

# A Spiritual Road Trip

Lunch Counter Stories XVIII



*Kim Taylor and Aidan Moon*  
*copyright ©2024, all rights reserved*

## Table of Contents

Custom Supernatural Vacations.....	3
Cabin of the Spirits.....	6
The Canopied Bed.....	8
Up the Volcano.....	11
Pele and Hi'iaka.....	13
Scuffles in Suwa.....	15
The Wolf War.....	18
Mike's Story.....	21
The Hard Man.....	23
The Pups Sorted.....	25
The Mine Field.....	28
The Patagonian Dragon.....	32
The Hain.....	36
The War of the Grootslang.....	39
Black Market Black Magic.....	43
The Harper.....	46
Merv reveals the Job.....	49
The Venice Job.....	53
The Battle of the Towers.....	55
On the Road.....	59
The Trouble-Maker.....	62
The Summer Fling.....	65
The Sea Monster.....	70
Freya.....	72
An Evening Feast.....	75
Beyond the Barrier.....	78
A Snow Day in Iceland.....	83
Hulder.....	86
Journey to the Centre of the World.....	89
Full Circle.....	92
Hawaii Again.....	95
The Cruise.....	99
Tahiti.....	102
The Pearl Divers.....	106
Matisse in Tahiti.....	109
Lake Te Anau.....	112
Aoraki.....	115
Teranaki the Mountain.....	118
Home Again.....	122
Epilogue.....	125

John was running toward Louisa even before she screamed.

Louisa screamed, high and loud but she was not frightened. It's hard to be frightened when you're already dead and a ghost. Pain and death no longer hold any mystery, and without glands, certainly no fear. Louisa was screaming toward a shape that clapped its hands over its ears and cringed away.

As John reached Louisa, she stopped and watched as John swung his cane at the creature. When he made contact, the thing screamed in its own turn. The cane was hazelwood, with an iron tip and had become John's weapon of choice. Where the cane hit the being, its flesh began to sizzle as if it was burning. The creature jumped back but its body kept sizzling and smoking.

John followed and thrust the end of his cane at the thing's face. It raised its hands to protect itself but where the iron tip hit its hands they also started to burn. Whipping its hands down and away from the tip, it exposed its neck which John struck with considerable force, slicing straight through and separating the head from the body. The screaming stopped and the creature fell dead to the ground.

~~

## **Custom Supernatural Vacations**

"Will, I didn't have a twenty year career in the police and fight a world war just to change sheets."

"You too good to change sheets?"

"You change whole rooms, create South Seas huts and London penthouses, why can't you change sheets too?"

"Because the customers like to see someone working around the place, they expect it."

"Our customers are magic users or supernatural types, why would they expect a maid service?"

"If they wanted to use magic, they wouldn't come to the B and B would they? Now get on up there and change the sheets, John."

"Not going to do it, I'm tired of it, and the bottles under the bed and the hair in the sink, and the toilets. Oh lord Will, the toilets, what are you feeding them anyway?"

"The same stuff I feed you, John, the very same. You're not having trouble with it are you?"

"I'm not digesting and shitting the stuff out, Will. I'm a ghost, remember."

"Oh, right."

"Will, I quit, I'm not doing this stuff any more."

Will stalked away, not answering John, but he called John's old wife, Louisa. "Listen, do you miss John? Maybe you could come take him away for a while yes?"

Louisa did miss him, and took the chance to have him to herself, "I'm sure he's just feeling trapped, I'll take him on vacation for a while. You'll see, he'll come back a new man."

"Not really looking for a new man, I'd settle for the old one."

Louisa smiled and was smiling when she appeared in the office in front of Will. "Damn, you scared me, a little warning before you appear on top of my foot."

"Oops, sorry Will." Louisa stepped back and put her cell in her jeans back pocket.

Will frowned, "So I still don't understand how you can put a cell phone in your pocket and then disappear without it falling onto the ground."

"I still don't know myself, but how come I disappear and reappear with the pants still on, pocket included?"

Will wasn't listening, he was thinking of Louisa's pants not appearing the next time she shifted. Louisa shook her head and walked into the bar to find John.

"Come on Cinderella, I'm taking you away from this domestic drudgery. We're going to the cabin for a vacation."

John loved the cabin, Louisa had made it hers over the years, simply by doing the fixing and living in the place. The moment he was through that door he knew he was with Louisa. It was important that he was with her again, they'd been so long apart, but coming into her cabin was comfortable, like they'd never been apart.

As they appeared at the front door, John reached for the latch but he couldn't seem to get close enough to grab it. "What's happening?"

Louisa frowned, "I don't know, let me... No it seems to be rejecting us both, that doesn't make sense."

Joe Makwa stood up from a chair and came around the corner of the porch, "I wondered when you'd get back. I thought I'd let you know that you're behind on your spiritual payments."

"My what!"

Joe raised his hands, they were the size of bear paws, "Hey, messenger here, don't shoot me."

Louisa relaxed a bit, "So tell me what a spiritual payment is."

"Nothing much, a bit of power from you or an artifact."

"Payable to?"

“The spirits of course, those who live here on the land where you built your cabin.”

“Are you kidding me? The spirits of the land want rent?”

“I guess, if you want to put it that way, sure.”

“I thought nobody owned the land, or the land owned us, or some such.”

Joe looked off into the woods and scratched his chin, “No, I don’t think that’s quite it, we may not own the land, but we certainly live on it, and off of it. And we want to be compensated if someone else wants a chunk of our territory.”

“Oh come on, you’re telling me you didn’t buy it from anyone but you took it, lived on it and it’s yours.”

“That sounds about right.”

Louisa rolled her eyes. “So what do I owe in back rent?”

“Well I’m not sure, best way is to make an offering and if it’s enough, you’ll be able to get back into your cabin.”

“Joe, are you familiar with the concept of blackmail?”

“You mean where you lock someone out until they pay their rent?”

“I mean when you say “gimme until I decide it’s enough.”

“Oh, free enterprise rent.”

“So give me a clue here Joe, what do I need?”

“Well around here I wouldn’t offer up anything from yourself, I’d get some tchotchkes with a bit of power in them.”

“You mean like ritual masks?”

“Sure that would work, or magical artifacts, or emotionally charged actions.”

“How do you collect an action?”

“Don’t ask me, I’m just a dumb bear spirit, I’d settle for a big salmon.”

“I don’t suppose the spirits that own... sorry, that occupy my cabin land are bear spirits are they?”

“Nope, just your usual interior mountain spirits. Very eclectic, I think they’d take pretty much anything.”

“So my collection of ritual masks I’ve got up on the wall?”

“What do you think you’ve been paying with, all these years, they’ve drained that power.”

“Ah, I’m starting to understand.”

“Really? OK then, well I’m off, see you later.”

“No, Joe I need to get into the cabin to collect some things before we go finding rent.”

“Uh, I’m not sure they will...”

“Joe we’re going to recharge the old masks and get some new ones.”

“Oh, well, ...” Joe looked off into the woods again. He waved toward the latch and Louisa grabbed it to open the door.

“Thanks,” she said.

~~

## **Cabin of the Spirits**

Joe was somewhat surprised that the spirits let Louisa back into the cabin, but who could predict their actions. Certainly not him, these were wood spirits rather than animal spirits, not that they were attached to trees, but they had the long view and the stubborn reluctance to change of oaks.

John, for his part looked at the masks on the walls and realized he had never really paid any attention to just how many masks were in the place. “Louisa, we can’t carry this many masks with us if we’re travelling. The weight alone would stagger us.”

Louisa was also looking with fresh eyes, and was about to agree with him, but before she could speak, the masks began to disappear. Joe’s mouth dropped open. “Well I’ll be, the spirits are taking charge of the masks, they must have their favourites, they are choosing a mask and absorbing it into themselves. There’s no power left in the mask, but they are giving it just enough that it becomes part of them.”

“Are you kidding? Why are they doing that? Don’t they want us to recharge them?”

“I think they do, but the spirits seem to have taken a liking to you, Louisa, they’ve bonded with you or the masks or something and I suspect they are going to go with you on your trip.”

“How is that going to work? Will they talk to me? Give me a mask to re-ritualize it? I can’t talk with them.”

“They can’t speak to you, but in my experience, the wood spirits have a lot of understanding. They will know what to do when the time comes.”

“They’re going to help...”

“Strange as that sounds, yes, I think so.”

“So what’s all that about wanting rent?”

“Even a spirit has to eat, I guess.”

John looked up, “Speaking of eating, do you suppose we could do that before we leave, and maybe even catch a night’s sleep?”

Joe looked from John to Louisa and noted a certain hunger there. Joe’s girlfriend was the incarnation of love, and so he had an understanding of the underlying question. He looked up slightly and turned his head from side to side. Apparently the spirits weren’t in any rush to get moving.

“They say no problem John, take a day or two and get ready to go. I guess they made their point that they can keep you out of the place should they need to.”

“Um, are they going to stay inside the cabin with us?”

“John, they’re spirits, they go where they want to go and you can’t tell where they are.”

“You mean they might have been watching us before when we were here?”

Joe looked at John with a frown. “You’re kidding right? Of course they can watch if they want. Why would they want to? They’re spirits, sex is not a thing with them.”

“How about with an animal spirit, with you?”

“How about it? I’m human and so is my girlfriend Jane. We like sex.”

“Could you watch Louisa and me in here?”

Louisa punched John on the arm hard. John ducked to avoid the slap on the back of his head and stopped talking. He wandered over and sat in one of the armchairs and picked up a magazine.

“Never mind him, he’s never had any class.”

Joe grinned and nodded. “I’ll check in tomorrow around noon to see how it’s going.”

Louisa walked Joe to the door and closed it behind him. She turned and looked at John sitting in what she now thought of as his chair. He turned to look at Louisa, who felt a bit like she was falling into his eyes. She often felt that way when he looked at her. She had loved him when they were together, and ever since she had left him. She would have stayed with him as his wife, but he changed, and she was not going to stay and watch the man she loved, destroy himself with drink.

She smiled gently and said “shall I make us some dinner?”

“Oh yes please love, I’m practically fading away with hunger.”

Louisa laughed in that slightly husky way that John remembered so well. He got up and walked to her, enfolding her in his arms as she leaned her head on his chest. “First chance to say hello, sweetheart. I missed you.”

Louisa made a buzzing noise against his chest that somehow sounded like “me too.”

“Can I help with the food?”

“Don’t you dare you can’t cook for beans and I love cooking for you.”

John looked a bit hurt and Louisa laughed again. “How have you been my love?”

“Well, thank you, and you? Have you been teaching young John to be a proper Shaman?”

“Time in the mirror world moves differently, John has had ten years of learning now and he’s every bit the Shaman that I am. I’m going to have to ask Hugo to teach him.”

“Ten years. Did you miss me?”

“More than you can know, but you’re here now and that’s wonderful. Now go sit down and read while I cook.”

“You’re too good to me.”

“Yes, I am, but I love you John.”

“I never understood why. I love you too, and I know why.”

Louisa smiled to herself as she started to chop vegetables. “Make yourself a drink, John, and one for me too.” Louisa liked John a bit drunk, not like he used to be when he was a detective, and tired of life, but more like before, when he was giggly and cuddly with a couple of drinks in him.

It had been over ten years for her, and Louisa had plans for John. She had created a big four poster bed while John was worrying about the spirits. A canopy on top and heavy curtains on the sides. It wouldn’t stop a spirit from peeking, but it might stop John from worrying about it.

Thinking about that, she accidentally chopped off one of her fingers. Oops, she stuck it back on and brought her thoughts back to preparing the meal.

~~

## **The Canopied Bed**

John found himself surprised at how much more comfortable he was in a bed with curtains around.



First, it was warm, while the old bed out in the middle of the room had been a bit cold the last time they were in the cabin, but also because the curtains gave him a feeling of privacy. He knew that wasn't true, that the spirits could see if they wanted to, but nevertheless, he felt better.

He had mentioned this to Louisa, and felt a bit silly when she laughed. Still, she had called him a dear man and had jumped on top of him once more with a whoop of pure joy.

Somehow they had managed a few hours of sleep, which felt much better than it should have. When they woke in the morning, John mentioned it.

“Oh you dear man, those spirits you worry about peeking at us? They are what give us our life here in the cabin. They let us become solid, they let us eat, and have sex. They give us the power to be more real than we would normally be, and that includes sleep.”

“How do you know that?”

“I'm a shaman remember, and Joe explained it to me as well.”

“Joe? Joe Makwa?”

“Yes, Joe Bear, why? Are you jealous of Joe? That's a glandular thing, something else the spirits have given us.”

“Whatever the hell for?”

“I don't know, it's probably a glandular thing if we are solid, you take what you get I guess. Anyway, don't worry about Joe, he's pretty faithful to Jane, even if she can't be faithful to him.”

John nodded, wondering if it was like this the first time he was in love and the hormones started kicking in. He didn't remember being so jealous, but then again, it was a long time ago and he knew he was angry about something back then. Was it more than the injustice of the world?

Louisa put their breakfast on the table, and John took a good look at her while she did. As always, he was amazed that she seemed so hard to remember. Louisa had always been difficult to describe, her appearance seemed to shift through the day, and from day-to-day. Not dramatically but enough to cause disagreement and confusion among those who attempted to describe her. Average but not average. Medium height with broad shoulders and good posture but an ability to minimize herself by stooping and dipping her head so that people often described her as small. Her clothing had always been loose and concealed her body, making it difficult for anyone but those closest to her to know her build. Her hair had always been shoulder length and held back from her face with a hairband which she only released when she is away from the public gaze. Her hair had flashes of gold in the sun but deepened when the light faded. Her eyes shifted from hazel to green to gold and back, depending on her mood.

Thinking about it, John realized Louisa could look quite frightening when she fixed her stare. But those who knew her well, saw her smile and heard her laugh when she found something amusing.

Once again, John wondered just what it was that she saw in him. Back in the past and today. He shook his head and decided not to think too much about it, he didn't want to jinx the relationship. He knew now that he had screwed it up the first time, and he didn't want to do that again if he could help it.

As they finished up their morning coffee, John gathered the dishes and took them to the sink to wash them. This Louisa let him do, knowing that he wanted to help, to feel useful. She smiled as he broke yet another glass. If he wasn't terribly good at dishes, he was amazing at other things, and with thoughts of last night, Louisa squirmed a bit in her chair.

She took a breath and settled down, they didn't really have time to go back to bed, much as she wanted to. She looked at John, bent over the dishes, being so very serious. He was serious last night, too. Louisa had reminded him that it had been ten years away for her, and he had declared that he was going to give her ten years worth of loving. He did, too.

It was funny, when life was too easy, like the time he spent in the pub, and when he was being a chambermaid, he would slip into a petulant inertia of complaints and indolence. Louisa was typically the only person who could jolt him out of it and remind him of his capabilities. When he focused on the business at hand, or when he really wanted to do the work, like the dishes right now, John was a formidable worker and a force of nature as a partner.

Louisa's mind wandered as she looked at John. Although he had been a ghost for a very long time, he maintained his distinctive features. He'd learned to materialize a physical form on a previous visit to the cabin and now had the habit of holding it most of the time. He had returned to his physique of before the explosion that made him a ghost. John had always been tall and lithe, with a long, graceful stride and a look of pent up muscular energy.

His sandy hair was barbered short and neat, flecks of silvery grey mixed in. His beard and moustache varied with occasion and the season. In profile, as Louisa was seeing him now, John was unmistakable, with a strong, balanced nose and chin and a symmetric head shape. John's eyes were a gentle blue-grey and he often had a quizzical look, as he had now, trying to decide which cooking implement went in which drawer. Many people thought that he looked absent-minded, but Louisa knew he was often thinking about problems, perhaps more than one and always from several different angles.

As he decided that the fruit knife went into the spatula drawer, Louisa thanked him for cleaning up and patted the couch beside herself. "We should be planning our trip, and I confess, I'm at a loss for where to start."

John sat down and shook his head, "I wouldn't have a clue, I don't know anything about spiritual

power and ritual masks.”

As he said that, a mask slowly appeared in front of the two. It was a tiki mask of the fire goddess of Kilauea in Hawaii.

~~

## Up the Volcano

Joe Makwa knocked on the door just before noon. As Louisa let him in, he smiled when he saw the half demolished main room. “Fighting the demons already?”

Louisa laughed, “Just in a bit of a rush to get to sleep last night.”

“Ah, sleep, yes.”

John scowled at Joe and seemed about to say something but held his tongue. The spirit with the Pele mask turned toward Joe and Joe laughed. “It looks like you’re heading in the right direction first. Pele is a jealous goddess, she will be an appropriate first stop.”

John half rose from his chair but Louisa pushed him back down. “I’m flattered, John but remember how old we are. I think we’ll need all our self control on this trip.”

John was about to say something to Louisa, but after looking closely at her face, he sat back and held his tongue. She really could look ferocious when she was serious.

“How do we proceed, Joe? Will the spirits take us where we need to go?”

“They will, they want the power restored, so they will guide you.”

The spirit with the Pele mask turned to Louisa and waited. “OK I guess that’s our cue, thank you Joe, we’ll check in when we get back. Are you ready to begin, John?”

John nodded and stood, holding out his hand to Joe, who shook it soberly, and then handed John a cane made of Hazel with an iron ferrule on the tip. “You may find this handy John. Best of luck, both of you.”

As John let go of Joe’s hand, the cabin faded away.

Louisa, John and the Masks arrived in a large open meadow with the blue Pacific Ocean in the near distance. On the land side was a tropical woodland with hardwood trees, and lianas – dense and lush.

In the centre of the clearing was a massive, tiered rectangular structure built of hewn blocks of black lava. Louisa recognized the structure as heiau, a sacred temple. Immediately, small creatures materialized. “What is your business at this temple of healing here in the navel of the world?” Louisa stepped forward. “We have come from half way around the world, from the Yukon Territories in Canada, seeking help and energy to heal and re-charge our spirit masks. In this place we would like to re-charge our Tiki masks representing Pele, Goddess on Kilauea. Is it possible to do that here?”

“You will not find the energy here but we can guide you. You will need companion spirits from Hawaii to accompany you. You must go to the true navel, the connection with the centre of the earth and talk directly with the goddess Pele. This will not be easy, Pele is a fierce and jealous goddess. No spirit or ghost can move directly to the caldera to petition Pele, she would simply assimilate your energy. We can take you close, but you must walk the final way as corporeal beings. Are you ready to do this?”

“We are”

“Very well, how many tiki masks do you have? I see three here.”

“We have the three, the rest are from other places which we will visit later.”

“Should you survive your encounter with the Goddess.”

Louisa gave the spirit a grimace which caused the being to take a step back. “We have three local spirits that can carry the masks for you.”

At that the three spirits who had been carrying the masks stepped forward to confront the locals. Louisa turned her half smile on her own spirits and they stared back for a moment, then handed over the masks. Louisa nodded and turned to the guide saying, “We’re ready to go now.”

“Be it on your own heads then.” The spirit waved his hand.

Louisa, and John found themselves at about 1500 metres up Kilauea. The local mask carriers were nowhere to be seen. Louisa looked at the guide, who spread his hands, “The spirits have gone on ahead, they will not be assimilated as they are servants of Pele.”

The group moved first through tropical rain forest – ferns, fragrant trees and birdsong. They reached a mountain lake, blue and still. “Many people bring their child’s piko here to give to the lake for protection.”

John asked, “What is a piko?”

“It is the child’s umbilical string, what connects it to the parents, and what holds the child’s knowledge, wisdom and emotions. They are safe here.”

Continuing on, the trail passed many small marker piles of volcanic stone left by those ascending the volcano. The markers made John feel better, others had come this way. Louisa, as if reading his thoughts, turned her head and with a small grin said, “They went this way but do we know they came back?”

John scowled at Louisa until he noticed the guide was grinning too.

The landscape gradually gave way to a drier land of scrub and forbs and eventually grasses and rock. Finally they were walking a trail cut into billows and rolls of hardened lava with uneven footing, slippery in the mist. Out on the plain of lava they could see the sparkle of Pele's Hair, the spun glass threads produced during violent eruptions.

The smell of sulphur and cordite grew stronger and mist descended making the air acidic. It stung their eyes and burned their nostrils as they inhaled. They heard sounds like creatures moving and breathing. A background of unsettled rumbling punctuated with pops and hisses as gases vented from fumaroles and pools of solidifying rock. At least that's what John hoped.

As they continued to climb, rising plumes of smoke and steam became visible. When they finally reached the caldera and looked in, they could see the moving, bubbling, cooling lava. Periodic flames licked up as gases ignited then flared out. They were guided beyond the caldera to open fissures where the orange and glowing lava could be seen moving slowly underground. "You must go closer to gather the energy, you must ask permission." said the guide.

As Louisa faced the caldera to ask, a beautiful woman rose out of one of the vents, directly from the lava. Her hair and dress was of fire, her eyes seemed to burn, as did her hands. John had to look away, but Louisa seemed not the least bothered. She opened her mouth to speak but the woman held up her hand and Louisa seemed to choke on her words.

The woman spoke and it was the sound of a thousand forest fires, the sound of lava eating the growing things of the earth and then creating new land from the sea. "You shall not get what you want here, I have need of your energy and so your existence is forfeit. Say goodbye to each other."

~~

## **Pele and Hi'iaka**

Long ago, Pele had been driven from Tahiti by her older sister, the sorceress Hi'iaka. Pele came to Hawaii and found a home among the volcanoes. After an age, Hi'iaka had decided to take Hawaii for herself. She and Pele had been locked in battle for years, and frankly, Pele was losing. She had used her power over the volcano Kilauea to fight Hi'iaka's demons but there was no more to pull forth from the earth. She needed more power, and this she intended to get from Louisa and John.

As Louisa found her voice again, she spoke not to John but to Pele. "To take us would be a mistake oh great Pele, we would be a small snack compared to this mighty volcano. Instead, why not use us to fight your sister's forces, why not make us allies. We will bring more forces to the fight, spirits from the wild cold lands of the Yukon, who fight the harsh elements of the north."

"You presume to bargain with me? You are insolent and trifling."

"No bargain, my Goddess, we carry your masks in honour, we have used their power. Now let us repay that favour with our efforts to defeat your sister."

“These three creatures of mine have told me that your masks are empty, and that you come here first to try to restore them. Why is this?”

Louisa suppressed a smile, she had her asking questions, this was good. “Fire is the most powerful of the energies, we wished to use this power to work quickly to restore the masks that belong to you.”

“They were taken from here too many years ago for me to bother with them. Do not ask me to heal them, they were taken from my people and so are lost to us. But what else do you bring to this mountain?”

“The two of us, warriors both, and many spirits from our land.”

“Very well, prepare yourselves. I see you have a weapon, boy, is it useful?”

“We shall see, Goddess.”

“Very well, I grant it immunity from the fires. Call your allies and go forth.”

With that, Louisa and John, together with their spirits of the north and the many masks from around the world were dumped into a fiery realm where they instantly saw the problem. Hi’iaka had thrown many thousands of demons against Pele, who was fighting back alone. Her jealousy was preventing Pele from using her own spirits in the battle. If she had not been losing, Pele would have fought on alone.

Louisa had no such hesitation, throwing most of her own spirits against the demons, and sending some back with the guide, to convince Pele’s creatures to join the fight.

John was amazed at how many demons faced them. He was looking to the right when Louisa screamed at one of them who had obviously been sent to test these new combatants. Before she had made a sound, John was running toward her and used his cane to good effect. It seemed that the demons were protected from the fires of the volcano, as John and Louisa were, but where the cane touched them, they lost that protection. In his mind, John sent thanks back to Joe Makwa in Whitehorse.

While the couple started to fight, the Northern spirits piled into the demons. Like the hunters of the north, like bears and wolverines and big cats, they ripped the demons to pieces. Those spirits who carried masks representing fire gods seemed to get stronger the more they fought. Perhaps the masks were taking energy from the core of the earth, the very creative forces of the universe.

Seeing this, Louisa realized that Volcanoes do not represent destruction, but creation. They are the only way that new land can be made. The reputation for destruction is only a function of man-made things being in the way of their flows toward the sea. She was developing a different feeling toward Pele and her importance to the Islands she had adopted.

John, meanwhile, was whooping and hollering like the overgrown boy he was. He was beautiful in his energy as he cleared a path through the demons in front of him, soon ending up surrounded by enemies. Louisa shook her head, did he think he was indestructible? He might be resilient in his ghostly form, but he could still be destroyed. Without hesitation, she plunged into the masses of demons and soon fought her way to his side. The northern spirits, after an initial success, found their shock value was used up. The demons regrouped and were holding them back. It began to look like the northern group would eventually be overcome.

But, as is the case in every good story, the local forces, loyal to Pele, and knowing that they fought for their land, suddenly appeared and hit the demon army from the side, causing confusion and then panic. As a rested Pele showed up once more, burning vast swathes of the enemy to ash with her fiery presence, the demons turned and fled back to Tahiti and Hi'iaka.

John was the first to turn toward Pele and bend his knee to her, surprising Louisa, who also knelt. Pele looked at them but didn't say a word, she simply waved them back to the edge of the caldera.

Louisa saw that her spirits and their masks were also there, safe from the volcano's, from Pele's, power. The guide was also there along with some of the local spirits with masks of their own. "The Goddess Pele thanks you for your help, and bids you be gone from her lands after you have recovered from your injuries."

Injuries? Louisa looked at John and saw that he was indeed burned in several places, and as she realized that, she could feel her own burns. Some of the northern spirits were also damaged, but nobody seemed in danger of extinction. "I thank Pele for her generous offer, and accept gratefully."

The group was led to a rain-forest cabin beside a black sand beach and they were waited on by the ghosts of ancient Hawaiian warriors. A great honour. While they recovered, they heard stories of the old days and the old battles.

Louisa soon realized that the fight had recharged the tiki masks and some of the other masks that belonged to fire gods. They heard nothing further from Pele so assumed that this was all right. There were several visits from the Hawaiian spirits with new masks who asked to join them on their journey. Apparently, these spirits wanted to go visit with those from the North West coast, who were somehow related.

As Louisa was being massaged by a massive warrior, she sighed and thought that it was perhaps a lovely start to their journey. John looked over and was surprised that he wasn't jealous, perhaps that had been burned out in the fight, or maybe Pele had absorbed that into herself, she had lots to add it to, that was certain.

In the meantime, John looked out over the peaceful ocean as he was being massaged by a beautiful Hawaiian demi-goddess. It was a good way to pass the time as they waited for their supper.

~~

## **Scuffles in Suwa**

All good things come to an end. Even being massaged and healed by demi-goddesses. Louisa checked all of John's boo boos and pronounced him fit for travel. Which was a good thing because the masks were starting to fight, the uncharged masks being jealous of the fire masks which had been showing off their new power like preening cats arching their backs.

The tree spirits with their masks began to lobby to be the next to be charged. They knew of a place, the Onabashira festival held every 6 years in Suwa Japan, to renew the 4 shrines where the mountain and tree spirits are worshipped. This was one of the years.

“I’ve heard of that,” John said with a worried look on his face. “It’s where those crazy Japanese ride huge logs down the mountain.”

“So?”

“You can get killed doing that!”

“John, you’re already dead, we can’t die again.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, oh. Right then, off we go to Japan.”

Louisa looked at the masks but they were still fighting with each other, so she figured she’d better just go before it got worse. To do this, she began island hopping along the northwestern Hawaiian island chain past Midway and on to Japan. On the last jump the group miscalculated a bit and ended up right in the middle of the scramble crosswalk at Shibuya station. Unfortunately, it was the turn of cars to roar down on the group. With a jolt, Louisa pulled the group north into the mountains.

As they travelled, John looked sideways over a city and exclaimed “The Pokemon Mountains!”

“How do you know about Pokemon?”

“Half the kids who come into the bar play the thing and that’s what the mountains look like.”

Louisa shook her head, “They’re the Kiso mountains.”

“The Kiss-off mountains?”

“Find us the lake, John and stop getting distracted.”

John began to scan the landscape and soon found the place. He pointed this out to Louisa who flicked the group off to the correct location.

They landed on the grassy slope of a mountain and as they faced downhill, admiring the view toward lake Suwa and one of the Suwa shrines. A loud commotion behind them made John turn around to see what was happening. He did not immediately appreciate that the large tree trunk sliding down the mountain was getting closer, not until it was right on top of him, literally. He was flattened and watched the underside of the thing go by above him, shedding Japanese to both sides. ‘What a rude welcome,’ he thought.

