


An Atom Of Freedom

By Daniel Davies

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Don't Panic! This is not all! There shall be more very soon...

Spare Contents Page

Spare Contents Page

This book is dedicated to all those who wish to shine, whatever your interests.

Impossible, they said.

*It can never be done, to wake people from the dead
You can't change the way you are once you've already become
Genetics were never meant to be undone
The world is the same as it's always been
Always in change, watched by the man who has the future seen*

*You cannot change the past
A paradox cannot last
The future is an infinite mystery
Branching out like a tree
The present is where we must stay
Locked into a stream that goes only one way
It's impossible, so they say.*

*We never flew in aeroplanes, balloons or choppers
We never did find the way to get rid of plague
The pestilence will never end
Because the mind of an established land cannot bend
We are like an old wood, always the same
Ready to die rather than change
Change is born of hope, my naive child.
A fool's last grasp on the immobile game.*

*But impossible is something without name
A challenge to all who stand before it
For no-one who ever said it was impossible
Could ever get anywhere without doing the improbable.*

Yes, thanks, the wheel now turns

The fire burns

The planes fly

We have our chance to fight what might otherwise cause us to die,

And the future holdeth what for us tired old men?

That I do not know, but only say it's impossible when

You do not believe in the truth

Which is

Nothing is impossible, only the improbable will win.

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By Daniel Davies

The First Chapter

It seemed like a good place to start.

Beep

A progress bar fills quickly.

A login screen appears. It has a circular logo and three basic colours to it.

The prompt box requires a user name.

Steven

Enter.

The prompt box now requires a password.

Enter.

The login screen disappears, leaving only a background colour for a second, before replacing it with a background picture, a bar across the top of the screen which rapidly fills with icons and a few icons on the desktop.

The hard disk light stops flashing.

A mouse cursor moves to a menu on the top bar marked 'Applications' and clicks on it.

The choices appear beneath, the mouse hovers over 'Other'

And selects the new program Steven has been working on.

"Come on, hurry up!" Steven mutters impatiently as his computer loads the program, "I didn't spend all that money on a top-whack machine to have to wait for a program to - well, it's about time!"

The display shows a window divided into six frames with a standard-looking toolbar across the top, beneath the usual 'File, Edit, View...'

Steven smiles to himself. He knew he'd only be interested in using the program once he completed it, so he had forced himself to give it a good interface before completing the main program. It was all going to pay off soon, and he wanted it to look right and be easy to understand. "Even a donkey can work this out," he chuckles to himself.

He moves the mouse to the right hand edge of the screen and the whole desktop moves back from the TFT panel, rotating as though on the side of a cube to reveal another desktop which then zooms back up to meet the monitor again. Places menu, Documents, Projects, Research-programdone.odt

The Word Processing application loads quickly and presents a few dozen pages of text.

Steven scrolls to the end and adds a note to the end:

Program and interface complete. Next is the first live test.

Steven flips the desktop back to his new program and stands up.

His computer is a home-made affair, built into a really old beige case that does nothing for heat or noise dispersion, but is great for fooling thieves. Its true contents are betrayed by the fact that the side panel is never screwed back on, such is the quantity of tinkering that has gone into getting it to run this sweet. That and the whacking great home-made expansion card sticking out of the side too far to put the case back together anyway. The whole monstrous electronic edifice languishes amidst the disorganised chaos beneath the desk – which is tidy when compared to the mess to be found up top. Steven knew exactly what his Dad would say, and had been saying every couple of days until he moved out to his own flat. “Tidy that mess up before it eats you alive, anyone who looks in through the window would think we lived in a right pig-sty...” Maybe so, but the opinion of the neighbours was the last thing on Steven's mind right now. He picks up a few unimportant pieces of paper and shoves them in the already stuffed middle drawer. The removal of some A4 has made very little impact on the room as a whole, but it has revealed the other half of Steven's invention. The hardware part.

A medium sized transparent plastic box from a local pound shop sits proudly in the sea of random papers, CDs, pieces of electronic equipment and student paraphernalia. Within it are various parts held together with mixed quantities of Lego and Super Glue. The overall effect is something of a cross between a microscope and a printer/plotter device.

The main structure is suspended from two metal rods attached to motors with wheels to guide them along the box edges. Wires trail out of the contraption at various points and meet in a ball of insulation tape before going behind the desk and into the back of the computer. Beneath the thing which could be a print head or a lens or maybe both is a glass slide held in place on a microscope base. Within the box but to one side are a row of old camera film cases, sterilised and re-purposed. They are fixed to the box in certain positions and their lids are removed. Some of them contain nothing but air, some contain water, others locks of hair. The whole thing is switched on and waiting.

Chapter 2

The Adherence Of A Repeated Mean.

Steven looks out of his window for a moment. It is dark, the yellow glow of the street light missing since someone has vandalised the base of it and tripped its RCD. The shadowy shapes of house roofs are silhouetted against the cloudy sky, which itself is lit from underneath by the fully working street lighting of the town half a mile away. There is near-total silence, only broken by the whirring of the fans in Steven's computer, the ticking of his wall clock, Steven's own breathing and the occasional, distant cars making their nocturnal journeys along the main road to the North. On Steven's street not a thing stirs. The wildlife even have better places to be. The time is 02:20 hours on a Thursday night and Steven is completely alone in a suburban sub-let substandard flat in a substantially boring town. The perfect place for a new invention or discovery to be made, then.

Steven opens a file he made earlier in his new program. He checks the picture it displays in the bottom-middle window against the picture on his wall behind the monitor. He scrolls through some numeric

sequences in the top-middle window once more to make sure all is as it should be. The sequences scroll by in a blur, but Steven has already checked them several times and he knows there won't be anything different really, and if there is he'll spot it straight away.

He flips over the desktop and types into the open document:

```
Software checks all OK
```

He then looks into the plastic box again to make sure everything is positioned correctly. He tweaks the parts that are supposed to move to make sure they still can. All present and correct, nothing has seized up. He checks the wires going into the oversized expansion card and makes sure the card itself won't move.

```
Hardware checks all OK.
```

He sighs and takes one more look at the picture in the bottom middle frame of the window on the first desktop. He rotates it through 360 degrees; it's a 3D design. Perfect. Steven has thought of everything and now the time is right, he is sure.

The mouse moves to an icon on the top toolbar.

"Alrighty then. Most important moment in my life. And this button isn't going to click on itself, so I'd better shut up and get on with it."

So he does.

The computer automatically flips to the second desktop.

The document on the second desktop is automatically appended by the program:

```
Job 1 has begun
```

And the machine in the tub, much to Steven's amazement, whirs into life without a single problem, first time. Genius.

The print/lens head thing moves to the row of film cases, powered by two motors held onto the tub with Lego wheels. It stops short of falling off the tub and moves along the row to the first film case, and dips in the water. It then returns to the microscope base with the slide and deposits a thin sheen of water upon the centre of the slide. It then moves back to the film cases, this time lining up with a case containing hair. It descends again and stops for a moment.

```
Reading Sample H1
```

```
Please wait
```

Steven doesn't need to be told that. He barely dares breathe, lest the movement of air should cause catastrophic failure. He knows he is being paranoid, he is sat well back from the machine, but still...

```
Verified as correct primary sample
```

The machine then lowers slightly more and touches a hair. It slices a microscopic fragment from the surface, then returns to the slide and places the fragment in the middle of the fine film of water. It then returns to the film cases and repeats the process, this time with a slightly different-looking lock of hair.

```
Reading Sample F1
```

```
Please wait
```

```
Verified as correct secondary sample
```

Once again the machine takes a microscopic fragment back to the slide and places it in the water. The motors, cannibalised from old CD Drives, move the bars exactly the right distance to position the device.

```
Loading sequences...
```

```
Done
```

```
Building package...
```

Now comes the real test of Steven's machine. The parts required to do this bit were never intended for this task, and it seems so more important at this point. The head of the device appears stationary, but between it and the glass a world first is in the making.

Steven's computer audibly goes to full throttle as every bit of processing power is squeezed into the completion of the task. The heat it gives off is enough to raise the temperature of the room by a degree or two. The desktop flips back to show the 3D image on the screen being 'scanned' – just an animated line generator Steven had inserted to show that the computer is actually doing something, rather than crashed, but now it seems like the coolest thing in the world, and the most nerve-racking all at the same time. The machine in the tub, meanwhile, appears idle except for the activity LEDs declaring otherwise. Just as Steven is beginning to wonder if he won't die of the tension before it finishes, his computer emits a satisfying 'beep' and the fans slow down again. The machine in the tub blinks its LEDs once more, then lifts up to reveal its creation to the world. The slide looks exactly the same to Steven as it did before. A wet spot in the middle of an otherwise clean piece of glass.

Steven flips the desktop back over to the document, which now reads:
Construction complete. Enjoy.

He adds his own line on to this log of his voyage of discovery:
The proof of the pudding is in the eating.
See you on the other side.

Chapter 3.0

The Appliance Of Science

It had all begun 18 months previously.

Steven had been an ordinary Yorkshire lad back then, with mixed ambitions and various ideas touring round his head in circles. He had excelled at science in school, but had taken his weakest GCSE subject, IT, in college and done a course which was the equivalent of 3 A levels. He only passed the course, but this display of mediocrity was down to his learning far more about computers and everything else outside college than he ever did in it. He had become the neighbourhood geek, fixing problems for the retired residents of the boring estate in which he lived at the time. The sporadic earnings from his odd-jobbery were enough to occasionally treat himself, but little more. Following the fiasco that had ended his 2 month attempt to help his Mum out of her debts and council flat, he now had no savings either. With his Dad pushing him to get a job and his brother nagging for what little attention he could get, Steven found himself going nowhere slowly. His EMA money at college had paid for driving lessons thus far, and now JSA was going to do the same, with the remainder taking the place of Child Benefit money for his Dad. Sheer joy.

“Steven, have you had anything to eat today?”

“Yes” (which was true, he had)

“No you haven't, you've been busy faffing about on the internet all day again. I've been at work all day and when I come home you haven't made me a cup of tea...” And so on he would rattle about how Steven's life was easy compared to his Dad's, how his poor Dad was working hard all day long while Steven stayed at home and how Steven really ought to be earning his own money now. And keeping up with the jobs around

the house (the ever-present pots being a constant reminder of the lack of a non-sentient dishwasher). Steven always meant to do the chores, and to be fair usually eventually did. As for earning money, he was doing what he could. But his Dad seemed to be under the impression that the more often you viewed a job search website, the more jobs would appear on it. Sadly not so. The websites were vacant of new vacancies. All the vacancies that were open, Steven had applied for. He was left with a lot of sitting and waiting to do. Except Steven never just sat and waited. He had far more useful things to do than that. Until recently he had been browsing the forums of a popular free, open source operating system, regularly partaking in the forum games and occasionally answering questions from n00bs. This had absorbed most of his time, since he really enjoyed the fact that, thanks to this operating system, his computer was virus-free no matter what porn he viewed or what websites he visited.

This same interest in free, open-source technology had led him, via a social news website, to read about the fascinating breakthroughs being made at the time. An open-source mobile phone was to be released soon. Not only would its software be free for developers and end users to edit as they wish without worrying about patents or corporate giants breathing down their necks, but so would the hardware. You could effectively go out and buy the manufacturing equipment and build the phone yourself. And the company making it would encourage you. The same ethics were true of the self-replicating machine, with which you could make anything including pieces of itself. Powered by open-source software, this thing had huge potential for exponential expansion by anyone with the nonce to give it a bash.

These new ideas, as amazing as they were to Steven, were forced to take a sideline however. His life had just been turned the right way up by the strangest decision he had ever made. Having gradually drifted in that general direction in terms of his porn habits over the last few months, Steven had realised it wasn't all about sex. He liked the idea in general and he was in fact a furry.

He had joined the UK forums and soon most of his time was absorbed by the amazing new world he had discovered. The people here were friendlier than anyone else he had ever met, and when he went to his first couple of furmeets they proved to him he'd made the right decision.

The progress he had made in his mind was nothing short of phenomenal from his point of view. Mere weeks before he had been a poor sod at the end of his college course without a job and with an unhealthy obsession with Linux. Now he was a furry poor sod past the end of his college course with no job and an unhealthy obsession with Linux... and some new friends from all walks of life, all over the country. And he felt on top of the world for the sake of that improvement. His feeling of well-being had seriously gone through the roof. He may have been poor, but now he was happy.

Steven keeps this in mind as he raises the slide to his tongue.... and licks it.

Chapter Four

Steven's Marvellous Medicine

As time went on, Steven realised there were a lot of furries out there who would go to extraordinary lengths, sometimes spending silly money and even going through painful experiences, just to look a bit more like their fursona, whether this meant fursuiting, a tattoo or something much more extreme or weird, such as cosmetic surgery or God knew what else. He began to think of ways in which one could alter the human body properly,

i.e. make it grow or change itself rather than synthetically forcing shapes on it by means of implant or whatever. His train of thought terminated at the idea that would simultaneously allow near-infinite customisation of the human body at will and at the same time allow for genetic diseases and cancers to be cured and a great deal of other diseases immunised against, that of genetic self-modification. And, he was quick to realise, the resources with which to facilitate such a scientific breakthrough were all around him. The self-replicating machine that makes anything, the open mobile, the open-source software with free development by anyone. All he had to do was assemble the puzzle.

Steven puts the slide down on the desk and keeps his tongue out and his mouth gaping wide for as long as he can. If this thing works right, it should have already begun working by now. The acceleration of the process is exponential, so he fully expects it to take a moment to kick in. Like all great scientists, he is his own test subject.

As his tongue begins to feel really quite dry, he suddenly feels something else too. It has begun.

Months of preparation and building and dry-testing every fathomable possibility, improvising and adapting both hardware and software alike to make the most of what he had had, taught Steven that you can never be too careful when preparing something of this scale.

So he had made sure one of his best friends knew what was going on tonight. Just in case. They were likely to want to try this out for themselves, all being well, but first things first.

Steven lies flat on his front on his bed, finally happy he has had his mouth open for long enough; he closes it and lets the magic begin.

Chapter The Fifth

Get to the point already!

A brand new piece of life has been called into existence. It exists as a single virus and contains DNA and the instruction to swap all DNA it encounters of the type which is compatible with it, with the new DNA it contains within, and to subsequently kick-start each cell's reproductive capabilities so that if the new DNA requires that cell to change, move or reproduce, it will. The last instruction the virus has is to then find a harmful bacteria and use that to reproduce itself, thus carrying the new DNA on to every cell in the body of the being, and reducing the numbers of harmful bacteria to boot. Upon completion of its task, the virus should then die.

Which is exactly what Steven is really hoping he won't be doing as a result of what he has just done. Not that he is afraid of death, but now could not be a more inconvenient time for it.

A bizarre sensation has appeared in his tongue, and is rapidly spreading out in all directions. Like a bomb of oddness, it balloons out through his head and spreads down his neck and right down his body, to the tips of his fingers and of his toes. His whole body tingles with excitement and apprehension, mixed with this weird new feeling. He tries to speak but his tongue isn't behaving, it is busy changing.

The rest of his
mouth starts to change,
and his nose, palate and jaw
suddenly stretch forwards like
the effect of a bad mixture of drugs
on the **brain**. His eyes go **out** of focus
and move around his changing face,
gradually regaining focus in time
to see red-brown fur growing
from the top of his new
muzzle and white
fur from the
sides and
bottom.

Like sharp pinpricks, his whiskers force themselves out while his brain suddenly feels under pressure as his head changes shape. His ears move up his head and grow long and pointy, before being smothered in the fur now making its presence felt all over his head and neck, then red/brown down his shoulders to spread along his arms to black and over his chest in white and over his hands which now look a little more like black furry paws and down his belly in white and down his back in reddish brown, reaching his crotch and making him want to cry as the fur carries on, a shooting pain in the base of the spine as his trousers (he *knew* he'd forgotten something!) are in the way of a suddenly bigger tail that forces the fabric to rip, freeing him of the pain and letting the tail grow long and fluffy while his legs turn rapidly to a reddish brown right down to his shins where the tone goes black for his feet which now ache as they grow longer and his toes shift to make digitigrade footpaws as the tip of his tail grows long white fur and the whole process peters out as slowly as it began.

Woozy and reeling from the sensory smorgasbord he's just been dealt, Steven sits up slowly and looks himself up and down. He decides to try talking – it is important to make sure the main method of communication with the dominant species of the world still works.

“This is freaking awesome.”

Historic first words of a first of his kind.

Chapter VI

Live it.

He pauses to more closely inspect himself. The transformation has worked a charm. He looks in a mirror and then at the picture on the wall.

“Uncanny” he muses to himself, awestruck at what he has achieved. He checks himself all over – better

make sure now that everything is as it should be. Truth be told, Steven feels absolutely fantastic. Now he has stopped reeling and has settled on just being awestruck, he can tell the little repairs he had built into the modification have worked too. His eczema is gone, and a quick ruffle of his headfur reveals no dandruff. Even the mild cold he had been worried might effect the outcome has gone. He is better than fine. At this point he realises it would be a good idea to add an entry to his research journal, so future users of his work will know of the outcome. He sits down at the computer, taking care not to squash his new tail.

02:45 hours

Transformation successfully completed. All corrections and alterations present and correct, and I feel great.

My invention works.

A digital clock is busily gathering dust alongside a telephone on a small IKEA bedside table. The time is 02:45 hours and the room is dark apart from these illuminated red crystal segments. A bed is occupied by a slumbering form and a couple of cuddly toys, all not quite covered enough by the duvet to keep out the cool air and keep in the body heat of the 18 year old lad who sorely wishes he could get some sleep. The fact is he is wide awake and bored stiff of it. For the hundredth time he looks up at the light bulb and shade hanging from the ceiling, casting odd shadows in the gloom, then looks at the cupboard-wardrobe-thing. The lack of sleep would do him no good, but nor would just lying there grinding his mind into the darkness, clearly not sleeping. He gets up and switches his light on, and picks up the book he's been meaning to finish reading for ages. *The Dark Tower* and its many characters beckon him to join them in more adventures, after all it wasn't particularly polite putting a bookmark in and forgetting the whole book right in the middle of an escape from a city gone mad on a monorail train with a severe personality disorder. But before he has even remembered whether it was the odd or the even page he had bookmarked, he is interrupted by a shrill tone repeating itself loudly from his bedside table. Wondering if he'll ever get round to finishing that book, he reluctantly puts it down and picks up the phone.

Steven has to share his new discovery with the world now. This sort of thing can't wait. It is just so amazingly cool, and has so much potential. But the internet isn't the right place to start. Too many idiots and liars spoil the truth on the internet, and Steven knows his announcement would be taken with the whole Saxa refinery's contents. Cries of 'photoshopped' and 'expensive fursuit' would mingle with 'heretic' and he would never get anywhere.

No. The first thing to do is inform those who will believe you.

He picks up the phone and dials a number for a residence in the next town, further down that main road over there.

Boop boop

Boop boop

Ayup Paul!

Ring Ring

Ring Rin -

Hello?

Steven? What you ringing me for at this time of ni -

oh, hang on... you mean you were doing it tonight?

Yep, and I did!

You what?!

I did.

You mean you... actually...

Yeah

You're kidding me!

I am not!

When did you do it? You alright?

About 10 minutes ago. And I'm fine – never better in fact.

...

Paul?

Sorry, it's just this is huge! Erm... I'll.. I'll be right there in 10 minutes, stay where you are!

Not going anywhere...

Paul hangs up.

Steven hangs up.

Paul jumps up, whips on some clothes as fast as he can and grabs his car keys. He grabs his mobile phone and switches off the bedroom light as he rushes out on to the landing. He jumps down the stairs two at a time, nearly cracking his head on the low ceiling in his hurry to get to the car. He grabs some shoes and fumbles as he tries to get them on, then unlocks the door, swings it wide open, jumps outside and slams the door behind him hard enough to wake up the whole street. Cursing his own lack of thought on the matter, he locks the door as quietly as possible, as though this will make up for the noise a moment before. He then zips around the corner to his L-Reg, L-Plated silver Volvo estate car and shoves the key into the lock. The central locking clicks resoundingly through the quiet street. He opens the door, gets in, shuts the door as silently as he can and starts the engine as quietly as he can. The silver Volvo seems to be very quiet for its age, as it inconspicuously rumbles and clatters over only the bumpiest and hardest cobbles it can find in the street.

Steven, meanwhile, changes into some clothes he had already prepared for the possibility of success in his endeavours. Trousers with tail hole – check. T-shirt with suitable pattern – check. Jacket – not check, it's just a plain beige colour. The main thing is none of them clash too badly with his fur, and they seem to fit quite well. He tidies some of the mess of papers etc out of the way so Paul won't have to wade when he gets here.

As soon as Paul reaches the tarmac, he drives as fast as he dares to down the main road. Steven's place is only a mile and a half away, so Paul doesn't have to speed for long. Around another few corners and on a bit,

the junction approaches and Paul slows down to turn into the side road. A few hundred yards down and third street on the left.

Steven nervously waits behind the door into the stairs to his first-floor flat. He can hear the Volvo in the distance already. And the other cars beyond it on the main road seem louder now too.

Paul pulls up, switches the engine off and gets out of his car, making sure it's locked. This neighbourhood isn't exactly car-owner friendly. He approaches the front door to number 42

And knocks on a door that suddenly isn't there any more.

It's wide open and standing in its place is an anthropomorphic fox wearing jeans with a hole at the back for his tail, a check T-shirt, a beige jacket and a big grin like a child on Christmas morning.

The Chapter Consecutively Following Chapter VI And Preceding The Chapter Holding The Much Hallowed Eighth Position Of This Tome's Logical Order

Also Known As Seven.

Annette is getting tired / it is difficult to get about these days / it seems to be night-time, but Annette doesn't have a clue which night it is / the room is lit by the light of the telly / the man on the telly is wearing a suit and reading news / which Annette can't remember / the window is open and the house is warm because the thermostat is turned right up / this isn't a house any more, it's a flat since you moved, Annette, you silly old thing! / 80 years do a lot to some girls / Annette remembers when she was a girl / she used to dream of animals walking and talking / then go to see them in the cinema / the fox and the hound was a nice film / there used to be a tree in front of the lounge window / now it's been reduced to logs / the council should be taking those away / now the flat over the road has lights on in its window / Annette can see two figures stood at the doorway of the flat over the road / one of them looks like a character from a film long ago / Annette loved those films... / Annette wants her husband to see this character / it's important to her / Annette turns around to shout for Edgar to get his lazy backside out of bed / Annette trips and falls / and pulls the emergency alarm switch hanging from the ceiling / it's what the nurse told her to do if she falls over / oh, the pain! / Annette needs sleep now / didn't she only just get up? / Where is Edgar? / Ed isn't in bed / Ed is dead / Annette needs to see a doctor now / Where the heck is Edgar when you need him? / Ow... that hurts.

Paul is awestruck. This is just too good to be true. It's Steven alright. Only now he's his fursona.

Steven sighs. The grin has worn off his face now, this is just getting silly.

"Much as I appreciate how gobsmackingly awesome this is, Paul, I think it might be an idea for you to come in now. It's cold and you've been gawking at me for five minutes."

"Huh? Oh yeah, sorry..."

Paul wipes the stupid look off his face and steps inside, bringing the butterflies in his stomach with him. Just as Steven starts to shut the door, the sound of a van engine approaching at high speed grabs his attention.

As it gets nearer, Steven sees flashing blue lights reflecting off the windows of the flats opposite his own.

"Oh crud!" He quickly shuts the door and sits with his back against the hardwood panels and his ears touch

the cold metal of the letterbox, making him shiver.

"What's up?" calls Paul as he does an abrupt U-turn halfway up the stairs. Seeing the scared look on Steven's face makes him worry all the more. Steven whispers a reply, barely discernible over the muffled sound of a van pulling up outside: *"it's the fuzz!"* Paul looks back quizzically, then sees the flashing blue lights in the small semi-circular window at the top of the door. *"What?! How could they know?"*

Steven shrugs, then the sound of a van door slamming shut reaches them both. They cringe in unison. If the police are here, the whole project and the rest of Steven's life is up the swanny for sure.

"What do we do?" Paul whispers frantically.

"How should I know?" Steven replies, frankly wishing he had thought of the possibility that the police would somehow know straight away a bit sooner. He shouldn't have opened the door and stood there like that for the whole world to see... but it was 3:00 in the morning and even if anyone else was awake, what could they say they'd seen? A fursuit at worst, surely! More than likely they shouldn't have noticed anyway in the gloomy light tonight, what with the street light out of action...

While Steven's busy letting his thoughts run away with him, Paul locks the door using the keys still hanging from it and gives them to Steven.

"Er, Steven? Don't you think if they were here for us, they would have let us know by now?"

Come to think of it, Paul was right. Those footsteps Steven could hear out there were moving away from him... and the voices seemed to be coming from at least 20 yards away, on the other side of the road...

Jeff knocks on the door.

There is no answer. There is no doorbell because the door is new, like the rest of the windows on the flat. Shiny and clean UPVC double glazing. To the left of the front door, a window is open. Jeff tries the door handle, it is locked.

"Are you sure this is the right place, Jeff?"

Jeff sighs. "Yes, Andy. I didn't get to the position of chief paramedic by taking a wrong turn. The nurse in charge of the old folks around here has CCTV cameras and alarms fitted in every flat on this side of this street, and all the flats down there" Jeff points to a side street just a bit further on, "and she says the lady here in number 39 – *and I know there's no number on the door, but it's number 35 next door and 41 up above* – she says this lady has fallen over and bashed her head and appears to be unconscious." Jeff grabs an expensive looking piece of kit from his belt, reads from the screen and continues, "Annette Wemyss, widow of Edgar Wemyss, suffering from mild senile dementia and insomnia. Sounds like the stereotype for most of the folk in these flats"

"What about the flats on the other side, the even numbers?" Asks Andy. He's a trainee and needs to know these things, so Jeff is patient with him.

"I think those are mostly chavs, mixed with a few bright students here and there... Anyway, we need to gain access to the property if we are to save this lady's life. Andy, you've been through the training for this, so demonstrate to me how you are going to handle this situation."

Steven breathes a sigh of relief and stands up. Just as he's about to turn around to peek out of the window, a resounding CRASH echoes through the street, mixed sounds of shattering PVC and breaking glass.

Shocked, both Steven and Paul hide behind the door again. A dog starts barking on the next street over.

“Or you could have climbed through the open window” Jeff points to the bleedingly obvious full-escape-sized lounge window which continues to hang ajar, as a red-faced Andy emerges from the wreckage of a brand new but very poor quality UPVC door, still carrying the large log he had used to bash the door open.

“You could have said something instead of making me look like an idiot!”

“It's your training, your lesson to be learnt. Anyway, we can close that window before we leave, since it wasn't in line with the CCTV camera. Just please think next time!”

Jeff grabs the radio on his chest pocket and informs it briskly: “We have gained entry into the property”

Jeff and Andy proceed over the ruined threshold to extricate the geriatric damsel in distress, whose money had clearly been extricated from her by an unscrupulous window salesman only a few weeks ago at most. The flat itself is dark, musty and dusty, littered with discarded sanitary towels and teabags and a random assortment of clothing, all filthy. The washing machine is in the middle of the kitchen, surrounded by a pool of water and an empty purse lies on top of it. Into the lounge and the TV is on, beaming BBC News 24 to nobody. Annette is lying face down on about the only clear bit of floor in the flat, her long white hair is splayed out over the floor and her wizened hand is still clutching the red emergency cord. Jeff quickly shuts the window while Andy reaches down to check Annette's pulse. Jeff can see a light on across the street. No doubt the flashing blue lights have woken up some chavette or other. Great. He works the early mornings from 2:00 till 9:00 to avoid exactly that sort of trouble. That and the fact that he likes the night-time and sunrises. “*This morning's sunrise*”, according to the weather man on the TV, “*will be at 7:12.*”

“Er, Jeff...?” Andy implores uncertainly

“What?”

“I think she's dead.”

The Chapter Holding The Much Hallowed Eighth Position Of This Tome's Logical Order

Bet you never saw this coming.

“Look, Steven, I think we can stop panicking. Whatever that noise was, it came from somewhere else. I'm going to have a look.” Paul stands up and looks properly out of the semi-circular window at the top of the door. He starts laughing.

“What's so funny?”

“It's an ambulance! Surely you with your newly heightened senses could have figured that out!” chuckles Paul.

“What about that noise? Sounded like a door being bashed in...”

“It looks like the other flat over there... I can't quite tell, it's dark and it's behind the ambulance...”

“Look, is anyone there who could see me?”

“Hang on, one of the paramedics just stuck his face in the window... now he's gone, it's alright.”

Steven stands up and looks out of the window too. A very flashy, not least because the blue lights are still on, brand new ambulance is parked in the middle of the street. In front of it the lounge window of number 39 is suddenly illuminated and two figures in green uniforms can be seen looking down at something. One of them

disappears from view. The front door to number 39 is broken and wide open, and Steven can see it through the side windows of the ambulance.

Paul looks across to Steven with a concerned expression, "do you think we should help them?"

Steven rolls his eyes. "Do I look like I'm about to go walking across to two paramedics? I'll probably get laughed at, then freak them out!"

"Well, when *do* you plan to show your face in public? You can't just hide from the world!"

Much as Steven hates it, Paul has a point.

Andy returns to the ambulance to get a stretcher and some sheets. He opens the back door and gets out the stretcher and sets about unfolding its wheels. Jeff is busy radioing base and clearing enough space to get the stretcher through the flat. Poor Annette probably died of shock because Andy was stupid enough to not spot the window. He pauses for a moment to kick himself for his stupidity, then happens to glance beyond the back of the ambulance and toward the door to number 42. What the...?

Andy blinks.

The face in the window, a most unlikely face to see in a window at the top of a front door, blinks back. Then it disappears.

Andy shakes his head. There are some strange folk around here, with some strange ideas for pets. And fancy letting your... it must have been some kind of dog, right? Fancy letting your dog get up to the top of your front door that easily! Only he could have sworn he saw something more human in that face, lit up by the flashing blue lights. And wasn't it more fox-like, than dog-like anyway? The thoughts continue to niggle at Andy's mind as he wheels the stretcher with its fresh sheets into the flat, lifting it over the remains of the door by balancing it first on the back wheels, then the front. Jeff has turned off the TV.

"You took your time! Come on, you lazy git! We're spending too much time here now, what if someone else needs us to save their lives?"

"Sorry, Jeff, I just thought I saw something in the window in the door to number 42"

"You can worry about that later. Let's get Annette to the morgue."

Between them, Jeff and Andy lift the frail body of Annette Wemyss onto the stretcher, turn off the light and wheel her out of the flat and into the back of the ambulance. Once the stretcher and its vivaciously challenged occupant are safely secured within, Andy shuts the doors on the back of the ambulance and looks back to the door of number 42. It's now very much devoid of vulpine-featured faces. Then Andy looks up at the windows above. The light shining through the thin curtains in the window to the left suddenly goes out. "Jeff?"

"What now?"

"There is somebody up and about in number 42. I just saw the light go out."

"What was it you saw earlier?"

"You might laugh, but I thought I saw a fox in the window. Only not just a fox, there was something else about it..."

Jeff went unusually silent and apparently into deep thought at this point.

"Jeff? Aren't you going to ask me to get back in the ambulance, drop it, it's just a figment of my imagination etcetera?"

For once, Andy, no. I'm curious at this point. For years I've been a furry, and never told a soul. And so it would have stayed if you hadn't said that... but no, this is different. Hmm...

Jeff climbs back into the ambulance driving seat and radios back to base: "We are heading back to the hospital. Any more calls?"

"No, you can go slowly."

Andy clammers back into the passenger side.

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think nothing's impossible."

The ambulance's engine starts up again and its blue lights stop flashing. It drives up to the end of the street and turns around, then goes back down past the wrecked door of number 39 and the spooky door of number 42 before making its way back along the short route to the hospital. An emergency glazier will arrive in the morning to board the place up. The police need not be involved, the circumstances were hardly suspicious.

Nine

Lost in Music

Steven sits on his bed in the dark while the ambulance drives off. His computer is still running, but by this point the monitor has switched off to save energy. Paul looks out of the window, holding the curtains just far apart enough to create a gap to peer through.

As soon as the ambulance has gone, they both exchange bemused looks. Paul is the first to pipe up.

"What do you suppose they were taking so long about?"

"Well, the old lass has just died I think. Her face was covered when they wheeled her into the ambulance..."

"No, I mean afterwards"

"Paul, one of them saw me. I think he was talking about it with the other paramedic. You should have seen the look on his face when he saw me!"

"Well, if this invention of yours takes off like we think it will, they'll soon have a lot more looks like that on their faces!"

"And cured patients, don't forget. This thing works to help people overcome diseases as well as customise their appearance."

"You're sure it can do that too?"

"Well, it got rid of my eczema..."

"Yeah, I can sort of see that. The fur is a coincidental side effect, then?" smirks Paul daftly.

"Well, this is the point. It can cure your ailments and your image!"

"It certainly improved your chances of getting a girlfriend anyway." Steven scowls at this remark, so Paul quickly moves on, "Can I be next on the list to try it, then? I feel up for a change!"

"What, to a Spaniel? You'll end up hunting me!"

"Of course not. I always make exceptions for foxes called Steven..." Paul smiles and gently strokes Steven's left ear. "Woah, that feels well good. Anyone would think it were real!" jokes Paul. They both can't help but laugh.

“Well, if you want to try being your fursona, it'll take a good few weeks of compiling your genetic files and deciding what you want where and how. It took me ages to get mine right. Obviously it's something you wouldn't want to make a mistake with.”

“That's a point, I haven't seen the software since you finished it. May I?”

“Be my guest.”

Paul wiggles the mouse on the computer and the screen lights up once again, with a single program filling the screen. The title across the bar at the top reads '*Geneticiser*' and the main body of the window is divided into six frames. The top left frame is titled 'Start DNA' and is filled with images of 23 pairs of chromosomes. The bottom of the frame is marked 'Human - File: Sample H1 - Steven Dhai.' The top right frame contains a list of genetic libraries of various animal genomes, of which the library marked 'Vulpes Vulpes - Red Fox' is selected. Next to the list is another set of images of chromosomes, complete with an option to 'add' them to the top middle frame. The top middle frame is marked 'Current mix' and shows the 23 chromosome pairs, somehow looking slightly different to those to the left. Beneath this frame is one with a 3D fully rotatable and zoomable image of Steven as he is now, in all his foxy glory. To the left of this frame, in the bottom left frame, is a whole range of tools including pan, zoom, cut, paste, draw, colour palette, fur/scales/nails options (which opens in a separate pop-up window) and a file importer to bring in pre-designed graphics or CAD files and apply them sparingly to the current design. On the bottom right frame are a few buttons (such as 'Export' and 'Build') and some space for future addition of some more. At the top of the window and spanning its width is a toolbar with such features as Undo, Redo, Refresh and a rather neat Autosave feature, which is switched on.

Paul lets out a low whistle of amazement.

“I've said it once, Steven and I'll say it again. You're a flippin' genius.”

“Do you think I'm doing the right thing here?”

“Blundering off into the unknown, against common sense, some people's ethics, tradition, the law most likely, all the odds and the fact that you're only 19 and a half? Absolutely.”

The ambulance arrives at the hospital and Andy helps Jeff to offload the unfortunate lady from her last method of motorised transport that isn't a hearse. Jeff's mind wanders as he pushes Annette through the corridors to the morgue. Did Andy really see what he said he did? There's no way Andy would lie, Jeff could tell that from the moment he met the young trainee. Which was two weeks ago now. The two had formed an uneasy friendship despite Andy's sometimes lamentable incompetence. The front door incident would just be added to the long list of clever-dumb-balance-restored moments which Andy was an expert purveyor of. And Jeff would take the flak. Again.

10*2/4*20/10

Thinking outside the fox

Meemeemeemeep!

Meemeemeemeep!

Meemeemeemeep!

Clack!

This bed is very comfy.

Warm and cosy.

I wish I had remembered to unset the alarm clock last night...

Last night...

Oh yes.

If that was a dream, I am gonna have to have serious words with my subconscious.

Steven opens one eye slowly.

And is thoroughly confused for just a second, because all he can see is white...

White fur.

It looks very much like...

My tail! It wasn't a dream!

Steven slowly uncurls from his sleep and sits up in bed. Paul is still here, he's asleep in the computer chair. His left hand is resting on the keyboard and his right hand is tightly gripping the mouse, dangling by the wire from the pull-out keyboard tray and swaying gently against the chair leg, which means the mesmerizingly fast spinning of the desktop cube that is now burning into the monitor has probably been going on all night. How long is that, exactly? The last time Steven recalls looking at his alarm clock, it said 4:15. Now it says the time is 7:12 (the alarm is set to 7:10). Just under 3 hours of unintended sleep. Steven yawns and stretches before getting up and going through to the kitchen to get breakfast. Looking through the kitchen window, a beautiful sunrise is spreading its light over the low hills and suburban developments. At least Steven's flat isn't overlooked to the rear. The other two streets before his are much shorter, so the back of his flat looks out on a field of long, dewy grass and the 33KV electric pylon at the far end. Beyond that lies the main road and some woods. They've never seemed so inviting.

Steven puts some bacon and a couple of eggs in the frying pan. He could just have cereal, but the smell of bacon has always been the best way to wake Paul up. However, this morning it isn't the smell of bacon that wakes Paul up. Before the bacon has even started to sizzle, a regular banging sound starts echoing up and down the street. The sound of nails being hammered into plywood.

Paul awakes with a start, suddenly stopping the cube spinning on the first desktop, where the Geneticiser is still open. "Huh, what? Agh, what have I done?"

Steven pads back into the bedroom to see what the fuss is about and peers over Paul's shoulder.

"It would appear you're trying to cross a dingo with an elephant and mix it with my DNA" muses Steven at the result of Paul's few seconds of random clicking on random stuff as he awoke from his slumber.

"What?"

"Well, it's more original than a fox anyway..."

They both exchange glances and burst out laughing. Paul momentarily pauses his mirth only to ask "Ooh, is that bacon I smell frying merrily atop the hob in the kitchen, my good vulpine friend?"

The rest of Jeff and Andy's shift is boring as can be. They can't clock off early, in case (God forbid) they should be needed by someone, somewhere. Resigned to the fact that time will go as slowly as it wants this shift, they both wade through the paperwork associated with Mrs Wemyss and her unfortunate demise. At

least this morning they have a nice sunrise to look at in between the bureaucratic hoop-jumping and the cups of tea. At least Andy proves himself useful when it comes to form-filling.

An 19-and-a-half-year-old anthropomorphic fox and an 18-year-old furry human sit down at the breakfast table in the lounge and get down to the important business of bacon and egg sandwiches. In between mouthfuls, Paul looks up thoughtfully, "I tell you what, Steven. These sarnies are proof enough to me that your mind hasn't been changed much by the transformation. You knew I'd get up to eat these!"

Steven smiles through a mouth working on a sandwich with different teeth and a different shape to what he's used to. Everything he does feels like a new experience, so he relishes every moment. When he's finished his mouthful, he replies, "well, it seemed to work when you got too drunk after the Leeds meet and ended up here overnight. Remember, that's when you went to sleep laid on my computer's new motherboard. How it survived that, or how you managed to sleep with it sticking into in your back, I'll never know..."

"It's called being under the affluence of incahol, Steven. I didn't even know that motherboard was there, I just needed sleep and that was a clear bit of floor..."

"So you thought..." Steven corrects him, looking at his computer through the open bedroom door, "Still, it's working fine now."

Paul looks at Steven thoughtfully for a moment. "I can tell..." then, "Er, Steven... you never actually answered my question last night. So, when do you plan to show your face in public?"

Steven looks awkwardly at him. His eyes, still blue and quite human-like, betray his thoughts behind their new surroundings. He hasn't a clue. Paul shakes his head in despair and takes another bite of his sandwich. "To be honest, that's one bit I haven't really planned so well... it was always me working up to this day, what happens next was left as a bridge to cross when I came to it. I always let you know what I was doing, that's why you've been the first to know. But what next I don't know... I can't just stop here in this flat for ever more, but if I show my face out there it'll soon be obvious this isn't a fursuit, and what then?"

"I don't know any more than you do, Steven. It was your big idea."

"Well, I suppose we can let the other furies know about it..."

"It'll be a shock for them, but they should accept you. But that's only if they believe us. Telling them over the internet, by forums or IRC won't work. They'll think we're either trolls or we've spent too long in our fursuits. But how else can we let them all know?"

"How about a furmeet?" Steven suggests hopefully, "Then they can see me for real and they can help us plan more long-term"

"Yeah, but there's the getting there to consider. An anthro fox on a train won't go unnoticed."

"Heh... 'Please can I see your ticket, sir... what the?'"

"Exactly. What we really need is a minimeet here in this flat. Get them to come to us"

"Yeah, but how will we word it? We need enough to attend so it isn't dismissed by the majority as the inane rattlings of a few fools"

"Hmmm..." Paul gets up from the breakfast table, having finished his bacon and egg sandwich.

"You have an idea?"

"If you can call it that. Your sandwich is going cold, by the way."

Steven inspects the lukewarm, half-eaten sandwich in his paws absent-mindedly before taking another bite.

Runny egg yolk streaks down his right paw and mats his fur. Steven ponders how he's going to have to change how he cooks eggs, and a dozen other things, as he quickly stuffs the rest of his sandwich into his mouth before going to the kitchen sink to wash his paws.

Chapter K

Jeff, Beth and Neff

Jeff's shift is finally over, and he has never felt more grateful to have a full 17 hours away from either the hospital or the ambulance. Much as he likes saving lives, he also has a life outside his paramedic-dom and often finds that a lot of people allow this fact to go unnoticed. *Now for some me-time*, Jeff cheerily thinks as he drives home in his Renault Modus in the bright, sunny Friday morning traffic, most of it going the other way. He arrives home quicker than he expects. The daily commute has become so ingrained in this 36-year-old's mind, he tends to drive on autopilot, then arrive home unable to remember a thing of his journey. Slightly unnerving though it may be, it proves the other drivers on the road must have been driving how he expected them to, or he would have remembered them for their road rage or impatient mistakes or whatever. Anyway, that doesn't matter now. Jeff is home and the rest of the people in these bungalows around him have gone to work, or have retired and are fairly quiet anyway.

Despite his age, Jeff has been unlucky in his relationships so far and his one long-term girlfriend left him three months ago. Even she didn't know of Jeff's favourite hobby. He kicks himself for being too darned shy and worried not to just tell her. It could have saved their relationship, for all Jeff knows. He had always suspected her of being a furry too. Of course, if she is a furry, then she's no better for having not told him. But that is all in the past, and the UKFur forum is Jeff's main source of friends now since the pub down the road closed. At least they'll listen to you. They don't judge you.

"Watch where you're going! Lunatic!"

BEEEEEP BEEP

The sounds emanating from a blue Ford Ka as its single occupant narrowly avoids a Land Rover Discovery trying to force its way into the traffic queue by inches. It's bad enough they've put roadworks in the centre of town lately, without having to dodge Chelsea Tractors on their school runs with the sun in your eyes. It's 9:25 and Beth is late for work when she can scarcely afford to be, and the spectre of redundancy returns to hauntingly swing around her head like the plush toy kitten in the rear window swings from its sucker-cup in response to Beth's evasive manoeuvres and hastily applied brakes. The Swedish-owned cooker manufacturer she works for are apparently 'streamlining their employment priorities in order to maximise efficiency.' In short, they're sacking some surplus workforce to fatten their executive wallets. Any excuse they can pin on you, and you're fired. *So it would really help*, Beth thinks as she navigates carefully between road cones and fallen red and white barriers, *if these traffic lights and barriers were actually here for a reason!* The tarmac within the cordoned off area was completely devoid of holes or even spray-painted measurements. The cones and barriers seemed to solely be there to protect a loudly chugging generator and a pair of temporary traffic lights.

Beth wonders quite seriously if this was actually some ploy by the management to get rid of her and a few

other employees who will inevitably arrive late as a result of this hold-up. After all, she only has to drive another 10 yards and turn left into the spacious car-park and she is at work. The cooker manufacturer's customer service centre has a clear view of the unnecessary roadworks and the queues they have created. *Very convenient, if you ask me.*

Beth gets out of her Ka, locks it and ascends the steps to the automatic front doors of her workplace, not really looking forward to another day of people whinging about heating elements.

Ten minutes later, she leaves again. *Profiteering b*****ds. I'll bet my redundancy cheque bounces too.*

Jeff logs on to his computer and opens his web browser. He goes to his favourite website and starts scrolling through the forum posts.

Beth arrives home in the huff of the century. She needs to let off some steam with some friends. All her friends in the local area will be at work. She drops her bags and coat in the hallway and settles down in the lounge with a glass of milk. She switches on her new laptop (buy now pay next year offer from a catalogue), opens the web browser and goes to her favourite website, intending to have a good-humoured rant and get some sympathy and virtual hugs. While it's loading, she wonders vaguely if she will ever have the money to pay off the cost of the laptop.

Jeff spots an unusual new thread in 'Northern Furs' and decides to take a look.

Beth spots an unusual new thread in 'Northern Furs' and decides to take a look.

Jeff's eyebrows are raised.

Beth chokes on her glass of milk as it goes down the wrong way. Once she's got her breath back, she curses her clumsiness under it.

VulpeSteven	Today, 09:55am
100% me ***** Group: Member Posts: 1824 Joined: 18 months ago From: Halden, West Yorkshire Member No.: 5,231 Species: Red Fox	***EMERGENCY MINIMEET*** An important new development has been brought to my attention and it affects all furs the world over. It's one of those things you have to see to believe. I don't care how you get here, just please come to my place (number 42 Kenneth Street) on Saturday (Tomorrow at time of typing this) by 10:00 and believe me it will be worth your while. Please post a reply if you are coming. P.S. Please note there will be free pizza and pop available for all who attend!
	My Deviantart / Is this a good question?

The Chapter Formerly Known As Twelve.

That's numberwang!

Paul has a Firefox window open on the third desktop.

Steven looks over Paul's shoulder at the newly posted topic.

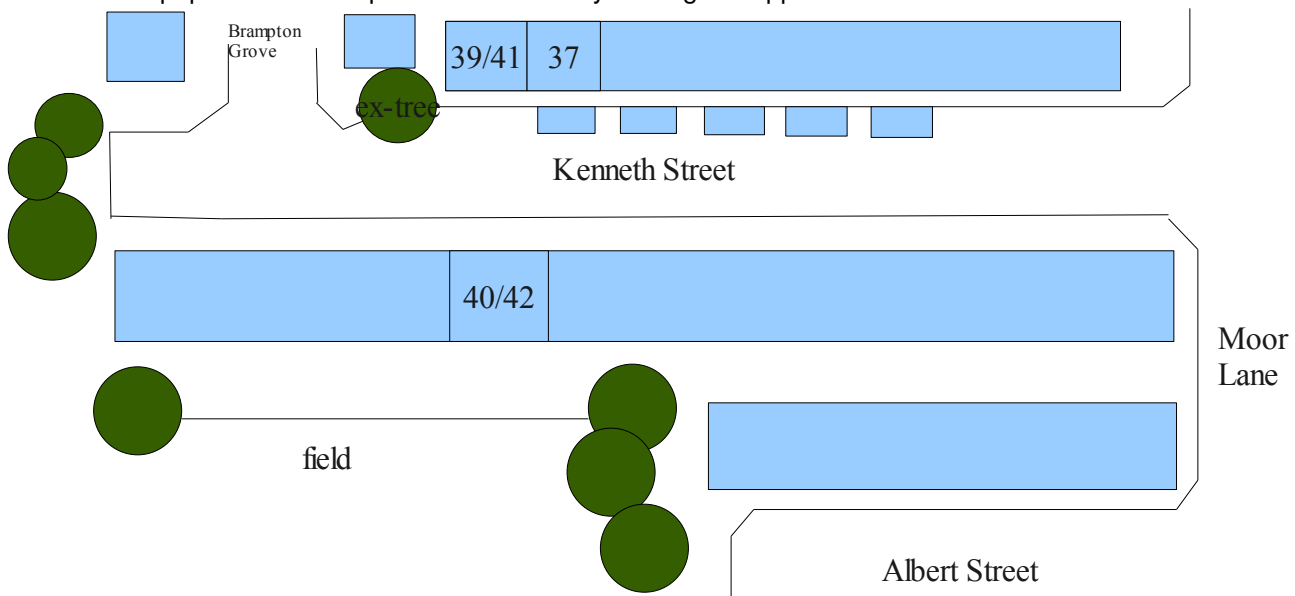
"Free pizza and pop? Just who do you think is paying for that?!" Steven objects loudly.

Paul turns around, grinning cheekily. "It's alright, I'll cover it. I had to say something to get their attention, didn't I!"

"All you ever think about is food. Still, it's a good idea. This flat should be full tomorrow."

"Yup." Paul stretches and gets up, then looks at his watch. "I'm just gonna go back to my place to get some stuff, then to the shops. Be back in a bit."

Paul picks up his jacket and makes sure his car keys are in his pocket before heading down the stairs to the front door. He unlocks the door, leaving the keys on the inside, and opens it wide. As he steps outside, he notices a van parked across the road. *Darren Willerby & Sons Glaziers* is emblazoned in blue across the side of the Mercedes Sprinter. A rather burly chap is busily packing away the last of his tools at the back of the van. Behind him the door to number 39 is boarded up neatly with low-quality plywood and silicon sealant. Paul shrugs and gets into his car, starts the engine and drives up to the end of the fairly narrow Kenneth Street to turn around in the junction with Brampton Grove. As he drives back down past Steven's flat, the Glazier's van pulls out in front without looking, then suddenly stops. Braking hard and narrowly escaping running into the protruding corner of a double glazed sealed unit, Paul curses the Glazier's stupidity and ironic inability to use mirrors. The van's reversing lights switch on, so Paul has no choice but to follow suit quickly. The reversing Mercedes Sprinter, apparently still oblivious to Paul's presence, doesn't stop until it has Paul trapped in the dead end at the top of the street. Across the corner to his left, Paul can now see why the van has reversed so far: A council flat-bed truck with a grabber attachment has chosen now to turn up and take away the large chopped-up sycamore tree from between number 39 and Brampton Grove, and has now reversed into the space previously occupied by the Glazier's van. Which is now finally moving forward, and releasing Paul from his impromptu parking spot. As it drives off, Paul makes a note of the phone number on some paper in the door pocket before finally shifting his flippin' Volvo out of this bloomin' street.



Steven sits back down at his computer, mouse in paw and refreshes the forum page.

There are already five replies. In as many minutes. Somebody must like pizza.

Jef Leppard	Today, 10:00am
Resident Paramedic * Group: Member Posts: 30 Joined: 1 month ago From: a farm near Halden	Number 42 Kenneth Street? Unbelievable! I was just opposite there last night in my ambulance, some poor lass called Annette fell over and popped her clogs. Be right there tomorrow. And that'll be my first meet, w00t!
Member No.: 7810 Species: Leopard	[quote]The van with the blue lights and the expensive medical equipment? Yeah, that's mine. What about it? It's been clamped?![/quote]
B37hc4t	Today, 10:00am
Wall-cat *** Group: Member Posts: 653 Joined: 2 years ago From: The wall (driven up it) Member No.: 5231	Yeah I can make it, especially since I just lost my job (unfairly I might add) I suddenly have a lot more free time on my paws.
Species: Cat-astrophe	Ceiling-Cat? Amen to that.
Wubble	Today, 10:02am
Where is the Iron Man? ***** Group: Moderators Posts: 2201 Joined: 4 years ago From: Manchester Member No.: 2903 Species: Space-Bat-Angel-	Sorry to hear about Annette. But Emergency meet? What the heck could be counted as a furry-specific emergency important enough for a meeting? I'm gonna be there out of sheer curiosity and so I can nick all the pizza. This had better not be a prank, or I'll be forced to eat you. >:D
Dragon	Est'd Yesterday
Sir Francis Snake	Today, 10:03am
LOL at my tongue. ** Group: Member Posts: 347 Joined: 1 year ago From: Mancunium Member No.: 6198	Something interesting going on for once? Count me in.
Species: Adder	Mostly Armless.
Cuggles	Today, 10:04am
NOM **** Group: Member Posts: 1018	I shall be present and there shall be much consumption of pizza and pop amongst the important debating. Needless to say, if this is a prank or something I will torture you mercilessly. * Readies itching powder and switches paws to tickle mode *

Joined: 2 years ago From: Hull Member No.: 5666	BTW, I have a Great Auntie called Annette, who lives in Halden. I just tried ringing her and got no answer. :-)
Species: Chinchilla	Cuggles is the best! - Sloganizer.net

Steven shakes his head in disbelief. All these coincidences are just getting freaky.

Jeff kicks himself for not thinking about patient confidentiality before posting. *There's no point in editing her name out of this post now, the damage is done. But more importantly, who is this B37hc4t character? Could it be Jeff's ex-girlfriend Beth? That would be strange.* Jeff gets up to pour himself a drink.

Beth refreshes the forum page, and sits up, stunned. *Surely there can't be two paramedics called Jeff who live on farms near Halden? This is getting strange.*

Jeff decides not to post or PM or email B37hc4t about the possible coincidence in case he's got it wrong. Besides, he doesn't really want to start a row on a public forum.

Beth decides not to post or PM or email Jef Leppard about the possible coincidence in case she's got it wrong. Besides, she doesn't really want to start a row on a public forum. There's enough drama going on as it is.

Paul arrives at his house and picks up enough clothes to stop over for a few days, the book he now feels determined to finish reading and his laptop. He switches off the heating, sets the alarm and locks the door behind him. He bundles his stuff into the back of the Volvo estate, making it resemble the nickname commonly applied to that model. He gets into the driver's seat, shuts the door and drives round the corner to the Co-op. Parking in the crowded car park, he sets off on a quick quest for pizza, pop and buy-one-get-one-free offers.

Half an hour later, Paul emerges triumphantly pushing a trolley full of pizza (mostly meat feast and veggie pepper/sweetcorn varieties), Tango of all flavours (BOGOF), Mars Bars, brown sauce, trays of salad (reduced for quick sale due to best-before dates), salted peanuts and yoghurts; followed by a puzzled-looking checkout assistant whose uniform identifies her as Claire.

"Excuse me, you forgot your receipt!"

"Oh, thanks." Paul fumbles to put it in his pocket.

"If you don't mind me asking, why have you bought all that pizza?"

"You want to know the truth?"

Claire nods.

"My best mate's just made a super-important scientific discovery in his flat in Halden, so we've called an emergency meeting tomorrow morning of people from the internet most likely to be affected by the implications of this discovery in order that they may see this discovery for themselves, that we may ascertain the best course of action to take next and whilst formulating our plan for the future, that we may consume

these provisions which I have purchased forthwith. Now if you don't mind I would like to continue in this course of action."

Clearly neither convinced nor overly certain of the meaning held in this only semi-expected bout of verbal diarrhoea, Claire replies simply and darkly, "What."

Paul shrugs and carries on wheeling the trolley to his car. "In other words a bunch of random people getting together to ogle at an invention and what it can do based on the promise of pizza and pop."

Claire returns disappointedly to the store to gossip with the other checkout assistants. They were so putting their money on it being a meeting of those weird folk called 'furries'. Not ruled out, but since when did furfags invent things? Unless of course the lad with the pizza and an eye for random discounts was lying and there was no invention, which seemed to Claire to be quite likely. She was spending a lot of time on the net lately and it had already generated some juicy gossip. Google is your friend. One day Claire would be out of this dead-end job and become a journalist.

