

All Part of the Show

By Geo Holms, Commissioned by Zia MacMarten

"I know you said this was a 'hole in the wall' but feels more of a 'hole in the ground'," Rory quipped as they entered the bar.

"Yeah, you've got that right. I think this is the right spot," Caleb said in a tone that told Rory his friend wasn't sure if this was the right spot. "I haven't been to this part of town."

Rory looked about the bar and concluded that not many people had been this to this part of town, in particular this bar. At least not for a good long while. Fluorescent lights buzzed from where they hung above. All tables and chairs seemed to be from a few decades ago and added to the dim shades of the bar. Patrons were scattered across the room. Less than Rory would expect in a bar, either for a Friday night or an upcoming event. The lone bartender at the bar looked bored, checking her phone.

Before Rory could bring up his own concerns whether this was the right spot, Caleb said "I'll get some beers. Go get a seat next to the stage."

Rory nodded in response. It took him a moment to spot the stage, an unassuming thing at the back of the room, just as grimy and dim as the rest of the bar. All the tables near the stage were empty. Seemed none of the patrons seemed interested in the upcoming entertainment, if there actually was to be any in the first place. He strongly suspected not but didn't have the heart to tell Caleb that.

Caleb, for his part, seemed to be trying to keep his expectations in check, though Rory could tell his friend was excited. He remained a little unclear on the finer details but seemed this has been some performer Caleb had run into as a kid at a friend's birthday party. Caleb found that the performer would be appearing nearby and wanted Rory to come along.

Rory skepticism grew with each passing moment. He'd already suspected his friend's rose-colored lens of his youth had escalated the quality of that performance. And even if they hadn't, what did it mean that that performer would be appearing in a place like a seedy basement bar on the edge of town? Nothing good, in Rory's opinion.

He worried more about Caleb than the show quality. On the off chance the performance did happen, Rory hoped that his friend's rose-colored lenses wouldn't crack, and all he'd have to do is insist "Wow, Rory, that was really something!" with a forced smile to obscure the actual quality of the show. He really didn't want Caleb's childhood memory tarnished.

As he squinted at the old posters on the wall, trying to decipher what old bands and shows they'd been advertising, Caleb returned with the beers. "Good news! Confirmed this is totally the right place. The bartender said should be starting shortly."

"Hmm," Rory said, taking one of the beers and then a long sip, enjoying the cool wheaty flavors. Maybe he ought to get another one before the show, just in case either he or Caleb needed to dull their respective senses as their expectations for the show shifted in flight.

The bartender stepped on the stage and cleared her throat into the mic. "Welcome to The Burrow," she stated.

A very small "woo" responded from the back along with some scattered clapping.

She nodded and made a small gesture to 'hold applause' as if the response had been much more enthused.

"Now presenting..." She checked what appeared to be a post-it note in her hand. "Bobbin the Brilliant." She stated this in a level tone rather than announcing it in some grandiose way the name seemed tailored for. She then left the stage without fanfare.

The curtains at the back of the stage stirred before a plain man in a rumpled suit and top hat stumbled out. "Hello, folks," he said, in a small quiet voice, "Ready for the show?"

Rory realized that the man was wearing a magician's outfit, except it being so worn out --and maybe dusty-- that it appeared gray rather than black. Rory tried to cast a inquiring look towards Caleb. His friend seemed fully engaged with the performance, so Rory just took another long sip of beer instead.

No response came from the magician's question, so he just coughed and looked about nervously. "Ah-ur, well, let's start with a classic then. I'm going to pull a rabbit out of my hat."

Rory took a proper swig of beer. This was going to be a loooooong show.

The man removed his hat and reached his hand, making a show of digging around, before he pulled a rabbit out of the hat by the ears.

Not JUST a rabbit though. A toon rabbit who upon seeing the audience gave a "Tah-DAAAAAH" and some jazz paws. The rabbit's toon brightness, from white fur to bright blue magician suit, complete with bow tie and cummerbund, stood out against the otherwise drab interior of the basement bar.

He spoke through the side of his mouth in a stage whisper, "Go ahead and put me down, Steve."

The man complied, setting the rabbit down on the stage and handing him the top hat, before heading back through the curtain.

The rabbit rubbed his ears and then flattened the top hat in his paws before giving it a tap, it popping back into out into a now toony bright blue top hat, bright blue to match his jacket. "There we go! Welcome, one and all! I am THE Bobbin the Brilliant, here to entertain you with the WONDERS of my BOUNCY magicks!" he announced, then leaned toward, putting his paw to the side of his face, lowering his voice as if telling the audience a secret, "Bouncy because I'm a bunny, of course. Would have said hare-raising, but I'm not teeeeechnically a hare except for a liiiiiiittle bit on my second cousin's side twice removed, but we don't talk about that. Annnnywaaaaaay, thank you all for coming here. Now, excuse me, gonna give this stage a sliiiight makeover before we continue!"

