

Art's Lunch Counter

Lunch Counter Stories II:



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Kit and Ray

Jim had been gone for two years and the diner remained. I hadn't aged a day since I took over, and every day I learned a bit more, mostly how to cook a panini without burning it, but other things as well. Still, each day seemed to bring something to remind me just how little I knew. Ray told me that I had centuries to learn what Jim had learned, but I had no intention of running this madhouse for centuries. Jim had promised to come back and I believed him.

Ray Keen was at the diner at least once a day. He had become a good friend to me, and we'd had a few adventures together. I suspect though, he had been asked by Jim to take care of me, keep me out of trouble. But who was going to keep Ray out of trouble?

Jonah came into the place with a frown on his face. He was the fellow whose wife had been impregnated by fairies. No, not like that, Raynard had got a girl named Tilly pregnant. You'd think a thousand year old trickster fox would know how to prevent that, but that's Ray for you, she ended up pregnant and Jim had arranged for the baby to be switched into Jonah's wife.

Do you see what I'm dealing with here?

Anyway, in the fullness of time, (a bit sooner actually) little Kitsune was born to great joy. But now, Papa was in the diner and frowning. That meant I needed to hear the story and do what I needed to do, which was fix it.

“What's up, Jonah, you look like something is troubling you?”

“It's Kit, she's an amazing toddler, but she is too curious by half, now that she's walking, she goes someplace once in a while, someplace where we can't find her. I can't figure out where, I mean we've got the entire place child proofed, every cupboard and closet is locked, there's no place she should be able to go.

“But she goes somewhere. I've even opened all the locked doors, but she's not there. She always comes back, but Lila and I are in a complete panic.”

I looked at Ray who was listening with both ears swiveled, and I mean swiveled. I can see Ray as a human and as a fox, both at the same time if I'm not paying attention, and believe me, that's disturbing.

“I'm sure it's nothing unusual Jonah,” I said to him, “but if you want to bring Kit in we can get her story. We haven't seen her for quite a while anyway, be good to see how she's grown.”

“Um, she's not talking much Art, so I don't know what sort of story you'll have from her but sure, I'll bring her in this afternoon. Anything to set Lila's mind at ease.”

Later that day, Jonah wheeled Kit into the place. She was in her stroller and as soon as she got into the place she started babbling. She loved the diner and we loved her. The regulars took a sort of uncle's pride in her, at least those who remembered her story. While most of us recognized a few words, and the rest as a toddler's gibberish, Ray seemed to

know exactly what she said. At least he nodded and tsk'd occasionally.

Eventually he nodded to me and Kit said "Walk!" which was pretty clear, so Jonah took her out for a walk on the way home.

"I know what it is," said Ray when they'd gone, "she's trickster fox, no doubt about it. A chip off the old block."

He sounded so proud that I gave him my best scowl and said "Ray, you know how dangerous it is to make little tricksters all over the place, we talked about that!" He had the grace to look a little embarrassed, but he kept smiling.

"So is there a problem?"

"No, none at all, she's just going off to her imaginary land to play, nothing to worry about at all."

"You want to try and explain that to Jonah and Lila? And what do you mean her imaginary land, I don't know what that is."

"Oh, sorry, you know how you dream at night? You go to all sorts of strange places right? But you're safe, it's just your brain having some fun. Well we fox tricksters don't dream, we actually step into another world, and when we do we disappear out of this one. In fact, you've seen me do it."

"I have never seen you disappear dude, what are you talking about?" And with that, Ray disappeared off of his stool. When he reappeared I hissed, "don't do that again, there are customers in here that don't know you."

“They won't remember, you know that, humans don't remember things they see unless they repeat the story, and who's going to tell stories about guys disappearing off of lunch counter chairs.”

“Still. Where did you go?”

“I dropped into my imagination, the same place where Kit goes, it's a family thing, all foxes of the same family go to the same place. We can drop back out at a different place, too. That's what I meant when I said you've seen me go, remember the times where I showed up out of nowhere when you needed me? I dropped back out where you were.”

I was speechless, I just stared at Ray, wondering if he was pulling my leg, but I guess he was serious this time.

“So what about little Kit? She's going to drive her parents crazy if she keeps disappearing, how can we fix that?”

Ray thought for a moment and said, “she should probably do her daydreaming when humans dream, late at night, so I'll tell her to do that. I couldn't talk to her while Jonah was here, but I could maybe tell her next time she's in the other place.”

Again, I must have looked a bit cross-eyed at Ray because he said “You want to go with me? I can take you. It's one of the things we do to humans who need to go to fairyland.”

“Why would you take a human to fairyland?”

“Usually because they are too stuffy, or need some other lesson, or just because it's fun.”

Oh yeah, trickster.

Ray cocked his head “She's there now, Jonah must have looked away for a moment, let's go.” and with that he reached across and grabbed my hand.

We were in some sort of fairyland, for sure. There was no other way to describe it. “This is what Kit sees, we all see something different when we enter and if you drop in while the place is open, you see what the person who opened it sees. Aww, look at the fluffy bunnies over there, and the clouds that are blue blankets. I bet we could find some cotton candy trees if we looked around.”

“Ray, we're here to find Kit and get her back to her dad, remember?”

“Right, right, but you gotta admit, the kid makes a pretty cool world doesn't she?”

“Ray”

“Ok, ok, she's my kid, let me be a bit proud of her, willya. She should be in the center, it's her world and it should spread out from where she is. There, she's over there.”

We walked over to where she was sitting on a stroller, a magnificent stroller, more like a carousel horse. She was chatting away to a crow, and I could understand both of them.

“Of course you can,” said Ray, “the crow dropped in and everyone in her world speaks her language. Hello Caw, any news?”

“No, just dropped in to see how Kit was doing, she's going to be a hellion Ray, I hope you're ready to take responsibility.”

“Does everyone know my business?” Ray complained and turned to Kit. “Hello niece, how are you today.”

“Are you my uncle?”

“I certainly am, and here is your other uncle. I'm Uncle Ray and this is Uncle Art. We came to talk with you about being in the world.”

“You mean like existentialism?” said Kit.

I looked at Ray and he shrugged. “Dream world, right? Probably heard someone talking about it. No Kit, not like that one, this world here and the one you just left. Your dad is very worried when you leave his world and come here.”

“Oh, I didn't know, I'm sorry, but it's so nice here and I talk to lots of people like Caw and like you.”

“We know pet, and you really should come here, but I tell you what, if you come here during the night, when you are asleep, and if you come here but leave your body behind, your parents won't worry about you. Would that be better?”

“I sure don’t want to make Mommy and Daddy worry, I love them a lot, so yes, if I come here at night and leave my body behind, that will be good. I’ll do that.”

“And you know, sweetheart, you can have any body you want if you come here without your body.”

“Really, I can fly with Caw, and swim with Fish?”

“Absolutely, just remember to go back before your parents wake up in the morning or when they try to wake you up, that way they won’t be worried.”

“OK uncle Ray, thank you, I will do that.”

“Good sweetie, and if you have any troubles, just remember you can shout my name here and I will hear you and come help. Now you better go back so that your Dad doesn’t worry about you. You know you can go back to the same time you left don’t you?”

“Ooh that would be good, thank you Uncle Ray, I’ll go now.”

And with that Ray and I were back at the lunch counter in no more than a blink of an eye after we left.

“Oh lord,” said Ray “she’s maybe more powerful than I am, I wonder who Tilly’s ancestors were? There might be some of the old blood there.”

“Keep an eye on her Ray, one trickster running around town is enough for me to keep track of.”

“More than one.” said Ray but I was trying not to listen.

Kobolds in the Basement

“What is that ungodly noise,” said Ray.

“It's Kobolds in the cellar,” I replied.

“Oh no, those guys are real pests, do you want me to see about getting rid of them?”

“Don't you dare, I want the extra storage space.”

“You hired them?”

“No, they came all hi-ho hi-ho in last week and ordered 14 hamburgers, then when they'd finished they begged off down the stairs to skip out on the bill.”

“Sounds about right,” said Ray

“Yeah, well they started digging to escape, and when I looked I realized if I waited I was going to get a lot more cellar, I'm thinking of starting a brew-pub.”

Larry's eyes lit up and I grinned, “have to get the license first though.”

“What about the pipes and whatnot?” said Ray.

“They have a little forge down there somehow, and they reroute the pipes, the place is going to have better service than it had before with those old rotting sewers and gas lines. I'm telling

you, it's a bargain for a few hamburgers. The only problem is the old bones, but they seem to be pretty good about reburying them in the side walls. You know, I wonder if this place wasn't on an old first nations burial ground, maybe that's why Jim set up here.”

“Knowing him, it was more likely they were murder victims thrown into a hole, and the place is under a curse,” Ray laughed. “Where do you suppose they will come out to make their escape?”

“I dunno, but I hope it's someplace useful, be nice not to have to carry the supplies through the diner.”

“You know, Kobolds can be pretty handy to have around the place if they take a liking to you, if you're serious about the brew pub idea, why not see if they'll set it up for you?”

“Ray, that's a great idea, watch the shop for a minute will you please,” and with that I headed downstairs. “Who's in charge of this operation?” I said.

“That would be me, Ken”, one of them said, “What's it to you?”

“Well I haven't forgotten about the burgers you fellows ran out on.”

“We didn't run out, we was short of cash and smelled gold down here, thing is we haven't found it, don't know where it would be, it still stinks of the stuff.”

“Well now, I think I can see where this is going,” I said, “what do you guys know about brewing?”

“Better to ask what we don't know about it boyo, nothing we like better than brewing except digging.”

“OK, I've got a proposition for you then, how would you fellows like to set up a brew-pub down here, I'll finance you and we'll split the profits down the middle.”

You could see the eyes light up, and believe me, when a Kobold's eyes light up the place gets pretty bright. I wished I had some sunglasses handy.

“Right then,” I said, “what do you need?”

“Well, there's not much you need, barley and hops, mostly, if you want to do human beer. We can scrounge for other supplies, we've got the river right nearby, lots of oaks and roots.”

“What about fermentation tanks, fire, water?”

“Are you kidding? We've got a forge and you've already got water and gas pipes running through the place.”

I decided that maybe I didn't want to hear any more and changed the subject. “If we're going to do this under the radar...”

Ken looked around and said “We always work under the radar,” as if I was a little slow.

“Got it, then why not put in another entrance, say under the tracks to the side of the embankment, that way the pub gets its own clientele and they don't have to tromp through the diner.”

“Done!”

Two months later, Ken's Keller opened. The entrance was a massive oak door in the side of the train embankment, you walked down a long passageway and then into an underground pub. Brew tanks on one side, a massive bar made of maple down the other, and oak tables. The floor was covered in sawdust. As for the drinks, the usual seven or twelve types of barley beer were on tap, along with acorn beer, root beer, and other stuff that you might not want to know what was in it. As a special treat to the student clientele, they made some West Coast IPA beers which were mostly hops, orange peels and grapefruit. I was assured that there was some grain in there somewhere but I couldn't taste it.

The place was supposed to be under the radar, but on opening night half the City Council was there whooping it up. Amber was playing Celtic fiddle tunes while the Kobolds hollered for good old-fashioned German polka. Ken had hired Morris Minor to tend bar on the theory that bartending can't go out of date after 40 years in a tree, and on the fact that Kobolds were not the prettiest folk on the planet. They kept to the background, doing the brewing, the cooking and the cleaning up. Who notices a busboy after all?

Mind you, they were damned good bouncers too, a fight would start and from below their eye-line, the combatants would be

grabbed by the legs and pitched out the front door to roll down the hill. Most of the time they couldn't remember how they got outside and if they were real trouble-makers, they forgot where they were before they ended up outside.

The clientele was a very mixed lot. Kids from the University who always seemed to be able to find the lowest dives in town, especially if the beer was cheap. The shadier characters in town, and by that I mean the ones who usually lived, as much as they could, in the shade. They were usually invisible to most humans (I could often see them), but in the bar they seemed to become visible, and the upper crust of the City who could always sniff out the trendy places. Mind you, most of the upper crust were former students, so maybe it was their left-over student skills at finding a cheap beer.

The various types seemed to get along while they were in the bar. No, I lie, there were a lot of fights, the Kobalds seemed to figure that without fighting it wasn't a proper bar, but there was never one group against another. It was a human against a changeling, a City Councilor against a street rat, with no discrimination apparent, just a good old fashioned "Who You Looking At?" And after the fight they were likely to buy each other a drink with much backslapping.

We put two doors between the cellar and the diner and kept them locked most of the time, to keep the two businesses separate. The places ended up having a different character, so it seemed appropriate. The cellar even had its own set of ghosts, the bones did end up being first nations burials and they enjoyed the company after centuries of nobody to talk to.

The income was nice for the diner, and for me, Hildy, Ingrid's pet pig ate way more than you would expect from her usual size. And yes, Ingrid and I were still together.

But damn it, I thought I was getting more storage space out of all this, and I ended up with less. Thankfully, Hugo Zembini, magician extraordinaire, agreed to move one of the weak spots in town to my back kitchen and I ended up with a whole frigid world to store my burgers and ketchup. I kept it behind a massive walk-in freezer door with a strong lock.

That's how Jim's Lunch Counter ended up in partnership with Ken's Keller, trendiest bar in town.

Coyote and the World

“Hello Amber, nice show you put on the other day at the opening of the Keller. Maybe you could learn a couple of Polkas though, Ken and the boys were really calling for one.”

“Thanks Art, I know lots of Polkas but it’s just so much fun to watch those guys go all red in the face when I play Irish tunes, especially ones about Leprechauns.”

“Well just be careful they don’t get too upset, they could fire you, although Coyote might have something to say about that.”

“Actually, that’s why I’m here, I’m worried about Coyote, he seems a bit scatter brained these days.”

Caw looked up and laughed, “He’s always been that way, I don’t know if he’s getting worse, but it’s to be expected in someone that old. Raven told me that it’s possible it was Coyote who sang the world into existence, and then forgot he did it. It wouldn’t be a big surprise if he was fading away a little bit.”

“I kind of wish he would fade away a little,” said Amber “he’s all too present these days and he’s living in my apartment.”

“What? Are you serious?” I said.

“Yeah, unfortunately, he lies around the place shedding all over my couch, and he’s a bit whiffy when he comes in out of the rain. Also, he’s not much of a talker. I think he used to talk, but

maybe he's forgotten how, if he's that old. Anyway he seems to have followed me home like a stray.

I mean, it's OK most of the time, and it gets cold in my apartment, so it's nice when he sleeps on my feet in the bed, and he doesn't mind if I use him as a foot stool when I'm working on my computer."

"You're using the possible creator of the world as a foot stool?"

"Well, he doesn't seem to mind. Actually it's sort of like having a big pet around the place, he is quiet and sometimes he squeezes under the couch and comes out with all the dust bunnies attached, he goes outside and shakes them off, so he's helping with the cleaning. It can be a bit disturbing if I'm sitting on the couch though, I mean he's not a little person and it humps up about two feet."

"The possible creator of the world is your dust mop?"

"Seriously Art, I don't ask him to do it, he just does. He's sort of helpful, which is actually the problem. I mean he lets me bathe him so he's not so smelly, and he even let me trim and file his nails so they don't click so much on the bare floors. But he insists on helping with things.

Like the time he figured my computer needed charging and the next thing I knew he'd plugged it directly into 110 volts without the charger. There were sparks. And the time he figured he would make pancakes from scratch. I must admit he was pretty cute with all that flour all over him. And the time I wanted to plant some herbs in a window box, he got in there to

help dig holes and sort of got carried away, there was dirt on top of the fridge, and that was two rooms away.”

I was staring at Amber with my mouth hanging open. Only she would have the nerve to treat one of the old gods, maybe the oldest, as some sort of pet poodle.

“I have friends over,” said Amber “and I tell them he’s some sort of shepherd cross. He sort of frowns about that but he plays along. Well, maybe I should say he plays it up. He tips his head and lets his tongue hang out and slobbers all over the girls laps. I’ve asked him not to do that but he makes it clear that if I want a dumb dog, I’m going to get a dumb dog. But I can’t tell people he’s Coyote can I?”

“I guess not,” I said “so what happens when you practice?”

“Oh, I think that’s why he’s there. He drops to the floor and his ears perk right up. I can tell he loves to hear me play. He’s a pretty big fan.”

“Why not take him along to the bar tonight when you play, maybe he’ll remember there’s a whole world out there beyond your apartment.”

“I’ll suggest it to him, thanks Art, maybe that’s all he needs is a night out.”

And so that evening I slipped down to the bar to see what was going on. Ingrid was going to meet me there, and we were going to make a night of it. I grabbed a table and noticed that Coyote was there, tucked up against the bar, watching Amber play.

The place was very, very quiet. Morris grabbed a glass to mix a drink and made a bit of a clink. Coyote's head slowly swiveled around to look at him, and Morris took a step back. When Ingrid came in she sat down with me and I noticed Hildy, our little fat bellied pig who would turn into a vicious giant boar, was tucked in behind Ingrid, trying to pretend he wasn't there. I checked out the rest of the bar, the Kobolds were on their best behaviour, no yelling for Polkas. Megan was there, and while she didn't look intimidated, she was respectful of Coyote's desire for a quiet bar. Hell, even Ray, who I would have figured too crazy to be scared of anything, even Ray was silent and paying attention.

It was all a bit much, tense you know? Like Coyote would tear someone apart if they weren't listening politely, and everyone in the place knew it. Amber finished her song and nobody clapped. She stood there for a moment, waiting for an excuse to take a bow, and then slowly swiveled on her heel. She took a couple of steps to the bar, bent over and I swear to you, she leaned over, grabbed Coyote's ear and lifted his head up a bit and whispered to him.

The person who made Hildy hide behind Ingrid's legs, who made the Kobolds shut up, ducked his head and wagged his tail a couple of times. Coyote, wagging his tail! A sort of shock ran

through the place and people didn't so much relax, as collapse. Amber straightened up and started to play, of all things, a polka, and that got the Kobolds out onto the floor. They must have been at the University in the seventies, because it wasn't just a polka, but a slam polka, just like the Aggies used to dance.

Pretty soon the place was as joyful and noisy as it usually was, with several of the students joining in the dance, it looked like there would be a revival of the Slam up at the college. Coyote looked around and seemed to shrug his shoulders and then get into the spirit of things. He and Megan set up a howl that several others joined. It was quite a din, but over it all, no matter how loud the shouting, you could hear Amber's violin, crisp and clear.

Ingrid put her hand over her mouth, leaned toward me and said "Oh dear, Coyote is in love."

Al and the Mermaid

Al Thundercloud walked in to the coffee shop and looked around. “Want a coffee Al?” I said.

“What? Oh Art, how are you, I didn't know you worked here. I was looking for Jim.”

“Jim’s been gone for a couple of years, I'm running the place now.” I put a coffee down in front of Al and pushed the milk and sugar toward him.

“Oh, I've got a bit of a problem and Mike told me to come here, said Jim would sort it out. It's about the pool.”

Al is the swim coach up at the University and I've known him for years. He's a good egg but one of the most practical guys I know, I doubted there was anything for Jim to fix. Turns out I was wrong.

“Let me know about it Al, I might be able to help.”

“Right, OK, well, it started at the beginning of this semester, the team will be training and someone will feel something brush their leg, like there's someone else in their lane. Nobody mentioned it for quite a while, but when one of the swimmers did, thinking it might be the start of a cramp, most of them said it had been going on for a while.”

“Not in the public swims?”

“Who would know, there's six or seven people in each lane banging into each other. We designate speeds in each lane but there's still a lot of passing going on.”

“Right, so just someone feeling something on a leg, that's it?”

“Well no, one of the guys last week said it felt like someone had grabbed his thigh and then run a hand down his leg.” Another one said it felt like someone grabbed his ankle and tugged it, not much, just a little bit. It began to sound like someone was underwater playing silly buggers but we've looked. There's nobody there.

“I've even sent swimmers down to the basement to look through the observation window and nothing.”

“Damn Al, I don't know a lot about things that happen in water, if Jim's girlfriend was still here it would be easy just to ask her.”

Hugo happened to be in the place and spoke up. “Sounds like you need a pair of specs that let you see everything.”

“Nothing wrong with my eyes,” said Al.

“Maybe not, but Larry, loan me your reading glasses.”

“I don't need glasses,” said Larry, looking like he'd been caught at something.

“Then you won't mind giving me those things in your jacket pocket.”

Larry handed the glasses over and Hugo made a few passes over them with his hands. “Here Mr. Thundercloud, go take a look under your pool with these. I have a suspicion I know what you've got. If it's what I think it is, put your forehead on the observation window and talk normally.”

Al looked skeptical, but tucked the glasses into his jacket, finished his coffee and nodded as I waved him off. “Come back and tell us what you find,” I said.

Al came back the next week. He gave the glasses to Larry, nodded to Hugo and said “You were right, there was something I couldn't see, it was a girl with a tail swimming around in the pool, and I mean under water. I tapped on the glass and put my forehead on it and she seemed surprised to see me looking at her, then she seemed scared, but she started talking. I told her to get out of my pool and she did. As she broke the water I could see her tail disappear and a couple of legs show up. Also a bathing suit, thank goodness.

“I went up and talked with her. It turns out she's a new student and she said she loves swimming and didn't know she was doing anything wrong. I told her to cut the crap, that I'd seen her tail. That's when she admitted that she was a mermaid. Now, she really is a student, but she has to get into the water at least once a day or she starts to choke.

“She told me she chokes anyway, chlorine is tough on her lungs, but the pool is not as bad as the ocean, which is full of garbage these days. She said it's better in the pool, even with the chlorine.

“I asked her if she is in the water during public swims and she said no, just when the team practices. Too many people churning up the pool is like swimming near the rocks apparently. She likes it with the team she said, because they swim like sharks. I was starting to like this girl at that point.” Al was grinning, he sure was proud of his team.

“She's a nice kid, and I asked her if she was interested in joining the team”

“Al!”

“Yeah, yeah, but with a tail like that...”

“Yeah and when she disappears?”

“OK, ok, but a coach can dream right? Anyway she wasn't much interested, but I did suggest that she might help the team along and get her daily swim in at the same time.

“I asked her about touching the swimmers legs and she said that mermaids were sort of known for teasing. It turns out that Scott, the fellow whose leg she stroked was someone she was attracted to, so she said she would help train the team. Now we have a whole new set of drills, sometimes she hangs on to the ankles and the swimmers have to really pull to get down the lane. Other times she grabs hold and pushes so that those kids who don't believe they can move, have to really windmill their arms. And then we sometimes do a random speed drill when she taps someone and they have to really pull hard to the end of the lane.”

My eyes were starting to droop.

“Fine, but you know how much I like to switch up the training, and Nerissa has given me a whole new set of ideas.

“She and Scott have become a bit of an item, turns out she doesn't have to become invisible when she has her tail, and so they often play a little game, she swims just out of range and he has to try to touch her. Damned if he hasn't got times that might win the nationals this year. Nothing like a bit of teasing to get a young man moving.

Without looking over I said “Don't say it Larry.”

“Anyway, thanks for the help Art, it turns out having a mermaid in the pool is good luck. The team has adopted her as a sort of mascot, and the older members are helping her along with her studies. They want to keep her around.

“You're welcome Al, but it was Hugo here that figured out what was happening.”

“Ran into the same problem about fifty years ago in Fergus when they built the outdoor pool beside the river. It was a mermaid that swam upstream and moved in.”

“Well she's my secret weapon,” said Al, grinning, “and Fergus can't have her.”

The Eternal Hero

He sat at the counter drinking a coffee, but my eye kept going back to him. He wasn't doing anything that I could put my finger on, it was just a stillness, a readiness, like there's no way anything could surprise him.

I decided he must be a martial artist, he was obviously aware of everything going on around him, and he never slouched, never relaxed like other people relaxed. Yet he wasn't tense, I bet if I poked his shoulder the muscles would be soft, but there was nothing at all soft about him.

I'd be willing to bet he wasn't human, the only mark on him was a slight frown, a vertical line between his eyes that looked like it was always there.

He knew I was looking at him, he turned his head and nodded. I stepped over and asked if he wanted some breakfast. "We've got brown eggs from a local farmer and fresh cured local bacon with toast of your choice, Polestar or With The Grain."

"Thanks, I'll have that, you pick the bread I'm not from around here. Your name is Art isn't it?"

"It is."

"Jim not around?"

"No, Jim went back to England a couple years ago for a vacation, he left me in charge while he is gone. You know

Jim?”

“I knew him, a long time ago. He probably never mentioned me, but my name is Gil Hamish.”

I was getting suspicious, something in the way he said “long time ago” made me ask, “just how long ago would that be, Gil? Like hundreds of years?”

He looked at me for a moment and then nodded. “You know about Jim?”

“Not as much as I’d like, but he calls me his apprentice, and I know that I haven’t aged a day since I took over the lunch counter.”

“Right, well Jim and I fought together in the 800s during the Viking wars in Wessex, we fought together for Alfred.”

I was stunned, Jim said he was from Wessex but I had no idea how long ago that was. “I didn’t know that, Gil, do you mind telling me how you and Jim became immortal?”

“First, we’re not immortal, we are just very slow to age. Very, slow. I’m a lot older than Jim, he was born around the time of the first Viking invasion of Mercia, and fought later.”

“I tell you what, breakfast and coffee is on me if you tell me the story.”

Gil smiled, “You should know it if you’re his apprentice, I’m surprised he didn’t tell you.”

“Yeah, well he can be a bit stingy with the information. Ray here has educated me much more than Jim has.”

Gil looked over at Ray and jumped “Jesus on the cross, I haven't seen one of your kind for centuries!”

Ray bowed while I decided that Gil was human after all.

“OK I assume the rest of the customers know what's going on? Or they will forget, right?”

I nodded.

“I was born to the north of Mesopotamia, in modern day Turkey, before farming got started, really. You know the city Gobekli Tepe? Not really a city, but I was born there and my father wanted a great warrior so he called in a... you might call him a wizard I guess, shaman? Anyway he cursed me with long life and so here I am. I fought for my family, then in Mesopotamia, and have been fighting ever since.

