

Allegory – Escape From Reality

by

Grim

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To Elizaveta

20JUN2001 Wednesday

1330 – Otterstow Canal

"Reality? Give over, Grace. I wasn't whelped yesterday, you know," Simon StæppanWulf protested as he sat on the grassy embankment of the canal that flowed through Otterstow on a warm, mid-June afternoon. "If you want to share a spliff with me, just say so. You needn't wind me up."

Simon was a fairly typical Wolf, or Lupan. Not quite fully grown at fourteen, he was five-eight with his ears down (a rare event as he was very even-tempered), although he was in the midst of a growth spurt that would end after a few more inches if his father was any measure. He had a typically grey pelage throughout, including a long, curly fex covering his scalp and a white ventral area.

"I didn't say it *was* the way to Reality. I said it *might* be. C'mon Si, come have a butcher's, please?" Grace ParsleyHare prodded. "Besides, I want you to be there too. I'm afraid to go it alone."

Grace was barely five feet with her ears down. She was covered in nearly pure-white fur from head to toe although she was not an albino, as she had green eyes. Her fex was also pure white and formed into a loose plait which reached halfway down her back.

"Nah, just can't be arsed, honestly," Simon answered. "Besides, the last time we smoked in the basement I got all woozy and could barely walk – and you couldn't stop giggling," he said as he dipped the end of his tail in the water.

"I didn't exactly hear you complaining," Grace noted. "Besides, I don't wanna do that." She looked about and cast her foot-long ears around, trying to detect any eavesdroppers. She lowered her voice to a furtive whisper and moved closer to Simon. "At least not now. Look, I found something in the basement."

Simply put, Grace loved Simon. However, convention dictated that whatever affection they might have for each other now would have to be shelved when they grew older. The social order demanded that Simon would eventually have to find some nice Bitch Wolf with which he could be paired off for life and Grace would find a suitable Buck Hare. The world they lived in, she had been told, would never approve of her being romantically involved with him, much less married. Grace, always one to revel at flying in the face of convention, thought such ideas were complete and utter prattle. She followed her heart where it led, damn the consequences and those who advised her to do otherwise.

"Found something?" asked Simon.

Simon's affection for Grace was mutual. They had never overtly stated this fondness for each other, neither to themselves nor to anyone else. As for each other, there was simply no need, as it was clearly understood. In regard to the rest of the world, Simon was justifiably afraid of the consequences of publicly revealing his feelings for Grace, the least of these being branded a furvert. It was not a fatal epithet, but it was far from desirable. Grace could not care less about the opinions of others, but she cared a great deal about Simon, thus she did her best to keep their affair secret.

Their efforts at secrecy, unfortunately, met with mixed results. Otterstow was small, and, as is usually the case in small towns, it was nearly impossible to hide anything so plainly obvious to even the most casual observer. Thus it was that Simon suffered a great deal of ribbing from his ostensible friends who kept enquiring as to why he was spending so much time with a Doe Hare instead of the few available Bitches in the neighbouring villages and towns. No one dared to confront Grace as they feared her wrath, which occasionally bordered on the violent.

"Shh!" Grace looked about again. "Don't want anyone to hear!" she admonished.

"Sorry," Simon said quietly. "So, what'd you find?"

"You know that cabinet at the bottom of the stairs?"

"What, the one in The tré?"

Just on the edge of Otterstow stood a small theatre, built several hundred years ago. In this little venue, twice a day on school days, all of the schoolchildren of Otterstow would gather to watch a Portrayal, an enactment of a fable, parable or apologue. Although the original title of this playhouse, if it ever had one, had been forgotten, the source of its current, rather singular, name came from the sign on the wrought-iron arch above the entrance to the spacious courtyard. Some time ago, the letter 'a' had fallen from the word 'Theatre', thus forming 'The tré', with the accent on the final 'e' being formed by some of the curly ironwork.

"Yeah, that's the one," Grace answered.

"What of it?"

"I told you, you stupid plonker," her eyes narrowed in impatience, "there's something inside."

"I would suspect so," Simon said. "It's under lock and key. Don't even recall it ever being opened."

"It has," Grace whispered urgently.

"Has it?" asked Simon. *Smack!* He had flicked his moistened tail on his hand, spraying Grace's face with water. Grace reflexively shut her eyes, but ignored what she considered Simon's childish attempt to get a rise out of her.

"Yes. I opened it . . ."

Splat!

". . . yesterday," she finished, hoping, in vain, that Simon had as well.

Shmick!

"Do you have a key?" asked Simon.

"No. It doesn't need a key," answered Grace. "But it does need at least two people to see what's inside. And stop that, it's juvenile."

Now Simon's curiosity was aroused. "If it needs two people then how'd you open it?"

"One person can open it, but it takes two to see what's inside."

Simon gave this statement some thought. He was one of those rare and truly gifted people who, despite being very clever, would be the first to sincerely admit that they are not. Despite this, Grace's description didn't quite sink in.

"Sorry. Don't follow that at all."

"Come to the basement with me and I'll show you."

1355 – The tré Basement

Einstein's special theory of relativity hypothesises that matter gains mass as it approaches the speed of light, thus gaining inertia. Sometime after Mr E's announcement, an obscure domestic physicist pointed out that this change in inertia pales in comparison to that of matter stored in attics and basements, where the gain in inertia (with 'inert' being the operative root), is proportional to the amount of time the matter has spent in one place multiplied by the number of people who have access to the facility. Secondly, these sites attract inert matter, much like a black hole, except they are not nearly as tidy. Thirdly, the amount of debris expands to fill the allotted space. Finally, as with any entropic phenomena, it takes an incredible amount of work to reverse the process.

These principles, named for their creator, are called "Clutter's laws."

With nearly a hundred people having access and being over two hundred years old, the basement of The tré was a textbook example to Dr. Clutter's tenets, as it had acquired the typical accumulation of junk and lumber that these laws of nature would require, which only an explosive effort could shift.

Although they had no idea that such was the case, Grace and Simon were about to spark this metaphoric explosion, as they managed to get into The tré minutes before the afternoon Portrayal, which took place at two o'clock.

Grace crawled over some dusty boxes, with Simon following.

"Look, there's this crank in the wall, just behind the shelf. Here, help me shift it, and I'll show you how to open it."

Simon helped her move the shelf a few feet over to gain access to what appeared to be a blank wall.

"There's no crank there," Simon protested, looking at the wall.

"It's behind the panelling," Grace said. "Watch." She ran a furry finger along the wall and found a spot. "Look, here's a little opening. Watch this – it's hinged." She gave it a little push and a flap of panelling, roughly a foot square, popped out. Grace eagerly opened it, revealing a well-greased, cast iron crank.

"That's incredible," Simon gushed quietly. "How'd you find that?"

"Just by accident. I was looking for something and I just bumped against it."

"What were you looking for?" asked Simon.

"My stash. I hid it in here somewhere, but I couldn't quite remember where."

"You know, you're smoking far too much," Simon objected.

"What bollocks! Mum and Dad smoke loads more'n me - and the twins do as well."

"But they're all adults," Simon pointed out.

"Just a silly rule they made up," Grace dismissed. "Look, that's not important right now. Just be a good Doggie and turn the crank."

Most Wolves would have bristled at the insult of being associated with a common house pet. Simon, however, found it very endearing when it came from Grace and could never resist her requests when she took such a bold stance. It made him appreciate that theirs was one of those special relationships that allowed bickering over trivial nonsense and sarcasm of each other's deepest foibles without hurt feelings or scores taken.

"Woof-woof," he replied as he squeezed himself into the tight area they had cleared and began to turn the crank. "Bloody heavy," he complained.

"Now, look over there," Grace pointed to the cabinet.

Simon looked while holding the crank still. "Don't see anything."

"Turn some more."

Simon turned some more and saw the cabinet rise higher than the debris that was hiding it. "Shave me! Look, the cabinet's growing up!" He turned faster in his excitement, watching it unfold like a concertina until it reached its fullest height of nearly seven feet.

It is generally considered undignified and puerile for a Hare of over a few years of age to hop, but Grace had little time for dignity. Thus, she hopped onto the boxes, over some rubbish, and straight to the cabinet door, which she swung open.

"So what's in there?" asked Simon.

Grace stuck her head in some more. "Dunno, can't see bugger all."

"Grace, this thing is heavy," Simon complained. "I'm gonna have to let go soon."

Grace removed her head from the door. "All right, let it drop."

Simon released the crank and the cabinet dropped to its previous height of a few feet, silent as smoke, blowing puffs of dust.

"We need candles," Grace stated. She rummaged through a box and instantly produced several tapers, along with some matches.

"You put those there earlier, didn't you?" Simon said.

"Course I did. Don't be stupid. Now, we have to find a way to hold this thing up whilst we go inside and explore."

"Explore?" asked Simon. "How can we explore? It's only two feet deep."

"Oh, no. It's much deeper than that. I can see in at least ten feet."

"Ten feet? Do you mean to say it's some sort of secret passage?"

"Pears to be, yeah."

Simon was hooked. "Right. I'm game." He glanced around the room as he formed a plan. "Look, we've a few timbers about. I'll crank it up and you lodge the boards under the rim, near the top of the cabinet. That should hold it up." He waded through the rubbish and retrieved some boards and gave them to Grace. "Right. I'll crank up the cabinet again."

Simon wound up the crank and the cabinet ascended to its full height once more. "Right, now wedge that board under the ledge near the top."

Grace stuffed the piece of timber under a small rim that barely jutted out a half-inch from the roof of the cabinet. She gave the board a kick near the bottom with the heel of her boot and it stayed trapped in place.

"Now do the other side," Simon added.

Grace did so, with similar effect. "Think that's enough?"

"Should do," Simon opined. "I'm going to test it now." He slowly relaxed his grip on the crank. The boards bowed a little under the weight, but held the cabinet up.

"What do I do with these other boards?" asked Grace.

"Just lean 'em against the wall somewhere."

As she carelessly rested the timbers against the wall, she gave more instructions to Simon. "Close the flap on that crank and put the shelf back, in case someone comes down while we're investigating."

"Right, good idea," Simon agreed, as she opened the door. When he had finished, he went to Grace's side. "Got the candles?"

Grace lit a wick and lifted it to illuminate the passage. "Ready?" she asked. "Yeah. Think so," he answered.

They cautiously walked in, side by side. Proceeding down a staircase, they were just beginning to notice that they were going upstairs without having reached any sort of landing when they heard a soft, scraping noise.

The source of this noise was one of the unused boards that Grace had hastily disposed of, as it slowly slid down the wall to the floor. She had chosen a rather unfortunate spot to place this wayward plank, as it hit one of the wooden props supporting the cabinet with a substantial impact on a rather key point, knocking it out of position. Fortunately, the prop on the other side stayed in place, thus preserving the cabinet's upright position.

Unfortunately, this remaining brace was now required to support a considerably heavier load.

Stress, it is said, causes strain. What this means is that when a weight (that's the stress bit) is applied to any solid object – say, just as an example, a wooden beam – that object will change from its natural shape somehow (that's the strain bit). It might twist or stretch – or it might bend. In fact, the last thing holding up the cabinet did just that – it bent. As a result of doing so, its tip was no longer well lodged under the rather narrow rim at the top of the cabinet. This being the case, the board popped out from underneath the rim after just a few seconds, causing the cabinet to collapse and revert to its very closed state.

"Oh, great furry bollocks!"

"Now you've gone and done it! We're trapped!"

"Me?" protested Simon. "Why do you always make it out to be my fault!"

1400 – The tré Auditorium Box Seat

The Honourable Ignatius Halifox, mayor of Otterstow, sat in his box in The tré dressed in a fine waistcoat and blazer with his mayoral sash across his breast. He was a mature Dog Fox, just under 40 with barely a few grey hairs showing around his muzzle and a neat, slightly longish, black fex (also slightly greyed), which he kept tidily swept back. He was still fit and lean from his school days and compensated his daily calorific intake (consisting mostly of pub food and cider) with substantial walking for exercise. His was a neat and orderly world.

Many years ago, Otterstow had once been large enough to qualify as a town. Its largesse at the time bestowed upon it certain privileges, such as the office of a mayor and a seat in Parliament. But, over the years, its population had dwindled and now it was quite small, not having reached a gross of citizens within its borders for the past 150 years. Through some oversight or other, it had never actually been demoted, thus it still retained the political rights of a town, as opposed to a village or hamlet. Some of Ignatius' constituents

grumbled that his salary was not worth paying and that he certainly didn't deserve the fine house that he had use of merely because he was mayor of a very small town that doubled as a rotten borough and whose biggest claim to fame was a rather pungent cheese.

His insistence on wearing the aforementioned sash, waistcoat and blazer simply added fuel to their arguments, as they would wonder, frequently out loud and in his presence, why the mayor of such a small village (although still legally a town) would consider himself of any importance whatsoever. Ignatius would generally ignore their comments, but if pressed, would merely reply that it was important to perform one's duties to the best of one's abilities. He would also confess that he relished his role, even if it was not of any great consequence and if that made him a pompous git, then, so be it. He loved his little town of Otterstow and would never abandon it for a higher office in the capital city of Trinova, whether elected or appointed.

Occasionally there was some idle talk about the MP for Otterstow. No one was willing to admit to being the MP, nor stand for election. Some suggested that Ignatius should go to Parliament in addition to his mayoral obligations to justify his salary. He would usually respond to this by remarking that *someone* would have to assume his unpaid, volunteer position as the sole member of the Otterstow Primary School Authority. Everyone knew why it was an unpaid and voluntary post, thus the topic of discussion would abruptly change.

The curtain opened for the Portrayal to begin, with a score of schoolchildren sitting in the darkened theatre, all eyes dutifully on the stage. As is usually the case with schoolchildren, they were on their best behaviour when someone 'important' was nearby and they had seen Ignatius come in just before them for the viewing of the afternoon Portrayal. So there were no spitballs, no tail-pulling or ear-thumping, just a few hushed whispers and hands were kept to themselves.

Opening scene: A parlour, with a chair.

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of The Angry Badger

Enter Badger, stage left, with spectacles on head

Thaddeus WhinnisBrocc stormed onto the stage.

Badger [*shouting to audience*]

WHERE'S MAH SPECTACLES?

he roared, stomping his feet.

Audience

THEY'RE ON YOUR HEAD!

they roared back, beginning to titter. Thaddeus put his hands on his hips as he scowled at the children.

Badger [*to audience*]

OH, NO THEY'RE NOT!

Audience

OH, YES THEY ARE!

they replied, some beginning to roll on the floor, incapacitated with laughter.

Repeat 'yes' and 'no' ad nauseam. May ad lib.

Badger

Servant! Servant!

Servant [*enters stage right*]

Geoff ThistleBoar came out onto the stage.

Do not be angry, my Lord. I am just here.

Badger

I am NOT angry. Stop saying I'm angry!

Servant

As you wish, my lord.

Badger

Where are my spectacles?

Servant

My Lord will not become more angry if I tell my Lord?

Badger

I AM NOT ANGRY!

Servant [*stepping backwards in fear*]

They are on your head, my Lord.

Badger [*feels for glasses on head and finds them – he tears them off and shouts*]

ARGH! Why did no one tell me!

Audience

We did! We did tell you!

Badger

Oh, no you didn't!

Audience

Oh, yes we did!

Repeat ad nauseam

Badger

Servant, why did you not tell me?

Servant

Because you would become even more angry, my Lord!

Badger

For the last time, I am not angry!

Audience

Oh, yes you are!

Badger

Oh, no I'm not!

Repeat ad nauseam

Servant

My Lord, please sit down. You are so angry, you may become ill.

Badger

I am only angry because everyone says I am, when I am not!

Audience

Oh, no you're not!

Badger

Oh, yes I am!

Repeat ad nauseam

The children laughed some more.

Ignatius smiled. Supervision of the Portrayals was one of the few undisputed responsibilities of his office. Everyone of age was required to spend some time doing the parts they could and Ignatius saw to it that they did them properly. Not only was it the law, it was a moral responsibility – the very fabric of society was woven with the lessons embedded in the Portrayals presented to the children. Not doing one's share of Portrayal Duty (known commonly as 'PD') was seen in the same light as stealing from charity or torturing defenceless animals.

And Portrayals were not just in Otterstow, but throughout The Kingdom and all lands throughout all of the Allegorical world. Although the content differed slightly from place to place, the themes were very much the same. There were different characters with different lines, but the messages were the same – messages of forgiveness, love, perseverance and numerous other virtues. The exact meaning of these messages, however, was frequently a matter of great debate, and not just among the schoolchildren.

The citizens of Otterstow were quite willing to perform onstage for their PD, even though they knew they were appalling actors, reasoning that, after all, children are not very harsh critics. Those few that weren't capable of acting would maintain The tré, work backstage or do something similar to help out. Regardless, everyone was involved. Only the physically infirm or profoundly mentally disabled were excused. Even Ignatius, in addition to his supervisory role, was required to perform his share of Portrayal Duty as scheduled, something his constituency took careful note of.

Paying someone else to do one's own PD was not only frowned upon, it was a punishable offence – although it had been so long since someone in Otterstow had been prosecuted for such an egregious *faux pas* that the terms of the punishment had been forgotten by everyone (except Ignatius, of course).

"Death, Taxes and PD," the saying went.

Some of the larger cities might have had those that got away with not doing their bit, but no city official would willingly admit to it. If they did, it was promised, sincerely or otherwise, that those responsible would have their feet held to the fire.

There were a small minority who were beginning to suggest that perhaps the Portrayals were not actually necessary or that they were not particularly effective. These people reasoned that there always were and always would be some children that were little hellions – who would then grow up to be big hellions. Thus, their reasoning went, the Portrayals had no effect on them and, by logical extension, no serious effect on anyone else. Why, these people would ask, waste everyone's money, time and energy on such ridiculous plays. Those who espoused this particular argument wore several political monikers, notably: 'idiot', 'slaphead' and occasionally, 'convict.' No such people existed in Otterstow, of course, or if they did, they kept their opinions to themselves, much to the mayor's relief.

Ignatius could not count the times he had seen this particular Portrayal since the first time as a tiny Kit of five. Thaddeus, the actor *du semi-jour*, was doing an excellent job, putting lots of feeling into his part, although Ignatius thought he might be hamming it up a little. Ignatius knew that although Thaddeus

espoused some unsavoury opinions and a questionable ideology, he deeply loved children – all children. And he loved to hear them laugh.

The mayor's mind drifted a little bit as he watched the children soak up the play. Suddenly his attention was seized by a voice. He was certain he heard someone speaking and it seemed that it might be that of a child's, although he couldn't quite tell. The tré was quite small and his box was on the ground floor (as there was only the ground floor anyway) and the only thing beneath it was the basement. For reasons he never understood, there was a vent that ran directly from his box to the basement and it was through this vent which he heard brief snatches of a conversation. *Someone in the basement?* he thought. *Well, they'd better have a very good explanation for why they aren't up here watching the Portrayal or why they're down there disturbing it.*

Leaning slightly in his chair and cocking his ear to the vent, he could hear the conversation a good bit more clearly. Although held at regular voice, even loud at times, it somehow seemed muffled.

"I'm trying, it won't open! You give it a go."

"Oh, fer the luvva Jack, yer such a . . . Here, hold this . . . Mmmph . . . Mmmph! Shave me, it is stuck, innit?"

Whatever this was, it was not some errant schoolchild skipping a Portrayal to experiment in some adult habit, such as smoke or alcohol – or worse.

Although he was not technically responsible for the discipline of the schoolchildren, he decided he would take the initiative to investigate, regardless. Upon making said executive decision, he quietly stole out of his seat, so as not to interrupt the performance. Gently and quickly, he crept to the basement door.

He knew the hinges would groan like a freight train and the 13th stair would squeak like a trodden-on Mouse, so he put his ear to the door one last time to have a quick listen before he burst in on the scene with the element of surprise.

Hearing nothing distinctive, he flung open the door, producing the usual emulation of an unoiled locomotive rolling on corroded tracks. He then heard a distant voice ask "Whuzzat noise?" and a faint answer of "Let's go!"

He flicked on the lights and whisked down the stairs as fast as he could to see what the source of the noise was before it disappeared. Twisting his ears this way and that, he listened carefully and hearing a few last indiscernible words, he also caught a scent of sulphur. The source of both was not far from the stairs and, as he suspected, was right next to the vent that led to his booth. It came from the large, metal cabinet that sat near the corner, untouched and unnoticed for ages. At nearly five feet wide, yet barely a few feet tall, it vaguely resembled a coal bin, hiding in plain sight, perfectly camouflaged by the debris surrounding it, such as planking, props and other theatrical residue. On the front, near the top, Ignatius discovered a padlock that had always been there, and gave it a cursory tug in the vain hope that it might simply pop open. He was disappointed in his effort. *If it's locked, how'd they get in the bloody thing?* he asked himself. There was just enough space for him to put his ear to the box, which he did. In this case, his efforts were not disappointed.

"Go? Go where? How're we to get out of here?" said one of the voices. It was that of a teenage girl and Ignatius seemed to think it rather familiar.

"Shave me if I know," answered the voice of a teenage boy, which also seemed familiar.

"We can't stay down here forever," said the girl.

"Well, we're not going back the way we came. I say our only hope is that we go through the other end."

"But we don't know what's there," said the girl.

Ignatius had heard enough. He banged on the side of the cabinet and said in a loud, clear voice, "Hullo! Now see here! Who's this? You need to come out of this thing right this instant. Do you hear me? Who's in there?" He banged again and put his ear to the cabinet.

There was silence.

1405 – A Tunnel Under the Basement of The tré

Grace and Simon stood frozen on the spot as they both instantly recognized the voice as belonging to that of the mayor. They also knew he would land them in a great vat of hot water if they responded in any way. Grace had led Simon on more than a few misadventures that had resulted in what the pair of them considered to be rather unfair and overly-strict punishments. Simon's parents, while not forbidding him to see Grace outright, did emphatically state that if there were one more 'adventure', he would be shipped off to a boarding school in the Caldons for the remainder of his education. Grace's parents, who seemed to think that most of the problem lay with the relatively blameless Simon, told her that if she didn't stay away from him, she would be spending the rest of her teen life indoors.

With these idle threats positioned firmly in their minds, the pair of them were paralysed with fright by Ignatius' demands.

"Come along! Open this thing up!" his voice demanded. He banged on it once or twice more and scowled, "How does this bloody thing *open*?"

Without saying a word, the two of them turned in the opposite direction and crept away from his voice. The entire channel was little more than twenty yards and at the other end was a door, exactly the same as the one they had entered. Simon carefully pushed it ajar.

With great caution, he stuck his nose out and had a sniff.

"What's that pong?" he whispered.

Grace had a quick whiff. "Ergh. No idea – is a bit nasty, though."

Simon had another taste of the air. "Still, nothing threatening." He slowly stuck the rest of his head out to see what was there. Just beneath his head, her ears framing his chin, was Grace's head.

He could tell they were in a basement, as there were some small windows near the ceiling, which was quite high. As with The tré in Otterstow, it was filled with the sort of rubbish that tends to accumulate in basements, as per Clutter's Laws.

"Si, do you think this is . . . ?" asked Grace.

"Reality? I think you were right all along, Grace. My Mum mentioned this to me last year – the basement, the cabinet, Reality – but I was sure she was just having me on."

"Funny, my old man told me about it as well, but it was just last week. I thought it was that tired, old line about 'behave or we'll throw you into Reality' sorta thing. He actually tried to make me believe that when Mum was our age, she went down to the cellar of The tré and entered a hidden passage to . . . Re . . . erm . . . ality."

"I guess she did, then, didn't she?" conjectured Simon.

"Come on, then. Let's see what's about," Grace suggested.

The two of them pushed the cabinet door open a little wider, but it stopped short.

"Hang about, Si. There's a chain across the door," Grace pointed out.

"Do you think you could slip through?" asked Simon.

"Yeah, think so," Grace said. She lowered herself below the chain and stuck her head through. It was an easy effort for the rest of her slim body to follow.

"Go on, Si, you can make it," she urged.

"I don't want to get stuck. See if you can get the chain off."

Grace investigated the chain a bit. "Oh, yeah. There's a hook in the wall and it's come loose. Close the door for a tick."

Simon complied and that gave Grace just enough slack to pull the chain off the hook. "All right, you can come out now," Grace stated.

Simon ventured out of the cabinet and the pair of them began to explore the expansive basement.

Perhaps by coincidence, or perhaps by the force of some higher power, a basement terminated each end of the passage through which Simon and Grace had just fled. By further coincidence (or not), each basement supported a theatre. On the one end sat The tré, a modest venue, well-loved and meticulously maintained. At the other end, stood the imposing Rialto, a dramatic stage, now well past its heyday and subjected to the ignominy of dereliction.

Grace took great interest in opening the many crates, trunks, chests and boxes that were scattered throughout the room, whilst Simon's curiosity leaned more towards the exterior of the building. Thus, he pushed a crate to stand beneath a window as Grace rooted around the debris.

Simon climbed onto the container and wiped the grimy glass with the cuff of his shirt, which only resulted in a dirty cuff. With some effort, he undid the hasp and managed to open the window. All of the sounds of the street just a few yards away were suddenly very noticeable and Grace, having rather keen ears, noticed them. She bounded onto the crate, bringing herself to stand next to Simon in the hopes of a glimpse. Unfortunately, she was a little too short to see out of the window and, after a couple of hops, which resulted in all-too-brief viewings of the outside, she decided to use Simon as a ladder.

"Piggyback, Si."

"Right," Simon said unceremoniously, bracing himself for the landing, as Grace jumped onto his back and he grabbed her legs to hold her up.

After just a few seconds of observation, she remarked, "Shave me, Si! This is Reality!"

The two of them kept their worm's-eye vigil for a few minutes and then dropped back down and sat on the box, looking at nothing in particular.

"I think we should go back," Simon said.

"There's no going back now," Grace replied. "I mean, if our parents caught us doing something a bit naughty together, it might be grounding for a month and no telephone. But *this!* Going to Reality's against the law! We'd go to prison – or worse!"

Simon considered Grace's perspective. "But we didn't know we were going to Reality. It was just an accident. Besides, we'll have to go back eventually – we can't stay here the rest of our lives."

"Okayokayokay," Grace was thinking hard for a plan. As was usually the case when she was plotting something that wasn't entirely above board, her ears began to sag forward. "Right. Got it. We hide out here for a week. When our parents don't hear from us for a day or two, they'll be angry. But after a week, they'll be hysterical. Remember when we ran away together, last year?"

"Yes."

"We were gone a week. And when we returned, they were so glad to see us, they never said a word and we didn't so much as have to stay in our rooms."

"You weren't punished?" asked Simon incredulously.

"No. Were you?"

"They shaved my head, if you recall!" he protested. "Took ages to grow back. It was nearly two months before it was back to anything normal."

"Oh – I thought you just wanted short hair. I had no idea. They didn't properly shave it though, they just cut it short."

"Still, wasn't like no one noticed."

"I didn't," Grace answered with an honest face, if not an honest heart.

"You didn't?"

"No. I thought you looked as lovely as ever," Grace said with an honest heart.

Simon smiled. Grace always said the nicest things to him.

"So we're agreed?" asked Grace.

"All right, then. But just the week and then we go straight back."

1405 – The tré Basement

Ignatius stood ramrod straight in thought, his tail thrashing about as it usually did when he was deep in contemplation. The voices might have been some of the local children, in which case it was a very serious matter that he would have to attend to immediately. On the other hand, they might have come from somewhere else entirely. He knew all the old stories about Reality; the party line had always been that they were just to scare the children into behaving. But he also knew that there was a basis for all mythology and Reality was no exception. Even the *Pedestra Charta**, the very basis of natural law for the entirety of the civilized world, mentioned it. The document was thousands of years old and it was pretty much all business, not given to digressions such as chronicles of fantasy or descriptions of preposterous creatures. These facts, in

* Commonly known as the "Pedestrian Charter" or, more simply, as "The Charter." Please note capitals.

Ignatius' mind, meant there was something more than whimsy to the Charter's allusion to Reality.

Regardless, he knew that his first priority was to get into the cabinet somehow. Suddenly, the scuffling of two-score tiny feet above him announced the end of the Portrayal. It was usually his custom to wait outside the door of The tré as the children returned to the primary school, so he rushed up the stairs and to his post just in time to see the last child out.

Nodding a quick acknowledgement to all of the adult participants for a job well done, he quickly returned to the cabinet at the bottom of the stairs. Once again, he grabbed the lock and gave it a tug. Once again, he was no better off.

Ignatius knew full well that he was not very inclined toward the mechanical workings of the world. Thus, when he gathered the nearest object that vaguely resembled a haft and whacked the cabinet with it in the hope that it might magically open, he mentally slapped himself as he looked at the broken candle in his hand.

Don't be a sifwit, he told himself as he threw the candle to the ground in frustration. *Use your brain, lad.*

His tail flew about in an agitated manner as he pondered how to approach his problem.

None of the staff would know how to open it – they've only been here for the few years. Who would know, then?

Liza might know, he conjectured, thinking of an elderly neighbour. *She knew Mummy and Da for yonks.*

I wonder what's on the other side of that thing. I suppose it could be Reality – oh, there you go, being a sifwit again.

Still, there must be something beyond that cabinet. Let's see if I can find out what it is.

Ignatius then employed any artefact in the basement that he could find that even slightly resembled a tool to pry, hammer or wedge the cabinet to move in the slightest. His efforts were, in a word, fruitless.

Two hours later, standing over the cabinet, out of breath, he tossed the spatula that he had been employing as a chisel to the ground and muttered, "Oh, stuff it. I'll never get this thing open. I need a drink."

1500 – MacAleister Estate

George MacAleister considered himself a captain of commerce. He was used to things going according to plans, as long as they were his plans. He fumed as he stood over the blueprints. "So what you're telling me is that we cannot demolish the Rialto?"

"No, Mister MacAleister," replied the engineer. "What I'm telling you is that it will cost more than the property is worth to demolish the building."

"But . . . *why*?" asked MacAleister.

"The Rialto was, to put it mildly, built to last. I daresay that Stonehenge would have a rough time of it competing with the Rialto as to which would collapse first."

"Can't we just . . . *burn* it down?"

"Only if we wish to break the law and endanger the public. Besides, much like Stonehenge, there's nothing to burn; it's mostly steel and concrete."

"Then use dynamite. I've seen you people use it on buildings larger than this. A few well-placed charges here and there and the whole thing collapses like a house of cards," suggested MacAleister.

"We *are* professionals, Mister MacAleister," the engineer stated. "That was, in fact our first consideration."

"And?"

"The amount of charge required to collapse the Rialto would shatter every window for a half-mile radius. I don't know who this . . ." the engineer took a moment to read the name on the original design plans, "'Bertram Proudfoot' is, but he completely overdesigned this building. If it hadn't been built over a hundred years ago, I'd've sworn it was an air-raid shelter. It has hardened steel I-beam struts and re-barred concrete spans every . . ."

"I'm not interested in struts and spans," interrupted MacAleister. "I'm interested in results. I want this building demolished! Now, what will it take to do that?"

The engineer shrugged. "We'll have to get cranes and welders . . ."

"Just a bottom line, please?"

"Over half a million quid and six months."

MacAleister was speechless.

"I did say it was more . . ."

"Just – leave, please."

"As you wish," the engineer said, scooping up the plans. "Frankly, it's a masterpiece of structural integrity. You should give some thought to keeping it intact and having it listed," he added as he walked out.

MacAleister sighed in frustration as he stood alone in his drawing room.

"Just can't find good help these days," he muttered.

The chauffeur floated into the room and poured a neat scotch. "Bad news, sir?" he asked, handing the drink to his employer.

"Oh, thank you, Leon," MacAleister grunted just before downing the drink. "That bloody theatre. I just got a very lucrative offer for the land as a car park, and then I'm told that the damned thing is more solid than the pyramids of Giza."

"Sir?"

"Apparently, it's indestructible."

"It certainly doesn't fit the stereotype."

"Sorry?"

"Theatres are generally thought of as majestic or festive. From the outside at least, the Rialto looks rather like an outpost for MI6 – or the KGB. If there's an air raid any time soon, at least you'll take comfort in having a durable building."

"No argument there," MacAleister conceded. "But I'd rather have a *profitable* building."

"Just do the usual jiggery-pokery with the depreciation. It's barely six figures, but still – money in one's pocket."

"Except the back-taxes would eat up about a third of that, so it's not worth my time," said MacAleister. "Now, if I could get rid of those, *then* I'd consider that as an option."

1620 – Black Kettle Pub

Ignatius entered the Black Kettle Pub, immediately collected his pint of cider and sat alone by the window to collect his thoughts which were running at a terrifying pace.

That cabinet – it can't just be a cabinet, he surmised. I heard them running away. One can't run in a cabinet; there just isn't enough room. It must be an entry of some sort. A mine shaft, a subcellar . . . Reality?

There I go, being a sifwit again. It's no wonder Mummy and Da found me such an easy target for a put-on. I'll believe anything anyone tells me – even me.

Ignatius recalled a particular wind-up that had always mystified him which, coincidentally, had to do with Reality. One evening, as a child of eight, he had crawled out of bed to his favourite place to listen in, unseen, on his father and mother talking in the parlour.

"Old Man Simon's finally passed on," Ignatius remembered his father, Xavier, telling his mother, Elizabeth, referring to a nonagenarian Vulpan that had recently died. *"He's the last. We can finally close that damned cabinet in the basement for good."*

"I think we should tell Ignatius," Elizabeth had replied.

"No, he's not old enough," Xavier had countered. *"Can you imagine telling our Ig that there's a cabinet that leads to Reality? He's a lovely lad and no mistake, but he's completely incapable of keeping a secret."*

"That's only because he's just eight – and scrupulously honest. We could tell him when he's older," Elizabeth had suggested.

"No, I think we should just close it up and let it die," Xavier had decided. *"If I had my way, I'd rip out that cabinet and fill that whole damnable tunnel with concrete."*

Ignatius remembered taking the first opportunity to look over every square inch of the basement at Nora, his home. Not finding any secret tunnels or cabinets, he had thus chalked up his parents' conversation as another clever ploy to teach him not to eavesdrop, or perhaps, to be less gullible. In light of the day's events, this perspective was suddenly about to change.

Great Jack's ghost! It wasn't our basement they were talking about – it was the one in The tré! They weren't winding me up at all!

His revelation was suddenly interrupted.

"Pardon me, Ignatius." It was Slide* HolenWulf, Simon's father.

* Slide's first name was actually Steven, after his father. After several abortive attempts at a byname, he earned the sobriquet of 'Slide' by demonstrating no small prowess on the pedal-steel guitar as a young boy. The tiny few that knew his true name never used it.

Apart from being larger and older, Slide was nearly Simon's twin, with an identical face and build and his characteristic wavy, wild fex. His sole distinguishing feature was that his pelage was, in contrast to Simon's grey, a bone white, with just a few tiny points on his eyebrows and nose and ears.

"Oh, sorry, Slide. What can I do for you?" asked Ignatius.

"Well, it's about Simon."

"Yes?" Ignatius prompted.

"He seems to have gone missing – again."

Ignatius sighed. *When it rains, it pours*, he thought. *I've already got two missing children. This is the last thing I need right now.* Still, as the *de jure* law enforcement of Otterstow, he knew his duty. "Has he? And what leads you to this conclusion?"

"He was supposed to meet me right after the Portrayal, but he didn't show. I don't suppose you've seen him."

"It's only been a couple of hours," Ignatius pointed out.

"Graeme was going to let him help with the horses down the dairy. He promised him a ride as well."

"Simon is rather fond of horses, as I recall." As his constituency barely exceeded three digits, he easily knew the habits and manners of everyone in town – even those that didn't vote. "Surely he wouldn't pass up an opportunity like that."

"No, he wouldn't miss it for the world. He'd rather muck out stables than eat, just to be around the horses."

"I can see why you're concerned."

"I don't mean to cast aspersions or make accusations . . ."

"Go on," Ignatius prompted.

"Gossip's not my cup of tea, you understand."

"I pass no judgement."

"I overheard someone saying they saw him and Grace ParsleyHare together, shortly before the Portrayal."

"Grace and Simon," Ignatius muttered. *So that's who those voices belonged to*, he recalled. *I thought they were familiar. Yes, it was definitely them.* "Grace ParsleyHare? Didn't she and Simon go off on a little escapade last summer?"

"Yes, yes," Slide sighed in embarrassment.

"Erm . . . I think I might have an idea of where he is – and Grace as well, but I'd like to break the news to all involved parties at the same time. Could you collect Sandra and meet me at The tré in, oh . . . twenty minutes?"

"Yeah. Could do." Slide departed to his home to tell Sandra StæppanWylf, his wife and Simon's mother, about the meeting.

Ignatius immediately went to the bar and, out of habit, Pete had a cider waiting for him.

Pete DunBerr was a basic, brown Ursan. His only distinguishing feature – a white ring around his neck that plunged to a 'V' at his sternum – was always hidden by a clean and pressed shirt, buttoned to the collar. Beyond that, there was nothing remarkable about his seven-foot, twenty-five stone build.

Gina ParsleyHare, the proprietress of the Black Kettle and his employer, found him indispensable. He had perfect recall of all the tabs and 'usuals' of his

patrons, the patience to suffer through drunken ramblings, the ability to spot troublemakers and ample robustness to deal with them.

"That one will have to wait, Pete," Ignatius said of the fresh pint.

"Oh, no probs," Pete said, putting the full glass under the bar.

"Have you seen Grace since this afternoon?" asked Ignatius.

"No, I haven't. An' Gina's in a right state, I can tell ya. That li'l toerag was s'posed to be here cleanin' the fixtures since two."

"I think I know where she is. I need you and Gina to meet me at The tré in twenty minutes."

Pete's face fell at the mention of the announcement. "Me? I ain't 'er dad," he protested. "Do I look like a Bunny?"

"As you have resided in the same residence with her mother for more than a year and there is no other adult male, you are *in loco parentis*."

"You can call me crazy all day long, but it still don't make me her dad," Pete objected.

"*In loco parentis*' means 'in place of the parent'. You are, by law, one of her legal guardians," Ignatius informed him.

"But Gina an' me ain't togever or nuffin'," Pete defended. "I sleep in my own suite."

"Legally speaking, none of that matters."

"What? When did this come about?" Pete was flummoxed. "Nobody's told me this before!"

"It's never been an issue before. Look, it's just a formality. There are two missing children and I'm required to brief all legal guardians – and legally, you qualify."

The Ursan scowled in anger as he threw his rag on the bar. "That bleedin' rug rat! She's no end o' grief! If I *ever* get ahold of 'er again, I'll cane 'er li'l white cottontail 'til she can't sit down."

Ignatius grinned.

"What?" Pete asked.

"And you say you're not her father."

"Oh, you're a bleedin' bubble, you are. Right, soon as I can get Johnny behind the bar, I'll fetch Gina."

1640 – The tré Auditorium

Ignatius stood in the middle of the auditorium of The tré. Grace's father *de jure*, Pete DunBerr and her mother *de facto*, Gina ParsleyHare, were waiting with him, as they had arrived first. They had enquired of the nature of this rather urgent and mysterious meeting immediately upon arriving, but Ignatius deferred their questions until all parties were present.

Gina ParsleyHare, like her daughter Grace, was mostly white, except for some darker tips on various points, which included her ears, eyes, muzzle, toes, fingers and certain other parts. However, her tail and fex were white, the latter being evident to all, as she was very short, at four and a half feet.

Simon's parents, Sandra StæppanWylf and Slide HolenWulf arrived. Whereas Simon favoured his father in build, face and an unruly fex, he

obviously got his colour from his mother, who was of the same colour scheme, but with a long straight fex in contrast to Simon's and Slide's curls. She was Simon's current height, thus being shorter than Slide, and quite fit.

"Oh, it's you," Gina commented on seeing the two Vulpans. "Let me guess. Your Simon and our Grace – again."

"If I may," Ignatius said, hoping to cool the inevitable feud.

"Don't take that tone with me, Gina ParsleyHare," Sandra StæppanWylf warned.

There was the briefest pause which Ignatius took advantage of. "Have you any idea where your children, Grace and Simon, are at this very moment?"

"No, honestly," Slide said. "I thought that's why we came here – for you to tell us."

"Erm . . . Right. If you would follow me," Ignatius suggested.

They followed him down the stairs into the basement. As they did so, there was some conspiratorial whispering between both sets of parents. As soon as they reached the cabinet, it stopped abruptly.

Gina nudged Pete, who looked off into a corner with an expression that suggested he might want to be somewhere else at the moment. Ignatius also noticed that Slide had a disappointed look on his face with his arms folded, while his wife, Sandra, was hiding her face behind her hand.

"It all seems to revolve around this box, or bin, or whatever it is," Ignatius said.

Gina ParsleyHare and Slide HolenWulf nodded curtly as Pete DunBerr and Sandra StæppanWylf tried to look inconspicuous.

"Let me tell you what I know. Then maybe we can come to some sort of conclusion." Ignatius took a moment to recollect his facts. "While I was monitoring the Portrayal this afternoon, I overheard some voices from the basement. I came down to investigate and it was quite clear that they came from this . . . fixture," he said, giving the box a pat.

There was more silence.

"I'm fairly certain I recognised the voices as belonging to Grace and Simon," Ignatius announced, expecting some reaction from the parents.

There was still no response.

Ignatius continued, hoping he might avoid the inevitable and undesirable mention of the word 'Reality'. "I beseeched them to come out, but they fell silent and I could hear them running away. I then tried to open it, obviously to no avail. Now, the question I have for you is, do any of you know where this thing leads? Or, more importantly, how does one open it?"

Gina pointedly looked at Pete and Slide stared sharply at Sandra.

"No?" prompted Ignatius.

Silence continued to reign.

"Well, then. I suppose there's little more I can . . ."

"It's an entrance to a tunnel," Sandra blurted out.

"Is it?" Ignatius asked. "Do you know where this tunnel goes?"

"It . . . it goes . . ." Sandra stuttered, visibly shaken.

"I'll tell him, Sandra," Gina volunteered. "It's a tunnel to Reality."

"Sandra?" Ignatius asked for clarification. "Do you know this to be true?"

Sandra, her hand on her face and her eyes shut with shame, nodded.

"Slide? Pete? Do you know anything about this?" asked Ignatius.

"Oh, don't pretend, Ig," Slide countered.

"I'm sorry?" Ignatius said.

"Don't pretend you don't know," Slide elaborated. "Your parents knew. Surely they must've told you."

"Never a word," Ignatius answered.

"Oh, you're 'avin' us on," Pete challenged.

"No, he's not," Sandra stated. "Ig couldn't tell a lie to save his tail."

"If we're done with incriminations, I'd like to focus on returning the children," Ignatius said. "Now . . . Sandra, Gina, how do you know this goes to Reality?"

"We've both been there," Sandra stated plainly.

"Sandra was with me at the time," Gina added. "Both our parents brought us down here as children and showed us through. Then they threatened to shave every hair off our bodies – permanently – if we mentioned it to anyone. So, Mister-Smarter-Than-Your-Average-Bear, here, decided he would ingratiate himself to our little tearaway by telling her the family secret. Nice going, Pete. Thanks to you and your fat gob, she's lost in Reality."

"Ang on a mo', Gina," Pete complained. "Ya can't pin this all on me!"

"You're the one who told her," Gina said plainly.

"First off, I don't care what the law says, she ain't *our* daughter. She's *your* daughter."

"If we could . . ." Ignatius tried to break off the argument.

"If that's the case, then why does she refer to you as her 'old man'?" Gina proposed.

"Because 'old man' is easier to say'n 'the bloke what works for mum.' An 'old man' don't necessarily mean 'dad', duzzit."

"As its other meaning is 'husband', I think we can use the process of elimination," Slide pointed out.

"An' she only calls me 'old man' in the third person," Pete continued. "Unless she wants some dosh."

"So you told her about the passage *and* you gave her money?" asked Gina, astonished.

"If we might . . ." Ignatius tried to get the meeting back on track.

"Just a pound or two," Pete defended. "An' if this was such a great family secret, Gina, why'd ya tell me?"

"Regardless," Slide re-directed the discussion, "it appears that your Grace has led our Simon astray, once again. I thought we'd agreed to keep them apart . . ."

"Slide," interrupted Sandra.

"She's simply a bad influence on him," Slide continued, unabated. "She always gets him into trouble. I can't count the number of times he's tried to take the fall to protect that . . ."

"Slide!" Sandra shouted.

"Yes, love?" Slide answered quietly.

"I . . . told Simon about the portal also. He was asking about Old Man Simon and his, erm . . . girlfriend."

"You did *what*?" Slide asked, incredulous.

"I made him swear to me not to tell anyone else," Sandra qualified.

"So maybe it was *your* Simon what told *our* Grace?" suggested Pete, with a slightly smug look on his face although there may have been a small element of relief as well.

"Don't think for one minute that you're off the hook," Gina warned Pete.

Slide turned to his wife. "So, Sandra – what's it going to be? Shears? Razor? Depilatory?"

Sandra removed her hand from her face just long enough to cuff her husband.

"I think this is painful enough," Ignatius suggested. "Any punishments would be pointless at this juncture."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"I still can't believe you never knew, Ignatius," Slide said.

"Oh, I didn't say I never knew," Ignatius admitted. "And the fact is I didn't – at least not for certain. As a child, I overheard a conversation that I have only fully come to understand scarcely an hour ago which suggested something of the sort. But it is true – my parents never told me anything about it.

"Now that we have that out of the way, let's get down to the business at hand. Gina, Sandra – could you please open the cabinet? We'll go in and see if we can find . . ."

"I have no idea how to open it," Gina interrupted.

"Nor I," Sandra added. "Our parents specifically did *not* tell us how to open it."

"Oh dear," Ignatius stated. "So, none of you knows how to open it?"

They all shrugged.

"Do you remember anything of what you saw?" asked Ignatius.

Sandra and Gina looked at each other.

"Well, it was some time ago," Sandra recalled. "I think I was ten at the time, if that. But, we went in. There's a staircase down . . . or up . . . down? Can't remember, anyway, at the other end, there's a cabinet."

"Much like this one," Gina added.

"Except we're inside the cabinet. We walk out and there's this enormous room, filled with all sorts of rubbish."

"Also much like this one," Gina commented.

"And maybe it's because I'm bigger now, but it seemed . . ." Sandra paused, unsure of herself. "The box seemed so much . . . bigger than it is now."

"Everything seems bigger to me," Gina mentioned.

"Anyway, after about, oh, a minute, we walked back," Sandra completed her tale.

"That's how I remember it," Gina added. "Although, for some peculiar reason, I remember one item in the other room that sort of stuck out from the others."

"And what was that?" asked Ignatius.

"A tandem," Sandra and Gina chorused.

"A tandem? As in a velocipede?"

"Most people call it a bicycle, Ig," Pete put in.

"Just like that one under the stairs, over there," Sandra pointed.

Ignatius followed the line of her finger. "How odd," he muttered. "Never noticed that there before." He turned back to face the others. "So obviously, this isn't some sort of sub-cellar or abandoned mine shaft," he conjectured.

"Oh, no," Sandra answered. "There were windows, with daylight coming through. I was very disappointed that Father wouldn't let me look through them."

Ignatius tail waved some more. "Well, then, it appears I have some research to do. Are there any questions before we adjourn?"

"Ain't it illegal to enter Reality?" asked Pete.

"Well, the Pedestra Charta says . . . Come to think of it," Ignatius pondered for a second, "I don't recall what it says, exactly."

"It says it's illegal," Slide said. "I'm no solicitor, but I've heard it a million times."

"It's what I've always heard as well," Gina added. "You don't have to be a solicitor to know that."

Ignatius scratched his chin in thought. "I'm not sure that it does, actually . . ."

"Course it does," Gina stated.

"Everyone knows 'at," Pete confirmed.

"And you as a solicitor," Slide teased.

"Yes, imagine that," Ignatius said, his patience wearing thin.

"Surely there's an exception for rescuing children," Sandra stated.

"At the end of the day, regardless of law or exceptions, we have no choice," Ignatius agreed in a roundabout way. "It seems we must do something unethical to accomplish a wholly moral objective. My only recommendation at this stage is that we establish a watch. Perhaps if the children return, they can instruct us as to how to open the box and let them out."

"I'll watch until midnight," Gina volunteered.

"Thank you, Gina," Ignatius said. "Now then, if there's nothing further, I'm off. I'll either be at my home or the Kettle if you need me."

"What about the box?" asked Sandra.

"What of it?" replied Ignatius.

"Ain't we gonna open it?" Pete asked.

"I thought we'd established that we don't know how," Ignatius said.

"Can't we at least try?" Sandra urged.

"Be my guest," Ignatius answered. "As a solicitor, my mechanical skills don't go much beyond a pencil sharpener. As such, I'll put myself to best use elsewhere."

"Right, then, let's fetch Geoff down here," Gina suggested. "He's a builder; he'll know how to crack this box."

"I'd think twice before consulting Mister ThistleBoar," Ignatius warned.

"Why so?" asked Sandra. "Geoff could help us."

"If our entering Reality, as you so adamantly insist, is illegal, then enlisting Geoff's support would make him an accessory," Ignatius warned.

Pete scratched his head in thought. "He wouldn't have to go in or nuffin'."

"If he helps in any way," Ignatius interrupted, "whether he knows what you're doing is illegal or not, he is an accomplice and, thus, culpable."

"But this is an emergency," Sandra said pointedly.

"Fine, please yourself," Ignatius waived. "And who will enlist Geoff to perform an illegal act? Any volunteers?"

No one spoke.

"I know it sounds rather selfish of me, but a large number of my constituency *does* rather depend on me for their employment – present company included, if I might be so bold."

"Excuse me, is that some sort of threat?" asked Gina.

"Honestly, Gina, I feel rather stung," Ignatius defended. "Have you ever known me to stoop to such perfidy?"

"No, of course not," Gina apologised instantly. "You are the most honest and forthright person I've ever met. Forgive me – I'm just a bit nervous about Grace."

"Thank you," Ignatius said. "There's an end to the matter. Now, as I was saying, if it came to be known that I enlisted someone to participate in a crime, I would be disbarred. Apart from losing my own career and throwing six years of uni down the drain, it would result in half of Otterstow losing their employ – something we all wish to avoid, I'm sure. Thus, it is vital that we keep this under wraps and it is also vital that we act in a manner to limit any damage should we be discovered.

"For example, one thing I could *not* say is 'Why don't you ask Geoff and just not tell me about it.' If I did so, I would still be equally culpable, disbarred, resulting in rampant unemployment *et cetera*. So, are we all clear on this issue?"

They all silently nodded in agreement.

"Very good, then. Now, Sandra, do you still wish to ask Geoff to help us?" Ignatius said.

Sandra considered this for just a moment. "No," she finally answered with a contrived deliberation. "I don't, actually."

"A wise choice. As for me, my efforts will be better spent using persuasion rather than force to open that box. If you make any progress using other methods, don't hesitate to let me know. Now, if I may?"

There was no protest, so Ignatius trotted up the stairs and off to his home.

The parents stood silent for a minute.

"I'm not much good with tools," Slide admitted. "I mean, I do models and such, but nothing involving intricate machinery."

"I know how to swing a maul," Pete admitted. "That box ain't gonna stand up to me an' a twenty-pounder for too long."

"I think we should use that as a last resort," Sandra suggested. "If we break it so that it doesn't open properly, the children could be trapped or injured."

"Sandra's pretty handy," Slide mentioned. "She's picked locks before."

"Slide!" Sandra scolded. "Honestly, you'll have everyone thinking I'm a common criminal. And besides, I didn't 'pick the lock.' I just took the damned thing apart and it opened right up."

"It had me foxed for hours," Slide admitted.

"What was behind this lock, if I might be so bold?" asked Gina.

"Oh, one of Old Man Simon's trunks," Sandra dismissed. "Spent hours cracking that thing open and the most valuable thing was the trunk itself. Nothing but century-old pants and a few bits and bobs. A bunch of meaningless papers."

"There was his diary," Slide recalled. "Sandra, why don't we both go to the house? You can get your kit and try your hand at this one. I'll see if I can find some sort of clue in the diary or his other papers."

1730 – Nora

Ignatius walked back to Nora, his home of many generations that stood on the south bank of the Fennec-Raven canal, at the very eastern edge of town. Something about how cocksure the others were on the legality of entering Reality felt like a shard under his claw. As he crossed the bridge to the canal which landed on his back lawn, it seemed rather irritating to him that there were people who hadn't spent a day of their lives studying Remun who would assume they knew more about the Pedestra Charta than he did. He had left all of the doors open to his home to air it out and, thus, strolled through the rear entrance without breaking stride.

"Think you know more about the Pedestra Charta than I do, eh?" he muttered as he filled his kettle with water and turned on the gas.

"Well, we'll just see about *that*," he challenged as he pulled out his only copy of the Pedestra Charta. He had purchased it twenty years ago, shortly after his entrance to university to study law and, as most law students did, he then filled it with notes and scribbles and had dog-eared numerous pages. Also, like most law students, he had not had much cash at the time, so it was an inexpensive copy, in a rather unassuming, saddle-stitched, cloth hard-cover with black ink titles and somewhat questionable interpretation. He had left it untouched since graduation.

The Pedestra Charta, in and of itself, was not a very large document. In its native Remun, it was barely 10,000 words and only occupied about 30 pages of the book. The remaining two inches of paper that made up the vast majority of the book were 683 pages of translation, commentary, opinions and other useless information.

Ignatius sipped his tea as he turned another yellowed page of his aging text.

He knew that it might be necessary to get other people involved to get the cabinet open. If entering Reality was illegal, that could present a problem; asking innocent people to involve themselves in illegal activities could result in his disbarment, at the very least. However, if he could present a case that what they were doing was legal, none of this would be a concern. Despite this, he knew that the idea he had brewing in his head could land him in serious trouble if he didn't do things just right. And even if he did do things just right, it could still be extremely awkward.

But first, he had to find a loophole. He knew, deep within his cunning mind (that Foxes were rumoured to have), that somewhere, hidden within all that

legalese in a dead language, there was an out, a catch, a finagle, a wiggle of some sort.

"Ahhhaaa," he whispered as he leaned forward to inspect the print more closely. "I spy with my little eye . . ." He grinned. *This is it*, he thought. *The flaw in an otherwise perfect suit of armour*. Jumping up, he grabbed a Remun-English dictionary and looked up a word. *It's just as I've always thought – it's the wrong conjugation*. He checked his dictionary some more. *In fact, it's not any of the conjugations*. He looked at the reference one last time. *In fact, it's an entirely different word*. He looked up the different word and found the appropriate conjugation. *But, that would mean . . .*

His visage briefly clouded. This very important conclusion was too significant to trust to a twentieth-generation transliteration owned by a mayor of a very small town, who'd bought the least expensive version as a law student.

For this little project, he needed a better source. He had been looking for an excuse to visit Trinova for some time anyway, and a trip to the city's enormous library for a good copy and translation of the Pedestra Charta would be more than sufficient. But he knew he would need some help. *I need someone who knows more about philosophy and other dangerous ideas*, he told himself. *Someone who's a bit of a rebel but would avoid doing anything stupid*.

But whom?

His train of thought was interrupted by the sound of footsteps ascending the cellar stairs. An Erinac wearing overalls with a logo appeared, making notes on a clipboard.

"Sorry, gov," the Hedgehog apologised. "You don't mind that I let meself in to do the inventory?"

Within the confines of Otterstow, Nora's cellar was legendary. From the stone floor to the rough-hewn rafters, stood racks of bottles and stacks of barrels of every imaginable form of alcohol known to brewer, vintner and distiller, from all corners of the world.

Despite this boon, Ignatius took most of his drink at the Black Kettle pub, where he willingly paid for it, as he preferred company with his alcohol. And though he would certainly partake from the contents of the cellar on a regular basis, the vast majority was actually consumed by his constituents. Reasoning that they had paid for it to begin with, he regularly entertained.

Every month, without fail, the drinks distributor would drop by to do an inventory and to top up any missing supplies.

"No, not at all," Ignatius dismissed. "What's the score this time?"

"A bit light this time. Just a few bottles here and there. Already put in the allotment from last month. Sign here?" the Erinac offered the clipboard.

Ignatius signed at the bottom. "Sorry we can't be a better customer."

"Oh, I daresay the fewer bottles, the better," the Erinac suggested. "Next month, then." And with that, he waddled off, not giving Ignatius time to question him about his unusual statement.

His clock chimed and, noticing it was half-past seven, he decided that he should soon make a move to the Black Kettle, as the parents of Grace and Simon might wish to discuss any new developments.

2000 – Black Kettle Pub

Thaddeus dragged himself into the pub and sat wearily on a stool, which squealed in protest. He was not a small Badger and fat was a very tiny percentage of his constitution. He had the usual black and white markings of his Genra, along with some grey due to age. Being just slightly older than Ignatius, his muzzle was also beginning to show hints of white. He kept his fex short, nearly as short as his fur, causing him to look almost feral, an effect he actually desired, as it looked somewhat intimidating.

"Pete?" he beseeched the Ursa behind the bar.

"Pint of?" Pete DunBerr asked, grabbing a glass and filling it before being answered, thus making his own question rhetorical.

"Ta be refilt 'til skailin time, if ye'd be sa kind."

Linda OakSquirrel climbed onto the back of his stool, wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders and ran her substantial tail around his waist. "Aww. Is ickle T'addums all shagged out fwom 'avin' to do his PD? Hmm?" she asked in a little-girl voice. "Maybe ickle T'addums just needs a good shagging out to makums feel better?" she teased, giving his pectorals a squeeze.

Linda was just under thirty, very fit and proportioned well, despite being short, although at four foot four, she was of average height for a Sciuran. She had crimson fur, except for the cream of her front and a few darker highlights here and there. Her long fex, a darker red nearing carmine, was long and plaited, hanging down her front over her shoulder to the side of her ample breast. Those who knew Linda usually used the word 'flirt' in their description of her, typically preceded by words such as 'shameless,' 'brazen,' and 'unabashed.'

"Ah, gerroff, ye shameless Con," Thaddeus laughed.

"Give us some sugar, first," Linda ordered.

"Ah, for Jack's . . ." He relented and gave her a kiss on the cheek and she jumped to her seat, next to his. "Ye're such a fur-blur, Linda, ye are."

"Don't see *you* complaining," Linda taunted. "Except about your PD – like you're the only that has to do it, you big whiny-baby."

"Na, isna the PD – is the travellin atween the office an here what's got me jeeked. Is over far ta juist take the half-hour for lunch. I hafta come here ta eat, set aboot two-three hours, do ma PD an then back ta the office for four hours. I'm no away hame 'til nearby seven!"

"Still – the PD just makes it worse," Pete conjectured.

"Na, 'tis the high point o ma day," Thaddeus protested. "Is gaun back ta the grind what brings me doun."

"Honestly?" asked Pete, handing him his pint.

"Oh, aye."

"You actually *like* PD?" asked Linda.

"Is a right dawdle – well, isna quite like a douk in whisky. An I must admit, there is *one* flee in the aintment."

"Ah, now we get to the troof," Pete said.

"Dinna misunnerstaund, Pete. I do love the weans . . ."

"You?" asked an astonished Clare. "Like children? This is news to me."

"Oh, aye," confirmed Thaddeus. "All the bairns, ivery one. Is a treat ta hear 'em gigglin away. Isna the weans a'tall what shaves ma arse."

"No, wouldn't be," Pete observed. "Not tall enough. So . . . what then?"

"I am sa scunnert o playin the bad man. I declare, I dinna knaw why I put up with it. Juist the once, I'd raither the role o the kindly, youthful saul I am, no this 'cross and angry' stuff."

"Youtful?" Pete blinked. "Not bein' unkind, but yer older'n me."

"And I, as well," Ignatius added.

"Juist by a month or two," the Melan defended.

"And it *is* the role o' Badgers, generally speakin'," Pete pointed out.

"Juist ma point, an isna fair, izzit?" Thaddeus WhinnisBrocc complained.

"Okay, I'll free admit; I'm a Badger, an I *may* have a wee bit o temper . . ."

"A wee bit?" Ignatius interrupted. "Tad, be fair."

"All right then, a middlin temper," Thaddeus admitted. "But there are a lot o things I'm no. I'm no mean."

"No fault there," Rachael MarchHare declared. "Buys me an' Sister a drink nearly every day," she added, referring to her twin sister Clare.

"Sister and me," Clare corrected. "And only after we've bought our rounds."

Clare and Rachael MarchHare were identical twins and, not surprisingly, had identical faces and a healthy height at five-eight (plus the usual extra foot for the ears). Their pelage was also of identical colouring, being a medium grey with a white ventral area from the throat, downward. Those three characteristics and their ages were the complete extent of their equalities.

Despite being identical twins, or perhaps because of it, Clare and Rachael MarchHare rarely agreed on anything. It was almost as if they were in a contest to demonstrate to the world how different they could be from each other in order to establish themselves as individuals. Rachael was substantially brawnier than her sister, who was very bookish and not inclined to much physical activity. Rachael wore her fex in sort of a rakish pixie-cut that was obviously bleached (and occasionally dyed) from the natural match of the grey fur on her body; Clare wore her fex long, straight and simple, combed to the back, with its natural, dark grey colour. Rachael also had a penchant for lots of trinkets and jewellery (mostly ear piercings – after all, a Hare had lots of ear to pierce), whereas Clare rarely used either. Having come of age only two short years ago, they were now barely eighteen and were just beginning their Portrayals for some of the simpler fables.

Technically, the twins were cousins to Grace ParsleyHare; in practice, they were sisters. The three girls always referred to each other as the latter and also referred to Gina as their mother. To the three teenage girls, that was the end of the story.

For Gina, however, there was a beginning. Between her and her younger brother, she had always been considered as the more pragmatic one and, thus, was left the family business just before the parents took retirement to some sunny spot in the colonies to while away their golden years. Not to leave little brother out in the cold, it was stipulated that Gina should provide him food and shelter. There were numerous harsh words spoken between the two adult

children concerning the situation, mostly surrounding concepts such as fairness, work ethic, lack of vision, overindulgence and so on.

Feeling that he should make his own way in the world, Gina's brother took his girlfriend to Trinova to try and make a living treading the boards. He did meet with some success, however none of it was with acting.

They both returned to Otterstow precisely one year later with the newborns, Clare and Rachael, in tow. They then announced to Gina that they were going to travel the world as thespians.

There was, of course, an argument.

Gina had told the young couple that they were (among other things) incapable of supporting the twins and not fit to be parents. In hindsight, she came to realise that that had, perhaps, not been the wisest course of action. They had taken Gina at her word and disappeared the very next morning leaving a note stating that they agreed with her in principle. They also left the twins, unceremoniously dumping the infants into Gina's miniscule lap, declaring that as Gina owned the Black Kettle, had a steady income and wasn't going anywhere, she could provide them with a stable environment.

Thus it was that Gina was left, quite literally, holding the babies. She was very displeased with this turn of events, but as the alternative was to leave the twins at an orphanage, she reluctantly took them in. This was not to say she did not care for her new charges. She had nothing but unqualified love for the girls, and had since dedicated her life to browbeating and bullying them into healthy, well-adjusted adults.

The very day after the adoption, as if deigned by fate, Pete Dunberr had strolled into town from Trinova for reasons known only to him. Gina had been in the habit of keeping the twins in their cots while serving at the bar and on this particular day, whilst being rushed off her feet during a lunch crowd, two punters decided to start trading blows just as the twins began crying. Realising Gina was at her wit's end, Pete sprang into action. Within a span of a few minutes, he was holding Rachael in a fresh pair of nappies, whilst pulling a pint for punters in a peaceful pub. As Gina powdered Clare, she looked on in wonder at the Ursan, who was indulging Rachael's singular curiosity of the taps.

Although care and feeding of the girls was not specifically mentioned during his job interview (which lasted for approximately a dozen words altogether), over the years he had diapered, washed, fed, clothed, advised, punished, consoled, encouraged and entertained the twins. Not once had he been asked to do any of these tasks.

Grace had come about through more prosaic means, being the result of a whirlwind romance gone bad. Her biological father had no desire to be involved and Gina readily agreed. They parted company with civility and, by mutual agreement, their sole correspondence involved a monthly cheque for the next sixteen years.

"Still, 'e puts in," Rachael defended. "Not like ovvers I could mention."

"Right, here we go," Clare rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "Let's drag it all out again . . ."

"Ladies, if I might continua," the Badger interrupted, hoping to avoid the all-too-familiar family argument. "Maist o all, I must object ta the idea that I'm some sorta recluse. I love the company o ma mates. I'm in the pub wi the rest o ye's naurby ivery day. Why, I must have the largest bar tab in the hale town, eh Pete?"

"Well, no," Pete DunBerr corrected as he polished a glass. "Now, if ya exclude Horses an' Bears o' course, but then again . . ."

"Oh, aye, I'm juist a Melan," Thaddeus protested, "I canna drink like a Horse, can I, but poond for poond . . ."

"Yeah, pound for pound, o' course," Pete conceded. "The Pigs are pretty good drinkers . . ."

"Hey, man! That's 'Suvan,' if you please," objected Geoff ThistleBoar. Geoff, at sixty-six, was older than the other regulars of the pub and the hair that covered his body was nearly half white from age. His mane, which was braided from the front of his forehead, down the length of his back still maintained the darkness that it had in his youth and was still thick and full.

"*Suvan*. O' course. Sorry, 'bout that," Pete apologised, although not sincerely as Geoff was smiling.

"Oh, come now, Geoff," Linda called across the bar, "you've always been my favourite piece of pork."

They were all the very closest of friends and, as friends do, they would taunt and jibe at the other's weakest points. Linda's remark, although spoken to Geoff was directed at Ignatius. Knowing that the mayor was obsessively civil and polite, she had a gift for turning a phrase that could scandalize, without being overtly vulgar. The double-entendre, although obviously sexual, was also a reference to Geoff as a domestic animal, specifically raised for the sole purpose of being eaten. It was the latter meaning which was actually more offensive.

Geoff, however, was not the one offended. In fact, he snorted in amusement as he observed Ignatius flinching from distaste at Linda's dysphemism.

Pete continued, pretending not to notice Linda's little coup. "In fact, Tad, ya do drink quite a bit here. An' despite bein' a full six stone lighter, I daresay ya could easily out-drink the average Equan wif a minimum of effort."

"That's enough, thank ye," Thaddeus said, wishing to list his other virtues. "An although I have a moderate temper, am no tight, an very sociable, I am ayeways portrayt as ithergates. Why dis I ayeways hafta be the bad guy? Why izzit ayeways 'Badger was so rankled that he swore and stamped his feet,' eh? Have I iver swore? Iver?"

"Yes," was the unanimous and simultaneous reply of those at the bar.

"Aye, fair enough, then. But I niver stamps ma feet, no eva."

Everyone about the bar looked at each other, nodding in concession.

Ignatius spoke, breaking the lull. "Well, in principal, we do agree with you, Tad, but what can we do about it? I mean, that's the image you're supposed to portray."

"An what about you?" Tad countered. "Ye're ayeways seen as bein sleekit an deceitful. An ye couldna tell a lee ta save yer tail!"

"True, but I'm not whining about it, am I?" Ignatius pointed out. "Now Tad, we all know that you're not the character you portray, nor are most of us. We

can't do anything about it, so let's have another round and talk about something else. Otherwise, you'll just get your hackles up and aggravate your ulcer," he suggested.

"Well, who says we canna do nought about it? I mean ta say, who says I have ta be cantankerous an reclusive an you have ta be the sly cheat, eh? Why canna we change, eh?" Thaddeus was becoming emotional. "We shouldna be deemed by the stripe o our fur, but by the character o our deeds an the truth o our words. We been telt sa syne we were bairns."

Ignatius thought this was an odd statement coming from Thaddeus given his blatant disdain for humans. However, Ignatius decided not to pursue the matter at the moment as Thaddeus was already in an irritated state.

Clare, however, had a ready explanation to provide to Thaddeus' question. "Because the Portrayals rely on an archetypal iconography," she idly stated, taking a sip of her beer.

A pall of silence filled the area as everyone stopped to look at Clare.

"What?" she said self-consciously.

"What in Jack's name dis *that* mean?" Thaddeus ejaculated.

"It means every kind of animal has symbolic characteristics," Linda explained. "Geez, don't you people know *anything*?"

Pete added, "It also means Clare's been readin' again."

"Well . . . what if I have?" Clare objected. "It's no sin to read. You lot should try it some time. Do all of you some good."

"Maist o ma day is spent readin'," Thaddeus objected.

"I wasn't talking about prospectuses and white papers," Clare replied.

"Then what sorta readin d'ya think might better us?" asked Thaddeus.

"I dunno," Clare shrugged. "Certainly not that pap they have the nerve to call newspapers. Maybe a story *without* a moral, or even some non-fiction for a change . . . history, or . . . or philosophy. Something besides those bloody fables."

"The Beuk has ayeways doon right by me," Thaddeus countered.

"I know this might come as a great shock to you but, contrary to popular belief, the Book of Common Portrayal is not the sole source of wisdom and knowledge."

"D'ye hear all this, Ig," Thaddeus complained. "Ma taxes pay the salary for this lass, mind."

"I happen to agree with her," Ignatius proclaimed calmly.

"Oh, dis ye nou?" Thaddeus said. "Is the slippery slope, Ig, I'm tellin ye. Next you know, she'll be sayin there's na need for PD."

"I never said *that!*" Clare protested, in fear of her job and, to no small degree, her liberty.

"Oh, behave, Thaddeus," Ignatius dismissed the charge, much to Clare's relief. "She has a better PD record than you do, and she complains about it substantially less, I hasten to add."

"Mebbe aye an mebbe na," Thaddeus conceded, "but she'd do well ta ken the Beuk is the moral compass o our society. Athoot it, our culture wad decline into the Dark Era."

"That's not what I'm on about at all," Clare remonstrated. "As Moral Compasses go, the BCP serves its purpose very well. My point is that everyone should do some reading outside of what's required. And not just outside the Book, but outside of the news, outside of our studies, outside of our jobs."

"Oh, aye? An what if this 'outside' readin puts some ideas into the heads o the more . . . impressionable types roond here?" asked Thaddeus, pointedly.

"That *would* be the general idea," Ignatius pointed out.

"An what if these 'outside' ideas cause 'em ta do something rash?" Thaddeus continued his train of thought.

"We tried living in ignorance, centuries ago. It didn't work out very well, by all accounts," Ignatius countered. "Besides, just as the best laid schemes gang aft a-gley, not every rash action results in ruin."

"Well, if His Honour, the Mayor o Otterstow decrees . . ." Thaddeus conceded, albeit with a hint of sarcasm.

"Course, it'd be a damn sight easier to read something else if we had a library," Geoff added.

"Niver let it be said I didna provide fair warnin'," Thaddeus absolved himself of Otterstow's future descent into chaos.

"It's never been brought up before," Ignatius said, referring to Geoff's comment, rather than Thaddeus' warning.

"I dinna know why I waste ma breath," Thaddeus grumbled.

"Could Otterstow have a library?" asked Clare.

Ignatius paused in thought as his tail swirled about. "I suppose it's doable. But it might take substantially more than the usual paperwork. I'd have to get some support from the . . . We're straying from the point, here. How did this thread get started again?" Ignatius adjusted his waistcoat in thought. He looked pensive for a second or two and flicked his brush to clear his mind.

"Symbols," reminded Linda.

"Ah, yes, symbols," Ignatius recalled. "Yes, the point I was trying to make earlier is that, as Clare has so eloquently stated, the characters we portray are symbols. And for that reason, our Portrayals to the children have to be consistent. If we were to change roles frequently, then we wouldn't be very good symbols, would we? The poor children would get mixed messages and become all confused and have trouble understanding what the Portrayal is supposed to be about."

"Oh, aye," Thaddeus agreed. "Consistency! That's what the Beuk dis well for the bairns. They're needin that stability, that fastness."

"But you were complaining that you didn't like being the symbol that Badgers portray," Clare pointed out.

"Aye, I dinna like it," Thaddeus answered, his patience thinning. "But I dis it all the same, for the sake o the weans I care about."

"But what if the character is a symbol of change?" asked Geoff.

"Whatcha mean by that?" asked Thaddeus.

"Well, there are some symbols of change," Geoff answered. "The tides . . . the moon . . ."

"But that's different," objected Clare. "They're inanimate."

"Not only that, they ain't alive," added Rachael as Clare sighed patiently. "They ain't got no brains nor 'earts nor nuffin' to decide what they wanna do, do they?" She nodded to herself in agreement.

"What about chameleons," suggested Geoff. "They're alive. And they change."

"Aye," agreed Thaddeus. "But there arna lizards what can talk."

"That's not true," Geoff countered. "There's several Portrayals where lizards have speaking roles."

"In the Beuk, aye, but there arna talkin reptiles in our world," Thaddeus explained.

"A Leper is a symbol o' change," suggested Rachael eagerly.

"A what?" asked Thaddeus.

"A Leper. Y'know, that big Kitty wif spots on 'im."

Thaddeus laughed. "Oh, aye, a *Leopard*," he enunciated clearly. "An exactly what way is a Leopard a symbol o change?"

"Well, he changes his spots, dunhe?" answered Rachael confidently.

"No, he does *not*," Clare took the opportunity to point out. "In fact Leopards are famous for *not* changing their spots. They are a symbol of consistency and *not* changing."

"Ow would you know? 'Ave ya ever seen one?" Rachael turned to Pete.

"'Ave we ever 'ad a Leopard in the Black Kettle, Pete?"

"Wouldn't think so," Pete said. "Don't get many visitors in 'ere from the next shire, much less outside The Kingdom."

"You don't have to see one to know it's a symbol," explained Clare, exasperated.

"If ya can't see it, 'ow's ye know it never changes? Eh? Answer that one, li'l Miss SmartyCottonTail," challenged Rachael.

"Enough, girls," warned Pete.

Clare was a bit put out that Pete wasn't going to let her respond, but held her tongue. Rachael, however, observed no such decorum.

"Well, she's such a . . ." Rachael didn't finish her comment as she noticed the look on Pete's face.

"As I was saying, we can but only be the best that we can be, otherwise." Ignatius finished, feeling that he finally got to finish his point.

"Otherwise what?" asked Thaddeus.

"Well, when we're not otherwise portraying," answered Ignatius.

"You mean when we're no doin PD?" Thaddeus asked for clarification. "Sa, 'outside' o our Portrayals, we may do as we like?"

"Within reason," Ignatius qualified. "You don't have to portray a symbol all the time. Just when you're portraying it."

"Tell me this, then," Thaddeus began a postulate. "When dis our Portrayal get made? When is it made oot that Badger's guan ta stamp his feet, an when is it decided that Fox is guan ta steal the custard? When exactly wad that be?"

Ignatius looked about the room. Everyone was staring at him, waiting for his answer. He shrugged. "Shave me if I know, mate."

A few of the patrons murmured amongst each other. It was a rare day when Ignatius didn't know the answer, or at least have one.

After a brief pause among the hubbub, Geoff suggested, "I should think that it's when we're being written about."

"Oh, aye? When's that, then?" Thaddeus asked.

"When the pen meets the paper, I s'pose," answered Geoff.

"How can we tell when that is?" objected Thaddeus.

"An' 'oo does all this writin', anyways?" asked Rachael.

"Auffors, I'd imagine," suggested Pete, sarcastically.

"Playwrights," Clare added to Pete's dig.

"Poets as well," said Slide HolenWulf. The others looked a little startled, as he had remained silent until now, perhaps preoccupied by other thoughts.

"People that write poems," he felt compelled to explain to the staring crowd.

"But all Portrayals, whether prose or poetry, have to be approved by the Portrayal Endorsement Committee. And they haven't approved a new apologue since the reign of King John VII, over eighty years ago."

"There's our taxes at work," Pete complained. "Eighty years o' committee meetin's wiffout accomplishin' a bleedin' thing."

"I don't think it matters who wrote it," said Slide, "or when. It's what they wrote about us."

"Aye, an they wrote whatever they wanted," said Thaddeus. "Juist ma point from the very start. I'm ayeways mean, ill-tempered an the like. They dinna hafta be bathered with the truth – after all, why let the truth get in the way o a guid story?"

"So end o' the day, it's nuffin' to do wif us, izzit?" Rachael pointed out. "We coulda been perfect li'l goody-goats or we coulda gone out to plunder an' pillage the countryside an' they'd still've written the same old rubbish, whever it's true or not. Foxes are clever, Mice are timid, Lions are brave . . ."

"Rachael certainly has a point," Clare added. "They didn't have much imagination, these writers. Always the same old stereotypes."

Everybody looked so surprised that Clare and Rachael had agreed on something, that it actually brought a lull to the conversation, if only briefly.

"Sa we may as well do what we will," Thaddeus stated. "Be ourselves. I mean, we're shaved if we dis an shaved if we disna – well, at least I am, onywey."

"Hmph. Try being a Pig, sometime," Geoff commented. "Oo, sorry. Boar, make that."

"Or the Big Bad Wolf," added Slide. The others nodded at his suggestion, acceding that he had the strongest complaint of the three. Slide, although not quite as good as Miss Goody's Good Dessert Goodies, ran a very close second.

"Right. Sa if we dinna meet the image o the Common Beuk, then shave the bastards!" Thaddeus proclaimed.

The chatter of the Black Kettle digressed into other conversations that Ignatius didn't care to participate in. This was partly because he had had enough for the moment but it was also because he was hoping to talk with the parents of Simon and Grace. He briefly watched as Clare held her own against Thaddeus and several others at the bar.

Quite the rebel, Clare, he observed silently.

He took his pint and moved to a large, empty table.

After a few minutes, he observed Sandra as she walked into the Kettle and exchanged a few pleasantries with Slide. They summoned Pete and all three came to sit with Ignatius.

"Any progress?" Ignatius asked.

"Nothing," Slide sighed in frustration. "I spent all my time scouring the attic and the cellar, trying to find something in a diary or the like from her Old Man Simon – with no luck, I should add."

"I tried bangin' away at it wif a maul a dozen times," Pete added. "Just bounces right off. Don't even leave a mark or nuffin!"

"I don't know who built that monstrosity, but it is absolutely seamless," Sandra moaned rubbing her eyes in frustration. "I couldn't find a crack wide enough to stick a scalpel into. And that lock – there's nothing to pick. It doesn't even have a keyhole. There aren't any numbers or moving parts or anything. It's like it's there just for decoration."

"I did find a little something," Ignatius said quietly.

Six ears were turned immediately in his direction.

"Didja plan on tellin' us, or shall we wait for the telegram?" asked Pete.

"Don't you think we should have Gina present?" suggested Ignatius.

"I'll be happy to brief her when I relieve her at midnight," Sandra suggested.

"I'll take that as a 'no', then, shall I?" Ignatius asked rhetorically. "Very well – In reference to our question as to whether it is illegal to enter Reality, I think it's perfectly okay."

"Izzit?" asked Pete, incredulous.

"No, no, that can't be right," Slide shook his head.

Ignatius sighed patiently at their dismissals. "Well, Sandra? Do you wish to second-guess my legal skills as well?"

"You said you *think* so," Sandra noted.

"Just so," Ignatius acknowledged.

"So you're not completely sure."

"No, I freely admit, I'm not completely sure. That's why I'll have to make a quick trip to the Met Library at Trinova."

Pete rolled his eyes. "Typical. Children's lives at stake an' ya wanna waste your time seein' if it's legal to walk inside a box. Just what a solicitor would do."

"I have to agree with Pete," Slide added. "Knowing that doesn't put us any closer to opening the box."

"We've already had this discussion," Ignatius mentioned. "Although I am going to Trinova to research the legality question, I have another, more important reason – I have one last source who might know something about how to open the cabinet."

"Who's that?" asked Slide.

"You remember our neighbour, Liza?" Ignatius reminded him. "She works at the Met Library."

"Liza Prigel?" asked Sandra. "Why would she know anything?"

"She and my parents were great friends all the time I was growing up," Ignatius answered. "Maybe they told her something."

"Then let's give 'er a ring on the dog, right now," Pete suggested. "Why wait?"

"You didn't know Liza very well, did you?" asked Ignatius.

"No, honestly," Pete admitted. "I was leavin' Big Smoke just when she was movin' there. Tradin' places, sorta thing. But what's it hafta do wif givin' 'er a ring?"

Sandra was losing her patience. "Look, with all due respect, our children could be in mortal peril and you're pussyfooting around. Pete's right - let's just give her a ring."

"As you wish," Ignatius conceded. He turned to the bar. "Johnny? Johnny Prigel, could you come here for a minute?"

An Erinac, perhaps in his late twenties approached the table. He was quite diminutive, being short even for a Hedgehog, barely passing four and a half feet. He wore rather shabby clothes and generally maintained an unkempt appearance. His face and pectoral region, including his arms and legs, were a soft, tawny fur with his fex being sort of a spiky blonde. His dorsal region, however, was an entirely different matter.

Although it was more of a courtesy than the rule of law, Hedgehogs were expected to keep their quills clipped, so as to avoid accidental injury to those nearby and to reduce property damage. However, it was also generally acknowledged by everyone else that to do so required a great deal of time and effort. In fact, maintaining a completely pointless pelt was nearly impossible for an Erinac unless they wished to go through the rather painful procedure of having the quills extracted. Even then, this was merely a temporary solution. Johnny, feeling that clipping quills was an unfair waste of time, rarely did so. As a result, he wore shirts that were bare all the way down to the small of his back, where the quills stopped. Even the other Erinacs thought this was embarrassing, if not disgraceful, behaviour. Although an otherwise amiable person, Johnny did not care.

"Yessir, what can I do for Yer Honour?" Johnny asked. "Round of pints?"

"We'd like to give your mother, Liza, a ring. Do you have her telephone number?" Ignatius asked him.

Johnny, sensing that this was a display more than an actual question, picked up the thread. "Why no, Yer Honour, I would not happen to have a telephone number for my mum."

"You don't have your own mum's phone number?" asked Sandra, amazed. "What about her rover handle?"

"Not that neither."

"What kind of son are you?"

"The old fashioned sort," Johnny replied. "See, Mum doesn't do phones and she certainly don't do rovers. She does either post or standin' on 'er doorstep."

"I can understand not doing rovers, but she doesn't do phones?" asked Sandra, incredulous.

"That's right. See, Mum had the eight of us – and she sorta got put off with all of us ringin' her up allatime, 'cause all we ever asked for was money, or to put us up for a while or to mind our sprogs for a fortnight or to . . ."

"All right, all right, I get the picture," Sandra interrupted.

"So, she tells us, either come by in person, if it's so damned important, or drop a card in the post. And if she don't get a card on her birthday, every single year, then we're out of the will. Will there be anythin' else Yer Honour?"

"No, thank you, Johnny," Ignatius answered.

Johnny departed.

"So we're agreed?" asked Ignatius.

There was a general mumble of assent, but nothing definite in terms of disagreement.

"Erm, look, why don't you stop by Nora, after the Kettle closes," Ignatius invited. "We can all have a little something – take our minds off the situation."

As this seemed to brighten their moods slightly, Ignatius excused himself momentarily.

For the next twenty minutes, Ignatius stood patiently by as he watched Clare slowly dissect, dismember and bury Thaddeus' view of horse-and-sparrow economics.

Eventually, Thaddeus took the opportunity of getting some relief, although more from Clare's disputation, rather than from his bladder.

"Hello Clare," Ignatius said with a smile.

"Good evening, Your Honour," she answered politely.

"I must say, you seem to be rather knowledgeable about the world of economics," Ignatius admired. "You certainly gave Thaddeus some food for thought."

"Well, be fair," Clare admitted, "his perspective is *somewhat* coloured by the fact that he makes his living as a stockbroker."

"Yes, I suppose it would be. Busy tomorrow?" he asked.

"I've PD tomorrow. And you have me dusting the Town Hall."

Although Clare's legal guardian, Gina, owned the Black Kettle, she preferred as much as possible to make her own way in the world. To this end, she took menial work for the town of Otterstow, thus making Ignatius her employer.

"You'll still have PD, but would you prefer something besides dusting?" Ignatius offered.

"I'd rather do the dusting and skip PD," Clare answered. "But sure, I'm game. What do you have in mind?"

"Fancy a train ride?"

2100 – Rialto Living Quarters

Grace and Simon had wasted no time in exploring what lay on the other side of the tunnel. They soon determined it was a derelict, old theatre (apparently named the Rialto) with some comfortable, if unkempt, living quarters upstairs. After exploring for the remainder of the day, they didn't find anyone about but it was clear that the building was currently inhabited. It also had a ubiquitous stench of tobacco from cellar to ceiling.

They were in the middle of their exploration when Simon suddenly recalled something important.

"Oh, sif!" he grimaced, slapping his forehead.

"What? What is it?" Grace asked, concerned. Simon rarely used vulgarity and when he did, she knew it was something important.

"I was supposed to meet Graeme DunHors to help with the horses! Oh, bloody hell. He'll be furious and never ask me again. And I was supposed to get a ride as well. Oh, damn!" He stamped his foot.

Grace knew about Simon's love for horses and dared not belittle it.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Si. I wished I'd known. I woulda waited until after your ride to bring you here."

Simon sighed. "Oh, well. Too late now. C'mon, let's finish exploring."

It was well after dark before they noticed that they were hungry. Making their way to the kitchen, they found an aging refrigerator that rattled and hummed, along with a neglected food cupboard filled with dozens of tins and jars of outdated food, opposite a sink filled with dirty dishes growing mouldy in the water in which they had been left to soak, apparently for quite some time.

Grace, feeling peckish, opened the tatty curtain that didn't quite conceal the pantry and began to investigate some of the tins as Simon braved the refrigerator.

"Oo, look, spaghetti!" Grace announced, brandishing a tin with a picture of the contents. "Don't know about you, but I could murder a bowl of this! And look, it's got little meatballs in."

Meanwhile, Simon had twisted the lid off a container he had procured from the refrigerator. He had a sniff and, smelling a just slightly salty aroma, put his claw in, scooped up a tiny sample and put it in his mouth. He instantly regretted it. "Billeeeech! This is absolutely revolting! Tastes like ear wax!" Returning the objectionable condiment to its place, he scouted around a little more, using his nose more than his eyes. "Hmm. This smells interesting," he said.

Meanwhile, Grace was opening the drawers and poking around to find something to open the tin and a couple of spoons. "Bloody sif, where's the opener?" she mumbled.

"Honestly, Grace," Simon admonished quietly. "Your language, sometimes . . ."

"Oh, don't be such a twat, Si," she said, rifling through the next drawer.

Simon picked up a small, plastic box which bore no labels beyond a single embossed word.

"Hmm. It says 'burpware' . . . Wonder what that tastes like?" He peeled off the lid and stuck his nose inside. "Phwoar! What a pong!" he commented, instantly closing it and stuffing it back inside the refrigerator. "I don't know what burpware is, but I sure don't want any!"

Abandoning the lower section of the refrigerator, he explored the freezer and found some white plastic bags covered in frost. A little wary after his last experiment, he pulled one of the bags out and was relieved to see a clear label along with an embellished illustration of the contents.

"Chicken nuggets?" he read out loud.

"Didn't know chickens had nuggets," Grace responded looking up from a drawer that was devoid of openers. She opened another drawer. "HA! Result!" she said, holding aloft the opener. "Now for some spoons."

"Bet they're all in there," Simon mentioned, pointing to the basin of self-dirtying dishes.

"They'll need cleaning, then," Grace said. "At least there's running water."

"I see a second tap, and it's got an 'aytch' on it," Simon observed, "so obviously for hot, but I don't see the heater or a switch or a burner or anything."

They stared at the sink for a moment in silent deliberation.

Without saying a word, Grace grabbed the knob labelled 'H' and gave it a spin. After a splutter or two, water began to come out of the faucet.

"What're you doing?" asked Simon.

"I bet hot water comes out," she conjectured.

"Nah, never happen," he countered. "Otherwise, they'd have to keep the water hot all the time. The gas bill would be horrendous."

"It's going to overflow," Grace said.

"Probably a plug in the bottom of the sink," Simon suggested.

"I'm not reaching into that matty mess!" Grace announced.

"You turned it on," Simon pointed out.

"Still not sticking my hand in that filth," Grace stated.

Simon sighed and stuck his hand into the grimy, black water. He felt around and, within seconds, located a plug, which he pulled out, allowing the water to drain.

"Hey, there's steam coming from that water," Simon said. As he had described, little wisps of vapour were emanating from the column of flowing water.

Grace stuck her finger out to feel under the water. She had just touched it when she drew it back instantly.

"It's hot!" she announced proudly.

"Is it?" asked Simon. He stuck his hand under the water and instantly withdrew it. "Shave me! It *is* hot!"

Grace looked at the taps. "Ha! I *was* right. They got hot *running* water!"

Simon turned the 'C' knob a bit and cautiously felt the water. "All the water heaters I've seen make just a trickle or they take ages." He tested the water again. "Seems about right now. Let's wash the dishes and eat."

Grace found a towel and dried the dishes and stacked them away after Simon had washed them. When they were finished, she opened the tin and spooned a little out on two separate plates. Each of them had a taste.

"Hmm," said Grace, sceptically.

"Yes," said Simon. "It's not quite like home. But we're not exactly at home and we don't have a lot of options."

They ate in silence. When they had finished, Grace suggested they explore the rest of the building.

After cleaning up after themselves, they entered the bathroom.

"I can guess what that's for," Grace said, pointing to the toilet, "although it doesn't look quite like what we use for raising our tails at home. And those're obvious," she said, indicating the basin and the bath. "But what's that?" she asked, pointing at what appeared to be some sort of booth that was, apart from some minor hardware, made almost entirely of glass. "Looks like a phone box, without the phone in."

Simon walked up to the glass fixture. "According to this little plaque here, it's 'Bertie Proudfoot's Fur dryer'." There was a handle on the glass door and Simon reasoned, quite correctly, that handles were made to be pulled, so he did just that. As a result of his efforts, one side of the glass booth opened. Shrugging, he stepped inside and, without thinking, pulled the door closed behind him. The moment he did so, a fan whirred to life and began to blow air from beneath him, releasing a brief flurry of dust. Only slightly frightened, he quickly opened the door to step out. The moment the door opened, the fan stopped. He stepped out. "Did you smell a heater when it turned on?"

"Yeah, like when it hasn't been on for ages. Sort of a burny smell."

"I think it's for drying off after a bath," Simon conjectured.

"Oh, behave, Si. What a ridiculous idea."

"It's what it says on the box. And this is the room where one would take baths. If one were to dry fur, then one must have wet fur and this is the room where that happens."

Grace let this idea soak in for a moment. "Come to think of it, Dad *has* mentioned that some of the rich types in Big Smoke have something like this."

"And I'll bet that bath has hot running water, just like the kitchen." He turned the hot and cold knobs. There was a bit of squawk from the pipes and then a splutter or two, but hot and cold water did come out, just as Simon predicted.

"Bleeding enormous tub," Grace observed.

The two of them watched the water begin to fill the tub. There was a prolonged silence apart from the running water.

Grace looked at Simon and gave him a nudge.

"Huhn?" Simon said, coming out his daze.

Grace was wearing a truly wicked smile. "Wanna take a bath?"

Simon covered his mouth in panic. "Grace!" he whispered. "We're barely fourteen! We can't be . . . naked together!"

"What are you prattling on about, you slaphead! We swam naked in the lake not two months ago!"

"But that was after dark!" Simon said. "And you had me stoned on weed." He looked suspiciously at her. "You always do when you're about to get me in trouble."

"Oh, ferjackssake," she muttered, as she began to take off her clothes as Simon stared silently. "Look if you're going to be such a prude all of a sudden, you can leave the room. Besides, it's not like we're going to do anything."

Simon seemed to regain some of his courage. He stepped cautiously forward and, now that Grace was down to her knickers, he felt more or less obliged to reciprocate and began to pull off his shirt.

Once Grace had completely disrobed, she quickly slipped into the bath.

"Oh, Simon, it's grand! Hurry up and get in while the water's still warm."

Simon, now hurrying, took off his clothes and got into the water.

"Wool!" He said as he lowered his tail into the water. "Ha-ha-haaa-hot-hotototot." He finally managed to get himself almost entirely immersed.

"Isn't this lovely?" asked Grace.

"Yes, very nice," Simon answered, looking in her eyes.

"I found some soap," she mentioned, holding up a bar. "Scrub my front?" she asked.

"Erm . . . yeah. Suppose so," said Simon, taking the soap with a blank stare on his face.

They slowly approached each other and then, closing their eyes, moved in for a kiss.

"Ow!" Simon said. "My nose."

"That big honker of yours poked me in the eye," Grace grumbled, covering her eye.

"Sorry," Simon muttered.

They sat in silence and looked at each other. At first the silence was uncomfortable, but Simon's smile caused Grace's giggle.

They tried again and did it properly.

"We shouldn't be doing this, to be honest," Simon reiterated.

"Oh, stop it," Grace answered. "I've already told you, nothing's going to happen. We're going to take a bath together, use that fur dryer and then get some kip."

"Right. We're just taking a bath . . . and kissing."

"Oh, right. And kissing."

They kissed again.

"But that's all," Grace said, breathlessly. "Nothing more."

"Nothing more," confirmed Simon.

After a thorough scrubbing, they stepped into the glass booth, their brushes at the ready*. As a soft, warm breeze came from beneath, the two exchanged brushes and began to meticulously groom each other. Within minutes their pelts were clean, dry and orderly.

"That is *so* neat," Grace said, stepping out. She looked at her clothes piled on the floor and then frowned. "I feel so clean and fresh. I hate to put those dirty old togs on again."

"They're not all that dirty," Simon said.

Grace thought for a moment more. "Well, I'm not putting them on until I've had some proper kip for the night. Let's see if we can find a place to crash." With that, she scooped up her clothes and walked naked out into the hall.

Simon followed her, still pulling up his trousers.

Grace found a small bedroom with a modest bed in the corner. "Okay, Si, you know the drill."

Over the years, Simon and Grace had actually slept together many times, in the most literal sense of the phrase, i.e., they did nothing else besides sleep. During these many slumber sessions, Grace discovered that she was most comfortable when she slept almost directly on top of Simon. Simon actually found it to be very comfortable as well.

Ten minutes later, they were fast asleep with Simon wearing just his trousers and Grace as naked as the day she was born.

* When one is covered with fur, one *always* carries a brush.

2350 – Nora Balcony

After closing time at the Black Kettle, Sandra StæppanWylf, Slide HolenWulf, and Pete DunBerr departed for Nora to have a discussion as to what their next course of action might be.

Of course, they all took this as an opportunity to tap into the vast resources of Nora's cellar, which were rumoured to be inexhaustible. Ignatius was of no mind to stop them, nor even slow them down to any degree. They had had a very trying and emotional day and he felt it was the least he could do to ease their torment.

"Where's Gina?" asked Ignatius.

"We got 'er watchin' the box," Pete said. "Just like ya told us to do."

"Oh, right. So I did," Ignatius admitted.

"She sends her regards and says to send her a bottle," Sandra said. "And before you ask, yes, we briefed her on our little conversation at the Kettle – whilst we spent three more hours trying to open that damned thing. Pete, could you please pour me a double-vodka?"

"There was one positive development," Pete mentioned as he handed Sandra her drink. "We found a box o' candles from our kitchen. Grace must've nicked 'em, so at least we know we're on the right trail."

"Could we talk about something else?" Sandra requested. "I need to clear my mind so I can start fresh tomorrow morning."

It was a clear night, so Ignatius suggested they retreat to the balcony on the second floor. It faced north, overlooking the canal just beyond the expansive yard. They were just sitting down when Ignatius noticed a couple walking along the tow path of the canal. He always kept a pair of binoculars on his balcony and he pulled them from behind his chair and focused on the pair of figures.

"Ah – it's Geoff and Linda," Ignatius announced.

"Oh, goodo," Pete said. "Let's call 'em in."

"No need," Ignatius said. "I invited them earlier."

Within a few minutes Geoff and Linda were entering the balcony, each holding some small trophy from Nora's cellar.

"Hiiiiii!" Linda said, waving.

"Evenin' all," Geoff greeted.

They all exchanged greetings and took their seats.

"Nice to have a clear night sky in the summer. It's a treat to look at the stars now and again," Geoff remarked.

"The best things in life . . ." Ignatius added.

"Wozzat lggy?" asked Pete.

"Hmm? The best things in life – they're free," Ignatius completed the thought.

"Are they?" Geoff asked. "I always thought you get what you pay for."

"Well, we're enjoying the night sky and it's free," Ignatius stated.

"True, I'll admit it's nice and it's free, but I wouldn't say it's one of the *best* things in life," Slide said.

"You may pay me a shilling for the viewing later on, if it'll make you enjoy it more," Ignatius offered.

Pete leaned back to look at the sky. "For every proverb . . ."

"There is an equal and opposite proverb," everyone else finished.

They kept silent for a while.

"Slide told me Tad was having a whinge in the pub. What was it this time?" Sandra asked. "Complaining that he pays more taxes than most of us earn?"

"Nothing of importance, I assure you," Ignatius said dismissively. "He was just in a bit of a fizz because he has to play Badgers during PD."

"So what?" shrugged Sandra. "I have to play a Wolf whenever possible. It's certainly better than having to wear those silly little masks."

"I think his issue was that Badgers in the CBP are typically angry and uncongenial," Ignatius explained.

Sandra sighed. "Let me guess – it was The Angry Badger again?"

"Just so," Ignatius confirmed.

"Let him try playing a Bitch a few hundred times," Sandra suggested.

"Ask me, it's all about labels," Geoff said. "After all, that *is* the whole point of 'The Angry Badger', innit? The Badger's only angry because everyone tells him he is or they keep asking him why he's so angry. You stick a label on someone and then they become what the label says."

"Personally, I think the Badger's angry because he's got no sense of humour," Linda hypothesised.

"Much like you, Ig," Pete added.

"I most certainly do have a sense of humour," Ignatius protested. "I enjoy a good joke as well as the next person."

"Ah, but that's the thing," Slide said. "A sense of humour is not being able to *laugh at* a joke, or even to *tell* a joke; it's being able to *take* a joke."

"And I can take a joke as well as the next person," Ignatius proclaimed. "I'm constantly being ribbed by everyone about how I'm some sort of . . ." Ignatius was at a loss for words.

"Fop," suggested Slide.

"Perfectionist," Sandra said.

"Academic know-all," added Geoff.

"Windbag," Pete put in.

"Goody-goat," Linda continued.

". . . as can plainly be seen," Ignatius finished the thought. "But has any one seen *me* pouting that my feelings are hurt? So, yes, I think it can safely be said that Ignatius HaliFox can take a joke – more than his share, I should hasten to add. And although I'm perfectly willing to tolerate it, I personally don't find much amusement in belittling other people."

"But, Ig," Slide countered, "nearly every joke ever told is at *someone's* expense."

"I happen to believe that to be a good person, one must be humble," Ignatius stated, "and a humble person cannot be a wise-arse. Belittling others does not make one any better."

"But what about when Geoff calls himself a 'porker' or Linda play-acts the tart?" asked Slide. "You start going on about 'sense of worth' and 'self-esteem' and so on. You can't play the humility card and then condemn self-deprecating humour."

"*Approval from none can we expect . . .*" Ignatius began.

"*If ourselves we don't respect*," Slide finished the axiom. "Yes, we've all seen that one. But isn't self-deprecating humour a form of being humble?"

"Respecting one's self and being humble are not mutually exclusive," Ignatius defended his thesis.

"Well, I happen to feel that there's nothing wrong with a proper ribbing, *if it's* between friends, and *if it's* kept to things that can be changed, like character flaws," Linda declared. "If you're going to laugh at your own shortcomings, the greatest gift your friends can give you is to point them out. After all, they know you best."

Ignatius sighed in defeat. "Just so, Linda," he admitted. "*Nosce te ipsum*."

"Wozzatwhenitzatome?" asked Pete.

"Know thyself," Ignatius translated. "Another facet of humility. Linda is right, of course. To laugh at ourselves is to know ourselves. If the Badger in the play actually had any friends, he wouldn't be angry. Perhaps we should make more of an effort to tell Thaddeus that we appreciate his company."

"We could get 'im to buy us more rounds," Pete suggested. "I'd appreciate that a great deal."

"And you should be grateful to us, Iggy," Linda said, "for keeping you so humble."

"I beg your pardon?" asked Ignatius.

"You'd get a great, big swelled head and think you were the cleverest Fox in The Kingdom," Linda answered, "if we weren't here to remind you of all your cock-ups."

"Like the time Jess hoodwinked you into letting her shave your tail," Slide reminded him of a childhood event.

"Or when she conned you out of the class milk money," Sandra added.

"Remember when it snowed, during exams?" Linda recalled, "And Jess locked poor Ig in the cupboard, telling him we were playing hide and seek and it was his turn? The poor dear – he was in there for almost the whole recess and didn't get a chance to come out and play with us."

"With friends like you," Ignatius admitted, "I can rest assured that I risk no danger of conceit."

"So there you have it," Geoff pronounced. "Ig is proof-positive that we don't have to live up to our symbolic counterparts."

"Shave me, ya don't need Ig for proof. 'Ave a butcher's at Eric BlostMus," Pete said. "Mice are supposed to be timid and look at 'im. Bold as brass, tryin' to chat up any old bird on two legs. What a Fur-blur that Rodent is."

"He even tried Sandra on when we were in school," Slide recalled.

"Oh, he was just teasing," Sandra dismissed. "Regardless, you're right. There's nothing timid about Eric."

"Why is everyone ragging on poor, little Eric?" Linda protested. "I think he's quite sweet."

"So, as we have concluded, followin' one's archetypal iconography ain't our full-time job, as such, then, is it?" asked Pete.

Everyone concurred with Pete's general premise.

"So our mutual friend Tad, even though 'e's a Badger, can be mild-mannered an' even-tempered?" asked Pete.

"If he so desires," Ignatius answered.

"Oh, good. I'm sure 'e'll be pleased to hear that. I'll tell 'im tomorrow," Pete announced.

21JUN2001 Thursday

0740 – Nora Balcony

Ignatius awoke and, as was his habit, made some tea. He slowly crept up the stairs to his balcony, which overlooked the canal that was illuminated by the bright and happy sunshine.

"Bloody sunshine," he mumbled as he sipped his tea.

He honestly didn't mind when his friends were over to have a few. Nora had an enormous cellar absolutely filled to overflowing with innumerable barrels and bottles full of lagers, ales, stouts, cider, brandy and any number of fermented and distilled grains and fruits, all of which were mysteriously replenished despite the best efforts of his guests. He also enjoyed the company and sharing his home, and as Nora was actually paid for by the taxpayers, he felt some degree of obligation to put it to good use by entertaining from time to time. Since the number of dignitaries visiting Otterstow numbered in the low zeroes, he felt it only fitting that he should use the resources available to entertain his tax base.

Just then a narrowboat pattered by. Ignatius thought how lovely it would be, cruising from town to town along the canal, stopping at the occasional pub or two or three each day – sleeping under the stars when the weather was right – enjoying the quiet stretches of natural beauty of the canal – particularly with someone special. The (frequent) mention of Jess FærFyxe the previous evening brought her to mind, and he reminisced for a moment on their lengthy and rather stormy relationship.

Absolutely stunning woman, he recalled. *Still, she was practically a criminal and never did anything for anyone besides herself. What a damned waste of talent. I'm glad she's moved away, but . . .* Ignatius thought to himself. *So few Vixens around these days, single ones, at least . . . with two brain cells to rub together . . . and with a great big . . .*

"Mornin' Ig," Pete interrupted his reverie. "Oo, sorry. Din't break your train of thought, did I?"

"Hmm? Oh, no, not at all. Have some tea," he indicated a chair for his use. "Feeling all right this morning?"

"Not yet, but a quiet minute or two an' a cuppa'll do me right."

They sat in quiet contemplation, watching the odd boat go down the canal.

"Nice mornin', innit?" Pete commented.

"Mm. Very nice."

They sat quietly for a minute or two more.

"So what's the agenda for today?" asked Pete.

"PD, of course. Then I'm taking Clare to Trinova."

"What? My Clare?"

"You know, for someone who disavows all paternal connections . . ."

"Whatcha bringin' Clare to Big Smoke for?" Pete asked eager to change the subject.

"As I mentioned, I need to do some research on whether it's legal to enter Reality – and speak with Liza."

"But why bring Clare?"

"She's clever, open-minded and in my employ – and not in yours nor Gina's, I hasten to add."

"Oh, right then. Fair play," Pete sipped his tea.

"Speaking of Gina, I hope someone remembered to relieve the poor woman."

"Oh, yeah. Sandra an' Slide left to relieve 'er, right after ya went to bed – 'bout one-ish, I think. Gina came 'ere, straightaway, we all had a few more an' then kipped out in the rooms downstairs. Gina's still sleepin' it off. She's not got PD, 'as she?"

"No, not 'til this afternoon. Could I ask you to monitor? I doubt I'll get back by the afternoon performance."

"Oh, Ig, c'mon," Pete grumbled. "Ain't it enough . . ."

"I'll give you a free pass on your next two PDs."

"Oh, right, then. Done deal."

"Did you see Geoff or Linda?"

"I think they're still 'avin' a bit of a lie in as well."

"They're not in the same room, are they?" asked Ignatius, concern on his face.

"Dunno," Pete answered. "Don't make it a habit to do bed-check in someone else's 'ome."

"Oh, well, so what if they are," Ignatius dismissed. "They're adults."

"There's a goo' boy, Ig," Pete said. "They did go out to that bridge a few times last night," he recalled.

"Did they?"

"Just for a smoke, I think. They bofe seemed pretty mellow by the end o' the evenin'."

The conversation was interrupted by the clock tower in town striking the hour. Ignatius counted the strokes, although he knew full well that it was eight in the morning. "PD waits for no man," he told Pete as he forced himself up from his chair so that he could prepare for the day.

0800 – Rialto

Simon and Grace woke the next morning. Being near midsummer, the sun had already been in the sky for hours and the blinding light had eventually ended their slumber. They held each other close for some time, with Simon gently playing with Grace's ears, nibbling on them and such. Grace giggled and gently slapped him in admonishment. Suddenly, she got out of bed, stretched and began putting on her clothes.

"Come along, Si. Can't hang about in bed all day. Let's get some brekky on and do some more exploring."

Simon rose and began to put on his remaining clothes.

The pair of them raided the larder once more.

"These eggs should be okay. We can have those. I can tell those rashers are off without even giving 'em a smell," Simon reported. "Chuck 'em the bin."

Grace examined a breadbox. "Well, you can forget toast. The mould on this bread's about to demand its own form of government."

"Oh look, here's some tea!" Simon said. He pulled down the little paper box and held it up for Grace's inspection.

"Oh, lovely. Could use a cuppa 'bout now."

There was a hob nearby and it took them only a moment to figure out how it worked and to locate the kettle and the teapot, although it took them a little longer to clean the latter.

After it had brewed, they cautiously sipped the result.

"Not bad, actually," Simon remarked.

"A little weak, if you ask me," Grace answered.

"Well, can't complain. We're basically stealing it anyway, aren't we," Simon pointed out.

After they finished their breakfast, the two of them began to explore more of the neglected old theatre.

"Someone must come here occasionally," Simon conjectured. "Otherwise, there'd be no food, nor hot water or anything of that nature."

"Let's hope they don't surprise us with a visit in the next week," Grace mentioned.

0855 – *The tré*

"Good morning, Your Honour," Clare said as she entered The tré and sat on the rail of the box seat. The schoolchildren were beginning to file in and take their seats in preparation for the Portrayal.

"Good morning, Clare. Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed? Ready for your trip?" Ignatius asked.

"As I'll ever be," Clare said. "Although I would be more ready if I knew what we were trying to accomplish."

"All in due time, young lady," Ignatius answered.

"Are we walking to the station?"

"Oh, no, we haven't the time to walk all the way to HareFam. We'll take a taxi ferry as soon as you're done with PD. Right, off you go."

Clare glanced at a clock and wordlessly scampered backstage.

Opening scene: A simple meadow. A Bear is sitting next to an enormous pile of food and eating.

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of The Bear in Wolf's Clothing.

Once there was a Bear who was troubled by a naughty Otter. Whenever the Bear found some food, the Otter would always steal some for himself.

Otter

[sneaks in, stage l,

Otterstow, being such a small town, required a very tight rotation of Portrayal Duty and, as such, it was not uncommon for one to perform several times a month, as opposed to a city, where one might portray every other month or even as infrequently as once or twice a year. Another disadvantage of this situation was that it was exceedingly difficult to have a person play their own Genra. For example, in this particular Portrayal, while Pete had the good fortune to play an Ursan, Clare was playing the part of the Otter, thus requiring her to pin her ears down. She also wore a little half-mask that made her face roughly resemble that of a Lutran and a rather clumpy bolt of tan cloth covering her scut that served as a tail.

As soon as Clare crept onto the stage, all of the little children pointed and shouted, "Otter-otter-otter!" presumably hoping that they might warn the hapless bear and change the outcome of the play. Although their efforts did not have this effect, it would not be accurate to say that they were disappointed.

Clare put her index finger to her lips, indicating that they should be silent. This only increased the efforts of the juvenile audience. Pete continued his imaginary feast, pretending to be oblivious to the din.

takes a piece of food and runs off, stage r]

Narrator

The Bear would chase him, but he could never catch him . . .

[Bear chases Otter back and forth across stage several times]

. . . as the Otter would always reach a lake or a river, where he could swim much faster than the Bear.

[Bear chases Otter once more across the stage. Otter exits stage, but Bear stops short of offstage.]

"Sploosh!" Clare shouted from offstage, throwing a glassful of water at Pete, to the delight of the children. She reasoned that one should take one's amusement where one could, especially in very small, very boring, towns.

Narrator

And then, the Naughty Otter would taunt the Bear.

Otter

[Offstage, taunts Bear. Bear shakes fist and retreats to opposite end of stage]

Narrator

This, of course, angered the Bear no end and he was desperate to find a way to stop the Otter. One day, he came across an old wolf's skin.

[Bear re-enters stage holding wolf mask]

Thinking that the Otter might be more frightened of a wolf, he wore the skin as a disguise as he sat down to his meal.

[Bear dons wolf mask and sits next to pile of food to eat]

Narrator

The Naughty Otter, as bold as ever, pinched the Bear's food and ran for the nearest lake.

[Otter sneaks on from stage l, steals a piece of food and runs off to stage r, followed by Bear. They chase each other across the

stage a few times. Bear stops short on last trip and shakes his fist.]

Narrator

But this time, the Otter did not taunt the Bear. Instead, he asked him a question.

Otter [*offstage*]

Tell me, Bear, why are you dressed as a wolf today?

Bear

I had hoped to frighten you from stealing my food.

Otter [*offstage*]

Wolf or bear, the same I dread
 Bear or wolf, I'm just as dead
 As it's plain you're still a bear
 It matters not what you wear

Narrator

Thus the fate of the Bear in Wolf's Clothing.
 Draw from it what you may.
 Until next we meet – good day!

Ignatius stood by the front door as he watched Otterstow's future constituency parade past. The last child, a small human, was followed by Pete, Clare and Sandra, who had narrated.

Although it was technically their legal duty, Ignatius still felt obliged to express gratitude towards the players. "Thank you. Well done, as always."

"Ya off, then?" Pete asked, although it was a rhetorical question. "Just so we're clear, I monitor at two an' get two PDs off, right?"

"That was the agreement," Ignatius recalled.

"Put me on the queue for the next time that offer comes up," Sandra offered.

"I suspect it will be a one-off, I'm afraid," Ignatius mentioned.

"Oh, I see how it is – political favours for one's favourites."

"Honestly, Sandra," Ignatius bristled.

"She's winding you up, Your Honour," Clare pointed out.

"Yes, it's that sense of humour thing we were talking about last night, remember?" Sandra winked.

"Oh, very well, ha ha ha ha," Ignatius droned. "Come along Clare. If this jocularity continues, we'll miss our train."

0930 – Train to Trinova

"So where, specifically, are we going? And, if I might ask, why?" Clare leaned over the little table in their train compartment as did Ignatius. There was a conspiratorial tone in their conversation, but it could hardly be called a whisper. The train was making its best effort to drown out even normal conversation with rattling and creaking wheels.

"We're going to the Metropolitan Library in Trinova – it's also the Department of Records. I'm doing a little research on . . . something, and I'm going to need your help. Now, I can't help but notice that you've been doing a good bit of

reading lately on some rather interesting subjects and I was wondering if you could perhaps shed a little light on a few things."

Clare was a bit mystified. "I'm glad to do as you ask, but surely a Vulpan as clever and educated as yourself . . ."

"Yes, yes, Clare, enough of that. To start with, I just want to ask you a few questions."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"What could I tell anyone with a Master's in Cunning from the Clever University at Oxonia . . ."

"Clare, please . . . Yes, true, I *am* educated, but in a very rigid and traditional sense; dead languages, the law and other swathes of useless information. Now what I need from you is some information regarding . . . hmm, how shall we start . . . Tell me what you know about Reality."

"Reality?"

"Yes, Reality. Tell me more about it."

"But surely you already know as much as I do . . ."

"Clare, we've just had this discussion. Please, just humour me."

"Erm . . . All right then. Well, as you are no doubt aware, we live in Allegory, where things truly exist in a solid, tangible sort of way. Then there is Reality, also called the Real World, which is an imaginary place, typically thought of as an under-world or other-world. And, as you certainly know, there's the old myth that the Zealots – mostly humans – were banished to Reality as punishment for their part in the wars and so on.

"Of course, this legend is frequently used as a pretence to make children behave. You know, the usual bogeyman stuff. Parents will tell their children that it's still populated with the Zealots that want revenge for being banished. 'If you don't behave, we'll chuck you into Reality and the skins will eat you' – that sort of thing. But surely you know all this?"

"Yes, I do in fact," Ignatius answered.

"Then why are you asking *me* about it?"

"To see what *you* know about it. We seem to be on the same page thus far, fortunately. So now that we've both agreed on the common-knowledge bit, let's do a little speculation. Do you think it exists?"

Clare looked out the window for a moment, more to avoid having to look the mayor in the eye than to gather her thoughts. She did have her own theories about the subject but she was reluctant to voice anything radical to Mayor HaliFox, especially after her narrow escape the night before. *He's a decent sort*, she thought. *It's not like he'd try to trap me into confessing some sort of subversive plot.* Regardless, she was still unsure, so she turned to face him and answered with an ambiguous, "Dunno, honestly."

"So you wouldn't mind saying that it's a *possibility* that it exists."

"Oh, well, anything's a possibility. It's a possibility that I might meet a penguin selling fresh vegetables in the next five seconds."

"Something tells me that you give the existence of Reality slightly better odds," Ignatius mentioned.

"Well . . . There are a few bits and pieces that imply that there might be a Reality."

"All right, let's hear them."

"You're not going to repeat this to anyone, are you?"

"Scout's honour," Ignatius replied.

"Well, to start with, the Pedestrian Charter forbids travel to Reality. Why make something illegal if it's impossible? I mean, it would make more sense to say that it's illegal to travel to the moon. That could actually happen one day. But to say that it's illegal to go somewhere that doesn't exist? Just doesn't make sense."

"In principle, I quite agree," Ignatius said. "Anything else?"

"Actually, I've been meaning to ask *someone* about this; maybe you can provide an answer. There's this ancient historian – his name escapes me at the moment – and he was writing about the Wars. So he goes into all these trivial details about the main characters and describing the cities, the ships, the ocean voyage, the killing, the torture, the rape – all very normal, mundane stuff. Then, right at the end, he describes the banishment, where the Zealots are sent to Reality. As I said earlier, everyone today seems to think it's mythical, like the lost island of Aeaea.

"But that doesn't quite wash with me. I mean, here he is, writing this historical account with absolutely nothing out of the ordinary for four hundred pages. And then, on the last ten pages, he just . . . makes up some fantastic fabrication? And he wrote half a dozen other histories that were all pretty routine stuff – politics, science, that sort of thing. So, end of the day, I do have to wonder, what is this little island of fantasy doing in the middle of an ocean of humdrum?"

"HolmMearh."

"Is that something like humdrum?" asked Clare.

"No, his name was HolmMearh," Ignatius explained.

"Whose?"

"The historian you mentioned. His name was HolmMearh."

"Oh, right. So you knew that as well."

"I knew about HolmMearh and his account of Reality, obviously, but I never connected the dots as you've just done, be honest. So you've been a help already."

Clare was encouraged by his comment. "There's one other thing. I've just finished a book on metaphysics."

"Metaphysics?" Ignatius repeated, his interest piqued. "Oh, yes?"

"There's this idea that what actually exists lies beyond what we experience – that we aren't capable of grasping the truth just from what we sense. The author gives an example of a bear and a cave . . ."

"Yes, I remember that one from my studies at uni as well."

Clare's suspicion returned. "You keep saying you know all these things. If that's the case, why do you keep asking me about them? Why are we having this conversation?"

"Clare, I'm sorry for not putting all my cards on the table just now, but I need to be careful or there could be serious repercussions."

"It's a bit unfair, though, isn't it?" Clare complained. "I mean, I have to show my hand, but I don't even know what game we're playing."

Ignatius sighed. "Yes. You're absolutely right. Besides, if you're to be of any more help, you'll have to know anyway. Well, I suppose it's safe enough to tell you now." He then proceeded to tell her about the voices, the missing teenagers, and the meeting with the parents.

"Do you honestly believe there's an entrance to Reality behind that old box?" Clare asked. "Surely it's just an abandoned well or a mine shaft or maybe just another cellar."

"Yes, all very likely possibilities," Ignatius answered. "But both Gina and Sandra claim to have been through the cabinet when they were children."

Clare leaned back in her seat and gave this some thought. "You know that Mum is quite good at wind-ups," she warned. "With all due respect Your Honour, you can be a little . . ." She paused, mid-sentence.

"I think 'naïve' is the word you're trying to avoid saying," Ignatius mentioned. He noticed that Clare looked a little startled at what seemed to be an accusation, so he continued. "And I'd be the first person to agree with you. I do have the odd habit of believing almost anything anyone tells me. Being honest, I live under the misconception that everyone else is as well."

"However, Sandra corroborated Gina's story and, despite my naiveté, I don't think she'd arse about when her child is missing."

"But maybe Sandra and Gina were shown some sort of sub-basement or a wine cellar or warehouse," Clare hypothesised. "If they were children, they could easily be misled – or flat-out lied to."

"Are you accusing your grandfather of a 'bogey-ism'?"

"If by that, you mean that Granddad frightened Gina into behaving by winding her up – then, yes, guilty as charged. He was quite the trickster, by all accounts. And Gina was, from all accounts, quite the tearaway as a child."

"True enough, but the description that Sandra and Gina gave of the room they went to doesn't bear that out. And I still have one other reason to believe that Reality does, in fact, exist on the other side of the cabinet."

"Might I ask what that reasons is?"

"When I was a young Kit of seven or so, I overheard my parents in conversation."

"What were the details of this conversation?" asked Clare.

"One of the town residents had just died. It was a StæppanWulf, I'm sure, and I *think* it was Sandra StæppanWylf's great-grandfather – the one she calls 'Old Man Simon'. And he was actually quite old when he died – close to ninety, as I recall. Mummy and Da mentioned that, apart from themselves, he was the last that knew of the passage to Reality and that it could finally be permanently locked."

"Until just recently, I had always thought their little chat was just a wind-up as well. As a kit, I was always rather earnest and, hard as it is to believe, even more gullible than I am now. One of their favourite diversions was finding a good put-on to try out on me, so I naturally thought they were at it again. Besides, as they had mentioned something about a cabinet in a basement, I naturally assumed they meant ours. But since we had no cabinets in our

basement – and, yes, I foolishly wasted an entire afternoon searching – I dismissed the conversation as another tactic to teach me not to eavesdrop. It never occurred to me until just recently that, first, they may have been serious and second, they might have meant the basement of The tré and not our own.

"So the whole point of this little exercise was to see if you were open-minded enough to help me investigate without thinking that I'd completely gone off the rails."

"Putting aside any comments that you had your sanity to begin with, can I assume I'm on the job?" asked Clare.

"Quite," Ignatius affirmed, smiling at Clare's cheek. "It appears that you and I share the same folly that seems to come from reading a bit more than we should. By the way, did you do all this study on your own?"

"Yes," Clare answered flatly.

"I'd never heard of half of it until I got to uni. You know, you should give higher education a try sometime."

"Haven't the dosh."

"Nonsense, young lady. Plenty of scholarships are available, especially for a Doe of your talents."

"Very kind of you to say, Your Honour, but I'd hardly fit in with all the Foxes and Weasels at Oxonia, would I. Besides, why should I spend time and money on having someone tell me what to learn when I'm perfectly capable of doing it on my own?"

Ignatius thought about this for a moment. "You're right about not fitting in; you're far more clever than the lot I went to school with. And I can't argue with your second point, either," he conceded. "Of course, if you did finish at school, you could get a professional degree and make a pretty good living."

"Is that why you went to uni? For the money?"

"No," Ignatius admitted. "I did it because I was under a social obligation from a very high authority."

"What authority was that?" asked Clare.

"My parents," Ignatius said. "Sorry for that. I'll let you have your life back now. Jack knows I didn't get to choose mine."

"Do you regret going to uni?" asked Clare.

"Oh, no. I feel very confident in saying that it gave me a great sense of achievement. It validated my scholarly abilities. And there is the small fact that it landed me what I consider the ideal job, but that's beside the point."

Ignatius leaned back in his seat and thought a bit. His brush, which was lying on his lap, began to patter a bit as he sank himself in thought. Just then, the tea trolley came by. "Tea? Biscuits?" droned the server. She was a younger Vixen, dressed in the usual drab smock. Ignatius did not respond.

"Your Honour?" prompted Clare.

Ignatius came out of his trance. "Mm?"

"Tea, sir?" asked the young Fox, losing patience.

"Oh, right. Yes, please, and a set of those nice chocolate biscuits. Clare, what would you like?"

"The same, sir. If it's not inconvenient."

"Two and four," the attendant stated the price.

Ignatius extracted the appropriate change from his vest and gave it to the attendant. "And what is your name, miss?" he asked.

"Elizabeth, sir," she said impatiently, pointing to the name clearly embroidered on her shirt.

"My mother's name was Elizabeth," he commented idly.

"Ya teas, sir. And ya biscuits," she replied curtly, handing over the goods and kicking the uncooperative trolley off to the next compartment.

Ignatius sighed and sipped his tea. "First Vixen I've seen in months and I can't get the time of day," he murmured to himself.

Clare considered this as rather strange coming from someone usually so very formal. *I never would have guessed he'd chat up the help on the train*, she thought.

1030 – Trinova

Clare, being constantly distracted by the sights of Trinova, found that she occasionally had to lope to keep up with Ignatius. She even had to resort to her instinctive habit of hopping, which she didn't like as she found it rather undignified and she didn't want anyone from the big city making snide remarks about small-town girls having no social graces.

"Ignatius, will you *please* slow down a bit," she complained.

"Come along, Clare. Keep up will you, we're almost there."

"But I don't understand. What does this all have to do with the Library?"

"The Library? Why everything, of course. You need books to read about Reality. I need to look for some legal documents as well. The Library would be the logical place to go, don't you think?"

"I suppose," she groaned. "But what's all the hurry? We have hours until our return train leaves. Couldn't we just have a little time to look about? How long does it take to find a book?"

"If we're lucky, we might get half of what we need – although I do think it would be a good idea to pop in here for just a minute," he said indicating a small shop.

Once inside, he looked around quickly. "Ha, just what I need." Without wasting a heartbeat, he picked up a small trolley basket and handed the owner of the shop a crown. "Keep the change."

"Sorry mate, it's two," replied the Otter behind the counter.

"Two? Two crown for this clapped out old trolley?"

"No, mate, that'd be two *quid*."

"Two pounds!" Ignatius reeled. "I'm terribly sorry, but that's far more than I'm willing to pay."

"Well, there's no reason to get all outta shape about it. I'll let you have it for half."

"Thank you, but no. Sorry to have been a bother." He began to walk out.

"Ten bob?" offered the Lutran.

Ignatius turned around. "Ten shillings? Are you sure? I wouldn't want you to lose money."

"I'll survive," assured the Lutran.

Ignatius placed the coins on the counter and took the trolley. "Why not just offer your best price to begin with?" Ignatius asked.

"You're not from around here, are you?" asked the Lutran.

Ignatius shrugged as he walked out. "Come along, Clare. No time to lose," he ordered as Clare tore her gaze from the trinkets in the window.

1130 – Trinova Metropolitan Library

The Metropolitan Library was a fairly impressive building. Having only seen the libraries at HareFam and, on two occasions, the slightly larger one at Writing, Clare thought it was positively monolithic, seeming bigger than all of Otterstow. They went in through the main entrance and walked up to the front desk. Behind it was a matronly Hedgehog who was busy scratching away at some records. Ignatius politely cleared his throat.

"Oh, sorry," the Erinac said, looking at Ignatius through thick spectacles. "Didn't mean to ignore. Never had very good sight and the hearing's going as well. May I help you?"

"Yes, please. Might I have the use of a research assistant for a few hours?"

"Certainly," the Erinac answered. "Name, please?"

Ignatius looked a little nonplussed by the question, but answered all the same. "The Honourable Mayor of Otterstow, Ignatius HaliFox."

"Could you spell that please?"

Annoyed, he patiently enunciated, "H-A-L-I-F-O-X."

"Right. One minute, please." She toyed with a terminal behind the counter for a few seconds. Pulling out a small retinal scanner, she handed it to Ignatius. "Right eye, please."

Ignatius put the scanner over his eye and soon heard a small 'bip'.

"So, it is you, Ig," the old Erinac announced quietly, squinting into her terminal screen. "Where the blazes have you been all this time?"

"A pleasure to see you as well, Liza Prigel," Ignatius answered. "As the mayor, I reside in Otterstow, of course. You remember Clare, I'm sure?"

"Gina's little girl?" Liza's face brightened considerably. Practically leaping up from behind the counter she said, "Ah, let's have a look – goodness me, you're about two feet taller! Give us a hug." She came forward and embraced Clare.

"So why are you wasting a perfectly good day hanging about with this silly git?"

"I wish to obtain some copies of the Pedestra Charta and my assistant here would like someone to help her with finding a few books," Ignatius answered on Clare's behalf.

"Excuse me, but was I speaking to you?" Liza chastised.

"Pardon *me*," Ignatius apologised with only a hint of sincerity.

"Is that what you're after, Clare? A little help in the stacks?" Liza enquired.

"Yes, please, Miss Prigel," Clare answered. "If it's not too much bother."

"See there, Ig? *That's* good manners. Watch and learn. Now, then. I'll just ring for my assistant to assist your assistant," Liza said, returning to her desk and picking up a telephone.

"Do you have that list of topics we made on the train?" Ignatius reminded Clare.

Clare started checking her pockets and cuffs trying to find the list. "I had it here somewhere. Where the blazes . . ." she said patting her clothing here and there and searching her pockets.

Ignatius ignored her search as he recollected his previous visit. "Now, the last time I was here, there was a decent, young chap who helped me out all day without a fuss. Hopefully it'll be the same one – Oh, there he is. Hello, Jim! Good to see you again."

"Ah, here it is in m' bras . . ." Clare's attention was riveted to the strapping, young Buck Hare who had suddenly appeared.

Clare was not a social animal, nor particularly well-travelled. Since her trip home from the hospital at birth, she had rarely ventured any farther than HareFam, which was barely a half-dozen miles away. Once there, she completed whatever business she had (usually buying books or visiting the library) and then returned home immediately. She had been to Writing, a score of miles away, only twice, also restricting her tour to the library, several bookstores and the train station. True, she had read numerous stories and dissertations from dozens of countries and a handful of continents, but she, herself, rarely left her home above the pub of the Black Kettle in tiny Otterstow. As such, whilst at home, she rarely saw anyone else beyond the patrons of the pub, the occasional teamster making a delivery and a few close friends; in HareFam, there were the librarians and the bookstore staff. None was a Hare.

The few strangers that did wander into Otterstow were usually of some other Genra and they were rarely close to her age. The few Bucks that had been available in Otterstow held little interest for her, being, in her mind, either too parochial or just plain thick. Rachael, who spent the larger part of her earnings on day trips and overnights to larger towns and cities for the sole purpose of socializing, preferably with the opposite sex, occasionally invited Clare along, genuinely wishing to see her twin find a friend *du jour* (or perhaps *du soir*) and pass a good time. Clare had always declined, preferring to indulge in buying as many books as she could afford so that she might sit in quiet repose with a glass of white and some imagination.

". . . siere," Clare completed the thought.

Jim held her full, immediate and rapt attention. Here was someone who, working in a very large library, obviously shared her love of books. Of course, the fact that she thought he was drop-dead gorgeous may have had some influence on her opinion as well.

"Good morning, Your Honour," Jim answered politely. "What can I do for you this fine day?"

"You'll be helping my assistant, Clare," Ignatius said, gesturing in her direction.

"I'll be glad to help you with your research today, Miss Clare. But I will be needing your notes, if you wouldn't mind."

"Notes?" she echoed, still somewhat in a daze.

"Yes, miss. The ones in yer, erm . . . hand. I presume."

Clare looked down her cleavage where her hand was still firmly lodged. "Thatwouldbethisthen," she mumbled as she handed the list to Jim.

"Ah, right," he said taking the list and flicking on his glasses. "Hm, quite heavy subjects here. Reality . . . Hellenic philosophers . . . Parallelism . . . 'bears', does this say? Well, let's get started then. This way, please, Miss Clare."

Ignatius looked at Liza who had also witnessed the show. They both exchanged knowing glances at each other.

"We don't get many Does in here. Poor Jim, just going to waste in this dusty, old Library. It'll be a nice treat for him."

"I suspect Clare won't be disappointed, either."

"Right, Iggy. What is it you want?"

"First of all, what's all this 'could you spell that, please?' business about?"

"Excuse me, but who greets an old friend by asking for services? Would a simple 'Hello, Liza, how've you been keeping?' be too much to ask for?"

"As this is your place of work, I don't think it's unreasonable to presume that you would wish to keep a business-like tone. And there's no use pretending that you're so blind that you can't recognise me from across a desk."

"We-e-ell . . . very nearly. And you could hardly blame me, you never come to visit, do you, love? I was practically your best friend 'til you left for uni, and not so much as a card in the post or a tinkle on the phone for the past year, since you were here on your last visit. I was best friends with both your parents, maytheyrestinpeace. And you and I were quite close, back in the day. You used to confide in me when no one else would listen, telling me your troubles and all."

Ignatius seemed a little uncomfortable at the remonstrance from his old friend. "My apologies, Liza. I didn't . . ."

"Nowadays, you sashay in here once a year, announcing yourself with all this 'Honourable Mayor of Otterstow' humbug, like you're the King of Shangri-la. By the way, do you wear that naff sash in your sleep?"

At this point, Ignatius' mood had changed from defensive to dismissive. "Oh, do behave, Liza. You know good and well that I haven't called because you haven't a telephone."

"Call me at the Library. You've done it before – you must know the number."

"The telephone here is for library business, paid for with taxpayer's money," Ignatius reminded her.

"Oh, for Jack's sake Ig, it's a library. It's not like I'm rushed off my feet all day. And I promise if any taxpayers appear in the middle of our conversation, I'll hang up without so much as a good-bye."

"By the way, you could come to Otterstow and sit with us for a while as well. The trains run both ways, you know."

"I'm old Iggy. I can't be lugging back and forth on those old bone-shakers. It's trouble enough sitting on a chair that doesn't rattle. Now, let's finish our business and then we can have a natter round my place after I get off work – you *are* going to stay the night with me to visit . . . right?" It was more of an order than an invitation.

"Regrettably, I must decline on the overnight invitation. Clare and I have urgent business back in Otterstow."

"Urgent business? In Otterstow? What could possibly be an urgent matter in Otterstow?"

"A matter of missing children."

"Let me guess – it's Gina's little one again."

"Just so. And the same boy as well, Simon StæppanWulf."

"Just like the old man," Liza muttered shaking her head.

"Sorry?"

"Oh, just thinking that the nutcase didn't fall too far from the tree," Liza noted. "We can discuss it over high tea when I get off at four. You can at least stay for that, can't you?"

"Actually, that would suit my purpose quite well. Clare and I were hoping to pick your brain for an hour or so."

"Well, that figures," Liza complained.

"Beg your pardon?"

"No one ever comes by just for a social call anymore. They always want something. Dosh, childcare for the sprogs, free advice . . ."

"Oh, come now, Liza," Ignatius cooed. "Since when has dispensing free advice ever been a chore for you? And I would be more than willing to pay for the meal at the restaurant of your choice – provided it's not too far away from the Padderloo station. We have to hurry home. Missing children and so on."

"Oh . . . well . . . all right, then," Liza agreed. "Charter copies, was it?"

"Charters? Oh, right. Let's see. I want a verbatim copy in the original Remun, not translated, and a current, first-generation translation. None of that student rubbish; I want a professional job."

"It'll cost you."

"It will? Since when does the library charge for loaning books?"

"We don't. But I can guarantee that every copy is checked out by the law students until end of term. You can either wait or we'll sell you a copy."

Ignatius sighed in exasperation. "Fine, then."

"Still want the best?" asked Liza.

"Yes, I do," Ignatius answered instantly.

"They don't come cheap, mind," warned Liza.

"I understand that. I'm willing to pay for quality."

"You are, eh? What're you up to?"

"All in due course, my dear pincushion."

"Always were a pompous git. It's why you never got any Vixens."

"Oh, and another thing," Ignatius said, ignoring the jibe, "I have a suspicion that Clare will be making a trip or two here in the near future to return books, pick up new ones, that sort of thing . . ."

"I daresay she shall," commented Liza, smiling. "Did you see the look on her face when she spied our Jim?"

"Oh, behave, you dirty old gossip," Ignatius mockingly scolded. "Anyway, I'd like to extend my library privileges to her."

"Will you require her to have written permission, or telegraph?"

"Better make it written for now. Not that she'd abuse . . ."

"True, but one must be careful. Lost books can cost a right packet. She a big reader?"

"She reads more than I did as a child," Ignatius replied.

"Honestly? Gosh, that's saying something," Liza said with admiration. "Why don't you get a terminal?"

"I already have one," Ignatius answered. "I use it for most of my paperwork, actually."

"A lot of good it's gonna do her sitting in your office. Get one for her, you inconsiderate oaf."

Ignatius gave this a second's thought. "I might just do that. A few of my constituents were just complaining that we had no library."

"There you are then," Liza concluded. "No need for stacks and books. Just a few terminals in a publicly accessible place and they can access every book we have here in the Met. And we're selling 'em dirt cheap these days."

"The library sells terminals?"

"We sell anything that makes money and encourages people to read," Liza explained. "That's pretty much our charter."

"Sounds intriguing."

"I'll t-post some forms for you later . . ."

"Tea post?"

"I'll send you a message to your terminal. Post to the terminal? Terminal – T. Post – mail? Surely you've heard of it?"

"Erm, no actually."

"How do you do all of that paperwork, then?"

"I print the forms, fill them out by hand, pop them in an envelope, address them, stamp them and leave them for the postman, just like anybody else," Ignatius answered honestly.

Liza stared at Ignatius in amazement.

"What?"

"I shudder to think what you could accomplish if you became just the tiniest bit terminal-literate," Liza conjectured. "But that's for another day. For now, let's get started on those Charters. Verbatims in the original Remun start at two guineas – usually done by starving university students – they're a bit dodgy if you ask me. A first rate translation by a professor is fifty guineas."

"I'm not interested in first rate. I'm interested in accurate."

"Oh. Thirty guineas, then. That'd be the BocFox rendition," remarked Liza. "They've always been considered the best of the commercial versions."

"I've always meant to ask; why does The Library charge in guineas and not pounds sterling?"

"Because we're pretentious."

"Oh. Right. Let's have a look at the copies then."

"Would you like annotated copies?"

"Is it more?"

"Of course it's more."

"Is it worth it?" asked Ignatius.

"A bunch of opinions by academics who think they know something. Honestly, no, at the end of the day."

"Pass. You're not much of a salesman, are you?"

"I'm a civil servant, just like you, Ig. Give me some dignity."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to be rude."

1500 – Rialto Office

Grace and Simon had spent all day exploring the Rialto, examining every room. There was an office on the first floor that had a window with a good view to the outside. Rather, it would have had a good view were it not for the fact that the window, like every other window in the building, was entirely frosted with grit.

Tucked away in a corner was a short door, perhaps a meter high.

"Hey, Si? What's a Marquee?"

"Seem to recall it's an enormous tent," Simon answered. "Why do you ask?"

"There's a little sign, just above this ickle door, here. Says 'Marquee' on it."

Simon examined the little placard and the abbreviated door. "Right. Let's have a look, then."

A key, conveniently placed on a hook next to the door, unlocked the door. Cautiously, they opened it and peered through.

"Don't see any tents," Grace complained. "Just goes outside to this ledge."

"I think this is the awning over the front entrance," Simon guessed.

"First good look we've had of the outside," Grace mentioned.

"It's quite busy out here," Simon noted.

The two of them observed the activities of the town below. Being well above ground level, they went completely unnoticed.

"Simon, is it just me . . . or?"

"You've noticed something, have you?" asked Simon.

"A few things, yeah," Grace answered.

"There's, like . . . *dozens* of wheelie-boxes."

"Yes, I'd notice that as well," Grace verified. "I've been to Big Smoke with Pete dozens of times and I've seen maybe, five in my entire life. And those were great, big ones for delivering pianos and the like – not for just carrying people about like these."

"They must be rather lazy here," Simon conjectured. "Half the people are in a wheelie-box instead of walking."

"Either that or they're in a bleeding hurry," Grace said. "As fast as they're tearing about, it's a wonder no one gets run over."

"Y'know, I'm guessing tobacco must be legal here," Simon guessed. "I mean, the whole place reeks of it and half the people I see on the street are smoking something."

"I can smell it from here," Grace stated. "And I notice more'n a few seem to be talking to themselves."

"I think they're talking into telephones," Simon said. "See? If you look closely, they're holding little boxes next to their ears."

Grace squinted at a pedestrian that Simon had pointed out. "Yeah, I can see she's holding something to her ear. You think that tiny thing is actually a phone?"

"Or something like it," Simon said. "But be that as it may, there's one other thing I've noticed that seems to be very important."

"I think I've noticed it as well," Grace said.

"I've not seen one single Frith yet."

"*Everyone* is human," Grace confirmed. She turned to Simon. "D'you reckon it's a prison of some sort?"

Simon shook his head. "Shouldn't think so. I don't see any guards about. Haven't even seen a bobby yet. Course, I've no idea what they look like here."

"Simon – we can't be seen," Grace said.

Simon stared at Grace. "I can see you quite plainly."

"No, I mean, we have to *avoid* being seen. If only humans are here, there's no telling what'll happen to us if someone sees us." Grace suddenly seemed concerned. "Maybe they killed all the Frith here in Reality."

"Oo, hadn't thought of that," Simon said. "That means it could be quite dangerous here. Maybe we should try and go back through that tunnel and go home."

Grace bit her lower lip and thumped the ground a couple of times with her foot. "Sif. Sifsifsifsifsif!"

"Language, Grace!"

"We're going to be in serious trouble when we get back," she said.

"Could be a lot worse here," Simon countered.

Grace sighed in resignation. "All right, then. Let's go."

She was just about to pull the door shut but froze with it barely cracked.

"Simon, look," she whispered, pointing to the pavement in front of the building.

Simon peered over her shoulder to take a look and saw two young men approaching the building, holding several sacks of groceries.

"I think they're coming inside," he said calmly.

"We'll have to hide!" Grace said, her voice rising in pitch to a panic level.

"Just a tick," Simon said. He carefully watched the two as they passed almost directly underneath them and then became obscured by the awning. There was a moment's delay, then the sound of keys jingling, followed by laughter and cursing. There was the squeak of a hinge and then the very clear slamming shut of a door.

Grace quickly shut the small door and began to prance nervously around the office. "Simon, let's hide, quick! I don't wanna be eaten!"

"Eaten? What do you mean 'eaten'?"

"Maybe there aren't any Frith here, 'cause the skins ate 'em all!"

"Grace, don't be absurd," he dismissed. His order had no effect. She was as paranoid as ever.

Simon, however, kept his wits about him. "Right . . . need a place to hide. But we need to be able to know when to come out . . . so we have to have a place so that we know if they've left . . . Rooftop. Come on, let's go." He grabbed her hand and pulled her along. Her first instinct was to hop and Simon stopped her. "No hopping," he whispered. "They'll hear us."

They knew the layout of the premises fairly well by this time and had managed to creep up to the rooftop without making any noticeable noises. Simon closed the roof door as quietly as he could and the two collapsed in nervous exhaustion.

Grace suddenly grabbed Simon.

"Don't let 'em eat me, Simon, please. You'll save me if they come, won't you?"

Simon stroked her ears to soothe her. "Don't worry babes. I'll protect you."

1700 – A Restaurant Near the Padderloo Station in Trinova

Eebumpeebumpeebumpeebumpskrittttchhh.

Clare stopped the trolley, backed it up, gave it a little turn and pulled onward. Eebumpeebumpeebumpeebump . . .

"That wheel is about to drive me up a wall. I can't stand it when it hits a rock; it's like claws on a blackboard."

"At least you don't have to pull the bloody thing," Clare countered Ignatius' complaint.

"We're nearly there," Liza encouraged. "Just around the corner, here. I have to say, I don't care much for this part of town. Used to be quite nice, but it's gone to the dogs these days . . ."

Suddenly a human rushed past, bumping Liza and instantly regretting it as he swore at the quills that had pierced his arm.

"Your Honour!" Clare shouted. "He's got one of the books!"

It is said, in *The Kingdom*, that humans are the fastest thieves on two legs. This, technically, is true. Of all the sapients, humans do run the fastest whilst on two legs, whether they are carrying a hefty tome or not.

However, if all four limbs are allowed, humans rank among the slowest of runners; it is a simple matter for almost any other Genra to drop to all fours and quickly outrun even the fastest human.

Despite this great advantage in speed, this tactic is rarely used outside of emergencies, sporting events and theatrics. The pretexts for Frith running (or walking) upright are legion: it is considered demeaning to move by the same method as bestiants; one must touch the ground and thus soil one's hands; if one is in such haste, then one obviously did not plan ahead and is, thus, foolish; sapients have ascended, thus they should be higher from the ground; to move on all fours is to put one's self lower than the wretched humans. The list is endless. In point of fact, the actual reason is simply because it requires greater effort.

Outside of a pitch, Ignatius would never consider doing anything so undignified except for the most profound of emergencies. Apparently, stolen books rated as such, for it was without the slightest hesitation that he dropped his umbrella and coat and bounded forward to give chase, not even noticing when his top hat flew off his head.

Clare and Liza stood next to each other, astonished at the spectacle of Ignatius running on all fours. Their astonishment did not spring from his graceful gallop nor raw speed, although these attributes were impressive in and of themselves. Rather, what made the sight truly impressive was that Ignatius would deign to lower himself to actually run on four legs. As a child, Clare had once seen Pete swallow a full half-pint of milk, in order to encourage her to

drink her own. Although a truly exceptional effort on Pete's part, it paled in comparison to what Ignatius was doing at the moment.

Even wearing his boots, Ignatius caught up to the book-bandit in little time, swatting his legs out from under him as if he had done it all his life. The human went flying, as did the book. Ignatius dove for the book and, skidding on the pavement for several feet, managed to catch the hardbound second edition of LattiMearh's translation of HolmMearh's "Troiad," not allowing it to suffer the minutest scratch.

Ignatius rolled over, clutching the book safely to his chest, thinking that he might suffer some violence from the thief who was now standing above him, bleeding and panting. Pulling a quill out of his arm with his teeth, the human spat it out and said, quite plainly, "I just wanted something to read," and took off.

Ignatius pulled himself to his feet and, still clutching the book, dusted himself off. He was disappointed to discover that his sash was torn and the rest of his suit had suffered small tears and abrasions as well. Sighing in resignation he walked back to an astonished Liza and Clare, picking his hat up along the way and then carefully tucking the tome away in the trolley.

"Shall we have some tea?" he suggested. "I'm absolutely parched after that run."

"Iggy?" Liza grabbed his arm. "You all right, son?"

"Yes. Fine. My suit's in a frightful state, 'though. And this sash . . ." A portion of the sash was nearly torn through and Ignatius completed the rift, allowing him to remove it entirely. "I suppose I'll just have to get a new one."

"I think you look better without it. Look, you're bleeding," Clare pointed to his elbow.

"Am I? Oh, so I am." He neatly folded his sash and put it on the abrasion. "Nothing serious. Didn't even notice. Come along, let's have tea." Ignatius opened the front door of the restaurant.

"Fine bit of fourlegging, Iggy," commented Liza as she walked through, "especially for someone in boots."

"That was a brilliant catch, as well," Clare added, following Liza.

Liza turned to Clare. "He always was a good athlete, even if he was a bit scrawny. At uni, he qualified in all twelve semesters for nationals."

"Liza, I'm sure Clare isn't interested . . ."

"Yes I am," Clare interrupted.

"Be fair, he had an easy league, and once he got to nationals, he was in way over his head. A bit unfair to him, honestly. Say, Iggy, there's a foxchase on this weekend. Why don't you stay and have a go?"

"A foxchase? At my age? Oh, do behave, Liza!" Ignatius complained as they were shown to a table.

"I've seen Erinacs older than you bring down full grown Equans," Liza mentioned.

"I haven't the time, Liza. Missing children, remember?"

Half an hour later, they were sipping tea, having finished their meal. Clare was smiling and laughing as Liza regaled her with stories from Ignatius' past. Ignatius, meanwhile, had spent most of the time staring out of the window with

a sort of brooding look on his face and alternately rolling his eyes to the ceiling and hiding them with his hand as he shook his head, looking at the ground.

"What's the matter Ignatius? Something on your mind?" asked Liza.

Ignatius looked up from his sulk. "No, everything's lovely. Please, carry on. Don't mind me."

"Well, I think you were quite brave," Clare commented. "Going on all fours to get that book back."

"I don't mean to belittle your efforts, Ig, but I could've just reported it stolen," Liza stated. "I saw it with my own eyes. You wouldn't've been charged for it."

"I'm beginning to regret it myself," Ignatius answered. "Do you know what he said to me, just before he ran off? He said he only wanted something to read."

"To read?" Liza dismissed. "All he wanted to read was a five pound note after selling it for hootch. And it's worth a hundred times that. Don't let it worry you, Ig. He was a hooligan, plain and simple. He was just trying to make you feel bad for doing the right thing."

Ignatius sighed silently, still obviously distraught over the incident.

Clare took it upon herself to cheer him up. She grabbed his shoulders from behind in a small hug. "Well, I think you did the right thing," and then, quite spontaneously, gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Clare, please," Ignatius smiled in embarrassment. "Liza might get the wrong idea."

Liza laughed. "The wrong idea? This coming from the Fox that kissed a Sow?"

"Oh, Liza, you great rumourmonger – that was on a lost bet with Milly MæstBar. I certainly didn't do it out of affection."

"What bet did you lose?" asked Clare, glad to see that Ignatius was out of his sulk.

"Oh, some trivial nonsense about . . . Oh, I've forgotten."

Liza was stroking her chin in thought. "I'm beginning to remember."

"If you'll excuse me, for a minute," Ignatius said, rising from his chair and examining his elbow. "Just going to clean up a bit."

Clare watched until she thought Ignatius was safely out of earshot. "Liza, was Ignatius very popular with the girls when he was young?"

"No, not at all, sadly. Poor lad – he gave it an honest try a few times, but it was not to be. Several of the Vixens treated him pretty bad; and he was a right good bloke, too. Kind, mild-mannered. A bit scrawny but hardly a weakling, very athletic, as I've mentioned. Quite good-looking from a Hedgehog's point of view, which doesn't count much in Fox circles, I suppose. I don't know about you Clare, but all the girls these days only seem interested in someone with a criminal record or who beats 'em mercilessly. Never could understand that kind of thing, but it's all over the place. Anyway, he seriously had his heart set on a young gal once, what was her name? . . . It'll come to me later. Anyway, she was horrible, she was. Strung him along, spent all his money, put him down in public, talked about him behind his back. Did some wicked things and tried to pin it on Ig. And the mouth on that girl could curdle milk!"

"What? Did she have bad breath?"

"No, it was her language! Just the words she taught my young 'uns would make a sailor blush!"

"Was she actually that bad?"

"Even Sandra called her a bitch. Anyway, she dumped him for some big-city hoodlum, whose name I'll never forget," Liza continued. "PenFox, it was. My word, what a big, greasy git he was. So this girl and PenFox run off to his home in Iscane. It just destroyed Iggy; we all told him good riddance to bad rubbish, but it killed him just the same. Well, damned if she doesn't come back a year later when it doesn't work out, all crying and being nice to Iggy. And credit to Ig, he wouldn't take her back. It hurt him all over again to say 'no', but he knew what would be in store if he did. And sure enough she was up to her old tricks with some other poor Dog Fox in Writing. To my knowledge, Iggy never dated again. Do you know if he's been seeing anyone of late?"

Clare shrugged. "No, he hasn't. We've only one other Fox family in Otterstow now. The rest have moved away. He did try a little chat-up with the tea-lady on the train here."

"Oh, izzat so?" Liza said, brightening. "Good, there's hope yet then, isn't there?"

Iggy returned to the table. "Now then, down to business . . ."

Liza had her own agenda. "Ig, who was that horrible Vixen you dated for ages? The one that ran off with that PenFox Cur."

Clare was sure she could see the hackles on his neck rise. "Her name," Ignatius bristled, sitting down and pouring himself another cup of tea, "was Jess . . ."

"FærFyxe!" Liza interrupted in sudden recollection. "Yes, that's the one. Jess FærFyxe."

"Yes, that is, indeed, her name," Ignatius confirmed. "I'm not a superstitious sort, but I hesitate to repeat her name as I would count my life full and rewarding if I never see her again. We went to school together all our lives, including six years at university. I think I've spent more than my fair share of time with her."

"As I told you, Clare," Liza reminded, "she was horrible to poor, old Ig."

"Well, I have no doubt now," Clare replied. "Not that I did before."

"What brought her name up?" asked Ignatius.

"Oh, you know how conversations float about," Liza said carelessly. "Just got around to love's labours lost."

"Hmph!" Ignatius snorted. "Not only love's labours, but its times, energies and monies as well. All of which pales in comparison to what a fool she made of me. That Vixen was just plain . . . evil."

"Y'know, I was just telling Clare – I wonder why girls always seem to go out with guys that treat 'em so horribly. Ig, maybe you can shed some light on the subject from your experience from the other way round. If Jess was so horrible to you, why'd you spend so much of your life with her?"

"Oh, you know how it is," Ignatius said dismissively. "There were never but one or two Vixens within miles of Otterstow. It's not like there's a whole lot of choice to begin with."

"True," Liza agreed. "But the way that Vixen treated you, I'd think a life alone would've been preferable to a life with her."

Ignatius put his teacup down, sighed in thought and had a faraway look in his eyes. "I did reach that conclusion eventually, but . . . I dunno. Difficult to describe, honestly. Well . . . you know what I'm like. Everything done properly. Pressed shirts, stiff collars, ducks in a row. Always play by the rules. Always be the good guy. Study hard. Never cheat. Everything's cricket."

"Yeah," the other two chorused.

"Jess was . . . an outlaw. Someone who got away with stuff. She was . . . exciting to be around. For some foolish reason, I felt . . . I dunno, 'privileged' I guess would be the word, to be around her. She was completely unlike me. When I was with Jess, I felt like . . . a dog off his lead, so to speak. Free to run. Maybe, for once in my life, I could get away with doing something truly *naughty*, while some gorgeous creature held my hand in the process. And, I'll be the first to admit, physically, Jess was *very* attractive. She dressed with an absolutely sinful sense of style, all those tight skirts and tops. I remember remarking to a friend about it – Geoff, I think it was – and he mentioned that it was like having one's own exclusive, erm . . ."

"Tart?" suggested Clare.

"'Prostitute' was the actual term used, I believe." Ignatius picked his tea up and had a sip as he thought for a second. "But she lied to, cheated on, stole from and humiliated me once too often. I was almost grateful when she ran off, although I wish it hadn't been with PenFox."

"Why not PenFox?" asked Clare. "Were you rivals or something?"

"Oh, hardly," Ignatius replied. "It was just as Liza was saying; some girls get involved with someone with a criminal record and a violent temper. He had both and I'm sure he gave Jess a right good smacking around on numerous occasions. Don't misunderstand, there was no love lost between Jess and myself at that point but I still didn't want her to get beaten to within an inch of her life. No one deserves that, even her." Ignatius' eyes glazed a bit as he stared out of the window. "Let's change the subject, if it's all the same to you," he suddenly suggested.

"All right, then," Liza agreed. "What's all these books and Charters about, eh, Ig?"

"Well, I did suggest, didn't I," Ignatius muttered. "Oh, well . . . I was at university. Mythology or some such rubbish from Aesop's tribe. Anyway, I found this book by accident. It wasn't mythology, it was philosophy."

"Philosophy? A whole book? What cobblers," Liza grumbled. "My philosophy could be written on a postage stamp and I've gotten by all right."

"I was bored, so I read it," Ignatius said, ignoring Liza's little rant. "I don't remember all of the details, although Clare has helped fill in a few gaps. Anyway, in this text, a philosopher says that we can only perceive the world in a limited way and that what actually exists is beyond our ability to comprehend. He gives an example . . ."

Liza blinked in confusion. "Yes, I think an example would be a good idea about now."

"Several people are sitting outside, near an enormous cave. And as the various animals – a bear is specifically mentioned – walk by, the people recognise them. But one of the group notices that as the animals walk by, they cast a shadow on a wall inside the cave."

"Skintails!" mumbled Liza. "Don't know how people can think up such . . ."

"So, our observant person goes into the cave and after adjusting to the darkness, becomes quite adept at identifying the animals as they go past."

Clare continued. "Then the author asks the reader to make a sort of leap of faith. He asks the reader to imagine that what our observer discovers in the cave is not the shadows of the animals, but their actual essence – that is the 'other story' that forms the word 'Allegory'. What is seen outside the cave are the illusions or shadows or reflections."

"So, not only easily misled, but delusional as well," Liza diagnosed.

Ignoring Liza's rant, Ignatius picked up the thread. "Of course, our observer knows that he has an enormous challenge trying to convince his fellows just outside the cave of what he's discovered. But that's the whole point; we've all been fooled into believing that what we experience is what actually exists."

"Yes, I'm quite familiar with ArisTigres and his analogy of the cave. Let me state now and for the record, he was a slaphead, just like you," Liza interrupted. "Yes, I read all that tripe ages ago, just page after page about being and nothingness and forms and dividing lines . . ."

"Then I'm sure you recall that ArisTigres goes on to say that he knows about the existence of the actual bear," Ignatius reminded her, "which is, of course, inside the cave, in the Real World, or Reality."

"No wonder you believe all that rubbish," Liza complained. "He *is* just like you. I would also hasten to add that not one of these great essays, at their conclusion, answers what is, in my opinion, the most important question of all."

"And what question would that be?" asked Ignatius.

"That question would be, 'So what?' Well, we're in the cave or out of the cave or under water or on the moon – well, whoop-de-do. So what?" Liza shrugged. "Just a lot of rabbit," she dismissed. "What does all of this have to do with your trip to Big Smoke?"

At this, Ignatius put his tea down and calmly stated, "We're going to find a way *in* to the cave."

Liza looked critically at Ignatius. "Is that what you want with all these books? You mean you're actually going to try to get into Reality? Ignatius, you're as mad as a March Hare!"

"Liza! Company, please!" Ignatius scolded.

"Oh, sorry, child. No offence intended," Liza said to Clare.

Clare, who was more than aware of the goings-on of March Hares (especially as it was her name) shrugged the comment off.

"If I might ask a rather pivotal question, then," Liza said.

"Yes?" Ignatius prompted.

"How could you possibly go to Reality?" Liza asked. "It's not like you could build a machine to get there."

"I, personally, have never been there, but I believe it does exist," Ignatius stated. "And we would not be the first to go there."

"Of course it exists," protested Liza. "In the hearts and minds of slapheads with far too much time on their hands and of children who need a good bogey-story to frighten them into behaving! Ignatius, you must be completely off your nut if you think you can go to Reality. Even if you could find out how to get there, you know the Charter strictly forbids it."

"If it doesn't exist," Clare challenged Liza, "then why does the Charter forbid entering it?"

"Laws don't have to make sense, they just have to be followed," Liza replied. "If you don't like them, become an MP and change them."

"At any rate, the Charter doesn't actually forbid entering Reality," Ignatius added.

"You *are* mad. Of course it does!" Liza retorted.

"Where?" asked Ignatius sipping his tea.

"I don't know, do !! Look, Ig, people spend their entire lives trying to figure out what the Pedestra Charta says, or means, or means to say. I'm not on the Lord's Court, and theirs is the only opinion that matters. If they thought it would serve their purpose to say pi equals four, they'd do it. And you'd hang for it."

"Have no fear, I've got it all sorted. Just checking the details," Ignatius said confidently.

"I hope you're this self-assured when you're before the bench, pleading for your life," Liza warned.

"Oh, Liza, how you do go on so," Ignatius dismissed. "I can assure you it's not an issue."

"Pardon me if I remain unconvinced," Liza answered. "And you still haven't explained how you plan on actually getting there."

"Actually, we were hoping you might help us in that regard."

"Me?" Liza smiled at the notion. "You *are* off your nut."

"You remember The tré, back in Otterstow," asked Ignatius.

"Oh, hmm, let's see, it was this place that served overpriced, crap ale – no that's the Black Kettle. Ah, yes, it was this outlandish villa where the mayor lives for free at the taxpayer's expense . . . no, that's Nora . . ."

"Are you quite done?" Ignatius asked patiently.

"Of course I remember The tré, Ig. Have I done anything that suggests I'm senile?"

Ignatius drummed his fingers for a few seconds. "Shall we continue, or do you have other diatribes you wish me to suffer through for offending your tender sensibilities."

"All right, I'll behave," Liza promised.

"Thank you. Next absurd question: Did you ever go in the basement?"

"Oh, yes. A number of times." Her eyes brightened with nostalgia. "When I were a lass in my teens, Geoff ThistleBoar and I would always volunteer to do a little work at The tré. Every now and again, after the performance was done and we'd finished up our chores, he and I would go down there and roll up a great big 'un and smoke it. Shave me, our parents would have skinned us alive if they'd known."

"At the bottom of the stairs," Ignatius continued, "there's a huge cabinet. Looks a bit like a coal bin."

"Oh, yes. I remember that. Always locked up."

"Ever open it?" Ignatius asked.

Liza considered for a moment. "No. Why should I? Locks are for keeping honest people out."

"Ever seen it open?"

"Never."

"Ever heard about it being opened, why it was locked, what was inside?" asked Ignatius.

Liza thought a bit longer on this one. "Can't say I have. Why, what's inside?"

Ignatius had some hesitation to take the next step, but he knew he had to trust Liza if there were to be any hope of progress. "It is my considered opinion that it is, in fact . . . Reality."

"So you're going to all this trouble just to see if you can find your way to the land of Make-Believe through a cabinet?" Liza asked.

"I'm serious, Liza," Ignatius stated.

"You're seriously off your nut, is what you are," Liza said.

"My parents thought the cabinet was a portal to Reality," Ignatius protested. "Do you think they were 'off their nut'?"

"Your parents? They never mentioned it to me," Liza said defensively.

"I was rather hoping they had, actually," Ignatius said, disappointed. "I wish they had told me."

"I thought you said your parents already told you," Liza said.

"No, I never said that," Ignatius denied.

Liza seemed lost. "Sorry. Lost. Did they tell you or not?"

"Not directly, but many years ago, I overheard my parents saying as much," Ignatius confessed.

"Pshaw!" Liza dismissed. "Liz and Xavier were always winding you up when you were a Kit. I told them you'd get wound too tight if they kept it up. And I was right, wasn't I."

"You remember old Mister StæppanWulf – died about thirty years ago?"

"Old Simon, you mean?" Liza recalled. "Lovely chap, he was." She leaned forward and spoke in a conspiratorial tone. "You know, he was in a mixie for most of his life – with a *skin* no less."

"Gossip, gossip, gossip," Ignatius shook his head and rolled his eyes disdainfully.

"Oh, don't be such a prig, Iggy," Liza chided. "So, what of the poor dear, mayherestinpeace."

"My parents mentioned him in the same conversation. They said he was the last one to know about Reality and that, as he had just died, they could finally lock the cabinet."

"Oh, Ig, believe what you want. I'm telling you, it was just a wind-up."

"Do you honestly think even *my* parents would include a recently deceased person in a wind-up? Especially one that was so well-loved?"

"Ig, just drop it," Liza advised. "There's nothing in that cabinet, so put your efforts into something more constructive."

"I wish I had that luxury," Ignatius said quietly as he sipped his tea.

"Luxury?" Liza echoed. "Why is it so important to get into the cabinet, or Reality, or wherever it is you're going?"

"I heard some voices, Liza," Ignatius began.

"Oh, dear," Liza said. It was not an "Oh, dear" that one would hear when another is dismayed at, perhaps, the sight of spilt milk. It was more of an "Oh, dear" one might hear during a cataclysm of a more serious nature, such as very large objects falling from the sky or walls of water approaching a shore.

"Voices, you say?"

"Yes, Liza, voices. I heard them. And it wasn't anyone in The tré doing the talking."

"How could you tell?"

"Do you know what's on the other side of the wall where that cabinet is?"

"I think we've established that there's nothing but dirt on the other side of that wall," Liza answered.

"That would be my first assumption as well," Ignatius replied.

"Sure you heard these voices, Ig? Worms aren't known for their oral skills."

"Are you questioning my sanity?" Ignatius asked defensively.

"I asked you first," Liza said.

"Yes. I heard them," Ignatius stated. "Very clearly. My ear was pressed directly against the cabinet. And there's nothing wrong with my hearing."

"In that case, I think you've still got most of your marbles in the bag," Liza admitted. "So what did these voices say? They didn't tell you to . . . do . . . anything, I hope?"

"I'm fairly certain that it was Grace ParsleyHare and Simon StæppanWulf. I suspect they got trapped inside somehow and they were afraid to come out when I called them."

"Are you sure?" asked Liza. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Am I sure I heard the voices from within the cabinet? Yes. Of that there is no question. Am I certain that they were the voices of Grace and Simon? No, I am not. However, they did sound very much like them and, as it turns out, they are both missing."

"Just so I'm clear on this," Liza started, "you have two children missing, quite likely trapped in Reality, with their lives in peril. And your first course of action is to doddle off to Big Smoke to see if it's legal to open a box. Am I right, or did I miss something?"

"Yes, you did in fact," Ignatius responded. "My second mission in coming here was to ask you, if during your long relationship with my parents, that they mentioned anything about how to open . . ."

Liza silenced him by putting up her hand. She then sighed deeply and placed her face on her hands. "Oh . . . sif," she muttered quietly.

"I'm sorry?" Ignatius said.

Liza lifted her head. "Stupid, stupid children . . ."

"Grace may be a bit of a wild child," Clare defended her sister, "but she's not stupid."

Liza nodded in acknowledgement, "No, of course not, Clare. Of course not. In fact, she might be a little too clever for her own good." Her attention turned to

Ignatius. "Grace ParsleyHare and Simon StæppanWulf? It was those two?" asked Liza.

"Correct," Ignatius confirmed.

"This *is* the same pair that wandered off last year?"

"The very same," Ignatius answered.

"If their parents had given 'em the canings they deserved, they wouldn't be in such a situation."

"Liza, caning is not the sole solution to disciplining children," Ignatius stated. "In fact, I don't think it's much of a solution at all."

"I was caned as a child," Liza said, "and I caned my children. All of us turned out all right," she countered.

"Have you? I seem to recall that your oldest son was imprisoned for possession with intent and your youngest daughter was done up for, erm . . ."

"Soliciting without a license," Liza admitted. "Well, six out of eight ain't so bad, all things considered. By the way, Johnny got two months for *buying* heroin, not selling it. And after he got out, even though he was twenty, I lashed his hide so hard, he still can't sit down. He's been on the straight and narrow ever since. And as for Nancy, well . . . I always told her she should never give her body away; I guess she just misunderstood."

"With all due respect," Clare said, "if you think Gina never caned Grace nor Rachael nor I, you're sadly mistaken. Even Pete winces when he watches her do it."

"Pete's heart always was as soft as his bottom," Liza replied. "Which is a good thing for you girls, I suppose. Regardless, when you have kids of your own someday, I'd like to see how well they turn out when you spare the rod."

"And if I might point out, my parents *never* caned me," Ignatius recalled. "Hopefully I meet your standards of behaviour."

"All right, let's drop it," Liza conceded. "Besides we have something more important to discuss."

"And that would be?" asked Ignatius.

Liz closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. "Oh, Xavier, Liz, please forgive me . . ." Liza mumbled.

"Liza, what are you talking about?" asked Ignatius.

"Before your parents died, I swore to them that I wouldn't tell you, Ig, but if what you say about Grace and Simon is true, then . . . well, I suppose I have to. You're absolutely right. Everything you've told me is spot on. The cabinet does, in fact, go to Reality."

"Why didn't my parents tell me?" asked Ignatius. "Why didn't they want me to know?"

"You're an honest man, Ignatius," Liza answered. "In fact, I can safely say that you are the most honest, forthright and guileless person I have ever met. And the sad fact of the matter is, honest men don't keep secrets." She lowered her voice. "And I hope I don't have to explain why it's important to keep this a secret. I don't care what sort of loophole you found in the Pedestra Charta; if the wrong people find out about this, you're done for and no mistake."

Ignatius nodded in agreement. "I've only told the parents thus far, and Clare of course. As it turns out, the parents already knew. In fact, it turns out that Pete told Grace . . ."

"That slaphead Bear," Liza rolled her eyes.

"And Sandra told Simon," Ignatius finished.

"Sandra? She blabbed to Simon?" Liza marvelled. "I don't believe it. Oh, for Jack's sake!"

"Liza," Ignatius continued. "By any chance, did my parents tell you how to open the cabinet?" asked Ignatius.

"No, they did not," Liza answered. "I specifically told them not to burden me with that information."

Ignatius' heart sank.

"But Xavier did tell me that he wrote it down. You'll find it on the building plans."

"The building plans?" Ignatius echoed. "What building plans?"

"You are the mayor, aren't you?" asked Liza rhetorically.

"Yes, of course."

"Don't you approve all construction – building codes, that sort of thing?"

"I . . . I never have. We haven't had any new construction in Otterstow since I took office. Several demolitions, but no construction as such."

"Oh," Liza said, genuinely surprised. "Well, in that case I suppose it's understandable that you wouldn't know. The building plans for every building in town are in the plan chest in the Town Hall. Just dig those out. Xavier said he wrote the plans so that only you would understand them."

"Did he? How would he accomplish that?" asked Ignatius. "I sincerely doubt that I could read a building plan even if it wasn't written in some sort of code."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out when you look at the plans," Liza hinted.

1700 – Rialto Kitchen

After a day of hallucinogenic recreation, Angus and Kenny walked upstairs to the living quarters, late that afternoon.

"Leuk, a body's duin the washin up," Kenny said, pointing to the stack of dishes and plates that had been neatly dried and stacked by way of tapping his cigarette ash into the dishwasher.

"Oh, aye. Maist like the wee poof manager. He still bides here," Angus said. "He'll be oot, afore over lang, as we'll be closed suin."

"Still, ye should cheenge the keys," Kenny suggested.

"Nae, canna be arsed."

1800 – Train From Trinova to Otterstow

The tea trolley arrived shortly after the train started. It was not the Vixen from the last trip or a Vixen at all, but a young human girl. Like most humans, she was quiet and compliant, almost subservient, dressed in her grey overall.

"Tea, sir? Miss?" she asked quietly.

"Ah, yes. Two, thank you, and a biscuit or two," Ignatius ordered.

She quickly pulled out the settings for the tea and biscuits and then hesitated, looking nervously back and forth.

"Two biscuits, please," clarified Ignatius upon seeing her discomfort over the ambiguity.

She nodded and neatly pulled out the second biscuit. "Half crown, sir," she said, almost in a whisper.

Ignatius fished out his change. "Have sixpence, Clare?" he asked.

Clare reached in her pocket, pulled out the coins, handed them to Ignatius and went back to her reading as Ignatius handed the human the change.

"What's your name, young lady?" he asked, out of politeness.

"Nadine, sir."

"Nadine what?"

"Nadine Cook, sir. I've done nothing wrong, 'ave I sir?" She seemed almost afraid at this point, looking down at the trolley.

"No, no, quite the contrary. Excellent service. Could you look at me, Nadine?"

She glanced briefly at him, almost terrified, and then turned her face back towards the trolley.

"How are you doing today, Nadine?" he asked in a reassuring voice.

"Finesirthankyousir, willtherebeanythingelsesir?" she mumbled.

"No, thank you. You've been very helpful."

With that she left.

"I must declare, that was quite different from the service we got on the way here," he commented. "Completely different attitude. Elizabeth, the Vixen, apparently thought such work was completely beneath her station and that it was our privilege to be served by her. Nadine, on the other hand, was practically in fear of making a mistake – although I must admit it's pretty rare to see a human doing a job as lofty as serving tea on a train."

Clare put her book down momentarily. "I just don't understand what they're so terrified of. Humans have equal protection under the law."

"Hmph," Ignatius snorted. "Try being a human some day. They still bear the stigma, Clare – it's still there. Some people will never be convinced that they should be trusted as much as the rest of us. Then there are those who profit from the cheap labour."

"Thaddeus was telling me just the other day that they're incapable of reading."

"Codswallop, girl! They can't read because no one has taught them. The rest of us are taught and we read nothing except what's required of us. You hit the nail on the head, yesterday in the Kettle. Those who can read, should. And write, as well."

"Don't get your tail in a twist at me," Clare returned. "I didn't actually believe Thaddeus. I know they're *capable*."

"Oh, sorry, Clare," Ignatius said with some discomfort. "Didn't mean to browbeat you."

"That's all right. Still, I don't see how someone as educated as Thaddeus could believe that. After all, it's historical record. Many of our leaders, as little as two centuries ago, had human slaves that not only read and wrote, but kept

accounting books as well. And these slaves were put in positions of great trust; they could have stolen everything and gotten away with it but they rarely did."

"Yes, well, as you recall from our conversation in the pub, Thaddeus doesn't believe in reading anything unless there's something in it for him; fairly traditional behaviour for a stockbroker, I'm led to believe."

"Ig, why don't we send the humans to school with the rest of the children?" asked Clare. "I mean, to actually learn, not just act as playmates."

"Believe me, I think it's an excellent idea," Ignatius stated. "But there are laws against teaching humans to read."

"But the law is wrong," Clare said.

"I agree. But it is still the law and to break the law is wrong," Ignatius pointed out. "At least it is in my book. And even if one considers a law to be wrong, and breaks it, then one must expect to suffer the penalties for doing so."

"What is the penalty for teaching humans to read?" asked Clare.

Ignatius gazed in the distance as he struggled to remember. "One day per offence, as I recall," he answered eventually.

"One day? Of what? Extra PD?"

"No. Prison."

"But prison is only for violent offenders," Clare pointed out.

"Teaching humans to read is a violent offence," Ignatius stated plainly.

"No it's not," Clare rebutted. "Who gets physically hurt from learning to read?"

"My dear young lady, the most important concept of law that you must learn is that has nothing to do with what is right or wrong, just or fair. It is merely a set of rules; whether they make sense or not has nothing whatsoever to do with anything. In short, law brings order, not justice.

"I agree, no one is physically hurt. The statutes and precedents merely place the offence in the 'violent' category."

"Why?"

"One might as well ask why the sky is blue..."

"That's because particles in the atmosphere scatter blue light..."

"As opposed to red or green or yellow," Ignatius interrupted. "It is a violent offence because it results in imprisonment and, yes, I appreciate it is circular reasoning, but there it is. If, as Liza points out, you wish to change the law, I suggest you become an MP – there is an open seat for our borough, by the way."

"No, thank you," Clare answered, smiling. "Besides, I hardly think I'm old enough."

"There are those younger than you that have served but, as you wish. I've no wish to wish to serve in Parliament, either – even for such a noble cause."

Clare continued with her reading as Ignatius referred to his new copies of the Pedestra Charta, both sipping their tea and nibbling on their biscuits in silence as they sped through the countryside.

Satisfied with what he had found, Ignatius put away his documents and took the opportunity to enjoy the scenery. He reached for his handkerchief to wipe his mouth when he noticed he had his torn sash in his hand. "Oh, bugger," he muttered.

"Your Honour?" Clare asked, pulling her nose from a book.

"Sorry?"

"You said something?"

"Yes. 'Bugger' was the word in question."

"I know you have a lot on your mind at the moment, but did any particular problem inspire this?"

Ignatius threw his sash on the seat in disgust. "Oh, just something Liza said."

"She said quite a bit. Anything specific?"

"About seeing if it was legal to open a box, when children's lives were at stake. Pete said as much yesterday, so I can't attribute it to hindsight. I did drop a hint that they should ask Geoff for help whilst I wasn't looking, but I should have just asked him myself and have done. Still, at the end of the day, they're absolutely right, of course. I'm more concerned with doing things in the right way rather than doing the right thing."

"If I might be candid, Your Honour?"

"Oh, I insist," Ignatius insisted.

"Well, first off, I agree with you in the sense that Simon and Grace probably aren't in any actual danger. If they were, they could easily let us know. Despite what Liza said, Grace, and Simon even more so, are not totally bereft of common sense.

"Having said that, I think we should make opening the cabinet a first priority. But I think there's a bigger issue here."

"Go on."

"What I'm about to tell you will be rather unflattering."

"I'm all grown up, Clare. I can take it."

"Right then," Clare took off her glasses and pursed her lips as she weighed her words. "If I might ask a loaded question . . ."

"Certainly."

"Why do you wear the sash of the mayor's office?"

"To show that I'm the mayor. One should take pride in one's position," he answered reflexively.

"Right," Clare gave some thought to what she had to say. "First of all, I think if you walked through town wearing a paper bag, everyone would still recognize you as the mayor. No one questions your authority and you certainly don't need a sash to convey that message. It isn't *their* presence that makes you mayor – it's *your* presence.

"Point taken. Please, continue," Ignatius urged.

"The second point I would make is that there is a difference between taking pride in one's *position* and taking pride in one's *work*. Pete has frequently told me that there's dignity in all work. Sort of as a joke, he usually adds that the more humble the position, the more dignified the work, which is why politicians have to act dignified and barmen just have to work."

"I've always had great respect for Pete's opinion," Ignatius confessed, "if not his work ethic." He looked out of the window as the countryside streamed past. "I think we work well together, Clare."

"I agree, Your Honour."

Ignatius turned to face her. "I think we would work better together as equals."

"Yes . . . Ignatius."

"I think 'Ig' will do. Or 'Iggy' for that matter." With that, he stuffed the sash in his pocket and never wore it again.

1830 – Rialto Stage

Angus and Kenny walked onto the stage.

"Angus, hou's it ye niver telt me o this place?" Kenny asked.

"Nocht tae tell, izzit? Tak a shufti. Is a shite dump, innit."

"Is it yers, then?"

"Oh, aye. Useta be richt nice. Dinna ken hou it juist, sorta muiltered." He stubbed out his cigarette. "Gat the smack, Angus?"

1930 – Black Kettle Pub

Upon their arrival in Otterstow, Ignatius pulled the trolley full of books, following behind Clare as they returned to the Black Kettle.

"Where've ya been?" Rachael interrogated her twin upon meeting her at the bottom of the stairs.

"The Library at Big Smoke," Clare replied simply.

"Ya coulda given a tinkle! Ya've got yer rover, dontcha?"

"I was helping Ig . . ."

"Oh, 'Ig' izzit? Quite familiar wif 'izzonor, now, are we?"

"You may call me 'Ig' or 'Iggy' if you like as well, Rachael," Ignatius said as he appeared a few seconds later with the books in tow. He had been slightly delayed, trying to get the trolley over the threshold.

"Oh, sorry Your Honour. Din't know you was just there. Claude Baughs, what's all these books for?"

"Reading," Clare replied.

"But, your lie-berry's already takin' up loads o' space. We barely got any room as it is."

"These are just borrowed, so I'll return them soon. And I'm going to lend most of my own library to Geoff."

"Oh. Right, then. 'Ere, lemme help." Rachael offered. She lifted the trolley, filled with books, and began to carry it up the stairs.

Ignatius marvelled at the sight. "She's quite strong, isn't she?"

"More than your average Doe, I'd say," replied Clare as the two followed her up.

"Could've used her for catching that bandit."

"I think you tripped him up quite well on your own," Clare said with a smile.

"Bandit? What's this all about?" Rachael's ear jewellery clinked as she picked up her ears for a bit of gossip.

"Rachael, I don't suppose you know where Pete and Gina are?" asked Ignatius.

"Erm . . ." Rachael equivocated.

Ignatius could tell her hesitation was not due to ignorance. "Do you know where Geoff ThistleBoar is?"

"Weellll . . ." Rachael elaborated.

"Let me guess – you know, but you're not allowed to tell me," suggested Ignatius.

"Sumfin' like 'at, yeah. But ya heard nuffin' from me," Rachael said.

"Honestly, Rachael – do I *look* like a grass?" Ignatius said with mock umbrage as he pulled out his watch. "Half-past seven – Sorry, must dash. Good evening, Clare, Rachael," he said, turning to leave.

"Bye, Ig," Clare waved.

"Bye, Iggy," Rachael added. She turned to Clare, "Oo, it feels all awkward sayin' 'at."

"You'll get used to it," Clare said.

"First time I seen 'im wiffout that naff sash. 'E looks sorta, dunno . . . nekkit."

"You'll get used to that as well."

Rachael looked at Clare suspiciously. "What? Ya seen 'im in the altogether?"

Clare smiled knowingly, but didn't answer.

1935 – *The tré Basement*

Ignatius approached the outside of The tré and although it was technically evening, the sun was a couple of hours from the horizon. He stopped just short of the threshold at the open door and pointed his ear to the interior for a listen.

There were several people in the basement and he could barely discern who they were. He couldn't quite make out what was being discussed, but the attitude seemed to be rather argumentative.

Doesn't matter he dismissed as he entered. He knew that his boots walking across the wood floor would easily be heard by those in the basement, thus he made no attempt to hide his presence as he ambled to the staircase. The tone of the voices shifted to a more furtive aspect.

"Hullo, it is only I," Ignatius announced himself as he began the descent of the stairs to the basement.

"Is that you, Ig?" asked Slide. "Hah! What a coincidence. We've all just arrived."

"At the same time," added Gina.

"Imagine," added Sandra.

"Watcha talkin' about? We been here all ow!" Pete's jaw was dislocated by an elbow placed discreetly into his hips.

Geoff ThistleBoar was there as well, although he seemed to be a bit uncomfortable with the situation.

"Is that something behind your back?" asked Ignatius of Sandra, who had her hands behind her back.

"No . . . nothing . . . Not much . . . Yes . . . actually." She brought her hands in front of her holding a tool that resembled a set of scissors with tiny blades about three inches in length and enormous handles, measuring a full yard.

"My word, what is that monstrous thing?" asked Ignatius.

"They're called bolt cutters," Geoff answered. "Only now they're a boat anchor, as they got jiggered trying to snip that lock off. The damned thing's so hard, it broke the blade right in two."

Ignatius sighed. "Well I hope you're proud of yourselves."

The four parents hung their heads slightly.

"Ig, look . . ." Slide began.

"As well you should be. I'm glad to see that at least one of you was clever enough to take my hint about asking Geoff to help whilst I wasn't looking. My apologies for taking such a roundabout way of doing things."

"Oh . . . erm . . . apology accepted," Sandra said.

"Still no luck, I presume?" Ignatius asked.

"Bad luck," Geoff answered. "Broke some of my best tools trying to get this thing cracked. It's made of some metal I've never seen before."

"I don't suppose dynamite would work," suggested Ignatius.

"Yeah, it'd work," Geoff replied. "Assuming you don't mind destroying the rest of The tré with it."

"Oh, could we?" suggested Pete eagerly, who rather relished a respite from PD.

"No," Ignatius answered immediately. "We're not *that* desperate. Not yet, anyway. And we certainly wouldn't want to risk hurting the children as well. Geoff, do you have any other options? Expense is not an issue."

Geoff scratched his head. "I'd have to make a trip to HareFam – or even Writing – to get the sorta tools that could even begin to scratch this lot. That'd have to wait 'til tomorrow. And I couldn't guarantee that they'd work, either. We did make a tiny scratch with the saws I have – but that was two hours worth of work and three blades."

Ignatius stood in silence as his tail flew around.

"All right, then," he finally said. "I'm off to do a little research at the Town Hall. Feel free to carry on." He nodded as a farewell and then turned to leave. After two steps he turned back.

"Oh, one last thing – you might be pleased to know that I have investigated the matter thoroughly and, contrary to popular opinion, the Pedestra Charta does *not* forbid entering Reality. However, having said that, if we get caught doing this, the *onus probandi* will be ours."

"Whose arse is gonna get probed?" asked Pete, nervously.

"*Onus probandi*," Ignatius repeated for clarity, "is the burden of proof. In other words, we will be presumed guilty until I can convince the court otherwise."

"Oh, that's awrite then," Pete murmured. "Had me worried for a moment there."

Ignoring Pete, Ignatius continued. "Thus, if I may suggest, please do not tell anyone else, unless you have a very compelling reason to do so. If you'll excuse me?"

No one said a word as he turned and ascended from the basement. On his way out of The tré, he heard them following him up the stairs.

1940 – Otterstow Town Hall

Otterstow was so small that the Town Hall was usually unmanned, even during business hours. It was also one of a handful of facilities that remained locked when not in use. Thus, Ignatius produced his key, unlocked it and entered. Turning on the lights, he looked about.

In an attempt to follow what he considered Liza's sole piece of useful advice, he began looking for building plans. He vaguely remembered that they were in a rather odd looking chest of drawers where the drawers were very wide and deep, but only two inches tall, as if each one might hold a complete, unfolded suit – but just the one. Of course there was no clothing of any sort in the drawers unless one was in the habit of wearing large sheets of paper or vellum covered with technical scribblings. He opened one of the drawers and, as he expected, it was filled with architectural plans, which explained why those who knew this singular piece of furniture for what it was, called it a plan-chest. Ignatius, being completely unacquainted with the technical side of anything, was not one of those people.

If Otterstow had been built in the recent past, it would have barely qualified as a village. However, at some point in its more distant history, some attribute or other had made Otterstow quite popular and it had been a properly sized town.

There were a number of theories about why it had been so much more populous (if not popular) than it presently was. Some held that gold had been discovered in Otterstow. However, the absence of mines and shafts or any historical evidence of this generally led to the dismissal of the idea. Others held that an ancient fortress had once been built by the mighty Remun Empire. Although not impossible, the only mention in the many Remun historical archives of anything in the area was of an outpost called "Casefeteo" roughly translating into "foul-smelling cheese." There was also a lack of anything remotely resembling a ruin, although it must be admitted that ruins are quite good at hiding sometimes.

Despite the fact that there were disagreements about the nature of Otterstow's past greatness, there were two things on which everyone agreed concerning its current insignificance. Firstly, whatever special appeal the town might have held in the past was now completely and utterly gone. It was a simple place, with no unique features whatsoever. The second thing on which everyone agreed was that it had nothing whatsoever to do with Lutrans, nor with otters.

This is not to say that it had no appeal at all. Unemployment was quite low, with the second largest number of jobs being provided by the local dairy, where the abundantly aromatic (yet mysteriously popular) local cheese was made. There was also a healthy supply of professionals such as solicitors, accountants and the like. The largest employer, it could be argued, was Ignatius, himself. He had long since mastered the art of tying red tape into curly, fanciful bows and interlaced loops, which were actually monetary snares and financial slip-knots that magically extracted funds from The Kingdom's Central Administration, or CA.

To his mind, Ignatius was merely a humble functionary of the CA and if they saw fit to offer funds to support the production of inexpensive and abundant cheese, then it was not his place to question; in fact, he considered it his civil obligation to put the funds to their best use. Therefore, he reasoned, the more money he could extract from them, the more he served the purpose of the CA and, thus, served both his country and his constituency. The entitlements he procured for the town trained and employed a panoply of government-paid positions including (but not limited to) dairy inspectors, agricultural consultants, refrigeration specialists and training officers, all to make safe, healthy and consistent cheese. Of course, all of this extra employment meant a larger tax base to pay for the Town's Clerk (Linda OakSquirrel), the Mayoral Page (Clare MarchHare) and of course, the larger part of the salary of the Mayor himself.

Apart from being able to manipulate red tape, he had equal mastery in circumventing it. On one particular day he had become fed up with numerous government agencies and, far worse, the teacher's labour unions. This legion of the well-intended had frustrated his numerous attempts to find someone to teach the children of Otterstow, by providing an endless (and frequently pointless) list of qualifications, requirements and restrictions as to whom he could hire (or not hire) and what remuneration they could receive.

In what he considered his masterpiece of bureaucratic avoidance, he reorganised the Otterstow Primary School Authority and created, completely from scratch, a new job description. It resembled a teacher, mentor, matron and governess, all rolled into one and then, as with any great literary effort, he gave the position a title that had almost nothing to do with the content. After deciding that 'Matress' might be confused with bedroom furniture, he hit upon the designation of 'Alma', reasoning that the children, upon graduation, would be considered as alumni. Having completed this *coup-de-grâce*, he could hire the very best candidates and pay them what they deserved and the town could afford. He had no shortage of applicants and those who were hired never once complained about their salaries or working conditions.

The town was clean, inexpensive to live in, completely devoid of criminal activity and not one person owed a mortgage on the home in which they lived, as people only moved out of Otterstow and few ever moved in, except by birth or marriage. The entire set of immigrants into Otterstow for the past twenty years consisted of Pete DunBerr and a small parade of Almas (who would eventually leave), all of whom were provided accommodation in the terms of their employment.

All of these charms, however, were not enough to sustain the population that Otterstow had enjoyed in its heyday and it had eventually dwindled to its present population of barely over a hundred. This prolonged exodus had left a number of deserted, ruined buildings of no importance. As most of them were either condemned or simply undesirable, Ignatius waved his magic pen over the appropriate forms and procured the federal funds to pay some locals to demolish the home, with the proceeds of any salvage being split between Otterstow and the contractors, and then procuring more federal funds to pay for

the upkeep of the Natural Recovery Area* which would replace the removed edifice. With its tiny population, Otterstow easily ranked first in The Kingdom for the number of parks *per capita*.

Regardless, it was required of the town to retain the plans for the removed buildings. Currently there were less than a hundred buildings extant in Otterstow, but the plan-chest held blueprints to over five hundred, harking back to a time that was, if not happier, certainly more crowded. This, however, only served to make Ignatius do more work in his search.

He opened the file labelled 'T-Z,' hoping it would contain plans for The tré. Inside was a stack of plans for various domiciles and businesses or, more typically, a combination of the two. Each of the plans was a stack of large sheets of paper or vellum, each about half the area of a door, stitched together.

"Tank tower . . . Terrance Cottage . . . Thackeray Lane Hall . . . Thatcher Cottage . . . Treacle house. Hmm. Nothing. Maybe under 'Amphitheatre.'" He opened the 'A' drawer.

"Aesop . . . Alandale . . . Althaar . . . Ambrosia . . . Ant Hill . . . Ant Hill? Who would name their home Ant Hill? Still, not there. Well, no use wasting time." He went to the telephone on the desk.

"Hello, Linda OakSquirrel? This is Mayor Hali . . . erm, Ignatius. I'm calling from the Records Hall and I was looking for the plans to The tré in the records. Would you happen to know what it's filed under? . . . Well isn't it in alphabetical order? What's the name of the building? . . . Yes, I tried looking under 'theatre' and 'amphitheatre' as well . . . Oh, I see . . . So I should just look through the lot, then . . . Would it be in any of the other filing cabinets, like properties or tax records? . . . Not sure? Now, I'm not trying to be rude, but you are the Town's Clerk, aren't you? . . . Well, true, and no telling what the previous clerks did on a bad day, eh? . . . No, no need to come down. Thanks all the same . . . Good-bye." He hung up the phone and looked at the drawers. Putting his hands on his hips, he said, "I hate having to look for something that's not there."

As mentioned earlier, at its peak, the number of buildings in Otterstow had never surpassed a few hundred, so it didn't take quite as long as Ignatius had imagined it might to look through all the files, but it was still without result. After he had scoured through the last drawer of plans, he began to look through the property tax files and the residence files and all the other files but he knew it was a futile task.

The town clock, directly above his head, chimed eight times.

Continuing his search, his brush began to twitch and it stirred up a little dust, which began to irritate his nose. "Bloody dust," he grumbled. He threw open the door and went to open some windows to let some fresh air in. He pulled up a stool, stood on it and was wrestling with the latch, which had been painted shut, when he let out an enormous sneeze, causing him to lose his balance and fall to the floor.

While he was lying on the floor, he pulled out his handkerchief, blew his nose and wiped his eyes. He then looked up (as his head was pointed in that direction). "Well, shave me . . ."

**Natural Recovery Area* – Bureaucratic 'park'.

The plan-chest, which held the plans, stood on legs roughly two feet high and Ignatius had landed with his head underneath. There, on the underside of the plan-chest, in plain sight to anyone beneath it, but completely invisible to anyone standing nearby, was a little latch holding a flap that probably contained something worth hiding. Ignatius supported the flap, which would drop downwards upon opening, and freed the latch. Slowly, he lowered the flap and felt a set of plans begin to slide out of their hiding place. "Well, well, well . . ."

He noted that they were in immaculate condition as he laid them out on the table and quickly began to look over them. They were definitely plans for The tré, but there was also some mysterious attribute about them that he couldn't put his finger on. He glanced at the open door. Running quickly, he slammed it shut. Then as an afterthought, he locked it. Then, as a further afterthought, he bolted it. Only Linda and he had the key and he didn't want her surprising him.

Then the telephone rang.

He thought about not answering it for a couple of rings, but decided to pick it up.

"Hello, records, Mayor Hali Ignatius speaking. Oh, hello, Linda . . . Oh, have you? . . . Where? The plan-chest? What's a plan-chest? . . . Oh, the one with the drawers that look like they might belong to a Giraffe . . . Look underneath the bottom . . . A catch? . . . A flap? . . . The tré plans are in a hidden drawer? . . . Why, yes. So they are . . . Thank you, Linda . . . Couldn't have found them without you . . . Imagine that, a hidden drawer. Just what I was looking for . . . No, I can't imagine why they would want to keep it there either . . . Thanks again. Goodbye, Linda."

Ignatius hung up and sighed. "Well, so much for keeping *that* a secret."

He re-opened the door to let the air flow through and set the plans on the drawing table. Leaning against it while resting his elbows on the surface, he began to study the plans.

Nearly an hour later he was still struggling with them as he turned another page. He wasn't a builder or architect or engineer by any stretch of the imagination and was having a hard time interpreting them. There were some parts of The tré he could make out, like the stage and his box and the rather odd vent that ran into it, although it seemed somehow altered from the plans. And there were thousands of little arrows pointing here and there with numbers and cryptic little symbols all over the place.

He leant just slightly forward, elbows on the table, with his head propped on his hands, as he lazily scanned the plans.

"Gotcha!"

"YIP!" Ignatius jumped so high in surprise, he nearly hit the ceiling. Landing on his feet, he turned with an astonished look on his face to see Linda, smiling evilly with her tongue sticking out.

"Linda OakSquirrel! Is it your usual habit to greet people by grasping their buttocks unawares?"

"Noooo," she drawled. "But yours was particularly tempting and as it was sticking waayyyy out here," she measured with her hands, "I thought I'd make an exception."

"Please . . ." Ignatius remembered his promise to himself to not be so haughty. "Allow me to return the favour some day," he suggested with a smile.

"Oo, yes, please!" Linda cooed.

"You *are* shameless," Ignatius admonished with a smile. "Never a dull moment when you're about."

"Oh, a compliment from hizzoner."

"Hizzoner has decreed," Ignatius said with mock gravity, "that I am to be called either Ig or Iggy. I'm weary of being so formal all the time."

"Bout time. I noticed you finally lost that naff sash you used to wear everywhere. You might even pick up a Vixen or two if you learn to let your hair down a bit."

"A Vixen? In this little stickfarm? Small chance of that," Ignatius grumbled.

"You could always do a mixie," Linda suggested. "I've heard a few of the girls say some interesting things about you. They may not be Vixens, but they're very keen." She raised her eyebrows suggestively.

"Pass," Ignatius replied quickly. "I'm sure they're lovely girls, but it's not what I want in life."

"Just an option," Linda dismissed. "Found your plans, I see," she said, changing the subject.

"Yes, I did," he replied, glad to have the subject changed. "Not that it's done me one jot of good."

"Why's that?"

"Because I can't make any sense out of them," Ignatius complained.

"How about asking Geoff? He's a builder."

Ignatius considered this for just a moment. "There's an idea. And he's already in on the secret."

"Secret?"

Ignatius rolled his eyes at his own indiscretion. "Damn. Never was much good at subterfuge."

"Well, you may as well fill me in," Linda urged. "I *am* the Town's Clerk and you *are* the mayor. You can swear me to secrecy. I've even got a few I'm not allowed to tell you."

Ignatius nodded. He sat down, beckoned her to do the same and filled her in on the story.

"I have heard a little about it," she admitted. "Be exciting to find out some more. And if Geoff's our man, he's at the Kettle."

"Well, as you're in, why don't you come along?"

"Buy a lady a drink?"

"If I see one, I'll considerate it," Ignatius replied.

"Oo, you cheeky Fox!" she scolded, tugging his cheek.

2050 – Black Kettle Pub

Ignatius, accompanied by Linda, entered the Black Kettle with the plans tightly rolled up under his arm.

Inside, Pete and Rachael were behind the bar, whilst Geoff and Clare were enjoying their drinks and chatting. It was unusually quiet for a Wednesday evening and the rest of the pub was unoccupied.

"What's 'at role o' paper under your arm, Ig?" asked Rachael.

"Propers, Rache," Pete admonished.

"No, that's quite all right," Ignatius said. "I've decided that life is too short to be so formal."

"No more 'Your Honours', then?" asked Geoff.

"First-name basis, like anyone else," Ignatius confirmed, "even from the children."

"I see you've lost that naff sash, as well," Geoff observed.

"Just so," Ignatius said.

"So, what's with the building plans?" Geoff asked.

"How'd you know they're building plans?" Ignatius replied as he put them on the bar.

"I *am* a builder."

"Oh, yes, of course. How stupid of me," Ignatius admitted. "Actually, that's the very reason we brought them here – for you to read them."

"Those for The tré by any chance?" asked Geoff.

"Erm, yes," Ignatius admitted. "But I think we might want to review these somewhere in private," he suggested, discreetly indicating Rachael's presence.

"She already knows," Clare said.

"What? About Ig fourleggin' to catch a thief?" Rachael mentioned.

Pete and Geoff looked at Rachael in astonishment of her announcement.

"Thief? What thief?" Geoff asked, stunned.

"What, Ig? On all fours? Pull your own tail!" Pete asked incredulously.

"Yep," Rachael confirmed, proud to be privileged to dispense such quality hearsay.

"Go on, then. What's it all about?" Geoff prodded.

"When they was in Big Smoke today, Clare got attacked . . ."

"Attacked?" asked Geoff, concerned.

"I didn't get attacked," Clare dismissed. "A human stole a book out of my trolley."

"Since when've ya got a trolley?" asked Pete.

"Get on with the bit about Iggy and the fourleggin'," Geoff goaded.

Rachael eagerly continued. "Oh, right, so just after Clare was attacked, this skin was a hunnert yards away, an' it took Ig all o' four seconds to trip up the sod up an' bring the book back."

"I think there's been some exaggeration in the retelling," Ignatius mentioned.

"Not on my part," Clare stated.

Geoff stroked his chin in recollection. "Y'know, when Iggy here was in his college days, he was quite the athlete – not a big burly brute, but he was a damn fast runner and not half bad at a few of the field events as well. You even qualified for the foxchase nationals a few times when you were at uni, dintcha, Ig?"

"All twelve semesters," Rachael bragged. "So, Iggy, when're ya gonna gimme some pointers before I have my run?"

"You should find a proper coach, Rachael. I had a very easy field," Ignatius dismissed. "Everyone on the pitch at uni was either a souse, some toff that used it to slack off physical training requirements or a spotty swot trying to impress some tart that was way out of his league."

"And which category did you fit into?" asked Geoff.

"All three, I'd bet," Linda guessed.

"Just so," Ignatius admitted.

Geoff stroked his chin in recollection. "Yeah, I remember you used to run around with that tramp, Jess, erm wusname . . ."

"FærFyxe," Rachael filled in the blank.

"Yeah, that's her," Geoff confirmed. "Nasty bit o' work, that Vixen. Say, how'd you know that, Rache? That was when you was just an ickle 'un."

"Clare tol' me. Iggy's friend, Liza, tol' her."

"Liza? Liza Prigel?" asked Geoff.

"Yeah, that's 'er."

"Oh, she's a good egg," Geoff said with a smile. "We were best mates in school. Fun bird to have about. She'd roll up these great big 'uns . . ." he had his hands a foot apart.

"If we could get back to the matter at hand?" suggested Ignatius. "Clare? What *else* does Rachael know about? Apart from my old girlfriends and my rather limited athletic career."

"I didn't tell her about the cabinet, Pete did," Clare held up her hands in defence.

"Oh, thanks for the grass, Clare," Pete complained. "Can't tell you girls nuffin' wiffout bein' dropped in it."

"Pete, honestly," Ignatius began an admonishment.

"I know, I know, we gotta keep a lid on it," Pete admitted. "But Grace is 'er sister, too. Well . . . Her cousin, technically, but if I'm 'er dad, she's just as much 'er sister. 'Sides, Rachael's got as much right to know as Clare, dontcha think?"

"No matter," Ignatius let the matter drop. "Geoff, if you would?" He tapped the building plans.

"Oh, right, right," Geoff answered as he whipped on his glasses and leafed through the pages. "I assume we're looking for some instruction on how to open the cabinet."

"That is the goal, yes," Ignatius answered.

"Man, lookit the shape these plans are in," Geoff marvelled. "You'd never guess they were two centuries old. I'd bet it's genuine vellum. That'd make these plans more valuable than The tré."

"How do you know that?" Ignatius asked.

"Normal pulp paper yellows as it ages, y'know. Gets brittle," Geoff explained. "They use it all the time now and it just falls apart. Hundred percent cotton rag is pretty good; it'll last a long time. More expensive, of course, but nothing compared to true vellum; that stuff's a right packet."

"No, I mean about the two hundred years part," Ignatius clarified.

"Right here," Geoff said pointing to the corner of the plans. "Date of the plans – although the building might actually be a good bit older. Well, never mind." Geoff continued, turning another page. "Right, here's the stage," he

turned a page, "the auditorium," turning another page, "roofing," another page, "exterior walls, interior walls, basement," turning more pages, "piers and piles, drainage, addendum for electrical, addendum for plumbing, addendum for . . . hang on, hang on . . . See, there's our cabinet at the foot of the basement stairs. Looks a bit like our coal bin. But it's definitely not for coal."

"What's it for, then?" asked Clare.

"Dunno," answered Geoff. "Don't say on the plans, neither."

"More to the point, I don't suppose it has instructions on how to open it," Ignatius said.

Geoff remained silent as he brought his face very close to the plans for study. "There's nothing explicit," he mentioned.

"Drat," Ignatius grumbled. "What in Jack's name am I going to do now? There must be a record *somewhere* that explains how to open that thing."

"However," Geoff continued, "It does reference a few non-standard items."

"Non-standard items?" asked Ignatius, eager for a lead. "What's that mean?"

"Well . . . items that aren't, erm . . . standard. So, it's not a door, or stairs, or a window. That sort of thing."

"Where are they?" asked Ignatius.

"I've picked out one, apart from the cabinet itself," Geoff stated as he pointed to a cryptic notation. "Here it is, right next to the cabinet."

Everyone leaned in to get a better view.

"What crap 'andwritin'," Rachael grumbled. "Whazzit say?"

There was a pause, as several of the better pairs of eyes leaned in a little closer, whilst Ignatius dug his spectacles out of his waistcoat pocket.

"Sistern?" guessed Clare.

"Not much point in having a cistern in the basement," Geoff observed.

"And 'cistern' starts with a 'c'," Linda pointed out. "This starts with an 'S'. And it's about the only letter I can make out."

Ignatius, having finally fixed his glasses upon his nose, pushed forward and squinted at the note. "Oh, of all the . . . that's my father's shorthand. I'd recognize that illegible scrawl anywhere."

"That must be what Liza meant about you being the only one to understand," Clare recalled. "You're the only one that can read his writing."

"No argument there," Ignatius agreed.

"But I can read shorthand," Linda objected, "and that's nothing like what I learned at school."

"Da's shorthand went through a sort of evolution as he went through uni. I always had to ask Mummy to read his writing for me until I was fourteen."

"What happened at fourteen?" asked Clare.

"Mummy finally forced me to learn how to read his shorthand," Ignatius recalled. "It was possibly one of the most useful things she ever taught me. Once I mastered it, I could do eighty words a minute on my better days – that's twice what I could do with the Pigman system. Now then," he leaned forward and squinted as he adjusted his glasses. "Sin – is – ter," he enunciated. "Well done, Clare, I'm surprised you landed as close as you did."

"Sinister?" repeated Rachael. "Oo, that don't sound too good."

Most of the others leaned back as they considered the word.

"Sinister . . . sinister," Ignatius mumbled. "Ah, so another piece of the puzzle. Da wrote it in Remun – my favourite subject at uni. He probably guessed that I'd be the only person in Otterstow that could translate it *and* wade through his shorthand."

"Clever man, Xavier," Pete said.

"A little too clever for his own good," Ignatius concluded.

"So, what's it mean?" asked Pete.

Ignatius shrugged. "That he made things more difficult than . . ."

