

After The End

Lunch Counter Stories XV



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The Beginning of the world

Coyote began to sing, and the world ended.

Arturus Pendragon stared at a hole in the hill. As he walked toward it, his slave got ahead of him and just as he looked in, she punched him hard. He flew backward and ended up crumpled at the base of a tree. When he woke, the girl was gone. Arturus wondered if she had fallen in, but he didn't spend much time thinking about it, he was a soldier and he had to report back. Yes he liked the girl, but if she had run away, well, more power to her, she was much too high ranking to have been made a slave anyway. He wished her well.

He turned and started walking.

Joan woke to a glorious morning, the sun streaming into her bedroom. She flipped the sheet off and stretched, Her long legs and arms reaching, reaching until they vibrated. She stretched long, wonderfully, with a "Brrrrrraaaah" sound. It was only then that she opened her eyes and realized she wasn't in her own bed. She did a bit of a self-examination and couldn't remember how she got there, but she didn't feel like it was a problem. She looked lazily to her right and smiled. Ray Keen, that yummy fellow she had been dating, she must have managed to get into his bed. Good.

Funny, she didn't feel like she'd spent a night in bed with someone. No bruises, no scrapes, no soreness. In fact, she felt, well, sort of new, as if all the aches and pains of a lifetime had suddenly gone. Drugs? She didn't touch them, just booze, but she didn't have that after-drinking taste in her mouth. Very strange.

Funny, she'd never noticed the hair on the back of Ray's neck before, as he slept face down on the pillow, arm hanging off the side of the bed. She reached for it, but stopped. Instead she slipped out of bed and went to the bathroom. After a brief search she found it just off the kitchen. What was it with these old apartments? Ease of plumbing, she supposed, but if she was designing a place she wouldn't make you walk through the kitchen to pee.

She tinkled, and wondered at the sound. The pitch was just a little bit too high, as if the air pressure was a bit more than it was yesterday. Yesterday, what was she doing yesterday?

She got up and padded into the kitchen. Looking at the place, she noticed it was much too clean for a guy, did Ray have a steady girlfriend, or maybe a wife? She thought about making breakfast, but looked at the clock and realized it was too early. She'd bet Ray was a late sleeper, so she walked quietly back into the bedroom.

"I thought I heard someone in the place."

Joan was startled, “You didn’t know I was here?”

“I smelled you when I woke up, but wasn’t sure. How do you feel?”

“Uh, good, yeah, good. How do you feel?”

“Do you remember yesterday?”

“Don’t you? Did we get really drunk or stoned or something?”

“Don’t worry about it, we’ll figure it out. This is interesting that you ended up here with me.”

Joan was getting a bit nervous, “Would you like me to go?”

“I’d like you go get back into bed, you OK with that?”

Joan climbed quickly into bed and into Ray’s arms. She kissed him hard and one thing led to another. She hoped she had taken her pill yesterday.

“Don’t worry, you can’t get pregnant if you’re a virgin.”

“What!”

“I’m kidding, but you won’t get pregnant, pill or not.”

“What?”

“Joan, do you remember anything at all about the last year or so?”

At least he knew her name, but what the hell, “No, I don’t. What’s going on Ray?”

“I wondered, Joan can you see what I am?”

“Ray, you’re getting weird, what do you mean, what you are?”

“Look hard, what do you see?”

“Oh, well that explains the fur on the back of your neck.”

“You know I’m a Fox, then?”

“Yeah, there’s sort of a double image, man and fox.”

“And it doesn’t bother you?”

“Should it? I mean it feels like it shouldn’t.”

“OK good, that’s fine. It shouldn’t bother you, you knew who I was.”

“Knew?”

“I can see this might take some time.”

“Time, listen do I need to get to a job or something?”

“You’re an art student, very flexible hours, but I’d like to stay inside and talk if that’s OK with you. I don’t know what we’re going to find outside.”

“Ray I’m pretty certain I like you, but you’re scaring the hell out of me.”

“Right, breakfast and talk. I promise I’ll explain, but you might have some trouble believing it. I mean, I have trouble believing it and I remember it.”

“Before I get out of this bed, in a nutshell sir.”

“The world is brand new.”

The Very First Breakfast Ever

Art reported back on the mysterious hole in the hill. The Druids who had called in the army had melted away, and when the place was looked at once more, the hole was gone. His commander had looked hard at Art, but a lot of strange things happened here on the edge of the world. The incident passed, but Arturus thought, once in a while, about that slave girl.

He grew old and grey, the Romans left Briton and he stayed, there was nothing for him in the Empire, he was a Briton, had

never been given citizenship. He spent what time he had in farming and trading. After many years, he died in his bed, something that he had never expected to happen.

And then he was a child again. His parents were different, he didn't think about it until he was five or six years old, but one day he looked at them and declared that they were not his parents. That got him a swat so he never mentioned it again. He grew up and became a warrior, he had talents, and he became a leader, it was as if he remembered how to fight, rather than learned it.

In fact, he remembered his training as a soldier in the legions. One day, when he was in his twenties, he saw a woman in the market. She was looking at him with a question in her eyes. He nodded and said "How is it that you're not a day older than when I knew you?"

She smiled.

Joan was having trouble, "The whole damned world? A coyote sang and the whole damned world disappeared and a new one showed up?"

"Not a coyote, Coyote. Capital C."

"So this Coyote sings and the world goes away?"

“Well there were two of him.”

“What?”

“Coyote and Amber. Amber was Coyote for a while and when they sang the world away, she became Coyote too and so they both sang.”

“Jesus Ray!”

“This would have been easier if you’d remembered. I thought maybe you would since you’re a seer. I mean it didn’t upset you to find out that I’m a fox.”

“Uh, should it? Is that unusual?”

“No, but most humans have no idea that there are beings around them that aren’t human.”

“You’re not human? You’ve got all the bits and pieces of a human.”

“Ouch, hands off, I’m trying to explain here.”

Later they were back in the kitchen having coffee.

“So there’s humans and other things and the other things sang the world away and back again because some even weirder

things were chewing the world up and making it disappear.”

“Yes.”

“And so the good guys made it disappear first?”

“Yes.”

“Are the bad guys still around?”

“I don’t know, Coyote said it worked before, so I’m hoping it did and the holes are gone.”

“Before? So he does this a lot?”

“No, I don’t think so, who could tell, but I lived ten thousand years in the old world, and I think it was a lot older than that.”

“Well you don’t look a day over five thousand. Listen, you called me Joan-Marie just a moment ago, is that my name?”

“It was, but apparently it’s Joan now.”

“Just like that?”

“Well I suspect a lot of details got skipped in the process, an entire world, right?”

“So how long was it gone?”

“We’d have to ask Coyote, as far as I can tell, no time at all. I think that makes sense, the world is gone, there’s no time. When it comes back, time exists. We were in Mike’s Lunch Counter and I watched Coyote begin to sing, then we were here in bed. As far as I know, nothing else in between.”

“My head is starting to hurt.”

“Yeah, mine too.”

“I sort of wish I remembered the old world, think of all the fun we’d have discovering the differences.”

“Sure, but I’m a bit afraid to go out and see who is missing.”

“Oh God, you mean it might not have come back like it was, just minus the bad guys digging holes and some minor details?”

“Apparently it never has, but this time we tried to minimize the changes. Coyote had lots of help to remember the world, but an entire world? There were upwards of 8 billion humans, how can you remember all of those?”

“Now I know you’re lying to me, 8 billion? What world could support that many people?”

“It didn’t. That’s why it started to fail.”

“Oh. And you think there’s less people now?”

“We tried, but who knows?”

“And what about the people like you? Did they all survive?”

“I don’t know, I know there’s you and me and that’s all I know now.”

“But you’re afraid.”

“I’ve got people I love, I had two girl children, I had other kids I was helping to raise. I don’t know and I’m afraid to find out.”

“Ray...” Joan reached for him and hugged him hard. It was maybe a good thing that she didn’t remember anything. What had he lost?

A voice appeared in Joan’s head, “Joan...”

Joan thought back, “I know you, Susume, you’re Ray’s wife.”

“I was, many years ago, I’m just an essence now. You and I know each other. Many of those Ray loved are still here, he was good about remembering them. I don’t want to shock him too much, he’s more worried than he is letting on.”

“Zaat and Julie?”

“Still here, you remember them?”

“I remember Ray cared a lot about them, I never met Julie.”

“A lot of those he knew recently are here again, but he’s lived a long time and met a lot of people. Plus some of the people will be different.”

“Will I remember people I’ve lost?”

“Joan, this may sound a bit cruel, but I hope you don’t. They are not gone, they never were, those who aren’t here now. Those with perfect memories, like Ray and myself, we will remember and we will mourn.”

“Susume, I’m so sorry, you lost people.”

“Descendants, some yes. Not as many as I had feared. Everyone will have lost some. The process was not perfect.”

“Shall I tell Ray you’re here?”

“No need, he’s noticed. Hello my love, it is not as bad as you fear. Many are lost, but most are here.”

“The kids?”

“Kit and her siblings are here, even the Twins, and Julie.”

“Thank you, Suzy, I fear I was beginning to panic.”

“That would be Robin. He’s here.” Ray could feel Susume laughing.

“He stepped away and back again?”

“As did all those who kept their memories, the ones who lost them to Percy, they mostly are back with some small mixings of memories.”

“What, like Bill is now Tom?”

“Don’t laugh when you meet those, they won’t know.”

“The others, the creatures with the holes?”

“In the past of this new world, Ingrid killed their entire universe, or as much of it as she could reach.”

“She exists? Art?”

“Can you imagine Art gone? He has had hundreds of lives lost and found again to practice for this. They are here.”

“Gods, Woden?”

“With Mishelle, both here.”

“For Ingrid’s sake, I am so pleased.”

“Things have changed, but mostly details. Some were lost,

most are here. The story may have changed but it is still the story.”

Art finds Ingrid

“I’ve been waiting for you.”

Arturus was standing on the beach, watching another boatload of Saxons land and stumble off into the Ceintish marshes. Poor bastards, shifted out of their homes, forced to relocate by the invaders from the east. Art had been waiting for a year, checking each boat as it arrived. He had got himself a job, if you could call it that, directing the Angles and the Saxons toward the marginal lands they were being allowed. He spoke the language and so was allowed to greet the newcomers.

“You know me?”

“I do my lady, I know you now, and I have known you before.”

“Last time you didn’t remember me.”

“I know, but this time, when I was a small boy, I remembered you and I have come here to meet you.”

“I am pleased you have done so, it is good to be met after a

long voyage.”

“My lady, I am aware that you are a Goddess, you could have found me and joined me at any time.”

“And yet this is where we meet. Arturus, I have my reasons for not making this easy.”

“You wish me to become immortal so that we don’t go through this nonsense each lifetime.”

“You truly remember our discussions.”

“Arguments, Ingrid, arguments. I have a home prepared, will you come?”

“I will, I will, let me collect my things from the boat.”

With that, Art began yet another life with Ingrid. There was no fighting yet, between the Britons and the Saxons. There would not be for many years, until the Saxon leaders fought the British leaders for the rule of the land. But that had nothing to do with Art and Ingrid, they were content to live near the coast, they needed little, they had each other and they raised a family, as they did so often. Many long years later, one of their children would be excavated and the DNA checked, to prove once and for all, Saxons and Britons mated. As if that was ever a question.

People meet, fall in love, have children. It’s only those in the

future with an agenda of some sort, who worry about the intermixing of peoples. The people themselves never have a problem with it.

Ray and Joan walked through the streets of Guelph, inspecting everything. It was all new to Joan, her recollection of the city was foggy at best, Ray noticed every crack and stain.

Joan remarked, “I don’t know if this is right, but the smells are sharper than I remember.”

“You’ve got a good nose, the air pressure is higher. I suspect that Coyote made the new world a bit larger than the old one, so it could support more people. Just a guess though.”

“Is he trying to put off the overpopulation?”

“Who knows why Coyote does anything. It wasn’t discussed.”

As the two of them entered the lunch counter, they saw Megan fuming. “What is that? What is that? Now I’ve got to go and fix it, honestly, how can one being screw up so badly!”

Joan was frightened, she didn’t remember Megan, didn’t imagine what could be so wrong, but if it was a brand new world, how much would it take to break it.

Ray noticed and put his arm around her shoulders, “Look over there, that’s Stan, he’s Megan’s mate. Take a look.”

Stan was grinning, barely unable to keep from laughing.

“What?”

“Megan is never happy unless she’s fixing something. Apparently, she has found something to fix.”

Stan waved them over, “Oh she’s found something all right. It’s not the same world, and she had the promise that it would be, so she’s running about doing her thing, which is readjusting it to what it ought to be. She’s as happy as I’ve seen her in a very long time.”

Joan looked at Stan, “but she looks furious.”

“Oh she is, she is.”

Ray shook his head, “Don’t fret it, Joan, she’s going to be working us all hard for the next century or so I suspect.”

“The next... Ray I’m not going to live that long.”

“We’ll see, you smell pretty healthy to me, who knows what’s happened in the changeover.”

“What? No I don’t feel any different than I usually do.”

“Well, perhaps, but seriously, how would you know? How much do you remember? Maybe you’re going to live a very long time.”

“Ray, don’t tease.”

“Percy! You made it through once more.”

“Hello Ray, hello Joan, yes I did. It was a close thing, it turns out I usually step out of the world as Coyote dissolves it and then back in again. I did it by instinct apparently. This time I almost stepped aside while Coyote was singing, but I had to resist, and that closed my mind for a while, when it opened again I wasn’t sure I would be here at the end of the process.”

“Well I’m very pleased you made it.”

Joan was getting used to voices in her head, “Hello Mr. Percy.”

“Oh, yes, Joan just call me Percy, we met and you gave me your memories directly, as did Ray. I suspect you both came back together because of that.”

“I woke up in a strange bedroom, that was confusing.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“No, no, don’t be, I think I would have been freaked out to wake up alone in my own place with no idea what was going on.”

“Most won’t notice, your situation was close to the action and so I suspect your brain has done a bit of compensating. Best not try too hard to remember the old world, it’s gone, it never was.”

“Thank you Percy, I’ll try to stay in the moment.”

“Always best, child.”

Ray looked around, there weren’t large numbers in the place, not like a moment ago, or centuries ago, who could tell, when the place was huge and filled with people.

“Stan who made it?”

“Pretty much everyone you’d expect to, Ray. It was a great plan and as well executed as we could manage it. As far as anyone knows, this time around, Ingrid destroyed the nothing universe. She spent hundreds of years there, and gave Woden a grey beard.”

“Now that is a change.”

“He says it was from all the work he did keeping Ingrid alive, but me, I suspect he made it grey to match Mishelle’s fur.”

Ray’s anxiety was starting to wind down, no big disaster had happened. Still, he wondered about the other shoe falling.

Percy chuckled, “Don’t borrow trouble, Ray. This is your first transition, of course you’re nervous, and the changes in you are fighting with who you were.”

“Changes? What changes?”

“Well for one thing, you’re not a red fox any more, you’re white.”

“I was red?”

“Indeed, we remember you as a red fox, but to you, you’ve always been white.”

Susume chuckled, “Like a Kitsune, it’s ever so much more handsome, lover.”

“Oh dear, will the family recognize me?”

“Red, white, purple, you’re you Ray, don’t worry about it, we know you.”

Ray laughed and Megan noticed him, “You! I’ve got a job for you!”

Coyote's World

There came a time when Art didn't find Ingrid. It was a life when he didn't remember her, didn't remember that he had lived before, but it was more than that, the world had changed, he had changed. Not by much, but someone had taken his body.

He didn't know this, of course, how could he? He was a child, then an adult. He was a Saxon in the Byzantine empire, in the Varangian guard. Just a soldier, nothing more. He lived, he trained, he took a wife, a slave who loved him, eventually. They raised children, and Art died fighting the Normans who had invaded the Empire.

“You see that tree out there?”

“Of course I do Megan, it's a tree that's been out there for years and years.”

“It wasn't there yesterday.”

“What?”

“There was never a tree there, it appeared overnight.”

“Are you sure?”

Megan gave Ray a look that said he was asking for a ding on the ear. Of course she was sure.

“So, what? You want me to cut it down?”

“It’s just a tree, Ray, but it means that things are still changing, and that’s dangerous.”

“So why tell me, what does Coyote say about it.”

Megan looked at Ray like she was waiting for a rather slow student to work out a math problem.

Ray caught on, “He’s gone.”

“Both of them are gone, Ray, as soon as they sang the world back into being, they changed and headed out into the bush. I can’t see them, nobody can, but they’re out there, they have to be.”

“And I’m going to go find them.”

“You’re going to go find them, bring them back and then they will stabilize the world, at which time I’ll start fixing it.”

“Can’t you fix it now?”

“Ray, it’s Coyote’s world. There are fundamental forces that I can’t touch. I see them but I’m damned if I’m going to screw around with them.”

“But didn’t Coyote say that he always screwed the world up?”

“Not this time, this time we all helped and it’s close, so very close, but it might change so that it’s not the same as it is now. It has to stabilize, you understand? Then we can fix things like that tree which, I don’t know if you noticed, is right in front of the door.”

“I just figured Liz had changed the place again.”

“She runs the place, why would she block the door?”

“So I’m going to go into the bush and hunt down Coyote when you can’t even feel him.”

Megan waited.

“I’m going into the bush to find Coyote and bring him back.”

“Have breakfast first. Hello Joan, good to see you.”

“Um, hello.”

“Oh, I see, well don’t worry about it, we’re all your friends here and you’ll soon know everyone.”

Joan smiled timidly and nodded. Megan, she could see, was a massive white wolf. Definitely not tame.

Ray had a thought, “What about Ingrid or the other Gods, can they see Coyote?”

“No, look, it’s Coyote’s world, if he doesn’t want to be seen, nobody on this world is going to see him.”

“Maybe I will see if Art wants to go along, he was pretty good at tracking when he was being a wolf.”

“Who?”

“Ingrid’s boyfriend.”

“You mean Will, he doesn’t change into anything.”

“Oh crap.”

“What do you mean, Ray.”

“I remember Art being with Ingrid. You know, the kid who grew up in the coffee shop with Jim. The guy who keeps meeting Ingrid, life after life. King Arthur, with the sword?”

“No, you’re talking about Will, he was an archer for most of his lives, he’s the guy with Ingrid and he’s immortal. She made him immortal back in the sixteenth century.”

“Like I said, crap. Megan how much mixing up of the past have you seen so far? How much remembering different things?”

“Look out the window, Ray. Do you see that field out there?”

“Yes, what is it?”

“It’s Pongee.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Nobody does, Ray, and that field was never there, but Robin remembers what Pongee is, he says it’s a breakfast cereal, you boil it up.”

“Like Oatmeal?”

“What’s Oatmeal, Ray?”

“Are you kidding?”

“Yes, but you get the problem right?”

“I think so, I remember a railroad being there across the street.”

“Really? Well that makes more sense than a field of Pongee, doesn’t it?”

“I’m just going to go over there and have some breakfast and try to get my head around this, Megan.”

“You do that, and figure out how you’re going to find Coyote.”

“Megan you don’t think that all this is just the new world settling down? Maybe it will stabilize on its own.”

“Go have breakfast, Liz will set you up.”

Ray escorted Joan to a table. Liz came over and took their orders, Ray hesitated but then asked, “Is Mike here?”

“Sure, he’s in the back like always, washing up.”

“In the back.”

“Yes, you know how shy he is, he’s happiest back there.”

“Oh, good, thanks Liz, what would you like, Joan.”

“Can I have Pongee and a coffee?”

“Do you know what that is?”

“No, but what the hell, let’s try it.”

“You’re taking this very well, Joan.”

“What’s to take, I have very little memory of anything, you tell me the world is gone and this is a new one, fine. What do I know about Pongee or Oatmeal for that matter.”

“Do you remember anything, your childhood?”

“It’s spotty, Ray, I don’t like Oatmeal, ate it every damned day as a kid. I remembered you when I saw you. I remember my mother, but not my father. I know I’ve always seen supernatural beings.”

“Perhaps it will come back to you.”

“I almost hope not, Ray, if this is a new world and it’s different from the old, what have I lost, who have I lost?”

“I see.”

Liz put down the breakfasts, Mike had done a good job with Ray’s sausage and eggs, and the Pongee looked a lot like Porridge. Joan made a face and tried it, “Hey, this is good!”

Ray let her eat while he considered how to find Coyote. He needed help, he would normally have taken Art, but apparently Art was Will. He was sorry to have lost his friend. Maybe Robin would come along, Megan had mentioned him so he was still here. Ray had been afraid to ask about Kitsune and the rest of the kids until Susume had told him. If Robin was around, there was a good chance most of his friends were too, they had all been in the cafe when the world had changed.

Art Pendry

As it turned out, Art Pendry was across town, running a lunch counter near the University. He had run lunch counters for over a hundred years, he learned to cook in the Boar War with Lord Strathcona's Horse.

Art remembered his past lives, he also remembered Ingrid, and was furious that some time around 1450 he had been swapped out for Will Tell. One life he was Ingrid's love, the next she didn't know him and that soldier was with her.

The problem was, he also remembered his last life, the one just before the end of the world. His lunch counter was near the Dark Library and on one of the bricks, around back, behind some bushes, was scratched 'Art Heart Ing...' If he had doubted he was supposed to be with Ingrid, that was the proof he needed. He remembered giggling and scratching that in before the library staff had pinned the two of them in a spotlight and Ingrid had whisked them away to Ken's Keller where they continued their drinking.

He had asked around and was told the Librarians had a machine in the basement that put a field around the library so that they could move from world to world without changing, like the ancient beings. That took some getting used to, but there was the scratch on the brick.

He remembered, and he remembered all the lives he had lived with Ingrid, and the last one where she had made him

immortal. But he also remembered that he wasn't immortal, that he had lived hundreds of lives since Ingrid had punched him away from that hole and then jumped in. She had spent many decades in that other place, destroying everything she could find, and then when she had come back through the collapsing hole, she had come back in time to find Art in his next life.

Then there was that life when she didn't find him, but when he had found her, she was with Will Tell. He had tried to tell her that he was the wrong man, but she had just waved him away, she said she didn't know him.

Since then he had stayed near to her, but life after life, she had forgotten him. As had almost everyone else that he had known. So he had done what he knew how, and run a lunch counter here in Guelph, and stayed away from Jim's Lunch Counter.

In that place, now named Liz' Cafe, Joan and Ray were finishing their breakfast and Ray asked Megan to bring Robin to the cafe. As he arrived, not instantly as Ray had expected, but through the door he waved a hand and the tree disappeared. "Who put that thing there?"

"It showed up this morning."

"Hello Megan, well it's gone back wherever it came from now. What is it you wanted?"

“Ray here is going to find Coyote so we can get this world stabilized. I don’t like all this trees appearing out of nowhere business.”

“Can I have a coffee first?”

Megan made a face but nodded.

“Hello Ray, Joan, nice to see you again.”

Joan gave him a small smile, “You know me?”

“I do, and Mr. Fox here.”

Joan smiled while Ray sat up a bit straighter. “Robin...”

“Fine, Ray, they’re all fine, I checked in on Lila and the kids this morning, even the twins are back, don’t worry.”

Ray sank back and nodded.

“Where are we going to look for Coy?”

“Megan said he and Amber just took off into the woods. I haven’t a clue where he would be and she says even the Gods can’t find him.”

“We’ll pick up Lila, apparently she’s full scout mode in this world.”

“This world...”

“Oh get over it Ray, there’s always hiccups when a new world is sung into being. Just roll with it.”

“Uh, I’m not even sure what I can do in this one.”

Robin looked around, “Nobody who shouldn’t see is here, try.”

Ray nodded and became a fox, he grew and shrank a bit.

“Anything else, any itches?”

Ray held out his hand and a sword appeared. “What the blazes is this? I seem to recall I used two swords, not this thing.”

“You don’t recognize it?”

“I do, it’s Art Pendry’s sword, it’s Excalibur.”

“Who? You don’t mean the guy who runs the Lunch Counter up by the University do you?”

“He’s here?”

“Sure, he’s run a lunch counter in town for decades.”

“That’s a relief, he’s a good friend of mine, when I’m not running him through with a lance.”

Robin frowned, but didn't say anything. What would be the point, people remembered what they remembered, and it wasn't consistent. The world was in flux.

Lila walked in. Ray was stunned, she was always handsome, but now she was magnificent. Tall, thin, but she moved like some sort of predator. She made no noise as she came in, even though the door still had the chimes Ray had put there last world. Ray was looking right at her but others in the cafe seemed not to notice she was there. Robin saw Ray looking and grinned, "I told you she was a scout now, be careful not to look away, you might not find her again."

Lila frowned at Robin, "Oh ha ha, Robin, you're saying I'm forgettable?"

"Oh my lady, anyone who looks at you will remember you for the rest of their lives. It's just that your beauty is too hard to hold in our eyes for very long."

Lila aimed a swat at Robin's head and he ducked with a laugh. "Hello Father, nice to see you're here."

Ray found his voice at last, "Lila..."

Robin laughed, "Even you, who raised her."

"Helped raise her, Tilly?"

“She’s here, not to fear, most people are here, the plan worked, but there are details that have changed.”

Ray glanced at Lila and then raised his eyebrow at Robin, who shook his head. He wasn’t bound to Lila yet, but Ray could feel the amulet Lila had around her neck. It was invisible and Lila had forgotten it was there, but some time in the future, Robin would be bound to Lila as he had been bound to her genetic father’s wife, Lila the Queen.

Ray decided Robin was right, just roll with it.

He had a thought, “Joan, we know you can see spirit beings, do you feel like you have other powers?”

“Like what?”

“Can you change?”

“How do I do that?”

“I’m not sure, I just sort of do it, like reaching out with my hand for a cup, I don’t really know how it’s done.”

Joan frowned. She stretched out her hand toward a coffee cup but half way there she was gone. The cup lifted, was set down and she was back. “No, nothing different about me Ray.”

The rest of the table laughed. Lila spoke up, “Nope, nothing different, you just disappeared Joan.”

“No I didn’t... did I? I could see myself.”

“Trust me, you’re better at it than I am. You didn’t go anywhere?”

“Nope, stayed right here, picked up the cup and set it down again, like Ray said.”

“Be careful with that, you can disappear but you don’t know you’re invisible. You need to practice that or you’ll be sneaking around in plain sight.”