“When I met Jim he was a snot-nosed kid and I trained him. He had a sort of witch for a girlfriend at that time and she took the template for long life off of me and gave it to him. She did a few others as well, that gave us a squad of fighters who had a long time to learn how to fight really well. And we did, for centuries.”

I refilled his cup and those of the other customers, nobody made a move for the door. We all knew Jim and wanted to hear this story.

“After a while, Jim lost his taste for killing, and went north to learn from proper shamen. A lot of our friends had been killed in the wars, and he wanted to learn how to heal, instead.

“Me, I had never been anything but a soldier, but my skill set became useless around the time of the Swiss pikemen. There was just no use for a man with sword and spear any more. War became a killing machine, chewing up boys until the land became salted with blood.

“And now, how can a man like me fight against those crow-fodder who fly drones around, who push buttons and send missiles thousands of miles over the horizon.

“I quite the armies and for the last four or five hundred years I've been wandering around just trying to get along. I have no desire to die, but it's hard these days to get along. I should maybe have gone with Jim to the north.

“Anyway, I heard about the dragon here in Guelph and I came to fight it, only Jim got there first, and I hear you fought alongside him. That must have been a bit of a fright for someone untrained like you.”

“Are you kidding, I had to throw those pants out, I couldn't wash the shit out of them.”

Gil laughed, and I thought I'd never heard a laugh so joyous in my life. All those years of surviving and seeing one more sunrise I supposed.

Ray was tensing up, “So you've switched to killing the old ones?”

“Pax my friend, I'm a soldier not a butcher. I hope that I never fought for an unjust cause, although over the years it got hard to justify any kind of a war. All wars kill children, and sometimes I curse my father for making me a warrior. I came for the wyrm because it isn't its time. I wonder if it was hunting for Jim, I didn't realize he was here. He may have given up soldiering but he still makes enemies.”

“Really?” I squeaked, “Maybe I should get Ingrid to give me some lessons.”

Gil's head snapped around, “Ingrid, with the giant boar, she's here?”

“I live with her,” I said, and watched Gil's jaw drop.

When he recovered enough to speak he said, “You are a brave man, but Ingrid's fighting style isn't something you could learn Art. It really isn't. The powers that flow through her would tear you apart. You need the skills of man, not the gods. Maybe Ray could teach you, the old ones are closer to human, and you might survive the training.”

Ray was shaking his head, “I don't fight like you mean Gil, I come and go and put the knife in the back, I don't fight, I survive.”

Gil nodded and looked thoughtful.

“Look, Gil,” I said “would you train me?”

“I learned my craft over decades and centuries,” said Gil, “but come to think about it, you've got time now don't you?”

“Alright, if Jim thought of you as an apprentice, that's good enough for me. Now, for the next four years, no sex for you.”

At the look on my face both Gil and Ray broke into laughter.

“On second thought, maybe Ingrid would get mad at me, and nobody on Earth would want that. OK Art, you've got a teacher.”

When I told Ingrid about it later she nodded and said “Take it seriously Art, learning from Gil is a rare chance and you need to understand that he is one of the best fighters humans have ever produced. You will need all your courage and all your concentration. Remember that you can die my lover, and I wouldn't want that. Now come here before you're too bruised to keep up with me in bed.”

I swear Hildy sniggered when she said that.

The Wizard's Convention

It was not a good day. The “World Convention of Trust Fund Billionaire Tech Wizards” was in town and we had four of them in for coffee.

A. Long Muskmelon was shouting “My rocket ship is longer than your rocket ship.” at Chef Bozoshoes.

“Hey, it's not the length, it's the width of the head you nancyboy.”

“You shopkeeper, why don't you go mind the store and leave Captain Kirk to me.”

“Listen you car mechanic, electric cars have been around for 200 years, you just copied an old idea and hyped it up to get investment bankers all hot and bothered.”

“What? like books are something new? And talk about ripping off someone else's idea, Barnes and Nobel beat you to the internet by a good ten years.”

Will Grates jumped in “You hacks never invented a damned thing, I invented the computer AND wrote the operating system for it.”

“I thought I invented the computer?” said Mikro Suckerfish.

“You reinvented AOL you idiot, and Grates, you didn't even invent the microcomputer, and as for your operating system,

you bought that.”

Oh lord it went on for hours, them sitting there in their convention robes and pointy hats. Yap, yap, yap. It was enough to make me think of booting them onto the sidewalk and I would have done that if it wasn't for the army of lawyers and publicists hanging around outside the place.

They were complaining about the food and drinking gallons of coffee bragging about how late they stayed up at night when they were kids, inventing stuff. I just knew they were going to stiff me for the bill.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Hugo whispering to Ray, whose eyes lit up. “Ray,” I said, “whatever it is, don't do it.”

But it was too late, he walked down the line of wizards and touched each one on the shoulder. It was only a blink when they were back on the seats, or something was. I soon realized that Hugo had replaced them with illusions that kept saying “I'm a genius”, talking over each other.

None of the lawyers outside had seen, and I made a little rotating motion with my hand toward Hugo. Instantly the fake wizards (who could tell them from the real, fake wizards who were gone somewhere) were silent, their mouths moving so the army of hangers-on outside would figure they were still yapping away at themselves.

By that time Ray had come back and I said “Ray, what have you done? If you've...”

“Woah there hoss, I put them all in Southern Alberta. One farm each. We'll leave them there for a while so they can figure out how to make an honest living. No buying up companies, no hiring actual geniuses, genii, whatever, smart people. They have real farms with crops in the field and machinery, and they are side by side out there. Let's see how they do for a year.”

“Damnit Ray, I can just imagine the trouble you're going to get me into.”

“Relax Art, I'll bring them back here a few seconds after they left. The only people who will know they were gone is them, and who will believe them?”

“Well, how about half and hour from now Ray, it's really nice to have some quiet in here again.”

So we enjoyed the peace and quiet until the yes-people outside started to look at their watches and glance inside.

“I guess it's time gentlemen, maybe they will leave after they get back. And you just watch, they're going to stiff me on the bill.”

So Ray and Hugo did their thing and for about four seconds we saw some bedraggled, skinny, bleeding handed, haunted looking Billionaires, until Hugo waved his hand again and restored them to their usual pudgy, selves.

Unsurprisingly, they looked a bit shocked. Suckerfish made a beeline to the washroom and when he came back he was the first to speak. “Hey there's an indoor toilet here with running

hot water!”

That started a stampede, and while they were jostling to be next, I looked at Ray. “What? I didn't say it was modern day Alberta, I put them out there in the sod hut and outhouse days, they all had good farms though, with horses and plows.”

“Outhouses, and hand pumps no doubt,” I said, “would they even know how to prime a pump?”

“Well they talk enough about priming pumps when they're talking about their business's right? Surely they know where that phrase comes from?”

I put four very large glasses of water on the counter.

When they got back they all ordered big meals, even though they'd eaten just minutes before, and the guys outside all looked a bit shocked. I could see some of them on the phone, tattling to the fitness trainers, no doubt, or the wives? Were any of these guys still married?

Once they had made up for a year's worth of missing calories they sat back to a couple of impressive burps and started in on four new coffees.

There was no bragging, no banter, and they looked at each other quite fondly.

“Shall we set a time next week for Euchre?” Said Bozoshoes.

“Yeah, that sounds good, and I still owe you a bag of wheat

seed, I'll bring it along," said Grates.

I was mystified and leaned over to Hugo who whispered "Still mixed up a bit between there and here, it will clear up as they forget it. Sounds like they had to learn that neighbours are for more than cheating out of money and patents. Funny how you learn to get along with folks when you have nothing. Honestly, I figured those guys would have died of starvation or freezing during the winter, but it looks like between the four of them they came up with the brains of a settler farmer. Frankly I'm impressed, settlers were pretty tough boys, and knew a lot more than these guys.

"I mean, think about how to fix a broken plow, how to repair a leaking roof, how to shoe a horse, not to mention when to plant and when to harvest, and how to store the harvest. I am impressed, I figured Ray would have to go back to before they died to pick them up."

"Hell," I said, "I just got blown away by learning those guys could get along well enough to play Euchre."

When I turned back to the boys, they were complaining about the banks and how they were just after profits, how they didn't care about the little guy.

Ray was grinning and nodded his head toward the crowd outside. “They’ll revert to form soon enough once their accountants get hold of them, but who knows, maybe they’ll remember something.”

As they went out the door, ‘forgetting’ to pay the bill, I said, “Nah, it won’t last.”

A Chateau in France

It was a beautiful snowy day, miserable for anyone who had to shovel it, drive in it, and impossible for anyone trying to walk in it after the plows had thrown the street snow onto the sidewalks.

Also miserable for Juan apparently, as he stumbled into the place. Wet, shivering, eyebrows covered in ice, and dressed in running shoes and a shirt.

“You look like absolute hell my friend, what happened?” I asked while pouring him a coffee after I'd warmed the cup with hot water. He needed some warming up. “And sit over here by the heater before you freeze solid.”

It was a little while before he could speak, he downed the first cup and took a second gratefully. “She threw me out, Art, my own place, she threw me out.”

“What? Out, out, like for good?”

“I don't know, I don't know, but she kicked me down the stairs and I spent the night in the stairwell, or was it in a snow drift, it's all a bit fuzzy.”

“Oh hell, Juan, you said you were going to cut down on the drinking. You promised. And if you did go drinking you were going to do it downstairs where we could keep an eye on you.”

“I know, I know, but I swear it wasn't my fault. I was just out

for a quick walk down the block to get some milk, I didn't even take a coat, it was mild. I got about half way to the store when I noticed a doorway that I'd never seen before.

“I looked in and as I touched the glass, I was suddenly inside at a table and a beautiful girl was shoving a beer in front of me. Well, you know, it's rude to refuse a drink from a beautiful woman right? So I drank it while she said... she said... oh God, I don't remember what she said. She was absolutely fascinating, I know that, but I don't know why.”

“Calm down, what happened while you were there, do you remember anything?”

“Well there was dancing, and the music was great, Peruvian, it was like being back home.”

I was starting to get suspicious, Peruvian music isn't exactly popular in Guelph. “Anything else Juan?”

“Not really, three or four other folks joined us at the table and we had a jolly chat, but I can't remember what anyone said. I was there for just a few minutes, I swear, and when I left, well it must have been a quick snowfall, because there was about two feet of the stuff.

“I went straight home, I was scared Art, I was only in there for a few minutes, and then when I looked back the place was gone. No door, no bar, nothing.

“When I got home Carly told me I stank like a brewery and got really mad. She turned me around and shoved me down the

stairs and told me to go back to my bar and not to come back. Art I love her, I'm afraid she means it this time. What am I going to do?"

All right, this was something that smelled. I looked over at Ray and he nodded. "What you're going to do Juan, is sit here and eat this breakfast, don't move from here. Mike and Liz, can you take care of the place for a few minutes please?"

With that, Ray and I walked down the street toward Juan's place. He and Carly didn't live too far away, and Carly had asked us to keep an eye on Juan. He wasn't an alcoholic, he didn't actually need the stuff, but he was a drunk, he didn't have any sort of off switch once he started drinking. We were happy to do it, they were good people. Juan had been good for a year, and I was beginning to smell some sort of trap.

We walked past the corner store and started looking closely at the buildings on the way to Juan's place. I didn't see anything but Ray pulled me up short. "Look, right there, look closely."

Something, I don't know, maybe something? Ray reached over and grabbed my arm and suddenly there was a doorway. "What's it say?" I asked, because it was written in a strange script.

"You can read it, Art, your brain just refuses to admit it, stop thinking like a normal human and read it."

Damned if I didn't suddenly understand it. "Fairy Bar" it said. "OK it's a fairy bar, what's that Ray?"

He looked at me like I was a bit slow, he often looked at me like that, sort of a disappointed teacher look. “It’s a bar run by fairies, Art.”

Oh

“I’ll bet Juan doesn’t have a penny in his pockets, and no jewelry either. These guys get susceptible types into the place, get them drunk as lords and pretty soon they’re broke. I’d be willing to bet Juan’s nice Llama jacket is in there too, Carly wouldn’t have kicked him out to freeze, she probably figured he’d forgot it in the bar.”

“So what do we do about this?” I asked, I mean fairies were magical right. I’d forgotten for a moment who Ray was.

“We go in and teach my countrymen a bit of a lesson, that’s what we do. Come on and follow my lead.”

Ray reached out and touched the door, and vanished. OK, I did the same and suddenly I was inside with Ray and the most beautiful creature I’d ever seen. There were two beers in front of us and she was speaking with the most lovely voice. The thing is, I forgot what she’d said the moment she said it.

Ray touched my arm, “... a really good business deal for you, it’s land in the south of France, and it’s going for cheap because the viscount who owns it has too many death taxes to pay. He needs the money and I’m sure you two handsome gentlemen would love the place. I happen to have the deed of sale right here, the viscount is a friend of mine and I’m selling it for him. Let me tell you about...”

Ray had let go my arm and I found myself reaching into my pocket for my wallet. Ray slapped my hand away and said “No you don't buddy, I was here first and I'm going to buy myself some land and go home.”

His accent was suddenly very thick and very french. I nodded and watched a master at work. He started talking fast to this woman and read the contract over carefully. He then reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. From that, he pulled out a bank draft made out to cash, that was written in French. When she saw this, the woman's eyes got very wide.

“I'd like to buy the viscount's chateau as well,” said Ray in a very persuasive voice, “and I suspect that this draft is a bit more than I need for that. It's OK, you can pay me the difference back later, but damn I want that land. I miss the old country and since I've made my fortune here, I'm going back.”

“Here, he said, let me add a clause to this deed that adds the chateau and says you will pay me back the difference, and we'll get this deal done.”

The woman practically snatched the draft from Ray's hand, and while she was staring at that, Ray wrote a bit of an addendum to the deed. He signed it with a real flourish, and spun it around for the woman to sign as well. He made such a production of passing over the pen that she didn't look down to read what he'd written, she signed the deed and he said “And down here too, thank you lovely lady.”

The moment she signed it, her eyes grew wide with horror. She

looked around in panic and all the patrons in the bar started to waver and shrink down to some wrinkled, grotesque little creatures. “You bastard!” she screamed, “You've bought the bar, how did you do that?”

Ray turned into a fox and said “Always read the fine print my dear, and you know, I haven't had fairy for years, as I remember you taste like chicken and I love chicken. Now get out of my bar.”

They ran for the door and Ray and I toasted each other with our beers, which really were excellent. With that we walked out of the place and Ray turned to me “You want a bar?”

“No thanks, one is enough and who wants to compete with his own bar half a block away?”

Ray nodded and made a pass with his hand and the doorway became just another part of the wall.

We continued down the street to Ray and Carly's place and when she let us in, Ray started to talk. “There's been a big mistake Carly, Ray wasn't drunk last night, we grabbed him on the way to the store. He was helping us clean out the vats in the Keller, and he fell in. Well in the struggles to climb out he swallowed quite a bit of beer. He said he was fine, and that he had to get home to you. He left in such a rush that he even left his coat behind. Don't worry dear heart, he's in the coffee shop and we'll send him home as soon as we get back from explaining to you.”

Carly was looking a bit suspiciously at Ray, but I was there looking angelic and backed him up. Ray, when he piles on the charm, can look just as angelic, and I could see that Carly was ready to accept our story just to let Juan back into their place.

We said our goodbyes, went back to the diner and filled Juan in on what “really” happened to him. He was delighted and rushed off home.

I looked over at Ray and said “I’m out the price of a breakfast and a couple coffees.”

Ray winked and said, “But we own a hundred acres and a chateau in southern France.”

The Tale of The Brooch

“What? Oh for cripes sake!” The fellow moved one chair down and said “Better now?”

As I wiped the counter and moved toward him I said, “Everything OK?”

“Oh, yes, no problem.”

I kept my eye on him and sure enough, he kept talking to himself, focusing on his plate, the fork, his water glass, the serviette container. I began to be concerned, not for myself, Hugo and Ray were in the diner so any troubles were sure to be dealt with.

But this fellow didn't seem to be violent, or even self harming. It was more like he was carrying on one sided conversations with objects. We're a pretty tolerant bunch in the diner, so we let him carry on while he ate his breakfast, but I did keep half an ear toward him.

In my attention on him, I had forgotten and left a spatula on the grill. I reached for it and he said “Don't touch me, I'm hot!” I snatched my hand back and then realized what I was doing. Putting on an oven mitt I moved the spatula to the counter top to cool down and then turned to this fellow.

“Thanks, I would have burned myself, but you said ‘don't touch me, I'm hot’ that was a rather strange way of warning someone.”

“I, well, I, I was repeating what the spatula said,” he stuttered out in a rush.

“Well my friend, you have just earned your breakfast, would you mind explaining what you just said?”

“Look, you won’t believe me, but things talk to me.”

Now I was intrigued, “My name’s Art, this is Ray and the fellow over there is Hugo. You might be surprised what we believe.”

“Hello, my name’s Sal, do you fellows really believe me? I mean it’s insane isn’t it? Most people just say I’m schizophrenic, that I hear voices, but I really do hear voices, from objects, and they hear me.”

Ray spoke up, “Sal would you mind if I touched your arm? It will let me figure out what you mean by that, and I can tell you if your brain chemistry is messed up.”

Sal held out his arm a bit reluctantly, and Ray touched his wrist. After about two seconds Ray snatched his hand back and looked at Sal with surprise. “In all my years... Hugo, Art, touch my shoulder.”

We did, and Ray touched Sal’s wrist again. The world exploded into a thousand voices all talking at once, it felt as if my head was filling up with sound. It wasn’t loud, but there were so many different voices I couldn’t make out anything that was being said. Hugo and I let go of Ray about the same time he let

go of Sal.

Ray shook his head, “Right, all three of us heard that, you are hearing real voices, that’s for sure. How can you function?”

“I was born with this, so I learned how to filter them out, maybe like someone who has had tinnitus for a long time, you learn how not to hear the ringing in your ears. Or like when you’re young you can pick voices out during a party, but older people can’t discriminate. I’m pretty sure it’s like that, I can pick and choose which voices I hear. And of course I can always just tell them all to shut up.”

“You carry on conversations with the voices?” I asked.

“Sure, I hear what things are saying and they can hear us.”

“So that chair you were talking to when you first came in?”

“Yeah, it said it was saved for someone named Larry? So I moved over.”

“Right, all chairs and other objects in the lunch counter, you will not play favourites with the customers. I can always find another chair or whatever, maybe it’s time to redecorate the place anyway.”

Sal grinned and said “the place just shut up, I think you’ve got everything scared.”

“Good, I brought you all into the diner, well Jim did, and I can take you out!”

Sal was laughing.

Hugo spoke up “Sal I think I could take that ability away from you, if you want me to.”

Sal frowned, “He can probably do it,” I said.

“No, I don’t think I’d like that, it doesn’t bother me, I just have to remember not to talk back too much so people don’t think I’m weird.”

“You got a girlfriend or a wife?” said Ray.

Sal ducked his head, “No, friends and family get a bit spooked around me, so I’m pretty much on my own.”

“I think that’s what Hugo means,” said Ray.

“That’s good of you guys, but I don’t think so, maybe if I get older and can’t pick one voice out of the crowd I’ll take you up on that.”

Hugo nodded and sat back in his chair, which creaked and I wondered if it was complaining. I didn’t ask.

Around about then a woman walked into the shop. I gave her a cheery, “Welcome,” but got nothing back but a glance. She sat down and ordered coffee and sat staring into the cup.

Sal looked over at her and cocked his head. He listened a while and then said gently. “Do you want to tell me about him?”

Her head snapped up and she looked at him hard, then shook her head, no.

“He hits you, often, and forbids you from going out of the house.”

She frowned and seemed about to tell Sal to mind his own business, but he went on. “This morning he hit you again and you stormed out of the house and came here. You must be getting tired of it to risk that, because when you go back it will be worse.”

“Look, it’s none of your business, and how do you know that anyway, are you some sort of mind reader?”

“Something like that, but I don’t have to be a mind reader to know you’re in pain.” Sal looked around at us and then back to her, “you’re safe in here, he’s not going to hurt you. Why not tell us about it?”

“What’s to tell, you’ve got it nailed. I live with him, he hits me and doesn’t want me going out. He yells at me, tells me I’m ugly and useless, all the standard abuse, and I loved him and put up with it because he said he would change and of course he didn’t. It’s the standard sad story.

“And yes, I’ve had enough, I didn’t know what to do but telling you makes me realize just what a cliché my life is, and so I’ll be going to the police after I have this coffee. Now tell me, how the hell did you know all this. I know there’s no marks where you can see them.”

Sal looked at us again and Ray shrugged, “May as well.”

“Your brooch told me,” he said.

“Bullshit, I don’t believe you.”

Sal shrugged, but seemed to make a decision, “Your shirt just told me you have a birth mark just to the right of your bellybutton. Your coat tells me it’s four years old, from before you moved in with this guy, and you talk to it because it’s from your life before.”

Her eyes had a lot more life in them, “Jesus, stop before you get to my panties. I believe you. My brooch eh? Well my mother gave it to me and told me that it was for good luck. Maybe it is.

“OK I’m heading to the police right now, before I change my mind. I’m done with that bastard.”

Sal looked at Hugo who nodded, that gift may be a pain in the rear end but it was damned useful. “You know where we are,” he said.

Sal nodded and turned back to the woman. “I’ll go with you if you don’t mind.”

The Training Partner

Gil Hamish sat at the end of the counter, lost in his thoughts. I wandered down to refill his cup and said “I’m really sorry that I’m such a bad student Gill, I mean I can’t seem to get anywhere near to you when we practice.”

Gil looked up and smiled, “You figure a couple of weeks will make up for thousands of years of practice Art? If you could get near me I’d have been dead a very long time ago. But that’s not what I’m thinking about, you’re doing OK and I’ve got a plan.”

“So why the thoughtful face?”

“Art, have you ever thought about what it is like to live more or less forever? I mean when you aren’t at work, when you’re home. I have watched a few hundred women I loved, grow old and die, while I stay more or less the same age. It hurts, you know, yet you have to have love in your life or else you cut your own throat.

“You’re lucky you have Ingrid to be with,” he said, nodding at her, as she nodded back. “Well I’ve never had such luck, and to tell you the truth, I don’t know that any relationship will last more than forty or fifty years. Not that I don’t hope you two are together in a hundred.”

He looked a question at Ingrid and she said, “Don’t ask me, I was married to one guy for several thousand years before I met Art here, still married to him, if you ask him, so I guess Art and I will just see how it goes. So far it’s been a lot of fun.”

“Well I wish you the best. What I’m thinking about is Sally, I met her a few weeks ago and I think I’m falling in love, again, which makes me sad as hell. I know how it’s going to go, and you know, sometimes I hope that I get killed in some battle rather than go through watching another person I love grow old and die.”

“Yeah, I can see that, but doesn’t everyone you know grow old and die Gil?” I asked.

“Sure, but I’m not sleeping with those guys, and mostly they just move away, very few wars last for generations and I’m usually moving on after a couple of years. No it’s my wives that are the problem.”

“I can see that, and I’m sorry Gil, but think of all the women you’ve known.”

He looked at me for a long time and said, “You’re a kid, Art, no offense, but talk to me in two hundred years or so.”

Ingrid raised her coffee cup to him and I decided I’d better go back to cooking their lunch.

Soon after that, a girl walked into the place and Gil looked up with a smile. “Sam, come on in and have a seat. You want some lunch?”

I looked around and saw a solid, but curvy girl of average height and a highly controlled head of hair, not curly so much as wavy, each strand in lock step with the next. Solid was

pretty much a good description for everything about her. She walked solidly, she moved solidly, she sat down solidly. If Sal was here he'd probably tell me the chair said "ouch".

"Art," said Gil "This is Sam Martin, she's going to be your new training partner. I found her at the University gym, she teaches Japanese martial arts there and she's going to be a much more useful partner for you than I am. She's agreed to work with us because I had a bit of a sparring match with her and she liked what she saw, so you're both going to be students."

Ingrid looked Sam over and said "What do you study Sam?"

Sam even spoke solidly, "I do Iaido, Jodo and Niten Ichiryu along with a couple of other weapon arts, and I have studied Aikido and taught Women's Self Defence."

"A good mix, and I like that you have a concentration on weapons. If you're empty-handed it's usually too late. I prefer the sword and the spear myself."

I wasn't sure about Ingrid's tone of voice, sort of a warning. What did she want? I mean I'd be as outclassed by a woman that can fly and has a sword that fights by itself as I am by a warrior that's been training for almost ten thousand years.

I looked at Ingrid and she gave me a sweet smile that said to me "just watch yourself hunnybunny, because I've got my eye on you". Yeah, I was old enough to recognize that one.

"Niten Ichiryu," she said to Sam, "I know that one, I met Musashi back in the day in Japan. Lovely fellow, big guy, with

really great manners and for a mortal he was one of the best I've ever met with a sword. He was also a whiz with a paintbrush and a damned good craftsman all around. Too bad he got such a poor treatment after he died, all that no-bath crap."

Ingrid had such a wistful look in her eye that I made a note never to ask her about Mr. Musashi.

Sam was looking confused, turning her head between Ingrid and Gil.

Gil noticed and said, "Sam you will have to learn all this sooner or later if you're going to be involved with this bunch, Art here doesn't age, but he's just a baby. I'm ten thousand years old and no, I'm not immortal, before you ask, I just age really slowly. Ingrid here is one of the original gods, she was around shortly after the Universe formed, and she is immortal"

Ingrid gave Gil a dirty look, "And a gentleman doesn't reveal a lady's age!"

Gil ducked his head and raised his hands, "Damn, sorry, you're right."

Ingrid was laughing and Sam looked like she was going into shock.

"Breathe Sam," I said, "it's a lot to take in, but these two aren't the whole of it. You'll meet some other folk who are also a bit other-worldly if you stick around."

“Yeah, like Larry,” said Ingrid.

“Hey!” Said Larry, who had been eyeing Sam.

“Tell us a bit about yourself Sam,” I said, to get her back to ordinary things.

