

bait and switch

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austen crowder

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foreword

BAIT AND SWITCH STARTED AS A SHORT STORY INSPIRED BY *WHO FRAMED ROGER Rabbit*. I won't deny the connection; in fact, I revel in the idea that this derivation of the "Toon versus Human" mechanic is actually seeing the pages of a printed book. I'd be lying if I said that typing those words into the same sentence felt a little strange, but here we are, right? I wrote the book, and you bought the book, and we're now both in this crazy little head-game together.

In a sense, I consider the entire novel an homage to the final scene of the source material. Judge, a closeted toon, is destroyed by the toon-destroying dip he created, and over his thoroughly melted body the director stages the final scene. A cast of cartoon characters that could only be described as the Warner Brothers/Disney answer to "We are the World" gather at the edge of the Dip, singing "Smile, Darn You, Smile!" with their arms slung around each others' shoulders. It's supposed to be a happy scene: the villain is dead, Valiant gains his revenge, and Roger Rabbit gets his girl Jessica. Fade to credits, and the family goes home happy.

For me, however, the ending always felt bittersweet. I always felt sad for the Judge: his self-denial led him to psychopathy, murder, and ultimately his downfall. In the back of my head – that dark, dank, moldy place where the stories come from – I wondered, "What would have happened if someone snapped him out of it before things got so bad?" If nothing else, I could simply leave well enough alone and introduce this as "a story for Judges everywhere", but that wouldn't entirely encapsulate what this book is about.

While the characters of the novel played on the page, the real me was a deeply closeted girl hiding in the dorm halls, classrooms, and social circles of one of two all-male colleges left in the country. I participated in the LGBT group on campus as an “ally” and got involved in a few of the group’s events on campus. Despite having great friends, a happy-go-lucky attitude, and a hand in many of the events that took place on campus, nobody really knew me. That is to say, nobody knew me as she. A few knew what I wanted to do, and of those that knew I made sure to constantly downplay my condition as much as possible. It was “just for fun”, or “just being androgynous”, or “just for *Rocky Horror* shows”. Pay no attention to the girl behind the curtain.

One of my good friends at Wabash, Denis Farr, once had a tee-shirt commissioned on the issue. On the front, the shirt asked, “Why do gay men go to Wabash?” On the back, its answer: “Plenty of closet space.” Such was my Wabash life. I shared certain parts of my feelings with certain people, always worried that they would eventually compare notes on my thoughts, eventually figure out that I wasn’t just a flamboyant straight man, or, for that matter, that I wasn’t even a man at all. I was paranoid and terrified that someone would figure out just how much of a lie I was living.

I wrote a lot of fiction, mostly painting transgender people as a sort of freakish, straw-man enemy, my own toons waiting for the Dip. (I was an odd duck.) I posted the stories to friends on the Internet, knowing that they were too far away from my day-to-day life to share my self-defined “dark” secrets with the people around me. When *Bait and Switch* started forming in my head, I convinced everyone around me that I was simply writing about the gay rights clashes I had seen in the news and on campus. At the time, I was a pretty decent liar, as far as the closet was concerned, and nobody really batted an eye.

The novel started as a way to talk through these feelings without attracting too many questions about my own personal closet. In the world of off-the-wall fiction a writer can be surprisingly honest about their emotions. Pulling away the real-world context allows the reader and the writer to interact on a level emotional playing field, where difficult issues can be explored and expressed without triggering antagonistic reactions, or probing questions of “what’s really going on inside your head?”—which, for a closeted girl at an all-male college, was just too much honesty to handle. In the world of the outlandish and absurd, the characters are stripped of preconception and reduced to their most basic denominator: people, with problems, looking for solutions.

For me, it was a way to say what I couldn’t bring myself to say out loud: the closet is a terrible, demeaning place to be.

This story isn’t just about the Judges of the world, or the closets we live in. It’s about the family of Judges, and the friends of Judges, and the judges of Judges, and the passersby of Judges, all trying to get into the head of a closeted person. We, the closet-dwellers past and present, all have our reasons, and while they aren’t always the most thought-out reactions in the history of human interaction they are built on seemingly solid emotional grounds. We don’t think we have a good choice to make; hence, we justify not making any choice at all.

And for those still holed up in that dank, musty, smelly place, there is always hope. The weather outside isn't always sunny, but it beats hiding in the shadows most any day of the week. Trust me; I know.

THE FUR GROWING ON FENTON'S BELLY SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN INTERESTING at all, but his rabbit friend Benny pored over it anyway.

They took all the precautions they usually took when dealing with Fenton's issues; they rented a fishing boat at the Lakeside Ink wharf and motored out until the bustle of Lakeside pedestrian traffic died away. Then they cast fishing poles and left them in holders, just in case someone was watching by binoculars. Nothing was too safe, especially when Fenton's father Daniel was standing at the entrance to Lakeside Ink, flanked by riot police, his words so hot with vitriol that the toons were screaming back.

Only then did Fenton Cobbler dare to lift his shirt, showing the small patch of ink-and-paint fur that fluffed around his bellybutton. "I just don't know what to think," Fenton said. "I mean, it's *there*, but it's not really that big. Maybe it will go down."

"Look. I *told* you that it's getting bigger. See? Three inches. That's twice as big as it was last week. Accept it, Fox. You are coming out."

Fox was just a made-up name, mind you. Fenton wasn't a Fox, nor was he a toon. He was just a teenage boy who happened to have a friend who, for whatever reason, ended up becoming a toon. It was an innocent enough mistake. Anyone could have made the same choice and ended up the same way. But best friends never stopped being best friends, even if one of them turned into a bunny, and they stayed together even when the other friend was starting to grow his own fur.

"Dad is going to disown me," Fenton said. He looked to the too-pretty sky

and let out a long, exacerbated groan. It wasn't supposed to turn out this way at all. Sure, he liked Benny, but becoming a toon just was not possible. It *couldn't* be possible.

"Then I'll take you in. I've always wanted a comic partner; too bad I've been waiting for you."

"You'll have to keep waiting," Fenton said. He prodded the ink-and-paint fur with a finger and swore under his breath. "I don't swing that way. This is just a phase."

"Eh." Benny shrugged. Downplay had always been his strong suit. "It's not *our fault* that your dad is a Realist, is it?"

Fenton made himself busy reeling in a fishing pole. "It's not *your tail* that'd be in hot water if he found out about us." The water rippled in all directions. When another boat came close they switched on the engine and idled back toward the shore.

"You're too uptight," Benny said. His pink nose wriggled as he considered it. "Could you consider relaxing and just enjoying your change? I'm betting on fox, myself. Though the colorings could go collie. I've been mistaken before."

"This isn't happening."

Benny's ears smoothed against his head as he said, "It's a good color for you, Fox. Shy, reserved, but not too much so. The toon life is gonna be good to you – I'm sure of it."

"No way." Fenton grabbed at the ink-and-paint fur and gave it a tug. "I was careful. I washed up every time I went back home. I dated real girls. I acted like a Realist."

His fuzzy paw felt soft on Fenton's shoulder. The boy knew he shouldn't have liked it, but the paw did make him feel better. "It wouldn't have mattered if you were a boy in a bubble – these things happen. And it's no big deal."

"I don't want to be a toon," Fenton blurted. He pulled at the fur, pinched it, and rolled it in his hands. It shimmered in the sunlight, caught reflections from the ink-and-paint lake below. "I can't be a toon. *I can't be a toon.*"

"You're a little past the denial phase," Benny said, chuckling. He licked his buckteeth and gave his friend's shoulder a good, long rub. "This is more than a little fur, Fox. Try to deny it all you want, but you know it's there. Deep down in that twisted brain of yours there's a voice screaming 'Go, go, go!' and shaking its foam finger for that fourth-and-inches play. I can see it in your eyes—"

They stopped talking when they heard Daniel Cobbler on the loudspeaker. "Dad," Fenton said. "Just what I needed to hear."

The toons of Lakeside were none too happy to hear the sound, either. They stopped almost in unison and flashed long, open-mouthed frowns toward the main node of town, a connecting point between the real world and the toon world. There Daniel Cobbler stood, loudspeaker in hand, riot police at his feet. "Realization classes begin tomorrow," he said, his voice calm and gentle, welcoming the toons to cross the line. "All costs are covered by Realist supporters. Come back to the real world, my friends. We don't hate you. We just dislike the life you've chosen."

The crowd screamed back. Benny and Fenton, knowing better than to step

into a riot ready to bust loose, returned their boat and slipped into the back alleys of Lakeside. They were bright back alleys, painted in ruddy browns and speckled reds. Wise toons were ducking into these little cubby-holes by the dozen, breathing sighs of relief while Daniel Cobbler droned on and on through the main node into town.

“I lost my wife to this problem,” he said into the bullhorn. The sound of a hundred marching feet echoed through the town. Smart vendors were already putting out bandages and bottled water for quick sale. Back entrances to the Real world were opened for rental. Police – real police – filtered through the back alley, nightsticks and cuffs in hand, a look of steeled determination on their faces.

And through it all Daniel Cobbler kept talking.

“I’d love to throw a brick at that man,” Benny said. “No offense to you, of course.”

“None taken.”

They paid a vendor a twenty and were led to a back wall. It wasn’t a perfect solution by any means, but it’d at least give Fenton a running start to make it home before his father. “He’ll probably get a handful of toons arrested before he heads out,” Benny said. “He always does.”

“I know. He’ll probably gloat about it, too. No offense, of course.”

Benny ignored the comment. “Just be sure you tuck in your shirt, okay? If you’re not lucky, the fur will be gone by the end of the week.”

“And if I’m lucky?”

“We’ll just have to see what becomes of you,” Benny said. He tugged at his ears and added, “If you get my drift.”