"Excuse me, are you going to scan these groceries through or am I going to have to do them myself?" an old lady inquires crossly, breaking Claire's train of thought.

"Sorry, I was miles away."

Beep.

Beep.

– (no beep)

Clack, clack, clack clack.

Beep.

Of These Chapters, Here Be Thirteen

Big Talk

It's amazing how quickly you can get bored of a place you know you can't leave yet. And the building tension in Steven's mind only serves to worsen the waiting. The clock couldn't be ticking any slower without going backwards. It's been 11:24 for an age. Frustration abounds; having just achieved what he has been working towards for the last year and a half, Steven suddenly finds himself at a loss for what to do.

He clicks on the refresh button on the web browser again, and another couple of replies pop up. At least there's something to do on the internet. But all the websites in the world can never be a substitute for true freedom.

Steven's ears twitch at the distant sound of a vehicle heading his way. It sounds quite old, and is probably about the right distance away to be just approaching Kenneth Street. *Paul? Don't get your hopes up Steven, it's probably that flipping postman again.*

Paul finally drives back along Kenneth Street to Steven's. The truck with the grabbing arm has left, along with the decimated sycamore. Paul takes advantage of this and turns around at Brampton Grove, then parks in the space, facing the right way to get back out of the street again. With arms full of pizza, two rucksacks on his back, clothes draped over his shoulders and carrier bags hanging a dozen bottles of Tango from his rapidly-turning-blue fingers, Paul somehow manages to shut, lock and alarm his car with a combination of

elbows, teeth and feet. He then labours his way across the street (*I'll sink into the tarmac at this rate*) and up to Steven's door.

A clumsy noise from downstairs makes Steven snap out of his boredom in an instant.

Paul forces himself up the stairs with his heavy load and at about halfway, Steven appears at the top of the stairs.

"Need a paw?"

"Heh, you could say that. Grab the Tango, I can't feel my fingers any more!"

Having relieved Paul of his silly quantity of fizzy drinks, Steven pads into the kitchen, sets down the carrier bags and puts on the kettle. Turning around as Paul lumbers in still heavily laden with his idea of emergency meeting supplies, he asks the obvious. "Did it really have to be all pizza and all Tango? A little variety could be nice..."

Paul attempts to shrug and ends up dropping a pair of jeans on the floor. "I didn't have to buy all this, you know. If you want to choose, put your money where your mouth is! Besides, they gave me a discount for getting so much pizza. The salad is on it's best before date, by the way. I figured we'd have it eaten by tomorrow evening anyway."

"You still took a while..." then Steven gets distracted, "ooh, Mars bars!"

"Yeah, they were on offer and I know you like them. And I took my time 'cause to get back here from the Co-op puts me into a one-way system that ends up on the main road in the middle of town. Where there are roadworks for the sake of roadworks, causing the biggest traffic jam this side of 1960's Turin. I got here as quick as I could, OK?" explains Paul indignantly.

"Sorry, it's just we've got some more replies. There's someone in London wants to come up here tonight and stop over. I just hope we don't disappoint any of them now we've gone and called it an emergency meet..."

Steven trails off worriedly.

"Er, Steven, look in the mirror." Paul points out flatly, "That'll be reason enough, don't worry."

Having filled the fridge, freezer and cupboards and having dumped the rest of his stuff in a corner of the lounge, Paul proceeds with Steven to inspect the latest replies to the forum thread.

"Right. We've got RayWolf in London wanting to stay over night, Sheric and DaveB both definitely coming, Edwin, KRed and Halt Mouse say they should be able to get here, depending on their parents, Jef Leppard, B37hc4t, Wubble, Sir Francis and Cuggles you already know about and Adamfox, Pam Ther and Squee want to be convinced before they'll decide because we're clashing with a minimeet in Newcastle and a concert in Wales." Steven takes a deep breath, "and there's a few who said they can't come, but they'll extract the info from someone who does. Quite a few will know about it soon."

"Well then, considering the numbers who'll just turn up anyway or maybe post a reply later, I'd say I did right to get as much shopping in as I did."

Steven starts typing a reply.

VulpeSteven	Today, 11:35am
100% me *****	Thanks to all who say you can come. We now have supplies of provisions procured for those wanting a nibble tomorrow. Just to clear a couple of things: [quote name='Adamfox', time=10:15am]I don't know, what could you possibly have

<p>Group: Member Posts: 1825 Joined: 18 months ago From: Halden, West Yorkshire Member No.: 5,231 Species: Red Fox</p>	<p>found out that warrants insisting we all get to your place pronto?[/quote] I can't really tell you on the forum because the internet has too many eyes. I can't prove anything to you right now, you'll have to choose based on how much you trust me. Suffice to say, it will be worth your while to come along. I don't post threads like this on a whim. [quote name='Squee' time=10:20am] [quote name='Pam Ther' time=10:18am] [quote name='VulpeSteven' time=9:55am] it affects all furs the world over.[/quote] What do you mean by that exactly? :huh: [/quote] ^ What she said ^ [/quote] * shrugs * Exactly what I said. It is something very important you all have a right to know about. I can't say more until the actual meet, partly because we don't know who could be reading this and partly because I would like to surprise you. ^_^ BTW, Paul J Spaniel will be here. Nom the pizza quickly or he'll have the lot!</p>
	<p>My Deviantart / Is this a good question?</p>

Jeff shuts down his computer and heads for bed. He's going to need some kip now if he's to be up all night at work and then up in the day for this meeting too. He sets his alarm for 11:30pm and shuts his 'blackout curtains' so he can get much-needed shut-eye.

Beth can't make the day go by fast enough. With no more job to be doing, she gets all the housework done in between refreshing the forum thread about the meeting. Quite a few will be coming along, by the looks of it. At least if it is Jeff there, she won't be stuck alone with him. *I'll just give him the evils across the room if it's him.*

"Oh, I just remembered." Paul pipes up suddenly.

"Hmm?" Steven replies with his vulpine nose still pointed squarely at the screen.

"I need to make a phone call. Some idiot in a van nearly forced me off the end of this street."

Paul digs a piece of paper and his mobile phone out of his pocket and starts tapping in a phone number.

While Paul is busily ear-bashing some chap called Darren about how one of his employees can't drive Mercedes Sprinters, Steven finally peels his eyes away from his monitor for a moment. *Lordy lordy, this place is a right tip.* With a big new invention and its results to show to dozens of surprised furs, the last thing he wants is someone derailing the whole point of it by being unable to see past the junk, the scattered papers and semi-useless items which he and Paul were currently wallowing in. Not exactly the right impression to give, really.

"I don't care who had right of way, the fact of the matter here is this stupid berk wasn't using his mirrors and nearly caused damage to one of your vans and a double glazed unit!" Some wittering from the other end of

the line, then “well, I know who not to buy my windows from then. Goodbye.” The phone snaps shut in Paul's hand. Paul puts it away, then realises Steven is looking at him as if waiting for the end of the phone call. “Yes?”

“I think it's time I got this room tidy. Care to join me or would you prefer to keep an eye on the forum?”

Paul sucks in breath between his teeth, “ooh, I dunno. Might cost you.”

“I have cookies in the cupboard in the kitchen, which you can have dibs on if you help out.”

“Deal.” The two shake hand and paw before laughing at each other for taking it so seriously.

“Come on, let's get these chunks of digital cameras and scanners and stuff out of the way!”

Thus begins a long clean-up of Steven's flat of thoroughness levels not seen since he first moved in.

It's 5:00 and Claire is finishing her shift. The Co-op has no real hold on her, it's merely a temporary source of wages. Claire is a budding journalist, and her blog has already attracted an award. But her real talent is sniffing out a good story, and she sees herself in a high-paid tabloid position within the next few years. Already a regular contributor to the local paper and a small-time gossip magazine, as well as several online communities, she knows she's got the right stuff.

Claire walks to the bus stop and catches the bus home. On the way her thoughts slip back to the guy with the pizzas and the Tango earlier. Why did he grab her attention so much? Why did her subconscious mind associate him with the stupid online group against which she has been campaigning for so long?

I know, I'll investigate. If it is to do with the furbags, their forum will have a post or ten about some big meeting nearby. I could drop by and snap some photos. Big LULZ. That'll have 4chan happy. Hehehe.

Claire rubs her hands together with glee.

The internet has just confirmed her suspicions brilliantly. *Masterful work, we'll make a journalist of you yet. Tomorrow morning at 10:00. Right.*

Ray shuts the door on the argumentative atmosphere in the terraced house in East London. Any excuse to get away from this doss-hole. His parents know he's going to the Leeds area for a gig. A do. A party. One he insists to them he's told them about weeks ago. He sighs, puts his hands in his pockets, clutches the conbadge stowed safely there and makes his way to the Walthamstow Central Tube Station. *A tube journey to King's Cross, then it's up the country to Leeds on a Pendolino. From there a bus to Halden. Should only take a few hours.*

At the cash machine in the station, Ray withdraws the money he made from selling some artwork commissions on the forum. Since his parents didn't know he had that money, it won't hurt for him to spend it.

Steven is busy pushing a Dyson back and forth on a wobbly pair of wheels held on with insulation tape. The most amazing thing being there is actually space to fit the Dyson into the room without it sucking up something important.

Paul is on the bed, folding the net of a cardboard storage box so it can be used to keep the research papers tidy.

the cycle racks are situated.

That was Wakefield.

Ray gets up from his cramped position and smacks his forehead squarely into a dirty bike pedal. *Never mind the Hoosiers, even I'm starting to worry about Ray..*

Collecting his thoughts and rubbing his sore forehead, Ray more carefully meanders among the other standees to look out of the nearest window.

The emerald and gold fields of oilseed rape in the short gap between Wakefield and Leeds whip past the window in the evening sunlight at seventy miles per hour, rapidly followed by endless suburban housing and miles of litter-strewn embankments beneath grey concrete road bridges sporting every swear word in every colour.

In response to the input of a fairy tale, Beth gets out a frog prince. She puts a normal frog and the lily pond it lives in into the vending machine, then swaps web browser tabs to have another skeg at the amassing interest in the enigmatic 'emergency minimeet.' For want of something better to do, she makes a list of those who are definitely going to be there.

VulpeSteven (obviously)

Paul J Spaniel

Jef Leppard (Beth frowns at this point)

B37hc4t

Sir Francis Snake

Wubble

Cuggles

RayWolf (staying over)

Sheric

DaveB

Edwin (had fun getting permission)

Kred

Halt Mouse

Adamfox

Pam Ther

Squee

D:Rat

Lupustorm

Helga

Georgina Tree

20 furs, all happy to go to a minimeet at the drop of a hat? What is this world coming to?

Andy has finally fallen asleep. His PS2 continues to cycle through demo levels, with pigs blowing each other up in a variety of interesting ways, while Andy starts to dream about being a medic involved in some strange sort of turn-based warfare. He can heal the sick and injured pigs around him (only their faces look more

vulpine...?), but only when it's his turn.

Jeff dozes on, his snoring having temporarily ceased. He has a most unusual dream, involving a fox and a powerful computer with a cheap plastic tub next to it that seems to contain something very important. Something made largely of Lego and gaffer tape.

The Chapter Whose Number Is Equal To The Quantity Of Mars Bars Present In Steven's Flat At This Point.

* OM NOM NOM NOM *

The 510 bus from Leeds powers its way down the dual carriageway. In the seat facing sideways over the front wheel arch sits Ray, rucksack in lap, conbadge now clipped to his belt and a low-res Google Map of Halden printed on cheap A4 in his hand. Kenneth Street is just off Moor Lane, which is part of this bus's route. This is surprisingly easy. Ray checks his battered digital watch. 8:30pm. He'll be earlier than he thought. That was one fast train.

Steven and Paul, having cleaned the flat 'till the cows came home (or at least it looked that way through the kitchen window, across the nearby field, the main road, past the woods on the left and another field on the right to the distant dairy farm), settle down to a night of TV with Paul hogging the settee and clutching the wrapper of another Mars Bar, and Steven curled up comfortably in front of the gas fire.

I could really get used to this, thinks Steven happily as Stephen Fry makes a remarkably good quip on a rescheduled episode of QI, to much laughter and applause from the audience.

Paul gets up to go to the loo, a few seconds pass and right on cue there is a knock on the front door.

Ray waits for an answer. It's getting dark and the sky is clouding over, and the cool breeze makes his conbadge twist and spin against his hip. The green wheelie bin next to the doorstep is overflowing, adding to the untidiness of the street. The sign at the end of the poorly lit street definitely says 'Kenneth Street' from behind a dangling thread of ivy on the wall of the block of council flats. And this weathered hardwood door definitely features a slightly corroded brass number 42. Is he too early? Is nobody in? No, the light just came on in the obscure-glazed bathroom window. *Perhaps I just caught them at the wrong time?* He chuckles to himself. *But if one of them is using the bathroom, surely the other can answer the door?* Ray knocks again, a bit harder this time. He hasn't come all this way to stand on a cold concrete step in rapidly decaying weather at the flat he knows to be the right one. Google maps showed this to be the only Kenneth Street in Halden, and the only Kenneth Street in West Yorkshire with a number 42. *OK, so I'm a little early. No need to ignore me though.*

Steven knows he can't answer the door, so, much as he hates it, he stays put curled up on the floor. It'll be up to Paul to hurry up on the loo and do the explaining to RayWolf for him. *At least Paul knew what he was in for before he saw me. This is a whole different kettle of fish.*

The sound of a flushing toilet announces that Paul has done. Paul returns to the lounge and makes to sit

down.

"No you don't!"

"Why?"

"There's someone at the door."

"What? Already?" Paul spins around and heads down the stairs to open the door. "Just a sec!"

Ray sits down on the doorstep. He'll wait all night if he has to. This is either an emergency minimeet, the wrong house or VulpeSteven will have some explaining to do. Either way, Ray would still rather be here than stuck at home, to be fair.

A muffled shout that sounds like "just a sec!" shakes Ray from his drifting thoughts.

Keys rattle and the door opens.

Paul opens the door to someone sat on the doorstep facing the other way. The seated man speaks with a deep voice into the late evening air. "Is this how long you usually take to answer the door to your furiends?" He stands up and turns around, grinning.

Paul's face lights up. "RayWolf! Long time no see! Glad you could make it. I thought we lost you in that rave last month!"

"Yeah, that was pretty freaky. Anyway, where's VulpeSteven and what's this about an emergency minimeet I hear?"

"Well... most of the meeting is tomorrow, so that's when decisions and stuff will be made. But as you're here, you might as well find out now." Paul shrugs, "you will anyway."

"Go on, then. Spill the beans," replies Ray with mild amusement.

"Er, right. Come in then." Paul steps back to let Ray into the hallway. While Ray takes off his shoes, Paul shuts and locks the door behind him. Ray raises his eyebrows, "you imprisoning me or something?"

"No, it's just a bit of a rough area and we don't want gatecrashers. You'll see why. I'll leave the keys in the door here."

The two proceed up the stairs.

Steven waits apprehensively in front of the fireplace as their footsteps approach.

Just before the lounge door, Paul stops and turns round to speak to Ray.

"OK, you know how we said there has been an important new development that affects furs the world over?"

"Yes?"

"Well, he's sitting in the lounge right now."

"Eh? Who else have you got here?"

"No-one else, just me and Steven. Prepare to be amazed."

"OK, I'll try my best," mutters Ray, half expecting the anticlimax of a lifetime.

Paul steps aside to let Ray into the lounge.

"Hello Ray"

61 retpahC

nowD edispU dlroW ehT gninruT

Ray's jaw falls through the floor. His expression priceless, at a complete loss for words, he simply stops in his tracks and stares agog.

Steven sort-of expected this, but he hasn't got any ideas of how to deal with the situation. *Probably best to give him a moment to get over the shock.*

A whole minute later, it's clear Ray isn't going to come back to his senses without a bit of a prod. Paul steps around him and holds up his mobile phone, making like he wants to take a photo of the still-perfectly-priceless expression on Ray's disbelieving face. This quite effectively awakes Ray from his aghast stupor.

"Alright, enough with the pranks and all. Still, that is one heck of a fursuit. May I?"

Steven nods slowly. Ray approaches him and, as he touches the fur on Steven's muzzle, quickly realises: *this is no fursuit. Holy-anthro-fox-standing-before-me, this thing is real! The tail, the ears... f**k.*

"Tell me this is some kind of a dream... Steven, is that you? Are you-?" Ray can't believe it. *This is just... awesome.*

"Real as I'll ever be," Steven replies, making Ray jump back, "feel free to check for seams or glue or whatever. There isn't any. This is me." Steven shrugs, holding his paws up in gesture. Ray responds by holding Steven's right paw in his hand and gazing at the black fur and paw-pads in wonderment. "So, mind if I ask the obvious? How?"

"Glad you asked," Steven exclaimed, breaking the tension, "come through here and I'll show you." An alarmed Ray is clearly taken aback, so Steven quickly adds, "not by doing anything to you or anyone else. I just want to show you my invention."

Much relieved and placated, Ray follows Steven into the bedroom, Paul bringing up the rear. *You're panicking over nothing. This is all bona-fide. Definitely a good reason to call an emergency minimeet... but still, how the heck did he do it?*

Beth gets up and stretches. Her wrists ache and her legs are cramped from spending all day chatting on the net. She casts a glance at the clock on the wall. 9:15pm. Beth quite fancies an early night tonight, what with the minimeet tomorrow and all. She checks the forums in which she has been posting once more. No new posts about anything important appear, so she shuts down the laptop and heads for bed. *This way I can get up nice and early in the morning and look my best. Mew.*

"Ta-da!"

An anthropomorphic fox and two young blokes sit down next to each other on a bed in a flat in a terrace on a street in the suburban sprawl of a Yorkshire town on a Friday night. The sound of a club further up Moor Lane thump-thump-thumps its way into the awkward silence as a chav hen-night cranks up the bass. The surreality of the situation is unmatched by anything Ray has yet experienced. *Particularly since they seem to be expecting me to get excited over...*

"What exactly is the great invention here? You on about the computer or the box of Lego and pieces of microscope?" Ray asks uncertainly.

“Both!” Reply Paul and Steven in unison.

“You mean to say that *that-*” (he indicates the random box of tricks on the desk) “and this computer are what changed you into your fursona?” Ray inquires incredulously.

“Well, it's not that simple, but you've got the gist of it, yeah.” Steven is beginning to worry about Ray. This isn't really the sort of grand unveiling he had in mind. Before Steven can go any further down this train of thought, Ray comes back at him with a sudden mischievous look in his eyes that surprises both he and Paul.

“OK, no idea how you do it, but can I be next? How are your wolf-making skills?”

Steven and Paul both exchange surprised glances. *That went well.*

10001₂

Geneticiser

Claire finishes off her conversation, then goes back to the furlag forum page with the golden opportunity. The list of attendees is now in the twenties. *Add one more*, she thinks sneakily, *tomorrow I shall have a field day*. She logs off her PC and starts preparing the tools of her success. *Tomorrow the world will see the furlags for who they really are. And I shall be a supermarket checkout girl no more.*

“I think we need to start making a waiting list, Steven. This thing is going to be popular, and quickly by the look of it,” observes Paul.

“How many anthros have you made so far?” asks Ray curiously.

“I'm the first and only one so far. You two are the only ones who know about me as yet. The meeting is being called to decide what's to be done next.” Steven turns to Paul, whose prodding at Steven's shoulder is getting annoying, “yes?”

“What about that paramedic dude last night?” Paul points out with concern, “he saw you, didn't he?”

“Yeah, but I doubt he knew who he saw or owt. Besides, there's Jef Leppard on the forums, he's one of the two paramedics who was there last night and he says he's coming along tomorrow. There's a 50/50 chance it was him who saw me, so he'll find out properly soon enough anyway. And if it was the other paramedic, I don't think that really matters either at this stage because he'll have either told Jef Leppard or kept it to himself. My point being they aren't likely to cause us any bother before the cat's out of the bag anyway.”

“So we're planning to tell the world about this?” inquires Ray.

“You hardly expect me to stay in hiding for the rest of my life do you? And while I can reverse this process to make me human again, to be quite frank I don't want to. I think the potential benefits of my invention outweigh the initial problems we're likely to face, so the world has a right to know about it. But just how to tell everyone I'm not sure, that's why we're having the meeting.”

“Potential benefits? I'll say! Being able to turn anyone who wants to change into whatever they want...” Ray trails off excitedly.

“Don't forget the ability to cure genetic diseases and immunise against a lot of others. It got rid of my eczema for a start,” points out Steven.

“So how does it work?” queries Ray eagerly.

“Well, I was going to save the explanations for tomorrow, but since you're here...”

30 minutes later...

"Right, so you select what you want from this list here, then use the 3D image to alter things visually using the tools on the left?" implores Ray attentively.

"You've just about got the main point of it, yeah." Steven wonders vaguely how Ray always seems so able to get his own way. His DNA scanned into the Geneticiser, Ray has managed to persuade Steven into showing him what to do, provided he promises not to actually apply the changes until after the meeting.

"And this way I can create the design of what I want, make sure I like it, then save it until we decide what we're doing tomorrow or whenever." replies Ray happily.

"Yeah, just remember it took me weeks to get my design right." Steven reminds him cautiously.

"True, but you were testing and developing the software and building the hardware in between. And you had the eczema thing to sort out." Ray has a good point.

"Oh, so you mean it can be done quicker? You said it would take me weeks to get my fursona right!" a miffed Paul chips in.

"Well, yeah, I suppose. I just assumed it would need more getting used to first, but as Ray here has pointed out, it is pretty simple. Sorry, Paul. And Ray, remember the more time you spend on it, the better the result will be."

"Well, let's face it Steven, even a donkey can work this out!" Ray jokes. Steven can't help but chuckle at the irony. "Just remember your promise. You'll be the proof to the assembled furs that anyone can use this machine, so it's important you get it right." The last thing he needs is a big embarrassment and a half-transformed Ray in front of the ogling crowd. Both Paul and Steven are getting worried about Ray.

"So you're sure your folks at home will be OK with this and everything?" Paul asks concernedly.

"They can take a long hike. It's my life, I'm old enough to make my own decisions," shrugs Ray flippantly. With that, they leave him to it.

Paul gets out his and Ray's sleeping bags and stuff on the settee and a rusty Z-bed in the lounge while Steven gets his first shower as a fox.

"Stupid bleeping gadget!" murmurs Jeff groggily from under his warm, comfy duvet.

Ah, it's stopped. That's better.

Beepbeepbeepbeep... beepbeepbeepbeep!

Aaaarrggghhh!

Jeff throws the duvet off and clouts his alarm clock into submission, the plastic hands stopping at 11:30 permanently. Looking around his dark room, he realises there is a small, bright light coming from the floor. On closer inspection, his mobile phone (carelessly cast aside with his trousers the night before), has a missed call. The hospital have been ringing him again. Whichever feckless drunk has managed to tie up all the other ambulance crews will now be facing the wrath of a chief paramedic who shouldn't have to be called out this early. *If they call me out before my shift one more time, I'll make sure I save the idiot whose fault it is' life so I can kill him myself!*

Having vented his anger on these semi-scary, semi-amusing thoughts, Jeff rushes to get up, whipping on another uniform at top speed and bolting down another breakfast, forcing himself through another bout of

indigestion (*saving lives is gonna kill me at this rate*) and out of the door with a slam.

Andy snaps awake from his slumber and is greeted by the sound of a pig shooting at another pig with a rifle (and badly missing). *Aw, crud, not again.* Andy looks up at his clock and is relieved to see it's only 11:30. Momentarily at ease, Andy then glances at his phone. A missed call from the hospital. *No rest for the wicked. Training is a compulsory part of becoming a paramedic. And if that means being told to get up earlier on no notice at all, you'll have to put up with it. That was what Jeff had said right back on day one. I can't afford to ignore him.*

Switching off the overheating games console and the TV next to it with its burned-in 'Press Start to begin' message, Andy rises from his slovenly mess of games and food wrappings to get ready for another long night/morning. *These nights might be the easiest shifts, but they don't do anything for your sleep.*

Chapitre Dix-huit

Merci Beaucoup.

Anaïs wakes up in a daze. *Où suis-je?*

She casts about and sees her Renault Clio, easily recognisable even now because of the bumper sticker ('Honk si vous êtes yiffy') and personalised number plate (AN-415-RN)... which are upside down? The shock hits her with the force of the minibus that had appeared in front of her moments before. *Mon séjour est terminé.* Shame. She was having such a good time too. And that Renault only had 5000 miles on the clock. This trip to Yorkshire had been her first long distance journey in what was une très belle voiture.

The glaring yellow street light directly above her is blocked out as a paramedic leans over, apparently very relieved to see that she's awake. "You're very lucky. That minibus was stolen and it's only these roadworks cones that saved you. What's amazing is you weren't hurt more. Your legs will take a while to sort, though." The paramedic frowns at this point and looks down at Anaïs' legs. "Hmm..." Anaïs attempts to raise her head to a position where she can see for herself, but a sharp pain in the back of her neck quickly puts paid to that. "Will I be OK?" she whimpers in her Lyon-accented, almost-perfect English.

The older of the paramedics steps into view. "We'll see. Is that your car?"

"Oui. Yes."

"I like the bumper sticker." Then the paramedic leans closer to Anaïs, so only she can hear him over the racket of chugging ambulance, police car and fire engine engines, and the voices of the police trying to send the dozen or so curious onlookers on their way. "Honk."

Anaïs brightens up in an instant. "Furry?" she asks in surprise. He responds by smiling and lifting a finger to his lips. Anaïs smiles and tries to move her arm to do the same, only to find she can't because it's firmly wrapped into the sheets on the stretcher bed she's on.

"It's OK, I'll make sure you're looked after." The older paramedic gets up and turns to the other paramedic.

"Andy, let's get her to A&E"

"Righto, Jeff. I'll be in the back" The two paramedics proceed to wheel her into the back of the ambulance, Jeff getting in the driver's seat while Andy sits with Anaïs. With much flashing of lights and wailing of sirens, the ambulance leaves the scene in front of the customer service centre in the middle of town for the police to

uss out and makes its way out to Halden Hospital.

Officer Harold Walters grabs the drunken driver from behind, ending his escape in a tackle to the ground and a face full of dog droppings. "You are under arrest for taking without consent, dangerous driving, drink-driving, criminal damage and resisting arrest. You have the right to remain silent although anything you do say can and will be used as evidence in court. And for God's sake, let me get these handcuffs on yer wrists!" "Shurrup and gerroff, you don't even know me! F***ing C-" Up this close, one too many Smirnoffs talks even louder than the dog leavings.

"And we'll have less of that foul language too. If you want I can add another charge to the list, mind... " Backup arrives in the form of two out-of-breath constables. Between them they haul the uncooperative hoodie-wearing scoundrel back down the path, his face covered in filth remarkably similar to that continually spouting verbally from his mouth. As they approach the dented police car, the semi-destroyed minibus comes into view a few yards round the corner, surrounded by a mixture of police vans for the unhurt occupants and ambulances for the less fortunate revellers. In one of the ambulances sits a particularly mouthy, slightly overweight chavette, absolutely insistent that despite the injuries to her arms, she can still walk home smoking a fag.

"Tough. Your arms are broken and they're going to need pots, and that means hospital. Trust me we won't keep you there any longer than necessary," the paramedic explains for the umpteenth time.

"Yeah, you'd better not. My Dave'll be back 'ere in a minute, you listen to him!"

"Right, will do..." sighs the exasperated paramedic. His attention is momentarily diverted by a loud shout from the police car across the street.

"I'LL BE BACK IN A BIT, KELLY! COPS WANT ME TO HAVE AN ASBO!" the drunk shouts at the top of his voice through all the crud smeared over his face whilst being bundled into the back of the police car. Before he can shout any more, a constable wipes his face with a dusty handkerchief.

"I'M OFF TO HOSPITAL! SEE YA DAVE!" Kelly blows kisses at her mickey-taking boyfriend.

The paramedics shut the back doors in Kelly's face, climb in to the front of the ambulance and set off for Halden Hospital.

Claire sleeps soundly, revelling in the thought of the next day.

Beth sleeps soundly, revelling in the thought of the next day.

Ray is busily choosing and refining the fur length and type, colour, pattern and shape of his tail using the 3D view. The genetic view above alters accordingly with every click.

Steven is curled up half-asleep in his bed, and would be properly asleep but for keeping an eye on Ray's progress. *Ray has definitely gotten the hang of this thing quickly.* "Ray, I think it's time you got some sleep. Big day ahead tomorrow and all..." yawns Steven.

"Just want to finish my tail. The rest is nearly done too." Ray zooms out the 3D view, showing a brilliant depiction of his fursona in full 3D glory.

"I'll have to make you the official designer. That was really fast" Steven is impressed. *Ray has a natural*

talent here.

Ray grins, "A lot of practice with 'Second Life'"

Steven nods in tired agreement, then falls asleep, leaving Ray to power on through the night with his indefatigable zeal and new-found talent.

Paul is asleep on the settee in the lounge. It's 1:30am, says the alarm clock which is set to go off at 8:00am.

La Dix-Neuvième Chapitre

Murky Buckets.

As the ambulance pulls in under the canopy of the A&E department, it starts to rain. Jeff and Andy radio their arrival to the control desk, switch off the blue lights, then proceed to open the back doors and carefully lower Anaïs's stretcher onto its wheels on the concrete. *Either Anaïs is being very brave or those were some decent painkillers*, thinks Jeff.

She had told them her name on the way to the hospital.

While Andy holds the doors open, Jeff wheels Anaïs into the A&E department.

"You'll be fine now. I'm just going to bring a doctor, and I'll be right back," Jeff reassures her calmly. "Andy, keep an eye on her."

"Will do." Andy turns to the annoyingly attractive patient. "Ah, Bone jower, madame. Un medicine will be icy in a mo."

"You will get zere eventually. Not bad..." Anaïs giggles despite the pain beginning to force its way through the painkillers the paramedics had given her on the scene.

"Murky buckets." Andy replies with a sheepish smile. To avert his attention from Anaïs's pretty face, he tries looking at her somewhat discombobulated legs. *Hmm, maybe not*. He settles on the cleaning trolley on the corner of the corridor next to where Jeff is busy filling a form to satisfy the bureaucrats that Anaïs should in fact be here and does in fact need seeing to as a matter of urgency.

Jeff returns presently with a doctor, who points them to a suitable ward to wait in while the operating theatre is freed up.

A nasal, slightly lipped voice states, "she's going to need an X-Ray, and that'll probably have us pinning the bones back together. Multiple fractures and at least three clean breaks would be my guess, just from looking at her." Then, to Anaïs, "You'll have a limp, but that's better than amputation. Just be glad we have the wonders of the NHS to sort you out in this country" The doctor rolls his eyes. Anaïs can just about see that his name tag reads 'Dr Mark Oldroyd.'

"I'll be back in a few minutes to take you for X-Rays. Is that OK?" Dr Oldroyd kindly checks.

"Yes, merci." Anaïs quietly replies. There goes her ability to walk properly, then. She shudders at the thought. The two paramedics have left now, and Anaïs is alone with a dozen other injured souls.

Jeff and Andy return to the ambulance to take it back to its base, out of the way of the other ambulances that may need to arrive here soon. Sure enough, as they are pulling out of the canopy and into the street-lit rain, another, slightly older ambulance takes their place.

Kelly is not amused. "Right, can you fix my arms quick, like, so I can get back to Dave?" she moans.

"Only as quick as they heal and you quit giving it lip," snaps back Linda, whose shift is over now and who really just wants to get home.

Kelly pouts at the paramedics and stumbles her way out of the back of the ambulance, her arms both in slings and her mind astray, swinging her footsteps way too wide, meandering out from under the canopy into the rain and splashing her way into a puddle. "Eurgh, now you've ruined me tracky bottoms!"

Linda and the other paramedic exchange glances, both full of the same thoughts: *I'll be glad to get rid of this one.*

"Come on, Kelly, A&E is this way." The tired Linda steers Kelly by the shoulder into the hospital amid continued pathetic drunken protests.

Officer Walters brings Dave into the police station once again. A serial offender, Dave is the sort that isn't so hard to pin down as to keep down for long enough, due in part to the creaking, lenient and now less effective than ever justice system, of which both Harold and Dave are equally aware.

"Right, we've been here before Dave. You know the drill. If you can't calm down and give me sensible answers, I'll just lock you away till morning."

Dave's response is a slurred mess of swear words. Officer Walters shakes his head. He takes Dave to the sink to clean up his face, then attempts to use the breathalyser test. He knows before he even starts that the answer to be written on the form will be 'failed to provide sample.' Been there, done that and worn the vomit-covered t-shirt.

"Why do I even bother?" he mutters as he locks the heavy steel door on the unruly job for the fifth time this year.

Ray is very pleased with himself now. Having finally finished his design, he saves it, shuts down the computer like Steven (who is now very cutely curled up fast asleep) said and goes through to the lounge to make use of the Z-Bed, across the room from the nowhere-near-as-cute Paul. (The clock insists against Ray's body clock that it is in fact 2:30, not 1:00 like Ray was sure it was only moments ago). And catch the few hours of sleep he now needs twice over. How he's going to cope tomorrow, he hasn't the foggiest. But this seems to matter very little, as the butterflies in his stomach are now throwing a wild party. *I'm going to be RayWolf! The real, anthropomorphic wolf of my inner self! Cool. And only the second ever anthro. And first ever anthro wolf. Even more cool.* To these happy thoughts, Ray falls asleep.

Anaïs returns to the ward from the X-Ray room, pushed by a sympathetic nurse. The painkillers are beginning to wear off a bit now, and Anaïs can feel every bump in the floor as a dull thud resonating through her bones.

The space next to her is now occupied by a girl who looks remarkably like Vicky Pollard from 'Little Britain' – a show Anaïs had never understood but still found quite amusing. The TV lookalike speaks to her dejectedly.

"What you 'ere for, then?"

"I was in zees car crash. A minibus appeared from nowhere. My lovely new car, she is upside down. I, too, am upside down, and cannot feel my legs." Anaïs explains miserably.

“You what? A minibus? I was in one of those. Now the doctor says, like me arms are broken or summat. I was only at a party an hour ago, like. And my Dave's been carted off to the cop shop, an' I'm stuck here with me arms hurting...” The obviously drunk be-track-suited individual trails off before adding, “What's yer name?”

“Anaïs.”

“Anna is.. Anice. Wha'ever. I'm Kelly.”

“Enchantée”

“Bless you.” With that, Kelly sits back and falls asleep.

Considering how spectacularly it had started, the rest of Jeff and Andy's shift goes by quite uneventfully. A prank call at 4:00am, but otherwise nobody else seems to need them. Once again, Jeff finds himself working through the neverending inboxes of paperwork and emails into the dawn light, only this time wishing he could see how things were progressing with Anaïs. But this is the paramedic's problem: once you've brought them into hospital and found them a doctor or nurse, your part with them is done. Except for the paperwork.

Twentieth Chapter Fox

Daa-da-daaaa-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da-daa-daaaa

Doo doo doo doo (daa-da-daaaa)

Doo doo doo doo (daa-da-daaaa)

Doo doo doo doooo! (daa-da-da-daaaaaa!)

Kenneth Street sleeps in to a wet Saturday morning. As the sun rises over the rooftops and treetops in the East, a lone figure in a green rain coat and blue jeans walks quietly down the pavement. A hood pulled over her blonde hair, Claire surveys the scene carefully, holding a printout from a website in front of her face. The rainwater is making the ink run a little, but it still clearly says 'just please [come](#) to my place (number 42 Kenneth Street) on Saturday (Tomorrow [at time of typing this](#)) by 10:00 and believe me it will be worth your while.'

Number 42 would appear to be the upstairs flat on the left with the overflowing bin and the weathered hardwood door. More interestingly, number 39 across the street is boarded up and appears devoid of occupants. *The universe provides.* Claire has found the perfect spot from which she can see all the goings on around and (assuming the curtains are opened) in the flat opposite. With Stanley knife and large screwdriver in hand, Claire removes the plywood board from the front door frame and peers inside. A dingy, old-people smell pungently hangs in the air. Holding her nose, Claire pushes the broken PVC door aside on its one remaining hinge and steps over the pieces of shattered plastic. Turning around, she decides to at least attempt to put the plywood board back on so as not to attract attention to her probably-illegal presence. By jamming the screwdriver into the plywood, Claire now has a handle with which she can pull it back up to the door frame. Some of the nails match back up with their holes, but it's clear it won't fit perfectly again unless hammered back on from the outside. Still, it seems to balance on the dozen or so nails that have matched back up, and the hole created by her screwdriver is minimal, and probably looks like a lost knot from a distance. Satisfied that she now has her tracks covered, Claire sets up her journalistic hideout.

Remember, you're not here to do any harm to anyone or anything, you just need a vantage point. The story will be worth it and there are plenty of journalists out there who do far worse things. And earn more money for it. It's not like you're chasing Princess Diana down a tunnel here...

Imagining the headline on a newspaper soon puts her at ease.

'Sex, Lies And Fur: The Truth About Furrries (by Claire Stott)'

That'll show them. Claire pulls an easy chair around so it faces the window, rather than the TV. In her coat pockets she has everything she needs to last the whole day. Looking around the flat, Claire feels a little uneasy, and remembers what one of the other furrfags had said. 'I was just opposite there last night in my ambulance, some poor lass called Annette fell over and popped her clogs.' *Is it possible he was on about this flat? After all, it does look like an old lady did live here and that everything has been left in a hurry.* The washing machine is still out of place, like someone had been in fixing it and never quite finished. Claire shivers. *If it has been left because of Annette, no relatives have been by yet.* The board on the door is obviously council-issue. *Perhaps Annette has no traceable relatives? Or maybe they want to drop by today, it being Saturday and all? Well, if they do, I'll just claim I'm related to her and I'm dropping by to make sure the place is secured and to see if I can find phone numbers for her other relatives. After all, old ladies have far-flung, widespread families. Unless they have a genealogist among them, they won't know who I am.*

Much the better for having thought up an almost believable story in case caught, Claire settles down to the most important business of watching and waiting. Made a whole lot easier now she's discovered a net curtain on the floor under the window. *I can see you and you can't see me. Perfect.*

She recites the motto her Uncle had taught her since she was seven. *If at first you don't succeed, cheat. If cheating, don't get caught. And if caught, blame HIM!* (At which point Uncle John would point at any random soul in the room at the time not directly involved in the conversation). Smiling to herself, Claire sits it out. This is going to be a long day.

A much used and abused Railbus bearing a quickly updated logo on top of older livery trundles along the wet, slightly rusty tracks just outside Hull, struggling to chug its way up to 60 miles per hour. A rather rotund fellow with shoulder length hair and a double chin sidesteps his way down the cramped aisle and sits on one and a half seats over the rear wheels. Above him, a fluorescent tube feebly flickers its last before giving up altogether. The heaters in the kickspace under the windows are working anyway. Just as the old train reaches the recommended speed for the line, it starts to slow down again. This will be a stopping service to Leeds, and the only one to run this morning due to line maintenance. As the rattling pair of short carriages pulls into another insignificant station halt, a couple of Network Rail employees can be seen in a ballast tamping wagon on the siding behind the platform, laughing over cups of tea. Cuggles sighs. There will be a long wait before the meeting starts in Halden thanks to these clowns and their bosses. The time when Cuggles is using the train is never the right time for track maintenance, which is naturally why it always seems to affect him on those rare occasions he actually does bother to use the train.

A bald bloke with a rather impressive moustache makes an unlikely conductor. "Tickets please... thank you." Cuggles waves his return tickets in front of the conductor's moustache, then goes back to being bored of the journey. *If only I hadn't forgotten my headphones.*

The rain continues pouring down.

Unbeknownst to Cuggles, another fur is partaking in the delights of travel aboard the same antiquated contraption. Helga, the crazy Viking fur, is sitting right behind him (facing the other way) with her earphones in, listening rather aptly to Phil Collins' *I Wish It Would Rain Down*. Having only just caught the train following a mad, rain-soaked dash from her house, Helga seriously hopes VulpeSteven's got a good excuse for this minimeet thing. She is down to her last tenner, *so it had better be good*.

Steven wakes up. His freshly washed and carefully brushed fur has managed to gain a little in the poofiness department overnight, making him look cutely floofy. Just as he gets out of bed, an alarm clock in the lounge goes off. The sound of a lazy hand switching the clock off, followed by utter silence proves that both Paul and Ray needed more sleep. *It's 8:00 and it's D-Day, and with only two hours to go* (Steven sticks his muzzle round the lounge door) *we really can't be doing with having lie-ins*. "Good morning you two. Sorry to get you up so early, but you both know why."

"Blarg." Paul's simple response for all he doesn't want to think about.

"You mean it's morning already?" Ray asks rhetorically.

"No, the alarm clock went off three hours early. Of course it's morning, you silly wolf!" replies Paul sarcastically.

"Do I have to resort to the bacon again or are you going to propel yourselves?" Steven smiles from the door. Paul suddenly gains interest in the world around him, "yes. Bacon. Good plan."

21

The Minimeet Cometh.

Anaïs runs through the wild woods, her paws barely touching the ground. The soil is moist and soft, and the pawprints she leaves behind are all that betrays her passage in this magical place. Around her the other wildlife are singing in the new morning or chatting away the end of a long night. Her tail swishes through the air, her nose piercing the cool air ahead of her as she moves forward faster than any vixen ever realistically could. Every hair on her fine, slender body seems to shimmer with some unseen power, and through them she can feel every bit of everything around her. She is in a super-aware state, and as her reddish brown body streaks past the trees with unmatched speed, she keeps up with everything quicker than instantly. This is perfection. Everything about her and around her feels right, for once in her life. *Je suis dans La Zone*.

Anaïs is deep under anaesthetic on the operating table. Her legs are being manipulated into position by the surgeon, ready for metal pins to fix the bones back together. With her legs in the state they are in, Anaïs would never regain her ability to walk without metal support. Using the handle of a pair of scissors, the surgeon marks the correct positions on Anaïs's legs to drill. The pins have to be fitted perfectly in order to support her weight. The machine behind the operating table continues to beep steadily.

Sitting at the breakfast table and munching on the last of the pack of bacon from the fridge (no eggs this time), Steven, Paul and Ray discuss the way they want to handle the meeting.

"Glad we did all that tidying yesterday," Paul manages to say through a mouthful of bacon.

"Hmm, work which has been undone in these last few hours, in the lounge at least" Steven comments as he looks over Paul's shoulder at the now-pretty-messy contents of the lounge. Sweaty sleeping bags, dirty clothes and rucksacks are scattered hither and thither about the Z-bed and the settee. Swallowing his food a little too soon, Paul gets his breath back before hastily taking another bite. Ray rolls his eyes at the buffoon before turning to Steven.

"We'll get that stuff tidied away before you can say 'anthropomorphic animals'. Which reminds me, I just about finished my design last night."

"I can tell," Steven says, looking at the bags under Ray's eyes.

"But what are we to do for a sample of wolf DNA on which to build my fursona? I don't have any to hand" Ray asks, clearly worried.

"Don't worry, it isn't really necessary. The Geneticiser can build all the changes based on the human DNA sample. It just means it'll take a bit longer because it has to take all the data from the library on the computer and build large chunks of it from scratch. I dropped lucky, if you can call it that." A saddened, almost guilty expression crosses Steven's face. "I found a poor victim of our roads, he had only just died so I took a little lock of hair from his tail before moving him off the road. Poor guy. I suppose he's literally a part of me now, but at the end of the day it was for the purposes of providing a little more data for scientific research. Besides, I haven't altered my brain or most of my internal DNA at all, the main difference is in bones, body shape and fur. And the tail of course. But for compatibility's sake, every cell has to contain the combined DNA even if that cell isn't directly affected by the changes. Otherwise you end up with large scale rejection within a few hours... I think. I have already mulled over this dilemma, but at the end of the day if you don't just say 'to heck with it' and get on, you'll never get owt done."

"So where does the data in the library files come from?" Ray presses on, absorbed.

"Scientific institutes and labs all over the world. They have files on nearly every important species in the world, and what they don't have we can make by mixing the rest," replies Steven.

"How much longer does it take to make a new you without the second sample, then?" Paul chips in.

"I don't know... a couple of hours more, maybe. Depends on how much more processing the computer has to do. And of course you only have the library copy to work from, so any genetic variations have to be of your own design. I chose to use my own sample rather than the library fox because it was a more thorough test of the Geneticiser's abilities, and a safer bet to start off with."

"The point being, do we have everything we need ready for me to be your grand demonstration today? I don't want to end up half-transformed with the computer complaining about some error. And if anything does go wrong, you can change me back, right?" a wary Ray implores.

"Yes we do, and as long as the computer and the Geneticiser are still usable, they can make a basic reversion virus that just swaps your old DNA back in, so yes. If something happens to the computer or the Geneticiser itself, you'd better know how to fix it or be prepared to wait until someone can." Steven isn't mincing his words.

"So what do we do when they start arriving?" Paul brings them back to the more immediate problem.

"Well, I'll wait in my room this time, that way you can gather them in the lounge first. It might be a bit easier to sort out that way. If you and Ray answer the door, get everyone in the lounge with cups of tea, then you can

come up with some sort of way of gently explaining what it's all about to them before I make my appearance. Once they've all gotten over the shock, we'll see about you, Ray, depending on how they react." Steven explains.

"Right, then. We'd better get on with it, only an hour and a quarter to go!" Paul announces, standing up as he finishes the last bit of his bacon.

"Where do you put all that food, Paul? It's not like you're fat!" Ray prods Paul as he steps around him.

Beth looks in the mirror. She sees a very human face staring back, but with a little spark in those eyes. *Because I know who I really am, and am all the better for it.* Smiling contentedly, she brushes her just-dried-from-the-shower hair and applies a little bit of make-up. *I know it's only a minimeet, but I might as well look nice.* The radio in front of her on the dressing table happily broadcasts the fact that it's five to nine, Saturday morning and raining pretty much all day, heavy at times, before starting to play Annie Lennox's *Kiss The Rain*. Beth chuckles. *You've got to love local radio stations. Always got a sense of humour.* Beth has almost forgotten who else might be at the meet.

Jeff gladly clocks off at the end of his shift. The impending minimeet means he needs to hurry, but Jeff spares just a little time to go and see how Anaïs is doing.

Anaïs is laid in a bed in a ward somewhere across the other side of the hospital. Fortunately, the kind folk at A&E know Jeff well and understand him wanting to check on her. He always keeps track of what's happened to his patients. And Jeff knows the hospital pretty well. It all comes from years of experience, something which Andy (who is probably halfway home by now) doesn't seem to get. Jeff arrives in the ward, still wearing his paramedic uniform. Anaïs has just come around from the anaesthetic and is still a little drowsy. On seeing who her visitor is, she sits up (as best she can with both legs suspended from the ceiling) and smiles.

"Merci beaucoup. Thanks very much for 'elping me."

"You're welcome. I'm just glad you're alright."

"I 'ad zis strange dream, like it was real. I suppose I can tell you about it... zere's no-one else 'ere to talk to, my family are down in France. I dreamt I was une renarde... a vixen, and I was running really fast. It was so good. What is your fursona, s'il vous plait?"

"Me? I'm a leopard. That dream sounds great. What sort of anaesthetic did they put you under? I want to try some!"

Anaïs giggles a little at this. "You're funny. Your name is Jeff?"

"How do you know?" Jeff replies with amusement.

"Your uniform."

"And you're Anaïs, unless you changed your name once we got you out of the ambulance. Nice to meet you, and I wish you a speedy recovery. I'd love to stop and chat, but I've got to be going. A furry minimeet, funnily enough."

"Aw, and I 'ave to miss it! Trust me to end up injured while zere is something fun going on!" exclaims Anaïs sulkily.

“Yeah, and all because of some chavs in a minibus. Very typical.”

“Chavs, what are zey?”

“You don't want to know.”

XXII

Something Furry This Way Pads.

Needless to say, Dave is released on bail. Most likely to skip it. Officer Walters knew this was coming. He shakes his head in despair, before going home, having finished another shift of upholding what's left of the law.

A bus station at 9:30 in the morning. Assorted litter drifting like urban tumbleweed out from under the shelters, only to be caught in the rain and get stuck to the surface tension of the gathering puddles at the blocked drains in the corners. One of which is thrown completely asunder as ten tons and fourteen feet of double-decker bus swings wide into the stand for arrivals from Leeds, its wipers ineffectively flopping side-to-side without really doing much to help. As the bus pulls up to stop, its left mirror clangs against the shelter, bending in against the bodywork. The doors open with a hiss and a bang, and forty or so passengers amble onto the filthy concrete paving in single file. As Helga gets off the bus, she spots a certain slightly-wider-than-most chap among the departing crowd. *As if, he was here on this bus, probably the train too, and I had to not notice! What a waste of potential catching up time!*

While Helga wends her way through the rabble of passengers, the bus driver climbs out to straighten the mirror. Ron never had been that good at lining up to the kerbs and bus shelters. It had nearly cost him his PSV driving test. With the 510 bus to drive back and forth to and from Leeds all day, he's beginning to wish he'd paid more attention to the instructor. They say you see plenty of the world and lots of new faces when you're a bus driver. 'You can really go places', they said. So far Ron has been back and forth to Leeds every day for a week and is about to sample the delights of shorter, local bus runs. Not quite what the recruitment agencies will have you believe.

At the shop around the corner from the bus station, Cuggles stops for a second to dig out his map of the town. A tap on his shoulder has him swinging round in an instant.

“Helga! How did you get here?”

“Went by the same bus as you. How didn't you spot me?” Helga has a point. With her ears and tail attached along with a Viking helmet with holes for the ears just in front of the horns, she's pretty hard to miss.

Together they set off for the mysterious 'emergency minimeet' amid the steady rain. Before they've even gotten out of sight of the bus station, Cuggles spots someone wearing the tell-tale tail.

“Doctor Livingstone, I presume!” Quoth the Space-Bat-Angel-Dragon that is Wubble. Also rather large (but dwarfed by Cuggles's proportions), Wubble is actually stood next to the furson Cuggles had spotted, who, now he has turned around, is clearly someone Cuggles has never met. Ignoring this, they greet each other with hugs anyway (nearly being squashed by Helga, let alone Cuggles. For a short girl, Helga is very strong).

“So, where's VulpeSteven?” asks the unknown fur.

"No idea. I thought he said on the forum we had to go find his house, meet him there." Helga replies.

"I have a map. More importantly, who are you, good canine-featured one?" queries Cuggles.

"I'm DaveB on the forums, and am supposed to be a Husky."

"We just got here from Manchester. Sir Francis Snake is in that shop over there," Wubble indicates a newsagent's across the road, "and I think Squee and Edwin said they would be in on the next bus."

Sir Francis Snake appears from the newsagent's, wearing a monocle and a short, gelled hairdo and carrying also carrying an unusual umbrella, an Ordnance Survey map and two bags of random stuff including a newspaper and a bottle of mineral water, his hat and an assortment of biscuits. At a gap in the traffic, he crosses the road to meet up with the growing group of furs.

"Right, you can't say I'm not prepared. Are we ready to go on our 'emergency' expedition?"

Met with nods, the well-organised be-monocled dude leads the party up the hill out of the town centre and across a seemingly endless area of suburbs, turning left, then right, then left again...

Helga notices early that these streets are vaguely familiar. "Er, you do know you're taking us back along the bus route from Leeds?"

"Well, it isn't the route from Manchester. And I think a little exercise will do us all some good." Sir Francis Snake surmises. Cuggles smiles in a way that only an irritated Cuggles can smile. "It's OK, I'll kill you later," Cuggles tells the adopted walk leader with glee. Sir Francis Snake turns back to him, frowning, making his monocle stand out even more ridiculously. "Don't you think it would be I who killed you, chinchilla?"

"Not if I got to you first," is the simple reply.

Jeff gets home just so as to turn around (and change speedily out of his uniform), pick up his sketchbook and tail, then head out again. In his Renault he bounces his way back down the farm track and into the patch of suburban housing nearby. Instead of going into town, he carries straight on. *What a hectic life you have when working nights...*

A Renault Modus drives up Moor Lane towards the group who are walking the same way. Some members of the group have tails, one even has a Viking helmet, but with ears as well as horns... *Obviously furies*. The rain stops as Jeff pulls into Kenneth street and parks where he had parked his ambulance only 31 hours previously (only now there's an ancient Flying Wardrobe parked there too, leaving Jeff with only a short parking space) and as he straightens out, watches the rabble of misfits in his wing mirror definitely coming this way too. Jeff gets out of his car, shuts the doors and presses the button on his keyfob. A satisfying 'clunk' accompanied by a flash of hazard lights announces that the car is locked. Jeff looks up the street and notices something that somewhat deflates his optimism about his first minimeet. A blue Ford Ka is parked up in the dead-end, with the unmistakable plushie kitten hung as ever from its sucker cup in the window. *Beth is here.*

Beth is here. Having finally found Kenneth Street, she gets out of her Ford Ka and walks down the pavement to number 42. Locating number 42 is easy enough; it's the one with the ragtag group of random furies hanging about outside it, all apparently waiting for someone to answer the door. As she draws nearer, Beth notices a face amongst them she was hoping wouldn't be there. *Oh dear, this is going to be awkward.*

Jeff tries not to look at Beth as the door opens and a guy called Paul shows them in.

Beth tries not to look at Jeff as the group remove their shoes in the cramped hallway at the bottom of the stairs before ascending to the flat above.

Halt Mouse and Pam Ther both arrive at the meeting place just in time for the door to shut in their faces. If they didn't have to park around the corner in Brampton Grove, they wouldn't have to be knocking on the door just as they can hear a set of keys jangling against the woodwork. The cylinder lock rotates first towards the frame, then away from it again as the person locking the door realises there are more attendees now stood outside in the questionable weather.

Claire, suddenly awoken from a couple of hours of watching very little happening at all, suddenly finds herself faffing with her zoom-lens digital camera, which has switched itself off to save power. A couple of snaps (with the flash switched off) of the furgags arriving later, all is quiet outside the flats again. Rather awkwardly, the Renault Modus parked in front of her has now blocked the view of the front door to number 42. This being the only usable window in the flat for this purpose, Claire decides to wait until someone appears in the first floor windows. Lining up her zoom lens carefully, she has a good view into the lounge and can see as far as the top of the wall and door frame on the other side. The bedroom curtains are rather annoyingly still drawn, and the minuscule bathroom window has obscured glass, which is fair enough. With only the camera lens poking out from under the bottom corner of the net curtain, from a distance no-one should be able to tell she is there.

In the middle of Halden, a bus arrives late from Sheffield. It's 10:10 already and Sheric and Georgina are both going to have to run if they don't want to be any later. Fortunately, Sheric has been to VulpeSteven's place before, on his 19th birthday bash. The two girls set off, Georgina just following Sheric, and run straight into a rather confused looking Squee. His conbadge bright orange and several glowsticks hanging about his person, he is hard to miss.

"You seen Edwin anywhere?"

"No." replies Sheric.

"BOO!"

All three turn around with a start.

Edwin, tall and slim and as goat-like as his fursona, looms over them all with a grin on his bearded face.

"Are we going to go find this minimeet, then? I think we missed the bit where we meet everyone in town..."

"That's exactly what I was going to do. Come on!" Sheric beckons the other three to follow her.