“Not much to tell, really,” said Sam “I’m an accountant, and I train in martial arts, have been for about twenty-five years now. I do that about five or six times a week for a couple hours a class. I have been teaching at the University for about fifteen years, and I travel all over the world for seminars, some of which I teach. I was wondering just how good I am when Gil here showed up at my class and promptly beat me about fifteen times out of fifteen. When you get humiliated that badly, you ask to become a student, and so I have.”

“Don’t sell yourself too short Sam,” Gil said in a serious voice, “for your time of practice you’re damned good, better than most I’ve seen. You are starting to understand the principles, what Musashi might have called the hyoho, instead of just dancing the kata. You adapted well to some of my attacks, and you will get a lot better if you train with us, which I hope you will.”

“Look, weird stuff or not, yes I want to train with you if you’ll have me.”

Gil tapped Sam’s coffee cup with his and smiled.

Amber Becomes Coyote

I don't know if people understand how powerful Coyote really is. I know that all the powerful types in the cafe are both respectful of him and care for him. It's like you might treat an ex-heavyweight boxer. He deserves respect for the power he once had and might have still, and he's old enough now to maybe over-push himself and break something.

At least that's sort of how I see it. I know that one day in the diner, Coyote came up in conversation and several of the old blood seemed worried about him. He hadn't been around much, and it took Amber's violin to draw him back to the local coyotes who were starving to death one winter. He had just gone away from them, and if he's away from the little brothers, he's away from the world.

He's been living with Amber at her apartment, she passes him off as a doddering old dog, and, to be honest, treats him like one. I saw her grab Coyote by the ear and scold him one evening. Anybody else and they'd have been in pieces, truly.

Lots of the old ones say that Coyote sang the world into being. I'm not enough of a metaphysics guy to know if they mean this planet or the universe. I suspect it's the planet, but all stories of the old ones are messed up by humans. It might have been the universe, but humans only knew about the world when they started telling stories.

Anyway, if Coyote is sickening, things are going to happen, most likely bad things. So from that worry came a delegation to

Amber's place where she told us her story with Coyote, who was in dog form, and, incidentally, slept through the whole visit.

Amber said, "This is a story about Coyote and me. It's a true story and I will tell it as it should be told.

"Coyote and I are close. He speaks directly to my mind, and because he does that, I see him, so I know his life. I even know things that he has forgotten, because they are still there in his mind. I think there is a lot that he has told himself to forget.

"Because I can see him, I know that he did indeed sing the world into being, but I don't know why he has forgotten that. I asked him once and he said 'so I won't screw up again,' but I didn't know what he meant.

"Knowing he sang the world alive has been hard for me. I have watched the world become worn out by too many humans and I wondered that Coyote ever let that happen. Don't misunderstand me, I didn't want Coyote to get rid of half the humans, or something like that, but I wondered why he didn't make them just a little bit worse at having kids.

"Finally I couldn't take it any more. I jumped on Coyote's back and told him to go to the west. When we got there I looked at miles and miles of forest on fire, I made him go to Australia and saw the same thing.

"While we were in Australia I made him go to the little islands in the Pacific that are disappearing under the ocean. I was heartbroken, and started to cry.

“We went to Antarctica and watched the ice disappear, to sub-Saharan Africa and watched the desert grow and the animals die. It became a sickness, I had to see more and more. At first I wanted Coyote to see it, but I guess he already had, he just stood and watched. I was crying and pounding his back, pulling his mane, screaming for him to fix it.

“Finally, in one more great leap, he jumped back here, to the park next door, where I could watch the river and feel the grass. It took me a long time to calm down, but I did.

“When I was quiet, Coyote said ‘I remember all of that, child, I have seen it, but if I sang the world alive, as you say I did, it was to give it to Man, and what he does with it is his business.’

“But you have so much power, I said, can’t you fix it? He said ‘Ah, but creating and fixing are very different things daughter, and I have tried to fix things, but it never works out like I expected. This is why I tell myself to forget, so I won’t try to fix it. Did you know that at one time humans came back to life after they died? It is true, when they died a great swirling wind would come and they would be alive again.

‘But one day I was visiting a human family and I was admiring the baby. You know how I love babies. Well I didn’t know that the father was upstairs, waiting to be alive again. I am pretty sure I did not know. When the wind picked up and the baby started to get cold, I shut the door. Because I tried to keep the baby from getting a chill, I stopped the swirling wind from making her father alive again, and the wind was so angry that I had done that, it went away and from that day, death has been

permanent. So you see why I don't help any more. Fixing one thing usually breaks something else.'

"I could not believe him. I told him that he was just lazy and old and didn't want to think it through. He said 'You may be right, I am old and may not have the new thoughts that it would take to fix this.

'I can see that you are upset, and I don't want you to be upset my love. I have the power to make you Coyote and then you can try. If I do that, I will be a coyote, a dog or a human and you can choose.

"I was so angry with him that I told him to become an old dog. Coyote! A dog! May he forgive me. Just before he made the change he told me he could also give me the one thing he never had, he could make it so that I would be able to see the consequences of my acts. Then he said that I can give his powers back at any time.

"He also said, 'I love you Amber, and I hope that after this you will not hate me.'

"I am just beginning to see what he meant. By looking at what my actions will cause, I dare not do anything. If I lower the oceans, floods will happen somewhere else. If I stop the fires, there are insect explosions that cause endless acres of dead trees. I won't even get into the things I know won't work, like introducing cane toads to control insects. I want so much to help, and I now have such power, more than I ever imagined, but I don't dare use it. Seeing the consequences is a curse, a real curse, but I can't blame Coyote for the curse, he has spared

me from watching my help get twisted into something that hurts someone else. He worries that I will hate him, but I cannot, I love him too much to ever hate him.

“And that is the story of where Coyote has gone.”

When she finished her story I asked if she would give the powers back to Coyote. “Not yet, I will keep trying to find a way to fix the world. The strange thing is that now I am worried that if I give his powers back, Coyote will hate me. I now understand his pain at not being able to fix the world. I also understand why he was so reluctant to give me the powers. I think that one day I will make him Coyote again, I can’t take this responsibility, and this helplessness for very long.

“I understand why Coyote made himself forget so much. But for now I will remember and I will keep trying to find a way.

We all said goodbye to Amber and to Coyote the dog, and went our separate ways, a great deal more sad than when we had arrived. Amber is too young to have that on her shoulders, but Coyote is still there somewhere, with her, to help.

Coyote in Kitsune's World

Ray Keen came into the diner and saw Amber. “Thank goodness you’re here Amber, I need Coyote’s help. Jonah and Lila went to get Kitsune from bed this morning and she wouldn’t wake up. I checked in our family world and I couldn’t find her, but the world is decaying. I’ve never seen anything like it, big chunks are falling to pieces.

“Amber I can’t make worlds, I’ve never done anything more than step into a world that’s already there. I need Coyote’s help to find Kit and get her out of there.”

Amber frowned, “What world, what are you talking about Ray?” She was worried, Ray wasn’t usually in a panic and Kit was taking violin lessons from her and Amber loved her.

It wasn’t usual to start them at two, but Kit wasn’t your usual kid, she was the daughter of Ray and Tilly, and Ray kept a close eye on her. He also suspected that Tilly had some old blood in her, making Kit a very powerful girl.

“Please just come with me Amber, I’m worried about Kit, I don’t know what will happen if the world collapses. Look, fox tricksters like me have a family world that we go into, instead of dreaming. It’s created by all the family members who go there, like Kit, but there’s no way it should break down, there’s too many family members holding it together, something stronger than all of us must be eating away at it. Please, I need Coyote.”

Amber didn't hesitate any more, she scooped up her violin and stood up. Ray grabbed her hand and they were gone.

"What the hell," said Amber, looking around at cotton candy trees and plushy toys wandering by, and there, not very far away, a black nothingness, which seemed to be chewing up the edge of the world.

"This is the world, but see, Kit takes it over when she's here, there should be bits and pieces of all the other family members here, but it's just Kit. And it's breaking down into nothing. I don't know what to do, I can't find Kit."

"Ray, calm down, first we find Kit and then we fix this, right, between you and I we should be able to fix it." Amber sounded more confident than she felt. She had been trying to fix the world for several weeks now, but each fix she thought up, she could see it going wrong. Now she was terrified that if she fixed this world they would lose Kit, and maybe themselves to that nothingness.

Damn it, this was just like the Earth, crumbling around the edges, abused by too much greed and too many people. Too little care for the health of the planet and the next generations. Just pure selfishness and greed.

"OK I can't see us wandering around and finding Kit can you?"

Ray was wild eyed, "I tried that, I looked everywhere I could get to and she's not where I could see her. Oh God, do you think she's been taken by the blackness?"

“Would the world still be here if she was? I mean the merry-go-round and the plushy animals?”

Ray relaxed a bit, “No, it would snap back to what it usually is, an average of all the Keens who use the place. Only Kit can override all those wills, or maybe everyone else just lets her do it, I don’t know, I should have looked more closely, I should have been a better sire, I should have...”

Amber put her hand on his arm and squeezed, “I’ve got an idea.” She unpacked her violin and started to play twinkle twinkle little star, the first song she taught to Kit. She played and played as they moved through the landscape.

Suddenly Ray’s ears swiveled to the left and there, in a crack in a rock cliff, they both heard a small yip. Running toward the sound they hoped was Kit, Ray started to bark. Kit answered and they found her wedged in tight, a scared two year old.

Amber gathered her up in a hug and Ray jumped around with joy. He held Amber’s arm and... nothing. “I can’t get us out, Amber I can’t get us out!”

Amber looked sharply at Ray and nodded toward Kit who was still scared. Ray stopped talking and sat down so that they could comfort Kit. In a while Kit said “Uncle Ray, I can’t find the way to go back to mommy and daddy, and the black started coming and I hid in the cave.”

“Don’t worry pet, Amber and I will help.”

“That’s not Amber, Uncle Ray, that’s someone else, who is this

big fox?”

Amber hugged her tight, “It’s me pet, it’s Amber but I’m also Coyote and I can help. What’s been going on here, can you tell me how the black appeared?”

“I was making things, lots of things, it’s fun to make things here, but it got harder and harder the more things I made, so I had to try harder and then the things I made fell apart and then the black came. Make it go away Uncle Ray, make it go away.”

“We will pet,” said Amber, “You and I and Uncle Ray will make it go away, I promise and then you can go home. Do you believe me?”

“Yes, let’s make it go away now.”

Amber closed her eyes and went through all the ways this world could be fixed, but the same problems kept showing up. No matter what she did, something more terrible would happen, so she thought back to what she had said to Kit. What if all three of them worked on this world, what if all the beings in the world right now worked together to fix it. She looked, and there was a chance.

“OK pet, you are going to play twinkle on my big violin, can you do that?”

“Oh yes, I just have to have bigger hands, no problem.”

“Wonderful, don’t start yet. Ray, you know this world, what it should be like, can you hold that in your mind and shape it

while I sing it back into existence? You will be using Coyote's power so be careful what you do."

"Yes, I know Coyote's power well, I'll be damned careful, can you control it?"

"I don't know, I've never tried, you will have to stop me if it starts to go wrong, it's like trying to water a plant with a fire hose, I'm asking you to pinch the hose."

"OK, Amber, Coyote trusted you with that power, think of the control you have with your violin, that's what first brought Coyote to you, your music, maybe it's that control he admired."

Amber thought about that, and nodded. "Let's do it then. Ray, hang on to my arm, use what I'm doing to rebuild the world. Kitsune, you will play twinkle, play it well, I'm going to use your music. Are you ready? Here we go."

As Kit started to play, Amber started to sing. She sang in a language that no human had ever heard, a language that came from before the world existed, it was low, so low the earth shook, yet they could all hear it. Ray felt it, felt the power to create a whole world, and he held on to it for all he was worth, pinching it down to this world, and then he heard Kit playing twinkle. Both Ray and Amber latched on to that tune and suddenly the power was under control.

Slowly the blackness moved back, and as it did, the cotton candy trees became ordinary trees, the plushy toys became real animals, but the merry-go-round remained, as did many others

of Kit's creations. Ray could feel the minds of his family coming back into the world as the darkness receded, and he understood what had happened. With that it was easier, and with the help of every Keen in existence, the world snapped back with a thunderclap.

Kitsune stopped playing, looked at the world, and looked at Ray and Amber. "I can go back now, and I won't change the world so much, I promise Uncle Ray, I changed it until it broke, but now you and everyone else can come here again."

With that she vanished back to bed at just the time her parents entered her room to wake her up.

Ray looked at Amber and said "Thanks Amber, and thanks Coyote, I think you may have saved us all, all the family. I can't believe that little girl was strong enough to push all the Keens out of this world and change it so much that it broke down. Our whole family owes you a debt."

Amber paused to think about what they had done, and how they had done it. Certainly food for thought.

She turned to Ray and said, "You can repay that debt right now with a coffee, I really need a coffee."

Liz and Megan

“Liz, I'm so glad to see you here, I'd like to talk to you about Mike,” said Megan.

Megan is a wolf-woman from the north of Ontario, she met Mike on the road and they shared a car (and a bed) for a couple of days on the way to Guelph. Once here, Mike ended up meeting Liz at the University. Liz lived in the tunnels and the three of them helped drive the Wyrms back underground about two years ago.

Liz looked sideways at Megan, she knew about that trip with Mike and she was more than a little suspicious of Megan. She'd seen her turn into a wolf, had ridden her in fact.

“Peace, peace, little sister. I'm not after him, he loves you. I just want to talk.”

Liz softened up a bit and shoved over so Megan could sit down next to her.

“What's up?” She said.

“Well, for one thing, I love that blouse, where did you get it?”

Liz smiled, “At a new shop just a couple of blocks over, I can tell you where it is if you'd like.”

“Later, maybe we can both go, but for now, I really want to know why I remember you. No offense, but I often don't

remember people, when you've lived as long as I have, people often don't stick in my head, but the first time I met you I seemed to know you.”

“But you know Mike?”

“Sure I do, I had sex with him so I have his scent... woah, woah, it was before he met you and not since, I promise. And it does me good to see you so protective of him. Mike is worth it, he's a seer.”

“Sorry, I guess I have a jealous streak. What do you mean Mike is a seer.”

“I mean he can see those of us who are the old blood, the supernatural types. Look, anyone can see us, we're not usually invisible, but Mike sees something more. He doesn't know it consciously, but he has a sort of attraction to us, he's not scared of us, and frankly, we don't have the urge to rip his throat out.”

“What!”

“The urge, the urge, it's been centuries since I ate a lover, I swear!”

Liz watched Megan for a long time and finally grinned, “So that's where the term 'man-eater' came from is it?”

Megan exploded in laughter. “I really like you little sister, you're hard to knock off balance.”

“Does Mike know what a seer is?”

“No, I doubt it, and you shouldn't tell him, it's not a talent that does a lot for you, except to make you attracted to the old blood. I'm not sure what it is, maybe just a tinge of the old blood from way back in the family line. I'm not sure, but if he starts thinking about it, he'll probably be imagining Brownies behind every milk bottle in the fridge.”

Liz laughed and slapped Megan on the thigh.

Megan looked at her thigh and nodded to herself, “You're not scared of me are you?”

Liz shook her head no.

“Not scared of me and I remember you. There's something, I don't know what. Have you noticed anything unusual about yourself?”

“No, nothing at all.”

Megan thought, “What about living in the tunnels at the University, and living in a basement apartment now with Mike?”

“That can't be unusual, I lived in the tunnels because I was a poor student, and an apartment is an apartment.”

“Yes, but how did it feel when you were staying overnight at Mike's place on the third floor of that house?”

“Have you been keeping track of us?”

“Yes dear, I keep track of all my friends and I consider you two to be my friends, as well as fellow fighters. We have had an adventure or two together after all.”

“Well, OK, I guess so. Anyway, I felt OK at Mike's place.”

“But you kept your own place in the tunnels and went back there often?”

“Yes.”

“And were you uncomfortable at Mike's place.”

“I see what you're getting at I think, I wasn't uncomfortable, but the tunnels felt a lot more like home to me, and yes, I'm perfectly happy in the basement.”

Megan looked thoughtful. “And you're small.”

“I beg your pardon!”

“I mean you're a bit under average height. You have to admit that.”

“Well yeah, but folks don't usually mention it, I've never called you a big person, but yes, I have to ask Mike to get things from the top shelf, why?”

“I'm trying to work that out. Look, can I tell you a story?”

“Well we are in Art's place, and Art seems to be listening to us.” Liz looked over and smiled.

Megan began, “Many years ago, before the Europeans showed up around here, there were a lot of wars. My people moved to an island west of here and were met by a people who were very peaceful. Small people who lived simple lives and did not make war. We lived together on the island for many years, but one day a people from the south arrived and defeated my people.

“We retreated back to the mainland but the small people stayed, and the invaders killed them all. All but one couple who went into the woods and found a cave. They lived there for many years and had children, but as the invaders spread out over the island, they were getting too close.

“This couple and their children stole a canoe and fled to the mainland. They found some of my people and set up a camp close to ours, but never revealed themselves to us. We had been kind to them before, and so they stayed close.

“Many generations passed like this, the little people were spiritual to begin with and became more so, learning many sacred things. Our people would sometimes see them in the woods and it was considered very lucky to do so. They were our little sisters and brothers.

“Often our young men were sent out to the woods on a quest for knowledge, and sometimes these little people, these spirit beings, would help them, and those young men became shamens of great power.”

Megan fell silent, and Liz said “You think I might be one of these little people?”

“I honestly don't know, Liz, but it would explain why I think of you as a little sister, and why you are more comfortable underground than above.”

“But I'm not a spirit being, I'm not even very spiritual.”

“Most of that is learning, it's taught, it's not something you have by genetics. There have always been those who are more concerned with the spiritual, with the higher emotions, as they were once called. Do you have an urge to help others?”

“Everyone does.”

“You would be surprised, sister, at how many people don't care about others. I have been told I am very uncaring of others, and I know I am quite unsympathetic to those who are stupid and selfish.”

“Well, I know I'm selfish of Mike, and don't want to share him.”

Megan let loose with that barking laughter of hers and held up her hands.

“Are these spirit beings still around?” Asked Liz.

“I don't think so, they were always shy and as the lands have been covered with houses, they may have gone away, but the blood would remain.”

“So what should I do?”

“Do? I don't know what you should do, I'm just satisfying my curiosity, but I am becoming more convinced that you have the blood of the little people. I wonder...”

“What are you thinking?”

“I wonder if any of my people have any of the wisdom of the little people. Would you be interested in learning, if I could find someone?”

“I think I might, what would I need to do?”

“Just learn, nothing else. I suspect the teachings would simply tell you to be kind, but I don't know. Very few people can do actual magic, so I wouldn't look for that. But for now, you can be what I know you are, a kind and loving, if jealous, person.”

They both laughed at that, and then went on to other topics, clothes mostly, as they spent the afternoon together.

I had indeed been eavesdropping, and I thought, “She's already half way there.”

The Fight Lesson

I was bruised all over. It had been another training day with Gil and Sam, and Gil started off with a lecture.

“I know you two have done a bit of martial arts, but I’m here to tell you that you won’t be doing that. You will be fighting instead, and I will explain the difference to you as we go along.

“A few things to keep in mind. First, we aren’t going to be doing any unit formation work. There’s only two of you which isn’t must of a unit, and these days shield walls and whatnot are not much use.

“Art, I know you were shield carrier to Jim in the fight with the Wyrms and I hear you did a good job. Still, all that was required was to push, and I know you can do that.

“Remember always, the goal, to hurt your opponent as fast and as badly as you can. There will likely be more people to deal with, so be ready.

“Never stand still, head toward your opponent and damage him, if you have a weapon, use it, if not, knock him onto his heels and keep him moving backward. Use your shoulder, your arms, just get him on his heels.

“Do not use your feet, Art I know you have some Tae Kwon Do, and you like lifting your feet. Don’t, you need them on the ground. Lose a leg to a cut or a strike and you are lying flat on the ground. You can fight with only one arm but you need two

legs.

“Take your opponent out and move on, look for another opponent. If you stick around to finish him off, his buddy will finish you off. Put him down hard and keep moving, even if he manages to make you trip it could be the end of you.

“From the first, keep moving, knock the nearest guy back and then down, leave him and as you do that, take the second opponent.

“If you can’t take out the first opponent, leave him when the second gets there, go back to him if you have to, but if you’re moving away from him you should be OK to keep moving away.

“Don’t be a hero, don’t be noble, don’t be fair. Be efficient and never look back, you may circle to where you can see what’s been happening behind you, but the moment you twist that neck around, bad things will happen.

“Is that all clear?”

To me it was more or less a jumble that came down to ‘go straight ahead’. Sam seemed to nod though, which made me nervous.

Gil started us with empty handed practice, on the theory that if we were disarmed we were screwed but what the hell, try it. And on a practical note, we were less likely to injure each other too much.

Gil had us 'toe the line' to come up to a couple of lines and try to knock each other back. So we pounded away at each other and ended up with bloody noses.

"How was that?" he said.

"Painful and stupid," said Sam

"So why did you do it?"

'Oh God, it's going to be like that.' I thought to myself.

Gil stepped up to the line and invited me to meet him. He said "hit me" and so I swung, he grabbed my arm, pulled and I was on the ground with his knee in my upper back and my head pulled back almost to the breaking point.

When he let me up I said, "That wasn't the exercise."

Gil looked disgusted and said, "You might as well have said that it wasn't fair, and after my little speech about how fair wasn't part of what we're doing.

"Right, try it again."

We did, and found that neither of us was willing to make a move. Just as I relaxed and turned my head to tell Gil it wasn't a good exercise, Sam slammed a fist into the side of my head and I went down.

I looked up, and Gil was not sympathetic, "Good, one of you is learning."

Sam and I had been working out at Aikido and Tae Kwon Do, trading techniques, so I wasn't completely at sea, but the lesson didn't become any easier.

Gil had us start from two arms lengths apart and so we had to approach and then fight. The end goal was always somebody on the ground, and that usually happened within the first one or two moves. I quickly figured out that the entrance was the key, get Sam to attack and I had a chance, she wasn't faster than me when I was ready for her, so getting her to commit to an attack meant I could counter, or better, attack into her attack. Once she committed, my entrance was the key.

Which, in my woozy state of mind, sounded backward, I mean didn't I mean the key to the entrance? At which point Sam floored me again while I smiled to myself. "No losing focus," Sam whispered, as she let me get up.

After that came the blindfold, so that one person didn't know when the second would attack, or from where. Move with the attack until you have your balance, and then respond. Don't try to resist the attack, you're usually off balance and resistance makes it worse. "Catch and return" Gil called it, catch your balance and return the attack. If you were good at it, you could rob the attacker of his balance as you recovered yours. As far as being hit in the head while you had a blindfold on, Gil said you just had to hope that it wasn't a great hit. He then proceeded to let us try to hit him while he had the blindfold on. We didn't. "A thousand years of practice," was all he said. I trusted him when he said he wasn't peeking.

We spent the whole morning on the empty handed stuff, some of it on some very uneven ground and I certainly wasn't tempted to throw a kick when I needed both feet under me to stay upright. Gil told us the empty hand practice would prepare us to move, with a weapon in hand.

We ate the sandwiches I'd made for lunch, and then Gil said, "Sleep for an hour, I'll wake you up." I guess he meant it, I was afraid to sleep because I figured he'd kick us awake, but he just gave me hell for not sleeping. "You need to learn how to sleep whenever you can."

Fine.

In the afternoon I really got clobbered. We started with bokuto, wooden swords, for the session and Sam was far ahead of my skills. Gil said "that's the point, Art, that's why she's here." I knew that, and struggled to catch up. Maybe in another ten years.

But Gil changed things up, showing us that we needed about four good attacks rather than twenty complicated kata, and then gave us the word to go at it. About two minutes later he came out with a pair of split bamboo swords in leather coverings and told us to stop trying not to hurt each other.

I'm here to tell you that you can hurt someone with split bamboo wrapped in leather. Half my bruises are from those things, including a couple on the back of my head where Sam wrapped her shinai (the bamboo sword) over my block and touched me with the end. Again I looked at Gil and he just laughed, "They bend." Fine, if you've got a bendy weapon, bend it around the block and hit the opponent. Good.

We moved to the rough ground and hurt each other some more... or rather Sam hurt me some more, and then we called it a day. Gil said we would start using different weapons the next class, long and short, long vs short and how to deal with that.

I was starting to catch on that part of the training was to make you so stubborn that you were hard to put down, while keeping you calm enough to be soft and smooth. Attacking straight in was great for Rugby but had to be used in the proper place in a fight, or your attack would be turned back on you. Yes I'd heard that, but I was starting to understand it.

That evening, Ingrid dumped me in an ice bath after having a good laugh at the purple patches all over me. Although afterward she warmed me up in her own special way.

Princess Kit and the Pirates.

Apparently, Kitsune was a big hit with the Keen family. Ray told the lunch counter about her latest story.

“It seems the family has started to pay attention to what Kit is doing in our shared dream world, at first out of self defense, to make sure she doesn't mess it up like she did last time, but then they started to get involved in her stories that she tells herself. I'm so proud of my girl.”

Perhaps I should explain that Kit is the biological child of Ray Keen, my fox trickster friend, and Tilly, a local girl. My mentor, Jim, arranged for the fairies to switch Kit from Tilly to Lila and her husband Jonah. A somewhat inventive solution for a young girl who shouldn't have a child so early, and an older couple who had been trying for a child for years.

Ray told us the story: “It seems that Kit has two favourite stuffed animals, an old teddy bear from her father, and an old bunny from her mother. They had almost given up having a child to give their childhood friends to, but with the arrival of my Kit, the toys were handed over.

“Lila and Jonah read her bedtime stories every night, and it seems that she has caught the knack of story telling. When she goes to sleep and moves to our family world, she makes herself another story.

“In the daydream world, the Keens have taken to watching Kit from behind trees or simply swinging on the swings or riding

on the merry go round. They help Kit a bit with the details, guiding her power, but mostly they just watch. Kit is a great story teller.