IT SEEMED LIKE THE ENTIRE CITY OF QUOTA WAS GRILLING OUT WHEN FENTON pulled his bike up onto the porch. The house was empty and the lights off – Dad worked late – but from every other backyard came the smell of charcoal-fired burgers. He brushed off ink-and-paint grime before anyone could notice; despite all his attempts to get the flecks of dust and water spots off his shirt, it wouldn’t stop glowing. He should have expected it; all toon stuff glowed faintly when painted in Real light. He had a whole pile of ink-and-paint stained shirts hidden at the back of his closet from his previous visits; they made good work shirts after he had a chance to wash out the cartoon sheen. He wore an undershirt on most days, just in case he needed to make a quick change.

“Welcome back,” a voice boomed from the far stairwell. His brother Tom came downstairs in a wife-beater shirt and athletic shorts, stocky and imposing as ever. His hair was greasy from spending all day in bed, eyes bleary from too many movies. “Long day at the Lakeside, hmm?”

“Yeah.” Fenton walked toward his downstairs room, careful to keep the shirt tucked tightly under his arm. “You missed it, Tom; there was a big riot this afternoon.”

“You’re still hanging out with that Benny guy?” He laughed. “Toon. Rabbit. Whatever the heck he is now.”

“You used to hang with him, too.”

“Used to.”

“How was your day?” Fenton flipped his shirt in the air; a little bits of glowing, ink-and-paint dust sprinkled onto the floor like glitter. “I mean, I’m sure you had a good time smoking and drinking with the McClatcheys last night. What was what was the special of the day – bathtub gin?”

“Martinis – top shelf. Nathan raided his mom’s cabinet.” It was an uneasy truce, their relationship. Not six months ago Fenton had walked home in a red toon tee-shirt Benny gave to him. No one was supposed to be home. No one should have seen him. But, sure enough, Tom was on the back porch, drinking and smoking a blunt with his friends. Their eyes met. No words were exchanged. They just knew that, no matter what one might have thought about the other’s actions, nothing could ever be said to Dad.

Of course, pot-shots were still in-bounds, so long as Dad wasn’t around. Tom cradled his head in one hand and groaned. “Yeah. It was a rough day. Dad thinks it’s just a migraine.”

“Did he catch a whiff of you?” Fenton’s face scrunched in revulsion. “You smell like pine nuts and oregano.”

“Pot.” Tom shrugged. “Bill has his plant out in his dad’s forest. Pretty good stuff. And no, he was too busy putting together his speech to notice.”

“Did you ever think about showering?” Fenton laughed and shook his head. “Sometimes you amaze me.”

“And you amaze me!” He sounded just like his father when he said it: jovial, sarcastic, and with just the right amount of shit-eating smile to drive the point home. “Damn toons and their stupid-ass ink-and-paint world. Every day those they brainwash another damned victim, turn ‘em toon faster than we can save ‘em. But you just keep going back!”

“Whatever.”

“Whatever,” Tom said.

Fenton sat down at the kitchen table, ink-and-paint stained shirt in his hand. Spread out on the oak table were yellowed newspaper clippings like bathroom tile. Teens and twenty-somethings dotted the headlines, all in various stages of transition between human and toon. One sported a tail held high, like a badge of honor; another half-heartedly covered an ink-and-paint blemish with a neck scarf and shied from the camera; one simply stared back at the camera as if to say “What am I supposed to do now?” Every image was circled, a name and address affixed. They would each receive a packet of information from the Realists, complete with ink-and-paint removal treatment options, reasons why turning toon was morally, ethically, and professionally wrong for any human being to undertake. Par for the course for the Realist movement.

Toon-bashing was part of their daily ritual. It was the dinner conversation, the house parties, the friends of the family, the protest signs stowed in every hall closet. Defending the culture was no small job; without Mom around to help, fighting the good fight had to be a family effort. Everyone helped. No one quit.

Fenton thumbed through the pictures. There were at least a half-dozen in the pile who went to his school at some point of time, back before they changed. Good friends. Casual acquaintances. He wondered if they started with a little belly-patch as well.

Tom moseyed through the living room as his brother flipped through the clippings. That was Tom's way: moseying. He'd mosey from room to room, heel-toe, heel-toe, humming some strange tune as he moved. He'd count tiles or wood paneling, careful to keep his strides limited to one step per four floor tiles, or five strides to cross the living room from corner to corner. He'd make patterns in the tile with his steps: one left and two backward, two left and one forward. It was a slow, methodical rhythm that eventually drove anyone else in the room out of their minds.

"My sources say you two are inseparable." He paused. "You and Benny, that is."

"Your sources?"

"I have friends who turned toon." Tom shrugged. "They talk to me every once in a while, tell me about what's going on around Lakeside."

"Benny is a good friend of mine," Fenton said. "That never changed. Nothing really changed."

He looked to another frame on the wall. This one held a page of a biology textbook. A single paragraph had been circled a half dozen times with a dark red china pencil. "Ever listen to your biology teacher?"

His dad had hung the picture when the Realist movement had just started, when scientists had just started to take notice. There, written in black and white, was the be-all end-all reason that toons were so dangerous to real life. "They're not alive – I know. I've heard it all before."

Tom shook his head, chuckling. "Those toons don't eat, don't sleep, don't breathe. Doesn't that strike you as the least bit strange? First they're freed of the most basic laws of survival, then they start fighting for more rights, then they change the old standards of living. What's next? They're not human, not animal, not technically *alive*... Any way you slice it they're an abomination that will tear the fabric of society apart. How far will it go?" Canned rhetoric. Fenton recognized it from a Realist pamphlet he helped spell-check a few months back.

"I don't care. Benny is still a nice guy... rabbit... toon... whatever you want to call him." Fenton looked at the floor trim and tried to shuffle toward the door.

But Tom wouldn't let up. He jabbed a finger into Fenton's shoulder and said, "I'm serious about this; stay away from the bunny. He's bad news."

"Thanks for the advice."

"I'm serious. And I'm not serious that often." Tom jabbed hard at his brother's chest so hard that his shirt lifted. For a single, terrified moment, Fenton thought his shirt had rode up on his belly, showing the little patch of brown.

He crunched over and tried to hide it. "Stomach pains," he explained, and Tom shrugged.

"Dad knows about how much you liked Benny," Tom added. The same old bait. Dad can help. Dad can make Benny better.

And, as if on cue, his father pounded on the door, cutting the sermon short. "Give me a hand!" he yelled to his sons. Tom ran to the door. In a state of panic Fenton sprinted upstairs and tossed his ink-and-paint shirt into the hamper. Before he went back downstairs he shuffled clothing around until there wasn't a single hint of glowing dust left in his closet.

DANIEL COBBLER SERVED CHINESE TAKEOUT TO HIS SONS THAT NIGHT.

This was very much not his style; Daniel never hit the Hong Kong Inn on the way back home. It was expensive, and with the old man's acid reflux he was better off drinking a cup of Drano than chowing down on MSG-and-red-sauce pork from the Inn. Chinese food was always reserved for a special occasion.

The business jacket was already off and hanging from a coat rack near the door, but even without the jacket Daniel Cobbler looked sharp. The sleeves were precisely rolled to the elbows, his tie perfectly straight. He wore his hair plainly, combing along the part with no hair gel. Machinist. Architect. Smart and conservative, foot-in-the-door type of guy that loved his kids too much and his principles even more. He never really smiled or laughed much, but when he was happy you could tell; it was in the young smile that dimpled his salt-and-pepper beard at the cheeks; the flash of teeth that weren't quite white, but still looked natural; the sparkle in his blue eyes when he opened his mouth to speak.

"We're winning, Fenton," Daniel said. Fenton stifled a sigh when his dad pulled small envelope from his front pocket. "This showed up at the campaign center today."

"A bill?" Tom asked. He sat shoveling heaps of fried rice into his mouth – just like any tough guy jock worth his salt. His portions and mannerisms made Fenton look small, sickly, weak. Dad knew it; Tom knew it; Fenton knew it. His mom would have a fit if she saw how things were turning up, but she was far, far away, and far too forgotten to be bothered.

Daniel put down his fork when he spoke – a force of habit from attending to many black-tie consultations. "The portable hole legislation goes to a vote tomorrow. We're gonna stop those toons before they get out of control, and there's not a thing they can do to stop us!" That was the Realist strategy. The complex problem was impossible to fix; toons existed, people sometimes turned into toons, and trying to do anything about the toon world would push toons out of everyday human interaction.

The simple problem, of course, was that toon antics were unsightly in the real world. The simple problem had a simple solution: make toon antics illegal.

The Realists liked to keep things simple.

"They keep pushing for more rights," his dad continued. "They've pushed and pushed and we're not giving another inch. They can have their own place. Fine by me, so long as they stay out of my face. But we're going to take our world back."

It wouldn't bring Mom back, Fenton thought to himself. No one could have changed her mind. No words would have stopped her from falling to her death from a toon cliff. But Daniel refused to listen. "I guess you gotta do what you gotta do," Fenton said, his eyes focused on a seam in the oak table. That was the secret: Dad could never understand if he didn't try to understand.

"That's right." Dad clapped his son on the back. Fenton could see memories of Mom sparkling in Daniel's eyes. It was always there when he got onto his high horse about toons. "They're trying to organize over there in that toon world. Have you heard anything about that? Ludicrous!"

"Not really." Playing dumb was his first line of defense when it came to dealing

with Dad. Better to have his father talking up a storm about something he cared about than to answer a thousand questions a dad should be asking. What did you do today? Who were you with? What's that sparkle in your eye? But Fenton just let his father ramble and ramble until nothing important was said at all.

And, as if on cue, Daniel leaned back in his chair to explain. "They want to work toward representation. Drawing up district lines and the whole nine yards. They want senators. Goddamn senators!"

Tom swallowed and pointed his fork towards Fenton. "We don't owe them anything. They're not even alive, really. Ain't that right, Fenton?"

Fenton glared at his brother. "Don't do this," he said with his eyes.