"I meant the word," Pete interrupted. "'Sinister' – what's it mean?"

"Oh, sorry. It means 'left'," Ignatius translated.

"'Left' as in 'gone'?" asked Rachael.

"'Left', as in 'opposite the right'," Ignatius clarified.

Geoff stared closely at the plans again. "Don't see anything that would apply to, but . . ."

"Oh, look, here's another one," Linda pointed out.

"Say, 'ere's an idea," Pete mentioned urgently. "Why don't we all go down The tré an' actually take a crack at it? Instead o' standin' round starin' at a sheet o' paper?"

Just then, Thaddeus WhinnsBrocc walked in, followed by a few other people that no one recognised. As soon as Ignatius saw him, he made a gesture to the others, yet unseen to Thaddeus, to button their lips.

"What's 'at you got there?" Thaddeus asked, obviously concerning the building plans to The tré.

"Oh, just thinking of doing a little decorating," Ignatius dismissed as he began to gather up the plans.

"Oh, aye, leukathat – there's that caibinet doun the stairs. Tha's where the killer came from."

"Killer?" asked Rachael nervously.

"Oh, aye. A true lunatic. Did you niver hear the tale?" Thaddeus asked.

"Two bitters, ale, lager and stout for masel," he ordered.

"Go on, then," Rachael prompted, lining up the glasses for Pete.

"Isna guid – an as usual when isna guid, there's a skin involved. Anyhoo, when I were a lad – eight or nine – ma auld gutcher, mayherestinpeace, he tellt me this tale. Years syne, I think it was turn o the century, when he were a lad, hissel, there was a bit o commotion doun The tré, some odd ongauns. An he hears his parents whisperin aboot hou there's a visitor what's come ta The tré, only he didna come ta The tré as such, he . . . he, erm, what way should I put this . . . he *appeared* – through the caibinet."

During the Melan's slightly inaccurate recollection, Johnny Prigel had entered the bar, hopped on a stool and listened in on what remained of the tale. Without giving any more thought to it than one might give to scratching an itch, Pete had served him, collected his cash and returned his change, all whilst hanging on every word.

"There was a few signs o him here an there an some things broke an stolen an then the matron was beat bad one night when she was cleanin after hours. He was an evil bit o work, ta be sure. Mad this man was – for he was a skin, an

a right wicked one, juist like durin the Great Conflict, when they were tryin ta rule the world an all.

"Sa's onywey they finally catch the filthy beast an restrain him an after a bit o confab, they take him an send him back through that caibinet in The tré, but I canna mynd the details o what way they sent him away or kept him from comin back."

They were all a bit wide-eyed at Thaddeus' tale and there was a very tense pause after he finished.

"At's just an old bogeyman skintail," Rachael broke the silence as she set the full glasses on the bar. "Used to keep the ickle 'uns outta the basement."

"Na!" Thaddeus protested. "Suith! Ma ole gutcher, mayherestinpeace, telt me it, straight up ta ma face. He wadna lee ta me!"

"When was this?" asked Ignatius.

"Oh . . . I was aboot eight or sa," Thaddeus answered, handing Pete some cash.

"No, I mean when did your grandfather say this took place?" clarified Ignatius.

"Oh, aye, erm . . . Juist aboot a hunnert years ago. Nou, if you'll excuse me – have clients ta entertain." He gathered up the pints and took them to the table where the strangers sat.

"So?" urged Pete. "Can we go now?"

"Do you wish Rachael to go as well?" asked Ignatius.

"Oh, can I? Please?" Rachael pleaded.

"Sure, why not?" Pete agreed.

"As you wish," Ignatius concurred. "But if I might enquire, who shall remain to tend the bar?"

Pete stared at Ignatius for a moment. Finally he muttered, "Shave me, I am eager an' all, ain't I. Almost left the bar untended. Maybe I am . . ." As if in sudden recollection, he turned around to face Johnny Prigel. Stopping in mid-slurp of his lager, the Erinac seemed very concerned that he was suddenly the Ursan's centre of attention.

"I *did* pay," Johnny muttered through a mouthful of head.

"Watch the bar for a few hours?" asked Pete.

"How much?" asked Johnny, wiping his miniscule snout with his sleeve in great relief at his change of fortune.

"Alf-pint an hour," Pete offered.

"Full pint," Johnny countered.

"Alf an' a bag o' crisps."

"Done."

Pete threw his pinny at Johnny, which could have served as his bed sheet and walked out from behind the bar to the exit. "C'mon girls, we're off!"

2100 – The tré Basement

Slide HolenWulf, Sandra StæppanWylf, Gina ParsleyHare, Pete DunBerr, Rachael and Clare MarchHare, Ignatius Halifox, Geoff ThistleBoar and Linda OakSquirrel were gathered around the plans in the basement of The tré. They

occupied almost every square inch of floor space available, even with Linda and the twins sitting on boxes and crates.

"We've got 'sinister', which is 'left', next to the crate," Geoff began enumerating the hand-written notes that had been added by Ignatius' father. "We've got 'torqueo', which is 'twist', on the west wall. Then there's 'premo', which is 'squeeze', right in the middle of the floor. Is that it, or . . ."

"Wait, there's one more!" Sandra pointed.

Clare had expressed a sudden interest in the HaliFox Shorthand System and Ignatius had written a simple list of the letters and their symbols. She also insisted on reading the remaining words. Glancing back and forth between the plans and the alphabetic list Ignatius had written for her, she nearly transliterated. "First letter is either an 'N' or a 'V'. Then it's either an 'a' or an 'o'. Next is definitely a 'c' and the last is probably an 'o'."

All eyes were on Ignatius as he went through the iterations. "Naco . . . Noco . . . Waco . . . woco. Ah! That's it. Woco. It means to summon or invite."

"Can't say it makes the picture any clearer," Geoff stated.

"That's what it means," Ignatius said defensively.

"Is it just me," Pete began, "or duzzit sound a bit like one o' those li'l Sinese puzzle-boxes ya gotta turn this way an' that to open?"

"Yeah, it does a bit," Clare agreed. "But they're not exactly precise instructions."

"They are rather complicated," Slide admitted. "I guess Ig's old man didn't want anyone opening it by accident."

"Or on purpose, for that matter," added Pete.

"Let's start with sinister," suggested Geoff, pushing things along.

"Yes, that's the one right next to the vent," Ignatius noticed.

"Vent?" Geoff said. "There's no vent here in the basement."

"There is," Ignatius protested, pointing to the object. "That great, big, black thing, just there – looks like a horn."

"Is that a vent?" asked Geoff. "Looks like the horn on a gramophone. And that pipe's also connected to the cabinet. See? Just there, it's a bit hidden, but look, goes down and into the box. Looks to me like it's got more to do with sound than pushing fresh air around."

"That would make *some* sense," Ignatius agreed.

"Clare, you're closest," Geoff said. "Have a goosey, please?"

Clare squeezed her way through the crowd and the debris. "There's nothing that looks like it moves to the left over here."

"All right, let's look for the next one," Geoff conceded. "Torqueo was on the west wall. That's that wall over there," he pointed without looking up. "And the scale is twenty-four to one, so I make it to be," he sucked some air through his teeth, "about . . . right . . . there." His thick finger directed to a spot on the wall. "Just behind that bookcase."

"Maybe it is the bookcase," Clare suggested.

"Nah, the shelf's only been there for about twenty-odd years," Geoff mentioned.

"How'd you know that?" asked Clare.

"I built it," Geoff answered simply.

"Ha-ha. Bookworm got one wrong," Rachael teased.

"Behave, Rachael," Pete admonished. "An' gimme a hand movin' that shelf."

Together, the two lifted the shelf and managed to get just enough room for one person to squeeze in.

"Could you make a little more room?" suggested Ignatius.

"There's too much stuff in the way," Rachael complained.

Eighteen hands flew into action to manoeuvre debris from the area.

Moments later, Pete and Rachael had the shelf fully away from the wall.

"It appears to be a rather ordinary wall," commented Ignatius. "I couldn't begin to guess how it might twist."

"Ah, yes, so it *appears*," Geoff admitted, "but what you see is actually panelling that's used to cover up the true basement wall. It's a simple matter to remove it and see what's underneath."

"Please proceed," Ignatius ordered.

Geoff began to run his fingers along the wall. "Should be a seam somewhere along here. Once we find that, we can pull off the panelling quite easily." He then began to tap randomly. "Hey, it's hollow just here." He tapped more firmly and a small door popped open. "Oh, think we've found it," he mentioned casually as he opened the panel.

Recessed within the wall was a crank attached to a gear whose diameter just barely fit within the foot square opening. In contact with the gear was a vertical pole, having teeth that meshed with the gear. It was reasonably apparent that if one turned the crank, the pole would move upward.

"Okay, that explains the 'twist' part," stated Clare.

"Right. Give it a turn, Geoff," Slide suggested.

"I'm not trying to be grand or anything, but I think it'd be best if it were me," Ignatius said. "If anything untoward happens, I can take responsibility. So if there are no objections?"

Everyone nodded their acquiescence. Ignatius stepped forward, rolled up his sleeves, grabbed the handle of the crank and began to push. "Umph, seems to be . . ."

"Erm, Ig?" Geoff interrupted.

"Stuck! MMMPH!" Ignatius grunted.

"Ig?" Geoff called again.

Ignatius gave up. "I'm sorry, Geoff, would you care for a go? I fear it's got the best of me."

"Clockwise, Ig," Geoff said, making a circular indication with his finger.

"Eh?" Ignatius seemed confused.

"Clockwise," Geoff repeated. "The gear should turn clockwise to make the pole go up."

"Oh! Right. Of course. Clockwise," Ignatius replied as he gave it another tentative push. It moved smooth as silk, although requiring some effort. After grunting and puffing through nearly six turns, it came to a stop. Ignatius continued to hold on to the crank. "Appears to be as far as it goes," he panted.

"Why ya still 'angin' on to it?" asked Rachael.

"It's pushing back. If I let go, it'll unwind," Ignatius replied.

Geoff turned around to look. "Hey! Dig this!" he nearly shouted. Everyone turned to look. The cabinet, which, up to this point had been only waist high, had suddenly grown to over seven feet.

"Cor! Didja see that?" Pete marvelled.

"Didn't make a sound," commented Slide.

"Fancy," added Gina.

"Hey, the lock's disappeared," Linda noticed.

"I *knew* it was bigger," Sandra said.

"Erm," remarked Ignatius. "I don't mean to complain, but this handle is rather difficult to hold and I think it's slip . . . "

The cabinet folded back to its previous state, silent as a shadow.

". . . ping. Right – before we go any further," Ignatius said, cleaning his hands on his handkerchief, "there's something we need to discuss briefly."

"Go on, then," Pete urged.

"First of all, if we're going to find the other bits to this puzzle *and* if they're all as well concealed as this one, we'll have to clean this place out a bit or we'll constantly be tripping over one another. If we could start tomorrow, just after the morning Portrayal – any volunteers?"

Everyone immediately threw up their hands.

"I must admit I'm impressed with your sense of civic duty," Ignatius commented.

"It's not so much duty as curiosity," Clare admitted.

"Yes, about that," Ignatius scowled at having to bring up an unpleasant subject. "It's just that, as I mentioned earlier, we must keep this whole thing completely secret. And while I admit I couldn't have made this much progress without you, if we start moving stuff out of the basement and tearing out walls and floors and who-knows-what-else, then everyone will know."

"Half the town is in here already," Sandra mentioned. There was a pause as the rest of the crew looked at her. "Well, *I'm* not going to say anything, of course."

"Ya *did* say it was legal," Pete confirmed.

"I would stake everything I have on it," Ignatius confirmed. "However, if we were to be found out, I would have to refresh the memories of the Lord's Court about conjugations and passive verbs – assuming they ever learned them to begin with. And even faced with overwhelming evidence, as a rule they're a rather hidebound . . . "

There was a bang from the direction of the box that garnered the undivided attention of all in the group.

A voice came out of the box, loud and clear. "Onybody inby?"

Everyone froze.

"Kenny, A dinna think is sauf-like doun there," said another voice in a cautious tone.

"Ah, Angus, ye great poof! Whaur's yer goolies, man? Is juist an empie caibinet," said the first voice.

Ignatius pointed to the box and mouthed, "It's in there." The others responded with an expression that said, "Yes, we know," although not in quite

as polite a manner. He quietly tiptoed over to the cabinet as the others followed.

"C'mon, Angus. A'll gang first," urged the first voice. Then in a louder, clear voice, he barked, "Come oot the nou! Or A'll bash yer barns oot!"

Linda and Clare hid behind Pete, who slowly reached for a large timber.

"Dinna mak me come inby!" warned the voice.

There was the sound of a door slamming, then some footsteps and a bump or two. Sandra and Slide stood side by side, each of them reaching for some kitchen knives.

"Damn. D'ja hear 'em vyces, dintcha Kenny?" said the second voice.

"Oh, aye! A did," confirmed the first.

"There's nocht here but stairs. Where'd thaim vyces come frae?" asked the second.

"Must've been an echa or summat from ootby. Come on oot. The fitbaw's about tae begin," cajoled the first.

"Ah, richt then," agreed the second.

The footsteps walked away.

Breathing a silent sigh of relief, the armed occupants of the basement set down their weapons.

2115 – Rialto Basement

Angus and Kenny exited the tunnel, entering the basement of the Rialto.

"Where's that thing gang?" asked Kenny.

"Nae scoob – Niver been doun 'til juist the nou," Angus said. He then noticed the chain, unhooked, on the floor and then the eye bolt, barely hanging on to the wall. "Oh, aye, A mynd. This caibinet's had the cheen 'cross it."

"Whitcha wanna fouter about wi that for? C'mon, the fitbaw's on," Kenny complained.

"Guan tae close it up," Angus stated, picking up the chain.

"Whit for?"

Angus' expression suddenly became very serious. "A've haurd soonds frae this caibinet." He measured the chain and found it only fit loosely around the cabinet, as the eye bolt had pulled slightly out of the wall.

"Ah, gang byle yer heid!"

"Nae, suiith!" Angus protested as he hiked the hook up another notch on the chain. "A've haurd 'em. Vyces an all!"

"Wha? Ghaists an bogles, like?"

Angus shrugged. "A wadna ken whit soond a ghaist micht mak. An ye haurd'm juist the nou, dintcha?" He stretched the chain tight and put the hook in the eye of the bolt, giving it a few test pulls. "Thare – should dae." He looked suspiciously at the eye bolt which seemed a bit unstable for his liking.

"BAH!" Kenny shouted, holding up his hands to scare his friend.

Angus flinched as Kenny guffawed.

"Ah, didja mak a skiddy, Angus?"

"Yeah, hah-hah. Uber-foony," Angus grunted as the two of them departed upstairs to watch the football game on the television.

2115 – Rialto Rooftop

The sun was just about to slip below the horizon whilst Simon and Grace had sat quietly the whole time, occasionally risking a peek over the ledge.

"Simon, I'm starving," Grace complained quietly.

"I'm dying for a bite as well," he said.

"Do you think they've left yet?"

"I haven't heard anyone going out the front, but I have dozed off once or twice. They're probably still in, I expect."

Grace grabbed Simon's arm and held it tight. "Oh, if I ever get out of this, I'll never do anything naughty again," she promised.

"I'm going to have a look," Simon said, getting up. "See if I can nick some nosh, as well," he added, taking off his boots.

"What? You're not going to leave me here alone, are you?"

"I'll just be a few minutes. Don't worry, I'll be very careful. When I come back, I'll knock three times, pause and knock once. That way, you'll know it's me."

Grace nodded.

Simon quietly opened the door and just before descending, turned to Grace and said, "I do love you Grace. You know that?"

She nodded. "I love you too, Simon."

They gave each other a quick kiss and he entered the stairs to the building, descending into darkness. Grace closed the door quietly behind him.

Simon arrived at the second floor where most of the living quarters were, his senses at their highest level. Sniffing the air, he detected a slight scent of cannabis, but nothing dangerous. He could hear some voices, but it was apparently from some sort of wireless set. Cautiously, he made his way along the corridor, the kitchen but a few steps away. Treading on his footpads as lightly as he dared, he peeked around the corner and, seeing no one present, quickly stepped in. No sooner had he done so than he heard footsteps coming down the hall. Scanning about, he looked for a place to hide. There was the cupboard, but it had only a curtain instead of a proper door. *Needs must*, he thought. As soon as he stepped inside, he noticed to his dismay that the curtain didn't go all the way to the floor, thus exposing his feet.

Just as Angus reached the entrance to the kitchen, he stopped, turned around and shouted, "Kenny, whadja for asides some brew!"

"Oh, aye, gie's a jaur o olives, wadja!"

"Richt!" Angus called back. He went to the refrigerator, grabbed a couple of bottles of beer and then went to the cupboard. He abruptly pulled the curtain back revealing a stock-still Simon.

"Excuse me," Angus said, reaching for a jar, then closing the curtain and trundling off to the master bedroom where his friend Kenny sat, watching television.

"United misst a try," Kenny reported.

"Kenny, ye'll niver believe whit A seen in the aumrie," Angus said, sitting down and handing a beer to his mate.

"Oh, aye?"

"A wouf!"

"A wouf, ye say?"

"Aye, a wouf – in the press. Cep he was wearin clothes an aw. A canna believe this smack, Kenny. Is the maist convincin hallucination A iver had."

Kenny looked smug. "Oh, aye. Didna A tell ye 'twas the mutt's nuts. Achmad's niver lemme doun, eh?"

"Aye, nae doubt," Angus agreed.

"Wonder when A'll start tae seein things?" Kenny asked.

Meanwhile, Simon was a bit puzzled by this recent turn of events. *Surely it's not an everyday occurrence to see a Wolf hiding in the cupboard in Reality. It would be pretty unusual even in Otterstow.*

He waited just a moment more. *That's as maybe*, he thought, *but I should probably best go while the going's good.*

As silently as he could, he gathered a few jars and tins from the cupboard (the visitors apparently had restocked the larder upon their arrival, Simon had noticed). He then went to the refrigerator and looked inside. Within, in easy-to-carry boxes of six, were pints and pints and pints of lager, ale and stout. Simon grabbed a half-dozen with a picture of a Fox on the box that was named for fowl for some peculiar reason and departed for the rooftop. He immediately returned, grabbed the tin opener and departed again.

"I know we're too young to drink," Simon said upon arrival, "but in this case, I think we can make an exception."

"It's no worse than smoking weed, and we've both done that often enough," Grace rationalized. She immediately took one of the bottles and opened it on a nearby ledge. "We have to drink something and besides, I don't care anyway," she said swilling a large amount of the brew. Her mouth puckered as she forced herself to swallow it. "My word, this stuff is horrid," she said after getting it down.

"Is it?" asked Simon, taking a sip. "Hmm. Nothing to write home about, I'll admit. Wouldn't call it horrid, though."

"That's because you've only had that awful stuff at the Potkiln – and even that's better than this."

"What other beers have you had?" asked Simon.

"Oh, loads. I've been drunk dozens of times."

"Living over a pub, I guess it must be pretty easy," Simon conjectured.

"Oh, *never* at the pub. If Mum caught me drinking from her stock, I'd never see the light of day again. I buy beer from pubs or shops out of town."

"You get away with everything, you know that Grace."

Grace had already finished the first bottle. "Do not – I've also gotten caught loads of times. Hand me another bottle."

Simon handed her another beer. "Well, yes, you might get caught, but you never get punished."

"No argument there," Grace conceded. "I usually get a bit of a bollocking from Dad, but he never grasses on me. Hey, open that jar there. I don't know what artichokes are, but I'm ready for anything if it's got meat in."

Simon opened the jar and sniffed the contents. "Don't think it's got any meat in," Simon said.

"What? Course it does," Grace argued.

"How'd you figure?" asked Simon.

"It's artichoke 'hearts,' innit?" Grace reasoned. "Artichoke must be something about the size of a chicken, judging by the size," she said as she peered into the jar. "Go on, gimme a bite. They look dead yummy – they're absolutely swimming in oil."

He handed her a sample. After a bite or two, she pursed her lips in appraisal. "Hmm. Think you're right, Si. No meat in here."

Simon sampled one of the hearts. "Tastes lovely to me."

"Not bad for something with no meat," Grace said, tucking into the antipasti. "'Sides, I'm starving."

In Allegory, as in Reality, almost all who are fourteen years of age are sexually (if not emotionally and mentally) mature. In the not-too-distant past, it was not unheard of for people of this age to begin a family. Further, as with any animal, whether feral, domesticated or sapient, the instinct for reproduction drives one harder than any addiction – after all, it is this very instinct that is necessary for the survival of the species. It is only by making very difficult choices that most people (and even some beasts) defer having children until conditions are more favourable.

Unfortunately, as not one of us is a perfect being, making the right choice every time is no mean feat, even for the fully mature. For a young couple who are too inexperienced to fully appreciate the consequences of their actions, no matter how many times or to what detail these consequences are explained, it is even more difficult.

There were a number of factors that contributed to what happened after the meal, during that fateful evening on the rooftop of the Rialto. Fuelled by the raging hormones of adolescence, the alcohol, their lack of experience and the enticingly aphrodisiac qualities of a warm, summer evening having a barely cloudy set of stars, with just the thinnest scythe of a moon chasing a sun just below the horizon, leaving them in the soft solitude of twilight, they succumbed to their instincts. Perhaps, it should be mentioned, that their genuine love for each other played some small part as well.

It would be easy to say that they deserved whatever fate they met, due to their actions. It would be even easier for one to say "I would never," and for some, it might well be true. But among those who count themselves as fallible, who, indeed, could honestly fault Grace or Simon for losing their innocence to each other during that extraordinary night on a rooftop in a strange land?

2116 – The tré Basement

Ignatius and all of the others had gathered just outside the front door of The tré, so that their voices would be a safe distance from the cabinet.

"What'll we do now?" asked Rachael, nervously. "Ya heard 'im. Said 'e'd bash our 'arns out – an' whotsa 'harn' anyways?"

They all turned to Ignatius. He composed himself and said, "I suggest that someone crank up the cabinet and I'll go in and have a quick look."

"By yourself?" Pete protested. "Ya could get skinned – or worse!"

"I'm certainly willing to take that risk," Ignatius stated calmly, "although I certainly wouldn't object to any support."

"I'll go," Sandra StæppanWylf chimed in.

"Then I'm going, too," Slide HolenWulf added immediately.

"I'm in," Pete DunBerr volunteered.

"I think that will be enough, then," Ignatius mentioned.

A few minutes later, Ignatius stood in front of the cabinet with a rolling pin in his hand. Behind him stood Simon's parents, each with some small, sharp object and behind them loomed Pete with a scrap of timber just big enough to be a club.

"Shouldn't we bring some sort of torch?" asked Slide.

"No, I think not," Ignatius answered. "If they *are* human, they can't see in the dark nearly as well as we can."

"And if they're not human?" Slide said.

"Then they're at the same disadvantage we are," Ignatius answered.

"Rachael? If you would?"

Rachael heaved on the crank and the cabinet unfolded to its full height. Ignatius began to claw at the edge of the opening, hoping to find a hold to open the door with.

"Think it's here, guv," suggested Geoff as he pulled on the opposite side of the door, opening it smoothly. "I'll prop this thing up with a timber and hold it steady until you return."

"Right," Ignatius said, steeling himself. "Here we go." He walked in. For the first dozen steps, the ambient light was enough to see the steps, but the stairway curled in such a way that it was soon quite dark and Ignatius had to feel his way along. His heart was pounding so loudly, that he could barely hear the others walking behind him. After about twenty yards, he felt an obstacle. Giving it a push, he could tell it was a door, but it opened just a tiny bit, letting an iota of light through a vertical sliver. He could make out an enormous room on the other side, but little else.

"Pete," he whispered.

"Yeah, Ig?"

"There's a door, but it's jammed or something. Could you come up here and give it a push?"

"Right, on my way."

"Ow! Have a care!"

"Sorry, Sandra."

After a moment of fumbling in the dark, Pete felt his way to the door. "Okay, here we go." He grunted and pushed his shoulder into it, but the chain held. He tried again and then a third and a fourth time, each with no result. "No joy here, Ig."

"What's holding it?" asked Ignatius. "It can't be a proper lock. It wouldn't crack open like that."

"I think it's a chain," Slide suggested. "Look, you can make out a link, just there."

"Where? I can't see your hand."

Slide tapped his hand on the door so Ignatius could follow the sound.

"There. See it?"

"Oh, right. I see it. Right, the lot of you go back to The tré and have Geoff come in here for a look."

"Aw, do we have to? It's just gettin' interestin'."

"Honestly, Pete," Ignatius chastised.

"Awrite," Pete grumbled.

Ignatius could hear them making their way back. Moments later, he heard Geoff on his way in and saw the small, bouncing light of a torch.

"Ig? You still down here?"

"Right here, Geoff," Ignatius called quietly.

"Ah, right." Geoff was at Ignatius' side in no time, holding the torch. "What's the deal?"

"Can you see that bit of chain, just there?"

Geoff pointed his torch and then gave the crank a few twists to recharge it.

"Yeah, I can just make it out."

"Do you think you could cut that?"

"Even if this chain is just basic steel – unlike the cabinet – no, I couldn't, be honest. At least not with any saw that I own."

"Why not? It's just there," Ignatius complained.

"Yeah, but to cut a chain link, you have to make two cuts. And even though I could cut that part just there quite easily, I can't even see the other side of the loop in the link."

"Oh," Ignatius said, suddenly comprehending Geoff's analysis. "No, I suppose you can't."

"There is a special saw made out of wire. That might work, but it's a full-day's trip to Writing to get one, if I'm lucky."

Ignatius sighed. "Right, let's go back."

Ignatius and Geoff returned to the rest of the group and explained the situation.

"We can proceed no further, for at least a day," Ignatius concluded. "Geoff, could you send someone to Writing to get the saw you mentioned? I'd prefer you to remain here to help out."

"Yeah, could send Vince," Geoff said. "Not a prob."

"Oh, good," Ignatius said. "For the time being, I suggest we keep it closed, in case someone unpleasant returns. We'll also keep the usual watch in case Simon and Grace return."

22JUN2001 Friday

0700 – Otterstow Town Hall

The moment Ignatius awoke the next morning, he was eager to do some more research. After foregoing breakfast for a quick spot of tea, he immediately set out for the Town Hall to continue his investigation. As usual, the building was empty, so he locked the door behind him and went to the council meeting files. His first thought was that, being of a generally honest nature, he disliked all this subterfuge, duplicity and sneaking about behind closed doors. He then recalled his business and tried to remember the date on the plans.

"Let's see, two hundred years ago was the original plan . . ." he dragged his finger across the labels on the drawers. Finding the drawer he wanted, he opened it and began searching for the appropriate folder. "January."

Marking his spot, he pulled out the folder, opened it and began reading. "Attendance, Reading of minutes, old business . . . Hmm." He sat down and began to read in more detail.

After spending nearly two hours digging through old files and making a note or two from time to time, he hadn't discovered anything about The tré or the cabinet that he didn't already know. Finally concluding that he had chased enough wild geese down a sufficient number of blind alleys, he decided to direct his efforts to another area of interest.

"Now when did Tad say that incident was – ah, yes, turn of the century," he muttered to himself. He looked at the council minute files and then it occurred to him that it would more likely be in the police records. Crime was practically non-existent in Otterstow, just as it was a hundred years ago. Thus, he reasoned, at least that would be an easy date to track down. Within minutes, he had the information in front of him; a report of an attack on the matron, just as Thaddeus had mentioned and then nothing for several years. He noted the date of the last attack as 24 June, 1900.

Midsummer Day, almost exactly one hundred and one years ago. Today is the 22nd of June, a Friday. Midsummer Day will be Sunday. Surely just a coincidence, he thought.

He dug up the council minutes for the same dates and found that they were missing. "Hmm, imagine that. Not concealed in a secret compartment anywhere this time, I suspect," he said to himself. Just to check, he had a quick look around the cabinet. He briefly toyed with the idea of calling Linda, but quickly dismissed it.

Being satisfied that there were no hidden caches of documents to be found, he decided to wrap up for the morning, as it was nearly time for him to attend the morning Portrayal.

He was putting the papers back into the folder when he noticed a note pencilled on the inside of the folder itself, reading "File No 189/27-A, sealed and vaulted, Metropolitan Library, Trinova".

"Met Library? We were just there. Sealed and . . ." Ignatius quickly pulled out his watch and concluded that there was just enough time before the Portrayal began for a brief enquiry. Putting the folder down, he picked up the telephone.

"Operator? Trinova, Metropolitan Library, records, please." He pondered his plans for the moment as he waited for the connection. *I won't have time to go there myself. I know. I'll send Clare; she can return the books she's read as well.* "Hello, this is Ignatius HaliFox. I'm the mayor of Otterstow and I was wondering if you had a particular record on file. I have a number."

After a mere five minutes, he had arranged the details to have Clare pick them up from Liza Prigel the next day. He hung up, satisfied that he had almost certainly accomplished something after all his efforts.

"Not a moment too soon," he remarked to himself as he began to tidy up before leaving for the morning Portrayal.

0895 – The tré

Exiting the Town Hall, Ignatius double-checked the time on the clock tower. He had enough time to take a leisurely stroll to The tré and as he walked, a question began to occupy his thoughts.

Should I tell Dawn? She'd probably be all right, but then I'd have to tell the juniors, Kelly and Carol, as well – and they're not exactly the open-minded type. I wish I could find a way to get those two shifted to some other district. I'll have to scratch up some paperwork on that.

By this time, he had arrived at The tré and, preoccupied with his thoughts, absentmindedly sat in his box seat.

The time for the curtain to go up came and went. Just one minute afterward, Dawn came to the box and whispered.

"Your Honour, don't you think you should begin?"

"What's the hold up?" asked Ignatius.

"You're on PD today," she whispered urgently.

"Oh, Claude . . ." he bolted out of his chair and ran to the backstage.

*Opening scene: Stage centre, a bunch of grapes hangs high
above the ground*

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of The Fox, the Goat and the Grapes.

A Fox, seeking his evening meal, came upon a bunch of grapes which hung high above the ground.

Fox enter stage l and spies grapes

Thinking he might be able to reach them, he jumped as high as he could.

Fox jumps for grapes

Ignatius, recalling his previous injury whilst performing a similar Portrayal, gave a couple of half-hearted attempts at jumping for the grapes.

"Higher!" called the children.

Narrator

He tried and tried . . .

Fox jumps for grapes again

Ignatius jumped a little higher this time, but it wasn't anywhere near his vertical reach and the children knew it.

"Higher!" they called again.

"Right," Ignatius muttered under his breath. Nodding a cue to the Narrator, Wanda FærFyxe, to pause for a moment, he stooped down and unlaced his boots to the cheers of the children. Removing them, he tossed them off of the stage and loosened up for just a few seconds. The room fell silent as he crouched as low as he could go and, his tail high, he shot upwards. The ceiling of The tré was 16 feet at its crest and Ignatius got up to at least twelve.

"Wow!" the children marvelled as one as Ignatius landed on all fours.

Dusting himself off, he gave his audience a questioning look and they all burst into applause. Ignatius signalled to Wanda to continue the narration, noting the look of annoyance on her face.

Flash, she mouthed.

Narrator

. . . however, he could not reach the grapes.
Just then, a Goat came by.

Enter Goat, stage r

Not a single Capran lived within the jurisdiction of Otterstow, so the part was bestowed on Thaddeus WhinnsBrocc. As per his role, he wore a set of horns and a little goatee.

"Maa-ah!" he called to the children, hamming it up as he usually did.

"Maaah!" they called back.

Fox

Greetings, friend Goat.

Goat

And good morrow to you, friend Fox.

Fox

Would you fancy some grapes just now?

Goat

Ah, just the thing! Where might I find some?

Fox

I will tell you if you promise to share.

Goat

Fair enough. A deal done.

Fox

They are directly above your head.

Goat [*looking up at grapes*]

Ah, just so. Sadly, they are out of my tiny reach. Can you not jump for them?

Fox

I have tried, but to no avail.

Goat

See here, let us co-operate and we can share the boon. Let me assist and then you can reach.

Narrator

And so the Goat allowed the Fox to jump upon his back, whereupon he could easily reach the grapes.

Goat assists Fox in reaching grapes

"Yer anklet okay after that spartle, Ig?" whispered Thaddeus.

"Yes, just fine, thank you. Ready?"

With the practised ease that came from a hundred performances under their belt, Thaddeus crouched and Ignatius scrambled up his back and onto his shoulders. Demonstrating the expertise of circus performers, Ignatius was launched into the air with Thaddeus' brute strength, caught the grapes at his apex and gracefully landed, uninjured.

Not only did the children applaud, but the Almas and, grudgingly, Wanda did as well. Ignatius and Thaddeus took a bow.

Fox [offering grapes to Goat]

If no success is shown

When you persist alone,

Goat [taking some grapes from Fox]

Some aid you might enlist

To prevail when you persist!

Narrator

Thus the fate of the Fox, the Goat and the Grapes.

Draw from it what you may.

Until next we meet – good day!

Immediately after the curtain closed, Ignatius made his way to the front door of The tré to see the children out, as was his usual custom. Wanda FærFyxe followed close behind, along with Thaddeus. The pair stood behind him.

The first of the children just began to issue out of The tré as Thaddeus leaned over Ignatius' shoulder, tapping his pocket watch. "Mayor HaliFox," began Thaddeus, "PD waits for na man."

"Yes, I freely admit it," Ignatius confessed. "I was not in the proper place at the appointed time."

"I think we'd be willin ta let the matter drop, if ye was no to be sa concernt about us bein there ta the minute. Give us all a wee bit o . . . leeway."

"No," Ignatius said flatly. "That is not acceptable. Otherwise there'd be no end to it. The standard penalty for being late is double duty for the month. And that's what I'll get, same as everyone. And shame on me for setting a bad example."

"We'd rather you let us be a little more flexible in our timing," Wanda suggested. "I don't see why we have to run on such a tight schedule."

"I'm sorry, Wanda, but the school runs on a schedule. One has to be in position on the stage before the curtain rises at the chime of the town's clock. That is the rule. I admit, I have broken it and I will suffer the consequences, just like anyone else. I make no excuse."

"Then let us do subs for each other without all the paperwork," Wanda suggested. "Couldn't we use T-post with our rovers or *something* besides trotting all the way out here to sign a book?"

"No," Ignatius said flatly. "There must be a paper trail. If there isn't, then I'll have no idea who's supposed to be where. Did you know, despite the fact that our town has one of the tightest PD rotations in The Kingdom, we have the longest running streak of unmissed Portrayals in the entire district? And only a

half-dozen towns in the entirety of The Kingdom have longer streaks than we do. Something to be proud of, I'd say."

"Yeah, but some of us got things to do," Wanda whined. "Going to the doctor, trips outta town, that sorta thing. It's a right pain in the arse for both people to run down to The tré and sign that damnable logbook, just to do a sub. We could send you a T-post over the æthernet and you'd have a record on your terminal. You could even use a rover. It's dead simple."

"Don't you think that would be unfair to those without terminals or rovers?" suggested Ignatius.

"Ignatius, practically everyone has a rover," Wanda pointed out, pulling hers out of her cleavage to demonstrate, "except, for some mysterious reason, you."

"I have a perfectly functional telephone with an answering service," Ignatius countered. "And to conclude this matter, I think I'm very flexible with your schedules. I usually only require a day's notice – and many's the time I did my Portrayal Duty early for the convenience of others. I've done as much for both of you on numerous occasions."

At this, Thaddeus threw up his hands in defeat, whilst Wanda rolled her eyes in frustration as they both casually wandered off.

The last of the various children including Erinacs, Equans, Melans, Ursans, Vulpans and the like trudged off to finish their school day. A single, human girl was the final one out and it reminded Ignatius of the conversation he had had with Clare on their train ride home.

No time like the present, he thought as he beckoned to the senior Alma of The tré, Dawn RoseMearh.

Dawn had an average height for a Mare of six foot and seven inches, a muscular and healthy physique and, like most Equans, she emanated health and a sort of raw power. Her coat was a simple brown with a blaze on the bridge of her nose and her mane and tail were worn as unadorned ponytails. Her personality was much like her appearance – straightforward, simple and easy to deal with it.

"Oh, Mayor HaliFox," she began before he could utter a word. "I'm glad I've caught you. It appears that someone broke in last night."

"Broke in?" he replied. *For Jack's sake, as if I don't have enough to deal with.* "Was anything taken?"

"It's sort of hard to tell, as there's so much rubbish down there, but it doesn't look like it. It looks like they just moved a few things about."

"Oh, what a relief. There was no break-in. It was only we," he replied, instinctively telling the truth, then immediately thinking it may not have been the best course of action, even though he would hate to tell an outright lie to Dawn.

"We?" asked Dawn.

Think fast, Fox, he told himself. He glanced at his co-conspirators from the previous evening, standing at the entry of the courtyard of The tré, waiting to begin clearing out the basement, and well out of hearing range. Then he saw Kelly and Carol, the junior Almas and Dawn's subordinates, having their own conversation, just a few feet away. "Yes, erm . . . We," he echoed, buying some time.

"And who would 'we' be?" asked Dawn.

"Well, 'we' would be myself," Ignatius answered and, after a short pause, added, "and the group of volunteers at the edge of the courtyard," he pointed with his eyes.

"And what would 'we' be doing in the basement of The tré, if I might ask?" Her tone of voice did not suggest a challenge, merely a polite enquiry.

"Ah, well, I was hoping to keep it a secret, but, erm . . ." Lying to Dawn to provide her with legal cover was truly odious, as far as Ignatius was concerned, but having the junior Almas find out about the cabinet would be the end of their mission. He knew the moment had come. He would have to tell a lie to someone he liked and respected. Then, inspiration struck.

"Ah, yes, you see . . ." he said lowering his voice, knowing Carol and Kelly would automatically stop their chatter and fall into eavesdrop mode. "I'm about to write a grant to have The tré spruced up a bit. Now, Geoff doesn't know this yet, but he's probably going to get a contract to completely overhaul the basement and, if I can get the right bits of paper done, we can remodel the stores on the ground floor into a tea room."

Dawn smiled. "Oh, that would be nice."

Not actually a lie at all, Ignatius rationalised to himself. *As long as I actually write the grant*. He knew he could, in fact, get the grant with just a bit of paperwork – and he would gladly do so at his first opportunity – but it still broke his heart even to mislead Dawn, whom he liked and respected.

"Yes, I think it's about time we took a little more pride in our humble venue, don't you? It's been neglected far too long. However, until the work is done, no one is to go into the basement. Also best not to mention it to anyone until the paperwork has actually gone through."

"Oh, that won't be a problem," Dawn said. "No one likes to go down there anyway. They keep hearing all these odd noises. It's so funny, honestly; some of the children think it's Reality." She looked a little embarrassed as she added softly, "I think the juniors do as well. And, erm . . . Excuse me." Turning to her subordinates, she ordered, "Kelly, Carol – go ahead and start the class with the children. I've some business to discuss with the mayor. I'll join you soon."

The Mares dutifully departed as per Dawn's orders. Ignatius thought he noticed a sense of indignation from them, although he could not speak as to its source.

As they were departing, Ignatius summoned his volunteers forward and, without comment, they entered The tré to begin the process of reversing Clutter's Law.

Dawn waited until the courtyard was completely cleared before she began speaking. "Your Honour . . ."

"Ignatius', please," Ignatius interrupted. "Or 'Ig', if you like."

"Ignatius . . . I know you've gone to a lot of effort to provide me with two juniors. Having them has a very strong, positive impact on the education of the children. And I doubt if I could possibly do my job nearly as well without them . . ."

"I sense the word 'but' is about to appear," Ignatius tendered.

Dawn tilted her head as if about to make an uncomfortable confession. "But . . . I was very much hoping that I could have two juniors that were someone else."

"I think I can guess why, but let me hear it, if you'll pardon the expression, straight from the Horse's mouth."

Dawn grimaced at the pun, but Ignatius had noticed that it had the desirable effect of lightening the conversation, thus putting her more at her ease.

"Yes, erm . . . The thing is . . . It's just that all they ever do is . . . gossip."

"Not while they're with the children, surely?" asked Ignatius.

"Oddly enough, no. When they're with the children, they're professional in every way. But outside of that, they're just so . . . oh, I don't know, it's difficult to describe. They look down on everyone in Otterstow, to begin with. They think that, being from large cities, they're more clever and worldly than anyone here.

"All they do is sit around and bad-mouth everyone in the town. It became so unbearable, I had to move out of Matron Cottage. I just can't abide gossip and that's *all* they do in their spare time."

"I agree. I think gossip is the most insidious . . . Just a minute. You don't live in Matron Cottage?"

"No, I moved out about a month ago."

"But that's its sole purpose – to provide free accommodation to the Almas."

"I know," Dawn said. "I pay rent for my flat, out of my own salary."

"It took me days of paperwork to get that arranged," Ignatius complained.

"You're telling me that you'd rather pay rent and live further away than live with your two juniors?"

"Yes, gladly."

Ignatius scowled. "Well, to be honest, I've been thinking of replacing them as well."

"Oh, could you?" Dawn gushed in relief.

"Dunno, honestly. I don't have any grounds for dismissal – and quite frankly, taking that route could get pretty ugly. I'll have to think of some way of getting them to 'volunteer' to leave."

"I don't think that would be a problem," Dawn answered. "As I said, they look down on everyone in Otterstow. And they don't exactly hold the town itself in high regard."

At about this time, Pete showed up with a box full of anti-clutter in his arms. "Where ya want it, lady?" His question was directed more towards Ignatius, although Dawn reasonably assumed that it was directed at her.

"Erm . . ." she answered, caught completely off guard by the question.

"Do we need any of that rubbish?" Ignatius asked Dawn.

"No, we never use any of it, except for some of the seasonal stuff," she answered. "We keep all the props for the Portrayals in the storage room, behind the stage."

"Right. Pete, anything that can burn, put it there, in the centre of the courtyard," Ignatius ordered. "We'll use it for a Midsummer bonfire. I think there's enough room for a fire and a hundred people, don't you Pete?"

"Oh, easy-peasy," Pete answered.

"Good," Ignatius said. "Things that don't burn can be piled just outside the entry against the wall. We'll let anyone dig out what they want and chuck the rest."

"Goodo," chimed Pete. He blew a shrill whistle to the inside of The tré. "Come along girls! Outside! New orders!"

"Well, Dawn, if that's everything . . ." Ignatius suddenly recalled his original purpose for summoning her. "Oh, yes, one more thing – about Mini, the little human girl – She doesn't actually participate in classes at the school, does she?"

"No, Your Honour," Dawn answered, feeling the answer rather obvious.

Ignatius was about to remind her to stop using his title to address him, but decided that it was pointless to force informality.

Dawn continued her answer. "Essentially, we just babysit her whilst her parents are at work."

"So she takes no lessons at all, then?"

"No, Your Honour. Well, she participates in some of the activities. Sport, bit of art here and there, that sort of thing."

"If I might ask your completely honest and frank opinion . . ."

"I think it's a waste of the worst possible kind," Dawn interrupted. "She's a bright, clever child – if somewhat introverted. Of course, I suppose I'd be a little withdrawn if I were the only one in the school who didn't receive an education."

"I'm glad you feel that way," Ignatius said quietly. "If I can get a new set of more . . . tolerant . . . juniors, I'd like to start educating her, just as you would the other children."

"I'll be more than happy to, Your Honour," Dawn said. "And you're quite wise to broach this idea outside of hearing distance of my present juniors. They wouldn't hesitate to complain to anyone in authority who would listen, as they are fully aware that there are laws about teaching humans to read."

"Yes, of course," Ignatius answered. "There most certainly are. And they are quite specific in regard to the rather draconian punishments served to those who disobey them."

"You'll pardon me for complaining, but I have no desire to experience these punishments. And no matter how 'tolerant' any new juniors might be, I sincerely doubt they would either."

"Ah, yes, there are, as you have just stated, rather strict codes concerning the act of teaching humans to read," Ignatius agreed. "However, there is absolutely nothing, immoral, unethical or illegal about teaching them to *write*."

Dawn blinked in confusion for just a few minutes. She seemed on the verge of saying something, stopped and then tried again, with equal failure. "This is *very thin ice* we'll be skating on," she finally managed.

"I do want it made clear," Ignatius stated, "that if you're not up to it, you're under no compulsion to do this."

"Believe me, nothing would give me greater pleasure. But we'll have to replace my juniors first."

"It might take a little time, but I shall make it a very high priority," Ignatius added. *Right after the grant for The tré*, he mentally added. *And that terminal thingy Liza told me about.*

After exchanging pleasantries, Dawn departed and Ignatius gathered everyone around and briefed them on what he had told Dawn about upgrading the basement (but not about the juniors or Mini). The rest of them returned to their work as Ignatius consulted with Geoff in the basement.

"Geoff, I'm afraid you're going to have to come out of retirement."

"That's not an issue," Geoff dismissed. "But something else is."

"Oh? What now?" asked Ignatius.

"You said you wanted to convert the stores, upstairs, to a tea room."

"Yes. Should be simple enough, no?"

"Oh, yeah," Geoff admitted. "Easy little earner. But that room is where they store all the props and so on that we actually use for PD. Where does that all go when the tea room's done?"

"Why, here in the basement, of course," answered Ignatius.

"But then the Almas will have to go in the basement every day," Geoff pointed out.

Ignatius' face fell. "Oh . . . so they will. Drat."

"Tell you what, Ig. You stick to that story. I'll get it all sorted, have no fear."

"Will you? How?"

"It'll take a bit more dosh, but not to worry. I'll have a set of plans ready in a day or two along with an estimate."

"Oh, thank you, Geoff. That would be excellent." Ignatius noticed some of the party coming down for their second and third loads. "Right . . . as I've taken care of all of my managerial duties, it's time for me to do some actual work." Looking at the shelf, he noticed a dozen slates and a small bucket of chalk. Inspiration suddenly struck as he grabbed them both. Making his way to the tip *pro tempore*, he noticed that his co-workers broke into pleasantly surprised expressions as they saw him carrying something besides a conversation. He took a slight detour to the entry of The tré's courtyard, picked out a clean slate and began to write on it with the chalk. "Jumble sale – all pieces free." As an afterthought, he included, in smaller script beneath, "small donations gratefully accepted."

Admiring his work for just a second and then checking for syntax, grammar and misspellings, he leant the slate against the entry for all to see. The rest of the slates and chalk were returned to the pile of non-combustible debris that was growing at an astounding rate.

For the rest of the morning and on into the afternoon, they carried up the rest of the basement's contents. About half-way through the work, Linda came across a tiny leather pouch, which she opened, took a sniff of and, recognizing it as cannabis, closed it immediately. With a wicked smile, she quickly tucked the bag into her cleavage and whispered, "Woot! Finder's keepers!"

1400 – Rialto

Standing before the Rialto theatre in the early afternoon sun, Steve Green was fiddling around with a set of keys. He was a slight, young man of twenty-five, with neatly trimmed brown hair. His face, although not without its charm

and character, was possessed of prominent incisors, giving him a vaguely rodent-like appearance.

Desiree DelHomme, his present companion, a similarly aged American girl, who was carrying luggage with scan tags reading LGW, found his mild overbite rather endearing. She was very fond of all animals and of the small fur-bearers in particular, being nearly finished with her post-graduate degree in veterinary science. As observed earlier, they were in fact the same age and they were also of the same height – five foot and six inches. Desiree, however, was somewhat larger than her escort in girth, being a full three stone heavier than Steve.

Steve did not view this as a problem. In fact, in consideration of the distribution of some of the weight, he considered it an asset. "So, this is where I live," he announced, after finally negotiating the locks on the front door. "It's not much to look at these days, but it used to be quite the venue."

"I love old buildings. There's always some great story behind them," Desiree mused. "When was this one built?"

"There's a date on a cornerstone that says March 4th 1870."

"Sure it's not the third . . . mph! dammit! . . . of April?" asked Desiree as she entered the foyer, yanking on her duffel bag to get the wheels over the threshold.

"Desiree, we've been over this. My email said '6/7'. In England – and the rest of the civilised world, I hasten to add – that's July 6th. The numbers are from most specific to most general. Date, month and year," he explained as he hoisted the strap of her oversized carry-on onto his shoulder.

"Yeah, but you say 'June 7th – the sixth month and seventh day. Which is why I had to put this trip off for another month, pay a couple hundred extra bucks in fares and fees and miss three credit hours from school so I could rearrange my schedule. I guess Americans, being the uncivilized retards that we are, don't know the meaning of big words like 'specific,' so we just write things like we say them. Wow!" she said, slapping her forehead. "There's a concept! How's it pronounced again – 'Gloster'?"

"You're one to talk. Should I mention Thibodaux, Lecompte or the mellifluous Natchitoches? Give it a rest, Desi. You're here, I've apologised several times and I've even gone so far as changing the way I write dates, just so no one will ever get confused again," he said as he flicked on the lights, illuminating the lobby.

"Awright, I promise, I won't mention it again. Sorry for nagging – probably a little cranky after that flight. Man, this is a nice lobby."

"Just a tick," Steve said. "Shan't be a minute." He crossed the marble lobby floor to the door of the auditorium, opened it and shouted at full voice. "Angus! You about?"

A distant voice replied. "Aye. That you, Steve?"

"I've got company!"

"Izzit that septic munter ye chatted up online?"

"Bye, Angus!"

"Later, wee poof!"

Steve returned to Desiree. "Sorry for that. That was Angus, the owner – or something like it."

"What's he doing in there?" asked Desiree.

"That's where he shoots up."

"Lovely. So, apart from being a shooting gallery, any good stories about this place?"

"Not much to this one. And sorry, we haven't a lift." Steve pointed to the stairs.

"Bummer," Desiree replied as she began to roll her bag to the bottom of the steps.

"Come to think of it," Steve suddenly recalled, "it *has* been rumoured that there's a ghost here." They had reached the stairs and Steve picked up the other end of Desiree's bag.

"F'true?" Desiree asked in astonishment. The stairs were just wide enough for them to walk side by side with the bag between them.

"It's a matter of record that an actress was murdered here. Supposedly she's been heard crying in the basement."

"Have you ever heard her?" asked Desiree.

"I've worked and lived here five years and I've never heard a thing," Steve shrugged. "No one I worked with ever mentioned hearing anything. Except Michael, but he was probably just winding me up at the end of the day."

"Michael?"

"Yes, Michael Robinson. You know, the tall skinny bastard you didn't like with the earring."

"Who says I didn't like him?" asked Desiree defensively.

"You did."

"I said I didn't like his piercings – he seemed okay as a person. And maybe it's just me, but how can a guy who has his rings on his nipples be as haughty as he is? Enough about him. So you said a junkie owns this place?"

"The guy in the auditorium I just shouted to is Angus MacAleister. He owns it, or maybe it's his dad or some conglomerate owned by his dad or something. Never made very clear to me. And, yes, he is a junkie, unfortunately – sank all the profits into his habit. Doesn't care at all for the place, just lets it run to ruin. But apart from being a waster, he's completely harmless. Actually not such a bad bloke, all things considered."

"And you *do* live here?" Desiree asked. "It is okay to go in? There ain't no legal issues or nothing, right?"

"We've shut down for a while – something to do with the electrics as I recall, but the building isn't condemned or anything. And, yes, I do live here. As the manager, it's part of my contract to have this as my residence. It's free accommodation, after all – and there's loads of space as well. Or there could be. It's such a shame – they could do so much with the place and they just let it go to waste, honestly. Would you like a Cook's tour?"

"Definitely," Desiree answered. "But first I need a few hours to crash so I can recover from that nine hour flight and six hour time change. What time is it now?"

"Just gone past two."

"Ergh. That's eight in the morning where I live. Show me to my room – and the showers – I definitely need to take a shower . . ."

"Sorry, no showers," Steve admitted.

"F'true?"

"We're a nation of bathers. At least we were when this place was built."

"Damn, you scared me just then," Desiree said. "Anyway, bath, crash, eat – then tour."

"Right, then," Steve agreed.

Desiree sniffed the air. "Is it just me?"

"Sorry?"

"This place smells like the cigarette's graveyard," she complained.

"Does it?" asked Steve. "I cleaned out all the ashtrays just yesterday. I remembered you saying you didn't like the smell."

"I think you'd have to do a teensy bit more than run an ashtray through the warsh to get rid of the cigarette smoke."

"Oh, yes?" asked Steve. "I could get a can or two of air freshener if you'd like."

"No, don't bother," Desiree dismissed his suggestion. "It'd take way more'n that."

"Such as?"

"I'm thinking you'd have to pretty much have to rip out the walls."

"Sorry, a bit out of our budget."

1410 – *The tré*

After watching the afternoon Portrayal, Ignatius took his usual stance outside the door as all the children filed past. His fellow conspirators were right behind him, waiting for *The tré* to empty so they could finish the last few bits of the job.

"Oh, bless their li'l cotton socks," Rachael practically purred as she watched the students.

"I thought ya couldn't stand the ickle sprogs," Pete mentioned. "One o' the few things I admired aboutcha, Rache."

"I can't. Think they're absolutely matty li'l vermin," Rachael answered. "But ya gotta admit, they're right cute when they're paradin' past in their ickle uniforms an' all. Just so long as they don't live wif me. Don't do litters."

"I think they're brilliant," Linda cooed. "I'd take the lot home with me if I could."

After the children and Almas had cleared out of *The tré*, everyone except Ignatius went to the basement to finish the last few bits of the job.

Ignatius stayed outside to ask the Almas to drop by later and see if there was anything of value.

"By the way, do any of you have keys to the basement?" he asked them, just as they were turning to leave.

"Yes, we all do," replied Dawn.

"I would like to collect them. As Mister ThistleBoar will be doing a great deal of work and leaving his tools there nightly, I think it might be a good idea."

Dawn immediately reached for her key hoop and began to pull off her key.

"Mayor HaliFox, surely you don't think any of us would take Mister ThistleBoar's tools?" asked Carol LeanHors, affronted.

"Oh, no! Certainly not. Nothing of the kind," he replied. *Oh, dear – time for another excuse*, he thought to himself. "It's a, erm, safety issue."

"We *are* adults. I don't think we would be in any danger from a set of spanners," Kelly RanchHors pointed out.

Kelly and Carol were just about the same size as Dawn, and at 22, were both ten years younger. They were both lighter in colour, with Carol being a nearly caramel Palomino whereas Kelly was a simple mouse Grey. Also, unlike Dawn, they wore their manes and tails woven with ribbons and plaited in complex braids and bands.

"Well, the, erm . . . the children. You know how some of the children are. Curiosity and the cat, as they say." *That was inspired*, Ignatius congratulated himself mentally. "And if you don't have keys, you couldn't possibly be held responsible if there were an accident, could you."

The juniors were clearly reluctant to lose their keys, despite the veiled threat in his explanation.

"Just the basement key," Ignatius qualified. "You may keep the rest, of course."

The juniors finally relented and handed over their keys. Ignatius thanked them and departed for the basement.

"Good of you to join us," Geoff told him as he arrived.

"Just getting the keys from the Almas," Ignatius said, handing them to Geoff.

"Ah, good idea," Geoff said, pocketing the keys. "Now, as I was telling the others, there's no need to get all the small bits of litter and so on, nor to sweep. When I start refurbishing, it'll be a big mess 'til I'm finished anyway," he advised. "So, let's see if we can get the rest of these clues on the plan sorted out." He had laid the building plans on an impromptu workbench made from scrap timber and an old door. "We've sussed out the 'torqueo' bit. So, there's the 'sinister', 'premo' and 'voco' bits left to do."

"Ignatius, I'm worried," Rachael said nervously. "What if there *are* mad 'umans on the ovver side. Ya heard that bloke last night – said 'e would bash our 'arns out – an' ya never did tell me what a harn is."

"I vaguely recall that one's 'harns' are one's brains in Caldor dialect," Ignatius explained. "And I quite agree – our mission could be quite dangerous. You're right to be concerned."

"I'm more concerned about Simon," Sandra StæppanWylf said. "He's so trusting. I'd hate to think . . ."

"Needn't worry," Slide HolenWulf interrupted. "Grace'll protect him."

"And what, exactly, is that supposed to mean?" asked Gina ParsleyHare.

"Pardon me for interruptin'," Pete DunBerr interrupted, "Din't they pull this stunt last year. Run away from home sorta thing?"

"That's correct," Slide grumbled. "Grace took him off to the lake for a week."

"Now see here, Slide HolenWulf," Gina protested. "Simon wasn't exactly dragged there kicking and screaming."

"If we may get back to the topic at hand," Ignatius suggested. "Rachael does have a point. We should exercise a good bit of caution."

"We already know how to open the cabinet," Gina pointed out. "Why do we need to know what this other stuff does? If it does anything at all?"

"The more we know about this thing, the more we can take advantage of it," Ignatius answered. "And if you feel this is a waste of time, you may attend to any other business you think is more important."

"Are you asking me to leave?" asked Gina defensively.

"No, quite the contrary," Ignatius countered. "We would greatly appreciate any help you can give."

"Oh . . . right then. I'll just . . . stay here, then," Gina muttered.

"Shall we get started?" Ignatius suggested. "Geoff, any ideas for a starting point?"

Geoff had been mulling over the plans for a bit and grunted in affirmation.

"Lessee, we've done the 'twist' over on the wall," Geoff recalled. "To me, the next, most obvious one is on the cabinet itself," he pointed out. "This one said 'sinister,' which is 'left.' And it's pointing to the left side of the cabinet. I don't see what it means by left, though."

Rachael walked to the cabinet's side joined by Gina and Slide. "There ain't no handles nor nuffin'," she commented.

"Try giving it a push to the left," Geoff urged.

"There ain't nuffin' to push," Rachael complained.

"She's absolutely right, Geoff," Gina verified. "Apart from the lock, it's all perfectly smooth surfaces."

"Just a guess," Geoff began, "we probably have to do them in order and we just happened to find the first one by sheer luck. If we turn that crank and unfold the cabinet, I suspect something will show up."

"I'll turn it, iffat's awrite, Ig," Pete suggested. "Save a bit o' time."

"Be my guest," Ignatius waived.

Pete opened the hidden panel and turned the handle. The box unfolded, as silently as before.

"Oh, hang about!" Rachael called out. "There's sumfin' here now." A large door bolt became apparent now that the cabinet was unfolded. Rachael quickly grabbed it and tried to push it to the left, once again with no success. "Nope. No way," she relented.

"Could we just throw a block in these gears?" suggested Clare. "That would keep the cabinet from falling down."

"Could do," Geoff answered. "But let's keep that as a last resort, though. Wouldn't want to break the teeth or anything. What was next?"

"Premo," recalled Clare.

"Premo?" repeated Geoff. "What's that mean again?"

"Squeeze," Ignatius reminded him. "Where's that one?"

Geoff pointed on the plans. "Hang about, lemme measure that out." Starting at the foot of the stairs, he paced off three steps. "Should be just here," he said, not completely convinced of himself.

"It's solid rock in this part of the floor," Sandra complained. "There couldn't possibly be anything there. Are you *sure* you measured correctly."

"Yes, quite sure," Geoff stated with confidence. "It is, as the plan states, directly in the middle of the floor."

"Sandra's right," Rachael observed. "If it is innat rock, we may as well go home an' show up tomorrow wif chisels an' 'ammers."

"No," Sandra stated emphatically. "We sort this out today."

The other three parents concurred.

"This is precisely where it should be," Geoff insisted. "Right there," he tapped his foot on a rather solid piece of floor.

They all stood a while in thought.

"Well, maybe it's under the floor of the ground floor, upstairs," suggested Linda.

"Don't be daft, girl," Geoff started. He looked and pointed upward, "under the ground floor is the ceiling of the . . . well, shave me bald."

"What?" asked Ignatius.

"Well, Miss Linda, it seems I owe you something of an apology," Geoff confessed.

"What for?" asked Linda.

"Under the ground floor," Geoff began again, more calmly, "is the ceiling of the basement." He pointed to the ceiling and there, hiding behind a joist, was a pair of hand-levers that were hinged with a spring. It was a simple matter to grasp them and squeeze tightly.

"See, I'm not just a pretty face," Linda said smugly.

"It ain'tcha boat all the lads are lookin' at," Pete pointed out to the amusement of most of the males in the room.

"We'll need a ladder," Geoff mentioned, looking up at the twelve foot ceiling.

"No we won't," Pete said. "C'mere Linda."

"Not until you say I have a pretty face," Linda ordered, in a mock pout.

"Course, ya do, girl," Pete freely admitted. "Course ya do. Lovely face. Just sayin' – not your best feature, is all."

"All right, then. As long I've got a pretty face. Now, what do you want to do with my pretty face?"

"I'll lift ya up an' ya squeeze the handles. Simple as 'at. I'm the tallest an' you're the lightest one here."

"Oo, a pickup, then!" Linda said enthusiastically. She stood under the grips and turned her back to Pete. "Ready when you are, big man."

"Okay, here we go." Pete effortlessly lifted Linda to stand on his shoulders and she squeezed the grips.

"All right. They're squuzzed," Linda announced.

"Nice bit o' teamwork, eh?" Pete said with enthusiasm.

"The only problem is, as soon as I let go, they pop right back out again," Linda noted.

"Right – I think I've got this sussed," Geoff said. "Slide, you turn the crank."

"On the way," Slide said, raising the cabinet.

"Now, when the cabinet's fully up, Linda should be able to squeeze the handle," Geoff guessed.

"Cabinet's up!" exclaimed Slide.

"Handles closed!" announced Linda.

"Rachael, try the bar now," Geoff ordered.

Rachael grasped the bolt and it slid a bar effortlessly to the left and into the wall. "Done," she replied.

"Linda, do the handles come apart?" asked Geoff.

Linda slowly released the handles. "No, they're staying shut," she reported. "They don't open back up, like they did last time. Pete, as much as I like having a big man between my legs, I think I'll come down now," she said as she climbed down his body.

"You are such a tart, sometimes, Linda, honestly . . ." Pete grumbled, although it hardly sounded like a complaint.

"Slide, let go of the crank," Geoff said.

Slide let the wheel roll back just a tiny bit, finding that it stayed in place.

"Yes. The cabinet is staying up by itself," he confirmed.

"Excellent," Ignatius stated. "Everything falling into place."

"But we've got this last one," Geoff pointed out. "Voco. Next to the vent."

"Woko," Ignatius enunciated, "means 'to call' or 'to summon.' You were correct in your earlier assessment of this mysterious horn and piping – it's not for ventilation. It's for communication. One may call into this horn and anyone in the tunnel can hear. Likewise, any sounds in the tunnel can clearly be heard either here or in the box seat upstairs. Sadly, there is no one at the other end at the moment."

"So, *now* we're done?" Slide asked.

"Certainly with whatever is on the plan," Ignatius admitted.

"It only took nine adults two days to suss out what a pair of teenagers managed to accomplish in an afternoon," Slide added.

"I would add that there is the small matter of retrieving Simon and Grace," Ignatius reminded him. "Sadly, I think that's all we can do for now, unless . . ."

"Um, Ig?" Geoff interrupted. "Sorry to cut in, but I think this is important."

"Go on, then," Ignatius urged.

"As a rule, building plans only use one side of the sheet so, by habit, I never look on the other side. But I just noticed this . . ." He held the plans to reveal an entire sheet of handwriting in the same scrawl that the clues had been written on the back of the last page. "You think it's important?"

Ignatius immediately whisked on his reading glasses and peered at the paper. "It's certainly Father's handwriting." He mumbled very lightly to himself.

"Oh, excellent!" he proclaimed. "It's a full set of instructions."

"That's excellent?" asked Pete. "We spend all this time sussin' this thing out an' the directions were on the back all along?"

"Ah, but there's more," Ignatius proclaimed.

"And what would that be?" asked Gina. "Does it tell how to open the cabinet at the other end of the tunnel?"

"No, that's exactly the same as this one," Ignatius answered, "or so this claims. The good news is – this has a trap built into it. I say, this is quite clever stuff."

"Trap?" asked Geoff.

Ignatius read to himself a little more. "Honestly, Father, you could've taken a little more care in your penmanship," he grumbled. "From what I read, we

simply set the trap and if someone tries to enter from Reality, the cabinet folds up, locking them inside."

"So how do we set the trap?" asked Clare.

"I'm having a little trouble with that," Ignatius admitted. "There's a word here that I can't make out – and I don't know if it's because of my father's crap handwriting or if it's just a word in Remun I can't remember. It looks sort of like . . . clevis?"

"Ah, yes, that would be a clevis," Geoff answered.

"What's a clevis?" asked Ignatius.

"Erm . . . difficult to describe," Geoff scratched his chin. "Basically, it's a connector shaped like 'U' when it's open and like a 'D' when it's closed."

"So, what's this trap have to do with a clevis?" asked Gina.

Ignatius read the instructions again to be sure. "It says that inside the door a clevis should be connected to a stirrup. Then, lift the cabinet using the crank and withdraw the bolt to the right. When an attempt to open the door from inside the tunnel is made, the cabinet will trap the opener by collapsing around him."

"Sounds just like what we need," Sandra said. "No undesirables can get in and Grace and Simon can exit, unharmed."

"Very good, then. Let's give it a test, shall we?"

"So who's gonna be the rat to spring the trap?" asked Pete as all eyes fell on Ignatius.

"Squeak, squeak, apparently," Ignatius answered. "Geoff, if you would?"

Geoff opened the door to the cabinet and easily found the clevis and stirrup about halfway up the hinged side of the jamb. "See, you pull this pin, that's the clevis, there – stick the stirrup between the tines, and put the pin back in – Baughb's your uncle."

"Very clever," Ignatius appraised. "Right, then." He entered the tunnel and walked a few steps away from the door. "Proceed when ready, Geoff."

"Slide, pull her up," Geoff ordered. After the crank had turned just a tiny bit, Geoff pulled the bolt on the side of the cabinet out of the wall. "Let 'er down, Slide."

Slide slowly relaxed his grip on the wheel and it held in place.

"Ig, you ready in there?" asked Geoff.

"No, but it's never stopped me before," Ignatius answered. "Here, I go." The door opened just the tiniest crack and then slammed shut. As per the instructions, the cabinet immediately fell to its coal-bin state, with its characteristic silence.

"You okay in there, Ig?" asked Geoff.

"The damned thing nearly cut my tail off, but yes, I'm fine. Could you please let me out?"

Slide, grinning, began to turn the crank. Then he tried again. "Erm . . . It's not going," he mentioned.

"Oh, lovely," Ignatius groaned. "I suppose we should have read how to *open* the trap before we actually sprang it. Clare, could you read me the fourth paragraph . . ."

After ninety minutes of Clare nearly transliterating and Ignatius translating, it was determined that to open the trap merely required squeezing the handles before turning the crank. This was done and Ignatius exited the cabinet, dusting himself off. "Nothing like a little excitement to brighten one's day," he grumbled. "Let's set a watch, shall we?"

1930 – *Rialto*

"Sure you got enough kip?" asked Steve. They were both seated at the kitchen table, where Desiree was finishing a largish meal.

"Not a big fan of smoked fish," Desiree answered. "I'll have one more of those sweet biscuits, 'though."

"They're scones. Biscuits are what you call 'cookies.' And I asked if you had enough kip, not enough kippers."

"And kip is?"

"Sleep," Steve explained.

"Oh, yeah. Well rested. Let's do the tour."

"Sure. Anything you'd like to see first?" Steve asked as he rose and took away some dishes.

"The basement," Desiree answered immediately, putting some extra food away in the refrigerator.

"The basement? Why the basement?"

"Everyone knows the basement is where the bodies are buried. And we don't have basements in the Big Easy."

"So where *do* they bury the bodies?" asked Steve as they exited into the hall.

"We don't *bury* anybody. We feed our dead to the 'gators. Jeez, don't you ever watch the movies?"

"Oh, of course, silly me."

"I'm just playing, Steve," Desiree admitted.

"I rather thought as much."

"We're under sea level, so we can't bury anyone."

"Sorry. Lost."

"A buried coffin would float out of the grave when it rains."

"Would it?"

"Yes. And it rains a lot."

"Does it?"

"More than here. So we use crypts and tombs above ground. The heat desiccates the bodies, so . . ."

"By the way, there are two basements, actually," Steve interrupted.

"Are they, like, on top of each other?"

"No, they're on the same level. One is directly under the stage. It used to be dressing rooms and guest suites for performers back when this was actually used as a stage instead of a cinema. The other basement is under the rest of the building and it's much larger of course – quite enormous, actually. Sadly, they've both evolved into sort of an indoor rubbish tip."

"I don't get it," Desiree admitted. "How are they two basements?"

"They're separated by an enormous wall, with one large door between the two. But the guest rooms and so on were entered from the back."

"Where was the woman murdered?" Desiree interrupted.

"Under the stage."

"Let's see that first."

Barely a dozen seconds after they began their descent of the stairs, a Lupan nose peeked around the corner and had a sniff. This was soon followed by the rest of Simon StæppanWulf's body as he crept silently into the hallway. He had heard Steve and Desiree speaking in the kitchen and knew that they would be descending into the basement for a while. He also knew the two others might be lurking about somewhere. His original intent was to sneak into the kitchen and grab some more food and water, but he decided to take the opportunity to go a little farther afield.

Going to the staircase, he had a quick listen and could just hear Steve and Desiree descending the stairs to the ground floor. He then went to the bedroom where he and Grace had slept earlier and noticed that the bed wasn't made and there was some strange luggage on the floor.

Bugger, she must be sleeping there now, Simon deduced.

Feeling slightly emboldened, he descended quietly to the first floor, and immediately noticed the office where he and Grace had first spotted the two men entering the Rialto. Going inside, he observed that everything was in precisely the same position as when they had left. A desk occupied the room, covered with papers and a few pieces of office paraphernalia. One item was a cup that had had either tea or coffee in it, which had long since evaporated, leaving the micro-organisms that had sought their sustenance from it to die a long and agonising death. He picked up one of the many papers and noticed that the sheet beneath it was white where it had been covered, but puckered and yellowed where it had been exposed.

I suspect no one comes in here very much, Simon conjectured.

He observed that there was a sofa that was big enough to sleep on. A cupboard under the stairs had a toilet and wash basin.

At least we'd be closer to the cabinet, he concluded. *And there's a toilet.*

Five minutes later, Grace and Simon were locked in the office, gorging themselves on leftovers.

2000 – Rialto Basement

"So, what's in this cabinet?" asked Desiree DelHomme.

"I dunno. I've never even noticed it 'til just now," Steve Green answered.

"Must be pretty important to chain it shut like that," Desiree observed.

"Although I have to wonder . . ."

"If it's chained shut to keep people out, why isn't there a lock on the chain?" Steve completed the thought.

"Don't suppose it's to keep something in?" suggested Desiree.

"One way to find out," Steve ventured as he went to the hook and began to pull. "This is really tight," he complained, tugging on the hook several times but unable to free it.

"Here, I'll do it," Desiree suggested.

Steve gladly moved out of the way as Desiree shoved a nearby trunk to give herself a little room. Taking careful aim, she kicked the hook cleanly off the eye bolt, dropping the chain to the floor.

"Shall we?" asked Steve, putting his hand on the door.

"It's your theatre," she pointed out. "But I'm game if you are."

Steve carefully opened the door. There was no ominous creaking of rusted hinges, just the silent movement of air, causing a little dust to stir.

The pair of them peered inside at the stairs leading down.

"Didn't bring a torch, by any chance?" asked Steve.

"No. Don't have a flashlight, neither," Desiree answered.

"Just a tick, I've got a lighter," Steve said, digging it out of his pocket.

They entered together, with Steve holding the flame above his head. They were nearing a door, when Desiree asked, "Weren't these stairs going down when we entered?"

"Yes, they were," Steve answered. "Give that door a push, would you?"

2000 – Otterstow High Street

By the time Ignatius had locked the door to the Town Hall, it was nearly eight o'clock. He was quite hungry, but he didn't feel quite right having his evening meal without having taken some proper exercise. So, even though he had helped to shift the contents of the The tré's basement to the courtyard earlier in the day, he thought it might be a good idea to take a quick walk to The tré and check in on whoever was watching the cabinet.

He was about half way between the Town Hall and The tré when he saw Rachael four-legging down the road, without her boots.

She must be in a hurry, Ignatius thought. He stepped aside to let her pass, but she pulled up short.

"Ig, hurry!" she panted out of breath. "Caught one! Maybe two!"

"Are they hurt?"

"No, safe as babies," Rachael said.

"Then there's no urgency," he said as he continued his walk, albeit at a slightly faster pace. "Let's just walk back to The tré. Have the others been informed?"

"Yeah, I sent 'em all a T-post. Ya need a rover, Ig. It's a right pain trackin' ya down when we need ya."

"I'll take it under advisement. However, at the moment, I've other things to think about."

2030 – The tré Basement

"Steve, Desiree?" Ignatius called to the two still trapped in the box. "We're ready to let you out now, but we want you to promise – we all stay calm and keep our heads and everything will be just fine. Is that acceptable?"

The two had been trapped in the cabinet for over thirty minutes. During this time, Rachael had managed to collect all of the conspirators, who now stood

nearby with some sort of weapon handy, yet hidden. Ignatius, meanwhile had calmly talked to the two prisoners, finding out their names, telling them his and assuring them that they would soon be released.

"Sounds fine to me," Steve agreed.

"Oh, f'sure!" Desiree agreed.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," Ignatius said. He made a signal and Linda hopped onto Pete's shoulders to squeeze the handles, while Slide turned the crank to raise the cabinet.

"Do you have any idea who these people are?" Desiree whispered to Steve as the cabinet rose.

"No, completely clueless."

As soon as the cabinet was fully up, Clare threw the bolt in place, while Linda climbed down from Pete's shoulders.

Steeling himself and taking a deep breath, Ignatius grabbed the door and pulled it open.

Even though the basement of The tré had a scant few electrical lights and a modicum of sunlight through the windows near the ceiling, it was blinding to the two prisoners who had spent the last half hour in absolute darkness. They squinted at the bright light as they came forth from the cabinet, dusting off their clothes.

They didn't notice Rachael closing the door behind them. However, their eyes soon adjusted to the scene in front of them.

"Good afternoon. My name is Ignatius HalliFox," Ignatius said, offering his hand to Desiree. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Desiree was speechless. A five foot canid was standing in front of her and she could understand every word he spoke.

"Yerafa," she muttered.

"Sorry?" Ignatius prompted.

"You're a . . . um . . . f . . ."

"Yes, I am, indeed, a Fox," Ignatius admitted. "Although I prefer the term 'Vulpan'."

"From the Latin, 'vulpes'," Desiree said instinctively.

"Latin? Surely, it's Remun?"

Desiree had finally gotten enough courage to shake his hand. Looking down she started to take it, but then her curiosity got the better of her and she started to examine it.

"*Loqueris Latine?**" asked Desiree as she pulled his manus into a better light and somewhat closer to her face.

"*Omnes callidi Vulpi locquuntur Remune*†," Ignatius answered. "Named for Remus, their founding father," he added as he gently, yet unsuccessfully, tried to extricate his hand from Desiree's grasp. She had taken his hand with both of hers and was examining it intently, spreading his fingers and bending them

* *Loqueris Latine?* – L. 'Do you speak Latin?'

† *Omnes callidi Vulpi locquuntur Remune* – R. 'All clever Foxes speak Remun.'

around as if they were made of paper. "Ah!" he winced, politely hinting that he was in pain.

Desiree continued, absorbed in her exploration of his manus, oblivious to the discomfort of her subject. "Remus? Rome was founded by Romulus."

"Ow! Pardon, yes, Romulus was his violent brother whom history has lost track of until *ah!* just now, I think," Ignatius hypothesised. "Look, if I could just have this back, please?"

Desiree had not been paying too much attention. She was engrossed as she probed Ignatius' digits without remorse, scrutinizing them for various features as she contorted them beyond the limit of their design. "Your fingers – they're almost as articulated as mine, but they only have two phalanges instead of three. Yet they're longer than a typical canid. Almost like a hybrid of the two . . . Here, can you do this?" she challenged as she held a hand up and touched her thumb to her fingertips, one at a time.

Ignatius took the opportunity to withdraw his hand with a pained look on his face.

"Oh . . . I'm *terribly* sorry," Desiree apologised with a grimace, suddenly realising what she had done. "I just sort of got . . . carried away. Comparative anatomy has always been one of my special interests."

Ignatius rubbed his offended hand gently. "Yes, well, erm . . ." Ignatius turned to Steve. "And you must be Steve."

Steve seemed entirely unconcerned that the person talking to him was covered with fur and possessed a tail and enormous ears. Good manners, he had been taught since before he could remember, should be extended to everyone (upon punishment of being made to stand in the corner while being made fun of by one's peers).

"Yes, Steve Green. I'm very glad to meet you, Ignatius," he answered.

"We won't shake hands, if it's all the same to you," Ignatius said.

"Quite understandable," Steve agreed, giving Desiree a quick look.

Ignatius stepped back. "Well, now. That wasn't so bad, was it? You seem like decent people."

"Yes, very decent," Steve agreed. "Some of us a bit more considerate than others, but still just as decent."

"Good," Ignatius said. "You see, we're in a bit of a bind. Perhaps you would be kind enough to help us?"

"Are those teeth real?" asked Desiree, seeming to regain her composure, if not her tact.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Ignatius.

"Your teeth. Are they real?"

"I'm sorry – I don't quite understand the question."

"Do you wear dentures or any sort of false teeth?" Desiree rephrased.

"Erm . . . no, I don't. These are my natural teeth since birth, barring a crown or two. Might I ask why this is important?"

"Could I have a look?"

Steve looked at her in disdain. "Desiree, perhaps we should get to know each other a little better before we start cataloguing dentition?"

Desiree suddenly realised what she was doing. "Oh, sorry," she looked down at the ground in shame at her *faux pas*. "Doing it again. Later . . . when we . . . know each other a little better . . . of course. I'll just be quiet now."

"You'll have to forgive Desiree. Despite being in her last year of veterinary school, she hasn't quite grasped the concept of bedside manner," Steve explained on her behalf. "What sort of favour did you need?"

"Well, we've had two children manage to get into your side of things and we haven't heard from them for over two days," Ignatius explained.

"Oh, that's horrible," Steve sympathised. "How old are they?"

Ignatius turned to Gina ParsleyHare. "Gina? Twelve, is it?"

"Fourteen," Gina answered. "Both of 'em."

"Ah, they grow so fast," Ignatius smiled.

"Fourteen – so not completely helpless," Steve judged. "So, what do they look like? Do you have a picture?"

"We can provide a picture later," Ignatius said, "But Grace ParsleyHare looks much like her mother, Gina," he pointed to Gina. "Younger, of course. A bit taller. No points, all white."

"I think we can safely say we haven't seen her," Steve answered. "There's a second child?"

"Yes, Simon StæppanWulf. This is her mother, Sandra StæppanWylf and her father Slide HolenWulf. He has his mother's colours, but his father's appearance."

"We haven't seen him, either," Steve stated.

"Are you quite sure?" asked Sandra.

"Believe me, he would not go unnoticed," Steve answered. "We've only humans where we come from. No one looks remotely like any of you."

"We had suspected as much," Ignatius said. "But we didn't want to presume."

There was a brief pause.

"I hesitate to ask," Ignatius began, "but as this is rather urgent business . . ."

"Why don't you come take a look for yourselves?" suggested Desiree.

"My thoughts, exactly," Ignatius smiled.

There was that motionless moment of inertia that a group of people generally experience when the next step is patently clear, but no one wants to take the trouble to mention it or, horror of horrors, actually do something. Usually, it takes the person with the most vision, courage and leadership to get things moving.

"Shall we go in, then?" suggested Clare as she entered the cabinet.

The rest of the group mumbled their approvals and they all filed through the cabinet in an exodus to Reality.

The staircase descended from the cabinet door in the basement of The tré and about twenty yards later ascended to an identical cabinet door in the basement of the Rialto. Upon arrival, they discovered that it was much like the basement of The tré, as it was filled with the debris afforded by Clutter's laws.

Desiree and Steve waited until the full group had squeezed into what little floor space was available.

Geoff was rubbing the back of his neck in thought. "Was it just me, or do them stairs go down and then up, but there's no landing?"

"I didn't notice one," Linda observed.

The rest of the group grunted or mumbled some sort of vague acknowledgement.

"There's something well odd about that staircase," Geoff conjectured.

"Welcome to the Rialto," Steve announced

"Rialto?" Pete asked. "I thought it was Reality."

"The Rialto is just the name of this particular building," Steve clarified.

"We refer to the world on this side of the passage as 'Reality'," Ignatius explained.

"And what do you call your side of the cabinet?" asked Desiree.

"Allegory," Ignatius answered.

"So, what's your first impression of Reality?" asked Desiree.

"Bit of an anticlimax, honestly," Clare remarked.

"Yeah, the phrase 'Reality sucks' is pretty common here," Desiree agreed.

"What's that smell?" Gina asked. "I know that pong – can't put a finger on it, though."

Steve and Desiree looked at each other and shrugged.

"It's the pernicious weed," Pete announced. "Get it all the time in Big Smoke."

"I don't smell anything, much less marijuana," Steve said.

"I think Pete is speaking of tobacco," Ignatius informed him.

"Hoo, boy. Wait'll you get upstairs," Desiree mentioned casually.

"Right, enough fannynin' about. Let's get crackin'," Pete ordered. "Pong or no pong, those two ain't gonna get found by themselves, are they!"

2100 – Rialto Auditorium

After searching the basement, the group entered the auditorium.

"Angus? You in here?" called Steve.

There was no response.

"Must've moved on," Steve surmised. He turned to Ignatius who seemed to be directing the search. "These are the regular seats, and we've got box seats on each side, as you can see, although they're never used anymore. Of course, there's the stage and backstage."

"Is there an exit from the stage?" asked Ignatius.

"There are some staircases to the basement backstage, but they're pretty solidly locked. There's also a catwalk above the backstage . . . Oh, and a trapdoor, right in the middle of the stage to the basement."

Ignatius wasted no time. "Pete, Sandra, boxes on house right. Slide, Gina, boxes house left. Geoff, common seats house right. Clare, common seats house left. Steve will take the rest of us to search the stage."

Steve led Rachael, Linda, Desiree and Ignatius around to the edge of the stage, up a small set of stairs and onto the boards. "This screen is for films," he explained. "Most of the stage is behind it," he gestured for them to follow as he

went behind the screen aiming his attention more towards the back of the stage.

As his attention was so directed, he didn't notice two unkempt men, perhaps in their early thirties (although they could easily pass for being in their late forties) standing with their backs to the screen in the dim light. They both wore short hair, gaunt faces and neither was much wider than a rail.

As soon as the last of the five had gone past, Angus and Kenny stepped into the gap, blocking the way out.

"Now, we've a set of stairs up to the catwalks in each of the furthest corners . . ." Steve began.

"Is this the septic minge . . ." Angus began. He soon stopped as Steve and his four companions turned around.

"Oh, sorry, Angus," Steve apologised. "I called and you didn't answer. I see you've got a . . ."

"Some barrie smack, Angus," interrupted Kenny. "The tall 'uns a donie. An izza bonnie wee con as well. A'm seein 'em, an aw, juist like you wis!"

"Aye, Kenny, masel as well! We're hallucinatin aw ae oo!"

"Aye, an a great whappin cou an aw," Kenny leered, pointing to Desiree.

Desiree looked at Steve. "Did he just call me a 'cow'?"

"Erm . . . yes," Steve answered nervously, hoping Desiree wouldn't ask him to defend her honour.

"Did you just call me a 'cow'?" asked Desiree of Kenny, stepping closer to him.

"Aye, a guttie, stroppey cou, is whit ye are," Kenny said with a grin on his face. "Gie us a 'moo'. An get yer tits oot."

Angus nudged his friend. "A dinna think ye should tak the piss on her like, Kenny. She's leukin a wee bit cross."

"G'wan lass, gie us a shoo. Tak it off."

"Oh, I see. You want me to take off my shirt," Desiree said with a smile that could pluck the feathers off a canary. She was just outside of arm's reach by this stage.

"Oh, aye." His expression turned a little more serious. "Ye haurd me. Tak it off." He suddenly produced a flick-knife and was pointing it at Desiree's stomach.

"Kenny, nae!" Angus protested.

"You're going to eat that knife, you know that," Desiree warned him.

"Yanks," Kenny spat. "All flash an nae arse."

"I ain't no yankee," Desiree protested with no small amount of venom.

"Oh dear, now he's done it," Steve mumbled.

"Kenny, A'll no tak part in this! Let her gang." He turned to Desiree. "He disna mean nocht, Miss. He's juist playin, like."

"Angus, ye big poof," Kenny said, his eyes not leaving Desiree. "Where's yer rig-bane? First ye piss yersel ower yer 'hanted caibinet' an nou yer feart o a cou?"

"A'll no tak part, Kenny," Angus protested. "A'll no hurt naebody!"

"You know there's a huge Bear behind you," Desiree pointed out.

"Ye think A'm daft, yank cou? Think A was born the last day?"

"Suit yo'se'f," she replied.

Pete's fist descended on Kenny's head, resulting in his immediate unconsciousness.

"I told you I ain't no damn yankee, neither," Desiree added.

"I'm not all *that* huge," Pete grumbled, grabbing his waistline.

Angus saw his partner drop to the ground and turned a bit to see the well-dressed Ursan that towered over him by well over a foot in height. High as a kite from one of many doses he had had for the better part of the last couple of days, he took in the scene. For just a second, he considered ordering the lot of them out of his theatre. Then he looked at his unconscious friend on the floor and considered the number and size of his opposition. Due to the abundant amount of foreign chemicals circulating through his brain, it took much longer than usual to make a decision *vis-à-vis* the whole fight-or-flight situation but, in the end, he did, eventually, make one.

He bolted to the edge of the stage and, apparently thinking he could handle the four-foot drop without the stairs, jumped off.

They all winced in sympathetic pain as they heard the collision of various lanky body parts with cinematic row seating. Angus was not deterred nor seriously injured, so he scrambled into the aisle and ran off to the exits and out of the theatre. By this point, the remaining members of the party had joined the group on the stage.

"That *had* to hurt," Desiree stated. "Even for a junkie stoned out of his mind, that *had* to hurt."

"If I might ask, Mister Green, what is the fate of 'junkies' in Reality," asked Ignatius.

"Possession, use, purchase and sale of narcotics is against the law pretty much everywhere in Reality," Steve answered. "In most countries they put them in prison."

"And in the rest?" asked Geoff.

"They behead them," Desiree deadpanned to the shock of the Frith.

"Not to worry," Steve belayed their fears. "He won't lose his head here."

"England is filled to overflowing with bleeding-heart liberals," Desiree told them. "They'll spend tons of money getting him on the wagon and ask him not to do it again."

"So what do we do wif 'im?" asked Pete, pointing to the unconscious Kenny. "Can't just leave 'im 'ere."

"Dump him outside the front door," Steve suggested. "I can call the cops and they'll drop him in the drunk tank. He'll be fine when he wakes up."

"Dunno 'bout that," Pete commented. "'E'll 'ave a massive headache."

"That's the least he deserves for calling me a 'yankee'," Desiree said. "And pulling that knife on me was none too swift, either. He's lucky you pounded him on the head before I got to him."

"Can we continue the search?" asked Gina.

"Mister Green, please direct Pete as to where he can dispose of the body," Ignatius directed.

Pete picked Kenny up by the ankle. "Where to, Steve?"

"Actually, I think I'd better handle this alone, if you don't mind," Steve suggested.

Pete unceremoniously dropped Kenny to the ground. "Please y'self, mate."

"Should only be a few minutes." Steve handed his keys to Desiree. "Here, while I dispose of this waster, you can take the others to search the first floor."

"Aren't we on the first floor?" asked Desiree.

"No, this is the ground floor," Steve answered. "If you're in the lobby, and you take a flight of stairs up, you'll be on the first floor. There's a second set of box seats and a few offices and work rooms. The second floor has the living quarters, but I should be back by the time we're ready to search that."

2130 – Rialto Upstairs Office

The sun had just barely set and it was still twilight. However, being a new moon, it was getting dark very quickly. Simon and Grace had moved to the office, as it could be locked and bolted from the inside and it allowed them to see and hear the front door much more easily. Unlike the roof, it also had the added advantages of having a very comfortable couch for sleeping on, an *en suite* toilet and was not susceptible to rain.

Simon had stolen a little more food from the kitchen, but had been careful not to take any beer. Grace had been quiet about what had happened the night before and if she was not going to say anything, he certainly was not.

They had heard a little bit of commotion earlier in the evening but it had been quiet ever since.

"Dunno how much longer I can go on like this," Grace said.

Simon nodded. "I quite agree. I'll be glad to get back."

"We'll have to make up a story. Our parents would never believe us if we told them the truth."

"I'm here and I can hardly believe it," Simon commented. "It's sort of like discovering that there actually *is* a Fur Fairy."

"Whatcha mean? Course there's a Fur Fairy," Grace said.

"Oh behave, Grace. That's a sad, old gag," Simon admonished.

"Shh, I can hear them coming."

Simon stopped to listen as Grace started to cling tightly to his arm.

Several sets of footsteps approached the office. The two runaways froze in place as a woman's voice was mentioning something about first floors being on the ground and that if they weren't, then they should actually be called the first ceiling. Soon after, the voice and footsteps faded away, allowing Grace and Simon to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Si, I can't take much more of this!" Grace whispered.

"Neither can I!"

2131 – Rialto First Floor Box Suites

"Pete, I'll leave you to organise the others to search the first floor loges, whilst Desiree and I make a quick check of the offices and work rooms," Ignatius ordered.

Pete sprang into action. "Right, ladies – you too, Linda – gather round . . ."

Desiree fumbled through the key ring, which held nearly two dozen keys as she followed Ignatius back to the hallway. She bumped into him as he came to a stop. "Oh, sorry," she apologised. "Here already?"

"Do you think you can find the key?" asked Ignatius. "There certainly are quite a few of them."

"They *are* labelled, but more than a few have the word 'office' on them."

"Trial and error?" suggested Ignatius.

2132 – Rialto Office

"That's the mayor's voice!" Simon whispered to Grace.

"Couldn't be! How'd he get here?"

"Same way we did, I suppose," Simon answered. "Look, it doesn't matter. We've got to get out of here, right now. Through the marquee door," he pointed.

2132 – Rialto Hall, Just Outside Office

Desiree looked at the lock and guessed at a key. It didn't fit. She tried another.

2132 – Rialto Office

"Hurry," Grace urged. "They're coming."

It's usually a simple and quick matter to fit a key in a lock to open a door. To do so whilst in a hurry will inevitably take twice as much time. Simon had already dropped the key twice, but he finally got it to function. He swung the door open and Grace crawled through and Simon was about to follow.

Just then the door to the office flew open with Desiree trying to pull the key out of the lock. Instinctively, Simon turned to look and he made eye-contact with Ignatius.

"Simon, no! Stay!" Ignatius shouted.

Simon followed the deep, genuine instinct of all canids, sapient and bestiant alike, when told to stay – he went. He pulled the door shut behind him and without giving it a second thought, locked it with the key. Having recently had some practice, he did it quite quickly, managing it in the first go, well before Ignatius could reach the door.

Leaving the key right next to the door, he joined Grace out on the awning and held her tight.

"We'll have to jump," Grace said. "There's no ladder or stairs from here."

2132 – Rialto Office

"Blast," Ignatius cursed, rattling at the door handle. "Simon, Grace, open this door this instant!" he ordered.

Desiree began tugging at the hasp on the window, trying to break the seal of a dozen layers of paint that had been applied over an equal number of decades. The hasp broke before the paint did, but it produced the desired effect – the window was now unlocked. "Hey, Ig," she called. "Come help with this."

"Bit busy at the moment."

"You'll wanna see this," Desiree suggested as she pulled on the window in an effort to open it.

Ignatius soon joined her.

2132 – Rialto Marquee

Simon was hanging from the edge of the marquee.

"C'mon, Si," Grace urged from below. "It's only three feet to the ground."

"But I can't see," Simon said as he tried to twist his head to see his landing point.

"I jumped straight off the edge," Grace said, "and I'm all right."

"But you could see the ground . . ."

Just then the window above them flew open. Clenching his teeth, Simon dropped to the ground and landed uninjured. Grace immediately grabbed his hand and they began to run.

Ignatius could just make out Grace and Simon disappearing into the darkness. "Simon! Grace! Come back! I can promise you won't be in trouble. Just come home!"

Desiree pulled him out of the window.

"Are you crazy? Do you want someone to see you?"

"Then you call them!" Ignatius ordered.

Desiree went to the window.

"Simon! Grace!" She paused to wait for an answer. "Come back! Ig says it's okay! You won't be hurt! No one will punish you!"

"I didn't promise *that*," Ignatius mumbled.

There was still no response.

2132 – Newburg 'Wilderness'

Simon and Grace ran and ran. They rushed through the darkness of the night, avoiding the well-lit streets and shops for the dim alleys and footpaths that no human could traverse with such speed in such darkness. After what seemed like ages, but was, in fact, merely five minutes, they reached a rather remote looking spot. It was along a towpath and nearly completely dark except for the faint light provided by some distant buildings on the other side of the canal. A few people saw them out of the corner of their eye but, largely, they went unseen.

"Simon, stop," Grace tugged on his arm.

"Are you tired?" asked Simon.

"No. But we can't see well enough to run this fast. We'll get hurt."

"Right. We'll walk then."

They slowed to a brisk pace.

"Did you see?" asked Grace. "They've got the mayor."

"I also saw the human who had him. You don't think they'll kill him, do you?"

"Oh, sif, I hope not. He probably came to look for us and got caught as soon as he came out of the door."

"Poor old Mayor HaliFox. I hope he gets away all right."

"Simon, will we ever get back through?" asked Grace.

He patted her hand to comfort her. "Should think so, yeah," he said with as much encouragement as he could muster.

2133 – Rialto Office

The others had heard Ignatius shout and immediately joined him and Desiree in the office. There was a bit of panic, but Ignatius quickly and calmly briefed them.

"Steve and I will go look for them, right now," Desiree said.

"Good idea. Do you have a map for us to organise our efforts?" asked Ignatius.

"No, not Steve and *we*. Steve and *I*. Singular. First person. Me. Alone. With Steve. Only."

Sandra objected, "But we can help . . ."

"By staying here," Desiree interrupted. "The last thing we need is another two or three of y'all getting lost that I have to find. Or worse, getting locked up for trespassing. No offense, but I can just see Steve trying to explain *y'all* to the cops. We'll go look for them. Y'all stay right here until I get back. Y'hear?"

"Not 'avin' that," Rachael protested. "We look after our own!"

"Besides, it's not like we'll be searching the high street," Linda pointed out. "They'll be hiding somewhere dark and inconspicuous, which is where we'll be looking for them."

"And you'll need our help, even if you do find them," Ignatius said. "They're not likely to trust you if you just ask them to return with you. And we'll be happy to stay with you while you search."

"No," Desiree said emphatically. "No one. Just Steve and me. And that's final."

"Although I disagree with her," Ignatius began, "it is *her* turf, so to speak, and she probably knows the situation better than we do. If she feels it's unsafe for even one of us to accompany her, then we should probably heed her advice."

There was a bit of grumbling but the others eventually agreed.

Just at that moment, Steve Green came into the room. "Were you waiting for me? I thought you'd be . . ."

"We found them," Ignatius interrupted.

"Excellent. Where are they?" asked Steve.

"And then we lost them," Desiree answered.

"Oh, well," Steve said. "Erm . . . could I get a little more detail?"

"Desiree and I found them in this room," Ignatius began. "Unfortunately, they both panicked and bolted out of that little door there, and then locked it behind them."

"So they're trapped on the marquee?" asked Steve.

Ignatius rubbed his forehead nervously. "No, they jumped off. We had opened the window to try to negotiate with them, but by the time we accomplished that they were just running off."

"An' Desi won't let us go after 'em," Rachael complained.

"Why not?" asked Steve.

"Why not? Isn't it obvious?" Desiree asked. "What happens if someone sees these people? What if they get lost? What if they get arrested?"

"Actually, this would be the perfect time for them to search," Steve said calmly as he slid a drawer out of his desk and began rummaging around. "It's Friday night and it's letting-out time at the pubs. Everyone is going to be too preoccupied with getting a cab, getting pulled or too pissed to notice – or some combination of the above. The police won't be a factor as this is, quite possibly, their busiest hour of the week, trying to keep all the pissheads from stabbing each other or vandalism or whatever. Ah, here 'tis." He pulled out an aging map of the town and unfolded it on his desk. "I've a copy machine just here and it's one of the few things that work in this building; I can give everyone a copy, so no one need get lost. Right, we're just here," he said pointing to a spot on the map.

"Okay, fine," Desiree conceded. "If you think that's the best course of action. Just don't come running to me when the cops slap your ass in jail."

23JUN2001 Saturday

0100 – Rialto Kitchen

They had broken into two groups, one with Desiree and one with Steve. Having carved up pieces of the town on copies of the map, they thoroughly searched the most likely spots that didn't involve trespassing or breaking and entering.

During their search, Desiree had noticed that they used their sense of smell a great deal. Sadly none of the aromas they detected indicated anything of Simon nor Grace, but they did run into a few unexpected surprises, some pleasant but mostly foul.

Steve and Desiree had kept in contact with each other through their mobile telephones, but as time wore on, their batteries wore down and, after three hours and four sweeps, they decided to call it off, at least for the time being and returned to the Rialto.

They had gathered in the spacious kitchen, each having something to drink.

"Well, if they don't *want* to be found, there's not a lot we can do," Linda remarked.

"When can we try again?" asked Sandra.

Steve shrugged. "Tomorrow evening, I suppose. It's Saturday, so everyone will be just as pissed or horny as tonight, if not more so."

"Couldn't we do it during the day?" asked Gina. "I tried hopping high enough to look over a fence, but it's so dark, I can't get a good look."

"I don't even 'ave to hop, an' I still can't see nuffin'," Pete complained. "There's not a trace o' moonlight."

"During the day would be quite impossible," Steve said. "On Saturday, the park is quite full and people are all over the paths and their allotments and just . . . everywhere. Oh, and to further complicate matters, there's a Midsummer Eve fete on at the park. It'll be absolutely packed."

"A fete?" Desiree prompted. "Is that like a carnival?"

"It's hardly Mardi Gras," Steve replied. "But yes, a carnival atmosphere, definitely."

"So, what might one expect at this particular fete?" Ignatius inquired.

"Good bit of drinking, mostly . . . lots of rigged games where you can't win a plush bear or the like . . . some live music . . ." Steve tried to recall.

"As opposed to dead music?" asked Ignatius.

"No, as opposed to recorded music," Steve explained. "There are also performers . . . jugglers, mimes, other annoying types."

"Are any of these performers in costume?" asked Ignatius.

"A few. Some of them are quite elaborate," Steve said.

"Is it a possibility," Ignatius began, "that we could present ourselves as performers, thus allowing ourselves to move among the general population?" Steve and Desiree looked at each other.

"This is your town, not mine," Desiree told him.

Steve ruminated on the idea for a moment. Eventually he shrugged. "What's the worst that could happen?"

"Thing is," Pete began, "if we're gonna present ourselves as performers, what kinda performance are we gonna do?"

"Shouldn't worry about that," Steve answered. He was about to elaborate when he was interrupted.

Rachael, having taken a moment to relieve herself of some lager, was nosing around in the bathroom. Seeing some things that piqued her curiosity, she stuck her head out of the door and called to the kitchen. "Pete! Couldja come 'ere a tick?"

Pete, thinking it might be some sort of emergency, hurried to the bath room. "Yeah, Rache? Sumfin' wrong?"

The others, spurred by Pete's urgency, had quickly followed.

"What's this, then?" Rachael asked, jerking her thumb towards a large, glass booth.

Pete shrugged. "Sorry, haven't a pot. Steve? What's this thing 'ere when it's at 'ome?"

"I've no idea," Steve confessed. "I suspect it has something to do with the heating system, but I've never bothered to find out. Waste of space, if you ask me."

As no one volunteered any further explanations or hypotheses, Rachael continued, pointing to the taps on the tub. "Those nobbly things on top o' the baff – wiffa 'haytch' an' 'cee' on 'em?"

"Those are the water taps," Steve replied.

"I'm not completely thick," Rachael protested. "I just wanna know why's there two of 'em, an' what's 'haytch' an' 'cee' stand for?"

"Hot and cold," Steve answered plainly.

"You mean to tell me," Rachael started with a rather sceptical look, "that I can get *hot* water, just by turnin' that li'l nobbly thingy wiffa 'haytch' on it?"

Steve shrugged. "Yeah."

"I don' hafta fill up a tank an' light a burner an' wait for ages for it to get hot?"

"No," Steve said. "Just turn the tap."

"An' 'ot water comes pourin' out, straight away?" Rachael asked.

"More or less," Steve answered.

"Ang on a mo'." Rachael turned the tap labelled 'H' causing water to spill out of the spout. "It's not the least bit warm. In fact, it's cold . . . oh, it's warmin' up . . . Ouch!" She withdrew her hand from the sting of the hot water. She turned to face the group and calmly announced. "We're stayin' right 'ere 'til I gets a hot baff."

"And me," Clare added.

"No, sorry, girls, some other time," Pete told them.

"Oh, c'mon, Pete, please," Rachael pleaded.

"S'pose . . . Could do . . ."

"No, we could not!" Gina asserted. "So typical of you, Pete. Melt like butter on a hot stove when they start with their little Doe eyes." She redirected her attention to the girls. "It's not on girls. We've got planning to do for tomorrow. Besides you'll take hours to dry and you've got to go home to get some kip. We need to be up at a reasonable hour to start searching again."

The twins groaned in frustration, but Gina held firm.

"Do you traditionally take hot baths at one in the morning?" asked Steve of the group in general.

"Not as a habit, no," Pete answered. "It's a matter o' spare time, honestly. Ya hafta set aside a few hours for the whole procedure."

"It takes three hours for a bath?" asked Steve.

"The washing bit only takes a few minutes," Geoff explained. "It's the drying and grooming bit that takes forever. We also don't have hot water on demand," he pointed out. "That, alone, adds a good twenty minute wait with even the best heaters. Most of the older ones take close to an hour."

"I saw you had electricity," Desiree recalled. "What's so difficult about running hot water?"

"Bleedin' bureaucrats is the difficulty," Pete grumbled.

"Although not this particular bureaucrat," Ignatius excused himself. He turned to explain to Desiree and Steve. "We have several committees that approve anything that is produced for the general public. Their list of reasons for rejection is legion."

"Course, the only real reason is to justify their salaries," Geoff pointed out. "As I recall, the official ruling in this case was that hot water tanks used too much energy."

"So now that it's established that we're *not* taking a bath," Gina confirmed, "let's plan our search for tomorrow, shall we?"

"Steve, since you know the town way better than me, why don't you organise the search," Desiree suggested. "I don't know about the rest of you,

but I could use some grub, so I'll make myself useful by making a run. Anyone else hungry?"

Ten hands shot into the air.

0115 – Newburg Market Square

Desiree stood in the queue at the burger van, counting on her fingers as she stepped up to the counter and thought to herself. *Lessee, there's Ig, Slide and Sandra . . . any other carnivores? No, then it's three carnivores . . . Then there's Rachael and Clare, Gina, Linda . . . so four herbivores . . . Geoff and Pete are omnivores, but just because they're omnivores, doesn't mean they'll eat anything. I wonder if those kebabs have pork . . . smells more like dog, actually. What if the other carnivores don't either? Nah, with those teeth, they must eat meat . . . So three carnivores, four herbivores and two omnivores, that's nine . . . who've I left out?*

"Excuse me, miss, but there is a queue," said an impatient punter behind her.

"Get a grip," she retorted. "Oh, yeah – me and Steve. That's eleven." She looked up at the vendor.

"Yes, mom?" he prompted patiently, knowing that people enumerating on their digits were likely to make large, profitable orders.

"Six large steak kebabs – no, not those, the one's on a stick, eight of those veggie-bean burgers and four large chicken thingies in a pita. And *no mynez* on anything!"

0135 – Rialto Kitchen

By the time Desiree returned with the food, Steve and the others had already routed out the search areas, designated teams and scheduled a rendezvous.

Desiree piled the food on the table. "Okay, in exchange for the cheap chow, I got about a bajillion questions I want answered." She started doling out packages of greasy paper to everyone around the table.

"Ask away," Ignatius offered.

"Okay – back in that . . . place where we got trapped . . ."

"That would be the basement of The tré," Ignatius inserted. "A small venue that belongs to the town."

"Okay, The tré," Desiree confirmed, "you said you were the mayor?"

"That is correct," Ignatius corroborated. "I am indeed the mayor of the town of Otterstow. It's not much bigger than a village, actually and if it were rated today, I think it would barely qualify for hamlet status. Technically it's still a town because it used to be a good bit larger than it is now and we still actually have an MP, although no one will admit . . ."

"Ig," Clare interrupted.

"Yes?" Ignatius acknowledged.

"You're rabbiting," Clare informed him.

"Am I? Oh. Sorry," Ignatius apologised.

"Is there any place in the UK called Otterstow?" Desiree asked Steve.

Steve shrugged. "Never heard of it. Why'd you ask?"

"All the places must have different names," Desiree concluded. "What's the largest city in The Kingdom?" she asked Ignatius.

"In practice, that would be Trinova, although the proper city is actually just a square mile . . ."

"Sounds like London to me," Steve interrupted.

"Big Smoke' to us common types," Pete added.

"So, the nicknames are universal," Steve concluded.

"Is there a Big Easy or Crescent City?" asked Desiree.

"San Souci," Pete recalled. "Also known as 'Cirrrosis by the Sea'."

"Yeah, that'd be my town," Desiree acknowledged.

"So is Otterstow part of Allegory?" asked Steve.

"Hey, I paid for the munch; I get to ask the questions," Desiree objected.

"That would be correct," Ignatius confirmed. "Although it would be more correct to say that Otterstow is part of The Kingdom, which is our nation."

"So how does that fit into Allegory?" asked Desiree.

"Our entire universe is Allegory," Clare answered. "Things that exist or are concrete in tangible sort of way are Allegorical."

"Doesn't 'allegory' mean something like . . . 'the other story'?" asked Desiree.

"Yes, it does, actually," Ignatius said, "however the explanation is rather long and involves bears and a cave and something to do with shadows. I'd explain, but if you'd prefer to accomplish something else tonight . . ."

"No, that's okay," Desiree readily dismissed the offer.

"Long story short, we come from Allegory, as opposed to Reality, or the Real world, which is where you come from," Clare contrasted.

"So, if you're not part of the real world, how do you exist?" asked Steve.

"Obviously, we exist," Slide stated.

"But Clare just said you're not part of the real world," Steve countered.

Slide began to give Steve a series of small pokes on his shoulder. "Still think I don't exist? I can give a more convincing demonstration."

"Point taken," Steve admitted.

Desiree noticed Geoff's hand as he nibbled on a kebab. "You've only got two fingers and a thumb," she commented. "Is that congenital, or . . ."

"No, I was actually born this way," Geoff answered, "as are all Suvans."

"If your hands match the number of digits in a feral, why do you have an opposable pollex?" observed Desiree. "And feral foxes and swine don't have fingers with this kind of articulation."

"Could I get a translation?" Geoff asked the group as a whole.

"A pollex is a thumb. It's opposable if it can touch the tips of the other fingers," Clare explained. "Articulated fingers are highly jointed."

"Yes, as you can see, quite unlike a bestiant," Ignatius said, absentmindedly rubbing his tender fingers in remembrance of Desiree's earlier inspection. "But I'm a sapient Vulpan, with a capital 'V', I hasten to add. *Vulpes sapiens*."

"Bestiant?" asked Desiree.

"Yes, 'bestiant' as in 'beast'," Ignatius explained. "A bestiant fox is quite small and goes about unclothed, hunts for food, hollows out an earth to live in . . ."

"Runs on four legs," added Clare with a smile.

"Beasts that resemble us are bestiants," said Ignatius, ignoring Clare's comment.

"So . . . feral animals?" Desiree said.

"Not only them, but wild ones as well," Rachael MarchHare added.

"Yes, wild animals," Sandra StæppanWylf confirmed indulgently, "but domesticated also."

Desiree thought for a second. "So, bestiant – beast. Got it. So I'd guess a sapient would be a person, such as you or I, or any of us present – someone that can reason and communicate?" she suggested.

"Correct," Ignatius confirmed. "Despite popular opinion, the scope of sapient includes all Frith *and* humans."

"Frith?" Desiree asked.

"Anyone not human is Frith," Clare explained.

"But skins sometimes call us 'Furs'," Rachael added.

"Rachael!" Gina excoriated. "Let's refrain from teaching them vulgarities right out of the gate, shall we?"

"Sorry, Mum," Rachael mumbled.

"'Fur' is vulgar?" asked Desiree, amused.

"Yes," Gina quickly answered, "and even more so is calling a human a 'skin'."

"I don't wish to contradict, Gina, but I wouldn't exactly call it *vulgar*," Sandra countered. "Childish, perhaps."

"What's so bad about 'Fur' and 'skin'?" asked Desiree.

"It's condescending and disrespectful," Gina retorted. "In my book, that's vulgar."

"Only small children use the term 'Fur'," Sandra explained. "Most four-year-olds have a very hard time of it saying 'Frith' without giving everyone in the room a shower."

"Pete still has trouble saying it," Clare teased.

"Ahem," Pete announced. "There are thirty-two feathers on a thrush's throat," he enunciated with perfect clarity.

"Still can't say 'Frith'," Clare challenged.

"Don't hafta," Pete dismissed. "Nuffin' wrong wif 'Furs' an' 'skins'."

"Oh, thank you for being such a good example to the girls, Pete," Gina complained sarcastically.

"Shave me, Gina, it's not like I taught 'em 'sif' or nuffin'," Pete countered, quickly taking a bite to hide his smile.

Gina cuffed him, regardless.

Desiree, ignoring the quasi-domestic spat, continued. "Okay, so we've separated Frith and humans . . ."

"Or Furs an' skins," Pete interrupted, receiving another blow from Gina.

"How do you distinguish the different, um . . . races?" asked Desiree.

"Genra," Ignatius answered. "From the Remun, *genera*, plural of *genus*, of course. *Exempli gratia**, my Genra is Vulpan, from *Vulpes*. There is also the less formal term 'peltage', in which case, I would be a 'Fox' – with a capital 'F'. There are some other terms – slang, of course, but I shan't enumerate them here. Nor shall Pete," he added quickly as a warning.

Desiree extended the train of thought. "So if your Genra is Vulpan, and your peltage is Fox, Pete's Genra is Ursan and his peltage be a Bear. Linda's peltage would be a Squirrel, and her Genra would be a Sciuran and Geoff would be . . . did you say Suvan?"

"Yeah, Suvan. That's right," Geoff confirmed.

"From genus *Sus* for bestiant swine," muttered Desiree. "So, just for fun, if there were a Mouse, his Genra would be Muvan as the genus is *Mus*. Right?"

"Correct," Ignatius confirmed. "Well done."

"So, Sandra and Slide would be Canans?" Desiree asked, "from *Canis lupus*?"

"Erm, in a word, no," Slide smiled. "Your logic is correct, but the statement is not. Sandra and I are Lupans."

"Any particular reason for this exception?" asked Desiree. "Why use the species and not the genus?"

"Avin' big, pointy teef let's 'em get away wif it," Pete opined.

"But I don't understand," Desiree confessed. "Why would they *want* to get away from it?"

"There is a taint with being associated with domestic animals," Ignatius explained, "particularly servile pets such as cats and dogs. One should avoid making such references."

"Like calling me a Porker," Geoff said.

"Or offering to take me for walkies," Sandra added.

"Sandra and Geoff are being self-deprecating in their examples, of course," Ignatius pointed out.

"Those of us with a sense of humour don't mind, honestly," Geoff said.

"I believe we've already had this discussion," dismissed Ignatius. "And I think if our human friends repeated such comments to someone with no sense of humour, they would find themselves in very serious trouble. Returning to your query, Desiree, bestiant wolves and dogs share the same genus of *Canis*. Thus, if 'Canan' were used as the Genra, it would equate Sandra and Steven with a schnauzer – an undesirable affiliation."

"So, Wolves are Lupans," Desiree reiterated, "and I guess Coyotes are Latrans?"

"Dunno, honestly," Sandra admitted. "Never met a Coyote."

"So, is my Genra Human?"

"Yes," Ignatius confirmed, "with one tiny footnote. Unlike the other Genra, such as Lepuns and Vulpans, the first letter is not capitalised."

"I'm not *even* gonna ask why," Desiree said. "So, what's my peltage?"

"Simian," Pete blurted out.

**Exempli gratia* - R. 'For the sake of example'

"Pete!" Gina scolded as she rolled-up a newspaper and began to swat him repeatedly. Desiree observed that most of the others were trying to hide their laughter.

After the commotion died down, Ignatius addressed Desiree's question more thoroughly. "This is Pete's idea of humour. I suggest you ignore him. Whilst your Genra is human, you have no proper fur, thus you have no peltage."

"So, humans have a Genra, but no peltage?" Desiree asked.

"At's not all they don't have," Pete commented.

"No need for that now, Pete," Ignatius warned calmly.

Desiree closed her eyes and rubbed her temples in concentration. "Sapient's are all people. Frith are sapient's, but not humans. Peltage for Frith only, Genra for all sapient's. Okay. I think I got my head wrapped around this. Sort of. Could someone hand me another beer? Might help it sink in a little."

"Right on it," Pete volunteered, instinctively jumping up to the refrigerator.

"Still wanna check out Iggy's teeth?" Linda OakSquirrel asked facetiously. "His canines aren't exactly his most interesting feature," she added suggestively.

"What's the obsession wif teef?" asked Pete, handing Desiree an open bottle.

"It's sort of a signature of a species," Desiree replied. "It tells about what kind of life and diet they have . . ."

"For Ig, that would be fish, chips and cider, mainly," Gina reported, to the amusement of the others.

Desiree continued. "Also, teeth are very durable as remains or fossils . . ."

"Hear that, Ig?" Pete interrupted. "You're a fossil!"

"If that was supposed to be a dig at my age, I would ask which of us is older, Pete DunBerr," Ignatius retorted kindly.

"And sometimes they're the only thing left of an extinct species," Desiree concluded. "Actually, I'd like to look at the rabbits' teeth – Rachael's or Clare's . . . if that's all right?"

"We're Hares, if ya please," Rachael corrected, taking care to enunciate the 'h'. "Go on, then." She smiled wide.

"Sorry. You did say that earlier, didn't you. Give me just a sec," Desiree said, running to the sink and giving her hands a quick wash. She returned and took a look at Rachael's smile. "Could you open a little?"

Rachael opened her mouth wide.

"Rache can put her fist in her mouth," Clare commented with a smile.

Rachael stopped Desiree's hand and told Clare, "I'll put my fist on your nose, ya li'l bookworm," She released Desiree's hand and opened wide again.

Desiree reached out slowly and ran her thumb down the cleft of the incisors, which ran nearly two inches. She then reached with her index finger behind the front incisors and felt the smaller pair of incisors behind the front pair. "I knew it. You have a second set of incisors, just posterior to the front, just like real – um, feral . . . sorry, bestiant hares." She withdrew her hand. "But your fingers are articulated. I don't understand. It's like your bodies are almost human except for the skull. I mean you even have hair that grows long on your head . . ."

"Fex', it's called," Slide mentioned. "It's a sign of being sapient. The legend was that those gifted with sapience were given a fex as a mark of their ability."

"Summa the sprogs'll call it 'headfur'," Pete mentioned. "Them an' other unwashed types," he added *sotto voce* as Gina gave him a hard nudge.

"What if someone is bald?" asked Steve.

"That only happens to human males," Slide answered, "barring some disease such as mange."

"Or a head-shave," Pete added.

"Head-shave?" Desiree asked, amused.

"As a fex is a symbol of sapience," Clare explained, "a common punishment for doing something truly stupid is to have one's head shaved."

"Hmph!" grunted Desiree. "If that was the case in my home town, we wouldn't need hairbrushes."

"Used to be, bald humans were thought of as bestiants," Geoff continued the thought. "They're still thought of as being a bit thicker than most."

"I couldn't help but notice that awesome tail y'got there," Desiree said to Ignatius. "Do you call it a brush?"

"Brush' is indeed the proper term for a Vulpan's tail." Ignatius verified.

"Thank you for the kind compliment," he added, trying to be gracious.

"Claude Baughs," Pete rolled his eyes. "Only Iggy would 'ave a special name for 'is tail."

Ignatius ignored Pete's remark, at least verbally. "But we can discuss our anatomical differences later. There are more important social differences we should discuss."

"I can imagine," Desiree said. "I somehow get the impression that humans do not have dominion in Allegory."

"That would be a fair assumption," answered Slide. "Is that the case in your world?"

"Being the only extant sapients, it sort of makes it a one-horse-race. So we find other differences as an excuse to kill each other. Is there a dominant species here?" asked Desiree.

"Not as such. But as we like to say here, 'some are more equal than others'," Geoff answered.

"Hmm, where have I heard that before?" asked Desiree of no one in particular. "And who is 'most equal' here in Otterstow. Wouldn't be Otters by any chance?"

"Well, Otterstow is a very small town," began Ignatius, "in a rather unimportant district . . ."

"Known for its cheese," interrupted Rachael. "The smell o' which would put a flatulent 'orse to shame."

Ignatius continued. "There is no one of particular, erm . . . *equality* in our small town – not even Otters. Generally speaking, over the entire world, there is no truly dominant Genra. Although a few places are almost entirely populated by one or another."

"And then there are humans . . ." began Clare.

"That doesn't sound very promising." Steve commented warily.

"Yes, well that has to do with why the humans aren't considered Frith," Ignatius began.

"Doesn't 'Frith' mean 'Fur'?" asked Steve.

"In practice, yes, but in theory, no," Ignatius answered. "I shan't go into a detailed history just now, but the term 'frith' has several meanings, the most commonly held being 'peace' or 'freedom'. However, its oldest meaning is 'kindred' – in the very broadest sense of the word, you understand.

"You see, in the Cold Age, which would be from pre-history to about 1000 years ago, circumstances were quite difficult and it was important that the members of a community could trust one another in order to survive. One minor act of carelessness or, Jack forbid, betrayal, could have devastating consequences for the entire group. If one was a kindred of the community, then one was part of the Frith and could be trusted. As long as everyone behaved, times were good and all prospered. However, if one was an outlaw, well . . ."

"And humans are not Frith," observed Steve.

"Quite," Ignatius confirmed, albeit a bit nervously. "There are some who consider humans beneath the Frith, for various reasons. Although, and I feel safe in speaking for all of us here, you are in the company of friends and none of us believe any of that."

"And that's not just because you're helping us find our children," Sandra felt compelled to point out.

"Just so," Ignatius concurred. "However, there are still those who feel that humans, due to their violent nature, should be subjugated."

"I quite agree," Desiree replied. "Humans that are violent should be subjugated."

"Ah, yes," Slide said. "However, these people feel that *all* humans are of a violent nature."

"Are they?" asked Desiree. "I don't know what humans are like in Allegory. And I'm not even too sure about them where I come from."

"No, certainly not all of them," Ignatius said. "Most of them live in fear and the rest are in workhouses and prisons where they live in a stupor from being overworked, undernourished and generally neglected."

"F'true? What a shame. I was hoping to see more of Otterstow than the basement of The tré," suggested Desiree. "But it sounds like it might be dangerous for me to stay there."

"Oh, I doubt that you would risk anything more dangerous than the odd comment if you were to visit Otterstow," replied Ignatius.

"As long as she stayed well away from Thaddeus," Sandra cautioned.

"This is scrummy," Rachael interrupted, oblivious to the ominous tone of the conversation. "So what's in this . . . wuzcalled?"

"Yours is a beanburger," Desiree answered. "You're a vegetarian so I got them just for you. No meat or animal product."

"I'm not vegetarian," Rachael replied. "What made ya think that?"

Desiree looked a little uncomfortable. "You and Clare *are* Rabbits."

"Hrz, atchly," corrected Rachael with a full mouth.

"Sorry, Hares. It's only about the third time you've told me."

"Wot's 'em over things?" Rachael asked, chewing.

"Kebabs," Desiree answered. She had a thought. "I don't suppose Vulpans eats Lepuns like foxes eat hares?"

Linda gave a little snort of mirth and quickly concealed her mouth. "'Scuse me!" she apologised.

Ignatius swallowed his mouthful and wiped his whiskers. "Ah, once again, the bestiants do, but I'd sooner eat my arm off than eat Clare or Rachael – or any sapient for that matter."

"But you *do* eat meat?" asked Desiree.

Linda was trying desperately to stifle her giggling in the corner as Geoff gave her a nudge and a discreet "b'haveyatart!"

"Most of us do, in fact," Ignatius said. "Some of the more liberal among us are vegetarians, but it's just as likely to be someone with long, pointy canines than a pair of enormous incisors."

"Well . . . Geoff, wouldn't you feel a little uncomfortable if someone set roast pork in front of you?" Desiree asked.

"Yes it would, but not for the reasons you'd expect," Geoff answered.

"Awright, I'll bite," Desiree conceded. "Why would it upset you?"

"Suvans are pork-intolerant. Apart from producing enough gas to choke everyone in the room, I'd spend the rest of the evening on the karzy, screaming in pain."

"So you *have* eaten pork?" asked Desiree, a bit incredulous.

"On numerous occasions," Geoff confessed. "And that's what's so upsetting. I honestly do like it. Properly done, it's brilliant. But I know that if I eat it, I'll pay for it later, so I just have to say no to something I greatly enjoy. Or at least I try to say no."

"All Suvans are like this?"

"Every one," Geoff said, taking another bite of his burger. "Just as all Bovans are beef-intolerant and all Ovans are mutton-intolerant."

"So you can see that it's not actually rude to have pork in front of Suvans," Ignatius explained. "It's just inconsiderate; much like having sweets in front of a diabetic. Vulpans and Bears and Badgers and the like are quite fortunate. No one ever serves their bestiant counterparts for dinner. Ironically, even though a bestiant lamb would be a great treat to a bestiant fox, I've never been fond of lamb or, even worse, mutton. Ghastly, stringy stuff, full of gristle . . ."

"So, what about Cattle? With a capital 'C'," Desiree asked, changing the subject. "Bovans, Ovans and Caprans?"

"For the peltages Oxen, Sheep and Goats, respectively," Ignatius confirmed. "However, 'Cattle' would not be used as that would imply domesticity, thus being offensive."

"And lest we forget – 'Suvan' for Boars," Geoff mentioned.

"So you're a Boar named Suvan?" asked Desiree with a small smile.

"Eh, what?" asked Geoff.

"Never mind," Desiree dismissed. "Obscure joke." She reformed her thoughts and asked Ignatius another question. "So you obviously raise livestock for meat. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I can only imagine that the Bovans, Ovans and Caprans – and Suvans – must not feel too comfortable with this arrangement."

"No, quite the opposite, actually," Ignatius said. "For example, as Ovans raise bestiant sheep, they take great pride in working their bestiant counterparts. Being of the same . . . 'family' for lack of a better word, they treat them quite well and they're *very* protective of them. Their charges are almost like a revered trust to them. In fact, some of the bestiants they raise live more comfortable lives than they do."

"Well, what about when they're slaughtered?" asked Desiree. "That can't be too pleasant."

"There's some sort of a ritual they use," Ignatius recalled. "Not sure of the details, honestly, but it ensures that the bestiant suffers as little pain as possible. After all, everything dies eventually. Animals in the wilderness typically starve or get gored or squeezed to death whilst being eaten by some other animal if they don't die of some terrible disease. Hardly pleasant. But when the farm animals are slaughtered, they don't suffer at all."

"Do you raise pigs, Geoff?" asked Desiree.

"Oh, no. I'm a builder, me," Geoff answered. "Haven't the stomach for slaughtering and the like."

"So, do humans eat foxes? Or Squirrels?" Linda asked Steve, wondering if the upper case initial would be detected.

Steve looked up just at the end of Linda's question and thought he might have detected the tail-end of a wink. "Erm . . . Some folks out in the country might eat a squirrel as game. As for foxes, no – but there's this very bizarre ritual called a fox hunt," he answered.

"Is there?" asked Ignatius. "I wonder if it's anything like a foxchase?"

Steve began an explanation. "Well, in a fox hunt, dozens of people with more money than sense ride around on horseback with a hundred dogs, thundering through the countryside until they find a fox and they chase him all day. They consider it great sport here. Well, some do."

"So, nothing like a foxchase, then," Ignatius concluded. "And what do they do when they catch the fox?"

"I'm not entirely sure," answered Steve. "I know they don't eat him, but from all accounts it's damned unpleasant for the fox."

"But I'll be all right, surely?" asked Ignatius.

"I think any hound that caught up with you would be in for the shock of his life," Steve conjectured.

"Serves 'em right," Gina said.

"What about wolves and hares?" asked Sandra with sudden concern. "Are those hunted here?"

"Feral wolves were hunted into extinction centuries ago in Britain," Steve said. "Although I think a few might be left on the continent. Hares are usually hunted by snares and traps. Why do you . . . Oh, for Grace and Simon?"

"They'll be safe, won't they?" asked Sandra, concern on her face.

"I don't think Grace is any danger of being snared or trapped," Steve said. "At least by something she can't get out of. And since wolves are extinct in Great Britain, no one hunts them anymore, so I should think they'd be safe."

"Fortunately, England has very strict laws about people having guns. If it was the States, I'd be worried, but there ain't but a few guns here," Desiree mentioned.

The Frith all looked at Desiree, mystified.

"What?" Desiree asked.

"What're guns?" asked Rachael.

0800 – Nora

Ignatius had had a very restless night. It was nearly three in the morning by the time he had got back to Nora and, even after peeling off his clothes and plopping into bed, he did little more than toss and turn for what tiny fraction of the night remained.

They had all agreed to meet at the Rialto at noon and then go to the Midsummer fete one hour later to continue their search for Grace and Simon. Ignatius couldn't stop going over all the possibilities of things that might go wrong. Of course, the question of whether they would find the missing children weighed most heavily on his mind. However, which course of action to take in the event the children were *not* found lost him the most sleep. Although, he did have to wonder if it might have been the kebab.

Being a creature of habit, he rose at eight, despite feeling completely ragged and traipsed into his bathroom.

Mounted on the wall near the bathtub was a largish tank, surrounded by a complex array of pipes and fixtures. Ignatius struck a match and held it under a valve. The heat of the tiny flame caused it to bend and within seconds a little *ping* was heard and a small, blue pilot ignited as Ignatius extinguished the match in an ashtray. *Pong*, said the tank a few seconds later and water could be heard rushing into the large steel vessel as a blue flame spread around the openings of the burner beneath.

From several years of experience, he knew he could just squeeze in the effort of making a cup of tea whilst the water for his bath heated, thus he descended the stairs for that purpose.

He returned upon completion of said task and, whilst sitting on the rim of the tub, set the cup and saucer on a small table nearby. Watching the flame, he had but a few seconds to wait until a whistle began to blow, signalling that the water had been heated to just the right temperature. The steam from the whistle extinguished the pilot and cooled the triggers for the valves. There was a double *ping* as they shut off, cutting off the gas. Scarcely a second went by when the remaining gas in the burner back-flashed with a tiny 'puff'.

Heaven help me if this thing ever breaks, Ignatius thought to himself as he pulled a chain to allow the water into the tub. *I doubt even Geoff would know how to fix it.*

After a good soak with his tea, he headed out to his balcony to weigh his thoughts in the cold light of day. Stretching out, prone and naked, he let the sun dry his coat.

Feeling a little less highly-strung after his simple therapies, he began to think a bit more clearly.

If the children are not to be found today, he reasoned as his tail began to patter, then the best we can probably hope for is that they might return on their own. Of course, the only way that can happen is for the portal to remain open and that means the Rialto would have to remain accessible, if not under our direct control.

He seemed to remember being told that Angus, the addict that ran away, was, in some way, the owner of the Rialto. *If that poor sod holds the fate of Grace and Simon in his hands then it looks like we might need his help at some stage – his cooperation will be the key to our mission. We'd better be nice to him.*

Having released some of his mental torments (or perhaps the digestive ones), Ignatius accomplished what he had been attempting all night and managed to drift off in the morning sun.

He awoke to see a pair of feet standing before him.

"Don't get up on my account," a voice chirped. "I'm just enjoying the view."

"Good morning, Linda," Ignatius greeted without looking up. "It seems you have caught my buttocks unawares yet again. I don't suppose you'd be kind enough to hand me my robe?"

"Nuh-uh!" Linda answered. "Wanna see the whole show."

"Might I ask what brings you to Nora? Apart from the opportunity to see your humble civil servant in the altogether?"

"I had something I wanted to talk to you about, but I got distracted," Linda answered.

"By something shiny, no doubt," Ignatius replied.

"Oh, did I just hear someone using *sarcasm*?" Linda teased.

"*Mea Culpa**. Look, my robe is just on that hook . . ."

"Oh, yes, I remember now," Linda interrupted, not fetching the robe. "Jess FærFyxe is here."

At this, Ignatius jumped immediately to his feet. "Jess? Here?"

Linda applauded. "Woot!" she cheered.

Ignatius gave Linda an admonitory glance, although still smiling, as he grabbed his robe. "She's not here in Nora?"

"No, 'here' as in Otterstow. I think she's at the Chequers Inn," Linda explained. "Aww, but I was enjoying the viiiieew!" she complained as he tied his belt.

"You scandalous Rodent," Ignatius chided as he walked into his bedroom. He noted the time as shortly after eleven. "That woman's timing is impeccable. I *knew* I mentioned her name once too often," he scolded himself.

"I'll admit you two had a stormy romance . . ." Linda began.

"Stormy?" Ignatius interrupted as he began to pull some clothes out of his closet. "It was positively cyclonic. But that's not what worries me – that's a dead issue. What worries me is why, at this time in particular, has she suddenly decided to appear."

"If you've nothing to say to her, then why does it bother you?" asked Linda.

"Do you know what Jess has been doing the last few years of her life?"

* *Mea culpa* – R. lit. 'by my fault'. An admission of guilt.

"I thought she was married to some poor sod in Writing?"

"She's been working for Civil Enquiries."

"Eww diya," Linda grimaced. "You're right. Bad timing, indeed. Very, very, very . . . bad timing."

"If you wouldn't mind?" asked Ignatius, holding up his pants.

"Oh, I'd love to," Linda smiled, stepping forward and taking them. "Do you dress left or right?"

"I'd like to put them on myself," Ignatius stated.

"Oh . . . Not as much fun, but suit yourself – as it were."

"In private, if I may?"

"Just us two, then," Linda answered.

"Out, please," Ignatius insisted politely.

Linda stuck out her tongue and flicked her tail as she turned to leave. "Spoilsport!"

1120 – Black Kettle Pub

Ignatius had tasked Linda to apprise Slide, Sandra and Geoff of the arrival of Jess FærFyxe, while he rushed off to the Black Kettle to inform Pete, Gina and the MarchHare twins. He was hoping to move their plans forward so that they might evade Jess and thus avoid any embarrassing questions that she might ask. He was a little disappointed to find Johnny Prlgel at the bar, as he had hoped to have a discreet word with Pete to hurry things along.

"Mornin' Mr. Ig," Johnny greeted as he pulled a glass off the shelf and placed it under the tap. "Thought you never partook before the sun was past the yardarm, as a rule."

"It's more of a personal guideline than an actual rule," Ignatius replied. "Would you be kind enough to summon either Pete or Gina or one of the twins?"

"Absolutely," Johnny answered, pulling the arm on the tap to fill the glass. "News about our little runaways?"

"Well, it does concern Grace and Simon, but it's nothing too important." Ignatius knew the fact that Grace and Simon were missing was now common knowledge about the entire town, so he felt safe in mentioning it, but he didn't want to call too much attention to himself by seeming to be in a hurry.

"Ah, right," Johnny said. "Miss ParsleyHare did mention that you were arranging a search party for the little tearaways. The whole lot's going – Gina, Pete – the twins as well. That's why she asked me to tend the bar for the full day." He laid the pint slowly and carefully in front of Ignatius. "Right, I'll dash up and see if I can roust one of 'em. Back in a tick."

Johnny, being a small Erinac, did not move very quickly. Also, as he did not know anything of the situation, he did not have quite the sense of urgency that Ignatius would have preferred. Humming a tune, the Hedgehog waddled to the stairs and slowly ascended.

Ignatius looked at the pint sitting before him. Normally, he would not drink before noon, but he had made a few exceptions in the past. Reasoning that today also presented exceptional circumstances, he thought it would be

acceptable to take advantage. With a slight tinge of guilt, he raised the glass to his lips and took a small sip.

There were a few others scattered about the pub, but they were paying no notice to him whatsoever, so he sat quietly, drumming his fingers, trying not to draw any attention to himself.

After a few minutes Johnny returned. "Right, Mister Ig, I spoke with Miss Rachael and Miss Clare. They said they'll be down presently," he reported.

"Thank you, Johnny," Ignatius replied patiently.

"Any hints as to where those two might be?" asked Johnny as he began to polish a fixture.

"I've no idea where they are at the moment," Ignatius answered as truthfully as he could muster.

"I'd suspect Mum would say that they weren't caned enough," Johnny speculated. "That's why they ran away."

"You needn't suspect," Ignatius confirmed. "That's precisely what she said."

"Did you see Mum on your trip to Big Smoke?" enquired Johnny.

"Oh, yes," Ignatius answered. "We dropped by the library . . ."

"Brace yourself, Ig," Johnny warned in a low voice. "Here comes the Devil in drag."

"Eh?" Ignatius said, caught unawares as he heard a voice behind him that he truly hoped he would never hear again.

"I thought I'd find you in here. You always were an exemplary alcoholic."

At first Ignatius thought if he didn't turn his head around, he wouldn't have to accept the fact that the person he least wanted to see in the world was standing right behind him. Even worse, he knew that he had to be as polite as he possibly could to her.

"Good afternoon, Miss FærFyxe. And what brings you back to Otterstow?" he asked without turning around.

"I *do* work for a living," she replied. "And my job, although a civil service job as yours is, involves a little more than watching plays and cutting ribbons."

It was all Ignatius could do to keep from pulling down his ears and raising his hackles. He knew she was just baiting him and the best way to deal with it was to ignore it. He put his cider down and finally turned around to face her. He was frankly astonished at the sight that he saw. His last remembrance of her, perhaps ten years ago, was of a svelte, petite Vixen with a short, red, tomboyish fex and piercing green eyes. She had always dressed very provocatively and many had made the comment that if she were not a Vixen of Momentary Relationships, she had every intention of conveying that image. She still had green eyes and fire-red hair. Her apparel, consisting of an overly tight top and a skirt that didn't quite accomplish its purpose, as it always had, suggested that she might be willing to receive payment for affection. He had not intended to say anything insulting or demeaning, but some differences were so remarkable, he felt an instinctive urge to remark on the most conspicuous one.

"My word, but you've put on a few stone," Ignatius exclaimed and instantly covered his mouth. She had, in fact, added more than a little adipose tissue since their last meeting, some around her waist, some around her hips and, Ignatius could not help but notice, more than a little around her top as well. Her

fex was now long, graceful and feminine with a long plait laid over her shoulder and a forelock hanging down to almost between her eyes.

"When was the last time you had that fex cut?" Jess shot back. "You look like a Vixen from the back."

Ignatius had thought of a particularly rude retort that would suggest another means by which she could verify his gender but, apart from considering himself above such vulgarity, decided that diplomacy might better suit his purpose until he found out why she was in Otterstow.

Johnny, however, had no such reservations. "If you wanna check for yourself that he's not a Vixen, I suggest you blow . . ."

"And what would that job be?" Ignatius interrupted Johnny's proposal.

"I'm an auditor for CE," Jess announced with a hint of arrogance. "And, as such, I'm granted the liberty of auditing any authority I see fit."

"Yes, I've heard about your audits," Ignatius mentioned. "I've received calls from three of my fellow mayors in the shire. Apparently they found out I was somehow acquainted with you."

"We grew up and went to uni together. And considering our familiarity with each other, I'd think we were more than just 'acquainted'."

"No argument there," Ignatius conceded. "It was my painful duty to inform them that we had long since gone our separate ways."

"Aww, that's sweet, Ig. Still carrying a torch are we?" Jess teased.

"Oh, quite the contrary," Ignatius replied plainly. "Our flame has long since extinguished."

"You just said it was your 'painful duty'," Jess recalled.

"Yes, it was painful because I was not able to help my *confrères* out of an unpleasant situation. My influence over you was miniscule even when we were a couple. It's been completely nonexistent since we've parted company."

"Too right," Jess agreed.

"Getting back to my original question, what brings you to Otterstow?" asked Ignatius.

"I thought I'd come and visit a few friends," Jess answered. She watched Ignatius' reaction and just as it seemed he might breathe a sigh of relief, she added, "while I do an audit of Otterstow."

Ignatius knew that this would have to be handled fairly delicately. If Civil Enquiries were to find out about his latest endeavours involving Reality, they would be handing him his fex in a brown paper bag.

"Friends?" Johnny grunted. "Since when do you have friends in Otterstow? We all know you."

"Oh, I have friends. Lots of them," Jess asserted. "There are a surprising number of Foxes in the civil service. Some of them are quite well positioned."

"As were you, no doubt," Johnny replied. "At any rate, you've no friends in Otterstow."

"Now, Mister Prgel," Ignatius warned politely. "Let's be fair. Miss FærFyxe has the best interests of The Kingdom in mind, I'm sure." He turned to Jess. "Would you care to join me for a drink? You would have to pay of course, as I'm sure if I purchased anything for you, it might be construed as a conflict of interest."

"Most people would call it a bribe," Jess replied. "You always were a pompous git, Iggy, but I'll still let you buy me a lager."

Johnny was about to object but Ignatius turned to him and added, "If you would be so kind."

"Might I ask the nature of this audit?" Ignatius queried Jess as he handed Johnny a coin.

"You can ask until your bollocks fall off. We're not required to divulge any details of our investigations."

"We? Are there more than one of you or have you been made the Queen as well?" asked Ignatius.

"Oh, *tres drôle*. 'We' being CE. Remember us?" Jess' tone turned to the sarcastic. "We audit all the local governments for fraud, corruption and the like. I'm sure you've heard of us?"

"Civil Enquiries? Yes, I have," Ignatius answered, ignoring her mocking tone. "You ruin the lives of perfectly innocent people based on suspicion. When you don't find what you want through the normal means of investigation you apply . . . how should I say this . . . *pressure* . . . on others to grass on them. I think it was called a 'witch hunt' in the more distant past, although the current terminology is a 'fishing expedition.' Much more pleasant euphemism, I think. Although I think either would suit you equally well."

"Lost none of that snooty arrogance you mistakenly refer to as wit, I see," Jess observed. "Until you got so drunk you couldn't sit on your arse, much less walk or talk."

Ignatius was about to counter with the fact that when Jess was loaded she would talk about anything, but his better judgement caught him just in time. His brush swished around once or twice.

"Oh, no clever little comebacks, Ig?" Jess taunted. "Don't wear out that brush of yours trying to think of something."

"You certainly won that round, Jess," Ignatius confessed. "*Touché*. Of course, you will have the full cooperation of my office, such as it is. We are an open book here in Otterstow. We've nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of."

"We'll see about that," Jess said. "And we don't need your cooperation. We can go where we bloody well like."

"Please yourself," Ignatius offered. While it was true that he was a master of paperwork and red tape, he had always been completely scrupulous in his many submissions for funds from the government. If that was what Jess wanted to look through, it would suit his purpose quite well, as it would take ages for her to wade through the documents and that would keep her away from the one thing he didn't want her to discover.

Ignatius knew that Jess was devious, clever and extremely difficult to fool. He was sure that these attributes were responsible for her attaining the position she held as an investigator at Civil Enquiries. She could spot even the tiniest double-meaning intended to cover a lie. Ignatius suspected that this was because she was quite experienced at fabrication herself. However, he had known Jess for many years and, as formidable as she was in the field of deceit, she still had her weaknesses, with which he was all too familiar.

He was beginning to form a plan. Unfortunately, the first, most obvious, step would be extremely odious.

He turned to her and, steeling himself, said, "You know, you've kept yourself very well." *That was easy enough – it sounded sincere to me*, he thought. Base flattery, he knew from past experience, was always a foible he could exploit to put her off balance. Jess was never capable of taking a simple compliment at face value. "You're in remarkably good form."

"You can take your nose out of my arse, Iggy," Jess said flatly. "It's not gonna get you anything."

"Just stating an obvious fact," Ignatius continued. "You honestly do look quite striking. If I didn't know you personally, I'd never guess we were the same age."

"Stop it, Iggy," Jess ordered. "It won't work."

"Won't work? Sorry, don't quite follow." Ignatius knew she was on to him, but he had to exit the ruse gracefully.

"You're not going to brown-nose me into getting anything," Jess told him. "I'm not stupid enough to think I'm the same Vixen I was ten years ago."

"Oh, I hardly think so," Ignatius said carelessly.

"Are you saying I'm stupid?" snarled Jess.

"Oh, for pity's sake, woman, of course not," Ignatius denied. "You may have your shortcomings, but stupidity is certainly *not* among them. I was disagreeing with your statement about not being the same Vixen of ten years ago. But if you feel so strongly that you look your age, I certainly won't mention it again." *That's the end of that idea*, Ignatius thought.

"Frankly, it's embarrassing," Jess added. "You stuck your snout so far into my . . ."

"Drink?" suggested Ignatius. "As you seemed to finish your first in a hurry, I assume you'd like another. Or are you too busy working?"

"I'm always working," Jess said in a serious tone.

"Sounds dreadful," Ignatius consoled. "Do you sleep?"

"Don't be a twat, Iggy," Jess scolded. "Just order the drinks."

"Cider and lager, please, Johnny," Ignatius ordered.

Other patrons had drifted into the bar during their conversation. Some of them recognised Jess but, wanting nothing to do with her, either steered clear of her or gave a curt greeting to Ignatius and pointedly ignored Jess.

As per Johnny's request, Clare finally descended the stairs. She had been about eight when she had last seen Jess, thus she did not recognise her. Assuming Ignatius had found a Vixen to socialise with and feeling curious, she sat down next to him.

"Morning, Ig," Clare said cheerfully. "Lemonade please, Johnny."

"Good morning, Clare," Ignatius replied. "Clare, I don't believe you've met my acquaintance, Miss Jess FærFyxe."

"Jess FærFyxe? No, I haven't actually." Clare suddenly recalled the name. "Is this the Vixen that scammed you when you were at uni?"

"Clare!" Ignatius admonished.

"Oh, is *that* what he told you? Well, just remember that every story has two sides, and his bloody siffing honour wasn't exactly the perfect gentleman to me," Jess snapped.

"Actually, no, *he* didn't tell me anything. I was told by a very reliable and impartial source," Clare returned as politely as she could.

"Oh, and who would that be?"

"*That's* . . . enough, Clare," Ignatius jumped in. He was hoping to isolate his good friend Liza from the tentacles of Civil Enquiries. Clare, fortunately, took the hint.

"Well, if you must know, it was my Mum," Clare stated.

"Your Mum?" Jess snorted in disbelief. "The one that *dumped* you and your sister as infants after marrying that stupid prat, so she could travel the world as an *ac-tore*? So, tell me, Clare, when's the last time the silly bitch so much as sent you a card in the post?"

Ignatius noticed that Clare looked genuinely injured by Jess' remarks, so he jumped to her defence. "Miss FærFyxe, that is quite enough! I will thank you not to browbeat my constituents."

"What's she to you?" Jess snorted.

"As I said," Ignatius answered. "She is my constituent and also my employee."

"So what," Jess dismissed. "She's just staff."

"Apart from that, and most importantly, she is my good friend," Ignatius added.

"Oooohh," Jess feigned sudden understanding. "*Your good friend?* So that's it? You two got a thing going on, then, do you?" Her voice affected a child-like tone. "Whatcha gonna do, Ig? Toss me in the nick for makin' your poor widdle *good fwiend cw*y with dose big Doe eyes?"

"Try . . . me," Ignatius suggested coolly, his eyes narrowing to paper-thin slits.

Jess looked carefully at Ignatius for a few seconds as she slowly sipped her pint. Perhaps she remembered some long-forgotten point of law that might have made her culpable of breaching the peace, thus allowing Ignatius to actually incarcerate her in the town's gaol. Maybe she felt that Ignatius had some legal ace up his sleeve, which would allow the same end. Or perchance she felt that it served some other pragmatic purpose to let the matter drop. But the fact of the matter was she had simply grown weary of the game.

"Whatever," she mumbled.

Ignatius turned to Clare. "Miss MarchHare, I humbly suggest you retreat to a more hospitable area of the pub. I suspect Miss FærFyxe and I have some important matters to discuss."

By this time, Clare's expression had turned from one of wounded shame to that of quiet fury towards her tormentor. Still, she silently departed and joined her sister Rachael who had just entered, taking the trouble to corroborate the story with her.

Pete, who had overheard Johnny's request to Rachael and Clare, had instinctively felt that his presence might be required downstairs. Thus, he

silently joined Johnny at the bar. He immediately recognised Jess, but kept quiet for the moment.

"If her mum told her that, I'm a Hyena," Jess said. "Besides, Iggy, what I said was true. You treated me like dirt at the end of our time together. I begged you to take me back and in my hour of need, you just flushed me like a bog. Like all our time together meant nothing."

Ignatius knew he had to keep his cool. He could tell that she was provoking him in an attempt to make him angry or emotional. "I'll not discuss our personal past here or at any other place or time," he said in a calm tone. "I have made it clear from the beginning that any emotional relationship between us is over. You are here on business, and business it shall remain."

"Fine!" she hissed, becoming positively venomous. "You always were a twat, Ig," she hissed. "Just, a big, wet, spineless, wanking cunt!"

Pete slammed his hand on the bar in front of Jess, genuinely startling her. "Miss FærFyxe," he said quietly through a smile that showed perhaps a few too many teeth. "We keep a civil tongue in our 'eads round 'ere. An' if ya insist on 'at kinda language, I will personally drop ya into the canal."

"Yeah, you just *try* carrying me to the canal, you overstuffed Ursan, and I'll have a Bearskin rug for my living room. The law says your jurisdiction ends one yard beyond your entrance."

"I din't say I would *carry* ya there," Pete pointed out. "I'm perfectly capable o' droppin' ya in the canal from the doorstep."

Knowing that the distance between one and the other was, at a minimum, a good thirty yards, Jess was understandably sceptical.

Johnny, reading her expression nodded vigorously with wide eyes as if to confirm that he had, perhaps, experienced the flight himself. "It's not so bad if you actually land *in* the canal." He inspected his glass for cleanliness and dramatic pause. "It's when he throws short. And not to be unkind, Miss FærFyxe, but you're a bit more to throw than me."

"Just shut the si . . ." Jess caught herself just in time. She sneered at him as she kept silent and then turned her head.

Ignatius could sense that he had struck a nerve by telling Jess that he would not discuss personal matters. It occurred to him that, as it usually was with Jess, there was a hidden agenda, and it somehow involved their past relationship. *What could she possibly want that involved me?* he asked himself. *Some sort of apology? Well, she can forget that!* His brush began to swish as he thought.

"What's on your mind, Iggy?" Jess asked, trying to convey that she had recovered from the shock of Pete's warning.

Damnable tattle-tail, thought Ignatius. He stopped it in mid-swish and it dropped limply down. "Does the jurisdiction of CE extend into one's personal thoughts as well?" he asked.

"Sometimes," Jess replied coolly.

"Not today, however," Ignatius answered. He stood up. "If you'll excuse me, I would prefer to sit elsewhere."

"Fine, go wank wherever you like," Jess sneered quietly.

"In that case, I bid you good day," Ignatius said, ignoring the remark. He smiled as politely as he dared, turned and left.

Jess was about to make another remark but, seeing Pete just a few feet away, thought better of it and merely swore under her breath as she sipped her drink.

Clare and Rachael had been stealing glances at the two Vulpans sitting at the bar. Now that Ignatius was walking towards them, they seemed a bit relieved although they were dying of curiosity.

"Ig, what's going on? What's Jess doing back here in Otterstow?" Clare asked.

"She's with Civil Enquiries," Ignatius answered. "She claims she's conducting an investigation."

"An investigation?" Clare asked incredulously. "In Otterstow? There isn't enough tax revenue in Otterstow to bribe a Cub Scout, much less a public official. What could she possibly hope to find?"

"My thoughts exactly," Ignatius confided. "I can't imagine what's she's after. Although – well, I hate to sound self-absorbed, but I suspect it has something to do with me – or more accurately, us.

"In the meantime, do not talk to her about anything. Do not mention any names, places and I don't think I even need to say what subject should not be mentioned under *any* circumstances. She has quite a talent for ferreting out information. Born into the wrong Genra, I've always believed."

"Why d'ya think she's concerned about you?" asked Rachael.

"She brought up our past and then she got her tail in a right twist when I said I wasn't going to talk about anything personal, as she's here on business. Something seemed to get into her fur when I said that."

Geoff walked into the pub, did a brief double take at Jess, said nothing to her and joined Ignatius and the twins. "I got Linda's T-post on my rover a bit back," he told Ignatius. He gave another look at Jess. "Shave me if she didn't add six inches on all three measurements," he noted. "What's she doing here?"

"Mystery of the day," Ignatius said. "She's with Civil Enquiries and claims to be investigating Otterstow's local government, although I suspect she might be up to something else."

"She here by herself?" asked Geoff.

"I haven't seen anyone new around the town, apart from our two new friends," Clare mentioned.

"Me neiver," Rachael added.

"Nor have I," Ignatius said. "But from the way she talks, it sounds like she brought someone with her. She kept saying 'we' . . . 'We can go where we like.' 'We can do what we want.'"

"Surely she couldn't be here because she knows about the cabinet being open," Geoff whispered even more quietly.

"I rather doubt that," Ignatius answered. "If that were the case, she would have just gone to The tré to see it. She hasn't been there, has she, Geoff?"

"No. I've been locked in the basement all afternoon. No one even knocked," Geoff answered.

"So, she probably doesn't know. It's something else, then. But we're going to have to be extra careful. She'll try and follow us or maybe have us followed. The one thing we have in our favour is that since we're such a small town, we can spot any strangers immediately," Ignatius pointed out.

"What about the fete?" asked Rachael. "Will we still be able to go?"

Ignatius considered the options. "It'd be a shame to miss the opportunity to find Grace and Simon. But on the other hand, we might kill the goose that lays the golden eggs if she catches us out. Regardless, if we're going to do it, we need to make sure she's tied down somehow and that will be no easy task. As soon as she spots that someone's wasting her time, she'll know something's up."

"I have an idea," Clare said. "She's after you Ig, for some reason or another. We'll hold her down here, while you make off to The tré. Once she's lost sight of you, we can meet you there."

"How are you going to hold her down?" asked Ignatius.

"She'll 'ave to lift 'er tail after all 'at lager. Wait'll she goes to the loo," suggested Rachael. "I'll take it from there."

"This won't involve any violence, will it, Rachael?" asked Ignatius.

"A bit o' brute force, but no violence as such," Rachael replied with an honest face. "I'll just 'old the door shut."

"That's still a violent crime, Rachael, and I won't have it," Ignatius protested.

Just then, Jess finished her pint, exchanged a few curt words with Pete and left the pub.

"Well, that's the end o' that plan, anyway," said Rachael.

"I'm still going to see if I can get to The tré. Meet me there at noon," Ignatius said.

"But, Ig . . ." protested Clare.

"No time to waste." And with that, he slipped off to the door.

1130 – Otterstow Streets

Ignatius peeked around the corner of the front door of the Black Kettle and saw Jess walking in the general direction of The tré. Casting about for suspicious types in the area, he slipped out and proceeded to the next doorway. He could just make out her reflection in the glass of a window as she went further down the street. She had just gone out of his line of sight when he decided to make his next move. Glancing around the corner of the doorway, he saw Jess moving further along, at the top of the bridge. He moved hastily forward, as the bridge arched up a good eight feet and she was no longer in visual range. As soon as he got to the bridge, he walked slowly and carefully ascended, keeping his ears down. He then decided to act as if he was just walking along and minding his own business, in case he was caught out.

The road on the other side of the bridge came into view slowly and he could see Jess walking away, much further along. From this point of view he came to two positive conclusions. The first was that since Jess' sisters lived in the opposite direction, she was not staying with them. The only lodging in the direction she was walking was the Chequers Inn so, as Linda had suggested,

she was probably staying there. The other positive note was that The tré was close to the inn, so he could keep track of her as she went along and then slip into it unnoticed.

He also concluded, as he observed her walking down the road, for reasons he couldn't readily explain, that the extra weight she had put on (particularly on her backside, as that was the part he was watching at the moment) seemed to somehow make her more attractive.

1150 – The tré Basement

Geoff ThistleBoar let himself into the basement of The tré, locking the door behind him. "Afternoon squire. Ready to begin our venture?"

"Quite ready. Where are the others?" Ignatius asked.

"They'll be along shortly. We're going to come here in one's and two's so as not to arouse suspicion."

"Excellent," Ignatius said.

A minute had barely passed, when there was a knock on the door to the basement. "Open up, it's me an' Clare," Rachael MarchHare was heard to say from the other side.

"Clare and I," Clare MarchHare corrected.

Geoff opened the door, quickly ushered them in, had a quick peek outside and then shut and locked the door.

"I have to say, all this skulking about doesn't agree with me," Ignatius grumbled.

"Me neither. I don't care much for deception," Clare concurred.

"I think it's a bit o' fun, actually," Rachael said.

"Well, just you be careful, young lady," Ignatius warned. "Jess is not one to be trifled with. She's after something and she'll trample anyone to get it – and she won't think twice about making your life a misery."

Shortly thereafter there was another knock. "It's us," Gina said.

Geoff opened the door, revealing Pete DunBerr, Gina ParsleyHare and Linda OakSquirrel. They entered and Geoff quickly locked the door behind them.

"Desi here yet?" Pete asked.

"Not yet," Ignatius said. "She said she and Steve would be here at noon, as I recall."

A few more minutes passed and there was a third knock, and Geoff allowed Slide HolenWulf and Sandra StæppanWylf to enter the basement.

"We're all here," Slide commented. "We got the T-post about Jess. I didn't see anything of her on the way here," he reported.

"Nor I," Sandra added.

All of the others admitted that Jess was nowhere to be seen as they had approached The tré.

"That's a relief," Ignatius said. He pulled out his watch. "It's past time. Desiree and Steve *did* say that they would meet us here at noon, did they not?"

The others agreed that that was their recollection as well.

"Should we go in anyway?" asked Rachael.

"No, let's give them a little more time," suggested Ignatius.

They talked of this and that and mostly about Jess' sudden appearance out of nowhere, when they were finally interrupted by Desiree's voice from the horn next to the cabinet. "Hey y'all? Where y'at?"

"We're here, Desiree," replied Ignatius.

"Awright," Desiree replied. The door swung open and she and Steve were shielding their eyes from the light. As soon as she could see clearly, she started handing out some papers. "Okay, here are your maps of Newburg. They show the zones we worked out last night that we'll search. Did you bring the photos?"

Sandra fished out a photo of Simon while Pete produced a picture of Grace.

Desiree took them both. "These will be perfect," she appraised after examining them. "Say, these are in color."

"There a problem with that?" asked Gina.

Desiree seemed unsure of herself. "So, no one here is color-blind?"

"Why would we waste expensive colour film if we couldn't see the colours?" answered Gina.

"Okay, then," Desiree shrugged. "Steve and I will need about twenty minutes to produce the flyers, but it should be easy enough."

"Do you have a mimeograph?" asked Ignatius.

"A scanner and a printer," Steve answered.

"Sorry?" Ignatius said.

"I'll explain later. Come along, no time to lose." Without hesitation, Steve went into the cabinet and the rest followed.

As they came out of the darkness of the portal, Steve gave Desiree a small, but intimate squeeze on her buttocks.

"Git your hand off that," Desiree admonished him.

Steve quickly removed his hand. "Oh – Sorry. Just returning the favour."

"What favor?" asked Desiree.

Steve pointed with his thumb back to the portal tunnel. "Didn't you, erm . . . Apparently not. Never mind."

Rachael smiled and gave Linda a nudge with her elbow.

"What?" Linda asked.

"I saw that bit. Ya fancy 'im, do ya?" she whispered.

Linda shook her head with a demure smile. "Certainly not I. Steve is taken."

1210 – Rialto Office

Steve Green placed the photograph of Simon on the scanner and lowered the lid. All of the Frith from Otterstow were watching with rapt attention. "Now, we use the mouse to order a sample scan . . . that looks okay, so we'll use that . . . copy . . . paste . . . print. We're done." The printer began a quiet whirr as it spit out scores of flyers with pictures of Grace and Simon, promising a hundred pound reward and referring finders to Steve's mobile telephone number. Desiree handed them out.

"This is *sooooo* awesome!" Linda gushed. "Could you teach me how to use this thing?"

"Perhaps later," Steve suggested.

"And you said it *does* do bookkeeping?" asked Linda.

"Oh, yes," Steve verified. "Very good for that sort of thing."

"Woot!" Linda cheered. "More free time for me!"

"Erm – if I could ask," Clare said after picking up a flyer to read.

"Did I misspell something?" asked Steve.

"Not unless you count the number up at the top here," Clare pointed to where the flyer read '£100'. "How are we going to pay for this?"

"Steve and I can rake up 50 quid a piece," Desiree said. "Do you think it's enough?"

"Enough? I think it's quite generous," Slide HolenWulf said gratefully.

"How long would it take you to earn £50?" Steve asked. "If you don't mind answering such a personal question."

"I earn just over a hundred nicker a month," Gina mentioned casually.

"Gina, honestly," Ignatius objected. "A little privacy, please."

"As a public servant, your salary is public record," Gina countered. "And everyone else's is private."

"Still, one might bother to ask first," Ignatius grumbled to no one in particular.

"It's a healthy salary, but not huge," Gina added, ignoring Ignatius' complaining. "Some of us make more than he does. But, as mayor, he also gets a nice house for free. Doesn't even have to pay tax on it."

"Might I ask the point of your enquiry, Steve?" asked Ignatius, eager to change the subject.

"Well, it's a bit embarrassing, actually," Steve said. "As manager of the Rialto, I make about 25 quid a day – after the taxes have been taken out, of course. Although, like Ignatius, I do have a free place to stay as a perk to the job."

"Cor, 'at's a bit 'o dosh!" Rachael exclaimed.

"I bet it's not," Linda conjectured. "How many pints would a pound buy in a pub?"

"None," Steve answered. "It might buy a half of rubbish lager. A full pint would go for just over two pounds."

"Since a pint in our pub is a shilling, the exchange rate is about twenty to one," Linda calculated. "One of our pounds is twenty of yours, so Steve makes just over a pound a day in coin of The Kingdom."

"If we're done with the financial news, could we push off now?" asked Sandra. "Actually do a bit of looking for our children?"

"A few rules before we go," Desiree answered. "Steve will be with one group and I'll be with the other, just like last night. There will certainly be unforeseen incidents, so everyone needs to stay within shouting distance of at least one of us, and that's not very far if you're anywhere near the fair. Remember that your money's worthless there, so Steve and I will have to buy anything we need. Also remember, everyone is going to think you're in costumes or fancy dress or whatever it's called here. Today, you're a human, so welcome to the human, um – race, for lack of a better word."

"Awright, mummy, we'll be good widdle spwogs, then," Pete said. "Can we get on wif it?"

1215 – Newburg Park

"Scuse me?" Pete said, startling the couple camped on a blanket before the soundstage, smoking a cigarette that contained something besides tobacco.

They silently stared at the enormous Ursan. "We're lookin' for a pair o' sprogs."

"Could you give us a tinkle if you see them?" asked Gina ParsleyHare.

"There's a reward, mind." Pete handed the astonished couple a flyer.

A nicely dressed couple were pushing an occupied pram whilst holding the hand of a second child.

"You have such lovely children," Sandra StæppanWylf remarked, causing the couple to flinch, as they had been preoccupied with wiping the face of their ambulatory child.

"Erm . . . yes," the father remarked as the mother froze.

"Sadly, one of ours seems to have gone missing," Slide HolenWulf mentioned politely. He held out the flyer which the father took without looking at it.

"You know how it is," Sandra sighed, "especially when they can move about. You turn your back for just a second and 'poof' – they're gone."

"Oh, yes," said the mother, regaining some of her motor skills. "Definitely."

"So, if you *do* see them, would you please give us a ring?" asked Slide.

"Quite," answered the father. "Of course. Will do."

Rachael came upon some lads sitting upon a low wall. "Oy!" she called.

Out of the half-dozen or so, all of whom had their backs turned to her, only one turned to look. He could not quite believe what he was looking at, but he did like what he saw. He pointed at his chest, as if to ask, "Who, me?"

"Right, you," Rachael confirmed, beckoning him to come closer. "The tall, skinny bastard what's got the rings on your tits."

At six feet and four inches, he was definitely tall, certainly for a human. At a mere thirteen stone, he easily qualified as thin. Although wearing a shirt, he was obviously sporting some small, hooped ornaments on his mamillae, thus meeting Rachael's third criteria. Coming to the conclusion that he was the person being addressed, he looked at his mates, who were busy checking out some of the local talent strutting by on the high street. He gave some thought to mentioning the sight to behold that was standing right behind them, but quickly concluded that it would be inconsiderate to distract them from their observations. As inconspicuously as he could, he slid off the wall and walked toward Rachael. "Yes, miss? May I be of assistance in any way?" he asked as politely as he could.

"We're lookin' for these two," Rachael said, handing him a flyer.

The tall, skinny bastard read it quickly. "I see. I shall endeavour to try, Miss. If I might enquire – are you associated with a certain Steve Green?"

"Yeah. Ickle fell," Rachael answered holding her hand to demonstrate Steve's height. "Looks a bit like, erm . . ."

"A squirrel?" suggested the TSB.

"Yeah, that's the one," Rachael confirmed. "Ow'd ya know 'im?"

"I had a brief stint at the Rialto, where he was my manager. We're good mates. My name is Michael Robinson." He held out his hand. "I love your ear piercings, if I might add."

"Ta for that. Rachael MarchHare," she introduced herself, shaking Michael's hand. "Din't it 'urt when they pierced your nips?"

"I screamed like a schoolgirl, as I recall," Michael admitted with a smile.

Rachael's ears suddenly turned. "Gotta run! Me sister's in trouble!"

At the south end of the park, Clare walked along the canal's cobbled towpath as she handed out the occasional flyer.

"Could you help us find these two?" she asked, handing a flyer to one of a group of youths dressed in ill-fitting clothes with tartan accessories.

Keeping his eyes on Clare, he didn't even give the flyer a glance as he wadded it up and threw it in the canal.

Clare thought it odd that someone, even a human, would wear trousers that, despite being quite large, didn't quite cover their posterior and exposed their pants. She also wondered why some of them wore track suits when, as evidenced by their obesity, it was quite apparent that they never actually used them for their intended purpose of exercise. However she reserved judgement, at least until they opened their mouths.

They surrounded her and began to make a few lewd comments concerning various parts of her anatomy and the mating habits of rabbits. Feeling a little uncomfortable, she crouched down and thumped her foot a few times, hoping it might summon her sister.

"So, does ya know Hugh personally?" asked one of the group.

"The only Hugh I know cleans the streets," Clare retorted. "And he smells a sight better than you do,"

The others laughed at her cheek.

"Let's have a pull on yer tail," suggested another. Without waiting for permission, he took the liberty to do so.

Clare swatted his hand away. "*Get your hand off of my scut!*"

Another hand reached for her tail as well, but before she could turn around, her assaulter was flying into the canal with a splash.

"Piss off, lads," said a rough Scots brogue. "If ye're ta be useless, then be away."

A stream of profanity issued forth from the group, asking, in so many words, who would force them do so.

A second and third splash were heard as Rachael and a tall skinny bastard pushed two more into the canal. There were three left standing and dry and they were outnumbered by Clare and her three defenders. Thus they took the traditional coward's way out, melting off down the towpath, with the swimmers wading for the shore having no assistance from their mates.

"Ye're okay, Miss?" asked the brogue. "They're right neds, they are."

"Neds?" asked Clare.

"Non-Educated Delinquents," the TSB explained.

Clare seemed to think the brogue to be familiar. "You're Angus, aren't you? The good junkie, from the Rialto?"

"They're all looking at me," Linda OakSquirrel whispered to Geoff ThistleBoar as they patrolled the park, posting the flyers on a list of points that Steve Green had given them.

"Course they are," Geoff said nonchalantly. "They're blokes."

"You don't suppose it's because I've got fur and a tail?" Linda asked nervously as she held a flyer up to a wooden post that contained a dozen other flyers for concerts, major appliances for sale and missing animals.

"No, it's because you've got a rack that's twice as large as your waist."

"Oh, it is *not*," Linda objected. "It's barely eighty percent larger. But, seriously, you don't think they're looking at me because of my big floofy ears?"

"I've got a rooter and trotters, and no one's giving me a second glance," Geoff pointed out, as he stapled the flyer into place. "Honestly, I don't know why this bothers you. You've flirted with every man in Otterstow at some point. Where's the next flyer go?"

Linda consulted her map. "That way," she pointed. "Yeah, but I *know* all the men in Otterstow. And they know me."

"What about Steve?" Geoff asked as they strolled to their next posting place.

"He's married," Linda answered. "And Sandra's a good sport – she even thinks it's funny when I tease him and he gets all nervous."

"I didn't say *Steven*, as in *HolenWulf*," Geoff clarified. "I said *Steve*, as in Green. And the last time someone referred to Slide as Steve – or Steven – I was in short trousers."

Linda hesitated briefly. "What about him? Steve Green, I mean."

"You *did* cop a feel of his bum whilst we were in the passage, did you not?" Geoff smiled with his accusation.

"Mmmmmmaybe," Linda hedged, going into flirt mode.

"Fancy him?"

"Mmmmmmight do. But he's taken," Linda pouted. "And Desiree's loads bigger than me."

"Wouldn't say that's gonna be an issue for too long," Geoff speculated.

"Oh, why's that? She gonna lose weight?"

"Just couldn't help noticing," Geoff muttered at a barely audible volume. "While Steve was giving you more than the occasional glance, Desiree just couldn't bring herself to tear her eyes away from the Ig-man."

"Oh, Geoff, you scandalous, old Hog," Linda chastised. "Even if she does fancy him, Iggy would never shack up with anyone besides a Vixen."

"Wouldn't he?" asked Geoff.

"He told me just last Thursday, in the Town Hall. More's the pity," Linda groused. "I wouldn't half mind a chap like Ig. Nor would most of the available girls in Otterstow, for that matter."

"I don't suppose any of them would be interested in a rapidly aging Boar," Geoff winked.

"And they call *me* shameless," Linda remarked.

1600 – Newburg Park.

They had regrouped in the park after four hours of searching, none the wiser as to where Grace ParsleyHare or Simon StæppanWulf might be.

Steve Green and Desiree DelHomme were discussing the success of the mission, whilst the others had a seat to sample the bill of fair available at some of the local booths.

"No joy?" asked Desiree of Steve.

"Nothing," Steve answered.

"They must've taken off," Desiree added. "We were looking in dumpsters and in people's yards. It's a wonder we didn't get the cops called on us. And I asked hundreds of people. Half the town probably thinks I'm a lunatic by now."

"I think my reputation for being mad was well-established before this; I merely confirmed it for the remaining population of the town," Steve admitted. "But I think Linda's right. They just don't want to be found."

"No calls from the flyers?" asked Desiree.

"A few crank calls from some yobs, but no, not really," Steve reported.

"Y'know, I see a lot more people in the park than when we first started," Desiree pointed out. "Maybe it would be a good idea to print up some more flyers."

"I don't suppose it would hurt," Steve admitted. "I can have Michael go to the Rialto and make some more copies. We need to have him away for a while, so we can talk to Ignatius about what to do next."

Steve and Desiree returned to the group, who were finishing up various bits of overpriced fried food. Michael Robinson had joined them and was sitting next to Rachael, discussing hypoallergenic studs.

"Hey, Michael, thanks for taking the time to help us in our search," Desiree held her hand out. "For a man with chest jewellery, you're a pretty decent guy."

"Thank you very much indeed," Michael answered, taking her hand and shaking it. "So, tell me about these lovely people."

"They're, um . . . actors," Desiree shrugged. "Like the flyer said, 'The Rialto Furry Troupe Players'."

"As we've just made good progress in our dialogue, I'll forgive the white lie," Michael said. "So, who are they *really*?"

Desiree glanced left and right, more as an indication that they were surrounded by the general public rather than to actually look for something.

"They – are – actors."

"Ah . . . I see," Michael nodded knowingly. "Later, then?"

Desiree nodded. "Later."

"Michael, could you do me a favour?" Steve asked, as he handed the keys to the Rialto to him. "Would you be kind enough to print out some more flyers? The image is on the screen, just have to jog the mouse, there's no password."

"Of course. How many?"

"Should be about a half ream of paper left in the printer," Steve answered.

"That should do."

"Right, then," Michael said, agreeably. "I'm off."

Rachael started to follow Michael, but Steve tapped her and signalled to stay.

"You're not my dad," Rachael complained.

"We need to discuss some things and it's important that he's not here," Steve said. "He's a good mate, but we require his absence for a bit."

"Oh, awrite, then," Rachael moaned as she sat back down.

Steve addressed the group. "We need to move someplace a little more secluded, so we can talk. How about right over there, under that oak?" he pointed.

As one, they rose and began to walk through the crowd.

A few of them were briefly distracted by the sight of a small child having her face painted like a tiger when suddenly there was a loud "Yip!" from the back of the group. It was Ignatius.

As one, they turned around to see a small child, about six years old, grasping Ignatius' brush. "Fox!" he shouted with enthusiasm. He pulled the brush again.

Ignatius yipped again in surprise and no small amount of pain. "Yowp! Excuse me, if I could just have this back . . ."

"Sorry!" A young mother came rushing forward to grab her little urchin. "Let go the nice man's tail, darling."

The mother took her son's hands and began to pry them off Ignatius' brush. Ignatius winced as some of his fur stuck to the solution of sugar and saliva that coated the boy's face and arms. "I'm so sorry, he's usually such an angel, but he just loves foxes."

"At least he has some sense of taste then," replied Ignatius trying to ease the situation as he pulled his brush close to his chest in a protective manner.

"Do you do parties?" the mother asked.

"Pardon?" asked Ignatius.

Steve jumped in. "I'm sorry, but no. This is an experimental costume we're trying out. Just giving a 'wear and tear' test, see how people react to it."

"Oh, well, it's quite . . . erm . . . fox-like," the mother replied, a little disappointed. "Well, sorry," she apologised loudly to be heard over the wailing of her child.

Ignatius smiled graciously, uttered some absolution and the mother departed.

"You okay?" asked Desiree as soon as the mother was out of earshot.

"A little tender. For such a small child, he was a strong little tyke. Nearly pulled my brush off!"

Desiree was suppressing a giggle. "You shoulda heard that yelp that came outta you. It was *too* funny! And the expression on your face. I do have to hand it to you Ig; you are a model of self-control. I probably woulda slapped that little kid silly if he pulled my tail like that."

As they continued to make their way through the park, enjoying the warmth of the late afternoon, they drew no small amount of attention and were asked several times if they performed at private engagements for children and, occasionally, adults. They eventually ambled over to the rendezvous point, where Steve was waiting for them.

"Steve?" Desiree prompted. "Why *doesn't* our group do private parties?"

"No," Steve answered without explanation or apology.

"Y'know, maybe we shouldn't be so quick to dismiss this idea of private performances," suggested Sandra.

"It would give us an opportunity to look for Grace and Simon," Slide pointed out.

"Believe me," Steve said waving his hand, "you don't want to do that. First of all, it's not that much money. Secondly, some of the kids at these affairs are spoilt brats of the absolute first order. Little horrors, the lot of them."

"Oh, come now, Steve," Gina said. "They can't be as bad as all that."

Their discussion was interrupted by a thunderous voice over the crowd.

"Good afternoon . . . Good afternoon. May I have your attention please? I'm afraid I have a little bad news. Due to circumstances beyond our control, the band has been delayed in arriving and they'll be about thirty minutes late. Sorry for the inconvenience and we thank you for your patience."

The crowd groaned. There were a few vulgar shouts.

"I *am* sorry, but it is beyond our control. It's nothing to do with us. Once again, thank you for your patience." The voice was beginning to sound a little nervous.

Desiree rolled her eyes in disgust. "'Nothing to do with us'," she mocked. "Damned national-excuse-of-England. It's almost as irritating as 'Not my job'." "Who was that?" asked Ignatius, ignoring Desiree's little rant.

"That was the mayor of our town," Steve answered. "See that stage over there?"

"Yes," Ignatius confirmed.

"He's the tall, sorta balding man in the blue suit," Steve described.

"Oh, yes, I see him," Ignatius said. "If I might ask, as private parties aren't your cup of tea, what about *public* performances?"

"What about them?" asked Steve.

"Could we make public performances?" suggested Ignatius. "Plays and the like. Charge admission?"

"I suppose so," Steve shrugged. "But, why?"

Ignatius bit his lip as his tail went through a full 360. "What is the status of the Rialto at the moment?"

"In a word, strapped," Steve answered. "There's no money coming in. We've been shut down for some safety violations and we can't re-open until they're fixed. Angus is a kind-hearted sort, but he's still a waster. The moment he gets any cash, he spends it on his jones. I haven't been paid since we closed two months ago. Eventually it'll run out of cash and the utilities won't get paid, so that's the water, gas and electricity cut off; at which point, I'll have to move home with Mum and Dad. As I recall, the council taxes are about a year overdue and we're on our third double-secret probation or something similar."

"And what will be the eventual fate of the Rialto if it continues on this course?" asked Ignatius.

"From what I understand, if we miss one more deadline, it goes into receivership and it'll probably be sold. And if that happens, there's a rumour that it will be demolished and made into, oh, I dunno, a car park."

"What's 'at when it's at home?" asked Pete. "Some sorta railroad station wif trees an' all?"

Steve silently pointed to a large paved lot, with scores of automobiles parked on it, while a dozen others roamed around looking for an empty spot.

"That'd be a shame," Geoff said. "The Rialto's a good, solid building. Just needs a little love. Then it'd be quite nice."

"If I might ask, why the sudden interest?" asked Steve.

"I was just about to get to that," Ignatius said, gathering his thoughts as his tail did a pirouette. "I don't wish to discourage anyone," he said as he looked at the four parents with a pained expression, "but, as much as it behoves us to try our best, I think it unlikely that we will find Grace and Simon by searching for them through alleys and trails.

"However, as Steve has mentioned, they are quite unique in their appearance, so if we were to let the general public know that we're looking for them, eventually they'll be spotted."

"We've put out the flyers," Steve said. "What more can we do?"

"It's not like we can put their face on a milk carton," Desiree added.

"I'm sure there are other methods," Ignatius said. "Although I'm not clear as to what dairy product has to do with missing children, but never mind, we'll work on those details later. Regardless of our method, it is of paramount importance that we have some base of operations here in Reality. There has to be some way for people to contact us should our runaways be seen. I also hold out no small amount of hope that the two of them will return of their own accord and if they do, then we need to be present to receive them.

"Thus, I think it is in our best interest to keep the Rialto open, or at least accessible, to them at all times. To accomplish that, we must have it under our control and make sure it is in no danger of being sold, closed, received, demolished or paved."

"So, are you suggesting we have performances in the Rialto?" asked Gina. "Put on plays and the like?"

"But we ain't performers," Pete stated.

"Well, we wouldn't have to do *every* performance," Ignatius qualified. "In fact, we wouldn't have to do any of them. We just have to keep the Rialto open long enough until Grace and Simon are returned."

"I suppose we could do that," Steve said. "We'd have to speak to Angus and I haven't seen him since he ran out of the Rialto."

"I saw him earlier today," Clare said. "He helped save me from some roughs."

"Yeah, I saw 'im as well," Rachael added. "He's definitely about."

"So, we're all agreed?" Ignatius asked. "We need to maintain control of the Rialto to facilitate Grace and Simon's return?"

They all consented.

"Well, as it seems likely that we're to be involved in the theatre business, in one form or another, we have a golden opportunity to promote ourselves at this very moment," Ignatius pointed out. "We have before us a captive audience and a stage."

"All well an' good," Pete put in, "But, as I've said before, we're no actors. We only do PD in front o' the children an' I'd venture to say, these people are probably a bit more demandin' than a score o' six-year-olds bein' watched by an Alma or two."

"We have to try," Sandra pleaded. "For Simon's sake, and your Grace."

"Are you suggesting doing some sort of performance in front of this crowd?" asked Steve.

"Yes, that's precisely what I'm suggesting," Ignatius said.

"Where?" asked Steve.

"Over there. That *is* a stage, is it not?" Ignatius asked.

"Well, yes," Steve hedged, "but it's for the band that's playing later."

"He just said they're not going to be on for at least thirty minutes. Is there any reason we couldn't use it?" asked Ignatius.

"What, exactly, are you going to do?" asked Steve.

"Present a play. Just five minutes, no more. Surely they wouldn't mind, as it's not being used just now."

"And which Portrayal," began Geoff, "involves three Hares, a Suvan, a Sciuran, a Vulpan, an Ursan and two Lupans?"

"I must say, considering Steve's remarks about children and the behaviour of the rascal that nearly de-tailed me," Ignatius said, "I think The Unrepentant Son would be our best choice."

"We don't have the cast for that," Gina protested. "And we don't have any masks either. The mother and child are humans, and the constable's a Horse as I recall. And there's not a single Hare in the lot."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," Linda dismissed. "No one here has ever seen it. We can make the characters anything we want. Look, Ig can narrate," she began, enumerating on her fingers. "Gina, you can be the mother, Clare's the younger son, Rachael's the older son, Slide's the victim and Geoff's the Old Bill."

"We can't be sons, we're girls," Rachael protested. "An' we're the same size – 'ow can I be older than 'er," she added pointing her thumb to her twin.

"It doesn't matter that you're girls," Sandra said, not wanting minor obstacles to get in the way. "Girls pass as boys all the time in PD. And Clare just has to walk flat on her feet to appear shorter, that's all."

"I saw some props at some o' the booths," Pete mentioned. "They're just what we need. Desi, I'll need some dosh. We'll meet the rest o' ya at the stage."

They all hustled off and managed to get through the crowd to the edge of the stage. Steve seemed very nervous about approaching the mayor. "I have an idea, Ignatius. Why don't *you* ask the mayor?" he suggested.

"Very well, then," Ignatius readily agreed. "The one in the blue coat, right?"

"Yes, that's him," Steve pointed.

"Right, then." Ignatius approached the edge of the stage where the mayor was standing. He cleared his throat and knocked on the stage to catch his attention. "Excuse me. Your Honour? May I have just a moment of your time?"

"Sorry, I've got a bit of a situation at the moment," dismissed the mayor. "I'm trying to find some way to placate this crowd until the band comes."

"Well then," Ignatius smiled, "I'm your man."

1615 – Newburg Park

The impromptu troupe were issued a few clip-on microphones and, after a quick sound check, they were ready to go.

Ignatius and Gina entered the stage first. Gina had appropriated an unused broom from somewhere and began to sweep the floor, giving Ignatius the nod to begin. He cleared his throat and stood before the microphone.

Enter MOTHER, stage right, sweeping or some domestic chore:

Narrator [*May ad lib*]

"Laaaaadies and Gentlemen!
Greetings!
Badgers and Bears,
Hedgehogs and Hares,
Lupan, Suvan,
Vulpan and Equan
And . . . ahem, humans, of course!
To all whom these presents may display!
We do now present to you . . . a play!
To amuse and to edify,
But chiefly, just to gratify,
Behold, a mother and her Unrepentant Son.

Clare, playing the Son, came onto the stage. Normally, she walked on her toes, which would bring her to her full height. As per Sandra's direction, she walked flat-footed, which took a whole foot off her stature, making her just shorter than Gina. Under Steve's advice, she wore a plaid cap that Michael had nicked from one of the ruffians they had met earlier. Clare couldn't quite understand why the audience thought this was so amusing.

SON [*enter stage left, skipping and singing*]

Mother, look, for I have found sixpence and a shilling!

MOTHER

Oh, lucky son! Then we shall have something fine and filling!

[SON exits stage left during narration]

NARRATOR

Mother could not know that day that her son had stole the coins. But next day should show the crime.

SON [*enter stage left, skipping and singing*]

Mother, what fortune, for I have found sixpence and shilling once again!

MOTHER

Oh, fortunate son, we shall have fine meat today.

[SON exits stage left during narration]

NARRATOR

The same sum, two days in a row?
A mother should recount.
But blinded by her love she chooses to discount.
The boy does grow as the years pass long
As does his indifference to right and wrong

SON [*enter stage left*]

Rachael played the part of the older son. Now wearing the plaid cap, she walked as she normally did, at her full height, and being more muscular, was easily understood to be the Son grown older.

Mother, may I have a knife withal? For I've a job to do.

MOTHER [*banding knife to SON*]

My good son. Always working harder.

SON

And I'll be home soon with good fortune to spend on larder.

NARRATOR

So our entrusted son returns that day.

Rachael re-entered the stage, her hand wrapped with a red bandana that Pete had picked up at a one of the stalls.

SON [*enters stage left with red rag tied around his hand*]

Mother, look, I've gained some pounds that we may live in ease.

MOTHER

Aye, but Son, what? Have you been assailed?

How did it happen? Let us go to surgeon and constable!

SON

Nay, Mother, 'tis a trifling mishap. And 'tis no concern. Let us enjoy our living.

MOTHER

Surely not some mischief?

SON

Mother, do you disbelieve?

MOTHER

Aye, I mustn't. Of course, my loving son could not lie to mum.

SON

Then let it be. I have said enough.

NARRATOR [*as SON exits stage left and MOTHER stage right*]

But comes a day when there can be no atone.

The boy and his crimes are now full grown

SON [*to VICTIM*]

Stand and deliver – your money or your life!

Slide HolenWulf, playing the victim, cowered in fear. Some of the audience laughed at the irony of a wolf being the victim of a hare.

VICTIM [*holding hands high*]

Take your bounty. I beg your mercy.

SON

And you will tell no tales!

VICTIM

Aye, I shall say nought to all who ask!

SON

Because you shall say nought to none!

[*Stabs VICTIM, pulls red cloth for effect*]

[*VICTIM falls*]

CONSTABLE [*off stage*]

Stop and cease! [*Entering stage right, running*]

SON

The Old Bill!

[SON exits stage left]

Geoff, wearing a toy constable's helmet suddenly appeared. The crowd roared with laughter at the visual pun.

*[CONSTABLE chases SON to stage right]*NARRATOR *[as MOTHER enters stage left]*

And now returns our son with his gains gotten-ill.

SON *[enters stage right]*

Mother, I have money, now, take and hide it well.

I must go away awhile and bide some time a-spell.

Do not speak my name and you know not where I've gone.

MOTHER

And what work is this? Who would ask these things?

SON

Do not question, do as I say!

For now your trust will bear me to the end.

Keep this quiet and all will make amends.

MOTHER

I will not question, but will trust.

Go and do what you must.

You have always been my good son.

NARRATOR *[as SON exits stage right]*

The law's long arm reaches far and wide.

There are those that run but none can hide.

Our son is captured, seen and fairly tried.

He now must face the noose

And is led to market where everyone

Will witness his demise

And he must face the final truth.

*[CONSTABLE leads SON with hands bound,**MOTHER watching]*

CONSTABLE

Hangin' today! Hangin' today!

Killer and thief! Killer and Thief!

Hangs today in market square!

Hangs today in market square!

NARRATOR

His mother sees him carried by and runs to say farewell.

The time has come to say goodbyes, but this will not go well.

MOTHER *[approaching son with arms open]*

Oh, son! Oh, son! It cannot be true!

*SON bites MOTHER on hand as she approaches*MOTHER *[recoils with red rag for effect]*

What is this? I did trust you and this is your repay?

SON

Foolish mother! Had you questioned me

When I were young I would not be here this day!

But for want of a good thrashing,
I follow straight and narrow!

MOTHER

Ungrateful wretch! Art sharper than a dragon's tooth!
'Twas you that deceived your loving mother.
'Twas not I that robbed and killed! Blame me?

SON

Just so! For I knew not better when I were just a lad!
Let your child rule your life?
Now my life is forfeit for my childish folly!
And you have lost your son!

SON exits stage left, led by constables

MOTHER

Oh, regret! Regret!
Why did I not query! Why did I not cane!
Was a father there to aid in discipline!

NARRATOR

Thus was the peace made with his mother
And her Unrepentant Son
And so concludes our play!
Draw from it what you may.
Until next we meet – good day!

All players come forth and bow

Narrator [*introduces players as they bow*]

"Dear audience, the players in order of appearance. Miss Gina ParsleyHare as the MOTHER," Ignatius offered. Gina stepped forward and took a small bow to a healthy round of applause.

"Master Geoff ThistleBoar as the CONSTABLE." There was more scattered applause and a little laughter as he waved the toy policeman's helmet over his head.

"Mister Slide HolenWulf as the VICTIM." Oddly, the audience started howling in their appreciation.

"Miss Clare and Rachael MarchHare as the SON, young and old." There was a substantially larger roar of applause as well as a few whistles and whoops from the crowd. This did not go unnoticed by the group.

"And, myself, Ignatius HaliFox as your humble narrator." He leant just slightly forward to a smattering of applause.

"I would also like to introduce the other three members of the Rialto Furry Troupe Players. First, our producer, Mister Pete DunBerr." Pete took the stage and waved, also to a smattering of applause and a few gasps at his sheer size.

"Our director, Missus Sandra StæppanWylf." Sandra walked on and bowed. Like her husband, she was greeted with howls from the audience.

"And finally, in charge of casting, Miss Linda OakSquirrel." Linda bounded onto the stage and bowed deeply. If the applause for Rachael and Clare had been substantial, the response for Linda was thunderous. Geoff, who was standing next to her leaned over and had to shout to be heard, even though he was inches from her ear. "Told ya it was the thr'pennies."

They all stepped forward and took their final stage bow to thunderous applause.

When the ovation had subsided, Ignatius spoke again. "Thank you for your attention. If I may make one last statement – If Grace and Simon are within the sound of my voice, would you please make your way home. Your parents miss you terribly and you will receive no punishment."

1620 – Newburg Park

Grace and Simon were, in fact, within hearing distance of Ignatius' voice, but just barely. They were hiding behind a short wall that enclosed the playground of a school for small children.

"Is that Mayor HaliFox?" asked Simon.

"Shh . . . He's saying something," Grace replied, turning her ears to catch the sound over the noise of the crowd.

"What?"

"Shh!"

They both focused their ears on the stage, but it was too late.

"He's stepping down off the stage," Simon said. "He's finished."

"Did you hear anything? I heard our names and that's all."

"I heard the word 'punishment' at the very end," Simon added. "Looks like we're in pretty deep if Mayor HaliFox is deciding our sentence."

Grace sighed. "I'd've thought our parents would be happy just to have us back at this stage."

"As would I," Simon mentioned. "So our choice is pretty simple. We go back and face the music or we stick it out in Reality for a while."

"Weeeeellll . . . Maybe just a few days longer here," Grace said. "After all, if Mayor HaliFox can stand in front of hundreds of people here in Reality and nothing happens to him, it must be safe for Frith to be here."

Simon gave this some thought as he stroked his chin. "Hmm. Hadn't considered that. I suppose you're right."

"I mean, we could probably just walk about like anyone else."

"Could we?"

Grace pointed to the stage. "HaliFox has. He's obviously come to no harm."

Simon looked toward the stage where the mayor had been standing moments before. "Hey, I see some others there as well. There's Mum and Dad."

"Yeah, look, there's my Mum and Dad as well. And that OakSquirrel woman is on the stage . . . And there's Clare and Rache. Look, you can just see their ears sticking above the crowd."

Simon looked at Grace. "How can you tell it's them just by seeing their ears?"

"You can see Rachael's jewellery all the way from here."

They watched their friends and relatives from Otterstow for a few moments before Simon spoke again. "None of them seems too concerned about being in any sort of danger. They're just milling about. So I guess you're right; it can't be all that dangerous for Frith to be here," he conjectured.

"We're probably safe as babies, actually," Grace said. "Pretty funny, honestly. Remember when we first got here? I thought I was gonna be eaten alive. And all along we were never in harm's way."

"Yeah," Simon agreed. "Hmph. Imagine that."

"In fact, instead of going back, we could have an extended stay," Grace suggested. "Why don't we make it a whole month?"

"A month?"

"Sure. Why not? Got a whole new world to explore. Should be lots of fun. They got all kinds of things we don't have in The Kingdom, like those wheelieboxes and so on. Be kinda interesting to take a ride in one of those."

"Don't you think a month's a bit long? Where're we gonna stay? What about food?"

"Simon, will you get your tail out from between your legs?" Grace exhorted. "We'll be fine. It'll be just like last summer. It's lovely this time of year, we can wander round and sleep under the stars. And there's always a little munch about."

"To steal, you mean," Simon grumbled.

"You didn't mind stealing last year," Grace defended.

"It was that or starve."

"So? It's the same here."

"No, Grace, it's different," Simon insisted. "We have the choice of going back to Otterstow, to three solid meals a day and soft, comfortable beds."

"And a backside so raw we'll have to sleep on our stomachs on those soft comfortable beds and stand up to eat our three meals a day."

"Yeah, *my* backside you mean. You'll get away with it as usual." Simon sighed in resignation. "All right, all right, we'll stay. So what do we do now?"

Grace's ears leant forward as she furrowed her brow and pursed her lips, indicating the deepest possible thought. "As soon as hizzoner is out of the crowd, let's see if we can fiddle a little food or cash. We'll split up and meet back here."

1630 – Newburg Park

The Frith of Otterstow were surrounded by dozens of little children. Pete was dangling a few by their ankles and pretending that he would eat them, to their great delight. Geoff was performing a trick with a dinner plate and his nose that was truly and uniquely his own to amuse some of the others. While some were politely requesting to touch the tails or whiskers or ears of the Frith, the vast majority were asking hundreds of questions.

"Where'd you get 'em costumes?"

"Wassat play really s'posta mean?"

"How comes the mummy wanted to cane 'er son?"

"Wha's 'cane' mean?"

"How'd ya make ya ears moof likat?"

The accompanying parents, however, all seemed to be more intrigued with the play, rather than the players, and each seemed to have an opinion, either one way or the other, about its moral.

A young mother approached Ignatius. "So tell me, what, exactly, was the point of this play?"

Ignatius was quite used to this kind of query from many years of experience and he gave the answer he usually gave. "As it says in the epilogue – draw from it what you may."

"I see," she said, coldly.

Ignatius could smell the coming cross-examination as easily as an elephant could see a charging lion. He was also equally prepared to deal with it.

"So am I to 'draw from it' that mothers are responsible for their children after they become adults?"

"One might make that conclusion," Ignatius replied.

He was distracted by a small child tugging on his coattail and holding aloft a small, well-loved, plush-toy fox. "Bis is Bazil!" he said proudly.

Ignatius knelt down and took the toy, making as if to marvel at it. "Oh my, he is a handsome rascal, isn't he? Look, he's dressed just like me . . . except he doesn't seem to have any, erm . . . trousers, to speak of."

The little boy examined the toy as if to notice for the first time that such was the case. He looked slightly embarrassed as he put his hand over his mouth. "Uh-oh."

Ignatius handed the toy back to the tot. "Best go ask mummy if she can find him a pair. Doesn't do for a proper Fox to wander about without trousers, does it?" The little boy took the toy and ran off.

Ignatius stood and returned to the conversation. "Sorry, where were we?"

"You were saying that one might conclude that mothers are responsible for their children after they've grown."

"Ah, so I had. And, yes, one might. But I think that would be a rather cynical interpretation, don't you?"

"Seemed rather straightforward to me," she stated icily.

"I dunno," stated a father who was standing behind the mother. "Seems like part of the play implied that there should be a father in the picture somewhere."

"Fathers are not always available," the mother retorted.

"True," countered the father. "But that's because some mothers go to great pains to make them unavailable," he added as courteously as he dared.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" asked the mother.

"Getting back to the point," Ignatius said, attempting to steer the discussion, if not in the right direction, at least away from a sidetracked argument. "What, kind sir, do you think the point of the Portrayal is, exactly?"

"Well, erm . . ."

Another father nearby interjected, "I think it means we, as parents, should stick our noses in our kids' business – and damn their privacy."

Most of the parents murmured their agreement.

A second mother added her voice. "I also think it means we should discipline our children, when we catch them out."

"What? Canings and the like? I'll not give corporal punishment to my child. That's assault, that is – from an adult to a child," said the first mother.

"Smacking a child's bottom is not assault," countered the first father.

"Oh, yeah, how would you like it if someone ten feet tall bent you over his knee?" asked a third mother.

"I'd damn-well do what they say, that's for certain!" said the first father to the laughter of those around. "And if that ten foot person was my Dad or Mum, I'm sure I'd get over it in short order."

"Can't say I agree with that," countered another father from the back. "Beatings only teach them that violence is an acceptable form of control. Besides, if you can't control your children without beating them, you're not much of a parent."

"You've obviously not met my children," said the first father, laughing.

The second father asked, "So which is it Mr. Fox?"

"HaliFox, actually," Ignatius corrected. "Which is what, sir?"

"The moral of the play?" asked the second father.

"As I stated earlier, draw from it what you may," Ignatius repeated.

"Oh, come on, that's a cop out," said the first father.

"Go on, give us your point of view. We've given you ours," added the second mother.

"Ah, I must admit that I am deeply gratified that you would value an opinion as humble as mine own," Ignatius said. "In response, then, I would say two things."

"Go on then, what's the first?" asked the first mother.

"First, I did not write this Portrayal," Ignatius absolved himself. "It was written long before I was born."

"So? What of it?" asked the second father.

"I lack the clairvoyance to read the minds of dead authors, thus I could only speculate on its true moral. And the second point is, I am wholly unqualified to render an opinion as I have no children," Ignatius finished. "Despite my best efforts," he added with a wink.

Most of the crowd laughed at that and the second father added, "He's certainly got a future in politics!" to which they all laughed loudly.

Ignatius smiled and bowed slightly. "Just so, sir," he said quietly.

Apparently the first mother was still not satisfied. As the other parents continued their discussion while they drifted away, she continued to stare at him with her arms crossed in indignation. Ignatius could sense she was not going to take 'no' for an answer. "Yes, madam?" he queried.

"You still haven't answered my question," the first mother insisted.

"Very well. A straight answer. I promise you that," Ignatius agreed. "But before I do, you must tell me why this answer is so important to you."

"You go first," the first mother replied.

"As you like," Ignatius conceded. "Well, then – and this is strictly my opinion – to answer your question; no, mothers are not legally responsible for the behaviour of their grown children, nor are fathers for that matter. Parents cannot force their children to be a certain way; they can only tilt the playing field in a particular direction. Some children, despite all the guidance, love, care and discipline in the world, are simply born to nurture misery. However, it is incumbent on parents to make their best possible effort in rearing their children and if it is not enough, then it is not enough. That is truly my honest opinion.

"As for beatings, in a perfect world, it would be nice if they were unnecessary, but I think it would be unfair of me to dispense advice to parents on the matter when I have no children of my own. I rather suspect that the lament of the mother in the play was intended to be shown as hindsight, but I cannot say, as it is impossible to ask the author," Ignatius explained. "As I have mentioned already, he is long since dead."

"What if the parents' effort was not their best?" asked the first mother. "Could a grown child claim that he's not responsible for his actions because he wasn't brought up properly?"

"I merely stated that a parent *should* make the best possible effort in rearing their children. I didn't say that a less-than-perfect effort produced any culpability on the part of the parent."

"You didn't say it," observed the first mother, "but do you believe it?"

"No, I do not," Ignatius replied unequivocally. "Otherwise a grown child could charge diminished responsibility for his crimes, using his parents as a 'scape Goat."

"For an actor, you sound just like my solicitor. Fair enough, you did your bit," the first mother admitted. "My turn now. My brother is in prison for a crime which he readily admits he committed and he's bringing suit against our parents for negligence."

"Is he?" Ignatius asked, trying not to sound incredulous. "What for?"

"He claims the only reason he committed the crime, is because our parents didn't discipline him enough when he was a child."

Ignatius was trying to restrain his astonishment. "Surely he doesn't have a hope of winning?"

"Our solicitor says it's a long shot," said the first mother. "But he also says that there's no telling what a judge will decide these days."

"I can see some things never change," Ignatius muttered under his breath. "Well, all I can say is, best of luck. I can certainly see how our Portrayal may have touched a nerve; they have a tendency to do that sometimes. My apologies if I've offended."

"Apology accepted. Just be careful what you *portray* . . . next time," the first mother warned as she left.

"I certainly shall," Ignatius replied. "If there is a next time," he added quietly to himself.

Not very far away, Michael Robinson appeared, dragging Angus MacAleister along.

"Leggo, ye tall, skinny bastart," Angus protested.

"Not until you talk to some people," Michael told him. "Look, we're in dire need of your help. Ah, there's Steve. Hey, Steve – I found him."

"Hello, Angus," Steve greeted politely.

"Oh, hey, wee poof manager Steve. This yer yank slag?" Angus smiled, nodding at Desiree, who was standing next to him.

"I'm not a yank," Desiree stated firmly. It was the one word she understood from Angus' mouth.

"Oh, aye? Ain'tcha nou?" asked Angus.

"No more than you are English," Desiree rebutted.

"Des, we need his help," Steve reminded her. "Let's be polite, shall we?"

"I was being polite," Desiree said.

"I've some people that urgently want to speak with you," Steve told Angus, eager to move things along. He turned around and summoned the parents and Ignatius, leaving Geoff, Linda and the twins to keep their new fan base entertained.

"Oh, aye, an I've a few questions as well," Angus said.

"Angus, this Pete DunBerr, Gina ParsleyHare, Sandra StæppanWylf, Slide HolenWulf and Ignatius HaliFox. Everyone, this is Angus MacAleister, the owner of the Rialto."

"I think we've met," Pete mentioned. "'Ow's your mate?"

"Still has a thumpin sair heid, na doubt," Angus answered. "An he's no ma mate na more." He then gave Pete a wary look. "Ye're no guan ta thump me, are ye?"

"Are ya gonna pull a flick knife?" asked Pete.

"I wadna carry one," Angus answered. "Sa, if ye're no here ta thump ma heid, what're ye efter?"

"What'd he say?" asked Desiree.

"What . . . dis . . . ye . . . want?" Angus enunciated.

"We need your help," Sandra proffered the flyer. "Our children have been missing for several days."

"Oh, aye, I seen this one," Angus said immediately, pointing to Simon's picture.

"Have you? Where?" asked Sandra eager for some good news.

"In the kitchie cupboard, at the Rialto," Angus answered calmly. "But 'twas a few days ago. He's no there the nou, I'd think."

Sandra's face fell as Slide consoled her.

"If is any consolation, they're no hungry," Angus mentioned.

"How d'ya know that?" asked Pete.

"They've nicked half ma farin – an they're welcome ta it, the poor weans. Leuk, I'm terrible sairy ye've lost yer bairns, an I'll help as I can, but what's this ta do wi me?"

"We need the Rialto to help recover Grace and Simon," Ignatius answered.

"I dinna unnerstaund. What way dis the Rialto help find yer bairns?"

"It's a rather long explanation," Steve hedged.

"Then save yer breath," Angus told him. "I wanna help an all but if ye'll be needin the Rialto ta take back yer bairns, I'm, erm . . . feart I've some bad news," he said sadly. "If the taxes on the Rialto arna paid by end o quarter, it'll be put in receivership. Sa, we've a few months, but even if ye could get the plumbin an electrics up ta snuff, there's na point in tryin ta keep it open beyond that."

"Why not?" asked Ignatius.

"It's a might foul, sa there's na business," Angus explained. "An I canna get her tarted up proper-like sa's it'll pull punters – an as there's na punters, it disna make any money."

"Couldn't you borrow money from the bank to make improvements?" asked Steve.

"Na, ma credit ratin's wrecked," Angus complained. "Banks wadna lend me tuppence 'til Tuesday."

"If I might humbly suggest," Desiree said trying to keep her tone civil, "perhaps if you spent your time and money actually working on the Rialto, instead of on *other* things, you might not be in this position."

"That's as maybes," Angus retorted, "but it disna help us the nou, dis it?" He nervously swept his hand over his head. "Leuk . . . I've one last card I can play. I canna warrand it'll work, an I dinna wanna, but for the weans, I'll give it a bash – I'll ask ma auld man for a bit o clink. But he's a tight bastart, sa's I wadna hold oot much hope."

"Interpretation, please?" Desiree asked the world at large.

"He doesn't want to," Steve began, "but he'll ask his father for a loan, although he probably won't get it."

"But if you *do* get the money, you'll actually spend it on the Rialto?" asked Desiree.

"Aye!" Angus snapped. "I'll admeet I've ma oon demons, but I wadna shoot up if it keeps a wean from thair mam an paw! An mark ma wirds, I'm on the straucht an nairae 'til the baith o 'em are in the airms o their kin. Na smack, na charlie, na weed, na sa much as a drap o lager. Are we clear?"

"F'sure," Desiree acceded, with a smile. "I didn't understand a single word, but I'll take that as a 'yes'."

"Nou, if ye'll excuse me," Angus said, his voice suddenly calm, "Ma pusher's got a drap for me." With that, he stalked off.

"I understood *that* part," Desiree said. "Say, is anyone else hungry? I'm fixing to go make groceries and whip up some po-boys, dressed with mynez and Zatarains."

"Sorry, Desi," Sandra said. "Didn't quite catch that."

1700 – Newburg Park

In a more secluded area of the park, Angus was leaning against a short, white fence. He had scheduled two meetings, both of which he wanted to hold away from prying eyes. His first visitor was just arriving.

"A gat yer gear, Angus," Kenny said as he arrived with a rucksack on his back.

"Aye. Ta. Hou's yer gulliver?" Angus enquired.

"Is richt sair, an aw," Kenny complained, rubbing his head. "Still dinna mynd whit happent."