Rory squinted hard at the rabbit, his mind still catching up. He hadn't seen a toon about in a long while. He'd thought they were out of style, sequestered to their own little sectors, doing their own toony things without messing with more dimensional folks.

While Bobbin made a show of having "technical issues" with his wand, producing sparks and carrots when attempting a makeover spell, he turned to Caleb ask some questions. His friend hadn't mentioned this being a toon magician. Though he supposed that made sense, especially since Caleb liked this magician so much as a kid. And years back Rory remembered toons being a more prevalent presence. Now they seemed relegated to the occasional internet ad Rory skipped the first moment he could to get to the video he was attempting to watch.

However, Caleb seemed completely smitten with Bobbin's antic, so Rory decided to refrain from asking. He glanced around the bar and no one else seemed too taken aback by a toon appearing in this discordant environment. In fact, most seemed happier than they had before.

The sudden brightness of the stage drew back Rory's attention. He blinked. The stage's rundown platform and dusty black curtains had shifted to something more grand: varnished hardwood floor, lush red curtains, all in those ink and paint trappings. Bobbin slid across the stage on his paws as if he were skating on the slick surface, making some leaps and spins to complete the effect. "Let us proceed with the shooooow!"

Rory, not being much for cartoons, being trapped here via friend obligation, kept swigging beer as the show proceeded, hoping that enough alcohol buzz would keep him from being a buzzkill when Caleb asked him his opinion.

Besides being bright and colorful and flashy for kids, what was the point of toons? They weren't bound by reality which in turn made them much less interesting to Rory. He feigned interest as Bobbin bounced around the stage, doing some tricks with portals and anvils and at one point producing some sort of toon dragon which he sent back into his hat (afterwards calling into the hat in response to a final growl and bout of flame that "Yes, of course I'll be there for tabletop night on Tuesday. I won't forget to bring cookies.").

At about the point Rory wondered if he should shuffle out for some fresh air, Bobbin called out, "For this NEXT trick, I am in need of a volunteer!"

Rory smirked as he saw Caleb enthusiastically raise his hand, taking a swig to finish his third-ish glass of beer, his mind feeling pleasantly muzzy at this point.

The toon rabbit made a show of rubbing his chin, looking around the room, pointedly avoiding the raised hand just in front of him. If Rory were two beers ago, he could have sworn that the bunny gave a small wink in his direction. Heh. All a part of the show. He was going to play coy, of course, and then choose C-

"You, good fellow! Would you please grant me your presence on my fine stage!" Bobbin said, pointing directly at Rory.

"Wha-?"

Caleb, instead of being disappointed, seemed excited at his friend being chosen. "Wow! Rory! Go on up! This is so cool!"

Rory found his buzzed self being confronted by the bunny beckoning him to the stage and his friend's excited face, mind failing to produce an excuse of why he couldn't be the volunteer. He decided against the "but I don't wanna" defense and instead stood up, shakily making his way onto the bright toon stage.

Bobbin, only a few feet tall, whispered up to Rory, "Ready for some fun, chap?"

Rory only gave an "uhhhhhh" before the rabbit pulled a lever. The floor opened up and what looked like a toony massage chair rose up. There was a thing at bottom of the chair thing that Rory didn't quite recognize in his buzzed state.

The rabbit took Rory by the hand. He was startled at how soft and fluffy the ink and paint paw actually was. He kept himself from giving the paw a rub. Bobbin led him over to the chair, directing him to climb on. When he did so, he finally noticed the device below his feet. A clothes wringer of some sort?

Bobbin turned back to the audience. "NOW here be a good classic! The ol' wringer trick!"

Rory tried to remember a wringer magic trick. If he recalled correctly, usually involved someone being put into a box and a wringer being used to do something. There didn't seem to be any box included in his case. But this being based on toon logic, none of the tricks this evening had been done conventionally. He just tried to relax, knowing that Caleb would get a kick out of whatever happened. He must look funny up here on the toony stage with this toony bunny hopping about in front of him.

He only realized he hadn't been listening to the rabbit introduce the dynamics of the trick when Bobbin placed the toes of his sneakers against the wringers.

And then into the wringers.

Rory blinked as he saw this, and then felt himself sliding down the flat surface of the toony massage chair thing.