Tom just smiled and continued. "I mean, they don't eat and they don't drink and they can't reproduce. That's three strikes against 'em. Nonliving. Why should we give 'em any representation?"

Daniel nodded to his son. "It makes 'em crazy, I tell you. Take away those basic human instincts and their minds just don't know what to do. It goes against every natural law!"

"But they're still people," Fenton countered. He was holding his fork in his right hand. The tines shook. He would have brought his left hand to support the fork, if only it weren't busy pulling down his shirttail to cover the brown spot of fur on his belly. He wondered if he was sweating or not. "I mean, they were. Once."

Dad laughed his usual, dismissive laugh. There would be no more opposition. "I'm glad that you're looking at both sides, Fenton, but I've heard all these excuses before. They don't hold water. Toons aren't caused by genetics, or by fate, or by intervention of a higher power; they're made by choice. It's the only explanation that makes sense."

Fenton nodded and looked down to his plate. Best to just let Dad continue talking and hope that the brown spot on his belly never showed through. "Just think about it, boys. After this vote tomorrow the world will be sane for humans again. Then we can open the Rehab Centers' doors to those toons—really open 'em this time—and give 'em a chance to make good on the mistakes they made going to the ink-and-paint world."

"And that'll work?"

"There's already a half-dozen toons reintegrating with normal society. It's only a matter of time before their bodies turn back the clock on the physical changes. We've seen it happen before." He looked at his son with a quizzical arch to his brow. "Are you okay, Fenton? You seem to be really worried about all this."

"Nah." He shook his head and tried to steady his fork. "I was just thinking about seeing all my friends again when they return to normal."

His dad clapped him on the shoulder. It was a warm, strong grasp, and the fingers found familiar places on his collarbone. "It'll work. Trust me on this one, buddy. You'll be hanging out with your old crowd sooner than you think. We can cure each and every last one of them."

Fenton tried to smile, to sell the lie. "They just need to see the light."

It wasn't his problem, he would tell himself. He wasn't a toon. He could stop going to the pocket any day he wanted to, and no one would poke fun at him.

His world was out here, out in the land of reality and normalcy, where the laws of physics were written in stone and the scenery was always dull, devoid of the brightness that the toon world had in spades. He could forget about toons, learn to love sports, become a mall rat, and maybe learn to drink. It wouldn't be hard at all to play the part.

No. Not hard at all. This wasn't his problem.

"Now you're getting it!" His dad snapped his fingers and gave him a thumbs-up sign. Fenton let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. "You just might learn something from your old man after all. And I thought for *sure* you'd end up with your mom's stubborn attitude!"

TEN YEARS AGO, NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE BEEN A PROBLEM FOR FENTON. There were no toons, no Realists campaigns, no nothing. There were only vast expanses of unclaimed land that just so happened to look like someone painted it by hand.

They weren't found by disciplined science, or crazy explorers, or by the grace of some generous government donation. It occurred, as many great advances occur, as a result of extraordinary irony. And, since no irony is larger than that of the fraternity house, it happened to one Vincent Tran, pledged to the now-defunct Kappa-Double-Oh-Psi chapter of Chi-Pi, nicknamed Wally.

Wally was a do-good pleaser kind of pledge, the one who would never say no to the actives no matter the question. One day, the Chi-Pi actives decided to paint a black hole on a wall that hadn't been cleaned in three years. It took a few coats on the count that the wall was crumbling in many places, but by the time they had run out of paint the hole looked decent enough. "Wally!" they screamed. Wally stood to attention. "Run through it!" He did so, running headfirst and with his eyes closed.

Then, for whatever reason, the pledge missed the wall and stumbled into a lake where the coral played like conga drums and the fish all sang in key. The active members then proceeded to peel the paint off the wall and make millions as the very first entrepreneurs of the portable hole.

Wally, on the other hand, was never seen again.

Many scientists have attributed the accidental development of hole paint to the caked-on deposits of everything-you-don't-want-to-know-about on the Chi-Pi fraternity wall. Some even postulate that the answer to all problems, medicinal and physical, could be fixed by this miracle crust if only fraternity guys were motivated enough to do more than drink and party.

LATER THAT NIGHT, LONG AFTER DANIEL COBBLER CLOSED UP HIS OFFICE and Tom was snoring in his bed, Fenton sneaked into the office. The clock on the wall struck three as he booted up the computer there. He switched off the desktop speakers and situated himself so that the chair wouldn't squeak. When Fenton surfed the internet no precaution was too great. The very thought of being discovered put bile in the back of his throat.

He couldn't sleep. All night long he tossed and turned, too cold with only the sheet, too hot with the comforter, lumps in the pillow, night-lights from

his bathroom. A thousand unanswered questions assaulted him, pounded him, and kept his brain churning.

He had to see what was out there.

The computer monitor made a loud “boom” as it degaussed; Fenton’s heart pounded out of his chest as the sound echoed through the house. Before anyone could walk into the living room he pulled up the internet and typed in a Realist website. Then he opened a smaller, less visible browser window below and typed in his real search.

He scanned the stairs one last time before turning to the matter at hand. One finger always rested on the key to switch windows; if he heard even the slightest sound, he’d swap to the Realist website and say he couldn’t sleep until he figured out the Realist movement’s founder.

Fenton pulled out a small piece of paper. It glowed an ink-and-paint glow; Benny had slipped his personal website Fenton earlier in the day. “You’re ready for it,” the rabbit told him. It was obviously a conversion tool, just like the ones Tom and his dad told him about. It would have been best to just rip it up and get on with life. Yet he kept it on him all the day long, meaning to trash it later.

And here he was, typing the forbidden URL into his browser window, wondering what waited for him on the other side.

The page couldn’t load fast enough for Fenton; he switched over to the Realist website while he waited and tried to make himself look busy. Another scan of the stairwell, a deep breath, and a shiver later the boy clicked the toon link on his toolbar.

Even on the computer the toon-made site made the room seem bright and sunny. The colors on screen brought the sparkle of ink-and-paint into the living room. “Photo Album” flashed in rainbow colors across the top of the page, bracketed on either side by big cartoon bunny pictures. Below the title, row after row of thumbnails waited for a click of the mouse.

The pictures were of Benny in different stages of his transition. On one hand the pictures held the appeal of a documentary; as the viewer skimmed down the page Benny’s transformation became more apparent. First it was a patch of fur on the arm. Next, the beginnings of a tail at seven days. A long string of pictures portrayed the reshaping of the face, taken in a two-day time span. Then a clickable movie showed his ears sprouting up in time-lapse like green onions pushing out from the ground. Fenton had never seen all the stages of a toon transition in one place before, and up until that point he had never given it that much thought.

For a moment he was even excited to go through the process for himself.

The thought hit him all at once, in a rush of whimsy. Before he could consider it he was wanting to be in Benny’s shoes. He pushed the thought from his mind as nothing more than silly fantasy; it just wasn’t going to happen to him. He couldn’t let it happen to him. He was better than a toon: that’s what his dad always told him.

Still the thought persisted. He closed his eyes, touched his belly, and envisioned the fur spreading, his head sick with the rush that every toon talked about when they finished their transformation....

No. He closed his eyes and shook his head. This wasn't him at all! It couldn't be. Silly urges; he fought them back down with a snide little chuckle. To think he would even *consider* being a toon! How ludicrous! He liked the ink-and-paint people, sure, but actually being one simply was a stupid thing to think about.

"I'm ready," he whispered.

"What was that?"

He nearly jumped out of his skin while he pulled his shirt back over the fur. Daniel Cobbler tilted his head to one side as he looked at his son, one eyebrow raised quizzically. Without thinking about how it may look Fenton jabbed the "switch window" key and spun around to face his dad.

"Whoa," Fenton's dad gasped. "You okay there, partner? Looks like you've seen a ghost."

Fenton caught his breath and covered his belly before answering. "I'm fine. You just spooked me, that's all."

"Where are you ready for? Looks important."

"Oh that?" He laughed as best he could. "It's nothing. I was just reading over a few pieces of Realist literature, is all. Was thinking about getting people ready for the Rehab Centers."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there, eh?" He smiled and gave his son an approving eye. "Get some sleep, buddy; it's gonna be a long day tomorrow; we've got a lot of work to do!"

Before his dad could think twice about coming closer Fenton switched off the computer and started toward the stairway with wobbly legs, careful to keep his shirt pulled down over his ink-and-paint belly.

2

FENTON DIDN'T EVEN SLEEP THAT NIGHT; HE SLIPPED OUT OF THE HOUSE AND made his way to Military Park. A phone call later, Benny had a portable hole opened at the Second Coming Picnic Shelter. "You owe me, Fox," the rabbit said. Fenton shrugged and locked his bike to one of the shelter's poles.

"Quit calling me Fox."

It was all force of habit.

The rabbit smiled wide and patted his friend on the shoulder. "Jeez! You'd think I was calling you a Nazi or something. It's just something I thought you'd enjoy hearing. There's no shame in being a toon."

"But there is shame, and fear, and loathing. I don't know how you do it every day."

He shrugged. They enjoyed the cartoon night sky in silence for a while. At one point the area had been an ink-and-paint extension of Military Park, plenty of campgrounds and pools and nighttime skies that swirled with milky stars. That was before people started turning toon, of course – before the nodes shut down and Real people started insisting on being Real at all times.

They plopped down on a patch of grass and looked to the sky. Benny finally spoke: "You're worrying too much about it, I think. After all, the fear and loathing doesn't affect you, now does it?"

"But it affects my friends." Fenton grabbed at some ink-and-paint grass and tossed it in the air, only to watch it waft down the hill in slow, graceful eddies.

"So you take an academic interest in the Realist cause, big deal. I'd expect it, considering who your father is. That doesn't change anything for me." The rabbit

flipped his ears onto a patch of clover. “What *does* say something to me is that you keep coming back.”

