

# Bean at the Crossroads

Lunch Counter Stories X



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## **Start at the Crossroads**

He was standing at a crossroads. It was about half a mile from the dust/mud drive to the farmhouse where he had been born and had lived until now. He had an ugly red mark on the left side of his face, and he was cradling his left arm where he'd tried to ward off the blows. For that, his father had struck him across the face even harder than he usually did. The left eye was swelling shut, but he could see with his other one.

Bean was looking down the road. He had tried running away twice before and his father caught him. Still he stood and looked down that road. Beside him stood a tall man with a cane and a wide brimmed, slouch hat. He wore a shabby trench coat, over a bare chest, baggy pants and bare feet. You couldn't see his eyes for the hat, but he had a neatly trimmed beard and was smoking a pipe. Not far away, a scruffy dog lay full out on the road, collecting the last of the day's warmth from the pavement.

The boy didn't see the man, but the man saw the boy. He saw him lie down on the crossroads, like he was going to wait for a car to come run him over.

A movement to his right caused the old man to look up, a fierce looking woman stood there, watched the boy for a moment, then looked at the old man and shook her head.

“Well boy, Oya says the Baron don't want you. I guess that

means you're not going to get your wish today.

“You don't know it, but you just called me, young Bean, and I'm Papa Legba. I am the stone by the road, I am the change, I am the bridge. I am here beside you when you call for me, and you will call for me again. One day I will answer. This is my place here, at the crossroads.”

The boy heard none of this, but perhaps somewhere in his dreams, that were more like nightmares, he might have been listening.

“You mind what I'm saying now, boys and girls together are abused alike. Boys grow out of it, get too big to hurt, they learn to fight. You will learn to fight, I can see that in you Bean.

“Girls now, they have their own ways, maybe find a strong man to protect them from other men. If he hits once in a while, well that's a small price to pay isn't it now?

“Or maybe she finds her words. Girls got words before boys do, and with those words she can form her group and her group can fight.

“Or maybe she just grows up enough to leave, just walk away down that road and disappear like you tried to do. Maybe she finds her way, or maybe she finds Oya.

“I can see in your head that you are a smart one, you wonder why your pa hits you, why the older boys hit you, why the girls

hit you. I can see that one day you are going to understand and you're not going to play the game.

“Yes, it's like a game where you take turns picking the teams, but most folk never get past the game. They were picked on and when they get big enough, they pick on. That's what they learned, that's what they do. You see something beyond that, don't you.

“Most folk figure they were hurt, so they can have their turn hurting, and some are bright enough to figure they have some sort of justification for hurting. They hear things like the ‘cycle of violence’ and ‘generational wounds’ and they feel they've got a right. They don't. Those folk are worse than the ones who just don't know why they hit their wives and kids. The ones that figure they have a right, they know they're wrong, but they do it anyway, and that's worse than those who struggle with their temper in ignorance.

“I can see you know right from wrong, boy, all on your own. You don't believe in what the preacher tells you about who owns who, you don't figure anyone who hits you has a right. I'm telling you this so you will keep on knowing because you ain't going to meet the Baron today.

“I see your car is coming, I will talk to you again Bean, the next time you're here.”

A pickup was speeding down the road, the man driving it, half drunk. Just another farmer with a new pickup heading home

from the bar. Somehow, the truck seemed to be losing power, the more he stepped on the accelerator, the more it slowed down. Looking around to figure out what was wrong, the man spotted Bean on the road. He hit the brakes.

“What the hell are you doing here kid? I almost ran you down, could have killed you.”

Bean looked up at him with hatred, he should have run him over. He said nothing, struggled a bit when the man picked him up and dumped him into the truck. He was just too little to do anything to prevent what he knew was coming.

Sure enough, the man drove him back to his house, delivered him to his mother saying the kid was crazy, lying in the road like that.

His mother thanked the man, even as she shied away from his boozy breath. She hurried Bean into his bedroom, saying, “Your father is still out. If he’d found you there we’d both have got a beating. You get to sleep before he gets back from the bar and we won’t say anything more about this.”

Later that night, when his father got home, Bean could hear his mother try to turn the argument away, the yelling became the grunts and groans Bean hated hearing more than the slaps. He knew his mother hated that, but an argument would have spilled over onto Bean, so she tolerated it and later did what she could to prevent having another baby.

## **Bean Growing Up**

Bean grew up some. He got a little bigger, but he was still picked on, ‘bullied’ the city folks would say. Those in the country understood about the hen-pecking of the chicken coop. It was accepted, natural, the way of establishing the pecking order. It was real, and it hurt more than some imagined slight. It was physical. Bean would have loved it if the other kids had shunned him. To be left alone would have been a luxury.

Bean was still too small to resist the boys, but Rebecca was the top girl on the schoolyard. The day Bean understood he was growing out of the abuse, moving up the pecking order, Rebecca and her followers were shouting, “Bean the Queen, Bean the Queen” and poking at him.

Bean tried to walk away but Rebecca slapped him across the back of his head. Some sort of switch flipped, it probably had something to do with his father slapping him. Bean spun around and pushed Rebecca to the ground. He stood over her, staring at her, breathing hard and flexing his hands into fists and out again, trying not to drop to one knee to punch her.

Rebecca could do nothing, she wanted to get up and shove him back in turn, but something about the way he was looking at her made her stay where she was, like a dog showing its belly, she was defeated.

Bean turned and left. Rebecca went down several rungs on the ladder, she had over-reached, and about half of her gang left her. The girls never bothered Bean again, and the boys became a bit more wary. The pressure at school on the outsider kid, the kid whose dad beat him, eased just a bit.

A year later, Bean took his father's cut-throat razor to church. When the pastor cornered him again in the cloak-room, Bean waited until the man took his penis from his pants. Being careful not to cut him anywhere public, anywhere the pastor could show, and claim that Bean was crazy, the boy sliced.

He had thought about it carefully, he didn't want to kill the man, just stop him, so he sliced from base to tip, avoiding the major blood vessels. Still, the preacher jumped back, trying to stop the bleeding while Bean came close and hissed in his ear, "You touch me again and I'll cut it off, you hear me!"

Another year, and Bean saw one of his almost-friends grab a girl and slap her. Bean hauled the boy away and asked him what he thought he was doing.

"I'm keeping her faithful to me, I saw her talking to Billy and she shouldn't do that."

"You think that's OK?"



“The councillor says it’s OK, I was slapped, so it’s OK for me to do the same, right?”

Bean punched him hard on the face, knocking the boy down. He bent over and said, “I was abused too, you know that, is that OK with you, if I hit you?”

The kid held his nose and shook his head no. “No? It’s not OK for me to hit you? Well that’s good, I know right from wrong and so do you. Don’t be so fucking lazy next time, you talk to her instead. If you’re hitting someone, it’s your fault, the why doesn’t matter. You understand me? It was wrong for me to hit you but I had to get your attention. You get me?”

The kid nodded and said, “Yeah, I get you Bean, I’ll talk to her.”

“You’ll apologize as well, and I’m sorry I hit you.”

“No, no, it’s OK just please don’t hit me again OK?”

Things began to change at home for Bean. His father still beat his mother, but only tried to hit Bean when he was drunk. Bean had grown tall, in spite of a poor diet and a few cracked bones. He was like a water-plant that got stronger the more it was slung around in the stream.

Bean got tough, mentally. Long before he could physically

stand up to his father, he gathered his anger and hatred into a white-hot ball in his stomach. He called on this to glare hatred at his father while he was being hit. No matter how hard his father hit, he would not cry, he simply glared his defiance.

Came the day when he was big enough. His father slapped and Bean caught his arm. The old man was drunk as usual, and staggered a bit, Bean used that and pulled, hard. The old man fell, crashing into chairs and the table.

Bean did nothing else, he had no desire to be thrown out of the house, but he didn't have to do anything else. His father was no longer sure he was stronger than his son, he stopped trying to beat him.

That didn't mean he stopped trying to control Bean. He knew the boy loved his mother, and so he would threaten to hurt her if Bean didn't do what he was told.

Bean did the chores his father told him to do, and so there wasn't much the old man could complain about. Still, there came the day when Bean talked back while his father had just a bit too much booze in him. It was a stupid chore, a waste of time and Bean said so. His father turned and slapped his mother hard. As he pulled back his hand to strike again, Bean caught his arm.

That was when the old man understood just how strong Bean had become. He was dragged into the tool shed, his struggling didn't matter. Bean closed the door, spun his father around and

slammed him face first against the wall. With his left elbow he pinned his father's neck, and with his left hand he held the old man's arm against the wall. With his right hand, Bean picked up a framing hammer and without saying a word, he smashed his father's hand, breaking several bones.

As the old man howled, Bean said, "You can tell your buddies at the bar that you caught your hand in the binder, or you can tell them that I did it. I don't much care, but if you hit mom again I'll cut it off." Bean looked meaningfully at the power saw as he said that.

His voice was so cold, the old man knew he meant it, and he pissed his pants.

That was the end of the abuse. His father became child-like in his desire to please his son. He did as he was told, and bothered neither mother nor son any more. He still drank, and when he did, he talked big, but deep in his eyes was the fear.

## **Down the Road**

Bean's father continued to go to the bar with the rest of the locals. These were fiercely independent, free men, which meant they were profoundly selfish and had some unwise ideas. The most unwise was a belief that vaccination, masks and quarantine did not apply to them.

Bean made sure he and his mother were vaccinated against smallpox, but he could not get his father to agree. “It’s my freedom” he would say.

“You are not free to put us at risk.”

“Fuck you boy, it’s a free country. You can’t make me get injected, or make me wear a mask, or keep me in the house, I’m tearing down that quarantine sign on our door.”

The old man had indeed caught smallpox in the bar, but headed out the door anyway. He spread it to a few others, and then, when sick enough, he died alone in the hospital. None of his free and independent buddies visited him, nor did anyone else in the community who were tired of his selfishness. When Bean and his mother visited, once, the old man ranted and raved about the unfairness of the world, the doctors who were refusing to cure him, and his family, who never helped him.

Even his mother was done with him. Never helped? She had devoted her entire adult life to the man, and he told her she had never helped. She did not cry when he died.

Bean stood again on the crossroads, looking down the road away from the farm that headed to the city. He was finished with high school and could go to University if he wanted. Papa Legba stood beside him.

“Your Pa is dead now, what you think? You want to go now? I know your ma says go, but who’s going to help her on the farm? It’s too bad your Pa was so mean, he never hired any help and with that crippled hand, it’s all been on you. At least you got your schooling, more than most around here.

“Whatever you decide, Papa Legba will be here to listen, and one day you will ask and I will appear.”

Bean turned away from the crossroads and walked back up his drive to the farmhouse. Somehow standing there helped his thinking, and he had realized he couldn’t leave his mother to try and run the farm by herself. There was no money to hire a man, what money they had his father had pissed up against the side of a building in town.

He walked in to the house and kissed his mother on the cheek, grabbed his boots and coat and headed out to the barn.

As he went out the door, his mother said to herself, “Papa Legba, why you make him stay, he ought to go and have his own life.”

A lifetime of hard work and abuse doesn’t make for a long life. Bean didn’t cry when his mother died. He wondered about that, but he was relieved that her suffering had ended. He buried her, sold the land and burned the house. The new owners didn’t

mind, it would have had to be knocked down anyway.

That was it, every string that had kept Bean tied in place had been cut. He got into his truck and drove straight to the city. There was nobody he had to say goodbye to, and so he didn't, he just left.

Once in the city he lived in his truck until he could find an apartment, and he enrolled as a mature student in the University. While he was there, he studied physics and math, anything but agriculture. There was money from the farm, but he waited tables and worked as a short order cook. It wasn't a burden to him, it was easy money compared to running a dirt farm.

In his third year, he was approached by a rather shady man who offered him a bursary and a job after his graduation. It seemed that being alone and unattached, being a bit of a recluse, had some value to someone. Bean accepted the offer.

It was the ass end of the cold war, and the shady man represented some half-connected government agency that provided assassination services for the more respectable agencies. In other words, killers for hire. It turned out the man had done his homework, a kid that was abused, but fought back strongly, one without any connections, who might as well have no past and certainly seemed to have no future. Someone who was looking for some sort of purpose in life, even if he himself

didn't realize it.

Bean was trained to kill people, and at the end of his training, he was good at it. For a long time he figured he was suited for this life, after all, he hadn't even cried for his mother's death. How could he not be a natural born killer.

He travelled all over the world, got to see the inside of hotel rooms, the back streets of romantic cities, and never, ever played baccarat in a fancy casino while wearing a white tuxedo. His life was grubby, his job was grubby, and eventually he grew sick of it, or as one of the string of paid companions told him once, he was soul-weary.

He quit. Contrary to the spy movies, his agency did not try to kill him. Why would they? If Bean went public with what he had done, he would spend the rest of his life in jail, short as that life would be, especially once the assassination agencies of the countries of his victims knew where he was. No, Bean was no threat and so he was allowed to go.

Go where? He still had that life in his memory, in his soul. How do you go on from that? Where in the world is forward? These men usually went back instead, back to the agency that gave them some sort of twisted purpose in their lives. Some sort of forgiveness for what they did.

So Bean went back, back to the crossroads near his house. He was further away from calling it home than he had ever been. He stood on the crossroads and this time he called, "Papa

Legba, I ask you, appear before me.”

Papa Legba was standing beside him and said, “I’ve always been here boy, no need to call me, yet you do. What do you want from Papa Legba?”

Turning to look at Legba, he saw the figure he had always had in his head of his grandfather, despite never having known either grandfather, he said, “I chose the wrong road, I went the wrong direction, that was not me. Not the me I wanted to be. Help me Papa, help me go in the other direction.”

“Boy, you chose and now you want to un-choose. What makes you think I can do that for you? Well as it happens, I can, but it will cost you dear.”

“I have money, I can pay.”

“What use is money to Papa Legba? What this is going to cost you is you, boy, you. I give you another direction and you lose your life up to now, do you understand?”

“I lose my memories of who I was and where I came from? Why would that bother me?”

“Easy said, Boy, easy said. Very well, we best sit over there on those rocks, this isn’t going to be a good time for you, and I give you one more chance to say no please, Papa, I changed my mind.”



Bean sat and said nothing. Papa Legba nodded and closed his eyes. Bean started to scream.

## **Spiders**

Cleo glanced across the bar in time to see a group of students jump backward and knock over tables and chairs. ‘What is Clara doing now?’ she thought.

Clara was grinning, and as some of the boys were picking themselves up out of the pool of beer on the floor, they were grinning too. “That would be great, Clara, just perfect, thanks. We’ll see you Saturday night.”

“What was that all about?” said Cleo as she arrived beside Clara with a mop.

“Oh, that’s a retro-goth-neo-punk band and they’re playing here Saturday, they wanted me to do a scary light show for them so I made them see monsters and giant spiders. I think they liked it.”

“Oh great. You’d better tell the Celtic band about it, they may want to change their practice to Sunday afternoon.”

“I’ll do that, some of them should be in here later today for a

pint.”

“Some of them?...” muttered Cleo as she turned away to go back to the bar.

“Oh, by the way Cleo, Ely says hello.”

Clara stopped, “I thought he was out west?”

“He is, I saw him this morning.”

“Out west.”

“Yes, I popped in to say hello.”

“Sit down, Clara, explain this to me slowly.”

“Well I learned how to do that Elf thing, you know, where they sort of step out of the world and back in again so they can go anywhere.”

“Clara, Elves can’t do that.”

“What, but Kit said...”

Cleo glanced at the monitors in Ken’s office, Kit was upstairs at the lunch counter with Dave, having a late breakfast or something, “Come with me, Clara.”

As Cleo and Clara sat down at Kit’s table, Cleo asked, “Did

you tell Clara that Elves could pop around the globe?”

“No, I told her that some of her Elf magic was similar to what I use to pop around. I showed her what I did, and she could do it. It’s not an Elf thing, no, but combined with what I know, Clara can do it.”

“Oh Gods. Clara you’re not supposed to be telling people you have Elf powers.”

“Well Kit knew it already.”

“And the kids downstairs?”

“Um, I don’t know how they knew, they just asked for a light show and it kind of slipped out.”

“Monsters and giant spiders just kind of slipped out?”

“Um, well it’s sort of early in the day and maybe I need another coffee?”

“You need to keep it in your panties, girl, your powers are supposed to be secret.”

“Yes, Cleo.”

Kitsune smiled, “Don’t be too hard on her Cleo, she’s not a life-long spy like you are.”

“Agent, and she’s supposed to be learning.”

Dave had been sketching, as usual. Now he raised his head and said, “Giant spiders?”

“Oh go ahead and show him, Clara,” sighed Cleo as she picked up the coffee Liz had just set down on the table for her.

Dave’s eyes got big as he sketched furiously. Cleo looked over at Kit who was smiling tenderly at Dave. Now there was a relationship that Cleo had never experienced. Kit supported and indulged Dave so that he could paint. She had her own career as a music teacher and composer, which she managed to do between keeping Dave in sandwiches and coffee.

Yet Cleo had seen Dave tidying up the house and making sandwiches for Kit’s students, while they were in for lessons. Some of those kids didn’t have a lot at home, but Dave and Kit made sure they got their music and a meal before sending them out the door. ‘They must have their arguments,’ thought Cleo, but she’d never seen one. Instead they paid attention to each other, well mostly Kit watched Dave, but both of them were unfailingly kind to each other and to their students.

Dave’s paintings brought them all the money they needed, yet even Dave had art students in. Again, a lot of them went home fed, and Cleo had sometimes seen kids flopped all over their place doing homework while waiting for lessons.

Cleo was sure they were creating a family for themselves.

Maybe some day they would have kids of their own.

Cleo shook her head, what was that thought about? Still... “Kit, I’ve been told that you might be able to repair internal damage to people. Do you think we could talk about that some time?”

“I can do some things, Cleo, sure we can talk later.”

Clara looked down quickly, she knew that Cleo had torn up her womb pretty badly, aborting a child their father had got on her, but she hadn’t known that Cleo was thinking about children. She and Cleo were in a relationship with Ben, and now Clara was wondering what kids would bring to their little threesome and often moresome. Well, maybe Cleo just wanted the possibility. Clara wasn’t sure she was ready for that much growing up just yet.

At that moment, Dave looked at Clara and she jumped a little, putting the spiders back into Dave’s head. He smiled and nodded and went back to sketching. ‘What a strange crew we are,’ she thought to herself.

Ray Keen came in to the lunch counter, and Kit’s face lit up. She excused herself to go over and talk to her birth father. Again, Cleo shook her head. Some people have all the luck, she thought, Kit had two fathers that loved the hell out of her. ‘Oh shit, what is this, happy families day, you’re over a century old girl, get over it.’ As Cleo thought that, she looked at Clara and thought of Ben. She had her own family, and there was Dave and Kit, and at the counter were Mike and Liz. Sam was off on

a mission with Hubert somewhere, Lorraine was in the St. George. Oh Hell's Bells, she had family, a big one.

And then there was cousin Ken downstairs. Oh yes, she had family that loved her, even if they didn't shout it all the time.

Cleo nodded to Clara and went back downstairs where she cleaned up the mess that Clara hadn't had time to. The bar was empty so she wandered into Ken's office, dropping heavily into a chair.

"It's early in the day Cleo, you done in already?"

"It's the constant management of everyone around me, Ken, it's exhausting."

"That it is, girl. You have to learn a key management technique."

"What's that?"

"They're all adults, they can take care of themselves. That spill you just cleaned up? Clara would have done that when she comes back downstairs. There are things you don't have to manage, they'll get managed."

"Is that what you do Ken?"

"Damned right it is, get the right people and let them get on with it. I look at the big picture, I see a problem and then I

point one of you at it and say, 'fix,' and that's all I need to do."

"But you've pulled our asses out of the fire more than once."

"Only after you get them in there, Cleo, mostly I don't give it another thought. Sure agents get in trouble and need help, but that's not the same as micro-managing."

"Is that what I do?"

"Not so much as you worry all the time. That mess out there wasn't doing any harm at all, the place didn't smell any worse for the spilled beer, and it would have smelled the same half an hour from now. It was your worrying about it that made it something you had to clean now."

"But if you leave too much?"

"You get a mess, sure, but again, you're dealing with adults and let's face it, Ben would have cleaned that up without even thinking about it when he came in. You know, not so long ago you would have left it, you used to be a bit of a mess."

"That's Ben's fault, he's a good influence."

Ken could see that Cleo was in a better mood and waved her out of the office back to the bar where a couple new customers had wandered in.

## **Cleo Thinks About It**

Not long after Cleo went back to the bar, Kit came in and sat down.

“Sorry for showing Clara how to pop around the globe, I hope it doesn’t cause too much trouble.”