"A telt ye," Angus said plainly. "Ye was thumped on the heid by a beir."

"Ah, thump yer awn heid."

"Weel . . . leuked like a beir. Ye mynd hou we wis seein things." Angus leaned a little to the side. "In fact . . ."

"Aye?"

"He's juist there. Gang ask him."

"Ta, nae," Kenny declined. "He nicht thump ma heid again."

"Oh, aye."

"Leuk, tak this, will ye?" Kenny said, holding the rucksack out for Angus. "A dinna wanna be fand hauldin. A'll git ten years in nick gin the filth find this poke in ma haunds."

Angus took the rucksack and slung it over his shoulder.

"Okay, is aw payed. Enjoy it," Kenny said.

"Aye," Angus replied with a faraway expression.

"The weed's naur a hunder quid a go, Angus. Put it tae guid use."

"Aye, will dae."

Kenny studied Angus' face for a moment. "Something on yer mind, fere?"

"Ma paw's comin tae meet me. A'm awa for a fortnicht."

"Awa? Whaur tae?"

"Detox."

"Detox? Angus, whit for'd ye buy a thoesand quid wirth o junk gin ye're gaun inta detox? Are ye daft, man?"

"Nae. Made the deceesion juist the day. Forgat about the order, er A woulda gien a bell an cancelt. Sairy for the aggro."

"A dinna dae refunds, mynd," Kenny warned him.

"A mynd, A mynd. Ye gat yer catter, A gat ma gear. Duin deal."

"Richt, A'm off. Na offence, Angus, but yer auld man'll clype on me gin he sees me. See ye efter." Kenny slapped Angus on the shoulder and ran off.

"No gin A sees ye first," Angus muttered to himself.

1700 – Newburg Park

Desiree had made everyone in the group simple sandwiches on baguettes. Although fairly straightforward, they were filling and a welcome alternative to the fare available from the burger vans.

They had just finished eating when the mayor of Newburg approached Ignatius.

"Ah, excellent, you're still here!" panted the mayor to Ignatius. "I wonder if I could convince you to do an encore performance. You see the second band is late as well – that's musicians for you. Not the most responsible people in the world, but there you are."

"I don't suppose I could convince *you* to give the Rialto a reprieve on their taxes in return for our performance," Ignatius countered.

"I do miracles by appointment only," the mayor replied. "However, I do promise to bring it up with the council at the next meeting, but I wouldn't hold my breath."

"Then we're agreed? We shall perform an encore, if you bring the matter before the council?"

"Agreed," the mayor smiled. "You have my word. Is fifteen minutes enough time for you to prepare?"

1710 – Newburg Park

George MacAleister was sixty and, apart from being almost completely bald, his physical appearance was completely lacking in any special features. He had

an average height, an average build and a rather ordinary face. Despite all of these non-descript features, Angus recognised him the moment he stepped from the limousine, even though it was over a hundred yards away.

Within a minute, George was standing next to his son, a look of annoyance on his face. "You wanted to see me? I've wasted enough time on you and . . ."

"I'm away ta detox," Angus interrupted. He turned to look at his father.

George seemed sceptical. "Are you?"

"Aye. Can ye spring for it?"

George stroked his chin in thought. Angus had gone through detoxification several times in the past, at his father's expense, only to return to his old habits within a month or two. The cash involved was insignificant compared to George's resources, but he was growing weary of throwing good money after bad on half-measures. "Are we talking about a fortnight of drying out, or are we going to do things properly this time?"

"Juist need detox," Angus protested, "I dinna need a buncha do-guiders havin me tell 'em I'm a user."

"Then the answer is 'no'," George said plainly. "I'll only pay if you go through the full rehabilitation program."

"Yeah, well thanks for naething," Angus muttered, returning his attention to the stage. "Tight bastart."

"So, did you run out of money for drugs?" George asked. "Is that why you want to dry out? To save up enough for your next binge?"

"Naw, naught like 'at," Angus said. "Still got a fair bit o dosh. Juist no enough for detox."

"Okay, what then?"

"See 'em actors?" Angus asked, indicating the Rialto Furry Troupe Partnership. "Up the stage, there?"

George looked at the stage and saw Ignatius and the others milling around as they prepared for their second performance. "The ones in fancy dress? Yes, I see them."

"I seen 'em the last day, up close," Angus began. "They leuked sa . . . real."

"Real?" asked George. "How do you mean?"

"Aye, real," Angus said, eager for a little validation. "I dunno, I thought I was seein things at first, but . . . Nou I leuk at 'em in the cauld light o day, they still leuk . . . real. Rabbits an bears an the like. Dontcha think?"

George adjusted his glasses so that he might focus better. The stage was distant, but it was still close enough for him to see some details. He had a germ of an idea and decided to test the waters. "So, when you say 'real', you mean . . ." He broke off his sentence so that Angus might fill in some blanks.

"Yeah, erm . . . Like they have, erm . . . fur."

"Fur?" George asked, expressing incredulity.

"Aye, fur. Like all over their faces an haunds, like," Angus described. "D'ye see it?"

"No, there's no fur on them," George stated. "Even from this distance, it's quite plain that they just have a little face paint."

"Na, is fur!" Angus protested. "Leukit, let's get a little nearby." He grabbed his father by the arm and urgently dragged him to a clear area that was perhaps twenty yards from the side of the stage. "There! See! Is fur!"

"No," George shook his head. "It's not fur. In fact, now that I can see them more clearly, it's quite obviously just paint. And rather sloppily done, I should add. Have you had your vision checked lately?"

"Ma eyes are fine!" Angus countered. "Leuk, I can read that bill juist there, it says 'Reward, £100'. See it?"

George noticed the bill on the post. "Yes, that's correct, so nothing wrong with your eyesight. But there's still no fur. Just some face paint and a little fancy dress."

"What about their lugs," Angus asked, becoming more anxious. "See 'em?"

"Their ears? Obviously just coat hanger wire and some sticky-backed plastic," George dismissed.

"But they're movin an all!" Angus pointed out earnestly.

"A bit of sway in the breeze, but no, they're not moving. Quite frankly they look like something done by a bunch of first-years in art class."

"Ah, juist a tick – leukit their tails," Angus said, desperate for some sort of corroboration. "See, leuka the Wolves – their tails are waggin juist like a dug."

"Well, I admit they are moving," George conceded, "but they're just swinging back and forth. It's quite plain that it's just a bit of cloth stitched over some plastic and clipped to their belts. I assure you, Angus, these are just normal, everyday people – humans – in fancy dress. And I wouldn't even go so far as to call it that."

"But, the . . ." Angus was so confused, he found himself at a complete loss for words. "Fur . . . an the . . . leukit the . . . tails." He gave one last look at the Troupe on the stage and finally sighed in resignation. "Fine, rehab," he finally muttered.

"And you'll take a serious effort to stay clean this time?" asked George. "You're not going to start shooting up again a month after you get out?"

"You've ma word," Angus said humbly.

"I'll need a little more reassurance than *that*."

In one quick swipe, Angus pulled a locket on a chain from his neck and gave it to his father. "Keep her 'til I'm clean for the year."

George looked at the locket and then at Angus. Without thinking, he opened it to see the tiny picture of Angus' deceased mother. "You *are* serious this time, aren't you?"

"Aye. Is it no enough proof for ye?"

"No. More than enough. I believe you. Completely. Could I ask what brought this about?"

Angus stared at the actors on the stage, disappointment spreading on his face. "Bein high's one thing. If I canna ken what's real an what's fantasy – I canna deal with. I gotta ken that what I'm seein is true or no."

"It's quite useful, I'm led to believe," George said.

Angus turned to his father. "I'm ready. A month in rehab should do me right. An ye'll pay for it?"

George nodded. "Gladly."

"An there's one ither thing," Angus said.

"Ah, yes," George said, "I was wondering when you'd get around to this bit."

"I wanna make a proper go o it on the Rialto. Yer banks winna lend me nought an I'll need a stake."

"No," George immediately responded.

"But . . ."

"Forget it. Clean or not, I told you I'm not giving you another penny. You can make your own way in the world."

"What about Steve, then?"

"Steve?"

"Steve Green – y'know, the wee poof manager."

"Oh, *that* Steve Green. Very sensible young man. What of him?"

"Wad ye loan him the dosh?" asked Angus.

George gave this some thought. "I don't understand – how do either of us benefit from me loaning Steve Green money?"

"He's all responsible an guid-like. He'll make the Rialto work an I'll have a nice earner. Niver ask for dosh again."

George gave this some serious consideration. "Why the sudden interest?"

"The actin troupe – on the stage. They've a great gimmick – an they've a guid cause." Angus could see it had been pointless to appeal to his father's good will. He quickly changed tack. "Could earn a wee sum."

"So, they're performers in search of an audience?" asked George, pondering for a moment. "All right," he suddenly said without waiting for an answer from Angus. "I'll have to have a talk with Steve . . ."

"He's juist over there," Angus pointed, eager to get things moving. "Right front the stage."

"Fine. You wait for me in the limousine while I have a quick chat with him."

"Ta, Pa," Angus said making his way to the car. On his way, he walked past a rubbish bin and dumped the rucksack into it without breaking stride.

As Angus and George separated, their backs to each other, a white, furry hand reached into the rubbish bin and pulled out the rucksack.

1715 – Newburg Park

George MacAleister had approached Steve Green from behind, where he stood unnoticed. Both were engrossed in the performance and George waited until it was over before he caught Steve's attention by tapping him on the shoulder.

"Hello, Mister Green," George said. "Remember me? I'm George MacAleister, Angus' father."

"Oh, yes, of course," Steve said politely. "I saw Angus just a moment ago . . ."

"I've already spoken with him," George informed him. "I'd like to speak to you now."

"Me?" Steve seemed surprised. "Certainly. What about?"

"About your role in the future of the Rialto. But I'd like to do it in a more private place. And those actors on the stage – do you know them?"

"Yes," Steve admitted.

"They have very convincing costumes," George remarked.

"Erm . . . yes, they do."

"Is that real fur?"

Steve weighed his words. "It's not fake," he finally stated.

"Must've cost a fortune to make those costumes," George marvelled. "Angus tells me they have a cause."

"Missing children," Steve replied without thinking. Mentally cringing for his indiscretion, he quickly added, "Although I think it might be better if they explained the details."

"Can they all be at the Rialto at ten, tomorrow morning?"

"Of course," Steve answered immediately.

"Excellent. I'll send a car. My driver will deliver you to my estate, where we'll discuss the details. Shouldn't take but an hour or two."

1830 – Newbury Park

The band had finally arrived, tuning their instruments and arranging the microphones on the soundstage, hinting at an imminent performance. Steve, after informing the others of their appointment, suggested that it might be a good time to start another round of searches about the town. He reasoned that if Grace and Simon were in the park area, they would have heard Ignatius' second plea to return, and as the two had not appeared, he concluded that it would be for the best to search away from the area. The fact that he didn't care much for the music was also an unspoken motivation in his decision as well.

This time they broke into three groups, with Michael Robinson heading the third faction.

2122 – Newburg Park

Simon, who had kept himself well-hidden until now, had seen no trace of Ignatius and the others since they left the park several hours ago. Deciding it would be safe to move around a little more freely, he came out of hiding. Still, he felt distinctly ill at ease in this environment, especially without Grace around. The sun had just set and, even though it was far from dark with the glow of twilight and the intense electrical lighting, he had an eerie feeling. He knew that he'd never get away with stealing anything and reasoned that they could get some provisions when there weren't so many people about. He was beginning to wonder what would happen if Grace were to get caught and suddenly he felt very uncomfortable with the image of her in a gaol in Reality. All of the humans around him seemed decent enough, but they were presumably the law-abiding citizens and even a few of these looked rather dubious. He wondered what prison life could possibly be like in Reality and suddenly became concerned that, were Grace caught, she might be tortured or raped while in custody. He didn't care much for crowds to begin with and the thoughts he was having were doing nothing to ease his state of mind.

He ambled idly through the crowd, in plain sight of everyone and seemed to draw little attention, except for the occasional waving or pointing. He hadn't noticed that he had wandered quite close to the stage and, due to his close proximity to the speakers, he was nearly deafened by an announcement that the band would start immediately. He was then nearly trampled by the surge of people rushing to the stage. Suddenly finding himself packed in and nearly immobile, he began to get a feeling of dread that one might experience when one is sinking in deep water whilst tied to a heavy weight.

As promised, the band started soon thereafter. Simon found the music to be uncomfortably loud and not particularly musical. He was completely enclosed by a mob of people pushing and shoving and was certain that someone was pulling on his tail but he couldn't move enough to find out who it was. He desperately looked about, hoping to see Grace's ear pricking above the heads of the crowd and was beginning to feel a little panicky when he didn't see them. He pushed away from the stage as hard as he could, with the very distinct goal of getting out of the crush. The pressure of the audience was beginning to wane substantially when someone yanked his tail particularly hard. His limit had been reached. Rapidly whipping his head around, he snarled loudly. It was still well below the level of the band, but the clearly recognizable noise along with the very large, bared teeth, suddenly gave Simon about three feet of vacant space in every direction.

He found himself staring eye to eye with a girl of about eight, adorned with waist-length hair of extraordinary redness. Her expression had changed from one of glee to one of great apprehension in a very short span of time, as evidenced by a lower lip that was beginning to tremble slightly.

Simon began to apologize instantly, trying to mollify the young girl, who still seemed somewhat uncertain of his intentions. Suddenly he remembered a trick his mother used to play on him that always made him laugh. He grabbed his tail and gently tickled her nose with the tip.

The look of apprehension changed to guarded amusement and with a second attempt with his tail, returned to glee. Simon rubbed her head and offered his hand.

"Friends?" he shouted over the band.

She shook his hand and nodded. Suddenly she jumped into his arms and held him tight. Simon had little choice but to pick her up and carry her.

"Nice doggie. Can I take you home?" Simon heard her ask.

"I'm not a stray. I already have a home, I'm afraid," Simon answered. The crowd was beginning to press in again. "Where's your mummy and daddy?" Simon said as he worked away from the stage.

"I don't know," answered the child.

"Let me help you find them," Simon suggested as he moved through the crowd with the little girl clinging to his neck.

"I think they're that way," the girl said, pointing. Simon went that way. They had managed to move out of the thickest part of the crowd and Simon felt a rush of relief as the number of people within arms reach dropped to just a few.

"My name is Simon StæppanWulf. What's yours?"

"Evangeline Proudfoot."

"That's a lovely name," Simon said. He pointed to a couple in blue uniforms. "Tell me, who is that man in the dark blue uniform with the funny pointed hat?" asked Simon. "Is that the police?"

"Course it is. And the woman next to him in the funnier hat is a policewoman."

"Are policemen and policewomen good here?"

"Course they are. At school they taught us that you can always trust a policeman. Mummy also says you can always trust the police, too, although she says that you can trust them to never be around when you need them and to be around when you don't."

"Well, they're here now and we do need them, don't we?" asked Simon.

"Yes. Does that mean that Mummy's wrong?"

"Erm . . . Just the once. But I don't think she'll mind this time."

Evangeline nodded.

Simon hiked towards the constables and politely gained their notice. "Erm, pardon me, but I seem to have attracted the attention of a little girl whose parents have lost her."

"Ah, there's a pretty little girl, then," the policewoman said comfortingly as he took Evangeline from Simon. "What's your name then?"

"Simon StæppanWulf," answered Simon.

"We were asking the girl, actually," said the policeman perfunctorily. "Thank you for your help, sir. We'll take it from here. And, in future, if the police should ask, please use your legal name and not your stage name."

"Of course," he said. Simon very much wanted to make sure that the girl reached her parents, but he knew that it was probably wise to move on.

The policewoman, still holding the girl, turned to go but the child turned in his arms to face Simon.

He waved to her. "Bye," he said quietly.

The girl waved goodbye with a sad expression on her face. "Bye, doggie Simon," she said as the policeman carried her away.

Simon sighed and, in his moment of sadness, looked down. On the ground was a flyer with his picture on it and, he noticed, Grace's as well. Immediately interested, he picked it up.

"Great Jack's ghost! A hundred quid? For us? We must be in some deep sheep doo!"

Folding the flyer quickly, he stuffed it in his back pocket. He wondered if he should take the time to see if there were other flyers about, but for the moment, he felt he had more urgent matters to take care of.

First, he had to find Grace. He thought that somehow, a completely white Hare of nearly six feet (including the ears) should be easy enough to find in a crowd of what were exclusively humans. But even more urgent than that, he had to go to the loo in the absolute worst way. He cast about for either and his eyes landed on a modest brick building with the word 'Toilets' clearly labelled on the side. He sighed with relief as he trotted to the door.

A few minutes later he emerged, wiping his hands with an indignant look on his face.

"Just don't understand the thinking behind all that. Have to be a bloody acrobat just to lift one's tail. What is so difficult about a tiled wall with a drain at the floor?" he muttered to himself. He continued to ruminate on the unusual and useless collection of vitreous china he had just witnessed, when he was grabbed by a white, furry hand and dragged into a hedgerow.

"Shh!" said Grace.

"Grace? Where in Jack's name have you been?"

"Shh!" she said again.

Simon kept quiet and waited patiently as Grace cast about.

"Look what I got," she whispered.

She opened a plastic bag filled with nearly five pounds of a greenish-brown collage of leaves, buds and resin. Simon didn't have to inhale very deeply to determine that it contained more marijuana than most of Otterstow would smoke in a whole year.

"Grace, did you steal that?"

"It doesn't matter," she replied.

"Course it does," Simon countered. "Stealing to eat is one thing, but stealing to get stoned is entirely different."

"No, it doesn't matter," she whispered conspiratorially. "And keep your voice down."

"Why?" Simon asked in a lowered voice. "Why doesn't it matter?"

"Firstly, because I didn't actually nick it. It was thrown in the rubbish. Secondly, I overheard a conversation between the two blokes that threw it away. It's illegal here."

"Illegal? Marijuana? I don't believe it," Simon said.

"It's true. They said they'd get ten years in the nick. Course they had a bunch of other stuff as well."

"Like what?"

"Dunno. A big white rock, some nasty smelling stuff and some syringes."

"What'd you do with it?"

"I dumped the rest of it in that rubbish bin over there," she said, pointing to a postbox. She lowered her voice even more. "And I heard that this sells for nearly . . ." she looked about to see if someone was listening and lowered her voice even more. "For nearly a hundred quid!"

"What, for that little bit? Couldn't be but a few pounds of grass. And it's filled with stems and seeds and all."

"It's what he said," Grace said. "I heard him quite clearly."

"Maybe he meant for the whole batch, including the stuff you ditched."

"So what's this worth, then?"

"Dunno, few quid at most."

"That could buy us a lot of nosh," Grace mentioned.

"But we can't sell it. That'd be breaking the law," Simon said.

"It's not against the law in Otterstow."

"But we're not in Otterstow," Simon countered. "Grace, you know what the Portrayal says. You have to obey the laws of the place you're at, not the place you're from. Don't pretend you don't know that."

"You are such . . . you're so . . ." Grace's face was about to explode trying to think of a truly mean-sounding antonym for 'criminal' to call Simon, but couldn't manage anything beyond 'goody-goat,' which wasn't nearly cool enough for someone of her age to use.

"That's as maybe," Simon retorted at her unfinished epithet, "but even you have to admit that you get away with everything whilst I'm always the one to cop it – and get punished I hasten to add. Why I love you is completely beyond me, with all the trouble you get me into."

Grace's expression softened. "Do you honestly love me?"

"No, Grace, I hate your guts," Simon said sarcastically. "That's why I constantly protect you from getting caught all the time. That's why I take the fall when we both do get caught out. That's why I'm here, holding something illegal in my lap and actually entertaining the idea that we should risk being arrested and imprisoned in Reality by selling it so we'll have something to eat for a month, just so we can get even with our parents, which has to be the stupidest possible idea that even *you* have uttered."

Grace let this soak in. "A simple 'yes' would have sufficed, you know," she said quietly.

Simon hung his head and sighed. "Yes, I know. Sorry."

"And the only reason I'm not going to beat you up about this is because everything you said is true. Except the bit about your hating my guts, which I appreciate is just our little habit of being sarky and that you do actually love me. Because I love you too, Simon." There was a brief silence and then Grace leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

Simon remained silent but smiled just a little.

"C'mon, babes, let's go," Grace said.

"What about the bag?" asked Simon.

"Waste not, want not," Grace said, grabbing the rucksack and slinging it over her back.

"Where're we going?" asked Simon.

"Dunno. How about a walk down that towpath?"

"Why don't we go back to the Rialdo?"

"Rialdo?"

"The theatre we were in – Remember?"

"Oh . . . Well, they'll find us there. Besides, let's see a bit of Reality while we're here."

"All right, then."

And off they went.

2130 – Snooty Fox Pub

After yet another fruitless three-hour search for Grace and Simon, the sun had finally set. Meeting at their rendezvous, the Troupe had decided to call it a day.

"Don't know about the rest o' ya, but I could murder a pint about now," mentioned Pete. "Steve, dontcha have any pubs 'ere in Newburg?"

"Yes, over a dozen," Steve answered. "There's the Snooty Fox just over the bridge there. A bit grotty, but a decent place. Shall we go?"

"You did say the 'Snooty Fox' did you not?" asked Geoff.

"Yes, that's right . . . Oh, sorry, Ignatius," Steve apologised. "Never even occurred to me."

"Why should you apologise?" Ignatius replied. "I certainly don't consider myself as snooty."

"This should be good. Go on, then, Ig," prompted Gina. "Let's hear it."

"Quite simple," Ignatius answered. "I may be a foppish, perfectionist, academic know-all, windbag goody-goat, but I am *not* snooty. I view everyone as my peer; and I dare anyone present to suggest otherwise."

"I said nuffin'," Pete replied innocently.

"Shall we have our pint before the pub closes, then?" suggested Ignatius. "Or do you consider me too elevated in my self-esteem to associate with me?"

"Let's have a drink before I throw up," Desiree said, starting for the pub. The others quickly followed her lead.

On the way, Pete leaned over to Steve, "So what's the name o' this geezer what runs the Fox?"

"His name's Pete Dunne. Almost like your name."

"Dunne? How does one dunne?" asked Pete.

"Beg pardon?" asked Steve.

"Skins always gotta name o' work. Scrub, Sweep, sorta thing," Pete pointed out. "Whatcha doin' when you're dunnin'?"

"I think it has something to do with debts, but I'm sure it's nothing to do with him. It might mean the same thing as the 'Dun' in 'DunBerr', mightn't it?"

"Nah, couldn't be, could it," Pete dismissed. "'Dun' is from the old times – means 'Mountain'. 'At's nuffin' to do wif work."

Steve stopped and turned to face the Ursan. "Pete, not every human is named for some menial task. My name, for example, is Green, which is merely a colour. And the only way I could green as a verb is to sprout leaves."

"Awrite, awrite. Don't get your ickle tail in a twist," Pete said. "So why'd they name this chap 'Dunne', then?"

"It was his father's name, I presume," Steve answered as he started forward again. "Look, there's the door. That's him keeping watch outside."

"Cor, 'e is a solid lookin' bloke, an' all, ain't 'e?" Pete observed. "Nearly big as me. Maybe 'e is named for a mountain."

They made their way to the entrance and Steve introduced the Troupe. "Pete, you know Desiree and Michael. The Bear is also Pete. The Pig . . ."

"Boar," Geoff corrected.

"Sorry, the *Boar* is Geoff, the three Rabbits, erm, Hares are Gina, Rachael and Clare, Linda's the Squirrel, the Fox is Ignatius, and the Wolves are Slide and Sandra."

Pete Dunne shook their hands as they were introduced. "Absolutely corkin' outfits ya got on there!" he stated. "You should hear all the rabbit about that play you put on down the park." He looked closely at Pete DunBerr. "'Ave I seen any of you before?" he asked as an afterthought.

"No, I think ya woulda noticed," Pete DunBerr replied.

"Oh, right. Well, go on inside, party's just gettin' started," Pete Dunne said. "Britney or incey, two quid each."

Once inside, Geoff pulled Pete aside. "I remember an incey is a cider, as in 'eensy-weensy spider'. What's a Brit knee?"

"Shave me if I know," Pete admitted. "Steve?"

"It's a beer," Steve answered. "Named for some yank tart. Lives close to Desiree, as I recall."

"Yeah, well, you can't always pick your neighbors," Desiree grumbled.

"Phwoar!" Linda bellowed. "Let's sit next to the window! I'm about to choke on this pong!"

"Pong? What pong?" asked Steve.

"I think she's complaining about the cigarette smoke," Desiree politely pointed out. "It's not quite thick enough to cut with a knife, but I bet you could paint a wall with it."

"Oh, it's not as bad as all that," Steve dismissed.

Desiree took a paper serviette from the bar, licked it, and ran it down the wall for just a few inches. The dark brown colour on the wall faded slightly and she held the napkin up for Steve's inspection. "I think this could easily be mistaken for what you would call a 'skiddy'," she said.

"Oh, right," Steve said. "I'll get Pete to open a few windows."

2320 – Rialto Kitchen

After the Snooty Fox closed at eleven, Steve, Desiree and Michael led their new friends back to the Rialto, after making a stop at a burger van to pick up some food.

"Bloody waste, this day was," Rachael MarchHare grumbled as she sat down at the kitchen table, ready to tear into her kebab. "Spent all day lookin' for those two wif no result."

"And we all have that horrible pong from the smoke in the pub," Gina ParsleyHare complained.

"I honestly don't smell anything," Steve Green said.

"I suspect their sense of smell is substantially better than ours," Desiree DelHomme conjectured.

"Consider your suspicions confirmed," Slide HolenWulf told her, tucking into a bean burger. "Humans have several features we do not, but a sense of smell is not among them."

"I think you've inured your sense of smell by living here," Michael hypothesised. "You've been living with tar on your walls for so long you can't even smell it any more."

"I wish we could use that hot bath you have here," Gina said with some desperation. "Steaming, soapy water is about the only way to get rid of that stench. And if we used the one at home, we wouldn't be through until morning!"

"You're more than welcome to use it," Steve quickly volunteered. "It's quite large and the water heater supplies heat to the entire building, so it'll never run out."

"That's very generous of you, Steve," Gina replied, "but that's not the issue. After a bath, we have to dry."

"He has towels," Michael offered. "They're even clean."

"That's one of the advantages of being human," Slide said. "Drying skin takes less than a minute; just a rub with a towel and you're done. But when one has fur that's saturated with water . . . well, it just takes a little longer."

"What sort of procedure do you use to dry your fur?" asked Desiree, more out of curiosity than anything else.

"After a good shake, and towelling off, we just find a private, dry place," Sandra answered.

"Private? Why does it have to be private?" asked Steve.

"We won't dry off in a robe," Sandra pointed out. "If it's at night, we don't want to go to bed wet, so we sleep in special hammocks until we're dry."

"Summa the rich types'll have a dryin' room," Pete mentioned. "Bit o' breeze, bit o' warm. Dry in no time."

"For those of us with more modest means, lying outside is even better," Linda added, "and having someone brush us out is a nice luxury."

"I have an idea - they could lie out on the rooftop," Michael suggested. "It's nice and dry up there and it's probably the cleanest part of the Rialto. It's quite private."

"And it's a clear night," Steve continued his sell.

"Right then," Gina smiled. "Girls, right after we eat, you dash off to the house and fetch some fresh kit. We'll have a scrub and a layout."

"Oo! M'shef ash well'!" Linda said with a mouthful of kebab.

Slide gave Sandra a sly smile. "How big did you say this tub was, Steve?"

"I think not," Sandra said, countermanding Slide's unspoken suggestion.

"Why not?" Slide countered. "We're married."

"And where would you dry out?" asked Sandra.

"Up on the rooftop, with you, of course," Slide said innocently.

"With four other women lying out?" Sandra pointed out.

"Oh," Slide said, suddenly catching on. "Right, I guess that's not on, then. Oh, well . . . bugger."

"Nice try, lover-boy," Sandra teased him.

"What about us blokes, then?" Pete demanded. "We don't want this pong in our fur any more'n you girls do! What're we supposed to do about it?"

"Take a bath at Ig's," Gina suggested. "He won't mind, will you, Ig."

"Quite the contrary," Ignatius offered. "And I'm sure Desiree would be more than happy to comb you out," he added mischievously, "in return for a few anatomical observations on a purely clinical – and hopefully painless – level."

"Ah-heh," Desiree smiled uncomfortably. She wasn't about to deny that she had some professional interest in the anatomy of the Frith. However, apart from being reminded of her *faux pas* upon first meeting Ignatius, she was unsure about what sort of taboos they might have about being nude in front of people they barely knew.

"Suits me," Geoff said.

"F'true?" asked Desiree, amazed. "You'd let me do that?"

Geoff shrugged. "Why not? Get my coat brushed by a young lass? What's the down side?"

"No problem here, either," Pete said.

"No surprise here, either," Gina muttered.

"Contrary to popular opinion, we ain't married," Pete complained to Gina.

"Please yourself," Gina absolved.

"But as I *am* married," Slide said, putting his arm around Sandra's shoulder, "Sandra and I will have a bath at our home."

Smiling, Sandra patted his hand in affectionate approval.

"Even I would not object," Ignatius added, "especially knowing that it contributes to an educational cause."

"Wow . . . Thanks," Desiree said. "I don't know what to say."

"I suggest packing light," Ignatius advised.

"Pack light?" Desiree said. "Why would I want to pack at all?"

"You won't finish grooming us until the wee hours of the morning and I assure you, you will be quite exhausted," Ignatius pointed out. "I have several guest rooms with all the amenities, should you desire to stay for the night. The choice, of course, is yours."

"Oh, um, gee," Desiree waffled. "I just unpacked for my stay with Steve . . ."

"No, quite all right," Steve said, to Desiree's relief. "After all, you're not going to get an opportunity like this every day."

"Y'sure, Steve?" Desiree asked. "I mean, after all you did for me . . ."

"Oh, behave, Desi," Steve dismissed. "Besides, you travelled all the way to Blighty – all I did was dust off the duvet."

"Does this mean we get to comb out the girls?" asked Michael, eagerly looking at Rachael.

"You wish, ya great furvert," Rachael scolded, yet still smiling. "Speakin' o' furverts – I musta had twenty blokes yankin' my tail innat pub tonight. It's so sore it's about to fall off."

"I don't think I quite got to twenty," Clare said. "But it was more than I've ever gotten before."

"Slide was next to me all night, so I guess no one dared to touch mine," Sandra said. "Not that I'm complaining."

"I had to sit on my tail," Linda said. "They just couldn't keep their hands off of it!"

"No one could reach my scut," Gina laughed. "At least without bending over."

"Still, that'd be an excellent night for either of us back 'ome," Rachael said with a smile, "even in a big city like Writing."

"Ritting?" asked Michael.

"Yeah, big place about twenty miles from 'ome," Rachael replied. "Shame they was all hairless apes," she added sort of sadly.

Michael's expression became one of guarded confusion as he and Steve looked at each other and mouthed the words 'hairless apes'.

"They'll certainly be less *this* Hare, I can guarantee that!" Clare added, stabbing her chest with her thumb.

"Don't do oorang-ootangs, meself," Rachael concurred.

"Rachael, honestly!" Gina protested.

"What, Mum?" Rachael protested in exasperation.

"As if 'skins' isn't bad enough," Gina reprimanded. "I hardly think our present hosts are 'oorang-ootangs' or 'hairless apes!'"

"Yes, Mum," Rachael said contritely.

"Now apologise," Gina insisted.

"Yes, Mum," Rachael said obediently. "Sorry fellas. Din't mean to insinuate you was monkeys."

"Orangutans are apes, not monkeys," Desiree pointed out.

"But apology accepted, regardless," Michael quickly added.

"So, is there intermixing of the Genra in relationships?" asked Desiree.

"We call 'em mixies," Pete put in. "Weren't always the way, but ya find quite a few mixie relationships these days. Years ago, ya din't dare, but today, it's all over the place. Even then, those what do, don't exactly put a flag on their tail sayin', 'hooray for me, I'm in a mixie.' Don't care for the lifestyle myself – don't get me wrong, it's no fur offa my nose – as long as all parties agree an' no one gets hurt. Just don't get me involved."

"Like it or not, we may *be* involved," Gina pointed out. "I suspect our Grace is smitten with Simon."

"It's just puppy love," Slide dismissed. "He'll grow out of it."

"He said whistling in the dark," Sandra added. "I don't know about the rest of you but, as I see it, Grace has got Simon on a lead."

"I'm inclined to agree," Gina said. "He'll do anything she asks."

"Either way, it's gonna come to an end sooner or later," Pete said. "'Sides, it's part o' growin' up – 'hearts an' shins', as they say."

"Hearts and shins?" asked Desiree. "What's the connection?"

"They both get skinned at some point in our lives," Linda explained.

Desiree raised her eyebrows in appreciation. "Oh, f'sure," she agreed.

There was a moment of silence as it seemed that everyone was recalling some point in their lives when this axiom had been applied to them.

"It used to be illegal," Ignatius suddenly remarked, breaking the silence.

"There was genuine concern that any children from such a relationship would live, shall we say, disadvantaged lives."

Pete snorted. "Disadvantaged? I think 'appallin' would be a better description. An' it's still true! Poor, ickle sprogs . . . The misery they endure growin' up. An' when they're grown, even the humans look down on 'em."

Desiree interrupted. "Wait a minute. Two parents of different Genra can have children?"

"Course they can," Pete replied. "Any of us could have children wif any other."

Desiree thought for a moment. "Could these children have children as well?"

They all looked at each other for a moment, exchanging shrugs and blank stares.

"Couldn't say," Pete replied. "I mean, not to say that it *couldn't* happen, but they're such outcasts that no one wants to get involved wif 'em. They just don't get the opportunity."

"Don't you have different chromosome counts?" Desiree asked.

"All the same," Clare answered. "Twenty-three pairs. Even humans."

"F>true?" asked Desiree, amazed.

Pete added a thought. "Summa them big-city types what like a bit of exotic are quite open about it. They'll adopt a mixed sprog, raise it as their own, hopin' it won't be a social outcast."

"Eww, gross," Rachael protested.

"What're ye goin' on about Rache?" Pete asked. "Just the other day ya was tellin' me about some friend o' yours up OwlPot way what's got a mixie shack-up. Wot was it?"

"What, ya mean the 'Orse an' the 'Are?" Rachael said.

"Yeah, them's the ones," Pete confirmed.

"No, what's put me off is the idea of adoptin' children," Rachael shivered. "Ew! Why'd anyone ever wanna take 'em on purpose? Absolutely matty li'l blighters."

"Are there any mixies in Otterstow?" asked Michael, a small tinge of hope in his voice.

They all shook their heads or shrugged while Linda pretended to be distracted.

"You said different Genra could have mixed children," Desiree recalled.

"Does that include humans as well? Could a human and a Frith have a child?"

"Not to be offensive, and to put this as delicately as possible," Sandra began, "but it's just not on. Present company excepted, humans just don't have what we would call 'animal magnetism.' They're not educated . . ."

"Through no fault of their own," Ignatius interrupted.

"True, through no fault of their own," Sandra agreed, "but still, as they're not educated, they don't exactly excel at conversation. Since they don't have as keen a sense of smell, most of them wear a pong worse than the local cheese. They're dirty, their fex is usually just a big tangle of matted fur, if it's not shaved off completely – and they've got nothing resembling fur. Nothing like any of you three."

"Thanks . . . I think," Desiree replied.

"We're not tryin' to be rude or nuffin'," Pete said, attempting diplomacy, "but it's the honest troof. Humans, where we come from, are just the dregs o' society. They're not evil, just . . . evil-lookin'. Nobody else'll touch 'em, apart from a few well-meanin' folks what wanna help 'em out."

"Okay, girls, dinner's over," Gina announced to her twin foster daughters. "Hop off to the Kettle, get our kit and hurry back."

2355 – Rialto Bath

Pete was looking at the glass booth as Clare ran the water for her bath (she had won the coin-toss and got to go first). Rachael was sitting in her robe, waiting her turn.

"Oo, nice and hot," Clare said approvingly, as she ran her hand under the water pouring out of the tap.

"I *know* I've heard that name before," Pete muttered.

"Ya gonna be all day, Pete? Clare an' I'd like to take our baff alone, iffat's awrite." Rachael said pointedly.

Pete ignored her.

"Pete!" Clare called.

Pete pulled tentatively at the little knob on the glass door. After seeing that he hadn't broken anything, he opened it wide and stepped inside. Closing the door behind him, a wind came up from beneath him and began to pick up speed. He noticed it was quite warm, although not uncomfortably hot.

He put his finger on his chin in thought. Something was just about to click.

"Fur dryer, fur dryer . . . Fur dryer?"

He opened the door and stepped out.

"Got it," he snapped his fingers.

"Lovely. Now piss off. We're 'avin' our baff," Rachael ordered.

"Rache – ya know that old pic in the Kettle?" Pete went on, oblivious to their impatience. "The one where the old Doe's got her tits out?"

"What? An' she's standin' in front of a volcano an' all?" asked Rachael.

"Right. That's the one. She was one o' the old owners o' the Kettle. An' on the bottom, it says, 'Sumfinother MarchHare . . .'"

"Sandy MarchHare," Clare reminded him. "It's our great-great grand Aunt or the like. Now could we . . ."

"Yeah, that's her. It says 'Sandy MarchHare – photo by Bertie Proudfoot – that's *his* name on this box!"

"Me water's gettin' cold Pete," Rachael reminded him.

"Bertie must've been a friend o' the old Doe. Ya know what this box is for?"

"Yeah. It's for bewilderin' thick Bears so a Doe can't 'ave 'er baff!" Rachael complained.

"When ya finish your baff, step innat box, 'ave a shake an' just stand for a few minutes."

"Why?" asked Clare.

"It's a Fur dryer," Pete professed. "After ya take a baff, it dries ya off."

"Pete, I think the cheese is slidin' off your cracker," Rachael warned.

"I'm serious. Look at this plaque," he said pointing to it. "I just noticed – 'Fur' is spelt wif a capital 'F'. It's for dryin' Furs like you an' me. Try it. Prove me wrong."

"All right, Pete, we promise we'll try," Clare promised. "But we'll do it alone, if you don't mind."

"Eh?"

"I need to take me kit off to take a baff, Pete!" Rachael pointed out.

"Like I never seen the pair o' ya's in the altogether since ya were in nappies!" Pete dismissed.

"Will you get out, ya great furvert!" Rachael remonstrated as she splashed him with water.

"Gina," Pete called, "there's gonna be change in plan."

24JUN2001 Sunday Midsummer Day

0001 – Newburg Outskirts

"Simon, can we stop now? I just heard the midnight chime," grumbled Grace. "And it's starting to rain again."

"All right. Look, there's a bunch of allotments with lots of little sheds. We can stay in one of those for the evening. Here, let me help you over the fence."

It was a pointless offer. Despite her confessed fatigue, Grace jumped the fence from a dead stand. Simon had to back up a good ten yards and get a running start and he nearly got his foot caught in the top of the fence. As it turned out, most of the little sheds were very securely locked, but one had been left ajar. When they opened it, it was apparent why that was the case.

"It's empty," Simon observed.

"Good, we've got a place to kip for the night. C'mon, assume the position."

"But . . . it's filthy. It's a dirt floor and my fur is damp from the rain. I'll be all matty come morning."

"Stop whinging, Simon, my fur is as wet as yours. We'll clean up later. Come on, down you go."

Simon gave a little whine but, nonetheless, curled up on the floor, using the rucksack as a pillow, as Grace curled up as well, mostly on top of Simon. He sighed deeply when he could tell that Grace had fallen asleep in seconds.

Why do I let her pull me about like I'm on her lead? Simon asked himself and then quickly drifted off to sleep, dreaming of being served bowl after bowl of hot vegetable soup along with cheese and nice, crusty bread whilst sitting in a big, fluffy feather bed.

0001 – Towpath to Nora

Pete, Ignatius and Geoff were walking with Desiree to Nora.

"So Slide HolenWulf's not coming?" asked Desiree.

"Nah," Pete answered, pulling Desiree's luggage along the towpath. "He an Sandra are gonna lay out on the roof o' the Rialto after their baff."

"What about the twins?" asked Desiree. "Where are they gonna dry out?"

"Gina ordered them to use the Fur dryer," Geoff said. "Said it's gettin' past their bed-time."

"Aren't they, like, eighteen?" asked Desiree.

"She's still their mum," Pete explained. "They'll be takin' orders from 'er until they're in their forties."

"Why not their fifties?" asked Desiree on a whim.

"She'll be brown bread by then," Pete grinned.

"Pete DunBerr," Ignatius scolded. "You can't tell me that you actually would wish for Gina's demise."

"No, course not," Pete confessed. "Even if she does get on me tits sometimes."

"What about Linda?" asked Desiree. "Is she gonna use the Fur dryer as well? Who's gonna brush her out?"

"Oh, didn't you hear?" Geoff said. "She asked Steve to brush her out."

"Say, what!" Desiree exclaimed.

"Just yankin' yer tail, Desi," Geoff confessed with a grin.

"Nah, she din't ask 'im," Pete admitted. After just a brief pause, he added, "E asked 'er, actually."

"You *better* be putting me on," Desiree warned.

"They're just teasing you, Desiree," Ignatius dismissed. "Pay them no mind."

"Now, hang about, Desi," Pete said. "'Ow come it's okay for you to brush us blokes out, but it's not okay for Steve to brush out Linda?"

"Desiree has a professional interest in our anatomy," Ignatius answered in her defence.

"Maybe Steve's developed an interest in Linda's anatomy," Pete countered.

"Or maybe he's just being a gentleman and doing a lady a favour," Geoff added.

"Except Linda's no lady," Pete an' Geoff chorused.

"Is she that bad?" asked Desiree, with a hint of concern.

"No, it's just a façade," Ignatius said.

"More of a runnin' gag, actually," Pete corrected.

"Linda acts the tart, and everyone plays along," Ignatius explained. "But it's all just a bit of play-acting, end of the day. She's actually a very principled woman. She'd never take a man from another woman."

"So, what *is* Linda gonna do?" asked Desiree.

"Whatever she wants," Geoff answered. "Last I saw of her, she was off to her home to get some clean kit. She might even show up at Nora and let *you* brush her out."

"F>true?" asked Desiree. "She'd do that?"

"Most certainly," Ignatius confirmed. "I think it safe to say, that of all the people in town, she is easily the most open-minded."

"I can't even believe y'all are actually going to let me do this," Desiree marvelled, "let alone, Linda. I mean, considering everything you've said about humans, and all . . ."

"I, personally, have no prob with it," Geoff said. "Pete and Ig are decent blokes, but I'd rather a lass brush my pelt any day."

"You're not gonna stick your fingers in us or summat?" Pete asked warily.

"I get paid for those kinda exams," Desiree mentioned.

"Here we are," Ignatius announced, happy to change the subject. "Almost, anyway. Just over this little footbridge."

They were crossing the span and Desiree marvelled at the building that sat across the canal and beyond an expansive lawn. It had three floors with expansive verandas at each level.

"Wow. That's some place. Do you live here alone?" asked Desiree.

"Yes, quite alone," Ignatius answered. "Both of my parents are deceased and I am an only child."

As they approached, Desiree could make out a word on the lintel above the main entrance.

"Nora?" Desiree read the name of the mayoral mansion. "Who's Nora?"

"Not a 'who,' but a 'what,'" Ignatius said. "And it's '*Norah*' – rhymes with 'hurrah.'"

"All right," Desiree conceded. "*What* is a *nurah*?"

"The house was built over a hundred years ago by someone from the eastern part of the Continent," Geoff answered, "and the tradition is to let the builder choose the name."

"So what's it mean?" asked Desiree.

"As best as I can make out," Ignatius said, "it means 'bolt hole'."

"Bolt hole? A hole where you put a bolt?" asked Desiree, exhibiting understandable confusion.

"No, a hole where an animal would bolt to in times of danger," corrected Ignatius.

"So – a burrow?" Desiree asked, trying to clarify.

"Technically, yes," Ignatius hedged. "But only in the same sense that a house is a home. A house is a building designed as a place for people to live. A home . . . well . . . it's where one feels safe and secure."

They entered and discovered Linda OakSquirrel posed on the sofa, holding an enormous hair brush in a slightly suggestive position. "So which of you lads is gonna give a lonely girl a hard . . . Oh, *hello*, Desi, didn't see you just there." She wore a huge smile that feigned surprise.

Desiree smiled at Linda's cheek, which was prominently displayed. "Hello, Linda."

Ignatius ordered Pete to stow Desiree's luggage in a nearby room as he went upstairs to light the water heater.

"I honestly envy you, getting to brush out all these lovely lads," teased Linda.

"My involvement is purely professional," Desiree admitted. "I have no prurient interest in my subjects." She looked aside and whispered, "Well . . . maybe just a tiny interest."

"There's nothing tiny about what I'm interested in," Linda leered. "No, seriously, are you gonna scope us out when you brush us down?"

"Oh, f'sure," Desiree confirmed. "Might draw a quick sketch or two."

"Lucky girl. You'll be the first to bathe, then," Linda stated.

"What?" Desiree asked, caught slightly off guard.

"There's no point in you brushing us down when we're all squeaky clean and you still reek of smoke," Linda explained.

"Oh, f'true," Desiree conceded.

"I've always wondered what human girls looked like in the altogether," Linda mentioned. "Guess I'll finally find out."

"Scuse me?" asked Desiree.

"Of course, what I'd like to see even more is a human bloke without his kit on. I've heard some interesting rumours . . ."

"Whoa, back up," Desiree interrupted. "What's this about seeing me jaybird?"

"Yes, without your kit on," Linda clarified.

"You mean nude?"

"Uh-huh. Bare."

"Nekkit?"

"That's right."

"And why would I be nude?" Desiree asked.

"That's the customary way of having a brush-out," Linda said casually. "The brushee is in the buff, so the brusher is as well."

Geoff, sensing Desiree's discomfort, said, "If it puts you off, you can put on a robe. Can't speak for the others, but it's all the same to me."

Pete had just re-entered the room after depositing the bags and had caught the last bit of the conversation. "M'self as well," he volunteered. "Just some bollocks tradition, is all."

"Um . . ." Desiree was giving all this some thought, when a *ping* came from upstairs, followed shortly by a *pong*, followed by the sound of water rushing through pipes and Ignatius rushing down the stairs.

"That tobacco smoke is just *insidious*. It's still clinging to my fur like tar," Ignatius sniffed in disgust.

"That's because it is tar," Desiree explained. "Um, Ig . . ."

"Before I forget," Ignatius interrupted, "it's an old tradition that the person doing the brushing is, as the Vinterrans say, *déshabillé*. However, as you are a visitor, you may feel perfectly free to wear a robe."

"Thanks," Desiree said, somewhat relieved.

"And . . . I have something you might want to look at while you're here," Ignatius mentioned, beckoning her to follow. He went to a book shelf and pulled out a tome. "I'm no expert on biology, but I've heard the best of the anatomy books is this one, even if it is nearly a hundred years old. After all, we haven't changed that much since then. The illustrations are accredited to someone who lived right here in Otterstow – one Simon StæppanWulf."

"Isn't that the name of the boy who's missing?" asked Desiree.

"Yes, it is. In fact, it's his great-great-grandfather. Or maybe it's a single 'great', I can't recall. And although he did get the credit, there is some evidence that he didn't actually draw the pictures," Ignatius said, handing Desiree the book.

"F'true?" asked Desiree. "And what evidence would that be?"

"According to my father, he couldn't draw a pint," Ignatius stated.

"That's pretty strong evidence," Desiree agreed, opening the reference to a random page. "Hey, these *are* pretty good illustrations."

"I don't usually repeat gossip . . ." Pete began.

He was stopped cold by the reproaching stares.

"Awrite, fair play, I *usually* repeat gossip," Pete admitted, "but I remember Sandra tellin' me that some bird named Alice actually drew these."

"So, women aren't allowed to publish anatomical drawings?" asked Desiree.

"No, weren't that a'tall," Pete answered. "Weren't that she was a bird. It's 'cause she was a skin."

"It would stand to reason," Ignatius said. "No publisher would accept such work from a human, no matter how expertly done."

"An' more 'n that, she was Ol' Man Simon's skin. They was in a mixie."

"I thought you said that no Frith would have a relationship with humans," Desiree recalled.

"A relationship, yes. Might even be intimate. But produce a child, never," Pete said. "That would be a disaster o' the first order."

"Certainly for the child," Linda stated.

"So there *are* intimate relationships between humans and Frith?" asked Desiree.

"Oh, yeah," Pete confirmed.

"Probably even more than most people would care to admit," Linda hinted.

There was a brief lull in the conversation, interrupted by a whistle, a double *ping* and a barely audible 'puff' from upstairs.

"That's your bath, Desiree," Ignatius stated. "I'll show you how to fill the tub and I'll also relight the heater for the next bath. By the way, did you pack a robe in that enormous valise?"

"No, I didn't, actually," Desiree answered calmly.

"Would you care to borrow one?" offered Ignatius. "I have several that are quite nice."

Desiree suddenly recalled the nudity situation. She had always held a firm belief that local traditions should be observed or, at the very least, not interfered with.

"Hey look, fellas, I just want you to know, I'm a firm believer in *Si fueris Romae** . . ."

"Sorry, see furry what?" asked Pete.

"She wishes to respect our traditions," Ignatius said, giving a loose translation.

"Anyway, if that's the tradition, then I'll live by it," Desiree agreed.

"No, Desiree, quite awrite," Pete dismissed. "Keep the robe on."

"I'm happy to abide by your rules," Desiree offered.

"No, serious. A robe'll be just fine," Geoff suggested.

"Y'sure?"

"We'd much prefer it actually," Pete mentioned.

"You would?" asked Desiree.

"If you, erm, wouldn't mind," Geoff added. "Just the brush out."

"Gee," Desiree said, finally picking up the hint, "thanks." Shrugging, she turned to Ignatius and Linda. "Y'all care one way or t'other?"

"Whatever you feel most comfortable with," Ignatius answered, sincerely. "Linda?"

"Uh-huh!" Linda said enthusiastically. "I wanna see your boobs!"

0104 – Rialto Rooftop

Sandra collapsed on top of Slide, panting.

"Oh, it's been *ages*," Sandra sighed. "That was so lovely, Slide."

"My pleasure, I assure you," Slide replied to his wife, while catching his breath. "But we'll have to get cleaned up again, won't we?"

"Pft! It can wait," Sandra dismissed as she embraced him. "Let's just enjoy the moment, shall we?"

* *Si fueris Romae* – L. 'When in Rome' (do as the Romans do)

"No argument from me, I assure you," Slide agreed. "A minute to ourselves, a million stars all around us, pints of lager," he said, pulling out one of the six bottles that he had nicked from the kitchen in an easy-to-carry pack. "Care for one?"

"Oh, could do, please," Sandra practically begged. "It always makes me thirsty." She took the bottle and twisted it open with her teeth. Steve Green had shown her how to open it using his hands, but she simply couldn't grip it tight enough, thus she used her jaws.

She spit out the cap and raised her bottle. "To us."

"To us," Slide answered, touching his bottle to hers.

They drank a heavy draught and leaned back to stare at the night sky.

"Nice of Pete to show Gina that Fur dryer," Sandra mentioned.

"Nice of Gina to make her girls use it and go straight home," Slide added.

"And of Linda to go to Nora," Sandra mentioned.

"I wonder if she'll let Desiree brush her when she gets out of the bath," Slide pondered.

"Wouldn't be a bit surprised if she did," Sandra said. "She's a nice girl, but she's no shrinking violet."

"The lads agreed to let Desiree brush them out," Slide mentioned. "I found that a bit surprising."

"Not me," Sandra said, taking another sip. "She's not like other skins. She's clean and neat. Doesn't smell bad at all. Rather fresh, be honest. Bit roundish, though."

"Did you notice her fex is all straight and full-bodied? Quite nice, actually."

"I wouldn't mind having hair as good as hers," Sandra confessed.

They stared at the stars in silence for a moment.

"Wonder where our Simon is?" asked Sandra.

"I think he was up here at some point," Slide said. "I think I caught just a tiny whiff of him here and there."

Sandra looked at him with a serious expression. "That's not all I caught a whiff of," she added. "I think he and Grace did what we were just doing."

Slide sighed. "Yeah, I noticed that as well. Although, it might've been someone else – couldn't honestly tell."

"No, neither could I," Sandra admitted. "For Jack's sake, please let Grace not be pregnant."

"One crisis at a time, dear," Slide consoled his wife.

Sandra suddenly put her hand on Slide's shoulder. "Let's call him," she urged.

"Call him?"

"Yes, let's do a howl. He'll know it's us. Desiree said there were no bestiant wolves here."

"You can't be serious?" Slide asked.

"I bloody well am," Sandra stated. She sat upright, began a low keen and then raised her head to the sky in a bay.

"Aaaarrrrrrroooooooooooooo!"

"Sandra! You'll attract attention!" Slide warned.

"That *is* the general idea! Are you going to join me or not!"

Slide sighed heavily, but still, he stood by his wife and raised his head.

"AaaaarrrrroooooYipyipyiproooooo!"

"I feel like a complete and utter prat," Slide said, lowering his head for breath.

"I'll prat you," Sandra warned. "Call our son."

Slide howled a low tone and Sandra added a minor third.

0104 – Otterstow Allotment Shed

Although asleep, Simon's ear gave a twitch.

His eye lazily opened, barely revealing his dilated pupil. He was now awake, but just barely.

He could hear the baying and instantly knew it was his parents calling him home. His first instinct was to jump up and run towards them on all fours, at full speed.

However, he felt the weight of Grace resting in peaceful slumber upon him. Not wanting to disturb her, he did not move.

His parents called him again. It was faint, but the night was still and there was no mistake as to who was making the call and what they wanted.

Simon could have dealt with whatever punishment they might have meted out. He could understand canings or groundings or being shouted at for hours.

But what he could not deal with was losing Grace. It broke his heart to not heed his parents' call, but he knew if he returned now, he and Grace would be permanently separated and that was a fate he was not prepared to handle.

Another howl pierced the darkness of the wee hours of the morning and Simon bit his lip. He tucked his muzzle a little closer to his chest in the guilt that he felt toward disobeying his parents, whom he loved.

Yet another bay beckoned to him. He could imagine the anguish they felt as they waited in vain and disappointment for him to return.

A tear rolled down his cheek as Grace slept blissfully on.

0108 – Rialto Rooftop

"AaaaarrrrroooooYipyipyipRrrrrrooooo!"

"Thumpthumpthump!" went the door to the roof of the Rialto.

"Sandra? Slide? It's me, Steve!" called a voice from behind the locked door.

"Steve? Is something wrong?" asked Sandra.

"I'm afraid so," Steve answered. "It's the police. They've received a complaint about your howling. I'm afraid you'll have to stop."

"Oh," Slide said sadly. "Right."

"Sorry," Steve apologised. "Were you calling Simon?"

"Yes, we were trying to," Sandra said. "But if he didn't hear us by now, he's not within range."

"Sorry," Steve apologised again.

They heard him descend the stairs and Sandra, biting her lip, put her head on Slide's shoulder.

0115 – Nora Balcony

Ignatius, being the host, was the last of the group to wash. Of course, while the others waited with him, he felt compelled to entertain them and thus made use of Nora's vast cellar. Naturally, he partook himself, and by the time he was due to be combed out, he wasn't feeling much pain.

"I hope you weren't offended by the other lads," Ignatius pointed out as he entered the balcony in his robe, dripping with water. "Personally, I find your physique quite attractive."

"F'true?" asked Desiree.

"Yes, for true. You needn't be nude, but if you wish to, there'd be no complaint from me, I assure you."

"Thanks for the compliment," Desiree said as she helped Ignatius out of his robe.

"Have you learned anything from your observations, thus far?" asked Ignatius.

"Quite a lot," Desiree answered as she hung her robe next to his. "Ready?"

"Just a tick," Ignatius said. Strolling slowly to the far corner of the balcony, he had a good shake. He casually walked back to the grooming table and lay prone. "Now, I'm ready," he said, closing his eyes.

Desiree had the brushes ready and began her task, starting with his fex. "So you're the mayor of this little one-horse town?" she asked.

"I am. And by the way, there are three Equan families in Otterstow."

"So did you, like, get elected and all?"

"In the strictest sense of the word, yes, but it's more of an inherited title," Ignatius admitted. "No one else wants it."

"Why not?" asked Desiree.

"First of all, it's frightfully dull work – current developments excepted, of course. Second, one must waste one's youth studying law to qualify. Third, solicitors usually make much better pay in fields other than civil service – particularly civil service in very small towns. But I'm very proud of my little town and I feel I help everyone here by what I do, so there is that tiny part that appeals to me.

"So, did you inherit the job or did you get elected?" Desiree asked for clarification.

"I suppose that depends on how one looks at the situation. My father was mayor and his mother before him and her mother before her. So in that regard, I inherited it. It was more or less expected from me to take up the job. However, I did actually have to get nominated, stand for election and win the ballot, which I did – with four votes."

"Sounds like a pretty close election," Desiree marvelled.

"No, safe to say, it was a landslide," Ignatius replied.

"By four votes?"

"Only four people bothered to vote," Ignatius explained.

"I thought Otterstow had a hundred people."

"They do. Roughly twenty are under voting age and another – a little firmer along the back, please – and another twenty are humans who, sadly, are disenfranchised."

"When did they lose the right to vote?" asked Desiree with concern.

"They've never had it," Ignatius answered immediately.

"Well, *that* sucks," Desiree grumbled. "So only four out of sixty people voted? Not exactly a huge turnout."

"One can hardly blame my constituents," Ignatius said. "After all, I ran unopposed and there were no other offices or measures on the ballot. I just needed one vote and I cast that myself."

"So how did Foxes get hegemony on the Otterstow political machine?"

"Actually, Foxes and Weasels occupy the majority of elected offices throughout The Kingdom, although certainly not all of them. Might I ask why you're examining my brush?"

"I'm looking for a caudal gland," Desiree explained, "but it's not there. Hmm." She dropped Ignatius' tail and resumed her task.

"Now, be a little more gentle when you brush my brush – and it's going to take twice as much time, so don't hurry."

"What property of Foxes makes them so popular with the electorate?" asked Desiree.

"Vulpans – like foxes – are reputed to be clever so they frequently get elected."

"Are they?"

"Yes, we've won the last twenty-six elections."

"No, I mean are Vulpans clever."

"Some are, but certainly not all of them. Some are quite thick. On the other hand, I can think of one or two that are a little too clever for their own good. Jess springs to mind."

"So what exactly are the responsibilities of the office of the Mayor of Otterstow?"

"Oh, nothing extraordinary. As mayor, I'm on the town council and have a vote on the budget and other affairs. But I'm also the sole member of the local school authority, as well – which is a job no one wants, I hasten to add, including me. And as we have no constables, I'm the *de jure* police force, but that's a job that requires no work at all, as everyone behaves themselves. The largest part of my time is dedicated to the Portrayals."

"Portrayals?"

"Yes, like we did at the fete," Ignatius explained, "twice. They're enactments of fables or apologues performed twice a day at nine in the morning and two in the afternoon. Done for the schoolchildren, of course, but it's the adults that do the acting. Teaches them morals and ethics, that sort of thing."

"Them?" asked Desiree. "The children or the adults?"

"It's always been my belief that it's more the latter than the former."

"Would it be all right for me to see one?"

"You're welcome to see them all if you like," Ignatius invited. "You'd probably find them dead boring, I'm afraid."

"Who does them? Does the town have an acting troupe?"

"No, it's done by a rotation of the citizens. Everyone has Portrayal Duty – 'PD', it's called – and is required to either act or help out with the performance when their turn comes up. I coordinate it all. And I have to attend to make sure

it goes according to plan. It's not difficult, but it can be time-consuming trying to juggle everyone's schedule, especially as Otterstow is quite small and has a very tight rotation."

"What happens if someone's a slacker? Doesn't do their bit?"

"One month's fine," Ignatius answered immediately, with a grimace.

"How do you fine someone a month?" asked Desiree.

"They pull double-duty for the duration," Ignatius explained.

"Why not just make it a monetary fine, like a hundred pounds?"

"That would hardly be fair to someone who only earns twenty quid a month, as opposed to someone who earns two hundred quid a month, don't you think? The very wealthy would hardly notice a sum like that."

"No, I suppose not," Desiree admitted. "What about a night in the clink?"

"It's not a violent crime."

"So what?"

"In legal principle, the purpose of incarceration is to protect the public from the criminal, presumably until they've rehabilitated," Ignatius explained. "Thus, prison is reserved only for the violent."

"So do you actually tread the boards like everyone else or do you have an exemption?"

"I'm on the stage just as often as anyone," Ignatius said. "In fact, I was recently late for a performance, so I have double-duty until next month. *No one* is exempt. If you stay here very long, I'll have to start requiring you to do some parts."

"Just so you know, I'm crap at acting."

"Like I've never heard that excuse before."

"Not an excuse," Desiree said. "I'll do it. Just want you to know in advance."

"Believe me, acting ability is *not* a requirement. You just have to remember your lines."

"Awright, roll over," Desiree ordered. "Time to do your front."

0830 – Allotments Just Outside Newburg

Grace awoke to a lightly snoring Simon. She wondered why she put up with him sometimes, but she knew in her heart of hearts that if she had any choice in the matter, she could never leave him. She also knew that a day would come, all too soon, when they would be asked – or more likely, ordered – to part company. She often wondered what the consequences of disobeying those orders would be. Rising slowly, so as not to disturb him, she got up. Simon made perfect bedding for her and she always felt refreshed after a night of sleeping on him, if he was in just the right position.

She silently stretched and yawned and peeked out of the door to see what was happening in the little collection of allotments that they had found to sleep among. There were lots of vegetables, such as spring onions and lettuces and leeks and tomatoes and celery.

Shave me, nothing worth eating in this patch, she observed. *Shame crisps don't grow on trees.*

0900 – Nora Kitchen

"Oh, you've made some tea," Ignatius groaned, entering the kitchen. "Lovely."

"I know my way around a kitchen," Desiree answered. "You awrite?" she asked, concern on her face.

"Oh, just overdid it a bit with the brandy," Ignatius confessed. "You'll excuse me," he said, going to the basin and plugging the drain. Filling it about half-way with water, he held his throbbing temples, took a deep breath and immersed as much of his head as would fit.

Desiree watched with interest as she took the opportunity to fill a glass with water. Shortly after she had accomplished this, Ignatius removed his head from the basin, gasping for air and groping for a towel, which Desiree placed in his hand.

Ignatius marvelled at the effect of the remedy. Before, his head was throbbing. Now his head was throbbing, cold and wet and he was out of breath. Towelling his head dry, he removed at least part of the last symptom. He briefly wondered if his headache would depart whether he soaked his head or not, but it made his headache worse to think about it, so he stopped.

"You done?" Desiree asked.

"Pretty much," Ignatius admitted, patting his face dry in a few places. "Not much for the 'hair of the dog' cure – being a Dog myself."

"You need a cure for that hangover?"

"I have a cure," Ignatius answered. "I'd prefer one that works."

"Here, drink this," Desiree suggested as she handed him the pint glass of clear liquid.

"What's this?" he asked.

"For your headache. Don't ask. Just drink it. It's got a special ingredient in it."

"But . . ."

"Just drink it."

He sipped the contents.

"All of it. Quick as you can."

Ignatius did as he was told. Taking a deep breath, he downed the contents. He put the empty glass down, exhaling and then belched loudly. "Oh, excuse me!" he said with genuine embarrassment.

"Not a prob," Desiree said. "How'd it taste?"

"Hardly any taste at all," he noted.

"Cause it's water. That's the special ingredient. Best cure for a hangover headache."

"Water?" Ignatius asked sceptically.

"You're dehydrated. That little man with a hammer in your skull is sending a message that your body is in dire need of a little water. And you can get a lot more water in your body by drinking than by soaking your head in a basin."

"I'll keep that in mind, next time. By the way, Desiree . . ."

"Yes?"

"If I could ask your personal opinion on a matter . . ."

"Yes."

"Do you think I'm an alcoholic?"

"You? An alcoholic? Compared to some folks I know, you're not even close. But, when it comes down to it, it's a question you answer for yourself. What brought this notion on?"

"I'm sure you've heard me mention Jess FærFyxe?"

"Jess? The Vixen from Civil Enquiries?"

"Yes."

"Jess, who made the larger part of your life miserable?"

"Quite."

"Jess, who thinks schadenfreude is not just a hobby, but a way of life?"

"Yes, that would be her," Ignatius sighed patiently.

"No, you've never mentioned her name," Desiree deadpanned.

"I wish you'd stop mentioning hers," Ignatius complained. "She has a habit of appearing when that happens."

"Well, since you asked," Desiree mentioned as she took a seat at the breakfast counter.

Ignatius joined her.

"Y'know, the place where I've spent my life is often described as 'a drinking town with a football problem'."

"What's football to do with drinking?" asked Ignatius.

"Nothing, actually – the point is, alcohol is everywhere where I live. We are a culture of drink."

"Just because we make cheese in Otterstow," Ignatius mentioned, "doesn't mean our lives revolve solely around dairy products."

"So I've noticed. But, as a result of living in this 'drinking town' all my life, I've known quite a few alcoholics. Over time, I've come to the conclusion that they fall into two groups. Those that can control their alcohol and those who let their alcohol control them. So, ultimately, the thing you have to ask yourself is this – who's running the show in *your* life?"

Ignatius was a little taken aback by such a direct question. He broke his gaze with Desiree and stared straight ahead, which happened to be at his reflection in a mirror above the basin. "Well, erm . . . I've never been drunk at work. Never missed PD – at least not because of drink. I've never hurt anyone from being drunk . . . well, there was the once when Pete dared me to punch him in the stomach, but I think I hurt my hand more than his breadbasket, be honest." His gaze returned to Desiree. "So, do I pass?"

"Why you asking me?"

"Because you asked me."

"I *said*, you have to ask *yourself* the question."

"Oh, yes . . . So you did."

"Look, I understand it's hard to be honest with yourself when something important like this is on the line. I struggled with my weight for years, but I've finally reached a conclusion I can live with."

"Which is? If I may ask."

"I came to the conclusion that there's a difference between being overweight and being out of shape."

"Aren't they the same?" asked Ignatius.

"They can be," Desiree admitted. "And they usually are. But not always. Now, I make no bones about it – I'm definitely overweight. I weigh . . ." she did some maths in her head. "Oh, just under fourteen stone. And for my height, that puts me about a cheeseburger below being obese.

"But, to me," she continued, "there's no great sin in being overweight. Now, I'm not a particularly religious person, but we've been given these absolutely amazing bodies. They repair themselves, they produce children, they nourish the children they make; and whether that's from God or whatever, it's still a gift. And to me, what *is* a sin, is sitting on your ass, eating all day and not doing a lick of exercise. And no matter how little you eat and how much you exercise, if you're twenty-two stone and under seven feet tall, then you've got a problem. I actually had this problem, because that's exactly where I was three years ago when I started grad school."

"You weighed twenty-two stone?" Ignatius asked, trying to restrain his astonishment.

Desiree reached into her back pocket, pulled out her wallet and fished out a picture, which she showed Ignatius. "I carry this around so that I can remind myself of what I can become if I don't exercise some self-control."

"This is *you*?" Ignatius marvelled. "Oh, sorry, didn't mean to . . ."

"Hey, no need to apologise," Desiree dismissed. "That's what I was and I didn't like it one bit. So, with that in mind, I cut *way* back on my diet, and I started to eat things that were good for me and not *just* the things I loved; and there are *still* days when I could almost kill for a muffuletta. Then I put in a good hour, every single day, doing something; and I still do. I walk, I do some special exercises for my self-defense, I swim. Heck, I can swim a mile without breaking a sweat. I know the fat keeps me afloat, but I bet there's a lot of scrawny-assed women that couldn't go half that distance with water-wings.

"So I'm happy about what kinda shape I'm in. I'm physically fit, I'm strong, I have lots of stamina. Although, that being said, I'm still not too happy about the shape of my body . . . except my rack. I do love my rack."

Ignatius was distracted by a noise in the sitting room. "Did you hear that?" he asked. "Must be Pete or Geoff."

"No, they left an hour ago," Desiree mentioned. "Linda's gone also."

"Then who . . . ?" Ignatius' face belied some concern as he rose to investigate.

"Morning Ig. The door was open so I let myself in," an all-too-familiar voice said from the sitting room. "You know, you have very boring mail."

0905 – Allotments Just Outside Newburg

"I see nothing wrong with carrots and celery. And I think blackcurrants are lovely," Simon protested. "It's free food and the amount we've taken won't be noticed." He packed the vegetables in the rucksack that Grace had stolen.

"I'm sorry, Si, but occasionally I just need to wrap my teeth around something that's been fried in deep fat, and I'd prefer the occasion be on a daily basis. Just because I'm a Hare, doesn't mean I nibble on little green things all the time."

Simon, having gathered enough fodder for his liking, rose to leave. "You hardly ever nibble on little green things, or big green things, or anything that grows out of the ground, unless it's got loads of sugar, grease or meat in. In fact, you're the most carnivorous Hare I know. All you ever eat is meat, fish and poultry coated with lard," he said as he walked out of the plot of allotments. "That and sugar by the gallon."

"That's not true," Grace objected as she followed him. "I eat bread almost every day."

"Which is nearly as bad. And the only reason you eat bread is to sop up gravy. It's a wonder you weigh under seven stone."

"Well, what about you?"

"What about me?"

"You're a Wolf and you're a vegetarian."

"So? Nothing wrong with that. Very healthy lifestyle."

"Ah, but it's not a balanced diet, is it," Grace pointed out. "You're supposed to have protein as part of your diet."

"I have protein from beans and other legumes," Simon countered as he held the gate open for Grace to walk out. Just then, one of the gardeners, an elderly lady that worked an allotment, walked in.

"Morning," Simon said as a friendly salutation.

"Morning," Grace added, remembering her manners as the two of them walked out. "It's not the same, Simon. You need animal protein to have a healthy diet."

"Morning," said the gardener cautiously, as she watched the two head off down the towpath, arguing the pros and cons of a meatless diet. As they faded out of sight, she took a minute to shake her head and clean her glasses. She turned to her allotment and observed, "Those little rogues! They've nicked my celery!"

0905 – Nora

"There are rules about search warrants," Ignatius bristled.

"What's this minger doing here?" Jess interrupted, indicating Desiree.

Desiree's first instinct was to return a verbal lashing, but she knew she was a visitor and decided to follow Ignatius' lead. She also knew that in uneasy situations like this, the best policy was to embarrass the offender with common courtesy, so she simply ignored the insult.

"She is a distinguished guest, from across the Pond," Ignatius stated plainly. "Desiree, this is Jess. Jess, Desiree."

"Pleased to meet you," Desiree said warily, extending her hand.

Jess stared at the hand as if it were a dead octopus. There was an uncomfortable pause.

"I'll . . . just go to my room, shall I?" Desiree hinted.

"Thank you, Desiree," Ignatius said.

Jess didn't respond or even turn to acknowledge Desiree's departure.

"You're keeping odd company," Jess mentioned.

"The company I keep," Ignatius replied, "is none of your affair."

"You don't mind that I let myself in." It was not so much a question or apology as a statement of fact.

"I hardly think a lock would stop you, Jess."

"This is a public building, Ig. It's yours courtesy of the taxpaying citizens of Otterstow, is it not?"

"Just so," Ignatius replied. "But it is still my private domicile and, as such, is not open to the public at large. Much like the Queen's palace – only more cosy."

"I hope you're not ordering me to leave?" Jess asked with a tinge of threat to her voice.

"It is your choice. You may come or go as you please," Ignatius informed her.

Ignatius recalled the first time he and Jess had been alone in Nora. It was just before they had gone off to university, at the age of sixteen, and his parents were out of the house for the weekend. He and Jess had Nora all to themselves and she had suggested that they have a little drink and take a bath together. To Ignatius, of the tiny handful of pleasant memories he had of his very lengthy and turbulent relationship with Jess, it was easily his fondest recollection, as it was their first intimate moment together. For him, it was the end of his innocence, although he somehow felt that such was not the case for Jess, as she seemed quite experienced during their little assignation.

However, it was not without consequence. After the event, Jess, when she would deign to talk to him at all, would only snarl cruel epithets at him. Ignatius eventually surmised that she must have been concerned about having become pregnant, but he was completely mystified as to why she did not want to discuss it with him, being especially taciturn when he brought the subject up. Eventually, she settled down to her normal level of cruelty, although she never related what the results of their tryst had been, despite several enquiries on his part.

Further, he had noticed, whenever he suggested they re-enact that tender moment involving the bath, she always found a ready excuse to be somewhere else.

Although Ignatius had had a good scrub barely eight hours ago, it suddenly seemed like a great idea to have another – or at least pretend to. "However, I should inform you that my next mayoral act will be to take a nice, hot bath," he announced.

"Nothing I haven't experienced before," Jess sneered.

"Very well, then . . . Is there something I can help you with?" he asked as he headed upstairs, while unbuttoning his shirt.

"Yes, I want to know about The tré."

"The tré?" *Keep calm*, Ignatius thought to himself as he undid the last button. "It's a very modest theatrical venue in our humble town, used for Portrayals. As you grew up here, I would think you'd be quite familiar with it."

"Don't be a sifwit, Ig. I saw something peculiar there last night."

Ignatius continued upstairs, pretending to ignore Jess. He removed his shirt quickly and threw it over his shoulder, hoping it would land somewhere

uncomfortable. A quick glance over his shoulder told him he had hit the mark as Jess pulled the shirt from her face, wadded it up and threw it to the ground.

"And why would The tré garner your attention?" asked Ignatius.

"It wasn't so much The tré, as much as those leaving it," Jess remarked.

"Pete, Geoff, your pudgy *distinguished guest* . . . Linda – and you. And as far away as I was, I could still smell tobacco smoke in your fur."

At least that's all she noticed, thought Ignatius. Those she didn't see are safe, at least for the moment.

Reaching the bathroom, he unbuckled his belt while kicking off his boots. Even though yesterday was the first time they had spoken to each other for over ten years, there was no pretence of modesty as each knew the other all too well. He was still hoping, although he knew it was probably in vain, that she might be put off if he continued to disrobe as if to prepare for a bath. "A rather common collection of citizens of the town," he mentioned.

"At siffing midnight?"

"My word – you weren't speaking in jest when you said you never slept," Ignatius said. "Regardless, I'll ask my question again. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Yes, I want you to explain what your little group of friends were doing coming out of The tré."

Ignatius had sat down on the rim of the bath tub and was pulling off his socks. "We were returning home, naturally," he said. He struck a match and held it under the valve, which began to bend. Within seconds a little *ping* was heard and a small blue flame ignited as he extinguished the match in a rapidly filling ashtray. *Pong*, said the tank a few seconds later as a blue flame spread around the openings of the burner beneath and water could be heard rushing into the large steel vessel.

"Where were you coming home from?" Jess demanded.

"A Midsummer Day festival, if you must know."

"Today is Midsummer Day," Jess stated.

Ignatius dropped his trousers and was folding them neatly to put on a rack while he stood in his pants. "I see nothing escapes your iron-trap mind Jess. Still alert as ever," he said with a smile.

"You're being evasive!" Jess said starting to raise her voice a little.

"No need to raise your voice," Ignatius said calmly. He had just finished removing his pants and stood naked before her. "I am an open book before you. I have nothing to hide."

"I knew that before you took your pants off, you pillicock!"

"Now if you're going to make remarks *ad Vulpinem*, I can't allow you to stay. You'll have to change your tone."

Jess's ears were flat and her eyes were angry little slits. "Don't . . . patronise . . . me!"

"Don't get your tail in a twist," Ignatius said, grabbing a robe and throwing it on. *The bath hasn't scared her off yet. I guess I'll have to introduce the second element of our night together.* "If you would excuse me," he said as he walked toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Jess asked.

Ignatius turned around to face her. "I thought I'd take a little stroll through town in my robe. For Jack's sake, woman, I'm just going to pour myself a brandy to enjoy with my bath – as any alcoholic worth his salt would do. Would you like one?"

"It's nine in the morning!" Jess pointed out.

"It's past noon somewhere in the world," Ignatius commented as he descended the stairs. He noticed that she followed. *What is she truly after?* he wondered to himself. *She can be quite a complicated woman.* As he sauntered to the drinks cabinet it also occurred to him that it was rather astonishing that she would cast aspersions on his drinking habits, considering the fact that hers were equal if not greater.

He opened the cabinet and filled two glasses with brandy. Upon turning around, he saw Jess standing directly behind him.

"Oh!" he said, as if surprised. "Well, here you are." He gave her one of the glasses. As an afterthought, he turned around, grabbed the brandy bottle and walked back upstairs to the bathroom. The water was still getting hot and he knew he still had a few minutes before it would be ready. He was just sitting down on the rim of the tub when Jess started a new barrage.

"All right then. You're coming home from a Midsummer's Day festival – being held a day early for some peculiar reason . . ."

"The reason is perfectly sound and only takes a moment's thought. Everyone works tomorrow and if the festival were held today, then no one would want to go to work on Monday."

"That is the most incredibly idiotic explanation that's ever come out of your mouth, Iggy. What kind of sifwit would even begin to believe such an absurd thing?"

"Me for one. It makes perfect sense. Besides, Midsummer Eve is just as good a reason to celebrate as Midsummer Day itself. Any excuse to drink for the irredeemable alcoholics of the world," he said, tossing back some brandy.

"Stop changing the subject!" Jess said, nearly shouting.

"No need to lose your temper," Ignatius scolded quietly.

"Where was this little festival?"

"Can't quite remember the name of the place. New-something? Ah, Newburg. Yes, that's it."

"Newburg? I've never heard of any place called Newburg."

"Maybe it's new," Ignatius answered glibly.

"Stop being glib."

"Hand me your glass," Ignatius offered.

"Why?" Jess asked as she complied.

"It's empty. I'll refill it for you." Ignatius took the glass and did so.

"Did I just drink that?" Jess asked, amazed.

"You didn't spill any. Go on, there's plenty more."

"You're trying to get me drunk," Jess accused.

"One generally does that to oneself, unless one is an incorrigible lush, as I am. But don't drink if you don't wish to. Now, you were asking about . . ."

"Your trip home. Why'd you stop at The tré?"

"Geoff's been doing some renovation work. He's quite proud of it and wanted to show it to us. It's an incredible improvement."

"Is that what all that junk is doing in the courtyard?"

"We're going to use it as firewood for a Midsummer bonfire tonight."

Jess' tone suddenly softened considerably. "Oo, a Midsummer bonfire," she said almost dreamily, thinking of all the free drink. "I love a good bonfire."

Ignatius noticed this was the first pleasant sentence she had uttered since her arrival. He also noticed her old habit of taking a drink, without thought and completely beyond her notice, whenever someone answered her questions.

"You're welcome to attend, if you like. Any other questions? Would you like to know what we did at the festival?"

"Erm, yeah. What'd you do?" She sipped again.

Ignatius smiled as his efforts produced their intended results. He, of course, had a ready-made answer, which was not entirely untrue. "Well, mostly we were there to look for Simon StæppanWulf and Grace ParsleyHare . . ."

"Look for them?"

"They've gone missing," Ignatius explained.

"How old are they?"

"Fourteen," Ignatius answered, noting that her glass was already nearly empty again. "At any rate, we had reason to believe they might be in the area . . ."

"What reason?" asked Jess. Ignatius read her expression as being genuinely concerned for the missing pair, which he found rather amazing. Regardless, he proffered the brandy bottle again. Jess, surprised that her glass was empty yet again, nonetheless held it forward for Ignatius to refill.

"Are you sure?" Ignatius said, holding the bottle back. "I don't want you saying I was taking advantage of an innocent, young Vixen."

"Innocent, my arse," Jess harrumphed and shook her glass a little to indicate that she wanted more. "And you can stick 'young' up your arse as well."

Ignatius ignored her comments and continued his story as he refilled her glass. "Desiree, the young lady you met earlier," Ignatius explained, "had seen them and led us to the area."

"How did she know you were looking for them?" Jess seemed confused.

"She didn't at first," Ignatius answered. "It was a completely random encounter. Still, no luck in finding them."

The whistle on the water heater began to blow, extinguishing the pilot and cooling the triggers for the valves. There was a double 'ping' as they shut off, followed by the tiny 'puff' as the residual gas flared back into the burner.

"Ah, my bath is ready." Ignatius pulled a chain, allowing the hot water to flow in to the bathtub. "I must say, this is the best perquisite to the job of mayor. It truly is the most wonderful bath in all of Otterstow."

"It does look very inviting," Jess said with a wistful smile. "And it's been yonks since I've taken a bath . . . with someone else, that is."

Ignatius thought her statement rather odd at first, considering her lengthy reticence to mixed bathing, coupled with alcohol. His original intent had been to get rid of her, but now it seemed an opportunity to keep her out of everyone else's hair. He knew he would have to miss the meeting with MacAleister, but

he also knew the others were quite capable of handling the situation without him. In consideration of his fellows, he was quite willing to make the sacrifice. The fact that he had had a few drinks himself, that Jess was looking particularly appetising and that it had been years since he had so much as shaken hands with a Vixen, also weighed heavily on his decision to make the following invitation.

He turned to her and smiled slyly as Foxes do.

"It's a big tub."

0930 – Black Kettle Pub

Barring PD, Pete would not normally have been up at the unduly early hour of half past nine in the morning, particularly on a Sunday. However, he had had a fairly decent night's rest as Johnny had tended the bar and closed up as well.

He went downstairs to make sure that everything would be prepared for Johnny at noon, when the pub opened for the day. Whilst in the middle of knocking on barrels to determine how full they were, he thought he heard one knock back.

"Must be the mice again," he muttered. "Li'l buggers."

He gave the barrel three taps.

Once again, it echoed, but with four taps. Rolling his eyes at his own stupidity, he went to the door to open it, revealing a grinning Desiree.

"Mornin', Des!" he said with a big smile. "You're back soon. Thought ya'd be sleepin' in at Ig's for a while."

"Normally, yeah, but guess who was at Ig's place?"

Pete shrugged.

"Jess."

Pete shook his head with a sigh. "Oh, that poxy . . . So's 'e gonna make it to the meetin' or no?"

"Dunno," Desiree shrugged. "I overheard some of their conversation and I kinda got the impression they wanted to be, umm . . . alone for a while."

"Alone?" Pete asked suspiciously.

"I can't say for certain," Desiree qualified, "but they were on their third glass of brandy – each – and the hot water was running in the tub before I high-tailed it outta there. That was about twenty minutes ago."

"Eww, diya," Pete said. He drummed his fingers on his chin in thought and then tapped his muzzle a few times. He picked up the phone behind the bar and dialled. After waiting patiently for a little while, he looked momentarily confused. "Hullo?" he prompted quietly.

0930 – Nora Master Bedroom

"Bloody phone," Ignatius grumbled as he picked up the earpiece and placed it on the table, returning his attentions to Jess.

A faint voice offered a tentative "Hullo?"

0931 – Black Kettle Pub

Pete listened for a few seconds more. The unmistakable sounds of ardour from the earpiece were becoming more apparent and at one point, Jess' distinct voice made some indiscernible noise. It was so loud, he had to move the earpiece a few inches from his head.

As if the sound of the telephone being hung up might disturb those on the other end, he gingerly put the earpiece back on the hook.

"Dang! Even I heard that," Desiree mentioned.

"Yeah," Pete nodded. "I daresay Ig's gonna miss the meetin'. 'E'll be on the job for a few hours."

"At the least," Desiree confirmed.

"Oh, at the *very* least," Pete confirmed. "I'll alert the others to the situation, shall I?"

0945 – Nora Balcony

Ignatius and Jess had slowly migrated to the balcony on the second story, just outside of the master bedroom, perhaps reasoning that, as they could not be seen from the ground, they might as well take advantage of the sun to dry their fur, whilst they took advantage of each other.

Of course, as they slowly proceeded in that direction, the bottle of brandy had passed from one hand to the other and at this stage, they were pretty much foregoing the formality of pouring it into glasses before pouring it down their throats.

Jess hoisted the bottle to her lips once again and was disappointed to find it empty. Pouting, she brandished the empty vessel before Ignatius, turning it upside down as evidence.

"Of course. Back in a moment," he replied. As he went into the bedroom, he quietly put the earpiece back on the telephone. Rushing down the stairs, he reflected that Jess wasn't such a bad person when she relaxed a bit, although it was unfortunate that the only time she ever relaxed was when she was fairly loaded. He reached the bottom of the stairs and discovered that they had used the last bottle from the cabinet while in the bath. Knowing that there was an ample supply in his basement, he quickly ran down to find it.

Coming out of the basement, he crept quickly to the telephone in the sitting room and dialled. "Hello, Pete . . . listen, I've only a minute," he whispered. "Can't make the meeting, obviously . . . I'm trying to keep her pre-occupied . . . No, push on to the Rialto without me . . . I say, there's no need to make personal remarks . . . No, I don't think she knows. She's not mentioned the cabinet . . ."

"What cabinet?"

"The one in The tré, of course. How many other cabinets are there? . . . What do you mean it wasn't you? . . . What? . . . Oh, bugger it . . . I'll talk to you later, Pete . . . bye."

Ignatius hung up the phone and sighed a deep sigh. "So, Jess, how long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough," Jess replied from behind. "So, tell me about this cabinet."

Ignatius sighed as he concluded that there was no point in hiding it any longer. "It's a portal to Reality."

"Reality?"

"Yes, Reality. Surely you're familiar with it."

"Familiar with it?" Jess asked in disbelief. "I should hope not. It doesn't exist."

"Please yourself," Ignatius said. "I'm not going to argue with you."

"So how does one enter this portal?"

"One opens the door and one descends a staircase. Reality is but a few dozen steps away."

Jess paused for a moment of thought. "Is this some sort of hallucinogenic drug thingy?"

"No, there are no pharmaceuticals involved."

"What's this 'Rialto' you mentioned?"

"It's a theatre also, but it's in Reality at the other end of the stairs."

She stood a while in thought looking at him. Ignatius was beyond caring at this stage. He looked at the bottle of brandy and, since it was the instrument of his betrayal, he decided that its fate was that it was to be consumed at the earliest possible opportunity.

"Brandy?" he proffered, as he poured his own glass. The invitation wasn't as enthusiastic as the last time, but it was more sincere.

"I have to hand it to you, Ig. You beat me this round," Jess admitted, smiling as she shook her head. "The staged phone call. This . . . *impossible* cock-and-bull story you cooked up apparently on the spur of the moment. I must admit, your imagination has developed quite a bit since I saw you last. A stairway to Reality. That takes vision. Could probably write a song about it."

He proffered the bottle again.

"Oh, go on then," she said.

He poured.

"And don't think we're gonna stop where we left off on that balcony, either," Jess warned him.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Ignatius replied.

0945 – Black Kettle Pub

"So what do we do now?" asked Clare. "He's in the clutches of that . . ."

"Vixen," offered Pete. "I say we go on. Poor lad's finally gettin' a bit o' tail . . . An' at any rate, 'e said 'e couldn't make it. We don't wanna keep our prospective benefactor waitin', do we."

"I hate to go without Ig," Geoff mentioned. "But if we don't make the meeting, then we might miss our only opportunity."

"Let's get on wif it, then," Rachael urged.

They left the pub and headed to The tré. Once there, Geoff unlocked the basement to the cabinet, let everyone in and then locked the door behind them. They traversed the passage, finally meeting Steve in the lobby of the Rialto.

"So how're we supposed to meet this geezer?" asked Pete.

"He said he'd send round a driver," Steve replied. "And that he'd drive us to his estate and back. The car should be here soon."

"Isn't he going to notice that we're not human?" asked Clare.

Steve shrugged.

"I think that will probably not go unnoticed," Desiree answered. "But, he asked us to come and we said we'd go."

"So, do we let 'im in on the secret?" asked Rachael.

"That's up to you," Desiree replied. "But if he doesn't ask . . . There's the driver," she pointed to a long limousine that had just turned the corner.

It stopped at the curb and Steve went outside to speak to the driver.

"Mister Green?" asked the chauffeur, getting out.

"Yes, I'm Steve Green."

"My name is Leon. I'm Mister MacAleister's chauffeur and I'll be driving you and the others to the estate. They're ready I hope – Mister MacAleister's time is very valuable."

Steve signalled to the others and they came out of the building.

"Never been in a wheelie-box before," Rachael whispered excitedly as she hung on Pete's arm.

"Safe to say, it's a first for most o' the others as well," Pete confided. "Only been a few times meself."

"Don't think it's dangerous, do ya?"

"Nah, safe as babies," Pete assured.

"My word," the driver said as he opened the doors. "What remarkable costumes! Is that real fur?"

"It's not fake," Steve answered, going with what had worked in the past.

They all got in and were comfortably seated as the car glided off into the countryside.

"Do you think he'll at least let us have the Rialto long enough to find Grace and Simon?" asked Sandra.

"Might do," Clare answered. "But we don't know how long that would be. Could be tomorrow, could be . . . who knows, honestly."

"One thing's for certain," Linda said. "We'll never find them without it."

"I suspect he'll probably just make us some offer we couldn't possibly afford," Desiree said.

"Come on, Desi," Geoff said optimistically. "Have a little hope."

"Yeah, sure," Desiree muttered dismissively. She concluded she was being a wet blanket and then intentionally brightened up. "You know what, Geoff? You're right. Let's go in with a positive attitude. What's the worst that could happen?"

"That's the spirit, Desi," Geoff said.

1015 – MacAleister Estate

The group had been deposited into a foyer filled with finger sandwiches and soft drinks, while the chauffeur went to find MacAleister.

"Sorry to keep you," the chauffeur apologised upon his return after a ten minute wait. "Mister MacAleister will see you now. This way please," he gestured. "He'll be sitting in the drawing room."

"Sure 'e's not drawin' in the sittin' room?" asked Pete with a smile.

"Very droll, sir," deadpanned the driver as he opened the door of the drawing room.

After they had all entered, the chauffeur closed the door and stood silently to the side.

"Oh, I see you came in character," George MacAleister noticed. "How nice of you. You needn't have gone to all the trouble."

"Sort of unavoidable, actually," Clare mentioned.

"Oh, no time to change? I'm sure it must take hours to take that make-up on and off."

"Practically a lifetime," Clare answered.

"Allow me to introduce myself, I'm George MacAleister. My son, Angus, is not here, as he's checked himself into a clinic. And you are?"

The company introduced themselves, individually.

"Lovely. Use your stage names when you're in character, do you?" Without waiting for an answer, he continued. "Now, then, let's get down to business. First of all, let me just say that I owe you a great debt of gratitude. Young Angus has always been a bit of a disappointment for me. His wife and I divorced when he was quite young and he grew up with her, up north.

"She didn't discipline him very much. He dropped out of school, started abusing drugs, in and out of the courts and there's only so much a good solicitor can do. I will say this; at least he's never done any violence to anyone. He really is a good lad, just a bit lazy and lacking in self-control.

"And now he's kicked the habit. And it looks like he'll really do it this time. He's said he'd do it before on numerous occasions, but this time I think he really means it."

"And why do you think that?" asked Linda.

"Because, he gave me this," he said, holding up a locket. "His mother died when he was fourteen and gave him this just before she passed on, God rest her soul, and it's the one thing he holds of value. Nothing else. Not his car, his house, anything. Just this tiny picture of his mother. He gave this to me and said, 'Father, I'm not worthy to wear this. Give it back to me when you think I am.' Now, I ask you, does that sound sincere to you?"

"Sorta brings a tear to your eye," Pete commented.

"It brought one to mine, I can tell you," George confirmed. "I told him if he could stay clean for a full 365 days, he could have it back. He said he would do it. Not even alcohol."

"We'd heard him say something along those lines," mentioned Steve.

"And you're the ones who made him do it," George said, "although, I'll admit to a little hoodwinking on my part."

"I'm happy to hear that he's made a good decision," Sandra began, "but what did we have to do with it?"

George smiled. "Can you actually *believe* . . . he actually thinks that you're covered in fur and have tails."

"Erm . . . we *are* actually covered in fur and have tails," Sandra dared to inform him.

"No, no, no, I mean when you're out of character," George explained, his smile widening. "Without all of the makeup and applications. He actually believed that you look this way *all the time!*"

The group looked on in stunned silence for just a second.

"Oh, f'true? Too funny!" Desiree said as sincerely as she could.

"I'll admit, I did give him a little push when I told, him," George covered his mouth to suppress his laughter, "hmpf! – that you were wearing face-paint, done, ahah, done by *six-year-olds!*"

This actually caused some of the group to laugh out loud and its contagion encouraged George. "And then I told him – get this! – that your ears were made of – ahmp – sticky-backed plastic!"

George was peeling with laughter now, as were a few others, but some nervous expressions were being exchanged. Pete noticed Slide looking very concerned and gave him a slap on the back. Having drawn his attention, he gave him a quick wink. Slide, picking up on the cue, began laughing and did the same to Sandra.

The laughter eventually died down and George had to ask his driver to fetch some soft drinks so he could recover.

"Mister MacAleister," Sandra began as soon as she had worked up the courage to ask, "we were wondering if you could tell us what will happen to the Rialto."

"Ah, yes," George recalled. "I was having so much fun, I nearly forgot the second reason I asked all of you here.

"I am the owner of the Rialto. I had placed it in trust for Angus, in the rather futile hope that he'd do something with it, but he's done nothing in all the years he's had it, except run it into the ground and use it as a hideout for his drug abuse, so I took it back. He's always been under the misconception that he was the outright owner. I've tried explaining to him several times, but he won't listen. Anyway, Angus will leave the clinic in just under two months. Of course, I want him to stay clean and I think the best way to do that is if he has someone to give him some direction, something to do. So, if you even want to consider any offer, the first stipulation is that you keep him clean for a year."

"That's a pretty tall order," Desiree said. "I mean, the only way we can make *sure* he stays clean is to watch him all day long and lock him up at night. Even then, he can always find a way to get his jones if he wants to."

"You're absolutely right," George said with a very serious expression. "But I feel fairly confident that if he's kept busy and is worked hard, he won't be a problem. If you put him in your employ, that should do the trick. So, are we agreed on this point?"

Everyone looked at everyone else, feeling very unsure of the situation.

"If not, then there's nothing further to discuss," George mentioned.

"Working on the assumption that we agree," Steve conjectured, "what would be the terms of the lease?"

"Oh, I'm not going to lease the Rialto to you, Mister Green," George said with a smile.

"You're not?" asked Michael. "Then why are we having this discussion?"

"I'm not going to lease the Rialto to you," George repeated, "because I'm going to *sell* it to you."

"Sell?" asked Steve, incredulous.

"That's right," George answered. "For one pound."

There was silence as the weight of the offer sank in.

"That is a most generous offer, Mister MacAleister," Michael stated warily.

MacAleister put up his hand to stop him. "Wait, there's more to the story."

He sipped his drink. "It's not quite the generous offer that it sounds. First of all, the reason I'm selling it to you is because the Rialto is a bit of a white elephant. There are back-taxes amounting to close to 300,000 pounds. That can wait a while and it will gather interest, but if you're successful with the Rialto, as I have no doubt that you will be, you can pay it off. Also, there are a few debts – not much, a few thousand pounds, but they have to be paid immediately."

"Why is that?" asked Steve.

"Because they're for the water, gas, electricity and phones. If you want any of those services, they have to be paid. I realise that you probably don't have that kind of cash lying about, but we'll discuss that later. Above all else, I want to make sure it goes to the *right* people."

"The *right* people?" asked Michael Robinson tenuously. For some reason, this phrase had always made him bristle, but his query retained a respectful tone.

"Yes, the right people. Oh, I don't mean any of that upper class nonsense, I mean the people with the right attitude and the right motives," George clarified. "For example, I raise horses. I love them as animals but, I freely admit, I do make some money on them. However, I want to make sure that when I sell one of my stock that it will go to someone that will treat it well and that it will have proper care and conditions. I don't want it going to some *nouveau riche* suburbanite, who's buying it for his spoilt daughter, thinking he can let it graze on the back lawn and keep it in the garage between the merc and the power mower."

"Good for you," Desiree said. "Personally, I think people that abuse horses should be whipped 'til dark."

"Oh, erm . . . thank you," George said, surprised at her passion. "Are you a horse fancier, then?"

"All animals, sir. I'm a semester away from getting my DVM."

"DMV? One doesn't need a driver's license to ride a horse."

"Doctor of Veterinary Medicine," Desiree explained patiently.

"Oh, right! Excellent. I'll have Leon, here, show you around the stables before you leave," George said, indicating the chauffer, who had remained silent thus far.

"Thank you, sir. It'd be my pleasure," Desiree accepted.

"Now, as I was saying, I want to make sure the Rialto goes into the right hands. I've dealt with it for years and, quite frankly, I just can't give it the time it needs or deserves." George took off his glasses and looked sadly introspective. "One would think one could trust one's own son, but . . ." He shrugged and put his glasses back on. "So, as it stands, I honestly *do* need to relieve myself of

the Rialto, as it's a liability, not so much of cash but, more importantly, of my time. However, I also want some assurance that it will be treated well and made into something – and that could take some doing."

"She'd take a bit of work, and no mistake," Geoff answered. "Floors in the bog are a mess, the seats in the auditorium have to be removed, windows need a good bit of work, the plumbing and electrics'll have to be redone, which means stripping the old plaster, which means replacing with new plaster, which means painting – but all that's superficial stuff. The supporting structure is all steel and concrete, so there's no danger of rot, termites or woodworm."

"How do you know all this?" asked George, with sudden interest.

"I'm a builder," Geoff answered instantly. "I noticed these things when I had a brief tour the other day."

"I thought you were all actors," George said.

"Ah, well . . . yeah," Slide waffled, "we are, of course . . ."

"But we have day jobs," Sandra helped her husband out.

"Some of us are career changers," Desiree added. "Take me, for example. I'm almost a veterinarian, and here I am, a manager for an acting troupe."

"You know how it is for the acting trade," Michael Robinson said. "Have to pay the bills until the big break comes."

"Oh, right," George said in sudden understanding. "So, what do the rest of you do?"

Pete: "Barman."

Rachael: "Me as well. Well, *barmaid*."

Gina: "Publican."

Linda: "Clerk and accountant."

Clare: "Dogsbody."

Slide: "Technical writer."

Sandra: "Sanitation Inspector."

Michael Robinson: "Bureaucrat."

"Wasn't there a fox in your party?" asked George. "I distinctly remember a fox."

"That would be Ignatius," Steve said. "He was unavoidably detained. He's a solicitor," he added, anticipating the next question.

"Excellent!" George beamed. "All of the components necessary for a successful business. If you truly put your minds to it, I don't see how you could possibly fail. Now, a very important question here, so pay close attention; Are you fully and truly committed to restoring the Rialto?"

There was a general nod of assertions and the odd mumble of affirmation.

"No, no, no, that won't do at all," George said, smiling. "Let's try this again. Are you fully and truly committed to restoring the Rialto?"

"Yes!" everyone chorused.

"Marvellous. And are you fully and truly committed to having the Rialto become a listed building?"

"Yes!" Steve and Michael cried.

"Yes!" the others said, following their lead.

"Fantastic!" George enthused. "Now – last one – are you fully and truly committed to making the Rialto a centrepiece of the community?"

"Yes!" they all affirmed, unanimously.

George put his hand on his heart, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. "You don't know how happy it makes me to hear that. Commitment. Passion. Dedication." He opened his eyes and scanned the others for a moment. "Those are the things that matter. Now, let's talk money.

"Our arrangement stipulates that you must pay me at least one pound for the sale of the building. I can't pretend that I understand them fully myself, so I won't go into the tax laws of how this is arranged. Do you have a pound right now?"

Desiree dug into her wallet. "Steve, I'm fresh out of cash. The only thing I've got is a 20 p coin."

Steve dug into his pockets. "I seem to have left my wallet. I only have 50 p." He turned to Mr. MacAleister. "I'm sorry. We only have 70 p at the moment."

Mr. MacAleister smiled. "You drive a hard bargain. That will do."

They handed him the change, which he put on the bar.

"As I mentioned earlier," began Geoff, "it's not in the best of condition. We can do the work ourselves, but we still need supplies and tools, and that'll be a fair amount of outlay. Where're we to get the dosh for that?"

"I'm afraid I can't really help you there. If I had provided any sort of funds for restoration, I wouldn't've been able to make the sale as I just have. I'm afraid you're up to your own devices. I'd start talking to the banks. Particularly the one just north of the market, if you catch my meaning," George mentioned with an obvious wink. "And be sure to bring a detailed business plan."

"Assuming all those minor details work out," Desiree started, "What if Angus doesn't stay clean for a year. What then?"

George smiled sadly. "I can see you've dealt with this kind of situation before, have you?"

"More or less," Desiree admitted. "I know a few people that had the monkey on their back. They still do. If they haven't OD'd yet."

"I had pretty much resigned Angus to the same fate. But this time is different. I'm sure of it. At any rate, to answer your question, let's just say we'll cross that bridge *if* we come to it.

"Anyhow, we'll make Mister Green our contact, as he's been the manager there for so many years. Steve, my chauffeur will take you to my solicitors tomorrow to sign the papers.

Steve suddenly seemed a bit nervous. "Erm . . ."

"Oh, I'm sorry," George apologised immediately. "You'd like to read the contracts first, of course. Perhaps review them with your own solicitor – Ignatius was it? That's perfectly understandable. In fact, I insist. Take a week and we'll get in touch then, hmm?"

"Yes, that would be preferable," Slide agreed. "Thank you."

"After that, the Rialto is yours," George said. "Now I'm *trusting* all of you to do the right thing. You won't let me down, will you?"

"No," everyone answered.

"You won't sell out, will you?"

"No," they echoed.

"Marvellous. Well, I see I have found a wonderful stable for a prize mare," George said.

1230 – Return Limousine to Rialto

Things were pretty quiet on the way back to the Rialto. Geoff finally broke the silence. "It's a pretty generous offer, all things considered," he said.

"Yeah, but . . ." Desiree muttered, trailing off.

"But what?" asked Geoff.

"Call me cynical, but it seems a little suspicious. I mean he just up and gives us a building for a pound? Right when we want it? Rich people don't work like that. Rich people do favors for their friends and family and they *screw* people like you and me. That's how they get to be rich."

"Maybe his friends and family weren't interested in the Rialto," suggested Steve. "After all, he let Angus have a go and that didn't pan out."

"Rich people also like easy money," Geoff pointed out. "And I can tell you, with a tax debt of 300 grand and the amount of work involved, it's gonna be a whole lot of work for a tiny slice of cash. That might explain why his friends weren't interested."

"And even if things don't work out, it might buy us enough time to find Grace and Simon," Sandra pointed out.

"And we're not committed yet," Steve said. "We haven't signed anything. We'll have Iggy look over the contracts very carefully and see what they say."

"I agree we should review the contracts," Slide said, "but regardless of what they say, we *must* sign them. If we don't, we've lost Simon and Grace. He might be running a crooked game, but it's the only game in town."

"So we sign the contracts. Then what?" Desiree asked. "I don't want to be a killjoy, but it's gonna be shut down within a month if we don't start making some money with it. And we can't make any money out of that thing unless we pour thousands into it to begin with. The building materials alone would bankrupt us. And on top of that, we could invest up to a year of our lives into it and if Angus starts shooting up again, we lose everything."

"We can take care of Angus," Michael pointed out. "For a year at least. Our biggest worry is, how to keep the Rialto open, so we can keep the portal open."

"We've got to renovate it," Linda stated. "Until we whip it into some kind of shape, it won't make tuppence. The big question is, what's that gonna take?"

"Gimme a few hours in the Rialto and I'll sort that out," Geoff said.

1300 – Newburg Outskirts

Some of the great cities of the world are in the United Kingdom – Edinburgh, Oxford, London, of course, and several others.

Despite these great metropolises, most (but certainly not all) Britons retain a small-town identity. This is not to say that they are unaware of the ways of the world or that they are simple; nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, it is a statement commending their humility and, being humble, they tend to describe themselves as being from a rather small place. For example, if one

were to ask a resident of Greater London where they are from, places such as 'Mitcham' or 'Clapton' or perhaps some district encompassing as little as a dozen city blocks might be mentioned, rather than 'London.' Even an answer of 'The City of London' would be limited to the 'Square Mile' of the financial district.

The British Broadcasting Corporation, one of the last great bastions of proper journalism in Britain that stands against the raging storm of Murdoch's yellow rags and shock-news that has plagued the United Kingdom (and the rest of the world), does an incredibly remarkable and commendable job of reporting the news throughout the UK and the world. They tell all sorts of interesting stories, which may originate from distant villages at the back of beyond where there are more livestock than people or from the very heart of the 'Square Mile'.

However, by and large, not much of worldly significance happens in the small area that the average Briton considers their hometown. There might have been the occasion when a beer barrel exploded, covering everyone in the pub with fresh ale or perhaps some other natural disaster, but life usually goes on with its humdrum pace of work or school and the occasional problems that crop up (many self-inflicted) that make life more interesting than one might care for it to be.

Because of this, Britons are known to occasionally do something intentionally outrageous or silly just to break the tedium or to bring attention to what they consider an important cause. A few witnesses to these artificial events might be astounded or amazed, but most just dismiss them for the silliness that they are.

That is why, as Simon and Grace wandered down the towpath and slowly away from the town, they drew little more than the occasional double take or rolled eyes from people who spotted them. This is not to say that they went unnoticed, rather that they were considered as not worthy of remark, as they seemed to have no desire to draw attention to themselves or some charity or event. Further, the handful of people that did spy them seemed to lack the courage or inclination to enquire of them who they might be, where they were from, what they were doing or why they were covered in fur and had big, fluffy tails and ears. They might also have been wary of the possibility that Simon and Grace might ask for loose change.

Thus, as they walked, it was mostly in silence.

"Shouldn't we stay near the Rinaldo?" asked Simon, after walking nearly an hour.

"The what?"

"The Rinaldo. That theatre we escaped from."

"Oh, right. I suppose. We just need a deserted building to stay in for a week or so. Maybe there's one on the outskirts of Newbury," Grace suggested.

"Newbury?"

"That's the name of the town that we were in. I saw it written on a few of the shops."

"Oh, right."

There was a pause in the conversation.

Grace's stomach broke the silence with a rumble. "I'm starving," she grumbled.

Simon wordlessly pulled a stalk of celery out of the pack and handed it to her. At first, Grace sneered at it but then her hunger overcame her penchant for grease and she grudgingly grabbed it from Simon's hand and took a large bite.

"At least it doesn't taste like that stuff I found in the 'fridge," Simon mentioned.

"Doesn't have any tashte at all," Grace said with a mouth full of greenery.

"Could be worse."

"Don't shay that," warned Grace.

"Why?"

"Becaushe it will be."

"That's bollocks. How is my saying anything going to make celery taste worse?"

"Trusht me, it will."

They walked to the sound of Grace ravenously munching on the celery stalk. When she finished, she held her hand out and Simon gave her another, which she ate without complaint. She held her hand out a third time.

"Sorry, that's it," Simon said.

"Whaddya mean 'that's it'?"

"That's all the food. There's no more."

"See? I told you it'd get worse. It's your fault."

"Course it is. It always is," he mumbled.

They were coming to a car bridge where there were a few small buildings. Parked next to a pub was a box van with one of a pair of cargo doors left slightly ajar.

"Let's have a look in that thing over there," suggested Grace, pointing to the van.

"What, that big box on wheels?"

"Yeah, that's the one," Grace commented. "Let's see if it's got a bit of nosh inside that we can nick. See, it's got a piccie of crisps on the side."

The two cautiously approached the van, ensuring by sight, sound and smell that no one was nearby.

"You watch the outside," Grace whispered as they stood behind the van. "Gimme a knock if someone's coming. I'll see what's inside."

Simon reluctantly nodded. He was quite hungry, but he still felt uncomfortable stealing or even being involved as an accomplice.

Grace, however, had no such compunction. She leapt into the rear of the van and immediately began to rummage about. Simon kept looking at all of the surrounding buildings in the event the owner might suddenly appear.

This, in fact, happened rather quickly. Simon spied a man coming around the corner of a building, fiddling with a few bits of paper and a clipboard. Giving a quick thump on the door, Simon waited for a response. Daring a glance, he observed that the man was barely twenty yards away. Knowing that they would never make a clean getaway, Simon leapt into the cargo of the van.

"Si, there's loadsermf!" Grace was interrupted by Simon putting his hand over her mouth and pulling her back against the closed door, so as to be out of sight of anyone outside.

"Bleedin' door latch. Told 'em to get it fixed," the man grumbled as he promptly closed it and latched it shut, leaving the two teens in total darkness.

They could hear him walk to the front of the van and get into the cab. Shortly afterward, the engine roared to life and they both lost their footing as it lurched forward.

"Now you've done it, Simon," Grace said, having to shout over the sound of the engine.

"Me? Why is it always me?"

1310 – MacAleister Estate

"So what was the trip back like?" asked George of the driver.

"They were very . . . *concerned*, sir."

"Concerned?"

"The American – the large girl that was not in costume – she showed a certain amount of scepticism."

"No surprise there," George replied. "And the others?"

"There seemed to be a cautious optimism but I think they'll take it eventually. Unless, of course, they or the banks find out about your rather special application of the depreciation tables. They're going to have their solicitor review the contracts."

"Did they mention his name?" asked MacAleister.

"Only his first name," answered Leon, the driver. "Iggy."

"Iggy?"

"I would take it to be short for 'Ignatius'," suggested the driver. "That was the, erm, fox they mentioned. The one that was detained?"

"Oh, yes, that's right. They did say he was a solicitor as his regular job. Odd – I thought I knew every solicitor in town," MacAleister mused. "I don't recall any by the name of Ignatius."

"It *is* an unusual name, sir," pointed out the driver. "Perhaps he's a new arrival to the town. Or perhaps his stage name doesn't reflect his real name."

"See if you can find out who this Ignatius character is and see to it he gets the proper information."

"Yes, sir. If I may ask, sir?"

"Yes?"

"Do you honestly believe this is the best approach? Why not just give the Rialto back to Angus and let him run it into the ground. Take the depreciation and leave it at that. You'll still garner a capital gain of well over £100,000. Not much at the end of the day, but still, it requires no effort on your part. And a bird in the hand . . ."

"They seemed eager. If I can convince them to apply for a loan at my bank, then I can get rid of the taxes. And if, miracle of miracles, they actually *do* turn it around, I could reap the benefit of their labours – as a functioning enterprise, the Rialto is worth several million. You'll have to agree that there's not a hope in hell that Angus would make a penny out of the Rialto."

The driver shrugged. "No argument there, sir. I just think that a simpler approach would be safer."

"Safer? How can I lose?" George put forward. "Even if they fail, the taxes get paid. I can still sell the Rialto to the developers, as is, and let them deal with the headache of demolition."

"Do you think Green will get the loan?" asked the chauffeur.

"Yes, and he'll only get it from my bank," George stated. "None of the other banks are going to loan him any money against that pile of rubbish. I just have to push the right buttons at the right time and it's a done deal."

"But if he defaults, the bank loses money. And it's your bank."

"First of all, as the chairman of the board of directors, I'm salaried. I get paid whether they make money or not. Secondly, let's say they fail – then what?"

"The bank forecloses on the property, of course."

"And who would the property belong to then?" asked MacAleister.

"The bank, naturally."

"And who decides how to dispose of repossessed property?"

"That would be you," admitted the driver. "And then the bank could sell it to the developers."

"Not quite," George contested. "If I allowed the bank to sell it to the developers, the bank would keep the money to recoup the loss and I really would have nothing to gain."

"So, who will the bank sell the Rialto to?"

"Me, of course," George answered. "For one pound. *Then* I can sell it to the developers. That way, I get to keep the money."

"But why go through this procedure? Why not just sell it straightaway? You'd make the same money, wouldn't you?"

"Not quite," George said. "As a standard operating procedure, the banks require that all overdue taxes be paid immediately. When the boys get the loan, the taxes are paid. No matter what happens, I'm 300 grand ahead already."

"Ah, I see. So, what if they succeed? Then what?" asked Leon, the driver.

"Oh, I have several options," George said calmly. "First, I could terminate the lease."

"Lease? You said you were selling it to him. Surely he'll notice when he signs the papers."

"It's a simple matter to switch contracts at the signing. With all the paperwork involved, he'll never notice. Alternatively, as he only gave me 70 p, I can say he never paid the asking price."

"That's a bit thin. Do you think that would actually stand up in court?"

"All I have to do is arrange for it to appear before Judge Balfour and Bob's your uncle. That's easy enough."

"And if you can't get it before Balfour?"

"The only way I wouldn't get it before Balfour is if he was removed from the bench – and the only way that would happen would be for him to be caught in bed with a dead girl or a live boy. And as a very last resort, I'm sure I can rely on Angus to start shooting up before the year is out," George said sourly.

The servant nodded in agreement. "True." He then recalled an important detail. "Oh, there is one other thing. Remember I told you, just when they arrived, that they seemed to think that they needed the Rialto to find someone.

Let's see . . . it was . . . Grace and Simon. They mentioned them again on the trip home. I suspect they're runaways."

"Why would they need the Rialto to find runaways?"

"I'm not sure, sir. I couldn't exactly ask for details."

"No, I suppose you couldn't. Hmm. Well, good news for me at any rate. If they feel that the Rialto is a necessity to find this Grace and Simon pair, then that's one more barrel they're over. Keep an eye out for any information about this. If I can actually manage to find them first, then I'll have some real leverage."

"Sir?"

"If I have Grace and Simon in my custody, then I can control their desire to keep the Rialto."

"Sir, I hope you're not suggesting anything along the lines of kidnapping?"

"No, nothing like that. After all, it wouldn't be kidnapping if they stayed with me of their own free will, would it?"

Leon smiled, somewhat relieved. "No sir. Not if it was by their own free will."

1830 – The tré Courtyard

"Shave me if I know what we should do," Ignatius replied. "Have the papers been signed?" he asked as he helped stack the burnable trash from The tré to form the bonfire for the evening. The yard was reasonably large and would accommodate a sizeable fire and well over a hundred people.

"I'm going to pick them up tomorrow," Steve answered, dragging a few pieces of old timber along. "MacAleister gave us a week to review them."

"Bring them round and I'll give them a good scan," Ignatius ordered. "I don't know what the law is like in Newburg, but I can read a contract."

"So, where's Jess?" asked Pete, as he prepared to break up an old desk.

"She's at Nora, either sleeping or drinking," Ignatius said. "I told her I was coming here to help build the bonfire and to clean up the rubbish. As there is manual labour involved, I can assure you, she is at a safe distance for the moment."

"So, what happened?" asked Linda.

"This should be good," Pete muttered with a smile. "Go on, Ig, tell us your tale," he said in a loud, clear voice.

"Ahem," Ignatius stalled. "Yes, well, as Desiree can attest, Jess simply walked into the house without invitation or announcement . . ."

"Then she dissed me," Desiree put in. "That's when I went to my room."

"She started asking lots of questions about us coming out of The tré past midnight," Ignatius recalled. "Fortunately I was able to stall her on most counts."

"What, exactly, did you tell her?" Slide asked. "It might be a good idea to get our story straight."

Ignatius stood still (except for his tail) while he tried to remember the details. "Erm, yes . . . I told her that we were looking for Grace and Simon. I then told her that we had a chance encounter with Desiree and that she took us to Newburg, where she had seen them."

"You told her about Newburg?" asked Clare. "Ig, there's no Newburg in The Kingdom."

"Shouldn't worry," Pete dismissed. "If she can't find it on a map, what's she gonna do about it?"

"That's about it, honestly," Ignatius almost concluded, "for the first act at least. At that point, I tried to get rid of her, by taking a bath and having some brandy."

Everyone stopped and stared at him.

"Sorry," Sandra said. "I fail to see the connection."

"When we were a good bit younger – just before uni – we shared an experience with a bath and some brandy," Ignatius explained. "Personally, I found it very gratifying – as did Jess, I'm sure. But from that day forward, if I ever suggested a repeat, she always made some excuse to be somewhere else. Thus, I made the suggestion, hoping it would have the same effect."

"I think it safe to say that things didn't go accordin' to plan," Pete surmised.

"Which is not to say that it had an undesirable effect," Ignatius countered. "I did manage to preoccupy her, allowing the rest of you to make the appointment."

"Preoccupy her?" asked Geoff, a sly smile forming on his face. "Is that what they're calling it these days?"

"What'd you do to preoccupy her?" asked Steve.

"Yeah, Ig," Pete urged with a knowing smile. "Go on. Tell us. 'Ow'd ya preoccupy Jess for all that time? Was it draughts? Perhaps a round or two o' cribbage?"

"Erm, that is to say . . . " Ignatius stalled.

"Oh, Ig," Sandra said reproachfully, dropping her lumber.

"You didn't!" Slide reprimanded after he'd thrown an old barrel on to the stack.

"What?" asked Rachael. "What'd 'e do?"

"He and Jess got drunk, took a bath, went to bed and did it doggy style," proclaimed Desiree in a loud and clear voice. Suddenly comprehending her gaffe, she covered her mouth. Her eyes were wide open as she looked at Slide and Sandra. "Oh, I'm *terribly* sorry . . . "

"It's Ignatius you called a dog, not us," Slide pointed out.

Ignatius had too much on his mind to even notice Desiree's slight.

"Oh, say it ain't so, Ig," Clare groaned.

"Well . . . she wouldn't leave," Ignatius said defensively, "and she was foxed . . . "

"Foxed? As in confused?" asked Steve.

"No, 'foxed,' as in 'drunk'," Ignatius clarified. "And it's been months – years in fact. Have a little sympathy."

"Well, good on ya, Ig," Geoff said. "Ya finally done to her what she'd done to you all them years."

"Not to mention the rest of us," Sandra bristled.

Ignatius continued his explanation. "Anyway, just after you called the first time, she said she wanted another brandy, so I went to the cellar to get a bottle. On the way up, I called you the second time."

"Still can't believe it," Slide muttered breaking up some drawers.

"Unfortunately, she heard my end of the second call," Ignatius confessed.

"Yeah, I'd sussed that. 'Ow'd it go?" Pete asked.

"The rather amazingly good news is," Ignatius said, "she doesn't believe it. She thinks it was staged."

"Does she?" asked Sandra, incredulous.

"Yes, she actually does," Ignatius stated. "She thought the whole thing was a wind up on my part. For the moment, we're safe. But we dare not clue her in that it might be true."

"Who is this person?" asked Michael Robinson, as he threw on a few more sticks.

"Old girlfriend o' Ig's – an' 'e's been 'ard done by 'er, that's for sure," Rachael said. "They broke up yonks ago an' now she's 'ere investigatin' 'is office."

"Investigating? Is she from the police or something?" asked Michael.

"Nasty bit of business that goes by the name of Civil Enquiries," Geoff answered.

"I take it they don't live up to their namesake by being very civil?" enquired Michael.

"You take it correctly," Pete answered. "Take it from me – they're about as civil as a Bear wiffa sore head."

"Are you quite certain she has the authority to do this?" asked Michael. "I've had several people try to audit my work who had no authority whatsoever."

"If she's with Civil Enquiries, then yes, she has the authority," Ignatius declared.

"Are you certain she's with Civil Enquiries? Did she show her credentials?" Michael continued.

"Credentials?" asked Pete. "Ya don't need a diploma to be a snoop."

"No," Ignatius answered. "He means some sort of identification that she's actually from Civil Enquiries. And no, she didn't." His brush swished in thought. "A very astute observation, Mister Robinson."

1830 – Somewhere in England

Grace and Simon were sitting in the darkness of the box van as it rumbled off into the countryside, although they could not know this as there were neither conveniently placed windows for them to see out of, nor any windows at all.

"We've been in here for hours," Grace complained. "Isn't this thing ever gonna stop?"

"I'm going to see if I can find some way of getting out," Simon said, standing up. "Stay put, okay, Grace?"

"All right," she grumbled.

Simon felt his way around and soon found the door. There was some sort of mechanism, but it seemed to be fairly immobile. *Grace is good at figuring out fiddly mechanical things*, he thought.

"Grace? Could you come here? I think I've found a way out," he called to her.

She came quickly to his side. "Where is it?"

"End of my arm."

Grace found the mechanism and began to play about with it.

"Hmm . . . Doesn't twist or turn like a regular knob. Lessee . . . Push, pull, slide, SIMON! HELP!"

Grace was now hanging on to the door, which had opened fully and was, along with the rest of the van, barrelling down a dimly lit road at a rate faster than anything Simon had ever seen before, including the trains that he occasionally took to Trinova. He bravely hung on to the doorsill and grabbed Grace by the belt on her trousers and pulled her back inside, laying her on the floor.

"Siffing JACK!" she exclaimed.

"You all right, Grace?" asked Simon.

"No, I am *not* siffing all right!"

"Are you hurt?"

"No, but I'm bleeding scared!" Grace exclaimed.

"Yes, I can see that from the pool of piddle on the floor that you've just made."

"Next time this thing comes to even a slow down, we jump out with all the goodies we can carry."

"Goodies? What've they got?"

This question improved Grace's morale substantially. She smiled, stood up and dusted herself off. "Lovely stuff, Si. Take a goosey. They've got all kinds of crispy things – and you can *smell* the fat they've been fried in. And biscuits and chocolates and just – everything!"

"So no actual, genuine food, then," Simon pointed out.

"Hold the door open so I can see and I'll stuff our bag."

Simon did as he was told as Grace filled their rucksack with little packets of junk food and then began stuffing her shirt and her pockets as well. She then started bringing stuff to Simon and stuffing his shirt as well.

She was almost done, when the van made the unmistakable noise of slowing down.

"Ready?" she asked Simon. She grasped the doorframe and sat on the ledge of the van. Simon sat next to her.

Being night, the road was quite dark and there were no cars visible for some distance. It was a quiet country lane with few buildings in the vicinity, surrounded mostly by sheep pastures and short fences.

The van approached the roundabout and, as there was no traffic, the driver felt no need to come to a complete stop, but the turn was tight, so he did slow down enough for the two stowaways to jump off, both falling backwards on their rumps and rolling with their feet flying up in the air.

"Ow, I think I kinked my tail," Simon said after he got up.

"Here, lemme see," Grace said. She grasped his tail and began to feel along it. "Yeah, there's a definite kink here. You want me to fix it?"

Simon steeled himself. "All right."

Grace grabbed the tail with both hands, with the kink in the middle. With a sudden jerk, she pulled as hard as she could.

Simon yelped in pain. "*Yowp! Ahhhh!* Cor, that hurts!" Simon hissed in pain.

Grace picked up their bag. "Better than having a crooked tail. Come on, let's beat feet. It'll take your mind off the pain."

"Don't I even get a kiss?" asked Simon.

"I'm not kissing your tail!"

"I don't want you to kiss my tail."

"Oh, you are such a . . ." She stretched upward and kissed him on the lips briefly. "Come along, then, you big whelp."

"Where are we going?" asked Simon.

"Well, the van went that way," she pointed. "So I guess we should head in the opposite direction to get back to where we came from."

Simon couldn't argue with that kind of logic, so he followed her.

As they walked along the road, the occasional car would zip past. A few actually stopped as if to offer them a ride, but as soon as the two came anywhere nearer, they sped off.

"Wonder why they do that?" asked Grace.

"Maybe they can tell that you wet your knickers earlier and they don't want you sitting in their little wheeliebox with your great, soggy bottom."

"Oh, shut it, you!" she admonished with an embarrassed smile, slugging him in the shoulder.

"Ow," Simon said in feigned pain. "Is that anyway to treat the person who just saved your life?"

"Just because you saved my life, doesn't give you the right to say horrible things about me," Grace said, although she was trying to keep from smiling.

"Okay, Grace," Simon answered softly. "Won't mention it again."

They locked their arms together as they walked down the dark lane.

"Mind you, I'd eat a carrot for a fresh set of knickers just now," Grace admitted.

2030 – The tré Courtyard

The bonfire in the courtyard of The tré was lit at twilight and by the time it was dark, it was roaring nicely. A good part of the town had gathered for the event, upon learning that Ignatius had donated a barrel of beer and some other components of Nora's vast cellar to the celebration. The townspeople took it in turns to stand before the fire. Some of them told anecdotes, some quoted poetry or sang songs (mostly of a ribald nature) and a few even took the tradition of jumping over the fire. It was a simple forum for a small town, but not to be taken seriously.

Ignatius could not help but notice that Jess was standing near him all night, but she wasn't asking questions or snooping about. She was just relaxing and having a good time.

At some point during the evening, while Jess was berating Thaddeus about some trivial character flaw, Ignatius took the opportunity of her distraction to catch Clare's attention.

Clare raised an eyebrow.

Ignatius pointed with his nose to the auditorium.

Clare excused herself from her conversation and entered The tré. Ignatius discreetly joined her.

"You wanted something, Ig?" Clare asked, the two of them alone in the auditorium.

"I want you to go to Trinova tomorrow. Take the earliest train possible," Ignatius ordered. "There's a six-thirty, I think. Go to Liza at the Library. She'll have a parcel waiting for you. It will be under seal, so resist the temptation to open it. You'll see the contents after I've had a look at them, but I have to screen them first, so no peeking, understood? I know we said that we'd have no secrets, but these are official documents and . . ."

"It's all right, Ig," Clare interrupted. "I understand."

He reached into his waistcoat and pulled out a small, signed and sealed envelope. "Now you'll have to give this to her to get the parcel, understood? And she or, more likely, Jim, will have to go and get it and that may take some time, but you should be done well before ten. That should give you a few good hours of . . . free time," he winked.

"What am I going to do . . . erm. Right. Think I could manage to amuse myself." She took the envelope and stuffed it in her brassiere. "Erm, how do I pay for the train?"

"Oh, right. Here's a sovereign," he handed her a coin. "Use that for your expenses and keep the rest for pay, carrying charges and, erm . . . entertainment. And take the opportunity to return any books you've finished."

Her eyes widened quite a bit at Ignatius' generosity. "Oh, ta for that, Ig."

"Right, let's get back to the party before we're missed," Ignatius suggested.

Upon his return, Ignatius noticed that Thaddeus was now sharing his opinions with Jess and he sighed in relief that his short departure had gone unnoticed by the pair of them.

Throughout the evening he socialised with his constituents and, being of an observant nature, noticed that although Steve and Desiree were never separated, they always seemed to be having a deep discussion, if not an outright argument. It also seemed to Ignatius that Steve was getting the shorter end of things in general.

He also observed that Linda and Geoff had disappeared for a little while and when they reappeared, they were sharing a bottle of wine as they giggled constantly.

The celebration lasted until well past midnight. Pete and Ignatius extinguished what was left of the fire, cleaned up some of the mess and retired for the evening.

25JUN2001 Monday

0800 – The tré Basement

Ignatius arrived at The tré well before the morning Portrayal and was standing in the basement, leaning over a crudely formed table as Geoff shared his vision of the changes.

"So, here's the basement plan," Geoff said, continuing with his rough sketch. "Fairly basic, just the rectangle beneath the ground floor, all one open space with some supporting pillars. What we'll do here, is," he drew a line, bisecting the basement, "sorta divide the basement in two, each side with its own entrance and staircase. One side quite large, where we put in shelves and the like for stores . . ."

"Ah, so that's to take the place of the stores upstairs where we're to put the new tea room?" asked Ignatius.

"Right. And the other, much smaller, side will contain all of our interesting bits – the cabinet, the crank and the lever."

"Certainly a good start, but what's to keep them from just going into our side?" asked Ignatius.

"Just a bit of misdirection," Geoff said, with a knowing smile.

"Being?"

Geoff pointed to the plans. "See, this bit here? The top landing of the stairs, that's open to the main room? We'll put in a second set of stairs, obviously and they'll be opposite the flight we have now. So, if you want to go downstairs, you stand here," he pointed to a spot with his pencil, "and you'll see two doors. To the right is a door which you and I know is the door to the old staircase and our cabinet and so on."

"As does everyone who's ever been to the basement," Ignatius pointed out.

"However, to the left, is the brand new staircase to the basement, with a stable door . . ."

"A stable door?" interrupted Ignatius. "Surely we wouldn't put an unstable door in a room filled with children, would we?"

"Stable, as in 'horse'," Geoff explained.

"Oh . . . No, sorry, lost now," Ignatius confessed.

"A half door."

"Ah, I see. Which side, left or right?"

"Bottom, actually," Geoff patiently continued.

"Oh, right! *That* kind of stable door. So an adult could clearly see over the top half . . ."

"And the children are in no danger of falling down the stairs. Now, you step on this landing – which way do you go if you wish to go to the basement? Through the shut and locked door, or down the open and plainly visible stairs?"

"Well, down the open stairs, naturally, but what if someone opens the door? What happens when they notice the new storeroom is not the whole basement?"

"Very simple," said Geoff, as he pulled a small yellow sign from under the plans.

"Danger – high voltage. Authorised personnel only," Ignatius read. "Ah, and it even has one of those little glyphs for the illiterate. Excellent."

"Are we gonna tell Dawn?" asked Geoff.

Ignatius sighed. "I'd like to, but I'm afraid to take the risk."

"Risk? Mind you, I wouldn't trust those stropo junior Mares with the time of day, but Dawn'd never grass. She'd do just about anything you ask, Ig."

"I'm not afraid of Dawn grassing," Ignatius said. "I know she'd never. It's just that I'd prefer that she be clear of the blast if this blows up in our faces."

"Oh, yeah, good point," Geoff concurred. "Frankly, I'd tell her anyway. End of the day, though, it's your neck she'll wring when she finds out, not mine."

"What if someone does take the wrong door?" Ignatius asked, hoping to shift the image Geoff had placed in his mind. "Won't they see the crank and everything?"

"Oh, we'll keep the door locked at all times. And I'll hide the crank and lever with some panelling, that sort of thing. Even you won't be able to find them once we're done," Geoff answered. "And, there's one other thing. This bit here," he said, pointing to a new spot on the plans.

Ignatius peered at the section of the drawing, none the wiser. "Sorry, don't quite follow. What's that, then?"

Geoff walked over to the wall, a dozen or so feet away from the cabinet. There was something resembling either a very steep staircase or a very wide ladder that ran up the full height of the wall. Geoff took a few steps up, opened a latch and pushed upward. Sunlight flooded into the basement as the horizontal door creaked open and then fell to rest on its stops, just after its zenith. He then pushed a second door twinned to the first, revealing an opening nearly six feet wide.

"My word," Ignatius marvelled. "I'd never even noticed those doors!"

"Neither had I," Geoff admitted, "until just this morning. They're old service doors to take large items in and out of the basement. For our purpose, it's perfect. We can go in and out of our half of the basement and, with the outer wall that surrounds The tré, no one will be the wiser. I'll have to replace the hinges and put in a new staircase, but that shouldn't take long."

Ignatius sighed. "I certainly hope we can keep up this charade until . . ."

"Hey! Y'all in there? It's me Desiree!" The voice came through the small megaphone-cum-vent. "Where y'at?"

"Come in, Desiree," Ignatius called.

Desiree DelHomme entered with Steve Green and Michael Robinson in tow.

"We went to gather up the contract as soon as we could," Steve mentioned, holding up a sheaf of papers.

Ignatius took the contract and pulled out his spectacles. "Geoff, please commence on the work as soon as possible. Feel free to hire anyone you see fit. It might take a while to get the funds, but I can borrow some from the town's surplus until it arrives. How long do you think it'll take to get the basement portion of this job done?"

Geoff looked at the three humans standing before him. "You three got anything going on just now?"

Desiree and Steve shrugged.

"I can take the day off," Michael suggested.

"With these three yard apes, I can get the most important bits done by today," Geoff told Ignatius. "Come along then," he told the humans, "no time to lose. First stop, we'll take my horse-cart to the lumberyard and get the timbers."

"Yard apes?" Desiree said, smiling. "Hee!" she giggled.

"Where's this lumberyard?" asked Michael as they all followed him up the stairs.

"It's in SwanThrop, about two miles away," Geoff said. "So if we get going and take turns pulling, it should take less than an hour or so to get there."

"I thought it was a horse-cart?" asked Desiree. "Why are we pulling it?"

"Just 'cause it's a horse-cart, don't mean I have a horse," Geoff pointed out.

1145 – *The tré*

"You guys are such wimps," Desiree protested. "Geoff and I pulled most of the way and it was all you two could do to walk fast enough to keep up."

"That may be true, but we loaded most of the timber," Michael said defensively.

"I've never been under the pretence that I'm a strong person," Steve admitted.

"The hard bit's over," Geoff told them. "Let's get these timbers in the basement. Then we'll have a quick bite at the Kettle and get straight back to work."

1200 – *Black Kettle Pub*

Ignatius was looking over the contracts while they were having lunch at the Black Kettle.

"Well, it does appear fairly straightforward," he commented. "We shall own the building itself, all assets therein, all acreage and the right to the Rialto name. Our responsibilities include the purchase price of a pound and keeping Angus free of all illegal drugs for a full year. What 'illegal' exactly entails and a definition of failure on that particular point isn't quite clear, but, no matter, we can take care of that.

"However, we are also responsible for all utilities, past and present, and all taxes, past and present as well. According to these valuations, the land by itself is worth about half a million quid, but the theatre itself is a liability of about £50,000. Furthermore the past due debts come to nearly £300,000."

"Claude Baughs!" Pete declared, "We could make a tidy sum sellin'."

"Yes, except for two things," Slide pointed out. "First, you couldn't spend the money here. Second, we'd lose the way to Reality."

"And without the portal we'll never find Grace and Simon," Sandra added.

"Sandra and Slide are right," Ignatius said sombrely. "We are committed to continue our search for Grace and Simon and that means keeping the portal open, which means gaining control of the Rialto. We gain nothing by selling, unless you want a permanent life in Reality. For the taxes, as long as we can keep paying the interest, they won't prosecute, from what I read."

"Awrite, awrite! I wasn't actually *suggestin'* we sell it," Pete qualified.

"How much is the interest?" asked Linda.

Steve opened a notepad. "Changes year to year. Last year, according to this, Mr. MacAleister paid . . . let's see, where was that number?" he asked himself, flipping through a few sheets. "Ah, here it is. £18,000."

"Oh, well, walk in the park," Pete said sarcastically. "We could raise 'at in our sleep."

"That's not the biggest problem, actually," Steve stated. "The problem is getting some cash to restore the Rialto to where we can use it for anything at all. It has to pass inspection and that's going to require no small amount of dosh."

"Scuse me, but this is impossible," Pete objected. "There is no way that we can just summon money outta the ground."

"As Mister Mac pointed out," Linda recalled, "there are the banks."

"Desiree, Michael and I are going to talk to the banks tomorrow," said Steve. "I'm not very optimistic that they'll give us the loan, however."

"I honestly don't see why not," Linda said. "We have assets worth over half a million and liabilities of 350 grand. That's a net worth of 150. Let's say the banks loan us 400. If we pay the debts immediately, there's fifty in cash left for the banks and whatever they can sell the property for. Even if they sell it at 350, they're ahead. So we have the security for the loan. That's the whole idea of banking – loan money to people only if they can prove they don't need it. By the way, has anyone written a business plan yet?"

"I put together a rough plan last night," Desiree answered. "I took some business classes in college while I was still under the delusion that I could start a vet business. They're sitting in my room – just need to be typed up all pretty-like."

"Oo! I'll type 'em up," Linda volunteered eagerly. "If Steve'll show me how to use that computer thingy."

"Sorry, Linda, I've got Steve for the afternoon," Geoff said.

"Clare can take Steve's place," Ignatius volunteered his employee. "She should be showing up within an hour or two. That should free up Steve."

"I'd prefer Steve, as humans can do better work with those long, skinny fingers," Geoff said, "but I'm willing to make the sacrifice to let him help Linda. Serves our cause best, all things considered."

"Yeah, Steve's just a yard bonobo. Geoff needs the yard orangutan and the yard gorilla," Desiree pointed out. "That's Michael and me."

"Mum!" Rachael protested. "'Ow come Desi gets to call 'erself an' 'er mates oorang-ootangs an' all, an' I'm not?"

"Because I'm your mum and I told you not to," Gina replied. "And by the way, you can help Geoff at The tré, as well."

"Don't do chippy," Rachael announced.

Desiree snorted as she suppressed a giggle.

"You'll do chippy today, young lady," Gina ordered. "And you'll not ask tuppence for it."

Desiree's eyes squeezed shut as she forced herself to keep a straight face.

"What's so bleedin' funny?" asked Rachael, noticing her mirth nonetheless.

"Let's just say you'd make a whole lot more'n tuppence if you were a chippie where I lived."

"Oh, yeah?" Geoff said. "What about an experienced old hand like m'self?"

"Even in my town, I think you'd have a hard time making ends meet as a chippie," Desiree answered coolly.

"She's just being clever," Steve dismissed. "She's talking about a fish and chips shop."

"Nooo, not exactly," Desiree qualified. "More like fried chicken."

"Fried chicken?" asked Rachael, mystified.

"Where I come from, a chippie would offer a pair of breasts, a couple of thighs," Desiree explained, "and a roll."

"I'm sorry, this conversation is becoming a bit much for me," Ignatius complained, rising. "If you'll excuse me, I have to make some enquiries concerning a certain unwanted guest."

1345 – Black Kettle Pub

Ignatius had spent the last ninety minutes in the Town Hall on the telephone.

"I told you he'd be here," Linda said to Clare as they entered.

Ignatius continued his conversation on the telephone. "I see . . . So she's still on assistance? . . . And how long has she been unemployed? . . . Oh, dear. Well, thank you for your time. You've been very helpful . . . Good-bye." He placed the earpiece on the receiver.

"Are we done?" asked Linda

He held up a finger to beg her patience, as he made a few notes on a list. "So, that's CE, her family, the dole office, Kings Yard – Yes, that should just about do it. Sorry to keep you waiting. What can I do for you?"

"Sorry I didn't arrive earlier, but I had to, erm . . . freshen up a bit," Clare mentioned. "But I did get them."

"Them?" asked Ignatius.

"The documents you asked for," Clare clarified.

"What documents?" asked Ignatius.

"The ones you sent me all the way to Big Smoke for!" Clare complained as she handed him a parcel.

"Oh, that!" Ignatius recalled, reaching for the envelope. "Thank you, Clare."

Clare jerked the parcel back and held out a form. "Liza made me promise to give you this first," she said, handing over a multipage triplicate form. "It's for a terminal. And she says to give her a ring so she can advise you on how to fill it out."

"As well as every other aspect of my life, no doubt," Ignatius muttered, taking the form and putting it aside. "Now may I have the sealed documents?"

Smiling, Clare handed them over. Ignatius adjusted his spectacles, unsealed the parcel and pulled out the documents. Mumbling to himself as he read along, he flipped a page and then another. He finished skimming over the first set and handed them to Clare. "Here, you can read these," he said.

Clare took them and glanced over them as Linda looked over her shoulder.

"These are town council meeting minutes . . . from a century ago?" asked Linda.

"Mm-hmm," Ignatius replied in acknowledgement as he skimmed over the second document. "Oo, that's interesting." He pressed his nose a little closer to the document to read in more detail.

Clare and Linda both leaned around to take a look over his shoulder. Ignatius noticed and put the papers to his chest. "Not yet. I have to clear them first."

They pulled away and rolled their eyes, waiting patiently.

Ignatius began examining the papers again. "I was hoping to find something about the origins of the portal and who made the cabinet. Seems a bit vague, how . . . ev . . . er." He flipped through a few more papers. "Now here's something. Apparently they knew about the portal before Tad's man from Reality appeared, but it looks like it was just a wooden door at the time." He ran through a few more papers. "Ah, here 'tis. Shortly after the man-in-The-tré incident, they had the current cabinet built. So it's about a hundred years old. Right, here, you can read through these," he said handing the stack of papers to Clare.

Looking through another set, he ran his finger down the page. "Ah, very interesting. Good. Here you are, Clare. Nothing involving national security here. Come take a look. Remember that tale Tad told us? Here it is in the police record. Look, there's the arrest record. Here's his name," Ignatius pointed.

"Oh, look, the cabinet was designed by Bertie PloughField, the man who made that Fur-dryer in the Rialto," Linda remarked.

"Was it?" asked Ignatius, incredulous.

"I distinctly remember reading the name on the Fur-dryer as 'Proudfoot'," Clare countered. "Pete pointed out to Rache that it was the same name as on the photograph in the Kettle."

"Which photograph?" asked Ignatius.

"The one with my great aunt Sandy in front of the volcano in the SandWedge Islands," Clare mentioned.

Ignatius raked his memory. "Have I seen this photograph?"

"The one hanging by the stairs," Linda said. "It's been there forever. The one where she's got her tits out."

"Oh!" Ignatius recalled. "*That* one. Are you sure it says 'Proudfoot'?"

"No, actually," Clare admitted. "I don't recall what the inscription on the photograph says. I just took Pete's word for it."

"I think I would have noticed a name like 'Proudfoot'," Ignatius pointed out. "It's not a Frith name and it's not a name of work for a human."

"Well, let's not just gab about it. Let's go and look," Linda suggested. "It's only around the corner."

The three exited the Town Hall, walked around the corner, into the Black Kettle and to where the photograph was hanging on the wall. Squinting, Clare read the caption aloud. "It says 'Sandy MarchHare, Pele Volcano, SandWedge Islands, April, 1900. Photographer – Bertie *PloughField*.' So it's *not* Proudfoot."

"Hmm. I wonder if he changed his name." Ignatius conjectured. "Linda, do you know anything about these people?"

"No, I don't, honestly," Linda admitted. "Although, I'm beginning to wonder if we've found another mixie in Otterstow's sordid history, and right here in the Kettle."

"What, Pete and Gina?" Clare grinned. "Not bloody likely."

"I was referring to Sandy and Bertie," Linda clarified. "Although I do wonder about Pete and Gina, from time to time," she added.

"So how do you link Proudfoot and PloughField?" asked Ignatius.

"Bertie's not a very common name," Linda pointed out. "And 'PloughField' sounds near enough to 'Proudfoot'. Ploughing a field would just barely qualify as a human name of work."

"If his name was Proudfoot and he was from Reality and he wanted to stay here in Allegory," Clare premised, "he'd certainly have to change his name."

"In that case, I'd have to believe that PloughField and Proudfoot are one and the same," Linda concluded.

"I suspect you're correct," Clare confirmed. "But even if Bertie is yet another escapee from Reality, that doesn't mean that he and Sandy were a mixie."

"And as interesting as all this is," Ignatius admitted, "it has nothing to do with recovering Grace and Simon."

"True," Linda admitted, "and while I'll be the first to say that recovering our little tearaways is at the top of my list of priorities, it is not the *only* interest in my life."

"You'll forgive me for being nosy," Ignatius said, "but why would the private lives of Bertram and Alexandra be any of your affair?"

"You're forgiven for being nosy," Linda replied, not answering his question. "Don't Clare and I have somewhere to be?" she reminded. "And you as well?"

"Ah, yes," Ignatius suddenly recalled. "Clare, I've volunteered you to help Geoff at the tré, so Steve can have enough time to teach Linda how to use that, erm . . . calculator . . . thingy."

"Computer," Linda corrected him. "I'm going to help polish up Desiree's business plan, so they'll have something to show the banks."

"Are we going to get a terminal here in Otterstow?" asked Clare. "Like Liza suggested."

"What with one thing and another, I haven't given it much thought," Ignatius confessed. "Linda, do you think . . ."

"Oo, yes please!" Linda ejaculated. "Several, in fact."

"Right, then," Ignatius conceded. "I'll fill out the forms."

1400 – Rialto Office

Clare had assumed Steve's duties with Geoff, freeing him to give Linda some personal instruction on the computer.

"Do they not have computers at all in The Kingdom?" Steve asked her.

"Well, sort of. We have these very large computers that everyone shares. They're usually housed in universities or government offices. To use them, you have to get a terminal.

"I think I've just convinced Ig to get a terminal for the town and link it to the library. Just the terminal is about as big as a valise and would have just a basic display. It's nothing like this fancy job with a colour display. This thing is tiny."

"You can get even smaller ones than this," Steve mentioned. "They're called laptops."

"Laptops?"

"They're so small you can sit them on your lap, carry them around like a book," Steve elaborated. "In fact, the smaller ones are called notebooks."

"So how did you get this one?" asked Linda.

"Bought it myself," Steve answered casually.

"Aren't they dear?"

"Not horribly. They can start as little as 400 quid."

Linda got a faraway look in her eye for a moment.

"Still with us?" Steve asked.

"Oh, sorry. So, what's the 'hard-drive' again?"

"That's where all the information is kept on a permanent basis," Steve answered. "The stuff that's up now is just temporary. If I were to turn the computer off, it would all be lost. But if I were to save it to the hard-drive, then it's stored permanently."

"And this internet thingy?"

"From what you described, it's something like that terminal you were just telling me about."

"So, what is it?"

"Well, it's millions of computers linked together, all over the world. They can communicate with each other and there are all sorts ways to do research, buy and sell things, read the news, display pictures of your holiday to the world . . ."

"So nothing like our system, then," Linda interrupted. "Ours is strictly civil use. About the only interesting things you can do are read books from the library and fill out government forms – and all the pictures are strictly monochrome and very grainy."

"Sounds like our computers about twenty years ago," Steve mentioned. "I think Dad still has one like that."

"Could this internet help us find Simon and Grace?" asked Linda.

"Could do," Steve answered. "If anyone saw them, I'm sure it would appear on the news."

"Could we use it to sell some things from the Rialto's basement," suggested Linda. "If we could raise a little cash, that would help our cause."

"Yeah, could do," Steve admitted. "There are several auction sites."

"So, what sells well on the internet?" asked Linda.

"Erm . . . not what *we'd* like to sell, I assure you," Steve mentioned, as his face turned slightly red.

"No? And what would what that be?"

"I'd rather not say," Steve said.

"C'mon, Steve, it can't be all that bad."

"You sure?" Steve checked.

"Go on, you can tell me," Linda urged. "Believe me, I'm the last to judge."

"Okay, you did ask. The biggest money-spinner on the internet, far and away, is, erm . . . to put it mildly . . . erotica."

Linda laughed. "You mean pictures of people making love? *That's* what makes the most money on this huge technical achievement?"

Steve shrugged in embarrassment as Linda laughed some more.

"Haha, erm hmm! Sorry," Linda said, patting him on the shoulder. "Sorry, just thought it was funny. So, nekkit people, eh? Hee! We *must* get to know each other a little better, Steve. Honestly."

"Actually nearly all of it is just plain porn," Steve added.

"Well, there's a difference between erotica and porn," Linda admitted. "I couldn't tell you what that difference is, but I know it when I see it."

"It's mostly women of course," Steve explained. "End of the day, blokes aren't much to look at, are we."

"Oh, behave," Linda countered. "Blokes can be just as beautiful as girls – and any woman that says otherwise, is lying through her teeth or needs a new set of glasses."

"Sadly, there's some pretty bad stuff out there as well," Steve mentioned. "Children and animals and the like."

Linda's eyes flared at this. "Bad? That's just plain wicked!"

"I don't condone it!" Steve defended. "I think it's sick, honestly!"

"Then I can see we're of a single mind," Linda said, her demeanour cooling. "Now, let's get down to business. Show me how we can sell some of our loot from downstairs," she asked, changing the subject, to Steve's relief.

"Right – open up that browser and go to this website. We can auction almost anything from there. Just have to talk it up a bit is all."

1400 – *The tré*

Ignatius arrived at *The tré* with just a few minutes to spare. Having double duty, he joined the others backstage as they were preparing for the performance. He donned his costume, consisting of bib and brace overalls, a rustic straw hat and a plush toy that vaguely resembled a chicken.

"Are you the chicken farmer?" Slide HolenWulf asked. "Bit of an odd role for a Fox, isn't it?"

"I wish I had the luxury to consider such nuances when casting Portrayals," Ignatius stated. "Shall we take our places?"

Opening scene: Old Wolf stage left, looking despondent.

Shepherd (with crook), centre stage, looking to stage right as if watching a herd.

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of *The Old Wolf*, who wishes to change the error of his ways. But those with an evil past are seldom trusted.

Old Wolf [*to Shepherd*]

Good e'en good shepherd, please do not despair,
But I come in peace to ask for our animosity to repair.

Shepherd [*turning to face Old Wolf with crook at ready*]

And what would you want besides to steal
Some fatted lamb for your next meal?

Old Wolf

Nay, of my sins I've taken stock.
I would help you herd and protect your flock,
For the pittance of one old mutton

- Shepherd
 For each month, for I'm no glutton.
 Fool am I? You are past your prime.
 You are old and slow in time.
 You could not steal a stillborn lamb,
 Much less a full grown ram.
 Why should I pay the likes of you
 Who could not outrun a ewe?
 Go elsewhere to bend an ear,
 I've no need for your like here.
Old Wolf exits left
Shepherd exits right
- Narrator
 Hurt but resolute to earn an honest living,
 He comes to yet another who has misgiving.
CHICKEN FARMER enters left, with cockerel under arm
- Old Wolf [*enters right*]
 Dearest farmer I come to you to implore
 That you might employ me to protect your store.
 I could keep those who might
 Attempt to steal what's yours by right
 And for the price of one fowl per week
 Would be the wage I humbly seek
- Chicken Farmer
 A Wolf to keep my fowl safe from fears?
 Ask my aid after stealing birds for years?
 Perhaps because it's less work now
 You think you deserve them somehow.
- Old Wolf
 'Tis true, I've seen the ways to mend
 My wrongs in life, before my end.
 Just a day's work for a day's pay
 I require a wage, lest I waste away
- Chicken Farmer
 Go elsewhere to bend an ear,
 I've no need for your like here.
Old Wolf exits left
Chicken Farmer exits right
- Narrator
 True, a setback but our Wolf is not dissuaded.
 He has one more that might be persuaded.
Rancher enters, left, leading bull
- Old Wolf [*Enters, right*]
 Good sir Rancher, I beseech you last.
 Do not turn me away as have others, past.
 I wish to earn and be humbly paid
 Not for thieving, nor for raid
- Rancher
 You have asked for work from others?

Old Wolf Whom among my friends and brothers?
 The good Shepherd and Chicken Farmer I did see
 But they would not place their trust in me.

Rancher
 And would you place your own trust in you?

Old Wolf
 'Tis true, my past is soiled and untrue.
 Only I, it seems, can place my trust in me for now.
 I wish to change and do what's right but I know not how.

Rancher [*produces lead*]
 Wear this lead for a time.

Old Wolf
A collar! Such a fate!
 I may not run nor stroll at will! Shut behind a gate!
 Tied to a post! What indignity!

Rancher
 That is the price for your errant history.
 When your trust is earned the lead will break.
 You have your choice now before you to make.
 Help guard my herd and have barley and meat.
 Choose my way or be gone, retreat.

Old Wolf [*grabs lead and fastens around neck*]
 Then lead it must be and this I pledge:
 I'll be loosed before I'm dead.
Rancher takes lead on Old Wolf and leads him away

Narrator
 And thus the fate of our Old Wolf.
 Be forewarned, this story in parts, two.
 And so our play does not conclude!
 Draw from this act what you may.
 Until next we meet – good day!

Ignatius quickly doffed his costume and rushed to stand outside the door of The tré as the children filed past. Desiree, who had been watching from his box, was trying to cajole one or two of the children to stand still for just a second. Dawn quickly put a stop to this, much to her frustration.

"How's the work going?" Ignatius whispered as Desiree closed her sketchpad in frustration.

"Don't tell anyone I said this, but Steve and Michael are totally useless with tools," she answered quietly. "Geoff, Rachael, Clare and I are the only ones getting any work done."

"Surely they're not being idle?" Ignatius asked.

"No, nothing like that," Desiree answered. "It's not laziness. They're just . . . inept with tools. Even Rachael does better than they do and she's only got those short stubby fingers covered with fur. Course, she is way stronger than any of us, but . . ."

"No question of that," Ignatius conceded. "Well, perhaps Michael and Steve have other talents. I'd like to stay and discuss, but must dash. Have a Vixen to torment," he said with a smile. "Tra la."

1700 – Nora

"And what the sif makes you think that?" Jess asked as she rummaged around the drinks cabinet. "Don't you have anything stronger than brandy?"

"I called them and asked," Ignatius answered her first question, while ignoring her second. "They said you'd lost your job over a year ago."

"Of course they did. They always deny anyone works for them." She opened a crystal decanter and took a sniff. "Ugh, gin," she grimaced. Still, she poured herself a glass.

"My thoughts as well. That's why I also called the Work Office. They confirmed that you haven't had any work for nine months – and you've been drawing the dole. Care to explain yourself?"

Jess suddenly turned to face Ignatius. From his expression, she knew that she had finally been caught out. She sighed deeply, sat down and held her head in her hands. "Well, that's the end of *that* idea," she mumbled to herself.

"What are you mumbling about, Vixen?" asked Ignatius.

"It was so *stupid!* What the sif what I was thinking," she said.

"What was stupid?" he persisted.

Jess looked him in the face as if she had something important to tell him.

"I . . ." she looked down again. "Oh, never mind."

"Don't you 'never mind' me," Ignatius ordered, folding his arms. "I'm owed an explanation, at the very least."

Jess braced herself and looked at him again. "I . . . I tried . . . I wanted . . . oh, sif! Sif, sif, sif, sif, SIF!" She rolled her eyes and looked at the floor again. "Of all the sifwit ideas."

"This is getting a little tiresome, you know," Ignatius said. "What, exactly, did you want?"

"Don't you know by now?" asked Jess, her voice strained and a tear rolling down her cheek.

"I *did* just ask, didn't I?" Ignatius ignored the tear, as he knew Jess could cry at the drop of a Rat.

"I want us to be a couple again!" Jess blurted out. She covered her eyes.

"Oh, furry bollocks! I can't believe I just said that!"

Ignatius was astounded. "A couple? Like old times? Well, you can forget that!"

"No!" Jess interrupted. "Not like old times. I want it to be different this time! Things are different now!"

"Yes, we're both older. And I, at least, know better."

Jess looked down. "I know better, too, Ig. Just hear me out, please, I'm begging you . . ."

Ignatius sighed and folded his arms.

"I came here thinking I could pressure you into getting together. But that'll never work. I know that now. I don't know why I took such a spectacularly

stupid approach. Maybe because intimidating you always worked so well in the past. I don't know . . . I wasn't thinking clearly. I want . . . "

"Yes?"

"I want *you*, Ig. Look, let's just bury all the bad things that happened between us. Let's start over."

"Oh, easy enough for the transgressor to ask!" He affected her voice, "'Oh, dear me, I'm so sorry, I've shat all over you for the larger part of your life, but let's just wipe the slate clean now, shall we?'" Ignatius, his patience wearing thinner by the minute, set his drink down. "All right then, I'm a forgiving sort. If it's forgiveness you want Jess, consider yourself absolved. And I hope you'll forgive me for whatever injustices I may have brought against you. And you may go in peace. But please, just go."

"For me to forgive you Ig, you need to apologise first."

"Apologise? That's cheek coming from you! What do I need to apologise for?"

"Remember when I came back from my affair with PenFox. I told you he beat the living daylights out of me?"

"I wasn't the one who beat you. Go ask forgiveness from PenFox."

"You didn't lift a finger to help me."

"I told you to find a solicitor and press charges, which would put him in prison and off your tail," Ignatius recounted. "Advice you ignored, as usual."

"PenFox was after me and I needed a safe place to stay for a while and you just threw me to the wolves. If you were such the great gentleman you pretend to be, why didn't you offer to protect me?"

"Because 'gentleman' is not synonymous with 'mug'. I was through being used by you. I would have helped you and I would've been taken advantage of once again," Ignatius protested. "Your standard *modus operandi**, as I recall."

"Taken advantage of? You sound like a schoolgirl on a date. Ig, I was being pummelled by a psychopath. You couldn't go to the great trouble of letting me have one of the numerous empty bedrooms in this mansion or even letting me hide in your basement? You knew PenFox was dangerous. You knew what he would do to me when he found out I'd run out on him. Why didn't you help me?"

Ignatius considered this for a while. Part of him knew that it was just vengeance, plain and simple. He'd had all the anguish from Jess that he could take at the time and he actually relished the thought that she would have to suffer for her own sins. He hadn't actually hoped that she'd come to physical harm, but he was damned if he was going to do anything to help her out. That, and he knew that he would lose any semblance of respect from his friends if he allowed her back into his life, much less his own self-respect.

"All right. When you left me for PenFox, I loved you and you knew it. And knowing that, you ran off with him, all the same. I *told* you he was dangerous and I *told* you that if you wanted to leave me, it'd break my heart, but I also told you, 'Don't run off with PenFox, because he'll break more than your heart.' You ignored me as you always did.

**Modus operandi* – R. 'Way of operating'

"One year later, you come running back to me. You'd broken my heart and dug your own grave, just as I said would happen, and you wanted me to pull you out of it." Once again he feigned her voice in a sarcastic tone. "Oh, I know, I'll get Iggy to pull my tail out of the meat grinder as he's done a thousand times before and as a reward, I'll use him as a doormat – again. He seems to like that. Well, I might be pompous, but I'm not thick."

"You've changed," Jess said sincerely.

"I should hope so."

"I've never seen you use sarcasm," Jess observed. "Not seriously, at any rate. Just to tease people on occasion. You've finally got a bit of . . . 'mean' in you."

"Hmm. Can't imagine where that came from."

"See? You did it again."

"Jess . . ."

"Okay, sorry. Erm, look . . . when I was with PenFox, yeah, it was exciting and adventurous – and even though it didn't take me long to figure out that being drunk while I was getting beat up might alleviate the pain a little, it took a bit longer before I remembered the difference between pain and injury. You *were* good to me – not perfect, but good. Very good. I know, I know – you're boring and square and pompous . . ."

"You're not doing yourself any favours here," Ignatius remarked. "And while I'll be the first to admit that I'll never make it as a jazz musician, I don't happen to think I'm all that pompous."

Jess stared at him for a second. Purposefully putting her drink down, she stepped towards him and grabbed his wrist, pulling it into view. "Cufflinks?" She pulled his tie out of his shirt and held it in front of his nose. "A cravat? A school tie, I could understand, but a *lavender cravat*?" She looked behind him. "And are those coattails? And a top hat? Ig, you walk into the Kettle – the only pub in a village of barely a hundred people – dressed like a Dog's dinner."

"I say! No need to be rude!" Ignatius scolded.

"Frankly, I'm surprised you don't wear that naff sash like you used to."

Ignatius was at a loss for words. The best he could manage was a rather weak "Well, then . . . I've improved, haven't I?"

Jess sat down and sighed. She concluded that she wasn't helping matters by pointing out his shortcomings. "Look, I'm sorry about the pompous bit; maybe that was a bit much. So, as I was walking out on PenFox – or running, more like – I'd seen the error of my ways. I admit it. I was wrong. You were absolutely right. I saw that, as clear as the tail on your bum. And I vowed I'd treat you right from that point on and that you'd be the one."

"The one? The one what?"

"The one for me. You were the one person in my life that could have made me happy – and you still are. And I can make you happy too, Iggy – and you know that. I knew both of these things ten years ago and I know it today."

"And you know what, Jess? You're absolutely right," Ignatius replied.

"See! I knew you'd see reason. When can I . . ."

"I'll be quite happy in knowing that you'll be somewhere else for the remainder of my life, so you can just bugger off."

"Ilg, that's not what I meant and you know it. Look, admit it," Jess challenged, "you've always found me exciting. You liked being around a 'bad' girl like me. Someone with a slightly naughty side."

"Slightly? Side? There was nothing 'slightly' or 'sided' about it. You were evil incarnate."

"Hey! I wasn't that bad!"

"*Who* lifted fifty quid from The tré collection and framed Johnny Prigel?"

"So? He got off."

"*Who* wrote an anonymous letter to Sandra StæppanWylf, containing the complete and utter fabrication that her fiancé, Slide HolenWulf, had gotten one of the StoBrocc girls pregnant?"

"Just did it for a giggle," Jess dismissed.

"Lupans take their relationships very seriously, Jess, as well you knew. She was on the verge of despair until the StoBroccs personally came round and told her it was untrue."

"Can I help it if she's highly strung? Besides, no harm done."

"And *who* put laxative in the beer barrel for the New Year's Eve party?"

Jess didn't answer for a second. She bit her lip. Then she snorted. "'Scuse me!" She rapidly turned around. Ignatius could see her put her hand over her mouth.

"You thought that was *funny*?" he asked.

She turned back to face Ignatius. "Yes! I did! It was hysterical! You have no sense of humour, Iggy. I don't know why you didn't think it was funny – it was a scream! Besides, you only drink cider, so it didn't affect you!"

"Because, unlike you, Jess, I consider the feelings of my fellows. By the way, the aroma stuck to the Kettle for months afterward and Pete and Gina nearly went out of business. And it didn't make things any easier when everyone, and I mean *everyone*, asked me who I thought did it and I had to lie through my teeth and say I didn't know, when it was patently obvious that I did. I kept that little secret as I have all of your other transgressions."

Jess stopped laughing. "You mean you never told Johnny?"

"No."

"Nor Slide, nor Sandra?"

"Not a word. Nor any of your *many, many* other victims."

"Honestly?" Jess asked. "Completely unlike you not to grass on someone at the first opportunity."

"That is *completely* untrue! I *never* grassed on anyone!"

"Phwa! You liar!" Jess accused.

"Who? Who did I ever grass on? Name one person."

Jess tapped her foot as she racked her memory. "Milly MæstBar."

Ignatius was dumbfounded. "I was, what? Six years old! She kissed me on a lost bet. I was – Okay, fine. *Mea Culpa*. Her parents forced her to apologize and we were best of friends until she moved off."

"All right. Basil StoBrocc."

"Of course I did. He vandalized the school, all but signed my name to the artwork *and* beat the crap out of me! What was I supposed to do?"

"Doesn't matter. You never grass, Ilg, no matter what. It's the code."

"Code? What code? The 'be-a-victim-for-life' code? I'm sorry, Jess, but no, that wasn't grassing, it was self-preservation. Regardless, I *never, ever* grassed on you, as much as you richly deserved it."

Jess paused. She believed Ignatius, but something seemed uncertain. "Why not?"

"Shave me if I know," Ignatius said. "I protected you all those years, even after you'd left me. Doesn't matter, they all eventually found out anyway – but it wasn't through me."

"Well . . . it's not like I took an axe to anyone."

"Oh, very well, fair play. You weren't an axe murderer. But you've got the same criminal mind-set. You always have an excuse for your liberties. 'Oh, he got off. Oh, it's just a giggle.' It's *never* your fault. You *never* take responsibility. And Jack knows you *never* apologize and you *never* explain."

Jess thought about what he said. "Okay, so you admit to being a pompous git, and I'll admit I'm a criminal. We can help each other. I'll teach you how to unwind a little and you can teach me how to be a model citizen. But still, you have to admit – you liked being around a 'bad' girl, didn't you?"

"You know what? You're right. I *liked* being around a bad girl. But you'll note the past tense."

"So?"

"So what?"

"I noticed that you didn't say anything about the present."

Ignatius paused in thought. Jess, despite the added cushioning (or maybe even because of it) still had a sort of intangible, bit-of-rough look to her that he found very appealing. And it was more than just her body. The way she dressed, her demeanour, her 'oh-go-sod-yourself' attitude. It was all just so damnably enticing to have something a little wild in his world where, since birth, he'd been whipped into behaving and told to toe the line. He truly relished something in his life that wasn't tied down, straight level, pressed to a crease, combed, brushed and parted. Jess was the complete antithesis of all of these things.

She began to smile that wicked little smile that he had known from many years ago. "I can see some things never change," she said, slowly reaching for him somewhere midst breastbone and thigh.

Ignatius mentally slapped himself. *Don't start thinking with that!* he told himself. He stepped back, out of her reach.

"No, Jess. I'm sorry, but the last thing I need in my life is more excitement. That was true then and it's true now. I need some stability, a bit of boredom."

"You know, it's funny," Jess said. "I was going to tell you exactly the same thing."

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to go," he said quietly.

She stared at the ground for a moment. She then looked him in the eye. "One last chance, Iggy. That's all I want. Just one chance."

Ignatius noticed a tear start to well in her eye for the second time in their conversation. He had seen Jess weep on numerous occasions, but never out of true sorrow or pain, as far as he could ever tell. He knew her tears were usually reserved as lubricant for those she wished to figuratively sodomize, rather than

as a salve for an aching heart. Ignatius knew if he was not careful, his good nature would allow him to cave in and give her what she wanted as he had almost always done in the past. He told himself it was just an act, steeled himself and resolved that he wasn't having it.

"And I'm just supposed to say yes, and we walk around, holding hands, kissing in the moonlight like Rick and Uldrim, the Reunited Wolves? I'm sorry, but I can't perform intimacy just like that."

"You didn't mind being intimate earlier," she pointed out.

"I don't think either of us are under the delusion that what happened earlier was the result of mutual love and affection. You and I both know it was the result of the creature comforts of alcohol, a warm bath and a soft bed, in that order."

Jess sighed. She looked up at Ignatius with a look of quiet desperation. "I know I've been bad, Iggy. I want to be good now, but I don't know how." She paused. "Help me . . . *please*," she said, practically whimpering.

Ignatius looked at her and he was deeply touched by Jess's appeal. *If this is an act*, he reasoned, *it's a damned good one*. He reminded himself that he was a bit of a chump for a hard-luck story and that he would have to be very careful so as not be taken advantage of, even if her pleas were sincere.

"I *would* like to believe you Jess, but you know what they say about liars telling the truth."

"Ig, I swear, I'll never lie to you again."

"Why do I find that hard to believe?"

"If you catch me in a lie, just once, you can throw me out. And I promise I'll go without a word. Just let me have the one chance. It'll make up for that time when you left me out in the cold when PenFox was after my hide. You may not live by *my* code, but you do have a code – and that one time, you broke it. And I know that bothers your conscience, Ig."

Jess was right. It had always bothered his conscience. He had always been brought up to help the victimized without judgement and the one time when Jess had actually been in imminent physical danger, he had turned his back.

"All right. A place to stay and *that's all!* We are *not* getting back together as a couple. I'm merely helping you find your feet until you can support yourself. And if you truly want this, you'll have to be not only honest with me, but also forthcoming. Any details I should know about, you'll have to tell *without* my asking."

Jess looked down at the ground and nodded. "All right, cards on the table," she said with a mild strain in her voice.

"Go on then," he said with an indulgent sigh.

"I've lost my job with CE . . . "

"I think we established that quite some time ago."

"Iggy, I have no work. My sisters won't let me stay with them. They say they don't have room, but I suspect that there are other reasons."

"Such as?"

"You and I both know I'm not exactly the easiest person in the world to get along with. There are lots of . . . *issues* . . . between my sisters and me. They're courteous to me now, but they don't want me around."

"And?"

"I've got no one, Ig. No place to go. No job. I'm rapidly running out of money, staying in hotels and boarding houses."

"So, you've managed to alienate everyone in your life; your friends, what few you had, your family and me. And the rest have all turned you down."

Jess nodded silently.

"Who was that poor sod you roped in Trinova after the PenFox episode? Began with an 'R' as I recall . . ."

"RiscFox. Basil RiscFox. I wanted someone like you. Someone stable and decent. He was a nice bloke, too – not as nice as you, of course."

"So why'd you leave him?"

"I kept telling myself that appearance wasn't important, but once he reached twenty-five stone . . ."

"Twenty five stone!" Ignatius marvelled. "Claude Baughs! A Fox at twenty-five stone? He must have looked like a fur-bearing football!"

"I admit I'm not exactly model material myself these days." She pinched a roll of fat on her waist. "Just don't understand where it all comes from."

Ignatius rolled his eyes. "Oh, do behave! Self-deprecation never suited you. Don't start now." He looked at his empty glass and decided he wanted a drink. He reached for the bottle and poured. "Brandy?"

"Don't you have something stronger?" she asked. "Besides that disgusting gin?"

Ignatius smiled at her cheek. *Here she is, scraping for a roof over her head and she has the impudence to ask for better booze.* "Sorry, you'll just have to rough it like the rest of us."

"Then run down the cellar and . . ."

"I don't wish to sound mean, but do you think demanding your choice of free drink on the taxpayer's shilling is a good start to things?"

"Ig, there's enough alcohol down there to float a fleet. No one's gonna miss . . . Oh, never mind," she said, giving up and pouring a glass of gin.

"You know, I actually pay for most of my drink at the Kettle," Ignatius pointed out.

"Don't lecture, okay? Look, I'm drinking the gin. I'm grateful for that. Thank you."

"You know, you always were a lot more pleasant when you had a few drinks in you. Unfortunately, that's not saying a whole lot. You were even more pleasant when you were unconscious."

"Ig, I know you're my benefactor and all, but I wouldn't wave the temperance flag too high if I were you. And if our relationship is going to go anywhere, we need to start with a little mutual respect."

"Respect? That's a piece of work, coming from you. Twenty minutes ago, you were trying to hold the upper hand by pretending that you were here in an official capacity with the dreaded Civil Enquiries. And as for relationships, ours is still strictly business. Being the soft touch that I am, I'm allowing you the use of a spare room until you find a job and get on your feet."

"Why can't I sleep with you?"

"I just said our relationship is business only."

"I'm not asking to get married. I just want some action."

"I can see you're still one to speak your mind," Ignatius noticed.

"Well?"

"No."

"Oh, come on. Why not? I enjoy it. You enjoy it. What's the harm?"

Ignatius wanted to say something about propriety and doing what's right, but he could think of nothing along these lines without sounding portentous.

"Besides," Jess cajoled, "think of it as me paying the rent."

"Oh, so you just closed your eyes and thought of The Kingdom during our last liaison, did you? I hardly think so; you raised more racket than a tennis match. I daresay you enjoyed it twice as much as I did, and I freely admit that I enjoyed it a great deal."

"I didn't make all that much noise," Jess protested.

"Jess, Desiree could hear you over a telephone line."

"So?"

"She wasn't the one holding the ear piece."

"Oh."

"Regardless, I have something else in mind for you to earn your keep."

She looked a bit doubtful. "Like what? I told you I'm almost out of cash."

"A clean house? Dinner on the table every now and again? Hmm? And if you want to make a very large step forward towards winning my heart you can do the wash. Can't abide washing clothes; takes loads of time. Especially ironing."

"What!" Jess objected. "You'd actually rather have me clean house instead of wrapping your tail round me? I'm sorry, but you've got your siffing tail up your arse if you think I'm gonna be your siffing maidservant!"

Ignatius was unmoved by her invective. "I would think a few hours of housework would be quite a bargain for free room and board. And I'm not asking you to do anything I don't already do on an everyday basis. Besides, if you don't like it, m'dear, the door is that way," he said, pointing.

Jess looked at Ignatius in disbelief. "You *have* changed, Ig."

He was completely unswayed. "Yes, I have. I'm not going to let you walk all over me as I've done in the past. You want a place to stay, you pull your weight."

She stared at him some more as if in disbelief. "You actually mean it? You want me to be the housemaid for a roof over my head?"

"Yes. I do. No one owes you a living. Frankly, I'm beginning to wonder if I've lost my senses by making the offer I have. I hope I won't have to change my . . ."

"No!" Jess said, holding up her hands. "Don't! No need to change your mind. I'll do the housework. It's just that . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, two things. First – respect. Both ways. I respect you and you respect me. No degrading remarks about drinking, being overweight and no bringing up old skeletons in the cupboard, especially in public. Secondly, no lies. Ever."

"All right. Agreed. So what chores will you be doing to earn your keep?"

"Erm . . ."

"Well, what is it? Out with it."

"Well . . . The thing is . . . erm . . . I don't, erm . . . I don't actually know how to cook or clean or wash clothes."

"What? I don't believe it! How did you get by all these years?"

"I always paid people to do it," Jess admitted. "Or I smiled nicely and showed some bloke my tits. Amazing what you can get some of 'em to do with just a splash of cleavage."

"So I recall," Ignatius admitted quietly to himself. "*Mea culpa*."

"I don't know why you don't just pay someone. It's not like you don't have the dosh."

Ignatius put his hand on his forehead. *How did I get into this?* he asked himself. He put his drink down firmly. "By the way, let's take care of one last thing. I had a little chat with Kings Yard about you."

Jess paused. "Yeah? So?"

"Apparently you've got quite the record at the Yard. Care to divulge?"

"I thought we weren't going to bring up old skeletons."

"And I also said you had to be forthcoming."

"Why bother? You talked to them. You know everything."

"No, I don't, actually. To get your record, I'd have to go to Trinova and present identification. So, are you going to spare me the trip?"

"Two counts of drunk and disorderly, two counts of attempting to bribe, one count of shoplifting."

"There were six counts," he stated.

She closed her eyes and sighed. "One count of urinating in a public place."

Ignatius tried his very best to keep from laughing. "Excuse me?"

"I'd just been thrown out of my flat and all my possessions inside were confiscated by the landlord. It was Friday afternoon, the banks were closed and I didn't have so much as a siffing farthing to my name. I was, literally, out on the street."

"So, you had no place to, erm . . . go . . . as it were," Ignatius said.

"Respect, Iggy? Remember? Respect?"

"Right. Of course. Say, did you say that the landlord repossessed your belongings? Were you renting them?"

"No, they were mine, Jack-dammit! Clothes, linens, everything. One week late on the rent and he changed the locks and took everything I owned. Thieving, fat bastard."

"He can't do that," Ignatius stated.

"He bloody well did."

"He has to give you the opportunity to remove your personal belongings."

"I *know* that Ig. We went to law school *together* if you recall."

"Have you got his name and number written down somewhere?"

"No, just up here," she pointed to her head. "Bastard stole my address book as well."

"Well, we can get that sorted out soon enough. I've a good friend in Trinova who can take care of it. If I don't mention that it's for you, that is."

"Thanks," she said, although it seemed a little less than sincere.

"Now, I'm going to the Kettle for dinner and a pint. I can't trust a shoplifter in the house, so you'll have to come with me."

"What? Together?"

"Yes, of course, together. But I certainly hope you're not expecting me to hold your hand. And you'd better think up a nice little speech for everyone once you get there."

"What?"

"I think you should make it clear what our situation is. If they come to the erroneous conclusion that I've allowed you to just move in without any good reason, they'll think I've taken leave of my senses and they won't have anything to do with me. Then they'll say I'm misappropriating town funds for putting you up."

"You won't make me tell them about all the things I did, will you?"

"No, I won't force you to do that – although I think you should, eventually. But somehow I doubt even you could remember all of your past transgressions."

"So, are we sleeping together or not?"

"Shave me, woman, but you don't take 'no' for an answer, do you?"

"So the answer's 'yes'?"

"Oh, for . . . all right, but *only* if it remains our secret," Ignatius stipulated.

"You let slip once and all bets are off."

"I can respect that."

"I'm serious, Jess. One word to anyone and it's over."

"Fine, fine," she said carelessly.

"You promise?"

"Yeah, yeah, fine, I promise, cross my heart, blah, blah, blah," Jess conceded. "Sheesh, you act like anyone actually cares what you do in bed."

1800 – Black Kettle Pub

The Monday dinner crowd at the Black Kettle was the usual affair of twenty-odd patrons taking their repast from work.

A section of the pub that was furthest from the street had an elevated floor forming a makeshift stage and, although the long table that occupied the area was typically allowed for general use, the stage was sometimes used for receptions or small affairs. Occasionally, the stage was even used for performances.

The table on the stage also had a dais, which was frequently used for announcements and Ignatius put it to its intended use. As he was relatively short, he pulled out the small footstool that was kept under the dais and stepped onto it, making himself plainly visible to the crowd and thus attracting their notice. "If I might have your attention? I'm sure you're all familiar with Miss FærFyxe, who has returned to Otterstow of late. If you would be kind enough to listen, she has an announcement to make."

Jess reluctantly took the stand. "Yeah, erm . . . First, I'd like to say to all those I've offended in the past, I'm truly sorry. This isn't easy for me. As you probably know I'm not exactly in the habit of making apologies – something that

will change, I assure you. Erm, what else? . . . I don't work for CE – not any more at any rate. I lost my job and out of the sheer goodness of his heart, Iggy is giving me a place to stay for a while. We are not getting back together as a couple, not yet, anyway . . . "

"Nor in the future," Ignatius interrupted loudly.

Jess continued. "I know you might find this hard to believe, but I've come to the conclusion that if you want more from life, you have to give more. I'm going to start a new chapter, as of today. No more lies, no more rumours, no more anything. My cards are on the table for all to see. It's not a good hand, especially at the moment, but I'll never ask for anything more than a fair deal.

"I know that I don't deserve your trust. I know that I have to earn it. I know that trust will not come tomorrow or next week or even next year. But I will do everything I can to be worthy of it.

"Finally, if there are any jobs, and I do mean *any* job, I could use a little dosh at the moment."

The patrons at the Black Kettle looked at her in silence. She bowed her head as she bit her lower lip in humility.

"Ig, I think you're off your nut to let her stay in your place," Graeme DunHors put in. "She's burned you before. She'll do it again."

There was a chorus of 'ayes.' Followed by a brief silence broken only by Jess quietly mumbling "Oh, sif. This isn't good."

"What's she gonna do for all her sins?" asked Johnny Prigel. "You're not the only one what's been hard done by her."

Another chorus of 'ayes' went around.

"I think she's gotta lotta cheek, showing up, acting like she's under the Queen's orders and then asking our forgiveness," added Slide HolenWulf. "Who the sif does she think she is?"

A third chorus of 'ayes' went around. It was looking pretty bad for Jess.

Slide, to Ignatius' recollection, had never used foul language before. He could understand the Lupan's animosity, as Jess had nearly driven his betrothed to the brink, but it made him appreciate the seriousness of the situation that was developing. He hoped things weren't about to turn ugly.

"I think we ought to give her a good shaving!" suggested Johnny. This was met with a very enthusiastic response from the patrons of the pub. Ignatius saw genuine fear in Jess' eyes and he knew that he might have to intervene to prevent something very unpleasant.

"And maybe a tarring as well!" added Graeme to an even more enthusiastic roar.

Ignatius was just about to intercede, when a lone, but very clear, voice said, "Give her one chance."

There was general murmuring as a search was made for the source of the comment.

"Who said that?" flew around the room, along with a range of adjectives such as "idiot" and "slaphead" along with "obviously don't know the Vixen." Shortly, the speaker was isolated and brought to the podium. It was Vince Scrub, a middle-aged human.

"Go on then, Vince," said Ignatius quietly. "State your piece."

Vince looked at Ignatius for reassurance and found some when the mayor nodded slightly.

He faced the patrons. In a loud clear voice, he spoke plainly, "First off, I wanna make clear – We're a small town and everyone knows everyone else and we all know each other's business. And we all know that I owe this woman no favour and she's never made mischief for me. We're at arm's length – agreed?"

"Yeah, so what's your point, Vince?" asked Johnny.

"I'm speakin' my piece 'cause I wanna, not 'cause I hafta," Vince answered. "You okay with that, Johnny?"

"Erm, sure."

"Anyone else think my arm's bein' twisted or that I'm payin' a debt?" asked Vince.

Silence reigned.

"Right, then," Vince continued. "Who in here has told a skintail and got away with it?"

Ignatius was the first to raise his hand. Faced with such an uncompromising basis of honesty for comparison, everyone else felt they had to raise their hands as well.

"Next question," Vince said. "Who among us has dished dirt behind another's back, whether it's true or not?"

Once again, Ignatius raised his hand immediately and everyone else felt compelled to follow suit.

"Okay, who in here has either stolen from or falsely accused or generally stitched someone up and got away with it?"

This time everyone raised their hands immediately, without waiting for Ignatius. A few of them seemed a bit perturbed that he didn't this time.

"Right, then. So, it's confirmed," Vince concluded. "We're all liars and gossips and cheats and we've all gotten away with it. Now, Miss FærFyxe here, will be the first to admit that she's gotten away with more than her share . . ."

Jess was about to protest, but as Vince quickly caught her gaze, she decided better of it.

"But, unlike the rest of us, she says she's turnin' a new leaf. You say she's gotten away with too much already but I say, if we shave her and tar her, then she hasn't gotten away with it, has she? She'd've been punished for her sins and we won't have.

"So, let's give her the one chance. *If* she fails – *then* we can shave and tar her. And if you don't agree, you can add 'hypocrite' to your list of sins, and you're no better'n her. All agreed?" Vince raised his hand.

Ignatius raised his hand shortly thereafter, even though he had been Jess' biggest target when she was in her heyday. Pete soon decided to follow Ignatius' lead. Gina elbowed him lightly but he pointed to Ignatius and she begrudgingly followed suit. Geoff raised his hand, as well.

For a few seconds, they were the only five hands in the air.

"We do this easy or hard," Vince warned.

"Is that some kinda threat?" Johnny asked.

"Now, I've heard tell," Vince mentioned casually, ignoring Johnny's question, "about some who've made a bit o' dosh on the side makin' some kinda what-not in their bath-tub."

Johnny quickly raised his hand, his eyes wide.

"And I can't help but have overheard that a telescope has gone missin' and someone's curtain is always open on clear nights."

A few more hands went up.

"And then there's them what's nicked some weed from a certain garden," Vince added.

A few more hands went up.

"Shall I go on?" cautioned Vince. Not seeing a forest of hands in the air, he continued. "And then there's some what done a mixie and ain't never told no one . . ."

Two more hands went up, but it still wasn't enough for Vince's liking. "Especially their spouses," he added.

Two more hands went up – and then a few more. Within a few seconds, a few more people decided that they also had something to hide and only a few people remained with their hands down.

"Right. So we've concluded the matter," Ignatius stated, breaking the silence. "No need to break out the shears and tar pot just yet. Let's all get back to our business."

Vince slowly walked back to his beer through a silent pub. Eventually the noise level began to pick back up as idle conversation began to creep back to normal.

Thaddeus, one of the few remaining dissenters, came forward to meet Ignatius and Jess. "Eh, Jess, ye've managed ta pull that one oot, na? Ye ayeways seems ta laund on yer boots. Although, I must say, ye're in bad shape when yer best advocate's a skin." He nearly spat the last word out.

"Thaddeus, what have humans ever done to you?" Ignatius asked.

"Defendin that Vixen, for one," the Melan replied quickly.

"I meant to you, personally," Ignatius clarified.

"They've doon nought. An they'll continua ta do nought, as I winna let 'em," answered Thaddeus.

"And what makes you think that they want to *do* anything to you?"

"Ma gutcher was beat up by a skin, when he were a lad."

"Was he?" asked Ignatius. "I've never heard of this. What happened?"

"They found the hairless ape an strung him up," Thaddeus recounted.

"They?" asked Ignatius.

"The town's fowk," Thaddeus specified.

"Was there a trial?" asked Ignatius.

"There was na need," Thaddeus dismissed. "They seen him do it."

"Perhaps he was defending himself," Ignatius suggested.

"It was unprovoked!" Thaddeus shot back angrily.

"Well, we'll never know, will we?" replied Ignatius calmly. "As both parties involved are not up to answering any questions. But, no matter. Who am I to disbelieve? Assuming everything you say is fact, is it your belief then, that the act of a single human many years ago gives you the right to bully them?"

"I dinna bully the skins. They ga their ain way, I ga mine. As long as our paths dinna cross."

"And if they do, who has the right-of-way?"

"I do, o course. Humans are no fit ta walk among polite society. They've na manners an they're as coarse an common as flees on dung."

"And how does that make them different from you?" asked Jess.

"Ye watch yer tongue, Vixen!" hissed Thaddeus pointing an accusatory finger. "Ye've na right ta preach, considerin yer past!"

"True, but I wouldn't cry hypocrisy too loudly if I were you," Jess replied.

"Ye Foxes are all the same, unco guid, sanctimonious, snobs. I'll no be spoken ta in this manner!" Thaddeus stated.

"Then I advise you remove yourself from hearing distance," suggested Jess.

Thaddeus, infuriated, looked at Ignatius to excoriate Jess, but Ignatius merely shrugged.

"Siffin snobs," the Melan snarled, and with that, he left.

Jess and Ignatius looked at each other.

"Well, even if he is a skin, I have to defend my only advocate," Jess justified.

"I don't think equating him with Tad is all that great a defence," Ignatius noted. "It's an insult to Vince, considering Thaddeus' current behaviour.

Something seems to have gotten into his fur of late. By the way, I think you ought to go and thank Vince."

"If he weren't married, I'd offer to have sex with him," Jess agreed. "Excuse me."

Shortly after she went off, Rachael, Geoff and Gina surrounded Ignatius.

"Ig, what's all this about? You're shacking up with Jess?" asked Gina.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Ignatius admitted. "But it's as she said, there's no relationship. She wanted to get back together but I made it very clear that that's not going to happen. She's just a boarder until she gets back on her feet. Then she moves out."

"Ig, we already got Angus to contend with. How're we gonna keep tabs on Jess as well? Either of 'em could have a change of heart at any moment," Gina pointed out.

"True, but if Jess becomes a problem, I can just throw her out," Ignatius replied. "Also, it'll help me keep tabs on where she is and what she's doing."

"Are we gonna tell 'er?" asked Rachael.

"Not for now. However, we might have to eventually," said Ignatius.

"And you think you can trust her?" asked Geoff.

"What makes ya think she's tellin' the troof," asked Rachael.

"She did actually cry," Ignatius pointed out.

"Did she, now?" asked Gina, unimpressed. "I hope those tears were true, or we're in trouble deep."

26JUN2001 Tuesday

1200 – Newburg Bank

"Miss DelHomme? Mister Green? Mister Robinson? Would you come this way please?" suggested the secretary. She led them into a small conference room where the loan officers, a man and a woman, were sitting. The man was quite elderly with a wrinkled face, sagging jowls and baggy eyes. The lady, also advanced in years, although not as much as the man, was of a firm constitution and had a small nose with a round face and large eyes. Steve couldn't help but think that the man resembled a basset hound and that the woman resembled a colourpoint cat. They indicated to the three applicants to sit, which they did. The older couple continued to work in silence for a few more minutes, while they patiently waited.

Finally the Colourpoint spoke. "Let's talk about your loan, then, shall we." She pulled out a slip of paper. "We do have the survey from the estate agent and they do agree with your business plan that the property, as it stands, is worth a half-million, possibly even more."

"That's good," Steve said agreeably.

"However, we do have some reservations about some other aspects of the loan," continued the Colourpoint. "To begin with, all of you are quite young. Why do you think you can run this enterprise profitably when it has failed repeatedly?"

"The previous owners or management were well-known as drug addicts. Their habit ate up all their profits," Michael explained, "along with their incentive to do anything constructive."

"Do *you* use drugs, Mister Robinson?" The Colourpoint asked strictly.

"No, ma'am," Michael answered emphatically and immediately.

She stared at him momentarily and then turned her head down to look at some more papers.

"This business plan is quite good," said the Basset. "Who did this for you?"

"I did," replied Desiree. As she had taken some business courses at university and was thus, the most conversant in the terminology of commerce, it was agreed between the three that she would take credit for writing the plan, even though she had had substantial help from Linda.

He looked at it for just a second before saying, "You're a yank, are you?"

Steve grabbed her hand, just as it was about to rise up and point a retaliatory finger. The two young, would-be entrepreneurs looked at each other with threatening glances and then faced the Basset.

"I'm from a Southern state. Yankees, technically, are from New England."

"All the same, here, really," replied the Basset, looking back at the paper.

Steve could see Desiree's cheek muscles undulate as she withheld her opinion through sheer force of will.

"I must admit, it's quite well done. Did you go to business school?" asked the Basset.

"I took several business classes in sch . . . university, as an undergrad. I planned to go into business for myself after I got my DVM."

"DVM?" asked the Colourpoint.

"Doctor of Veterinary Medicine," answered Desiree.

"A veterinary nurse?" asked the Colourpoint.

"No," Desiree said, calmly. "I will have a doctorate."

"Oh, then," said the Basset. "A veterinary surgeon."

Desiree considered the description. "Something like that. Yes. Sort of like an MD for more than one species."

The Basset took a moment to consider the remark. He smiled. "Quite," he commented. "At least it shows you're responsible. When will you be done with your – what was it? DMV?"

"DVM," corrected Desiree. "Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. I'll be done this August."

"I must say," said the Basset, "we've had a few odd loans. Never had a veterinary surgeon applying for a loan to refurb a venue. But . . ." He let his train of thought remain incomplete.

"Mister Green?" prompted the Colourpoint.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Do you have a licence?"

"Not at the moment, no, but I have been manager at the Rialto when it was under other ownership and I foresee no trouble in getting one."

Desiree jumped in. "The plan mentions that and as a contingency we could hire a manager with a license."

The Colourpoint pursed her lips and nodded.

The Basset spoke again. "This *is* quite a good business plan," he reiterated, "but you do realise, Miss DelHomme that there are differences between doing business in the US and doing business in the UK?"

Not to mention Otterstow, Desiree thought. Aloud, she replied, "That is true, of course, but some principles apply in either place. Profit margins, fixed costs and I think, most importantly in the decision for you to make the loan, collateral. We have an asset of over half a million. If we collapsed tomorrow, you'd still be able to recoup your losses and have more than enough to recover your expenses by selling against the lien."

"Quite correct," the Basset replied with a smile. "But we are not in the foreclosure business, nor the business of real property. We are bankers. We earn our money on interest of investments. Foreclosure and sale are only a last resort to minimize losses."

Desiree thought she detected just the faintest hint of flirtatiousness in his voice and expression. She quickly decided to give her theory a small test.

"As my grandfather has pointed out on numerous occasions," she said with her most charming smile, "banks make their money by loaning to people who have wealth, but no cash."

The Basset smiled. "Did he?" He paused for a second. "Not an inaccurate observation," he agreed. "Was he in finance?"

"He was before the War, but after his service, he went into law."

The Basset looked over his papers. "He was in the War?"

"Hundred-first airborne – purple heart," Desiree said, proudly.

The Basset raised his eyebrows. "Oh, yes . . ." He went back to his papers. There was another pause.

"How did you come to these figures for the refurbishment, Miss DelHomme?" asked the Colourpoint.

"Section three of the plan," she mentioned. "We had an estimate done by a contractor for minimal restoration. That, and we applied Parkinson's law," Desiree responded.

"Beg pardon?" asked the Basset.

"Work expands or contracts to fill the allotted resources. We would shrink or expand our work to fit the cash and time allowance, but we should have more than enough to function, so extra cash would go to improvements as we could afford them. Also, we have several people who have pledged work at minimum wage for a share of the net profits. That part's on the last page of the plan."

They flipped to the last page. After studying a while, they nodded to each other, put down the plans, took off their glasses, put their folded hands on the table and looked very gravely at the three applicants.

"If we were to loan you the money . . ." began the Colourpoint.

"Due to your rather brief credit history, Mister Green . . ." added the Basset.

"And yours as well, Mister Robinson," continued the Colourpoint, "I'm afraid we couldn't give you a very good interest rate."

"I understand that," Steve replied.

"It's unfortunate that you have no credit rating here, Miss DelHomme," said the Colourpoint.

"I understand," Desiree replied.

The Basset continued. "You'd have to meet at least the interest every month. And if you miss just one month we could foreclose at any time in the future. You understand that, as well?"

"We appreciate that you have to protect your assets," Steve said.

"Quite," affirmed the Basset.

"As long as you're protected," Desiree said. "That's what matters."

"I'm glad you realise our position," said the Colourpoint.

"Then you'll give us the loan?" asked Desiree.

"We can't give it to *you*, Miss DelHomme, as you're an alien, with no credit history – here at least," the Colourpoint replied. "We would have to give it to Mister Green and Mister Robinson – assuming we decided it was appropriate."

"Then you'll give *them* the loan?" Desiree rephrased.

The two bank officers looked at each other.

"We'll consider it," answered the Basset. "We'll have to discuss it with some of our colleagues. We'll have an answer for you Wednesday, noonish. Good day."

1230 – Newburg Bank

"Shameless flirt," muttered the Colourpoint.

"Oh, calm down. She was just nervous," said the Basset.

"And if her grandfather was in the war, then I'm a Hottentot," the Colourpoint added. "I doubt if he ever was a banker – or a solicitor, come to it."

"And I'd bet my boots that tall, skinny bastard smoked a reefer within the past fortnight," said the Basset. "But, at the end of the day, it doesn't really

matter," he stated, looking over his papers. "They've got a plan and collateral and we have a quota. That girl might be a flirt and a liar, but she's damned clever. And both of the lads have spotless credit histories – brief as they are. Combined, they easily meet the targets."

"As much as it galls me to admit it, the girl is right. We could repossess tomorrow and be all right."

"We'll give it to them, then?" asked the Basset.

The Colourpoint considered a moment. "All right, then."

Just then, the secretary stuck her head in the door. "Call on line one, sir," she said.

"Right. Got it," said the Basset. He picked up the handset and punched a button on the desk telephone. "Yes? . . . Yes, we just interviewed them. Did you want us to deny? . . . I'm sorry, but that's confidential . . . All right, all right – yes we're going to give them the loan. Anything else? . . . Oh, I see . . . Very good. Goodbye."

"Who was that?" asked the Colourpoint after the Basset hung up.

"That bloody busybody, MacAleister. Wanted to know if we were giving those three the loan."

"And you told him? That's against policy!" admonished the Colourpoint.

"You want to tell him that?" grumbled the Basset. "We'd be sacked in a heartbeat."

"That MacAleister has some bloody cheek," muttered the Colourpoint. "You know what this means, of course?"

"Yes, it means we take another bath on a repossession," answered the Basset. "If MacAleister wants us to loan the money, it means the Rialto is worthless – to us at least. If they fail, repossession won't cover the loan. MacAleister will sell it to himself for a pound or the like and all the back-taxes will be paid off by the defaulted loan. Suddenly the value of the Rialto goes from fifty thou to nearly half a million."

"What if they succeed?" asked the Colourpoint. "What would MacAleister gain by that?"

"He must have some trick up his sleeve," the Basset answered. "He'll have some loophole that will allow him to legally steal it from those poor sods on the off chance they manage to pull it off. And Green and Robinson won't have the income to pay off the loan. It's a complete no-win situation for us, and it's not exactly good news for Green and Robinson, either. Their surnames might as well be 'Patsy'."

The Colourpoint was getting more furious by the moment. "Bloody hell! I'm sick of us left holding the baby every time that . . . that . . . con-artist wants to swindle someone. Our insurance rates are already through the roof!"

"I couldn't agree more," growled the Basset. "Just once, I'd like to . . ."

Their collective anger warmed the room as they gave a few ideas silent thought.

"They have to succeed, that's a given," said the Basset. "If they fail, we've lost."

"And they have to keep the Rialto after they've succeeded," added the Colourpoint.

"Which means, if we repossess, we've lost as well," reasoned the Basset. "MacAleister will assume control and sell it to himself."

"Blimey," the Colourpoint gasped. "We *have* to make a loan and we *can't* repossess. It's enough to give me a turn."

"Steady on, we can do this if we dot our 'i's and cross our 't's. We just have to remember how he's done it in the past and beat him to the punch. For example, remember that engineering firm?"

"Yes, I remember them. They claimed they signed a contract for a sale, when it was a lease. Poor lads took a bath – as did we."

"I'll bet MacAleister switched contracts somehow," the Basset speculated. "He gave them a sale contract for review and switched it to a lease contract when they weren't looking."

"And that nice solicitor," the Colourpoint recalled. "MacAleister had him do all of that legal work, and then just completely reneged on the payment. Poor man nearly lost his home."

"I'll never understand how the judge could have ruled for MacAleister," the Basset said, shaking his head.

"Hah! I'll bet MacAleister's got that judge in his pocket somehow," the Colourpoint guessed. "That's the only way it could have happened. I mean, really! A *solicitor* losing an open and shut case like that? There's no way, unless the judge was bought off."

"Right, we can't do much about the judge, but we can do something about the contract. First thing we do is have Green and Robinson give us a copy of the review contract they have now and another copy of the contract that MacAleister has them sign. If he tries to pull some stunt like switching contracts, then we might be able to get him on misrepresentation."

"And we have to make sure they get as much help as possible to make the Rialto a success, or none of this will matter," the Colourpoint pointed out.

"True," admitted the Basset. "At least they're keen. We have that going for us. And they said they had their own labour for construction. So that's ninety percent of the battle out of the way. But if we really want to make sure they succeed, we'll have to make some concessions on the terms of the loan."

"Such as?"

"If they have a lower interest rate, they're less likely to default. And if we give them a larger loan, they'll have more capital to work with."

"True," the Colourpoint considered for a moment. "But you know what new business owners are like when they're flush with cash; they waste it on all sorts of rubbish, like solid oak desks. Let's give them just enough to get by – then they'll watch their pennies. And if things get sticky, we can always give them a little more cash or a deferral."

The Basset nodded in approval. "Yes, I agree, that's a better approach. But we'll have to stay on top of them every step of the way. We'll stipulate that they meet with us twice a week to report on progress. And we can do other things to help them."

"Such as?"

"We have more than a few clients that have an axe to grind with MacAleister. That hardware store, for one. Then there's that editor for that

horrid little rag – might be useful for a little publicity when they open. Oh, and that waste disposal company. Every construction job needs a skip."

The Colourpoint thought for a second and her eyes slimmed in conspiracy. "And there's that engineering firm you mentioned earlier. And the security firm that's just started up. They could use a little steady work."

"And if MacAleister's involved, they're going to need a solicitor, sooner or later," added the Basset. "And we both know who *that* would be."

"Quite," agreed the Colourpoint. "Indeed we do." She considered some more. "It'd be nice to stick MacAleister with the bill for once."

"I concur," said the Basset. "But it's just you and me. No one else can know."

"I'll be tempted to brag," replied the Colourpoint. "But not *that* tempted."

"We'll do it then?" asked the Basset.

"Too right, we'll do it," replied the Colourpoint. "Let's get the paperwork done and call them back as soon as possible."

1330 – Newburg Streets

"I never knew your grandfather was in the War," Steve commented when they were safely outside.

"He wasn't. He was never a banker, either," Desiree responded calmly. "But he was a lawyer."

"Desiree! You lied at our loan application? If they caught you out, we could have lost the loan!" Michael protested.

"You lied first," Desiree answered calmly.

"Me? What did I lie about?" asked Michael.

"*D'uh!*" Desiree scolded. "You've been smoking *way* too much weed if you can't remember."

"What are you – Oh. Yes . . . That. Well, fair cop, then," Michael admitted.

1800 – Linda's Home

Desiree sat at Linda's kitchen table, examining a statuette with a magnifier. "This is some kinda de-tail, hawt," she complimented. "You did these yourself?"

"Every one," Linda said proudly.

"And they're all lifelike?"

"That's right," Linda declared.

"Completely accurate?"

"I can assure you, they are as accurate as possible," Linda stated proudly. "There's *no* idealisation or embellishments in my work, despite the repeated request of some clients." She sighed and rolled her eyes. "You wouldn't believe some of the things they ask me to exaggerate sometimes."

Desiree examined the figurine more, cautiously turning it in her hand as she examined it through the magnifying glass. "How often do you do this?" she asked.

"On average, about four a year, but I have to get commissions."

"You use live models?"

"Of course."

"Can I come next time? Just to draw some sketches?" asked Desiree.

"It's all right with me, but I'll have to ask the models. And even if they allow it, I want you to promise me – no examinations."

"Okay," Desiree agreed.

"I mean it, Desiree," Linda warned. "When you brushed me out the other night, you got more acquainted with my body than most men I've slept with."

"Okay, I promise, I won't touch the models," Desiree reaffirmed. "Geez, it's not like I used an endoscope or something."

27JUN2001 Wednesday

1200 – Black Kettle Pub

The next day, Wednesday, the Troupe was gathered around the table at the Black Kettle for a briefing during lunch. It had been several days since the meeting with MacAleister and Steve had spent most of his time running between the bank, the estate agent and the solicitor.

"Well, we've finally reached a conclusion of sorts," he reported. "I was quite surprised by the bank's offer. Nothing in writing yet, but they told me that they actually are willing to loan us 75% of the value of the property and at a pretty good rate, as well. Pretty amazing, considering our credit rating."

"That's awright, then," Pete said.

"Very good news, indeed," Geoff added.

"Could buy lotsa ale wiffat," Rachael added.

Gina was not so easily pleased. "What's the catch?"

"We have to pay all debts and taxes within ninety days. The loan itself would come to just under 390,000. After bank fees, taxes, debts for public utilities and the ever-present insurance we'd have about 65,000 quid left. That's all the money we'd have to renovate the Rialto, buy supplies, drink, *et cetera*. There is some old equipment we could make use of, or maybe sell, but not much. It's mostly just rubbish. And we'd still be 350 grand in the hole. We'd be working for free for some time to come."

"Not as rosy as it seemed a few moments ago," Geoff said.

"It gets worse," Steve said. "As I mentioned, even though they offered us a rather low rate, we'd have to scratch up about 1600 quid a month, just to pay the interest. And if we were to miss just one payment, the bank can foreclose at any time in the future. And we won't, erm . . ."

"Have a pot plant to piddle on," Linda stated emphatically.

"That's about the size of it," Steve confirmed. "If we do go through with it we'd be working for the bank for the next thirty years. After that, we'd be making almost all of the money. And the first ten years is going to be very rough. Extremely rough."

Michael spoke. "I'd also like to state that I hope that one day, hopefully in the near future, Simon and Grace will return. If that day arrives, I will still require your commitment to the Rialto at least until we can find a buyer at which point,

we could split the profits and go our merry way. Or we could keep going; but we'll cross that bridge if we come to it."

"*When* we come to it," Ignatius interrupted.

"Of course – *when* we come to it," Steve agreed. "I haven't signed anything yet, as I thought I would get your approval first, so, speak now or forever hold your peace. The deal is that we all enter as partners with equal shares.

Michael, Desi and I have agreed to go in as soon as one other person comes on board. Anyone?"

"We're in," Slide and Sandra chorused.

"And us," Pete said, speaking for himself and Gina.

Linda was next to throw up her hand. "I'm on. I'll volunteer to do the books as well."

"That'd be a relief," Steve said. "Can't abide bookkeeping and taxes and that sort of thing."

Ignatius spoke next. "I'm in."

Clare and Rachael chorused, "We're in," without even consulting one another.