By now the local Yokai had noticed the arrival of strangers. They were not pleased to have their preparations disturbed. The masks continued to bicker and squabble as they swarmed onto the trunks, having decided that they needed to ride the trunk to replenish their mask energy. Or maybe they just figured it looked like fun.



Louisa surveyed the mayhem, John squashed, the masks now shouting and pushing with the Yokai. She decided she needed Shochu and a soak at the local hot spring. As she faded out, she shouted “I’ll come back later,” just in case anyone was listening.

In the meantime, the Yokai were getting more and more angry as the masks began knocking the celebrants off the trees in greater numbers than normal. Fights began between the Yokai and the foreign spirits. Fights that sent waves of energy out toward the ten thousand Suwa shrines throughout Japan.

This sort of disturbance was bound to attract attention, and it did. Suzume was an important Yokai leader, one of the seniors and also one of the most recently formed, being only a few hundred years old. “Is there nobody else the council can send, who can deal with the Gaijin problems?”

The old man, chair of the council, shook his head sadly, “I know we ask a lot of you, but you are our expert on all matters foreign.”

“These are not foreign men, they are ghosts and spirits, is nobody else qualified to deal with them?”

The old man just waited, looking at Suzume, who finally nodded. “Very well, I’ll deal with it.”

The next moment, Suzume appeared in Louisa’s hot tub. Two beautiful women, naked. One half drunk on a very good Shochu. Suzume immediately began shouting, “You can’t just come into this country as if you own it and screw around with one of our major festivals, what’s wrong with you! Have you no manners? Did nobody ever tell you that you don’t go to another country and act like the place should run like your old place?”

Louisa put her hand on Suzume’s head and pushed her under the water.

As Suzume rose out of the sulphurous waters, thunder on her face, Louisa held up her hands. “Sorry, you just wouldn’t shut up to let me explain that we need help. Our masks need to be replenished and the spirits determined your festival was the best place to do that.”

With a visible effort to control herself, Suzume answered. “Look, our shrines have closed themselves down, they are not accepting or offering prayers, and what prayers the people are offering are bouncing back. This is the trouble your spirits are creating.”

“You’re kidding, your Yokai never fight amongst themselves? Do their fights disturb the whole organization, cause the lesser shrines to shut down? Look, those things going on out there are just scuffles, like little boys wrestling about on the living room floor. I can’t believe they are as damaging as you say.”

Suzume thought for a moment. She cocked her head as she listened to the events going on, and realized that both spirits and Yokai were laughing as much as shouting at each other as they pushed and shoved to get onto the trees. No, this should not have been the cause of ten thousand shrines shutting down.

Not only that, but only a portion of the foreign spirits were trying to ride the trees. Others were more quiet, watching from the sidelines and absorbing the atmosphere. “Perhaps you are right, but why are you here in the first place? Masks get their power from being carved, they don’t re-charge. Once their power is gone they are just a piece of wood.”

“Do you really believe that? Have you not picked up an ancient mask, no longer used but stored for centuries, have you not felt the power that has accumulated there? We are simply taking a shortcut. We can’t wait for centuries while the masks recharge, some places, like your festival, allow it to happen much faster.”

“Well the festival is coming to a close, your masks are as recharged as they are going to get. How about pulling them out of there?”

Louisa nodded and turned slightly to one side. “John, stop lying around on your back and gather up the masks would you please?”

John, unhurt by being run over with a massive tree trunk, dusted himself off and stuck a couple of fingers in his mouth, letting out a piercing whistle. Instantly all the spirits, the masks and quite a few Yokai showed up in the Onsen. The water sloshed over the sides of the tub, and the shochu sloshed onto the deck. Louisa scowled, “Oh very funny John,” but he wasn’t there.

Shaking her head, Louisa turned and explained things to the masks. “Have you recharged, tree masks?”

The masks concerned seemed satisfied, but some stepped forward. Many of the Haida masks bowed toward Suzume and she understood that they were offering to help preserve the original forests around Suwa. They would remain and lend their expertise and experience.

Suzume bowed back, “We accept your kind offer, perhaps a new perspective will help.”

Turning to Louisa, she wondered, “if it wasn’t your spirits that shut down our shrines, what was it?”

~~

## **The Wolf War**

She was running, and whoever it was that was chasing her, it was gaining on her. She felt like she had been running her whole life, but she wasn’t tired. This worried her a little, she was just an ordinary girl, a shrine maiden, no different than the thousands of other attendants at thousands of shrines, but she wasn’t tired. She knew she should be.

They were catching up slowly and she looked back over her shoulder to see just how close they were. That was a mistake, she stumbled on a root and went sprawling, ending up near a huge cypress. She scrambled to put the tree at her back and then looked up to watch the pursuers approach.

But they didn’t. They stopped, took a step to the side and vanished. As she wondered why, she became aware of a man standing beside the tree. She scrambled away from him but he made no move toward her. “Hello, my name is John. Can I help you?”

“You’re an Obake, a ghost!”

“I’m impressed, most people don’t see me as a ghost. How could you tell?”

“You’ve got no legs!”

John sighed, looked down and manifested some legs, “That happens to me a lot, I wonder why? Who were those things that were chasing you?”

“Yoro, wolf demons, but there were too many of them, they don’t run in packs. Why were they after me?”

“In my experience, demons who chase humans are after power. Who are you? Are you someone who has power?”

“I’m just a shrine maiden, a Miko, nobody special. My name is Yuki, my family never gave me a family name, they just handed me over to the shrine.”

“That wasn’t very family-like, were they too poor to keep you?”

“What? I’m a girl, why wouldn’t they get rid of me?”

John had reached the end of his understanding of Japanese and Shinto culture. “Louisa!”

Louisa and Suzume arrived beside John, and the girl bowed deeply to Suzume, who bowed back.

“What is it John?”

“This girl was being chased by wolves. They disappeared when I arrived, but I am having trouble getting the story. I don’t know enough of the culture.”

“I’m flattered that you think I know more than you, John, but I’m afraid I don’t.” Louisa looked to Suzume, who smiled.

“This girl is a shrine maiden from one of the sub-temples. There are about ten thousand of them. She is known to me because she is like me, someone who came from away. I keep an eye on her and those like her.”

John was relieved to have someone who seemed to know what was going on. “She was being chased by wolves, they faded away when I showed up. I don’t know why. I have been trying to figure out what’s going on but even though Yuki speaks English, I don’t know what she’s saying.”

Yuki looked startled, “But you’re speaking Japanese.”

Louisa smiled, “Ghosts and spirits all speak the same language, or rather, they all understand each other.”

Yuki looked like she was about to start running again, “But I’m not a ghost.”

Suzume stepped to the girl and hugged her. “You have been since your shrine burned last month. You didn’t leave, the priest shouted for you but you said you had something to do and you stayed inside.”

“I’m dead?”

“I’m afraid so, I’m sorry little one, but you had something important to do and so you stayed.”

“What was it that I had to do?”

“We don’t know, perhaps this is it. Can you tell me more about what was chasing you?”

“Wolves, Yoro, demons. But I don’t know why.”

“Child, think, they must have been after something, perhaps something you stayed in the shrine to protect?”

“This?” Yuki pulled a key on a string from around her neck. Suzume took in a sharp breath.

“That is the key to the ten thousand shrines of Suwa, how did you get it?”

“I don’t know, it was in the shrine, when it caught fire I had the urge to protect it but I remember I couldn’t touch it when I was alive. I had to be a ghost to pick it up.”

“Oh you dear girl. That was a terrible price you paid to protect the key.”

“Is that why the Yoro are chasing me? For the key?”

“Quite probably, unless you have anything else of similar value.”

“Not that I know of. Wait, so being a ghost, that’s why I didn’t get tired while running.”

“Yes, you have nothing to get tired any more.”

“Well that’s not so bad.”

“You can talk with these visiting ghosts to find out about the other aspects of being dead. In the meantime, did I hear you say that these Yoro are not solitary?”

“How do you know that? You weren’t here.”

Suzume waited while Yuki caught up, “Oh, right, senior Yokai.”

“Yes, and so if these wolves are not Yoro, not Yokai, then what are they?”

John, who had been looking back and forth with a frown on his face, spoke up. “They looked like regular wolves to me, ghost wolves that is, or spirit wolves. Are they Western? Visitors to Japan?”

“Invaders, more like,” said Suzume, who was frowning. “Yuki, come here.”

Hesitantly, Yuki stood beside Suzume, “I’m not going to hurt you girl, stand still.” Suzume put her hands on the sides of Yuki’s face and closed her eyes. A moment later she opened them again.

“European wolves, without a doubt. Trying to find a foothold in Japan, and what better than the Suwa shrines. No wonder the shrines are shut up tight. Yuki, you have become the embodiment of the Suwa shrines. You locked them up. Tell me girl, how did the fire start?”

“I don’t remember, but I had terrible nightmares about something for a week before.”

Suzume suspected Yuki had set the fire herself, she knew she was a throwback to the days when the Miko were shamans, she had seen that, and she understood from her own experience as a spirit being from outside Japan.

“Louisa, are you leaving Japan right away?”

“We don’t have to, but if you’re asking us to go fight the wolves, we aren’t exactly trained for that. John was a detective and I’m a shaman, but we are city folk.”

“You can see them and I can help you find them. We know they are wary of John for some reason. I can get you some help, an old friend from France.”

John closed his eyes and pinched his nose, he could feel a headache coming on.

~~

## **Mike’s Story**

Louisa opened the door and froze, staring.

“Do you remember me?”

“Remember you? You were my first, and we lived together for what, four years? Of course I remember you Mike, and you look like hell.”

“I’m dying, the doctors have given me three months.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that.”

“Well, the thing is, I don’t want to die alone in a hospital ward.”

“Mike?”

“So I’ve come here to ask if you would take me in until I’m gone.”

“Mike I’m married with three kids almost grown and out of the house. What’s wrong with your own family?”

"I wasn't very good to them, maybe even worse than I was to you. My son wants nothing to do with me, and my wife moved out and remarried when I got sick. She said she wasn't going to change my diapers and clean up after me."

"So you remember that you drove me away then."

"I do Louisa, and I've remembered that for my whole life."

"And you think that I will take you in?"

"I'm asking."

"What do I tell my family? They know nothing about you at all."

Mike stood silent, waiting.

"Jesus, Joseph and Mary, you've still got a set of balls on you, if nothing else."

Louisa studied his face, but all she saw there was pain. As she watched, a small shudder went through him and he winced.

"Mike."

He seemed to take that as a no, and began to turn away. As he did, Louisa stepped back and opened the door the rest of the way. Mike turned back and walked slowly, painfully, past her and into the house. He didn't say thanks, this was beyond such things.

Louisa took him to a bedroom on the main floor, one her son had recently moved out of to go start a family of his own.

"He lasted for five months, two more than the doctors gave him. They said it was the good care he received. When he died his son was the only one to come to the funeral. His son and our family."

"How did your husband take it?"

"I told him that Mike was an old friend come to die. What else could I have said?"

"If he drove you away, why did you take him in? Why not just send him on his way, he could have gone to the hospital."

"Because he asked. I know that doesn't sound like a very good reason, John, but for him to ask, after our experiences together, it was important. I took it as important."

~~

## The Hard Man

Suzume popped into existence in the breakfast room of the onsen. John was staring at the fish on his plate, "But it's looking back at me, I swear it is."

"Only it's ghost, that's a cooked fish my love, if you don't want to eat it, hand it over."

"That seems a bit rude while it's still watching me."

Louisa picked up the fish with her chopsticks and dropped it on her own plate. She turned her head to Suzume who bowed and said, "As promised, this is Ray Keen, and..."

Louisa's eyes grew wide, "And Mike Murphy, the man I was just telling you about, John."

John was staring at the ghost with Suzume, "I hate to tell you this but he's been lying to you. His name is Kimbal Feeney and he was one of the chiefs of the IRA when I was over in Ireland helping the local police. He's a Hard Man."

"Hello John. That was a very long time ago, and I don't go by Kimbal any more, haven't since I was in my 20's and met Louisa. I gave all that up."

Suzume looked at Ray and raised an eyebrow.

"He attached himself to me in a bar in Guelph, I told him the story and he said he could help, he's got experience with these wolves. Called himself Mike, beyond that I don't vouch for him."

Suzume turned to Mike, "What is it you think you can contribute here?"

"Look, these are young wolves, France and Germany are getting too crowded, so these pups were banished and ended up here in Japan because there's room with all the depopulation happening."

"You know them?"

"Well, yes, I mean I might have been the one to suggest banning them to here."

"You what?"

"Look, Japan is depopulating right, lots of empty houses in the countryside, that sort of thing."

"Did you tell them to take over the ten thousand Suwa temples?"

"I did not. I feel bad about that, and so I've come to help stop them."

John frowned, "That's all?"

"Well, when Ray told me he was going to be working with Louisa, I thought I'd come and say hello."

“Well say it and go, we don’t need you.”

Louisa put her hand on John’s arm and John turned to her, he bowed his head, remembering how he had treated her, himself. Louisa shook her head as if to deny all that blame and shame and said simply. “We might need him.”

Ray shook his head as if all this relationship stuff was beyond him. He went to Suzume and hugged her, “Good to see you again Yamika.”

Suzume smiled gently, “Nobody calls me that any more except you, Ray. I hope you’ve been well.”

Ray nodded, “And your descendent Kit has grown to a wonderful woman and a powerful being in her own right.”

“She’s your daughter, Ray, how could she not?”

John’s eyes grew wider, “Kit... the white fox girl that went after that loup garou in the pub a few years ago? I might have used something a bit stronger than ‘powerful’ to describe her.”

“You met Kit? You’ll have to tell me the story some time, but right now we should deal with these wolves, pups or not. We foxes are natural enemies of the wolves, and so I can find them. Do we have a plan for getting rid of them?”

Suzume grinned, “You’re the trickster my love, I thought you’d have the plan.”

Ray laughed, “You give me much more credit than I deserve, Yamika, I tend to jump in and improvise.”

Yuki had been silent through all the introductions and discussions, “Can’t we just destroy them? Our temples have been locked up, mine has been burned, me with it. Haven’t these creatures earned extinction?”

Suzume shook her head, “Revenge is an ugly thing, Yuki. If we can avoid it we should.”

“What about telling our local Yoro about these invaders.”

“Now that is a good thought, but they already know and they have tried, a lone wolf demon is no match for a pack, even a pack of youngsters. We will have to deal with the problem ourselves.”

Mike spoke up, “They know me, let me go talk with them, maybe I can get them to leave for another place.”

John grimaced, “Where would they go, Man has spread all over the world, there’s no space left for the wild things. Better you sneak in the spiritual equivalent of a satchel of dynamite and blow them up. You have had some experience with that haven’t you?”

Mike rounded on John, only to see that Louisa had stepped between them. She said nothing, but both men backed down.

Suzume turned to Mike, “Go ahead and talk with them, in the meantime we will think on a plan.”



With that, Mike disappeared with Ray who would find the wolves. The rest of the group sat down to their breakfast and brainstormed ideas.

~~

## The Pups Sorted

Ray was heading deeper into the woods around Lake Suwa, he had the scent. As they walked, Ray turned to Mike, “John says you are a Hard Man. What’s that?”

“Was, I gave all that up when I met Louisa.”

Ray kept walking silently. Mike sighed, “A Hard Man is someone who will do anything to ensure a free Ireland. I was an IRA bomber, just like John said. I went to London to blow stuff up and I needed a cover, so I got involved with Louisa, only that didn’t work out like I thought it would. I fell in love with her and by her kindness, she changed me. I gave up the life, but now both the army and the IRA were after me, so I drove her away before she got caught in the cross-fire.”

“Is that how you died?”

“Funny enough, it isn’t. After years of hiding, I think everyone gave up on me, I married a nice girl and had a kid, but I still wasn’t such a nice person. I had nightmares and a terrible temper. I lost that family and ended up dying of cancer. At the end, I asked Louisa to take me in and she did. I died in her arms. I didn’t move on because I’m afraid of what is waiting for me if I do, so I’ve floated around for years, eventually got to Guelph where I met you.”

Ray held up his hand, “They’re just past that group of trees on the hillock. Do you want me to go in with you?”

“No, my problem, I’ll go alone.”

Ray nodded and sat down on a stump while Mike walked over the hill. Half an hour later, Mike came back. “No good, there’s 50 or 60 of them and they figure they’ve found a good thing here. They aren’t moving on. Do you know something that will blow up spirit wolves? I’ll deliver it to them.”

“My fights with wolves centred around one of them, Isengrim, and I usually managed to trick him rather than kill him.”

“What about Yamika?”

“Oh lord don’t call her that, she’s Suzume now. I tease her with her first name but we spent a lot of years together so she lets me. We can go back and ask her if she knows how to extinguish spirit wolves.”

Back at the onsen, the group was sitting back with coffee and throwing out ideas. Mostly those ideas were thrown out, but Yuki shyly put one forward that Suzume declared might work. “That plan is worthy of Ray. We’ll put it to those two if they can’t convince the wolves to move on. I feel that Ray and Mike are returning to us here.”

Sure enough, shortly after that, Suzume poured two cups of coffee and the men walked through the door. “Thanks love, we had no luck at all, but Mike here would like to bomb the pups to eliminate them. Is there such an explosive available?”

Louisa started, “They’re pups, you can’t just blow them up.”

Before Mike could answer, Suzume said, “We may not have to, Yuki has a plan that I think you might approve, Ray.”

After telling the two what Yuki had in mind, Ray grinned, “I like it, and we don’t have to do any killing. I really like it.”

“So you think it will work?”

“I can think of a way to make it more likely to work. Mike you and I need to go back to the pack.”

Mike nodded and Ray flicked them back to the hillock. This time they both entered the encampment, Ray with an evil grin. “Hey wolves, my name’s Ray and I’ve got a proposal for you. I’m going to help you get control of the Suwa temples, all of them.”

“But there are so many of them.”

“That’s the fun of this, you only need to control about one in a hundred and the rest will fall into place.”

“Who are you? And why are you doing this?”

“Let’s just say that the Suwa temples have not been good to me or my kind.”

The wolves seemed to accept that, “But the places are locked up, how do we get in?”

“You leave that up to me. Each of you, get close to a sub-temple and be ready to enter. When it opens, that’s your chance.”

After a bit more discussion, the wolves agreed to the plan. Ray and Mike went back to the Onsen and Ray was practically rubbing his hands together. “It was like the old days with Isengrim!”

“Let’s hope they are as gullible as he was,” said Suzume.

Ray grinned, “Give them an hour to get into place. Have you warned the Miko what to expect.”

Yuki nodded, “They will be waiting.”

“Time for another coffee then.”

Louisa put her hand on John's knee and pressed down. John got the message and sat while she moved over to sit beside Mike. "You're still here as a ghost, why?"

"Hi Louisa, to be honest I'm worried about what's next. Where will I go?"

"You're a good Catholic boy, Mike, but surely you now know there's more than heaven and hell."

"I don't, you know, this existence here? It could be purgatory."

"In that case, your whole life was purgatory, ghost or alive, you seem to be the same fellow."

"Perhaps that's the point? Your whole life is waiting to go to heaven or hell."

"Do you really believe that Mike?"

"I don't know what I believe any more. I think that's a part of why I don't want to move on."

"Well nothing says you have to, John's been in a pub for decades. I'm not sure he knows there's somewhere to move on to."

"You're happy with him?"

"I am. I'd never have left him if he was like he is now."

"Well I'm happy you found him again, then. I'm sorry I was the fellow I was when we met."

"I understand, Mike, why you did what you did. I appreciate you were trying to keep me safe."

Ray looked up from his own conversation with Suzume, "It looks like we're ready folks. Shall we put the plan into action?"

Yuki stood up and made a mystical-looking gesture with her arms, almost a dance. Suzume smiled, she knew the value of a good display, but she needed no such thing to make it so the group could hear what was happening at each sub-shrine that had a wolf pup outside the door.

What was happening was a lot of doors opening and pups entering. Yuki closed the temples again so that the pups could not get out. In about half a minute after the doors closed, great whoops of "Kawaii!" were heard. Ray grinned.

Within a day, Yuki could open the doors once more, the pups, far from taking over the shrines, had been taken over as pets by the Miko. The fearsome wolf spirits were now cute little fluff-balls that would roll over to have their tummies rubbed by the shrine maidens.

As the group gathered for one last breakfast, Suzume stated, "Never underestimate the power of young Japanese girls to convert fearsome monsters into cute fluffy pets. This is a secret Japanese power, the power of kawaii, of cuteness. I thank you all for your help in this crisis. Ray, will you stay for a while and visit?"

Ray nodded.

“And Mike, will you return to Guelph or move on?”

“I’ve put it off too long, I’m going to see where I end up when I move on. Goodbye Louisa, you have always been good to me and I wish you all the best. Thank you so much for what you’ve done for me.”

Louisa kissed Mike and gave him a huge hug. She then looked around at her group of masks and at John. “Where to next, family?”

~~

## **The Mine Field**

“OK are we all here? Rule number one for everybody. Do not manifest as a physical body, this place is full of antipersonnel mines and worse. Become physical and risk being blown to pieces.”

John sidled up to Louisa and asked quietly, “Why are we here? Of all the non-spiritual places on earth, the DMZ between North and South Korea would be number one in my guess.”

“Well we do have a Korean mask or two, and believe it or not, this place is gaining new spiritual power that we can tap into.”

“How? It doesn’t seem possible, this place is war and violence, how could it possibly be spiritual?”

“Look around you John. This zone is 4 kilometres deep and 250 kilometres long, and on the south side there’s a restricted zone another 9.5 kilometres deep that’s mostly just farmland. The demilitarized zone has been empty of people for 60 years. That’s a long time for nature to come back.”

“Demilitarized, that’s a laugh, the place is covered in explosives.”

“No soldiers, John, no people. Look, there are thousands of species here, over a hundred of them are protected, nature is taking over again.”

“Until they sign a peace treaty and start developing the place you mean.”

“There are those trying to keep it as it is, they might win, who knows. In the meantime, the spiritual powers of the place are building and we can tap into that. The masks already are, those who are dedicated to nature gods.”

John pointed up, “What’s that?”

Louisa looked up to see several balloons with something attached, drifting south. “Ah, those would be trash bags, the modern equivalent of flinging a diseased cow over a castle wall. Crude biological warfare.”

“Oh my lord, the childishness of the modern man.”

“Come on, what about Gruinard Island in Scotland? Death Island? The one that was finally declared safe in 1990? Full of anthrax that was being weaponized.”

“What were they going to do? Drop diseased sheep on Germany?”

“Linseed cakes, John, that the cows would eat and infect anyone who ate the meat.”

“How do you know this stuff?”

“I was there, just like you, John, during the war. One of my jobs was with the team that assessed the effects of spreading anthrax with a bomb, to see if it was still infectious. It was, oh dear it was. Eighty sheep to be cut up, burned and buried.

“Well OK I agree, people have been stupid for a very long time, still, trash?”

“I suspect it’s bags of shit, John, but what would you say it was, if you were telling your people they were harmless?”

At that moment there was a tremendous explosion, followed by three more in rapid succession. Louisa ran the ten metres to where it happened and arrived just in time to see a spirit manifest a leg, tap the top of a mine, and dematerialize as the mine exploded.

“Stop, all of you! What do you think you’re doing?”

All the spirits blinked out of sight. “Honestly what are you? Eight years old? Now you’ll bring down both sides on us. You’d better disappear and for goodness sake, stay out of sight. Do you hear me?”

Louisa turned to speak to John, “John! Seriously! If you tap that mine I hope you lose your leg! Although the way you forget to manifest them you might as well.”

John bowed his head in what he thought was a sheepish move, but Louisa caught his grin just before he did. “Honestly, you and those spirits, you’re all just little boys aren’t you?”

At that moment, the North Koreans opened fire with machine guns and ended up exploding another five or six mines. Louisa was in full sight, but dematerialized, so the bullets went right through her. Staring at where the bullets were coming from, she put her fists on her hips and stared. This seemed to make the soldiers angry and even more machine guns began to fire at her. Eventually Louisa got tired of glaring at the soldiers and vanished. It took a few minutes for the firing to stop.

Thinking to get away from the soldiers who had seen her, Louisa drifted westward about half a kilometre and became visible again.

“I say, could you keep your crew from causing such a racket please, I’m trying to write.”

Louisa was startled, “What, who are you?”

"I'm a writer and I'd like a bit of peace and quiet please, my shed over there is not soundproof you know."

"No, I don't know. Who are you and how come you saw my spirits?"

"Isn't that obvious? I'm dead, I'm a ghost like you are."

"I suspect not like I am but once more, who are you?"

"Asked three times, not answered three times. Maybe you should be asking John who I am."

"I will, but in the meantime, what the hell are you doing with a shed here?"

"I'm sorry, didn't I say? I want to write in private, undisturbed, with no visitors, and what better place than here? Nobody ever bothers me here. Until you lot that is."

"Well I'm sorry about that. Look we will be gone in just a couple of hours, we're charging up a few masks with the spiritual power of the nature around here."

"You're what? Are there going to be more of you lot coming around to charge up their batteries?"

"I shouldn't think so."

"And you're going to be another few hours?"

"Yes."

"In that case, I've got a nice bottle of white wine in the shed, would you like to join me in a glass or two?"

"Not too much interruption?"

"Well I've been nicely alone for almost thirty years, I suspect a bit of company for a couple of hours won't hurt anything."

"And what are you writing?"

"I'm extending a book on dolphins."

"So you're a scientist then."

"No, no I wouldn't say that. Large glass or small?"

"Large if you don't mind."

The writer poured two glasses of wine and set them on a small table alongside his typewriter and his Macintosh computer. "You have both?"

“Oh I hated computers for years, but I went to a computer fair and bought two of the first Mac’s sold in the UK. Stephen Fry bought the third one.”

“Which of them are you using now?”

“The typewriter, no power here in the DMZ I’m afraid. I tried a solar panel but the reflections seemed to attract attention and I got bombed a couple of times.”

“I see, and what is it you’re writing?”

“Well, I wrote a book on dolphins and it was made into a radio play where the adaptation said that they ended up flying around in space. That’s not what I intended, so I thought I’d correct the story.”

“Where did you send them in the original story?”

“That’s just it, I didn’t specify. They just disappeared.”

“I think I see, the dolphins disappeared and reappeared somewhere else, and the radio guy thought outer space.”

“I know, stupid eh?”

“Yes, and thank you, I’d love another glass, but I should check on John to see that he’s not getting into trouble. By the way, why would John know who you are?”

“Oh, he’s one of the first ghosts I ever met, in a pub in London. I introduced myself.”

“And you think he’ll remember who you are?”

“I did think he would, yes, maybe not?”

“Come to the door and look.”

The writer looked out the door and there were John and several other spirits, at the top of a tall tree, waving like maniacs at the border guards, trying to get them to shoot.

Shaking her head, Louisa went back to the table, as did the writer, with a thoughtful look on his face.

“OK maybe not. Another glass you said?”

“Thank you, yes. Look, would you like me to take you to a dimension that might be more suited to your dolphins? One you can check out for yourself?”

“You could do that?”

“Sure, it will be a nice break from babysitting those children out there. Pick up your glass and we’ll go.”

The writer did so and as he took Louisa's hand, he found himself on a semi-tropical shoreline with a clear blue-green sea. "This is nice, it will do perfectly."

"I thought you might like it, the first time I visited, I thought it needed dolphins."

"Why did you come?"

"That's a good question. That man back home, John, he went a little 'off' at one point when we were married, and so I had to leave him, but I never stopped loving him. When I died and became a Shaman, I learned how to go between dimensions, and I looked for one where he never became impossible to live with."

"Here, I see, and where is he?"

Louisa turned around, "You see that house up on the hill? We live there with our three children. John always thought he would like to live by the water, and so we moved here when we could. He consults all over the world on police matters, and I became a specialist in agriculture so I could travel with him. When one of us is working, the other is usually free to take care of the kids."

"If I write that the dolphins came here?"

"Then we will have dolphins in this dimension, and I would be most happy."

"Very well Louisa my friend, this is where they will go. Thank you for the trip and for the story."

They travelled back to the Korean DMZ and Louisa managed to get the family down from the trees, and on their way to the next location. Louisa never did find out who the writer was.