He didn't feel pain. But he definitely felt something as his feet were fed in between the wringers.

Of course not. This was a toon wringer. Not a normal wringer. And a magic show toon wringer at that. There had to be some catch, some twist.

Something came out of the other side of the wringer.

"Oh? What's this? Looks like we have a tail already here?"

The bunny showed off a toony tail to the audience, dark brown fur, flattened with thick ink lines. And Rory could swear he could FEEL the tail (his tail) being lifted and shown off to the audience.

That couldn't be right. Only his feet were through the wringer. No, no, that wasn't even why. The reason was none of this was actually happening. He'd slip through the wringer and find himself back stage. He was just going through some sort of toony portal or something and would be flopped behind the curtain or behind the audience once the wringing process was complete.

He continued to be pulled down, the wringer making it to his legs.

Bobbin kept showing off new parts produced on the other side of the wringer in their flattened state, first toony paws, then toony legs. And if Rory didn't know better, he could feel his legs flopped on the other side of the wringer.

He briefly wondered if this is what pasta felt like, then brushed the thought away because of course this wasn't happening. Though even just thinking that, he took a sharp intake of breath as the wringer made it to the crotch of his jeans, then just continuing to feeling the strange tingling as he kept feeding through, soon the bunny magician showing off what appeared on the other side. "Looks like the wringer ate this fellow's pants, eh?" Bobbin quipped.

The bunny held up what had appeared, Rory seeing the blank toony crotch on the other side of the wringer.

At this point Rory debated whether he just get up and wiggle himself out, ruining the illusion when the Bobbin said, "Now, how about we speed up this process a bit?" With that, he flipped a switch on the wringer and the process of being "pulled" into the wringer sped up, and with it, Rory's assurances that this could all be an illusion cracked

His stomach moved between the wringers. He tried to reach down, to attempt to hold the process back, only for his fingers to be pulled in.

"Uh, I'm not so su-" he started saying as the wringers pulled in his arms, his chest, taking a deep breath as the wringer made it to his neck and soon he found his vision filled by the upcoming wringer before he was pulled through.

He felt himself fall to the floor. Or maybe float to the floor? In any case, Rory couldn't move and all he could see was the ceiling lights and Bobbin towering over him, facing towards the audience. "There we go, the process is complete! Let's see how our lovely volunteer turned out."

Toony rabbit paws reached for him and lifted him up. Rory still felt strange and floppy as he was directed at the audience. "Ah, looks like he has been shifted into a handsome ferret fellow. Though his acting seems a bit flat at the moment." He saw Caleb who looked wide-eyed and impressed, giving enthused applause.

"Why don't you give a wave, chap?" Bobbin said, and Rory felt his arm being moved and waved at the audience, still being unable to move on his own accord. He attempted to make a sound and could only manage a muffled squeak. The rabbit chuckled in response. "Suppose we better fix you up here quick, my ferrety chum. Could use a bike pump or helium tank, but my time is running short. Let's just give you a shake."

With that there was some movement as the rabbit shook Rory out and the sound like a rug being snapped and suddenly he found himself flopped onto the floor of the stage, able to move again. He scrambled to his feet, and then promptly wobbled about, feeling like a Jenga tower, tottering on the edge of unbalance. Apparently he still retained the buzz of the alcohol. He gave a squeaky hiccup.

"Wha-?" he said, as Bobbin took his hand, "What is...what...?"

"Let's get you back to your seat, buddy," Bobbin said, bringing him to some stairs down from the stage.

Caleb was there to meet him. He whispered to the magician rabbit. "Wow! This is so cool! Really loving the show, Mr. Bobbin. Been a big fan. This is, like, one of your assistants, right? So cool he's wearing a copy of Rory's shirt and flap cap."

The rabbit chuckled and whispered back, "You go ahead and take your friend to his seat, enjoy the rest of the show."

Rory looked about, thinking that the drunk pink toon mice scampering about in a wobbly dance above his head seemed a new experience, leaning against his friend as he was led back to his table.

Bobbin continued with a few card tricks and pulling a giant toony elephant from his sleeve (who huffed about having his shower interrupted), before starting to wind down the show.

"Thank you, thank you, for joining me here this evening being observers of the MAGIC of MAGICKS and all that! I must be heading back to the burrow to rekindle my powers. So until next time, hop along well!"

With that, Bobbin clapped his paws together and all lights in the bar went out. A few seconds later, everything flickered back on, and the rabbit was gone, the stage back to his rather unstable platform and ratty curtain original form.

"I'll be right back," Rory said, slipping down from his seat and heading towards the bathroom.