“You’ve always been a good friend to me, Benny; we’ve already been over that. Nothing changed when you turned toon.”

Benny flashed his big buck teeth in a bright smile. “I didn’t have a choice coming here, but now that I am here it’s the right place for me. For the first time I can actually relax and be myself! Isn’t there something to be said for that?” He shook his head and heaved a sigh. “Not that I wanted to be here when things started; I was sitting in my mom’s house when my ears came in. I freaked out, called 9-1-1, everything. I didn’t want to be a toon.”

“Okay, I give.” Fenton sighed and finished the story for his friend: “But here you are, happier than you ever dreamed possible.”

“Darn straight.” He wagged his paw in Fenton’s direction. “That’s the problem with your attitude, Fox; you just can’t let yourself see the facts right in front of your nose if they’d disagree with that Daniel Cobbler guy you live with.”

“I guess.”

“Not that toon life is perfect,” Benny added. “No more eating. No more... ah...”

“Yeah,” Fenton finished for him. “Kinda sucks when you can’t get any.”

“Don’t even have the parts for it anymore.” Chuckling, the rabbit pointed to his smooth front. “I forget what it was like – not like I had the chance to score before I changed, but I had enough of an idea to know what I was missing. Nowadays it’s just sort of... I don’t know. Alien, I guess; there isn’t any better way to put it.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

The rabbit shrugged. “Tradeoffs. You aren’t bothered by living a lie, I’m not bothered by not getting horny. We each float our own boats, fox.”

“I’m not living a lie.”

Benny wouldn’t be satisfied with that answer, however. “And yet every time you come back you swear up and down that you won’t. You prefer to window shop and browse the stock – look, but don’t touch. But deep down you want this place.”

“Okay.”

“Okay what?” the rabbit tilted an ear toward his friend and craned his neck to listen.

There was a pause as Fenton took a deep breath and let it out his nose. He mumbled, “I can’t believe I’m doing this.” Then he turned to his rabbit friend with a defeated look in his eyes. “You just, maybe, might have half a point.”

“Do tell.”

Fenton flushed. “Well... I do kind of... I mean, it’s not a big thing, but...”

“Come on, spit it out.”

“I like being called Fox. When you call me that... well...” he lifted his shirt to show the fur, “it makes me feel like I belong. Even if that’s only in spirit.”

“I could always get you to fess up,” the rabbit said, smiling. “So you really do like it here. Good to hear you being honest, for once.”

“But I can get Realized if things go bad.”

“No.”

Fenny shook his head. “But the statistics don’t lie. Success stories are out there. Realized toons live good lives, too.”

Benny laughed. “They live a lie. You should see the number of ‘Realized’ toons that revert within the first year. It ain’t natural and it ain’t healthy, trying to change something that’s such a deep part of your psyche.”

“But it can be done.”

Benny didn’t answer.

“It *can* be done, right? We’ve both seen the statistics on it. All you have to do is be willing to make the change...”

“Look. I’ve seen all the literature and I’m just saying that statistics can lie. Just... trust me on this one, okay? Leave it alone.” Benny’s teeth chattered as he tried to get himself under control, his hands shaking, his arms quaking, his face twisted with memories left unsaid.

Fenton and Benny watched the night sky for what felt like hours, neither one willing to break the silence that separated them.

WHEN HE WENT BACK TO THE PICNIC SHELTER THAT NIGHT HE WASN’T alone.

It wasn’t an instant realization. She didn’t make herself known, after all; she hid behind the water fountain at the opposite side of the shelter, splashing cold well water on her face. It wasn’t until after Benny had said his good-byes and peeled away the portable hole that she decided to say anything at all:

“Hello!”

The sound made Fenton jump and let out a yelp. He hid his face and pulled his shirt down to his knees. “Who are you?”

Cassia took a step forward. “Just another traveler. That’s all. Don’t worry, hon. I’m not going to tell anybody.” Her face seemed to melt as she spoke; on it were the last vestiges of oversized anime eyes painted onto her face with bright, shimmering toon-paint. Her whole body glistened with the stuff: long, tedious strokes that covered her slinking arms and flowing legs with pale white streaks. When framed by the mottled browns and greens of the dark forest Fenton could have sworn she looked like an angel.

“You’re a toonpainter,” Fenton said, more out of reflex than anything else. They walked around Lakeside from time to time, regular-Joe people coated in shabby layers of bright-colored paint.

She let out a small chuckle that rang like angel bells in his ears. Then she wiped away the face to reveal dull skin and ruddy brown eyes. “Guilty. I have a couple of good friends in JANM that I like to visit from time to time. The clubs there are just amazing,” she added. Moment by moment her paint faded away, and Fenton realized that he was staring at a woman at least five years older than he was. (Paint had a funny way of taking away the years, he realized.) She put a hand on the top of his head and gave his hair a tussle. “What about you? You into anime?”

“Just old fashioned,” he said. A toe traced the contours of an exposed tree root. “I have a friend that lives near Lakeside.”

“Neat place.” a quick wipe down the arm and her slinky, angelic colors faded to pale, mottled, imperfect human skin. “I go there for the theater. It’s absolutely nuts. Never seen so many anvils in a single place in my life!”

“It’s pretty fun,” he mumbled. Cassia kept wiping away the paint with a rag that shimmered in the faint forest light.

“I usually have another friend that goes with me,” she said suddenly. “Nice boy – he goes in drag, but a nice boy nonetheless. Toon paint does amazing things, you know.” She laughed and flipped a few daubs of paint against a tree, white crystals that dribbled through the furrows of the bark. “You ever try it? Toonpainting, that is.”

“Not really,” Fenton said. He pulled down on his shirt as he spoke.

“You really should. It’s a little more difficult to swing anthro toons than anime bodies, what with all those stints for ears and tails and oversized shoes and all that – but I’ve seen some ‘painters do amazing things. I’m sure you could find someone in Clamptett Park that’d do you up nice.” She wiped away the last of the paint from her legs with a wan smile. “Or you could always try anime.”

“No thanks.”

“No biggie.” She put the rag in a duffel bag full of paints. “You’d make a nice catboy. Or a kitsune. Yes! A kitsune. You’d be such an *adorable fox!*”

Fenton blushed and looked away from Cassia.

“Come on now; it was a compliment.” She chuckled and gave him a nod. “Nothing wrong with the ink-and-paint world. Everything’s nicer there. Cleaner. More fashionable. Safer, even.”

“Safer?”

“Toons aren’t out for sex,” she said simply. “It’s more for women like me than you, I guess.”

“Right.” Fenton picked up his bike from the shelter and spun the cranks as he talked. “But it is nice to know.”

Cassia knew when to take a hint; without warning she snatched up her bag and zipped it tight. “Well, I’ve got third shift at the Gas n’ Go tonight. Better get going!” She pointed to her truck in the parking lot. “Want a ride?”

Fenton blanched. “Oh no,” he said. “Wouldn’t want to make you late.”

Cassia leaned in close, grinning. “Going home to your parents, then?”

He nodded.

“No offense taken.” She smiled and fished her keys from the duffel’s outside pocket. “I guess I’ll be seeing you around. You use this node often?”

“Pretty much.” There were only a certain number of connection points between the toon world and the real world. This node was barely travelled most days; Quota kept a tight lid on toons, what with the Realist movement working in full swing there. Not that Real people traveled there anymore; better to be safe than to risk becoming a toon.

“That makes two of us.” She smiled and offered her hand. “I guess that makes us travel buddies, eh?”

“I guess it does.” They shook hands. Cassia went to her car and Fenton biked the three miles home, alone, careful to take the long way around.

By the time he biked home the fur had crawled past his bellybutton. It ruffled

and whispered against his shirt to the wind. He impulsively reached down to touch it when he was alone on the road, tracing the outline where his skin gave way to soft, ink-and-paint fur that wafted and flowed over his fingers, but every time he turned a corner he was careful to cover it once again.

If anyone asked about the day he'd just talk about the local arcade. Sure. That'd do the trick. No one had to know any better.

But Fenton knew better.

THE GUYS WERE PLAYING POKER ON GREEN FELT SPLAYED OVER THE DINING room table. It was another lazy weekday night: from the sounds coming from the bedroom he knew that his friend Franklin was busy playing video games in his room, and Tom, just old enough to have a job worth gambling over, sat at one end of the poker table, a small stack of chips in one hand, five cards in the other. Fenton's father and his friend Chris drank beers that left slow white streaks of froth on their mustaches. But most importantly, sitting at the head of the table with blank, staring eyes....

"Fenton!" Daniel chirped. "Good to see you. Pizza's in the kitchen, if you want some."

He shut the door behind him and paused to brush his shirttail down over his fly. The fourth man at the table froze him in place. His eyes sparkled with a dull, half-painted glow that reminded Fenton of a dirt-riddled dusk. They were tired eyes, eyes that hid deep, dark smile lines gone slack for lack of laughter. When Fenton caught his gaze, nothing looked back at him.

"Oh!" Daniel put down his cards and stood from the chair. "Almost forgot the introductions. Your mom would've *killed* me!" He forced a laugh before continuing. "Fenton, this is Orville. Formerly Orville T. Otter – he's our first patient in the district's Realization program. Orville, my son Fenton."

"Pleasure to meet you." Orville nodded to the boy. Fenton tried not to blanch. Brown-and-black matte patches of fading toon paint mottled his face like rot. There was no handshake offered, mostly because Orville's paws were flaking away: a claw here, a finger-webbing there, a dark, black pad that flecked to the table like caked-on mud. He faked a smile and a long streak of paint fell to the table where, brittle in the crisp, dry air, it snapped in two.

Fenton wondered, idly, if toons could sense other toons in the making. Then he shook off the thought before he could get too paranoid.

Daniel took his seat again. "Chris wanted to bring him to a poker night, just to get him out of the Center. It must be *hard*, coming back to the real world. Takes some real guts."