“Um, sneaking around?”

“Sure, like in the enemy’s camp.”

“The enemy?”

Robin grinned, “Lila has a rather singular attitude to life, Joan, she’s a being in search of a war.”

“I am no such thing!”

Ingrid and Will

“I’m telling you, I don’t know why I’m upset. I’m a damned Goddess, I’m allowed to be upset.”

“Well it’s a bit irritating, Ingrid, I mean you’re biting my head off because I forgot to buy milk?”

“It’s not just that, you forget a lot of things, Will. Like who made you immortal. Oh damn, forget I said that, I didn’t mean it.”

“You mention it often enough, and I’ll tell you again, I don’t forget, I’ll never forget so it’s not like you need to remind me. You made me, you’ve kept me around and I appreciate it, but I wonder if you’re getting bored of me.”

“What? Never, look, I’m sorry, I don’t know why I’m so antsy, but I’ve been that way since we made the change, since Coyote sang the world away and back again. It bothers me, it’s like there’s something that’s not quite right.”

“A lot of things aren’t quite right, you’ve been telling me. I don’t remember anything about any change so how can I know.”

“That’s it, why don’t you remember? You remember our life together but not the change. You were right there when it

happened.”

“As you say, but it’s not in here Ingrid, not in my mind.”

“Damn it to blazes.”

“Look, do you miss Woden? Is that it?”

“What? No I see him regularly, I don’t miss him.”

“I mean as a bedmate.”

Ingrid looked long and hard at Will, “We’ve been together for centuries, I haven’t missed Woden in my bed and I don’t now. That’s not it.”

“Right, well I’m going out for milk now.”

“Oh never mind, it’s in the fridge, and I put it on our bill at the bodega.”

“Right, well sorry for upsetting you.”

“You didn’t, honestly you didn’t, it’s me and I apologize for snapping at you.”

“Beer?”

“Yes, and I’m buying.”

Ray was outraged, “I’m a fox, not a hound, what makes you think I can sniff them out?”

“Ray who knows what powers people have these days, so you don’t have a super-nose?”

“I do, it’s magnificent, but it isn’t designed for smell, it’s designed to look good.”

Megan gave up, “Right, I should have known, very pretty.”

“What about your nose?”

“I’d have gone and got them myself if I could have found them.”

“Stan?”

“Drunk as a lord downstairs with Ken, they apparently have a wonderful batch of cider that was laid down in the last world. They are trying to drink their way through it.”

Ray looked thirsty.

“And you can go find Coyote before you start helping them.”

“Yes Megan.”

“Don’t start!”

Megan stalked away to harass someone else into fixing some other problem.

“Lila can you get a fix on Coyote?”

“I’ve been trying, but he and Amber are flicking all over the place. They haven’t been in one place for more than five minutes since I’ve been looking, and some of the places they seem to be don’t seem to exist after they leave.”

“What does that mean?”

“How should I know, are they chopping bits of the world out of existence?”

“That doesn’t sound very good. Is there a pattern?”

“Nothing I can figure out yet, but give me a few more minutes.”

“Right, Liz can I have another round of coffee here please.”

Megan sent a sour look their way but didn’t say anything.

Ingrid and Will appeared in Ken’s Keller and realized that they weren’t going to get any service. Ken was almost paralyzed

with drink at a table next to the bar.

“You two are trying to drink the tank dry aren’t you?”

Stan looked up, “Ho Angry.”

“Ingrid you boob, I told you two I would help drink it.”

Ken looked a bit watery, “S’help.”

Ingrid pulled a couple of pints for herself and one for Will.
“Ugg, not beer, this was supposed to be beer.”

“We have beer, don’t we?” Ken looked around the place.

“Never mind, this is fine, but it’s above proof, no wonder you guys are drunk.”

“No, not drink,”

“Right, not drink, so drink, here’s to your health.”

Will looked on as Ingrid poured the two pints into herself and went for two more. “You going to catch up?”

“Yep.”

He nodded and sat back. It was going to be a long afternoon.
Again.

The coffee was gone, but Lily still hadn't found a pattern. Ray glanced over at Megan and decided they should be somewhere else. "Take us to the last place they were, Lila and we'll see what they're doing, at least."

Lila grabbed Robin's hand and the four of them were deep in the woods. It was truly deep in the woods. There was nothing there that looked like it hadn't been there for years.

Robin sniffed the air, "Nothing, this place has been undisturbed."

Ray shook his head, "Except that it has only been here a few hours."

Robin nodded, "Coyote does good work. I can't figure out what he's done here."

Joan had been looking hard at one of the trees, "Ray are trees supposed to be alive and walking around?"

"Not that I remember, Robin?"

"Not last world. What do you see, Joan?"

"That oak there, it was alive but now it's dying."

"Looks pretty healthy, what makes you think it's dying?"

“It’s thoughts, they’re fading, or rather the impressions of its thoughts. And Robin, it wasn’t a nice tree.”

Lila nodded too, “I can feel a threat fading, I think Joan is right, Amber and Coyote are cleaning up, not taking a vacation.”

Ray frowned, “Do we go back and tell Megan they’re fixing things or do we drag them back?”

“I think we leave them to their work, we do not want killer trees around do we?”

“Well let’s see if we can find Coyote and check in with him. Can you find the next nearest sentient tree, Lila.”

“Yes, it’s about a hundred kilometres from here.”

“Right, Robin if you’d take us there.”

As the four arrived at another spot in the woods, they fell unconscious. Coyote and Amber were singing a sort of lullaby to sentience, and the four were caught. Unluckily they had appeared on the other side of the tree and Amber grabbed Coyote’s hand. He stopped singing too. “Oops.”

“What are those four doing here? Did we stop fast enough?”

Coyote shrugged and pointed at the tree, which was reaching

for the visitors, “Maybe?”

Amber and Coyote

“Um, Art can I ask you something?”

“Sure, ask away, Kelly”

“I’m not quite sure how to put this, but, uh, are you straight.”

“More or less, why?”

“Well I’ve been giving you signals for months now, and you’ve never indicated any interest in me.”

“What do you mean? You’re one of my regulars, I talk to you every day.”

“Oh come on, give a boy a break, you know what I mean.”

“Oh, well look, Kelly, you’re a nice fellow, no doubt about that but like I said, I’m mostly straight, and I’m involved with someone.”

“Oh, sorry, you just don’t give off an involved vibe.”

“Well, that’s sort of complicated, she doesn’t remember me, and she’s with another guy, has been for a long time.”

“That’s rough, man. No hard feelings?”

“Are you kidding, knowing that somebody is interested in me is a big boost to the ego, so thanks.”

“Sure, any time. Can I have another coffee?”

Art reached for the coffee pot and once again wondered what had happened between him and Ingrid.

Half way to Kelly’s cup he doubled over in pain and dropped the pot on the floor.

Kelly was there, “Art? Are you all right?”

“I think so, there, now the pain is gone, damn that’s twice today my head felt like it was going to explode. I’m glad it was the steel coffee pot I had in my hand. Just wait a minute and I’ll brew another pot, after I mop this up.”

“I’ll mop, you put the coffee on and then sit down for a couple of minutes, that looked like it hurt a lot.”

“Thanks, Kelly, won’t take a moment to put a fresh pot on.”

Kelly shook his head and watched to make sure Art was steady as he made the coffee and then helped him to a chair. He got

the mop and cleaned up the spilled coffee but kept an eye on Art as he sat and closed his eyes. When he'd finished with the spill, he found a clean cloth and wetted it with cold water. Carrying it over to Art he gave it to him and told him to keep it on his neck.

Kelly helped himself to coffee when it was brewed and sat quietly keeping an eye on Art while he drank it.

“No.”

Amber didn't say it loudly, but there were overtones. The woods around shivered a bit as if a breeze had come through. The sentient tree froze, quivering, as if trying to move.

As Amber walked toward her friends, she put her hand on the tree and it was suddenly just a tree. “Damn I hate killing it like that, much better if it's asleep.”

“Sorry about that Lamb, I told you I could do this on my own.”

“You don't like it any more than I do Coy, we're doing it together.”

“How are they?” Coyote was hanging back, looking around. The trees were very territorial, but occasionally they were mated.

“They seem just to be asleep. Let them sleep?”

“Can’t move on and leave them here, how about we send them back to the cafe. I suspect Megan sent them to find us.”

“Let’s find out.” Amber spoke softly, “Wake.”

The four beings on the ground woke slowly, as if from a deep, dreamless sleep. In a few moments they were sitting up and looked none the worse for wear.

Ray spotted Amber, “Wow, that was a real treat, I haven’t slept for centuries.”

“Oh shit, are you OK? I forgot you don’t sleep.”

“Well, now that I think about it, I was lying just then, I woke from a sleep in the new world.”

“Beside Joan?”

“You did that?”

“I thought she’d feel less disoriented if she woke next to you.”

“Thanks, Amber. She has a screwed up memory of what happened.”

“I think when Percy lost something to the holes, it might have been her. Then again, humans are variable in their reactions to

a change in the world.”

“You’re human, Amber.”

“Also Coyote, remember.”

“Right. Joan, you’re awake, you OK?”

“I am, no harm done I think, what the hell was that?”

“Lullaby, sorry, you guys popped in right in the path of the song.”

Robin and Lila were up, Robin looking concerned toward Lila, she was looking at him, somewhat confused. “What?”

“Just wondering if you’re good?”

“I’m good, thanks, refreshed if you want to know. How long were we asleep?”

“A few seconds, but Coyote put us under so it feels longer.”

At that moment, there was a roar right next to them. A tree seemed to have come to life, and branches were sweeping quickly toward the group. If they hit, nobody would survive. Amber breathed in to sing, as did Coyote, a look of panic on his face as he watched.

Ray lifted his arm, a sword was in his hand, and the branches

were falling toward the ground. The tree recoiled and all of them felt it's pain. Amber sang a single note, and the tree fell silent, gone.

“Damn it. How did I miss that one.”

“It was so still, how could we have seen it Coy, it's fine, don't worry about it. We're all fine.”

Coyote looked at Ray, “Where?...”

Ray had released the sword and it was gone wherever it went when it wasn't being used. “I don't know, it's Art's blade, it's Excalibur and I don't know why I've got it.”

“But he's running a lunch counter up by the University, why do you have Excalibur? He's half that blade.”

“And what is Ingrid doing with Will Tell? That's not what I remember at all.”

Coyote nodded, “I told you I screwed things up.”

Amber stormed, “You did not! Damn it Coy, stop that, we sang a world away and back again. Of course there's wrinkles, I remember the other worlds from when I was Coyote, and we did a lot better on this one than on most of the others. We'll iron it out, you'll see.”

Raven

Art stood in the shower, letting the water run over his neck. He pissed toward the drain and noticed there was blood. He had caught a good one in the lower back, but he didn't think it would be a problem. Ingie would fix it... Oh fuck, she wasn't here, she was supposed to be, but she wasn't here.

Damn it to Hell. He'd been on his way home when some smart ass called him a Paki. He was Roman enough to be dark skinned but shit, he was also Roman enough to snap back. "I'm Italian you dumb-fuck redneck."

Art hadn't noticed the others, they looked like they were in from some small town. A wannabe gang to teach the big city sissy-boys what's what. There were seven or eight of them, Art didn't count. Two or three wouldn't have bothered him, he'd trained with Sam and Hubert in the last few years, and had fought seriously in almost every lifetime, but there were too many to take unarmed.

Art reached out his hand, but nothing happened. He looked to his right hand, expecting to see nothing and that's what he saw. He hadn't expected Ingrid's sword, she didn't know him, but he expected the other one. He wasn't angry, after tens of centuries hating the thing, apparently Excalibur had finally believed him. It was gone.

And he wanted it in his hand. A flash of movement caught his eye. A girl, sitting low in a tree was grinning at him. She reached up and seemed to pull something out of one of the branches. As the so-called gang came closer she threw it at him.

He figured it would drop at her feet, but it seemed to sail the ten metres to his hand. Instinctively he gripped it.

It was wood, so it was thick, but the weight and balance was identical to Excalibur. The hilt fit into his hand like it was always there.

Art grinned and faced the country boys, taking a two handed grip. Art showed his teeth in a huge smile when they pulled knives. He had been angry all day and now here was something to cheer him up. And no souls sucked into some sort of half-real sword, just a nice piece of... Art glanced at the wood in his hand... hickory.

Still, at seven to one, Art caught a few blows.

He left the young heroes groaning on the ground, several broken wrists and a couple of broken skulls. Not to mention the knees. He really had been in a bad mood and they didn't have a chance. He had chased down a couple of them that tried to run.

After gathering the knives together and dropping them in a trash bin where they'd be found after he called the police, he

turned without another word and went home. He did call the police before getting into the shower.

Where he was surprised to find the girl in the bathroom with him. His loofa went down to his crotch as he looked at this sudden appearance of a youngster.

Who was laughing at his attempt to cover up, “I’ve seen it before, child, no need to hide it away. Now let’s have you, turn around so I can fix those kidneys.”

After a moment, Art realized his lower back was in quite a bit of pain, maybe it was worse than he thought. He turned around, as much to hide his junk from the girl as anything else and he felt her hands go to his back.

She ran fingers slowly from shoulders to butt and Art felt like his internal organs were rearranging themselves. With the pain almost gone, he remembered to turn off the water, the girl was dressed and would be getting wet.

He felt her hands go down his legs and then she told him to turn around. When he did so, the adrenaline and the pain was mostly gone, as was his surprise. Until he realized she was naked too. As his eyes widened she laughed again, it was a sort of short, sharp bark of a laugh, but pleasant enough.

She inspected his front side, running her hands down his arms and then over his chest where he had a few bruises. Art flinched as she ran her hands past his genitals but she went

around the complicated bits and down his legs.

He felt great. As good as when Ingrid would fix him up after one of his runs with Okami and Stan.

The girl seemed to grow clothing as she stepped back, “Finish your shower, I’ll wait in the next room and we can talk.”

Art nodded, he was glad of a chance to recover his wits and to try to figure out just who this girl was. As he was rinsing off, he realized she’d called him a child. Maybe not so young after all.

With a towel around his waist, he went into the living room and noticed she was looking over his books. “Just going to get dressed.”

“Take your time.”

Art dressed quickly and went back to the living room, where she had settled into a chair and was reading something. “Thank you for your help and for the healing, can I get you a coffee, or tea?”

“Or me?”

“Pardon me?”

“Never mind, an old book about Stewardesses. I have a thing for flying.”

“Ah, you’re reading Erica Jong I see, Fear of Flying.”

“How about tea?”

“Coming up, are you hungry? I’m going to make a sandwich, I’m hungry myself.”

“Not surprised, you burned off a lot of calories on the boys. Nice moves by the way.”

“Uh, thank you.”

Art went into the kitchen and pattered around while he was once again getting his head together. He made two sandwiches and took the teapot and two cups out.

“Cream, sugar? I don’t know if I’ve got any lemon.”

“Black is fine, and thanks for the sandwich.”

“Can I ask who you are? You seem to know me.”

“I don’t really know you, but I have known the sword you were reaching for, that’s why I made the wooden one for you. You can call me Raven, most people do.”

Remembering the impression of feathers, Art guessed, “As in Raven from out west?”

“My uncle, my father is actually Caw, I’m a Jay.”

“Raven the Jay?”

“I know, but most people don’t know the difference and they call me Raven because of my black hair.”

Art looked, and her black eyes too, he thought.

“So why did you help me? Not that I don’t appreciate it a lot, and the healing afterwards”

“You needed it.”

“That’s it?”

“Do I need more reason to help someone?”

“No of course not, thank you again.”

Raven bobbed her head sharply, “You’re welcome.”

“Another sandwich?” Art passed his uneaten half to her.

“Thanks, I guess I’m hungry too. Now, can I have the sword back? Tree wants to replace it.”

“Tree, the tree you were sitting in?”

“Go ahead and say perched, you want to.”

“You’re reading my thoughts?”

“Don’t have to. Yes, tree would like his branch back, he’s got a thing about having all his bits around.”

“Of course, it’s there by the door.”

Raven flicked her hand and it was gone. She tipped her head to the side, and then said, “Tree says thank you.”

“A sentient tree?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Because there weren’t any in the last world. You know the world was sung away and back again?”

“Sure, Coyote did it once more. Tree and I were left behind when the last world happened, but we came to this one.”

“You weren’t here?”

“No trees, no me.”

“There are more sentient trees?”

“Sure, most of them are wild, only my tree is friendly, at least to me and my friends.”

“Well I’m very happy he helped me.”

“He says, ‘no problem,’ you’re a friend of mine so he likes you.”

“I’m your friend?”

“Sure, you fed me.”

“And before?”

“I knew you would.”

Back in Guelph

“Coyote and Amber are hunting down sentient trees, they said that you could handle anything around here.”

“Shit, I can’t. My powers are not what they were last time, and I don’t know if they’ll get there again.”

“Are you serious?”

“Ray have you ever known me to kid about things like this?”

“Joan, look deep at Megan, what do you see?”

“Big wolf, she has other powers but they’re not on the surface.”

“Well that’s a relief, it’s probably the shock, Megan, you didn’t step out and back, you stayed here. That means you were gone and Coyote brought you back.”

“And?”

“And you probably reset or something, like Joan here, who lost some memory but can go invisible.”

“Joan could you do that before?”

“I don’t know, but nobody says I could so maybe I couldn’t or maybe it was buried and I swapped it for my memories.”

“Pretty sure it doesn’t work that way. Never mind, if I’m dealing with the problems, I’ve got folks who can help. Might be time to get Stan to sober up.”

“Shall I go get him?”

Megan looked closely at Ray and shook her head, “Oh hell, go drink, we’ll start cleaning up the world tomorrow morning.”

Robin laughed, “It was a pretty busy day, you have to admit, even if it’s only mid-afternoon.”

Megan nodded, “Those trees worry me. They shouldn’t be here, they haven’t been since the last... the world before last.”

“Will you go back to your tree, Raven?”

“No, I’m going to stick around for a while, you need me.”

“How do I need you, except to heal me when I take on a gang of idiots?”

“You remember two lives, and that’s not a good thing. Very dangerous.”

“What, for me?”

“For everything, somebody like you can shake the world.”

“That’s a little dramatic isn’t it? I’m not a world shaker, never have been.”

“What about King Arthur?”

“I’m not... even as King Arthur I didn’t shake any worlds.”

“If you say so, but right now your story is fading, and if it goes, this world will be ever so much diminished.”

“What story?”

“You’re not getting it, King Arthur is important, the story is important. It teaches young humans about magic without being in their face about it. Through your story they can believe.”

“That’s good?”

“Look, Art, in your last world, the one where you were King Arthur, were there fairy lands?”

“What? No. Just beings with powers in this land, no other lands.”

“Where did the creatures from the holes come from?”

“Another place outside this one.”

“Not other lands?”

“Raven, what are you telling me?”

“Fairy lands, or something like it. Lands where talking trees exist, where very dangerous things exist. The lands of magic are back, dude, and a huge number of humans brought them back by believing in, ta da, stories like yours.”

“Raven, I was there, I lived all those lives and there was no Lady of the Lake, no Merlin, no Morgan le Fey, not for me,

anyway.”

“Ah but you know them, because you know the stories.”

“The stories weren’t true.”

“People think they are, believe they are. Did you ever tell anyone the real stories?”

“I was going to tell Ingrid.”

“Too bad you didn’t do it when you had the chance to set the record straight.”

“It would have helped?”

“I doubt it.”

“Well, then...”

“Come on, we’re going out.”

“What? No, look, how do you know all this about me? You said you didn’t know me.”

“I know the stories Art, I know your sword, I have been around since before Coyote sang in the first world.”

“You were? I didn’t know Caw was that old.”

“Well, he may have a bit of confusion about whether or not I’m actually his daughter.”

“You said you were.”

“And yet I’m older than the hills, maybe older than Caw.” With that Raven sang a bit of ‘The Cuckoo is a pretty bird.’

“Oh, so the name Raven is...”

“Of no meaning at all. It’s just a name.”

“But I thought Caw and Raven fought all the time, at least argued.”

“Yes, and dear Papa hates the name Raven.”

“Ah, so you use it.”

“Gosh he’s quick. Look, let’s get out of here and go someplace.”

“Where?”

“Well eventually to Ken’s bar, you need to sort things while the day is young and getting older. But first I want to show you the other lands through the tree.”

“Through the tree?”

“Yes, wow, through the tree, the one who helped you. The very being whose cousins Coyote and Amber are destroying. They’re closing down the portals and that’s going to be another war.”

“What?”

“Oh for goodness’ sake, put your damned shoes on Man, and come with me.”

That last comment made the room warble a bit. Art looked around and frowned at Raven, “You trying to command me?”

It was Raven’s turn to go wide eyed, “Um, please?”

“All right, let’s go.”

“Wait, how...”

“Look, I’ve spent countless lives with Ingrid, who is a Goddess as you know. She’s got a great command voice and used it on me so much I started to build up a resistance I guess.”

Raven looked at Art with a bit more, well, she would have to admit to herself, a bit more respect. He wasn’t just another Human. She looked around the apartment again, eyes a bit wider this time and she noticed things that she hadn’t before. The books, for instance, some of them were centuries old. Some of the knick knacks looked like they came out of an archaeology dig. Hmm, these are the things he had in his mind

when the world began? He was rooted deep in the past, but she didn't feel that when she looked at him.

Raven was new to this world, so she decided she'd better be careful, she extended her senses out into the town. What came back to her was Art. He and the town seemed to be linked a lot more closely than she thought. Yet he didn't seem to feel it, and there were those who didn't know who he was, former friends, it seemed random.

As the two of them walked out, Raven decided this man was a lot more important than she assumed. Maybe she needed his help, not the other way around.

They turned down the street toward her tree.

Ken's Keller

"Ken why is this place exactly the same as it was before?"

"It isn't, I had beer in that tank and now it's cider."

"Yeah fine, but I mean, the cafe used to be a lunch counter, why is it a cafe and this is still a bar."

"You're kidding right, we could call this a restaurant or a bistro

but it's the same place right?"

"Yeah but..."

"Ray, I don't know, maybe I've got a strong grasp of the place, maybe that got into Percy and then into Coyote. Maybe Coyote remembered the place like this, he drinks here."

"Yeah I guess, anyway, Joan, this is Ken and Stan and Ingrid and Will."

"Hello everyone, sorry I don't remember you."

"Nice to meet you, Joan, I'm Will, I don't think we've met."

That earned a sharp look from Ingrid, who was not as drunk as she should have been. She'd caught up with Ken and Stan and was now well ahead of them. In fact they were making a serious dent in the level of the cider.

Ray looked from Ingrid to Will. If Will had been with Ingrid in the last world, he should have met Joan. They were all upstairs together at the change. "Megan sent us down to help drain the tank, we're all off until morning."

Stan grinned, "Want to bet? There will be some sort of crisis and she'll be down to get us. But until then I'm going for another pint, who's ready for more?"

Ray raised his hand and looked at Joan. She blinked, "Do I like

cider?”

“I’d say so, it’s what you usually drank. In fact, Ken maybe Joan here made your beer turn into cider.”

Ken grinned, “Cider’s as good as beer, just glad she didn’t turn it into Shirley Temples.”

“Do I like those?”

“No sweetness, you don’t.”

Jonah came into the bar, looked around and headed straight for the table. “Stan, Ken, Ingrid, how about a beer?”

“Cider is the drink of the day, Jonah.”

“Cider it is. Listen, did you folks know that Coyote has sung back the homelands?”

Robin’s head snapped up, eyes wide. Lila looked confused. “Homelands?”

“Where we came from, Lila, where we left and entered this world. Now it’s back. Someone must have wanted it.”

“What is it, or where is it? You’ve never told me about it.”

“What’s to tell, stupid, chaotic place full of evil. I thought we’d left it behind.”

Ingrid frowned, “Are you sure, Jonah.”

“The trees, they’re back.”

Ray shook his head, “The sentient trees? They’re from somewhere else?”

“Yes, and they’re the best of what’s over there.”

“Coyote is trying to kill them.”

“Good, close down the portals, hope they don’t find another way in.”

“Maybe you’d better tell us what they are, what this other place is, for those of us who don’t remember.”

“You wonder why we Fairies are so big, why 90 percent of us are fighters? We spent centuries at war before we found our way here. Now that place has followed us and I’m afraid the creatures that are over there will come through to here. We’ll need to fight again.”

Lila looked hard at her father, “Is that why I’m a scout now?”

“You know you weren’t?”

“I remember being a fighter but I’ve got different talents. Damn it, I don’t want to go to war.”

“Then hope Coyote can close the portals.”

Ray nodded, “No wonder he told Megan to take care of things here, does he know what these trees are?”

“How can he not?”

“Should we go help?”

“The trees aren’t just portals, they are gates. That the other side isn’t pouring through right now is maybe because they aren’t awake fully yet, or they are being picky as to who gets through.”

Will had been quiet, but he spoke up now, “Can we talk with the trees? Maybe get them to cooperate with us without killing them all?”

Ingrid frowned at him, “You remember the holes and the creatures that were making them don’t you? I spent a thousand years or more killing their world. I don’t want to spend that much or more killing yet another world.”

“Er, yes of course I remember. Surely you’re right.”

With that, Will sat back in his chair and picked up his cider while Ray gave him another hard look.

Amber took Coyote's hand, "They're getting harder to find, does that mean there aren't many of them left?"

"Or they are getting better at hiding. I'm not sure we will find all of them, but we keep hunting."

"Is this other world so very evil?"

"Not evil at all, what's evil? You can talk with Beelzabub about that, but I've never met evil. I have met this other world and it is just chaotic, you can't have rules or laws there, the entire place is full of magic, and it all comes from other beings. To live there you have to suck magic out of others. It's a place of constant war and so it looks evil to those who understand order."

This was a long speech for Coyote and Amber considered it carefully. After a while she said, "Can we help?"

Coy smiled and gathered her in for a gentle hug. "You are the best thing I know, Amber, the best thing in all the worlds to happen to me. In order to change, that world would have to want to change. Most of those there can't imagine anything else but what they have. The most powerful would have to give up some of that power. It's not likely that they ever would."

"So we shut down the gates?"