~~

## **The Patagonian Dragon**

"This isn't Patagonia? Why are we here?"

"We're part way there, John, it's Isla Negra, the home of Pablo Neruda, on the coast. We're going to look at the mask collection. I think there may be some masks that still have power."

"And we're going to steal them?"

"Borrow, John. We're going to borrow them."

"How do you know about Pablo Neruda?"

"I read too John, in fact I read him in the original Spanish."

"You're kidding... no wait, you aren't. Is there anything you can't do?"



“Fly. No wait, I can fly now too, couldn’t back then.”

“Back then...”

“Yes, when I met Nacho, who introduced me to Neruda’s poetry.”

“I’m pretty sure I don’t want to know.”

Louisa smiled enigmatically.

“No, I’m certain I don’t want to know. So where are the masks?”

“Not here, this is the room with the ship’s figureheads.”

“Can we just sit here for a while?”

“John get out of that chair, you’re not supposed to sit there, it’s a museum piece now.”

“Ugh, you’re not kidding, the padding is shot.”

“Come on, the masks are down the hallway.”

As they walked from one room to another, down the hallway that was the house as it had been build onto, over the years, they saw the mask collection. “Louisa, these masks are long dead. There’s no power left in them.”

“I’m afraid you’re right, this is a museum, not a home any more. The power has been lost in the gaze of strangers, how terrible, to lose all vitality to the small cold regard of a tourist. They never see the spirit behind the mask, only the carved piece of wood. Every time someone says ‘Oh, isn’t that nice,’ the mask loses a bit of its power.”

“So do we borrow these and take them with us?”

“We can’t, we don’t have that many spirits with us. I didn’t realize just how many masks were here, and they are well and truly exhausted. Let them sleep, we’re done here.”

As they toured the rest of the house, Louisa made small satisfied noises in the back of her throat, the many-tailed hobbyhorse, the men’s bathroom, the bed upstairs where Neruda spent his last days, the bottle collection, the writing desk picked up off the beach. She enjoyed it all despite the bitter taste in her mouth, of seeing so many masks that had been drained, slowly leached away.

John was happy to see her mood improve, “Come on, let’s go to the interpretation centre and I’ll buy you a book.”

“Thank you, you’re very kind, perhaps in Spanish... John?”

John flicked his chin across the room, toward a young boy who was sitting at a table, reading.

“What... oh, oh dear, what is that?”

John shook his head and kept looking at the boy, who finished the poem he was reading, closed the book on his finger and looked up at John. He gave a small nod and waved at the empty chairs at his table.

The spirits, who had been happily showing their masks around the place, suddenly winked out of sight and sound. John noticed, but didn't comment as he pulled out a chair for Louisa and then himself.

“Dragons don't exist.”

“Ah, then I should dive back into the ocean and swim away, should I?”

Louisa was looking at John with her mouth open. She closed it and turned to the boy, “I'm sorry for my friend, he doesn't get out much.”

“But he's right, dragons don't exist, and so I don't exist, this follows logically.”

“My name is Louisa and this is John.”

“I am Arturo, your Spanish is a bit slow, you are not Chilean then?”

Louisa actually blushed, “I'm afraid not, I learned in Spain and could never speak like a Chileno.”

“It is all right, your Spanish is lovely. You like Pablo's writing?”

“I do indeed, I have read him for many years.”

“That is good, he wanted his work to be known beyond Chile and Latin America.”

“You knew him?”

“I was talking to him just last week.”

Louisa was stunned into silence. John looked at her and said, “He is a personal hero, she is speechless to think that you talked to him so recently.”

“I can take you to see him. I am somewhat unstuck in time.”

John looked at Louisa who shook her head, “Perhaps not now, I suspect she will need to work up to that. So you can travel in time?”

“I can, since I went through my double Hain. I'm a Patagonian Dragon you see.”

“Ah, we were on our way to Patagonia, to recharge some of our masks, and we thought we might borrow some masks from this house to take along. Unfortunately they are all dead.”

“Not exactly dead, but perhaps in a coma, no that's not quite it, they have been so long inactive, treated as some sort of strange collection from an odd man, that they have gone to sleep.”

“Well should we take them along with us?”

“There’s a lot of them, I’d just take one. I was in the hallway today and a Zaouli mask winked at me, why not take her along, maybe if she is recharged, she can wake up the others.”

“Which is the Zaouli mask?”

“Can you see the mask being used when you look at it?”

“Sometimes.”

“OK look about half way along, a female mask with someone moving their feet impossibly fast and their upper body still. That’s the Zaouli mask, she’s from the Ivory Coast and about 200 years old.”

Louisa had been quiet, thinking of Pablo Neruda and her chance to meet him. She decided she wasn’t quite up for that yet, but she was curious about this boy. “Arturo, what is a Patagonian Dragon? Were you born one?”

“No of course not, the insect is like your snow fleas, they are small, about a centimetre and live on the ice. But I’m much bigger when I change.”

“How did you become a dragon?”

“ I went through the men’s Hain when I was a boy, and then a year later the women took me through the women’s Hain. That let me become a dragon.”

“I don’t understand. I thought the Hain was a coming of age ceremony.”

“It was, but there were two, one for the women originally, but the Moon was in charge and her husband, the Sun, found out it was a big fake, spirits that were just the women in the village who pretended, so that the men were scared. The sun beat his wife and chased her up into the sky, where he is still chasing her. The other men killed all the older women and then took over their scheme so that the boys were initiated. One of the initiations was that the boys found out the spirits were just men in body paint and a mask, and they were told not to tell the women. All this had to do with who did what jobs, who did the cooking and washing up, who hunted the game.”

“But if there was no woman’s Hain, any more, how did you get initiated?”

“I didn’t say there was no more, Moon is still around and she remembers the old rituals, she made sure the women remembered, and kept it secret from the men. They pretend to be scared of the men’s spirits and to obey the men, but they really just do it to keep the peace. Moon is there as a warning against what happens when secrets are revealed, you can still see the scars on her face where her husband beat her.”

“So you were initiated in both Hains and became a dragon. What does a dragon do?”

“Not much these days, the old culture is gone, people claim there are no more Selk’nam, which is silly, we didn’t die out, we intermarried with the whites who were hunting us. There is still Selk’nam blood

around and that's what lets me be a dragon. I was the one who kept the peace between men and women if I was needed, there's only one of me."

"And you can travel in time?"

"Of course. How else can I do my job?"

"So you're a real spirit."

"Sort of, I guess. I'm just a boy who can become a dragon. A big dragon."

"Well we're heading to Patagonia to recharge some of our masks with energy, could you guide us?"

"Won't do any good, there's nothing left down there. You need to go back in time, to when the Hain was still being performed. That's when the energy was there."

Louisa's face fell, to come all this way for nothing. But Arturo grinned, "No sad face, lady, I can take you all back in time so you can recharge your masks."

"You would do that for me?"

"Sure, go get your Zaouli mask. I want to see Pablo's masks awake again. It's been too quiet around here since he died, and he'd be upset that his masks weren't alive any more. We'll do that for him."

John ran next door to borrow the mask and as he got back to the group, they vanished, causing several tourists to blink, shake their heads and invent some story as to how several people didn't really disappear.

~~

## The Hain

"Stop your whining John, it's not that cold, those boys over there are naked."

"Look, if I wasn't a ghost I'd be shivering out of my socks, it's cold, and those boys are crazy. Where are we anyway?"

Arturo smiled at the continuing back and forth between Louisa and John, "We're in Selk'nam territory, somewhere in the 1850s. My timing isn't all that accurate, but there's a Hain going on right now and it will charge up the masks, some of them anyway."

John took a good look at the tent that was shaking, and the painted figures with masks that showed up outside the tent for the women and the boys to see. "Wait, didn't you tell me that those weren't really spirits, but just the men dressed up?"

Louisa giggled, "Or undressed up."

“How can fake spirits charge up our masks?”

Arturo covered John’s mouth with his hand, “Shhh, don’t let the women hear you. Do you want to start another massacre? This is to convince the women that the spirits are on the men’s side, so that they have to carry the camp from place to place, do the cooking, and take care of the children.”

Louisa was watching the women, “Arturo, they don’t look very frightened to me, I think they know all about this little play.”

Arturo grinned lopsidedly and waved them further away from the group. “Let your spirits stay there to absorb the energy into your masks, but let’s not break the conventions OK? Once more, the story goes that an age ago, the women used to hold the Hain and the men were convinced that the spirits favoured the women. That way the men did all the work around camp as well as hunting. One day, Kreeh told Kren about the Hain, or maybe he spied on the ceremony, regardless, he was furious. He beat Kreeh and burned her face but she escaped, going into the sky as the moon. Kren became the sun and they both became Howenh, ancestor spirits, the sun chasing the moon ever since. But that wasn’t all of it. The men killed all the women who knew about the secret, all who had been initiated, and left only the young ones. Then they took over the ceremony and have kept the women under control ever since.”

Louisa was horrified, “That’s terrible, how do the women tolerate that!

“It works. The men think they are in charge, but as you noticed, the women go along with it. They don’t let the men know they understand the big secret.”

John wasn’t convinced, “I still don’t know how the masks are going to be recharged by pretend spirits.”

“The Soorts? They are men in costume, certainly, but Xalpen, queen of the underworld, and Temaukel, god of the universe are very real. Their power is here in the Hain, it will charge your masks.”

“So what about you? How far back in time did you have to go to participate in the women’s Hain, and how did that work?”

“Well if you must know, I’m a two-spirit. There aren’t many of us, but I lived as a girl when I had my first Hain, a very long time ago. Since then I have lived long enough to do the boy’s Hain and that’s when I became a dragon.”

“OK let’s stop here, I’ve never heard of a Patagonian Dragon.”

“Look down, John, look close at the top of the snow.”

“But those are tiny little bugs, they look like our springtails, that’s not very impressive.”

“Imagine one that is three metres tall with wings and firey breath and time travel.”

“Oh, and that’s you?”

Arturo nodded.

“Wait, those boys are naked, how did you pass as a boy for that Hain?”

“You’re kidding, I can change into a dragon but I can’t add some bits between my legs?”

John seemed satisfied, but Louisa wasn’t done. “You can change to a ten foot dragon who breaths fire and flies, why didn’t you stop the Europeans from shooting your people?”

“The genocide wasn’t just about farmers hunting the Selk’nam, it was about diseases. I punished a few of the murderers when I could, but there was nothing I could do about people dying from disease. I had to watch as my people died. If I could have stopped it, I would have.”

“Are you the only dragon?”

“As far as I know, I’ve never met another.”

“Why? I mean why are you?”

Arturo cocked his head as if listening to something, “I’m afraid you’re going to find out now.”

Louisa heard it too, a sort of insane cackling, coming from both above and below. From the sky she saw a woman with a burned and scarred face, and from the ground below her feet she saw a woman rise from the rocks, half rock herself. Arturo said, “Meet Kreeh, the moon who hates all men, and Xalpen the cannibal ruler of the underworld. Her Soorts are what the men dress up as.”

“So there are actual spirits, not just the pretend ones?”

“Later, I need to deal with this.”

Arturo began to grow and change until he was indeed a ten foot high dragon with wings. He leapt into the air and flapped toward the moon woman saying “It is too late, these men are not your enemies.”

John rubbed his eyes, the woman was not normal sized, he could see that when she got close to Arturo. She was at least three times as tall. She reached out with a massive hand and swatted at the dragon. Arturo jiggled in the air so that she missed, then roared fire close to Kreeh’s face.

This had an immediate effect, the giant woman shrieked, threw her hands in front of her face, and turned, fleeing back into the sky.

The dragon then plunged back to the earth to stand in front of the stone woman. “Xalpen, these men have gathered meat for you, will you eat it and be satisfied?”

“I will,” boomed the woman, and she turned to the men’s tent where piles of meat were laid on platforms. The woman ate the meat but then turned a slavering glance toward the boys who were being initiated.

As she stalked toward them, Arturo sighed. “Never satisfied...”

He flew to put himself between the boys and Xalpen. “You will not have these or any other here today.”

“And what can you do about it, insect?”

Arturo snapped at her arm but could not penetrate her stone-like skin. Xalpen shook him off and then clubbed him aside. As she started toward the boys, John was in her way.

“Try me you ugly stone-monster.”

John dove into her body in his ghost form and then became solid, more than solid, he became stone himself, much to his own surprise. This had an immediate effect on the underworld spirit, expanding her body so that the various bits and pieces of rock lost their cohesion. Xalpen cursed as she began to fall to pieces and as she did, she flowed back into the ground from whence she came.

Which left John in a stony state with a disgusted look on his face before he became immaterial once more.

“Well done you,” said Louisa, clapping her hands.

John bowed theatrically as Arturo shifted from Dragon to boy again. “Indeed, thank you John, the fight with Xalpen is usually long and hard. This has saved time and has expended a massive amount of energy, I suspect your masks are as charged up as they will become. I will take you now back to the present and let you get on with the next part of your trip. I will take the Zaouli mask back to Isla Negra with me if you are good with that?”

Louisa handed Arturo the mask and kissed him on the cheek as they faded away from the Hain.

~~

## **The War of the Grootslang**

“Louisa, why are we here? This is South Africa isn’t it? I thought we’d go to the Ivory Coast or someplace green and lush.”

“You didn’t like the trip across the southern Atlantic?”

“I’m sorry, I slept for most of the way, was it nice?”

Louisa shut her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. John knew that signal well, and decided to change the subject as fast as possible. “Did Arturo get safely back to Isla Negra with the mask?”

Louisa looked up from the puddle of water she’d stirred up with a stick. “He did, the mask is back on the wall. Apparently it woke up the other masks and there’s quite a noise late at night as they all catch up on their stories. Not only that, but the ship’s figurines all talk well into the early hours in the livingroom, just as Pablo and his friends used to do. Arturo can’t bring Neruda into his future, but he says the poet is well pleased that the house has woken up after its long sleep.”

John smiled, "That's good, I found the place to be a bit dull as a tourist attraction, it could use a bit of life from those who live there... What in the world is that commotion?"

John and Louisa walked to a corner of the rocky hill they were standing beside. There they spied the source of the noise, a Grootslang, an elephant headed giant snake, was emerging from a cave. On its back were ghosts of the Boers, yelling insults at the English Outsiders, "Death to the Uitlanders" and such. As Louisa watched, the Grootslang swerved to come at them, but the spirits, wearing their masks, intercepted the animal.

John cheered, "They must have remembered the log ride in Japan, they're jumping onto the snake and pushing the ghosts off!"

Louisa shook her head, "boys, all of them. Still, that's a good trick."

"Why are those ghosts coming after us? What have we done?"

"You don't remember the Boer Wars? We took South Africa from the Dutch farmers, at one point we put almost the entire population into concentration camps and starved them."

"Oh, so they're a bit angry?"

"I'd say so, just a bit. Still it looks like our spirits are getting into the..."

"Don't, please don't say the spirit of the thing... damn."

Louisa gave John a quick hug to make up for the groaner. "I think this is going to be a bit more of a fight than we anticipated, the spirits are not doing as well as I thought they would against ghosts."

"Well if I remember right, those ghosts had a lot of experience in the wars. They always fought against superior numbers and weapons."

Louisa frowned, "Our spirits are using the power of the masks to match the ghosts. That's not good."

Sure enough, the spirits were holding their own, but the masks were losing the power they'd picked up so far on the journey.

"No it's not, can you call them off?"

"Bad idea John, the ghosts would wipe them out. No, we have to win this fight."

"Help? Do we have any allies around here?"

"What, like the ghosts of Lord Strathcona's Horse?"

"Who?"

"I thought you were a buff on Canadian history, they were a unit of mounted cowboys recruited in Manitoba to fight in South Africa. It still exists as an armoured unit."



“How do you know this stuff?”

“I don’t know, I must have read it somewhere.”

“Are their ghosts still here?”

“I doubt it, no we’re on our own I’m afraid. Any ideas?”

John whistled loudly and several Canadian masks appeared in front of him. “You fellows are now cavalry and your job is to take down that big snake. Think you can do that?”

The spirits saluted sloppily and were suddenly on horses, rifles slung from their saddles and each with a lasso. “That’s the spirit boys, see those tusks and that trunk on the snake? Go stop it now and once you’ve done that, make sure you chase it back into its hole.”

The spirits wheeled their horses around and galloped toward the beast. Several lassos flew toward the tusks and trunk, many of them finding the target. Looping the ropes around their saddlehorns, the spirits backed up their horses and held the beast in one place.

Those spirits not handling the ropes drew out their guns and took aim at the Grootslang. “Will that do anything, John?”

“Just watch.”

The spirits fired and each spiritual bullet stung the beast. It trumpeted as best it could and soon turned to head back to the cave it came from. Without their main ally and weapon, the ghosts soon turned tail as well and ran for the cave.

The mounted spirits fired their rifles into the air or into the rear end of the snake while the other spirits cheered silently as their buddies, the ones who had jumped on and pushed a ghost off, tumbled off of the snake before it got to the cave.

“That was a close thing, but John we’re still in a bad situation, the masks are much depleted from what they were when we got here.”

“You’ll think of something love, you always do.”

A day later, the troupe was standing at the base of Table Mountain. “Ready for a climb?”

John shook his head, “Why do we always have to walk up the mountain? Why can’t we just flick ourselves to the top?”

“That’s not how it works, dear. We have to do the work if we want the benefit.”

“But it’s the spirits that get the benefit, why can’t they walk the masks up there.” He was cranking his neck to see the faint traces of a pathway.

“Remember the cottage? We climb if we want the cottage, otherwise the spirits get the energy and boot us out.”

“Damn and blast. Alright, let’s get started.”

As John set his foot onto the path, he found himself flying backward. Ten metres back, he landed heavily on his butt. “What the hell?”

“You can’t cheat, John. You’ve got to walk up with your full body and the weight. You know that.”

John blushed, “I thought that maybe shaving a few pounds off wouldn’t matter.”

“John there’s lazy and then there’s you. Now let’s go.”

John got up off the ground and brushed his pants off, he somehow got the impression the spirits were laughing at him, but it was hard to tell behind their masks. He joined the rest of them as they walked up the mountain, slipping and sliding on the loose rock of the pathway. “I don’t know why it is always so hard, I mean once upon a time I was that weight, just because I’ve put on a couple of pounds...”

Grumbling all the way, they continued on up the pathway. Later, they stopped and had a look around, “Will you look at that ocean. That’s something you don’t see every day.”

“Certainly not at the cabin, it’s lovely isn’t it?”

“I’m so glad I insisted we walk up this path.”

“Yes, John.”

“Louisa, the masks don’t look any different, I thought walking the path was going to recharge them.”

Louisa frowned, shook her head. “Let’s see what happens when we get to the top.”

Twenty minutes later, they stopped climbing and were shocked at what they saw, “I thought the top was empty except for the cable car building.”

John laughed, “Looks like a bit more here than a cable car.”

Louisa stood with her mouth open. There was a city on the top of the mountain, shops, houses, streets.

John poked her in the arm, “and nothing has changed with the masks.”

“Hang on, stop talking for a minute and let me look... Damnit, this is a spirit town. You there, boy, how long has this town been here?”

“Forever, Miss. It’s always been here.”

“I can feel a lot of power here, why haven’t our masks picked up any of it.”

“Have you paid, Miss?”

“Paid? What do you mean, paid?”

“Just down that street, miss, is the best recharge shop in Tabletown. You just take your masks there and they will fix you right up.”

Louisa was catching on, “Let me guess, your Uncle owns that shop.”

“Cousin, Miss.”

“Of course, of course. Well escort us there son, and maybe you can arrange a discount with your cousin.”

“I’ll do my best, Miss.”

The group tramped down the street and squeezed into the shop, which was bigger on the inside, or perhaps it expanded to accommodate the numbers.

“How can I help you, folks?”

“Your cousin here tells us we need to pay to get our masks recharged, and that we can do that here.”

“Only a modest charge for time and effort, I assure you.”

Louisa swung her purse around to the front and opened it, “How much, then, for these masks.”

“Oh we can’t take money, Miss, it just won’t work.”

“Not money, well what do we need, to pay for spiritual power?”

“Miss...”

Louisa was silent for a moment. “Oh dear, we need to work and sweat, don’t we. Spiritual power requires great effort, right?”

“Exactly correct, Miss, and this week we have a special, three masks for three days of repetitive work building up the stone walls around the edge of the mountain. Lots of time to contemplate the nature of the universe and your place in it.”

John groaned, he could see months of masonry in front of him.

~~

## **Black Market Black Magic**

“We’re being watched.”

John looked up from where he was laying a large stone in the wall, and looked around. “Who, where?”

Louisa sighed, "I feel it, John, but I doubt anyone would be dumb enough to be staring at us."

"Like the Shopkeeper there you mean? Mr. Travers? He's staring a hole in your back."

"No not him, he's just horny, it's something else."

"Something else, not someone else?"

"I don't know, something nasty for sure. I can feel it wanting to hurt us."

"That doesn't sound good, what should we do about it?"

"Just keep working, we'll see what it is when it appears I guess."

"Well I'd like it to happen soon, I'm sick of stacking rocks. Also, why aren't any of our spirits helping us build this damned wall?"

"It's close, you may get your wish."

"The spirits?"

"They aren't going to help us, John, stop complaining about them, no I mean whatever is watching us, it's close."

At that moment, the section of wall that John had been working on exploded. Rocks went flying everywhere, but mostly over the side of the mountain. What John saw, once the dust cleared a bit, was a vaguely human shaped being with no mouth and massive arms. Instead of legs, it had the body of a seal. "What the..."

Louisa had no such moment of hesitation. She threw the rock she'd had in her hand. A twenty pound ball hit the being square in the face going at a tremendous speed. Fast enough to knock the thing right off the top of the mountain and end over end all the way back down to the ocean.

John watched it fall, and then looked a bit further outward, "Wow, what a view. That's amazing, why would you want to build a wall to cover that up?"

Travers, the shopkeeper was there in a flash with a big tarp, "Shhh, shut up, shut up, shut up and help me tack up this tarp."

Louisa was frowning, a sure sign she was thinking. "You don't like the view, Mr. Travers?"

"What view, there's no view, why would you say there was a view?"

"Really? I'd describe that view as almost magical..."

"Nononono, it's not, I assure you it's not magical. No not at all. Boring, scary that's what it is, I assure you there's nothing magical at all, it's just too far down, right?"

Louisa put her hands on her hips and had that look in her eye that made John back up several paces to get out from between the two. “Mr. Travers, I do believe you are keeping the beings in this town from looking at that view. Now why would you do that... no don’t, let me guess. You are restricting the free flow of magic in order to control the folks in this town. You, sir, are running a black market in black magic. You are making money from something that ought to be free, it’s like you’re charging folks for the air they breathe. And worse than that, they have bought into your little scheme, they pay for their magic by building this wall that keeps them from the magic they ought to be getting for free.”

“I never traded in black magic!”

“Magic you charge money for is, by definition, black magic and you know it. Now tell me what that being was that blew a hole in the wall.”

“That, that was nothing, just a Trunko, a blob of rotting flesh that washes up on the beach once in a while.”

“A blob of rotting flesh that washes all the way up to the top of this mountain? John, how about we just blow these walls apart so that the good citizens of this town can enjoy the view?”

“Well, er, maybe we can negotiate a better rate for you and your masks?”

“I’m pretty sure I don’t want black magic for my masks. How about it masks?”

“Well, look, I’ve got some pretty good witches on my payroll. How about we give you and your lovely partner here life again?”

“Do I look like I just fell off the turnip truck? I know all about that scam, your witch gives us life and we instantly age to dust. OK that’s enough of your nonsense. Masks? What have you decided?”

In an instant, all over town, handbills appeared on walls, trees and fences, outlining the whole scheme to sell magic, sell it not only to the citizens of the town, but also half way up the African continent. In about ten minutes, the rocks started to fly outward from the mountaintop and within an hour, the magic of the view came flooding onto the mountaintop.

Louisa and John smiled as their spirits carried the masks around the edge, gathering power. In no time at all those masks who could take it, were full of power again.

As the troupe took the gondola down off the mountain, John saying he was too tired to walk, they noticed the shopkeeper sneaking down the side of the mountain. As they watched, he began floating back up to the top again, the townsfolk having also noticed him sneaking away. John chuckled, “I wonder if he’s going to need that witch of his to bring him back to life, those people look a bit pissed.”

Louisa smiled, “Good work, masks, I didn’t think of putting up signs.”

Many of the masks seemed to smile in the late afternoon shadows.

“Where to now, my love?”

“I don’t know, John, we’ve messed about in the south, how about we go north. Have you ever been to Iceland?”

“Once, during the war.”

“Oh? What were you doing?”

“You know Iceland was neutral during the war, right? Well the Navy thought the Nazis might invade and use the place to attack England, so I was sent in early to scout, and in 1940 the Navy and Marines pulled off Operation Fork where we invaded first. I was there for a couple of years before they invaded.”

“Do you still know anyone there?”

“Good lord, they’d all be dead long ago.”

“Too bad, it’s always a good idea to have someone to visit.”

“Sorry, but we’re going anyway?”

~~

## **The Harper**

As they reached the bottom of the gondola ride, the Trunko was just emerging from the water. John nudged Louisa and pointed with his chin. The creature came up to them on the street, lower body splitting and acting something like legs to propel it along. Nobody seemed to pay it any attention.

“Ah, I guess I owe you an apology for smashing you off the mountain,” said Louisa.

A mouth appeared in the Trunko’s face, “No need, it was worth it for you to figure out what was going on and for that black marketeer to get what was coming to him.”

“What was that?”

“They’ll turn him into a tourist attraction. He’ll be a statue to some made-up hero and they’ll put him into the guide books.”

“Sounds reasonable I guess. He can help bring in some actual cash. Will they encase him in cement or something?”

“No, no need for that, Medusa drifted down here from Greece about a thousand years ago, she’ll take care of it.”

“Ah, those other life-like statues we saw...”

“He wasn’t the first, no. I think the spirits up there like a bit of excitement once in a while.”

“I see, well I’m glad you’re fine, we’ll be going now, we’re heading for Iceland.”

“Do you know the way?”

“Sure, follow the coast north and then a left, yes?”

“I suppose that’s close enough, good luck.”

John frowned and was about to say something when Louisa waved her hand.

“Isn’t Iceland supposed to be cold?”

Louisa looked around, the place was steaming hot, a jungle. As they turned around trying to figure this out, several men with automatic rifles stepped out of the trees. “Oh hell, Louisa, we need to go now.”

“John, you’re a ghost, you keep forgetting that, they can’t hurt you. Now ask where we are.”

“Ask... is that some sort of crack about me being a man and not able to ask directions?”

Louisa waved her hand and they vanished just as the men opened fire. This time, they were in the middle of a desert. John looked around, saw nobody and said, “Again?”

This time they were on a boat that was drastically overcrowded and sinking. In the distance, John recognized Gibraltar. “Louisa we’re on a migrant boat.”

“No kidding, Mr. Detective. Did we overload it and make it start to sink?”

“I doubt it, I think it’s been sinking for a while, can you get them to shore?”

“No problem, ‘Masks off, use them to paddle, start!’”

In no time the boat was flying over the waves and more or less smashed half way up a beach when they finally came to a stop. Louisa began to wave her hand again but John stopped her. “Can we rest for a few minutes here? I am being reminded of a trip I once took across England. I got on a bus with no idea where it was going, and didn’t know where I ended up. At that next bus station I bought another ticket to I didn’t know where. This feels like that trip.”

“Sorry John, I’m trying my best, it’s like something is pushing us away from Iceland.”

“Are you sure you’re not just weak? Or maybe something is pulling us toward something.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, something we’re supposed to do?”

“I repeat.”

“Our lives entwine and unweave as events and people move in and out of the scene.”

“What? Why did you say that, John?”

“Well if you must know, it’s something I learned as a Harper, many centuries ago.”

“No, I’ve looked at you John, you’ve only had a single life, I’ve never seen any indication that you’re twice-born.”

“Or more? Are you sure you’re Shaman enough to see it if I simply lead the life I’ve got now, or lack of life?”

“John I’ve known you now, living and dead, and you have only ever had this life, none before. You’re just messing with me now right?”

At that moment, Louisa heard, faintly and far away, a harp. She looked at John for a long time, shook her head and turned away, vaguely waving her hand as if to say it didn’t matter. “You ready now?”