"Huh. Wait, why are you still here? Where's Rory?"

Rory squinted up at his friend, trying to piece together what was being asked. "Uh. Bathroom first, then I'll get back to you," he said before making his way via a very wobbly curvy route to the bathroom.

Only when standing in front of the urinal did he realize there were a few things amiss.

For one, he didn't seem to have a full bladder as he normally would after drinking that much beer. So he'd wandered to the bathroom on habit rather than any actual need.

Secondly, he didn't seem to have any pants to pull down to do his business, even if he'd needed to.

Thirdly, he didn't seem to have anything at his crotch to even do business with in the first place, either for using the facilities or otherwise.

He blearily looked down at his pantless bottom half for a long time while standing in front of the urinal trying to connect dots between these things and what they may mean.

Apparently not having to use the urinal, Rory headed to the sink, to maybe splash some water on his face. The sink seemed to be at face level. Again, this felt weird, since Rory wasn't on his knees. At least he didn't think so.

He turned towards the door, to find himself looking at a full length mirror, the glass grimy and streaked and littered with faded stickers, the reflected image still clear enough for Rory to see something reflected back. Whether that something was "himself" remained to be seen.

The ink and paint bright against the otherwise drab bathroom, a cartoon ferret stood there, wearing a blue flat cap and a zip up hooded sweatshirt. Weirdly, the flat cap and sweatshirt weren't toony and they were the exact cap and shirt that Rory wore. The sweatshirt did seem to fit differently on the ferret, the sleeves rumped up to fit shorter limbs.

Rory looked at one his own sleeves, finding the same rumped sleeves. He lifted a hand, finding a four digit toony paw, dark brown fur, pink pawpads. He opened and closed his hand. The paw responded in kind.

He shot a look back at the mirror and swayed. The ferret in the reflection swayed. He stepped forward, the toon ferret stepped forward, its details sharpening. "What the...?" he started saying, in a squeakier voice than expected, then found he had trouble encroaching the word he wanted to say and instead said "...fridge..." He reached up and felt his face. It felt both real and unreal, his face squished under pressure, and yet the details, even in this bleary buzzed state, felt utterly and absolutely...

The door of the bathroom, which the mirror was screwed to, banged open, throwing Rory into the wall. There was no crash. There was no bang. He just sorta...impacted and squished against the wall, before, quite literally, feeling his body slide to the floor.

Where he lost consciousness.

Rory woke up to the smell of coffee and burnt toast. He woke up further to find himself flopped on a taupe couch, soft and comfy after years of guests being flopped on it. Most of those guests being Rory himself.

It felt bigger than usual.

He streeeeeetched giving a yawn that finished off with a strange squeak. He coughed, which seemed to gain attention from the kitchen.

"You're up. Good. Let me get you something." Caleb came around to the corner with a NASA themed coffee mug and set it on the coffee table. He gave an apologetic look down at Rory, "Sorry to, uh, bring you to my place. Couldn't find your rabbit friend. Or my friend. I...think I flattened you in the bathroom when looking for him. Sorry about that. I know you're a toon, but you seemed rather out of it and...anyway, I left my contact information with the bar for if Bobbin was looking for you."

Rory only barely was keeping up, his mind fluttery and muzzy, flashes of bright color flickering over his vision, causing everything to go blurry at the edges, uncertain what to focus on. He took the coffee and sipped. Bleh. "I...I'm gonna get some creamer." He said, making his wobbly way to the kitchen.

"Uh, sure. I guess?"

Rory retrieved the French Vanilla creamer from the fridge. He looked between the creamer bottle and coffee mug a few times, before making a decision. He reached up to pour the remaining coffee into the sink before filling the mug completely with the sweet vanilla goodness. Logically, this might have struck Rory as strange if the pleasant sweetness didn't supersede such logic.

Things ought to be sweet. Sugar kept up one's energy. Gave a pep to one's swoop.

Swoop. Swoop. Swoop.

"Do you need to go anywhere? To be dropped off anywhere? Need to call Bobbin or anything?"

Rory looked up Caleb. Had Caleb always been so darn tall?

"N-No. I'm good. Thanks for letting me crash here. Don't know what hit me so hard last night. I guess I just drank too much."

"Might have been the bathroom door hitting you. Again, sorry about that. I didn't know you would...like, let me back up. I didn't catch your name."

Rory took another long sip of the pleasant vanilla creamer sweet, squinting up his friend. His mind was clearing a bit and becoming more muddled at same time. "Caleb, what are you playing at?"

"I'm just asking your name, sir. Did...did you work with Bobbin and Rory to pull some prank?"