“No, forget it, Ely explained to us that Clara will find her powers on her own, best that someone shows her how to control them. I just worry. Too much, Ken says.”

“Well you’re the den mother for your group aren’t you? It’s hard not to worry, I know.”

“I’ve just got to get it into my head that Clara isn’t my little lost sister any more, that she’s part of our threesome with Ben.”

“Where is Ben, I was sort of wanting to talk to both of you.”

“He’s home, got one of his headaches, he should be up and around by later this afternoon, he usually is.”

“Migraine?”

“Who knows, it’s never very serious, he just waves us off and has a bit of a lie-in.”



“Well if I can help, let me know, in the meantime let’s talk about you. Are you serious about patching up your uterus?”

“I don’t know, Kit, I really don’t know. Ben has talked about kids a few times recently, and Ken did too. They both said you might fix my guts up so I could have one, but do I look like the mother type to you?”

“Frankly Cleo, yes you do. Den mother, remember. You’re trying to raise Clara, you know exactly where Ben is and why. You may not remember your own mother very well, but I remember mine, Lila that is, the woman who raised me, and she was the same. She cared and she somehow kept track of us, all three of us.”

“Somehow?”

“Well it didn’t hurt that she is the Fairy Queen, but I never saw that for years, she was just a mom, and I thought we were fooling her with our sneaking around.”

Cleo was grinning, thinking of three young spirit beings trying to out-think the Fairy Queen. Cleo had heard about how Lila showed up outside Jim’s Lunch Counter with a Fairy army when Kit was on trial.

“Still, how can I decide to have kids when I live such a dangerous life? Ben wondered the same thing, how do we raise a kid when we’re going out on assignments.”

“Do you need to? Can Ken not do without you for a few years?”

“You know, he waved my portfolio under my nose and said I didn’t have to work. What is that? I can’t see myself not working, there’s so much to do.”

“Well, perhaps the world won’t fall apart if you take a break?”

“Well, granted, it will probably limp along without me. After all, Ken has other agents.”

“And it’s only a few years.”

“Damned few from what folks tell me, two years of no sleep, followed by three of too much sleep and then they’re gone off to school.”

“What does Clara say about having a baby to take care of?”

“Nothing at all, she hasn’t mentioned it.”

“Have you asked her?”

“I haven’t even decided myself, no sense bringing it up until I decide, is there?”

“I see, but maybe if the three of you talk it over, deciding will be easier than convincing Clara after the decision is made.”

“What?”

“Talk to Ben and Clara. Now let me come around the bar and feel you up.”

“What?”

Kit came around and put her hands on Clara’s belly, she ran her hands over the front and the back of Cleo’s womb while Cleo looked around the bar, daring anyone to say something.

“Yes, I can fix it, Cleo, it’s mostly scar tissue. You are still producing eggs, they’re just not dropping because they’re blocked. You have that talk with your mates, and let me know what you decide.”

“What?”

Kit laughed, waved and went back to Dave before he realized she had disappeared. She figured she had another hour or so before then, but sometimes he surprised her.

Almost as soon as Kit went back upstairs, Lila walked in with Jonah trailing along behind. Lila waved a pint aside and sat down with a serious look on her face.

Cleo blinked, “Did Kit send you?”

“Fairy Queen and King, dear, we hear things. Besides, can you imagine Kit sending her mother along to talk with you? She’s much too young yet, to do that sort of thing.”

Cleo had to laugh at that, “But you thought you should talk with me?”

“Of course dear, what’s the point of being parents if you don’t interfere with others who are considering it?”

“I assume you know the story so far, what do you think then?”

Jonah spoke up for the first time, “Don’t do it.”

Lily gave him a look, but he continued, “It’s a radical change to your lifestyle, it’s stressful, it’s expensive.”

Cleo caught Lily’s eye and said, “And yet, Jonah, you have been parenting for centuries.”

“Sure, I didn’t say it wasn’t a lot of fun and incredibly rewarding, I just said it’s a pain in the ass.”

“Lily?”

“Oh for goodness’ sake child, being a mother isn’t a matter of drawing a line down the page and listing the pros and cons. If you’re ready and able, you’ll know it. Just don’t let fear convince you you’re not ready. Give me that Kobold grin will you?”

Seeing a large double row of teeth filed to points, Jonah leaned back.

Lila clapped her hands, “There, that’s a mother’s grin at those who might harm her babbies if I ever did see one. You’ll be fine girl, and if you want help, you call on us.”

With that, Lila waved and spun around to walk out of the bar. Jonah reached over and squeezed Cloe’s arm with a warm smile, “Very exciting,” he said as he rushed to catch up to Lila.

“I see you Ken,” called Cleo.

Ken walked out of his office with a piece of paper. Cleo frowned, “If that’s my financial portfolio, I’ve seen it, and I’d just as soon not make you eat it.”

“But you’ve earned another three hundred K since last month.”

“Ken, I’m warning you, get that out of my sight.”

“Well what about the Kobold royal line? I mean you and Clara are the last, don’t you think...”

“Ken!”

Ken grinned and ducked the pint glass that was heading toward

his head. Behind him, one of the students who were more or less permanent residents in the bar, caught it one handed and said, “Hey, I’d like one of these but with beer in it please.”

Cleo looked hard at him and he continued, “Er, I’ll come over there and get it, shall I?”

## **A Headache**

Ben groaned and pressed his palm into his right eye. He groaned again, this was a bad one. They seemed to be getting worse, and he wasn’t sure he could survive worse.

His head pounded, and the pain had gone into his stomach so that he was afraid he was going to throw up.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, he’d had another of those stupid spy movie dreams. He was hiking across a mountain with a pack and a break-down sniper rifle. It took days, and he was exhausted, both in the dream and in real life. He was stressed, the hike was going wrong and apparently the bad guys had caught on to him. He was doing more dodging of patrols and drones, than he was hiking. Yet there was no choice, he had to go on. He had a mission.

Eventually, he arrived at the mountain cabin of his target. Yes,

it was a simple assassination, just get rid of the bad guy, no other duties. Why was this guy a bad guy? Ben didn't know, movies never explain why bad guys are bad, except maybe to say they're from some country that's out of favour at the moment.

The instant he took the shot, the dream ended and he woke up.

The bed was empty, the girls had gone to work and he was alone. That was fine with him, he'd had a lot of trouble getting it up last night. Ben wasn't sure what was bothering him, but he was definitely stressed. Was it the boredom of a quiet life? Ken hadn't had any jobs for them lately other than working at the bar. Cleo and Clara seemed to be fine with that, but Ben was getting antsy. Literally, he felt like there were ants under his skin. This was not good, he figured he needed some alone time.

When he thought about it, after another wave of pain behind his eye had passed, he realized he had not been alone for years now. It had been that long since he had met Cleo and Sam on the road, and he'd been with them, and then with Clara ever since. No wonder he was feeling stressed. That was the longest he'd been with anyone, ever, except the time with his family, the ones who had disappeared one day.

He loved the girls dearly, but he needed some time alone up in the cabin. That had to be it.

He shut his eyes again, hoping to sleep, hoping that sleep

would let the pain disappear.

He dropped off to sleep, and again that movie appeared. This time he was bombing an apartment. Apparently he was very good with shaped charges, which he set all around the perimeter of the place, and when the target came in and keyed his security code, the place exploded inward. Unfortunately, the woman and her child who were with him, were also caught in the explosion. According to his movie sense, he was supposed not to care about them. Unfortunately, Ben wasn't like that and he jolted awake, sitting upright and sweating.

Stupid, stupid dreams. He lay back down and fell asleep again. When he woke it was late afternoon and he felt better. The dreams didn't reappear and the pain was gone. Not only that, but he'd had some decent sleep. He wandered over to the bar.

Cleo walked to him as soon as he came through the door. "Are you OK love?"

"Fine, fine thanks Cleo, all the better for seeing you," murmured Ben as he hugged her close and then kissed her, much to the delight of the customers.

"I was a bit concerned when you didn't come in earlier, are you sure you're OK?"

"Got some decent sleep, so yes, much better than earlier today. I had those damned stupid dreams again."



“Ben Martin, super spy?”

“Yeah, those ones, I have no idea where they’re coming from.”

“Really, not from all those spy movies you watch?”

“Well, OK, maybe I ought to stop watching them. Speaking of which, love, I wanted to ask you if you’d mind if I spent some alone time in the cabin.”

Cleo had been expecting this, ever since they had bought the cabin up on the Bruce Peninsula. It had been a present to Ben, but up to then they had only visited the place together. Cleo realized that Ben needed some wilderness in his life. Who knows, maybe some cabin time by himself would sort out whatever it was that was stressing him lately. He put on a brave face, but Cleo and Clara both could tell he was in trouble. Cleo was about to call in Lorraine, but why not try some quiet time first.

“I think that would be a good idea, Ben, it would get you away from the TV shows and the movies.”

Cleo didn’t say that she figured he watched the things to shut himself off from the girls, or that his late night sessions had made him a bit less tumescent. Yes she had noticed his difficulty getting it up lately. How could she not. Even Clara had started to remark on it.

Clara wandered over from busing some tables and asked,

“What’s happening, family?”

“Ben here is going to head to the cabin for a while.”

“Great, When? I’ll go with you.”

Cleo shook her head, “No sis, he’s going up on his own. He’s had enough of us two for a while and needs to recharge the batteries.”

Clara looked genuinely hurt, “You mean he doesn’t love us any more?”

Cleo shook her head once again at how her sister had changed, ten years ago she wouldn’t have cared if a lover had dropped dead in front of her, now she was actually hurt that Ben was going to spend some time away from her. “No Button, he still loves us, he just needs a bit of alone time.”

Ben said nothing but gathered Clara into his arms and held her for a long time. He whispered into her ear, “I love you both, Clara, I’ll be back soon, count on it, and always remember, I love you the best.”

Clara stepped back and laughed brightly. “You are a big liar but I love you for it. Go on with you then, Cleo and I will try our best to get along without you.”

Ben looked toward Ken’s office but he just gave a wave of dismissal. Ben smiled and nodded.

He went home to pack.

## **Ben Loses It**

Ben arrived at the cabin late in the afternoon, just as the sun was going down. The place was cold and damp. He built a fire, made a coffee and then settled down in a stuffed chair with a blanket around him, watching his breath steam in the air.

It felt good to be alone for a change, not just for a few moments in the apartment, but alone for as long as he wanted, off in the woods. He held his mug in both hands, to get the warmth of the coffee into them and to keep the coffee warm for a while longer.

He picked up a book from the coffee table, one he'd started a while ago. Hoping that it would not set off one of his headaches, he started to read.

An hour or two later, there being no official time in a cabin, he heard a thump on the front door. 'Who or what the hell,' he thought as he picked up a machete on the way down the hall. He switched on the outside light and saw a wolf there, with a hare in its mouth. It was looking directly at Ben and so he

figured it was probably someone he knew. He opened the door.

The wolf padded in a couple of steps, then stopped. Dropping the hare on the floor, it tossed its head, sniffing. Ben backed down the hallway two steps and then realized he had the machete in his hand. He put it down and said, "Hello Mara."

Changing into a woman, Mara reached casually to the coat rack and took down a fuzzy blue robe. Putting it on, she said, "Ben, is that you?"

"Of course it's me. What are you doing here?"

"It is you, I can see that, and smell it now too. I wasn't sure for a moment there." Mara bent down and picked up the hare, a good sized one, "I've brought us some supper, and I need your help."

"Mara I've only just got here, how did you know I was here?"

"Oh, I smelled your car as you came in, I figured it was you, it's just about that time of the year."

"Pardon me?"

"It's hunting season, we all get the urge to go into the bush around this time of the year, all us hunters."

"I've never been much of a hunter, Mara."

Mara had started skinning the hare and was assembling a dinner of canned vegetables and instant mashed potatoes which she would spice with garlic. “No? Well never mind, I’m glad you’re here, I need your help.”

“Sure, anything.”

“There’s a commercial hunting, if you can call it that, operation going on across the road. Maybe you heard them?”

“Guns, certainly, and at least two on full automatic.”

“Which is illegal, as you know, for very good reason. Look, there’s a place that is set up to drive animals into a funnel, they line up the so-called hunters and they blast anything that comes. What gets past them, they have a series of wire snares set up and what gets snared, these shit-eaters pose as if they shot them anyway. The whole thing stinks and I want to take it down but with that much firepower, I need help. You want to help?”

“Of course I will, tomorrow just before dawn?”

“Good, in the meantime, here’s dinner for us.”

Mara finished cooking the food in silence, she wasn’t any more eager to talk than Ben was. They ate quietly, with Ben occasionally filling in the gossip that Mara had missed.

After Ben tidied up and washed the dishes, he suggested that

they get an early night. Mara agreed and walked to the bedroom. Ben blinked and started to say, “Mara...”

“Relax, it’s still too cold in here to sleep alone, I’m going to turn into a wolf and we’ll both be warm enough.”

Ben nodded and with that they turned out the lights.

The next morning, Mara was up before dawn and woke Ben by the simple method of putting a cold, wet nose on his cheek.

Changing back to a woman she said, “You talk in your sleep, you know that?”

“I do? That’s not good.”

“You feeling OK?”

“Been better, I’ve been getting headaches and having stupid dreams.”

“You OK to work this morning?”

“Sure, my only dreams last night were of being suffocated by a big furry blanket.”

“Oh, sorry about that, I sometimes get a bit restless when I sleep as a wolf.”

“No problem, let me get dressed and we’ll go sort your

hunters.”

“Right, I’ll grab some of your extra clothing so we can talk while we’re going there, if that’s OK with you.”

“That’s why it’s there.”

The two set off into the frosty air, each footstep echoing around the bush, it was that kind of morning. As they got across the road and into the bush again, Ben heard signs of a largish camp starting to wake up for the day. Pots and pans banging, smoky wood fires just starting to warm up the stoves.

Mara folded the clothing neatly and stored it beside a tree, then changed and melted into the bush. Ben could see the fences they’d put up to funnel the animals down toward the killing ground, he especially noted the snares, wire thin enough to cut throats. Some of the snares held animals that had simply been left there out of sheer laziness. He felt himself getting angry.

Without any more thought, he walked up to what was obviously the main shack and hammered on the door. He was greeted with the business end of a rifle as the door opened. This did not improve his mood and Ben shifted to the side, pulled the gun forward as it fired. The idiot had the safety off and his finger on the trigger. Ben saw red, he took the butt of the gun and smashed the man’s face with it. As he fell down unconscious, Ben flipped the gun around, unloaded it and then used the barrel to drive into the guts of the next man. He went over puking and Ben was on the rest of the cabin. There were

three more men there and in as many seconds they were unconscious. A couple of those who had gone for their guns, had broken arms.

Having heard the gunshot, men came running from other sheds and tents. Ben grabbed a submachine gun, feeling disgusted with those who would use such a thing on animals, and loaded it quickly, he stepped out as some of the mighty hunters were trying to cock their weapons. A spray at their feet stopped them dead and the guns were dropped without being ordered.

Behind Ben, the owner of the operation was sneaking up with one of those gigantic hunting knives that were no use for anything but gutting another human. As he was about to swing, a growl warned Ben, who spun around, caught the knife arm and spun the man straight into one of the snares.

An instant later, Ben had the gun trained again on the rest of the men and had every indication that he was going to let the man in the snare die while he was shooting the rest of them.

Mara changed, took a belt knife from one of the stunned men and cut the wire, letting the man fall unconscious on the ground. She threw the knife into the bush and changed back to a wolf.

Ben hadn't moved, hadn't even looked as she saved the man's life. Now, with Mara walking toward the men, snarling and growling deep in her throat, some of them pissed themselves.



“In five minutes I am going to set fire to this camp. I will shoot anyone who tries to pick up a gun, grab your clothes and run, this wolf will be following you. Do you understand?”

One of the more brave said, “Can we take the unconscious?”

Ben said nothing but Mara nodded, and the men started to run, some of them stopping to carry off the unconscious. Mara made a bit of a run in the bush just to keep them moving, herding them toward the road and their vehicles just like they’d herded the trophy animals, then she came back to help Ben burn the place down. She removed all the snares and piled them where the authorities could find them, after the anonymous call. Of course the locals were in on the scheme, but being officially told of it, they would be quick enough to swoop in and clean it up.

The guns went onto the fires, ammunition was piled neatly with the snares. Ben truly hoped some of the hunters would be stupid enough to recover their guns and try to fire them.

When Mara had dressed and they had walked back to the cabin, she turned to Ben and asked, “What was that about? You were going to let that guy strangle to death, and I really thought you were going to gun the rest of them down.”

“I don’t know, Mara, I really don’t. You’re right, I would have let him die.”

“Man, you didn’t smell right when I got here last night, and

you smelled like that today. You really need to get some advice here. Killing when you don't have to, that's not your style."

"But I've killed before, Mara."

"Like I killed during the war, but Ben, I almost lost it, Megan had to pull me back, I was almost a monster. You, my friend, are not like me. You are not half monster."

"Gods, Mara, are you sure?"

"Damned right I'm sure. You don't need some solitary time, Ben, you need your family, and you need them now. I'm calling Cleo and you're going to tell her the truth, I know you, you've been telling her you're fine. Well you're not, like I said, you smell wrong."

Ben dropped heavily into a chair and sat quietly while Mara made breakfast and most importantly, coffee.

The smell of burning sheds wafted over the bush.

## **Kit Sees a Bridge**

"Please don't call Cleo, maybe you and I can figure this out," pleaded Ben.

“Don’t ask me that, Ben, I owe you, but not that.”

“Please Mara, I don’t want Cleo to think I’m losing it, not now, not when it’s going so well.”

“Jesus, Ben. You need help, and you need Cleo, you know this, what can the two of us do? Neither of us are healers.”

“Can we get a healer? Can we find someone?”

“Ben there are healers in Guelph, lots of them. What are you doing?”

“I don’t know, give me two days here, Mara, just two days. If I’m going to crack up, let it be here, you can take out my throat if you have to, OK? I feel something inside my guts and it isn’t that black hole that keeps me from aging, there’s something else in there and I don’t want to be near Cleo and Clara if it comes out. Please, two days.”

“Damn you. Alright, two days. I’ll be close, I’ll know if something bad happens, Ben I’ll be close. If I go out, don’t lock the door or I’ll come in the window, you hear me?”

“I hear you, thank you Mara, I hear you.”

Ben sat in his chair and thought hard about what was happening to him, whatever it was, it wasn’t him, he was sure of that. Mara stayed inside during the day, cooking and

cleaning while Ben sat and thought. At night she got out of the cabin, the place didn't smell right, Ben didn't smell right, and the night was worse than the day.

On the second day, Ben started to hallucinate. He sat perfectly still so that Mara wouldn't know, but in his head, he was somewhere else. Some gods-forsaken place in a desert, where he was hidden on some high ground with broken rocks all around. It looked like it had been bombed. In fact it had been bombed, for generations by empire after empire. Ben had been there for two days, waiting. He checked his sniper rifle yet again by feel. All seemed good.

He was alone, no spotter. Was that usual? He didn't feel that it was. A lone sniper, that was what he was. There was movement down below, a group came into view and Ben felt himself compelled to target them. Six people, two of them children, and he fired. Although he was screaming inside to stop, he killed all of them, the primary target, the two kids, and the bodyguards.

He stayed where he was until nighttime, there were searches, but he was well hidden. He didn't move, not even a muscle, and half way through the night, he stood, left the gun and moved carefully out of the area.

'What the hell,' he thought as he returned to himself. 'What the hell was that?'

He tried to figure out where that hallucination had come from. It was frighteningly real, and the man who was shooting was

cold, emotionless. Ben thought he was a bit too stoic, but compared to whoever that was, he was a romantic poet.

Ben was sweating, and Mara looked closely at him, she could smell the fear on him. He smiled and waved a bit to say he was fine, but she wasn't buying it. She turned back to the cooking.

Ben finished his now-cold coffee and sat back, closing his eyes. Maybe a nap. When he opened them again, he was in a strange cabin with a strange woman. His cover was blown, he had to escape.

Mara was over the sink when she felt the cord come over her head. She barely stopped herself from burying the kitchen knife in her hand, into Ben's guts. Instead she invoked the talisman she had used to scout the Giants, and moved Ben and herself onto a barren, icy world. Ben was shocked, he eased up on the cord and at that moment, Mara changed.

Ben found himself trying to throttle a wolf, a big wolf, and he didn't have the correct leverage. Mara turned, took Ben's throat in her jaws, and squeezed. Her fangs had found his blood vessels and he was unconscious in just a few seconds.