A Volkswagen camper van of typical sixties décor is parked on the hard shoulder with a flat tyre. Adamfox, spanner in hand, is busy swapping the spare wheel on while Lupustorm and Kred wait inside the van making cups of tea with the little gas cooker. Having driven all the way from County Durham, it seems silly to be stuck at the side of the M62 only a few miles from your destination. Fortunately, the blow-out of the tyre only caused damage to the wheel arch and a couple of paw-print transfers on the side of the van. More importantly, from Lupustorm's point of view, is the fact that they are probably missing out on something really

cool. "For all we know, VulpeSteven could have invented some sort of machine that changes your genetics or something so you can actually become your fursona. I wouldn't put it past him, and it would be just our luck"

"Yeah, and I think you're wearing that collar a little too tight. Next you'll be telling me the girl from the supermarket is spying on their every move from an empty flat or something!"

The two sit in the tilted, jack-bendingly overfilled camper van in silence for a moment before they both say in unison, "Naaah!" and fall about laughing.

"OK, my turn..." Kred continues his game.

D:Rat has decided not to bother with the minimeet after all. It clashes too much with the gig in Leeds he wants to go and see. On arrival at the gig, it quickly becomes apparent he has made the wrong choice.

|||| |||| |||| |||| |||

Chaos Theory

Just as Paul is showing Pam Ther and Halt Mouse, along with the rest of the attendees into the lounge, another knock on the door announces some late arrivals. Paul briskly swings around and heads back downstairs to let in the latecomers. Unlocking the door yet again, he opens it to find himself face-to-face with a very out-of-breath Edwin and a frankly exhausted Squee. Behind them are Sheric and Georgina, bearing sketchbooks and faux-fur samples, and equally tired-out.

"Are we too late?"

Paul rolls his eyes. "No, come in. I'll have to lock the door behind you, though. It's a little chavvy about these parts," he adds with the air of someone commenting on the weather.

The band naff, the stage falling apart and the rain bucketing down, D:Rat is really regretting wasting his money on the tickets. Half the audience are booing another drenched performance off the stage, the other half having already left.

"OK, if you can all get settled in the lounge, I'll get you all drinks. We have Tango in every flavour and not much else." Paul shepherds the gathering into the lounge, allowing the furs to decide between each other who wants what drink while he gets out as many glasses as he can find. Wubble takes the important job of counting up how many of what need to go around, then relays the info to Paul in the kitchen.

About five short. Luckily, VulpeSteven's kitchen cupboard has the answer in the form of some flimsy plastic cups. Drinks distributed and with nothing better to do, they quickly grab places to sit and commence nattering.

"RayWolf, eh? Nice to meet you."

"Has anyone seen Lupustorm or Adamfox?"

"What do you think is the better sort of fur for my tail? I like the long better, but the short is longer lasting..."

"Thanks for the Tango, mate."

"I'm a mouse, she's a panther. Match made in heaven, apparently..."

"Sorry to be asking so soon, but we just had a long journey. Where's the bathroom?"

"Have you seen The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy?"

"Well, I got to level 30 of the first part of my game, then I got stuck. I'll get around to finishing it in time."

"I know this sounds silly, but since we're at VulpeSteven's place, where is he?"

"Excuse me, I need to get to the bathroom. Ta."

"I still think purple would work better..."

"So that was when I finished my dream, still balancing on this cliff edge..."

"You what?"

While the small talk settles down in the lounge, Steven takes the opportunity to set up the computer and Genticizer ready to demonstrate.

Paul stands in the doorway, holding a glass of Tango Orange and waiting for everyone to quieten down enough for him to address them all. One by one, the idle conversations cease as the occupants of the room realise Paul is patiently awaiting their silence. Paul beckons Ray to join him at the doorway as the last of the noise dissipates and all eyes settle on him.

Including those of Claire. Click-click. She can't hear what's being said, but it's clearly something important.

"Ladies and Gentlefurs, and those uncertain or somewhere in between..." (Georgina looks up indignantly at this point) "anyway. Myself and Ray here have found out something flipping cool. Perhaps even extraordinary. VulpeSteven has created an amazing invention, and both he and it are currently in his bedroom. It has the potential to change the world, depending on who uses it and how of course. But, as you will see in a minute, the first and foremost use of it has direct implications to us furies. I can't really explain much further than that, it's one of those things you have to see to believe."

Helga sits forward and interjects, "So you mean to say that's why we've been called here to this flat for an 'emergency minimeet'?"

"Yes."

"It had better be good, then."

"That's why I used all those superlatives. I don't take this sort of thing lightly, and nor should any of you."

Paul turns to the fur stood next to him, "including you, Ray." Ray smiles sheepishly back.

After a moment, Sheric (sat in front of the fire) breaks the momentary silence. "Well? The speech?"

"Er, yeah. That was all I really had to say about it. The next bit really is for you all to see what it is I'm rattling on about. I'll just go and see if Steven's ready."

"What about the pizza? I came here under the impression there would be pizza, free of charge. I insist on proof of this before partaking any further." Cuggles requests firmly-but-in-good-humour, stopping Paul as he heads into the hallway.

"It's in the fridge and the freezer, we'll be having it later. First things first, though."

Paul leaves the room, and all eyes switch their gazes to Cuggles.

“What? Someone had to ask!”

The Twenty-Fourth Division Of This Book

The Tension's Killing Me!

Claire can see the bloke who she had sold the pop and pizza to leaving the room, having just given some kind of speech. So far, so mildly interesting. But Claire has a feeling things are about to get a lot more newsworthy. Something is about to happen. *I can feel it in my bones.* Claire's bones have never yet been wrong, and she has always prided herself on her woman's intuition/sixth sense/whatever. The couple of furbags Claire can see (one of them wearing a Viking helmet?) sat near the window get up as if they're trying to see what's going on.

Steven has the computer running and ready. The Geneticiser, having survived the clean-up operation, must now survive being curiously stared at by dozens of furs and then being used whilst being utterly marvelled at by those same furs. But even more than he's worried about his invention, Steven is getting last-minute cold feet about going through with showing this thing to all and sundry. *What will the world say? Showing it to Paul, and then especially to Ray was bad enough, but now it's getting bigger than me. Once they've seen it, it's out of my hands. I'm walking, no, padding into the unknown.*

Paul walks in to a very deeply thoughtful Steven. “Er, Steven, it's time you make yourself known. Be prepared for lots of staring and wonderment and such!”

“Yeah, in a minute. It's just that now it's come to this, I'm not sure if the world is ready for me or the Geneticiser. What will happen once this gets out of my hands? Who will use it, for what?”

“To tell the truth, I have no idea. But imagine what the world will miss out on if you don't. Besides, the longer you put it off, the harder it will be.” Paul sits on the bed next to Steven's tail and starts to stroke it. Steven looks up and gradually lifts himself out of his depressed moment.

“Thanks, Paul. You're a really good friend, you know. And dangerously close to sounding like you know what you're on about!”

“Someone's got to keep an eye out for you. You'll do the same for me. Now, when you're ready...”

“And when you've let go of my tail...”

“Oops, sorry!” Paul relinquishes his grip on Steven's tail, the end of which had been starting to go numb from being squeezed a bit too hard by an absent-minded Paul.

“What's he taking so long about?” Halt Mouse asks impatiently.

“I don't know, but if he takes much longer, Cuggles and I will be making short work of the pizzas,” replies the hereunto very quiet DaveB.

“I don't think Cuggles will want to share them...” surmises Wubble.

“It's alright, I can kill you all before you get anywhere near them.” Cuggles flippantly replies, meshing his fingers together menacingly.

“Charming,” replies DaveB in a voice that suggests he doesn't really believe the threat somehow.

Paul enters the room and the motley gathering falls silent. Their eyes are not on him.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Freeze-Frame!

Claire takes a photograph, then takes her eyes away from the camera lens to have a look for herself. She expected to be putting together a scandalous story of true fursuits, devoid of any possible mystery. This so far has been a story of an important gathering, something to do with a possible invention or discovery, and now this... is it some kind of amazingly realistic fursuit, per chance? Whatever it is, it's obviously warranted a gathering and the purchase of a lot of pizza. *Well, if I can't make sense of it, I can always fill in the gaps with hearsay and conjecture.* Claire takes a closer look at the screen showing the picture she has just taken. With the zoom lens and silly number of megapixels, this camera has captured the scene across the street quite well. *That fursuit does look very, very realistic... must have cost a bomb.* That's one thing Claire never understood about fursuits. Why do they spend so much money on a silly outfit like that? She gets back into position behind her £1200 camera.

"Er... hello," the anthropomorphic fox standing bold as brass and clear as day in the lounge doorway says tentatively.

Everyone in the room seems to have lost their ability to speak. They simply stare for a minute or two, apparently too busy trying to process what they are seeing. Far too real to be a fursuit, and as everyone else in the room can see the same thing, they all remain speechless except for Paul and Ray, who are waiting for the shock to sink in. Steven just stays where he is, worried that if he steps further into the room he might be going too far too soon.

Eventually, Ray decides to stop the stalemate. "Fat Penguin!"

Half the room turns to face him with puzzled looks. Paul says what they're all thinking. "What? He's obviously a fox, and you should know, you've been here since last night!"

Ray's Antarctic bird remark has, however, had the desired effect. "It breaks the ice." The fall of two drums and a cymbal from the proverbial cliff can almost be heard over the silence.

Amid several members of the room facepaw-ing, the admirably level-headed Georgina brings things swiftly back on topic. "Alright, so you're telling me this is Steven. Fine. He is, as far as my sensory perceptions can divine, an anthro fox. There is no way that's a fursuit, I should know because I make them. I do believe I met you before, Steven, and there is no way you would try to trick us all. So would you please be so kind as to explain to us all just HOW THE HECK YOU FRIGGIN' MANAGED TO TURN YOURSELF INTO YOUR FREAKIN' FURSONA, IN THE NAME OF ALL THAT IS GOOD AND FURRY!" Georgina knows how to get the point across. Several other furs murmur in agreement, equally awaiting some kind of explanation.

Steven looks across to Paul, who looks back as if to say 'go on, tell them then!'

"Well, erm... oh, heck. I don't know where to start now!" Steven was prepared right up until standing in that doorway. Now he just feels nervous and a little embarrassed.

"The beginning would be good, usually works for me." Helga helpfully inputs her two pence.

Steven pads into the middle of the room and sits down on the floor next to the coffee table.

Claire gets a better photo of him as he does so. Even from that distance, she can tell there is something

significant about this furfag. The rest of them (from what she can see) are all watching him like he might either explode any minute, or start singing, or both.

Fixing his eyes on a point somewhere in space in front of the big lounge window, Steven prepares to explain himself, dreading the idea that this situation will probably repeat itself with ever-bigger numbers of people as time goes on.

“OK, here's how it started. Ever since I joined the furry fandom, I was amazed by the idea of transformation and the stories linked to it. Of course, I knew it was impossible, like so many other floaty ideas the internet has. But then I thought to myself, 'wait a sec. Nothing's impossible. I looked at it another way, considering what it would actually take to create something that could alter your genetics and make you change without surgery or unnecessary pain. It was then I realised that all the tools to make it were already out there, in the mainstream. The invention I have made (more on that in a minute), is made from a random connection of many different things, all sorts of technologies from everywhere. The main thing that gets it to really work, though, is open-source philosophy. I know you're all sick and tired of me banging on about using open source software on the forums and so-on” - several furs nod in agreement at this point - “but the fact of the matter is that without the ability to pick apart the inner workings of software and, as later became possible, hardware, I would never have been able to create my new invention. I know this all sounds like waffle, but I am getting to the point.” Steven adds hastily as one or two furs appear to be rolling their eyes in dismay. “That all combined with the collaboration of a few furs in universities and laboratories here and there, and my good friend Doctor John Crossley before he mysteriously vanished, has led to the creation of a machine which allows us to *not just* pick apart our genetics and reassemble them to our heart's content (including the ability to remove any isolatable genetic disease and to immunise against quite a few others), with the obvious ability built in to personalise yourself as you wish, including but not limited to our fursonae; *but also* to do all the above at a ludicrously low price due to the free/open source hardware and software philosophy, meaning I can give you all blueprints to this thing and copies of the software and you can go and make your own. BUT what I've just said is all useless until you know what I'm on about, so without further ado, waffle or lung-emptyingly long talks, I would like to show you all not just what can result from the use of the invention in question (I'm sat right here already), but also the invention in action!” Steven takes a deep breath and continues his long-winded description, “now as you've probably already figured I have used the invention once already, on myself, like all good mad scientists do. Hence this is an anthro fox talking to you and not just some weird hallucination. Since I am now happy... nay, over the moon with how I am, there's no need to use it on me again, at least not for now. At this point I would ask for a volunteer to demonstrate the machine for us all, but one already came forward.” Steven stands up and surveys the half-impressed, half-bowled-over-with-scientific-jargon furs. “Any questions before we proceed?”

Wubble raises his hand. “Just one thing: exactly how much of your explanation was in English?”

“Alright, hands up everyone who didn't understand any of my explanation.”

Five hands shoot up, another couple rising more slowly. Steven facepaws. “Well, if you didn't get the explanation, you'll understand once you watch the demonstration. Next question?”

Halt Mouse, a fairly tall, curly-haired chap, raises his hand and inquires briefly, “what if this got in the wrong hands, or paws? I mean, it all sounds well and good, but someone could use the design for evil purposes.

What then?"

Steven sighs. *Halt Mouse has a good point.* Paul decides to save Steven from the awkwardness of the moment. "Well, look at all the other great inventions the world has seen. What would it be like without them? The microchip, let's not invent that because it will be used in missile guidance systems and war machines of all sorts. The wheel, let's not invent it because someone could use it to get away quicker after a robbery. I know it's hard to do something like this, but it will be worth it for the positive impact it has."

Sheric pipes up, "What about the creatures we don't have DNA for? Like dragons?"

"They can be done, but it's up to the designer to manually create the dragon DNA. That should mean lots of variations, though." Steven replies thoughtfully.

"Who is your volunteer, then?" Jef Leppard queries from the back of the room.

"I am." Ray steps forward, much to the surprise of at least half the room, "I've decided to be the first wolf to try this thing."

Claire is getting impatient. She really didn't expect to be watching them just talking for ages... boring lot. This is looking more like a book club than a furry orgy. The only real things maintaining Claire's interest now are the guy who bought the pizzas' suggestion of some kind of invention, the fact that her instincts are telling her to stick at it and that strangely realistic fox guy in the middle of the room...

Z

Much Ado About Something

A Volkswagen camper van, covered in a complete panoply of overtly furry regalia and looking even odder for the lack of spare wheel on the front, chugs its merry way up Kenneth Street and parks up in Brampton Grove. Claire vaguely wonders if it contains something important, or indeed a more interesting story.

"Right, so we had how many theories as to why this emergency minimeet is going on?" Kred double-checks with Lupustorm as they cross the street. Lupustorm straightens his collar, then responds, "five. I bet you a fiver it's the first one. If none of our theories are true, the bet is void."

"OK, I raise you a tenner it's the third one."

"Deal." Lupustorm grins as they approach the hardwood door of number 42. The bet will be void, but it'll make a funny talking point.

"Honestly, do you two gamble over everything?" Adamfox asks rhetorically. "Come on, we're late. They've probably nommed all the pizza now."

"Oh noes, the pizza!" Lupustorm replies with mock horror.

A knock on the door interrupts Steven just as he's about to suggest they all get up and cram into the bedroom, so he can show them his machine. Sighing in disbelief, Steven looks to Paul.

"Yes, alright, I'll answer it again. But you're gonna owe me cookies for this." Rolling his eyes, Paul descends the staircase to open the door.

"NOBODY EXPECTS THE FURRY INQUISITION!"

A typically normal greeting coming from Adamfox. Paul welcomes him, Lupustorm and Kred in while Adamfox starts chuntering about how many chief weapons he has, including his magnificent white tail that he never takes off.

Before Paul can warn any of them, they have their shoes off and are running up the stairs to greet the whole minimeet in much the same way. As Paul shuts and locks the door, this time taking the key with him to hang back up in the kitchen, he can tell what's coming before he even hears it. *Oh woof.*

"NOBODY EXPECTS THE... Anthro... fox...?" Adamfox trails off into stunned silence as he finds himself standing face-to-face with Steven. Behind him, an equally shocked Lupustorm whispers in awe, "I think I owe you ten quid..." Kred tries to hide a mischievous grin at this unexpectedly-beneficial-for-him development.

"Yes, thank you, I think we've all established that Steven has made a thorough job of amazing everyone." A rather annoyed Paul speaks from behind Lupustorm's head, making him jump. "Please, just go into the lounge and someone will fill you in on what's what. We're not about to go through the whole explanation again."

"Agreed, enough talk. Right, those of you who haven't just blundered into the middle of everything, please come with me. The invention is on my desk in the bedroom, and I don't want to move it. And please avoid touching it, for obvious reasons." Steven leads the way into his room, followed by his attentive audience. Unsure of what else to do, Adamfox, Lupustorm and Kred just join the back of the queue filing into the limited space of the bedroom, with Kred positively smirking as the word 'invention' adds to the fulfilling of Lupustorm's own wacky hypothesis at his own expense.

Claire can't believe her luck when the bedroom curtains open. Re-aligning her camera expectantly, she is then somewhat disappointed when the fat one chooses the wide windowsill to be his seat. With him in place, most of her view of the room is blocked. The only other bit she can see, though, is no less interesting. A computer with some sort of box next to it. Using the camera like a pair of binoculars, she zooms it in as far as possible. The box appears to contain a random assortment of objects, but arranged very purposefully, like they're meant to do something. To her non-technical mind, it looks like a cross between a printer, a box of Lego and something else. *Maybe this is the invention? Unlikely, but I might as well take a photo, just in case.*

Ray knows from Steven's preparatory talk that morning (and from common sense, really) he'll need a pair of trousers with some sort of hole in them for his tail. Otherwise he'll embarrass himself in front of everyone. In the bathroom, he quietly takes a pair of scissors and a needle and thread to the oldest of the two pairs of jeans he brought with him before changing into them. Meanwhile, Steven can be heard explaining more about the machine to the gathered furs in the bedroom.

"Right, now we're all squeezed in, I'd like to introduce you to my creation. This is the Geneticiser." Steven, standing proudly in front of his desk, indicates the machine sat atop it.

"What, you mean that box of stuff on the desk?" a disappointed Squee asks.

"You mean to say that that thing is the reason you are your fursona now?" Pam Ther inquires not-quite-

believingly.

"Yes, along with the software I made to go with it." Steven quickly wiggles the mouse to wake up his computer from its screensaver (a descending assortment of Lego bricks building something random), then rotates the desktops to show his Geneticiser software.

"OK, I won't knock the machine for looking like a toy box because if it works, that's pretty cool." DaveB states more or less what the rest of them are thinking.

"We shall have an actual demonstration of it working when our volunteer, Ray, is ready in a moment. Please bear in mind the actual transformation does feel flipping weird, so give him plenty of space." Steven says with a slight warning tone.

"We're already packed in like sardines. Might it be better if we leave the room while he changes, then come back in after?" Suggests Paul sensibly.

"Or you could wait for me and ask me instead of talking about me behind my back!" Ray interjects from the doorway. "Look, I haven't changed the actual size of my body in that design, so the clothes will stay on, right?" Steven nods. Ray carries on, "in that case they can watch. I think it'll be better that way. You're all my friends, so it's moral support for me and a free lesson for you."

"You *think* we're all your friends..." Cuggles interrupts with an air of false malice. Everyone ignores him.

The fox-man is standing by the computer desk, his gesticulations making it obvious he's talking about the box of tricks therein. The evidence all seems to point to it being the invention in question. Claire takes some more photos. The memory card still has at least half its capacity free, even at the high resolution Claire's using. The occupants of the room (there must be at least 18 from Claire's point of view), all appear to have swapped their attention to the unseen doorway at the other side of the room, out of Claire's sight thanks to the rather well rounded fellow in the window.

D:Rat spends the rest of the day faffing with the UKFur forums. Which are pretty quiet, due presumably to the minimeet he very nearly went to. Ho-hum. *I can catch up with my commission for Bonny Rabbi in Scotland.* Opening the graphics application on his PC, D:Rat sets to work with his wonderful artistic skills. *Who knows - perhaps some day I'll be able to pay off my debts with commission work.*

Ray sits down at the computer and clicks on the icon on the top bar. This time, logging output is set to a quiet background text file, meaning no silly flipping over to append documents. That had been for testing purposes. The Geneticiser machine, now with a fresh slide and water, and no secondary DNA sample to read, starts its work with a lot of LED blinking. Ray, expecting something a little more impressive, looks up to Steven worriedly. Steven appears to just be waiting for the machine to do something, so Ray follows suit. Moments later, it starts to move the main print/lens/head/thing down to the row of film cases. Just short of hitting the end of the tub, it stops and descends to one of the film cases to pick up a little water. Back to the slide it goes, once again creating a smear of water in the centre. Over to the human sample it goes, where it promptly stops with the flashing of more LEDs. Realising this looks pretty anticlimatic to those who can't tell what the machine is doing, Steven reaches over Ray's shoulder and pulls up the automatically created text log file over the top of the program, but not so as to obscure it entirely. He sets the font size large enough for

just about everyone in the room to see.

```
Job 2 has begun  
Reading Sample H1  
Please wait
```

```
Verified as correct primary sample
```

The machine once again lowers slightly more and touches a hair, this time it's one of Ray's. Microscopic fragment obtained, it returns to the slide and places the fragment in the middle of the fine film of water. The machine head then returns to the row of film cases for a second sample. Finding none in any of them (one by one it checks each), it spits out a new message on the log file:

```
Reading Sample F1  
No secondary sample found.  
Using library sample data: computing and comparing physical ingredient  
requirements.
```

Steven bites his lip in nervousness, then realises the hard way just how much sharper his teeth are. His computer climbs in audible stress again, kicking out enough heat to raise the temperature of the room.

```
.....100%
```

```
All requirements fulfilled in Sample H1, in other words a 'simple' re-jig of  
molecules is in order.
```

Steven relaxes a little. A couple of furs smile at the amusing way Steven has programmed the machine to report its status. The atmosphere is still tense, though. You could cut it with a knife. The Geneticiser's head moves back to the slide once more.

```
Loading sequences...  
Done  
Building package...
```

Once again, the computer starts to take the strain as every piece of Ray's new DNA is processed and built using his old DNA and the atoms therein as building blocks. From the point of view of the rest of the room, the Geneticiser is not doing much at all. Other than a few blinking LEDs and a faint occasional buzzing from somewhere within the assemblage, it appears to be quite inactive. As the computer continues to radiate heat full-blast and the immobility of the head continues, Ray looks to Steven for answers. Steven just stands there serenely, prepared to wait all day if he has to. Baffled by his inexplicable patience, Ray concludes it must all be going well and continues to wait along with the 20 other silent, anticipating furs in the room. Out of boredom, he moves the text log file around to watch the window wobbling, then realises the computer is actually very busy. Behind where the log file had been, the 3D image of Ray's fursona has started to rotate, accompanied by it being 'scanned' in a futuristic graphic representation of what the computer is doing internally with its 1s and 0s. Satisfied that the computer is actually doing something, Ray sits back and enjoys watching his new self being computed and built into a little benign virus thingy on a piece of glass. Kred is positively rubbing his hands together with glee. This unbelievable coincidence just keeps getting better. Lupustorm gets out his wallet. He knew he shouldn't have bet against his own prediction, but that was the point of the game...

Three Nines Am I

RayWolf

Claire can see through her camera that the machine-in-a-tub on the desk is doing something, but what she can't tell. The rest of the occupants of the room all appear to be watching it, so it's obviously the 'invention' of which the lad at the Co-op spoke. Interesting, but not in itself newsworthy. She needs to know what it does. And why it's so furry-centric.

Ray's benign virus is indeed taking the machine longer to create. As the computer labours on at full speed, gradually heating up the air in the already overcrowded room, the LEDs continue their ceaseless blinking.

Through gritted teeth, Ray utters what everyone is thinking: "HOW MUCH LONGER DO WE HAVE TO WAIT!"

In response, the computer makes everyone jump with a surprisingly loud and immediate 'beep!'

Construction complete. Enjoy.

The Geneticiser stays put for a moment longer, then the LEDs stop flashing and the head lifts up from the slide. The computer's fans audibly cycle down a few RPM. Ray looks to Steven for encouragement as some of the other furs in the room gather in close to look at the masterpiece of nano-engineering with eyes that can't see it.

Steven calmly and slowly starts speaking.

"Could you all please stay back, we're going to need to breathe, ideally. Ray, the machine's finished. You can take the slide out from under those metal clips now. Be careful not to touch the wet patch in the middle, that's your ticket to anthro wolf. Touch it with your fingers and I can't guarantee it will work."

Ray tentatively grips the edges of the slide with his thumbs and pulls it out from under the clips of the old microscope-base with a scraping click. Holding it up to the light in front of his face, he can't see anything more than a tinier than tiny black dot in the middle of a wet spot on the glass.

"When you're ready, you can lick it. From then on you're an anthro wolf, assuming it's all worked like it did for me."

"Lick it?" A confused Adamfox chips in.

"Yes, lick it. That's because the tongue has plenty of bacteria which are essential to getting the process going, and it has a decent blood supply and is indeed designed to absorb molecules for the purposes of tasting. Makes the best place to start things off, I should think. Oh, and try not to shut your mouth too quickly, however tempting it might be. It's best to allow a minute at least for it to settle in." Steven spouts sense.

Claire, meanwhile, takes some more photos as close-up as she can of the slide in the younger one's hand while he's still conveniently holding it up to the light. Then he appears to move it towards his face, and... lick it?

Ray licks the slide. Avoiding the urge to shut his mouth or lick his lips, he keeps his tongue hanging out for as long as he can. Eventually, he decides enough must surely be enough and shuts his mouth anyway so as to speak. "I don't feel any diff- - oh, wait a sec..." Ray starts feeling a niggling tickle on the tip of his tongue. At this point, Steven realises the other furs in the room have gradually crept in close again. "Get back,

please. He needs room now.” And then to Ray, “I suggest you put the slide down on the desk and lie down on the bed, Ray.”

Ray nods in agreement and does as Steven says. Just as he's climbing onto the bed, his tongue starts tingling ferociously, like an all-night curry party with no drinks. The feeling starts to spread around his mouth, then changes into something softer, but definitely weird. Like nothing Ray has ever felt before, quite likely. Then the oddness explodes and the whole shebang of weird feelings seem to spread through his head, down his neck and through his whole body, making him shiver from head to toe. To the observing furs, he's just laid out on the bed displaying some very strange facial expressions and body language for the moment, but all that changes in an instant when his tongue suddenly grows longer in the order of inches and hangs stupidly from his mouth, before his mouth and nose stretch forward quickly to meet it. The shape of Ray's head starts to change and his ears move and stretch, followed quickly by an outburst of fur from Ray's new muzzle that quickly spreads over his face and around his ears to the back of his head, where it meets up with the fur going down and around his neck, down his chest and back and carrying on under his clothes.

Ray's mobile phone suddenly starts ringing, so while his hands are turning to paws and rapidly furring up, Ray is frantically trying to find his phone in the pocket of the jeans through which his tail is now growing, and inside which his nether regions are filling with fur and moving slightly to adjust to his tail's presence. Ray passes the phone to Paul, who checks the name on the screen: Mum. “It's your Mum. I think we can ring her back!” Paul cancels the call and the rather annoying ringtone ceases playback while Ray's legs ache and his feet grow longer and more paw-like by the second. The mesmerised audience continue watching as the fur continues its inexorable march down Ray's legs until the last few bits of fur fill out the end of his interestingly patterned tail and the gaps between his toes. Ray, shaking with the overwhelming sensations that have just flooded his mind, realises one very important thing: the transformation may now be petering out, but the changes he must make to the way he sees the world are only just beginning.

Claire is annoyed. She can tell something important is going on in the flat, but the rather wide bloke together with a couple of other furbags are completely blocking her view. *I will have to wait and see*, she grumbles to herself as she reaches for a sandwich.

U+0032 U+0038

Worried About Ray

*“The truth be told, the truth be told,
I'm worried what the future holds, the future holds -
I'm seriously worried about Ray.”*

-The Hoosiers

Which is exactly what Leanne is thinking as she tries dialling Ray's mobile number again, hoping the call was cancelled by a lack of signal on Ray's end and not by her son being rude.

Ray sits up on the bed, his new tail swishing uncertainly. He stares at his paws for a moment in awe and

disbelief, then turns to look at his tail: *exactly like the design I made*. As Ray raises his paws to his head, trying to make sense of its new shape, the mobile phone rings again. Ray tries to speak, but his mouth is dry and all he can manage is a hoarse whisper. *"Can I have a drink of water please?"*

While Steven quickly goes into the kitchen to fetch a glass of water, the more skeptical among the furs can't help but wonder if it hasn't been a complete success. Paul answers the phone.

"

Hello?

Hi, I'd like to speak to Ray, please.

He's a bit busy at the moment, can he call you back later?

I'm just getting a bit worried about him, that's all. Mother's intuition, you see. I just want to know he's alright.

Er, I think he's fine. Like I say, he'll ring you back in a bit. He's a bit, um, tied up at the moment.

Tied up? What do you mean?!

I just mean he's busy and can't talk right now. He'll call you back in about ten minutes, OK?

Fine. But if it's any longer than that I'll be ringing him again. And it'd better be Ray who answers.

OK, I'll make sure of it. Bye.

"

Paul rolls his eyes as he presses the call-ending button on the phone. Ray, empty glass in paw, licks his nose for the first time in his life. Feeling much refreshed on top of all the other sensations now bombarding his only semi-prepared mind, Ray says his first (proper) words as a wolf (the ones he actually wanted to say), in his still-recognisable deep voice.

"Anyone mind if I say 'Aroooo'?" the silly expression on his face makes it clear he's still the same old Ray inside. Only now of course, he's much more confident. Much more comfortable with himself. *In fact, I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life - and I feel more alert, to boot!*

"Well, Ray, needless to say, that was flippin' cool!" An awestruck Squee exclaims.

"I like the look of this, actually. Nice one!" Lupustorm is impressed, despite the monetary loss incurred by the unlikely events unfolding before his eyes.

Claire's eyebrows rise up her forehead. *Wasn't there only one of these very realistic furs about a moment ago?* Now, as she watches through her zoom camera lens, she sees the rather rotund chap leave the windowsill, to be replaced by someone new. Someone standing, looking out of the window. Someone who looks like a wolf, to the same level of realism as fox-man. Only, wolves don't have such intricate patterns in their tails. And, whoever this wolf-man is, he seems to be looking right at her. All Claire can do is stay still and take photos without flash, until he looks away.

"I gotta say, that is some uncanny resemblance between you and your fursona drawings, Ray. You have a

great eye for detail." Georgina compliments him. But RayWolf isn't listening. As the others leave the bedroom to get settled down to an afternoon's deliberation, entertainment, pop and pizza in the lounge, Ray is standing at the window, looking at the ground-floor flat across the street. His newly improved senses are telling him something about it isn't quite right. *What about that flat is making me so uneasy?* Then the penny drops. *The boarded up door. The board looks loose. It wasn't like that last night when I arrived.*

Having twigged that something is amiss, Ray then looks closer. *What's that in the window? Not an ornament...*

"Steven? Could you take a look at this for a minute?" Ray calls to the anthro fox as he's about to leave the room.

"What's up? You alright?" Steven crosses the room with concern.

"Yeah, I think so. It's just, that flat across the road. The one with the boarded up door."

"What, you mean number 39? Jef Leppard said he was there the night before last."

"That's right. Notice anything odd about it?"

"Well, the door is boarded up, obviously. Or... hang on..." Steven looks harder. "It looks loose, doesn't it!"

Claire's heart races. Both the furfags with the eyes for detail in looking like animals are now eyeing the detail of her hideout. Not daring to move lest she be spotted, Claire wills them to shift their gazes elsewhere, that she might be able to pack up and make some kind of escape.

"And there's also something in the window there. Not really an ornament, is it? And why would it be lifting the corner of the net curtain like that?"

"Just a second here... that looks like a camera lens!"

Claire takes another picture, this one with them both in it. She can peruse it and the hundred or so others to her heart's content in high-def once she gets home, but for now she is pinned to the spot. To move would break her meagre cover, since net curtains break up shapes but don't mask movement. Cursing her choice of location, Claire has no choice now but to wait.

"Well, we can't call the police..." Ray puzzles, "it would be a fat lot of good if we call them out to deal with a possible spy and they cart us two off instead..."

"What are we supposed to do, then? We can't have somebody taking photos of us and running off to the press!" Steven stresses exasperatedly.

Ray steps away from the window thoughtfully. "I know. Leave it to me."

"Er, Ray, what exactly are you going to do?" But as Steven turns round, all he sees is Ray's funkily patterned tail disappear beyond the doorway.

Now's your chance. Pack up and get out as soon as the coast is clear.

The rest of the furs are once again filling the lounge. Just as he's about to go and see what's taking Steven and Ray so long, Paul is stopped short at the door Steven, whose vulpine face is now wearing a very worried

expression.

"Where's Ray?" Steven asks Paul urgently.

"I don't know, not in the lounge." Paul answers with bewilderment.

Both of them look into the kitchen. The window is open and the keys missing from their hook.

Quoth Steven, "I'm seriously worried about Ray."

The Tenth Prime Chapter Number

Espionage

Claire speedily bundles her stuff back into her rain coat, making sure not a crumb of evidence is left in this filthy, crumb-strewn environment. Her camera safely away, memory card separately stowed, sandwiches and drinks, notepad and pen all stuffed into her pockets, Claire makes ready to leave. In her haste, she doesn't notice the ludicrously cliché banana skin rotting on the floor, and makes a headlong trip to the floor almost exactly where Annette had been a day and a half earlier.

Ray is in The Zone. As he makes his ninja-like stealthy progress, a poem he read recently enters his head.

I am in The Zone
I am like lightning in a place
That no-one goes alone
I see space
I am aware
My tail is making the loudest sound
In the quietest air
My mind is on fire
My paws electric
My feet don't stop
Until they get there

This is The Zone
I live for this
And this alone.

Never before has it been more true.

Claire gathers her scattered thoughts and wits, along with the camera which has fallen out of her pocket, from the threadbare rugs and vinyl tiles of the disgusting floor of the flat. Pulling her aching self upright again, using the chair she had nearly forgotten to put back in place as support, Claire checks her camera for damage before placing it back in her pocket. Cursing silent vehemence at the semi-mouldy banana skin, she dusts herself off and moves the chair back into place as quickly-but-quietly as she can. That done, she makes her more careful way round into the hall. But before she can get to the collapsed door and associated

plywood, somebody beats her to it. From the outside. As the board swings open creakily, Claire looks the figure silhouetted in the doorway up and down once, and pees herself. *My God, it's real!*
A deep voice quite befitting of its anthropomorphic lupine speaker resonates in the cold hallway.
"You want a story? I'll give you a story."

Ye Olde Chapter-e Thirty... e.

The Situation

"I thought Ray needed to ring his Mum, wasn't that why he was staying in the bedroom for a moment?" a confused Paul inquires.

"So did I, but before he could get round to it, he looked out of the window and spotted something in the ground floor flat opposite here. I saw it too. It looked like some sort of camera, and before I could stop him, he'd gone!" Steven explains to Paul.

"You mean number 39?" Jeff is stood right behind them, having left the lounge to see what the confusion is about. "Like I said on the forum, an old lady died there on Friday morning. I was one of the paramedics who was called out to check on her."

OK, Claire, get a grip. What can you do? The police are out of the question – apart from the likely dismissal of her story, she's likely as not in trouble herself. She can't escape because the Big Bad Wolf is in the way. Even if she does, she can tell this dude is more than capable of tracking her down. *Checkmate, you win.*

"You can take all the pictures you want, break into as many empty flats as you want and they won't bring you any closer to the truth. Or you can come with me and I'll show you what it's all about." Ray explains fair and squarely in his low, wolf voice.

Grudgingly, Claire steps forward to accept the offer she can't refuse.

Ray marches Claire across the street to Number 42 and, with her held in one paw and the keys in the other, he unlocks the front door quietly, steps inside, Claire in front, then shuts and locks the door behind him. There is a conversation going on upstairs with an air of tension about it.

"So the place is definitely empty now?" Steven double-checks with Jeff.

"Yeah, she was the only one there." Jeff responds.

"It would make sense that if anyone wanted to spy on us, that would be the place to do it from." Paul reasons sensibly.

"But why would anyone be spying on us already? How could anyone already know outside these four walls about the Geneticiser?" Steven implores with disbelief.

"Andy." Jeff replies unexpectedly.

"Who?" Steven, Paul and Ray and Claire all say at once.

"Andy, my colleague." Jeff carries on, "he was with me on Thursday night in the ambulance. He said he saw a fox in the window in your front door, only not a fox. His words to the letter."

"So you think he could have decided to come back and spy from the old lady's flat based on seeing my face for just a second?" Steven queries incredulously.

A deep voice behind him makes Steven jump. "No. I think it's got a lot more to do with Little Miss Nosy here, actually"

"Hang on, you're the girl from the Co-op!" Paul exclaims disbelievingly.

"Honestly, what is all this? Scooby Doo?" Claire protests, looking up at Ray, whose paws maintain a tight grip on her shoulders all the while, "You've even got a Mystery Machine out there!"

"Actually, that would be mine!" Adamfox calls from the lounge. It quickly becomes apparent that the whole meeting has been listening to the preposterous developments with increasing interest.

"Just what were you doing out there?" The anthro fox asks interrogatingly.

Claire, realising lies are no use here due to the obviousness of her situation, decides to come clean. Through a semi-terrified, semi-sheepish grin, she decides the quickest way out is the truth.

"I wanted to get some photographic evidence to back up claims of fuffaggotry. It would have made a great newspaper article if I could actually get pictures of fuffags yiffing. But, erm... that's not what you're here about today, is it?"

"And she would have gotten away with it too, if it weren't for us meddling fuffies!" Kred jokingly points out, making everyone except Claire laugh.

As he stops laughing, Steven quickly drops the smile from his foxy face to replace it with dead-seriousness in an instant. "Right, what do you know already?"

Ein Und DreiBig

Wass?!

Herr Jurgen Kimpler.

Deutsch Medien-Mogul.

Außerordentlich fruchtbar, als Resultat einer Medien-Imperium über Europa.

Und im Moment ist diese massive Mann des Geldes

hat Kopfschmerzen.

German Media Mogul.

Extremely rich, as a result of a media empire on Europe.

And at the moment this massive man of money

has a headache.

Why must the news be so slow? Even the usual backup sources of news – the celebrities – seem to be very quiet and careful of late. So Kina Grannis has released another album. Big deal, it's not like she's doing a Britney Spears and climbing out of a car with neither knickers nor hair. The news from elsewhere is unusually sober too. Heck, it hasn't been this quiet since before 9/11. Not that Jurgen would wish such an event on anyone, ever. But it does feel rather like the world is waiting for something. And, as Jurgen's rule of thumb usually goes, *the longer you wait, the bigger it gets*. Well, a month is a pretty long wait. *The next person that gives me a print-worthy story is getting a bonus*.

Anaïs, unbeknownst to her father, is even more bored than he is. Unable to sleep for long, the bags hang heavily under her eyes. And her legs could win Olympic Gold for aching. Stuck in a ward, watching the

pathetic British attempts at 'reality' TV on a TV permanently stuck on Channel 4, Anaïs wills her legs to heal quicker so she can get out of this trap. Amid the beeped out swears from the TV, a nurse brings in lunch. It's 2:00pm and the weather outside is grey and miserable but not actually that wet, despite the forecast earlier claiming it would rain to the point of flood. Attempting to straighten out a cramp in her back, all she achieves is to set off more pain in her left leg. Seeing a recurring theme developing here, Anaïs starts to hate the so-called 'chavs' as much as she hates the cabbage she didn't ask for on the plate in front of her. *Whoever did this to me, they are Têtes de noeud. And it takes a lot to make me swear.*

Marie Kimpler sits at home in Lyon, staring out of the window at the acres of vineyards, wondering what possessed her to marry such a workaholic husband. When he's not at work running his media empire, he's always busy doing *something*. On top of the fact that he's German and seems to know more English than French. *Clearly, love is blind. The only thing keeping me here with you and your megalomaniac ways is Anaïs, and now she's gone off to England in that Renault you bought for her... well. What am I supposed to do?*

Marie pours another glass of the rather fine local wine. The clouds scudding across the sky reflect from her tear-filled eyes. *Fifty years old. No party will excuse what happened in the earlier part of those, and the time since then hasn't made me forget.*

Andy sleeps on through the day, his sleep not really interrupted by the arrival of a mangled Renault Clio on the back of a flatbed truck at the police impound yard next door to his house, in preparation for the insurance assessor to see what's happened. You get used to noisy things like that when you live next to them.

"So you know we have an invention here. I suppose it's fairly obvious from what you've seen, what it does, then." Steven surmises.

"Oh, I would presume it has something to do with you being a fox and this guy being a wolf, per chance? Or am I seeing things?" Claire sarcastically remarks.

"Absolutely. But you need to know, this invention is more than just something that can turn a furry into their fursona. I designed it to be useful in the medical world too. It can cure genetic diseases and solve many other problems if in the right hands."

"Yeah, and the right hands are a bunch of furfags who use it for what exactly? Yiff would be my best guess. And how exactly is turning someone into a half-animal a cure? I must be missing something here!" Claire retorts infuriatedly. The claws on her shoulder start to dig in slightly.

"Yes, you are missing something. And no amount of explaining we try to do will change that. Steven, I don't think we're getting anywhere here." Ray turns Claire around to face him. "I tell you what. We'll do a deal. You hand over the memory card with the pictures on it, and the camera, and we'll let you go."

Claire worriedly clutches the expensive piece of kit in her coat pocket. "And if I don't?"

"Let's just say you'll be our b**ch and we'll make sure you do just what you seem to think we do." Ray replies, relishing the look of horror on Claire's face at his words. Steven can see things getting out of hand, and quickly takes on the role of peacemaker. "Look, we'll just wipe the photos from your camera and memory card, then you can have them back and be on your way. In a few weeks this will be in the news

anyway, it's just we're not ready for it yet. And don't listen to Ray, he's just getting high off power." Steven shoots a warning look at Ray, and while Steven's eyes are averted, Claire pulls a face at Ray too.

"Alright, here's my camera..." Claire can see this is her only way out. She hands over the camera, still attached to its massive zoom lens, then starts fumbling in the same pocket for her memory card. Handing that over too, she turns to Ray.

"Could you ease off with those claws a bit, they're really digging in!"

Steven heads into the bedroom to check the contents of the card and camera.

"Well, I suppose you won't be going far..." Ray relinquishes his grip on Claire's shoulders.

"Aw, this isn't fair! I was so looking forward to killing her!" Cuggles speaks up from his seat in the lounge, where the rest of the furs are still watching the unfolding drama with a mixture of amusement and worry. Sir Francis Snake spots it before anyone else does, but before he can alert Ray, the mistake has already been made and the damage caused by it unfolds before their eyes.

Steven plugs the camera into his computer and searches the memory built into it. Empty. He puts the memory card in its slot and searches that too. Empty... *Well, she wasn't sat there in an empty flat with an expensive camera for the fun of it. She must still have the actual photos on another card, this one's a fake, a spare.* Steven gets up to confront the sneaky so-and-so about this, but before he can get to the bedroom door, a loud, painful whine can be heard in the hall, then Claire, followed by Sir Francis Snake and Helga, Cuggles, Lupustorm and then Kred all blast through the doorway, ploughing into Steven and piling on top of him on his bed. Claire manages to wriggle free of the impromptu furpile, leaving Steven winded and stuck under the combined weights of Lupustorm and Cuggles. Claire jumps across the room and grabs the camera, yanking out the cable and holds it high above her head, making all the pursuing furs stop one by one as they realise what she's threatening to do.

"One step closer and I destroy your invention!" Claire throws down the gauntlet by threatening to do the same with her camera.

"But surely your camera will be destroyed too?" queries Sir Francis Snake disconcertedly, his monocle dangling from his neck like a clock pendulum.

"Maybe, but I think it makes a worthy trade. So, I go free no more questions asked or your invention ends now. You choose."

Ray appears in the doorway growling deep and loud, clutching his groin in pain in one paw, his ears flattened against his head and the most fearsome of expressions on his lupine face. Fortunately he sees the hostage situation and stops in his tracks, despite his nature screaming at him to attack.

Steven, finally having gotten himself out from under Cuggles's gargantuan mass and Lupustorm's unhelpful additional weight, speaks up despite being out of breath. "Let her go, it's alright. She can put what she wants in the newspaper, I don't care. The Geneticiser is too important for that."

"After what she just did to me? If I had my way, b**ch, you would be in hospital by now!" Ray growls with exasperated anger.

"And what would that achieve, Ray? It would make you a criminal. Worse press than anything this madam can slap on us. Steven's right, let her go. She's not worth it." Lupustorm hurriedly points out.

"Glad you're seeing sense. Now get Wolf Man into the lounge with Fat Dude holding the door shut. The rest

of you I want out of the way, and Fox Man here can show me out. Do it now or I destroy your precious Geneticator. Understand?"

Ray, Cuggles, Helga (who has frozen on the spot like some kind of Viking statue lest she be the one to set off Claire's threat), Lupustorm and Kred all turn to look at Steven, all wearing looks that seem to say 'well, any ideas?'

Steven just stands up and waves his paws at them with an air of urgent dismissal, all the while keeping an eye on Claire. Ray drops the keys at the top of the stairs before Cuggles ushers him into the lounge.

"Well, are they all ready?" Claire inquires impatiently.

Steven spares a second's glance through the doorway before snapping back to look at Claire so fast he pulls the muscle in his neck. "Ow... yes, they're ready. I'm ready when you are."

Claire lowers the camera to her eye level, removes the zoom lens, switches it on and takes a picture of the Geneticiser, and another of Steven before switching it off again, returning it to her coat pocket and heading for the door. Steven makes to follow her, but when she sees the keys, Claire dives past Cuggles and Kred for them and jumps down the stairs. Steven matches her speed and arrives at the door at the same time. He's not going to let her steal the keys, that would be a slap in the face.

"I'll have those, if you don't mind."

Claire smiles and passes him the keys. "Just testing you."

"And the photos."

Claire sighs and takes the memory card out of the camera. *Looks like I'll have to make do with the photos I took from across the street anyway.* "Here. Now can I go?"

As Steven takes the card from her open hand, she grips the card again with her fingers in a move of grudgingly giving up. Steven's black paw pulls the card from between her fingertips anyway.

That done, he unlocks and opens the door. "There. F**k off. And if we ever see you on this street again, I'll let RayWolf decide what we do!" Steven shouts after her.

"Yiff in hell, furfags!" Claire taunts as she runs full pelt down the street, safely convinced she has the photos she originally took safe in a separate pocket. *In fact, I'd better just check that.*

The pocket is empty.

Three And Two, Thirty-Two.

Full house.

"Right, so what exactly did we gain from that?" Ray asks Steven as he re-enters the lounge.

"Quite a lot, actually." Steven replies with a surprising lack of concern.

"Aren't you worried she's going to take evidence of us to the papers?" Ray inquires with a frown.

"Not too much. She doesn't have evidence." Steven answers with a poker face.

"Oh yeah, and a memory card probably full of surveillance of Ray transforming escaped your notice, did it?" Cuggles retorts ironically.

"You mean this memory card?" Steven holds up a high-capacity memory card in his paw for all to see.

"You sly little fox! / Well, obviously. But how did you do it?" Sir Francis Snake is as utterly amazed as the rest of them.

"Yeah, how did you get the card off her?" Helga implores, impressed.

"He took it off her at the front door, I heard him ask her for it!" Cuggles explains.

"Yeah, but the card's empty anyway, so what are we worried about?" Lupustorm points out, "I saw the folders open on Steven's screen before Claire pulled the camera out, and they were empty folders."

"Be that as it may, she still took two more pictures afterwards, I heard the camera shutter sound go off just before she left the bedroom." Kred interjects.

Steven views their piecemeal knowledge of the situation with mild amusement. "When you're quite done interrupting each other, I'd like to get a word in edgeways about how it really happened."

The room falls silent again. Ray gesticulates to Steven: *go on, then...?*

"The card she gave me to begin with was a spare, an empty. When I checked it on my computer, both the card and the camera's memory came up empty. I realised she still had the card with the photos on it, so I got up to interrogate her about it, thinking perhaps the threat of a little skritch might settle the issue.

Unfortunately at that point she came bursting through the door with you guys behind her, and we all ended up on the bed. But the way she landed on me put the small chest pocket of her coat right in front of my paw, unbelievably luckily it was that pocket that contained THIS card," at which point Steven produces an identical card in his other paw, "Which if we are lucky is the one containing the photos she took from across the road. The other card here I asked for at the doorway, because it contained the other two photos she took afterwards. Claire gave it to me, thinking she still had the card with all the surveillance pictures, and presumably thinking that by placating me with this card she would not be pursued in future by us. Seen as we now have both cards, I think Claire will soon be finding herself without any evidence to back up her story."

The room sits once again in stunned silence for a second before Edwin breaks it with the simple words, "you're good!"

Quentin Harrison returns home from a Saturday Lunchtime Bingo competition at the local community centre, having raised £300 for his favourite charity, Friday nights in the Fox & Hounds pub. Having dodged some stupid blonde running across Moor Lane in a massive raincoat, he pulls in to Kenneth Street only to find his usual parking space blocked by a Renault Modus. This would all be well and good if he could use one of his alternative spaces, but between a VW Camper covered inside and out in faux fur, animal pawprints and silly stickers and murals, a Ford Ka with a stuffed toy kitten hanging in its back window staring forlornly back at him and a rusting silver Volvo Flying Wardrobe, all his usual spaces are taken.

Walking back down from the far end of Brampton Grove, Quentin grumbles to himself and looks for the flat where the party is being thrown. Sure enough, the flat right above his own is packed with people (*including one wearing what looks like a Viking Helmet? Must be fancy dress*), he can see them all through the oversized lounge window of the Victorian terrace which he himself had gone to great lengths to develop into affordable, if slightly quirkily laid out, flats. Originally intended for students, most of them had been snapped up by chavs who tend, as it turns out, to spend very little time indoors anyway. Most of them appear to prefer hanging around in town hung over from the night before and hanging on till the pubs open. But Quentin's personal favourite, number 40, he had kept for himself and his visiting grandchildren, who had been dumped on him by his daughter Jane when she insisted she needed a weekend break. He would have a word with

his tenant later. *For now the party or whatever it is can go on, provided the noise is kept down.*

As Quentin opens his front door, an exhausted babysitter awaits in the hallway, clutching the five-year-old Timothy to keep him from running into the road. Once Quentin has shut and locked the door, she lets go of Tim, who immediately sets off like he's been fuelled up with E Numbers.

"Granddaddy, I saw a wolf fall into the garden today! He fell from the sky and landed like this!" Tim mimes someone landing expertly on their feet, "Then he jumped over the wall and he was gone!"

"You saw what?" Quentin checks with mild surprise and amusement.

"A wolf. He's been on about it for the last hour," the tired babysitter replies. "Probably dreamt it or something."

"It was not a dream! I saw him for real, you just didn't, because you were watching telly!" Timothy protests with annoyance. "I saw him land on the grass and he stood up and jumped over the wall! He was wearing a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt and a jacket!"

A mildly impressed Quentin remarks, "that is some pretty detailed description. You have a very vivid imagination, Tim. Now do you mind going in the lounge for a moment while I say bye-bye to this nice girl who's looked after you for me while I went to Bingo?"

Tim sulkily plods his way back into the open-plan lounge/diner/kitchen and hoiks his short legs up onto the sofa.

"Thanks for looking after them. Where's Sarah?" Quentin checks with her as he gets out his wallet.

"She's in the lounge, just asleep on the armchair. I had them watching Robin Hood, only Tim seemed more interested in imagining his own stories based on the back garden. He's pretty intelligent for a five year old." She takes the £20 note from Quentin's hand. "Thanks, by the way. I can pay for my driving lesson now."

Without further ado, the babysitter leaves the flat of her landlord and walks two doors up the street, back to her own rented flat.

Quentin, having shut the door behind her, turns around to survey the scene in the lounge.

"Not exactly one for tidiness, is she?"

Tim looks around the room, smiling cheekily. "I got my drawing stuff out. Want to draw something with me?"

"Yeah, alright. So long as we tidy up afterwards. What do you have in mind?"

"The wolf I saw earlier. He was really fast, you know. I want to be just like him when I grow up."

Quentin wonders across to the patio doors as Tim is saying this, and looks out onto the moist back garden, scratching his dark-brown-with-grey-flecks beard.

There are large paw prints in the muddy grass.

The Thirty-Third collection of Words.

Lost for them.

"Right, now we've dealt with our spy problem, have Ray most definitely transformed into a wolf and my own transformation into a fox explained (and I'll give hugs to anyone who isn't convinced), how about we tuck in to some nosh?" Steven proposes to the assembled gathering.

"A most excellent idea, I shall participate forthwith!" Sir Francis replies with his usual unnecessary pomp.

"About time!" Edwin agrees.

"That's a point, what time is it? Anyone got a watch?" Georgina asks the room in general.

"There's a clock up there, silly! And it's quarter past three." Pam Ther answers with a giggle.

"Right, we have a dozen pizzas in the kitchen. I'll stick them in the oven four at a time. That's all I can fit in. Paul, if you could help I would be grateful, since this is your area of expertise and you bought the darned things." Steven requests not-so-subtly. He and Paul go into the kitchen to sort out the pizzas and pour some drinks. Realising the window is still open from Ray's earlier acrobatic act of impressive stealthy escape, Steven sticks his head out of the window for a second to peer down at the garden where Ray landed when he jumped out. Sure enough, the pawprints in the soggy grass from where Ray landed are standing out like sore thumbs. As is the very surprised look on the face of Quentin, the landlord, who happens to be standing next to them, looking up.

Ray, meanwhile, is back in the bedroom. Finally getting round to ringing his Mum back, it's only now that he realises he hasn't a clue what he's going to say to her. Poor Leanne doesn't even know he's a furry, let alone an anthropomorphic wolf. She will still be labouring under the delusions that he's at a gig somewhere in Leeds, and will be back tomorrow morning at latest. Oh dear. *But Paul did say I would ring her back.* Nervously anticipating the worst, Ray takes his phone out of his pocket, considering sending a text. *No, better not. It would only annoy Mum, she hates texts.* Pressing the button to bring up his previous calls list, he presses it again to call the last incoming number.

"

Boop b-

Hello Mum, it's me.

Erm, to be honest, Mum, never better. B-

Look, I've got something to tell you, Mum.

It's just that, erm... I'-

No, I-

Ring R-

Hello?

Ray, thank God. I was so worried about you! Are you alright?

Oh, good. It's just, you know those moments when a Mum is convinced something's happened to her child, you know, mother's instinct or whatever? I was so sure I had one of those earlier, that's why I rang you up. Only your friend answered. That got me worried even more. What had you so busy you couldn't answer the phone anyway?

What? What's the matter?

You what? You pulled a girlfriend at last? Cos if so, good for you!

What, you're gay? I really don't mind so long as you're happy, son. Come on, spit it out!

No, just listen! I'm a furry, if you really must know. B-

A What?!

A furry. Yes, I like anthropomorphic animals, the art associated with them and the stories written about them. It makes me happy. That's why I got that grey faux fur bed throw last week. But-

Well, I had been wondering about that, but go on...

But I'm also an idiot, because I didn't tell you sooner. I lied to you, I'm not at a gig at all. I'm actually at a furry mini-meet, basically a gathering of friends off the internet. We're in Halden, somewhere between Leeds and Manchester. But that's not important right now, what's import-

Well, I think it's very important! You should have told me where you were going, what if something really had happened to you?