“We shut them down, I know you don’t like this, and neither do I but these few trees can destroy our world, and I just created it. You know, there’s always something, in the last one I started it from scratch and let it go the way it wanted to go. There were a few false starts but eventually you Humans came out on top. Unfortunately you were too good at cooperation and you pushed a lot of other species out. That meant you had nobody to fight but yourselves, and so you did. This world was getting as bad, as chaotic as the one beyond the trees, which left the opening for the creatures who made the holes.”

“Are they likely to go after the magical world? If it’s so chaotic won’t that give them an opening?”

“It might have happened, but Ingrid pretty much destroyed that null world. Now we have to deal with this magic.”

“I’m so sorry Coy, you let me see just how frustrating this is for you.”

“Hey, silver lining right, out of all the fuss, I’ve met you.”

Amber grinned and jumped into Coyote’s arms.

A Walk in the Park

Art walked along beside Raven through the park. Raven looked at him and said, “You’re still confused that you remember two timelines for yourself.”

“Yeah, and I’m really wondering how Ingrid could forget me.”

“Look at those gatherings over there. Family reunion, and they’ve got name tags. It’s not that hard to forget, Art, and some folks that are new will throw everything off, you know, the partners who you’ve never met will leave you confused about those you ought to remember.”

“I suppose, but to be forgotten by Ingrid of all people. She’s got perfect recall.”

“It is a puzzle, and like I said, a dangerous one.”

“You must be mistaken, I can’t be that important.”

“Art, I looked around, you are woven into the fabric of this town, and this town is key to the rest of the world. I mean, this world came from here didn’t it? Coyote lives here.”

“Maybe. I still say I’m not all that important.”

“Look, important doesn’t always mean a powerful guy with lots of money. If you didn’t exist, a lot of the stories here would be very different.”

“You keep talking about stories, Ingrid talked a lot about

stories. What's the deal? Stories are just stories.”

“You really think so? What's bringing those people together after decades to see each other? There's no real need for them to do that, all the matings are done, all the business is settled, except maybe for old grudges. They got along for decades without getting together and suddenly, somebody starts to think of a story about the family and there they are.”

Art grunted and looked down the street to where the tree stood, quiet and still. Just another tree on a street full of them.

“I've told tree that you're thankful for the loan of the sword, but it will help if you tell him too.”

As they walked up, Art stopped outside the range of the leaves. Raven looked a bit surprised but nodded her head. Everything above and underground that is inside the stretch of leaves and roots belongs to a tree. Art nodded and said, “Thank you for the loan of your branch. It helped me quite a bit. I would like to get to know you more if that's OK.”

“Good, he's pleased, come on and I'll show you what he is.”

“More than a tree that can think?”

“All trees think, these trees think fast, Art. That's the difference. They aren't from this world.”

“Not... Raven we just went through a problem with another

world, is this another problem?”

“Come and see for yourself.”

Raven walked up to the trunk and put her hand on the bark.
“Put your hand here beside mine.”

“Are we going inside the tree? Morris Minor went in to live with a Dryad in her oak.”

“Not inside, through, come on you’ll see.”

“This other world, I’m going to need a weapon?”

“I’m with you, relax, you’re going there to see for yourself if there’s a problem.”

“Canary down the mine?”

“Yes, something like that. You’ve got pull in this town, and right now your friend Coyote is killing these trees.”

“What? Why?”

“Because a lot of them are not very nice, and he wants to shut down the gates between worlds.”

Art looked closely at Raven. “You’re not the daughter of Caw or his cousin are you? You’re from this other world.”

“And I’d like to stay here.”

“Why? Are you telling me we’re going to have a problem with the two worlds?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“Then let Coyote kill the gates, as you call them. You’ll be on this side right?”

“It’s not quite that simple. This tree is a friend of mine, for one thing. And I need the other world to keep living, those of us from that side live off the accumulated magic of the place. Off of each other.”

“Wait, I know this. Percy! He’s from over there isn’t he?”

“Big worm under the city? Yes he came over a few worlds ago.”

“Well he’s adapted, why can’t you?”

“Because I like the sun and the wind, because I’m not a worm, I’m a Jay.”

“You can’t adapt above ground?”

“It’s complicated.”

Art looked again at Raven, trying to see beneath the words.

“Jays can’t help picking up shiny things, you’re afraid you’ll take too much and get killed for it.”

“Something like that, yes. There’s so little magic here, so few beings of power. Yes, I’m afraid I would take too much and come to the attention of someone like Coyote.”

“And me? You think I wouldn’t hurt you, report you to Coyote?”

“You haven’t so far.”

“And I owe you for helping me, right? OK let’s go see this other world.”

Art put his hand on the trunk, or tried to, it went through, and so did the rest of him. There was a sort of misty bit and then he was on the other side of the bark. He thought to himself, ‘That was a cliché.’

In his head he heard, “What did you expect, bright lights and bells ringing? Nothing at all?”

Art looked at Raven, “No I said that. The tree, as you called me, I’m talking to you.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me before?”

“You weren’t inside and through me. Now I can speak to you, all of us can.”

“All of you?”

“We share with each other.”

“So you know what Coyote is doing to your buddies?”

“Wouldn’t really call them friends, more like family. Nasty, brutish family who have no desire to get along with anyone. Always complaining that it’s somebody else’s fault.”

“And you’re different.”

“You know it, King.”

A hand came out of nowhere and grabbed Art’s shoulder, “OK tree, let him the rest of the way through.”

Art was jerked into another world.

Raven let go of his shoulder, “So what do you see, Art?”

Art looked around himself, “I see the same world as mine, but everything is reversed, even the writing on the signs.”

“Oh good Gods. Really?”

“Yeah, it’s like that story about the mirror, Wonderland, by Louis Carroll”

“Lewis, he was English, and you’re kidding. That’s what you see? The same world but reversed like in a mirror?”

“Sure. Why? Isn’t that right?”

“It’s not wrong, nothing is wrong here but I thought you’d see something a bit more imaginative.”

Kit and Dave

Megan sat at a table in the Cafe, arms folded and her head on her arms. Liz sat beside her, sipping a coffee and waiting.

“Why me? Why is it always me that has to clean up after Coyote? The rest of them are content to just get along with the way things are, even if they’re different. They’re down there drinking cider, Stan doesn’t even like cider.”

“He seems OK with it now.”

“That’s the thing, he knows he doesn’t like cider and now he’s drinking it. Didn’t occur to him to change it to beer, the lazy jerk.”

“Is that important?”

“What? You think I should just let things go? Walk downstairs and get drunk with the rest of them?”

“Well...”

“Oh not you too, Liz?”

“Look, I’ve known you for a long time Megan, and it wouldn’t hurt you to go get roaring drunk with the rest of them. You can’t do anything about anything right now, how about letting it go until morning, like you told the rest of them?”

“Damn it, you know I can’t do that.”

“Couldn’t, it’s a new world M. Why not embrace the chance to make a little change.”

“You think so? And what about you?”

“I like cider too. Look, near the end of the old world you were loosening up. Smiling once in a while, being friendly and helpful.”

“Don’t hold back, say what you mean, Liz.”

“Don’t be like that. You care, we all get it, and the rest of us care too, but you have to admit you’re a bit intense.”

“OK fine. It’s just that I’m also a bit upset that I seem to have lost my powers.”

“You think you’re trying too hard?”

“Look, I can’t even flick from here to the bar.”

“So do it without thinking about it, Joan said you’ve still got the power.”

“Oh yes, like I can just snap my fingers and be...”

“Hello kids, mind if Megan and I join you?”

Stan grinned and shifted his chair to one side, pulling over another from the next table. “I’ll get you two a couple of pints of the best shall I?”

Which earned him a dirty look from Megan, but she sat down. “We really ought to get a plan of action worked out...”

The rest of the table shouted her down and told her she had to have at least three pints before they’d talk to her. Megan grinned and downed her first in one go.

The St. George Apartments hadn’t changed much at all. Kitsune and Dave were puttering around their rooms, cleaning up, discovering where Dave’s paints had ended up.

Dave finally found his Yves Klein blue, a gallon of it, and looked at Kit. She shook her head, “The last time you smeared me with that stuff and hauled me around on a canvas it took me a month to get it out of my hair.”

“You turned fox, what did you expect.”

“Didn’t mean to, but when you dragged me over that bump in the floor I got a bit excited.”

“Yeah, well sorry about that. What if we just do the pressing of the body on the canvas against the wall.”

“Darling, Klein did that, I can’t see the attraction of doing what someone else did before.”

“You play music someone else wrote.”

“OK fair point, do you suppose I can still compose?”

“Of course you can, Coyote is your great great grand something.”

They had woken earlier that morning in their bed and had spent a lazy morning on the assumption that if everything was fine, they could, and if everything was wrong, they’d have that last morning to enjoy.

“Well maybe we eat lunch first before we see if we can still produce anything worth creating.”

“You stay in bed, I’ll cook.”

“OK that’s weird, there must be some other changes.”

“Oh ha ha. Just lie there and look sexy, I want to think of you that way while I cook. Lunch will be ready soon.”

There were changes, but with the paint found, Kit’s bow in the wrong case, and the piano keys flipped around, they were happy enough. Kit turned the keys around with a wave of her hand and played a bit. No problem, she remembered. Her violin was even in tune.

“OK, you want a warm-up on your painting? I’ll strip while you put up a canvas on the wall, just no dragging me around.”

Dave grinned and went to the closet to get a canvas.

“OK Liz you were right, a couple of pints hasn’t changed anything but my stress levels are a bit down. That’s got to be a good thing doesn’t it?”

“I’d say so, but more than that, everyone else’s stress levels are down too.”

“I get it, don’t rub it in. Ray how is Coyote doing with the extermination campaign?”

“I checked in a while ago and he says it’s getting a bit harder to find the trees. Maybe they’re getting scarce, or maybe they’re hiding better. He thinks that some of them have slipped into the cities.”

Robin glanced toward where the front door was upstairs in the Cafe. Megan noticed, “Did you feel anything from that tree?”

“No, I think it was just a tree.”

“Joan?”

“Not that I noticed, would I be able to tell if it was sentient?”

“There’s a good chance you would, you’re a seer. What about Mike, Liz?”

“He didn’t notice anything unusual, other than it was at the front door like it wanted to have a coffee. He thought it was funny.”

“Well keep your eyes open everyone, if the trees are in the city I suppose we’ll hear about it soon enough, once they start hitting citizens.”

Ken rapped on the table, “Less talk, more drinking, that tank needs to have beer in it, proper cider ought to be made in a tub in the barn.”

“You don’t have a barn.”

“Sure I do, I think. I used to have a farm outside of town. I wonder if it’s still there.”

“Ken can we run a tap from the tank to here? It’s getting a bit hard to stand up and walk over there.”

The Mirror World

“So it’s not a mirror world?”

“It obviously is to you, Art, if that’s what you see.”

“Well what do you see?”

“I see what’s here for me, farmland and a lot of bush.”

“Not a city?”

“No, but now we have a problem.”

“Why is that?”

“I want to show you around the place, but we’ll have to walk out of a city to see my home.”

“Your home?”

“Yes, my home. What did you think, I lived in a cave or up a tree?”

“Um.”

“Let’s sit down and I’ll tell you my story, maybe that will help.”

“There’s a bench here.”

“I see it, I can see what you see Art. So sit.”

“Can we get a coffee, there’s a shop there, it says Efac, strange name.”

“Sure, I’ll got get us a couple of coffees while you think about that strange name.”

When Raven came back, Art looked pleased with himself, “It’s Cafe backward.”

“Yes.”

“Sorry, thanks for the coffee, do you feel like telling me about this place?”

“I told you that this world was connected to yours once, then

Coyote sang your world away and back again. The connection was lost, but for some reason it's back again."

"Yep, I'm following so far."

"Well when it was connected, my family moved to this world, they wanted to get away from some nasty things that were happening."

Art looked closely at Raven, "That must have been a very long time ago."

"It was, I'm old, so are you, but not as old as I am."

"OK, so you moved here?"

"Shortly after I came of age, yes. I remember the old world and I grew up here. Our family built a farmhouse on some land and we farmed. There weren't as many beings here in those days, but now it's getting a bit crowded."

Art looked around and raised his eyebrows, "Crowded?"

"This is your world, Art, you see what you want to see. Wait a bit and maybe when you hear my story you'll see something else."

"What do you see?"

"Like I said, fields, trees and too many beings all trying to

drain power from wherever they can.”

“So they live on other people’s power?”

“No, they gain magical powers from other people, they eat food. Fields and farms, remember.”

“And what do they do with this power?”

“Try to get more.”

“I don’t understand, why is that?”

“Oh Gods, OK think money, Art. I saw enough of your world to see that. Why accumulate more money than you need?”

“Ah, so here power is like money, and it’s a zero sum game?”

“Your money isn’t zero sum, Art, and neither is power here, you can make it if you work hard enough. It’s just easier to get it off of other beings.”

“So a world full of thieves?”

“Oh grow up, thieves are no more common here than in your world. No, more like corporate con artists. It’s tricksters pretending to be leaders and such.”

“And why haven’t they taken over everything?”

“Because there are enough people like me who don’t figure they need whatever the con men are offering. If you don’t give it up, it’s yours. There are good people here Art, but the balance is tipping, fewer and fewer people are getting more and more power because that’s how most people think it is.”

“And those like you?”

“Can’t really get much traction. We don’t have the power to convince others that they are not going to get powerful by giving their power away to the con men.”

“And you don’t think this is a mirror world to mine?”

“Yeah, you’ve got a point, and that’s why I want to keep access to your world, someplace where I’m not constantly struggling to keep my power.”

“OK how do we get to your farm, is it far?”

“No maybe five minutes walk.”

“If I close my eyes, can you take me out of this city?”

Raven stood and held out her hand, Art took it and closed his eyes.

“Coy, what if we don’t destroy all the trees?”

“Last time it was a constant battle between there and here. Too much magic means the beings there figure they can do what they want over here, especially to the Humans.”

“There was fighting?”

“There was a war, love, and it got messy.”

“Coy, how many times has this sort of thing happened?”

“Wars?”

“No, well yes, you having to sing the world again?”

“More times than you would want to know, I think.”

“Like, 17?”

“You counted? Why would you do that?”

“I don’t know, I tried to make sense of being Coyote and so I did things like count how many times you’ve sung the world. Look, I’m just a girl who played the violin, I didn’t have your experience or your history. It was hard being you.”

“Amber I am truly sorry I did that to you, it’s just that you thought it was easy, that I could fix things.”

“Oh, Coy, don’t be sorry, I understand because of that, why you try not to sing, why you are so reluctant to fix things. Honestly I don’t know how you put up with me before.”

Coyote got very quiet. He looked at Amber carefully, and as if to make sure she understood completely, he said softly, firmly, “Because I love you.”

Amber didn’t trust herself to speak, Instead she reached up and lightly tugged Coyote’s ear, which instantly became his furred one. Coyote nodded and folded her into his arms. This was important.

When she could speak again, Amber took her head from his shoulder and said, “I’m glad you made me Coyote again to sing this world.”

“Amber, I wasn’t frightened this time, when it was two of us together, there was nothing to be afraid of. You understand, if we both were to have disappeared, become nothing, I wasn’t afraid. You were with me, part of me. I’m not sure I could have sung if you weren’t singing with me. I would have been afraid that I would lose you. Please forgive me for being so selfish.”

“Oh Mutt, it was my idea, you think I was any less afraid of losing you?”

“Your idea?”

“Of course it was, do you remember asking me if it was all

right to include me? You didn't, I'd already told you we would sing together."

"Thank you."

"Silly old Mutt, come on, there are trees we need to deal with."

Raven's House

Art closed his eyes and stepped off the curb. He was convinced that they would be run down by the cars in the street, and the direction he was walking would take them right through a large building. When nothing happened, not even a step down from the curb (which jolted his leg annoyingly) he started to doubt his version of this new world.

"Keep them closed, you don't want to open them in the middle of a wall."

"What!"

"Kidding, just kidding, relax you're in my world now. I'll let you know when we're clear of your city."

A few minutes more and then Raven told Art to open his eyes. He looked out at fields, and when he turned around, he saw

more fields out to a tree, one lone tree standing lonely. “Is that the tree we came through?”

“It is, and now you’re seeing my world.”

“So it’s your tree?”

“It’s the one my family came through when we first arrived here, we didn’t go very far. That’s the house we built over there.”

“Are your parents still here?”

“No, they died long ago, we don’t live forever, not in this world, someone eventually gets some leverage and sucks us dry. Without magic you can’t live here.”

“What about me?”

“You’re kidding, right? You radiate magic, you literally glow with it. Now that you’re here I can see it.”

“But I’m not magical.”

“Really? Well you look like it. You manifest that sword, you can change shape, I can see that.”

“Stan and Okami taught me that, it wasn’t something I could do.”

“But you can do it now. What do you suppose that means.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what any of my life means any more.”

“Well come on, let’s get into the house before something nasty sees us.”

“What? Is it that bad here?”

“It’s not good, but I’ve been gone for a while, something may have got through my protection.”

“Something?”

“Just walk will you, it’s not far.”

They were close to a stone fence around the farmyard when it happened, something rose up out of the ground just in front of Art. He instantly moved to put himself between Raven and this formless thing that looked like a blob of clay, it slid like a snail toward them and some sort of arms, maybe tentacles, were forming and reaching for him.

Without thinking, Art held out his hand and there was a sword, Ingrid’s sword. It had never been what anyone would call chatty, but today it was fairly singing. “Oh yes, yes, give me, that thing is juicy, let me touch it, come on Art, let go, let me get to it on my own, I promise I won’t leave even a trace of a mud stain, I’ll eat it all down, come on, let me go please please

let me go.”

This went on for a while. Meantime the something slowed down, it was obviously listening to the sword. After a few moments of hearing what was going to happen to it, the something decided it wasn't going to be a good idea to stick around. It flopped back down and disappeared into the dirt.

“Damn, damn, why didn't you let me go, I wanted it. You're a real jerk you know that Art, a jerk.”

Art looked at the sword, turned it this way and that and said, “Are all you magical swords insane?”

“Not insane, not, not, just hungry. Can you go get another thing like that and let me have it please Art, please.”

Art shook his head at this and let go of the sword. It disappeared. “That was Ingrid's sword, Raven, why didn't it come to me in my world, and why in this one.”

“I don't really know, but I would guess that in your world, Ingrid doesn't know who your are, but in this one she does.”

“Ingrid is in this world?”

“Sure, most of the Gods who live ‘somewhere far away in a magical land’ live here. We little ones try to stay well away from them.”

“They can get here without the trees to go through?”

“Art, they’re Gods, they step out of the world and back into this one. They don’t need to move like we do.”

“Ingrid is here now?”

“Who knows, maybe. You know the Gods can be in many places at once. Not like us.”

“Can you take me to her hall?”

“No. First, we would probably not make it, and second, if she’s here and she knows you and she doesn’t know you in the other world, what’s that going to do except piss her off.”

“OK good point. I wonder if I can call Excalibur here...”

“Don’t.”

“Too risky?”

“You don’t have any idea what that sword can do in this world. And neither do I, don’t mess with it. Didn’t you ever hear that if you join a new group you ought to stay quiet and figure out what’s happening before you go trying to contribute?”

“OK I get it.”

“Come on, I’m hungry let’s get into the house and eat.”

“You don’t exist on magic?”

“There you go again. Why would you waste your magic on keeping yourself fed? It’s just as easy to grow food.”

As they got to the gate in the stone fence, Raven waved her hand and it opened. When they stepped through she waved again and it closed. Art was impressed, “Your protections?”

“Yes, where the stone wall is, but I’ve got a couple of rays out from the wall so that nobody can move along it. That thing must have come directly in line with the tree. Ten feet to either side and it would have hit the rays.”

“Nice thinking.”

“Thanks so much, go on, get in before anything more realizes I’m home.”

Inside it was a farmhouse, old. They had come in the kitchen door. There was a well with a pump and a cast iron stove. In the corner was a half barrel with a hand wringer on the side. A couple of china cabinets and a massive table with chairs.

“The kitchen, through there is the parlour and upstairs a couple of bedrooms. The outhouse is outside and around the corner.”

“No electricity?”

“No, and no running water either, this world is more populated now, but here it was never very crowded. Who would put in water and electricity?”

“What about solar panels?”

“And advertise? What most beings on this world see is an abandoned house. When they try to investigate they get a feeling of dread that increases the closer they get. Very few get as far as the wall.”

“And you’ve lived here alone since your parents died?”

“No, I had a sister with me, and the kids over the years.”

“You’ve had children?”

“Art, I’m older than you are, a couple of worlds older. You’ve had kids haven’t you?”

“Yes, many of them over many lives. Siblings too, lots of them. They all die, they’re only human after all.”

“I just can’t figure out how that would work in your mind, having so many different lives.”

“Often I forget that I’ve had any lives but the one I’m living. When I do remember it seems like dreams or old stories rather than memories.”

“I suppose you cope with whatever happens in your life, or lives.”

“Is your sister still here?”

“No, she met the wrong man and he drained her. These days she can just about manage a house sparrow or a chickadee. She was a beautiful Grey Jay. I don’t know where she is, but she’s too weak now for anyone to bother with her, I’m pretty sure she’s still alive and around here somewhere.”

“Could she recover?”

“That’s one reason I want the portal to stay open. I think she could gather magic in your world.”

“It doesn’t work that way over there, people don’t get their power from other people.”

“You’re adorable. It’s the Humans, Art. They have some little bits of magic in them, but not enough most of the time to do anything with it. There’s billions of them, all radiating a little bit and that amounts to a lot. If I could get her there I think she could soak up enough over a few years to become a Jay again.”

The Second Day

“Dave, do you remember that neighbour we had, the one with the red hair and the green eyes?”

“I think I’ve got a painting of her somewhere around here.”

“Of course you do. Do you remember her name?”

“I don’t. Isn’t that peculiar, I wrote it on the back of the canvas, just a minute and I’ll find it.”

Kit shrugged and went back to doing the dishes, she seemed to be having trouble calling some people into her mind, and yet she had perfect memory. It was a bit unsettling that she couldn’t remember.

“Kit, I found it but there’s no name on the back of the canvas.”

“You always put names on them, are you sure you didn’t put it in a different corner?”

“Yes, dear, I looked in all five of them.”

“Sorry. That is peculiar, do you think we should go next door and check on her?”

“On who? That apartment is empty.”

“Oh, I think maybe she didn’t make it across. She never had many friends and... oh damn, do you think that maybe we didn’t call her into our minds when the time came?”

“Kit...”

“Damn, it’s my fault she’s gone.”

“Kit! You’ve met thousands of people, there’s no way you could have put all of them into Percy’s mind. The Lion Man warned us that not all Humans would make it. Just the ones who came to his notice.”

“I’ve killed her, how many others did I kill?”

“Kit leave the dishes, I’ll finish them, go sit down and I’ll get you a cup of tea. Go on, go sit.”

Ray had a hangover, he never had hangovers, but this morning was a big one. He wondered what had been in that cider. He rolled over and onto Joan, “Oops, sorry.”

Joan just moaned, mumbled “s’ok” and rolled over away from Ray.

Ray got out of bed and shuffled into the kitchen to drink a

couple gallons of water. He started breakfast, and a very large pot of coffee.

An hour later, Joan wandered out of the bedroom, holding her head. She stumbled over the threshold to the bathroom, swore, and closed the door very quietly. Ray, who had mostly recovered, grinned.

In a few minutes the door opened again and Joan came out, towelling her hair. “That feels better, don’t you have any hot water?”

“You’ve got to wait for it. Coffee?”

“Oh you lovely man, in the big mug that I like please.”

“You remember the mug?”

“Hmm, I guess I do. Not a lot else though, Gods what was in that cider?”

Ray carefully placed the mug in front of her and then went to fill a plate with a nice greasy breakfast, just the thing for a hangover. He looked over at Joan, elbows leaned on the table, carefully levering the mug toward her mouth, and smiled. She was a keeper, he decided. In his head, he heard Susume laugh, “They’re all keepers to you Ray. You’ve never met a woman you didn’t love.”

Ray grinned, she was right, but Joan, with the sun coming in

through the window, shining through that hair, just starting to dry into a fluffy mass of curls... Susume laughed again, “Go on then, I’m out of here.”

Ray walked to the table, set the plate to one side of Joan’s elbows and kissed her on the back of the neck. Shivers ran down Joan’s back and she reached up to move her hair aside, “Mmmmm”

Ray laughed, “Eat, it will settle your stomach.”

Joan sighed and looked at the plate, “More like drop it through the floor. That’s a lot of grease, Ray.”

“S’good for you, tuck in. We might have an hour before Megan finds something for us to do.”

Megan was in the Cafe, taking reports from her many agents on what needed to be fixed. She was as happy as a wolf in a pet store.

Liz wheeled around with the coffee pot, “That’s terrible!”

“Oh stop listening in to my thoughts, and if they’re in a pet shop they’re pre-pets.”

“Megan!”

Megan smiled, she was feeling pretty good, she had her powers back, even if she had to snap her fingers. It felt good to be back. “I have to admit that Coyote did a pretty good job this time, it’s mostly like it was, with not all that much that has to be fixed. Give us a week and we could have things in their proper places. The rest we can probably let go, we’ll accept it as normal by then.”

“Is that why you’re in such a rush, will we forget, or just acclimate to the changes?”

“We’ve usually got a week to a couple of months before it’s all normal to us. Depends on just how serious the changes are.”

“And then we get back to our usual messing around and interfering as Stan puts it.”

Megan grinned, “Speaking of whom, where is my sweet hubby?”

“Last I saw, he and Ken were passed out on the table in the bar... No, no you don’t need to blast him with a horn. That sort of shock could give him a heart attack. Be nice!”

“Good to see you haven’t changed.”

“Oh ha ha.”

Stan woke to birds, hundreds of songbirds right next to his

right ear, the left one being stuck to the cider on the table. “Oh lord, I’m up, Megan I’m up. Ken what was in that cider?”

“Aargh, did I swallow one of those birds? I don’t think there was anything wrong with the cider, Stan, but the tank is empty. Somebody liked it.”

“A lot of somebodies, there’s bodies all over the bar.”

“Leave them be, we don’t open for hours yet, I’ll get the kitchen to start on breakfast. You better see what Megan wants before she gets down here and wakes everyone else up.”

Stan nodded and stumbled up the stairs to the Cafe. Half way up he muttered, “Not since University.”

Ken smiled, “Was that Oxford or Cambridge?”

“Nalanda, actually, 550 to 556.”