"I'm...Rory," Rory said, realizing as he said so his voice still sounded weird and squeaky and strange, like last night. When he'd looked into the mirror. "Roderick for long. Rory for short. But either way I'm pretty darn long. You have any eggs about here, good fellow?"

He clamped a paw over his snout, uncertain where those words had bubbled up from. Then he realized that he had a paw. And a snout. The weird memories from the night before came back. He swigged more of the creamer, hoping the sweetness would clear his head and this strange illusion.

"Uh. Yeah? I think I have eggs. Is this all part of the prank? Is this being filmed or something?"

"Eggs first, please! I mean, no, I'm actually Rory. I'm having some trouble thinking straight. This is really weird. Eggs might help. Eggs!"

Caleb knelt down in front of Rory, squinting as he gave him a closer look. Rory felt himself going hot, fighting the instinct to cover himself.

"I admit you're a cute weasel b-"

"Ferret. Note the mask," Rory said, making a motion around his eyes to direct attention to the distinct darker color around his eyes. "Masks. Not just for robbers and raccoons anymore!"

As Rory tried to catch up with what he'd just said, Caleb continued. "Ferret. Yeah. OK. I just can't believe that you're actually-"

"I have proof!" Rory said, pulling a VHS from out of his sweatshirt. He stared at the VHS tape, bright in its ink and paint form. "I don't know where this came from. Thankfully I have a VCR too!" he said, pulling a toon version of a VCR out of his sweatshirt. For every normal statement he gave, it seemed another unbidden jumped out from his maw. His thoughts seemed to be two sided too, on one trying to come to terms with what he currently was, some sort of toon ferret thing, on the other side wanting to let loose, swoop about, find eggs, mischief, fun, eggs ,swoop!

He gave an excited dooking sound at the thoughts of having a good swoop about.

Which he did as he swooped about connecting the VCR to the TV, which surprisingly had connections for a toon VCR, though he did take the time to get tangled up in a comical fashion before completing the task.

Caleb seemed to have bypassed the questioning phase for now and just sat on the couch, looking mostly confused with a level dose of restrained bemusement.

Rory rewound the tape, seeing flashes of the magic show from last night. He hit the button to rewind faster, things blurred for a few seconds before he hit play.

A hiking trip, in the corner of the screen showed a date from a few years back, the camera showing off the scenery, Caleb's voice giving general commentary before giving a "What do you think, Rory?" and swinging over to show, what should have been the human Rory, enjoying the view. Instead it was the toon ferret, his mouth full of eggs and Caleb giving a "Rooooory" as he sounded mock angry.

Caleb gave a soft, "What? I...can kinda remember, h-"

Rory rewound the tape further, longer, before hitting play again. Another scene, a skatepark where Rory and Caleb used to hang out, Caleb saying something about the sweet moves, before off screen Rory's squeaky voice gave a "Oh yeah, watch this!" before the toon weasel on a skateboard, wearing a backwards baseball cap and tank top, swooped on screen down a ramp, then up a ramp, going out of view of the frame, before hitting the ground, the skateboard following a moment later, hitting his head, producing chirping toon birds around his head.

Rory kept rewinding and sampling: amusement park trips, birthday parties, hanging out, all things he could remember, all with the toon ferret instead of himself.

He hadn't always been a toon ferret.

...right?

Caleb spoke up, sounding quieter this time. "W-What exactly is going on, Rory? Why am I thinking of you, remembering you, like...this?"

"...I need some eggs," Rory said, heading towards the fridge.

"No, wait, we need to talk about this now!" Caleb stepped between the toon ferret and the fridge.

Rory looked up at his friend, his vision continuing to keep flickering between normal drab tones and bright technicolor which he could almost swear was accompanied by a jaunty tune. "I don't know what to talk about, good chap-a-rino! That bunny be the one who'd know why I be a swooping this way and not like he's just gonna...urm...ah."

A toony white paw had suddenly appeared, hovering around Rory's head. It patted and felt at the ferret's face before it suddenly grabbed at his snout.

He tried a muffled "now see here" before he was suddenly yanked, full body, thrust through a blur of light and color before being sprawled across grass.

Someone helped Rory up, and he found himself, outside, in a yard, a dozen so kids staring at him, from the party hats and streamers and large banner that said HAPPY BIRTHDAY, he suspected it might be a birthday party of some sort. Bobbin stood next to him and was brushing him off. "Ah! Whoops. Didn't pull a rabbit out, you see, since I'm already here! THIS be my fine friend, Rory Ferret. Give a warm welcome to Rory."

A scattered chorus of "hi Rorys" came from the audience.