When Ben woke again, he was in his apartment and Mara was watching him closely, as was Clara. Mara sniffed and nodded, she said, "You need some new clothing in the cabin boyo, you just caused me to rip up what I was wearing." She had dressed in a sarong and a t-shirt, something that Sam had left behind.

“How long...”

“Not long, Clara put you under when I came back from the ice world with you. Maybe half an hour.”

“I’m sorry Mara, it wasn’t me trying to kill you, I couldn’t stop it.”

“I know that, Ben, I could smell it wasn’t you. Look, you’ve got a problem and you can’t fix it. I’m going back now to shut down the cabin but you’re staying here with Clara and she’s going to shut you down at the first sign of trouble. You understand?”

Ben nodded and took Clara’s hand. “Thank you Mara.”

Mara nodded back and disappeared.

“Clara, I need some help.”

“No kidding, sleep now, Cleo’s on the way home,” and just like that, Ben was out again. Thankfully, his sleep was dreamless.

When Cleo got home she checked on Ben and got the story from Clara. “Can you please go fetch Lorraine, we need to see what’s happening here.”

Lorraine was in the lunch counter with Liz when Clara popped in. She explained and both those women came back with her.

Lorraine dropped off beside Ben to check on his dreams, but he was having none. She pushed, and he began to dream the usual things, Cleo, Clara, Sam. Nothing to indicate a problem. Lorraine came back and reported what she found.

Liz nodded and slapped Ben hard enough to wake him up. He sat bolt upright and was ready to fight, but Liz put her hands on his shoulders and he couldn't move. She was much stronger than she looked, and she looked. Deep into Ben's eyes. "Two-spirit," she muttered to herself.

"Gay? That can't be right," said Cleo.

"Two-spirit, there's two of him," said Liz as she covered one of Ben's eyes with her palm, then the other. She nodded and looked again. "He's fully awake, there's only Ben now. Kit, we need you."

Kitsune was there beside them. It was getting crowded in the bedroom, Liz the shaman, Kit and Lorraine, the foxes, Cleo and Clara the Kobolds and of course, Ben, stretched out again on the bed.

"Kit, I saw two spirits in him for a moment. You're much better at this than I, can you look deeper?"

Kit nodded and looked at Ben. She had trained at directing dreams with Lorraine, and Liz had trained her in dreamwalking. Kit looked for a long time.

“There’s a bridge, a drawbridge, and it’s up. It was put there somehow and it keeps something separate from Ben. I can’t see beyond the bridge.”

“Can you do anything?” asked Cleo.

Kit nodded, “I can drop the bridge and go across.”

The crowded room got a little more crowded as a tall man with a cane was there. “I’d rather you didn’t do that,” he said quietly.

## **Papa Legba**

Liz stiffened, and Kit spun around with a snarl. “Woah, woah, it’s only Papa Legba, no need to get your backs up. Well, well, two vixens from what you think of as the old country, two Siyawesi, oh pardon me, Kobolds, and a Shaman. That’s an impressive group around one poor man. And you say you want to help him?”

Ben looked up, “Papa Legba, the Robert Johnston devil at the crossroads?”

“Oh boy, if I had a dollar for every time I heard that story. I don’t collect souls, boy, what would I do with them? That’s the



other guys who are having a contest. Robert called for me at the crossroads and played for me. He was awful but I showed him a lick and he got it, so I knew he was teachable. I sent him to a good teacher and he spent as much time as he needed to learn. You know his music?”

“I do, I loved his music when I was young.”

“Ah, yes, when you were young. Now what do you ladies want to tear down my nice bridge for?”

Kit took an aggressive step forward, causing Legba to smile, “What is it and why is it in my friend?”

“Now that’s a proper question. Why didn’t you ask that first rather than call me here with a threat to damage my work?”

“Look, no more riddles, what is it and who are you to be putting things like that in someone?”

“Who am I? Ben here knows me, we’ve met many times although he won’t remember. I’m the stone at the crossroads, I’m the bridge to Bondye, I’m the agent of change, when the wind switches direction, I’m there.”

Liz looked a bit irritated, “What he’s saying in such a flowery way is that he’s a Voodoo shaman, comes from Africa, figures he’s been around forever. What did you do to our friend, trickster.”

“Trickster? I haven’t been called that for a long time. That would be Anansi these days, though there’s lots of us with that aspect. Where I come from, Anansi is Raven, around here he’s Coyote, and if you’re old enough, he’s Br’er Rabbit.”

Kit was catching on, “Papa Legba, aren’t you from Louisiana? Why don’t you have an accent?”

“Why don’t you, little fox? Why don’t you have a French accent? You want me to speak French like the Cajans? Or Gullah, or Creole, maybe West African Pidgin? Look, for Ben here, I’m Haitian French, from Northern Quebec. Shall we compare our antique French with each other?”

“Alright, fair enough, and I was born here, in this town for the record, so I speak as you hear me. I can also speak Parisian French.”

“Please don’t, that modern degeneration hurts my ears. You understand then, that we speak what we speak so folks can hear us. That’s good. I’m the bridge between, so you hear me.”

Liz spoke up again, “What do you mean you speak to Bondye?”

“Oh, you know him? You know better than I then, Bondye is the creator and I speak to him for those here. Problem is, he never answers. What about you, Shaman, you speak to the creator? You speak to Bondye?”

“I go to the spirit realm, but there’s no creator that answers me either.”

Lorraine spoke up, “What about Coyote? Or Woden? We speak to them all the time.”

Liz smiled, “Aspects, we’re all aspects, can’t you feel Legba here? Reynard is a trickster too, you can’t feel a connection?”

“I thought maybe he was doing that. Him being the bridge and all that.”

Cleo and Clara had moved to either side of Ben and without any communication between them, they were showing their teeth and their hands were curling into hammer holding shape.

Legba looked at them and nodded, “Your actions do you credit, Kobolds, but you couldn’t hurt me if you decided to. I’m not fully here.

Clara reached and got hold of Legba’s mind. She squeezed a little and Legba’s eyes grew wide. “I apologize girl, you could hurt me even now. I’d ask that you don’t. Now, does anybody know their manners? Why don’t we all sit at the table and have a glass of wine, or a beer, or whatever else you might have available. I’d love some Kobold brew, I haven’t had it in a long time.”

Liz shook her head, “My pardon, Shaman, we are concerned with our friend here and have become distracted. Kit, can you

raid the bar for some of Ken's finest?"

"Oh, yes please, I owe him a bit of payback."

Legba threw his head back and laughed, "I like you girls, I can see you've taken good care of Ben here."

When they had all sat down at the table, the height differences were tremendous. The girls had been sitting on the bed, but now, they were still a foot shorter than Legba. He grinned at that. "I am the Grandfather figure, so I got to be tall, would you all like me to be shorter?"

"You're fine," said Liz, pouring the beer for everyone. "Ah, excuse me a moment, Nanabozo has noticed, I'll just reassure them."

"Now this is quite the town, you all look after each other so well, I am truly pleased that Ben found his way here."

Kit had just finished telling those at the St. George that they weren't needed, and she had even felt the Dryad and Morris coming out of their tree. With so much power focused on the apartment, the place almost seemed to be shaking. "Look, Papa Legba, Ben is in trouble, Liz says he's a two-spirit man, he's having dreams and now hallucinations, like there's something else inside him. What do you know about that?"

"Everything, child, what is inside is what he was. I put that down deep and put the bridge there, drawbridge up to keep it

from coming through. I guess the bridge is a bit old and tattered now, or... no, Ben you've been picking at it. Why would you do that?"

"I've been trying to understand myself."

"You got to be careful about doing that, boy, you never know what you will find deep down. What you are now is the man you wanted to be, the man you should have been. What's buried down deep is what you were turned into. You understand me?"

"Not really, I just know that I have to fight all the time to be a good person."

Legba was angry, "You look around you boy. You look hard, what do you see? I'll tell you what you see. You see women who care for you, women who love you. Good women who would not have any time for a monster. And feel that," Legba waved his hand at the walls, "There's more people out there that would come here to fight me because they love you. How dare you argue with all these people and tell them they're wrong about you. They aren't wrong."

"But..."

"Don't you 'but' me boy, I watched you grow up. I know what and who you are. You came to me and asked that I take away what you had been made, and I did. I gave you the person that you were meant to be, I didn't create some sort of angel, I just

let you out, let you be you, and you go and start picking at that, looking for a monster. You want a monster? I can give you back that monster.”

Ben screamed, he looked like he had never been as scared as he was right now. Both Clara and Cleo had their hammers in their hands, but Liz shook her head. Kit and Lorraine stood up between the Kobolds and Legba.

Legba’s face softened, and Ben stopped screaming. “Now you see, now you know what you were, boy, and yet you came to me and you asked me to get rid of that monster. I can’t, nobody can, but I could bury it deep. You want that man back?”

Ben was slumped forward, facing the table, he shook his head.

“Then you sit up, boy, and you be the man you ought to be, the one you want to be, the one these women around you know you are. You hear me!”

The room had grown dark and Legba’s eyes seemed to glow red. Yet Ben raised his face and looked directly into Legba’s eyes. “I hear you Papa and I understand now what I asked for, I will not ignore what you have said, but answer me one thing. If I am a good man, why did my wife and children leave me?”

The room returned to normal and Legba had a puzzled look on his face. “Wife and children, what you talking about boy?”

“I came home one day and they were gone, surely they left me

because I was a monster.”

“Ben, listen to me carefully, you never had a wife and children. I would have known, I check up on you every time you are at a crossroads, there was no wife, no children.”

“But...”

“But you remember them. When you wall off your childhood, when you wall off years of killing, like we did for you, an idle thought can leak in to fill the void. You understand me? You must have wanted to punish yourself, you didn’t dare remember all the evil you did in the name of patriotism, for other people who said it was necessary, but you could remember a hurt, you could punish yourself for what you were, by giving yourself a thorn in your side. I’m telling you son, you had no wife and children.”

## **Legba Has a Beer**

It was Ben’s turn to be confused, Legba set a hand on his shoulder and said, “Forget about that, now we have to repair that bridge or tear it down. Which you want to do?”

“I, I don’t know. I saw a childhood I never remembered, a

mother, but I also saw that I was a true monster. I don't know."

"Well now I see some healers here, a whole pack of them if you'll excuse that, and maybe they can put all of you together. I can't do that, I could build a bridge. What you got down there that you want to have again?"

Ben thought hard, "My mother I suppose, she loved me."

"You remember that now do you? So you got her. Anything else?"

"No, I feel dirty even now, and I can't remember it, but I know I don't want it."

"You didn't want it then either boy, I asked and you said there was nothing you wanted. It's still going to leak, so you want me to fix the bridge? You know it's gonna hurt, don't you."

Ben nodded, he remembered how it hurt the first time, but knowing what he had been, also hurt. "Put it back down deep please Papa Legba, save me from what I was."

"You sure? I give you one more chance to say no."

As he had so many years ago, Ben said nothing.

"All right then, you asked me. Shaman, you want to learn something new? You come along with me and I'll show you how to repair that bridge just in case I'm not here next time this



idiot picks at it.”

Cleo looked hard at Ben, “He won’t pick at it any more, now that we know what’s there, I’ll make sure he doesn’t look for it.”

“Good, you two put your hammers away and you hold him, this is gonna hurt and he’s a lot stronger than he was when we did this last time.”

Cleo and Clara looked at the hammers in their hands with some surprise. They let them go, and they grabbed Ben.

Liz moved beside Legba, who closed his eyes and once again, Ben started to scream. He arched up off the bed but the girls held him tight. They were a match for his strength, even when he became dense, Cleo matched him and Clara put Elf bonds on him that would hold an elephant. Liz winced, she got the full understanding of what he had been before Legba walled it off.

When it was done, Ben was unconscious. Lorraine checked and he was deep asleep, but as Ben.

Liz looked at Papa Legba and bowed, “Your power is exquisite.”

“And you, little one, are every bit as strong as I. When you are as old as I, you will be better than I. When you start to age again, you come see me, your power should not be lost to this

world.”

Liz blinked, “Oh yes little one, you can’t come along with me without opening your mind. I know you’re the last, you will maybe find someone to teach, but don’t you pass without doing that. You come see me, I’m easy to find.”

Liz nodded and Legba bowed, “And now I’m going to leave my son with you good people. You know now where he came from, but that isn’t as important as where he goes.”

Legba looked at Cleo and Clara, still holding Ben tight as he slept and laughed hugely, “Oh I wish I was a few centuries younger, I’d steal you two away and we’d run. Oh yes, we’d run on down that road, and Ben here would chase us. It would be a good chase.”

Cleo and Clara both showed their double rows of filed teeth and once again Papa Legba threw his head back and laughed. As he faded from view, the laughter remained for a few moments, and then it was just in their heads.

Kit shook her head, “What was that? He’s not just a Shaman is he?”

Liz smiled, “He’s both Shaman and God, there’s power there, but kindness too. I think he is one of the original tricksters, the ones who brought us into being.”

Cleo shook her head, “Well I’m just glad he gave Ben back to

us.”

“Cleo, do you want to know what he was before he was Ben? I can show you.”

“He’s not that, he buried that. No I don’t want to see, not the man he was or the way he became that man. I know what he is now and that’s what’s important. Thank you Liz, but no.”

Liz seemed relieved and nodded. She and Kit and Lorraine were gone, just like that. Leaving Cleo and Clara with Ben. Cleo spoke up, “We’re taking the rest of the day off, Ken.”

The lights in the bedroom went out.

“That’s not creepy,” said Clara.

“Oh you’ll get used to it, and when you need him, Ken will be there.”

“Yeah but when we’re...”

“Relax, I suspect Ken isn’t the least bit interested in watching us have sex. He’s got too much to do, he keeps track of all his agents, and there’s a lot of them.”

They lay on either side of Ben, their arms over him as they talked with each other. “Cleo, are you thinking of having a kid with Ben?”

“I don’t know, people seem to be pushing me that way, but I haven’t decided. What do you think, Clara?”

“I think that I’m awfully young to grow up, but I’m trying to grow up aren’t I? Do I have to have one at the same time?”

“No squirt, you do not. But if I have a child and you’re still around, you’re going to be raising it too.”

“Oh that’s not a problem, I’m all over that, I’m a great babysitter.”

“Really?”

“Well I’m pretty sure I would be.”

Cleo ruffled Clara’s hair, “You’re a good sister. So you’re not against the idea?”

“I guess not, but what will Ben say, he got a glimpse of what he was turned into, do you think he will be afraid his kid will turn out the same?”

“I don’t know, I really don’t. On the other hand, his big fear was that family he made up, the one that disappeared. Gods, that is weird, that he created them in his head to punish himself.”

“Or maybe just to remind himself of the monster that was buried?”

“You may be right, sis, I wonder if we’ll ever know. This is hard, isn’t it?”

“Well it will be easier with three of us. We are so very good that it will overwhelm any bad in Ben right?”

Cleo burst out laughing, “Oh yes, we’re the good ones aren’t we?”

## **Ben Gets a Lecture**

Ben slept for the rest of the day and all night. Cleo and Clara made food for themselves and ate it, always with one eye on Ben. “You think we should wake Ben and feed him?”

Cleo grinned, “No, he’s getting fat, be a good thing if he lost a pound or two.”

Clara laughed, Ben was anything but fat, he could go into bodybuilding competitions without any preparation at all.

They spent a quiet night. As far as they could tell, Ben slept without dreams. In the morning he woke up and stretched, hugged the girls and then remembered.

“Oh Gods, oh Gods, what have I done...”

Cleo put her hand over his mouth, “Hush, hush, we were there, you did nothing. Papa Legba fixed up what was starting to break down, you’re good, love, you’re good.”

Clara had both hands around his chest and moved around behind him to squeeze hard, “Ben we love you, that’s never going to change, whatever you did, whoever you were, we love you.”

Ben calmed down slowly. He lay back on the bed and the girls put their arms around him as if to keep him safe. They were keeping him safe, from his own shock and self-loathing.

Clara looked at Cleo and raised her eyebrows. “No Clara, we’ll deal with this, he’s too strong to make him forget for long. We’ll get through this.”

Ben looked from one to the other and closed his eyes. He was out, just like that, and Cleo looked at Clara, who shook her head.

It was another two hours before Ben woke again, this time more calmly. He hit the bathroom and the girls joined him in the shower, they scrubbed him down while he looked a bit embarrassed and not a little bit confused at how nice they were being.

Once they were dressed and at the breakfast table, Clara

serving pancakes and sausage, Ben was truly disoriented. Cleo patted his hand, “Dude, you have had a hell of a shock, take it easy.”

“I remember my mother now, and some of my childhood. But my family, my kids?”

“Never happened, that’s why you could never find them, Ben, you made them up.”

“Why?”

“Who knows, maybe to punish yourself for what you were.”

“I don’t know what I was.”

“Those dreams you were having, the hallucinations, I think they were real. I think you were a cold blooded killer.”

“And you’re still here?”

“Of course we’re here, that’s not who you are now.”

“But I’m a killer, I’ve killed. I was a killer then and I’m a killer now.”

“I’ve been thinking about that, Ben. You’re not the same as you were. Look you’ve killed, but you had a different starting point than that other guy. No, listen to me. You started out from a different place, that other guy came from a loveless place, he

didn't know any kindness except from his mother, and she couldn't give him much. That much Liz told me. You were then trained as a killer. All technique, no second thoughts, just follow orders."

"But I follow orders now..."

"No, you agree with orders and you kill only if you have to, and for reasons you agree with. That's not the same at all. Not only that, but Ken would never send you out to kill, at least to kill a sentient being, mindless monsters maybe, but even then only if there was no other way. Look, you, the you now, were trained by Hubert. You started and continued from a moral viewpoint, the first you was just a tool, you are not a tool, you are a thinking human being, do you understand? Do you see the difference?"

"I'm not sure..."

"Oh for the God's sake, Ben! Stop seeing the worst in yourself, I swear, you need to stop beating yourself up. You are not that other guy, you buried him and you learned how to be a human being. You need to see the difference between the two of you. No! Shut up for a minute. We love you Ben, and nobody could love that other guy. Nobody did, after your mother died. You've got a whole town full of people who care for you. Nobody cared for that other guy. Can you get that through that thick head of yours. I don't want to hear you beating yourself up any more. Just don't!"



Ben was quiet, but Cleo could tell he was having a hard time believing what she had said. Cleo spoke up, “Ken we’re going to the cabin for a week so we can process this. You need us?”

The lamp spoke, “Go, I can reach you if I need you, try not to cost me money.”

“Not a vacation, Ken, you should be safe.”

That was a running joke now between Cleo and Ken, it seemed that every time the agents took a vacation they seemed to attract trouble, which cost Ken money. Ken didn’t really mind paying out, but for his reputation he had to moan about it.

“Clara, we’re packing for a week, then you can pop us to the cottage.”

When they arrived, the front door was unlocked and the lights were on. Clara looked inside with her Elf senses and nodded. It was Mara who had remained in the place.

“Welcome, welcome. I thought you might be coming back so I kept the place open, always better to come to a warm place.”

Ben looked around, “You rearranged.”

“Yeah, well the way you had it was really inefficient, clean but inefficient. I reorganized a bit, hope you don’t mind.”

Ben was looking doubtful, but said, “No, no, it’s fine, thank

you Mara.”

Cleo winked at Mara.

Ben was exhausted and was happy to sink into his usual padded chair, he was soon napping. Mara looked a question at Cleo who replied, “You missed Papa Legba, it seems our Ben here is from Northern Quebec by way of Haiti, he’s got another personality buried down deep that was starting to get out, that’s what you smelled. Legba fixed up things in his head and now he’s back to normal. Whatever that was for him. He’s having a bit of trouble working it out, but he’ll be OK we hope.”

“You think he’s OK with a little work? I’ve been keeping an eye on the hunting camp, if you can call it that, that he helped me with a few days ago. There’s still trouble there. They’ve started building wolf traps, for me I think.”

“Just human hunters? That’s no problem for us, Mara, we’ll go take care of it with you. We’ll leave sleeping beauty here to his nap. We’ll leave him a note.”

“Now?”

“Sure, now. I’m itching to get out and thump something, all this psychology gives me a headache.”

## Hunters Again

The three women walked across the road and into the bush toward the hunting camp. Mara filled them in as they walked. “That’s when I knew he was in trouble, he would have shot them all and then let the guy strangle in his own snare. Ben’s just not like that.”

“Apparently that was a guy named Bean, the guy Ben was, before he asked Papa Legba to get rid of him, He buried him down deep and Ben forgot about him.”

“Well he didn’t smell right and frankly, Ben scared the hell out of me. He asked me to rip his throat out.”

“That was certainly Ben talking.”

They arrived at the camp and Cleo saw what Mara meant. There were man-traps and wolf traps and all sorts of other nasty surprises for a wolf with only half a brain. The amount of brains a man might think a wolf had. Mara could smell them all of course.