John nodded and they were once again in motion. ...

It was dark, not just dark but pitch black. John tried closing his eyes and opening them again. Nope, still dark.

Not only dark, but Louisa wasn’t there, and neither were the spirits. But someone else was nearby. He knew this because that person was playing a guitar. No, a lute. Who plays a lute any more.

“Can I have some light?”

“There is a harp by your right hand on the table, play up some light if you want it.”

“I can’t play a harp. Where are the rest of my friends?”

“In between.”

“In between what?”

“There and here.”

“Bring them here please?”

“There is a harp by your right hand, play them here.”

“I can’t play. Is it you that has been redirecting us? Why?”

“Your lady is very powerful, I can only nudge, and finally I have nudged you here. I need your help.”

“Not likely, you’ve hijacked us. Why would I help you?”

“Because we’re old friends.”



“Really? I’ll have to trust you on that, I can’t see you at all.”

“Play in some light, John. Try, pick up the harp and see if you don’t remember.”

John reached carefully and with some fumbling found the harp. Running his hands over it he figured out how it fit on his lap. He had told Louisa he trained as a Harper but he had no idea why he had said that. He had thought it was all part of the general teasing the two of them carried on, but now, as he set his hands on the harp, he found that he did know how to play it.

He went through a few lines of a 14<sup>th</sup> century lament and then stilled the strings. “Fine, I can play, but I have no idea at all how to play up some light, as you say.”

“You do, concentrate on what you want, John, and then play.”

Shrugging, John thought about light and played a complex series of chords. “Damn, that worked, now, who are you?”

“John we were partners, you really don’t know me?”

“When were we partners, 1350? Dude you are seriously old.”

The minstrel played a short tune and suddenly he was young. “How about it?”

“Marv? No Merv, I remember you. I remember you owe me a florin you jerk.”

Merv grinned, “Of course you remember that. I’ll pay you back and more if you help me.”

~~

## **Merv reveals the Job**

“Aren’t you going to bring your lady friend and the rest here?”

John looked at Merv for a long time. He slowly shook his head no, “Tell me.”

Merv grinned, “It’s that way with her is it?”

“Don’t be an ass, I didn’t know I’d had a previous life, and so she didn’t either, but I remember it now and I remember you. So she’s better off in the void or whatever you called it.”

“In between.”

“Whatever, they’re not aging or anything right? It’s outside time? Between places?”

“Yes, they’re fine, like I said, they’re in between.”

“And you can do that.”

Merv nodded.

“And so can I.”

“Yes, you were better at it than I was, maybe still are.”

“I haven’t actually lived all these years between then and now, have I.”

“No, it’s the old blood in your system, I woke it up. All the skills you have were in the blood, you’re really not old at all. Not compared to me, anyway.”

“You’ve lived all these years.”

“If you can call being thrown into the between living.”

“How long?”

“1350 to a month ago.”

“No, you’re lying, you’re speaking perfect modern English.”

“Yeah, that’s weird isn’t it? And I look like a young man.”

“All right, never mind. What’s the job?”

“Get the old gang out of the between, and collect the last job we did.”

“How much?”

“A lot. Half a million Florins.”

“Half a... what did you do, rob Venice?”

“Uh...”

There was a cracking sound, and multiple tearing sounds like a schoolroom full of children with poster paper pretending to be Matisse. Louisa and the masks were in the room with John and Merv, and Louisa had her hands on her hips.

Merv took a step back, “How did you...”

“Oh please, the between? Just open the door.”

“What door? I never saw a door, I looked for 650 years and never saw a door.”

Louisa wasn’t listening, she looked at John and one eyebrow quirked upward.

“I can explain...”

“I was listening. It’s sweet that you thought to protect us, but obviously you two know nothing about the between, as you called it. Now, let’s hear it, you.”

“Uh, Louisa, this is Merv, Merv, Louisa.”

Louisa put out her hand, Merv looked at it and tried to kiss it but Louisa wrenched his arm back down to shake. “Been a while has it Merv?”

“I guess it has. OK here’s the story, after John here left our little band, we went on to pull a few other jobs, but the big one was Venice. We worked our way toward it by a few other jobs where we tunnelled under vaults and came up under the floor in the treasure rooms. Once we figured out how to breathe underwater, we went after the Doge in Venice.”

“What went wrong?”

“What makes you think anything went wrong? We took the treasury.”

Louisa tapped her foot.

“OK, OK, we got the treasure, put it under a bridge where some Northerner was wandering over in a short sleeved vest in the middle of winter.”

Louisa’s mouth fell open. “That was your landmark? Some person walking over a bridge?”

Merv looked embarrassed, “She was really good looking.”

“What happened next?”

“We ported out of there, intending to come back the next day to collect the gold, but somehow we got stuck in the between.”

“Somehow...”

“Well apparently the Doge had some sort of wizard.”

“How is it that you got out of the between if you don’t know about the doors?”

“Well, to be honest, it was you, John I could feel, and when you ported him around I figured out how to borrow your power to get me out. It took several tries but I finally made it, and diverted you two here.”

Louisa looked around, “Venice...”

Merv nodded, “I didn’t dare move too far from here, I figured our crew was close.”

John shook his head, “Our crew? Why did I leave, Merv?”

“You thought the jobs were getting too ambitious, that we were going to get caught.”

“Ah, guess I was wrong.”

Merv made a face, “So will you help us?”

John looked at Louisa, who shrugged, “It’s your old blood my boy, if you figure you owe it to this fellow, go ahead. Just remember that we don’t need money.”

“It would be more to get the others out of the between I think.”

“Well don’t let me stop you.”

John looked at Merv, “You say I was good at this stuff? The harping, and I could port us around?”

Merv smiled, “You were the best.”

“Well let’s see if I can get the band back together. Louisa do I have to know where these fellows are to bring them out?”

“No, the between is everywhere, that’s why we can use it to go from here to there.”

“Got it, OK here goes.” John began to play the harp while keeping the faces of the old crew in his mind. After several minutes, vague images appeared in the air, transparent and wavering.

Louisa watched, but eventually shook her head. “We don’t have all day John.”

Merv looked shocked, “But this is how you do it isn’t it?”

“Not me.” Louisa waved a hand and the crew was in the room, looking confused.

It turns out the band of thieves John was associated with in a former life, was in fact, a band. The band appeared with drum, flute, bagpipe and a singer with a tambourine. With the lute and the harp that made six. Louisa shook her head, “six, how did you work with such a large number of thieves?”

“Well it was five after John left, but what are you talking about, you’ve got at least twelve spirits with masks right here in the room.”

Louisa smiled lopsidedly, “Are you folks hungry after six centuries? I suspect I could call up some food if you’d like.”

Merv smiled, “And maybe some beer? You guys are going to like the beer they have now.”

~~

## The Venice Job

Introductions were a bit strained, the band remembered their instruments, but not their names. Apparently a long time in the between could encourage forgetting. They agreed to answer to Drum, Flute, Bagpipe and Singer.

“I thought it would be a lot harder to rescue the guys.”

John grinned, “Louisa is an endless surprise to me, what she’s done and what she can do never ceases to amaze me.”

Across the room Louisa grinned to herself and pretended she hadn’t heard John.

“Now that we have them here, and they’ve had several beers each, do you mind telling me where we are and what we’re doing?”

“We’re beside St. Mark’s square in a storeroom, and we can just port over to the underside of the Ponte di Rialto and collect the treasure.”

Louisa looked up. “You do realize there are shops on that bridge, and there will be people all over the place.”

Merv beamed, “That was the brilliant part of the plan, the loot is underwater, hidden in the bank of the canal. Nobody is going to see us.”

“Well let’s get to it then, the sooner you’ve got your loot, the sooner John and I can get back to our own business. I know where the bridge is, which end do I take us to?”

“The East side, same side as the square.”

“And you still remember how to breathe underwater?”

“I think so, it was only a month ago for me, and a couple of days for these guys.”

The band all nodded, but John was frowning. Louisa patted his arm, “One of our spirits will help you John, he’s from under Lake Superior. “Muskrat, take care of him will you please?”

One of the masks bobbed yes.

“Fine, now that we are all ready...” Louisa waved her hand and they were on their way to the bridge. They never made it, the entire group ended up on their asses in six inches of water in the middle of St. Mark’s.

Louisa was furious, “What the hell was that?”

John pointed toward the bridge where Louisa saw a wall. The citizens were walking through it as if they didn’t see it or know it was there, but Louisa squinted. “It’s not real, but there it is, and look, there’s a tower. It looks like your Doge’s magician figured you might get out of the between.”

“Wizard... but yeah, so what do we do now?”

“Well if there are defences around the bridge, he knew where you put the treasury but somehow couldn’t get it back. First thing we do is see if this is a one direction defence. Spirits, off you go and see if we can get at the bridge from the other side.”

Louisa cocked her head to listen to the reports, “Nope, it’s guarded all around. If he knew where the treasure was, why didn’t he just get it back for the Doge?”

“I don’t know... Where did she go?”

John shrugged, “You’ll get used to it.”

Louisa reappeared, “I checked the records. The Doge never lost the treasury. My guess is that the wizard made a load of fake gold to put back into the treasury but was never able to collect the real gold. Provided the real gold is still under the bridge like you think.”

“It must be, otherwise why the defences?”

“Why indeed, and is the wizard there in that tower?”

“Oh lord, do you think he’s still there? What can we do?”

Louisa sighed, “The things I do for a log cabin in the woods. It’s been a while, but we’re going to tear down that tower and the defences around it. Spirits, are you willing to do battle? It’s been a long time for you too.”

Dozens of broad grins appeared in the air over the square.

“Well it has been a few centuries, but I suspect you remember how. John, you stick with the band and set up beside the wall, when it comes down get yourselves to the loot and collect it fast.”

Merv muttered, “Treasury.”

The band walked as close to the wall as they could, and then set up their instruments, somebody produced a hat and they started playing for the tourists. Louisa grinned and created a permit for them to busk, attaching it to the hat.

The band started playing and soon attracted a small crowd, one of which, a man who looked like an academic, whispered to his companion, “Those are period instruments, that’s pretty good, and they know how to play them.”

His friend, a distinguished-looking fellow, instantly answered, “How do you know how they’re supposed to be played?”

Louisa shook her head, they seemed to be just where they should be. She moved off, waving most of the spirits to her and said, “First thing we do is raise our own tower, can you sieve through the water and air and put up our own invisible fortress?”

The spirits seemed to laugh and proceeded to build a tower of the same construction as the other. This one was both larger, taller and more massive.

“Is the wizard still in his tower, I wonder, or has it been hanging around passively for all these years?”

While her siege tower was being constructed, she called Mouse aside, “Can you slip in and see what’s happening over there?”

The spirit manifested as a smallish mouse, nodded and took off toward the wizard’s tower. Louisa watched as he slipped through a crack in the base, and then turned back to her own tower just in time to deflect a huge blast of energy, aimed at the spirits who were busy building. “That might be a clue,” she thought to herself.

Mouse was surprised to see a crack in the tower, it was magical, supernatural, why would there be a crack? Well never mind, in he went and was surprised to see a busy place. Dozens of wooden automatons were rushing around, gathering up whatever energies they could, and passing them to the next floor up. Mouse grinned, they were disrupting cell-phone reception for kilometres around.

Making sure not to get stepped on, Mouse scampered up the stairs to the next floor, in an alcove, he saw a few wooden figures standing still, but most were just as busy as on the ground floor. On to the next level and the next until he finally got to the roof, where he saw the wizard. With his wand crackling with power, he was gathering the energy passed along from the lower floors and throwing it toward Louisa’s tower, as well as at the spirits who were building it.

Mouse was more powerful than people usually gave him credit for. He looked carefully at what the wizard was doing, figured out the timing, and just before the next blast of energy, Mouse became pure spirit and stood in front of the blast, reflecting it back onto the roof. The wizard was surprised as all the automata on that level burst into flames. Before he could find Mouse, that spirit had jumped back to Louisa’s side.

Louisa, who had been watching, grinned largely at Mouse. “Good one, and now we know he’s there, Thank you. Say, are you a bit larger now?”

“I saved a little of the energy for myself, I didn’t get the wizard though, he seems impervious to what he blasts at us.”

“Well done you.”

Mouse grinned and joined his fellow spirits in the construction project.

~~

## **The Battle of the Towers**

“I still want to know why the wizard didn’t collect the gold. Any of you spirits carrying an all-seeing god mask?” One of the masks, a rather lopsided frog face, moved forward. “Can you tell me what the wizard is thinking?”

“Of course, the spirit croaked, he’s furious that you are building a tower of your own and opposing him.”

“What about the gold, why hasn’t he stolen it for himself?”

“It appears that the barrier he put up can’t be penetrated by himself. Just like the energy blasts he puts out can’t hurt him.”

“Interesting, I wonder what happens if I fire at him?”

The frog-god stepped back, two questions a day was his rule.

Louisa waited for the next energy blast and absorbed it, then when the next arrived she combined the power of the two of them and sent them back at the wizard. Nothing but a few chips of his tower flew outward. “Looks like it will take a bit more than that.”

Louisa checked John and the band, they ducked as bits of the wizard’s tower landed on them, but they were unharmed. By the time the pieces got to them, they had reverted to ordinary incoherent particles.

Louisa decided she needed more power than supplied by the wizard, which meant more than from WiFi. She sighed, “I like this town, but needs must. Spirits, find me the power lines.”

Mouse looked surprised, “The lay lines?”

“No, the electrical power lines. I’m not messing with lay lines again, my ears are still ringing.”

The spirits soon located the main power lines underground and underwater, Louisa was pleased to see they were 240 volts. “OK time for a brownout.”

The city slowed down as the lights became dim. Vehicles even stuttered to a stop as Louisa took in more and more electrical power. She floated an inch or two above the ground as she did, with a grim look on her face. “Let’s not make this any more drawn out than necessary.” With that she threw her arms, fingers spread, at the wizard’s tower. A massive bolt of power flew across the space from tower to tower and crashed against the wizard. His tower exploded and disappeared in smoke and rubble.

With the tower gone, the wall disappeared as well, and some of the band fell backward from where they had been leaning on it. John looked to where Louisa was leaning on the edge of her tower, she nodded and John said to the band, “Let’s go.”

He played a chord on his harp and the thieves were underwater, facing the bank of the canal where erosion had revealed the corner of a chest. Digging quickly the group exposed three more chests and Merv signalled that they should all put their hands on them, making a chain.

He nodded at John who strummed his harp, but nothing happened. He tried three more times but everyone remained underwater. It seemed that harps didn’t make much noise when waterlogged.



Glancing at Muscrat, John mouthed 'Louisa.' The spirit nodded and was gone. Of course it was at that time John remembered that the spirit had been keeping him breathing underwater.

Holding his breath for as long as he could, John was just on the edge of blacking out when Louisa transported the entire group, chests and all, into the storeroom where they had started. Merv was ecstatic, he flipped open one of the chests to expose a huge number of gold florins. Selecting one, he threw it to John. "There, that's the florin I owe you."

John took a step toward Merv, intending to punch him when the room went still. "I will take the treasury now, and I thank you all for getting it for me."

The band reached for their instruments, but the wizard shook his head, raising an arm. "I would not advise that gentlemen, I can blast you out of existence before you can play a note."

As the band took a step away, the wizard looked at Mouse, "As for you, my little spy, you I will blast, and now."

Louisa sighed, she stepped between the wizard and Mouse and said, "Can we make an accommodation here? Perhaps split the treasury? After all it is worth a lot more now than it was, surely there is enough for you all."

"Oh I don't think so, that would have made me the richest man in the world, now I'd be well down on the list with all of it, why would I take just a part of it? No I think I will take it all and your cheap trickery won't work on me again woman."

"Look around wizard, what do you see."

"Darkness in here where there are no windows, what of it."

"Can you see beyond this room?"

"Of course, it's dark out there too."

"Do you wonder why?"

"Enough of this, begone witch." The wizard raised his hands in a dramatic fashion toward Louisa. John started to run to stop him, but Louisa sighed, waved her hand in a sort of dismissal and the wizard was gone. Simply gone.

"I did warn him."

John looked again at Louisa and wondered just how powerful she was. He decided he didn't want to know and turned to Merv, still intending to punch him. Before he did, Louisa put her hand on his arm and said, "We don't need the money, John. What would we do with it?"

John looked down at the floor, "Well I thought I might take you to the Rio Nova, you mentioned you liked that restaurant and I imagine it's very expensive."

"Oh you dear man, remember where you are. Just wait here for a moment, and give me your Florin."

Louisa vanished, and when she did, Merv said, “She seems nice.”

“Merv, I ought to...”

“John, you don’t need the money, remember.”

Louisa faded back into view, as she did John could have sworn she was wearing 14<sup>th</sup> century clothing for a moment. “OK love, we can go and eat, and drink some of that nice wine they have here.”

“Where did you go?”

“Never you mind, but we have to stop somewhere first.”

John said goodbye to the band with a warning to keep their heads down and not exchange too many of the coins in one place. As his own band of spirits walked, hopped, and floated across town they came to a somewhat tatty old building. Louisa led the way in and up to a second floor office where they opened the door on a completely modern office complex. “Louisa, what did you do?”

“I made an investment with your money.”

“When...” at that point a well dressed lawyer type walked in and asked them to move to his office.

“What can I do for you?”

“I believe you have an account in the name of Louisa and John.”

Typing into his computer, the man seemed a bit surprised. “We do, and it’s quite an old account. It has not been updated for a considerable time, but I see it is managed actively by us. There is a considerable equity in the account now. Could I have your code number please.”

Louisa handed over a gilt edged card which the man received with more surprise. “This is signed by our founder, oh my, but it is correct. What can I do for you today.”

“I would like a bank card that allows us to draw on the account, we’re going to dinner and will use it there.”

“That’s it? Madam would you like to know the balance in the account, the investments we’ve made?”

“Is there enough to have a nice dinner?”

“I should say so.”

“Then that is sufficient, thank you. Please continue to manage the account as you have since it was opened.”

“Very well Madam and Sir, you shall have your cards momentarily.”

John had been following this closely, “Sir, would you have a history of your firm that I could read?”

“Of course sir, here is a brochure that describes our firm and our services.”

Having obtained the bank card, Louisa and John walked the rest of the way to the Rio Nova and had a wonderful dinner with plenty of good wines, one for each course. The spirits also had a ball, wandering all over the neighbourhood and soaking up the ancient energies they found there.

During dinner, John had gone through the brochure from the investment firm. “Louisa, it says here that they started with their founder getting an anonymous donation from a woman to start the firm.”

“Does it really, I’m surprised they would say that.”

“It seems the young man had a good head for investments, he became very rich very fast and they have many of the super-rich in their clientele but they won’t name them.”

“Well I should think not.”

“Louisa, were you that woman? Did you give the fellow some hints on where to invest?”

Louisa smiled that gentle smile she had when John said something cute.

~~

## **On the Road**

John was driving, an old pickup truck with a bench seat. It was late at night and Louisa was asleep beside him. The road was long, straight and dark as they made their way through Southern France. It had been a nice dinner, and John was pleased that they had funds enough to do whatever they wanted, including buying this truck to travel a bit differently than usual.

All of a sudden, John slid violently across the seat and bumped Louisa into her door. Then through her door. He lunged and caught her arm, pulling her back through the door onto the seat as she woke up. She frowned, “John?”

“It wasn’t me, I swear, something shoved me sideways into you. Are you OK?”

“Fine.” Louisa slowly looked around and out the back window where the spirits were piled into the truck bed, all of them doing their best to look innocent. She waved her hand and there was a sealed cover over the bed. Shortly, John could hear the sounds of a fight from behind, and he assumed that the rest of the spirits were beating up on the trickster.

“Louisa, you are showing me a lot of powers I’ve never seen before.”

“Well, we haven’t seen each other for a very long time, I did some things, learned some things.”

“Yes, but you know all there is to know about me, and it isn’t all that much. I feel like I hardly know you.”

“I didn’t know you could play the medieval harp.”

“Hell, I, didn’t know I could play the harp.”

“Well there you go, there are things neither of us know about either of us. This little road trip is letting us catch up on all that time we missed together.”

“Uh, can I ask how you learned how to throw energy balls?”

“From Hugo, the fellow who taught me how to be a Shaman.”

“But Shamans don’t do that usually do they?”

“I suppose not, but he and Ash Childress were mercenaries for a very long time, they must have picked it up somewhere along the way.”

John looked sideways at Louisa but saw only an open and innocent face. He sighed and turned his face back to the highway. “Sounds quiet back there.”

“I guess the little rascals have finished playing. Maybe that extra case of wine was a bit much for them.” Louisa waved her hand and the bed was open to the sky once more. Most of the masks looked outward except for the Coyote mask, which was in the corner, looking a bit more scuffed up than it had earlier.

Checking the mirror, John said, “Ah, someone is taking on their mask persona.”

“He didn’t mean any harm. Just a trickster, no harm done, and it’s not as if Coyote never pays the price for his tricks.”

John grunted and concentrated on the drive. They were headed for Denmark where they would take the 2 day ferry to Iceland. Doubtless Louisa could just wave and they’d be there but sometimes it was good to travel slowly. Louisa was right, they were learning about each other, there were a lot of years to catch up on.

Beside him, Louisa looked at John’s face in the light of an approaching truck. She wondered that she ever had the strength to leave him so many years ago. She didn’t regret it, she’d had a wonderful life after him, but it was a hard thing to do. She loved him dearly, and still did. Not for the first time she wondered if she could have saved him from his demons. Would it have worked out? She now had the ability to go back in time and maybe change her decision... in fact..

Louisa was in the dingy front room watching herself wait for John to come home. The front door slammed open and the policeman stomped into the place, bloody boots staining the floor. Her younger self looked up from her knitting and her face showed fear. He was in one of his moods, she could tell by the blood on his boots, he’d stomped some criminal again, maybe to death. She could also smell the cheap perfume his latest floozy used.

Louisa shook her head, she had made the correct decision, some things you have to survive, you can't fix. As it turned out, John had survived to become his old self, the one she had fallen in love with in the beginning.

"...feeling OK? You sort of faded for a moment there."

"What? No I'm fine John, thanks for asking. Are you good to keep driving?"

"Sure, we only get tired when we decide we are, right. If you want to go back to sleep you go ahead."

"Thank you love, I may just do that. Wake me if you want to switch."

"I will, but it's nice to just drive for a while. Sweet dreams little bunny."

Louisa smiled, he probably didn't remember that's what he used to call her in those first couple of years together. She didn't want to remember the things he called her later.

John went back to the rhythm of driving and his mind drifted to the time they had been married. It was not a good time. He had been a policeman in a bad part of town and that had put him into a bad way. His frustration at not being able to fix things had led to him becoming what he thought he was fighting. Coming home to Louisa's unconditional love had been too much. He felt he had to fix the world for her, and somehow that feeling had translated to a feeling that she was blaming him for his failure. He got more and more abusive toward her, and barely caught himself several times from hitting her.

When she left him he told himself that was what he wanted. It wasn't, but looking back now, he realized she had to leave. It was too dangerous for her to stay. After she left he spiralled downward and eventually quit the force on strong advice from his superiors. A few years off and he managed to get it together enough to at least have some half-way normal relationships. When the war came, he joined up in time to be blown apart in the Blitz. Having such a strong bond with his pub, he became a ghost, always feeling that there was something incomplete about his life.

That something became obvious when he met Louisa again. It seemed like they just picked it up where they left off. He expected her to hate him but she forgave him the crap he had put her through. John was just now beginning to see how much regret and fear he had been carrying through the years. He had tried to convince himself that she was fine, and had moved on to a good life, and it turned out that she had. A rich, full, busy life that he wondered about ever catching up on. It seemed that every day brought some new revelation. That she hadn't fallen apart after she left him was wonderful to realize, it had been one of his biggest fears.

He wasn't jealous, exactly, of her life, but he was becoming more and more impressed... no, the word he was looking for was proud... of what she had accomplished. She said she had missed him, and he believed her, but he couldn't get past the feeling that she had done much better without him than she would have with him. And he was good with that, delighted in fact.

She was here now, they were together again and he wasn't jealous of the time she had spent with other partners, he was grateful she had found people who were good to her, and for her. She was here now and he could hardly believe his good fortune. Sure they were ghosts, but their relationship was better now than it ever was before. They had no worries about the future, that was all behind them. They

could simply be with each other and that was plenty. Even when they were apart, John found his thoughts going to her, storing up stories to tell her the next time he saw her.

John smiled, he wasn't going to jinx this with plans, but as long as Louisa wanted to be with him, he was going to say yes. He let his thoughts slip back to the road and the long night ahead of them. Louisa had fallen asleep again with a light blanket and John pulled it up to cover her shoulders.

She shifted, smiled and settled again.

John drove on.

~~

## **The Trouble-Maker**

“Why have we stopped?”

“We're out of gas. Or at least that's what the gauge says.

“You don't believe it?”

“I stopped for gas half an hour ago. You didn't wake up.”

Louisa looked around, the road was deserted, obviously a back road, not one she'd expect went through to Denmark. “Why are we on a back road?”

“That's where the GPS told me to go, I thought it was a bit strange but maybe it's a shortcut?”

“It's a shortcut to nowhere, that's for sure. Let's get out and see what sort of trouble is waiting for us.”

“You think there's trouble?”

“There's always trouble John, it wouldn't be much of a road trip if there wasn't trouble. This has the feeling of a trap.”

“And we're going to walk into it?”

“Got a better idea?”

John opened his door and checked the truck bed, the masks were piled up haphazardly, and the spirits were sleeping quietly. John wondered if spirits got hangovers. His head was aching a bit. On the other side of the truck, Louisa smiled, “Aren't they cute all piled up one on another. We'll let them sleep until we figure out what's going on.”

John reached down and gave Mouse a poke. As that spirit woke up, John put his finger to his lips and moved around the vehicle to where Louisa was looking off into the woods. "If there's a trap, something ought to be coming at us right about now."

John squinted at the woods and completely missed the wolf that rose from the ditch and lunged at the pair as they stood looking. Mouse didn't miss the wolf and slammed into its side when it was about five feet from John. The wolf and the spirit flew sideways to roll over and over in the field. Mouse really had been getting bigger after absorbing some of the wizard's power, and most certainly heavier. It was a big wolf but Mouse ended up on top.

Louisa took a step toward where the two beings were wrestling in the field, but John held out his arm, "Let him have his fun, there's probably more of them."

Sure enough, the woods were erupting with furry bodies as twenty wolves came running across the field. Louisa grinned and rubbed her hands together. John glanced at her and rolled his eyes, "Are these the same as the wolves from Suwa?"

"The adults, I suspect."

"And what do you intend to do with them?"

Louisa bared her teeth, she wasn't in the best of moods first thing in the morning.

At that moment, Mouse got enough space to punch his opponent in the jaw, knocking him out. He jumped up, faced the rest of the wolves and rolled his fists at them while hopping up and down. John wondered where he had learned to box, he looked like the silent movie version some bare knuckle fighter from a couple of generations back.

"Louisa, why don't we let the spirits take care of this?"

Louisa stared at John as if he had asked her not to eat a chocolate, or have another glass of wine. After a moment she turned to the truck and shouted, "Hey, lazy spirits, you going to let Mouse have all the fun?"

A general grumbling and moaning movement over the side of the bed happened and then the spirits saw the wolves. A great whoop went up and they ran past Mouse toward the attackers. Suffice to say, the spirits were indeed hung over, and the wolves got a major beating. Louisa and John were leaning against the truck, elbows propped on the side of the bed.

"Good idea, love, much more humane than what I had in mind. Now why were they attacking and how did they screw up the instruments to pull you down this road."

"We could ask. Mouse is still beating on that big one there, maybe he's the leader."

Sure enough, Mouse was dragging the wolf toward them by the scruff of its neck.

"Thank you Mouse, we do indeed have some questions."

The spirit, who seemed to have gotten a bit bigger, nodded and wandered back to the field where he helped the others kick the wolves in the backside as they sent them toward the woods once more.

Louisa turned her attention to the wolf, “Well?”

John was startled, “You speak wolf?”

“Later, love. Well, what’s with the technomancy, and why us?”

The big wolf had a badly swollen lip and a half closed eye, but he managed. “Hungry.”

“You’re not after us specifically? Just looking for someone to eat?”

The wolf nodded.

“Why not eat the game you usually eat? Deer and rabbits and whatnot?”