"You've been awfully quiet, Geoff," Ignatius stated. "Trouble making up your mind?"

"Yeah, somewhat." The old Suvan stroked his chin in thought. "It's just that I've been working very hard the past few years. I'm not young anymore and I can't do the work like I used to. And I've got enough to live on, assuming I don't reach 150." He picked up his lager, took a swig and put it back down in an introspective manner. "I had been hoping to live the rest of my life in some sort of comfort. Take it easy. Travel a bit. Home's paid for. Piglets have all grown up and moved out. Wife left me ages ago, may she rest in peace."

"So d'ya not want in, Geoff?" asked Rachael.

"Well, I *have* been thinking about it. I did try the idle life for almost six months before Ig came and gave me that job at The tré. I use 'gave' in a very loose sense, you understand, but . . . up until that point, I was just sort of . . . sad and bored. My life had no purpose. It had no goal. There was no job to finish. I had taken it for granted what it meant to look at a finished job and think to myself, 'Now there's a job well done. I wonder how long it will last?' Most of my jobs are still up. Those that weren't were torn down for something better."

"So ya *do* want in?" asked Rachael.

Geoff nodded. "Yeah. I want in." He began to smile. "I wouldn't miss this for the world." He hurriedly took another swig of beer. "That venue is in a deplorable state. I've always said you can't make a silk purse out of a Sow's ear, but I have to say I honestly believe there's a good bit o' silk hidden behind them walls. Personally, I think we could turn it round in two months time. She's a good, solid building. She just needs a bit of TLC to bring her back to life."

"Unanimous, then," Steve said. "We'll go and sign the papers immediately. Congratulations everyone, you're in the venue business. We are now the Rialto Furry Troupe Partnership, Limited or, in short, the Partnership."

1400 – Newburg Bank

The Basset and the Colourpoint compared the two contracts, side by side. One was a copy that had been given to Steve and Michael for review. The other was a copy they had personally watched him sign.

"It's official," said the Colourpoint, "at some point, MacAleister is going to try to swindle them. But this time, we've got him by the short and curlies."

"Oh, really. No need to be vulgar," chastised the Basset.

"My vulgarity is nothing compared to what MacAleister does," the Colourpoint said in her own defence. "Now *that's* vulgar."

"Can't say I disagree on that point. And we may have carried the day on the field of battle, but the war is not yet won. We'll make copies of these and inform our solicitor."

"That's it?" asked the Colourpoint. "Why don't we have him hauled in front of a judge, straightaway?"

"MacAleister will just say he accidentally gave the wrong contract to Green and Robinson, so let's not tip our hand just yet. Give him time; he'll drop another clanger, soon enough. And, comes the day when he *does* claim he gave Green a lease contract to review, *then* we'll have him by the short and curlies. But for now, let's sit tight."

1800 – Rialto Auditorium

Michael Robinson, Steve Green and Desiree DelHomme returned to the Rialto auditorium, where they met the other members of the Partnership. They had gathered near the stage, some sitting on the edge and others taking seats in the auditorium.

"How's the work in The tré going, Geoff?" asked Ignatius.

"We finished the important bits this afternoon. That'll allow us to go in and out unnoticed," Geoff reported. "Vince and his crew will finish the rest in his own time."

"How do we keep this secret from Vince?" asked Sandra.

"We don't," Geoff answered. "He already knows. But not to worry, we can rely on him to keep mum."

"Are you sure?" asked Slide. "Vince is kind of a dodgy character."

"That's why we can trust him to keep quiet," Geoff smiled. "I've got loads more on him than he does on me."

"And even if that weren't the case, he's hardly the type to grass, just on principle," Linda added.

"So, when do we start work?" Pete asked.

"Bright and early, lobby of the Rialto, seven o'clock," Geoff said.

"Seven?" Rachael moaned. "I don't do early."

"You do now, you little toerag," Gina ordered. "Whinge again and it'll be for six."

"I'm not complaining," Clare carefully prefaced her question, "but why so early?"

"Because, every day we lose, we come that much closer to losing the Rialto," Geoff answered. "It's imperative that we spend every waking moment putting her to rights, so that we can have opening day as soon as possible."

"Geoff's absolutely right," Linda reiterated. "This first month is critical. Steve and I ran some numbers on the computer and if we don't start making some dosh from this place in a hurry, we'll run out of cash. If we open in one month, we can squeak by. If we take longer than two months – well, it won't be a pretty picture. We *must* be ready for opening night by the 28th of August."

"You're telling me we've got 61 days to make this place ready for business?" asked Slide. "We're not skilled builders. We'll never make it."

"We can and we will, Slide HolenWulf," Sandra countered.

"And we don't exactly have 61 days, either," Geoff said. "We need a fortnight for the high-skill stuff – sparkies, plumbers – and the inspections."

"We have to have those jobs done by qualified professionals," Michael Robinson said.

"So we get a little time off while that's being done," Geoff continued. "The down side is, that means we only have 45 days to get our work done."

"So, we have 45 days before we can let the pros in?" asked Gina for clarification.

"No, we have, at the very most, a month," Geoff said. "We strip the joint, let the pros do their bit, come back in and finish it off, so that it looks good enough for the punters. But the sooner we get the pros in, the better."

"Isn't that gonna arouse some suspicion?" asked Clare. "All of us running in and out of The tré for the next two months – or more?"

"Yes, it would," Ignatius agreed. His tail did a turn as he considered the problem. "Steve, how many people can the Rialto sleep?" asked Pete.

"Upstairs, there are three bedrooms that could max out to about, oh, eight or nine, people," Steve answered, "depending on how well you know each other. However, beneath the stage, we've nearly a dozen small rooms. They were used to accommodate the visiting actors and musicians. But they're not fit for living at the moment."

"I see," Ignatius said, his tail waving about some more. "Very well, here is what I propose. We'll tell everyone in Otterstow that we're planning an expedition to find Grace and Simon and that we'll be gone for several weeks. Both true, in point of fact. Then we can stay in the Rialto as we do our work."

"But we have regular jobs and all," Slide said. "I don't have six weeks of vacation."

"Take a leave of absence," Sandra said. "We can live off our savings for a while."

"Pete and I will have to let Johnny tend the bar full-time," Gina mentioned. "We'll probably have to hire other help as well."

"But at least we'd get a leave on PD, right Ig?" Pete smiled.

"Hmm, hadn't thought of that," Ignatius said. "But for my plan to work, I suppose you'd have to. And I won't be able to follow my own plan as I'll have to juggle the schedule, and I'm still on double duty for being late."

"Am I to understand, apart from having to hire extra help, that while we're roughing it out in the Rialto, you'll have the privilege of sleeping in your own bed at night? Am I right?" Gina asked.

"Gina, behave," Pete scolded. "It's not 'is sprogs we're doin' this for."

"And I'm not mandating this scheme," Ignatius said. "If you wish to go in and out every day or every other day or third day, feel free. It was just a suggestion to avoid suspicion."

"Oh . . . all right, then," Gina said, conciliated.

"I'll have to be in and out all the time as well," Geoff mentioned. "I'll be rooting around for tools and supplies."

"But that's all right," Linda pointed out, "You can just say you're working on The tré."

"But we can get tools and supplies in Newburg," Steve mentioned. "There's a hardware place, just down the road. They heard that we were refurbishing the Rialto and said they'd give us an open credit account. We can borrow on ninety days, with no interest."

Linda rapidly scribbled down a note. "That'll give us some breathing room," she mentioned.

Yeah, but I like to pick out the quality stuff," Geoff countered. "And some of them tools won't fit our hands."

"Oh, right," Steve admitted. "And we can't exactly have a six foot Boar walking through the power tools section. But surely we could buy *some* things in Newburg."

"How about letting Vince have a look?" suggested Linda. "He's human, so he wouldn't be noticed. He's already in the loop and he's going to be in The tré nearly every day anyway, so he'll be accessible."

"Yes, excellent idea," Geoff agreed. "I'll bring it up with him, straight away. Although, I think it fair to say, we still might have to tart him up a bit before he goes unnoticed in Reality."

"Just in the event," Gina began, "that whilst we're slaving away, Simon and Grace happen by. Is there something we can do to let them know that they're welcome home?"

Steve stroked his chin for a moment. "I think I can do something for that," he mentioned. "I'll show you tomorrow morning."

"So, what've we gotta do wiffa place?" asked Pete, looking about the dingy auditorium. "I mean, I know we've gotta do more'n a lick o' paint an' a few curtains, but . . ."

"Oh, it's a complete strip," Geoff stated. "The roof leaks, the interior is falling apart . . . Besides, we'll have to strip it down anyway if the electrics and plumbing have to be redone. No, that's not an issue. The issue is, what do we want it be when we put it back together? Do we want live shows? Do we want it to be for small band concerts? A dance hall? A dinner theatre?"

"Didn't you say it was a cinema at one point?" asked Linda.

"Yes, it was," Steve said. "That's what it was just before it shut down."

"Well, perhaps we should eliminate that, as it didn't work," Linda suggested.

"Ah, yes, it did, in fact, fail as a cinema," Michael recounted, "and a dinner theatre and a number of other ventures as well, but that was because a large

amount of the profit went up the nose and in the veins of Angus – and several of his younger female employees."

"So, what's it gonna be?" asked Linda. "Time to make our game plan."

"Well, the floor slopes, so it can't be a dance 'all," pointed out Rachael. "Unless everyone 'ere's got one leg shorter than t'other."

"It's a false floor," Geoff pointed out, stomping on it to emphasize its hollow nature. "It's been sloped so the audience can view the cinema screen. It'd take no time at all to take it out."

"I think the key to our success," Ignatius hypothesised, "is versatility. If we can make this a venue with several possibilities, then we're more flexible. One week can be a play. The next week can be a concert. Then next week can be a dance hall."

"Sounds very reasonable," Geoff put in. "Whatever we do, as a start, we can rip out all those cinema seats and tear up the sloped floor. Since it's decided we're not going to do *just* a cinema, we may as well get rid of that lot. These seats have seen their last days anyway. And that matty old carpet is so sticky, it could slow down a racehorse."

"Right," said Steve. "What's that gonna take?"

"To start with, screwdrivers and crowbars," Geoff replied. "And lots and lots of muscle power. And a place to put it all."

"I'm not very good with the muscle bit," Steve mentioned, "but our loan officers pointed out that every construction job requires a rubbish skip, so I hired one that they recommended. It's sitting out front."

"Very resourceful," Geoff commended. "I've only got the one set of tools, so if this one bit of job is going to take less than a month, I suggest you get everyone a set," suggested Geoff. "So when does this store of yours close?"

"Eight," Steve answered.

"Perfect," Geoff said, checking his watch. "It's just past six now, so we have plenty of time for a quick bite before we accomplish our little mission tonight."

"Mission?" Michael asked. "What mission?"

1900 – Rialto Basement

"Vince, this is Steve Green, Desiree DelHomme and Michael Robinson. Steve, Desi, Michael – Vince Scrub," Geoff introduced.

They all shook hands as Vince grunted an affirmation.

"Vince, these three are gonna take you to assess some materials and tools. I'd go myself, but – well, you know the story. Now, I've got a list here of our immediate needs – mostly tools, since we're in the demolition phase. Have a butcher's and tell me if they're any good or not, if they'll fit our hands and so on."

Vince nodded.

"These three will note the price and your comments."

"They can read and write, can they?" asked Vince.

"Oh, yes. Quite the academics."

Vince, who was substantially taller, than Steve and a great deal more muscular than Michael, commented "I can see how they'd have to be."

"I've heard tell," Geoff began in a conspiratorial tone, "that their writing is even better than yours."

Vince looked very angry for a second. "Don't go mentionin' that so casually, ye great Swine!" he said in an angry whisper.

Geoff wore a big smile.

"Doesn't everyone read and write here?" Michael asked.

"No!" Vince answered in a most definitive tone. "No, everyone here does *not* read and write. Particularly skins. In fact, everyone *but* skins are allowed to read and write."

"Sorry. Didn't mean to offend," Steve said.

"Let's get on with it, then," Vince growled.

"Are you familiar with Reality?" asked Steve.

"Aye, Geoff's clued me in on the details," Vince answered.

"Did you know that it's occupied entirely by humans?" asked Michael.

"Something like 'at," Vince replied.

"Lissen cap, I know I ain't your mamma, but we're gonna have to get you cleaned up a little before we get to our destination," Desiree said. "Even hardware stores have some dress standards."

"Does it involve a bath?" Vince asked as they walked up the basement stairs of the Rialto.

1930 – Rialto Master Bedroom

"So that's what a *hot* bath is like, izzit?" asked Vince, still wet and wrapped in a towel. "I could get used to that once a week, whether I needed it or not." Michael threw him a stick of deodorant.

"What's this, then?" asked Vince. He sniffed the toiletry.

"It's called deodorant," Michael explained. "You rub it under your arms – pull the cap off first – that's right. It keeps you from smelling if you've been perspiring."

"Y'mean sweatin'?" asked Vince.

"Yes. Sweating," Steve clarified.

"So I could work all day and not smell bad?"

"Not from sweat," Michael said. "If you were shovelling manure all day, it won't stop that."

Vince examined the stick carefully. "Can I keep this? Only the missus says she can't stand to be in the same room when I get home from a day's work."

"It's yours," Michael offered. "Keep the shampoo, as well. It'll get rid of the dandruff."

"Dandruff?"

"The little white flakes that fall off when you scratch your head."

"But that's only natural," Vince mentioned. "Everyone has it."

"You could be the first not to," Steve suggested. "Keep that hair brush as well."

"What would I do with a hair brush?" Vince asked, rubbing his mostly bald pate.

"For your wife," Steve suggested.

"So where're me clothes?" asked Vince.

"In the wash," Steve answered. "They'll be clean and dry in a few hours. In the meantime, I've got a few things you can try on. They're over there." He pointed to a bed with some fresh clothes laid out. "You're just about Michael's size, which is a bit of luck."

"Keep those as well," Michael offered.

Vince held up a pair of pants. "And what's this, then?"

2000 – Newburg Hardware Store

"Sandpaper?" Steve asked an employee walking past.

The employee pointed in a general direction. "Aisle three," he said, quickly departing to take care of some task that didn't involve pesky customers.

"We'll never finish with our list before they close," Steve complained. "It takes ages to get help every time we want to look at something."

"I agree," Michael said. "Just can't get good service here."

"Excuse me," Vince said, "You did say we're about to spend a couple grand here, did you not?"

"Yes," Steve shrugged.

"Leave this to me," Vince said ominously. His eyes narrowed as he searched about the store.

"He's looks rather intimidating, Steve," Michael whispered to his friend.

"Does a bit, yeah," Steve admitted. "What's he gonna do?"

"*You!*" Vince garnered a hapless stock boy by the collar. "Look here, lad, we need the chief out here, straightaway. You go and fetch 'im. Hear? We've no time to waste."

"Yessir!" said the stock boy. He ran off the moment Vince let go of his shirt.

Two minutes later, a senior member of the sales staff was handing Vince a cordless drill. "This is one of our higher quality models," he smiled. "Not too expensive, but very durable. Variable electronic speed control, 10 millimetre single sleeve keyless chuck with automatic spindle lock, two speed gearbox, adjustable torque with 5 settings, 1250 rpm, run out brake for exact screwdriving, soft grip for comfortable use, digital display to inform of charge status, performance and overheating warning, charging time 1 hour. Comes complete with two batteries, a charger, double-ended screwdriver bits, carrying case and a two year manufacturer's warranty."

Vince grinned maliciously as he pulled the trigger to hear the whirr of the tiny electric motor. "How many've you got in stock?"

"Four."

"We'll take the lot," Vince ordered. "Steve, pay the man and we're on our way."

"My card," the salesman offered Vince.

"Give it to him," Vince pointed to Steve. "He's the ones with the dosh."

2230 – Black Kettle Pub

Geoff was patiently waiting as Vince entered the auditorium.

"Evening, Geoff," Vince beamed.

"How'd it go, Vince? Any good?" asked Geoff.

"Oh, I think you'll be presently surprised. Show 'im what we got, Michael,"

Vince ordered.

Michael held the cordless drill up and pulled the trigger a couple of times for effect.

"Shave me," Geoff marvelled.

"We picked up three," Vince said. "Should make short work of this job."

"No doubt," Geoff agreed readily.

"It was four, wasn't it?" asked Steve.

"No, it was three," Vince said pointedly looking over his shoulder at Steve.

Geoff leaned slightly so that he could clearly see Steve standing behind Vince. "Not to worry, Steve, it was three." He straightened up to look at Vince. "There'll be more to come."

"Look forward to it, me old fruit," Vince smiled. "Steve's got my opinion on the materials written down. I wouldn't even bother with the stuff in Otterstow or HareFam. Just get it all here."

"Oh, right," Geoff said. "At least that'll get me out of PD for a month. Well, ta then, Vince."

Vince nodded silently and departed, an unlabelled box tucked tightly under his arm.

"Um . . . How's he gonna recharge that thing in Otterstow?" Desiree asked Geoff.

"What thing?" asked Geoff.

"The thing he was carrying under his arm."

"Didn't see anything under his arm," Geoff replied.

Desiree gave the situation some thought. "Say, cap, if I had a cordless drill that I bought here in Newburg, would I be able to recharge it in Otterstow somehow?"

"I don't think it's escaped your notice, young lady, but we do actually have electricity in The Kingdom," Geoff said. "Even the humans."

"Well, yeah, I did actually notice that," Desiree countered, "but what about the volts and amps and frequency and all. Is it gonna work?"

"I assure you, if it doesn't, Vince would have no desire for a cordless drill that he couldn't charge – which he doesn't have, by the way."

And on that note, the conversation ended.

28JUN2001 Thursday

0700 – Rialto Auditorium

As Geoff had requested, they had gathered in the lobby of the Rialto at seven in the morning.

"Where's Jess?" asked Pete of Ignatius.

"Jess? At seven in the morning?" Ignatius asked rhetorically. "Sound asleep, I assure you."

"Wish I was," Rachael grumbled wearily.

"Have some tea and quit whinging," Gina ordered, handing her a hot cup. "Steve, you said you would do something that might help Grace and Simon know they're welcome back?"

"Yes, I did. Last night, I took the liberty of putting a message on the marquee," Steve said, "saying 'Grace and Simon, please come home.'"

This met with a few confused stares.

"Marquee?" asked Geoff. "I've always thought of a marquee as a great big tent, like they use for wedding receptions." Some of the others nodded in agreement.

"It is," Steve replied. "But it's also that big awning with the sign on it that tells what's on at the Rialto." He somehow sensed that this didn't clear the matter to any degree. "Right, come with me," he sighed patiently.

They all rose and followed him as he exited the front door and stood under the awning which overhung the entrance.

"Okay, now, we're all outside right?" Steve asked.

They all nodded and agreed.

"But we're still under a roof, right? And this roof, or awning, is here so the punters waiting in the queue won't get rained on."

They agreed again.

"This awning or 'outside roof' over our heads is called the marquee. And it serves the same purpose as a big tent, as it provides shelter."

"Oh, right," Geoff said in comprehension. "But what was the bit about the message?"

"That's what makes it a marquee and not just an awning," Steve said, beckoning them forward into the open air. He led them from under the shelter so that they could see that just above the edge of the marquee was an elaborate sign that had replaceable letters. On the bottom row of the sign, a group of letters clearly spelled out "Grace and Simon, please come home" along with a telephone number.

"I don't know if you've noticed, Steve, but 'please' is misspelt," pointed out Ignatius.

"Oh, so it is," Steve admitted. "It's hard to notice when you're looking at it upside-down."

"Upside down?"

"Yeah, you're looking at the sign upside down when you place the letters," Steve explained.

They looked at the sign a while longer.

"It's a lovely sign," Rachael commented.

"Do the neon bits light up?" asked Pete.

"Sadly, no," Steve answered. "People have thrown rocks and things at it and broken the tubes. It was a lovely sign, but I somehow suspect it'll cost a packet to get it repaired. Probably just best if we remove it."

"But that would take down the message," Sandra countered.

"Yes, that's true," Steve agreed. "Guess we'll have to leave it up then. At the very least, we could repaint some of it. I suggest we take care of the

necessities first and if we have any cash left over, then we can start to restore the neon."

"I think we should make it rather high on our list of priorities," Ignatius said. "I know everyone thinks of me as an over-dressed fop and obsessed with appearances, but the fact of the matter is, a well-dressed business will attract custom."

"Yeah, you right, hawt," Desiree said. "Especially as this place has a bad rep, we'll need to make the outside look good enough so they'll wanna see the inside."

"Could do," Steve said. "We'll have to postpone any refurb on the kitchen, then. Any objections?"

The Partnership remained silent as they looked at the forlorn sign.

"Sad, innit," Pete said. "Lovely sign like 'at, an' someone throwin' rocks at it."

A drop or two of rain fell on them and they took it as an excuse to return to the auditorium, which they did in comparative silence.

0730 – Rialto Auditorium

Twenty minutes later, Sandra was holding the power tool in her hand. "Right, one last time. I put the screwdriver bit in the chuck," she said, performing the task, "hold down the spindle lock to keep the drill from turning while I tighten the chuck to hold the bit in place. Then I let go of the spindle lock, and erm . . ."

"Pull the trigger," Desiree suggested politely.

Sandra pulled the trigger.

"Oo!" Sandra said excitedly as the tiny motor whirred.

"And what do we do *now*?" prompted Desiree.

"I make sure it's set in reverse," Sandra recalled, pushing a button on the side. "That's anticlockwise, so the screw will come out. Then I set the point of the bit into the slots of the screw . . ." She knelt down and put the tip of the screwdriver into a screw that was holding down the seats. "Push down firmly and pull the trigger."

There was a growl and then a ratcheting sound.

"Ah! I broke it!" Sandra exclaimed nervously.

"No, you did no such thing, hawt," Desiree explained calmly. "You just have the torque setting too low. Set it to the maximum."

"Torque? What's torque?" asked Sandra, nearing panic.

"It's how much force it twists with," Desiree explained patiently. "Remember how we set that?"

"Oh, right, I remember!" Sandra exclaimed with a sudden smile. She held the drill to the light and turned a plastic collar to its full stop. "Right, let me try again." She set the bit to the screw once again. This time there was a brief growl of two seconds and then a 'clink' as the screw fell to the floor.

"Shave *me*!" Sandra marvelled. "It came out, just like that!"

"Excellent," Desiree praised. "Now, do the next two thousand and we can call it a day."

0745 – Rialto Office

"Right, so I log on," Linda said, hunting and pecking her user name and password. "I click on this link here to set up an auction," she added, grabbing the mouse. "Then I type in the copy and upload the pictures here."

"You set up an auction account?" asked Steve, incredulous. "By yourself?"

"It's all very straightforward," Linda shrugged. "The instructions for the auctions are pretty clear and if I had a question, I just sent an email. They wrote right back."

"You set up an email account?"

"And I tied it to our bank account, so we could have e-payments. That's so much faster than checks and easier than credit cards, although I'll probably set those up later," Linda said.

"You set up an e-pay account?"

"Did I do something wrong?" asked Linda, concern in her voice.

"No, nothing wrong at all," Steve shook his head. "You learned all of this by yourself?" asked Steve, still in disbelief.

"No, not by myself, silly. You taught me how to use it, remember?" Linda reminded him. "Last Monday."

"But it's only Thursday," Steve remarked. "It's only been three days! And I only gave you the one lesson!"

Linda smiled and tickled him under the chin. "Must've had a *very* good teacher, huh?"

"But it was a twenty minute chat," Steve marvelled. "And half the time we were talking about porn!"

"Oh, we were *not*," Linda dismissed. "It was five minutes, tops."

"Still," Steve admitted. "I must say, you certainly have *my* respect. It took me ages to figure this out."

"Oh, why *then kyu!*" Linda gushed. "Now, on to business. What's the first of the goodies from the basement we're going to auction?"

"There's this old tandem bicycle," Steve said. "It's in pristine condition, except for the tires. Should fetch a few quid."

"Yeah, I saw that," Linda said. "I think we had an identical one in The tré. Pity someone snapped it up in Otterstow or we could've sold it as well."

0800 – Rialto Entrance

The first row of seats had been removed and was being carried out to the skip by Rachael, Clare and Michael. As soon as they were close enough, they heaved the seats up and over the edge. The seats reached their apex and stopped.

"What the . . ." asked Rachael.

"The skip's full," Michael said, standing on his toes to peer into the skip.

"We haven't put anything in it yet," said Clare. "This is our first load."

"It's so difficult to throw anything away here, any time there's a skip sitting around, people come from miles around to get rid of their rubbish," Michael explained.

"What're we gonna do? We got loadsa rubbish to pile in yet," Rachael objected.

"I'll have to get Steve to call the company and have them remove this first load," Michael said.

"How long's that gonna take?" asked Rachael.

"Several hours, I would think. We'll just have to pile all the stuff outside until it's done," Michael conceded.

0830 – Rialto Kitchen

"I don't understand," Clare asked, taking the last plates from the cupboard. "Why are we taking everything out of the kitchen?"

"Not everything," Geoff qualified as he and Pete wheeled the refrigerator out of the room on a hand-truck. "We'll leave the hob, but everything else has to go."

"But why?" asked Rachael, assisting with more chairs.

"Because the pipes and electrics are a complete redo," Geoff explained. "That means we have to expose them all."

"But they're in the walls," Clare stated.

"Precisely," Geoff said. "And that means we have to knock down *all* of the plaster, not only the walls, but the ceiling as well."

"But I thought we was gonna do the audience area first," Rachael said. "Then the other bits later."

"Michael says it won't pass inspection unless we do *all* of the wiring and plumbing," Ignatius clarified. "So we have to expose every single bit."

"And be grateful all of the floors are concrete," Geoff said. "If they were wood floors, we'd have to pry up all of the floor boards and walk on rafters and joists."

"Then why are we doing the kitchen first?" asked Clare. "I thought we wanted to focus on getting the customer areas done first."

"Steve says all of the electrics and plumbing have to be redone," Geoff explained.

"So shouldn't we save the kitchen for last, since we use it the most?" asked Clare.

"As soon as we knock down the plaster, we can get it cleaned up and fit to eat in again," Geoff patiently explained. "It'll still be a functioning kitchen, just without any walls."

Ten minutes later, the kitchen was cleared of anything that wasn't nailed down.

"So, are we ready to begin?" asked Geoff.

"I suppose so," Ignatius answered. "Where do we start?"

"The ceiling," Geoff said.

Ignatius looked upward at the ceiling which was twice his height. "I won't be much help there, I'm afraid."

"On the contrary," Geoff countered with a smile, as he raised the window and turned on a fan. "Being the smallest, you'll be doing most of the work."

"But how will I reach?" asked Ignatius.

Geoff turned to Pete. "Can you reach high enough to knock a hole in the ceiling?"

Without speaking, Pete reached up with a crowbar and easily knocked some of the plaster down, forming a small hole.

"Right, now make it about three feet wide, and be sure to peel back that screen."

Pete continued to poke at the ceiling, widening the gap. "Bleedin' dusty," he complained after he had finished the task.

"Right, now Ig, you crawl into that hole and start knocking the plaster down from above. That's a lot easier and safer than knocking it down from below."

"How am I to get up . . . Oop!" Ignatius' question was answered by Pete picking him up bodily and placing him on his shoulders. "A bit of warning next time, please, Pete," Ignatius pleaded. "And I'll still need a little boost."

Pete pushed him up and Ignatius scrambled through the opening into the space above the ceiling.

"All right, I'm in," he announced. "Bar, please?"

Pete lifted the bar to the opening and Ignatius' hand reached out and pulled it into the darkness.

"And whatever you do," Geoff warned, "don't touch the electrics! And for Jack's sake don't stand . . ." He was interrupted by a shower of plaster, wood and screen raining down on them.

Everyone shielded their heads and as the dust began to clear they looked up to see Ignatius hanging from a rafter.

"A bit of assistance, please," he asked meekly. "I suspect you were about to warn me – ah, thank you Pete," he said, getting a boost back into the crawl space, "that I shouldn't stand on the plaster."

05JUL2001 Thursday

1800 – Black Kettle Pub

A week had gone by since work had started on the Rialto. Every day the group would get up early and set to work. During the Portrayals, which were fairly short in duration, the crew would have a break while Ignatius went to observe (or portray), as was his duty as the mayor of Otterstow.

At the end of the day, they would retire upstairs, taking turns at the bath and dryer. Desiree, in addition to her usual work duties, had become the *de facto* caterer, as the rest of the crew seemed to like her preparations.

"You absolutely *must* teach Jess how to make some of these things," Ignatius said. "Especially that soup thingy – what's it called, goomba?"

"Gumbo," Desiree corrected. "So our favorite Vixen isn't working out on the culinary front, huh?"

"No, to put it mildly," Ignatius answered. "She's hardly working at all."

"Shame she ain't 'ere 'elpin' out," Rachael protested. "Geoff's workin' us 'ard, mornin', noon an' night."

"Spare a thought to the humans who live in Otterstow," Ignatius mentioned. "They put in just as many hours as we do, every single day – with no end in sight, I might add."

"Ow do they keep from fallin' apart?" Rachael wondered to herself.

"To be fair," Pete pointed out, "Geoff ain't workin' us any harder'n what he's workin' himself. And he's not a young 'un, like you are, Rache – or me for that matter."

"I find it quite exhilarating," Ignatius proclaimed. "I don't know that I'd like to do it as a living, but it's something new, for once. And I never imagined I could actually do all of these things. "

"I just love those power tools," Sandra gushed. "Can we keep them after we're done?"

"They are quite nice, aren't they," Gina agreed.

"I can't wait until this is over," Sandra said. "I've got about a dozen projects at the house lined up."

"I've been cuckolded by a reciprocating saw," Slide said, smiling.

"Oh, quiet, you," Sandra cuffed him as the others laughed in amusement.

"I have to say, I honestly feel like I'm slacking," Steve confessed. "I hardly ever lift a spanner to help."

"Oh, so what, Steve," Linda dismissed. "I spend all day selling things from the basement and buying tools and supplies on the internet when we can't find them in the shop. It doesn't mean we're not contributing."

"Yes, but at least you're raising money," Steve countered. "I only spend it. And I spend so much time running around and making phone calls, that it's a rare moment when I can get something meaningful accomplished."

"No, no, Steve, not at all," Geoff absolved. "You keep the wheels rolling and the axles greased. It's your efforts that keep things from grinding to a halt – like getting us a new skip and finding the tools we need."

"And not to put too fine a point on it, Steve, but your strength doesn't lie in your strength," Slide pointed out, "if you catch my meaning."

"Sadly, yes," Steve admitted. "I'll freely admit I'm not what one would call muscular; and nothing compared to you lot. Even Desi's stronger than me."

"Well, I *am* bigger than you," Desiree pointed out. "And I didn't exactly spend *all* my college career with my nose in a book. Although I have to wonder why Geoff has me capping off all the plumbing."

"Quite simple," Geoff replied. "You mentioned it the first time we met. Look at your hands. What's different about them?"

"My fingers have three phalanges and yours have two," Desiree replied without bothering to look.

"The fact is, Desi," Geoff continued, "you've got the brains to do the job and the fingers as well. I can't speak for the others, but it's tough doing little spinny things like that with paws or trotters. And that texture on your fingers can give you a grip that we could never hope to achieve – 'monkey-grip' we call it, if you'll pardon the phrase. Steve, Michael and you will become pretty useful when the construction phase starts. It's a shame that so many humans take their hands for granted and don't use 'em to their full potential. Humans have a true gift in their hands – very nimble, very sensitive . . . "

"Next time you're in Trinova, take a look at Galecaster Abbey," remarked Ignatius. "That was built entirely by human hands; slave labour mind, but it's a sight to behold. They did a proper job of that."

"And have you ever seen humans play those guitars and violins and pianos?" Linda asked. "Their hands are like little spiders moving about. And I don't even want to mention how much *faster* Steve can type than me. It's embarrassing!"

"Be fair, Linda," Steve admitted. "The keyboard was designed for human hands. And you've only got eight fingers compared to my ten."

"Yeah, that's all well an' good innit, but it ain't detail work we need now, it's brute strength an' warm bodies, what can lift an' 'aul," mentioned Rachael.

"True," Steve admitted. "But we can't hire humans from Reality just for that. They cost too much and there's all the paperwork."

"What about someone from Otterstow?" Rachael asked.

"Vince is the only one I'd trust," replied Geoff. "And he's got other projects on his plate just now."

Ignatius rose to leave. "Well, speaking for myself, I'm all in, so I'm off to Nora. Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," the rest of the crew answered quietly, not having much strength to raise their voice.

2000 – Somewhere in England, at a Deserted Intersection with a Junk Food-Restaurant

"But Si, this is where they throw their rubbish!" Grace protested.

"I don't care," Simon countered as he scrambled into the skip outside the lonely highway diner. "I'm not above a little skip-shopping for my dinner, especially if the alternative is starving."

Grace and Simon had taken to wandering about at night as it drew less attention to themselves and, as it was summer, it was only dark for a few hours at most anyway. Few people actually ever bothered them but even with the occasional unkind remark or epithet, they eventually determined that, while most people didn't give a toss about their unusual appearance, those few that did looked like they might actually do something about it. Thus, they concluded, it would be for the best to be seen by as few people as possible.

It had been eleven days since their ride in the van, with few opportunities to bathe or wash their clothes, thus they carried an aroma with them that even they could smell. This precluded a large number of activities such as appearing in any sort of public building, except for the briefest of moments. At one point, Grace had suggested that they enter a restaurant and threaten not to leave until they got a meal, but Simon pointed out that the owners would merely call the police.

Fortunately, Simon had spent a few summers at camps as a boy and Grace was not exactly a stranger to the wilderness herself. As it was late summer, there were all sorts of wild provisions available, although they usually took from the more domesticated allotments that they stumbled across from time to time. For now, there was no shortage of either food or water, but they both knew that

summer was drawing to a close and they would either have to find their way home or find a place that could provide them with a steady supply of food and shelter.

Near an all-but-deserted intersection of two small roads, they had found a small collection of buildings, one of which featured a huge sign of a grossly obese person of indeterminate peltagage with a large red nose, brandishing a spatula. Simon decided it was time to get something for Grace besides the forage of allotments or from nature's woodland. Thus it was, by following his nose, he found himself in a skip, poking around in darkness for his next meal.

He was just as absolutely ravenous as Grace was and he smelt something incredibly wonderful inside the huge blue container. There were other, less pleasant, aromas to be sure, but his nose had centred on something that was just wonderfully tasty. He lifted the lid. "Grace? Here, hold this open so I can see what I'm doing."

"No, Simon. It's rubbish. It's not clean."

Simon looked at Grace in astonishment. "Grace, have you had a good whiff of us lately? We haven't bathed in yonks. You're *still* wearing the knickers you soiled when I saved you in that wheeliebox."

Grace looked angry and embarrassed at the same time. "I've rinsed them out since. . . once."

"But most important, we're starving. We ran out of the junk food we nicked and even with what we've foraged, we haven't eaten anything for a full day. Besides, I think there's some meat in here."

Grace grabbed the lid and held it open for Simon. "Try not to take too long."

Simon began to sniff about. Some of the smells, although unpleasant, did not belie any disease. He threw some of the garbage bags to one side as he rejected them. Very soon, he found one that seemed promising. He gave it a quick sniff to make certain and tore the plastic easily with his claws and stuffed his nose inside. *Stale bread . . . some mustard . . . pickle . . . well cooked meat . . . very greasy potatoes . . . no trace of decay or disease*, his mind's nose told him. *Not the best, but needs must. At least Grace won't complain too much.* He stuck his head out of the skip and handed Grace the bag.

"Take this," he ordered. Grace took it as Simon climbed out of the skip.

"Hurry Si, I think someone's coming," Grace said.

The two of them ran off into the night with their loot.

2000 – Nora

Ignatius entered his home and ignited the water heater to prepare for a hot, evening's soak. His muscles were tired and aching and he felt a little stiff from all the work. "Not a Kit anymore," he grumbled to himself. As the water was heating, he went downstairs to pour himself a drink.

"Is that you, Iggy?" asked a voice from the kitchen.

"Yes, it is I," he replied, pouring a brandy.

"I made some dinner. Are you hungry?" Jess asked.

This was the moment Ignatius was dreading. Jess was not meeting with a great deal of success in her attempt to help out around the house. Ignatius,

being the understanding soul that he was, tried to encourage her, although sometimes it took more than his usual sympathetic efforts of a few kind words and a pat on the back.

"Did you? What's on then?" he asked, expecting the worst.

"Shepherd's pie," she replied.

Oh, for Jack's sake, he thought to himself. *Not again!* In his kindest voice, he reminded her, "Jess, I *have* told you that I don't very much care for lamb, haven't I?"

"I didn't use lamb," she shouted from the kitchen.

No lamb? he thought. *How does one make shepherd's pie without lamb?*

Jess came into the dining room, proudly carrying a casserole. "Knowing how you feel about lamb, I asked the butcher in the market for something else to make shepherd's pie with. He suggested mutton instead. And guess what? It's cheaper!"

"Oh, yes?" Ignatius said. "So it's mutton dressed as lamb, then, is it?"

"You don't like it?"

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"You always say, 'Oh, yes,' when you don't like something."

"I haven't tried it yet, have I? Go on, then, let's have a bite and see. Who knows? Maybe it'll be just fine."

Jess went into the kitchen and returned with a plate of food and a glass of cider.

"Thank you, Jess," Ignatius said as she lay the plate before him. He took his knife and fork and cut a piece of the pie away and had a taste. There were worse things he had put in his mouth before and some of it was actually food. He chewed patiently, trying not to show his revulsion at the occasional bit of gristle that caught between his molars.

Jess could read the expression on his face all too easily. She sighed in a quiet, desperate sort of way as her shoulders and tail fell. "I'll get some bread," she said dejectedly as she slipped into the kitchen.

Ignatius forced himself to swallow the mouthful of food he had. It was no small task.

Jess returned with the bread, sat down and put her head in her hands. "I'll never be any good at cooking. I'm only good for one thing."

"Oh, don't be childish, Jess," Ignatius scolded. "Besides, you know it's not true."

"Oh, yeah? Name a second thing I'm good at. I've broken a dozen dishes trying to wash them. I've ruined half your wardrobe trying to do the wash. Even Desiree knows how to cook better than I do, and she's a skin."

"How can you say that?" asked Ignatius. "Have you ever tasted her cooking?"

"No, but you constantly go on about how good it is," Jess answered. "Where is she, by the way?"

"She's helping the others find Simon and Grace," Ignatius hedged. Changing the subject, he added, "And frankly, this self-pity looks rather contrived coming from you. If there's one thing you never lacked, it was confidence."

Ignatius paused to butter a slice of bread. *Shame she can't be put to better use*, he thought to himself as he took a bite. An idea occurred to him and he stopped in mid-chew. *Hmm . . . Maybe she can, at that.*

He swallowed his mouthful and continued. "Regardless, I can see that your heart's in the right place, even if it is a day late in getting there, so, tomorrow, I want you to come with me. I've got something else I want you to do. We'll leave at quarter of seven in the morning. Be sure to wear something durable."

"Quarter of seven?" Jess protested.

"How does six-forty-five sound?" Ignatius asked.

"Oh, tee-hee, funny boy. How long is this going to last?"

"All day," Ignatius replied.

"Then how will I do the housework?" she asked.

"We'll, erm . . . let that go for the moment. Suffice to say, I think you have greater talents."

"In other words, I'm crap at it," Jess pouted.

"Oh, do behave!" Ignatius replied. "Now, my bath's ready. Come up and scrub my back. You do that well enough."

"Oo, yes," she said with a little gush.

*2020 – Somewhere in England, in a Forest, near a Deserted Intersection
with a Junk-Food Restaurant*

"Shi, you were right – thish ish absholutely loverly," Grace said, tucking into the fourth of the little meat patties wrapped in bread. She grabbed another handful of the potatoes that had been fried in deep fat and stuffed her mouth almost to the point of not being able to chew.

"Slow down, Grace, don't want you choking," Simon warned sincerely.

She dismissed his concern with a wave of her hand, as she was unable to vocally communicate at just that moment. She made another gesture to him, demanding something.

Simon handed her one of the ubiquitous water bottles they had seen during their travels. Chewing noisily, she managed to swallow and was ready to stuff her mouth again.

"Careful, Grace," Simon said. "If you eat too much, it'll just come right back up again."

"You sound like Mum," she answered.

"Was she ever right?"

"No. The only two times I ever threw up was when I had a stomach virus and the first – and only – time I tried tobacco. I can eat *anything*," she boasted.

"Wish you hadn't said that," Simon muttered.

She didn't hear him as she was too busy smacking away on a fistful of greasy, fried potatoes.

Within the space of thirty minutes, Grace had absolutely gorged herself on the contents of their takings and was lying on her back, scratching her belly, looking at the black, starless sky. Simon, although he had been famished, could only stomach a third of what Grace had eaten. He had wrapped up the best bits of what little remained and stuffed it in their rucksack.

Just as he did so, he felt the first few droplets of rain begin to fall.

"Raining again. Shall we find some shelter?" Simon suggested.

"Ohh, help me up, Si," Grace said, extending a hand.

Simon gently pulled her up and they began to walk for a while.

"There was a silo just over there," Simon pointed out. "I remember it had a shelter of some sort."

06JUL2001 Friday

0715 – *The tré*

Jess and Ignatius stood in the auditorium of The tré.

"You look cute in those dungarees and vest," Jess teased Ignatius as she tugged on one of his braces.

"I have some spares, if you'd care to use them," Ignatius advised.

"Right, so why have you dragged me out of a nice, warm bed at six in the morning to take me to The tré?" Jess asked, tacitly declining his offer, as it seemed to involve work. "Haven't Geoff and Vince finished all the building here?"

"Your work is not here," Ignatius said cryptically.

"Then why are we here?"

"Jess, I know it's been only a week or so since you've moved in, but I'm sort of at a loose end and I need your help."

"Fine, but could you get on with it instead of rabbiting the morning away?" Jess suggested impatiently.

"One of the aspects of our relationship was honesty, correct?"

Jess shrugged. "Sure. I suppose. We said, 'no lies'."

"Then, before I tell you something, I need you to tell *me* something."

"You're a pompous git, but I love you just the same. How's that?" Jess offered.

"Yes, very endearing, my little recidivist. But what I actually need you to say is that you'll promise to keep what I'm about to show you a secret."

Jess' eyebrows rose. "Oh?"

"Say it," Ignatius ordered.

"Make me," Jess taunted.

"Jess, I'm serious. This is very important and I'm placing a lot of trust in you and I *know* you don't want to disappoint me. If you want to earn your keep – and if you want our relationship to move forward – you'll have to do this."

"And if I don't?"

"You'll have to eat your own cooking," Ignatius threatened.

"Where do I sign?"

"An oral statement will suffice."

"Very well. I promise that what I am about to see, I shall never mention, blah, blah, blah, whatever."

"I somehow suspect that there is a loophole in that statement, but regardless – if you were to betray me, it wouldn't matter."

"You don't half wank on, do you, Ig? Point, please?"

"Very well. Follow me, if you would." Ignatius entered the landing to the basement. Jess, automatically assuming that he wanted to descend into the basement, started down the stairs that were plainly visible.

"No, not that way," Ignatius called to her as he unlocked the door to the other side of the basement which held the cabinet. "This way," he said, holding the door open. She seemed a bit confused, but went through the door and began to descend the stairs as he locked the door behind them.

"Why are there two sets of stairs into the . . ." She stopped short when she noticed the cabinet was at its full height. Her suspicions were aroused as she descended the stairs, not caring to finish her question.

They reached the cabinet and without ceremony, Ignatius opened the door of the cabinet.

"Siffing Jack!" Jess exclaimed, frozen to the spot.

"Are you going in?" proffered Ignatius. "Or do you plan to rabbit the rest of the morning away?"

Jess eagerly entered, followed by Ignatius. When they emerged at the other end, she surveyed the basement of the Rialto. "Where the sif are we?"

"The basement of the Rialto," he said.

"Isn't that the theatre you mentioned?"

"The same."

"So you're saying we're in Reality?"

"*Ecce signum**," Ignatius answered pointing to a cellar window that was halfway up the stairs. Jess climbed up and peered out of the window. It took only a few seconds for her to form an opinion. She sat down and silently looked at Ignatius.

"It does exist," she said quietly.

Ignatius nodded. "Just so."

"Bloody sif," Jess said quietly to herself. "I've been a naughty girl all my life and I finally, *actually* got sent to Reality."

"Jess, we're here for a reason," Ignatius reminded her.

She snapped out of her reverie. "Oh, sorry. Right. By the way, you know it's illegal."

"It's never stopped you before," Ignatius pointed out. "But we can discuss that later. Now, if we may?" he gestured up the stairs.

Jess rose and began to follow Ignatius up the flight. As they ascended, Ignatius briefed her on Grace and Simon's disappearance, the meeting with MacAleister and their work on the Rialto.

"But what's all that to do with me?" asked Jess.

"You're going to help," Ignatius stated.

"I don't know Jack about refurbishing theatres."

"And I do?" Ignatius asked rhetorically. "Come along, then, let me show you the rest of the building."

They were in the lobby when they heard someone descending the stairs.

"I suspect that would be Slide and Sandra," Ignatius conjectured.

* *Ecce signum* – R. 'Behold the proof' (lit. 'Behold the sign')

"Ooooh, sif," Jess muttered under her breath. Since she had returned to Otterstow, she had not purposefully avoided Sandra, but she was grateful that their paths hadn't crossed. "Geez, Ig, you coulda given me a *little* warning."

As predicted, Sandra and Slide entered the lobby. Upon seeing Jess standing next to Ignatius, there was a momentary pause, but Sandra forged ahead, Slide two steps behind.

"Good morning, Ignatius," Sandra said as politely as she could muster.

"Good morning, Sandra, Slide," Ignatius returned.

"My name is Jess, as you might recall," Jess mentioned.

"All too well," Sandra replied icily.

"Erm . . . look, Sandra," Jess began. "I'm sure you know by now . . . I'm the one that wrote that note about the StoBroccs just before you and Slide were married. And . . . I wanted to apologise. It was a horrible thing for me to do. I hope you'll have it in your heart to forgive me."

"Why are you here?" asked Sandra.

"I'm, erm, not entirely sure. Ig? Why am I here?" Jess asked Ignatius.

"To help with the refurbishment of the Rialto," Ignatius said plainly. "This, of course, will help with the recovery of Simon."

"I see," Sandra acknowledged, her voice thawing. "And what remuneration do you receive for this work?"

"Beyond a bed to sleep in and the food that Desiree prepares for the rest of us, not a single farthing," Ignatius answered for Jess.

"Yep," Jess concurred. "That's about the size of it."

There was a protracted silence. Sandra stepped slowly forward to Jess, until they were toe to toe. Jess was genuinely concerned that the much larger and stronger Sandra might lash out, but she firmly stood her ground, unflinching.

Without any warning, Sandra gently grasped Jess' head and kissed her on the cheek. "Consider yourself absolved."

She then led Slide to the auditorium, where they had work to do.

"Ig?" Jess whispered.

"Yes?" Ignatius answered in full voice.

"That was just plain *weird*," Jess said as quietly as she could.

"I think it was extremely magnanimous on Sandra's part," Ignatius observed.

"Oh, no doubt," Jess admitted. "But still . . . it was just plain *weird*."

"Good," Ignatius stated. "Then that will prepare you to apologise to Clare, who is currently approaching with Rachael."

As Ignatius had predicted, Clare and Rachael descended the stairs.

"Good morning, young ladies," Ignatius greeted the twins courteously.

"What's she doing here?" asked Clare, pointedly.

"Yeah, what's all this, then?" asked Rachael, indignantly.

"You said we needed help," Ignatius stated clearly from across the floor, as he dragged Jess towards the twins. "This is our newest help-mate."

"Ig, when I mentioned she should be 'ere to do some work, I didn't mean it lit'rally," Rachael said.

"Clare," Jess said stiffly, yet sincerely, "I want to apologise for my comments about your mother. It's not my place to judge her."

"I have no idea who you were talking about the other day," Clare commented mildly, "but it was not my mother."

"Sorry?" asked Jess.

"My mother never dumped me. And she's no need to send Rachael and me anything by post as she can simply shout down the hall if she needs my attention. My mother," Clare explained, "is currently upstairs with my father, finishing breakfast before a day of hard work."

"Still," Jess offered, "it was rude of me to suggest that she had."

"Then apologise to Mum," Clare suggested. "It's her dignity that's been impugned, not mine."

"C'mon Clare, we got better things to do than 'ang about wif the likes of 'er," Rachael said. The two departed to do some work elsewhere in the building.

"Poxy, stuck-up, little minges," Jess snarled under her breath.

"Honestly, Jess," Ignatius scolded, "And you were doing so well until now."

Just then, Pete, Gina, Linda and Geoff entered the lobby from upstairs.

"Ig, I expect ya wanna tell us sumfin'," mentioned Pete upon seeing Jess.

"We need all the help we can get. Jess is here to work," Ignatius said plainly.

"And I would like to apologise..." Jess began.

"Yeah, 'bout the laxative in the barrel thing," Pete recalled.

"Yes, that would be down to me," Jess admitted and then bit her lip as she looked sheepishly to the ground. She was trying to appear humble but, in fact, she was trying to keep from laughing.

"Be honest," Pete admitted, smiling lightly, "lookin' back, it *was* pretty funny,"

"Oh, sure it was," Gina cuffed his thigh. "It wasn't *your* pub that nearly went under because no one would come in for a month because of the pong."

"Yeah, well, I din't exactly see you cleanin' out the khazies, neiver," Pete recalled.

"Excuse me?" Gina said. "Who's the employer? And who's the employee?"

"Oh, very nice," Pete said sarcastically.

"And if it's forgiveness you want, Jess," Gina said, ignoring Pete's invective, "your penance can be doing the bogs. Geoff, give him my job."

"Right, then," Geoff stated. "Miss FærFyxe, this is a crowbar," he said handing her the instrument. "It has many uses. One of them is to remove floorboards. And, as it happens, the gent's bog has quite a few that require removal. Get on with it, then."

"The gent's bog?" Jess repeated.

"That's right," Geoff said. "Also known as the Men's Toilets or the Gentleman's Water Closet. Pry up the floorboards and stack 'em up just outside the door. That should keep you busy for the better part of the day."

Jess looked at Ignatius as if to see if this were some sort of elaborate wind-up.

"You heard the man. Let's go," Ignatius said as he escorted her through an opening into the men's toilet room. Beyond the gap, a small window let a spot of daylight into a dark and terrifically stench-filled room with several mysterious bits of vitreous china hanging on the walls. One or two of the floorboards had

been removed, showing the concrete base beneath, but there was a very large percentage still left to do.

"Phwoar!" Jess ejaculated. "What a siffing pong!" She turned to leave as she covered her nose.

Ignatius grabbed her arm. "This is the first day of your new job, Jess. Let's not walk out on it, please."

She turned back and released her nose, fanning it as if that might dispel the aroma. "Don't you smell it?"

"Yes. I'm just not complaining."

"What am I supposed to do?" she asked with a very concerned expression on her face.

Ignatius put on a pair of work gloves. "Hand me the crowbar," he asked. She complied with no small amount of enthusiasm, eager to be rid of the tool. Ignatius took the bar, stuffed one end between the nearest floorboard and the concrete slab and wrenched it up, destroying most of it in the process, as it was mostly rotten. He pulled the board out and threw it near the door. "Then you stack them in the barrow just outside the door."

"What barrow?"

"The one I'm about to bring you."

"But it's matty!"

"I quite agree. I'd prop open that window to let a little fresh air flow through. Otherwise you might faint." He handed her the crowbar. "Right. Off you go. Get to work. Oh, and here's a pair of work gloves. I strongly suggest you wear them," Ignatius said, pulling them off his hands.

"Is it just me," began Jess, "or does this place absolutely reek of skins?"

Ignatius considered this question for a second. "Well, you know how human smells linger. After all, they don't have the olfactories to notice they've done an offence." He turned to leave. She stepped in front of his path to stop him.

"Can I try some more housework instead?" she asked.

"No," he replied without hesitation.

"But I'll ruin my clothes," she protested.

"I told you to wear something durable," he reminded her.

"But . . ."

"Yes?"

"Oh, never mind. Piss off and get the barrow."

Ignatius had left and returned with the barrow by the time Jess had finished opening the window. He departed wordlessly, not noticing the gesture of contempt she made behind his back.

Why on earth did I play dumb and slack off on the housework? she asked herself. With something bordering on the less-than-enthusiastic, she shoved the crowbar under the next floor board and prised it up. It broke with a mouldy 'snap!' releasing a board of perhaps six inches.

I never imagined that he'd actually find something else for me to do. She picked up the tiny piece of broken board, holding it arm's length as if it were freshly dead vermin that had been caught in a trap and dropped it into the barrow. *And this is loads worse than pressing trousers. Sif, what a pong!*

He's still pretty naïve though. She idly walked back to her work and slid the tip of the crowbar along the concrete base, wedging it under the next floorboard. *Can't believe he bought the line about me not knowing how to wash or cook or clean.* Another tiny piece of board popped up and she put down her crowbar and carried it back to the barrow. *Shame I had to ruin all those clothes and dishes, and waste all that food, just to convince him. I'm surprised it took him that long to get the message.*

Still, if I slack enough at this job, he'll give up on the idea of me earning my keep. Oh, is it break time already? She stopped for just a moment. Suddenly hearing Pete walk through the lobby, she snarled to herself, grabbed the bar and began to work in earnest. *What I honestly cannot believe,* she thought as she pushed the crowbar deep under the boards and pushed down, causing quite a few of them to pop off the floor, *is that Ig won't just let me earn my keep by letting him get his tail round.* She took another swing at another spot on the floor, resulting in more boards being removed. *I mean, it's always worked before, and not just with Ig.*

Although, fair play, I probably do enjoy it just as much as he does. Jess took another swing at the floor. She hadn't noticed but, in her ire, she was making considerable progress on her appointed task.

No, strike that, I enjoy it far more than he does. Still, men should pay for the privilege.

She took one last swing in earnest and pried. "Sif," she protested as she looked at her fingertips. "Chipped a claw," she muttered as she bit off the chip and put on the work gloves.

0830 – Rialto

"These are the original plans to the Rialto," Steve said as he unfolded a set of blueprints onto the bar in front of Michael, Geoff and Ignatius. "I could have hired an architect to redo the floor plan, but I decided that was an unnecessary expense, so we'll just stick to the original layout. That way, it'll be much cheaper to just have the architects and engineers review it for current code violations.

"In looking at them, I've noticed that there've been a few changes since the building was constructed. For example, there's an empty shaft we found that runs from the master bedroom to the basement. It's for a dumbwaiter, and a rather large one. The sketch even shows two people in it. Almost a lift, actually."

"Yeah, that's right," Geoff said. "And look here. Here's where the projection room is, or used to be. It says 'Proprietor's box seat'. And there's a door directly to the old master bedroom."

"Well, if there were any doubts before, this confirms it. The original owner must've known about Otterstow," Ignatius stated. "And, obviously, about Allegory as a whole."

"Bit of a leap, dontcha think?" asked Geoff.

"No, not at all. They come out of the portal, here in the basement," Ignatius said, pointing to the plans. "They ascend in the dumbwaiter-slash-lift, unseen . . ." his finger followed the shaft of the large dumbwaiter, "to the

master bedroom, here. And then they watch the performance in their private box," his finger tapped on the box seat in the plans.

"And then they go back to the bedroom for a bit of a cuddle," Geoff added with a smile.

"You're right, Ig. He must've known," Steve said. "That's the only possible explanation. Must've been that Proudfoot person and that Doe Hare with her tits out in the photo in the Kettle."

There was a brief silence as the three considered the possibilities.

"Should we, erm . . . restore this part to the original plans as well?" asked Michael. "Put the lift back in?"

"Could definitely come in handy," Geoff said.

"I could see quite a few uses," Ignatius pointed out.

"Might be a bit dear," Steve noted.

"We'll bring it up with the others for a vote," said Ignatius. "Somehow, I don't think there'll be much resistance to the idea."

"We'll have to add that to the engineering cost as well," Michael said.

"Engineering?" asked Geoff and Ignatius simultaneously.

"Yes, we've had to hire an engineering firm to design new electrics, plumbing, heating and ventilation to current code," Michael informed them. "Mister Proudfoot, the designer of the Rialto, actually had a very sophisticated boiler system with its own dynamo. Sadly, it was DC, so it's a complete redo. The engineering work is a bit of a packet, but at least the construction that we'll have to contract will be very carefully supervised."

"How much will all this engineering cost?" asked Geoff.

"About ten grand," Steve said, wincing.

"My word, that's quite a bit!" Ignatius complained. "Are you sure they're worth it?"

"Don't know, honestly," Michael said. "Although I did shop around and they were easily the lowest priced; actually they called us. They heard we were refurbishing the Rialto and wanted to help us out. And they're local, so they'll be close to hand . . ."

"Morning, girls," Jess interrupted.

"Finished already?" asked Geoff.

"Just thought you might want to know," Jess answered calmly as she removed her gloves. "There's a corpse in the bogs. Does that mean we can go home now?"

Geoff, Steve, Michael and Ignatius looked at each other for just a second and then ran off to the men's toilets.

The boards that Jess had pried up were loosely piled in the barrow.

"She's made remarkable progress," commented Ignatius absently.

"Well, I can certainly see why she stopped here," Geoff pointed out.

Underneath the floor was concrete and, pressed into the concrete, when it had still been plastic, were the remains of a human, just as Jess had stated. As the corpse was wearing a suit, the only visible parts of the body itself were the side of the face and a hand, with desiccated flesh tenuously clinging to the skeleton.

"Urp . . . 'Scuse me," Ignatius said as he ran out, covering his mouth.

"Geoff? Where'd ya go?" Pete yelled from outside the bathroom.

"We're in here, Pete!" Geoff called. "Get the others!"

Within a minute, everyone except Desiree was in the room as well, staring at the half-revealed body.

"At's a body, 'at is," stated Rachael.

"It's human, too," added Clare.

"What's he doing there, I wonder?" asked Sandra.

"Not much of anything at the moment," Slide replied. "He's not even decomposing at this stage."

"How'd 'e get there?" asked Pete.

"More important, is what're we gonna do with it?" asked Geoff.

"Well, I sure ain't touchin' it." Rachael declared. "Don't do stiffs."

Desiree calmly entered the room and noticed the body in the floor. "Who found the corpse?" she asked.

"Jess," replied Geoff.

"Our new 'elp-mate. Probably just set us back a whole month," Rachael added contemptuously.

"Hey, don't pin that on me!" Jess protested. "I didn't put the siffing skin there! I just found it. And it would've been Gina if I hadn't taken her job."

"How do you get these boards up?" asked Desiree.

"What are you proposing?" asked Steve.

"Finish opening it up. I wanna see if there's something to indicate who he is or what he's doing here," Desiree replied.

"You're not gonna *touch* 'im, are ya?" asked Rachael.

"Sure, why not? I've wrapped my hands around nastier stuff than this. At least he's desiccated. Steve, we got any of those latex gloves left?"

"Oh, too wicked! Can I help?" asked Jess with genuine enthusiasm.

"Yeah, get these boards up so it completely uncovers the body," Desiree answered.

Jess slipped her gloves back on and went to work while Steve went to fulfil Desiree's request.

"She's pretty handy wiffat bar," Rachael remarked to Clare.

Ignatius returned before Steve and it was clear that he had been sick.

"You all right, Ig?" asked Jess.

"I'm fine," Ignatius said, wiping his nose with a handkerchief. "Just the smell made me dizzy. Actually sort of interested, now."

Steve returned just as Jess had finished the work. Desiree put on the latex gloves and began to gingerly poke around and feel about the corpse. This was a little too much for Ignatius and he felt his legs get a little wobbly. Jess, who had been leaning on her crowbar, dropped it to hold him up.

"Easy there, big fella," she said as the crowbar landed on his foot. The pain it rendered left him far from faint.

"Claude Baughs, Vixen, have a care!" Ignatius groaned clutching his toes.

"Hey, don't get your tail in a twist at me!" Jess scolded. "I'll let you hit the floor next time, if that's all right."

Desiree was ignoring this little drama, as she was too involved in her investigation. "There's a tiny bit of facial hair, so he appears to be male. Hair is

nice and black, so not too old. Must've gotten into some sort of trouble. I'm sure he was dead before he was buried or entombed or whatever this would be called – implanted, I suppose."

She ran her hand around his head. "Yeah, pretty severe trauma to the back of the skull. I can put my fingers in it. He was unconscious at the very least."

She examined here and there, taking care not to disturb the body too much. "Aha!" she said at last. She had immersed her hand fairly deeply into the body's midsection. "We may have a story here soon."

Clare leaned over to Ignatius and whispered, "You don't think it's him, do you?"

"I suspect it probably is," Ignatius whispered back, while clutching his aching toe.

Desiree pulled out a wallet. "Well, whatever reason he died for, it wasn't money," she said as she opened it. "There's a ten pound note dated 1865. That was probably a good bit of cash back then. Lessee, is there an ID in here?"

"We don't have IDs now," Steve pointed out. "It's unlikely he had one then."

"No, I wouldn't expect a credit card or driver's license, ah, here we are – a passport. Couldn't ask for better ID than that." Desiree opened the passport. "No picture, but there's a name – a little faded – looks like . . . Nicholas Hodge?"

Ignatius and Clare nodded to each other. "It's him," they chorused.

"Y'know 'im?" asked Pete.

"Well, not personally, obviously. We know *of* him," Clare responded. "He was the mad human from Reality that Tad was telling us about; the one that came out of The tré. Although Tad's story seems to have been embellished a bit through the ages."

"Now, I'm not from around here, so I couldn't say if he was anyone famous – or more likely infamous," Desiree said. "You ever hear of him, Steve? Michael?" She held out the passport to Steve.

Steve took the document and studied it as Michael looked over his shoulder. "Yeah, that's what it says. Nicholas Hodge."

"I know I've heard that name before," Michael said. "Wait a minute, this isn't a British passport. Well, it is, but it just says 'The Kingdom'."

"May I?" Ignatius asked, holding out his hand. Steve gave him the passport and Ignatius opened it to the front page. "It's one of ours, from The Kingdom, in Allegory. Could I have a look at that ten pound note, as well?"

Desiree handed it to him.

"Ah, yes, this is one of ours as well," Ignatius said. "Anything else in that wallet?"

"Nope, nothing," Desiree said, prying the various openings. "Apparently, our friend Hodge believed in traveling light. Passport and ready cash."

"So what do we do with him?" asked Linda.

"As throwing a body in the tip might arouse suspicion," Michael conjectured, "I suspect our best course of action is to call the police."

"Y'know, this is so . . . typical," Pete railed in exasperation. "Just lovely. We're finally makin' a bit o' progress an' *this* happens. Perfect. The Ol' Bill'll come around, a thousand questions an' 'whats-all-this-then's an' weeks later,

maybe, they'll let us get back to work. An' who're we gonna say discovered the body?"

"I'll do that," Michael offered. "Besides, I'm familiar with the paperwork."

"Well, that's awrite, I suppose. Still, it's weeks off our schedule!" Pete continued to grumble.

"There's nothing we can do about it, though," Ignatius pointed out. "Let's make the most of it. However, I think we should take that passport and that note with us. If the police in Newburg see documents from The Kingdom, it might raise a few embarrassing questions."

"I bet we could get a fair few bob from that note," Linda speculated. "I'm sure it's a collector's item by now."

"I'll call the police," Michael said. "I think you lot should take off for the rest of the day. I'll let you know when it's all clear."

"Oh, well," Geoff sighed. "Look at the bright side. At least we get a well-deserved day off. Just hope it doesn't become too many."

1430 – Rialto Toilet Room for Men

"A fortnight?" Steve groaned.

"That's just four nights, ain't it?" asked Desiree.

"No, it's two weeks! Fourteen nights!" Steve exclaimed.

"Please understand," said the officer from the Metropolitan Police. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. A find like this doesn't come along all that often and we should take advantage."

"Take advantage? Of whom?" Desiree asked indignantly.

"Of the deceased, naturally," answered the officer, patiently ignoring the dig. "The more we can study finds like this, the more we can apply it to real-world criminology. We might even bring some of the University lads in. Maybe even make a little docco for the Beeb. I mean, here we have a corpse, a century old, completely encapsulated in concrete and oak . . ."

"And urine," interrupted Michael.

"I should mention, that at this point, we are talking about a voluntary arrangement," said the officer. "I could, if I saw fit, make this a criminal investigation and take as long as I pleased."

"Two weeks is fine, cap," Desiree mentioned.

"Will you need keys?" asked Michael.

"Accommodations?" suggested Steve.

1030 – Newburg Bank

"We're not due to meet for a few days," mentioned the Colourpoint. "What's the hurry?"

"We've had to stop work for a couple of weeks, I'm afraid," Steve reported.

"Stop work? Whatever for?" asked the Colourpoint.

"We found a body," Michael answered. "Well, I did actually."

"A body?" the Colourpoint and the Basset chorused, incredulous.

"It was encased in the concrete floor of the men's room," explained Michael. "And it's been there a long time. In fact, it's Nicholas Hodge. Have you ever heard of him?"

"Oh, I have," commented the Colourpoint. "Bloodthirsty killer, he was. Went missing, right here in Newburg."

"Refresh my memory," suggested the Basset.

"Turn of the century, killed and skinned several of his victims. Shot a police officer in this very town. Our grandparents might have been old enough to know him – not personally, of course, but to know of him."

"Oh yes, I remember now," said the Basset. He turned to Steve. "So what's the disposition of the Rialto at the moment?"

"The police are doing an investigation along with a group from a university," Michael said. "They might even do a documentary. They promised they'd be done within a fortnight, but they won't allow us to do any work until they're finished."

"Can't you work around them?" asked the Basset. "Surely there are other places in the Rialto that need work besides the gents?"

"Erm . . ." began Steve.

"Apparently, this is such an unusual find," Michael continued, "that the Met have gotten involved and they're using it as sort of a case study."

"They have to remove the body bit-by-bit," Desiree continued, "and reconstruct it, *ex situ*, as the opening isn't quite wide enough to pull the body through *en masse*, so they'll probably have to dissect it . . ."

"Could you get to the point, please?" asked the Colourpoint, who was beginning to lose some of her colour.

"Oh, sorry," Desiree apologised. "Well, they don't want us accidentally contaminating their work."

"How do they know it's Hodge?" asked the Colourpoint.

"The police have already made a few discoveries that pretty much verify that it's him," said Desiree.

"And what might those be, if I could ask?" enquired the Basset.

"He had a wallet with his initials on it," Desiree answered.

"Hardly conclusive evidence," the Basset noted.

"Well, there were . . . other things," Steve added.

"Yes?" asked the Colourpoint and the Basset.

"To make a long story short," Desiree cleared her throat. "They found his name stitched into his boxers."

1515 – Newburg Bank

"Well, well," commented the Colourpoint after Steve and Desiree had departed. "So they've solved the great mystery of the missing Nicholas Hodge."

"Our bad luck," said the Basset. "It'll put 'em a fortnight behind schedule."

"Don't you see?" asked the Colourpoint. "This is like finding the Princes in the Tower! Hodge is the most famous missing person in history, outside of those two and perhaps Jimmy Hoffa and Amelia Earhart. This is news!"

"Yes," agreed the Basset. "*Bad* news. For us, at least. It'll back things up for weeks. They could default on the loan."

The Colourpoint sighed in exasperation. "*Who* was it that wanted a loan for a house that was just a few thousand above his reach last month?"

The Basset paused in thought. "Oh, yes! That reporter chappie! From that horrible old rag, the Star or the Moon or something."

"Would you like to call him, or should I?" asked the Colourpoint.

1800 – Black Kettle Pub

After their visit to the bank, Steve, Michael and Desiree met with the Partnership at the Black Kettle. "Well, I've got some bad news and some good news," Steve said. "The bad news is that the police investigation of the site is going to take a fortnight to finish. Until that time, we can do no work on the Rialto."

Pete threw up his hands in disgust. "Oh, bloody 'ell. Now we'll never finish in time. May as well sell it an' take the dosh."

"You'll sell the Rialto over my dead body," Sandra growled.

"We already got one o' those," Pete snarled back. "And we can't beat the deadline anyways, so what's the point?"

"Perhaps you remember our children, Grace and Simon?" Sandra reminded him pointedly.

"Oh, yeah," Pete winced. "Sorry, Sandra, I was way outta line. Cold stone forgot about them two."

"Wait a second," Steve said. "You haven't heard the good news. Tell them, Michael."

"Nicholas Hodge," Michael began, "was a notorious killer from about a hundred years ago. A century and a year ago, almost to the day, he disappeared. Shortly before his death, he was hiding from the law in the town of Newburg and somehow managed to escape the police on two occasions, through some miraculous means. The last time he was seen alive, he was reputed to have been gibbering about seeing a number of human-like animals . . . such as Hares . . . Horses . . . Foxes. He then disappeared altogether.

"At any rate, *somehow* word got out and just after we told the bank about us being out of commission for a fortnight, one of those rags with the nerve to call themselves a newspaper called us and offered us a fee for the story."

"A fee?" asked Geoff. "Why should we pay them?"

"They pay us, Geoff," Michael explained. "We let them in on the story, and let them take some photos."

"You mean to tell me," Clare started, "that a newspaper will actually pay us money because we had a dead body in our bogs?"

"It's not just *any* body," Steve inserted. "It's a mystery that's been unsolved for over a century."

"How *much* money?" asked Geoff.

"Two grand," Michael responded.

A cheer went around the table.

"That'll give us an extra month of breathing room," Linda added, "and a little extra spending dosh."

"We were very, *very* lucky," said Steve. "Although, I can't help but wonder how the reporter found out about it."

"Don't matter," Desiree dismissed. "We'll get the cash, regardless. I've no great love for the Yellow Monster, but at least it was put to good use for once."

"The Yellow Monster? Wuzzat when it's at 'ome?" asked Pete.

"My nickname for the press," Desiree bristled. "I'll spare the rant for later."

09JUL2001 Monday

1030 – Appraiser's Office in SwanThrop

On Monday morning, Ignatius took the ten-pound note for an appraisal by a dealer in SwanThrop, a nearby village that was six times as large as the town of Otterstow.

The appraiser looked at the note through a loupe. "Aye, it's in fair condition," he said. "Just a bit foxed."

"Pardon?" asked Ignatius.

The appraiser, an elderly Hedgehog, raised his eyes to Ignatius. "Don't get your tail in a twist. It's just a technical term." He held the note for Ignatius to view. "See those brown spots around the edges?"

"Yes."

"That's what foxed means – if one is speaking of printed matter."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Quite all right," said the appraiser. "Where'd you say you found this?"

"Otterstow. I'm the mayor there."

"Are you?" asked the Hedgehog. "Very interesting. You found it, did you?"

"Not me directly. A group of us found it while doing a little work."

"Ah, the famous, 'found it whilst digging in my garden' story, eh?" The Erinac remained silent for a while as he studied the note some more.

"Could you tell me what it's worth?" asked Ignatius.

"If this were authentic, it'd fetch about a pony at auction on a good day."

"A pony?"

"Yes, twenty-five quid. Named for when twenty five pound notes had a picture of Horatio FenHors on it."

"Oh right. Only twenty five? Admittedly, it's welcome money, but that's barely more than face value," Ignatius said.

"A good many were printed. They're quite common. However, it might not be authentic."

"Sorry?"

"There's a good possibility that it might be counterfeit."

"Are you suggesting I'm trying to defraud you?" Ignatius asked defensively.

"No, no, you misunderstand," said the appraiser, putting the bill down.

"Look, do you know how Otterstow got its name?"

"Da always used to tease me by saying it's where they used to stash the Otters. Of course, it was actually named for John OtterStough, who was a scarf-maker, if I'm not mistaken."

The Erinac shook his head.

"No?"

"John Otterstough was named for the town, not the other way round. A common piece of misinformation."

"It's what I've always been told," Ignatius protested.

"Of that, I have no doubt," said the appraiser. "The powers that be in Otterstow probably wouldn't want the truth to be widely known."

"As the mayor, that would be me. And I'd rather the truth were out, if it's all the same to you. So, what *is* the origin of our town's name?"

"That's where the counterfeit note comes in," said the appraiser.

"Sorry, what's it to do with counterfeiting?"

"You *do* know the meaning of the word 'utter'?"

"Yes, those are the big things under milking cows that they . . ."

"No, no. Ut-ter. Spelt with 't's."

"Oh. Sorry about that. Just means to speak aloud, doesn't it?"

"Yes, that's one meaning. Another meaning is to print bogus money."

"That would be forgery," corrected Ignatius. "Uttering is to put the forged money into circulation. Two different crimes actually."

"Oh, yes. I forgot you're a solicitor," said the dealer. "Then I'll try to make this simple enough for you to understand."

"Otterstow is one of the great legends among numismatists. Some time ago, it was named, oh, what was it . . ."

"'Casefeteo', which is a combination of the Remun words for fetid cheese," Ignatius reminded the appraiser.

"That's right. Do you still make it?"

"Yes, of course," Ignatius said.

"Lovely stuff, Otterstow cheese. Could you bring a wheel next time you're by?"

"I doubt you could consume a whole wheel before it went off."

"At any rate, the name was changed because a counterfeiting ring got caught out there. Thereafter, it was the 'Utter's town,' – the place where the counterfeiters lived. Of course, once they *were* caught out, the town wasn't quite as much fun to be around and it dwindled a bit in size and the name got corrupted to Otterstow somehow."

"I've never actually heard that story, but you'll pardon me for saying that it sounds a bit apocryphal."

"Normally, I would say the same," concurred the appraiser. "However, I know for certain that the forgeries do exist. I've seen them with my own eyes."

"Regardless, what's this to do with our note here?" Ignatius asked.

"Ah, well, if this is a genuine note, as printed by Her Majesty's presses – or was it His Majesty's at the time? Can't remember the dates. Anyway, if it's a genuine note, as I said, it'll fetch about a pony. But if it's an actual Utter's Town forgery, then it's worth much, much more. Could go as high as . . . oh, a monkey."

"You did say . . . monkey?" asked Ignatius.

"Yes."

"I don't recall any human portraits on monetary notes."

"There aren't. It got its name because it portrays a human hand helping Her Majesty from a carriage. Ostensibly, he's the one that rescued her from highwaymen, although there's some debate as to what the actual facts are. Regardless the monarch ordered it so, thus, it was done."

"From a carriage. . . ." Ignatius jogged his memory. "Say, that's on a five hundred pound note, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right. Anyway, the forgeries are very hard to come by, thus a counterfeit would be much more valuable than a valid note. The government destroyed most of the counterfeits and of course they printed thousands of their own."

"Oh, I say! That would be excellent news."

"I just happen to be going to Big Smoke tomorrow and I have a friend who's an expert in that area. He'd be very excited about this, so I'll give you a tinkle." Ignatius pulled out his card. "Here's my number. I'll be in all day."

1300 – Black Kettle Pub

Later that afternoon, the Partnership were at the Black Kettle, discussing finances.

"We need to find a way to exchange Newburg cash for Otterstow cash," Linda pointed out.

"Why?" asked Michael. "Everything we need, we can get from the shops in Newburg."

"It's not just about buying things," Linda answered. "I mean, we might buy a few things here and there . . ."

"Such as drink," Pete mentioned. "I think we'd do well for ourselves if we offered summa the brew from 'AreFam or OwlPot on openin' night."

"Oh, f'sure," Desiree agreed. "That stuff you serve in the Kettle is ten times better than the bear whizz they have in Newburg."

"That's as maybe," Michael admitted, "but Newburg's bear whizz is far better than the bear whizz they serve in the Vieux Carré."

"And how would you know?" asked Desiree.

"You told me," Michael answered.

"F'true? Oh, I guess I did."

"Getting back to the point," Linda said, tapping her finger on the table to attract their attention. "We need some cash here in Otterstow. Some of us have expenses. Slide, for example, is on unpaid leave, but he still has bills to pay. Pete and Gina are losing money with all the staff they're paying."

"We have savings," Slide mentioned. "We'll get by for a few months."

"We'll manage as well," Pete said. "But when Grace finally does return, we may 'ave to sell our ickle white Bunny for medical experiments to recoup our losses."

"I'll sell you, you great Bruin!" Gina scolded, as she cuffed him.

Linda continued her case. "But you shouldn't have to 'recoup your losses'. You should be paid for your work. And one day, some unforeseen expense is going to come along."

"Like what?" asked Rachael.

"Rachael, what part of 'unforeseen' don't you understand?" asked Clare.

"The fact is, we should have a 'rainy day' fund, and it has to be in coin of The Kingdom," Linda advised. "And furthermore, even though the entire point of this endeavour is to recover Grace and Simon, wouldn't it be rather nice to actually be paid for our investment of time and effort?"

"I quite agree," Michael added. "True, Steve and I are taking the financial risk, as we're the ones who signed the loan papers. And officially, we're the ones to financially benefit if we succeed. But we both consider all of you as partners."

"And you certainly deserve your share," Steve corroborated.

"So, we come back to our original problem," Linda said. "When these stacks of dosh start appearing in the Partnership's accounts, how do we move it from Newburg to Otterstow?"

"Oh, I have good news about our note," Ignatius recalled. "We'll be able to sell it."

"So what'll we get for it?" asked Linda.

"A bit of bad news, I'm afraid – I can only guarantee twenty-five quid," Ignatius said.

"Not very much, izzit?" Geoff complained.

"But there's some good news," Ignatius added. "If it's a forgery, it's worth twenty times what it's worth if it's genuine."

"Wha?" Geoff exclaimed in amazement. "That's, erm . . ."

"Five hundred quid!" Linda exclaimed. "Shave me, a whole monkey?"

"How is the note worth more as a forgery?" asked Gina.

"Long story," replied Ignatius. "But there's some more bad news, I'm afraid."

"I've lost track by now," Slide said.

"We won't know if it's a forgery or not until tomorrow, at the earliest," Ignatius said. "And it'll take a while to actually get the cheque and so on."

"There's no great hurry," Linda said. "But we still have to find some common currency between Newburg and Otterstow so we can have a cash flow. Aren't pounds in Reality backed by silver?" she asked Michael.

"No, we went off the silver standard ages ago." Michael said.

"Then how does the money have any value?" asked Linda.

"It's all based on faith from what I understand," Steve replied.

"Faith? You mean everyone has to believe in it in order for it to work?" Geoff said.

"Yeah, that's about the size of it," Steve answered.

"Can't see how you'd get away with that. One good run on the banks and the pound's worthless," Linda pointed out.

"Does it have to be silver? Could it be gold? Diamonds?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, but it's pretty hard to find a ready buyer," Linda pointed out. "And we'd lose a lot of value that way. It's not like we have a network of a bajillion

computers with eager punters. But with silver, it's easy. Here in The Kingdom, a pound's a pound. That's guaranteed by Her Majesty's banks."

"Even if a Newburg pound isn't backed by silver, couldn't we still just buy sterlin' silver – the metal itself?" asked Pete.

"Sure we could," Michael admitted, "but it'd be substantially less than a pound of silver for a pound of sterling, cash that is – if that makes sense."

"So, how many pounds of Newburg cash would it take to buy a pound of sterling the metal," asked Pete.

"Not quite sure," Steve said, scratching his chin in thought. "Last time I heard it was a few pounds to the ounce and it's twelve troy ounces to the pound, so thirty-odd pounds cash for a pound of silver metal."

Geoff tried to do a quick bit of maths in his head. "Claude Bullocks, it's enough to make your head spin. Right, so if we took the 45 thou in cash we have in Reality, that'd give us about . . . carry the two . . ."

"About fifteen hundred pounds sterling in Otterstow," Linda answered.

"Oh, yeah. That'd do more than enough," Geoff said. "Even with the losses from trade, we'd come out way ahead. How long do you think it'd take to get your hands on some silver?"

"Dunno, I've never tried," Steve answered. "Usually when you buy silver, they just give you a slip of paper saying that you have it."

"I hate to rain on your parade," Jess began, "but even if you *could* figure a way to get your hands on silver ingots, wouldn't it look a little odd trying to cart nearly a ton of silver into Otterstow? And what then? Are we gonna say we found it digging in the garden?"

"Jess is right," Desiree concurred. "Not only do we have to figure a way to exchange the cash, we'll have to figure a way to launder it as well."

"Sorry, wouldn't begin to know how to do that," Steve mentioned.

"Nor I," Michael said. "Didn't take corruption classes at school."

Jess suddenly noticed that she was the centre of attention. "What the sif are you all staring at *me* for?"

1700 – Nora

Ignatius was enjoying the late afternoon of a fine summer's day on his balcony, sipping a highly alcoholic drink and watching the barges and narrowboats roll up and down the canal. It had been his first opportunity to relax for quite some time. Apart from all of the demolition work at the Rialto, stacks of paperwork had backed up and he had spent almost his entire weekend at his desk. First, there were the usual chores, such as catching up on his scheduling for PD and taking care of all the bills and correspondence that seems to multiply when left alone for any amount of time. All of that paled in comparison to the necessary paperwork for displacing the junior Almas, procuring the library terminals and funds for renovating The tré.

There was one last piece of business he had been hoping to wrap up by the end of the day, which was why he was keeping watch on the balcony, binoculars at the ready. He had been sitting for nearly an hour or so, when a barge began to moor on his lawn. "Ah, it *must* be them," he muttered as he

pulled out his binoculars to have a look. "Just so," he confirmed to himself as he saw the crew fitting the dock crane to an enormous box.

He calmly walked downstairs, stepping down into his basement to retrieve a tool. Just before exiting Nora, he summoned Jess, who was taking some instruction from Desiree on the finer points of browning a roux.

After crossing the lawn to the dock and exchanging pleasantries with the crew, he was presented with a receipt to sign. Provided with such, the crew returned to their barge, cast off and pattered off upstream to make their next delivery, just as Jess arrived.

"Sorry I couldn't come immediately. Desi wouldn't let me leave until I finished my roux. So, what's this pile of crap doing here?" asked Jess, indicating the wooden crate, which measured as a nearly perfect cube of four feet.

"Open it," suggested Ignatius, proffering the tool, a crowbar.

She took the crowbar and, even though she had only had an hour's practice with the tool, commenced to separate the sides of the crate with ease.

Inside were several packages wrapped in paper. Taking one, she peeled the paper off and revealed a tatted cloth. "This looks like a table cloth. Just like the one I lost in Big Smoke."

"It *is* the one you lost in Trinova," Ignatius pointed out.

"How'd you mean?" she asked.

"They're your personal belongings. My friend contacted the landlord and, after a little legal intimidation, he managed to recover them."

Her eyes grew wide with appreciation. "My things! You got them back for me! Oh, Ig!" She dropped the package with the tablecloth and the crowbar and threw herself on Ignatius, tackling him to the ground in the process.

"Ow! Bloody crowbar! Jess! Stop . . . please. Restrain yourself . . . We're in public . . . OW! Stop biting my ear! Jess, please . . . Wouldn't you rather unpack your things?"

Several hours later, her possessions were scattered about the living room, the dining room and everywhere else in Nora that had spare space.

"Oh, Iggy! It was so sweet of you to get my things back for me. You are *such* a stud!"

"I did find out one other thing whilst I was getting all this done," he mentioned. "Apparently, you ratted on your old landlord to the CE, presumably in revenge. My friend had to visit him in jail to find out where your things were being stored."

"Sif him, he deserved it. Apart from what he did to me – and numerous other tenants – he was running a knocking shop."

"Not my cup of tea, but nothing illegal."

"With no license? No checkups? No taxes? Beat his girls senseless if they walked out on him? Still think he's a pillar of the community, Ig?"

"You could have mentioned that to begin with," Ignatius pointed out. "I presume you found the working conditions unsuitable, then?"

"I never said I worked for him," Jess protested. "Although I freely admit that most of them have higher moral standards than I ever did. However, I also like

to think I spent a great deal of time and effort in higher education so that I could assume a professional position that didn't involve hands and knees."

"Spoken like a true solicitor," Ignatius complimented, "if you'll pardon the pun. So, if it's your code not to grass, why start with this panderer?"

"He wasn't a 'panderer,' Ig. He was a *pimp*. When he propositioned me to work for him and I refused, he threw me out, literally. He picked me up, carried me to the doorstep and tossed me through the air onto the pavement."

"He must have been quite strong," Ignatius commented.

"Is that a dig on my weight?" Jess asked.

"Perish the thought," Ignatius replied. "Merely an observation. Please continue."

"So I sent an anonymous tip to one of the few people in CE that I knew would do something about it," Jess finished her story. "I hated her guts and she hated mine, but I knew she hated people like him even more."

"My word, I hope I don't do anything to offend you in the near future," Ignatius said. "I'd hate to meet a similar fate."

"No, I'd never." She turned to look at him, thinking for just a moment. "When we were in the basement, that first time – I said that it was illegal for us to be in Reality. You were just about to say something about it?"

"Ah, yes, from what I read, it's not, actually," Ignatius answered. "But there are others who would disagree."

"And why is your opinion more correct than theirs?"

"Personally, I don't think it is a matter of opinion, but . . ." he shrugged. "Are you familiar with the Articles of Security in the Pedestra Charta?"

Jess shrugged. "Vaguely. Charter studies were never my strong point. All seemed a bit academic to me. Lord's Court just makes it up as they go along, anyway. It's more important to learn all of the precedents instead of actually learning the rules."

"There's only a tiny part that concerns the entrance into Reality," Ignatius continued. "It's barely a footnote near the very end. Many people, mistakenly, believe it reads that one may not use an entrance to Reality as a means of travel. But the verb conjugation is all wrong for it to be that. The fact is, it reads that it is forbidden as a means of banishment or punishment. This, of course, is precisely what happened to the exiles of the Great Conflict, several centuries before the Charter was written. And although it is forbidden as a means of banishment, it doesn't say or suggest or imply that there is anything wrong with going voluntarily."

"Doesn't it?"

"No, it doesn't," Ignatius responded. "And I'm absolutely certain of it. I've got several very good copies of the Pedestra Charta to back that up. You've taken Remun at university; if you'd like to come and take a look, I can show you the section where it's written."

"No, that's okay," Jess declined. "I have every confidence in your abilities. But one has to wonder – why all the secrecy?"

"I have every confidence in my abilities as well," Ignatius replied. "However, there are those who are substantially more powerful than I who would not agree with me, no matter how much evidence was placed before them."

"In other words," Jess interpreted, "judges can be notoriously thick."

"Oh, I feel safe in saying that they can be too clever for their own good. 'Hidebound' is the adjective I would use, if I might be so colourful," Ignatius said. "Regardless, I do not wish to be the one to convince them."

"I can understand that," Jess concurred.

"You can?" asked Ignatius.

"Yes, absolutely. I've been before several magistrates, as you may recall."

"Oh, yes, so you have. So, you're not going to turn us in, are you?"

"You know I'm not with Civil Enquiries anymore. And you know how I feel about grassing."

"Besides, at this stage, you'd be an accessory," Ignatius pointed out.

"Well, I can't honestly blame you for not trusting me completely – at least not yet." She smiled and shook her head. "But you don't know CE nearly so well. All it takes is an anonymous tip and they're away. Don't delude yourself into thinking that they actually do any research as to whether it's just someone with an axe to grind with an ex-friend or even bothering to see if anything about it is true. They just . . . *pounce!* Next thing you know, you're in a room without windows, no solicitor, and it's the bright lights and 'we'll let you go to the loo if you tell us who else is involved' while a tar pot and shears sit in the corner. And they'll tell you any lie in the world to get you to open your mouth about something. They're quite good at it too. You'd probably grass on your mum within the hour."

"But none of that is legal," Ignatius exclaimed. "There are protocols governing interrogation."

"Write your MP," Jess sneered. "Oh yeah, that's right, we don't have an MP, do we."

"Maybe we should think about getting one," Ignatius muttered. He pondered this for just a moment and then his thoughts returned to Jess and her motives. "My better judgement says I shouldn't ask this question, but I'm going to anyway. What's to stop you from going to Civil Enquiries and telling them everything?"

"Oh, lots of reasons. First, when I left CE, we didn't exactly part with kind words. Second, they have absolutely no regard for anything I could tell them. I doubt half of them would even believe this rather incredible story, even if I left it as an anonymous tip. But most importantly," she gave him a big hug, burying her head in his chest. "Because I'm madly in love with the most wonderful Dog Fox in the world."

"Are you? What's his name?"

She slapped him on the chest. "Oh, stop it! You know I'm talking about you!"

"Well, what happens when you get tired of me?" he asked.

She snorted in laughter. "Hmph! Fat chance of that!" she smiled at him. "Who could get tired of the perfect guy?"

Ignatius' heart sank, although he couldn't show it. Jess was an attractive Vixen, despite the fact that she was a little more to admire these days or, perhaps, because of it. But he knew in his heart of hearts that he didn't truly love her and barring some great turn of events, he probably never would. She had left such a bad taste in his mouth when they were younger, that no matter

how nice she was to him, no matter how much she loved him, no matter how devoted she was to him, he could not see himself feeling the same way towards her. He also knew that if she caught him out just one time, that would be the end and despite what she had just told him, she could very well go running to CE. He thought it ironic that she was the one who should have been walking the thin edge when, in fact, it was himself.

She continued as she buried her face in his chest. "I know you think you don't love me, Ig but I know you do, deep in your heart. You just don't know it yet. You'll come around. You'll see. It's okay, you don't have to say you love me just now, but one day you will. All I ask is that you be honest with me."

Ignatius shrugged helplessly. "I shall," he said a little nervously. "I shall."

11JUL2001 Wednesday

1400 – The tré Backstage

"No, don't mind playing the Doe," Eric BlostMus agreed, shrugging. "Done drag loads of times," he added as he pushed some stuffing under his shirt.

"Very decent of you, Eric," Ignatius commented as he snapped on a Mouse mask and reached for a pair of clip-on ears. "You're the last Muvan in town and half the Portrayals with Mice seem to have a Buck and a Doe."

"Doesn't matter to me," Eric said, proffering his prosthetic breasts. "Think this will do?"

"Bit over the top, be honest," Ignatius commented. "You're a Doe, not a Cow."

"Oh, right," Eric said, abashed as he removed a bit of the stuffing. "Get carried away sometimes."

"Quite all right," Ignatius absolved.

"So, who's that lovely bit of rough staying at your place?" asked Eric.

"You mean Jess?"

"My word, man, Jess isn't a bit of rough, she's the devil in drag," Eric bridled. "Ghastly woman. No, I meant the lovely human girl. The one who sits through all the Portrayals."

"Her name is Desiree DelHomme. She's from San Souci."

"Oh, love their music," Eric chirped. "So, in exchange for me going drag, you'll introduce me?"

"She *is* taken, I'm led to believe," Ignatius pointed out as he adjusted his ears.

"My dear man," Eric chastened him, "I assure you, I have nothing but the most honourable of intentions. I merely wish to talk to her."

"Well, certainly nothing wrong with a little bit of innocent natter," Ignatius admitted.

"Nothing at all," Eric confirmed. "So you'll do me the favour."

"Drop by for dinner," Ignatius invited. "Desiree makes the most superb seafood."

"Ah!" Eric put his hand on his heart with feigned emotion. "Beautiful, intelligent – and she can cook! A woman after my own heart."

"Eric, you promise you'll behave?" warned Ignatius.

"I shall be a model of propriety," Eric promised.

"You're even more shameless than Linda sometimes," Ignatius commented.

"Linda OakSquirrel is quite the virtuous lady," Eric stated. "More's the pity for me," he added, acting sullen.

They heard the curtain open.

"That's our cue," Ignatius prompted.

Opening scene. Open field with Mouse Wife holding some gardening instrument.

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of the Mollifying Mice.

Mouse Husband enters stage right

Mouse Husband

Dearest Wife! Dearest Wife, we must leave at once! We have but minutes to spare!

Mouse Wife

But why, good Husband?

Mouse Husband

The dam of the Beavers has finally broke and our entire field will be underwater! Oh, dearest Wife, I knew this would happen soon!

Mouse Wife

Then why did you not tell me, good Husband?

Mouse Husband

I did not wish to cause you worry!

Mouse Wife

I have just finished planting our field! Had I known we could have moved to higher ground and saved our seed! Now we will have to live on sweet charity!

Mouse Husband

You have just planted the field? Why did you not say you were going to do so? That is why I went to inspect the dam – to see if we should plant the field or not!

Mouse Wife

You had much to do already and I was at my leisure – I did not want you to work too hard.

Mouse Husband

With kindest hearts and best intentions
We tell white lies and circumventions,

Mouse Wife

Mistaking blissful ignorance
For safety and deliverance.

Narrator

Thus the fate of the Mollifying Mice.
Draw from it what you may.
Until next we meet – good day!

Desiree had been in the box seat to watch the show and joined Ignatius as he stood outside the door of The tré, watching the children walk past.

"Excellent performance," Desiree complimented.

"Oh, thank you," Ignatius said.

"So, who was that guy playing drag?"

"Oh, Eric? Yes, that would be Eric BlostMus. Lovely gentleman. In fact, he'll be joining us for dinner tonight. Is that all right?"

"Why you asking me?" said Desiree.

"You're the cook, at least for the fortnight until . . . well, you know."

"It's your home," Desiree told him. "Invite who you want."

Shortly after the last child had left the building, Wanda FærFyxe, who had been the narrator for the Portrayal, stormed out, spun around and shouted, "No!"

"Oh, come along, Wanda," Eric cajoled as he followed her out of The tré.

"What could be wrong with sharing a pint at the Kettle?"

"Sod off, furvert," Wanda snarled as she retreated from the yard.

Eric snorted, as he stopped in his tracks. "Stuck up, snooty . . ." he mumbled.

"Vixen," Desiree filled in.

"She said it, not me," Eric said defensively to Ignatius.

"How about a pint?" Desiree suggested.

Eric was suddenly taken aback. "Who, me? A pint? Erm . . . Well . . . Certainly! Why not? I'm Eric, by the way. You're Desiree, aren't you?"

"That's right," Desiree answered.

"Lovely accent," he complimented as they strolled off to the Black Kettle.

"Oh, that's sweet of you to say, hawt. So, is it true what they say about Muvans?" asked Desiree.

"Well, that was easy," Ignatius muttered to himself.

1630 – The tré Tea Room

It was late in the afternoon and the two junior Almas, Kelly Ranchors and Carol LeanHors were having a chat in the tea room while Dawn was taking care of some details elsewhere in The tré.

"She's already senior Alma; I don't know what she's after. She's got her nose so far up Ig's arse, it's a wonder she can breathe," Kelly commented quietly.

"Tell me about it," Carol said, rolling her eyes in disgust. "Have you ever noticed she never calls him 'Ig' – even when he's not around? It's always 'Mayor HaliFox' or 'His Honour'. And I heard him asking her to call him 'Ig' as well."

"Personally," Kelly said, leaning over and lowering her whisper to a conspiratorial level, "I think she fancies him."

"Do you think?" asked Carol, *sotto voce*. "You don't suppose she'd actually . . . you know . . ."

"Weeeellll, you never know, do you?" Kelly drawled. "Can you imagine it, though?" she added, as they both fell into restrained hysterics.

Their hysterics restrained themselves into complete silence as Dawn entered the room. She was her usual ebullient self as she picked up a cup of tea from the table and sat with the others.

"I just can't get over this tea room," Dawn RoseMearh admired, taking a seat with the other two. "I'm so pleased the town has finally put some money into The tré. It was getting so run down. This room is so lovely and they still managed to keep the character of the building."

"I agree. It was nice of Ignatius to clean the place up a bit. Although it's nothing compared to what I grew up with in FurCaster," confirmed Carol.

"Or what I had in CoalCastle," added Kelly.

"True, but we're just a very small town," Dawn defended. "Both of your homes were in large cities. We couldn't compete with their budgets. Even with the Shire's help, and all the grants Mayor HaliFox gets, we're doing pretty well to have as much as we do."

"Yeah, but . . . still," Carol said.

"Still, what?" asked Dawn.

"Can't help but wonder . . ." Kelly trailed off.

"You must admit, there has been a bit of queer activity of late," Carol added. "I missed a few Portrayals a couple of months ago."

"Oh, he was there. He just forgot he was onstage," Dawn dismissed.

"And those three skins," Kelly began. "That fat one. What's her name? Dizzy?"

"Desiree DelHomme," corrected Dawn. "She's visiting Mayor HaliFox."

"And what kind of name is 'DelHomme' for a human?" asked Carol. "How does one DelHomme? Is that like a builder?"

"I suspect it's a Vinterran name," Dawn mentioned.

"What's it mean, then?" asked Carol.

"I don't know," Dawn replied. "I don't speak Vinterran."

"And then there's that other one, Steve. What's his last name? Grey?" asked Kelly.

"Green," corrected Dawn.

"So what's greening?" asked Carol. "I could see 'Whiter' as a last name for a human – that'd be whitewashing. But greening?"

"Maybe it's gardening," suggested Dawn.

Carol continued her suspicions. "What about that tall, skinny bastard?"

"Language, Carol," Dawn admonished.

"What?" Carol dismissed. "We're among adults."

"If you make it a habit, you'll forget your manners in front of the children one day," Dawn told Carol.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Carol admitted. "Anyway, his last name is Robinson, isn't it?" asked Carol. "What sort of work would that be?"

"You know, it's not the law that humans have to have work names," Dawn pointed out.

"Still . . . very queer," said Kelly sipping her tea.

"And then there's all the others that disappeared for over a week," said Carol. "Slide and Sandra . . . Pete and Gina . . . And the MarchHare twins."

"And I noticed Linda OakSquirrel and Geoff ThistleBoar were missing as well," Kelly added.

"It was just as they explained," Dawn said, "they were looking for their missing children, Grace and Simon."

"But what about Ignatius?" asked Carol. "During the week that everyone was gone, he spent practically all of his time in the basement."

"He wasn't here all the time," Dawn countered. "I hardly ever saw him, apart from PD."

"That's because, you don't live across the street in Matron Cottage as we do," Kelly said. "There's been a break of late, but up until a few days ago, he was always coming in at seven and departing near dark."

"Yet he was always there for the Portrayals," Carol observed.

"And, of course, those three humans," Kelly said. "There's something well odd about that lot. They're so unlike most humans. They're so. . ."

"Clean?" suggested Dawn. "Yes, I had noticed that. They're actually . . . well, I wouldn't use the word 'attractive.' But they're certainly not matty, like the other humans. Desi has a better fex than I do, I'll admit. And she doesn't smell like a human at all."

"And her skin isn't all rough, like most humans," Carol mentioned. "It's actually quite smooth. Very strange for a human."

"Well, she is a foreigner," Dawn said.

"Is she?" asked the other two.

"Yes, she's from San Souci," Dawn answered.

"San Souci?" asked Kelly, mystified.

"Across the Pond," Dawn hinted. "Big Easy? Crescent City?"

"Oh, right," Carol recalled. "*Love* their music."

"And their food's to *die* for," Kelly added. "What's she doing here, then?"

"I seem to remember that she had some information about the two runaways," Dawn explained.

"Why would that involve a stay of weeks or months?" asked Carol.

Dawn shrugged. "Well, I don't know, do I? It's none of my business anyway – and none of yours either, I might add."

"Still," Carol said, putting her cup down with a sigh. "Very queer goings on. Someone is up to something, I can feel it. All this renovation is a cover up of some sort."

"Carol, how could you say that?" asked Dawn. "You know the mayor. He's the most honest person in The Kingdom. He'd sooner cut his brush off than lie to someone."

"I have to agree with Carol," Kelly said. "*Someone* is up to something. All this work at The *tré*. These 'clean' skins running about. People disappearing for days at a time. Mysterious meetings at The *tré* . . ."

"And have you noticed how they've split the basement?" Carol pointed out. "We've *two* doors, now. There's the one door that goes to our stores, and the other that goes to . . . whatever that other half is."

"Have you been down that other bit?" asked Kelly. "Apart from being almost completely empty, there's a new set of stairs to the service door – the one that opens behind the courtyard wall."

"And I've seen Ignatius and Geoff both use it to go in and out of The tré," Carol pointed out. "I honestly must wonder why they can't be bothered to use the front door. Unless they've something to hide."

"And then there's that cabinet, at the bottom of the stairs," Kelly said. "Have you noticed it's suddenly seven feet tall now?"

"What's in that cabinet, anyway?" asked Carol.

Dawn hesitated briefly as she lifted her cup. "Nothing, I'm sure. It's been locked since I've been here."

"And I've seen that Vixen, wusname . . . Jess . . . sniffing around a few times as well. Now tell me there's no jiggery-pokery when she's about! I've heard an earful about her," Kelly mentioned.

Dawn sighed as she put her cup down firmly. "Will you two listen to yourselves? You both are the most paranoid, mistrustful, gossiping old hens I've heard in ages! We have our jobs because of the mayor to begin with and here you are questioning his conduct. Out of the goodness of his heart, he appropriated the funds to doll up The tré – and, just for us, he threw in this lovely tea room – and here you are, casting aspersions, left, right and centre!"

"Dawn," Carol said, "Don't you find *any* of this the least bit suspicious?"

"No, I don't. There's no money missing. No one has made any complaint – at least of any substance," she said, looking at her two subordinates in mild disapproval.

"Don't get me wrong, Dawn," Carol qualified. "I don't question his generosity, but, even if it's nothing *illegal* – there's still something going on that we haven't been told about."

"I'm sorry but I disagree. I've known the mayor far longer than either of you two, and you may take it as read that he would not be involved in anything that wasn't completely and totally above board," Dawn said. "In the meantime, as senior Alma, I would remind you that our responsibilities lie with the education and welfare of the children, maintaining the properties of The tré and . . . and . . . putting the kettle on. *Not* with exchanging idle gossip and speculation."

1700 – The tré Tea Room

Carol and Kelly had departed for Matron Cottage as Dawn had volunteered to stay behind and do the washing up in the tea room. The conversation with her subordinates was rattling around in her head as she was drying the cups and saucers and putting them out to dry.

So glad I have my own place, she thought to herself. *I don't think I could stand listening to those two rabbit on about the most useless things. As if they had nothing better to do with their time. Just a couple of spoilt, big-city brats. Had everything handed to them from Daddy, no doubt.*

She flung the tea towel onto the counter in disgust.

Looking out of the window, she reflected on her life. She loved working with the children, even though they belonged to others. Otterstow was small and, although she didn't truly consider that to be a liability, it did severely limit her prospects for a soulmate, if not crush them completely. There wasn't so much as a Gelding for twenty miles that wasn't married or less than twice her age.

Looking out of the window, her mind cleared as she watched a pair of squirrels chase each other amongst the massive branches of the oak in the courtyard. Then a question one of her juniors had asked returned to her head.

What is in that old cabinet? she thought. And why is it suddenly so tall?

Putting a few last things away and taking off her pinny, she briefly considered her loyalty towards the mayor and decided that trying to open a cabinet would hardly be an act of treachery. After all, she was the Senior Alma of The tré and was at least partly responsible for its security.

With this in mind, she walked through the auditorium and instinctively began to descend the highly visible set of stairs. After just one step, she forced her focus back to the shut door that led to the other staircase. Reading the sign that warned of high voltage, it occurred to her that the fuse box was in the tea room. She put her hand on the door knob and discovered that the door was locked.

Maybe those two are on to something, Dawn concluded. After a moment's thought, she went outside, around the courtyard and into the alley behind The tré where the service door to the basement lay. *These are new doors,* she observed. She also noticed that the handles on the doors had a simple lock.

Equans, despite many protests otherwise from Ursans, are unmatched for raw strength in The Kingdom. Despite having a single digit opposed to their thumb, their hands are, although marginally less graceful and adroit as most, immensely forceful. Thus when Dawn gave the lock a second appraisal, she surmised that it was actually quite small and, thus, merely a mental obstacle rather than a physical one.

Although she was certainly an intelligent woman, she did meet some resistance as she circumvented the mental obstruction. However, quickly deciding that she needed neither excuse nor explanation to investigate the venue for which she was responsible, she grasped the padlock and gave it good, firm yank, severing it from its hasp and breaking the shackle in the process.

She pulled the horizontal doors up and rested them on their stops and descended the steep staircase into the basement. As she did so, she noticed that it was new and that a ramp had been installed as well for the purpose of rolling down heavy loads using a hand truck. Further examination showed that they were well-used, having more than a few smudges of mud and the like all over the steps and the ramp.

To be expected, she told herself. *There's been a good bit of construction lately.*

Then there was the cabinet. Until now, Dawn had not seen it in its fully erect state. Its monolithic, black form beckoned to her.

She touched it, investigating if it had some sort of handle or latch and, in so doing, noticed she still had the small, broken lock in her hand. Annoyed, she dropped it on the floor and continued her investigation. In short order, she found a tab on the door that allowed her to pull it open.

So it has been opened recently, she deduced. *Why didn't anyone tell me about this? Surely there's a reasonable explanation.*

She peered into the darkness of the descending stairs, opening the door wider to let in more light. Looking on the ground, she saw the small, broken lock

and pushed it with her foot to hold the door open, thus keeping the flight illuminated. Feeling a little more intrepid, yet being very cautious, she began to step down the staircase.

A dozen steps later, she could see light coming out of another door. Very cautiously she opened it just a crack further and peeked through. Seeing nothing threatening, she opened the door wider still and ventured through the opening. Once in the basement of the Rialto, she walked as silently as a six foot-seven, sixteen stone Equan could. Observing a window near the staircase, she decided to take a look outside. It was nearly four feet wide and ran a few feet down from the ceiling and Dawn was just tall enough to be able to see outside without stepping onto the box that was in front of it.

Raising herself to her full height, she peeked outside to see, with a worm's eye view and just a dozen or so yards away, a busy street with a number of humans walking about.

There are an awful lot of humans about. Why aren't there any Frith? she wondered to herself. And why don't I recognize any of the buildings?

Then a car whizzed past followed quickly by another.

Dawn's eyes widened considerably. At this point, she decided that she had seen quite enough and didn't want to see anymore. She quickly and quietly went back to the cabinet, down (and up) the stairs and into the basement of The tré. Shutting the door to the cabinet, she put her back to it as if to ensure that nothing would follow her through it.

She had just remembered the broken lock on the floor, when Geoff, Steve, Michael and Ignatius came in through the door at the top of the stairs that led to the auditorium.

They were so engaged in their conversation that they were nearly halfway down the stairs before they noticed a somewhat anxious Dawn, still leaning with her back against the cabinet door, as if to keep it closed. Then, as one, they noticed the open service doors to the alley and then the small, broken lock at Dawn's feet.

They also began to feel no small amount of anxiety, very similar to that which might be experienced by schoolchildren who have been caught out playing truant or smoking behind the auditorium. Two factors magnified this apprehension for Ignatius in particular. Firstly, Dawn was an Alma and, although technically she was his subordinate and she was younger than he was, she was still an Alma. Because of that, she generated an aura of authority over the inner child that most adults keep close to one's heart. Secondly, he had never, ever been caught out doing anything wrong as a schoolboy (because he had never actually done anything wrong as a schoolboy).

The fact that she towered over all of them seemed to have an equal effect on the others.

"Mayor HaliFox," Dawn said quickly, by way of greeting. Despite the fact that it was merely a greeting, her voice had that slightly accusatory tone that educational staff seem to develop instinctively and very early in their careers.

"Alma RoseMearh," Ignatius croaked in a barely audible reply.

There was an uncomfortable silence as no one dared to move, with the penitent accused holding their hands in front of them and wearing hangdog expressions.

Ignatius broke the stillness. "I take it you've been, erm . . . "

"In the cabinet?" finished Dawn. She paused, as if reluctant to answer. "Yes. I have."

"Oh," Ignatius said, not feeling very clever.

Another pause interrupted the conversation.

Dawn broke the silence this time. "Apart from you four, who else knows? Pete and Gina? Sandra and Slide? The MarchHare twins, I presume?"

"Yes," Ignatius answered. "And Jess. Who else?" he asked of the others.

Geoff thumped Ignatius. "Don't grass, Ig!" he whispered.

"This is about the missing children, Grace and Simon, isn't it?" asked Dawn.

"Just so," Ignatius confirmed. "They departed through that cabinet and we are pursuing them."

"Who else knows?" Dawn demanded.

"Desiree and Linda," Ignatius added instinctively as Geoff rolled his eyes.

"Quite a company," Dawn stated. "Is that all?"

"Erm, yeah. Should think so," Geoff hinted, as he looked pointedly at Ignatius.

"Oh yes, Vince – and Liza Prrgel," Ignatius added as Geoff slapped his forehead.

"That being the case, I have a very important question in mind," Dawn said.

"And what would that be?" asked Ignatius, politely, if a bit nervously.

"Mayor HaliFox," Dawn began. "Ignatius . . . "

Ignatius felt even more guilt, as this was only the second time ever that Dawn had called him by his first name, the first time being immediately after he had suggested she do so.

"Why didn't you tell me? You've always had my trust and loyalty. Carol and Kelly are asking *lots* of uncomfortable questions. It's fortunate for you that I'm senior Alma, or there'd be . . . *consequences* . . . I'm sure."

"I don't know what to say. I suppose 'I'm sorry' would be a start."

"Too right," Dawn replied. "I know you are my employer, but I still think I'm due an explanation."

Ignatius cleared his throat. "Well, erm . . . As you, no doubt, are aware, you are standing in front of a doorway that is a portal to Reality. And, as you know, there are some in authority that might frown upon its intended use. The reason I didn't tell you, was mostly for your own protection."

"My protection?" asked Dawn, incredulous.

"Yes, quite," Ignatius added. "If you didn't know . . . "

"So, that bit about the children getting into Geoff's tools. That was all just a fabrication?"

"Not entirely," Ignatius said. "The safety of the children *was* actually a genuine concern. But, to be completely honest, it was not my *greatest* concern. And I said it in your best interest."

"I hardly think *lying* to me could ever be in my best interest," Dawn countered.

"I say," Ignatius said, wounded, "it was still the truth."

"Don't you think I would have helped you, if you had just come to me with the *whole* truth?"

"Dawn, if this had blown up in our faces, I wanted you to be protected," Ignatius said. "In hindsight, I understand it was a mistake, but . . ." he left his thought unfinished.

"But you couldn't *trust* me," Dawn finished for him. "The parents, I can understand and, arguably, the twins. But what about all of these other people? You seem to trust all of them."

"Some were necessary, others were by accident – mostly due to my inability to keep secrets," Ignatius explained. "But nonetheless, you are completely right. It was wrong of me not to confide in you from the very start," he confessed. "Please accept my humblest apologies."

"Consider them accepted and the issue closed," Dawn said. "But, if I might ask, what course of action are you pursuing to recover Grace and Simon?"

"We're rebuilding a theatre," Geoff answered.

Dawn looked a little confused. "What does rebuilding The tré have to do with . . ."

"No, not The tré," Geoff clarified. "An entirely different theatre. It's called the Rialto. It's the building on the other side of the tunnel."

"I see." Dawn paused in thought for a moment. She glanced towards the ceiling, the farther wall, and several other objects about the basement as she considered the information she had just been given. Then she looked at Geoff again. "Why?"

"Well, it was in a dreadful state for one," was the only reasonable reply Geoff could think of.

"As Grace and Simon are lost in Reality," Ignatius clarified, "we must maintain control of the portal in the event they make their way back, thus we must control the Rialto."

"Are you certain they're in there?" Dawn asked, pointing to the cabinet at her back with her thumb.

"Quite sure. In fact, I, personally, saw them," Ignatius explained. "They became frightened and ran off."

"What's it like in there?" asked Dawn.

"If you would care to see for yourself," Ignatius offered, "we'd be quite happy to give you a tour."

"All right, then," Dawn agreed.

1800 – The tré Basement

They finished the tour and returned to the basement of The tré.

"It's quite a large theatre," Dawn commented.

"Yes, it is. Should seat over four hundred," Steve affirmed.

"And it is quite lovely, or will be, I'm sure," Dawn added. "It would be a shame to let it go to waste."

"True, quite true," Geoff mentioned. "We've put a lot of effort into the Old Gal, thus far."

"But isn't going into Reality illegal?" asked Dawn.

Ignatius gave Dawn the same explanation he had given Jess. "So, if I might be so bold, could we count on your discretion?" he asked when he had finished.

Dawn considered for a moment. "Despite the fact that you kept me in the dark about all this, yes, you will have my full discretion in this matter. However . . ."

"Yes?" prompted Ignatius.

"In future, I expect to be kept fully informed of all activities regarding this."

"Oh, yes," Ignatius agreed. "I quite agree. Definitely."

"You do understand that I do this out of loyalty to you and your office. And because I have the utmost respect for you as a person, despite your keeping me in the dark."

"I think that you are fully justified in that regard," Ignatius concurred. "And thank you for keeping our confidence."

"Also, if I might . . ." Dawn said with a little hesitation and a slightly wry smile. "Could I have a moment alone with Ignatius for a few minutes? I have some information about the juniors that he might find . . . amusing."

2000 – A Silo, Somewhere in England, Near a Deserted Intersection with a Junk-Food Restaurant

It had been nearly a week since Grace and Simon first raided the skip at the restaurant. They had repeated this episode every night, and then returned to a shelter near the silo.

The shelter was merely a set of eight steel posts along with some rails and corrugated metal, forming a roof and supporting a single wall against the prevailing winds. Although simple and mostly exposed, it provided cover from the rain, shade from the sun and there was a good deal of hay for bedding. There also happened to be a water spigot which actually provided water.

They slept at the shelter, raided the skip of the restaurant at night and took the occasional foray to explore their environs, stealing occasional luxuries such as fresh underwear and soap whenever the opportunity safely presented itself.

The situation was an improvement, generally speaking, but when they returned from one of their exploratory strolls, they noticed a vehicle parked in the shelter and heard some angry swearing from the silo. Thinking it might be a good time to seek digs elsewhere, they wisely departed for good.

They had been walking along the edge of the forest, which was nearly a hundred yards from the road, when Grace made an observation.

"Look, Si, see that intersection," Grace pointed. "There's a bridge for one of the roads. We can just sit under there. See, there's even a big empty box. That'll give us some privacy."

"At least for a night or two," Simon agreed as they began to walk toward the intersection.

Grace began digging into the rucksack that Simon was carrying. "Ah, there it is," she mumbled. She pulled out one of the marijuana cigarettes she had rolled earlier, using the little papers that had been conveniently included. "Light."

Grace, being a Hare, had no pads on her fingers. Apart from making it difficult to gain traction on the tiny little wheel that sparked the flame, the fur on her fingers was prone to igniting as well. Even when Simon lit the lighter, he would use the tip of his claw, rather than the pad on his finger, a skill Grace had not quite mastered.

They stopped in their tracks, Simon lit Grace's cigarette and she took a puff. Passing it to Simon, they continued their trek. By the time they had shared a few hits each, they had reached the box which, to their dismay, was not exactly empty.

The occupants of the box, also two teenagers, were not very pleased with the situation either. One of them, a girl of just under sixteen years of age, resembling a whippet, although quite annoyed at this new development, kept her thoughts more or less to herself. The other, a boy, also fifteen, whose Asian features approached that of a Siamese cat, had no such reservations and found the appearance of their new visitors so disturbing that he began to scream.

Generally, in describing reactions of fright, one would say that women scream and men yell. However, there was absolutely no mistake that what the Siamese Cat was doing was screaming. It was so high-pitched and shrill, that it would be impossible to call it anything else. Fortunately, it lasted just a few seconds, as his housemate gave him a good slap to silence him.

"Oy! Stop 'at!" the Whippet yelled at him.

"Look at them! They're . . ." The Siamese Cat began to scream again.

This time, the Whippet gave him a proper slug on the chin, knocking him over.

"Forgive him," the Whippet said casually. "He's a bit excitable."

"I noticed," Grace said, rather carelessly.

"Is that weed I'm getting a scent of?" asked the Whippet.

"Erm . . ." said Simon.

"I'd kill for a bit of weed," the Whippet urged. "Been ages."

"I take it you mean that in a metaphorical sense. You wouldn't actually *kill* someone for it, would you?" asked Simon.

"No, course not," dismissed the Whippet. "Get done up for life, doing that. Got any?"

"What's weed go for?" asked Grace.

"Grace, I don't think . . ." Simon began to whisper.

Grace nudged him.

"Dunno. How much?" asked the Whippet. The Siamese Cat began to get up, rubbing his jaw, remaining quiet but for a little moaning.

"Oh, say . . . just one joint," Grace suggested.

"Depending on the size and quality," began the Whippet, "fiver, I suppose. You carrying?"

"We've just a little," Grace said. "But we can get more."

"Well," the Whippet said with a smile, "let's have a sample and we'll take it from there."

Grace pulled out the half-smoked cigarette and passed it to the Whippet.

An hour later, the Whippet and her now-silent boyfriend were leaning back on the concrete beneath the overpass, staring blankly upward.

"See, we actually want to get home," Simon explained.

"Yeah," said the Whippet.

"But we don't know where it is," added Grace.

"Mostly what we need," Simon interjected, "is a map. But we'd also like some good food . . ."

"Some clean clothes," added Grace, "and some clean knickers wouldn't go far amiss."

"I can relate to that," the Whippet admitted.

"And some way of getting home," Simon added.

"Well, I *can* get you those things," the Whippet said. "Course, I got zero cash right now, so you'll have to give me a few spliffs, so I can sell 'em."

"We can do that," Simon said.

"And there's a substantial risk involved. If I get nicked by the police . . . well, it's not good news for any of us. If that *were* to happen, I would suggest you leave immediately, because I *will* grass on you if it'll accomplish anything for me."

"Okay," Grace said, growing a little more suspicious.

"And we get half the proceeds," said the Whippet.

"Half!" protested Grace.

Simon held her. "Will that be enough for us to get home?"

"Depends. How much you got to sell?"

He thought for a moment. "A pound."

The Whippet sat up immediately. "A pound!"

Simon seemed a little uncomfortable. "Is that not enough?"

The Whippet looked at the Siamese Cat. Together, they laughed.

Grace and Simon were unsettled by their mirth.

"Mate, if we sell a pound of that stuff we shared just now, you could hire a limo to anywhere in the country!" said the Siamese Cat.

Simon and Grace gave each other a look that belied their naiveté on the matter. This did not go unnoticed by the cardboard tenants.

"Right, give us the pound," said the Siamese Cat. "We'll go and push it and come back here with the dosh."

Now Grace was very suspicious. "Hang on a minute. What if you two just scurry off with our goodies?"

"We could," said the Whippet. "But you'll just have to trust us."

"Sorry," Grace answered. "But I wasn't born yesterday."

"You got no choice," said the Siamese Cat. "What you gonna do? Go stand on the corner and try to push weed? Who's gonna buy it from you? Look at you! You two are freaks! You don't know jack about pushing. And even if you did, how you gonna spend the money? Walk up to a counter and say, 'I'd like a map and some clean knickers, please?' Get real. They'll call the filth and get you locked up just for looking like that!"

Simon and Grace looked at each other once more.

Simon turned back to the Whippet and the Siamese Cat. "Could I discuss this with my partner?" He pulled Grace a few steps away.

"Si, I smell a rat and that's an insult to rats," Grace said. "Even if they don't take everything, they'll cheat us of something."

"I have to admit, you're right. But they've got us over a barrel. On the other hand, we've got a lot more than just the pound. Even if they do just scurry off with it, we'd have loads left."

"Yeah, I suppose so . . . Hey, they're digging through our rucksack. Hey! Stop it, you two!" She began to stride towards the Whippet and the Siamese Cat, with Simon in her wake.

The Siamese Cat grabbed the rucksack and was laughing childishly as he stood behind the Whippet who had suddenly grown a large knife in her hand.

Simon and Grace stopped in their tracks.

"We're parting company now," explained the Whippet. "You don't follow and no one gets hurt. Understood?"

She didn't wait for an answer as the Siamese Cat ran out from under the overpass as fast he could. The Whippet followed shortly thereafter, still holding her knife and occasionally looking over her shoulder.

Simon and Grace watched them for just a second and then looked at each other.

"Boots," they chorused as they immediately sat down and removed them.

Grace had finished hers first and took off. In the time it took her to strip off her boots, the two urchins had traversed perhaps fifty yards.

The Whippet, who had merely a physical resemblance to the breed and in no way retained the aspect of its speediness, was quickly bypassed as Grace landed on top of the Siamese Cat. He was caught completely by surprise as he had never looked back and had no reason to suspect that the Hare he had just mugged could outrun him even if he were on a motor scooter. To his credit, he held on to the rucksack.

"Gimme that!" Grace yanked at the rucksack.

"No! Mine!" shrieked the Siamese Cat, pulling it out of her grasp and trying to punch her with effeminate little swipes.

"I said *gimme!*" Grace shouted, infuriated. She then kicked him in the groin, causing him to drop the bag that he was holding, in order that he might clutch another. Grace took the opportunity to grab the rucksack.

The Whippet, who had finally caught up, was enraged that her boyfriend had been assaulted, particularly in an area which she probably held quite dear (perhaps because there was so little of it) and had drawn her knife again. Unnoticed by Grace, she was approaching from behind and she had blood in her eyes.

Her hand swung down and was caught by Simon's maw as he tackled her in the grass. He bit down, drawing blood and the Whippet dropped the knife, screaming in pain.

"Si, let's go!" Grace shouted. Simon let go of the Whippet's hand, which she immediately clutched in pain and held close to her chest. Simon and Grace four-legged it back to the overpass and began to put their boots back on. They kept a close eye on the two as they laced up.

"Reckon we oughtta beat feet?" suggested Grace.

"Probably for the best," Simon agreed.

They went out of the opposite side of the overpass and began to briskly walk to a forest that offered itself in the distance.

"That went fairly well," Simon said.

"Oh, shut up, Simon," Grace replied.

2000 – Nora Kitchen

"Man, where'd you get these shrawmp?" Desiree asked Ignatius.

"The prawns, you mean? They're not off, are they?" enquired a concerned Ignatius.

"No, they're awesome," Desiree said, scooping up a bunch with both hands and inhaling the aroma. She held them out to Ignatius. "Go on, take a whiff."

Ignatius had a tentative sniff. "Yes, quite fresh. Eric procured them for us, to answer your question."

Desiree dropped the prawns back into the bag and went to the kitchen door. "Eric? Get your booty in here, boy!" She returned to the prawns and poured them into a large bowl. "Okay, Jess, have you got all the vedgitibbles cut up?"

"Peppers, spring onions, celery," enumerated Jess. "That's it, right?"

"Awrite, hawt," Desiree appraised. "You wanna make the roux or peel and de-vein the shrawmp?"

"Prawns have veins?" asked Jess.

"No, actually," Desiree answered. "It's not actually a vein you're removing but their lower digestive tract, so it's actually filled with . . ."

"I'll do the roux," Jess decided.

"You're not gonna get distracted and let it burn like the last three times?" warned Desiree.

"You never give it a rest, do you?" Jess complained, as she reached for the oil and flour.

Eric entered the kitchen. "You rang, lovely lady?" he purred.

"You bought these shrawmp, hawt?" asked Desiree.

"What, the prawns, you mean? Why yes, I did. Are they not satisfactory?" Eric asked.

"They're perfect, hawt," Desiree said. "Have a seat and help me clean 'em."

"Erm . . . right," Eric agreed. "With soap and water?"

"Go wrench your *hands* with soap and water in the sink, smartass," Desiree ordered, "and come siddown next to me. I'll show you how it's done."

"Sorry?" asked Eric.

"Sink." Desiree pointed to the basin. "Hands. Soap and water. You and me. Sit. Peel, de-vein shrawmp."

"Prawns?" Eric asked, suddenly intimidated.

As it happened, the entire Partnership, plus Dawn and Eric had come for dinner at Nora. An hour later, Jess and Desiree were pouring the coffee, adding large amounts of milk to each cup.

"I'll just take mine black, Desiree," suggested Slide. "And that was a fabulous dinner, by the way."

"Lissen, hawt, no one drinks this stuff straight unless they wanna myocardial infarction or something," Desiree explained. Still, she left his coffee as requested, pouring a glass of milk on the side for him.

"Yes, excellent meal," Sandra agreed.

"Marvellous. Simply marvellous," Ignatius said. "I look forward to the day when Jess can do as well."

"Oh, ta for that, Ig," Jess grumbled. "Not that I had anything to do with tonight's bill of fare."

"Credit where due," Desiree admitted. "Jess and Eric did just as much as me."

"About bleeding time I got a little recognition," Jess said.

"So, have you had any luck in your search for Grace and Simon?" asked Eric as they all sipped their coffee.

"No, sadly," Ignatius sighed.

"Pity," Eric said calmly. "All that work you're doing on the Rialto and not so much as a word."

To a person, everyone in the room froze on the spot.

"Not to worry," Eric added cheerfully, as he introspectively sipped from his cup. "I'm sure they'll make their way home soon enough."

Everyone else looked at each other, wondering what to say.

"However, if I might advise, you should be a bit more discreet in your activities," Eric continued to a silent audience. "You've certainly nothing to fear from me, but if those two junior Almas ever cotton on . . ." he sucked some air through his teeth, "that would be a very *bad* situation indeed. Or, Jack forbid, Thaddeus. My word, this is excellent. I've never had coffee prepared like this before. What's it called again?"

"Umm . . . *Café au lait*," Desiree answered quietly. "Means . . ."

"Coffee with milk, of course," Eric answered. He looked at the group surrounding him. "Oh, don't look so surprised. Honestly. Did you think no one's noticed all your comings and goings in and out of The tré?"

"Actually, we were rather banking on it," Jess said. "How did you find out about the Rialto?"

"Quite simple," Eric answered. "I heard these two lads talking about it in the Black Kettle," he explained, gesturing towards Michael and Steve.

"Erm . . ." began Michael.

"We . . . erm . . ." continued Steve.

"Oh, don't blame *them*. They couldn't've known, could they!" Eric continued blithely. "They couldn't *begin* to guess that I could hear them whispering across the Kettle over a crowded, noisy bar, especially as they've never seen a Muvan before in their lives. Humans only have their tiny little ears." He grabbed his enormous lobes. "Not like the great, big flappers hanging on my head that pick up every gnat's fart for the nearest mile. And it wasn't just them; I've heard just about everyone at this table mention it at some time or another. Except Dawn, and she's only just found out."

"I suppose I have been indiscrete," Ignatius confessed. "I guess now the question is, who else in Otterstow knows?"

"Oh, most of the town, I expect," Eric hypothesised. "Not all of the details, but bits and pieces. But not to worry, we're all behind you."

"You say Tad *doesn't* know?" asked Pete. "'Ow'd that happen? 'E's always in the pub."

"It's no coincidence that Thaddeus has small ears and a large mouth," Eric pointed out. "He's much more interested in hearing himself talk than in listening to others."

"No argument there," Jess agreed.

"What about my juniors?" asked Dawn. "How did two of the biggest gossip mongers in town get left out of this particular loop?"

"Quite simple, honestly," Eric mentioned. "They've such high opinions of themselves, they only deign to talk to each other. And apparently they'd just as soon get loaded in Matron Cottage every night instead of walking four blocks to associate with any of the bumpkins that reside in Otterstow. But our gain, eh what?"

"Our gain, indeed," Ignatius agreed.

"So, tell me Desiree," Eric said, turning his head to look at her as she was seated next to him, "I hear you rather fancy anatomy."

"Um . . . Yeah, I do," she admitted.

"Well, if you want a fine specimen, don't look to me," Eric laughed. "I have a terrible body."

This relieved the tension of the room somewhat.

"But seriously, I think I overheard you mentioning some theory or other to your man Steve, over here," Eric said, "Something about the land of fable?"

"Nothing anyone here would be interested in," Desiree dismissed.

"I am," Eric prodded. "Go on, then."

Desiree seemed hesitant but, as everyone was expectantly looking at her, she began. "Um, awrite. We have this ancient author, named Aesop," Desiree began "He wrote a bunch of apologues or fables. And in my observations of all the Portrayals, I sort of see a parallel.

"The stories aren't exactly the same, but they are similar. Like the Fox and the Grapes. In our version, the fox jumps for the grapes and when he can't reach them, he says they're sour and walks away, so we say that things that we envy and can't have are 'sour grapes'. In your version, 'grabbing the grapes' is a moral for persistence and cooperation. And all of the species at this table appears in one of these fables . . ."

"What about Linda?" asked Michael. "I don't remember any squirrels in Aesop's fables."

Desiree gave this some thought. "No, I can't remember any either. Do they have squirrels in Greece?"

"What do Grecian squirrels have to do with it?" asked Steve.

"Aesop was from Greece," Desiree pointed out.

"Oh, right," Steve admitted. "Well, there are squirrels all over Europe. There must be some in the Peloponnese."

"Anyway," Desiree began her conclusion, "I can't help but wonder if Aesop somehow managed to enter this world and draw his inspiration from them. Or

perhaps it was the other way around. Maybe he already knew the fables when he came here and inspired someone here to write the Portrayals."

"We actually have a group called Aesop's Tribe," Clare mentioned. "So either of those scenarios may be a possibility. When was he alive?"

Desiree shrugged. "Not completely sure, but I think maybe . . . 2500 or 2600 years ago."

"That's about the right time," Clare admitted. "He may well have left his stories here. Of course, he may have been from here as well."

"Seems a bit thin to me," Steve mentioned.

"It's no thinner than your idea about this place," Desiree retorted.

"Oh, *another* theory," Eric said with enthusiasm. "Go on, Steve. What's your idea?"

"Oh, please, no," Desiree pleaded. "Not that sad, old theory they use in all the science fiction books where there's an infinite number of parallel universes. That is *so* lame."

"You had your go, Desiree," Linda pointed out. "Let Steve have his say."

"Erm, right, if I could just get a fresh pint of that sparkling cider, that would be a good visual aid," Steve said. "The nice, clear one."

"A bottle of Grim's?" suggested Jess. "Just a tick, there's one on ice." She rose and departed to the kitchen. Returning with the bottle, she removed the wire and gave it to Dawn. "Cork, please?"

Wordlessly, Dawn removed the very tight cork from the bottle and handed it back to Jess, who poured the contents into Steve's glass.

Steve held the glass aloft, to allow everyone to see it. "Right, now see how the bubbles seem to start at a point in the middle of the cider?"

Everyone stared at the diamond-like bubbles ascending in the pale, amber liquid. A general murmur of affirmation was returned, comprised of 'yeah's, 'right's and 'okay's.

"If you look at the source of where they appear, they seem to come out of practically nothing, and then they expand a little as they go up. See that?"

"Yeah, can see that, right," answered Geoff.

"Now even though air is something, it's mostly nothing. But the fact of the matter is, solids and liquids are mostly nothing also."

"Lost me there," Geoff admitted.

"Me, too," Rachael confirmed.

"Solids and liquids and gasses are all made up of atoms," Steve continued his explanation. "And atoms are all pretty much the same. They're sort of like houses or buildings. They take up lots of space, but the only reason they take up lots of space is because they're mostly empty inside. There are all sorts of houses – big, small, different sizes, shapes and colours, but they all have one thing in common; they have empty space inside. And our two worlds are just two houses occupying, mostly, the same space."

"Oh, right. I can understand houses and buildings," Geoff said. "But how do you get two houses in the same place?"

"Well, the trick is to get the occupants to share the same house without knowing it. Like having one live on the floor while the other lives on the walls." There was a brief pause as Steve took a sip of the cider.

Steve continued, "To address Desiree's comment, there are other universes, to use the term loosely, but there's simply not room for an infinite number. I think a better phrase – as opposed to 'parallel universe' – would be 'perpendicular universe.' I don't know how much physics you know, so I think it'd be best if I give you the short version."

"I'm more of a liberal arts person, myself," Ignatius mentioned. "Dead languages, the law and other swathes of useless information, so that might be a good idea."

"Pete, could I borrow your pencil for a moment?" asked Steve.

Pete took out his ever-present pencil and handed it to Steve.

Steve held the pencil with an index finger on each end. "Let's say this pencil is a line. Something on that line, say an ant, can move in one dimension – forward-back. That's the first dimension."

Putting the pencil down, he rubbed the tablecloth's surface with his hand. "This table surface is a plane. Now, our ant can move in, essentially, only two dimensions – forward-back, and left-right."

Clare broke in. "But it can also move diagonally. And there are an infinite number of directions for that."

"True," Steve replied. "But any diagonal can be made up of the other two dimensions. If I go this way diagonally," he drew a random diagonal line. "It's the same as going forward this much and to the right that much."

"I'll forgive you for drawing on my tablecloth," Jess commented.

"Oh, terribly sorry," Steve apologised.

"No, carry on," Jess urged. "It's well worth the explanation. That's why you're forgiven."

"Oh, right," Steve said. "Anyway, the idea is that any diagonal motion is essentially just a combination of the original two." He pushed his pint glass forward, which was approaching emptiness in a rapid fashion.

"Extending this concept, this cider is a space and it has three dimensions. Forward-back, left-right, and our new friend, up-down. Any other direction is a combination of these three.

"Now, most scientists claim that time is the fourth dimension and that, so far, we've only been able to move forward in time at a constant velocity, and that's as maybe. However, we're not concerned with that. We want to explain why we're all here together, even though we come from different worlds or universes or whatever we wish to call them."

"And what is that explanation?" asked Ignatius.

"Ah yes. Unfortunately, it's impossible for me to illustrate this for the three-dimensional world that we live in, but I could explain if we're willing to pretend we live in a two-dimensional world. So, let's go back to the plane – two dimensions. Imagine that we live on a plane. As we are two dimensional, we live not on a spherical planet, but it's two-dimensional equivalent, a disc – say this beer mat," which he brandished for all to see, holding the paper disc horizontally, like a tiny platter.

"In the three-dimensional world that we actually live in," Steve continued, "we live on a sphere. But we rarely go inside the sphere, do we?"

"No, we only walk around on the outside of the sphere," Clare said. "Well, we walk into basements and mines and the like, but that's just a tiny bit into the surface, all things considered."

"Precisely," Steve confirmed. "So, by logical extension, if we lived in two dimensions and lived on a disc . . ."

"Then we'd only walk on the outside rim of the disc?" Clare conjectured.

"Do you have a degree in science as well?" asked Steve of Clare.

"What on earth for?" asked Clare. "Go on. Get to your point."

"Oh, right," said Steve. "So here's the world we live on," he continued, indicating the beer mat that he was holding horizontally. "And, as Clare suggested, we only walk along the outside edge."

He then took another beer mat and held it vertically. "Now, here's another world. It's exactly like ours in almost every way and, although it does have a 'left-right,' it does not have a 'forwards-back'. However, it *does* have an 'up-down'. Now – let's say they intersect." He then tore a slit in each beer mat, halfway through, and stuck them together so that they stood at right angles with each other, one horizontal and the other vertical, forming something that was roughly spherical in appearance.

"Oh, sort of like a plan and an elevation on a blueprint," commented Geoff.

"Right," Steve said. "Now, if I'm a two-dimensional ant, living on the horizontal beer mat, I could only walk on the edge." He ran his finger along the edge of the horizontal beer mat. "But, if I turn at *just* the right point," his finger went to where the edges of the two beer mats met and now traced the edge of the vertical beer mat, "I can now be on the vertical beer mat. Of course, there *is* a slight change of direction."

"Ah, so *that* explains them stairs," Geoff revealed. "You walk down the stairs going in but you walk *up* the stairs going out and you never change directions. That's because the two worlds are perpendicular somehow! And the stairs let you change direction without banging yer head. Hmm. Quite clever, actually. Man, this is mind-blowing stuff!"

"I think this idea would also go a great deal towards explaining dark matter, but that's for another day," Steve commented. "So, that's my theory of perpendicular universes. Any questions?"

"Perfectly clear to me," Geoff admitted.

"I think I might have to walk through it a second time," admitted Ignatius.

"As there's actually *two* points of intersection," Geoff pointed out, "that might mean there's another portal like ours on the other side of the world."

"Erm . . . I suppose there could be, at that," Steve admitted. "Hadn't considered . . ."

"And since you could put a third beer mat perpendicular to those two," Sandra hypothesised, "that would make a total of six intersections."

"Yes, of course. That *would* be a logical extension," Steve admitted, examining his beer mat model.

"Wouldn't it stand to reason that, as we used a two-dimensional model and had points for intersections," Dawn conjectured, "that since we live in a three-dimensional world, therefore we would have lines for intersections."

"Yes, it does, indeed, stand to reason," Steve concurred.

"Well, that would mean there could be portals all over the world," Linda suggested. "We might not be the only ones."

"Sounds plausible," Steve concurred.

"And just as we added a third beer mat, there might possibly even be a third perpendicular world," Clare added.

"That would, erm . . . make sense," Steve said, sounding a little deflated. *And here's me, thinking I was clever,* he thought.

12JUL2001 Thursday

0400 – A Forest, Somewhere in England

After parting ways with the Whippet and Siamese Cat, Grace ParsleyHare and Simon StæppanWulf had walked nearly two hours, at which point, the sun had set. They then continued on for an additional six more hours until they noticed the sky starting to brighten, heralding the imminent dawn. They had come upon an isolated clearing in the forest, whereupon Grace finally suggested they stop.

"Okay, I don't think we need go any further," she said, dropping the rucksack. "C'mon Si, do your bit."

He took off his shirt and the odour caused him to wince. "You don't – oh, phwoar – You don't think they'll follow us. They're probably quite angry with us."

"No, Si. They are not *probably* quite angry with us. They *are* quite angry with us, full stop. But, no, they won't be following us. After my assault on the family jewels, I don't think that little boy will be going walkies anytime soon. And besides, we're miles away by now."

"Guess I am being a little paranoid," he admitted, stretching his arms and back in preparation of assuming his duty as Grace's mattress.

Without apology, Grace admired Simon's physique as he did so, observing his not-overly-muscular, yet still fit, body. She sighed in admiration.

Simon suddenly seemed aware that he was being stared at. "What?" he asked, suddenly embarrassed.

"Oh, nothing. Go on," she urged. "I'm tired." She did a little stretching herself and it was Simon's turn to admire, which he did as he dropped to the forest floor and curled up, using his shirt and the rucksack as a makeshift pillow. "Ready?" he asked.

"Hold still." She knelt beside him and curled up on top of him.

Of course they were filthy and hungry and absolutely reeking, but despite these distractions they immediately fell into the sleep of the innocent.

0920 – The tré Tea Room

The day after Dawn had discovered the secret of the cabinet, Carol LeanHors and Kelly RanchHors were engaging in their diurnal hearsay at The tré for their afternoon tea.

"You know, I heard that Ig's not been with a Vixen for ages," Carol LeanHors mentioned.

"Don't know about that. That FærFyxe Vixen has just moved into the mansion," Kelly RancHors said.

"So I heard, but I also heard she made a pretty little speech at the Kettle the other week about how she's *not* involved with Ig. At least, that's what she *tells* everyone. And if she *is* after Ig, she'd better not let Dawn find out," Carol said with a smile. "Dawn would flatten her in short order."

"I just keep picturing Dawn with Ig," Kelly said, barely containing her mirth. "She'd flatten him as well."

"If Dawn were ever with Ig," said a familiar voice from just outside the tea room, "he'd have two less Almas to deal with," pointed out Ignatius as he entered the room.

"Mayor HaliFox! We had no idea!" Carol spluttered.

"At least when Dawn does call me by my title, she does so with sincerity. Please, call me Ignatius."

"Certainly! Of course, of course!" Kelly agreed.

"Let's dispense with the apologies," Ignatius said, pulling up a chair to sit on. "I have some business to discuss with you."

The two Equans were all too eager to redirect the conversation.

"Business," repeated Kelly as if to confirm the change officially.

"Yes, business," Ignatius said. "First of all, I'd like to ask each of you about how you feel about Otterstow. Carol?"

"Erm, lovely town. Lovely children. Lovely theatre," Carol enthused.

"I see," said Ignatius. "Kelly?"

"Likewise," Kelly concurred.

"So, there's no place else you'd rather work?" Ignatius enquired. "Otterstow is the perfect place to be, then?"

There was a brief pause as the two looked at each other and considered the mayor's last statement.

"You did say 'work,' didn't you?" asked Carol.

"Yes, I did," Ignatius confirmed. "But as you seem so smitten with Otterstow . . ."

"Oh, work!" blurted out Kelly. "Well, as lovely as Otterstow is, there's nothing like diversity for experience. And Otterstow's nice, but for developing one's career as an educator, it just doesn't have much to offer, does it."

"No, not very promising at all," Carol agreed. "Don't get me wrong – it's all very lovely, but for *experience* – well, it's just not on, is it?"

"I tend to agree," Ignatius said. "You two have backgrounds that bespeak culture and breeding . . ."

"Oh, thank you, Mayor," Kelly said.

"Much like mould, I'm led to believe," Ignatius completed the thought.

"Regardless, you're both quite young – both twenty-four, correct? Still relatively fresh out of uni. I think a change right now would serve your careers quite well. Don't you agree?"

"Oh, yes, quite," they both concurred.

"Yes, a good variety of experience should be one's objective at your stage in your careers. Don't want you to get stuck in a rut. Now there *are* a few places we could send you . . ." Ignatius glanced into an unoccupied corner of the room as he thought.

"Big Smoke?" suggested Carol.

"Hmm . . ." Ignatius looked doubtful.

"CoalCastle?" put forward Kelly.

"Perhaps, but . . ." Ignatius hedged.

"FurCaster?" suggested Carol.

Ignatius put his hands up to signal an end to the stream of suggestions.

"Yes, those are all very good and fine places. But the problem is, we don't have a replacement to send you there."

"Replacement?" asked Kelly.

"Yes, you see, we – that is, the town of Otterstow – are allotted two juniors beneath Dawn, based mostly on the number of children. If you left, we'd have to replace you, of course. The problem is, we have to find someone who wants to come to Otterstow, either through exchange with another town or someone with fresh qualifications; a formidable challenge for a town as humble as Otterstow, one must admit, despite its loveliness.

"Now, as it happens, we have three candidates who have expressed an interest in our humble town – or at least they haven't found it specifically objectionable. And they are from three different districts."

"And where would those districts be?" asked Kelly.

Ignatius counted on his fingers as he mentioned the possible destinations: "HorseHinter in SunsetShire, MareSydoats in NorthumbrageShire and BoarHamlet in HempShire."

The two Equans looked at each other in confusion.

"Never heard of any of those places," Kelly confessed. "I barely know where the Shires are, much less the cities."

"Villages and hamlets, actually. I suspected that such might be the case," Ignatius said with a pleasant smile. He opened his jacket and pulled out a map and a few handwritten notes. "I took the liberty of calling the mayors that preside over their catchment areas and asked them to enumerate a few of the highlights of their respective jurisdictions." He handed the notes to the juniors. "You'd leave at the end of the month."

"We haven't decided that we'd go yet!" protested Carol. She looked at Ignatius' notes. "And what interest would I have in a town where . . . an *owlery* is the main attraction?"

Kelly looked over her shoulder to read. "Or where the favourite activity is . . . does this say 'swan-spotting'?"

"Well, I *would* point out that Otterstow is hardly a cultural oasis," Ignatius said. "After all, our biggest attraction is a canal, and our humble little venue doesn't even have a proper name. But, if that's your opinion, I'll just tell my 'girlfriend' that you'll be staying, shall I?"

"Girlfriend?" asked Carol, looking confused.

"Which one is warmest?" asked Kelly, catching on.

Ignatius opened the map and put on his reading glasses. He pointed to a remote area. "BoarHamlet is furthest South, but," he said, pointing to somewhere even more distant, "HorseHinter is nearly the same and has a beach as well. However," he leaned forward and whispered conspiratorially, "MareSydoats is quite the drinking town, I've heard." He winked to add weight to his suggestion as he indicated a spot much further north.

"HorseHinter for me then," Kelly claimed. She turned to her partner. "I hope you like owls – or snow."

1200 – A Forest, Somewhere in England

Grace and Simon awoke at noon. It had not rained during the day and they were well rested, albeit just as ripe as when they went to sleep.

"Hold on, Si, looks like you've got some lodgers," she mentioned casually.

"Lodgers?"

"Got a few little bugs crawling round your fur."

"Tell me they're not fleas," he said, hopefully.

"No, nor ticks neither. Look like just plain old bugs of some sort."

Simon whipped his brush out of his pocket and unfolded it. "Quick, brush 'em out!"

Grace began but quickly determined the brush was ineffective. "I'll have to use the comb," she warned him. "The brush doesn't work – the little buggers are too small."

"Get on with it," Simon ordered.

"All right, all right," Grace said. "Just thought I'd warn you." She began to comb vigorously and Simon winced and yipped occasionally as the teeth in the comb occasionally caught a small snarl of hair.

She stopped after a few minutes, searching his fur for other insects. "I don't think I got 'em all, but I don't see any more either. They're obviously not any sort of parasite or they'd be biting the hide off you."

"Still, I'd like them off."

"Well, there's nothing I can do for you, Simon. We'll have to find a place where you can take a proper bath and then you should be all right."

He shifted his shoulders back and forth a bit in discomfort and scratched at an imaginary itch. "Oh, this is just . . . Jack-dammit, I *hate* bugs in my fur."

"Well, let's beat feet and see if we can find some place for you to get cleaned up," she suggested. "And while we're at it, we need to get some other things as well."

"Apart from food?"

"Yes, apart from food," Grace answered, cryptically. "Unless you want to experience a serious pong, we need . . . other things."

"What? Like soap?"

"Soap we have."

"Erm, fresh underwear?"

"That would be nice as well," Grace admitted as they began walking in no particular direction. "And, just as a clue, you're in the right neighbourhood of body parts."

Simon's brow wrinkled as he gave this some thought. "Oh, erm . . . Those . . . erm, girly . . . doodahs," he ventured.

"Yeah, that'd be them," Grace answered.

"So, you're having your, erm . . . ?"

"About to, yes," Grace nodded.

"Then, you're not . . . erm . . . ?"

"No, I'm not." She finally brought herself to look Simon in the face. "Bit of a relief, innit?"

"Putting it mildly, yes," Simon agreed. "So, where do you think we could find some of these girly doodahs?"

"Shouldn't worry. We'll manage," Grace dismissed. "Just need to find some laundry hung out to dry."

"Laundry? Aren't they disposable?"

"Just . . ." Grace interrupted, "keep an eye out, okay?"

2000 – The tré

On her first day in Nora, Desiree had heard Pete mention some illustrations that were hanging in the home of Sandra StæppanWulf and Slide HolenWulf. These sketches were ostensibly drawn by their great-grandfather, coincidentally named Simon StæppanWulf, for a text of anatomy. However, it was generally surmised that they were actually drawn by his partner, Alice Rush, as 'Old Man Simon' had a singular lack of talent for the graphic arts.

Regardless, Desiree had been curious about the anatomical sketches that Pete had mentioned and asked Sandra and Slide if she could see them. She had subsequently been invited to their home to cook dinner, with Pete and Gina as additional guests.

"You keep stirring this until it turns a chocolate brown," Desiree instructed Slide. "If you get little black flecks, then it's burnt and you have to start over."

"Then what?" asked Slide.

"When it's brown, you toss the vedgitibbles into the roux and cook them for a few minutes," Desiree instructed.

"Right, got it," Slide said, continuously scraping the skillet. "So, what did you think of the illustrations?"

"They're quite lifelike," Desiree evaluated. "But Pete was right – they're gory as all get out."

"Still, quite good works of art," Sandra appraised.

"Oh, f'true," Desiree agreed as she chopped up a few last spring onions. "I wish I could draw like that."

"I think your sketches are quite good," Sandra said agreeably.

"And even if you don't consider yourself an artist, you're quite the cook," Gina mentioned. "Where did you learn all this?"

"I'm from a big family – six brothers. So, yeah, we all did a good bit of cooking. Each of us got one day a week for KP."

"KP?" asked Sandra.

"Kitchen police," Desiree translated. "Basically doing the grunt work of cooking dinner."

"Seven children," Gina marvelled. "My word."

"That's big even for a family of 'Ares," Pete mentioned.

"Oh, for crying out loud, Pete," Gina scolded. "Give it a rest!"

"Ig seems to like my cooking," Desiree noticed. "But whenever he says anything about it, Jess seems to get her tail in a twist."

"Oh, never mind her," Sandra dismissed. "She's just jealous."

"Of me and Ig?" asked Desiree. "There ain't nothin' between us two."

"You sound like you wish there were," Slide smiled, still stirring his roux.

"Behave, Slide," Sandra chastised.

"So, what's the dish, Desi?" asked Pete. "Ya fancy the Ig-man?"

"Pete!" Gina scolded. "Don't put her on the spot like that."

"Like Ig'd even," Desi dismissed, rolling her eyes.

"Din't ask about 'im," Pete said. "Asked about you. D'ya fancy him?"

"Pete! That's enough," Gina warned. Then to Desiree, she added, "You pay these two hooligans no mind, Desiree. They're just baiting you."

"No worse than I get from my bro's at home," Desiree said, scraping the vegetables into a bowl. "I mean, Ig's a great guy, he's cute as can be, and he's smart, but . . . none of that matters, anyways 'cause Steve and I are together."

"What if there were no Steve?" Slide asked.

"Slide! For the last time," Sandra warned. "Right, official change of subject time. Let's talk about our children – Grace and Simon. Do you think they'll be safe, running about in the United Kingdom?"

"I find it hard to imagine that anyone would do anything too horrible to 'em," Desiree answered. "It's got to be one of the safest, most civilized countries in our world."

"Well, that's *some* good news," said Sandra.

Desiree continued. "But, you never know. They might run into the pervert/psycho of the century – and England has had its share. But I'd say their odds are pretty good. They can come home when they're ready. And unless they decide to constantly remain in hiding from *everyone* they'll be spotted pretty easily. Steve and Michael have both been keeping an eye on the news for any stories."

"What if they're lost?" asked Gina ParsleyHare.

"As long as they can remember 'Newburg' or 'Rialto' they can find their way home. Any policeman will help them," answered Desiree.

"That's as maybe, but how are they to know that?" mentioned Gina.

"How do they feel about the police, by the way?" asked Desiree.

"How d'ya mean?" asked Pete.

"Do they trust 'em? Afraid of 'em? Hate 'em?" asked Desiree.

"Couldn't say, honestly," Slide said. "They've never met one. Ig's the only cop in town and that's only in a legal sense."

They sat for a moment in silence, the only sound being Slide constantly scraping the bottom of the skillet with his spatula.

"Wonder what they're up to just now?" Sandra asked no one in particular.

"Probably shivering in the freezing cold," Gina said.

"Gina, it *is* July," Pete reminded her.

"They could be trapped in an ice house," Gina postulated.

"I'll bet they're hungry," Sandra said. "Simon loves good, nourishing food. He's very particular about eating healthy things."

"Our Grace is particular, as well," Gina said. "She eats nothing but crap. If it's not fried in deep fat or loaded with sugar, she won't touch it."

"She'd be in paradise in my home town," Desiree muttered. "Until she got to twenty stone."

Slide sighed. "I just hope they're not . . ." He left the thought unfinished.

"What?" asked Pete, innocently.

"Frolicking," Gina nearly finished the thought. "Jack help us if Grace gets in a family way from a mixie."

"Nah, Simon's a good lad," Pete said. "An' 'e cares enough for our Grace not to engage in any . . . frolickin'."

Sandra StæppanWylf and Slide HolenWulf looked at each other with an uneasy expression.

"'E wouldn't, would 'e?" asked Pete of Simon's parents.

Sandra and Slide exchanged glances again.

"Simon's a good lad," Slide began. "But I think he's smitten with your Grace. All the other lads rag him a good bit about it."

"It's just puppy love, though," said Gina. Her expression became more concerned when she saw the faces on Slide and Sandra. "You said as much yourself. Didn't you?"

"Well, yes we did," Sandra admitted. "And as far as I know, he's never . . . frolicked . . . with Grace, or anyone else for that matter. But he does talk about her all the time. He absolutely dotes on her – writes her notes, gets flowers from the field from her. Quite the romantic."

"'Nuffin' to worry about. We all did those things when we were young, din't we?" Pete admitted enthusiastically. "When I were a lad, I was smitten by a young Hedgehog for a while but ya know what they say about lovin' Hedgehogs, so that was a no-starter to begin wif. Gina 'ad a crush on a Badger once. But, comes a day when we all 'ave to part company."

Sandra sighed. "Simon's been saving money for their marriage."

"Oh, he'll meet a nice Bitch soon enough," Gina said. "And he'll just spend the money on her."

Slide smiled. "And I'm sure Grace'll find a nice Buck in due course. Oh, look, the roux's nice and brown."

Desiree tipped the chopped vegetables into the skillet, raising a cloud of steam as Slide continued to stir.

There was an uncomfortable pause as the cloud dissipated.

"Wonder what they're doing just now?" Slide asked again.

"Hope they're not hungry," Sandra said.

"Or cold," Gina added.

"Or frolicking," Slide and Pete chorused.

20JUL2001 Friday

1300 – Nora

"We'll have a new barrel of cider for you next month," the deliveryman reported, retrieving his clipboard from Ignatius. "See you then."

"Could I ask a brief question?" Ignatius said.

"As long as it's brief. It's a Friday see, and I'd like to get home for the weekend."

"I'll get straight to the point then. Last month, when you were doing the inventory for the cellar, you said 'the fewer bottles, the better customer'. I'm wondering what you meant by that?"

"Just that," the Erinac shrugged. "Don't know the details, but your hooch is all bought and paid for."

"By the town, surely," Ignatius replied. "So the more I buy, the more business you have."

"Yeah, but judging by the way the boss moans about it every time we make a delivery here, that's not the case. He'll be one Angry Badger when I tell him we've gotta bring a whole barrel of cider next month."

"Why should he be angry?" asked Ignatius.

The Erinac shrugged. "Dunno the details, I'm just the deliveryman. Here, call the office, number's on the receipt. Now, if it's all the same to you . . ."

"Oh, yes, sorry for the delay," Ignatius said, dismissing him.

As the Erinac trundled off to his boat, Ignatius stared at the receipt. "Odd . . . Come to think of it, I never have seen a charge. I'll have to ask Linda about this."

23JUL2001 Monday

0700 – Rialto

After the police had finished investigating the Nicholas Hodge site, the Partnership returned to work and the Rialto slowly transformed over the ensuing weeks. The skip had been filled six times over and still a century's worth of stopgap decorating continued to flow into the rubbish where it belonged. Facades and veneers that had long ago lost their ability to conceal with grace and elegance were removed. Plaster was knocked down, nails were pulled, carpets were torn up and skirting boards were pried off. Entire windows were defenestrated, doorjambs were pulled out and every bit of plumbing and electrical work was exposed. The Rialto was quickly being reduced to its interior skeleton, consisting of all the struts, frames, beams, joists and so on that actually kept the building from falling in upon itself.

Yet, as they worked at removing cheap panel ceilings and even cheaper wall panelling, they discovered polished marble and stained oak – these, blemished as they were, stayed under Geoff's orders, either *in situ* or stored in the basement.

Everyday, Geoff would direct the others as to what was to be removed or retained. "Want to do this one right. The Ole Gal deserves a proper treatment. None of this 'cowboy' nonsense," he would say each day, more to himself than to anyone else. The Rialto, to Geoff, was an old spinster who had been deathly ill. In his own mind, he had become her private physician and had made it his personal mission in life to rehabilitate this old, wrinkled crone into a beautiful, youthful slip of a girl.

31JUL2001 Tuesday

1600 – HareFam Train Station

A week after the work on the Rialto had resumed, on the last day of July, Ignatius escorted all three Almas to the railway station in HareFam. The train was just pulling in and the two junior Almas were both to travel to Trinova and then, ultimately, to their final destinations.

"Miss RancHors, I hope you enjoy the beaches in HorseHinter and Miss LeanHors, I'm sure you'll, erm . . . make plenty of friends in MareSydoats," Ignatius said, shaking their hands as he addressed them.

The two juniors sneered in revulsion, turned about and pushed their trolleys to the luggage car to prepare to board the train.

"Nosy Mares," Dawn muttered when they were out of hearing range. "Good riddance and not a moment too soon."

"I won't deny, I do feel some relief now that they're gone," Ignatius added, standing beside her, looking down the platform towards the luggage car.

"At least now I can have Matron Cottage all to myself, fortunately. Or unfortunately, as the case may be."

"Unfortunately?" asked Ignatius. "Why would it be unfortunate?"

She sighed. "I'm thirty-three, Ig, and I'm not getting any younger, either. It'd be nice to have a life besides work."

"I offered you a spot in the Partnership. The others had even agreed to it, but you said . . ."

"I have a job I love," she finished the sentence. "Maybe sometime in the future. I'm grateful you've left that door open, but I'm not talking about that. I want Foals. And a decent Stallion to go with it would be nice."

"Oh, well, maybe some good news for you then," Ignatius said, as the guard called all-aboard.

"What's that, then?" asked Dawn. "I hope you don't believe a word of what those two said. I do respect you Ignatius, but I'm not interested in a mixie."

"And as attractive as you are, Dawn, I'm afraid a relationship with a Mare would be more woman than I could possibly ever handle. How Eric BlostMus thinks he could possibly cope is completely beyond me."

Dawn snorted mirthfully at the thought. "He doesn't half have it on, doesn't he? He still tries to chat me up from time to time."

"Bless his little cotton socks," Ignatius commented wryly. "The good news is – did you not notice the two departees from the train?"

"What, the two Stallions putting their luggage on the trolley?"

"Yes," Ignatius replied. "Those two." He pointed to them at the other end of the platform, loading their luggage on a cart.

The train started to chug off, as the two Stallions approached Ignatius and Dawn, pushing their luggage before them.

"What about them?"

"They're the new juniors. They're the replacements for Carol and Kelly."

"Ignatius, the term is '*alma mater*', not '*alma pater*'."

"Actually, it would be '*almus pater*'. You see *pater* is masculine, thus the ending . . ."

"I'm not concerned about what we call them," Dawn dismissed the suggestion. "I just need to get used to the idea of men as Almas."

"Now, now, Dawn," Ignatius chastised, although not too earnestly. "We must give equal opportunities to all. Just because they're male, doesn't mean they're not qualified. Both fresh out of uni, twenty-two years old and glowing recommendations from their deans."

"Don't misunderstand, Ignatius," Dawn explained. "I have no reservations about their qualifications. It's just the whole idea of working with . . . *blokes!*"

"I chose these two specifically because I was rather under the impression that you'd had your fill of working with Mares, but I can find replacements if they're not to your liking . . ."

"No! Please, don't! They're bloody gorgeous!" Dawn said quietly as the two approached.

"I was actually speaking of their professional abilities, but as long as you're pleased."

"How in Jack's name did you find *two* male Almas?"

"It did take a little doing. There were only three available in the entire country," Ignatius said. "But well worth the effort to keep my senior Alma happy," he added with a smile.

"Take it from me," Dawn confirmed, "she's well chuffed!" Suddenly she recalled something important. "Do you think they'll be more open-minded about educating Mini?"

"They certainly couldn't be any worse than the two we just lost," Ignatius conjectured.

"No argument there," Dawn concurred. "I'll feel them up about the subject over the next few days."

"I presume you mean 'feel them out'," Ignatius corrected.

"Isn't that what I just said?" Dawn asked.

"Close enough for my sake," Ignatius answered. "But do try to keep your mind on business in their presence."

The first of the Stallions, a Piebald, addressed Ignatius. "Begging your pardon, but would ya be Mayor HaliFox?" he asked in a distinctive accent.

"I am indeed, Ignatius HaliFox," he responded, extending his hand. "Please, take no offense if I allow you to pronounce your name for me?"

"Liam AbannEach," he said distinctly as he shook the mayor's hand. "From Laurie Down, just across the channel."

Ignatius turned to the other Stallion, an Appaloosa. "That would make you Brandon StonePony," he guessed, offering his hand. "From the colonies?"

"My pleasure, Your Honour," Brandon said, taking his hand. "Yes, sir, from MileHigh, although I went to school at GrenteBrige, where my grandfather lives."

"My very great privilege to meet the both of you," Ignatius replied. "And for the future, 'Ignatius', or any of its diminutives, will do. We're very informal here. Gentlemen, if I might introduce your immediate superior, Miss Dawn RoseMearh."

"Gentlemen," Dawn said with a smile that belied something more than trading pleasantries.

"Miss RoseMearh," Liam replied.

"Ma'am," Brandon took off his wide-brim hat.

"Did ya not hear the man?" Liam nudged his friend. "It's *Miss* RoseMearh."

"Pardon *me*," Brandon apologised. "*Miss* RoseMearh. So where's our digs?"

"At Matron Cottage," Dawn answered immediately, "just beneath me."

13AUG2001 Monday

0900 – MacAleister's Estate

An early model compact car of no small experience sputtered up the winding country lane towards the enormous estate, pulling in behind the building. The engine took its own sweet time in dying, dieseling a few hundred extra revolutions, thus making the ratchet of the hand-brake barely audible. The death-rattle was nearly drowned out by the protest of a rusted hinge on an ill-fit door and finally punctuated by the door slamming shut, seemingly causing its final demise.

Angus MacAleister, leaving the keys in the car, walked through the rear door of the domicile, thus entering the kitchen, which was capable of catering for some of the smaller countries of the world. Taking no notice of its massive collection of hanging cutlery, nor its gleaming, unstained, stainless steel countertops, he walked straight through to the main hall.

"Faither! I'm hame!" called Angus, smiling.

George MacAleister came out of his drawing room. "Hello, Angus. How was rehab?" he asked as if enquiring of the weather.

"I feel . . . greet!" Angus said cheerfully. He came forward and gave his father a hug, which was barely returned. "I dinna feel like ma minds swimmin through slush. Is all . . . brilliant. Sharp."

"Glad to hear that," George said, unimpressed. "So what are you going to do?"

"Is like I said – guan ta make a go o the Rialto. Do a proper job o it. Make it an earner. Ye'll be proud o me," Angus answered enthusiastically.

"Ah . . . yes," George hedged.

"Didna Steve get the loan? I drove by the Rialto an there was all kinda construction gaun on."

"Oh, yes, he got the loan," George said. "But the Rialto is now his. I sold it to him for a pound."

"Ye did what?" asked Angus, astonished. "But 'twas mine. Ye gave it me!"

"No, Angus. We've been over this. It was a trust. It belongs to Mister Green now."

"That's no what ye telt me," Angus protested. "Ye said 'twas mine."

"Then you misunderstood," George stated. "However . . ."

Angus fell silent, waiting for the qualification.

"It *can* become yours," George continued, "if you do as I tell you. And when it *does* become yours, it will be a profitable, viable business."

"What've I ta do?" asked Angus, suspicion hanging in his voice.

1100 – Rialto Kitchen

It was now mid-August. Three weeks had elapsed since the police had finished their work and the Partnership had resumed theirs.

As usual, they gathered for their morning meeting in the wall-less and ceiling-less kitchen to coordinate their work over breakfast and a cup of tea.

"Before you begin, Geoff, I've a small bit of good news," Ignatius said. "You might recall the ten pound note we found earlier. Sadly, it was a genuine note, so it wasn't worth as much as a forgery," Ignatius stated, as he dug into his pocket and pulled out some notes. "However, because it was in such good condition, it sold for forty quid at the auction."

"I'll have that," Linda said, snatching it out of his hand and stuffing it into her brassiere. "A nice start to our emergency fund."

"Cor, you'd think they were married or summat," Pete marvelled to the amusement of the men in the group.

"Not to worry, I'm sure it's in safe, erm . . . hands," Geoff stated. "Now, back to business. My friends, we have now finished the first phase of our work, the demolition. It's taken us about six weeks, but we had two weeks out, courtesy of Mister Hodge, so we're actually ahead of schedule. I think I can say that all of you have done an excellent job thus far. But demolition is the easy bit. Now we begin construction. This is more difficult, of course, but easily the more exciting part in my humble opinion . . ."

"Oh, I dunno, I rather enjoyed swingin' 'at wreckin' bar round," Rachael commented.

"Yes, there is a bit of thrill in demolition," Geoff admitted. "I certainly won't deny that. But, to me, there is no greater satisfaction than looking at a finished piece of work, knowing that it was done to a proper standard. Anything from a plastered ceiling to a fitted toilet. And every time you see it, you'll say to yourself, 'I did that.'"

"Now, according to Steve, before we begin, we've got to get the special crews in here to do the sparky work and some of the other special jobs we can't do. Then we have to get it inspected. We've laid everything out for 'em. That means that Steve, Michael and Desiree will have to spend some time here

staying on top of things, but, at the end of the day, what this means for the rest of us, is another fortnight's holiday."

There was a little applause and cheer from the group.

"Now, now. Let's not get carried away," he said with a smile. "We still have some work for today.

"Anyway, after the sparkies and plumbers are done, we come back and finish what we can, focusing on the customer areas. It's all right if we leave the office, the staff areas and the flat upstairs undecorated, but we've got to get the public areas in perfect form. That's our main priority."

"Are we gettin' that lift put in, what runs from the basement to the master bedroom?" asked Rachael.

"Erm . . . in a word, no," Steve said. "Has to do with building safety codes. If it's to carry people, then it has to have a proper double-door lift and all. It was just too expensive."

A few of the group seemed disappointed.

"However, we are getting a ladder put in," Steve added. "Sometime later, when we've got the dosh, we can get it replaced with a proper lift. But you'll still be able to sneak up to see some of the performances from the box. In fact, you'll probably have to occasionally, as it's the only way to get upstairs without being seen in the public areas."

"Halloo! Onybody about?" came a voice from downstairs.

"Oo's 'at, then?" asked Rachael.

"I think I know," said Steve. "Sounds familiar." He cupped his hand to his mouth. "We're up here!" he shouted.

"Right! Be right there!" replied the voice.

"Who is it, then?" asked Gina.

"It's Angus, I think," Steve replied.

A general groan went up among the group.

"Bear in mind," Ignatius reminded, "that we wouldn't have any of this, except for his efforts."

"Must admit, the Ig-man's right," confessed Pete.

By this time, Angus had climbed the stairs to the kitchen where the group was having their meeting.

"Mornin all!" he said cheerfully. He then looked around with a gobsmacked expression. "Ye're still animals," he commented. He sat down as he felt a little unsteady.

"No we're not. We've evolved. We're all sapient and civilised," replied Clare. "We're as much animal as you are."

"Aye, but ye's leuk like bears an rabbiz an the like."

"Hares," Rachael and Clare corrected.

"You there," Angus pointed to Steve. "Wee poof manager."

Steve pointed to his chest with wide eyes. "Me?"

"Aye. Ye iver do smack?" asked Angus.

"No," answered Steve, honestly.

"Charlie?"

"Never."

"Tell me, what dis these people sittin about leuk like? This one here. What's she?" Angus pointed to Linda.

"She's a Sciuran. She looks like a squirrel," Steve elaborated, "but much larger, of course."

"An this one?" Angus asked, pointing to Pete.

"A Bear," answered Steve plainly.

"An those three?" Angus pointed to Gina and the twins.

"Hares," Steve carefully specified.

"An the couple there?" pointing to Slide and Sandra.

"Wolves," Steve said.

"Sa I'm no hallucinatin?" Angus asked. "They dis leuk like animals?"

"Yes," Steve confirmed.

"Allatime?" asked Angus.

"Yes. All the time," Steve corroborated patiently.

"They dinna change ner the like?" Angus delved.

"Just their clothes," Steve qualified.

"An isna fancy-dress, ner Hollywood makeup ner the like?" Angus attempted to disqualify.

"No, it's their skin," Steve answered.

"It's fur actually," Desiree clarified. "Their skin is beneath the surface, but you can't actually see it . . ."

Angus was not paying attention as he was busy banging his head on the table. "I . . . [bang] . . . am . . . [bang] . . . ta . . . [bang] . . . styoopid . . . [bang] . . . ta . . . [bang] . . . live!"

Pete, who was sitting near Angus, grabbed him by the collar and held him up straight so that he would stop banging his head.

"D'ya mind?" Pete scolded. "You'll damage our table. Now what's all this about, then?"

"I thought I'd lost ma sanity, that I was seein things. Sa I swore ta give up drugs," Angus admitted, "even alcohol."

"So? You're clean ain'tcha? Sod all wrong wiffat," Pete pointed out.

"But I did it all for nought. Ye's really leuks this way. I gave up ma favourite thing in the hale world," Angus wailed, "an all for nought!"

"No, it's not for nought," Linda pointed out. "You're better off for it."

"Look, if ya can keep clean for just the year, we'll letch take all the drugs ya want," Pete offered.

"Na, I canna," Angus moaned. "I made a promise. I promised Mum, rest her saul."

"Shave me, what a crybaby," Jess muttered.

"Here, lad, have a cuppa," offered Sandra, pouring some tea.

"Maybe it'll stop that bawling," Jess sneered.

"Play nice, Jess," Ignatius warned her quietly.

Sandra set the cup in front of Angus, who was holding his head in his hands.

"Ta, Miss Wouf," Angus sniffed.

"My name is Sandra," she reminded him. "Sandra StæppanWylf."

Angus looked at her, recalling their meeting in the park. "Oh, aye, I mynd the nou. Ye're the boy's mum? Simon, the one what's away?"

"I am. And you might recall his father, Slide," Sandra indicated her husband.

"Ma pleasure, Mister StæppanWylf," Angus said with as much courtesy as he could muster.

"It's 'HolenWulf', actually," Slide corrected.

"Oh, sorry," Angus said. "Sa . . . what about the wee Bunny lass? Ye're her mum? Gina?" he recalled.

"That's right," Gina answered. "Gina ParsleyHare. These two," she indicated the twins, "are her sisters, Rachael and Clare MarchHare. And I'm sure you haven't forgotten Pete DunBerr," she pointed to the Ursan, "her father."

"Am *not!*" Pete protested.

"I wadna think sa. Ye dinna leuk like a Bunny," Angus agreed.

"I admit, I helped raise the li'l toerag," Pete confessed. "Changed 'er nappies, fed 'er, took 'er to the park an' the like . . . But I ain't 'er dad."

"Ye're better her dad than maist," Angus stated. "I remember ye's all from the park. An the backstage here in the Rialto," he added a bit sadly. "An by the by, we'll be seein na more o Kenny. He's na welcome here, no eva, an I made it clear ta him. Forby, I wanna make it clear, I'm here ta help ye find yer weans. Whatever it taks an na excuses. Isna right when they're separated from a mam an pa that loves 'em proper-like."

"Thank you, Angus," Ignatius said. "We're glad to have you help us."

"I've heard ye've bought the Rialto," Angus mentioned, skimming the room for reactions.

"Yes, we have," Ignatius answered. "We need control of it so Grace and Simon will have a place to return to. If we lose control of it, there's no telling what will happen to it."

"I still dinna unnerstaund," Angus said. "Why do they need ta have the Rialto open? It disna make sense-like."

There was a silence around the table as everyone looked at everyone else.

"Do ye no trust me?" asked Angus. "I'm here ta help."

Five minutes later, Angus was staring out of the front door of The tré. "I am saaeed glad I'm clean," he stated. "I'd niver believe this if I was wasted."

1600 – Rialto Backstage

Deep backstage, in a dark corner, yet still light enough to see if one was patient enough to allow one's eyes to adjust, Angus sat at a small table, his hand supporting his chin. He stared at a little wooden box, silently contemplating his future or lack thereof.

"I thought. . ."

"Gah!" Angus shouted, grasping his heart. "Losh, Vixen!"

". . . I might find you here," Jess finished calmly.

"Hou'd ye smook up on me like 'at?" Angus asked, amazed. "I didna hear ought!"

"I'm a Fox," Jess explained, patiently. "It's what I do." She looked at the box. "Having a crisis of faith, are we?"

Angus didn't respond, beyond looking at the ground.

"Siffing pathetic, you are," Jess tsked. "First day out of rehab, you lie to your mum, you break your promise to help find Grace and Simon . . . "

"Ye're no helpin the seetiation," Angus interrupted.

Jess leant over the table and whispered in his ear. "Look, sunshine, I know we don't know each other very well, but if you were to ask any of the partners, they'd tell you in a heartbeat that I'm a selfish, uncaring, vixen – that's with a small 'v' by the way. In fact, they'd say that I was just plain mean-spirited. And sometimes, when it suits my purpose, I actually am. Now, I've got a rep to uphold, so if you tell anyone about what happens in the next five minutes, I'll rip your goolies off. Understood?"

"Erm . . . aye."

1800 – Black Kettle Pub

There were nearly a dozen people at the Black Kettle, which was an extraordinary crowd for a Monday evening. Desiree sat at the bar, quietly reading a translation of La Fontaine's fables and sipping a pint of lager.

Ignatius was at the other end of the bar, having a discussion with Pete when, to his horror, he suddenly noticed her performing this singular activity. He then noticed that this was attracting the attention of Thaddeus, who was making light of it with some of his friends.

Gritting his teeth, Ignatius slipped off his barstool and stealthily eased in her direction, hoping to reach her before Thaddeus did. He had just arrived and began to whisper in her ear, "Desiree, it's probably not a good idea for a human to read in public, as it might attract . . . "

Suddenly the book was whipped from her hands.

"Aye, nou, what's this then?" asked Thaddeus looking at the cover.

"Hey!" Desiree protested.

Ignatius rolled his eyes in despondency. "Bugger," he muttered.

"La Fontaine? Who's 'at when he's at home, eh?" asked Thaddeus, reading the cover.

"If you don't mind," Desiree objected.

"Oo, ah, leukin at the pertty pitures, eh?" Angus teased, looking at an illustration.

"I happen to be read . . . ermph." Desiree was cut short in her sentence by a hand placed over her mouth. It happened to belong to Ignatius.

"Now, Thaddeus," Ignatius suggested in his kindest voice, "why don't we give Desiree her book back, so she can finish looking at the pictures, hmm?" He then removed his hand from Desiree's mouth, hoping against hope that she took the hint.

"Mebbe I dinna wanna," Thaddeus answered. "Might wanna have a leukit masel."

Angus was now standing next to Thaddeus, and he tapped him on the shoulder.

Thaddeus turned and looked at the scrawny human. "Aye? Whit ye after?" he asked contemptuously.

"A'll ask the ance – haund it back her or ye'll rue it."

"An wha'll gaur me?"

"A will," Angus said plainly.

"You?" Thaddeus said, nearly laughing. "Awa an bile yer heid."

"Ye'd leif a kiss?" asked Angus.

"Ye whit?" Thaddeus asked, repulsed.

Without waiting for any further response, Angus grabbed Thaddeus' lapels and launched his forehead directly onto the Melan's nose. Thaddeus, obviously in pain, reeled several steps backwards as he clutched his nose with both hands and, in so doing, dropped the book. Angus carefully picked it up and handed it to Desiree.

"Oh, dear," Ignatius sighed, slapping his forehead.

After a few seconds, when Thaddeus could bring himself to do so, he looked at his hand and noticed the blood dripping down.

"Ye'll no oul the lass again," Angus stated plainly.

Thaddeus regained his composure and wiped his nose with his handkerchief. "Oh, aye – but A'll gie you a stieve clot!" He began to step forward.

"Thaddeus, no!" Ignatius interjected.

Desiree was off her chair and stood between the two, with her feet apart and her hands open in front of her. Thaddeus, undeterred, strode forward and attempted to brush Desiree out of the way so that he might strike Angus a blow. Each was partly successful in their goals.

At this point, everyone in the pub was watching. This is not to say, however, that they saw what had happened, as events transpired rather quickly. What almost all would agree on would be that, when the proverbial smoke had cleared, three facts were clear. First, Thaddeus was lying prone on the floor, if not unconscious then something close to it. Second, Desiree was kneeling on top of him, holding his arm at an awkward angle and then, upon standing, dropped it to the floor. Third, Angus, who had acquired a large weal on the side of his face, wobbled for a few seconds and then joined Thaddeus on the floor.

"How on earth . . ." Ignatius pondered aloud. "Oh, well. No matter," he muttered. "Angus MacAleister and Thaddeus Whinn's Brocc, as an officer of the law, it is my sworn duty to place you both under arrest for assault, battery and actual bodily harm and to confine you to Her Majesty's Gaols until such time as seen fit by the . . . oh, bugger, how's the rest of it go?" His gaze drifted.

"What're you looking at *me* for?" Jess asked.

14AUG2001 Tuesday

1000 – Gaol Outside Courthouse at HareFam

Angus woke the next morning, considerably worse for wear. "Oo, laird, what hit me?"

"You were struck by one Thaddeus WhinnsBrocc," said a Marten with a doctor's white lab coat as he prepared a syringe. A slight Weasel in a dapper suit sitting next to him handed Angus a tissue.

"Oh, ta. Aye, the bangster Brock," Angus recalled, blowing his nose. "What became o him?"

"He's in another cell for petty theft and assault and battery," answered the Weasel.

"Who are ye? Where ab I?" asked Angus through his congestion.

"I am Eli ThrælWesle," answered the Weasel, "solicitor."

"And I am Doctor Alex BrookMarten," said the Marten in the lab coat. "As for your second question, you are in the HareFam gaol. Your arraignment is in one hour. Roll up your sleeve."

"Arraignment?" Angus undid his cuff buttons and began rolling up his sleeve.

"That's right," confirmed Doctor BrookMarten. "I'm here to verify that you're competent for trial and to see to your medical needs. This'll sting a bit," he mentioned as he injected Angus, "but nothing you haven't experienced before, I'm sure. Judging from the age of those tracks, I can see that you've taken at least one responsible step in your life."

"Aye – fat lotta guid it's doon me," Angus muttered. "What's this about an arraignment?"

The Weasel spoke. "An arraignment is when you plead 'guilty' or 'not guilty' before a trial. Or perhaps '*nolo contendere*'."

"I'm no guilty o nought," Angus flared.

"You'd better get that temper of yours under control before you see the judge," advised Eli. "You're in pretty deep, young man."

"Dis ye knaw a guid solicitor?" Angus asked the Doctor.

"Several," answered BrookMarten. "Yours is pretty good."

"Mine?" asked Angus. "I dinna recollect askin for a solicitor."

"You didn't," said BrookMarten. "He was assigned."

"An who is he?" asked Angus.

"He's sitting right next to me," said the Doctor, indicating the Weasel. "Eli ThrælWesle will be your counsel for the trial."

Eli gave a friendly smile and held out his hand to shake.

Angus ignored it. "Can I no choose ma ain solicitor?"

"No, of course not," answered Eli. "We all have equal protection under the law. That includes equal access to counsel. Thus, one's solicitor is chosen at random from within the pool of solicitors that work within the shire."

"The shire?" asked Angus. "Are there na private solicitors?"

"Quite the contrary," Eli answered. "All solicitors have their own private practice. They work in business or contract law, property, immigration, finance or the like."

"Then who dis the prosecution? Who dis the government's business?" asked Angus.

"All government work, including all courtroom activity, is divided evenly among the solicitors in the district. We're compelled to do it free of charge and we must all do our share. I've had to take time out from a very important

probate account to defend you. But that's the price we, as solicitors, pay for a free education and the privilege of a legal practice. The exceptions being judges and juries and," Eli added as a disdainful afterthought, "politicians."

"Well, what if ma counsel's shite?" asked Angus.

"I would not be here if I weren't well qualified, I can assure you of that. They'd have me doing legal work elsewhere for the government if that were the case – and substantially more of it! However, if you find you're at odds with me as your solicitor, then you may ask for a new one, within reasonable limits," suggested Eli. "Now, as we're short on time, let's get down to business. My first task is to disclose the evidence against you."

"Wag on, then," Angus muttered.

"Basically, the prosecution's evidence is that eleven people saw you threaten and then 'kiss' Mister WhinnsBrocc on the nose. That would make the charges assault, battery and actual bodily harm. Now, I will read you their names, in the event some of them have a personal grudge, we could discount them . . ."

"Dinna bather. Those I know are ma friends, an the rest I dinna know," Angus admitted. "But I was protectin the lass, Desiree."

The Mustelan looked over his notes. "Ah, yes. Mister WhinnsBrocc took the book from Miss DelHomme, and when you threatened him to return it – that would constitute the assault charge . . ."

"Na, I didna kiss 'im juist then," Angus denied.

"Legally," the Weasel began, "assault means an act that *threatens* physical harm. Whether the assailant – that would be you – succeeds or not is immaterial for assault. And since you eventually succeeded in your attempt, that adds battery. Then, as you actually injured him in the process, that adds ABH. Unfortunately for you, Mister WhinnsBrocc's father is on the Lord's Court, so that makes him an officer."

"Officer?" Angus sneered. "Like the filth?"

"I beg of you, *please* refrain from using such terms in a court of law," Eli beseeched. "If I might explain . . . Mister WhinnsBrocc's father is on the Lord's Court. It is a hereditary title, thus Mister WhinnsBrocc is, by birth – and from birth – a Lord as well. Thus, he is an officer, as in 'officer of the court'."

"O the court?" asked Ignatius. "I'd heard he was a stockbroker."

"He is," Eli corroborated. "If I may advise, do not try to make sense of the law, just try to understand it. And to get to the final point, assault and battery on an officer is an aggravation."

"Oh, aye," Angus agreed. "Isna picnic for me neither."

"When I say it's an aggravation, I mean it is a more serious crime," Eli explained patiently.

"What? Ye mean ta tell me, that acause o his birthright, is more serious for me ta cloot him, than for him ta cloot me?"

"Legally, yes," Eli confirmed. "Although it would also apply to *actual* judges, solicitors, juries and of course . . ."

"Politicians," the both of them chorused.

"Oh, aye," Angus said in comprehension. "But, still, it disna matter, I'll be pleadin 'no guilty' ta the assault."

Eli looked a little puzzled. "As your solicitor I will respect your wishes, even if they are against my advice, but I feel compelled to ask: Why 'not guilty'?"

"I was defendin the lass, Desiree," repeated Angus haughtily.

"Was she in imminent danger from Mister WhinnsBrocc?" asked Eli. "And allow me to emphasize, this is very important, Mister MacAleister – Was there any indication whatsoever that Mister WhinnsBrocc was about to harm the young lady?"

"He teuk her beuk away," Angus protested.

"Yes, we've established that," Eli agreed. "But was Miss DelHomme in any physical danger from Mister WhinnsBrocc? Did he threaten to harm her, either verbally or through gesture or attitude, in any way?"

Angus simmered for a while. "Na. He didna," he admitted.

"Was there any indication that the book would never be recovered? For example, was he about to run away with it, never to be seen again, or was he about to destroy it by, say, throwing it in a fire?"

"Na, he wasna."

"It was very brave of you to stand up for the young lady, but the fact is, unless he was threatening her with some sort of violence or he was about to irretrievably remove or destroy her property, then, moral obligations aside, you have no *legal* right to use violence against him. Now, as your solicitor, I must advise that you have no case at all. It is my counsel that you plead guilty, make a contrite apology and throw yourself on the mercy of the court. The judge will be very lenient. You'll probably get no more than a month or two."

"Na," Angus stood firm. "I've doon nought wrong."

"As you wish," Eli shrugged. "That being the case, I'll see you in the courtroom. If you'll excuse me?" He packed his papers in his bag and left.

"Weasel!" Angus called after the solicitor, sitting up.

Eli turned around at the door.

"Tell me this, then," Angus mused, "didja no juist say there is equal protection for all under the law?"

"Yes, there is," Eli ThrælWesle agreed. "We all have that protection."

"Then why is assaultin – whadja call it – an officer? Why is that different from assaultin a common five-eight like me?" asked Angus.

"Well, that wouldn't quite fall under the concept of equal protection, but the intent of the law lies in the fact that sometimes officers need to do unpopular things, like impose curfews or raise taxes or sentence criminals. This law provides them with added protection so that they may perform the functions of their office without fear of violent retribution from those who might protest."

"Are policemen nor firefighters na dignitaries?" asked Angus.

"No, legally, they are not," Eli answered.

"I see." Angus leaned back. "Seems ta me, some o us are more equal than ithers."

Eli nodded once with a small smile. "That opinion has been noted on many occasions, Mister MacAleister. And I heartily agree with you, but it is the law. And to use another truism, the law does not bring justice – it brings order. And until the law changes, which I do not foresee happening within the next day,

your actions are outside of that order. If you wish to make it your life's work to change such laws, I, for one would be more than happy to help you."

As Angus had no reply for this comment, Eli left.

1030 – HareFam Courthouse

"Bring the defendant to the dock," ordered Judge StoBrocc.

Angus was brought to the dock by a Bear bailiff three times his size.

"Angus MacAleister . . ." The Judge pursed his lips in confusion as he read the name which seemed quite unusual to his ears. Deciding it didn't matter, he continued. "You have been accused of battery, assault and actual bodily harm, aggravated by being performed on a dignitary. How do you plead, 'guilty' or 'not guilty'?"

"M'Lud, I'm led ta believe there is a plea other'n 'guilty' ner 'no guilty'?" asked Angus.

"You do have counsel, Mister MacAleister?" enquired the judge.

"Aye, M'Lud," Angus answered.

"Did he not explain your options to you?" asked Judge StoBrocc.

"We barely had an hour, M'Lud," Eli interrupted. "He took a bit longer to recover than anticipated."

"Oh, very well," Judge StoBrocc said impatiently. "You may plead *nolo contendere*, which means that you will not contest the charges. That is you will claim neither guilt nor innocence, but are willing to face the consequences as if you were guilty. Now, how do you plead?"

"No guilty," Angus answered.

"Your solicitor has advised you to do this?" asked the judge, incredulous.

"Na, M'Lud," answered Angus. "I am guan agin his advisement."

The judge looked at Eli, who shrugged.

"You are aware that you committed the offence in front of nearly a dozen witnesses?" asked Judge StoBrocc. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I was defendin an innocent, M'Lud," Angus answered.

"Save your defence for trial. Defendant has pleaded not guilty," Judge StoBrocc stated. "So noted. Trial will begin tomorrow at noon, if that please the prosecution."

A stoat sitting at an opposing table rose to his feet. "Yes, M'Lud. That will be suitable. We have already disclosed all evidence to the defence."

"Would the defendant care for bail to be set?" asked Judge StoBrocc.

"Na, as the defendant hasna money," replied Angus.

The judge rapped his gavel. "Adjourned until tomorrow."

15AUG2001 Wednesday

1200 – HareFam Courthouse

Angus was led into the dock the following day.

"Does the defendant have anything to say before we begin trial?" asked Judge StoBrocc, expectantly.

"M'Lud, if I were ta change ma plea, wad I be allowed ta make a statement toward the court, sa as ta explain the extenuatin circumstances?"

Judge StoBrocc nodded. "Within reason, yes. Do you wish to change your plea?"

"Aye, I wad like ta change ta *nolo contendere*."

"Very well, make your statement and I will pass sentence."

Angus gave a quick cough as he tried to muster his ability to speak the local dialect. "I did assault Mister WhinnsBrocc, this is true. The law says, that, as a defence, if he were ta threaten me, or some other innocent party, with harm, that I could defend ma person, or that innocent. I will admit that he didna threaten Miss DelHomme with sharp edge nor fist. But he threatened ta steal what was rightfully hers – a beuk . . . book . . . o great value. Havin lost that, she would have been deprived of it; thus, she would have been forced ta work for several weeks ta recover it.

"Secondly, I would like ta address the notion that Mister WhinnsBrocc deserves more protection under the law. Why should it be a more serious crime ta assault him than any o the rest of us? If there is no equal protection under the law, then are we not truly equals?"

The judge paused a moment. "Are you done?"

"Aye. I'm done an I throw maself on the mercy o the court." Angus bowed politely.

"An interesting speech, young man. The first part is a textbook example of a specious argument. If you wish to address any grievances concerning a theft, you should take Mister WhinnsBrocc to civil court, or to have him arrested for theft, not attempt to . . . does this say 'kiss'?"

"Aye M'Lud," Angus said, holding back a smile.

"A vernacular, M'Lud," Eli explained. "It means to butt one's head against."

"Yes," said the judge, pondering the term. "Regardless, it is not necessary for you to 'kiss' him on the snout.

"As for the second part, I have to say it was most eloquently put – especially as it was brief. However there are two details I would mention. Firstly, I would point out that the term 'equal protection under the law' refers to *you* being protected from *us*, the courts, the police and the government in general from such things as unreasonable searches and seizures, unfair trials and discrimination due to Genra or gender or personal beliefs. It does *not* refer to protecting you from theft or assault from your neighbours. And take it as given when I state that you, personally, have benefited greatly from this protection in the past two days.

"Secondly, even in the incorrect context that you mention, it is irrelevant to this case and it does not excuse your behaviour. In either case, whether you had assaulted an ordinary individual or an officer, I would pass the same sentence, all things being equal. If you had assaulted him *specifically* because he was an officer in order to *prevent* him from performing the duties of his office, or as retribution for doing so, I would consider otherwise. Frankly, I'm not

entirely sure why the prosecution bothered with the aggravation charge. This in mind, you are hereby sentenced to ten months in Her Majesty's Prison . . . "

"M'Lud!" interrupted the Stoat on the opposing table, rising to his feet. Angus noted that Ignatius was leaning over a rail, just beyond his shoulder. "If I might have a word."

"Approach the bench," ordered Judge StoBrocc.

The Stoat and Eli came to the bench and had a brief conversation with the judge.

"Well, Mister MacAleister," Judge StoBrocc mentioned. "It seems you now have an option. The plaintiff, His Honour, Mayor HaliFox, says that in return for ten months of labour, under his bond, he will be willing to have your sentence suspended."

"Meanin what?" asked Angus.

"Basically," the judge began his explanation, "instead of going to prison, you do whatever he tells you for ten months. If you get through this period, you are released, with no obligation. If either of you disagree at any time, you serve the remainder of your term in prison. You would also have the added benefit of having your record expunged, if you complete the term under his bond."

"Would I not get time reduced for good behaviour in the gaol?" asked Angus.

"You are expected to behave in the prison at any rate," Judge StoBrocc stated. "Why should you get time off for doing what you are expected to do? His Honour has made a most generous offer. I suggest you take it. It will be far better than prison. Now, what say you?"

Angus turned to Eli as if to see if this was some sort of test or trick.

Eli nodded eagerly, with wide eyes.

"Erm . . . Aye," Angus agreed.

"Then we're adjourned," Judge StoBrocc said, banging his gavel.

1300 – Road From HareFam to Otterstow

The courthouse, where the trial had been held, was actually six miles from Otterstow, in the much larger town of HareFam. All of the members of the Partnership had made the trek in the event they might be called to testify.

Ignatius and Angus had stayed behind at the courthouse to take care of some paperwork. Jess, thus, felt compelled to stay as well.

The remaining members of the Partnership and Thaddeus, however, began the two-hour ride back to Otterstow via narrowboat. They had barely set foot onboard, when they began to discuss the verdict.

"Ten months for a Glasgow kiss?" Michael said. "That's a bit steep."

"And no time off for good behaviour," added Steve. "He turns over a new leaf, and it doesn't get him anything."

"And why should it?" Pete asked. "If 'e's gonna reform, it's gotta be for the right reason. If it's for some personal gain, then 'e gets released an' 'e hasn't truly mended 'is ways, 'as 'e. Then 'e's off makin' more trouble. If 'e wanted time off, 'e coulda pled guilty an' said 'e was sorry. Besides, 'e did the deed an' got what 'e deserved. It's not like 'e's a 'scape Goat ner nuffin'."

"At least Angus is under Ig's thumb now," Gina mentioned. "If he goes off the rails, Ig can have him do porridge, straight away. So that's that worry out of the way."

"How did Ig arrange that?" asked Desiree. "What law allows him to get Angus off the hook like that?"

"I can tell ye what way it happent," said Thaddeus, as he stepped on board, just as the moorings were being cast off. "I'm no a solicitor, but he did the same for me." A thought occurred to him and he turned to Desiree "Oh, an Miss, I wish ta apologise for ma behaviour. I was a wee bit . . ."

"Drunk?" suggested Desiree.

"Aye. I'm no prood o it. An I hope ye'll forgive?" Thaddeus put his hand out. Desiree took it. "Awrite. Water under the bridge."

Thaddeus leaned forward and whispered in her ear, "Can ye truly read?"

Desiree had since been briefed by Ignatius and the others about the educational state of humans in Allegory.

"Umm . . . just a few letters. I figured 'em out by myself," Desiree said. "It was just like you said, I was looking at the pictures."

Thaddeus stood upright with a smug smile. "Hah, thought as much. Skins canna read. Ma gutcher telt me sa."

"So, what's the deal with Ig getting both you and Angus off the hook?" asked Desiree.

"Oh, aye, nou mynd, I'm no a solicitor, but ma pa is, an he explaint it ta me," Thaddeus said, taking a seat next to Desiree. "See, Ig, he's the mayor o Otterstow, an as we've na constables, he's the police as well. This puts him in a very singular position. As the arrestin officer, an the mayor, he forms the plaintiff, all rolt inta one. That bein the case, he can drap the charges or take the prisoners inta bond. An the day, he's doon the latter, for the baith o us."

"Taking them into bond? What's that mean?" asked Michael.

"Weel, when a convict's sent ta gaol, he's the responsibeelity o Her Majesty's officers o the law. Ig, bein an officer, can ask for that responsibeelity."

"But couldn't someone abuse that to get all of their friends out of prison?" asked Desiree.

"Na, they canna," Thaddeus dismissed. "It's up ta a juidge ta say. Ig, he'd niver tell a lee, no eva. An as StoBrocc knaws 'at an all, sa he'll give Ig his way."

"Lucky for you," Steve commented.

"Oh, aye, an na doubt," Thaddeus agreed. "I do awe the Ig-man, big-time. Must be a guid lad."

"Gonna play ball, are ya?" asked Desiree.

"Oh, aye – play baw," Thaddeus nodded. He looked at Desiree with some curiosity. "Furryboots ye frae, lass?" he asked as he put his arm around her shoulder.

"Say, what?" asked Desiree, mystified.

"Speaking of playing ball, what about Jess?" asked Clare. "She claims she's mended her ways but I honestly have to question her motives."

"I'll tell ya what 'er motive is. She's doin' it for the dosh," Pete said dismissively.

"Whaddya mean?" asked Rachael.

"Well, it's like most birds, innit?" Pete surmised. "They get married, or shacked up, or cohabitated or the like for the money. I mean, not like 'uge stacks o' sterlin' or whatever, but just a roof over their 'eads, someone to provide for 'em so's they can stay home wif the sprogs, is all."

"Oh, aye, is a fact," Thaddeus agreed. "'Mony a ane for laund, taks a fuil bi the haund', they say."

"Yeah, but Ig's no fool," Clare mentioned. "Bit overly trusting, I'll admit."

"An' I'm not even sayin' it's a bad thing. I'm just as guilty anyway. Gina an' I ain't married ner nuffin' – just good friends. Shake hands an' the like. But she takes care o' me. I might be out on the street if it weren't for 'er. As for Jess – maybe she's truly changed, maybe not. But one cannot deny, she needs Iggy – in a financial sense – an' if 'e din't 'ave a farthin' to 'is name, she wouldn't be interested in 'im at all. She's an Old Wolf."

"You mean 'Fox,' don't you Pete?" asked Steve.

"As in the fable," Clare explained. "An 'Old Wolf' – also a 'Reformed Wolf' – is a reprobate who wishes to reform, whether sincerely or not, because they must in order to survive. The other part of the fable is if they 'break the lead,' then they've proven their motives were genuine."

"So, Pete, you think Jess is an Old Wolf?" asked Geoff.

"Oh, I know so, I know so," Pete confirmed. "And she'll never break that lead. If ever comes a day when she 'as more lolly 'n what Ig's got, she'll either start trashin' 'im round like she used to or she'll scurry off."

"I'm inclined to agree," Slide opined. "The only person Jess cares about is Jess."

"I love Ignatius as a person," Sandra said, "but I think he's an absolute fool to have anything to do with that Vixen. Even though she is trying to help us find our children, it'll all end in a broken heart for poor Ig – and that's if he's lucky."

"I'm not so sure," Geoff said, stroking his chin in thought. "Maybe I'm an eternal optimist, but I think she *has* changed her ways. We all have revelations in our lives and maybe she's had an eye-opener of late."

"I think she's changed 'er tune, but not 'cause she's 'ad some sorta knock on the head," Rachael commented. "She's looked inna mirror an' seen she's old now – well . . . older," she quickly qualified. "An' she's noticed she's also a good bit more 'eavier. Ig's 'er last chance. She knows it's eivver be good wif Ig or be bad alone. She's not only an Old Wolf; she's a Fat Old Wolf."

"And you call me cynical," Pete remarked.

"I don't think she's changed," Clare commented. "I have a feeling she's up to something."

"I dunno," Linda countered. "She's awfully affectionate to the Ig-man. It's hard to pretend that kinda *luurrrvve* – at least for very long. Ig's got a little dosh and he leads a comfortable life, but I'd have to think that two months in, she woulda slipped on something if she wasn't genuine."

"I am a firm believer that people can change," Steve put in. "I can't honestly say that I've personally seen it happen, but I do believe it."

"Well, I don't know the girl, myself," Desiree added. "But from what I heard, she's scamming him. Clare is right, she's after something – and it ain't Ig's body, cute as it is."

"Desiree," Clare warned. "I don't think that's something you should say openly."

"What?" asked Desiree.

"Yeah, Desi," Steve put in. "Shouldn't say such things."

"Why?" asked Desiree.

"I dunno," replied Steve. "Clare? Why shouldn't she say such things?"

Thaddeus addressed Desiree. "Personally, I dinna care one way or f'ither – dis ye truly find the auld Fox fetchin'?"

"Yeah. In an aesthetic sense." Desiree became visibly more excited. "I mean, who could resist those cute furry ears . . ."

"Erm, Desi, I think you shouldn't . . ." Rachael began. Pete and Gina exchanged a set of raised eyebrows as did Linda and Geoff.

"And that adorable little snout with those trim little whiskers . . ." Desiree continued.

Clare and Rachael rolled their eyes.

"And that loooooonnnnnng, bushy, red, sexy brush," Desiree added becoming animated.

"Sa, dis ye fancy Frith, lass?" Thaddeus asked, smoothly moving his hand to her thigh.

Desiree turned her glance to him. "Lissen cap, move it or lose it," she warned.

Whether or not Thaddeus fully understood the literal meaning of Desiree's admonition, he did understand her tone of voice and, thus, removed his hand from her person.

"Even if ya do fancy 'im, ya don't just go round tellin' everyone," Rachael admonished, "They'll think you're a furvert!"

Linda defended Desiree. "I don't see anything wrong with it. She's just expressing admiration for his physique."

"I don't wanna take Ig to bed," Desiree professed.

"Dontcha, nou?" asked Thaddeus.

"Course not," Desiree answered. "I just think he's cute. You people have pets, don't you?"

"Oh, aye, but . . ." Thaddeus agreed reluctantly.

"Pets are cute, but it doesn't mean you want to mate with 'em," Desiree pointed out. "Just give 'em a little cuddle now and then."

"So you think of Ig as a pet, then?" asked Clare. "Put out a saucer of milk and table scraps sort of thing?"

"No, of course not! I would never suggest anything as offensive as that!" Desiree said defensively. "Ig is a warm, intelligent and kind human – sorry, Vulpan. He just looks . . . cuddly."

"Miss, if I might suggest," Thaddeus began, once again putting his hand on her shoulder. "For a skin, ye're a bonnie lass, an na mistake. An it's plain as parritch ye've bin brung up wi braw folk an all. But there's some roond here what winna take innerly ta that kinda talk. An they might do something ill ta ye."

"In other words, the more narrow-minded hicks in town might beat the crap out of me," Desiree stated flatly.

"Oh, aye. But no me, no eva," Thaddeus claimed. "I dinna condone violence, ta neither Frith nor skins alike."

"Damned Frith of you," Desiree drawled. "But it's okay to say we're all friends, right?"

"Oh, aye, feres an pals, na probs," Thaddeus confirmed. "But dinna mention any physical or emotional interest."

"Yeah, Desi," said Steve. "Try becoming interested in someone that's not a Frith. Like me."

"Steve, didn't you tell me just last week," Desiree recalled, "that you thought Rachael and Clare were the sexiest girls with a cottontail that you've ever met?"

Rachael and Clare gave Steve a concerned looked. Steve looked very concerned. The statement also drew Linda's undivided interest.

"Well . . . yes . . . I did . . ." Steve admitted. "But that doesn't mean I find them more attractive than you."

"You sayin' we ain't good-lookin' enough to compete with yer nekkit-ape girls?" teased Rachael.

"Rachael, for the last time!" Gina excoriated, much to Steve's relief.

2200 – A medium-sized town in Northern England

Grace and Simon had risen at sunset and resumed their journey, with absolutely no idea of which direction to go, or how far.

They walked in darkness, down a secluded road, occasionally ducking out of sight as a car drove past. After an hour or so, they noticed that they were approaching a small town.

"Think we could find any skips to shop tonight?" Grace asked, less than hopeful.

"Dunno. Looks like a pretty small place. Might not be much to choose from. Just keep your eyes open and . . ."

"Hey, there's a place open," Grace pointed to a tiny shop, with the lights still on and a small woman behind the counter, reading a newspaper. "Right, you distract her and I'll nick a few goodies."

"Do we have to steal again?" Simon objected.

"It's either that or starve," Grace threatened. "And besides, I've gotta nick something besides food."

"What? Like soap?"

"We've been over this bit, Si."

"Oh, that. Is it already that time again?"

"Yes, it's already that time again," Grace grumbled impatiently.

"Right, well, I guess we're on then."

They stopped across the street and looked into the shop.

"See anyone?" asked Simon.

"Just the clerk," replied Grace.

"She seems pretty preoccupied with that newspaper," Simon mentioned.

"Good, then maybe she won't freak out and call the cops the moment we set foot inside," Grace suggested.

"Well, there's no one about. The usual routine?"

Without another word, they crossed the street and entered the shop.

Simon's original intent was to talk to the woman and ask her for something behind the counter and stall while Grace filled their bag. However, as the clerk didn't even bother to look up from her racing form as the little bell tinkled, he joined his partner in crime behind a shelf and assisted her in cramming some tins of food in the bag as Grace packed as much junk food as she could lay her hands on, after first grabbing one, very important, box.

The clerk, still absorbed in making little notes in her form, did pause momentarily as she sniffed the air, her face turning sour. Without looking up, she reached under the counter and flipped a switch.