Then Cleo spotted the Gatling gun. “What the hell is that? How did they get that into this country?”

“Probably bought it at a gun show in Michigan and threw it in the trunk of their car.”

“Clara?”

Before their eyes, the thing crumpled into a useless lump of metal, good maybe for a boat anchor.

As the multi-barreled mini-gun was reduced to scrap it made a lot of noise, which brought the hunters out of their sheds, looking around for whatever had done that to their toy.

Mara changed to a wolf and faded from view into the bush while the two Kobold sisters walked out into the clearing. “That thing is illegal in this country you know. Subject to immediate confiscation, consider it confiscated.”

“Who the hell are you, bitch, and what makes you think you can interfere with our property?”

Clara grinned and the men took a step back, but brought up their guns.

“I wouldn’t fire those if I were you, boys, it will go very badly for you.”

One of the men with an assault rifle stepped forward and took the safety off. Clara tilted her head, “That’s a scary sound is it? Isn’t it supposed to be louder? It’s always loud in the movies.”

“You’re not scaring me bitch.”

“No? Let’s see what does scare you,” and the man saw hundreds of giant spiders running toward him from all parts of

the camp. He screamed and started shooting on full automatic, spraying the camp with bullets. The rest of the men were smart enough to hit the ground and some of them were screaming themselves. In no time at all, the clip ran out. Again, something that never happened in the movies, and the shooter fainted as he was buried under hundreds of spiders with dripping fangs.

As he stopped firing, some brave soul yelled “Fire,” and a wall of bullets went toward the women, who both grinned. The wrist devices that Kam had given them put up a shield in front of the women, curved in such a way that the bullets went back toward the men firing. Much of the energy had been lost, but the deflected bullets still ripped into flesh and muscle and in no time at all, the men were down and screaming.

‘A lot of noise,’ Clara thought, and suddenly none of the men could make a sound, “Better,” she said as she turned to Cleo, “What was all that about us being bitches, Mara is a bitch, we’re not bitches are we? Now there’s a bitch.”

Mara had sauntered into the clearing, three or four of the traps hanging from her jaws. She dropped them on the pile of wounded hunters, and one of them, that was still unsprung, took a chunk out of someone’s ass.

“Nice,” Cleo laughed.

“Why weren’t these idiots cleaned up last time, Mara?”

Mara changed to a naked woman, but the men were too

preoccupied to notice, “I don’t know, probably paying someone to look the other way? They must have had help building new sheds, we burned the last bunch.”

“Well let’s tidy the place up shall we?” and with that, Clara had her hammer in her hand and headed for the sheds.

“I’ve got dibs on their pickups,” said Cleo, walking back toward the road.

Mara was a bit disturbed, “How are these guys going to get help with their wounds?”

Cleo showed her teeth, “Mara, we’re not Ben. He thinks he’s a monster but we know for sure that we are. They can stay here and bleed out for all I care.”

As Clara hit the first shed, it exploded and a man who had been hiding there came flying out, “This guy can take care of them, oh never mind, he didn’t bounce so well.”

Mara turned and howled. Five or six wolves padded silently into the clearing and grabbed the hunters by the ankles. One by one they dragged the unconscious or groaning men out to the road.

Cleo shrugged and carried on smashing the trucks, “Soft-hearted,” she muttered to herself.

The Kobolds piled up the sheds and tents and set fire to the lot.

Clara turned to Mara, “There, the fire department will come take care of those idiots.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it,” said Mara with some sarcasm.

Apparently, someone called the press, and with things out in the public, the camp was finally investigated and folks ended up in jail.

Mara nodded to the girls as they headed back to the cabin and Ben, “I’ll be off, I’ve got things to do, I’ll check back with you guys later in the week.”

Cleo nodded and said, “We wouldn’t have left them, not really.”

“I know, too much paperwork,” Mara laughed as she hugged them both and changed, to drift into the bush.

“She’s good people,” said Clara.

“Better than us, come on, I’ll race you back.”

Cleo grew in size and her strides simply ate up the distance back to the cabin, but when she got to the front door, Clara was leaning on the logs with her arms crossed. “You can’t cheat a cheater, Cleo.”

“Damn, I forgot you could do that.”

“Come on, let’s see if sleeping beauty is awake yet.”

As the girls walked into the cabin they were greeted with a frightened looking Ben, sitting at the kitchen table with a large whisky in front of him. “I’ve been dreaming again.”

## **Ben the Super-spy**

“Whatever it is, I don’t think that Papa Legba buried it deep enough.”

Cleo sat at the table with Ben while Clara started making coffee, “Just relax, Ben and tell us about it, Liz was pretty impressed with Legba’s work.”

“Well I was dreaming about teaching dance to the Moscow Ballet, then there were four girls who lived with me and I had a private jet. There was a knife fight in a bathroom in Marseilles, and gadgets in a watch and a lighter.

“There was an evil group called Galaxy who were controlling the weather. A vault on wheels, and I stopped my heart from beating. They took me to a secret base in a volcano and I blew the place up, killing a whole bunch of people.”

Cleo was trying very hard not to laugh, “Darling, your name is



Ben Martin, not Derek Flint.”

“What?”

“You just described the plot to “Our Man Flint. We watched it about a week ago, don’t you remember? I told you not to watch so many spy movies. That wasn’t you in a past life, that was a spy movie and it sounds like you replayed the whole thing in your dream.”

“Not me?”

“Check your arm, you see a watch that pokes your wrist to wake you up?”

“No, I see the wrist thing that Kam gave us.”

“A gadget that is much more fun than a watch with an alarm. And you’ve got implants in your jaw to communicate with, you don’t need a lighter that flaps in Morse code.” Cleo was really laughing now.

“I’m not a photographer and there wasn’t a flying saucer?”

“Oh lord, now you’re Matt Helm. No sweetheart, that’s another movie, and before you ask, no you don’t have a car that turns into a submarine.”

Ben looked both relieved and a bit disappointed, which caused Cleo to laugh even harder, “No, no, this is a good thing.

They're just normal dreams for a young fellow.”

“I'm almost as old as you are, woman.”

“Not by over forty years, junior.”

Clara brought two cups of coffee to the table and put them down before picking up the half full whisky glass and pouring it down the sink. She took her cup to the table and sat down, “Here's to the clever super-spy. Does that make us the big breasted women who live with him wearing bikinis and swirly dresses?”

“Oh yes please,” said Cleo through her laughter, as she put her cup back down for fear of spilling it,. “When we get back to Guelph we're going shopping!”

“Ooh, can we have one of those '60s futuristic phones, the swoopy ones, and, and, oh, one of those egg chairs that hang from the ceiling!”

“And a big round bed that slides back and dumps us in a pool to wake us up in the morning.”

“And a secret room behind a sliding panel with a big arsenal.”

“We've got one of those.”

“Oh, yeah I forgot.”

Ben had been looking from one girl to the other. He shook his head and took his coffee to his armchair while the girls redesigned their apartment to be some sort of spy-movie bachelor pad.

Mara liked Ben and the girls, but she wasn't much in the mood for other people. At least other two-footed people. She was in wolf form sitting in a circle with a bunch of coyotes in the middle of the bush. They had been nervous at first, Mara being a big wolf, but they had settled down.

Mara was happy that Coyote had taught her how to talk to the little brothers, they were a lot of fun. More, she had to admit, than most of the wolves she knew, who were pretty serious types. Fine, right, OK, she thought, I'm pretty serious most of the time too.

These coyotes were a lot like the crows, they'd tease anything, just for the fun of it. They would surround a cabin and stay just out of sight while they howled. It was fun to see the lights go on and the faces come to the windows, the kids trying to see the coyotes and the adults afraid they would.

Not at this time of year though. The coyotes had thanked Mara for getting rid of the hunting camp. They didn't mind the occasional pot-shot from legitimate hunters but automatic weapons and leg-hold traps were a bit, well, not playing the game.

Somehow they had got onto the topic of pups, and Mara wasn't totally comfortable with that.

"I'm still young, there's lots of time before I need to think about having a baby."

"You're joking, pups are the reason for living. When else do you have so much fun. Look, do you have lots of food in your territory?"

"Oh, yes, James and I have all we need."

"Doesn't sound like it, if there's lots of food, have lots of pups. You ought to know that, even if you are a wolf."

"Hey now, no insults. I just don't know if I'm ready for kids yet."

"Didn't you tell us you were a tripper, don't you take pups out into the bush and teach them about life and how to survive? It sounds like you were ready long ago."

"Oh not you guys too. James gives me the same argument."

"So maybe you're thinking of getting another mate?"

"Good heavens no, I've loved James since he was a senior camper."

“And that was how long ago?”

“Many years, that’s for sure, more than I’m going to tell you.”

“Are all wolves insane like you? What’s the reason for you to be alive in this wood, if not to have pups?”

“Look, can we go on to some other topic, I get enough of that at home, I came out here for some peace and quiet.”

The coyotes barked, “So you blow up a hunting camp. Are you sure you don’t have some issues to work out?”

Mara growled, which only caused the coyotes to bark even more. “Come on, let’s go bother your friends in the cabin, they won’t shoot at us.”

“Anything to change the subject,” Mara said, as she followed them to where Ben and the girls were trying to get to sleep.

After an hour or so of howling, Cleo threw open the door and yelled, “Mara, you and your buddies need to shut up or I swear I’m going to kick some coyote butt.”

That had no effect, so five minutes later she said, “Right, I’m going to have Clara pull some serious tail!”

Silence descended on the wood. The coyote pack wandered back to their den and Mara, too big to get in with them as a wolf, changed and slept as a woman amongst the pile of warm

bodies.

Ben and the girls had a peaceful night, Clara dreaming of a big circular bed, and Cleo wondering how in the world you got sheets to fit a circular bed. Who knows what Ben was dreaming, but he had a grin on his face. Probably thinking of cars that become submarines with missile launchers.

## **Psycho Pike**

Ben was up early, Clara and Cleo were sleeping in and it looked like they would be sleeping until about noon. Ben had made himself some coffee and was just thinking about breakfast for the girls, when there was a frantic knocking on the front door. Opening it, he saw a girl with tattered clothing with blood all over her.

“You have to help me, we were fishing and this monster came out of the water and grabbed my boyfriend, I tried to keep him in the boat but this fish pulled him into the lake. Please, you have to help me get him back.”

Ben was a bit startled, it was a small muddy lake, “When was this?”

“Just now, I saw the lights and drove the boat over here as soon

as I was sure he was gone. Please you have to help me.”

Ben thought fast, he had heard a story years before about a strange Pike who was driven crazy by the effluent dumped in the lake from the mill on the other side, but that was just a story, surely. No sense waking the girls, he thought, he’d go see what he could do to help the girl. What probably happened was the boyfriend fell overboard and got tangled in the weeds.

“OK let me write a quick note and we’ll go see what we can do.”

The girl looked relieved and was already half way to her boat when Ben got out the door. He ran to catch up.

“What’s your name?”

“I’m Mandy, my boyfriend is Wayne, please hurry.”

“OK in you go, I’m right here, my name’s Ben by the way.”

She started the motor and gunned it as fast as she could to the spot where Wayne went over. Ben looked, but didn’t see anything in the murky water. He stripped off his coat and shoes and touched a control on his wrist band, then said, “Stay here, I’m going down to see what I can find.”

“Oh please be careful, that fish is horrible.”

“Don’t worry, just stay here in the boat.”

With that, Ben went over the side, surrounded by a thin bubble of air as the wristband processed water to oxygen. There was something else in that air, it smelled terrible. Ben tapped the wristband but it didn't help. 'Maybe there is something to the story about contaminants,' he thought.

About six feet down, Ben ran into a hand, drifting on the currents. 'Oh damn,' he looked around further and sure enough, there was Wayne's head. Or at least he assumed it was Wayne. He headed up, leaving the hand and the head.

As Ben climbed into the boat he said, "I'm afraid he's gone, Mandy, eaten, we need to get back to the cabin so you can report this to the authorities."

Ben drove the boat back to the shore while Mandy blubbered in the front. As she got out onto the land, a massive fish with wicked teeth came leaping out of the water and clamped onto Ben's arm. "Move back away from the water," he shouted at Mandy who had stepped forward to help him.

Ben's protection field had kicked in automatically to protect his arm. He took a good look at the fish before reaching with his other hand and grabbing its head. Ben squeezed, his giant powers winding up until he had crushed the fish's skull. He pulled it into the boat and then carried it up to the cabin. Mandy followed but couldn't look at the fish at all. She was certainly looking at Ben.



As they got onto the deck, the door flew open and Cleo and Clara came out, Clara took a look at the fish and said, “Not good eating Ben, Pike are too bony.”

“You don’t want to eat anything out of that lake, I think the stories are true, the mill has contaminated it. This one tried to take my arm off, and Mandy’s boyfriend has been killed by one of them. I don’t know if it’s this one, Clara can you check the lake please.”

Clara nodded and closed her eyes, they snapped open again almost instantly, “Don’t go swimming in there, the place is full of psycho Pike. There’s hundreds of them and they’re all insane, all they want to do is kill anything that’s near the lake.”

“Can you cure them? This used to be a great fishing lake.”

Cleo spoke up, “Still is, only it’s the fish who are fishing now.”

Mandy broke out into more sobbing and Cleo put her arms around her, “Sorry dear, bad joke, bad joke.”

Ben looked at Clara who shook her head, “I could maybe, but whatever is in the water would just drive them insane again.”

“So we need to clean up the mill.”

“Those things are supposed to be regulated by the government, the effluent tested.”

“Same government that let the hunters out there with a Gatling gun right? That government?” Cleo sounded disgusted.

Ben frowned, “Clara?”

“What am I? Google? All right I’m looking, it’s going to take a minute.”

Mandy had got control of herself, “Who are you people? How can you do these things?”

“What things, dear?” said Cleo.

“Um, things?” Mandy was already starting to forget what she didn’t want to believe.

Clara snapped out of her sort-of trance, “Not the whole government, just three or four of them who figure that getting stuck into the trough like pigs is what’s important in government, they can be bought and they are.”

Cleo nodded, “We’ll put Ken on them and they’ll be unemployed and flat broke in a few hours. Maybe the rest of the government, the ones who have been closing their eyes, will step up and enforce the laws. In the meantime, how about we clean up the mill, put it out of business until they get properly inspected.”

Clara looked eager, “Bend a few pipes?”

“I was thinking more of disappearing their chemical supplies, no raw materials, no processing.”

Clara looked a bit disappointed, “And bend a few pipes?”

“If it makes you happy sweetheart, just make it look like an accident.”

Moments later a forklift went out of control and burst a feed-pipe. Then the chemical storage facility exploded, it turned out that two chemicals that should never be mixed had been stored one on top of the other. A series of unfortunate accidents. As a result, the place was inspected and found to be massively in violation of about twelve environmental and safety laws.

“The fish?” Ben asked. Clara nodded and adjusted the whole lake, with the mill shut down, the water would clear before they became insane once more.

As for Mandy, Ben took her in her boat back to her cottage dock and he told her that Wayne had got tangled in the weeds, then chewed on by the Pike in the lake. That was something she could fix on, and it became the official story. In fact, Mandy eventually forgot all about Ben and the girls, they were ‘helpful citizens’ to everyone else.

Clara surprised even herself by saying, “I think these elf powers are too easy. What’s the point of knowing how to fight and of having a big hammer if I don’t go mess things up with it.”

Cleo blinked and said, “Pumpkin, we’ll have lots of chances to smash things, but if we’d gone and beat up the mill, too many people would have seen us. Much better to do it the way you did it. Save the personal touch for when there are no innocents around the place.”

“Well, I suppose so.”

## **Loup-Garou**

She was naked and alone in the deep woods with night coming on. It was just how she liked it, except for those pushy coyotes and their talk about pups. Mara let out a snort and continued her walk through the bush, her coat was coming in longer and warmer as the temperatures dropped. She stopped to listen to the howl, and to add her own voice, “I’m here.”

There were rumours on the howl. A wolf had moved into the territory, a crazy wolf who was killing everything, coyotes, bears, men, anything it could find. This was not good, sometimes lone wolves went a bit odd and for years afterward wolves and coyotes were hunted, but mostly it was dogs left to run wild that were doing the damage that wolves were blamed for. The howl said wolf, not dog, so this was something to be concerned about. A wolf could do a lot more damage than a

couple of pets running loose.

She howled a question and, shuddered as the answer came back, this was a werewolf. Now, Mara wasn't a werewolf, just a woman who liked being a wolf, she'd been born with the ability to change, but werewolves were bad news. They were bitten, or more often, they were created maliciously. No matter which, they didn't want to be wolves. They usually hated themselves and everyone else.

Mara thought she'd check in with the girls and Ben. As she got close to the cabin she almost threw up. There was a Pike out in the bush that absolutely stank with sickness. She changed so that she couldn't smell it as well and knocked on the door before pushing it open. "What the hell have you thrown out into the bush."

Cleo handed Mara a robe and said, "It's a Pike, it tried to chew Ben's arm off and he killed it. The lake is toxic, we fixed it but we thought maybe the animals around here would eat the fish."

"Not unless their noses are cut off, you need to bury that thing, no animal is going to go near it. It's going to rot before it gets eaten."

"OK I'll do that now, it won't take a moment, come on in, we were just about to eat."

"Thanks, I'm not sure I can, after smelling that thing but maybe a nibble."

Cleo smiled, the day Mara couldn't eat, Cleo would be burying her. Cleo took her hammer and swung at the ground beside the fish, kicked it in and kicked the dirt over it. Later she wondered why she hadn't just disintegrated it, but that's the power of suggestion for you. Mara had said bury it, and so she did.

When she got back into the house, Clara was dropping a big plate of stew in front of Mara and her appetite seemed to be just fine. Ben was mopping up the last of his plate with some fresh baked bread. Clara was serious about learning to cook, much to Cleo's pleased surprise.

The wolves were howling more than usual that evening, and Mara cocked her head to listen.

Ben turned to her after eating the last of his meal and said, "That's not your coyote buddies again is it?"

Mara looked a bit shocked, "Wolves, Ben, for goodness' sake."

"Sorry, what's up, problems?"

"Well you have that right, there's a problem, a werewolf has moved into the territory and the wolves have just said it came from the east."

"Lougarou?"

"Quebec? That's quite a way from here, what makes you think

it's a Loup-Garou?."

"I don't know, something from my childhood I guess, maybe?"

Cleo had been listening, Kobold hearing turned up to maximum, "I don't understand wolf, but it's nearby, it's Loup-Garou all right. I've run across them before."

Mara shook her head, "I don't know them, do I have to kill it?"

"You might, but Quebec was very Catholic for a very long time. The Loup-Garou can be created through not doing your religious duties."

Clara stopped pouring coffee, "You're kidding, what the hell is that all about? What kind of religion would create monsters from their believers not going to church enough."

"Are you kidding me, sis? Pay attention to religions some time, every one of them creates demons of those who don't toe the line. Mara, if I remember right, you can cure a Loup-Garou by cutting it, making it bleed. Then afterward, neither of you can mention it ever again or the monster returns."

"Won't it return anyway, if the guy doesn't do his religious whatever?"

"Not enough belief around any more, no spiritual pressure, this guy must be pretty old, Quebec threw over the church in the '60s. This poor guy must have been in the bush for a very long

time, no wonder he's nuts."

Mara thought about it, "OK I'm off to find this thing and make him bleed. Clara can you find him?"

"I can do better than that, I can drop you right next to him."

Cleo put her hand on Clara's arm, "Not yet, and make it a distance away, if he's skittish enough he might get Mara first. Who knows what happens if he bites Mara, how does a wolf-woman react to being bitten by a werewolf?"

"What about if she bites him?"

Mara answered, "I'm pretty sure it's the intention that matters, who bites who."

Cleo nodded, "Mara, we're going with you, we'll help if we need to, between the four of us we can kill the thing if necessary, but you do your bit first, maybe you can save him."

Mara looked at Cleo, who had not so very long ago said that she was a monster herself. She nodded and smiled, "Let me finish eating, this is good stew."

Clara beamed.

Ten minutes later the four of them popped into place about ten feet from the werewolf. He spun around and snapped, Cleo had been right, he had good reflexes.



Mara changed and was at least twice the size of the werewolf, who, it must be admitted, looked pretty bad, he was thin, his fur was matted and falling out, but his eyes burned at the sight of Mara challenging him.

The fur on the nape of her neck was up, Her tail was straight out behind and there was a horrible, low pitched burr coming from her, a sound that made Ben want to shit his pants.

Cleo and Clara were grinning, showing their Kobold teeth, and they were fading around to either side of the werewolf. That left Ben to stand where he was as Mara stalked toward the other wolf.