“Gone.”

“You ate them all?”

Again, the wolf nodded.

“Keep an eye on him John, I’m going to check a few things out.”

John nodded and Louisa vanished. She was soon back. “Right, these wolves are indeed overpopulated and starving. Wolf, you do know that if you attack humans, even with your technomancy, the humans will wipe you out to a pup. They’ve done it before.”

“Hungry.”

“Yes I get that. John the females are mostly pregnant, something has let them over-breed, there are pups all through the woods. I see that we have two things to do. The first is to stop the idiot that gave them the fertility drugs, and the second is to educate the females. More education means fewer pups.”

“Uh, Louisa you’re still speaking wolf, I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

Louisa sighed and repeated herself. “I’m going to have a talk with the she-wolves, you take Mouse and find that damned trouble-maker will you please, and stop him.”

John nodded, called out to Mouse and explained the plan. Mouse grinned and told the spirits to find the trouble-maker.

As it turned out, there was a small town not too many kilometres from the wood. In it, the spirits identified a somewhat run-down house as the place where the miscreant lived. John pounded on the door and a shabby looking middle aged man opened it.

“You the one who gave the wolves the technomancy and the fertility drugs?”



Mouse wondered what John was doing, who would answer that? But the man did, he seemed proud of what he had done as he nodded yes.

“Why?”

The man started talking as if he had been yearning to confess. “I’ve been waiting for them to come and eat the others in this town. They are terrible people, the women ignore me and the men won’t hire me to work. All the women in this town ignore me, well they won’t ignore it when the wolves tear them apart, that’s for sure. They should be having babies, that way there would be enough people to fight off the wolves, now the wolves are out-producing the humans, so they will see they should have listened to me long ago. I’m happy the wolves are coming to wipe out these people who can’t see what a blessing I could have been to them.”

Mouse didn’t bother listening to any more, and punched the man unconscious. John grinned but said, “So how are we supposed to stop his interference if he can’t tell us how the electronic stuff works, and the fertility drugs?”

Mouse sighed and gestured, “Look around, the place is tiny and I bet nothing is ever put away, the things ought to be right out in plain sight.”

John looked, there was a big bucket that was labelled, ‘Baby Stuff.’ John poured it down the drain and ran some water after it. Next he found and smashed some electronic jamming equipment, very crudely made but obviously it worked. “Nothing magical about this guy, just another virgin with lots of time to scroll through the internet.”

Throwing the man over his shoulder, John went back to the truck where Louisa was waiting for him. “What do you want me to do with this guy?”

“Leave him at the edge of the forest, maybe he’ll wake up and run fast enough to get back to town before the wolves limp after him.”

Mouse took the man and ran him across the field. While he was doing that, John asked Louisa, “Did you talk to the she-wolves?”

“Oh yes, and I told them what Mouse told me. They weren’t happy to be pregnant all the time and the worry over the pups was huge. The men couldn’t feed them so the pregnant females had to help hunt. I think that little shit ought to hope the men catch him before the women do.”

John thought about that and decided he didn’t care which caught the loser, as long as they caught him. He jumped back into the truck which fired up instantly. Time to get back on the road.

~~

## **The Summer Fling**

Driving through the night, John’s mind wandered, as it often did.

Some time between when he quite the police and when he joined the army, John ended up staying at a cottage by the beach. He had been there for a couple of weeks and had settled into a routine. Wake up, shave, go lie on the beach, have lunch, start drinking, pass out and repeat. He didn't regret the way he was living but he was feeling the first hints of boredom.

He was lying on his back, feet toward the ocean when he turned his head to the right. Out of the glare of the sun on the water, he saw an indistinct figure walking across the sand. It was early and the beach was almost deserted, but the figure walked directly to John. "Do you mind if I lie down here beside you?"

John was confused, but after flicking his eyes around the empty stretches of sand said, "No, not at all."

"Good, I hate sitting by myself in situations like this, it seems to give strange people permission to approach, doesn't it?"

"I suppose it does."

The irony was lost on the girl. "Well, my name is Jan and I'll shut up now to leave you in peace if you would rather."

"No, no, I don't mind chatting."

"Oh good, and you are?"

"Sorry, I'm John, pleased to meet you."

They shook hands and then Jan lay back and squirmed a bit to get comfortable. "Mmmm warm, we're lucky to get a stretch of dry hot weather to spend on the beach."

"It has been a good summer so far."

"So what do you do for a living, John, if you don't mind me asking?"

John thought, 'I'll never see her again, might as well be truthful.' "I'm between jobs right now, I was a police detective, but I quit. I've done a few other things, but now I'm just here to enjoy the sun. How about you?"

"Teacher, I'm off for the summer and had the urge to get some sun while it was here."

The two of them lay back in a comfortable silence for a while. Eventually a cloud moved across the sun. Jan shivered. John noticed and picked up his second towel, "Here, put this over yourself, it will keep you warm."

"You're very kind. I thought you would be kind, you have that sort of face."

"My first wife might have disagreed."

Jan laughed, she had a nice laugh, "Trouble?"

“I sort of lost my way as a policeman and was more or less drinking myself to death. My wife didn’t approve and she left me because of it. And I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“Just a stranger on the beach, John. No reason not to be truthful.”

John laughed himself, “I guess not. Do you like teaching?”

“I do, very much. So it was a good thing that you left the police?”

“Well it was suggested, but yes, a good thing. I’m a lot more calm now.”

“But you still drink?”

“How did you... yes I still drink every night, but not to forget what I was, what I had become.”

“Are you sure?”

“Just what kind of teacher are you?”

Jan laughed, “Kids, just kids I promise you.”

The sun came out again and Jan gave the towel back, John noticed her body for the first time, and he draped his own towel across his waist. Jan’s eyes flicked to his crotch but she looked at John’s eyes again quickly. “Have you had another relationship since your wife left?”

“Not to speak of, no.”

Jan nodded and leaned back once more. She could feel John looking her over and decided that she was being rather blunt. Fortunately, John didn’t seem especially sensitive to such things. The truth was, she was broke and had no place to go and no money for food.

“John, I want to be honest with you, I have no place to stay and no money for food. Could I stay with you today?”

John was shocked. He had seldom met a woman so forthright, except perhaps for the prostitutes back in London. As if reading his mind, Jan shook her head, “No, I’m not a whore, I’m just broke. I spent all my money to get here and have nothing left. I can sleep on the beach if I have to, but last night it was damned cold.”

“Are you hungry now?”

“A bit.”

“Come on then, let’s get you some food.” John gathered up his towel and put on his shirt. Jan didn’t seem to have anything but her bathing costume.

“Do you have clothing?”

“Of course I do, over by the cliff. I’ll go get it.”

The two walked down the beach toward the town and at some time, Jan took John’s arm. It was such a natural movement that John made no comment.

They found a tea room and John made sure Jan had several biscuits along with her cream tea. She ate delicately, not as if she was starving and John felt better about that.

When they had finished, John suggested they go for a stroll in the town. This Jan agreed to instantly and so they set off, arm in arm once more. They examined the window displays as they walked along, Jan slowing down in front of the hat shop. John entered without asking and Jan followed along. “Try that one, with the black and white stripes.”

Jan did, looked in the mirror, tilted her head to several angles and smiled. As she was putting it back on the display John called out, “Don’t put it away, put it on.” He had paid for it while she was admiring herself.

“What? Oh no you mustn’t.”

“Perhaps not, but it’s yours, it looks lovely on you.”

As they walked further down the high street, Jan looked at John. “Why did you buy me this hat?”

“You don’t like it?”

“I very much like it, but why did you buy it for me?”

“Because you look good in it, and because I can afford it.”

Jan walked a bit further with a frown, then stopped, making John turn to face her. “Whatever you might have been as a policeman, you’re a good man now.”

John might have blushed, if he were the type to do such things, “Just because I bought you a hat doesn’t mean I’m a good person. You should know that.”

“I’m a woman, I know that, but you saw a hat that would look good on me, and you wanted me to have it. That was the act of a good man. I just wanted you to know that.”

“Thank you, Jan, I think perhaps that’s the first time someone has called me that for a long time.”

They walked on far enough to make it to the cottage John was staying in. Jan walked in as John held the door for her. They both sat on the couch and chatted the afternoon away.

Toward supper time, Jan went into the kitchen and started to make a meal. “You don’t have to do that, I can cook us something.”

“You sit, John, have another cup of tea, I’ll be done here very shortly.”

John poured another cup and sipped it as he listened to Jan work. It was soothing to hear her cook, and to hear her hum to herself. John drifted, half asleep.

Jan brought the food out to the main room and set the table, then woke John, "It's ready, come eat." As he walked to the table, John realized he rarely had dinner these days, and his stomach rumbled. He sat and enjoyed what Jan had cooked. Curiously enough, John did not miss the drinking he usually did at this time of day.

Once the meal was over, Jan washed up, she would not let John help. They sat once more on the couch and talked about nothing and everything. In a short time, Jan got up. "I have to go now, John. Thank you so much for taking care of me today."

"Where will you go? You can stay here if you wish. I can make up the couch."  
"I can't. My time is limited but I thank you for the offer. You are, as I said before, a good man and I thank you for the hat."

With that, Jan put the hat on her head and let John take her to the front door. "If you wish to come tomorrow, I would be happy to take you to lunch again."

"Thank you John, I appreciate the offer, Good night."

With that she left and that was the last time John had ever seen her. Curiously, he stopped drinking every night, and found he could sleep very well with or without a couple of drinks.

As a truck passed, the lights brought John back to the present, and he wondered what ever happened to Jan.

Beside him, Louisa spoke as if she had been reading his mind. "Do you need to know?"

"What? Sorry were you talking to me love?"

"No, but I can answer your question."

"You can... You were Jan?"

"I was, my love, shortly after I became a Shaman, I went back to check on you. It was a lovely day."  
"I stopped drinking like an alcoholic, did you perform some magic on me?"

"I did nothing but remind you that you were a good man. You had forgotten that."

"After you were a Shaman... you were a ghost?"

"Of course. I changed my appearance and travelled back in time but I wasn't very good at it then, so I only had one day with you."

John wasn't sure what to think, he wasn't angry, but... no, he wasn't angry. She had cared enough to check back on him and had pulled him away from the bottle. "Thank you for that wonderful day, my love. It is nice to know we had a Summer fling, even if I didn't know it was you."

~~

## The Sea Monster

It was the second day of the ferry trip. Louisa and John were leaning on the rail, looking at the wake, they were out of sight of land but something caught John's attention.

"Oh good lord, seriously? What does that look like to you?"

"Looks like a sea monster."

"And they don't exist, right, so what is it?"

"A sea monster."

"Oh come on! Can't we have a ferry trip without having to fight a monster or some such?"

"It's just swimming, John, it might not want anything to do with us."

"Do you believe that?"

"No, but we can hope, right?"

John watched the monster swim right up the wake of the ferry. It was obviously heading for them.

"Maybe the ferry company keeps it as a pet?"

Just then the horn blasted, three sharp notes followed by three long and three short again. "SOS, no, it's not a pet, but they have seen this thing before I'd bet."

"Well let's go see what the crew knows."

John followed Louisa across the deck and up the stairs to the wheelhouse. "You can't come in here, Ma'am passengers are restricted to the lower decks."

"Don't be stupid, we can help, what is that monster that is following us?"

"You can see it?"

That statement told Louisa a lot about what it was. "The regular passengers can't see it?"

"No, and we have signalled for help."

"The SOS on the horn."

"Who are you? That's also something the passengers can't hear."

"I'm a Shaman, I see and hear all sorts of things."

“Ah, come up then, the Captain will want to talk to you.”

The bridge crew were a lot less panicked than Louisa would have guessed. The man on the helm pointed, “There they are.”

John looked and saw a boat with a square sail coming from ahead. It was going to miss the ferry but was headed straight for the monster. He pointed at the boat, “What’s that?”

The Captain turned at the question. “Who are you and what are you doing on the bridge?”

The sailor who had let them in spoke up, “They can see the monster and heard the alarm, sir. I thought they should be here rather than on deck.”

The Captain considered that, “Probably right. Very well, we are fine, that is indeed a sea monster behind us, it tries to catch us regularly on this route. Up ahead is a Viking ship, they will fight the monster and they usually chase it off.”

Louisa turned from watching the Vikings, “Usually?”

“Ah, well you see that this ship is fairly new...”

“Let me guess, sudden North Atlantic Storms.”

The Captain looked a bit sheepish and nodded.

“Can we help?”

“I’m not sure what you can do, with any luck that monster won’t get within three kilometres of us.”

“Yes, but we’ve got others who can jump to the Viking ship and help them.”

“Stowaways?”

“It’s a ferry, Captain, we paid for our vehicle and passengers. They’re spirits, they’re in the truck.”

John touched her arm and pointed aft, “Actually, they’ve seen the monster.”

Sure enough, the spirits were excitedly pointing at the monster, and Mouse had his fists up and was jumping around like he was about to dive overboard and swim. The Captain must have been in touch with his pagan roots, he could see the spirits. “They want to help?”

“We’d have a hard time stopping them.”

“Very well, but we can’t speak with the Viking ship, it’s not really in our time and they don’t have a radio.”

“The spirits can get there, do they have permission?”

“By all means, if they can help, please let them help.”

Louisa grinned, they were going to love this, especially the Viking masks. She spoke normally, but looked toward the back railing, “Mouse, tell them there is a Viking ship that will be passing us, heading for the monster. You can all go help.”

Mouse grinned so much his head was in danger of splitting. The spirits dove over the side and skimmed across the waves to the Viking ship where they scrambled up the planking to land on its deck, striking heroic poses.

John shook his head, “I’d love to be there to see how the Vikings deal with our spirits.”

On the Viking ship, the sailors seemed to be startled by the arrival of the spirits, but one of the Viking masks reassured them. They all looked toward the monster with renewed eagerness.

Louisa and John watched as the Viking ship reached the monster, who turned to attack them. Opening its mouth, it seemed to be about to snap the ship in half, but several Vikings drew their swords and dove right into the monster’s mouth. The monster snapped its mouth shut on the Vikings, and Mouse was furious. Such bravery did not deserve death. He and several of the spirits transported themselves onto the face of the monster. They pried its jaws apart and kept opening them until there was room for the Vikings to leap back to their ship.

The sailors cheered the spirits who continued to pile onto the monster. They started ripping its fins off, and then began pulling its teeth. The Viking masks concentrated and soon had massive swords in their hands, these they used to stab the monster in the eyes, blinding it.

As the massive creature thrashed in the water, the Viking ship rammed it, and with their axes, the sailors began hacking great chunks out of the side. In what seemed like no time at all, the Monster dove and retreated. As the spirits moved back to the boat, the sailors cheered and slapped them on the back.

In the ferry, the Captain also applauded. “That was the easiest escape I’ve ever had from the monster, your spirits are great warriors.”

Louisa nodded, “They’ve had some practice lately.”

“I don’t suppose some of them would like to join the Vikings, it will take the monster a couple of months to heal I suspect, but it will be back.”

“They are their own spirits, Captain. Some of them might consider it.”

~~

## **Freya**

Mouse was wide-eyed, he spun around trying to look everywhere at once. “Glaciers, volcanoes, thermal vents, sulphur hot springs, there’s energy everywhere. Why didn’t we come here first?”



Louisa smiled, “We may find out why I was reluctant to come here. There are other factors beyond the natural world to consider in this place.”

“Them? I thought this place was Christianized long ago.”

“It was, long ago, like a thousand plus years ago, and in 1990, 90 percent of the population declared themselves Christian. That’s changed, only about 70 percent are Christian today. The old gods never really went away, but now they’re coming back.”

John snapped alert, “Is that going to be a problem?”

“I hope not, but that’s why we went first to other places to charge up the masks.”

“You think it will be a fight?”

“When is ever not a fight, but let’s hope, these gods have been around for a very long time, perhaps they will be tolerant. And don’t forget, our Anglo-Saxon gods are cousins.”

“Yeah, but do we know any of them?”

“Well, Joe Bear fought in a war with Ingrid and her husband, Woden. We do have connections.”

“You know Ingrid?” A tall woman with flowing blond hair and wearing what could only be described as war gear stood in front of Louisa.

Louisa, startled, took a step back, “Ah, no we’ve never met but as I just said, Joe Bear knows her.”

“She’s my sister but I haven’t seen her for a very long time. So you believe in her?”

“It would be hard not to, I’m a Shaman, trained by Hugo Zembini and Ashley Childress. My name is Louisa and this is John. Mouse is beside John, he’s a spirit that is becoming more solid. We’re here to recharge some masks carried by spirits from the Canadian northwest, who have been good enough to allow us to use a log cabin on their territory.”

Mouse smiled behind his hand, and John noticed. Before he could say anything, the women were talking again.

“I am Freya, Goddess of this land and as I said, sister of Ingrid who is living in Canada now, I’m frankly surprised you have never met her.”

Louisa wasn’t sure how to answer that, “Well goddess, we are in the Yukon and Guelph is a very long way away.”

Freya laughed, “It is indeed, I’ve looked at a map or two in my life.”

Louisa found she liked this rather imposing woman. “Perhaps I should ask you if we can recharge our masks here on your territory.”

“Oh, do as you like, I thank you for the thought, but we Norse gods are not the force we used to be. As for the Lutherans who are the religious leaders of most of the people, they don’t believe in spirits and old gods, so they won’t care at all.”

“I thank you Goddess, is there anything we can do for you while we are here?”

“Just believing I’m real is a big favour my dear. There is one thing though, I heard from some of the old Vikings that you and yours helped them fight a sea monster. Is this true?”

“The spirits had a good time helping out, John and I didn’t do much more than watch. Mouse was a good fighter.”

Mouse made himself bigger, took a heroic pose and waved his fists. Freya smiled and bowed toward him. “Doubtless a great warrior, and quite handsome.

Mouse swelled his chest even more, if that was possible, and Freya winked at Louisa. Spirits of ghosts or humans, men were all the same.

“Shaman Louisa, you offered to help. We could use your assistance in a small matter, a trivial thing I assure you.”

Mouse stepped up beside Louisa and saluted. Louisa glanced at him and turned back to Freya. “It seems our spirits would be happy to help.”

“Fine, please come to my hall, you are all welcome to stay with me and we can discuss this matter.”

“We are driving our own vehicle, can we get there from here?”

“That green truck there? It won’t make it over the roads, best we simply move directly to Sessrumnir.”

Freya lifted her spear and the company was in a summer meadow, in the centre was a massive ship with a stream of people moving toward it and through the hull. The spirits seemed impressed, especially those with the Viking masks. John was mesmerized, “Is this Valhalla?”

Freya rolled her eyes, “My husband’s hall? No John, this is my hall, the place where the other half of the dead come. Odin takes only those who fall in battle, I take some of those, but also those who die of other causes. I am somewhat more eclectic than he is, as we do a bit more than drink and brag here.”

Louisa smiled at that, she really was becoming fond of this woman. The company followed Freya across the meadow and walked through the hull of the ship. Once inside they realized just how many people had died over the many thousands of years that Freya and the other gods had been around. The hall was bigger than massive, it stretched away into the distance so far that you lost the details. Louisa had an urge to go back outside to compare the space, but stopped herself. ‘Be cool’ she thought.

Freya wasn’t fooled, she laughed, “It’s impressive, isn’t it?. This is part of the problem I wanted to discuss with you. The hall is partly in another world, and at its edges we are having a problem, but never mind that now, let me show you around.”

Louisa, a bit red-faced, followed along to look at what was happening in the hall. She saw the dead doing more than drinking and bragging, as Freya had said, although there was plenty of that.

“The retired warriors. Over here are the artisans and merchants. They continue their crafts should they wish, and most do. Time and money are meaningless here, so you can see the quality of their work. They supply the gods with their armour, for one thing.”

John was admiring the decoration on a helmet, it was magnificent. But he wondered if it was practical, having worn helmets in his own war. Without comment, Freya picked up a war-axe from another table and handed it to him. “Go ahead.”

Looking at the craftsmen, who nodded, John swung at the delicate wings on the side of the helmet. The wing showed a slight scratch and the axe was as sharp as it was before hitting the helmet. John blinked and then grinned, bowing at the axe-maker as he handed the weapon back. “Who uses these?”

“Not all our Warriors wish to retire, the men on the boat you saw, fighting the sea monster, were ours. We continue to be useful to the world in places where there are things humans can’t deal with themselves.”

“The Captain of the ferry could see your men and knew enough to call them.”

“Yes, some humans remember the old ways. We help when asked. That monster has been around for many thousands of years, we beat it up and chase it away where it recovers and comes back.”

“But the captain said the ship is sometimes lost.”

“Balance must be maintained, the monster must win occasionally, but no more than a couple of decades between. Usually if a ferry is old and ready to sink anyway.”

John frowned, “That seems harsh.”

“We are not gentle gods, John. We come from harsh places and harsh times. Look around Iceland, this is not a gentle land. Our people did not go Viking because they were bored with the easy life at home.”

~~

## **An Evening Feast**

John was enjoying himself, sitting with a group of Vikings and Medieval peasants. He was drinking some very tasty beer and playing his harp. The latest tunes from 1350 seemed to find approval as some of the group sang along. The Vikings thumped their weapons on the floor in time to the tunes.

Louisa was off to one side with Freya, their heads leaned toward each other. Freya nodded toward John, “He’s good, has he been around for that long?”

“Surprisingly, no. That’s old blood in his system, it was called forth by someone who knew him back then.”

“Interesting that a ghost would have old blood to call up.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. Well I don’t have any other good explanation for it. We were alive at the same time and I know he wasn’t immortal.”

“Not all it’s cracked up to be, that’s for sure.”

Louisa smiled, Freya would know. Louisa looked around the place and saw her spirits embodied and scattered around the hall. It was the place where spirits and ghosts took on material forms. Funny thing, some of the spirits were animals and nobody seemed to notice. There was Mouse, in mouse form but human sized sitting with several warriors, trading stories. Further away was a moose, several geese, hissing as they laughed at something that Killer Whale had just said. The crew was making themselves at home.

Freya seemed relaxed as well, but she leaned closer and said, “About this problem we have...”

Louisa turned her face to Freya and lifted her eyebrows.

“It seems we’ve run out of room in that other world where the hall stretches its legs. It’s getting crowded in here. There doesn’t seem to be anything that I can see, or that our warriors can fight, we just can’t expand any more.”

“And you’d like us to take a look?”

“Perhaps you can see what I cannot. If we can’t expand, I’ll have to get a lot more selective about who comes into the hall, and that means ghosts and spirits wandering around making trouble.”

Looking at her own crew, Louisa nodded, “I can see where that would be a problem. OK we’ll go have a look.”

“Tomorrow will be soon enough, tonight please enjoy the evening. Some of the other gods have said they will drop in.”

As Freya said that, several tables were upset and scattered violently as Thor and Loki went at it, literally hammer and tongs. Loki had Thor’s nose trapped with a pair of tongs and was twisting hard. Freya growled, “Is that any way to behave?”

Louisa laughed, “So the stories are true.”

“Unfortunately. Those two don’t usually get physical, they must be showing off... ah.”

A mighty voice blew across the hall, “Loki, Thor, de cease this moment or face my wrath by my eye!”

“And now you see where they learned it.”

Freya stood and called over the din, “Odin my king, leave them to their play and come sit, meet our guest.”

As Odin sat, Tyr came into the place, took one look at the fight and yelled, “Stop your idiot fighting or I’ll go get my arm and beat you both with it!”

Odin giggled, “Now there’s a threat if ever I heard one.”

He bowed his head toward Louisa, “I am the great King, Odin Ravenfriend, and you are?”

“Just a traveller, please call me Louisa.”

“A lovely name, just lovely, you have the sound of England in your voice. I have always had a fondness for the lassies of the island.”

Freya shook her head, “You’ve got a fondness for anyone who will let you into their bed you old goat.”

Odin leaned back and spread his arms, as if to say it was all true.

Thor and Loki had stopped fighting, and Coyote had waved Loki over to his table. Thor looked confused, as he often did, but spotted Thunderbird and went to sit with that spirit. Soon the noise from that table was painful as the two thunder gods tried to out-do each other.

Louisa wasn’t too worried about the thunder, but she kept an eye on Coyote, who seemed to be talking intently to Loki. She asked Freya what they were talking about and Freya listened, “Coyote is telling Loki about his grandson who became a horse. Now Loki is telling Coyote that he gave birth to a horse. They seem to be getting along.”

“Hmm, well please let me know if Coyote tries to talk Loki into a contest.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much, Loki deserves whatever he gets.”

Louisa thought for a moment and nodded, “As does Coyote.”

Soon enough, Loki called Sleipnir to the hall. Seeing his legs, Coyote said, “Oh, only eight legs, why my grandson has twelve.”

Louisa blinked, how was Coyote going to produce a horse with twelve legs. She watched with a half smile in anticipation, sure enough, Coyote waved his hands and a horse with twelve legs appeared. Along with three heads and three tails.

Freya laughed, three tails like the rocking horse in Neruda’s house, but Odin didn’t appreciate the tricks. “Put my horse back in the stable and stop this horse-play!”

John laughed... ‘horse-play,’ but he soon stopped as Odin turned a thunderous face toward him.

Odin turned to Freya, “Oh, oh I see, horse-play, rather good wasn’t it.”

“Yes my dear, very good.”

“Bit crowded tonight, perhaps you should be a bit more selective about who you let in. My hall isn’t crowded at all.”

“You haven’t let anyone into Valhalla for centuries, Odin.”

“No Vikings dying these days, strange that.”

“Yes dear, strange indeed.”

Louisa stopped herself from winking at Freya, but she had been thinking. “What would happen if you did get more selective about who you let in?”

“I would like to avoid that, there are enough ghosts flapping around loose as it is, no offence.”

“None taken, what about making everyone half the size and adjusting the tables to match?”

“It would solve the problem for a short while, but more and more humans are being born, we’d hit the same problem in a short time.”

“Do they ever move on? Perhaps you could encourage them.”

“What? To the Christian’s heaven or someplace like that? They’d have to convert. If they move on from here, and some do, after a few centuries as they get bored, they just disappear as far as we can tell. Our religion says this is where they go after death. We don’t know of anywhere else.”

“Well, tomorrow we will investigate for you, provided our people aren’t too hung over.”

“No worries about that, there are no hangovers in our religion, that’s considered part of the big reward.”

“The boys will be glad to hear that, but let’s not tell them until tomorrow.”

Freya laughed, “Absolutely!”

~~

## **Beyond the Barrier**

“This is as far as I can go, there’s a barrier that none of us, none of the gods, can pass.”

John looked at Louisa, “If the gods can’t get past, how are we going to do it?”

Louisa gave him a half smile, “Not everyone can do everything my love. Let me see about pushing this back.”

Louisa waved her arm toward the blankness, but nothing happened. She frowned and lifted two hands to chest height and pushed. Still nothing, so she stepped forward and put her hands on the barrier and tried again. Glancing at Freya, she spoke words in a barely remembered language, one Hugo had taught her when training her as a Shaman.

Still nothing, but Louisa narrowed her eyes, she had felt something. Putting her fingers together and turning sideways, she slowly leaned toward the wall. Her fingertips vanished, then her hand and then the rest of her, as she disappeared, she grabbed John by the shoulder and pulled him through as well.

Just as John's head was about to vanish, his eyes as wide as dinner plates, Freya murmured, "Good luck."

As the two vanished, Freya put her hand out and felt the barrier once more. No, she still couldn't get through. She turned and was somewhat surprised to see Odin standing behind her. "Will they be able to do it? Get you more space for your hall?"

"I don't know, but they got through the barrier, that's a hopeful sign."

"Let's hope they can get back. And what of their spirits?"

"They are still in the hall, some drinking, some sleeping it off."

"They didn't take them along?"

"Louisa said that they weren't looking for a war, but I remembered those words she used, they were an old Lappish battle cry. I wonder if she knew that?"

"She's a Shaman in that tradition?"

"Apparently, and those Shamans were powerful. Remember when we fought them, even their Reindeer fought. The Shamans never knew just how much power they could wield, thank goodness."

Odin nodded, he remembered very well, those were hard battles. "Come, sister, let us find some breakfast while we wait."

Grey. That was the colour scheme as far as John could tell. The sky, the ground, the mood for goodness' sake. He could feel his good mood disappearing. Waking up without a hangover was a nice surprise, but now his head was starting to ache. "If this place were a song it would be in a minor key."