He redirected his attention to the rabbit. "Bobbin! Now see here, I-"

"Yes, yes, I know, I'm sure that I interrupted another of your egg proffering schemes. You will be rewarded for the interruption. As you see, we have a volunteer from the audience."

Bobbin gestured to a man standing there, older, bearded, wearing a grilling apron complete with saying "The Grillfather" printed on it. "You know, the grill should be warmed up. I don't have time for this kiddie stuff. I better-"

"This shall only take a second, good sir! Just need to find the right device for this display of MAGICS! You don't wanna disappoint the audience! Do you? Look at those young expectant faces!"

The man glanced at the audience and begrudgingly remained standing there.

"Now, Rory, could you please hold my hat while I do a bit of digging?" He handed the top hat over to Rory and before the ferret could respond, Bobbin was halfway into the hat, the sound of rummaging and clanking as he dug around. General giggles rose from the young audience, even the few parents mulling about the edges of the yard seemed to be at least some level of bemusement.

After a few more seconds of digging, the rabbit pulled himself out of the hat, holding in his paw what appeared to be a hula hoop. He spun it on his paw. "This will do the trick! Borrowed this from a raccoon

friend of mine. You know raccoons love their rings. Usually when they're on their tails! Let's go ahead and get you those eggs there, Rory."

The rabbit grabbed the hat, popping it back onto his head, before turning back to the man, who was looking longingly towards his grill. Bobbin hopped up, hoop still in paw, and slipped it over the man. The man disappeared from sight as the hoop traveled downwards, until it hit a floor, and a small toon chicken stood in the middle, wearing a very small version of the apron, now saying "Cluck Around and Find Out".

The chicken looked up at the now taller rabbit, giving a questioning "BAWK?" followed by a few more confused "BA-BAWK?"

"Daddy's a chicken!" someone in the audience, presumably the chicken's kid, called out in apparent glee.

More frantic bawking and clucking from the toon chicken who ran in a circle, flapping its wings about, before stopping, and then sitting down. Rory wasn't sure what was happening for a moment before the chicken gave a BAWK and stood up, revealing a big toon egg.

Rory couldn't help drool, licking his chops at seeing such a perfect example of egg.

"Hey, Mr. Bobbin, sir," a woman came up from the side, her voice lowered to a whisper as she tried to get Bobbin's attention, "Where is Jim? We do need him to start grill-"

"Ah! We have another volunteer from the audience!"

"O-Oh, no, I'm not really-"

"Come on! Hey, kids! Don't you wanna see another trick?"

The kids responded with an enthusiastic cheer. The woman blushed. "I suppose something quick."

The chicken seemed to be trying to get the woman's attention. Rory figured something along the lines of how it wasn't just a chicken, but actually Jim. The woman just ignored the frantic cartoon poultry.

"Seems like you're ready to get eating, so let's see," Bobbin said, picking the hoop back up. With another hop and another drop of the hoop over the woman, in the middle of the hoop stood a toony fox.

The toon fox blinked, then sniffed, her attention drawn directly to the chicken.

The chicken, noticing the sudden attention, froze.

A second passed as the fox licked her chops.

And in a blur of flapping feathers and red fur, the chicken was off with fox in pursuit through the audience, falling into their respective archetypes of toony predator and prey, flavored with the usual hijinks that accompanied such things.

Rory gave a nervous glance between the poultry/vulpine hijinks and the rabbit.

"Don't worry about them. They're cartoons. They'll be fiiiiine. Anyways, that should keep the audience occupied for about 5-7 minutes. How can I help you, Rory?" Bobbin asked, "Egg?" The bunny magician presented the giant perfect toon egg, which, obviously, Rory's currently ferret nature couldn't resist. He grabbed and popped the egg into his maw.

It was perfect in ways that Rory couldn't believe, the flavor in his maw, the feel of it going down his gullet, sheer satisfaction causing him to give little ferret dooks of pleasure before he remembered he hadn't even cracked the egg before swallowing it down.

That wasn't important right now.

"What did you do to me?" Rory growled.

The rabbit gave the ferret a once over, rubbing his chin. "Hmm? Do elaborate. I do tend to get into so much mischief."

"You turned me into a toon ferret!"

"Ah, right. Yes. The whole wringer trick. Works best when you involve a loooooong species. Really makes the whole trick come together, you see."

"Y-You can't just do that! I'm a ferret! I'm naked!"

"You're not naked. You're just pantless. You're only naked if you lose the shirt and the cap. Or lose your swimsuit if you happen to be wearing one."

"You know what I mean!"