There was no posturing, no threats, no dancing around. The thing wanted to kill and Mara wouldn't have hesitated to do the same. She was going to end this thing.

The Loup-Garou never made a sound, it just leapt, expecting to get his teeth into Mara's neck. At the last moment, Mara shifted, turned a quarter around and bit the werewolf as it sailed past. She didn't bite down fully, but raked its skin open.

The Loup-Garou landed clumsily, it was changing already, and what finally hit the ground was an old man. Mara had changed and was beside him almost at the same time. She put her hand over the wound on the back of his neck and gently turned him over, "Easy, easy, we'll get you to help as soon as we stop the bleeding."

The man looked up at her with grateful eyes and shook his head. He answered in French, “I’m old, let me die here as a man. Thank you for giving me back to the world, I hope God will take me, but if not, let the Devil do his worst. It won’t be more than I deserve.”

Beelzebub was there, he looked at the man and said, “Neither my brother nor I did this to you. You were a good man with a poor farm and a family to feed, yet your community saw fit to condemn you for not going to church. I have them with me in Hell, you have paid for any sins long since, you belong to my brother.”

Beelzebub had appeared looking as devilish as it was possible to look, so the old man understood and smiled. Beelzebub put his hand on his forehead and the man breathed out for the last time.

Mara was crying, she looked up at Beels and he changed to his usual human form before helping her up. “I will take the body and his soul will go to my brother. Nobody remembers this old man, I hope you will.”

Mara nodded, “Do you really have his neighbours in Hell?”

“Oh yes, I get the hypocrites and zealots, that was part of the original rules. My brother gets the good. I thank you Mara for righting this wrong, he was one of ours so we couldn’t interfere. That was, maybe, a rule not so well thought out. I

will take my leave now,” and he bowed toward Mara while waving toward the others and was gone.

Cleo picked up the robe Mara had been wearing and put it over Mara’s shoulders, “Come on love, you’re sleeping with us tonight, Ben can have his big soft chair. Tomorrow you can put out the news on the howl.”

Mara nodded and the four of them were back in the cabin. Clara poured four large drinks.

## **Ben’s Family**

Papa Legba was on the front porch, “Very nice little cabin you’ve got here, Ben. Nice location too, away from the road, lots of privacy.”

“Hello, Papa, what can we do for you? You’re a long way from your usual place.”

“Well I’m everywhere there’s a crossroad, Ben, everywhere.”

“But there’s no crossroad here, a mile or so down the road, sure, but we haven’t been out of the place for a few days.”

“Crossroads aren’t just pavement, son, I’ve come to hear about

your crossroad.”

“What... oh, I haven’t even told the girls yet.”

“How are the darlings, they sick of you yet? They want an outing with Papa Legba?”

“You’d have to ask them about that. Come on in and have a coffee.”

“With maybe a little rum in it?”

Ben sighed, “Come on, I’ll tell you the story.”

When everyone had taken a seat at the table, and Legba had grinned at Cleo and Clara, and got a Kobold grin in return, he took a big sip of his coffee and rum and declared, “Ben has a story for us.”

“I guess I do, I think I’ve figured out where my ‘family’ came from. It’s not very interesting.”

Cleo touched his hand, “It is to us, Ben, go ahead and tell us.”

“All right, this happened decades ago, I was a young man back in Montreal, I was in school and in an apartment I loved a lot, a walk-up in the old part of town. I was between the second and third wives, women I lived with for a while. The second left to go become a sailor in the navy, and the third stuck for many years. In between there, I met Jane who moved in to the spare

room. She was pretty, and a waitress, one of those girls who could make a room full of guys fall in love with her inside of ten minutes. It wasn't anything she said or did, it was just who she was. She was like this bright fire on a cold day, you were just drawn to her.

“We sat around the apartment and talked a lot. She was in love with a guy who took her way too much for granted. At least that's what I thought, but she just looked at me like I was a bit stupid, you know? I suppose I was. I loved her but I didn't know it for years afterward, I just figured I was infatuated with her like her customers in the bar. I realize now I was jealous of that guy.

“I suppose I should have clued in when I refused to go drink at the place she was working. I didn't want to see all those other guys making moon-faces at her.

“We lived together for a while, and yes, she'd visit my bed once in a while. Sex was no big thing for her, and don't look at me like that Clara, she was a healthy girl, liked sex, just didn't get all bent out of shape either way. Sleeping with me was all a part of our talks, if that makes any sense. Friendly like.”

Papa Legba nodded, “I know that girl, she is a lot more than you remember her, Ben. Funny thing, they're always named Jane.”

Ben looked at Legba for a while, wondering if he should ask him to explain, but he thought better of it and continued, “That

was a happy time in my life, studying, working, with a good woman to come home to, or rather she came home to me, I'd be in bed before she finished at the bars and some nights she'd just march into my bed. At that time in my life, I loved the idea of a relationship.”

“How do you mean, Ben. And what's this about a second and third woman you lived with, didn't you live with Jane too?”

“That's the weird thing, Cleo, I considered the girls I lived with, the three of them, to be sort of wives, while Jane was a friend. With benefits maybe? I don't know, I suppose it was because she had her own room and didn't sleep with me every night.

“Having a long term relationship was really important to me, there were lots of girls I slept with, but the ones I wanted, the ones I remember with fondness, were the ones who lived with me. Is that weird for a boy in his twenties?”

“This was before you became that guy you buried right Ben?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Cleo looked at Legba as she said, “Then why can you remember this? Is there leakage again?”

Legba looked back at Cleo, calmly, “I think he's going to remember what he wants to, he wasn't the Bean he hated yet.”

Ben looked from one to the other with some confusion, but he shrugged, he knew there was something he had buried, that Legba had buried, and he knew he didn't want to know what it was.

Cleo looked back at Ben, "I suspect you wanted a bit more love than you felt at home, we all want that, those of us who didn't get a lot of love when we were kids."

Ben very carefully said nothing, Clara looked down at the table, and Papa Legba broke the mood by asking for another coffee, this time with a bit less coffee and a bit more rum. Cleo dropped the bottle in front of him and got a brilliant smile in return. "Go on, Ben, what happened."

"Not much, really, we lived together, friends dropped in, I was working and making more than she did, so I got her in with my dentist for her first checkup in years. Perfect teeth, like the rest of her. After a while, a year maybe? She decided she wanted more than to be a waitress, so she left town to go to school and become a nurse. We wrote to each other for a while, and somewhere when she was gone, I gave up on my second wife coming back, and met the third.

"I suppose thinking the Navy girl would come back had prevented me from thinking of Jane as serious. Like I said, I had no idea I was in love with her at the time.

"Anyway, with the new girl in the apartment, Jane never moved back in when she finished her schooling, and we drifted

apart. Not that I lost track of her, a few years later she asked me to make a set of bunk beds for her kids. This I did, and with my usual refusal to study plans, the upper was somewhere close to the ceiling. She told me it was fine, if a little hard to make the bed.

“So there you are, a wife and two kids, and a lost love. I think I put that all together to get the ‘family’ I thought had abandoned me.”

Clara had a tear in the corner of her eye, “And you figure you’re a bad man, Ben?” She got up and hugged him hard.

Cleo looked at Legba, “Why are you here? Did you think this story might rip up your bridge?”

“The thought had crossed my mind, but I think now, that even if the bridge is gone, the boy will be fine. After all he’s got the family he always wanted right here, doesn’t he?”

Clara frowned, “Hey, does that make me the kid?”

Ben hugged her back, “Never, you’re my wife and so’s Cleo.”

Cleo was still looking at Legba, just daring him to say something about children. Instead, he threw his head back and laughed that big, booming laugh of his and faded away.

Cleo checked outside the door to make sure he really was gone, and then came back to sit with the others, “This cabin is just a



bit too busy for my taste.”

## **Back to Guelph**

“Let’s go back to Guelph, we get more alone time there than in this place, for some reason everybody and their dog wants to drop in.”

“Cleo, Mara’s not a dog,” said Clara, which earned her a dirty look from her sister.

“Well we can go straight back after practice I guess, Mara is probably going to stay out here for another week or so, she can use the place at night and close it up when she goes back to Guelph. She is probably getting a bit tired of sleeping with that coyote pack.”

With that, Ben and Clara walked upstairs to the second floor, which was a big open space, just right for practice. They were working on iaido, and Clara was trying hard to get the strength out of her swings, trying to relax and let the sword do the cutting. She didn’t really understand that when Ben said it, so he was trying to explain. “You have to understand the sword,”

“What, I’ve got to listen to it tell me things?”

“Not with your ears, look, hold it loosely in your hand, now bounce it a couple of times, do you feel the balance and the weight?”

“I suppose so.”

“Well stop wrenching it around, coax it, help it, have faith that it’s hellishly sharp, like a kitchen knife, you don’t have to chop through a log, you’re cutting a tomato.”

“Um, we’re not doing either of those, Ben.”

“Aargh, just stop muscling it around, OK, please. Look, here’s a bokuto, now hold it overhead with one hand and just let your arm drop, grip at the last moment before you hit this one.”

“You let it go.”

Ben picked up his bokuto and said, “I did not, you knocked it out of my hand, your arm is heavy enough, that, combined with the leverage from the length of the bokuto is plenty strong enough. You don’t need to add your muscles.”

“But if it cuts by itself, isn’t it better for me to add power?”

“Not when you wrench it around and take the edge off of the line of the cut. When you grip it like it’s trying to get away from you, it becomes an iron stick. The side doesn’t cut, the edge does. Yes! Like that.”

“Well I don’t feel very tough just moving the thing around, but if you say so.”

“You’re not just moving it around, you’re cutting. This is what it looks like to just move it around.”

“Yuck.”

“Yuck indeed, Iaido is difficult, there’s no actual opponent there, you have to more or less invent one, whereas our partner practices are a lot easier to figure out. The target is there or it’s not. The problem with partner practice is that we stop just before the target, we don’t hit our partners.”

“Oh, well then.” A nasty looking samurai appeared in front of Clara, she drew her sword and cut deeply through his neck so that his head, complete with helmet went bouncing across the floor and down the stairwell. Blood was flying everywhere and from the first floor Cleo yelled loudly.

Ben shook his head, “No, no, no. Clara please stop doing that. Now look, I want you to get your mind off of chopping stuff up. As you said, we’re not cooking. I want you to go through the kata again and feel what’s going on in your own body, forget the sword, forget imaginary enemies, just feel how your body moves, will you please.”

“Hey, I felt a bit annoyed as I was drawing to cut.”

“Good, this guy isn’t backing down as you draw, so you should

feel annoyed that he's forcing you to kill him.”

“But I don't want to kill him, I don't want to kill anyone.”

“Hence the annoyance, right?”

“Oh, I see. So when I shake off the blood and put the sword away?”

“What did you feel?”

“A bit sad.”

“Good, and could you connect those feelings to what your body was doing at the time? Try again and see.”

“Oooh, my body position affects my feelings.”

“Now you're getting it. Now see if you can get your feelings to control your body position.”

“What? How does that work?”

“Body and emotions are linked, Clara. Take a stance in front of me.”

“Now, feel like you want to hurt me.”

“You mean same as always?”

“Just do it, will you please. OK now feel like I have just beaten you black and blue.”

“Like always?”

“Stop it. There, now did you notice that your body weight changed?”

“Let me try that again. Oh, isn’t that interesting, you’re right, my emotions affect my body position... wait a minute, I already knew that.”

“Of course you did, you can tell when people are sad or angry by the way they are holding their body, we’re just working on it so that we can make our budo come alive.”

“No, it’s more than that, even I know that, Ben.”

“You’re getting too clever, my dear, let’s call it a practise.”

“No, you tell me what more it is.”

“OK stand on the very edge of the stairs, how do you feel?”

“A bit nervous that I’ll fall.”

“Now take a stance, leave your heels hanging off the edge but just lift your sword. How’s it feel now?”

“I’m not nervous.”

“You’re learning how to manipulate your own emotions, how to control them with your body posture, OK?”

“That’s so cool. Thanks Ben.”

Class over, they went downstairs to find that Cleo had tidied things up and done the dishes. After a check around, Clara popped to where Mara was prowling around the wood and told her that she was welcome to sleep in the cabin.

In fact, Mara was far from tired of sleeping with the pack, but one of the elders was a bit sick, and having trouble with the colder weather, so there was a coyote in one of the beds each night, until Mara went back to town.

When Ben and the girls popped into their apartment, Sam was there. She was cooking when they got in and Cleo went to her immediately, “What’s wrong, Sam?”

“Nothing, really, Cleo, I just wanted a bit of a break from Hubert and Lorraine, they’re doing some adjusting and it gets loud at times. I just wanted them to have some space so they could yell as loud as they wanted.”

“Is it about Lorraine being able to sleep and dream on her own?”

“Yes, I can’t believe Hubert is that insecure about it, he’s always so sure about things, never loses his cool. Well he’s losing it now, he just can’t believe that someone like Lorraine wants to be with him, now that she doesn’t need to be with him.”

Ben moaned.

Cleo heard, “What’s that Ben?”

“I know how he feels, I think it’s something like imposter syndrome. In my case, I can’t believe that you girls find me interesting enough to hang out with.”

“Is that why you’re always asking if you’re doing it right? Asking if class was OK?”

“Exactly.”

“Well that’s just stupid. Look my pet, if I was unhappy with you or your efforts, I’d just leave.”

Ben moaned again.

“Ben! I’m not walking out the door! Get a clue would you? Or at least some ego.”

Sam was grinning with an ‘I told you so’ look on her face.

Ben shook his head and said, “I’m going into the den to read,

do not disturb.”

Sam looked at Cleo, “You guys built a den?”

## **A Visit From Doctor Kit**

“What’s up Pumpkin? You’re really quiet this morning.”

“Good morning Cleo, coffee is made. Help yourself.”

“You got out of bed early, and I see there’s French Toast in the oven, and you’ve cleaned the kitchen. So what’s wrong little one, something is bothering you.”

“Do Elves have precognition, Sis?”

“Nobody does, as far as I know, between Ken and Kam they can predict what’s going to happen pretty well, but they don’t know, not really, despite their self-satisfaction if they turn out to get it right.”

“That’s good, because I’d hate to think my dream was going to come true. You know how much I hate that post-apocalypse literature.”

“I actually didn’t Clara, but good to know.” Cleo put the book



she had bought for Clara the day before, down on a side table.  
“So tell me about this dream.”

“I’m not sure I want to, it left a real sadness in me when I woke up, I figured I needed to do some real things, some cooking and cleaning just to get the taste of it out of my mouth.”

Cleo waited, Clara would tell her eventually.

“We were living in some sort of blasted landscape, like you get after a war, dead trees, dead ground. We were in some sort of hut, stone walls with gaps, like a hut had been built beside a dry-stone wall, sort of shoved up against a corner. The other two walls were just a frame and boards nailed on. Old papers were stuck to the walls to keep the wind out. The door was the same, a diagonal and two horizontal boards, and planks on the outside. Dirt floors and a roof that was barely there, with old shingles.

“There was a wood stove in the place that we used for heat and to cook on. We used the dead trees outside for wood. We had potatoes that we’d grown but that was about it. The horse we had was dead and we butchered it to eat, but that didn’t last long.

“Outside, the days were getting shorter and never got longer after that, they eventually got to where it was dark all the time, and the snow started. There was no way we were ever going to grow anything again. All we had was a bin of potatoes that we boiled in melted snow water.

“We could live for a few months, we had some candles for light, wood for warmth, and potatoes. Basically, we were waiting to die, like the horse, which seemed to decide that it wasn’t going to wait to starve, so it starved itself.”

“Cripes, Clara, that’s bleak.”

“Not only that, but we three were super powerful, but somehow we couldn’t prevent whatever had happened. I know we tried but I don’t know what happened or how we tried to prevent it, we didn’t talk about it any more. There was just this overwhelming sense of failure and defeat. I don’t even know what we were waiting for, maybe for the potatoes to run out, then we’d kill ourselves. I know for sure we were going to die, we all knew it.”

“Well we all die eventually, sis.”

“Maybe not Ben, we know some people who will live forever if nothing happens to them.”

“Well that’s it, isn’t it? Eventually something happens, eventually even the universe ends. Even Ingrid and Woden will eventually be gone.”

“Is that it, just existential dread? Is that what the dream was about?”

“You’ve been reading, spud.”

“Look, just because you think I’m a ditz doesn’t mean I can’t learn. I read a lot. I read whenever the jerk I was living with went out chasing other women, and believe me, that was a lot of reading.”

Cleo reached across and squeezed Clara’s hand, then got up and refilled their cups. “You think it’s time to wake up Prince Charming?”

“Yeah, breakfast will dry out if we don’t. Maybe he’ll have an idea about my dream.”

But when they woke Ben, the dream was forgotten. For the first time since they’d known him, he was sick. His throat was swollen and he was running a low fever. Ben figured he had a cold of some sort, although he hadn’t had one in decades.

He could walk around and drink liquids, but no solid food, and for that he told Clara he was sorry, breakfast looked good.

That was it, Clara contacted Kit and asked her to come over.

“Sorry Kit, we seem to be using you as our doctor these days.”

“Don’t fret about it, Dave and I aren’t doing much except working these days. I left him with food and he’ll be good for hours of painting.”

“Ben seems to be sick, and he’s never sick, can you check to

see what it is?” Cleo sounded concerned, almost scared for Ben.

“I’m sure it’s nothing, I’ll have a look,” and Kit sat beside Ben, running her hands over his body. She asked him to stand up and checked his legs too, and that’s when she whistled. “How do you get through the days with that amount of pain, Ben? You’ve got old and new breaks all over you. You’ve got two ribs dislocated that look like they’ve healed into new positions. This is just silly, the amount of damage you’ve had.”

“I don’t know, Kit, it’s just what I am I guess, I don’t notice much pain, maybe I got used to it?”

“Gods preserve me from Men,” said Kit.

Cleo touched Kit’s arm gently, “What is it?”

“Oh, he’s got mumps, probably never got vaccinated as a kid. He’ll get over it, but let me check something...” and Kit grabbed Ben’s crotch which caused his eyes to widen in surprise.

“Oh, damn, one of the effects of mumps can be sterility, it’s not a big deal unless you want kids of course.”

With that Kit looked at Cleo. Kit still hadn’t fixed her uterus, she was still trying to decide if she wanted a child. Cleo was very quiet for a long time, then looked up at Kit and said, “Can you fix him?”

Ben wasn't going to get a say, he could see that, so he shut up and let the women decide for him.

"We'll let the mumps run its course and then figure out if I need to fix him. In the meantime, can I fix your injuries Ben? I can do that right now."

"Not his scars, please," said Clara, who loved tracing them with a finger late at night.

Ben shrugged, which was rather typical of him. Things worked, that was good enough wasn't it?

Cleo nodded to Kit. "Do it, please, and thank you."

"Knock him out, Clara, no sense making him suffer through the adjustments."

Clara nodded at Kit and caught Ben as he fell sideways out of his chair. She lowered him to the spotless kitchen floor and Kit closed her eyes.

What happened next was rather disturbing to watch, Ben's limbs and torso seemed to bubble and flow as bones were put back into the correct place. They could see muscles changing shape as bones moved and as the muscles were cleaned of their internal scarring. Kit left his visible scars alone for Clara, she could always fix them later.

## **A Little Job**

“He’s really all right?” Cleo was worried.

“He’ll be fine, Cleo, keep him in bed for a week or two and plenty of fluids. His testicles are swollen so we’ll keep an eye on him, Orchitis is sort of unpredictable.”

“Well OK, it looks like there won’t be much fun around here for a while.”

The lamp spoke, “So do a couple of you want to do a little job since all you’ve got going is waiting for the boy to get better?”

“Cripes, Ken, do you listen in all the time?”

Ken chuckled, “No Cleo, but I’ve got an AI that lets me know if there’s a problem. Ben getting sick is one of those triggers. I told you I’m only looking after my agents.”

Kit whispered, “He’s got your place bugged?”

Cleo nodded.

“Why don’t you get rid of the bugs?”

“He can hear whispers, don’t bother, his bugs are damned good. We don’t get rid of them because he’s right, he only listens when we might be in trouble, and when that happens, we need help fast.”

Kit shook her head, this agent stuff was more complicated than she thought it was.

Ken spoke again, “Kit, since you’re there, we could use you on this job if you’re not busy.”

“You weren’t listening earlier when I said not much was happening?”

“No, the AI has a pretty good filter, I could rewind the tape if you’d like.”

“No, I would not like. Do you have the St. George bugged?”

Cleo laughed, “Why would he, the George listens.”

“Oh Hell, never mind, and no Beels, I didn’t just call.”

“Gods and Devils and Ken eh?”