...

...

Ray?

...

I've got to go, sorry. Love you lots, bye!

boo Ray! RAY!

oop

”

Leanne puts down the phone. Let alone worried about Ray. This is getting out of hand. *When Ray gets back home he will have some serious explaining to do.*

Ray quickly ends the call and puts his phone away to see what the source of the commotion at the bottom of the stairs is.

Paul is stood at the bottom of the stairs, holding the door half-shut against an apoplectic, purple-faced Quentin, whose furious voice is ringing in the ears of all within a 100 yard vicinity.

“I DEMAND TO SEE MY TENANT THIS INSTANT! I WILL NOT HAVE ANIMALS IN MY FLATS, THE TENANCY AGREEMENT HAS BEEN MADE PERFECTLY CLEAR TO STEVEN. A PARTY I CAN COPE WITH, IF IT'S A ONE-OFF! BUT A FOX IN *MY FLAT* IS REALLY TAKING THE BISCUIT. WHERE IS STEVEN?”

“I'm sorry, he isn't available at the moment.”

“Not available. NOT AVAILABLE?! WHAT A CONSIGNMENT OF GERIATRIC SHOEMAKERS! IF YOU LOT ARE HERE, SO IS HE! Yes, I can see through the lounge window up there -” Quentin gestures wildly at the window in question “- SO COME ON OUT, STEVEN. THIS NEEDS TO STOP NOW!” Quentin puts his foot

down at this point with enough force to dent the floor. Paul shrugs and releases the door.

"Alright, come in and see for yourself. But you're not going to like it." Shutting the door behind Quentin, Paul turns to see both Steven and Ray stood at the top of the stairs. Quentin, having not noticed them yet, carries on, "Damn right I'm not going to like it..." At this juncture Quentin spots something in the corner of his eye as he straightens up from adding his shoes to the huge pile now accumulated in the small space between the door and the stairs. Slowly lifting his head up, Quentin turns to look properly.

"Hello Quentin. Sorry I didn't answer the door." The anthropomorphic fox apologetically says.

Quentin's jaw drops as he gibberingly tries to pick up his words, "St.. Ste..ven?" Then comprehension and a sly grin dawn in equal measure on his still-red face. "You are having a laugh! Good one, now where's the camera? I want to see the look on my own face."

Paul looks worriedly from Quentin to Steven. *Man, this is awkward.*

"And I suppose your friend there next to you, he's in a suit too? Very good, Steven. Mind if I, ah, take a closer look?" Quentin is clearly trying to convince himself as he ascends the stairs, "That is the best costume I have ever seen. My gosh, I bet it cost you a bomb! But so long as you can pay the... rent..."

Quentin is now stood face-to-face with Steven, so close he can see there are no seams, and Steven's warm breath is adding more moisture to the sweat beading on Quentin's balding forehead. Those eyes are Steven's alright, and the fur, it just carries on down through underneath the clothes. And that tail is moving on its own...

"Wow, that's really good! You almost had me fooled... again..." Steven holds Quentin's hand in his paw, and there can be no denying. *It's real. No suit or animatronics could be this good. Holy Lord...*

Quentin looks across to the wolf. Just as real, just as plain to see. "I'm not even going to ask why you apparently jumped down into my garden." Then he slowly says to them both, "I think I'll leave you to your party and come back another time, when I'm feeling a bit... better..."

With that said, Quentin turns around and slowly makes his way back down the stairs, like he can't even trust his feet. As soon as he gets to the door, he flings it wide and scarpers back to his own flat as fast as his feet will carry his 63-year-old overweight body.

"I think we're going to have that effect on people, Steven." Ray remarks matter-of-factly.

I Can Haz Chapter Number plz?

Quentin gets back inside his flat, slams the door and stares worriedly up at the ceiling for a moment. Then he looks at himself in the mirror on the wall, as though he can spot whatever's made him go mad in his reflection. Walking into the lounge, Quentin takes a seat next to his grandson and picks up a pencil and paper. Glancing across at Tim's efforts at drawing the wolf, Quentin then draws his own picture.

"What you drawing, Granddad?"

"I'm sorry I doubted you, Tim. I just met that wolf of yours face-to-face."

"What did you say to him?"

"Nothing that meant much. To be honest I was too flipping scared. I must be going nuts!"

"That's a really good picture. I don't think you need to be scared of him, though. When I saw him in the

garden, he looked at me for a second... and I think he smiled. Bad wolves don't usually smile at you, they eat you. Like Little Red Riding Hood's Grandma. So I don't think you need to be scared, because if he was nasty you would be in his tummy."

Quentin only shook his head at this point. Kids have a great way of putting the most complex things simply. *Perhaps that's where I'm going wrong. I'm making it more complicated than it is.* Oddly, this thought seems to help calm him down. Quentin looks at his drawing. *The subject certainly looks like he has the potential to be harmful, but that doesn't have to be his nature.* But all of this pales into insignificance as Quentin's rational mind slaps him with reality again. *You just saw a wolf-man and a fox-man. For real. The fox-man is Steven. Either they really are really there and real, or you're going mad. What's more likely?*

Steven puts two ham and pineapple pizzas and two meat feast pizzas into the two ovens (top and bottom). Both are set to 200 degrees Celsius and left to cook. Paul, meanwhile, measures out some more glasses of Tango. Ray, ever the show-off, is on the floor in the lounge surrounded by furies who are finally getting a chance to touch him, to see what real wolf-fur feels like and so on. And he's being skritchted into submission by the rib-ticklingly dexterous Halt Mouse. "No-ho-ho, ple- ple -please, that tickles! Hehehehehehe!" Ray giggles uncontrollably under the pampering hands of a dozen furs.

"Aw, but you feel so soft and cuddly!" Pam Ther simpers from next to his left ear.

"And to be brutally honest, you are one of two very interesting furs at the moment!" Edwin informs him unnecessarily from somewhere above him.

"I love it, you're adorable!" Beth says from somewhere near his feet, "Can't wait to change myself!"

"So, you're not phased by the reactions we received from Claire or Quentin?" Ray manages to ask in between tickles.

"Hell, No! I want it all the more, to see the priceless looks on their faces! After all, we're furies, we're proud of it, let's show the world who we really are!" Lupustorm exclaims from somewhere near Ray's left paw.

Steven looks in on the scene from the kitchen. "Glad it's him, not me. If it were me I'd run a mile! I mean, you'd think we've established by now he and me are both for real!"

"Oh, I'm sure you'll get your fair share. Get used to it and enjoy the attention." Paul responds with mild amusement, which instantly multiplies ten times when Cuggles appears in the doorway and grabs Steven's tail, "don't think you're getting out of it! Come on, in the lounge!"

Surprise rapidly being replaced by the pained expression of a fox being pulled by the tail into a situation he's pretending he doesn't like, Steven grabs at the door frame with his claws digging in. "Help me... not fair!" He strains against the inexorable force for a moment longer, but seeing only laughter from Paul, decides to give in and let go before Cuggles pulls his tail off. To much cheering and applause, Cuggles drags the reluctant fox backwards into the lounge to join in the fun.

"I bags the tail! Woo! Floof! Yay!" Squee jumps up to grab his slice of Steven.

"Alright, steady on, there's plenty of me to go round!" Steven calls out above the noise, clearly enjoying himself.

Wubble takes the opportunity to start messing with Steven's headfur and ears. Steven gives up fighting and just lets them enjoy the moment. After all, someone else might knock on the door any minute.

"Prepare to be glomped, foxy-fluff!" A gleeful Sheric pounces out of nowhere and starts skritchting his leg.

Uijsuz-Gjwf

Uif ✦✧✧✧✧ ✎ 📄 📁 📧

D:Rat finishes off his commission piece for Bonny Rabbi in record time. *Today could have been worse... at least I don't have an art block.* The fully inked and coloured finished piece looks stunning. D:Rat always enjoys his art. *It gives a real sense of bringing the fursona to life.*

"Alright, sorry to be a killjoy, but the first pizzas are ready. Make some room please!" Paul announces as he walks into the lounge brandishing two steaming hot pizzas on plates and a pizza cutting wheel. "More on its way soon." While Paul gets more pizzas going, Steven and Ray take advantage of the momentary distraction to get up and straighten their much-ruffled fur out. That done, Steven attempts the impossible: addressing a bunch of ravenous furies who have just been presented with food.

"Right, we need to sort some important stuff out now..." Steven starts off, but is interrupted by the effect of pizza.

"No, it's alright, I don't like pineapple"

"Yay! Nom nom nom!"

"Pass us a slice of pepperoni please!"

"Brown sauce anyone?"

"Look, Steven, I think we're better off leaving the important discussion until after the pizza." Ray states the obvious as Paul brings in the other two pizzas.

"Yeah, it's just that once they've had pizza, some will want to go home and others will want to just chill out. We still have some important pressing issues to discuss." Steven explains to Ray and anyone listening.

"Like?" Ray replies from slowly leaning towards the last slice of pepperoni.

"Like what we do next with the Geneticiser, ourselves and the introduction of all this to the world!"

Suddenly everyone is paying attention again. Not wishing to waste his chance, Steven grabs the slice from under Ray's paws and gets down to the serious stuff.

"Right, so far you've seen me, the result of the first use of the Geneticiser I created. You've seen it in action, transforming our good friend RayWolf." Steven nods towards Ray at this point. "Awkwardly timed phone calls, hostage situations with spying supermarket checkout girls and thoroughly freaked out landlords aside, that still leaves us with the major decisions to make. Now as there are so many of us here, I would like to request that we are all polite enough to not interrupt those with important points. And please don't get too distracted when Paul brings in more pizza, just take what you need -" Steven looks at Cuggles in particular emphasis at this point "- and get on with the main subject. First up: the fact that transformation or genetic alteration should be openly allowable and available to anyone, furry or not, provided they don't use it for malicious purposes. Agreed?"

Most of the furs show nods of agreement, except for Sir Francis Snake and Wubble.

"Just how are we supposed to police what purposes the technology is applied to?" Wubble queries in the style of someone with an excellent point.

"Excellent point. The fact of the matter is, we can't. I have built in a few safeguards against mind-control and heavy brain alteration, but even they aren't infallible, and there are other things people could do with it too.

The situation as I see it is much like that of Albert Einstein with his Theory Of Relativity, as he said, 'Had I known that my work would lead to the creation of the atom bomb, I would never have lifted a finger'. But think how much of the mod cons we have and other stuff all relies on his work. I don't know what sort of things the Geneticiser could lead to, good or bad, but I do know the world would only miss it if we went without. There's no point in going back now we've come so far. Trust me, it holds a heavy weight on my conscience. But I think it will be worth it because we'll get there in the end." Steven finishes with more questions than answers. "We could conceal it all, keeping it just for furies and as a secret hospital treatment, sort of like how the Wizarding World is kept separate in the Harry Potter books?" DaveB suggests tentatively.

"Do any of us look like wizards or witches to you? Do you think we know magical ways of hiding whole buildings and railway station platforms from the Muggles?" objects Ray.

"What do you plan to do to make it available to anyone and everyone, as in the public? We can't have them all coming to this flat for one machine!" Sir Francis Snake raises the elephantine, room-filling issue.

"Indeed we cannot. This is where the importance of it being open-source comes in. As Claire most kindly proved for us, one physical stand-alone example of the Geneticiser on its own is vulnerable to destruction or damage. The scale of some of the parts make it impossible for it to be anything but fragile. But because I've made it open-source, anyone can take the blueprints and copy the design and software and build their own, including any improvements they might wish to make if they understand it. Now I know not many of you are nano-engineers or have the money to buy expensive stuff, but that's the beauty of this design. It's made of pieces of household or school laboratory-level gadgets by and large, with Lego structural support and only one or two 'specialist' parts. The software is free to copy and redistribute and works on any deb-based Linux system. To those of you still unfortunate enough to run proprietary systems, I offer copies of Furbuntu and installation advice." Steven thinks for a moment, "but what I'm basically trying to say is, anyone with a computer, plenty of patience and the 'Scrapheap Challenge' mentality can build a working Geneticiser. It took me 18 months to work out how it all goes together. Building it was easier once I already knew that. So rather than queue at my flat with hordes of people wanting everything from a facelift to a fursona to a cure for cancer, what I'm suggesting is a do-it-yourself approach. The whole world will have the technology at their paws in a few months if we do it this way. But for this I need your help, that's one of the main reasons I called you here. Furiends, we stand at the cusp of a revolution. We can change the world," Steven realises just how big-speech-like this sounds. A big flag can almost be seen hanging behind where he stands, "by helping everyone to cure their diseases and helping everyone who wants it to physically become their inner selves. Because since I became my fursona, I've never been happier, despite the frankly odd setbacks, I know it's the real me standing here before you now. I'm holding no secrets any more. It does the soul good. So, friends, furs and countrymen, who's with me? And who thinks I'm completely off my rocker? Speak now or forever withhold your peace."

"That was one heck of a speech. Anyone would think you knew what you were on about" Adamfox muses whimsically, "look, you even have a flag to stand in front of!"

Steven turns round to see Ray, grinning daftly, has quickly drawn a Union Jack on some spare A3 and is holding it behind Steven's head. Steven folds his arms and throws an unimpressed look at Ray until he puts it down.

"I think you're off your rocker." Cuggles shruggingly comments unhelpfully. Ignoring this and turning back to

the rest of them, Steven continues, "well, sort of, but I don't know how best to start it all off. What I really need to know here is how we can each best contribute to moving this forward."

Beth looks forlornly up at him. "I would help, but having just lost my job, I'm a bit stuck for how."

"Oh, I'm sure we'll come up with something for you. You're only a partial waste of space anyway." Jeff speaks directly to Beth for the first time in months. She responds by sticking her tongue out at him. *No love lost there.*

"Any *constructive* ideas?" Steven rolls his eyes at the two still pulling silly faces at each other across the room. *Anyone would think they were an ex-couple.*

"Well, Claire won't be keeping quiet about us. It's almost guaranteed something will appear in the papers, and I think we're better off getting our positive message out first. I would suggest a world's first true anthro walkabout in the town centre, but the difference between fursuits and you guys is pretty big..." Wubble trails off thoughtfully.

"Yeah, but we can't hide either. I think we should get the technology spread out first, otherwise you can say goodbye to the whole Geneticiser, me and Steven in the next couple of days." Ray enigmatically suggests.

"Why?" Kred confusedly inquires.

"The government. The military. Unless we get the blueprints spread out fast, and ideally some positive, benign public uses made before we make too many more anthros, they'll nip public development in the bud and take it all to Area 51 or whatever. Then we'll be nothing more than weapons for some future unjust war." Like it or hate it, Ray has struck the proverbial steel wood-fastening device on the wide bit at the top.

"OK, then. I'll take some blueprinty things back to Manchester and get building my own Geneticiser. I know what I can write my thesis on at university now." Sir Francis Snake offers his help.

"My brother's a vet and sort of a furry. I could build and demonstrate the Geneticiser there on curing some sick pets. Once enough of them are cured, I could give copies of the designs to the RSPCA and so on. Then once enough people have Geneticisers for the novelty to have sunk in, I'll change myself." Halt Mouse looks across to his wife. "If that's OK with you, Pam."

Pam hugs him tightly and smiles. "I will change with you. We can both be together in fursona form."

Jeff scratches his chin, then stands up to present his thoughts on the matter. "What we need is some good publicity. I suggest you lot go ahead with your university and vet thingies, they're great. I'm going to go directly for the route of curing folk. I know for a fact there are a whole load of medical students in the hospital this next week. I also happen to know several patients who would make good candidates for this new 'pioneering treatment'. I can see it works perfectly well thanks to you guys. The difficulty will be building and using a Geneticiser in hospital in front of lots of people without getting caught by the managers, because if they hear wind of this before they see the amazing results it has, that's my job gone and my name ruined. Thankfully, I know a few folks who will help me. If I can get this right, we'll have some miracle cures in Halden Hospital. That will be all the publicity we need."

"You'll be the leopard with the healing paws!" Kred drops another attempt at a joke with a loud clang.

"Or possibly greasy. Pizzas up again, everyone. Careful, still hot!" Paul enters the room with four more pizzas balanced precariously on his arms, looking evermore waiter-like as he wends his way to the coffee table to place the new pizzas down and pick up the plates from the earlier ones. While everyone once again tucks in (Cuggles and Wubble just nicking a whole pizza each this time), Steven considers more of what can

be done.

“If I give you all the blueprints today, it should take you until about Tuesday to amass the necessary materials between you, obviously many paws make light work. If we can work together we can reduce the time it takes to get the news out. Meanwhile, I'll stay here and be the central hub for the software and blueprints. I can post them on a hosting site and anyone who wants to download them can do. The shopping list is easy enough to follow, like I said only a few unusual parts. I reckon if you can scavenge the top half of the list from second-hand and junked items, the rest should only cost about £120.00 per machine. If we get cracking, this can really become something. Ray here has discovered himself to be talented with the software.” Steven suddenly has a thought. “That's a point, Ray. When do you need to be back home?” “Er, well... I have a problem with that now, don't I.” Ray holds his paws up in front of his face. “How am I supposed to use public transport to get back? And when I do – or indeed if I don't, what will my Mum say?” “You were given plenty of warning before you changed. You went and decided to transform as the demonstration model.” Steven annoyedly continues, “Now, I can change you back to how you were before if you want, but...” Ray interrupts with a placatory “No, that's quite alright.” He sighs, then elaborates, “I don't want to change back. I like being me for once. I'll just have to make my excuses to Mum until we can figure something out. To be honest I'm not scared half as much of her seeing who I am as of her not knowing, so really I do want to get back down to London. But it'll have to wait until we've sorted stuff out.”

Somewhat unexpectedly, Adamfox stands up at this juncture. “Not necessarily...” The expression on his face is written all over with him having a plan.

Paul shouts from the kitchen, “Would someone kindly come in here a sec and gimme a hand? Lots of drinks to distribute and all!”

9E

Steven's List

Claire finally gets back home, her head reeling with thoughts of what she has just found out, seen, photographed and lost. Opening her door, she finds copies of the Halden Herald and The Daily Disaster hanging from her letterbox. The headlines of both are dreary and boring. The local broadsheet Halden Herald has a main headline of:

Drunk Driver Caught Following Crash

Stolen minibus wrecks

Renault Clio, injures four.

Man, 22 arrested, released on police bail.

While the nationwide tabloid Daily Disaster clearly caters more for the whole country's needs:

Free DVD Today:

Le Renard Et L'Enfant

Wow, they're really pulling out all the stops. Free French films probably not worth the DVDs they're pressed on. Claire pulls them out of the letterbox, shuts the door and throws the papers into the lounge for later reading. Taking off her shoes and sweaty, full-pocketed raincoat, Claire sits down for a moment to take in everything that's just happened to her. I just lost the evidence of a really juicy story, to the very subject of the story. A real fox-man. And a wolf-man too. At a furfag meeting. They have an invention that can turn them into animals now. And, they claim, cure cancer. Yeah, right. More likely an excuse to hide their guilt at what they're doing. Well, pictures or no pictures, there's no way we can let them all turn into animals - they'd probably take over the world with their animal strengths, then subject the world to their main weakness: yiff. There's no way I can let that happen. I need to get the news out now. The Daily Disaster are clearly having a slow news day, and they readily accepted the pile of waffle I threw at them last time, and printed it straight away. This time I know what to do, and this time the world shall know just how despicable these idiots are. I may not have evidence, but I still have memories and the ability to make it juicier. Let's see who's better at inventing.

Claire boots her computer and gets to work with her favourite subject in the Rumour Mill. *The 4-chan folks won't believe their eyes when I post an actual scan of this from the newspaper. Truth is most certainly stranger than fiction, and when combined with my mind it makes money. If at first you don't succeed...*

"Cheat! There's no way you won that!" Kred exclaims at Squee incredulously.

"No, I won fair and square. It's a normal 2p coin, I called tails 'cause my tail never fails."

"When you're quite done arguing, you'll notice the last slice of pizza has already been eaten." Cuggles amusedly interrupts, patting his voluminous tummy with a satisfied look on his face. Both Kred and Squee turn round and simultaneously respond, "Y U!" before falling about laughing. Half of the furs are now in the bedroom, while the rest remain in the lounge, having opted out of Geneticiser-building on various grounds. The hi-fi now plays James Blunt - *Three Wise Men*, while Cuggles, Kred, Squee, Edwin, Georgina, DaveB and Sheric all chill out and discuss such important matters as pizza, fursuits, games and anything to take their minds off the others in the other room. Georgina has opted out of 'the mission' due to it clashing with her having a lot to do already and very little technical knowledge ("No offence, but if I built one of those it would turn me into an amoeba!"). Sheric, while liking the idea, is far too busy as well and says she'll probably help later on once it's gotten off the ground. Squee can't see any real way he can help, so he just adds himself to the 'wants to transform' list. Edwin, Kred and DaveB don't really want to be involved too much, but offer their support of the general idea. Cuggles sums up his own position perfectly: "I'm already an obese, mouthy slob. Turning me into a chinchilla won't change that, but more people will laugh at me. And because people laugh at me anyway, nobody's going to listen to me trying to promote something I only half understand. But if you need anybody killing..."

Meanwhile, in the bedroom, Steven is printing off a pile of lists.

"These are a list of everything that goes into the Geneticiser. You can get shopping for the stuff you need straight away. And I suggest you get a spare one of these -" Steven points at entry 24, an ultra-fine drill chuck, "- because they tend to break easily. There's an electronics factory down the road where I got mine. I should think you'll find them in most industrial or medical machinery scraps. Once you've gathered all the

parts, go to the website at the bottom for the blueprints.”

“What about the computers to run it on? And what about that massive custom expansion card? Where are we going to get them from?” Halt Mouse inquires worriedly, “There's no way my PC even has half the power of that behemoth. Will it still be able to run the software?”

“Yes, it should do. It'll just take a lot longer. I suggest you max out the RAM before you start or it'll be slower than a snail in molasses with added salt. And don't worry about the card, I made that for a separate project. The main stuff you need for the interface is on the list, it just means instead of the card you'll have a little box to plug into the USB ports. It uses two of them, by the way. That's how it gets its power. If your computer is older than... about 4 years, upgrade it or replace it. Everything else is explained on the list, so please do read.”

The printer spits out the last of the lists and each of them take one.

“OK, you really made sure it's within budget! I'll give you that, Steven!” Adamfox states with surprise as he reads the list.

“Yeah, well. You'd be surprised how useful garden strimmer wire can be.” Helga grins, pointing out item number 45.

“So we'll work as teams, OK? Between us we should generate at least one positive event with public interest...” Lupustorm confirms with everyone.

“Yeah, I think we're decided mostly based on geography.” Then Steven goes through who will do what, “so, Jef Leppard and Paul will work on the hospital idea, with me staying here to help coordinate it. Beth, you lost your job and so are free to liaise with press, as is Lupustorm, until we have enough public acceptance for you both to transform, correct?”

“I think we can sort that out between us, don't worry.”

“Adamfox, you said you and Ray have some kind of plan in the making. Care to divulge further?”

“Nope. But once we're done, we'll be back here to help you guys. Kred and Lupustorm have already said they'll make their own ways home tonight.” Adamfox looks to Lupustorm, who nods, then to Kred whose nose is peeking around the door, who also nods in agreement.

“Halt Mouse, you and Pam Ther will be doing your vets idea. Keep us posted.”

Halt Mouse looks up from the list and nods before returning to the bizarre stuff needed to build the contraption in question. The reading glasses he has donned give him the look of a school teacher checking a test.

“Sir Francis Snake, best of luck with your thesis. Most of the work's done for you anyway, I should think...”

Sir Francis Snake replies with a smile, warped slightly by the monocle he insists on wearing.

“Which leaves Helga. What are you planning on doing?” Steven turns to the Viking Fur.

“Being surprised you remembered all our names for a start. But I think I have an idea, it depends on my parents, but they're pretty understanding. I'm going to spread the word around East Yorkshire too.”

“Thanks very much, that sounds good. So, are we all agreed on what we're doing?”

Nods and yes's from everyone in the room.

“Right, if anyone has any trouble, contact by PM on the net or by texting me or whoever can help you. Can we all make notes of each other's phone numbers, since in emergencies we'll only have each other.”

Much exchanging of phone numbers ensues, with plenty of pressing of keypads and beeping and uttering of

digits to each other.

"All done? Operation Geneticiser has begun. And yes, I know that sounds corny, but I had to say it!" Steven stands up to go back to the lounge, the other furs following slowly, still scratching their heads over the strange shopping list.

"OK, thanks very much to you all for attending and putting up with me and the results of my zany schemes. Those of you who need to leave, you're now free to do so, those of you wishing to stay, may. The important stuff is out of the way now, so the rest of this evening you can either relax here or do whatever you need to be doing. But the quicker we get started on this, the better, so by all means those of you wanting to get going, do so." Steven addresses them all before sitting down to wind down for a bit. Today has really been very strenuous for a lad who's only just become his inner self for real.

Adamfox jumps up from his seat as though it's the opposite end of a see-saw that Steven has just sat on.

"Alright, I intend to carry out my plan straight away. Ray?"

"Yeah... oh, are we moving, then?" Replies the suddenly-awoken-from-daydreaming RayWolf.

"Most definitely we are. To the Furmobile!" Adamfox announces grandly, pointing first at the window, then swinging daftly round to point at the hallway and, as he steps out of the lounge, down the stairs. Shrugging and leaving most of his stuff behind, Ray follows Adamfox out onto the darkening street, shutting the door a little over-zealously, causing it to slam.

ThE thirtY-seVenth CHapTEr

No! Not The Comfy Chair!

Oh my God I can't believe it -

I've never been this far away from home!

- Kaiser Chiefs

Anaïs needs to make use of the lavatorial facilities. The uncomfortable truth faces her that she'll have to call a nurse just to do even something as basic as this. Anaïs eventually manages to get the attention of the nurse at the desk through the open doorway. Slowly and carefully into the wheelchair and across the million miles it might as well be to the Ladies room at the other side of the ward, minding not to bash those legs as they heal slower than slow. *This will grow tiresome rather quickly..*

Quentin sits with Tim and Sarah on the leather settee in his lounge, not really watching CBBC channel but thinking over what his mind is doing to him. *When your tenants are talking animals and they jump out of windows, anything is possible. Next thing you know they'll have cured cancer..*

Tim is once again not particularly absorbed by the TV. His attention is quickly caught again, in fact, when he looks out of the front window.

The window of number 44 is also occupied by a surprised face, this one being that of Harriet, whose babysitting for the landlord has just earned her driving lesson money. Looking out one moment at the dreary street with its fresh sycamore stump, sawdust-and-litter strewn grass and broken lamp-post, the next

moment two very odd people are walking across the street towards a VW camper that's decked out in so much faux fur and animal-related stuff it isn't even funny. *And if I didn't know any better, I'd say that one was a wolf... deary me, there's nowt so queer as folk.*

Zack the Sparky to the rescue!

A Ford Transit van with cherry-picker pulls into Kenneth Street, and Zack the council electrician searches for a spot to park so he can fix the street light.

Just as Adam and Ray reach the Furple, a Ford Transit van appears at the end of the street.

"Come on, get in the back, quick!" Adam ushers Ray into the rear of the Furple as the street lighting repair van draws nearer. Ray clammers in to find himself in a bizarre interior to surpass the extravagant exterior. In the small space within the van has been squeezed an army of plushies, an array of beanbags and a big armchair, along with loads of furry artwork of varying levels of detail, covering every millimetre of internal wall, and most of the ceiling is covered in faux fur.

Zack notices the VW camper on the corner of Brampton Grove with its back door open. He catches a glimpse of a funny-coloured and patterned animal tail (dog perhaps?) and a stuffed toy falls out of the back. A paw reaches out to pick it up. *A paw? You mean a hand, surely. You'll be seeing things again, Zack.*

Ray curses under his breath as a plushie Arctic Fox falls out of the back door, landing on the tarmac below. He reaches out to get it back as quickly as he can, and manages to get it back in and the door shut before he is seen by the bloke driving the van. Or so he hopes. *With a plan to be getting on with, the last thing I need is to be gawked at again.*

Zack pulls into the dead-end space next to a Ford Ka with another cuddly toy hanging in its window, waiting for the VW camper to set off so he can swap into the space.

Adamfox starts up the Furple after only 3 attempts, and as it splutters into life, he looks over his shoulder into the back. "You alright in there?"

"I think I'll be OK, there's no way I can't be comfy in here," replies Ray's slightly muffled deep voice from somewhere among the gubbins.

Twisting round further, Adam can see Ray is in fact sat on some bean bags, curled up to keep out of sight and nearly smothered in plushies. "I don't think you need to go that mad about hiding, we'll be going too fast for anyone to see you. Make yourself comfy, sit in the chair."

In a mock of Monty Python, Ray responds with "No! Not the comfy chair!" with a great look of mock horror. Giggling slightly, Adam makes his own use of the joke, "OK, if we're parodying films and TV, let's do what Claire said. If this is the Mystery Machine, we should make like a tree, and leave!"

With that, the VW camper swings round into a 3-point turn, then pulls away, heading for the main road.

Zack pulls into the space with his cherry-picker van, and gets his tools ready to fix another vandalised piece

of council property.

Steven is tired out and excuses himself from the room.

Laid on his bed, stretching his limbs, he resembles a lopsided six-pointed star. Head, arms, legs, tail all spread out equally on the bedspread as Steven stares into the ceiling as though the answers to the questions in his head have been hidden in the smooth, fairly new plasterboard all along. The white paint and cobwebs impart no more information than he expects, however, so he just lets his mind relax for a bit. The magnitude of what he's doing can't be ignored... and nor can his own limitations.

In the lounge, Paul has gotten out a game of Twister to keep the other furs amused. While Helga, Squee and Kred all tangle their limbs over the coloured blobs, Jeff finds himself nodding off in the armchair to the sound of Kaiser Chiefs – *Oh My God*. Realising this is an indicator of how long he's been up, Jeff slaps himself awake, cleans the gunk out of his eyes and gets up to go. As he heads out of the lounge, he bumps into Paul, who is still making heroic efforts to ply everyone with Tango and occasional cups of tea.

"You off already? Want to make an early start with Project Genetics Lesson?" Paul asks expectantly.

"No, I need sleep. Been up since yesterday evening. Knackered." Jeff yawns a wide, leopard yawn.

"Fair enough. Give us a bell when you're ready to get started."

Without further ado, Jeff descends the stairs and leaves.

Steven continues ceiling-gazing. In the background he can hear the laughter of the other furs in the lounge, which rises to a crescendo in time with a loud 'thud' on the floor. From outside comes the sound of a cherry-picker arm descending back to its van-roof, followed by the sound of a car door shutting and an engine starting. The engine sound grows slightly nearer, then fades off into the distance. Through the wall, the words 'Left paw green' set off another fit of giggles.

From the smothering contents of the rear of the vehicle comes the voice of a grateful Ray. "Thanks very much for offering to take me down to London and back so I can sort stuff out with Mum, but why are you going so out of your own way for me?"

"I'm not." Adamfox responds from the wheel of the Furmobile as it pulls onto the M62 slip road, the engine revving as high as the somewhat dwindling numbers of horsepower left in it can muster.

"mm?"

"I'm going down to London today anyway, as it happens. When I heard about the emergency minimeet, I just decided to set off earlier. I offered Kred and Lupustorm lifts to the meeting to save them train fare. The original purpose for today's trip was actually to go to the Isle of Dogs to see a dog about a Man."

"Don't you mean, 'to see a man about a dog'?"

"No."

With a triumphant last few taps of the keyboard, Claire saves her masterpiece and closes the Word Processing window. *If there's one thing I am good at, it's typing stuff like this up fast.* A smile of self-pride spreads across Claire's face. With a half-decent computer keyboard and the imagination to pull it off, you can

make a newsworthy story in a second. All that remains now is to get published.

The icons await in their folders. The web browser is open and the site ready. *A few well-placed clicks of the mouse will see a new journalist rise to fame.*

Chapter 38

Normal

Jeff just about manages to get home without falling asleep at the wheel. He parks up, switches off the engine, gets out of the car, shuts the door, hits the central locking button (Clunk-flash-flash-flash), ascends the steps to his front door, digs out his key, unlocks and opens the door, shuts and locks it behind him and mooches up the stairs to his bedroom, where he falls asleep before his head hits the pillow. Thoughts of what he never expected to be doing tomorrow swirl round his head as he dozes off.

Zack is driving the cherry-picker van back to base. The sun throws its last bits of Saturday night light at the low, dreary clouds and the lamp-post on Kenneth Street switches on again, returning the yellow sulphur-lamp glow to the night time of the street. All it had needed was a replacement length of wire, but that had meant undoing the wire at the top. *Vandals seem to have an amazing capability of only wrecking stuff that's awkward to fix.*

Dave decides to spend the night in. 3 ASBOs are enough for now, and another won't really help him maintain his alcohol fix. He puts on the telly to watch the footie match in Barcelona. Slouched in the stained sofa, he guzzles another can of lager. The fridge behind him is stacked with Carling. Emergency supplies in place, one word sums up his mood: *Sorted.*

Some foreign footballer curls the ball into the bottom corner of the net. Man U are losing badly to Bayern München. *Ruddy Germans using an African bloke against England in Spain.*
More lager.

Georgina is in The Zone.

For a shamanic type, this means a lot.

The auras of the others in the room are bright and clear. Each glows with enjoyment, wonderment and amusement, but each is slightly burnt by tiredness and disbelief. The flat itself holds a lot of energy. There are forces pivoting here, strong forces.

Paul watches as the game of Twister collapses one last time in a heap of sweating tangled limbs and laughter. Something catches the corner of his eye. *Georgina looks like she's in some sort of trance.*
As Paul turns to look at her to see if she's OK, Georgina gets up and serenely leaves the room.

Steven is sat on his bed, absent-mindedly stroking his own tail, lost in thought. His computer still whirs on untouched since Ray's transformation, the monitor off to save power. The bedroom door quietly opens, and Georgina drifts in. And stands in the doorway, looking as deeply at Steven as he is lost in his thoughts.

Vulpesteven has a brighter aura than the others. It shines like a beacon in the ether. His ears and tail, muzzle, paws and all the rest of him emit a powerful spiritual light, just as bright through his clothes as it is from the exposed fur. One of deep contentment, but also uncertainty in the mind.

Georgina sits down next to Steven. A spiritualist she may be, but also a great analyst and judge of character.

"I just want you to know I think you've done the right thing. It's not easy, but you know in your soul it's right."

Steven looks up at her calm, smiling face. *If I've never heard good sense before in my life, this surely is it.*

A pleasantly surprised expression mixes with relief on Steven's face. He can see Georgina's absolutely right.

"Thank you so much. That's just answered..." Steven casts about for the right words.

"All the questions in your head. I know." Georgina puts her hand on Steven's shoulder, and smiles as he hugs her back.

"What are you like, you great psychic thingy!" Steven cheerfully whispers in her ear.

"Glad I'm not normal. Or we wouldn't be here now, would we?" Georgina responds to the blessed fool.

Nine and Thirty

Take Us To Warp!

Zephyr in the sky at night I wonder,

Do my tears of mourning

sink beneath the sun?

She's got herself a universe, come quickly!

Before the call of thunder

Threatens everyone...

– Madonna

Claire sends her finished article in by email to The Daily Disaster. An automated reply comes back instantly, but a human response will likely take a while. Claire goes to get a cup of coffee. *These media organisations are open 24/7. I'll wait all night if I have to.*

Beth returns from the bathroom, much refreshed. Glancing into the bedroom, she notices Steven and Georgina sat together on the bed. Beth rolls her eyes. *Everyone except me can do fine with relationships...*

Spotting the look on Beth's face, Steven realises he looks a bit close to Georgina.

"Er, Beth, don't think this is anything more than it is."

"No, don't mind me. You two look pretty happy." Beth promptly leaves them to their own devices. She knows full well it's nothing more than a hug of friendly support, but she can't help but feel jealous.

Turning to Georgina, Steven lets go of her and surmises bemusedly, "well, she'll make a great press liaison person. It's been an hour since we designated her as such and already she's got the wrong end of the stick!"

Georgina chuckles lightly, evidently not worried in the slightest.

"Come on, you. I'll be going home soon and we haven't seen much of you since earlier. Lighten up, it's all good fun." *Or the most serious thing ever to happen here, but either way...*

Adamfox and Ray are powering down the reasonably empty M1 with some considerable speed. The Furmobile is going faster than its official maximum speed, and at 88 mph, the windscreen wipers are lifting from the glass and rattling in complaint. Watching the fuel gauge closely, Adamfox decides to pull into a service area and fill up the Furmobile with biodiesel (made from 30% chip fat extracted from the local chippy, hence the small bumper sticker on the back advertising 'The Mitre Fish and Chip Shop, Bishop Auckland'). In the middle of the Woodall Services car park, surrounded by cars and vans, Adamfox opens the back door of the VW camper, setting off another plushie avalanche. Reaching behind Ray and the comfy chair, Adam pulls out a large jerry can full of mixed biofuel. Ray attempts to sit up straight (having just been flung about by the rapid steering on entry into the service area), and only succeeds in pushing more plushies out of the van. While Adam fills the tank, a group of van drivers meander by, wearing suspicious looks on their faces and holding hot polystyrene cups of coffee in their greasy mitts. As soon as they're out of sight, Ray leans out of the back to retrieve the unfortunate toys from their dangerous proximity to an oily puddle. A particularly ugly Fiat Multipla trundles past, on its way out, causing Ray to momentarily pause in his actions and lay still, that he might look like another cuddly toy. *This is getting silly. You're being paranoid.*

Having completed his task, Adamfox helps Ray regain the last of the fallen plushies, puts back the empty jerry can, then shuts the back door before any more can fall out. Returning to the driver's door, Adam peers into the back and calls into the accumulated stuff, "the gas cooker's run out thanks to Lupustorm and Kred earlier. So what you want from the shop? I'm going to get a drink and some chocolate. Any requests?" From behind the seats comes the deep voiced reply, "Smoky Bacon crisps and a cup of hot chocolate. Hang on, I'll get my money." Ray starts shuffling about, trying to get in his pocket to extract a fiver for Adam to spend.

For the fifth time today, an unusual looking vehicle has caught Roger's eye. There's something a bit different about the camper-van on camera screen 3. Something Roger can't quite put his finger on. Looking closer, he sees a young man leave the van, heading towards the services complex. A young man wearing a white faux-fur tail...

Raising his eyebrows, Roger tracks him bemusedly through the car park. Now he's stood in the light, it's clear this individual is also wearing a pair of white, furry fox-ears. Chuckling to himself, Roger wonders what sort of fancy dress party has been going on. *And what this young man is on... although he appears to be acting perfectly awake and normal...*

Adam walks into the automatic doors. Literally, because they're broken. Cursing under his breath for not thinking, he sidesteps to the manual door that everyone is using. Making his way through the mooching hordes of truckers and families heading home from their holidays, Adam approaches the overpriced canteen. Overhead, a CCTV camera focuses on him with a whirl of the motors. Having obtained two hot chocolates and a packet of crisps, Adam leaves the complex with no change from Ray's money.

Roger watches with amusement as him of the foxy get-up struggles with the door whilst holding a polystyrene cup of hot liquid in each hand and a bag of crisps in his mouth. Reaching for the bag of Butterkist

he always reserves for moments of customer comedy like this, Roger switches his gaze to screen 3 and sits back.

As the stereo continues to play random songs, the furmeet games and such continue into the evening. Steven joining in with a new game of Twister adds much hilarity when Squee ends up with Steven's tail in his face for four spins in a row, only to be ended by 'right paw red' at which point Steven's vulpine body ends up bridging over the top of the others, causing them to collapse in a silly heap.

With a clunk and a creak, the VW's front door opens and Adam pokes his head in.

"Your beverage and light snack are served, sir," Adam pontificates with a mock-pösh accent.

Ray hoiks himself upright from amid the disorganised chaos, and reaches a paw forward to receive his crisps, and again for the drink. Adam stands outside and waits for his hot chocolate to cool down enough not to burn his tongue. Ray starts munching crisps, trying his best (but finding it difficult with these sharper teeth) not to get the bits and crumbs all over either his own fur or that of the plushies etc. *It's alright for him... he can stretch his legs...*

And go to the loo.

When they have both finished their hot chocolates (which are actually quite good considering the source), Adam gets back in and makes ready to drive off. As Adam puts his seatbelt on, Ray interrupts him.

"Er, what about me? Am I to get a chance to go to the loo?"

Georgina, Sheric say goodbye to the other furs, and sets off home. As she steps outside the flat, Georgina notices the aura about it is greater than that of the other flats. And the aura about the boarded-up ground floor flat across the road is quite cold and negative. *Like a recent death has happened there. Figures.*

"Come on, what's keeping you?" calls Sheric from the end of the sulphur-lamp-lit Kenneth Street.

Shrugging, Georgina heads for the bus stop to catch the last bus back to Sheffield

Zack arrives back at home after another day of repairing things that shouldn't have needed it, if only the chavs could grow a single brain cell between them. Having made himself a cuppa, he settles down to some semi-decent Saturday night TV.

Just across the street, Andy snoozes on, oblivious to the events unfolding in the life of his colleague and mentor.

40.01758

Right Guard

Roger watches with interest as the ridiculous VW Camper pulls out of its parking spot, drives round to the far end of the car park and... stops again, next to the curb, right opposite camera 4 (which is hidden from the drivers' view in the trees). The driver gets out of the van again, and opens the back door. A few small objects fall out of the back of the van (it's hard to tell what they are in this shadowy corner of the car park at this time

of night), then a figure emerges from the gloom in the van.

Drug smuggling?

Alarm bells start ringing in Roger's head. *It fits, if they are smugglers then the one in charge might dress up a bit differently so as to make it clear that he's arrived to whoever he was meeting here. And by using an outlandish looking vehicle, he could escape suspicion by being too obvious. Double Reverse Psychology.*

Roger turns to the sleepy fool sat next to him. Portcullis Security Services have two men on site at all times, and both are currently in the CCTV room.

"Oi! Tom!"

"What?" Tom turns round from the screen he's been watching, this being the camera on the footbridge over the motorway.

"I've got someone acting a bit funny over on camera 4. Can you keep an eye on it while I get back? I'm going to see what's going on."

"Righto. If owt happens, I've got you covered."

Roger gets up and leaves the room with all speed, descending the stairs two at a time and bursting out onto the public concourse so quickly he surprises an elderly gentleman who happens to be reading a newspaper there. *Calm down, it's not going to help if you make everyone panic!* He tells himself as he excuses his way around a group of Japanese tourists with huge cameras snapping away at everything.

Tom watches the screen intently for a moment, as several more unidentified items fall out of the back of the overstuffed van. Then someone climbs out, feet first. *Funny... I could swear he looks like a wolf.*

Tom rubs his eyes and looks again into the poor light. *Is he wearing a costume or something?*

Ray quietly steps over the kerb and makes his way up the embankment, to the shadows behind a bush to relieve himself. It might just create a bit too much disturbance if he were to walk into the complex and use the toilets there...

Adam stands behind the van, throwing the now slightly mucky plushies back in once again. *I really need to sort out some kind of proper storage for these.*

"Excuse me, mind if I take a look at those?" A voice suddenly issues from behind him.

Turning round, Adam finds a security guard stood just 2 yards away, looking vaguely amused but also apprehensive.

"Erm, OK, I think you can see for yourself what they are."

The guard steps round Adam and picks up a cat plushie. After inspecting it for a moment, he turns back to Adam. "Why on earth would you have so many cuddly toys with you? Are you trying to hide something?" Feeling rather narked at being suspected of smuggling, Adam retorts, "Not unless cuddly toys are contraband!"

Not impressed, the guard starts prodding and poking the plushie. Adam, not wishing to see any of them come to harm, complains, "here, don't be so rough with it! I happen to like these toys a lot. If you have a problem with that, say so."

"Well, what if you've sewn drugs into the toys?" the guard has a perfectly good point. But when he lifts the

cat plushie up into the air and starts tugging at its head, Adam has had enough.

"Look, you have no grounds for suspicion! How dare you start damaging my stuff?"

"We have CCTV. I saw your accomplice, he was hidden in the back of this van a minute ago. Why would you hide someone in the back when you have a passenger seat empty for him to sit in?"

Surely he didn't see Ray, at least not properly, or he would know he's a wolf...

Adamfox thinks quickly. With overexaggerated realisation, he plays slightly dumb. "Oh, if that's all it was, why didn't you say? Don't worry, we're furrries!"

"Furrries?" The guard raises his eyebrows, utterly nonplussed.

"You know, into anthropomorphic animal art, enjoy doing silly stuff like dressing up as animals..." Adam points at his ears and tail, "and forever get picked on by the newspapers and media for the actions of a select few who like yiff..."

"Yiff? Oh yeah, I saw that article in the Times. God, you lot are weird!"

"Look, if you believe everything the papers say you won't get very far. We are not like that really. Most of us are just in it for fun and friends, not sex. Now if you don't mind, I'd like my plushie back."

Adam holds out his hand to take back the cat from the brink of decapitation. The guard, though, is still not happy. "What about that guy who was in the back of the van? Why was he there and where is he now?"

"He was, ah, getting into his fursuit ready for the gig we're going to in London. The trouble is he then realised he needed a pee, so rather than getting trapped by hordes of truck drivers and tourists with cameras in the complex and risk being late, he decided to go behind that bush."

At this point Ray steps back out from behind the bush, grateful that the explanations have gotten good enough for him to show his face again.

"Woah, that's one heck of a suit, I must say I am impressed! Mind if I stand with him and you take a photo?"

Ray, knowing that if he speaks he'll give away just how real he is, glances urgently at Adamfox.

"Er, I'd love to, but in this lighting I don't think it would look that good and we really need to get to this gig because we're running late so if you don't mind I'd like my plushie back..." While Ray sneaks around Adam's distracting verbal diarrhoea and into the back of the Furmobile, Adam snatches the cat plushie from the blithering guard's hands before he can object, "...and I'm sorry but we really must be going, kkkthanxbai!"

"Wait! My camera has night mode, I can still get a decent..."

SLAM!

SLAM!

"picture..."

The camper van sets off without further delay, leaving a disappointed Roger stood there like a lemon. *I really need a new career, I'm certainly rubbish at this. What a weird story too. Can't have been made up, could it?*

His walkie-talkie crackles into life. "What the heck was all that about?" Tom inquires from the CCTV room. Pressing the button so he can reply, Roger responds, "I don't think we want to know. Either way, they've left now." *And good riddance. Too much paperwork if they had been up to anything, so for the sake of the argument, they weren't.*

"Well, him who looked like a wolf (well, he did to me anyway) was just out of shot, so can you fill me in on what he was doing?"

"Taking the p*ss."

Kapitel Ein Und Vierzig

Die Tägliche Katastrophe

Jurgen is still at work. His business open 24/7, he would usually enjoy working with it as long as possible. Only now the news has dried to a trickle of bilge and until an hour and a half ago he'd wanted nothing more than to get back home. But, having requested that any news stories are now directed straight to him and ever the procrastinator when it comes to the subject of his wife, he had managed to keep himself busy through Saturday until, when he was on the brink of leaving, he had checked his emails one last time to find something rather intriguing waiting in the inbox. It was from none of his usual editors or journalists, but the title promised that the attached file would be worth his while. Having checked it thrice for viruses, he had opened it to see what it was about. As it turns out, this girl from Yorkshire knows how to dig dirt when it's needed most. Having read the article she had sent him with relish, Jurgen had contacted the Human Resourcing department, asking them to contact her immediately. The Daily Disaster will survive with more people like her. Keeping the public entertained and buying the papers is paramount, regardless of the subject matter used to achieve it. Too late for the Sunday paper, this article will have to wait until Monday. But this little break from the norm has been enough to raise Jurgen's mood from the doldrums. Things might just be alright after all. Jurgen sends the article in question to his editors, with the instruction to print it in the Monday Daily Disaster.

Much cheered up, Jurgen rings up his HR department again.

Their phone is engaged. Good.

Claire is on the phone to the Daily Disaster. She can hardly believe her luck. It would appear that news has been getting so slow of late, they'll happily recruit her as a journalist for them, effective immediately, if their papers sell more than they have over the last week on Monday. Putting the phone down, she punches the air in celebration. *No more Co-op for you! They must have really liked my writing style. I would hardly expect it to be down to the slightly dubious-sounding story material.*

Claire looks over her finished article again. True, she's fleshed it out with some conjecture and a couple of assumptions, but that seems to make it more believable, rather than less at this point. *A lucrative tabloid career awaits.*

Cuggles, Helga, DaveB and Edwin having all now left, the flat subsequently seeming suddenly quiet from a lack of false death threats and Viking-related banter, the remaining furs (VulpeSteven, Paul, Lupustorm, Kred, Halt Mouse, Pam Ther, Sir Francis Snake, Squee, Beth and Wubble) finish up indulging in much small talk.

"So, who's staying here overnight tonight?" Steven finally manages to steer the random conversations to something useful, "I need to know what you're all planning on doing."

"I'll probably stop over tonight, then get searching for bits of Geneticiser tomorrow. Halden has a decent market place and a car boot on tomorrow morning, so it'll be a good start." Lupustorm replies.

"I'm staying over tonight, if that's alright," Squee looks up at Steven as cutely as he reasonably can.

"Well, I'm not going anywhere until Adamfox gets back from his mission." states Kred.

Steven frowns. "How come? I thought you said you could make your own way home."

"That was before I realised I'd left my bag in the Furmobile, complete with my wallet and phone!"

Steven facepaws.

"YELP!"

As the Furmobile gathers speed on the Southbound slip road from the services, a rucksack falls down from an overhead rack of some kind, landing on Ray's tail heavily, squashing it against the wall and sending pain shooting up Ray's spine.

"You alright?" calls a concerned Adam from the front.

"Some fool has left a heavy bag where it could fall on me!" growls back a rather peeved Ray.

Cursing and swearing at whatever idiot went and put it up there, he opens the bag (to see what could have made it so heavy) with one paw while nursing his tail with the other. Contained within are a wallet and a mobile phone, a couple of 500ml bottles of water and a large biscuit tin (100% extra free), which judging by its weight must be full to bursting. Indeed, on opening it, the smell of cookies blasts out like a heavy guitar riff. Inside the tin are what must be the most tightly packed cookies ever, most of them chocolate chip.

Resisting the urge to eat them, Ray grudgingly replaces the lid and puts the tin back in the bag. The wallet contains a tenner and a photo of... Kred. So the bag is his. Right. I know who to ask for cookies now.

Putting the wallet, the phone and the drinks back in their places, Ray sighs. This probably means Kred won't be able to get back home now until they've done in London. Ray begins to wish he hadn't made such a big deal of whether he needed to go home. Putting ideas in Adamfox's head clearly has unexpected results.

The ward is quiet and the lights are off. Anaïs can't sleep a wink. Her legs are shouting at her even through the painkillers. Anaïs worries about her parents, and whether they know what's happened to her. Another long night as she gradually is forced into sleep without realising it.

Ring ring	Boop boop
Ring ring	Boop boop
Ring ring	Boop boop
Ring ring	Boop boop
Ring ring	Boop boop
Ring ring	Boop boop
C'est le Kimpler Résidence. Malheureusement, Jurgen, Marie et Anaïs sont tous occupés à l'heure actuelle et ne peut obtenir au téléphone. S'il vous plaît laissez un message après le bip.	
-BEEP-	
	Excusez-moi, Madame, c'est une urgence. S'il vous plaît répondre au téléphone.

Gordon, the police interpreter puts down the phone again after another call ends with the answer phone. The

number marked 'Maman' in Anaïs' phone once again brings a dead-end. Informing the parents is always difficult, but when they won't even answer the phone, it makes you wonder. Giving up for the time being on Anaïs' Mum's number, Gordon tries the number marked 'Papa mobile'.

Jurgen's pocket starts vibrating to a tune by Technotronic.

Get up, get up, get busy to it	Boop Boop
Get up and move that body	
Get up people and get down to it	Boop Boop
'Fore the night is over	
Hallo?	
	Bonjour Monsieur. Je suis le plus malheureux position de porter une mauvaise nouvelle.
Entschuldigung Sie?	
	Ah, Sie sind Deutsch. Entschuldigung, aber haben Sie eine tochter?
Ja, meine tochter heißt Anaïs. Gibt es etwas, was ich wissen muss?	
	...

"OK, I shall have to be going now. University theses do not write themselves!" Sir Francis Snake stands up and puts his monocle back in place.

"I also shall depart at this juncture. It's been nice meeting you and all, but now I must fly." Wubble looks at his watch, "Yes, 9:30. Please do let me know how things are going with the Geneticiser."

"Will do. I'll put a thread about it on the forum once it's gotten around a bit." Steven adds thoughtfully.

"Yes, likewise, we need to be heading back home too. Nice to meet you, let's hope this is the start of something big!" Pam Ther stretches and begins gathering her gear together.

"How could it be anything else?" Observes Halt Mouse. "I would stop later, but my pub has been left in the paws of someone I'm not sure can handle it. I'll probably need to help clean up the mess."

"Your pub?" Steven queries curiously.

"Yes, the Malt House."

The Answer To The Ultimate Question Of Life, The Universe And Everything

Jurgen Fries, Jurgen Flies and Jurgen Vries

Jurgen had been waiting for a news story for weeks. *Anything at all.* But one bit of news he really could have done without has now decided to happen. *What am I to do about Anaïs? She's in hospital in England, they say. I gave her that Renault for independence and freedom. If I go up there visiting her now...*

But she needs me. I must go. Better call Marie.

His head feels fried. Picking up his phone, Jurgen scrolls straight to his home number to ring his wife.

The VW camper van rockets away down the nearly empty M1 at an impressive 90mph past Derby and Nottingham, then past Leicester... and several hundred lorries with rather irked-looking drivers in the slow lane. Ray, all the while, has discovered a comic book to keep himself occupied since he can't look where he's going. Rather amusingly, the main subject of the comic is an anthro wolf. Just about readable in the passing streetlighting, presently it comes to an action sequence involving a helicopter and a big media company.

Answer phone. Unbelievable. Relaxing for a moment, taking deep breaths and trying to get himself in The Zone, Jurgen grabs his coat, pockets his wallet, keys and phone and sets off to his private helicopter to fly himself to Yorkshire. A qualified pilot and dedicated father, he won't believe his daughter is OK until he sees for himself. And that can't be soon enough.

At number 42 Kenneth Street, the sleeping bags are laid out and the sleepover (by definition a night of little sleep) has begun. Lupustorm, Kred and Squee have various spots around the lounge to choose from, provided they aren't on top of Paul, who has most definitely chosen the settee. Since Ray is not in at the mo, and it's uncertain when he'll be back, Lupustorm nabs the Z-bed. Kred and Squee make beds up from random cushions and stuff on the floor in the lounge. The Hi-fi, having not stopped playing music for hours, is now playing Jurgen Vries – *The Theme*.

Beth, Paul and Steven are in the bedroom, debating what to put on the forum regarding the minimeet now it's done.

"I think we should start the new thread now and use it to spread the Geneticiser's blueprints and software to as many people as possible." Paul suggests.

"If I'd wanted to do that, I would have done it already instead of holding this meeting. The trouble is, if we make it too open too soon and not enough of them actually exist, we risk being shut down by the government. Besides, no-one is going to believe in my claims about the Geneticiser until there are dozens of anthros appearing everywhere and this is the explanation. That's why I'm doing it the way I am. But we could still do with something on the forum..." Steven scratches his headfur absent-mindedly.