“What?”

“It was a three year course.”

“OK, good to know,” Ken said as Stan walked through the door at the top of the stairs.

The Kitchen Table

Art was sitting at the kitchen table, a coffee in front of him and sandwiches. There were pickles as well, all of it from Raven's farm.

"That was probably the best ham and cheese I've ever had, and the coffee is good too. You grew the coffee?"

"I never said we didn't use magic to grow things, just that we don't eat magic."

"Got you. So your sister is a Jay, is she a daughter of Caw as well?"

"Oh lord, neither of us are, I just tell Caw he's my father and he goes along with it. I'm a Jay, same as my sister. I want to take my sister to your world so she can become a Jay again."

"Ah, I think I've got it. But can't you just go through and let Coyote close all the portals?"

"Tree is a friend, it would hurt him to be killed in your world."

"OK hold it a minute, he won't die in this world if he dies in ours?"

"No, but it will hurt, and he's a portal, he's waited the life of your old world to be a portal again."

“And the magic here has to be taken from other magical beings but in our world the Humans make a little, but there’s so many of them they create Gods and spirit beings and whatnot?”

“Yes, and some of them, yourself included, manage to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps and become powerful themselves.”

“I never knew that, never even questioned it.”

“Why would you, the world is the world.”

There was a thump on the door, Raven looked up and swore, “That son of a bitch, what does he want now?”

Ray started to get up and was reaching out his hand, but Raven waved him back down in his seat, “Eat, it’s my ex-husband.”

She opened the door and said, “What do you want, Willy.”

“Hello to you too,” the man said as he stepped into the room, wincing at the nickname. “Ah, is this your new defender? He looks like a Human. It didn’t take you long to go through and find a new champion.”

“I don’t need a champion, your wards are still holding and as you well know, I’m not without defences myself.”

The man rubbed his jaw and nodded, “A good left hand, anyway.”

“What do you want, Wilhelm?”

“Where’s the boy?”

“How would I know? You took him from me years ago, have you lost him?”

“I took him because he was taking Janice.”

Raven flicked her eyes to Art, “Janice is my sister, we call her Jayce. And so you say, I don’t believe you that our son would be going after his own aunt.”

“I’m not going to argue with you again about this. He was better with me, I could control him.”

“So where is he then.”

“I don’t know, I’ve got trackers on him, I should be able to find him wherever he is in this world but I can’t see him. Did he figure out how to remove them?”

Art spoke up without thinking. He knew how dangerous it was to get into a family fight, but he had a sudden thought, “What if he went through to my world? Would you be able to track him through a portal?”

Wilhelm looked at Art for a moment, as if remembering he was there, “You’d better hope not. He’s got an urge, a sickness for

power. If he's there he will try to suck the place dry of magic and then come back here to take this world for his own."

"He's my son, there's no way he's like that."

"Maybe he's mine too, and I'm sure he would do just that."

"Maybe? You absolute bastard."

"I guess I am, but you know I still love you don't you."

"Oh piss off, maybe Art here is my new boyfriend."

"He's got a lot of power, you could do worse, I'm not sure I would go up against him."

Art snapped his head up from his sandwich, "Hey, I'm right here! I'm not her boyfriend, she helped me out in a fight."

"Yeah, I can see you there. Look, Raven, whether you believe it or not, our son is dangerous. Maybe he got it from my side, but he is convinced that he's destined to become a "Great Mage" and that's a sure sign that he's a selfish, power-hungry sociopath."

"Like you?"

"Like I was, before I met you, yes."

"Gods help us, Will, you don't know anything about him."

“All right, let’s not argue about this again, if he’s not here, he’s not here, I’ll go back to looking. By the way, Human, I’m Wilhelm Tell, Magician of this region.”

“Art Pendry, Human of the world next door, I guess.”

“Nice to meet you, if my son is indeed in your world, watch him closely, despite what his mother says, he’s not to be trusted.”

Raven broke in, “It was nice to see you, Willy, don’t let the door bruise your ass on the way out.”

Wilhelm winced again, but nodded and left. Art turned back to his sandwich and finished it. He didn’t look at Raven, who was staring at the door, obviously fuming. She turned to Art and said, “He probably drained Jayce himself.”

Art sipped his coffee and looked mildly at Raven.

“OK probably not, aside from stealing my son, he isn’t that bad.”

“I’m glad. I’d hate to think you were a terrible judge of character, seeing as you’ve brought me here. Incidentally, why did you bring me here?”

“To show you why we should leave the portals open. To ask for your help in persuading Coyote to stop killing the trees.”

“You think I can command Coyote?”

“No, of course not, but you have influence in that town of yours, and he does still listen to people, doesn’t he?”

Art considered that, “Honestly I don’t know. He did, but does singing a new world change him too? Anyway I haven’t seen anyone from the old crowd for years and years. Ingie doesn’t know me.”

“Ingie?”

“My ex. We talked about her didn’t we? In one life we were together for centuries, in my world, it seems she has forgotten me, while in this one she remembers. So is Coyote different too? I would never have thought that Ingrid could forget me.”

“I’m sorry about that, truly I am. Do you want another sandwich?”

“I would love another, for some reason I’m famished.”

“It’s the portal, for some reason it strips the sugar out of you.”

“Is that why they are portals? Trees need sugar, right?”

“Never thought about it much, you might be right, maybe that’s what they’re doing, getting sugar from those who use them.”

The Fun Fair

“Good morning Megan, how come you aren’t hung over?”

“Muffin.”

“Cookie.”

“What are you talking about, Stan.”

“Oh, sorry I thought you called me Muffin like you used to.”

“I was referring to your muffin top when you went through that fat phase and wore skinny jeans.”

“Ah, that muffin, or did you mean some other muffin? You meant some other muffin. What muffin.”

Megan was smiling her lopsided ‘gotcha grin’, “Mike made some hangover muffins, they work. He’s got several different flavours.”

Stan looked over at Liz behind the counter, she lifted the cover and threw him a muffin. He bobbed it a bit before getting a grip.

“Wow, you really are hung over.”

“Yeah, well. I came up to see what jobs you have for us this morning, Megan.”

“I don’t know, I was just telling Liz that Coyote did a pretty good job this time. Very little has changed, and what has, we’ll get used to in time. Still, why don’t you and your buddies take a stroll around town while I check in with the folks out in the bush.”

Stan popped the last of the muffin into his mouth, saluted with a couple of fingers and then walked out the front door. Right into a tree. As he stumbled backward into the room, Megan pursed her lips. “Robin got rid of that yesterday, why is it back?”

“It wasn’t there when I opened the door, just as I stepped through.”

“Ah, I see Robin is awake and waiting for you, Stan. The trickster tricked.” Megan waved her hand and the tree was gone again.

Stan, rubbing his forehead and mumbling something about revenge, walked out to go find the rest of his crew.

“Robin.”

“Here, Megan.”

“Good one, now stay away from Stan for a while, he’s grumpy.”

“Yes Ma’am”

“And go check out this fair that’s in town.”

“A fair? Nothing strange about that is there? Once a year right?”

“No, there’s no fair in Guelph, not for a century or so.”

“Ah, and you think this one is an anomaly.”

“I think it doesn’t belong, go check it out.”

On the way, Robin picked up Lila. There was no real need, but he wanted to see how her powers had changed, and with two of them wandering around, it would be less conspicuous if there was something going on.

They arrived at the gate to the fairgrounds, a lovely thing of stone, it looked like it had been there for decades. The rest was a wire fence enclosing the rides and the midway. The place wasn’t open yet, but the gate was. The two wandered in and started checking out the midway booths, all of which were shuttered.

“Your usual fairgrounds with fair.”

“Yes, but Guelph doesn’t have a fair, it moved to Toronto decades ago, Robin.”

“Right, well maybe someone got nostalgic.”

“So why do I feel like.... Oh dear, a murderous clown with a big knife.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you ought to watch out on your right side. Honestly, can you get more cliché.”

Robin stepped back and took a quick look around, only the clown was in sight. “All yours Lila, you saw him first.”

Her staff was in her hand, she jammed it into the clown’s chest, keeping him out of range and then triggered a charge. The clown dropped like a sack of red noses. Robin grunted and looked at the creature. He realized that what he thought was makeup was actually the thing’s face. “OK not your normal fun-time fair then.”

“No, and here come a couple more of them.” Lila aimed her staff and blasted them. Robin waved a few more, coming up behind, into the local river where, to his shock, they melted.

“Weird.”

“Yeah, a whole midway full of clowns, that’s not a clue at all.”

Robin nodded and started walking toward the rides. “Let’s see what the rides are doing.”

As they approached, Lila grabbed Robin’s arm. “Those aren’t rides, they’re alive, and they look hungry.”

“Rides that eat their riders?”

“Like a bad horror movie. Honestly it’s kind of sad, really.”

“Who would have thought this up for Coyote to sing into existence?”

Lila looked puzzled as she searched Robin’s face, “You’re kidding right? Every kid in town. But I don’t think these are Coyote’s, they feel like they’re just arrived and they’re confused.”

“Look over there, it’s one of those clever trees, with a couple of roadies carrying another ride through.”

“There you go, an invasion of killer clowns. Can we burn it down?”

“Have fun, I’m going to pop my head through that tree. Be careful.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” said Lila as she brought her staff up and started to destroy rides, sheds and any stray clowns.

In the meantime, Robin waved the roadies into the river where they did not dissolve. Ah, these were real. He waved again and they went into the tree at a fast clip.

Robin followed closely behind and found himself on the other side, in a circus world. Thousands of rides, tens of thousands of clowns, and a few roadies hanging around. The roadies that he’d thrown back were picking themselves up off the ground and they didn’t look pleased.

“Now boys, that world over there is under my protection, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t send any more fun fairs through your tree.”

The beings just shook their heads and came on. Robin shrugged and waved his hand to throw them a couple miles away, but that didn’t happen. Instead he felt a massive surge of power in himself as he took their magic. The ones he’d wanted to move fell down unconscious.

Robin looked around and thought, ‘Different world, different rules. You know, I think I’ll keep this to myself, too many beings from our side would come here and wipe the place out... or get drained themselves. Best we just close the door yes?’

He stepped back through the tree and then waved it out of existence. The fun fair was nothing but ash, the fence was

gone, the gate was gone, and not even charcoal was left.

A bunny hopped across the grass, looked up at Robin, stuck its tongue out and hopped away. “Nice touch.”

Lila giggled, “Thanks.”

Wilhelm’s Safe Room

“Do you play?”

“Ingrid and I play Scrabble, sometimes we play tennis, but that’s not what you mean is it.”

Raven had taken down a fiddle from the wall, “I meant a musical instrument.”

“In all the time I’ve been around, I never managed to learn how to play anything I’m afraid.”

“Too bad, music is very powerful here in this world.”

“But I’m not going to stay in this world, am I?”

“No of course not. I brought you here to see that we aren’t a threat to your world, not to kidnap you.”

“Well that’s a relief, what are you going to play?”

“I’m going to find my son, Wilhelm is wrong. I’m going to talk with him and straighten this out.”

With that, Raven began a tune that brought tears to Art’s eyes. It was full of the longing for home, the love of a mother for a son, and the promise of a decent meal. All the things to bring a son running.

Raven played for half an hour, but nothing. Nothing at all, no son, although when Art glanced out into the field beyond the fence, he saw a lot of creatures with hungry looks in their eyes.

“Damn him, if Will had been in this world, he’d have come by now. Was Wilhelm right? Is he in your world? Why would he go there?”

Art said nothing, what could he say, “Maybe your ex is right? Maybe your son is looking to take over a whole world?”

“We’re going back, you’ve seen that this world is harmless, but I have to find my son.”

“Not exactly harmless, Raven. That’s quite a crowd you have attracted, how are you going to get rid of them?”

“By feeding them. After all I promised them a meal, even if it wasn’t intended for them.”

With that Raven walked out to one of the sheds and opened the doors, the shed was full of some sort of root vegetable and she loaded up a cart, took it to the edge of the stone wall around her farm and dumped it over the top. Putting the cart back, and making sure all of the creatures were busy eating, she led Art out the gate on the other side of the farmhouse and they were on their way to the tree.

As they were getting close to the portal, Wilhelm showed up, he fell out of the air about ten feet in front of Art and Raven, and he landed hard. Raven ran to him and checked, “He’s still alive.”

Art was there in a moment, “What happened?”

“I don’t know, but I think he’s withdrawn into his core. Somebody tried to drain him of his power. He’s got this emergency room in his mind somewhere that he can go to, and slam the door shut. He told me about it one day, I hope that’s where he is.”

“An emergency room, have you seen him do this before?”

“No, and he’s never run back to me if he’s under attack, I wonder what made him do that?”

Art thought perhaps he knew, he would drop in front of Ingrid if he was wounded, even if she didn’t know who he was. “So how do we help him?”

“I haven’t a clue, maybe go in and knock on the door?”

“You can do that?”

“I can try, sit down and support my body while I go.”

Art sat, Raven sat too and leaned her back into his arms, “Don’t be afraid, I’m going to look like I’m dead.” With that she slumped and Art gripped her tighter because her body had gone entirely limp. He checked for a pulse and found nothing at all.

After a short time, during which Art was scanning the field for anything dangerous, she stirred and sat up. “I can’t get in, he must really hate me, but why did he come here?”

“I didn’t get the impression that he hates you, Raven, just the opposite, in fact.”

“Will you try?”

“Uh, rooting around in someone else’s head is more Ray’s specialty, not mine.”

“Will you try?”

Art realized that she meant it, she was genuinely worried about Wilhelm and wanted to help him now. Art nodded, thinking relationships were weird things. “What do I do?”

“I can put you in his mind, but you have to trust me.”

“Because you might not bring me back?”

“Because he might just take you, if this is a trick he could drain you completely.”

Art stared at Raven. “You think it’s a trick?”

“That’s where you have to trust me, I don’t, but I won’t put you in there unless you agree to it.”

“What have I got to lose, Raven, I don’t have Ingrid, and my life is more or less nothing without her. Fine, put me in there.”

“We need to talk about that, but there’s no time right now. I will pull you out as soon as you think of coming out. Just say the word, call my name, OK and no matter what I’ll pull you out.”

Art nodded and his body slumped into Raven’s arms.

It was dark. No, not completely dark, there was a dim light over there in the distance. Art went toward it, although he didn’t know how he was moving. He wondered if this is what Ray did, he had heard the stories, but Ray was a bit stingy on the details. Maybe it was different with each of his patients. He said he worked on many different beings back in his days at the temple in Japan.

Art could see the light now, it was a lamp next to a door. The door was in a wall, just a featureless wall that stretched for as far as Art could see in either direction.

The door wasn't big, but it surely looked solid. Right, why the light if Wilhelm didn't want someone to come along and knock on it? Art knocked. There was no sound at all, the door seemed to be solid, but his knuckles made no impact on it. Right, he pulled his foot back and booted it as hard as he could.

It was as if a cricket had thrown itself at a tree. Art could tell it made a sound but he doubted that it was heard anywhere on the other side of the door.

Art looked around for a rock or some other object to hammer on the door but there was nothing, just a featureless wall on a featureless plain. The ground was solid, but when he stamped on it, it made no noise and his foot hurt.

Right, that's enough of that, Art held out his hand and Ingrid's sword appeared. Suddenly the area in front of the door was flooded with light and the ground started to open up under his feet. Oops, he let go the sword and it all returned to the same wall and ground as it was.

At least he'd made some sort of impression.

Art decided maybe it needed some subtlety, he leaned his ear on the door to listen. Was there anything on the other side?

What he heard was snoring. He was asleep?

Looking more closely at the door, Art saw a keyhole. There was no way that was there before, yet now it was. Fine, he bent over and looked, but pulled his eye away quickly, realizing what a stupid idea that was. Sure enough, something shot out of the hole and would have pierced his head. Before it could get away, Art grabbed it from the side and pulled, hard. Whatever it was, it bent and now could not get back into the hole.

Art bent over and shouted into the hole, “Wilhelm, it’s Art Pendry, you just met me. You’re with your wife and it’s safe, open the damned door and come on out.”

Nothing, no noise, no response at all except that the spike made a couple of moves, trying to return to it’s side of the door. Art bent it once more so that when it tried, it poked the door, which seemed to make it stop.

There was space between the spike and the side of the keyhole. Art thought about it and decided that since he was outside his body, he didn’t really need to be body sized or body shaped. No sooner had he thought that than he started to elongate like some sort of rubber-man super hero.

It was a big door, at least a mile thick, but when he got to the other side, he saw a man sleeping on a bed under a bower of roses. “Really? You’re sleeping beauty?” Art went to the bed and leaned over to shout into the man’s ear. “Wake up, you’re

safe with Raven. No sense spending eternity asleep, and no! I'm not going to kiss you!"

"What?"

And Art was waking up in Raven's arms.

"What?"

"You called my name so I pulled you out."

"Oh, yes, well I think maybe I woke him up just before you did."

A Second Chance

"Yeah, well fuck you and the horse you rode in on!"

"That's the thing, you don't fuck me, are you saying you fuck my horse?"

Silence...

“Get out.”

“I’m not getting out, it’s my place.”

“And that’s where it stood for a couple of days, we didn’t talk to each other at all, but one day when I got home, she was gone. That was twelve years ago and I have regretted it since, I’ve tried to get in touch with her but I don’t know where she lives. She’s just gone from my life. I wish her well, but I wish a lot harder that she was with me.”

“That’s rough man, but you have to admit, you were a complete jerk.”

“Thanks for telling me that, I know I was a jerk, it was our place, we rented it together but I guess I claimed it from her. I know she gave me chance after chance and I blew it. Now it seems like my life has no purpose any more, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I think maybe I do, and sorry about the jerk comment, I can see you’re still hurting.”

“Don’t be sorry, I was a jerk. I hope I’m not any more, I’m trying, I really am. God if I had one more chance.”

The air seemed to shudder.

It felt good to wake up with my arm around someone. I tried to clear the cobwebs from my head, but for the life of me I didn’t

remember who this was. I ran my hand up and down and decided it was a girl. More than that, it felt like I'd known whoever this was for ten years or more.

I opened my eyes and looked, it was early dawn, and she didn't look familiar. Well, never mind, time for a bit more sleep.

When I woke up again, she was awake and looking at me. "Who are you? How did I get here?"

Oh shit. "I don't know, I really don't know how you got here, and to tell the truth, I don't know who I am. I thought I was hung over or stoned or something"

"Really? You don't know who you are?"

"Honestly, but I swear to you I won't hurt you."

"OK, I believe you."

She set a kitchen knife onto the bedside table and pulled the covers up over herself.

"I'm suddenly very glad you do. Could you tell me who you are?"

"I'm... I'm... I'm not sure, I don't have a name that I can think of."

"Right, it looks like we're both in the same condition. Do you

think if we go back to sleep it might just come back to us?”

“The sun is well up, I’m not going to sleep again, and I’m not sure I want to sleep beside you anyway.”

“I swear, on my mother, if I could remember what she looked like, that I would not harm you. Somehow I feel like I would never do that. Can I ask, do I look familiar to you?”

“No, not really.”

“Not being a perv here, I promise, but could you run your hand up and down my side here and then see?”

She frowned, “Keep the sheets over your crotch.”

As she ran her hand quickly over his side, she slowed down, she reached over and felt his shoulder-blade, then ran her hand over the back of his head, feeling the stubble there. “Uh, yes, it feels like I know you, that I have for a long time. That’s weird, how could I know you if I’ve never seen you before.”

“That’s how I feel about you.”

She pulled the sheets tighter around herself, “You felt me up?”

“Sorry, yes. I was half asleep and my arm was already around you. I did nothing more than that, I swear. At least I think that’s all I did. I don’t remember... I don’t remember anything before waking up here with you.”

Her hand rustled around under the sheets. “OK I believe that you didn’t do anything more, now I’m wondering why? Don’t you find me attractive?”

His eyes went wide and she laughed. “I’m teasing, relax. Look I have to pee and I’m starving. Stay here and I’ll use the can then cook some breakfast while you get up. After that and a big coffee, we’ll look through our things and see if we can find a clue who we are.”

She gathered her clothes, and he noticed she didn’t bother taking the sheet along with her as she walked out. Nice ass.

When he walked into the kitchen the pongee meal was cooking on the stove and two coffees were poured, the pot in the middle of the table with another cup worth. His was black, hers had cream. She looked frightened again. “I knew where the bathroom was, where all the pots and pans were, you take your coffee black, don’t you? And you like a second cup I think. I made three on automatic pilot.”

He sipped his cup, “I guess I do.”

“What’s going on? Did the aliens hit us with some sort of forgetting ray? Wait, let me check something.”

She walked back to the bedroom and he could hear her going through the closets and the dresser drawers. When she came back she was frowning again. “There’s no women’s clothing

there, and you've got too much dresser space for a guy. We don't live together, but you lived with someone once."

"It's possible? Let me get my wallet and see what my name is at least."

While he did that, she looked around for a purse, but found a wallet in her coat pocket.

"OK, big reveal, my name's Clint Walker. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing."

"Well it looks like this is my address, I checked the door, right apartment number anyway. What about you?"

She pulled her driver's license from the wallet. "Well if this is right, and the picture is me, it may explain something, My name's Chassie Walker."

"Relatives? My sister maybe?"

"You don't recognize my name? I don't feel like I'm your sister. Clint I'm going to guess I was the woman who used to live with you. It can't have been very long ago, not if I remembered where all the pots and pans were."

"No, we were involved? I can't believe I would ever not be involved with someone like you. I'd have to be crazy."

“Maybe we both are. Look the Pongee is ready, let’s eat, crazy or not, I’m starving.”

“OK, but wait, where does it say you live?”

“Surrey, BC. A long way from Guelph.”

“Close your eyes and imagine where Mike’s Cafe is.”

“What? Why?”

“Because there’s something that tells me, like you know the pots and pans, that we are going to visit there. Can you see the way?”

“Shit, yes I know exactly where it is.”

“Me too.”

“I wonder if I like Pongee?”

Julius Shows Up

Kitsune was getting ready for her next student. She wasn’t sure who it was, but it was on her calendar. She was organized

enough to know that she would have written down the name, the problem was, it was Julius. The sweet little kid that she couldn't save from cancer.

When she saw that, she cried a little, then got ready for whoever showed up.

She was just sitting, remembering how Julius always tapped out a bit of whatever piece he was working on as he knocked, when she heard a bit of the last piece she taught him.

She bolted upright and stamped to the door, 'Whoever was messing around like that was going to...'

It was Julius, smiling and holding his violin. He bowed to Kit as he always did, their little joke and she could barely bow back. When she did she dropped to one knee and hugged him so hard he squeaked. "You're squishing me, be careful of my violin."

Kit let him go and said, "How..." She stopped, he came back during the change, she knew how. "Come on in Julius."

"Jules, remember, I decided on Jules a couple weeks ago."

"Oh, yes, very sorry Sir Jules, come on in."

"Sir Jules? Yeah, that's cool, I like that."

Later, Kit was in the Cafe telling Liz about it. “I’ve never been so happy in my life as when he walked in the door.”

“I’m so happy for you Kit, but I thought that Beelzabub said he would keep Julius in Hell with him.”

“Beels! Oh my dear, I hope he’s OK.”

“I’m fine, Kitsune, thanks for asking, and Hell is back where it belongs. It’s all good.”

“But Julius...”

“Was the subject of a bit of an argument between my brother and I. He said Julius was one of his, which is true, and I said I’d promised to look after him and so, well, the end result was that we put him back.”

“But his cancer is gone.”

“Sure, it never was, none of his people remember that, we’re pretty good when we work together, my brother and I.”

Kit threw her arms around Beels and kissed him, saying, “You’re wonderful!”

“Hey, hey, don’t go kissing the Devil, people will get the wrong idea.” But the Devil was smiling as he said that.

Liz laughed, “Mac and Cheese Panini for both of you to celebrate?”

“Oh yes please.”

Wilhelm still looked rather dead, but Raven assured Art that he was alive and he was out of his safe house. “He’s unconscious, he must have been drained severely, before he got to his hiding place. He would, he’d fight until he was losing, the idiot.”

“So what do we do?”

“We take him to his castle.”

“He’s got a castle?”

“Sure, he’s a big lord, a high mucky-muck in his lands. Very lord of the manor and serfs paying taxes and all that.”

“Ah, been there, done that from both sides. Can you pop us there?”

“I don’t ‘pop’, art, sorry. We’ll have to carry him.”

“He’s pretty heavy.”

“Not that heavy, pick him up will you and we’ll take him back to the farmhouse, figure out something there.”

Art found that Wilhelm wasn't as heavy as he looked, from the size of him. Or maybe he had gained a bit of muscle from his exercise with Stan and Okami. Exercise...

“Raven hold him up a moment will you, I want to try something.”

Art waited until she had him upright and then willed himself to change. A large wolf was what he got. Perfect, just the thing. Raven laid Wilhelm over Art's back and walked beside him, steadying the unconscious body. She looked at Art with wide eyes, “You can shapeshift.”

“I guess so, I was learning how.”

“Learning, you weren't born with the ability?”

“No, but a fellow I know changed me as we were exercising and I guess I caught the knack.”

“And for speaking in the mind, apparently.”

“Well, yes, it's hard to form words with a wolf mouth.”

“I knew you were powerful but never suspected.”

“What, is this unusual?”

“Art, over here it's god-like.”

“No, lots of people in the other world can do it. You and your sister can do it right?”

Raven shook her head in wonder, and fell silent.

As they walked toward Raven’s house, Art thought about her, alone out here with so many people wanting her power. How did she survive before Wilhelm’s defences? Maybe there was something to her saying shapeshifting was big magic.

When they got to the farm, Art changed back. “Can you heal him here?”

“No, it has to be in his place of power, otherwise my people will have to pay the price with their power.”

“Your people?”

“Sure, you saw them, we fed them.”

“Ah, I see, and where is Wilhelm’s castle?”

“Quite a long way from here I’m afraid. It’s a very long walk.”

Art wasn’t thrilled about walking a long distance trying to balance a body on his back. “Wait, that cart of yours, do you have a harness for it?”

“Yes, we used to have draft horses to work the farm.”

“Let’s go get it out.”

“You’re not big enough for it, Art, you saw the size of it.”

“Yeah, but there’s this trick I might pull off if I’m lucky.”

They pulled the cart back out and Raven arranged the harness, then looked at Art. Art changed to his wolf, then grew to the size of a Shire.