Hearing some movement upstairs, Simon nudged Grace's shoulder and signalled that it was time that they depart. Grace grabbed one last bag of crisps and they both bolted for the door. Seconds after their departure, the clerk's husband appeared with a rifle that hadn't been fired since Mafeking and was in no danger of doing so in the foreseeable future.

17AUG2001 Friday

0800 – The Rialto office

Linda scanned through the news, reading the occasional article as she sipped her morning tea. Just as she requested another page, something caught her eye in the corner of the page.

"Oo, backup, backup," she muttered, returning to the page.

The page reappeared and she read the headline, as if in disbelief. "Oh, this *must* be them . . ." She opened the article and began to read the story. "Angus . . . *Angus!* . . . ANGUS!" she shouted, flying out of her chair and momentarily forgetting that workmen would be arriving within minutes.

1200 – A medium-sized town in Northern England

An early model compact car with no small experience sped down the street and up onto the kerb. Angus leapt out, struggling against the rust of the door hinge and, not even bothering to turn off the engine, dashed into the shop, clutching a print of an article, including a still from a security camera.

"Scuse me, sir," he said to the gentleman behind the counter. "Did ye see these two yestiddy?" he asked, pointing to the blurry photo.

The clerk uttered something in a language Angus didn't know.

"Y'knew, Bunny-Rabbit? Tch-tch-tch-tch," he said, using his hands to illustrate large ears out of his head. "Big Doggy?" he added, lolling his tongue out and panting.

"Ahh!" said the clerk, expressing recognition. He uttered some more in his native language and it was not in a pleasant tone of voice. He then stated something that was quite clear. "Ten kid!"

"Pardon?"

"Ten kid! Cash! Ten kid!" he insisted, pointing to his empty palm.

"Ten quid?" Angus was mystified. "Oh, aye, for the stuff they teuk," he said, digging out his wallet. "Erm . . . right. Got a twenty." He proffered the bill.

The clerk took it and stuffed it in the till. "Solly, no change!" he announced loudly, as he apparently had done on numerous occasions.

"Leuk, is all right. Keep the change," Angus enunciated as clearly as he could. Showing the picture again, he pleaded, "Please, tell me. Where are these two? Did you see which way they went?"

The clerk dragged him outside, pointed south and began to chatter.

"Aye, ta for that," Angus said appreciatively. He hopped in his car and drove off.

"Stupid berk," the clerk mumbled in a clear Scouse accent.

1400 – The tré

Opening scene: a forest.

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the tale of the Fat Wolf.

Once there were a pack of wolves. And, like any other pack, they hunted for their food and they had a leader to guide them.

[Wolves run across the stage, chasing a deer]

Ignatius, in his desire to have the characters portrayed by their own Genra, as much as it was possible, enlisted the only two Lupans available, Sandra and Slide. Although he could have easily stopped at just the two, in his mind, there should be at least four wolves in a pack, thus he conscripted two Vulpans – Jess' younger sisters, Samantha and Wanda to be a part of the pack as well. There was but one Cervan in Otterstow and he was getting on in years, thus the 'hunt' was portrayed by the 'pack' jogging only slightly faster than a standstill as John FeDeer ambled across the stage as fast he dared with his cane.

And, as was the tradition, the leader got to eat his fill first.

[A table is set and the Lead Wolf sits down, draws a napkin across his lap. Second Wolf comes in and sets a plate of food and the Lead Wolf begins to eat ravenously]

Sandra and Slide, after a lengthy discussion quite some time ago, had decided to alternate the roles of the Lead Wolf; it was Sandra's turn this time. Their compromise on this point had little to do with gender roles and stereotypes and more to do with Sandra not liking the part because she had to become 'fat'.

However, as every wolf knows, if you eat too much, you become fat. And if you become too fat, then you cannot run well.

Lead Wolf

More food!

[Second Wolf brings another plate of food. Lead Wolf, while eating, stuffs a pillow under shirt during narration.]

Narrator

And if you cannot run well, then you cannot hunt well. And if you cannot hunt well, then you cannot lead a pack.

As the narrator continued, Sandra, true to the script, found the hidden pillow under the table and surreptitiously slipped it under her shirt. She had a little difficulty as the usual one had been substituted for one that was slightly larger.

And this Wolf ate far too much and became far too fat.

[Lead Wolf gets up from table, rubbing large stomach and exits stage r]

As she stood up, she noticed the pillow stretched her shirt substantially, and she was just thinking that it made her look not only fat but . . .

"Ookit! Miss StæpnaWyf is wike my Mum!" a five-year-old Equan girl announced, pointing her (only) finger. "She gonna 'ave a baby, too?" she asked the world at large.

The poor Filly had to be consoled by Liam and Brandon (who could barely keep a straight face as it was), as she couldn't quite understand why all of the grown-ups thought her statement was so amusing. A few minutes later, the play resumed.

The next hunt revealed that he had, indeed, become too slow to hunt

[Wolves run across the stage, chasing a deer. Lead Wolf follows far behind, waddling while holding stomach.]

Narrator

But as leader, he still expected to eat first.

[Table is set again, but Second Wolf sits down. Lead Wolf comes and is astonished to see someone there.]

Lead Wolf

What treason is this? I am the Lead Wolf – I eat first!

Second Wolf

The Lead Wolf eats first, it is true. But you are no longer the Lead Wolf.

Lead Wolf

And why is this?

Second Wolf

You must eat last, as you have had more than your share in the past and have not caught so much as a rabbit in the last moon. You are so fat and slow that you cannot even keep up with the slowest of the pack.

Lead Wolf

But I deserve to eat first – it is my privilege!

Second Wolf.

Privilege comes to those who've learned
To recognise it's something earned!

Narrator

Thus the fate of the Fat Wolf.
Draw from it what you may.
Until next we meet – good day!

Desiree, who had made it her habit to attend the Portrayals whenever possible, stood outside the door with Ignatius as the children exited.

"What, no sketchpad, today?" asked Ignatius.

Desiree shrugged. "Nah. I can't get any of 'em to stay still long enough, and besides, it irritates Dawn. I'll have an opportunity when they get out of school for the day. I found out that a lot of 'em like to have a little snooze on the canal bank. I can just sit there and they come and flop down on the grass. Some of 'em even talk to me. They told me they like to do that when the weather's warm like this."

"Ah, yes. I remember doing it myself as a Kit," Ignatius reminisced.

"If you'll excuse me," Desiree said, departing.

Ignatius continued to watch the children file out, until he felt someone tap him on the shoulder. Turning around, he faced Dawn's chest, so he looked up to see her face. "Oh, hullo. Quite the awkward moment, eh?"

"Even Wanda and Sam admitted it was worth doing PD for that one," Dawn concurred.

"Did they? Good, then maybe they'll stop complaining so vociferously," Ignatius reasoned. "How is the poor dear? All right?"

"Oh, she's still in a right state. She's absolutely convinced that she's made some horrible gaffe."

"Well, it's hardly any secret that Lucy's in her ninth month," Ignatius mentioned. "And she and Leon have been married for, what, eight years?"

"Twelve, I think," Dawn corrected. "Not to worry. She'll have forgotten all about it in about ten minutes. Look, we have something important to tell you."

"We?" Ignatius questioned the plurality.

"My juniors and I have something we wish to tell you, Ignatius," she said quietly.

Ignatius' eyebrows went up slightly at this news.

Liam AbannEach whispered in his left ear, "With your permission, we'd like to teach the lass, Mini, to read . . . erm . . . to *write*, that is."

Brandon StonePony spoke quietly in his right ear. "And while we're certainly not gonna advertise the fact, we're damned proud to be part of it."

"And we'd like to phase the other humans into the school over time," Liam added.

"You'll brook no argument from me, I assure you," Ignatius stated.

"And we'd also like to commend you on your bravery for taking the risk to attempt something so important," Brandon added. "After all, we'll just be getting a slap on the wrist if they catch us with our hand in this particular cookie jar – you'll be the one going to the hoosegow if it gets out of hand. I must say, I admire that kind of integrity in a man," he said as he slapped Ignatius on the back. "You're what heroes are made of, Ignatius."

"Thank you, Brandon," Ignatius said nervously. "I think."

1600 – Otterstow Canal Bank

Two hours later, Ignatius was snoring slightly on the canal bank with an empty pint glass in his hand. Desiree flipped a page in her sketchbook to cover

the roughs of him drawn just minutes earlier. Without much ado, she began some drafts of the dozen or so juveniles who had just arrived.

1800 – Black Kettle Pub

"I leuked for naurby three hours," Angus said. "I'm sorry, but I didna find ought. I asked aboot an even went ta see the filth."

"That's all right, Angus," Sandra said. "You tried. And at least we know they're alive."

"Oh, aye," Angus agreed. "An, erm . . . no ta be, erm . . . well, I mynd as ye were concernt that . . . y'knaw."

The four parents looked at Angus, mystified.

"Refresh our memories, if you would," Slide suggested.

"Oh, aye, what way can I put this . . . In the police report, were a list o things teuk an the first on the list were, erm . . ." He held the police report up and read, "Fourteen-pack o medium sanitary napkins . . . with wings."

There was a moment's pause and then all four parents breathed a collective sigh of relief.

18AUG2001 Saturday

1900 – Black Kettle Pub

Desiree, Angus, Steve, and Michael had spent the day chasing down problems with the electricians and plumbers. Thanks to the engineering firm they had hired, they had caught several mistakes and managed to get them fixed. Despite these accomplishments, they had had more than they could handle for the day and decided to relax at the Black Kettle for a while, as Gina had graciously given them *carte blanche* in pint denominations as exchange for their help in securing the return of her daughter. The fact that none of the four had so much as a farthing in coin of The Kingdom also weighed in on her magnanimity.

"As God is ma witness," Angus complained, leaning back and rubbing his eyes. "Gin I hear anither contractor souk air through his teeth an say 'Oo, ya gotta problem 'ere, mate – it's gonna cost,' I swear I'll be doon up for life for chowkin the leevin shit ootta him."

"Good," Steve said. "Cell mates, then?"

"Oh, yeah, that and 'Sorry, love, it's nuffin' to do wif me'," Desiree mocked. "Got-damn National Excuse of England."

"I just can't believe the nerve," Michael marvelled. "They do a cowboy job and then they expect us to pay *more* for them to do it properly."

"It's a good job the engineers were there to put them in their place," Steve said.

"Pft," Angus dismissed. "After that sparky called Desi a 'yank' we didna need the engineers ta dress him doun."

"Honestly, Desiree," Michael chided, "telling the electrician, 'lissen cap, I'm not going to call you a bloated, overpaid orangutan because it would be an insult to orangutans', might have been a bit over the top."

"Hee!" Desiree giggled. "Still – pretty funny."

"What I dinna unnerstaund," Angus began, "an ye'll pardon me for askin, Desi . . . Ye didna lose yer temper when he called ye a 'slag', a 'moonter' an a 'septic'. Yet ye chomp his goolies over bein called a 'yank'?"

"As I *explained* to you when we first met," Desiree said. "Yanks or yankees are from the northern states."

"Just so I'm straight on this," Michael asked, "you object less to being compared with a pit of rotting sewerage than residents of New England?"

"About the size of it, yeah," Desiree said. "Ask Angus here if he likes being called English."

"Oh, I might munge a wee bit about it," Angus confessed, "but I wadna rip the heid off an shite doun the stoomp, as you wad. Nou, ma sister, she . . ."

Rachael approached with four pints. "'Ello, lads. 'Ere's your lagers," she said putting three glasses down. "And 'ere's your stout, Michael," she added, not putting it on the table.

"Oh, ta, Rachael," Michael said, reaching for the pint.

Rachael pulled it away from him.

"May I have my pint, please?" asked Michael politely.

"If you'll answer me a few questions," Rachael said.

"Certainly," Michael agreed. "Fire away."

"Where'd ya get them rings on your tits?"

"In Newburg, of course."

"Ya think I could get some done like 'at'?" she asked.

"Well . . ." Michael hedged. "Even though the artist is a pretty open-minded guy – especially considering his clientele – I rather suspect that he *might* balk at a six foot Hare requesting a tat or pierce."

"Oh, I dunno," Steve shrugged. "What's he gonna do? Suck air through his teeth and say . . ."

"Oo, ya gotta problem 'ere, mate – it's gonna cost," the four of them chorused.

Rachael slowly put the glass within Michael's range and as he began to reach for it, she slowly pulled it away from him, causing him to lean forward. At just the right moment, she leant over and bit his ear.

"Ow!" Michael complained, as he grasped his ear and then inspected his hand. "I'm bleeding," he noted.

Smiling, and without a word, Rachael put the glass of stout in front of Michael and departed.

Michael and Steve exchanged glances.

"What do you suppose that was all about?" asked Michael of Steve, who shrugged.

"I'll tell you, if we can do business," said a voice behind them.

They turned around to see Vince Scrub.

"Hello, Vince. Good to see you again," Steve said.

"Listen, lads, I've a proposition for you." Vince seemed somewhat guarded.

"Oh. What's that then?" Steve was speaking in a voice that suggested the world could hear him and he wouldn't care, probably because he didn't.

"D'you think you could get your hands on some more of 'at doe-drint?"

"Deodorant?" asked Steve. "Yeah. Could do. How much did you want?"

"I was thinkin' . . . forty or fifty?"

Michael blinked. "Forty or fifty? Vince, one stick should last months."

"I know, but I told the guys at the mill about it," Vince explained. "They're all pretty keen. Some of the women are as well."

Steve scratched his head. "I suppose so. Shouldn't be too hard."

"I'll pay for it," Vince offered.

"Would you?" asked Michael.

"Course. I wouldn't expect it for free," Vince said.

"How much?" Steve asked.

Vince shrugged. "Few shillin's each?"

"Yeah, could do," Michael said. "How many did you want? Fifty was it?"

"If you can get that much," asked Vince.

"Yes, I think I can oblige," Michael agreed.

"Ta for that, mate," Vince winked.

"Anything else you'd like?" asked Steve.

"Actually, now you mention it . . ." Vince looked around carefully to see if anyone was looking. Satisfied that they were not under constant surveillance, he slipped a note to Steve under the table. "Could you get some prices on these items you'd mentioned as well? And gimme a list of what other things like 'at they got in Newburg."

Steve opened the note under the table, out of view of the general public.

"Shouldn't be a prob," Michael conjectured, reading over Steve's shoulder.

"Right, then," Vince nodded. "I'm off."

"Hang on a moment," Michael put his hand on Vince's shoulder and then suddenly removed it. "Sorry. But what was this business with Rachael biting my ear?"

Vince shrugged as if the answer were obvious. "It's what Hares do."

"Sorry, don't follow," Michael said.

"It's what Hares do when they fancy a lad," Vince elaborated.

"They *bite* them?" asked Steve, incredulous.

"Wouldn't a simple kiss suffice?" asked Desiree.

"Bite, scratch, kick," Vince listed. "Have ye never seen hares in March? The way they mix it up? The ones in the field, mind, not Lepuns like Rache, there."

"But that's two bucks fighting for mating rights," mentioned Michael.

"No, it ain't," Desiree corrected. "It's a doe, giving her mate a little grief before the main event."

"Desi's spot on, as usual," Vince agreed. "Rachael's on to you, mate."

"Is she?" Michael asked, hopeful.

"Aye," Vince confirmed.

"Then what's my next move?" asked Michael.

"How the bloody hell should I know?" Vince asked. "Do I look the type to chase Hares? Sorry, must dash." He whisked himself away.

Geoff approached their table. "Was that Vince here, just now?"

"Yes, it was," Steve said, still reading the list.

"Michael, your ear's bleeding," Geoff pointed out.

"Rachael bit me," Michael said, somewhat proudly.

"Jammy bastard," Geoff smiled, cuffing him on the shoulder. "Best treat her right, lad," he suddenly warned.

"Flowers and chocolates, then," Michael said.

"No," Geoff shook his head. "Doesn't sound like Rache's scene at all."

"What is, then?" asked Michael.

"You should know, son. It's your ear she bit," Geoff shrugged, taking a seat next to Steve and looking over his shoulder at the list. "What's that, then, Steve?"

"I think we just found a commodity that we can use to launder money into Otterstow."

"Have you?" Geoff asked with genuine interest. "Precious metals?"

"No," Steve said.

"Gemstones?" Geoff tried again.

"Hardly," Michael dismissed.

Geoff shrugged. "Well, I'm at a loss. What is it then?"

"Personal hygiene," Steve answered.

"Wha'?" Geoff said.

"Apparently, we are going to sell soap to the Great Unwashed," Michael conjectured, "namely the humans of Otterstow."

Geoff smiled. "Well, if there were ever a case of having a 'ripe' market, this would be it."

19AUG2001 Sunday

1600 – Town Hall

"Town council for 19 August will now come to order," Ignatius banged his gavel. The council met every Sunday at four in the afternoon.

Linda, the secretary-treasurer and Town's Clerk, rolled off the names of the council as a sort of *de facto* roll call. "Mayor HaliFox, Judge StoBrocc, Councillor WhinnsBrocc, senior Alma RoseMearh, Vicar Sweep, Doctor BrookMarten and myself; all present, Mayor."

"All right, then, let's get this over with. Old business . . ." Ignatius looked at his minutes through his spectacles. "Hmm. There doesn't seem to be any old business. Is that right?"

Linda looked up from her minute-taking. "That's right. No old business from last time."

"Right. On to new business. Any new business?" Ignatius asked.

Judge StoBrocc raised his hand. "About all these renovations to the theatre . . ."

Ignatius suddenly was near panic. *How did StoBrocc find out about the Rialto?* he asked himself. "Theatre? What theatre?"

"The tré," Linda reminded him, reading the alarm on his face. "The basement renovations and the new tea room."

"Oh, yes! Of course," Ignatius responded, clearing his throat and trying to calm down. "Yes, the work Geoff has done at The tré. Erm . . . What of it?"

"Where's the money coming from?" asked Judge StoBrocc.

"I applied for a grant. And besides, we had a surplus last year, didn't we?" Ignatius asked.

"That was spent on school renovations," Dawn RoseMearh reminded him.

"Oh," Ignatius replied, in his most clever fashion. "Still, the grant should cover it."

"Regardless, we have other projects in the town that certainly won't be covered by grants from GrayHall," the judge said.

"Do we?" asked Ignatius. "I'm unaware of anything in that regard. Almost any project can be funded by doing the right paperwork. What projects did you have in mind, Morris?"

"That's, erm . . . irrelevant," the judge dismissed. "There's bound to be something eventually. The fact of the matter is, we need to stop relying so much on entitlements from the central government and start providing for ourselves a little more. In short, we should scratch up a little cash of our own."

"While any cash would be welcome, it will almost certainly place a burden on *someone*," Ignatius pointed out. "Unless we've discovered gold under Otterstow."

"True," Morris agreed. "And I assume that it is your position that you should protect the interest of your constituents."

"Of course," Ignatius agreed.

"So, if there were a way to provide funding for Otterstow that didn't cost your constituents anything, you'd be all for it?" asked the judge tentatively,

"Provided it was legal, yes, of course," Ignatius qualified. He suddenly felt uneasy about the way Judge StoBrocc was equivocating. "Did you have something specific in mind?"

"Erm, yes, actually," the judge admitted, taking off his glasses and biting on the earpiece. "I've an idea, but I don't think you'll like it."

From the judge's remark, Ignatius already knew he was right. "Oh, yes?"

"Well, basically, the idea is . . . Look . . . Your family has held the mayoral seat for well over a hundred years. You'll never be unseated."

"Possibly, but one never knows," Ignatius said, although he felt that he might soon regret it. "I've no heir as of yet."

"Yours is the only office that is given a domicile," continued the Melan.

Oh dear, Ignatius thought, *this doesn't sound good at all*.

Judge StoBrocc continued. "Why should you be given the privilege of the best home in all of Otterstow just for being mayor? I mean, you only have to view the Portrayals and attend these meetings."

"There's far more to it than that," Ignatius defended. "I have to schedule which Portrayals are being done on a given day. I have to notify those who are participating – and that's no easy task, given the very tight rotation we have for PD. Then there's the budget, a host of licences, the constant list of grants and

so on. Not to mention, I'm the *de jure* head of law enforcement, tax collection, town services and primary education."

"But you're paid for all that," replied Morris. "I have just as much responsibility as you and I don't get a free home. And my salary is not quite what yours is."

"Well then, what are you suggesting?" asked Ignatius.

"I'm suggesting," began Morris, "that you either buy the mayoral mansion outright or pay rent. We need the money."

"*What?*" Ignatius protested. "Pay *rent*? Need I remind you that I have the right to use of Nora by virtue of my office! Honestly, Morris, I've never heard such a ludicrous idea. And you need some revision in maths if you think you work as many hours as I do."

"You could buy it," the judge added, ignoring the remark. "You have the cash."

"Do I?" asked Ignatius sarcastically. "And how would you know that?"

"Oh, come now, Ignatius. At your salary?" remarked Morris. "Surely you have enough stashed away to pay cash for at least half of it. The banks would loan you the rest."

"Well, I don't *want* the banks to loan me the rest," Ignatius stated. "I'm entitled to Nora by virtue of my office of mayor. And what if someone else gets elected mayor? What then? They're entitled to a house and if I own Nora, they won't have a place to stay."

"Erm . . ." The judge began. It was an 'erm' that Ignatius knew was not a statement of mild confusion or looking for the right word, but merely a polite way of stating that the other person in the conversation was in error, despite what this other person might think.

"What . . . now?" asked Ignatius impatiently.

"That is to say," the judge started again. "There is actually no provision that says that the mayor is entitled to a domicile at the expense of the taxpayers."

"What!" interjected Ignatius.

"It's true," Morris returned. "It's not in the shire bylaws, nor is it in the town bylaws either. And it's certainly not in the Pedestra Charta."

"You're pulling my tail!" Ignatius protested. "Every town and city mayor from Sea's Found to Trinova has a mayoral mansion!"

"Most do, I'll grant – but not all. SwanThrop doesn't," the Judge replied. "And they've got six times our population."

"Yes, but they don't have a mayor, as they're a village and not a town. They fall under the jurisdiction of Writing, whose mayor has a much nicer home than mine, I hasten to add!" Ignatius said indignantly. "As well you know!"

"But there's no rule, one way or the other, regardless," the Judge said. He took off his glasses, trying to look thoughtful. "After all is said and done, we're not legally obligated to provide you a residence," he pointed out, trying to be tactful.

Vicar Sweep spoke up. "I know this must be difficult for you, Ignatius, but bear in mind, you're not truly losing anything."

Ignatius was gobsmacked at the vicar's comment. "And just how do you come to that conclusion?"

"Well, Nora was never actually yours to begin with, was it?" the vicar asked rhetorically. "I mean, you do *live* there, but the deed to the home never had your name on it. It belongs to the town. You've just been granted usufruct."

Ignatius recalled that the vicar, despite being the only officially literate human in Otterstow, rarely used words such as 'usufruct' and he quickly deduced that she must have learned it quite recently from someone very proficient in the legal profession, such as a judge.

"I therefore move," began the judge, "that Mayor HaliFox will either pay fair market value for Nora or pay fair rent."

"I'll second," Vicar Sweep added.

Linda looked apologetically at Ignatius as she did her duty. "Motion and second will count as voting for the measure. Please vote as I call your name. Councillor WhinnsBrocc?"

"Aye," Thaddeus answered.

"Doctor BrookMarten?"

Alex stroked his chin for a moment. "Please don't take this the wrong way, Ignatius," he said, in what was obviously a pre-emptive apology. "But, I think the judge makes a very good case on this. I'll vote 'aye.'"

"Alma RoseMearh?" Linda said, shaking her head at the futility of the situation.

"Neigh!" the Mare answered emphatically.

"Mayor HaliFox?"

"Nay," Ignatius answered.

"And my vote shall be 'nay' as well," Linda added. "Motion carries, four to three."

"Very well," Ignatius admitted. "Mark as an action for the next meeting – Linda, I will appoint you to determine the fair market value for sale or rent of Nora. Is that suitable as a first step, Norris?"

"Yes, quite apposite," Judge StoBrocc nodded.

"Any other new business?" asked Ignatius.

There was silence but the buzz in Ignatius' head was deafening.

"Adjourned," he tapped the gavel.

The other members of the town council filed out. Ignatius, being too stunned to move, stayed behind.

Why am I being deprived of my home? Ignatius thought to himself.

At this point, Ignatius reached a rather unsavoury conclusion.

So, this must be how Jess feels, he thought to himself. *This is how it feels to not be sure in the knowledge of having a roof over your head.*

1600 – Liberty

On the very southernmost tip of Otterstow, stood a plain, two-story, brick house shared by all of the humans of Otterstow (except the vicar) as their collective home bearing the simple name of 'Liberty'. Erected a mere ninety years ago, it ranked among the more modern buildings of Otterstow.

Vince had invited Steve and Michael to share a Sunday roast with the rest of the humans and to discuss some business. In anticipation of the topic of

discussion, they brought several samples of the items listed by Vince along with some brochures.

The two young gentlemen of Newburg approached the building, which stood in a solitary lot. Although simple, the home was flawless in appearance. Every square inch of the grounds was immaculately maintained, sprouting some plant, bush, vine or tree, all of which produced something edible or useful, and not a single weed in sight.

Upon entering, they were warmly greeted and ushered to a place of honour at the table and given the first serving. At first, they were taken aback by the very pragmatic lifestyle of the humans of Otterstow, but the warm company soon put them at their ease.

They finished the meal and were brought out to a small deck, alone with Vince, to discuss business.

"You can see, we deal with the very basics, here," Vince mentioned. "Lye soap, baking soda and vinegar are about the only things we got for cleanin'."

"I did notice that your home is spotless," Steve mentioned, as he handed Vince a brochure. "Are you the only one that can read?"

"It's not a question you ask of skins," Vince mentioned. "Like askin' a grown bloke if he's still a virgin."

"Oh, sorry," Steve apologised. "And just for the record, no, I'm not."

"I was beginnin' to wonder," Vince muttered as he opened the brochure.

"I only asked about the reading bit because the products do come with written instructions," Steve explained.

"Since when does soap need instructions?" asked Vince.

"It's not all soap," Michael countered. "In fact, only a small amount of the products involve any sort of washing. And if the instructions aren't followed, there could be serious side effects."

"Oh, right," Vince said. His attention returned to the brochure. "Kennett? Who's he?"

"Kennet cosmetics. It's a whole line of hygiene products," Steve said.

"Who's High Gene? And what makes him so siffin' high?"

"Hygiene. H-Y-G-I-E-N-E. It's personal sanitation," Michael explained.

"Eh?"

"Keeping one's body clean and free from disease and odours and other unwanted symptoms," Michael elaborated.

"Oh, right," Vince said. "So, this is their catalogue?"

"Right," replied Steve. "You're about to become a sales representative for Kennet Cosmetics."

Vince examined the brochure some more. "No one could afford any of these prices!" he suddenly observed.

"Divide the price by twenty," suggested Steve.

"Oh, yeah, forgot where they were comin' from for a sec." Vince studied the prices for a moment. "Why're they all sumthin'-ninety nine?"

"Marketing gimmick. Makes it look cheaper than it is. Just round it up," Steve said.

"So this one here is four ninety nine . . ." Vince read.

"So make it five, even," Steve said. "That's . . . " he did a quick mental calculation, "a fourth of a pound which is . . . "

"Five bob – that's a crown," finished Vince. "Now, this thin' here – I know what a towel is and I know what sanitary is. What's a . . . never mind, then, sorted."

"If we order in large quantities, we can get discounts," Michael pointed out. "And if we meet a sales quota, we get more free samples."

"What's this 'conditioner' business?" asked Vince.

"Ever see Desiree's hair?" asked Steve.

"Your lass, is she?" Vince enquired.

"Yes, that's her," Steve said with a little pride. "Notice how her hair looks shiny and straight."

"If you don't mind me sayin', she don't half have a good set of headfur," Vince remarked. "Better'n the rat's nest you find on most of the girls here. Even better'n some of the Furs'."

"That's what conditioner does," Steve explained.

"She's a right stout bird," Vince commented.

"A bit," Steve admitted with a shrug. "But in all the right places," he added.

"Not in a family way, is she?" asked Vince.

"What?" asked Steve.

Vince held his hand in front of his stomach by a good foot. "Y'know. Expectin'?"

"Oh, no," Steve laughed. "Haven't had the opportunity. And I'm sure we'll take precautions should the event arise."

"Precautions?"

"Birth control," Steve explained.

"You mean like havin' yer 'nads snipped?"

"Nothing *quite* that drastic," Steve mentioned. "Perhaps just a condom."

"Clever lad," Vince advised. "No point in bein' a slaphead about it. Oh, and by the way, those go on the list as well."

"What's a slaphead?" asked Michael, as he made a note.

"Stupid people get their head shaved," Vince explained. "And everyone wants to slap a bald loaf."

"Do they?" asked Michael.

"O' course! Nothing more gratifyin' than whacking a dome!" Vince leaned over, showing his hairless pate. "Go on. Give it a go. Y'know ye wanna!"

"No, I mean, do stupid people actually get their head shaved?" asked Michael, declining the offer.

"Pretty rare," Vince answered, returning to an upright sitting position. "Largely done as a symbolic gesture these days. That, an' for the lice."

"Must be rough for people that are naturally bald," commented Michael.

"Speakin' from personal experience, I can assure you, it's no picnic," Vince agreed. "But only skin males lose their headfur, so no one actually gives a toss. Just between you and me, I use it to my benefit, as no one thinks I can do anythin' clever enough so as to take advantage, if you catch my meanin'."

"We have a drug for baldness now," Steve mentioned casually.

"Do you?" asked Vince incredulously. "Great furry bollocks! Next you'll be tellin' me there's a pill for yeast wilt."

"Yeast wilt?" asked Michael.

"Y'know," Vince nudged him. "Half post."

"Sorry," Steve answered. "Not following."

Vince sighed in frustration. He took the brochure and rolled it tightly to form a tube and held it firmly erect. "See this?"

"Yes," the other two chorused.

He let it unroll and flop over. "This is yeast wilt."

Steve grinned. "Oh, impotence! We call it brewer's droop. And yes, there is actually a pill for it."

"Is there? Oh, c'mon, lad," Vince said dismissively. "Pull me other tail! You're just havin' me on!"

"No, straight up," Michael confirmed. "As it were."

"Can you get some?" asked Vince.

"Oh, yes. It's all over the place," Michael said.

"Right then, let's get down to it," Vince said eagerly, putting down the brochure. "Okay, for starters, I wanna say I appreciate all you've done with the brochures and the samples, but let's put a little thought into this, shall we?"

Michael and Steve shrugged in agreement.

Vince continued. "Of course we want the cure for baldness and yeast wilt, but, odd as it may seem, we want the simple stuff even more."

"Simple stuff?" asked Steve.

"Deodorant. Shampoo for dandruff. And – very important here – condoms."

"What about the female doodahs?" asked Steve.

"Oh, yeah, *definitely* those," Vince exclaimed. "As they're not for my own personal use, o' course, we'll have to consult the missus on that one."

"Surely all of these things are available here in Otterstow," Michael commented. "I'm sure I've seen most of these things in the shops . . ."

"Aye, but that's specially for Furs," Vince explained. "See, us skins, we need things what are for *us*. Like head lice. Only skins get 'em, so there's nothin' for it but a full head shave and believe me, there's some of us would rather live with the lice than go through that kinda humiliation."

"They'd rather have the lice?" asked Michael, incredulous.

"Oh, aye," Vince nodded. "Gettin' yer noggin shaved ain't exactly a fashion statement. Now, as I was sayin' we ain't got fur all over our bodies – just on certain parts. And our skin is different from theirs. All the stuff you've seen on the shelves in the shops is geared towards a soft, shiny coat of *fur*, and gettin' rid of parasites you find in *fur*. And there's salts and oils you can put in your bath to keep the skin under your *fur* from dryin' out. And there's condoms and female doodahs what fit *Furs*. Catchin' my drift here?"

"Humans aren't the target market?" Michael hypothesised.

"I dunno what that means, but it sounds about right," Vince agreed.

"Basically, the companies that make all these goods don't do nought for skins for two reasons. First, they're guessin' we got no money at all, beyond what we spend for food. Second, they assume that even if we did scrape up a few spare coppers, we'd only spend it on ale or the like, not on somethin' to keep us from

havin' a rash or raisin' a stink. And neither o' these things is true, I can assure you."

"So what's wrong with what we've brought you?" asked Steve.

"There's nought wrong with what's *inside* the bottles and the little packets," Vince answered. "What's inside will suit us just fine. The problem is the bottles and packets themselves." He tossed them each a sample bottle of shampoo. "You're clever lads. You tell me why I can't flog this stuff in Otterstow."

"Erm . . . wrong colour?" guessed Steve.

"Try again," Vince ordered.

Michael and Steve silently stared at their bottles some more.

"Remember lads, we're workin' under the counter, here," Vince hinted.

"Oh, then it's obvious," Michael said, reading the label. "There's no such place as Norwich in The Kingdom."

"And that's just to start," Vince agreed.

"And you don't have plastic bottles," added Steve.

"We might be behind you in some regards," Vince said, "but we're not in the Stone Age. Of course, we have plastics."

"Oh, sorry," Steve apologised.

"Not to worry," Vince dismissed. "But dontcha think them funny little lines on the label might cause a few embarrassin' questions as well?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But what can we do?" asked Steve.

"We could buy in bulk," Michael suggested. "Would that do? Could you repackage?"

"Excellent," Vince agreed. "Now we're talking. You get it in bulk and we can do some business."

"We could get empty bottles as well," Steve mentioned. "They'd be completely unmarked."

"I'll do that bit m'self," Vince agreed. "Just the raw material for the moment. Now let's make our list a little more specific, shall we?"

1630 – Black Kettle Pub

Ignatius dragged himself into the Black Kettle with his brush hanging down. Apart from Gina at the bar, the pub was deserted.

"Cider, Ig?" asked Gina.

Ignatius nodded silently.

"Your tail's on the ground. Something on your mind?" Gina enquired.

"I've just been ordered that I have to pay for Nora," Ignatius groaned.

"Have you?"

"Yes, I have," Ignatius confirmed. "I'll either have to pay rent, buy it outright or move out."

"Aw, poor lad," Gina consoled. "I thought you had use of the house as the elected mayor."

"So did I. However, Judge StoBrocc doesn't seem to think so," Ignatius replied. "And say what you will of him, he *does* know the law."

"You don't suppose he's bluffing?" asked Gina.

"Bluffing?"

"Maybe he's just counting on you to accept him at his word," Gina suggested.

"Even if he did have a motive for doing so, I doubt it would be so important as to risk having himself disbarred if he were caught out. He'd lose his pension. No, if he says that there's no precedent or law, then it's almost certainly the truth."

"If this ever makes the papers, it'll make for a lot of nervous mayors," Gina speculated.

"Quite likely," Ignatius agreed pensively. "I suppose I should warn them, but I've enough to deal with on my own at the moment."

"Still, it's only fair, Ig," Gina said. "All the rest of us have to make our way in the world. No one is owed a free roof over their head."

"I seem to recall that you inherited the Kettle," Ignatius argued politely.

"Fair play," admitted Gina, handing him his cider. "But *someone* in my family paid for the Kettle, at some point in the past; you can't say that about Nora, can you. And Nora's not exactly the Black Kettle, either. It's a right fine house."

Ignatius nodded again. "Yes. You're absolutely right," he nodded. "Still – it is a bit of a bolt from the blue. I'll have to borrow from the banks at the very least, which is not something I'm eager to do. And it's going to take every penny of my savings *and* my pension."

Gina looked around to ensure that the pub was still empty. "Maybe once the Rialto starts making a little dosh, you can pay it off," she whispered.

"Perhaps," Ignatius agreed. "You know, we base all our lives on what to expect. I've always expected that I would be allowed use of Nora as a perquisite of the mayor's office. And now that privilege is gone. But, at the end of the day, you are right. It *was* a privilege, and at *your* expense. Nora was always my home, but it was never my house." He sipped his cider. "In a small way, I suppose I should be glad this happened. Now I can say with a straight face that I'm earning my keep, just like anyone else."

"I don't know if I would go as far as *that*," Gina winked.

"You wicked woman," Ignatius said, forcing a grin despite his sadness. "Doesn't this place have any food? What's a Fox have to do to get some fish and chips?"

"He has to ask for it first," Gina replied as she wrote up the order.

1900 – Nora

Desiree had taken it upon herself to do the cooking, as she was quite good at it and knew lots of ways to prepare just about anything that could swim or fly (or both), usually involving lots of butter and heavy seasoning. Her decision to become the *de facto* chef for Nora was also weighed by the fact that both her and Ignatius would quickly starve if they continued to wait for Jess to bother herself to so much as fry a rasher.

The two Vulpans of Nora were indulging in one of Desiree's creations for their evening meal, while sitting on the balcony, just outside of the master bedroom. Desiree, as had become her custom, usually left them to their

privacy. On this particular night, she had (quite easily) persuaded Eric to model for some anatomical sketches in her room.

"Iggy?"

"Yes, m'dear," Ignatius replied between bites.

"Do I have a share in the Rialto?"

"No, you're on wage. Working on the Rialto is how you earn your free room and board at Nora. We've been over that."

"Well, that's not very fair, is it? I mean, the Partnership gave that whiny little Caldon a share before he had so much as lifted a reciprocating saw. Meanwhile, I've been slaving away at that dump for yonks for nothing."

"I rather doubt that the month for which you've worked at the Rialto qualifies as even a single yonk," Ignatius pointed out, "much less the plural. I would also add that, apart from the fact that Angus works tirelessly, and without complaint . . ."

"Hey, I don't complain," Jess complained. "And let's face facts. Who gets the *worst* possible jobs on the list? Me, that's who. I swear, Gina must be blowing Geoff on a daily basis, just so he'll find every possible task that involves effluent, so she can get even with me for the beer barrel incident."

Ignatius paused patiently. "Are we finished with our paranoid delusions?"

"Delusions? Paranoid? I'm telling you, Ig, Gina's got it in for me and Geoff's in on it as well," Jess snarled. "No one has to put up with the crap – and I mean that in the literal sense – that I do. Name one person in the partnership that's so much as touched a sewer pipe. Hmm? Anyone spring to mind? No? I thought not."

Ignatius chewed on his fish in silence, staring out at the night sky.

After receiving no response for a few moments, Jess sighed. "Okay, fine. I'm done. You can finish telling me why I don't deserve a share."

"Angus has worked tirelessly and without complaint," Ignatius picked up his thread. "Further, we all agreed to let him have a share and become a partner as he was instrumental in obtaining the Rialto for us. Frankly, I think that you've got the better part of the deal by far. I've been working even longer than you and I haven't received so much as a farthing for my efforts."

"Neither have I," Jess complained.

"You receive a service of monetary value, namely room and board, allowing you to keep what few assets you have."

"Could I forsake my wages for a share?"

Ignatius stopped in mid-bite and considered. He started chewing again for a moment or two. After he swallowed his morsel, he looked rather pensively for a moment as he licked his chops. "I suppose you could do. That would mean that you'd actually have to do something around the house."

"I clean up after myself," Jess protested.

"As does any well-behaved ten-year-old," Ignatius countered. "Even I pick up after myself and I *own* Nora."

"Do not," Jess commented.

"Oh, very nice, Jess," Ignatius said sarcastically, "Rub the salt firmly into the freshly opened wound, thank you very much."

"Pardon me for reminding my great and munificent benefactor what it's like to be without a home," Jess retorted.

"*Touché*," Ignatius grudgingly acknowledged. "At any rate, if you want a share in the Rialto *and* free room and board, you're going to have to either start shelling over some dosh . . ."

"Which I don't have," Jess said. "That's hardly fair."

"It's hardly my fault you can't manage your affairs," Ignatius pointed out. "It's either the *status quo* or you start doing the cooking, laundry and cleaning – and not just for yourself, but for me and Desiree, as well."

"Desiree? She's a house guest. Why should I cook and clean for her?"

"Those are the terms," Ignatius stated. "If you don't like them, you needn't accept them. Besides, even if you did agree to them, it'd have to be a unanimous vote by all of the Partners to let you have a share."

"Unanimous? Well, forget it then. I could save their lives tomorrow and they wouldn't let me in."

"Not too sure about that," Ignatius replied. "Let's assume, however, that you were allowed in. You know that you'd be working without pay for some time to come?"

"Of course," Jess acknowledged.

"Well, tell me this, then. Why do you want to be a partner? It's a huge risk. There's no guarantee of success and if we fail, you'll get nothing in return and you'll have lost a great deal of effort and precious time."

"You're committed to it, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes, as you well know. Certainly until Grace and Simon return."

"Then I want to be committed, too. With you. This way I know we'll be together."

"Jess, we've been over this as well. You know that I'm not promising that we'll ever be an item again. I might become involved with someone else. I might want to spend the rest of my days as a bachelor."

"You wouldn't actually do that would you?" Jess asked with an apprehensive face. "That'd be a total waste."

"I don't know. But it is a possibility and you *did* tell me to be honest with you, didn't you?" Ignatius knew he was walking at the edge, but he had to keep Jess at an arm's length. If he were too forward, he reasoned, she might begin to think they were making progress.

"Yes, I did," she admitted with a little pout. She looked askance with a smile. "But you're not saying that we will *never* be together. That's *still* a possibility, is it not?"

"An extremely remote one, but yes, I'll admit it. A possibility."

"I'll take my chances. So, you'll ask the Partnership?"

"Very well, as you wish. We have a dinner meeting of the Partnership, here at Nora a week from today, just before we resume work. I'll ask then. However, if I might suggest . . ."

"Yes?"

"If you prepare a truly spectacular dinner – instead of having Desiree do it for you – I feel certain it would put everyone in a much more receptive mood."

"Like that's gonna change their mind," Jess dismissed.

"Perhaps not everyone's," Ignatius said, "but it will certainly change *mine*." He smiled slyly. "And that's one vote you'll need for a unanimous decision."

"You're a right bastard, sometimes, you know that?"

26AUG2001 Sunday

1800 – Nora

"You've absolutely outdone yourself, Desiree," Slide admired as Jess went around the table, pouring the coffee.

"Yes, excellent as usual," Sandra added.

"I didn't cook this meal," Desiree stated. "Jess did."

"She did?" asked Slide, astonished.

"Don't look *too* surprised, Slide," Jess retorted.

"Oh, fair play, erm . . . Well done, Jess," Slide said by way of apology.

The others around the table sent Jess their compliments.

"Now, on to business," Linda announced, pulling out a laptop computer and tapping a few keys.

"Where'd ya get that from?" asked an astonished Pete.

"It's in the budget," Linda replied. "Steve approved it under discretionary funds."

"Doesn't look very discrete to me," Gina grumbled.

"She can't always be in the office," Steve explained, "and she needs it to do her work."

"So Linda," Jess began as she took a seat at the table, "how much cleavage did you have to show him before he agreed to buy your new toy?"

"Oh, behave, Jess," Linda drawled. "Besides, I don't have to use my boobs to cajole men into getting what I want – I actually manage to convince them with things like reason and logic."

"Fine, do things the hard way," Jess muttered.

"If we could actually get down to business?" Ignatius suggested.

"Right," Linda announced. "First item, who's going to do our opening gig?"

"I'm afraid I haven't given it much thought," Steve shrugged.

"Maybe we could audition a few bands in the area," Desiree suggested.

"Not like them noisemakers they had at Midsummer Day," Pete protested. "Bloody awful racket, that was."

"Who's gonna decide which acts we want?" Clare asked.

"I suppose we all can," Michael suggested. "We can have auditions in the Rialto and come to some agreement on who we like. I'll put an ad in the paper, post a note in the music shop and get in touch with a few contacts – I know a few musicians. There's bound to be some talent around somewhere looking for a venue besides a pub. The Rialto's a big place, relatively speaking, so I'd guess bands would be more eager to play there, as they'd earn more money."

"Action item for Michael, find band," Linda hunt-and-pecked into the computer. "Next item, bar staff."

"We've plenty of people that we can hire as bar staff," Steve answered. "And if we can't find enough, some of the pub owners are mates – they'll loan me one or two for a few nights. Even if we are taking away their trade."

"Hire?" objected Pete. "We got bar staff right 'ere. Gina, me, the girls . . ."

"We can't have Bears and Hares serving drinks," Steve mentioned. He looked at Michael, "Can we?"

"Why not?" asked Desiree. "It'd be a nice gimmick. And what's the worst that could happen?"

"We'd have to take someone on, otherwise," Linda pointed out. "And train them."

"I personally have no opposition," Michael put in. "But I'm just concerned there might be some legal problems. First – and I don't mean to offend – but you're what we call 'non-persons'. Our legal system doesn't recognise you. Could be a bit difficult to explain if we're inspected and you don't have any identification. Secondly, I'm sure Health and Safety have rules about hairnets for food service."

"We won't be serving any food, except pre-packaged," Desiree pointed out. "Stuff like chips, or crisps or whatever, little snacks and stuff. We won't have a kitchen. By the way, when're we gonna talk . . ."

"I'm sorry, but I could lose my licence if we risk it," Steve interrupted. "I hate to sound horrible, but all Frith have to stay behind the scenes, at least until I can figure out some way round it, and I'm afraid that might take a while. I will investigate this, but I can't promise anything."

Some of the crew looked a little disappointed, but Linda hammered away at her keyboard. "Action item, Steve, hire bar staff, investigate letting Frith working behind bar. Let's move on. What about security?"

Steve spoke again. "I've talked to several pub and club owners in the area and they've made some very good recommendations. We're getting a set of cameras and recorders put in, along with a communications set."

"That all sounds a bit dear," Gina mentioned.

"It will be," Steve said, "but it's in the budget and Pete Dunne – you remember, the owner of the Snooty Fox? He said, with a place the size of the Rialto, we'd be fools not to. I'll put the estimates together and we'll vote on them later."

"Also, I was just about to start calling around for some security people – you know, someone at the door, a bit of muscle if things get rough – when this small security group called me and asked if we needed someone. It was eerie, to be honest. Almost as if they knew in advance. The only people I had mentioned the idea to were our loan officers at the bank when I had a few questions about payroll . . . anyway . . ."

"Action item, Steve, estimates for security equipment, marked as new business for next meeting," Linda pecked furiously. "Next item, Marquee." She lifted her head above the monitor. "Steve's got some good news, dontcha lad?"

"Linda and I found the original plans for the neon signs in the basement, when we were cleaning it for stuff to sell," Steve said. "We did some research on the internet and the company was still in business, so I contacted them."

They came out, did a survey and gave me an estimate. It wasn't nearly what I thought it'd be and it's well within the budget."

"The boxes arrived yesterday after everyone had gone home for the day," Linda added. "It looks like it'll be very lovely. Nice neon letters, with some curvy bits."

"We'll have to take down the old bits and prime and paint the metal underneath," Geoff said. "I'd have to take a look at the plans, but it shouldn't be too much work, although we'll have to get a sparky to wire it."

"That bit's already done," Michael noted. "We just plug it in to a common power socket."

"Can I be there when we first turn it on?" asked Clare. "I'd like to see that."

Most of the group added their interest as well.

"Sure," Steve said. "We can all throw the switch together. Sort of an opening ceremony."

Everyone seemed excited about the idea and Linda had to calm them down to press on. "Item, Steve, arrange light ceremony. All right, that's everything on my list. Any new business?"

"Yes," Desiree said immediately. "I want to make the Rialto a no-smoking venue."

This drew immediate support from all of the Frith.

"I agree," Sandra said. "Especially after ripping out all of those walls to get rid of that wretched pong."

"The auditorium area is already non-smoking by fire code," Steve mentioned. "But we can make the lobby a smoking area."

"No," Gina objected. "No smoking anywhere in the building, full stop."

"We'll lose custom if we do that," Steve pointed out. "We can't afford that luxury just now."

"You're just saying that because you smoke," Desiree said.

"Desiree, I haven't had a single cigarette since you arrived," Steve said. "I gave up specifically for you. And my point stands; people will stay away if we make them smoke outside. I'm sorry, but I absolutely must insist that you follow my experience on this."

"Experience? When have you ever worked at a place that *didn't* allow smokers?" asked Desiree.

"Desiree, look at the Snooty Fox," Steve argued. "Everyone smokes that goes to pubs. If they banned it, no one would come."

"That's because the non-smokers don't like it. If it was smoke-free, then all the non-smokers would be there drinking – and there's *more* of them."

"I rather doubt that's true," Steve said. "Also, we'll make a couple hundred extra quid a month selling cigarettes. That's badly needed cash."

"And what about a safe working environment," Desiree said. "Don't our employees deserve that? Even if they *don't* have fur?"

"Cigarette smoke is an occupational hazard that comes with working in a pub or venue," Steve stated. "Get used to it."

"Actually, a ban is coming anyway," Michael mentioned. "I've heard they're planning one across the channel first and then here, eventually."

"It'll never fly," Steve opined. "Those bastards across the channel are born with a cigarette in their hand. They'll revolt. Anyway, I move we have a smoking lobby. We can put in some extra fans, if you like."

"Second," Angus agreed. "I dinna smoke the nou, but Steve is right. We'll lose custom if we dinna let 'em have their fags."

"All in favour?" Linda said and then counted the votes. "All opposed?" She counted again. "Looks like a tie."

"If I might suggest," Ignatius began, "I think this whole issue revolves around money – as do most conflicts, but I'll not digress. As I see it, the pro-tobacco argument is that we'll make more cash. The con is that we'll have a healthier work environment. To solve this, I would ask – what is our ultimate goal in this endeavour?"

"Making money," Pete offered.

"Keeping the Rialto open," Steve contended.

"Retrieving Grace and Simon," Sandra stated.

"Very good, Sandra," Ignatius confirmed. "Now, to accomplish that, we *do* need the Rialto open which, in return, requires cash. However, our goal is not to make as much cash as possible; it is to make enough to keep the Rialto open. Thus, I would suggest that we keep the Rialto smoke-free until we decide that we need the extra cash. Motion?"

"All in favour?" Linda asked. "Motion passes," she noted after counting a majority of hands. "Any other new business?"

"Yes, there is," Ignatius said. "Jess wants to be a partner and, thus, have a share."

"No," Rachael and Clare chorused.

"Well, that's that then," Ignatius said, putting up his hands in concession.

"Hang on a mo'," Geoff interrupted. "Jess, why do you wanna be a partner all o'sudden?"

Jess was awkwardly silent on the matter as she looked at the floor.

"She wants to commit to the Rialto, because she knows that I'm committed as well. That way we'll be together," Ignatius explained, rolling his eyes in embarrassment.

"But you're not an item – are ya?" asked Pete.

"No. Most definitely not," Ignatius answered.

"Then what's her point," Geoff asked. "She can work for us as long as she likes. You're not going anywhere, are ya, Ig?"

"Y'know, now I think of it," Pete began a train of thought. "There is one reason I can think o' why we should let 'er in."

"Whuzzat, then?" asked Rachael.

"Insurance," Pete replied.

"We already have insurance coming out of our ears," mentioned Steve. "And we're paying through the nose for it."

"No, no. Not that kind," Pete said. "Look, we all know she was wif Civil Enquiries, right? An' she knows we're spendin' the better part of our days in Reality, so what's to stop 'er from goin' back to 'er old boss, 'opin' for 'er old position back, a reward or 'oo knows what else."

"I think I'm beginnin' to get your drift 'ere," Rachael remarked. "She'd be just as guilty as any of us."

"Unless she'd planned that to begin with," Clare remarked, still being a little reluctant to play along.

"But if it was, she'd've grassed on us by now," Gina countered. "I say we go for it. At the very worst, we'd get some free labour. She might get tired of it after a few months and piss off. We've nothing to lose."

Rachael and Clare looked at each other and gave a nod. "We're for it, then," Clare said.

Ignatius was drumming his fingers as his brush did a few clockwise whirls. "I dunno. Everything you say makes perfect sense – but I'm the one that has to live with her for all that time."

"Ig!" Jess protested. "You promised!"

"Promised what?" asked Ignatius, innocently.

"You said if I cooked a good meal for the Partnership, then you'd vote to give me a share," Jess complained.

"I made no such promise," Ignatius denied. "I merely stated it was necessary, not sufficient."

"You *wanker*," Jess snarled quietly.

"Jess works for the Partnership on wage," Ignatius reminded the others, "and her wage is room and board at Nora, nothing more. I told her that if she wanted a share, then she'd no longer have this wage. Thus, she would have to pay her way at Nora either with cash, which she has precious little of, or by working around the house. Her efforts tonight were to see if she would take the responsibility in a serious manner."

"Oh, c'mon, Ig," Desiree cajoled. "Be reasonable. Besides, from what I hear, you're getting a lot more outta Jess besides clean towels and casseroles."

"Am I?" asked Ignatius, his voice tinged with anxiety. "And what exactly would that be?"

"Sexual affection," Desiree stated plainly. All the others looked a bit stunned at her frankness. "What?" she chastised the group for their scandalised looks. "C'mon people, we're all adults here." She turned back to Ignatius. "Even if you and Jess don't have an emotional relationship, you *definitely* are having a sexual relationship."

Ignatius dithered for a moment and then blurted out, "A gentleman doesn't . . ."

"Oh, come off it, Ig," Desiree interrupted. "You've already told us about the first time. And it's not like I don't hear you two going at it like rabbits."

They all waited for Rachael or Clare to make their standard correction. None was forthcoming.

"I don't think that's . . ." Ignatius began.

"Ya mean there's been more'n just the once?" asked Pete, surprised. "Ow many times?"

"I don't actually keep count . . ." Ignatius fumbled.

"I'd say a minimum of, oh . . . forty-five times since she's moved in," Desiree interrupted.

A low whistle of appreciation came out from across the table. "Let's 'ear it for the Ig-man," Pete stated. "Weh-hey!"

"Now just a minute. That's my private affair!" Ignatius protested.

"Affair is right, but it's not exactly private," Desiree countered.

"It most certainly is!" Ignatius stated firmly.

"It would be," Desiree began, "if it weren't for the fact that Jess makes it common knowledge to me on a daily basis."

"Oh, she *does*, does she?" asked Ignatius, his eyes narrowing and his ears flattening.

Jess suddenly tried to appear to be somewhere else.

"For some reason," Desiree continued, "she feels compelled to tell me about your nightly adventures on a daily basis. Every day it's 'oh, Iggy did this' and 'Iggy did that' and 'it's a wonder we sleep at night'. But to be fair, she wouldn't even have to tell me and I'd *still* know."

"Yeah? 'Ow's 'at?" asked Rachael.

"I don't wanna sound ungrateful for your hospitality and all, Ig," Desiree prefaced her answer, "but it's a wonder I sleep at night, either. All night long, it's 'Yiff' and 'Rowr,' 'Rowr' and 'Yiff' – enough to wake the dead. My gawd, the way you two carry on it's a wonder y'all have the energy to come to work every morning."

The crew was in hysterics over Desiree's tirade except for Ignatius, who was absolutely gobsmacked.

"Of course, Jess is the one making most of the noise," Desiree continued, oblivious. "And even with my tiny ears, it sounds like she's getting the ride of a lifetime, so maybe she oughtta be the one . . ."

Desiree's thought went unfinished, as Jess finally decided to make her feelings known in no uncertain terms.

"WILL YOU STOP TALKING ABOUT ME LIKE I'M NOT HERE!" Jess exploded. "Is that all you think of me? That I'm still some sort of conniving, manipulative, oversexed . . ."

"Vixen?" suggested Clare.

"Clare!" reprimanded Gina, although with not an entirely straight face.

Jess was still incensed and Clare's epithet was the least of her concerns. "Look – I joined this group, not of my own free will. I had no choice. And I always – *always* – get the mankiest, mattiest, smelliest, most ferociously malodorous jobs! Always in the bogs or the basement and almost always involving effluent or corpses or some sort of rancid filth and noxious chemicals! And you *all* know how sensitive a Vulpan's nose is. Yet, not once, *not once*, have I complained. I've done nothing that even remotely resembles duplicity, disloyalty or dishonesty. And I have nothing to do with CE anymore. They wouldn't listen to me if I crawled on all fours through their front doors in broad daylight and told them I held the secret to beating the Bierlanders in football!"

Pete interrupted. "D'ya seriously know 'ow to beat the Bierlanders in . . ."

"OF COURSE NOT, YOU BOOB!" Jess shrieked at Pete as he hid behind Gina from Jess' Vulpan fury. "I was speaking hypothetically!"

Jess addressed the Partnership as a whole. "All I'm asking for is what you have and I'm more than willing to give up my wages. I think I've paid my dues to get in."

There was a stunned silence.

"Right, then. All in favour of Jess becoming a full partner, say 'aye'," prompted Linda, still trying to contain her mirth.

There was a chorus of ayes, although rather quiet.

"Any opposed," Linda prompted.

"Nay," Ignatius put his hand up. He was looking a bit insolent, crossing his arms in defiance.

"C'mon Ig," Clare coaxed. "Even I'm willing to let her in."

"I – don't – care," Ignatius replied indignantly.

"Well, why the 'nay' vote, then?" Geoff asked.

"We agreed to keep our . . . *activities* . . . private," Ignatius complained. "And once again, she's humiliated me by talking behind my back."

"If what Desi's told us is true," Pete said, barely containing a straight face, "then take it as read, we've more respect for ya now than we've ever 'ad before."

A few at the table clutched their snouts in an effort to suppress their laughter.

"Oh, yes, I'm quite happy to see that I am the sole source of amusement for our party, thanks, once again, to Jess' indiscretions," Ignatius harrumphed.

"Fine, enjoy yourselves. Regardless, Jess will be leaving Nora at the earliest possible opportunity."

A good bit of the laughter subsided at this point as Jess put her hands over her eyes and began to sob.

"And you needn't pay any attention to those crocodile tears," Ignatius told them. "I assure you, it's all manipulation, plain and simple."

"Wha'? C'mon Ig. Just a bit of a giggle. Have a sense of humour," Geoff urged. "All right, we had our fun and it was at your expense, but don't make Jess pay for our sins. Do the right thing."

Ignatius turned to face Geoff directly. Practically snarling, he growled. "I *am* doing the right thing. I shouldn't have let her in my home in the first place," he said angrily. "First thing tomorrow, she's out. She won't be working here, she won't be a partner, she won't be living with me and we most definitely will *not* be a couple!"

For the first time during the entire evening, Angus spoke. "Might I say a few words in her defence?"

"Please yourself," Ignatius fumed. "It won't change *my* mind, I assure you."

"Right, yeah . . . Leuk, I dinna knaw yer past an all, but . . . I feel there's one mair wee fact ye's should all be made awaur o. The first day I came, juist ootta rehab . . . I was might waesome that the Rialto wisna mine na mair . . . Ta make a lang story short . . . I, erm . . . naur had a lapse. An gin it werna for Miss Jess, I'd no be enjoyin the pleasure o yer guid company the day." Angus paused for a moment and then nervously added, "I only hope she'll lemme keep ma goolies for tellin ye this."

Ignatius sighed in exasperation as he massaged his brow in embarrassment. "Is this true, Jess?"

"Snrf . . . Mm-hm," Jess answered.

Ignatius sighed deeply again as he addressed the others. "All right. I'll let her stay. But she's not becoming a partner. She wanted a job for a room and that's what she'll get – her *own* room. Once the work on the Rialto is finished, or when Simon and Grace make it home, whichever comes first, she moves out of Nora."

"Very well, then," Linda said, barely above a murmur, as she quietly closed her laptop. "Motion denied and meeting adjourned. See you tomorrow at seven."

Unseen to all, Angus gave a comforting pat to Jess' knee.

27AUG2001 Monday

0700 – The tré basement

It was early Monday morning, the 27th of August. Vince was taking his first delivery as the Partnership looked on.

"Right, so we've got six litres of regular shampoo, forty litres of dandruff shampoo, twenty litres of conditioner, fifteen kilos of the deodorant, forty cartons of female doodahs, three litres of lotion and four cases of, erm, prophylactics," Steve read down the list as Vince checked his inventory.

"Looks like it's all there," Vince said, counting some packets.

"That'll be 325 pounds, sixty," said Steve. "Sorry. Convert that to coin of The Kingdom," he added as he pulled out his calculator.

Linda's eyes looked toward the ceiling as she did the long division in her head. "Sixteen pounds – five and seven – and just under a farthing," she said as Steve put his calculator away. "You can keep the farthing, Vince. We did agree the exchange rate was twenty to one?"

"That's right," Steve said.

"Not that it matters to me, one way or t'other, but . . . based on what?" asked Vince.

"The fact that a pint in Otterstow costs two shillings and it costs two pounds in Newburg," answered Linda. "In other words, we're pegging the pound to the pint," she observed.

"Fair enough. Can't go amiss on a pint of," Vince noted as he counted out the cash to Linda, who immediately stuffed the notes in her brassiere and the coins in her pocket.

"I sure hope I can shift all this," Vince groaned. "If I don't, the missus is gonna flay me alive."

Vince was packing up his goods to take out when Steve caught him by the cuff.

"One last item," Steve said quietly, as he pulled a set of blue pills from his pocket. "Both Michael and I had to tell a doctor we were impotent to get these.

We'll do these on a fifty-fifty consignment instead of cash up front, so make sure you charge a packet for them."

Vince's eyes widened with reverence. "Right. I'll do that. What about the bald cure?"

"It's not actually a cure," Steve explained. "I found out that it only works as long as you continue to use it. Once you stop, you become bald again. Do you still want it?"

"Lemme do a little 'market research' as you call it and get back with you," Vince suggested. "Later, Steve."

The Partnership began ascending the stairs to the lobby so that they could begin their work day.

Pete pulled Geoff aside for a quiet conversation. "Geoff, what 'appens if Vince gets caught sellin' the soap an' all? I don't wanna kill the goose what lays the golden eggs, but I'm not so sure we should give 'im all this much free rein on 'is ventures. Wif so much money passin' 'ands, 'e might arouse some suspicion."

"You've nothing to worry about with Vince," defended Geoff. "He knows exactly what he's doing. I'll say two things for him. First – he's quite clever. More than me, and probably more than you. Second – he's no grass. If he ever were to get caught out – an extremely unlikely occurrence in my opinion – he'd never let on that we were part of it. He'd go to the clink first. Trust me. Vince knows his way round the system."

"Sure 'bout that?" asked Pete.

"Pete, you know how I feel about the Rialto," Geoff said. "Ever since the little woman left me, I've been trying to find something that was meaningful in my life. I've found it and this is it. She's almost part of my flesh and blood and I'd protect her to my last dying breath. Do you think, for one moment, that I'd risk her on some slaphead who'd land us all in the lockup? Vince knows that as well and he'd have his last one pulled before he grassed on us."

"'Asn't got any teef left to pull, 'as 'e?" asked Pete.

"I wasn't talking about teeth," Geoff muttered.

0900 – *The tré*

"Ready for your first Portrayal?" Ignatius asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Desiree answered. "I'm not very good at memorizing lines."

"Don't worry. Vince will prompt you if you forget anything. He's quite the old pro."

"Can't this wait?" asked Desiree.

"No, Desiree. You're behind schedule as it is. You've been my guest for nearly two months now, so you're a resident and you need to do your bit."

"All right. All right. Just don't expect too much."

"Oh behave, you'll be fine. Children are very forgiving as theatre critics."

Opening scene: Prison grate dividing stage. Human Woman on stage left, Guard (Horse or Bear) stage right.

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of The Forgiven Wife. She has committed the horrible sin of beating her husband to near death and he comes to grant forgiveness.

Guard

Prisoner will approach the gate.

Woman [*walks toward the gate*]

Desiree stepped forward.

I am here.

That wasn't too bad, she thought.

Guard

Your visitor is here. 'Tis your husband.

Woman

Let him in.

Guard [*turning around*]

Visitor, approach the gate.

Vince stepped in front of Desiree.

I was supposed to have beaten him half to death? she thought. *I guess kids will believe anything you tell them.*

Man [*to Guard, approaching gate*]

Thank you, Guard.

Woman [*to Man*]

What is your will?

Man

I have come to forgive you.

Woman

Forgive?

Man

Yes. Even though you have broken my bones and broken my heart, you have expressed remorse. Although my faith requires it, I do this solely from my heart, not from obligation.

Woman

Then I am to be set free?

Man

No.

Woman

To have my sentence reduced?

Man

No.

Woman

Then you will rejoin me when I am free?

Man

No.

Woman

Then you still love me?

Man

I have never stopped and that is why I forgive you. But I will not live with you. I cannot trust you for my safety or that of our children.

Woman

And I will not see my children?

Man

No. Not until they are of age.

Woman

Then what good is this forgiveness?

Man

It is nothing more nor nothing less. The day you step out of this prison, you have paid your penance and are free from guilt, on my part, at least.

But you have no license to transgress again.

You have no license to see me again.

You will never see your children again, until they are grown.

But you have my forgiveness, and with that, you can start anew. With someone else, if you like or by yourself, but with a clean conscience.

Woman

I see. And nothing more?

Man

Just that.

Woman [*considering*]

This pardon's use, I cannot state,

But it strips from me some awful weight

Narrator

Thus the fate of our Forgiven Wife.

Draw from it what you may.

Until next we meet – good day!

The curtain fell and Desiree let out a huge sigh of relief.

Vince came forward and patted her on the back. Leaning down he whispered in her ear. "Quite good. If I didn't know any better, I'd never guess this was your first time." He straightened up, looked at her and tapped the side of his nose.

After the Portrayal, Ignatius and Desiree finished watching the children issue from The tré, turned inside and headed slowly towards the basement.

"So, how'd it look," asked Desiree.

"Just fine. You remembered your lines. Even said them with some conviction, I daresay. Excellent for a first time."

"Does someone pick which Portrayal gets done on a certain day?"

"No, there's just a standard rotation," Ignatius explained. "Why do you ask?"

"Maybe it's just me, but they seem to hit a nerve, more often than not,"

Desiree said. "How many are there?"

"Depends," Ignatius shrugged. "There's the basic set, that's set to rotate at exactly a year, so 400 or so. Then there's the original canon, which goes up to 600, and then there's the Common Book of Portrayal with over a thousand.

There are several other versions that I won't go into, if it's all the same to you."

"Still," Desiree remarked, "pretty odd that this particular one came up."

"And why should this one be any more remarkable than, say, the one that was on yesterday?"

"Well, it's about forgiveness."

They had walked down the basement stairs and Ignatius opened the door to the portal. "Yes, true. What of it?"

"Two things. First, I want to thank you for forgiving me."

"Oh? Whatever for?" asked Ignatius.

"For being so indiscreet at dinner last night. I should've kept my mouth shut," Desiree confessed. "And you haven't said a word about it, so I assume I'm forgiven."

"You never offended," Ignatius stated. "You merely stated what you knew to be true. And in the process, you revealed that Jess had been dishonest with me. Yes, it was painful and embarrassing for me, but it was still the truth and there's no sin in that, thus you may consider the matter closed. So what was your second point?"

"Well, I think you should forgive Jess," Desiree suggested.

"I have. And as the Portrayal points out, it doesn't give her the right to trample me, as she has in the past. Once again, she betrayed my trust by telling you about our assignments. We had agreed to keep it to ourselves. It might sound like a trivial point but privacy ranks very high on my list and she has always known that."

They entered the relative brightness of the Rialto basement.

"Ig, it's not like I couldn't figure it out by myself. You two make enough noise to wake the dead."

"So you had mentioned," Ignatius reminded her. "Sorry to have kept you awake."

"Like I said, it's Jess that makes most of the noise. She's a hell of a screamer."

"No lack of enthusiasm on her part, I'll freely admit."

"Hee! Pretty funny, sometimes. I wish I knew what it is you do that gets her going. It's a good thing I'm not a Fox, or that you're not a skin. If half of what Jess says is true, I'd be parking at your doorstep and blowing something besides the horn."

"Desi! Behave!" Ignatius reprimanded. He paused for a moment as a smile began to grow on his face. "Still," he said, his good humour returning. "What can one say?" he winked. "No, Desi, let go of the brush!" he said wagging his finger at her.

"Make me," she challenged.

2100 – Nora

Ignatius and Jess dragged themselves into Nora, followed by Desiree. It was nine o'clock in the evening and they had been working non-stop all day, except for the two Portrayals and a very brief lunch.

"Sorry, kids, but it's leftovers tonight," Desiree announced as she shuffled off to the kitchen. "I'm too pooped to lift a spatula."

"Quite understandable, I assure you," Ignatius said, plopping onto the settee. "Just some of that fried fish will do nicely. Don't even bother warming it up – I'm too famished to care."

Jess went into the cellar and returned with two bottles just as Desiree was returning from the kitchen with some food.

"Man, we have *got* to get ourselves a microwave," Desiree muttered as she handed Ignatius and Jess a bowl of fish and chips each. She sat down on a lounge and Jess silently went to the loveseat opposite the settee.

Noticing that Jess was staring at the floor, Ignatius caught Desiree's attention and silently gestured that she might want to be somewhere else.

"Y'know . . . It's nice out – think I'll take this outside," Desiree said as she took her meal upstairs to sit on the balcony.

Ignatius returned his gaze to Jess as he listened to Desiree ascend the stairs and exit to the balcony. He noticed that although she took a sip or two of her drink, she wasn't eating. "Lost your appetite?" he asked, feeling that Desiree was a safe distance away.

Jess looked up. "Yeah, something like that." She downed the rest of her cider and went to the drinks cupboard and poured herself a glass of vodka.

"While we have a moment alone," Ignatius said, forcing himself not to comment on the amount of drink in her glass, "I just wanted to apologise for blowing up at the meeting. And, for what it's worth, I don't hold any grudge for your indiscretion about our little trysts. Consider yourself forgiven and the matter closed."

"Yeah, thanks," Jess said blankly. She took a large swallow of the vodka and then exhaled, relishing the aroma. "Lemme guess. Still no vote for partner, though, right?"

"No," Ignatius answered.

"Still have to leave when the Rialto's done, right?"

"Yes."

"Still no bedtime action, right?"

"Correct."

Jess took another swallow, although not quite as deep as before. "Why not?"

"Because I can't rely on you to be discreet," Ignatius answered.

"So?" Jess shrugged.

"I would prefer not to have everyone know about our relations."

"Why?"

"It is a simple matter of privacy," Ignatius answered. "There are some things I would prefer the world at large not know about me."

"You're ashamed that you have sex with me?"

"Of course not."

"Then why hide it?" asked Jess.

"If you don't understand the very basic concept of 'privacy' then you spent far too much time at Civil Enquiries," Ignatius said. "That being the case, then I feel no compulsion to explain any further than I have."

Jess took another swallow when Ignatius answered, as was her habit.

"Then allow me," Jess volunteered. "You don't want anyone to know about it because you're too concerned with what people might think of you. And if people don't think the *proper* things of you, then you're a failure."

Ignatius shrugged. "Is it such a great transgression to hope that people think well of me for doing the right thing?"

"The *right thing*? There's something *wrong* with two consenting adults having sex?"

"No, there's something wrong with telling everyone about it afterwards," Ignatius clarified.

"I'm sorry Ig, but I don't see anything wrong with it at all."

"That doesn't surprise me one bit," Ignatius said. "You are what you are and I make no judgement."

"How very gracious of you," Jess answered sarcastically. "Next you'll be telling me that only people who love each other should have sex. Like they gotta be married or something."

"It is considered the moral standard, by the way," Ignatius pointed out. "However, even I think it would be hypocritical of me to take such a posture. After all, I freely participated on numerous occasions, and I suffer no delusion that we love each other, much less that we're married."

"Don't presume to tell me what *I* feel," Jess snarled.

"Pardon my presumption," Ignatius apologised. "But my point still stands."

"So, what you're saying is, you're perfectly willing to have sex without love, as long as no one knows about it."

"True. And I'm perfectly willing to have sex *with* love," Ignatius added, "as long as no one knows about it."

Jess shut her eyes and shook her head in contempt. Then she emptied her glass. "How can you be so . . . sanctimonious?" She suddenly turned around and poured herself some more vodka. "I'll tell you what it is. You've grown tired of me. You got a bit of nooky and now you're bored with it." She turned around to face him. "Go on – tell me it's not true."

"Very well," Ignatius replied. "It's not true. And you know I'm telling the truth. I enjoyed our assignations a great deal. Nearly as much as you did."

"But now that you're not as horny as you used to be, because you've gotten your rocks off a few times, suddenly your morals can stand in front of your goolies?"

"You know for someone who's had the better part of a pint of vodka, you're terribly lucid," Ignatius remarked.

"Ah," Jess smiled as she wagged her finger at him. "Typical solicitor trick. You're losing the argument, so you change the subject. Apparently, I've struck a nerve."

"Yes, you have," Ignatius said as he rose from the settee. "Congratulations on your verdict. You've won your case. I am a sanctimonious hypocrite. Guilty as charged. My sentence is that I shall be sent to bed – alone – for the evening. And *you*," he added, "shall go to *yours*."

"Another solicitors trick," Jess replied. "Turn tail and run when you're in a corner."

"How can one 'turn tail and run', when one is cornered?" asked Ignatius.

"Erm . . . dunno, actually," Jess admitted. "Oh, c'mon Ig," she pleaded. "What's the point?"

"Of what?"

"Why can't we enjoy each other? There's nothing wrong with it. I promise I'll be quiet about it from now on. And no strings."

"Good night, Jess," Ignatius said unceremoniously as he turned to go upstairs.

Jess silently made a rude gesture at him when he was halfway up the stairs.

"I heard that," Ignatius said, not bothering to turn around.

Jess snarled silently, sighed and had another sip of vodka. She noticed the bowl of fish that Ignatius had left behind, virtually untouched and her portion next to it. *No sense in letting that go to waste*, she thought, combining his portion with hers into a single bowl.

28AUG2001 Tuesday

0700 – Rialto Lobby

"Right. Rachael?" asked Geoff, looking at his clipboard.

"Runners for the roof tiles," Rachael answered. "Need more lumber."

"Steve, get Rache to measure out what you need before you buy," Geoff ordered. "Pete and Gina?"

"Installin' the pipes for the barrelled drinks," Pete answered.

"Is the bar area finished?" asked Geoff.

"The bar itself, yeah, but we've no shelves, mirrors, nor cabinets," said Gina.

"They're due to arrive today," Linda announced.

"Right then, Clare? What're you up to?" Geoff asked.

"Laying roof tiles behind Rache's work," Clare reported.

"Sandra and Slide? How's the paper hanging?"

Slide said, "We finished the kitchen . . ."

"I thought we agreed to do the customer areas first," Geoff interrupted.

"We've papered everything downstairs," Sandra replied. "All of it."

"We have to finish decorating *all* of the customer areas before we do *any* decorating upstairs. Let's see, what's next on the list," Geoff consulted his clipboard.

"Dados," Linda told him, tapping away on her laptop.

"Right, so Slide and Sandra, dados."

"Do I get a new power tool?" asked Sandra eagerly.

"Air stapler," Linda answered.

"Yes!" Sandra pumped her fist eagerly. "Woot!"

"All right, Sandra, let's not get carried away." Geoff looked at his notes.

"Desi? How's that plaster frieze on the ceiling going?"

Desiree looked up from her sketchpad. "I'm getting off most of the old paint and grunge. It's not perfect, but nothing anyone will notice from thirty feet below. Should be done with the cleaning by Friday. Paint will be done over the weekend."

"I've seen it close up," Geoff mentioned, "and it's a damn-sight better than I could ever do. Ignatius?"

"Prime and paint the lobby ceiling. I'm done taping the trim," Ignatius said. "After you inspect it, we can hire the sprayer."

"Excellent," Geoff remarked. "Michael and Angus?"

"Still cleaning out the basement," Michael reported.

"How much longer are you gonna be on that?" asked Geoff.

"I think we should finish by the end of the next millennia," Michael conjectured.

Geoff seemed annoyed at this response, but continued regardless. "Right, that leaves . . . Miss FærFyxe?"

"Installing new wax rings on all the toilets and urinals," Jess sighed, "after I finish cleaning all the toilets and urinals that I've removed."

"Eww," Rachael commented. "Don't do vitreous china."

"Right. Don't forget to leave a rag in the pipes to block any sewer gasses from coming in," advised Geoff. "They're poisonous, y'know. Right, let's get a move on."

2100 – The *tré*

As was her habit, Desiree had accompanied Ignatius to both Portrayals during the day, noticing that he sat wordlessly through both performances. He did likewise as he stood next to the door while the children issued out and barely spoke to the actors for PD, inaudibly mumbling some *pro forma* thanks and then returning immediately to the Rialto.

The rest of the day had passed uneventfully, with everyone doing their work and as Ignatius and Desiree were making the usual trek back to Nora, they were alone on the tow path, when Desiree finally took the initiative. "Um . . . Ig?"

"Yes, Desiree?" he responded. His voice was listless, devoid of its usual diplomatic, yet sincere, enthusiasm.

"I tried to move out of range of hearing, last night, but I . . . um . . . I kinda cornered myself and . . ."

"Surely you didn't eavesdrop on us?" Ignatius asked.

"No, I did not *eavesdrop*," Desiree said defensively. "I *overheard*."

"I fail to see the distinction," Ignatius stated.

"Quite simple. I lack *mens rea**," Desiree pleaded.

"Do you?" Ignatius said irritated.

"Of course I do," Desiree replied. "I'm a woman."

They walked a few more steps in silence and Ignatius came to a complete stop, standing bolt upright.

"Excuse me," he said. "Did you just make a *legal* pun?"

Desiree smiled innocently. "*Moi*?†"

"Using Remun, no less?"

"*Nunquam ego*‡" Desiree denied sweetly.

* *Mens rea* – L. 'guilty mind'

† *Moi*? – F. 'Me?'

‡ *Nunquam ego!* – L. 'Not I!'

"*Mihi denuo nunquam loquitor.*"*

"*Remuni?*†"

"In any language," Ignatius replied. "*Mens rea*, indeed. You certainly performed an *actus reus*‡ with that pun."

"*Mea culpa*," Desiree apologised with a smile.

"I'll let it slide," Ignatius absolved. "This time."

"Well, at least it got you out of that funk," she pointed out. "So, do you wanna talk about it?"

"No, I, erm . . . As you probably *overheard*, I'm a rather private person."

"Okay, I respect that. But if you change your mind . . ."

"Am I truly a hypocrite? I can live with being sanctimonious, especially by Jess' rather loose standards, but not a hypocrite."

"No, Ig," Desiree said sincerely, "you're not a hypocrite. It's okay to keep what happens in the bedroom in the bedroom."

"I did want it to work out," Ignatius mentioned. "But there has to be trust. We never had that. She simply *cannot* be trusted."

"Well, certainly not *all* of the time," Desiree qualified.

"Do you think she deserves another chance?" asked Ignatius, hurriedly.

Desiree grimaced at the question. "Not for me to say."

"No, of course not. Sorry to put you on the spot."

"It must be a blow," Desiree consoled. "I mean, I know you cared for her and it didn't work out. And it's pretty difficult to find someone else. There's only Wanda available here in Otterstow . . ."

"Oh, Jack forbid," Ignatius said pointedly. "She's worse than Jess is now." He sighed. "No, I'll have to look farther afield if I want to find someone suitable."

"So, what kind of things can you do to find an eligible Vixen?" asked Desiree.

"Oh, there are a few avenues – pen pal groups, social clubs for singles, that sort of thing. Albeit most of the time, it's just a chance meeting."

"So what's your ideal woman like?"

"Oh, there was precious little wrong with Jess," Ignatius admitted. "Apart from the trust thing."

"So her weight wasn't actually a factor?"

"Not at the moment," Ignatius said. "You'll forgive me for sounding horrible, but she has been packing it away ever since her arrival. She was nearly your weight when she arrived, which I certainly had no issue with. But I reckon she put on at least two stone in just the two months since she came here and at that rate, she'd be Pete's weight within the year."

"Yeah, I noticed that, too," Desiree admitted. "So you think my weight's okay?"

"Oh, fine. You're taller than Jess, regardless, so quite fit. You've actually lost weight since you've arrived, haven't you?"

"Maybe a stone," Desiree fudged. "Or two."

* *Mihi denuo nunquam loquitor.* – R. 'Never speak to me again.'

† *Remuni?* – R. 'In Remun?'

‡ *Actus reus* – R. 'guilty act'

"Well done, Desi," Ignatius said sincerely. "Must be difficult, being around all that delectable food you cook."

"You got that right. So you like my food?"

"Regrettably, yes," Ignatius admitted, patting his stomach. "Half a stone's worth, I'm afraid."

"Oh, pshaw," Desiree dismissed. "Who'd notice? So what else are you looking for in a woman?"

"You sound as if you have someone in mind," Ignatius mentioned casually.

"Oh, no, nothing like that," Desiree protested.

"Honestly, Desi," Ignatius smiled wryly. "Trying to catch me on the rebound?"

"Nooo!" Desiree forced herself to reply as they reached the bridge to Nora. "I don't do that kinda thang!"

"Just a little harmless flirtation, then?"

"Well . . ."

"Or are we testing the waters," Ignatius offered.

"Ig, it's not like I'm hitting on you or something!" Desiree objected. "And stop it. The only person you're embarrassing more than me is you."

"Oh, very well," he said as they began to descend the bridge to the other side of the canal and onto Nora's lawn. "So now that I've stoked your ego about your weight and culinary prowess, maybe you can feed mine a bit."

"Erm . . . okay," she agreed.

"Do you actually find me physically attractive?"

"Oh, f'sure," she readily answered. "Mentally as well. I'd've thought that was obvious by now."

"You know I don't do mixies," Ignatius said.

"Well, that was a bit of a presumption," Desiree said with a smile.

"Fair cop," Ignatius admitted as he opened the door to Nora and allowed Desiree in. "Sorry for that. Drink?"

"Forget about it. And, yes, please."

Ignatius went to the drinks cabinet and began to prepare two glasses of port. "Could I ask a very personal question of you, Desiree?"

"You can ask me anything," she replied. "I might even answer."

"Strictly on a hypothetical basis," he paused as he poured a glass, "if I were to change my personal policy on mixies . . ." He paused again as he poured the second glass.

Desiree's heart beat a little faster in anticipation of the coming question.

"Would you?" he completed, handing her a glass.

"Ain't but one way to find out, hawt," she replied, taking the drink.

Ignatius lowered his drink, putting his free hand on his hip as his face screwed up with bewilderment. "I've heard you say that a hundred times – what on earth is a 'hawt'?"

"H-E-A-R-T, hawt," Desiree spelled.

"And 'cap'?"

"Term of endearment, short for 'captain'. And that's three questions."

"Oh, so it is. Well, to good friends," Ignatius raised his glass.

"And lovers," Desiree boldly added, raising hers.

03SEP2001 Monday

1820 – Rialto

The Troupe was waiting patiently for the first act to be auditioned, whilst sitting in the private box seat attached to the master bedroom.

"Where are they?" asked Clare. "They were supposed to be here twenty minutes ago."

"I did tell them, six o'clock, straight up," Steve stated. "They haven't even come through the front door yet."

"You *did* unlock it?" Pete asked.

"I'm not an idiot, Pete," Steve rejoined.

"Just askin', is all," Pete answered defensively.

"I'll go wait out front," Steve said, getting up. "They may not know where the entrance is."

The rest of the group sat and made small talk for another thirty minutes.

Pete had finally lost patience. "Well, this tears it. It's been nearly an hour. I'm not waitin' another minute for this . . ."

"They're here," Steve shouted from the ground floor of the auditorium.

Pete sat back down. "'Bout bleedin' time. Cuttin' into some serious drinkin' time," he muttered.

"They'll need about thirty minutes to set up," Steve called from below.

Pete rolled his eyes and sighed. "Bleedin' marvellous."

"That's *two* strikes against them," Clare grumbled.

The band came in, wheeling their equipment behind them. They set to work in earnest, putting their gear together, spending a few moments to adjust this or tighten that, tuning a guitar to just the right pitch or tweaking their equaliser for just the right blend.

"Y'know, I think this is the group what we 'eard at Midsummer Day," Rachael observed.

"I believe you're right," Geoff concurred. "I recognise that guitarist with the blue fex. Yeah, and that bald drummer with more metal on his head than what you got on your ears, Rache. Yeah, that's them and all."

"Lovely," Pete groaned. "Another evenin' wasted."

As promised, a half-hour later, they were ready to start. The lead guitarist called out to the box seat. "Ya ready up there?" he called.

"Yeah, go on then," Steve called back.

"Could we get a look at ya's?"

"Nope, 'fraid not," Steve replied. "Light's aren't in yet."

"Nice one, Steve," Pete whispered.

"Thanks for giving us the chance to audition. We're Bloody Marvellous." The lead turned to the band, gave a count and on the downbeat, plunged the Rialto into the musical equivalent of a train wreck.

The lead singer launched into his lyrics, which, if they had been intelligible, would wax poetic about how his impoverished youth was responsible for his life

of crime and drugs and how anyone attached to any form of authority was his sworn enemy. There were also the numerous allusions (if not direct statements) concerning his sexual prowess.

The Partnership all looked at each other and pointed their thumbs down.

"*Thank you!*" Pete shouted as loudly as possible.

The music continued to play, drowned out by the noise of the band.

"*I said 'Thank you!'*," Pete tried again.

The band played on, unable to hear.

Pete shrugged.

After a few barely endurable minutes, the song finished.

"For our next number . . ." the lead started.

"No! No! That's . . . quite enough," Pete interrupted. "Thank you. We'll be in touch."

"Y'sure?"

"Yes. Thank you. We'll be in touch," Pete repeated.

"We've got three more."

"No! Thank you," Pete said emphatically.

The lead looked back at the rest of the group. "Sorry, lads. Let's pack up."

While the band was packing, the Partnership retreated to the kitchen, except for Steve, who stayed with the band until they were ready to leave.

They were still discussing their opinions ten minutes later, when Steve finally joined them. "Sorry I took so long. They insisted on seeing the hole where Hodge was buried. So, what's the consensus?" he asked.

"Absolute naff," Linda bristled.

"Bloody awful," Clare and Rachael chorused.

"Don't see how they have the nerve to play in public," Gina added.

"I've heard worse," Desiree said. "But they still stink on ice. I hope we can find someone better, and soon."

"I'm no musician," Geoff put in, "but if that's music, then I'm a hyena."

"I like to keep an open mind, as well," Ignatius commented, "but you're right, Geoff. It's not music. It's just noise."

"Siffing rubbish," added Jess.

"It's crap," added Sandra and Slide.

"I'll, erm, abstain," Michael waffled.

"Oo, I dunno, a bit Kafkaesque, but no sa bad," Angus muttered.

"I think you all know my opinion," Pete said. "Oo's lined up for tomorrow?"

"No one," Michael replied. "This is the only act that's asked to audition."

"That's all? No one else?" asked Desiree in disappointment.

"The ad runs for the week," Michael suggested. "It's possible no one else has seen it yet. Give it a few days, and we'll see what happens."

"Did you say you took the band to see the Hodge hole?" asked Geoff.

"Yes, I did," Steve answered. "That's okay, isn't it?"

"Why'd they wanna see that?" Geoff said.

"I admit, it's a bit gruesome, but there's a great deal of interest," Steve said. "Especially as he was a local hero – or 'anti-hero', I suppose you'd call it."

"I think 'villain' would be closer to the mark," Michael pointed out.

"Whatever his title, we wouldn't want to disappoint our public," said Geoff. "Go talk to your friend at the shop. See if we can get some sort of glass covering so the punters can take a butchers."

"That's a bit morbid, don't you think?" asked Ignatius.

"It'll pull in punters," Pete pointed out. "And 'e's not actually there anymore. It's not like they'll be lookin' at 'is remains while they're reliev'in' themselves."

Ignatius conceded. "As you wish. Steve, Michael, if you see nothing inappropriate with this scheme, then please proceed."

04SEP2001 Tuesday

0100 – A campground in Northern England

"Nice having that full moon to see by," Grace commented as she and Simon ambled along the country footpath.

"Yeah, it's good to be able to see where we're going," Simon agreed.

"Even if we don't know where we're going," Grace added.

"Next time we have a chance, let's be sure to nick a map," Simon suggested.

They walked in silence for a few minutes and then Simon suddenly stopped as Grace continued on for a few steps.

"Si, what'd . . ." Grace began.

Simon put his fingers to his lips to silence Grace, which had the desired effect. He then pointed ahead and just to the left. Grace returned to his side and followed his finger. Off in the distance were three tents in a small copse of trees.

"Just some tents," whispered Grace as quietly as she could.

"Look above the tents," Simon ordered quietly.

"Trees," Grace observed.

"Look again."

It took a few seconds, but Grace eventually observed a rucksack hanging from a rope. It took only a few seconds more for her to trace the other end of the rope as being tethered to the trunk of the tree.

"Yeah, I see it now," Grace said.

"By the way, do you smell something?" asked Simon.

"Smoke from the fire . . . Is that a bit of weed I'm getting a whiff of?"

Simon nodded. "I have an idea."

Five minutes later, Simon was treading ever so slowly so as to position himself directly under the rucksack. Reaching his destination, he put a small parcel on the ground, stood erect and made a signal to Grace.

Being more adept at spatial coordination, she was the obvious choice to undo the knot which held the rope and thus she began examining it. In order to get a closer look, she adjusted her footing on the roots of the great oak tree and, in so doing, made some noise.

Simon clearly heard voices within one of the tents, and although he could not hear the entire conversation, he was certain he heard the word 'squirrels' in a dismissive tone. He signalled to Grace to continue.

It was only a matter of seconds for her to undo the knot, but the rope slipped away before she could grab it. Simon, although not quite prepared, adjusted quickly and caught the pack. Instantly, he departed the copse of trees, the rope dragging along behind him. The pair of them were well beyond sight before a head managed to stick out of one of the tents and shine a torch on the situation.

"Oh, bummer," noted the camper as she braved exiting the tent. "Malcolm! Someone's nicked our pack!" she complained. "Come have a look."

Malcolm came out of the tent, wrapped in a blanket. "Blimey, Nance. Guess it wasn't squirrels after all."

"Probably for the best we didn't investigate," she said. "Could've gone quite bad."

"Hey, look, they left something," Malcolm noticed a packet on the ground and picked it up.

"Eww," Nance groaned. "Don't touch it! It's a bag they put, erm . . . female doodahs in – and it's been opened."

"Don't think it's anything dangerous," Malcolm observed, opening the bag. "Ah, look – it's a stick of weed."

"Are you sure?"

"Here, have a whiff. Looks like a full ounce as well."

"Is it?"

"Oh, yeah. This gear could pay for all of our gear!"

"Oh, look," Nance observed. "They wrote 'thank you' on the side of the bag. How considerate."

0900 – Newburg Hardware Store

By this point, Steve was on a first name basis with the district sales representative at the hardware store. He particularly liked him because, unlike most salesmen he had to deal with, this one didn't try to sell him anything. He merely provided the information asked for and offered any information he thought was relevant, but he never actually pushed anything on Steve. This was why nearly two thousand pounds in commissions had been forthcoming from the refurbishment of the Rialto.

"Good morning, Steve. What can I do for you today?" asked the salesman.

"We've got this floor, see. And there's a big hole in it . . ." Steve was explaining to the salesman.

"How big is this hole?" asked the salesman.

"About five feet long and a bit more than a foot wide and a foot deep."

"Concrete floor or wood?"

"Concrete with a tiled surface. It's in the gents."

"Go on."

"Well, we want to put something transparent like perspex over it so people can walk over it and see the cavity."

"No, not perspex. That'll scuff up and you won't be able to see through it in a week. Laminated is what you want," the salesman suggested. "How thick is it from the top of the tile to the cement base?"

"Haven't measured, be honest, but I'm sure it's just under an inch," Steve replied.

"Is there anything fragile or valuable in this . . . cavity?"

"No. It's just a hole."

"Two centimetre thick should be enough," the salesman advised. "Someone would have to hit it with a maul to damage that. It'll still scuff up from the traffic and so on, but you'll probably only have to replace it once a year or so. Not a big job though."

"Right. Ta for that. I'll get back to you on that."

"Might I ask? Is this anything to do with the Hodge discovery?"

"Yes, it is. We're thinking of using glass to cover the depression where his body was found, so the patrons can have a butcher's."

The salesman suddenly seemed very eager. "Tell you what. Since you've been such an excellent customer, I'll sell you the glass and material at cost, we'll make up a nice little plaque, saying 'spot where Nicholas Hodge was found' and throw in all the labour for free, for one little favour."

"Which is?"

"Our store gets a little by-line on the plaque. Small letters, 'courtesy of'. Something like that."

"Sounds all right. What about repairs or replacements?"

"We'll redo it, same deal, every year. Wholesale for the glass. Labour is free."

"Sounds very interesting. Could you give me something in writing?"

1400 – The tré

Ignatius was backstage at The tré, looking in the log. "So who's on to play the Mouse?"

"I am," said Wanda FærFyxe.

"And who's the Fox?"

"That'd be me," Eric BlostMus raised his hand.

"That's absurd. Why have the Mouse play the fox and vice versa?" asked Ignatius.

"Because that's what you scheduled us for," Wanda stated. "And that's why we asked you to have our parts exchanged."

"Oh," Ignatius replied intelligently. "Right. You both know the parts?"

"Yes," Wanda and Eric chorused impatiently.

"All right, get on with it then," Ignatius ordered, making the change in the log. He left to take his seat in the audience.

"And keep your hands to yourself, you little furvert," Wanda warned Tim.

Opening scene: Mouse nibbling on crust of cheese or the like.

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of The Vixen and the Mouse.

Vixen sneaks up on Mouse and pounces on him

Mouse

Oh, spare me, wise and clever Vixen!

Vixen

Spare you? For what reason?

Mouse

Oh, clemency please. Perhaps I might someday save your life!

Vixen

Save my life? How could you, a small and defenceless mouse, save my life?

Mouse

I did have a cousin once, who was to be gobbled up by a Lioness. But she let him go on hearing his pleas for mercy.

Vixen

And then?

Mouse

One day the Lioness was caught in ropes by men and my cousin did gnaw upon the ropes to free her.

Vixen

A touching story and I'm sure it's true, but I have kits to feed and I cannot let them starve.

Mouse

But if you spare me, everyone will love you.

Vixen

Sometimes, to do what I require,
Is not to do what all admire.

Narrator

Thus the fate of The Vixen and the Mouse.
Draw from it what you may.
Until next we meet – good day!

"Honestly, Wanda," Eric complained. "I'm lying, face-down, on the floor, with you kneeling on top of me. Was it absolutely necessary to twist my arm behind my back?"

"You're supposed to be the prey," Wanda answered, unconcerned. "And I'm supposed to be dominant."

"But it bleeding *hurt*," Eric moaned.

"Oh, stop whinging, you little Rodent," Wanda dismissed. "Just play your part."

Eric simmered for a moment. "As you like," he muttered.

1900 – Rialto Bar

That evening, the Partnership was breaking in the new bar works of the Rialto by having the first pints out of the taps as Steve was briefing them on the terms of the deal with the Hodge site.

"Not to sound ungrateful but our labour's free anyway, so it's no great deal, izzit," Geoff pointed out.

"Geoff, don't be a slave driver," Clare pointed out. "We've got enough to do as it is and we're still not gonna be completely finished by the time we open."

"And we do get a discount on the glass," Steve pointed out. "I mean, it's not a whole lot, but waste not . . ."

Geoff pursed his lips in thought. "All right. We'll have 'em do it, then, if no one objects," he acquiesced.

"Action, Steve to have glass installed," Linda said as she tapped it into her laptop. "Next item, auditions."

"Michael? 'As anyone new called for an audition?" asked Rachael.

"Sorry Rache. Not a word," Michael replied.

"That's not good," Clare stated. "Today's the fourth of September and we open on Friday the 14th. We've ten days and no opening act yet."

"Maybe we could put on an act," suggested Steve innocently.

There was an immediate dismissal of Steve's idea from the entire party.

"Forget it," Slide advised. "Except for that band we auditioned, I think it safe to say that we are the biggest bunch of no-talents the world has ever seen."

"Oh, Slide, how can you say that?" Sandra chastised. "You're *very* talented at steel guitar; Geoff and Linda aren't exactly amateurs, either."

"I'm okay, but I'll never match the humans, will I," Slide mentioned humbly.

"That's just because you don't have those long, spidery fingers," Linda pointed out. "And at least you have five of them," she said, holding up her four-fingered hand.

"Regardless, we're hardly an act," Geoff mentioned. "We'd have to rehearse for ages and develop a repertoire that would last longer than ten minutes."

"Actually, I was talking about the plays," Steve clarified.

"Plays?" asked Clare.

"He means the Portrayals," Desiree corrected.

"Yeah, that's right," Steve said. "They caused a huge stir at the Midsummer fete. People were talking about it for ages."

"That's true," Michael agreed. "I saw you do the Portrayals as well. Even though it was the crappiest writing I've ever seen, you made it look quite good – a bit campy, but quite good fun, honestly."

"Thank you for your gracious – and undeserved – compliment," Ignatius acknowledged. "But our only experience is the Portrayals themselves. And let's face facts; we're not going to keep any audience with two-minute acts. Especially with a troupe of twelve."

"But there must be *some* alternative to that awful band," Gina complained. "Apart from the money we'll lose on that lot for just the night, we'll get the wrong sort of reputation. None of the good acts will want to book us for gigs."

Angus spoke deliberately. "I feel gart ta point oot that Bloody Marvellous will make us money. I've checked aboot an they ayeways pull a huge crowd. Whether we like their music or no, oor ain tastes winna pay the bills. We bring the public what *they* want an if we dinna care for it, that's oor problem."

"You'll forgive me for pointing this out," Jess began quietly, "but Angus is absolutely right. Our mission is to make money, not to shepherd the musical tastes of Newburg."

The others sighed and a few grumbled but they did eventually agree that Jess and Angus were right.

"So do we give the band a call and tell them they're on?" asked Steve. "Or do you want to wait a little bit."

"How much notice do they need?" asked Ignatius of Steve.

"They said they've been getting pretty steady work of late," said Steve. "But they also said they were very keen on opening for the Rialto."

"So, how much notice do they need?" asked Ignatius again.

"They also said that even though they were keen to open the Rialto as the first act, they'll still charge the same . . ."

"What's their rate?" interrupted Pete.

"An even grand," Steve replied.

All of the Frith, except Linda, were gobsmacked.

"A *grand*, did you say?" asked Geoff. "As in a *thousand* quid? For a night of banging out that naff noise?"

"Yeah, it's about the going rate," Michael answered. "Even a bit low. But we'll easily make it up on the door."

"How're we gonna do that?" asked Clare incredulously.

"We charge five quid a head," replied Michael. "We can net a thousand if we pack the place."

"Five quid? To see that *crap* they dare to call music!" exclaimed Gina. "They just played on Midsummer Day – for free!"

"If they'd never been heard, I'd've thought we'd a chance," Sandra conjectured. "But who'd want to pay to see them after hearing how bloody awful they are!"

Michael continued. "The local rag said there were two thousand people in the park to see them. And they stayed the whole time. They played three encores."

"You'll pardon me if I might suggest . . ." began Jess.

"Right, awbody!" Angus interrupted, slapping his hand on the table. "I've an intimation ta mak. As o the nou, Miss Jess has hauf ma share."

This announcement caused quite a stir.

"Now, just a minute, you can't just give her half a share," Ignatius protested.

"An why no?" asked Angus. "Is ma share. I'll do as I please with it."

"I don't think we've covered this point," Linda mentioned. "Shall we have a vote?"

"Motion to allow shares to be divided and distributed," Slide tabled.

"Second," Desiree said.

"All in favour?" Linda prompted.

"Aye," said everyone except Ignatius.

"Motion carried," Linda announced, typing in a note.

"Very well," Ignatius conceded. "Far be it from me to fly in the face of the Partnership's will. Congratulations, Jess. You finally have what you wanted – or at least half." He then looked at Angus. "I assume you have a specific reason for this act of generosity?"

"Aye," Angus answered. "I am thankrif ta Jess, an na mistake. But I didna do this juist acause o that. I did it for the alluvus." He turned his attention back to Jess who was still looking at the floor. "Jess. Leuk at me."

Jess couldn't bring herself to look up.

"I said . . . leuk . . . at . . . me!"

Jess forced herself to sit up straight and look Angus in the eye. It was painfully apparent that she was uncomfortable but she bit her lip and did as she was told.

"Jess – You are nou a paid-up pairtner in this endeavour. What th' fook is all this 'forgimme this' an 'pardon me that' nonsense, eh? You are a necessary part o this group. We want yer input juist as much as mines or Geoff's or Ig's or onybody. I went ta the bather for ye acause we're wantin someone with a bit o cauld-hearted grippiness an rig-bane ta 'em, like ma auld man – no like this lily-livered lot."

"Gosh," Jess muttered, "thanks."

"What happent ta the Vixen what shored ta champ ma goolies when I didna walk the straucht an nairae? Whaur is she the nou? We need her – an we need her the day.

"An leukit yersel, guan all saft an fozie on us, all suddent-like. Thir milk-lappin kittlins wad give the Rialto away gin it wasna for ye – an masel, o course. But I canna hauld all their noses ta the grindstane alane, can I? I needs yer help!

"Nou, stap clootin yer clockwork moose about an speak yer piece!"

Jess looked a little stunned. She shook her head, not to convey a negative, but to remove the astonishment that had filled her head from Angus' tirade.

"Erm, right. Sorry . . ."

"An stap apologisin!" Angus scolded.

"Yes. Exc . . . As I was saying, I move we book the band," Jess finally blurted out.

"Wait!" Ignatius halted the proceedings. "Steve – how much notice do they need? No explanations, no digressions. Just . . . a number of days, please."

Steve shrugged. "One week."

"Right," Ignatius suggested. "I suggest we wait until a week before opening and then give them a call if nothing better turns up."

"I say we give them a call now," Jess argued.

"Why now? Maybe someone better will appear," said Ignatius.

"We've waited a week," Jess said. "If there were someone else, they'd've called by now. Why waste the money on the advertisement?"

"The ad's free," mentioned Steve.

"Beside the point," Jess returned. "We need to get on with our lives. Tell Bloody Marvellous they can play the opening night, try and negotiate a better price with them, since they're so keen to open the Rialto and if someone else comes along, they can play the next night. Motion."

"Second?" Linda asked without looking up from her laptop.

Gina raised her hand.

"All in favour, Aye?" Linda asked.

Everyone raised their hand, including Ignatius.

"I'll ask them about their fee, but I don't think they'll negotiate," Steve warned.

"How do you talk to them? Face to face? Post? Phone?" asked Jess.

"Mobile," Steve replied.

"Call them. Now," Jess ordered with narrowly slitted eyes, her ears slightly back. "I'll change their point of view."

Ever since her expulsion from the master bedroom of Nora, Jess had felt a slow slide of despair. Her ultimate goal of re-establishing a meaningful relationship with Ignatius was slipping further and further away. In desperation, she had played the hypocrisy card to no avail and, out of ideas and seeing no other options, decided to be deferential and polite. It was her hope that, over time, such behaviour might once again land her in the good graces of Ignatius but the more she played along, the more she realised how futile her efforts were.

It had only been a week, but she was exhausted. It was no more her nature to exhibit humility and civility than it was to scrub all the floors in Nora, and from her own experience, either task drained her just the same.

Angus' fulmination had become her turning point. Realising that being a 'good girl' might one day, in the very distant future, win her heart's desire, she would not, and could not, continue the charade indefinitely. At some point, she would either revert to being a 'bad girl' or go insane; there could be no happy outcome. Even though she recognised it as a setback, she cut her losses and made her decision.

And now she was presented with an opportunity to let off a little pressure by driving her own metaphorical, high-pressure steamroller over someone in what she considered to be a positive and constructive manner, at least based on her own singular, ethical standards.

Steve opened his mobile, dialled and waited. "Hello, is this Stig? . . . Hi there, this is Steve, from the Rialto . . . Listen, we're reconsidering you as the opening act at the Rialto, but I'm going to have to let you talk to our bookings agent . . . Her name's Jess . . . It's not a common name for men, I'm led to believe . . ." He sighed and looked apologetically at Jess. "Look, I'll put you on . . . Here she is." Steve handed the phone to Jess.

"Hello? This is Jess FærFyxe . . ." Her ears flattened. "Get a life, sunshine. I'm way out of your league. Besides, I'm spoken for."

"Not by me, she isn't," Ignatius whispered defensively to the others.

"Ready to talk business, or are you still busy fondling yourself? . . . Listen, about your fee . . . It isn't? Gee, that's too bad, because we're sort of strapped for cash these days, so we'd like some sort of affirmation that you can actually draw a crowd . . . Guarantee? What kind of guarantee? . . . Your word, my arse! Look, skippy, how about one-fifty a head? If we're packed, you get over eight hundred quid. That's nearly two hundred per each band member, which is far more than you deserve if I might say . . . A minimum? What if only ten people show up? . . . Yes, but that doesn't protect us. We've got to make a living and frankly – well, we *have* seen you play . . . Oh, get your head out your arse! You're having a laugh . . . Fine, be a dickhead. We'll find another act, but I was under the impression that the virgin act at the Rialto . . . Oh, you will? Good.

Have your agent drop by and we'll give him a copy of our contract . . . Look, you smarmy turd, you can go and give your 'word up' to your mum . . . No, I *don't* trust you. I don't care if you're the fucking Queen, we don't do oral contracts. Either you sign our contract or. . . You'll have it tomorrow? Good boy, spanky. And, by the way, the stage lights come on at nine. Be under them *on time* or you don't get paid, understood? . . . Right, then. Goodbye."

Jess snapped the mobile closed and handed it back to Steve. Her eyes closed momentarily and a blissful little smile crept across her face. "That . . . felt . . . soooo goooooood," she cooed in a quiet, almost inaudible voice.

Rachael, who was not usually given to being intimidated, leaned over and held Michael. "Michael, she's scarin' me," she whispered.

Michael patted her hand to comfort her. "Be all right in a moment."

After a brief pause, Geoff dared to venture a question. "So? What happened?"

Jess opened her eyes, her smile intact. "We charge five per head, they get thirty percent – one-fifty a head. We're guaranteed at least some return. If the place jams, we get over a thousand just on the floor. Then there's the box seats – that's where we can make some major cash. Somehow, I just *knew* the word 'virgin' would touch a nerve."

"Must say, she certainly knows the finer arts of manipulation," Clare acknowledged.

"You needn't tell me about *that*," Ignatius confirmed. He turned to Jess. "And if you're spoken for, who is the unlucky chap?"

"Decent bloke. Gorgeous, sexy, witty. Great sense of style."

Ignatius smiled at the veiled compliment.

"Nothing like you at all," Jess added.

"And on to our next point," Steve said, reaching into his portfolio. "I have a contract from our hardware supplier about a display for the Hodge-Hole. Thought you might want to take a look at it." He handed the document to Ignatius.

Ignatius put on his spectacles and opened the contract as Jess read over his shoulder.

"They've got some nerve," Jess stated almost immediately.

"Have they?" asked Ignatius.

"Look here," she pointed out a clause. "The plaque shall read 'This depression is where blah-de-blah-blah, courtesy of thus-and-such.'"

"We agreed they'd get a byline for the discount and the labour," Steve mentioned.

"They could put the first part in tiny little letters and their name could occupy ninety percent of the plaque," Jess pointed out.

"Yes, they could do, at that," Ignatius agreed. "Better change that wording." He pulled out a pen and made a note.

"And look at this part," Jess pointed again. "'Acceptor' – that's us – 'shall pay for all materials and costs for installation.' What's that mean? I thought we were just paying wholesale for the glass. This wording could include the plaque, the labour, framing, who-knows-what-else?"

"Very observant," Ignatius allowed, making another note.

"And I noticed something that's *not* on here," Jess added. "What if they just lift their tail for the job? We've put a lot of work into the Rialto to make it a first-class venue, and then they come in and stick in some piece of rubbish? Even if it is in our gent's bog, it doesn't mean that it should be a piece of crap."

"I quite agree," Ignatius said. "Yes, there should definitely be a quality clause. I'll write one in and you can review it."

"And while you're at it," Jess added sharply, "Put in a deadline clause as well. Make it due one week before opening, so we can get it fixed if there's something wrong."

"There's the Jess we ken," Angus said patting her thigh.

"I move," Sandra began, "that we make Jess our bookings agent."

"And I append," Geoff added, "that we make her in charge of our work schedules."

"Me? Why me? I don't want either of those jobs," Jess rebuffed.

"What you *want* is irrelevant," Sandra answered. "Our goal is to recover Grace and Simon. To facilitate that goal, we need to make the Rialto as successful as possible. Thus we need the most qualified person at each position."

"But I've never done bookings before in my life," Jess argued.

"I think you've just demonstrated your mettle at negotiation," Sandra pointed out.

"Manipulation," Ignatius quietly corrected.

"And from what I saw, you rather enjoyed it," Sandra continued, ignoring Ignatius' dig. "As I recall, you specifically stated as much."

"Well . . . yeah," Jess squirmed, "I may have said something along those lines."

"Think of the possibilities," Sandra cajoled. "With the approval – nay, the *expectation* – of everyone in the Partnership, you'll be allowed to bully overpaid musicians and bilk other people out of money on a daily basis. Surely you couldn't pass on an offer like that?"

"And Ig claims *I'm* the manipulative one?" Jess asked rhetorically. "Okay, I'll give the bookings gig a shot, if you insist," she conceded, "but why should I be in charge of the work schedules?"

"Quite simple," Geoff answered. "The construction bit is done, for the most part, anyway. I might be able to head up a building crew, but I know sod all about what goes on in a venue."

"And I do?" asked Jess.

"Setting up the work schedules isn't complicated at all," Steve said.

"Then *you* do it," Jess suggested. "You've more experience at it than anyone else, after all."

"Jess, it would mean a great deal to me if you would do this for me," Steve pleaded.

Jess thought she detected a note of desperation in his voice. "But, why me? Why not Linda? She's got good organisational skills. Or Pete – he's been doing the work schedule at the Kettle for ages."

"Please?" Steve appealed.

"Oh, siffing . . . Okay, fine, I'll do the bookings *and* the work schedules," Jess finally conceded. "But if I'm going to be dragooned into doing these things, then I'm going to make an amendment to the motion as well; you can bitch, sorry Sandra, about your schedules or the bookings all day long and I won't give a rat's arse. But the moment anyone second-guesses me, says they can do a better job or goes over my head, then the job becomes theirs. Are we clear on this point?"

"All in favour?" Linda asked instantly.

"Aye," chorused the group as one.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," Jess assumed.

1900 – Snooty Fox Pub

Stig hung up the phone. His mates were gathered around at the pub and had been hanging on every word.

"Didja hear?" he asked. "Didja hear? We're gonna get eight hundred quid for a night's work!"

They all shouted and punched the air in celebration.

"That's four times what we got at the park at Midsummer!" Stig said. "I toldja it was a good idea to ask for a grand. They think they're getting a good deal!"

2300 – Rialto Kitchen

Jess and Angus were exploiting a quiet nightcap just so they could enjoy a skull session when Steve walked by the kitchen on his way to the bedroom.

"Oh, good evening, Jess, Angus," Steve waved. "See you in the morning."

"Steve?" Jess called to him.

Steve returned to the kitchen. "Yes? Something I can do for you?"

"Yes, there is," Jess answered. "Have a seat for a second."

Steve obediently complied.

"Why were you so keen on me taking the scheduling job?" asked Jess. "You said yourself it's not that difficult."

"I said it's not complicated," Steve corrected.

"And this distinction is important," Jess said, "why?"

"In terms of complexity, it's a matter of putting enough boxes in the right positions and then filling the boxes with names. The first part is dead simple. And for most people, the second part should be easy as well. But to me, it's always been the most difficult part of being a manager."

"And why is that?" asked Jess.

"Is acause our Steve is a great, saft, oosie kittlin," Angus mentioned.

"At least you didn't call me a 'wee poof'," Steve said.

"Aye, you're that as well," Angus added. He continued his explanation to Jess. "Y'see, he's so concernt that somebody will girn, he's afearnt to tell 'em what ta do. Is why he works hissself all day, to tak oop the slack."

Jess looked at Steve in disbelief. "You mean you actually do other people's jobs, just because they're slackers?"

"No," Steve denied. "Well . . . sometimes."

"Try naur ivery day, ye wee poof," Angus scolded.

"Not *every* day," Steve objected. "Most of them, I'll admit, but . . . "

"I'm not going to even ask who the slackers are," Jess stated. "I'd want revenge and that would be bad." She patted Steve's hand. "Not to worry, champ, consider that weight off your shoulders. I'll be the slave-driver from now on."

"Thanks, Jess," Steve said gratefully. "It *does* mean a lot to me."

"Don't mention it," Jess smiled. "Seriously, don't. If I keep doing good things, people might start taking advantage of me as well."

05SEP2001 Wednesday

1400 – *The tré*

A City Mouse and a Village Mouse, seated at a table.

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of the City Mouse and the Village Mouse

One day a City Mouse and a Village Mouse were discussing how nice their lives were. The City Mouse invited his friend to visit for dinner that evening.

City Mouse

Oh, we shall have the very finest food and the best wine.

[Both exit, stage r]

Narrator

And so they went to the home of the City Mouse. But upon arrival, there was bad news.

[Both enter, stage l]

City Mouse

Oh, dear! It appears the Rats have stolen all of my food! And they have drunk my wine!

Village Mouse

Stolen it? Dear me, do you mean to say there are thieves about?

City Mouse

Sadly, it is so.

Village Mouse

No matter. Let us go to my home. We shall have simple fare, but I am certain it will not be stolen when we get there.

[Both exit, stage l]

Narrator

And so, they went to the home of the Village Mouse. At the gate of the village, they were stopped by a guard.

Guard *[A Dog, enters stage r]*

The term 'Dog' used in the official script found in the Common Book of Portrayal has provoked numerous arguments from various authorities. A sizeable minority take it to mean a sapient version of a domesticated dog, such

as a Schnauzer or a Terrier. A slim majority have countered that no such thing exists, thus it refers to either a male Fox or Wolf. Although the majority are correct in their premise, their conclusion is still debatable.

There were no Dogs (in the domestic sapient sense) in Otterstow, nor The Kingdom nor, for that matter, anywhere in the whole of Allegory. None would dare admit affiliation with a subservient pet. Ignatius generally tried to have everyone play their own Genra as much as possible, but this was the exception; he would be quite sure that no Lupan nor Vulpan would ever play the Guard in this particular portrayal, as it would be quite offensive to the actor. Thus, Pete was doing the part, wearing a little mask and a tail clipped to his belt.

Papers, please.

Village Mouse [*Shows his papers to the guard*]

This is my guest for the day.

Guard

He must be gone by sunset.

Village Mouse

Very well. I shall see to it. [To City Mouse] You see, we are very secure here.

[*All exit, stage l*]

Narrator

And then they are stopped by the police.

[*Mice enter, stage l*]

Police [*A Cat, enters stage r*]

As with the term 'Dog' used earlier in the Portrayal, the term 'Cat' also inspired controversy. The minority that held the Schnauzer school of thought said the inclusion of the term 'Cat' was proof of their tenet. The majority that touted the 'male Fox' theory countered that 'Cat' could mean almost any Feline, such as a Lynx or Jaguar or Tiger – or, rather glibly, a Jazz musician. At this point in the argument, the Schnauzerites would politely suggest asking a Tiger their opinion on the matter.

As with Dogs, there were no Cats to be found, so Doctor Alex BrookMarten was doing a very credible job.

Where are you going?

Village Mouse

To my home for dinner.

Police

Who is this person?

Village Mouse

He is my guest.

Police

Open your coats so that I might check for weapons, both of you.

[*Both mice open their coats for the police to check.*]

Be on your way.

[*Exits stage l, Mice exit stage r*]

Narrator

At last, they arrive at the home of the Village Mouse.

[*Both Mice enter, stage r*]

Village Mouse

Ah, at last we are here. One moment and I shall fetch dinner.

Narrator

The Village Mouse had barely uttered these words when two police appeared.

[Police enters, stage r, Guard enters, stage l]

Police

[To Village Mouse] You shall come with us.

Guard

[To City Mouse] You shall go home.

City Mouse

Where are you taking him? What did he do wrong?

Police

Ask more questions and you shall be next.

City Mouse

Although I fear coarse criminals,
My liberties are in one piece.
Far worse are thugs with uniforms
That act like the police!

Narrator

Thus the fate of the City Mouse and the Village Mouse.
Draw from it what you may.
Until next we meet – good day!

Ignatius waited outside and thanked the actors as they departed. As soon as Eric BlostMus exited (he had played the Village Mouse), Desiree suggested that they go to his home for some more 'modelling', to which Eric eagerly agreed.

Ignatius thought this slightly peculiar, and as most people might do, he began to mentally speculate what might be going on during these 'modelling' sessions. Reasoning that they were both adults and that it was not his business, he retreated to the Black Kettle for a late lunch.

1500 – Rialto Kitchen

"Couldn't 'elp but notice," Pete began. He and Ignatius were alone in the kitchen of the Rialto, having a cup of tea.

"Yes?"

"Ya seen Desi swannin' off wif Eric?" Pete mentioned. "They're spendin' an awful lotta time together."

"I had noticed, yes," Ignatius agreed.

"And?"

"And it's none of my business," Ignatius stated. "Two adults, that sort of thing."

"Just sayin', is all," Pete muttered.

"So, we open Friday week, do we?" Ignatius asked, officially changing the subject.

"That we do," Pete acknowledged. "Steve's got the new security system in. 'Ave ya seen that lot? We can all talk to each ovver over them headphones. An' there's cameras everywhere, what can even record an' all."

"Can they?" Ignatius asked in amazement.

"Oh, yeah. I'm tellin' ya, it's the whole Village Mouse bit! Ya can see everythin'! Even the loos! Even the ladies' loo! Not in the stalls, o' course, but still . . ."

Ignatius bristled. "Yes, I did see the cameras. Can't say I care much for any of it."

"Shame it 'as to be that way," Pete said. "But Steve's right. We gotta protect ourselves. If there's a fight or what-not, we got it all to show the Oi' Bill."

"Whatever happened to privacy?" Ignatius groaned. "Don't care for someone staring over my shoulder all the time, even if I'm not doing anything wrong."

"Fair enough," Pete agreed. "But when ya get mugged, you'll be grateful it's there."

"I understand that, and that's the only reason I put up with it. The thing that irks me is that there is so much possibility for abuse. Jess could tell a few stories from CE, I'm sure."

"Yeah, but this is Newburg, not The Kingdom. There's no CE here."

"I'd bet pounds to pints that somewhere in Reality, there's some assemblage just like Civil Enquiries that's willing to sacrifice our right to privacy for 'security'," Ignatius countered, "or whatever they call it."

"No argument there," Pete answered. "But the cameras belong to us. If there's any abuse, we're the abusers."

"Even more to worry about," Ignatius muttered, sipping his tea.

"Ya think one of us could get the goods on someone?" Pete asked.

"Anyone can be corrupted," Ignatius pointed out.

Pete nodded. "Ain't that the troof. Just 'ave to keep an eye on each other, then."

"We probably shall," Ignatius confirmed. "We have the cameras for it, after all."

12SEP2001 Wednesday

1200 – Rialto

It was a mere two days before opening and there was still plenty of work to be done. For the past week, everyone had been putting in sixteen hour days, taking the time to eat only when Ignatius was monitoring the Portrayals. Even Ignatius was sneaking in a sarnie or two while he was sitting in his box watching the Portrayals in the dark, with no one looking.

On this particular Wednesday, however, something unusual happened. Desiree, Michael, Angus and Steve did not show up for work at the appointed hour. The other members of the Partnership forged ahead, wondering to themselves if there was something wrong with them. It was never even

considered that they would skip out on a day of work, especially at such a crucial juncture.

The Frith of the Partnership were taking a brief break from their work just after the morning Portrayal and were discussing the absence of the four.

"Must be something very serious," Geoff mentioned. "They wouldn't just bunk off like this. But I can't understand why they don't give us a bell and tell us what's going on. Completely unlike them."

"I hope none of 'em's come to harm," Gina said.

Just then, the four humans of the Partnership slowly shuffled into the room.

"Where the sif have you slackers been?" asked Jess.

"We've been up most of the night. There was, erm, a bit of bad news yesterday," Michael said very sombrely.

"A bit of bad news'?" Desiree repeated sarcastically, keeping her tone level. "I know you Brits have a gift for understatement, but I think 'A bit of bad news' would be like saying Iggy is a bit full of himself."

"I say!" Ignatius protested. "I'm not all that bad!"

"I'm sorry, Ig. That was unfair of me. My apologies," Desiree admitted. "I'm just tired, is all."

Ignatius folded his arms indignantly and looked off in some other direction. "Don't know why I even bother to try some days . . ."

"Anyway, it was a complete calamity," Desiree finished.

"Well, go on then, tell us about it," Pete remarked. "Don't leave us in the dark."

"Go to all the trouble to make oneself more humble . . ." Ignatius continued muttering, staring out the window with a scowl.

"Well, difficult to explain, honestly," Michael began, running his hand over his head, nervously. "I'm sure you're familiar with aeroplanes?"

"For all the good it does, still getting called 'snob' and being told I'm full of myself . . ."

"Go on then, what 'appened?" Pete prompted.

"Well," Steve cleared his throat. "Some very horrible men took control of a few of them and flew them into some buildings."

At this, Ignatius turned to Steve and a look of genuine concern crossed his face. "I take it this is not their normal method of stopping?" he asked.

"You would take it correctly," Desiree replied, practically snarling. "It killed everyone on the planes and damn near everyone in the buildings. Probably several thousand people, in total. They think there was a fourth plane that just crashed in a field somewhere but they're not sure just now."

There was a brief but very uncomfortable silence.

"Why?" asked Clare. "Why would anyone want to do such a thing?"

"It's a bit complicated," Steve began, "and I can't even say that I understand all the details but it basically revolves around a dispute over something to do with religion. Apparently some misguided individuals are of the belief that, by doing this act – which is somehow supposed to convince the world that they're right – they'll gain instant access to heaven in the afterlife."

"Oooohh," all of the Frith chorused in understanding.

The four humans looked at each other, as if to ask the other if they knew the significance of this response.

"Is there something we should know about this?" asked Desiree.

"Do any of you consider yourself very . . . religious?" Clare asked.

"Oh, aye," Angus readily professed. "I couldna face one day at a time, ithergates. An mebbe the ithers may think is juist some cantrip, but I'll believe 'til I'm sax feet unner."

"Sorry, but I'm convinced we're all just some sort of sapient coincidence," Michael asserted. "I have great faith in my atheism and I avoid church religiously."

Steve considered for a moment. "I do go to services . . . occasionally." He paused for a moment. "I do believe that there might be some higher power that should be held responsible for creating all this muck. But I don't think he intervenes in our lives and I can't honestly say if there is an afterlife, one way or the other."

"Well, I'm a believer," Desiree answered. "I believe in the teachings of our Saviour, i.e., that we should be good to one another, love our enemies and so on. The rest of it is just a bunch of shinola as far as I'm concerned."

Ignatius spoke. "We only have a handful of Portrayals concerning religion here in Allegory," he stated. "Now, we would never state that a religion is wrong or that it's not genuine or whatever. However, we do make it clear that a belief is just that – a belief. A faith, not based on logic or evidence. Just . . . a belief. And inasmuch as it is not founded on the rules of rationality, it's not allowed as a pretext to allow one to exert one's point of view onto others."

"In other words," Michael said, "you don't allow religion to be an excuse for someone to act like a complete and utter bastard."

"In summary, yes," Ignatius agreed.

"I agree completely," Steve responded. "You'll pardon me for asking, but somehow, I think there's a little more to this than you're letting on."

"Steve, love," Linda said, taking his hand (which did not go unnoticed by Desiree). "You know how we've always said you're not like the humans in Otterstow?"

"Yes."

"Well, humans bear a bit of a stigma here in Allegory," Linda said.

"Do they?" Steve asked. "I have noticed that humans are rather submissive here. I'd been meaning to ask about that. Is that why most of them can't read?"

"Oh, they can read," Ignatius replied. "It's just that no one has taught them yet."

"So, what's the deal with humans?" asked Desiree.

"Basically, years ago – and I'm talking nearly two thousand, mind," Clare began, "humans lived among us and we were pretty much in harmony as we are now. Although there's some argument to that, but beside the point. Anyways, we're all getting along and then the humans decide that there's a god, a higher power, a greater being. Someone that made all of us. And they start to spread the word. Now, the general premise is that this 'god' loves us and he wants us to be happy and that we should all be kind and so on – all very

noble and good ideas. This religion develops a very large following, mostly of humans.

"But then, some of the humans decide that those that don't believe should be punished or convinced otherwise. And they don't stop with humans, either. Then they start to gather the non-believers together and, erm . . ."

"Apply a little pressure to sway their opinions?" suggested Desiree.

"Yes, with the pressure being applied to some sensitive body part with a hot, sharp object. The thing is, humans are quite clever and they've got good hands. And once they'd decided that they're going to run things and it's going to be under their religion, they built terrible machines and inventions and the like to do horrible things.

"Unfortunately, for them at least, they were a *bit* outnumbered by the Frith," Clare continued. "It was a short, but very violent, war, which we call the Great Conflict.

"Now the old texts all say that every human was asked to make their peace with their fellow sapient. Those that did were allowed to stay. They could keep their religion, but they had to keep it to themselves.

"Those that chose otherwise were called the Zealots and were cast into the Pit of Reality, which should not surprise us if it were a portal just like the one we use to move between The tré and the Rialto.

"Not only humans went. Some of the Frith were Zealots as well and they went too. You may have noticed that there is a certain inequality among the Genra?"

Desiree answered. "I have noticed that carnivores seem to rank highest, followed by omnivores, then it gets a little blurry."

"I ken a major-mindit Brock wha seems ta think muckle o hissel," mentioned Angus.

"Everyone seems to think Foxes are full of themselves as well," Ignatius pointed out.

Michael continued. "I have also noticed that some Genra seem to be somewhat more down to earth. Some of them even have work-related names, like humans, whereas most have something pleasant, like a plant, or a colour or a geographic feature."

"Very observant, very observant," Geoff said. He looked at the others, impressed. "Nothing gets by this dude, eh? Quite right. Quite right." Picking up Clare's thread, he continued. "Now, dig this. It's not officially in the texts, but legend has it that the highest lieutenants of the humans went with them. And over time, they were enslaved as livestock or pets, bent to the needs and wills of the humans. That's why Sheep, Oxen, Goats – and some others – have work related names. Like . . ." Geoff looked upward as he tried to think of a name. "Tommy ShearSheep . . . Robert PullBison . . . Nigel HerdGoat. They still bear the disgrace of being associated with humans."

"Sounds horrible," Steve said.

"Just legend, that part," Geoff mentioned. "No actual record of it."

"You might also have noticed," added Slide, "that, although we do have cats and dogs as pets, there are no sapient Cats or Dogs. There are Lupans, such as Sandra and myself, of course, and some of the larger Felans and so on –

Leopards, for example – but no sapient counterparts to domestic cats and dogs."

"As I'm sure you've all noticed by now," mentioned Geoff, "it's a great insult to insinuate a Frith is a domestic animal, whether it's raised as livestock or, worst of all, a pet. Smacks of treason or servitude of the worst kind, like references to 'moggy' or 'bowser' or eating out of a bowl on the floor. Very rude."

"I understand that," Michael said. "But at the end of the day, you are . . ."

"Yes, a Suvan," Geoff said. "However, I distinguish myself as a Boar, being the complement to a wild boar, not a domesticated pig."

"Is there a difference?" asked Steve.

"Just as all domestic dogs are descended from feral wolves, all domestic swine are descended from feral boars," Desiree pointed out. "So, yes, they are the same species. But let's be honest – could you ever possibly mistake a Chihuahua for a wolf?"

"Wolves are far nicer animals than Chihuahuas," Michael opined.

"With that in mind, take a close look at Geoff. Notice the thick hair?" asked Desiree of Steve.

"Yes," Steve replied.

"The big tusks," Desiree pointed out as Geoff gave them a proud tweak with his thumb.

"Right. Tusks," confirmed Steve.

"Nice mane growing down his back?" Desiree said.

"Yes. Quite nice," Steve agreed.

"Ever see that on domestic swine?" Desiree asked.

"No. Can't say that I have," admitted Steve. "They're all fairly hairless. Sorry about that Geoff. Didn't mean to be rude."

"Nothing to concern yourself with, Steve," Geoff dismissed. "As we say, ignorance can be fixed."

"What about Horses? Equans?" asked Desiree, shifting the focus of the conversation. "What's Dawn's last name? RoseMearh? 'Rose' is hardly a work related name and I've seen horses on farms, even here in The Kingdom."

"No one gives 'em any aggro about it, 'cause they're a damn sight bigger, is why," Pete conjectured. "Even I'd think twice about changing blows with a Horse. It's a good job they behave themselves."

Ignatius put in. "Yes, well, their story is that horses earned their living through work, unlike the pets or food stock."

"Besides, there are so many exceptions, that it's pointless trying to make sense of it all. Anyway, to continue the story," Clare said, "of those humans that were allowed to stay . . ." She paused, and it was clear she was choosing her words carefully at this point, "it was never said directly, but it was implied that they would pay a price for their guilt-by-association. Ever since then, humans have been subjugated and bear the stigma of their violence."

Ignatius rang in again. "However, I feel free in stating, that there are only two groups that still subscribe to this point of view."

"And who would they be?" asked Steve.

"Those who would make a quid on cheap labour and those who are simply bloody-minded traditionalists," Ignatius answered. "The sad part is, there are a significant number of people in both of these groups who hold the reigns of power, so the situation is unlikely to change anytime soon."

"Do most people think of humans as being a bit thick?" asked Steve.

"Thaddeus certainly does," Ignatius mentioned.

"I don't think they're thick at all," Linda said.

"Are they, in actuality, as dim as they're made out to be?" Steve asked.

"Most certainly not," Ignatius stated emphatically. "I've conversed with more than a few humans, who, although lacking in formal education, are possessed of good, keen minds. You've dealt with Vince. He's quite clever, honestly. Frankly, it's a wasted resource to keep them uneducated."

"If you look at Reality, compared to our world," said Clare, "they're more or less as advanced as we are. They even have things that we haven't, such as microwaves ovens, mobile telephones, automobiles – dozens of things. Having fingers like spiders, being able to tinker with things, do fine work and all helps in that regard, but they've got to have the brains to figure it out in the first place, don't they. They must be clever. And you can't convince me that humans in Allegory aren't the same as humans in Reality."

"I agree with the notion that humans are as clever as we are," Linda admitted, "but the reason they've more technology in Reality than we have has more to do with policy than with the lengths of their fingers or the size of their brains."

"How'd you mean?" asked Steve.

"Well, you know how we're careful not to bring anything technically advanced through the portal," Linda pointed out. "Well, I sneak my laptop through occasionally, but you know what I mean."

"We have all these regulations about manufacturing," Geoff continued. "Basically, at the end of its life, every product – and its package – has to be consumed, buried, burnt or melted."

"And we also have a concept called Beneficial Endangerment," Linda said. "The Pedestrian Charter very explicitly states that until something is sufficiently understood, and proven to be safe, it can't be openly used, as there might be some unintended side effects."

"Gee, that *never* happens in our world, does it Steve?" Desiree asked sarcastically.

"That's all a very laudable notion, but nothing is *completely* safe," Michael stated. "Even this pencil has a sharp point that I could stab someone with. What about forks and knives and building tools? There must be a thousand things that are perfectly harmless when used properly but could easily be very dangerous even with just minor negligence."

"Acceptable risk is what it boils down to," Desiree answered. "Allegory's standard is higher than Reality's. However, I would also add that we have made substantial gains in medicine that don't exist here. And we couldn't have done that without some of the risks encountered with advanced technology."

Ignatius spoke up. "I would also state that our system in Allegory is far from perfect. I have noticed that some advances manage to squeak through the review boards whenever there are large sums of money involved."

"Like that ocean liner, the Priapus," Jess said. "They said it was unsinkable and when it sank on its maiden voyage, ten people died needless deaths. I'm sorry, but you can't tell me that somewhere, someone didn't get a blowjob they didn't deserve."

"Now the trains," Geoff said. "That's something they did properly."

"So how many train accidents have you had?" asked Desiree.

"Not that I paid close attention," Geoff said, "but just three that I recall in my lifetime."

"And how many people were killed?" asked Michael.

"Killed? Dear me, no one has ever *died* in a train accident. They just got a nasty little scar or a bump on the head. In the worst case, some poor sod lost a finger."

"Hasn't anyone ever been hit by a train while crossing the tracks?" asked Michael.

"It by a train?" Rachael asked. "Michael, 'ave ya seen our trains? The tracks are thirty feet off the ground! Ya couldn't get up there 'less ya was a monkey!"

"Rachael!" Gina admonished.

"I din't call 'im a monkey this time, Mum," Rachael protested.

Desiree stood up and declared, "Look, I'd like to get my mind off yesterday's events and I think some hard work would just about do that. Geoff, what you got for me?"

"The perfect thing for them spidery little fingers of yours – caulking the fixtures in the loos."

"Oo, don't do caulk!" Rachael bristled. "That nasty gloop gets all in me fur an' it takes ages to get out!"

1400 – Rialto

After caulking the fixtures, Desiree was asked to lay some tile in the ladies room. As one of them slipped out of her hand, she fumbled with it in the air trying to catch it, resulting in it landing on the floor and chipping slightly.

"Got-dammit!" she cursed, examining the chipped tile. "Geoff? Could you come here a moment?" she shouted.

Geoff appeared quickly. "Yes, Desi? Something wrong?"

"Yeah, I dropped this tile and chipped it. See here, on the corner. Should I use it? It's just a tiny chip and we're running short."

"No, use it for one of the side or corner pieces. You'll be slicing that chipped part off and it won't be used anyway."

"Oh, that's a good idea," Desiree agreed.

"Ah, good! You've cut your hand," Geoff said.

"Good?" Desiree asked, looking at the minor injury. "I wouldn't say it's a tragedy, but why is it good?"

"Here, gimme your hand," he said.

Geoff turned her hand over and spilt a drop of blood from the scratch onto the bare floor where no tiles had yet been laid.

"Here, get some mortar on your trowel," he said.

Desiree scooped a little mortar up and held it.

"Spread it down on the floor, like you always do."

She spread the mortar on the floor, covering the spots of blood. Geoff handed her another tile. "Right, now put your tile down."

As Desiree fitted it into place with the spacers, she asked Geoff, "Is there a point to this?"

"You're the last one," he answered cryptically.

"The last one?"

"It's an old builder's tradition. If you get a cut, you seal the blood into the building. So, now the building is part of you. But it has to be an inadvertent injury – an accident. You were the last one to get nicked. I couldn't tell you or it wouldn't be a proper bond, but now that it's happened, we're all bonded to the Rialto. It has all of us sealed somewhere inside."

"So does this mean we'll all die at the same time or something?" she asked.

Geoff laughed. "Goodness me, I should hope not! No, just sort of a tie that binds us to our work. You're working on something that's your own flesh and blood now. Wouldn't want to do anything less than your best effort, now, would you?"

Desiree considered this for a moment. "No, I suppose not."

"And as we are all related to the Rialto, we are also related to each other. In a sense, we're all brothers and sisters, now."

"Ah," Desiree said, appreciatively. "Sort of like getting in-laws without the marriage."

Geoff smiled. "Never *quite* thought of it that way but something like that, yeah."

14SEP2001 Friday

0800 – Rialto Marquee

It was Friday morning, the fourteenth of September. Today would be the opening act of the newly refurbished Rialto, featuring Bloody Marvellous, a truly awful band that, for some inexplicable reason, had a rather large following.

Steve called the Partnership outside to the front entrance of the Rialto.

"Good morning, everyone. I know we've all got a million things to do before opening today, so I'll keep this short. But it's also something important that I knew you wanted to be involved in. So, if you'd all put your hands on this switch."

There was a large, knife-blade switch with a big handle on it. Everyone stacked their hands on it.

"On the count of three," Steve said. "One . . . two . . . three."

The switch changed over and fell to the other side, closing the circuit. The incandescent lights to the marquee came on and shortly afterwards, the neon tubes flickered on, lighting up strands of blue and pink.

Everyone stared for a few moments in wordless wonder and appreciation.

"Okay," Steve said. "That's it. Let's get back to work."

They all rushed back to the last-minute details they were working on for the opening later that day as Steve began to pack up the switch so that he might attend to some of his own urgent duties.

0810 – Rialto

Clare and Rachael, who were running the stage lighting, were in their control booth, testing out all the controls.

"This one seems to be sticking a bit," Clare mentioned.

"The footlights?" asked Rachael.

"Yeah, those."

Rachael gave the control board a solid thump with her fist. "Try it now," she asked.

Clare gave it another try. "No. No go."

"Broken then. We'll 'ave to do wiffout. Steve'll give the sparky a call on Monday to fix it."

"How do we know what lights we turn on and when and so on?" asked Clare.

Rachael reached over and handed her a script. "'Ere's the lightin' arrangement they asked for. Generally, once they're goin', it stays put. We just 'ave to follow the musicians wif spots, usin' these stick thingies," she motioned to the little joysticks on the board.

Clare leaned over the board and looked at the controls. "Lemme give this a go," she said. Taking the control in hand, she moved it around a bit. A spotlight hanging in a corner began to move about. "Should turn it on, I suppose." She flipped a switch and the spot turned on as she fiddled with the control a bit more. "That's more like it," she said as she wiggled the spotlight around a bit. "Could I ask a favour?"

"Yeah, what's 'at then?" said Rachael.

"Could you go down on the stage, wander around a bit and let me see if I can track you with this?" asked Clare.

"Why don't *you* go down to the stage an' / try it out?" suggested Rachael.

"Okay, you can have a go with the lights after me," Clare offered.

"Why don't I get a go first?" asked Rachael.

"You are *such* a baby," Clare replied.

"Awrite, awrite. I'll go down first. But ya promise I get a go after?"

"Promise."

Desiree walked into the control room, carrying a box of equipment. "Hey guys, we're all going to have to keep in constant contact with each other tonight. I need y'all to put these on." She pulled a pair of earphones out of the box.

Clare and Rachael looked at the earphones. Then they looked at Desiree. Then they looked at each other.

Clare pulled her ears forward. "On *these* ears?"

"Ye're 'avin a bubble, ain'tcha?" Rachael asked.

0900 – Rialto Lobby

Shortly after nine in the morning, three very large gentlemen and a lady came by and knocked on the door of the Rialto. Steve answered. "Hello. You must be the security for the evening."

"That we are, sir. Wanted to have a look round while it was nice and quiet."

"Right. Come right in," Steve waved them in. "I'm Steve, by the way," he said, sticking out his hand.

They shook hands. "I'm Roland. This is Alan, Bruce and Paula. Here's our card, by the way."

Steve instantly forgot their names, as he immediately assimilated them as being a Rottweiler, an Alsatian, a Borzoi and a Poodle, respectively. He was beginning to find this new habit of associating people with domestic cats and dogs to be mildly disturbing, but chalked it up to being overworked.

After exchanging pleasantries, Steve cued his microphone. "Desi? Can you hear me? . . . Security is here to look around a bit. Could you tell the others? . . . Ta for that." Steve flipped his microphone up. "Desiree is my partner in crime in this little endeavour. So, what would you like to see first?"

"Well . . . it's a bit of cheek, but if you don't ask . . ." Roland the Rottweiler hedged.

"Ask away," replied Steve.

"Where's that bog with Nicholas Hodge?"

1158 – Rialto Lobby

Roland the Rottweiler had finished discussing the responsibilities of the evening with his staff and the humans of the Partnership.

"I must say, your camera arrangement is very well thought out," Roland the Rottweiler remarked.

"It should be. It cost enough," Steve commented.

"Believe me, it will eventually pay for itself," Roland the Rottweiler promised.

"Right, now, if everything goes smoothly, then it'll be like we weren't even here," he stated. "Let's hope that's the case. However, what you're really paying for is if, God forbid, something goes wrong. A fight, a fire, an accident, drugs, that sort of thing. We'll know exactly what to do.

"In the unfortunate event that something does happen, we should be able to handle it but it just might be that we require some assistance on your part – turning on the house lights, for example, stopping the concert, that sort of thing." He pulled a sheet out from his portfolio. "Now here's a list of standard operating procedures and code words. Make sure your staff goes over this before tonight's performance."

"Oh, right," Michael answered. "I'll make sure that everyone knows."

"By the way," Roland the Rottweiler looked about. "Are there just the four of you?"

"No, we have other staff," Michael answered as Desiree elbowed him.

"I think it best we meet them all, just so there's no case of mistaken identity," Roland the Rottweiler explained. "It wouldn't do to throw out a member of staff, just because we didn't recognise them."

"I gar-on-tee," Desiree emphasized, "if you *ever* bumped into one of our staff, you would definitely know."

"Surely they're not anyone famous," Roland the Rottweiler guessed.

"No, I can say with certainty that no one has heard of them," Michael stated. "Regardless, they'll be behind the scenes and will be completely isolated from the customer areas. You'll never see them."

"I still think it would be for the best if we met *all* of the employees," Roland the Rottweiler asserted. "It does help us to do our jobs."

"We do appreciate your point," Michael agreed. "And normally we would take your suggestion but, suffice to say, it would be a bad idea."

"Could I at least ask *why* we're not being shown the other personnel?" asked Roland the Rottweiler. "I assume they're not wanted criminals."

"Oh, no, nothing like that," Michael assured.

"So . . . ?" Bruce the Borzoi shrugged.

Michael, Desiree and Steve looked at each other nervously, desperately trying to think of an answer.

"They're, erm . . . a wee bit blate aboot their faces," Angus said.

"Sorry?" asked Alan the Alsatian.

"They dinna wanna be seen acause they leuk . . . unalike," Angus added cryptically.

"Unalike? You mean they're . . . *deformed*?" Paula the Poodle said, mouthing the final word.

"I wouldn't put it *quite* like that," Desiree said. "Let's just say 'different' and leave it at that, shall we?"

"Yes, of course, of course," Roland the Rottweiler agreed hastily. "Well then, we shall, of course, leave them to their privacy and, erm . . . that's an end to the matter. Right, crew?"

The others members of the security team readily agreed.

"So, basically, you're to stay on the ground floor at all times, except for the auditorium boxes on the first floor and second floor," Michael warned.

"What about the third floor?" Desiree asked.

"We've been over this Desi," Steve reminded her. "We don't have a third floor, only the ground floor, first and second."

"Oh, yeah, d'uh," Desiree admonished herself.

"Any place that is off-limits will have locked doors, so a guest straying into the private areas shouldn't be a problem. However, if it does happen, you are *not* to follow them," Michael stated. "Tell us and it will be a simple matter for us to trap them."

"As you wish," Roland the Rottweiler conceded.

1210 – Rialto kitchen

"We heard every word," Slide HolenWulf said as the humans joined them upstairs.

"Except the one just before Desiree said to leave it at 'different'," Sandra recalled. "What did they say we were?"

"I'm not an expert lip-reader," Michael qualified, "but I'm pretty sure she said 'deformed'."

"Oh, very nice," Pete grumbled. "Not only are we outcasts, we're freaks as well."

"I happen to think we're neither," Clare stated. "Although Rachael's doing her best on the latter."

"Oh, ha-ha, bookworm," Rachael retorted.

"Be that as it may, we gotta make our beer run," Pete mentioned. "We got six barrels to pick up before the gates open."

"Where're we goin'?" asked Rachael.

"The Lamb in SwanThrop an' the Potkiln in OwlPot," Pete answered. "I figure it to be nearly six miles, so we need to get a push on. Ready, Rache?"

"Aww, do I hafta, Dad?" Rachael moaned. "Don't do beer runs."

"Don't do beer runs'?" Pete mocked. "'Don't do beer runs'! Rache, ya been dyin' to be a barmaid since ya could reach the taps an' now you're tellin' me ya don't do beer runs!"

"It's no fair. Why's she get to stay?" Rachael pointed to Clare.

"Cause she ain't strong enough to make a difference," Pete said. "We need a bit o' muscle. It's a long haul an' we gotta lift them barrels, an' once that cart's loaded, we're gonna need a bit o' leg to pull it along."

"I'll go to help out, if that's all right," Michael offered.

"Attaboy," Pete said, slapping him on the back and knocking him on the ground. "Oo, sorry 'bout that, mate."

"I'll go along," Desiree volunteered. "Need the exercise just now," she winced, grasping her stomach.

"Masel, as well," Angus added.

"Oh, ta for that," Pete smiled.

"How long are you going to be?" asked Steve.

"Should be about six hours," Pete estimated. "C'mon girls, no time to waste," he hustled the crew to the basement.

"Bye, Rache. Have fun," Clare said with a smile and a wave.

Rachael waved back, but with only half of her fingers.

1740 – Rialto Lobby

Just under six hours later, Geoff and Steve were waiting in the lobby, when they heard Pete's voice from the basement stairs. "We're back!"

"Watch this," Geoff nudged Steve.

Pete came into the bar area, rolling a huge barrel behind him, nearly as big as his own twenty-five stone. He expertly caught an edge, spinning and lifting it just so, such that it popped upright on its rim and began to wobble like a

dropped coin. He sustained the wobble until it was positioned precisely where he wanted it. Wiping his brow, he exhaled.

"Nice trick," Steve admired as he moved the hoist over the barrel and pulled the chains to lower the hook.

"It is if ya don't get your feet caught underneaf the barrel," Pete mentioned. "Could lose a few toes, if ya ain't careful."

Rachael suddenly came waddling through the door with a barrel on her back. "Dad! Take this offa me! It's bleedin' massive!"

Pete and Geoff manoeuvred the barrel off her back and set it gently to the floor.

"Rache! Why din't ya just roll it in?" Pete asked.

"I 'ad to carry it up them bloomin' stairs an' after I picked it up, I was afraid I couldn't put it down wiffout smashin' it!"

"Rache, how're ya gonna become a barmaid like me if ya don't learn a few tricks o' the trade," Pete admonished her. "When ya get to the last couple o' steps, ya turn about an' set it on the landin'. I've told ya a dozen times . . ."

"I'm sorry, Dad," Rachael said meekly. "I'll try 'n remember next time."

"Oh, that's awrite, girl," Pete said, giving her a hug for consolation. "You'll be the best barmaid Otterstow's ever had, never you worry." He gave her a peck on the top of her head. "Kay, love?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Rachael forced a smile. "Y'know ya said 'a barmaid like me', dontcha?"

"I'm a barman, not a bleedin' grammarian," Pete mentioned.

Angus, Desiree and Michael were the last to appear, using a hand truck to wheel the barrel into the bar area. Huffing and wheezing, they gently set it on the ground and collapsed on the floor in exhaustion.

"How do you move these things without a hand truck?" asked Michael between breaths.

"We usually save the trolley for the 'eavy barrels," Pete answered.

1920 – Just off a footpath somewhere in Northern England

It was getting close to dark, so Grace and Simon came out of the tent they had stolen at the campground, rolled it up and began their evening sojourn. They had walked along a deserted footpath, mostly in silence, hoping to find some place that might hold their next meal or, perhaps, a map that might give them some clue as to how to get home.

After scarcely an hour, they heard some voices ahead of them and, wishing to avoid contact with anyone, ducked off the path to hide in the brush, roughly twenty yards away. They had just taken cover when Grace gave Simon a nudge. Barely a few feet away were the remains of a vagrant who had passed away, perhaps just a few days ago.

Simon gasped and then covered his mouth to keep from making any noticeable noises. Leaning against Grace, he squeezed his eyes shut and gritted his teeth.

Grace patiently waited until the voices went past and then gave Simon another nudge.

"Think it's safe now," she whispered.

"Oh, Grace, that poor soul," Simon groaned.

"Erm . . . Look, why don't you, erm . . . go back to the footpath and I'll . . . erm, do something else."

"What are you going to do?" asked Simon, almost horrified.

"Never you mind," Grace admonished. "Just go and keep watch, okay?"

Deep inside, Simon had an inkling as to what Grace had planned, but nonetheless, he obediently went out to the footpath and kept watch.

Once alone, Grace muttered an apology to the deceased and began to go through his pockets. She then resorted to more thorough exploration, even going so far as to remove his shoes.

Having finished after a few minutes, she quietly cursed at herself, not for coming up empty-handed, but because she had lowered her standards to do so.

After returning things to their previous state, she enlisted Simon's aid in moving the deceased to a spot where he would be visible from the path.

"Is there a point to this?" asked Simon.

"He deserves a cremation – or a burial or whatever they do with their dead here," Grace said. "And that isn't going to happen if they never find his body."

2000 – Rialto Marquee

A half-dozen teenage boys reached the head of the queue for admission to the Rialto.

"Could we come in, see the bogs and then come right back out?" asked one of the lads.

"Yes, you can do that," replied Bruce the Borzoi.

They started to move through the door. Bruce the Borzoi held them back.

"At five quid a head."

"Five quid? Just to see the bogs?" one of the party protested.

"That's the cover charge, lads," stated Bruce the Borzoi.

"But we'll just be ten minutes," another of the group objected.

"And how will I know that you'll be just ten minutes?" Bruce the Borzoi asked.

"We'll leave you the fiver. If we come out in ten minutes, you give us it back. If not, you keep the lot," another suggested.

Bruce the Borzoi rolled his eyes. "Hang on." He flipped his microphone down. "Desi? You there? . . . Lemme talk to, erm, wusname . . . Right, Jess . . . Hello Jess? . . . Listen, we got a group o' young anoraks down here that just wanna see the Hodge site in the loo. They say they'll just be ten minutes. Wanna deposit a fiver, but they'd like it back if they make it out in time . . . Right . . . Okay, just a tick." Bruce the Borzoi took off his headset and put it on the spokesman. "Push this to talk in here," he instructed. The boy nodded.

"Hello? . . . Yes miss . . . No miss . . . No miss . . . Cash miss . . . Ten minutes and not a second more, miss . . . Yes miss . . . Thank you, miss . . . Is your name Bruce?"

Bruce the Borzoi looked down. "Yes."

"Miss Jess says to stop wankin' her about 'less it's important and to use your own judgement and initiative." He handed the headset back to Bruce the Borzoi.

"Did she now?" replied Bruce the Borzoi with a smile.

"She sounds dead sexy," the anorak mentioned.

"Never seen her myself, but rumour has it she's a right fox, our Miss Jess," Bruce the Borzoi replied with a grin. "Right. Here's the deal. It'll cost you two. Five quid deposit. You have ten minutes and you get three back if you're out in time. Otherwise, you might as well stay and watch the concert."

"What? That crap band? You couldn't *pay* me to watch them," one of the crew protested. They all started to dig out their wallets.

"Right, now. IDs, please. And don't even think about handing me some fake."

"But I'm not gonna buy any drink," one protested.

"Sorry son, it's the law. Not even Jess can change that one," Bruce the Borzoi noted. "Come round on Sunday afternoon. It'll be free then, anyway. Right. Rest of you, it's precisely twenty-to, you've got till ten-to."

A few handed Bruce the Borzoi the cash and dashed in, pulling out their cameras, whilst their friends waited behind.

The next party in line consisted of some gentlemen that were more than a few years advanced of Bruce the Borzoi himself. "Did I hear that we could see the Hodge site for just two quid with a fiver deposit?"

Bruce the Borzoi sighed. "Well, I don't suppose you're here to see the band. We'll waive the deposit, so just the two. Go on, then. Don't take too much time, please."

"Was there a band?" asked one of the geriatrics.

2020 – Rialto Marquee

Bruce the Borzoi was doing a brisk trade in the Nicholas Hodge Gravesite Museum business when he noticed that one of the elderly gentlemen he had admitted earlier was being removed from the premises by Alan the Alsatian.

"Have a care! Have a care!" the elderly gentleman protested. "I'm not a young man, y'know!"

Alan the Alsatian had escorted him out the exit door and ignored the two fingered salute returned by the old man. Bruce the Borzoi summoned Alan the Alsatian over.

"What was all that about?" asked Bruce the Borzoi.

"He was taking a leak on the Hodge site, if y'please!" Alan the Alsatian complained.

"What? Right in the middle of the floor?"

"Yeah. Taking a widdle."

"A widdle in the middle?"

"Aye, a widdle in the middle of the floor!"

"A widdle in the middle – dear me. Whatever for?"

"He claims Hodge killed his grandfather."

"Well," Bruce the Borzoi replied, "I can understand that, then."

"Yeah, well you can understand cleaning up after him, then."

"No, thank you. I'll leave that in your capable hands," Bruce the Borzoi said with a smile. "I've got door duty tonight and it's no small task. Half the people here just wanna see Hodge's penultimate resting place, snap a piccie and go home."

"Dirty old bugger, he was," Alan the Alsatian complained.

"Yeah, I read old Hodge was a real piece o' perv," Bruce the Borzoi agreed.

"Not Hodge. Him!" Alan the Alsatian pointed to the old man who was still waving his fingers.

2100 – Rialto Security Room

"Steve, where are you?" asked Desiree into her microphone.

"On the floor, helping some of the patrons find their seats. What'd you need?"

"What's the deal with calling me your 'partner in crime'?"

"It's slang, Desi. It means you're my business partner," Steve answered. He covered his mike, but Desiree could still hear him. "Let me get that chair for you ma'am. Would you like something to drink?"

"Steve?"

"Yes?"

"I thought we were a little more than business partners, Steve."

"Are we?"

"What the *hell* is that supposed to mean?" asked Desiree.

Steve replied. "Desi, I don't think this is the time or place to discuss this."

"I think this is the *perfect* time and place to discuss this," Desiree countered.

"Please yourself," Steve answered.

"So what's the deal with the 'business partner' thing?" Desiree asked.

"Desi, I know we've been very busy, but we've been seeing each other for months and I can't say that I've been overwhelmed with physical affection," Steve complained.

It should be born in mind that the Rialto was built in an era where listening to a musical performance usually involved staying in one's seat for the larger part of the performance, with refreshments only served during brief intermissions. On the few occasions where the patrons might dance with each other, drinks, although served continuously, were usually limited to the lobby to prevent costly accidents to apparel. Thus an area for serving drink was, if not an afterthought, a rather low priority.

As there was now a much higher demand for drink during events at the Rialto, space at the bar was quite valuable and it was quickly determined by the Partnership that there would be little room for anything that wasn't directly involved with serving. Thus, two service lifts had been installed to an identically-sized room directly above the bar, which was now being used as a scullery, with the remaining space being reserved for a kitchen that had yet to be paid for (despite Desiree's best efforts).

The bar staff would send the dirty glasses up in one service lift, where Slide, Sandra, Pete and Gina were assigned for the evening. Once cleaned and dried,

the glasses would then be sent down in the other service lift, ready for the bar staff to stack away or put to immediate use. Apart from saving space at the bar, it also allowed the Frith to work out of sight of the general public.

As there were the four of them, they weren't exactly overwhelmed with their duties, but they had been kept constantly busy. Despite their workload, they heard Desiree's last comment over a speaker that had been connected to the wireless communication system.

They all stopped for just a fraction of a second in their very busy service to look at each other and shake their heads.

"I told you that it'd take time, Steve," Desiree countered.

"Desi, I think I've been very patient. And I'm not demanding anything that you're not ready for."

"But?" prompted Desiree.

"Are you sure you want to hear this?" asked Steve.

From backstage, Geoff and Ignatius looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

"Yeah, go on. Sock it to me," Desiree replied.

"The fact is, it is my belief that I'm being strung along. You have no more intention of going any further in this relationship than I have of becoming . . . two lagers, please, thank you. I don't know what you want out of this relationship. Maybe someone to talk to, or to control or the status symbol of a steady boyfriend . . ."

"Status symbol? . . . Roland, we got another guy taking a leak on Hodge . . . A status symbol? Well, someone *is* full of themselves today! You're a status symbol now, are you?"

"I didn't say that it was a particularly high status," Steve said defensively.

"Two quid change, thank you."

"Well, look, Mister Luxury Saloon, looking at it from the other side, I happen to think you're doing pretty good to have someone like me around you at all."

Clare and Rachael, who were working the lights, looked at each other and cringed.

"Right. That tears it," Steve said. "We're off. I've nothing more to say to you. Just bugger off. Oh, sorry, not you miss. Here are your ales."

"Yeah, well while we're using polite little British euphemisms, you are cordially invited to go . . . Roland, looks like a little dope deal is going on in box five . . . you are cordially invited to go wank yourself."

"It'll be more than I ever had with you," Steve replied.

Linda, who was upstairs counting admission receipts, mouthed a silent "Yes!" as she pulled her fist down and spun her chair around.

"Desi?" asked Jess.

"Yes?"

"Can you hear me over this?"

"Yes. But we're in the same room. Why are you using the headset?"

"Did it not occur to you that everyone else can hear you as well?" Jess pointed out.

"No they can't. They can only hear when I flip this switch over . . . Oh, dammit!" Desiree turned to look at Jess. "You mean *everyone* heard that?"

"Every word," Jess replied.

"Why the *hell*, didn't you tell me?" Desiree roared at Jess.

"Don't snarl at me," Jess retorted.

"It was a singular performance," Pete put in.

"Best entertainment I've had in weeks," Clare added.

"Stop it! *Stop it!*" Desiree protested.

"Serves you right, Desi," Steve teased.

"You bastard! You knew we were on the air all the time!" Desiree accused.

"Yes, of course I did," Steve admitted. "I assumed you did as well, as you're working in the security room at the control board. I did warn you."

"Shut up, Steve. I thought you said you had nothing else to say to me," Desiree said as she held her head in her hands.

"Actually, there is one last thing I'd like to say," Steve continued.

"Shut up, Steve," Desiree repeated.

"The fact is, since this is a radio link, anyone with a scanner could hear our conversation."

Desiree sat up. "How many sad bastards could there possibly be with a scanner listening in our conversation?" she asked.

"Me, for one," said an unknown voice. "And I've got a transmitter as well, although it's unlicensed."

"Clear the channel," Roland the Rottweiler ordered.

"Me, as well," said another voice.

"Clear the channel," Roland the Rottweiler repeated, although he was smiling and knew it was futile to try and force them to leave.

"I didn't hear the whole thing," a third voice said. "Could you replay some of it, please?"

Jess gave Desiree a nudge. "Come on girl. Pick yourself up."

Desiree sighed. "At least someone's on my side."

"I couldn't give a toss about your personal problems. We've got a job to do and you're slacking. Now get off your arse and do some work."

2300 – Rialto Security Room

"Are they supposed to be lifting those people up like that?" asked Jess.

"Yeah, all part of the show," Desiree answered.

"What about that girl on camera twelve?" asked Jess.

"What about her?" asked Desiree.

"I can't see very well, as it's a bit dark, but it looks like some of the lads are doing something to her that they shouldn't," Jess remarked.

"Clare, swing a light on . . . table three. Security, there might be an incident, better head over to check it out," Desiree ordered.

The light swung over and illuminated the scene as clearly as day. It showed a woman being held by two men as a third was reaching under her skirt. The men involved instinctively looked directly at the light and the camera.

"Clare, move the light away!" Jess ordered. "Move the light away! Roland, Alan, Bruce, Paula. Table three. Assault. Three men assaulting a woman!"

"Nearly, there," Alan the Alsatian replied.

The women watched from the security room as Alan the Alsatian arrived first and alone. He pulled one perpetrator aside but the others ganged up on him and he was on the floor in short order. "Alan is down! Alan is down!" Jess shouted.

Roland the Rottweiler and Bruce the Borzoi set upon the three assailants. Unfortunately some of the patrons from neighbouring tables decided to take it upon themselves to assist the assailants. The remaining security team were quickly overwhelmed.

"Roland and Bruce are surrounded by about a dozen guys. They're about to get their asses kicked!" Desiree announced. She suddenly flew out of her chair and bolted for the door.

"Where the sif do you think you're going," Jess asked over the wireless, as Desiree was no longer in the room.

"To help security!"

"Do you think you can actually accomplish anything that they can't?" Jess asked.

"Watch me," Desiree snarled. "Steve, call the police!"

"They're already on their way," Steve answered.

"Sod this for a shave!" Pete remarked. "I'm goin' in, too!" he said as he ran from the kitchen.

"Not 'avin' this!" Rachael announced as she sprang up from the light board and dashed to the auditorium.

The fight was showing no signs of alleviating and every sign of escalating. Desiree had arrived and pushed her way into the circle of spectators to get to the fight.

"Dalmation!" Roland the Rottweiler called, using the code word to set the fire alarm. "Dalmation!"

"Belay that order!" Desiree shouted into her microphone as she pushed her way through the throng. She grabbed one of the aggressors by a collar and within a second he was on the floor, incapacitated. "Jess, use the PA to clear the building."

"Clare, house lights up," Jess ordered calmly as she flipped a switch to turn her microphone into a PA, overriding the band. With the most generic voice she could muster, she began her announcement. "Please exit the building in a calm and orderly manner. I repeat, please exit the building in a calm and orderly manner."

Looking through her monitors, she noticed that only a tiny percentage of the patrons were obeying her order, with most of them gathering around to watch the fight. She calmly repeated the notice.

There was still a bit of hesitation among the patrons, as they seemed to be sceptical of the announcement. The sound of the approaching police sirens inspired her to modify the announcement slightly.

"This is an official evacuation notice. Everyone is to exit the building immediately. Those that do not exit will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. I repeat, this is an evacuation notice. Everyone is to exit the building immediately. Those that do not exit will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

This seemed to have the desired effect as the crowd flooded to the exits.

Meanwhile, Desiree had been joined by Pete and Rachael and, with the help of the security team, they had managed to subdue the few remaining belligerents.

"Pete, Rachael, you'd better depart, the police will be in the building in about ten seconds," Steve warned them.

Then the fire alarm went off.

2320 – Rialto Exterior

The Rialto had been emptied of patrons and a fire engine was sitting outside, doing nothing in particular but flashing its lights.

"Are you the manager?" the chief firefighter asked.

"Well, I'm a manager," Desiree hedged. "Sorry for the false alarm."

"You're an American, are you?"

"Yes, and thank you for being the first Briton not to call me a yank," Desiree felt compelled to add.

"From your accent, I rather guessed that you are not from New England."

"I'm impressed," Desiree said, "seriously."

"I spent a number of years in the States at school," the firefighter answered.

Desiree was a bit curious as to why a British firefighter would be telling her his life story but, in consideration of the circumstances, she decided to hear him out. "I hope you passed a good time."

"Oh, I did indeed," answered the firefighter. "I did indeed. Whilst I was earning my degree in firefighting, I immensely enjoyed my minor in history."

"History?" asked Desiree, realising that she was being led down a conversational path.

"Yes, history," the firefighter continued. "Especially American History. This is where I learnt that your Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes used the rather specific example of shouting 'fire' in a crowded theatre as *not* being protected by the free speech clause under the First Amendment of your Constitution."

"Um, yes," Desiree admitted. "So he did. I vaguely recall that as well." *Out of all the firefighters in England, I get the only one with a minor in American Jurisprudence*, she grumbled mentally.

"The same concept very much applies here in England as well."

"No doubt," Desiree agreed.

"So, why did you set the alarm?"

"I, personally, did not set the alarm," Desiree denied. "In fact, I issued an order *not* to set the alarm."

"And why would you suggest *not* to set the alarm?"

Desiree grimaced at her clumsiness. "Well, as you can tell from the numerous police, there was a, um . . . situation. A fight broke out, and several of our security detail were getting, um . . ."

"Their arses handed to them?" completed the firefighter. "And then one of them suggested to set the alarm?"

"To make a long story short," Desiree confirmed. "But I did betray the order in time. If someone set the alarm, it was against my orders."

"So you think it might have been one of the punters?"

"Gawd, I sure hope so," Desiree answered. "But, to be perfectly honest, I don't know. We have dozens of cameras, so we might be able to find the culprit on film."

"You do that," suggested the firefighter. "If it's none of your staff, then you'll be off the hook."

"I hesitate to ask, but what if we can't find the culprit on camera? Or, gawd forbid, it is one of us?"

"I'd suggest you find a solicitor," said the firefighter.

15SEP2001 Saturday

0001 – Rialto Bar

Just after midnight, shortly after the fire brigade had left, the Partnership of the Rialto was sitting in the bar, as Gina continued to anaesthetise Pete and Rachael with grain alcohol, administered orally, while Michael patiently held an ice bag on Rachael's shoulder and head.

"If it's any consolation, we did quite well tonight," Steve mentioned.

"Quite well?" asked Desiree. "Quite well? Apart from my own public humiliation, we lost over an hour of prime-time earnings and we're a gnat's ass away from a false alarm charge, which may result in my immediate deportation, I hasten to add. Meanwhile, the rest of our security team got their asses handed to them trying to protect a girl who was being sexually assaulted right under our noses. Did I miss something or is this what passes for 'doing quite well' in England?"

"I don't care how much of a crowd they draw," Geoff stated, "I forward that we never let that band or any of its members play in here again. It may not be their fault, but they just attract the wrong crowd. All in favour?"

A unanimous round of ayes approved the measure.

There was a solemn pause as they all considered the events of the evening.

"So, erm," Gina ventured, "exactly how well did we do?"

"Pretty good," Linda hinted.

"How good?" Gina asked.

"Not only did we pack the house," Linda answered, "but we had nearly a hundred people come to see the Hodge Hole. That's two hundred quid we don't have to pay the band, according to their carefully phrased contract and Jess' watchful eye. It'll probably be a one-off, as I'm sure curiosity will die out but the early cash injection is quite welcome. Add 1000 for the floor tickets, less five for security, and then there's drinks . . ."

"Judging by the number of glasses we washed, we must've made a packet," Gina speculated.

"I ran the registers upstairs just now," Linda continued. "With our special 'supplier,' we probably netted close to an even grand for drinks. That's 1700."

And Jess was right – the box seats are where the big money is. They piled on an extra 2400."

"That's over four grand for the evening!" Gina marvelled. "That's well over our bank note for the month."

"In a single night, yet," Linda pointed out.

"Apart from that, Mrs Lincoln," Desiree mumbled, "how was the play?"

1000 – Rialto Kitchen

"She wants what?" asked Geoff in disbelief during the group's morning meeting.

"She wants us to drop the charges on her boyfriend and the men that were brawling," Michael explained.

"Who wants this?" asked Jess.

"The girl that was assaulted," Michael answered. "I know it sounds amazing, but . . ."

"Did she say what would happen if we don't comply?" Jess interrupted, unamazed.

"Nothing specific," Michael answered. "Just that we'd live to regret it. Oh, and she told us not to hand any tapes over to the police, although I'm not sure how she knew that we were about to."

"The problem is," Steve added, "we are legally obligated to provide the tape to the police. We could get around it, say we lost it or something, but it wouldn't be good for us. We'll need the police in future, so we don't want to aggravate them this early in the game."

"Oh, f'sure," Desiree agreed. "We've already managed to piss off the fire department."

"Then we should do our duty and hand over the tapes," Ignatius said.

"Let's back up a second here," Jess said. "She said this bloke that had a hand under her skirt was her *boyfriend*?" she asked with a suspicious look.

"I don't think she used the term 'boyfriend' exactly," Michael replied. "I think she just said 'my man'."

"When did you talk to her?" asked Jess.

"This morning," Michael answered. "She called the office and I happened to answer the phone."

Jess narrowed her eyes. "Did she imply that she was going to contact us again, or . . .?"

"Not in so many words, no," Michael scraped his memory as he did the same to his chin. "She did mention that we might 'do business' later on or something. I don't remember her exact words."

Jess nodded. "It's a scam. She and her 'man' are setting us up."

"Jess, the girl was being sexually assaulted," Clare said angrily. "How can you be so unfeeling?"

"Years of practice. And I'll bet my right tit that the blokes at the other tables were her accomplices."

"You think so?" asked Geoff. "Awful lot of bother and the girl was being assaulted. We saw it on the tape."

"Did we?" asked Jess. "What did we see? His hand was under her skirt while she was being held. The whole thing was just an act. And why did those blokes at the other tables jump to his defence instead of hers?"

"That's a pretty cynical view, dontcha think?" Pete commented.

"I'm telling you, Pete, the moment they're all out of nick on bail, they'll start the extortion game. It's either pony up the cash or they'll start another brawl or it'll be arson or vandalism. Mark my words," Jess warned.

"Even if it were true," Geoff pointed out, "what can we prove? Give the tape to the local pigs and let them sort it out."

"Oh, yeah, we should give the peelers the tape, no question," Jess remarked. "But we're gonna have to be a little more pro-active than just letting them sort it out. Linda, have you doctored the tapes that we're gonna give to the fuzz?"

"I didn't *doctor* them," Linda protested. "I just deleted any potentially embar . . ."

"Right, I'll prove it to you. We're going to go over that tape frame by frame and I'm going to tell Angus, Michael, Steve and Desiree precisely what to point out to the detectives."

"Erm, think I'll give this one a miss, miss," suggested Angus. "Me an the filth, we dinna exactly walk side-by-side."

"Well, get in step, sunshine," Jess ordered, "because it's time to toe the line."

1025 – Rialto Office

They had all gathered in the office of the Rialto. Linda sat at the computer, ready to take orders.

"We made a copy of the relevant material from the tapes and put it on this CD; it makes it a lot easier to edit and review the material," explained Linda. "This copy is the one we plan on giving to the police. The unedited originals are locked in the safe."

"Did we catch who set off the fire alarm?" Desiree asked.

"Sort of," Linda answered. "He was one of the brawlers who got away. Very thoughtfully, he was wearing a jersey with the number 8 on his back. You can see him very plainly throwing punches in the brawl and then setting the alarm. The only thing we *don't* know is his name."

"But it's a slam-dunk that it's not one of us, right?" Desiree asked.

"That much is certain," Linda confirmed.

"Man, what a relief," Desiree sighed, "I thought I'd have to choke the living shit outta someone in the Partnership."

"Okay, now that that's out of the way, let's get on with this," Jess urged.

The screen came to life with the images of the auditorium. "We've collaged together the relevant scenes from the master set of tapes," Linda continued. "Here's where we first noticed something wrong." The television showed an unlit table with men and a woman.

"Bit dark," Michael commented.

"We had Clare swing a spot on the table so we could see what was going on. See, here comes the light," Jess pointed out. "And there they are.

"We didn't want to embarrass the girl, so we moved the spotlight away and called security . . . there he is now. As you can see, some of the other patrons decided to help out. The only problem was, they were helping the attackers." The recording reached its conclusion. "Play it again, Linda."

"Sure," Linda complied, fiddling with the mouse and keyboard. The scene looped through several times. Jess was nodding her head as she noticed little details here and there.

"Right, just there, the guys at the other tables are watching the whole time. And they're talking to the guys holding the girl, right? And it's just friendly conversation. They're not angry. See, that one's laughing. I could see not getting involved, but laughing? And then beating up security? It all adds up."

"Yes, that's a good point," Steve agreed.

"Now look at the girl, just after your security arrives. Alan tears the bloke away and she just stands there. She's not scared, doesn't run away, doesn't run to her saviour for protection, she just stands there and looks at the guys at the other table, like she's expecting them to do something."

"I have to agree, it is all quite odd," Michael agreed.

"Okay, pause," Jess ordered, "Start at . . ." she considered a moment, looking upward, "from when the spotlight leaves the table, run it for just a few seconds and then loop, so I can see it a few times – and in slow-mo, if you could."

Linda played with the keyboard and mouse a little bit and the film began to loop in slow motion. It had looped through a couple of times and Jess suddenly pointed at the computer monitor when the girl was being held.

"Stop! There! Look at the girl's expression. Does that look like the frightened expression of a girl that's being held against her will?"

Steve looked for a moment. "She certainly doesn't look frightened."

"Look, she's even got a smile on her face," Desiree observed.

"Right, let's get all this down," Jess said. "When you get to the station, insist on seeing a detective and point out *everything* we've just gone over."

16SEP2001 Sunday

1000 – Rialto Office

On Sunday morning, Steve, Desire, Angus and Michael were waiting in the office for the call from the girl.

With them was an inspector from the local police. He was a large man, muscular, but not overly so, with a steadfast, yet kind, look upon his face. Steve thought he bore a vague resemblance to a Great Dane.

The telephone on his desk rang and the Great Dane nodded to Michael.

Michael picked up the handset. "Hello?" he answered as the recording device automatically started.

"Michael, yeah?" said the woman's voice on the other end.

"Yes, this is Michael."

"So ya goin' to the filth, yeah? I told ya to drop the charges, yeah?"

The Great Dane shook his head.

"No, I did not go to the police. Now, in return, you agree not to sue us, is that correct?"

"Oh yeah. But listen Michael, yeah?"

Michael bristled. He couldn't stand the constant stream of 'yeah's coming out of the girl's mouth. Despite this he continued.

"Yes?"

"So yer not going to the plods, yeah?"

"No, I'm not going to the police. We've established that."

"And ya dropped the charges, yeah?"

"That's in process right now. My partner is sitting with the police right now, getting it all sorted."

"That's good, yeah. Now, we can talk business, yeah."

Doesn't waste any time, thought Michael. The Great Dane apparently thought the same as he was nodding.

"Business?" Michael repeated.

"Yeah, it's easy business, yeah. Ya pay a grand every week, an' we don't trash yer joint, yeah. Simple, yeah?"

Michael looked at the Great Dane who was furiously writing a note. He held it up. "Clarify," the noted said.

"Still there, yeah, Mikey?"

"Pay you? What exactly do you mean?" asked Michael.

"Yeah, well ya pay me . . . us a grand, yeah, every week, yeah, and ya drop all the charges, yeah. And ya have some nice, peaceful gigs, yeah. It's quite simple, yeah."

The Great Dane pointed to the note again.

"Just let me get this straight," Michael said. "We pay you a thousand pounds each and every week, we drop all charges and you agree not to cause any trouble at the Rialto. Is that right?"

"Yeah. That's right, yeah," said the girl. "Look, when can ya get the dosh?"

The Great Dane was writing again.

Michael decided to stall. "Don't suppose you'd accept a cheque?" He shrugged at the Great Dane, who smiled and held up a note saying "soon as possible – get location".

"No, no cheques, yeah. Cash, yeah."

"All right. I've got the cash," Michael said. "Let's get this over with."

"Good, yeah. Like yer 'tude, yeah."

"Where would you like to meet?" asked Michael.

"Saint Nick's, yeah. Across from the Fox, yeah. How'm I gonna recognise ya, yeah?"

The Great Dane pulled on his tie.

"I'll have a school tie. Blue on black. Houndstooth jacket . . ."

"Oundstooth, yeah? What's that, then, yeah?"

The Great Dane rolled his eyes and shook his head. He frantically began writing again.

"Sorta black and white pattern, little diamonds."

"Oh, yeah, yeah,"

"I'm about six foot, fifteen stone, short brown hair and green eyes."

"Sounds fit, yeah. Maybe we can party later on, yeah?"

Now it was Michael's turn to roll his eyes. "Yes, maybe later."

The Great Dane handed the note to Michael, which he read quickly. "Erm, by the way, do you think you'll be safe carrying all this cash around?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah. I'm not comin' alone, yeah. But ya'd better be alone, yeah.

Or ya could be gettin' yer face smashed, yeah."

"Oh, right," Michael agreed. "I'll be alone, then. Be there in about . . ."

The Great Dane flashed all his fingers three times.

". . . Thirty minutes?"

"Right, yeah. See ya, yeah. Bye, yeah." She hung up.

The Great Dane peered over the recorder to see that the red light was off. "Well done, my son! Well done, indeed! We'll take it from here. You will press charges of course?"

"By all means," agreed Michael. "Can we put an extra charge of threatening bodily harm on that?"

"Indeed we may, sir. Indeed we may," the Great Dane concurred. "I must say, you've been much more cooperative than most business owners have. This little group has been on our list for some time but we've got 'em by the short and curlies this time. Thanks to you and your friend here."

"Why is there so much reluctance to help from the other businesses?" Steve asked.

"I won't mince words," the Great Dane admitted. "They're a violent group. Better keep a close eye on this place, they might try arson or the like. They could burn the place down, given the opportunity."

"Burn it down?" asked Steve, suddenly concerned.

"Only if you let them. Get a night guard, someone to watch the place for a few weeks and they'll scare off," suggested the Great Dane.

"Who are these people?" asked Steve.

"Are these what you call 'pikeys'," asked Desiree in all sincerity.

"We don't actually use that term, miss. Besides, they're a local gang, not travellers. Well, here and a few nearby towns. The girl is the ring-leader of about a dozen-odd lads and I can only speculate as to how she holds them in her thrall. However, thanks to your very detailed recording, we shall have a very solid case indeed."

And no small thanks to Jess for suspecting in the first place, thought Steve. *Shame she can't share the credit.*

"Well, I've got to gather a dozen of my fellow 'plods' to round this lot up, so I can't stand around rabbiting all day," the Great Dane said rising. "Thanks again. See you in court."

"In court?" chorused the four.

"Yes. To testify," reminded the Great Dane.

"Oh, right," they all replied.

1200 – Black Kettle Pub

The Partnership were having their Sunday noon meeting in the Black Kettle and Steve was briefing them on the events of earlier in the day.

"So now we've got to pay for round-the-clock security?" asked Geoff. "How much is that gonna set us back?"

"Very little, actually," replied Steve. "We can do most of it ourselves, and the Rottweiler said he'd get us some guards for the off-hours."

"I'm sorry, *who* said?" asked Slide.

"Oh, sorry," Steve said, "head of security, largish bloke . . ."

"Roland," Desiree reminded him. "Why'd you call him 'the Rottweiler'?"

Steve looked momentarily embarrassed. "Is it just me? Don't you think he bears some resemblance? I mean, not fur and all, but . . . you know, narrow eyes . . . sharpish nose . . . No?"

Desiree, Angus and Michael all looked at each other and shrugged.

Steve shrugged. "Sorry. Probably my imagination running away with me; I probably just need a break. Anyway, on to business. How'd we do last night, Linda?"

Linda looked up from her notes. "Not nearly as good as Friday, but good enough. We threw a monkey over the bar."

"And in English, that means?" asked Desiree.

"Five hundred quid," Ignatius answered.

"That's good news," Pete said. "At this rate we could 'ave it paid off in a couple o' years."

"That's the problem," Steve said. "It won't stay at this rate. Today's Sunday and we won't get much business. We're going to have to recruit more acts. Not just bands, but something . . . different."

"Like what?" asked Geoff.

"Dunno. I'm just the business side of things," Steve said. "Don't have much imagination when it comes to the marketing end. If anyone has any suggestions on what we can use the Rialto for besides music acts, speak up."

"Back home, we got this football stadium," Desiree began. "But, unlike all the other teams, our stadium is multi-purpose; we use it for conventions, concerts, even weddings and receptions, all kinda things."

"Sounds good to me," Jess announced. "As our official slave-driver, I hereby declare that Desiree becomes our new director of marketing and sales."

"Hey, na!" Desiree objected. "Maybe I don't wanna be marketing and sales. I got enough on my plate as it is."

"That excuse didn't work for me, either," Jess recalled. "You'll have to do better."

"Hey, I pull my weight, just as much as anyone else here," Desiree answered. "And I cook most of the meals for the group."

"Sounds like a second-guess to me," Jess mentioned. "Do you want my job?"

"Don't you blackmail me!" Desiree countered. "We put you in charge of scheduling, not appointing new positions."

"Desiree is right," Ignatius agreed, "we didn't specifically say one way or the other. Shall we put the new position to a vote?"

Five seconds of motions and votes made Desiree the new Director of Marketing and Sales.

"All right, fine, I'll do it," Desiree conceded. "If you're sure you want me to."

"Everyone voted for it. I would take it as given," Jess observed.

"Fine, Pete, gimme that little pad and pencil, please," Desiree asked. With just the tiniest bit of separation anxiety upon his face, Pete handed over his ever-present barman's pad and pencil. He never actually used it for taking orders or running tabs, for, as barman's barman, he had a perfect recall for orders (and the Black Kettle was never that busy anyway). Desiree took the pad and wrote:

- Conventions
- Concerts
- Receptions

After a moment's thought, she added

- Indoor sporting events

"Okay, we're gonna play a little game," Desiree announced. "Everyone has to think up a *new* item to add to the list. First come, first served. You wait, you'll have to come up with something the rest of us haven't thought of yet."

"Wha', right now?" asked Geoff.

"Yes, right now," Desiree announced.

"When's the deadline?" asked Jess, looking for a loophole as any good lawyer would do.

"You can't leave until you think of something."

"Me first!" Steve announced. Desiree threw the pad to him. "We could do Portrayals for children here. Maybe sort of a Sunday matinee. We could even make it sort of a baby-sitting Sunday School for people that go to services."

"Oh, c'mon, Steve," Pete protested. "That ain't on. It'll . . ."

"Hey, I didn't say it had to be a particularly *good* idea," Desiree interrupted.

"Now he's got his out of the way, he's done."

"Oh, right then. Iffat's 'ow it's played, 'ere's an idea," Pete began, remembering an idea that Steve had objected to earlier. "Let's do parties for the tykes where we can appear as ourselves. Just one or two hour affairs so we could do a few in a day."

Steve, who had dismissed that idea on numerous occasions, slid the tablet to Pete, "Fair play. You're off the hook now, too," he said as Pete added his idea to the list.

"Oh, I know," Sandra said eagerly, raising her hand. In all innocence, she suggested, "Slide, Geoff and Linda could do a short warm-up set for the bands we book. They're very talented." Pete eagerly handed the tablet to her.

"Oo, I know also," Slide raised his hand in mock-enthusiasm. "Sandra could sing with us as well."

"Me? Sing?" Sandra asked, astonished, the tablet still in her hand. "Slide, I can't carry a tune in a bucket. And I've never performed in my life!"

Slide took the tablet from her hand and added his suggestion to the list. "Some songs are easier than others. And besides, it's for Simon."

"If I may?" Ignatius spoke up. Slide eagerly gave him the tablet. "What about informing the academic world of our availability? We could have guest lecturers

give seminars. Authors, academics, VIPs in general. University professors love to hear themselves talk."

Clare raised her hand and Ignatius passed the tablet. "Amateur night," she suggested concisely.

Rachael grabbed the tablet just after Clare had finished her note. "Quiz night," she added quickly.

There was a pause as the remaining Partners figuratively scratched their heads.

"Ah!" Gina raised her hands. "Fashion shows!" Rachael tossed her the tablet.

"Oo, me next," Linda waved. Gina handed her the tablet. "Art show! I could even display some of my stuff!"

"We'd have to rope off a section for adults only, then," Jess pointed out.

"Ah, I have one," Michael announced as Gina passed the paper. "Business meetings! At my place of work, we're *always* having these long, pointless, meetings . . ."

"So, nuffin' like us, then," Pete said smiling.

"But there's never a place to meet. We're always competing with the local businesses for the meeting rooms in the hotels – and sometimes they're just not big enough. If we could provide *that* service – especially if we can get a reliable caterer – it would spin some fast money."

"Blimey, you folks are too fast for me," Geoff complained. "Now all the good ideas are taken . . . erm, lemme see, go with what I know . . . building . . . erm . . . Ah, well, bit of a stretch, but . . . erm, Vince mentioned when he was in that shop, buying all the tools and what-not, everyone was asking all these detailed questions about plumbing, electrical and so on."

"Yeah, that's true," Steve agreed. "We'd be waiting for twenty minutes for a salesman because some cheapskate was trying to figure out how to save two quid on a hundred dollars worth of plumbing."

"I'd bet that shop would love to have workshops for D-I-Y types," Geoff conjectured. "Like how to tile a floor or how to wire a ceiling fan. Only thing is, I don't think we could make any money charging admission for it."

"Oh, I suspect, as we are their largest customer, the shop itself would pay us a few quid," Steve opined. "After all, they'll be selling a dozen ceiling fans on the day."

"It's an idea," Desiree stated. "Put it down and I'll scope it out. That leaves Jess and Angus."

"Are we juist puttin forth money-spinners, or could it be, say, a public service, like?" asked Angus.

Desiree pondered this for a moment. "Well, I suppose a little *pro bono* work would be good for our reputation. What did you have in mind?"

"If I might, can I bring it up private-like first, juist atween us skins an then efter for all ta hear?" Angus asked. "Is a bit . . . kittlie."

"Excuse me," Jess said. "But is there something you can tell them that you can't tell us?"

Angus seemed caught off-guard. "Oh, er, na, isna like that a'tall."

"Okay, then – out with it," Jess ordered.

"Oh, erm, right. As y'like. There'd be na dosh in it for us, but there's a group what meets ivery nou an again. An we're . . . they're havin a bit o trouble findin a place. An is for a guid cause."

"And who would we – sorry, *they* be?" Jess asked, pointedly changing her pronouns.

It pained Angus to say it, but he finally did. "Alcoholics Anonymous."

Jess mentally slapped herself for being so hard-nosed, especially as it was towards Angus. *Time for damage control*, she thought. "Sounds like excellent *pro bono* to me. Desi?"

"I couldn't agree more. Consider it done," Desiree replied.

"In fact, I wish I'd thought of it first," Jess admitted, adding a little salve to the sting. She gritted her teeth, scraping her mind for an idea. "I know this is totally unlike me, but I'm at a complete loss for words."

Ignatius looked at his watch. "In that case, you have until four this afternoon," he announced. "At that point, I find out what Nora's going to cost me."

"Would you like me to go with you?" Jess asked.

"As it's an open council meeting, you may attend," he replied. "And if you want to come just to watch, you may do so. But I would prefer to handle this myself."

"Can anyone come?" asked Michael.

1600 – Otterstow Town Hall

Ignatius found himself being followed by the entire Rialto Furry Troupe Partnership as he entered the town hall.

He took his seat and gave the gavel a rap. "Town council for 16 September will now come to order."

"Mayor HaliFox, Judge StoBrocc, Councillor WhinnsBrocc, senior Alma RoseMearh, Vicar Sweep, Doctor BrookMarten and myself; all present, Mayor," Linda announced.

"And some extra as well," noted Judge StoBrocc. "I see a few new faces in the crowd. Is that you, Jess FærFyxe?"

"Yes, M'Lud," Jess answered from the gallery.

"Are you returning as a member of this township?"

"I plan to reside in the town for the foreseeable future, yes," Jess answered respectfully. "And pay my council taxes and participate in Portrayal Duty, as required."

"And who are the four humans?" asked the Judge.

"Visitors," Ignatius replied. "They are my personal guests."

The Judge looked a little annoyed at Ignatius' curt explanation. "They have names, I presume?"

Ignatius looked at his human friends. "State your names for M'Lud, please," he suggested.

Michael instantly stood up and bowed slightly. "Michael Robinson, M'Lud."

Steve and Angus quickly followed suit.

"Steve Green, M'Lud."

"Angus MacAleister, M'Lud."

"Ah, yes, I recognise you now," StoBrocc recalled. "Behaving yourself, I hope, young man?"

"Yes M'Lud," Angus answered dutifully and, more importantly, concisely.

"Mister MacAleister has demonstrated exemplary behaviour," Ignatius confirmed.

Desiree remained seated. "Desiree DelHomme."

"In a court of law, one rises to address a judge," Judge StoBrocc mentioned, looking pointedly at Desiree, who remained pointedly seated.

"This is the town council, Morris, not a court of law," Ignatius reminded him, not looking up from his notes. "Miss DelHomme, as a lady, is well within the bounds of propriety to remain seated whilst introducing herself." He looked up to see the others still standing. "And you may be seated now, gentlemen, thank you."

Michael, Steve and Angus slowly sat down.

"Bit odd for skin names," the judge grumbled. He turned to Ignatius with a slightly jaundiced eye. Ignatius caught his glare but simply shrugged as if he didn't care.

"Old business. Linda?" Ignatius prompted.

"Old business," Linda announced. "I was to find the fair-market value of the mayoral mansion for sale or rent. Only three homes have sold in Otterstow in the past ten years, so there's not much to go on, I'm afraid. I have some numbers here," she handed out some papers to each of the council members. "Taking the size and location of the homes that were sold and comparing them with the mayoral mansion, I simply extrapolated the cost of the homes."

Ignatius smiled. "I must say, I find these numbers quite reasonable."

"I don't," Judge StoBrocc objected.

"Don't you?" Ignatius responded. "Why not?"

"This is far too low," complained the judge. "You should pay twice this amount for that enormous house!"

"Twice?" Ignatius asked. "And how do you come to that conclusion?"

"That's what it's worth," the judge stated.

"Not according to Linda," Ignatius pointed out. "Surely you wouldn't accuse her of any partiality."

Linda smiled. "I tried to be as fair as possible in all this M'Lud. The only way we could truly tell what Nora is worth is to put it up for sale and take an average of offers. Of course, we would inconvenience the potential buyers, as we have no intention of actually selling it, assuming hizzoner is still of a mind to stay there."

"Which is, in fact, the case," Ignatius stated.

"It seems we disagree," the Judge grumbled.

"In that case, it would have to go before the shire council," commented Ignatius. "And you know how they are. They don't like to be involved in petty squabbles of this nature."

"It's not petty!" the judge exclaimed defensively.

"Unless it's a dispute between two townships or a question of shire-provided services, the shire council will not wish to be bothered," Ignatius pointed out.

"They'll just take the fastest and most expedient route and be done with it. You know that."

"I still say this is unsatisfactory," insisted Judge StoBrocc.

"Then what do you recommend as a remedy?" asked Ignatius.

"I, erm . . . I haven't had much time to think about it, honestly," began Morris.

"I have a suggestion, then," Ignatius offered. "I move that we list Nora for sale for one month. We then take the average of all tenders as the fair-market value."

"I'll second the motion," Dawn RoseMearh stated.

"I further provide a rider that I have the first refusal to buy the house," Ignatius added.

"I'll second that," Linda raised her hand.

"Wait!" exclaimed the judge. "Let's slow down, here. How about some discussion?"

"As you wish," Ignatius agreed.

"I don't care much for this idea," Morris stated.

"Do you have any alternative ideas?" asked Ignatius.

"Not at the moment, no," Morris admitted.

"May we put it to a vote, or shall we sit here until you think of something?" asked Ignatius.

"Fine, then, put it to a vote," Morris grumbled.

"Motion carries, five to two," Linda stated after the parliamentary dust had cleared.

"Secretary-Treasurer is hereby tasked with placing an advertisement in the appropriate periodicals that we are considering offers for the mayoral mansion in Otterstow," Ignatius announced. "After four week's time, we will average all offers and that will be considered as the fair-market value for sale. Any other new business? Would the gallery like to add anything?"

Ignatius waited for a moment. "As there is no response, this council meeting is adjourned." He banged his gavel.

1700 – Black Kettle Pub

They had all retreated back to the Black Kettle and were celebrating Ignatius' small victory.

"Must say, Ig," Pete commented, "ya handled that fairly well."

"Years of practice," Ignatius said. "And even though Morris is nearly twenty years older than I am – and he's been on the council twice as long – he still hasn't grasped the basics of the by-laws. In a court-of-law, he's practically an emperor, so he can almost make the rules up as he goes along. But in the council, he's just another voting member and he hasn't quite caught on that you can't just bully the other members into voting your way. Although you'll never convince the vicar of that."

"Why's he so interested in relieving you of Nora, anyway?" asked Michael.

"At first, I took him at his word," Ignatius answered, "which was, ostensibly, to raise money for the town."

"Still the naïve patsy," Linda tsked, patting him on the shoulder. "Honestly lg, how *lost* would you be without your humble, underpaid, Town Clerk."

"A situation soon to be remedied, I assure you," Ignatius stated. "To provide you with the *actual* reason, Michael – Morris wanted Nora for himself, and he wanted it on the cheap."

"Doesn't he have a home?" asked Michael.

"Oh, yes," Ignatius answered. "It's even grander than Nora."

"Judge StoBrocc's home is a bit further away than Nora and he wants to live closer to the town centre," Dawn explained. "Apparently the half-mile horse-ride to the pub is starting to wear on the poor dear's bottom in his old age and Nora's the only house in Otterstow that meets his rather high standard of living."

"If he has such high standards for his home," Michael hypothesised, "surely he could just have a house built to suit his needs."

"It's those 'high standards' that prevent him from doing just that," Ignatius explained. "He doesn't want any of the vacant buildings, nor the lots that they're on, and most of the empty plots in Otterstow – certainly all of the best ones – are now officially parks. When the derelict buildings that had previously occupied these lots were torn down, they were zoned as parks or, officially, 'Natural Recovery Areas'. That basically means that they cannot be built upon, which means he has to either buy an existing home and live in it or raze it to the ground and build anew."

"He actually has a third option of having a park re-zoned and building on that. The fees and sale price would raise even more money for Otterstow than the sale of Nora, I'd wager, but Morris would never pay it. He'd much rather save a few quid by having me ousted from my family home of countless generations."

"So, how did you find out about his plan?" asked Steve.

"I have my soon-to-be-overpaid Town Clerk to thank for that," Ignatius answered. "I'll let you explain Linda. I fear I might use foul language."

Linda began her story. "About a year ago, Vicar Sweep started asking a bunch of questions about 'surveys' and 'usufruct' and 'plats' and other words she doesn't know the meaning of. Then she started filing for building permits and zoning appeals, not to the Town, but to the Shire. It suddenly occurred to me that, as she certainly had no intention of building a new house of worship, she would have little need for such information or for filing the permits and appeals. She was rather clumsy in her attempts to disguise the fact that she was filing these forms on behalf of Morris. It took me all of ten seconds to figure out that he wanted to rezone a waterfront park to build his home on. That was a *complete* waste of time, as once a lot is made a park, His Honour, the Mayor of Otterstow is the only one who can take the first step to re-zoning it back to residential . . ."

"Ironically, if Morris had merely asked me," Ignatius interrupted, "I would gladly have started the process of re-zoning. I try not to play politics, but as he's gone behind my back and, far worse, tried to evict me, I don't think I'm being unreasonable by – Oh, sorry, Linda, just got on a tear. Please continue."

"At first, I wasn't too concerned about their activities," Linda resumed her story, "as neither one of them had any more clue than the man on the moon as to what they were doing. I find it well odd that Judge StoBrocc knows the length and breadth of civil and criminal law, but he doesn't know a tin of beans about the machinations of the civil service. So, a year goes by and suddenly he starts all this nonsense about forcing Ig to sell or rent Nora and it quickly occurred to me that he had gone to plan B."

"But even if Ig is forced to sell," Desiree qualified, "how does Morris end up with Nora? He has to compete with all the other buyers, doesn't he?"

"I'm sure our actions today forestalled any intrigues he may have had," Ignatius said, "whatever they may have been, so it's academic at this point. But to be honest, I'm sure I have no idea what he had in mind. I never did very well in corruption classes at school."

There was a momentary silence as no one could think of a response.

"Why is everyone looking at *me*?" Jess protested.

17SEP2001 Monday

0900 – The tré backstage

Eric BlostMus was preparing for his part for the morning Portrayal. The only other character was being played by Wanda FærFyxe, Jess' younger sister.

"Why do I *always* get stuck in duets with the town furvert," Wanda sneered.

"Just lucky, I guess," Eric said with a big smile.

"And *how* is that lucky?"

"Lucky for me," Eric pointed to his chest as he strapped on a wolf-mask.

"Hey-hey!"

"We're not kissing," she said with a sneer.

"Aren't we?" Eric asked, feigning hurt. "But we're meant to be lovers reunited."

"And we aren't hugging, neither."

"My word," Eric said.

"And don't even think about holding my hand or summat."

"No, no, course not. We're just two reunited lovers after decades of being apart," Eric answered. "Wouldn't want things to go too fast."

"And you can stop being sarky."

"Sorry. Erm . . . Would it at least be all right if I were to put my hand on your shoulder?" asked Eric.

"Just forget it, furvert. You're not touching me. Understood?"

"Very well. As you command," Eric conceded.

The town clock chimed.

"It's time," Eric said. "Best take our places."

The pair of them hurried out onto the stage.

Opening scene: Park bench, an old Dog Wolf, Rick sits on the right, reading a book.

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of The Reunited Wolves, Rick and Uldrim.

An older Bitch Wolf, Uldrim, enters stage right and sits on left of bench, with some pigeon food.

Uldrim

'Morrow, sir.

Rick

'Morrow, good lady.

Uldrim

And what book do you read today, sir? Is that LapinTain?

Rick

Aye. I have not read this since I was in university, some thirty years ago.

Uldrim

I knew a boy in university who read the old LapinTain. We would go out to the park and I would read while his head was in my lap.

Rick

Did you? My girl would do as much for me.

Uldrim

What was your university, then?

Rick

Oxonia. And yours?

Uldrim

Oxonia as well.

Rick [*astounded*]

Hold, I do know you. You were my girl – Uldrim? Is that you?

Eric stood as if in amazement.

Uldrim

Rick? Is that you? You have changed a good deal!

Rick

Thirty years will have an effect on a Wolf, but the years have been kind to you.

Uldrim

That is very gracious of you to say. I do remember those days in the park.

Rick

As do I, very fondly. What became of you? You disappeared one day and I did never see you again.

Eric took a dramatic step towards Wanda.

Uldrim

I saw you in the arms of another! We were to meet at the library and I saw you at the entrance, embracing and then kissing.

Rick

I do not recall any such embrace. My heart was yours. I would never love another.

Uldrim

She had a red ruff, much as you do. It did break my heart as you did mention at some point that you preferred red.

Rick

A red fex? Was she as tall as I?

Uldrim

I recall as if yesterday, she was your same height.

Rick

My dearest Uldrim – that was my sister! I had not seen her in six months and she did surprise me with a visit!

Uldrim

Your sister? You did never mention a sister!

Rick

Aye, my older sister, Agnes! She is taller than me by a hair. And she does have the same ruff of red hair as me, or as I used to have. Yes, now I think of it, it must surely have been her.

I was eager to introduce you and you did not come. 'Twas most embarrassing that night.

Uldrim [*putting her head in hands*]

Oh, I am fortune's fool!

While Wanda put her hands over her eyes, Eric took the opportunity to step behind her and put his hands on her shoulders, despite her warnings before the performance.

Rick

Poor Uldrim! Surely you did find some other good lad to walk through life with?

Uldrim

Nay, nay! I found none. You were my only one, Rick. My only love.

Rick

As you were mine, Uldrim. I never did marry.

Uldrim

What folly! Had I merely asked you, we would have spent our years together!

As he started his next line, Eric wrapped his arms around Wanda and gave her a hug, discreetly cupping one of her breasts. Desiree and Jess both had to cover their mouths to keep from laughing out loud. Ignatius seemed a bit in the dark until Jess pointed out what was going on. He sighed in exasperation.

Rick

And had I sought you out, instead of giving up, the same as well. But what is done is done. Hindsight cannot change the past.

We still have some good years left. Let us make the most of them.

Wanda's eyes widened with rage, but still delivered her next line.

Uldrim

Oh, Rick, what time we have wasted!

Having had accomplished his small mission of retribution, Eric released her and then knelt at her side to deliver his next line.

Rick

My dearest Uldrim, life is short! Let us not waste a minute more with what might have been. Come with me and we can marry as we planned and live out our tiny march of days.

Uldrim

You are right. So let us go and marry just now!

Rick

Spend a minute in regret
Take an hour from life's debt

Narrator

Thus the fate of Rick and Uldrim, The Reunited Wolves
Draw from it what you may.
Until next we meet – good day!

Ignatius went to the backstage immediately after the children had gone, with Jess and Desiree following. Wanda was fuming, her arms crossed in indignation. Eric was holding one hand over his eye.

"Eric, I'm afraid I must reprimand you for your little stunt on the stage," Ignatius said.

"Too right!" Wanda exclaimed, nearly shouting.

"Yes, Ignatius," Eric answered courteously.

"I would remind you that the audience is comprised of children and it doesn't do to do that sort of thing in their presence," Ignatius admonished.

"It doesn't do me any favours, neither, I can say that!" Wanda snarled.

"Yes, Ignatius," Eric answered.

"The first order of business should be for you to apologize to Wanda," Ignatius suggested.

"I'm sorry Wanda," Eric said sincerely. "I do promise I won't do anything like that in future."

"Too right, you won't, furvert," Wanda bristled.

"Eric, why are you covering your eye?" asked Ignatius.

"Because it hurts," Eric answered plainly.

"And why is that?" asked Ignatius. "And move your hand so I can take a look."

Eric removed his hand, revealing a bloodshot eye with traces of bruising and swelling beginning to show. "Wouldn't want to grass."

"I don't think it's any secret who did *that*," Ignatius replied. His voice became a little sterner. "I think I should point out to the pair of you that you have both broken the law and your offences could give me cause to arrest and charge."

Wanda's jaw dropped. "I'm not having this furvert grope me on stage and not get my due!"

"Due?" Jess repeated, incredulous. "'Due', my tail, girl. You and Eric are both guilty of assault and battery, but you, Wanda, are also guilty of ABH."

"Oh, I barely touched him!" Wanda dismissed.

"Yeah, well I don't see any bruises on your chest that match what's on his eye," Jess observed. "And I certainly don't see any swelling, either."

"Oh, is that it, then?" Wanda snarled sarcastically. "Just 'cause I don't stuff my shirt with padding, I oughtta be grateful that anyone'd touch 'em? Is that it, eh?"

"First of all, I've no need to stuff *my* shirt with anything," Jess retorted as politely as she could, "as my tits manage to do that all by themselves. And yes, I think you should be grateful. Especially someone as sterling as Eric, here. In fact, I think you ought to apologize to the poor lad."

"Apologize!" Wanda exploded. "You must be joking!"

"Do I *look* like I'm joking?" Jess asked through clenched teeth. "And as you're doing so, kindly remember that his name is 'Eric' and not 'furvert'."

"Just 'cause yer my older sister and blowing hizzoner, here, doesn't give you the right to order me around," Wanda snarled.

"Let's set some things straight, my little vixen," Jess said quietly, her face getting very close to Wanda's.

The others were astounded that Jess actually used the term in an obviously derogatory sense to a female Fox.

Jess was impenitent as she continued her diatribe. "Defending yourself against furverts and psychos is one thing. Nearly blinding someone when there is obviously *no* imminent danger is *not* acceptable, even as a matter of retribution. You do *not* take the law into your own hands. Do I make myself clear?"

"But . . ."