Clara had her hand on Ben’s forehead, checking his temperature, “What’s the job, Ken.”

“Kam could use a bit of help down in South America, he’s got a situation that’s too big for him and the kitties.”

Cleo looked concerned, “That doesn’t sound like Kam, he’s the lone wolf type.”

“Well it seems that he has found a reason to be a bit more careful with his life these days.”

“The library?”

“The librarian.”

“You’re kidding!”

“I’m not, and I’ll thank you not to mention I told you that, when you see Kam.”

“I won’t see him, I’m staying here with Ben, Clara and Kit can go help.”

Clara clapped her hands, “Ooh, a new team. What shall we call ourselves, something like ‘Bennifer’ yes? How about Kitara?”

Ben put his hands over his ears, “Stop, don’t go there.”

Kit was laughing, and Clara put on her best wide-eyed look, “What?”

Clara got serious and asked Kit if she was ready to go. When Kit nodded, she looked at Clara and Ben. “You guys sure you don’t want me around for a while?”



“Go, have fun, Ben is going to be woozy and learning how to walk again with all the fixed up bones and muscles anyway, he’ll be no fun at all.”

“Except to watch him fall over?”

“Yep, but maybe only one of us should laugh at the poor boy, right?”

Clara could see that Cleo wanted some time with Ben and she was good with that. She turned to Ben and gave him a kiss and a big enough hug to get a tiny ouch sound from him. “Get better, OK?”

Ben hugged her back, “Come back safe, both of you.”

“Kit do you want to drop in on Dave to make sure he won’t miss you?”

“He won’t notice until he gets hungry, Cleo maybe you can check in on him?”

“You know I will, and so will Oki and Kuri and Sam and half the building, including the building. He won’t starve.”

Kit smiled and took Clara’s hand, “OK Clara, you know where we’re going? Why don’t you take me.”

With that they popped out of the apartment. Cleo looked at Ben

and said, “Back to bed with you my boy, and we’ll have a bit of a nap, best thing for you. After that some soup.”

Ben nodded, “Will they be all right?”

“They’re there, I just heard from Clara, and Kam is there and the cats are there. Can you think of anything that could hurt that crew? Even a big bomb would not get through the wristbands, and before you start thinking about it, I gave Kit my band, Kam can adjust it for her. They’ll all be fine, now come over here and give me a cuddle while you sleep. I’m stuffed with Clara’s breakfast and I want a nap too.”

“Have I told you how much I love you two?”

“Not for years and years, and stop that, you’re not going to die, it’s just the mumps.”

“Wasn’t thinking of dying, was thinking of going infertile.”

“Kit says she can fix it. Hell she got rid of a big load of scar tissue in you just now, I’m sure she can get rid of a bit in your balls. And such big balls they are right now.”

“Ouch, and damned sore.”

“Sorry baby, let me kiss them better.”

“No, kiss me up here instead, they really are sore.”

“Oh, sorry pet.”

“Mmm, better already. Cleo are you ready for a talk about kids?”

“I guess so, Ben, it’s part of the reason I stayed back here rather than handing you over to the tender mercies of Clara.”

“She’s pretty good and getting better, and you’re evading while agreeing. You’re getting pretty good at that, Cleo.”

“Yes, point to you. I just don’t know, Ben. Are you ready for kids, assuming that is, Kit can fix you, and me too for that matter.”

“She says she can and she’s pretty good at that. Look, my leg doesn’t even have that bulge any more where my leg healed slightly off centre.”

“Which brings us to your lifestyle, and mine. We live dangerous lives, don’t we?”

“We do, but that’s because we have always done that, what if we don’t lead dangerous lives for a while?”

“Stop? Could you do that Ben? You wouldn’t get itchy feet?”

“Oh Gods Cleo, I’ve been paying for whatever it is inside me for a very long time, maybe it’s time I decided my debt is cancelled. You have no idea how much I longed for a home life

when I was a kid. Maybe it's time to have one.”

“I'm not sure I'd know what a home life is, Clara and I aren't exactly products of a model home.”

“Look at Kit and Dave, or Sam, we've got examples of loving relationships don't we?”

“Sam and Kit are out on missions right now.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I do, but maybe we need to find our own way, after all we've got a loving relationship right now don't we? I'm just concerned what happens when kids come into it. If we turn out to be our parents...”

“Cripes, don't even think about that. What if? No. No we've got people around us who would see what was happening, Ken would see it and stop us, I know he would.”

“Well, now I'm well and truly scared Ben. Let's have that nap and see what it looks like when we wake up.”

Ben kissed her lightly on the shoulder and was out.

‘Damn, I really need to get him to teach me how to do that.’

## **Isla Negra**

Kit and Clara popped out near the ocean, and Clara instantly dropped into a crouch, hammer in her hand.

Kit looked around but saw nothing, “What’s the matter. What do you see?”

“Nothing, I see nothing, I’m blind.”

“I seem to be fine, I can see and there’s no danger around us. Don’t hammer me, I’m going to take your hand so you can see too.”

With that, Kit grabbed Clara’s free hand and felt the relief in Clara that she could see again, even if only through Kit’s eyes. Clara swung her head from side to side but nothing, “Can you tell what’s wrong with me Kit?”

“Nothing physical, wow, you can see in the dark, but you can’t see now?”

“I see you looking at me and that’s it. What about psychologically, magically, apparently Cleo and I are susceptible to Elf control, do you feel any Elf magic?”

“Just a minute, let me go deeper. Yes, there it is, it’s magical. I’ll give you a way to block it.”

Clara sagged with relief. “I can see, and we should see Kam. This is where I felt him, I still feel him. I wonder if he got hit with blindness too?”

Clara frowned, put out her arms and swung them from side to side, “Nothing, no smell, nothing to hear, Kit do you detect anything?”

“Not a thing, and my nose is pretty good.”

“OK I know he’s here, it has to be the cats. Boots? Puss? It’s me Clara, do you have Kam with you?”

Nothing, so Clara decided to do something risky, “Boots, I’m going to open my mind, it’s really me, not someone pretending, I’m not an Elf.”

Two huge cats and Kam were suddenly there, causing Kit to jump back about ten feet, “Woah.”

“Kam, what’s going on, damn, you can’t see. Can you talk? Kit?”

Kit frowned as she looked at Kam, she started to walk toward him and both cats stepped together to block her. “Puss, Boots, she’s a friend, she’s with me.”

With a warning sound deep in their chests, the cats stepped aside. Kit thought to herself ‘I can freeze them if I have to,’ and

was shocked to hear Puss answer her in her mind, “You can try, little fox. Fix our friend and you will be our friend.” Boots nodded his head and Kit fought the impulse to change. “I will not harm him, I need to get closer. Kam I’m going to put my hand on your forehead now.”

Kit closed her eyes, somewhat against her better judgment, but she heard a chuckle in her mind and went ahead. What she felt was more or less the same as she felt in Clara, but stronger, Kam had no extra powers to resist like Clara, but there it was, the same control. She blocked it.

Kam blinked in the light and looked around. They were on a rocky shore and behind him was the house that belonged to Pablo Naruda, so Isla Negra.

“Cleo, Kit, so good to see you, I wasn’t sure where I would be.”

“Kam, you were in trouble, why didn’t you call?”

“I did, or rather the cats did, they tripped their alarm with Ken.”

“Ken didn’t say. We didn’t realize it was an alarm, that you were in danger, we’d have all come.”

“I was fine, in no danger, when I was attacked the cats took me out of the world.”

Kit was looking hard at the cats, “I don’t understand. If they were invisible I’d have seen you all.”

“You’ve met the cats haven’t you?” asked Clara.

“I think I’d have remembered. I’ve heard about them of course.”

“They didn’t exactly go invisible, they went into the past.”

Kit looked at Clara as if she thought she might be joking.

Kam spoke up, “They came from the past, I found them in the present and we became friends. When they fade they sometimes move into the past. That’s where they took me, as well as sideways. We were much further south when I was attacked.”

Clara hugged Boots and then Puss before doing the same to Kam, “What’s happening, Kam, are we safe here?”

“I think we’re safe, let’s get out of the wind and talk.”

Clara had her hammer out and was swinging for the rocks. Kam caught her arm, “No! You’re on a monument, Clara, people know every crack in every rock here. Let’s go up the hill and have coffee, the place looks like its open.”

The cats started to move out to both sides and faded out. Kit nodded to herself, “Just invisible now.”



It turned out the cafe and book shop was open, Kam bought three coffees and a book for Clara, 'Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair' which she took in both hands. "I think you'll like this, Clara."

"Thank you Kam, I'll read it, in the meantime, what is going on."

"It's a full scale war, and I've been fighting since I got down here. One of Ken's 'little spots of trouble'. I want to know how Kit blocked the blindness, I didn't know foxes could do that."

"I'm half fox, we're not sure what the other half is, but it's strong. I got into some trouble as a kid, and Liz was kind enough to take responsibility for me and to train me as a Shaman. What I found in you two is Shaman magic, but nasty."

"OK that seems about right. What I've been fighting down here is a Kalku. He was the last Machi and grew bitter about the losses of his fellow Machi and his people's lands. He became a sorcerer, a Kalku, and he has been waging war on those with European roots."

Clara had a face like thunder, "And you're fighting him instead of helping him?"

"Clara my love, extermination is never the answer, either way. The Mapuche and the government can make their own peace, and they should, but one man with supernatural powers should

not dictate what men need to work out for themselves. I may agree with you about the conquest of indigenous peoples, but Men have to make their own peace.”

“So we take away the best chance the Mapuche have for getting their lands back?”

“The Mapuche have no more say in this than the Christians do, despite what they and their God did in the past.”

With a bit of a pop, Beels was at the table with an espresso in front of him. “Don’t put that on my brother, our bet was only for Europe, his religion and my Hell were only ever meant to be regional. Much as I’d like to, we can’t interfere with the Men who took what we did into other lands and spread damage in our names, well his name. Yet I get blamed as the leader of the Men these so called religious types are fighting. I wish I was, truly. Unfortunately, I can’t even collect their souls when they die, all this is out of our territory. Europeans only. Trust me, if I had been able to interfere, things would have been much different.”

Clara scowled, “So you won’t help?”

“Can’t, the Kalku is not mine, any more than the Conquistadors were my brother’s. And for the record, I agree with Kam, Men need to work out their differences without what they call supernatural means.”

Kit spoke up, “But you collected souls back in Guelph.”

“That was by agreement with Coyote who loves a trick, it was a trick on my brother, who was pretty damned upset I’ll tell you. It was great. Kam are you planning on hurting the Mapuche?”

“Of course not, just stop this Kalku and the poor beings he’s using for his war.”

“All right, I’ll leave you all to it. Good to see you Kit, if you need my advice, just call, and I absolutely can protect you should you need it. Friend to friend. Now I’ll take my leave, I feel a disturbance in the ether, oh, no it’s just my breakfast getting cold. Adieu, oops.”

And he was gone. Clara was quiet for a while, and the other two left her to her thoughts. She idly opened the book of poems and read one. Closed the book and looked up, “Just stalemate the Kalku, nothing more?”

“I promise kitten.”

“Boots agrees?”

“They both do.”

“Let’s do it then.”

## **You Do You**

Cleo woke up with Ben's arm still over her. She had rolled her face away from him and had stuffed herself into the curve of his body. It took a while before she was ready to open her eyes, he felt so good all along her back, his hand on her breast, her hands holding his arm.

Eventually she realized that she had to get up and visit the bathroom. She stretched and rolled over to look at Ben. He was still sleeping as she spread herself out on the bed. It really was a big bed, and Ben was a big boy and she had him all to herself for a while. Nice.

She was about to take advantage of him when she touched his forehead and realized he still had a fever. He wasn't burning up, but she figured she'd better let him sleep. She got up, threw one of his shirts on, which came down past her knees, and padded out to the bathroom.

While she was sitting on the toilet she looked in on Clara, who was reading a book by Neruda. 'Not my baby sister any more' she thought. As she broke the connection, she looked up to find Beelzabub standing in the bathroom.

"You've got a bit of nerve, Beels, a little privacy please."

“Hey, Devil right? I’m supposed to do things like this, but also, I’ve seen it all before.”

“What do you want?”

“Frankly, I want you to keep a close eye on Clara, I don’t think that group has any idea of just how powerful that sorcerer is they’re fighting. He beat Kam, although Kam would never admit it, but he blinded and muted him.”

“Slow down Beels, what are you talking about?”

“OK sorry, sometimes I just assume everyone knows what I know. Kam has been down south fighting the Kalku’s monsters, he and the cats spent months running around the southern part of South America before they got an idea where the Kalku was. They fought through the Wekufe and were almost at the sorcerer before a Nguruvilu stopped them long enough for the Kalku to cast a spell.”

“OK slower still, a Kalku is a sourcerer right? What’s a Wekufe and what’s a Nguruvilu?”

“Wekufe are demons, your run of the mill nasty spirits who cause sickness and destruction. They come in and out of existence and Kalku use them to do their will, which is mostly making folks sick and other such harms. A Nguruvilu is basically a Great Lynx, but with a fox head rather than a lynx, and a serpent back end with a tail that has claws. They’re more river dwellers than lake beings and they’re a lot more nasty

than Great Lynx, they like luring folks into river and drowning them. Normally the Machi, that's Shamans, fight these things but this Kalku was the last Machi, gone mad with grief and rage."

"OK got it, turn around I'm going to get up now."

"But I've seen..."

"Just do it please Beels."

When they were in the kitchen, Cleo put the coffee on. "You want some?"

"Thanks, yes."

"So what makes you think that crew can't handle some spirit beings and a sorcerer?"

"That's what I'm afraid of, just that attitude. Look, this Kalku has been accumulating power for a very long time, I think that maybe he's been killing Machi and taking their power. Think of Liz times twenty."

"I see, can this guy be killed?"

"I hope so, he's insane enough that you will probably have to do that to stop him."

"What can Ben and I do? He's sick with mumps right now."

“Mumps? You know I’m Pestilence right?”

“I thought the horsemen were different people?”

“What for? No, they’re all me, I take a different name whenever I need to, like putting on a different hat.”

“Well, Pestilence, how about curing Ben?”

“No problem, no more mumps.”

“Thanks, um, are there any lasting effects?”

“You mean is he sterile? Not much I can do for that, I’m sort of a big picture guy, I don’t really go in for cleaning up scar tissue.”

“Well thanks anyway. I’m still not sure what Ben and I can do to help.”

“You can watch, and if they need help, you’ve got lots of it here in Guelph. Megan and Stan are Nanabozo, Liz has the accumulated power of her line, just like this Kalku, Ingrid and Woden. Hell Amber and Coyote could sing the guy out of existence if it came to that. You’ve got help here. It’s just that it’s Kit and you know...”

“I do Beels, I know how fond you are of her.”

“She put my tooth back.”

“Yes, after knocking it out, I’ve heard the story and I promise, Beels, we’ll keep an eye on things, especially Kit.”

“Thanks Cleo, I appreciate it. Call if you need me, I can’t fight the Kalku, not my territory, but I can pull the guys out of there if you need it.”

“Leave it with me, go on back to the opera.”

“How did you know?”

“Dude you’re in formal dress with opera glasses hanging from your neck.”

“Ah. Be well, Cleo, Ben’s waking up.” With that, he was gone. Cleo shook her head at how strange the world was. The Devil worried about a girl who beat him up, well how about a Kobold King in love with a dirt poor Man.

She walked in to the bedroom to find Ben just sitting up, “I’m starving, Cleo, you want some breakfast?”

“Sure do, love, glad to see you better.”

“No sweat, at least not now. What’s been happening?”

“Go make breakfast and I’ll change the sheets then tell you all about it. There’s coffee in the pot.”



While she was changing the bed she checked in with Ken,  
“What the hell, Ken, why didn’t you tell us it was serious?”

“Get good people and let them do their jobs, remember? Now you all know what’s happening and have prepared as well as you can for the next part.”

“You are a right bastard, you know that?”

“So you’ve said before Your Majesty.”

“Say that again and I’ll have your head, I’ll tell Ben to do it with those fancy swords of his you gave him.”

“Ouch, the irony. How is he?”

“Beelzabub was just here and he cured him, did you know he’s Pestilence as well as the Devil?”

“Yeah, he’s got a lot of hats, but he’s his own thing, I’d love to recruit him.”

“Good luck with that, I think he’s partial to his own friends but mostly he lets things happen.”

“Still, a good being, although he gets upset when you say that.”

“Actors!”

Ken laughed for a long time at that. Beels was indeed an actor who got well into his role. Beels' brother on the other hand was a being who just couldn't let go of the role he'd taken on. Dour wasn't the half of it.

“Ken I'm going out for breakfast now, I'll talk to you later.”

“It's two in the afternoon.”

“Ben says it's breakfast time.”

“Well, you do you, girl.”

Cleo laughed and walked out to the smell of French Toast with vanilla, just like she liked it. 'I'll do me and Ben both,' she thought.

## **Colocolo on the Beach**

Clara turned to Kit, “What are Machi and Kalku? I've never heard of them.”

“A Machi is a Shaman, and a Kalku is a sorcerer, someone who deals in magic that compels what we might call demons, or monsters, but as Beels says, these demons are not the same as the ones he has in Hell.”

“So this Kalku is using spirit beings to attack the Spanish?”

“The Spanish speakers, yes. But these people are Chilean, same as the Mapuche, more or less. They were all born here and none of them took part on either side in the conquest.”

“To hear some of them talk, you’d think they were still fighting for control of the land.”

“They are, but it’s usually a matter of money these days, not religious conversion and conquest. The Spanish speakers aren’t going back to Spain, any more than the Europeans who came first to Canada are going back to France or England. Liz’ people were there before anyone else, including the indigenous peoples, and the monsters this Kalku is using were here before the Men came down from the north. People can argue from History but they have to live together today. They can argue about past injustice but they have to reconcile today.”

“Sometimes history isn’t so far away, there’s Kobolds who want Cleo to be the King, no that’s not right, I guess she is the King, but they want her to rule.”

“There’s some who imagine they would be more comfortable in the past, but it’s rarely the golden age they imagine it to be. Mostly they think they’ll be on top of the pile. Ever wonder about those who figure they can remember their past lives? They’re never some slave digging a ditch, they’re always Cleopatra or some such famous rich person.”

Clara laughed bitterly, “Well these Kobolds who figure the monarchy was a golden age can have my childhood as a princess, and welcome to it.”

Kit looked closely at Clara but saw only a normal amount of resentment and anger. She had certainly healed a lot in the past couple of years.

Kam was watching her too, and was relieved when she shook her head and said, “So let’s get on with stopping this sorcerer so the countries around here, and their people, can get back to arguing about money.”

Just then all three of them heard Boots in their heads, “Little rats with feathers coming, lots. Puss is fighting already.”

“Rats with feathers?”

“Colocolo, Clara, they usually just hang around houses and drink saliva and make people fatigued, but the Kulku calls them up by the thousands, we’ve been fighting them since we got here. It’s almost impossible because there are so many, but the cats like the taste.”

Clara stood, “Let’s go then.”

Kam stood too but Kit said, “Go hold them off, I have to think for a moment.”

That was unusual for Kit, she was more of an act first sort of person, but Kam and Clara just nodded and stood to leave the interpretive centre. Kam made some fast adjustments to Kit's wrist band and ran out the door. He and Clara split up since the rats were coming from both directions down the beach.

There were thousands of them and Boots was slashing with fangs and claws, not bothering to eat the creatures. Clara yelled, "Go help Puss, I've got these," and split into a dozen people, each with a fully functioning hammer. She spread across the rocky shore and began swinging those hammers back and forth. Rats disappeared as they were hit, and a rain of feathers began to drift onto the shore.

After ten minutes of that, the rats were still coming and Clara was wondering if they would ever stop. The fact that each rat represented a slight or an injury to the Mapuche over six hundred years of confrontation, meant it wasn't likely they would ever run out.

It was at that moment that Kit struck. First she froze all the thousands of the Colocolo, then she made them take on the thousands upon thousands of slights and injuries everyone, on every side had experienced in the last thousand years of history in the southern part of the continent. It was enough to dissolve the spirit beings back into the earth from which they sprang.

Kam, the cats and Clara were suddenly alone on the shoreline. Not even the feathers were left.

When they got back to the cafe where Kit was drinking her second coffee, they sat and stared at her.

“What? I figured out where they came from, and thinking back on what you said about balancing things again, Clara, I cast the resentments of the other sides into them. The several forces of animation cancelled out. They’re back to where they were, sneaking into houses and licking up spit while people sleep. They were never very harmful for doing that, I mean who knows why they are tired. The little things had their own resentments about getting blamed for people having to work too hard and being tired.”