“When I dropped in to the world, there was a full scale pirate raid happening on Kit's house. Apparently Teddy was now a sea captain and some of Kit's stuffed toys were here crew. Funny thing is, a lot of the Keen youngsters were in there as well, and even one or two of our more playful adults. They all looked like stuffed toys of course, and were in full uniforms.

“I was tempted, but decided I'd better just watch, so I reverted to fox shape and just sat on the grass and enjoyed the show.

“Did I mention I'm proud of my little girl?

“Well, there was a short battle, but the toys who were defending the house were outnumbered, and Princess Kit was soon captured and carried off to the riverside where Teddy's ship was anchored. There was lots of 'oh save me,' with the back of the hand on the forehead from my little ham of an actress. Teddy had a big waxed mustache and he twirled it with a lot of evil laughter. 'Nobody can save you now Princess, I have you!'

“It was wonderful, and the family were laughing and applauding.

“The pirate ship floated down the river to the ocean where they anchored in the middle of the harbour. Teddy put on a dinner party to impress the Princess, lots of sweets and not a healthy bit of food on the table. A two year old's dream dinner.

“While that was going on, Old Bunny was back on shore, organizing the rest of the stuffed animals plus quite a few other Keen kids, and again, a few adults to make sure things didn't get out of hand because there were plenty of swords being handed out.

“Bunny and her crew got into several rowboats just after midnight when the pirates were sound asleep after crashing from that sugar high. The only one still awake was Kit, and she spotted the rowboats coming, so she dropped a ladder over the side. Bunny and her men swarmed up over the ladder, but of course, like any good story, someone woke up and all the pirates came spilling onto the deck.

“What a fight, swords flashing, guns firing, and it took all the efforts of the adults to keep the youngsters from chopping each other to bits. Kit is really serious about her stories, there were stuffed toy pirates and rescuers falling into the water and swinging down from the rigging. I have to admit I was quite caught up in the action.

“Suddenly, Princess Kit got on an upper deck, and yelled “Everybody stop! I've just learned that there is a foreign land that is under attack and we must go there to help. They need a big load of ice cream so that everyone stops fighting, after all, you can't fight if you've got an ice cream cone in your hand. So we must join hands now to help our future friends!

“The pirates and the rescuers all clapped and cheered and shook hands. They fished the folks who went overboard out of the water and Teddy declared 'We have a load of ice cream in

the hold, let's go!

“The pirates and the rescuers climbed up into the rigging and set the sails and off they went, across the ocean and up a river into the middle of a large country where, sure enough, a war was going on.

“As they got to the middle of the fighting, Princess Kit climbed up to the crow's nest where Caw helped her into the nest. He handed her a big megaphone and Kit said 'everybody stop fighting, we have ice cream!'

“With that, both sides of the war stopped shooting at each other and yelled 'hooray' and lined up for ice cream. While they were eating Princess Kit said 'You shouldn't fight, someone could get hurt, why don't you all shake hands and go home to tuck your kids into bed.' And that's what they did.

“Princess Kit and the pirate crew then sailed home and when they got there they all had a picnic and finished up the ice cream. I have to admit, I joined in with the rest of our family and after that, Kit said 'OK everyone, it's almost morning and we should all go back to wake up.'

“Which is what everyone did. I haven't seen our family have so much fun together for centuries, and I really wish I could show Jonah and Lila just what a gem of a kid they are raising.”

Everyone in the diner sat back off the edge of their chairs, it truly was an exciting tale.

“Ray, why don't you write that story down and slip it to Jonah the next time he comes in for coffee. I'll bet Kit would be delighted to hear her own story read back to her, and at least Jonah and Lila would hear the tale their daughter made up.”

“And we want to hear the next story,” said Ingrid, while looking at me in a very worrisome way. We had not talked about kids yet, but I suspect the topic will come up soon.

The Wounded God

I was in the kitchen cooking breakfast for Ingrid when I heard, “Damn it!” From the bedroom.

I knew that tone and I turned off the burners before going in to ask what the problem was.

“I’ve been having the same dream every night,” said Ingrid.

I sat down on the bed to listen, “It’s about an Old God, at least I think he’s a god, one of the randy ones from about five thousand years ago when they made a habit of getting mortals pregnant, but this time he must have screwed up, because he got pregnant and when the daughter was born, she came out of his side, ripped him open and he hasn’t healed yet. I get the impression it was long ago.

“This daughter is grown up and has some power of her own, I’m sure. She wanted to help her father heal and figured somehow that having a kid by him would be the way to do it. Honestly, some of these younger old gods were a bit thick if you ask me. Anyway, the daughter had a boy by her father, only this boy was born insubstantial. He’s barely here in this reality, you can see through him. It’s nuts.

“And now the daughter thinks that getting a wife for her son will make him more substantial.”

“How would that work?” I said.

“I don’t know, it’s a recurring dream and it only goes a bit further every night. I haven’t got to the part where they marry off the grandson. Man I hate it when I get this kind of dream, it’s such a pain.”

“Is it usual for gods to have children growing inside them?”

“It’s not unheard of, but mostly they get a mortal woman pregnant and you get your heroes from there. Hercules and such.”

“Did you know Hercules? He was my favourite in the Saturday morning cartoons.”

“I remember those, yeah I knew him, and his voice was more like Newton’s than like whoever did the Hercules voice. Real high pitched and whiny. Mind you, if you had to do all the shit jobs that boy got assigned, you’d be whiny too.”

“But this old god you’re dreaming about, do you know him?”

“Never seen or heard of him, could be new to the job.”

“You mean he could have some folks out there that believe in him and he showed up?”

“Hah, I know you like his books, and I’ve met Terry Pratchett. He was a lovely man, but gods don’t show up because men believe in them, it’s the other way around. Man showed up because gods believed in man. Trust me, I was around when men showed up, not sure who was actually responsible but I know a lot of the gods were hunting for that fellow for the next

few thousand years. Wanted to give him a good thrashing. Too late now to do anything about it.”

“Were you one of the gods hunting?”

“No, I always thought men were kind of cute, just like you, Artie. Cute.”

“Stop pinching my cheek, listen, about that god you dreamed of, should we try to help him?”

“You are a kind and considerate man, but no. Gods have their own fates and they need to work through them. Gods don’t evolve much, never learn from their experience, they just are. In fact this guy might just be the God of Unintended Consequences, if you think about it. I’d forget about him if I were you, wish I could forget about him too, but I’m afraid I’m going to dream about him again tonight.

“In the meantime, I’m starving.”

“No problem, I’ve got your usual, six eggs, a pound of bacon and four big potatoes fried up, as well as half a loaf of bread toasted. It ought to get you through to morning coffee. Hildy’s had her truffles and a quart of cream already.”

“Like I said, a kindly and talented man.”

Ray had promised to look after the lunch counter for the day, so I could spend it with Ingrid. He also promised no tricks and I almost believed him, but whatever it was, we’d sort it tomorrow. Today I was off with my girl.

Girl? She wasn't certain, but she may be thousands of millions of years old, she was around shortly after the Universe formed, but years didn't exist until Coyote sang the world into being she says. Since she's a god of war, I don't want to challenge her. But then again, she's also the goddess of love, so I'm not going to complain if she doesn't tell me everything. She makes up for it in other ways, and to tell the truth, she looks to be about my age.

After Breakfast we headed to St. Jacobs for the market. We wandered around, looked at the hideous wall-decoration knives, the amber beads, the gemology stones, the leatherware, and then we had some lunch. My favourite is a Monte Cristo sandwich, Ingrid loves the waffles, and Hildi gets a giant dill pickle on a stick every time.

I went through the vegetables and meat to stock up for the lunch counter, and when we were done that, we went into the town where we had coffee at the bakery and bought some treats for the diner. Finally, we wandered down to the silos where I found a nice necklace for Ingrid, which she insisted on wearing right away.

As we walked back, she told me about the original blacksmith and the others who had used the old shop, some of them made pretty good knives she told me. I bought a locally made broom for the diner and we all headed home again.

That evening the three of us dropped into Ken's Keller to sample the new wheat beer the boys had brewed. Like all their beer it was pretty good, if I do say so myself, as the co-owner of the pub.

Ingrid drank about a gallon and a half, as usual. She doesn't so much drink beer as pour it down her throat. I tried my best to keep up, but stopped after three pints. I knew what was in store for me when we got home. Ingrid always gets a bit friendly when she drinks that much.

The two of us bounced off each other on the way home, with Hildy giving us disgusted looks over his shoulder. A couple of the University boys who had been drinking downtown, thought they would challenge us on our way home. It turned out that Gil's lessons were enough for me to send them packing without unleashing Hildy, or the ultimate weapon, Ingrid. That little incident made me feel a bit friendly as well, so we barely made it up the stairs to the apartment before I was removing Ingrid's outer layers of clothing, and the inner.

But that's far enough for you folks, go get your own goddess of love.

I will say, I'm not sure what bruises me more, Gil's classes or Ingrid's cuddles.

Ron and His Angel

Ron had been through the wars. I mean really, through the wars, he was in one of those where-is-that-place, proxy wars that are always bubbling up around the world as the big powers play their games.

He had lost his family, a wife and a little girl, and then he'd lost his left leg just below the knee but he survived. I think this upset him far more than he ever let on, I think he wanted to die with his family. But he didn't. He was evacuated and re-settled in Canada, and eventually drifted to Guelph where he became a regular at the coffee shop.

He'd been through the wars in another way, trying to get on with his life. He'd been through several relationships but they all fell apart after a few months. He tried, the women tried, but his PTSD often triggered violent outbursts, and the constant drinking, the usual symptoms of his condition, made it hard for him to connect. The past sometimes does not let go, and the war is fought again and again.

This morning he was looking particularly rough. As I poured his coffee I asked him how he was.

“Not well, Art, I've been sleeping less than usual and this morning just as I was waking up I heard a woman's voice whispering my name.”

“It was probably a dream, Ron, don't you think? Just the remnant of a dream?”

“I did when it first happened, but it happens most mornings, someone saying my name, it sounds like she is right there, beside my head, on my pillow.”

“Are you thinking of one of your old girlfriends?” I said, not wanting to say it might be his wife.

“My wife, you mean Art? I thought of that, but it’s not an echo of her voice, and as far as I can remember, not a memory of any of my girlfriends’ voices either. The funny thing is, I’m curious about it, but it doesn’t upset me like a voice I recognized would. It’s really sort of a comfort. I am starting to look forward to waking up in the mornings.”

“Do you want me to ask around to see if anyone has any ideas what’s happening?”

“I don’t know, maybe. Like I said, it isn’t bothering me, other than I’m losing a bit more sleep than usual, I keep waking up expecting to hear the voice, but it only happens when it’s time to get up. Never in the middle of the night... Yeah, thanks Art, I guess I’d like to know who she is, or what it is.”

Ron finished his breakfast and went off to work and I thought about it. I could have asked Gil, he’d been in so many wars that he was an expert on all the effects of PTSD. Unfortunately he had disappeared, saying there is a new war in Europe and he felt he should be there.

I did ask Ingrid, and she said that she didn’t really deal with that sort of problem, only with the fallen. When I asked her if

she should be over in Europe, she cupped my cheek and said “I am my love, and it hurts me, as it always does, but I’m here with you too, and trust me, that helps. I wish I could help Ron, but I don’t know what might be happening with him.

“Can you get in touch with John? You told me about his relationship with Lilith. It’s just possible that she would know what is happening with Ron.”

“Lilith? She’s some sort of healer isn’t she? Jim seemed to know about her, do you think she could help Ron?”

“Art, she’s the original succubus, do you know what those are? Good, well she was Adam’s original wife, according to one of the middle eastern religions, but she was a bit too independent and took off on her own. The Christian church made her into some sort of demon, like they often did with uppity women, but she’s not a demon, she’s not evil or good, she’s just a woman who has certain powers. John told you what a good healer she is, and Jim could see that she had real affection for John. She’s capable of love, like anyone else, she just doesn’t like being tied down and controlled. I mean who does?”

I had a vision of Ingrid reacting to me being some sort of dominating male jerk. She’d probably let Hildy chew on my liver.

“So you think it might be a succubus that’s whispering to Ron?”

“It’s been known to happen, ask Lilith.”

“Alright, I’ll ask Caw if he’s seen John around, he’ll know where Lilith is.”

And I did, and Caw told me that he and Lilith were not far away, just up north a bit, working in a resort on Lake Huron. I looked it up in Jim’s always up-to-date phone book and called.

John said that he and Lilith would be off for a couple of days at the next weekend, so we arranged to meet at the lunch counter.

“You’re doing those eggs all wrong,” said Lilith after I’d met her. “Let me show you how.” Before I knew it, she was behind the counter and cooking. Having her stand so close to me made me fear for my life, after all Ingrid was sitting not too far away, and so was John, but I was so sexually attracted to this beautiful woman that I almost grabbed her and bent her over the counter.

She noticed, sort of grinned an apology and suddenly she was just a woman who was cooking on my grill.

John and Ingrid were falling off their chairs laughing at me. Ha, ha, but it did give me an appreciation for just how powerful Lilith is. Then I started to pay attention to what she was doing with the eggs. I could see her point, but I said, “that’s a new way for me, I haven’t seen that before, thanks. But I rarely have a reason to cook enough eggs for fifty people at the same time.”

“Oops,” said Lilith, “sorry, force of habit.”

“No problem, we’ll have fried egg for the Thursday

sandwiches, they'll freeze until then."

Lilith and John listened as I told them the story of Ron and his whispering voice. Lilith thought a moment and said, "That does sound like one of my kind, I don't keep track of them but tonight I'll go look to see what's happening."

With that, they spent the morning in the diner, John talking with the various characters in the place, Lilith giving me cooking instruction, and I spent the morning trying to make sure she didn't make fifty of every order. Ingrid watched and smiled.

After work, we all went downstairs to the pub where John met the Kobolds for the first time and sampled enough of their beers to get a glorious drunk on. He took to the stage and started belting out old logging songs, and Amber stepped in for some accompaniment on her fiddle. The place loved it, and Lilith sat watching him with a dreamy look in her eye.

I have to admit, sometimes I need to pretend these people are just people, I mean, the original wife, the oldest girlfriend in man's history, who had been in the wet dreams of countless young men, watching this big lumberjack type belting out song after song, with stars in her eyes. It was a bit unnerving. I suppose if I had another two hundred years of this I'd get used to it.

Ingrid noticed me looking and leaned over to hug my arm. "Don't question the heart," she said.

When the evening was over, John and Lilith went to stay with friends and then headed back to their jobs.

A day or two later, Ron came in looking better than he had for quite a while. I asked what had happened. “I woke up a couple of days ago and there was a discussion going on in my head. It was weird, but certainly interesting.

“Two women were talking about me. It went sort of like, ‘What are your intentions with this man.’ ‘He’s in pain, I want to help him.’ ‘Are you sure you can, you know it will be hard on you.’ ‘I realize that, I’m not some kid of 300 you know.’ ‘All right, get hold of me if you need me.’

“After that I got up and started to feel a bit better. Then each day afterward I have heard the voice saying my name, but this time I know she’s trying to help me, and that has made me less worried about hearing things. The pain in my heart is still there, but it’s like some sort of angel is caring for me so it’s a little easier to live with it.

“I think you might be right,” I told him, “you might just have an angel looking after you. I’m really happy to see you feeling better, my friend.”

The Chosen One

“OW,” I hit my head yet again on the pipe overhead, “I should have brought a hard hat.”

“Don't complain so much,” Ray said, “you'll let him know we're after him.”

“I still don't get it, why are we chasing some poor guy through the underground streams, I mean if he's hiding down here he must not want to be found.”

“He's the chosen one Art, they need him.”

“Need him for what?”

“I don't know, what do you need a chosen one for? He's got some big task to do to save the day, it's tradition, you can't go against tradition. He's got to go play his part.”

“Look, he obviously doesn't want to, it's cold, wet and miserable down here, and I don't want to be here. If he's here there's got to be worse out there for him.”

“Art, listen, we're the searchers, there's got to be searchers who find the chosen one. Don't you read, for goodness sake? You know how this goes.”

“I know that OW, my poor head is throbbing, and that my feet are wet and that I'm cold. What I don't know is why you and I have to be chasing this guy down, why don't the damned Elves

or the Kobolds, or the men of the shires get their asses down here and look for the poor begger.”

“It's tradition Art, you've got to have someone else find the chosen one, some heroes who go and find him and guide him to his destiny.”

“Ray, it's obvious we're going to be guiding him kicking and screaming to his destiny. He doesn't want to be the chosen one, and I don't blame him. Don't the chosen ones face all sorts of bad things, get the hell beaten out of them and end up barely alive, crawling through the mud to do their thing? Who wants that?”

“It's tradition,” Ray said, rather petulantly.

“It's tradition to burn witches and their familiars Ray, should I denounce you to the witch-finder general and point the finger at some poor old woman living alone in the woods so you two can get burned at the stake?”

“That doesn't happen any more, Art, and you know it.”

“But being a chosen one does?”

“Art, it's not our call, the Kobolds need him for a great deed, and they're your partners in the bar, so you have to help them.”

“Well I don't like it, and I, OW, don't like wandering around in these storm drains.”

“Not storm drains, this is Silver Creek, famous for being the

source of water for the original Silver Creek Lager brewed by Sleeman's Breweries.”

“They're nowhere near here Ray and you know it, they're miles down the road and they use the same damned aquifer that everyone else in town uses. I shudder to think what beer made from this road runoff would taste like.”

“Maybe better than the rat beer the guys brewed up last month.”

“Oh lord, I thought they were kidding, just doing one of those cutsie names for another IPA. Honestly, how do you make beer out of rats anyway?”

“I think they just threw a bunch of dead rats in with the barley when they were malting it...”

“Stop, just stop talking, my stomach isn't that strong and the smell down here isn't helping.”

“Shh, I think I hear something?”

“The chosen one?”

“I hope so, I've heard there are giant blind aligators down here.”

“That's the sewers of New York City you idiot.”

“Are you sure?”

“Look, Ray, can't you turn into a fox or something and sniff this guy out? I'd like to get back to the diner and get started on lunch. You remember the last time Larry tried to make paninis?”

“I'm a fox, not a bloodhound Art, I don't do sniffing and snuffling, and being in this muck with my fox feet? Not a chance, I'll keep my nose up here thank you.”

“Fine, let's just keep going, we're nearer the end than the start and this thing doesn't branch, he's got to be up ahead of us. So what happens when we catch up with him? What if he puts up a fight and doesn't want to come with us?”

“Nah, the rules say that he comes along once we catch up with him. Shouldn't be a problem, and you've got all that fighting skill now. I hear that you and Sam are still training on your own now that Gil has gone to Europe.”

“You mean Sam is still beating nine kinds of hell out of me, yes. It's too bad Gil figured he had to go, after he'd decided he was done with war.”

“Well he did say that this one was too clear-cut to ignore.”

“Still, it would be nice to have him here to slap Sam down once in a while, she's getting vicious.”

“She told me you were getting better Art, so she's stepping it up.”

“Doesn't feel like it. Hey, I hear something too, let's OW, damn

it. Let's go.”

We caught up with him just as the storm pipes gave way to the hundred yards Silver Creek ran above ground before it hit the Speed River. He was trying to get up the embankment to the railroad tracks but Ray got to him and clapped a hand on his shoulder and said “You're nicked mate.” At which point they guy spun around and punched Ray in the nose.

By that time I'd caught up and twisted the guy's arm up behind his back.

“I thought he wasn't supposed to fight back,” I said to Ray.

“These modern times,” said Ray, shaking his head. Well actually he said something more like “theb boderd dimes,” but you get the idea.

We hauled this guy back to the pub, where we presented him to the Kobalds. They seemed very happy to see him, and thanked us.

“Just what task does this guy need to perform,” I said.

“Task?”

“Yeah, he's the chosen one, right? What is his great destiny?”

Ken looked from me to Ray and back again. “Chosen one?”

“Ken, I just spent two hours in a sewer pipe and got a concussion from hitting my head. What is going on.”

Ray was also looking daggers at Ken, beginning to suspect something.

“Well,” said Ken “this deadbeat skipped out on the bill last night, and so we needed to get him back to pay up. I may have, sort of, implied that he was a chosen one to Ray, to get him interested. But he owes us money, right Art, we both own the pub, right, and so this guy owes us both.”

I looked at Ray, who was reaching for the illegal expandable baton he keeps in his side pocket, and put out my hand to stop him. I looked back at Ken and, although I wanted to join Ray in beating the hell out of him, just said “How much?”

“It was a thirty dollar tab, Art!”

“So you're saying that this guy owes you thirty dollars, and for that, Ray and I chased him half way across Guelph, underground, is that right?”

Ken was starting to catch on that I wasn't happy, “Well it's the principle of the thing...”

I held up my hand, stopping him, reached into my pocket and pulled out my wallet. I handed over thirty dollars to Ken, grabbed Ray and the “chosen one” by their collars and we walked out of the bar.

“Come on you two, coffee is on me.”

Art Hears Voices

I don't know what it is. Maybe I've been around the lunch counter too long, but when I'm at home and sit in a certain chair I have started to hear voices. Not clear, they are too faint, or too far away for me to make out what they are saying, but I hear them just the same.

I asked Ingrid about it, but she just laughed. "No voices, no little Brownies or Pixies or anything else. I would know."

"Well you tell me what it is then, I can certainly hear them."

"Fine, where do you sit when you hear them?"

"Here, at my desk, they're right over there."

"What, in the direction of the fridge?"

"Yes, I can hear them..."

"When the fridge comes on, right? Art you're hearing the noises of the compressor, and your brain is trying to understand those noises as human voice. It's just the way your brain is wired."

"Well, OK but what about all the supernatural beings that hang around the lunch counter?"

"Art, they aren't supernatural, am I supernatural? Does that feel supernatural to you," Ingrid said, as she pinched my butt.

“You know what I mean!”

“Yes, I do, but what I’m saying is that every flash in the corner of your eye, every voice you think you hear on the wind, is not automatically some supernatural event.”

Alright, what about the Puslinch Lake island monastery and the ghost?

“There was a church there, but it was never a monastery and yes, a kid or two drowned there but no ghosts.”

“We’ve got ghosts in the lunch counter.”

“Yes we do, but they say there’s nobody haunting Puslinch Lake.”

“How about Al Capone’s mistress, murdered on the top floor of the Albion, humn?”

“Nice girl, she was just in the wrong card game at the wrong time with a bit too much smuggled rum in her. Didn’t duck fast enough, nothing too sinister there.”

“And all the smuggling tunnels under downtown?”

“Dude, what’s supernatural about smuggling tunnels? Seriously?”

“And the haunted Arena that’s now the Paisley Mall?”

“It was a dairy, not an arena, and there is no ghost of spilled milk floating around, I promise you.”

I was beginning to think that Ingrid was making fun of me a bit more than usual. Her little way of saying she loves me, I assure you. “How about the professorville ghost?”

“The what? I haven’t heard that one.”

“Well, in the late ‘70s some students living in the basement of a Professor’s house were kept locked there to write all his class notes. Eventually this professor went on sabbatical and forgot the kids in his basement. They died of starvation and ever since they roam around the neighbourhood begging for food.”

“Never heard of that one Art, but when did you ever meet a student who wasn’t starving to death and begging for food? No need to put ghosts into that story.”

“The Boathouse Tea Room, it was a naval ship that sunk with all hands and was later re-floated and brought up the Speed and hauled onto land.”

“Art does it look like a ship to you? It was the clubhouse of the Sea Cadets, so it had a boat’s name. Honestly, you’re reaching my friend.”

“The bottom dwelling water monster that lives under the river where Edinburgh crosses the Speed.”

“They drain the river every fall, you goofball, you can see the stones at the bottom, no monster, and before you say it, there’s

a dam so it doesn't go downstream to sunnier climes for the winter."

"Fine, then the ghost train."

"Where, the one that runs along the speed on the other side of the Boathouse?"

"Yeah, on the radial line trail."

"That does exist, Art. I used to take the electric cars from Toronto up to here to visit friends. That's when I started to like Guelph. When it went out of business, and the track was ripped up, the spirit of one of the cars kept running."

"Really, I was making that one up."

"Well good guess. It exists."

"You wouldn't be putting me on would you? I run on that trail, ride it with my bike too, and I've never seen a ghost train. Lots of real ones down the Junction line, but no ghosts over the trail."

"Let's go for a walk Art, and I'll show you."

So we wandered down to the Boathouse, had an ice cream and watched the crazy geese chase the kayakers around looking for food, and then set out. Across the bridge you turn left down the road and just behind the golf course you start walking. Providing you can duck the stray golf balls.

We went under the Victoria street bridge and turned the corner to go behind the Turfgrass institute. A couple of hundred yards down, Ingrid turned us off the trail toward the river. There was the broken down train bridge, which I'd seen before. Ingrid took us a little bit upstream and then said "Lean over to about eight inches from the ground and look at that bridge, wait for the sun to hit it and then squint a little."

I did, and son of a gun, there was the bridge, intact again, and tracks running up to it on both sides.

"Shh, listen, here comes the train car," said Ingrid, "keep the bridge in your eye and wait for it, just about now."

Sure enough, I saw the damned train car, and the overhead wires that powered it. It was heading toward town. "Where did it go?"

"It went down the trail to James Street, where we came in, and hooked up with the streetcar line out to OAC and to the downtown core. The whole thing sort of grew organically from when old George Sleeman built the first line to get his brewery workers to their jobs on time."

"An electric streetcar line to Toronto and running around Guelph would be great today, what happened?"

"What always happens, it stopped making money and in the late '30s they shut the whole thing down. I've seen it hundreds of times, and it always seems like a stupid idea fifty years later when you've got to rebuild the stuff you got rid of."

“Well, now I know why it’s called the Radial Line Trail. Let’s go back and follow the old line into town and have dinner at the Albion, maybe we’ll meet the ghost.”

“Don’t you want to eat at Ken’s Keller? You get a pretty good discount after all.”

“No, I’m a bit pissed off at the Kobolds at the moment, if we go there I might pop Ken on the nose.”

Ingrid laughed and grabbed my arm. She called Hildy back from wherever he was rooting around, and we went to the Albion for burgers, and for beer that wasn’t made of rats.