"I suppose. Humans do seem to have different sensibilities when it comes to such things. Now, what's the problem? Need more egg? I'm sure there's gonna be an egg gag or two during this whole chase sequence here."

Seemed at this point the fox and chicken were popping up and down amongst the pile of birthday presents.

Rory turned back to Bobbin. "Egg? Egg. No, no, no. Wait. No egg. I mean, I would appreciate an egg. But that's not the point. I am not supposed to be a ferret!"

"Sure you are. You make a fine ferret. Love the flat cap. Gives you a nice old school edge."

"You're NOT understanding me!" Rory said, a snarl in his tone, taking the rabbit by his vest and lifting him off the ground.

Bobbin kept calm. "You see. This is why I wanted to check in. Just in case," he said, booping Rory's nose, "Yes. I did use my magic on you. That's my jam. That's how I'm written, that's how I'm drawn, a rabbit magician complete with top hat! The jokes and gags write themselves. Been off the animated shorts

circuit for a while. Needed to keep myself occupied. The real world is FUN to play with. Messing with humans who need to let loose is great. Give them a little break from reality, see what happens, see how they react, see how reality settles."

The rabbit talking so calm and cool caught Rory off guard, his grip on the rabbit's vest relaxed.

"Why don't you set me down, I finish off this trick and we discuss this further?" Bobbin gave a winning wink with a twinkle in his eyes.

Rory set the magician rabbit down.

Bobbin picked up the hoop, spun it in his paw, and when the chicken and fox tore across the yard next to him, he put the hoop in their path, the two toon creatures sailing through, the man and woman from before stumbling out the other side, their clothes looking rumbled, but otherwise looking back to their normal human selves.

As they both tried to come down from whatever had just happened, Bobbin stashed the hoop into his vest and turned to the audience, still giggling and laughing at the series of toony hijinks they'd just seen the chicken and fox show off -- the adults seeming more startled by the trail of destruction and broken items the chicken and fox had left in their wake, one of them still in the midst of using a fire extinguisher on the grill.

"And with that, we shall end the show! (ACME Insurance will cover all damages!) I have been Bobbin the Brilliant! And you, Jim Jr. have a great birthday!" He pulled Rory close and with a snap, a poof of white smoke enveloped them.

When the smoke cleared, they were back in Caleb's living room.

"Rory! There you are! What happened? Wait, B-Bobbin?"

"In the fur! Caleb, isn't it? Don't forget a face. Jackie's 8th Birthday Party. Made a killer whale appear above the pool. What a splash!"

"Y-Yeah?"

Bobbin noticed the TV, paused on one of Rory's life events, seemingly of the ferret with a barrel full of ACME fireworks for 4th of July. Seemed that Caleb had been continuing to sample the VHS. Bobbin rubbed his chin. "Seems you found Rory's archives. I have some too. Though mine are on film reels. Need a movie projector to play them. Keep meaning to convert them to digital."

"My archives?"

"Yeah. Every toon has one. You were born in the 80s, right? Explains why yours are on VHS."

"But I'm not a toon!"

"Reality thinks otherwise."

"N-No, this doesn't make sense," Caleb said, "I c-can still kinda remember this right. I mean, I can remember what I'm seeing on this tape. But I can also remember Rory as, like, not a toon weasel."

"Ferret. Check the m-"

"Check the mask. Ferret. Yeah, yeah, I know, Rory. Ferrets and weasels are practically the same."

"Gasp! My own friend! Such slander!" Rory scoffed, before realizing what he'd just said, then glared at Bobbin. "Explain this!"

"As I said before: reality thinks otherwise."

"What does that mean?"

"OK. Example: the fox and chicken. Great for a gag. Fun for everyone. But at the end, they turned back to their normal human selves, right?"

"Right."

"Even if I hadn't used my magic hoop thing, they would have turned back eventually. Their realities didn't match up with those forms. Though, think about this: a chicken dad and a fox mom raise a human kid. Great sitcom material, right? But I digress. Feels weird being all expositiony and using words like 'digress'. Let's skip to the 'why' of all this. I think your archives will tell us what's up. I just need to rewind with INTENTION!" Bobbin grabbed the VCR's toon remote and hit rewind. Images blurred across the screen until the rabbit released.

On the TV screen, there was the image of a TV, where some blurry image of a cartoon played.

Rory blinked. A cartoon? He didn't watch cartoons. Cartoons were for kids and for non-serious people. That's why he was so skeptical of Bobbin in the first place. That's why him being a toon ferret didn't make any sense. Why would this be in his memories? His archives. Whatever. What did this have to do with anything?