Raven was even more impressed than before. “Can your friends change their sizes too?”

“I’ve seen a lot of them do it, yes, that’s why I thought maybe I could do it too.”

Raven muttered, “I hope to the Gods that my son isn’t over there trying to take over the place.”

Art shook his shoulders a bit to settle the harness and then asked if they had all they needed for the journey. Raven nodded, “We will get food and lodging along the way, no problem once they see you pulling the cart.”

“Do I look impressive?”

“My knickers are damp, Art, yes you look impressive.”

Art laughed in her head, and lifted his muzzle to give a tremendous howl. Birds took off from the fields, Raven's people could be seen covering their ears and cowering or running full speed away from the farm.

Raven too, laughed and then joined Art in the howl. No, they would not have any problems along the way.

The Conspiracy Theorists

“I am seriously blocked, Fred.”

“Yeah, you've been staring at a blank screen for hours, why don't you write about how the world went away and came back.”

“Fred, I don't think we were supposed to notice that, nobody else did. Can you imagine the power of those people who did that?”

“Sure, and why would they pay any attention to a couple of nobodies like us?”

“Because we would blow the whistle? What if everyone knew what they'd done?”

“El, nobody would believe us, we’d just be another in a long line of loonies with conspiracy theories.”

“Some would.”

“Lots would, the same people who believe in the world wide Illuminati who are really lizard people who control all the major politicians everywhere.”

“That’s major corporations and their publicity departments that made that one up.”

“Really?”

“Sure, one of my cousins worked on the project.”

“The corporations invented the Illuminati?”

“Pretty cool eh?”

“And the Lizard men?”

“Nope, that just sort of got attached to the story.”

“Well I still think you should write about the world change, at least you could make it a fantasy story. Just start writing something, I’m getting tired of hearing you sigh and moan, staring at the computer scree.”

“All right Mr. Idea man, what’s the plot?”

“Plot, what plot? Who needs a plot, it’s post modern times, Jack Kerouac has lived and died, get a roll of paper and feed it into a typewriter and go all stream of consciousness.”

“Fred you’ve never written anything have you?”

“More a photo sort of guy, really. Seriously, El, start typing or get up and come for a walk. Maybe something will come to you.”

“What if there’s lizard men out there just waiting for a couple of Humans to come along as a mid-afternoon snack?”

“Then we’ll be good, it’s early morning.”

Art’s muscles bunched and the cart started rolling. He sort of enjoyed pulling hard, he hadn’t had much exercise in the last few days of the before and after, he’d been preparing for the end of the world. This world wasn’t his, but it could be worse, and now he could stretch his muscles.

It worried him a bit that he was starting to be as comfortable as a wolf than as a man. Maybe he ought to get back into training so that his muscles would settle into Human form. Those lumps on the back of his neck to hold up his various animal heads were a bit strange looking, for an upright man.

He glanced over his shoulder and Raven gave him a thumbs-up. “He’s stable, Art, I think we’ll get him to his castle without further damage.”

Further damage. Just how damaged was the man anyway? Well, he was Raven’s worry, he just had to pull the cart. Art settled into a comfortable lope, and the cart hardly felt like a weight at all. Some sort of lightening spell that Raven put on it?

“No, just well greased wheels, Art, I told you that magic is expensive here, we don’t use it carelessly.”

“I’m thinking out loud?”

“No, but I’m in touch with you now. If you want privacy you’ll have to shut your mind to me.”

“How do I do that?”

“I don’t know, it’s different for everyone, try putting up a wall like Will did.”

The great wolf collapsed on the ground. Raven muttered “Oops.”

The wolf got up again and continued to walk, “Nope, that didn’t work, but I have my own escape room now.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Well never mind, I don’t have any big secrets anyway, just a long line of soldier’s memories, and you’re welcome to them.”

“I can’t touch your memories, Art, just what you’re thinking at the front of your mind.”

“OK fine, listen in, no worries.”

Mile after mile of farmland gave way to forest. The trees were mostly just trees but every so often a few branches drifted toward them. Raven would wave her hand vaguely and the branches would pull back again. Art noticed, “What’s going on with these trees?”

“They’re not connected to another world, so they’re not very active, a little tap on the nose, so to speak, and they give up trying to eat us.”

“They eat us?”

“Sure, why else kill anything? See that one over there? Look at the base.” Various animals were lying on the ground, rotting. Some just bones, some more intact.

“Let me guess, the dead bodies attract scavengers which the tree kills too.”

Raven nodded and then looked ahead. “Uh oh.”

Art looked, and saw a gigantic bear. “Real bear?” he thought.

“Yes, real, big, and looking for a meal.”

“Magical?”

“Not that I can tell.”

Art shrank to fox size, and then stepped out of the harness. He grew again to something that was half again the size of the bear and stalked toward it, a low menacing growl deep in his throat. The bear snapped his head toward Art and rose onto its hind legs.

Rather than turning to run, Art just kept stalking forward, head low and swinging from one side to the other, and that strange noise got just a bit louder. The bear dropped onto all fours and he lumbered off into the woods, fighting with something that won't back off is never a good idea.

Art watched it go for a while and then trotted back to the cart. He shrank and managed to get mostly back into harness, but got one line crossed. As he got larger it cut under his throat.

“Wait, wait, I'll fix it. That was impressive.”

“What, being bigger and stronger? Not really.”

“But you knew how to deal with the bear.”

“Animals aren’t humans, they aren’t going to fight for some abstract reason. Scare it away or run away, that’s about it. Now if it had been a magic person who had the shape of a bear, that might have meant a fight. If for no other reason, than right of way on a path. Stupid.”

Raven looked closely at him, “You learn that by being so old?”

“I learned that by being a stupid Human who fought for too many wrong reasons over the centuries.”

Raven nodded, “All straightened out, we can go again.”

Art pulled the cart up a few feet and stopped, Raven hopped on again and they were on their way.

Gin Rummy

Ingrid was angry and she didn’t know why. She had been with Will for centuries, old and new world, and he was irritating her to no end she could see. She wasn’t a stranger to relationship troubles, she’d had a lot of practice, and she knew damned well that the sort of fights she was having with Will should have been settled at the beginning of their relationship.

It was tiring, all this irritation and her having to stamp down her temper so hard and so often. It didn't seem right, somehow. Not only that, but lately she'd been getting hangovers. She never got hangovers.

She was talking with Megan in the Cafe, "It doesn't make any sense, I'm not really even a part of Coyote's world, I just found it and moved here after some Humans got all 'come into being' on me."

"Look around you, Ingrid, this was a lunch counter, now it's a cafe, things change when Coyote sings."

"Well sure, but my hangovers? Look those are putting a serious crimp in my lifestyle."

Megan smiled, "I imagine. It may settle down, do you want me to give you a powder for the headaches?"

"Willow bark?"

"No, just Ibuprofen."

Ingrid laughed, "Thanks, I have some at home. All right, enough of me complaining, let's get down to the game shall we, I seem to recall that it's my deal and you now owe me more than ten thousand dollars."

"Not surprising, you change the rules every three games."

“I do no such thing!”

“You know, Will wants us to keep the trees.”

“Why?”

“He won’t really say, but I tell him that it’s not my world, and that if Coyote wants to get rid of them, we should. Will says there may be wonderful things in the other world. There are, of course, wonder full, but dangerous as hell. Anyway, you should know, Ingrid, you and Woden have your halls there don’t you?”

“I have a hall?”

“Oh, funny, come on it’s your deal, I want to make some of my money back before next Tuesday.”

Art was getting a bit thirsty again and sure enough, by the side of the road, there was a tap and a trough. “Raven, I’m doing this aren’t I?”

“What, making taps and water? Sure you are, this is a magical land, what did you expect. I told you that you were powerful.”

Art grunted, then drank his fill. In the distance he could see the beginnings of a city. Outlying farms, shacks, tilled fields. It was like the foothills to the city proper. That wasn’t in view yet but there was the promise of packed buildings and tall towers.

Or at least that's what Art thought as he walked on.

"About three hours more from here."

"So it's a big city?"

"Well, sort of, it's a big accumulation of people. I'm not sure it would fit your idea of a city."

"Now I'm even more curious. Anything I should know before we get there?"

"Only that it gets very dangerous once we get into the city, Wilhelm will have lots of enemies looking to replace him as the ruler."

"We'll have to fight?"

"Only if they see that he's weak. I'll try to cloak him as much as possible."

"Or we could just buy a few bales of straw from that farmer and put him under them."

"That would work, nobody much knows me here except his inner circle of advisors."

"Do we need to worry that they'll be in the town?"

"No, they hardly ever leave the palace."

“Then let’s buy the straw.”

Two hours later they were inside the town limits and Art understood what Raven had said. “It’s more than a little strange, hollow trees, caves, straw huts and that monstrosity in the centre, towering over everything else. There must be a thousand rooms in there.”

“There’s four thousand, they’re interpenetrating each other.”

“They’re... oh, magic, there could be as many rooms as magicians to make them.”

“You’ve got it.”

“And we start to worry once we’re inside.”

“Yes, we have to make it up to the main apartments on the top floor.”

“No back door and servant’s elevator I presume?”

“No, we need to go in the front.”

“Well let’s do it in style, make two saddles will you?”

“How do you know I can do that?”

“This harness isn’t hand made and it doesn’t look store bought, you created it when you needed it.”

“Smarty pants. OK are they to go on your back?”

“Yes and I’ll keep this size, nobody knows me so I’m a wild wolf your husband has captured. If I snarl and snap, nobody will be looking too closely at you two. Ride behind him and keep him upright. We’ll change behind those sheds.”

“Got you, here.”

Art was out of the harness and into the saddles. Raven moved Wilhelm to the front and she got on behind. Art stood up off of his belly where he’d dropped to let them mount, and walked slowly, majestically into the open and up to the front doors.

As he got near he roared, swung his head to snarl at each guard and more or less demanded they open the doors. When they were a bit slow, he growled deep in his chest and they jumped to it.

Art stalked into the castle and was relieved to see a wide staircase going around four sides of the main walls. He stalked to the stairs and began to go up. Over each landing, he could see people looking down. Nothing suspicious yet, just open curiosity, but Art figured the big shots were on the upper floors. He watched for threats while occasionally snarling or snapping, as if he was being controlled by the man riding him who had his eyes closed in concentration.

Round and round, Art trudged up the stairs, dividing his attention between the steps, artfully antique, and the faces above. He was glad he had four feet because someone's idea of artful was chipped and broken stones set at variable heights. High overhead he smelled more than spotted a rat who released a large stone to fall on Wilhelm's head. As it got close enough, Art sidestepped and it made the stair even more quaint, taking out half of a paving stone.

Having noted the man's face, he sent the image to Raven whose attention had been on keeping her husband upright. Her head snapped upward, eyes flashing and the wall the attacker was leaning on suddenly collapsed. The unfortunate fellow dropped the entire way to the floor below, as he went by, Art could see that he was trying to open his arms. Presumably he could turn into a bird and fly, but not with a rope around his arms.

Art kept on climbing and was happy he was not on the receiving end of Raven's anger. No more attempts happened until he'd reached the top.

Raven's voice cracked like a whip, "Who here was with that man? Anyone? Then get out of my sight or your Mage will set the beast on you. Move!"

There was a great scurrying of feet.

In the Tower

Raven looked around with some satisfaction, there was nobody on the landing. Well, nobody except an old woman leaning on a cane, looking carefully at Wilhelm.

Raven shook her head as if she couldn't quite believe it, "Hello Mother."

"Don't you mother me you husband-deserting hussy."

Raven sighed, "What is it you want?"

"I want to heal my boy there, you may have fooled the others, but I can see he's hurt."

Raven glanced around to make sure there were no other listeners, "I see, well you're right, he's hurt, he came to me and I've brought him back to heal. No need for you to worry."

"Who's worrying, I'll do it myself."

With that, the old woman took a step forward and stretched out her arm.

Raven took the old woman's wrist in one hand and gently pushed her back with the other. "No, you don't have enough in

you to heal him, Mother, and you'll only end up dead."

The woman glared at Raven with more hatred than could be imagined. "You did this to him!"

"I did not, he dropped from the air in front of us, and he was as you see him now. He came to me for healing, which tells me there is something here that hurt him. Do you know something of this Lady Wills?"

"Don't you call me that, that man is dead and gone!"

"That man was your husband and your son's father."

The old woman spat on the ground, "Never, I reject him."

With a tired voice, Raven asked again, "Do you know anything of an attack on your son, Mother?"

"No, no. I didn't even know he was gone from the tower."

"You didn't send him to me?"

"Never!"

"Fine, Art let's get him into his rooms. Wait for a moment while I check them."

Raven tried the door, it was locked by magic. She waved her hand and it opened. So he hadn't changed the spell since she

had cut him off.

In a moment she called out, “Please bring him in, Art, it’s empty.”

Art changed to his normal form, which was actually quite big for a human. There was a reason he was so often a soldier. He had no trouble lifting Wilhelm and carrying him through the door. As he did so, the old woman gasped and made some sort of sign with her hand. Art assumed she was warding off the evil eye.

From the room, Raven called, “The residuals, Mother, don’t try to take anything else from him.”

“What?”

“She gathered up the leftover magic from when you changed.”

“I leak?”

“Yes, you leak. There’s no reason for you to have learned to be more efficient. Your world doesn’t work like this one, right? We’ve talked about this.”

Art made a sour face and put the body on the bed where Raven pointed.

Raven sat on the edge of the bed beside Wilhelm and muttered to herself, “I don’t know why I’m doing this, I suppose because

he asked, but I swear..."

She took his limp hand and placed it, palm first, onto her chest, between her breasts. "Heal then, my husband."

She stayed that way for a minute or two and then took his hand away. "I don't understand it, I can feel my magic going into him but it doesn't stay. I don't know what's wrong."

Art frowned, "I don't know what you mean, where would it be going?" With that, Art felt a sort of wet-hand running down his spine. He spun around quickly, expecting to see the old woman, but there was nothing at all.

The feeling persisted, but now it was on his left shoulder. Art slowly reached out his right hand and took Ingrid's sword. Turning slightly to his left, he pointed the blade forward and upward into the shadows by the ceiling. A beam of bright light came from the sword and skewered something there. Art let the sword go and it flew straight at whatever it was, stabbing it. The sword turned a bit, keeping the thing on its tip and floated back, in a very smug way, to Art, who gripped the hilt again.

Art dumped the thing on the ground, there was no doubt it was dead, but he put a foot on it anyway. Looking at Raven he asked, "And what is that?"

Raven's eyes were wide, and at the door the old woman cackled. "That, boy, is a funnel, a conduit, very hard to make, even more hard to find."

“But what is it?”

Raven glared at the old woman, “It’s something to steal magic from others. Is this yours Hag?”

“Not mine, Witch, it’s probably the work of that Son of yours.”

Raven lifted an arm toward the woman, but Art put his hand on her wrist and forced it down. “No.”

Raven turned angry eyes on Art, but then seemed to collapse, “It’s true then? Will would do this to his own father?”

“Perhaps the man who dropped the rock?”

“No he didn’t have the power. It had to be someone close and someone with power. Art, it had to be my son.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, you need to be angry that he would think to attack your world. Perhaps Coyote is right to close the portals. It always comes down to a war.”

“Still, I’m sorry that it may be your son. It’s always hard when those close to you lose their way.”

“It was me who lost my mind, not to have seen what he was becoming. Wilhelm was right.”

Raven turned, picked up her husband's arm once more and placed his palm on her chest. In a short time, the man stirred, opened his eyes and snatched his hand away from Raven.

“What are you doing?”

“Healing you.”

“You trusted that I would not drain you?”

“Don't be stupid, we both know that you would not. How are you, any damage?”

“Just a massive headache and a desire to sleep for a month.”

“Good. Your mother is outside, do you want to see her?”

Wilhelm glanced, Raven was blocking the doorway, he shook his head, no.

Raven nodded, she'd been quiet with the question, but she could feel the old woman slumping outside the door, she had somehow understood the question and the answer.

Art went out and closed the door to give the couple some space. He could see the old woman was beginning to despair and he took her by the arm, guiding her to a chair. “They need some time, I will make sure your son knows you would have sacrificed yourself for him. You are weak, take some strength

from me.”

The woman looked up at Art and shook her head. Art smiled and said, “I give you enough to recover, please take it.”

With that the woman nodded, shyly, Art thought, and he felt a vibration where he was holding her arm. It was gone before he could figure out what was happening, and the woman straightened up. “You are kind, are you and my Daughter-in-Law...”

“No Lady, nothing like that. We are companions for now, she is showing me your world. I come from the world on the other side of the trees.”

“You are very strong, I am surprised you would want anything from this world.”

“We want nothing, but the worlds are joined right now, Raven would like us to keep them that way, but Coyote, the being who created the world and the connections, is closing the portals.”

“I see. My advice to you would be to close them as quickly as you can. There is nothing here for you, it is an old world, and the magic is disappearing as the great and powerful gather it and squander it. It has been millennia since it has circulated widely. We are all the more poor for that.”

“There is no more magic being created?”

“There was never more than a world-full, it was enough once, but as the Great Mages began to accumulate it, we all suffered.”

Art glanced at the door.

“Yes, my son is a Great Mage, he was part of the problem for a very long time. I must admit, he changed when he met Raven, though it pains me to say so. She taught him that accumulating magic is not the way to be happy. Something I could never teach him.”

“Yet you don’t like her?”

“Oh I like her well enough, but when she cut him off, she hurt him terribly.”

“I thought he left her and took their son with him.”

“He did, she never saw what their son had become. To my shame, he became like my husband. Wilhelm took him to save Raven and her sister, but he couldn’t control Will. Now this, a funnel web to drain his power. That boy is poison.”

“I am sorry for your hurt, because of your family.”

“You have no family.” She said it with certainty.

“All dead, and my wife has forgotten me.”

“Family is pain, who else can we attack when we are hurt and angry, with any assurance they will not walk away.”

“And yet they do.”

The old woman dropped her head, “And yet they do.”

Will and Ingrid

Will was yelling, no, he was screaming hysterically. “You’re a Goddess, you need to stop Coyote from killing the trees, we need them! Why aren’t you doing it? It’s so obvious, we need them, what’s the matter with you? You should have done it, are you stupid? Don’t you see what’s plain to see? You’re just standing there, why don’t you go stop Coyote? You have to stop him!”

Ingrid looked on as Will got louder and louder. She frowned, the one she was tempted to stop was Will, but rather than blasting him into a cinder, she simply turned and walked out of their apartment. She walked to the Keller and ordered her usual, a couple of schooners of the IPAest IPA. Throwing those back at the bar, she ordered another round. Ken, behind the bar at that moment, dropped them on the bar and said, “Should I ask?”

Ingrid looked up as if noticing him for the first time. She shook her head and said, “Will, of course, I think he’s gone insane. He was just yelling at me to stop Coyote from killing the trees.”

“Does he have an argument to make for that?”

“Nope, he figures it’s obvious to anyone. Like what’s obvious to him is what everyone thinks.”

Ken nodded, and waited.

“He wasn’t always like that, he was the perfect mate until Coyote changed things, do you think Coyote broke him?”

Ken shrugged and replaced the empty mugs with full ones.

“Is it me? Have I actually become stupid like he seems to think I am? Gods I’m so tired all the time, being around him. I seem to be pussy-footing around just so as not to set him off.”

“That doesn’t sound like the Goddess of War, Ingie.”

“It doesn’t, does it? But we make allowances for the ones we love, right? I mean I’ve been with him for centuries, if I feed him to Hildy it’s sort of being a bad girlfriend right?” On hearing herself say that, Ingrid’s hand flew to her mouth.

“Relationships are complicated, that’s for sure.”

“That was awful, what a thing to say!”

“Well, we all get there sometimes, I doubt Hildy would eat him anyway.”

Ingrid looked hard at Ken and then just shook her head and picked up her mug. Ken saw that she wasn't just draining this one and decided she was going to be OK, so he picked up a bar rag and started to wipe down the counter. He checked once in a while to make sure Ingrid was just muttering to herself.

Shortly after, Will came through the door. Ingrid's back was to him but Ken could feel her stiffen. He took Will by the arm and walked him back out the door where he hissed, “You really don't want to do this right now, Will. She's not drunk enough to forgive you. Give it another couple of hours.”

“But she has to see...”

“Dude, I'm not kidding, you need to leave it, and then the first thing you need to do is apologize to her.”

“But this is important...”

“It's not you know, the trees were not here last world, we aren't going to miss them. Leave it.”

Will looked like he was going to take a swing at Ken, but then he saw the look on Ken's face and backed off. Spinning around on his heel he stomped off toward his apartment and Ken watched him go, taking his hand off the force projector in his

pocket. “Stupid kid,” he thought to himself and went back into the bar.

Ingrid was ready for a couple more schooners of beer and as Ken pulled them she said to his back, “Thanks.”

Ken nodded and dropped the pair onto the bar, collecting the last two and putting them into the dishwasher, which he turned on, thinking to himself that they ought to get more schooners if this was going to happen as often as it had been.

Will was steaming, why couldn't people see what was so obvious! He was just winding up into another rage when something hit him.

“Oh sorry Will, didn't meant to bump into you, you sort of weaved toward me.”

“You stup... Oh hello, uh”

“Joan, I met you yesterday, remember?”

“Oh yes, Joan, how are you, are you all right, sorry for bumping into you.”

“I'm fine thanks, just going to get a coffee. How are you? You look a bit upset.”

“I’m just worried that Coyote will kill off all the sapient trees. That would be a big mistake.”

“It would? But they’re hostile to us, aren’t they? And they will let the fairy lands invade? Isn’t that what Jonah says?”

“He is an idiot, uh, yes that’s what he said.”

Joan hadn’t met anyone so far that was quite as odd as Will, he didn’t seem to fit. He still didn’t recognize her, even though most other people could. If he was in the lunch counter like people said he was, and she was there as well, why didn’t he know her?

She looked hard at him and frowned. Will noticed and Joan could feel him trying to shut her out of his, his what? Mind, body? Whatever it was that let her see those double images of the spirit beings. Nobody had bothered to do that so far, why him?

Joan looked harder, and she gasped. She couldn’t help it, she saw that he was not from her world, but from someplace else, and that he had a lot to hide.

“What do you see, girl! Tell me!”

“Nothing, nothing at all, Will, I thought you had a mosquito on your forehead, that’s all. But there wasn’t one there.”

Will didn’t buy it, and Joan could feel a magical energy

building up around him. Oh shit, time to disappear, and she reached out her arm, hoping that it worked. When she saw Wills eyes go unfocused, and his head move from side to side, she quietly stepped away and tried to make it to another street.

“Damn it,” Will said and Joan could feel a different magical force come from him. She felt like she was slowing down as she walked quietly toward the next intersection. She stopped, it was too much and she cried out as it squeezed around her.

“Got you. So you know about me do you girl, well let’s see just how much you can use that information where I put you.”

Joan felt herself begin to fade from the world. “Ray!” she shouted in her head, but it was too late, she was gone.

Joan in the Tower

Ray’s head snapped up from his book. He’d been reading in the apartment, waiting for Joan to come back with a couple of fancy coffees she had wanted. He had heard her call, and then she was gone. “What now?” he said to the room in general, but he was worried. Joan would have to be someplace very far away for him not to know exactly where she was. He hadn’t told her this but he’d attached to her.

“Susume?”

“I can’t see her either, Ray.”

“How far can you see?”

“She’s not in North America. Not in this hemisphere. Ray, I can’t feel her anywhere on the Earth.”

“You’re kidding... no sorry, of course you’re not. She must be in the fairy lands then. I’ve got to go get help with this.”

With that, Ray ran out the door and down the street to the Cafe. As he banged through the door, Megan and Liz looked up.

“It’s Joan, she’s disappeared, she called and then she was gone, Susume says she’s not on this world.”

Megan looked at Liz, “Do you feel her?”

Liz shook her head, “Could she have gone through one of those trees, those gateways to the fairy lands.”

“There isn’t one near here. Where was she when she called, Ray?”

Ray thought carefully, “About a block from here, she was coming for coffees, she disappeared about a block from here.”

Megan got up, “Wait here, she’ll come here if she’s able, I’m going to go sniff around where she vanished.”

Ray looked like hell, Liz dropped a coffee in front of him and put in a couple pieces of toast. He liked toast when he was upset.

Ray nodded thanks, “I should be out there looking too.”

“Megan knows how to sniff, Ray, as well as you do, and she’s right, this is one of the most likely places Joan will come back to. Here’s your toast.”

“Thanks, Liz. I appreciate it.”

As Art was speaking with the old woman, an equally old man came up the stairs carrying a spear. He took one look at Art and started for him. Thrusting with some accuracy, he tried to stab Art in the chest. Art, old soldier that he was, noticed that the man had training, but no strength. He deflected the spearpoint with his hand, and stood up, now inside the weapon’s range.

“Don’t hurt him,” came the old woman’s voice.

Art moved so the old woman couldn’t see, put both hands on the shaft, turned and stripped the spear from the old man. As soon as he did that, he looked directly at the old man and

handed the spear back. He held it for a moment until he could see the old guard understood what had just happened.

Grounding the spear, the guard came to attention and looked at the old woman.

“You are a good and faithful soldier, Maxim, and I thank you, but this man is no threat to me. Please reassure the rest of the guards that you have made sure things are fine here.”

The old man bowed and with a last sharp look at Art, walked slowly back down the stairs.

The woman shook her head, “He was the only one to come and confront the monster.”

Art smiled, “He loves you.”

“He does, he has for years, he was with me when I was with my husband and he watched over me.”

Art nodded, but snapped his head toward the bedroom door, “What!”

The old woman was on her feet, she waved at the door and opened it but stepped aside to let Art move through first. He found Raven and Wilhelm holding hands and talking seriously, but right where the Funnel Web was lying on the floor, a figure was forming.

Both Raven and Wilhelm were raising their arms to point at whatever it was that was appearing, but Art shouted, “Wait, she’s no threat.”

Joan had just materialized, and she was falling. Art stepped forward and caught her, easing her down on a chair the old woman had quickly brought over.

“This is a friend, the lover of an old friend of mine, she is no danger to you.”

“How did she appear here? Through the wards, and from the other world?”

“We can ask after I tend to her,” Raven stood to check that Joan was all right.