Bite Me

“Mara sent me to talk to you, Art.”

James looked like he had something on his mind. You get pretty good at telling that in this job. I suppose I'm sort of like a bartender. Well, not like the Kobolds downstairs, their solution to all problems is another beer.

“What's on your mind, and what can I get for you while I'm listening?” I guess I'm as bad as the Kobolds, my solution is more food.

“The farmer's special please. Look, I asked Mara to bite me.”

Larry looked up.

“As a wolf, Larry, as a wolf.”

Megan was at the counter and she took over the conversation.
“Why do you want her to do that James?”

“So that I can be with her forever.”

“James, I'm immortal, but Mara's kind isn't, she will get old and die just like you will.”

“But she hasn't changed since I first met her in summer camp.”

“Tell her that, women love to hear that, but it's not true. Her kind is very hard to kill, and she doesn't get sick very often, but

she does age, truly.

“Is that the only concern you have? Do you miss the nights when she's a wolf on your bed instead of in it with you?”

At this point Larry started to say something but decided against it when Megan growled low in her throat. Yeah, my hair stood on end too.

James grinned, “Can't say I never thought of it, but no, I don't mind that. I just want to be with her as long as I can.”

“So you asked her to make you a wolf too. I like that, but do you know just what it is you're asking her to do?”

“For one thing, she'll be pack leader. Yes I know she's pretty dominant in your relationship, but that's partly because you're still thinking of when you first met her, when she was a trip leader and you were just a kid. This is different. She'll be in charge, and maybe you won't mind that, but have you asked her what she thinks about that?”

“And then there's the changes. I'm a wolf-woman, I just decide which form I want and I'm that form. I've heard that Mara's kind goes through a different process, and that it hurts.”

“Mara became a wolf at a very young age, I've talked with her about it. She's used to it, but I suspect she is very worried about how you'll deal with it. You're not a kid any more James.”

“Why don't you go get Mara and we'll talk some more about this?”

“She should be here soon, she was just doing some shopping and said she'd be here.”

“What is it that you're most afraid of James?” I said, putting his breakfast down.

“I guess of getting older and older while she stays the same.”

Megan jumped in again, “Like I said, James, she will get older too. It's just that she's so healthy, seldom sick, and the change rids her of things like bullets, not that she's got to worry much about that, but it's her that changes, and she doesn't carry other things along with her, including foreign things like bacteria, other than her own gut of course.

And before you say it, that's not really a fair trade for being a wolf. It's not. It's more like a small compensation for the pain and disorientation she goes through.”

“But she doesn't seem to be in pain or disoriented when she changes.”

“She's had practice. You haven't. Look, she won't outlive you by too many years, provided you're moderately healthy for the rest of your life, and barring accidents to you both.”

“What about you Megan? What if you bit me?”

“You would say ouch, you idiot. I am a spirit being, I can't pass on what I am, I just am, so if I bite you it will hurt, you will bleed, and nothing else will happen.”

James looked a bit dejected and was quiet for a while as he ate his breakfast.

Mara came in with a couple of bags of groceries. “I got some things for the Thursday sandwiches Art, can I give them to you now?”

“Sure Mara, thanks. Your partner here has been talking with Megan about what he asked you to do.”

“Good, I hope you straightened him out, Megan.”

“I don't know, he seems pretty determined. James what is it that concerns you most?”

“I guess it's to be older than Mara, and to die first. That makes me very sad.”

“Fine, did you consider that most men die before their partners? Women are just better at living longer and healthier so that's perfectly normal. You're already ten years or more younger than Mara, what would you feel about outliving her? It could happen if she bites you.”

James looked like he might never have thought about that. “That would be horrible.”

Megan kept after him, “And what happens if you stay years younger than Mara, does she remain your trip guide forever?”

“Oh, I wouldn't mind that.”

“James you're being lazy, give the poor child a break. Look, if you stay as you are, you're eventually going to look much older than Mara, and then you will have a partner who's young and beautiful, you'll be the envy of all your friends.”

James looked at Mara, who said “I've always liked older men you fool, I look forward to having an older partner who, frankly, takes the lead. I'm a traditional girl, despite being a wolf, and if I wasn't in love with you, I'd never have picked you for a partner. Megan is right, we both still see you as the kid I first met at camp. I want to think of you as a man.

If Megan says I will live about as long as you do, James, I'm delighted. I have no idea how long I'll live, but I'm happy to age alongside you. It makes me feel better.”

James had a half grin and said “You haven't aged a day since the first time I met you Mara.”

That earned him a giant hug and a kiss, and Megan hid a grin behind her coffee.

Ray spoke up for the first time, “James, if you want to know what it's like being a wolf, I can show you, if Mara is willing.”

Mara nodded, “Do it,”

Ray stood up and moved behind the couple. He put a hand on each shoulder and James went stiff. You could see agony pass over his face, then horror. I looked from Ray to Megan and they both shook their head, so we watched as James went

through what Mara felt each time she changed, then he saw what it was like to be a wolf. His eyes even changed, became more wolf-like and his lips pulled back in a snarl.

After a few minutes, the agony passed over his face again and Ray took his hands away. It took several more minutes before James could speak.

“That's what it's like?” He asked Mara.

She nodded.

“Oh my God, I'm so sorry baby, I had no idea how much control you have to have, to keep from ripping my throat out. I'm so sorry I asked you to bite me.”

“It's not always that bad,” Mara said, “I'm just hungry right now.”

And with that, I dropped another farmer's special in front of her, to a relieved round of laughter.

Jenny the Dip

Jenny was perhaps the worlds worst pickpocket. It wasn't that she couldn't steal from people, she was one of the best. It was just that she couldn't keep what she stole. You'll see what I mean.

Jenny sat with a coffee, warming up her hands and staring sadly at her morning's take. There were watches, rings, wallets and various other bits and pieces that she'd managed to steal.

“Good haul this morning Jenny?” I asked, thinking it would cheer her up.

“I guess, I just don't want to pick them up again.”

“Yeah, I get that, you want a refill?”

Jenny nodded and then picked up a watch. “Damn, his grandfather's watch, great sentimental value, only thing he has from him, and it's expensive too. Shame.” She waved her hand as if throwing the watch up in the air and the watch disappeared.

“Wallet, lots of cash and cards, but she's a single mom with three kids, hell the cards are maxed out anyway.” Again the toss, again the wallet disappeared.

“Wedding ring, but he died, she would be heartbroken.” Flip, gone.

This went on through the whole pile. You see, Jenny was a great pickpocket, but she was also a first class divvy, she could pick up an object and be connected with the former owner. So she picked up another wallet and she could tell the man who used to own it, had just lost his job, and his wife had lost hers a week ago, two kids to feed, back it went into his pocket.

Don't ask me why she didn't know this when she stole the items, but she didn't get the story until after she had stolen the thing and then picked it up later. Maybe it had something to do with separation from the victim.

Yes, she could magic them back to their owners. She had no idea how she did that, or how she became a divvy. Maybe it was when she developed a conscience after a few years of being a thief.

She sent back just about everything she stole, so we didn't really consider her a thief. Well, we considered her a very bad thief maybe. She kept enough from people who didn't care that they lost a little money, to be able to get by.

It was all a bit sad, because she really was an amazing pickpocket.

“What the hell?” she said, holding another wallet and frowning.

“What is it?”

“I can't feel this person, it's as if they never existed or something, there's no connection at all. Look, it's a local

named Julie, she lives downtown here, but she's gone."

"Nothing? She's not dead maybe?"

"No, I could tell if she was dead, this feels like she never was."

"Oh shit, a weak spot." I said.

I needed Hugo, he wasn't in the diner but he had taught me a trick to get in touch with him. I picked up my phone and touched two buttons, soon the line was ringing and Hugo picked up.

He arrived about twenty minutes later and we explained the situation.

"It sounds like a weak spot, we need to find it."

"Jenny, do you remember where you stole this wallet? If we go there can you maybe track whoever owns it?"

"Yeah, I can do that, I know who owned it, and I can tell where she's gone, there's just nobody at the end of the trail."

"Alright, Hugo and I will go with you, Ray can you mind the store?"

Ray nodded, "You know how to get me if you need me."

The three of us walked into the center of town, to where Jenny had met this girl. Once we got there, Jenny took off her shoes and walked around a little. I looked at her with a frown and she

said, “better than walking on my hands, I need to touch the ground where she walked to track her. I can tell she came from that direction, and went this way.”

So we followed Jenny and her bare feet for a block or two until we came to the Red Brick Cafe, one of the coffee shops downtown. Jenny walked through the door, frowned, and came back out again. “She just disappears here in the doorway.”

“Intermittent weak spot?” I asked Hugo.

“Likely, let me check,” he said as Jenny put her shoes back on.

He cocked his head to the side and made a few motions with his hands. “Yes, it’s here, shall I close it?”

“Woah, we should see if we can get this Julie back first don’t you think?”

“If you wish, step through the door when I tell you, and be ready to step back fast if we need to, who knows where it goes. Maybe into empty space.”

I hadn’t thought about that, but I figured we could hold our breath long enough to get back.

“Now.” and we went through to a world that didn’t look all that different than our own, including the goons in uniforms pointing weapons at us.

“You are now prisoners of ICE, do not try to escape, you will be searched and taken to a humane detention centre.”

Well that sounded unpleasant and I was about to start fighting when Hugo put a hand on my arm and shook his head slightly.

Fine, off we went with the goons. As we went through the nearby gates to this detention centre, I noticed that we were being held by the Inter-dimensional Containment and Exploitation department, a subsidiary of Oberon Enterprises.

“This isn’t a government facility?” I said

“Sure it is, Oberon runs this area.”

Fine, fine, different dimension, same old tricks. We were herded into a huge area where hundreds of people of various shapes and sizes, including kids, were milling around doing jobs that didn’t seem to make any sense. Some were breaking up rocks, others were sewing, melting plastic or some sort of metal. Then there were those who were soldering circuit boards.

Hugo leaned over and said “from each according to their abilities, to those who exploit those abilities.” I looked at him and he pointed to another sign. Oh great, wonder if they need a short order cook.

I looked at Jenny and she nodded “Just over there.” I looked at a very confused looking young woman.

“Hugo?” I asked.

“Just her or all of them?”

“All of them.”

Hugo waved again, and the entire population was doubled. I looked again at Hugo and he said “none of the guards can hear.”

“Listen up all of you, we’re leaving now, if you want to go home, come with us. The guards are fooled by your doubles but they won’t be once we cross back through the weak spot and close it. Now move if you’re coming.”

Needless to say, some of them stayed behind, muttering things like conspiracy and freedom and ‘what right do you have to decide for me’. We un-doubled them and left them behind.

We got to the gate to the compound but it was locked, Hugo started to wave but Jenny produced a key she had boosted from the guard and out we went.

Back on a run to the weak spot and luck was on our side, or maybe a bad movie script kicked in, whatever, it was open and through it we went on the run.

As the last of us got through, Hugo closed the damned thing.

A lot of the folks took off to find their families, but a couple came back to the lunch counter where they told us that they’d tried to go in to the Red Brick, but ended up with ICE. It seems that those guys noticed the weak spot and decided to exploit the poor beggars that walked through. They couldn’t have made any money from the random work the prisoners were

doing, but that didn't seem to matter.

It was the power over others that was the important thing. Like I said, same old same old.

The Doppelganger

She looked a bit beat up, and also a bit like she needed to talk.

As I dropped a coffee in front of her and took her order I asked
“How are you today?”

“Shitty, it was the worst night of my life, last night.”

“Want to tell me about it?”

“No, I just want to forget about it.”

“Fair enough, I'll go get your order.”

Mara was in getting a couple of take-out coffees for herself and James, but I saw her take her phone out and tell James she would be a while.

She sat down beside this girl and popped the top off her cup.
“Hello, my name's Mara, mind if I sit?”

“No, not at all, my name's Janis, Jan for short.”

“Good to meet you. What brings you in to the diner today?”

“It was the closest public place to my apartment, I've never been in before, but it seems like a friendly place.”

“It is. It's also a story telling place. Art there loves stories and he's even been known to throw in a free breakfast for a good

one.”

“Really, I might have one, some time. Right now though, I need to calm down and get some calories into me.”

At that point, I dropped the farmer's special in front of her and reached over to add one of the hammerhead dutchies from the bakery. “Here's your breakfast and here's a few extra calories, on the house.”

She looked at the dutchie, heavy, full of raisins and covered in icing. She gave me a crooked smile and said “Thanks, if I survive the sugar spike I suspect I'll enjoy that.”

The exchange seemed to let her relax a little and she tucked into her breakfast while I dropped a bacon sandwich in front of Mara and gave her a ceramic cup of coffee. Mara nodded and took a bite of her sandwich.

“OK, you want a story? Here's one. Last night I met my doppelganger, she was in my bedroom and she beat twelve kinds of hell out of a guy I'd brought home.

“I picked this guy up in a bar, he was nice and a real sweet talker, but he turned into Mr. Goodbar when we got into bed. I said no and he didn't take no for an answer. He smacked me around a bit, hence the bruises, but just when I was afraid he was going to really hurt me, there I was, behind him.

“I mean, my double was there. Hell I don't know what I mean, the door was locked and I didn't hear this girl come in, but there she was. This guy was about to punch, instead of slap, me

like he'd been doing, and this girl grabbed his arm and his hair and hauled him off of the bed.

“She pulled him up and dropped him onto her knee as she knelt on the floor. She hauled his head one way and that arm the other and I could hear his shoulder dislocate. She stood and slammed his back onto the floor and then stomped on his throat. The guy died about three seconds after she showed up. And then she was gone.

“He's still there on my bedroom floor, I wandered around the streets for a while and came here when I saw you were open. I guess I'll be heading to the police station right after breakfast although I have no idea what I'm going to tell them. Some double of mine shows up out of nowhere, kills a guy, and then just vanishes?

“I'm heading to jail because of that asshole.”

Megan had been listening, she'd been spending a lot of time around the place lately, and she practically licked her lips. “Jan, tell me if anyone saw you with this guy in the bar, I mean someone who knew this guy?”

“I don't think so, he didn't talk to anyone else or even look at them.”

“Anybody see you go into your place with him?”

“No, that thought crossed my mind while he was beating me, nobody saw him, if he killed me he could walk out and never be caught.”

Megan nodded to herself, “Where do you live Jan?”

Jan told her and asked “What are you going to do?”

“I'm going to go take a look.”

“OK, here's my keys, I made sure I locked the door.”

“Good thinking, but I don't need them.” Megan looked over at me and I nodded. I looked around the place and all the customers nodded in turn. If it was like Jan told us, Megan would clean things up.

“What is she going to do?” Asked Jan.

“She's going to take a look and she'll decide what to do when she gets there,” I said as I refilled her cup.

Mara turned to Jan, “Tell me Jan, has anything like this ever happened to you before?”

“What, go to bed with a guy who beat me up? No, never.”

“No, no, have you ever seen your doppelganger before?”

“Never, although there was a time when I was a kid that I saw things... We were in a train junkyard and there was an old kitchen car there with big refrigerators. My brother dared me to get inside one of them and he shut the door on me.

“At first I panicked, but then I was watching him from outside,

I could see that he was still hanging around, thinking he was such a clever fellow and I just watched him and waited.

“I knew exactly when he opened the door and when he did I kicked him square in the face with my heel. I hopped out and punched him a few times before I realized he was out cold and falling. I caught him as he fell so he wouldn't hurt himself. I felt pretty bad about what I'd done, but I've always had a bit of a temper. Anyway, he was fine, came around almost immediately, and he never did anything like that again.”

“I bet he didn't. Jan you've heard of creatures like werewolves that can change shape right? Well I think you might be able to do something like that. Not change into something else, but to maybe project yourself. When you were in the fridge, you were also outside, where you could see what your brother was doing. If you could do that as a kid, maybe now, as an adult, you can project yourself physically.

“I have no idea if that's even possible, but it makes more sense to me than your exact twin walking twice through a locked door into your apartment.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jan looked horrified, you're suggesting I'm some sort of monster that splits in two to murder people? Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde maybe?

“No, no, please calm down, I don't mean you change into a monster, I mean you are your own doppelganger, you project another you when you need it.”

“Look, as far as locks are concerned, your friend said she didn’t need keys to get into my place. Maybe that’s how that other girl got in there.”

Mara could see that talking wasn’t going to work. “Calm down and watch me carefully Jan. Don’t get scared, just watch.” And with that, Mara changed into a quite small wolf for a short time and changed back. There’s nothing dramatic that happens when Mara changes, it’s just a sort of smooth shift from one to the other, and it doesn’t take very long. Still, she made an extra effort not to show just how painful it is.

Jan’s eyes were wide. “That’s some sort of trick isn’t it?”

“No, I really shifted into a wolf.”

“Oh shit, I’m sorry I called you a monster, I didn’t realize.”

“Don’t worry about it, but I’ll tell you that I turn into more of a monster when I’m on my period than when I turn into a wolf.”

That broke the tension, Jan smiled and said “I hear you,” and then she stopped, “but I killed a guy last night, is that what’s going to start happening to me?”

“Slow down, Megan will be back soon and she’ll sniff out what happened.”

“Sniff out?” said Jan, but she left it there.

With that, the two girls looked into their coffees for a few

moments until Megan came back in the door. I looked a question at her and she nodded.

I felt relieved, and said “Jan, Megan will have a report on what she found, but first, Megan can you show Jan what you look like in another shape?”

Megan frowned, shrugged, and was a massive white wolf. Then she was Megan again.

Jan jumped half way out of her seat, “Jesus, are you all werewolves!”

Megan looked a bit offended, “I’m not, we think Mara might be, but that’s it as far as wolves are concerned here. Ray is a fox and Art, well we’re not sure what Art is.”

“Oh thanks,” I said, “Jan I just wanted to make sure you know you’re not alone. If you can make another you when you need to, that’s just who you are.

“Megan, what did you sniff out?”

“As far as I can tell, Jan told us the truth, it happened just as she said. Since this guy had it coming to him, and nobody saw what happened last night, as far as everyone here is concerned, Jan walked home last night, alone. This guy walked out of the bar and probably caught a bus out of town or something.

“Jan your place is clean, no bodies, no blood, no evidence. Do you understand?”

Jan nodded slowly, and looked around at faces that were nothing but supportive.

“Jan,” I said, “this lunch counter is unusual, and you’ll find many people here who have problems similar to yours, not dead bodies in the bedroom, but problems just the same. Now I can see that you’re worried about your ability, and that’s good. We can help you.”

Mara nodded and said, “I have some experience with people going through changes and coming to grips with who they are, I’ll give you a hand.”

Jan seemed about to cry, when Ray said “I always wondered what it would be like to bed twins.”

The look Jan gave him wasn’t even close to crying, and the rest of the place started laughing. Jan included, it seemed she would got over her experience soon enough.

The Underground Railroad

It had been a busy week. Ken and his crew of Kobolds had dug fifty feet further down and created a train stop on the railroad. They figured they would make a fortune selling lunches and setting up a bar for those heading through to the west coast.

No sooner did they get it set up than the refugees began pouring through their new station. Ken was in a funk. “It's costing us business, Art, I'm telling you, it's awful. Instead of making money selling meals, we're making meals and handing them out for free. We're going to go bust.”

“What are you talking about Ken, you're making a fortune selling beer and whatever else that stuff you sell is called.”

“It's mead, Art, and cider, and blotch.”

“Yeah, that stuff, who drinks that stuff?”

“Kobolds, and they drink a lot of it, so don't complain. Every time you come into the place you say loudly that someone has run a flatulent goat through the place. Look, it's our biggest seller.”

“All right, I'll stop complaining but it does smell like goat farts.”

“It's supposed to. Anyway, we're not selling much of anything these days. We're shut down until ten at night, and we've got full shifts making sandwiches and coffee, and shunting it down

to the train station to feed the refugees.”

“I'm sure it's just temporary, the wars will be over soon won't they?”

“I don't know about that, the last European wars of this scale lasted six years.”

“Well it's a good thing you're doing here Ken, and I'm sure the business will come back, but I know you, I would be willing to bet that what you make from 10pm to 4am, more than makes up for what you're spending on meals for the women and kids who are coming through.”

“Fine, yes, and we'd be doing it even if we were actually losing money, but you don't need to be telling people that.”

“Your secret good side is safe with me Ken.

“So where are all these folks going?”

“Mostly to the prairies, a lot of them have relatives there, and the rest are being hosted by the community.”

“Well it's a shame it's happening again. It seems that there's always somebody with lots, who wants more, and tries to take it from those who are weaker.”

“Maybe weaker in arms, but not unwilling to fight, not this time. It's kids and grandparents coming through, all the fighters have stayed to fight.

“Let's hope it stays between the giants and the pixies, if the other folk get pulled into the fight it would be a disaster. There's a lot more fearsome weapons now than there were a hundred years ago.

“Hey, did I tell you that while we were digging we found Al Capone's long lost safe?”

Really?

“Yeah, but all we found in it was a gold wedding band.”

“Did Ingrid put you up to telling me that?” I said to his innocent looking face.

At that moment, a pixie child came up to me and said “Are you my daddy?”

I bent down one one knee and was about to answer when Ken said, “Away with ye, gramps, quit your fooling around. And wait, take these sandwiches with ye.

“The cheek of the old devil, he was 800 if he was a day.”

I brushed off my knee and said, with a red face, “I'd better get back to the shop,” and started to climb back on the stairs, leaving Ken to his mission.

Once there, I found a fellow who looked pretty down in the dumps. My first thought was “you think you have it bad,” but I reminded myself I wasn't here to judge.

“What's the problem my friend? Food not to your liking?”

“Oh no, it's fine, coffee too. No I just realized I've lost a couple of years from my life.”

“Lost?”

“Well, maybe not lost, but I loaned them to a friend and he never repaid them. Now I'm worried that I won't get one of the best times of my life back again. All the stories are gone.”

“That seems a little unlikely, are you sure you didn't just forget what was happening?”

“No, look, I spent two years with an amazing girl about thirty years ago, and at that same time I told my best friend all about what was happening. You see, he was going through a rough patch, so I gave him my two years. It got him through the rough patch, and before he could tell the stories back to me, he moved away.

“I never realized it, not for 30 years, but just recently I understood what had happened. I gave him those two years of my life. I know that because I can't remember them at all.”

“Well you must remember something, or you wouldn't know you're missing them.”

“Oh yes, I remember how I met this girl, I remember when she moved in, then brief flashes of living with her, and I remember how she left to go to a new job in another city.

“But that's it, all the stories, all the good memories I gave to my buddy and he made off with them. The bastard probably thinks that they're his memories now.”

“Can you get in touch with this friend? Ask him to tell you the stories?”

“I did, but he says they're his memories, not mine, and he won't talk to me. I'm afraid I got a bit abusive about it.”

“That is a puzzler then. Listen, my martial arts teacher tells me that we don't notice things that are going as expected, that we only notice things that are jarring, out of place, a danger to us. Things that make us unhappy. You tell me that you were happy with this girl, do you suppose that you didn't create any memories of those times because they weren't painful, that it all went smoothly and so you just didn't notice the time going by?”

“I'd never thought of that, I know that I made notes and took photographs of other periods in my life, but I don't have anything on paper from that time. That's partly why I thought it had been loaned out and lost. Maybe I was thinking that I'd loaned the photos out and hadn't got them back? I wonder.

“If that's so, my time was so happy, so smooth, that I don't remember it at all, except for those few rough patches.

“You know, even if I did actually lose those memories to my buddy, I can choose to believe that it was as you said, that I had a lovely time with this girl, so nice and smooth that I didn't make any notes. I know I parted on good terms and she just

moved on with her life... Yeah, that's great, thanks!"

Well, I thought, you may not be able to solve the big problems, but if you solve the occasional little problem, it's something.

The Foundling

Sam Martin walked in for lunch and noticed a basket in the corner. She also noticed that there was a hell of a racket coming from the basket, as in a baby's cries.

“What's up with the baby?”

“Hi Sam, every couple of years we get a foundling left by the front door. The baby is usually too much of a problem for the parents, or maybe a single girl that met one of our old blood folks.” With that I shot a dirty look at Ray.

“He's not mine Art, I checked, remember. If he was, I'd be able to calm him, but nothing, I can't get a read at all.”

“You mean the baby is magical?” said Sam.

“More likely half old blood,” I said, “old blood babies are just like regular babies, not much trouble other than gas problems. The ones left with us tend to be babies that disappear, or set their blankets on fire, or turn their parents into frogs. That sort of thing.”

“Damn it,” said Sam “I can hardly hear you.”

Hugo made a pass with his hands and the baby was silent.

“What, did you do, Hugo?”

“Nothing to the babe, I just set up an interference pattern for

the sound, like noise cancellation for earphones.”

“And you couldn't have done that three hours ago?”

“Didn't know it bothered you, I'm half deaf so it didn't bother me much.”

Shaking my head I turned back to Sam, “we can usually figure out what the problem is, or what mix of old blood the baby has and send it along to the proper people, but this little guy is a mystery. All we know is that he's unhappy, very unhappy. He won't eat, he cries louder when someone picks him up, we don't really know what to do with him. There's old blood there for sure, so we don't dare send him to the hospital. We did that one time when we probably shouldn't have.”

“Why, what happened?”

“The new wing.”

“Oh, I see. Look, let me call my mother, she's really good with babies, used to work in early childhood care, and she's a healer.”

While she was dialing I said, “Your mother is a healer, and you like beating the bejeepers out of me?”

“Budo is a healing art, Art, it just uses different methods than others. Now shut up. Hello Mom?”

Shortly after that, Shelley came into the diner and said “That child is crying but there's no sound, is he mute?”

“Oh, sorry,” said Hugo and waved a hand.

Shelley frowned at him and turned to the baby. She knelt over the basket, checked what was in it, lifted the blanket, checked the baby's arms and legs, felt the torso, and ran her hands over his back.

“He's not injured, let's see what we can do for him.” With that she grew quiet, and then she slowly ran her hands over him. It looked a little like a massage, but she wasn't pressing very hard. Still, her forehead was covered in sweat as she concentrated.