"Yes, Eric was a complete sifwit for doing something so spectacularly thick. But he's hardly a threat to your personal safety," Jess pointed out. "Now, apologize."

Wanda was cowed by her older sister's excoriation and she finally mumbled a feeble, "Sorry."

"His name is Eric," Jess reminded.

"Sorry Eric," Wanda grunted.

It was barely a heartfelt effort but Eric acknowledged it. "It's all right," he answered.

"One last thing, Wanda," Jess continued in a soft, yet spiteful voice. "Maybe you wouldn't be wound *quite* so tight if you'd blown Ig when you had the chance. He may not look it, but . . ."

"Jess," Ignatius interrupted. "Are you *quite* done?" he asked with narrow eyes and flat ears.

"Erm . . . yeah," Jess chirped, withdrawing from Wanda's personal space. "Quite done, thank you."

Ignatius looked at the two offenders. "Eric, I can't believe I have to tell you, of all people, to keep your hands to yourself.

"As for you, Wanda, I'll give you a choice. Either I drag you and Eric to court and charge fully, or you can take double PD for the next month."

"And what about him? He gets away spot-free?" Wanda complained.

"Eric received his punishment when you took the law into your own hands. Need I repeat my offer?"

"That's blackmail," Wanda pointed out. "And that's illegal."

"I don't do illegal," Ignatius said pointedly. "Everything I have offered is completely within the scope of the law. Frankly, I find it offensive that you would make such a suggestion and my patience is wearing thin. I could, if I wish, add slander to your charges . . ."

"Fine!" Wanda snapped. "I'll do the double PD. Can I go now?"

Ignatius silently waved to the door and Wanda left in a huff.

"Eric, what could possibly possess you to do such a thing?" Ignatius asked. "I know you like to flirt and tease, but you've always been respectful towards a woman's wishes."

"Before the Portrayal," Eric began his explanation, "she was being a bit . . . y'know . . . frosty, sorta thing. 'Don't kiss me. Don't hold my hand. Don't touch me.' That sort of thing. I mean, it *is* a play about reunited lovers. And they're not supposed to hold hands?"

"So you decided that the best course of action was to grope her on stage in front of two dozen children?" asked Ignatius.

"I appreciate that that was definitely a mistake now," Eric admitted.

"I thought it was funny," Jess admitted.

Ignatius gave her a disapproving look.

"Understood, it was still *wrong*," Jess qualified. "But it *was* funny."

"You're not helping matters, you know," Ignatius told Jess. He turned to Eric. "Go and see Alex about your eye."

As soon as Eric had left, Jess began cajoling Ignatius. "Oh, come on, Ig, he's seen the error of his ways. We can all look back and have a little giggle now. She's just a cold-hearted bitch, honestly."

"Honestly, I'm just as astonished as Ig that Eric would do such a thing," Desiree said. "He's always been such a sweet guy."

"I agree," Jess added. "Eric's usually such a goody-goat. Much like you, Iggy."

Ignatius ignored the dig. "Desiree, I ask this in all sincerity; do you think what Eric did was amusing?"

"As an audience member – well, I *did* laugh, so I'd be lying if I said 'no.' But I can honestly say if it were me on the stage, it might be a different story. I'm not saying Wanda deserved it – no one does. And, when all is said and done, even I wouldn't risk putting an eye out, just for a little grope like that."

"As we're being frank," Ignatius began, "I happen to think you're both very warm-hearted bitches."

"Oh, thank you," they chorused.

2300 – Rialto Kitchen

Angus and Jess sat exhausted in the kitchen of the Rialto, following a full day of work, each sipping some lemonade.

"I wadna object if ye had some proper drink," Angus offered. "Dinna abstain on ma part."

"No, I'm fine," Jess dismissed.

"Seriously, I wadna care."

"It's got vodka in," Jess lied, holding up her glass.

"Ah, right."

They sat in silence a while longer. Jess, in her fatigue, leaned back in her chair, causing her shirt to ride up, exposing her stomach. She was too busy yawning and rubbing her eyes to notice that Angus was staring at her navel.

She stopped rubbing, blinked a few times as she stared out of the window and then turned to Angus to say something. She cut herself off when she noticed where his attention was directed.

"Whaaat?" she said very self-consciously.

"Ah, is naething," Angus replied sheepishly, looking down at his glass.

"No, come on. What?" Jess insisted. "Please don't clam up on me now, Angus. You're the last person on earth that still talks to me."

Angus smiled shyly for a second. "I was juist havin a deek at yer tum."

Jess bashfully pulled her shirt down over her stomach. "Sorry about that. I've put on two stone since I've got to Otterstow. It is kinda gross."

"Oh, na, isna that a'tall," Angus disagreed.

"It's all right, you don't have to apologise," Jess said. "I know it's disgusting."

"Na," Angus denied sincerely. "Isna disgustin. Why'd ye say that?"

"Look at it. It's huge." She gripped a roll of fat from her waist.

"Pah! Isna as much as all that. It suits ye."

"It *suits* me?" Jess asked incredulous. "It's hideous! It's why I g dumped me – because I'm *fat*."

Angus shook his head. "Na, I dinna think sa."

"Is *too*," Jess retorted. "That and he's a pompous prig."

"Na, I dinna think that, naither."

"Oh, don't you? So what do you think?"

"I think he dumped ye's acause ye couldna keep yer mooth shut."

"Don't spare my feelings or anything," Jess said sadly. "So I'm a fat loudmouth." She bit her lower lip. "What else is new?"

Angus leaned forward in his chair. "Jess, erm . . . what way can I make this plain . . . I think ye're right bonny as ye are."

"But . . . I'm . . . *fat*!" Jess practically wailed.

"Aye, a strong, wallie woman, no some paulie waif. A woman what's sweitin life from ivery pore instead o bein two steps afore the Reaper."

"Are you saying you find me physically attractive?"

"Oh, aye," Angus nodded sincerely.

Jess gave him a disapproving stare.

"Have I iver leed ta you, Jess?"

Jess looked him in the eye. "Prove it."

18SEP2001 Tuesday

0100 – Rialto Kitchen

"Jess? You awrite?" asked Angus.

Jess looked up from her sixth bowl of red beans and sausage that Desiree had prepared for the next day's lunch – for everyone.

"Oh, sorry. Just like a little snack after the main event. This is the last bit, I'm afraid, otherwise I'd offer. Sif me, for beans, this is excellent, especially with some cheese in."

0600 – A forest somewhere in Northern England

"Sun's about to come up," Grace mentioned, noting the eastern glow.

"Yeah, about that time," Simon agreed. "There's a nice spot over there to pitch our tent – off the trail, good bit of cover."

"Right," Grace agreed. "So, what's for dinner?"

"Nothing," Simon answered. "We've eaten the last of our nickings."

"Nothing at all?" Grace complained. "Oh, come on, there must be something."

"No. We've no food. And as we're in the middle of nowhere, without so much as a farm in sight, I don't think we're going to get anything either."

"Bloody hell," Grace grumbled. "And I'm starving and all. I'd eat a bowl full of carrots just now."

"Honestly?" asked Simon, somewhat amazed.

"Oh, yeah!" Grace admitted. "You don't happen to have any?"

"Sorry, no."

Grace sighed. "Well, it's not like it's the first time we've gone to bed hungry. Go on, then, let's pitch the tent. But first thing tomorrow, we nick some food."

"No argument from me," Simon agreed. "Just hope we can find some."

1200 – Rialto Kitchen

"Sorry there's no food," Steve apologised, bringing the Tuesday meeting to order in the Rialto kitchen.

"I cooked a huge mess of red beans and sausage," Desiree insisted. "Got no clue what happened to it. The rice is still there, but . . ."

She was interrupted by the unmistakable trumpet of flatulence, followed by the usual protests and accusations.

Angus tried to hide his smile as he gave Jess a discreet nudge. Jess returned a look that belied innocence.

"I've acted on some of the ideas we had in our little brainstorm session," Desiree mentioned, forging ahead. "First of all, I put a notice on our marquee along with a number, saying we're available. We've already had an enquiry from an oldies band that wants to play next weekend and I told them we'll meet later today to work out the details. I've also contacted the larger companies in the area to tell them the Rialto is available for corporate meetings. I'm not exactly sure how to get academics to rent the hall for lectures and guest speakers but I'm attempting to find out as soon as I can. There's a bulletin board at a day-care centre and I posted a note saying that we're available for children's' parties, providing live . . ." Desiree used her fingers for quotes, "'animal' entertainment. I left a message with a bridal shop in town saying that we were available for wedding receptions, dinners, etc. Finally, I called every school in the area and told them we'd give them reduced rates if their students had a performance and needed a venue. As for the rest of the ideas, they're in the works. That's it for me. Who's next?"

"Steve, what about our money-laundering scheme?" Jess asked.

"I wish you wouldn't refer to it in quite that way," Steve winced. "Anyway, Vince wants to buy more of our . . . soapy things. But we don't need very much money in Otterstow."

"I beg to differ," argued Rachael.

"How's that?" asked Steve.

"Well, we ain't never been paid, 'ave we?" Pete replied. "And some of us got food to buy, that sorta thin'."

"Oh, I *am* sorry," Steve apologised. "Hadn't thought of that. Gosh. In that case, I guess we'd better come up with some arrangement for splitting up the profits from Vince."

Linda smiled and waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, leave that to me. I'll set up the finances and the money exchange with Vince. Everyone'll get paid their share. 'Course, we'll have to make a profit with the Rialto to pay for it, first."

"I thought we were in the black for the month already," Steve objected.

"Not quite yet," Linda put her hand on his knee and gave it a squeeze.

"We've just barely paid off the bank loan for the month. We've got utilities, taxes, insurance, the lease payment on all the lighting and security equipment . . . and don't forget that we now pay Roland and company to watch the building full-time!" She waved away Steve's worried look with her hand. He was grateful it was no longer on his knee. "Not to worry, love. Even a couple of nights with that record spinner and we'll be in the clear soon enough."

Another blast of intestinal gas made its announcement as Angus struggled mightily to contain his mirth, while Jess looked on, apparently mystified.

"With that, we're adjourned," Steve announced.

"And not a moment too soon," Pete complained.

1245 – Rialto Kitchen

The meeting had been dismissed and most of the Partnership went about their business as a puzzled Desiree searched the refrigerator.

Angus gave Jess a nudge.

"What?" Jess whispered. "It's not like I ate *all* of it."

Angus rolled his eyes and nudged her again. "G'wan."

"All right, all right, I'm going," Jess conceded. "Sif, can't have a snack without getting CE on my tail."

Jess hesitantly walked over to the refrigerator as Angus looked silently on.

"Erm . . . Desiree," Jess said, lightly tapping her on the shoulder. "I think I know what happened to *some* of the beans." She grimaced as she mercilessly broke wind once again.

"Oh, f'true?" Desiree asked, amused. "Apparently the truth isn't the only thing that will out."

"I had, erm . . . a little snack in the wee hours of the morning," Jess confessed. "But just a few bowls. Certainly not the entire amount for everyone. And a little cheese. By the way, it was awesome."

"There was a blue and white serving bowl," Desiree stated. "How much of it did you have?"

"Erm . . . all of it," Jess said honestly. "But that was just part of it, right?"

"You ate *everything* in that blue and white serving bowl?" asked Desiree, somewhat incredulous.

"Well, yeah. Like I said, just a couple of bowls."

"Jess," Desiree began, "those 'couple of bowls' came to nearly a half gallon . . ."

"No way!" Jess protested.

"Along with about four feet of pure-pork smoked sausage."

"Oh, it did not! Someone else must've had some as well, then," Jess reasoned. "How could I possibly stomach a dozen servings?"

"It's served over rice," Desiree pointed out. "The beans and sausage are only half the meal."

"So I ate the whole thing?" Jess said apologetically. "Oh, sif, I'm sorry."

"Look, if you like it, I'll be happy to make you as much as you want or I can show you how to cook it yourself, but if you keep eating like that . . . Better yet, lemme *show* you." Desiree dug out her wallet and fished out a picture. "Here. Have a look."

"Shave me, that is absolutely gross! How can anyone let themselves get so siffing enormous! That's absolutely disgust it's you, isn't it?"

1200 – Newburg Bank

The four humans of the Partnership sat in front of the bank officers as they reviewed their semi-weekly report.

"Excuse me," asked the Basset. "Does this say that you spent fifty quid on . . ." she adjusted her glasses as if to make sure she wasn't hallucinating, "generic *condoms*?"

The four entrepreneurs looked at each other nervously.

"Erm . . ." Steve began, "we have . . . vending machines in the toilets. I hope you don't find that morally objectionable."

"We're bankers, not preachers or politicians," responded the Colourpoint. "Although my next question is, why don't I see an expense for a vending machine? Surely you don't plan to sell them over the counter at the bar?"

"Oh, erm, no," Steve added nervously. "Still looking for a suitable machine, is all."

"Well, in that case, I can understand the next item on the list," the Basset said, "being the hundred nicker worth of, erm . . . female doodahs. But why on earth do you need to sell *hair conditioner*? And forty pounds worth? And deodorant?"

"Oh, sorry," Desiree interrupted. "That's me. Well, the conditioner and deodorant, not the hundred pounds worth of pads and 'pons, obviously. I have, umm, a . . . sorta skin condition and I have to buy these very expensive products to keep from breaking out in a rash. That shouldn't have gone on the expenses list – and I *did* pay for them out of my own pocket. They just got on the list somehow."

"Oh, aye, that'd be doon ta me," Angus admitted. "She musta just left the receipt on the counter and I totted it oop."

"All right then," agreed the Colourpoint. Still, she looked a bit upset. "Look, let's get something clear. We can have no jiggery-pokery here. You spend the money on what's necessary for the Rialto and that's fine. But you *must* keep *careful* records of those expenditures and *no* personal items. I'll not put up with any more lapses like this. Understood?"

The four nodded and mumbled their agreements.

"Honestly," the Basset mumbled absently, "if I were the suspicious sort, I'd begin to wonder if you were laundering money or some such."

1300 – Black Kettle Pub

Steve had decided to spend the rest of the afternoon at the Black Kettle and was relaxing and socialising with Clare, Rachael, Desiree and Linda. He briefly went up to fetch his round for the others when Linda was suddenly by his side at the bar.

She leaned over and whispered in Steve's ear. "Just wanted to say 'sorry' for putting my hand on your knee."

"Quite all right," he whispered back. "It's not like Desi and I are a couple anymore, anyway."

Linda looked surprised and took his hand, as if to console him. "Aren't you?"

"I thought everyone overheard our break-up last Saturday," Steve mentioned and suddenly wished he hadn't.

"Oh, poor dear," she tsked.

"I'll live," he replied. "And it's not like we're bitter about it. She's being quite civil about the whole thing, actually."

"Still, it can't be pleasant. Poor chap. Here, let me help carry them to the table."

"No, that's quite all right . . ."

"No, I insist. Here, let me help – Oops!" she exclaimed as one of the pints spilled onto his trousers. "Oh, dear! I'm terribly sorry." She quickly grasped a nearby towel, knelt down and attempted to dry off his trouser legs.

"That's not actually necessary, Linda," Steve said, a little impatiently.

"Oh, don't be silly! Here, almost done!" she stated enthusiastically. "I'll get these," she added, throwing the towel on the bar and picking up the pints to deliver to the table.

Johnny Prigel, who was behind the bar, smiled wryly at Steve and handed him a replacement for the spilt pint. "Careful there, Steve," he advised quietly while Linda was at the table. "I think she fancies you."

"What?" Steve asked incredulously.

"She likes you," Johnny whispered loudly. "In fact, I think she more than fancies you. I suspect she'd like to wrap her tail round you."

"But I'm . . ." Steve suddenly lowered his voice. "Pete said no one wants to mixie with humans! And I'm younger than she is!"

"How old are you?" asked Johnny.

"Twenty-five."

"Not by much," Johnny said. "She's only twenty-nine."

"Still, I'm a human! I can't date a . . . a *Squirrel*."

Johnny shrugged. "Don't think she'd mind, honestly," he nodded as he went off to take care of other business.

Steve looked nonplussed as he considered Johnny's remark. It was only a moment before Linda was back and tugging at his arm. "C'mon Steve. Let's go have a seat with the rest of the girls," Linda urged.

"What? Oh, right." He obediently went along with Linda.

At some point during their socialising, Linda went off for a few moments. Clare and Rachael moved to sit on opposite sides of Steve, hemming him in.

"What now?" asked Steve.

"Don't you see?" asked Clare.

"See what?" asked Steve.

"She fancies ya," Rachael replied.

Steve looked across the table at Desiree. "Do we have to discuss this in front of Desiree?"

"Don't mind me. We're not together any more," Desiree replied, returning to her sketches. "Leave your foot on that stool, Rache. And try to stop wiggling your toes."

"So, Steve?" prompted Rachael.

"So, what?" asked Steve.

"Linda?" Rachael reminded him.

"No, thanks," Steve said curtly.

"Why not?" Clare continued the disyllabic dialogue.

"I'm a human and she's a Squirrel," Steve complained.

"You'd be datin' up, then," Rachael continued the sell. "Squirrels are considered even more sought-after'n 'Ares, I'll freely admit."

"Sorry, I'm not a social climber," Steve said.

"She's a lovely girl," Clare added.

"Yes, she is," Steve agreed. "She's charming and cheerful, and I'm certain she's affectionate, but the fact remains, she's still a Squirrel."

"An' you're a chimp, but she's willin' to overlook that," Rachael replied.

"I am *not* a chimp," Steve protested. "A chimp is *Pan troglodytes*. I'm a human being! *Homo sapiens*. And she's a Sciuran."

Desiree looked up again. "The 'c' in 'Sciuran' is silent, by the way."

"Much like the 't' in 'bitch', I imagine," Steve retorted.

Desiree presented a rude, uniquely American, gesture and went back to her drawing.

Clare rebutted. "She's not a squirrel with a small 's'. That's *Sciurus vulgaris*. She's a sapient Squirrel, or Sciuran, with a capital 'S'. *Sciurus sapiens*. So that's that argument out."

"Since when did you change your tune about mixies, Clare?" asked Steve.

"I didn't change my tune about mixies," Clare denied.

"What? You two are always going on about it! You even gave Desi a hard time just because she mentioned that Ig had a nice brush, much less dating him. And you as well, Rache."

Rachael shrugged. "We never said we minded one way or t'other; we just said it was a bad idea to advertise."

"I'm sorry," Steve protested, "but if I'm to have any sort of meaningful relationship, I'd prefer to be open about it. Besides, there are taboos in Reality about dating other species."

"So, what's the problem?" Clare asked.

"I can't date Linda because she's a different species!" Steve clarified.

"No she's not," Desiree and Clare chorused. They looked at each other in surprise at the coincidence.

"What're you talking about? Of course she is!" Steve countered.

Desiree answered. "No, she's *not*. Haven't you been paying attention, Steve? We're *Homo sapiens*. Ig is *Vulpes sapiens*. Linda is *Sciurus sapiens*. We're all the same species – sapiens."

"That's just nomenclature," Steve dismissed. "Just because two things have the same name, doesn't make them the same."

"No, it's more than just nomenclature. I've been studying this ever since I got here. We all have the same chromosome count. And I admit I don't know what the whole story is, but these people – Linda, Clare and Rachael, all the Frith – they're all just as human as you and I; and I use the term loosely."

"Speak for yourself," Steve protested.

"Yeah," Rachael and Clare chorused.

"No, I'm serious. We're just variations of the same species."

"What?" Steve protested. "You're absolutely insane! Of course we're different species! Look at us!"

"No, we're not, Steve. It doesn't matter what they look like. Take a look at a Chihuahua and a husky. How similar do they look? We're all the same under the skin – or fur. Well, almost the same. Well, quite different actually. I haven't quite figured that out. But we are similar enough in a genetic sense to be the same species."

Steve heaved a deep sigh. He couldn't go anywhere as Rachael and Clare had him pinned on both sides. "I don't care," he said. "I simply cannot date a Squirrel. Even if it is a move up, I just can't do it. Tell me, Desi, could you date, say, a Boar?"

Desiree pursed her lips in consideration. "I only have Geoff to judge by, so I couldn't honestly say. But I wouldn't object if I were on the receiving end of the attention of a certain Fox."

"Better not let Jess hear you say that," Clare warned.

"Why would she care?" Desiree dismissed. "She's wrapping her tail around Angus, from what I heard."

"What'd ya hear 'bout that?" asked Rachael.

"Mostly screams and howls," Desiree answered, "from Jess, of course – Damn, if that woman can't raise a racket. Anyway, Steve, look, do what you want. I don't care." She went back to her sketches.

"C'mon Steve," Rachael urged. "Give 'er a chance. The poor dear's so lonely."

"That's another reason not too," Steve objected. "Mum always told me to never have a relationship with someone because you feel sorry for them."

"That *is* good advice," Clare acknowledged.

"Yeah. 'Tis," Rachael admitted.

"Probably should tell Linda that as well," Clare suggested.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Steve asked suspiciously.

"Well," Rachael began. "One o' the reasons she's so interested in ya is 'cause ya can't seem to find yourself a steady girl."

"I was with Desi for months!" Steve explained.

"Well, true enough," Clare allowed. "But, look what came of it. She spends one night at the Rialto and she's been camped out at Nora ever since. What kind of girlfriend is that?"

"Hey, na!" Desiree snapped, looking up from her sketch. "Ig invited me and even *you* have to admit that the Rialto's a dump compared to Nora."

"Still, Desiree, ya gotta show your man some affection," Rachael stated.

"I did!" Desiree said defensively. She paused and noticed all three were waiting for an example. "I . . . *hugged* him from time to time."

Rachael turned back to Steve and took his hand to gain his confidence. "Steve," she said with great sincerity, "all we're askin' is let 'er take ya to dinner. Nuffin' else. Just an evenin' o' conversation, a drink or two . . ."

"And then you can bonk like rabbits," Desiree interrupted with a rude smile.

"Hares!" Rachael and Clare chorused to Desiree.

"Oo! No! That's not what we meant!" Clare said turning back to Steve.

"No! No! Just a li'l wine an' dine. Nuffin' more!" Rachael pleaded.

"Come on, Steve. It'd make her happy," Clare implored.

Steve sighed again. It was apparent his resistance was weakening.

"She'll promise to be good," Rachael said.

"She won't . . . squeeze anything?" asked Steve.

"Nope," Rachael said in proxy.

"She won't kiss me or grope me or anything like that?"

"Promise," Clare said.

"All right. Just dinner. What restaurant was she thinking of? There aren't any in Otterstow, so I guess we'd have to go to HareFam, or . . ."

"Restaurant?" asked Clare.

"Yes. You know. You pay for food. They bring it to your table," Steve explained facetiously.

"She wasn't gonna take ya to a restaurant," Rachael said.

"I thought we were going to have dinner," Steve said.

"You are," Clare confirmed. "At her home."

"Great," Steve muttered to himself.

Just then, Linda returned to the table.

"Linda? Why don't you ask Steve over for dinner?" Desiree suggested.

Steve gave Desiree a subtle glare.

"Oh?" Linda replied, a little unsure of herself. Seeing as Steve was sitting right there and had heard the question, she didn't want to seem rude. "Erm, Steve? Care to join me for a little bite tonight?"

"Sure, I'd be glad to," he replied politely, if not completely sincerely. "What time?"

"How about six? If you're not busy?"

"The Rialto is open tonight, I should be there for work."

"Oh, go on Steve," Rachael urged. "We'll run the show. It's only a Tuesday record spin anyway."

Steve sighed in resignation. "Okay. Right. Six, then. I'll meet you here, if that's all right. So, if you'll excuse me, I've a few things to attend to before then. Girls?"

Rachael and Clare looked at Steve. "Yes?"

"Could I get out, please? You're sitting in my way and I can't leave."

"Oh, right!" Clare said and jumped up to let Steve off the bench.

Steve departed.

Linda looked suspiciously at Rachael and Clare. "What exactly did you two say to him? You didn't threaten him, I hope."

"No, nothing like that," Clare answered. "Just a little persuasion."

"And we sorta promised sumfin' on your behalf," Rachael added.

"And what was that?" asked Linda.

"That you wouldn't grope him," answered Clare.

"Or squeeze anyfin'," Rachael added, "of 'is, that is."

Linda had her arms crossed and was still looking askance at the pair. "I would have preferred to handle this on my own. But, seeing as you two have managed a result, I won't complain *too* much." Her expression brightened just slightly. "Guess I'd better go get something ready for dinner, then," she said, departing.

"Desiree?" Clare prompted.

Desiree looked up with an innocent smile. "Yes?"

"That stuff you said – about us being the same species. Did you just recently come to that conclusion?"

"When Ignatius was explaining about the Genra, I noticed the species was always *sapiens*. I didn't want to ask at the time, but I had to wonder; was it just nomenclature, like Steve said, or were they all actually the same species. Then, when Pete told me about mixed children, that's when it whomped me upside the head."

"Why mention it just now?" asked Clare.

"Mostly, to embarrass Steve into going out with Linda."

"There's an example of doing the right thing for the wrong reason," Clare observed.

"Seriously, the real reason – sorry, the *true* reason," Desiree corrected herself, "I didn't know where to find out or who to ask."

"You sounded fairly confident in your opinion when you told Steve," Clare recalled. "Nonetheless, perhaps I can help. What's on your mind?"

"Let me start with what I know – or what I think I know. Then you can fill in any gaps or correct any misconceptions."

"If I can," Clare offered. "Go ahead, then."

"First item – You and I, all of us . . . We all have twenty-three chromosome pairs. That would be necessary, although not sufficient to be the same species."

"Correct," Clare confirmed, "on both counts."

"Okay, next item. A species is defined by its ability to have fertile offspring – that's an opinion but it's not just my opinion and it's not the only definition either."

There are lots of different definitions of what distinguishes species. That particular one is the most popular and it's called the biological definition, at least in Reality."

Clare shrugged. "Not much argument on that point, except to say that many animals that are branded as different species have had viable offspring. There are several cases of mules foaling as well as tigers and lions having third and fourth mixed generations. When you come right down to the nitty-gritty, there actually is no universally accepted definition of 'species'."

"So far, so good," Desiree concurred. "What about the children in Allegory who are of mixed . . . parentage, for lack of a better word. I don't have the resources to find out first hand if, A – there have been any live children or, B – if any of these children have had children themselves. Everyone I ask changes the subject. Besides, I prefer to have either first hand sight or some reliable source, like birth records and I don't know where to look."

"I, personally, have never actually seen a mixed child," Clare confessed. "Rather tragically, they're isolated most of their lives, either in institutions or private homes and their records are sealed, ostensibly for privacy. But I'm certain they exist. As to case 'B' – have to give that one a pass."

"What do they look like?"

Clare shrugged. "Couldn't say. As I said, I've never seen one. I suspect it would be a mixture of features of the parents, but I just don't know."

Desiree continued. "Also, there's a lot of things that don't make sense. Ig is a Vulpan, but he lacks quite a few features that a bestiant fox would have. For example, feral foxes smell horribly."

"Well, he *does* bathe," Clare commented. "Rather frequently, actually."

"There's a gland in the tail of feral foxes that makes a smell. He's allowed me to look and I can't find it. And you have most of the outward characteristics of a bestiant hare. At least in your extremities – I haven't had the opportunity to examine you closely . . ."

"And you're not likely to anytime soon," Clare warned. "I've heard about your 'examinations'. Linda's still recovering, from what I hear."

"Awright, awright," Desiree raised her hands in defence. "I wasn't even asking. Anyway there are lots of things that are different between you and bestiant hares. You have hair – a fex, like us. Bestiant hares don't have that. Also, your breasts are enlarged – naturally, I'm assuming. That only happens when the feral does are pregnant or nursing and even then, only to a tiny degree – nothing like what you have. And you only have two. Bestiant hares have like eight, or ten or something, I can't remember offhand."

"In the other direction, Ignatius is digitigrade. He walks on his toes, like a feral fox. It just doesn't piece together. Nothing fits the way it's supposed to. There aren't any rules."

Clare gave this some thought. "There are rules – lots and lots of rules. But, as is usually the case in the sciences – biology in particular – there just happen to be even more exceptions. If I might suggest, why don't we climb the taxonomic tree?"

"Awrite," Desiree agreed. "Kingdom is the first branch, I presume."

"Animals. We all fit the general description there. And, as we all have spines, except for one or two individuals I won't mention, that makes us vertebrates."

"Class is next," Desiree pointed out. She put her hands on her breasts and raised her eyebrows in question.

"Mammal," Clare remarked. "No question there, either, especially at this table."

"Order," prompted Desiree.

"Oo, I'll take another lager, if you're buyin', please," suggested Rachael, looking up from filing her nails. The other two ignored her.

"Primate," Clare stated plainly.

"Sure about that?" asked Desiree askance. "You're a primate?"

"Prehensile fingers, binocular eyes," Clare listed.

"But your dentition is different," Desiree pointed out. "You don't have canines..."

"We do, they just don't emerge," Clare interrupted. "Not in Hares at any rate. But they are there. We can see them in our x-rays when we go to the dentist."

"All right, we'll let that one go," Desiree conceded. "Suborder?"

Clare shook her head. "No suborder here. Family's next."

"And that would be?"

"Ambulid."

"Ah, see? There. I'm a hominid," Desiree said. "We have a split. What are the characteristics of . . . what was that again?"

"Ambulid? Erect posture, bipedal, language skills. In our world, humans are Ambulids as well as the rest of us."

"Okay, so Ambulid equals Hominid," Desiree replied in concession.

"Although they keep changing all the rules and making it about chromosomes and DNA correlation . . .". She rested her forehead on her fist as she thought.

"Ambulid? Ambulid?" she asked herself. "From Latin *ambulare*. To walk. Of course. Makes sense. Say, didn't you say Ig was on all fours once."

"Just for emergencies," Clare replied. "Chief locomotion is bipedal. Not always the fastest, but it is most used."

"Well, what about the hands? Everyone has an opposable thumb and almost everyone has four fingers but Geoff only has two fingers and Dawn only has one."

"Doesn't matter," Clare dismissed. "Humans are occasionally born with six fingers, aren't they?"

"Oh, f'sure," Desiree admitted.

"The description of the Ambulid family only says that they have to have prehensile hands with an opposable thumb, capable of a certain level of manual dexterity. All sapientia can write – or at least they have the capacity to do so. There's no requirement on the number of fingers."

"Awright," Desiree conceded. "Pass, then. Next is genus. *Homo*, *Vulpes*, *Lepus*, *Sciurus*. So *that's* where we differ?"

"I never claimed we were the same genus," Clare said defiantly.

"That's it then," Desiree concluded. "You can't be the same species if you're from different genera. The taxonomic tree branches, it doesn't form closed loops."

"Ambulids are the exception," Clare said plainly.

"Are you trying to tell me," Desiree started, "that everyone here is the same species but a different genus? That doesn't make much sense."

"Makes perfect sense to us," Clare replied. She glanced at Rachael who was filing a claw and not paying very close attention to the conversation. "Well, to me anyway. The fact is, and I've stated this several times, we've evolved. We are not like our bestiant counterparts, just as you are not like chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utans."

"Even if that tall, skinny bastart does look a bit like an oorang-ootang," Rachael commented idly, examining her manicure.

Clare ignored her sister. "For example, do gorillas and chimps have a fex? Do they have enlarged breasts? Do humans still spend the larger part of their lives in trees?"

Desiree considered for a moment. "No, I suppose not. So assuming, as you suggest, the different peltages are different genera, but still the same species – and assuming the sapients of Reality and Allegory are all . . . related, for lack of a more specific term . . . as the same species or subspecies or whatever . . . How did we evolve? Where did we come from? Species split from the main branch. They don't converge. And certainly not several different genera."

"Don't honestly care, at the end of the day," Clare dismissed. "I'm just trying to fix Linda up with Steve."

1400 – *The tré*

"You know, for the first time ever, I'm actually glad to do this part," Dawn told Ignatius. "I absolutely hated it for ages."

"What brought about this turn of events?" Ignatius asked as they waited for the clock to chime for the afternoon performance. "Ah, let me guess – the departure of your two juniors?"

"Got it in one," Dawn admitted.

"There's the chime," Ignatius announced. "Let's take our places."

Opening scene:

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of *The Nosy Mare*

Once there was a Mare who had a great curiosity about things that were none of her affair. For example, one day she asked a Hare . . .

MARE [*Enter stage r, crosses stage and asks to OOV stage l*]

The children cheered at seeing their beloved Alma on the stage. Dawn, ever the professional, pretended they weren't there.

Pardon me, Mistress Hare, but how can you have so many children?

Narrator

And then she once spied on a Badger in his Sett

MARE *[crosses stage and bends low as if to look into a hole, offstage r]*
[Roar of Badger can be heard]

Offstage, Ignatius roared a perfunctory "Raar!" with his best attempt at a Caldon accent as Dawn recoiled in mock surprise.

Narrator

In fact, she was so nosy, all of the animals in the forest complained to the Fox and asked him to do something about it. So one day, the Fox happened by the Nosy Mare and said:

Fox *[enters stage r]*

Good morrow, Miss Mare.

Mare

Good morrow, Mister Fox. Have you heard any interesting news of late?

Fox

No, not I. But I have heard the bees are buzzing with some interesting bits of gossip.

Mare

The bees?

Fox

Why of course! They fly everywhere and see everything. And then, every evening, they return to their hive and while they are making honey, they sit and gossip all night long.

Mare

Do they?

Fox

Certainly. On occasion, I have gathered juicy morsels beneath their hive. But they can be quite difficult to hear sometimes.

Mare

Can they?

Fox

Oh, yes. But that is easily remedied. You see, they are more than happy to share their tittle-tattle. All one has to do is poke one's nose into the hive and shout "Tell me more!" as loud as one can.

Mare

Oh, how interesting.

Fox

And, as it happens, there is a hive, just over the next hill. Here, let me show you.

[Both exit, stage r]

Narrator

That evening, the Nosy Mare went to the hive
[A hive is hung and Mare enters, stage r]

Narrator

True to her nature, the Nosy Mare listened for a while and then followed the Fox's instruction to the letter.

[Mare sticks nose into hive and shouts]

Mare

Tell me more!

Narrator

This, of course, agitated the bees, and they began to sting the Mare's nose. Unwilling to remove it for fear of missing any gossip, she was stung many times and, thus, her nose became quite swollen from the many stings.

[Mare removes nose from hive, with some marking of being stung repeatedly]

Dawn removed her nose from the hive, at first covering it with her hands. She then removed her hands, revealing dozens of red dots. Years ago, Geoff had rigged up the hive so that it would cover the nose of the actress with red builder's chalk, thus producing the desired effect and being easy to remove afterwards.

Narrator

And that is why mares have such big noses.

Mare

If I'd kept my nose from private places,
I would not suffer such disgraces!

Narrator

Thus the fate of the Nosy Mare.
Draw from it what you may.
Until next we meet – good day!

Ignatius had seen the children out of The tré and was waiting for Dawn to appear to thank her for her participation. He assumed she was washing her nose of the red chalk, but when she finally did appear, her nose was still covered in red dots.

"Didn't the chalk wash off?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't wash it off," Dawn said. "The children compete for the privilege. I can get loads of participation from them that way."

"Bit of a twist," Ignatius commented. "Usually it's the one's who participate that need to have their noses washed."

"Speaking from experience, Ignatius?" Dawn smirked.

"Just so," Ignatius smiled.

1800 – Black Kettle Pub

Steve arrived at the Black Kettle at the appointed hour. Although he had taken the time to neaten his appearance a little, he noted that Linda had done more than just drag a brush through her fur. She had changed into a rather revealing ensemble involving undersized denim shorts and an overstretched cotton top.

She beamed at Steve. "Hey there! Ready to go to my place?" she took him by the arm.

"Erm, yes, I suppose," he conceded, although more to himself than her.

Linda wasted no time in escorting her date through the door and into the evening air. Although she wasn't pulling too hard, she seemed eager to draw him along. Steve could tell that she was quite strong, given that she was a head shorter than he was and over a stone lighter.

"Linda, slow down," Steve protested politely.

"Sorry," she apologised with an enthusiastic smile. "Guess I am a bit keen."

"That's very flattering, but you needn't be. After all, we have all night," he said, and suddenly wished he hadn't.

1810 – Linda's Home

Linda's house was a modest tiered home with a few pictures of relatives on the mantle and a surprisingly simple collection of furniture. There were just the very basics – a love seat, a dinette set, a few end tables and a glass curio cabinet.

"Have a seat and I'll get you a drink. Lager?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you," Steve replied, although he considered that something substantially stronger would suit him just now, but he was afraid to ask.

"Be right back. Don't run away," she said cheerfully as she opened the cellar door and skipped down the steps. Steve could hear her 'tra-la-la's as she descended. Having not sat down yet, he decided to take a look around. The only things that attracted his attention were the figurines that filled the cabinet. He stepped toward the glass case to take a closer look. At first he was quite impressed with how life-like the little statues were. They looked to be hand-painted, showing remarkable detail. It was only after noticing exactly what kind of detail was being shown that he appreciated the nature of all the statuettes. Each was a rendition of a loving couple (with everyone having a partner of the same Genra he was relieved to note) in various tender embraces and couplings, and all without so much as a stitch of clothing, apart from the occasional hair-ribbon or odd glove or mask, none of which concealed anything beyond their intended purpose. *Not much left to the imagination*, Steve was thinking to himself.

"Like 'em?"

"*Yah!*" Steve was startled out of his reverie.

"Oh, I *am* sorry," Linda said with a wicked smile. "Didn't mean to sneak up on you like that. Bad habit I have. Here's your lager," she added, handing him a pint.

"Oh. Cheers," Steve raised his glass.

"You too." She clinked her glass against his and they both drank.

"You didn't answer my question," she asked with a sing-song lilt.

"Eh? Oh, the figurines. Erm . . . yes, they're remarkably detailed. It's quite a collection. Are they porcelain?"

"Natural, hard-paste, biscuit porcelain." she said proudly.

"They look quite white to me," Steve said.

"Biscuit means unglazed, silly boy."

"They must be quite dear."

"They are. I've sold several for over a hundred quid."

Steve was doing the math in his head.

"That's two grand in Real money," she mentioned before he could do the calculation.

"Two grand? My word, that is quite dear. You're quite good with figures."

"Numbers, art or my body in particular?" she winked while wiggling her hips as a taunt.

"All three actually . . . Wait a minute. Did you say you *sold* them?"

"Mm-hmm," she nodded. "I make them myself. Takes me weeks.

Sometimes more than a month. I keep all of the moulds, in case one gets broken, but I've never made more than one of each. That way they keep their value. Plus it's sort of a tacit promise to my commissions. They're all unique.

"I'm a very patient girl and I know what makes good quality. And I also know that if I just take my time and do things properly, I get the best possible result," she said as she looked at Steve in much the same way a burglar would look at a diamond in a high security display.

"You make all these yourself?" he asked, still not quite believing. "Right here in your own home?"

"Yes, I do," she bubbled with pride. "Sculpt, bake and paint all in my studio and basement. Like to take a look?"

"Yes, definitely."

"Oh, well, follow me, then," she beckoned, turning towards the stairs.

Steve followed her up the stairs into a larger room. There was a table with a shelf full of sculpting tools and materials, but the rest of the room was empty.

"Lot of space for making such small statues," Steve commented idly.

"Well, I have to have models, silly!" she stated with mock anger, placing her hands on her hips.

"Models?"

"Don't you know anything? Someone to pose for me so I can sculpt the figure. I'm good, but I'm not *that* good."

"Do you mean to tell me," Steve asked, "that you actually had people pose for those figurines?"

"It's what I just said," she replied.

"Sorry, didn't mean to be rude, or judgmental. It's just a bit of a shock. You don't strike me as the sort of person who would, erm . . ."

"Do this sort of thing?" she prompted.

"Well, not to be too blunt, but, yes. You're always so cheerful and light-hearted, you just seem to be . . . I don't know if 'innocent' is the word I'm looking for . . ."

"I have to admit, you said that a lot more politely than almost anyone else has. But I think you absolutely *should* get to know me a little better!"

"Who do you get to model?" Steve asked.

"If it's a commission work, the clients pay for the models. Usually professionals from out of town. They'll stay with me for a few days while they work. Sometimes, the clients themselves will pose," she explained.

"Interesting way to have one's portrait done," Steve mused. "Most people would be satisfied with a facial profile on canvas."

"They're *always* satisfied after sitting for one of my portraits," she smiled wickedly. "Come on," she waved. "Let's go down to the basement and I'll show you my kiln."

After a rudimentary tour of the house *cum* studio, Steve asked to examine one of Linda's creations a little more closely. He was holding the figurine in his

hand, examining it very carefully using a magnifier. "The detail on this is absolutely extraordinary," he commended. "It's just like looking at a miniature person. It must take you ages to do the fur."

"Fur is easy. You don't have to be quite so detail oriented. If you make a minor mistake, you can usually paint over it. Eyes, hands, feet, genitalia, they're painstaking – with a capital pain."

"Not that I'm complaining, but most of the penes seem to be, erm . . . enclosed in some orifice or other."

"Well, the nature of eroticism more or less requires that, doesn't it?" Linda said.

"I did say it was *not* a complaint," Steve defended. "Has Desiree seen these yet?"

"Desi's been by several times. She hasn't exactly been shy about asking for details either."

"Something Desi told me the other day – if you take off the hands, feet, head and tail, the rest looks almost totally human." He turned to Linda for verification. "You've apparently had a close look of a wide assortment. Do you think that's a fair assessment?"

"From about the knees to the elbows and less the tail, yes, I'd agree. Oh, yes – except that we're covered in fur. Otherwise, I quite agree, with one or two minor exceptions. Although I'd say that humans look like us, rather than the other way round."

"Sorry," Steve apologised. "Didn't mean to sound self-centred . . . or 'species-centred', but where I grew up, we've only humans. Desi also seems to be coming to the conclusion that all of us are genetically related – maybe even the same species. That we might be genetically compatible so that mixed children could be produced and that they could have their own as well."

"Well, I *am* certain that there are mixed children," she replied. "I know that as first-hand information." She looked up in thought as she tapped her finger on her chin. "Now, let me see, I can't personally recall any mixed *grand*-children on record. Not surprising, as they hardly ever get the chance."

"How'd you mean?" asked Steve.

"When a mixed child is born, assuming there isn't an abortion in the first place, they're usually stuffed away in their homes or, even worse, an institution. They live a life of almost total seclusion, the poor dears. It's absolutely horrible how they're treated. There's one girl in a nearby town – poor little darling has been shut away all her life. Never been to school, no one to play with."

"That's *horrible!*" Steve stated.

"I quite agree. So, as I was saying, they hardly have the chance to develop any relationships and by the time they mature, they're so socially and emotionally underdeveloped that they couldn't possibly go out into the world. Plus the fact that they've been brainwashed into believing that they're some sort of hideous freak."

"That's absolutely tragic," Steve replied. "The poor souls," he added reflectively. "Somebody should do something." He stared in thought for a moment.

Linda was waiting for him to move. "Steve? Still here?"

"Oh, sorry. Just lost in thought. Anyway, as I was saying about Desi – she's always doing sketches of everyone. I've heard Eric has had a few modelling sessions with her."

"No surprise there," Linda said. "He's a sweet lad, but Eric would probably pay to have someone look at his body in the altogether."

1830 – Linda's Home

Linda had prepared a casserole for dinner, along with a few simple vegetables.

"Smells very nice," Steve commented honestly as she spooned some onto a dish for him. He was quite hungry but even if he weren't he still would have thought so. "What's in it?" he asked idly, as she prepared her plate.

"It's acorn lasagne," she replied.

"Is it?" His face belied his concern.

Linda broke into hysterical laughter.

"I take it you weren't serious about the acorns, then?"

Linda was doing her best to suppress her giggling. "Mmm-hm-hm, your face, Ooo – it was just priceless!" She mocked Steve, "Izzit?" Covering her mouth with her hands, she tried to hide her laughter. "I'm sorry, Steve. It's so sweet of you to not get angry. You're such a good sport!"

"It's okay," Steve answered quietly. "Don't mind a bit of a giggle even if it is at my expense."

Linda had calmed down enough to serve her own plate and sit beside him. "There's a good lad. You don't mind me saying, but you look like I might have struck a nerve."

"It's not that you offended my sensibilities," Steve said. "I rather think I offended them myself."

"Sorry. Don't quite follow that."

"I like to think of myself as open-minded. But when you told me about the acorns, I immediately assumed it was true. Guess I still have some prejudices."

Linda sighed and rolled her eyes. "Steve, Steve, Steve . . . *Everyone* has prejudices and anyone that says they don't is lying. You got caught in an unguarded moment and that makes you as flawed as the rest of us. It's also why it was so funny."

"Do you have any prejudices?"

"Course I do," Linda winked. "And I'm dying to find out if one in particular is true."

1900 – Linda's Garden

They were sitting on her garden bench, chatting in the fading evening light, as the thinnest scythe of a waxing crescent moon sliced into the horizon. Steve was doing a little maths in his head about his body weight compared to hers and how much lager they had each had and that if he was feeling like this, why wasn't she foxed out of her mind, instead of appearing to be completely sober?

After being unable to come up with a suitable answer to this question, another appeared in its place.

"Linda?"

"Yes, dear."

"Please, don't take this the wrong way . . . but why would you possibly be interested in me?"

"Well," she pondered, putting her finger on her cheek as if pretending to be in thought. "For now, I'm willing to settle for a little company."

"But you could have anyone for company."

"Do you not wish to be with me?" She seemed more than a little anxious at asking this question, as if she might not like the answer.

"No, no. I mean, yes. I mean I like being with you. You're always cheerful and playful. You've got a scandalous sense of humour. And you're quite clever."

"So what's the problem?" she turned him around. "Here, let me rub your shoulders a bit."

"And you're considerate," Steve added. "There's no problem. Just a question that keeps coming up. Everyone says I'd be dating up if I went with you. But that's not the reason I'd date anyone, of course. I'd do it for the right reason."

"Good for you," she said. "Not that I'm nobility or anything, anyway."

"Oo, that feels good. Careful with the claws. Erm . . . where was I going with this? Oh, yes. Well, the fact is, I'm a chimp, metaphorically speaking. What could you possibly see in me?"

"Oh, fishing for a compliment, are we?" she said. Steve couldn't see the smile she wore, although he thought that he might have heard it.

"No, nothing like that . . ."

"I'm just teasing, you silly," she teased. "Well, all right then. First of all, I know of only three other Sciurans within twenty miles, and I don't want to know them any better. Frankly, they're all well overdue for a head-shave. I know for a fact that you're clever – a plus in my book. And don't take this the wrong way, but you're not like the humans here in Otterstow. You don't smell horribly, or at all, as far as I can tell. Your fex is nice and neat, although I think it would look very attractive if you would let it grow just a little." With this she ruffled his short hair and pulled his head back against her chest and kissed him on top of the head.

"Oops! I'm sorry," she apologised. "I wasn't supposed to do that!"

Steve looked upwards to see her contrite face. "It's all right. Quite nice, actually."

"What, the kiss?"

"Well, that too."

"Oh, well," she cooed. "There's *lots* more where that came from!"

"Let's save that for when we get to know each other a little better."

She rolled her eyes and pretended to consider. "Oooh, okay. If you insist."

"Would you like a little shoulder rub?"

"Oo, yes, please!" she gushed and turned around. Steve gently rubbed her shoulders. "Harder, love. You won't break me."

"Well, go on then," Steve urged. "Surely there must be something more than my hair that you find appealing."

"Well, two other things. Your teeth. They're clean and white and it looks like most of them are still there. And I know it may not be a compliment to a human, but with your teeth, your face is not totally unlike a Sciuran's."

"You're not the first person to mention that, although not in so many words," he commented. "And you were right; they didn't mean it as a compliment either, although I know you did. So what's the second thing?"

"Well, I'm not sure I should say," she replied. "Come on, a little harder please."

Steve squeezed her shoulders with more force. "Go on. I won't pass judgement."

"It's not judgement I'm worried about," she answered. "Come on, Steve, give it to me. Harder!"

Steve began to knead her shoulders with vigour. "Well, what then?" Steve's curiosity was getting the better of him.

"Ooooooo, that's lovely. Just brilliant. YES. Just like that. Ah, let's just say I've heard some rumours about humans."

"Rumours?" asked Steve.

"Let's just take it a step at a time for now," she added. "And we'll leave it at that. Ooo, that's fantastic. I could go on like this all night. Yes . . . Yes . . . Faster, please . . . Mmmmm . . . Please don't stop."

2020 – Rialto Lights Room

Clare was sitting at the control board for the lights, trying to keep herself from being too bored by experimenting with some of the controls, when Rachael appeared at the door with a smug look on her face.

Clare examined her expression. "What're you doing here? It's your night off."

"Wouldn'tcha like to know?" Rachael answered in a conspiratorial tone.

Clare turned back to her board. "Fine. Don't tell me."

Rachael tapped her on the shoulder and pointed to her headset. Clare turned off the microphone.

"Steve an' Linda were doin' it," Rachael tattled with a mischievous smile.

"Doing what?" asked Clare.

"Gettin' a tail round," replied Rachael.

Clare smiled in disbelief. "No way! We had to twist Steve's arm off just to get him to go to dinner!"

"No, it's true! I was out for a spot o' fresh air . . ."

"And let me guess, you just happened to stroll past Linda's place," Clare interrupted.

"Nuffin' wrong wiffit. Just out for a stroll. It's a small town. Good chance I'd go by anyways. So there I am, walkin' past Linda's – as ya do – an' I hear 'em."

"Hear?" asked Clare, her scepticism adding.

"Well, a Hare's gotta believe 'er ears before she believes 'er eyes."

"So you didn't actually see them," Clare reiterated.

"Believe me, I din't 'ave to see 'em. There was no question what they was doin'."

Clare folded her arms and asked, "All right, then. What'd you hear?"

Rachael looked upward and counted on her fingers. "Well, I couldn't 'ear everythin', but to start wif, lotsa 'Ooo's an' 'Aaah's outta Linda."

"Go on," Clare prompted.

Rachael counted another digit. "I 'eard an 'arder' or two."

Clare looked confused. "Excuse, me, did you just say 'Narder'?"

Rachael looked annoyed. "An . . . 'harder'," she enunciated the 'H'. "Shave me, sister, just because I ain't got that 'oity-toity electrocution as what you got. Where'd ya get that accent from anyway? Why can't ya talk like a normal person?"

"I was about to ask you the same question," Clare retorted. "Anyway, 'ooo', 'aah' and 'hhhhharder'."

Rachael counted another digit. "'Give it to me' was mentioned, as well as 'brilliant' in a loud, passionate voice."

"I don't picture Linda as being the type to say 'Give it to me'," Clare stated.

"I heard 'er. I'm sure I did. It was Linda an' Steve, 'avin' a go, in 'er own garden under the moonlight, if y'please."

"I think you've got the wrong end of the stick."

"Clare, I distinctly heard 'er say 'Please, don't stop.' An' she weren't talkin' about puttin' lumps o' sugah in 'er tea!"

"I have to admit it sounds pretty convincing," Clare admitted. "But, even as a Hare, you shouldn't leap to any hasty conclusions."

"Claude Baughs, girl! D'ya need a bleedin' photygraph or summat? I could tell what I heard. 'E was gettin' 'is tail round 'er . . . or she was gettin' 'er tail round 'im, seein' as 'e ain't got no proper tail. But that's bee-sides – you know what kinda sounds get made when it's goin' on."

"I should do, as I've heard you often enough from the next room. Although it has been a while."

"Tell me about it," Rachael complained. "I been workin' so hard since we started this Rialto gig, I haven't 'ad time to do so much as a bunny-bump. I dunno how ya stand it."

"Stand what?" asked Clare.

"Not gettin' any. I ain't never 'eard ya goin' at it since last March."

"Perhaps I'm just a little more discreet," Clare commented with a sly smile.

"Oh, pull your own tail," Rachael complained. "You haven't 'ad any."

"All right then, if you say so," Clare returned to her controls.

"Ya holdin' out on me? Come on, I tell ya all 'bout mine!"

"Like I actually ask you to!"

"C'mon, Clare. I mean, we don't always sees ear-to-ear, but I letcha in on my li'l secrets."

"Not much to tell . . ." Clare muttered.

Rachael grabbed Clare by the arms and shook her, although just enough to be playful. "C'mon, girl, I'll shake it outta ya. 'Fess up. 'Oo izzee?"

"All right! All right! Let go!"

Rachael stopped shaking her but still held on to her arms.

"You know the trips to the library I made? First with Ig and then by myself."

"Yeah?"

"It was Jim. The assistant at the Library."

"Ya bonked a lie-barrarian?" Rachael rolled her eyes. "Now why don't *that* surprise me? I knew it 'ad to have sumfin' to do wif books."

"Believe me, it had a lot more to do with looks than books." Clare emphasised. "Although we did do it in the basement stacks, surrounded by paper and leather," she added quietly, "the first time."

"*First* time? Clare, you *have* been 'oldin' out on me! Details girl, details!" Rachael demanded.

"Later, after we close. If I start now, I won't be able to do my job."

"Where's Jess? I wanna tell 'er," Rachael said. When she saw Clare's expression, she clarified, "About Steve an' Linda, not you!"

"Don't you have anything better to do?" asked Clare.

Rachael pouted. "Suppose I shouldn't." She sat and waited while Clare continued her work.

"It's wrong to gossip," Rachael added while tapping her foot nervously. Clare was pointedly ignoring her.

"Tittle-tattle is just . . ."

"Will you get out of here!" Clare shouted. Rachael scurried out.

2030 – Rialto Security Room

Ignatius and Jess were working in the security room, monitoring the cameras. Jess leaned slightly sideways in her chair.

"Oh, for Jack's sake," Ignatius protested over the volume of the flatulence. Jess chuckled at his torment.

"I just hope you'll be done with it by the time you return to Nora this evening," Ignatius said. "Otherwise I'll have to ask you to stay in the basement. I've been meaning to have an exterminator come by, at any rate."

"Oh, tee hee, Ig," Jess replied. "In that case, you'll be relieved to know that I'm moving out."

"Are you?" asked Ignatius. "Might I ask where?"

"We've finished the bedrooms in the Rialto. I'll take one of those."

"How much rent are you paying?" asked Ignatius.

"I won't be in your house, so I don't think it's any of your business."

"I'll take it as read that you've wangled free rent once again," Ignatius conjectured. "And as we're all partners in the Rialto, I think it *does* make it my business. However, not to worry, I shan't bring it up again."

"Gee, how decent of you," Jess deadpanned.

"After all, if someone complains, you might move back to Nora."

"I'd live in the bottom of the canal first," Jess retorted.

"Considering the amount of gas in your system, I think you're safe from sinking for the next few days," Ignatius commented. "By the way, what do you want to do with your things? Nora is not a warehouse."

"There's tons of space in the basement of the Rialto. I'll personally carry it there myself. Unless you think I should pay rent on that as well?"

"As long as it's not in Nora," Ignatius qualified, "there won't be a word from me."

"And while we're . . . "

Jess interrupted her comment when she felt a tap on her shoulder. Looking around, she saw Rachael beckoning her into the hall, and thinking it might be something important, she got up and joined her.

"Something wrong, Rachael?" she asked.

2032 – Rialto Security Room

Jess returned to her seat in the security room and sat with an enigmatic smile.

"What was all that about?" asked Ignatius.

"Just Rachael with some gossip," replied Jess with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Oh, right then," Ignatius replied, continuing his watch on the monitors.

Jess began to giggle.

"What's got you all excited, Jess?"

"Did you know that Steve and Linda were on a date tonight?"

"So I'd heard," Ignatius said dismissively. "What of it?"

"Rachael picked up a bit of news about it."

"Somehow I suspect that neither Linda nor Steve told Rachael this 'news'."

"Rachael overheard them getting a tail round."

"Jess!" Ignatius remonstrated.

"I thought you'd want to know."

"Did you say she *overheard* them?" Ignatius asked.

"She was out on a walk. It's her night off."

"And she just happened to walk by Linda's home and listen at the keyhole?"

"She didn't have to. They were in the back garden."

"Rachael's nose is twice as big as her ears," Ignatius said reproachfully.

"And I trust that you won't repeat any of this. You've broken your promise, you know."

"What promise?" asked Jess.

"How soon we forget. Remember your little speech at the Kettle . . . when you were saved by Vince?"

"How could I forget? I thought I was going to be shaved and tarred!"

"You came damned close to it. And you promised . . ."

"No gossip. I remember. Well, if you won't mention that I told you, I'll keep my mouth shut. Besides, it's just a little harmless girl-talk. It's not like we're blackmailing them," she rationalised.

"I know I promised to remove some of that big stick up my arse but I feel compelled to point out that there is no such thing as harmless gossip. Someone always gets hurt." He pulled down his microphone down. "Clare, is Rachael about? . . . Could you tell her to come to the security room? . . . Thank you."

2045 – Rialto Security Room

"So whom have you told?" asked Ignatius.

"Clare, o' course. Jess. Gina," Rachael confessed.

"Rachael, this is juvenile," Ignatius scolded. "You're not in school anymore; you're an adult. Now I can't *tell* you to stop, but I will ask you – as a friend and a colleague – not to repeat this to anyone else."

"It's just a bit o' 'armless tittle-tattle," Rachael dismissed, "it's nuffin' . . . "

"There is no such thing as harmless gossip," Ignatius interrupted.

"Iggy," Jess reproached. "Don't be so hard on the girl. She took your meaning."

Ignatius was going to drive his point home a little more, but he decided that Jess was right. He didn't want Rachael to feel bad or punish her. A word was enough and he had given that. "All right, then. Sorry if I was a little . . . "

"Pompous," Jess suggested.

At first Ignatius looked a little defensively at Jess. He acceded, "Yes, pompous."

"I'm sorry, Ig," Rachael said. "You are right. I shouldn've. But a girl's just gotta have a bit to talk about sometimes. I'm sure no harm'll come of it."

"Let's hope not," he said consolingly.

19SEP2001 Wednesday

1150 – Rialto Bar

It was Wednesday, shortly before the Partnership held their noon meeting at the Rialto. Steve was in a little earlier than the rest of the group and poured himself a lager.

"I'll have one of those," Gina ordered upon entering.

"Certainly, Gina," Steve said as he drew her a pint.

"So. How'd you and Linda get on last night?"

"Quite good. She was quite nice to me, actually."

"So, quite good, was it?"

"Yes. Very good, in fact."

"D'you hit it off?"

Steve nodded. "Yes, we got along quite well."

Gina didn't quite seem satisfied with his response. "I heard you did more than just get along."

"Oh?" Steve replied, handing her the glass with a mystified expression on his face.

Gina decided to let the subject drop. "Glad to hear it went well."

Steve shrugged. His mystified expression brightened as Linda entered.

"Oh, hello Linda. Thanks for last night," Steve said. "It was a very nice evening."

"Thank *you*, love," she replied with a genuine smile.

"I'd like to reciprocate sometime, but it'd be limited to the Rialto, I'm afraid," Steve said. "Taking a five-foot Sciuran about the town in Newburg might raise a few eyebrows."

Linda dismissed his concern with a wave and a smile. "Oh, that doesn't matter. Besides, it's the company, not the place."

"I'll try to think of something we can do together," Steve mentioned.

"Don't worry about it. I just wanna know when you can come by my place again," Linda suggested.

Steve was considering this when Pete burst into the scene and blurted out, "So, how's our two li'l love-birds, today?"

The two looked at each other and shrugged.

"You don't suppose he's talking about us?" asked Steve.

The remaining Frith and Angus came in shortly thereafter, followed by Desiree. Steve noted that the last of the arrivals was having an animated discussion with Gina.

"Uh-oh," Clare muttered.

"No, Desi, don't say it," Rachael whispered.

Ignatius leaned over to Jess and said quietly. "What did I say about gossip?"

Jess nodded "Don't gloat, Ig."

"I'm not gloating," Ignatius said defensively.

"We admitted it was wrong. You're gloating," Jess replied.

"Hey, there Stevey-boy!" Desiree smirked, slapping him on the back.

"Scored a homer with Linda last night, I hear."

"What's that?" Steve asked.

Desiree sat down with a self-satisfied smile. "You bagged her. Tried her on for size . . . What's that euphemism they use here?"

All of the other members of the Partnership except Geoff were cringing at Desiree's singular lack of discretion.

"Doin' the horizontal bop. The beast with two backs. Ten toes up and ten toes down?" Desiree said. "Oh, yeah, I remember what they call it now . . . You were getting a *tail round!*"

Linda looked at Steve with outrage. "Did you tell them this?"

"No, Linda, I have no idea what she's talking . . ."

A loud, firm slap landed across his cheek, leaving three little weals from her claws.

"That's for lying to me," Linda simmered. She slapped him again with the other hand, producing three more distinct weals on his other cheek. "And that's for lying *about* me!" Linda stormed out, obviously distressed.

"You know those welts look just like whiskers," Desiree commented idly, as if she hadn't noticed Linda's temper. "Whiskers . . . Teeth. You could almost pass for a Squirrel."

Steve was stunned. "What the *hell* just happened?" he asked.

Geoff, who hadn't been informed of much of anything, spoke up. "As I see it – and I could be mistaken here, so feel free to correct – you and Linda were together last night. Desi here," he waved his hand to Desiree, "somehow got the wrong end of the stick about how far things went. Now, I'm going out on a limb here, but I'm willing to guess that everyone kept their clothes on."

"You would guess correctly!" Steve protested.

"I see," Geoff nodded, helping himself to a pint. "I also see that Rumour Central has been at work again. Rachael? What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Me?" Rachael protested. "Why'd ya always assume it's me?"

Geoff folded his arms and looked at her.

"Well, fair cop, it was," Rachael confessed, "this time."

"I think you should go and tell Linda," Geoff suggested.

"I'd like to know meself, first," Rachael stated. "Steve, what was all that racket you an' Linda was makin' in 'er garden last night?"

"It was a back rub, as if that was any of your damned business!" Steve replied angrily. "And what were you doing, listening to private conversations?"

"Awrite. Awrite. Keep your fur on. I'll go an' get it sorted." Rachael got up and ran out of the lobby.

"And as for you, Miss Desiree," Geoff started.

"Me? What'd I do?" Desiree said defensively.

"We are business partners. This is a business meeting. If you have any personal animosity towards Steve, you'd better put it aside. And when Linda gets back here, you'd better apologise to both of them."

"Who the hell are you to tell me what to do?" Desiree retorted. "You might be an old man, but you ain't *my* old man!"

"You know, you're absolutely right," Geoff admitted. "I shouldn't speak for the Partnership. I motion that Desiree apologise to Steve and Linda for her unprofessional behaviour."

"Oh, snatch me!" Gina moaned. "May as well add my name to Desi's. I'm the one that told her. No need to vote for me, I'll apologise, regardless. Steve, I'm terrible sorry. Shame on me for repeating gossip. Will you accept my apology?"

Steve nodded. "Of course, Gina," he said coolly.

"I'll apologise to Linda when she returns," Gina added.

"Is there a second?" Geoff asked.

"Stop. Just stop." Desiree held her hands up in defeat. "I'll apologise. I don't need a motion to see I'm in the wrong," she conceded. "Steve. I was out of line. Please accept my apology for my remarks," she asked sincerely.

"Accepted. Let's not mention it again," Steve replied curtly.

"Umm, look, I have some other news," Desiree mentioned. "It doesn't have to do with Linda, so I'll go ahead and mention it."

"This sounds pretty serious," Pete stated.

"It is," Desiree confirmed. "After what I've just done, you might be glad to hear it anyway. I've got one year left in vet school. I've missed the fall semester, but if I go back for spring and summer, I can be finished by August of next year and then come back here. I want very, very much to stay as part of the Partnership, but this is something that's important to me and I want to finish my degree. I always try to finish what I start. So I'd like to ask the group to let me depart for eight months, as unpaid sabbatical."

"I'll second," Steve said.

There was a pause, as Linda would usually ask for votes. Pete finally asked the question. "All in favour?"

A unanimous round of 'aye's went around.

"Well, that's enough," Pete said. "Linda's an' Rachael's vote won't make a difference. When'dya leave, Desi?"

"Very end of December," Desiree answered quietly.

There was a much longer uncomfortable pause around the table.

Just then, Linda came rushing back in, followed by a very guilty-looking Rachael.

"Oh, love, I'm so sorry. Oh, no! Look what I've done!" Linda was beside herself. "Oh dear, I hope they don't scar! Do we have some iodine?" Linda continued to fuss over the weals on Steve's face as Michael dug for the first aid kit behind the bar.

"Linda, honestly, it's nothing. It'll go away in time," Steve protested.

"Listen to this poor bloke. I scar his face and he says it's nothing!" she continued to move his head around. "What a lovely lad he is!" Instinctively, she pulled his head to hers and gave him a big kiss. Steve didn't resist too much.

"That's for being such a good sport." She hugged his head to her chest and while he couldn't see, she winked and lolled her tongue at the others.

Linda moved his head away from her chest and tilted it so that she might inspect it again. "You know," she began, looking speculatively, "those weals look just like whiskers. You could almost pass for a Squirrel now," she said with a wink.

"Michael!" Steve called out. "Got that iodine yet?"

1230 – Black Kettle Pub

Steve was reading as Linda was dabbing iodine onto the weals she had put on his face. "To recap, working backwards, Sunday is the oldies band, Saturday, we have a rock band, Friday is the DJ, Thursday's quiz night and tonight we have a private party for fifty. Jess as our bookings agent and slave-driver will relate the details about tonight's affair."

"And if anyone has an issue about my scheduling, feel free to complain so I can laugh in your face. Or better yet, tell me how it can be better, so I can let *you* assume the reins," Jess warned. "Right . . . Tonight, they're only paying a thousand quid and it's an open bar, but we made less than that yesterday, so it's not too bad. Once everyone's there, we'll only have Paula for security."

"That's the Poodle," Michael felt compelled to remind Steve.

"Why just the Poodle?" asked Steve.

"The guest of honour is a bride the next day," Jess explained. "They're throwing her a hen party . . . male stripper in a cake, that sort of thing. As all the guests are women, the client has asked that there be only female staff for the night."

"And you agreed to this?" asked Gina.

"Sure, why not," Jess shrugged. "As half the Partnership is female, that's easy enough to arrange. It's only fifty people so we can run on a skeleton crew;

Clare and Rachael for washing up, Gina and myself for security cameras, Sandra for lights and Desi on the floor."

"Sure that'll be enough?" asked Gina sceptically.

"You want the scheduling job?" threatened Jess.

"No, no," Gina declined politely. "If you think it's enough, then it's enough."

"So I'm off?" asked Linda, suddenly noticing she wasn't mentioned.

"Did I mention your name?" asked Jess.

"Mmmmmnope," Linda answered.

"Then I guess you're not working tonight," Jess confirmed.

"Pity. I was hoping to see the male stripper," Linda commented.

"There's a stripper?" asked Sandra.

"Guess I get to spend the night with the boys, then. Lucky me," Linda smiled, nudging Steve. "I'll have to arrange my own entertainment."

"We've always considered you as one of the boys, anyways," Geoff mentioned casually.

"You *did* say there was a stripper?" Gina asked.

1400 – The tré

"Steve, Michael, Angus?" Ignatius called. "Perhaps you might wish to join me for PD this afternoon. It has a certain element you might be interested in."

"Does it?" asked Steve.

"I'm the narrator," Linda mentioned.

"I'm there," Steve agreed.

*Opening scene: Jack AngeLagos asleep on a very humble bed,
stage centre. Angel Hare standing nearby.*

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of Pilgrim Jack AngeLagos and his trek to Hell and Heaven.

Angel Hare

Arise Pilgrim Jack, arise and come with me, for your prayer to know the distinction 'twixt Hell and Heaven will now be answered.

Pilgrim Jack *[sitting up wearily in bed]*

Who does disturb my much-needed rest with such irreverent jest? Let an old man sleep and not taunt him with his idle thoughts.

Angel Hare

This is no jest and it is not idle! Rise, for your good works, you have been selected to see that which you know already in your heart, and which many would think they know, but are ignorant.

Pilgrim Jack *[rising to his feet]*

If this be true, then lead on. Else leave me be.

Angel Hare *[taking Jack's hand]*

Follow then. You may ask five questions from each side.

First to Hell -

*Both turn to house left and see Denizen of Hell sharpening an
axe.*

Pilgrim Jack [*to Denizen of Hell*]

Good morn, friend. And what axe do you grind in such earnest this day?

Denizen of Hell

This shall be used to fell the seedlings of my neighbour's fruit grove. And then I will fell him by placing this axe in his heart. His plantings have grown for nearly a year on my land that he has stolen from me.

Pilgrim Jack

And how did he come to plant trees on land that you do own?

Denizen of Hell

He will claim that I stole from him. But the land is rightfully mine and has always been thus. My ancestors were here first, despite his claim, and he has cut down my trees and plantings which I did toil to sow the year before.

Pilgrim Jack

And what gives you right to this land?

Denizen of Hell

It is God's will! He has given me this land. It is holy and I will slay all that defile it by taking it from me. God does wish such heathens a thousand deaths!

Pilgrim Jack

Could you not share the land?

Denizen of Hell

And why should I share what is already mine!

Pilgrim Jack

Cannot the land grow enough to support you both?

Denizen of Hell

Aye and more! This land is rich and there is good water! One has but to plant and there is fruit. But 'tis all mine by rights! Yet the land does not support anyone solely because of my neighbours! If I cannot have this, then none shall! And I will destroy my enemy and the land with it, if it is not restored to me! I cannot count the years that I have gone hungry because I have had to force my neighbour to leave this place. My family starves because of these nonbelievers!

[Denizen of Hell exits house left]

Angel Hare

Thus answered your fifth question.

Now to heaven -

Angel Hare takes Pilgrim Jack by hand and leads him to house right, where we see a Dweller of Heaven, who looks suspiciously like the Denizen of Hell, and is sharpening an axe as well

Pilgrim Jack [*to Dweller of Heaven*]

Good morn, friend. And what axe do you grind in such earnest this day?

Dweller of Heaven

Good morn, to you as well, Pilgrim.

I sharpen this axe to prune some olive trees. They are in their twentieth year and are just now starting to fruit! And what olives! Ripe and firm! But it has not been without toil. We have had drought and flood,

earthquake and fire. But at last I may relish sharing the crop with my neighbours.

Pilgrim Jack

Is all of the land yours to farm?

Dweller of Heaven

Oh, certainly not! Mine is but a small portion. I was one of the first to arrive and I started my grove, which was much larger than it is now. Then some others came later. There was more than enough for all, and they had their own talents, which we put to the best of uses. We cannot live on olives alone!

Some grew flax for linen, others grain for bread. Now our lives are rich with goods that we share with each other. As each new arrival comes, yes, our share of land is smaller, but we are all richer for it, for each will contribute something new!

Pilgrim Jack

And who did give you this land?

Dweller of Heaven

This land was given to all of us by God, or Fate or mayhaps it just was here before us. Call it what you will, how it came to be, does not matter. No one owns this land to my ken. My neighbours and I arrived here, some later than others, but we all play our part. There is much work to do as the land is poor and we must use our resources wisely, but we make our living.

Pilgrim Jack

How is it you trust each other so sincerely?

Dweller of Heaven

Because we verify each other, without resent. We ensure each other's work and we count each other's harvest.

Pilgrim Jack

And if you do not agree?

Dweller of Heaven

We put it aside until an agreement is come to or we ask a trusted friend. Sometimes we let chance or turns decide the thing. Nothing is so important that we cannot agree without coming to hard words or, forbid, blows. If we wish to best each other, it is with games and sport, and not with swords and shields over something as trivial as material things like money or land. We are all well-fed and housed and live in liberty and peace.

Angel Hare

And thus answered your fifth question of heaven.

Pilgrim Jack *[to Angel Hare]*

I am done. To home.

Angel Hare *[taking Pilgrim Jack's hand and leading him back to his bed]*

And when you speak of this venture to your peers, what shall you say of it?

Pilgrim Jack *[returning to bed and sitting]*

The difference between heaven and hell lies not in the quality of the land, or the abundance of good fortune.

It is simply the attitudes of the people within.

Heaven comes to those who nurture
 And leave grudges on the shelves
 Hell springs not from chance, nor gods
 We make it for ourselves

Narrator

Thus the fate of Pilgrim Jack AngeLagos.
 Draw from it what you may.
 Until next we meet – good day!

Steve woke out of his reverie at the end of the play as the children got up to leave. "Gosh. Don't know what to say, honestly. I thought you said religion was sort of taboo here?" he asked as an afterthought.

"No, it's not forbidden. Those that do practise form a fairly substantial minority," Ignatius said. "Nearly all the humans, for one. But there are quite a few Frith that are believers."

"I think it's ironic that a Hare is the main envoy for their religion," Desiree pointed out.

"It is a bit of a mystery how Jack AngeLagos came to be," Ignatius agreed. "Most of the Frith look down on religion as some sort of trickery or sham, but one must admit, there are some good messages in religion. Love your neighbour, for one."

"Forgive one another," added Steve.

"Dinna seek vengeance," Angus said.

"Pay your taxes," Desiree recalled.

"Pay your taxes? I've never heard that one. Is that true?" asked Ignatius incredulously.

"It is in mine," Desiree stated. "Don't know what passes for religion here."

Ignatius mused in thought for a second. "Well, then. Might have to have a talk with the council about the Vicar's tax exemption."

2001 – Black Kettle Pub

The male component of the Partnership was spending the evening of a Wednesday in the pub, as all the female partners were working in the Rialto for the hen party. Linda was the exception, being with the lads as well, and she had more or less permanently joined herself to Steve, who didn't seem to mind very much.

The conversation drifted around various unimportant topics as the male part of the Partnership (and Linda) spent their idle hours talking of this and that, allowing the conversation to flow in random directions, as conversations have a habit of doing.

During an animated discussion on the finer points of juggling beer mats, Linda whispered into Steve's ear.

"You'll excuse us, then," Steve said quietly as he and Linda got up to leave.

Linda wasn't pulling too hard on Steve's hand as they exited the Black Kettle, but he wasn't resisting as much this time.

2005 – Otterstow Streets

Steve and Linda were walking down the street towards her home.

"Thanks for pulling me out of that," Steve said. "It was getting a bit boring, all that idle chit-chat."

"I couldn't agree more!" Linda said. "Yawn! You'd think a bunch of blokes would talk about something more interesting than juggling beer mats and installing hot water. What happened to things like football and pulling birds?"

"So are we going to your place, then?"

"Oh, yes!" said Linda enthusiastically.

"Did you have anything special you wanted to do?"

"You know what I want," Linda said suggestively. "I've never done a human before."

"Oh, that." He looked forward for a moment. "I have given it some thought. I have to admit, it has its appeal."

"Only if you want to," she cautioned.

"You as well," Steve replied. "I wouldn't want to rush you into anything you weren't ready for."

"Are you ready for it?" asked Linda.

"Only if you are. You sure you want to do this?" queried Steve.

"I am if you are."

"Don't feel that you have to do this," Steve qualified.

"No, I think I can handle it."

"You sure?"

"Yes. How about you?" Linda countered.

"Pretty sure."

"Pretty sure? You should be certain."

"I'm certain."

"Good. I'm sure too," Linda replied. She looked at Steve for a moment with a sly grin. "Almost talked you out of it, didn't I?"

"Hardly," he replied.

2005 – A suburban alley somewhere in Northern England

Grace and Simon had gone nearly three days without food. They had attempted to steal from some small shops, but something had always either gone wrong or the conditions weren't just right. During their meandering, they had discerned that they were on the outskirts of a larger city and were wandering around the suburbs, looking for a place to camp and, more importantly, for food.

"You two looking for some nosh?" asked a friendly voice.

Simon and Grace looked about, trying to find the source of the voice.

"Up here," the voice said.

Looking upward, they saw a middle-aged woman sitting on a ledge of rock, peering over the edge.

"C'mon up. You're Simon and Grace, ain'tcha? My name's Alice."

The two looked at each other.

"How'd you know that?" asked Grace of Alice.

"Aw, don't matter," dismissed Alice. "Got some nosh, if you want it."

Without further ado, Simon and Grace climbed up onto the ledge and had a seat next to Alice. She was overweight, covered in blemishes and sores, wearing tatty clothes and had an overbearing stench. But she did have food.

"Got a few tins," she offered, holding up a pair.

"Erm, gosh . . . thanks," Simon said, politely as he reached for them.

Alice suddenly clutched the tins to her chest. "You got a little weed on ya? We can do a trade."

"Oh, right. A joint for the pair?" he suggested.

"Gimme a quarter and I'll give you twelve tins outta my stash, just behind me," Alice offered.

"Done," Grace hurriedly agreed.

"Go on, then," Alice offered. "I trust ya. And just a tip – don't pick the enchilada sauce – it's rubbish." She stepped aside to reveal several dozen tins of various fruits and vegetables.

"No meat, then?" Grace asked.

"Well, 'cause yer such sweet kids, I'll letcha have this 'un." Alice pulled a tin of corned beef from her jacket and handed it to her.

"Ah, lovely," Grace replied. Taking the tin, she practically drooled over the picture of the contents. "You're a star, Alice, honestly."

"Don't suppose you have a map?" Simon asked, hopefully.

"Sorry, no need for maps, me," Alice replied.

Grace and Simon showed Alice the tins they had chosen. She nodded approval as they tucked them away in their rucksack.

"Where ya offta?" asked Alice.

"Trying to find our way home," Grace said.

"Otterstow, then?"

"How'd you know this?" asked Grace.

"Pah," dismissed Alice. "What's it matter, eh? Y'know, I used to be an architect," she suddenly added, as if to change the subject.

"Did you?" asked Simon. "Sounds like a nice job. How'd you end up here?"

"Oh, one thing and another," Alice sniffed. "Bad investment here, inappropriate word there and next thing y'know, I'm outta house and home."

"Have you no family?" asked Grace.

"Nah," dismissed Alice. "Got relations – no family. They were all put out with me once I became a solicitor."

"Solicitor?" asked Grace.

"Aye," Alice nodded. "Had a thriving practice. Actually did legal work for the Queen herself."

"Did you?" asked Simon, trying his best not to sound sceptical.

"No, I tell a lie," Alice recalled. "That was when I was a doctor. I treated the poor dear for her gout."

"Ah," Simon said. "Well, erm, thank you very much for the food. Enjoy your weed. And, if you don't mind, we'll just be on our way."

"Oh, so soon? Well, off you go then. Good luck on getting home. Sandra and Pete miss both of you terribly, I'm sure."

Although amazed at the coincidence, Grace and Simon said their good-byes and departed quickly.

"Si, how did she know all that about us?" Grace whispered when they were safely out of earshot.

"I've no idea. She couldn't've overheard us. We haven't mentioned either of our parents in days. Much less, Otterstow."

"Well, at least we have some nosh," Grace said.

2005 – Black Kettle Pub

"Thought they'd never leave," Geoff said with a smile. "I thought for sure that talking about hot water heaters would put 'em off. Linda can't stand to talk shop on her own time."

"I must admit, Ignatius," Michael opined, "the topic of juggling beer mats was a veritable inspiration of the insipid."

"Thank you," Ignatius replied. His brow wrinkled. "I think."

"Well, they're off, bless 'em. Maybe they'll get a tail round this time," Geoff said. "Got the fixture list yet, Pete?"

2250 – Linda's Studio

"Right, get your kit off," Linda ordered as she hung her blouse on a clothes rack.

"You're taking yours off as well?" Steve asked.

"I'd've thought that rather obvious," Linda said with a smile as she unfastened her belt.

"Of course." He continued to disrobe. When he was done, he stretched out on the divan, his nude body beginning to feel a bit chilled. "Still don't understand why you want to do this with me. I mean, I'm not exactly the Olympian ideal."

"Who's a limping deal?" asked Linda, confused.

"Oh, sorry – I'm not an Adonis, no that won't work either. Erm, I'm just some scrawny guy. Why me?"

"Oh, *that!*" Linda said, sitting next to him, also nude. "There's beauty in all things. You just have to see it," she consoled, looking deep into his eyes. She took his head and gave him a kiss. "Now, just try to relax. I'll do most of the work. It's important that you feel comfortable. Otherwise it just doesn't work out," she advised. "Have you ever done anything like this before?"

"Nothing *quite* like this, I must admit," he answered. "Linda?"

"Yes, Love?"

"We're not doing this because of what happened at lunch, are we?"

"Did I not apologise?"

"Yes, you did," Steve admitted, "profusely."

"Did you not forgive me?"

"I suppose that's the end of the matter, then," Steve conjectured. "It's a bit cool," he added, although he tried not to make it sound like a complaint.

"Don't worry, love, you'll be warm soon enough," she took his hand and moved it just so. "There, that's good. Oh, yes. Quite nice."

"Do you think this will take long?"

"You have something else you'd rather do?" she asked with mock sternness.

"I think I have to wax the cat and wash the furniture – or maybe it's the other way round," he deadpanned.

Linda smiled. "Oh, you are a little comic, aren't you?"

"Do try to avoid saying 'little' when I'm not wearing clothes. My ego's a bit sensitive."

Linda giggled. "Goodness, what am I going to do with you? Believe me, you've nothing to be ashamed of either. Good to see that you're at your ease now."

"I do have to say that I feel comfortable around you Linda. You're very easy to talk to. I feel I could say almost anything."

"Well don't let our little activity stop you. Say whatever you feel."

"I like you, Linda," Steve admitted. "A lot."

"I don't half fancy you, love," she replied with a wicked little smile as she ran her hand over his back and along his buttocks, positioning him just so.

"What's it like, dating here in Otterstow? I imagine it must be quite difficult. In Newburg, which isn't nearly as small a town as here, there wouldn't be too much to choose from. Here, it must be even more difficult. Not only are there only a just a dozen eligible people, they have to be the same, erm, thingy."

"Genra," she reminded him. "Or peltage."

"But it *is* difficult."

"Oh, yes. Especially if you're something like a Sciuran or an Erinac," Linda pointed out, "as we're among the rarer Genra."

"So you're the only Sciuran in the whole town?" Steve asked.

"Yep, just me. There used to be a fairly extensive family of OakSquirrels here, but they've all moved away or passed on. Not that it matters; I can't marry my cousins, can I. Anyway, what few Squirrels there are around here are complete sifwits and even if I could live with that, they've got other problems I'd just as soon not deal with. Let's talk about something pleasant. How about us?"

"All right, then. I think you're a beautiful, erm . . ." Steve wondered what word to use. "Sorry, just – I'm at a bit of a loss as to what to call you."

"A girl. A woman. A lady. A person. All quite acceptable to me."

"At first, you did take a bit of getting used to, with the fur and everything; as I've mentioned, we've only humans in Reality. But now that I've had a bit of time to adjust, I have to admit you're quite nice. You're very fit. You've got lovely, soft fur, a wonderful tail, and cute ears."

"Thank you!" she gushed.

"Have no idea what you see in me," he mumbled.

"Now, now, we'll have no negative talk while we're doing this. I think you have a special beauty. You're not what I'd call muscular, but you're quite trim, very fit. You're neat and clean, you don't smell bad . . ."

"But that's more or less a given, isn't it?" Steve asked.

Her eyes rolled upward. "Hardly," she replied. "You've met Vince, haven't you?"

"Yes, of course. Oh, I see your point."

"And he's probably the cleanest human in Otterstow – the others actually consider him a bit of a toff. And your teeth are all there. You've got a lovely set of incisors. There's just something about you . . ."

"Thank you, Linda. That means something coming from you."

There was a brief pause.

"Can't believe people actually get paid to do this," Steve mentioned idly.

"There's always a demand for it," she mentioned.

"Of course you'd get paid much more than I would," Steve replied. "You've much more to offer than I do."

"Thank you!" she beamed. "That was very nice of you to say that." She gave him a kiss and a caress.

20SEP2001 Thursday

0010 – Black Kettle Pub

It was past midnight when Steve and Linda returned to the Black Kettle. Normally, Pete would have closed the pub by this time, but the gentlemen of the Partnership were waiting for the ladies of the Partnership.

"So what were you two up to," asked Geoff. "Something untoward, I hope," he added with a wink.

"Steve took all his clothes off," Linda started, putting her finger on her chin with an enigmatic smile."

"TMI for me already," Michael stated.

"And so did I," Linda added.

"And I'm back now," Michael said.

"Oh, yes?" Geoff raised an eyebrow. "Wouldn't care to indulge a dirty old man in some details?"

"Oh, go on. Tell him," Linda nudged Steve, who was taken off-guard at Geoff's request. "Poor old sod never gets any excitement."

"Erm . . . I dunno," Steve waffled.

"Oh, go on," Linda dismissed. "Brag a little."

"Yeah, brag a bit, Steve," Pete urged.

"Quiet, you," Linda scolded Pete.

"Yeah, quiet you," Geoff scolded as well.

"Why don't you tell him," Steve suggested to Linda.

"Oh, all right." She turned to Geoff. "It'll cost you a pint and a glass of white."

"Pete, if you please," Geoff ordered.

"On their way," Pete replied. The glasses were being filled as he spoke.

"Now then," Geoff said, "you were saying?"

"We will serve no dish before it's paid for," Linda deadpanned.

Pete handed the drinks to Linda and Steve. "Right then. So what's the story?"

Linda sampled her wine, looked around the room and rested her glass on the bar. "Well . . . After we both had our kit off, we exchanged some small talk, back and forth," Linda continued casually, "As you do."

"Will ya get on wif it!" Pete ordered impatiently.

"*Who* paid for the clash?" asked Linda. "Was it *you*? I think not."

"Sorry, love," Pete apologized.

"And, personally, I think we had a pretty good first session," Linda remarked. "Especially since Steve was a first-timer as well."

"Oh, aye, a virgin," Angus nodded knowingly. "I ayeways knew he was a mummy's boy."

"Who's a mummy's boy?" asked Gina. She and the other women had just entered the Black Kettle and were gathering around the bar.

"I thought I was a wee poof," Steve mentioned.

"Linda, here," Geoff said, "was just about to disclose the details of her evening with Steve, so a bit of quiet please."

Linda started again. "Right. Bit of small talk, the occasional double-entendre, a caress here, a kiss there."

"Oo, all a bit torrid, innit," Rachael threw in.

"Shh!" Geoff shushed her. "I paid two drinks for this. Listen up, girl."

"So," Linda smiled. "Before we got to my home, there was a little hesitation on both our parts, I don't mind saying. But we decided to press on. He was so good. Very patient and such a pleasure to work with. A little inexperience as a beginner, but very eager to please. Desi, I don't mean to sound like sour grapes, but he does have so much to offer . . ."

"Hey, as long you're happy together," Desiree replied.

Linda pulled out a small miniature statue that vaguely resembled a figure of nearly any genus reclining on a divan. "And this is what I managed to form in our first session. It's just a rough at this stage, but a few more sittings and it'll be an exact miniature of our Steve."

"What? In the altogether?" asked Rachael.

"Oo, I'd like to see that," Gina commented.

"Me, as well," Clare added.

"Pft," Jess dismissed. "Nothing I haven't seen before. Put a paper bag on their heads . . ."

"And as I'm sure all of you are aware, my miniatures are couples engaged in intimacy, so I'll be including a partner in this sculpture in order to complement it."

Pete blew a low whistle as everyone else (except Steve) raised an eyebrow.

"Wait a minute," Steve began. "So I'm not the only one to be in this sculpture?"

"That's what she just said, Steve," Geoff confirmed.

"So there's to be another person in this sculpture?" asked Steve.

"That would be another way of putting it, yes," Geoff confirmed.

"Do I get to choose who the second person is?" asked Steve.

14OCT2001 Sunday

1600 – Otterstow Town Hall

"Town council for 14 October, 2001 will now come to order," Ignatius banged his gavel.

Linda took roll and Ignatius began the meeting.

"Everyone's here," announced the mayor. "Old business, Linda?"

"In regard to the fair market value of the mayoral mansion, we ran the ad for a month and we received six offers. The average of these offers came to approximately £2500 sterling," Linda read from her notes.

"What!" shouted the judge. "That's impossible! That's even lower than your estimate!"

Linda handed all the letters over to the judge. "Here are the letters making the offers. You may see for yourself."

The judge snatched the letters up and rifled through them. "Here's one for ten grand. And the rest of these . . . they're for just around a thousand apiece. This is outrageous!"

"Hardly," Ignatius replied. "We're required to expose any shortcomings of the house to anyone who asks. Firstly, it is in desperate need of a new roof. It also has dry rot, woodworm, needs new wiring and the basement floods on a regular basis. And although they are not necessities, it is also in dire want of new cladding, freshly puttied windows, a fresh coat of interior paint, repaired floorboards and about a dozen other repairs. All of these things bring the value of the home down, Morris. Honestly, if the mice weren't holding hands, the place would crash to the ground. Here," he added, digging out a slip of paper, "is a survey.

"And not to put too fine a point on things, Morris," Ignatius continued, "but that one, very large, bid looks suspiciously like your handwriting. If I knew for certain it was yours, I'd have half a mind to force you to take the bloody thing. I could build an entirely new house that was much better for less money than it would take to restore this one. And the council could use the cash."

Morris was staring at the report. "Eh?" he said distractedly. "No! No, that won't be necessary. I agree. Nora is yours. I won't contest any further."

"Any further old business?" asked Ignatius.

"Ahem," Linda cleared her throat. "There is the matter of first refusal of Hizzoner to purchase?"

"Oh, yes! Of course, I will be buying Nora. I'll have a cashier's cheque delivered to the Secretary-Treasurer who will deposit it in the general fund of the township. That should be enough to cover the renovations at The tré and leave us with a rather substantial surplus. I task our Secretary-Treasurer to draw up the papers for sale.

"Anything, erm, else?" he looked meaningfully at Linda.

Linda shook her head.

"No? Any new business?" asked Ignatius.

There was no response.

"Very well. Meeting adjourned." Ignatius banged his gavel.

1630 – Black Kettle Pub

The Partnership followed Ignatius back to the Black Kettle. Once inside, they all patted him on the back.

"Brilliant idea, Ig," Pete admired. "Puttin' that fake survey for Morris to look over."

"I must admit," Gina stated, "I've never seen you tell skintails like you did today."

"The sad part," Ignatius admitted, "is that it's not a 'tail. I *did* actually have a surveyor come by and take a look and the place is completely falling apart. If it were in perfect condition, it would be well above Morris' bid. But the fact is, it's a ruin and it's not worth half his bid. It actually does have woodworm, dry rot and all the rest. Maybe I should have let Morris have it. Would have served him right."

The rest of the Partnership were a little stunned to hear this news, except for Linda, who had helped prepare the report.

"Ow's about a cider, Ig," Pete offered, breaking the silence. "On the house, o' course – oh, sorry for that," he added as he reached for a glass.

"Thank you, Pete," Ignatius accepted quietly as he took a seat at the bar.

Geoff patted Ignatius on the back. "Not to worry, old man. You'll get by."

"I'm sure I shall," Ignatius said. "Tell me, Geoff, what's your opinion? Should I try and patch Nora up or should I just blow the whole thing up and start from scratch?"

"I have seen Nora in her proper light, Ig," Geoff mentioned. "You're not too far off in your suggestion of blowing it up and starting over."

Jess interrupted. "Oo, can I be the one to push the plunger?"

Ignatius buried his head in his hands. "Thank you, Jess."

"Although I think regular demolition should do just fine," Geoff continued giving Jess a dirty look. "Anyway, get an architect to survey your basement and foundation and then move your things into storage. I'll have summa the lads tear it down and a month later, you'll have a brand new home. It'll cost a bit, but it'll be worth it."

Ignatius picked his head up. "How much?"

"Well, if you're willing to do some of the work," Geoff did some mental calculations as he stared upward, making an effort *not* to suck air through his teeth, "just some basic decorating stuff, mind; tiles, wallpaper, curtains and so on. Probably a good . . . eight grand."

Ignatius rattled out a sigh. "My entire savings is going to be wiped out for the sale and the banks won't loan me money on a house that's not built. Not that I want to borrow from those sharks anyway. Even if I did, I'd have nothing left for my pension."

"Might be best to wait until we get the Rialto paid off," Geoff suggested. "Then we'll be rolling in it. You'll be able to afford it then." He patted Ignatius on the back and left him alone with Jess.

"Of course, that's assuming we could actually launder that much money into Otterstow," Jess pointed out.

Ignatius sighed. "Perceptive as usual, Jess. Thank you for that insight."

"I know it's a dump," Jess said, giving him a pat on the back to encourage him, "but you'll manage until you've got the dosh to rebuild it – even if it's just your regular salary."

"Thank you, Jess," Ignatius groaned.

"If it doesn't collapse between now and then," Jess added. "But not to worry, even if it does, you could always move into the Rialto. Oh, no, I tell a lie – I got the *last* bedroom. Of course, there are those icky dormitories under the stage, but even Angus wouldn't live in those. However . . ." She paused for dramatic effect, putting her finger to her cheek and looking off into the distance.

"Yes?" Ignatius prompted, against his better judgement.

"Why, I have an idea!" Jess suggested with a sweet and innocent voice. "You could share *my* bedroom."

"Pass," Ignatius grunted.

29OCT2001 Monday

1400 – *The tré*

Desiree was sitting in the Black Kettle drawing some sketches and making a few notes, while Eric gave some constructive criticism.

"Yes, quite good. But the ears are a bit too big and you'll want to make the toes arch a bit more," he said, pointing to the relevant parts of the drawings. He leaned forward and whispered. "And if anyone asks, I wrote the notes in the margins."

"Shit!" Nearing panic, Desiree had a sudden look around to see that no one else had noticed her writing. "Still not used to being illiterate," she mumbled.

Ignatius tapped her on the shoulder. "Come along, Desiree, time for you to be off to *The tré*. Apparently you're not used to having PD, either."

"Oh, yeah," Desiree said nervously. "I nearly forgot."

"You remember your lines, I hope?" Ignatius asked.

"Umm . . ." Desiree hedged.

By the time Ignatius had escorted her through the door of *The tré*, he had fed her her cues and she had responded correctly almost every time.

Michael Robinson, Steve Green and Angus MacAleister were waiting for her when she arrived.

"Ready, Desiree?" asked Michael.

"No, actually," Desiree admitted.

"Here's a script," Angus offered. "Ye'll no be seen as ye're pullin the puppie. But dinna let onybody sees ye readin!" he warned.

"I'm the narrator and I still don't have the privilege of reading from a page," Michael said. "Everyone would notice that immediately."

"All right, all right," Desiree grudgingly admitted. "I've been preoccupied, I'm sorry. I'll be better prepared next time."

"I'll be in my box," Ignatius said. "Take your places and the curtain opens when the last clock chime is heard."

Opening scene: Spider (as puppet) building web in doorway of cave

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of The Resilient Spider.

Badger Bruce enters cave and accidentally destroys web in doing so

Steve, wearing a Badger's mask crashed through the simple drawing of a spider's web, drawn on a large sheet of paper by the first-year students. He thrashed about a good bit, to the amusement of the children.

Spider [*angrily*]

Who has ruined my weaving!

Desiree was reading her lines in a falsetto from the rafters of the stage as she operated the spider puppet.

Badger Bruce

Pardons, Madam Spider, but I am in dire need of somewhere to hide. My enemies pursue me and I must find refuge in this remote cavern. I would name the king and my choice does not sit well with those in power. Had I known your handiwork was here, I would have entered more carefully!

Spider

Such pretty words will not replace my work!

Badger Bruce

My pardons again. If I may be of any help, you may but say and I will assist as I can.

Spider

Of what use could a Badger be to restore a web? Be of use by standing aside as I mend!

[She weaves another web]

Narrator

And so our Spider works in the night to build another web.

Another paper drawing of a spider's web instantly rolled down.

But webs are such fragile things . . .

Badger Robert [*enters cave, destroying web*]

Angus crashed through the paper effortlessly.

Milord Bruce! Milord Bruce! News Milord! . . .

Spider [*angrily*]

Again, some clumsy oaf does wreck my work!

Badger Robert

Forgive, milady Spider, your webcraft was so fine that I could not see. Permit me to assist in putting to rights my transgression.

Spider

And can you spin a web? What use are you? Tell your news, and let me do my work!

Badger Robert [*to Badger Bruce*]

Milord Bruce, the enemy grow strong but the king will grant you amnesty and welcome you back to court if you but admit the error of your ways.

Badger Bruce

Is this sincere Squire Robert, or some trickery?

Badger Robert

I do believe sincere, Milord Bruce, but 'tis your life, not mine, on the line.

Badger Bruce

Just so, Squire Robert. Find out what you may and see me on the morrow.

[Badger Robert departs cave]

Narrator

And so our Spider builds again, and the next day . . .

Badger Robert *[enters again, destroying web]*

Milord, Milord, I bring more news!

Spider *[angrily]*

You thick wretch! You knew my web was here! Yet you spoil it once again!

Badger Robert *[bowing]*

Forgive, milady . . .

Badger Bruce *[swats spider, who falls dead]*

There's an end to that, Squire Robert.

Badger Robert

Milord Bruce?

Badger Bruce

This dead weaver has guided me to my fate, as I have learnt from her example. There is no purpose in lurking in caves and spinning webs over and over for all one's life. See here, friend, it all ends in being swatted.

Tell the King I will make peace with him. They are no worse than I and what point in my death and the death of others over an exercise as pointless as the name of a king. 'Tis a trivial matter. Let them have their way and we may take some merriment in the bargain.

Let's not waste our lives on things

As petty as the names of kings

Narrator

Thus the fate of the Resilient Spider.

Draw from it what you may.

Until next we meet – good day!

Desiree joined Ignatius at the front door of The tré as the children filed past. "Desiree, I would have expected you, of all people, to have their lines learnt on time," Ignatius chided gently.

"Yeah, you right," Desiree admitted sincerely. "And no excuse, neither."

"Just so," Ignatius said. "And be prepared for the consequences should this happen again."

"I can assure you," Desiree stated firmly, "that is something I will *not* have to be prepared for."

Michael, Angus and Steve joined them just as the last child had departed.

"My word, I never thought a two-minute play could be so exhausting," Steve complained.

"I couldna mynd ma lines," Angus admitted. "An speakin pan-laif, as well!"
 "Dear me," Michael said smugly. "I thought it was dead easy."
 "Oh, aye," Angus complained. "You wi the fewest lines."
 "C'mon, cap," Desiree nudged Michael, "you can buy us a round at the Rialto for being so haughty."

1410 – Rialto Bar

The four humans of the Partnership retired to the bar at the Rialto.
 "Do you get the feeling," Steve began, "that our Furry partners aren't quite happy with the current arrangement?"
 "Seem content enough," Michael dismissed, taking a bite of a muffin.
 "Aye, fine," Angus agreed, sipping coffee.
 "I sort of get the impression that they'd like to be among 'em," noted Desiree. "You know, work at the bar, get a little face-time with the customers."
 "That's precisely what I was thinking," Steve concurred.
 "Ye think?" Angus asked.
 "Mm," Michael nodded, swallowing quickly so that he might answer a little more eruditely. "Yes, now that you mention it, that does seem to come up now and again. Can't blame them, having to work behind the scenes all the time."
 "I've been trying to think of some way we could let them work with the customers," Steve continued. "Apart from saving us a packet on employees, I think they'd be a lot happier."
 "Aye. An what's yer idea?" asked Angus.
 "Don't actually have any, to be honest. Apart from claiming that they're trained animals," Steve admitted.
 "Niver work," Angus stated. "Need special leecance an all furrat. Couldna we . . . nah . . ." he started and stopped.
 "Go on, then," Michael urged.
 Angus seemed reluctant but restarted. "Couldna we get 'em NI nummers? Jus' like awbody else?"
 "Do you still have your job with DSS?" asked Steve of Michael.
 "I switched to part-time, after I finished my leave of absence," Michael answered. "And we're DWP now."
 "Mebbe we could file 'em as special needs?" suggested Angus.
 "Just because they have fur doesn't mean they wear a colostomy bag," Michael pointed out. "They actually have to require some sort of special care to get that status. Besides, it gives them benefits, not the right to work or reside."
 "Asylum status?" Desiree proposed.
 "No, they'd have to say where they came from," Michael said, "and I don't think that's going to fly, for obvious reasons."
 They sat for a moment in silence, considering the problem.
 "Why can't we just say they've lived in the UK all of their lives?" asked Steve.
 "Suppose we could," Michael shrugged.
 "Come ta it," Angus said, "do we need ta say ought ta onybody?"
 The other three sipped their coffee or tea as they pondered this possibility.

"What about their pay?" asked Desiree. "How would we handle that?"

"Could we no juist pay 'em the dry siller?" Angus suggested. "Who's ta knaw?"

"Just pay them cash?" Michael repeated to Desiree's relief.

"Aye? An why no?" Angus shrugged.

"How would we list it on the books?" asked Michael. "We have to have a full accounting of all our assets and debits. Inland Revenue is rather sticky about things like that."

"Not to mention that Basset and Colourpoint at the bank," Steve added. "You remember how testy they got when we put tampons on the expenses. They'll claw our eyes out if there's something amiss on payroll."

"Couldn't we pay them directly out of our own pockets?" asked Desiree.

"Oh, lovely," argued Steve. "I take my salary, pay full tax on it and then get to keep one-tenth? Very nice."

"Steve, we would have to pay human staff, otherwise," Desiree justified, "so it's six of one, half dozen t'other."

"But how're we going to justify to the bank that I need a ten-fold rise in salary?" Steve asked. "Even then, I'll be in higher tax bracket."

"I don't think their pay is the issue, as far as they're concerned," Michael pointed out. "They know we can only launder a certain amount of cash to Otterstorn anyway and that's going to bare necessities like beer. They're certainly not interested in buying anything in Newburg."

"And we're straying from our original point. The aim of letting them work in the open isn't for them to earn money – it's to boost their morale."

"It'll also lower our payroll, as we won't have to hire outside bartenders," Desiree pointed out.

"Suppose you're right," Steve conceded. "They're already doing work for free. At least if they're facing the customer, it'll be more fun for them."

They sat a while in uffish thought.

"Winna Health an Safety come roond?" asked Angus.

"Wouldn't worry about them," Steve dismissed. "They've got their little checklist concerning fire extinguishers and clean work areas and as long we get a tick on each item, they couldn't care less. And somehow, I don't think 'all serving staff must be hairless apes' is on the docket. The very worst they could do is force them to wear a hairnet."

"We don't serve food anyway," Desiree pointed out. "Unless it's in a factory-sealed foil pouch. Say, when are we gonna get that kitchen . . ."

"An Immigration?" interrupted Angus.

"What are they going to do?" Michael dismissed. "Ask for a passport? None of them has an accent."

"From yer point o view, mebbe," Angus pointed out.

"So, it's decided?" Michael prompted. "We don't tell anyone at all and hope that no one notices?"

"Sounds perfectly plausible to me," Steve agreed.

"Perfit," Angus consented.

"As far as governmental regulatory agencies go," Desiree qualified, "I think that's a good plan. But, what are we gonna tell our customers when they see a

seven foot Bear behind the counter serving pints? I think 'Oh, it's just a costume' is going to wear pretty thin after a while."

"What questions did anybody ask at Midsummer?" asked Angus.

"I think the leading query was 'Do you do parties?'" Steve answered.

"Oh, f'true," Desiree concurred. "We heard that one often enough. I don't know if everyone was being polite, but almost no one asked about the costumes, apart from small children."

"And while children will believe almost anything you tell them," Michael pointed out, "I suspect our adult clientele will require a little more, erm . . ."

"Spin?" suggested Desiree. "Y'know, I have an idea – how about a field trial."

1600 – Rialto Kitchen

"As you know, Halloween is this Wednesday," Steve said. "Today's Monday. So that gives us a couple of days to prepare."

"Hollow wha'?" asked Geoff.

"Halloween," repeated Steve, enunciating clearly. "Short for All Hallow's Eve."

"Religious 'oliday, izzit?" Pete commented idly. "Goodo. Could use a day off."

"Not exactly," Steve said. "Well, it *was* a religious holiday, but it's more-or-less evolved into sort of a giant, fancy-dress fright-fest. Everyone dresses up in a costume and there's usually a sort of macabre theme to the whole affair. Used to be only in the States, but it's becoming more popular here. We've got a very nice little band called 'Almost Grown.' They're a bit new, but I did hear them recently and I think they'll do quite nicely. We might do a 'best dressed' or the like. Charge the contestants a couple quid and the winner gets the pot or something along those lines.

"Anyway, pressing on," Steve continued. "I thought it would be nice if we took advantage, like we did at Midsummer Day. You could take turns working the bar and partying with the punters."

"Oo, now I *could* do that!" Rachael answered enthusiastically.

The remaining Frith of the Partnership were just as enthusiastic as Rachael.

"In fact, if we prepare ourselves, I don't see any problem with having all of you work out in the open all the time," Steve added.

This was met with even more enthusiasm.

"I don't mean to rain on the parade," Ignatius asked, "but what approach did you plan on taking?"

The four humans looked at each other, wondering which would be brave enough to tell Ignatius their non-plan.

"What we decided," Angus volunteered, "is ta tell nought ta nawbody."

"You mean, we're to pretend that the ten of us simply don't exist and hope that no one in authority notices?" Ignatius rephrased.

"Aye," Angus answered simply.

"I appreciate that Newburg is in your world and you know better than I, but I must object to this plan in the strongest possible terms," Ignatius stated. "For

the short-term, we might get away with it. But when – and please note that I did not use the conditional conjunction, 'if' – but *when* we are caught out, we could lose control of the Rialto."

"You have a better plan?" asked Jess.

"Yes, I do," Ignatius said. "We do whatever paperwork is required to make us legal workers."

"We?" Jess repeated. "Are there more than one of you?" she asked, echoing his taunt when they had first reunited, "are have you become the Queen."

"If your jest is meant to imply that I am to do the paperwork," Ignatius replied patiently, "then I will be more than happy to, if someone will but provide me with the necessary information."

"That would be Michael," Steve volunteered his friend.

"Oh, why thank you, Steve," Michael said sarcastically. "I'll be happy to donate my remaining five minutes of spare time to assist Ignatius on performing the impossible."

"Don't underestimate the Ig-man," Linda warned Michael, "especially when it comes to paper-work. He can move mountains of red tape with the stroke of a pen."

"That's as maybe," Michael answered, "but it's all done on computers now. And it takes a mountain of paperwork to move a pen."

"You said there was some preparation to be done before we appear," Sandra recalled. "What does that entail?"

"Ah, yes," Steve said. "While you might be able to escape the notice of the authorities, albeit temporarily, our punters will notice the moment they lay eyes upon you."

"So what?" Pete shrugged. "Let 'em notice. If it bovers 'em so much, they can go elsewhere."

"Apart from losing custom, I think that would be the wrong approach," Michael answered. "What we need to do is think up some responses to questions that they might ask."

"Such as?" Slide asked.

"How much do those costumes cost?" Michael suggested. "Or, 'How long does it take to put on?'"

"What did you have in mind for a response?" asked Sandra.

The four humans looked at each other again.

"We're no quite sure," Angus admitted. "We dinna wanna lee. But we obviously canna tell 'em the full truth."

"In other words," Ignatius observed, "some sort of duplicity will be involved in our responses."

"I wouldn't go as far as to call it *duplicity*," Desiree hedged.

"Very well," Ignatius asked patiently. "What would you call it?"

Desiree gave her answer a moment's thought. "Perspective?" she tenuously suggested.

"As you wish," Ignatius allowed. "I can't say that I feel comfortable passing a line of questionable veracity to the people who provide our incomes. That being said, I greatly appreciate that it is a necessary evil for us to continue in our

endeavour. The question now becomes, how do we convey this 'perspective' to our customers? I'm not much good at evading the truth."

There was a moment's silence as no one seemed to have an answer.

"What are you all looking at *me* for?" Jess wailed.

30OCT2001 Tuesday

1400 The tré

Opening scene: A simple parlour with a comfortable chair, outside entrance to stage right, interior door to stage left.

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of The Badger Wife.

Husband (A married Badger) enters the house from stage right, apparently from a hard day of work, opens a bottle, pours a glass of wine and sits down to relax

Husband

Ah, a glass of wine and some quiet time after an honest day's work. The best part of my day.

Wife [*enter stage left*]

Drinking again? You'll nix your liver and leave me a widow!

Husband

Eh? Dearest, you did know I always had a drink at work's end. It is everyone's right after an honest day's labour and I do not drink to excess. Nor do I drink before or during work!

Wife

'Tis the slippery slope! A glass here and a glass there and soon a whole bottle! And did I not tell you a hundred times not to wear boots in the house!

Husband [*sighing and removing boots*]

That you have, my dear, and a hundred more. Although I always wore my boots inside in my parent's home, and . . .

Wife

And when will you lose some weight?

Husband

I have the same weight I have had since our wedding day. I will free admit I am larger than average but I have grown no more since that day, unlike you . . .

Wife

And 'tis time to trim your fex. 'Tis in a frightful state!

Husband

Mine is shorter than all my fellows! Might I grow it just a bit? I shall keep it neat and combed.

Wife

Nay, 'tis horrible for me to look at.

Husband

And would you wear yours in plaits as I have asked so many times?

Wife

'Tis too much bother. And our rent has been raised! We cannot afford the fine plates, like my sister has, now! When will you find employ that will pay more?

Husband

This is the profession I did have when we met. It does not pay much, as well you know, but teaching is good and honourable work. Your sister's husband inherited his estate. I had no such legacy.

Wife

You spend too much on your friends! Then we would have more money! Forsake their pleasures for mine!

Husband

But tonight is my night this week for some sport with my companions! 'Tis but once a week! We have done so since school!

Wife

'Tis but an excuse to waste money that should be spent on me!

Husband gets up, exit stage left to kitchen

Wife [*calling after him*]

Where do you go? Tell me now!

Husband [*returning from kitchen with small case*]

I am leaving.

Wife

Wherefore?

Husband

The wrong house I have entered
 And that is plain to see
 I know not whom you married
 But it surely was not me

Narrator

Thus the fate of our Badger Wife.
 Draw from it what you may.
 Until next we meet – good day!

Ignatius took his usual position just outside the door, with Desiree at his side, while the others waited, unseen, in the Rialto. When the last child had filed past and was beyond the gate, Ig went to give his customary thanks to the Almas and the players for the day.

"Ig, I dinna mind when I hafta play angry Badgers. And I dinna mind when I hafta play outside ma own Genra. But I must draw a line at playin in drag! Is completely humiliatin!" Thaddeus threw his wig down on the floor.

"Better you'n me, mate," Pete said, taking off his Badger mask.

"I *am* sorry, Thaddeus," Ignatius consoled. "I did have Wanda for the part but she got the grippe at the last moment – hardly my fault. Pete would only volunteer if he got to play the husband."

"All right, fair enough," Thaddeus said. He then wagged his finger at Ignatius. "But that's the last time. Niver again. Na more drag."

"I can't promise that, Thaddeus," Ignatius stated. "We work on such a short rotation. But I *will* try."

After Thaddeus had departed, Ignatius, Pete and Desiree left to join the other members of the Partnership, who were waiting in the Rialto.

They were just getting seated when Steve appeared, wheeling in a stack of boxes on a hand truck. "I hope you don't mind but I've taken the liberty of getting something the rest of you might want to wear tomorrow night. Feel free to decline if you like but all I ask is that you try them on and have a look before you reject them out of hand."

He pulled a pair of boxes off the stack and blew some dust off. "Okay, these two are for Clare and Rachael."

"Bit dusty," Rachael commented. "Where'd ya get this lot?"

"I found almost all of these in the basement and instead of putting them up for sale, I decided to keep them for this occasion. The rest were stored in the bedroom for some reason," Steve explained, handing them out. "Most of them are from old musicals and period pieces."

"Don't you get one?" asked Linda.

"Yes, but I couldn't get it altered in time for today," Steve said. "Go ahead and try these out and let's see what you think."

They had all departed to change and Desiree was the first to come back, dressed as a rag doll. "This is nice, but are we trying to make some sorta statement here?" she asked waving a huge accumulation of red yarn.

"Don't read too much into it Desi," Steve dismissed. "It's just a rag doll outfit and it was your size."

"Hope you don't mind if I forego the wig," Desiree said, disdainfully placing the pile of red yarn on the bar.

Geoff came out wearing an outdated police constable's uniform. "Ha, imagine that – me being a bull. That'd be the day . . ."

"You *sure* we're not trying to make a statement?" asked Desiree.

"No, Desi, it's just a costume and he was the right size," Steve reaffirmed.

"Better hope no real cops show up," Desiree mentioned.

"Shouldn't worry," Steve said. "They're not wound as tightly as you are; they do actually have a sense of humour."

Linda bounded into the room in a revealing pirate outfit. "Aargh!" she shouted, waving a fake scimitar. "It's Jolly Linda, Privateer, Swashbuckler and chaser of Man o' Wars – and Man o' Loves – and Man in General." She giggled, running up to Steve and pointing the tip of her plastic sword at him, somewhere midst breastbone and thigh. "Prepare to be boarded."

"Oh, is *that* what they call it in Her Majesty's Navy these days?" Geoff asked.

"Well, blow me," Pete said, entering with Gina. ". . . down."

Pete was wearing a woodsman's outfit that was about two sizes too small and Gina was in a medieval noblewoman's clothes that was about four sizes too long.

"This is smashin', this. Straight outta our storybooks. Nick Ruff an' 'is Merry Lady," Pete said.

"Is it?" asked Steve. "How's the story go?"

"Nobleman, Nick Ruff, 'as 'is land taken by the pretender while the King is gone. Becomes an outlaw. Steals from the rich . . ."

"And gives to the poor. King comes back and reinstates him," Steve finished.

"That's right. Have you heard the story, then?" asked Gina.

"We have the same story," Steve said. "The character names are *slightly* different."

"Oh yeah?" Pete turned to Gina. "Whatcha think, Gina? Sound like fun?"

"Just hope I don't trip over this dress," she replied looking down. "Not that I have a long ways to fall. Still, just a moment's needlework ought to fix that."

Clare and Rachael were making their entrance in matching ball gowns with crinoline skirts.

"They're *so* lovely," Clare said appreciatively.

"And they already got the seam for our tails built in!" added Rachael.

"Thanks for that, Steve."

"Do they?" asked Steve in amazement. "I try to plan for everything but I *never* would have thought to put seams in for your tails. That's the way I found them. They were tucked up in a closet in a box labelled 'Sandy'."

"Oh, that'd be our old friend, Sandra MarchHare," Pete recalled. "The old Doe wif 'er tits out, front the volcano. She's the one what used to own the Kettle an' I'd bet these used to be hers."

"No alteration needed for that pair. So what're 'em things they're wearin', Steve?"

"They're just ball gowns," Steve shrugged. "I couldn't tell you what story they're from."

"Well," Pete began speculating as he stroked his chin. "Seein' as they been altered to be worn by 'Ares that would make 'em . . ."

"Hare ball gowns," Steve chorused with Pete. "You should be ashamed of yourself, Pete. Honestly."

Michael and Angus returned, wearing skin-tight, pink leotards and enormous tutus.

"*Tres amusant**," Michael said politely. "Now, where are the costumes we'll actually *wear*?"

"Oo, dunnoo," Angus shrugged. "Bit o paddin here an there – we might pull, wearin this."

Michael considered this for just a second. "Right. I've got some socks, just upstairs." The two of them dashed out of the room.

Rachael leaned over to Clare and whispered, "Thought they was already paddin' the pouch."

Clare shrugged. "Might have to find out for ourselves someday."

Ignatius entered the lobby simultaneously with Jess, with the former wearing a bright, red business suit and a pair of horns, while the latter wore a white tunic with a small pair of feathery wings on her back.

"I somehow think we've been miscast," Ignatius suggested to Jess.

"Yeah, you would think that," Jess muttered.

* *Tres amusant* – F. 'very amusing'

Sandra's voice could be heard just beyond the door. "Oh, come on, Slide, where's your sense of humour?"

"Right where it's always been," Slide replied. "I just fail to see anything funny about it."

"Well, please yourself," Sandra said. "I'm going out." She strutted into the lobby wearing thigh-high boots, a miniskirt, a halter top, and a little red cape with a hood.

Pete whistled. "Wha-hey! 'Ello, darlin', new in town?"

"Oh, stop it, Pete," Sandra blushed, tugging her skirt down a bit. She turned her head and shouted, "Slide? Please, come out! Everyone else has."

"All right, all right," Slide blustered, striding into the room wearing a pink, flannel nightdress. He flung a matching nightcap onto the bar next to the ball of red yarn that Desiree had discarded earlier. "Does anyone actually *wear* a nightcap anymore?"

Michael and Angus reappeared from upstairs, dashing out of the staircase into the lobby. They both struck a pose before the group, thrusting their hips prominently forward, their tutus hiked just high enough to display a ridiculous amount of padding in their crotch.

It was just enough for most of the men and far too much for all of the women as the entire crew broke into loud laughter.

Giving each other a thumbs-up, the pair of ballerinas joined the others at the bar, with Michael digging out a sheaf of papers from beneath the till.

"Right, just a tiny bit of business," Michael ordered as he handed out some papers to the Frith. "Jess has provided us with a list of responses to some of the questions we're likely to be asked tomorrow night. As it will be Halloween, it will be a good opportunity to try them out, as any miscues can be chalked up to the holiday.

"However, if you're to appear on the floor every night, then we'll have to get these responses down pat, see which ones work and which ones need some tweaking."

They read in silence for a while.

"I must say, Jess, you've outdone yourself," Ignatius commented.

"Nice to get a little recognition for once," Jess said.

"Even as a solicitor, I never quite appreciated how flexible the truth could be," Ignatius added. "But, not a word out of place, so fair play."

31OCT2001 Wednesday Halloween

0930 – Rialto Auditorium

Halloween arrived and the Partnership met at the Rialto after the morning Portrayal to begin preparing decorations.

"Where's Steve? Anyone seen 'im?" asked Rachael.

"Not yet," replied Ignatius. "Look, he's left the decorations," he said pointing to a box in the corner. "Let's get started, then."

They all started to dig around in the box, pulling out plastic skeletons and crepe paper. Desiree had been made the *de facto* decorator, as she had more experience with the subject than anyone else and directed the others as to where things should go.

"Steve was right, this isn't half macabre," Geoff pointed out. "All kinds of death and monsters and what not."

"Is a bit grim," Pete conceded, as he hung up an enormous paper spider. Several hours later, they had finished.

"Looks well odd," Clare commented, admiring their work. "But Steve did warn us."

"Where is that layabout?" Jess complained.

"Dunno. Let's go to the bar an' 'ave a pint," Pete suggested. "'E'll show up the moment we start pourin'."

They all sauntered off to the bar, ready to take a breather from the morning work. Gina was about to walk behind the bar and start pouring when a Sciuran head popped up for just a second, placed four glasses under the taps, opened them and ducked back under the counter.

"D'ya see that?" Pete whispered.

"Claude Baughs, someone from Otterstow's gotten in," Geoff observed quietly.

"And he's helping himself to free drink as well," Gina added angrily.

"How'd he get in?" asked Clare.

"Rache, 'ere's your chance to practice tossin' punters," Pete observed. "Go get 'im, girl."

"Right, dad," Rachael muttered eagerly. She scrambled behind the counter and picked the intruder up by the neck and belt. "Gotcha!" she announced.

"Yerk!" protested the Sciuran.

"Right! 'Ow'd ya get in 'ere, ya li'l sneak?" the Lepun barmaid asked as she started to cart him off. She had only just lifted the culprit barely off the ground, so the others were unable to catch a glimpse. Rachael was slowly working her way out from behind the bar as her captive struggled to try and get free, knocking things about and onto the floor.

"Quit thrashin' about! You're makin' a right dog's dinner back 'ere!" Rachael protested.

"How're we going to keep him quiet?" Jess asked. "He'll talk as soon as he's let back into Otterstow!"

"Jess is right, Rachael," Ignatius added. "Put him down, so we can talk to him."

With a heave, Rachael hefted the hapless intruder up and dropped him onto the bar. He was wheezing heavily, trying to catch his breath.

"Oh, for Jack's sake!" Linda exclaimed. "It's Steve!"

Rachael looked down at the lower half. "I thought them legs were a bit long. An' I wondered why his tail weren't wavin' about." She lifted him up by the collar and looked closely into his eyes.

"Afternoon, Rache," Steve croaked.

"Yep. It's our Steve." Rachael dropped his head unceremoniously onto the bar and turned off the taps where the pints were just about to overflow.

Linda broke out of her astonishment to rush to Steve's aid. "Love? Are you okay? Are you hurt, Love? Why didn't you say something?"

"Hadn't fe chanshe," Steve said as he sat up and rubbed his throat. "I couldn't bweaf."

Linda gave a cold stare to Rachael. "Rache, you could have hurt our Steve!"

"Ow was I to know?" Rachael answered defensively. "No one else recognised 'im. 'Sides, I wouldn've 'urt 'im seriously. Shoulda told us 'e was gonna pull a stunt like 'at."

"Itsh all right," Steve said. "I'm not hurt."

Linda turned back to Steve. "*Where* did you get this . . . this . . ." She was at a loss for words.

"Do you wike it?" Steve asked, trying to smile as he straightened out his waistcoat.

"You put one over on Jess," Ignatius pointed out. "That's no mean feat."

"Fank you. I'd been pwaning fish for fome time. I have a fwiend of a fwiend who doesh fish fort of fing. Bwief exchange of favoursh, showed him shome of Deshi'sh shketshesh, a bit of weady cash, and here'sh Shtevy the Shquiwell! Compwete wif cartoon voishe." He posed with his hands out.

"Will you stop talking like that?" Desiree complained. "It's very annoying."

"I can't help it," Steve apologised. "It'sh fe teef."

"I must say, even from a short distance, it does look phenomenally life-like," Sandra said admiringly.

"If you get up cwoشه, you can actually shee some of fe fake bitsh – oh, showwy, Shandwa. Didn't mean to be wude!" Steve grimaced, as he covered his mouth in embarrassment.

"I'll let it go, considering the circumstances," Sandra absolved, still marvelling at the transformation.

Steve continued, taking one of his ear lobes. "Fere's a wittle too much hair in fe earsh, but fat wash to hide fe fact fat I don't actuwawwy have earsh way up wike fat. Feet have to be in boofsh." He held up his hands. "Handsh are a wittle warger fan should be, but have to take some wibertiesh. Can't carve my handsh down, after all."

Linda examined the hands. "Maybe a bit big. But I've seen hands this big on a Sciuran."

"And ya know what they say about blokes wif big 'ands," Pete felt compelled to mention.

"No. What's that then?" asked Gina, just to put him on the spot.

"Well . . . they gotta wear big gloves, don't they?" Pete muttered.

"I'd say," Clare remarked, "on a dark night, at a few feet, he could pass quite easily."

"Wouldn't even 'ave to be a particularly dark night," Rachael added, eager to defend her earlier actions.

"Those aren't your teeth, I take it?" Slide enquired as he started passing out the pints.

"No. I have about eight falshe teef on fe top." Steve tapped on them. "Had to move my top jaw out a bit to hide my weal noshe. Which alsho explainsh the lishp."

"We didn't want to shay anything, erm, say anything," Michael ribbed.

"What on earth possessed you to do this?" asked Linda.

"I'd fought it was waffer obviovush. I wanted to shurprishe you," Steve said.

Smiling, Linda poked him in the chest. "You . . . silly! You certainly accomplished that, didn't you! Nearly surprised me out of my fur!" She looked like she was about to admonish him some more, but her demeanour softened a little bit. "You had all this done – just for me?"

"Yesh. Of courshe," Steve said. "Jusht a wittle idea I had."

Linda paused and looked Steve up and down. "How far down does this . . . disguise . . . go?"

"I could wear a very short pair of twoushersh," Steve said, "alfough I'd shtill have to wear boofsh on my feet."

"Take off your shirt," Linda ordered instantly.

Without hesitation or question, Steve took off his blazer and waistcoat, undid his tie and began unbuttoning his shirt. The others watched in awe as he removed the garment and threw the shirt over a chair, held his arms out and spun around.

"Cor, 'e did a thorough job an' all din't 'e?" Pete said, dumbfounded. "Covered 'im all over."

"Coloration is pretty good," Desiree added.

"Can you move your tail at all?" asked Linda.

"Fought about having it done," Steve said. "My fuwwier shaid he could do it, but it took too much time and money."

She rubbed her chin and stared, deeply considering the situation.

"Would you wike me to model?" He went into a ludicrous pose, as if flexing his muscles, causing most of the crew to laugh.

Linda just smiled and rolled her eyes. "You are so absolutely . . . daft! Steve, this is far and away the sweetest, most considerate and romantic thing anyone has ever even come close to doing for me. And it is truly an incredible work of art. Whoever did this, tell them they did a brilliant job."

Steve could tell there was more she had to say and had a go at a pre-emptive motion. "But – you don't wike it."

"No. I love it. Honestly, I do," Linda motioned. "But, even better than this is the 'Real' you. I like you as you are – as a human."

"Oh." Steve was at a loss for something wittier to say. "Gosh. Fanksh. I can honeshtwy shay, no one'sh ever shaid that to me before."

"I've said it to a few guys I've been out with," Desiree commented.

Pete gave her a small cuffing. "Quiet you," he whispered. "We're watchin' a pivotal romantic development."

"Should I take it off?" Steve asked Linda, as he grasped his cheeks with his hands.

"No! No, no, no, no, no, no!" Linda stopped him, grabbing his wrists in her hands. "For tonight, it'll be perfect. But tomorrow, you'll be back to your old self . . . Right?"

"Oh, yesh. I'll pwobabwy need shome help taking fish off, actuawwy," Steve said. "Shomeone hash to rub me down wif fairwy shtwong chemical to disholve fe appwicationsh."

Linda put her finger on her chin and looked toward the ceiling. "Hmm. Wonder who that would be?" She wrapped her arms around him and buried her head in his chest. She moved her head off his chest and examined the fur, running her fingers through it. "Not trying to be rude or anything, but it's nothing like proper Sciuran fur."

"Didn't fink you'd want *genuine* fur," Steve commented.

1800 – Rialto

The evening was much more of a social success than a financial one for the Partnership (and it was a reasonably good financial success). There had actually been a very good turnout of patrons with costumes, some of mundane objects, such as a beer can, a prophylactic, a mace sprayer and a kettle. On the more traditional side, there were a couple of wizards and a few witches, a vampire, a werewolf, a Frankenstein's monster and several dressed as the Grim Reaper, to various degrees of effect. The best costume was won by a young woman who came as a fairy, complete with wings and wand, although there was some grumbling from the other costumed patrons (mostly female) that she only won because her costume was so revealing. There was the counter-argument (mostly from males) that her demonstration of the less-is-more school of thought was what made her costume the best.

An inebriated patron, wearing the highly imaginative fancy-dress of a football shirt (apparently of a team well-sponsored by a large telecomms corporation) tapped Sandra on the shoulder between sets. "'Scuse me, Miss Wolfy. How long's it take to get inna that gear?"

"Well, there's just this tiny skirt and the top, so barely a minute, actually," Sandra answered, giving the standard response.

"Just one minute?" asked the faux-footballer. "Heh. Pretty amazing." His face formed an unsubtle grin. "So, tell me, how long's it take to get out of it?"

"Oh, what a clever chat-up line," Sandra smiled sweetly. "Perhaps my husband can answer that for you."

Slide, who had been standing right next to Sandra the whole time, grinned as broadly as he could force himself, in order to display his numerous, pointy teeth.

Ignatius, with the consent of the others, had invited Vince and Eric, as well as Dawn and her two new juniors, as all of them were already aware of the portal.

"So, do you use some kind of glue?" asked a young woman of Rachael.

"Oh, I'd *never* use glue," Rachael replied. "Takes ages to get outta your fur."

As it had been at the Snooty Fox during Midsummer Day, all of the Frith (and Steve) found that their tails were rather popular targets of attention, as they were constantly being pulled and fondled by the revellers. Most of them

responded with a gesture of admonishment, with those of Clare, Rachael and Jess in particular being somewhat more pointed in nature.

"Is there some sort of zipper?" asked a polite gentleman of Jess.

"Of course there is," Jess replied with a wink. "If a dress like this had buttons it would take ages to get off – and that would get in the way of having sex."

The male members of the Partnership spent most of the night drinking and talking, except when they were hauled off to the dance floor by one of the female members of the Partnership, who spent most of the night dancing. Perhaps the only exception to the latter was Michael, who was more than willing to dance as if no one were looking, as long as it was with Rachael, who was also more than willing to do the same.

"How do you make your tail wave around like that?" asked a young lady of Linda.

"Oh, I don't even think about it," Linda answered. "It just sorta has a mind of its own."

"I mean, does it have some sort of motor?"

"Motor?" asked Linda, blinking innocently. "Why on earth would a tail need a motor?"

"Did they have to pull all of your teeth to get you into that mask?" asked an impertinent anorak, dressed as a trainspotter.

"Certainly not," Ignatius replied. "These are my own teeth."

"Yeah, right," the anorak sneered.

"If you're sceptical, I'll be happy to demonstrate," Ignatius smiled. "However, it will cost you two pints and one finger."

"A finger? Of what? Vodka?"

"No, of your hand," Ignatius clarified politely. "You see, after I snap your finger off with my rather sharp teeth, I'll need a pint to wash the taste out of my mouth."

"Erm, pass," the anorak declined. "Just out of curiosity, what's the second pint for?"

"You, of course," Ignatius answered plainly.

"Aren't you hot in that suit?" asked a middle aged woman dressed as a lamb.

"Hey, babe, I'm hot *all* the time," Geoff said smugly.

"My, you're a big lad," remarked a lady who had taken advantage of her body shape to dress as a rugby ball.

"That's what they tell me," Pete answered, trying to be genial.

"So, is that all you under there?"

"Yep, just me," Pete admitted, "and the seven people I swallowed."

"Did being a dwarf affect your decision to join this acting troupe?" asked an impertinent customer.

"I'm not a dwarf," Gina protested. "I'm a Hare. I'd've thought that rather obvious."

"Yes, but when you're out of costume . . ."

"Then I'm a naked Hare," Gina interrupted.

It was the end of the last set for the band when the lead singer stepped up to the mike and announced the final song.

"Thank you, ladies and gents," she said. "You've been very lovely tonight. Some very nice fancy dress as well. Do go and get that special person in your life – or whoever might be to hand, if they're not here – as this *will* be our last song. We'll give you a minute for that . . ." She turned back to the band and had a brief discussion, while there was a bit of a mad dash as everyone found a dance partner.

After a minute, she turned back to the audience. "Everyone got their partner? You sir, in the policeman's uniform . . . No one? . . . No, this won't do at all. Excuse me – if there *is* an unaccompanied lady in the audience, we have a pig dressed as a policeman or a policeman dressed as a pig, can't tell which . . . Sorry? . . . Oh, excuse me, a boar, not a pig – anyway, he's sitting all alone in the corner with no one to dance with . . . Poor bloke . . . Won't someone help him out?"

Desiree ran to the corner to grab Geoff's hand once again and pulled him onto the dance floor.

"Ah, very lovely of you to help out, Miss. Right, every one ready?"

The audience shouted their willingness to begin.

She turned about, gave the band a count and the guitarist started the opening riff for the closing song.

"Are you for real?" asked a young man, even younger than Clare, sincerity hanging on every word.

Clare had been prepared for this question and she had a standard pat response at the ready. However, this one time, she simply could not bring herself to mislead or deflect his ingenuous query.

"No, I'm not," Clare answered. "I'm Allegorical."

The young man pondered this for a moment, putting his fingers to his lips as he looked her in the eyes.

"You're not human," he finally said quietly.

Clare shook her head. "No, I'm not. I'm a Lepun."

The young man looked around the room at the multitude of revellers. "No one else seems to notice."

Clare shrugged.

A whimsical ballad began in the auditorium.

"May I have this dance?" asked the young man.

Clare took his hand and led him to the floor for a slow waltz.

They never saw each other again for a very long time.

"Thanks for that, Desi," Geoff mentioned. "You know, the missus loved to dance, but I never could get the hang of it, personally. Wish I'd given it a proper go, now."

"You're not dead yet, Geoff," Desiree mentioned, as they began to walk back to the table.

Geoff smiled. "No, not quite. But there's precious few prospects, especially at my age."

"At your age?" asked Desiree. "How old are you?"

"Sixty-six," Geoff admitted.

"Well, how old does a Boar live?"

"Usually late seventies, eighties," Geoff said. "Take care of myself, I could make the century."

"Sounds like you got at least twenty years of happiness comin' to you. I'd get on the stick," Desiree suggested.

Geoff laughed. "If only it were so easy," he said. He sat down at the table next to his unfinished lager as the house lights went up.

"Geoff, you're older than me, so I don't have to tell you that life is short," Desiree said. "Make the most of it. Go after what you want."

"I'll give it due consideration," Geoff said as he finished his pint.

The Rialto gradually cleared as security slowly urged the patrons to leave the building. The Partnership, along with Eric, Dawn, Liam, Brandon and the security team, stayed behind, collecting at the bar to fraternise.

"I must say, that was the most fun I've had in a very long time," Slide admitted, as he and Sandra shared a chair and a pint.

"I have never danced so much in all my life," Sandra admitted. "Who'd have thought you could have this much entertainment without it being illegal or immoral."

"Or fattening," added Jess.

"Come now, Jess," Eric said, wrapping his arms around her waist. "You know I like things built for comfort instead of speed," he commented.

"Gerroff, you little cheese-bandit," Jess scolded, laughing despite herself. "I'll speed you, you . . ." She playfully cuffed him as the others laughed at the scene.

Geoff raised his glass. "I would, at this time, like to offer recognition for the effort that Steve, Michael, Angus and Desiree went to for all of us. I'm sure they went to a lot of trouble for the extra help and all so we could have the evening. Ta for that."

The rest of the Frith raised their glasses and gave the humans of the Partnership a verbal accolade for their troubles.

"I wash gwad I could be a part of it," Steve acknowledged.

"Don'tcha think it's about time ya got that costume off?" asked Pete.

"Will do, tonight. Winda'sh gonna help me," Steve replied.

"Weh-hey! Bet she's lookin' forward to that!" Pete exclaimed.

"Oo, yes!" Linda gushed as she gave Steve a squeeze while her tongue lolled with a depraved little smile thus providing further amusement for the crowd.

Just out of the corner of his eye, Steve noticed Roland giving him a curious look.

1900 – A small town in northern England

As autumn was now in full swing, the sun was setting earlier and rising at a more reasonable hour, thus Simon and Grace were getting about a little more. They had come across a suburban town, consisting of a few thousand detached houses surrounding the centre. It was, on the whole, unremarkable.

Having started their day's journey about an hour before sunset, they had had a chance to scope out the general lay of the land, in the hope of sniffing out a shop on the outskirts from which they might nick some food and other necessities. Keeping to the less-travelled alleys and footpaths, they traced their way closer and closer to the centre.

The sun was very close to setting when Simon noticed two things as they rounded the corner of a hedgerow on a seldom-used path. First, he observed a sign announcing the presence of a university. Just beneath this sign, he observed a person with no tail and a face that, in a much distorted sense, resembled a Wolf with a very unruly (and green) fex. It did take a few seconds, but he quickly concluded that it was just a human in a mask.

Giving Grace a thump on the shoulder, he pointed out this oddity. With merely an exchange of looks, the two decided to follow this Lupan impersonator.

After a short walk across a quadrangle, the object of their attention entered a building. Simon made a signal to Grace, and he began to walk briskly to the opening as she stayed behind. Hearing loud, thumping music issuing forth from the building, he quickly looked through the glass entrance, as casually as he could, and read "Halloween Fancy Dress Party - 8-12".

"Scuse me, love," said a voice behind him. Spinning about, he saw a young lady, wearing face paint and a pointy hat, carrying an old-fashioned broom. "Oh, blimey," she commented in disdain as she opened the door to go in. "Guess I can kiss best costume good-bye. You're a shoo-in with that lot!"

"Erm . . ." said Simon.

"Ya comin' in or no?" she asked, holding the door open.

"Erm . . ." said Simon.

The young lady sniffed. "May wanna check yer boots, love. I think ye stepped in some doo."

"Erm . . . Right," Simon agreed. "I've just been slobbered upon by a large, wet dog," he ventured. "Where's the nearest place I could clean up?"

"Yer dorm, o' course," the young lady said, pointing to a building across the quadrangle that had the words 'Faraday Dormitory' carved into an archway.

Ten minutes later, Grace and Simon had pulled a curtain closed in a shower stall in the men's dorm and were scrubbing each other furiously.

"What about our clothes?" Grace asked as quietly as she could. "They'll still stink."

Five minutes later, Simon and Grace were scrubbing their clothes.

"How're we gonna dry?" Grace asked.

"We'll just have to shake very hard," Simon ventured.

"And our clothes?"

"We'll just have to wear them wet until they dry," Simon suggested.

It took the better part of an hour, but they had cleaned their persons and their clothes, combed each other out and Simon had plaited Grace's hair.

"Now to get out," Simon suggested.

"Ugh," Grace complained, lifting her pack. "Wet clothes with wet fur - this'll take ages to dry out."

Simon, without complaint, lifted his pack and headed towards the door of the men's showers and toilets. Seeing no one as he peeked out, he signalled to Grace to proceed. They hurriedly went into the hall and, their clothes making wet, squelchy noises, walked quickly down the hall. Suddenly they noticed that someone was about to turn a corner. Observantly, Simon saw a door marked 'Stairs' and he wasted no time going through it, with Grace following quickly behind.

"Up or Down?" asked Simon.

"Down," Grace guessed.

They descended. At the bottom of the stairs, they entered a room with a labyrinth of insulated pipes and conduits. A few yards away, there was a closed door, clearly labelled 'Boiler Room'.

"Now, I'll freely admit, I've never seen a boiler room before," Grace allowed, "but I'd bet we've found a place where we can dry out fairly quickly."

Thirty minutes later, a very dry Grace and Simon issued out of the boiler room, wearing clean, dry clothes.

"I say," Grace began, "that we hide our packs and go to that fancy dress party."

"Y'think?" asked Simon.

"What's the worst they could they do? Throw us out? And they might have some food."

Thus it was that Grace and Simon went to the party, had more than just a bit of nosh, made a few friends (if only for the evening), and even danced a little.

Oddly enough, neither of them won best costume.

01NOV2001 Thursday

0200 – Rialto Bar

By two in the morning, Geoff was the last of the Frith remaining.

"Well, I'm off, ladies and gents," he said, rising. "Be sure to watch her carefully."

"Her?" asked Alan the Alsatian, pointing to Paula the Poodle. "She hardly needs watching."

"No," Geoff said with an air of solemnity. "Not your girl," he patted the counter of the bar. "The Rialto." He looked around again. "Mine. Watch my girl. See nothing happens to her." He waved and walked slowly out of the room.

Desiree noticed that every time he touched any piece of the building, whether it was a wall, a door, a window or a curtain, it was not merely a touch. It was a caress. She sighed. "Poor Geoff."

"Why so?" asked Alan the Alsatian.

"He had a wife who died years ago," Desiree mentioned. "He's buried himself in his work since then. And now he's in love with the Rialto."

"Well, be fair," Bruce the Borzoi said considerately. "It *is* a very beautiful building."

"Yes, but it's just a building," Desiree said. "It's not a person."

"True," Roland the Rottweiler admitted. "But what's the harm? People love their pets. Is that any different?"

"It's vastly different," Desiree said with a distant look.

"How?" asked Paula the Poodle

Desiree looked pointedly at her. "Many animals are very capable of love; more so than some people, in fact. But the Rialto *is* just a building. It can't love him back. One day, it will betray him without a thought and break his heart. And that would probably kill him." She sighed as her gaze deflected downward. "Sorry, didn't mean to jump all over you. Guess I'm just tired." She stood to leave. "Tomorrow."

"One last thing," Roland the Rottweiler said, "before you go?"

Desiree turned to face him.

"These people that were here tonight," Roland the Rottweiler continued.

"Are they the workers you didn't want us to see?"

"Yes, we made that clear before the evening began," Desiree admitted.

"Something tells me that there is more to them than just fancy dress, such as Mister Green was wearing," Roland the Rottweiler conjectured.

"They had more expensive costumes," Desiree explained.

"And they only mentioned taking off Steve's costume," Alan the Alsatian added. "No one else mentioned taking off their costume. Surely they don't wear them *all* the time?"

"They're experts at taking off their own. This is the first time Steve's worn one of them," Desiree said.

"And we couldn't help but notice," began Alan the Alsatian, "that when they departed for the evening, all but one of them left through the basement."

"They live in the actors' dorm, under the stage," Desiree explained. "Except for Jess, who lives upstairs."

"And that their tails could move," observed Bruce the Borzoi.

"As well as their ears," added Paula the Poodle.

Desiree looked at Angus and Michael, both of whom remained silent, waiting for her response.

"Make no mistake," Roland the Rottweiler said. "We don't want to have something to hold over your heads."

"No, that's not it at all," added Bruce the Borzoi. "But it would be in everyone's best interest if we did know the truth of the matter."

"The *whole* truth of the matter," clarified Paula the Poodle.

"So much for thinking no one would notice," Desiree shrugged.

1130 – *The tré Tea Room*

The Partnership was due to meet at lunchtime in the tea room of The tré for their daily briefing. As a result of the observations made earlier by the security team and the ensuing decisions made thereon, the four humans had agreed to arrive early to discuss a course of action.

"I think the elephant in the room is, who's going to tell them?" said Steve, getting straight to the point.

"I think it's also pretty obvious that none of us want that odious task," Michael Robinson added.

"But we've gotta tell 'em," Desiree said.

"Rock, paper, scissors?" proposed Angus.

Thirty seconds later, Angus was regretting his suggestion. "Me an ma great muckle mooth."

The four parents were the first to arrive.

"I don't know about the rest of you," Sandra StæppanWylf gushed, "but I had a *fantastic* time last night."

"I honestly can't remember when I've had so much fun," Slide HolenWulf concurred, "even if I did have to wear a pink nightdress."

"Yeah, ta for settin' that up for us, Steve," Pete said.

"It wasn't entirely my idea," Steve hedged.

"Still, it was a lovely night out," Gina said.

The MarchHare twins entered.

"I'll actually look forward to workin' each night, if I can get an hour or so on the floor," Rachael said.

"Aherm," said Angus.

Geoff, Linda, Jess and Ignatius were the last arrivals.

For the next few minutes the room was filled with enthusiastic chatter about the previous evening's events. The humans of the Partnership wordlessly poured cups of tea and set out some light fare for the meeting.

During a brief lull, Angus stood up and lightly cleared his throat, attracting their attention. "We've, erm . . . a bit o bad news, I'm afeart."

There was a bit of hubbub among the Frith, but they soon fell silent again.

"We, erm . . ." Angus paused as he scratched the inside of his elbow, at the numerous injection scars. "Weel, erm . . . We had a bit o confab wi security – after all o ye's was away hame."

Angus looked at the other humans for some support and, apart from encouraging smiles, found little else.

"Sa's, anyhoo . . . erm, suffice ta sez, they, erm . . . *noticed*," Angus grimaced.

"Noticed?" prompted Ignatius. "Noticed what?"

"They, erm, noticed that ye wasna in fancy-dress, as Steve was," Angus clarified. "An that ye's all was away doun the cellar ta ga hame."

"Eww, diya," Linda commented.

"An, after a wee bit more confab, they – security, that is, no us – they suggested we, erm . . . 'limit yer exposure'."

"Limit our exposure?" asked Jess. "What the sif is *that* supposed to mean?"

"Just what he said," Desiree jumped in, to the relief of Angus. "We'll put it to a vote, of course, but Roland and the others said they couldn't guarantee our personal safety if you continued to expose yourself as you did last night."

"I didn't expose myself," Geoff objected. "Had my kit on the whole time!"

"He just means that you were seen," Michael clarified. "And I think, even more importantly than the safekeeping of our security, was the safekeeping of our *privacy*."

"In other words," Steve continued the thread, "it was his opinion that if we continue to allow you to be seen on a daily basis, we'll draw more attention than we need or want."

"But this would be good," Sandra countered. "We'll make the papers and the radio. People will want to see us."

"Yes, but . . ." Desiree tried to interrupt.

"And if Grace and Simon are lost, as they may well be, they'll be trying to find their way home," Slide pointed out. "Our fame will provide a beacon."

"That's true, but . . ." Desiree tried again.

"Our Grace has always been a bit of glory hound," Gina mentioned. "Once she sees a sliver of fame, she'll immediately want to be in on it."

Angus looked at the other humans. "Must admit, it dis shed new light on the matter."

"But what happens if someone finds out?" asked Desiree.

"So what?" shrugged Jess. "Are we violating any laws? Could they shut us down?"

"I'm not concerned with that," Desiree dismissed and then immediately backtracked, "well, I am, obviously, but what I'm *more* concerned about is if someone finds their way through the portal. Then what? What if Tad finds out? What if CE catches wind of our little cabinet?"

"I *know* you're not suggesting that I would grass the lot of us up," Jess bristled.

"Jess, if I want to accuse someone, they *know* they're being accused," Desiree said pointedly.

"Before we get too deeply into recriminations," Ignatius said, thwarting the impending invective from Jess, "I think Desiree is right. We must keep *both* sides of the portal open. Having our side shut down, apart from putting me into a horrific legal bind, would shut off our connection with the Rialto altogether, thus defeating our ultimate purpose of retrieving Grace and Simon."

"All right, fair play," Jess conceded. "But frankly, I don't see this as a problem. At least not a problem that will be made worse by us working in the light of day in Newburg."

"Why do you think that?" challenged Desiree.

"There's only one path connecting Otterstow and Newburg," Jess pointed out. "We keep a lid on that and we're clear."

"Oh, sure, walk in the park," Desiree dismissed sarcastically. "What if the police in Newburg decide to search our basement? We're powerless to stop them, no matter how much security we have."

"Why would the police search us?" asked Jess.

"Well, there is the matter of a dozen people working for us with no papers," Steve mentioned.

"Not to mention me," Desiree added.

"And our mysterious beer suppliers," Michael added. "Not entirely above board."

"But if we removed these things, then it would be safe to be out in the open, wouldn't it?" asked Sandra.

They bickered and argued and harangued for another hour or so and, after putting it through several votes, came to a decision; have another talk with security.

After moving to the Rialto and having a two-hour discussion with Roland the Rottweiler and his employees, they finally came to another conclusion.

"Right," Linda said as she frenetically tapped the notes into her laptop. "We Frith are to remain completely out of sight until we've completely accomplished the following four actions:

"A – Michael gets the paperwork done to make us legal, tax-paying British citizens;

"B – We secure the cabinet in the Rialto with a keyless lock;

"C – We put keyless locks on all avenues into the basement;

"D – We stop buying beer from The Kingdom.

"Agreed?" Linda asked for confirmation, looking up from her keyboard.

"Agreed," echoed the Partnership and Security.

"Good, because we're late getting started for today," Steve said. "Let's get a move on."

They all began to depart for their appointed tasks. On his way out, Michael felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning around, he found himself alone with Rachael, as she grabbed him by the collar and pulled his face close to hers.

"Something I can do for you, my dear?" Michael asked quietly.

"I rather liked servin' at the bar," Rachael answered quietly.

"So I'd gathered."

"Bein' among the punters."

"Duly noted."

"You get that paperwork done an' I'll be in a very good mood," Rachael nodded.

"I take it that would put me in a good mood as well?" ventured Michael.

"Probably," Rachael said. "But until then, I'm one mad MarchHare."

"I take it you mean 'mad' as in 'angry', as opposed to, no you mean 'angry' then, don't you. Just as a point, the office closes in about thirty minutes, so if you were to release me now, I might be able to get there just before it please don't bite me!"

Michael closed his eyes in anticipation of the forthcoming nibble. He could feel her breath on his ear.

"Sure ya don't wan' me to?" whispered Rachael, her mouth millimetres from his ear.

"Erm . . . okay." He winced, as one might when expecting an injection.

He could feel her incisors grip his lobe. Slowly the pressure increased and he gritted his teeth in preparation. Just before he began to cry out in pain, the pressure eased and she slowly withdrew.

"There. Weren't so bad, wuzzit?" she asked.

"Erm . . . no, it was justooof!" Michael doubled over and then sat down, clutching his stomach as Rachael calmly walked away.

2200 – Rialto Security Room

"So, she bit you a second time?" asked Clare, somewhat surprised.

"Yeah, but not as hard as the last time," Michael answered. "And she didn't draw blood."

"Then what?"

"She asked if it was all that bad, and as I was telling her 'no, it wasn't,' she sucker-punched me, mid-sentence, right in the breadbasket."

Clare's eyes grew large with astonishment. "Did she?"

"Yes, it's exactly what happened. Clare, you've got to help me out here! What's going on? How do I deal with this?"

"Most unlike Rache, be honest," Clare said. "Not quite sure what to make of it."

"Is she usually this violent?" asked Michael.

"Oh, yeah," Clare said, returning her attention to the cameras. "But only with blokes she likes."

"So she *likes* me?" asked Michael, askance.

"She hasn't said anything to me, but that certainly seems to be the case," Clare admitted. "Shave me, with an orang-utan, no less."

"I'm not an orang-utan," Michael protested.

"Figure of speech," Clare dismissed. "Don't make too much of it."

"Why does she do this?" asked Michael.

"I told you," Clare said. "Because she likes you."

"Couldn't she just say, I dunno, 'I like you' and have done? Maybe the occasional peck on the cheek or something?"

"Don't be stupid, Michael; this is Rachael we're talking about," Clare retorted.

"Do all Doe Hares do this to Bucks that they like?"

"Only the ones that want to and can get away with it, apparently," Clare said. "I'm not into the pain scene, actually. Bit more on the cerebral side, myself."

"Well – what do I do?" asked Michael.

"Whatever you please," Clare shrugged.

"No, I mean about Rachael! Am I . . . supposed to bite her back or scream in pain or tell her to stop? What?"

"As I said, whatever you please," Clare repeated. "I strongly recommend that you not bite her back, however. That could be fatal."

"But if I tell her to stop, will she hate me? Will she stop talking to me?"

"No idea," Clare said.

"You're not being very helpful," Michael pointed out.

"Then why are you wasting my time?" Clare asked.

Five minutes later, Michael was talking to Gina and Pete.

"First off, I want to make clear that I'm not trying to get Rachael into any trouble," Michael clarified.

"Ew, buey, wudshedonow?" asked Pete.

"Well, some time ago, she was serving me a beer and she bit my ear," Michael said.

Gina and Pete exchanged surprised glances.

"Did she now?" Gina asked, rather surprised.

"Yes. And today, after the meeting, she gave me another bite and sucker punched me," Michael said. "And she hit me very hard."

"Was the bite hard?" asked Pete.

"The first one drew blood," Michael complained.

"And the second?" asked Gina.

"No blood, but it was on the verge of hurting," Michael said.

"Didja complain at all?" asked Pete. "About the second bite?"

"Erm . . . She asked if it hurt and I said no. That was when she hit me."

Gina and Pete exchanged glances and rolled their eyes.

"Would *someone* please explain to me what's going on?" Michael demanded.

"Dunno, honestly," Pete told Gina. "I'm kinda curious to see if 'e can sort it out on 'is own."

"Must admit, it'd be good sport," Gina agreed. She looked at Michael. "Tell me, lad, what do *you* make of all this?"

"Everyone keeps telling me she fancies me and that I'm a jammy bastard," Michael said. "But I can't suss it at all. I mean, if she does fancy me, couldn't she just say so? And if she does, why does there have to be pain involved? It doesn't sound like the foundation for a healthy relationship to me."

"Oh, dear me," Gina shook her head, sucking air in through her sizable incisors. "Poor lad's in for a wild ride."

"'Ere's the deal – an' this is all I'm gonna tell ya," Pete warned. "If ya can't take the heat, get outta the kitchen. If ya truly want our Rache, ya gotta sort it out on your own. If it's too much aggro, just tell me an' I'll see to it she never bovvers ya again."

"She won't hate me, will she?" Michael asked. "I mean, I may not want to have a relationship, but I . . ."

"No, no, no, nuffin' like 'at," Pete dismissed his concerns. "She'll still be good pals wif ya, course she will."

"Although, truth be told," Gina continued, "she might be a wee bit disappointed that you rejected her . . ."

"Careful, Gina, don't wanna give him TMI," Pete warned tapping his nose.

"Oh, it's nothing to worry about," Gina scolded Pete. Turning back to Michael, she continued. "As I said, she'll be a little put out, but that's just life and she's not one to hold a grudge. She'll always be your friend, Michael."

"Oh, by the by," Pete recalled, "there is just *one* rule in this li'l game o' love 'at Rachael likes to play."

"And that would be?" asked Michael.

"No matter what," Gina said sternly, wagging her finger at him, "you can *never* hit back."

Michael looked slightly affronted. "No, of course not. I'd never."

03NOV2001 Saturday

1000 – Rialto Office

Ignatius had mastered the nuances of the mouse and keyboard and Michael was showing him the basics of the World Wide Web.

"Right, if a word is underlined, that means it's a link," Michael explained. "And if you click on it – give it a go – it takes you to another page."

"Quite clever, this arrangement," Ignatius marvelled. "A good bit easier to use than our terminals."

"Now, if you just put the curser over the link, but don't click, down here in the corner," Michael pointed to the nether regions of the monitor, "that shows what comes up if you click on it. Sometimes it's a new page, but it might be a document. Now, this particular one is a form, called a PDF."

"And what does that stand for?"

"It's an acronym for Portable Document Format," Michael explained.

"An abbreviation or an initialism, surely," Ignatius corrected. "I think it would require at least a couple of vowels to qualify as an acronym."

"Be that as it may," Michael continued patiently, "if you'll click on it, it produces this form which you can fill out."

"On the computer?"

"Yes, and then you can print it by clicking here."

"Pity, actually," Ignatius said. "Rather proud of my penmanship."

"You can still print a blank form and fill it out by hand," Michael said.

"I'm not *that* proud of it."

"So if you follow this link, here . . . That's where I work. This page is the starting point for all of the things my department does."

"And I take it this is why you've dragged me here on a Saturday morning? You need some assistance in accomplishing your assigned task of getting us working papers?"

"In a nutshell, yes. It also might keep Rachael from beating the crap out of me."

"Is she mistreating you?" asked Ignatius, concerned.

"Let's solve this problem and that one will solve itself," Michael suggested. "Unless you know why she mauls her boyfriends?"

"Sorry, haven't a clue," Ignatius confessed. "Red tape I can handle quite easily, but romantic relationships have always been a great mystery to me."

"Okay, let's focus on this then. What we need to do is the paperwork so that all of you can work here legally."

"So what seems to be the problem?" asked Ignatius.

"Well, I've looked at a few approaches," Michael confessed, "but none of them make any sense."

"My dear boy," Ignatius said, looking at Michael over his reading spectacles, "how long have you worked for the DPW?"

"Under its various names, about two years now," Michael said proudly.

Ignatius closed his eyes, shook his head and tsked. "And you *still* haven't learned the universal law of civil service?"

"Apparently not," Michael admitted, "but I have a feeling I'm about to."

"Take a piece of paper and pencil and write what I am about to say, one hundred times."

Michael smiled and did nothing of what Ignatius suggested.

"I'm serious, Michael. Pencil, paper, one hundred times."

"Oh, sorry, just thought you were joking," Michael said, scrambling for the materials. He was soon poised with a notepad and a pencil. "Ready, then."

"It doesn't have to make sense. One merely has to follow procedure."

Michael furiously wrote as fast as he could. ". . . follow . . . procedure . . ."

"Didn't you learn shorthand at school?"

"No," Michael said. "Hasn't been offered in ages. We learn keyboarding these days."

"Ninety-nine to go," Ignatius reminded him. "And while you're doing that, I'll start exploring some avenues. Shouldn't be too difficult. All seems to be here in black and white. But stay close. I might have a question or two."

1820 – The Vicarage of a Church in the Far North of England

Father Gabriel Martin unscrewed the top off of the small plastic bottle of pills.

So this is what it's come to, he thought to himself. I gave up all my earthly vices for You. I went through withdrawal for You. I suffered through four years of that mind-numbing seminary for You. And the only thing I asked in return was to help those who are like I was.

From the first day that I knew of Your love for me, a thieving, self-centred, junkie, all I wanted to do was spread Your love to others who needed it as badly as I did. I wanted to help others as You helped me.

I didn't mind the diabetes, and I didn't mind losing my sight – well, fair play, I did – but I accepted it as Your will and never so much as thought a word against You for visiting them upon me.

Even as I am, I would gladly serve in the darkest slum or the hottest desert to bring some tiny ray of hope to those in need, to provide a little guidance . . . just to help.

And here I sit, amongst one of the most beautifully pastoral churches in the entire country; and yet, ironically, I am no longer able to even take the simple pleasure of a sunset from this most splendid vista.

Everything I do here is a waste. There must be a thousand priests that would appreciate this parish far more than I; I feel like a dog in the manger. My congregation has to constantly spend their time and money on me, bringing me medication, bringing me food, doing every simple task. They could be doing so much more for the world; there are so many homeless to shelter, so many

hungry to feed, so many children to educate. I can't bear the thought of all their resources being wasted on some useless wretch like me.

Yet, I am sent to provide salvation for those that need it least; pious farmers with their righteous wives and innocent children, where the only soul that needs saving is my own.

I'm sorry if I do not measure up to Job, but I cannot be a burden to these good people any longer when their efforts can be spent on those more worthwhile. I wanted to lift burdens, not be one.

He lifted the glass of water while he held the bottle of pills in the other.

"Dear God, forgive me, a humble sinner," he added out loud. With that, he slowly raised the bottle of pills to his mouth. He was just about to tip them back, when he heard a scream from the chapel.

He sighed and put the bottle and the glass back onto his nightstand. He rolled his unseeing eyes upward and mumbled, "You don't half slice things thin, do You."

As he reached for his white cane, he muttered, "I'll wager it's that bloody crucifix again."

1810 – Near a Church Somewhere in the Far North of England

Being twilight, Grace and Simon awoke and began their trek for the night as they had done for the past three months. Shortly after waking and stretching their limbs, they unceremoniously began to walk. They had no food nor water at hand on this particular day, an event that was becoming more and more common in the recent past, so there was no breakfast or so much as a cup of tea or even a sip of water. Needless to say, there was nothing in the way of toiletries and they were beginning to appreciate the reasoning behind shaking hands with one's right.

They had been walking for less than an hour when their stomachs had begun to rumble once again.

"Simon, I'm starving." Grace grumbled, her voice beginning to show the slightly panicky tone that was becoming more and more common in the past few days.

"Have a little patience, Grace. We'll find something soon. And I think we're getting closer to home. Not sure, but I seem to remember some parts of this towpath."

"You've said that a dozen times. We've been lost for months now and we're no closer to home."

"I'm sorry Grace," he said. "I'm doing my best."

Grace groaned. "Oooh, I'm sorry Simon. I know it's not your fault. I'm the one that led us into the cabinet."

"No, Grace, we both went in. Let's just focus on getting back. We just have to find out where there's a town called Newton with a run-down theatre called the Waldo."

"Oh, that'll be easy," Grace said sarcastically. "We can't exactly ask anyone, can we. And there's probably dozens of 'em here."

"I'm trying to be hopeful, Grace. You have to try as well."

The falling leaves of autumn were a harbinger to Simon that they were rapidly running out of time. If winter came, he knew that they'd be very hard up to find food from natural sources or allotments. Shelter would also become important as sleeping out in the open, which they had done in the past, would be more than just uncomfortable, even with their abundant fur and a tent. As he folded his arms tight to keep warm against the brisk autumn breeze, he appreciated that warm clothing might develop new significance as well.

Simon saw something on the horizon and he stopped in his tracks. Grace stopped and looked in the same direction.

"There's a building, up on that hilltop. See it?" Simon pointed. "It's difficult to spot because it's surrounded by trees."

"What, the one with the skinny letter 't' on the top?"

"Yeah, that's it. Looks a bit isolated. Maybe it's deserted."

"Shall we have a look?" asked Grace.

They crossed an open field and walked up the hillside to the crest. There, surrounded by trees, was a largish building, rather simple in design. Nearby was a smaller building, also rather simple.

"You can see for miles up here," Simon observed. "Well, maybe not miles, but a good ways."

"We're not here for the view. Let's see what's inside."

"You think anyone's here?" Simon asked.

"Dunno," Grace answered. "It does look a bit neglected. This garden's a mess, there's rubbish about the place. I don't see any lights on in the buildings."

"True. But none of the glass is broken and the doors look like they're still okay. I suspect someone comes here, but just occasionally."

"Yeah, does have that feel to it, dunnit?" Grace agreed. "Well, let's hope they're not here now and that they've got some nosh stashed away inside."

As they approached the larger building, Simon observed, "It's quite big. You think there's some sort of guard or something?"

"Dunno," replied Grace. "Looks safe enough. Look, at the headstones all round it."

"Maybe it's where the undertaker works," Simon reasoned.

"Doesn't look like a business."

"Doesn't quite look like a home, either," Simon observed.

"Let's have a peek inside the big building first," suggested Grace.

"All right, then," Simon agreed.

"There's the front door there," Grace pointed out. "Let's try that."

Simon nodded his agreement and the two walked quietly until they got to the entrance, whereupon they both put an ear to the door. Hearing nothing, Grace pulled gently on the handle, causing the door to slowly open with just a mild groan from the hinges. As soon as it was open wide enough, she slipped in, followed closely by Simon.

"I'm quite . . ." Simon began, but quickly stopped. He suddenly appreciated how well his voice carried inside the building. Lowering it to a barely audible whisper, he started again. "I'm quite surprised it's all one room. I thought it'd be lots of little rooms."

"It's got loads of benches. Must be some sort of meeting hall or town theatre," Grace mentioned. "I wonder if they do Portrayals like we do. Look, there's the stage, up . . ." Her voice stopped cold. Simon followed her gaze.

Grace screamed. It was magnified by the echo of the large room and was surprisingly startling. Simon desperately tried to put his hand over her mouth to get her to stop but she kept going, pointing to the hideous sculpture she saw above the stage. It was of a human, a ring of thorns piercing his head at a hundred points, with his hands and feet outstretched, nailed to a cross of wood and in obvious agony.

"Simon, look! They must be horrible barbarians! This is where they torture people!"

"No, it can't be," Simon responded. "Don't be absurd," he added, although he didn't seem too sure of himself.

"I want to go now! Let's get out of here before one of them comes!"

"Shouldn't be surprised if the next village shows up, the way you carry on sometimes," Simon said as he guided her out of the door.

He ushered her out of the building and they went to hide behind a large headstone.

Grace held tightly to Simon as she cried.

"These people must be the victims they tortured," she said, indicating the various headstones.

"I think you might be jumping to conclusions, Grace," Simon said. He seemed a little surer of himself. "I mean, read the stones. They say things like 'beloved mother' and 'father and husband.' If they were torture victims, don't you think they would say something a little more . . ." He paused as he was at a loss for words.

"Cruel?"

Simon and Grace instantly noticed that the voice that made the suggestion did not belong to either of them, but to the short, roundish, human male standing in front of them. He was an older man, with grey hair and a beard, dressed in very simple black clothes, wearing blacked glasses and carrying a contrasting white cane.

The two gasped as they held each other tightly.

"Is there something wrong?" asked the man.

There was no response from the pair. Then Simon noticed that he wasn't looking at either of them but somewhat to the side.

"Can I help you?" the man asked.

There was still no response. The man took his cane, which was quite slender, and gently prodded the ground just before them, slowly making his way towards them. Grace was petrified with terror, but Simon had enough of his wits about him to observe that the man was not looking at what he was doing and that the cane was far too flimsy to be for any type of support.

"Are you . . . blind?" asked Simon.

"As a bat," answered the man, stopping his search. "The white cane is usually a dead giveaway. It is still white, isn't it?"

"Yes," answered Simon.

"I can't tell, y'see," answered the man. "I'm blind." He grinned wide. "I'm Father Gabriel. And you are?"

"I'm Simon and this is Grace," Simon answered.

Grace instantly cuffed him.

"It's okay, Grace," Simon reassured her. "I'm sure we can trust him."

"Well, if you can't trust a priest, who can you trust?" asked Father Gabriel. "Are you two all right? You're not injured are you? I heard a most horrible howl just now."

"No, we're fine. Honestly." Simon answered.

"You won't . . . hurt us?" asked Grace, very tentatively.

"Hurt you? My word, child, heaven forbid! As a priest, I am opposed to all forms of violence. I don't even like to harm animals. I'm a vegetarian."

"So you don't eat meat of any sort?" asked Grace, a tiny note of disappointment in her voice.

"That is the general meaning of 'vegetarian' last I heard. I eat only fruits and vegetables. But I'm not like those vegans. I do like a bit of dairy product and some eggs."

There was another pause as Simon and Grace looked at each other.

"You *are* okay, aren't you?" asked Father Gabriel.

Grace nodded.

"I can't hear a nod," Father Gabriel mentioned.

"I'm fine, honestly. Just had a bit of a shock, is all," said Grace.

"Was that you yowling in my church?" asked the priest.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to!" Grace apologized.

"No, that's okay. I'm just concerned is all," Father Gabriel consoled. "What gave you such a fright?"

"That statue," Grace answered, "above the stage."

"Statue above the stage?" the priest repeated. He then shook his head, "Oh, you must mean the crucifix above the altar. You know, I lost my sight about four years ago – Listen, let's go to the vicarage and we'll have some tea. Come along. It's not far." He turned to go and Grace and Simon followed him as he continued his story.

"That cross was delivered about a year before I lost my sight. I remember mentioning to a friend 'I wish I never have to look upon that monstrosity again.' One year later, I was blind. There's a lesson for you; be careful what you wish for, for you shall surely receive it!" Father Gabriel laughed. "Anyway, I never did like that crucifix. A little too lifelike if you ask me. While I can appreciate the suffering of Jesus, a crucifix is supposed to be a symbol of our faith, not a reminder of His agony. Well, that's my opinion, anyway."

"Jesus?" asked Simon.

"Yes, that's Jesus on the cross. Have you never heard of him?"

Simon and Grace looked at each other and shrugged.

"No, never," Grace said.

"Well, then, we'll have lots to talk about, won't we," said Father Gabriel with a smile.

"What happened to him?" asked Grace.

"He was given forty lashes, a crown of thorns and nailed to a cross because he dared to suggest that we should all love one another," Father Gabriel said. "That's the short version, anyway."

"Did he die?" asked Simon.

"Yes, a most agonizing death. But he came back to life three days later," Father Gabriel said.

"Did you say he came back to life?" asked Simon.

"That's right. After a few days."

"I don't mean to sound disrespectful and I'm sure you're telling us the truth," Grace said, "but it *does* sound a little hard to believe." Simon nudged her for being rude.

"You're absolutely right. It is hard to believe. But it's what life's all about, isn't it. Faith. Beliefs. If you can't put your faith in something, if you've nothing to believe in, things get rather pointless in a hurry, don't they.

"I must admit if I'd never heard it before, my first reaction would be that it's a load of pants as well. But there's a lot more to the story. Would you like to hear? I've got loads of time. Say, are you two hungry? Like something to eat?"

"Oh, yes, please!" Grace blurted out.

"Thought I could hear your stomachs rumbling," Father Gabriel smiled as he stopped at the door of the smaller building. "This is the vicarage where I live. Go on, get inside."

Simon opened the door and led Grace in as Father Gabriel followed. He flipped a light switch just inside the door. "Did the light come on?"

"Erm, in a word, no," Simon answered.

"Oh, sorry. Bulb must be burnt out. I never use the lights, so I'd never notice, actually," Father Gabriel excused himself. "Look in that drawer next to the sink. Should be some in there. And that cupboard next to the window has a few things to eat. Why don't you poke around and see what's there?"

Grace tended to the bulb whilst Simon rummaged through the cupboard.

"And you'll pardon me for saying so, but I'd bet you're pretty keen on a bath about now," mentioned Father Gabriel.

"Sorry," Simon apologized. "Didn't mean to offend."

"No offence taken, my son," said the priest. "Besides, it's hard to keep fresh as a daisy when you're a runaway."

"What makes you think we've run away?" asked Grace defensively.

"Sorry to presume," Father Gabriel excused himself. "So you're on a camping holiday, then?"

"That's right," Grace jumped in before Simon could say anything. "Just got a bit disoriented is all."

Father Gabriel continued without missing a beat. "So . . . Simon, was it? How old are you two?"

"Fourteen," Simon answered. Grace cuffed him again and scowled.

"Grace, I assure you, I have nothing but your best interests at heart," Father Gabriel said. "But it is important that you tell me the truth."

Simon pulled down a tin. "What's enchilada sauce?" he read, not quite believing his eyes.

Simon was sure he could see the priest roll his eyes behind the dark glasses. "The rubbish some people unload on me. Toss it in the bin and find something else."

Simon did as he was told and began to rummage some more. By this time, Grace had found the box of bulbs and was standing on a chair and removing the old light bulb.

She inserted the new one, illuminating the room.

"Ah that's better," Simon answered. "Can see loads better, now." He pulled a box out of the cupboard and began examining the list of contents.

"Don't know what that is," Grace said, "but the piccie on the box looks dead yummy."

"Right. We'll cook that up, then," said Father Gabriel. "But first you two need to get cleaned up. Grace, there's a bath down the hall to the right. Just before, there's an airing cupboard with some of my spare robes. So hop into the bath and I'll go in and collect your things to throw in the wash. When you're done, Simon, you'll do the same and we'll get dinner started."

"You're gonna come into the bathroom while I got my kit off? I don't think so!" Grace objected.

"Grace, he's blind," Simon reminded her.

"Oh, right," Grace mumbled. "Sorry, forgot."

2001 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

Simon and Grace were wearing monastic robes as their clothes went through the spin cycle. They had eaten and, as Simon had finished the washing up, were sitting down to some tea.

"I suspect those robes are a bit big," Father Gabriel apologised.

"Mine fits quite nicely, actually," Simon said. "Grace looks a bit overwhelmed, though."

"Nothing a few clothes pegs can't fix," Grace said. "Quite comfortable, actually."

"So how old did you say you are? Fifteen, was it?" asked Father Gabriel.

"Fourteen," Simon answered without thinking. Grace gave him a silent admonishment.

"Fourteen," reminisced the old man. "I remember when I was fourteen . . ."

Grace made a little gesture of opening and closing her hand, representing a puppet chattering away as she looked bored stiff.

"I was on the streets, selling heroin to keep up a daily habit," the priest recalled, as Grace looked up in disbelief. "Then my supplier got caught and I had no source. I had to go through withdrawal. Bloody hell, what an awful experience that was. And I had to find another way to make a living."

"Is that when you became a priest?" asked Simon.

"No, that's when I became a thief," answered Father Gabriel as Grace's expression changed from scepticism to astonishment. "Stole all sorts of things. Hurt quite a few people in the process. But enough about me. What about you two? Do you go camping often?"

"We aren't actually on a camping holiday," Simon confessed.

Grace scowled at Simon as silently as she possibly could.

"We are, in fact, runaways," Simon continued. "We want to return home, but we seem to have lost our way."

Grace rolled her eyes in defeat and flopped her head onto her arms on the table.

"You've come to the right place, then," Father Gabriel said. "It's sort of ironic, but I'm quite good at helping people who've lost their way."

"How's that?" asked Simon. "Is that what priests are trained for?"

"To a degree," Father Gabriel answered. "But I feel I'm particularly good at it because I was lost for the larger part of my life and I gained an awful lot of experience by finding my own way. Now, where are you from?"

"Newtburg?" Simon said uncertainly.

"No, I think it was Newbury," Grace added. "No, that's not quite right either."

"You can't remember the name of the town you live in?" asked Father Gabriel, incredulously.

"It's rather difficult to explain," Simon said.

"I've got time," Father Gabriel replied, leaning back, "if you have."

"I think you'd have a rather hard time believing it," Grace said.

"Look, if I can believe that a man was resurrected three days after his death, I think I can handle whatever you have to tell me," Father Gabriel stated, "if it's the truth."

Simon and Grace looked at each other.

"You swear you'll listen to the whole thing?" asked Grace.

"Every word," promised the priest.

"And you won't call us crazy or try to get us locked up or nothing?" asked Grace.

"As long as you don't become violent," Father Gabriel qualified. He then leaned forward slowly and put on a very serious face. "And much more importantly, what you tell me *must* be the truth."

Grace and Simon looked at each other again and, with a brief exchange of nods, had made and agreed upon their decision.

"Well, to start with, I'm a Wolf and Grace is a Hare," Simon began.

"Right, so Simon Wolf and Grace Hare. Not entirely uncommon names," Father Gabriel observed. "A rather bucolic coincidence, but no matter."

"No, our family names are StæppanWulf and ParsleyHare," Grace clarified. "I am a Hare and Simon is a Wolf."

"Sorry . . . Not that I don't believe you," said Father Gabriel, "but I'm just not clear as to what you mean."

"I'm covered head to foot with white fur," Grace described, "have a great, big cottontail and ears a foot long. Simon here is also covered in fur, has cute, pointy ears and a tail nearly three feet long."

There was a silence as Father Gabriel leaned forward and took a sip of his tea. "So, what colour is Simon's fur?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Grey, mostly, with a whitish front," Simon answered earnestly.

"I hope it didn't bung up the bath drain. It clogs rather easily, I'm afraid," Father Gabriel said casually.

Grace and Simon looked at each other, with Grace seeming a little perturbed by the priest's tone. "You're just taking the piss. You don't believe a word we've just said," she challenged.

Father Gabriel smiled. "So you're capable of seeing so deeply into my heart that you know what I believe and what I don't? That's something I *do* find hard to believe."

"It doesn't matter," Grace replied. "You're just humouring us."

"Am I?" asked Father Gabriel. "You seem so sure."

"Course you are," Grace stated. "You don't believe for one second that either of us are covered with fur and have tails."

"So when I say 'I believe you,' you think I'm lying and that I don't trust you?"

Grace looked a little uncomfortable with this rather pointed accusation, but she clung to her contention. "Well, yeah. I think you're just saying it; you don't actually mean it."

"Why would I do such a thing?" asked Father Gabriel earnestly.

"I dunno," Grace admitted. "Maybe you just want us to stay here long enough to call the police or summat."

"Why should I call the police? Have you done something wrong?" enquired the priest.

"Well, we *have* nicked some food to eat occasionally," Simon mentioned.

"Jack's bollocks, Si," Grace said in a low scold. "Can't you keep a lid on it from time to time?"

"Sorry," Simon said, flinching from Graces invective.

Father Gabriel was nearly laughing. "You stole food to keep from starving; what kind of crime is that?" He set his cup on the table and then directed his sightless gaze in Grace's general direction. "Listen, my little ray of sunshine – faith is a two-way street. I could just as easily have closed my doors to you and left you out in the cold to starve and fend for yourselves. At some risk, I invited you in, gave you a meal and a bath, offered a roof over your heads and even cleaned your clothes. I did it because I have faith that you won't beat me over the head with a truncheon and steal what little of value I have.

"So, here's the deal. If you tell me the *truth* about yourselves, then I promise to believe every word you say, without judgement or reservation. Further, I will help you find your way home and I will allow you to stay with me as long as you need, if you adhere to a few rules – oh, and do a few bits and bobs around the place.

"The key is faith. But it has to work both ways; I respect yours and you respect mine."

"So, if you're gonna respect our faith, that means we don't have to become religious or nothing, do we?" asked Grace.

"Everyone that walks into my church does so of their own free will," Father Gabriel answered.

As Grace was considering Father Gabriel's offer, Simon pushed her consideration in the right direction with a sharp nudge of his elbow. "All right," she replied. "I'll go along with that."

"Why don't you feel my face," Simon suggested. "It'll prove what we just said. Here," he said pulling his tail in front of him. "Here's my tail."

"No," Father Gabriel said, waving his hand in rejection. "You asked for my faith. You have it. You require no proof of your story. Whatever you tell me, I'll believe you, as long as it's the truth. Now, let's continue. Tell me the rest about where you're from."

"We live in a town called Otterstow," Simon continued. "But it's not here. It's . . . well, somewhere else."

04NOV2001 Sunday

0830 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

The next morning, Simon and Grace were sitting down to breakfast with Father Gabriel.

"Oo, look, Si," Grace gushed. "Proper brekky fry-up and all. Greasy eggs fried with greasy sausages with greasy toast. Even the tomato looks greasy."

"Don't you have any cereal?" asked Simon. "I thought you were a vegetarian."

"I am," Father Gabriel replied. "Those are vegetarian sausages."

Grace was crestfallen. "They are?"

"Sorry, Grace," the priest apologised. "Still, give 'em a go. They're actually quite 'greasy', only it's vegetable oil instead of animal fat."

After they began to tuck in, Grace gave her approval of the bill of fare and even asked for seconds.

"Don't know where she puts it all," Simon mentioned. "She'll probably turn into a right elephant when she gets older. She's no self-control whatsoever."

"That's all right," Father Gabriel said. "Let her revel in her time. And speaking of lack of self-control, I noticed that when she snuck into your room last night, you didn't exactly throw her out."

"Sorry, 'bout that," Grace said, helping herself to some more bangers. "We didn't actually do anything besides sleep. It's just that Simon makes a rather comfortable surface for me to sleep on."

"Yes, I'm sort of a living, breathing camp bed for Grace," explained Simon. "She sleeps quite soundly when she's on top of me."

"But it's all I do. Sleep, that is," Grace quickly pointed out.

"Of that, I have no doubt. Believe me, if you two started something, I'd be the first to know and I'd put a stop to it instantly. Call me old fashioned, but sex is for after marriage. After that, I encourage it with all my heart."

"Could we get married?" asked Simon.

"Legally, no," answered Father Gabriel.

"What about illegally," asked Grace.

"I wouldn't do it. You two are too young. Wait at least a few years. If you're still together, then you can get married. Besides, what's the rush if you're both truly committed to each other?"

"Actually, even if we were of age, we'd never be allowed to marry back in Otterstow," Simon mentioned.

"Oh? Why not?"

"Because we're different peltages. It's not allowed," Grace said.

"Different what?" asked the priest.

"Different peltages," Simon said. "I'm a Wolf and she's a Hare."

"Ah, I see," answered Father Gabriel. "Actually, I don't. Why can't a Wolf marry a Hare if they both love each other?"

"Shave me if I know," Simon said. "Lots of people seem to think it's disgusting when two people of different peltages get involved with each other. We call it a 'mixie.'"

"So what do *you* think of it?" asked the priest.

"What, me?" asked Simon.

"You see someone else in the room?" asked Father Gabriel. "I don't."

"Well," Simon gave the matter a moment's thought, "I do love Grace. And I think she's the most gorgeous girl in the world. Even if she does cause me a lot of aggro."

"Hey!" protested Grace.

"But no matter how much trouble she causes me," Simon qualified, "I'll still love her."

"Nice recovery," Father Gabriel commented. "But I think you missed the point of my question. I know you love Grace. I want to know what you think of – what was it you called it? Mixies?"

"Right. Mixies," Simon confirmed. "I think that whatever two adults do or feel should be allowed, provided they both agree and no one gets hurt."

"Grace?" prompted Father Gabriel.

"Ditto," she said between bites.

"I'm glad to hear that you have convictions," Father Gabriel said. "And even if I don't agree with you one hundred percent, I want you to always speak your piece – and not just to me. What's vital is that, despite any criticism or ridicule, you always say what you truly believe. Stick to your guns. That's what's important."

"Our what?" asked Grace.

"Guns," repeated Father Gabriel.

"What're guns?" asked Grace.

"Oh, right. Probably no guns in Allegory," Father Gabriel conjectured. "Erm, I'll explain what guns are later, but as far as the expression . . ."

"Does it mean to stay true to what you believe, even when everyone else thinks you're daft?" asked Simon.

"Yes, that about sums it up," Father Gabriel said.

"We have a Portrayal about that. 'The Vixen Who Stayed in Her Earth'," Simon explained.

"Really? You'll have to get me a book of your Portrayals. They sound quite interesting."

"We'll have to get back to Otterstow, first," Simon said.

"Do you remember any off by heart?" asked Father Gabriel.

"Oh, yes. More than a few," Grace answered. "It's required viewing at school. As adults, we have to perform them as part of our civic duty."

"Then write them down," Father Gabriel suggested.

"We don't know them all," Simon confessed.

"It's all right," Father Gabriel said. "Just write down the ones you can remember."

"Oh, suppose we could do," Simon said.

"Could you perform one? The one you just mentioned?" asked Father Gabriel.

"Yeah, that one's easy," Grace admitted.

"It's quite short, not much action," Simon added.

"Go ahead, then. I'm listening," Father Gabriel leaned back in his chair and folded his hands on his stomach.

"Oh, right. Erm, Grace, You do narration and Vixen, I'll do the others."

Grace nodded. They both stood in front of Father Gabriel.

"It opens," Simon began, "with . . .

Opening scene: a Vixen digging an earth

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of The Vixen Who Stayed in Her Earth.

Hare, Horse and Bear enters stage right

Horse

Look, good friends. Our foolish Vixen does dig her earth as always. She should teach her kits to run from danger, as Hare and I would do.

Hare

And her kits will live in the filth of a hole. She should let them lie in a clean form as we do.

Bear

Why bother with making a den to tie you to a tiny piece of land. Roam far and wide for your needs.

All

Nonsense. What foolishness. A waste of time, &c.

All except Vixen exit, left

Narrator

But, our Vixen digs away, ignoring the comments of the others. The winter passes and her neighbours return to visit that spring.

Vixen

Good springtide, friends. And have you come to mock my efforts once again?

Mother Mare, my regrets that your foal could not run fast enough to escape the wolves that roam the land.

Mother Hare, your kits may be clean, but it seems they have no place to hide that will protect them from eagles.

And Mother Bear, my children have not wandered off, as they have a place to call home.

Foolish me! To have spent all that time hollowing out my earth. Now I have all these kits to care for!

Staying in my earth

When others say I'm foolish

I'll listen to my own advice

Though others think it mulish

Narrator

Thus the fate of the Vixen Who Stayed in Her Earth.
 Draw from it what you may.
 Until next we meet – good day!

"That's it," Simon said at the conclusion.

"Marvellous!" Father Gabriel said enthusiastically as he applauded.

"Excellent."

"We've got dozens more," Grace added.

"Brilliant. And I look forward to hearing them all in due course. You know, we have a few of our own," Father Gabriel mentioned casually.

"Do you?" asked Simon, genuinely astonished.

"Well, probably not *quite* as many as you do," Father Gabriel qualified, "but a few. My particular favourite is the one about the Workers in the Vineyard."

"What's a vineyard?" asked Grace.

"It's where grapes are grown," Father Gabriel explained, "usually for making wine. Grapes grow on vines of course, so it's called a vineyard."

"What about beans?" asked Simon.

"What about them?" asked Father Gabriel.

"They grow on vines," Simon mentioned. "What would you call a place where beans are grown?"

"A bean field," answered Father Gabriel.

Simon looked confused. "But . . ." He couldn't quite form a question.

"Shall I continue?" suggested Father Gabriel.

"Oh, sorry," Simon apologized. "Go on, then."

09DEC2001 Sunday

1615 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

Simon and Grace had stayed with Father Gabriel for about a month, but they were no closer to finding out where they needed to go than when they arrived. Father Gabriel, not being one to travel much, had little use for maps and it took no small effort on his part to find a parishioner of his small congregation who was willing to part with one. Of course there were lots of embarrassing questions about whether he'd like someone to read it for him or not and so on but he managed to skirt around these somehow and finally received a tattered old book with a few missing pages.

That afternoon, Simon and Grace were poring over the map, trying to find some clue as to where they may have come from.

"I don't see a Newbury or Newburg," Simon complained.

"Well, what about this one? Newbury?" suggested Grace.

"No, that's not it," Simon dismissed. "That one's way too big. It was a small town. A village almost."

"What about the Waldo?" asked Grace.

"The who?" asked Simon.

"The Waldo. The theatre we stayed in for a few days."

"You prat," Simon said. "That was the Ribaldo, not the Waldo."

"Sorry," Grace said in a sad tone. "Just tryin' to help." She turned to look out of the window.

"Where'd you get 'Waldo' from? Honestly."

Grace remained silent and Simon could see that he had hurt her feelings. "Oh, Grace. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude." He gave her a hug from behind and a kiss on her cheek. "Forgive me?"

She turned to face Simon. "It's not that, Si," she sniffed through her tears. "It's just . . . I'm beginning to think we'll never find our way home again. Our parents are probably thinking we've died in some terrible accident. I just wish I could get a message to them somehow that we're okay."

"Don't worry, Grace," Simon said, consoling her. "We'll find our way home. Come on, help me look."

Grace returned to the book and flopped it to the front page which had an all-encompassing map of Britain. "Si? Have you noticed anything odd about the shape of this country, the United Kingdom?"

Simon took a look at the map. "Erm, no, couldn't say, honestly. Looks perfectly normal to me."

"When you say 'normal,' what exactly do you mean by that?" asked Grace.

"That it looks like it should. There's that peninsula down here in the southwest where the Shire of Danmon would normally be. Then there's the round, bulgy bit on the east side. There's the river, and that big red spot is where Big Smoke would be. Just the place names are different."

"Yes," Grace agreed, "and if Big Smoke were there, where it says 'London,' then Otterstow would be – where?"

"Oh, just about an inch or two this way . . . Shave me! Wait, it says that area's on page twenty-three." He quickly flipped the map book open and turned the pages. "Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three."

Grace pointed to a fine, squiggly blue line that crossed the page. "Look, there's the Fennec-Raven canal that goes through our town."

"And it goes straight through the town of . . ."

"Newburg!" they chorused.

"Grace! We found it! We found out where we came from! And we know exactly where it is!"

Grace bit her lip as she made another, less pleasant, observation. "Shave me, how'd we get all the way up here, then?"

1630 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

Simon and Grace took the map into the kitchen where Father Gabriel was enjoying a quiet cup of tea, whilst listening to a little music on the radio.

"Father, we've found the place where we came from," Grace announced joyfully.

"You have? Excellent! Just a moment." The priest leaned forward and turned his radio down. "Most excellent. So what is it?"

"Newburg," answered Simon.

"Newburg?" repeated Father Gabriel, surprised. "I have good friends from close to there. I don't mean to discourage you, but I think you should know . . ."

"Yes?" said Grace.

"It's quite a trip," Father Gabriel mentioned. "It's about 250 miles."

"Yeah, we noticed we weren't exactly next door," Simon said. "Still, I didn't think it was *that* far."

"You did say 250 miles?" asked Grace.

"Yes," Father Gabriel confirmed. "I said 250 miles."

Grace and Simon had to let this soak in for a while.

"Shave me, Si, that's an awful long way to beat feet."

"It'll take us weeks," Simon conjectured.

"Surely you could just take the train," Father Gabriel suggested.

"No, we can't be seen outside," Grace said. "Remember, we're covered in fur."

"Besides we don't have any money for fare," Simon added.

"Don't you have someone you could call?" asked Father Gabriel.

"No, honestly," Grace answered. "We could call the Ribaldo – but we have no idea what their number is."

"And truth be told," Simon added, "I'm not quite sure that's the name of the theatre we came out of."

"And even if we did know the name of the theatre, who would we ask for?" Grace asked. "Mayor HaliFox? Mum? Dad?"

"There's a small chance I can get the number for you," said Father Gabriel. He stood and made his way to the counter. Opening a small drawer, he fished around and pulled out a mobile telephone. "They took out my landline phone and gave me one of these wireless jobs. I've never been able to make a call since." He flipped open a lid, dialled some numbers on a keypad and held the phone to his ear. "Nothing," he sighed in frustration as he threw the phone back into the drawer. "This world is so full of high-tech crap that doesn't work – especially if you're blind."

"Could I have a go?" asked Grace.

"Be my guest," Father Gabriel answered. "There's a manual for it just underneath."

1830 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

Two hours later, Grace was explaining the finer points of the mobile telephone to Father Gabriel. "Right, now just put this little card thingy in the back. There's a little notch. That goes to the outside. Then you put the battery and cover on."

Father Gabriel followed her instructions. "Okay, now what?"

"Right, it's gotta have the battery charged, so here's the charger. I've plugged the big bit in the wall, but this tiny bit has to go up the mobile's bum sorta thing. Here, take the parts and I'll guide your hands."

Father Gabriel took the wire and the mobile and Grace guided his hands.

"Goodness me. Your hands are, erm . . . quite small," Father Gabriel mentioned. He had wanted to say that they were furry, but had changed his mind at the last moment.

"The better to guide you with," Simon mentioned.

"Shut it, you," Grace admonished Simon. She returned her attention to Father Gabriel. "Right, next you gotta turn it on. That's this button here."

"Okay, I turned it on. We can make a call now?" asked Father Gabriel.

"Hang on a bit," suggested Grace.

"What . . ." began Simon.

"Shh!" Grace silenced Simon.

They waited for about ten seconds and then the mobile issued three little raps.

"Right, that means that *now* we can make a call," Grace explained.

Father Gabriel opened the flip and dialled some numbers. He held the mobile to his ear. "Sorry, still nothing," he reported.

"You hafta press the 'go' button after you dial," said Grace.

"Oh." Father Gabriel pushed the button and listened again. "Hey! It's ringing! First time I've made a call on this thing!" He beamed with delight. "Hello? . . . Yes, I'd like a number please . . . Newburg . . . The Ribaldo theatre . . . No? Oh, I see. Well, thank you for your time." He flipped the lid closed. "Sorry, kids. It's not the Ribaldo."

"It's okay. I'm sure we'll eventually remember its name," Simon said.

"But thanks for getting this to work. I haven't made a phone call in months," Father Gabriel beamed. "You won't mind if I ring a few friends will you?"

"No, that's all right, Father. Glad we could help," Grace answered. "Besides, we made a big step forward today. We could be home within a week or two!"

16DEC2001 Sunday

1200 – Rialto Kitchen

Steve opened his binder for the meeting. "Sorry to drag you all here on this bitter cold Sunday but week-Monday is Christmas Eve and we need to plan ahead as there'll be a lot going on. We'll have the usual band and decorations for that. For Christmas itself, we've hired caterers for a family-style sit-down dinner in the afternoon. We'll also have some live after-dinner theatrics – panto, of course, but still a good bit of fun. And we've sold out at three hundred head. That'll last from the early afternoon until six. Then we move the tables away and have our band take the stage from eight 'til closing. It's going to be a very long day of work but, as I said, a good bit of fun."

"Maybe for you, perhaps," Rachael grumbled gloomily.

"Sorry, something wrong?" Steve asked.

"Just be nice to, y'know . . . be in on it again," Rachael said with a pout. "It'll be okay for you, but the rest of us are stuck behind the curtains an' all."

"Couldn't we do like we did at Halloween?" Slide suggested. "Be among the punters instead of hiding in the dark?"

The rest of the Frith eagerly agreed.

"I don't know about the rest of you," Sandra began, "but when I'm working strictly behind the scenes, I feel like an outcast."

"Speaking from experience," Jess said, "it's not too far off the mark."

Gina added her opinion. "I must admit, every time I go up that hidden shaft, just so I can avoid being seen, I do kinda wonder, 'this is my own place; why'm I sneaking around?' It's like I don't belong."

"I'm sorry, but my hands are tied," Steve grimaced. "I can't promise anything, but I'll bring it up with security and see if we can get away with it as a special occasion. Anyway, on to other business . . ."

"Um, Steve?" interrupted Desiree. "I hate to interrupt . . ."

"Never seemed to bover ya before," Pete interrupted her interruption.

Desiree waved off his comment. "As I was saying . . . I told everyone a while back that I was going back home to finish my degree. With any luck, I'll be back at the end of August with my diploma."

"Yes, you had mentioned that," Steve replied.

"I leave the day after Christmas," Desiree clarified. "Just thought you'd wanna know."

There was a sombre pause.

Geoff looked out of the window. "Is it sleeting again?" he asked of no one in particular.

"Na, isna, is snaw," Angus answered quietly.

As one, the Partnership looked out of the window to see the first, brave few flakes venture to the ground.

"We will miss you while you're gone," Ignatius said.

"Even I will, Desi," Steve said with an honest face.

"Thanks, Steve," Desiree acknowledged. "That does actually mean something to me. Especially after I've been so rotten to you."

"I didn't think you were all that bad, by the way," Steve said. "Still, let's not dwell on it. Okay, last bit of business," Steve said. "So, directly after Monday's concert on Christmas Eve, we have to clean up that evening and get everything straightened out. The caterers will be arriving at four in the morning to start preparing the food and the main room has to be given a good clean for the Health and Safety people. I suggest we close at two in the morning, spend a couple hours tidying up, let the caterer's in at four and then go home and get a good eight hours kip."

1300 – Black Kettle Pub

The Partnership had retired to the Black Kettle for the afternoon and Steve was mulling over a pint.

"What's on your mind, love?" asked Linda, wrapping her arms around him and giving him a peck on the cheek.

"Oh, not too much," Steve said, looking into his glass as he swirled his lager around.

"I didn't ask what's *in your brain*," Linda teased. "I asked what's *on your mind*."

"Oh, right. Well, it's what Jess and Gina were saying. It's not very fair to the other partners. Desi, Michael, Angus and I can go down, have a pint and chat around, mix with the crowd anytime we want to. All the others have to stay hidden out of sight – except for Halloween. Maybe Midsummer Day. But it's hardly fair. I can imagine it gets to be a bit of a drudge after a while."

"Steve . . . Love . . . You can't take the weight of the world on your shoulders," Linda pointed out. "You don't have to be their saviour."

"I know, I know. But still," he admitted. "I feel guilty anytime I'm on the floor."

"Oh, Steve, you shouldn't do. They wouldn't deny you that, just because they can't have it."

"I know that as well," he replied. "Still . . . it's how I feel."

Linda stroked his shoulder in consolation. "Poor dear."

"I don't feel sorry for myself, or for them, to be honest. I know they wouldn't want that," he said. "But the thing is, I know there's a way round it. There's a way they can come and go on the floor as they please, without arousing suspicion or notice. It's like when you have a word on the tip of your tongue and you can't get it out. There's this idea. It's just at the edge of my consciousness."

"Seriously?" asked Linda.

"Yes. It's just under the skin of my skull but it won't come out. It's like I'm mentally constipated, if you'll pardon the expression."

"Well, if you're after a cerebral laxative, then come with me. I have just the thing."

1330 – Linda's Home

They were in Linda's home a few minutes later.

"Sit," she ordered. It was not a suggestion.

Steve sat on the love seat in her living room.

She went to the glass cabinet with the numerous figurines and pulled one off of the bottom shelf. Turning it over, she slid this, twisted that and pulled the other and the base of the statuette came off in her hands. Inside were a dozen small cigarettes. She took one out and placed the statuette and the base on a nearby end table. Walking into the kitchen, she returned with some matches.

"I had no idea you smoked," Steve mentioned. "In fact," he thought aloud, "I can't remember anyone having tobacco of any form in The Kingdom."

Linda struck a match on her claw and ignited the cigarette. Taking a puff, she held it for a few seconds in her mouth and then exhaled the smoke through her nose.

"I wouldn't touch tobacco with a ten foot pole," she stated. "Even if it were legal here."

"Tobacco is illegal? Then what's that?"

She handed the lit cigarette to him. "It's cannabis."

Steve took a light pull on the fag and immediately began to cough.

Linda retrieved a glass of water from the kitchen and handed it to him. He sipped it and calmed down a bit.

"Bit harsh," he croaked.

"You need to hold it in your mouth for a few seconds. Let it cool off. The smoke is pretty hot. Here, like this." She demonstrated and then handed the fag back to him as she sat in his lap.

Steve tried again with more success, but still a hack or two.

"That's better," Linda commented. "Now, next time, just hold it a few seconds more."

"I usually use a water-pipe. Keeps the smoke nice and cool."

"I find it reduces the effect," Linda returned. "So how long have you been smoking?"

"My mum gave me my first on my sixteenth birthday," he replied quickly, taking another puff.

"Do you like it, then?"

"Oh, yes. Quite nice, although it is rather dear."

"It's dirt cheap here," Linda commented.

"Seriously?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. I grow it in my garden every spring. Didn't you notice the first night you were here?"

"No, I didn't. Isn't it illegal?" asked Steve.

"No. It's always been allowed. We're allowed to grow a certain amount, tax-free."

"Ah, well that would explain the price difference. It's illegal in Reality."

"Is it? What on earth for? It's no worse than ale." She pulled on the fag in Steve's hand. "After all, nobody ever overdosed on grass."

"Except for the harm the smoke itself causes, like emphysema. Be fair, I wouldn't want someone driving a train after having a spliff."

"Why would a train need a driver?" asked Linda, genuinely confused.

"Are there no . . . No, I guess not. Erm . . . A pilot on a boat?"

"Now, *that* I can understand. Mind you, after a few pints would be just as bad."

"I'd agree with that," Steve agreed.

"So cannabis is illegal in Newburg, yet tobacco is legal?"

"And it's exactly the opposite here in Otterstow," Steve observed.

"Imagine that," she remarked as she took another puff.

She passed it to Steve and he took a drag. "Tell me, if it's legal here, why do you have it so well hidden?"

"It's not to hide out of sight. It's to hide out of smell. Once those freeloading models get a whiff of it, they're constantly bumming it off me – or pinching it outright. They'd smoke me out of a year's supply in a week if they had their way. It also keeps it from getting too dried out. So what do you think of it?"

Steve exhaled. "In my past experience, I've noticed it has two very strong side effects. First, it makes me incredibly hungry. One last puff for me, thanks." He took a pull.

"And second?" she said as she took the joint and turned around to stub it out on the base of the statuette which doubled as an ashtray.

He gently pulled her head towards his and placed his lips squarely on hers. Gently, he opened his mouth, forcing hers slightly open and exhaled the smoke into her. After a few seconds, she came up for air.

"Yeah," she said dreamily. "It has that effect on me as well."

1400 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

"Good news," Father Gabriel announced. "I've got some of the parishioners to donate some clothes. You might have to do a little tailoring to get them to fit, but it'll be better than wearing monk's robes or your one set of clothes every day. How's that sound?"

"Lovely," Grace said with enthusiasm. "Simon knows how to pull a needle and thread, so he can do it."

"Marvellous," the priest enthused. "Meanwhile, how's the work on the graveyard?"

"It looks very lovely," Grace said proudly. "All trimmed up and not a spot of litter to be seen."

"Brilliant," Father Gabriel beamed. "The next thing I'd like you to do is clean the stain-glass windows."

"What kind of stains do they have?" asked Simon.

"Sorry?" asked Father Gabriel.

"Is it mud? Or that sort of scaly lime that never comes out?" Simon clarified.

Father Gabriel laughed. "Oh, no, my son. The stain in stain-glass is the dye they put in to make it different colours and to draw the pictures. *That* stain we want to keep! They just need to be cleaned occasionally and it takes a lot of time and patience."

1530 – Black Kettle Pub

"D'ye reckon they've ever done it?" asked Rachael.

"Nah," Clare commented. "We'd know something by now."

"You lot talking about our Steve and Linda?" asked Gina.

"Yeah, that's right," Clare confirmed.

"Hmm. Dunno. Maybe, maybe not. Hard to read," Gina pondered.

"I know it ain't none of our business an' we been stung for pokin' our noses into it before," Rachael recalled, "but it's been months. Steve wasn't wif Desi this long an' 'e broke up wif 'er as she wasn't givin' 'im so much as a cuddle."

"True," speculated Clare. "On the other hand, Steve's a quality guy. I mean," she paused to sip her lager, "if he were a Hare, he'd be a prime catch, even if he's not a whole lot to look at. He just needs the right shaped head . . . and ears . . . and a tail."

"An' feet . . . an' hands," added Rachael.

"And fur, of course," Clare put in.

"Oh, aye," Gina agreed. "But other'n that, there's certainly nothing wrong with him. As a person, he *is* lovely."

"Sterling chap." Clare admitted.

"Absolute star," Rachael concurred.

Gina was polishing a glass behind the counter with a slightly wry smile on her face. This did not escape the notice of the MarchHare twins.

"What?" asked Clare.

"Y'know, I'd say, if I were to put enough pints into the pair of you, you'd spend a night with one of 'em human lads."

"Oh, get out Gina," Rachael protested. "That's disgustin'! I'd never!"

"Oh, no?" Gina challenged. "So you didn't bite Michael's ear?"

"Twice," Clare added.

"Or give him a hare-punch?" Gina mentioned.

"Or dance with him all night on Halloween?" asked Clare.

Rachael squirmed for a second. "Just a bit o' flirt, is all 'e is. Not like I'd actually wrap a tail round 'im."

"Ohhh, I dunno. If them beer-glasses was thick enough . . ." Gina didn't complete the thought. "And I bet you would as well, Clare."

"No," Clare denied. "No way. I've been pissed to where I couldn't stand and I could never get that drunk."

"Wouldn't you now?" Gina appraised the state of her vessel, found it to be satisfactory, placed it back on the shelf and grabbed another. "Y'know. I've heard rumours about the human lads."

"Rumours?" asked Clare. "What kinda rumours?"

"Oh, I heard them rumours," Rachael waved her hand dismissively, pretending to be worldly. "There ain't nuffin' to 'em. Just skintails."

"So you've seen your Michael in the altogether then, have you?" asked Gina.

"No! Course not! Why would I be caught dead, lookin' at a skin wiffout 'is kit on? An' by the way, he ain't *my* nuffin'!"

"Well, you seemed to be so well-informed, I thought maybe you'd taken a poll or summat," Gina teased.

"Gina!" Rachael protested.

"*What* rumour?" asked Clare insistently.

"Oh, for the luvva Jack!" Rachael leaned over to Clare's ear and whispered.

"How . . . ?" asked Clare.

Rachael made a demonstration with her hands.

Clare laughed. "No way!"

"And how would *you* know, then?" asked Gina with a barely concealed smile.

"Couldn't be," Clare insisted.

"Just ain't 'appenin', is all," Rachael dismissed.

"Well, tell me this then," Gina looked up as if forming a hypothesis. "Just supposing – and I'm not saying one way or t'other – but just supposing it was true. Would you do a tailless then?"

The two looked at each other momentarily. "Nah," they chorused.

Gina had a self-satisfied look on her face. "Well, then, that's it, innit. Although," she paused for a moment, "I couldn't help but notice, you both did have to think about it." She continued to smile as she wandered off, in search of a new glass to polish.