Chris nodded and turned to face Fenton. "He's just learning how to eat solid food again. When he came to the center he was pretty far along: you hadn't eaten in... what, how long?"

"Three years," he said, his voice little more than a raspy whisper.

Chris gave him a pat on the shoulder. "You don't mind if we talk about it, right? I just wanted Fenton to know what's going on."

"It's fine."

"If you want me to stop, just say something."

“No, really. The boy needs to know.” Then Orville slowly, carefully put a saltine cracker into his mouth and began to chew, the action as mechanical as a wind-up doll that hasn’t been oiled in some time. Chris coached Orville through each step: first, put the food on the tongue; second, chew slowly; third, taste – never forget to taste, he would say – with every part of your tongue; finally, swallow, but only in manageable sizes. Real esophagus tracts didn’t squish and stretch, though Chris was a fully trained EMT in the common case that a toon didn’t realize the difference.

This was Chris’s job, of course: Realize the toons that wanted to be Realized. Once upon a time Chris had been a social worker making darn near minimum wage in a big city. He jumped at the offer to work in a rehab center in the suburbs – for the money they paid, he’d have been willing to turn people into most anything.

Not that Fenton could get mad at the man. This was the same Chris that, at one time, was the “uncle” he never really had: the scout leader, the troublemaker, the cool guest that always, always brought presents for him and Tom, no matter the occasion. Besides, if Chris hadn’t come to the town Fenton would never have met Franklin. Imagining his childhood without Franklin was much like trying to imagine a swimming pool without water – it just didn’t work.

Tom tapped the table with his knuckle to break the awkward silence hanging in the air. “Orville’s got balls,” he said. The half-otter managed to laugh at that one. “He’s gonna testify for an FDA hearing on Realization. Living proof, you know?”

“I’m working on the ‘living’ part,” Orville responded. “Slowly.”

Fenton tried to laugh it off, but the half-otter’s face kept his attention.

Then, just like that, Daniel Cobbler was all business. “The portable hole vote was postponed,” he said. “Minority party hem-hawed to buy an extra day. Happens all the time, apparently – the whole politics thing confuses the hell out of me either way.”

“Understandable.” Fenton’s feet were still glued to the entry’s rug. He hadn’t so much as budged an inch since he saw the toon-turned-human flaking out from below the ink and the paint.

“Sure you don’t want pizza?” Daniel pointed to the kitchen. “Good stuff: we got mushrooms and anchovies.”

“Yeah.” But no matter how hungry he was, he couldn’t bring himself to walk by that rotting corpse of ink, paint, and swallowed skin. He could only excuse himself up the stairs; it wasn’t until the otter was completely out of his sight that he could even begin to think again.

Seeing Franklin sitting on the foot of the bed made Fenton breathe easy. “You see that Orville guy?” he asked. He threw a controller at his friend and restarted the game; soon enough they were running through one of their favorite levels and killing everything in sight. “Ho-ly crap. Scary, huh?”

“You could say that.” Fenton shuddered to even think about the man fading in from under ink-and-paint skin. “Did he look dead to you?”

“Yeah.” Franklin shrugged. “Dad brings home a lot of patients, but that guy’s the biggest case yet. Closest he’s come to Realizing a toon ever. It’s just....”

“Creepy?”

Franklin nodded. “Yeah. Creepy.” Fenton couldn’t even begin to count how many times he and Franklin had spent their day in front of this very same screen, holding the very same controllers, playing the very same games over and over again. If anything, this was one scene that would never change; no matter what, he would always have Franklin around, with or without Benny as a third wheel, with or without him becoming a toon. Playing video games in a bedroom: this was completely normal.

This was just fine until Fenton’s chest exploded into fur with a single, resounding “fwomp.” Sure enough, Fenton looked down and found that his tee-shirt had ballooned outward, coming to a point at the tip of his sternum. He clamped down on it, hard, and tried his best to keep playing.

Franklin didn’t even look. “What’s your deal, man? You look like the feds might break down the door at any time.”

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m always a little paranoid when I come back from seeing Benny. You know that.”

“Oh yeah. Your dad.” He paused the game and fell back onto the bed, groaning. “You know,” Franklin added, looking at the ceiling fan as he spoke, “I got nothing against ’em. Toons, that is. They want to do their thing, and that’s fine. The whole thing just... I don’t know.”

“Doesn’t sit right?” Fenton pulled at the hem of his shirt. The fur kept fluffing up, unabashed, forming ruffles in the tee-shirt.

“That’s it,” he said. “I mean, I wrestled one this year. Freestyle, you know. So long as you pay the association and show up with a red and blue singlet they’ll let you on the mat. My first draw of the day was this catboy – slinky, anime-looking catboy that mewed instead of grunting like everyone else on the mat. I felt *dirty* rolling around with that cat!” He shook his head. “I mean, it shouldn’t be a big deal and I know that, but I kept wondering what the cat was doing on the mat with me.”

Fenton nodded. Toonophobia; it came in many shapes and many sizes, and well-meaning people sometimes couldn’t help it. It didn’t matter if they saw toons as well-meaning people, or if they felt that toons should have equal rights; some people just couldn’t plain couldn’t stand being around toons. Natural reaction to something different, Fenton guessed. Fenton didn’t want to press the issue, what with his chest being so fluffy and all. “I think they’re putting restrictions into the rulebook this year. Something about requiring a pulse to step onto the mat.”

“Dude.” Franklin pointed at his friend’s belly. “You’ve got a little brown on you.”

And that’s when Fenton found out that wishful thinking was always different than the reality of things. Suddenly his mind clamped down hard, a trained reaction, a moment’s bravery hidden in shame. With a yelp he threw his arms down around his belly. “It’s nothing,” Fenton said, and he stood up from the bed to tuck his shirt back in.

“Nothing.” Franklin propped himself up on one arm and gave his friend a disproving glance. “Your chest’s all puffy, there’s a patch of brown on your hip, and you’re acting like a skittish little punk every time I ask you a question.” He

opened his arms to Fenton, pointing, inviting him to go on. “So I ask you again: what’s wrong?”

He blanched. Then he leaned close to whisper to Franklin. “Promise me it won’t leave this bedroom?”

“Fenton, I’m your friend.” He turned off the video game and situated himself on the bed to face his friend. “I’d take it to the grave if that’s what you wanted me to do.”

“Okay.” Fenton locked his bedroom door and nodded to his bathroom. “Come on. I’ll show you.” They slipped into his private bathroom, little more than a white closet with a shower stall, toilet, and sink. He turned on the vanity lights and stepped inside; Franklin stood at the bathroom door and watched. Their voices echoed off the barren bathroom walls, hollow, tinny, strange.

Fenton looked to his bedroom door one more time – just making sure it was locked – and then removed his shirt. Almost immediately the fur on his chest sprang to life. At the tip of his chest the whitest chest fur tussled and tossed into a single, fuzzy point. No matter how he stood he looked proud, noble, a fox-in-training. He moved and the fur shifted right along with him. He pushed down it and it sprang right back into place.

Franklin watched with wide, disbelieving eyes. “No way,” he said. “You painted. You had to have painted.”

“I’m afraid not.” Fenton turned to his friend. “It’s all real. Want to feel it?”

Franklin backed away. “No thanks. I’ll take your word for it.” He blew a stream of air between pursed lips. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Your dad will kill you if he finds out.”

“Or he’ll send me to your dad,” Fenton offered. “Then I’ll end up just like Orville.”

They both shuddered.

“Well, you look nice.” Franklin bit a lip. “I guess. For a developing toon, at least. This what you want?” He kicked at the nape of the carpet as he spoke. Fenton knew the signs: Franklin wasn’t happy about all this. That made two of them, at least.

“It’s what I’m getting,” Fenton replied. “Whether I like it or not. It just sort of... happened. Really. Just started the other day.”

“You going to tell him?”

“Eventually,” Fenton replied, and left it at that. He twiddled his chest fur with a finger as he spoke. “But this is a bad time. Later, once all this voting junk is out of the way. Then I’ll talk to him.”

“I see.” Franklin took a few steps backward and sank into the bed. “And... well... you’re not going to try and make me a toon, right?”

“No.” Fenton laughed. “I wouldn’t wish this on anybody.” He turned off the bathroom light and slipped into his closet. He returned wearing three tight tee-shirts. “Does that help with the chest fur?”

“A little.” Franklin pointed at his sternum. “If I didn’t know any better I’d ask questions about the lumps. Maybe you need to invest in some spandex undershirts.”

“Agreed.” He looked at himself in the mirror for a while longer, adjusted the shirts a tiny bit, and then, satisfied, turned back to his friend. “Look. I didn’t choose to be this way. It just happened. You understand that, right?”

Franklin nodded weakly.

Fenton put on a fourth shirt and tugged until the lump on his chest had gone down. “And remember our deal. You can’t tell anybody. Not yet. Right?”

“Right.”

He offered his hand to seal the deal, but Franklin didn’t dare touch him. Instead, his friend could only flash an uncomfortable smile and walk out the bedroom door, trying his best not to look disgusted.

HE DREAMED OF BENNY’S LAST DAY AS A HUMAN THAT NIGHT.

It was a recurring dream for him; no matter the week, and no matter the mood, Fenton could always rely on seeing Benny in his sleep. Sometimes he didn’t remember what happened, and sometimes he couldn’t quite recall the context, but he always knew when he had a Benny dream. There was a certain facial expression— a mixture of fear, excitement, dread — that had been ingrained in his mind ever since Benny threw pebbles at his window the day he left for Toontopia, long ears sloping in the wind, always looking over his shoulder in hopes that his father hadn’t followed him out.

It would happen anywhere, anyplace. He and Benny would be together doing whatever dream-people do, fishing or playing games or shooting the breeze on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Things were like they always had been; Benny was the old, smiling boy that Fenton knew in elementary school, complete with dorky red glasses, greasy black hair, and knocking little-boy knees. They’d laugh and play and tell old stories to one another for what felt like forever.