Slowly, the baby got more quiet, then grew silent. In no time at all he started to smile, gurgling at Shelley, and reached out with his little arms. Shelley picked him up and cuddled him, then turned around and said, “Do you have any baby formula?”

We did, there's always a box of it under the counter but we'd filled a bottle earlier so I handed that over. The baby drank like he needed it, I guess he did after all that energy trying to break our eardrums.

Shelley sat down with the babe in her arms and I asked her how she calmed him down.

“He was just a bit out of balance, not surprising if he'd been abandoned, but he's a strong little guy, he'll be OK. Where did he come from?”

“We have no idea, he was on the doorstep this morning. None

of us could calm him, we tried feeding him, burping him... that was fun, he head butted Ray there, damned near broke his nose.

“We're pretty sure he's got old blood, but we can't figure out which, so we're kind of stuck as to what to do with him.”

“Old blood?”

Sam spoke up “I'll explain later Mom, just roll with it.”

“Shelley do you want some lunch?” I said.

“I don't know, have you got anything other than greasy hamburgers and fries?”

Larry looked a little offended and pushed his plate down the counter.

“How about a vegetable panini on whole wheat?”

“Perfect, and maybe a tea?”

“Coming up. My name's Art by the way.”

“The Art that my daughter has told me about? The one she's training privately?”

I bowed and she laughed, making me wonder what Sam had told her about me.

As I was cooking the panini, Megan walked in. She stopped dead, lifted her head and sniffed.

She walked over to Shelley and looked down at the baby, reached out to stroke his cheek with a kind of half smile on her face, and then there was no smile at all. She had a very unsmiling face and she said, "I'll kill him", and walked back out of the place.

Ray unfolded from where he'd ducked and put his arms over his head. "That is one pissed off wolf. I guess we know whose baby that is, Megan is always trying to get her boyfriend to keep it in his pants... so to speak... and he's done it again. No wonder I couldn't tell what the baby is, Megan and Stan are a hell of a lot more powerful than I am, and they don't like advertising. The kid is protecting himself."

"Later, Mom," said Sam.

Shelley looked at me and said, "What are you going to do with him."

I looked at Ray who said, "Megan's not going to want to raise him, and Stan certainly won't."

"You're not going to give him to child welfare?" asked Shelley.

"No, that doesn't work well, he needs to go with his own, with people who can take care of his, uh, special needs."

"I'd take him in a heartbeat, he's got a strong energy, he'll be a little hellion, but my child-rearing years were a couple of years ago, with Sam and her brother."

Ray spoke up, “What about Jonah and Lila? They're coping well with Kitsune and she's been asking for a little brother or sister.”

“Are you serious Ray? Can they handle a fox-girl and a wolf-boy together? Can you?”

“I'll talk to Megan, she trusts me, sort of, and she can drop the baby's defenses for me. Kitsune can help keep him under control, and that will help her grow up too. Yes, I think we can do this. Megan seemed to like him, and after she gets through beating Stan to a pulp, she will probably take an interest too. She'll help if I need it.”

After Sam had a bit of a discussion with her mother, to explain just what was going on with wolf-boys and fox-girls, Shelley finally agreed with the plan, but only if she met with Kitsune and her parents.

This she did and finally handed over little Oki, short for Okami, to the family, or rather, to Kit. Jonah and Lila were understandably reluctant to simply take a baby, but Kit marched over and promptly started talking with the child, who responded with delighted gurgles and reached out to her.

That seemed to settle the matter.

The Dreamer

“More refugees coming in today,” Ken said, “but they will be coming through the front door. Apparently Old Mrs Moore has had something happen to that fridge she has on the front porch, and occasionally she gets a bunch of refugees coming through there.”

“Are you kidding? How does that work?” I asked.

“Well, you know pixies like milk, and so they must have some way to get into the back of a fridge, I don't know how they do it, but Mrs. Moore says they are coming through quite often. She is putting them up in her house, but there's only so much cooking, cleaning and rearranging any house will tolerate, so I've told her to send them down here.”

“What am I going to do with them?”

“Just send them on downstairs, we'll put them on the train to go further west. It's a real efficient process now, that we've got down there. We're keeping records up and down the line so nobody goes missing, and we've got Kobold guards riding with them on the trains so no personal items go missing either.”

“Who's watching the guards, Ken?”

“Art, I'm hurt, yes we've been known to recycle the occasional bauble when it gets thrown out by rich people, but we won't steal from refugees. That is too low even for us.”

“That's good to hear, is there anything else I can do to help?”

“You've done plenty Art, we appreciate the extra cash and the use of your kitchen when you're closed. I think we're coping pretty well, but we'll let you know.”

The war between the Pixies and the Giants was still raging on. Despite the apparent superiority of the Giant's war machine, the Pixies were holding their own for now. That was allowing the flow of refugees to happen in some sort of manageable way.

As I was cleaning off the counter tops after the food prep crew had ducked back down to the bar, my first customer arrived through the door.

“Good morning, what can I get for you?”

“Coffee, toast and a big knife please.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Sorry, forget the knife, it's just that I've pretty much had it with my life.”

“I see, well here's a coffee and my name's Art. You want to tell me about it?”

“I'm Sue Ishida, and I doubt you'd believe my story if I told it to you.”

“You might be surprised, why not tell me and we'll see.”

“OK, I'm a dreamer.”

“Right, with you so far, so am I, I dream pretty much every night.”

“Sure, but do your dreams come true? ”

“Um, in my dreams, yes, but mostly they are so weird I wouldn't want them to come true.”

“And now you know my problem. My dreams tend to come true and when they do, people die.”

“I said I wouldn't question you, but are you kidding?”

“I'm not kidding. What I dream tends to happen, and if I dream someone dead, they die.”

“Are you sure you're not just seeing into the future? I know a couple of folks that can, they see someone's death and it happens.”

“No, I dream things like car accidents and stabbings and it happens as I dream it, no future involved.”

“Well, what about if you're just seeing it as it happens, rather than you causing it?”

“I've thought about that, but how do you prove that one way or the other. I dream something and it happens. Did I cause it, or did I see it as it happened. You see the problem? How do you decide which is which.”

“Interesting, are you dreaming the world into existence or are you just dreaming you dream the world into existence.

“OK, is it just deaths? Have you ever dreamed up, say, pink elephants?”

“Not yet, but how about werewolves? I dreamed about one and then I saw one change on the street. This girl was arguing with her boyfriend and she got so mad she turned into a wolf.”

“Really? What happened?”

“The boyfriend said 'Oh yeah, pull the wolf card, just because you know I'm right,' and she turned back into a girl.”

“That sounds like Mara and James. I pretty sure you didn't create them, I think you maybe just saw them, dreamed about them, and saw them again. We seem to forget seeing things like werewolves, things that aren't supposed to exist.”

“Now I think you're nuts,” Sue said.

“I get that a lot. But Mara exists, trust me, and she's living with a guy named James. Nice couple, if a bit enthusiastic in their fights.

“I don't know if that shows you can see events in the future or as they happen, but I think you should consider it. It's very hard to actually cause things to happen remotely, dreams or otherwise. But not so hard to see them remotely. There's lots of seers out there, and they see things at different times ahead.

Does that make sense? Some see things a couple minutes early, some a couple years. Maybe you see things as they happen.”

Sue looked a bit confused, “You know several people who can see the future?”

“Sure, you'd be surprised who you meet in this place.”

“Right, fine, seers. How do I know if I'm a same time seer or the cause of the things I dream.”

“It's absolutely a problem, how would you design an experiment that proved one or the other, you can't control what you dream. If you could, you might be able to decide to dream of a pink elephant and see if one shows up.”

“Shows up where? These folks I dream about dying are often in other places, I read about it in the paper.”

“Absolutely a problem. Ray, what do you think?” I said as Ray came in for breakfast.

“About what?”

Sue was waving her hands trying to get me to stop talking. “We're trying to figure out if Sue here makes things happen when she dreams, or dreams about things that are happening.”

“How would I know? I don't dream, you know that, we have a shared world we create to give ourselves a break from reality.”

“Exactly,” I said, “your equivalent of dreaming is to create a

world, so what you dream is what happens.”

“Dude, you're stretching it. We're not dreaming, it's more like what you'd call a daydream, but it's real. We direct it, it doesn't happen to us, dreams happen to you.”

Sue was confused, “Us, you? Don't all humans dream?”

“She doesn't know?” Ray was frowning at me. Yes I tended to say more than I should at times, but this time I really wanted to see if Sue was a danger or not.

“Show her, would you please Ray.”

Ray sighed and changed into a fox and back again. Sue's mouth dropped open. “I know you, I dreamed about you! I thought that was one of my normal dreams.”

“Well you didn't dream me up.” Said Ray, “I've been around far longer than you've been alive.”

“Ray, is there any way you can figure out whether Sue creates things in her dreams or sees them? What about taking her into your daydream and letting her dream there, would that work?”

“Jesus, Art, are you insane. Stop screwing around with reality. I'm not going to do that, a dream inside a real daydream? Have you ever heard of a paradox?”

“It was just a thought.” I was a little bit hurt, but I saw his point.

Ray turned to Sue and said “Look, there's a really good principle of life that you might want to consider. It's the 'as if'. Why not just decide that you are a seer instead of some sort of super sorcerer, live your life ‘as if’ you are just dreaming things as they happen. Live your life ‘as if’ you'll live forever, that sort of thing. It's not healthy to think too long about questions you can't answer.

“It doesn't matter if you cause what you dream, or if you're just seeing it. There's nothing you can do about it, so live as if you are simply seeing it.”

“But if I'm causing deaths, don't you think I should kill myself?”

“Ah, that one,” said Ray, “you can drive yourself nuts with that one. Maybe you should consider whether you are God or not. And whether these people who are dying, should die, were meant to die by your dreams. You seen how screwed this can be?”

“Yes, I can see that, why do you think I'm at the point where I asked Art here to give me a knife.”

Ray looked at me and I shook my head, of course I didn't give her a knife.

Ray looked back at Sue. “Why don't you try a month of living as if you're a seer and not a God with the power of life and death. If, after a month you still think you're causing people to die, come on back and I'll see about locking you into a daydream so you can't affect the real world.”

Sue seemed to accept that, and after she'd finished her meal and left the diner I asked Ray if he could do that.

“Probably not, but hey, trickster fox, right?”

Past Prime Powers

“Hey, your plant needs some water.”

“Good morning, thanks for the heads up, can you speak with plants?”

The fellow stopped and thought for a moment, and then said, “Well I suppose so, at least I know that when plants need water they droop their leaves.”

I laughed, sometimes you see magical powers where there is only common sense. Sometimes that means you see a lot of magical powers, I mean, common sense isn't so very common these days.

“What can I get you?”

“I'll have a coffee and pancakes please.”

“Coming right up. Sorry about assuming you could talk to plants, we get a lot of folks with unusual powers around here. My name's Art by the way.”

“Stewart. You really have folks with special powers?”

“Sure, more than our share I suppose.”

“Well I used to have a super power, but no more.”

“OK give, what was it?”

“Well I used to live on an obscure volcanic island where there was a nasty religious cult that wanted to sacrifice virgins to the volcano god.”

“Oh no, don't tell me,” I groaned.

“Yep, I used to have the power to save virgins from being sacrificed.”

I laughed and said, “coffee's on me, my super friend. If I run across any virgins in danger of being eaten by dragons or such, I'll keep you in mind.”

You know, some days it just runs like that. The next guy through the door was an older fellow and as I dropped a coffee in front of him I said, by way of introduction, “This is Stewart, He's an ex-sacrificial virgin rescuer.”

“Hello Stewart,” he said, “I'm Joel and I'm an ex truth teller.”

“Oh,” said Stewart, “what's that?”

“I used to read letters people brought to me and tell them if the writer was telling the truth. I used to call it reading between the lines. Business contracts, love letters, apologies, that sort of thing. People would come to me to tell them if the writers were being honest or if it was just a load of hogwash.”

“That sounds like a pretty valuable talent. What happened?”

“The internet happened. People stopped writing and started

typing, and my ability dropped to random guesses. I need to see the handwriting to know if it's true or not. My talent just tells me it's a lie if I look at an email or a contract that's typed."

"That sounds like you're still pretty accurate," Stewart said, "I get the impression that most of what comes over the internet is false these days."

I laughed and dropped Stewart's pancakes in front of him. "Can I get you some breakfast Joel?"

"Sure, I'll have the same, it looks good."

As I gave Stewart a serviette, I noticed something written on it. Now I have to say right now that I am not in the habit of re-using serviettes, this one came out of the dispenser, but someone else must have written on it and put it back in.

Stewart read it and then slid it over to Joel. "Here's something for you to look at Joel."

It read "Help me, I am being forced to marry against my will. I hate this man and he will beat me I'm sure. If I'm not a virgin he won't marry me, please help."

Stewart looked sharply at me and said, "Very funny Art, a real ha ha."

I held up my hands and said, "not me, I swear."

Joel looked at it and said, "It's not him, this is real, someone is asking for help."

“Are you kidding? No you're not are you. Art, do you remember who was sitting here yesterday, who might have written this?”

I thought about it but nobody came to mind. “I can't think of anybody, but this is a bit weird even for this place. Joel are you kidding us?”

“I'm too old and tired to kid. But I can tell you where this girl is.”

“Seriously? Joel are you serious?” Stewart asked.

“Sure I am, handwriting holds a lot of information. I can tell you this was written yesterday, and that this girl is serious, she's worried about something that could happen very soon.”

“Damn, you know I wasn't kidding about that virgin saving thing. I hate the whole women as property, and I hate the virgins for marriage thing even more. I used to have to do some serious sneaking around and fighting. These girls are usually pretty closely guarded. Just like prize cows.

“I don't know though, I'm not a kid any more, and I've got the scars to prove it.”

“This girl is pretty scared, Stewart.” Said Joel

“Ah hell, you're reading me now aren't you.”

“Let's just say it's written on your face.”

“Fine, give me the location and I’ll see what I can do after I finish my breakfast. I’ll probably need the calories.”

Stewart left the diner shortly after that, and was back three days later. He had a very young, very pretty girl with him and as I saw her I realized that she had been in the place. I didn’t really remember her because I was paying attention to a couple of nasty looking men with her. I thought they looked like trouble about to happen.

“Is Joel around?” Stewart asked?

“Not lately, I’m afraid.”

“Well he deserves the story, can you tell him when you see him Art?”

I nodded and he continued. “This is Sherry, and she was where Joel said she would be. I watched the place for a day and the next night I went in and got her out. Not without a bit of trouble, but that guy ought to heal eventually. We’ve been at my place since, but now I’ve got to get Sherry out of town.”

The girl was looking at Stewart with big soft eyes and clinging to his arm. I raised my eyebrows at him and he said “No. Too young Art, so she’s got to get away from her family. I wondered if you had any ideas.”

“I do, and you were right to come here. Nobody gets in here that I don’t want in here. Take a look outside.”

Caw and his murder of crows were milling around outside, and Ray came in right about then with Ingrid. If Stewart was followed, there was plenty of muscle around the place. Nice to have friends.

I was a bit surprised to see Megan walk in as well, but it turned out she caught Stewart's work to collect Sherry while she was out prowling around. "I have a place for her, she'll be loved and protected. We can leave after she eats."

That seemed to be that, nobody in the place felt like asking where she meant, and Sherry let go of Stewart's arm with a kiss on his cheek, to move beside Megan.

It was total love or bowel-dropping terror with that wolf. I'd felt both from her, and I told Stewart that Sherry was in good hands.

With that I got busy at the grill.

The Invisible Boy

“Ingrid, I don't understand, you're there at the war, why can't you do anything other than watch?”

“Art, my love, I really wish I could. At least take the dead back to my hall, but that's for men, not pixies or giants.”

“No, not that, why can't you fight on the side of the pixies, they are so much weaker than the giants, they don't have the number of weapons, it's amazing that they have lasted as long as they have. Can't you and the other gods help them?”

“No, we can't. We do what we can, but if we were to fight the giants we would risk breaking the world in two. That almost happened. When this world was new, before we dreamed up men, we fought the giants, the full might of the giants, and between us, we almost destroyed the world. It was terrible, and we dare not do that again. That's why there are men, to fight proxy wars for us.”

“That's what we are? Toy soldiers for the gods?”

“And the giants, yes, at first. But like all living things, you have your own opinions, you have free will, and that's one of the delightful results of your creation. We can't just wind you up and aim you at the enemy, we have to convince you that the fight is right. That was surprising and it has stopped a lot more wars than there would have been.

“Look, Art, the fact that you want us to help the pixies should

tell you just how warlike your nature really is, and how refined your sense of justice. We created you as creatures to fight, as toy soldiers, like you said. But we can't control you, never could. From the beginning we had to convince you that the cause was just before you would fight. We figured promises of eternal drinking, feasting, wenching and fighting would be enough to get you to fight and die for us, but damned if you didn't start thinking."

"Some of us maybe, but there's lots of men who think only of dying for the cause to get rewarded in the next life."

"You did that to yourselves, Art, that sort of blind obedience isn't innate, that's something you men figured out how to educate into yourselves. It's fascinating, but even the gods don't like that part of what you've done. Those men who have forgotten how to think are used by the giants, only this time, the giants have acted for themselves. No proxies"

"If they're so powerful they can destroy the earth fighting you, why are the pixies not crushed already?"

"Because it's not all of the giants, it's the fool of a leader they have given themselves. They turned over too much power to him, and like all those who end up with that much power and too few voices in opposition, he has begun to live in a vacuum, he imagines greatness when he looks at tattered, withered, barren gardens. Those giants who are fighting now don't want to fight. They were fooled into it, they were lied to, but they are too powerful to be beaten quickly. The pixies, on the other hand, are united and ferocious in their determination not to become slaves."

“Was this a surprise to you? That they are having such trouble defeating the pixies?”

“No, the giants went up against the kobolds and other peoples, and it was the same. The leader said go conquer and his people followed only reluctantly. They were defeated, eventually, by each opponent, but not before devastating their lands.”

“You can't just hit the leader with lightning or something?”

“And unite the giants in the desire for revenge against the gods? No that would trigger the end. Only the giants can replace their leader. Perhaps they will, eventually, but for now we can only hope to contain the damage, and that means the pixies have to fight alone.”

“Jesus, Ingrid. That's horrible, that's such a cynical view.”

“Maybe it is, love, but remember how old I am, if there were another way we'd have used it by now. Only the giants can come to their own solutions, just as only men can come to theirs, and we gods to ours.

“In the meantime, you and I will be as kind as we can, and love each other, yes?”

I felt like crying, there was so little I could do. Ingrid pulled me to her and hugged me hard. She could read me better than she usually let on and said, “You're doing as much as you can, you and the kobolds are helping the refugees, and others are helping the pixies with as many weapons as they dare supply.

Don't forget this has happened before, and if we are careful, the giants will back off.”

“But not before a terrible cost to the pixies.”

“But not before a terrible cost.”

She held me for a while longer and then said “Go to work, do your best to be kind, to help. You have no idea how important it is for men to be kind, that's something that you have taught the gods. Be the man I love.”

She must have told Ray that I was feeling down, because he was in the diner when I got there to open up. Honestly, I've asked him not to do that, it confuses the customers, they figure the place is open when he's sitting at the counter drinking his coffee.

“Hey Art, the Black Circus is in town!”

“Oh lord Ray, I hate that thing. You walk into blackness and you hear trapeze artists yell, but you don't see a damned thing.”

“You don't?”

“Don't start with me, I'm not in the mood.”

“Right, so you don't want to talk to Vinnie here, one of the acrobats, who has a problem.”

“Ray!”

“Hi, said a voice from next to Ray, I'm Vinnie.”

I looked hard at Ray, but he shook his head. I've known him to pull invisible people tricks before, but maybe not this time.

“Vinnie I can't see you. Do you want a coffee, some food?”

“Thanks Art, I'll have black coffee and the farmer's breakfast.”

“Burned black?” I said, still half expecting one of Ray's tricks.

“Yuck, no thanks, just regular please.”

Maybe this guy was actually there. Ray is usually laughing by now. “Coming up, why don't you tell me your problem while I'm cooking?”

“I'm in the Black Circus, I'm an acrobat, and as you know I'm invisible to normal eyes. All of us in the circus are the same. We keep the place dark to the usual wavelengths because they blind us, we see in the infra red, and use it for lighting, so to us, the circus is brightly lit.”

“OK I'm following so far, except why put on a circus that nobody can see?”

“Um, mostly because we're all crap performers. If the audience can't see us, they can't see us screw up.”

I looked at Ray again. Was he putting me on? He shook his head again and held up his hands.

“OK Vinnie, I'm not seeing the problem. If folks will pay to hear you guys mess about, all should be good.”

“Oh it's not the circus, it's me, I'm in love with a girl who came to watch, but she can't see me.”

“Ah, I begin to understand. Have you ever read the story of the invisible man?”

“My uncle Alphonse, yes of course.”

I was getting a sore neck with whipping my head around to look at Ray.

“So clothes, bandages and makeup right? Wait. Vinnie are you wearing clothes? Are you sitting there naked on my chair?”

Ray pointed down, “I put a napkin down first Art.”

One of these days...

“Never mind, so what about clothes and makeup Vinnie, can't your girl see you like that?”

“We tried, but she still isn't happy, if I put makeup all over, she complains it's too messy on the sheets.”

“Hmm, OK how about getting someone to adjust her eyesight so she can see the infra red?”

“It's disorienting, she didn't grow up with eyes like that, and she got massive headaches when we got a sorcerer to do that.

Infra red only, yes, normal spectrum only, yes, both means a splitting headache.“

“Well maybe that's your solution, turn off the lights and give her a pair of infra red goggles.”

Vinnie thought about that for a moment, and then said, “We'll try it. Thanks Art.”

When he had finished his breakfast he left, or at least the door opened and closed. I turned to Ray, “You can see infra red?”

“Yes.”

“What's he look like?”

“Pretty spotty face, he's not very old.”

“Well let's hope his girlfriend isn't too picky.”

Cliché Day

“Come on Jonsie, you come in here every morning and get the cheap muffin, you know you prefer the fancy one, why not get it.”

“I know, I know Art, it's just that I didn't have very much money as a student, and I guess, once poor, always poor.”

“Jonsie you make well over a hundred grand a year and I know you own three houses. Get the damned muffin you like.”

“You're right, give me the fancy one.”

“Other than poor, how have you been lately?”

“Well I'm a little bit bummed out, to tell you the truth. I had a photo shoot the other day and I decided to use my new phone to do it. I mean why not, it's as good as the equipment I used to use when I started as a photographer.

“I had a pretty good model, and it was going great, right up until we took a break for coffee. I bought this phone through a flyer, and I decided to be clever so I turned the phone back into the photo on the flyer and stuffed it into my front pocket.

“Of course I spilled coffee all over my pants and soaked the flyer. By the time I dried off my pants and the flyer, the photos and print had all faded to nothing.

“I couldn't find the phone to get it back, and so I lost the phone,

all the shots I'd taken, and the model wandered off. A complete disaster, and all because I wanted to make sure I didn't damage the phone by putting it in my back pocket and sitting on it.”

“Geez Jonsie, that's rough, but what have I said about being penny-wise and pound-foolish.”

“What are you nattering about now Art, you've never said that.”

“Well I've thought it, by trying to protect your phone, you lost it and the shots. You can buy dozens of phones, what's important is the shots you take, and your own enjoyment taking them. You need to keep your eyes on the prize.”

“Dude, you're a walking cliché today, but I guess you're right. Cameras are tools, take care of them but use them, is that what you're saying?”

“Yep, exactly, I've lost two really important rings in my life, by taking them off and putting them into my shirt pocket to keep them from being scratched. One was my wedding ring and one was my mother's. If I'd kept them on my finger I'd have them today.”

“Sure, I guess I can see how that might be distantly related to what we're talking about, Maybe.”

“Oh, ha ha. Other than losing your camera, how has the hobby been going anyway?”

“Funny you should ask, I've been meaning to talk to you about something that's been happening once in a while with my old

Canon SLR, the one that's pretty much on its last legs.

“Every so often it will glitch and I get a shot of the model that isn't the model. I don't know how that happens, but, for instance, I got Ray here, to model for me a while ago and about every 15 shots, I've got a fox face rather than Ray's face.”

I looked over at Ray who was the picture of innocence, little beatific smile on his, admittedly handsome, face. “I don't think I would call that too strange Jonsie. You and I both know he's a bit of a fox in the hen house.”

“Again with the clichés, but he's not the only one. I shot a girl just last week and through the good ones there were a few where she looked a bit like a dog.”

“A female dog?”

“Yeah, that's what I mean, and there was another girl who seemed to be crying between shots that were just fine, smiles and all. There's no way she was crying, I was on motor-drive, I mean continuous shot.”

I thought for a moment and said, “Jonsie, I've known you since public school, and I know you are pretty sensitive to what's going on in other people's heads. You make your living as a life coach, and you're damned good at it. Do you think that maybe you've had that camera for so long that it's picked up your ability?”

“What, the camera now somehow sees that Ray is a fox, the one model is a bitch and the other was sad? How would that

work Art?”

“Well they do say that every photograph is a self portrait of the photographer, maybe this is a manifestation of that.”

“Still with the clichés, I don't think I'm buying that. I think the damned computer in the camera is wearing out.”

“Isn't it usually the shutter that goes first?”

“Yeah, and it is, but when the shutter misfires you get nothing at all, or maybe half a shot. This is something else altogether.”

“Is that the camera you mean, in your bag there?”

“It is, should we try it out?”

“Why not? How about taking a shot of me.”

“Alright, shift a bit away from the window, and turn toward me. I'll put it on multi-shot because that's where it seems to work most often.”

He took ten or twelve shots and there, in the middle, was me in some sort of ancient armour.

“Ray!”

“Not me Art, not me. But haven't you ever wondered about your name? Arthur Pendray?”

“Sure, same as King Arthur, if you take his last name as

Pendragon, which comes down to Pendray. I'm pretty sure I'm not King Arthur, Ray.”

“I don't know about that Art, Ingrid and I have been talking about that.”