Louisa nodded while she looked around. She reached back and felt where the barrier should be and nodded again, "We can get back."

"But we're not going yet."

"No love, not until we find out what's happening here."

John frowned, "If this is another world, we're lucky it has the same atmosphere aren't we?"

“We’re ghosts, John, we could float around in outer space and not worry about it.”

“Oh, right. Do you see anything? All I can see is grey mist.”

“Nothing yet, but there’s something...”

John looked in the same direction, he saw nothing. He looked back at Louisa and got worried. She was frozen in place, as if terrified.

“What is it?”

“Can’t you see? It’s... you know that cannibal monster from the Yukon? The one Joe told us about? Here it comes.”

“I can’t see anything. Where is it?”

“There, right in front of me!” Louisa lifted her hands and sent a blast of energy out into the mists. This she followed with another, and another. Aside from burning holes in the mist, John could see nothing else happening. Louisa fell to the ground and curled up in fetal position where she whimpered.

John ran to her and knelt. “Louisa! Louisa, there’s nothing there!” He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. Louisa shuddered, and curled up even tighter.

John wasn’t sure what to do, he’d never seen Louisa like this, she was so strong, always the leader. How could he fix this? There must be something affecting her, or someone. John had his harp, he barely let it out of his hands these days. He swung it around and, thinking for a moment, played a song of revelation.

Not long afterward, the mists to his right began to clear, and a figure appeared. It nodded at John and didn’t try to hide. John swung his harp around onto his back once more and rose to face the man, for it was a man. “Who are you and why did you damage my friend.”

“She is unharmed, but now she is harmless.”

“Why?”

“You ask why? You invade my lands and ask why?”

“We are not invading, but we are trying to find out why Freya’s hall cannot grow any more.”

“Why do you think? As it grows larger, my domain grows smaller. Enough is enough.”

“How did Freya’s hall get linked to your domain in the first place? Is this not another world?”

“How are you so ignorant? Were you never trained?”

“I’m not from here, and I went to school like everyone else.”



“That one knows, I reached her instantly, why don’t you see what she sees?”

“About that, can you let her free please, I assume you’re messing around in her mind.”

“She stays where she is, she is too powerful, look what she did to the barrier.”

John looked where the being was pointing and saw a massive, ragged hole in a wall of what looked a lot like ice. Ice and mist, something was tickling John’s memory.

“I’m a lot better on Saxon mythology, but wasn’t there a world next to this one made of ice and mist?”

“You are not completely ignorant then. Yes this is Niflheim.”

“So literally another world, not another dimension. But doesn’t that make you...”

The creature was ten feet high, with a bluish tinge to his skin. “I am Ymir, ruler of Niflheim.”

“But didn’t Odin kill you and use your body to create the cosmos?”

“Yes, yes, and set Loki’s daughter Hel to rule over Hell, where the ordinary folk go after they die. Look, I didn’t die, and there’s no Hell, OK? The ordinary folk go to Freya, not here.”

“I don’t understand, and could you come back to normal size please. My neck is getting sore looking up at you.”

“Normal size?”

“Sorry, my size.”

“Is that better? Now, I am going to send you two back to Freya and repair the wall.”

“Won’t work. Louisa is a bit stubborn, she’ll only come back again.”

“Are you telling me I should kill the both of you?”

“I’d rather you didn’t, can we talk perhaps? Make some sort of a deal so that Freya’s hall doesn’t explode at the foundations from too many spirits?”

“What is all this to you?”

“Louisa promised to try to solve Freya’s problem, and so we are bound to try.”

Ymir leaned toward John as if searching for a smudge on his forehead. “Admirable, what is your suggestion?”

“Me? Louisa is the smart one, you should be talking to her.”

“As I said, I have no interest in fighting her, she is too powerful, no, you and I will talk. Come with me.”

With that, John was in what looked like an ice palace. It was plain, obviously designed by Ymir himself. Looking closely, John got a hint of the man's thinking, very plain and direct, honest. They noticed a massive hole in the wall as they entered and Ymir waved his arm. The wall began healing. "You see what I mean, too powerful, blast first and ask questions later."

John grinned lopsidedly, "I won't argue with that."

Ymir laughed, "Sit, have some wine, we will talk."

Louisa sat up, the monster was gone and John was there. "How do you feel?"

"Fine, what happened?"

"Let's go back and I'll tell you when we're in Freya's hall again."

Louisa stood and started to speak that strange language again, John put his hand on her arm. "I can do it, just hold my hand."

John put his arm out and walked through the barrier as if it didn't exist. As they got to the other side, John waved at Mouse, "Can you bring us some wine, a lot of wine please. Can you ask Freya to come as well please?"

Louisa sat down in some confusion. "Is it over, John?"

"It is, but wait for Freya. There is an agreement."

Freya arrived at the table carrying four bottles of wine and Mouse followed with glasses. Having set the glasses down, Mouse disappeared. Freya poured and looked at John.

"The next world turned out to be Niflheim and I met Ymir there."

Freya sat forward and started to talk, "Please hear me out Goddess. Then you can ask questions. Ymir did not die, he rules that world and it was he who set the barrier to your hall. The legends say that Odin sent Hel to rule over Hell in Niflheim after Ymir was killed, that she took in the dead who did not die heroic deaths."

Freya spoke, "There is no Hel, and no Hell, what are you talking about."

"There will be, Ymir was impressed with Louisa and so he took one of her eggs and implanted it in Loki, who will have a girl that he will name Hel and she will rule in Niflheim with Ymir."

Louisa's hand flew to her belly, but finding nothing amiss, she slowly picked up her glass and drank deeply.

"Why would Ymir agree to something like that?"

“Frankly, I think he is lonely, he has a whole world to himself. I think he would not mind some spirits and as I said, he was impressed with Louisa’s power. I think he would like some of it in his world.”

“So the dead will go to Niflheim?”

“I think you and Ymir can work that out, maybe some of those here would like to go somewhere else. That would leave room for you to take in new spirits.”

Freya smiled, leading John to wonder if she was forming plans for Ymir already. “And what can I give you two for solving my problem?”

Louisa finally spoke, “Our road trip was to empower our masks, perhaps a bit of power for the Viking masks?”

Freya looked closely at Louisa, “And why are you gathering power in the masks?”

“The spirits that own the land our cabin is on, use the power in the masks for rental payments.”

Freya looked a bit surprised at this, she looked over at Mouse, who seemed to be stifling a laugh. Freya nodded to herself, “Very well, you shall have it. Have some more wine as well.”

~~

## **A Snow Day in Iceland**

There is something magical about the words ‘a day off.’ The spirits were determined to enjoy themselves. Even the most stuffy of them, the school teacher, the accountant, the city councillor from Watson Lake, even the Lord Mayor of Ipswich, were acting like school kids on a holiday. The Lord Mayor was dancing around on the edge of Fagradalsfjall with such enthusiasm that he fell in to the volcano.

Louisa shook her head, “He’ll be all right, but look, there go the rest of them. John did your folks ever ask you if you’d jump off a bridge if your friend did?”

“I did, damned near drowned.”

“Well maybe those folks are going through a second childhood. You’d think they would be used to being spirits by now though.”

“New country maybe, some of the masks may be from here but the spirits are mostly from the cabin. Maybe the warmth is getting them all worked up, seeing all this ice and snow and being next to, sorry inside, a volcano.”

“Well this sulphur spring is plenty warm enough for me. I can feel all the tension draining out of my shoulders.”

“That’s good, I’m glad to hear that. You do know it’s pretty much boiling right?”

Louisa looked sharply at John. “Don’t think we’re not going to talk about you giving away one of my eggs.”

“It was sort of a spur of the moment thing, I know I should have asked.”

“John it was a major invasion of my body. Honestly what makes men think they can do with us what they wish?”

“Love, it wasn’t like that, and I didn’t know ghosts had eggs anyway. When Ymir suggested it I laughed, but he seemed to conjure up an egg.”

Louisa thought about that, “Maybe he did. You’re right, ghosts shouldn’t have physical cells. Maybe he created an egg by magic.”

John looked sort of pathetic, and Louisa had to laugh. “Oh relax dude, it was an egg, women get rid of them once a month, no problem. I’d have given it to him if I’d been awake. It’s just the doing it without asking first that’s irritating me.”

“Sorry, if the same situation happens you can take my sperm and give it away.”

“Not quite the same, John, men spill their seed all over the place, including the bed at night.”

“But every sperm is sacred.”

“You did NOT just pull a Monty Python quote on me!”

John grinned and slid under the water to blow bubbles. Louisa watched and shook her head, “Another thing men release under the covers at night.”

John came up above water, “I heard that.”

A few of the spirits, including Mouse, approached the cave with the hot spring, “Excuse us, but we’ve got a message.”

Louisa was a bit surprised, “From inside the volcano?”

“Pele sends her greetings from Hawaii, the volcanoes are connected through the lava tubes, and she also sends this along, since John left it back at Kilauea.” Mouse offered John his Hazelwood cane with the iron tip.

“I left it behind?”

“Pele says that she has seen that you may need it again. It is still protected from fire.”

“You can hold it?”

“There is nothing to harm me here, but yes, it should have removed my protections, I should have perished in the Volcano when I touched it, but Pele told me that I was protected similarly so I could carry it.”

“So you can use the cane?”

“Yes I suppose so.”

“Please keep it with you then, Mouse, you are so much quicker than I am, I’m sure it will be better if you have it.”

Mouse bowed deeply and backed out of the cave. As he did, Louisa turned to John, “That was a very nice thing you did for Mouse, he is a warrior with a deep sense of tradition. To receive a weapon from his leader is a wonderful thing.”

“Really? Well I’m glad of that, but I was just thinking I didn’t want to carry it if I didn’t need it.”

“John, to get back to your giving away one of my eggs...”

John winced, “No love, no need to duck, but tell me what Ymir did.”

“Well he sort of waved a branch, a wand I guess, and the egg was in his hand. It had some sort of red-orange berries on it, a big cluster.”

“Ah, perhaps that explains it. Freya gave me something, it’s a cane made from the Rowan tree, she said it will have great power once Loki gives birth.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure, but you keep the cane, you’re better with it than I am. Presumably it will be as useful as the Hazelwood cane Joe gave us.”

“Will it remove protections like the other one?”

“I suppose we’ll find out when we use it.”

“Shall we get out before we get too wrinkled and go to that restaurant beside the lake? I hear they poach the seafood in the lake water.”

Louisa smiled and stood up, her clothing appearing on her body as it left the water. John rose naked and shook his finger at her, “Show off, I was looking forward to seeing you naked.”

“You see that every night, my boy.”

“What’s your point?”

Louisa laughed, was naked, did a pirouette and was dressed again. “Get dressed, stud, now I’m hungry.”

John conjured up clothing and took Louisa's arm to walk to the restaurant. Out in the lake they saw some of their spirits splashing and swimming. One of them had found a boat and was happily trying to run the others over. Of course if he succeeded, that spirit would just float through the boat and pop out the back end. John shook his head like a schoolmaster watching the kids at recess.

Louisa grinned, she knew he would be out there with them if he got half a chance.

Just then, Louisa and John stopped and looked upward. The Northern Lights had started. With their extra sight, they saw that the lights were spirits dancing in the sky. On the lake, their crew were looking back toward shore with hopeful eyes. Louisa looked away from the lights long enough to yell out across the water, "Go ahead if they will have you. You have the rest of the night off."

In the sky, the spirits were spreading their arms, and from the water the Yukon spirits were leaping upward to embrace them. Long practised at dancing in the sky, they made a beautiful display, swaying and flowing together and apart again.

John was fascinated, he'd never seen such a display. "I wonder, is this how new spirits are made?"

Louisa looked thoughtful, "I never thought about it before, but look, that pair just split apart and there are three now. Oh how wonderful."

The two stood, arms around each other, for a long time and watched. Eventually John's stomach growled and Louisa hugged him a bit harder. "Let's get some food into you."

The meal was just as good as they hoped it might be. Fish, squid, shellfish and many other things John recognized. But there were some things that he'd never seen before. He looked at Louisa. "Those are ram's testicles, that is fermented shark"

"This looks like a sheep's face."

"It is, this is a special meal for sure."

John looked sideways at Louisa who laughed. "Just try, you may like it. The cuisine began with not wasting anything. There are things here that you won't find anywhere else."

"I believe you. Pass the squid please."

~~

## Hulder

Louisa stretched in the lovely soft bed, pushing the covers down as she did so. John woke with the movement, looked over at Louisa and without his direction, his hand reached for her. When he realized, he stopped. Louisa noticed and put on a pout.

Later, with rumpled sheets and tired bodies, they lay side by side, drifting in half sleep. John was first to rise, he visited the bathroom and when he returned, Louisa took his hand. "I guess we should be moving on after breakfast."

John nodded lazily, "Up to you my sweet, but could we go somewhere warm this time? I'm chilled to the bone."

"Not the impression I got half an hour ago, you were pretty sweaty."

"Just from the hard work."

Louisa laughed and tapped the back of her fist on John's chest, "So I'm a lot of work am I?"

"If you were any less work, love, you wouldn't need me in the room."

"OK we'll go somewhere warm, how about New Zealand?"

"Sounds lovely as long as it's warm."

"North Island it is."

"Do you think we could have something other than fish for breakfast?"

The spirits and masks were gathered together by the lake. Louisa took a quick count, then counted more slowly. "Where's Mouse?"

A chorus of frowns and head-shakes answered her. John said, "Last I saw him, he was headed down a vent with the Hazelwood cane. You don't suppose he's heading home that way do you?"

"He wouldn't leave, certainly not without telling us. Which vent?"

"The one we were near yesterday, beside the volcano."

"Let's go see."

"We should check out first and maybe donate the truck to the hotel. I'm sure they can find a use for it."

Shortly, Louisa flicked the crew to the vent. It took no time at all to realize that Mouse was in deep trouble, or someone was, there was the sound of a battle not too far from the entrance. Without hesitation, Louisa jumped into the vent, closely followed by John. Too late he realized that he was holding the Rowan cane, which as far as he knew, was not fire-proof. As he was falling, he felt a shock run up his arm and the cane, which had been starting to char, was fresh and whole again. John shrugged, maybe Loki just gave birth to Hel.

At the first bend of the vent, John saw Louisa fighting beside Mouse and... And what was that? A tall, hard looking woman. Hard, she looked like she might have been made of stone. Good looking though.

“John, help, there are too many of them!”

John tore his eyes from the statue and looked to see hundreds of ugly looking... um... Trolls, that was the word he was looking for, they were Trolls. John wedged himself in beside Louisa and started using his cane. It seemed to hurt the Trolls quite a lot, and they were soon backing up in fear. This let Mouse and the stone woman throw back those on the other side of the vent. Soon the attackers (assuming they had attacked Mouse first) retreated down the tube.

“Reminds me of fighting for Pele.”

“Never mind that, John. Mouse, what’s going on here.”

Mouse actually put his hands behind his back and looked down. He’d have kicked at the dirt if the vent wasn’t solid rock. “Well, I came exploring and I met Hulder and we got talking and, well, one thing led to another.”

“One thing led to another?”

Hulder stepped in front of Mouse, “We fell in love and spent the night in bed is what Mouse is trying to say.”

John looked around, “A bed of lava?”

Louisa ignored him, “And then?”

“My father found us and they decided Mouse must die, but we fought side by side, as is proper, and held them off until you came and we defeated them in glorious battle.”

Louisa looked at Mouse, who was all dewy-eyed looking at Hulder. He was in love, certainly. “Hulder, will they be back?”

“Oh no, once defeated, that’s it. They will go home and I must go into exile.”

Mouse got bigger, “What! Just because you helped me?”

“It is the custom, if I defy my family I have left them already.”

“Hulder, if I’d known that I would not have let you fight beside me.”

“How could I not, my husband. I left my family when I slept with you.”

“Husband?”

John was laughing, “Oh Mouse, for an ancient spirit, you don’t know a lot about the world do you?”

Mouse whirled on John, “Mice have sex and reproduce, we don’t get married!”



Hulder put a hand on Mouse's arm. "Peace, if this is not your custom, then I will go, it will not be the first time a Troll woman has become alone."

Mouse got smaller, the same size as the giant stone woman. His eyes softened again and his body relaxed. "I am no longer a mouse, I know not what I am but one thing is certain, I am yours, my wife."

John leaned toward Louisa, "Is it just me or is he starting to sound like her?"

Louisa nudged him away from her. "Hulder, you are welcome in our family, we are about to go to New Zealand and eventually home to the Yukon."

Hulder smiled, "I can guide you there, I know the paths of the vents."

At that moment, a lone Troll came down the vent toward them. He had his hands spread to show he was unarmed. Hulder took a step toward him, looked closely at his face and nodded. "This is Hakalai, my father."

"Daughter, I came to give you my blessing. Your man fought well, as this dent in my skull would indicate. He is a worthy husband to you. Your cousins will recover from the wounds you two laid on them. I'm not so sure about the injuries this man laid on, his club would seem to be god-blessed. We will apply to Freya for help for them. But regardless, he and the woman also fought well. We are pleased with your choice."

Hulder went down on her knee and bent her head, "I thank you for your blessing, Father, and I will do my best to make you and Mother proud."

"I am certain you will do great deeds, and we will hear of them." With that, Hakalai lifted his daughter to her feet and joined her hand with that of Mouse. Mouse bowed deeply to Hakalai, who inclined his head slightly less deeply, as befitted father to son.

John watched all this carefully, he was beginning to see that customs were different, but love never changed. He supposed that Trolls, who had fought for so long, would want to test anyone who was a suitor to their children. He just wasn't clear what his position was in all this, were he and Louisa the new parents? He was certain that Louisa was the boss of their ragged little mob.

As for his Rowan cane, he was certain now that it contained some of the powers of the Norse gods, and he hoped Freya would know how to heal the Trolls.

~~

## **Journey to the Centre of the World**

John turned around to climb up the vent, but realized it was vertical. He turned to see Louisa thinking about it. "We'll have a hell of a climb out of here love, it was a lot easier to jump down."

Louisa smiled, "We're ghosts John, we could float up, but I'm not sure that's the way to go. Hulder says she knows the way through the volcanic vents. Why not get warm now and go that way to New Zealand."

John pretended to think about it, to cover up his embarrassment. Life seemed so normal with Louisa that he forgot he was a ghost. Wait... normal? They were heading down into the bowels of the earth to go to the other side. Normal went away a long time ago. "Sure, why not?"

Louisa did another count of spirits and others, and came up with plus one this time. Good everyone was there. "Hulder, if you would guide us, we can go now."

"With pleasure. We have a short hike through the Troll lands, and then we will find an elevator on the other side."

"Lead on Macduff."

"Lay on Macduff," muttered John.

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing love, after you."

Louisa, who had spent a couple of years in a Shakespeare company, grinned as they followed Hulder and Mouse down the passageway. As they walked, they passed a few Trolls being bandaged, but all of the tribe smiled and nodded as they passed. Hulder was well-liked and they were happy she had found someone she loved. Seeing this, John could only shake his head. These were not the Trolls he had known from the stories he had read as a boy.

Louisa took his hand and squeezed, "Beings are beings, John. If Trolls were like the stories, they would have disappeared long ago. Same with all the other supposedly evil creatures. Some people once declared that Neanderthals only procreated by rape. In fact, now that I think of it, the idea that 'the other' exists to rape our women is still around. Damn, that is a depressing thought."

John, whose time as a policeman had given him a rather different view of humanity, kept his opinions to himself. Not for the first time, he wished that he, and all other people on the earth, had the same kind outlook as Louisa. It would be a better place. Looking ahead at Mouse and Hulder walking arm in arm, he smiled. Maybe it was a better place.

Several hours later, they came to a place where a volcanic tube filled with lava was bubbling. Hulder turned, "This is it, just let me put the floor down." With that, she walked to the side of the passageway and grabbed a steel dish, twenty feet across and many centimetres thick. She picked it up as if it was nothing, but it must have weighted several tonnes.

"Mouse, jump across and catch this, we don't want to splash all over the place."

Mouse did just that and as Hulder dropped the dish, Mouse caught it easily and the two lowered it onto the top of the lava. John looked at Louisa who shrugged and whispered, "I think Mouse becomes whatever is close, I'm sure he wasn't that strong before he met her."

Hulder turned around, "Please get onto the floor quickly, the drop is about to happen."

As the spirits piled on with plenty of grins, John frowned, "Drop?"

"The lava in this vent goes up and down as it is heated and cools in a deep pool, we can ride it down."

"Oh, no problem then."

As they sat on the steel dish, John turned to Louisa, "Why isn't it heating up?"

"It is, but we're OK in the lava itself, why would this bother us?"

"Oh." John decided to stop goggling at things and be as cool as the others.

Soon the dish shuddered and then dropped, at first the speed was rather alarming, but after a minute or two it slowed. Some sort of pressure thing, John supposed. The drop took almost an hour, and when the dish finally stopped, there was a massive iron door beside them. Hulder pushed that door open, and started to pick up the dish after they had unloaded. "Ho, we're going up," said a voice from further down the passage.

"Ah, it's all warmed up for you then," said Hulder to the Trolls coming up the passage.

"You would be Hulder. We heard about your marriage, our tribe wishes you well."

"Thank you cousins. How goes it with you?"

"Fine, fine, some good mining in the new seams. Oops, going up, best close the door."

Hulder nodded and swung the door closed. Turning to the group she indicated they should head down the passage. "Mind your step, it's a bit rough, good thing the worms are glowing well."

John noticed the worms on the walls and ceiling for the first time. He shook his head and muttered, "Where did I think the light was coming from?"

Another long trek and they arrived at a shack by a massive cave. Hulder turned "There is a crazy man here, please don't confuse him with the truth, he figures he is going to be rich beyond counting any day now."

As they got close to the shack, the door flew open, "Welcome, welcome visitors, are you come to buy water?"

John was shocked, here was a raggedy man, scraggly beard and hair. "Water? You are selling water?"

"Indeed sir, Oceans of it, and I've claimed it all. When the surface water is all polluted, I will be here to sell this water."

“I see blue rocks, but no water I’m afraid.”

“The water is in the rocks, and the rocks are mine, I’ve laid claim to them, all of them.”

John was getting angry, “You’ve laid claim to all the blue rock, what, here in this cave or all around the earth.”

“All of it, all around the earth, any day now I’ll be the richest man who ever lived.”

“And you made this claim with whom?”

“The Oregon mining commission of course, where I’m from.”

“And the Trolls who live here?”

“What about them, my claim came first.”

Now the scraggly man was starting to get upset. Hulder said softly, “He thinks he owns it, please don’t upset him, we let him believe it, he will die soon and nothing will change. We are just happy he doesn’t think he can claim the air, or the food that grows on the walls. That would annoy us.”

John was not placated, “Why don’t you just squash him? He might start trouble for you.”

“How? Oregon has no jurisdiction here, and even if he could convince a military to back him up, they could not get here to fight us. If they did fight, they would have to use drills and nuclear arms and that would contaminate the water, humans can’t get here to fight.”

“He did.”

“We brought him here, found him about to fall into a lava tube, so we took him here where it was cool enough for him to live. He was raving about ‘the last great monopoly on Earth’ or some such. We thought it would be kindest to just let him live out his days here.”

“I know his kind, I think I would have let him fall into the lava. You are a better being than I am, Hulder.”

“I doubt that, let’s just pass on, we’re heading for the West Coast of North America on our way to Hawaii. There we turn south.”

With a wave at the old man and his dreams of being a water baron, the crew marched on.

~~

**Full Circle**

They had not gone very far down the passageway before they saw another shack. As they walked past, John called to Hulder, "Another water baron?"

"Yes. There are quite a few of them, apparently the minute the scientists found water bound in the rocks here, the entrepreneurs began jumping into volcanoes. Every one of them is convinced that they own all the water and that they will become uselessly wealthy."

"That's a great way to put it, wealth beyond a certain amount is useless, isn't it?"

"That's what the philosopher tells us."

Louisa was intrigued, "Who is that, dear?"

"This man who wandered into our village about a hundred years ago. He said his name was Lash LaRue but I don't think that was his real name. He told us he was a philosopher but I think he was more of a social reformer. He said there was enough on the world for everyone, but some thought they should have more than others. He looked at some of the gold diggers back at that time and said they wanted money more than a good life. They wanted useless amounts of money."

"I would have a hard time arguing with him. I've seen lots of people with more money than they could use, far more than they needed, who said they were poor and were looking for more."

Distances were deceiving and they were moving fast, three days later they were under British Columbia. Some of the spirits seemed to be homesick, if that was possible, and about half of them headed up the vents toward the North.

Mouse stayed with the main group, so that Hulder could continue guiding the rest. John was curious about the number of vents and volcanoes around the British Columbia and Yukon border. Hulder drew a map in the dust on the floor of the passage which absolutely terrified John. "This whole place is set to explode, who could live here!"

"We do John, when we're in our cabin."

"Yeah, but we're ghosts, not to mention we could flick ourselves back to England any time we want. What about these people who live around here?"

"Well, volcanoes don't erupt all that often, so generations of people can live and die without ever thinking about them."

"Is that it? Men are just stupid? They ignore the ground underneath them?"

"Well, I suppose that's so, after all you and I aren't out trying to change the climate are we, and that's a lot more dangerous right now, everywhere, than a volcanic eruption... at least it seems that way."

John shook his head, "I suppose. I guess anyone who is poor has to stay and take what they get, and those who could afford to do something about it, don't care."

“On the climate, I think you’re right, but lots of people recently have moved away because of the volcanoes and earthquakes. They can afford to do it.”

“Louisa, why are we doing this? Wandering all over the world?”

“To recharge the masks so we can keep using the cabin, have you forgotten?”

“No, but we’ve been wandering for a very long time.”

“We’re close to the cabin, do you want to go there instead of New Zealand?”

“Well, you know I’m happy sitting at home. You’re the traveller, do you want to go on?”

“I do, but if you want to stop I’m happy to stop with you.”

“Well I’ve never been to New Zealand, let’s continue on. Where are we headed now?”

“Hawaii, then south.”

“To see Pele, I got the impression she didn’t want us to go back there.”

“We’ll go under, rather than to her.”

“Maybe we won’t go anywhere near her, look up ahead.”

Across the passage were several hard-looking beings armed with axes and shields. They had stopped Hulder who was arguing rather noisily.

Louisa was startled, “Kobolds? What are they doing here in BC?” She walked forward to where the group was arguing.

“My name is Hulder, Trollish from Iceland. You have no right to detain us, we are passing through.”

“No right? This is our land long-legs, and we will say who goes where.”

“Your land? Since when are your tribe here? You come from the forests of the east. Are you lost, little one.”

“Little... you’re asking for a smack.”

Louisa put her hand on Hulder’s arm, and stepped in front of Mouse who was growing in size. “Can I ask, please, what the problem is?”

A general easing of tension could be felt. One of the Kobolds stepped forward and grounded his axe on the ground in front of him, folding his hands over the head. “We are the heavy squad, in charge of patrolling this stretch of the passageways. It’s our job to make sure nobody invades from the west.”

Hulder was snickering at the idea of these men being 'heavy'. Louisa gave her a look and turned back to the little being, "We're coming from the East, if you're guarding against movement from the West, you're not looking for us."

The man looked up and down the passageway, obviously confused as to direction. "Nevertheless, we cannot let you pass."

"Your lands are beyond? Where we are going?"

"No, you have passed through them but nevertheless..."

Louisa realized she was dealing with a bit of stubbornness. "And the mechanism of passage?"

"No mechanism, no passage."

The other beings behind the leader were looking a bit uncertain, Mouse had been bulking up and was looking a bit ferocious. More and more spirits were manifesting as well. The Kobolds were definitely outnumbered. Looking around, Louisa thought quickly. "Single combat, me against your champion."

"That would be me," said the leader, pounding his breastplate with his fist, but I'll not fight a woman.

"That seems a bit sexist."

"No, it's not, it's just that any woman I've fought has been a dirty fighter. I will meet the big fellow behind you."

"Mouse, you wish to fight Mouse? How about it, are you willing to be our champion?"

Mouse stepped forward, "This wee fellow, perhaps I'll match him in size." At that, the spirit shrank to Kobold size, but Louisa could see that he gave up none of the mass he had put on. He was about as dense as the rocks around them.