"Well, let's just say the meeting went well, and everyone who attended knows what they need to know, and progress is now being made. People will ask questions about it, but we can answer them as and when we're ready." Beth spouts sense fantastically.

"You know what? She's got a point!" Steven says to Paul before turning to his PC and posting exactly that.

Having put the two tiny terrors to bed twice and read five bedtime stories to Tim (all of them, Tim positively insists, must have something to do with wolves), Quentin finally gets himself to bed with a mug full of hot chocolate and a head full of questions. *Perhaps things will be better after a good night's sleep. And at least I won't be at bingo. Can't all be bad.*

The same rattling railbus from the morning service pulls out of Leeds with a groan from the furthest platform. Cuggles and Helga are both sat on it again, but this time at least they know it. The moon shines brightly from

the edge of a cloud and the Diesel fumes drift slowly up the embankment to the housing estates at the top.

T?

D:Rat

As the night wears on, D:Rat finds himself refreshing the forums again and again, as though he has nothing better to do. A train rattles past with its engines blasting out a right racket through his open window. He reaches over to shut it before the fumes get in. Sitting back down, he takes a sip of tea that isn't even lukewarm any more (*markwarm perhaps, or maybe matthewwarm, but definitely not lukewarm*) before clicking the much-used refresh button in his web browser yet again.

A new post has been appended to the thread about the 'emergency minimeet'. Wishing he had been there instead of some silly gig, D:Rat reads the new post.

Vulpesteven	Today, 9:55pm
100% me ***** Group: Member Posts: 1825 Joined: 18 months ago From: Halden, West Yorkshire Member No.: 5,231 Species: Red Fox	Thanks very much to all who attended, that was an amazing turnout at such short notice. I think the meeting went well, and everyone who attended knows what they need to know, and progress is being made. To those of you who didn't attend, panic not. You'll find out soon enough what it's all about, I'm sure. This is likely to be in the news soon. And pizza and pop have indeed been had by all present today. :D
	My Deviantart / Is this a good question?

Beth glances at the clock. 10:05pm and nothing more seems to be going on now. Needing sleep and not wishing to share this flat with the guys (*after all, you never can be too careful... just think of Jeff*), Beth gives Steven a hug (*Ooh, that fur is sooo soft!*), then to everyone says "goodnight! See you tomorrow for making plans and shopping and stuff!" With that she heads down the stairs, grabbing her coat and shoes on the way out and shutting the weathered door behind her with an unintentional bang.

With an unusual mix of emotions in her head – joy at the discoveries she has been one of the privileged few to have seen today, sorrow at the loss of her job and now impatience in wanting tomorrow to come faster; Beth gets in her Ford Ka and burns a small bit more precious petrol to get back home, a couple of miles away.

Sitting round in the lounge full of sleeping bags, 4 furies and an anthro fox start playing that most traditional of sleepover games: the game of Animals.

"Just one thing about this game that I see not working, Steven..." Squee hypothesises as they're about to begin.

"Yarf?" Steven replies jokingly

"Well, you just summed it up in one word. How are we supposed to tell what animal you're miming if all we can think when we see you is 'fox'?"

"I'll just be adding a whole new dimension to the game, won't I? You'll have to try even harder and focus

more. Besides, you just wait until the Geneticiser is more popular and we're all our fursonas. That'll make it more challenging!" laughs Steven, getting grins from the others. Before Squee has fully taken in what's been said, Steven does the mime of The Worm (a set position who always goes first) followed quickly by that of the Speedy Skwerl (Squee, whose preoccupation has cost him his concentration, causing him to respond far too late). Amid laughter from the others, Squee moves down to be The Worm while Kred moves up to take the Skwerl place and Steven moves in to Kred's position, apparently the perennially inexplicable and most obviously inanimate Camp Chair. Squee starts things off again, and this time everyone's ready. Worm > Elephant (Paul volunteered for this set position), Elephant > Wolf, Wolf > Camp Chair (Mimed expertly by Lupustorm with a flick of the wrists in line with invisible chair arms), Camp Chair > Worm, Worm > erm... erm... Squee fails miserably to think who his next target will be in time. Being already in the lowest demoted position, he has nowhere to go. After all, you can't be a sub-worm...

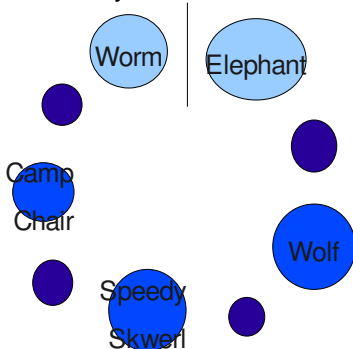
The others make up for it by making it a rather humiliating situation to be in. Losing twice in a row, Squee cares not and takes it in good humour. Then, while everyone's laughing, he does a lightening fast Worm mime followed by a super-Speedy Skwerl. Kred, still busy laughing at Squee, doesn't notice until too late, and so becomes the subject of the laughter himself. *Some crafty tactics there.*

The Game of Animals

Ideal game for groups of 5 or more. Sit in a circle and assign your seats animal mimes. Using first your own mime (Either to start the game or to show correct response to someone else doing your mime), you must then follow it with someone else's, who you are aiming to outwit. If you miss your mime being done, or respond too slowly, or take too long deciding who to do next, you are demoted. The group decide how many rounds or a time limit the game shall have at the beginning. A round lasts until a demotion.

This game was invented by Rev. James, Catherine, Ben, Rebecca and Joseph Allison for use in a youth group. All thanks go to them. Sorry if it seems a bit cheesy to be incorporating a game in a story <_<

If someone is demoted, all players in positions below them are promoted by one seat and so one animal. All players above them are unaffected.



The Worm is always at the bottom of the game. The Elephant is always at the top.

This story's game as example

The places hold the animals, not the players. The seat you are sat on decides your mime.

Animals (other than the worm and the elephant) can be any type you like. They can be real or made up. So long as they have a suitably original mime associated with them. ever

Whoever is elephant after enough rounds have passed (usually with increasing speed and use of tactics as the rounds go on), has won the game. Therefore the main object of the game is to out-mime the elephant.

Additional

As many players can play the game as you want, although numbers beyond about 40 get difficult. Just add as many animals as you need (all must be unique mimes for the game to work)

A small, long-range helicopter buzzes away at low altitude over the English countryside. Finding the M1 as he circumnavigates NorthEast London, Jurgen sets his course North and opens the throttle wide to follow the endless double lamp posts up the tarmac hill to Bedfordshire... and far beyond.

A small, biofuel-powered VW Camper labours its way down through the English countryside. Following the M1 for nearly its entire length all the way into London, Adamfox grabs a can of Red Bull from his drinks holder while going through a quiet, traffic free section of motorway somewhere near Bedfordshire. The throttle wide, the road ever further South, Adam and Ray zoom on beneath a formidably long parade of double lamp posts to the end of the motorway... and beyond.

Paul, having won the game by a long shot (having not been demoted even once), gets up to put another pizza in the oven for a midnight feast for them all to share.

"You would have thought Paul wasn't paranoid buying all those pizzas..." muses Steven wryly, "But we've only eaten half of them today. I think my vulpine diet will be that of a student!"

The lamp posts change to a string of lights hung between larger poles. A sign indicates that the motorway will end in two miles.

Jurgen watches his personal dot on his Sat-Nav as it moves at a considerable pace towards the top of the map. *I knew this chopper would come in handy. And I hope to God my daughter is OK.*

Off the end of the M1, onto a roundabout. A confusing array of signs later, Adamfox settles on the road heading in the most South-Easterly direction he can find.

Munching on a feast of ham and pineapple pizza, getting crumbs on sleeping bags, Z-Bed, settee, clothes and fur, they all enjoy the fun while it lasts. *With stuff like what's happened today, you don't know what's coming next. Appreciate the*

"...moment. I just need to check your vehicle for road-worthiness, that is all, so if you'll just step aside it can be over with in a jiffy."

Parked in a layby North of Regent's Park, the Furmobile clicks regularly as its engine cools, the hot bonnet reflecting the fluorescent colours of a traffic police officer's uniform in between paw-print transfers. Not helped by actually being slightly lost, Adamfox is in a real dilemma. If the policeman just checks the outside, the tyres etc, all well and good. But if he does what Adam fears he will, and -

"Mind if I take a look inside, please?" Holding his clipboard tilted to the street-lighting to finish annotating the 'external check' section of the form, P.C. Harvey is just doing another routine Saturday night check on a rather unusual vehicle. Fortunately not noticing the look of horror on Adam's face, he continues to wait expectantly by the back door.

Ray has an idea. Realising he's rumbled unless he can deter the officer from looking into the van, he tries

playing to his strengths.

A cacophonous din of snarling and growling sounds, scratching and banging sounds erupts from inside the camper van. This has the great effect of putting one thought in the mind of P.C. Harvey. *Dog. And it doesn't sound that happy with me either.* If there's one thing P.C. Harvey never could stand, it's dogs. Turning to his colleague, only to find she's back in the squad car again, he decides not to press things this time.

"OK, can you just tell me yourself, do you have a first aid kit?"

Looking very relieved, Adam replies, "Yes, in the cupboard."

"Fur ext - erm, I mean, Fire extinguisher?"

"Yes." Adam tries hard to keep a straight face at this amusing slip-up.

"Can you please show me your driving license?"

"As a matter of fact, I can. It's right here, just a sec." Adam reaches into the front of the Furple, rummages in the door pocket and surprisingly produces from the chaotic mess his driving license.

"OK, that seems to be in order. Have you consumed alcohol or taken any drugs in the last 48 hours, which may affect your concentration or ability to drive?"

"No. Unless you count Red Bull!"

"OK, and if you could just confirm that with a simple breathalyser test, you can be on your way." It's clear the policeman has had enough and wants to move on as much as Adam. Holding out the tubular device, he indicates the end to blow into and asks, "do you know how to use these?"

"Yes, I do." Breathing deeply, he blows hard into the breathalyser until the light turns green. Passing it back to the officer, Adam impatiently waits to be given the -

"All clear, thank you for your co-operation, Mr. Fitzwilliam."

Shutting the driver's door to the Furple, Adam sets off and ensures a good distance is put between them and the police car before speaking to Ray. "Thanks, that was brilliant!"

"I have my moments. And watch out, you're drifting. Don't want the police to pull us over again, do you?"

Snapping his concentration back to the road, Adam quickly corrects his deviating course in time to miss a BMW going the other way.

Having finished the pizza and had yet more pop, the four furs in the lounge sit around yawning and stretching, burping and farting, giggling and repeating as the hi-fi gets stuck on the same few seconds of a scratched TV themes CD, in the middle of 'The Bill'.

Steven, in the kitchen, makes the last round of hot drinks for the night, the kettle rumbling to a boil once more.

Unbelievably, they've arrived. Having trundled its way past Canary Wharf and all those great ivory towers, the humble Furple pulls exhaustedly into a yard on the back of the tackiest building on the Isle of Dogs. A vaguely upmarket night club, the dimly flickering sign outside reads 'R4V3'. A loud, deep thumping beat pounds through the metallised surface and deep beneath it. Ray wonders if it can be heard from the Underground. "So this is where a wolf and a fox come to see a dog about a man?" Ray asks Adam

nervously. Climbing out of the back for a moment's stretching, he flexes his cramped paws and joints and tail. Adam smiles. "Not quite. Ideally he should be out here, but since he isn't, we'll go in there. He's probably chatting up some fit bird."

Ray looks at Adam disbelievingly. *Quite how you do that over all that noise, I have no idea. And did he just say...*

"Yes, we." Adam reads Ray's thoughts like his Lupine face is a book. "Don't worry, this is the sort of club where either you'll fit right in or you'll be ignored. Just grab some glowsticks on your way in. I'll go find Douglas."

Quarante-Quatre

R4yv3

This beat is, this beat is, this beat is Technotronic

This beat is Technotronic

There's the dance floor, get on it!

- Technotronic

Ray approaches the doorway to the club with apprehension, Adamfox close behind him.

A very burly bouncer stands by the door, busy chatting with his best mate, who is stood to one side, smoking a cigarette. As a result of their obviously very absorbing conversation, they seem to completely fail to notice that one of the two who have just entered the club behind them is in fact of a category not mentioned in the club rules at all.

Jurgen has landed. His helicopter winds down in the dark, otherwise deserted park football field. Looming into the night sky just over the road is the random conglomerate of hospital buildings of varying ages and architectural styles, with lights shining from most of the windows. Stepping out of the chopper casually, he holds up a key fob and presses a button.

Bleep-beep! -CLUNK- The central locking engages just like he's parking a car. Smiling vaguely (never tiring of cool ideas of his own making), Jurgen quickly steers his thoughts back to Anaïs and steers himself in a hospitalwardly direction.

As Ray enters the darkened club, a box of glowsticks holding open the door becomes apparent amid the chaotic lights and thumping bass. A piece of paper stapled to the box declares that the glowsticks are free, provided you buy a drink. Straining his head to see over the revellers and past the blinding strobe, Ray can just about make out the bar at the far side of the room. As Ray grabs and cracks up a few glowsticks, Adam starts to force his way through the crowds and towards the DJ's desk. *Nobody here seems to care I'm a wolf. Are they high or do they not give two hoots? Or perhaps they just can't tell how real I am in this light anyway...* Suspecting it to actually be a combination of all of the above, Ray shrugs and ties a glowstick to his tail. Mingling with the back of the crowd quietly, Ray starts to just enjoy the rave and builds a mighty groove.

Steven and the other furs, having exhausted all their games etc, turn their conversations to Adamfox and his mission.

“What do we all reckon he's up to then? Any guesses?” Paul asks them all.

“Knowing Adam, I haven't a clue. It could be practically anything. But I doubt it involves sleeping, because Adam don't hang about.” Lupustorm surmises.

“Well, anyone care to hazard a guess before I ring Ray?” Steven looks around them, holding up his mobile phone. He is met with silence and shrugging.

Ray can't hear himself think over the blasting noise of the rave. Trying to remain incognito at the back, he dances away and just tries to enjoy himself while Adam's done doing whatever it is he's doing here. Ray's pocket starts to vibrate harder than the rest of the club and his body are already doing from the bass. Pulling out his phone, he can see it's lit up with Steven's number, incoming call.

Adam stands at the DJ desk, trying to get the attention of the somewhat engrossed dude sat behind it. Screaming at the top of his voice right next to the be-earphoned DJ is having no effect. Eventually, he resorts to pulling the earphones out, causing the shocked DJ to turn and see who's nicking his gear. Realising who it is, Douglas grins from ear to ear and shouts pointlessly into the noise. Hugging Adamfox tightly, he gets up from his chair and clicks the 'random' button on his laptop. The tune accidentally changes instantly to Technotronic - *This Beat is Technotronic*. And all the lights switch from strobe to quite a bright yellow. Confused, the revellers start looking around. This isn't rave music! Just then, a disturbance in the crowd becomes apparent in the corner by the doorway. Craning his neck across the packed room, Adam can just see Ray struggling to end a mobile phone call while being dragged across the room by a girl in crop top and miniskirt.

Boop boop	Ring ring!
Boop boop	Ring ring!
Boop boop	Ring ring!
Hello?!	BOOM BOOM BOOMHELLO!BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOMHELLO?!BOOMBOOM BO- HELLO?
HELLO!	
Hello, Ray? Just wondering where you're at, how stuff's going and all. More importantly, when you'll be back.	<i>(Music starts again.)</i> Well, I'm in London at the mo. THIS BEAT IS, THIS BEAT IS, THIS BEAT IS TECHNOTRONIC!!'LL BE BACK IN THETHIS BEAT IS TECHNOTRONIC,

to follow him to the far corner of the yard. Parked in the shade under a decrepid plane tree is a small truck cab. Avoiding a scattering of broken bottle glass, Adam follows.

Jurgen enters the reception of the hospital. His impatient fingers tapping on the counter, he awaits the computer's confirmation that he is authorised to visit his own daughter. The receptionist, clearly unhurried, sits forward and peers at him over her glasses like an old school teacher. "Ward four, second floor, third corridor on the left."

As soon as she's finished and passed Jurgen his visitor badge, he snaps it up and vanishes into the corridor.

The truck cab, which has obviously not moved far in a while, is gradually falling into disrepair. The large badge on the grill is missing, leaving only the dry glue shaped into the word 'Man' and a picture of a big dog. Below the grill, on the bumper, the number plate is held on with two rusting screws: FV02 RRY
Adamfox grins like a kid. "That's perfect. Much better than FPR 765 J, anyway! How much?"

4ty 5ve

Sheep in Wolf's Clothing

After much faffing about and trying to get comfy, Lupustorm, Kred, Paul, and Squee all get down to that most important of pastimes; sleep. Steven grabs a glass of milk and downs it in one before also going to bed. Today has been every bit as long as he expected it would be, and he's no less knackered. Curling up under the duvet, warm and cosy, Steven wonders what Ray is up to as he drops off.

The music pounding out from the rave ends abruptly. Adamfox pauses as he holds out a wad of cash to Douglas.

"Er, Douglas...?"

"Yeah?"

"Does it seem a little quiet all of a sudden to you?"

"What do you mean? Oh, wait..." realisation dawns on his face, "the music! It's stopped!"

Adamfox and Douglas rush back into the club, brandishing a bundle of £20 notes, and a screwdriver and a set of number plates, respectively. The revellers all seem to have frozen on the spot. The house lights are up and the strobes and disco lights off. Stood upon the raised stage at the front is Ray, wearing an expression of many emotions, the foremost of which is fear, closely followed by an attempt not to look scared. Also in there somewhere is anger and nervousness, bewilderment and impatience. Someone in the middle of the crowded room holds up a camera phone to get a snap of this bizarre expression on a most unusual face, which is now quite visible to all present. The glowsticks attached to Ray's tail and held in his paws still emit a green glow as though they at least hope the rave will resume.

Swearing under his breath, Adam quickly makes his way through the ogling onlookers. Douglas, shaking himself back to his senses, goes to his laptop to see what caused the music to stop. It is simply sat waiting, the music paused and the lighting effects switched off.

Adam, having reached the front, finds the whole story lying on the floor in front of him. A semi-circular crowd has formed around a young woman, who is lying on her back, apparently unconscious. Suspicious eyes are all looking daggers at Ray, who is now throwing a pleading look at Adam.

"Well, is anyone going to say what happened or are we all here to gawk?" Adam turns succinctly to the gathered hordes.

"Wolfboy knocked her out, didn't he! He's hit her, and she's on the floor. That's what I saw!"

Adam looks up at Ray.

"I swear I never touched her. Well, she dragged me up here to the dance floor earlier, but I never hit anyone! I was just dancing and raving, and turned around only to find her on the floor."

Adam turns back to the rest of them. A bloke on the right with a funky hairdo pipes up quite soberly;

"I know this is neither the time nor the place, but is it just me or is he actually a wolf?"

Ray facepaws. This is just getting worse.

Helga arrives back at home at last. Looking out of her window, she can see the garden finely manicured all these years by her parents, only now it's five feet shorter. Tunstall is a village on the Holderness edge, and Helga's parents' house is right at the front and not getting any further from the sea. The road behind used to be the main through road, but now ends abruptly 50 yards further South-South-East. The main road now snakes around the back of the 2 narrow fields between Helga's parents' house and the rest of the village. The tide is in and the moon shining its pale glow on the sea spray-moistened privet hedge. Turning back to her room, she takes one last look at her posters and artwork of Vikings and furs and Viking furs, then she climbs into bed and is off to sleep amid thoughts of the uncertain future lying ahead. A Viking style helmet is silhouetted in the moonlit window where the curtains need no longer be closed and a big ship pulls her load of miscellaneous containers South on the horizon with a guard of little coloured lights.

F r y i

B l r o B l z

One plus one does not make two.

One plus one makes... one plus one.

- Technotronic

Arnold hasn't managed very well lately/*Swig some more from this bottle/corporate job in the Gherkin has ended/Another night on the streets of somewhere in London. Pathetic. Another meander to get him home, /the wife will complain/breath stinking/booze fuelled junkie. A dimly glowing sign swims into view/that rave place/perhaps they'll serve up some more drink?/Worth a try/the bouncers are staring, try to look sober... /At the doorway. The bouncers, what are they looking at?*

BANG!

*Reeling/falling/the floor/ow! Concrete on the head... Ah, nuts! The drink's spilling! Who the f**k was that?!*

The doors to the nightclub fly open, and Ray, closely followed by Adamfox and Douglas burst out onto the street – and straight into a collision with some drunk. Wishing he could stop to say sorry, Ray runs round into the yard as quickly as he can and hides behind the Furmobile. Adam, having somehow completed his purchase from Douglas amid the chaos, arrives presently, opens the doors and flings his new number plates into the foot well. Ray jumps into the back of the Furmobile, glowsticks still shining from his tail and paws, and shuts the door hastily. Adam shuts his door too, and bends over the passenger seat so as not to be seen in the street light.

About half a dozen rave-goers round the corner into the yard. From the far end of the yard comes the sound of a truck engine starting. The old Man swings out and with full beam headlights reflected from rusting chrome coated steel, diverts the attention of the pursuing group and gives the impression of having been chosen as a getaway vehicle, what with its number plates being gone and all. Not noticing the rather obvious Furmobile parked just yards from them, they instead follow the truck as it slowly gets away on flat tyres and seized brakes.

Once the coast is clear, Ray turns to Adam.

“What the heck were you thinking?”

“Well, it was a rave. Everyone was drunk, I figured you'd be safe. You WERE safe until that girl had a funny turn in the wrong place!” Adam protests retrospectively.

“Yeah, and thanks to her, I'm the black sheep! Everyone blamed the outsider, the guy who stands out.”

Which is a real irony, considering what the rest of them were like.

“You didn't actually do anything wrong, and we made that clear. The bar lady seemed to know.”

“Yeah, well, she could have said so before we invoked the rage of Captain Thug and the Chav Army!”

“They just got angry over nothing. How was I to know?”

“I think it was quite obvious in that situation that 'Don't worry, we're furies' was not going to work in front of them!”

“Could you think of anything better to say?”

Ray pauses before avoiding the question, “...why were we even at that rave in the first place?”

Adam doesn't reply with words, but simply holds up a number plate. FV02 RRY. Ray rolls his eyes. *I should have known Adam would be lunatic enough to come all this way just to pimp his Furmobile.*

“Anyway, let's go and see your Mum before anything else happens. At least she's not going to be drugged up to the eyeballs, drunk, armed and dangerous... right?”

Ray smiles cringingly, “you don't know my Mum!”

Leanne is soaking in the bath. Her husband already in bed and probably asleep, Leanne finds that she can't sleep for being too worried about Ray. He's been gone this long before. Just not that far away.

Jurgen sits at the bedside, not daring to wake Anaïs from what is likely to be a very uncomfortable, difficult sleep. A cold cup of tea stands on the bedside table, gradually soaking a ring into a sheet of paper underneath it. Looking closer, Jurgen can see there is a picture drawn in pencil. A picture of a vixen, and a very good one at that. The signature at the bottom, though half-obscured by a tea stain, says Anaïs drew it. Jurgen sits back to wait for Anaïs to wake up. He's sure she will, sooner or later. She's such a light sleeper.

Andy wakes up automatically, his body clock insisting it's time for work. Sighing, for Sundays are not his realm in the paramedic department, Andy gets up anyway, wide awake and glad of the time off. He grabs a dish from the cupboard for his breakfast, the kitchen light reflecting coldly off the dark window overlooking the impound yard. At least this way he can get round to selling and getting rid of some stuff he doesn't need any more at the Halden Sunday Car Boot Sale. God knows it needs to happen, Andy is a clutterbug.

11138831158831178811121110881112880088311888111588111221881117883114

A Tail Of The Unexpected

The Furmobile pulls into a quiet residential street in East London.

"It's... just over here. The second-last on the right." Ray indicates his parents' house to Adam. Adam slows the van down.

"I'll just park round the corner, there's no space here." Rounding a random group of parked vehicles and some traffic-calming bollards, Adam parks up just beyond the high wall on the corner.

The Malt House is indeed in a chaotic state on the return of the furry couple. Halt Mouse and Pam Ther find themselves spending another late night cleaning up after a Saturday binge party.

Dave has exhausted his supply of lager, and his capacity to drink it, simultaneously. Snoozing on his settee, his greasy hand clings the last can almost perfectly still, the last few dregs swilling back and forth very slightly with his snoring. The TV remains on a sports news channel, endlessly going through replays of minor division football matches and commenting on the importance of a goalkeeper's transfer to Liverpool.

Sheric has entered the building. She points her paw at one of the walls, a string of yellow dots appears in mid-air indicating what she's manipulating. Within a few seconds, the wall is a new shade of blue. Turning around, she manifests a sphere from thin air. The sphere grows slightly bigger, and changes colour to a sort of metallic green before becoming shinier. The yellow dots vanish and the ball drops to the laminate floor.

Test ball: Boing!

This program is great fun, and if circumstances in real life were different, Sheric might be earning some in-game money instead of faffing with her frankly appalling building skills. But for want of concentration, and inspiration. Her mind askew, she realises she isn't getting anywhere tonight.

The world suddenly turns black, the window containing it in the medium of LCD frozen and jammed. A moment later, it vanishes, to be replaced by a still image taken from within that world, now nothing more than a desktop background. The timely crashing of the application reveals Sheric sat on a seat she bought from the horse sat next to her, smiling at the camera that exists only as much as the seat does. *Second Life? It may very well ruin my first if I keep up being this obsessed with it.*

Ray moves gingerly along the pavement, feeling the filthy asphalt and ubiquitous chewing-gum beneath his paw pads. Sticking to the shadows as much as he can, he rounds the corner, watching the dark, silent windows of the houses on the other side of the street. *Not a sausage.* A cat sits patiently atop the brick wall

on his left, next to the gate into his next door neighbour's yard. On seeing him, the cat gets up and makes a beeline for the cat-flap. A halogen security light triggers and glares burningly into Ray's sensitive eyes. Raising a paw to shield himself from the light now spectacularly showing him up beacon-like in this empty street, Ray gives up trying to be incognito and just strides around to his Mum's front door, through the gap in the low wall where there would be a gate if they could be bothered to get one. Not that it really seems to matter when you've only got a few square metres of stone slabs and a couple of diseased pot plants to protect anyway. Taking a deep breath, Ray wishes Adamfox had come with him now, for support. *But if he did, Mum would only assume this is all his fault.*

Leanne has exhausted every last degree of heat from the bathwater, every last bubble of soap. Getting out and grabbing her towel, she pulls the plug and, dripping wet, plods into the bedroom. Her hair wrapped in one towel and her ageing, tobacco-suffered body in another, she picks up the phone to try calling Ray once more before bed. *He's quite likely still up...*

Ray reaches forward with a trembling paw to press the cracked plastic doorbell, cursing himself for having forgotten his keys.

Boop boop	Di-di-ding-ding-ding-ding-ding...
-----------	-----------------------------------

Ding dong!

Ray pauses with momentary surprise. That stupid ring tone from years ago is now assigned to his Mum's number. *She's ringing me NOW, of all times?* Pulling out the phone, he hits the cancel button with a claw of one paw while pressing the doorbell again with the other paw.

Leanne pauses with momentary surprise. *Who on Earth would be at the door at this time of night? And Ray's phone just went straight to the answer phone...*

Ding dong!

Shrugging to herself, Leanne gets up, grabbing her dressing gown and slippers.

Oh heck, this is going to be awkward... Ray thinks nervously as the sound of feet on stairs comes clearly to him through the door.

If this is anyone other than Ray, I'll -
Leanne unlocks and opens the door.

Ray takes a deep breath.

Leanne finds herself face-to-face with a grey wolf wearing a T-shirt, jeans and a nervous grin. A tail with zigzag patterns in its fur hangs between his legs, and his bare foot-paws stand digitigrade upon the doorstep,

his claws, his whiskers, his ears all screaming 'real'.

Leanne can't decide what to say. *Holy friggin' whatsits, it's either a werewolf or one very convincing suit! But they're not real! Yet if I didn't know better, I would swear he looks a bit like Ray...* Ray decides to make like a fat penguin and break the ice.

"Hello Mum."

Feight And Orty

Mum's The Word

A wasted youth is better by far than a wise and productive old age.

- Meatloaf

Adam sits in the Furmobile, fiddling with Ray's glowsticks amid a mood of half-boredom, half-apprehension. The keys in the ignition and the radio on, playing a local digital station with regular news bulletins, a lot of adverts and just occasionally some music. The speakers, slightly muffled by a couple of stray plushies, issue forth a tune being murdered by a TV talent show nominee, whose inexplicable fan base and good looks were the sole reason they got onto the local radio.

The lounge is lit up with all the lights on. Ray's eyes, forced to adjust quickly, water slightly, forcing some sleepy gunk into his fur. *Tiredness will have to wait...* Looking into his mother's eyes, he can see she is trying to fathom whether he really is Ray or not. Apparently having made her mind up for the time being, Leanne finally speaks. "What on Earth possessed you to do this... whatever it is?"

"I've been trying to tell you over the phone!"

Definitely Ray's voice there.

"Tell me what? That you've managed to turn yourself into... this?" Leanne can't decide whether to laugh or cry. "I mean, is this for real? 'Cause if you're having me on, you've really gone to town!"

Ray is slightly taken aback. *I suppose this is to be expected.* It didn't seem to matter what anyone else would think, but Mum... "It's as real as I am." Ray puts his right paw forward, his Mum holds it in her hand.

Reaching forward with her other hand, she touches his nose. A sharp intake of breath, followed by the most meaningful profanity Ray has ever heard. "F*ck!"

The towel falls off her head.

Adam looks up from the yellow numberplate he can't wait to get registered to his vehicle, to see another vehicle approaching in the mirror. The black Mondeo rolls past quietly and disappears round the corner. A flashing aircraft light traces a curve across the semi-cloudy, light-polluted sky and a dog barks in the distance.

Clutching a cup of tea that Ray insisted on making, Leanne sits down with a mixture of awe, terror, pride and disappointment melding in her 48-year-old face.

"So you see," Ray continues, "these furies are some of the best people you could ever want to meet. I

found out the other day there was this meeting going on up in Yorkshire, and I normally wouldn't have bothered going so far. But the post on the forum said it was urgent, and to be honest I needed an excuse to go somewhere anyway, so I went along."

"But how does this have anything to do with you turning up at this time of night in this state?" Leanne interjects, puzzled.

"Well, it turns out the reason they said it was an emergency minimeet, was because one of my best friends has come up with an amazing invention." Ray explains as best he can, "One that lets you change yourself how you wish."

"What, so you decided to turn yourself into some kind of wolf-freak?!" Leanne is beginning to get her head together.

"That's not-"

"Am I missing something here, or have you just made yourself into a wolf-man?"

"Yes, we've already established that."

"Thank you. Now why on Earth did you do a thing like that?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you!" Ray rolls his eyes in exasperation.

"Hey, don't you get all shirty with me! I don't care whether you're a werewolf or the Loch Ness monster, you can talk politely to me or you'll get what's coming to you!"

His Mum is clearly taking this just like she would any other awkward situation involving him and doing something she doesn't approve of. This could take a while.

Douglas is forced to pull over into a lay-by North of Regent's Park, having led the gang of misdirected hooligans on a merry 10 mph chase across London. The poor truck's tyres are flat as pancakes, and now quite shredded to boot. The chavs and their pursuit were brought to a halt by a passing police car just 50 yards back, and with them scarpering in all directions, Douglas could finally pull over and re-attach the original plates to the truck before the cops cotton on. Just as he's about to climb back in and return the truck to its semi-permanent parking spot, Douglas is stopped short by a tap on the shoulder. Turning around to face the owner of the tapping finger, Douglas finds himself looking he of the funky hairdo right in the eye.

"Right, listen. First, I'm not a werewolf, and have no intention of biting anybody. Second, the machine is called the Geneticiser, and I volunteered to help try it out. Third, No, I'm not the only one to have used it. The guy who invented it is now a fox. Fourth, I did it because I chose to. Was not forced by anyone, it was my choice. I have never felt better and I'm not worried, so please don't you worry about me. Fifth, the Geneticiser is designed not just to turn people into animals, but to be able to fix any issues with genetics, cure diseases etc as well. I just chose to be a wolf because that's my fursona. Sixth, no I'm not gay, but if you keep going on about it I'll become bi just out of principle. And don't panic, I'm not going to burden you or this household with me staying here. I'll take my stuff and leave tonight if you like."

"No, wait a minute. What's going to happen to you now? You can't just go parading around like that!"

Leanne, for all her faults, is still a concerned mum at heart. "If people find out about you you'll become a freak show!"

"I'd rather that than be something I'm not!" Ray retorts, "besides, a lot of my friends and many other people

besides are likely to do this too, very soon. It won't be long before we're everywhere, and society can like it or lump it!"

"Admirable though your intentions clearly are, I still think it's a foolish thing to be doing. But, it's your life, you'll only have it once and you can do with it as you see fit. Heck, given half the chance, I'd like an excuse to escape the crazy rat-race of this world too. I sympathise with you that much. But I don't think you really have the right answer. All I can do is sit here and worry about you, and wish you luck. So go on, get your stuff and go have an adventure! Just don't go crawling back to me, saying I hadn't told you so!" Leanne finishes her rantings with the stereotypical mum's response to an errant son.

"Where is he?" The man of the weird hair demands.

"Where's who?" Replies a frightened Douglas.

"The wolf guy, you know!"

"I don't know at all where he is, I just saw him go one way while I set off driving the other."

"Yeah, don't we know it! Now where is he?"

"I told you, I don't know!"

"For crying out loud! Get the f**k outta my way!" The enraged raver pushes the DJ aside and clammers into the truck cab. A few minutes pass during which he's obviously searching the interior up and down. Douglas sits on the rear wheel arch and waits patiently. *Lord, I need a miracle.*

The sound of police sirens starts to build from up the road, and soon the blue flashing lights start flickering among the trees and reflecting off the windows of the houses nearby. The thug tumbles out of the truck in a heap, swearing like a trooper, then with a scramble to his feet and a ginger glance over his shoulder, he sets off at a run into the park, his tattooed arms grazed on the rough tarmac. The police cars simply pass by, and for a moment the pathetic individual is lit up in blue as he continues running across the recently mowed grass. Douglas just climbs back into his cab and takes a deep breath. *Thank you!*

Anaïs wakes up to find her father waiting patiently by her bedside. Smiling to herself and to him, she pulls herself upright.

"They have treated you well here?" Jurgen inquires, looking down at her plastered legs.

"I think so. I have another week before I am allowed out, at least. I'm sorry, Papa!" Anaïs can't help but get upset. "I'm sorry about the car..." she sobs.

"Don't worry, it was not your fault." Jurgen reaches out with a comforting hand. *Whoever did do this will have hell to pay.* When Anaïs has calmed down, Jurgen picks up the cold mug of tea and takes out the picture from beneath it. "Did you draw this? It's very good..." Jurgen switches his eyes back and forth between Anaïs and the vixen on the paper. *Come to think of it, Anaïs does look a bit like this vixen.*

Having been to the loo, grabbed the most important of his stuff and shoved it into a big holdall and an army-surplus rucksack, Ray is stood at the door, ready to go. His mum stands in the lounge doorway.

"Are you sure you'll be alright with all that?"

"I'm fine. I love you lots, and I'm sorry I can't stay longer, but you know what Dad would say..."

Leanne smiles and gives her son a hug. His Dad would probably disown him if he found out. *Better this way,*

really. And this fur of his is so soft...

"Er, OK, Mum. You can let go now." Ray says from next to her ear some 5 minutes later.

"Alright, just promise you'll look after yourself."

"Of course I will. I'll be back eventually, don't worry."

As her son opens the front door, Leanne can't help but be worried about Ray.

Ray stands frozen in the open doorway, Leanne's worries instantly confirmed. A good half dozen police cars, all with lights a-flashing and officers awaiting with truncheons, along with a couple of unmarked cars and even a helicopter overhead, are all waiting outside in the street, all focused on Ray. Blinded by the lights and confused by the sudden noise, Ray finds himself rooted to the spot.

Four-Niner

Whisky Oscar Lima Foxtrot

*I know I won't be leaving here
with you....*

.....

I say, don't you know?

You say, you don't know

I say... take me out!

- Franz Ferdinand

Adam can't help but notice the appearance of a lot of blue flashing lights reflecting from the house windows around him, and along with the steady beats of a helicopter's rotors directly above, they give him the impression something might be going on not far away. Removing the key from the ignition, Adam abruptly ends the music that had been reverberating about his Volkswagen for the last few minutes; thus catching Franz Ferdinand right in the middle of their memorable guitar riff.

Adam casually gets out of the Furmobile and walks over to the corner, from around which the noise and blue lights seem to be coming. Poking his head around the red brick edifice, Adam raises his eyebrows.

"What?!"

"Roger that. We have a Whisky Oscar Lima Foxtrot fitting your description. Proceeding to detain him, as we speak. Over." Chief Constable Fenton releases the radio button. Two of his officers are leading the suspect to their car. At the far end of the street, the traffic unit are keeping the area free of nosy chavs.

PC Harvey stands by his patrol car at the end of the street, watching as his colleagues take someone away from the house near the corner.

"'Ere, what's goin' on?" A voice asks from behind his right shoulder. Turning to face the source of said voice, PC Harvey doesn't see anyone. Then he looks down. A very short chap of about 55 is stood, arms folded, looking distinctly unimpressed with the disturbance in the neighbourhood.

Before he can get his head around the situation, Ray finds himself being frogmarched into the police car. The

officers seem to be quite disinterested in the fact that their charge is a 6 foot anthropomorphic wolf, and pull him to the back of the police car amid the din and flashing lights as though he's some convicted criminal. "We have instructions to take you to the station for questioning." That's all they'll say. Ray, tired, dazed and confused, says nothing and lets them bundle him into the back of the police-issue Astra without having a clue of what's going to happen next. Broken thoughts swirl in his head: *I did nothing wrong, so I should just comply and everything will be OK / What the heck are all these police doing here anyway?* An eruption of shouting halts PC Fenton short of shutting the door on Ray. At the end of the street, a row involving the traffic unit is quickly escalating to affray.

"What are all you cops doing here?" an irate chavette in a dressing gown shouts from her upstairs window. "Go back to yer paperwork!" the dwarf shouts angrily into PC Harvey's Kevlar vested chest. At this point a group of underage drinkers round the corner. Spotting the argument, they decide to help it by finishing their WKDs quickly with much gulping and momentary light-headedness, then by lobbing the bottles at PC Harvey. Amid a storm of abuse and low-flying glass, PC Harvey just has time to see a couple of officers break away from apprehending the suspect; before being hit squarely in the face with a square bottle of Jack Daniel's.

Ray, suddenly left alone in the back of the police car, looks around. All the officers are distracted, sidetracked, or otherwise busy. Not least because one of the drunks has managed to get to a point of rage that requires three strong blokes to restrain him. *All because the police have dared even venture into this crud-bucket of a neighbourhood. And for what?* Despite the circumstances, Ray finds himself sympathising with the poor b**tards in their high-vis jackets and funny-shaped helmets. *But, as Grandma often says, 'This isn't buying the baby a new bonnet'.* And so, Ray seizes the opportunity and calmly gets up to walk casually away from the scene. His mum, still stood in the doorway of her house, starts gesticulating wildly at Ray. *What on Earth is she pointing at?* Before he can figure out the answer, it hits him in the back of his head with a massive bang and a peculiar smell.

Adam, meanwhile, finds himself surrounded in a pool of searchlight. The helicopter, using its infrared camera, has mistaken him for Ray due to his outline of ears and tail. Raising his hands into the air, he awaits the arrival of a couple of officers not engaged in the tussle at the end of the street. The two bobbies run straight past where Ray is... was standing moments before, but has now mysteriously vanished. As the two policemen approach the corner, realisation dawns on their faces. One, turning to the other, exclaims simply, "feck! Where's the wolf?"

50/50

Adamant

D-d-do you realise?

Jurgen heads back to his helicopter, glad to know his daughter is OK. The drawing she made safely stowed in his pocket and temporarily forgotten (she did say he could keep it, after all), Jurgen's mind turns to Anaïs's

expected recovery time: 4 weeks. *The NHS are slow! Why, if this was France or Germany...* Jurgen's internal rant is cut off by a noise in the shadows to the right. A medical waste bin emits a loud clang, and a discarded brush pole falls noisily from where it had leaned to the filthy tarmac. Frozen to the spot for a moment, Jurgen's thoughts race through ludicrously improbable but possible causes of the noise. And so it is in a great moment of relief that Jurgen spots the perpetrator of the disturbance: naught but a domestic cat, startled from the windowsill into a clumsy leap down to the large, metal wheelie bins below. Rolling his eyes at how easily scared he has become of late, Jurgen nevertheless picks up the pace as he covers the rest of the ground between the hospital and his unofficial parking spot.

D-d-do you realise?

Adam returns to the Furmobile, on the simple basis that he hasn't done anything wrong, and the officers were ordered to apprehend a wolf, not a wannabe Arctic fox. Despite their suspicions, the police had bigger fish to fry and had been distracted long enough. His head in turmoil, Adam wonders what could possibly have provoked this... *I suppose it's a raid, but isn't it all a bit disproportionate? Besides, what could they possibly want him for? Ray did nothing wrong... and surely they wouldn't go to all this trouble over a girl who had a funny turn at a night club?* Something just doesn't ring true.

D-d-do you realise, this world is totally fugazi!

...

Leanne, shaking in the cold and shattered by what she's just seen, heard, touched... oh, it was all as real as her body could tell... tired and bewildered, shuts the door as the police cars and helicopter depart to search elsewhere, leaving behind a small detachment to mop up the neighbours and their misconceptions, but not leaving behind any explanation for the night's events. The bags remain on the carpet. *And my son is gone, twice over.*

Adam spots a black Ford Mondeo in his wing mirror, approaching from behind without headlights. Considering how Ray's sudden disappearance had been as much a puzzle to the police as it was to Adam, this rather innocuous, boring vehicle returning to pass the scene by would be all too conveniently forgotten. *Give me a tinfoil hat and call me a nerd! If this isn't suspicious, what is?* Adam resolves to follow it, in his somewhat less incognito VW camper van.

Andy has gathered together a wide range of gear, clobber, gubbins, oojahs, kapivs, dohickeyes, whatnots and other random miscellany into boxes labelled as such. His house, aside from the presence of said boxes, now looks vaguely tidier. Shapes in the dust on the shelves mark where useless ornaments and old toys did stand until now. Feeling rather pleased with himself and thinking of TV shows such as 'Bargain Hunt' and 'Cash In The Attic', Andy starts loading the boxes into his car, ready for an early start. Checking his watch (2:00), Andy decides to aim to be ready in the market car-park by 3:30. All the serious collectors are said to shop this early, so why wait? *For once, I'm up early enough. I never thought it would come to this, but thank you*

night shifts!

Officer Harvey, having finally dealt with the angry drunken dwarf and his gang, is now on his way back to the station. The whole situation stinks as once again, he and his colleague are expected to put up with all the crud resulting from a decision made higher up in the force than either he or any of his fellow minions are ever likely to see. It reminds him of the 'anti-terror' raid he had been pressed into helping with just two months ago. Asif Yewud had been just as shrouded in mystery, it seemed. With all the embarrassing data leaks of late, the government had decided to restrict the information given to the average officer on the street to a bare minimum. The effect of which was simply to make PC Harvey's job more difficult. As a mere traffic cop, he need not know why he's closing the road, only that he must keep it closed until told otherwise and in the mean time help to keep the peace. This had been all well and good in the case of Asif Yewud, who had been arrested and driven off in no time flat, before the local vigilante types had even noticed. But with this one, the chavs had been far quicker to start making trouble and so, adding insult to injury, it appears the whole raid has been made in vain as the suspect (referred to by the rather sparse, reluctantly given details as 'Wolf') has vanished from under their noses. *And whose were those unmarked Mondeos that were automatically allowed within the cordon from the start?*

Following the Mondeo this way and that, up and down various streets, Adam can't seem to fathom where it's going. Just when he feels sure he's getting somewhere, the car stops sharply, forcing him to brake hard. The suspension creaks heavily and a dozen plushies tumble listlessly. Suddenly, his quarry burns rubber and accelerates quickly down an empty street, and when Adam attempts to do the same, the VW stalls. Knowing he hasn't really got a hope of matching the no doubt finely tuned vehicle that is now apparently most aware of his pursuit, Adam's heart sinks further when he sees how low the fuel needle has also sunk. Adam is left standing, and the mysterious black car with its lack of lights and its tinted windows is gone.

Where are the prophets?

Where are the visionaries?

Where are the poets?

To breach the dawn of this sentimental mercenary.

- Marillion

One More Than Fifty

Anorakorama

Hold On To What?

- The Beautiful South

Ring, Ring!	Boop Boop
Ring, Ring!	Boop Boop
Ring, Ring!	Boop Boop

Ring, Ring!	Boop Boop
Ring, Ring!	Boop Boop
I SAID RING, RING!	Boop Boop
Hello, Halden Fur's Home?	
	Hi, Steven. Looks like we have a bit of a problem with our lupine friend...
What - *yawn* - what's the matter with him?	
	He's gone.
Gone? What do you mean?	
	As in a whole bunch of police turned up, dragged Ray to their car to question him or something, then a whole load of chavs distracted the coppers and Ray vanished!
What the heck were you doing to cause the police to turn up?	
	Good question.
--!	

The call cuts off to an abrupt message on the screen of Adam's phone: 'You have no talk time registered. Please top up now at your local outlet or www.t-mobile.co.uk'

Steven facepaws, then gets back to being curled up, comfy and warm, asleep, from which he had been so rudely interrupted. Ray is a responsible adult, and a wolf at that. Surely he can look after himself?

Ray is waking/street lights/car/smell of 3 blokes in expensive suits/eyes like glue/shadow over his face/car turns a corner/sharp pain in the thigh/was that a needle?... ..
/ow/blarg... ..

The cold night air gradually condenses into a pallid mist hanging at knee-height everywhere. The shafts of light beneath each street light illuminate the diffuse moisture and create pools of yellow in the dark white. The trees aloof and the buildings silent; the car park in the town centre a hive of activity. An enterprising burger van is already parked up, its generator adding to the floating mist with a loud and thick and regular chug. A greasy fellow with a slight beer belly lifts the steel hatch of Richard's Mobile Eatery and hooks the rusting props into place in their slots in the aluminium chequerplate counter. The fluorescent tube within the van adds its light to the car park, alongside a buzzing bug-zapper with its own brand of ultraviolet luminance. Despite the dawn being a couple of hours away, the traders are all readying their vehicles and arranging their wares on only the flimsiest tables throughout the tarmac expanse for a long morning and short afternoon of car boot sale shenanigans. Among their ranks stands Andy, laying out row upon row of books he'll never get round to reading and hastily cleaned ornaments with chipped china bases.

Dave wakes up to a throbbing headache and a broken alarm clock that now won't stop beeping until 4:00.

Feeling surprisingly awake, he decides to get up early for once. Perhaps a quiet morning walk will shift this stupid hangover.

The Furple trundles into a North London Tesco car park. Climbing out of the driver's seat and feeling more tired by the minute, Adam puts his feet straight into a pool of swirling filth, dead leaves and fag-ends. The car park is enormous, and largely empty. *And I had to choose the space with the blocked drain. Urgh.* Muttering under his breath, Adam stomps moodily through the automatic doors, his ears askew, the tip of his tail dripping and his feet shlopping in soaked trainers.

And so it is a rather peeved Adam who emerges 15 minutes later with a freshly topped-up mobile phone, a can of Relentless and a massive bottle of vegetable oil. Having filled up the thirsty Furple's tank, Adam gets out his mobile.

Two attempts at phone calls (to Steven and to Douglas) later, Adam finally realises that 3:55am isn't a good time to try ringing anyone. Answerphones are also very annoying. With this in mind, and nowhere he can realistically park or stay in London, Adam sets off back up the M1, mission failed and minus one anthropomorphic wolf.

Five And Two, Zwei Und Funfzig

Cheap As Chips

Andy is glad he remembered to come to the car boot sale for a change. Only 4:00 and already he's sold five old DVDs and a set of wicker baskets he'd found on top of the kitchen cupboard doing nothing. And a portly gentleman is now eyeing his much abused antique chess set with great interest.

Quentin, looking for a distraction from his weird tenants and the grandchildren on whom the weirdness seems to be wearing off, and suffering from a bit of insomnia, browses back and forth among the trestle tables and assorted jumble. He knows a bargain when he sees one, and this chess set could be just the ticket.

The Furple rests in the Northbound car park at a service area on the M1. Adam, exhausted, sprawled over the plushies in the back, sleeps deeply. A CCTV camera turns and focuses on the VW camper. Roger smiles.

"Oi! Gerroudamaway, fatty!"

Quentin's face turns dark. "What."

"I says get out of my way, fatty!" replies the eloquently challenged Dave.

Turning to Andy, Quentin raises an eyebrow. "Did he just call me fatty?"

Andy nods slowly from behind his creaking wallpaper table.

"Thank you." Quentin turns and knocks seven bells out of Dave in one punch.

Jurgen flies South again, his helicopter thumping the bestilled air down and flashing red and white lights into the top of a low, foggy cloud. The long double row of pale yellow lights marches into the fog beneath him on

galvanised steel legs, accompanied by the fog lights of a group of articulated lorries draining their batteries into the thick air at a speed limited by force to 70 miles per hour, but by sensible choice given the weather, to 30. A dot-matrix board flashes its one-word warning onto the central reservation in orange while a dark shape rapidly passes by overhead, narrowly missing the tall, mist shrouded lattice and unprotected cables of a high voltage pylon. The sole occupant of the chopper knows exactly what he'll be doing once he gets back home. Sleeping.

LIII

Hello Dave!

Harriet is once again in charge of Tim and Sarah's well-being.

"The way your Granddaddy goes on, anyone would think it were difficult looking after you two!"

Tim looks up from his wax crayons and points at Sarah, who right on cue is emanating an unmistakeable stink from her high chair. Sighing, Harriet adds, "then again..."

If it weren't for the double pay, Harriet would not have even considered working this early on a Sunday morning. But her landlord's daughter had acted on very short notice, and Harriet knew three important things:

1. She was the only babysitter who would be available
2. Quentin would rather be damned than mess up his meticulously planned weekend on the whim of that half-wit Jane
3. If Harriet didn't babysit, Quentin would probably evict her for a higher-paying tenant in this for-some-reason sought-after town.

The dark sky slowly gains a few hints of early dawn, slowly adding colour to the world through the mist.

Reeling and somewhat irked by the feeling of chunks of tooth on his tongue mingling with general pain throughout his mouth, Dave narrowly avoids falling over. If it weren't for his drinking and smoking, he might be tasting blood too, but his taste buds are not what they could be. Regaining his balance, Dave spits out a mixture of swear words and blood. On Quentin stepping forward so his face is illuminated by the misty shaft of light from above, Dave's bloodshot eyes fill with recognition of his nemesis and he scarpers.

Andy, obviously surprised, looks at Quentin with mixed fear and wonderment. "I take it you know this man?"

Quentin snorts. "Oh yes. Scum of the Earth, that one. He's been ruining the Fox And Hounds with his disproportionate gob for the last three years. I'm sick to the back teeth of swallowing humble pie from his insults, so I decided it's about time he swallows his *front* teeth and gets out of my friggin' face, I've had enough of him!"

"Glad to hear you had good reason to hit him like you did, 'cause I'm an off-duty paramedic and would have helped him mop up if he hadn't run off, you know."

"Don't bother, not worth your effort. He wouldn't be able to tell the difference between someone *saving his life* and someone who's *'lookin' at (his) bird, innit.'*"

Andy shrugs. "Well, he's gone now. Care for a game of chess?"

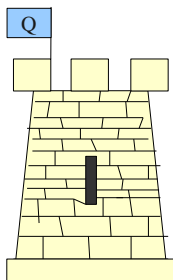
Kelly can't sleep. Her arms ache crazily, despite the plethora of pills she's been taking. Worse, there's no

this mention was only a reference to someone whose surname was 'Wolfe', but it nevertheless costs Quentin his white-squares bishop, at the hooves of Andy's well-placed black knight. Just as Quentin is beginning to worry about the outcome of this game, a man wanders between the cars and glowing lamp-posts; whose faint silhouette against the gradually brightening sky throws a look of surprise onto Andy's face.

"Jeff! What a coincidence!"

Rolling his eyes at the store Andy seems to set by these coincidences, Jeff folds his arms and remarks smoothly, "you're not going to sell a game of chess by beating someone at it."

Andy needn't worry, though, for with a sly move of his castle, Quentin instantly proves who the better player is. "Checkmate."



A small, long-range helicopter stirs the dawn air as it lands home at the Kimpler residence. Marie, awoken by the sound of rotors slowly spinning down, realises she's still sat at the kitchen table, still halfway through a glass of wine. Putting the bottle away and draining the (she would say half empty) glass, Marie just has time to hastily straighten her stress-damaged hair before *Monsieur Workaholique* shows his face for once.

Roger and Tom have clocked off from their night shift. Crossing the footbridge over a near-invisible motorway, they descend through the Northbound side of the complex just as a very tired-looking guy wearing a now rather bedraggled pair of white faux-fur ears and matching tail shuffles groggily through the automatic doors (which still work on this side of the M1), heading for the loo.

"Hey, look, Tom! It's him from earlier, you know, with the VW Camper!" Roger nudges his colleague while pointing across the hall.

"Oh yeah, so it is. Heh, wonder where his wolfy friend is?" Tom scratches his chin. The subject of their conversation, fast approaching them, has ears of his own as well as the two extra on top of his head, and interrupts them both before they can speculate. "For your information, I had to leave him behind in London. Now if you two don't mind, I would like to gain access to the toilets!" Sure enough, Roger and Tom are unwittingly blocking his way. Stepping aside to let their *Weird Customer Of The Month* nominee past, Roger and Tom exchange glances.

"There goes your chance of a photo with the wolf dude..." Tom points out.

The 'wolf dude' is just waking up. And many of his chances, it would seem, have long gone.



?

Confusion never stops,

Closing walls and ticking clocks...

- Coldplay

D:Rat is awoken early by yet another cruddy old train hammering past at stupid o'clock on a Sunday morning, pulling an endless parade of 79 ton wagons through the sonorous, poorly ventilated tunnel just down the line at about 15mph. *You'd have thought that after three months in this place, I would have gotten used to it*, he thinks exasperatedly while watching the midges that sneaked in last night before he closed the window now happily orbiting his bedroom light. The low conifer hedge between his house and the railway, barely visible in the early morning fog, reduces neither train noise nor insect population.

Douglas, up until a few seconds ago, was fast asleep in his flat above the night club where he has been declared permanent DJ by the owners for the last few months, much to his own annoyance. Now, however, he is wide awake, rather disturbed by the sudden presence of a house-brick on his pillow, right next to his head. On the floor between him and the window is a small pile of broken glass, and looking up, Douglas can see the cause of the sudden cold draft that did more to wake him up than the shattering sound. The window, completely shattered, has been replaced with the face of a very ugly, and now-Douglas-comes-to-think-of-it quite smelly man wearing a bruised cheek, a very tatty jacket, stale urine and a look of urgency. Douglas's eyes switch between the watch balanced on the headboard of his bed and the bloke balanced on the massive wheelie-bin outside.

"Why couldn't you just knock?" Douglas implores with disgusted indignance from between dusty duvet and sweaty sheet.

Arnold, not one to mince his words, simply replies, "yer truck's gone."