What happened next was always a toss-up. Sometimes Benny would just grow old; he and Fenton would go off to college, pick up girls in a frat house. Sometimes Benny would become a full-out rabbit and go skittering off into the woods, and Fenton would spend the rest of the dream chasing him down. Sometimes he’d start changing into a toon right then and there: for these nights, Benny would be laughing, smiling, but his eyes were always, always afraid.

But it always ended with the face.

This night, however, was different. As they ducked and dipped through the stands littering the amusement park’s streets Benny held onto Fenton’s wrist. He held and held and didn’t let go, even when his skin turned to white fur and his feet into flopping gunny-sacks of paws. No matter how much Fenton fought Benny held on tight, all the while smiling and flashing those fearful eyes at his best friend.

Fenton was repulsed, at first. The in-between stages of toon and human were less than appealing, when ink-and-paint would well into mottled skin pools like pimples that desperately needed popping. Fenton closed his eyes. He shuddered. He tried to look away.

Then he was jealous.

Benny kept laughing. Laughing! His life was coming to an end and he was laughing! Benny’s steps grew larger: first, a stutter, like he didn’t know what to

do; then, hops, graceful and marvelous, the kind that wrench the stomach and tickle on the way down. This was supposed to be a terrible thing, Fenton thought to himself. This wasn't supposed to be fun!

Then Benny yanked on his arm. There was no more Fenton and Benny. They were one in the dream, and suddenly Fenton was giggling something fierce as his stomach rode the hopping roller coaster, up and down, up and down, his toes barely touching concrete before he'd bound forward again. Each hop went a little further, left him weightless a little longer.

The ears came in quickly; one hop he had his normal, human ears, and the next he felt his new long ears lay flat against his head, the wind whipping around them like a fan scattering papers. Yes! He thought to himself. This is it! This is what matters! He closed his eyes and felt the spring air blowing through his fur, the way his ears caught the wind and made him cool. And, for the first split second of his dreaming life, he felt completely comfortable with who and what he was.

When he woke up that morning his fox ears had already started budding.

3

“SO MUCH FOR GETTING REAL,” BENNY SAID. HE FELT AT THE LUMPS ON FENTON’S head with gloved hands and a wan smile. “I think you’re terminal.”

“Terminal?” Fenton’s eyes were saucers.

“Yes. Terminal.” He patted his friend on the shoulder and smiled. “I’m terribly sorry, Fox. You’re becoming one of us.”

He rubbed his eyes and let out a long moan. They took shelter in The Perk, a café on the toon end of the Lakeside node. Before people started turning toon the place made brisk business on the tourism crowd – a trip to Lakeside made for a great weekday getaway. The local newspaper even printed Lakeside Ink coupon sheets right up to the day that the kids started turning toon and the fingers were pointed.

Benny went to the counter. The barista, a little anime girl with a cheeky, small-mouthed smile, was more than happy to give the up-and-coming toon a meal on the house. “Welcome home,” she spoke to him from behind the bar, and the words made Fenton’s head loll with dread.

“Well, at least take off some clothes and stay a while.” He handed the plate to Fenton, who nibbled at it like a last meal. Benny slid into a chair on the other side of the small, round table, his fur soaking up sunlight coming in from the window. “You look like a snowman in all that clothing. Can you at least show a little pride?”

“I don’t want people to see,” Fenton said, even as he removed the top two layers of his shirts. “There have already been... problems.”

“How cute, Fox! Who did you tell?” Benny leaned in close and draped an ear over his friend’s head. This sharing a secret to the rabbit; even in the sour mood Fenton still managed to smile.

“Franklin kind of... found out.” He waved his hands in the air to try and dismiss the thought. “He saw the chest fur come in last night and I let him know.”

“And?”

“He’s not happy about it.” Fenton sipped at the shake again; talking about it helped to calm him down. “He tried to help, but you could just tell. You remember what happened when he found out about you.”

“Yeah.” Benny’s face fell for a moment. “I remember.” It was a fight for the ages: Franklin, the wrestler who expected to go to college with his two best friends, only to discover that one of the three amigos wasn’t going to be there anymore; Benny, the play-it-cool boy who said that things wouldn’t change; Fenton, the innocent bystander, the hinge of the whole operation. Benny and Franklin slugged it out in the backyard for a full two minutes before anyone came out to stop them, and that was the end of that.

Outside, two mice splashed around in the lake. The water, clear and bright, caught the sun and kept it in emerald sparkles. It was such a *nice* day.

Fox fingered the buds on his head as he watched the mice at play. There wasn’t much to speak of yet; they felt like two large pimples on either side of his head. If he picked he could almost feel the inside of the ear hidden under his skull; with a little more exploration he could trace the outline of the ink-and-paint cartilage as it was forming. They’d be pretty ears, he knew: bright and brown and full of ink-and-paint splendor. Majestic. Cunning.

“How long?” he asked Benny.

Benny tapped his fingers on the table and hummed. “Dunno. It all depends: you have to think about body type, willingness to change, species, air temperature... could be as short as a few days, as long as a few weeks. But it will happen. Sometime.”

The mice, seeing Fenton staring out the window, waved to him. They laughed, asked him to come to the lake. The water looked cool. Inviting. But Fenton looked away.

Benny shrugged. “But there are more important issues at hand here. Like... Tank tops.”

Fenton put down his shake. “The hell?”

“We need to get you some.” Benny pointed to the fur seeping through Fenton’s collar. “Look at that plume, Fox! It’s marvelous. Why wouldn’t you want to show that off? I mean...” he ran a hand across his own arm, “I’ve got some decent fur, but that’s just... wow! You’re going to be a hell of a looker, Fox!”

Fenton shook his head. “No. I’m not going to be a looker. If my dad finds out about all this he’s going to kill me. Just think: Daniel Cobbler’s son just up and turns—”

Benny put a finger on his friend’s mouth. “Best not mention him here,” he said, and pointed to the rest of the café. Everyone watched them with quiet, surprised eyes, as if Fenton had just summoned a devil. The music scratched like vinyl before turning off.

"I see." They smiled at the café. The café smiled back. Then things picked up again.

"But anyway." He pointed to Fenton's chest. "Tank tops, Fox. We're going to buy you one today. Something green, maybe. Give you a little Robin Hood appeal. All that fur flowing over the top of an A-shirt'll look real good on you." He smiled. "So. You still having fun?"

Fenton caught a sidelong glance at the mice outside. "I guess. It's just that... well..."

"Well, what?"

"It's not fun and games anymore." He pulled at the fur on his chest as he said it. "I used to be able to go home after everything was said and done."

"So what?" Benny smiled and chucked him on the shoulder. "As long as you're enjoying it, no harm done."

"You know better—" Fenton began, but his jaw dropped into silence when she walked through the café door.

Cassia.

She was dressed up in toon paint and a sailor suit, but Fenton knew exactly who he was looking at. It was her smile: that half-cocked, innocent smile that melted hearts. "Look, don't touch," the eyes said, and she carried herself with the grace of a princess. Yep, Fenton knew her on sight.

The fact she made a bee-line for their table helped matters, too. Definitely Cassia.

"Fenton!" she yelled. "How's my travel buddy? So great to see you here! I had the day off and figured I'd spend it shopping in Clampett Park and..." She looked down to his chest and made a low meow. "How cute! You went out for a painting. I went with the cat-ears today," she said, pointing at the two blonde ears on her head, "but you've definitely got me beat."

Benny smiled and patted Fenton on the shoulder. "That ain't paint, toots. Fox here is all real."

Cassia squealed with delight. "You've got to be kidding me! I know a toon in transition?"

Fenton nodded, sheepish, not sure if he should own up to the fact.

"That's so awesome!" She gave him a cheeky hug that felt like a soft feather pillow – anime hugs tended to be that way. "I mean, really. Way to go. Show those Realists who's boss!"

Benny put his hand over Cassia's and shot her swooning eyes. "I know! And isn't that plume just marvelous?"

"Oh my God!" She touched the tips of his chest fur and let out a gasp. "That's so amazing. You know what you need, Fenton? A tank top. Really show it off. I mean, I'm jealous right now. Why hide it when you look so marvelous?"

Benny flashed his friend a wicked smile. "Funny. That's what *I* just told him! Oh, and it's 'Fox' over here in the toon world. His name, that is. Call him Fox. Right, Fox?"

Fenton, not sure what to think, nodded and pretended to be interested as the two discussed how wonderful his change really was. And, when the opportunity presented itself, he calmly excused himself to be alone.

IT WAS NICE IN TOONTOPIA. THE PEOPLE WERE SMILING AND THE CLIENTELE always willing to help. There were no muggings in Toontopia, nor were there rapings, robberings, pickpocketings, murderings, or any other form of crime so prevalent in the real world. If anything else, Fenton had found a place where he could feel truly safe. Loved, even.

Yet looking at the hole in the Lakeside wall just made him want to go home.

On the other side of the hole a group Realists were waiting with pamphlets. "Tired of dealing with nonsense?" they said to a passerby, and a pamphlet would be handed through the hole to a passing toon. Sure, they weren't doing brisk business, but the mere fact that Realists were standing at the entrance to Lakeside with pamphlets in hand caused quite a stir in itself.

Fenton tried to make himself lost in the crowd of toons hanging around the hole. Most were laughing at the two boys standing at the entrance, their scripts scribbled on their wrist. But Fenton knew them by sight: Tom and one of his drinking buddies. "Don't you have something better to do?" one toon asked, and Tom responded with a curse and a thrown pamphlet that joined a small pile of dull, yellow pamphlets covered in dirt that seemed to glow against the paper.

"Realization and You," the pamphlet read. On the front was a line drawing of a boy shedding his cat ears, a big smile on his face. Inside, the benefits of being a Realized human being were illustrated in simple comic book panels. Fenton snatched one from the ground, careful to avoid exposing himself to Tom, and slipped it into his pocket. "Come and join the rest of the human race," Tom said, and his friend reached into the hole just far enough to put down a whole display case of the pamphlets.