“But how did you counter the magic of the Kalku?” asked Clara.

“I told you, magic is balance, and the Kalku put these poor creatures well out of balance. When I evened it up, they decided not to play any more.”

Kam shook his head, “We’ve been fighting the Colocolo for months, and you take them all out in an instant.”

Kit just smiled. In her head she heard, “You have friends now little fox, call on us when you need us, we’ll be there.”

“That still leaves the Kalku and his other servants. I think he’s still down south, in Patagonia somewhere.”

“Then let’s go there, I can take us all,” said Kit as she reached

for hands.

Clara shook her head, “Coffee, book.” She was reading Neruda again and Kit sat back. What better place to read the poet than beside one of his favourite houses, the place where he died. Kam waved Kit back into her seat and went for coffee.

Puss was in Kit’s head again, ‘She’s reading it to us, it’s wonderful.’

Having read those poems herself as she became involved with Dave for the second time, Kit had to agree, ‘They are indeed wonderful.’

## **Prohibition Times**

“Beels is worried that they can’t handle this sorcerer.” Ben and Cleo were in the lunch counter talking with Liz.

“Kit can handle herself, and the others aren’t helpless, I think Beelzabub is right, keep an eye on them and we’ll go help if we need to. This Kalku sorcerer sounds like the sort of threat Megan would fight if it came to that. I mean, if it’s Kit, half the town will be there at need. Kit doesn’t realize it but she’s one of those people who tie a community together. Just by being who she is, she has friends in a lot of different factions, even

Megan is fond of her and Megan tends not to like anyone, including Stan if you can believe her grumbling about him.”

Liz want back to washing dishes and Mike came over to fill their coffees and talk, “We’ll be there for them, don’t worry. Now, what about you two? How are you?”

“Don’t answer him Ben, he’ll have your life story out of you.”

Mike laughed and held up his hands.

“Well, aside from being worried about the guys down in South America, Cleo and I are still talking about having a kid.”

Mike looked at Cleo, “Really? I wouldn’t have put you down as someone who wanted children.”

Cleo bristled, “And why is that? I’m too rough and tumble to raise a kid? Kobolds don’t actually eat their babies you know, that’s just a rumour.”

“What?...”

“She’s messing with you, Mike, we’re just talking about it. It’s come up a few times, that’s all, but I’ve just got over the mumps and I may not even be able to have kids.”

“Kit says she can fix that, it’s not part of the equation, Ben, and you know it.”



Mike looked from one to the other, “I can see you two have a lot to discuss about this. I’ll leave you to it.”

Cleo took Ben’s hand in hers, “He’s right, we’re just going around in circles. Maybe we should flip a coin.”

“Maybe we ought to shelve this discussion for another day, we’ve got other things to think about, how is Clara doing?”

“At the moment she’s reading, so they seem fine. I’ve got a signal, an alarm I guess, set up so if things get hairy I’ll know.”

“Good, and what are you and I doing today?”

“You just got over being sick and you’re never sick, so maybe we just relax for the day?”

“I feel great, why don’t we go help out in the bar.”

When they went downstairs, Cleo turned to Ben and said, “When was the last time we were here?”

The place looked like they would meet Al Capone coming out of the washroom, it was all prohibition speak-easy style. “Cleo, time travel isn’t a thing is it?”

“Not unless you’re one of the kitties. I’m sure Ken can’t go back in time, we’d better check with him.”

Ken looked up as they walked into the office, “Hey, you guys

decided to come to work did you? What do you think of the place?”

“Ken what have you done?”

“I thought a bit of a sprucing up was in order, and then I thought, what better style than Sleeman’s prohibition era.”

“We were in here two days ago...”

“Oh, didn’t Clara tell you, she has been working with the Smith and together, mostly Clara I’m told, they have managed to come up with some illusion tech.”

“What!”

“Cleo, your sister is far from the helpless girl you remember, she’s got a head on her shoulders and when she found out about Ben’s mental control over his hammers, she started thinking.”

“Clara worked out technological illusions? Is it frying our brains right now?”

“Cleo...”

“OK, OK, I’m just having to adjust my opinions about my kid sister about once a week. You’re right, she’s got a good mind.”

“I mean, look at this place, so many settings.” Ken started turning a dial and the bar changed from prohibition to big city

fancy with mirrors and smoked windows, to turn of the century Paris, to cowboy bar, to the old Ken's Keller. The few students who were in the place didn't even blink, but then again, they were in the middle of exam week and would only have noticed if their beer had disappeared. In fact, one of them lifted a mug and drank from a flute but didn't say a word.

Cleo decided there was nothing in the world so calm and focused as a student in his cups. Bless their little hearts.

"Ken do you have anything for us? Ben and I are sort of at loose ends as to what to do today."

"I'm keeping an eye on the team, but other than that, all that's happening is some research through a lot of paperwork, trying to find some leverage on the current Kobold government."

"What for?"

"Cleo, I can't believe you just said that."

"Sorry, I forgot who I was talking to. Have you got anything yet?"

"Still looking, you guys want to help?"

Ben started toward the office, "Sold!"

Ken looked at Cleo, "Paperwork? Ben?"

“Yeah, it’s sort of worrying, but he keeps telling me he’s changing. Maybe he wants to try an office job.”

“Well you two are welcome to it, I have to go visit some folks, can I leave the bar to you?”

“Not a problem Ken, off you go.”

Ken headed out the door and Cleo went into the office. She found Ben half buried in paperwork. He looked up as Cleo entered, “You have to see this Cleo, the Kobold government is riddled with corruption and the budget is blown three ways to Sunday. I’d say it’s about to collapse.”

Cleo spun around in the doorway and shouted, “Ken you bastard!” He was long gone and probably laughing.

Cleo sighed and pulled another chair to the desk, “Show me.”

Half an hour later she was as sure as Ben, “It’s a mess. What the hell, they’ve had democracy for ten minutes and they’ve learned how to get their snouts into the pig trough. How is that possible, I thought it took a little time for newly democratized folks to get cynical about this stuff and start looking for their cut.”

“Well it looks like most of the leaders of the new government were ministers in the old one. They’re the same old crew under a new name.”

“Damn Ken, you know what he’s doing don’t you?”

“I’m beginning to suspect.”

“He’s got us in here so we could see this, and he figures that since we ‘discovered’ it, we’ll feel obliged to fix it.”

“I’m not seeing how to fix this, Cleo, except maybe an election and a whole new system of government. The ruling party shouldn’t even exist, it’s supposed to be party-free, with the elected members of the legislature getting together to agree.”

“How long did that last before there were parties, Ben?”

“Almost a year.”

“And under this system now, what are the checks on the ruling faction?”

“None at all, no second house, no head of state. It was set up as an Athenian style of democracy, which translates to mob rule. But there’s no mob any more. As soon as a majority of legislators figured out they could run everything, they did just that. There’s nobody to stop them.”

“Nobody? Ben did you say nobody?”

“No Cleo, not a chance, you’re not doing it.”

“That’s what that bastard wants, that’s why we’re here looking

through this pile of paper. He wants me to jump in and reform the system. Damn him! He knows I'm going to do it."

"Cleo, you don't want to do this and I don't want you to do it. What are you doing?"

"Who else can, Ben?"

"Ken, for one! He's got to be in the succession line somewhere, you resign, Clara resigns, it's him."

"It's Kam first actually, he's a couple of minutes older."

"That's brilliant! He's already got a secret police!"

"The cats, that's right. You know you've got a devious mind Ben, you'd make a great first minister."

"What, NO!"

## **Castillo Wulff**

When they had finished their second coffees, and Clara looked up from her book, Kam leaned over and whispered, "Just how powerful is Kit?"

Kit heard and laughed, “I honestly don’t know.”

Clara shook her head, “Sam told me she was powerful enough to be put on trial by Megan and Stan. Part of Megan’s job is to destroy any spirit being who goes out of control. Apparently half the town came out to defend Kit, and by that I mean they would have fought Nanabozo. Megan told Sam later, she and Stan would have lost, but they would have fought anyway, it was that serious.”

Kit sat quiet while Clara told the story, she knew how close she had come to being destroyed, and she had accepted her fate.

“As it turned out, Liz offered to take her on as a student, and Kit accepted, so that’s why Kit is a Shaman, but combined with her other powers, she’s one of the most powerful around. You met Beelzabub earlier. Well he had his hooks into Dave for his soul. Kit knew Dave was in trouble and went to Paris, froze the Devil and knocked his tooth out with his own cane. So if anyone can defeat the Kalku, Kit can do it.”

Kit shook her head, “Don’t get cocky, Beels wouldn’t have offered to pull me out of here if he thought it would be a walk in the park.”

Kam nodded, he’d gone up against this sorcerer and had his butt kicked. If it hadn’t been for the cats, he’d have been killed. “I agree, Kit, this character is strong. We’ll need to play it careful and slow.”

Clara nodded, but said, “Kit took care of the Colocolo, I’m not too worried.”

“The other beings this Kalku controls are tougher.”

Kit frowned, “Kam do we know this sorcerer’s name? We’ve got him if we do.”

“Unfortunately nobody seems to know it, or at least nobody is talking.”

“Do we know where he is?”

“He was well south the last time I caught up with him. Almost to Tierra Del Fuego.”

“Well he’s not there now, I can feel him, or at least I could when he sent the Colocolo. He’s north of here, in, I’d swear, a castle.”

“Castillo Wulff, it’s in Vina Del Mar. Oh Gods, of course he is. He’s thumbing his nose at us.

Kit held hands with the other two and they were there, just north of the place, on the beach. Clara shook her head, “What is it with us and beaches, we can’t seem to get away from them.”

Kit took a step back and winced, “He knows we’re here, and Kam you’re right, he’s powerful. If I hadn’t been expecting an



attack, he might have got through to me.”

“Well so much for sneaking up on him, and here comes the Nguruvilu, oh, and the Wakufe. What fun, that’s the combination that sent me away with the cats.”

The cats were there, stalking toward the Wakufe, if they were solid, they were dead, that was the feeling Kit got as they moved toward the demons. They had met before and the cats had no intention of being out-fought again.

Kit probed the Nguruvilu and found a raw power she’d never come up against before. She turned to Kam and said, “Stay out of the fight as long as you can, I’m going for help, I can’t take the serpent and the Kalku both together.”

With that she was gone, back to Guelph where she appeared in Kuroneko’s kitchen. “Kuri, you want some fun? I’ve got another serpent creature for you to fight down in Chile.”

“I’ve never been there, of course I want to go with you. Oki, want a fight?”

Oki was there in a moment, and the three of them were back in Vina Del Mar. Kuri took one look at the Nguruvilu and said, “Where does a creature like that get that much power? Woden, can we borrow Mishelle for a fight?”

In a crack of thunder, Mishelle, the Great Lynx who had taught Kuri to become the same, and who had fallen for Woden, was

there. “Woody sent me along and said he’d be watching, let’s... oh lord, what is that thing?”

Mishelle had felt the power and instantly became her natural form, a giant serpent with the front end of a lynx. Kuri became the same and Oki, who was glad he’d come along to back Kuri up, became a gigantic wolf. The three of them launched themselves at the monster with Oki howling in glee. Finally, something he could let his full powers loose on.

As those three attacked, Kam turned to Clara, “We’d better get to the cats before they come to grips.” Puss and Boots were already in amongst the Wakufe, but those beings could move in and out of solid form, the cats were swinging at nothing and then, being outnumbered, the spirits were becoming solid in a variety of shapes and striking the cats.

Clara was furious, “Oh no you don’t,” she screamed and suddenly the Wakufe were solid, no longer able to avoid the cat’s claws and fangs. Puss roared, grabbed one of the bigger spirits and ripped it apart with his back claws. Boots was using his sabre-like teeth to rip and tear by driving his head back and forth in the largest concentration of the beasts. Now it was the cat’s turn to fade out and back again, weaving in amongst the crowd.

When Kam and six Claras got to the demons, their hammers were screaming. They didn’t bother with anything fancy, they just pounded away with glee. The Wakufe gave way, then turned and ran.

In the meantime, Kuri and Mishelle had wrapped the Nguruvilu tightly with their own bodies, Kuri made sure to lock the spiked tail down well and Okuri had lunged for the fox head. He got a good grip on the thing's throat, but could not get through the tough skin. They had come to a stalemate, and Kuri could feel the beast pulling strength from the land. They would lose it soon.

At that point, Oki shouted into the spirit realm, "Father, give me strength!"

Half a world away, Stan put a beer down on the bar and closed his eyes. Megan was with him and became alarmed, Stan went white and shook with effort.

In Chile Oki felt the full power of his sire and used it. The Nguruvilu's throat collapsed and Oki tore it out.

While this was happening, Kit had begun to walk toward the castle, each step brought her closer to the Kulku's full power but she struck at him from every angle. Still, the more she hemmed him in, the more concentrated his power. She slowed down and finally had to stop. The Kulku was trapped, but so was Kit. If she let go in the least, he would break free once more and she would be vulnerable.

## **Kit Asks for Help**

“Beels.”

Her own devil appeared, looked at Kit and said, “Out?”

Kit shook her head no, “Power.”

Beels nodded and fed his power into Kit. It was massive, he and his brother had created a whole world after all, but Kit only got another thirty feet toward the castle.

In Guelph, Cleo turned to Ben, her face white, “They have the spirits but Kit can’t take the Shaman, even with Beels’ power.”

Ben nodded, “Papa Legba who watched me at the crossroads, I call you now at another crossroad, your son Bean needs you.”

Legba was there, and he was not laughing. “You haven’t called on me for a long time my son, I am here.”

“You know about the Kulku?”

“A very dangerous situation, the world is out of balance with that one.”

“Can you help?”

“Of course I can, and I will.” With that he was gone, standing now beside Beelzabub.

“Legba.”

“Beelzabub. We need to end this one.”

And Legba called upon all the forces of change and said,  
“Mamon Brigitte, Baron Samadi, take this one now.”

He channelled all the power of the Loa into Kit who stumbled, almost fell. Beels took her arm and Legba the other. Together the three of them walked forward and that tremendous surge of power, more than any being should ever have, flowed through Kit. Suddenly, the Kulku was gone. He had not escaped, he had simply never existed.

“Take it away, please, it burns.”

Beels and Legba withdrew their power from Kit and this time she did collapse down onto the sand. Beels held her in a sitting position and turned to Legba. “I thank you cousin, we have watched this one for many years, waiting for this day, I am pleased we could be of service together.”

“We were asked, how could we not help?” Legba threw back his head and laughed. “I see no other obstacles on the road, I will leave now, take good care of your fox, she has more to do.”

Beelzabub bowed and Legba was gone.

In Guelph, Cleo and Ben heard Legba's laughter and Cleo smiled at Ben, "They're safe, the Kuku is gone. How did you know Legba would help?"

"He saved me when I was a boy, I remember that now, he must have saved me for something and I think this is it. The Shaman and his servants were not Legba's. They weren't Beelzabub's either, so those two had to be asked. They worked through one of their own. I think they somehow knew this Kuku would arise, and they would be needed. These Gods, they work through us, don't they?"

"I don't know, I'm just glad they were on our side."

"I'm not sure I'd say either are on our side, but we were useful to fix something they wanted fixed."

As Cleo and Ben were discussing the business of the Gods, the squad was sitting on the beach beside Kit. Kam spoke first, "I am thankful that so many of you came to help. I have to admit the job was beyond me."

Mishelle nodded, "I get the impression this job was beyond a lot of people, Gods included. Woden was listening, and when Kuri asked for me, he sent me right away. I think he was waiting for the call. I've never asked him, but I think there is some sort of agreement among the God-like that they will not

interfere with what is outside their responsibility. Still, they're a slippery lot and maybe there is some sort of mechanism for them to help when it's needed."

"Like going through those who are theirs?"

"I suspect so."

Kuri and Oki were with Kit, Kuri was frowning at Beelzabub, "Kit are you all right?"

"I'm fine, or I will be. I don't think anyone is supposed to have that much power. When Beels and Legba were giving me their help, I could feel what that Kulku felt, I was feeling it myself, the power, the power of a God. I don't know how the Gods stop themselves from going insane."

Beels smiled, "We're old, and we watch, those who go insane, who go beyond their people, who upset the balance, are dealt with one way or another."

Kit nodded, "I understand. I know how Megan felt when she put me on trial, I could have spared that Shaman but it was too dangerous, he would never have come back under control."

Beels nodded, "Perhaps you should talk to Megan when you get back, we asked a lot of you today."

"I won't be going back for a few days, I have to find a Shaman here and train them. There has to be someone to control the

spirits, they have been corrupted.”

Clara nodded, “I can search for those who can touch the spirit world, we’ll find you an apprentice.”

“Not too fast, Kit, look inside yourself and make sure all is fine, you took a lot of power from Legba and me.”

Kit nodded and closed her eyes, “I think I have a bit of you here, Beels.”

Beels laughed, “You’ve had that from the day you knocked my teeth out, my friend. You took it, but I gave it willingly. You were such a charming young girl, so powerful, so assured.”

“Really? I’ve always wondered, I guess I’ve always felt you there. Nothing of Papa Legba though.”

“Ah, but you have him too, whenever you’re at a crossroads, that’s Legba’s domain, and he’s earned it. You all carry him with you, he watches the crossroads.”

Kam was looking thoughtful. Clara took his arm and said, “You’re at a crossroads aren’t you cousin, I can feel that much.”

“You’re in my head?”

“You know I am, you didn’t block me. Is your work done here?”



“I think it is, or Ken would have told me about the next job. I think I’m done here.”

“But there’s another place for you to be?”

Kam looked hard at Clara, “You think so?”

“I know so, and so do you, my sweet Kam, so do you.”

At that moment, both cats materialized, one on each side of Kam and from deep in their chests they seemed to say “Hmmm?”

## **King Cleo**

Ken walked into his office and Cleo cuffed him hard across the back of his head. “I’m just thinking of having a family and you’re trying to make me the King. What’s wrong with you?”

“You’ve already had a family, Cleo, and I think it would be great if you had another one with Ben here. I don’t know what you’re talking about with this King business.”

“Damn you Ken, do you even know when you’re lying?”

“Well I’m not lying when I say the Kobolds are in trouble, we set up the wrong sort of democracy, one where the idiots have found a way to game the system. There needs to be an adjustment, and frankly, I can’t think of a way to do it without involving you. I’m sorry Cleo, but that’s the way of it.”

Ben slapped the desk, “You’ve gone too far this time Ken, Cleo will do it, you know that, but what gives you the right to ask her?”

Ken looked at Ben and refused to apologize, “Several hundred years of working to keep the country together. I’m not asking Cleo, I’m asking the legitimate King of the Kobolds. Look, if the Kobolds fall apart, the wars start again, first civil war amongst us, then larger wars. We’re one of the groups keeping a lid on the rebel Giants and Elves. We just came off that war, I don’t want to see it happen again when the Kobolds are disunited, it will be much worse than last time. So yes, I have a right to ask.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I!”

“Oh shut up, both of you. Let me think.”

Ken walked around his desk and Ben got out of his chair to sit in another one.

Cleo looked up at Ken, “Are you sure there’s no other way?”

“We could try an elected Kingship, like the Americans set up, it was magnificent, checks and balances, unfortunately they ended up with only two parties and so they spend all their time trying to figure out how to stay in power forever. The most stable democracy seems to be one with a non-elected head of state and two chambers, one elected and one not so beholden to the electorate, to give legislation a sober second look. Neither too much, nor too little democracy.”

“Yeah, that’s sort of what I came up with too. I’ve been thinking about it since I became King... Oh don’t look at me like that, I have been known to think about things.”

“Cleo, I know you have, you are one of the few people I know who thinks deeply, which is somewhat the problem. Your two kids are, at the moment, in line of succession, since they are adopted by Kobold law. Your biological children, should you have any... no hear me out... they would jump to the top of the list. No matter who it is, will the next person in line be as thoughtful as you? That’s the problem with monarchies, some good Kings, some not so good.”

“Ken, there’s no way I’m going to reinstate a full monarchy. I’ll maybe have a few powers that I can use only with great difficulty in an emergency. Otherwise I open shopping malls and kiss babies.”

“Ben? What do you think?”

“Look, it’s up to Cleo, you know I’ll back her no matter what she decides.”

“You have an idea on how to fix things?”

“No, not really, but you’ve got lots of examples around the world. You seem to be talking yourself into the British or Canadian system. Head of state that’s non-negotiable, an upper house that’s appointed or hereditary, or like Australia, elected, and an elected lower house with more than two real parties. I like that, I like minority governments where two parties have to work together. I don’t like dozens of parties where the most radical gets to dictate policy in fractured coalitions.”

“You sound like you’ve thought about this too.”

“Ken I know as much as the next guy, but is my way the Kobold way?”