"Very well, shall we begin?" The Kobold lifted his axe and swung it at Mouse. Mouse stepped inside the arc of the swing, blocked the Kobold's arm with one hand and punched the man hard in the face.

When The Kobold regained consciousness, he was watching Joe Bear wag his finger at Mouse. "Just because you have a girl, there's no reason for you to go picking fights. These are my friends, why didn't you call me to settle things?"

Mouse was hanging his head, but John could see a bit of a grin on his face as Hulder looked on with dreamy eyes.

~~

## Hawaii Again

The Kobolds seemed impressed with Joe Bear. Enough that they grabbed their leader and hurried off down a side tunnel. Joe stayed to chat with Louisa, “How is the trip going?”

“A bit of an adventure, but then again it wouldn’t be a trip if it wasn’t an adventure, right? We’re going to New Zealand next.” Looking at John she smiled and said, “and then we’re heading home.”

“Well the cabin is in good shape, I’ve been keeping an eye on it. Being out of the way like it is, and without the spirits around to watch, thieves seem to find it.”

“Some of the spirits have headed back, maybe they sensed a problem coming, I’m sure it will all be fine as long as they don’t take it into their heads to turn the thieves inside out like last time.”

“I’ve had a chat with them about that. They’ll just run them off.”

“Will you come with us to New Zealand, Joe?”

John looked up sharply.

“No thanks Louisa, I want to get back to Jane. She’s still adjusting to being a normal person. I know it’s been years but old habits...”

“All right Joe, thanks for your help, we’ll get on our way. See you in a couple of weeks.”

“No rush, like I said, the cabin will wait for you.”

Joe lumbered down a side passageway toward the north, and John looked hard at Louisa. Louisa looked back just as hard. “You must be kidding, have you met Jane? She would cut my throat if I made a move toward Joe, just get that idea out of your head will you please.”

John put up his hands, “Far be it from me to ask you to be faithful, after all this time.”

“Oh stuff it, you fossil.”

John laughed, ‘one for me’ he thought.

John woke up slowly, he had no idea where he was, it smelled electrical, mechanical. It was dark too. At least there was no movement, each time he woke up earlier there was a strange pitching movement, and then he would fall back asleep. He reached down but no, he hadn’t pissed his pants, even if he’d been there for weeks, or what seemed like weeks. Thinking that, he realized just how full his bladder was.

He stood carefully, figuring he was in some kind of storage closet, and felt his way to a door. Shocking himself a few times, he realized it was an electrical cabinet. Opening the door he realized he was in the cargo hold of an airplane. A big one. There was a wide door open but nobody around, they must be changing carts, so he carefully made his way down the conveyor belt and hurried behind one of the huge rubber tires to relieve himself. Having done that, he realized nobody was paying any attention to him so he made his way into the terminal through a service door.



Once inside, he was met by a strange being, half transparent and wavering like it was on fire. “We were just coming to get you, come this way.”

“No.”

The being looked at John and frowned a bit, John was in agony, his whole body arched as wave after wave of fire ran through his nerves.

“Come this way.”

John followed, relieved that the pain was gone, and vowing not to disagree any more. He wanted to ask where they were going but he didn't dare.

They walked along a corridor that became more and more rough until John was convinced they were in a tunnel under the earth. After what seemed to be kilometres, and as it got more and more hot, they finally came to a cavern. As John stepped in, the temperature dropped and he stopped sweating. At the far end of the cavern was a throne of some sort. The throne was hard to see because there was a bright, wavering light. As John and the being accompanying him got closer to that throne, he realized it was a human-like figure, but made of fire.

When John was about three metres away, his legs buckled and he fell to his knees. The figure seemed to grow in size, “I am Pele and this is my domain. Why are you here?”

John got angry, as he often did, “Why am I here? Why did you kidnap me and bring me here!” Unfortunately for John, his anger didn't have the usual effect it did on those who knew him. Pele just tipped her head to one side and John was again on fire. This time it went on for a long time.

“You dare to be angry with me, tiny man? Perhaps you don't know the situation here. You will answer my questions or you will die in agony. Why are you here?”

Through the pain, John managed, “I don't know, I don't know, I don't know.”

“Very well. I sense that your group is moving this way and will soon be in the passageway beneath me. For services rendered to me in the past, I will send you down to them. You will tell them to move on or I will absorb them all. This is my gift to you on behalf of the woman Louisa.”

“Who?”

“Silence.”

With that, John felt the floor become soft and then start to flow around him. He sank for a very long time until he emerged from the roof of another tunnel, fell several metres and landed awkwardly on the floor. He screamed, having felt his leg snap. “Why me, why is the universe doing this to me, what did I ever do to that bitch?”

This went on for at least a day, as John lay there and cursed everything but himself. Eventually, Hulder and Louisa came from around the corner and discovered John muttering about how unfair everything was. Louisa was shocked that John had somehow got ahead of the group. She ran to him.

“John, John are you all right? What happened?”

John stopped complaining long enough to stare at this woman. After a few moments, recognition flared in his eyes. “You, I should have known you were behind this! Not enough that you left me, you have to find me and torture me years later?”

Louisa was confused, “John?”

A voice from several metres behind Louisa said “Yes?”

Louisa turned her head to see John coming around the bend, she looked back to see him lying on the floor, hatred on his face. She frowned.

As John approached, he saw himself crumpled on the floor and he frowned as well. “What? Who is this?”

As he took another step, the crumpled thing on the floor began to come apart, small bits and pieces like dust flowed toward John and were absorbed into him. As they did, John’s eyes got bigger. Louisa reached out toward the thing on the ground, but Hulder put her hand on Louisa’s arm, stopping her. Louisa slumped.

As the last bit of the dust was absorbed into John, he sat down hard. Nobody spoke for a long time, then finally, John lifted his head and said, “I’m sorry Louisa, I had forgotten what I was like. I am so sorry.”

Louisa nodded.

“No wonder you left me, I used anger and fear to control you. I was so self-absorbed, not to mention drunk, that I didn’t realize what I was doing to you. I’m sorry.”

Louisa shook her head, “I stayed for a long time, letting you do that John, I wanted to work it out and I kept hoping you would return to the gentle man I married, but one day I couldn’t take it any more.”

John nodded, then asked, “How was this possible? That was me just after you left, but that was decades ago.”

“I don’t know, it was as if he was ripped out of the past, and when he faced you, he was dragged back into the present. I have no idea how that could happen.”

“Why then, why did it happen? I thought I’d shoved that side of me so deep down that it would never show up again. Did I shove him right out of my life?”

“Perhaps, I don’t think we will ever know.”

“Well, now he’s back in my head and I am just so very sorry to have treated you like that. To make you do what I wanted you to do, on the threat of me getting angry. It’s like I was some two year old throwing tantrums. I am so ashamed.”

“That was you, John, but your world seemed out of your control. You could at least control our house, I understood that.”

“No, you should have refused to let me do that to you. I didn’t want to do that to you, I’m so very sorry Louisa, that was not something you did to someone you loved. I didn’t want to love you, I wanted to control you, didn’t you see that?”

“Of course I did my love, but I hoped. Eventually, to keep my own life, I had to leave.”

“And you came back to give me another chance...”

“I did, I never stopped loving you, and I am so glad that you left that man behind so we could be together again.”

John tapped his chest, “Now that he’s in here, I’m going to keep a close eye on him, I promise.”

~~

## The Cruise

John was drinking one of those fancy things with an umbrella and an orange slice on the edge of the glass. The straw was glass, and it was supposed to stay with him from drink to drink. He was on the side of the cruise ship that was out of the wind so he was comfortable on his deck chair. He was squinting into the sun as it bounced off the ocean and he was almost asleep, except for that nagging feeling in his mind.

He had remembered just how badly he had treated Louisa, and not just her, but others for several years after she had left him. There was nothing he could call it except abuse. He had kept those who lived with him in line by threatening to become angry, and he had explained it as something he couldn’t help. What that meant was that those around him had to stay quiet and do what he wanted them to do in order to help him keep his temper. It worked, those who loved him, or who could not get away from him, would do what he said just to escape the stress of the arguments.

Some of the things he had called Louisa... John shuddered. No wonder he had pushed all that from his memory, but now it was back and he wasn’t happy about it. “Just why did you get back with me, Louisa? I was an absolute beast to you, why would you risk going through that again?”

Louisa was half asleep herself, in the next chair, her own drink finished and another on the way. “Because I figured you had probably grown up. People do change you know, and if the worst happens, I can always walk away from you again. But I don’t think it will, you’ve learned to look at yourself and take some responsibility for your actions. You never did that back in the day, it was all someone else’s fault.”

“Well I’m sorry for how I treated you.”

“Yes, love, you’ve mentioned that, many times, and now it’s time for you to forgive yourself as I have forgiven you.”

John was quiet for a time, then smiled. “And thanks for going with the cruise ship rather than another long hike underground. This is so much better.”

“Well you were looking a bit fatigued, to tell the truth, and I was getting a bit leg-sore too.”

“Poor Hulder though, is she still getting sea-sick?”

“The medication seems to be working, but she’s still a bit shy of the sunshine. Trolls and the sun never got along very well.”

“Turning to stone and all that?”

“Well, maybe a long time ago, but they don’t do that any more, still, there’s the old stories they get told and that makes them a bit nervous. Personally I think it’s just parents trying to keep their kids from wandering around aboveground. Maybe meeting humans.”

“Well the Trolls crunching human’s bones might have something to do with the bad blood.”

“Again, long ago John, but you’re right, as long as there are enemies, there are leaders to take advantage. Keep me in power and I’ll protect you from the evil Trolls.”

John took another sip of his drink, “These things are pretty good.”

“They are, aren’t they, and all inclusive so drink up. Yours is alcohol free so no worries about evil John showing up.”

“If he does, punch him in the face would you please.”

“Certainly my dear, and with pleasure, or maybe I’ll just tell you that you’re being a jerk and you can stop. Now, where is that waiter, I need another drink.”

John looked around Louisa’s chair and did a quick count. “There’s twenty or twenty five empty glasses around your chair, how many have you had?”

“I don’t know, it’s all inclusive. A lot?”

“Oh. And since when do ghosts get drunk, anyway?”

“We don’t, John, but you asked for sissy drinks, shall we get you some with alcohol?”

“Sure, but what’s the point?”

“None at all, right?”

“Isn’t it about time for the hide and seek game again?”

“I guess it is, but we need a meeting.”

Louisa raised her voice and called all the spirits together where they gathered around the deck chairs and looked keen. “Now, before we start today, we need to get a few things clear. It took us until four o’clock last night to find all of you. That’s too long, so a few ground rules, OK? Find a spot and hide, stay there. No falling through the decks when you see us coming. Don’t let the normal people see you, but stay in your current form, vaguely human shaped. No changing spots, no changing form to a grease stain in the kitchen, smoke from the smokestack or steam from the whistle, got it?”

Several of the more competitive spirits looked a bit disappointed. Louisa continued, “And no hiding inside the bulkheads, right? Even if you are human shaped, you aren’t the right thickness. Same goes for hiding inside the flag. Now, this is the third day of the game, so let’s see if we can get it right this time shall we?”

Again, several of the spirits looked chagrined and nodded slowly.

“Good. Now you all have two minutes to find someplace to hide, and then we’re coming after you. Starting now.”

As the spirits scattered, the steward arrived with more drinks. Louisa and John lay back on their chairs and saluted each other, maybe they would give the spirits a few extra minutes to get hidden.

Eventually Louisa sighed and stood up. “Time to start hunting, John.”

John nodded and turned around in his chair. “Three days in a row, didn’t we explain that trees don’t grow on boats? I know you’re a pine spirit, and that you’re doing a good job of hiding behind that tree in the middle of the patch, but it’s not hard to know you’re there. Trees don’t grow on boats.”

The spirit stepped out from behind the tree trunk and grinned. He took John’s appearance, sat down in John’s chair and waved for another drink. John laughed, “I see. Well let’s start.”

He and Louisa strolled over to the pool where there was a great commotion. The lifeguards were trying to drag a body from the bottom, but their hands kept sliding through. John looked at Louisa and raised his eyebrows. Louisa shook her head, “Good spot for a water spirit to hide, but the humans can see. Needs work on her appearance, let’s let her stay for a while, the guards look like they’re enjoying themselves.”

John pointed his chin toward the bow of the ship and they wandered over that way. Leaning over the rail, John said “Nice, but modern boats don’t have figureheads, I was on a sailing vessel in these waters a long time ago and you would have fit right in... Wait, I recognize you, you were our figurehead weren’t you? You did a good job back then, well done.”

Louisa looked over at John, “I didn’t know you were a sailor?”

“For a couple of years, not very long. I got a tattoo and an earring out of it.”

“I’ve never seen either one.”

“Didn’t keep them, they were OK while I was sailing but they weren’t in fashion when I got back home, so I dumped them when I was blown to bits. Funny, as the war went on, the kids in the navy started a new fashion for them.”

Louisa looked thoughtful but said nothing as they strolled down the starboard rail. Seeing a pair of hands, they stopped and leaned over. “Gotcha.”

The afternoon drifted on.

~~

## **Tahiti**

“Who programmes this stuff? All Stevie Wonder all the time?”

“It’s a cruise John, they cater to the audience.”

“Boomers?”

“Yes, Boomers, who else can afford a cruise.”

“Aargh, let’s go to Tahiti.”

“They don’t stop there John.”

“We can.”

“Why Tahiti, have you been there?”

“In 1930, yes when I was working on the steamer.”

“I never knew that. The things I’ve missed.”

“If I’d still been with you love, I’d never have gone to sea. It wasn’t long, I didn’t take to it.”

“Hmm, the land of Gauguin, why not?”

“You mean Matisse don’t you, he was there when I was, and that German fellow who made the Movie... Tabu I think it was called.”

“I’ve seen that, native girls with their boobies hanging out. But Gauguin was there for years, very famous for his paintings of girls with boobies hanging out.”

“Yeah, from what I heard the missionaries had been there for decades, he made most of that up, just like the German fellow, Murnau was his name. The movie came out in 1931.”

“What was it about?”

“Hah, Romeo and Juliette in an exotic locale, what else?”

“Just like us then, let’s go.”

John smiled, Louisa was just so romantic. He hoped she wasn’t disappointed, Tahiti was probably like Brighton now, with better beaches, beaches with sand instead of stones. John had been part of the details that stripped the sand from the beach to fill sandbags during the war.

Mouse and Hulder agreed to come along on the excursion. The Tiki masks had been fully powered up in Hawaii so none of the other spirits were going to attend.

Louisa flicked them off the boat and they landed on one of those lovely beaches, just in front of a tourist hotel. Ugh, John took one look around and decided this was a bad idea. It was Hawaii with a French accent. “This may have been a mistake, Louisa, it’s just another tourist trap.”

“Was it better when you were here?”

“Much better, still a bit of a tourist trap but harder to get to.”

“Well then...” Louisa waved her hand and they were in Tahiti in 1930.

“Is this...”

“Yes, 1930, and it’s certainly not as touristy as it will be.”

“But is this wise? What if I meet myself here?”

“What would happen? John you already met a past version of yourself and nothing changed.”

“This paradox stuff makes my head hurt.”

“You planning on killing your older self? Look, you’ve met people that look like you haven’t you? What do you do, run away just in case they’re from the future? No you say hello and go on your way. So if you meet yourself, say hello and walk on. No harm, no foul.”

Mouse and Hulder were at a booth buying a big floppy hat for Hulder, to keep the sun off. Louisa grinned, “Now those two have the right idea. Buy me a big hat, lover.”

After a bit of confusion about money, the hats were obtained and there was change left over to have coffee at a cafe on the beach. After some discussion, it was decided that Mouse and Hulder would go hunting for the ghost of Paul Gauguin while the other pair would go find Henri Matisse. John thought he remembered the hotel he lived in.

Mouse looked around, “Nice forest, but would Gauguin’s ghost be half way up a mountain?”

“I don’t know, that’s what the nice lady said, after she got done screaming about Tiki gods.”

“You are a bit large, dear, not that I’m complaining, large and beautiful. It’s just that you pulled that face at her.”

“I was imitating that tiki mask outside her door. I don’t know why she would have reacted like that. You’d think that meeting one of her gods would be a happy occasion.”

“Not all gods are nice, Hulder.”

“Well anyway, she calmed down after we told her I wasn’t a goddess.”

“You are to me.”

“You’re sweet. Now, what’s that cave over there, do you suppose it’s haunted?”

“Oooh, I hope so, empty caves are sort of boring don’t you think?”

As the couple walked into the cave they realized it was much larger than it should have been, there seemed to be kilometres and kilometres of darkness. This didn’t bother either Hulder, with her Troll eyes, or Mouse, with his spirit senses. As they walked, various Tiki masks came out of the walls, making fearsome noises and further in, whole Tiki statues came out and danced a war-dance.

Mouse smiled, “They are greeting us, isn’t that lovely.”

“Not greeting you, chasing you away, why aren’t you running you puny humans!”

Mouse wasn’t startled at this man who had just appeared in front of them. “Maybe because we aren’t humans. Who are you with the poor eyesight?”

“I am the great Maui, ruler of these lands and bringer of life to all.”

“Really? You rule what? This island? Or this cave?”

“You haven’t heard of me?”

“Can’t say I have, we’re not from here.”

“Ah, tourists, well go home, there’s too many of you here.”

“Wait a century,” muttered Hulder.

“Are you really the giver of life?”

Maui looked over his shoulder and made shushing motions with his hands, “Bringer of life, not giver... don’t put words in my mouth.”

“Ah, sounds like a story there, shall we sit and listen?”



“No. Why are you here?”

“We’re looking for the ghost of Paul Gauguin. Is he around here?”

Maui laughed a bit, “I think you may have taken that literally, Gauguin isn’t haunting anything, and if he was it would be the island he died on, nothing around here. He did come up this mountain when he was here the first time. I think someone might have meant “ghost” in the sense of, he was once here.”

Mouse looked disappointed, “I was going to ask him about his painting, that’s too bad.”

Maui shook his head, “Don’t be, he made most of that stuff up, that he put into his paintings.”

“Oh I know that, I was wondering about his technique. How he got those wonderful colours.”

“Paint, as far as I know.”

Mouse decided to give up that line of discussion. “I have a lovely picnic lunch here, would you like to share it? You mentioned that you were the bringer of life and not the giver of life. Will you tell us about that?”

“Not much to tell, really, I have a fishhook that I use to pull islands up from the sea.”

“Ah, so you bring the places where life can exist.”

“That’s right, that’s right.”

Hulder had set up the picnic lunch and invited the other two to sit. When they had, Mouse continued, “I’m from the middle of our land, which is also an island, but a big one. In our case, Nanabozo sat on a Turtle’s back and asked the animals to get mud from the bottom of the sea. Lots of animals tried, but it was Muskrat who finally got some and that’s how Turtle Island was formed.”

“Interesting, they had to dive for it? No wonder so many failed, a fishhook is much easier.”

“So it would seem, you have lots of little islands here, I think Nanabozo made lots of land from the little bit of mud Muskrat brought back. Our island is huge.”

At that moment, a huge roar came from deeper in the cave. Hulder was on her feet with a great club, stalking down the passageway. Mouse called her back and looked at Maui who said, “It’s Te Tuna, the former husband of my wife. He keeps coming back to fight me, it’s tiresome, to tell the truth.”

Hulder had not put her club away, “We are guests, we will stand with you to fight this Te Tuna.”

Mouse, who hadn’t had a good fight in a while, nodded his agreement and stood up, a long spear in his hand that looked suspiciously like a gigantic sewing needle. A bit of thread still through the eye.

Maui sighed and picked up a carved wooden hand-axe. “I thank you, let’s go beat this fellow up again, maybe he will learn this time.”

As Te Tuna came into view, Huder realized he was eel-like, but not an eel. “Oh dear, it’s mythological isn’t it, he’s a gigantic penis.”

Maui went a bit red in his face.

~~

## **The Pearl Divers**

“He’s not in his hotel, they say he’s on one of the out islands, swimming.”

“Oh John, can we please?”

“What’s that?”

“Can we get an outrigger and paddle over to visit him.”

“Sure, but don’t you want to visit the movie set? I’m sure that would be fun.”

“I’ve been on plenty of sets, but I’ve never paddled an outrigger. It’s quite a distance isn’t it?”

“Never mind that. What do you mean you’ve been on plenty of movie sets?”

“I didn’t tell you? Yes I was an extra for Hammer studios, I was usually the third girl killed by the monster.”

“Hammer, they did all those gothic horror movies?”

“Those are the ones, the pay was good and all I usually had to do was scream a bit.”

“Hard to think of you being scared of anything, you must have been a good actress. Well OK, outrigger it is.”

With that, John went down to the beach to negotiate the rental of a va’a. The fellow he was talking to was a bit reluctant. “You can catch a supply boat over there, it’s almost a thousand kilometres to Apataki sir.”

“No, my companion wants to go by outrigger.”

“Well at least let two of our boys take you, they can navigate and they are quite strong.”

John looked over where a couple of Polynesian men were sitting with coffees. They were piled with muscle, slick with sweat, and John had to admit, very handsome of face. “No, I think not thank you, but I can assure you we will be fine. Would it be better if I bought the canoe?”

“Well, if sir would be willing to do that, and sign this waiver...”

Louisa, who was listening in, had a good look at the paddlers and sighed. Well she could use a workout, she had been feeling a bit bloated on the cruise boat.

Negotiations concluded, money changing hands, and the outrigger, complete with paddles was on the water with John and Louisa seated, ready to go. The fellow who had sold them the canoe had looked and saw no supplies at all. He turned to the men on the bench and said, "it's too bad, that was one of my best boats."

The men shook their heads. "Maybe we can go out and find the va'a in a week or so."

How far can you paddle in a day? That's a good question. 125K over three days is a pretty tough race. To do a thousand Kilometres would take upward of a month at that pace. Not very hopeful for someone who has no food or water in the boat. The thing is, John and Louisa needed neither food nor water, and were tremendously strong when they wanted to be. Louisa declared they would paddle for three days and then they would be at Apataki, the atoll they'd been told Matisse was on.

John and Louisa were floating on the water around 300 kilometres from Tahiti, a linen cloth spread between them, roast fish and white wine on the cloth. They were eating with their fingers and enjoying the shade of a small cloud that seemed to remain about twenty metres above their heads. "This is the life."

"Thank you John, you like the food?"

"I do, pull a small tuna out of the water will you? I've got a taste for some sashimi."

"Oh not a whole tuna John, and we ought to eat local. Here, a nice plate of Poisson Cru I just lifted from a restaurant in Tahiti. Tuna, veg, rice and coconut milk."

"Is that lime?"

"Of course, do you like it?"

"You know me so well. Pass the wine."

Lunch over, John looked around and spotted a few white blobs on the ocean. "Can we have a sail like those boats over there?"

"Sure, why not." A triangular sail appeared on their canoe and shortly afterwards a wind was blowing from directly behind them. The va'a fairly leapt over the water and they were on their way once more.

Two days later they were sailing between small atolls, maybe not even big enough to have names. Still, there were signs of habitation, small huts and the pair could see divers heading down to collect black-lipped oysters to look for black pearls. Louisa and John stopped to watch for quite a while. "That's a tough job."

John nodded, "Free diving for hours a day, I'd heard about it of course, when I was here, but I've never seen it."

As they floated, admiring the work the divers put in, a motorboat could be heard from far away, as it got closer, the couple realized it was headed their way. Louisa was first to understand what was happening, “Trouble coming, I think they’re pirates.”

John was thinking, “Not pirates, but they might as well be, around this time they were setting up cultured pearl farms. They must be here to put the independents out of business. Look, they’re about to ram their boats. Want to do a bit of haunting?”

“You know me so well my lovely man, let’s go.”

The next thing the motorboat riders knew, there was a monstrous apparition looming over them. As it opened its mouth, full of sharp teeth, to bite them in half, the company men dove over the sides. Being kilometres from the shore, they began to swim and had to be rescued by the pearl divers.

John sat in the motorboat, laughing at the splashing when he looked down and saw rifles sticking out under the seats. “Damn, they were serious.”

“Maybe we should have bit them in half.”

“Are those divers going to be all right picking up these guys?”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about their safety, did you see the size of them?”

“Yes I noticed you noticing. Let’s go pay the company bosses a visit.”

“Now John, just remember that this is the past, we shouldn’t do much. We’ll leave our boat here for the divers, I’m sure they can find a use for it, We’ll flick on to Apataki. Maybe the pearl farmers are there.”

With that, they were on the beach and looking at some newly built huts on stilts over the water. Long lines of bags of oysters were floating from the stilts. In the huts were people prying open the oysters and inserting seeds. Shortly, the couple was noticed and an officious looking fellow came stamping over. “You’re trespassing, you need to get back down the beach.”

Louisa got a sour look on her face, “Well hello to you too, whoever you are. You own the beach do you? Are you the owner?”

“I’m the manager, our owners are overseas if you must know, now scram.”

“Did you send a motorboat out to the smaller atolls to stop the free-divers from working?”

“We have the concession on all the black pearl production, they are poaching.”

“Really? They have been diving for generations, how is it that you are in charge?”

“We bought the concession from the French government, that’s how.”

“Right, right, and so the divers are now criminals.”

“That’s right, now get off our beach.”

“Oh yes, and you own the beach.”

“Yes!”

“Well perhaps I should explain something to you.” With that Louisa became a massive Tiki and roared at the manager. John also changed and grinned horribly at the man, who promptly peed his pants.

Louisa bent forward, “The divers are under our protection. You will not harm them, and in fact, you will need divers for your farm, so hire them, they have the experience. Not only that, but there will always be a market for natural pearls, so don’t disrupt their livelihood, buy their pearls instead. Do we understand each other?”

The man quickly nodded.

“Good, now we’ll go, but we will be watching!”

~~

## **Matisse in Tahiti**

With the pearl divers sorted, John led Louisa to the other side of the atoll. Somewhere around here was Henri Matisse, or so John had been told. John reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of large natural black pearl earrings. These he offered to Louisa. “I asked the divers if I could buy a couple of pearls and they gave me these, I hope you like them.”

Louisa looked as if she was about to cry, “I’ve been wishing I had a pair since we were watching the divers work, but I was embarrassed to ask.”

“Good thing I have no shame then.”

Louisa hugged John. “You are such a dear. Do you remember you bought me jewellery when we were first married?”

“Did I?”

“Come on, let’s go visit with your artist friend.”

Walking further along the beach, they came upon Henri Matisse, who was getting ready to go for a swim. “John, nice to see you again, I thought you were going to stay on the main island.”

“Ah, yes, well I thought I’d come visit with you again here. You said such nice things about the atolls. Um, this is Louisa, I met her on Tahiti and brought her along to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you my dear, are you here on vacation?”

Louisa did a bit of a curtsy, "I am, and it's such a pleasure to meet you. Are you hard at work?"

"Hardly, I've done a few sketches and that's about it. Oddly, I think it's a bit overwhelming, the colours and the shapes. Will you swim with me? Can you swim?"

"Yes, I can, and thank you. I'd love to swim with you."

With that, Louisa and John stripped to their bathing suits and dove in. The three of them drifted and dove and splashed for about an hour. As they left the water, Matisse offered Louisa a quilt. "To keep you warm, my dear."

"It's lovely, and the applique forms are like the vegetation and the fishes, how special, but I don't need it, I'm warm enough, please wrap it around yourself."

"I will do that, an old man gets so cold. It is a lovely thing isn't it? There are many quilts like it here, I shall have to remember them. Now, before I forget, I have my camera here, would you mind if I take your picture?"

"No of course not, I hope it comes out."

Frowning a bit at that last statement, Matisse took three images of Louisa as she posed nicely. "Monsieur, can we take you to dinner?"

"Ah, there is no restaurant on the island, but please come back to my hut and my housekeeper will make us something to eat."

Louisa curtsied again, "Thank you so much."

Smiling, Matisse led the way to his hut on the beach. They had a wonderful meal of locally caught seafood and yam, taro and breadfruit. For dessert they had fruit from the many trees around the hut.

Louisa and John thanked the housekeeper for the wonderful meal and Matisse said, "That's another reason I'm not doing much work, the food contributes to the distraction."

John smiled, "I can understand that, but I'm sure that at some time you will find a use for all you've seen here."

"I hope so, and thank you for the reassurance, I have been wondering if I've lost my inspiration."