He felt a familiar hand on his shoulder.

"Oh yes, Fox. Almost forgot to tell you about that." Benny patted his friend on the shoulder a few times. "Realists are doing a pamphlet day today. They advertised it for a few days in the café. It totally slipped my mind."

"What's that mean?"

"Oh, nothing much." He shrugged and pointed to the lake; they left the crowd of toons to walk along the white sands. "They do it every once in a while in the major city nodes; Chicago, New York, you know. Hand out packets about the evils of toon living, how our way of life is going to doom modern society, that kind of thing." Benny reached into the pocket of his overalls and pulled out a carrot. "But this is the first time they've tried in Lakeside. Something's got your dad pretty stirred up."

"There's a vote in the statehouse right now," Fenton said. He kicked at the sand with his toe and watched semi-transparent clouds swell in a puff of inky black borders.

Benny chewed at his carrot as he walked. "Yeah. Banning toon antics in the real world. What's the big deal?"

"I watched a toon couple blow each other up with dynamite," Fenton said. Not a hundred feet away, the mice Fenton saw in the café were blazing across the water in some sort of wacky chase scene. One carried a bomb, the other a pistol.

There were gunshots and smoke going every which way. Sure, toons couldn't have sex. But they made up for it in spades when it came to crazy toon antics.

"And they wiped themselves off when they were done, right? I mean, I do that all the time here in Toontopia. Sometimes I third wheel with a hunter-slash-hunted duo, take a bomb to the face. You just take a rag and wipe off the soot."

"But real people can't do that," Fenton countered.

"So?" Benny pointed to the mountains on the horizon.

Fenton's tongue caught in his throat. "Nevermind."

"You sound like your dad sometimes." Benny laughed the thought off before Fenton could get angry. It was their little thing, like a running gag or a little ribbing. But the fur growing on Fenton's chest and the ears budding on his head made the joke hit home a little harder than usual.

The mice stopped their chase; the bomb went off with a bang and a large puff of red-and-yellow explosion. Laughing, they wiped soot from their ink-and-paint fur and went back to walking on the beach. "Want a go, bunny?" they asked Benny, and he could only shrug. "Oh," they added, "I see you've got the new toon there. Some other time, then?"

Fenton imagined himself catching a bomb, how he would respond, how the red-and-yellow halo would surround him, cover him in black ink. Like sex, he imagined, though he never really had a chance to experience the real thing. But why go for the real thing when ink-and-paint was so much more fascinating?

"Where's Cassia?" Fenton asked, trying to keep his mind from heading too far off into speculation.

"Took off for the day. Said she was going to watch a play in Clampett City." They never went to Clampett City; it was a tourist town, for one, and with the Realists raising a stink in the area there were just too many news cameras around to risk discovery. That didn't stop Benny from keeping a to-do list for the day Fenton was ready to head into town, mind you, but he could be patient when the need arose.

"You've got some ear showing." Benny pointed to his friend's head. Sure enough, Fenton could see in his shadow the distinct outline of two pointed lumps on either side of his head. "It's developing really fast."

"Yeah." Fenton's eyes fell. He touched the ears: velvet soft, complete with a little fur that sprouted from inside the ear. With a little thought he was even able to lay them flat against his head; it made him gasp with a mix of pleasure and anxiety. "Developing into something, that's for sure."

"Don't worry." He looked down at Fenton's chest. "You'll be pretty, at the very least. Keep that in mind. This is about you, Fox. All about you. And I want you to enjoy your transition."

It was the way he said it that made Fenton stop. He thought of Orville and Franklin and Tom and his dad watching over his shoulder, waiting for an explanation. They'd go nuts, he thought. Transition? Ha! "Look. Do you just not *get* it? I'm not proud to be a toon. I can't be. I have family and friends to think about, you know?"

"Again," Benny said, his voice calm, "you need to make this about you. No

one else has to live your life; if this is what makes you happy, this is what you need to do.”

“I lost my mom when she became a toon,” he said, and then he turned to walk away. “I can’t put Dad through it again. I can hang around, yes, but if this keeps up I’ll have to get Realized.”

Realized. The word broke over Fenton like a light bulb, shutting his eyes and scrunching his face.

Benny let his ears lay flat against his head. “Okay. Maybe I’m being a little overzealous about all this. You should go home and take some you time. Watch some movies. Sleep. Think things over.”

Fenton shot his friend a queer glance. “And you?”

“Will be right here when you’re ready to come back,” Benny said. He offered a handshake. “I was just excited that you might change over. No hard feelings?”

“None.” They shook hands. Then they embraced. The mice made swooning noises and the sun winked down at the pair. “But how do I get home? My brother’s sitting at the node right now.”

“Take the library node,” Benny offered. “I’ll buy you a cab. Just...” he choked on the words, “try not to think about that R-word, okay? It gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

THE LIBRARY NODE EXITED IN A SUBURB ON THE OTHER SIDE OF CLAMPETT, A toon town so big it rivaled some of America’s smaller cities. Considering that the town had sprung from nothing ten years ago and had become a large amount of something, this was quite an accomplishment. There were hundreds and thousands of toons there, from the fuzzy animals that hailed from the Lakeside district, to the big-eyes-small-mouth crowd from northern JANM country, to the do-good southwest side of Milk and Honey, complete with clouds, teddy bears, and sing-alongs. Driving through the town was always a treat; in the cab Fenton could relax, enjoy the passing storefronts, the mix and mingling of toons, the events that always, always brought crowds to the plaza squares that dotted the cityscape.

That, and he could always duck down inside a cab when he saw someone he recognized.

It was a lazy Wednesday afternoon in Clampett; a few toon performers went through some simple shticks in the plaza squares, and in the sky he could see a pair of anime fighters sparring peacefully over the city. Most stores were open but not crowded; any other week Clampett would have been teeming with tourists coming from sympathetic areas of the country, but with the Realists having a national pamphlet day the crowds were mighty thin.

Not that it mattered much. Anybody could get to Clampett; there were plenty of ways into the city from the real world.

In the JANM district were twenty portals that spanned the United States. Most of these portals coincided with coastal cities, young and fashionable districts, where sushi bars and Otaku ruled the streets day and night. The place never

went out of favor; in fact, it was considered “edgy” and “cool” even by Realist standards. Proprietors made a steady business playing bookie for giant mecha matches that could never, ever happen in the real world.

In Milk and Honey there were five major portals to children’s hospitals; before the Realists began raising a stink it was standard practice to take terminally ill kids to there to meet ponies and unicorns and gigantic, fluffy teddy bears that would never, ever get tired of hugging the frail kids. The area still did a decent West Coast business on oversized playplaces and daycare centers, but the feigned altruism and bratty kids took their toll; The Bar Belt around Milk and Honey was growing ever larger as more fluffy bears and ponies turned to the bottle to make the days pass by.

The toon part of town, despite the controversy, was by far the most popular. Here the portable hole nodes spread out like subway entrances: New York, Chicago, Indianapolis, Houston, Orlando, San Francisco. One simply needed to name the city, and a node probably existed there. People-watching for sports team shirts in Clampett was like watching the melting pot in action; each street had a different clientele. Reds and whites on one side of the street, blacks and golds on the other, and on the next street a whole new pattern emerged.

Even Quota, distant a suburban town as it was, had three entrances to the toon world, each leading to three distant suburban cartoon exits.

The mall was by far the most popular of the three; it shuttled travelers into the Clampett Fashion Mall. Shoppers at the Quota Square Mall used to be able to make a quick jump into the toon world, but ever since kids started tuning into cartoons the mall had adopted a strict “bring your own hole” policy. All entrances were at the risk of the customer, which would have been fine if anybody could afford to have a human-compatible portable hole delivered to the real world. (Most holes were public for a *reason*, after all; owning a hole in reality was like owning a nice car; they were few and far between.)

Fenton’s favorite, the state park shelter, was the trendy entrance. If you wanted to be a real hipster you scooped the shelter early in the evening, when the Lakeside Ink public works crew would leave a hole open for all takers. The timing of the hole’s opening was a hush-hush secret, what with all the kids wanting to see what all the hubbub was about, but those in the know were more than happy to head in for double-priced coffee and a chance to take a toon dip in the lake. Most serious travelers at the shelter did their travel in the early mornings and late evenings, long before or after all the hipsters had frequented the Café for their toon fix.

But the library was the real secret of Quota, the one place no toon ever talked about. If no one told you it was there, you’d have had no idea. And that’s exactly what Fenton was counting on.

ALLEYWAY BOULEVARD LOOKED EXACTLY LIKE A SAFE NEIGHBORHOOD SHOULDN’T. Here, Fenton found fake designer outlets beside liquor stores inside of cash advance shops. No one walked the streets; most of the lights were out, and a

dark haze haloed the lights that were still lit. The stores all advertised in neon, the cheap kind of neon that breeds in pawn shops and garage sales. “SALE,” says one, and the next is a dollar sign wrapped in dollar bills.

Fenton stepped out of the cab without paying. (“Anything for a toon in need,” the guy said, and drove off without waiting for so much as a thank-you.) Help one another, he reminded himself. Things were different in ink and paint. Shrugging, he made a bee-line for the “Salvage Shop,” a small hole-in-the-wall under a brightly-lit sign.

But Fenton didn’t go inside. His attention was caught by a scream and a quivering hand.

There, sitting on the pavement, was a half-crazed beagle with a hand grenade in one hand. “Pull the pin!” the dog screamed, and thrust his green pineapple into Fenton’s face. “C’mon, man. Do it for a toon in need. I lost my partner and I’m just looking for a little fun. Just a little tug?”

Fenton shook his head. The dog smelled of turpentine and vomit. His eyes sparkled with fire and desperation. Behind him, Fenton saw the remnants of newspapers, shredded by claws with nothing better to do.