"Desi'd know if it were true," Rachael mentioned.

"Yeah, we'll ask her. She'll tell us," Clare added.

"Wouldn't make any difference," Rachael reiterated. "Don't do hairless apes."

Clare concurred. "They'll always be less this Hare," she pointed her thumb at her chest.

1730 – Black Kettle Pub

It was a good bit later in the afternoon when Steve and Linda were making their way back to the Black Kettle, the snow crunching under their boots.

"I hate it when that happens," Steve said. "Not that it happens all that often."

"Nothing wrong with it, love," Linda replied.

"You just feel so relaxed and mellow, everything important is on the back burner for a while, so you can finally lie back and shoot the breeze and be silly for an hour or two. And it was so serene, watching the snow fall. And then it happens . . ."

"Nothing to get upset about," Linda reiterated. "Everyone does it at some point in their lives."

"Still . . . just a wasted occasion."

"You know, you're making this into something way bigger than it is," chided Linda.

"Yeah, I suppose I am," Steve admitted.

They walked in silence for a few moments.

"I just wish . . ."

"Ah!" Linda interrupted. "Enough of that."

"But . . ."

"Stop it, Steve," she ordered.

"All right, all right. I guess I needed the sleep anyway, as I'm still thinking of people in Reality as Bassets and Poodles."

"That's better."

"Probably should take a few days holiday. I've been working non-stop since we started back in June."

"And it's not like you're the first person in the world to fall asleep while they were stoned," Linda consoled. "I've done it loads of times."

"Still, I hate getting stoned and then missing it by falling asleep."

"Steve, enough," Linda warned.

"But I feel like I wasted your stash."

"Oh, behave," Linda dismissed. "I've got loads left."

"True," Steve agreed. "Second-best thing about Otterstow."

"And even if it was dear, which it's not, I think sleep is very important. It's certainly more important than money."

"No argument from me on that point," Steve concurred.

They finally reached the Black Kettle and made their way to the bar and ordered. They turned around and found themselves face to face with Thaddeus. This, in itself was not always a bad thing, except that he was drunk and in a particularly dark mood.

"Linda," the Melan sneered. "I ayeways thought ye was into all sortsa heronious things. I didna figger ye'd stoop sa low as to be fraternising with *this*," he said as he indicated Steve.

"I don't see this as any of your business," Linda replied icily. "And I would remind you I am the town's record-keeper, so I wouldn't point your finger – or anything else for that matter."

"An' what's 'at supposed to mean?" asked Thaddeus.

"I keep the records. I make, fill in and seal *all* documents in this township," Linda pointed out.

"Ye're sworn to saicrecy!" Thaddeus protested.

"An oath which I will never breach," Linda confirmed. "But I still know."

Thaddeus stepped back and let them pass. "Ye'd better watch yer step, Squirrel. Or ye'll no be much of nought," he said darkly.

"Is that a threat?" asked Steve staring up at Thaddeus, eye-to-eye (although looking upwards to a large degree).

"Steve. No!" Linda reproached.

"My certies," Thaddeus pronounced loudly. "Skins are sa prood these days. Seems they dinna ken their rank in the world. Away ootby, skin, and I'll shaw ye the syver."

Steve was still looking the Badger in the eyes, trembling slightly.

Linda was pulling him on the arm. "No, Steve. He's baiting you. He'll cut you to pieces!"

"I'm not afraid of you," Steve told the Melan.

"The door's just thare," Thaddeus remarked.

"After you," Steve answered.

"Gledly," Thaddeus smiled.

"Steve! No! You'll get hurt!" Linda shouted.

The confrontation attracted Gina's attention. She came from behind the bar in short order and stepped into their path, glowering at the pair. "Let me make it clear to you two – I can't stop anything you do beyond my pub walls. But if you're to cause chaos on my doorstep, you'll both be banned for the month. D'you hear?"

"Suits me," Thaddeus remarked. "Worth it ta show this *puggie* his place," he said as he glared at Steve.

Steve would not bend. "Fine with me. After you."

Thaddeus broke eye contact and began to stride toward the door with Steve a step behind.

"Gina!" Linda shouted, livid. "Stop them! Steve'll get mauled!"

"I can't!" Gina protested. "Once they leave the pub, I can't order 'em to do sweet FA!"

Thaddeus had his jacket off and was rolling up his sleeves. He was three steps out on the street, when he wheeled about and saw . . .

A shut door.

Steve was walking back to the bar, hefting the rather sizeable key in his hand. He walked to Gina and handed it to her. "This'll be yours, then. Sorry if I've been any bother but I figured it'd be the easiest way to get rid of him. You'll forgive me if I inconvenience you to open it."

They looked out of the window to see Thaddeus storming back toward the entrance and then heard the ensuing pounding on the door.

Angus stepped forward and held his hand out for the key. "Miss Gina, it'd be ma privilege . . ."

Without a second thought, Gina handed him the key.

Angus stood before the door, which he unlocked and opened. There was a brief exchange of words between Angus and Thaddeus in their native tongue*.

"Oot mah wae, skin! A wants inby!†"

Angus pointed out the door. "Nae, ye'll staund yont!‡"

"An wha'll gar ma?§"

"Ah'll gar ye claw whaur it's no yeukie! Ye been telt tae gang. Nou gang! Or ye'd lief anither kiss?¶"

Then there was a slightly longer pause in the conversation followed by a brief train of expletives from Thaddeus as he walked in front of the pub to some other, undetermined destination. Desiree happened to be walking to the pub at the moment and Thaddeus made it a point to bump into her hard enough to cause her to lose her balance and fall over.

"Eep!" Desiree exclaimed, landing butt-first in the snow. "Hey! Asswipe! Watch the hell where you're going!"

Gina, satisfied that Thaddeus was going elsewhere, walked straight to Steve. "If you ever – *ever* – pull a stunt like that again in my pub, I'll personally put you over my knee!" She smiled a very stern smile, grabbed his cheek, shook his head and gave him a gentle slap on the face. Steve knew that it was just a little love-tap, but it felt like his eyes were about to rattle out of his sockets.

"Yes ma'am," Steve replied instinctively.

Thaddeus had ignored Desiree's invective and continued to walk down the street. Desiree, feeling a little hard done by, gathered up a fistful of snow and packed it tight. She then gave a wind-up and pitched an overhand slider that managed to land squarely just under Thaddeus' occipital, causing a large part of the projectile to slide under his shirt.

"Steeee-rike!" Desiree declared smugly, pumping her fist.

However, as Thaddeus turned around, a new emotion surfaced.

"Oh, shit," she muttered quietly to herself. "And damn if I didn't step in it, too."

"That was very brave of you, young man," Gina told Angus.

"Ah, is naething. Ye juist hafta staund up ta bangsters like him," Angus dismissed. "They ayeweys back doun."

* Whether this 'native tongue' could be considered a dialect or a separate language to those present would be open to discussion. However, everyone in the Black Kettle would freely admit that it was the latter as they found it completely unintelligible.

† Would you please stand aside, so that I might enter?

‡ I'm sorry, but no. Would you please go over there?

§ And who would compel me to do so?

¶ ** I'll ask you nicely, just the once. You've been asked to leave. Please do so, now. Or would you prefer another kiss?

"Still, it was good of you to step up for the little guy," Jess stated. "You're a goo'boy," she said, giving him a hug and peck on the cheek.

"Ah, nou," Angus blushed. "Ig'd get the wrong idea if he were here."

"Stuff him," Jess retorted. "Which is more than he's done for me, lately."

"Jess, please, I dinna wanna knaw!" Angus protested.

Meanwhile, outside, Thaddeus was slowly walking back to Desiree "Kiss ma fud, skin!" he snarled.

"You can kiss my ass, mother fucker!" Desiree replied, standing her ground.

Jess had heard Desiree's comment. "And they say *I've* got a mouth."

"Hey, what's Desi doing out there?" asked Clare.

Those who were not already aware of the events that had transpired just outside joined the rest to look out of the window to see Desiree and Thaddeus staring each other down.

"I havna the rest o the day ta be kissin yer whappin airse," Thaddeus retorted.

"Excuse me, was that a dig at my *weight*?" asked Desiree. "That's the best you can do and you still want your propers?"

"What's she doing?" asked Gina.

"She's playing with fire, if you ask me," Geoff answered. "Tad's a foot taller than her and he's got at least four stone on her. And it's not exactly fat, either."

"I'm not having this. Clare, go fetch your father, quick like a bunny," Gina ordered.

Clare dashed upstairs, not wanting to miss any of the imminent action.

"Ye should respect yer betters," Thaddeus said, menacingly.

"If I see one, I'll keep that in mind," Desiree answered. She then decided it might be a good idea to make a peace offering before things got too far out of hand. "Meanwhile . . . why don't we have a pint and iron this out."

"I canna, can I?"

"Sorry, say that again?" asked Desiree, confused.

"I . . . can . . . no. I been barred acause o yer Steve."

"Hey cap, he ain't *my* Steve. And how'd he get you barred?"

"Skins ayeweys makin cummer. Is ayeweys their fault."

"Oh, so you're not actually responsible for anything that happens in your life, are you?" accused Desiree.

"Where's the fire?" Pete asked, upset that he'd been disturbed from his lie-down.

"Desi's trying to mix it up with Tad. Go out and stop her before she gets hurt," Gina ordered.

"Me? Why me?" Pete complained.

"Like *I'm* going to stop him?" Gina mused, indicating her diminutive body.

"Better you'n me," Pete said. "Tad'd dare not touch you. The whole town would shave an' tar every inch of 'is body."

"You'll pardon me if I don't put that theory to the test," protested Gina. "Are you gonna help Desi or not?"

"If she wants to get 'er 'ide plastered by a Melan, it's none o' my affair," Pete protested. "'Sides, they're beyond our doorstep. That's outta our jurisdiction."

"That's our Desi, man! Now get out there!" Gina pushed him out.

Desiree and Thaddeus were still exchanging words in the street.

"I wadna cloot a wee lass, even a skin. Nou ga away hame, sweetie," Thaddeus said, patronisingly.

"Go on," Desiree taunted, beckoning with her hands. "Bring it. I can handle it. Come on."

"Ga ta yer hole an have summa them bowfin slugs ye call bairns," he snarled as he reached out to poke her in the chest.

Lightning-quick, Desiree deflected his hand with her left and rapped his nose with her right.

Pete took the opportunity to move quickly forward. "Now, Desi, look, the missus sent me out 'ere to keep ya from gettin' 'urt, so if you'll just come inside wif me . . ." He took her arm gently but firmly.

Desiree resisted. "Tell the missus I'm stayin' out here!"

Pete pulled a little more insistently. "Let's not 'ave any unpleasOOWF! Whaddya do that for!" Pete was cradling his right arm in his left. "Claude Baughs! That 'urt!"

"It was meant to!" Desiree retorted.

"Well, sod this for a shave," Pete protested. He walked back inside and told Gina, in no uncertain terms, that if she wanted Desiree inside, she could bloody well go and get her and where was the bloody ice?

"Okay, fuzzbutt. You want a piece o' me?" Desiree taunted Thaddeus.

"Ga hame, puggie-girl. Afore ye dis yersel a mischief." He turned his back on her and began to walk away. Five seconds later another snowball landed just behind his right ear.

He stopped in his tracks and slowly began to turn around to face Desiree. Desiree, however, had her own agenda. By the time Thaddeus got to the point where he could see her, it was too late. She was airborne.

The group that had gathered around the front windows to watch the altercation was rapidly growing. As one, they all cringed at the collision, which knocked Thaddeus completely off his feet with Desiree on top.

"Oo, even Tad had to feel that one," Steve commented.

"Desi's gonna get herself cut to ribbons," Slide said.

"Why don't you stop her?" suggested Sandra.

"After what she did to Pete? No thank you," Slide replied.

"I think she knows exactly what she's doing," Steve stated.

"I tend to agree," Pete stated, nursing his arm.

"Just like skins, always spoiling for a fight," Johnny Prigel pronounced.

"They're just plain violent."

"Violent, my arse," said Vince, slapping Johnny on the back of the head. This was immediately followed by Vince protesting in pain. "Johnny!" he complained, pulling the quill out of his finger with two of his few remaining teeth.

"Johnny Prigel, shame on you," Gina protested. "What would your mother say?"

"Oh, give over, Gina," Johnny retorted. "He deserves what he gets for slapping a Hedgehog. Besides, I can't find every quill on the back o' me head, can I."

"I was referring to your comment about humans," Gina stated.

"Don't honestly give a toss," Johnny said. "I'm a big boy now and 'sides – Mum ain't here."

"Well, I know what she'd say," Jess answered. She reached behind Johnny's ear, quickly found a quill and yanked it out.

"Ow! Hey! Have a care Vixen!" Johnny protested.

"First of all, she'd tell you to have your quills trimmed as would *any* respectable Erinac," Jess said, showing a quill that was easily six inches long. "This is shameful, Johnny, honestly."

"Get stuffed!" Johnny grumbled as he rubbed the spot on his head where the quill had been plucked.

"And secondly," Jess began as she poked his hand with his own quill.

"Ow!" winced Johnny.

"If you think only skins are violent, try this Vixen on for size!" Jess poked him again.

"Ow! Stop it!" He retreated to safer quarters behind Gina to the laughter of some of the other patrons as Jess threatened him once again.

Gina stepped aside, exposing him to Jess. "Don't seek refuge behind my pinafore," she stated.

Whilst Jess was making her point, Desiree and Thaddeus were rolling around on the street, each trying to gain some sort of leverage on the other. For a moment, Thaddeus had a good grip on her hair, but she could just barely grab his snout and seal off his air supply, compelling him to release her hair so he could remove her hand. They rolled about a little more and she tried grabbing his fex but it was too short to get a good grip. Shortly thereafter, he managed to pin her to the ground, face down, with him on top.

"See, skin, here's the syver, where ye belong. An a skin kittie sich as yersel . . . well, ye're guid for one thing, aintcha?"

"Fuck you, maggot," Desiree retorted. She could feel his groin hardening and suddenly regretted her choice of words. It was at this point that Desiree knew that their confrontation had escalated from a tussle for mutual respect to something a little more serious.

"Aye, wi pleasure, lass. Come away hame wi me an I'll give ye the privilege o ridin mah . . ."

Whilst Thaddeus had been engaged in this seductive banter, Desiree had pushed her face as far down into the ground as she could. Suddenly she whipped her head back and managed to bash the back of her skull right on his nose. She knew she had a very limited window of opportunity and she took advantage of it. As Thaddeus was reaching for his suddenly bleeding nose, she scrambled out from under him.

"She's got goolies big as . . . sumfin' very, very massive," Rachael said.

"Orchestra stalls," Pete suggested.

"Niagara Falls," added Michael.

Although she had escaped from beneath him, Desiree was still being restrained. She took an opportunity to ram her elbow into his stomach which seemed to have little effect. It was like hitting a pillar. Still, it was just enough to distract him so that she could break his hold. Seconds later, they separated and squared off.

"This is actually pretty good sport," Pete commented.

"Until Desi gets hurt," Linda said with concern.

"Where'd she learn to fight like 'at?" asked Pete.

"She has six brothers," Steve pointed out.

"That so?" asked Geoff. "Oh, well then – crown on Desi."

A quick round of betting found both contestants at even money.

Desiree was beckoning Thaddeus to throw a punch. "C'mon big man. Sock it to me. You can do it." She summoned his blows with her hand. "Go 'head. Gimme your best shot." She tried to think of something to make him angry. "They call you Tad, 'cause you've got a little tadger? That it? You talk like a big man 'cause you got a tiny pecker?"

Thaddeus growled a deep and menacing snarl. This actually frightened Desiree, as she had never heard a Frith growl before and it was a bit unexpected. But she kept her head, as her adrenaline flowed deeper.

"Right, ya poxy skin minge, I'll shaw ye's hou wee mah tadger is," he said as he pulled off his coat. Desiree slid hers off as well and threw it aside.

Thaddeus struck out, his claws open wide. Desiree easily caught the wide swipe, pulled his hand over her shoulder and threw him down.

The spectators gasped. There was Desiree, standing, holding her hand out to help up Thaddeus, who was flat on his back in the street.

He refused it, jumping immediately to his feet. He was very angry now and immediately took a few swipes with his claws. Desiree easily dodged him.

Swish, smack. Thud.

"Could someone tell me what 'appened?" asked Pete. "I blinked just then."

"Tad missed a swipe. Desi kicked him in the chest and as you can plainly see," Jess said giving her best blow-by-blow account, "Tad is on his back, again."

"See, I told you," Johnny felt compelled to point out. "Skins are *masters* of violence. If there was a Reality, she's probably got relatOW! Shave me, Vixen! Aye! Give it a rest!"

Desiree was holding her hand out to Thaddeus again. He refused for the second time, jumping to his feet once more, although not so quickly as before. "There'll be na mercy this time, ye great coont." Furious, he lunged, just catching her across the stomach. Desiree shouted a vulgarity in pain, knowing that she'd been hit and probably cut. She also knew that she didn't have the luxury of inspecting the wound, as it would distract her from more urgent matters at hand. They squared off again, Thaddeus growling slightly, feinting with his left and then his right, determined to hit squarely. He lunged again and gashed her shoulder, but Desiree caught his arm, threw him over and then pinned his arm behind his back. Rapidly, she manoeuvred her leg on his neck to pin it down. She pulled his arm upward, aware of his raw strength as he pulled back, but she had leverage and she put it to use.

Thaddeus finally gasped in pain. "Dammee, woman! Stop it!"

"Not until we get a change of 'tude," Desiree demanded. "First of all," she grabbed him by the ear and twisted his head. "See that, Tad. It's the gutter. But if you wanna show someone the gutter, ya gotta be there with 'em. Understand?"

"Aye, unnerstuid. Nou, lowse ma airm."

"Second thing, if you wanna get *me* into bed, I expect flowers . . ." with this she pulled on his ear, lifting his head and then she slammed it onto the pavement.

"Ow!" Thaddeus protested.

"And I want a nice dinner." She slammed his head again.

"Aye! Crikey, stap it woman!"

"And I want a great, big box of chocolates," she added, slamming his head once more.

"Ow! Jackdammit woman, ye've wan! Stap it."

"I'll let you up after you say your catechism. Repeat after me. 'I love humans.'"

"Sod off *Owwwwrrrr!*"

"I love humans," Desiree repeated, pulling harder on his arm.

"Get stuf*owwwrrrr!*" he shouted louder than before.

"I have to admit you've got a very high tolerance for pain," Desiree admitted. "Now, let's try again or I *will* open a commercial-size can o' whoopass. Say it – 'I love humans'."

"I love humans," Thaddeus growled.

"Now, say 'Humans are wonderful'"

"Humans are wunnerful!"

"I'd want my daughter to marry a human!"

"You leave mah bairn ootta this!" Thaddeus hissed quietly.

Desiree knew she had struck a nerve but she also knew it might be a good idea not to pursue it. As fate would have it, she did not have to make that decision.

"Excuse me," Ignatius said angrily, "I certainly hope you're not *fighting*."

As one, the pair looked up to see Ignatius, arms akimbo and looking very upset. Behind him, the sound of a dozen pair of boots found somewhere else to be besides looking out of the window.

"Oh, erm, na, na. Isna like 'at a'tall!" Thaddeus quickly denied.

"Get inside, the both of you," Ignatius ordered impatiently.

Quickly scrambling to their feet, they hustled inside. As discreetly and quickly as he could, Thaddeus gestured to Desiree to keep quiet.

"Sit down, there, right now," Ignatius demanded, pointing to a bench.

They obeyed and remained quiet.

"Well, Miss DelHomme?" Ignatius asked Desiree. "I'm waiting."

"Um, look, Ig," Desiree began. She was looking at the ground and as soon as she found her words, she looked up to explain.

"It wasna a fight a'tall," Thaddeus jumped in.

"Oh, *wasn't* it?" Ignatius asked. "So, just rolling around on the street looking for loose change?"

"There's na need ta take the piss," Thaddeus objected.

"Very well, would you please *explain* your actions?"

Desiree looked to Ignatius for some guidance.

"I feel I should warn you, Miss DelHomme," Ignatius scowled, "*credo quia absurdum*."

"We were, um," Desiree paused for just a second, "dancing."

"Dancing?" asked Ignatius, incredulous. "This should be good. Go on then."

"Yeah, there's this dance we do at home," Desiree continued the thread. "It's called the Lindy."

"The Lindy?"

"Yeah, he was a flyer, so the guy..."

"A flyer?"

"Yeah, someone who flies an airplane."

"Was he." It was not a question.

"So, anyways, the guy has to pick the girl up over his head – like an airplane – and I was betting Tad, here, that he couldn't do it, 'cause, y'know, I'm kinda heavy and . . ."

"Stop – please," Ignatius ordered. He turned about to face the patrons at the bar, who suddenly found something else to look at. "Right, did anyone here see these two fighting outside?"

Of course, there was no response.

"I'll ask again. Did anyone see these two fighting outside?"

The silence continued.

"Very well, did anyone see these two *dancing* outside?"

Everyone's hand went up.

Ignatius rolled his eyes and tsked. "Right, then," he muttered. Turning back to face Desiree and Thaddeus. "Well, it appears that this is your lucky day. I wasn't here to witness it myself and no one here seems to think you were doing anything more than a rather dangerous waltz.

"I think it would be best for all involved if you, Mister WhinnsBrocc went home, sobered up and cooled down. And the next time you consider partaking of any alcohol in public, kindly remember that you are in my bond. You, Miss DelHomme, are to go to Doctor BrookMarten to see to your wounds and then immediately to your room to stay until I return to Nora."

The pair both silently rose and departed the pub together. They shared a common path for some distance and as soon as they were out of hearing range of the Kettle, Thaddeus offered his hand in conciliation.

"A wee bit ahint the haund, but aefauld, onywey," Thaddeus said softly.

Desiree took his hand and shook it. "It's over. Forget it. And you don't need chocolates, by the way."

At first Thaddeus was a little confused but then he was quite embarrassed. "Oo, aye, erm . . . right. Juist the tea an the flowers, then. I'll . . . erm . . . keep that in mind."

"What was all that about?" asked Desiree. "With Ig, I mean."

"Yeah, well, y'see if Ig were ta actually catch us oot, like, fechtin or the like, we're baith away ta gaol – an for a lang stretch, no juist a week or two."

"I kinda figured, but . . ."

"We're baith o us guid friends, like – o Ig's, that is. He disna like ta play favourites, 'cause if he dis, then there'll be na end o rammies an they'll all say 'Ah, but ya let Desi an Tad away, dintcha?'"

"So, are you saying he let us both off the hook because we're his friends?"

"Oh, aye. That, an we're pals wi awbody in the pub, as weel. Is why they didna grass on us.

"But I didna say there wadna be consequences," Thaddeus pointed out. "But we're no ta be brought afore Juidge StoBrocc naither – an that's a great relief."

"But that's completely unlike Ig," Desiree complained. "He's completely and totally honest. He's all about responsibility and being above board and legal."

"Oh, aye," Thaddeus nodded. "Mind you, all he dis is legal. He winna break the law nor tell a lee ta save his fud, no eva. An I daresay he'll explain it all ta ye's suin enough. Oh, an what's it he said ta ye's in Remun?"

"Oh, erm, *Credo quia absurdum*. 'I believe it because it is absurd'. So, obviously a hint to tell a story."

"Ah, sa he knaws, then. He kent we were havin a proper rammie," Thaddeus sighed. "Oh, aye, we're in for it an na mistake – we winna ga afore a juidge, but he'll make oor lives a leevin hell. He's awreadies forbidden me to drink in public. I canna think on what he'll do ta you."

Desiree didn't feel compelled to mention that she was about to leave, and that there was little Ignatius could do to her.

He stopped at the intersection. "This is where we part company."

"Awrite, hawt. Later."

"Will ye have that tea with me some day?"

Desiree gave the invitation a moment's thought. "Yes. I will."

Thaddeus smiled slightly. "I'd like that."

1800 – Doctor Alex BrookMarten's Surgery

Alex applied a swab of iodine. "This one will have to have stitches."

"It wouldn't be there at all if I lost a few pounds," Desiree moaned.

"I think I can safely say," Alex said as he threaded a needle, "that if you can bring down a fully grown Melan – three times, no less – then you are as fit as anyone in this town.

"And if I may add, Miss DelHomme, that was a horribly dangerous thing you did. If he'd've caught you one good strike, you'd've been gutted like a trout. You shouldn't trifle with Thaddeus WhinnisBrocc."

"We've made our peace," Desiree said. "He wouldn't go back on that, would he?"

"No, he'll keep his word," Alex stated. "He may have his shortcomings, but he does keep his promises. However, he does have more than a few friends and they're under no such obligation.

"You'd be well-advised to watch your back for some time to come. These friends of his don't like humans. For whatever reason, they feel that humans threaten their rather comfortable lifestyle and they're not timid about sharing their views." He held up a hypodermic as if to ask Desiree if she were prepared.

Desiree nodded and the doctor began a few small injections.

"I admit, I probably went a little overboard," Desiree sighed. "I'll, ah! – careful Doc! I'll try and watch my back."

"You do that," continued BrookMarten. "I sure would hate to see you on my operating table as a result of one of their 'opinions'."

"Has this happened before?" asked Desiree.

"Yes," Alex said ominously, "it has. So you be careful, young lady. I went to school to become a doctor," he said as he began to stitch Desiree's wounds, "not a tailor."

1800 – The Black Kettle Pub

"I'm sorry, Linda," Steve apologised. "That was pretty stupid of me."

"Okay, we got lucky *this* time," Linda warned. "We'll just chalk it up to a noob mistake."

"Noob?" asked Steve.

"As in 'newbie'," Linda explained.

Steve was none the wiser. "Is that someone who lives in Newburg?"

"No, silly, it's internet talk," she elaborated. "It means someone who's 'new' at something."

"Oh, right," Steve caught on. "Gosh. You've been on-line for barely six months and now you're teaching me about the internet."

"Yep. Guess that makes me a geek-chick," Linda smiled.

"Yes, I suppose you are at that," Steve admitted.

They went silent for a while and Steve spoke again. "Erm, Linda, look, I know we've been going together for just a month or two, but I think it safe to say that we're in a pretty serious relationship."

"Yes," Linda agreed.

"It's just that, before we go any further, it seems we ought to hash out a few things," Steve mentioned.

"Such as?" Linda asked tentatively.

"Well, for starters, at some point, I would assume that we'd live together," Steve said.

"Are we working on the assumption that this is what you want?" asked Linda.

"Oh, very much so," Steve agreed.

Linda shut her eyes and let out a sigh. "Oh, what a relief," she said. "I thought you wanted – oh, never mind."

"Wanted what?" asked Steve.

"I don't want to sound . . . *clingy*. But usually when blokes say they want to hash things out, they're just looking for an excuse to get out of a relationship," Linda said.

"Hardly," Steve said. "Just looking ahead. I mean, if you lived in the Rialto, that's not much of a life. You could never leave the building, so that's a no-starter.

"On the other hand, if I were to live with you, what's our life going to be like? We'll always have to deny we're a couple, except to our closest friends. And people will talk, regardless."

"Pft! Like I care," Linda scoffed.

"End of the day, I guess that's an obvious choice," Steve admitted. "But what am I going to do here? My employment opportunities are pretty limited."

"Oh, that doesn't matter. My house is paid for. I make more than enough money to support us both. And who said you had to quit the Rialto? I mean, you can if you want to, it's all the same to me."

Steve stroked his chin in thought. "Let's see. Free room and board. Don't have to keep a job. Free weed. Get to sleep with a gorgeous woman. No, there must be something wrong with this picture."

"I *do* expect some help around the house," Linda mentioned.

"Oh, of course. I don't mind cleaning and all. Although I'm a crap cook. So, now that's settled, I guess the next step is to meet the parents."

"Parents?" Linda blinked nervously.

2000 – Nora

"Ready for your quilling?" asked Jess.

"No, but let's get on with it," Johnny said. "I'm still smarting from earlier this evening," he said rubbing the back of his head.

"Well, don't just stand in the door, whinging," Jess said, waving him into Nora. "You're letting all the heat out."

"One quid, right? That was our agreed upon price," Johnny reminded her.

"One quid *per hour*. If you've neglected your quills as much as you think I have, you'll have three hours worth of work to do."

"But that's three quid!" Johnny protested.

"If you hadn't been so tight to begin with and had it done on a regular basis, it wouldn't have gotten out of hand," Jess replied. "And you're lucky I don't charge you my usual solicitor's fee for this kind of work."

"Does Ig know you're doing this? I mean, I'll be lying in front of you on a table – in the altogether and all."

"First of all, Ig *suggested* it. Secondly, it's not like I've never seen you naked before. Remember?"

"Oh, aye! You oughtta do this for free to make up for that! I was about dead from embarrassment!"

"That was twenty years ago and you *don't* want me to do this for free," Jess said with a hint of threat in her voice.

"You've not changed a bit," Johnny said. "Still the same mean, spiteful Vixen."

"You're not helping yourself, you know," Jess pointed out. "Now let's get down to business. What's it gonna be? Tongs, clips or chemical?"

"Chemical? What chemical?"

"It's a treatment that Vince sells. You see, your quills are actually only hardened hair and this will soften it," Jess said as she picked up a little bottle without a label.

Johnny looked sceptically at the bottle. "Is it painful?"

Jess shrugged. "Shouldn't be, but dunno, honestly. We've never used it on an Erinac before."

"Never used it before?" Johnny suddenly became nervous. "Am I to be some sorta experimental Cavy?"

"We can always do the clips," Jess suggested. "Or the tongs?"

Johnny winced at the mention of the torturous instruments. "Okay, we'll give the chemicals a go – but just a test spot first, somewhere inconspicuous."

"All right, then, but it's going to take more time and that's more money."

"Oh, shave me!"

"We could do that too," Jess suggested.

"Don't be daft, Vixen," Johnny answered. He considered his options for a moment. "Right. I'll do the chemicals. The full monty."

"Right. Get your kit off and hop in the tub. The water's already hot."

"I don't have to pay for the bath time and laying out, do I?" asked Johnny.

"No, Johnny," Jess answered patiently. "Besides, you're not gonna lay out to dry. I apply the treatment while you're still damp."

"Right, then. Time for a scrub." Johnny waddled up the stairs as he began to disrobe.

An hour later, he was naked and lying prone on a table in front of Jess as she inspected his quills.

"How's it look?" he asked.

Jess ran her fingers through his quills. "Well . . . they *are* softer. They're not sharp at all – very yielding. But they feel sort of . . . oily."

"But that'll go away soon?" Johnny asked. "Won't it?"

Jess lifted her hand and a dozen quills came along with it. Looking at where her hand had traced his back, she saw naked skin. "Erm . . . Yes. In a manner of speaking."

2200 – Nora

Desiree was busy sketching, but her mind was mostly occupied with what she would say to Ignatius upon his return to Nora. It was getting late and she was wondering if she should just go to sleep, when he finally arrived.

"Miss DelHomme," Ignatius said, appearing out of nowhere, "the drawing room and not one word."

She silently followed him to the drawing room.

"Pour us both a brandy, please. It's been a very trying day," he ordered as he sighed heavily and reclined on the love seat. "You see, I have this good friend. I thought I could trust her yet she did something very dangerous and rash."

"Yes, she did," Desiree admitted softly.

"Excuse me, but did I say you could speak?" Ignatius admonished. "Now, where was I? Ah, yes. I didn't personally see it myself, but I rather suspect this young lady was involved in a brawl. Not only that, it was with another good friend whom I had taken into bond from Judge StoBrocc.

"When I take someone into bond, Miss DelHomme, I am, in essence, promising M'Lud that I can control this person and keep them out of mischief. If I fail to do so, not only do they go back to gaol for the remainder of their sentence – and likely a good bit more – it also reflects *very* badly upon me.

Very, very badly. Ah, thank you," he said as Desiree handed him a full glass. He took a good long draught.

"That would have been bad enough, but this young lady would also have gone to gaol, for as much as a year, possibly even more if she had caused any serious injury. It was also quite possible that her opponent, in his drunken rage, might have caused her *very* serious injury.

"Of course, I could simply ignore the whole thing. After all, they're both good friends, they made up afterwards and nothing more serious than a few stitches and bruised egos. However, forever after, every time someone else got into a fight, this would be thrown in my face. Lucky for my two friends, no one present was willing to report what had happened – and lucky for me, everyone present saw that no one was willing to report what had happened. Thus, I have been removed from an enormous steel hook upon which my friend had placed me. Now, before you speak, I want you to bear in mind that, in a legal sense, there was no fight. One might *allege* as much but, legally, no fight existed." He took another sip of his brandy. "*Now*, you may speak."

"If I only knew what to say," Desiree said meekly. "Except that I'm sorry."

"Sorry? Why should you be sorry? All you did was dance with Thaddeus and manage to injure yourself."

"Ig . . . Mayor HaliFox – I simply cannot bring myself to lie to you. Thaddeus and I were . . ."

"Lalalala!" Ignatius said loudly, covering his ears. "Can't quite hear you!" He suddenly stopped. "My dear girl – if you say nothing, then you cannot lie. Is that not obvious?"

"Isn't withholding pertinent evidence equal to lying?" asked Desiree.

"Legally, no, it is not. If I, as an officer of the law, asked you a specific question, like 'Are you fighting?' – which, I hasten to add, I never did – and you answered untruthfully, that would be a lie. Punishable, in fact. Morally, is it a lie? That is a question that only *you* can answer."

"But you asked us . . ."

"Jess! Give us a hand, please?" Ignatius interrupted.

"Coming!" Jess called from upstairs. She soon descended the stairs and strolled to the drinks cabinet. "What can I do for you?" she asked, pulling out a glass.

"Miss DelHomme needs a primer in *hoc est verum*."

"Ah, so naturally you ask for me," Jess said dismissively, as she mixed a vodka and tonic, "when the subject is the subtle art of not telling the truth."

"In other words, lying," Desiree paraphrased.

"*Hoc est verum et nihili nisi verum*," Jess completed the phrase. "Tell me, Desiree, what does that mean?"

"This is the truth and nothing but the truth'," Desiree translated accurately.

"Does it say anything about volunteering information?" asked Jess.

"In my world, we also include '*et verum in toto*'* when we testify in court."

"We're not in court, but fair enough. Let's say I ask 'What colour is your hair?'," Jess proposed. "How would you answer?"

* *et verum in toto* – L. 'and the whole truth.'

Desiree shrugged. "Black."

"So, there's no legal compulsion on your part to say that it's not dyed, that it's congenital, that it was blonde when you were a baby or anything along those lines, is there? A question was asked and truthfully and fully answered. One must assume the simplest possible answer – otherwise, you'd never shut up."

"Ignatius specifically asked if we were fighting," Desiree stated.

"I did no such thing," Ignatius denied. "I said 'I hope you're not fighting.' That is not a question. It is a statement."

"But you knew we were fighting," Desiree objected.

"That was my first assumption, yes," Ignatius admitted, "but I *knew* no such thing. And before I can arrest or press charges, I have to either witness it myself or having willing witnesses or *some* physical evidence. I can't very well go before a judge and say, 'They were a bit untidy and she had his arm behind his back but, no I didn't actually *see* either one throw a punch, and no one else will admit that they saw as much and I have no physical evidence such as a photograph or a bloody weapon with fingerprints.'

"Honestly, Desiree, I'd be held in contempt for wasting the court's time with such a weak case."

"So why the hat and cane act?" asked Desiree.

"I'm still responsible for the peace. Those who were present denied you were fighting. If any of them decide to have a bit of a tussle tomorrow, they can't use the excuse that I let you off the hook."

"But I told you a lie. We weren't dancing, we were . . ."

"Lalala! Not listening!" Ignatius held his ears again. "Goodness, me, Miss DelHomme, stop doing that. It's most exhausting on my part."

"Doing what?" asked Desiree, mystified.

"Trying to tell me that you were fighting. You were dancing and there's an end to it, if you don't mind."

"We weren't dancing," Desiree countered.

"Define dancing," Jess challenged. "Besides, I'll bet this bottle of vodka that Ig did *not*, at any point, ask what you were doing in the street just before he arrived."

"Just so. I asked for an explanation," Ignatius said. "I never specified what it had to be an explanation of, or when or anything else for that matter."

"Shouldn't we face the consequences of our actions?" objected Desiree. "Pardon me, Your Honour, but with all due respect, I thought that was your credo, your cornerstone, your . . . I don't know. I thought you were *honest*."

"I am," Ignatius objected, hurt. "I find it practically impossible to tell an outright lie. It's the most painful thing in the world for me to do."

"Truer words never spoken," Jess admitted. "Of course, I lie all the time, so . . ." She did not conclude her paradox, instead giving a shrug while sipping her drink.

"However," Ignatius continued, "I certainly have no qualms about keeping my mouth shut if it suits my purpose."

"But I've confessed," Desiree pointed out. "Or tried to."

"I'm not legally obliged to accept a confession," Ignatius said, his patience beginning to wear a bit thin. He purposefully set his glass on an end table. His voice became stern as he looked at Desiree. "As your friend and your host, I strongly suggest you not mention this to anyone else. From a legal standpoint, you and Thaddeus have no legal obligations, and my life will be considerably more comfortable *if you exhibit some common sense and stop pursuing this matter*. I assure you, everything I have done is legitimate and legal and honest."

"I still have some things I want cleared up," Desiree complained. "I know it might offend your sensibilities, but I think . . ."

"Fine, Desiree, for my legal services today, you may buy me a pint tomorrow," Jess said. "I haven't been disbarred, so we now have client privilege. *Now* we can talk."

"Oh, quite clever," Ignatius said with admiration. "Well done, Jess."

"What Ig is *not* trying to tell you, is that if you keep your mouth shut about this, it all goes away, and best of all, it all goes away legally. If your conscience pangs you so much that you feel you *must* go to prison, you *could* write a confession, have it witnessed and present it to a judge.

"At which point the judge would give you a reduced sentence for confessing, but he'd tack on *two* years of legal bankruptcy for obstructing . . ."

"Whoa, hang on a mo'," Desiree interrupted. "What's legal bankruptcy?"

"When you lie to the judicial system, it means your word is meaningless. It's not a violent crime – unless it resulted in violence – so you can't go to prison, so this is the alternative."

"Okay, but what's the consequence of legal bankruptcy?"

"You know how you're always signing little things?" Jess said. "Imagine that you couldn't sign *anything* without a judge's specific permission for each signature. No cheques. No credit of any sort. Couldn't buy anything with a title, like a house or property. Couldn't run a business. Couldn't go to school. Couldn't vote. No dole. Not even a book from the library."

"Albeit, as a human, you've barely half of those rights anyway," Ignatius mused.

"Getting back to my point," Jess continued, "you'd get two years of legal bankruptcy, as the judge will feel that you lied to an officer, regardless of whether you actually did or not.

"However, you would not be the only one to suffer consequences. Thaddeus would get a larger sentence, as he did not confess, and thus lose his career. Can you imagine a stockbroker that can't legally sign his name?

"And finally, Ignatius has promised the court that those in his bond will toe the line. When a judge sees that Ig can't live up to this promise, that would mean Angus goes in nick for the remainder of his term. And Ig wouldn't go totally unscathed, either.

"So, if I might ask, Miss DelHomme – as my client, do you feel compelled to confess to a court of law?"

"Um, no," Desiree deferred. "Look, I just want you to understand – I firmly believe that I've earned everything I have, and that I should bear responsibility for everything I do."

"Well, goody-gumdrops for you," Jess smiled, patting her on the head.

"Scuse me?" Desiree said curtly.

"Don't give me that crap," Jess dismissed. "You act like you were born in abject poverty in the middle of the swamp, taught yourself to read and grew your own food. You've told me about your family – from what I can see on the telly and the news in Newburg, you were probably in the 95th percentile of wealth.

"Look, sunshine, we all get help. Frankly, I got my spot at uni because Mom blew the bursar."

"Did she?" asked Ignatius, amazed. "I guess that explains the enormous scholarship," he recalled.

Jess ignored the interruption and continued her tirade at Desiree. "Spend some time with the skins here in Otterstow. See what *their* lives are like. And if you honestly think you could accomplish all that you have whilst living under *their* roof, I'll be the first to apologise."

"Awright, I'll admit I had help," Desiree conceded. "But I still think I should take responsibility for my actions and this all sounds like situational ethics to me."

"You're confusing ethics with morals," Jess countered.

"Then it sounds like situational *morals* to me," Desiree corrected.

"If I might ask, then," Ignatius prompted, "who is the *custos morum**? Certainly not I." He paused for a sip of brandy. "Would it be *you*, perchance?"

"Morals might differ from one person to the next, but the truth doesn't," Desiree pointed out. "There's only one truth."

Jess rolled her eyes and sighed in exasperation. "Siffing hell, you're thick. Look Desi, let's assume for the sake of argument that there is one version of the truth, okay?"

"Fine," Desiree agreed.

"Good. Then the legal system hasn't got a clue as to what it is, okay? Can I make that any simpler? Everything Ignatius does revolves around the truth and upholding the law; but make no mistake, those are *two different things* and even *he* knows that. Does he think you were fighting with Tad? Prob . . ."

"Lalalala. I can't hear you," Ignatius said, holding down his ears. "And be a dear, my glass is empty," he added, handing it back to Desiree.

"Okay, one last question," Desiree promised. "If it were two total strangers instead of me and Tad – then what?"

Ignatius pondered, "*Ceteris paribus*†?"

"Which it never is," Jess interrupted.

"The same *modus operandi*‡," Ignatius admitted, "but almost certainly a different result."

"And why should strangers be held to different standards than me?" asked Desiree.

* *Custos morum* – R. 'Custodian of Morals'

† *Ceteris paribus* – R. 'All else being equal'

‡ *Modus operandi* – R. 'Way of operating'

"They wouldn't be," Ignatius said. "If it were two strangers, everyone who witnessed the event would be more than happy to tell me as much. I would have a case and I would be compelled to act on it."

"Doesn't that seem unfair to you?" asked Desiree.

"Fair means that the law is applied equally to everyone," Ignatius explained. "As such, yes, it is fair; in both instances I have upheld the law and kept the peace. Is it just? Is it right? Who can define such a thing? Throughout history, it has been incumbent on strangers to be held to a higher standard until they have developed a reputation as trustworthy."

"The law is not just the police and the courts. It is the entire community. And they have made it very clear that you are no longer a stranger, but one of us."

"Frith," Desiree said. "That's the whole concept behind Frith, isn't it? The people you can trust?"

"Yes," Ignatius interjected. "That's precisely the point of Frith. Frith contribute to the community. They can be trusted to do what's right. And, even though they might have the occasional transgression, they make their community a better place."

"And take it from me, your rep follows you like a ball and chain," Jess said. "I've been back in town just as long as you, without a single offense to my name, and I'm still an outlaw."

"If it were me instead of you, you can bet your dead granny's chamber pot that I'd be in nick right now, and I'd count myself lucky there wasn't a tar pot and shears in the corner."

"Oh, how you do carry on, sometimes, Jess," Ignatius chided. He refocused his attention on Desiree. "As for you, Miss DelHomme, don't you dare do anything this rash in future," he warned severely. "I don't know about the United Kingdom, but violence is taken *very* seriously here in The Kingdom, and in all of the other cultures, as well. We lock people up, not for retribution, but because we wish to protect the public from their actions."

"Yes, Your Honour," Desiree admitted demurely. "Tad mentioned that you might have something in store for us. I'm willing to accept any punishment you feel is fitting."

"Did he?" asked Ignatius.

"He did mention something about a 'living hell' as I recall," Desiree said.

"I don't do 'living hell'," Ignatius stated. "Regardless, I am not best pleased, to say the least."

"I can do 'living hell'," Jess suggested. "Please, may I?" she volunteered enthusiastically.

"No, you may not," Ignatius said immediately. "I ask you, Desiree; is this matter at an end?"

"Yes," Desiree conceded, "not another word."

"Right, well, that's a relief, then." Ignatius sighed as he took another sip of his drink. "Very well. Bath time. Off you go, then."

"Bath?" asked Desiree.

"Yes, you know the drill. You have to be clean, so that you can brush me off after my bath."

"Oh, f'true," Desiree said, catching on.

"And it would be *quite* pleasant if there were a nice, hot pot of that delectable gumbo on this cold winter's night, afterward, don't you think?" suggested Ignatius.

"*Mais oui, cher**," Desiree agreed.

1200 – Nora Kitchen

"So he's snatch bald?" asked Desiree of Jess, as she prepared the vegetables.

"Yeah. Head to toe. I bathed him in the stuff. His quills *did* get softer, but then they just . . . fell out. As completely naked as the day he was born." Jess look mildly embarrassed as she stirred the roux. "I followed the instructions to the letter."

"Do you have the bottle?" asked Desiree.

"Over there on the counter," Jess pointed with her nose, not daring to abandon her culinary post. Desiree had abrogated her each time she had gotten distracted from her duties and burned the roux. "The green one."

"Jess, that's not softener. It's depilatory," Desiree observed. "The softener I gave you was in a *blue* bottle. Not the green one."

Jess' eyes grew wide as she smiled guiltily. "oopsie."

"You *can* tell blue from green, can't you, Jess?" asked Desiree. "I seem to remember being told that all Frith can see all the colors of the rainbow."

"As a rule, yes we can," Jess answered. "But it doesn't help matters that Vince keeps putting the stuff in unlabelled bottles. Oh, well, there's nothing for it now," she dismissed. "The damage is done."

"Maybe I should go visit him," Desiree suggested, "have a look."

"That would *not* be a good idea," Jess pointed out. "Apart from the fact that he doesn't care much for humans, he's also moved in with his mum in Big Smoke until his pelt grows back. It'd be a bit of a trip for a courtesy call."

18DEC2001 Tuesday

1200 – Black Kettle Pub

"Fellow members of the Partnership," Steve announced, "I present to you, the hero of the day. Michael, show them your big red S."

"I have some *very* good news for all of us," Michael said. "However, there is a tiny catch at the end, but we'll get to that, momentarily." He pulled out a stack of plastic cards. Reading them, he passed them out individually. "Ignatius HaliFox, Jess FaerFyxe, Gina ParsleyHare, Clare MarchHare, Rachael MarchHare, Geoff ThistleBoar, Pete DunBerr, Slide HolenWulf, Sandra StaepfenWylf, Linda OakSquirrel." He then held up four more cards. "These are for Vince Scrub, Dawn RoseMearh, Liam AbannEach and Eric BlostMus."

* *Mais oui, cher* – F. 'But yes, darling.'

Sadly, Brandon StonePony is an alien and his will take a little longer to process, but it is in the works."

"You've misspelt my name," Sandra StæppanWylf pointed out.

"Mine as well," Jess FærFyxe added.

"Ah, the forms don't take 'ash' as a letter," Michael explained. "Only the standard twenty-six, I'm afraid."

"What are these?" asked Clare.

"They're NI cards," Michael answered.

"I rather gathered that from the fact that they are cards with 'National Insurance Numbercard' written on them in large, black letters," Clare answered. "If I might rephrase; how will these cards affect our role in the greater socio-economic scheme of Newburg and the United Kingdom?"

"Basically, they let the government acknowledge that you, as people, exist. What this means, is that you can now work out in the open. The paperwork's done. And respect where due, Ignatius is largely responsible for getting this done."

"Oh, hardly," Ignatius dismissed. "Michael did most of the donkey-work. I merely provided him some guidance, research and the universal law of work in the civil service . . ."

"It doesn't have to make sense, one merely has to follow procedure," Michael and Ignatius chorused.

"As you can see," Ignatius smiled wryly, "he has learned his lesson well. I foresee a very promising future in public service for this young man."

"Surely they must have asked *some* questions," Clare said.

"No," Michael denied. "That's the thing with computer automation. There's no one to ask things like, 'Why does this batch of applications have so many animals in their names?' or 'Where, exactly is Otterstow in Berkshire?' Oddly, computers don't notice things like that."

"Don't they have people to watch out for those things?" asked Sandra.

"Yes, they do and that's the little snag I mentioned earlier," Michael admitted. "In a few months time, you'll be asked for an interview. It's fairly straightforward, just to make sure you can repeat the information you provided, see to it that you're a, erm, 'real' person, if you'll pardon the term. They'll also ask questions like how your mother's name is spelt and so on. The only thing required of you is to tell the truth. As long as you do that, you're clear."

"So the fact that we're covered in fur, 'ave tails an' some of us wif big floppy ears won't make no nevermind?" asked Pete.

"No, of course not," Michael said. "That would be discrimination based on appearance, which is strictly forbidden in the politically correct world of civil service."

"But you will have to go it alone. I can coach you as much as you like beforehand, but when you walk in the office, the only way you can have someone with you is if you don't speak English or you're stone deaf."

"So, we walk in, answer the questions an' walk out," Pete clarified. "Simple as 'at?"

"Hopefully," Michael qualified. "But if someone stroppy is behind the counter, it could get complicated."

"I'll go first, then," Ignatius volunteered. "I've no fear of civil servants and I'll be most likely to work my way out of a jam, should one occur."

"But 'til then, we're legal, right?" asked Rachael. "We can work the bar?"

"That's right," Michael answered, sitting next to her. "Does that put you in a good mood, Rachael?"

"Oh, a most excellent mood," Rachael replied, a wicked grin appearing on her face as she reached under the table.

"Over to you, Steeeeeeahve," Michael said, grimacing.

"Erm, right. Basically, for the Christmas do, we've made a few arrangements for you. We can provide everyone with suitable uniforms . . . dinner jackets, cocktail dresses and so on. That way you could work as bar staff, hostess, waitresses, maitre d' and so on. The duties would be quite light, so there'd be lots of time to fraternise. In fact, I think we should openly encourage it to make the customers feel special.

"At present, we do make enough cash to hire others for the security room, bar staff, lights and so on. And as the evening wears on, your duties will slowly disappear. You could even sneak in a dance or two. So what do you think?" Steve asked.

There was about four seconds of silence, finally broken by Sandra clapping. This was soon followed by Slide and then everyone else.

"I'll take that as a 'go', then. And for our final point of business," Steve concluded, "it's no secret that Linda and I have been together for a while. And now it's come to the point where I'd like her to meet my parents."

Unseen by Steve, Linda bit her lip and then held her hands in front of her nose in fright.

"So, before I introduce her to Mum and Dad as my girlfriend, I'd sort of like to slowly introduce them to Allegory as a whole. I know this sort of bends our rules about nondisclosure a bit, but this is important to me. And to Linda as well, I hope."

"Oh, yes! Very important!" Linda echoed nervously.

"Anyhow, they're coming to Christmas Dinner as my guests where they'll meet you all. I thought we might show them our little secret, bring them over to the Kettle and explain things to them – sometime between when we clean up for dinner and when we start the band. Would there be any objection to this?"

Linda threw her hand up. "Can we do it on New Year's Eve instead?" she asked eagerly. "Or maybe Wester?"

"No, Linda," Steve said. "And it's Easter, not Wester."

"Oh . . . poot!" Linda scowled.

"Linda, why are you so nervous about this?" Steve asked. "It's not like you're being put on trial."

"Am so!" Linda objected. "Isn't the whole point of meeting the parents to let the *mom* see if I'm fit to take her baby boy away?" She stuck out her hand to an imaginary parent as if to shake it and recited a mock initiation. "Oh, why hello, Miss Green, I'm the girl your son is making time with. Drugs? Me? Oh, of course not – marijuana is perfectly legal where I live. Pornographic sculptures? I prefer the term 'erotic' actually, but why not come and see for yourself. No? Perhaps later. Oh, and I'm sure you've noticed by now that unlike every woman

you've ever seen in your entire life, I'm not human, but a Squirrel. Did he not mention that? Grandchildren? Why, no, thank you. Just ate. But I hear they're delicious with butter and lemon." Linda looked at Steve after breaking out of her act. "Still think there's nothing to worry about?"

Steve gave Linda's concerns a moment's thought. "Maybe Easter might not be such a bad idea."

"Of next year?" suggested Linda hopefully.

24DEC2001 Monday Christmas Eve

2100 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

Simon was slowly stirring a cauldron on the stove when Grace approached him from behind. She wrapped her arms around him and gave him a proper hug.

"Evening babes," Simon said, continuing his stirring.

"Didya see it's snowing out," Grace mentioned. She pointed to the window a few feet away.

"Oh, is it?" Simon raised his head from the task at hand to notice the flakes that were coming down in large clumps. His stirring began to slow as the hypnotic, flurry descent began to capture his attention. They both stared at the window in silence for a moment.

The neglected pot began to froth a little and then overflowed, causing a hiss of steam, breaking the spell of the snowfall. Simon resumed his stirring.

"Mmm. That smells yummy. What's on?" Grace asked.

"Just some kidney bean stew."

"Oo, goodo! Love a bit of kidney," Grace licked her chops. "Be nice to have a little animal protein."

"Erm . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Never mind," Simon said.

"Father Gabriel said tomorrow's a holiday called Christmas," Grace said.

"Is it?"

"Yeah. Birth of Jesus," Grace announced.

"That's nice."

"And he says that good little girls and boys get pressies."

"Oh, do they?"

"And bad little girls and boys get switches and ashes and lumps of coal."

"At least you'll have something to build a fire with to keep warm," Simon said, grinning.

"Oh, you . . ." Grace swatted him lightly.

"Just teasing, Grace."

Grace tightened her hug. "I'd like to give you something nice for Christmas. But then we'd both be bad."

"Grace, if that's what I'm thinking, then best not. If Father Gabriel found out, he'd chuck us out into the snow. We can't give our only benefactor that kind of aggro."

"Oh, c'mon, Si . . . "

"Grace, we should count ourselves lucky that you're not already pregnant from that time on the rooftop. And as appealing as it sounds . . . well, we've got enough problems."

"Can we still have a cuddle?"

"Sure, a cuddle's all right."

They stood for awhile, Grace embracing Simon, the silence broken only by the bubble and hiss of the stew.

"Si?"

"Yes, babes?"

"Are you comfortable here?" asked Grace.

"Oh yes. Quite comfortable."

Grace paused, thinking about how to word her next question. "Do you think maybe we're getting a little *too* comfortable?"

"It's not like we're being waited on hand and foot, Grace. We do a good bit of work. Cooking, cleaning, all the upkeep on the church . . . "

"No, not that. I mean . . . Don't you think we should be trying just a little harder to get home?"

"Not quite sure what you're on about, Grace."

"I mean, we've been here, what, two months? And we've barely a clue about how to get home. We've no idea where that theatre is or how we can travel 250 miles."

"I'm not going for a 250 mile stroll in that," Simon said, pointing to the snowy outdoors. "Best to sit tight for the moment, I think."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Grace agreed. "But still, we're not doing anything to find our way home, are we? We've just been sitting here for ages. We need to . . . *do* something."

"I agree," Simon said. "What do you suggest?"

Grace sighed as she placed her chin on his shoulder. She had a despondent tone of voice when she finally replied. "Oh, shave me if I know, Si."

25DEC2001 Tuesday Christmas

1200 – Rialto Bathroom

Looking at his reflection in the mirror, Pete straightened his bow tie. "Smashin' outfit," he commented.

"I don't think I've ever seen you in a monkey suit before," Gina mentioned. "I must say, it does rather become you."

"Y'know, I heard the name for this suit comes from across the Pond. It means 'Place o' the Bear.' So here's a Bear in 'is natural camouflage – a tuxedo."

"Maybe I should have forgone the tux for something a little more girly," Gina considered as she twisted in front of the mirror to examine her scut.

"Nah, ya look lovely, girl," Pete said. "Might even get your tail pulled once or twice."

"Only by Eric," Gina grumbled.

1201 – Rialto Guest Bedroom

"Do I have to wear this maid's outfit?" asked Sandra.

"I think it looks quite lovely," Slide replied. "Although I must admit, I look forward to taking it off later on."

"Do you?"

"Oh yes, quite."

"Well, we have a whole hour."

1202 – Rialto Second Guest Bedroom

"Ow's me skirt?" asked Rachael.

"Looks straight," answered Clare.

"Don't care if it's straight. Just don' want no one to see me knickers."

"Not much chance of that, with all the lace around these things," answered Clare.

"Oh, yeah? What about when I bend over like this," Rachael demonstrated.

"Oh, right. See what you mean. Hmm. Well, not much we can do about it at this stage, except to make sure we have clean knickers."

"I've an idea," Rachael said. "Gimme me 'at safety pin."

1203 – Rialto Master Bedroom

"Do I look all right in this?" asked Linda.

"Brilliant," Steve replied. "You're an absolute treat, you are, Linda."

"Maybe I should raise the skirt a little," she suggested, hiking it up.

"If you feel like it, go ahead. Do remember – Mum and Dad will be there tonight, and you know what they say about first impressions."

She sighed and let the hem fall. "Oo, why am I so nervous about meeting your parents! I'm scared witless!"

"Why is that?"

"I . . . don't . . . know!"

"No need to shout."

"I'm *not* shouting!" Linda shouted.

"Maybe a little puff will calm you down," Steve suggested.

"Noooo, no, no, no. Bad idea. The last thing I need is to be paranoid *and* stoned. Just be patient with me Steve; I'll get through this."

1204 – Rialto Dormitory Under the Stage

"You great Swine," Geoff said to himself in the mirror. "Looks all right, looks all right! Bow tie straight. Cummerbund set." He examined his hands. "Not too much dirt on the old trotters. Hair is good. Shoes shined."

He reached over for his hat. "Puttin' on my top hat . . ." He whistled a tune as he grabbed his cane and departed for the auditorium.

1205 – Rialto Office

"Hmm," Jess appraised herself. "It's a bit . . . frumpy. Wonder if I have enough time to sexy it up a notch."

"No amount of 'sexying' is going to make it look any less 'frumpy'. And it's hardly the fault of the dress," Ignatius pointed out, "as you've put on four whole stone since you've arrived."

"Gee, thanks for noticing," Jess grumbled.

"At any rate, it's an evening gown for a Christmas roast," Ignatius pointed out as he straightened his spats, "not a bustier for a boudoir romp."

"Speaking of which, when are we going to romp again?"

"To my knowledge, never," Ignatius answered.

"Oh, come on, Ig, it's been ages," Jess whined. "I've learnt my lesson. I'll be a good girl."

"I'm sure you will," Ignatius replied. "And I envy the lucky chap."

"You know I become grumpy when I'm sexually frustrated."

"I was rather under the impression that . . . Oh, never mind, none of my affair," Ignatius dismissed.

"Under what impression?" asked Jess. "That I was getting my rocks off with someone else?"

"I'm not having this conversation," Ignatius stated. "What you do with your life is entirely up to you. I don't care."

Jess sighed a sad little sigh as she looked at Ignatius. He was dapper and fine in his evening wear. *It's actually, finally over, then*, she thought to herself. "No, I suppose you don't," she muttered quietly.

1259 – Rialto Lobby

The Partnership met in the basement of The tré shortly before one in the afternoon and admired each other's dress.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Steve addressed them, "one last word. My parents will be dining with me. We'll be in box suite one. Please be sure that each of you comes to see us at some point during the dinner. Their names are Dianne and Ian."

1400 – Rialto Lobby

Steve and Desiree were standing in the lobby waiting for his parents.

"Nervous?" asked Desiree.

"More than a bit, yes," he admitted.

"Don't worry about it. They'll be fine. We have lots of things on our side."

"Like what?" Steve asked, hoping for some good news.

"Well, since they're open-minded, they'll be more susceptible to new ideas."

"True," Steve agreed. "But I consider myself fairly unprejudiced and I still have issues with what I'm seeing."

"Still seeing the dog and cat thing?" asked Desiree.

"Yes, still seeing the dog and cat thing," Steve admitted. "So, what else is on our side?"

"They'll have the benefit of a well-planned introduction, instead of just being dropped straight into it."

"As we were," Steve recalled. "And even then, we managed all right, all things considered."

There was a brief pause.

"Do you think they'll believe?" asked Steve.

"Well, I don't know them well enough to make that judgement," Desiree confessed. "But, like they say, 'The wish is the father to the thought.' We believe something because we want it to be true – and we all want different things. From what I've observed, everyone has a different reaction. Some people refuse to believe, like George MacAleister. You saw how he was in the same room with our partners all that time and he never thought of them as anything but humans in costume. And then there's our security crew; they eventually figured it out on their own, despite our best efforts, but it's their job to be observant and ask questions. Angus, understandably, thought he was hallucinating the first time but when he was sober, he picked it up immediately. He wasn't too happy about it, but he knew the truth when it was staring him in the face."

"Michael's had no problems with it from the very beginning," Steve observed. "Still, I wonder how they'll take it. I just hope they don't have a stroke or something."

Desiree continued. "I've also overheard some of the customers talking about our partners. A few that insist that they're 'real' but no one believes them. I guess what someone believes depends on not only what they want to believe, but on who's around."

"Very true," Steve observed. "Speaking of who's around, those are my parents, just coming in the door. Let me introduce you to them."

1405 – Rialto Lobby

"Would madam care for a plate before or after the dinner?" asked the caterer.

Jess mulled the question for a second. "Could I have just a half-portion now? Tiny bit of everything? Sort of . . . test the waters?"

"As madam wishes."

1410 – Rialto Box One

"I've been dying to meet some of the staff," Dianne mentioned. "I've heard they're all kitted out like animals. Quite realistic, from what I hear."

Steve had promised Linda he wouldn't lie to his parents but he didn't feel compelled to correct any misconceptions they may have had, thus he did not respond to his mother's comment.

"How'd you get this posh box seat?" asked Ian. "It must've cost a hundred quid per!"

"Not a penny," Steve admitted as he pulled a chair out for his mother.

"I must say, it's a vast improvement from just a few months ago," Diane observed, taking her seat. "So did the owners come to their senses and put some money into it?"

"Not exactly," Steve answered. "The Rialto has new owners."

"Ah," Ian said in comprehension. "Anyone we know?"

"Yes, actually. Mum, Dad . . ." Steve hesitated. "Michael, Desiree, Angus and I own the Rialto."

"Own it?" asked Ian incredulously.

"As in . . . it belongs to you?" added Dianne.

1515 – Rialto Box One

Over the course of the dinner, Geoff, Pete, Ignatius and Jess came by the booth to deliver food and drink and to meet Steve's parents. They had just finished dessert, delivered by Sandra and Slide and were being given an order of liqueur by the MarchHare twins.

"Mum, Dad, this is Clare and Rachael MarchHare," Steve introduced.

"Our pleasure," Clare said, pouring the drinks.

"Oh, what lovely hares," Diane mentioned.

"Surely they're rabbits?" asked Ian.

"Their last name is 'MarchHare'," Diane reminded him. "I should think not."

"We are, in fact, Hares," Clare confirmed.

Suddenly, she and Rachael both put their hands to their headsets.

"Oops, shows 'bout to start," Rachael announced. "And I gotta be on the stage. 'Scuse me!" she said, departing.

"Anything else I can get you?" asked Clare.

"No, we're fine," Ian said.

Clare departed and within just a few minutes the curtain opened.

"Oh, look," Ian said pointing. "The panto's about to begin."

"I don't think this is panto," Steve said guardedly.

Ignatius stepped on the very edge of stage just in front of a microphone.

*Opening scene: A young HARE sitting on stage right, playing
jacks or something similar.*

Narrator

"LAAAAADIEEES and Gentlemen!
Badgers and Bears,
Hedgehogs and Hares,
Lupan, Suvan,

Vulpan and Equan
 And, . . . ahem, humans, of course!
 To all whom these presents may display!
 We do now present to you . . . a play!
 To amuse and to edify,
 But chiefly, just to gratify,
 Behold, the Lonely Unicorn.

A unicorn prances out onto the stage.

Eric BlotMus cantered out onto the stage, wearing a fake horn and a ridiculous smile. To accentuate that he was still in childhood, he was also wearing a too-small shirt and short trousers.

NARRATOR

Once there was a little unicorn.

UNICORN

I am a unicorn!

Desiree, Angus and Michael were planted near the front row and shouted their line.

AUDIENCE

Oh, no you're not!

UNICORN [*angrily*]

Oh, yes, I am!

AUDIENCE

Oh, no you're not!

Most of the audience roared back.

Repeat ad nauseum, may ad lib

"Then why've I got a horn? Eh? Nyah," Eric taunted. As if on cue, the horn, which was held by a simple elastic string, fell off his head.

"scuseme," Eric said with an embarrassed smile as he swept up the horn, turned around to hide his face for a moment and then turned back to face the audience, wearing the horn and his large smile once again.

"See? Unicorn!" he pointed to the horn, which looked a little more stable.

Back in the box seat, Ian leaned over and whispered to his son, Steve, "Smells like panto to me."

UNICORN ventures to HARE on stage right. BOAR enters on stage left and quietly sits.

HARE

Good morrow, friend. Would you care to play with me?

Rachael asked. Although her clothing was similar to Eric's, consisting of a schoolgirl's skirt and an undersized shirt, the effect was not quite the same. In fact, as the numerous wolf-whistles from the audience attested, she looked anything but the innocent schoolgirl she was supposed to portray.

UNICORN

You are but a common Hare. Why should I lower myself to play with you?

HARE

Then I shall play with the others.

Rachael and Eric both stuck their tongues out at each other as they parted.

HARE rises and departs stage right.

Eric broke character momentarily and looked at the audience. "On second thoughts, maybe I was a bit too hasty . . . Oh, never mind. Let's push on. Ta-de-de-de-dum." He turned around and skipped to the other side of the stage where Geoff was sitting, also wearing a small shirt and short trousers. "

UNICORN turns to stage left where BOAR is playing with cards or the like. As he is doing so, WOLF takes the place of the HARE on stage right.

BOAR

Greetings, friend. Would you care to join me?

UNICORN

You are but a filthy Swine. Why should I sully myself by joining you?

BOAR [*rising to leave*]

Please thyself!

Geoff gave a two-fingered salute and blew a linguolabial trill before departing offstage.

UNICORN

Such manners!

UNICORN turns back to stage right where WOLF is playing.

If Rachael's costume was considered risqué by some of the audience, Sandra's was positively scandalous. She wore the same outfit she had at Halloween; the thigh boots, mini-skirt, a halter top, and a little red cape and hood. And although she stuck to the script, more or less, its meaning had subtly changed.

WOLF

Hi there, little boy. Would you like to play?

Eric broke from character and faced the audience, biting his knuckles. "Oh, please," he pleaded with the audience. "Can I? Just for a little while? Oh, please?"

"Oh, no you can't!" Desiree, Michael and Angus chorused.

"Oh, yes I can!" protested Eric.

"Oh, no you can't!" the rest of the audience roared.

"Oh, please yourselves!" Eric camped, throwing up his arms in resignation. Putting them on his hips, he paused. "Where was I? Oh, yes . . ."

UNICORN

I'm sorry, but you are too rough for me.

"Oo, she is a bit of rough, isn't she?" Eric said to the audience. "Oh, please yourselves," he rolled his eyes, going back into character.

WOLF

Then I shall play with the other girls and boys.

Eric broke character once again. "Lucky girls and boys, indeed!"

Wolf departs stage

Sandra threw her little cape over her shoulder and casually strolled offstage to the wolf-whistles and howls of the audience whilst Eric bit his fist again. "Oh, please? Just for a little . . . Oooo, never mind."

NARRATOR

And so it was that the little UNICORN had no one to play with.

Eric pouted and shuffled to centre stage and, at the last second, ripped off his horn, threw it on the ground and stomped on it several times.

Returning home, he seeks the advice of his mother.

"Mummmmyyyy!" Eric yowled, wringing his eyes, although technically it wasn't in the script.

Enter UNICORN MOTHER to stand behind

UNICORN

Dawn entered the stage wearing the same little horn as Eric and stood next to him. Although substantially taller than he, it was patently obvious that she was not nearly old enough to be his mother. Thus, she was given some costume that helped encourage the image. The less obvious part was that her mane, which was tied in a bun to make it appear more matronly, was also dusted with flour to affect grey hair. The more noticeable element of the disguise, however, consisted of two balloons, positioned in the lower portion of her shirt, barely above her abdomen. Breaking from character herself, she pointed to the trodden horn that was still on the floor. Eric folded his arms and stomped his foot. Dawn sternly pointed at it again and Eric petulantly picked it up and strapped it on.

UNICORN MOTHER

Yes, my son.

UNICORN

Mother, I have no friends to play with me.

UNICORN MOTHER

And why is this?

UNICORN

None is as cultured or intelligent or refined as I.

UNICORN MOTHER

Choose your friends by how they play

Not by colour, breed nor cachet

Narrator

Thus the fate of the Lonely Unicorn.

Draw from it what you may.

Until next we meet – good day!

Ignatius introduced the Portrayers one by one as he had done at Midsummer's Day. The only difference was that this time, Sandra received even more applause than Rachael.

"It's crap writing," Steve told his father and mother.

"But they do such a great job of it, don't you think?" added Diane.

Backstage, the Partnership were patting each other on the back at their success.

"Awesome work, Eric," Pete congratulated. "Sandra, you did look a treat in that outfit."

"Hey," Rachael protested. "'Ow 'bout a few kind words for your own?"

"Oh, behave, ya tart," Pete laughed, giving her a hug and a kiss on the head.

"Seriously, Sandra. I think this could be a new look for you," Jess told her. "I'm sure Slide wouldn't object."

"It might look nice, but it's far too impractical," Sandra said. "Somehow, I just can't see myself weeding the garden in a miniskirt and thigh boots."

"Fair enough," Jess admitted. "I can't see myself weeding the garden, full stop. If you'll excuse me, I've a matter of some small urgency to attend to."

1530 – Rialto Lobby

Jess returned to the caterers as they were cleaning up. "Excuse me, could you tell me what happens to all of this leftover food?" she asked.

"H and S say if it's not eaten by a customer, then it has to be disposed of," explained the caterer.

"Disposed of?"

"Tossed in the skip," the caterer answered.

"Do I count as a customer?" asked Jess.

"Did you buy a ticket?"

"No, but I do work here."

"Fair enough. What would you like?" asked the caterer, eager to not waste food.

"I live upstairs. Would it be all right if I just took what I liked and put it in my fridge?"

The caterer looked a little nervous. "Let's rephrase that, shall we? Why don't you take what you like with the understanding that you'll eat it this afternoon."

"Anything?" asked Jess.

"Anything," answered the caterer. "The more you take, the less we have to carry to the skip."

"Rrrriight," Jess said, tapping her lips with her finger. "Start with what's left of that pastry thingy there. That was nice."

"The cheesecake? Full slice?"

"No, the lot. I'll also have the rest of that joint – just leave it on the bone – and those thin little things that sat next to them, wusname?"

"The Yorkshire puddings?" asked the caterer, pointing.

"Yeah, the lot of those as well. And as much of that lovely gravy as you can scrape up."

2100 – Rialto Security Room

Steve and Linda were working in the security room, watching the cameras, giving the staff a break.

"Not so bad, all things considered," Steve said, haphazardly.

"Steve, they threatened to disown you!" Linda protested.

"Oh, they weren't serious," Steve dismissed. "They'll be over it in short order. Month or two at most."

Linda didn't seem entirely convinced but she decided it might be a good idea to espouse a more positive attitude. "I suppose," she said, tentatively. "Still, a bit odd . . ."

"What's that?" asked Steve.

"Maybe it's just me, but I kinda got the impression that their biggest concern was that they wouldn't be able to show off their grandchildren to all their family and friends."

"Yes, I sort of got that impression as well," Steve admitted. "And they also seemed overly concerned with the fact that you're five years older than me."

"Hey, it's only four years, mister science degree."

"Oh, sorry, right, just four. Still, it did seem to sort of weigh on their mind. Like you were taking advantage of me or something."

"I hope you don't feel that way," Linda said.

"No. Quite the contrary; I feel very happy with our relationship. There's some give and take, but on the whole, I have to admit I'm well chuffed."

A bit of time passed in silence as Linda considered the situation some more. "I mean, they seemed completely indifferent to the fact that I'm covered in fur."

"You noticed that as well?" Steve asked.

"And that I have large, pointy ears as well as a big . . . flick . . . bushy . . . flick . . . tail . . . flick flick."

Steve shrugged as he watched the monitors. "I admit, it's completely beyond me. There they were, trying to suss out whether we would have enough income to support ourselves and any children we might have and all along I was thinking when are they going to ask whether we're going to live in an oak tree or how many voles we'll have to pay Owl each month to gather acorns. Good job they didn't ask about what you do for a hobby."

"It is *not* a hobby," Linda corrected. "I made nearly six hundred quid on that last year and that's nearly twelve thousand in Real money."

"Sorry, fair play," Steve admitted. "Your very profitable avocation."

There was another pause filled with thought.

"Linda, I want to move in with you."

"What?"

"I want to live with you. In your house," Steve reiterated. "If you don't mind."

"Not that I'm complaining but why the sudden change of heart?"

"I've decided I want to spend more time with you and I want our relationship to move forward. I talked it over with my mum and dad as they were leaving the Rialto."

"What'd they say?" asked Linda, concerned.

"I think Mum's words were something along the lines that I was pushing thirty and wasn't it about time that I had a steady girl."

"She did? Even after that grilling we got this afternoon?"

"I told you they weren't all that serious about it. I'll be the first to admit they weren't best pleased, but I've had far worse from them – which I've richly deserved, in hindsight."

"All right, then. Let's do it."

"Great," Steve said. "Do I get the spare room?"

She grabbed his arm and punched him on the shoulder. "Spare room! You little git! I'll show you spare . . ."

26DEC2001 Wednesday Boxing Day

0010 – Rialto Kitchen

"Jess, must ye stech yerself after ivery time?" asked Angus as he watched her pull yet more food out of the refrigerator.

"I have strong appetites, especially after a bit of weed," Jess answered. "One begets the other."

"Oh, aye? An what army did ye fook afore me?"

"I thought you liked a bit of paunch on your women," Jess retorted as she pulled out still more plates.

"Aye, a painch, mebbe – no a great, whappin bowie!"

"So *now* you tell me," Jess said with no trace of concern in her voice.

"Jess, ye'll do yersel a mischief eatin all this," Angus protested.

"Nah, I'll be fine," she denied.

"I dinna think sa," Angus warned.

"Watch me," Jess defied as she sat down and tore into the first slice of a four-pound cheesecake that sat next to dinner for twelve.

0200 – Rialto Kitchen

Nearly two hours later, Jess leaned back in her chair. "Errrggg. I am *soooo fuuulllll*. Just one more Yorkshire pudding and I'm done."

Using her arms to sit herself upright, she reached for the little blanket of baked batter and dropped it on her plate. She then spooned some gravy on it and reached for her fork.

Picking up the whole plate, she didn't bother with such niceties as stabbing and slicing, instead using the fork as a rake to shovel the entire portion directly into her mouth.

"Mmrrrrmmmm, shoo goood," she said, gravy dripping down the corners of her mouth and onto her night shirt, which was saturated with various food stains.

Finally swallowing, she announced, "Done now."

"Can ye move?" asked Angus with genuine concern.

"Course I can move," Jess retorted.

"Awrite, then."

Jess attempted to push herself up and just managed, using the edge of the table for support.

"Bathroom," she announced. "Must hurry."

"Need help?" asked Angus with more concern.

"Don't need anyone's help," Jess scolded. "Okay, maybe just a bit of help," she admitted, "getting to the bathtub."

"The bath?"

"Might be a bit of a problem trying to aim for the toilet."

"I'd jalouse ye've a bigger problem'n hittin the bath," Angus pointed out, as he gently yet quickly assisted her across the hall.

31JAN2001 Monday New Year's Eve

2345 – Rialto Spare Bedroom

A week later, Jess and Angus were lying quietly in bed as the celebration of the impending New Year roared in the auditorium below.

"Are ye sure ye dinna wanna join oor friends? Have a cuppa kindness for auld lang syne?"

"No, let's have some quiet time. Too much temptation. Everyone will insist that you have champagne and that I have tons of food."

"I dinna mind sayin 'na' ta 'em," Angus countered.

"I'm new at this addiction thing," Jess said. "I need a little help in the self-control department."

"Oh, aye," Angus agreed, "but oor addictions are unalike."

"How so?"

"A body can ga a lifetime with no s'much as a drap o alcohol or weed or smack an all. But awbody's must have some farin. An ye's hardly titched a biscuit syne Boxing Day."

Jess looked nervously at Angus. "I'm afraid I'll overeate again."

"Tell ye what. Make a rule. Ye dinna eat unless I haund it ta ye. Okay?"

"And you'll keep careful track?"

"Promist. As long as ye're greater'n ten stane."

"Eight stone," she countered.

"Nine," Angus compromised.

Jess was still apprehensive, but she finally acquiesced. "All right, then. We've still got ten minutes. Let's get dressed and go downstairs."

31MAR2002 Sunday

1200 – Rialto Kitchen

Steve walked into the Kitchen of the Rialto and assumed his usual seat for the Sunday meeting. "Afternoon, all. Business has been a bit slow, but that's to be expected for the winter. Now that April is just around the corner, things will pick up a bit for spring and summer. We've managed to make all of our payments on time, we still have a good cash reserve and everyone's getting at least a little dosh, no small thanks to Vince."

Rachael grumbled something under her breath.

"Sorry Rache?" Steve asked politely.

"Get on wif it!" Rachael snarled.

Steve looked at the others as he recoiled from the verbal assault. "Sorry. Did I say something?"

"Just the end of March," Gina grumbled.

Steve shrugged. "Yes?"

"We're Hares," Clare made her point, which Steve completely missed.

"So you've mentioned," Steve recalled. "On countless occasions."

"Do we have to draw a picture for you, Steve?" asked Gina, somewhat impatiently.

"Sorry. I just have no idea what you're talking about," Steve confessed.

"A word in his shell-like, Michael," Pete suggested.

Michael tapped Steve on the shoulder. Steve turned to look and, for the first time, noticed that Michael had an enormous bruise on the side of his neck.

"Where'd that come from?" asked Steve, astonished.

"Rabbit punch – I'll explain later," Michael said. He then leaned closer to Steve's ear and whispered.

"Season?" Steve repeated out loud. "Can't they do it any time they like?"

"We can," Clare said out loud. "It just sort of . . . springs into action in March. Something of a tradition among Hares. The Bucks all get a bit mad for it."

"Mad for it?" Pete snorted. "There's the understatement o' the day. Most of 'em take a month's 'oliday so they can be at it, hammer an' tongs, mornin', noon an' night. An' it ain't like the Does are shrinkin' violets, neiver."

"For Jack's sake, Pete!" Gina scolded. "It's not like we become sex fiends for the month."

"Oh, yeah?" Pete challenged. "Go on then; name one Bunny born outside the month o' December, eh? Go on . . . No one? Yeah, I thought so," he said smugly.

"Oh, and Ursans are a model of chastity and restraint, are they?" challenged Gina.

"So Rachael is annoyed from all the attention?" Steve asked.

Everyone at the table looked somewhere else, except Rachael, who was looking at Steve as though she would manually dismember him.

Jess, who was sitting next to Rachael, nudged Angus. "Budge up, Angus."

"Whit fer?"

"I'm directly between Steve and Rache," she whispered urgently.

"I take it that's the wrong answer, then," Steve suggested.

"You would take it correctkly," Rachael snarled. "All o' bleedin' March an' not one Buck so much as pulls me tail!"

"Oh, boo-hoo," Gina scolded. "You know there is such a thing as having a meaningful relationship that lasts more than two hours."

"I'm nineteen, Mum," Rachael stated. "'At makes me an adult, an' 'at means I can do *as* I please wif *who* I please."

"*Whom* I please," Clare corrected.

"Shut up, you!" Rachael snapped. "Ya had to go to bloomin' Big Smoke to get it, din't ya! Wiffat bloody lie-barrian!"

"Oh, *very* nice, girls," Gina excoriated the twins. "Maybe we oughtta change your last name to MarchHarlot!"

Rachael continued, oblivious to her mother's sarcasm (or at least she pretended to be). "Then when I goes to Big Smoke for a bit o' tail . . ." Her voice drifted off into a quiet string of obscenities.

"Don't snap at me because the shoe's on the other foot for once," Clare said.

"I'm not snappin'!" Rachael shouted. She lowered her voice. "Just wanted a bit o' thingy, is all. Great furry bollocks! I'm so desperate, I'd almost bonk that oorang-ootang, Michael."

"Rachael Clare MarchHare!" Gina shouted. "For the hundredth time . . ."

Michael held up his hand. "Yes, that would be me. Sitting here in the same room, inches away."

"Yergh, Rache," Clare commented with disgust. "Try and maintain *some* dignity."

"Clare Rachael MarchHare!" Gina cried.

"Aherm," Linda and Steve cleared their throats pointedly. It was completely lost on the twins.

"You maintain dignity when ya ain't 'ad so much as a peek at o' Buck's bum through the entire bleedin' month o' March! Every Buck in town's been at it allatime an' they won' even touch me!"

"Can't blame them," Clare commented. "It's those last piercings you got."

"What's wrong wif 'em?" Rachael said defensively.

"Rachael's got new piercings?" asked Gina. "I didn't notice a new earring."

"Nor have I," Ignatius mentioned.

"They're not on her ears," Michael hinted.

"Oh? Where are they?" asked Gina.

"She got the idea from some of our goth regulars at the Rialto," said Michael and let it go at that.

"From the goths . . ." Steve looked at Rachael. "Rachael, I hope you didn't do anything foolish."

"I'm an adult; It's *my* body," Rachael said.

"Where?" asked Gina with a firmer tone.

"Tongue and lips." Rachael stuck out her tongue to display the stud.

"My word," Ignatius commented.

"Oh, lighten up, Ig," Jess countered.

"I don't see any studs on your lips," Steve mentioned to Rachael.

Linda leaned over and whispered. "Obviously not the lips on her mouth, you whackhead."

"Oh," Steve's eyes grew slightly with comprehension.

"Oh, for Jack's sake," Gina groaned, as the penny dropped. "I give up. I really do."

Ignatius nudged Linda and whispered "Where then?"

For fear of being overheard, Linda typed the ninth letter of the alphabet, capitalised, surrounded by round brackets, thusly – (I).

Ignatius' eyes flew open in astonishment. "You can't be serious!"

"Honestly, Ig," Jess dismissed, "as if it's a big deal or something."

"I certainly hope *you* haven't done anything so rash," Ignatius said.

"And why should *you* care?" asked Jess. "She's not the only one getting left out in the cold for months," she added as Angus pretended to be disinterested.

"Tell me about it," Gina grumbled. "Oh, sorry, *years* make that."

"Gina, I told ya, go to Big Smoke for a weekend," Pete urged. "It's not like the Kettle's gonna fall over if you're gone for a few days."

"I did that bit," Gina replied. "Got a broken heart and a missing daughter. No thanks."

Pete shrugged with a sigh. "Please yourself, girl."

Steve heard some footsteps ascending the stairs. "I have a pleasant bit of news, today."

"Could do with that," Gina said, eager to change the subject.

"Guess who's come to visit?" Steve said.

Desiree stepped through the door. "Surprise!" she shouted. "Hey girls! Getting any lately?"

Rachael jumped up. "I'll kill her!"

"Oo, wrong answer," Desiree said as she sprinted back out.

1230 – Rialto Kitchen

They had finally managed to restrain Rachael by having Pete sit on her lap.

"So what brings you back?" asked Geoff.

"Spring break at school," Desiree explained. "Just wanted to see all my good friends. I've got a few technical things I'd like to investigate as well."

"How is university?" asked Ignatius. "Burning the midnight oil, I presume?"

"Midnight oil would be a vacation," Desiree commented. "It's a rare night when I'm not up past two, studying my ass off, *and* I have intern work as well as classes. But it's only 'til August and then I'm done. Can I have the spare room at your place, Ig?" she asked.

"Of course," Ignatius replied. "Always welcome."

"Oh, by the way, Jess, I got a little something for you," Desiree told her, rummaging around in her bag and pulling out a cookbook.

"Shame you couldn't come up with a little something for Rache," Clare said with a smile.

"Shut it, you!" Rachael barked.

"Girls!" Pete and Gina reprimanded.

"Cooking for Morons?" exclaimed Jess reading the cover. "And just what the sif is *that* supposed to mean?"

"It's just a cookbook for people who aren't good cooks," Desiree answered plainly.

Jess opened the book to a random page. "I bloody well know how to boil an egg!" she remonstrated, slamming the book shut and looking put upon.

"Don't get your tail in a twist, Jess!" Desiree said defensively. "You don't *have* to be a moron to use the book. It's just the title."

Jess was not to be mollified. "I've managed to successfully boil eggs on dozens of occasions, thank you very much. Ig has even eaten them . . ." she grumbled.

"Pardon me for asking, but what's going on with Rache?" asked Desiree.

Linda got up. "I'm going down to the bar for a round. Desi? Care to help me?"

"Some nerve, implying I'm a moron . . ." Jess continued to grumble.

"Sorry, Linda," Desiree answered, "but I'm absolutely exhausted from the flight . . . Oh, f'sure."

The pair returned from the bar with a fresh (if premature) round and a well-informed Desiree.

"Erm, there's nothing left concerning business," Steve said. "Here's the schedule for the week." He handed out sheets to everyone.

Rachael squawked. "I've gotta work tonight? I can't work tonight!"

Steve was caught by surprise at her protest. "Why not?"

"It's the last night o' March," Rachael pleaded. "This is my last chance!"

"Would someone like to sub for Rache?" asked Steve.

"No, someone would not," Jess answered. She addressed Rachael. "You've had a dozen schedule changes this month and you've worked less than anyone else. Believe me when I say that I sympathise, but you have to pull your weight, especially today. We've got two children's Easter parties and then a reception. And you'll take off all of your jewellery for the children; the Easter Bunny does not wear chains on her ears."

"It's not fair!" Rachael protested. "Clare got three whole weeks off!"

"She took holiday that was due her and booked it months in advance," Jess countered. "And she has one week left for the year. You could have used holiday if you wanted."

"What about Desi? She's 'ad months off!" Rachael complained.

"Desi's not getting paid until she returns to the Partnership," Jess responded. "And she's across the Pond, at uni."

Desiree begged off. "Even if I wanted to sub tonight, I couldn't. I've been up all night travelling. I'd fall asleep."

"Can't I have 'oliday tonight?" beseeched Rachael, tears welling in her eyes. "Oh, please, please, please!"

Jess was unmoved. "No. You have to give some notice."

"I'll do the parties durin' the day, I just wanna have the evenin' off. An' I'll be a good li'l Easter Bunny, an' all, I swear! I'll watch my language in front o' the brats an' I'll be super nice to the li'l toerags, I promise! Oh, please!"

"You'll do all that, regardless, because it's your job. And the answer is still 'no'," Jess said plainly.

"Could we put it to a vote?" pleaded Rachael. "Motion to lemme 'ave tonight off as 'oliday."

Linda sighed. "Motion to let Rachael have off this evening."

"You mean to let Rachael *get* off this evening," Desiree grumbled.

Pete raised his hand. "I'll second."

"You will not, you great pillicock!" Gina scolded. "Let the girl pull her weight!"

"Gina, she works at the pub and the Rialto," Pete countered. "It ain't like she's been skivin' the past six months."

"She just wants to pull. Do you *want* our daughter to have illicit sex?"

"She's an adult," Pete countered. "She 'as the right."

"Not under *my* roof," Gina stated.

"Oh, *very* nice," Pete grumbled. "It's *our* daughter, but it's *your* roof. Look, if you don't approve, toss 'er out."

"Maybe I will," Gina threatened.

"An' I'll be right behind her," Pete added.

"Mum, Dad," Clare cut in, "let's stop now, before any of us say something we'll regret later."

"I think we've concluded any debate," Ignatius pointed out. "Let's have our vote, shall we? All in favour, aye?"

"Aye," Steve, Pete, Geoff, Ignatius, Angus, Michael, and Rachael raised their hands. Rachael counted the hands and groaned again.

Gina glowered at Pete.

Linda noted the votes. "Six and a half. All opposed, nay?" she prompted.

Desiree, Clare, Jess, Gina, Linda, Sandra and Slide raised their hands with a "Nay."

"Six and a half as well. It seems we have a tie," Linda stated.

"So, what 'appens now?" Rachael asked anxiously.

"The motion is neither carried nor denied," Ignatius stated.

"Then it's the status quo," Desiree said. "She works tonight."

"No, Rachael's fate is still undecided," Ignatius corrected. "We have no policy one way or the other concerning notice of holiday. The issue is still open."

"You're making this up as you go along, aren't you?" asked Desiree.

"Honestly, Desiree," Ignatius chided. "I'm hurt that you would suggest such a thing. Besides, Jess would catch me out immediately if I dared try."

Jess shrugged.

"Okay," Desiree conceded impatiently. "So how much more time do we have to waste on this?"

"We have to take another vote," Ignatius mentioned.

"But it'll just come out the same way, won't it?" asked Sandra. "Unless we have some sort of debate and someone changes their mind."

"Further debate *would* be a waste of time. It's hardly worth pointing out that the voting was made along, shall we say, party lines," Ignatius pointed out. "No, we must take another vote and the motion must be reworded or amended somehow that might make compromise. If I might be so bold, I motion that we allow Rachael holiday, contingent only upon someone volunteering to take her place."

"Second," Pete put his hand up.

"I'll second you," Gina threatened.

"Vote is for Rachael's holiday, pending a volunteer. All in favour, aye?"

Linda announced.

All the males, Linda and Clare raised their hands.

"We have a majority," Linda stated. "Motion carries. Any volunteers?"

Rachael pleaded. "C'mon fellas. I'll do a double for ya later. Oh, please, please!"

No one volunteered.

"So *now* we're settled?" Desiree said.

Ignatius sighed. "Yes, I'm afraid so." He turned to Rachael who was quietly crying on Pete's shoulder as he consoled her. "I'm sorry Rachael. I tried my best."

Rachael sniffed. "S'okay, Ig. I know ya did." She hid her head in Pete's chest.

"There, there, Rache," Pete consoled, stroking her head. "If mean ol' Gina'd let me go out, I woulda taken your shift for ya."

Gina rolled her eyes and shook her head. "We still have a pub to run, if you recall!"

"Have a heart! Ya won din't ya?" Pete said, almost scolding. "Ig, what's on your agenda tonight?"

"I do actually have a second job," Ignatius reminded him.

"Oh, what's 'at then?" asked Pete.

"I'm the mayor. Remember?" Ignatius answered. "PD, paperwork, that kind of thing?"

"Oh, right," Pete grimaced. "Sorry. Slide, Sandra? Why couldn't one o' you have taken her shift?"

"We've, erm . . ." Slide waffled a bit.

"Oh, I nearly forgot," Steve interrupted. "I left the Riding Hood outfit in the office, just as you asked. You can pick it up on your way out."

"So that's that question out the way," Pete mentioned, as Sandra and Slide smiled nervously. "Angus?"

"Oh, erm . . . got a date," Angus answered, somewhat abruptly.

"Ave ya? Anyone we know?" asked Pete.

Angus stared hard at the table and suddenly answered. "Na. Ye wadna ken her a'tall."

Pete shrugged. "Steve, why din't you volunteer to take her shift?"

"I'm terribly sorry," Steve apologised, "but Linda and I have plans as well. I would have done, otherwise."

"Steve, you work too hard as it is," Linda chastised, albeit lightly. "You're burning the candle at both ends and you're going to go up in a puff of smoke if you don't slow down."

"She *is* right, Steve," Sandra added. "You do all of the organizational work and then you spend just as many nights as any one else working at the bar or security."

"I do enjoy it," Steve rationalised.

"I hafta agree wif the girls on this Steve. It don't matter if ya do enjoy it," Pete said. "Ya gotta make time for yourself. An' your best girl as well." He turned to Geoff. "Geoff, ya great Swine – why din't you volunteer?"

"Quite simple," Geoff answered. "I'm already working as bar staff tonight, as is Michael."

1230 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

"Oh, c'mon, Si, it's been ages," Grace groaned. "And it's the last day of March."

"No, Grace. You know what Father Gabriel would do to us if we got caught."

"So?" Grace dismissed. "It's not snowing anymore. Spring is just around the corner."

"And what if you get pregnant?"

"I won't get pregnant."

"How do you know that?" asked Simon.

"Cause I know. I just had my, erm . . . thingy."

"Ah, yes. That would be the famous rhythm method," Simon said sarcastically.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" asked Grace.

"Grace, do you know what they call couples that use the rhythm method?"

"No, what?"

"Parents," Simon said.

"You could pull out before you finish."

"Do I have to tell you what they call couples that use the withdrawal method as well?"

"Yeah, yeah, all right. But can't we do *something*? I'm absolutely gagging for it. You know what it's like for Hares in March."

"You've only got the one day left," Simon said.

"Si, it's not like it just shuts itself off at midnight!"

Simon did feel his resolve weakening, not that it was that strong to begin with. For the entire month of March, Grace had been constantly pestering him for sex. He recalled the time on the rooftop so many months ago. Even more, he remembered the awkward silence on the topic for the following week, when it was pointedly not mentioned and he awaited anxiously the announcement from Grace that she was pregnant. He counted it as one of the few times in his life that he actually got away with doing something spectacularly bad.

Yet, in hindsight, he didn't consider it as all that bad. They hadn't hurt anyone, although they took the risk of doing so, and it certainly felt nice enough at the time.

He had, during their stay at the vicarage, discussed the topic of premarital sex at great length with Father Gabriel and had made it a point to do so while Grace was busy elsewhere. Simon found it remarkably easy to discuss almost anything with the old priest without fear of judgement or admonishment. He would ask a question and Father Gabriel would answer it or state that he simply didn't know, if such was the case.

It was the good priest who had informed Simon of the various means of birth control and how effective they were and more importantly, how ineffective they could be. He went on at some length about the possibilities of disease and the other dangers of sex outside of marriage. Simon did actually know a good deal already from school but his formal education seemed to have a few blank spots and, at the time of its presentation, he couldn't bring himself to ask the rather stern instructor at his school anything that came to mind, particularly in front of his peers who might think less of him for his sexual ignorance.

Father Gabriel had also instructed him in some of the finer arts of remaining chaste, including engaging in some distracting activity such as working or practicing a musical instrument. Simon had once heard that a cold bath was a good idea, but Father Gabriel had said that it wasn't actually very healthy. He had even, with reluctance, recommended taking 'matters into one's own hands' as being a preferable method to taking a cold bath.

During one of their last little talks, Simon had hinted that Grace was pressing him for sex, but he wasn't quite sure that Father Gabriel had understood what was being said.

"Simon," the priest had said, "there's a Bible on a stand in the hall; I'm sure you've seen it. It's quite large, has a white cover with some roses on the spine. Be a good lad and fetch it for me."

Simon had done as he was told. Although normally, he would have felt offended by being asked to 'fetch' something like a pet dog, he had known that Father Gabriel had said it in ignorance and so had dismissed the slight. As he had been retrieving the tome, he had felt some apprehension that some proselytizing might be in store. Up until that point, there had been a more or less tacit agreement that Father Gabriel would not try to make his faith theirs and, thus far, he had lived up to that treaty.

When Simon had returned to the room with the Book, he had handed it to Father Gabriel.

"This is one of my favourite Bibles," the priest had said. "Now, I've never pressed you into reading it. If you'd like to, that's fine. If not, that's fine also. I'm here to help you, not to convert you. But the Bible does contain some great wisdom."

"Yes?" Simon had said.

"And I want you to make a little promise to me. If it gets to the point where you think you and Grace can no longer stand against temptation, I want you to open this to the first book, which is Genesis, and read chapter 38, verse 9. Will you promise me that? Jot that down, will you?"

Simon had jotted down the passage. "Erm, what do I do with the note?"

"We'll use it as a bookmark. Here, hand it to me."

"How are you going to find . . ." Simon had stopped short when he had seen the pages of the text. "Oh, right, it's in Braille. And it's got the written text as well."

"Yes, quite useful. Or it would be if I had more people come to visit, but beside the point," Father Gabriel had said as he slipped the piece of paper in as a bookmark. "Took me ages to get my hands on a copy. Right, so I've bookmarked the passage so you can find it easily. Now, will you promise?"

"All right, Father," Simon agreed. "I promise."

Simon had then returned the Book back to its stand.

That particular discussion had been over a month ago. On this last day of March, Grace was getting more physical in her displays of affection and Simon knew that the time had come. He desperately wanted Grace in the absolute worst possible way and he knew that Grace wanted him as well. He wondered what words in the Book could possibly sway their feelings on something they both felt so strongly about.

He took Grace by the hand, went into the hall and opened the Bible.

"Si, what's all this about?" asked Grace.

"Father Gabriel said if I knew we were going to do it, that I should read one little passage before we did."

Her expression brightened. "So we're gonna do it? Honestly?"

"Have to admit, I'm up for it. But I did promise I'd do this first, so . . ." He found the bookmark still there and opened to the appointed page. Therein, he found a pack of six little sachets of plastic.

"What're those?" asked Grace.

Simon picked them up and held them to the light. "They're . . . they're condoms."

"What, like mustard and all?"

"No, Grace, not condiments. *Condoms*. They offer very good protection against pregnancy and disease – not that the latter concerns us. Anyway, he must've put them there, knowing I'd need them."

"What a decent bloke," Grace said. "Well, you kept your promise; let's go get our tails round each other."

"Not yet, I didn't read the passage." Simon looked at the note with the chapter and verse. "Thirty eight, verse four, five, six . . ."

Grace followed Simon's finger down the page to where it came to the desired verse and they both began to read.

"Claude Baughs!" Simon ejaculated. "That poor bastard!"

"Just for that? Poor sod!" Grace proclaimed.

"I think that's a different story, actually," Simon mentioned.

"Is it?"

"I seem to remember him mentioning it one day, yes. So, erm . . . still interested?"

Grace thought for a second. "Nah," she shook her head. "Must admit, the moment's gone."

"Not exactly in the mood, myself, anymore. Let's have some tea and we can cuddle a bit."

Simon put the condoms back in the Book and slammed it shut on its stand.

01APR2002 Monday

0045 – Rialto Basement

The Rialto had closed over two hours ago and the paid staff had long since gone home, leaving a very inebriated Rachael and her ostensible admirer, Michael Robinson alone in the building. She had managed to corner him in one of the darker recesses of the basement near a large purple settee.

Michael had made no secret of his admiration to Rachael in the past and at first glance, one would think her sudden interest in him would be quite welcome.

However, as is usually the case when one party is deeply intoxicated (as Rachael was) and the other party is completely sober (as Michael was), the glamorous appeal of the former to the latter fades rather quickly. The slurred speech and boorish behaviour that intoxication brings to most will make even the most attractive person look witless and plain, unless the other party happens to be equally inebriated.

Michael, as mentioned earlier, was completely unebriated as he recalled the numerous minor injuries he had received at her hands when she had been sober and merely in a romantic mood. He began to wonder if his own personal safety might be at risk now that she was roaring drunk and unlikely to take 'no' as an answer.

"Y'fancy me, dontcha? I seen y'lookin' at me allatime. Like my ickle cottontail?" Rachael turned around and lewdly waggled her tail at him.

"Erm, yeah. It looks very . . ." he searched for an appropriate adjective, "cotton-like."

"An' me? Fancy me?"

Michael wanted to tread carefully here. He wanted to put her off just a little without being totally offensive. He briefly considered picking his nose but decided against it.

"Erm . . . Yeah, sure," Michael replied and instantly regretted it.

"Y'got nice teeth," she said, grabbing his mouth.

"Thanboo," he replied.

"Couldn't get no biggah, I s'pose?"

"Ermmm, noorp," he shook his head.

"Ey, get your kit off an' 'op onto that settee 'ere," she pointed.

"What for?" he asked.

"Wha' for? Wha' for!" she was practically shouting. "Is nearly enda March an' I ain' 'ad a decent seein' to as o' yet, tha's wha' for! 'Bout thirty-one laps behind!" She pushed him onto the settee and sat on his lap.

"Yeah. Tha's me. March . . . Rachael MarchHare. March is shaggin' month for 'Ares – 'cept no one's . . . oh, sod it. 'Nough talkin'. Get your kit off an' le's get on wifit."

"I'm not sure I want to," he ventured, although he was still concerned for his safety. Her physical approach was a reminder of just how strong she was.

"Don' wanna? Burry Fullocks! Don' wanna?" Rachael grabbed his head and kissed him heavily. "Still don' wanna? Monkey boy?"

"Could I go now, please?" he asked.

"After we boink, erm, bonk. Shag. C'mon, get it off." She grabbed his shirt and ripped it off effortlessly.

"Bloody hell!" he yelped.

"Get 'em trousers off!" she demanded.

"I can't, your sitting on them," he said by way of an excuse.

Rachael looked down. "Oh, erm, right."

She stood up, slowly and unsteadily. Seizing the opportunity, he immediately bolted to the stairs. Rachael, being a Hare, caught up with him instantly, tackled him, hauled him over her shoulder and dumped him back down on the couch. "An' where d'y'think you're goin' eh?"

"Rache, just let me go, please."

"I toldja. After I get a proper seein' to."

"Erm . . . what about protection?" he protested.

Rachael ignored his objection. "Oy, you're a shy one, bless your li'l cotton socks – an' get 'em off as well. Don't do shag wif socks." She picked him up by his legs and pulled off his trousers and socks. She turned around. "Unzip me. An' don' run 'way again."

Michael tentatively reached up and pulled the zip down, fearing for his wellbeing from the adamant Lepun. The dress sagged down and Rachael yanked it off, revealing her body in her underwear. "Like whatcha see . . . monkey-boy?"

Michael nodded, more from fear rather than actual personal opinion, but he did find her body appealing, if not a bit unusual.

Rachael pulled off her bra, grabbed his head and pulled him to her breasts. "Ow 'bout this, then?"

"Ibverysof," he mumbled from deep within her cleavage.

"Mmm. Goo'boy," she said. "Now, get 'em pants off. Ne'er mind, I'll do it for ya." She grabbed his pants by the elastic and with a tug of her claws, ripped the material off as she forced him into a kiss.

Rachael instinctively reached down to fondle him as she kissed him and Michael, despite his fear, was becoming aroused. Her eyes opened a little and she broke off to get a clearer view. Unconvinced from her current perspective, she held Michael away from her, looked down and visually inspected her target. "Great bloody bloomin' furries. Tha's some . . . kinda . . . weddin' . . . tac . . . kle . . ."

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she slumped forward, unconscious. Michael managed to catch her and exhaled deeply in relief. "I know I'm not a religious man, but – ta for that," he said as he looked upward. Even though, for all practical purposes he had just been the victim of a sexual assault, he felt compelled to do something for her besides leave her naked on the basement floor. With no small effort, he carefully laid her down on the settee. There was a spare packing blanket nearby which he dusted off and pulled over her to keep her warm. He then put on his trousers and shirt (what was left of it) and began to depart. Just as he was heading back up the stairs, he had a thought. Michael didn't consider himself a vindictive person but he did think it would only be fair, after his treatment at Rachael's hands, for him to have a little fun at her expense. He found a pen and some scrap paper and scribbled a note. He then rolled the note into a scroll and put it where she would find it in her bra, which was on the ground. Taking his torn pants, and risking the fact that he might wake her, he carefully tucked them into her knickers.

"That should do," he whispered with a sly smile.

0900 – Black Kettle Pub

"Anyone seen Rache?" asked Clare of Pete. "She was supposed to close last night, but she wasn't in the flat this morning. It's nearly nine now and she's nowhere to be found."

"I ain't seen 'er," answered Pete. "She hasn't been 'ere. Didja check the Rialto?"

"Why would she spend the night in the Rialto?" asked Clare.

"Dunno," Pete shrugged. "Why's she do half the barmy stuff she does to begin wif? Go have a goosey."

Clare shrugged and headed off to the Rialto. After searching the building, the only non-resident she found was Paula the Poodle, watching the monitors in the security room.

"Paula? Did you see Rache last night?"

"I got in after closing, Clare. I haven't seen anyone except you. Is something wrong?"

"Rache's gone missing. Can't find her anywhere. She was working last night, but she wasn't at the flat this morning."

"Sorry. Haven't seen her."

Clare excused herself and headed back to the basement, the concern for her sister's whereabouts growing deeper. On her way to the cabinet, she heard a little grunt. Turning to find the source of the noise in the expansive basement, she saw a large, sister-shaped lump on a purple settee, covered by a shabby moving blanket, with a pair of jewellery-bedecked ears protruding. On the floor were several articles of feminine clothing.

Clare bent down to pick up the bra and noticed a little slip of paper rolled up inside it. Checking to see that Rachael was still asleep, she silently unrolled the little scroll and read the note. The first time she read it, it didn't make much sense. The second time, the general idea sank in. She looked at Rachael, the scattered clothes and read the note one last time.

"Snrrrk!" she slapped her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. As quickly and as silently as possible, Clare ran to the portal, back through The tré and off to the Black Kettle.

"Find Rache, didja?" asked Pete.

She nodded, trying to control her mirth.

"Care to share this source of amusement?"

"You know that purple settee in the basement of the Rialto?"

"Yeah, that matty old thing we been tryin' to get rid of?"

"She was there, asleep."

"Yeah?" Pete shrugged. "What's so funny 'bout that?"

"You know how she was going on about not getting any for March and she wanted off so she could go pull a Buck?"

"Right."

"So she's laying on the settee with a blanket over her. And her clothes are scattered on the ground, around the settee."

"Yeah, so she kipped out on the settee," Pete said. "Probably too knackered to make it home."

"Pete, we're a five-minute walk from The tré. And she could've kipped out in the office in the Rialto if she wanted. She didn't stay there because she was tired."

"Oh? Why then?" asked Pete.

"Because she got a seeing to."

"In the Rialto? There ain't no Bucks there, only skins."

"Exactly!" said Clare, elaborating the point.

"What? Are you suggestin' our Rache – Miss I-don't-do-oorang-ootangs – got 'er tail round a skin?"

"I *know* she did. It was Michael!"

"Ow'd ya know 'at?"

"I found this note that he left in her bra, sitting on the floor," Clare answered, handing him the tiny missive.

He read it once and looked a bit confused. "Wha's he mean . . . Oh, I see. Heh. Hehmm. Eww, diya!" Pete grew a wide grin. "Ho! She'll never hear the end o' this one!"

Gina came down at that moment on some other business.

"What's so amusing?" Gina asked. "I could use a laugh about now."

Pete briefed her on the situation and handed her the note.

Gina gave the note a few reads. "There's a clever lad! He must've finally sussed her all out and now the shoe's on the other foot. I'd like to see her face when she reads this."

"Well, what're we waitin' on," Pete said. "Let's go."

0930 – Rialto Basement

Rachael was still fast asleep on the settee.

"You wake 'er," Pete said. "You're 'er sister."

"She's dangerous to wake," Clare said. "Why don't you do it?"

"Oh, for the luvva Jack, I'll do it," Gina stepped forward and gave Rachael a gentle shake. "Rache? Rache, girl. Get up!"

A hand swung out from the covers and landed squarely on Gina's nose.

"Great furry . . ." Gina gasped, clutching her nose.

"I told you she was dangerous to wake," Clare said.

Satisfied that her nose was not injured, Gina gave Rachael another shake.

"C'mon, girl. Get up! Time for work!"

There was a rather rude grunt as a response.

"Right," Gina said. She took the blanket and yanked it off Rachael, revealing her in only her knickers and the torn pants that Michael had tucked into them from the previous evening.

Clare and Pete were beside themselves as they contained their laughter and had to support each other from falling over. Gina noticed Michael's pants a few seconds later and had to hold her mouth to keep from laughing out loud.

"Gimme back!" protested Rachael, reaching for the stolen moving blanket.

"Get up," Gina ordered in as stern a voice as she could muster.

Rachael looked up, squinting. "Stop it. Gotta 'eadache."

"At ain't all ya got, from the looks o' things," Pete added.

"Eh, go on. Lea'me'lone," Rachael muttered.

"Get up, girl! Can't have topless Does wandering round our place of business," Gina pretended to reprimand.

"Topless?" Rachael asked. She looked down at her chest and noticed she was uncovered. "Oh, right." She looked about and saw her bra lying nearby. Covering her breasts with her arm, she got up to grab her garment and noticed the note, which Clare had thoughtfully replaced. Opening the note, she squinted to read. "Can't read this. Wha's it say?" she said handing it to Pete.

"Sure ya want me to?" Pete asked.

"Eh, go on," Rachael said.

"Awrite, then. 'My dearest Honey Bunny – Thank you for your tender love. You captured my 'eart when you said you'd love me forever an' you wanted to marry an' 'ave my children. I'll meet you again tomorrow night an' we'll run off to elope, just like we planned – your ickle monkey-boy, Michael."

"Michael? . . . Michael?" She asked, her face in a fog. Her eyes wandered in thought for just a moment. Then she rolled her eyes in at least partial

recollection and sank her face in her hands, ignoring the fact that she was still topless. "Blood . . . ee . . . 'ell."

1000 – Rialto Kitchen

"I swear, I don't remember nuffin' 'bout shaggin' Michael an' I sure don't remember nuffin' 'bout no marriage!" Rachael protested. "Cor, my brain hurts."

Desiree handed her a tall glass of liquid. "Drink this," she ordered.

"What for?" asked Rachael.

"It'll help get rid of your headache," Desiree promised.

"All of it, quick as you can," Ignatius added. "I've taken it before. It works quite well."

Rachael downed it all.

She exhaled after the draught and wiped her mouth. "I do remember one thin', for certain," Rachael recalled.

"What's 'at, then?" asked Pete.

"I dunno what them rumours about 'umans is," Rachael paused and then belched loudly. "But they're definitely true."

1400 – The tré

Desiree and Ignatius entered The tré to find Steve waiting for them in the box seat.

"Oh, hey, Steve," Desiree said, surprised. "Didn't think you liked the Portrayals."

"I have PD today," Steve announced, rising from his seat. "I'm just waiting for . . ."

Jess came tearing out of the basement, "Sorry I'm late, Steve, c'mon hurry!" she called, hustling to the backstage.

"Later," Steve said, waving to Desiree and Ignatius as the children from the school started to pour into the room.

Ignatius pulled out his watch. "Hmm. I wonder why Jess is in such a state? She still has a few minutes." Shrugging as he pocketed his watch, he took his seat.

Backstage, Jess was picking out a mask for Steve.

"Here, this one should do," Jess said, helping him strap on a mask that just covered the top half of his face.

"Oh, ta, Jess," Steve said, holding still.

"Now we'll have to get some ears," she rummaged through the bin and pulled out a set, snapping them on his head. "And a tail." Reaching for the rack on the wall, which contained dozens of clip-on tails, she picked out a large ball of fluff, and clipped it onto Steve's belt. "Do you know your lines?"

"Yes, all memorised," Steve answered. "Calm down, Jess, I'm fine. And where's Clare, by the way."

"Eep!" Jess' eyes flew open in panic. "Clare! Where is she?"

"I'm right here," Clare said, appearing from around the corner.

"Why are you so nervous, Jess?" asked Steve. "Usually you're the cool one."

"Nervous? What makes you think I'm nervous?" asked Jess.

"The fact that you're wringing your tail is a bit of a giveaway," Steve pointed out.

Jess looked at her hands, which were indeed, twisting her brush. She rolled her eyes and dropped her tail. "All right, let's take our places," she mumbled, walking off.

Clare and Steve looked at each and shrugged, following her to the stage.

*Opening scene: Hare 1 and Hare 2, munching on carrots,
stage left. A garden, stage right.*

Narrator

Greetings to all to whom these presents may appear. Hear now the story of the Garden's Hare.

Hare 1

There is so little to eat here – I think I shall go to the farmer's garden. I see there is much fine food there.

Desiree, having seen the play before, decided to look around at the children as she found them irresistibly cute. She noticed a little Kit Fox pulling on a young Badger's tail. He ignored it at first. *Good self-discipline, ignoring that,* thought Desiree, *especially for a Badger.*

Hare 2

No, I should not, for there is a vixen that lives nearby. And if she should catch you, she will eat you.

Hare 1

But many others have eaten there. I have seen them. Even you have done so.

Hare 2

'Tis true when I was young and knew not better. But I would not risk it now.

Hare 2 exits stage right

Hare 1

Feh, what does that fool know. I have seen a thousand eat in the farmer's garden and live to tell. I shall go.

The Kit pulled the young Melan's tail one too many times and he turned around and snarled pretty ferociously for a five year old. Instantly, Dawn RoseMearh appeared, queried the young Badger who pointed to the Vixen, who then pointed to a nearby human who had been blissfully unaware of what had taken place. Dawn picked up the human by the arm and led her out of the audience.

Narrator

And so our Hare does dare to venture to the farmer's garden.

Hare 1 [*goes to stage left, the garden and picks up handfuls of carrots*]

Ah, here is food galore. Now I shall eat well.

[Vixen creeps up behind Hare 1]

Audience

Look behind you!

Vixen [*Pounces on Hare 1 and holds in clutches*]

Forgive me, Hare for your demise, but I have kits to feed.

Hare 1

But I have seen so many dine here and not be caught. Such injustice to me alone!

Vixen

Imprudent Hare, the good luck of other trespassers does not excuse your own foolishness. I only hope that my kits do not digest the idiocy within you.

One or two might cheat a fox

And live to tell the tale

But if you wish to test your luck

Know the price to fail.

Narrator

Thus the fate of the Garden's Hare.

Draw from it what you may.

Until next we meet – good day!

The Portrayal had ended and Desiree gestured urgently for Ignatius to follow. She pulled him along, before the crowd of children had gotten a good start.

"See here, Desi, what's all this about?" protested Ignatius.

"There's a little Kit Vixen, she'll be coming out in a second. Be sure to stop her."

"Why?"

"She framed another kid," Desiree said.

"What?"

"And call Dawn over here," Desiree demanded.

"Desi, you'll have to tell me what's going on first. These are children of my constituents; I can't just apprehend them like criminals."

Desiree leaned over and whispered in Ignatius' ear, all the while keeping an eye on the children, as they filed past. "There, that one," she whispered.

"Oh, dear, that's one of Sam's Kits. She'll flay me alive for this. Are you *absolutely* sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure, I'm sure," Desiree whispered.

"Chris, dear? Could you stay behind for just a second?" Ignatius politely requested of the Kit Fox.

The little Kit stopped in her tracks. She turned around, and said, "But I hafta go to school, now. Miss Brandon will be angry with me!"

"That's all right, I'll explain to Miss, erm, Brandon later. Now just wait here," Ignatius said. He caught Dawn's eye and beckoned her over. She came over with the little human child in tow.

"Yes, Ignatius?"

"I think there may have been a misunderstanding," Ignatius said as politely as he could muster. "There is some evidence that you may have apprehended an innocent bystander, rather than the actual culprit."

"Have I?" asked Dawn.

"Could I speak with this young lady, here?" asked Desiree. "And maybe we can get to the bottom of this."

Dawn appeared a bit dubious, but nodded her consent, regardless.

Desiree looked at the little human, who was staring at the ground submissively, with her fingers in her mouth. Desiree squatted down and turned the girl's head up. "Hey, what's your name, hawt?"

The little girl looked dubiously at all the adults and looked back down again.

"Hey," Desiree said gently, pulling her head back up. "I asked you a question; what's your name?"

"Mini," the girl replied reluctantly.

"Mini? Mini, did you pull Amos' tail?" Desiree asked softly.

Mini looked at all the adults and looked back down.

Desiree rolled her eyes. She took Mini's chin one last time and held it gently, yet firmly, so that Mini was forced to look up. "Mini? Did you pull his tail?"

Mini paused for a moment. "Can't say," she replied.

"Why can't you say?" asked Desiree.

"Be a telltale," replied Mini.

"She's a liar!" objected Chris, pointing to Mini.

"Is she?" asked Dawn of the Kit. "And what did she lie about?"

"She, erm, said, erm, I pulled his, erm tail," Chris answered.

"She said nothing of the sort," Dawn said. "Do *you* know who pulled Amos' tail?"

Chris pointed to Mini. "She did."

"Did you know, Chris," Ignatius explained, "that it's a bigger crime to lie, than to pull a tail."

"Izzit?" asked the Kit, concern growing on her face.

At this point, Jess, Clare and Steve had come into view.

"That's right, kiddo," Desiree replied. "And Mini, here, might not grass, but I sure will. And I saw everything from start to finish."

"You did? You would?" asked Chris.

"In a Big Smoke minute," Desiree replied. "Wanna change your story?"

Chris looked down. "I s'pose so," she muttered.

Dawn looked at Chris. "Chris, did you pull Amos' tail?"

"Yes, Miss," Chris grumbled.

"And you tried to blame poor Mini for it," Dawn said reproachfully. "Well, your mother will have something to say about that, I'm sure."

"If I know Sam," Jess muttered with a snarl, "it'll probably be a pat on the head with milk and biscuits."

Dawn ignored the remark. "Now, Chris, apologise to Mini."

"It's not fair!" shouted Chris. She pointed at Jess. "Mum says you're queer, Aunt Jess, an' you're doin' this just to be mean to me!" Then she pointed to Ignatius. "And she says you're queer 'cause you're always hangin' about with skins! An' you're teachin' 'em to read which is 'gainst the law!"

"Chris! That was *very* rude! You apologise this instant!" Dawn scolded.

"I'm sorry," Chris whimpered, pawing at the ground with her boot.

"Mini, you run along to the school. I'll tell Miss Liam that you didn't do anything wrong," Dawn ordered.

"Mini," Desiree called to her. Mini turned around to face Desiree, although she was looking at her shoes, rather than her face. Desiree grabbed her chin

once more and held her head up so she could look her in the eye. "Mini, you've got to stick up for yourself. If you don't, no one else will. Don't you understand that?"

Mini shook her head.

"Mini," Desiree said with a sigh, "if someone says you did wrong when you didn't, you have to speak up. When someone says you told a lie when you told the truth, you have to say you told the truth. Don't you know that?"

Mini shook her head again.

Desiree shut her eyes in defeat and let go of Mini's chin. "Okay. Get your mother to explain it to you. Now, go on to school. I hope you learn something there." She sighed in defeat and stood up as Mini trudged off. "You sure didn't learn it here." Desiree turned back to the group and shook her head, saying, "Six years old and dumb as a box of rocks."

"She's not six," Dawn mentioned. "She's nine."

"Nine!" Desiree said, astounded. "And she got cowed by a Fox of, what, seven?"

"Six," said Chris with a slightly wicked smile as she held up six fingers.

"Yeah, well, hope you live to see seven, kiddo," Jess commented.

"Jessica FærFyxe!" Ignatius admonished. "It is not our policy to threaten children for pulling tails and telling fibs."

"Chris, run off to school," Dawn ordered the Kit. "We'll talk about your punishment when we get there."

Chris stomped off, kicking and scowling as she went.

"Dear me, quite the tempest in the teapot," Steve remarked.

"Excuse me?" Desiree said.

"Honestly, Desiree. Getting the mayor involved because of a little tail-pull?" Steve said dismissively.

"Oh, and we're just supposed to sit by and let Mini get framed to protect Sam's tender sensibilities?" asked Jess.

"It's not like she'll have a criminal record," Steve said. "And who's Sam?"

"No, Desiree did the right thing," Dawn admitted. "These children are at an age where every little thing makes an impression. If I knowingly let Chris frame Mini – even for this tiny infraction – then Mini *and* Chris learn that humans can be subjugated. And I admit, my own prejudices let it happen. Amos pointed to Chris and Chris pointed to Mini. Subconsciously, I assumed the human was the guilty party."

"No you didn't," Desiree countered. "You just followed your gut and, like anyone else, you made the occasional mistake."

"But still a mistake," Dawn said. "If you'll excuse me . . ." With that, she departed for the school.

"And who is Sam?" asked Steve again.

"Chris' mother and my sister," Jess responded. "Now that her darling little angel has landed in hot water, she'll start blaming everyone else. I swear, Ig, if Sam says one word to even the juniors, let me know and I'll straighten her out in no time."

"Tempting, but no," Ignatius declined. "Apart from it being my responsibility and *not* yours, I hasten to add, I rather feel it might escalate to violence."

"Dammit, Ig, you never let me have any fun," Jess moped.

1800 – Rialto Bar

The Rialto was opening for the evening and even though Rachael wasn't scheduled to work, she was there, regardless, hoping that Michael would show up. She helped her sister at the bar to keep herself from becoming nervous or bored. Her memory was a little foggy on the details of the night before but she did recall one thing about him that she would not soon forget.

Clare approached Rachael when there was a brief lull in orders. "Why are you so concerned? I'd've thought you'd never want to see him again."

"Dunno, honestly," Rachael said.

"Don't you?" asked Clare. "You're not going to an awful lot of effort to avoid him. In fact, and I'm not trying to be funny, but it seems you're going out of your way to make sure you do see him."

Rachael moved her mouth to the side in thought. "Just wanna clear a few things up, is all."

Clare shrugged and went back to her customers.

Rachael was involved with her thoughts as she kept herself busy cleaning.

"Hello, my little carrot bandit!"

She looked up. There was Michael with a big smile and a little bouquet.

"These are for you," he said with a smile.

Rachael was a bit flummoxed but she took the flowers. "Erm, ta for that," she mumbled.

"Are you ready?" Michael asked enthusiastically.

"Ready?" Rachael asked. "For what?"

"To go. You said you wanted to leave this place. To have someone take you away. Remember?"

"Erm . . ."

"You *do* remember?" Michael prompted, his voice having a slight emotional urgency to it.

Clare had actually stopped serving her customers and was pretending to do something else while she witnessed the drama unfold. *The Partnership should share in this*, she thought. Flipping down her microphone, she said, "Security, camera on Rache at the bar." She looked up to see the tiny red light on the camera come on as it slowly panned to the scene.

"Erm . . ." said Rachael.

"You said you loved me. You said you wanted to marry me and have my children." Michael was becoming more emotional by the moment. "Or don't you remember?"

"Look, we need to talk," Rachael said.

"Rache? What does this mean? Weren't you serious?"

"Look, Michael . . ."

"So – you were just playing with my affections, then, weren't you?" Michael asked. Although he was keeping his voice at a reasonable level, he was plainly angry.

"No, that ain't *exactly* what I was playin' wif . . ."

"You were just using me for my body, then?" Michael asked heatedly.

"Coulda, done yeah, but . . . "

"You . . . you *lied* to me?"

"Can't actually remember . . . " Rachael mumbled.

"So, I waited all of those months, suffered all of those minor injuries, thinking that you truly loved me. And it was all just for a frolic so you could go brag to all of your friends. What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Erm, don't actually know what to say . . . "

"Well, *I* know what to say!" He stepped close to the bar, grabbed her head and kissed her long, slow and hard.

The whole bar stopped and watched. As the kiss progressed, a few whistles and whoops of appreciation came from spectators in the crowd. Rachael's hands moved up and then down and then up again as they seemed to have conflicting orders from different parts of her psyche, undecided in their attempt to either remove or encourage the embrace.

"Get that simian off!" screeched her superego.

"Ang about, give it a bit o' time – it's not such a bad kiss," suggested her libido.

"E does love ya," suggested her subconscious. "So what if 'e's a chimp. They all are, end o' the day."

"Let's just use 'im for gettin' a tail round, then we'll dump 'im," said the id.

"Erm..," said the ego.

All things considered, Rachael did feel as though she were the offending party and, despite the fact that she did pretty much as she pleased in the affairs of love, she felt culpable and, thus, obliged in some small way to let him have the moment.

After a good solid minute, Michael broke the kiss off.

"And what I want to say is . . . " he continued.

He kissed her again. This time, Rachael's hands were of a more decisive approach. The various elements of her psyche (except for the superego, which was sulking in the corner) decided that this Michael person was not so horrible after all. Despite lacking in fur, tail and ears, he had other assets (in addition to the flowers). With this in mind, her hands – if hands had a mind of their own – lightly grasped his head and held him in the kiss. The whole bar was still and silent. Those that had wandered in were immediately captured by the presentation. Another minute passed.

"And . . . erm . . . that would be what, exactly?" Rachael asked with a breathless gasp.

"April fool," Michael said with a wink.

Rachael looked at him with a sustained misty passion for a few seconds more, but as the clouds of ardour soon began to dissipate, the import of his message began to sink in. She blinked. Her brow furrowed as she tightened her grasp on the front of his shirt, pulling him further and further over the counter.

"You . . . *You . . . Git!*"

Everyone was so busy holding their stomach laughing or applauding that they hardly noticed as she dragged him over the bar. Clare was concerned for his safety and was ready to spring to his aid when they fell to the floor. She

then noticed that Rachael was laughing along with Michael, although hers was more out of relief than mirth, as she covered her forehead with her palm.

2000 – Rialto Rooftop

Rachael and Michael were alone on the rooftop terrace of the Rialto, passing a cigarette back and forth.

"You'll forgive me for askin'," she began. "But . . . erm . . ."

"Did we do it?" he prompted.

"In so many words, yeah. So, erm . . . did we?"

"You're being a lot more polite than you were yesterday."

"C'mon, Michael. Don't leave me on tenterhooks."

Michael took a drag. "No. You kissed me. Practically ripped my clothes off. Not practically either. You *did* rip my shirt off . . . and my pants as well."

"Figured 'at. They were tucked in me knickers this mornin'. Didja leave 'em there?"

He smiled and nodded, handing the fag back to Rachael.

"So all 'at stuff wif the flowers an' all. It was all just a wind-up then?" Rachael asked. "I din't promise to marry ya, ner 'ave your Kits an' all?"

"No, Rachael," Michael admitted. "You didn't actually promise me any of those things."

Rachael exhaled in relief. "Thank Jack fer that. An' you're sure we din't get our tail round?"

"If you mean by that, did we have sexual relations, then the answer is definitely no," Michael clarified. "Can I make that any clearer?"

"No, no, I get the picture," Rachael said. "Just a bleedin' relief, is all."

"Yeah, for you and me both," Michael said casually.

Rachael gave Michael a look of confusion. "For you? Why'd it be a relief for you?"

"Sure you want to hear this?" asked Michael.

"Yeah, I would, in fact," Rachael answered curtly. "I thought you were dyin' to get in me knickers."

"I'll admit, that was a part of the attraction," Michael acknowledged. "But let's take a look at our relationship thus far.

"First, the only signs of affection I receive from you result in contusions or lacerations. Second, you don't explain any of this behaviour to me at all, expecting me to read your mind. Third, when you finally do want some action, you won't take 'no' for an answer. So tell me, Rachael, do you think this would be a good basis for a long-term relationship?"

"Right, first of all," Rachael countered, "if you're such a crybaby ya can't take a few rounds o' 'nips an' cuffs', ya can always say 'enough' an' 'at's an' end to it. Mum an' Dad made that clear to ya – I heard 'em tellin' ya. Second, I don't never recall *you* ever askin' *me* nuffin' 'bout it. Ya asked Geoff, ya asked Clare, ya asked Mum, ya asked Dad – ya even asked Vince, for Jack's sake – but never me."

Michael gave this a moment's thought. "Okay, fair enough," he admitted. "I'll give you both those points. But what about last night? We have a word for that and it's called 'sexual assault'."

"At's two words, college boy."

"Perhaps, but it still results in a sentence," Michael noted. "Several years, if I'm not mistaken."

"Oh, puh-lease, Michael," Rachael dismissed. "You agreed not five minutes ago that ya been dyin' to get in me knickers since we met. I go to the trouble of offerin' an' suddenly ya get all wobbly 'cause there ain't no flowers nor moonlight? Give over. Ya wanted it an' ya know it."

"Not with you pissed out of your mind, I didn't," Michael protested.

"Oh, pull your own tail."

"I'm serious. Put the shoe on the other foot. I'm roaring drunk, you're sober, I'm coming onto you like a ton of bricks, won't take no for an answer. What would you do?"

"I'd clean your clock before ya could say 'Jack AngeLagos', 'at's what I'd do," Rachael replied.

"Yeah, well, I didn't exactly have that option, did I?" Michael pointed out. "Firstly, even with you drunk and me sober, I'd still probably get my clock cleaned. Secondly, it's not like I could get away with it without going to the nick for years."

"Is there a point to all this?" asked Rachael.

"Yes. My point is . . . Look, I think you're very attractive, especially when you're sober, but 'no' still means 'no.' Even if it comes from a bloke. You have to respect that from me, just as I've always respected that from you – and not just because you could give me a good hiding or because I could go to jail."

Rachael weighed this for a moment. *Perhaps*, it occurred to her, *he has a point*.

"Serious?" she asked.

"Yes. Very."

Rachael paused in thought. "Guess I owe ya an apology then."

"Go on."

"Sorry."

"Well, that wasn't very sincere," he complained, although not too sincerely himself.

"Right, 'ow's this then." She stubbed out the fag, took his head and gave him a small kiss on the lips. "I am truly sorry for puttin' ya in such an uncomfortable situation."

"Much better." He kissed her back and said, "I'm sorry I wound you up so badly."

"So we're all square, then?"

"Slates are clean," Michael concurred.

"Y'know you're pretty dishy for a hairless ape."

"There's a kind word!" he laughed.

"No. Serious."

"Well, I think you're gorgeous, too."

"There's a goo'boy," she patted him on the leg.

"I don't suppose you'd care to ask me again," Michael mentioned hopefully.

"Ask ya what?"

"What you were asking for last night," Michael reminded her. "In the basement?"

"Oh, that," Rachael recalled.

"Except we could do it properly. Bit of chocolate, a little wine, some music . . . perhaps a mild abrasion or two to warm things up?"

Rachael giggled. "Hee! So ya don't mind a bit o' 'nips an' cuffs', then?"

"So is *that* what all this is about?" Michael sussed. "The bites and punches – 'nips and cuffs', of course." He rolled his eyes at his own idiocy. Looking Rachael in the eyes, he asked. "So this 'nips and cuffs' – is that what turns you on?"

"Not 'alf," Rachael muttered under her breath with an embarrassed smile.

"All right, then. If that's your kink, I'm game," Michael agreed.

"Seriously?" asked Rachael, her interest whetted.

"As long as we have a few rules, yeah, I think I could handle it. Shall we?"

"Very sweet o' ya to offer," Rachael began, "but I don't do hairless apes."

"Oh, right." Michael's face fell a little. "Just had the beer glasses on last night, then?"

Rachael reconsidered quickly. "On the other hand," she began a qualification. She tried to think of a delicate way of saving her dignity while still dragging Michael to bed. "Oh, sod it. Come on then," she said, grabbing his hand and leading him away.

2200 – Rialto Security Room

"Shift's over," Angus said as he took his earphones off.

"Erm, yeah," Jess said thoughtfully, removing hers as well.

"Ye awrite, Jess?" asked Angus.

Jess paused for a moment. "Erm . . . We need to talk."

"Awrite, then."

"Yes. Right. How to start?"

"Na clootin yer clockwork moose," Angus told her. "Oot with it."

"Right," Jess said. "My period is late. I may be pregnant."

"Oh, aye?" Angus said smiling. "Sa, who's the faither?"

"Very funny," Jess smirked.

"Sa, erm . . . ye dinna seem over cantie about it."

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but if you're the father, it's *very* bad news," Jess stated.

"Is it, nou?"

"Mixed children are outcasts. If you're wealthy, they're shut-in. If you're not, they're institutionalised. And if one of the parents is human, well, it's even worse."

"Crikey," Angus whispered.

"Angus, if I *am* pregnant," Jess said, a tear rolling down her cheek, "I think it best for all involved if I had an abortion."

"What? Na, Jess, I beg o ye, dinna do it."

"Angus, a child of ours will be a social pariah," Jess explained. "He'll be tormented wherever he goes, throughout his entire life. He'll never get an education, he'll never hold a job. You've seen how the humans in Otterstow live. Even they won't take him in."

Angus was silent for a moment. "I canna stap ye. If it's yer will. But I'll ayeways love it. Erm . . . by the by . . . what wad it leuk like?"

Jess shrugged. "How the sif should I know?"

"I mean, wad he have fur? Or a fud?"

"How the sif should I know?" Jess repeated.

"Still, na matter. I'd care for him all the same. If ye dinna want him, I'll be happy ta take him. Ye dinna need an abortion."

"Please understand, I don't *want* to. It's a horrible procedure."

"Ye've doon it afore?"

"No. This would be my first pregnancy. I had a scare at an early age and I've been *very* careful with my pills ever since."

"Aye, but even if ye're perfit, they dinna ayeways work."

"So I've heard," Jess said. "And regardless of the outcome, my next act is to get my tubes tied."

"Hang aboot, Jess. Mebbe ye'll meet some Foxy fallae an wanna have Kits someday."

"No, no Kits for me. Besides, I'd be a horrible mother," Jess confessed.

"Whyzit ye'd say that? Ye'd be a bonny mum."

"I'm an addict. I drink like a fish. I swear like a sailor. I can't cook. I couldn't change a nappy if my life depended on it. Still think I'd make a 'bonny mum'?"

"Ye're better'n half the women I know that are mums awreadies," Angus admitted. "They're on the dole, spreadin it aboot when they're wed, smokin an drinkin when they're preggers. Takin maintenance for their bairns they dinna care for an are no their hoosband's ta begin with. An no lettin the poor bloke see 'em when is his go."

"Geez, they *do* sound worse than me."

"Aye, ma sister's a right bajin. Sa, juist a cuddle tonight, then?"

"The damage is done," Jess shrugged. "Why stop now? I can't get more pregnant."

"When'll ye know for certaint?"

"I *could* wait for the month, but I think I'd die of anxiety before then. I need a pregnancy test kit."

"Oh aye? We can get 'em here at a chemist. They're dirt cheap."

"Yeah, but will they work on me? They're designed for humans, aren't they?"

"Oh, aye," Angus admitted. "They might no work fer ya."

"Look, there's a little chemists in Otterstow. They open at ten. The moment they open, you need to buy a kit."

"Me? Why me?"

"Because if I do it, everyone will know."

"The chemist canna say nought, can he?"

"He won't have to. Someone will see me walk out of the chemists *not* empty-handed. In a town as small as Otterstow, that's all it will take to get Rumour Central on the job. No one knows you, so you'll be fine."

"I dunno . . ."

"Angus, I'm trusting you with something very important. Please, help me with this."

Angus nodded his assent.

"Goo' boy," she said, giving him a kiss. "Now let's go have a hot soak."

2300 – Rialto Guest Bedroom

Michael cuddled next to Rachael. "That was absolutely brilliant."

Rachael had a dreamy look on her face. "Yeah. Brilliant."

"You're very passionate."

"Yeah. Passionate." She closed her eyes in repose and sighed a deep, relaxed sigh. It had been far too long for her liking since she had last been satisfied and Michael had not disappointed her in any aspect. She felt completely and totally sated.

"And the best part is," Michael pulled her closer, "is that since we're different species, you couldn't possibly get pregnant."

Rachael's eyes flashed open as her brow furrowed in uncertainty. *What was it Desiree had said about species and genus? she tried to recall. Was it same genus and different species? Or were they both different? Or both the same?* She chewed on her lip in doubt. Her blissful tranquillity of just a few seconds ago was now replaced by a very severe case of misgiving.

02APR2002 Tuesday

1005 – Just Outside the Bathroom Door of the Rialto

"Jess? Are ye doon yet?" Angus tapped on the bathroom door.

"Gimme a minute, okay!" she called back.

Angus patiently waited as he heard the toilet flush and a trickle of water in the basin.

Jess opened the door, holding the stick in her hand. "Five minutes, right?"

"Is what the box says," Angus confirmed. "I've niver duin a pregnancy test afore."

"Let's get some coffee," Jess said, walking across the hall to the kitchen. Leaving the test strip on the table, she went to the cabinet to gather a pair of cups. Filling them with water, she turned around to Angus and asked, "Did you have any problems at the chemists?"

"Na tribble a'tall," Angus mentioned as he retrieved the instant coffee and some spoons.

Jess stuffed the cups in the microwave. "Any questions? Coy remarks?"

"No one word," answered Angus, fetching the milk from the refrigerator.

"That's a relief," Jess said. "Usually they have *something* to say." She nervously chewed on a claw. She then began to pace as the microwave heated the cups of water.

"Ding!" said the microwave.

"Ah!" shouted Jess.

"Are ye sure coffee's what ye're after? Ye're right nervish as it is."

Jess nodded. "I'll calm down, I promise," she said as she retrieved the cups from the microwave and set them on the table. She sighed heavily and sat down. "Get a hold of yourself, girl," she told herself as Angus sat next to her.

"Ye'll be fine, na matter what," he said, taking her hand and stroking it. "I'm here for ye."

"Thanks, Angus. You're so good to me," she replied. She opened the instant coffee and spooned some into her cup and Angus' as well. "And you're right; there's no need to be nervous, is there. I mean, whatever happens, happens." She poured a dollop of milk into both of their cups. "I'll either be pregnant or I won't." She looked at Angus as she stirred her coffee. "I have a course of action prepared for either contingency, right?"

"Erm, Jess?"

"I do have a preference for the outcome, but I'm prepared in either case."

"Oh, aye, yeah. Erm . . . Jess?"

"Yeah?"

"Ye're stirrin yer coffee with the pregnancy test."

Jess looked at the spoon she was stirring with and discovered that it was, as Angus had observed, not a spoon at all, but her recently used pregnancy test.

"Ah! Quick! Go to the chemists! Get another one before they close for the day!"

"Jess, they dinna close for eight hours," Angus said calmly.

"I don't care! Go get another test, right now!"

"There's na need."

"Yes, there is a need!"

"Na there's no," Angus countered.

"I'll fill the need to rip your head off and shit down the stump if you don't get another test, *right now!*"

Angus sighed and held up a fresh test and calmly mentioned, "They come in packs o five."

"Oh," Jess said calmly. "How very clever of them."

"I jaloused we may wanna do this more'n the once."

"You jaloused right. Oh, and, erm . . . Sorry about the 'ripping your head off thing."

"Is awrite."

"No, seriously. I was way out of line."

"Believe me, I've had worse. Nou ga take yer pish."

Jess kissed him. "You're better than Ig, you know that?" She ran off to the bathroom. She immediately ran back, picked up the fresh test stick and ran back to the bathroom again.

Ten minutes later, she and Angus were staring at a small blue minus sign on the stick.

"That means negative, right?" asked Jess.

"Aye. Ye're no pregnant," Angus stated. "Na worries."

"Oh, thank Jack," she sighed, putting her head on his shoulder. "Oh, thank Jack," she repeated as she began to weep.

"Ah, poor dearie, got yersel a wee scar," Angus said as he stroked her head to comfort her. He heard her start to snivel a little. "Na fears, is awrite, dearie, is awrite."

Jess began to bawl uncontrollably.

1835 – Towpath from Otterstow Town Centre to Nora

Desiree had finished dinner at the Black Kettle and was walking along the canal back to Nora. It was just before twilight, at that certain time when the sun is just low enough to illuminate the undersides of the clouds, which it was currently doing with great relish. Another figure was walking down the path toward her. She moved a little to the right side of the path, so they could pass each other. The other moved to her right as well, blocking the path. Thinking it a mere miscue, she stepped left and he followed.

"Oh, sorry," she apologised with a smile. "Didn't mean to dance." She sidestepped again to get around and the other stepped in front of her, in a rather deliberate manner.

She looked the other in the eye. It was a large Lupan that she didn't recognise. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get in your way." Her instinct was telling her that something serious might happen very soon.

"You should know your place – skin." The Wolf said contemptuously.

"Left or right," Desiree offered, "whatever."

"You humiliated a friend of ours. That's not something skins should do."

"Tad managed to humiliate himself," Desiree responded, slowly stepping backward, hoping to get a little manoeuvring room or, perhaps, a small lead on outrunning him. He stepped slowly forward to keep their distance close.

"And we've made our peace with each other," Desiree added.

As she stepped backward, she bumped into another person. Startled, she looked around to see not one, but three others – a Suvan, a Vulpan and an Equan, none of whom she recognised.

"Um, look. What do you guys want?" she asked.

"We want," the Lupan began, "to show you your place in this society. You are obviously not from around here. And you obviously acted in ignorance. Now, we will educate you."

Desiree had long since determined that she was outnumbered and, reasoning that she might take out one or, on a good day, two of the group, she couldn't deal with four. She knew her only choice was to scream and hold them off as long as possible. She had never had to scream before but she gave it her little all. At first, the four were startled, which gave Desiree just about three seconds of good, solid screeching before the first punch was thrown, which she easily deflected. Two grabbed her arms as the Lupan aimed a second blow. Desiree landed a kick directly on his nose, sending him reeling to the ground in

pain. She struggled against the holders, but the Boar came around to face her, grabbing her from behind the neck and holding her hard, immobilising her.

"Oh, you shouldn't gone and done that," the Suvan said.

The Lupan was still rolling on the ground, shouting obscenities and making suggestions involving painful, if not impossible acts.

Desiree continued to struggle but she could feel the raw power of the two holding her. The Boar nodded to the Horse, who grabbed her right forearm, held her elbow and the wrist in separate hands and then brought it down over his knee. Desiree screamed in agony as she saw the bone penetrate through her skin. With this much pain, she was now defenceless. As the Boar released her neck, she sank to the ground. He then nodded to the Fox, who brought his boot down on her knee. At this point, Desiree had reached her limit and was fading fast from consciousness. Just before she went out, she heard a familiar growl. There was a chorus of snarls and shouting, some yelping and running. She had closed her eyes, but wasn't quite out yet when she heard a name being called.

"Tad!"

2002 – Nora Balcony

Ignatius and Geoff sat on the balcony of Nora, quietly sipping some cider and solving the problems of the world.

"Well, I think the whole problem revolves around private practice," Ignatius said.

"There's nothing wrong with 'em. They provide better service than the National Service."

"Of course that's true," admitted Ignatius, "but they take resources from the National Service as well."

"Yeah, but who can blame 'em for going private. The dosh is better," Geoff countered.

"Do we honestly want people who went into the profession just for the money? Granted, they deserve better pay, but . . ."

Ignatius stopped mid-sentence, cocking his ears and holding up a finger. Geoff cocked his ears as well.

"That's Desiree," Ignatius said.

"She's down the canal," Geoff added as they both jumped to their feet and rushed downstairs.

Ignatius was the first out of the door as Geoff had the presence of mind to grab a poker from the fireplace on his way out.

As Ignatius ran onto his lawn, he felt the soft grass under his feet and recalled that his boots were off. *Make the best of it*, he thought to himself as he fell to all fours, ran the short distance to the canal and bounded across it, landing just slightly short. This resulted in little more than wet feet as he regained his footing quickly and shot down the path, still on all fours. Geoff, carrying the poker, ran on two feet some distance behind, crossing over the bridge.

As Ignatius approached the scene, he saw Tad leaning over an unconscious Desiree, along with a wounded Wolf and Boar lying unconscious nearby.

"Tad!" yelled Ignatius.

Thaddeus turned to see the approaching Fox.

"Thaddeus WhinnsBrocc! You are under arrest!" Ignatius panted.

"Ig! Fetch the Doc! Desi's hurt bad!" Thaddeus pleaded.

Ignatius looked at the Melan with scepticism.

"Ye know I'll no scurry. Hurry, Ig! Fetch him!" Thaddeus urged. "She could snuff it!"

Ignatius looked down the path and saw Geoff just coming around the corner, a hundred yards away, still holding the poker. "You've some explaining to do – later," he growled. With that, Ignatius bolted on all fours to the town centre where Doctor BrookMarten had his home and surgery. Out of breath, he banged on the door. With no immediate answer, he banged again.

A voice within called out. "Coming! Coming!" Ignatius had to restrain himself from knocking again.

The door flew open and Doctor BrookMarten had his bag at the ready. "Emergency, I take it?"

Ignatius, out of breath, nodded.

"Hang on," he said. He reached for a torch on a nearby shelf. "Go on then, I'll follow."

Ignatius led him back to Desiree at a fast walk. The Boar and Wolf were conscious now and moaning in pain, nursing some cuts and other less conspicuous injuries. Thaddeus was sitting down, looking sombre and miserable, while Geoff was holding watch with the poker over his shoulder.

The Doctor leaned over Desiree. "My word, she *is* in bad shape," he muttered. He opened his bag and pulled out a hypodermic. "See if you can find something for a splint, so I can set that broken arm," he ordered. Ignatius looked around, but couldn't see anything remotely rigid that was larger than a twig.

"Izzit a splint ye'd be wantin?" asked Thaddeus.

"You've done quite enough, already!" Ignatius snapped. He continued to cast about.

"Geoff, if ye'd be kind enough ta haund me that poker," Thaddeus asked politely.

"Kiss my tail," Geoff said plainly.

"I'll no cause trouble. What could I do? Murder the lot o ye? I can help. Haund me the iron," Thaddeus suggested.

Geoff's intuition told him that he was telling the truth and he felt himself cautiously handing the poker to Thaddeus.

"Ta," he said politely. Taking the rod, he put his hands on each end and began to press the centre over his knee. After the bend was started, he removed it from his knee and bent it so that there was a small curve at the centre and two parallel runs, forming a very narrow letter 'U' – perfect for a splint. He then unscrewed the point and the handle and handed it back to Geoff, who in turn handed it to the doctor.

Ignatius returned from rooting around, carrying a rather jagged looking stick. "Sorry, this was the straightest thing I could where'd you get that from?"

"That was your poker," Geoff answered, as the doctor was busy.

"Did you do that?" Ignatius asked in disbelief.

"No. Tad did," Geoff responded.

"Tad? You trusted him?" Ignatius said. "He might be responsible for all of this."

"Maybe. Maybe not," Geoff replied. "He's responsible for that splint."

Ignatius glanced toward Tad who was still looking rather sullen.

2330 – Doctor BrookMarten's Surgery

"How is she?" asked Ignatius. They were at the doctor's surgery, with Desiree on the table.

"Very serious. That arm is the least of her problems. She has several broken ribs, her knee bends in about three different directions and I'm sure she's haemorrhaging, but I don't know where or how much. I've given her some morphine but that will eventually wear off. I don't envy the pain she's going to feel when she wakes up."

"She will live, won't she?" asked Pete.

"I don't know. That depends on the extent of her internal bleeding. I don't want to operate unless I absolutely have to."

There was a knock on the door. Geoff opened it to reveal Steve.

"Rachael told me Desi's here," he said. "What happened?"

"She got the sif hided out of her," Geoff answered.

Steve frowned. "Bet it was something to do with Tad."

"It was something to do with him, all right," Ignatius confirmed. "Although I'm not convinced of his guilt just yet. Or his innocence. He's locked up at the moment. His arraignment is tomorrow."

"How bad is she?" asked Steve.

"Critical," answered the doctor. "If it's too serious, I'm not sure I can handle it."

"We need to get her to hospital, then," Steve said.

"Nearest hospital is an hour train ride," the doctor stated. "That kind of movement might kill her before she gets there."

Steve looked at Ignatius. "Ig, we need to talk."

2335 – Doctor BrookMarten's Surgery

Ignatius approached the doctor. "Erm, Alex. We'd like to take Desiree with us."

"She's not moving," Doctor BrookMarten replied flatly.

Ignatius' tail moved around in a circle.

"And you can wave that tail 'til you fly in the air," Alex added. "This girl is staying on that table."

"When dealing with your patients, you generally provide confidentiality concerning their welfare."

"Generally, yes," Doctor BrookMarten agreed. "I wouldn't tell anyone what I prescribed or diagnosed – other than the patient."

"So . . ." Ignatius wanted to continue the train of thought, but was at a loss as how to do so. "Whatever course of action, whether that be a prescription for pharmaceuticals or diet or exercise, that would be patient-confidential, would it not?"

Doctor BrookMarten shrugged. "Yes."

"If you were to suggest a course of action of any type for her well-being, you'd have to keep that a secret then, wouldn't you?" Ignatius hypothesised.

"Yes, I would," Alex said patiently. "That's what 'confidential' means, as I recall. Where's this heading, Ignatius?"

"Is she stable enough for us to leave for, oh, ten minutes or so?" asked Ignatius.

"I suppose," the doctor shrugged. "I'd prefer to keep a watch, but . . ." he was becoming intrigued.

"I'd like to show you something that might save her life. But you have to promise me – not only in the confidence of the doctor-patient relationship – but also as my friend, that you will not breathe a word of this to anyone," Ignatius warned.

The doctor looked at Ignatius for a moment. Then he looked at Desiree, stretched out on the table. "And this may save her life, you say."

"I think it would have a significant impact on that, yes," Ignatius stated.

"Very well, then. Let's go," Alex said.

03APR2002 Wednesday

0005 – Rialto Rooftop

Fortunately, it was just past midnight, so there was no activity at the Rialto. Alex and Ignatius were standing on the roof, looking over the rails at the city below.

"This is not Otterstow," the doctor remarked. "I don't know how we got here in five minutes, but this is . . . somewhere else."

"This is where she's from," Ignatius explained. "They are slightly more advanced than us in technology. And from what I've heard, their medical technology is beyond imagination. Ironically, she is studying veterinary science at uni and could probably help herself more than you could," Ignatius conjectured, "if I may be so bold."

"She's at university?" asked the doctor. "Pretty rare to find a human that can read. Never heard of one going to uni."

"Waste of talent, wouldn't you agree?" asked Ignatius.

"No argument there," Alex concurred. "Let's get back. I don't want to be away too long."

They started down the stairs.

"There are good hospitals here," Ignatius mentioned. "So Steve tells me. They could look after her quite well."

"This is all pretty fantastic. I'd have you locked away if I hadn't seen it myself," Alex said. "But I'd prefer to see this hospital before I release her."

Ignatius sighed. "While I would not say that was impossible, it would be very, very difficult."

"Why's that?" Alex asked.

"Because the only sapients in this world are human," Ignatius explained. "You would be noticed rather easily."

"Humans? Entirely?"

Ignatius nodded. "We get away with it here, because it's a theatrical atmosphere. Everyone just assumes we're in fancy-dress. It's a good job that the portal went into a theatre. If it had gone into a bookkeepers firm, we'd never have gotten anywhere."

"How far is the hospital from the Rialdo?"

"Rialto," Ignatius corrected. "It's here in the town. A dozen blocks or so from what I understand."

Alex sighed. "If she stays with me and complications develop, she's dead. I can't move her to a hospital here."

"So you'll allow us to move her?" asked Ignatius.

"Okay, I'll allow it. But I want to supervise the carry over," Doctor BrookMarten said. "Make sure she's not jostled too much. I also want to ensure she comes to see me regularly when she's better."

"For check-ups?"

"That as well," Alex said. "But I want to learn about all the medicines and procedures they have. If it's so advanced, I'd like to learn about it. Could do a world of good here."

0005 – Rialto Auditorium

Michael and Angus carried Desiree on the stretcher as Steve, Ignatius and Alex held open the doors and removed any other obstacles. The Doctor had ordered the stretcher to remain level at all times, which was a bit difficult when they got to the passage, as it went downstairs going in but upstairs going out and there was never a change of direction. Somehow they managed.

"What do we tell the medics?" asked Roland the Rottweiler, who was on security that night.

"Why tell them anything?" Steve responded.

"They'll need to know what I've given her," Doctor BrookMarten said. "If they give her more, she could overdose. Or they could give her something that might react with it."

"What do we do then?" asked Steve. "We can't tell them she's had morphine. That's a prescription drug."

"She's a vet isn't she?" asked Doctor BrookMarten.

"Not in this country. And she hasn't actually graduated yet," Michael explained.

The doctor looked at his watch. "It'll be a few hours before that last dose I gave her wears off."

"Go home, Ignatius. I'll handle it," Steve said.

"Are you sure?" asked Ignatius.

"Yes, I'm sure," Steve said.

"You won't get locked up, will you?" Ignatius asked. "The Partnership can't function without you."

"No, I'll be okay. I'll fix it. The Rottweiler and I will take over from here."

"Excuse me. Who?" asked Roland the Rottweiler.

"You sure you know what you're doing?" Ignatius asked.

"Not entirely," Steve replied. "But it's never stopped me before. Doctor BrookMarten, would you write down all the information the doctors need to know. Angus, Michael, I'll need your help with my plan."

0100 Streets of Newburg

Steve nonchalantly strolled out of the front door of the Rialto. He stopped just at the edge of the marquee and patted his head. Angus and Michael took the cue and hurriedly carried out Desiree on the stretcher.

"Where are we going with this, Steve?" asked Michael.

"We just need to put her somewhere nearby," Steve answered, stepping quickly along, trying to avoid the brightly lit areas.

They went down an alley under cover of darkness and had gone just a hundred yards, when Steve suggested they set the stretcher down.

"Sa hou's she ta get ta the infirmary?" asked Angus quietly.

"I was thinking that we could call an ambulance," Steve answered, "and give them the details."

"Right, sounds like a plan," Angus agreed. "What's stappin ye, then?"

"If I use my mobile, they'll trace it," Steve said. "And if I use a pay phone, there's almost certain to be a camera trained on it somewhere. Sorry, hadn't thought this through completely."

"Pft! Is that all?" Angus dismissed. He pulled out his mobile, removed the cover and then the battery. Very carefully, he removed the small SIM card and slipped it in his pocket. With a smug expression, he re-installed the battery and the cover and handed it to Steve. "Dial emergency."

"How's it going to work without the chip?" asked Michael, incredulous.

"Ma ex-pusher worked for a telecomms company. He says any mobile has ta make an emergency call, even if is stolen or there's na chip," Angus explained. "I'll hafta ditch it afters, but is shite onyways. G'wan, give it a bash."

Steve and Michael looked at each other and shrugged. Steve dialed three nines, pressed a green button and held the mobile telephone to his ear.

"Sod me, it's ringing," Steve whispered, pulling out the sheet of notes that Doctor BrookMarten had given him. He suddenly affected a fake voice. "Erm, ambulance service, please . . . Yes, erm, there's a badly beaten girl in Jack's Alley. She's had 15 milligrams of morphine five hours ago and 20 milligrams one hour ago." Steve paused as he listened to the operator and then hung up. "She started asking if we could stay until the ambulance arrived."

"I think even Desiree would suggest that's a bad idea," Michael said.

"Then it's probably a good idea to leave, just now," Steve said urgently as the three of them fled into the darkness, back to the Rialto.

Jess greeted them as soon as they returned, along with the other members of the Partnership.

"Where is she?" Jess asked, genuine concern on her face. "Is she going to be all right?"

"Yes, she's probably in an ambulance right now, on her way to hospital as we speak," Steve reassured her.

This query was followed by dozens of other questions about when she would be out of hospital, which one she was going to and so forth, none of which any of the three could answer.

"Look, we've all had a very trying evening," Steve declared. "Let's get some rest and Michael and Angus and I will try to find out where she is tomorrow morning."

Reluctantly, they all agreed.

0800 – Rialto Kitchen

Steve sat with Michael, Angus and Jess over some morning caffeine.

"We can't just barge into all of the local hospitals and ask if Desi's checked in," Michael argued. "They'll want to know how we knew she was injured."

"Oh, aye," Angus agreed. "An then the questionin starts."

"So we need to come up with an excuse for why we're looking for Desiree in the hospital," Steve summarised.

"So, one way or the other, we'll have to get round the police," Michael pointed out.

"An that means we hafta come up with a whappin big lee," Angus added.

There was silence as they considered their options.

"Why the sif is everyone looking at *me*?" Jess complained.

0900 – St John's Hospital, Newburg

At nine in the morning, Steve, Michael and Angus walked through the front door of St John's hospital and up to the admissions desk. "Did you admit a Desiree DelHomme?" Michael Robinson asked.

"Room 220," the receptionist said. "But you'll have to talk to these gentlemen first."

The three turned around to see two plain-clothes inspectors showing their badges. Steve and Michael instantly recognized one of them.

"Say," Steve began, "aren't you the Great D –"

Michael had elbowed him, anticipating the canine analogy.

" . . . erm, the inspector we worked with on the extortion thingy last year," Steve finished.

"Oh, yes," said the Great Dane. "That's right. I remember you. Excellent bit of work, I must say. Did you hear the girl and her 'boyfriend' got four years? And they had *ten* accomplices that got a year each."

"Great," Steve replied. "That ought to keep them out of our hair for a while."

"Pardon me, where are my manners," the Great Dane said. He then introduced his partner, whose name Steve instantly forgot. The partner, like the

Great Dane, was very solidly built but, in contrast, he had a large, flat face with a strong jawline. Steve mentally scolded himself for comparing people to cats and dogs yet again but he couldn't help but notice the similarity between the second detective and a bulldog.

The detectives led Steve, Michael and Angus to an isolated room, where they all sat down at a table.

"Right, Gentlemen," the Great Dane began. "Do you know where Miss DelHomme was staying?"

"Yes, she was with us at the Rialto," Steve answered, remembering Jess' story-line. "She was out late and she didn't come in. We called the station this morning to see if perhaps she had been arrested. Then we assumed the worst and started checking out the hospitals."

"Do you have any reason to believe she should have been arrested?" asked the Great Dane.

"She can be very outspoken," Michael said. "Some of her opinions can be grating to some people."

"Typical brash yank, then?" asked the Bulldog.

"Quite," Steve quietly agreed.

"How do you know this woman?" asked the Bulldog.

"We were involved for a while," Steve admitted. "She was coming back to visit during a break in her studies."

"Just to visit you?" asked the Great Dane.

"Yes, all three of us," Michael clarified.

"So she's late after a night on the tiles and you assume she's in hospital or arrested?" conjectured the Great Dane. "Wouldn't it be more reasonable to assume she just pulled and couldn't be arsed to phone?"

"Oh, no, that's not Desi at all," Steve dismissed. "Speaking from experience, she's not one to sleep around. And she *always* calls if things don't go according to schedule. And she gets quite stroppy if we don't do likewise."

"Maybe she couldn't be arsed to bother her date to use a telephone," suggested the Great Dane.

"She's her awn mobile," Angus mentioned.

As the Great Dane took notes, the Bulldog continued his line of questioning. "You say she has a mobile?"

"Oh, aye. Flash little nummer," Angus confirmed.

"She's a yank, though, isn't she?" asked the Bulldog.

"She is a United States citizen, yes," Steve clarified.

"Maybe her yank mobile doesn't work here," suggested the Bulldog.

"Na, works juist fine," Angus countered. "She's called us dozens o times usin it."

"She had your mobile number then?" asked the Bulldog.

"Yes, sir," answered Steve. "All of our mobile numbers and the office number for the landline at the Rialto, as well."

"And she's called all of you?" asked the Bulldog.

All three answered affirmatively.

"Could I see your mobiles, please?" asked the Bulldog.

Steve and Michael pulled out their phones.

"Erm . . . Seems I've mislaid mine, juist the nou," Angus said, patting his pockets. "Been missin a day or two, come ta think on it."

The Bulldog made another note.

"Mister Green – you and this woman. You're still together, then?" asked the Great Dane.

"We're not romantically involved, no, sir. We *were* together," Steve digressed, "sort of, but we broke up – September, I think. It was amicable, I assure you."

"Well, you're hardly a suspect," the Great Dane said. "No disrespect, but you could hardly have done this much damage to her."

"Too right, if it's anything more than a bloody nose. She's a double black belt," Steve mentioned.

"Is she now?" The Great Dane leaned forward. "This woman was brutally beaten. This was no robbery either. Nor a sex crime. She had her arm broken and her knee smashed and she was brutally kicked and God-knows-what-else. Do you have *any* information on why this happened? Who might have done it?"

"No, sir. Haven't a clue," Steve answered.

"She hardly knew anyone in Newburg besides the three of us," Michael said. "Maybe she met someone that doesn't like Americans."

"I think septics are arrogant but I wouldn't beat one to within an inch of their life," said the Great Dane.

"I'll admit, Desi was blunt sometimes, even for an American," Steve admitted. "But not that blunt. And as long as you didn't call her 'yank', she was generally okay."

"Why didn't she like being called a 'yank'?" asked the Bulldog.

"She's from the Deep South," Steve explained. "Civil War thing, I'm sure you understand."

"Riiiggghht." The Great Dane made a note. "One other thing," he said.

The three waited for the question as the detective finished his note.

"Ever hear of a place . . . thing . . . person . . . whatever, called . . . Otterstow?"

"Otterstow?" repeated Steve.

Angus, Michael and Steve looked at each other, saying nothing.

Steve briefly considered showing the two detectives through the basement of The tré. "No. Never. Unless it's where they stash the otters. Might I ask why?"

"Someone gives her this incredible hiding, then they take the trouble to put her on a stretcher, give her some paramedic assistance and call emergency services to come and get her."

"Pretty thoughtful for a mugging," Michael commented. "If I might ask, what's this to do with Otterstow?"

"On the stretcher, it clearly says, 'property of Otterstow – not to be taken away'," said the Bulldog.

"Sounds like a town, then," suggested Steve. "Or a place name of some sort."

"We've checked," said the Bulldog. "There's no place in Britain called Otterstow."

"Hospital or clinic, mebbe?" suggested Angus.

"No, we've checked that too," said the Bulldog.

Steve shrugged. "I'm sorry. I've never heard of it."

"Nor I," Michael confirmed.

"No me," Angus added.

There was a brief pause as the Bulldog made a note.

"Is there anything else?" Steve asked. "Can we see her now, please?"

The Bulldog handed them each a card. "Call if you think of anything, please."

The three bid their adieus to the inspectors and quickly walked out into the hall.

The Bulldog looked at the Great Dane.

"They're hiding something," the Great Dane said. "The IMEI trace says that Angus MacAleister bought the mobile phone that made the call and he hasn't reported it stolen."

"I think you're right," confirmed the Bulldog. "So, we tail him?"

"Nah, we'd be barking up the wrong tree," the Great Dane said.

"He's our only lead," the Bulldog pointed out.

"I think he is hiding something but I also think it's nothing to do with this case. You heard our conversation when they first came in – those three were the ones that helped us catch out those extortionists. Brave lads, they were, standing up to 'em. That gang was a dangerous bunch. I just can't see why they'd do that and then hold out on us when a good friend's been given the hiding of a lifetime."

"He did say they broke up. Maybe it wasn't as amicable as he would have us believe."

"Then why visit her in hospital? Feel free to disagree but my instincts tell me we'd be chasing our own tail if we followed him," said the Great Dane.

"All right, then. I'll defer to your experience on this one. Still think they're hiding something, though," said the Bulldog.

"Everyone's hiding something. But we can't dig up every bone we come across – just the ones that are worth chewing on," the Great Dane pointed out. "And I don't suspect there's much meat on this particular joint."

1000 – St John's Hospital, Desiree's Room

Desiree was lying in her bed, staring at the wall. There was little else to do, as she couldn't focus her eyes enough to see the television or read.

Steve, Angus and Michael stuck their head in.

"Desi? You awake?" asked Steve.

She nodded.

"Are you okay?" asked Michael.

She looked at the tubes coming out of her body and the casts on two limbs. "Stupid fucking question. How the hell does it look like I'm doing?" she whispered. Michael considered that she might be speaking like that due to the medication.

"I'm in a happy, happy place, though," she smiled weakly.

Michael *knew* she was on medication.

"What day is it?" she asked.

"Wednesday," Steve replied.

"Have to get back to vet school by Monday," she murmured.

"Shouldn't think so," Michael said. "You're not going anywhere for a while.

Not like this."

"Try and stop me," she rasped. "I'll kick your ass."

"Won't argue with you Desi," Steve said. "Save your strength."

"Did they catch 'em?" asked Desiree.

"Aye, three o' 'em," Angus reported. "Tad was there. An a Wouf an a Boar."

"Tad wasn't there," she stated flatly without shaking her head.

"He wasna?" asked Angus, confused.

"No. I'm sure," Desiree said. "Tell Ig."

"Oh, aye," Angus nodded. "Will do."

"But I heard someone call his name," Desiree recalled, "just before I blacked out. There were four. Wolf – I broke his nose. Horse – broke my arm. Fox – busted my knee. And a Boar."

Steve picked up a pencil and pad that were lying on the table and made notes. "Right. Wolf has broken nose. Horse – arm, Fox – knee and Boar. Tad not there – someone called his name."

She stretched a little. "Docs have good painkillers here," she whispered.

"Do they, nou?" asked Angus.

"Haven't had this many drugs since undergrad," Desiree reminisced. "You're a lovely shade of purple."

"Thank you," Michael humoured her.

"Kidding," Desiree winked.

"Of course you are," Michael nodded.

"Tell everyone the docs say I'll make it just fine," Desiree said. "Probably lose ten pounds."

"I'll do that," Steve said, making a note.

"Need to rest," Desiree yawned. "Have to blow this joint on Saturday."

"Not with my help," Steve advised.

"Thanks. Knew I could count on you. One last thing," Desiree said, "then you go."

"Yes?" asked Steve.

"Watch your step," Desiree warned. "You're next."

"Right. Will do," Angus said.

"Goodnight, hawts." She closed her eyes.

1200 – Black Kettle Pub

Steve, Michael and Angus walked into the Black Kettle and the Partnership were waiting for them. They were pelted with a hundred questions but they patiently waited until everyone finished asking before speaking.

"Doctor says she'll be fine," Steve read from his notes. "She's getting loads of painkillers, so she doesn't say much. She also said that Tad wasn't there, although she did hear his name."

"That's not true," Ignatius replied. "I saw him. He was standing over her."

"Tad claims he was protecting her," Jess countered.

"Possible. But he was there," Ignatius replied.

"Desi also says that a Horse, a Wolf, a Fox and a Boar were present," Steve added.

"A Horse and Fox?" stated Ignatius. "Haven't heard anything about that."

"She also said that . . . let me make sure I get this straight," Steve said as he pulled out the notes he jotted earlier. "Horse broke her arm. Fox bunged up her knee. Yes, that's right."

"Any other details," Ignatius asked, jotting down some notes.

"She said she broke the nose of the Wolf," Steve added. "She was pretty knackered from all the drugs. Could barely speak."

"Poor Desi," Linda sighed, holding Steve by the arm.

"I don't wish to sound unfeeling," Ignatius warned, "but we'll have to get a full statement from her as soon as she's more lucid."

04APR2002 Thursday

0900 – HareFam Courthouse

"Thaddeus WhinnsBrocc, you have been charged with grievous bodily harm and conspiracy to commit the same. How do you plead?" asked Judge StoBrocc.

"No Guilty, ta baith counts, M'Lud," answered the Melan.

"Normally we would bring trial the next day but the victim is still recovering and her statement would be a key part of that trial. I can't say how long that will be but I'm led to believe it could be on the order of weeks. Bail is set at ten thousand pounds. We will rehear the date of trial in two days time, unless the prosecution or the defence can bring reason for moving forward." The judge banged his gavel. "Adjourned."

0930 – HareFam Gaol

Ignatius stood by the entrance to the gaol cell as Thaddeus lay on his bunk, staring up blankly.

"What's it ye're after?" asked Thaddeus impatiently.

"I'd like to know what happened," Ignatius said plainly.

"I've a solicitor. I've explained it ta him an it's no yer affair. An as I recall, ye're a witness as well. We shouldna be talkin amongst oorsels."

"I had a very good friend who was very nearly killed and I am the law in Otterstow. It most certainly is my affair," Ignatius objected. "You are also in my bond."

"Then be at the trial."

"There's something you're not telling me."

Thaddeus snorted. "Aye. There's a great pile o things I'm no tellin ye. Nou, pish off. I've got ma ceilin ta stooody, until ma bail is paid," he said as he continued to stare upwards.

1000 – St John's Hospital, Desiree's Room

Desiree woke to see a doctor standing next to her bed.

"You the sawbones?" she asked dryly.

"Yes. That would be me. Doctor Alex Martin," he answered. "Feeling any better?"

"Yeah. Whatcha got me on?"

"Morphine, for now. You were very seriously beaten."

"I want something else. Makes me constipated," Desiree complained. "And it makes my skin crawl."

"You'll only be on it for a couple of weeks. And just about any opiate will make you constipated."

"Haven't got a couple of weeks. Need to leave Saturday."

"Saturday?" The doctor laughed. "You'll be lucky to be walking to the loo by Saturday."

"What's today?" asked Desiree.

"Thursday. Fourth of April."

"Got school. Can't miss it."

"Sorry. You're not going anywhere for some time. Do you know what happened to you?"

"Radius and ulna fracture. Four broken ribs, numbers six through nine, on right. Bruised spleen. Greenstick fracture in mandible. Various contusions and lacerations . . ."

"I thought you'd get the picture by now," Doctor Martin said patiently. "You'll just have to miss the term. I'm sorry, miss, but you're not going anywhere."

"Still don't want morphine. Something else, please."

"All right then, demoral."

"No, no opiates. Just . . . something simple, aspirin, ibuprofen."

"Aspirin? You'll be howling in pain within ten minutes if you're on aspirin. At any rate, we haven't prescribed aspirin for ages."

"Ibuprofen, then. And maybe some sleeping tablets."

"Sorry, but you'll just have to put up with being constipated for a few more days. You can drink some extra water or I can give you a mild laxative or a fibre supplement, if you like." he said with a condescending air as he made some notes on her chart.

Desiree summoned the doctor with her left hand.

"Yes."

"Hand."

Doctor Martin put his hand in hers.

"Ow! Stop that! That hurts! You're hurting me!" he complained.

"Ibuprofen?"

"Yes! Yes! Fine! Ibuprofen! Please let go!" Desi released his hand and he shook it out. "That was very painful."

"Meant to be. I'll show you how. Good for unruly patients."

"You're a doctor? Or worse pre-med? Always do make the worst patients."

Desiree started to laugh but winced in pain immediately. "Worse. Last year of vet school."

"Mmm. No wonder you're anxious to return." The doctor jotted on Desiree's chart. "Right. You'll have your prescription changed immediately. Anything else? Leather strap to bite down on, perhaps?"

"We use bullets in the States."

"Sorry, fresh out. They're a bit difficult to get here."

"Thanks. Just the drugs, please."

"Right. Now, how's that hand thingy work?"

Moments after Doctor Martin had left, the nurse appeared with Desiree's new prescription. After she left, Desiree scanned the room. *No phones*, she thought. *That's bad. But I could call a cab with my mobile. That's good. But my mobile is at Ig's place in my bag. That's bad. Steve will get it for me if I ask him. That's good.*

Almost on cue, Steve came into the room. "Feeling any better?" he asked.

"A little. I asked for something besides morphine. Makes my skin crawl." She shifted in her bed. "Makes me constipated, too. I've been backed up since I got here."

Steve wasn't particularly interested in the details, but decided to try to be helpful. "Would you like me to write a note to the doctor?"

"Already told him. They're here." She took the pills.

"Oh." Steve leaned in close so he could talk discreetly. "Ignatius wants to get a statement of what happened. When you feel coherent enough to do so, let me know and I'll come and take it."

"Good. Write your number down so I can call you," she said. "Oh, and could you get my mobile for me? It's at Ig's in my bag. Just bring the whole bag, if you would."

Steve took a pad and paper from her bedside table. "Of course. Here's my number. I'll put it on your bedside table. The doc says you'll be here a few weeks at least. That will delay your graduation, won't it?"

"Yeah," Desiree said.

"Shame."

"One damned thing after another. Tell me some good news."

The pair talked for an hour or so of this and that, after which Steve departed to perform her requested tasks and inform the others of her state.

05APR2002 Friday

1200 – St John's hospital, Desiree's Room

Just after lunch on the next day, Desiree was struggling with the bed rail. The intravenous drip was on the same side and she wanted to try and walk around a bit, despite the doctor's orders, but was having trouble lowering the rail. "Damn piece o' crap. Siffing Brit nanny-state hospitals. Don't see why they

have to have some damned rail up like I'm gonna roll outta the damned bed like some damned four-year-old . . . "

She heard Steve's voice out in the hall. *Time for the stoned-patient act*, she thought as she quickly fell back in bed and put on a more relaxed demeanour.

"Hiiiiii, Steve," she waved.

"Hello, Desi," he returned cheerfully. "Feeling any better?"

"Feeling no pain," she replied with a smile. "Listen, could you do me a flavor?"

"A flavour?"

"Yeah. Could you go by Ig's and pick up my other stuff. I've got a few schoolbooks. Might as well try and study." She laughed a light, delirious laugh. "Can barely read, wonder what makes me think I can study? I just feel sort of . . . nekkit without 'em. Maybe just a few bits of clothing. My wallet and purse, toilet kit."

"Oh. Right. Would you like it today?"

"Oh, *could* you?"

"Sure. Be glad to do it."

"Thanks, Steve. You're a mensch. Oh, and while you're here . . . "

"Yes?"

"Could you lower this bed rail, please? It's so bright and shiny it sorta scares me. Pretty silly, huh?"

"No, not at all," Steve said, getting up hastily to assist her.

2200 – St John's Hospital, Desiree's Room

That evening, Desiree was getting a little late night exercise in the form of a stroll from her bed to the door and back again. As she padded around the room in her bare feet, she could barely walk from the pain as she used her rolling IV hanger as a combination of a walking frame and crutch. Her stumbling gait reminded her of an elderly relative. "Ow, damn, shee-it . . . christhathurts . . . ow-ow-ow-ooo . . . damn." When she finally got back to her bed, she collapsed into it, panting. "Oh . . . my . . . gawd . . ." she panted. "So that's why Gigi walked that way. Man, if it's that painful to walk when you're ninety, I don't wanna live past sixty."

She pulled herself into a more comfortable position. "Not a bad day's walk. Ten feet," she said to herself. "Yeah, I can make it to the airport tomorrow."

She caught her breath. The bag Steve had fetched with her books and belongings was on the bedside table within easy reach. She opened it up and pulled out her wallet. Unzipping it she made sure she had her passport, tickets and some cash. "Hundred quid. That oughtta get me to the airport." She put the wallet back in her bag.

Opening her mobile, she dialled a number. "Is this the taxi? . . . Great! Listen, I'd like a cab at the entrance to Saint John's at about eight in the morning . . . How much would it cost to go to the airport? . . . Yeah, that one . . . Good. You won't get much of a tip, but I have the cash . . . Name's Desi . . . I'll have a cast on my arm and my knee . . . Okay. Bye."

06APR2002 Saturday

0700 – St John's Hospital, Desiree's Room

Desiree awoke the next morning and looked at the IV plugged into her arm. *Time to cut the cord*, she thought. Peeling a small portion of the tape back so that she could get a good firm grip on it, she held it fast and yanked the tape off with one quick jerk.

"Aargh!" She immediately put her mouth onto her pillow and yelled into it. "Sif! That *hurt!*" She took a few deep breaths and then pulled the IV out of her arm and folded her arm as tightly as possible to minimise any bleeding. Gathering her conviction and her bag, she started towards the door. Her pace was not one of great haste.

She had just made it out of her room when a nurse turned the corner. "Miss DelHomme! Where do you think you're going?"

"Home. I've got a degree to finish and cheap health insurance."

"You'll do yourself an injury!" the nurse admonished.

"I'm already injured."

"I strongly suggest you reconsider!"

Desiree looked a little surprised. "Reconsider? I have a choice?"

"This isn't a prison," the nurse replied. "But you're going to undo everything the doctors have done for you if you leave."

"My decision. Now, are you gonna move?"

"Look, go back to bed . . ."

"Excuse me, but my taxi for the airport is gonna get here any minute."

"If you'd be kind enough to let me finish," the nurse scolded. "Go back to your room, I'll bring the discharge papers for you to sign and we'll put you in a wheelchair to the door. Don't you think that would be more comfortable than walking? It's over a hundred yards."

Desiree considered the two options. "Um . . . Okay."

The nurse took her bag and helped her back to the room. She departed and returned just a few minutes later with some forms and a wheelchair. After signing the former, the nurse wheeled her to the front door in the latter just as the taxi arrived.

"Well, good-bye Miss DelHomme," the nurse said. "I must say, I think you're making a terrible mistake but you seem awfully determined to get back home. Please be careful."

"Little late for that now," Desiree muttered as she got in the taxi.

1200 – Black Kettle Pub

"She's gone," Steve said.

"Gone?" asked Ignatius.

"Gone. Left. Scurried. Done a runner. Had it away on her toes," Steve reiterated. "Well, probably not the last two, as she can barely walk, but . . ."

"Oh, dear," Ignatius replied. "That's not good. Did she leave a note or anything?"

"No. The nurse said she wanted to leave," Steve related. "So she left."

"Very unlike Desiree. Usually, she's more than willing to let her feelings and intentions be known," Ignatius recalled. "She practically prides herself on it."

"I think she was planning to escape and wanted to keep it a secret," Steve conjectured.

"Escape?" asked Linda. "I thought she was in a hospital, not a prison."

"I guess it never occurred to her that hospitals can't keep people against their will," Steve mentioned. "Unless they're mentally incompetent."

"Do you have mentally incompetent hospitals in Reality?" asked Geoff.

"Sorry?" asked Steve. "Oh, no . . . I meant if the patient was mentally incompetent. And to answer your question, yes, a few, I suspect."

"This is very bad news for Desiree," Ignatius stated. "You know what this means, don't you?"

"Apart from what we've just said, no," answered Steve.

"Tad and the others go free," Ignatius declared. "She failed to make a statement."

"What about when she returns?" asked Steve.

"She has no recourse," Jess stated. "She left of her own free will before she gave a statement. Tad and all the others are completely off the hook."

"I've never heard that law before," Steve said.

"It might not be the law in Newburg but it's the law in The Kingdom," Ignatius explained. "If a defendant or victim departs the jurisdiction of their own free will before giving testimony, the accused go free."

"What an absurd law!" Steve complained. "What's the reasoning behind that?"

"It's quite sensible, actually," Ignatius countered. "Before the trial begins, Thaddeus is presumed innocent but he's also incarcerated until the trial, assuming he can't make bail. If the victim – Desiree, in this case – scurries off to parts unknown for a year and a day before presenting evidence, well, he'd be stuck in the nick all that time, wouldn't he? The intent of the law is to ensure that the defendant has the opportunity to present a defence in a trial without having to wait for ages.

"If Desiree had even given a simple sworn statement, that would have been enough. But now, as her evidence cannot be presented within a reasonable amount of time, he's off the hook completely, as are the others."

"What about when she comes back?" asked Steve.

"Tough titties," Jess said. "She had her opportunity and she blew it like a whore on farthing night. She has *no* recourse."

Michael began to object, "But she couldn't have known . . ."

"Ignorance of the law is no excuse," Jess and Ignatius chorused.

Shortly after this pronouncement, a small Friith entered the Black Kettle wearing a hood. He garnered little attention until he stepped behind Jess and tapped her on the shoulder. "I'd like a word, please," he said. It was not a happy voice.

Jess turned to look at her challenger. She could tell that the nose, which was practically the only part visible, was that of an Erinac.

"Yeah? What?" Jess asked.

The Hedgehog pulled back the hood, revealing his head. It took a moment to place him, but she eventually recognised him.

"Johnny? Prigel?" Jess said.

"Aye, it took a while to recognize me, eh?" Johnny said, his voice quite angry. "Lookit what you done to me! You and that skin, Vince. Look at me! I can't show myself in public!"

"You've got fur," Jess marvelled.

"Aye! And not a quill to be found!" Johnny complained. "How'm I to show myself in public like this! It's humiliating!"

"Looks quite nice, actually," Jess admired. "Is it just your head?"

Defiantly, Johnny pulled off his jumper, showing himself from the waist up. "Do you see one?" he asked angrily. "Go on then, give a feel and see if you can find a quill! Go on, give it a go! Run your hand up my back." He turned about so she could do so.

Jess looked at Ignatius and shrugged. She took her hand and, starting at the small of his back, ran it up until it touched the back of his head. It was as smooth as her own fur.

"Nope, not a one," Jess answered.

Johnny turned back around to face Jess. "Right. And how's a self-respecting Erinac to show his face about the town looking like this, eh? I've half a mind to haul the pair of you into a court o' law!"

"Please yourself," Jess dismissed. "You've no case, as you . . ."

She was interrupted by someone saying, "Oo, just feel how *soft* it is!" as Johnny's expression changed from anger to surprise.

His astonishment arose from the fact that a pair of hands were running through the abundantly thick fur on his back.

"Johnny, how *did* you do this? It is *so* lovely!"

Johnny whipped around to see Linda with an enthusiastic smile. "Linda?"

"Oh, and you've got a new coat on your head, as well!" Linda marvelled.

With no reservation whatsoever, she began to run her fingers through his fex. "You know, I always thought you were *so* cute, but you know that old saw about making love and Hedgehogs. Might have to reconsider!" Her smile suddenly seemed somewhat less innocent.

"Erm, yeah, but . . ." Johnny dithered.

"But *this* . . ." Linda marvelled. She spun round and called to the customers at the bar. "Hey, girls! Come check *this* out! Johnny's got *fur!*"

"Aye, but 'as 'e got any spines?" asked Rachael.

"Not a one," Linda stated.

Johnny suddenly found himself being fondled by four women, all gushing with compliments. Linda quickly made it three, as she dashed out of the pub and scurried down the street on four legs.

"It's right proper fur, innit?" Rachael said, grabbing a fistful and pulling on it.

"Ow," Johnny protested, although not too loudly.

"Come along an' 'ave a pint, Johnny," Rachael suggested.

Johnny was stunned. Over the course of his lifetime, he had received little if any attention from female Erinacs and none at all from any other females. At first, he felt quite uncomfortable from all the interest but he quickly grew used to it and soon grew to relish it, especially as it resulted in several free drinks.

He was just starting on his second pint, when Linda reappeared pushing a reluctant female Erinac in front of her.

"I don't care what he looks like, I'm not interested. I'm pushing forty and he's not even thirty yet. Besides, he's a right . . ." Katherine Finlgel stopped her protests dead in their tracks when she saw Johnny with his shirt off, sipping a pint at the bar. "Johnny?" she asked, amazed.

Johnny spun round to look at Katherine. "Katey?" He bit his lip in anxiety, recalling his clumsy attempts at wooing her a few years ago. Despite the recent stream of constant praise, he suddenly felt very self-conscious and insecure about his appearance. Without thinking, his hand snapped out to grab his jumper which he held against his chest as he backed against the bar.

Katherine eyed him warily as she slowly strode forward. Taking his hands, she pried them from his front and took away the jumper as Johnny stood, nearly shaking in his diffidence. "Turn around," she ordered.

Johnny stood rooted to the spot, so Katherine took his shoulders and turned him about. She took her finger and, starting at the base, ran it all the way up his back, just as Jess had done. When she had finished, she inspected her finger, amazed at the lack of injury after rubbing the back of an Erinac the length of his spine in the wrong direction.

Johnny braved a look over his shoulder. "Can I put me jumper on now?"

"How, *exactly*, did you achieve this effect?" asked Katherine in a very serious tone. "I want to know *precisely* how this happened."

Johnny pointed his finger at Jess and indignantly stated, "It's *her* fault. She done it. Once again, she's stitched me up and she'll go unpunished, as usual . . ."

"Johnny," Katherine interrupted.

"I say we tar and . . ."

"Shut up, Johnny," ordered Katherine.

"Oh, erm. Yes, Katey."

"Do you know *why* I want to know how this happened?"

"Erm, to render punishment to that conniving . . ."

"You *are* thick, Johnny," Katey interrupted. "Cute, but thick."

Johnny was about to protest, but thought better of it. "Erm, yes, Katey." He swallowed nervously.

She looked Johnny in the eye. "Do you think I *enjoy* being plucked and trimmed every fortnight? Don't you think it would be *nice* to have a *warm* coat of soft fur instead of these clumsy, naff, pointless spines?"

"Erm, yeah. S'pose so," Johnny answered.

"Don't you think it would be worth a lot of *money* if all the Erinacs in The Kingdom thought the same thing?"

"Oh. Erm, yeah. Could be."

"Come along, Johnny. I want to inspect the whole package . . ." she said, looking somewhere below his waistline, "before we discuss the new business

we're about to start." She took his hand and pulled him out of the Black Kettle just as he managed to grab his pullover.

Jess looked at Ignatius. "I don't think we'll be hearing from his solicitor anytime soon, do you?"

"I should think not," Ignatius agreed. "But I think we *should* inform Vince."

1900 – Black Kettle Pub

"Evenin all," Thaddeus addressed the Partnership (less Desiree) as he entered the Black Kettle later that evening.

He was greeted with cold stares all around.

He held up his hands in defence. "All I ask is ta be heard."

"Hearings are held in courts," Gina bristled.

"I didna have the chance ta be heard in court. Sa I ask ta be heard here. If no by a jury, at least by ma peers."

"You can kiss my tail if you think I'm *your* peer!" Jess pointed out indignantly.

"Speak your piece," said Ignatius.

"What I will tell ye is the truth. On ma mither's grave. I didna harm the human, Desiree. I had telt summa ma mates about the laldie she gave me juist here . . ."

"Excuse me, the what?" asked Ignatius.

Thaddeus suddenly recalled that Ignatius could not know that he had been fighting with Desiree last winter. "Ah, erm . . ."

"I suppose a 'laldie', as you call it, is some Caldton word for 'dancing lesson' or something of the sort," Ignatius suggested.

"Oh, aye!" Thaddeus answered quickly, relief filling his face. "Right – something o the sort, aye." He cleared his throat and continued. "After our wee mishanter whilst lairnin the finer points o the flyin Lindy, they, erm . . . they teuk it upon thairsels ta give her the same – an then some. Had I kent, which I didna, I wadna have let 'em. As suin as I fand oot, I did all I could ta put a stop ta it. But I were a wee bit late.

"I ken the culprits. They were all guid mates an thought they were doin me a favour. It wadna be ma wish ta have 'em thrown in gaol, but on t'ither haund they shouldna ga unpunished. One's had his nose broke by Desi hersel – he's had his due. Anither has had his arm dislocated. A third has had his punishment as well. There's anerly the fourth that's guan unpunished."

"Thaddeus," Ignatius addressed him. He paused to collect his thoughts. "Justice is not meted out by fractured noses and broken bones. It is done through the rule of law. It is not your responsibility – and more importantly, it is not your privilege – to discipline them. If individuals take the law into their own hands, then there is no justice."

Gina interrupted. "I wouldn't mind meting out a little justice to them lads," she growled.

"Except we have laws about cruel punishments," Pete reminded her.

"And what if you got the wrong lads?" Ignatius proposed. "Everyone is entitled to their day in court to explain their actions. Who knows what

happened? One fact could change the whole complexion of the case. What if the fourth defendant tried to stop the other three? Is that a possibility? Even if he changed his mind at the last moment, he has some diminished culpability.

"And at the end of the day, even the most evil, heinous criminal, no matter if they are guilty by their own admission, should have their say. That way, when they are put away, we, as a society, can punish them with a clean conscience, measuring not only their culpability, but also their remorse. I know if I were falsely accused or if I had extenuating circumstances, I would want that, as would anyone."

"Are you done?" asked Jess.

"Yes. I've said my bit," Ignatius replied, folding his arms.

"You bleeding hearts are all the same," Jess said scornfully. "The rule of law has now given Desiree no recourse. She'll come back eventually and when she does, the people that beat her, and who, by all rights, should be in prison, will be out spot-free, able to commit the same crime."

"Na, isna true," Thaddeus stated. "I'll make sure they get their due. An I'll make it clear ta 'em they're no ta try again."

"That's not the point," Jess answered. "The point is, the rule of law just let four criminals – possibly five," she looked at Thaddeus, "back into society at large. As usual, the law has brought order instead of justice."

"The Rule of Law brings more justice than vigilantism," Ignatius pointed out.

"That's as maybe," Jess countered. "But the Rule of Law ought to be changed."

"Agreed," Ignatius answered.

"So there," Jess countered.

"Fine."

"Oh, get stuffed."

"I'd like ta say something else," Thaddeus broke the rapidly cooling conversation between Ignatius and Jess.

"Go on, Tad," Pete said.

He paused to consider his words. "Desi did humiliate me in front o the town. But the word ta make 'humiliate' is 'humble.' An I been thinkin a bit about that day. Twice times she offert her haund ta me in reconciliation. I been askin masel – why'd she do it? I wadna have doon the same, I was sa furious. It wasna she who humbled me – it was masel.

"She deserves ma respect. I teuk some time, but I must admit she did change ma point o view. Respect is earned by the person, no the peltage. Desiree certainly has mine. Claude Baughs, I hope she's on ma side in the next fight."

"You wanna medal for finally becoming a sapient?" asked Gina. "Your goons beat the living crap outta the poor girl and they're away!"

"An what wad ye have me do, woman?" Thaddeus asked.

"You claim you stopped 'em. You claim you know who did what," Gina accused. "You should turn 'em in."

"I'll no grass," Thaddeus said. "Mates or no an is more no than mate the nou."

"You've an obligation!" Gina stated.

"I dinna! Tell 'er Ig," Thaddeus protested. "Is it no the truth? I'm no compelled."

"One is not legally compelled to report a crime," Ignatius answered, his ears flat.

"Legally, no," Jess agreed. "Morally, however, is a different story."

"Morals speak ta the person, no the law," Thaddeus argued. "I'll do what I thinks is right," he said as he jerked his thumb to his chest. "Juist ken, I wanna do right by Desi, but I'll do it in ma ain way."

"You'll pardon us, then," Gina answered icily, "if you haven't won our respect and admiration."

"Speak for yourself," Rachael put in.

Gina stared in astonishment at Rachael. "'Shave and skin me! What kind of talk is that!'"

"Steady on, Gina," Pete reproached carefully. "She's got a right to an opinion; she's your daughter, not your 'usband." He turned to Rachael. "Go on then, Rache."

"Granted, 'e ain't perfect," Rachael stated, "but 'oo is? We know 'e's innocent – Desiree said so."

"For once, I agree with Rachael," Clare concurred. "And even if he did turn in the others, it wouldn't accomplish anything, as Desiree can't make a complaint. At least he's made it clear to these people that he doesn't approve of this 'favour' they were doing for him."

"Oh, aye," Thaddeus nodded. "I've made a lot more'n that clear ta 'em."

"I agree wif Rache also," Pete broke in. "I mean, we've all got our dirty li'l secrets. Some more secret'n others – an' some more dirty. The whole thing in life is to live it as best ya can. An' if ya start behind, then ya gotta make some progress. Tad's no saint but 'e's puttin' 'is foot forward."

"Right into an enormous pile of dung," Gina scowled.

"For Jack's sake, Gina, give the man a *bit* o' credit," Pete entreated.

"From what Desiree has told me," Steve began, "Tad's story is true. He put a stop to the beating and prevented it from being worse than it already was. But I agree with Jess, he has a moral obligation to do more than just warn his friends off."

"Even if he were ta name the ithers ta a court o law," Angus pointed out, "Isna warrant they'd stop from tryin again. If his warnin means more ta the lubbarts than the law itsel, he's doon his best."

"He could do both," Michael pointed out. "That would be even more effective. At the least, it'd be public knowledge that they're violent criminals."

"But grassing them up might motivate them to take further revenge," Slide conjectured.

"Not if they were in prison," Sandra pointed out, "where they belong. I just wish we could bring them all to trial when Desi returns."

"Barring a change in the law between now and then, that won't happen," Slide said.

"Even with a change," Ignatius corrected. "It would be *ex post facto*."

"Ig, if you would kindly remember that not all of us are versed in the dead languages of the law . . ." prompted Slide.

"Oh, sorry. *Ex post facto*. Remun for 'After the fact.' If I do an act that is legal today and a law is passed against it tomorrow, I am not responsible, as the law was passed 'after the fact' that I had committed the crime," Ignatius explained. "Sorry to digress."

Linda sought to speak her mind. "Personally, I think any problem can be solved without violence. And since Tad seems so determined to use that as his chief weapon, he hasn't changed as a person. He's just changed sides." She faced Thaddeus. "I don't want to discourage you from doing what's right but if you do it the wrong way, you're no better."

Thaddeus let this soak in. "Well," he muttered. "It seems awbody here has an opinion. 'Cept for Geoff. You got something ta get off yer mind, auld Boar?"

Geoff was relaxing, with his hands locked behind his head, soaking up the conversation. He looked upward in thought for just a second. "Mmmmmnope."

"Surely you must, after all this banter," prompted Thaddeus.

"Yeah, Geoff. Come on," prompted the others.

"Oh. Well. Right, I *do* have an opinion. That would be that I'll not judge others. I would judge their actions. But who's to say what's in Tad's heart? How he feels or his experience? If I were in his shoes, would I have done differently? Now, I must say that we've the right to protect ourselves and he must be held to the law, like all others – and he has been, like it or not. Vince said the same thing once – although not in so many words – in this very pub in defence of another unpopular person who shall remain nameless. So I've nothing to say in that regard but I do have one other opinion I'd like to confess."

"Oh, aye?" asked Thaddeus.

"I believe," Geoff said as he swirled the last ounce of his lager in his glass and downed it, "that I would like another pint."

"You can buy the next round for your penance," Gina suggested.

"Gladly," Thaddeus almost volunteered, "but I been barred from drinkin alcohol in public since ma dancin lesson, til my bond is up."

"I never said you couldn't buy drinks for others," Ignatius pointed out.

"Oh, ta for that," Thaddeus grunted.

2200 – Rialto Security Room

"Shift's over," Jess said as she took her earphones off and turned off the monitors in the security room.

"Aye," Angus said thoughtfully, removing his as well.

"You okay?"

Angus paused for a moment. "Aye. Awrite."

"Look, it's like any other night. I'm not forcing you," Jess said. "If you're not in the mood, just say so."

"Na, I'm up for it," Angus quickly replied. "But I been meanin ta ask . . ."

"Go on," Jess urged.

"We been doin this naurby ivery day for, wha? Four months? An na mistake, I'm thankrif an all, but . . ."

"You want something more?" asked Jess.

"Oh, aye, mair or less," Angus waffled, "but that's for anither day. I'm juist wunnerin . . . why're we still keepin it secrets?"

"Angus, you know what the score is with mixies in Otterstow," Jess answered.

"Aye, na argument there," Angus agreed, but pressed his case further. "I can see no lettin ont a the rest o the warld an all, but no even the Partnership? Steve an Linda, Rache an Michael – they're no scoukin ahint the hedges. Although I suspect Desi an Eric's might be smookin about."

Jess sighed. "Angus, it's been wonderful so far. Let's not spoil it. Please?"

"Leuk, I'm no tryin ta have ye pledge yer undyin love afore the warld ner the like. I unnerstaund. An juist sa's ye know, I'm willin ta continua as we are, for the nou. But's important ta ken why."

"What difference does it make?" asked Jess.

"If ye're still kittle aboot bein in a mixie, I unnerstaund . . ."

"It's not being in the mixie that I'm nervous about," Jess admitted. "It's having my friends know about us that I want to keep under wraps."

"Aye, I ken that – but why? Izzit cause ye dinna want ta tell *ony* yer friends ye're in bed wi a skin? Or izzit one in particular?"

Jess dropped her eyes. "Just the one," she admitted. "And yes, it's Ig."

"Still carryin a torch for him?"

"I know," Jess rolled her eyes in self-admonishment. "It's pathetic, honestly. You must think I'm a lost cause."

"Feh! Dry yer eyes, woman," Angus scolded. "Tell me this, then . . . come a day, if Ig were ta ask ye back . . . Wad ye ga with him?"

Jess sighed and looked down at the floor. "I'm guessing the actual question is not so much would I return to Ig, but would I leave you. Is that it?"

"Na, ye've the wrong end o the stick, Jess. I want ye ta be happy, is all. Aye, we're makin guid time together an certies na molligrant from me a'tall.

"But isna a life for you. Ye deserve a man ye can crawl aboot, mebbe even two, three Kits o yer own."

"I've made it clear, no Kits for me," Jess reiterated.

"I canna help but notice, ye didna have yer tubes tied after yer wee scar, as ye said ye wad."

"Just haven't gotten round to it," Jess fudged.

"Accidents niver happen," Angus observed. "An is awrite that ye dinna wanna burn yer bridges. I'd be right nervish aboot snippin ma goolies masel, an tha's juist 'bend over, small prick, snip-snip, sees ye in a fortnight for the stitches'. Isna near as bad as what they do ta a lass for her tubes. But be leal ta yersel first, Jess; ye're no a hunder percent certaint aboot havin yer oon Kits.

"An end o the day, it disna matter. Ma point is, I'd far raither ye'd be happy with Ig than miserable with me. If he calls for ye, an it's yer will, then ga an na regrets nor tears on ma part."

Jess considered Angus' perspective for a while. "And if he makes it clear that he never wants me again?"

"I'll be here, for as long as ye can bide me."

"Wow," Jess opined. "Can't lose with an offer like that, can I. Thanks, Angus."

"Oo, afore I forgit, got ye's a li'l propine."

"A pressie? For me?" asked Jess.

Angus pulled out a box with a ribbon around it.

"What's the occasion?" asked Jess.

"Juist acause."

Jess pulled on the ribbon to open her gift. "Ig *never* brought me presents.

Why, it's . . . cheesecake?"

"Ye seemed ta fancy it at the Christmas party," Angus mentioned.

"Fancy it? I wanted to have sex with it," Jess recalled.

"Ye been a guid lass syne the New Year. Ye deserve a special treat."

"I have lost a whole stone since then, haven't I," Jess remarked as she looked at the cake and then at Angus. "You sure I can handle this?"

"Oh, aye. Is from ma haund."

"Can we share?"

"Is two servins. I should hope sa."

"I won't deny," Jess admitted, "this and a good seeing to will put a smile on my face for days. C'mon, stud, let's hit the bath."

01MAY2002 Wednesday

0900 – National Insurance Office, Newburg

The taxi carrying Ignatius and Michael pulled up to a modest, inconspicuous, government building that was just a few short blocks from the high street of Newburg.

"Ready, Ig?" asked Michael.

"As I'll ever be," Ignatius replied. He straightened his waistcoat and casually stepped out of the taxi as Michael paid the fare.

He stood on the pavement, patiently waiting for Michael, grateful that pedestrian traffic was fairly limited. One elderly woman did happen to wander past, walking on the pavement on the opposite side of the street. As she stared at him, Ignatius politely took a small bow and tipped his top hat to her. Embarrassed, she quickly looked away and hastened her progress, not wishing to donate her spare change to some suspect cause.

Michael finally joined him on the pavement.

"Some kinda outfit ya got there," the taxi driver shouted as he drove off.

Ignatius removed his top hat as Michael ushered him into the building and to the interview area. The receptionist, a cheerful middle-aged woman, greeted him warmly.

"Oh, hello Michael! Who's your friend?" she asked enthusiastically.

"Good morning, Gwladys. This is Ignatius HaliFox," Michael introduced, trying to play his role as seriously as possible.

"My, aren't you dapper," Gwladys enthused.

"Thank you, madam," Ignatius replied, bowing slightly.

"So, which charity do you represent? I don't see a badge . . ."

"He's not with a charity," Michael explained.

"Oh?" Gwladys said, her enthusiasm untainted by her confusion.

"No, he's here for an identity interview," Michael said.

"Is he *really*?" Gwladys gushed. "Oh, I see, it's a wind-up for Anna, isn't it? Where's the camera?"

"No, it's not a wind-up," Michael answered. "He's here for an actual interview."

"Is he?" Gwladys asked, uncertain of how to proceed. Procedure, ever the bastion of civil servants, kicked in. "Well, erm, seat number two, please," she said, pointing to a chair in front of a counter with a closed window.

"Thank you, madam," Ignatius said, bowing slightly and then departing for the chair.

Michael followed him, whispering instructions in his ear. "In just a few minutes, Anna will open this window and ask you a few questions."

"Yes, yes, we've been over this. I'm quite prepared," Ignatius said confidently.

"Right, then," Michael said. "I'll just . . . erm . . . good luck." He patted him on the shoulder and departed to somewhere else.

Just as Michael had foretold, the shutter in front of the window rolled up and a rather stern-looking woman took a seat as she stared at a clipboard.

"Ignatius Halifax?"

"That would be HaliFox," Ignatius corrected.

"Oh, right, so with an 'o'?"

"That's correct, and the 'F' is capitalised as well."

"Ah, so it is. Good morning, Mister HaliFox, my name is Anna Wilson, I'm going is this some kind of joke?" she asked, looking at him for the first time.

"Joke?" Ignatius shrugged. "No, I see nothing humorous at all about our situation. Is there a problem?"

"We don't do jocularly here. If you want to promote your charity, don't waste taxpayer's money by wasting my time."

"I'm not here for charity," Ignatius stated. "I'm here for my interview, as you requested per this letter," he said, digging an envelope out of his vest pocket.

Anna took the letter and read it. "Yeah, this is an interview letter . . . Look, Mister . . ."

"HaliFox," Ignatius reminded her politely.

"Whatever. You can't have an interview in disguise."

"I'm not in disguise," Ignatius stated. "This is my genuine appearance," he said, dramatically waving his hand the length of his body.

"Fine, you want to play the funny man, show me some picture ID."

"Very well," Ignatius said as he dug into his lapel pockets. "Here is a student identification. A bit dated, I'm afraid, but it's all I have in the way of a picture with my name on it."

Anna, a little perturbed, took the document and examined it. "This is obviously fake. There's no university named 'Oxonia' that I've ever heard of."

"So if you've never heard of it, then it doesn't exist?" Ignatius asked rhetorically. "You must have an encyclopædic knowledge of schools."

"Look," argued Anna, "I'm a busy person, and I've just about had it with this charade. Now either take off that ridiculous mask or leave."

"Excuse me," Ignatius said politely yet sternly, "are you insinuating that I am wearing a *mask*?"

"I'm not insinuating it," Anna retorted. "I'm stating it as a matter of fact."

"I must say," Ignatius said, feigning offence, "I feel rather affronted."

"Oh, *do* you?" asked Anna sarcastically.

"Yes, I *do*," Ignatius said emphatically, continuing his little rant. "If you truly feel that I'm wearing a mask, I invite you to physically examine my person to try to find otherwise. But upon finding that this is, *as a matter of fact*," he emphasised, mockingly, "my genuine face, I shall feel compelled to make a formal complaint of discrimination based on appearance."

"What?" asked Anna.

"You are apparently treating me differently from other applicants based solely on my, admittedly, singular appearance. Further, I happen to know that such behaviour is against policy and could result in your termination and, in severe cases, revocation of your pension. I do not wish these things upon you, but I feel compelled to state that if this approach does not stop at this moment, I shall make a formal complaint and bring proceedings against this office."

Anna stared silently as she blinked at Ignatius, who pouted whilst looking in a different direction and pretended to be put out. He then flicked an ear and made it a point to twirl his tail around.