Zack, being a man of many precariously juggled debts, often works at weekends. As such, he now finds himself on call-out. Again. As he pulls into the dead-end cobbled street in the modified van, the cause of the problem is immediately apparent. Another lamp-post, another wretched suburb. This time not failed due to vandals or cars crashing, but simply sheer age. The poor item of street furniture is more rust and grime than steel, and, as he looks to the lamp at the top, Zack muses that no-one will see it even if it does work. Surrounded by an overgrown pine tree on the street end, bent slightly to one side and with a base buried in dog leavings, this one looks more like a full replacement would be more apt than sending out some poor sparky with a few pieces of wire, a fuse and a spare bulb.

Mooching down the stairs in slippers, D:Rat opens the kitchen/lounge/dining room door and is immediately flattened by a lolloping pile of a silly dog.

"Jack! I love you too, but do you have to do that?" D:Rat speaks through half a mouthful of carpet and half a mouthful of long dog hair. Jack just steps back slightly, allowing D:Rat to sit up before licking his face some more.

The fog swirls a particularly thick soup around Hull and Holderness. Helga's bedroom window is filled with white cloud, and the distant sounds of foghorns slowly work their way into her mind. The sea laps gently at

the base of the short cliff, the high tide pulled higher by the time of year. The eerie blankness of the sky filters the rising sun to a diffuse white. Unlike her surroundings, however, Helga's mind is anything but blank.

Kelly is once again in the ward, the nurses having taken the opportunity to persuade her back to her bed for a while.

Dave, his mouth full of dentistry and warm mouthwash, sits bemoaning the pain still throbbing following the no-frills tidying up of his mouth by an unsympathetic dental surgeon, whose scheduled appointments, in his opinion, far outweigh the need to clean up a hooligan who walks in proclaiming himself an emergency case, yet has the gall to boast of how he had brought it on himself through years of bullying people – and with pride. Dave, of course, doesn't quite see it that way. But quite how he does see it is difficult to tell.

Kelly, feeling thoroughly miserable, settles on giving the French accented goody-two-shoes next to her the evils. Anaïs adopts a decidedly disinterested expression, and ignores her fellow patient's arrogant, rude, unkempt and unruly demeanour as much as she can.

Georgina awakes shakily from a very vivid dream. She's not unused to dreams of this sort, and indeed has a long journal of them. But this one she finds particularly strange. *A square tunnel of concrete... Something that needs destroying, some kind of contraption... A group of people with uniforms... Only one way out... A choice with only one option... A field in fog, muffled shouting. Pain. Vehicles rolling past.* It feels like something yet to be. But at 6:55 in the morning? *I was rather hoping to get more sleep than that.*

The 56thicated Chapterified Sectionofthebookication

No! Don't take me away from my ingredients!

Jeff meanders thoughtfully among the gathered cars, vans, wallpapering tables and mobile food establishments, scanning the contents of each table in turn for the random contents of his weird shopping list. A box of second-hand Lego turns up soon enough, and although a little chewed on by their previous, somewhat younger owner, the right pieces all seem to be present and correct. An old digital camera and an older scanner turn up as well, and soon Jeff can see an impact being made on the more mundane parts of the list. Oddly, though, there are no plastic tubs or film cases about. There is also a rather more obvious lack in such items as the microscope and the parts for the circuitry. And not a printer to be seen.

Adam, having managed to fool himself into being wide awake again (I'm gonna be out cold by Monday at this rate), drives his VW Camper the rest of the way up the M1 to the junction with the M62, then off at Halden, all the while concentrating hard on keeping off the rumble strip and borrowing an articulated lorry's slipstream for much of the journey. 'MacEgbert's Hauliers' dominates the view from the windscreen of the Furmobile in black and gold for nearly 40 miles.

The crumbling remains of a burnt-out transformer fall apart at the end of Zack's screwdriver. Standing up, he shakes his head. "Never seen owt like it," he mutters to himself.

"Scuse me." A voice utters groggily from behind him. Zack looks around to see a young man with his t-shirt

on back to front and a vaguely rodent-like face, walking what looks like a cross between an English Sheep Dog and some mucky carpet on the end of a red roll-up extendible lead. D:Rat ducks under the oversized pine tree, to head down a public footpath between the garden walls that Zack has only just noticed. The dog, unworried by his owner's oblivious continuing down the path, stops to sniff at the base of the lamp-post while his lead extends longer and longer from its roll in the handle. Zack only cottons on to the territorial intentions of this interloper when it's too late.

"No, please... for goodness sake! Stop it, those are my screwdrivers..."

From around the corner, D:Rat has finally reached the end of his tether. "Jack! Come on!"

Jack, however, refuses to budge, and merely continues in his rear leg lifting activities, intent on ensuring his bladder is empty and his scent the most dominant at this strategic spot. D:Rat, realising he'll get nowhere unless he goes back to force the silly pooch into the exercise regime he promised his Mum he would keep the dog doing (Jack, of course, has other plans, but D:Rat won't give up without a fight); goes back to the end of the street to see if he can extricate the hapless hound from distraction.

"No, Jack! Naughty boy!" he firmly enunciates to the now-apologetic dog. "Sorry, I can't believe he's done this." D:Rat turns to the electrician, whose face is wearing a mixture of surprise and dismay. Seeming to come round a little, Zack lightens up.

"Oh, not to worry. I used to have a pet dog myself. Massive husky she was, almost looked like a wolf. Best temperament I could have wished for, though. But I have to admit, peeing on tools is a new one in my knowledge of dog behaviour..."

7:45 and the mist still hangs, lit up like the inside of a massive crystal ball by the sun from the low East South East. The London pollution adds to the eerie colours. Douglas stands aghast in the rough yard behind the club, watching the now vacant space as though he expects it to move. A throat clears with the subtlety of a circular saw next to him. The ragged pile that is Arnold is waiting, arms folded, fag in mouth, wondering just how long they're going to stand there like lemons. Finally deciding Douglas must have had long enough by now to take in the fact his favourite vehicle is missing, he makes like he's about to speak.

"-..."

"Sh!"

"B-"

"No."

"?"

"Not a word. This is... this is beyond a joke. Beyond you and me. I have had enough. This is war!"

A bright fluorescent tube shines invasively, producing a high-pitched din that few can hear, but that those who can all agree is extremely annoying. Ray looks around himself for the moment, stunned at how clear and well rested he feels. Wasn't he just at home, looking at a forum? *How the heck did I get here?* Ray tries to sit up, only to find he can't, his arms and legs have been strapped to the bed, and he then realises there's something a bit strange. Just something that feels different. He lifts his head to look down at his hands. *Paws?* And looking at the rest of his body. *Fur?* He moves the appendage sending sensory input from the base of his spine. *Tail?* He licks his lips, feeling a set of big, sharp teeth in a long jaw.

Oh my God, I'm actually a wolf!

“But how can anyone steal my truck when it's got flat tyres and nearly no diesel left?”

“I don't know. But the answer is probably over there!” Arnold points across the murky docks to a warehouse with a rather obvious truck parked outside it. Avoiding getting too close to the smelly air around the tramp, Douglas looks to where Arnold is pointing, past the stunted tree and across the disused waterway.

F1F7Y 53V3N

The What Now?

*If my life is for rent,
And I don't learn to buy;
If I desire nothing more than I get -
'cause nothing I have is truly mine.*

- Dido

Gregory Alexander Percival Smith. There's a name you wouldn't want to say when drunk. Which is why, to most of his mates, he's simply known by the rather obvious nickname 'Gaps'. Not just because of his initials, but also due to his bizarre hairdo, that on anyone else would look outright wrong. But Gaps doesn't care what people think of his hair. He just wishes they would have chosen for him a better nickname. And now, as he stands outside his warehouse on the dockside fitting new tyres to the truck that made him look such an idiot last night, he can't help but wonder what possessed him to go chasing after the stupid thing in the first place last night. But the answer to that, of course, is obvious. Drink and a need to prove himself that even he can't deny. Because after a nickname like that, he needs to do all he can to uphold his fearsome local reputation. Because if he doesn't do that, he'll lose respect. And beyond losing respect is the unthinkable. Which is why Gaps then returned later that night to get his revenge on the b**tard who stole his respect, by stealing the b**tard's truck. Unfortunately the flat tyres make it near impossible to shift far, so Gaps drove it in the early morning to his own place to fix it enough so he can get rid. That'll serve the DJ right, and make him think twice before messing with Gaps, or any of his gang.

Quentin returns momentarily to his car to deposit his new bargains. The fog is as thick as ever, and the sounds of the car boot sale's chatting, bartering customers and thudding burger van generator all seem miles away, despite only being around the corner. Just then, the fog lifts slightly, allowing Quentin to see as far as the main road through the town centre. And a VW Camper rounds the bend in front of Marks & Spencer's, covered in paw print transfers, faux fur and various similar paraphernalia. The rear side window appears to be crammed with cuddly toys, including one of a wolf. Added to that, the driver appears to be wearing white faux fur ears. Only from this distance, Quentin can't quite tell. Could they be real? Quentin shakes his head, trying his best to rid his mind of such thoughts. But still, after what he saw yesterday... *yesterday. That's when I last saw that van!* Back then it had just seemed silly, but now it has Quentin thinking. *Surely this has something do do with that wolf-man.* But if it does, that means Quentin did see what he saw. *Does that make*

me more likely to be mad or less? For the first time since his mother died, Quentin feels like he really needs a stiff drink before it's even 9:00 in the morning. *Either a stiff drink, or if that don't work... a shrink.*

"Oh, I'm sorry. Here, let me help you clean them up." D:Rat apologetically starts picking up Zack's toolbag, thus far just outside the befouled zone, so he can move it aside to get at the main disaster spot and rescue Zack's screwdrivers.

"Don't bother, it's OK, I'll sort it." Zack waves the dog walker impatiently away.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, not to worry!" Zack replies, turning his head first to D:Rat and then to the silly hound responsible for the mess. "I mean, he's not really the sort of dog you can stay mad at, is he?" This is true, especially with Jack now giving his all in the department of cute, soulful expressions, the effect of which aren't even lost through the straggly strands of fur hanging over his eyes. "What's his name?"

"Jack."

"Heh, cool name. I'm Zack, by the way."

"And I'm David. Nice to meet you."

"And you, if only it were under better circumstances!" Zack says jokingly.

"I suppose. Well, I'll owe you a drink, then. Next time I see you, remind me."

Zack chuckles, but notes it down in his mind nevertheless. "OK."

Waking up and finding yourself in a different (but oddly familiar) body is quite a shock to the system. But then, so is waking up somewhere you've never been before. Looking around with his suddenly-feeling-rather-sharp eyes, Ray realises the place is some kind of facility. An institution, vaguely hospital-like but without sympathy. Besides, no hospital ties you to a bed. There are various apparatus by the walls, which are magnolia painted prefabricated concrete slabs. The apparatus consists of several machines connected to monitors showing graphs of things like heart rate and blood sugar levels, as well as one which is now bleeping loudly – and flashing up a warning:

SUBJECT AWAKE. PLEASE REFILL TRANQUILLISER.

Ray's mind races. *Tranquilliser? How long have they had me here? Who are they? Why am I tied to this bed? Why am I suddenly my fursona? (Although that is flipping cool).* All this before he hears a new sound with his sensitive ears: voices and footsteps approaching from somewhere outside the room, likely a corridor. The time to act is now.

Ray starts pulling himself as upright as he can. The straps holding him down dig into his fur, but he manages to raise his head to a level at which he can see across the whole windowless room, and watch as the door opens and two women in plain white lab coats walk in. They notice the bleeping of the machine. They notice Ray sat up, wearing an expression that demands to know what is going on. Ray notices their expressions switch to a mixture of surprise and curiosity. Before either of them can regain their composure, Ray asks flatly and simply: "Would you mind explaining why I am tied to this bed?"

"Would you mind explaining why you haven't called the police yet?" Arnold inquires to Douglas as he sits in

the bar, obviously procrastinating.

“Would you mind explaining why you're still here?” Douglas responds irritably.

“Touché”

At number 42 Kenneth Street, the weathered hardwood door resounds to a good solid knocking. A sleepy Steven awakes with a start. Quickly grabbing his jeans with the hole, he drags them on, snagging his claws on the denim in his haste, and threads his tail through the hole. Flinging his bedroom door wide, he goes to open the lounge door, only suddenly it's not there any more, and he finds himself pawing stupidly at the air in front of Paul, who just shakes his head and points out, “I think after the landlord incident, you need to wait here. I'll go see who it is.”

Steven nods understandingly, and steps back so Paul can get past and descend the staircase in his pyjamas to answer the door. As soon as Paul has the door open, a very bedraggled Adamfox stumbles in, quite clearly deficient in the department of anthropomorphic wolves to the tune of one.

Fifferty Eiger-ht

E-Claire

*Good girls go to heaven,
But the bad girls go everywhere.*

- Meatloaf

Claire receives a phone call at 9:30 in the morning from The Daily Disaster Editorial. Her story has been lined up for Monday's paper. Page 4. *Marvellous*. Her parents may not appreciate the situation, but Uncle John would. He would be begging her to write more.

The dishevelled appearance of a Ray-less Adamfox somewhat dampens the spirits in the flat. It also leads to questions.

“What on Earth happened?” That being one Adam couldn't figure out how to answer. It is clear to all that coming back without Ray had not been Adam's intention, but to the contents of number 42, quite what his intention had been remains to be seen.

The hospital awakens to the foggy Sunday morning with a general rise in noise levels throughout. The chattering, the beeping and the high heels of strict health and safety inspectors popping down the corridor all add to the effect. Kelly, incensed at her situation, waxes miserable. Every word from her is sulkier and more negative than the last, and on every subject from the hospital food that she hasn't even tried yet to the way Friday night went so disastrously wrong for her when 'some idiot in a little foreign car' had apparently single-handedly masterminded the present circumstances. Just as Anaïs feels like she can't possibly take any more of this tortuous ranting, a bloke appears in the doorway clutching his jaw like he thinks it's going to fall off. “Dave! Come here, you alright?” Kelly puts on her most concerned-sounding, mollycoddling voice she can manage. Anaïs just shakes her head. *These British are crazy.*

Beth stretches and yawns. Start of a new day, and a Sunday at that. And this morning she feels on top of the world, this cat. Humming a made-up tune to herself contentedly, she gets up and goes for a shower. The steam in the bathroom clings to the walls and doesn't go out through the open window, where the air is still and the fog still lingering about 10 feet above the ground. After the shower, Beth sits in her dressing gown, drying off and thinking about her new 'job'. *Media liaison for Vulpesteven and his marvellous invention. Beats working for a cooker manufacturer. But what exactly will I say, and to which media? I suppose I'm meant to be the one figuring that out... but when this Geneticiser thing gets big, I'll be the one to face down the critics. That contraption had better work on me!* Beth smiles to herself as she gets dressed. *Things are going to get better.*

Enough. Marie is at her wit's end. With all the fury of a neglected French housewife whose daughter is in hospital and whose husband cares more for work than family, she launches into the argument she's been keeping herself from for over a year now. Jurgen doesn't know what's hit him. *A huge lack of news had been bad enough, although that English girl has at least proven the rumour mill to not be totally dry yet. But then there's what happened to Anaïs, and now Marie's had enough too. Whatever next?*

Feeling on top of the world this wonderful morning, Claire decides to go out to the shops and get in some well earned retail therapy. Soon will be pay day from the supermarket, and if this story sells well, so will be pay day from the Daily Disaster. *Which right now feels more like a miracle.*

Another Sunday for an old lady. Being 70-odd doesn't come without its disadvantages, but the free bus travel and a right to play bingo (*for me it is a right*) aren't to be sniffed at, and the best bit is you can say what you want. Like to this young so-and-so here, for example.

"Seven pounds? You're having a laugh! This is worth ten pounds, at the very least!" Connie Anderson exclaims sniffily. *What a week this has been! Having to wait in that queue for that dopey checkout girl, nearly getting run over by some stupid minibus, a stall holder at this very car boot sale who wasn't even interested in me buying his book on gardening and now this portly fellow has the nerve to suggest this fine piece of self-help literature could be worth anything less than a meagre ten pounds?*

Quentin, not to be done out of a bargain, continues haggling with the hag.

"How about eight pounds, then? Come on, bigger books are on sale new in the shops for less than that!"

"And millions of people will go without receiving our good help in the name of our Lord if we don't raise enough money to reach our target!" Constance replies irritably, reaching up and tapping the canvas banner hung at a slight angle from brush poles over her head with her arthritic fingers. It reads 'Salvation Army Charity Stall - Help Us Raise £100,000 For The Children'. As she leans forward, her curly grey hair brushes against it slightly.

"Well, ma'am, you have before you a simple choice. Either you sell me this book for eight pounds, or I won't buy it. Because that's all the money I have left in my wallet today. Up to you."

Andy raises his eyebrows as Quentin returns from the charity stall triumphantly brandishing a copy of *The*

Outlook For Your Inner Child: A Self Help Guide by Paul T Otterone.

"So, you managed to actually barter with her?"

"Yep." Quentin responds affirmatively.

"How much did she drop the price by in the end?"

"Two Pounds."

"Two whole quid? OK, I stand corrected." Andy admits, impressed. He knew he shouldn't have challenged this man to a bet, especially after being beaten at chess, but then Connie is probably known by everybody in town, and well known for not giving an inch. *Still...*

As the two of them stand conferring over how well the day is going so far, they notice Connie packing up her stuff and leaving. Not having sold very much. The church clock two streets away chimes half past nine.

Quentin looks at his watch, and seeing the time, decides to hurry up. "I think I'd better be going now..."

"Why? The sale's far from done!" Andy replies bemusedly.

"Because babysitters don't pay for themselves, and I need to get home before my daughter does."

Harriet sighs as she helps Tim find his way to, and use, the bathroom again. He may be a bright kid, but this is one area it seems he has yet to master. Too much lemonade, most likely. Tim, meanwhile, doesn't seem to be in the least bit worried about, well, anything. He's actually in a very good mood today. *And if it takes a little over-zealous sudden interest in wolves and anything to do with them to achieve that, then let him be.* At the end of the day, so long as she's paid for looking after him, Harriet couldn't care less whether Tim was into wolves or wizardry, it really doesn't matter. *Just so long as it isn't all he'll talk about for the next 3 months...*

A locker hidden deep in some store room somewhere starts to vibrate and emit a tinny ringtone.

"Nope, still no answer. Ray had his phone last time you saw him, didn't he?" Lupustorm queries with concern. Adamfox nods as he sits dejectedly in the lounge, hugging Steven for comfort, gradually falling asleep. The explanations Adam could come up with had brought no real answers to their questions, and so there is now a general air of 'well, what can we do now?' Because, Steven realises as Adam starts dozing somewhere in his upper arm fur to his right, they haven't actually got a clue. Squee brings in a couple of mugs of tea, intended for Steven and Adam. Seeing that Adam has dropped off, he just quietly places the tea on the coffee table and returns to the conversation he's been having with Paul and Kred for a while now. Lupustorm sighs and puts the phone down.

"Have you got nothing better to do?" Douglas asks Arnold with all seriousness.

"Not today. It's either here or scaring church folk." Arnold replies.

"Scaring them? - No, wait, don't answer that!" Douglas amends as he realises who he's on about. This is Arnold, the binge drinker of the century. Always drunk, always on the street, yet always has just enough money to buy a pint. With that in mind, Douglas considers his options. Adam will be long gone by now, along with that wolf friend of his, who would in all fairness have been ideal for the dilemma Douglas now faces. Because if he goes to the police, he risks incurring the wrath of the Gaps Gang and their associates, not to mention uncovering his own slight misdemeanours that he would rather the police not concern themselves

with. *Nobody's perfect, after all.* Douglas really needs the truck back, though. He was going to use the money from the number plates to help fill the gaps in its repair budget, then sell the truck to pay off his debts; but since the thieves who took it are most likely Gaps' gang (who else?), they would probably give it some new tyres and a fake set of plates, then try to sell it on. Douglas is forced to come to only one conclusion: play them at their own game, and move house quickly afterwards. The club was making a slight loss anyway, and would need to be shut sooner or later. *The time to act, it would seem, has been thrust upon me.*

"Care to risk your life against a dangerous gang to retrieve my truck?" Douglas throws matter-of-factly at Arnold.

Arnold shrugs. "If there's booze to be had?"

Douglas nods. That's one thing he can arrange.

"Deal." Arnold responds, smiling a brown-toothed grin.

Quentin pulls up in Kenneth Street behind the silver Volvo. Looking around, he spots two things that worry him greatly. Firstly, that weird VW Camper is back again, like a bad smell that refuses to go away, and even more scarily, Jane's horridly ugly burgundy Fiat Multipla sits just behind the VW, parked (if that is the word) at a strange angle that nearly blocks Brampton Grove. Feeling a headache rise, Quentin looks at the stuff amassed on the back seats of his car. And grabs the book on psychology he bought from the old lady. *I think I might need it, the way things are going.* Getting out of his car and making sure it's locked behind him, he steps warily across the street to his front door. Opening it quietly, he makes his way into the lounge, where Jane and Harriet are busily chatting away about Tim and Sarah.

"...So yeah, Sarah's growing ever so quickly." Jane ponders, "Soon I'll have to go and buy her the next size up. Anyway, she's looking right enough." Then, switching her gaze to her son, she adds, "How's my little Tim been?"

Tim, unconcerned by the mundane nattering, continues to absorb himself in drawing a not-too-crude image of a house with his wax crayons.

"Oh, he's been fine. Just been his usual self, really. But he has started a new phase, I think I should warn you..." Harriet looks vaguely concerned, but this is not met by Jane, who simply replies with a bored "what is it now, then? Robots? Aeroplanes?"

Tim looks up at this point and states quite simply, as though the adults are being rather silly, "course not. I just saw a wolf, yesterday. He fell onto the garden, out there!" Tim points straight at the spot where Ray had landed the previous day through the patio doors. Although now covered in dew from the fog still a-hanging, the paw prints are still visible. Quentin stands silent by the doorway. "I drew a picture too. And Granddaddy met the wolf too, and he drew a better picture!" Tim goes on. At this point, Quentin decides enough is enough. "Yes, it's amazing what your imagination can come up with, Tim, but now it's time for you and Sarah and Mummy to be going."

Jane throws Quentin a look of disgust. "Dad! I am quite interested in what he has to say and to show me, even if you aren't! Whether he imagined it or not doesn't matter! Come on, Tim, you tell us what you saw. Tell your Mummy."

Quentin can tell this is going to be a long day.

This Chapter Is 59.

Salvation

*The Salvation Army band played
And the children drank lemonade,
And the morning lasted all day -
All day.*

- Dream Academy

Halden has the unusual claim to fame of having the largest number of religious places of worship on one street in the UK. Its diverse populace have, in their time, seen fit to build several churches of various denominations, a mosque, a synagogue and a Buddhist shrine. All within 100 yards of each other, on the aptly named Sabbath Street. Not always content to live in harmony, these interesting circumstances have led to many skirmishes in the past, but to date the police have always had the last word, and things have been quickly resolved.

Connie makes her way to the Salvation Army Church with all due speed, lest she be late. The bells of St Peter's C Of E have always been seen as a sufficient call to prayer for all the Christian churches on the street, so it is to their tuneful ringing that Connie enters the porch, only to bump into a rather grim Sergeant. "Oh, good morning, Sergeant. I've got another £150 for our cause this morning..." Connie trails off, losing her optimism quickly.

"Sorry I seem to have lost my indefatigable zeal for the moment, but we would seem to have lost a member of our ranks." The Sergeant explains in continued discontentment, "Annette Wemyss was a dear friend of mine... well, at least she was until old Edgar died. That really made her lose her marbles. I know, because I used to visit her house every month, you remember?" The Sergeant looks up to Connie for support. Cottoning on quickly, she humours him with an answer. "Oh yes, and you always took some fruit and veg to keep her healthy."

Holding up his index finger as though he can see the point he's making hovering in the air, the Sergeant reminisces on, "exactly. It only seems like yesterday (but it was actually two Sundays ago, mind)" - the ever-practical Sergeant interrupts himself before continuing - "that I took a basket of bananas round to her. She was getting pretty bad by then, to be fair, but the remote nurse said she would keep an eye out, so I assumed all would be well..." A group of school children aged between 9 and 13 turn up, highlighting the fact that the not-particularly-thin Sergeant is blocking the entrance. He absent-mindedly wipes a tear from under his 60-year-old eye before stepping aside to let the young cadets in. Connie may be old and often rude, but she can tell when someone has lost a dear friend, she's not stupid. She decides to give the brass band-obsessed officer a good five minutes to calm down. *The service will start soon, though. He'd better not be whinging for too long.*

Steven considers the options they have carefully. It's clear that Ray did not intend to just disappear, what with the whole police incident and what-have-you. It seems far more likely that someone took him, which would fit

well with Adamfox's description of the tinted black Mondeos that trundled in random directions around London all last night. The obvious question being, who? And what are their intentions?

RayWolf remembers. He remembers yesterday and the Geneticiser, the trip down the M1, the moments at the service area and later the lay-by with the police car, the night club and the moment he had dreaded: telling his mum. Then opening the door to find all those police there, and waiting in the police car, and escaping but obviously not for long, as everything goes black at that point. Then the waking up in the strange car, then waking up here. None of it makes enough sense, and to try and make sense of it just burns a hole in the mind. But one thing makes perfect sense. *I must get out of this place. NOW* Which is why Ray is now stood over the bed, free of his shackles, while the two who had entered his room not expecting him to be awake lie on the bed, tied to it with those same clasps and chains.

"OK, that really puts a whole new perspective on the situation, and thanks for showing me what it feels like to be in your position, Subject A. Now, how's about you let us out?" The first woman implores hopefully, with slight panic.

Ray growls. "The name is Ray!"

"We shouldn't have bought what he said to get us to let him go in the first place!" The other, slightly older woman spits bitterly, before cursing at the pain in her wrists caused by the angle at which she is sat tied to the right of the bed.

"Well, ladies, I apologise. But you were about to raise the alarm, and just as I was about to regain my freedom, which is after all a basic human right!" Ray replies, as though this is just another reasonable Sunday morning and they're interrupting his cup of tea.

"Human right? You're not even human!" The older of the two women exclaims, growing increasingly hysterical. The younger one gives her a look as if to say "shut up! You're making it worse!"

"You know what I mean. Stop splitting hairs. Anyway, it's time for me to leave now, before anyone else shows up. Don't bother telling me the way to the exits, I'll find my own way out."

"But..." Donna, the younger one begins, as she casts about for the right words, "this place... it's, it's huge. You'll need someone to help you find your way out!"

"And why should I trust you?" You're with whoever put me here in the first place. Thanks, but no thanks, I'll find my own way out." Ray turns to leave.

"Hey, what about us?" The older one shouts, panicking. "You can't just leave us here!"

Ray doesn't stop or even hesitate, he just throws the keys to the shackles down on the floor about six inches beyond either of their reach. Before either of them can respond, his interestingly-patterned tail has flicked past the doorway and he's gone.

Donna attempts to reach the keys, stretching her pale fingers as far as she can,, straining against the restraints. No good.

As Ray heads down the corridor (so far empty, as luck would have it), he hears the first woman realise her situation better. Very clearly.

"F**K YOU RAY!"

Imran is at the corner of Sabbath Street. Life does not favour those whose beliefs are the source of much

derision from one's peers. And at 13 years old, being a devout follower of any religion is hard enough. But in a white-dominated school like Halden Comprehensive, being a Muslim is not the best position to hold, by any stretch of the imagination. Even one of the teachers is rumoured to belong to the BNP. And now, on Sunday, the rest of his classmates would be playing football, watching TV at home or else dossing about on the streets with nothing better to do – like the 3 now blocking his way, in fact.

“Where you going? Back to Pakistan?” Jeers the ringleader of the group.

“You going to go get Osama Bin Laden to blow up our houses?” Starts another, setting off a peal of stupid laughter from his mates.

“Aaaaaaallllaaaaahhhh Aqbah!” Calls the Imam through his megaphone from the minaret down by the Mosque. Added to the sound of the church bells, it makes for quite a cacophony. Seeing the potential developing conflict, most of the worshippers filing into this end of the street cross the road.

Imran is going to end up late because of these 3 clowns.

The Sixtieth

Allah Aqbah (God Is The Greatest)

“It appears the time has come for one of our number to be Promoted to Glory. A good few of us will remember Annette Wemyss, co-founder of the Halden Girl Guides and a friend to us all. In recent years her health and mind had deteriorated somewhat, but to those who knew her through the greater part of her life, know how simply magnificent she was as a person. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to invite you all to her funeral, tomorrow at 11 o'clock. Due to her huge involvement in the Church Of England's relations with ourselves, it will be the Anglican Reverend Thomas Ingham who shall be in charge of her funeral. Annette did, however, stress firmly in her will that none of this has any bearing to the detriment of her position in either church, and she furthermore requested in that same will that I would ensure you all knew about it – so there you go, she's managed to get her way even now.” The Sergeant looks up from his notes to survey the congregation. Numerous wry smiles and murmurs of agreement. He goes on. “Annette also asked for the Band to be present, and to play her favourite hymn. I shall be seeing to arrangements for this, as I'm sure you all expect.” The band, assembled in their usual place to the left, all nod in acknowledgement. “Thank you.” The Sergeant heads back to his seat.

Jeff, having exhausted the car boot sale of all useful items for his Geneticiser list, is about to leave when he spots a discount shop across the square. *Worth a look.*

Claire knows exactly where to find the best bargains, and they certainly are not at her erstwhile workplace, despite her boss's numerous attempts to involve her in persuading the general public to the contrary. Far more likely is good old K. McE's, the discount hardware shop advertised over the local radio actually quite rightly as the cheapest in town. And probably the whole county. Crammed into that little establishment is a plethora of odds, ends and paraphernalia of varying levels of quality and usefulness, but all ridiculously cheap. It's one of those places that you can never be certain will stock the same things twice, because at least half the inventory of the store consists of end-of-line, discontinued products. Nevertheless, certain items

are perennial, such as the novelty garden gnomes and the clear plastic tubs, over which a rather well-built, short-haired, yet for some reason odd-looking character is now holding a piece of paper that appears to bear a long list. She can't quite put her finger on it, but Claire is sure she's seen this man before.

An anthro wolf isn't exactly the most incognito form to take. Although he managed to trick his way past those first two, and read from their ID cards on their chests that they are both Nurse Technicians (whatever that means) and the logo for the place is a big M over a G and a U (Mighty Government Unhelpfulness? Misery Guts Unlimited?), Ray is no closer to finding either answers to his questions or a way out. And as he traipses the third length of corridor past the room he'd been in, his luck finally runs out. A door stands ajar to his left, and a light is on. Inside sits a man who could just as easily be the Doc from Back To The Future, if it weren't for his hair being a bit shorter and his voice deeply Yorkshire-accented. As Ray approaches, the man ceases his argument with his apprentice with a silent hand gesture, and instead pricks his ears at the sound (click-click-click) of claws on ceramic floor tiles. Leaning back to see around the door frame, the man who could get away with gaining a professorship on the sheer grounds of looking like one, places one hand on the wall behind him to steady himself as his chair leans back on two legs, and the other on the alarm button beneath his favourite desk. Just as Ray realises he's been heard, a voice that clearly recognises who in a place like this makes sounds like that on ceramic floor tiles; places an unmistakeable direct order in such a tone that few would, or ever have dared disobey, be they schoolboy or scientific genius. Peering menacingly over his sixth pair of half-moon glasses in as many months, Doctor John Crossley relishes both what he says and how he speaks it:

"Come HITHER!"

^!

The Italian Yob

Douglas and Arnold sit, sweating profusely, swearing under their breath and bleeding in various cuts and bruises. Their hands tied behind their backs, a knife at each of their throats, a spare wooden chair beneath each of them, a cup of tea on the table in front of them and a brand new twisted triple-twine rope digging into their wrists behind them; Arnold and Douglas have long since realised that a 30-odd year-old furry DJ and an uncertainly aged alcoholic tramp do not match up against what they had thought were three, but turned out to be six members of a surprisingly ruthless gang of mismatched thugs and immigrants. Despite Douglas's amazing show of skill in a well-planned use of Kung-Fu, he was getting a bit rusty to the tune of ten years of no real practise. Despite Arnold's amazing show of outright nerve in the faces of these gang members, it is safe to say by this point that the left hook to his jaw probably did not help to swing things in his favour. The propagator of said left hook now holding a knife to Arnold's throat, and a slightly battered Italian lad of about 16 with little proper English holding the other blade to the throat of a now increasingly desperate Douglas. The weird-haired leader of the gang is gone momentarily, in all his own eloquence 'to the bog'. The Italian boy (some of whose bruises are courtesy of the man he now holds captive), wearing a painfully angered expression, speaks up.

"Who-'sa sent you here? What you beat me up for, hmm?"

A worn hardwood door reverberates to the knocking of a young, attractive woman's hand. *If only it were a paw.* Beth waits eagerly on the doorstep of number 42, wondering why she feels so ready to jump headlong into the doubtlessly mad world waiting before her. Beckoning her. *Wasn't it the same feeling that got me into the 'fandom' in the first place? But,* Reasons the reserved, sensible part of her mind, *just how far are you really willing to go? What about friends (all my friends are furrries, so that answers that), family (it's not like I even have much to do with them any more since I split up with Jeff and they all assumed I'd gone mad, giving up on a 'decent' guy like him) and after the Geneticiser does its job, what then? Will I really be able to get a job?... That remains to be seen.*

The door opens at last, shaking Beth from her thoughts. The fog of the early morning has lifted enough now, so that a grey mist hangs at the far end of wherever you look. As Paul opens the door, he also wonders what he's thinking, going along with all this. *But look at the amazing adventures that are bound to lie ahead if all this works. I'd rather do it than live the rest of my life thinking, 'what if?'* And by the look on Beth's face, Paul reckons she's come to the same conclusion.

Haven't we all?

As the mosque empties from the morning's prayers, a young lad of 13 makes his mind up. It doesn't matter how much the Imam reads the scriptures to him, or how many times he attends morning prayers, those people around him don't really understand what it's like to be him. *The only people who understand me are those on that forum on the net. Their views may be a bit extreme on some subjects, but I can cope with that for the sake of not just being bullied and overlooked again. Besides, I'm a good judge of character...*

The Sunday morning fast approaches the Sunday afternoon, and the Malt House appears completely different to how it did just a few hours ago. Pam surveys the results of both her and her husband's hard labour, while Halt Mouse sits outside with a cigarette and a lot on his mind, including a stubborn nagging at the back of said mind telling him off for smoking, *You gave up weeks ago! Why start again?* Ah, the joys of trying to use hypnosis to cure the habit.

He wanders back indoors, and is pleased to see the place gleaming from banister to linoleum, from light fittings to fireplaces and from bar to doorway architrave, the whole establishment veritably transformed. "Surprising what you can learn from a couple of ladies, a lemon and some bicarbonate of soda when they're on a TV program, isn't it?" Pam chuckles, looking at the random collection of cleaning materials they had been using.

"Absolutely..." Halt Mouse starts preoccupiedly, "right, I need to get down to Dennis's place now and see if he's alright with this Geneticicator-thingummybob idea. Can you please keep an eye on the pub today, sweetheart? I know you'd like to come with me, but I don't trust that kid as far as I can throw him." He refers to the hired help they had the previous night, then grins and talks all mock-chief-executive-of-big-company-like, "I think we need to restructure our employment options..."

Someone Insisted Xenophobes Take Your Total Worldly Outgoings

Zuh?

*You can't run away for ever,
But there's nothing wrong with getting a good head start -
- Meatloaf*

The bespectacled genius leans over his desk, calculating the mindset of the amazing lupine now stood before him. It is a moment before either of them speaks.

"I am the most likely person in this building to give you answers. You are not running away from me because you want answers. You aren't about to attack me for the same reason. So I hold the power, and you will SIT." John triumphantly summarises his surmising. Ray, about to speak himself, realises everything he was going to say has just been rendered unnecessary, and so shuts his mouth again – but remains standing.

"I said SIT, wolf." John puts it plain and simply.

"No. I'm not your pet dog. Treat me as your equal and I'll be more inclined to listen."

"Sit down and do what I say and I'll be more inclined to listen."

At this point two heavy-set figures appear at the doorway, emanating a smell that Ray finds familiar. *The car that brought me here. They were in it – oh God.* Resisting the urge to appear scared by the arrival of these recognisable foes, Ray remains focused on the man behind the desk. With anger in the back of his mind that nearly shows on his face, Ray responds; "You make your point most convincingly."

The lights throughout the facility go out.

"I still say we should go and look for him. Do some research, find out what happened!" Beth exclaims exasperatedly.

"I can see a few problems with that. 'Oh, excuse me sir, sorry to bother you, but did you see a guy we know last night, about yay high, with grey fur and lupine features?' Oh yeah, that'll go down very well!" Adamfox retorts with dejected sarcasm.

"What about his Mum? She must have seen what happened..."

Ring Ring

Boop Boop

Ring Ring

Boop Boop

Hello?

Hello, are you Ray's mum?

I HAVE NO SON! (phone smacks down loudly)

Booooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooop

oooo-kay...

"Well, to be honest, I'm amazed you even had her number." Adamfox replies as Beth gingerly places the phone back down on the table.

"...And that's where he landed, is it?" Jane attentively replies to Tim, throwing a quick glance at the patio doors. Picking Tim up, she wanders over to the doors. Quentin holds his breath, hoping against hope it's all in his head.

"Wow, those are big pawprints, aren't they!" Jane exclaims to Tim with almost-genuine amazement. Tim

smiles and grabs tightly onto Jane's cardigan with his grubby fingers. "Yes, mummy. I saw a wolf and he made them when he fell. He was big and he smiled at me."

Jane turns around to face her dad. "That's a great story you've told, you even had me convinced for a second!" Jane laughs. Quentin fakes a short laugh in response, then turns to Tim, whose face has assumed the position of being very confused. Changing the subject smartly, Quentin says a little louder than he means to, "Right, time for you and mummy to be going home now! It's been a great long weekend for you, hasn't it!" "Bye Granddaddy." Tim cheerfully forgets the confusion of a moment ago, unlike his Grandfather, whose mind said confusion is still occupying greatly as he gives both Tim and Jane a hug.

"I'll see you next week. Thanks for having them." breezes Jane, having had enough of her Dad and his impatience and flatulence anyway now.

"It's been a pleasure..." Quentin lies outright, chuckling to himself as he picks up Sarah from her high chair, getting a face full of drool-covered bib.

It's only after packing them all into that hideous car and sending them on their merry way back to the other side of Halden that Quentin realises Harriet is still sitting patiently, waiting in the lounge.

"I want to move house, Quinn. Ideally in the next week."

Arriving home in a huff, Imran mutters to himself over his disillusionment. *If I could just be free of this stupid place and its stupid rules... Heck, I want a new life!* Into the bedroom, drop coat, shut door, turn round, deep breath. Open eyes. The computer has gone, as has the TV and the stereo. The window hangs open and the tiles of the roof of the single-storey porch extension below hang crooked and bear shoeprints. Mum can still be heard downstairs, obviously continuing to tend to Jacobim, the screaming baby with the power of three. Looking at this, she will now have real cause to get her sari in a twist. Imran sighs. A tear attempts to work its way into the corner of his eye. *Why is it always me?*

Anaï's sits upright in her bed, feeling oddly dulled by the painkillers administered to her by Dr Oldroyd, whose job it seems to be to ensure she stays put and doesn't have anything to actually do. *Another week of this and I'll... I'll... I do not know, I'll get back to me on that!*

Chapter CENSORED

MGU - Military Genetics Unit

I can't say what I mean!

- Kaiser Chiefs

A clock ticks loudly in the semi-darkness. Its hands indicate that the time is 11:20 and the sound of the ticking competes with the faint rattle of light rain on the corrugated roof of this sorry little outbuilding. In Maine there's plenty of rain at this time of year, and Dwayne would complain at this, were he not causing the only other sounds in this shack: a quiet sound of breathing and a louder keyboard clack. A browser with a dozen open tabs serves as the main interface with the outside world via a 19 inch LCD monitor, a random mass of cables, an utterly silent PC of which Dwayne is proud, and an old ADSL modem to link to the rotting cable

hung across the stone paved yard to the house, and on to the telegraph pole in the street. Down this cable has just come the most important information for many weeks, something he'd been searching for but had still taken him by surprise. Hacking a conspiracy theory into solid fact or fiction is Dwayne's speciality. And this theory just got its first hint of proof.

Gaps is livid. Absolutely furious, in fact. 100% peeved.

This sort of thing just doesn't happen to a gang boss! It's just not the way things are! Just not cricket!

The complete, total and utter lack of a certain 'Man' truck cab that Gaps himself has just splashed money – his own capital – out on, is quite noticeable. The combined payment and means of transport for that last considerably oversized consignment of cheap cigs, skunk, heroin, E and other such crap is now conspicuously absent from the garage and its forecourt. To further rub salt in the wound, his prisoners have escaped, and that Italian nerd he'd employed to help translate the Mafia's phone calls and otherwise be a gang apprentice has seemingly done a similar disappearing act (why?). The dull grey sky casts a dull grey light on Gaps's trendsetter hairstyle, and the vein now throbbing most clearly on his left temple.

After much trudging back and forth after a dog more concerned with territorial marking than getting back home, then on finally getting home, discovering a note from the landlord reminding of 'overdue' rent, then upon trying to ring said landlord, discovering he has instead got the wrong number and is in fact calling an increasingly irate insurance assessor whose Sundays mean a lot to him, D:Rat finally gives in to the urge to just sit down with a tub of popcorn and a big bottle of lemonade and watch the telly. And so, after several episodes of Bargain Hunt and a black and white Frankenstein, he needs the loo. Getting lazily up from the settee, he mooches past a somewhat nonchalant Jack and to the downstairs bog. Up with seat and – it's blocked. Swimmin' with last night's results of an ignored flush. Charmin. A bag of 6 rolls of the stuff lies beside on the dusty carpet, and there could easily be the same amount again held in the porcelain receptacle now emitting an unmistakable pong. *I may be a rat*, he reasons, *but there are limits*. Grabbing the loo brush, he attempts to shift the crud without gagging. Outside, the fog is gathering again.

"Steven?"

"Hmm?"

"You alright?"

The fox's ears droop still further. "It's all my fault"

"What are you talking about? You didn't call all those police, did you?"

"No, but Ray would never have got into this mess if I hadn't called you all out here in the first place."

"How do we know he's in a mess? We don't even know -"

"Where he is at all, exactly. Adam, don't think I haven't thought that through. I just can't believe I was so stupid, so selfish as to call you all out here just because I wanted to – to do this to myself, and show it off!"

"Hey, don't go worrying yourself like that. I want to use that thing too, and I'm just really, really glad you did show it to us, Steven. You've given us all a great opportunity!"

"To do what? Get kidnapped by some gang, or the government or whoever? Probably get carted off for experimentation or something!"

"Then why did you do it to yourself in the first place?"

"Because... I didn't care about the consequences. But now I'm stuck here, and if I leave this bloody flat, likely as not the same will happen to me as did to Ray!"

"Well, you're the one supposed to have a contingency plan in case these sort of things happen!"

"I know, but I was so busy making sure every little thing about how that Geneticiser works is perfect – (and you wouldn't believe how easy it is for something to go wrong with one of them, which is why I used a simulator before applying the real thing for the first time – that's why the computer's so darned huge) – that I didn't think about afterwards. Don't you see, I failed right there!"

"Look at yourself in a mirror. That, that right there is WIN. You don't have any weird side effects or unexpected mutations. You don't have any part of you unfinished. You are exactly how you want to be, there, art thou happy?! Because I certainly would be!" Adam points out exasperatedly. "If anybody failed, I did – I was supposed to be looking after him, but I was too busy thinking about that stupid DJ and his numberplates!"

"Right, so as I was saying anyway – I've got a house going in Leeds, same rent, if you want to have a look at that, but nowt else around here."

"It's OK, that'll be fine. I just need to move nearer to where I'll be able to find work, really" *And get away from you and your constant short-notice babysitting requests, and the weird stuff that grandson of yours comes out with...* she adds in her head. Finishing her cuppa, Harriet gets up to leave.

"One more thing" - Quentin pipes up quickly, "I can help you move tomorrow if you want, since I'm going over to Leeds anyway – if you're not busy then?"

Harriet jumps at the chance. "No, that'd be great!"

An appointment book lies open on the counter. Sunday's page is nearly always empty – most pet owners seem to assume (despite the large 'open 7 days a week' sign hanging on a frame outside) that Dennis only has Hilltop Vets open on weekdays. As a result, an even less interesting publication also adorns the counter space – The Sunday Disaster, the highlight of which is the fiendishly difficult Sudoku that Dennis has just completed (but not for the promised prize of a holiday to Florida – Dennis knows better than to fall for scams like these). Just as he's about to go check on the eternally noisy kennels out back where a few strays have been put for their own protection (but don't seem all too grateful for it), the door opens with the tinkling of a bell suspended from a length of tape-measure spring. And in walks big bro, looking for all the world like a mouse on a mission.

"Whassup, squeaky?" Dennis uses the name by which he has come to affectionately refer to his publican sibling ever since learning where he spends most of his Saturdays, with whom and why.

"I need to request your assistance in a matter of utmost weirdness, coolness and which is dangerous if it falls into the wrong hands or paws."

Raising an eyebrow, Dennis taps his chin once with his pen before pointing it squarely at Halt Mouse and replying, "what's new?"

The assistant nurse/secretary, an ageing lady whose expression belies her boredom with working here and unlikely-to-happen desire to get back to her previous job at the vets in Halden (funnily enough), walks in at

this point with a mug of tea and a sad expression on her face.

"Yes, I know about Bertie. God, you're not still upset over him, are you?" Dennis speaks to her with little concern for how upset she appears to be.

"He was my parrot, and if you hadn't had me working late on Friday..."

"I know, it's ironic. Save the life of a hamster and end up with a dead parrot. That's the life you've signed up to, working here." Despite the lack of care in his voice, Dennis absent-mindedly gives her a pat on the back as she puts down his tea.

It's 5:00 and the shops that have bothered to open for Sunday have nearly all shut. Jeff, his car now laden with the random oddments off the list he could find at the car boot and around town, arrives at number 42 Kenneth Street with a few questions in mind. As he brings in the rather modest Modus to park up outside the boarded up flat, the street light at the other side of the junction for Brampton Grove starts to glow red in a slowly descending white mist, casting a mild, weird light over an equally weird VW Camper.

Speaking of weird, it's at about this point that Sheric finally peels her face away from the computer monitor, having just been slapped in the virtual face by her own virtual ouija board, for which Bonnie Rabbi had given her the code earlier in the day. Only now did she manage to get it working. Pretty pointless really, it is actually programmed to move in the direction of the nearest place the last person to touch it had been 12 hours previously, precisely. Neat idea, though. But since she was the first to touch it, Sheric was the only place for it to move to...

Anyway, after far too much time spent scripting virtual objects, it's time for a drink and a breath of fresh air.

When I'm Sixty Four...

Pleasant Days And Long Nights

*There's too many men
Too many people
Making too many problems,
And not much love to go round;
Can't you see -
This is the Land Of Confusion!*

*This is the world we live in
(oh-oooh-oh)
And these are the hands we're given,
(oh-oooh)
Use them and let's start trying
(oh-oooh-oh)
To make it a place worth living in...*

- Genesis

Harriet makes short work of packing her stuff. It's a fully furnished flat, and most of her stuff has always been kept in boxes anyway. Add to this that she has always been ridiculously organised when it comes to her own stuff (and never really much liked this flat – it smells funny), and it becomes clear why it doesn't take long to fit a lot of college and beauty paraphernalia into a dozen plastic crates. As the solitary coiled energy-saver bulb dangling above her head begins to buzz annoyingly again, a door can be heard slamming through the thick stone wall separating Harriet's flat from the stairway to number 42.

"Ayup Paul, have you been here all along?" Jeff bemusedly greets as he crosses the threshold.

"Not sure if I have a choice..." Paul smiles as he tries to push the door shut at the same time as Jeff swings a large plastic tub full of stuff clumsily towards it in an abortive attempt to do the same. The result – the door slams loudly, and a small wedge of hardwood falls away from the edge of semi-circular window at the top, revealing a poorly bodged repair to some burglary attempt of yesteryear gradually filling with mould. Said wedge of wood lands smack in the centre of the lid of the plastic tub in Jeff's arms, causing much raising of eyebrows all round.

Discarding it hurriedly, Jeff powers up the stairs and nearly trips over an eager-for-a-change-in-news Steven on the landing.

"Wow, how the heck did you get all that together so quickly?" An impressed Steven inquires as Jeff deposits the box on the coffee table. Adamfox somehow manages to prick up his faux fur ears quite realistically at this point, a talent that the other furries seem to find amusing. Something to do with the position of the headband about one's real ears and a strong set of ear-wiggling muscles.

"You've never got all the parts for another Geneticiser together in one go. I mean, surely there's some stuff that's microscopic and needs specially making?"

"Of course not, I'll need to get the rest of it from work, probably. Which is why I'm here, Stephen. I need to ask you some stuff."

"Believe it or not, none of the parts are actually bespoke. One or two are modified and they're all heavily re-purposed, but they're all from standard mass-produced items. Now, please fire away, Jeff. I need something to take my mind off the serious lack of RayWolf we currently seem unable to explain."

Feeling sure he's only sold the things he didn't care if they were sold or not, and being left with a lot of useless junk he really needed to be rid of, Andy only now manages to get sat down with a hot cup of tea at last, his body clock feeling quite fritzed after his first week of night shifts, and with a week of days looming with the boss off duty.

Back home at last after earning some serious overtime, Zack also takes to the armchair with a cup of tea. And, in his case, a Chinese takeaway meal from Wing Wing Hai, the restaurant of a thousand slightly racist jokes. And really good Sweet & Sour. *But I doubt*, Zack muses as he peruses the leaflet advertising Wing Wing Hai's Chinese comestibles, *that anyone would be daft enough to try something just called 'OK Sauce' – what makes it OK?*

As soon as the mug of tea is drained, Andy is fast asleep in the armchair. *It's like jet lag.*

The dawn of a new career is fast approaching. With the whirring of industrial printing machines in London, owned by a media company based in Germany, it all seems inevitable. Claire can practically hear the presses printing her first ever publication outside school. *Permission to be excited?*

And it's one-up on those flipping furfags. Even without the photos, it's a good enough read and fits neatly into this slow-news month.

Jurgen, on the other hand, has for once got no thoughts of work, news or printing presses in mind at all. Sitting in a big chateaux with a helicopter pad just somehow doesn't feel the same when you've been told a divorce is on its way and your wife has stormed out into a quiet, calm night to catch a taxi to go to her parents' house, while the helicopter on said pad has only just cooled down from a trip to the North of England to see your only daughter in hospital. *Le sigh.* Jurgen quite fancies some of that wine for himself now, actually.

Holding a glass of fruit juice in her hand, Sheric stands barefoot on the cold flagstones of her somewhat dishevelled back yard and looks out across the Don Valley, through a rare momentary break in the fog (you can literally see walls of it to the left and right, like parted curtains) towards the setting sun. *After what I saw in Halden yesterday, how can I stay like this now? How can I ignore it? Second Life is cool enough, but it's just a game, something false while these guys can change for real. Maybe that's what the ouija board slapped me in the face for.* Downing the juice in one, she heads back in with a changed mind. *Time to write an email.*

Anaïs, meanwhile, is in pain again and only half an hour after her last 2-hourly dose of painkillers. And, worse than the pain, an itch has already manifested itself on her ankle. Deep inside the pottery. *A mild form of torture in itself... At least those idiots from earlier have gone...*

Council flat. Fumble with keys. Push door open. Stumble past it with pots on both arms. Wait for Dave to catch up. Realise door is closing by means of one of those lever-thingies at the top. Reach out to stop it so Dave doesn't have it slam shut in his face - "Aargh! Me friggin' arm!" Kelly manages to catch a sweet spot of the broken left arm against the jarring action of stopping the door's self-closing. Dave tries to utter words of concern, but his jaw remains slack, a deliberate overdose of numbing on the part of a fantastically trig dental nurse to stop his constant spouting of expletives. At the sight of his gormless jaw-movements, Kelly almost forgets the pain in the face of this clown she just can't stay angry at.

At number 42 Kenneth Street, a plan is being hatched. With the return of Jeff, a kind of renewed zeal has entered the atmosphere, in such a way that even Beth will put up with him, to see what's going to happen next.

"So, we're going to go to the hospital tomorrow. Paul will go back to his place and check up on stuff, and be coming back here, that right?" Steven looks across to Paul, who nods, adding, "If that's OK with you?"

“Yeah, it's no problem. You're the one doing me the favour, for crying out loud. I should be thanking you!” With that, Steven gives Paul a friendly hug. Paul, still secretly unable to get over how much he wants to transform for himself, rubs Steven's back-of-neck fur absently until Steven has to force him away, feeling like a friction burn must surely be imminent at this rate.

“I can't believe you're taking the risk of coming with me, especially after what happened to Ray!” Jeff points out incredulously. “I don't even have a camper van!”

“Yes, but you aren't driving me very far, and once we're at the hospital, I've got it all worked out. You said you have a friend who's a doctor there and will help you out?”

“Yes, just bear in mind this is at risk of my job...”

“You have the opportunity to back out at any time, I'm not forcing you to do anything!” Steven quickly recites his mental disclaimer. Jeff just smiles in a way that says, *'You know why I'm doing this.'*

“But what about getting me and Lupustorm home? Sorry to interrupt, but it is kinda getting late and my stuff is still in the Furbobile...” interrupts a Kred who has suddenly noticed the time. Adamfox rolls his eyes, then sighs. “If you think you can trust me all the way back to County Durham... I managed to lose Ray right outside his own house!”

“How many times do we have to tell you, it's not your fault!” Beth nearly shouts from by the doorway, about to leave.

A rather front-heavy looking, slightly rusty truck cab barrels up the M1 with limiter disabled. In the driver's seat is Douglas, amazed at his luck. In the far passenger seat is Arnold, festering quietly but for the occasional burp. And sat between them like a child bunking off school for the first time is the young Italian interrogator, freed from the clutches of the Mafia by his own choosing. And now seemingly unable to either shut up, or fully comprehend what he's just done, or where he's come from. Which is apparently why he wants to talk about it all at once. Needless to say, it isn't long before Douglas digs out his DJ-ing earplugs. “Oh, not fair! How come you get earplugs and I still have to put up with his foreign nibs here?” Arnold complains as Douglas finally gets a moment's peace.

“...so when we got to zis London place, he say 'get those two men in the room, they steal my truck...”

Ignoring the third repeat of the story, Douglas slows the truck and pulls into the first lane. “Here's a service station. Be grateful for a moment away from him.”

Tom is taking his turn to watch the cameras while Roger checks his emails.

The fog is returning lethargically to plague the air around Woodall and appears to be gathering in the dark around the Services area, between the trees and the lamp-posts like oversized cobwebs. On one such lamp-post a CCTV camera is pointed at the entrance to the truck park. Through which a rusting Man truck cab with new tyres drives a little too fast, and neatly knocks said lamp-post over.

Sitting back from the screen for a moment, Tom blinks with surprise. One moment a truck is shown approaching the truck park, the next, the picture slews around madly before turning distinctly sideways and much nearer to the ground. Before Tom can say anything, Roger perks up and holds out his hand in a 'sshh! I heard something!' gesture. “Did you hear that?”

“Lemme guess, did it sound like a rather rusty truck cab colliding with one of our lamp posts upon which is

mounted camera number six?" Tom sarcastically quips.