“Wilhelm, this is all a bit much for me, I’m going to go to my room and lie down.”

“Mother, I saw you move, you are not feeble, and Raven told me how you tried to heal me. Go and rest, take my love with you, we will talk later.”

“She’s unconscious, but I have done what needs to be done, she will awake soon. Wilhelm, I have not told you about the Funnel yet, but she appeared right on top of what’s left of it. It was on the ceiling, if she had appeared there, she would have been seriously injured or killed in the drop.”

Wilhelm leaned over and looked at the dead thing on the floor. He nodded but said nothing.

“I believe you now, my husband, about our son. I am sorry to have doubted you.”

Looking toward the door, Wilhelm gave a sour smile, “Mothers and sons have a bond that often clouds judgment.”

“What are we going to do with Joan?”

“We can take her back through the tree, no problem there. We will rest here a while and then go. Art you can fly can’t you?”

“I’m not good at it, but I can change into a crow.”

“Well I’m a Grey Jay and showoff here is an Eagle, we can carry Joan or perhaps turn her to a bird as well. It’s a matter of weight reduction.”

“Why didn’t we fly Wilhelm here?”

“He’s a Great Mage, too damned many protections hanging around him. Makes it hard to help him.”

Raven smiled when she said that and took Wilhelm’s hand once more, “Put Joan on the bed please Art, she won’t be comfortable slumped in that chair.”

Art nodded and carried her carefully to the bed. “Shall I go and find some food? I don’t know about you but I’m starved.”

“No need, I’ll call for lunch,” and with that, Wilhelm clapped his hands.

“You seem well recovered.”

“Once Raven kick-started me, the magic from my people flowed in again.”

“Your people...”

Raven put a hand on Art’s arm. “In your world you have taxes right? The government looks out for you and you pay them to do it?”

Art nodded.

“It’s the same here, only we use magic as our currency. Each person pays a little bit of their magic to be protected here in this region.”

“But you said it’s a zero sum system, and your mother said the magic was running out.”

“It’s not, but it accumulates slowly, more slowly than our population grows, and unfortunately, it’s just getting concentrated at the top.”

“So what happens when nobody down below has any magic?”

“Same as your world, there’s a revolution and the guys at the top are killed, or the guys at the top get smart and give away their magic.”

“Does that ever happen?”

“You’re kidding right? When have the powerful ever given anything away. No, the guys at the top get killed and all that magic is let loose again. Then the whole thing starts over. Been going on like that for centuries.”

A Queen, A Knight and A Page

Will stumbled toward Ingrid’s apartment. Banishing Joan took a lot of his power, but he had done it without using a portal tree! He could be the ruler of this place, he could feel it in his bones.

He needed his Queen here, for when he had drained Ingrid completely. Should he try to get her across now? Best not rush things, best to make sure he couldn’t be stopped first. He would show his father how to have real power, not that personal satisfaction bullshit he had preached. Will knew his father had been an absolute and cruel ruler before he had met that black-

eyed witch of a mother and her weak sister.

No, he would do this carefully, properly, and when he was ready he would bring his own Queen across. Tanya would be so proud of him. He had not known that Ingrid could move to the other world without the trees. Perhaps he would let that dog they called Coyote kill all of them, that would make him even more powerful.

Under the street, Percy shook his head. There was always a boy who thought he could rule the world. Percy had come to this world to get away from that nonsense, he would keep watch on this one, and get involved in the world if he had to, but so far, that hadn't been necessary except for his help when Coyote sang.

Still, no harm in a little lesson right?

Will staggered and dropped to his knees on the sidewalk. He clapped his hands on his head and moaned. It felt like he was about to lose his lunch, the pain was so intense. Just as he was about to pass out, it was gone. He looked up and glared at the Humans who were coming to help him. Animals, just animals, they would soon learn.

Percy sighed in his tunnel. This was not going to be pretty, but it seldom was when a being decided that everyone else was a thing to be used.

Ray was pacing in the Cafe, Megan had found nothing, but she had smelled that Will was there with Joan just before she disappeared. Ray was about to go ask Will some hard questions when the women had stopped him. Megan made a good point, “If he sent her across, running him through with a spear isn’t going to get her back. Sit and calm down.”

“Damn it, I was a knight in arms, I was a soldier, I can extract the information!”

Susume had intervened, gently. Ray had found his butt glued to the chair and she kept him there until he had calmed down.

“You need your calmer self, Ray. Call Art, call your page.”

“Hardly a Page, he’s more a King to my Knight if you want to know.”

“Yes, but now the two of you take turns being Knight and Page don’t you? Getting each other in trouble, getting each other out.”

Megan frowned, “Who’s Art?”

Ray shook his head, “He’s the true love of Ingrid, I remember that, but I don’t know why nobody else seems to. This Will needs a good shaking so we can get some answers from him.”

“Not by you, Ray, leave that to us. Now, how do you get to the other world to rescue your damsel in distress?”

“Coyote is killing all the portals. I’ll check with him to see if there are any left.”

Percy spoke up in their heads, “Will is bad news, he’s from the other world, that’s why the confusion with Art and Ingrid. Art is on the other world, he went through a tree not far from his apartment. Unlike the others, it is friendly, you should go there, and quickly, I’ll guide you there.”

Ray was up and out the door.

Wilhelm and the others were on the balcony outside his rooms. Joan hadn’t woken yet, but they decided they needed to get her back soonest. Wilhelm turned to his mother, “Keep things safe here, trust nobody, who knows who has sided with Will.”

“Have no fear, I know how to root out the bad influences, I spent a lot of years with your father.”

“Be careful, Mother, make sure first before you blast someone out of existence.”

“I will be, now you and Raven get this girl to where she needs to be, and you, Art, you are welcome here any time, but I still

say you should cut your world from this one.”

Art nodded and turned to a large crow. Wilhelm made a pass over Joan and she became smaller, she was in a basket and suddenly there was a huge eagle grasping the handle with its claws. Raven became a Jay and the three of them leapt from the balcony to wing toward Raven’s farm.

The old woman watched until they were out of sight, then rubbed her hands together, “Right, let’s see if the old magics still work to find the scoundrels.”

The flight to the farm was uneventful until it wasn’t. As they got out of the region of the city, a huge bird rose from the ground and came toward them. Art looked toward Raven and she said, “Roc.”

‘No such thing,’ thought Art, but there it was. He swung toward it, diving as it rose and he could feel it reaching out to steal his magic. As he got near, Art changed to human form, “If you want my power, fine, here’s my non-magical form.” With that he slammed into the bird, got onto it’s back and pulled hard on the wings. Since even a Roc has hollow bones, and Art had muscles well honed by shifting from animal to animal, the wings broke. As the bird shifted to a human form, Art felt a tremendous surge of power move into his own body. He shifted back to a crow and rose to join the others.

Wilhelm shook his head, “I’m glad you’re on our side, Art.”

“What the hell was that? Why do I feel like I just sucked his magic away and into myself?”

“It’s the nature of this world, you just gained what magic he had.”

“I don’t want it. It feels tainted.”

“It will settle down, what you’re feeling is who that person was, at a guess, not very nice. The magic isn’t either nice or nasty, only the being it lives in.”

“I’m not sure I like this world very much.”

Wilhelm shrugged and flew on. Raven sent a brief note of comfort to Art that showed him she was sympathetic. Art was grateful for the comfort but then thought, “Can I give this magic to your sister?”

Raven touched the end of her wing to Art’s. “You can, and thank you.”

They were getting near the farmhouse when Raven gasped, “The tree, there’s something wrong with the tree, I can’t feel it!”

Trouble with Trees

Ray got to Raven's tree, but it was just a tree. Susume had guided him. "It's blocked, Ray, bound around so that it may as well be dead. I'm sorry love, I can't get you through to the other world. No, don't touch it, there's a charge around it that would give you a nasty shock."

"Damn it, is there no other way through?"

"Coyote is not back yet, perhaps he hasn't killed all of them, but they are very hostile, they don't seem to want anyone moving from one world to the other."

"I thought that's what they did? Coyote, can you show me where he is?"

"Certainly, hang on."

Ray hadn't known Susume could flick him from place to place, he staggered as he appeared in a wood. After he had hit a tree and bounced off, he shook his head and looked around.

"Thanks, that was interesting."

Susume laughed and healed the cut on his head. "I'm a Yokai with access to all the Yokai, Ray. Sorry to have startled you."

"It's fine, fine, thanks again. Can you point me to Coyote?"

“He’s right behind you, Ray.”

“Hello, Ray, nice to see you.”

Amber had her hand over her mouth, trying not to laugh. Ray didn’t miss-step often.

Ray grinned at Amber and then turned to Coyote, “Have you killed all the trees?”

“We’re looking, but I think we’ve got all of them.”

“There’s one in Guelph, but Will put a binding on it and it can’t be used.”

“Will? Well that’s good isn’t it? We’re cut off from the fairy world. Jonah and Lila will be relieved.”

“Not cut off, and damn it, Art and Joan are on the other side.”

“Ah, I see, well if they got over there, perhaps they can get back.”

“Can you sing me there?”

“Risky, Art, very risky, it might just blow a hole between the two worlds, and then we’d never get it closed again. I don’t want to sing the world away and back again, we were lucky this time.”

Amber put her hand on Coyote's arm, "Not lucky, Coy, you had enough help and it worked pretty well. Just the trees."

"And you see what trouble even that little detail has caused. Jonah has gathered his army and is ready to go fight a war."

"It won't come to that, I'm sure. Ingrid! Ray why don't you ask Ingrid, her hall is in that world. She could send you."

"How would I explain it to her? Will has some sort of hold on her, she thinks he's Art."

"What?"

"Never mind, I'll go back and see if Megan has found anything out. Are you two coming home?"

"Not right away, this looking around for trees is kind of peaceful, we're going to keep on with this for a while, aren't we Coy?"

"As you wish."

Ray smiled, they were good for each other, and Joan was good for him, and Art should be with Ingrid. "Megan can you fetch me please?"

Nothing.

"Megan?"

Susume spoke up, “She’s not answering anybody, Ray, I’ll send you back.”

With that, Ray was in the Cafe with Liz and Megan. “What’s happening, you didn’t hear me call. What did you two find out about Will?”

Megan looked confused. “Will? What about him?”

The group landed by Raven’s tree and looked at it. There was nothing to see, it was a tree, the same tree that Raven had brought Art through. Raven put her hand on the trunk and jerked it back quickly. “Ouch, that’s quite the shock, don’t touch it.”

“Will, he’s found a way to stop us from coming through, I wonder what he’s up to, he can’t take his people through without a tree.”

Art shook his head, “Ingrid. You said she can move without the trees, and he sent Joan here directly. He must figure he can move his people through, and wants to stop us from going back.”

Wilhelm frowned, “Ingrid? Goddess of war, weather and whatever else she puts her mind to?”

“Yes, my wife.”

“Your? You’re Woden?”

“No, OK my partner, she and Woden split millennia ago, Woden is with Mishelle.”

“I don’t understand, who’s Mishelle?”

“Did nobody ever tell you that the affairs of the Gods are inscrutable.”

Raven shook her head, “How long have you been saving that one, Art?”

Art grinned. “Look, you say she knows me here, because I can call her sword to me. Well let’s go see her.”

“You’re kidding right? The Gods are half a world away, and we leave them alone in the hope that they will leave us poor little people alone.”

Wilhelm nodded, “Even the Great Mages leave them alone.”

Raven shook her head, “There’s that ego again, Will.”

“Well we do, or at least those of us with half a brain, do. You don’t mess with the Gods if you want to remain un-charred.”

Art insisted, “Look, we’ve been together for centuries, if you say she remembers me here, she won’t hurt me. Let’s go see her.”

Wilhelm and Raven looked at each other, Raven shrugged and changed to a Jay.

Robin was shouting, “Look, you don’t want to start the war, why would you want to go back there!”

Jonah folded his arms, “Because I don’t want a magical war here on this world.”

“But Coyote has killed all the trees.”

“Coyote doesn’t know everything, there’s pathways he never found.”

“Oh no, you don’t want us to go through the mountain. Surely you don’t.”

“I know the way.”

“So do I, you walk in and later, if you’re still alive, you walk out again. It’s simple. Except for the middle part!”

“You came across that way, what’s your problem.”

“You want to take thousands across. Look, one being can sneak through, an army can’t.”

“They know the risks.”

“No, they don’t, they follow their King and their Queen.”

“Stay here then, Goodfellow, we’ll go alone.”

“You’ll go with your scout. With your daughter leading the way! She’s never been through the mountain, damn you, she doesn’t know the way.”

“She’s our scout, she will do her job.”

“Listen you stubborn old man, she wasn’t a scout until a couple of days ago, and she’s your daughter. I can’t believe you would throw her out in front of the rest of you maniacs.”

Jonah waited, quietly watching Robin go through a lot of faces.

“Aaargh! All Right. I’ll lead your army through. Damn it, I’m a crazy man for doing this.”

Jonah didn’t smile, “You’ve always been crazy Robin, and I thank you for your service to our family.”

“Thank me when half your people are lying dead on the way.”

“Oh I think maybe not so many will fall, I’ll be with you out front, scouting the way.”

“You’re too old.”

“I’m half your age you old fool.”

“Oh so now I’m the fool.”

Jonah grinned then, and clapped Robin on the shoulder.

Through the Mountain

“Where is everybody?”

Megan looked up from a map and looked around the cafe. “Oh, yes the place is a little empty isn’t it?”

Liz nodded and put the last dried mug back on the shelf.

“Let’s see, Stan and Ken are out removing a bunch of electrical lines that appeared a few hundred miles into the bush. Someone must have wanted a power connection, but it’s just poles and wires, no connection. Amber and Coyote are still out looking for trees. Ray is looking for Ingrid to send him across to the other world, to go find Joan.”

“No, Ray found Ingrid but she can’t send him for some reason. He’s gone to find Robin in the hopes that he can figure out how to get there.”

“Robin? What’s he know.”

“Megan, wasn’t there something that we were supposed to do with Will? Ray mentioned something and when I said I didn’t know, he looked confused.”

“I don’t remember that. Ah, Stan and Ken are on their way back.”

Ray, Robin and Jonah were deep underground, they were maybe a couple of miles into the mountain. Lila the Queen and Lila the scout were back with the main force and Lila the scout wasn’t happy about it. “That was my job, I’m the scout, I should be out ahead.”

“Dear, you have never been here, let your father do his job, you can do yours here, looking for anything that he missed on the way through... like that thing.”

The Queen had snapped her head to one side and spotted some sort of movement deeper into a side tunnel. Lila was gone, spear humming along with her. She was happiest when she was hunting something down. The Queen smiled to herself and held

up her hand to stop the troops. She sent three of them after Lila to help or to clean up whatever her daughter killed.

Ahead, Jonah and Robin were arguing, The way split, and they both remembered a different path. Ray was pacing between the two and finally came back to interrupt, “The one on the right smells of danger, the one on the left seems to hold clear air.”

Robin nodded, “Ah, all right then, Jonah you were right, we need to go right, toward the smell of danger.”

Ray did a double take, “What?”

“Magic, Ray. If you want someone to come into a trap, you don’t make it smell dangerous, you make it look innocent.”

Jonah nodded and started down the rightward path. Ray shook his head and followed him. Robin gave the finger to the left path and made another pass with his hands that caused the tunnel to collapse before following.

“We’re beyond half way, starting to come out again. We should slow down and let the army catch up.”

“Jonah, we should keep up the pace so that we don’t all walk into a trap in the other world.”

Ray rolled his eyes, it had been this way since they started down into the mountain. He was still amazed that there was a mountain just outside the city, but Robin had explained that it

was a metaphor for a ‘strange interior journey’ or some such. Ray didn’t care as long as Joan was on the other side.

As they came out of the tunnel, much sooner than the other two had expected, Ray saw another Fairy army drawn up in battle order. Now this was something that he knew about.

As Ray ducked and was about to move to the side, Jonah put his hand on his arm to stop him. “Wait for our people, I recognize this band, the Queen is going to want to talk with their leader.”

“Talk, I thought you were coming here to fight? A little disruption to their rear will let you come out without meeting them prepared.”

“No, wait, you’ll see.”

Ray fumed, but sat down on a rock to wait for the main army. It wasn’t long, and as he did a quick estimate, Ray realized that they’d brought them through with very few losses.

The Queen and Lila walked to Jonah and there were hugs all around. “Thanks for waiting, I could feel Ray itching to get at it, I’m going to talk to Tanya.”

Jonah nodded and watched as his wife walked across the field. “Listen, she’s broadcasting back to us.”

“Hello Tanya, what’s this?”

“Hello sister, it’s what it looks like, we were waiting for you, we heard you the moment you entered the mountain.”

“And why would you wait for me with an army?”

“Don’t be stupid, you’re not coming back to our lands and taking them again.”

“Tanya, I never wanted these lands, I just wanted a quiet life, you can have these cursed places.”

“Then why are you here?”

“To stop you and your plans.”

“What plans?”

“Oh please, the trees are back, the wolds are linked once more, and you have assembled an army. The only question is why you aren’t already in my world.”

“Your world is it?”

“The world I live in, so yes, mine. I don’t claim to own it, and I don’t intend to allow you to own it either.”

“I see, and so you’re here to fight me.”

“No, I’m here to see that you don’t come over. You will notice

that I now control the entrance to the mountain, and we are killing the trees.”

“The trees, the damned things won’t let us through.”

“But there is one who has come through, and he seems to think that you are his Queen.”

“He is a useful fool, certainly not my King.”

“He locked out the trees?”

Tanya gave Lila a sour look, which said all that need be said.

“So your plan was to use him to gain access and then to betray him.”

“How did you know?”

“You’re kidding? We grew up together child.”

“Child? You’re barely a century older than I am.”

“Old enough.”

While the Queens were bickering, Robin was grinning. He waved his hand to one side and three rocks exploded, the fairies who were hiding there flew back twenty feet and ran back to the main group. “It’s good to be back I suppose, but I’m a peaceful man.”

Ray looked at him and snorted, “Sure you are.”

At that moment, Ray felt Joan. “I have her, Robin. Joan is on this world, I have her.”

“Go, this could take days, those two have a lot to argue about.”

Jonah nodded, “Go on, find her.”

Joan Wakes Up

Ray changed to a massive fox and began running, he sped past Tanya's fairy army. As he did so, he felt a surge of power as he automatically drained magic from the soldiers there. He had been a commander for too many years, not to know how to get the best out of fighting men. In this case, how to take some of their magic.

He needed it, he realized that Joan was a long way away and was somehow flying. He picked up speed but then thought of Art. Why not? Ray decided that he was a flying fox and suddenly he was, a small fox with wings.

After he had come to a stop in the dust and rocks where he'd fallen and rolled, he took a little time to figure out how wings

worked.

Although he felt a bit guilty about leaving Jonah and Robin on the brink of a war, he decided there wasn't a lot a lone fox could do. The King and Queen looked about as competent as most war leaders were and they would keep Lila safe in the ranks now that they were here. As he looked back he saw Robin blowing up a couple of rocks and was glad he'd never made the little fellow that angry at himself. Looking forward again, he drove on toward where he seemed to know he'd find Joan.

He let out a squeak that caused half the Fairy army to wince. 'Good to know if I ever have to distract a Fairy,' he thought.

Word seemed to have gone out that there was a crazy Crow who would change in mid air to defeat anything coming to fight him. The flight was settling down into a rather routine journey, although it was taking as much time as Art had been warned it would. Ingrid was indeed in a land far far away from where Wilhelm and Raven had their home.

Just before they left Raven's farmhouse, a small bird had flown to them and Raven was overjoyed. It had been her sister, and Art, true to his word, had given her enough of the Roc's magic to regain herself. There were now two Jays in their little flock. As Vivian had changed to human form, Art noticed that she was even more beautiful than her sister.

They had stopped a few times, to eat and drink, there seemed to be Inns, or at least homes where people could exchange a small amount of magic for food and drink. Overall, Art didn't think the place was so much worse than his own world.

Vivian hadn't needed all the Roc's power, so Art wasn't tired as they flew for their fourth hour since the last rest. The other three seemed to replenish themselves as they flew, animals and human forms looked up in annoyance as they moved overhead. So much for not eating magic.

After what felt like forever, a line of mountains came into view and Art moved toward Raven. "What is that ahead of us?"

"The Abode of the Gods"

"With capital letters no less."

"Yes, OK, ha ha, it's a barrier that the Gods put up to keep all us annoying little people away from them. We'll have to find a way through, we can't fly over them."

"Is there a way through?"

"I don't know, Nobody that I ever met went to the Gods and came back."

"That fills me with confidence."

"Look, it's your girlfriend we're going to see, your idea, so let's buck up and look forward shall we?"

Art grumbled to himself, but flew on in silence. The miles crawled by, and after an hour or so, they were surprised to see a small bat winging toward them as they went. Surprised mostly because there's no way a bat should be able to keep up with them, birds that they were. Yet there it was, growing larger as it got closer, its little wings a blur. Wilhelm had spotted it first, of course, and alerted Art. "You might want to go deal with that thing."

Art turned back, ready to knock whatever it was out of the sky, but as he got closer, he realized that it was Ray Keen coming at them. "The blazes, Ray is that you?"

"What, you've never heard of a flying fox, Art?"

"You can fly now? Oh good lord, and you know me!"

"I know you, and I know you're supposed to be with Ingrid and I know that the Will with her has sent Joan here to this world somehow."

Art took a few beats to get all that straight, "Come on then, those three specs up ahead are carrying Joan to Ingrid so she can send her back to you. Only you're here now and, oh never mind, come on, can you make it?"

Ray's bat wings beat even faster, "Watch me."

While Lila and Tanya had been talking, the two armies had drifted closer to each other. Taunts were floating across the gap now, and those taunts took the form of small bubbles of stink. When they hit someone on the other side, all manner of insults exploded out. Sexual orientation were the bulk of them, but there were accusations of thievery, of lewd behaviour in schools, and anything else designed to irritate the receiver. It was inevitable that some of the Fairies would break ranks and go running for the other side. Small skirmishes were happening between the two armies.

When the Queens noticed, they both waved, and their fighters were suddenly armed with rubber air bladders. The sounds of poing-poiing rang out across the fields. This didn't stop the fighters, but the rest of the two armies began to laugh and urge the fighters on. The Queens smiled at each other and Tanya said, "Jinx."

As Ray and Art got near the others, Ray felt a pull. He let some of his accumulated magic bloom forward. In the basket Joan began to stir and finally woke up. Wilhelm looked down and shrieked, which Joan heard as, "Don't sit up you're in a basket in the sky and you're small, I'm not gigantic."

“Uh, what?”

Wilhelm had slowed down and Ray had caught up by then, “Joan, relax, everything is fine.”

Wilhelm took a look at the exhausted little bat and shook the basket at Ray, who dropped thankfully into it. After a moment of confusion, Joan recognized Ray, even as a bat, and wrapped her tiny arms around him.

Will has Troubles

Will was furious, he had sent for his Queen and she hadn't arrived. Since the trees were unreliable, she was supposed to come under the mountain with her forces. She hadn't even responded to his call. Not only that, but Raven's tree was fighting him. He was spending magic keeping a barrier on the damned thing. This was not how it was supposed to go. He was drawing more and more power from Ingrid, and he was worried that she would notice.

He had thought that he could steal magic from others on this world, but for some reason it wasn't working. He had cast a spell over them to accept him as Ingrid's long time lover, but that was it. Not only that, but there were some that he had to keep spelling, they kept remembering that other fellow, Art.

The whole thing was starting to feel like work, and that wasn't what he wanted at all. He wanted control, he deserved control, the voice in his head told him that he was destined for control, but nothing had told him it was going to be difficult. In his head it was all so simple. He would come here and it would all fall into place.

That Ray fellow who had tried to get through the tree seemed to have disappeared, along with the Fairies he had felt. That worried him a bit. Tanya was supposed to take care of them when she got here, had she come through? But if she had, surely he would have known. Unless she was hiding herself from him. Would she do that? Surely not, she loved him. How could she not?

The worries kept running around in his head, but he was still certain that it would all work out. How could it not?

Ray fell asleep in the basket, he had exhausted himself catching up with the birds and now he was asleep in Joan's arms. On the other hand, Joan was wide awake, not exactly rested but there was no way she was going to sleep now. She peered over the edge of the basket to watch the countryside flow by, she looked up at the huge eagle carrying her, and at the Jays and the Crow flanking her. It was all a marvel, she was in another world.

Art had explained what was happening and that was a marvel as well. So much change. She wrapped her arms tighter around Ray and hoped it would turn out, especially now that she knew Ray had followed her to another world. She knew he liked her, but she hadn't remembered just how much. Still, it felt right.

She could feel when they started to descend, they were into what should be the foothills of the mountains, but there were none. A flat plain right up to towering cliffs. These could not be mistaken for anything but God-made. She wondered which God.

“One of the few things they could agree on,” said Wilhelm in her head. “It took most of them to do it, and looking closely, I suspect they each had their part to do. There’s a seam, a crack between two sections just about a mile to the right, can you see it?”

Joan didn't see it yet, but she believed it was there, it was the way home. Ray had explained that the path under the mountain was out of the question while the Fairies were fighting in front of the entrance, and Raven had said her tree was still bound by magic.

Another few minutes and the birds landed in front of a crack in the wall. Ray woke up and joined the conversation as Art was laying out the plan.

“There’s no sense risking everyone, Ray, Joan and I will go

through alone.”

Raven frowned, “Are you sure? Remember its not an easy place to get into and if you meet any grumpy Gods you might not survive.”

“Which is why we go alone. Look, Ray and I have centuries of experience fighting, so I’m not worried about any beings that might attack, and I’ve had centuries of living with a Goddess. If I can’t talk my way past any grumpy Gods, I deserve what I get.”

Wilhelm laughed, “I wish you luck, you seem more confident of your Goddess than I am of mine.”

Raven looked at him and smiled, “Come on then Willy, let’s go back to the farm and have a bit of a talk.”

Jayce looked from one to the other and sighed, “I’ll go visit your Mother shall I? In the City Tower?”

“She ought to have things under control, but thank you sister-in-law, she will be happy to see you once again. Perhaps you can help her.”

Raven hugged her, “Go with my love, sis, give us a couple of days to discuss things would you please?”

With that, and more farewells the birds took off back to their homes. Art and Ray looked at each other and smiled, “Good to

see you Art.”