"My word, what is the world coming to?" Ignatius remarked to no one in particular. "The next thing one knows, I shall be told to shave off all of my fur to determine the colour of my skin. I just cannot understand why one cannot simply follow protocol without making judgements about another's appearance. I've been a solicitor for over a dozen years and not once have I ever done anything so callous."

Anna blinked uncomfortably. "What's the spelling of your mother's first name?" she asked, slipping behind the safety of procedure.

27JUN2002 Thursday

1200 – Rialto Kitchen

"Good afternoon, all," Steve said cheerfully. "Today is the 27th of June and I'm sure we all know what that is," he said with a smile.

The other members of the Partnership looked around at each other and shrugged.

"It's not our wedding anniversary," Slide HolenWulf recounted very carefully.

"No, but it is an anniversary," Steve mentioned. All of the Partners looked at him with blank stares. "Does no one remember?"

They shrugged and muttered "Dunno," and "Can't recall."

Steve raised his eyebrows in disbelief, shaking his head. "Goodness me. One of the most important days of our lives and everyone's forgotten. I'd've thought Geoff, you, of all of us, would remember."

"Sorry," Geoff apologised. "Completely at a loss here."

"Don't keep us in suspense," said Rachael. "Go on."

"It's the first year since we formed the Rialto Furry Troupe Partnership. One year ago, we signed the papers, giving us ownership of the Rialto."

They all recalled the day, slapping their foreheads or raising their glasses.

"Well, I wouldn't have known, would I?" Jess said defensively.

"So, some good news," Steve began. "I have produced our one-year report and a little prospectus." He passed copies of a booklet out. "Things have slowed down a little due to the economy but we're way ahead on our timetable and, barring an act of war or terrorism, we'll have the Rialto paid off in about six or seven years' time, well ahead of schedule. Then the big money rolls in.

"Also, I got a letter from Desi, yesterday. She'll be back, late July."

"Hou's oor bonny lass farin?" asked Angus.

"Here's the letter," Steve said, pulling it out of his briefcase and handing it to Linda on his left. Another letter fell out from underneath, unopened. "What's this?" he said picking it up. "Didn't notice this earlier. Hmm. Guess I was so interested in Desi's letter, I didn't see it."

Steve opened the letter and read it. "Oh dear."

"Doesn't sound good," Pete remarked.

"It's not," Steve answered. "It's from Mister MacAleister. I'm not a solicitor, but from what I can understand, he's telling us to surrender the Rialto by . . . first of August."

Everyone at the table was astounded.

"May I see that?" asked Ignatius. He pulled out his reading glasses as Steve handed him the letter. Ignatius read it through, mouthing the words softly as he went along. "Oh dear. Steve is right. He claims the Rialto is his because of non-payment."

"We paid the bank every month. We've always met the mortgage," Linda protested.

"No, you misunderstand," Ignatius said. "It's not to the bank. It's to Mr. MacAleister. He says we owe him money that we never paid."

"Ow can 'e say that? 'E sold us the buildin' for a quid!" Pete protested. "I was there!"

"Did you pay him?" asked Ignatius.

"Course we did!" Pete said.

"Erm, not exactly," Steve said.

"Ah, no! I remember now," Gina recalled. "We didn't have the cash. We only paid him 70 p!"

"Oh, yeah," Pete recalled quietly.

Ignatius put his head on his forehead. "Oh dear. I remember distinctly in the contract it said the full sum must be paid within ninety days. I assumed you had paid it. I should have asked!"

"C'mon, Ig," Geoff remonstrated. "You can't be everywhere at once. It's certainly not your fault."

"It's mine," Steve admitted. "I should have paid him the extra money. It just never occurred to me to do so. What was I thinking?"

"No. No. We'll have none of that, sir!" Geoff cautioned. "There will be no finger-pointing, even if it is to one's self. We live as a team, we die as a team,

and we're nowhere near dead at the moment. Now, I seem to recall that he said the 70 p would be acceptable. Anyone else remember that?"

"Yes, I do," Clare recalled. "He said it'd be all right – or words to that effect."

"His exact words were, 'You drive a hard bargain. That will do.'" Michael recalled.

"There we are then," Geoff said.

"Geoff, there is a famous saying in law," Ignatius recalled. "'An oral agreement is not worth the paper it is written on.' He'll simply deny it. And even though we have several witnesses, all of them have a conflict of interest, so their testimony is suspect. He has it in writing. We have no receipt for the pound. We have no case."

"So it's gone?" asked Jess. "Just like that?"

"But if he takes it back, we'll never get our Simon back," Sandra complained.

"Nor our Grace," Gina added.

Ignatius was looking at the contract, reading it line by line. "Seems that way, yes."

Jess suddenly took the contract from Ignatius. "Gimme that," she ordered pointlessly, as she was already reading the fine print. "I rooted out the sewer lines, replaced the toilet waxes, put in new p-traps, scraped a ton of pigeon shit off the marquee and shovelled a mountain of rat shit out of the basement. MacAleister's gonna get *my* half-share of the Rialto over *his* dead body."

"I, erm, wadna worry over much," Angus mentioned.

This guaranteed the immediate and undivided attention of the Partnership.

"Na guarantees, mind, but end o the day," Angus added quietly, "he is ma auld man."

28JUN2002 Friday

1000 – MacAleister Estate

Angus drove his early model compact car of no small experience up the lane of the estate and behind the main domicile. He escaped from it with a sense of urgency, defying the creaking hinges of the door and, as always, leaving the keys in the ignition as it dieweled to a slow death.

Quickly running through the kitchen to the main hall, he called for his father.

"Faither? I'm hame!"

George MacAleister called to him and quickly entered the hall. "Angus?"

"Aye, faither," he said, giving him a hug. "'Tis me."

George returned the hug with something less than enthusiasm. "Yes, of course. How nice to see you again."

Angus broke off the hug and smiled earnestly. "I been clean. The hale year!"

George smiled with sincere appreciation. "Excellent! Normally I'd suggest a drink to celebrate, but we'll have to settle for soda, I suppose. Come in to the drawing room."

They walked into the drawing room and George opened a couple of small bottles of lemonade, handing one to Angus.

"Congratulations, Angus. I'm very proud of you," George said with a smile. "You've finally got the monkey off your back."

"Na, isna true," Angus countered.

"Sorry? I thought you said . . . "

"Oh, na. Dinna misunnerstaund. I been clean, as I said. But the monkey's niver gone. The urge niver goes away. But I'm in control the nou. One day at a time."

George smiled and raised his bottle of lemonade. "One day at a time."

Angus clinked his bottle to his father's and they each took a sip.

"Oh, lest I forget," George said, opening a drawer and pulling out a locket.

"This is yours, I believe?"

Angus took the locket and opened it to reveal the tiny picture of his mother in the flower of her youth. Smiling, he tucked it in his shirt pocket and buttoned the flap. "Ta, father."

"You earned it," George answered.

"Sa, what's this about ye repossessin the Rialto?" asked Angus.

"That was the plan all along," George said. "I repossess. You get the Rialto."

"If it's all the same, I'd lief ye juist left it ta Steve an all."

George smiled patiently. "Angus . . . dear, sweet, naïve Angus. Look around you. What do you see? A fine house. Staff to suit our needs. Stables with fine horses. Tell me, Angus, how do you think this was paid for? Bonds at three percent interest?"

"Sorry, I dinna follow," Angus answered, confused.

"We are the captains of commerce," George enthused. "Steve and Michael and his like? They work for us, so we can make money."

Angus remained silent and George could see that he was still not following the thread.

"Look, people like us . . . "

"Captains o commerce, like," Angus said.

"Right, we captains of commerce don't do manual labour. We invest. We find sound business ideas and inject them with capital to make them work. We are the risk takers. Now, Steve and Michael and their sort – they're just part of the working class. And don't get me wrong, there's nothing wrong with that; a day's work for a day's pay and all that. But they're not taking the risk, are they? They're not the ones dedicating their fortunes to the future of Britain. They've got the security of a steady income, whilst you and I have to brave the storms of the global market, never knowing when the next crash is going to come."

"Oh, aye, ye've tol' me this one afore. But what's it ta do wi the Rialto?"

"Oh, right," George said. "If we let Steve and Michael retain control of the Rialto, they'll reap all the assets once the loan is paid off."

"Aye," Angus agreed.

"But we're the ones that made it happen."

"Na," Angus disagreed.

"We are," George countered. "You can't possibly tell me that they could have accomplished anything at all without our intervention. I could have just sold the Rialto for the land and they would've been left out in the cold."

"An?"

"So, we repossess, and you get the Rialto."

"I've hauf a share awreadies," Angus mentioned.

"Half a share?" George smiled. "Out of how many shares?"

Angus counted on his fingers. "Thirteen."

"So you expect to make a living on less than five percent of the profit of the Rialto?"

Angus shrugged. "Dunno. Could do."

"Tell me Angus, which would you prefer? Your 'half share'? Or the whole enchilada?"

Angus considered this for a minute. "I take yer point."

George patted him on the back. "That's my lad," he congratulated him.

1200 – Rialto Kitchen

"In as simple terms as possible," Jess said before the Partnership, throwing down the contract, "we're siffed."

"Are you sure?" asked Sandra.

"He telt me that he'll gimme the Rialto after he's repossessed," Angus said, "but I knaw he was tellin a lee."

"How do you know that?" asked Slide.

"His lips were movin," Angus answered.

"So that's the end?" asked Clare.

"He's not the kind, grateful father we thought he was," Steve said. "That's for certain. I called Desi and told her about our situation. She didn't have much in the way of suggestion except to say that we should hire a good solicitor."

"I think that would be a very wise course of action," Ignatius opined. "And the sooner the better."

"So they're gonna close the portal?" asked Linda.

"Very likely," Steve replied.

"But they can't!" protested Linda.

"Fraid they can," Steve said.

"I'll miss the Rialto of course," Linda said as she looked longingly at him. "What about you Steve?" A tear was rolling down her cheek.

"I don't know," Steve said. He looked at Linda and for the first time, he saw her in distress. Whenever he had been completely exhausted from work or the general tensions of everyday life, she had always been there for him with a smile or some affection. It disturbed him that he couldn't offer her anything comforting when it was her time of need.

"Our battle's not lost yet," Geoff said with conviction. "There is always a way."

"If you have any ideas at all, let's 'ear 'em," Pete said. "I, for one, do not relish the idea o' donatin' a year o' my time to this bastard."

"Michael, ya gotta do sumfin'," Rachael pleaded.

"Steve and I will go to the bank. Maybe they'll have some ideas," Michael mentioned.

1245 – Newburg Bank

"We've already had our weekly meeting," said the Colourpoint. "Is it something urgent? Surely not another corpse."

"I'm afraid we have an unexpected expense," Steve said uncomfortably.

"And what's that?" asked the Basset.

"We need a solicitor. MacAleister wants to repossess the Rialto," Michael said, handing them a copy of the letter he had received.

The two loan officers read the letter.

"Why didn't you tell us this sooner?" asked the Colourpoint, angrily.

"We only found out yesterday afternoon," Steve replied defensively.

"Let's keep calm, no reason to lose our heads. Now, here's what you do," said the Basset, scribbling on a piece of paper. "You go to this solicitor. He's not high street, but he's capable enough. You tell him what you've told us. Do this. Right this instant, d'ya hear?"

"Yes sir," Michael replied taking the note and leaving with Steve.

The second he was out of the office, the Basset turned to the Colourpoint. "There's no holding back now. We need to take the gloves off. If MacAleister wins this, we're done for. I'll get all the other files where Mac has screwed someone and get them to the solicitor, straight away."

"I think I have the solicitor's number. I'll give him a call right now and brief him on the situation," said the Colourpoint. "I'll be damned if I'm caving in to that bloody crook this time!"

1500 – Linda's Garden

Linda and Steve were at her home, sitting in the garden under the afternoon sky. Linda was cradled in Steve's arms, as he gently stroked her head.

"Steve, I'm frightened."

"I can understand that," Steve replied. "I'm in a bit of a state myself."

"If it were just the Rialto, I could handle that," she said. "But what about Grace and Simon? The poor dears – I wonder if they're even still alive."

"I have to believe they're still living," Steve opined. "They're just in hiding."

"How can you be so sure?" asked Linda.

"If they had died, then someone would have found the bodies," Steve conjectured. "And considering what the papers would pay for that kind of story, we'd be reading about it for weeks."

"I suppose," Linda agreed.

"I just hope they come to their senses and come home before the first," Steve said. "Otherwise they may not get through."

"I know we're just one small part of the picture," Linda said, "but what about us?"

"What about us?" Steve asked.

"If we lose the Rialto, and we don't have the portal any more, you can't come and go from here to Newburg."

"That fact has crossed my mind as well."

"You know what that means?" Linda prompted. "If we lose the Rialto, I lose you!"

Steve looked down at her. "How'd you mean?"

Linda looked up at Steve with tears on her cheeks. "Steve, if we lose the Rialto, you can't simply walk through the portal."

"I understand that but how do you lose me?"

"You'll be stuck in Reality. You can't come and be with me."

"I'm not trying to be thick here, Linda, but I just don't follow. Why would I be stuck in Reality?"

"You'll be in Newburg. I'll be in Otterstow. And there's no way for you to get from there to here."

"I won't be in Newburg when the portal closes," Steve stated. "I live here. With you. I'll be in Otterstow when the portal closes."

"You can't do that!" Linda protested. "You'll lose everything! You could never go back!"

"I'll lose some things. My mates. My mum and dad – that'll take a little getting used to. But I'll be here if the portal closes."

"No, Steve! You can't!"

"Why not?"

"Can you?"

"Course I can," Steve answered. "It's what I want. You've always been there for me. I'll grant, you took a little getting used to with the fur . . . the tail . . . the ears . . ."

"But we've only been together for a little while. What if things don't work out? What if I become some sort of unreasonable, clingy woman that you can't stand the sight of?"

Steve gave her a look. "Has this happened before?"

"Erm, no. Not as such." Linda flashed a sudden smile, belying some embarrassment. "Look, I'm just saying – this would be a lifetime commitment on your part – with huge sacrifices. I don't know if I could live up to whatever expectations you would, erm . . . expect."

"The only thing I would expect," Steve said, "is that you treat me just as you've done for the past year. Except for the face-slapping incident."

"Hey," Linda objected, "that was ages ago."

"Not complaining, just making a point."

"Which is?"

"Look, you've been extra-super nice to me," Steve said. "Does that stay, even after I'm committed? Or is it all an act that you'll drop once you know I can't go back?"

"Of course it's not an act," Linda protested.

"Then I guess I'm staying here in Otterstow," Steve concluded.

2200 – Rialto Rooftop

Michael and Rachael were lying on the roof terrace of the Rialto, staring at the stars.

"Last day looks to be first o' August," Rachael commented.

"I know," Michael replied. "Mates'll miss me."

Rachael turned to Michael. "Eh? What're you on about?"

"My friends'll be sad that I'm gone."

"I heard what ya said. What's it s'posed to mean?"

"I'm staying with you," he said.

"You are not!" Rachael protested.

"Well, I'm staying in Otterstow, that's for certain."

"Are not!"

"Are so. I want to watch our son grow up."

"Our what?"

"Our son," Michael repeated, "or daughter."

"What in Jack's name are ya talkin' about?" asked Rachael.

"Don't pretend, Rache," Michael protested. "You're beginning to show now. That's half mine in there. And you might shut me out of your life but I'll be damned if you'll shut me out of his – or hers."

"You're mad!" She turned back up to look at the stars.

"As a March Hare," Michael replied. "Go on then. Tell me you're not carrying our child."

"I am *not* pregnant."

"You're in denial. You know that, don't you?"

"So what if I am? Don't mean I 'ave to put up wif *you* the rest o' me life."

Michael turned on his side and took Rachael's hand. He spoke calmly.

"Look, I understand that maybe you're not ready to commit to you and me. But, like it or not, you and I are committed to that child you're carrying."

"I'm gettin' an abortion," she said.

"If you're getting an abortion," Michael said softly, "why haven't you done so by now?"

"Just 'aven't got round to it," Rachael replied.

Michael rolled onto his back and looked at the stars. "I see. And what I want doesn't matter."

"No. It don't."

"And what we have doesn't matter either," Michael said.

"No. That don't neiver," Rachael replied. "Just gettin' a tail round, is all."

Michael nodded. "Okay. Good. If that's what you want. But I'm still going to be in Otterstow when the door shuts."

"What?"

"I'm going to be in Otter . . ."

"I heard that bit. Why dontcha stay in Reality where ya belong?"

"Belong? Why do I 'belong' in Reality?"

"It's your 'ome. It's where ya grew up. It's where all your mates are! An' your family."

"I've thought about that a lot," said Michael. "I mean, the technology's better in Newburg – or at least there's more of it. I'd live longer most likely. There's more music. Got computers and video and so on. But when I'm in Otterstow, there's a voice that says, 'I'm home.' And to tell you the truth, Rache, it sounds clear as a bell when I'm with you."

"Oh, bloody 'ell! I've got a lovesick oorang-ootang taggin' along wif me!"

"Ook-ook," said Michael as he waved his hand over his head in a simian gesture.

Rachael couldn't keep herself from laughing.

2355 – Rialto Bathroom

Angus held Jess as they quietly soaked in the enormous bathtub of the Rialto.

"So, this is it?" she asked.

"Izzit?" asked Angus.

"You said yourself, we're screwed."

"Oh, aye. S'pose I did at that," Angus admitted.

They sat silently as he cupped a little of the warm water in his hand and poured it onto her shoulder.

"I'll miss you, you big monkey," Jess said, kissing his hand.

"We're no apart, juist yet," Angus stated.

"If you've got any tricks up your sleeve, I'd sure like to know what they are," Jess stated.

"Sorry. Na cantrips," Angus admitted. "Juiust hope."

07JUL2002 Sunday

1200 – Our Lady of Forgiveness Church, Bastrop

Simon and Grace had both taken to coming to the services on Sunday, as there was little else to do. They would sneak into the church well ahead of time and hide in the loft amongst the many organ pipes. Even though they had a clear view of all the activity down below, they were completely obscured from the view of the congregation due to a well-placed screen. As it was a smaller church, it was usually a very informal affair. The same score of people almost always showed up, with the ranks swelling for special events such as weddings, funerals, christenings or some annual celebration. During these occasions when the pews were a little more cramped for space, it was not uncommon for the smaller children to play out in the yard amongst the headstones while the service went through its paces. One of the younger teenagers would usually volunteer to keep watch although, Simon was quick to notice, this was usually just a pretence to engage in a marathon snogging session with a current love interest. He could observe this as there were two, small, conveniently placed windows on either side of the loft, which, unlike the other windows of the church, were made of a glass that could actually be seen through.

Early in July, there was a particularly large crowd gathered for Father Gabriel's birthday, which happened to fall on a Sunday that year. Simon lost interest in the service and was watching the children play in the graveyard. Those who were ostensibly responsible for their momentary care were engaged in more carnal delights on the entirely opposite side of the church, in a rather secluded area behind the vicarage.

"They don't half run about, do they?" Simon commented.

Grace looked out of the window with Simon. "Cor, don't they just. Look at 'em go. Did we have that much energy when we were their age?"

"No. Couldn't've," Simon denied.

They watched the dozen youngsters fly about the lawn, dodging in and out of the larger headstones, oblivious to the macabre character of their playground.

Suddenly Simon saw something that he knew was important but he wasn't quite sure why. On the grounds, with all of the other little playmates, was a girl of about eight, adorned with waist-length hair of extraordinary redness. Apart from that, she was generally unremarkable but for some reason he knew that she held some significance in his life. He also knew that he had to talk to her.

"Stay here," he ordered Grace.

"Where're you going?" she demanded. "Si, you can't go out there. You'll be spotted like a Leopard!"

"Just stay here," he ordered as he ran down the stairs and outside, unseen to the congregation who all had their eyes on the altar as Father Gabriel was raising a chalice.

He snuck round the side opposite the graveyard where all the children were playing and came to a corner where he had a generally unobscured view of the yard from behind a row of bushes. He observed that they were playing some sort of game where they seemed to rotate around the yard in some fashion and that there would always be one child just a few yards away at the foot of a massive oak tree. *All I have to do*, he reasoned to himself, *is wait until she gets to the tree. I just wish I could remember her name.*

He waited with the patience and discipline that living with a priest brings and, as expected, the little redhead was finally at the base of the oak. He took a large acorn and gently hurled it in her direction. At the moment, she was engrossed in the game, but she did notice when the acorn hit the roots and, gauging its trajectory, traced its origin back to Simon. Her first reaction seemed to be one of shock and she seemed about to panic.

Recognition and inspiration came to Simon at once. He grabbed his tail and tickled his nose with the tip. It was the perfect stimulus as she covered her mouth in silent astonishment, remembering Simon from the Midsummer's Day festival. She looked about the yard to ensure no one was watching and then ran straight to the hedge where Simon was hiding, tackling him to the ground.

"Simon! How'd you find me?" she squealed.

"You're Evangeline aren't you? You were the little girl in the park – the one that pulled my tail."

"I didn't mean to," she said apologetically, letting him get up.

"No, that's okay. It's all right. Listen. This is very important. I need your help."

"Okay."

"You know that town we met in that day?"

"Yes. It's called Newburg," she said proudly.

"That's right. Now, just a block away from the park where we met, there was a great, big theatre. Do you remember what it was called?"

"Ermmmmnoppe."

Simon sighed in exasperation. *Try to get something out of her*, he thought. *She must know something we could use.* "Erm, okay. Do you know the name of the park?"

"Ermmmmnoppe."

"Crap," Simon muttered.

"Simon said a naughty word," Evangeline said.

"Don't be a telltale," Simon replied. He stroked his chin in thought. "Are you going to Newburg again anytime soon?"

"Oh, yes. Uncle Ernie lives there and we go there to visit him all the time. Do you know what?"

"What?"

"We went to that big theatre there when Jenny Banks had a birthday party and they had Animals just like you and you know what?"

"What?"

"There was a Beeaarr," Evangeline started counting on her fingers. "And there was a Foooxxx . . ."

"Was there?" Simon asked, astonished.

"His name was Ignatius and he was really lovely."

"Ignatius?" Simon's jaw was nearly on the ground with astonishment.

"Ignatius HaliFox?"

"That's right. And there were two Raaaabbbiiittss . . ."

"Rabbits? Surely they were Hares?"

"That's right. They did say they were Hares. You know what?"

"What?"

"They said they were twins! Rachael and Clare MarchHare. I remember because I read 'Through the Looking Glass' by Lewis Carroll and there was the Hatter and the March Hare and they were both mad but there wasn't a hatter at the theatre, just the Hares . . ."

Simon put up his hands to interrupt Evangeline's line of thought. "Listen, Evangeline, that's all very interesting, but I need to get to that theatre. Do you remember what it's called?"

"Ermmmmdunno."

"Think very hard, Evangeline. This is very important. Try again."

"Ermmmmnoppe."

Simon knew he was running out of time. "When do you think you'll go to Newburg again?"

"Oh, quite soon. I'm going to have a party, just like Jenny did, with all the Animals. Will you come?"

"When is it?"

"July fifteenth. That's only eight days from now. I'll be nine."

"Yes, I'll come, Evangeline. I will come to your birthday, *if* you can remember the name of the theatre."

Evangeline screwed her face up in concentration. "Ermmmm nope. Sorry, can't think of it."

"Well, I'm sorry, Evangeline, I can't be there. But . . ."

"Yes."

"If you do me a very, very, very important favour . . . "

"Yes?"

"I can be there for the next one."

"Okay. What's that, then?"

"When you have your party, be sure to tell all of the Animals that Simon and his good friend Grace are here. Do you know where *here* is?"

"Ermmmno. Forgot."

"This is the church of Our Lady of Forgiveness at Bastrop. Can you remember that?"

"Yes."

"Good. Say it for me."

"Our Lady of Forgiveness at Batsdrop."

"Erm, maybe I should write it down for you."

"No, I can remember."

"No, honestly, Evangeline, I think I should write it down." Simon patted his pockets. "You don't have any paper about, do you?"

"I have this invitation," she said, whipping out a cream coloured, embossed envelope.

Simon was about to enquire if she had a pencil on her when he noted the return address of the invitation. "Erm . . . Evangeline?"

"Yes?"

He pointed to the return address of the envelope. "Do you see this, Evangeline?"

"Yes?"

"What's it say?"

"Our Lady of Forgiveness, Batsrop."

Simon was nearly about to cry. "Evangeline. Here's what I want you to do."

"Yes?"

"Give this envelope to the Animals at your party. Okay?"

"Okay."

"And tell them that I am *here*," he pointed distinctly to the return address.

"Not *here*," he pointed to the address.

"Course not! That's my address!" she said.

"Can you do that?"

"Oh yes," she said.

"Now, who am I with?"

"Erm . . . Faith?"

"No, it's Grace. Like you say grace before eating, right?"

"Oh, right. 'Thank you, Oh, Lord, for these . . . '"

"That's all right, Evangeline. Now, I haven't much time, so listen very carefully. If you don't do this for me, you'll never see me again and I'll never see my home again. Remember how I helped find your parents?"

"Sort of. I live with Gran now."

"Do you?"

"Yep. Mum and Dad got done up for trafficking. I'm not sure what that is but I think it has something to do with motor-cars or lorries. That and dangerless

en-wrecking-ment. No idea what that is, either. But they're in the nick for the next twenty years, so I have to live with Gran."

"Oh . . . sorry to hear that."

"No, it's okay. Gran treats me lots better anyways. She's quite nice, really."

"Oh, that's good."

"She always lets me eat. And she always has yummy food about."

"Commendable features for a guardian," Simon mumbled. "Okay. One more time. Who do you show the invitation to?"

"The Animals at the Rialto."

"Good. And who am I here with?"

"Grace."

"Excellent. And where are we?"

Evangeline turned the envelope to read it. "Our Lady of Forgiveness, Bastrop."

"Perfect. Now promise you won't forget?" asked Simon.

"I'll never forget you, Simon," she said.

"And you'll never lose that envelope?"

"I'll guard it with my life," Evangeline stated proudly.

Simon sighed a sigh of hope. "Excellent. How old did you say you'd be?"

"Nine."

"Then I'll see you when you're ten. Maybe sooner, if we're lucky. Right. Now off you go. Your friends'll be missing you."

"Oh, right! Bye, Simon!" She gave him a tight hug and departed from the hedge.

Simon watched as she rejoined her playmates. "Jack help us," he said. He was about to get up when he noticed the invitation on the ground, just at his feet.

1700 – Our Lady of Forgiveness Church, Bastrop

The service had ended and the party on the lawn had finally dissipated only after everyone had had their afternoon tea. A few guests volunteered to help tidy up but Father Gabriel kindly dismissed them with his thanks. As the last of the visitors departed, Grace and Simon came out of hiding and began to clear things away. Simon began to brief Father Gabriel about his encounter earlier that afternoon.

"I just couldn't get Evangeline's attention again," Simon said. "I had to go back to the loft or be spotted."

"How do you know Evangeline?" asked Father Gabriel.

"We met in Newburg, shortly after Grace and I ran away. She was lost and I got her to her parents. Well, to the police actually."

"Yes, shame about her parents. But at least she's in good hands now. By the way, she was most distraught after the reception," Father Gabriel said.

"Said she had lost her invitation. No one could understand why she was so upset, as she was here at the party anyway. But she insisted that she had to have an invitation."

"So what happened?" asked Simon.

"I gave her mine," Father Gabriel answered.

"Yours? You had an invitation?" asked Grace. "To your own birthday party?"

"Printing error," Father Gabriel dismissed. "This sort of thing happens when you order things on the Internet."

"The what?" asked Simon.

"I'll explain later. Anyway, it seemed to placate her to no degree. She seemed to be especially happy that the mailing address and the return address were the same."

Simon and Grace sighed a bucketful of relief and embraced each other.

"Was it something I said?" asked Father Gabriel.

"While the service was on," Simon explained, "I was trying to get her to remember the name of the theatre in Newburg – with little luck, I'm afraid. She couldn't remember. But she's having a party there in just over a week's time. I told her to give the invitation to one of our friends from Otterstow and they could come and get us using the return address on the envelope."

"Oh, bummer!" Father Gabriel said. "I could have asked her grandmother, Vicky. She was here at the party."

"Well, yeah, but you didn't know Evangeline knew," Simon mentioned.

"True," Father Gabriel said. "Ah, I know. We'll give her a call in a few hours time."

"Why not now?" asked Grace.

"Because she left a couple of hours ago it takes five hours for her to get home," Father Gabriel said. "And Vicky doesn't have a mobile."

"Pretty lucky, finding her right here in the church," Grace commented.

"A miracle, here in my own church," Father Gabriel said. "Who'd've thunk it. And the shame is, I can't tell anyone."

"Don't believe in miracles," Grace replied. "It's just coincidence met with opportunity. There's nothing miraculous about meeting someone by chance."

"Just because something has a logical explanation, doesn't mean it's any less of a miracle," Father Gabriel pointed out.

They cleaned up the remainder of the outing in short order and then repaired to the vicarage. After a few hours, Father Gabriel asked for his telephone. "Vicky ought to be home by now and had a chance to relax for a while. Would you dial the number, Grace?"

Grace did so and handed the telephone to Father Gabriel.

"Hello, Vicky? This is Father Gabriel . . . Home safe? . . . That's good. Listen, I understand Evangeline is having a birthday party at a theatre . . . That's right, the one in Newburg . . . Does it? Well, that's nice. Do you happen to remember the name of the theatre? . . . Is it? . . . Are you sure? . . . Oh, I understand, then . . . Well, give my regards to Bertie . . . All right, goodbye."

"Well?" asked Grace and Simon.

Father Gabriel sighed as he put down the telephone. "She said she thinks it's the Ribaldo."

"That can't be," Grace said. "We tried that one already."

"She's not making the arrangements. Her son, Evangeline's Uncle Ernie is making the arrangements."

"Let's call him then," suggested Simon.

"I would except for two reasons," Father Gabriel replied. "First, I don't have his number."

"Doesn't this Vicky person have it?" asked Grace.

"Very probably," Father Gabriel answered. "But I don't want to bother her for it, because he's out of the country until the day before the party, which is the second reason I can't call him."

Simon and Grace sighed in despair.

"Now, now. Don't lose hope. I suspect God had a reason for wanting you to stay here for a little longer than you think absolutely necessary."

"Like what?" asked Grace with a slight edge to her voice.

Father Gabriel shrugged. "Blimey if I know," he smiled. "Maybe to help an old, blind priest see something important. Perhaps to make you truly appreciate the importance of what family means. Who can divine His will? Certainly not I."

"Or it could be that we're just incredibly unlucky," Simon countered.

"No, couldn't be that," Father Gabriel said.

"Why not?" asked Grace.

"Things could be *far* worse than they are now. I'd bet you could both think of three things over the space of ten seconds that could make your situation a lot worse than it is now. Now, if I might humbly suggest, there's been enough self-pity – let's pack it in for the night. I'm sure we'll have some inspiration by morning."

08JUL2002 Monday

0800 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

The next morning, Simon and Grace were having breakfast with Father Gabriel.

"Father," Simon began. "Grace and I have come to a decision."

"Have you?" he asked.

"We had a long discussion about it last night and we've decided that we'll give Evangeline a little time. If she doesn't come through, then we'll just walk back," Simon announced.

"Walk back?" asked Father Gabriel, concerned.

"Yeah. It's about two hundred and fifty miles according to the map," Simon said, "so we figured, walking about three miles an hour . . ."

"Taking a few stops a day to rest . . ." Grace added.

"Using footpaths and towpaths . . ." Simon put in.

"And staying off the main roads . . ." Grace said.

"Oughtta take us about ten days."

"That's quite a trek," observed Father Gabriel. "Sure you can make it?"

"Well, it took us months to find this place. I think we could handle ten days all right," Simon stated.

"What about the theatre?" asked Father Gabriel. "How will you find it?"

"Newburg's not all that big a place," Grace said. "I'm sure we'll be able to find it once we get there. It's a huge building and we do know a little about the town."

"We could even risk asking one or two of the locals," Simon said. "We could just say we're there to perform for a party."

"What about Evangeline?" asked Father Gabriel.

"Yeah, and I could grow wings and fly home," Grace said.

"Don't underestimate her," Father Gabriel said. "She might come through."

"Her birthday's the fifteenth of July," Simon said. "That's a week from today. Grace and I decided that we would wait one week after that and then we beat feet. Either way we should be at the Rialto by August."

"All right, then. Let's prepare for the trip," Father Gabriel agreed. "I hope and pray that she will come through but as your Portrayal says, 'hope for the best, prepare for the worst.'"

10JUL2002 Wednesday

1200 – Black Kettle Pub

Steve was moping over a pint in the Black Kettle when he was approached by a very anxious Vince.

"Steve, izzit true?" Vince asked in an urgent whisper. "Are we gonna get cut off?"

"Afraid so," Steve replied. "First of August."

"But that can't happen. I've got punters – and distributors! They're depending on us."

"I'm sorry, Vince. I'm doing all I can but it looks very bad. I wouldn't count on any supplies after the first."

Vince was becoming increasingly frantic. "Steve, just tell me what has to be done – I'll do it. It doesn't matter what it involves. Even if it means . . . *persuadin'* someone in Reality."

Steve looked at Vince in disbelief. "Vince, you couldn't possibly propose violence to solve this?"

Vince shrugged. "Well . . . not violence as such. Perhaps just a suggestion to 'em that he might regret his actions if he cut us off."

"He has a lot more suggestions than we have," Steve said. "And if he found himself running short, he could easily get more."

"How many suggestions has he got?" asked Vince.

"I've personally seen only four. And they're all quite strong and large suggestions."

"Four?" snorted Vince. "That's nothin'. I could easily round up at least a dozen suggestions – big strappin' suggestions that been workin' at the mill all their lives."

"Among his many other assets, Mister MacAleister owns controlling interest in a multinational company employing over five thousand suggestions. They make military-grade weapons."

"Oh," Vince said. "I see. Well, then . . . It'll be a blow to my customers, not being able to buy them things anymore. I'll scrape up all my cash to buy as much stock as I can before things dry up."

"Might be a good idea," suggested Steve.

"Any way I could make this stuff myself?" asked Vince.

"Not without an advanced understanding of chemical engineering. I know a little about it, but frankly, Vince, I've got other things to take care of."

"I'm a quick study," Vince suggested.

"Vince, I just don't have the time . . ."

"Just a few books is all I'm askin'," Vince pleaded. "Deodorant couldn't be all that difficult. Maybe some conditioner and dandruff shampoo – and the prophylactics. Definitely the prophylactics. It's not like I wanna make the cure for yeast wilt. I'm sure that's a closely guarded secret, anyway."

"Vince, I'd like to, but I've got tons of stuff to do before I move here."

"Move here? You're stayin' with Linda then?"

"That's my intention, yes." Steve replied.

"You'll need a job, then?"

"I suppose."

"Well, with your special understandin' of things and my connections, I'm sure we could put something quite profitable together."

Steve sighed. "Fine, I'll see what I can dig up."

"Good lad. You won't regret it Steve. You'll be a good provider for your Linda."

"She hardly needs provision from me," Steve answered.

15JUL2002 Monday

1200 – Evangeline's Home

"But Gran! I have to go! I have an important message to tell the Animals!" Evangeline Proudfoot beseeched.

"I'm sorry, dearest, but it'll have to wait," Vicky Proudfoot said. "You simply cannot go to your birthday party with a fever of a hundred and two."

"Can't I go just to deliver the message?"

"No, dearest, not today."

"When?" Evangeline asked.

"My word, but you're an importunate young lady!"

"When?" Evangeline asked again.

"We can have your party here at the house at the first weekend that you're well."

"Sod my birthday party! I need to talk to the Animals."

"Evangeline Proudfoot! Where did you learn to use that kind of language?"

"Mum," the little girl replied matter-of-factly.

"Oh, right. No surprise there," the grandmother scowled under her breath.

"Sorry, Gran. Didn't mean to use foul language."

"We'll let it go this time and chalk it up to the fever."

"But I still want to talk to the Animals at the Rialto."

"What's this message that's so important?" asked Vicky.

"They have a friend named Simon who's lost. And I saw him at the church."

"The church?" asked the grandmother. "At Bastrop?"

"Yes, that's the one."

Vicky's demeanour changed a bit. "Oh, my. That does sound serious."

"And his friend Grace is with him."

"Oh, my," she said, genuine concern crossing her face.

"Simon's a Wolf, but he looks like a big doggie. And Grace is a Hare, but I've never actually seen her."

Vicky's face changed to one of dawning comprehension. "And this . . . doggie . . . told you that he was lost?"

"That's right."

"Ah, well, that's that, then," Vicky stated emphatically. She patted Evangeline's leg heartily. "I shall ring up the Ribaldo at once and demand to speak to one of the animals . . ."

"Ask for Ignatius or Clare. They're supposed to be the most clever," Evangeline interrupted.

"I shall. I shall," she replied. "But you have to promise me that you'll take your medicine and lie quiet for the rest of the day."

"Can I read?"

"Course you can. Which book would you like?"

"Could you get me the one with Toad and Ratty?"

"Right. Then I'll go and ring up the Ribaldo, straightaway."

"Ta, Gran."

Vicky kissed Evangeline and retrieved the book. She then walked into the hallway, picked up the receiver, dialled a number and began to speak in a loud and clear voice, whilst her thumb was on the hook. "Hello, Ribaldo theatre? . . . This is the Proudfoot party calling. Sorry about the cancellation, but I have a most urgent message for one of your animal performers. I was told to speak to Ignatius or Clara . . . Thank you, I'll hold . . ."

Just then, Bertram, her husband walked down the hall with his newspaper and observed his wife on the telephone. "What the . . . ?"

Vicky put her finger to her lips and he stopped although he was no less mystified.

"Hello? Is this Clara? . . . Yes, I have a most urgent message to convey from my daughter, Evangeline Proudfoot," Vicky continued. "She said that your friends, Simon and Grace, are at the church of Our Lady of Forgiveness in Bastrop . . . You will? . . . Very good. Most excellent. I'll tell her."

Bertie was still stumped as to what was going on but he kept his peace for the moment.

Vicky stuck her head back into Evangeline's room. "Did you hear me, love? I called the Ribaldo and they said they'd send someone straightaway."

"Thank you, Gran," Evangeline said meekly.

"Ah, bless, poor little dear must be worn out after so much excitement," Vicky replied. "Well, we'll let you rest a little. Ni-night." She turned out the light, closed the door quietly and beckoned her husband to follow to the kitchen.

"There *is* an explanation for all this, I presume?" he asked patiently. "Why'd you pretend to have that conversation on the phone?"

"You know how they have the animal performers at the theatre for the birthday parties?"

"Oh, yes. State of the art costumes from what I hear. Quite convincing."

"Remember when we went to the service at the lovely little church, up near Bastrop? For your cousin, Father Gabriel?"

"Certainly. But what's one to do with the other?"

"Eva said she saw a wolf there who told her he was lost. And that he had a hare with him that was lost as well. So, this wolf asked Eva to tell the animals at the Ribaldo so they could come and rescue them."

Bertie smiled. "Wow." He looked at his wife. "That's some story. What an imagination! Say, maybe she could be a writer some day."

"Could do," Vicky said as she started to put the kettle on.

"Might be the next Carroll."

"Or Milne."

"Or Grahame."

"On the other hand," Vicky mused, "it wouldn't hurt my feelings if she just got a steady job. At least she'd be a step up from our daughter."

1200 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

Grace was jotting down lots of little items in a notebook.

"Hello, Grace," Simon said. "What's with the list?"

"Two things. Our route back to Newburg and a list of things we'll need for our trip."

"I thought we were going to wait 'til a week after Evangeline's birthday."

"We are. Father Gabriel told me to make a list to prepare for things, so we won't be rushing around at the last minute."

"Oh . . . Right. Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes, try to think of things we need to carry with us."

"Loads of fresh pants and toilet paper."

"Excellent idea, Si," she said, jotting down the items.

"Oh, and female doodahs."

1210 – Evangeline's Home

Evangeline sighed. Nothing was going right and she desperately wanted to keep her promise to Simon. Rolling over in her bed, she pulled the invitation to the church from her nightstand and read the address that she had memorized as she felt the soft perimeter of the fake torn edge. She then took out the invitation to her birthday party. Looking at it she noticed the name of the theatre.

"Rialto," she whispered, reading it. "It's not the Ribaldo. It's the Rialto."

Despite her illness, she steeled her resolve. Getting up, she went to her desk and took out some writing paper, two envelopes and a pair of stamps. She then took out her favourite pen and began to write.

In ten minutes, she had composed a pair of letters that were very much to the point and ready to post. She would trust no one but herself to actually slip them in the postbox, which she determined she would do as soon as she was well enough to go outside. Of course, she could not know that she would be housebound for another three days.

22JUL2002 Monday

0800 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

Grace, Simon and Father Gabriel were sitting down to breakfast.

"Father," Grace began. "You know that Simon and I have decided to go. Today's the last day."

"I remember your agreement," the priest answered. "I'll freely admit I've grown quite attached to you two and the place won't be the same without you. When do you plan on leaving?"

"Tonight. At sunset," Simon answered. "We get around quite well in the dark and we won't attract as much attention."

"Makes a certain amount of sense," Father Gabriel agreed. "Oh, just a tick. I have something for you." He got up and made his way out of the room and then returned with a simple post card, wrapped in a little plastic bag. "The moment you get to Newburg, post this. It'll let me know that you arrived okay. Could you do that?"

"Sure, Father. No problem at all." Grace took the card and looked at it. The address had been filled in and there was a stamp, but the body of the card was filled with little holes. She took the card and put it in a pocket of her already bulging rucksack.

"And I know it's a bit of cheek, but I was wondering if you could put yourself out for one last favour," Father Gabriel began.

"Sure, Father," Simon said. "Whatever we can do . . ."

0810 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

The camera sat precariously on the top of the chair's back.

"Now, what you do," Father Gabriel began, "is push the little button next to the picture of the clock, and then run up here and sit with Grace and me. In fifteen seconds, the camera will take the picture."

"Right. I can do that," Simon said. "Ready?"

"Is it framed all right?" Father Gabriel asked. "Will we all be in the picture?"

"Hang on a tick. Let me check." Simon peered through the viewfinder. "Yeah, should be all right." He stood up straight. "Ready?"

They nodded and Simon pushed the button, being careful not to move the camera. Satisfied that it wasn't going to slide off the back of the chair, he quickly ran to sit next to Grace. They stood for ten seconds with cheesy grins on their faces and Simon was just about to ask if it was going to work when the

flash went off. There was the whir of a tiny, overworked electric motor and a picture flopped out.

"Now, just lay that down on the table and it'll develop all by itself in a couple of minutes," Father Gabriel instructed.

Grace and Simon watched as the picture slowly came into focus before their eyes.

"Is it coming out?" asked Grace. "Can barely see it for the spots in front of my eyes."

"Oh, yes. It's quite lovely," Simon remarked.

"Let's take two more," suggested Father Gabriel. "That way, there's one for each of us."

"I don't wish to sound selfish," Grace began, "but what would you want with a picture?"

"Well, just humour an old priest, if you would." He leant forward and said in a conspiratorial tone, "I'd like to show some of my friends who's been helping me along all this time."

"All right," Grace agreed, almost laughing. "I've done things more daft than giving a photograph to a blind man."

2130 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

Night fell and it was time for Simon and Grace to depart.

"Listen, I know you're not believers, but would you object to me saying a blessing on your journey home."

"Certainly couldn't hurt," Simon answered.

"All right, then, Father," Grace agreed.

"Good, now if you'll bow your heads . . ."

They did so as Father Gabriel raised his hands. "Heavenly Father, first I would like to thank you for the blessing of the company of these two lovely, young people. Your message to me has been loud and clear. They have been angels in the truest sense of the word. Secondly, and more importantly, please bestow your blessings on them as they make their way to their homes and families unharmed. And if you could grant them some extra favour that might make their journey less of a travail, we would offer eternal praise. Amen."

"Angels?" said Grace. "What, like on the stain-glass windows with wings and all?"

"I know that you've seen the paintings and stained glass windows in the church," Father Gabriel answered. "That's what many people think of as angels. But what many people don't know is that 'angel' simply means 'messenger.' It has nothing to do with wings or having any special powers. Just someone with a message from God."

"Message? What message?" asked Simon.

"I didn't bring any message from God," Grace added. "I've never even spoken with Him. I think I'd remember."

"Messages aren't always written or spoken," Father Gabriel explained. "Before you came . . . I was . . . in despair," he confessed. "My life seemed to

have little purpose and I have to admit, I was close to ending it all. The only reason I didn't commit suicide was because I couldn't live with the shame."

There was silence.

"That was a joke, actually," Father Gabriel said, smiling.

"Oh, right," Simon said, relieved.

"But I was in a pretty bad way. A true crisis of faith."

"But you're a priest. You have to have faith," Simon said.

"Justice without mercy is retribution. Glory without humility is vanity. And Faith without doubt is blindness.

"Anyone who says they have never doubted their faith is either lying or a fool," Father Gabriel answered. "We all falter. We are all human."

"We're not," Simon and Grace chorused.

"Present company excepted, of course, but the principle's the same.

Sometimes we become . . . weak. You made me see that I had purpose in life, even if it wasn't always apparent. You made me re-examine what it meant to have faith; our pact that I would believe what you told me did that. And that gave me strength."

"But we didn't convert or nothing," Grace said. "We're no more believers than when we came."

Father Gabriel shook his hand to dispel her argument. "Not the point. I helped someone in need and the only way I could do that was to place my faith in them; and believe me, it was *some* test of faith. If I had . . . left the church before you had arrived, you two would have come upon an empty building and who knows what would've become of you. Still on the streets, months, years later, assuming you were still alive."

"No argument there," Simon said. "And we'd like to thank you for all you've done. I wish we could leave something for you."

"You've done more than enough. And I'm not in it for the money. So I've kept my faith in you and you in me."

"Father, there's something I'd like you to do before we go," suggested Grace.

"Yes? What's that?"

Grace took his hands and placed one on her ears. "I was the one who doubted first. I think you deserve this." She placed the other hand on her cheek.

He gently pulled back his hands. "No. It was an act of true faith. I did believe you. You don't have to prove it to me."

"Then do this to remember us," Grace replied. "So you'll know what our faces are like. I've seen you feel the faces of some of the little children when you first meet them. Remember Simon and me. Remember us."

There was a moment's hesitation, but he did slowly put his hands back on her ears and felt the soft velvet.

"My goodness, what big ears you have," he said, smiling.

"The better to hear you with," Grace replied, her voice choking with emotion.

His other hand scoped out the fur-lined curve of her jaw and her chin and the various other parts of her face. When he was satisfied, he examined Simon's face as well.

"It's not every day a man gets to see that his faith was well-placed," Father Gabriel said when he was done. "Now – it's time you were on your way. I can hear a car coming up the drive, so let's say goodbye and you two can . . . beat feet."

Grace embraced Father Gabriel tightly. "Thank you, Father," she said kissing him on the cheek. "I'll always remember you."

Simon gave him a quick hug. "Thank you, Father Gabriel. You're right. Time to say goodbye. I can see that car coming round."

"So long. And don't forget to post that card when you get home."

Grace and Simon uttered one last set of good-byes and turned to walk off into the darkness, hitching up their heavy rucksacks, which would become all too light, all too soon.

Father Gabriel stood in the darkening grove and listened as they walked away over the fields towards their home.

"My word, she didn't half have some proper fur on her," he said, touching his cheek where she had kissed him.

23JUL2002 Tuesday Midsummer's Eve

1300 – Father Gabriel's Vicarage

The next afternoon, an early model compact car of no small experience sped along the dusty little road that led to the copse of trees that grew around the church.

The moment it stopped, Angus jumped out and, half-walking, half-jogging, made his way to the vicarage. Impatiently, he knocked on the door. After waiting a scant few seconds he knocked again. He heard some rummaging around inside and knocked again.

The door opened, revealing Father Gabriel. "Sorry for the delay, I had to find my cane," he said.

"Are ye Faither Gabriel?"

"In the flesh," the priest replied.

"I'm after a pair o teenagers by the name o Simon an Grace. I got a letter sayin they were here."

Father Gabriel sighed. "Come inside and have some tea."

"Are they awrite?" asked Angus. "They havna come ta harm, have they?"

"No, they're all right. But you just missed 'em. They were here for months and they left just last night."

Angus swore.

"I'll ignore that one, considering the circumstances," Father Gabriel said.

"Oh, sorry, Faither," Angus apologized. "D'ye know where they went?"

"They're on their way to Newburg. Should be there within ten days."

"Ten days? Are they bein sent by post?"

"No. They're walking."

"Walkin? All the way ta Newburg? Is naurby three hunder miles! It'll take 'em ages!"

"It's two hundred fifty and it'll take them ten days, in fact," Father Gabriel said. "Come inside. Have some tea."

Angus knew that there was little he could do at this stage besides go back to the Rialto, so he decided that it might be a good idea to have a break as he had been driving for five hours straight. "Thank ye, Faither. If I might ask . . ."

"Yes?"

"Why is yer nummer no listed? I called enquiries an they said there was na listin for a Lady o Forgiveness Church onyweys in the county."

"Ah, because we're listed under the convent's name, Saint Joseph's. I know, doesn't make much sense, but there you are."

"Could've spared me ten hours o drivin," Angus grumbled.

"Let me see if I can make it up to you," Father Gabriel said, ushering him inside. "By the way, how'd you find out about them being here?"

"I got a letter from a wee lass by name o Evangeline. She said she was guan ta tell us personally at her birthday party – we do that as a serveece – but she wasna weel an couldna come."

"So, Evangeline did finally come through for us," Father Gabriel said. "A day late, but at least she tried. No matter, ten days will pass in a heartbeat."

"Ten days?" Angus said suddenly as he started counting on his fingers. "Ah, na, they winna make it! The Rialto'll be closed by then!"

"Rialto?" said Father Gabriel. "So *that's* the name of the theatre! Wait a minute, why's it closing?"

25JUL2002 Thursday

0500 – Just West of Nottingham

Grace and Simon had been walking barely two days and their packs were already becoming uncomfortably light from lack of food.

"Si, could we stop now. I'm dead tired," Grace complained.

"Yeah, it's about time anyways. We need to find somewhere to sleep. We're too close to the road . . . Look, there's some horses," Simon pointed out.

"They've probably got a nice barn somewhere nearby, with some nice soft hay as well, no doubt."

"All right, let's have a look," Grace suggested, bounding over the fence into the field.

They walked in the darkness for barely a minute when Simon saw the barn. "There it is over oh, bugger."

"What? Oh, Si, gross."

"And it's a nice fresh one, as well," Simon grumbled. "Yick," he added as he wiped off his boot.

They made their way to the barn and were quite surprised to find that it actually had a small light on.

"Someone must like their horses an awful lot to leave the light on for 'em," Grace commented.

"Come on, let's go up to the loft," Simon suggested. "Wouldn't want to disturb the tenants." He began to climb the ladder and Grace followed him. He was looking forward to a little snack, perhaps a puff or two of the marijuana they had taken all those months ago and then a long day's sleep on some lovely, scratchy hay with his soft bunny curled up on top of him.

He was not disappointed, although he did have to go to the trouble of shooing off an enormous raven that was roosting in the rafters.

1145 – A Barn Just West of Nottingham

Simon woke the next morning just before midday. Normally he would have continued sleeping until nightfall but there was some activity in the barn.

He tapped Grace, waking her and signalled for her to be silent. Grace, still a little bleary, tried to listen. She silently fell off of Simon and they both crept to the edge of the loft so that they might hear a little better. Below them a man and a woman were having a conversation that had started off rather normally but was quickly becoming heated.

"She's a perfectly healthy animal," protested the man.

"I don't care," answered the woman. "It's to be destroyed."

"Right, I'll call the vet."

"You'll do no such thing, you stupid bumpkin! If the vet puts it down, we don't collect the insurance."

"Well, how'm I supposed to put her down?"

"I don't care. Shoot it. That's what they usually do to horses, isn't it?"

"You know we don't have a weapon."

"Well, run over it. Throw it off a cliff. Poison it. I don't care. Just . . . get rid of it."

"Couldn't we just sell her?"

"No, we could not just sell it. Bloody hell, why I ever married such a sappy git like you is beyond me."

"You used to love horses," he replied.

"I love the money horses make. They're animals and they were put here for our use. Now off the bloody thing."

"But why?"

"Because it's costing us money!" she shouted, losing her patience. "How many times do I have to explain this to you? Now just screw your courage to the sticking place and get it over with!"

"But she's made thousands for you. Put her out to pasture. She deserves that."

"You talk like it's a person. It's not a 'she' or a 'her' – it's an 'it.' A thing. It's an animal. A beast. It has no concept of money or retirement. It exists for the sole purpose of our benefit. Now, off the damned thing! And if you call the vet and have it put down, I'll take the insurance money out of our divorce settlement. Do you understand that? This horse has to either die or be stolen and I haven't time to arrange a proper theft. So get on with it. It has to be done today. Understand? Today!"

There was a sigh from the man. "All right. I'll do it."

The woman stormed out wordlessly. Moments later, Simon and Grace heard a door slam and a car race off.

They could tell that the man was clearly distressed as he walked to one of the stable doors. He chirruped and a horse stuck her head out. She was a grey, rather unremarkable in appearance. As he caressed it and stroked her neck and ears, Grace could see that he was crying.

"Poor guy," she whispered.

"Poor horse," Simon sympathised.

Grace looked at Simon. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I rather doubt it. I'm not thinking anything," Simon whispered.

Grace whispered into his ear.

Simon considered this for a moment. "Yeah. Could do."

Grace, never the one to stand on ceremony, stood up, gave a small leap and fell from the loft, landing on the floor of the barn, albeit unhurt, but with something less than belied her namesake. This attracted the undivided attention of the man.

Simon, meanwhile, took the more conventional approach of taking the ladder.

"Excuse me," said Grace, smiling. "My name's Grace."

Despite the polite introduction, he was terrified at the sight of a five-foot (plus ears) Lepun standing before him that was capable of speech. He was also a little distraught at the nearly six-foot canid that was descending the loft ladder.

"And my name's Simon," Simon added.

"Morning, Grace, Simon," he answered as politely as he could muster. "I'm Marc," he said, remembering his manners. "Erm, I take it you're not from round these parts. What is it that brings you down this way?"

"You," Grace answered.

The frightened Marc, as if thinking that there might be someone else standing near him that she might be addressing, pointed his finger to his chest, with a querying look on his face.

"I understand you've been ordered to put down that lovely horse there. Is that right?" asked Grace.

Marc's expression changed from frightened to ashamed. "Yes. That's right." He paused, embarrassed by his confession. "I don't wanna. She's really lovely," he said, indicating the grey. "And she's bloody clever – more'n some folk I know."

"Why can't she be sold?" asked Simon.

He stumbled for words. "For one, no one will buy her. And she – the missus – wants to collect the insurance for either theft or death. She's tired of paying all the legal fees. Poor old Fauvel – she's given everything and now she's to be put down."

"Why's that?" asked Grace.

"She's costing us too much money," answered Marc. "She made us a fair few bob over the years as a jumper and then for foaling. But she's nearly spent it all, of late."

"How much money could a horse spend?" asked Simon.

"Normally, not all that much. The usual vet fees, some insurance, then there's the basic stuff like feed, stable, grooms and so on. If it were just that, it wouldn't be a problem."

"So what *is* the problem?" asked Simon.

"This one, she's got a special talent."

"That's normally a good thing, innit?" asked Grace.

"Not in this case," answered Marc. He gave the mare a quick, nervous look.

"She nicks things," he said quickly.

Fauvel nudged the man with her nose.

"And she doesn't like people mentioning it," Marc quickly added.

"Nicks things?" asked Grace. "Whaddya mean? Like . . . stealing and all?"

Fauvel neighed and stamped the ground with her hoof, whilst shaking her head.

"How's she do that?" asked Simon.

"Dunno. I've never actually seen her do it. But sure as we're all standing here, if I let her out of her stable of a night to roam the pasture – next morning, in her manger, there'll be something."

"Like what?" asked Simon.

"All manner of things . . . Car keys, fruit, little toys . . . Sometimes expensive stuff like jewellery, watches, wallets . . . Never anything very big, mind. But it's gotten so that some of the neighbours are using her as an excuse to replace things they never had. Had one neighbour accuse her of stealing his television. And it's beginning to cost a lot of money, taking it to court and all."

"Sounds rather hard to believe," said Simon.

"And I'm standing here talkin' to a Wolf and a Hare?" said Marc.

"Oh, yeah . . . well, fair play," answered Simon.

"How'd she learn to do that?" asked Grace.

"Dunno. When we bought her, she weren't even a yearling. I can't believe someone taught her that in such a short time. And we've bought from the same people dozens of times and they don't do such things. I guess it was just . . . a natural talent."

"You mean she's a congenital kleptomaniac?" asked Simon.

Fauvel neighed loudly in protest and nearly reared in her attempt to stamp the ground.

"Sorry?" asked Marc.

"A natural-born thief," translated Grace.

Fauvel snorted, turned away and went to hide inside her stall. Marc looked at her in disappointment. "Fauvel, they didn't mean it," he said to her consolingly. The unmistakable sound of flatulence issued from the stall. He turned back to the other two. "She's quite sensitive about it," he said. "You oughtn't mention it."

"So what's to become of her?" asked Simon.

"Have to put her down. You heard the missus. It's not like I wanna. I really don't wanna even put her to sleep; she's a perfectly healthy animal. But the missus wants me to do somethin' horrible, so as it looks like an accident."

"But, as an alternative, she could be stolen?" mentioned Simon.

"Stolen? Yeah, suppose so. That'd suit the missus okay. But I'm not much good at theft – and I don't know any thieves," he glanced back into the stall for a second to see if Fauvel was out of sight. "'Cept her," he mouthed, pointing.

Fauvel neighed loudly and kicked the door of her stall, causing Marc to flinch.

"The missus had one of our stallions stolen once before but it didn't work out very well. In the end, it was damned unpleasant for the horse, I can tell you that. I'll never forget the look ol' Piper-san gave me as he lay dying. I felt like I'd betrayed my best friend," he sniffed. "I hate to put the ol' girl down, but if I arrange a theft and she gets recovered . . ." He left the thought unfinished, but it was clear he wasn't comfortable with it. "No, if she's to be stolen, she can't never be found again."

Simon gave a moment's thought to what he was about to say and decided that he didn't want Fauvel to die either.

"I'd like to ask permission to steal your horse," Simon said.

Fauvel suddenly reappeared at the door of the stable.

"You? Steal Fauvel?" asked Marc.

"That's right," Grace said.

"She won't be found again, would she?" asked Marc.

"Do you have any idea where we're from?" asked Simon.

"No, none whatsoever," Marc admitted. "I've never seen the like of either of you ever before."

"Do you know anyone that has?" Simon asked.

As far as Marc was concerned, it was a rhetorical question. He stroked his chin in thought as he thought about their offer.

"We'd take good care of her," Grace added.

"D'you know ought about horses?" asked Marc.

"We've a few horses at the dairy in our town," Simon mentioned. "I've done a good bit of work with them."

"Ever ride?"

"Oh, yes," Simon answered.

"You've a proper stable for her when you get home?"

"Yes, of course. And lots of pasture – if she doesn't mind keeping company with cows."

Marc still seemed very dubious about the arrangement. "You'd never . . . hurt her, would you? You're not gonna sell her to the knackers or . . . eat her or the like?"

"Of course not," Simon said in disgust. "That's horrible. Who'd eat a horse?"

"You are, erm . . . well . . ."

"A Wolf?" suggested Simon.

"Not to put too fine a point on it," said Marc.

"True, but I'm a vegetarian. She's the one you should be concerned about," Simon pointed to Grace. "She eats pig skin fried in pig fat, given half a chance."

"Oo, yeah, love a bit o' scratchin's when the Suvan aren't lookin'," Grace said, licking her chops. "But I'd never eat a horse."

"What's a frog?" asked Marc.

"Something that sits on a lily pad and eats flies," Grace answered.

"I think he's talking about the softer part on the bottom of a horse's foot," Simon conjectured.

"Clever lad. Ever pick a hoof?"

"Sure, loads of times," Simon answered.

"Curry and brush?"

"Of course."

"Anything you *don't* know?" Marc's question seemed directed.

"Graeme – he's the one that taught me – says that no one knows everything about horses. And I must admit, we haven't quite got round to the bit about tack."

Marc finally seemed convinced. "Wait here," he said. He ran outside and returned instantly. "No, follow me," he said, beckoning them to follow. They pursued him behind the barn and into a makeshift office, filled with tack.

"We haven't much time," he warned.

2100 – A Barn Just West of Nottingham

The sun was approaching the horizon.

"Right, so I just have to adjust the chin strap," Simon demonstrated his newfound skill, "until there's about two fingers' width between the throat and the strap."

"Maybe just one finger for you," Marc suggested. "Excellent. Now, get on, just like you did before."

Simon put his left foot in the stirrup and heaved himself onto the horse's back. Grace went behind the horse and simply vaulted up behind Simon.

"Now, your curry-comb and brush are in here, as well as all the other supplies. You promise you'll take good care of her?" Marc pleaded.

"I promise," Simon said sincerely.

Marc could tell he meant it.

"Now, don't forget, always pick her hooves after a ride and . . . great granny's ghost! It's her! Run! Quick! Off with you!"

"What?" asked Grace.

"It's her! The one that wants to put her down. Go, on! Steal her, right now! Quick! Here she comes!" He slapped the haunch of Fauvel as Simon dug in with the stirrups. Fauvel took off. Grace was caught a little unawares and had a hard time of it trying to hang on to Simon as they bounced across the pasture. They had had only had a couple of practice canters around the barn and she wasn't quite used to the motion of a full-out run.

"Simon!" Grace shouted over the wind and hooves.

"Yes, Grace?"

"There's a stone fence ahead of us!"

"I can see that Grace!" he replied.

"We're going to run into it!"

"Shouldn't think so!" Simon returned.

"Doesn't look like we're gonna stop, Simon!"

"No, we're not stopping."

"Then what's gonna happen?"

"Hang on tight, Grace!" Simon warned. Grace shut her eyes tight and squeezed Simon's waist.

There was a full second of silence as Fauvel leapt over the fence as easily as the quick brown fox jumps over a lazy dog. She then continued at a full gallop down the road.

Grace opened her eyes. She knew she was still on top of a running horse. She also knew that they were no longer in the pasture. *Oh, that wasn't so bad*, she thought to herself.

"You git! I told you to destroy that animal!" shouted the woman.

"Can't," replied Marc.

"Why the blazes not?"

"She's been stolen."

"Stolen?"

"Stolen," Marc confirmed.

The woman looked at the horse as it ran off down the road with the two little figures on it. "Well, that's justice after all the pilfering that bloody animal's done. Now it's gone and gotten nicked. I daresay those thieves'll get more than they bargained for. And we still get the insurance money."

She stared a bit longer as they finally disappeared around a corner. "Did you arrange that?" She had a look that almost approached admiration for the man.

The man looked taken aback. "Me? I'm no horse thief. Besides, they lifted your saddle as well."

"My saddle?"

"Aye."

"My ten-thousand pound, bespoke saddle?"

"Aye. And the matching bags."

"*You idiot!*" she shouted, slugging him with her matching, bespoke purse.

26JUL2002 Friday

0600 – A Field Somewhere in the Midlands

Simon and Grace rode for the rest of the night and into the early morning. They would stop occasionally to let Fauvel have a little rest and sometimes they would lead her, discovering that she was very cooperative. Just before daybreak, they found a little field that was on a very remote road. After tending to Fauvel, they spread a little blanket out, had a bite or two of their rations, talked for an hour or so and finally went to sleep under the shade of a spreading chestnut tree.

Late that afternoon, Simon was awakened by Fauvel nudging him with her nose. At first, he ignored it and went back to sleep but Fauvel insisted.

"What?" Simon said.

Fauvel looked off to the road and Simon followed her gaze. There, on the side of the road, roughly a hundred yards away, a brightly coloured van was parked. Two uniformed men were emerging. At first Simon thought nothing of it.

Then he noticed the word "Police" written very clearly on the side of their vehicle.

"Furry bollocks!" he said, waking up in a hurry. "Grace, get up," he said quietly. She had slipped off of him and didn't seem in any hurry to awaken.

"Grace," Simon said, shaking her. "It's the Old Bill. We've got to beat feet."
"Huhn?"

"We've a stolen horse, remember? And if she gets taken back, they'll . . . do something to her," Simon reminded her.

Fauvel snorted impatiently.

Grace sat up and Simon pointed out the two policemen who were opening the back of their van and pulling out some ropes and a rifle.

Fauvel was all cooperation as they threw on the blanket and saddle, forgoing the bridle for the moment. They gathered their things in the saddlebags and had just mounted Fauvel in their own particular idiom when the police entered the field. By that point, Fauvel had trotted off and the police knew they had no hope of catching up with her on this particular occasion.

"She's a clever horse," Simon told Grace after they had slowed down, knowing they were out of harm's way. "She woke me up when the police came."

"Oh, it's just coincidence," Grace dismissed.

0600 – A Familiar Intersection With a Familiar Restaurant

They travelled the rest of the afternoon and on into the next morning. Just before sunrise, Fauvel trotted out of the woods, revealing a scene that was all too familiar to Simon and Grace.

"This is where that couple tried to nick our stuff," Simon said. "See, there's the overpass."

"Yeah, I recognise this. And there's the restaurant where you went diving for those hamburgers in the rubbish skip."

"You don't suppose those two from the box are still about, do you?" asked Grace. "They were right dangerous; they'll be after our hides if they see us again."

"No question of that," Simon agreed. "It's almost time to stop for the day but let's not stop here. We'll go on a bit until we're a safe distance away."

Grace approved. Simon gave Fauvel a nudge and they had a slow gallop along the road, under the overpass, past the restaurant and a little further down the highway. They continued on for a minute or so at a gallop, slowed to a canter for a few minutes and then finally to a walk for a couple more miles.

Simon turned back to speak to Grace. "Did you see anyone?"

"No. Mind you, I wasn't looking all that hard."

"Good. I remember there was a silo just a little further along. We can stop there for the day. There was a nice big sheep pasture, so Fauvel can graze and get a little water."

"Sounds lovely," Grace said. "I'm dead tired."

They found the silo and the adjoining shelter made of corrugated metal was still there; as Simon had hoped, it was deserted. After they dismounted, Simon

and Grace removed all of Fauvel's tack, gave her a good grooming, cleaned her hooves and let her loose in the pasture. Simon rummaged about in the saddlebags for something to eat before they went to sleep as Grace rolled a cigarette.

They had had their dinner, smoked a bit and then prepared for their diurnal slumber. As there were several bales of hay about, it was a simple matter to form a makeshift bed. Simon assumed his usual position as Grace's living futon and she curled up on top of him.

"Did you curry Fauvel?" asked Grace.

"Course I did," Simon said with a yawn. "Don't ask such silly questions."

0700 – A Payphone Near the Familiar Restaurant

Barely a mile away, the Whippet dialled three nines at a pay phone.

"Listen, there's two dodgy characters having a bit of kip at the silo near Bulger's Landing and I'm sure they're carrying at least a kilo of hash. Send the filth to have a look." She then hung up.

"What good's that do us?" asked the Siamese Cat. "We don't get no money by calling the peelers. We should just steal their junk."

"It's called revenge," answered the Whippet. "And as for trying to steal their gear, I'm sure you haven't forgotten what they did to us last time."

"Oh, no, I won't forget that anytime soon. But you know – I don't like grassing, even for revenge. That's not my scene."

"I don't give a rat's arse about your scene," replied the Whippet. "Come on. Let's go watch the fun."

0730 – The Silo Near Bulger's Landing

The Whippet and the Siamese Cat climbed the bluff on the side of the road and sat down, out of sight of the cars whizzing past. Just within view, a solitary lump of white resting on a slightly larger lump of grey could be seen beneath the shelter next to the silo.

"This should be good," commented the Whippet. She rubbed her arm where there were some slight scars.

"I dunno, I think this is a mistake," the Siamese Cat said. "You don't grass, no matter what. Do it yourself or live with it. That's how it is . . ."

"Shut it," snapped the Whippet.

They sat in silence, waiting a good fifteen minutes.

"What's the hold-up?" asked the Whippet, impatient. "They're always there when you don't want them and they're never there when you do. Honestly, can't trust the filth for anything."

"Oh, dunno 'bout that," said a voice behind her.

The Whippet and the Siamese Cat both spun around to see a uniformed police sergeant standing behind them. A few others were appearing behind him.

"Nice to see you again, Wendy," the sergeant said. "And you as well, Sian. I'm quite surprised at you two, grassing on someone. Not like you, really."

"It was her idea," the Siamese Cat spat. "I didn't want to."

"Doesn't matter. C'mon you two. You know the drill," ordered the sergeant.

"What are we being arrested for?" protested the Siamese Cat.

"Several thefts have been reported in the area and you two fit the description."

The Whippet sniffed in disdain as she put her hands behind her head. "We'll just run away from that crappy little place again."

"Oh, shouldn't think so," the sergeant said as he put the cuffs on her.

"And why not? They can't restrain us."

"That's true. But you've been given your reprimand and your final warning. This time you get charged," the sergeant explained calmly. "And you'll get locked up, as well. No more foster care. You're past sixteen now."

"What about those two, over there?" the Whippet protested. "They *do* actually have a kilo of weed on 'em. Go arrest them!"

The sergeant looked over at the silo. "Where?" he asked.

"Over there!" exclaimed the Whippet. "Next to the silo!"

"No one over there," observed the sergeant. "Nothing but an old, grey mare lying on the ground with a great, bloody, big rook on her back."

The Whippet turned her head to look. The sergeant was completely accurate in his description. Apart from the ornithological inaccuracy, it was exactly as described.

"Oh, fuck all!" protested the Whippet. "They *are* there! They're just hiding. Go get them! Don't be so useless for once in your life!"

"Put 'em in the van, Perce," said the sergeant as the Whippet was escorted down the hillside, kicking and screaming a string of profanities.

0731 – The Silo Near Bulger's Landing

Simon and Grace slept on, oblivious to the confrontation between the two teens and the police sergeant barely a hundred yards away. As soon as the police had disappeared over the hillside, Fauvel rose to all fours to find something to eat and drink.

The raven flapped off into the morning sunrise.

27JUL2002 Saturday

0600 – The Silo Near Bulger's Landing

The next morning, Grace and Simon sat on a blanket under an enormous, spreading oak as Fauvel stood nearby. They had stopped for the night and were preparing to go to sleep for the day. Simon was consulting the map and Grace's notes as Grace was tucking into a nectarine.

"I still say it's just coincidence," Grace said as she and Simon sat on the blanket in a field. Fauvel nudged Grace's head with her nose. "Gerroff, Fauvel! Go play with Simon!"

"It's more than coincidence," Simon said, eating a radish. "Every day, we've had a nice big tree to sleep under if the weather's good or a shelter to sleep under if it's raining. She leads us to them."

"What about the silo? *You* remembered that spot," Grace recalled. "As sweet as Fauvel is, she'd nothing to do with that."

"Yeah, but that was just the once. I didn't remember any of the other places we've stayed. Fauvel found them – we never could've."

"Sure we could've," Grace answered. Fauvel gave her another nudge, but a little harder, this time. "Ow! Fauvel, stop it!"

"And for the past week there's always fresh fruit and veg waiting for us when we get up."

"So you're saying that Fauvel trots off to buy them at the shops while we're asleep?"

Fauvel snorted as if in laughter.

"Well, you can't deny that it appears. And we're out in the middle of the countryside. I doubt anyone is following us around, providing us with food."

"Where's she get it from, then?" asked Grace.

"Haven't a clue," Simon answered. "All I'm saying is that she's a bloody clever mare and I wouldn't put it past her if she were nicking all this nosh, just for us. Look at what she's brought us in the past few days," Simon said counting on his fingers. "Three little baguettes, a few nectarines, a couple of oranges, a bag of radishes, a bunch of carrots, a bunch of celery, two oranges – even a little box of chocolate biccies."

"How'd you know she brought it?"

"Of course she did. Who else?"

"How'd she get it here?" asked Grace.

"Carried it in her mouth, I suppose. They always come in those little plastic bags."

"Rubbish," Grace said. "'Sides, the bags would be all slobbery if she was carrying them in her mouth." Fauvel gave Grace a good solid push, knocking her over.

"Fauvel," Simon admonished. "That wasn't very nice. Why'd you do that? Is Grace being rude to you?"

Fauvel was quiet.

"'Tis a bit spooky, sometimes," Grace admitted, righting herself. "I won't deny, she's a lovely girl – when she's not tipping me over. But I just can't buy that she's providing us with food and shelter."

Fauvel made a move for another nudge but Grace was ready. However it didn't matter as Fauvel was much stronger than Grace and she ended up on her back again anyway.

Simon reached over to stroke Fauvel's nose. "That's all right, Fauvel. I know you're clever. But you need to be nicer to Grace – just have to accept that she's a bit thick."

"I am *not* thick!" Grace protested.

"And I think she's a bit jealous," Simon said.

"I am not jealous, either!" Grace protested, laughing and sitting down. "Why should I be jealous of a horse? Besides, if Fauvel is getting all this for us, we

should give her a break and nick a little food ourselves. I know all this stuff is healthy but I need something with a little M-E-A-T on it."

Fauvel neighed and pawed the ground.

"You can't deny that we've made excellent progress with her," Simon pointed out. "We'd never have gotten this far, this fast. We're only three days away from Newburg. At this rate, barring any great delays we should get there by the thirtieth. The whole journey will have taken us only eight days," he commented.

"And we still have toilet paper and clean pants," Grace said.

"True, but despite Fauvel's contributions, we're running short on provision. We'll probably just have to survive on bits and pieces until we get to that last, lonely mile. It'll be tough but I think we'll manage."

1500 – Another Field Somewhere in England, Slightly Further South From the Silo Near Bulger's Landing

Simon was snoozing lightly under Grace during a warm, yet damp afternoon beneath the shelter of a particularly wide oak branch that was just wide enough and just low enough as to provide protection from the softly falling drizzle. Fauvel, untethered, grazed close by. A raven landed on a nearby fence, surveyed the situation and flew to the branch just above Simon and Grace. It coughed out a raspy croak and then flew off.

Plop!

Simon woke, fluttering his eyelids as if to bring them into focus. He was careful to be still enough so that he would not wake Grace, whom he could hear breathing in slow, regular puffs. Somewhere in his fogged mind, he knew that something had happened nearby that warranted his attention – a noise, a smell. He then noticed a small, plastic bag of tiny carrots, inches from his nose.

Without moving his head, he rolled his eyes upward to see Fauvel, busily taking advantage of some wild rye. He could also see a raven flying away from him and landing on her back. Fauvel snorted, the raven flew off and Simon went back to sleep.

29JUL2002 Monday

0900 – MacAleister Estate

"We've only two days before the repossession, sir," said Leon the chauffeur.

"I realise that," George MacAleister replied. "It's so . . . inconsiderate of him, really. Just can't hire good help these days."

"Inconsiderate, sir? He died of a heart attack."

"Yes, inconsiderate. I mean, here's me, having paid good money to put a judge in my pocket and on one of the few occasions I get to put him to good use, he snuffs it."

"I don't think he had much choice in the matter sir."

"Would it have hurt him to eat a few vegetables?" asked George. "He could've walked around the block once or twice a day instead of drinking himself into a stupor every evening. And he could've stopped smoking; that would've made a world of difference. I thought judges were supposed to be endowed with exceptionally good judgement. Isn't that how they become judges?"

"Hardly sir, as well you know," Leon said. "In his case, it was mostly a political process of having the longest tongue and finding the largest backside to lick with it. Besides, if he were endowed with exceptionally good judgement, then he would hardly have succumbed to your efforts at bribery."

"Maybe," George grudgingly admitted. "All beside the point, as he's dead now."

"How much of a delay will this cause?"

"Normally, it'd take ages. They have to appoint a new judge or move our case to somewhere else. So, I've decided to go with arbitration. It'll be quite fast. And I know the arbitrator, so it's good as finished."

"Oh, most excellent, sir."

30JUL2002 Tuesday

0900 – A Dozen Miles Outside Newburg

It was midmorning and Grace and Simon were riding Fauvel through the countryside. Normally they would have stopped at dawn to sleep but Simon insisted on pushing on, as they were just a few hours away from Newburg. It wasn't the best of weather this particular day and Grace was making sure that Simon was aware of this fact.

"Simon, can't we . . ."

"No, we can't," he interrupted. "We're barely a dozen miles from Newburg."

"How're we gonna find the theatre when we get there?"

"We'll ask around."

"But, it's pissing down rain!"

"It's not that bad, Grace. It's barely past misting."

"It's been days since we've had a bath. I'm getting all matty."

"Get your kit off and you can have a shower."

"Oh, ha, ha, funny boy! And I haven't had a decent crisp for ages."

"Stop whinging," Simon ordered. "You're probably eating better than you did at home."

"Wish I was at home. Could do with a great, big, juicy . . ."

"Don't say it, Grace," Simon interrupted. "You know how Fauvel gets when you start mentioning meat."

"Simon, she's a horse," Grace pointed out. "She has no idea what we're talking about."

Fauvel neighed and increased her trot to a canter.

"There," Simon said. "See, you've upset her."

"At least we're going faster," Grace said.

At this, Fauvel broke into a gallop and then into a dead run. Grace was doing all she could to hang on to Simon and she was fearful of falling from the horse's rain-slicked back.

"I'm sorry Fauvel!" she shouted over her hooves thundering on the turf. "You needn't hurry!"

Fauvel was not to be deterred as she jumped over a low, stone wall and began to charge down a country lane. She was going full out until she crossed an intersection and was nearly hit by an early model compact car with no small experience.

The driver, Angus MacAleister, stuck his head out of the window. "Hey you! Canna ye keep yer eyes on the road! 'Ave a care!" He focused on the two Frith struggling to stay on top of the mare, who was now prancing about nervously and showing signs of bolting. "Hey! Are you . . . erm . . . wuzname, wuzname . . . Simon? An Grace?"

"Yes, that's us," Grace shouted back. Fauvel was clearly becoming uncontrollable. "We're trying to get to the theatre!"

"I knaw! We been leukin for you for ages!" Angus said. "I'll take ye's ta ma house, ye's can get cleaned up an then I'll take ye's on ta the Rialto."

Fauvel reared, unseating both Grace and Simon. After they were off her back, she calmed down considerably,

Grace and Simon lifted themselves out of the rain-soaked muck they had landed in.

"Don't think Fauvel thinks much of that idea." Grace mentioned.

"Think we should trust this geezer?" asked Simon.

"Listen, I knaw Ignatius an Pete an the lot. They'll be dead chuffed ta see's ye! Come on, get in!" he offered. "Ye can get cleaned up an have a hot meal at ma place an I'll take ye there."

"We have to bring the horse with us," Grace mentioned.

"Oh? Aye, well, na prob." Angus instantly pulled off the side of the road, exited his car without bothering to lock it or take the keys. He went to take the reins of Fauvel, who rendered no objection. "Aw, here's a guid lass, eh?" he consoled Fauvel, rubbing her nose gently. "Come along, isna but a mile ta ma hame." He began to lead the horse. Simon and Grace followed as they walked along the road, dripping with mud.

"I mynd ye," Angus said to Simon. "Ye was in ma kitchen press."

"Oh, yes. I remember you as well," Simon recalled. "You were getting a jar of olives."

"Aye, tha's right! I thought you were juist ma imagination rinnin away."

"No, it was actually me."

"Ye fond o olives, then?" asked Angus.

0910 – MacAleister Estate

Angus led the horse up the hillside to the stables behind his father's manor, where he instructed one of the staff to groom and stable Fauvel.

"Sure she'll be all right?" asked Grace, suspicious.

"Oh, aye," Angus assured. "We've guid staff here. No ta worry, she winna be put up wet."

Leaving their beloved Fauvel in the capable hands of the stable staff, Grace and Simon followed Angus into the manor via the back door and into the kitchen.

"Faither?" Angus called. "Alloo! Anyone aboot?"

Leon the chauffeur entered the kitchen. "Angus? My lad, how've you been?" he asked with a genuine display of concern.

"Is a long story. Leuk, these two're ma friends, Grace an Simon. Can we get 'em cleaned up an get 'em a hot meal. Then I'd like ta take 'em ta the Rialto. Is dead urgent. An they've a mare with 'em in the stables; she's ta ga as well."

"Certainly, of course," Leon said. "Your father is in the study. He's quite anxious to see you. Meanwhile, I'll take these two upstairs to the guest suites." He looked at Simon and Grace who were dripping in mud and soaked to the skin. "My word, look at you two. No doubt you've seen better days," he said.

"Eh, we've seen worse," Grace mentioned casually.

"Follow me, please," the chauffeur gestured. "We've some suites upstairs where you can get cleaned up. I'll have something ready for you to eat when you're done and then we'll see about taking you to the Rialto. I've heard you've been lost for quite some time."

0915 – MacAleister Estate Office

Angus entered his father's office. "Faither, I'm hame," he announced.

"So I see," George answered.

"Guid news, I fand the two fugies, Grace an Simon."

"Who?"

"Grace an Simon," Angus repeated. "The lad an lass we been seekin all this time."

George had to search his memory for a moment but it eventually came to him. "Oh, yes. I remember now. Did you? Where are they now?"

"Up the stair, gettin cleaned up for dinner. After a wee by-bite, I'm guan ta take 'em ta the Rialto."

George had other plans but he wasn't about to tell Angus that.

"Leuk, there's something important I wanna discuss juist the nou." Angus set his determination and finally came out with it. "Faither, I've come for ma legacy."

"Your legacy?"

"Aye, the Rialto. It's mine by rights; ye telt me it was mine."

"Did I? When?"

"Mynd, I was juist oot o rehab, an ye telt me. An then again, juist a month syne. Remember? An I doon all ye telt me ta – an I didna do ought ye telt me no ta do."

"Yes, I don't dispute that," George replied. "But I never said that I'd give you the Rialto."

"Aw, same auld dance, changin the rules in the mids o the game."

"I'm not 'changing the rules' at all," George defended. "I've got an interested buyer from an American chain, is all. And they're offering much more than it's actually worth. If the deal goes through, I'll be sure to put in a good word for you so that you can work there as a manager."

"A guid word? A manager?" Angus laughed. "What happent ta 'the hale enchilada' ye were talkin up, eh? What became o the 'captains o commerce'?"

"You can't start at the top, Angus," George told him.

"You did. Yer pa gave ye an heirship wirth two, three millions!"

"I was over forty when that happened, and I was already a millionaire at the time," George countered.

"Oh, aye, as Gramps gave ye an eith job wi a whappin salary maist o yer life."

"I took the trouble to earn a business degree," George pointed out. "Unlike someone I could mention."

"Sa tell me, if I were ta ga an earn a degree as well, am I ta get the same?"

"You? A degree?" George snorted "No respectable school is going to accept you."

"Sa, lang story short, na Rialto?"

"You'll have an almost guaranteed job that actually has some sort of future if you're willing to take responsibility for once in your life. That's more than most people can hope for."

"This isna what ye telt me." He affected his father's accent. "'Do these things, don't do those things and the Rialto's yours'."

"I never said any such thing," George replied.

"That's what ye telt me!" Angus protested.

"Then you misunderstood!" shouted George.

"Sa with all yer riches, ye've nought for yer onerly son! Thanks for naething!"

"If you . . ." George began, but stopped abruptly. It suddenly occurred to him that he still hadn't won the battle to retake the Rialto and that his legal standing on the matter had suffered heavy casualties.

His voice lowered and he looked at Angus severely. "All right. How *would* you like sole ownership of the Rialto? All you have to do is sign a paper."

Angus looked suspiciously at his father. "What's it say?"

"A simple statement that you've used drugs in the past year."

"Na," Angus replied simply. "I canna do that."

"Why not?" asked George.

"Acause I havna," Angus said plainly.

"So? Lie, then," George said.

"Na. I winna lee. I promised Mum that I wadna take drugs. I been clean an I winna lee about it."

"Do you want the Rialto?" asked George.

"Aye, course I do," Angus replied.

"Then sign the paper. I don't care of it's true or not. It's only going to be used to get the Rialto from that Green fellow."

"Na, I canna. Isna true. I been clean the hale time. No sa much as a half o lager or a puff on a fag."

"Then you can forget about getting the Rialto," George said brusquely. "It'll never be yours."

"But ye said it was mine!" Angus protested.

"Listen!" George said angrily, "I don't know what you heard or think you heard, but the Rialto was never yours, it never will be yours and I *never* promised you any part of it, unless you sign the papers!"

"Na! I winna do it! Isna true!" Angus dissented. He paused and then seemed suddenly suspicious "Ah, I ken! This is some sort o cantrip ta get me in deep with the law. I'll have na part o that! I been clean!"

"Calm down, you idiot. Look, it's nothing like that," George explained. "Part of the agreement with the Partnership was that you had to remain clean for the year for them to retain possession. If you sign a statement saying that you've had drugs in the past year, there's no contest. I get the Rialto. I give it to you."

"All well an guid," Angus said. "Cept for two things. First, as I've said a hunder times, I havna doon any drugs. Second, hou do I know I can trust ye?"

"I'm your father."

"Sa? I've seen hou ye've sconced awbody else ta get what ye want. Ye wadna stap with me."

"I'm your only hope of getting the Rialto," George declared. "Besides, what've you to lose?"

"Ma self-respect," Angus replied instantly.

"Self-respect?" George snorted in contempt. "Look at you. Despite being given every advantage, you've been a junkie most of your adult life, been in a dozen scrapes with the law, can't hold a job . . . Just sign the papers. Do it and get the Rialto. Don't sign and you'll get sweet FA from me anymore. No more free rides, no more solicitors, no more cars, no more cash. And you can find your own place to stay."

Angus looked at his father, an expression of quiet rage returning to his face. "We'll see who gets sweet FA," he said. Turning around he strode out.

1925 – MacAleister Estate Office

"Where's Angus?" asked George of his driver.

"He's in the kitchen, about to bring up the meal for the two guests," answered the chauffeur.

"Good. Once they're all up there, lock the doors."

"Lock the doors?" asked the chauffeur.

"Yes, lock the doors. It's a simple procedure. You stick the key in the keyhole and turn it. The door is locked, they can't get out," George said facetiously.

"I understand the concept sir, but there are two minor flaws with your suggestion. Firstly, the doors only lock from the inside, in order to protect the occupants from intruders. They are not designed to keep people within against their will.

"Secondly, even if it were possible, I would not do it, as I have made it clear that I will not participate in kidnapping."

"When did you suddenly grow a conscience?" George said sarcastically.

"Money is one thing, sir, but I have made it very clear that I will not take part in criminal violence of any sort," Leon said. "Call it hypocritical but that is my answer."

"Fine, then you can look for other work."

The chauffeur considered this for a while. "Is that your final ultimatum? Either I participate or I lose my job? After twelve years of service that I think has gone well beyond dedication?"

George straightened up. "Yes. I think that sums it up rather nicely."

Leon took a moment to consider. "Very well. I'll expect my severance and vacation pay in the mail within ninety days. Good day, sir." He turned around and walked out.

"Bugger," George complained. "Just can't hire good help these days."

Slamming his fist on his desk in frustration, he uttered a mild curse. He got up, began to pace around a bit and then fixed a drink. He walked to the window and looked out on the dreary, rainy day and noticed one of the hands leading a mare to the stables. "Since when do I own a grey?" he asked himself.

1945 – MacAleister Estate Guest Suite

"Sa what's this horse ta do with onything?" asked Angus.

"Her name's Fauvel, and we stole her," Grace answered.

"With the owner's permission, of course," Simon added hastily.

"Otherwise, she'd've been put down," Grace explained.

"And if they catch her before we get home, she'll be put down anyway, so it's vital to make sure she goes with us," Simon finished.

"Oh, aye," Angus said in comprehension.

"But how can we get her into the basement of the Rialto?" asked Grace, who then shoved a mouthful of tinned ravioli into her mouth.

"Oh, tha's the eith bit," Angus waved his hand in dismissal. "She could ga through the front or on the rear o the building is a service door. It's great wide with a set o stairs down. A horse can get through, na probs. Juist hafta get it unlocked is all but leave it ta me."

"Oh, ta for that," Simon said.

George suddenly entered the room.

"This is ma auld man, George," Angus said with nothing resembling pride.

"The grey mare in the stable?" asked George. "Is that yours?"

"That's the one," Grace answered.

"You're all to stay here until you have my permission to leave," George ordered. "Otherwise, I'll have the animal destroyed immediately. Do I make myself clear?"

Simon and Grace looked at Angus to see if perhaps this was some sort of wind-up.

"Aye, he's serious an all," Angus confirmed. "He'll do it, if we dinna follae."

"We'll stay then," Simon said. "We don't want anything to happen to Fauvel."

"Good," George responded. "Stay in this suite at all times. One foot out and the grey's history. That includes you, Angus."

31 JUL 2002 Wednesday

1300 – Black Kettle Pub

Steve walked into the Black Kettle with Desiree on the last day of July. She was still limping slightly but seemed to be fairly fit. All of the Partnership, save an absent Angus, gave her a hug before they began business.

"Got back just in time to say good-bye," Desiree said with tears in her eyes.

"So, what's up, Doc?" Rachael asked.

Desiree stared at Rachael for just a second. "Steve asked you to say that, didn't he?"

"Actually, it was me," Michael admitted freely.

"But, ya are a doctor now, ain'tcha?" asked Rachael.

"Yes, I am," Desiree admitted. "And Michael's gonna need a doctor if he pulls a stunt like that again. But please, do not call me 'Doctor' or 'Doc' or anything . . . medical. I'm still just Desiree."

"I seem to remember your saying that you had earned your doctorate," Ignatius recalled. "Surely, you deserve the title."

"Oh, well, thank you, *Your Honour*," Desiree said sarcastically. "Sorry, but it just sounds too snooty for my taste."

"Oh, does it?" Ignatius replied coolly. "Well, then, as I am the foremost authority on being snooty, far be it from me . . ."

"I think it rather suits her," Jess interrupted with a sly smile. "In fact, I think it's perfect. 'Doc' it is, then."

"What? Wait, hold up!" Desiree objected. "Who made you the naming committee while I was gone?"

"The same person that determined you were dancing in front of the Black Kettle last winter," Jess reminded her and, indirectly, Ignatius.

"Ah, yes," Ignatius said in recollection. "I must agree, Miss FærFyxe. It is, indeed, quite suitable."

"You *bitch*," Desiree scowled at Jess.

"I think it's rather suitable as well," Sandra added at the slight.

"Oh, crap. I'm sorry Sandra! It just slipped out," Desiree apologised.

"No offense taken on my part," Sandra dismissed, "Doc."

"Frankly, I think it would serve as an excellent reminder to Doc to mind her manners," Ignatius said. "Every time she hears her new name, she'll be reminded to be a bit more civil during her time in Otterstow."

"Me?" Desiree objected. "What did I do?"

"Not being prepared for PD," Ignatius reminded her.

"Hey, I was a rookie," Desiree argued.

"Slander," Ignatius continued, ignoring her excuse.

"Slander?" asked Desiree. "I didn't slander anyone."

Steve pointedly cleared his throat.

"What did I ever say about you?" Desiree asked.

Linda pointedly cleared her throat.

"Oh, yeah," Desiree called. "That."

Ignatius continued, "One totally unnecessary fight and a rather violent dancing lesson. Oh, and lest we forget, a *legal pun*," he sniffed, "in *Remun*, no less."

"I'm getting dissed for telling a joke?" Desiree asked.

"In and of itself, a minor offense," Ignatius admitted, "but calling *me* snooty after doing so is the *actus reus*. I hereby decree sentence: forever after, you shall be referred to as 'Doc'."

Desiree did a slow burn. "Fine. You want to call me 'Doc', you do that. And what do I tell the Frith when they ask what it means? It ain't exactly Remun for sweeping the floors."

"Work done at shipyards," Jess suggested. "Human names can also be where they work, not just the work they do."

"Why don't you shut the hell up from time to time," suggested Desiree.

"Ooo, scary," Jess said, uncowed. "Don't hit me too hard, Doc, or they'll put you in the . . . Oh, I've forgotten. What's it called again?" she asked, feigning ignorance, her finger on her chin.

"That would be the dock," Geoff answered with a smile.

"Oh, c'mon, Geoff! Not you, too!" Desiree moaned.

"Sorry, Doc," Geoff said. "But Ig's right. You'll remember next time you call me an old man," he reminded her.

"Fine," Doc sighed. "I give up. At least Slide has a cool nick; I'm stuck with a cliché."

"Oh, ta for that, Doc," Slide said.

"If we could get down to business," Steve said a little sombrely. "I'm sure you all know this is our last day as the Rialto Furry Troupe Partnership. Shortly after noon tomorrow, Mister MacAleister will have control of the Rialto. The local paper's run the story along with dozens of editorials on our side but the solicitors have made it quite clear that it will do little more than give Mister MacAleister a guilty conscience. As he apparently has no conscience to begin with, that won't make a difference.

"I'll be staying here in Allegory," Steve stated, "with Linda. So if there're any jobs available, I'd be more than happy to take on some work.

"Tonight at the Rialto, we have our favourite band, Almost Grown. We've told them they're the farewell performance, so they'll be doing an extra set for us at no charge."

Tears were starting to run down several faces around the table.

"We'll all be working tonight and we'll have a lock-in after hours, of course. One last lash."

Geoff was quickly becoming beside himself. Those nearby patted him on the back and gave him a word of consolation.

"I'm all right," he waved through wiping his tears. "I'm okay. Just gimme a mo'." He blew his nose.

"Sure. Course. No prob." they all agreed.

"Has any one seen Angus since yesterday?" Jess asked.

There was a good bit of murmuring but no one could definitively declare that they had.

1400 – Rialto Office

Later that afternoon, Steve and Doc were in the office of the Rialto, putting a few personal items into a box to take into Allegory. His phone rang.

"Hello? . . . No, I'm sorry but my solicitor has made it very clear that I'm not to talk to you. If you have something to say, then have your solicitor talk to my solicitor. Goodbye." He hung up his mobile.

"Who was that?" asked Doc.

"George MacAleister," Steve answered. "It's about the twentieth time he's tried to call me. He should know better, honestly. I just hope Michael doesn't talk to him."

"Give Michael *some* credit," Doc suggested. "The boy's got way more sense than that. By the way, where the heck is he? He's supposed to be helping us pack all this stuff, ain't he?"

"He spends most of his spare time in the Kettle, helping out Rache with the bar work. He promised he'd be here when the lunch rush at the Kettle was over."

"Since when does the Kettle have a lunch rush?"

1401 – MacAleister Estate

George MacAleister swore as he snapped his mobile shut. His many attempts to call Steve Green had been futile and Michael Robinson's mobile never seemed to be on. He knew that he couldn't ask his solicitor to convey a message that he had Grace and Simon as hostages. *Even my solicitor wouldn't be a party to that*, he thought to himself. *I've got to get a message to one of those two that I've got Grace and Simon.*

1402 – Rialto Office

Steve's mobile rang again. He checked the number. "Oh, good, it's my solicitor." He flipped open the mobile. "Hello? . . . Oh, hello, listen, I wanted to thank you for all the good work you've done for our case . . . Rescheduled? . . . A month from now? Erm, that'd be very difficult. I was thinking of leaving the country for a while, actually. Is my presence all that important? . . . Very important? Is there even the slightest possibility that it would change anything? . . . Does it matter one way or the other if we're there or not? . . . So if we're not there, it's definitely tits-up – I see. Well, why was the court ruling pushed back? . . . Oh, bad luck for the poor judge. So, why did the courts suddenly refer us to an arbitrator? . . . *MacAleister* asked for it? . . ."

"Sorry I'm late . . ." Michael said as he entered the room with Jess.

Steve silenced him with a gesture and Michael waited patiently.

"Oh, I see," Steve continued his conversation on his mobile. "To sort of push things along, then. Well, tell me this, what would be the disposition of the Rialto between now and our arbitration? . . . So it'll just sit here, will it? It won't be demolished or anything? . . . Will we be able to go in or out during that time? . . . Not even to collect personal property? . . . I see. If we lose, will we be able to enter the building to, say, gather some personal items? . . . Why

not? . . . I see. Well, I guess we'd better clear out everything we can today, which is what we were doing anyway . . . Okay. Thank you. Good bye."

Steve closed his mobile. He sighed.

"New development?" asked Doc.

"There's been a change of events just now, Doc," Steve said.

"Would you stop calling me that?" Doc protested.

"Sorry, everyone agreed," Steve said. "You're stuck with it. So, as I was saying, there's been a change."

"Well, considering that we're completely screwed at this stage," Jess observed, "it could only be an improvement." She began to help by throwing a book at Michael to subtly suggest that he could help as well.

"Our solicitor said the judgement has been set aside for several months as the presiding judge has just snuffed it," Steve explained. "MacAleister wants us to sign on to arbitration so we can get this all over with sooner."

"Is this good news?" asked Doc askance.

"It's just a glimmer of hope," Steve said. "And a very, very small one. Microscopic, in fact."

"Still, why not take our shot? What've we got to lose?" asked Michael.

"No one is allowed in the Rialto between now and the judgement," Steve said, "so if we stay and fight, I can't be with Linda and you can't be with Rache. We'll have to be here in Newburg and we can't go back and forth."

"Rache might actually breathe a sigh of relief," Jess admitted, "but, I can see that Linda wouldn't be best pleased."

"Even if we win, Linda won't be too happy about it," Steve pointed out. "But if we lose, it's even worse. The only way we can go back to Allegory would be to break in, assuming we could. I'm not much at burglary."

There was a brief pause in the conversation.

"I *know* you're not looking at me," Jess warned.

"So what's it gonna be, Steve?" asked Doc. "You stayin' or goin'?"

"If Grace and Simon get back in time," Steve conditioned, "then it's no contest. I'll go to Otterstow and sod the Rialto."

"And if they don't show?" asked Doc.

Steve shrugged. "Dunno. I'll talk it over with Linda, see what she thinks. But in my view, I have to believe that exploring every avenue towards returning Grace and Simon to their parents is more important than Linda and I being together."

"I'd have to agree. And I think Linda would, too. She won't be *happy* about it, but," Jess observed, "whatchagonnado."

"Do both of us have to be present?" Michael asked Steve.

"I think so, but I didn't ask specifically," Steve said. "Does it matter all that much?"

"I hate to sound selfish," Michael said as he began to help pack some items, "but I've my own child to put first. If only your presence is required, then I'm going to stay in Otterstow."

"What if we're both required to be there?" asked Steve.

Michael's telephone rang and he started to dig it out of his pocket. "We'll rig one of the basement windows."

"If that's MacAleister, don't answer it," Steve warned.

Michael glanced at the phone number on the display. "Unknown," he read out loud. He flipped open the mobile. "Hello?"

1430 – MacAleister Hostage Suite

It was late afternoon on the second day of their incarceration. Angus, Grace and Simon were spending the afternoon watching a little football on the television.

"Not much scoring," Grace complained.

"Aye," Angus agreed.

"When we play, there's usually a dozen scores on each side," Simon added.

"Aye?"

"Course, we can kick the ball a good bit harder than skins," Grace mentioned.

"Aye."

"And run faster," Simon said.

"And we don't have the bloke standing in front the goal like that, what can use his hands, neither," Grace said. "That's cheating, that is."

George entered the room with a trolley full of sandwiches and drinks. "Look, I've brought you all a nice tea," George said. "See, I'm not a complete monster. Everything okay?"

"Except that we're not allowed to leave," Simon answered.

"Let's address that right now," George suggested politely. "Angus, do you have your mobile?"

"Na, I dinna," Angus replied.

"Go and get it," George ordered.

"I canna," Angus answered.

"Why not?" asked George.

"I, erm, had ta *dispose* o it, juist o late," Angus admitted.

George sighed in exasperation. "Very well. All of you follow me to the office. We'll make a call on the speaker-phone."

He turned to leave and the three hostages followed him without question to his office.

"Okay, Angus, here's what's going to happen. You're going to ring Steve. Tell him that I've got Grace and Simon and that he's to do what I say. And then say nothing further. Understood?"

"An if I dinna?" asked Angus.

"Horse stew for dinner," George warned.

"Oh, aye," Angus agreed reluctantly as he began to dial.

"Good lad," George muttered.

The ring tone came through the speaker for all in the room to hear. It was quickly followed by a generic female voice. "You have reached seven . . ."

George interrupted the call and dialled another number. "For your sake, you'd better hope that Mister Robinson has his mobile on for once."

The ring-tone sounded. Then a second time. Then a third. "Hello?" came Michael's voice, loud and clear.

"Aye, Michael, is me, Angus."

"Oh, hullo, Angus," Michael replied. "We've been wondering what's happened to you. Where are you?"

"Erm, listen, I'm at ma auld man's hoose. An, erm, I've some guid news an bad news."

"Oh? What's the good news?" Michael asked.

"I've come across Grace an Simon. They're here in the room wi me."

"They are? Excellent!" Michael enthused. "That's fantastic news!"

"Aye, but there's bad news as well," Angus reminded him.

"They're alive and well aren't they?" asked Michael.

"Oh, aye, isna as bad as all *that*. They're soond as a poond. Lissen, erm . . . ma auld man's got us under his thoom, juist the nou, sa if ye want things ta ga smoothly, ye're ta do as he says."

"Do as he says? How'd you mean?" asked Michael.

George signalled to Angus to stop talking. "He means," he began, "do as I say and you'll receive the children."

This caught the undivided attention of the three captives.

"Receive . . . Wha . . . oo . . . ar . . . sta . . ."

"Sorry, Michael, you're breaking up," George said. "Could you repeat that?"

"Ah . . . oo . . . ee . . . orp . . . orp . . . walla . . . walla . . . ding . . . dong. eaking up, I'll ring you back on the landline." *Click!*

1431 – Rialto Office

"Ah . . . oo . . . ee . . . orp . . . orp . . . walla . . . walla . . . ding . . . dong. eaking up, I'll ring you back on the landline." Michael snapped his mobile shut. "Quick! We've no time to lose! Help me plug in the recorder!" Michael ordered as he dug out the telephone recorder that had been used for the police investigation after their first day of business.

There was a flurry of activity as a half-dozen hands pushed various plugs into their appropriate sockets.

"Whatdeheckwasdatallabout?" Doc asked in astonishment.

"Later, later," Michael answered impatiently. "Just start the recorder and listen to the call." He opened his mobile and looked up the number that last called him. "Ah, good," he said quietly, "still there."

Doc turned on the recorder and Michael started dialling.

There was a single ring and then MacAleister answered. "Mister Robinson?" Steve, instantly recognising the voice, gestured for Michael to disconnect. Michael acknowledged his gesture but continued regardless. "Yes, this is Michael Robinson. Is this George MacAleister?"

"Yes, that's right. You're on a landline?"

"Yes, I'm calling from the office of the Rialto. Sorry for that, my mobile's sort of dodgy. Half the time, I can't even receive calls."

"Oh, I know. They're dreadful," George grumbled. "You wouldn't believe the horrible coverage they have here on the estate."

"Could we continue with our conversation?" Michael suggested. "I thought I heard something rather incredible and I wouldn't want a miscommunication."

"Yes," George answered. "I have Grace and Simon right here and I will gladly return them to you."

"Oh, most excellent," Michael said. "Would you prefer for us to pick them up or will you drop them off?"

"I'll drop them off," George said. "At one minute after midnight."

"A bit past their bed-time, don't you think?" asked Michael.

George ignored the comment. "In return, you and Steve Green sign the releases for the Rialto."

"Releases?" asked Michael.

"Yes, releases. It's just a form stating that you've ended your trial period of the Rialto and you're turning it over to me," George explained.

"So you'll own the Rialto once we sign those papers," Michael clarified.

"That's correct," George confirmed.

"And in exchange, you return Grace and Simon?" asked Michael.

"Yes, I will, but I want to make clear; this is not a *quid pro quo* exchange," George answered.

"But what happens if we don't sign the releases?" asked Michael.

"I see no need to discuss that option," George stated.

"You would return the children, regardless?" asked Michael.

"If we continue this line of discussion, I'm ending the conversation," George threatened.

"Could I hear Grace and Simon say something? Just a simple 'hello' or the like?" Michael asked.

There was a brief pause and a girl's voice stated. "Hullo, this is Grace," followed by a boy's saying, "And this is Simon."

"Good enough for you?" asked George.

"Suits me," Michael answered. "Consider it a done deal. We'll see you at one minute after midnight."

"Please hold," George ordered.

1432 – MacAleister's Office

"Please hold," George ordered, pressing the mute button on the speaker phone. "Right, the three of you, back to the room. Right now."

The three silently rose and exited the room. George waited at the door and watched as they walked down the hall until he could see that they were back in the suite.

Returning to the speaker phone, he pressed the mute button again.

"Michael? Still there?"

"Still here," Michael responded.

"You know, just as an aside," George mentioned casually, "Angus has been working with me the whole time."

"He has?" asked Michael.

"That's right," George continued. "He's been reporting your activities to me the whole time since he came out of rehab."

"Has he?" Michael asked.

"Yes, he has, and right under your noses. He's been quite helpful to me," George said. "You see, he was working under the impression that he would receive the Rialto at the end of the year."

"Was he?" asked Michael.

"That's right, he was," George said. "So tell me, did you ever suspect that he was leading all of you along, all this time?"

"I can't speak for the others, but, no. Hadn't a clue," Michael admitted.

"Oh, well. Now here's the plan. I'll arrive at midnight with the two children. We'll sign the papers and then go our merry way, okay?" suggested George.

"Suits me," Michael agreed.

"Thank you," George replied. "I always knew you were much more sensible than that Green fellow."

"Thank you," Michael said, smiling uncomfortably at Steve.

"And that bloated yank girl, what was her name?"

Steve instantly clapped his hand over Doc's mouth.

"Surely not Desiree DelHomme?" suggested Michael, wincing as he looked at Doc.

"Yes, that's the one," George recalled. "Honestly, Mister Robinson, you've the only brain between the three of them; it's a wonder you managed at all."

"Very nice of you to say," Michael replied. "Is there any other business, I've a good deal of packing to do so you can repossess your theatre."

"Oh, sorry. Well, look me up in a few months and we can talk about your future. Good managers are hard to come by. And can you drive, by the way?" asked George.

"Erm, yes," Michael replied.

"Excellent, then I may have just the position for you," George said. "Good day, Mister Robinson."

1433 – Rialto Office

"Good day," Michael said, taking the opportunity to hang up.

"Did you have to be *that* sociable?" asked Doc.

"You heard him," Michael answered. "He's holding Grace and Simon as hostages."

"What, exactly, do you plan on doing with that recording of our conversation with MacAleister?" Jess asked, her eyebrow raised.

"It's for the police, of course," Michael answered plainly.

1434 – MacAleister's Office

George MacAleister picked up his desk telephone and punched a button. "The mare we picked up today? . . . Call the vet. We're to have it put down as soon as he's available . . . What do you mean he's on holiday? . . . Next week! . . . Oh, never mind, then."

He sighed as he hung up. "Just can't find good help these days," he grumbled.

1435 – *Rialto Office*

Jess smacked her forehead in frustration. "The police? Why are we gonna bring the police into this?"

"Because MacAleister's guilty of kidnapping, of course," Steve answered in defence of Michael.

"Slow down a bit, lads," Jess said, putting her hands up to indicate a stop. "Let's think this through, shall we? We tell the Alsatian . . ."

"No, the detective is the Great Dane," Michael corrected.

"Then who's the Alsatian?" asked Jess.

"Alan, from security," Michael replied.

"Okay, we tell the Great Dane, 'See here, Inspector, here's a recording of MacAleister offering *children* for a ransom.' He listens to it and his first question is going to be . . . what?" prompted Jess.

"Erm . . . Who are the parents?" Steve ventured.

"Precisely," Jess said. "And we're going to tell him . . . what?"

"Slide and Sandra and Pete and Gina, of course," Doc answered, mystified as to why Jess thought this important.

"Is it just me?" Jess pointed to herself. "Am I the only that can see why this would be a very *bad* idea?"

1445 – *Newburg Police Station*

"A deal?" asked the Great Dane of Leon the Chauffeur. "What sort of deal?"

"I want three things," Leon said.

"I assume immunity is first on the list," suggested the Great Dane.

"It's on the list," said the chauffeur, "but it's not first. First, I want respect."

"Respect? For being a grass?" snorted the Bulldog.

"That's right," insisted Leon. "Respect. I understand the world at large doesn't put a lot of stock in snitches, but I'm doing you an immense favour by bringing all of this evidence. And I'm helping two children that may be in danger. You speak to me in a respectful tone or I leave. I, of course, will treat you with the same civility. I don't see any reason why we can't talk to each other as mature adults."

"Sorry, mate," the Bulldog grumbled, "but if . . ."

The Great Dane held his hand up to his subordinate to silence him. "I can promise that we will speak to you and treat you in a civil manner. But I cannot say that we will respect you."

"That will suffice," Leon agreed.

"So, civility and immunity. What else?" prompted the Bulldog.

"MacAleister owes me a substantial sum for severance," Leon explained. "I will release the evidence for his arrest *after* I have received my severance, and you agree not to arrest him until then."

"I don't know if I can make that guarantee," the Bulldog stated. "If he murders someone, I've a responsibility to protect the public."

"Very well," Leon conceded. "I'll work on your word that you won't arrest him unless absolutely necessary. Can you agree to that?"

"I haven't agreed to anything yet," the Great Dane mentioned. "You haven't told us what's in it for us."

"I have a substantial set of records that would implicate MacAleister on numerous financial charges," Leon said.

"Numerous?" asked the Bulldog. "How numerous?"

"I haven't bothered to count," Leon said. "That should give you *some* idea, I suspect. However, we need to focus on a more urgent situation. He has kidnapped two children and an adult."

"Is this why you've suddenly grown a conscience?" asked the Bulldog.

"Respect? Remember? First item on the list?" warned the chauffeur. "I've had a conscience far longer than most. And if my idea of morality doesn't match yours, then that's your problem, not mine, as far as I'm concerned." He paused. "I don't condone violence. Holding innocent children against their will for whatever reason is just plain barbaric."

"And stealing money isn't?" asked the Bulldog. "Tax evasion, embezzlement, insider trading? None of that pangs this wonderful conscience of yours?"

"No, in fact, it does not," Leon admitted. "People steal outrageous sums of money every day. The only difference is that they do it legally, but it's still theft."

"I fail to see your line of logic," complained the Great Dane.

"Stockholders enslave the working class in their stores and factories for a substantive pittance while they rake enormous profits by doing little more than sitting on their arse all day.

"Railroads endanger the general public by cutting corners on safety so that they can save a few million quid which goes into the pockets of their executives.

"Actors and athletes and rock musicians make scandalous amounts of cash, and for what? Kicking a ball? Playing a guitar? Having good looks and speaking a few lines in front of a camera? Most of them would do it even if they were paid the wage of an average teacher. Yet we encourage our children to pursue these as careers, not because they love them, but in the avaricious hope that they'll win that particular lottery.

"Our beloved council governments pay executives more money than the US president – whose budget runs into the trillions, last I looked – to determine how their money is to be spent."

"Yeah, but they probably do a better job than the president," smiled the Bulldog.

"Even with the current administration, I wouldn't count on it," sneered the chauffeur. "As we agreed to mutual respect, I'll spare you my diatribe about the justice system."

"Look, let's keep our focus here," said the Great Dane, tiring of the topic. "We'll solve the problems of the world later on – tell me about these kids. Where are their parents?"

"I suspect they work at the Rialto," answered the chauffeur. "There's a boy name Simon StæppanWulf, whose parents would be Sandra StæppanWylf and Slide HolenWulf. The girl, Grace ParsleyHare, has a mother, Gina MarchHare and a foster father, Pete DunBerr."

"Those are pretty unusual names," mentioned the Great Dane.

"I suspect they're stage names," admitted Leon. "But if they are, I've no clue as to what their real names might be."

"What do these kids look like?" asked the Bulldog. "How old are they?"

"Early teens for their age, but as for their looks . . ." Leon looked a bit uncomfortable. "Grace is maybe five feet even and seven stone. Simon's approaching six feet and a dozen stone or so. Beyond that, I couldn't honestly say. I've never seen them outside of their kit."

"Their kit?" asked the Great Dane.

"You know those costumes they use at the Rialto? I've only seen them in that get-up," Leon admitted. "I've never seen them without it. If I might suggest?"

"Yes?" chorused the Great Dane and the Bulldog.

"Go to the Rialto, right this very moment, and have a chat with Steve Green, Desiree DelHomme and Michael Robinson," advised Leon. "They know all about the kidnapping – and don't let them hoodwink you into thinking they don't."

1500 – MacAleister Hostage Suite

George entered the suite where the hostages were sitting.

"Right, you heard the whole conversation," George told them. "You just have to wait until midnight and all will be right with the world."

"And you'll let us take Fauvel?" asked Grace.

"Of course I will," George cooed. "But until tonight, remember that I've got the mare locked up tight. If I see you outside of this room . . ."

"Aye, we know all that," Angus interrupted impatiently.

"Good. Then see to it that you stay here," George said. "And get out of those ridiculous costumes," he ordered Grace and Simon. "You're not fooling anyone, you know. Even a child could see through that kit." He walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"He's tellin a lee," Angus said quietly. "He'll keep Fauvel for hissel or put her doun, or he'll no return us or something else."

"How'd you know he's lying?" asked Grace.

"His lips were movin," Angus replied. "Leuk, I can shaw ye's the way ta the Rialto. I'll make a map an ye'll be there afore he susses ye're away."

"No, we're not going without Fauvel. She's done too much for us," Simon said. "Leaving without her is not an option."

"Have to go with Simon on this," Grace added. "Yes, we desperately want to get home but we couldn't betray the old girl. Even though we're this close."

"Ah, right. Fair play," Angus said. "I know where he's keepin her. There's a stable at the very end wi a lock an all. He uses it when he's got a valuable animal."

"Do you get many stolen horses around here?" asked Simon.

"Na, is ta keep 'unauthorized personnel' from tamperin wi the animals; at least that's the story he tells. I suspect is more like he dis the tamperin an nickin an disna want naebody ta catch on, like."

"So is it possible to see her in this stable?" asked Simon.

"Aye, there's a winnock wi bars on the stable. Ye could take a deek an see if yer Fauvel's there but ye'll niver get her oot wi na key."

"Couldn't we at least see if she's all right?" asked Grace. "We could go out the balcony. No one would see me."

"Oh, aye, mebbe's ye could lowp oot an laund okay, ga take yer deek an come back. But what way're ye ta get back in? Must be a dizzen feet from the balcony ta the ground."

"I could jump that," Grace said idly. "Might need a little help, but, yeah, it's doable."

Angus looked at Simon in disbelief. "Can she, nou?"

Simon nodded. "Oh, yeah. Might come a little short, but we can catch her hands, no problem."

1600 – Rialto Office

"Kidnapped?" Steve said to the two police officers, a mystified expression on his face. "No, I'd no idea."

"Yes we did," Doc confessed immediately. "We got a call this afternoon. Although, I think there's some argument about whether it's 'kidnapping' or not."

"I thought you didn't want to oof!" Michael cut himself off in mid-sentence as Doc used her many years of training in the martial arts to discretely silence him.

"What's he asking for?" asked the Great Dane.

"Have a listen, cap," Doc offered, "and see for yo'se'f." She turned the tape on.

After listening to the full conversation, the Great Dane turned off the tape recorder.

"He probably suspected he was being taped or listened to," the Great Dane conjectured. "That's why he wouldn't make any explicit statements. Very cagey."

"But in our first conversation, he said he'd return the children 'unharm'd'," Michael pointed out.

"Should be able to get that in as evidence, surely," suggested the Bulldog. "It's not hearsay."

"Oh, no doubt," said the Great Dane. "We'll present it. It *is* a bit thin, but I think we've got more than enough to charge and arrest."

Doc, Michael and Steve gave each other the briefest exchange of looks, without saying anything. They knew the subject of pressing charges would come up, and they had previously agreed amongst themselves that the best course of action was to avoid the subject as much as possible. Even though MacAleister was plainly guilty of kidnapping, it would be impractical to have Grace and Simon presented before a judge in Newburg as the abductees. Bearing this in mind, they also knew that the Great Dane would be very displeased to hear that he was going to all of this trouble without any possibility of a collar to his credit.

"Okay, a few instructions," the Great Dane started. "You're to have the Rialto cleared immediately after closing – no afters. We don't want someone

strolling out of the loo right in the middle of our sting and saying 'what's all this, then' now, do we?"

"No, of course not," Michael agreed.

"We'll arrive here, right when you close, and put a wire on the three of you, which will be just after eleven," continued the Great Dane. "Do any of you have a problem with that?"

The three Partners all consented.

"Very good, then," said the Great Dane. "If things go according to plan, you might actually put George MacAleister behind bars. Now remember, don't tell anyone of our plans. If word gets back to him, he might spook and you've already mentioned you don't want that. Neither do we, obviously. Now, just one last thing."

"Yes?" asked Steve, grateful that the conversation was coming to an end.

"We need to talk to the parents of the children," said the Great Dane.

"In person?" asked Doc.

"Preferably," said the Bulldog. "Where are they?"

The three Partners looked at each other.

"Wales, wasn't it?" suggested Doc, trying to think of somewhere inaccessible, but not too distant.

The other two Partners rapidly agreed.

"They got a tip about the children being in Holyhead," added Michael. "Obviously a false lead."

"Would a telephone call be all right?" suggested Steve.

The Great Dane and the Bulldog looked at each other and shrugged.

"Surely they could drive back to see their children returned?" asked the Bulldog.

"They took the train," Steve said.

"Suppose a phone call will have to do," said the Great Dane. "They'd never get to here from Holyhead in time for the exchange."

"Certainly not by train," agreed the Bulldog. "All right, then," he ordered Steve, "give 'em a ring."

1730 – Rialto Office

With a little juggling, Steve had managed to have the officers call his own mobile phone while he was in the basement with the four parents. They had their conversation, which was filled with many assurances and consolations, and then the police, to everyone's great relief, finally left the Rialto to prepare for the evening's sting.

The entire partnership (less Angus) had squeezed themselves into the office of the Rialto as they concluded a lengthy conference call with their solicitor.

"Well, you heard the man," Doc said to the others. "He says that even if MacAleister is in the joint, he could still legally take the Rialto."

"That's as maybe," Sandra said, "but let's focus on getting our children back. He comes, we sign the papers, we get Simon and Grace back and deal with the Rialto as best we can later on. Agreed?"

They all agreed.

"Where will the police be while they're monitoring?" asked Clare.

"Here, in this office," Michael answered.

"Surely they'll notice that Grace and Simon aren't human," Clare pointed out.

Doc shrugged. "Yeah, but, whatchagonnado? Besides, they'll be more interested in nabbing MacAleister than in what happens to Grace and Simon."

"I've an idea," Steve said, "remember when I had the squirrel costume, how we had to use the acetone to remove the applications?"

"Boy, *do* I!" Linda gushed. "Not half!"

"We'll just tell the police that Grace and Simon need to do the same thing immediately," Steve suggested, "and then we send them upstairs straightaway. They're minors, so they'd be given some privacy to take off their 'costume'," he concluded, using his fingers to form inverted commas.

"So, we all stay upstairs in the kitchen until Grace and Simon arrive?" asked Sandra. "And you'll send them up right after the exchange?"

"Sounds like a plan," Pete stated enthusiastically.

"You do understand," Ignatius began, "that this will inevitably force our hand to one of two actions, neither of which is very palatable."

"Which are?" asked Geoff.

"Our first option is for us all to disappear into Otterstow for good, locking the cabinet behind us and giving up the Rialto," Ignatius said. "Our second option is trust two more people – namely the police officers – to keep our secret. If Doc, Steve and Michael are ever to show their face in the public view of Reality, the police will want to know what became of Grace and Simon."

"Hey, we didn't *ask* for the cops to get involved in this," Doc said defensively. "They just showed up because someone tipped them off."

"Look, can't we just cross that bridge if we come to it?" suggested Jess.

"Maybe the pigs will lose interest or we can put 'em off until they get re-assigned or they'll die of a heart attack. And if they get all bolshy on us and we have to show them Otterstow, then we'll show them Otterstow. But I sincerely doubt it's going to be an urgent issue any time soon. For tonight, I suggest we stick to Steve's plan. What's the worst that could happen?"

2100 – MacAleister Hostage Suite

Simon and Angus were leaning over the balcony rail, staring over the lawn, lit by the twilight's last embers, waiting for Grace's return.

"She's certainly taking her time," Simon mentioned casually.

"She'd best chase back," Angus mentioned. "The auld man wasna wastin his breath when he said he'd . . ."

The thought went unfinished as it was interrupted by George entering the room. Simon turned to face him as Angus continued to stare into the rapidly fading light.

"Where's the rabbit?" asked George. "And I thought I told you to take off those ridiculous costumes."

"She's, erm . . . in the bath," Simon mentioned, "taking off her costume," he added, sounding a bit lame. "It's a rather long procedure." His attention returned to the lawn.

"Fine, I'll just see for myself," George started to move toward the bathroom door.

Angus turned around. "She's in the altogether, gettin the kit off. If ye'd like ta invade the privacy o a bare-scud fifteen-year-auld girl, wag on, then," he suggested. Just then, Grace came darting back towards the house. Simon tried to make the most discreet indication possible that she was to hide.

George looked at the bathroom door and then at Simon. "All right. Fine. I brought your supper." He said, placing a brown bag of takeaway boxes on an end table.

"Ta," Angus said quietly.

Simon's gestures were becoming a little more obvious, as Grace was poised to spring upward but she seemed unclear on the message.

"What're you looking at?" asked George.

Angus turned around. "Eh?"

Suddenly a raven landed on the railing. Simon, slightly frightened by its presence, gave a feeble attempt to shoo it off. "Push off," he ordered meekly, fanning it with his hands.

"Kraa," the raven countered in defiance, whilst holding his ground.

George grabbed a poker from the fireplace and strode toward the balcony. "Bloody rook," he muttered as he raised the iron.

The raven, knowing a killer when he saw one, immediately flew off.

Satisfied that the bird was gone, George returned the poker to its place.

"The next time I'm up here, I'd better see a fifteen-year-old *human* girl up here. Or else."

After George slammed the door shut, they breathed a sigh of relief and Simon gestured for Grace to jump up. She took a short, running start and bounded up just high enough to have Angus and Simon catch her hands and pull her in.

"She's there," Grace reported. "Safe and sound. And that great, black bird that seems to follow us everywhere."

"Any way we can we get her out?" asked Simon.

"Angus is right. The door is too solid; we'd never break it down. And the bars on the window aren't going anywhere in a hurry either."

"Maybe we should just do as he says," Simon suggested. "It'll all be over in a few hours."

Angus shook his head. "Ye dinna know his kind. He's no ta be trusted. He'll say one thing an then ga back on his word. An he'll ayeways say he's in the right. Leuk, ye see that great grey box over there, wi the wheels on, oot next the stables?"

"Yeah," answered Grace and Simon.

"Is ta carry horses in," Angus explained. "If he were plannin ta move Fauvel a'tall, they'd be heukin it up an gettin it ready. Sa, ye see, he's na intention o takin us nor yer horse anyweys."

"We need ta get oot – an suin. When he comes back an sees ye're still a Doe, he'll snuff Fauvel, na excuses."

"Why's that?" asked Grace.

"I told him you were getting out of your costume," explained Simon.

"Well, of all the . . ." She threw her hands up in frustration and walked to the centre of the room. "At least we won't have to leave hungry," she mentioned as she opened one of the little takeaway boxes. "Oh, for Jack's sake! Vegetarian *again!*" She turned to the others. "All right, we blow this joint, first chance we get."

2300 – Rialto

The last performance of the Rialto was a success by any standards. The music was good, the drink flowed and the customers packed the dance floor. Eric, Vince, Dawn and her juniors also made it a point to come enjoy the party for at least a few hours. Although Sandra and Slide gave an honest try of getting into the swing of things, the pain of knowing that this was the last chance that they might ever see their children again was too much for them. Thus, they spent the remainder of the evening quietly chatting at the bar with Pete and Gina, who were serving.

Just before the last song, Steve, Doc and Michael started cueing the Frith members of the Partnership to discreetly depart for the living quarters on the second floor, as the police would be monitoring from the office on the first floor.

The last song came and went and it was time for the Rialto to close. The patrons never wanted to leave on regular days but this time they practically had to be driven out by security. Many of them called in at the bar to give their sympathy and regards to Michael, Steve and Doc. When the last punter and the band had finally been escorted from the building, the security team said their good-byes and departed.

"Ready for your wires?" asked the Bulldog, as he entered the lobby with the Great Dane.

2330 – MacAleister Hostage Suite

Simon was lying on his back, staring at the canopy cover of the bed, whilst Grace was lying prone next to him, staring out of the window at the black night sky. Angus was reclined in a large chair, his feet propped up, drumming his fingers in thought. They had considered a dozen different plans and the conclusion they had reached in each case was that they were all worthless ideas, although the actual adjectives they used might have suggested a somewhat stronger tone of disapproval.

It was rapidly approaching midnight, and they were no closer to getting Fauvel out than they were when they had started. They were beginning to tire and within the span of a few minutes, they all dozed off, one at a time.

Just after the last one was asleep, the raven flew in through the open balcony window. With but a light flutter, it landed on a trestle of the bed's canopy and then dropped a large, iron key dead onto Simon's chest, instantly awakening him. Simon wasn't quite aware of the cause of his arousal and chalked it up to the bird staring down at him and instantly dozed back off to sleep.

The raven let out a hoarse croak.

Simon woke more fully this time, spied the raven and instantly began to suspect that perhaps this rather large, black bird was somehow important for some reason or another. Instinctively, he sat up. As he did so, the key slid down his chest and into the crotch of his trousers. This did not escape his notice.

Grace and Angus had awoken as well at the sound of the raven, but had little comment until they saw Simon digging in his groin as if searching for something.

"Got a little morning wood?" asked Angus, smiling. "Loo's free, if ye'd like a wank."

Simon pulled the key from his trousers. "I think this might be the, erm . . . key."

In less than a minute, Grace, riding bareback, had returned from the stable with Fauvel.

Simon and Angus were watching from the balcony window.

"Come on, Si," she whispered loudly.

The height was a little higher than Simon was used to but he climbed over the railing and jumped, landing less than perfectly.

"Ah, crap, I think I sprained something," he groaned as quietly as he could. He stood up and limped around a bit. "Owowow," he winced.

"Here, gimme your hand, Si," Grace offered.

Simon reached up and Grace grasped his hand. She hauled him up and he was soon on Fauvel's back, behind Grace.

"Hang about, how's 'boot me?" asked Angus.

"Jump down," Grace called, still remembering to be quiet.

"I canna. I'll do masel a mischief from this height. Hang about! Juist a tick!"

Angus disappeared from view.

Simon and Grace looked at each other for a moment.

"Should we leave him?" asked Grace.

"He said to wait just a tick. Let's give him a minute."

"We may not have a minute, Si."

"Just a few seconds more."

Just a few seconds was all it took. Angus burst out of the back door, shouting, "Run! He'll be oot any second!"

Simon dug his heels into Fauvel's side and she began a slow walk.

"C'mon Fauvel, faster," Grace complained. "We'll get caught and you'll get put down!"

By this time, Angus was by their side. Fauvel increased her walk to a trot just fast enough to keep up with him. Grace reached his hand down to Angus. "Here you are, mate. Help yourself on," she said. Angus grabbed her hand and as she lifted him up onto Fauvel, she slid off the other side.

"Grace!" Simon shouted.

"Don't worry about me, I can keep up," she said. Grace began to run on all fours and, as she was without her boots, she began to pass Fauvel quite easily. Fauvel, not to be outdone, increased her speed to a gallop to keep up.

"Ma motor's juist aheid!" Angus shouted, pointing at the derelict vehicle on the side of the road. Sitting on top of the hood was the raven. "Lemme off and

"I'll guide ye straight to the Rialto. It's barely a dizzen miles, but we'd best hurry; we'll be followed soon."

"Do you have a key?" asked Simon.

"Aye, in the car. I keep hoping somebody may nick it, but naebody iver dis."

Angus slid off of Fauvel and ran to his car. Jumping inside he turned the key and the engine roared to life. Grace took the opportunity to vault onto Fauvel's back, landing snugly behind Simon. Angus pulled the car into reverse, quickly managed to get it turned in the right direction and then sped off down the road, with Fauvel following and the raven flying directly in front.

For a solid ten miles, Fauvel gave it her all. They were on a stretch of smooth open road, when Simon, looking back, noticed there was a pair of headlights behind them and they didn't look friendly.

"He's following us," Simon said.

"Are you sure it's him?" asked Grace.

"I'm not going to stop and ask," Simon replied.

Fauvel soldiered on as best she could.

"If it is him, he's gaining on us," Grace observed as she turned back to look.

The automobile behind them was indeed making substantial gains on the three.

"Simon, I think he's going to run us over!" Grace shouted. "He's not slowing down!"

Simon looked back and could see that Grace was right; within seconds they would be overcome and quite probably run over. He looked ahead and saw Angus' old coupe pattering ahead. They had just started on a stretch of bridge that seemed to go on for at least a hundred yards and, as good as Fauvel was at running, she would never make it to the other side in time.

In most serious accidents, the amount of time from when one realises that one is about to be in an accident and when the accident actually occurs, is usually quite short, thus there is little time to react. On this occasion, however, Simon and Grace had several seconds notice that they were about to be involved in a serious, probably painful and possibly lethal mishap. Grace held tight to Simon and said simply, "Goodbye." Simon remained speechless.

Fauvel, however, had other ideas. She was a mare in her twentieth year – far from the prime of life – but she was damned if she was going to let herself get run over by an overpriced sedan of foreign origin.

Canter, canter, canter, crouch and . . .

Fauvel jumped over the railing, right in the middle of the bridge. From the point of view of the road they were on, it was an easy thing, even with two riders, as it was no more than a few feet high. However, on the other side of the railing, it was another matter. Even on her very best day, Fauvel could not have jumped as high as it was from the canal to the bridge, which came to roughly fifteen feet. Fortunately for her, the laws of gravity tend to work in one's favour when one is going down, which was definitely the case. Unfortunately for Fauvel and company, the impact of the ground from a fall at such a height, particularly for a horse, could have very severe consequences. Fortunately for Fauvel and her passengers, canals are usually filled with water.

It was not painless but it was free of injury.

That is to say, it was free of injury for Fauvel, Simon and Grace. For the driver of the car that was pursuing them, who, it should come as no surprise, was none other than George MacAleister, it was a different matter. He had pursued the horse along the same course, perhaps forgetting that four-door saloons, no matter how expensive, and no matter the reputation of engineering of their country of origin, are not capable of jumping much of anything besides a low kerb. It should also be noted that air bags, while quite effective at saving lives, have no guarantee against injury. George would not be signing anything with his right hand for some time to come.

Simon and Grace had fallen off of Fauvel on the way down and found themselves floating in the canal. Simon was quite good at swimming, but Grace had never cared for the natatorial arts. Fauvel, of course, had little trouble at all and soon found her footing on the bottom of the canal. It was short work for her to pull herself up the bank and on to the shore. She immediately shook all the water off of her fur.

Simon, meanwhile, was struggling with Grace. "Grace, just relax. If you struggle, you'll just go down again," he advised.

"I'm try . . ." she went under again and Simon pulled her up.

Grace surfaced and shook her head. She was near to panicking and Simon could see it. Fauvel was on the shore and slowly walking along with the current, keeping up with them.

"Si, I can't . . ." She went under again. Simon lifted her up again but in doing so had to go under himself for a few seconds.

Now Grace was in a full-blown panic.

"Simon! Help! I can't . . ." She flailed her arms about, trying to grasp onto anything that was solid and hold herself above the water but there was nothing there. She submerged again.

Fauvel had heard enough and jumped back in. There was only a small part of the canal in which her hooves didn't reach the bottom anyway, so it was a short swim for her. Simon had managed to surface with Grace again and bumped into Fauvel.

"Here, Grace, hold onto Fauvel. She'll take you ashore."

Grace clung to Fauvel's neck for all she was worth causing the mare to neigh.

"Not too tight, Grace!" Simon warned. "You'll choke her and I'll never get *her* out of the water!"

Grace relaxed her grip slightly and Fauvel found her footing on the canal bed once again, walked to the bank and deposited Grace on dry land. With some effort, she hoisted herself onto the shore. Simon did a few easy strokes to the shore and, nearly out of breath, crawled onto dry ground.

Grace and Simon lay on the bank of the canal, gasping for breath as Fauvel stood over them.

"Carrots for Fauvel, until death do us part," Simon promised.

"And curry and brush," Grace added.

Just then, the raven came and sat on Fauvel's rump.

"I can see why you didna wanna leave her ahint," Angus' voice broke the silence.

Grace saw Angus holding out his hand to help her up. Taking it, she came to her feet and the pair of them helped up Simon.

"I think we owe that bird some gratitude as well," Simon mentioned.

"Oh, aye, na doubt," Angus agreed. "Didja knaw, he was flyin right in front o ma motor all the way? Like he ken where we were gaun."

"Did he?" asked Grace.

"Was that your father chasing us?" Simon asked Angus.

"O course," Angus answered, as if it were common knowledge. "I heard the crash, sa I spun about. Ma auld man started ta give me a right bollockin when he telt me ye'd jumped inna canal, sa's I chased ye down here." He looked over his shoulder to see the lights of his father's car still shining over the canal, some fifty yards away. "Best be movin. Filth'll be here suin."

"Hey, I know where we are," Simon suddenly recollected. "There's that set of allotments we slept in, where we nicked the celery."

Grace looked up. "Yeah. I remember now. The town centre is just about a mile that way," she pointed.

"Oh, aye," Angus agreed. "The Rialto's juist down the path an left at the park."

"Let's get on with it, then," Simon said.

"Come along, Fauvel," Grace chirruped. "I won't ride again. I reckon you've carried me enough."

With that, the five of them proceeded down the canal path, passing some small landmarks that became more and more familiar, entering the park and walking past the school for children.

"Look, there's that rubbish bin where I dumped . . . Oh, Jack, that's not a rubbish bin, it's a postbox!" Grace covered her mouth in embarrassment.

"Oh, speaking of which. Where's that postcard for Father Gabriel?" asked Simon.

"I don't have it," Grace said. "I thought you had it."

Simon pursed his lips in recollection. "No, he gave it to you. You put it in the rucksack pocket."

"Yes, but you're wearing it," Grace pointed out.

"Oh. Right." Simon pulled the rucksack off his back. It was soaking wet, still dripping water from their swim in the canal. "Oh dear." He opened the zipper on the pocket of the rucksack and pulled out the postcard. "So that's why he wrapped it in plastic," Simon noted.

"Here, I'm dry," Angus volunteered. He took the plastic bag, unzipped it and dropped the letter in the box.

"Think it'll get there?" asked Simon.

Grace shrugged. "Shouldn't be any more trouble than it's had getting here," she pointed out.

"That rucksack – it leuks familiar," Angus noted.

"Yeah, I picked it out of the bin, just over there," Grace pointed. "It was filled with loads of weed and some other stuff."

"We ditched the other stuff," Simon mentioned.

"But we kept the weed," Grace added.

"Oh, aye – didja nou," Angus said quietly.

They walked off to the Rialto, leading Fauvel with the raven still perched on her rump. As they approached, more than a few revellers were walking about, laughing and talking.

"There 'tis," Simon pointed as it came fully into view.

"Aye, an no a moment over suin," Angus said, urging them along.

"Look, they've even got a little notice for us. 'Grace and Simon, please come home'," Grace read.

"Is it just me or is 'please' misspelt?" Simon observed.

Grace squinted to make sure. "Yeah, you're right. It is wrong."

"Aye, isna proper spellin, but let's push on," Angus pressed. "Follae me," he said as he led them around to the back of the Rialto. There were two doors that lay almost flat on the ground. Angus tapped a code into a keyless lock and opened them both, revealing a wide set of stairs and a ramp. "Right, down we ga."

Simon and Grace went down the stairs with ease, but Fauvel was reluctant. The raven, of course, had no problems whatsoever and then Fauvel followed suit. After they were all in, Angus led them to the cabinet, through the portal and into the basement of The tré.

"Thanks for everything, Angus," Grace said, giving him a kiss.

"Ah, na probs, lass. Glad ye're hame," Angus blushed.

"Yeah, thanks," Simon added. "Well, we're kind of eager to get home, so . . ."

"Yer parents are no at yer homes," Angus told them.

"They're not?" asked Grace. "Where are they?"

"Yer parents are in the Rialto an, after I do a wee task, I'll need ta ga fetch 'em. I want ye's ta stay right here. Dinna ga ta yer hames, unnerstuid? Am I clear? Ye're ta stay here," Angus ordered as he pointed to the ground for emphasis.

Grace and Simon both nodded.

"I shouldna be more'n ten minutes, at maist," Angus promised. "An *whativer* ye do, *dinna*, I repeat, *dinna* ga back into the Rialto. Clear?"

"Yes, we understand," Grace said obediently.

Feeling certain that he had left obvious instructions, Angus departed.

As the door closed behind him, the two looked about the basement of The tré.

"Is it just me, or does it seem a lot smaller than when we left," Grace observed.

"It's certainly a lot tidier," Simon commented.

01AUG2002 Thursday

0001 – Rialto Marquee

Doc, Steve and Michael stood patiently under the marquee of the Rialto. The rest of the Partnership, save Angus, were waiting on the top floor of the

Rialto, in the kitchen. The Great Dane and the Bulldog, unaware of the Frith one floor up, were in the office, listening and running the recordings.

"You think he'd be on time," Doc grumbled.

"Not like he has something else to do," complained Steve.

"Now, now, children," Michael scolded. "Good things to those who wait."

They waited in silence for a few minutes.

"Bleeding quiet, innit?" Steve asked.

They heard the familiar groan of the hinge on the basement door and, as one, they turned to see Angus approaching them from across the lobby.

"There's our traitor," Steve mentioned darkly.

"Wonder what he wants?" asked Michael. "Surely he knows that we know about him."

"Let's see what he has to say," Doc suggested. "Don't say anything until he's done talking."

Angus, smiling innocently, strode through the front door and wrapped his arms around Steve and Doc. "Hey, awrite? Guid news! I got the weans away hame!" he announced.

"F'true? Where they at?" asked Doc, breaking her own suggestion.

"They're in the basement o The tré," Angus answered, smiling.

"Right now?" Michael asked, incredulous.

"Aye, juist the nou," Angus clarified. "Where is awbody?"

"More importantly, where's your father?" asked Steve.

"Ma Auld Man? He's had a wee mishanter juist the nou. He winna be joinin us the night. Sa, where's Gina? An Sandra? I'm dyin ta tell 'em the guid news."

"Upstairs, in the kitchen," Doc said.

"Laters," Angus said, departing quickly.

The three stood for just a moment.

Michael sighed, opened his shirt and pulled out the microphone. "Inspector, I think we're done here." With that he pulled the microphone out of the transmitter. He then gestured for the others to do the same as he stepped inside the lobby.

Steve and Doc shrugged, but complied with his wishes.

"The inspectors don't know that the Frith – especially the parents – are upstairs, do they?" asked Michael.

"Um . . . No, they don't," Doc answered. "Oopsie," she cringed, suddenly remembering that she had told the officers that the parents were in Wales.

"And Angus mentioned The tré, didn't he," Michael added.

"Oo, yes he did," Steve recalled, wincing.

"And we're in deep du-doo, aren't we," Doc stated.

"Yes, we are," Steve and Michael chorused.

Just then, they heard a great rumbling from the staircase.

Sandra was the first one out of the gate, dashing across the slick marble of the lobby floor on all fours. Halfway across, she put on the brakes and started to skid, ending precisely in front of the basement door, which she flung open and ran through.

"Gosh. You'd think she'd done that before," Steve commented.

In short order, Sandra was followed by Slide, also on all fours, and Pete, who was on only two feet but was carrying Gina under his arm. Rachael and Clare were right behind him and apparently he had been blocking their way in the staircase, as they quickly ran around him (on all fours). However, they lost their bid for third place when they both overshot the basement door, banging into the far wall.

"Must be harder to stop when you ain't got pads," Doc observed.

To the consternation of the twins, Pete (and, thus Gina) regained third (and fourth) place before they could recover.

"Let's see," Michael scratched his chin, "that leaves . . ."

"Linda," Steve mentioned.

Linda bounded out of the stairs, took a huge leap halfway across the lobby and slid the rest of the way.

"Geoff," Doc said.

Geoff scrambled across the floor on two feet.

They waited for just a moment more.

"Should be Ig and Jess," Michael said. "Right?"

The other two nodded in agreement. However, the last two Frith did not appear within the next dozen seconds.

"I think we should see what became of them," suggested Michael as he headed toward the stairs. The others followed suit.

They could hear some cursing as they ascended the stairs.

"Sounds like Jess," Doc observed. "And it don't sound good."

They walked a little further and the shouting and profanities got louder.

"Jess?" Doc called. "Where y'at, girl?"

"Siffing master bedroom, is where I'm siffing at! With a siffing great pig on my back!"

"Oh, dear," Steve sighed. "This should be interesting."

They entered the master bedroom and did indeed find a handcuffed Jess being held to the ground by the Great Dane and the Bulldog.

"What the bleeding hell is this!" the Great Dane asked of the three standing before him, as he continued to struggle to hold Jess down.

"Siffing pig! Gerroff!" Jess snarled and then, in her anger, bit the hand of the Great Dane.

0005 – The tré Basement

Sandra burst through the cabinet door, startling Grace and Simon. Homing in on her son, she swept him up in her arms, lifting him completely off the ground. "Oh, Si! You're home!" she cried, instantly bursting into tears.

"Yes, Mum! Can't breathe!" Simon answered, yet still holding on to his mother with all the strength he could afford.

Slide was next and rushed to embrace his wife and son.

"Pete! Get your great arse out the way!" Rachael's voice could be heard through the horn next to the cabinet.

"Oh, it's Rache!" Grace whispered excitedly.

"Ere's me face!" Pete retorted to Rachael. "Me arse is followin'!" He then burst through the cabinet door, still holding the diminutive Gina under his arm. He scanned the room for Grace.

"There!" Gina pointed. Pete gave Gina a little toss, landing her halfway to Grace and Gina made the rest up on the bounce, embracing her daughter. "Oh, Grace! Thank Jack you're alive."

"I'm sorry I worried you, Mum," Grace cried. "I was terrible to do such a thing."

Rachael had her arms around her next and then Clare.

"Hey, a li'l love for the old man," Pete complained.

The girls let go of Grace and she sprang up into his arms. "I'm sorry, Dad," Grace whimpered as she buried her face in his broad shoulders.

"You awrite, girl?" asked Pete.

"Mm-hm," Grace cried.

"You're soakin' wet, is all," Pete observed. "Oh well, 'ome an' wet's just as good as 'ome an' dry, I s'pose."

Geoff had just arrived. "It's true? Ah, there they are!"

Linda came in just afterwards. "Oh, they're here! And they're both a foot taller!"

"Aren't they just," Geoff agreed.

They all clustered around the two and were talking a mile a minute, with dozens of questions and apologies.

Nearly three whole minutes had gone by before Ignatius finally entered the room, followed by Angus.

"Excuse me," Ignatius called loudly that he might be heard over the din.

A few took notice, but he largely went ignored.

"Excuse me!" Ignatius repeated a little more loudly.

Once again, there was some notice but he generally went unnoticed.

Angus stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled. The shrill noise quickly stuck in the sensitive ears of the Frith, causing their rapid silence.

"Excuse me," Ignatius said politely, if impatiently, as he tried to dig the ringing from his ears with his finger. "Grace, Simon, you are both well, I take it?"

"Yes, Your Honour," the pair chorused.

"Excellent. And welcome home. You may call me Ignatius, if you like," Ignatius offered. "Now, if I might ask one further question; what are this horse and raven doing in the basement of The tré?"

0100 – Otterstow Police Department

"I want a full cavity search, shots and blood tests. That bitch bit the hell out of me!" the Great Dane ordered the desk sergeant.

"Yes, sir."

"And I wanna find out where the zipper is on that bleeding costume. Shave off every hair on her body, all the way down to the short and curlies if you have to."

"Yes, *sir*," replied the desk sergeant.

0400 – *The tré Auditorium*

For most parents, there can be few emotions greater than the sense of relief experienced by the return of missing children, no matter what the cause of their disappearance. Pete, Gina, Slide and Sandra were no exception and were ecstatic to once again feel the embrace of their offspring. As Grace and Simon had hoped, there wasn't a single word of admonishment, although she and Simon were quite eager to issue more than a few words of contrition.

For three hours, as they sat on the stage of The tré, Grace and Simon regaled their parents and the others with their adventures, omitting only the details of the night on top of the Rialto, although they did mention the episode about the Bible.

"And Angus, he's such a lovely bloke," Grace concluded, "he ushered us into The tré. And that was that."

"Well, that's a most incredible story," Sandra StæppanWylf commented, "but it's past four in the morning and we *all* need a little rest."

"Erm . . ." Simon said.

"Yes?" asked Slide.

"There's one last thing that Simon and I would like to tell you," Grace blurted out.

"Yes, go on," Gina urged.

"Well, erm," Simon continued, "Grace and I *have* been through an awful lot together . . ."

"Ew, diya," Pete muttered.

"You're not . . . *pregnant*?" asked Gina.

"No, no! Not pregnant," Grace answered instantly.

The parents exhaled as one.

"Si, here, was a model of restraint," Grace said. "But getting back to it . . ."

"And we're not completely definite on the idea, but . . ." Simon continued.

"We're thinking that we might . . . you know . . ."

"Possibly . . ."

Simon and Grace looked at each other and nodded.

"Get engaged," they said together.

"There. We said it. Wasn't that horrible, wuzzit, Si?" Grace added.

None of the parents wanted to come outright and say 'no' just at that moment. They had only just gotten their children back and the last thing they wanted to do was drive them away by forbidding them anything. Even though there were no specific laws about them being engaged, the prospect of their children forming a mixed marriage, which was actually an illegal act, seemed a little more than they could manage at the moment, thus they did what almost any sensible parent would do in a similar situation.

"We'll discuss it tomorrow," they chorused.

With that, they all went to their homes.

0400 – Newburg Detention Centre

"We gotta search ya, hon," said the prison guard, smacking her gum. "Now, if you're reasonable, we can do this the easy way . . ."

"Get stuffed," Jess snarled. Restrained as she was to a stretcher, she felt she had little to lose.

"Okay, have it your way," said the guard as she held aloft a set of electric shears. Turning them on, she asked, "Now you wanna tell me where the zipper is?"

"Not the hair," Jess pleaded. "Anything but the hair!"

"Ah, so *that's* where it's hidden," said the guard, aiming the shears for Jess' forelock. "Thought that looked kinda fake."

02AUG2002 Friday

0800 – Newburg Police Station

It was eight the next morning before Michael, Doc and Steve were allowed to see the Great Dane.

"Right. You three. My office. Now," the Great Dane barked.

Without question, they followed his bidding. Closing the door behind him, he sat behind his desk. The Bulldog was there as well.

"We can explain . . ." began Steve.

"Shut up!" snarled the Great Dane. "You'll answer my questions as I ask them."

They nodded.

"First off, I said no other people in the building, didn't I?" asked the Great Dane.

"Yes, sir," they chorused.

"And did I tell you to take off them wires?" the Great Dane enquired.

"No, sir," the three Partners answered.

"Here I am, tryin' to *help* you and all I get is lies and more aggro!" complained the Great Dane. "Then you go and tell your buddy he can just go up the stairs, if ya please. And the upshot of all this, is we can't pin MacAleister with kidnapping, so all our work's for nothing."

"I think you'll find that's a moot point, actually," Michael said.

"Shut up!" growled the Great Dane. "I'm not finished yet! So, anyways, this character runs up the stairs, you ditch your wires, and the next thing I know, I'm being stampeded by a pack o' wolves and then I'm being trod on by a bear."

Michael bit his lip.

"You think this is funny?" asked the Bulldog.

"No sir!" Michael replied loudly and instantly.

"And that bleedin' squirrel jumped clean over me!" marvelled the Bulldog. "Some pig nearly knocks me down the stairs and then a pair of giant rabbits land on my head before they scaper off."

"They're Hares," Doc corrected.

"Oh, *are* they?" said the Bulldog in mock politeness. "And how would you know that little detail, if I might ask?"

Doc was uncowed. "Because they told me. Look, can I level with you guys?"

"Oh, feel free," said the Great Dane, sarcastically. "Let's hear what the yank has to say, shall we?"

Steve sighed as he put his hand over his eyes.

"Look, in the town I grew up in, the cops tell you to do something, it's done or you're in the parish prison, *toute de suite*. I *respect* cops. They got a tough gig," Doc sympathised. "Now, I'm thinking, you ran across some crazy shit last night, and you're wanting some answers."

"Too right," the Bulldog snarled.

"But you ain't never run across this kinda thing before, so I'm guessing you're also having a little trouble coming up with the right questions. Am I close here, cap?" asked Doc.

"I'm an inspector, not a captain," the Great Dane pointed out.

"Look, I can give you all the answers you want, if you do two things."

"And they are?"

"You come with me to the Rialto and I'll show you where it's at."

"And the other thing?"

"You can charge her, book her, fingerprint, mug shot, cavity search, convict, incarcerate or execute, but whatever you do, I beg of you, *please, please, please, please* – do *not* shave Jess' hair off her head."

"Might be a bit late for that," said the Bulldog, concerned.

"Excuse me!" complained the Great Dane loudly, holding his bandaged hand aloft for all to see, "does it look too bleeding late for me! She nearly took a chunk outta me, if ya please!" He turned his attention back to Doc. "You got somethin' to show me?"

Twenty minutes later, the officers were standing in front of the Black Kettle as Doc knocked on the door. It was only nine in the morning and Gina hadn't opened yet.

Doc was on her third round of knocking when it finally opened, revealing a very weary Rachael.

"Doc? What's the prob?" the weary Lepun asked.

"You look fresh," Doc said sarcastically.

"We was up 'til four," Rachael excused, "catchin' up wif Grace."

"Oh, sorry," Doc said. "Um, recognise either of these two gentlemen?" she asked, indicating the two officers behind her.

"Yeah, I remember that one," Rachael recalled. "Sorry for landin' on your noggin last night."

"Erm . . . Quite all right," the Bulldog replied.

"Look, all the ovvers is sleepin' in . . . or sleepin' it off," Rachael qualified. "If there's nuffin' else I can do for ya?"

"No, thanks, Rache," Doc offered.

Rachael quietly closed the door.

Doc turned to the two officers. "Seen enough?"

An elderly Erinac walked by, dragging a shopping trolley behind her. She stopped and looked suspiciously at the two officers. "Must you two loiter about our town like a band of hooligans?" she admonished, and walked on.

"Yes, quite enough, thanks," said the Great Dane.

"You'll release Jess?" asked Doc.

"Yeah, erm . . . If we kept her, I think it'd create *more* problems for all involved, actually," the Great Dane admitted, "myself included. And I think she'll have suffered enough at our hands for her crimes. You'll remind her to reconsider the next time she's in a position to bite an officer of the law."

"Oh, I'll definitely *tell* her," Doc agreed.

0930 – Newburg Police Department

Angus signed the papers.

"She's free to go," the Great Dane told him. Looking at the desk sergeant, he said, "Spring her. No charges. No booking."

"Yessir," replied the desk sergeant. "Have a seat over there," he told Angus and Doc. "I'll send her out in just a minute."

Angus and Doc took a seat in the empty waiting room.

"Did ye tell the Great Dane about shavin heids an all," Angus asked Doc quietly.

"Yeah, I made sure he knew the whole story," Doc said.

"Soddin filth . . . "

"Hey, na!" Doc chastised Angus. "Don't you go dissing the cops, y'hear?"

Angus began a protest. "But they . . . "

"Yeah, and Jess *bit* the man," Doc interrupted. "They took care of our ass when we needed 'em. You think you can do a better job, then join up."

"Ta, na," Angus declined. "Why's ye ayeweys on the side o the filth?"

"Because they protect my 'whappin' backside'. And they protect you, believe it or not. Yes, they're not perfect, but you name a banker, butcher, baker or politician that's willing to put their *life* on the line for *your* benefit and less pay than a teacher."

"Awrite, awrite, dinna shite a wildcat," Angus surrendered.

There was a buzz and an inconspicuous door flew open. A figure ran out, with her shirt pulled over her head and ducked behind the nearest chair.

"Angus, please! Don't look at me like this!" Jess pleaded as she hid behind a row of seats. "Please, look away!"

Angus looked somewhere else. "Jess?"

"Doc?" Jess pleaded. "Don't you have something to cover me?"

"Um . . . It's summer. No, I don't usually," Doc said. "Angus, hand me your shirt."

Angus unbuttoned his shirt, revealing his bare torso and handed it to Doc, who threw it to Jess, who used it to cover her arms and head as she departed outside to the cover of an early model compact car with no small experience.

1000 – Rialto Kitchen

"So what exactly did they shave?" asked Desiree. "Besides your fex, obviously."

"My entire torso," Jess moaned. "Everything from my neck down to my knees and elbows. My boobs. Even my pubes!"

"Ftrue? What was the point of that?"

"They were looking for a zipper. That fat ogre thought I was in a costume."

"The Great Dane? He's big, but he's not what I'd call fat."

"I was talking about the prison guard!" Jess said. "Stupid bitch cut me four times!"

"Well, you're amongst friends now, so you can take off the hood," suggested Desiree.

"No!" Jess protested. "I'm hideous!" Her hands, wrapped around a cup of tea, and just the tip of her nose, were the only part of her body that was visible from the fleece that Angus had given her.

"Na, for the hunderth time, ye're no laithly," Angus pleaded.

"I think you're beautiful," Doc added. "Why don't you let me have a complete look at . . ."

"No!" Jess shrieked. "You just want to catalogue my anatomy."

Unseen to Jess, who's head was under the hood, Doc grimaced with a smile.

"Jess, ye're ayeways bonny ta me," Angus pleaded.

"But they shaved *everything!*" Jess moaned.

"Jess," Doc said, "you can't spend the next two months of your life under a hoodie."

"Easy for *you* to say. At least I can hide out here in the Rialto until it grows back to something respectable."

"Erm . . ." Angus began.

"What?" asked Jess.

"We been given a court order," Angus began. "Hafta be oot by end o the day."

Jess pulled the cowl of her hood even tighter around her head as she sobbed on Angus' shoulder. "Can't I just hide out here? Who's to know?"

"The filth'll come ta clear the buildin. We're oot or in the nick," Angus said.

"Is trespassin while the arbitration is settled."

"They'll cut the power and water. We'll have no way of getting you food,"

Doc pointed out.

Angus gave Doc a discrete signal.

"Look, I gotta finish packing," Doc said, taking the hint. "Gimme a shout if you need something."

"Yeah, ga an do that," Angus urged as Doc departed.

"She's away the nou," Angus said. "Ye can take off yer huid."

"Don't wanna," Jess moped.

"Got some cheesecake for ye," Angus cajoled.

Jess sniffed. "Cheesecake?"

"An a steamy, hot bath for the two o us," he added.

"But you'll think . . ."

"Jess," Angus interrupted. "I've niver had fur in ma life an ye've ayeways held me tight, true?"

"Yes," Jess agreed.

"Ye mynd when Steve busked hissel up for Linda on Hallae een?"

"Yes."

"Sa, nou, ye're doin the same for me."

Jess sniffed. "F'true?"

"Aye. 'F'true'."

Jess snorted a tiny laugh.

"G'wan, give us a smuirich?"

There was a moment of hesitation. Slowly, Jess peeled back her hood. Although there was still a circle of fur on her face, the rest of her was, in fact, completely bald.

"Are you sure you want that kiss?" asked Jess. "Now that you've seen me?"

"Oh, dry yer eyes, Vixen," Angus reproached her, as he grabbed her head and landed a kiss on her mouth. "Nou, let's have that bath."

"No," Jess protested.

"Na?"

"Want cheesecake first."

1020 – Black Kettle Pub

Except for Jess and Angus, Doc had gathered up the members of the Partnership to meet at the Black Kettle behind closed doors, as it had not opened yet.

"Okay, here's the tune, folks," Doc said. "We got 'til midnight to vacate. Let's make some decisions and make some plans."

"Where are Jess and Angus?" asked Linda.

"They're, um, recuperating," Doc answered, "from last night. We'll, um, talk about them later."

"By the way, Ig, how did you and Angus get to The tré? We didn't see you cross the lobby," asked Michael.

"We took the ladder down the dumbwaiter shaft that runs from the master bedroom to the basement," Ignatius said simply.

"Oh, yeah, I'd clean forgot about that," Steve recalled.

"Probably because you have the privilege of never having to use it," Gina grumbled.

"Angus came in and made his announcement that the children were in The tré," Ignatius recalled. "I was going to suggest everyone use the shaft, but they all stampeded down the stairs before I could get a word out, which is understandable, I suppose. So there was Jess, Angus and myself, left in the kitchen. You'll pardon my digression, but Jess seemed *very* happy that Angus had returned. Regardless, while they were, erm . . . embracing, I politely excused myself, saying I would take the shaft down, rather than the stairs, as I recalled that the police might still be in the building.

"I was about halfway down the ladder when I saw the door above open and Angus step on the top rung. He called for Jess several times and she kept

calling back, saying, 'almost done', then 'I'm ready – wait', and then 'coming!' I then heard a torrent of expletives just before Angus closed the door and followed me to The *tré*. He didn't see fit to tell me anything of what transpired, so I respected his privacy and didn't ask him any questions."

"'Almost done?'" Michael repeated quizzically. "What could she be doing that would be more important than escaping the police?"

1021 – *Rialto Bathroom*

"Cheesecake," Jess answered, covering her face in embarrassment.

"Cheesecake?" repeated Angus, incredulous. He could barely keep from laughing. "Ye got nicked for *cheesecake*?"

"Yeah, cheesecake," Jess admitted. "That and resisting arrest and assaulting an officer. Mind you, it was *siffing* good cheesecake."

"Oh, aye," Angus mused.

"Anyway, you made your announcement that Simon and Grace had returned five seconds after I decided to tuck into a slice, and I was damned if I wasn't going to finish it. Bit of a waste, honestly, I had to rush through it and I didn't get to actually enjoy it very much."

"I feel a right feartie for scarperin on ye's. Ye'll forgive me?"

"No, you don't even need to apologise," Jess absolved. "It was my own stupidity and gluttony that got me into it. And take it as read, fighting with cops is just plain, siffing stupid."

"Still . . ."

"Oh, stop it," Jess scolded. "You'd have to be a Bear or a Horse to take on those guys. And even if you'd beaten 'em, they'd just arrest you later and then we're both in the nick. You did the right and sensible thing and that's an end to it, okay? Stop trying to take responsibility for my vices."

1022 – *Black Kettle Pub*

"Excuse me? Did you say 'escaping the police'?" asked Ignatius.

"So it's safe to say our Jess got nicked?" asked Sandra.

"Ew, diya," Pete mumbled softly.

"We'll, um, discuss that later also," Doc suggested. "Look, we're getting distracted here, folks. Let's focus. Evacuate Rialto. Arbitration. Let's stay on target."

"I don't wish to sound greedy," Sandra began, "and as we have Simon and Grace back, it's a happy ending as far as I'm concerned. But I'm not inclined to let a year of my hard labour be donated to some fat cat."

"Fair play," Slide mentioned, "even though you *did* get a closet full of power tools."

"Well, there is *that*," Sandra admitted.

"I didn't get any power tools," Geoff observed, "not that I need them. But I agree with Sandra. I'd much prefer to keep the Rialto."

"Here, here!" agreed Pete. "Put it to a vote?"

"Aye!" they all raised their hands.

"Guess we'll forego the motion process," Linda said, making a note.

"Okay, if we're gonna fight for the Rialto, that means Steve and Michael hafta show up for arbitration," Doc pointed out. "And the Rialto's gonna be locked up. So, Linda, Rache, unless you wanna spend a month in Reality, kiss 'em good-bye."

"What?" asked Linda, suddenly wide-eyed.

"Pft! Like I care," Rachael dismissed.

"Love you, too, dearest," Michael said, patting Rachael on the knee.

"Can't you sneak in and out of the Rialto?" asked Linda "It's got electronic locks and we've got the master code."

"Two things," Doc said. "If Steve is caught on the Rialto grounds, he gets charged with trespassing. He might get away with it once or twice, but not on a daily basis.

"Second, they might do something a little more than change the lock codes. For all we know, they might chain all the doors shut."

"What about the cabinet?" asked Clare. "Will they chain that shut?"

"Dunno," Doc said. "I wouldn't think so, as they would probably suspect it's just a closet."

"Hopefully the Great Dane won't tip them off," Steve mentioned.

"And there's one further complication," Michael added. "If we fight and lose, we've got one shot to get back to the Rialto. We'll have to rig some easy way of getting into the basement and making a dash for the cabinet."

"You *will* be allowed to walk around the perimeter of the building, will you not?" asked Ignatius. "As long as you don't cross the property line?"

Steve shrugged. "Sure, should be all right."

"Okay, then. I've a plan," Ignatius stated. "It won't solve all of our problems, but it should let Linda and Steve see each other every day. And Rachael can see Michael if she's so inclined."

"Not," Rachael stated.

"And should the occasion arise," Ignatius added sombrely, "it can provide one last escape from Reality."

1145 – Rialto Kitchen

Michael and Steve were discussing their short-term living arrangements over tea in the kitchen of the Rialto.

"All packed?" asked Michael.

"Yep, all done," Steve answered. "Never quite noticed how much junk I had. Threw half of it away or gave it to Oxfam."

Jess and Angus entered the room.

"Glad to see your face," Steve said politely to Jess, who had her hood down.

"Yeah, get stuffed," she answered as she prepared some tea for herself.

"Right, erm . . . Sorry to, erm . . . drag you out of bed, as it were," Steve apologised. "Just wondering what your plans were."

"Ah, erm, right," Angus waffled. "Yeah, y'see, up ta juiust the nou, I was thinkin we'd get a wee flat in Otterstow . . ."

"No!" Jess interrupted. "I am *not* going to Otterstow or anywhere else in Allegory in this condition."

"As ye can see, ma plans fell through," Angus said.

"Jess, you can't stay in the Rialto and if you're unwilling to stay in Allegory, then that means you'll have to stay in Newburg," Steve pointed out.

"Looks like we're getting a flat somewhere in Newburg," Jess answered.

"But ye'll niver be able ta ga oot in the light o day," Angus told her.

"I don't care," she replied.

"Ye'll hafta stay inna flat twenty-four, seven," Angus emphasized.

"Suits me," Jess answered.

Angus seemed mystified. "I ken ye're no happy about yer new 'do, but . . ."

"Look, genius," Jess interrupted, sitting down with her tea. "If I'm seen here in Newbury, with or without my fur, I'm a freak, but I'm only a freak until I leave. If I go to Otterstow and I'm seen, I'll never live that down."

"So all we need to do now is find you a flat," Steve mentioned.

"Aye, an we've only the day ta do it," Angus mentioned, grimacing. He looked at Steve and Michael. "Any ideas, like?"

"I'm staying with my parents," Steve said.

"Don't suppose they have a spare room?" asked Jess.

"It was all I could do to get myself a room," Steve answered. "And I'm their son."

"I've always had my own flat," Michael said. "But it's just a studio."

"We'll share the rent," Jess offered.

"Sorry, lease says 'no pets'," Michael replied, suddenly finding himself doused with tea. "You're not exactly selling me on the idea, you know that, Jess," he pointed out, ignoring the fact that he was dripping wet.

"You apologise for that remark and I'll apologise for breaking your nose," she retorted.

"My nose isn't I'm terribly sorry for making such a crude and insensitive remark," Michael said.

"I'm sorry for dousing you with tea," Jess replied. "So how much of our stuff will fit in this flat?"

08AUG2002 Thursday

0530 – A Window in the Basement of the Rialto

Linda entered the basement of the Rialto from the cabinet and crossed the floor. Climbing the stairs, she approached a window that was within easy reach. As she had done several times before, she tripped a small switch to disable the burglar alarm and then opened the window.

As it was half past five in the morning, the sun was just broaching the horizon. They had chosen this time for their assignations, as there would be daylight, yet the small road next to the basement window would be devoid of human activity, except for the occasional car.

"Good morning, Stevie," Linda chirped, resting her head on her arms, which were folded on the window sill.

Steve, who was standing on the pavement, 2 yards away beyond a chain-link fence, turned around and looked down at the window. "Hello, Linda. How's tricks?"

"Haven't turned any lately," Linda replied.

"No Rache, I presume?"

"No Michael, neither, I notice."

"Rache hasn't shown up since day one and it's been a week," Steve said. "Can you blame him for not coming just the one time?"

"No, honestly," Linda admitted. "Still, shouldn't be too much of a surprise. We all knew Rache 'don't do mornings'."

"Right," Steve agreed. "It's not like he's the father of her child or anything."

"Speaking of which, she felt the baby kick yesterday," Linda mentioned.

"I'll be sure to pass that along," Steve said. "Are you sure you can't convince Rache to come to at least one meeting? It would mean a lot to Michael."

Linda sighed. "I've tried, believe me. Even Pete's starting to give her grief about it. And I think Gina's on the verge of a threat."

"As long as it's of her own free will."

"Steve, we *are* trying," Linda said.

"Sorry, Linda. Didn't mean to give you any aggro."

"Oh, more news," Linda said. "Doc's found an orphanage of mixed children. It's down by Iscane. A place called Belvedere."

Steve looked puzzled by this news. "Does she plan on adopting?"

"No, silly. She's going there to study the phenotypes of mixed couples."

"Is she?" asked Steve, suddenly interested.

"She wants to try and figure out what the baby's gonna look like."

"That should be interesting. I wish I could go with her."

"I wanted to go with her as well, but that'd mean I'd miss our little meetings."

"So who *is* going with her?"

"Clare and Dawn," Linda replied.

"Oh, right . . . I overheard a conversation between Angus and Jess once," Steve mentioned casually.

"And that's important . . . why?"

"Jess had a pregnancy scare," Steve said.

"By Ignatius?"

"No, by Angus," Steve corrected. "Anyway, she said she'd rather have an abortion than have a child with a human father."

"She's not alone," Linda stated. "I'd never, but a lot of people would take the same course of action and I wouldn't blame them a bit. It's a huge burden, and not just for the parents."

"Still, seems a bit drastic. And, to her credit, for all of Rachael's bluff and gruff, she's still having her baby."

"See? She's not quite the monster you make her out to be," Linda said in her friend's defence.

"No, of course she's not a monster," Steve concurred. "Some people are coming; I'll have to go now."

"Bye-bye, Stevie. See you tomorrow," Linda said, quickly closing the window.

2330 – Father Gabriel's Bedroom

Father Gabriel was lying in his bed, the postcard clutched gently to his heart. He had read the Braille holes a hundred times and wept in the memory of his two charges that he had grown to love. The vicarage rang hollow with emptiness every time he called for them, on the few occasions that he had forgotten that they had departed over a fortnight ago.

Now the card had arrived, ensuring that they had made it to their destination and he knew, for once, he had done something that had made a difference.

His joyful and sorrowful ambivalence made it difficult for him to sleep. After tossing and turning a bit, he recalled the sleeping tablets he had ordered the year before, when he was actually thinking of doing himself in, that had arrived the very day as Simon and Grace. He found it ironic that now he intended to take one for its intended purpose of just getting a good night's rest.

02SEP2002 Monday

0615 – A Window in the Basement of the Rialto

The window cracked open at sunrise.

"Morning, Stevie!" Linda chirped, resting her head on her arms.

"Good morning, Linda," Steve replied. "No Rache?"

"Sorry," Linda shrugged.

"Sorry, Michael," Steve echoed to his friend.

"It's all right," Michael said, leaning against the fence a few yards away.

"Is that you, Michael?" Linda called. "Come here and let me see you."

Michael reluctantly appeared where Linda could see her.

"How's tricks, lad?" she asked.

"Jess is about to drive me out of my mind," Michael complained. "I don't know why she thought she could stay in a tiny flat for a month straight."

"Got a little cabin fever, eh?" asked Linda.

"I think it's progressed to a full outbreak of bird-cage flu at this stage," Michael noted.

Linda giggled. "Poor lad. How's Angus holding up?"

"Oh, he's fine," Michael reported. "In fact, if it weren't for him holding Jess in check, I'd probably wake up with a knife in my heart."

"Oh no!" Linda covered her mouth to keep herself from laughing. "So today's your big day?"

"Yep, we sit before the arbiter and roll the dice," Michael answered.

"Best of luck," Linda said. "Here's hoping you come up elevens. Oh, hang about . . ."

Linda disappeared for a moment.

"Where's she gone?" asked Steve.

Michael shrugged.

They then heard Rachael's voice. "No! I don' wanna."

"Fine, you want toilet duty for a month?" threatened Gina.

"I'll take the loos," Rachael opted.

"Rache, ya face 'im or you're off the staff," Pete threatened. "If ya don't do this, you're not fit to be behind a bar."

"Pete, no! You wouldn't!" Rachael pleaded.

"Go on, then. Try me," Pete challenged.

"But why? Why're ya makin' me do this?"

"First rule o' bein' a barman – when the drink is ordered, ya open the right bottle or draw the right handle an' it goes in the right glass. An' if it's wrong, ya take the cost."

There was a pause.

"Wozzat to do wif anyfin'?" asked Rachael, confused.

"It's called takin' responsibility for your actions," Pete clarified.

"Oh, right," Rachael said. "Awrite, gimme a hand up."

Rachael's face finally appeared in the window. "Michael? Is 'at you monkey-boy?"

"Rachael!" Gina's voice stabbed the air.

"It's all right, Gina," Michael called to Gina. "That's just her pet name for me."

"Izzit?" Rachael whispered to Michael.

"It is now, apparently," Michael whispered back.

"Don't think I didn't hear that," Gina shouted.

"Let's give 'em a little time alone, shall we?" suggested Linda.

0800 – Newburg Arbitration Court

The arbitrator, an older gentleman, entered the office and they all introduced themselves.

"Excuse me," MacAleister said, "but wasn't Johnson supposed to be the arbitrator for this case?"

"He was recused," explained the arbitrator, "as he is related to the defendant's solicitor. After all, we wouldn't want to be unfairly biased towards Mister Green, would we, Mister MacAleister? I've been seconded from an entirely different arbitration firm to take his place. Now, if you'll give me just a few minutes to go over some documents, we'll get started."

MacAleister leaned back in his chair and put his hand over his face in frustration. "Just can't hire good help these days," he mumbled quietly.

As the arbitrator studied his papers, Michael and Steve had a whispered conversation.

"Dachshund?" asked Michael.

Steve shook his head.

"Malamute?"

"Wrong species," Steve hinted.

Michael gave the arbitrator another careful look. "Tortoiseshell?"

"Tortoiseshell?" Steve gave him a look of disdain. "How do you get a tortoiseshell from a face like that?"

"Sorry – I'm not well-versed in hallucinations."

"They're delusions, not hallucinations," Steve defended.

"Right, sorry. Erm . . ." Michael hesitated at his next guess. "Tabby?"

"No. Give?"

"Give."

"Maine Coon."

"You really must get some professional help on this, Steve."

Shortly thereafter, the arbitrator began asking a few questions. An hour or so of deliberations about submission of evidence had passed, mostly involving technicalities. The arbitrator sat behind his bench and adjusted his tie as he read a particular document.

"Mister MacAleister?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry, but I cannot weigh as evidence the affidavit from your son. He's a habitual drug user, with an obvious grudge. Simply speaking, he could not be viewed as credible, so I'll simply have to take that anything he said might be a fabrication."

MacAleister looked upset. "But those are sworn statements . . ."

"I realise that, but that's not the point. Even if he were here in person, he would not be credible. I'm sorry, but I'll have to throw it out as evidence."

MacAleister and his solicitor conferred briefly. "Fine, then," he surrendered grudgingly.

"Moving along . . . Mister Green, Mister Robinson – according to this document, you were to pay Mister MacAleister the sum of one pound for the ownership of the Rialto and associated assets?"

"Yes, sir," answered Michael.

"And you failed to pay?"

"Correct, sir," admitted Michael.

The arbitrator leaned forward, incredulous. "And how did that come about?"

"We were not informed of the nature of our first conference," Michael elaborated, "except in very vague terms, so we weren't really prepared. We didn't have proper change, to make a long story short."

"And why didn't you pay him later?" asked the arbitrator.

Steve picked up the thread. "When we paid him the 70 p . . ."

"When did you pay him 70 p?" interrupted the Maine Coon.

"During our first conference, when he offered the sale, on our first visit," Steve answered.

"Go on," prompted the Maine Coon.

"When we paid him the 70 p," Steve continued, "he said that it was all right, or words to that effect. And he never asked us to pay the remainder."

"Is that what you recall, Mister Robinson?" asked the arbitrator.

"His exact words were, 'You drive a hard bargain. That will do'," Michael stated.

"If your recollection is correct, Mister Robinson," said the arbitrator, "then you have a most remarkable memory."

"Thank you, sir," Michael said, with just the tiniest hint of smugness.

"That was a statement of scepticism, Mister Robinson," said the arbitrator, "not a compliment."

"Oh, sorry," Michael apologised.

"Mister MacAleister?" the arbitrator said. "Are the events, as these gentlemen relate, true?"

"I never said any such thing!" MacAleister protested.

"Did you send any sort of collection notice to Mister Green or Mister Robinson?" asked the arbitrator.

"I did. I have a copy of a receipt of that notice, signed by Mister Green." MacAleister opened a file and produced a paper. The receipt was handed to the arbitrator and he examined it.

"Mister Green, did you sign and receive this receipt?" asked the Maine Coon.

"I don't recall signing any," Steve stated. "May I examine it?"

The paper was handed to Steve. His solicitor whispered in his ear and Steve took out a handkerchief to handle the document. He scanned it carefully. "I admit, it does look like my signature. But I do not recall ever signing this sheet of paper." He scanned it for a moment more. "Ah, I could not have signed this paper. The date is wrong, sir."

"The *date*?" asked the Maine Coon. "Are you saying you signed it, but not on the date shown?"

"No, sir," Steve answered. "When I say that the date is wrong, sir, I do not dispute that the date and month and year occurred during the accompanying signature, whoever may have signed it. And although their handwriting looks remarkably like mine, I did not sign this. When I date a document, I always write two numbers for the day, three letters for the month and the full year. For example, today's date would be zero-two-S-E-P-two-zero-zero-two. I never write a series of three numbers."

"Never?" asked the Maine Coon.

"Not since over a year ago," Steve stated.

"And what prompted this rather specific change in behaviour?" asked the Maine Coon.

"I had started dating an American girl," Steve began his explanation. "As you might be aware, they date documents as month, day and year, for some peculiar reason. This fact caused some confusion between her and me, resulting in some wasted cash, an academic delay and, not to be too personal, some very hurt feelings due to a miscommunication. Since then, I've written dates as I've just mentioned; two numbers for the day, three letters for the month and a four-digit year. No exceptions. There is no possible way that format can be misconstrued."

"Very pragmatic," mentioned the Maine Coon. He suddenly began flipping through the papers with renewed interest. "What is the name of this woman?"

"Doctor Desiree DelHomme," Steve answered.

"Where is she just now?" asked the Maine Coon.

"I couldn't say specifically," Steve hedged.

"I'd very much like to have a chat with her," the Maine Coon requested. "Can you get in touch with her?"

Michael and Steve looked at each other and shrugged.

"We wish to cooperate, of course," Michael said, "but it might take a bit of doing."

"Could take as long as a whole day," Steve said.

"Is she in the wilderness or something?" asked the Maine Coon. "Surely she has a mobile phone."

"Yes, she does," answered Steve, "but she's American and her mobile seems to have some issues with the networks here."

"So where is she now? The Sahara? Antarctica? Patagonia? Wales?" The Maine Coon seemed to be losing his patience. "Could you at least tell me which continent she's on?"

"I could barely tell you what universe she's in, some days," Steve replied.

"This is no time for levity, Mister Green," the Maine Coon warned.

"Of course not, sir. Sorry," Steve apologised.

"How long would it take for you to find out the whereabouts of this woman?" asked the Maine Coon.

Michael shrugged. "An hour?"

"Very well, we'll adjourn for an hour," ordered the arbitrator. "Unless you wish me to find in favour of Mister MacAleister, I strongly suggest you track this woman down." He looked at his watch. "It's ten-twenty. We'll resume at eleven-twenty on the dot. Adjourned."

Without exchanging pleasantries with their solicitor, Michael and Steve departed the room and ran out into the street.

"You couldn't have said *two* hours?" asked Steve. "Shall we get a taxi or run?"

"I'll run. You try and get a taxi," Michael said as he took off.

Newburg was not a particularly large town, but the Rialto was a solid two miles from the office where the arbitration was being held.

As it turned out, Michael made it all the way to the Rialto just as Steve was getting a taxi.

Scouting around for anyone that might be watching, Michael ran to the service door to the basement of the Rialto and tapped the code into the electronic lock. As quickly as possible, he slipped inside, locking the door behind him. He jogged to the cabinet, through the tunnel, out through The tré and down the street to the Black Kettle. Completely out of breath, he banged on the door.

The door swung open with Rachael behind it. "Whatcha doin' 'ere? You're supposed to be at the arbitration!"

"Hafta . . . call . . . Doc . . . Where?" panted Michael.

"Oh, shave me, she's just got back to Ig's from 'er trip to Iscane," Rachael recalled. "Quick, come in an' we'll give 'er a ring," she invited.

Michael entered the Black Kettle, dragging his feet. "Water . . . please."

Rachael poured him a glass of water as she simultaneously dialled the number for Nora. "I know she's back. I saw 'er just an hour ago."

Michael took the pint glass and drank it one go as Rachael waited for an answer.

"Hmm. No answer."

"Sure she's at Ig's?" asked Michael.

"Positive. What's this all about?"

"She has to testify . . ." he paused, pursed his lips and belched loudly, "scuseme . . . at the arbitration. Need to get her there in," he looked at his watch, "in about forty minutes. Or we lose the Rialto."

"Oh, that's not good," Rachael said. "It's nearly a ten minute walk, just to Nora. Bloody 'ell, I'm sick an' tired o' trackin' down that old Dog every time there's a crisis. 'E's gonna get a rover, even if it 'as to come outta me own pocket." Convinced that no one would answer, she hung up the telephone. "You go to The tré. I'll meet ya there wif Doc, one way or t'other," she ordered as she removed her boots.

As Michael jogged back to The tré, Rachael flew down the tow path, passing the occasional pedestrian. When she got to the bridge that crossed the canal to Nora, she took a flying leap across the canal and easily cleared it.

It was a mere few seconds until she was at the back door of Nora. Not bothering with formalities such as knocking, she flew through the door and skidded to a halt.

"Doc? Where y'at?" she called out.

Doc's voice called from upstairs. "Rachael? Whatchou doing here?"

"Michael needs ya at the arbitration," Rachael explained. "We got a half-hour to get there. Ya need to leave right this instant."

"Erm, right . . . Just a sec," she shouted. She ran down the stairs, tucking in her shirt and pulling up her fly. "Let me put my shoes on," she added. It was barely a few seconds when she said, "Okay, let's go. Where to?"

"To The tré. Michael's meetin' us there," Rachael told her. "Later, Ig!" she called up the stairs.

"Later, Rachael," Ignatius' voice called back.

Together the two bolted out of Nora, Doc jogging at her best to keep up with the much faster Rachael. It was another five minutes before they met Michael at The tré.

Michael wordlessly led them through The tré and into the tunnel.

"We have to part here, Rache," Michael said.

"At's awrite, monkey-boy," Rachael replied. "I love you," she added suddenly, giving him a kiss. "Come back wif or wiffout the keys to the Rialto – but please come back."

Michael and Doc emerged from the service door of the Rialto and ran immediately into the street. Michael pulled out his mobile and dialled as they jogged along.

"Steve? . . . Coming out of the Rialto, just now . . . South on . . . ah, gotcha." He snapped his mobile shut and tapped Doc to indicate the waiting taxi with Steve in it.

They piled in and the taxi took off.

1100 – Rialto Basement

Rachael sat in the basement of the Rialto, occasionally nibbling on her claw. Hearing footsteps, she turned to see her sisters.

"Hey, Rache," Clare called.

"Any news, yet?" asked Grace.

1131 – Newburg Arbitration Court

The arbitrator came back from his recess. "I've reviewed the evidence given and I have come to a conclusion, which I have placed in this sealed envelope. But before I issue that conclusion, I would like to ask each of you a question. We'll start with you, Mister MacAleister. If you were to receive the Rialto in its present state, what would you do with it?"

MacAleister consulted with his solicitor. "Sir, on advice from my solicitor, I have been advised not to answer, as it is irrelevant to the case."

"On advice from me, I would suggest you consider otherwise," countered the arbitrator.

MacAleister shared another discreet word with his solicitor. "I'm sorry, sir, but there is no legal compulsion for me to do so. I must decline."

2000 – Rialto Basement

The three teen Hares were chatting of this and that when they heard another party coming through the door.

"Rache? You in here, girl?" asked Geoff.

"We heard Michael came to fetch Doc," Linda said.

1133 – Newburg Arbitration Court

"Fine," the arbitrator said. He turned to Steve. "Mister Green? Mister Robinson?"

Steve's solicitor gave a tug on his sleeve, but Steve politely waved him off. "I have no reservations whatsoever about revealing our plans for the Rialto. We plan to continue our business. It is also part of our charter to be committed to assisting the community by any practical means and to attempt to have the Rialto listed as a historic building via English Heritage."

"And you are committed to that plan?" asked the arbitrator.

"Fully, sir," replied Steve without hesitation.

"You don't know how glad I am to hear that," the arbitrator smiled slyly.

"Sir," MacAleister jumped up. "Pardon, but after due reflection, we feel that a similar approach . . ."

The arbitrator interrupted him. "You had your chance. Sit down," he said calmly.

MacAleister sat down.

2000 – Rialto Basement

Very shortly after Geoff and Linda had arrived, Sandra, Slide, Simon, Pete and Gina came through the cabinet all at once.

"Girls? Any news yet?" asked Pete.

1135 – Newburg Arbitration Court

"You might be wondering why," the arbitrator began, "if my decision were already made, I would care one way or the other about the ultimate fate of the Rialto.

"I've been a judge or an arbitrator for nearly twenty years. When one passes judgement, it's not always clear that one has done what is best for all involved – and not just for the litigants, but for the community, the country and, sometimes, even the world as a whole. There is also, of course, the small matter of upholding the spirit and the letter of the law. Any judge who says they never second-guessed themselves is lying.

"When the opportunity presents itself, I will occasionally ask a question of the litigants, as I have just done, to see if my judgement was well-placed. To use a phrase I have just learned from my interrogation of Doctor DelHomme, I think I 'hit this one out of the park'. Now, as to my judgement . . . "

The arbitrator removed his glasses. "At first blush, it seemed that this whole case hinged on either the receipt or demand of thirty pence, but after further investigation, I've discovered that there's a little more to it than that.

"The most difficult part of cases like this is not so much interpreting the law, but in determining who is lying and who is telling the truth; no small task, I assure you. However, once that is established, the application of the law is almost always quite straight-forward. And I'm afraid, Mister MacAleister, that you blinked first, and rather loudly. Mister Green's statement regarding this forged signature – or more specifically, this forged date – was corroborated by a stack full of documents bearing his true signature and date. Doctor DelHomme, in no uncertain terms I hasten to add, has also substantiated his claim. Her statements, along with other substantiating documentation, have led me to one inescapable conclusion. Mister MacAleister, as I see it, one way or the other, your plan was to somehow deceive Mister Green and Mister Robinson. I think the fact that you take advantage of our legal system to swindle innocent people of their time and effort is reprehensible. According to documents produced by the defence, you grossly inflated the value of this property through fraud. How the bank never noticed this when they financed the loan is still a mystery, to the good fortune of Mister Green and Mister Robinson, and to the bank's as well, as they have made a very sound investment in two gentlemen of good character.

"If Mister Green and Mister Robinson had been successful, your intent was to repossess. That is abundantly clear; otherwise we would not be here today. Conveniently for you, they were short of change that day you met. I do not know what other means you might have used had such not been the case but that is not necessary knowledge for my judgement. Your intent was quite clear.

You set them up to fail and if, by some small miracle, they succeeded, then your intent was to reap the benefits of their labours.

"According to these figures, if they *had* failed, you would have shed yourself of a huge liability and, in the process, they would have accumulated a massive debt, most likely resulting in a ruling of bankruptcy and all the misfortunes that entails. They may have possibly even been convicted of fraud. In consideration of the heavy tax liability as well as the desperate need of restoration, I consider it a testimony to their resourcefulness that they managed to get the effort off the ground at all, much less make a profit.

"I also have a large stack of evidence that makes it abundantly clear that this is not the first time you have used such tactics on hardworking, unsuspecting folk, such as Mister Green and Mister Robinson. The difference is, this time you won't get away with it.

"My finding is for the defendant. All assets, rights and liabilities of the Rialto shall henceforth be the joint property of Mister Green and Mister Robinson, upon the receipt of 30 pence." The arbitrator handed the envelope to the solicitor for Steve and Michael. "Here is your court order, gentlemen."

Steve pulled out a pound coin and placed it on the table before Mr. MacAleister's solicitor. "Keep the change."

"Our business is adjourned. Good day, gentlemen," said the arbitrator.

MacAleister's solicitor stood up. "We would like to motion to appeal, sir. Also motion for an injunction that the defendants not have usufruct of this property until this appeal is resolved."

"You don't seem to understand, counsel," said the arbitrator, rather severely to MacAleister's solicitor. "This is arbitration. There is no appeal. There are no injunctions. Both of you signed on to this and, as I recall, it was actually the suggestion of *your* client, Mister MacAleister, in order to speed up the process."

"It is you who misunderstand," said the solicitor. "We will move to strike your decision."

"On what grounds?" asked the arbitrator in amused disbelief.

The solicitor looked to Mister MacAleister.

MacAleister answered for him. "That you were either incompetent or coerced by the defence. The letter of the law clearly states that I am the owner of that building and all its rights. We'll bring suit against your judgement and get it overturned. Meanwhile, we *will* get an injunction to freeze use of the building until this is resolved."

"You've got a lot of bloody cheek suggesting either of those," said the arbitrator menacingly. "I can get a judge to hold you in contempt, you know."

Steve whispered to his solicitor.

"Sir," Steve's solicitor stood up. "May I approach the . . . erm, desk?"

The arbitrator waved him forward as well as the opposing solicitor. There was a brief discussion between the parties, frequently interrupted by loud interjections from MacAleister's solicitor.

They returned to their seats.

"For the record," the arbitrator began, "Mister MacAleister, there is ample evidence for a civil trial against you on numerous charges. However, if you will agree to a number of terms, these charges will be dropped."

"That's blackmail!" shouted MacAleister. "I could have you disbarred for that."

"Publish and be damned," the arbitrator replied calmly.

1200 – Rialto Basement

Ignatius quietly entered the basement of the Rialto. "Ah, good. I see we're all here," he noted. "No news, I assume?"

1400 – Rialto Exterior

"Yes," Steve patiently explained to the constable at the gate. "Here is the court order," he pulled out the document. "It's very clear. I own this building now. Would you please remove the chains from the door."

The constable looked at the order. "You won't mind if I call this in, will you?"

Steve rolled his eyes impatiently. "All right. Get on with it, then."

After speaking with his radio for a moment or two, the constable turned to Steve. "Inspector's on his way. Be here in a few minutes."

"Look, could I go in, just by myself?" Doc asked.

"No, 'fraid not, miss," the constable apologised. "Sorry. Like to, but it's not worth my job."

1415 – Rialto Exterior

The inspector arrived and Desiree, Steve and Michael instantly recognised him as the Great Dane.

"Afternoon, constable. What's the emergency?" asked the inspector.

The PC handed the court order to the inspector. "Not an emergency, Inspector. This geezer says he's the owner now. Says we don't need to guard this pile o' rubbish."

If Steve had had hackles, they would have raised at this.

The inspector inspected the order. "This is an order all right," he remarked. "Normally, I'd ask for ID, but as I know these three personally, I think we can dispense with that formality."

"Thank you, Inspector," Steve said politely.

"Everything seems to be in order. Constable, unseal the building." He handed the order back to Steve. "And you three keep your noses clean."

2000 – Black Kettle Pub

"So what about the baby?" asked Michael of Doc. "What's he gonna look like?"

"He? I don't even know what the sex is gonna be," Doc admitted.

"But what's he gonna be?" asked Rachael. "Human or Hare? Or sumfin' in between?"

"Good question," Doc answered. "But from the research that Clare, Dawn and I did down in Iscane, there seems to be an incomplete dominance . . . "

"I think that's arguable," Clare argued. "I mean, I agree that the children have mixed features of each parent, but the brothers and sisters all had the same traits, more or less."

"The problem is, we couldn't find anyone that mixed with a human," Doc said. "But basing it strictly on what we've seen with all of the other Frith, it should be some sort of mix."

"Suffice to say, you have no idea," Michael interrupted.

"Oh, we have an *idea*," Doc admitted. "It's just a dispute about what the probabilities are."

"So what's your best guess?" asked Michael.

"Well, based on our observations," Clare said, "and bear in mind, that even though we catalogued over six hundred orphans . . . "

"Six hundred?" marvelled Michael.

"Yep, six hundred," Doc confirmed. "The poor darlings," she shook her head. "I wouldn't say it was the ninth level of hell, but it had to be at least the third."

"I wish we could do something for them," Steve mentioned.

"Yeah, well, you wanna fish or you wanna cut bait?" asked Doc.

10SEP2002 Monday

1200 – MacAleister Estate

"George MacAleister?" asked the Great Dane upon entering his office, followed by the Bulldog.

"Excuse me, how did you get in here?" MacAleister asked.

The inspector identified himself as a police officer, showing his badge.

"Yes, I'm George MacAleister. What do you want?"

"I have a warrant for your arrest. Please place your hands behind your back," ordered the Great Dane as he pulled out a pair of cuffs.

"On what charge?" MacAleister asked, incredulous, although complying with the officer.

"Kidnapping . . . " began the Great Dane.

"Kidnapping?" asked MacAleister. "Whom did I kidnap?"

"One Angus MacAleister," the Great Dane answered. "You are also charged . . . "

"But he's my son," George protested. "How could I kidnap my own son?"

"Without a thought, apparently," said the Great Dane. "You are also charged with twelve counts of bank fraud, twenty-three counts of wire fraud, and a hundred and twenty seven counts of tax evasion. You do not have to say anything . . . "

1200 – Rialto Kitchen

"Good afternoon, Jess," Ignatius said warmly.

"Hello, Ig," Jess replied courteously.

"I just wanted to let you know that if you want a room at Nora, one is available. Although I should advise that you sleep at your own peril of the house collapsing on top of you."

Jess gave this but a brief moment's thought. "Pass," she replied.

"As you wish," Ignatius stated. "Might one ask where you might be found?"

"Right here at the Rialto. With Angus."

"An excellent choice," Ignatius acknowledged. "From all accounts he is a fine gentleman."

"Don't know about that," Jess admitted, "but he's a damned good lay."

Ignatius smiled at Jess' irreverence. "Very well. As long as you're happy here," he said gracefully. "And with him. And if I may?"

"Yes?"

"I think your fur is coming out very nicely."

"Thank you, Ig. That's good of you to say. And I hope you find a nice bit of tail as well."

Notes from the author

Why 'Allegory'?

Frequently, I have been asked how the people of Allegory can equate a tale of hidden symbolism to their equivalent of the "real" world. It would seem to us in the "Real" world, that to call one's universe "Allegory," would be to live one's life in a fable or apologue.

It is this last word that belies the answer.

First, bear in mind that the word "Real" ultimately springs from the Latin "res," which means, simply, "thing". Oddly the term "real estate" has more to do with those roots than the existential definition of being and nothingness that we normally associate with the term "real".

Returning to the concept of an apologue, the modern word 'apology' means to express regret and humility for an offense. It is frequently the experience that apologies are followed by a (sometimes fictional) defence or excuse of one's actions. It is this second action that is the original meaning of an apology; to speak in one's own defence. How this comes from 'apo', which is Ancient Greek for 'away' and 'logi', also Ancient Greek for 'a study of interest', is a study for scholars greater than I (or is it 'greater than me?'). Continuing this study of interest, we know that for every story (or excuse), there is always another side, thus we have an allegory, which comes from "allos" (Ancient Greek for "other") and "agoria" (Ancient Greek for "speaking"). Thus, those who reside in Allegory are presenting their side of the story, namely, that they exist in a very tangible and concrete sense. I can only surmise that this second defence is presented to themselves more than anyone else, as they have little, if any, contact with anyone in Reality.

The cast and the origin of their names

First, a few rules:

Except for humans, all surnames typically have two parts, a root and a suffix. The root can be pretty much anything, while the suffix would be based on the Genra, e.g. MarshHare; root=Marsh, suffix=Hara.

Women do not take their husband's surname in marriage. And why should they?

Children usually take their mother's surname, as there is rarely any dispute as to who the mother is.

Some, but not all, Genra have different suffixes for male and female. For example, a male Fox might be Bob HaliFox and his mother, Nina HaliFyxe. Or Bob BeoWulf and his sister, Nancy BeoWyflf

Humans typically only have a root to their name (with no suffix), usually work-related, e.g., 'Sweep' or 'Load'. They also might have a name of their *place* of work, like 'field' or 'dock'.

Below are all of the characters, in order of appearance, with the year of their birth, the page they are first mentioned and a brief description. Where it isn't obvious, I have included some information about the names.

Simon StæppanWulf (1987 pg1) An ingenuous teenager that loves Grace. [from OE *stæppan* 'step', 'go', or 'advance' and OE *wulf* 'wolf' (masc)]

Grace ParsleyHare (1987 pg1) A mischievous teenager with a callous disregard for the rules, but a deep and abiding love for Simon.

Dr Clutter (1879 p3) A domestic physicist.

Pete DunBerr (1962 p3) Barman of Black Kettle pub [OE *dun* 'mountain' plus OE *bera* 'bear' (masc)]

Gina ParsleyHare (1955 p3) Proprietress of Black Kettle Pub. Mother to Grace and step-mother to Rachael and Clare.

Ignatius HaliFox (1962 p5) The pompous but well-loved Mayor of Otterstow. [OE *halian* 'heal' or OE *halig* 'holy']

Thaddeus WhinnnsBrocc (1962 p6) Stockbroker and drunk bully. [Scots *whins* 'gorse' or 'furze']

Geoff ThistleBoar (1935 p7) Widower, master builder, hippy.

Sandra StæppanWylf (1955 p10) Simon's mother [from OE *stæppan* 'step', 'go', or 'advance' and OE *wylf* 'wolf' (fem)]

Liza Prlgel (1935 p13) A Hedgehog librarian. Mother of Johnny and Lisa [OE *prica* 'prick', 'point' plus OE *igl* 'hedgehog']

George MacAleister (1945 p13) Angus' father.

An Engineer (1935 p13)

Leon (1952 p14) George MacAleister's driver.

"Old Man" Simon StæppanWulf (1882 p15) Simon's great-great grandfather, who didn't draw a book on anatomy.

Xavier (1935 p15) Ignatius' deceased father.

Elizabeth HaliFyxe (1932 p15) Ignatius' deceased Mother. [OE *halian* 'heal' or OE *halig* 'holy' plus OE *fyxe* 'vixen']

Steven 'Slide' HolenWulf (1955 p15) Simon's father [OE *holen* 'holly']

Graeme DunHors (1966 p16) Tends stables at dairy. [OE *dun* 'hill' plus OE *hors* 'horse']

Johnny Prlgel (1972 p17) Past victim of Jess and part-time barman. [OE *prica* 'prick', 'point' plus OE *igl* 'hedgehog']

Linda OakSquirrel (1971 p25) Town's Clerk and erotic sculptress

Rachael MarchHare (1982 p26) Grace's cousin, Gina's step-child, twin to Clare. [OE *mersc* 'marsh']

Clare MarchHare (1982 p26) Grace's cousin, Gina's step-child, twin to Rachael. [OE *mersc* 'marsh']

Bertie Proudfoot aka Ploughfield (1840 p38) Builder of Rialto (does not appear)

Jess FærFyxe (1962 p42) Ignatius' old love. [OE *fær* 'sudden', 'fearful', 'danger', 'calamity', etc. plus OE *fyxe* 'vixen']

- Eric BlotMus (1968 p42) Otterstow's bon vivant. [OE *blōst* 'blossom', 'flower', 'fruit']
- Elizabeth (1978 p51) A Vixen tea trolley attendant on train.
- Lutran shopkeeper in Trinova (1955, p52)
- Jim (1980 p54) A Hare librarian
- Milly MæstBar (1962 p62) Childhood friend of Ignatius (does not appear) [OE *mæst* 'nuts as food for swine', 'most', 'ship mast' plus OE *bar* 'pig']
- PenFox (1955 p63) Violent ex-boyfriend of Jess [very late ME or very early Modern English *pen* 'female swan']
- Nancy Prlgel [1976 p69] Liza's daughter (does not appear) [OE *prica* 'prick', 'point' plus OE *igl* 'hedgehog']
- Angus MacAleister (1970 p70) Drug addict and 'owner' of the Rialto.
- Kenny (1970 p70) Angus' friend
- Nadine Cook (1978 p70) A human tea trolley attendant on train.
- Vince Scrub (1968 p95) Builder, entrepreneur.
- Dawn RoseMearh (1967 p97) Senior Alma at The tré. [OE *meorh* 'horse (both masc and fem)']
- Kelly RancHors (1978 p97) junior Alma and gossip. [OE *ranc* 'haughty', 'full-grown', 'overbearing', 'forward', 'proud', 'noble', 'brave', 'strong', 'ostentatious' plus OE *hors* 'horse']
- Carol LeanHors (1978 p97) junior Alma and gossip. [OE *lean* 'reward', 'gift', etc. also 'to blame', 'find fault with' plus OE *hors* 'horse']
- Wanda FærFyxe (1966 p98) Jess' youngest sister, estranged. [OE *fær* 'sudden', 'fearful', 'danger', 'calamity', etc. plus OE *fyxe* 'vixen']
- Mini (1992 p100) A reticent human girl.
- Steve Green (1975 p104) Decent English lad.
- Desiree 'Doc' DelHomme (1975 p105) Steve's American girlfriend.
- Michael Robinson (1975 p106) A tall, skinny bastard. Steve's friend.
- Evangeline Proudfoot (1993 p176) A girl with hair of extraordinary redness.
- Pete Dunne (1962 p180) Landlord of the Snooty Fox.
- Alexandra 'Sandy' MarchHare (1840, p186) Previous owner of the Black Kettle and Bertie PloughField/Proudfoot's 'special friend'.
- Alice Rush (1880 p190) A 'special friend' of Old Man Simon.
- Basil StoBrocc (1967 p239) Childhood bully (does not appear) [Scots *stob* 'thorn', 'stake', 'fence post', 'a prickle', 'spike', 'stout thickset man']
- Basil RiscFox (1956 p242) Jess' ex-husband. [OE *risc* 'rush, as in marsh grass']
- Colourpoint and Basset (1947, 1949 p250) Two bank officers.
- Roland the Rottweiler (1965 p255) Chief of security for the Rialto.
- Alan the Alsatian (1968 p255) Security for the Rialto.
- Bruce the Borzoi (1969 p255) Security for the Rialto.
- Paula the Poodle (1970 p255) Security for the Rialto.
- Appraiser (1940 p287) Erinac appraiser/numismatist.
- Liam AbannEach (1979 p323) New Almus for The tré. [Old Irish *abann* 'river' plus Old Irish *each* 'horse']
- Brandon StonePony (1979 p323) New Almus for The tré.
- Alex BrookMarten MD (1955 p332) Local doctor that does not like Lutrans.

Eli ThrælWesle (1965 p332) Solicitor for Angus. [OE *þræl* [pron 'thral'] 'thrall' plus OE *wesle* 'weasle']

Whippet and Siamese (1986 p335) Two runaways of dubious character.

Samantha FærFyxe (1964 p343) Jess' younger sister, estranged. [OE *fær* 'sudden', 'fearful', 'danger', 'calamity', etc. plus OE *fyxe* 'vixen']

Judge Morris StoBrocc (1933 p349) Local judge of Otterstow. [Scots *stob* 'thorn', 'stake', 'fence post', 'a prickle', 'spike', 'stout thickset man']

Vicar Mary Sweep (1950 p349) Local vicar of Otterstow.

Stig (1980 p378) A rapper.

Malcom and Nance (1975 p381) Two campers that know good weed when they see it.

Inspector Great Dane (1950 p417) Newburg police Chief Inspector.

Alice (mid-century? p464) A kindly street person.

Father Gabriel (1939 p500) A priest of a very rural church.

Dianne Green (1955 p532) Steve's mother.

Ian Green (1952 p532) Steve's father.

Chris FærFox (1996 p569) One of Samantha FærFyxe's Kits. [OE *fær* 'sudden', 'fearful', 'danger', 'calamity', etc.]

Amos BenBrocc (1993 p569) A very patient Badger. [Scots *ben* 'mountain']

Inspector Bulldog (1960 p588) Newburg police inspector.

Doctor Alex Martin (1955 p594) Doctor of Newburg.

Katherine Finlgel (1968 p600) Johnny's soon-to-be girlfriend/business partner. [OE *fin* 'heap', 'pile']

Vicky Proudfoot (1933 p619) Evangeline Proudfoot's grandmother.

Uncle Ernie (1935 p621) Evangeline Proudfoot's Uncle

Bertram Proudfoot (1930 p625) Evangeline Proudfoot's grandfather.

Marc (1950 p632) A man who doesn't want to kill a horse.

An unnamed virago (1952 p632) Marc's wife, who wants to kill a horse.

A raven (1982 p632) A rather clever raven.

Fauvel (1982 p632) A rather clever horse.