"Never, I think it is as you said, the input is just too intense. You need time to process it all. And now I think we should leave you to your thoughts, it's time for us to be going. It was so good to see you again."

"You're welcome any time, John, as are you, my lovely lady, would you mind if I paint you, if the photographs come out?"

Louisa beamed, "Of course not, I would be delighted."

"Wonderful, very well, farewell to you both, enjoy the rest of your stay."

Louisa and John walked down the beach, enjoying the feeling of a good meal and the sand between their toes. As they rounded a bend, Louisa looked back to make sure they were out of sight. "I wonder, did he ever paint me?"

"I suspect he did, shall we go and see?"

"When?"

"He started his cut-outs in 1941 after surgery left him more or less bed-ridden. If he painted you it would be earlier than that. Shall we go visit him as he recovers?"

"Could we? Please, I'd like that."

John nodded and Louisa waved them to Matisse's bedside where the painter seemed delighted to see them. "John, Louisa, so good to see you, it's been what, ten years? I'm so sorry not to get out of bed to meet you but it's hard for me to sit up."

Louisa gently pushed him back and adjusted his blanket, "Don't you worry about that. I see you've been doing decoupage, how wonderful."

"I have, and John was right, the colours and shapes of Tahiti have come out in my work, I'm quite happy with my cut-outs, but dear lady, I have something to show you."

With that he called his assistant and told him to bring in "the painting of this lady."

A canvas was brought into the room and on turning it around, Louisa saw that it was of her. She gasped, "It's wonderful, just wonderful."

"I'm glad you like it, you must accept it for yourself."

Louisa was shocked, she turned to Matisse with her jaw dropped.

"Please Louisa, don't refuse an old man, I loved painting it and remembering our swim. It is yours, I beg you."

With tears in her eyes, Louisa nodded. "Thank you Henri, I shall treasure it always."

Matisse smiled broadly, "You make me very happy. And now, I am quite tired, please forgive me if I lie down and sleep."

"Of course! We will take our leave and again, I thank you a thousand times for this most generous gift."

Matisse smiled gently and lifted his hand in farewell as John left the room with Louisa clutching the painting to her chest. As they left the house and turned into a deserted alleyway, John remarked. "I always wondered if that painting in the cottage was 'in the manner of' Matisse. I guess it wasn't."

"One of my most precious things, John. I will put it there now." And she did, waving her hand so that it was on the wall in the cabin.

As she did that, she took them back to the cruise ship where the two greeted the spirits and Louisa sent one of them back to keep an eye on the pearl divers of Apataki, to stay with the divers to ensure that they would no longer be harassed by the farming company. After a head count, John realized that Mouse and Hulder were missing.

Louisa went to fetch them and was just in time to catch the battle with Te Tuna. It didn't last long, Maui, Mouse and Hulder were more than a match for the... the... Louisa had to sit on a rock, she was laughing so hard.

When the battle was over and Te Tuna had shrunk, er, slunk away, Mouse and Hulder bid farewell to Maui and came to sit beside Louisa. "Did you two find Gauguin?"

Mouse looked embarrassed, "No, haunting apparently has two meanings, folks just meant he was here once, not still here."

"That's too bad, well are you ready to come back to the cruise ship?"

"I think that maybe we will stay here if it's all the same for you, we'll eventually go back to the cabin, but we'll age there if it's OK with you?"

"Of course it is, you'll hang out here for a while and make your way? You can always call me if the journey gets too long or too boring, it's almost a hundred years and thousands of kilometres."

"Just enough time for a honeymoon," said Hulder, taking Mouse's arm and leaning into him.

Louisa laughed, waved to them and was back on the cruise ship with John. "They're happy where they are, they're going to make their own way back to Canada and meet us there."

John blinked, "This time stuff is confusing."

~~

## **Lake Te Anau**

"Louisa I'm getting so tired, do we have to go to New Zealand? Can't we just go home?"

Most of the spirits looked at John with expressions of disgust, and then looked at Louisa.

"Last place, I promise John, I have a feeling we are needed here."

"Oh good, another adventure. And then we can go back to the cabin?"

"Yes love, then we can go back to the cabin. I'm sure you are going to like New Zealand."

John had such a grumpy face that Louisa laughed. "I promise, last one."



The cruise ship continued on toward Aotearoa, the land of the long white cloud as the Maori called it. “Perfectly good name. These Europeans were such unimaginative name producers. Seriously, New Holland, like New Amsterdam and then New York. It’s like they had no imagination at all.”

John grinned, Louisa sometimes got on these rants. He figured New ‘Old-name’ was perfectly adequate for those who figure they are the superior types. Renaming Aotearoa to New Zealand says a lot about the original Dutch visitors. Sort of the same thing as renaming Lake Ontario to Lake New York State as some of the colonists were suggesting. John actually liked that, New Amsterdam to New York and then Lake Ontario to Lake New York State. It all made perfect sense to those with nothing better to do.

Louisa was eyeing one of the lifeboats. “I think I’d like to go to the South Island first. I hear there are spirits of light there. Shall we borrow this little boat here and go on an expedition?”

“Sure, why not? They are supposed to have extra boats on these cruise ships aren’t they?”

“I don’t know, but we’ll put it back when we’re done.” With that, Louisa made a shooping motion with her hands and the lifeboat was on the water beside the ship. It was a fifteen metre ocean-going explorer, plenty of room for all the spirits and all the masks. Another wave of her hands and they were all on the boat, driving through the waves.

It took a day and a half for them to get to Doubtful Sound from the east coast. John had to admit that the deep fjords, the steep coastline and the high waterfalls were rather spectacular. In fact, he spent a long time leaning on the rail while Louisa captained the boat. John had admitted that his sailing days were as a deck hand and not as the captain of the ship. He knew nothing about navigation or about piloting and was not embarrassed to admit it. After all, he got to lean on this rail and look at one of the most spectacular landscapes he’d ever seen.

As he watched, he felt some sort of tug, and shortly afterwards, Louisa changed course. She was heading toward the end of the sound. Heading up to the cabin, John asked, “What’s with the crash course toward the cliffs my love?”

Louisa grinned at him, “I’m not going to sink us, I promise. I’ve detected a large energy source and thought we should go visit.”

“I felt it too, but aren’t we heading for that cliff a bit fast? These things don’t have brakes you know.”

Louisa laughed and just as they were about to crash into the cliff, she waved and the boat was on a lake.

“You did that on purpose! I might have to change my pants.”

Louisa laughed again, “You’re a ghost, John you would have survived.”

“Oh, right, I keep forgetting. So where are we now?”

“We’re on Lake Te Anau and we’re heading for the glow-worm caves.”

“I notice we’re on a much smaller boat.”

“Well yes, we’re heading into a cave, this one will fit.”

“How do you keep all this stuff organized?”

“I don’t know, a multi-track mind?”

“I see it’s dusk, can you find the cave?”

“Sure, we are here after the tourists have gone home, but the glow-worms will tell us where the cave entrance is. We’ll just drift on in.”

“Through the rock? And I hear a waterfall.”

“We’ll be fine, don’t worry about it John, I’ve got you.”

As they moved through the rock at the entrance, and drifted into the river that is cutting out the caves, they ended up in a quiet section of still water. The group was entranced, thousands and thousands of electric blue lights, pulsing in the darkness. John could feel the power coming from the worms, but he wasn’t the only one. A Salamander spirit was growing and becoming more solid as she collected that energy. Louisa nudged John and pointed with her chin as Salamander became solid and began to speak. “Hello Louisa, nice to meet you. The worms are asking me for our help.”

“Good to meet you too, Salamander. If we can help, we will of course. What is it that the worms need?”

“They have been here for centuries, but recently the tourists have become too much. The worms have lost their connection to their power, one of the walkways has cut their connection.”

“How? How has it cut their connection?”

“They don’t know, but they are growing weaker. They don’t want to leave but they may have to if they can’t reconnect with the energy source deeper in the cave.”

John had been looking closely at the walkway Salamander had pointed to. “Louisa, it’s metal. I’d bet that it’s grounding the energy into the walls.”

Louisa took a look, “Worth a shot, let’s change the metal to something non-conductive.”

“Can you do it yourself?”

“No, we’ll need to do it the old fashioned way. Hey spirits, how about a bit of carpentry?”

With that the crew materialized and set about dismantling the metal railing on the walkway. While they did that, Louisa found a lumberyard and brought in the materials to rebuild the railings in wood. The moment the last piece of the metal railing was taken out of the cave, the glow-worms brightened. John would have sworn the place looked a lot happier than it had. Salamander agreed. “That did it, they can access their energy source again, and there is so much there, that they are happy to give us some of the extra that has accumulated. May I stay in this form, like Mouse?”

“Yes of course you may. Are there any more spirits who wish to be the same?”

“I have asked, the worms could do one more, but that’s all. However, no other spirit wants the weight.”

John grinned as he said, “Well then, I guess our work here is done.”

To a chorus of moans at the cliché, the group began their drift out of the cave. As they left, the worms put on a spectacular display of lights for them.

~~

## **Aoraki**

Leaving the cave, Louisa grew the dingy back to a forty footer sailboat and turned north. For some reason she thought they needed to be at Mount Cook, otherwise properly named Aoraki, the cloud piercer. It was a nice trip as they started, uneventful and quiet as they listened to the wind through the sails. “John, do you know the story of Aoraki?”

“Tell me, I know you want to.”

Louisa laughed, “Aoraki and his three brothers were the sons of Rakinui, the sky father. When their canoe was stranded on a reef, the South Wind froze them solid. Aoraki was the tallest and so he became the Cloud Piercer. If we walk to the top we can reach the spirit realm. The mountain is the link between the supernatural and the natural world.”

“I thought we were the link, I mean look around us, we’re surrounded by spirits and we can go to the supernatural realm any time we want.”

“True, but do we know that our spirit realm is the same as the realm here? After all, the South Wind is the cold wind here, things are different.”

“Shall we go see? Oh that was a silly question wasn’t it? Of course we’re going to go see.”

Again, Louisa laughed and gave John a brief hug before grabbing the wheel once more. Salamander had kept his human form and was looking over the rail into the waters. He turned his head to Louisa and said, “What is that thing below us, some sort of whale?”

Louisa looked overboard and flinched, “No whale I’ve ever seen. It looks like a sea monster, can you scare it away without hurting it?”

“Without hurting it?”

“Look, it is the nature of sea monsters to sink boats, we’re in no danger so there’s no reason to hurt it.”

Salamander looked doubtful, but he dove into the water and shortly after that, a bright light appeared underwater, in fact, under the monster itself. That creature breached and as it splashed down it swam

quickly away from the boat. Salamander climbed back aboard and John watched clouds of steam come from his body and clothes. “What did you do?”

“I just gave him a bit of a hot foot.”

“How did you...”

“I’m a salamander, we’re creatures of fire, John. Didn’t you know that?”

“Ah, I do now. That was quite impressive.”

“Well it might not have been if the monster came from a volcanic vent, but this one was from the cold ocean.”

“Do they look different?”

“I don’t know, I’m just a new material being. I’ve got lots to learn.”

The rest of the voyage was as quiet as the start had been. When they docked and got to the foot of the mountain, John looked at Louisa expecting her to whisk them all to the top. She shook her head, “We need to walk up in order to access the spirit realm. It’s part of the process.”

John thought about his tired legs but simply nodded and started up the track beside Louisa. Salamander, taking on the role of protector, went ahead. As they got up into the snow, he melted footsteps into the ice for the others to use.

It was quite a trudge, and Louisa was giggling for most of it, as she listened to John trying not to complain. The mountain was indeed “Cloud Piercer” as they walked through a layer of cloud that settled on them and put ice in John’s beard. Once again, Louisa reminded John that he was a ghost and could simply dematerialize his beard to get rid of the ice, not to mention he had no leg muscles to get tired. John grumbled, “It’s hard to drop old habits.”

“Yes, I guess so love, but you can get comfortable if you wish.”

Salamander had no such trouble, he kept his temperature high enough to simply boil off any ice that tried to form on him. Louisa of course was climbing with only enough weight to keep her from flying off the mountain in the slight breeze.

John grumbled.

Finally, they reached the top of the mountain and as they looked around even Salamander was disappointed. It looked like any other mountaintop, nothing special. Nice view though, they could see the land and the sea through breaks in the cloud cover. They saw why New Zealand was properly called the land of the long white cloud. The original inhabitants would have seen that cloud long before they saw the land as they sailed their double hulled canoes toward an unknown destination.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?”

John and Louisa spun around, surprised. There they saw a bright figure, shining like the sun. On instinct, they bowed as Salamander stepped in front of them, intending to protect them. The being held up his hand, "I am Rakinui, the Sky Father, come to look on my sons. The four of them came down to visit the Earth Mother and were stranded here, they became these mountains. Be at peace, I am pleased that you have come to admire them as well.

A snow drift seemed to shake itself, and a beautiful woman in a white fur coat stood up. "Ah, you were looking for your sons but already know where they are. I sensed that you were searching for them, Sky-Father and of course I came to help track them."

Rakinui was startled. "Who are you child?"

"I am Michelle, Great Lynx from Manitoulin in Canada, and I apologize for the intrusion. I was under the impression that Woden, Sky-Father of the Saxons and my mate, was calling."

"Woden? Another Sky-Father, how is this possible?"

"Not another, you are aspects of each other."

"If that is so, why do I not know you as Earth-Mother?"

"Ah, well I am not an earth mother, I am a minor deity I suppose you could say, I am a serpent underwater and a lynx above, a shape-shifter. Woden's mate is Ingrid, sometimes called Frigg. She and Woden no longer live together, and she is now the mate of Arthur Pendry. It is all a bit confused.

Rakinui laughed, "As it is here child, with so many tribes giving me wives in the sky and on the earth and sons and stepsons. I would say that you have found my sons, there they are before you."

"They are beautiful."

"Thank you."

"Would you wish them back in their original form? I know enough beings with enough power that we might be able to do it."

"Bless you Michelle of the North, but if they were restored, these lands would collapse. My sons are the backbone of Aotearoa, they should stay where they are."

"Very well, I am confused, then, why I was drawn here..."

At that moment a tremendous earthquake began and rumbled on for quite a long time. Louisa tipped her head to one side as if listening carefully. "She is pregnant."

"My wife Papatuanuku, yes she remains pregnant with my son Ruaumoko."

"Having had children of my own, I sense that your son is restless."

Michelle nodded to herself. "My own child kicks often, I think I know why I am here. I will try to comfort the child."

With that she changed to a massive lynx and made a tremendous leap from the top of the mountain, changing to a serpent as she hit the ocean. She could be seen swimming deep and toward the land. In a few minutes the shocks and aftershocks slowly subsided and Michelle reappeared on the mountaintop.

“Your son was suffering with some gas, I burped him and he is comfortable now.”

Rakinui smiled, “My wife thanks you, she cannot comfort him, she wonders if she can call on you again if Ruaumoko becomes restless once more?”

“Of course, I would be delighted to help. Perhaps she can give me some advice. This is my first child. A child with Woden, a Sky-God. It is a bit concerning to me.”

“She would welcome you any time Michelle of the North. As would I. I would like to hear stories of this other aspect of myself.”

Feeling a bit like excess baggage, Louisa made her good-byes to the Gods on the mountain and flicked the group back onto the boat.

John was confused, “Are Rakinui and Woden really one entity?”

Louisa took his arm, “I’m not entirely sure, John, but perhaps aspects are the appearance of a larger whole.”

“I’m not sure that helps, but thanks.”

~~

## **Teranaki the Mountain**

“A rose? You must be kidding, you’re here in rural New Zealand at a traditional tattoo shop and you’re asking me to do a rose?”

“But I like roses.”

“Lady, you don’t, or at least you wouldn’t like my rose, now let’s get serious, I’ll do a design on both of you that, together, will mean a loving ghost that watches over you.”

“You know we’re ghosts?”

“You’re kidding right? Old Maori tattoo guy in the middle of the Primordial forest? Of course I can see a ghost when there’s one standing right in front of me. If it makes you feel any better, I’m the local Shaman... and I don’t do roses.”

John and Louisa had decided to get tattoos. They were on the North Island in Te Urewera, one of the three natural entities that had been given personhood by the New Zealand government. Louisa wanted to visit them and as they wandered in this forest they had come across the tattoo parlour.

As they went into the shop, they noticed the distinct lack of modern equipment. What they saw instead were wide toothed combs and tap sticks. John took one look and turned around but Louisa turned him around once more. "Time for us to man up and get our ink, John."

"Hey, that stuff hurts."

"You can take it my hero."

"Now I know it's going to hurt."

"What can I do for you folks?"

The man who had entered looked truly ferocious, his features looked vaguely, well, aboriginal. There was old, old blood in this Polynesian. Then there were the facial tattoos. As John and Louisa stared, John at his appearance, Louisa at what she saw deep inside this being, he stuck his tongue out and made a Haka face. "I'm Maori, have no fear, even if I look like I come from New Guinea."

Louisa shook her head and then ducked an apology. "Sorry, we'd like to get tattoos."

"Would you now, and what would you like?"

"Well, I was thinking of a rose on my thigh."

Several hours later, Louisa's right shoulder and John's left had a pattern that, when put together, looked amazing. They had to trust that the Shaman had drawn what he said he would. John chuckled, "Want to bet it means "stupid Europeans can't read this?"

Louisa smacked him hard on the bandage that covered his upper arm. "It doesn't. He let me read him."

"Can anyone read this? Do we really want everyone knowing we're ghosts?"

"We can show it or hide it, just like you do with your other ink."

"You know about that?"

"Sure I do you idiot, you slip when you sleep and I can see all those Tahitian tattoos on your shoulder and neck."

"I, uh, I was pretty drunk and Matisse dared me."

"I figured it was something like that. I bet the girls back home loved it."

"Well..."

Louisa hugged his arm. "Listen, Fred the Shaman told me we should get to Taranaki Maunga, there's someone there waiting for us."

"His name was Fred?"

"You were crying like a baby when he told me. You probably didn't hear."

"Hey, it hurt."

"The boat is back on the cruise ship so I'll take us all to the mountain directly, that ought to save your poor legs from more work."

"Look, it hurt, OK."

Louisa smiled gently and waved the group to the top of the mountain, another of the three sacred natural wonders with personhood. As they appeared, they saw a short, very solid being who was obviously waiting for them.

"Greetings Louisa and John and spirits from the North. My name is Ken Kobold, Joe Makwa told me you were travelling and Michelle told me you were here in New Zealand."

"Good to meet you Mr. Kobold, we met some of your people in British Columbia, is there some sort of problem with us passing through?"

"No, no, nothing like that. No, Joe told me about it, and it's all sorted. Please, call me Ken, and I have a favour to ask of you."

"Ah, you know Fred the Shaman? He told us to come here."

"Fred... yes he has a peculiar sense of humour. Good tattooist though, he's come through the Guelph area a few times. Can I offer you coffee? There's a good coffee shop not far from here."

"Sure, coffee would go down a treat. Shall I take us there?"

"You can do that? That would be better than hiking back down the mountain."

"It's worked so far, let's try it, which cafe do you have in mind."

"Worked so far..."

"Louisa laughed and waved them all to the nearest cafe."

John rubbed his hands together, "Warm."

"Sorry?"

"Well we came south to get to the warm climate and we seem to spend a lot of time on top of mountains in the snow. Nice to get warm again."



Ken came to the table with four coffees and muffins. “I figure your spirits can help themselves. Speaking of which, I don’t know you, my name is Ken.”

Salamander shook his hand solemnly and then ducked his head, “Salamander.”

Ken looked at Louisa who explained, “He hasn’t been a solid being for very long. He’s learning.”

Ken beamed, “Good for you, Salamander. Please check in with Joe Makwa when you get back to the Yukon, he would love to meet you. Now, are we all fed and watered? Good, here’s my problem. Our people, the Kobolds that is, are spreading out, and we have some who would like to come here to live. The thing is, this mountain is now a person, and so I don’t want any Kobolds moving in here without permission. We tunnel you see, now an ordinary mountain is just fine, but one that is a person, well.”

“I’m not sure how we can help, Ken. The brochure here says the Teranaki Iwi are guardians to the mountain. Why not talk to them?”

“They are humans, no offence but we don’t ask humans about where we live, we’re underground and are happy out of sight of your people. We also live alongside the Elves now, who live very lightly on the surface of our mountains. It’s a workable system if there aren’t too many governments involved, if you know what I mean.”

“So if I understand this correctly, you want to talk to the mountain itself.”

“Exactly.”

“Why not just use another mountain that hasn’t been declared a person?”

“Honestly, it would seem rude to ignore the personhood of Teranaki so I’d like to negotiate if I can arrange it. You have quite a lot of spirits with you, I’d like to see if any of them can talk to a mountain.”

Salamander had been following all this and spoke up. “I can ask the spirits, some of them are spirits of a mountain, I suspect this mountain has its own spirits, perhaps they would know.”

Ken beamed, “That would be perfect, thank you.”

“While Salamander is checking on the spirits, can I ask you something?”

Ken spread his arms, “My life is an open book... sort of.”

“Who are you?”

“Ah, I’m the owner of a bar in Guelph.”

Louisa looked steadily at him.

“Well, and I’m cousin to our Kobold king, and er sort of a general, all purpose trouble shooter and negotiator.”

“You’re a spy.”

Ken grinned and didn't deny it, "I've been called that."

"And you just want to talk to this mountain."

"Well, Joe suggested I might want to meet you as well. I know John works in a pub in England, so pubkeeper to barkeeper and all that."

"And maybe another favour in the future?"

Ken spread his arms once more and smiled.

~~

## Home Again

As they worked their way through coffee and treats, Louisa kept questioning Ken about what he wanted from them. Eventually, John spoke up. "So you have people in England, especially this Ashley Childress fellow, but there may be some sort of situation in some sort of future circumstance where you may want to use my abilities, or the Pub, or some other, to be determined, favour. Is that pretty much accurate?"

Ken threw his head back and laughed, "That's it exactly, you've got the idea."

"Yeah, well feel free, and I'll feel free to say no."

"Can't ask more than that."

Salamander had come back from wherever he had gone to talk to the other spirits. "There's a spirit that can talk to Teranaki for you. He'll interpret if you want."

"Thanks, do I need to go anywhere?"

"No, this can be done from here, the Mountain's roots go under this cafe. The spirit is here now, you can simply talk as you are now."

"Very well, I thank you both, and I thank you, Teranaki for speaking with me."

They all heard a voice in their heads, "Not a problem, I hear you want to tunnel through me and build all over my surface."

"Ah, no, no, we would not dig into you and as for the surface, the Elves are very light in their occupation. There will be no building, and no tunnelling in you, we are asking about the mountains around this area."

"I am to agree that you will riddle my brothers with holes?"

“Let me lay out the deal for you before we get off on the wrong foot. We Kobolds have very strict rules about mining without permission, and we stick to our deals. With us being in residence, there will be protection from humans coming in and knocking the top off a mountain for open pit mining. Our technology is very efficient, but mostly we are not looking to mine, we are looking to retire. The Elves will not be too numerous at the beginning, they are our allies and are simply looking for magical places to live. Your country is very magical, and as I mentioned with us, the Elves will make sure no humans start blasting into your sides to build housing or anything else. All of our agreements will be thoroughly worked out and we will stick to it.”

“You will keep the humans out?”

“Absolutely, the Elves will throw illusions to discourage and if it comes to it, Kobolds are fierce fighters.”

“But you don’t think it’s worth living in or on me?”

Ken grinned, he could see they had a deal, they were down to the details. “Oh sir if you wish we will live on you as well.”

“Probably a good thing, the other mountains might start thinking I consider myself above them. Let me think about this and ask my fellow mountains.”

With that, Teranaki was gone. Louisa had been listening and nodded approval. “OK you will probably get your new homes, and I suppose you have your agreement with John and me. I think it’s maybe time for us to go home, what do you think, John.”

“Oh yes please, some resting time at the cabin would be great.”

“Right, Salamander can you ask the mountain spirit to stay and help Ken here make his deal? You can let me know when he is done and I can take him back home.”

“No problem. He will stay and we can move around without help, Louisa. You won’t have to get him.”

“You can... I didn’t know that. Very well. Now, group, do I flick us back to the cabin or do we get on that 747 above us to fly us the old fashioned way.”

Many of the spirits voted for the airplane, they’d never been in a plane. John gave in, “I suppose I can sleep most of the way there.”

With good byes to Ken, the group was whisked up onto the plane that was flying overhead. The spirits were excited and were hanging out near the windows as well as out on the wings. Louisa, Salamander and John found empty seats in first class and instantly called for drinks.

Many hours later, the group was flicked down to the cabin by Louisa. The plane continuing on its way to land in Vancouver.

They had landed outside the cabin, and John reached tentatively for the door latch. It turned easily and they all piled in to the place with a big sigh of relief. The masks appeared on the walls and Louisa nodded approval. "Who kept the place so neat and tidy?"

Salamander nodded toward a corner, "The house Brownies stayed behind to keep things in order."

"Well thank them for me, the place is spotless. I didn't know we had Brownies, although John has always believed in them."

John began to sputter until he saw that Louisa was grinning at him. He mumbled, "I clean up..."

"Are you hungry, John, I'm going to make us some supper."

As she began to putter around in the kitchen, Salamander looked confused. "We just ate on the plane, and you're ghosts, you don't have to eat at all. Neither do we spirits. What is she doing?"

John leaned close to Salamander, "She likes to play house, it makes her happy."

Salamander looked even more confused but let it drop.

After supper, which Salamander declared was wonderful, the best he'd ever had, and after Louisa had laughed and said "It was the only supper you've ever had," and after John had done the dishes, the three were having coffee. "It's nice to be back to the cabin."

John nodded, "Very nice. And I must confess I'm getting a bit tired."

Louisa grinned and looked pointedly at Salamander, "Me too, is it time for bed?"

Salamander looked a bit sheepish and finished the last of his coffee, "Well I think it's time for me to be going as well."

As he faded out to nothing, John chuckled, "He's picking up this being stuff."

Louisa stood and nodded, holding out her hand to John, "Shall we? There's a four poster bed just calling out for us. It may be lonely after all this time."

The next morning, Louisa was stretching, enjoying the feeling of her own bed. John was pretending to sleep but had his eyes firmly on all that lovely skin. When Louisa noticed him looking, she tickled him.

A bit later, as the sun came through the window and across the bed, John was once again admiring the view of his companion. Louisa had a slight frown on her face as she looked out the window, "After looking at all the exotic plants on our travels, I'm going to miss the variety."

John made a sympathetic noise, he had never understood just how deep Louisa's love was of plants. They got up, made breakfast and were lingering over coffee when a rumbling "Hellooo" came from outside.

"Joe Bear is here, shall we take him a coffee?"

Louisa poured another cup and the two went out onto the porch. As they went through the door, Louisa gasped. There, just outside the foundation and for three metres out, was a veritable jungle of exotic plants.

Joe waved his hand as if he'd done the planting, "The spirits noticed your interest, they thought you would like a garden of all your favourites."

"It's wonderful, but won't they die in the cold?"

"They tell me that they've made a microclimate for each plant. They will be there as long as you want them there."

"That was so thoughtful, please thank the spirits for me."

"They say you're welcome, they've become quite fond of you two."

"Come on in, Joe and have a sit down."

Joe wiped his feet and took off his boots as he went in the door. He got settled in one of the big comfy chairs and looked around the place. Taking note of the masks up on the wall.

Louisa nodded toward them, "I hope the masks are charged up with enough power to pay the rent for a while longer."

"Ah, about that."

Louisa frowned, "Yes?"

"Well the spirits tell me that they never were charging you rent. They just wanted to go for a road trip."

"They... Salamander!"

Joe ducked down further into his chair.

~~

## **Epilogue**

John and Louisa spent a very restful and enjoyable month in the cabin. The spirits stayed out of sight, perhaps because they were worried about the trick they'd played.

Eventually, John went back to the pub in London and Louisa headed to Haida Gwaii where she had some projects on the go.

The masks sat on the walls of the cabin, humming with stored power, just waiting for the time when they were needed once more to go on a road trip.

All in all, everyone agreed that they would get together again soon.

You will find more free books from Kim Taylor at:

Martial arts

[https://sdksupplies.com/cat\\_manual-free-ebooks.html](https://sdksupplies.com/cat_manual-free-ebooks.html)

Poetry, Photographs and Prose

<https://180degreeimaging.com/TaylorBooks.html>