“You too Ray, I wasn’t sure who remembered me.”

“Some, but not everyone, and I have a feeling I know why. Anyone who could make Ingrid forget you would be able to make most others forget.”

With that, they walked into the crack in the wall.

“Damn that woman,” thought Will, as Megan once again remembered she was going to have a good look at him. She just wouldn’t stay spelled.

It was actually getting a bit scary how easily she saw through him each time. He had to scramble to make her un-see his true nature, and then she would be back a short time later. He could see her true nature and his imagination kept going to having his throat torn out by a large wolf.

It was so unfair, it wasn’t supposed to be this difficult. He worried about taking so much power from Ingrid, but she seemed not to have noticed that he was siphoning it off. He wondered where she was getting it, there was no indication that the powerful people around her were being drained.

In the coffee shop by the Dark Library, Kelly was behind the counter, wondering where Art had disappeared to. He was enjoying his time as a barista but was worried about Art. It wasn't like him to abandon the shop, but what the hell, there didn't seem to be any other employees that Kelly could remember, so he would run the place until Art got back. What were friends for?

Business was good, he'd have to figure out where Art got his bakery goods from, there should be an invoice somewhere around the place, and if not, he knew a guy who ran a great bakery. As he was rummaging under the counter, a lovely bass voice called out, "Anybody here?"

Kelly straightened up and was greeted with some sort of God, the man was gorgeous and Kelly was speechless. The man laughed, "Good morning, can you do a double strength Cappuccino?"

Kelly nodded and, red faced, spun around to the espresso machine.

Joan Steps Up

The further they walked into the crack, the more nervous Joan became. She was concerned she would get stuck as it narrowed to nothing. The only thing that kept her going was knowing that Art and Ray could shrink down, get behind her and pull her back out.

She walked with her hand on Ray's shoulder, Art leading the way. "Do you think it goes right through?"

"It feels that way to me, if it doesn't, we just back out and find another way."

"We've been walking for quite a long time, Ray, that's even longer on the way back."

Art called back, "I think it's getting a bit wider, not to worry."

Joan smiled and tried to put on a brave face, but it did indeed start to widen out. Eventually they came to a small cave and as they did, Art stopped.

"We are just passing through, we don't want any trouble."

An ugly looking being with long arms and a club faced them, Ray had walked out into the cave too, so that they could turn and run should they need to. He was glad that Joan would be protected by both Art and himself.

Art spoke again, “Now look, I don’t want to fight you, but if I must, you are going to be hurt.”

“You think so, little man? You think you will hurt me? Shall we see who will get hurt?”

Joan squeezed Ray’s shoulder and then put her hand on Art’s arm as he lifted it to grip Ingrid’s sword. “Let me.”

“Hello Mr. Ogre, we are friendly folk who are simply trying to get to the other side, can we come to an agreement without anyone fighting?”

“Oh aren’t you cute. You call me an Ogre and think you can talk your way past me?”

“I’m sorry, are you not an Ogre? You look like pictures I’ve seen of them.”

“OK you got me, I’m an Ogre. You must know that my job is to prevent you from getting past.”

“Is there no way?”

“Of course there’s a way, there’s always a way, for instance, you could kill me, but I don’t think that’s very likely.”

“Can we pay you?”

“I’ve no need for more magic.”

“Magic?”

“How long have you been stupid, girl?”

Ray whispered to Joan, “They use magic like money here.”

“Sorry, Mr. Ogre, I just got here. Is there something else we can trade?”

“Well let’s see, how about you? You stay here and the others can go on, how about that?”

“To eat me?”

“Eww, no, to be my wife.”

“Ah, well how about a kiss would you settle for that?”

“You’re going to bargain? No.”

“What about a game? Do you like games?”

“No, I don’t like games. What do you have in mind?”

“Well, if you can catch me and kiss me, I’ll stay here to be your bride.”

“Why would I play a game like that? What’s in it for me, I kill you all or you stay and the others go, no reason to play a

game.”

“Well, if you play the game and win, and I don’t see how you can lose, do you? I will be the sort of wife that doesn’t constantly nag and complain at you. I can be a real shrew, just ask Ray.”

The Ogre looked at Ray who was nodding and making a horrible face, “It’s true.”

The Ogre thought for a moment and said, “Very well, I like a bit of the rough stuff anyway, we’ll play your game.”

Ray didn’t know what Joan had planned, but she gave him a look and he settled back again, he was about to fight the Ogre himself.

Joan nodded, “And if I win, we all go through right?”

“That was sort of obvious wasn’t it? Or do you think I’m stupid?”

“Just wanted to make sure we’re all on the same page.”

The Ogre refrained from the obvious joke, “Very well, prepare to be kissed.”

As he stepped forward, Joan disappeared, or at least she hoped she had.

The Ogre quickly swept his arms through where she had been, but found nothing. Joan hadn't actually had time to move or to duck, but his arm went right through her. She almost squeaked with surprise but managed to keep quiet.

Standing perfectly still, she let him move around the cave, swinging his arms and backing up to the other side, hoping to cut off her escape. He found nothing. Art and Ray sat down with their backs to the wall and put bored faces on, as if Joan did this sort of thing all the time. This did not please the Ogre at all.

After many minutes, the Ogre's shoulders slumped, "I give up, I can't find you and so I guess you've won."

Joan reappeared exactly where she had been and smiled her nicest smile. "So we are free to go?"

"You're free to go, just don't tell the Gods I let you through. This is a good gig."

"Oh we would never tell them, thank you so much for being a good sport," and with that, Joan went to him and kissed him hard.

As she let him go, the Ogre half smiled and said, "Shit, wish I'd found you. Go on before I change my mind, and watch out for the spikes. You ever get bored with this guy, come see me."

"I will, I promise, spikes?"

“What spikes? Who said anything about spikes? Go on, git.”

At the other side of the cave, the crack narrowed again and they walked single file. As they did, Joan muttered, “How did he get into the cave? Climb down from the top?”

“Magic, no doubt, sent there by the Gods.”

“Oh the poor man.”

Ray looked back at her, “The poor man who was about to kill us. Good job, by the way.”

Joan grinned, Ray was so easy to read, “No I’m not thinking of going back, dear.”

Art half turned, “Shh, I hear something ahead.”

There was indeed something, a dozen small beings with spiked hair were blocking the way at another widening of the crack.

Ray took a look and groaned, “How many of these things are there going to be?”

“Don’t need any more,” cried one of the Spikes, “We’re enough.”

Art turned and looked at Joan, “You want these?”

Joan shook her head, “All yours, Art.”

Art smiled and turned to the Spikes, “You have a chance here, I’m heading through to see my wife, you can try to stop us, but it will go bad for you.”

“Bullshit, you ain’t got no wife.”

“I’ve got Ingrid, and I’ve got her sword, would you like to see?” With that, Art held out his hand and the sword was spectacularly not in his hand.

Ray groaned, Ingrid must have helped set up this barrier. He held out his own hand and Excalibur appeared, just at the same time Art fell to the ground holding his head.

Ray looked at the Spikes, “Perhaps this sword would do?”

The little beings took one look at the blade, which seemed to be looking back at them, or rather at their souls, and the Spikes disappeared back into the walls.

Ray opened his hand and the sword was gone, he bent to pick up Art, who was shaking his head gently to make sure the pain was gone. “You have the damned thing?”

“Not because I want it, Art. It seems to have adopted me.”

“Poor bastard, be very careful it doesn’t get its hooks into you.”

“I’d just as soon you had it back, Art.”

“Yeah, I know, but I think it’s mad at me.”

“Well kiss and make up, I miss my own blades.”

Kelly has a Secret

Will stumbled, it was getting difficult to draw power from Ingrid, and that tree was fighting a lot harder against him than one of those things ought to.

He felt some power from the man who just passed him and he reached out.

Joe Makwa turned around, looked at Will and started to walk toward him. Joe was in town to talk with Stan and Megan about some problems in the far north, and he was in no mood for any sort of magical challenges from kids. He began to change to a Kodiak bear.

Will, his attempt to steal magic totally blocked, took one look at what Joe was becoming and ran. Joe snorted, turned back to a man and shrugged. Just another punk.

Will was confused, he was starting to realize this world didn't work like his did. So how come he could take power from Ingrid? It was confusing to say the least. He kept stumbling as he ran, he was tired.

As he got to the top of the hill, he saw a coffee shop and went in to sit down for a few moments. Kelly looked over and noticed the fellow who looked both out of shape and out of wind. He left him to recover while he dried the cups from the dishwasher. Stacking them carefully on the shelf behind the counter.

Will slowly got his wind back and his heart-rate down a bit. He looked around and decided a coffee would maybe help. He went up to the counter and ordered a black dark-roast and a Morning Glory muffin.

“There you are sir, that will be five dollars and seventy five cents.”

Will made a pass with his hand, but the man simply looked at him. He made another pass.

“Are you a bit short of cash at the moment sir? You can pay us next time you're in, if you'd like.” Kelly knew what it was to be on the streets and penniless, although this fellow was a lot better dressed than you'd expect.

Will tried to change tactics and cast another spell toward Kelly. It was supposed to confuse him, to make him doubt.

Unfortunately for Will, Kelly had no doubt at all about what and who he was.

“Ah, I felt that one, practising to be a magician are we? Well that was a good one, but please let’s not get into it shall we? The last contest I had resulted in a very small frog. Now, if you have no money, take your order and pay us later. I have work to get back to.”

Will was stunned, he was the finest mage on his world, and this Human had just deflected his magic. And threatened to turn him into a frog. Will began another pass with his hands.

Kelly took a quick look around the place and could see that nobody was paying attention. He flicked his hand and Will, his coffee and his muffin were a kilometre away on a park bench.

He hadn’t even felt it, he was simply moved from the coffee shop to the bench in a blink. Nobody could have that much power and mastery, it wasn’t possible. And yet, this human did. What sort of world was this?

Will looked down at his hands. He decided he’d eat the muffin and drink the coffee while he thought over his next move.

As it turned out, there were no more obstacles in the way of getting through the mountains. Art, Ray and Joan emerged into

a sunny day at the edge of a massive desert, complete with sand and nothing much else, if you didn't consider the giant scorpion that had just noticed them.

“Oh for goodness sake. Who thinks up these things, they ought to be writing movies.” Art was walking toward the threat and reaching out his hand. Nothing came, not Ingrid's sword and not Excalibur. He glanced at his hand in disgust and shook it. Fine, he changed to a wolf.

At about that time Ray called out to him, “Leave it, change to a crow and we'll fly from here.”

With that, Ray changed to a huge flying fox, one large enough for Joan to ride, and she climbed aboard, sitting just in front of the leathery wings and leaning onto Ray's neck. He was getting the knack of this shape.

Art shrugged, changed to a crow and with a rude caw toward the scorpion, leapt over it's head and then it's tail, and went winging after Ray. Below, the scorpion shrank a bit as Art drew it's magic into himself. Somehow, Art didn't feel bad about that.

The desert was a lot bigger than they had thought when they first saw it, but they made good time and soon saw various buildings dotted along some hills.

“They look like temples and halls. How are we going to find Ingrid?” thought Ray.

“I can feel her off to the right, I’ll know her hall when I get to it. It should be close to Woden’s hall.”

The sun hadn’t moved in the sky when they finally caught sight of two long wooden halls that Art declared were their destination. They had been flying for hours so the sun must be fixed in place. Well why not? Gods, after all.

A massive figure rose into the sky riding an eight legged horse. As it approached, spear set to throw, a massive voice called out. “Oh, it’s you Art, come to see Ingrid I suppose.”

“Hello Lord Woden, I have indeed come to speak with her.”

“Well she’s right there behind you, riding her pig. Welcome to our halls, don’t stay too long or you’ll stay forever.”

With that, Woden disappeared, and Art turned in the sky to see Ingrid, riding her giant boar Hildy and holding her sword, which she made vanish. “Art! To what do I owe this delightful visit?”

“My Lady Goddess, may we speak somewhere more comfortable than the middle of the sky?”

“Of course, My Lord Husband, and why so formal? Come to my Hall, I suspect there’s meat and drink there. Ray, is that you? You have learned to fly I see, good for you. And Joan, most welcome.”

Joan was startled, as much by the glory of Ingrid in her full Goddess form as by her recognition. “You know me? My Lady?” she added quickly.

Ingrid laughed, “So very formal, come on, let’s get more comfortable.”

When they had settled down in a cozy room somewhere in her hall that wasn’t too near the feasting in the main hall, Ingrid turned to Art and said, “Enough to eat and drink?”

“Enough thank you Ingrid, I assume we can leave here after eating?”

Ingrid laughed, “You think this is fairyland? Of course you can leave any time you wish. Or perhaps I should say, any time I allow it!”

Seeing the looks on their faces, Ingrid dropped her Goddess form once more and laughed. “So tell me, what brings you to this world Art?”

The Truth of Magic

Amber woke up with her nose tucked under someone else's paw. She lifted her head from the pack and could smell the first scents of Autumn. While she had been Coyote, she had somehow inherited his itchy feet around this time of the year, the migration, the preparations for winter as the fat squirrels stored tree nuts where they would forget most of them, the Bears fattening up on berries and fish, for a winter's nap.

She stood and stretched, then shook herself free of the last few wisps of sleep. Padding over behind a tree, she marked it and then came back to see Coyote still sound asleep in a pile of coyotes. Say what you want about the little brothers, they made for a warm and cozy night. She changed to human form and built up the fire from their evening meal. Coffee and eggs with sausage appeared as she cheated just a little bit.

One thing about this new world, the magic in it felt like a spring from deep under a mountain, fresh and clean. The old world had been getting a bit stale, although she hadn't realized that. She stretched, then shivered a bit. Oops, she was still naked, time to dress. She simply thought, 'dressed' and she was in her tramping clothes. She looked fondly over at Coyote, who had gifted her with so much power, and the sadness of knowing she could not fix the whole world, just little bits of it.

Well that was enough, she was working each day to fix those little bits of the world and she was with the man she loved. Even if he was a smelly old dog.

"I heard that."

“Good morning love, I’ve got coffee and breakfast here, which would you like first.”

“You.”

Amber smiled, “Coffee it is then.”

Coyote got up, sniffed, and went over to the tree Amber had marked, he added his own mark and then changed, coming back to the campfire naked and dangling.

“Put that away, we’ve got things to do today Coy, we can play tonight after the sun is down. There’s less of it these days.”

“There is, isn’t there, the year is sliding down into winter.”

“Coy, when we’re done with the trees, I’d like to head north to meet the snow.”

“Your students?”

“Kit will take them, let’s you and I go spend some time away from people, some time by ourselves yes?”

Coyote reached out and gathered Amber in for a hug. He buried his face in her hair and whispered into her ear, “Of course, my love, as soon as we finish with the trees we’ll run and run and run.”

Wilhelm and Raven made good time back to Raven's place. They had time to chat on the way back, starting with Raven apologizing for driving Wilhelm away.

"I understood, Raven, a mother doesn't think badly of her son, and I didn't either, for far too long, but I felt what he did to Jayce and I couldn't ignore it."

"Poor girl, but she seems fine now even stronger than before. Will she get along this time with your mother?"

"I think they will, Mother needs the help, and Jayce will enjoy helping. I think Mother figured she was a bit helpless before."

"Well after spending a year as a chickadee, she'll know about hard work. Not that I think it was good she had to learn that way."

"They'll be fine. Trust me, and now here we are at the farm."

"The key has been changed since you were here last, Wilhelm, I'll change it back."

"No need, they're my wards," and with that Wilhelm reached for the gate. The next moment, he was on his back a good twenty feet away.

“What the... hey, woman, don't you laugh at me.”

“Sorry love, your wards are a lot stronger than when you put them up.”

“No kidding, but how are they so much more powerful?”

“Come in, we'll sit and I'll tell you something you don't know.”

With two cups of tea and biscuits on the table, Raven began. “I came from the other world, things are a bit different there. You know how it's thought that Humans are the source of that magic? Well that's only partly true, they are so numerous that they can't help but be most of it, but it's not just them. Both there, and here on the farm, magic comes from every seed that germinates, every fruit and grain that forms, and from every animal born. Each and every act of creation is magic, and it goes out into the world.”

“What? But that's, that's not right, we take the magic from each other.”

“We don't have to. You see, creation isn't the end of it. Every act of kindness in the world, every act of love is also magical. Humans got where they are by kindness and love, by working together. That's their magic. Now that they've built so much, they can forget that, and that's why the old world began to stumble, why my family came here from the world before that. This is a family secret, this world is far from being old and

tired. It's full of potential for those who wish to see."

"But the magic is dwindling, isn't it?"

"No, it's being hoarded, concentrated, not dwindling. There's lots for those who know where to look. Here on the farm, you can see it being created, but back in your castle, you are too far from the creation. Too many beings grubbing for power through stealing from others makes you blind to the real magic."

"So the wards I set up here..."

"Are constantly being strengthened by every new seed that germinates, every act of kindness in this district, and the best thing is that it happens regardless. The magic is created and comes to where it is welcomed. You have barriers that you've created out of fear of someone else draining it from you. Drop them and you will see the magic of the world, the magic of life as it becomes."

"But your sister?"

"Was in fact, getting better, stronger. To steal someone's magic is the fast way to accumulate it, a lot in a short time, but you can accumulate over time, smaller amounts yes, but they just keep adding up, each act of kindness makes you more."

"And you've always known this?"

“I have.”

“Just how strong are you, Raven?”

“Drop your wards and find out, husband.”

“I, uh...”

“You’re behind your own wards on the farmhouse, and nobody on this farm wants to obtain power by stealing it.”

Wilhelm nodded, and then his eyes widened. He looked at Raven, looked around, and opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again, “You knew this while I was here?”

“It’s why I insisted we live here and not in your castle.”

“But you never said.”

“I did, love, every day and in many different ways, but you weren’t ready to hear me. You weren’t a kind man when I met you, but I fell in love with you anyway, and I was willing to wait for you to learn how to be kind.”

“And there’s no way I could have learned in the castle.”

Raven nodded and got up to pour more tea.

“But what will I do now that I know this? Can I change our society, change the culture of the castle?”

“I don’t know, but you are my husband and I would like you to come live with me here, once again. Let Jayce and your mother deal with the castle. I suspect your mother knows what you and I now know.”

“My father...”

“Could not see, and it made your mother unhappy and then bitter.”

“Wait, you would take me back?”

“Yes, it was my blindness that drove you out, I see that, and now I would like to apologize and ask you to come back.”

Wilhelm looked around once more, Raven could see the tension leaving him, the guarded look, the frozen shoulders that went with a lifetime of being suspicious of everyone. She reached her hand across the table and her husband took it.

Ingrid has a Plan

“I like that you made it a fantasy story, and especially that you included characters like Coyote and that giant worm? Excellent.”

“Well it was your idea Fred, I’m glad you appreciate it.”

“It reads like you know just what you’re writing about. It’s great, almost like you were in the know when Coyote changed things.”

“Well, thank you.”

“Eli, you weren’t in the know were you? I mean we noticed the change, but you weren’t part of it were you?”

“Who me? If I was part of it wouldn’t you be part of it too?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. So are you going to send this out to a publisher?”

“I don’t think so, I’ll probably just publish it as an ebook online. I doubt anyone would want another fantasy story, there’s lots of them out there and they are all sort of variations on a theme, aren’t they?”

“I guess so, but not too many of them read like the truth.”

“Let’s see if anyone likes it before we go around the publishing circuit. I’m not really into trying to push my work. So you want to go for coffee?”

“Sure, hey, you want another mystery to write about?”

“I’ll bite, what is it?”

“Well Kelly says the owner of Art’s Cafe over by the University has gone missing. Just vanished off the face of the earth.”

“Art Pendry?”

“Yeah, you know him?”

“We were buddies a long time ago. He’s gone missing?”

“So Kelly says.”

“Wasn’t Kelly one of your exes?”

“Hardly an ex, we went out a few times.”

“Well, let’s go get the story, I could use a coffee. Just let me upload this to my website and we’re offski”

Art had finished telling Ingrid the story of Will and herself on the other world. It wasn’t easy, Ingrid in this world had a bit of a temper, as befitted a goddess perhaps. By the end of the story, she was ready to go and smite this Will, who had magic’d her.

“Won’t two of you in the same place break the Universe or something.”

“You’re cute, no it won’t, when I’m in more than one place I’m not some identical particle thing, not quantum or anything like that, I’m just in two different places. No, the reason I don’t go visit myself is that I don’t get along all that well with my others.”

“But, I’d think you would be compatible.”

“Nope, for instance I think Ingrid on your world is a bit of a sop, no offence, but being in love with you isn’t my idea of a good thing for a Goddess to do.”

“No offence?”

“You asked. Look, here I’m wife to Woden, there he’s with Mishelle and I’m with you. No big deal, but she and I don’t have a lot to talk about.”

“But you’ll help?”

“Sure, of course. I tell you what, I won’t go over there and hit that kid with lightning or something, but I’ll send you back with an amulet that will bounce the magic off of Ingrid. How’s that?”

“OK that sounds like a good idea.”

“But understand, you’ll have to get it around her neck, and I hate necklaces.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“I’m sure you will. Send that little shit back here for me to smite, will you?”

“Uh, I can’t promise that, I’m not sure what will happen when we free Ingrid from the magic.”

“Probably smite him herself. She’s a piece of work, she is. Joan was it? Come on over here for a moment, I have something to give you too.”

Art wasn’t sure about the smiting, his Ingrid was rather a gentle sort, they’d been in love for centuries. This Ingrid, on the other hand, seemed a lot more Goddess than his.

When she was done with Joan she turned back to Art. Ingrid waved her hands in a complicated pattern and an amulet appeared.

Art blinked, “That was kind of complicated, was that to form the amulet out of the air?”

Ingrid laughed, “No, just a bit of flim flam to amuse myself and you guys.” With that she held out her hand and three more amulets appeared draped over her hand.

“Take your pick, they’re all the same.”

Art smiled and picked one of them, “Not that one!”

“What?”

“I like you, you’re easy to mess with. That one’s fine, you ready to go now?”

“Just like that?”

“Just like this.”

Art, Ray and Joan found themselves in Mike’s Cafe. Megan blinked as they appeared at her table, “We’ve been looking for you, Joan.”

“It’s a long story, I was in the other world and Art found me, then Ray came for me.”

“Art? Art, you look a bit different.”

Will finished the muffin and drained the coffee. He felt a bit better for the food, but decided it was time to get back to Ingrid. He walked slowly down the hill and to their apartment. Ingrid was out, and he figured he knew where. Walking to Ken’s bar he paid attention to the beings around him. He had

wondered why he wasn't gathering power, and now he knew, these were not just Humans, a lot of those he passed were powerful, they simply shut him out. Not only that, but the closer he got to the bar, the more of them there were.

As far as he could tell, they didn't steal magic from each other, they were just magical. Born that way? He didn't think so, some of these people didn't know that they had magical power. It was so confusing.

As he got to the bar, he could feel Ingrid inside, she was drinking again. Good thing she could handle it, she drank a lot. She had been the first magical being he had met when he came over, he had concocted a life history for the two of them and had been draining her ever since. That she never seemed to be losing her power was a bit confusing, but what of it, he could feel his own magic getting stronger the closer he got to her.

"Hello Ingrid. Glad to run into you here in the bar."

"I can't have a beer?"

"I didn't say that. Let's not get into that again."

"Fine, fine, you're right, you just care for me, I understand that."

Stan looked at Ingrid and frowned. He looked at Will, who made some sort of gesture with his fingers. Stan frowned a bit more deeply about something or other, but he couldn't

remember what. Oh well, “Another pint Ingrid? You want a beer Will?”

Stan got up and wandered over to the bar, letting Ingrid and Will work through whatever they were arguing about this time.

At the bar, Ken shook his head, “There is something we were supposed to be asking Will, isn’t there?”

“Maybe? I keep thinking there’s something, but then it’s gone.”

“Yeah, it’s weird. Here’s your beer.”

Stan walked back to the table with three pints. He set them down and Ingrid drained one right away. She slid Will’s beer over to her side and Stan suddenly remembered, “Sorry Will, I forgot you didn’t drink.”

ZZZZZZZZZZZZ

The Great Fairy Battle

Jonah was laughing. He couldn’t help it, the two sisters were going at it as if they were still sixty years old, instead of well over six hundred centuries.

His daughter was disgusted, “I was never so happy not to have siblings as I am right now.”

“What are you talking about, you had plenty of siblings in Tilly’s house.”

“I was the oldest, father, I was more mother than sister to them.”

“Well, Lila was the older in her house, but that, apparently, didn’t mean much.”

“Listen, are we going to fight or what?”

“It was never going to come down to that, those two still love each other. On the other hand, I’ve seen these arguments go on for days.”

“Days! No I can’t afford that, some of the kids are due to start a new school year. No this won’t do at all.”

With that, she nodded to Jonah and stalked out toward the two Queens. In a booming voice she said, “I call individual combat to settle this!”

Lila the Queen snapped her head around, “No!” She was as protective of her husband’s daughter as if she was her own.

Tanya, her sister, saw this and grinned, “Done! And what is done cannot be undone.”

Lila looked like she was about to punch her sister. Jonah took a

step forward, but Lila slumped, “Very well, what is done is done.”

Lila junior was grinning, hand on hip, spear in her other hand. She was looking forward to a good fight.

Tanya took one look at her and seemed to decide, “Cally! You will face this child.”

A huge fairy stepped forward from the troops lined up facing the other army. Lila grinned even wider, he looked like he would last more than a couple of minutes. She shouted out, “Oh he is too pretty, I would not want to mess up a face like that, please pick someone else.”

Tanya blinked, she had counted on Lila being intimidated. She looked at Cally and could see that he was furious. Idiot, she thought, she’s got him already, well let him find out what it is to lose for a change.

The sisters stepped beside each other and looked at the cleared ground where the fight would take place. “Shall I choose someone else, Lila?”

“No, I think she has him already, we’re fighting for you to stay here right?”

“Yes, if she wins we stick to our own worlds.”

“And this Will you are supposed to help?”

“What about him?”

Lila the Queen nodded and returned her attention to the fight.

Cally had picked up a massive battleaxe, and wore a short sword on his belt. He was obviously comfortable in hand to hand range.

Lila, on the other hand, was a scout, used to fighting at a distance, she had her spear from the Twins, and with a rather negligent movement, dropped it to fire a blast into Cally’s left knee. It wasn’t meant to cripple, just to sting like blazes.