"... as a matter of fact... Yes! How do you know these things, Tom? You psychic or something?" Roger implores, almost genuinely impressed.

"Oh, I dunno... maybe it's my superior knowledge in the field... or maybe it's the fact that camera six is now producing an image that looks markedly closer to the ground than before, as well as adequately skewed to the sort of angle one would expect from such an event. It brought me to believe there could only be one logical explanation, based on the evidence so far presented to me, which has it would seem proven impressive to my audience thus far."

Roger looks at him nonplussed for a second before saying, "I wish you wouldn't do that, with your long and complicated unnecessary explanations!" At which point they both depart from the office to investigate the subject of their conversation.

Dragging the gear stick into reverse as quickly as he can, cursing under his breath, Douglas revs the old-but-still-pretty-mighty truck's engine to pull it off the decapitated lamp-post and down from the now rather damaged barrier-kerbs. The front bumper snags on the base of the lamp-post and snaps off loudly, then as the dented behemoth clammers down from its impromptu podium, the tyre marks in the grass and pieces of kerb become clear to see while all that can be heard is a heavy scraping of the sump and suspension against what remains of the kerb. With a heavy thump and some creaking, it drops back onto the tarmac, filling the white chevrons in the corner of the slip road.



Marie est pas stupide. She has with her some food (including a random jar of honey), plenty of money and her mobile phone. And rushed though her exit is, she has been planning on the off-chance for several weeks.

Hence the majority of her stuff is in storage away from the Château (unlike in the attic, which her (ex-)husband still thinks it is. It's not like he ever goes up there), and her sister, Sister Amalie, is on standby at the convent in Luxembourg to help her out at a moment's notice. *You thought I wouldn't manage, Jurgen. Think again. And going off to England in that helicopter of yours without me when Anaïs needs me is overstepping the mark by a mile! Goodbye, workaholic chauvinist bastard!*

The two guards arrive at the scene of the accident and survey the damage. While Tom is busy checking what's left of the lamp-post to see if it can be salvaged (and the CCTV camera re-used, for they cost too much), Roger inspects the truck cab. Knocking on the door, he eagerly awaits its opening so he can request from the occupants some kind of explanation. The passenger side door swings open in his face, and a rather immediately odorous heap of rags and beer bottles turns to face him.

"I didn't do nothing, the driver's on the other side!"

"That's all well and good, but I can't get at that door, you've parked right next to a holly bush!" Roger points out frustratedly, and indeed with some truth; a much neglected corner of the service area has sprouted forth at some time in the past a holly bush that now overhangs the kerb slightly, though the combination of pollution and noise has left it looking rather ugly and discombobulated.

A young, foreign-looking lad leans around the alcoholic's shoulder, looking quite frightened. Roger, craning his neck to see into the cab, asks, "are you the driver?"

"No, my name is Edwardo and I not drive!" The Italian kid, upon seeing that what he has said has been understood, regains some confidence. Before he can open his mouth again, however, he's pushed out of the way by a now rather annoyed bloke who doesn't seem to have noticed he's still got headphones around his neck. "Sorry about these two, you can imagine what it's like trying to concentrate on driving with them bickering over what they're buying with my money!" With each emphasis, Douglas throws a glare at the two beside him. Roger rolls his eyes while behind them a furniture van squeezes past the back wheels to get into the service area.

"Still, I don't care whose fault it was, it's coming out of your insurance. You'll need to fill in some insurance forms before you leave. We don't put up street furniture for trucks to knock over!" Roger points out with an air of being slightly amused by the whole event. Douglas sighs. "Alright, where shall I park up?"

Roger, almost blinded by the full-beam lights on the enormous unmarked white pantechnicon that's just come to an awkward, complicated-series-of-brakes-and-pneumatics type of halt behind the cab that's taking up just slightly too much room in this now inadequately lit slip-road, that is now itself gathering a queue of cars and vans behind it, points over towards the truck parking bays. "Just get it shifted from here, for goodness sake!" A loud, hollow metallic clang announces that Tom has moved the lamp-post out of the way, satisfied that his CCTV camera is still working and can be swapped across to the new post.

Another Ruddy Chapter

Tell Me Why I Don't Like Mondays

- Boomtown Rats

Dull, chipped chrome corrodes disdainfully upon a mock-old-fashioned tap as it is gripped by the podgy

fingers of the man whose wife is always too busy to get round to giving it a quick wipe with a cloth and some bathroom spray. Hot water issues forth and the bath collects it together with the scum of a hundred previous baths. With a slight squeak, the cold tap joins forces with the hot, together to flood this enamel expanse. All for the sake of a man who couldn't care less. Add some soap bubbles and for God's sake, de-stress. The life of an insurance assessor is not easy, no matter how much you type there's always more, no matter how many scenes of crime and scenes of destruction you visit, there await infinite more. It takes something out of you. It already has from Mr Noakes. Late on a Sunday night he thinks back as he soaks, to the times he would think of things like going to a party or buying a car, and not worry about it all in legal language.

The wood lies in stacks about the workshop, all picked out for its high quality and suitability for the job. But for this client, it's down to a straightforward coffin made of spare teak, for that is all they can afford. The lady to lie in this modest masterpiece was known as Annette. So, as an ironic touch, Joe adds a small piece of net curtain to the fabric lining. *There's always a cosmic joker, he figures, so I might as well add a little joke of my own for their afterlife. It's not like they mind...* he chuckles to himself, glancing across to the other coffin for his other funeral this week – for a baby girl named Lily, who controversially died of cot death three weeks ago up at Moor Crescent, and who only now was released by the still-not-entirely-satisfied police for funeral. Upon the lining sits a solitary white lily flower. Hers will be on Tuesday, but Annette's, arranged a little more quickly, will be tomorrow. Joe has no reason not to work on a Sunday night, and hasn't had for a long time. The radio upon the windowsill therefore continues playing a tune by the Boomtown Rats as he starts adding brass-ware.

The Malt House is abuzz with people trying their best to deny the existence of Monday as it quickly approaches. Not many actually drinking alcohol now, but a surprisingly large number of folk sitting and chatting, even at this time of a Sunday night. Looking up at the clock, Pam realises it's stopped at 10:24 and momentarily ceases serving drinks and crisps so as to grab the attention of her husband – which isn't as easy as she thought.

Sat in the quiet corner behind the left side of the bar, Halt Mouse and Dennis are holding an engaging conversation of the sort that creates an invisible barrier of ceased attention to the outside world, so gripping is the subject matter.

"...so, we arrived there and there were already a few others there. Went in, and (his best mate had answered the door, you see)" -

Dennis, hooked, just keeps him going with an "mm-hmm" -

"Steven was there, only he wasn't just Steven – who I think you've met, once, didn't you?" - At this, Dennis frowns a little - "You remember, the furmeet I dragged you along to in Manchester?" Halt Mouse presses further into this tangent to ensure he's being understood.

And Dennis's face moves towards a mischievous grin, "Ah yes, wasn't that the dude who managed to stay sober and took the piss-head bunny dude home by tram?"

"Yes, that's right, anyway, as I was saying..." Halt Mouse takes a sip from his glass of orange juice with ice and a deep breath before carrying on, "Steven wasn't like how you saw him, he actually was his fursona! I mean, he's managed to turn himself into an anthropomorphic fox (now, I know what you're thinking, there's

no way he could have done that for real, what am I on?) but hang on, because I wouldn't have believed it either, but then this wolf dude from down London says he'll have a go and be the next one to change. I didn't know what was next, so anyway, I went through into the bedroom with the rest of them and there was this machine-thing, built in a plastic tub and connected to his computer. I watched..." And now Halt Mouse leans forward over the little oaken table, so as to look deep into his brother's quite worried-looking eyes with his own, now wide with recollection of amazement. Grabbing his brother's hands in his own, he goes on, "I watched as he turned into an anthropomorphic wolf, as real as you and I are here now, so I saw it happening to him. I even touched his arm when he brushed past... That was real fur, which I'm sure, as a vet, you'll know what I mean. Dennis, you can tell I'm not lying, and Pam was there as well, and she saw the same. Just ask her!"

Dennis then looks up over his brother's shoulder. Halt Mouse, unaware of a reason to do so, simply asks, "what?"

"No need to ask me, I'm here and I'll tell you. I saw just what he saw, word for word, even if his description does sound a little mad. I always said you'd make a good storyteller!" Pam says bluntly from behind his right ear, holding the same clean glass and tea-towel she's been holding absently for the last minute or three.

"Now tell me, when are you going to fix our clock?"

"It doesn't need fixing, it's still right twice a day!" Dennis points out cheekily. Ignoring this, Pam shoves her watch in her husband's face.

"Half past twelve?! Already?"

"Yes. Now, are we going to call Last Orders or stay open 'till the cows go back out again?"

"Let me at least finish discussing with Dennis here, then we'll call it a night. Sit down, this is about what you saw too..."

"I've got a ruddy pub to run here! Something I thought we were both doing, T-O-G-E-T-H-E-R!" Pam grabs his ear and drags Halt Mouse from his chair, throwing a look at Dennis that somehow says, 'Sorry about this, but I need him right now, you can talk to him in a bit' and 'How dare you get him started on one of those conversations?!' all at once, as she rounds the corner to get them both behind the bar once again, to the triumphant cheer of the inexplicable but welcome numbers.

Access Denied.

OK, how about this?

Access Denied.

Right. Dwayne cracks his fingers and sets off a dozen password cracking algorithms to sort yet another of these fairly straightforward lines of defence. With them all awaiting on the left of his desktop, they can all be set off on any web form or security checker with one click. The great thing about this server is, under every layer Dwayne peels off it like an onion, he finds an Aladdin's Cave of useful information. But there's always a level higher still to go. And that pattern has gone on all day. The Ministry Of Defence own the server officially, but some of the stuff Dwayne is now finding on it clearly belongs to an authority higher and more mysterious than the average public will ever hear of. One of the secrets the Prime Minister never gets round to asking about, because it's hidden behind all the other secrets of a similar nature. These obscure government units have safety in their numbers. And the only thing more difficult than cracking into an obscure government

unit's server is cracking into an obscure British government unit's server. Because these Brits think outside the box on so many levels and so strangely too. Already, Dwayne has had to break through countless passwords set to the least guessable words ever, and along with them have come CAPTCHAs, video CAPTCHAs (where you have to answer a question about an event in a short video clip with only the most cryptic answer) and several crossword puzzles, each far more fiendish than the last, and set in a format that cannot be put into a computerised cracking algorithm, much to Dwayne's disappointment. Chuckling to himself, he muses that this must all count as a morning brain-warming-up session for these Brits, as he downs another mug of Ubuntu coffee and the rain still hammers into the mouldy felt above his head. Breathing a little cloud of moisture in front of his face, he sits back and waits for this next password barrier to be cracked, to see what wonders shall face him next.

What's this?

Military Genetics Unit.

TOP SECRET LEVEL 9 CLASSIFIED

The document below it is then blanked out with censorship black marks across the text. But it's just a highlight on this page, because Dwayne has found the original document and just clicks and drags his mouse to reveal the text. And his eyes go so wide, they darned near pop out. Twelve and a half hours following a potential lead has just proven its worth.

Sat around mugs of hot chocolate in the cafeteria, Douglas and Arnold eye the young Italian lad doubtfully. His blatant 'smile and nod' approach to the Services area isn't helping their attitudes towards him. They've already tried a few sentences made deliberately of garbled nonsense, and conclude that he doesn't really know so much English as very good reading of body language. Maintaining decidedly friendly/harmless postures, Douglas and Arnold debate their situation while awaiting the assessment of the guards on their unfortunate incident.

"Why the heck did we bring this idiot along?" Douglas side-mouths to Arnold through a fake smile.

Surprisingly adept at this sort of feigned contentment to cover a conversation, Arnold replies in much the same manner, "How should I know? You and him got in the truck before me!"

"Well, we agreed to bring him along because they would likely kill him for letting us go and he never would have let us go if we didn't!" Douglas slurps some hot chocolate noisily before nearly choking on it.

Arnold, not convinced, looks momentarily into the lad's eyes before returning his gaze to Douglas. "I'll tell you what I think is more likely. He doesn't just think we did that for him. He thinks we're a rival drug gang and we'll be using him to get the next batch of crack from Naples or something!"

"Well," Douglas replies after a moment's thought, "there's something I wouldn't see him doing again. But there's no point trying to talk to him in English about it. We need to go and see my old English teacher, who also happens, oddly enough, to be Italian, and who used to do evening classes in my school teaching Italian. If only I'd taken it up..."

"Is that why we're driving North, then?" Arnold interjects bemusedly.

"That too, and the fact we need to go find Adamfox and that Wolf dude, who I'm guessing are likely to be in this direction by now, because they're the only ones with any hope of protecting us against Gaps and his knuckle dusters, should he decide to come after our heads, which is now quite heavily likely!"

“Have you tried ringing them yet?” Arnold asks helpfully, despite obviously having no mobile phone of his own to offer.

“Do I look like I've had time to ring anyone yet? I've just spent several hours driving up the motorway to get away from a freaking psychopath, crashed into a lamp-post because of an Italian kid who won't shut up and a...” Douglas vents his frustration in a loud huff, “well, you didn't help matters, in all honesty, and now I'm stuck at a service area with no money on my phone and I've just spent the last of my change on these drinks, like the idiot I am! Ideas?”

Edwardo looks up from idly twiddling his thumbs and pulls out a Motorola. “I have phone, you make call, fine by me!” He beams at them indomitably, as though this is a simple solution that instantly makes it all better again, and places it on the table in front of Douglas. It shows a nearly empty battery and a full signal with Vodafone. Shrugging, he sits back and returns to twiddling his thumbs and taking occasional, tentative sips of hot chocolate as though it might bite.

“Thanks very much, that's very nice of you!” Douglas responds, relieved. He keys in Adam's number from the list on his own phone, and presses the call button. At exactly the same moment, the two guards return and draw seats, apparently happy to wait while Douglas has finished his call.

At Scotch Corner, a mobile phone starts ringing in Adamfox's pocket. Lupustorm smiles slyly and makes to grab the phone himself.

“For the last time, Lupus, I'm STRAIGHT! Leave off, I'll get it myself, then hand it to you!” Adam proceeds to do exactly that while pulling out into the fast lane to overtake a huge articulated lorry as the central reservation widens towards the main bend of the Corner itself. Sticking his tongue out at the strangeness that is Adam, he presses the 'Answer' button on the loudly jingling telephone.

Hello?	Hi, is that Adam?
Nope, it's his friend Jason here. Adam's driving. What can I do you for?	Er, if you could just forward a message to Adam that Douglas is in a spot of bother, and if he could ring straight back I would appreciate it.
OK, will do. Er, is that Douglas the DJ dude from the rave in London last night?	Yes... why?
Just wondered. I'll let him know anyway.	Cheers, mate.
Bye.	

At this exact moment, several things happen simultaneously. The lorry, which the camper van is still overtaking, starts to steer around the bend. A rabbit wanders onto the roadway, blinded by the headlights of the lorry she stays on the tarmac. The driver of the lorry, unaware of being overtaken on this dark dual

carriageway, swerves to avoid harming her personal favourite animal, who would otherwise have aligned most unfortunately with the left wheels. Lupustorm hands Adam's phone back to him, causing him to momentarily lose concentration. Kred sneezes, further adding to this, and keeping him from seeing what's unfolding about them. Suddenly the road is too narrow, and sandwiched between the lorry and the kerb, the Furmobile zips over the rumble strip, narrowly missing a drain, mounts the kerb and bounces over the grass to slide to a halt down among the trees in the middle, almost completely hidden from the roads on either side, and with much amazement from all present that it didn't hit anything.

"Are you alright?" Lupustorm asks a still-snotty Kred.

"That was one heck of a sneeze!" He replies shakily, wiping his nose on his sleeve. They both turn to look at Adamfox. Whose hands are locked onto the steering wheel with white knuckles, and whose face is frozen in a stare into the middle-distance. "Hey, you OK?" Lupustorm passes a hand in front of Adam's face slowly. No response.

"Oh shit!" Kred suddenly adopts a similar stare in the same direction, and begins to point, too. Finally following their gaze to see what's causing the fear in their eyes, Lupustorm peers into the bushes in front of them. Among the branches, upon the twisted remains of a rusting motorcycle, is a scattered skeleton, partly covered by a rotting leather jacket. Its skull is not human, and there are bones stretched out behind it in a neat row, a tail. The feet are also longer than those of a human, and there are no boots to be seen. All this, literally a few feet from the faces of the three now transfixed in the Furmobile.

Adamfox gradually relaxes his grip on the wheel as his mind races. *I really wish we'd set off earlier now instead of staying back to finish off the Tango and trying to argue Steven out of going to the hospital tomorrow with Jeff. I mean, now he's more determined than anything! And now we're here, and we've found this, I haven't a clue what to do!*

"Er, guys, I dunno about you, but I really don't like this. Kinda doesn't bode well..." Kred mutters fearfully through his teeth.

"Look, there's a torch in there, let's have a proper look, ring Douglas back and get out of here!" Lupustorm replies, obviously just as scared.

Chapter 65½

Because I'm bad at fitting it all in

"Right, we've discussed with the manager over the phone, and he says so long as you leave your details here with us so we can contact you in the next few days to sort out insurance, you can continue your journey so long as your vehicle is still roadworthy. He says he isn't bothered what speed you were doing, or owt like that, just grateful you're OK and that business isn't affected. You jammy bastards." Tom adds, clearly displeased with the lot of them – including Roger, who seems to be siding with the perpetrators.

"Right, let's go and put the truck back together, then we'll be on our way. And tell the manager, a big thank you from all three of us." Douglas gets up ready to leave, prompting Arnold and Edwardo to hurry up and do the same. Arnold barely has the time to belch out his own thank you before Douglas has managed to get to the automatic doors, looking for all the world like he would happily leave the both of them behind at this point, although Edwardo may be tricky to shake off.

Pam finally having managed to shift the last of the customers for the night, Dennis and his elder sibling sift through the rest of the details of what happened, nibbling through silly amounts of peanuts and drinking much pop.

“So, as a result, I've decided I've just got to build one of these for myself, and to share with anyone else who needs it. Sort of as a project. This way I'm helping Steven by ensuring his idea doesn't die, me and Pam can give it a try (don't forget, we can change back again if we want), and the upshot for you is it can heal your animals, making you the most successful vet ever!”

Stroking his chin, Dennis gives it a moment's thought before flippantly saying, “OK, I'm in, when shall we start building it?”

The printing presses are finished, and the newspapers stacked. Loaded into blue vans, they are sent up and down the country to reach every newsagent and every supermarket by 5:00. And Claire lies fast asleep as her story is distributed by the biggest and most influential tabloid this side of the Atlantic.

Ring ring Ring ring Hello?	Boop boop Boop boop
Well, I seem to have come upon a spot of bother with Gaps...	Hi, it's Adam here. What were you trying to call about?
He's the one who stole the truck from ME. Anyway, I got it back from him. The trouble is, one of his drug-runner kids has decided to hitch a ride, and speaks English, but understands it about as well as I do Italian. Anyway, I thought I'd head North . I've also got that idiot Arnold with me, because he had nothing better to do, so he saved my life, you see.	Not Gaps! How the heck would you be stupid enough to do that?
Now I'm stuck at a service station though, cause I've managed to flatten one of their lamp-posts and these two dopey guards of theirs came out and took forever to decide what to do. The question now is, can I ask of you and that wolf dude friend of yours a massive favour?	Yes...
What's up?	Erm... might be a bit of a problem there...
	Well, a few things I can think of.

<p>OK... so I'll take that as an 'I'm a bit busy at the mo, call back another time'</p> <p>Sounds like a plan. We've nothing better to do, have we?</p>	<p>One, I've lost Ray, only that is a really long story and it'll take forever to explain,</p> <p>Two, I'm stuck on the central reservation at Scotch Corner at the moment, with two guys who really need to get back home tonight to County Durham because they have work in the morning, and who are both now wishing they'd taken the National Express, and</p> <p>Three, I'm staring in the face currently the skeleton of someone who I thought until a few days ago couldn't exist, and now I'm unsure how the heck this particular one ended up here on this central reservation, and hoping to God it isn't Ray!</p> <p>Yeah, sorry, there's not a lot I can do for you at the moment. Unless you'd like to give us a drag out of the mud I currently have the Furbobile stuck in, in which case I may be more inclined to help you with your problem...</p>
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Douglas looks around to Arnold and Edwardo, who are now leaning on the truck while Douglas stands with the front bumper in one hand and his phone in the other.

<p>Nope, we're free as long as it involves being away from London for the next week or two. I'll just check if we've got a tow rope...</p>	
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Adam looks back to the van and the slope it has careered down to reach its current position. It would be rather difficult to get it out under its own steam, and the wheels would probably spin in this grass.

<p>Found it, where did you say you are?</p> <p>yeah, I'll be there in about an hour and 45, OK?</p> <p>You're welcome...</p>	<p>Scotch Corner, A1. Erm... just after the sign for how far it is to Newcastle, slow down and look out for one of us stood on the central res.</p> <p>No probs, mate. Thanks very much!</p>
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Adam ends the call, but keeps his phone out.

"Douglas will be here in an hour and three quarters with that truck cab of his, so he can pull us out of here!"

"You reckon we're stuck that much?" Kred inquires hopefully. Ignoring him momentarily, Adam holds up his

mobile phone.

"Hey, Lupus..."

"Yeah?"

"Shine that torch on the mystery fur again, would you?"

"OK." And so he does just that. Adam snaps a picture of the unfortunate remains with the camera in his phone, and another from a different angle. As he's straightening up, he frowns a bit.

"Look at the branches on the bush. The bike snapped these ones off when it crashed, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Wouldn't you think that if it had happened more than, say, a year or three ago, the snapped edge of wood would have rotted and fallen apart? Particularly considering how quickly the flesh of our friend here's vanished..."

"Oh aye, I see what you mean. Must have been about two years ago... So how come the bike's so rusted up?"

"Maybe it was an old bike to start with?"

"Much as I appreciate your detective work, I ain't stopping here with the dead dude, no matter how furry he looks to have been, for another hour and three quarters!" Kred complains, shivering.

"Then you can be the first to have a try at pushing the Furmobile back up and out of this hollow! Aren't you lucky." Adam informs him sarcastically.

"Alright, I'll go and flag down Douglas in a bit!" Kred gives in.

Imran can't sleep. His room empty of stuff (there's even a dust mark shaped exactly like a computer monitor on the wall, burnt on over the last two years), the police saying they'll 'look into it' and still not arriving [Imran took the liberty of taking his own photos of the frankly obvious evidence with his camera phone (one of the few possessions he has left to his name now) before the weather might get a chance to ruin it], and Jacobim still not having learnt the difference between day and night, he has every reason to stay awake in an increasing headache. *Now can things get any worse?*

Claire wakes up already, too excited about her first ever publication (and such a juicy story) to sleep.

Beslipped, she makes her way downstairs to raid the fridge for some 3am snacks.

A chocolate bar and some milk later, she's back in bed, head still swirling with thoughts of her new career as it so brightly unfolds before her...

A pile of empty lager cans remains. After the first one failed to enter Dave's flopping gob, Kelly dug out some straws and so the two were sat, drinking and watching TV, for the rest of the night. Now, the two having finally gone to bed, Kelly's cats take over the lounge for the night, one of them sleeping on the settee perilously close to the pool of drool deposited over the course of a few hours by Dave, the other on the stained, scraggy rug in front of the still-warm council-issue three-bar gas fire, licking her paws clean, knowing full well that they'll probably be the cleanest things in the flat.

Route

Chapter 66

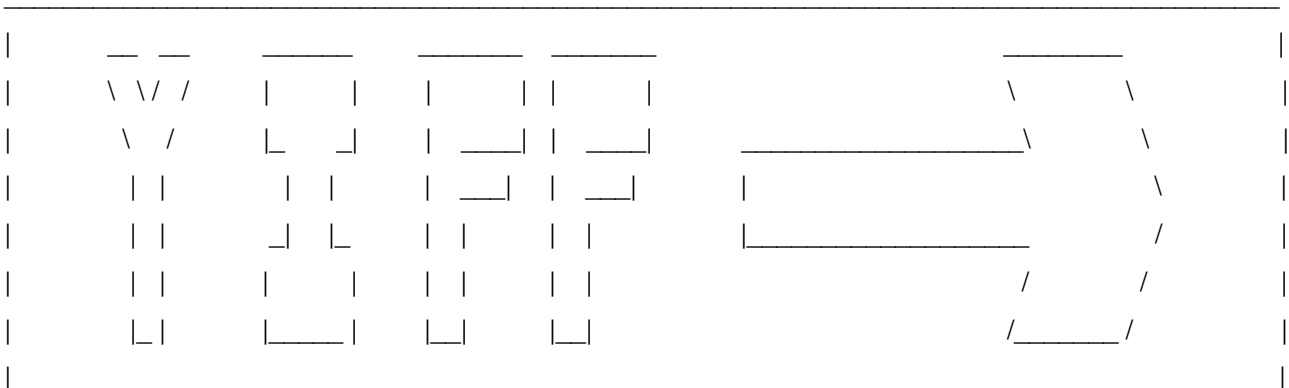
The Angry Mob

*We are the angry mob
We read the papers every day
We like who we like
We hate who we hate
And we're also easily swayed
- Kaiser Chiefs*

"Right, where's this fabled corner full of Scottish people, then?" Arnold asks Douglas, assuming he'll know, being a truck driver and all.

"About three miles off, actually. But I think where Adam said he was is just before the junction bit... or maybe just after it, can't actually remember..."

His indecision is soon answered, however, by the rather cold-looking guy standing on the central reservation, holding up a piece of white chipboard upon which is written the following piece of attention-grabbing genius:



As he clammers out of the cab, Douglas can't help but laugh at Kred as he walks back from the side of the now-rather-quiet A1. "You had that already in the Furple, didn't you!"

Adam grins. "You know me too well, Doug. Now let's see if we can drag it back to the road, if you would be so kind, then I may be in a better position to help you... Oh, but first take a look at this!" Adam beckons Douglas towards the trees and assorted bushes in front of the Furple. Now partly illuminated by the headlights of Douglas's truck, the motorbike and its unfortunate rider remain. Douglas rubs his eyes, and looks again.

"Where do these guys keep coming from? And where, for that matter, is the one I saw alive and well last night? You don't seriously mean to say this is him?" Douglas looks suspiciously at Adam, whose outraged expression immediately implies both that he has no idea and that there is no way he would do that to a friend, of course! So, Douglas quickly switches his attention back to the bike and its mysterious occupant. "I want to know three things: How he's ended up like this so quickly, and why he's on a Harley Davidson. And how a Harley Davidson ever got neglected so much as to end up this rusty, because there's no way it

crashed here more than two years ago – I mean, look at the bushes, those snapped branches haven't rotted or healed yet. Just gone a bit weathered. Which is more than we can say for this chap. Can't have been wearing much..." Douglas reaches forwards and, much to their disgust and fear, touches the leather jacket. "Here you go, some of his fur. See if that friend of yours Steven can come up with anything about the DNA. I hear he has something to do with the guy you brought by the rave last night?" Adam nods. "Right, then he might be able to shed some light on this." Douglas holds up the sample to the truck headlights. It's hard to tell, but the colour seems to be a sandy brown.

"That's not Ray's colour anyway. He's more of a grey... and has a shorter tail." Adam realises with relief.

"Where's Lupustorm and Kred?"

The two of them look round to see them both making their usual Furmobile cup of tea in the back of the van, under the light of the truck – a tradition fast developing, it seems, for whenever anything goes wrong and Adam is busy sorting it. Kred smiles cheerily through the window and holds up a cup of steaming beverage with his little finger lifted, all posh-like. Adam equally-as-cheerfully replies with an uplifted middle finger, before turning to Douglas: "Right, where's this tow-rope?"

Between them, Adam and the DJ have the rope attached to the back of the van, and the now-exposed, slightly bent in bodywork at the front of the truck. Arnold and Edwardo are fast asleep in the cab. Douglas once again can't help but laugh – the Furmobile will probably be heavy enough to pull the front bodywork of the truck straight again.

Much engine-revving and tearing up of central reservation grass later, and much to the annoyance of Lupustorm and Kred, whose tea-party is abruptly interrupted, the Furmobile is back alongside the fast lane of the Northbound A1. The two vehicles set off together towards Adamfox's house, via Lupustorm's and Kred's.

As the light gradually increases pre-sunrise over Halden and the neighbouring towns, the newsagents are already open and the delivery vans are on their way South again. And the paper boys and milkmen are doing their rounds. It's only ten to six, and the fog is breaking up somewhat, becoming patchier.

Up on the moors, a shape moves deftly through the mist. Soaking wet and covered in a mixture of mud and blood, he shivers as he pauses for a moment behind a stile. Not far behind are the splashes and noises of men, chasing still onwards, still on his trail. These are crack troops now, and all without a word to the public, lest they panic. A farmhouse looms in the vague distance. *Good – confuse my scent and my tracks with those of the farm dogs.*

Half a mile behind, right out in the wildest part of the moors, the troops stop again to allow their sniffer dogs to work out the scent. A moment later, it becomes unnecessary, as the fog shifts to reveal a line of massive paw prints heading off through the mud towards the row of pylons marching over the hill.

Steven awakes early for this, a big chance to ensure the publicity, safety, multiplicity and so future of the Geneticiser project and to change the world for the better. *I seriously hope this does change the world positively, for the better. I won't stop until it does.*

Jeff waits outside with his blue Renault parked as near to the door as possible. The back door wide open, he

steps up to open the front door. As soon as he opens the door, a flash of red and white, wearing a smart suit, zips past him into the car – and collides neatly with the box of stuff placed upon the seat. Jeff shakes his head. “I was going to say, the coast is clear and it's foggy anyway so no-one's going to see you. Ah well. You got those spare electronics you said you would need?”

“Yeah, just a sec...” A muffled voice says from somewhere behind the passenger seat as Jeff gets in the car from making sure Paul has locked Steven's door. Paul, half asleep, can be seen peering through the semi-circular window in the door, waiting for them to leave.

“And have you got the tools you said you'd need?”

“Lemme check, hang on” - Steven reaches a paw into the cardboard box next to the clear tub on the seat he isn't occupying.

“Soldering Iron?”

“Check.”

“Screwdriver?”

“Check.”

“Old radio screwdriver?” Jeff reads from the bottom section of the list he is now balancing on the steering wheel.

“Czech.”

“Hammer?”

“Russian.”

“Glue g- What? Oh, honestly!” Jeff throws the list into the back, causing it to land neatly on Steven's face, actually hiding him from the outside quite well. “I'm trying to take this seriously. I would appreciate if you would too – after all, it's your idea!”

“I wouldn't dream of taking it anything other than seriously...” mutters Steven as they pull away in the dawn light, heading for the hospital.

The dogs stir in their outbuilding at the side of the barn. A new smell has introduced itself in the air nearby. A strong canine smell, in their territory. Who is this interloper, why are they here? Ah, they smell of fear.

Perhaps they should be given reason for it.

GgrrrrRRR – WOOF! WOOF!

WOOF!

No response from the perpetrator of this new smell. Curious. Is somebody walking a town dog up here, this early? It has happened before, true enough, but this one isn't accompanied by any new human smells.

Curse this door, I can't see or get to them, whoever they think they are!

Ray realises at this point, much to his dismay, that the language of dogs still eludes him despite his canine form. Anyone can understand the vaguest rough gist of a dog's barks or growls through the accompanying body language and actions. But beyond that, seems difficult to fathom. Treading in yet another cow pat, Ray curses under his breath. The farm dogs are locked up, so his smell will not only remain the most prominent, but will further have cow pat added to it. Some new tactics will be required to shake these folk – the MGU, apparently, have easy allowance with the MoD to send out crack SAS troops on what will probably be a so-

called 'training exercise'. Even so, their ability to track him is proving impressive. *What I need is a waterway of some sort, and a boat... or indeed a railway. Just something to cut off the scent and get me away.*

His train of thought is broken at this point by the sudden appearance at the back door of the farmhouse, of the farmer (stereotypical Yorkshireman with flat cap type) and his wife (quite thin, probably older than he is, but clearly able bodied all the same). Both of them are frozen, framed in the peeling varnish of the doorway, staring across their yard at the massive wolf stood on two legs staring back at them with equal surprise. The farmer comes to his senses first, and can't decide whether to go for his video camera first or his shotgun, so he picks up both. Before he's even got the lens cap off and the gun cocked, Ray is running at full sprint away from the place, across the field downhill of the farm, towards the woods. The camera starts rolling as Ray gets about three quarters of the way across the field, and the shotgun fires with a huge, well-oiled CRACK just as he jumps over the dry stone wall at the far end. The gun's pellets clatter against the blackened gritstone blocks as Ray lands entangled in the wire of a partly collapsed parallel fence on the other side.

"Good morning." Jeff cheerfully addresses the disinterested receptionist behind the desk at Halden General Infirmary.

"Good morning, Jeff..." She replies with half the enthusiasm. "Aren't you on holiday this week?"

"Yes, supposed to be, but I have a whole load of paperwork to catch up with and I like to keep an eye on my patients."

"If only I could approach my job the same way you do yours, Jeff, I'd be expecting a promotion."

"Only you know better!" Jeff quips. Peering over her spectacles, she replies in the same monotone whilst signing Jeff in, "exactly."

As Jeff is about to head off in the direction of the ward currently home to the pretty young French girl, he spots someone he really needs to see. Barely able to hide his relief, he quickly sidesteps over to Dr Oldroyd.

"Hello Mark..."

"Oh, hi, Jeff. How's it going?"

Good, he's not too busy today, otherwise he would have brushed me off straight away..

"Er, fine, thanks. Just wondering if I could ask of you a favour, if I may have a few minutes of your precious time?"

"Oh, not at all, I'm not supposed to be in for another hour anyway. What's the deal?"

"Well, you've known me for how long now, be honest, Mark."

Lifting his head towards the ceiling in that way you only do when casting back to work out a distant memory, he replies with a sharp intake of breath, "ooh, must be a good twelve years now. I still remember that time you helped me with my medical exams, actually..." Mark cheekily grins, then they both recite in unison,

"Forceps until the pressure stabilises, then use the scissors technique!"

"Ah yes, that will be of use to me some day, I'm sure! Now, tell me something, Jeff."

"Yes?"

"Why are we walking towards your car?"

"It has to do with the favour I was going to ask..."

"Ah."

"Excuse me, would you happen to have seen anything strange going on around here lately?" A mud-covered SAS soldier implores from somewhere between the camouflage paint on his face, his rifle and his beret bearing the crest of his regiment (about the only part of him not covered in muck seems to be this beret). Around him stand a dozen similar troops, arranged in an outward-facing circle. In the middle of their circle is an extremely new Land Rover, its canvas still emitting the smell of newness, the camouflage paint barely dry, now splattered with only slightly less mud than those surrounding it, mounted atop with a roof rack to which is attached a machine gun. At the side barn door stand two sniffer dogs, their tails wagging, eager to meet their farm cousins.

All the guns are pointing at the farmer, who for a moment can't figure what he's doing wrong. Slowly, he realises he's still holding his shotgun, and places it carefully upon the cobbled yard before speaking.

"Aye, as a ma'ner of fac', I 'ave. Ah see you lo' turnin' up in yer ruddy great Land Rover, on my land, without asking permission firs'. Ye're poin'in' guns at me, scarin' my wife silly, an' that mad scientist ye've got sat in the Land Rover hasn't stopped giyyin' me the evils since ye gorrear. Warriwannaknow is wha's goin' on, then Ah'l tell ya wha' I might have seen or have no' seen, if tha's alright with you. All I ask is a li'le respect, please."

The window of the Land Rover winds down.

"Sir! With all due respect, your presence upon the battlefield, or amidst negotiations with potential leads to our quarry is unorthodox, to say the least. May I request permission for us to do..."

"Your job, and for I to do mine, quite." Doctor John Crossley finishes his sentence. "Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Shut up."

"Sir, Yes, Sir!" The Lieutenant barks loudly at a quick snap to attention.

"Right. Have yer seen a ruddy great wolf that looks like summat off o' t' telly around 'ere lately?" John inquires calmly and directly of the farmer, brushing the Lieutenant aside with a single stern look.

"Yeah, I have. Go' video of i' too." The farmer replies calmly, holding out his camcorder for them to take a look. Inspecting the camcorder momentarily, John mutters under his breath - *"how do ya work this thing?"* - then turns to the Lieutenant.

"Lieutenant."

"Sir, yes Sir!"

"Get this thing to play back the last bit of video on its little screen, would you please?" John asks, mocking his own ineptness with technology more than anything else.

A spare catering trolley rolls down the corridor, pushed by Jeff. Ahead of it walks an exceedingly anxious Dr Oldroyd. Thanks to Mark, and through clever timing and wording, Jeff has managed to smuggle Steven into the bottom shelf of the trolley, which rather handily is covered to just the right length by the tablecloth Jeff had the foresight of bringing. Also underneath the tablecloth, the clear plastic tub and similarly sized cardboard box, containing three quarters of an unbuilt Geneticiser. And dug out from the boot of Jeff's car, for Steven insisted on bringing it, is Steven's desktop computer, now taking up the remainder of the free space under the tablecloth and adding even more weight to the already overloaded trolley.

Before long, they pull into the old lab store at the far end of the disused Third Ward. Nobody else is about, so

Steven clammers out of the trolley for the time being, but stays below worktop height.

"This is the most likely place for you to find what you need. It's where all the outdated equipment got chucked when we upgraded the Operating Theatre and the Lab. Heck, some of the nurses are still discovering things that ought to be down here as recently as last week. You'd better hope they don't dig out another 1960's microscope or you'll be found!" The doctor then turns to Steven, whose story and intentions were quickly explained amongst the fog of the car park moments earlier. Seemingly having settled on the thought that it must all be an illusion created by his own overstressed mind, Mark nevertheless plays along for the time being, to see where it's going. "Oh, and by the way, I'm still standing by my amazement from earlier that you could ever get away with what you've done to yourself, mate. I mean, what a way to test a life-saving invention!" Mark grins.

"Well, that's what it's supposed to do, anyway. The purpose of today's exercise is to prove that it's easy to build one of these, and to use it to cure a patient in hospital. Now, you say you already have a patient in mind?" Steven checks with Jeff.

"Yes, if I'm not mistaken she and you share a common interest. If nothing else, that will make her more likely to co-operate. But it's vital we get this right. I'm not going to lose my job if I can help it." Jeff reminds them.

"Yes, well, this is quite the risk you're taking here. But I'll cover you as best you can. Now, you going to be OK in here by yourselves for a bit?" A concerned Mark looks at them both as though they're kids being allowed out to play in the park by themselves for the first time.

"Yes, stop worrying, we'll be fine. You need to be getting to work now, this thing won't be ready until midday, will it, Steven?"

"More like 11:00 if we get a move on. Depends on if everything we need is here. Are you sure it's OK to be raiding this stuff in here like this?"

Mark shrugs. "It'll only get chucked out soon anyway, so go for it!" With that, Mark leaves, heading straight for the cafeteria to obtain a hefty coffee and to see if he can find someone willing to slap him out of this weird dream.

"Right, first we're going to need the USB leads." Steven starts the long job of construction. Jeff watches as Steven reaches for pieces of this and tools for that, evidently having memorised the process during the course of building and rebuilding his own Geneticiser over the course of several months.

Upon a slippery slope

A

steep

scramble

down to the

bottom where the

woods meet the canal. Claws digging in for grip, Ray clings onto an almost vertical rock face cut by navvies of centuries past. Shimmying himself across to the right, he finds a ledge on which he can stand. Finally letting go of the rock face, he turns around only to find himself staring at the back of the head of a boater. As the good boat *Pot Of Gold* toodles by on the chug of an impeller driven by diesel, Ray looks up and down the canal. No locks or bridges in sight, and the rock face becomes more treacherous to the left. To the right, a

continuation of the ledge for a short distance, then more rock face. Trapped if he stays put, and obviously having already been seen, Ray finds himself with no choice. As the *Pot Of Gold's* stern swings up close to the ledge so the boat may navigate the upcoming bend, Ray speaks up.

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, what can I d- w- b- " is all the man at the tiller can say before he cracks up laughing. And quickly revs the engine up, swelling a surge of water up behind the boat and making it surge forward. Before he loses his chance, Ray jumps aboard. Momentarily knocked to his senses, the boater works up the courage to shout.

"Oy! Fuck Off! This is my boat!"

"And how else do you suppose I am going to get from that ledge, to the tow-path at the other side?" Ray reasons in his ever-deep voice. After a moment's gibbering, the boater replies, "Ah, but how did you g-get there in the first place?"

"I fell. Now, please, to the other side of the canal, and a bit further down since we already appear to be heading that way at quite a speed..." - which indeed they are, the boat's speedometer is measuring their progress as well above 3 knots, impressive for a canal boat. As they round the bend, a dank and dreary tunnel becomes visible.

"Actually, if you could get me to the other side of that tunnel, that would be even better..."

"Are you kidding?" The boater kills the speed and pulls the *Pot Of Gold* up against the tow-path and throws a rope over a spare mooring post.

"If you think I'm going through there with you, uninvited, on board, you've another think coming!" He quivers.

"OK, in which case our short journey is over. I'm sorry I didn't have chance to introduce myself, but I'm sure the gentlemen at the top of the cliff will happily furnish you with more information. Goodbye!" Ray legs it as fast as he can in the general direction of what appears to be civilisation. *Steven's theory is right - the more people know, the less the Government can do to repress us.*

A soldier appears on the high horizon amongst the trees, peering down towards the boat half-tied-up on the canal-side.

"Any chance he went down there, sir?"

"I wouldn't put anything past this one." The Lieutenant replies with all honesty. "He is to be considered extremely dangerous and a threat to National Security. That's why we're all here, to stop the new terrorist threat before it gets out of hand, lest you forget it!"

At St Peter's Church, the clock turns its mighty hands to 9:30 and the bells jingle their half-hour across the town. Reverend Thomas Ingham stands outside, breathing the foggy air with a sense of sadness and deep thought. The first of the people for the morning's funeral service are turning up, despite that it isn't going on until 11:00. But, there's a brass band, a choir and a lot of mourners to assemble carefully, such is the way things go. And at 11:00 precisely, the funeral director will bring the hearse from the hospital mortuary to the final resting place of Annette Wemyss (not that he'll have far to drive, it's only down the road and around the corner).

Mark, now wide awake and worried sick, goes to check on Miss Kimpler.

"Allo Doctor..." Anaïs dejectedly greets he of a thousand painkillers and much boredom.

"Hello again. I've got some interesting news for you, straight from my colleague."

Anaïs sits up straighter, at the expense of a heavy twinge from her left ankle. She nods for him to continue.

"I've been informed that a pioneering new surgery has been developed that can cure a wide range of ailments. Now, because it is in its infancy, it isn't yet registered officially. If, however, we can make it do what I am told it can, you could walk out of here on both feet in a matter of hours. Now, I am usually a skeptical man, but I've seen somebody who's already used it, and believe me, it's clear that it worked perfectly for him. He's currently setting it up, ready for a demonstration of the capabilities of this new procedure to a delegation of medical students who will be in today to learn about the way we pioneer new practices. The question of course being, are you interested in giving it a try?"

"Well... it sounds a little too good to be true... what 'appens if it goes wrong?"

"I've been told, that firstly it is very unlikely for it to go wrong, and that if it does, nothing much at all will happen anyway."

"But 'ow is zis possible?"

"It's based, I believe, on a genetic refresh and kick-start. Basically, you get given a good virus that sweeps through your body and has the option to fix your DNA where it needs to, then it kick-starts cell growth at high speed using hormones and some sort of enzyme. The upshot being, your legs will mend within a few minutes, if I hear right!"

"I was told it would take weeks before I can walk again. Now you tell me zis, 'ow can I say no? - But remember, my Dad is a billionaire – zat was him in ze 'elicopter on Saturday – and if anysing goes wrong, you will be in court!" Anaïs finishes with a smile on her face. "Can I speak to ze person who made zis new technique?"

"Ah, not yet. But all being well, you can be in the Operating Theatre with no anaesthetic required, by 11:00."

Having seemingly pacified her and gained her consent, Mark leaves before she can ask any more smart questions that might put him on the spot. Now comes the difficult task of getting the Operating Theatre booked in, no mean feat with the busy schedule of the NHS. Fortunately, on days when students are to be wandering around, a few slots are kept open for showing said students the equipment etc. Mark sits down at his desk. And, upon checking the computer, it would appear that a window has been left open between an amputation and a keyhole procedure. At, quite astoundingly, 11:00 precisely – for ten minutes.

Suddenly the atmosphere around him changes – a bus has just pulled up outside, from the University Of Salford. And the students go marching in, to meet with the indomitable stern face of the receptionist.

On the main road into Leeds, crammed into the morning rush and crammed out with the worldly possessions of Harriet, Quentin's car pulls out into the chevrons, overtakes two standing cars, then finally turns up a neat little side-street after waiting twenty minutes just to get past the traffic island that heretofore had blocked their way.

"You're happy to just move right in, then, without viewing first?" Quentin queries with some worry as he hits the first of many speed-bumps.

"Looks, you know I trust you like an uncle. If it's half as good as the one in Halden, I'll have it."

"OK..." Quentin lifts his fingers on the wheel in the universal drivers' 'if you're sure' gesture.

They round a corner, turn right and head up a slight hill, all cobbled. A train roars past D:Rat's house. A new

neighbour makes an unexpected arrival along with the unwanted arrival of his landlord. But D:Rat, expecting this turn of events, has neatly removed himself from the situation. From the corner shop down the road, he looks up from his recently-purchased newspaper to see that all-too-familiar shape stood outside his door.
More bad news.

Ron is awakened from the stupor of waiting for the traffic lights by a sudden BANG from above. The double-decker rocks slightly on its suspension and creaks, and the passengers start muttering about the state the public transport system is getting into, completely ignoring that this bus is actually less than three weeks old, and still smells new.

Flicking on the hazard lights, he opens the riot-shielded door and heads up the stairs to investigate the source of the noise. Other than a couple of undisturbed old biddies sat at the very front and a group of chavs smoking with the windows open at the back, nothing appears out of the ordinary. Not wishing to pick a fight with the chavs, and remembering the difficulty he's just had trying to get the two sat at the front to hear anything he said at all (*their hearing aids must be switched off...*), he decides not to question them and continue his journey. *Maybe I'm just being paranoid. Last time I heard a noise like that, it turned out to be a drunk falling over anyway.*

Ray has executed a perfect landing upon the roof of the bus. Clinging on to the bull-bars at the front left corner, he keeps his head low to avoid being spotted. Before long, the lights have changed – but the bus isn't moving. *Given enough time...*

The bus pulls away at last, the only vehicle to get through that change of lights, much to the anger of the motorists left behind it. And heads straight for a low bridge.

CLEARANCE: 15' 5"

The bus is 14' 5"

Ray, needless to say, is rather frightened by this experience alone, even without it being part of his ongoing escape attempt. As such, he forgets to flatten his tail against the bus roof. Much pain to be had from that 20mph collision with a hefty, gritty keystone. *A lesson learnt: Keep that tail in when going through narrow gaps!*

"Right, bring out the helicopter!" The Lieutenant orders the radio operator to forward on as they both lose Ray and become rather too conspicuous to the public in this increasingly built-up area. Having searched up and down the rows of terraced houses (built slightly below canal-level) that their quarry disappeared into, they find to their dismay that the scent the dogs have been tracking simply ends, along with all paw prints, at the apex of a roof above a Pakistani-owned corner shop by the traffic-lit junction between Halden Road and Bradford Road. At the other side of the junction is the river, and on the road itself nothing but endless traffic. The troops congregate in the corner shop, buying newspapers and snacks while they await further orders. The shop owners are at once both pleased to have some business and unnerved by the presence of soldiers. And so pleased once the soldiers have left, and the sounds of footsteps on the roof have ceased. "OK, so do we have him on screen yet?" The Lieutenant speaks into the back of the Land Rover. A rather young, inexperienced-looking lad sits there with radio equipment and a 'rugged laptop' (basically, one built to withstand Army use, for thrice the cost of any other at the same spec), looking very frustrated.

"Unfortunately I cannot currently pinpoint his present location, Sir!"

"Why not?"

"Well, the satellite's complaining about the fog, but I can work around that. There's something else interfering with the signal, on and off..."

Having forgotten the random loud bang for the moment, Ron resumes the conversation he was having with his best mate Anthony on the number 598, using the bus's inbuilt CB.

"So I says to this woman anyway, I says 'IT'S FREE TRAVEL NOW FOR OVER SIXTY'S!' - at which point, the entire bus bursts out laughing. And you know what, she heard that! Over!"

#"Ee, don't get me started about the one I had on Saturday night! Right weirdo, he was! Over!"#

"Yer frickin' implanted chips don't work. I said all along it'd be a bad idea!" John slams the Lieutenant's choice of the previous night.

"Aha! Got him!" The radio operator pipes up.

"Where is he?" The Lieutenant asks eagerly.

"Halden, Sir. In the bus station."

"Well, what are we waiting for? Let's get there! Troops, in the Land Rover!"

The brass band, gathered on short notice, take the opportunity to play some practise of slow, mournful tunes before the procession arrives. The General, resplendent in full Salvation Army uniform, complete with a black wrist band for the occasion, takes up the position of conductor, one which he relishes and enjoys greatly. The grave site is conveniently near to the entrance to the church itself, and so the band are assembled on the lawn just aside from the main part of the graveyard. The Reverend continues to welcome in the friends and distant family members of Annette Wemyss who have now, on the occasion of her death, surfaced from the woodwork as they all expected each other would.

Claire, unable to contain her excitement, buys two copies of The Daily Disaster from the shop in the bus station, and starts doing what she loves: stirring the rumour. Just quietly by standing among the people looking at the paper a certain way, she can get a few more to look at that article, to gain interest in it, than would otherwise. And so she becomes an innocent bystander who just happens to mention in a mutter to herself that everyone can hear, how much she agrees with the article on Page 5.

Dave enters one of his many usual haunts. His mouth now sufficiently de-numbed after the night before, he purchases a newspaper from the Bus Station shop. Oblivious, he stands outside the Bus Station, reading the featured story on page 5, the one referred to by a smaller front page box.

The Furries: Crooks Who Play God? (by Claire Stott)

I set out to create an article providing an insight into the lives of a group of people who are both very extrovert and very secretive, who parade on the streets but keep themselves to themselves, all apparently to do with a common fetish for all things furry. What I found out, however, was quite astounding, disturbing and even weirder than I had expected. If you think these strange people are safe to let your children go near, think again. On the outside they appear harmless, but what goes on behind the façade? That's what I've been finding out. Beware: read further and you may be shocked and appalled.

Bordering it is a picture of some bloke in a cheap fursuit walking down a path, putting on a mean face for the camera. Cheap photo-manufacturing it may be, but the minds of some are easily won over.

“The horrid little sh*ts!” Dave spits as he reads on. Above his head, limbs splayed on the glass roof, Ray reads a bit of it too, disgusted at the way this moron – and several other people about the bus station seem to be taking it all in, spoon-fed.

The time has come: Joe loads the unfortunate deceased into her coffin, to transport her to her final resting place, and, aided by the coffin-bearers, takes Annette to the Hearse parked outside in the still-lingering, but considerably thinner fog. The contents of Annette's Will were very to-the-point: “I shall have a quick funeral, with none of that lying-in-state nonsense. I shall be taken from whatever hospital or mortuary I end up in, straight to the graveyard and be buried, in the presence of members of both the Church Of England and the Salvation Army, who may if they wish provide music. I wish to make it clear that my position between both churches is a neutral one, but that for the sake of the argument I will be buried at St Peter's Church in Halden.”

Joe has never yet disrespected the wishes of his clients.

The time has come: Quentin, having failed once again to extract rent from D:Rat, heads back home, leaving Harriet to set herself up in her new flat. *That has to be the quickest house move ever. I wonder why she needed to shift herself so quickly?*

Back along the road to Halden – but stopping off in the town centre for some shopping.

The time has come: Steven once again hidden in the trolley, Jeff, sweating profusely, wheels it into the Operating Theatre. Like so many hospital drama sets, this Operating Theatre is surrounded by a viewing platform in a mezzanine level, where every word the surgeons say can be heard and everything they do seen. Assembled in the seats are twenty-five eager students, all of whom now have their eyes set upon the computer tower and the clear plastic tub that stand connected to each other on the trolley. Anaïs lies immobile on the bed, but clearly awake, much to the raised eyebrows of the audience. In silence, Jeff takes the monitor from a spare computer in the corner and the keyboard and mouse with it, and connects them up to Steven's monster of a machine. Plugging in the power leads, he switches it on. The audience continue to watch with baited breath and marked confusion as the computer quickly boots. Lightly tapping the trolley with his shoe, Jeff whispers from the corner of his mouth furthest from his microphone, while pretending to adjust it, “username, password!”

An almost inaudible whisper replies, “steven. OKsauce, one word.”

Tapping these in, Jeff is relieved when the login screen vanishes to be replaced by a desktop. Remembering what Steven told him earlier, he goes for the icon marked 'Geneticiser'.

Dr Mark Oldroyd, meanwhile, has been stood at the far end of the room all the while like an inspector. Jeff looks him in the eye and gives a firm nod.

“OK, Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for being here today with us. We are about to start a pioneering new technique of surgery, in just a few short moments. While we wait for my colleague here to prepare the technology that makes all this possible, I would like to point out that this is not a government-funded

procedure, due to its experimental nature this is entirely at the expense of its inventor, and also of my colleague here. Both with whom you will have the chance to talk once the demonstration is over. Now, the process is based upon the fundamentals of Genetic displacement and re-energising, with the help of retroviruses, a selection of hormones and an enzyme created using nanotechnology. Now, the details of this will be further discussed in a paper to be released shortly, but at the moment reading material is currently awaiting publication due to an issue with the publishers. The main purpose of today's exercise, however, is to show that the theory works when put into practise. I now bring your attention to our patient. Please note her injuries sustained to the feet, lower legs and right knee in particular. These currently make it impossible for her to walk, and the healing of these injuries is likely to take several weeks. I am now proceeding to take a sample of hair from the patient." Mark produces a pair of scissors before continuing with his gripping talk, keeping the audience safely distracted while Jeff quickly checks with Steven that the machine is indeed set up correctly, and that he has the software ready in the right place. Jeff finds himself quickly shutting up as Mark walks over to Jeff and hands him a small lock of Anaïs's hair. Anaïs herself is clearly confused (*is this not a paramedic?*) but decides to play along for now, as she feels she can trust him.

Jeff places the lock of hair in the camera film-case that Steven only stuck down in the tub with some glue-gun glue half an hour previously. Nervously and with anticipation, he sets the Geneticiser program to run one of its already inbuilt templates: 'Read & Repair'.

The hastily cobbled together read/write head moves on the steel bar nabbed from an old printer, propelled by the old motors from the same. Stopping just short of the edge of the tub, it moves slightly to the left and descends to read the sample. On the screen comes no log, this is the Geneticiser at work.

A picture of Anaïs gradually builds on the screen as the computer starts to belt out heat in great wafts from the overworked fans. A dialog box appears, an added part of the process for this template to be easier: Identify areas for particular attention? Y/N

Jeff selects Yes, and highlights the legs, like Steven suggested moments before.

Then, that done, he presses the big button marked 'apply'. The Geneticiser moves its head back to the microscope stand in the middle, descends and stops at the slide.