"Let's go take a closer look," Bobbin said, taking Rory's paw and Caleb's hand, before running towards the TV screen, pulling them both along.

All went bright white, then dark, then with the flickering as if an old TV were coming into focus, the surroundings came into view. They were standing in a living room. Not Caleb's. One with generic 80s aesthetic, from deeper plush carpets and furniture with weird designs.

On the couch, sat Rory, still the toon ferret Rory that had been appearing on the rest of the VHS, except this one looking younger, and wearing what appeared to be a non-toony kigu. The small ferret kit watched the TV with rapt attention. Rory looked at what was playing.

Rory recognized the swoop of the main character, the way he twisted across the screen, the blur of weasel mischief: Wellington Weasel.

Wellington Weasel.

The memories flowed back into Rory's mind.

Wellington Weasel. Rory's favorite show as a kid, a cartoon from at least a few decades before Rory had been even born, but Rory loved him and his weaselly antics. He wanted to be just like Wellington Weasel when he grew up. Hence the weasel-themed kigu being worn.

Rory heard some murmurs, the sounds of two people speaking. He followed the sound.

His parents, talking in their bedroom, the door opened a crack. He heard scattered piece of the conversation.

"...worried about Rory."

"...just harmless fun..."

"...needs to get outside. Make some friends..."

"Inside on a beautiful day."

"...wearing those PJs too much..."

And then Rory remembered what had happened.

Soon after, Rory had been banned from watching Wellington Weasel. He'd been banned from watching any cartoons. His parents had a lot of Opinions about cartoons and toons in general and the effects they'd have on a young mind. There had been many reasons they'd given and Rory couldn't remember. He'd been so devastated and hurt he'd archived all those childhood memories away into a little box he'd not revisited until now.

"Let's go back out, Rory," Bobbin said, placing a paw on his shoulder.

He only realized then he'd been crying.

"Yeah, dude. I'm sorry, I forgot how much your parents were jerks about toons," Caleb said, putting his hand on Rory's other shoulder.

Rory sniffed and whipped the tears away. "Yeah. Let's go back."

Everything looked brighter here.

He'd never considered going to the Toon Sector before. Until a week ago, he'd not been a toon ferret or had remembered his childhood affinity for toons.

Or would it be kithood? Young ferrets were called kits, right?

He needed some eggs. He found he ALWAYS needed eggs and whenever he let his mind wander they usually involved elaborate schemes on how to get eggs. Yes, he could just buy eggs, but where was the fun in that? Where was the drama and thrill of the chase and tension and new opportunities to swoop about in and out of danger?

Yes. Chickens and farmers didn't appreciate that stuff in the way Rory did, but that was more on them and having eggs that they didn't directly deposit into a ferret's maw, right?

Bobbin needed to drag Rory way from looking wistfully (or perhaps more hungrily, considering the drool) at any chicken coop they passed.

The magician rabbit had agreed to be Rory's "toon sponsor" while Rory figured stuff out, show him around the Toon Sector, show him how stuff worked, maybe run him through some mischief or hijinks if opportunities presented themselves.

"Where are we headed? Are there eggs there?" Rory asked, looking about. From the trees seemed like they were headed into the Woodland District.

Bobbin giggled. "Maybe. Just wanted to swing by to visit an old friend of mine. Thought he might be able to give you some insight into this next comic page of life. Or would it be reel? Or VHS? You might wanna look into converting that thing to digital for backup purposes too. Here we are."

In front of them was a mound of dirt with a wooden door installed into it. There may have been some logistical questions on this if were anywhere but in the Toon Sector.

Rory looked about, wondering who they'd be meeting. He'd only just seen the name on the nearby mailbox as the door opened.

There, standing in all his ink and paint sleekness, stood a very familiar figure to Rory.

"Bobbin! Long time, no nibble! I gots a hot tub out back, complete with potatoes and carrots and celery, with your name on it!" the figure swooped over to Bobbin, wrapping his full body around the rabbit to give a warm hug.

"Maybe later, buddy. Just wanted to stop by and introduce you to a new toon I'm showing the ropes. Thought he might appreciate some stories from an old toon. I think you may share some interests in food preferences."

"Hmm? Oh! Hey, chum! Are you a fellow connoisseur of the egg sort? I know all the best spots to sneak in and snag a few. Have any experience being a hapless sidekick, by any chance?"

Rory still stood in shock at seeing this weasel standing before him, let alone talking to him directly, a rush of feelings and emotions came over him, and from the warmth he knew his paint must be turning red all over.

"Ah, ah, Well...Welling...W-Wellington Weasel! P-Pleased to meet you."