“Oh for... OK Jonsie, I see what you mean. It's certainly weird.”

Jonsie was looking at me, “You know, Art, even in public school you were the guy who protected the little kids, and all your life you've been the guy most likely to stick your neck out for other people. I've always thought of you as a bit of a King Arthur.”

“Now who's using the clichés. Do you really think of me like that? If so, maybe it's right that the camera is taking cues from you. Look, that's better than photo editing software. 'Real portraits.' You could make another fortune.”

“Art, do you really think that people want to know their true natures when they sit for a photo?”

“I guess you have a point. Not many people want to know what they are really like. Most just want to be told they are what they think they are.

“How about the girl that was crying? Did you ever look into that?”

“Didn't really have to, she told me all about how her boyfriend was cheating on her, during the session. She's a good enough

model not to show it, but she was pretty sad during that shoot. I wish now I'd asked her to just be sad, would have been better shots.”

“So what will you do with the camera?” I asked.

“Oh I'll keep using it, I'll ignore the weird shots, but if I see something that is beyond life coach stuff, I'll send them down here for you guys to sort it out.

With that our conversation drifted to other things. It wasn't until much later that I remembered that Jonsie shouldn't have been able to turn a phone back into a photograph on a flyer.

My Father's Life

“I spent another night with doomsday dreams, so make it a black coffee with an espresso shot please Art.”

“Wow, that bad eh? Are you worried about the European thing spreading into a bigger war?”

“What? No, nothing like that, I just made a really bad decision and I've been paying for it for a month.”

“Doesn't sound good, want to tell me about it?”

“Not until I've had that coffee, I've been sleeping very poorly.”

“I put two shots in it, Molly, get that down you and I'll fry up a big danish with butter.”

“You lovely man, you know just what I need. You know I never knew my father very well right?”

“He wasn't very talkative, especially about his early life. He drank a lot, smoked a lot, got ulcers, cancer, spent years in the Veterans hospital, and died early.”

“My mother left him when I was five but drove me to his place every weekend to visit him and my grandmother. In all that time, I swear I didn't get to know him very well at all, and after he died, it started to bother me more than I guess it should have. Fathers and daughters eh?”

“So a while ago I asked Hugo to help me out by giving me my father's memories for a while, a few weeks, just so that I could root around in them and find out about his life.

“Hugo warned me, he asked if my father had a happy life or not. I knew he hadn't, but I was stubborn and insisted. Honestly, Hugo was right to warn me, he even asked if I just wanted half the memories, or to get them faded, as if they happened to someone else, but I'm a stupid, stupid woman and didn't listen.

“Well I got the full treatment, and like I said, I'm not sleeping well. Thanks for the Danish, oh yes, sugar and fat and carbs, you know the way to a girl's heart buddy.”

“Can I ask you what you learned about your dad? Or is it something I shouldn't know?” I asked.

“You know, you're a lot like my dad. He never talked about his life and now I know why, there are things a kid doesn't need to know, shouldn't know. Now I wish I didn't.”

“You know,” I said, “a pain shared...”

“Is a pain halved. I know Art, you've said it often enough in here. OK then, my father's life.

“His father, the grandfather that I never knew, he died when I was two or three, was in the Second World War. He went over in the Normandy invasion and caught four machine gun bullets across his chest. He came back two inches shorter than he left. Now he was always a drinker, a fisherman and a construction

worker, so he spent a lot of time in bars back home. When he went to England he did quite a bit of suckering the Brits at darts. He was really good at it. It helped that he had arms like a gorilla and more or less just reached out and stuck the dart in the board.

“Anyway, he was married to my grandmother, dad's mom, and she was just as rough a character as he was, but a lot more dominant. When gramps came back from the war he drank way too much and she divorced him. She supported my dad and my grandfather by working in a drugstore and then as a clerk at the Public Utilities. She would make food every day for gramps and dad would carry it over.

“This was the situation dad was raised in, a really powerful mother and a father that had PTSD for sure, and drank to treat it. Of course he resented his mother's domination, and so he turned to his father as a role model.

“Not much of a model, he never understood what the war had done to his father until much later, and then it was too late.

“My father started drinking when he was in his early teens, he and his buddies would get hold of a bottle and spin the top off and throw it away. Like that was a real grown-up thing to do.

“When he was seventeen, the Korean War started and he signed up, just like his father had. He lied about his age and they put him in the Lord Strathcona's Horse, which was attached to the PPCLI, the Princess Pat's, and they shipped them over to Korea.

“It was the long stalemate by then, so they parked the tanks on top of a hill and used them as artillery. It wasn't nice, it was long days of boredom and nights of sheer terror as the Chinese charged the positions with not much but bodies. The butchery was awful, and my father never forgot.

“The one time I got a hint of what he'd been through was when I was a kid and grabbed his foot to wake him up. They slept under the tanks and that's how they'd wake them up when the Chinese attacked. He came awake looking for a gun and someone to shoot. I never did that again.

“Anyway, at one point he ended up getting blown off the top of his tank by a phosphorus shell, and he had shrapnel coming out of his cheek for the rest of his life. They shipped him to Japan where he recovered, and got a soldier's wife, a poor Japanese woman whose best chance was to live with a soldier. He got her pregnant and then came back to Canada in irons after the Military Police beat him down and dragged him away from her.

“He came back and met my mother on the beach, married her, had me, and then she couldn't take the nightmares, his drinking and eventually the time he hit her. You know, she told me years later that she had provoked him, because you just didn't walk away from your husband in those days. I could tell she still cared for him, and probably knew he was just too damaged by the war to recover.

“I was five when we left, and like I said, went down each weekend to stay with my grandmother and run food down to my father, just like he did to my grandfather. My father was the lightkeeper in town, and did construction. Later he bought a

saw sharpening business and sliced off the end of his thumb. And he drank, forty ounces a day of rum. He eventually followed his father to the grave with liver disease.

“So now I know what drove my father, and what drives me to a large extent. A father who drank to dull the pain, a mother who was a bit domineering because she had to be, a war I was never in, and now I've got PTSD too.

“Hugo says it should fade with the memories, but until it does, I regret, every night, that I asked for this.”

“You're not drinking are you?” I asked.

“I don't dare, I remember what happened to both my dad and my granddad. I'm afraid that if I started I'd never stop. No, I'm just gritting my teeth and waiting for this to fade away.

“I found out what my father's life was like, and I wish to heaven I hadn't. He was right not to tell me anything about himself. I know that he loved me to death, and didn't want me to ever go through what he did. And yet, I guess I'm his daughter, I went ahead and learned his story.

“You know how much he loved you,” I said, hoping it would make her feel better, “and maybe how much he loved your mother.”

She gave me a gentle smile and nodded, and I left her to her danish.

Go With the Flow

Sam and I were flat on our backs, staring at the ceiling of the gym after a long, hard workout. After I caught my breath, I asked her, “Why do you do this?”

“What, martial arts? Or working out hard. I work out hard because it feels so good when I stop, and the soreness next day is, frankly, a bit of a turn-on. Same as why people watch horror movies I guess, they like to be scared.

“But if you mean martial arts, that’s different. Why I do it isn’t the right question. I am what we’re doing, this is what I do. Why, doesn’t come into it any more. I breathe, I eat, I practice, it’s what I am now.”

“It wasn’t always what you are, was it?”

“No of course not, I fell into it, like most people do, I went to a seminar one day and stayed. I found a group of kind, caring people who took an interest in me, who wanted to share their passion and their knowledge. Of course I stayed.”

“OK then, what are you doing when you practice budo?”

“Ah, closer. I’m looking for something, I’m trying to lose all the things I put in the way of my life. Look, maybe I’ll explain the process of Shu Ha Ri.

Shu is just doing what you’re told, to copy sensei and learn how to do the kata.

Ha means to break it down, to think about it, how does the kata work? What does it mean, why does it exist? The kata have been around for a long time, so they must have some value, some meaning right? What is it?

And the final stage is Ri, to understand the principles of what you're doing, it's when you leave the kata behind, when you don't need the kata any more and you go out into the world.

“You can't understand the principles if you can't do the basics, and somewhere in between you've got to start asking questions.

“So that's what I'm looking for, the Ri, a way to get past the Ha, a way to deal with the world without the excess thinking, the rationalization. I'm looking for what we call Mushin, no mind.

“You have to understand, all these terms are just metaphors they aren't real, they're just ways to either think about what we're doing or they are a big box that we can throw our questions into and forget about them. Hopefully not the second one.

“You understand Mushin in different ways as you move along. You understand kata in different ways as well. In Aikido, the kata are created each class, in Niten Ichiryu, they are more or less set, but they can be performed in different ways, depending on the instructor, on the needs of the school, and on the abilities of the student. How I teach you Niten is quite different than how I teach other people.”

“Why is that, am I different than other students?”

“Sure you are, for one thing you’re looking at this training as something you’re really going to use. Gil set us up together so that you could be ready to fight anything at all, at any time. Now, a lot of students come to the arts from fantasy novels or video games, they’re elf-warriors or they’re Japanophiles looking to be samurai. That’s fine, they change or they leave, no bother to me, I teach them all like they should be taught. They work like hell on the kihon, the basics. That changes their body and their mind. It’s like learning your abc’s as a kid, then you learn grammar, which is the kata. If they stick around long enough they might just learn how to write something interesting.

“You, on the other hand, came into this with nothing in your mind. I didn’t have to wait for the silliness to drain out your ears, it wasn’t there. You also saw what Gil can do. He’s totally out there, he has no style, no thoughts, he just ‘is’ fighting. You saw that, you experienced that, and so you know where you’re going. You’re patient, you soak it up without question. You’re a natural.

“But most of all, you go with the flow. Do you know that phrase?”

I nodded, “It’s the old hippie way of life, just go along to where-ever the wind blows you.”

“Not quite, Art, it’s to be adaptable to what life brings you, to blend with the ebb and flow of your river. It’s the core of

Aikido practice, but it applies to all of the arts, not just budo. To a large extent, it's getting out of your own way, accepting what you are given and embracing it. That's what you do in class. You accept what I teach you and absorb it, integrate it into what you already know. That means I can push you hard.

"The way you and I train is also different, I usually teach the form, this foot here, move your hand there. That's not just so the students look good, it's to get them used to the kamae, the positions of strength, so they get used to being in balance and strong automatically as they move. In your case, I'm teaching from the function. This works, this doesn't. It's a lot more painful to learn this way, and frankly, it's more painful to teach this way. We do a kata, you misstep, I crush you. Sometimes you recover and I've got a new bruise.

"I teach you this way because you've already experienced what you need to learn. You told me about the Wyrms and fighting with Jim as his shield bearer. He sang what you needed to know and you did it, without thought. That's mushin. Your rationalization didn't get in the way.

"You're also smart, Ingrid gave you her sword, were you tempted to use it?

"Are you kidding, I felt the power there when I put my hand on the hilt, humans aren't supposed to have that much power. Maybe I would have used it if I had to, but only as a last resort."

"You see, you felt that blade and you understood what it was, that you really should not use it. Ingrid gave you that blade

because she loved you, and she would have been there beside you fighting, but you had no business with it. You understood without taking a long time to think about it.”

“Well I don’t know if I’m that clever, but I did understand it was Jim’s fight, and my job at his side.”

“Yes, exactly, and as to what I’m doing with my training, Musashi talks about what happens after you learn hyoho, ri, the principles. He says that once you have learned one ‘way’ you can do other arts without the need for a teacher. Now, this might be literally true, my sensei decided late in life to start writing books and he wrote several in two months. He simply opened up his heart, as he put it, and listened to the story as it was told. He’s a bit of a mystic, but there’s no doubt that he simply started writing, took no classes, no advice at all.

“But that doesn’t mean he didn’t learn how to write in school. Of course he did, it’s just that having come all the way through budo training and out the other side knowing nothing, he could let go and write, just as he could let go and fight.”

“He sounds like an interesting guy, I’d like to meet him.”

“He’s dead, Art, but I wish you could have met him too. He was the original ‘go with the flow’ guy. Lived his whole life in the moment, never made a plan, although at the end, he worried a lot about whether he was kind enough to those he had met. He didn’t have to worry about that, but being the guy he was, he worried that he wasn’t organized enough, kind enough, whatever. Like I said, I couldn’t see anything he needed to worry about.

“Anyway, you always put your teacher on a pedestal. He did have his moments when I wanted to bust his head. He usually laughed when I tried. It took me years to understand that I could have done it, but he was using psychology to control me, ‘Jedi mind tricks’ he used to call it, when he wasn’t saying ‘stupid sensei tricks’. I mean how do you bust the head of a guy who constantly tells you how weak and sickly he is.

“What I’m trying to say is that I’m trying to be like him. He could never remember a kata, always pointed at me and said ‘how does it go?’ because he had forgotten. Couldn’t even remember the names, but he could see a brand new kata and understand how it worked. That’s what I’m trying to find, how to read a kata and then how to read an opponent, and finally, how to read my life. Just look at a situation and know what has to be done, or when to just let it go.

“I’m half way there, you know I’ve got trouble remembering kata names, and I tend to flow from one kata to another. It’s especially hard when I’m teaching you because all I want is what works. Unfortunately, what you need is the precision, you can’t skip that part, not if you want to learn budo, and I want you to learn those lessons. Gil wants you able to fight. We’ll both get what we want out of you, I’m sure.

“The thing about the budo way is that it’s the same as all Japanese ways, or all ways anywhere. Learn how to learn. Most people think there’s an end goal, maybe a high rank, maybe to be a big teacher, but none of that is real. Only the way is real, only moving along the path. So you can see why it doesn’t make much sense to me when I’m asked why I practice

the arts. They are my way, it could be another way, it might be at some point. When my teacher got less physically inclined he started writing. Still the way. Try to get somewhere on the way and you get nowhere at all. There's no place to go.

“You're looking for who you are, for free access to your internal workings. My sensei used to say that the sword swings you. He meant that it doesn't feel like you're doing the swinging, but something is. He said that's how his writing went, he'd start, and then keep writing because he wanted to see how the story went.

“For me, when you and I spar, my biggest effort is to start, to move from stillness. Once I do that, the sword takes over, my body-knowledge takes over, my brain gets out of the way. If I had to sort through kata to find one to respond to your attack, I'd be dead. Just start, trust yourself, you either succeed or you don't. Neither is of much consequence, only the process, only the moving along the path.

“I've worked all my life to be free, to understand 'go with the flow' doesn't mean get blown around by circumstance, it means to be open to what's happening, to respond correctly, to do what needs to be done.

“That sounds pretty focused, and maybe lonely.”

“Lonely? Just the opposite. You wouldn't believe how many more people are in my life since I started budo, and how many people I can accept without screaming at them for being stupid.

“I'm still not sure how being a martial artist makes you a

writer.”

“It doesn’t. What Musashi said was that once you learn the principles, the method, the way, you don’t need a teacher any more, you are free to create. Musashi was an artist, a great one, and a sculptor. Did he learn from others? I suspect so, how to grind ink, maybe how to carve a face. What he meant was that you don’t need a teacher.

“You see, a teacher will restrict you. They will lock you in to a set of methods that you need. A lesson plan. You get the basics, then the simple stuff, and eventually the hard stuff. You don’t jump in at the deep end. But once you go through that, you understand what you need. Musashi decided to paint, he probably picked up a brush and started. He would see what he needed, go find out how to do that, and then go on to the next step. Or maybe he experimented to learn what he needed to learn. Regardless, he already had the discipline and patience to do that, he learned that in budo.

“He had ‘it’ and that’s what I want, that ‘it’. Once I find it, I suspect I might be able to go beyond what my teacher did. He told me constantly that if I didn’t get better than he ever was, I was a lazy girl.

“Wait, don’t you do Japanese weaving? Did you take lessons on that?”

“No lessons, but I do weave sageo, I looked at prices, and decided to build my own loom, which I did from looking at photographs online. I just borrowed a friend’s shop and started to build. It works pretty good. I then bought some things, like

the spindles, and did some research in books for how to make the patterns. So yes, I used my budo experience to go ahead and make sageo.

“Who knows, maybe some day I’ll be writing novels too.”

The Model

Jonsie walked in with a model. She was a looker, too. High cheekbones, amazing smile, and dressed like a student, sneakers, jeans and a t-shirt, but with a dress shirt thrown on top that was long enough to look like a skirt from the back. Very nice.

“Jonsie, I have to ask you about last time you were in. You said you changed your camera into a picture on a flyer, did you mean that?”

“Hey Art, yes I meant it. I’ve been able to turn objects into photographs or what have you for years, I could do it in high school, did you never notice?”

“OK you have to tell me about that, in the meantime, what would you two like?”

“Sorry, Mika, this is Art. Art, Mika is a student at the University, she’s been modeling for me for a couple of months now.”

“Hi Art,” Mika said, “can I have a chocolate milk and a veggie panini please.”

“You got it, Jonsie the usual?”

“Sure, thanks. Now, about the trick, I’m sure you saw me doing it in school, but come to think of it, not many people remember me doing it. Weird.”

“So you can take an object and make it two dimensional.”

“If I’ve seen it in a photo before, sure. I told you about my phone, bought it from a flyer and turned it into a flyer. Stupid idea as it turned out.”

“Can you do it with people?”

“God, I don’t know Art, why would I try that? What would happen to something alive if it suddenly went flat and then round again? Nothing good I suspect.”

“Hmm, I was thinking of bad guys, but yeah, I suppose it would be just as easy to shoot them, probably the same result. Did you ever find a use for the trick?”

“You mean aside of taking something bulky and storing it in my pocket? I do that quite a bit, actually. Sure saves on parking fees.”

“You can turn a car into a flyer?”

“Sure, only my car though, sometimes they come back out with wrinkles.”

I looked sideways at him, I couldn’t tell if he was kidding now or not.

Mika spoke up, “You’re talking about taking a picture right? That’s how you turn something 3d into 2d isn’t it?”

“Well, not quite,” Jonsie said, “I mean the car or whatever disappears onto the paper, and then reappears after I move it back. Nothing on the paper afterward.”

“Wow, that’s freaky.”

“Yeah, but aside from tucking things away, not a lot of use. I can only do it to one thing at a time and I obviously have to do it to things that are portable. Disappearing a building would be rather messy right?”

I looked at Mika and said “do you suppose that has anything to do with your camera taking strange shots in the middle of the normal ones?”

Mika smiled, “Oh I know all about that, Art, no worries. Jonsie gives me all the shots at the end of a session.”

“I guess it must be related,” said Jonsie, “can’t think that I’d have two talents so similar, or that the camera developed it on its own, we’d have heard about cameras taking ‘real’ photographs I’m sure.”

Mika cut back it, “I like the odd shots. They seem to go along with what I’m working on at the time.”

“How’s that,” I said.

“I’m working on me. Simple as that. You ever wonder why someone would pose for months in the nude? Or why a photographer would use the same model for months? We do a lot of setups, sure, but it’s the shoot that is important to me, not

the shots.

“Look, I wasn’t a very nice person when I met Jonsie, selfish, self-absorbed, quite a bitch. The reason was that I felt I had to assert myself, look after number one, protect myself, or I would disappear. I know it sounds strange, but it’s the way a lot of girls I know feel. Guys too.

“So one day I see an ad for figure models. No cute hints, just real plain, ‘involves nude work’, and a link to some of Jonsie’s work. I really liked it and thought ‘why not?’

“I got in touch, and Jonsie tried to talk me out of it. ‘You ever going to teach Sunday school?’ That sort of thing, well that just made me want to do it all the more. I mean, it’s my business what I do with my body, not anyone else, and so we set up a shoot.

“I couldn’t believe it, that first session, Jonsie said ‘you want me to talk you out of your clothes, or you just want to jump in?’ Well I wasn’t there to be cute, I wanted some of those shots I saw, so I said ‘jump in.’ So Jonsie says, ‘change room over there or get undressed here, I’ll be over there messing with the lights.’ I got a bit ticked off, I mean the guy didn’t care that I was undressing, he wasn’t even going to try and look. OK I know, he was about to see me naked, but undressing? I asked him later and he said ‘I don’t do glamour shots, don’t like to take pictures of half naked girls looking coy and holding their boobs.’

“So I drop the clothes right there and sure enough, he’s off in the corner messing with the lights. It was like he didn’t care

about me or my being naked. Turns out he actually didn't care, that first shoot he told me that I was just something to reflect light. You'd think that would offend me, but he was so intent on putting me in the right place, shining the lights just so.

"I mean, he knew I was there, but I was half of the process, I should just do my job and try for the best pictures we could get."

"You didn't feel like an object or a piece of meat or something?"

"No, if he'd made a big deal about me being naked I would have been self-conscious, but he really didn't care. I believed him when he said that naked was better than clothes for the shots. It really was.

"I never felt like I wasn't there, wasn't involved. I mean he spent three hours staring at me, he would really look hard, then he'd shoot some, change the lights and completely ignore me. Just as I was getting ticked at being left alone, that stare would be back on me. Honestly, I never feel as affirmed as a living being, as when he is staring at me. I'm really there. Weird isn't it? That's not how it's supposed to feel.

"That was when I realized what was happening to me, why I went back again. I was losing my fear of disappearing. There's no way in hell I could ever disappear when Jonsie is staring at me. So I went back several times and each time I felt like he was stripping away some of the bad things, the things I was beginning to realize were not so nice. I was me Jonsie was looking at, just bare me. It's clear he has no patience for my

bullshit, my bitchiness. He just expects a professional job and I want to give it to him.”

“Is he capturing those bad things on his camera, those odd shots? Are they a bit of your soul?”

“What, like ‘don’t take my picture, I don’t want my soul stolen?’ Not a chance, it’s the opposite. He’s cleaning up my soul. He’s stealing all the stuff that hides my soul. When I’m posing naked, I’m totally exposed, completely. He told me that if I didn’t want my pussy in a photograph, don’t show it to him. He totally doesn’t care that I’m naked, he wants to see light bending and bouncing around my body.”

“Well, not entirely true,” said Jonsie, “it’s an amazing body, and I’d rather see it than not see it.”

“Goofball, you’ve never touched me, never made a pass at me, you don’t care about me at all.”

“I touch you lots, when I’m poking and prodding you into position.”

Mika laughed, “Yeah and you’re not supposed to do that, you’re supposed to use a wooden stick to poke me around, I read that on one of the photo blogs.”

“Oh my god, stop or I will start using a stick.”

“Don’t you dare, you have such nice soft warm hands.”

“Mika!”

“Anyway, he often doesn’t use that strange camera, but when he does, I can see bitchy faces, sometimes dog faces it’s so bad, and hornets for eyes if I’m mad at someone, and all sorts of things that I know I ought to get rid of.

“You know, I once took that camera and shot Jonsie, and there in the middle was my dad. Weird as that could have been, I knew what it meant, and I didn’t need to see it, but it proved to me that Jonsie has my best interests at heart, even while he’s taking dirty pictures to share with his pervert buddies.”

“Mika, please, Art doesn’t know you, he’ll be reporting me to the police.”

I liked this girl. And she was right, for someone of her age, she had it together.

Wolf Moon

“Hey there James, haven’t seen you around for a while, how are you and Mara getting along?”

“Good, Art, very good. It’s a wolf moon so Mara is off romping around with Megan.”

“I didn’t know those two were close? It’s not like they are even the same type of wolf-woman. What do they have in common?”

“They’re both wolves I guess, they both love the woods, and let’s face it, there aren’t many wolf-women around Guelph are there? They get together once in a while for what they call a ‘girls night out’.

“Mara has promised me that they don’t eat anyone, but honestly, I think they do go out and scare the hell out of the developers who are chopping down the woods to build houses. They don’t like that much. Lots of poopy pants created, Mara tells me.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask if you’ve given up asking Mara to make you a wolf too, are you still thinking about it?”

“No, I love the girl to pieces, but after Ray showed me just what she goes through, I realized she doesn’t want to inflict that on me. We’ll just take it as it comes, I’ll eventually look old enough to be her mate, and I’ll let her do the howling. Mind you, she’s been teaching me some great howls. You want

to hear one?”

“No! Not in here James, not in here.”

James laughed and said “Mind you, Mara can change into a pretty big wolf, and sometimes she lets me ride along. That’s a treat, I can tell you. Feeling that power between my legs, hanging on to her mane. She can really turn on the speed.”

“OK, so that’s why I’ve been hearing stories of centaurs in the woods, it’s you two messing around.”

“Oops, we try to stay away from other people.”

“Maybe don’t run around on Starkey’s Hill then, that place is more crowded than a downtown street on the weekends.”

“Not us, Art, we don’t go there.”

“Oh god, this town is getting worse and worse. Hugo can’t close down the weak points fast enough. It’s supernatural central these days.”

“You want to go see if we can find a centaur then?”

“No, I’m sure he, she or it will walk in the door for coffee any day now.

“And how about Coyote? I haven’t seen Amber around for a while, have you heard from her?”

“She’s a mess, Art. The last time I saw her she was still trying

to fix the world, and still seeing the consequences. Coyote's damned powerful but his power doesn't account for future twists."

"You're getting to be quite the scholar on this stuff James."

"Almost have to be, you know that Mara and all the other beings that have power, express it within the scope of Coyote's power. They don't screw things up like Coyote does, because they bump into his limits, the edges of his world. But Coyote, being the guy who sang the world into being, is free to screw up big time.

"Poor Amber is just starting to figure out how continuously frustrating it is to be that powerful. I'm afraid she's getting as grumpy as Coyote was before he gave her his power."

"How about you Ray, you're the other member of our little lunch counter pack, how come you aren't out yipping at the moon?"

"What part of girl's night out is unclear to you Art? In case you hadn't noticed, I'm a boy, at least that's what the ladies have decided I am, shape shifter or no."

"Ray I never want to picture you as a woman ever again."

"But I look so good in stockings."

"Stop, just stop. How's little Kit getting along with Oki?"

"Good, Okami is fitting right in, kids are kids I guess. Hey, you

want to go see? They're in the family playground at the moment."

"Got to look after the shop, Ray, but it's Sunday morning, why don't you and James go along. James can do some more research on the various canine spirit beings."