With great tension in the air, the whole theatre watches as a tiny LED nabbed from a broken CD drive blinks quietly atop the Geneticiser. A few minutes pass with no sound but the heavily stressed whirring of the computer. When the light stops and the head raises from the slide, Jeff carefully takes it from beneath the rusting clips of the microscope stand and steps forward to Anaïs. Addressing the room, he announces: "The Retrovirus is ingested orally, through the tongue. Hence our patient will now lick the slide and keep her mouth open for a good minute to give it time to set in." Looking at Anaïs in a way that says 'please do what I've just said, for the sake of everyone here!', he hands her the slide and steps back, adopting the same disconnected pose that Mark seems to enjoy taking when observing the audience observing the theatre. Anaïs licks the slide.

Holding her mouth open for as long as she dares, she begins to feel it working. A smooth, cool sensation hits her tongue from where she licked the slide, and spreads like a refrigerated wildfire throughout her body in a matter of half a minute. Her expression almost looks high.

Suddenly, her legs start to shake, and the hairs on them grow a centimetre all at once. The parts of her legs you can see, suddenly look more natural in shape and position again. Anaïs can feel each pain rising to the

front of her mind in turn, each break or fracture takes up every nerve with its pain, yet without hurting somehow, then disappears.

When every last one has gone and the coolness has given way to a plain normal, but much refreshed feeling, Anaïs sits up and lifts one leg, still weirdly heavy with the pottery but otherwise feeling fine, and places her plastered foot gently on the floor.

Whispering to herself, everyone hears her anyway: "It is perfect!"

The look of amazement and relief on Anaïs's face is almost surpassed by the barely disguised amazement that IT ACTUALLY WORKED on both the medical staff present in the room. The students, started off by one particularly rapt girl, begin to applaud.

The time has come: Dave and a group of other Daily Disaster readers start to discuss with each other, temporarily forgetting their differences, the scandalous article on Page 5.

"Genetic experimentation!"

"People turning themselves into animals!"

"That poor journalist – she says she lost her camera to these thugs!"

"Smashed it using their machine, so as to keep it secret from us!"

"Here, in Halden!"

"The kids aren't safe!"

"You know what, I wouldn't be surprised if some of them were paedophiles!"

"Look at the ugly geezer they managed to get a photo of!"

As unfortunate moments go for Ray, this one has to cap the lot right now. For it is at exactly this moment he loses his grip, and for a mad moment is scrambling around with his foot, trying to regain his balance. The sudden sound of claws tapping on the glass so loudly grabs the attention of one or two of the gathered crowd. A few taps of the shoulder later, and the whole lot are looking up. With nothing better to do, Ray gives a sheepish smile and wave.

"Hang on a sec, isn't that the one she describes in here?"

"...one of them had just turned himself into a grey wolf, with eyes cold and evil, and a tail marked as though trying to outdo that of the devil..." Quoth one by-standing volunteer, her thumb on the right paragraph.

"HE'S ONE OF THEM! A FURRY! GET HIM!" Shouts Dave over the confusion. The sheepish grin turns into a very frightened face. Before he can even turn round to get off the glass roof, Dave has found a lump of cobblestone and lobs it at the roof. On his first attempt, it bounces off. But, second time lucky, and right under Ray's panicking feet and paws as he attempts to get a grip on the anti-vandal paint and mossy glass.

CRASH

And with that, Ray quickly braces himself to land neatly on the concrete below, cutting his right foot on an errant piece of glass as he lands. And is set upon by the gathered mob almost immediately. A helicopter hovers overhead, its down draft stirring open a small hole in the low foggy cloud above the bus station.

The funeral procession gradually makes its way around the town centre, at walking pace. Joe knows his route and is sticking to it – not the shortest, but the one that holds up the most people, so thy all know there's a funeral going on. You can always be sure of a few extra guests by this guilt-trick.

"We have a visual, Sir." The radio operator informs the Lieutenant as they finally pull up outside the bus station and can quite clearly see for themselves anyway.

"OK, so you've seen what it can do. Now, I'm guessing you would like to meet the inventor of this new technique?" Jeff gains immediate nods and affirmatives from the audience. "Please bear in mind, he had limited funding when developing his invention, and so tried one of its more novel applications upon himself first. I understand that not all of you will agree with self-testing, and please bear in mind that what my friend here did to himself holds no bearing on the fate of our patient, these are two DIFFERENT applications of the Geneticiser, they both got their intended results, FIRST TIME. So, without further ado, and please excuse his chosen method of entrance, my good friend and in my opinion a genius, Mr Steven Dhai!"

Steven clammers out from under the trolley, and dramatically pushes it aside. The audience goes dead silent. "Hehe, I knew they wouldn't expect that!" Steven grins to Jeff, whose stress levels are clearly showing. Mark, seemingly having lost the plot, sits quietly in the far corner, taking notes once again like an examiner. Just when nobody was expecting some sort of inquisition, the doors at the side of the auditorium burst open, propelled by none other than the Chairman of the Board Of Governors. "Jesus Christ, what the Dickens is going on in here?!"

Beside him, a ridiculously short man adds helpfully, "At least we've found the students!"

Jeff looks awkwardly across to Steven. Mouthing from the corner away from the mike again, he grabs Steven's attention with a look. "Well... Plan?"

"Erm, Run?"

"Excellent choice!"

About to turn and leave, Steven finishes up doing a smooth digitigrade 360 as he realises what they're forgetting. "What about the patient?"

"My name is Anaïs!"

"OK, what about Anaïs?"

"Er guys, hurry up, the Chairman is turning puce!" Mark warns them.

"What do you want to do?"

"Take me wiz you, if you can take these stupide casts off!"

"It's OK, we'll discharge you. You're fit to walk now?"

"Thanks to your amazing idea, never better! But I can see we chose ze wrong time, no?"

"Quite. Hasty exit, now. Questions, later."

Sitting Anaïs on the trolley next to the Geneticiser, they wheel it out into the corridor. Before the Chairman can get his head around what he's seeing, the students start to pile out of the room past him, apparently unsatisfied and in need of answers. All 25 of them, for their own reasons, set forth after Jeff, Anaïs, Steven and not Mark, because he's managed to blend in with the other confused staff now looking up from their desks with bemusement at the bizarre group of people followed by students passing them by, with a Chairman bringing up the rear shouting, "Is anyone going to explain what the heck's going on?"

Out the doors, down the path to the main road and as fast as possible away from the hospital. "What about my car?" Jeff offers as they blatantly go the wrong way. "No time for that!" Steven replies, leading them on.

"Where the heck are we going?" Jeff asks with urgency as they round the bend at the end of the wheelchair ramp down from car-park level to road level.

"I have an idea!"

"Care to impart it with us?"

"No, no time! Just run, come on!"

The Procession arrives at St Peter's, to the striking of the bells for Quarter Past Eleven. The Salvation Army band start playing Annette's favourite tune, to much arm-swinging on the part of The General. As the pallbearers carry her coffin up the path to the church doors, an anthropomorphic wolf running at full speed nearly knocks them all over, but dodges around them at the last moment, and past the band who quite understandably stop playing at that particular development. Just as the Sergeant is looking around to try and divine the source of the interruption, an angry mob led by no-one in particular but inclusive of Dave and the shopkeeper from K. McE's, noisily arrives, apparently having lost the wolf they were chasing and, with nothing better to do, start sampling the food on the trestle table by the buttress of the church tower. Greatly miffed at this sacrilege, The Sergeant turns back to the band just as a helicopter hovers overhead.

"OK, from the top, page 45!"

A moment of page-flapping and reading later, the band start playing once again, and the Sergeant sings along.

"Oh when the Saints..."

Quentin arrives at the roundabout only to see that wolf his Grandson had obsessed himself with, who he himself had met but hoped against hope it was a dream, now being chased through the churchyard and across the road in front of him by a crack SAS squad towards the terraced housing, beyond which lies his street, Kenneth Street. Deciding he must be going mad,

"Go marching in, oh when the Saints go marching in..."

Steven, Jeff and Anaïs round the bend into the street with the Police compound for cars involved in crimes at the end. Mr Noakes, absorbed by his work, thinks he can hear a funny noise for a moment. Shrugging and wiping his eyes, he turns back to the Renault Clio in question, unaware that its owner has just rolled past him on a hospital catering trolley pushed by an anthropomorphic fox and a paramedic who hasn't a clue if this will be the end of his career. What does grab his attention, however, is the mob of students running after them, shouting after them to slow down and brandishing clipboards and fountain pens. An out-of-breath Chairman arrives at the gates of the compound, completely exhausted.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Yes, what can I do for you?"

"I really need a drink, you couldn't spare a glass of water, per chance?" A now evidently dehydrated Chairman requests, bent double as he catches his breath.

"What about that lot you were chasing?"

"Oh, forget it, I'm getting too old for this!"

“Right, erm, water... I don't know about from here, I'm just the insurance assessor. But if you ask next door, maybe they'll help you?”

“Oh I want to be in that number!”

Quentin heads straight for the mental health unit at Halden General Infirmary.

“When the Saints go marching in!”

Steven arrives back at his flat.

Ray arrives at Steven's flat, hoping to God that Steven is in, right up to the point where he bumps into Steven outside his own door. The medical students arrive, somehow having been joined at some point by a random group of Japanese tourists, who are now very excited over the two stood on the doorstep in front of them. Looking around, Steven can see that Beth's car is here, as is Paul's. So they must both be in. A crack squad of SAS troops arrives, and immediately are about to start dispersing and moving on the crowd, only to stop and stand to attention at the behest of Dr John Crossley, who now steps out of his Land Rover, only to suddenly be surrounded by an angry mob of chavs and random bystanders wielding newspapers.

The front door opens behind Steven, to reveal the last two people he expects to see there, and so it is with much aplomb that Steven reveals to his parents his furry tendencies. Just to complete the scene, the Salvation Army Band marches in, still playing When The Saints Go Marching In, with an apoplectic vicar and utterly outraged Connie bringing up the rear. All eyes are on Steven and Ray.

-.... --...

Ray, Of Light

Quicker than a Ray of light!

- Madonna

The Eurostar arrives at London St Pancras a minute early. Marie steps out, dragging a suitcase behind her on little built-in wheels. Straight around the corner to a waiting taxi.

The band, simultaneously spotting Ray, Steven and certain military members of the crowd, stop playing. The tension is unbelievable. A hundred or more gather in a street with many different reasons, all doing the same: staring with utter amazement and disbelief along with a varied mix of other emotions. After a good five minutes of knife-severable atmosphere, the moment is finally shattered by a sound of feet thumping down the staircase in number 42. Trying to look over Steven's parents's shoulders, trying to see what the heck is going on, Squee, unable to tell what this whole to-do is about, quite reasonably asks, “Hey,

sorry I didn't say hello sooner, Mr and Mrs Dhai, I presume?" On realising he's being utterly ignored, "Er, what did I miss?"

An unbelievably infuriated, absolutely seething Dr John Crossley replies in a voice that captures the attention of all: "THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT I WANT TO KNOW."

Coming to his senses slightly, Noel Dhai decides enough is enough. "OK, why on Earth are you all here, and for the last time, WHERE IS MY SON?"

Cringing, Steven turns around and looks his Dad in the eyes for the first time in three weeks. Dave digs out a KitKat and snaps it in two noisily while continuing to watch the unfolding scene like an episode of Eastenders. A nearby chavette nudges him with her elbow and whispers, "I thought we were gonna beat the shit out of them?"

Dave whispers back, "Not yet, this is more fun. An' anyway, in case you 'aven't noticed, there's a whole lot of soldiers here who look like they wanna do the same thing!"

Said chavette looks around and about the crowd at this point, and her eyebrows disappear behind her fringe.

The Bishop Auckland residence of Adamfox plays host to a real mix of folk this Monday Morning/Afternoon lazy lie-in. Having thrown a sickie at work due to the events of the previous night and the associated worries they entail, Adam is once again depressed. Even the faux-fur ears are drooping to the sides of his head.

"You've really got to cheer yourself up" Lupustorm points out helpfully while cuddling Kred.

"That's easy enough for you to say, you have everyone you need right there with you!" Adam replies not untruthfully.

"I still can't get my head round that dude on the Harley Davidson..." Douglas ponders aloud.

"I think we should let Steven know about it, after all it does seem rather relevant to his current situation..."

Kred points out.

"Steven? What have you done to yourself?" Susannah Dhai whispers faintly.

"How in the name of everything that is good and holy do you not tell your own parents about something like that?" The Reverend cottons on, aghast.

"Do you seriously think I would have let him if he'd told me this was what he was doing?" Noel responds with surprising composure, then turning to Steven, "the main thing is, physical appearance for the moment notwithstanding, are you alright?" Noel asks, obviously doing his all to avoid collapsing in tears.

"Fine... but next time, could you let me know when you're coming to visit? Only, as you can probably tell, I'm a bit busy at the moment..."

Claire snorts amid the crowd, "a bit busy? Understatement of the freaking year, FREAK!" She is followed by gathering murmurs of agreement from around the crowd. The natives begin to grow restless. Despite the impossible situation, Mr Dhai still finds a disapproving look to fling at Claire hard enough for her to notice. Having lost the will to stave it off any longer, Susannah collapses in tears. Steven offers to hug her, but she rejects his paws and turns away.

"Ah, excusez-moi, but I sink zese sentiments may 'ave to wait for a better time..." Anaïs reminds the Dhais of the impending crowd.

One of the medical students, clearly unimpressed with the way things are going, clambers upon the stump of

the sycamore that once stood at the other side of the street and decides to attempt to bring some kind of order to the chaos fast encroaching. The noise of confused and angry people rises quickly.

“HEY! WAIT JUST A MINUTE HERE! THERE ARE QUESTIONS THAT NEED ANSWERS!” She screams at the top of her voice, but is barely heard above the din.

Growing impatient, John shoves his way past a soldier before grabbing his arm and shouting something in his ear. The soldier nods, and John steps onto the tree stump next to the student.

BANG

And all fall silent again. A skyward-pointing assault rifle smokes gently in the soldier's hands, and before anyone can panic, John gets their attention.

“Alright, enough faffing about. Those two creatures you see on that doorstep are government property, and should be handed over to us immediately. Anything either of them say should be disregarded, they have a tendency to lie. Now, you two, you can either come quietly or innocent people may end up getting hurt in the process of taking you by force. Make the sensible decision please!”

Beth squeezes her way out of the door, past Ray and Steven, past the trolley with the Geneticiser and makes her way towards the newspaper-brandishing mob. Press liaison is obviously something she'll have to make up as she goes along.

Claire, mortified that the press haven't turned up yet (and furiously texting to the Daily Disaster and to the BBC and every other media organisation she can think of), is not about to lose a good story. Snapping a couple of photos over the heads of the crowd, she shoves her camera back into her bag before turning toward her Uncle and making sure he sees exactly how much his favourite niece disapproves of the 'disappear off the face of the Earth' policy.

Ray, meanwhile, is having none of it.

“NO! YOU MAKE THE SENSIBLE DECISION! WE HAVE RIGHTS AND ARE NOT OWNED BY THE GOVERNMENT, NOR WILL WE EVER BE!” At this point, the troops are beginning to shift uneasily, and at a nod from John, start forward, sideways and backwards to make multiple approaches from all sorts of angles. A helicopter pulls in overhead and the door opens to reveal a tranquilliser gun.

“WAIT, STOP!” The medical student hereunto ignored upon the makeshift podium beside the mad scientist shouts with surprising certainty. Having grabbed his attention, she continues over the noise about her, “I have seen this fox, this man, whoever he is, do something amazing! He cured a girl whose legs were smashed to pieces in a matter of minutes, she's the one stood next to him, and if you don't believe me I have a whole lot of friends who will back me up!”

At this moment precisely, two mobile phones ring simultaneously. Both are ignored.

Finally, the police arrive, causing much disturbance among the Japanese tourists, who it would seem were up to this point under the assumption that a film was in the making. Many cameras flash in all directions. Jeff, taking the opportunity to add his two pennies worth, adds to the evidence against John's claims, “Steven made himself a fox using open source technology and an invention he created. If that makes him government property, there's no hope for anyone with INTELLIGENT THOUGHT!”

A particularly young member of the SAS stops advancing through the crowd for a moment and turns with a questioning look on his face towards his commanding officer. Utterly appalled by this insubordination, John voices low and clear, “Who put you in a position to question my intelligence? That Wolf killed one of your

comrades!”

The bystanding crowd at this point all switch their gazes to Ray, expecting a response. Ray stands frozen to the spot, exhausted and frightened for his life.

Quentin stands at the hospital reception and awaits response from the officious receptionist.

“Computer says no...”

Quentin facepalms.

“What is so difficult about getting an emergency appointment with a psychologist?”

“Sorry, but no slots free until next week. If you want to sort it any sooner you'll have to go private.”

“So is that two sugars you want with your tea?” Andy looks up from pouring hot water from kettle to mug with teabag now afloat.

“Oh, if you could, please...” Replies a still-red-faced chairman. “God knows I need it after today. Can I trust you not to go blabbing to folk if I just get a load of crud off my chest?” Andy nods. “Thanks. It's just that losing a whole group of undergraduates in my own hospital was embarrassing enough, but to then find two of my own staff breaking half the rules in the book, and furthermore seeing something I still don't understand... I think it'll take more than tea to get rid of this headache...” He takes a sip of tea, stares into space for a moment, then continues, “what will the other governors say? I'm not even sure why I'm talking to you about it, but there's no way I'm chasing them students any further up that ruddy hill.” Gathering his shattered thoughts and wits somewhat, he regains some of his air of authority. “I think I'll ring up the police.” Andy just sits opposite, wondering if the staff members involved could possibly be anyone he knows, and wondering if the chairman has yet noticed the bulging bin bag gradually leaning further out from behind the open kitchen door, its pizza boxes and plastic wrappings threatening to spill over any minute. The Playstation under the TV remains switched on and continues to whirl, outputting its signal to a TV on standby.

An absolutely bewildered Officer Harold Walters arrives on scene and, seeing the strange combination of people present, signals to his awaiting constables to stay back for a moment. *First thing to do is work out just what the situation is, why these people are all here – and what the heck is stood on the doorstep in front of number 42.*

The atmosphere has suddenly become extremely tangible upon the dropping of this bombshell, and the longer it hangs, the worse it will get. Time to act -

“Well? Did you?” Anxiously implores the student on the tree stump next to the mad scientist, beating Harold (and seemingly half the rest of the crowd) to asking the same question.

The wolf-dude stands frozen on the spot for a moment longer, then seemingly gains some confidence – or maybe realisation.

“I'll tell you what happened. I was in London, visiting my Mum. I was about to leave when a whole load of police turned up, helicopters, riot gear, the lot. I had no idea how or why they got there, and when I've finished I'll expect an explanation. But I wasn't taken away by any of them. Rather, all I remember was being hit around the head from behind as I was away from them. The next thing I knew, I woke up in a car surrounded by thugs. I woke up again in some kind of government installation...”

"FIRE!" John shouts suddenly into a radio. The tranquilliser dart is launched from its gun and Ray nearly dodges it – only to find it sticking through his shoulder, having just caught him. Already beginning to feel drowsy, Ray realises that this is the same potent stuff used on him before. Before he loses consciousness, Ray manages to squeeze out another sentence: "In short – I had to escape somehow, and I did lose my temper with a few guards – but I didn't kill them..." With that, he slumps backwards into Paul's arms, who with a surprised and angry expression simply exclaims, "bastards!"

Before he can even lay Ray down or drag him inside, he's surrounded by SAS troops with big, pointy guns. The crowd voice their approvals and disapprovals in a confused noise, before themselves being beset by police officers hurriedly donning riot helmets.

Mr Noakes pulls in to Kenneth Street to see to his next appointment: assess damages at number 39 Kenneth Street for the nursing home trust that own it. Getting out of his car at the end of the street, he peers around the random assortment of vehicles to try and see what the source of the commotion is – only to be pushed aside by a TV crew lugging cameras and microphone equipment as fast as they can.

"Oh no you frigging don't!" Steven mutters as he pulls the hands of another soldier of his soldier. Immediately they remind him who they are by prodding a gun into his back. Turning round, he growls in the face of the soldier in question and says clearly in a voice undercutting the noise, "You wouldn't DARE! You need me alive!"

The soldier smiles and points at his gun with his other hand. "Tranquillisers. Get in the chopper." A rope ladder hangs among them. Casting about, Steven realises the police have succeeded in separating the increasingly annoyed crowd from the subjects of their confusion and amazement. Skirmishes among the chavs have begun, and the Japanese tourists are still frantically trying to photograph Ray through several layers of people. A TV crew has appeared at the far side, complete with a reporter trying to make herself heard over the growing din, trying to ask questions of an obviously unsure Beth. Just as things seem incapable of getting worse, the student next to John on his podium does what everyone least expected: knees him in the balls. Losing his balance, John lands splayed over the concrete of the pavement, his arm folded at an awkward angle under him.

Suddenly, the soldier prodding his gun at Steven is replaced by two absolutely furious parents.

"AND NEVER DO THAT TO MY SON AGAIN!" screams Noel, in an impressive rage. Momentarily taken aback, the other soldiers look to their lieutenant, who is busy trying to help out an injured John. *The orders were simple: capture and secure the wolf, take him back to the base. The fox had been a surprise, but it had been taken as granted that he would need to be taken too. But what to do with his parents, and all the others who are suddenly emotionally involved? And these orders don't exactly seem to be moral. Most of the evidence seems to point at what they're doing being wrong. At what point do you declare the issuer of your orders insane?*

Meanwhile, seemingly having recovered from being upset, Susannah has gone into kick-ass mode. A feeling of pride for his parents mingles with all those other feelings as Steven tries to work out what to do next. As his Mum pulls Ray away from the apparently uncertain soldiers, he looks into the doorway to number 42, where Anaïs and Squee are temporarily evading being caught up any further.

Finally, John manages to shout through gritted teeth and the pain, "Get the f**king lot of them either arrested or in the chopper, depending on their status, yer great lot of dimwits!" But even as he speaks, John realises he's outnumbered here. When they set out, they did not expect such a wholesale spectacle to be made of it. Now it's a wholesale farce and the MGU will have a lot of covering up to do. The pain in his arm, the pain in his back and the headache all throb together in anticipation. Nevertheless, the SAS soldiers finally seem to be getting somewhere. A limp wolf being winched up into the hovering chopper suddenly brings a hush on the crowd. Moments after the soldiers have Ray in the helicopter, they lower the ladder again and Steven, ears flat back and face strained in an expression of pure injustice, reluctantly grabs on and is lifted up too. Claire and her gathered mob, momentarily looking up from their mêlée, cheer at the defeat of their common foes, as dictated by this convincing article in the papers.

Jurgen watches with great interest as the unfolding events are beamed to the monitor on his desk in live HD. That wonderful prodigy, Claire, has just tipped off his reporters to the biggest story in weeks. Just as he's beginning to forget the headaches of his personal life for a moment, Jurgen spots something in the corner of the frame that makes a shiver run through his spine. Pausing the video, he takes it back frame-by-frame.

Mein Got. Anäis!

β→»← E→ηħ

An Uncommon Goal

As the helicopter flies away quickly over the countryside, Steven finds himself locked in a cage toward the rear of the craft with Ray. Ray stirs from his slumber. The dart, unbeknownst to the troops, had missed his blood vessels and instead gone right through his shoulder at the top, and is poking through the other side under his fur. With only a small dose, Ray is already coming around.

"Right! Get the parents, the French girl, the paramedic and anyone else who was directly involved under arrest and bring them to me, NOW!" John growls into the radio, cursing under his breath at his arm. "And if you see the girl that did this to me, make sure she's arrested too!"

The Reverend sighs in relief as it becomes clear that those who desecrated the funeral are getting their come-uppance, and the unholy creatures in question are being airlifted away. "OK, Sergeant, I think we can let the authorities deal with it from here..."

At which point Ray wakes up fully, and with all his strength launches himself at the mesh of the cage, ripping it open. With surprise, the two soldiers sat in the back begin to point their guns, ready to fire again, but not before Ray is upon them, and giving them both a good match in strength and keeping them quite busy. Taking the opportunity, Steven steps forward through the rend in the cage and calmly past the struggling three, picks up a magazine of anaesthetic darts that were for some reason just lying on the floor next to the door and taps the unarmed pilot on his shoulder.

"Excuse me, would you mind taking us back to Halden? My friend forgot his bag."

The pilot just looks up as if to say, 'You've got to be kidding'.

Steven's mobile phone rings.

As he sits in the back of the Land Rover, surrounded by madness, Jeff's mobile phone rings.

Ring Ring	Boop Boop	Ring Ring	Boop Boop
Ring -	B-	Ring -	B-
Hello?		Hello?	
	Hey, it's Adam. You got a moment?		Hey, it's Andy. Just a heads-up, Jeff. I've just had the chairman of the board of governors round my house, and he's been babbling on about some really weird goings on. He says some of his own staff are involved. Just wondering if you'd heard owt?
No, why?	I'll keep it short, then. Last night I was driving up the A1, and crashed into a really wide bit of central reservation.		
Crashed? You alright?	Yeah, fine. But the guy I found there most definitely wasn't. In fact, he was most definitely dead. And has been for at least two years, we reckon.	Erm... You could say that.	
You found a dead body in the middle of the A1? Surely the police are the first people you need to tell this to...		Well... ...	What do you mean? You know one of those involved?
	Yes, but this is where it gets interesting, because, it's worse than that, he's furry, Steve!	Look, Andy, I'm a bit busy right now, could you possibly call me back at a more convenient time?	What? Honestly, I thought you were taking time off this week...
What? You mean someone we know? Who?	No, I mean he's furry in the same way you and Ray are!	I am, I'm just... busy. And anyway, how am I supposed to know what's going on when I'm off work?	
Whoa - did you say at least two years?			Hehe, you're you and usually know this stuff...

Oh shit.

Yep.

Just don't say I didn't warn you.

"Are you quite done?" John inquires with deep sarcasm as he stubs out a cigarette in the sawdust-laden filth in the gutter.

"Yeah, sorry about that." Jeff replies. Before anyone can say anything else, John grabs the phone and flings it over the roof of the Land Rover.

Mr Noakes, trying to shut out the strange things going on around him, determinedly holds up his clipboard and starts assessing the damage to number 39. Before he can even step over the threshold, something hits him in the back of the head. Reeling, he trips on the doorstep and lands on his back on the grass. A mobile phone lies with a cracked screen next to him. Looking up, he notices a helicopter flying erratically back towards the scene. At a very low altitude. Leafing through his clipboard to the 'hazards still present at time of assessment' page, he adds a note or two:

Low flying aircraft and telecommunications devices pose an immediate threat to my health at this location. I will be seeking danger pay.

"Right, distractions aside, would someone kindly tell me what the heck is going on here? WHO IS THE FOX?" John implores urgently.

"Is that helicopter yours?" Noel asks disinterestedly.

Nonplussed, John quickly adds, "Yes, why?"

Smiling slightly, Noel points past John to where the craft in question is gradually hovering lower and lower, dipping gently behind the houses. "I didn't know you did all this just to make sure my son got a flying lesson..."

"What?" John turns around, and is just in time to see through the helicopter windscreen the shape of an anthro fox at the controls, before the chopper drops out of view altogether. John mutters to himself, "God, they call these the best troops? Can't even capture a couple of miscreant animals!" Then, to the Lieutenant, "Oy! Get some backup here, now! These two are clearly a threat to National Security. They must be captured."

"They're already on their way. Should be here any moment now."

"A threat to national security?! Who are you kidding?! WHAT IS HAPPENING TO MY SON?" Susannah flips at last.

"That's exactly what I want to know." John grunts a pained reply as his arm muscles twang again.

As the rotors wind down in the field behind Kenneth Street, Steven checks that the pilot is still unconscious, then turns to Ray, who is now sat on top of three badly scratched and unconscious soldiers. "What do you suppose we do, even when we've bested this lot of soldiers? They'll only send more..."

"Damn right they will, but there's no way I'm giving up to them!"

"What good is fighting them?"

"Because if we don't, they'll have us fighting for them, on their terms, as slaves. And they'll take your

Geneticiser and make it a military secret, and make whole armies of killer furies. Don't think I'm making this up, I heard it from Dr Evil himself!"

"Then just please tell me one thing – did you actually kill anyone?"

"You know I didn't, I just did what I had to to get out. Injured a few guards, OK? Nothing more than broken arms and legs. I didn't have a lot of time to check them over, there was a squad of SAS on my tail!"

"Hehe, some SAS..." Steven chuckles, looking at their dispatched consignment of the best.

"Yes, well, the more we do things like this, the more they'll want us for their own ends. Steven, I don't want to end up starting a war!"

"Me neither. But I've been set thinking now. Adamfox just called me and told me he'd found a dead body in the middle of the A1..."

"OK, that's weird and gross, but what's so special about it?"

"Of a furry."

"Oh. Who?"

"Couldn't tell. Appeared to have been dead at least two years."

"Then how did he know the body was that of a furry?"

"Because, Ray, he was like us..."

Ray's eyes widen and then glaze with a should-have-known anger.

"I bet we can guess where that poor dude came from. This MGU lot must have been doing some of their own Geneticising before. In which case, why do they need us?"

"I don't know, I guess they're worried we'll draw attention to their project. Or maybe we're better than what they could do?" Theorises Steven as he borrows a tranquilliser gun from one of the unconscious soldiers.

"Either way they'll be wanting to cover us up I guess," points out Ray.

"Exactly why I said we need to just get the message out to enough people, and get enough to understand that we're not bad, that way we should have a half-fair chance of some rights..."

"Well, right now, that pie is as much in the sky as that Chinook." Ray lifts a paw and points up at the simply huge double-rotor chopper now manoeuvring into position to drop in reinforcements, straight into position around the helicopter in the field. "Subtle, aren't they?"

The Chapter Whose Number Most Often Has Rotational Symmetry.

Extraordinary.

Dwayne wakes up, realising he's managed to fall asleep on his computer keyboard. Lethargically deleting a random string of characters from the address bar in his web browser, he sets about making a credible leak. The truth must be known. This is what Dwayne does, and what he does best. *The world must know about the abuses taking place within its own systems of government. And England? I thought you knew better!*

"For the last time, we have no idea about any more of this than you do. We literally came to see our son today, only to find he's turned into some sort of fox. How do you think that makes my ex-wife and I feel?" Noel flatly summarises what he's been trying to say to the rather insistent scientist for the last 20 minutes. "Sir, we have no evidence on which to hold these two..." the Lieutenant informs John with a whisper.

Gesturing with annoyed impatience, John moves on to Jeff. “OK, how about you, then? What on Earth brings you to use this unofficial, potentially dangerous contraption (which we are confiscating, by the way) on a patient in hospital? How could you know it would work, how do you justify the risks? What would bring you to break the rules of your own establishment? I find it hard to believe that a professional such as yourself would do such things. Least of all in front of a whole class of undergraduates! WHAT do you have to say for yourself?”

“Only that I did it because I knew from the bottom of my heart that I could trust the inventor of the contraption in question, and that the patient gave her consent knowingly of the risks and rules, am I correct, Anaïs?”

“Oui, Absolument. I 'ave never felt better since zat treatment, but if only you 'ad seen my injuries before, zey would 'ave taken months to 'eal. I thank Monsieur Jeff and Monsieur Steven very much.”

John contemplates their answers for a moment, then turns around to look closely at the device recovered by his men, and the huge computer tower still perched on the trolley with it. *This could be the key to what we've been looking for for the last few years... how the heck did that fox man do it?*

A very interesting weekend, this has turned out to be. Squee came up North to meet his mate in Liverpool, then got wind of the goings on in Halden and decided to divert his trip in a Westerly direction, rather than heading to the concert held by a band he didn't even like. He'd never have guessed that this decision would change his life. Oh, but how it already has. *And now*, Squee thinks as he digs out his hereunto unnoticed 3G phone, *I'll return the favour.*

Squee	Today, 2:03pm
<p>Ribena Powered **** Group: Member Posts: 1421 Joined: 17 months ago From: Bournemouth, Dorset Member No.: 5,434 Species: Red Squirrel</p>	<p>ATTENTION ALL FURS! Vulpesteven and RayWolf are in a spot of bother. Erm... help? Attached to this post is a photograph of them both, TAKEN YESTERDAY. This picture will speak louder than any words I can say, and is not edited in any way. Besides, from what I can gather, if any of you have been reading today's Daily Disaster, you will see why emotions in the local area are now somewhat inflamed. All that aside, the government are now trying to suppress us. And are currently trying to apply tranquillisers, mad scientists and helicopters to the situation. We, however, will not let this happen! FREE THE FIRST REAL FURRIES! LET THEM HAVE THEIR SAY! -- Please, all who now have Geneticiser instructions etc, please make as many copies as you can. We need to keep this idea alive. The world deserves it. The original Geneticiser computer has now been confiscated, and I'm going to have to go now because I hear footsteps heading my way.</p>
	Honey Roasted Cashews & Peanuts are legal tender for all my artwork.

A dozen police vans arrive back at the station, crammed with the most vocal and awkward of the crowd, the

less interested ones having been shooed away from the scene and warned not to turn up there again for at least a day if they didn't also want a criminal record.

Claire is very cheesed off with Uncle John for not keeping her from being taken to the police station. The police just viewed the whole thing as a riot and removed whoever they saw fit (except of course Uncle John and his Soldiers, since they are authority too). And so she sits in the Waiting Room with nothing but a dusty TV showing ITV Calendar News to watch. Luckily, the local news is exactly what she wants to watch.

“A violent protest has emerged today in Halden outside what we have been informed is the home of a certain Mr Steven Dhaj, amid claims of animal rights abuse, desecration of a funeral and disrupting a military training exercise, amongst some other, more bizarre claims. The details are sketchy at best, but it would appear that the Police, in conjunction with the branch of SAS originally meant to be in training today, have now got the situation under control. The main perpetrators have been taken away for questioning, and the other troublemakers among the crowds now amount to twelve arrests and another twenty taken for questioning.

Now this is all well and good, but it doesn't really answer the important questions: Who and what were the two figures seen here in the corner of the frame, whom Dr John Crossley of the Ministry of Defence accused of manslaughter, and why did the military need to airlift them away? We have here with us now Bethany Suthers, who can hopefully shed some light on the situation. First of all, could you please tell us what the protest is all about?”

Beth doesn't have a clue what to say. Stepping off-screen, Beth speaks to the manager of the news team.

“I didn't know you meant right now, I haven't had chance to talk to them yet! How am I supposed to know what they've been up to when they've only just got here, then been dragged straight off again?”

“I don't know, ring them up or something. We need to have some facts to tell the public, otherwise it's just the best guess of the reporter.”

“Well, her guess is almost as good as mine at the moment...” *Steven, what the heck is going on?*

Imran, wishing he could be anywhere but school today, sits bored and depressed in the Geography classroom while the aged teacher wheels in an enormous black CRT television – which, although it's missing most of the plastic trim from its front corner due to an accident last year, still somehow gives the vaguest impression of working when one applies percussive maintenance and tunes it to channel 24.

The geriatric tutor manages to locate a 3-pin socket for the power plug (which just reaches around the side of the dilapidated textbook cupboard (which is mostly dilapidated due to the sheer weight of dilapidated textbooks stacked high within)) and the screen springs to life, displaying a sea of white static. The speakers built into either side hiss, but also produce loud-and-clear the voice of a news reporter. Mr Cohen tries to stand up from picking up the battered and worn educational video he's just dropped, only to bash his head on the TV trolley. Shaking slightly, he avoids swearing in front of the kids and straightens up. The impact of his cranium upon the underside of the melamine trolley has the effect of jarring the TV into tune. And the news is on, clearly showing a report from just up the road and around the corner and up that hill over there. And the two figures at the left of the screen, about whom the crowd seem to be getting increasingly agitated, are shown being lifted into a helicopter, no less. More to the point, they aren't human. Imran can see who they are in an instant. *I know a furry when I see one.*

Suddenly, the report is replaced by a buck-toothed woman of about 22 at the time of filming getting over-excited about igneous rocks behind a thick stripe of static from the failing heads of a worn-out VHS recorder. It had long ago become evident to Imran's class that Mr Cohen is a technophobe and will avoid modern technology, even when it literally hangs from the ceiling above his head by a slightly wobbly aluminium bracket, in the form of a projector pointed at an interactive whiteboard. Both have been there for several years, and are used every day by the other teachers. But upon the mention of them, Mr Cohen just employs his selective deafness, much to the ridicule and dismay of the students.

Imran, deciding that the one shown on the TV a moment ago is the more interesting and educational of the two farces, quietly asks if he may be excused. Selective deafness meets his request, so like many of his peers, he opts for the less subtle approach.

"EXCUSE ME, SIR. MAY I PLEASE BE EXCUSED?"

"Yes, if you must, no need to shout..."

The whole class grins, and a few mime their regardless continuation of their hatred for Imran as he leaves the room.

Platinum Chapter

Claire's Big Break

*Good girls go to heaven -
But the bad girls go everywhere.*

- Meatloaf

Jurgen would, if circumstances were different, be having a field day. As it stands, he's at an altitude of some 10000 feet, tilting his private helicopter forwards and willing it to go faster. Anaïs is not answering her mobile. The police interpreter says that the hospital says she is no longer in the hospital, and has in effect been discharged. Attempts to fathom her whereabouts beyond that have lead to confusion, so Jurgen has brought a downloaded map on his laptop showing the location of the news report and is hoping against hope he can find her.

Anaïs herself, meanwhile, is in the back of a Land Rover, surrounded by armed SAS and sat opposite the man who helped to fix her legs with such ease. The others and the amazing machine have been bundled into other Land Rovers and are either in front or behind them on the road, as they drive in the rough direction of Huddersfield before turning right and then down a narrow track, across a ford and into dense woods. Anyone looking at this area on an OS map would find private property with no footpaths.

A Chinook and a smaller chopper fly past them to the left before vanishing completely, just short of what appears to be an abandoned gritstone quarry, hidden behind a huge wooded embankment from prying eyes. Moments later, another helicopter flies past at an angle, and as the Land Rover pulls to a halt, Anaïs realises that she recognises the all-black but for the green striped underbelly anywhere... before she can see where it's going, she's handed a blindfold and someone up front announces, "Please put on your blindfolds so you can't see where you're going. We wouldn't want to spoil the mystery of the place... my men have permission

to adjust the blindfolds if they suspect peeking. It's like blind man's bluff, except more serious."

The other vehicles are getting much the same pep talk. In the case of Noel and Susannah, their Land Rover would be driven by John if it weren't for his arm. As things are, he sits in the passenger seat, turns around and spits to the soldiers sat in there with them, "Get their blindfolds on. Though if it were up to me I'd be tranquillising you lot an' all, but things are awkward enough with fox and wolf as it is. Anyway, get them on."

While the couple are busy fiddling with their assigned black cloth, the Lieutenant mutters to John, "You do realise, Sir, that there will be hell to pay when all is said and done. I don't think it was kept very incognito..."

"No shit, Sherlock. And who do you think is to blame for that?" He responds bluntly.

You, SIR. Ye great pillock. Whoever put you in charge of this place needs to be shot.

"I think we can safely say Steven gets this from your side of the family." Noel smirks from under his blindfold.

"I think you remind me every time I see you of just why I left you," Susannah replies.

The police soon realise they have picked the wrong person to question when it comes to Claire's turn. All she does is play the part of innocent journalist, caught up in the crowd. It works surprisingly well, for half an hour later she's free. Free to further her career.

	Boop boop This is the Daily Disaster switchboard. For news updates by text, press 1. For the editor's desk, press 2. For The Page Three Competition, press 3. For all other queries, please hold.
--	--

Claire presses in 2#6 for a fast connection straight through to the editor.

Hello, it's Claire here, remember the article on furrries printed this morning?	Hello, Daily Disaster editorial...
Well, I'm not sure if you've seen it all over the TV yet, but I have first hand experience of the goings on at Kenneth Street in Halden...	Oh yes, hi, what can I do for you?
I shall have a report typed up and emailed to you this evening, ready for tomorrow's edition.	Ooh, really?
Oh, I think I might just manage that...	That would be brilliant. Do you think you could shed some light on the actual reasons behind what happened there, too?
I'll have it done by six.	Thanks very much, remember the deadline is 8 o'clock.

"Right, where is my daughter? Where is Anaïs?" An upset Marie questions the receptionist. With the extra-boring, double-strength sarcasm she reserves for the hoi-polloi, the receptionist tinkers with the database in slow, deliberate pauses until it becomes clear that the answer will not present itself.

"Computer says she was discharged this morning. We don't know where she is now."

"Discharged?"

"Left, removed herself from the premises, if I recall correctly she was followed by a paramedic, the chairman of the board of governors and a whole load of students." A moment's pause. "Don't ask me why, I don't know."

Dejectedly, Marie turns around, about to leave, when she spots the TV in the corner of the waiting room. A news report is showing two very strange looking characters being winched by helicopter from a doorstep. And who's that behind them?

"Anaïs?"

"Oh, that report's been all over the news this afternoon. They say it happened just up the road from here..." a random person in the waiting room helpfully points out.

"Can you tell me 'ow to get zere?"

"Yeah, just walk out the main doors of here, go to the far end of the car park, go left, then right, head up the hill, then left and after the pub it's right again. I know that road 'cause it's where I used to do me paper round..."

"Merci! Thank you!" Marie refrains from kissing the random person on either cheek, *after all what might they be in hospital for?*

The helicopter lands in a field already used as a landing pad today. Jurgen gets out, and looks at the stills saved from the news report. The corroded brass of a number '42' shows on the door behind them involved. The field is full of footprints, including some very large canine ones. Shrugging, Jurgen heads up to the end of the terrace to vault the gate there and head for the front. And find out where his daughter is.

Beth tries yet again to raise either Steven or Ray on their mobiles. They just keep ringing and not being answered.

The lockers inside the MGU complex vibrate a tinny vvvvmmmm-vvvvmmmm, vvvvmmmm-vvvvmmmm. Nobody can hear them.

"Right, this time make sure they're kept under close observation..."

"We want to get all tests done as soon as possible..."

"It's only a matter of time before this place gets shut down, so make sure you get results. I want to know where these guys came from, and how they can do what we didn't."

That last voice I recognise.

Dr John Crossley.

Ray opens his eyes and tries to move his arms.

"Oh, not again!"

Immediately Donna starts scribbling down, *This time no memory loss exhibited. Subject may be building a resistance to tranquillisers.*

“STEVEN?!”

“Hey, if you don't want more sleep, you'll keep the volume down!” the older woman speaks up from a safe distance somewhere beyond Ray's vision just outside the door to the room.

“WHAT?!” comes a reply, amazingly enough.

Dr John stops mid-stroll along the corridor just outside the rooms, rolls his eyes and looks questioningly at his staff. “Do you mean to say that you were stupid enough to put them within earshot of each other?”

“Do you mean to say that you're going to put off seeing to that arm of yours and risk further damage to it? You really should be getting that seen to...”

“Look, just stop worrying about me, I've had worse. Right now my questions are the more important ones, if you want to keep your job, got me?”

Steven, having awoken in the same situation, but for the first time in his life, feels a bit uncertain as to how he got there. But hearing the familiar voice of Ray is something of a consolation in this alien place. Looking down the bed, he can see clasps holding his paws and feet, and even his tail down against the hard mattress. Unable to move, he watches as a man in a white coat turns round from a lab bench and starts taking swabs from his mouth. It's just the situation he'd tried to avoid. *I can only hope enough people know now.*

“Excuse me, but isn't this a basic violation of human rights?” Steven asks the preoccupied bloke.

“Quite likely but for one small detail. You're not human.”

“I know that, but surely as a sentient being I deserve the same treatment either way?”

“We don't have any proof of that, that's one of the things these tests will determine, and I'm just following the orders of John, because as we all know Sir High And Mighty is absolute ruler supreme of the MGU, lest we forget...”

“Well, what's your opinion on the matter? What would you do if it were up to you?”

“On the kind of pay I'm getting, that's irrelevant at this juncture. Now if you don't want more drugs, I suggest you shut up and let me work out just who you are.”

“You could just ask!”

“Yes, but how would I know you weren't lying...?”

“Well, you wouldn't. You would just have to trust me, I guess.”

“After what I've experienced here, I trust no-one, least of all a half-breed!”

After what had happened earlier, Kenneth Street now appears deserted. Jurgen wanders cautiously up to the door of number 42 and knocks.

Squee hides in a most awkward position behind the settee, frightened that another soldier might have come back to search the place again. They've already given it a thorough rooting through and ransacking twice, but managed not to find either Squee or the Geneticiser (which Steven hid in a safe place just before he left in the morning). Quickly pulling his feet up under him and so hiding completely out of sight behind the hot water tank, Squee waits for the person at the door to notice it is now bolted shut.

Getting no answer, Jurgen turns to look around and see if there is anyone else to ask about his daughter's whereabouts. Right on cue, a somewhat portly gentleman steps precariously over the remains of a front door across the road, making a final signature at the bottom of his clipboard. Seeing that he's being watched, Mr Noakes calls across the street to this lost-looking soul, "Can I help you?"

"Ah, Ja, I was looking fur mein daughter..." Jurgen approaches the insurance assessor as he speaks, "Anaïs. She is here in this picture..." Jurgen holds up his laptop and indicates the still frame showing her stood just behind the ascending foot of Steven, "Do you know where she is?" Jurgen summons all his knowledge of English just to say it.

"Hmm, let's see, I think she was with them who went in a Land Rover. That black foot you see in front belongs to one of the guys they airlifted out, they had a small helicopter and one of them ruddy great Chinook things..."

Realisation dawns on Jurgen's face.

"Oh, I was just there five minuten ago! I flew past two helicopters, just like you say! I go to there now, thanks very much!"

"No problem... seems I'm helping folk out a lot lately. I was just telling a French woman where the same girl went just before you arrived..."

"Marie ist hier?" Jurgen raises his eyebrows.

Eventy Sone.

The Mighty Quinn

Come on without, come on within!

You'll not see nothing like the Mighty Quinn!

- Manfred Mann

Quentin sits quietly on his settee, ignoring the third helicopter to turn up behind his own garden wall today. Since he got back from hospital and being told just how long he would have to wait to see a shrink, he's been reading *The Outlook For Your Inner Child: A Self Help Guide by Paul T Otterone*. Apparently, according to the wise words of Paul, the best bet is to let your inner child be set free, to imagine and to accept, and generally to just cheer up. *Who pays someone to write stuff like that that I could have figured for myself? And what exactly are you supposed to do when you see people as animals and they seem 100% really like they are animals, even act like it and everything? What do you do if you feel like the very world around you is descending into a random mush of these wolf-people and fox-people and the government along with everyone else and their Aunties chasing after them? Is it paranoia?* According to Mr Otterone, 'Yes.'

"You may now undo your blindfolds. Please be seated." A guard briskly informs the 'guests'.

"About time!" Retorts a very displeased Noel. "Where's my son and his friend?"

"I'm not permitted to tell you that," the guard responds monotonously.

The sound of a helicopter landing faintly thumps through the thick, small, obscure-glass windows.

"I wonder if that's him arriving now?" Susannah guesses hopefully.

The arrival of a private helicopter does not impress the security teams around the MGU.

Jurgen steps out of the cockpit. And is immediately assailed by three sprinting guards, who, having brought him to the ground, present the business end of their weaponry to his face.

“Please state your name and your business here. Failure to comply will result in heavy penalties, to the fullest extent of the law.” Orders the guard with the shiniest insignia.

“I am Jurgen Kimpler, of A.G. Kimpler Media. Mein business hier ist mein daughter Anaïs. I am unarmed, please take me to see her, I need to know she ist OK.”

“I'm afraid that won't be possible.” The guard flatly replies.

Dwayne completes his fake blog entry, in a scarcely used blog by some guy at the MGU who seems to command a lot of respect. *The beans, I spill them.*

The Doc's Blog

Genius at play

Today at 16:21:05 GMT:

ENOUGH.

I have decided to blow the whistle. To show the world what I actually work on. I am sick of keeping quiet when I know the potential of what I am doing here for the military is going to affect the whole world. The official secrets act can take a hike, I'm not going to have much to live for either way.

In a nutshell, I work for the Military Genetics Unit in Yorkshire. It is a subset of the MoD, one they keep very well hidden to avoid disruption from the public, due to the controversial things it does. I am the chief and have control over the MGU. Due to the nature of our projects, we always have a small consignment of SAS soldiers, who are under my command.

We have been researching genetic manipulation for the last 10 years. 7 years ago, we made a breakthrough. Tests on lab animals confirmed that we could change their DNA whilst they were alive, and implement those changes. The result being that a few rats were grown to twice their usual size, their fur changed to pink and their tails made bushy. All these were intended results.

5 years ago, we changed a chimpanzee. We gave it a wolf tail and ears, and changed the colour of its hair. And three years ago, things got interesting. We changed our first human volunteer subject's DNA. We gave him the characteristics of a wolf, this being judged as one of the best animals from which traits could be used for our ultimate, somewhat predictable aim: to create a superior, more loyal soldier and so bring the British Army back to being the best in the world. And it worked. We got a real fighter, who would remain loyal to his cause to the ends of the Earth. It had cost us millions, but it paid off. And so, we began to train him to be the best he could be. The SAS really helped here, making him the best soldier we had ever seen. He could do anything at twice the speed and thrice the accuracy of even the Mossad's best. Secretly, the world was envious of us. The trouble was, we had overlooked something about our soldier, and had no idea of the consequences. He began to lose his mind, to lose all memories of who he was – and what he was fighting for. Before long, he was unable to see past his own instincts to survive and to break free. He saw the MGU more as being a prison and against his will every day. Ironically, it was this paranoia that forced us to treat him more as a prisoner. He attempted to attack a few guards, one of whom nearly died. And so was consigned to solitary confinement for a month. Until finally, two years ago, he took my brother's old

motorcycle from the MGU garage and, in the middle of the night, surprised everyone by escaping. The SAS gave chase in helicopters, but in the end it was the ailing bike's suspension that got him. It got jammed, and the bike disappeared from their view behind a pantechicon. The next they looked, he was gone. We returned to the site several times, disguised as community service workers on a litter pick. We found plenty of litter, but we never did find our wolf-man or the bike. What we did know is that, after a few months of no sightings, he must surely have crashed and not survived, or else totally disappeared off the face of the Earth.

Naturally, the government were not impressed with a breach of security such as this, and all but shut us down. We effectively became an auxilliary equipment store and SAS training exercise centre. And so it remained until a few days ago, when I was informed by my long term friend Tom of an unusual sighting at his workplace on the M1. We immediately brought up all CCTV on the route, and lo and behold, despite the poor lighting, we could see exactly who was in the back of the outrageously easy-to-spot van. I couldn't believe my eyes. The soldier we had lost, we were now pretty sure we had found.

We followed the progress of the van all the way to the Isle of Dogs. While it was parked outside a busy club, our London agents caught up with it in their unmarked cars. However, as soon as they got there, the van pulled out of its parking spot and headed East. Following at a safe distance, they eventually reached a residential area. Realising the implications of the presence of our not-necessarily-stable soldier, we employed the simple tactic of informing the police that we had just discovered the whereabouts of a known terrorist suspect. What we didn't count on was that at the same time, someone else had done exactly the same thing, as we found out later due to waging by means of friends in high places, revenge on the wolf-man for assaulting a woman at the club. As such, the police were thoroughly confused and quite ineffective, so to avoid the chance of things swinging in our soldier's favour, our agents took the matter in their own hands and brought him directly back to the MGU.

As soon as we had him back at the MGU, we realised there had been some sort of mistake. He most certainly did not match our description of the wolf man we had lost all those years ago. He was taller, had different coloured fur and even a different blood type. Which indeed raises the question: where does he come from? Is he safe? Who is he? We can only hope to answer these questions over the next few days. But I won't be needed for that. I've had enough making mistakes, the government wants my head anyway. In short, I'm out of here.

2 months ago at 17:30 GMT:

The Psycho Bitch From Hell

I have still got her chasing me about what she thinks is her money. You're not getting a penny, madam. You are the most rotten pile of merdiferous kreng I have ever had the misfortune to set eyes on. To all other readers, as my Niece put so aptly, IGNORE MEEEE!

Now if I could just figure how to get this damned contraption to post this thread without giving me a thousand pop-ups about filipino women (which I don't object to, but there is a time and a place), I'll be much less stressed up to here...

Dwayne celebrates with a suitable plate of waffles. *I just love the smell of a self-fulfilling prophecy in the morning.*

The police station is beginning to quiet down as Officer Walters sorts through the careful processing and paperwork of each offender in turn, before sending home those who haven't actually done much wrong and locking one or two real troublemakers in the cells until they calm down. *Why do the military have to create*

such a scene? If they can't keep control, who can?

Lexical Divider The Seventy Second

Missionary Man

*If I had a dollar bill for all the things I'd done,
There'd be a mountain of money piled up to my chin!*

...

"I'd like to keep this short and sweet, so if you'll just answer a few questions, you can be heading home again this evening and all will be well. First, what do you know about the two creatures present at number 42 Kenneth Street at 12:00 hours today?" An interrogative John implores of Noel in a small office next to the waiting room where the others now sit awaiting their turn.

"First of all, I don't think it is very fair of you to refer to them as 'creatures'. They are clearly just normal people who have changed themselves somehow. And the one who has taken on the appearance of a fox is my son. I can't really describe how I know, it's just the way he talks and I remember him drawing pictures that look exactly like he does now. I can only assume it's him, but how he came to be how he is now is anyone's guess."

"Oh, believe me, I have very good reason to refer to these brutes as 'creatures'. I have seen one before, and I shouldn't really be telling you this, but I know just what they are capable of – and for that matter, the wolf seems to have proven that last - "

The door opens and a voice interrupts, "Sir, I am receiving reports from Intelligence that your posts to your blog have begun to leak sensitive information. I don't doubt that you would never do such a thing, but I don't think the MoD will see eye-to-eye with you for it, considering the amount of money they have invested in helping to keep it all secret." The Lieutenant pops his head round the door, clearly concerned.

"Agh, tell them I'm busy. Right now I need a cig break." A sleep-deprived John distractedly gets up from his chair before carrying on, "anyway, secondly, do you know anything about the French girl and the paramedic?"

"The who?" Noel raises his eyebrows, genuinely lacking any knowledge of these people, "if you mean the two who turned up with that trolley thing, I have no idea. Previous to today, I have never seen either of them before in my life."

"You do understand that this conversation is being recorded and that if you lie it will make things a lot more difficult for you and a lot more enjoyable for me?" John checks, gaining again in the department of malice.

The Deputy Prime Minister picks up his private phone, catching it just short of vibrating off his antique desk.

Hello?

Hallo, it is Jurgen hier. It would seem I haff a small problem vith your, how you say, Military Genetics Unit.

Jurgen? Good grief, long time no speak-to! And

<p>MGU, you say? Yes, we've been having a spot of bother with them ourselves recently. And to be honest, while your involvement surprises me, I should have expected it. What can I do for you?</p> <p>Pardon? What has your daughter got to do with this?</p> <p>I won't ask how you got to a top secret site, but I'll see what I can do. God knows you've helped me out of some tight spots before...</p> <p>Quite... ..quite.</p>	<p>Tell these dumbkopfs who I am so I can see my daughter!</p> <p>They've taken her here, to their compound, and I want to know now that she's alright, and I want to know why she ist hier!</p> <p>If it vas not for me, you vould not haff your job.</p>
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Don't mess with a Missionary Man!

- Eurythmics

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Claire sits at her computer, amazed at how much has happened over one weekend. As she types away with a fervour that most gamers don't get, a half-mug of coffee sits at the side of her desk turning cold, forgotten.