Cally roared and limped forward.

Lila shot his other knee, his shoulders, and finally his groin. Cally kept coming and Lila was impressed. ‘He must be wearing a cup’ she thought after the groin shot. What she said was, “What no balls on you, boy?”

Oh, he didn’t like that, Lila ducked as the battle axe whirred over her head. He was inside her spear now and she shortened it to club length. The end of it hummed with power as she jammed it into Cally’s chest. The shock was absorbed on his breastplate, but he was blown back several feet anyway.

He paused, out of range, and took three deep breaths. ‘Oh shit,’ thought Lila as she saw he had got his emotions under control. Now it was going to get tricky.

Cally dropped the battleaxe and drew the sword. He used it one handed and stepped in. Lila swung the club and he caught it, power humming through his bare hand. Damn, the power made his hand spasm and she could not pull it out of his grip. She had to let go or be pulled toward him.

As she let go, the club went inert and Cally threw it away. He pointed his sword at Lila and for a moment she wondered if she would survive, but then he threw it away too.

Lila grinned, it would come down to submission, not death. This was going to be fun.

The Queens both had calculating looks on their faces, and Jonah looked from one to the other. Oh well, his daughter wouldn't stay with him forever.

Lila, on the other hand, kept her eyes on this oversized boy. She had no doubt she could take him down but not if she attacked first. She waited, and so did he. The more he waited, the more worried Lila became. Well, there was more than one way... she relaxed and glanced at the Queens.

It worked, Cally attacked while she was pretending to be distracted, but Lila really was distracted. What were those two up to? Cally got hold of Lila's arm and hauled on it, pulling her into a bear hug. Or that was the plan, Lila's elbow came up under his chin and her knee into his groin.

The elbow snapped his head back, but her knee met his protective cup. Ouch. Cally staggered back and Lila limped out of range.

More careful now, the two of them circled each other and then they lunged, Lila was much stronger than her size would indicate, they locked up and swayed, neither being able to get any leverage. An unfortunate rock caused the two to trip and end up on the ground. As they were falling, Cally was on top and Lila had time to think “uh oh” before he spun her around so she landed on top of him.

As the Queens saw that, they grinned at each other. Jonah shrugged as the two rolled across the ground, neither able to free up anything to strike with. Back and forth they went, until they slammed into a ledge at the edge of the field and stopped dead.

Panting, they stared at each other, Lila considered hitting Cally with her forehead, but Cally’s helmet was still in place. Cally, for his part, grinned. ‘Uh oh,’ thought Lila, expecting her own nose to be broken, but to her surprise, Cally kissed her.

Both armies erupted in laughter. They had felt the emotional back and forth of the fight, and a massive burst of magic erupted as Lila returned the kiss.

Just like that, the war was over.

A Family Chat

It was nice to sit at the rough kitchen table in Raven's farm house. Wilhelm realized that he had missed their time together, the talks they had over biscuits and tea. So very different than the formal dinners he had to attend in the castle. He was content to sit and watch Raven's face, to drink that horrible blend of tea she liked so much. Still, he noticed a bag of his blend in her cupboard. She had kept it. No doubt she would act surprised and tell him that she had just not noticed it, and that she would throw it out now. But perhaps he could hope. In the meantime, he asked, "Do you think Jayce and Mother will be OK in the tower? There are some there that will be looking to take advantage."

"You haven't changed much, Wilhelm, still think women are weak don't you?"

"What? No, I just worry about them."

"Your mother has had centuries to build her own political networks in the tower, and she is not without power. Jayce has her own strength, you shouldn't worry about them."

"But Jayce is just recently recovered, and Mother is getting older."

“Let me tell you a couple of things that may ease your mind. Your mother has a defence that will reverse any attempts to drain her magic. I’ve never seen it anywhere else, but she told me how she’d found it while your father was beating her once. Each time he did that afterwards, she got stronger, and eventually she sent him away.”

“You don’t have to tell me that, I know she killed him.”

“I’m sorry about that, love, she thought you’d feel better if you thought he’d just left you.”

“I felt better when I learned he’d never be back.”

Raven smiled sadly, and continued, “As for Raven, she can also resist any attempts to take her power. The reason Will was able to drain her was that she trusted him, and he took his time. She couldn’t bring herself to believe her nephew was trying to hurt her.”

“I’m sorry Raven, I didn’t realize until too late.”

“I never did realize, I’m glad you took him away before he could kill her.”

“But there are some powerful men in the castle.”

“Who are, like most men in charge, afraid of women.”

“What? No, women are weaker...”

“Will! You are neither fearful nor contemptuous of women, don’t be ignorant of them. Remember I told you that with each and every act of creation, magic comes into being?”

Wilhelm nodded.

“Well women create life, they have children, that act of creation is magical, mysterious, incredibly powerful. The pain of childbirth is also an amazingly powerful source of magic, the pain combined with the creative act of birth, of a baby opening its eyes and its lungs to the world. Look into me, am I weak?”

“You are far more powerful than I had thought.”

“Because you looked when we met, but not after I gave birth to Will. Wilhelm, women are not weak, they are as strong as any man in the magical arts. They just use their magic for raising children, rather than for the purposes men put it to.”

“Like defence in war, hunting, providing?”

“Yes. All the things that shape your brains toward believing you are superior to other men and to women.”

“Shape our brains?”

“Yes, it’s almost inevitable that you see the world as you do, through your acts and through what you need to do to get along

in our world. Men are outward facing, Women are inward facing. Men place themselves between children and the world, women look to the children. Men and women are back to back, not because they can't stand each other, but because back to back is the stance they need."

"Where did you...."

"Read your history, Wilhelm. Women rule the home, men defend it. When "home" became larger than a single dwelling, men assumed they were larger than a family. They will never be, of course, but that doesn't matter. Look at our world, fewer and fewer men with more and more power. Other men bowing down to them for the scraps. Women can't afford such games, not when they are raising children."

"Wait, what about Will?" Wilhelm regretted saying it as soon as he had.

"Will is the son of a powerful Mage. He learned that, and then saw that you were not following your destiny, which, in his childish way, he thought was to rule the entire world. How do you suppose he dealt with that as he got into his rebellious phase, his "I am not my father" phase?"

"To take up where I refused to go?"

"Perhaps, and as a mother, I didn't see it."

"A fine couple we are, aren't we?"

“Fine enough, husband, fine enough. Let the Goddess and her true mate deal with our son. I doubt they will kill him, I see too much gentleness in Art for that, but Will may regret his path. If we are fortunate, they may send him back to us.”

“I hope so too. Still, I don’t know about men fearing women.”

“Your father would have done well to have feared your mother.”

Wilhelm nodded. “As I should fear you?”

“Have you ever given me cause to fight you, Wilhelm?”

“I took your son.”

“You did, and I hated you for it, but somewhere, deep inside, I must have known why.”

“Women being more powerful than men. It’s a lot to take in.”

“On the other world, there is a crayfish that reproduces without sex, it is taking over from other crayfish. Look, I’ll take the other way of saying this, and tell you that Men aren’t needed, not many of them at least. One man can impregnate hundreds of women, and what else do we need to continue the species? That crayfish is female, no males needed at all, so none exist.”

“Is there no use for us men in your universe?”

“Of course there is, one virus and that entire species of crayfish is gone. No genetic diversity. We need you to shake up the genes.”

“Is that all?”

“No, husband, you defend the cave from the were-beasts. Back to back, remember?”

“Oh.”

Raven smiled at the look on Wilhelm’s face, “And sex. My bed has been very cold and lonely while you were gone. Are you going to stay and warm it up again? Perhaps front to front?”

Wilhelm gathered her up and carried her toward the bedroom. “Try to keep me away.”

Ingrid Finds Out

Art and Ray finished telling Megan about their adventures in the other world. Megan was fascinated with Raven, “I think I might have known that family, I wondered where they had gone. Raven and her sister were Grey Jays, not common around here, they caught a lot of teasing from the other birds, I

think Caw tried to stick up for them.”

“Raven told me Caw was her father.”

“Yes, I think that’s what he told people to help the kids. Well nice to see they’re still around. Sorry to hear about their parents.”

Art nodded, “Listen, we need to deal with Will, I sort of promised Raven I wouldn’t kill him but we sure need to stop him from taking over this world.”

“Will? You mean Ingrid’s Will?”

“Oh for goodness’ sake, Megan, we just told you the story, Will is from the other world, Raven’s boy.”

“Oh, yes, you did, I keep forgetting.”

“That must be him making you forget. Do you have any idea where he is?”

“Who? Will? I suppose he’s at home with Ingrid.”

“Aaargh”

Joan put her hand on Art’s arm, “Ingrid is here, in the bar downstairs.”

“What, how do you.... She is.”

Art headed for the stairs down to Ken's, Ray and Joan followed. Megan went back to her coffee.

As Art came through the door, Ingrid, Stan and Ken looked up to see who it was, and then away again, they didn't recognize him. Will on the other hand, sent a look of pure hatred at Art. He moved his hand, but Art barely noticed the attack. In fact, he grinned at Will, knowing he was about to fight him.

He pulled a chair up to Will's table and sat down, nodding to Will and Stan. "Hello Ingrid, how are you?"

"Do I know you?"

"Oh yes, from a very long time ago. Britannia, a few years before the Romans left."

"Oh, well hello, are you Saxon, one of my followers?"

"Closer than that, and I was a Briton, not Saxon."

"Oh, I don't remember you, how close were we?"

Will couldn't stay quiet, "This man is an imposter, Ingrid, you and I have been together much longer than that and I'd have known if you were involved with him. How about you just piss off out of here, whoever you are."

Art turned his head slowly to look at Will. When he did, Will pulled his head back. Very few people had ever dared give him a look of such loathing and hatred. Will half stood from his chair and Art said, quietly, "Please do, I have promised your mother not to kill you, but if you try me, I can take you apart. I would like that very much."

Again, Will moved his hands but Art just smiled nastily at him. Will sat down again after a moment. "Come on Ingrid, let's go home and leave this crazy man to his ravings."

Ingrid was frowning. She was looking closely at Art, "You do look familiar, you knew me from Britain you say, but I wasn't there when the Romans were in charge. Too much bother to fight their Gods on their own territory."

"Oh but you were, Woden sent you to close up a hole in a hill, I was a soldier investigating that same hole. You were pretending to be my slave, a captured Saxon princess in fact."

Ingrid frowned and looked from Art to Will and back again. Something. Something...

Ray nudged Joan who became invisible. Ingrid's head whipped around to see what that burst of power was, but she only saw Ray, grinning and reaching for a beer at his own table. Ingrid turned back to Art, "Tell me more of this supposed mission."

Will interrupted, "Ingrid, we should go home now!"

“No, I want to hear more about this mission, I don’t remember any such thing, and I never forget anything.”

Just then, Joan dropped the amulet onto Ingrid’s neck. Ingrid straightened up and in a much different voice said, “How, who, show yourself now!”

Joan became visible, in her hand was another amulet, “I’m sorry my Lady, your self in the other world gave me this amulet to hide myself from you, and the other around your neck, to make you immune to whatever magic this man is using on you.”

As Ingrid held out her hand, she turned toward Will. Joan put the amulet in her hand and more or less ran back to Ray’s table. Ray grinned and motioned Joan down into a chair. He was looking forward to the show.

And show it was. Ingrid looked at Art, and he could see recognition in her eyes, but she continued turning her head toward Will. When she had fixed him with her glare, she sat quietly, organizing her memories.

“Love. You bastard, you used a love spell. Not only that but you used Art to get to me, you displaced him. I should let Art kill you.”

Will could not flee, Ingrid had nailed his ass to the chair. Behind her, Ken had taken a fire extinguisher from the wall, just in case lightning was involved.

“But...”

“Silence, boy. I would imagine my other self would like to have you. Yes, I can see now that she would very much like to smear you across the barrier mountains. Art, you said his mother would like him back?”

“Yes my Goddess.”

That earned Art a frown and a grin at the same time. He knew Ingrid was indeed back.

“Well. Magician boy, you wanted power, here, have power.”

With that, Will’s eyes got big, he had never imagined such magic before, what Ingrid blasted at him was as much as existed in all the lands of his father’s domains, more, and still it kept coming. For an instant, he tried to use that power to fight back. An instant later he tried to block out the magic that was coming into him, it was too much. He could do neither, and still Ingrid poured magic into him.

Eventually, she gave Will so much he could not handle the amount, nor the raw power of what she gave him. He passed out and as he did, his ability to manipulate magic was gone, burned out completely.

As that happened, Stan looked at Art with recognition, as did Ken, who carefully replaced the fire extinguisher. Ken poured

several more beers and dropped them on the table between Stan and Art. Ingrid was grinning, “Hello lover, I missed you.”

Art smiled back and picked up a beer to clink mugs with Ingrid. “Not as much as I missed you.”

Several more rounds found their way onto the table, Ray got up and he and Joan dragged another table over to make a big group, which was joined by Megan. She looked at Will, unconscious in his chair. “This worm messed with my memories, he used your power, Ingrid. He used my trust of you.”

With that, she put her foot on his chair and pushed Will over backward. Ken looked sadly at the broken chair, but said nothing, Megan was good for it.

“Do you want me to flick him deep into the ground somewhere far away in the bush? I’d be happy to do that.”

Art looked at Megan, wondering how many bodies were out there in the bush. She looked back and said, “What?”

“I promised Raven I’d try to keep him alive.”

“Ah, yes, Raven, very well then, no flicking. Ingrid is he harmless now?”

“I think so, I suspect I burned him out. We’ll know for sure when he wakes up, I doubt he will be able to use magic any

more.”

“Did he not understand just how much power a Goddess has?”

“I doubt it, you know these magicians who get a bit of power and then think they can handle it all.”

“Well he’s yours now. I’m still pissed that he messed with my memory, but I’ll leave him to you.”

“Thank you Megan. I’m not happy myself, but if Art wants to send him back to the old world I’ll be satisfied with that, although a bit of lightning might...”

Ken looked toward the fire extinguisher but Ingrid winked at him.

Art spoke up, “Yes please Ingrid, can you send him to Raven?”

“Let me look, did you spend a lot of time with her?”

“Some, yes.”

“OK come here and let me hug you. Oh yes, you were a good boy.”

“What!”

“Kidding. I’ve got her. Oh, we’ll send him back in an hour or so, she’s a bit busy right now.”

“Wilhelm?”

Ingrid nodded and then tilted her head to one side. It seemed she had thought of something. Art blinked, “Uh, will he stay unconscious?”

“Sure, as long as I want. Ladies, gentlemen, Art and I are going to have a chat, if you will excuse us?”

The group laughed and waved them off.

After, After the End

Joan and Ray were lying on the bed, enjoying the late afternoon sun coming through the window. “Ray do I have a place of my own?”

“You do, Joan. But you’re not too fond of us being together there, too crowded you say.”

“But that drawer over there has my underwear and socks in it.”

“Maybe I should have said it’s our place.”

Joan smiled shyly, “Ah. Should we give up my place, Ray.”

“Why?”

“Well it’s expensive to keep two places isn’t it?”

“It’s an apartment in a building a friend owns, and I’m a very rich person, Joan.”

“You are?”

“Yes, very.”

“Oh, and do you have any other places like this?”

Susume laughed out loud. Joan looked up, but smiled when she recognized Susume’s voice.

“He’s faithful, in his way, don’t worry about him having a dozen girls, Joan.”

“Good, I’d hate to have to go prowling to find him in the night.”

Susume’s laugh faded away while Ray looked a bit shocked, “You’ve changed.”

Joan blinked her eyes coyly, “Have I?”

“Come here, you.”

Fred and Eli went to the coffee shop to ask Kelly about Art's disappearance.

"Oh he's back. No big story there, he said he had to go visit some friends suddenly. He gave me a bonus for covering the place."

Fred was a bit disappointed, "So no story there then?"

Kelly glanced at Eli, "Sorry, I'm afraid not."

Just then the door opened and closed, but there was nobody there. Fred pretended he hadn't noticed, these things had happened around Kelly before. The couple said their goodbyes to Kelly and wandered home.

"Eli, you're one of them aren't you?"

"Sorry?"

"One of those folks who changed the world, you and Kelly."

"I assure you, I did no such thing, and neither did Kelly."

"So you don't deny it?"

“Fred, what difference does it make?”

“None at all, except that I’m going to get old and you aren’t.”

“I will get old with you, I promise. But Fred, that is going to be a very long time from now, you’re a young man. If you want them, we’ve got a lot of years together. Do you want them?”

“I do.”

“Uh, that sounded like, uh.”

Fred laughed, “Oh lighten up. I don’t care what you are, as long as you’re whatever you are, right here with me.”

“Same.”

“So what are you?”

“I’ve lived a long time, and I can move back and forth in time, or I could. Best I can do is move back a few days, now.”

“Ah, so you’re going to take me back and see how the change happened?”

“Why? Coyote sang and it changed. Not terribly exciting, really.”

“Oh, I thought maybe there would be fireworks and volcanoes.”

“Sorry. That’s more Kelly’s kind of thing. He’s a magician, does magic. Loves drama.”

“So now that Art is back, what’s he going to do with the cafe?”

“He gave it to Kelly, turns out Kelly loves the place more than he loved Art.”

“So, Art?”

“Is back with Ingrid who is the Saxon Goddess of War and a bunch of other things.”

“A Goddess, a real Goddess?”

“Yep, they’ve been together for centuries, Art used to reincarnate a lot, but now he’s immortal.”

“So why did he reincarnate?”

“Wasn’t his choice, he looked into a place he shouldn’t have and to save his life Ingrid gave him some of her power, which brought him back to her when he died. Eventually he let Ingrid make him immortal.”

“Cripes, Eli are you going to write all this down?”

“I don’t know, do you want me to?”

“You have no idea how much I want you to do that. To read books that everyone thinks are fiction, knowing they’re true, damned right I want you to.”

“Well, I do like writing.”

“You get working, I’ll make us some lunch.”

Somewhere deep in the bush, Amber howled. She was answered by a pack of wolves. She howled again and listened. Nodding, she turned to Coyote, “We’ve got a place to stay tonight.”

Coyote squeezed her hand, “You really like it out here?”

“I do, but I like even more that you like it, and that you’re here with me. Let’s not go back, OK Coy?”

“This isn’t our place, love, we need to go back and take up our jobs once more.”

“Not soon?”

“Not soon.”

“And what are our jobs?”

“We are Coyote.”

Strangely, Amber simply nodded, she knew what that was at last. “And I’m a teacher.”

“You are, with students who are teachers themselves. Think what that will mean in a hundred years.”

“A hundred... Oh, I’d never thought about that, but you’re right. I sit at the end of a very long line of teachers and students, and from me, maybe Kit and the others will keep it going.”

Coyote nodded, “I’ve seen that line, it’s a good one, and you’ll see where it goes from here.”

“I’ll... Coyote what are you saying?”

“You are Coyote now, ever since I gave you the power, you retain that power, meaning you and I will see your lineage continue down the years. Together I hope.”

Amber was quiet for a moment, looking into the woods, then she looked at Coyote, “Of course together, Mutt, where else would we be?” She reached up for his ear and gave it a tug.

“He’s not getting it, Papa, it’s like he’s from a different world, but I understand his world, why doesn’t he understand mine?”

“Cally? You having trouble understanding him?”

“He’s having trouble understanding me.”

“Like I said. Look every couple has trouble finding a common language, it takes a while.”

“Like you and the Queen?”

“Oh yes, you have no idea. She and Robin... You know, I sort of thought you and Robin...”

“Robin? You mean Goodfellow? I hardly know him. Why would I get involved with him?”

“Nothing, nothing. So you and Cally?”

“Yes, no, I don’t know, damn it, I don’t understand him, like I said, he seems to live in a different world.”

“He does, but not the other one at the end of the tunnel. I’ll try to explain, we’ve been gone for millennia, very little contact. That let the language drift. We speak different languages now.”

“So? We translate it by magic.”

“Yes, but we don’t grow up with the same language, and that shapes our world.”

“You’re losing me.”

“You create the world in your head, and you do it by means of your language.”

“No, still lost.”

“OK, babies see everything, yes? No discrimination right?”

“Sure, must be frustrating.”

“I suspect so, but as they learn their language, they begin to organize what their senses bring in. They sort it out and start to create a world for themselves.”

“Wait, what about animals, no language.”

“Sure they have a language, it’s the way they integrate with each other and the world around them. It’s just not filled with words, it’s not as abstract as our language.”

“Never mind, go on.”

“Each language contains assumptions from the culture that uses it, and those assumptions end up inside our heads, shaping the world we inhabit in there and therefore out here.”

“That sounds nuts, sorry, but it does.”

“Think about it. You said you understood the world over there, but you understand it from your interior world. That world is

similar enough to this one that you can make your way around without getting killed. Think about one that is hostile, vastly different from this one. Your misunderstanding of that world could kill you.”

“Language does all that?”

“No, but language helps shape how you interact with your world, with your society. Language is what develops to contain our culture, society, environment, attitudes, and so we give that language to children and they grow up to have similar world-views as we adults.”

“So you’re saying that Cally sees a different world than I do.”

“Exactly.”

“And we’ll eventually have a similar world view along with a common language?”

“Perhaps.”

Lila nodded. “Perhaps. Now tell me about Lila and Robin.”

“Uh...”

Will Goes Home

Art and Ingrid got back to the bar, where Megan had been keeping an eye on Will. Art noticed that Will was still sprawled on the floor, amongst the wreckage of the chair. “He was out the whole time?”

“No, he came around once, but then passed out again. I had the impression Ingrid was distracted for a moment.”

Art grinned, then looked at the imprint of Megan’s boot on the side of Will’s head. He said nothing, he’d wanted to kick him in the head himself. “Well I’m glad he was no trouble.”

“Oh none at all. Are you going to send him to the other world now?”

“I’d like to get him to his mother, can we be that accurate, Ingrid?”

“We’ll take him to the tree, I can get a direct line through there.”

As they appeared in front of the tree, Art had an idea. “Ingrid, why don’t we see if we can go through the tree so you can meet Raven and Wilhelm.”

“I don’t know, Art, if I meet myself on the other world the consequences may be disastrous.”

“What, like you’ll have an argument? You explained it to me in the other world, nothing will happen.”

Ingrid smiled, “Well let’s ask the tree.”

She put her hand on the bark and had a short discussion.

“His name is Jeremy, and he says we can go through.”

“Jeremy. OK thanks Jeremy.”

“Oh don’t call him that, he hates that name, it’s Jerry.”

“And you, my Lady, are pushing it.”

Ingrid laughed, picked up Will and moved into the tree.

As Art went in, he heard “I really don’t like Jeremy.”

“What?” But the mist was gone and Art was in the other world.

Ingrid was laughing, “So where is Raven?”

“That’s her farm over there, it’s a short walk. She’s got defences around the rock fence.”

“So I see, well let’s deliver her boy.”

They walked across the field and Ingrid opened the gate. Nothing happened, no sparks, nothing at all. He looked at

Ingrid who laughed again, “Goddess, remember?”

“Ingrid, that wall of cliffs between here and the Gods, it’s to protect these people isn’t it? Not to protect the Gods.”

“That’s true, there are so many like Will here that get it into their heads that they have a lot more power than they actually do. Those that make it through the mountains tend to be those with enough power to take care of themselves on our side of the fence.”

“So you can walk right through Wilhelm’s defences here.”

“Sure, not a problem.”

With Will over her shoulder, Ingrid knocked on the door politely while Art wondered why she didn’t just kick it in. That thought earned him a dirty look from Ingrid.

Raven opened the door and gasped, “Will! Art. Come in, come in.”

Wilhelm rose from the table and took his son from Ingrid, putting him in the bedroom beside the kitchen. “My Lady, thank you for bringing him home.”

“You know me then?”

“Of course, Goddess, and who else would you be, visiting us here with Art?”

“Ah, so he wasn’t spending his time on this world, running around with other women then?”

“Not to my knowledge, Lady, although he got along well with my Mother.”

“Well he has a thing for older women.”

Raven’s hand went to her mouth to stifle a laugh. This was not the Ingrid she had heard of. “I’ll put on some water for tea shall I?”

“You wouldn’t have some of Wilhelm’s special blend would you?”

Raven smiled, “Of course.”

Art had been looking from one to the other and shrugged. He sat down while tea was prepared and when they had all settled, along with some of Raven’s biscuits, which Ingrid declared scrumptious, Art spoke up. “I think that perhaps your son may not be able to manipulate magic any more. Ingrid gave him enough that she thinks he might have been overloaded.”

Wilhelm nodded, “It won’t be a problem, we’ll keep him with us. He’ll be safe enough.”

“Will he be able to adjust?”

“He will or he won’t. He had trouble with seeing consequences, perhaps he will understand that concept now.”

Ingrid put on a serious face “Wilhelm, is there anything I can do to help? I am responsible for his condition after all.”

“He is responsible for what he brought upon himself, Lady, you need not concern yourself with his condition. My mother and Raven’s sister are taking care of the lands, Raven and I will stay here on the farm and perhaps Will can learn to be a farmer. It won’t hurt him to learn how to do an honest day’s work.”

Raven looked at Ingrid, “Lady...”

“Please, Ingrid is fine, I’ve been with Art for a very long time and I’m mostly Human these days.”

“Yes, Lady, er Ingrid. I wanted to ask that you keep my tree alive in your world. It would provide a small outlet for those who can’t deal with our world.”

“Are there many?”

“Not as many as you might expect, but there are those who have lost what magic they have, who might be happier in your world, where they can recover.”

“Will you keep watch over who moves through the tree?”

“He is my friend, he won’t pass anyone I don’t approve, I promise.”

“Very well, I’ll talk with Coyote, it’s his world after all. Perhaps a few more refugees won’t hurt.”

Art spoke up, “What about the tunnel that the Fairies used?”

Ingrid nodded, “It has its own defences, and the Fairies will be guarding it against trespassers, and each other for that matter. Although I suspect that with the relationship between the two children they will refrain from starting any wars.”

“Relationship?”

“Lila and Cally, daughter of a King and Son of a Queen.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No. Didn’t you know?”

“Ray didn’t tell me that part.”

“He doesn’t know, you can tell him.”

Art smiled, wondering what Ray’s reaction would be to knowing one of his wards had taken up with a Prince. Life with a magical world next door was going to be interesting.

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