Ray winced, "I'm canine like you're an ape, Art, but I know what you mean. Maybe just call us the pack and leave it at that, two wolves, a fox, and a coyote make a pretty strange crew no matter what you call them. What we need now is a dog-faced boy."

"Careful what you wish for, Ray, you'll have one coming through the door on the back of a centaur. Go on you two, go visit the kids."

Ray was more attached to little Kitsune than to anyone else he knew. It didn't hurt that she was his kit, but still, he'd had other kits with humans over the years. Kitsune seemed to be special to him. Hell she was special to me too, we all loved her, and her little brother.

Ray hesitated, but I said, "Sunday morning Ray, and the Kobolds are just downstairs, sleeping it off, I can get them if I need them, and Caw is always around, I'll be fine."

They were back in five minutes, Ray can leave the family world and come back to this one at any time, but he usually let time run normally. James looked shaken, I looked at Ray.

"Damn it Art, there's a problem. Last time we thought it was

Kit, but it turns out she had help to crumble the edges of the daydream. When we got there half the family was there, and Hugo. Someone had called him in, they found a weak spot in the daydream world, Art.”

“Didn’t you say that sort of thing wasn’t possible?”

“I said it was dangerous as hell, and it is. Somehow it happened, there was a weak spot, and James here, not being one of the Raynards, and so less at risk, offered to go through with Hugo to anchor him. He tried, but he said it was like someone was blocking the door. Someone halfway through.”

James took a big shuddering breath, “I’ve seen some strange things around here Art, but I got my head through and what I saw was grotesque. Not quite monsters with fifty arms, but monsters who were starving to death, they were weak, pitiful, dying. They looked horrifying, but they were also looking at me and somehow asking for help. I must have looked as horrible to them as they looked to me, but they were asking for help. I tried to get the rest of the way in, but like Ray said, something was blocking the door, and then Hugo pulled me back.

“Art, we have to help them. They’re dying.”

I looked at Ray, but he shook his head. “We had to close the weak spot, Art, our daydream world was crumbling. If it goes, we go, we couldn’t stabilize it and so Hugo closed it. Art I heard the screams, whatever James saw, I believe he was right. There’s an entire world that is dying.”

I dropped a couple of sweet hot chocolate's in front of them and told them to get on down to the pub for a stiff drink. Then I drew a sign on the window to get Mara back from her run, so she could take care of James. If Ray was rattled, James was probably hanging on by his fingernails. The worst part, the part that was scaring me, was that Ingrid had seen that dying world in her dreams. Wounded Gods, dying worlds, this was getting a lot more serious than a few spirit beings floating around Guelph.

When Mara and Megan came in, I sent Mara downstairs and asked Megan what she thought.

"I'll go talk with Ingrid, and see what she sees. We on this side don't usually pay much attention to the European gods, but there's so much mixing in the last few hundred years. That Wounded God may be European, but my people have felt his pain I think. It's not ours, and I didn't think much about it, but we can feel it.

"Art, if our spirit beings are starting to mix with their gods, and if the other worlds are starting to bleed together, there's something deadly happening. After I talk to Ingrid, I'm going to talk with Mike and Liz, it's time to gather the peoples."

As she walked out the door I realized I was shaking. Time to close up shop and get a drink myself.

The Writer

“Hey there Hemmie, how are you today?”

“Is that my name?”

“Oh dear, no, sorry Henry, I was making a joke about Hemmingway. Your name is Henry Wayson and you like coffee and a danish for breakfast, and my name's Art.”

“Got it, thanks Art. You know, I think it's getting worse, my memory. Each book I write, I use part of my lifetime experiences to create it, and once I do I lose those memories.”

“You're kidding, I assumed it was dementia. You're saying it's not?”

“Not according to the tests, my brain is fine, I'm just losing my memories. I'm afraid that pretty soon I'm going to lose the ability to write.”

“Can't you write things that are totally fiction? Do you need your memories to write?”

“I tried, and all that comes out is really bad science fiction, the sort you might write in elementary school. I need to write from my life experience, and since I'm an old man, it worked for a lot of years. But about a year ago I realized I was losing the memory of that experience. Now I've got big holes in my life, there's people and places in there that have no relationship to each other. Just flashes, you know it's like some sort of South

American magic realism, bits and pieces that are hard to fit together, rather dream-like.

“Now, that's not too bad in itself, but I'm afraid of writing books like that, for fear I'd soak up the rest of my memories. I mean, I wrote about this place a while ago and now you have to introduce yourself to me. It's all rather depressing.”

“Can't you just repeat the old stories? I mean some authors write the same book several times over. They say there's only 7 plots, so that's OK right? Just write the same thing you already have.”

“It doesn't work quite like that Art, I need the life experience to be able to write, I need to have real conversations in my head to pull into the books.

“Yes they say there's seven plots, but if you combine them there's more like 5000, seven factorial if I remember right, but even with a plot, I can't write without something to call on when I fill in the story.”

“But you don't write autobiography, so if you don't have specific memories to put down, you can still write a story can't you?”

“Art, you've heard of the advice to write what you know, yes? That means write from your experience, use the conversations and actions of your life to make your characters live. My friends used to love going through my books to find bits and pieces of themselves in there. But look, when I write it down it's gone from my head. Friends have disappeared, they have to

introduce themselves to me. There's nothing there now, there's so many holes that I have trouble remembering where I live. You know my favourite breakfast, but I don't. Not any more.”

“Man, that's rough Henry, I didn't know it was that bad.”

“My next book was going to have a writer as a character, but I'm afraid if I write it, that will be the end of my career as a writer, I'll forget that's what I do. On the other hand, maybe I should do that, then I'll just be another old man with a bad memory and I won't feel so bad about not writing.”

I shook my head and turned back to the grill. There was a girl who came in most days and sat back in the corner. I didn't even know her name, she just drank coffee and read her book. I figured she was one of those painfully shy types, with her bun and glasses. I often forgot she was there, but now she leaned forward and said “Excuse me, sorry, I was eavesdropping. Henry, can you tell me where your books are published?”

“Hello my dear, nice to meet you,” said Henry, “My books aren't published, I was never really interested in that sort of thing. Some of them are online on a website, but most of them exist here in my laptop and nowhere else.”

“Sorry, I should have introduced myself, I'm Cary. Do you suppose you could give me the copies of your books Henry? I'd be interested in reading them. Art here can tell you that I read a lot, I'm in here almost every day.”

“I'd be delighted to give you the books, in fact if you have a memory stick I can copy them to you right now, before I

forget.”

“That would be great, I have one here in my pack, it's almost empty.”

I refilled both of their coffees and wondered about the strange meetings that happened in the diner. I mean a guy who writes and a girl who reads. OK that's not so unusual, but from what I've gathered, Henry does nothing but write, and Cary nothing but read.

The USB drive handed over, Cary opened her laptop and started to read.

“This is really good Henry. You're a great writer, your characters come alive on the page. It's just like you said, I can feel the reality that you've put into them.

“Art, would you mind if I read a little bit aloud?”

“No, go ahead,” I said.

Cary asked Henry to move over beside her and she didn't read quite loud enough for me to hear, but Henry certainly did. His eyes got brighter as she spoke, she was quite animated, I think she was a good speaker. After about fifteen minutes Henry sat back and she stopped.

He looked at her and said, “I had forgotten her, I loved her so much, and for ten years I haven't thought about her at all. Thank you young woman, having her back in my memory is the greatest gift I've had in a very long time.

“You know, I've read that book and others, but they don't trigger anything. Hearing you read it though...”

He stopped and I could see that he was near to tears. I looked at Cary and raised my eyebrows.

“I think he's exactly right,” she said, “his memories are here, in the book. It really is good, the characters come alive, and I think that's why, they are literally his memories.”

“Yeah, but how come he can't read it and get them back?”

“I'm not sure, but I think that he doesn't want them back, they are perfect on the page, so he leaves them there. But when I read them to him, maybe, I don't know, maybe if they flow through someone else he can take them back.”

“Cary, look at him, you've given him something amazing. You've got coffee for life if you read him back his memories. If you're willing to do that of course.”

“Are you kidding, if they're all like this one, these books are amazing. I'd be delighted to read them to him.”

She did just that, they were in the place every day at about the same time. She'd read for an hour or so, and after a few days it wasn't just Henry that was listening. Cary had an audience of five or six every day. She would read aloud and stop at a sort of chapter end. She really did have a wonderful ability to make the characters come alive, as I found out when she raised her voice for the larger audience.

Henry became more and more animated as he got back what he'd given, and the audience would clap at the end of each reading.

I could see that Cary was also coming alive, by sharing her love of books and her ability to narrate, she was coming out of her shell.

Win, win I called that one.

Mike and Liz Go Out of Town

“Liz are you home?”

“Yes, come on in... Megan, how did you know where we live?”

“Are you kidding child, I know where both you and Mike are whenever I need to know.”

“Well that’s not creepy at all. Do you want a coffee? What can I do for you?”

“Coffee would be nice. I’ve come to tell you that I’ve found a shaman that knows the ways of the little people. If you’re interested, I can take you to him.”

“I don’t know, Megan, I don’t know if I want to leave Mike on his own, he’s pretty helpless.”

Megan smiled, “Not so helpless that he can’t be away from you for a few weeks, and I’ll keep an eye on the boy.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of, that you’ll take care of him a bit too well.” Liz was smiling when she said that, Megan had promised not to bed Mike again.

“If he makes a pass at me I’ll give him such a bite!”

The girls laughed loud enough to wake Mike, who tended to sleep until he heard the oatmeal bowls hit the kitchen table.

“What’s up ladies?”

“Good morning dear boy, I want to take Liz away from you for a few weeks so that she can study with a shaman.”

“Oh... Liz, do you want to go?”

“I don’t know, Mike, I’m pretty happy right now and we have our jobs and a lot of things going on.”

“It’s up to you love, you know that, right? If you want to go, you should.”

Megan spoke up, “If it helps with the decision, I have talked with Ingrid, and with James and Ray, Art of course. There’s a problem coming, I’m not sure what it is but Ingrid is dreaming of it, and I think Jim is in Europe because he senses there’s a problem there. We are going to need all the help we can find, which is also where you come in Mike.”

“Me?”

“Yes, I’ve told you that you’re a seer. That’s why you stuck in my memory, and how you found Liz. You can find spirit beings, and we will need beings from all the peoples.”

“Megan you’re starting to freak me out here. Liz, I can buy as a spiritual being, I mean she’s an angel as far as I’m concerned, but me? I rather doubt that.”

“Mike it doesn’t matter what you believe, you will be found by those we need, so I’d like you to go walkabout, to take a trip

with your thumb out while Liz is studying.”

“But our jobs?”

“Will be there when you come back, I promise.”

Liz had been thinking, “Megan you’re serious about this, you think we need to do this?”

“I do.”

“All right, I don’t know why but I have a really strong urge to do as you say. You’re not doing any magic on me are you?”

“Not on either of you Liz, but you might understand that urge a bit more when you get some training. Best you don’t hear too much from me about that, I don’t know what your training will be but I certainly don’t want to interfere with it.”

“Fine, Mike and I will do as you ask, when should we go?”

“Mike can tidy up around here and then take off in a few days, but you and I should go now, this shaman is very old, I had the feeling he has been waiting around for someone to pass his wisdom to.”

Mike was looking at Liz, she didn’t usually make decisions for the two of them. so when she did, he tended to go along with it.

“Where am I going on this trip of mine, Megan?”

“Just north and west, up around the lakes, I’m going to go East

and circle around to the south once I get Liz where she needs to go.”

“And what do I tell these folks I’m supposed to meet?”

“Just talk with them, let them see you for what you are, and tell them that I would appreciate them getting in touch. Mostly just have a good trip, you’ll be away from Liz, if you meet some sexy women don’t just jump into bed with them. I suspect that you’ll meet several, and when you do, look inside. Liz will tell you what to do.”

“What?”

“Oh just follow your heart, not your crotch, OK?”

“Right, stick my thumb out, wander around, follow my heart not my crotch. I think I can do that, are you sure you can’t be a bit more specific?”

“No. Liz can you be ready in a couple of hours?”

“Make it three?”

Megan looked from one to the other and smiled. “I’ll be back in four.”

Megan went to the coffee shop, where she filled Art in on what she was doing.

“Megan are you sure there’s trouble coming, I mean more than what we’ve been getting?”

“I am. I’ve talked with Ingrid about her dreams, and I’ve got a strong feeling that they are true. I didn’t want to tell Mike and Liz, but there’s a lot of blood to be spilled, I think there’s a war coming, at least that’s what it feels like. I’m not much of a sooth-sayer but the wolf in me wants to run. Mike and I are going to see who is around that can help. A lot of the gathering of the peoples has already happened, and it’s here, it’s the lunch counter.”

“You’re kidding, it’s just a coffee joint.”

“It’s a focus, Art, just like Guelph is a focus. You know, I think Jim knew this a hundred years ago, even if he couldn’t put it into words. Like I can’t. Just have faith that he chose you to run the place, for a reason.”

“Right, what can I do?”

“Stay here for now Art, you’ll know when the time comes, and take care of Ingrid, those dreams are getting like fights for her. She’s too tough to let on, but they are taking a toll. Make sure she knows you’re there for her.

“Now I need to break up the love birds and get Liz on the road, we’ve got a long trip into the North country and we have to go off road. Damn I hate this, burrs and snags all through my fur.”

When Megan got back to the basement, she noticed Liz was flushed and still panting. She grinned and made sure Liz had everything she was going to need. Liz’ blood was somewhere other than her brain at the moment. “OK little sister, got that

pack tightened down well? Cinch it up and hop on, this one will be a bit rough.”

That was an understatement, Megan turned into a large white wolf and took off into the woods behind the apartment. It seemed like they never went out the other side. Liz figured she would be knocked off Megan’s back as they brushed by deciduous and then cedar and finally pine trees, but she somehow stayed on. They ran for several hours and Liz lost all sense of time or distance.

They finally arrived at a longhouse of bark and sticks, like Liz had seen in illustrations of old villages. It was alone in the wood, with no defensive fence as Liz had seen in museums.

An old, horribly old, man came out of the lodge and nodded to Megan, who nodded back. Liz realized he was about a third of her size. He motioned for Liz to enter the lodge and Megan changed to a human to say “This is as far as I’m allowed to go, Liz. Listen carefully and remember everything, he will probably not repeat what he teaches you. I hope I see you again.”

As Liz walked into the longhouse she wondered at that last comment. “I hope I see you again?”

The Recruitment Trip

Mike had been on the road for five days, he had covered a lot of ground and Megan was right, he'd met a lot of sexy women. The thing is, they didn't seem interested in him. With a little discussion he realized it wasn't the women he should be talking to, it was their men.

This last one, name of Katie Jimson, had a hell of an Ottawa Valley accent. She told him about her boyfriend, Joseph Montferrand whose nickname was Joe Mufferaw. He was supposed to be a giant of a man according to Katie, still falling trees with an axe. Mike had a bit of history and he wondered if this was the original Joe Mufferaw or somebody who took up the name.

Like the other women, he asked Katie to tell Joe to get in touch with Megan. He figured if they were the ones she was looking for, they would know who she was.

So far he had found several of these folks who were claimed to be “a giant of a man”. Namely, Louis Cyr, Édouard Beupré, Angus MacAskill, and Joshua Doan. He even found a couple, name of Anna Haining Swan and Martin Van Buren Bates.

He had no idea why these historical names kept popping up, but he figured Megan could sort it out.

These folks must have some amazing charisma, not one of these women had made a pass at him. He, of course, not wanting to be in trouble with Liz, returned the favour and kept

his passes to himself.

Being about five days out, however, he was getting pretty horny. He was hitching outside Kenora when he got a ride with a woman who was driving a beat up old Mercury Capri. Mike just barely remembered that car from his youth, and had never seen one. Sort of a Mustang kind of thing.

The woman who picked him up was named Jane. She never did give him a last name, but the moment he got in the car, he was in love with her. This upset Mike more than he wanted to admit, it was usually the women who were attracted to him. It upset him even more that this woman seemed not to notice the effect she was having on him.

They made their introductions, and realized they were both from Guelph. Not as much of a coincidence as might be thought. Guelph wasn't a tiny village.

“Where are you headed?” Mike asked as they got back on the road.

“I don't know, I'm following my nose, I'm looking for someone.”

“Anyone I'd know?”

“Maybe, if you're from Guelph, maybe you might. His name is Joe Makwa, but I call him Joe Bear.”

“No, sorry, doesn't ring a bell.”

“Well he was a strange guy, I met him a while ago, we lived together, and then he left and I forgot all about him. It was only last week that I remembered him, and so I quit my job and I've been on the road ever since. I want this guy back in my life.”

“You lived with him and forgot about him?”

“Yeah, weird eh? I don't understand how that could happen.”

“I might know how, there are some strange things happening in Guelph and most people see them and forget them.”

“Do you forget? How would you know if you forgot?”

“I don't, but I remember quite a lot. This Joe Bear, tell me the story.”

“He showed up in a bar I was working at. He didn't remember anything for a while, but eventually it turned out that he was a... Look this is going to sound absolutely nuts to you.”

“Yeah? I once went to bed with a wolf-woman, and then I got involved with a girl who lived in a tunnel, and we helped fight a dragon. I know another girl who turns into a wolf, a guy who is a fox-trickster. Why not try me.”

“Jesus. OK well it turned out that I'm some sort of goddess of love, and Joe fought off some sort of abomination who had stolen power from Coyote and Raven. Then he left and I forgot all about it. Now, if he's some sort of god, and I'm a goddess, why did I forget, and why did I suddenly remember all of this?”

“As to the forgetting, I can't explain that, but I might know about remembering. There seems to be some sort of danger coming, and all sorts of people are coming to help. I get the feeling I might want to get in touch with Joe, if he's a fighter. I can probably help find him, I'm what the wolf-woman calls a seer. I can be seen by these non-humans. The old blood as she calls it.”

“Good, you're with me then.”

That evening they stopped in a bar just inside the Manitoba border, and asked around for anyone who had seen Joe. It was a terrible way to hunt down a spirit being, but ask enough people and the word gets around.

As it turned out, they found no news at all. Life not being a bad movie, it wasn't a surprise.

They took a cheap motel for the night. The bed was king sized so Mike thought it would be fine, lots of room to avoid Jane, even if his hard-on seemed to be pulling him over to that side of the bed, all by itself.

About an hour after they had pulled up the covers, Jane said “Mike, do you suppose we could fuck? I'm lonely, cold and horny as hell. I have no idea if it's this goddess of love thing, but it's been terrible lately, these urges.”

Megan had said Mike should ask Liz if this happened. He didn't know how, but closed his eyes and asked. It just about scared him out of bed when Liz showed up as if she was

standing in the room. “Hello my love,” she said, “I understand, and I feel that we will need this Joe Bear. I can hardly be jealous of a goddess, I mean that would be like being jealous of Megan right?”

“So do your duty lover, and please, try to enjoy yourself.” She roared with laughter and faded away.

Shaken badly, Mike turned to Jane who had been waiting for an answer and opened his arms.

Now that he knew he could, he opened his mind to Liz every night, he would ask permission each time, to sleep with Jane, until Liz got tired of saying yes and told him to just go ahead. He also asked about her training.

“I can't speak about it specifically, Mike, but it's going faster than my teacher thought it would. He's only half in this world, and with each day he seems to fade a little so I'm absorbing as much as I can, as fast as I can. Mike, it's incredible, how much I was missing when I looked at the world around me. My teacher has opened my eyes, and I can see so much more. I'm also learning what he calls the tricks of the trade. Mostly I'm learning about healing, which is why I said you could sleep with Jane. She is hurting badly, and needs you with her now.”

“You say 'teacher' but what's his name?”

“Nope, one of the things I can't tell you love. But I can tell you to look north, go to Lake Winnipeg and find a ferry town. Your Bear is there.”

“Do you know which town?”

“Sorry sweets, no, just a ferry town. Good luck.”

Shortly after that they walked into the Norway House casino and there Jane spotted Joe, talking to the manager. She was hesitant, walking slowly toward him until he suddenly looked around and smiled. Then she ran. She launched herself into the air and Mike expected she would bowl the man over, but he caught her without a backward step and hugged her, both of them laughing.

After Jane introduced him, Mike started to explain, but Joe shook his head. “I’ve been expecting you, Jane and I will be along, you should head on back to Guelph. Please tell Megan that I’ll be there when you need me. Take the car back, we won’t need it.”

It wasn't ten minutes after, that the two of them were heading upstairs and the manager was steering Mike to the buffet.

To the Old World

Ingrid was sweating and moaning in the bed. Not in a good way either. Another dream, and I didn't know if I should wake her or let it run.

There's no way I was going to get any more sleep, so I went to the kitchen to start breakfast. It wasn't much later when Ingrid got up and joined me. She downed a coffee and held out her cup for another, it must have been bad.

“I saw the Wounded God again Art, and I saw Jim kill him. Don't look like that, he's done it before. This time though, it will cause a catastrophe, not just for our world but for dozens more. This god is somehow linked to all the portals that are opening up, and if the god dies, the worlds die.

“Jesus, we old gods may as well be fighting the giants, get a bit of fun in if the world is going to end.”

“What can we do Ingrid? Can we get hold of Jim and tell him not to kill the god? Has he done it yet...”

“Relax, I dreamed of the future, not the past. We don't want to get Jim by phone, we need to go help him.”

“What, you and I? We need to go where Jim is? But we don't know where he is.”

Ingrid looked at me with that special look she gives me when I'm 'being adorable.' “I'm a god, Artie, I can find him.”

“But the lunch counter...”

“Will either be there when we get back, or nothing will be there. It's serious Art, you're going to have to hand it over to someone else for a while.”

“But the bar, the refugees, all the things that need to be done.”

“Art! I'm telling you that none of that matters if the worlds are gone. You and I are leaving for England, that's where Jim is. We don't have a choice in this, we go.”

Ingrid said that in the voice of a god, that inevitable-doom voice she used on me when I screwed up, but this time it had undertones and I started planning.

“Right, let's eat breakfast and have coffee at the lunch counter. We'll see who is around.”

When we got to the diner, it was full. Ray again, but this time I didn't mind his opening the place early. Mike was behind the counter, cooking breakfasts and making coffee. That settled that.

Mike and Liz had both got back into town a few days ago, and they both looked changed. Mike had grown into his seer thing, whatever that was. He was completely comfortable with the non human types in the place, I guess it was like he saw them. Before he didn't, and they barely saw him.

I remember when I saw Ray for the first time as a fox, after the

local ghosts opened my eyes. Mike was taking it a lot more calmly than I did.

But as much as Mike had changed, Liz had changed much more completely. She was a tiny thing, but I got the impression she was eight feet tall. She had spent several weeks with a shaman, and neither she nor Megan would say what had happened, but now you could tell that she 'knew things'. I don't know how better to put it. There was a self-assurance that radiated from her.

She insisted that she had no special powers, but damn it, when she was around you just knew it was going to be all right. She must have become something, because Megan, who had treated her like a little sister, now treated her as an equal. This is Megan, who, I suspect, was as powerful as Coyote, as Ingrid.

I left Mike to work the grill and sat down. “Well gang, I don't know how you all knew we'd need a meeting but I'm glad you're here. Ingrid has had another dream and we're in trouble. Jim will find the Wounded God and kill him, but that won't close the weak spots, it will destroy the various worlds that are being linked. There's more than just a few portals here in Guelph. We know about the portal from the Keen family daydream, and the poor creatures there. Mara has gone to help them if she can.

“Ingrid and I need to go and stop Jim, so we need to do some planning here. First, the lunch counter, Mike will you take over here? Your ability to see supernatural beings, spirit beings I guess, is going to help to manage this madhouse.”

Mike nodded, "Of course I will Art."

"Thanks, Hugo, will you go with us to find Jim, you're one of his oldest friends and I don't know how easy it will be to stop him."

"Older than you might know, Art, of course I'll go but who is going to take care of the weak spots here?"

Liz spoke up. "I can help there, the weak spots have happened before, and I know how to handle them. Ray can you touch both Hugo and I so that he can check what I know please?"

When Ray touched them both, Hugo looked startled, he nodded deeply to Liz and said, "There's nothing I can add to what you know, Liz. Art, Liz can handle things here."

Megan nodded, as did Mike. That must have been some crash course in Shamanism.

"Alright, that's settled, Megan will you come with us?"

"No, I need to stay here, Art. There is more going on than we can see. There's a danger to Guelph, it's somehow a focus point, maybe because Jim has been here so long, he tends to attract trouble. At any rate, I will be needed here."

I wasn't going to argue with that. "Ingrid do you think that you, me and Hugo can handle things?"

Ingrid nodded, she was frowning a bit and looking at Megan but she didn't say what she was thinking.

“Fine, then it's to England. How do we get there?”

Liz spoke up, “Go to the wooden bridge, exactly a third of the way from the Boathouse side take a sharp right and you'll be in Winchester.”

I started to ask, but Hugo nodded so I said “Thanks Liz,” and we seemed to be set.

I picked up Jim's drinks tray, the one that turned into a shield, and looked for the broken knife, but it was gone. Jim must have taken it. Ingrid put her hand on my arm, “You won't need it love, we're not going after wyrms this time.”

Fine, I put it back, not without some reluctance, I wasn't spear-proof, but I reminded myself that Ingrid had a spear, and a sword, and a flying cloak and she had a cute little pet pig that grew into an absolutely monstrous fighting boar. I suspected I would be safe enough. She must have been reading my mind again and squeezed my hand.

I looked around the place and realized that it was as much a home as any I had ever known. I looked over the crew, and realized that if I had to go somewhere else to protect the place, I couldn't leave it in better hands.

I handed over the keys to Mike with some ceremony, and he grinned. “It will be here when you get back, Art, no fear.”

With that the three of us walked out of the shop, crossed the bridge and walked through the park to the covered bridge. I led

the way with more confidence than I felt, and when we got 2/3 of the way across I turned hard right and walked straight into the wall. As I staggered back, Ingrid caught me, gave me a bit of a hug and said, “wrong right, sweetheart.”

We turned the other way and walked through the wall and I wasn't in Guelph any more.

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