“You just gotta pull the pin for me. Doesn’t work unless someone else pulls the pin.”

“Why?” Fenton asked.

“Man!” The dog’s eyes darted to his developing chest, then up to his budding ears. “You don’t get it yet, do you? Of course not. You’re just coming into yourself. You wouldn’t get it anyway.”

“I want to get it,” Fenton said, even though what he really wanted to do was run into the building and hide.

The dog cupped his bare, smooth crotch. “Nothing down here anymore. Get me? This is the only thrill I get anymore.” again, the grenade wafted in Fenton’s face. “Just a little tug’s all I’m asking.”

Lucky for him, the dog didn’t follow when he slipped into the building.

The Salvage Shop was every run-down thrift shop Fenton had ever visited. The dull aroma of drywall dust assaulted him as he opened the door; an electronic bell beeped twice as he let the door close. The shelves were off-level and the floors were uneven. Hand-painted signs advertised the latest and greatest deals on the shelves. But the most striking part of the place was its plainness – compared to the ink-and-paint grandeur of the rest of Clampett, the place had dull, subdued tones lining every pegboard wall. Racks of sharktooth wool sport coats and khaki slacks sat across from jeans and tee-shirts, all real, no ink-and-paint about it.

Had it not been for the vixen running the cashier counter, he could almost have sworn he was in the real world. That’s how Marie wanted the place to look: dull, uneventful, such that anyone and everyone could pass the place by without so much as a second glance. She dressed down for the job in a white blouse and simple, long skirt, with dull brown eyes and a gentle smile that, while pleasing to the eyes, wouldn’t turn heads.

And, as Fenton entered the room, Marie was happy to have a new customer.

“Welcome,” she said, making an effort not to look at the tuft of fur on Fenton’s chest. “What can I do for you?”

Fenton cleared his throat and turned away, suddenly embarrassed. For as she asked him that question he had a fleeting image pass through his mind. He saw himself in a sharktooth coat and pork-pie hat, tail swinging behind him, ears poking through holes in the hat, a pad of paper in his hand. “I’m a toon,” he imagined himself writing on the pad, “and I don’t care who knows it!” The image made him smile a dumb smile, and when Marie asked her question he was snapped back to drywall dust and pegboard walls, uneven floors and disheveled shelves.

She stepped out from behind the counter. “Oh, hon. No need to be embarrassed. We toons all had one of your days.” They shook hands and traded names. “Was Merv out there?”

“Merv?”

“The hound dog.” She nodded to the door. “Was he outside? I bet he was. Don’t pay him any mind. He’s a bit... over the top. Figured out he was a toon while he was married. When the bit and two pieces disappeared his wife tried to make it work. No dice. So now he just hangs around, looking for anything.” She giggled, and the sound made Fenton breathe easy. “Do you need anything? Shirts, coats, the like? It’s all on me.”

Fenton forced himself to look away from the sport coats. “I need shirts,” he said finally. “And a hat.”

“I can see why.” She whistled with the tips of her teeth on the tip of her muzzle. “You’re going to be quite the looker, Fenton. Quite foxy.”

“I guess.” He stood a bit taller, sucked in his gut. “Benny keeps calling me Fox.”

“Benny Bunny, huh?” She looked to a dry-rotted corner of the store and considered it for a moment. “Ah yes. I remember him. Came through here a few years ago. Nice kid.” She laughed at some far-gone memory before she turned and met Fenton’s eyes with her own deep, brown pools that soaked up all the light in the room. “In any case, he’s got a good instinct. Fox is a wonderful name for you. I’d usually say it’s too cliché, but hey. You’ll have the body to carry it. Fenton Fox, eh?”

He tried the name on his tongue once, twice, three times. “I think it’ll work out nicely.” Yes, he thought to himself, and then he ran a hand through the fur that flowed over the collar of his shirt. Very nice indeed.

“Good to see you being positive about it,” she said, and then went over to a shirt rack for a moment. “I’ve got some cotton undershirts; they should push down the fur pretty well. I think two’ll do you just fine.”

Fenton gave her a queer glance. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, hon.” She walked back to give Fenton a pat on the cheek. “I’ve been at this store for a few years now. I don’t get customers looking for the greatest in fashion. I get people looking to cover up. So, two shirts, right?”

Fenton nodded, and she handed him the shirts. When Fenton went to take

out his wallet she pointed a finger at him. "I told you that it's on the house. Just pay it forward, right? Go change; there's a curtain in the back."

"Thank you," he said, even though he thought it wasn't nearly enough. He changed, checked his chest for any signs of fur, and emerged, looking a little more plain than he did going in.

Marie nodded her approval as he stepped out. "Can't say it's an improvement, but it does the job. We need to finish the look," she said, and then went over to the sport coats and hats. "Here. How's about a pork-pie hat? I saw you making eyes at them earlier."

"I couldn't possibly—"

"Nonsense." She walked over to him and plopped the hat over his budding ears. "There. Perfect fit! No one would ever tell the difference. Looks handsome on you, too. You should do hats when you turn toon, I say."

He blushed fiercely and looked away. "Thank you. Again."

"Not a problem." She went back to the counter and pulled out a small pouch. "So. Where do you live?"

"Quota."

"Quota, eh?" She smiled. "I guess that means you knew Benny as a kid."

He nodded.

"Funny how those small towns work," she said, and then she waved him through an old, flimsy door. "Come on."

They walked through a back hallway with small lines drawn every few feet. On small pieces of masking tape were the names of towns, dozens of towns, each one with its own four feet in the back of Marie's shop. He followed her with a sort of dumbfounded awe, for in his mind Fenton imagined that he was already far, far along the process. As he walked he wore a tail swishing from side to side, catching the wind in whorls and whishes. Just like Marie's long, slinking tail, puffy but always, always moving, swirling, beckoning him to come on, come further.

"Here we are," she said. Then she opened the bathroom door and threw a portable hole over the sink. "Right here in the back. Haven't had to be here in quite a while."

He came to a stop in front of the hole, a wide smile on his face. I could be like Marie, he thought to himself, and the mental image made his heart skip beats.

"I'll see you again, I assume?" Marie said. Already the hole was taking shape; Fenton could see a microfiche machine and a table in the dark corner that appeared in the hole. Fenton nodded and stepped inside. Before he stepped all the way through, however, he took a deep breath and cleared thoughts of his wonderful future from his mind. By the time he crawled out from below the microfiche table he was Fenton once again, heavy-hearted, paranoid, and ready to avoid his dad in every way possible.

What made the library node so wonderful was the positioning. Fenton appeared in the dark, dank basement of the library, hidden behind stacks and microfiche catalogs. The place smelled of mold ready to bloom, and the uncomfortable

chairs ensured that most library patrons took their books upstairs for study. The Realists, put off by the “no loitering” signs posted all over the library, never came to pester anyone. And toons made sure that the node stayed secret.

Behind him, Marie tore the hole from the node, the sound much like a strip of masking tape ripping from a wall. He adjusted his hat before stepping upstairs. With a little smoothing he managed to get the hat to lay down flat; to any casual observer, he simply looked like a fashion-conscious boy with a great-looking hat.

As he went up the basement stairwell he imagined a fox tail and ears poking through his clothing. He looked just like a newsie, he thought. A foxy newsie handing out papers to any and all takers, hoping against all hopes to get a job writing for the Big Boys. Maybe he could write for the Clampett Press, he thought—

—and quickly wiped the daydream from his mind as the basement stairwell door flew open. He looked down at his feet and passed through the door, mumbling a thank-you to the man that held it open. Old high school teacher, he noticed, struggling to get his brain focused on the task at hand. Blend in. Forget about Fenton Fox.

It wasn't a large library by any stretch of the imagination: just a few rows of books, a children's reading room (complete with faux oak tree covered in ink-and-paint—a sticking point for the Realist lobby in Quota Town Hall), and a pair of study tables arranged lengthwise across the front of the building. There were only two other patrons in the library: polite people, but neither one took the time to look up from the books they were reading.

The man at the front desk, however, was quick to take notice. “Jonathan Lambert,” the placard read; behind it sat a thin young man sporting a goatee and a dimpled smile. He stood up when Fenton walked toward the exit and offered his hand. “You're new here,” he said. They shook hands. Fenton was careful to keep his hat squarely on his head.

“I figured I'd stop by,” Fenton said. “Check out the books. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” He ducked behind his desk and produced a postcard-sized application. You'll probably want to get a library card. Plenty of movies and good books here at the library. We can take you places you'd never have imagined.”

“You're telling me,” Fenton said, and he bent down to fill out the card. Almost instinctively he reached up to hold onto his hat as he wrote.

Jonathan leaned back in his chair with a little groan. “So,” he said suddenly, “hear about the Realist protest? They're handing out flyers at all the nodes, apparently. Saw a little news special about it just a few minutes ago.”

“Leave it to the Realists,” Fenton said as he signed the dotted line. Jonathan pulled the application in two and handed Fenton a thin piece of tagboard.

“Bet it's impossible for a toon-to-be to slip through the park node.” He winked. “You're the third one today. Was Marie in a good mood?”

Fenton blanched. “Um... yes, actually. Kind.”

“Always is,” Jon said. He dug through his desk for a moment. “But she let

you go without barrettes. You may want to put some on," he said, producing a pair of them from his desk. "They'll help with the bulge."

And, sure enough, Fenton's ears had started to prick into two little mountains under the wool pork-pie hat. He felt them growing to their full length and settling in; heard the hair displacing and rustling as they fell into their rightful place. The moment's surprise turned to embarrassment as he took the clips from Jon. "Restroom's just around the corner, right?"

"Certainly." Jon pointed to his left and tried to stifle a smile. "It's unisex, and the door locks. Hope that's okay." Fenton nodded, put his hand over his head, and went to the bathroom to clip down his new ears.