Cleo smiled at him, “It will be if I’m installed as King and you’re the Royal Consort.”

Ben groaned and went directly to the bar to have a beer.

Cleo watched him go with a smile. Ken smiled himself, “You really do love him, don’t you?”

“Of course I do, Ken, and I don’t think me being King would drive him away, but I’m not keen to test that. You know I’ll do

it, but damn you, you convince Ben of the need for me to do it, if you have any fondness for me.”

“He’s half way there, little one, I’m going to give him the rest of the files.”

Cleo nodded, and then brightened up. Clara had popped into the bar and was headed toward Ben’s seat. “Ken, you and Kam come up with a way to fix this, one that works this time, all right? That’s what you two were born for.”

As Cleo headed to the bar, Ken let out a moan of his own. “We’ve been known to screw up, little one, more than you will ever know.”

Cleo grabbed her sister and squeezed her hard, getting a laugh and a squeeze back. Clara had already kissed Ben thoroughly, and they all sat down again.

Clara looked at Ben and said, “You look good, I thought it would be longer before you were better.”

The bartender showed up and asked for orders. Cleo and Ben ordered a beer but Clara said she’d like a tea. Cleo looked at her, “You don’t want a beer Clara?”

“I don’t know, maybe I’ve caught what Ben had, but I’ve been feeling a little sick lately. I’ll stick to tea.”

“You sure it wasn’t something magical from Chile?”

“I’m pretty sure it isn’t. Not unless spirits can make you sick by dying all over you.”

“How did it go? You guys got rid of that Shaman pretty quickly after Kam was fighting them for a couple of years.”

“He was powerful, really powerful, but Kit took him, with some help from Beels and Papa Legba. Even then it seemed to be a close thing.”

“I would never have thought Kit would have trouble with anything.”

“Me too, but it looks to me like the Gods knew there was going to be trouble that they couldn’t deal with themselves, so they used Kit and Ben. There’s some sort of arrangement where the Gods stick to their own business usually, but can help their own. I’m really not clear on the mechanism.”

“It sounds like they’ve got it worked out while we’re still experimenting. Ken’s next project is to figure out how the Kobolds can govern themselves.”

“I thought that was settled.”

“It twisted, and now the government is riddled with corruption. Ben is going to sort it out.”

Ben made a sour face, “I’d like to just let it work out however

it works out, Cleo, but you're not going to let it lie are you."

Cleo shook her head and Clara looked at her in anger, "You promised, Cleo, you said no being King and I don't have to do it either."

"May not be much choice, Sis, unless Ben, Ken and Kam can get it sorted some other way."

"Oh shit on a stick."

"Yeah."

## **Ben Makes a Plan**

Clara finished her tea and said, "I've got to go back to Chile, Kit is there looking for an apprentice to train as a Machi, a Shaman. I saw a young girl on the beach who seemed to be watching our battles with the sorcerer's demons. If she can see the spirits, she might be a good candidate."

Cleo was disappointed, "So soon? How long do you think you'll be gone?"

"Not long, I have her pattern, so I should be able to find her

and then Kit can train her. Both of us can move from there to here instantly, so I'll only be gone for a short time. Do you miss me Cleo?"

"You know I do, I've just got my sister back, and I like spending time with her."

"You're sweet, I'll be back soon, I promise."

"Are you feeling well enough to go?"

"I'll get Kit to take a look, don't worry, I'll take it easy, all I'm doing is finding a kid."

"OK then, be careful."

Both Cleo and Ben kissed her and Clara was gone. At one of the tables a student said, "Hey that woman over there just disappeared."

His buddy looked at him and shook his head, reached over and slid his beer to the other side of the table.

"Ken wants to give you the rest of the files, Ben, are you up for that?"

"I guess I'd better be, if you're serious about getting involved as the King. You know this is going to affect our plans to have a kid right?"



“How would it?”

“Cleo, can you see raising a baby and ruling a country at the same time?”

“But there’s you and Clara to help.”

“And we would, but Cleo, think back on your family, did you have a lot of time outside of raising the kids?”

“OK good point, I wouldn’t want to miss out on that.”

“What does your son think about being in line for a throne?”

“How would I know, I haven’t told him. It hasn’t come up before today. Gods, this is going to be complicated isn’t it?”

“We’ll get through it. This glass has a hole in it, my beer’s gone, let’s go talk to Ken again. He can show me the secret files.”

“What secret files?”

“Oh come on, with Ken there’s always secret files.”

As they walked into the office, the desk was piled even higher than it had been. Ben looked at Cleo who stuck out her tongue. “Oh very regal. Ken, is Kam going to show up to help sort this?”

“I’m honestly not sure, he may be heading to the library.”

Cleo clapped her hands, “Good for him.”

Ken frowned, “Yeah but bad for us, we could use his insights.”

“So go visit the library, ask for the answers you need. Kam can help that way, especially if we present a plan to him, he can tell us what the result will be,” Ben said.

“You do know that he approved the plan that got us into the problems we’re in now, right?”

“So you made a mistake, you lost sight of the greed of all beings, no matter what shape or size.”

“Yeah, I’m coming to understand that, I just thought that after the wars and after... oh damnit, of course you’re right. Listen, Ben, no messing around, I would really like to have you look this stuff over and make what suggestions you can. I don’t want to mess this up again.”

Cleo looked hard at Ken, but she could see no hidden agenda, he seemed to actually be asking for help. It must be very bad.

Ben just nodded and went behind Ken’s desk. Ken moved out of his chair and Ben started reading the files.

Cleo went behind the bar and started a shift while Ken went off to see if his contacts had any further information for him.

In the meantime, Mishelle was back with Woden in their apartment. “Woody, what is this arrangement you Gods have with each other? Do you really have your territories?”

“What? Oh, I suppose so, I never paid that much attention. I kept up with my own followers and never worried much about others. Nowadays, I’m sort of back to where I was at the beginning, a few folks who believe.”

“Surely you remember more than that, you old faker.”

“Well, if you really want to know. Yes, those who have the ‘powers of a God’ whatever that meant, came to an arrangement not to fight each other directly. Too damaging to reality. That didn’t mean that our followers didn’t fight each other in our names, but in that case we just sort of made sure the other guy didn’t get into it. Over the centuries there were some Gods that tried to rule everything and the rest of us would get together to stop them. Who wants to rule the universe except for crazy people? Some of them we stripped of power, some just got eliminated.”

“And this sorcerer?”

“Hasn’t happened for a long time, but yes, Beelzabub and Legba said they would take care of it, Kuri asked for you and so that’s how I got into it, by sending you.”

“And you were sure I would survive?”

“Oh please, Mish, you’re damned near a God yourself, and did you feel a little tickle?”

Mishelle wiggled a bit on Woden’s lap, “I did you old softie, I knew you had a hold on me. That made fighting that serpent a lot of fun.”

“Well I’m glad you had a good time. Now, what shall we do for the rest of the day?”

“You’re kidding right? I’m sitting on your lap which means I can read your mind you old goat.”

When Cleo shut down the bar for the night, she found Ben still reading files. “You need to stop now before you go even more bug-eyed, Ben. Come on let’s go home.”

Ben looked up, then looked at the clock and yawned, “Wow, too much to read here. I should have started a month ago.”

“Are you getting anywhere?”

“Well, I know what the problems are, who’s skimming where, but I haven’t got any further with solutions than throwing the lot of them in jail and putting in a Constitutional Monarchy with two or three legislative bodies. It’s the committee

problem.”

“What’s that?”

“One person, and decisions get done. Two or three people, a little less prompt but things get done. A committee of more than about five, and it’s a place to bury problems, unless you’ve got people of good will and a strong chair to crack the whip, but won’t try to impose their personal will.”

“Ah, got you. So you’re trying to balance things, find the least worse system.”

“And it’s driving me crazy, especially when I try to do it without you and your influence.”

“What influence?”

Ben picked up a pile of folders, “Here, Ken has done his homework, you can lead your people, they have tremendous faith in you.”

“What? Since when?”

“Since you were born, and even more so when your father was deposed. You really are the leader of the Kobolds, as far as the population is concerned. Those who oppose you are those in charge, they’re afraid you’ll put them out of business. You know they justify half their decisions by speaking in your name, well, in the King’s name. Not on paper of course, but

privately, ‘Oh the king approves of this,’ sort of thing.”

“Well they’re right I’ll put them out of business. Greedy power-mongers that they are. How dare they put words in my mouth.”

“Remember you said it yourself, Cleo, you’re a spook, you can’t trust yourself with too much power.”

“Stop, my head hurts. Ben you work it out and we’ll do it. In the meantime can we go home? I’m tired.”

## **Decisions**

Ken was in another bar, half way across town chatting with a couple of Kobolds there. The peculiar ‘I didn’t just see that’ field was working to keep the other patrons from seeing three short, very stocky, fellows with sharp teeth. It almost failed though, when Kam showed up out of nowhere with a couple of extinct predators. The cats were gone as soon as Kam was fully in the room and those who had seen them, had another sip of whatever they were drinking.

“Kam, good to see you, you know the brothers?”

Kam nodded, sat down and ordered a beer. Ken turned back to

his guests and said, “You’re sure about the locals?”

“As sure as you can be with Kobolds, they are all supporters of bringing the King back into the government. As far as we can determine, no Kobolds outside the old lands have any liking for what the new government is doing. A bit of pork-barrelling is to be expected, but these guys are well over the line.”

“All right, thanks, we’ll talk later.”

With nods all around and a sort of nervous half salute at Kam the Trouble Magnet, the brothers melted into the crowd and drifted out of the bar. They left the bill to Ken, which worried them some. It wasn’t like Ken to pick up the tab.

Ken was looking hard at his brother with a worried look of his own. “You’re going back to the Library?”

“Ken, all I thought about while I was in South America was Lucy. I mean to the point of being distracted. If it hadn’t been for the cats I’d have died down there. I’m pretty sure I’m not as much use to you as I once was.”

“I’m pretty sure you are, brother mine. Nobody had a clue as to how strong that sorcerer was, but it worked out.”

“With the help you sent, and I’m not used to needing others to do the job.”

“Kam, that’s not a failure on your part. It only felt like it,

because you don't have a death wish any more. Now you have a reason to live and you know, brother, I prefer you with a reason to live. It hasn't been pleasant, wondering if you were finally going to die, each and every mission."

"It was that obvious?"

"I'm your brother, of course it was obvious. Now, what are you going to do?"

"I thought I'd help clean up the government, again."

"No."

"What?"

"No, Cleo is on it, you need to get your ass back into the library and back to Lucy."

"What?"

"Oh Gods of the underworld, for someone who's supposed to have insight, you're blind and deaf to your own feelings. You love the woman, go to her."

Kam frowned, "Ken, never mind that, we swore we would leave the girls out of it when we set up the government, it's not fair to them."

"And look at how badly we screwed up. They aren't kids any



more, they don't need us to protect them. Cleo and Ben are working on it this time, you and I are sitting it out, you hear me?"

"I hear you, are you sure about this?"

"It wasn't just we two who learned something from our mistake, I'm hoping the Kobold population learned something about voting, and how it requires a bit more thought than 'oh, I like this guy's logo.' I'm counting on it, and on Cleo to make them think hard."

"OK, you trust her, and so do I. We sit this one out."

"Good, now there's someplace for you to be."

"You know how to find me if you need me."

"Always. Go be happy, Kam."

Kam drained his beer and left the bar, he walked up the hill to the library and with each step he felt lighter. He was practically running by the time he got to the top and turned across the grass toward Massey Hall.

"Eureka!"

"Werzle?" said Cleo from beside Ben in the bed.

“Oh, sorry, but since you’re awake, your cousin is a genius.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Way down deep in the laws and procedures of the government is a tiny little sentence that I bet Ken had forgotten was there. It took three reads through the damned documents before I noticed it.”

“Ben, you’d better impress me...”

“OK, sorry, how’s this? There’s a clause that says the legitimate King can call for a referendum on the government at any time.”

“There can’t be. That would have let my father disrupt the government every ten days.”

“No, legitimate means the King who is not under criminal proceedings, not deposed. You see, the documents don’t specifically exclude a King, he or she just has to be legitimate. That’s you, love, that’s you from the day your father was deposed, not from when he died.”

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not, Ken is so devious that he somehow managed to fool himself when he wrote this stuff up. Kobolds still have a King at the head of the government, with a single role, to put

questions to the electorate in the form of referenda.”

“So what does that mean?”

“It means we can make the electorate help us reform the government. We don’t impose it, we propose it.”

“It’s too late at night to be making up clever slogans. Write it down and let’s go back to sleep.”

Back in his office, Ken smiled to himself. They had found it.

Clara walked over to the girl who was sitting by herself on a bench beside the playground, “Can I sit here beside you?”

“Have you come to tease me?”

“I’m not sure what you mean, dear. My name is Clara.”

“You’re one of them, aren’t you? The ones who keep showing me things and getting me in trouble for telling lies.”

“Do you see things, things that you’re not supposed to see?”

“And my teachers punish me for lying, and my mother takes me to the priest who tells me that such things don’t exist and I will burn in Hell for believing in them.”

Clara almost laughed at the irony of that statement, “Oh, sweetheart, you’re not lying. Can you tell me what’s over there?”

“Two big lions, they’re looking at us. Please don’t tell people I saw them.”

“I won’t. Do you see anything else?”

“Yes, that woman is really a fox.”

“You can see that?”

“I’m not lying.”

“No you’re not, can she talk to us too?”

“I guess so. Are your teeth really pointy?”

“They are, love, they are. This woman is called Kit.”

“Oh, is that short for Kitsune? I love anime, do you have nine tails?”

“Not yet, love, I need to do some heroic things. But my ancestor has nine tails”

“Oh, here come the other kids, they’re going to tattle on me for talking to you, I’m not supposed to talk to adults, my mother says so.”

“Well, how about I give those kids a big case of the itches.”

“Clara! That’s not what a Machi would do!”

“No? Well too bad.”

The little girl smiled, “I like you.”

## **Plans and Lessons**

“You can’t just say, ‘do you want a change’ or ‘how would you like your government set up’, nobody is going to give you a useful answer.”

“Ben, I love you dearly, but if you don’t shut up about this for long enough to eat breakfast...”

“So I think the first thing is that we ask for a committee to be set up, we’ll have to ask some of the current government to be on it, but I think you ought to chair it.”

“What the hell do I know about herding cats?”

“Proper process has to be seen to be done or you create as many problems as you solve.”

“Ben how do you know so much about this.”

“I remember it all, Cleo, I remember when I was toppling governments and making it look like they were falling naturally. I had to learn all this stuff.”

“When did you remember all this?”

“I guess when I needed it. The drawbridge dropped, I actually watched it go down, and when it did, there was all this training there.”

“What do you feel about that? It bothered you enough to bury it, does it bother you now?”

“It’s just what I was.”

“What changed?”

“You, I think, and gaining a family, and knowing Papa Legba will help if I need him to.”

“Well if you’re sure.”

“I also remember the organization I worked for.”

“Will we get into any difficulties from them?”

“Nope, Ken took them down just after I quit. They got in his

way.”

“You’re kidding me, he’s got that sort of power?”

“He’s got the entire weight of the Kobold nation behind him, even if the current government doesn’t know just how much he’s in charge behind the scenes. It took him all of twenty minutes to eliminate the company.”

“Let me guess, half of them work for him now. Wait, so he knew about you all along?”

“Probably, I suspect he’s been pulling my strings for a lot longer than I knew.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“Everyone has strings, Cleo.”

“All right, if you’re good with it, so am I. The man has played me like a puppet my whole life. Now what is this great plan you’ve got.”

“Since you can call a referendum, you have to have a question to put to the people, which means you have the right to get help setting the question. As chair and as King, you can guide things in that committee to where you want them. The way I see it, the government is just about bankrupt, which is not strictly accurate, since a government isn’t really a housewife running a family budget. In the case of Kobolds, you can just mine more

gold, or sell your tech, but folks don't see it that way. We use that."

"Cripes, you're scaring me Ben, you're starting to sound like Ken."

"Cleo, if you're going to get involved, I'm going to make sure you've got a solid foundation. You're going to have a government that will work."

"OK, I suppose Ken and Kam are on this committee?"

"Not a chance, they stay out of the way, if the government sees they have a part in this they'll dig their heels in. No, it's you and the upstanding citizens."

"And you."

"No, I'm not Kobold, definitely not me. Look, as chair you can consult with anyone you wish, so we'll talk, Ken and Kam will have their input through you, but the public face has to be carefully legitimate, all Kobolds, all straight arrows."

"Even the crooked ones from the government?"

"Especially them, they're going to agree to step down and run for election again, or retire gracefully."

"They will?"



“A discrete word in an ear does wonders, Cleo.”

“Ben, I’m not sure I like this new you.”

“Sorry Cleo, but you’ve got this guy until we sort things.”

“Well whoever he is, this new guy, he’d better shut up and eat before this food gets cold.”

And so it started. It would take two years of negotiations, planning, nudging, and sometimes straight threats, but the committee was formed and eventually, the Kobold government would be remade.

But that was two years away, right now in Chile, a young girl was complaining, “What is the point of being able to make people disappear if I don’t make them disappear?”

Kit rolled her eyes upward thinking, ‘was I like this at this age?’

‘You were worse,’ came a voice in her head. Liz was helping with the education. ‘You tried to kill a boy, do you remember?’

“Yes I do. I remember quite clearly, and I remember that Sam damned near beat me to death. Should we get her down here?”

“No, Gabby hasn’t actually tried to kill anyone.”

“I’m right here you know, and I can hear you.”

Kit smiled, “You’re meant to, we’re threatening you.”

“Well, maybe I should meet this Sam.”

Kit winced, “No, you don’t want to meet her, she’s scary, I’m not kidding about her nearly killing me, and she had no magical powers at all. The point of the story is to teach you that having powers without understanding, without restraint, makes you too dangerous to be allowed to have the powers.”

“But you just said you were a bad girl, and you still have powers.”

“I was almost destroyed, Gabriella, I would have been if Liz here hadn’t taken me on as a student. And now she’s going to teach you. Don’t forget what you saw on the beach the day we destroyed the Kalku.”

“OK, OK, but can’t I have Clara for a teacher?”

“Absolutely not, you’d have half of Chile under an itching spell in a week.”

Clara put her hands on her hips and glared at Kit, which caused Gabriella to laugh. This made Clara turn to glare at the young girl, “Sit, be good, learn!”

Gabriella sat and assumed an air of complete innocence, which caused Kit to hide a grin behind her hand. Liz glared at both Kit and Clara and said, “begone, back to Guelph, we have work to do.”

Gabriella was shocked when the other two women popped out of existence. She settled down and began to listen to what Liz was teaching her. “Now, give me the biggest reason not to disappear someone.”

“It diminishes me, and corrupts my mind, Ma’am.”

“Good, and if the person is truly evil?”

“No such thing, Ma’am, evil is an opinion, not an actual state of being.”

“And you know that how?”

“Because Beelzabub, the Satan told me that.”

“And he would know, right?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

In Hell, Papa Legba and Beelzabub stopped listening. “They have a good one there,” said Legba.

“We’ll need them all.”

Legba sighed, “We always do.”

Beelzabub nodded, “Coffee in Paris?”

## **Revelations and Celebrations**

Kit and Clara arrived in Jim’s Lunch Counter and sat at the counter. They told Mike that Liz sent her love, and could they please have a panini. Clara ordered vegetarian which caused Mike to frown, but he said nothing.

Kit took a sip of her coffee and turned to Clara, “You’ve decided?”

Clara nodded.

“You’re going to tell them?”

“I will, soon, the time has to be right doesn’t it?”

“There is no right time, Clara, ever. You think of all the ‘right times’ you’ve had in your life.”

“Yes, but Cleo, she might go ballistic.”

“Mike, do you still have Art’s serving tray back there? Clara thinks she might need it... which reminds me, here’s Cleo’s wrist thingie. Give it back to her will you please. Maybe after you’ve spoken to her? No sense giving her a shield if you two end up in a fight.”

Clara was grinning, “OK I’ll tell them soon, and thanks Mike, but I probably won’t need it.”

“Too bad, it doesn’t get out much and it complains. Once in a while, very late at night I let the Seax and the shield out to beat at each other. They’re like young cats, really, bored easily.”

The paninis were on the tray so he unloaded them and said, “Tonight, you can play with Mr. Broken Knife tonight, buddy.”

There was a sort of happy chime from the tray as he hung it up on the wall.

Ben, Cleo and Ken were in the bar, discussing things as Clara and Kit said goodbye and went their ways. Kit popped into Dave’s studio and gave him a big hug. As she suspected, he hadn’t noticed she had gone, but the painting was coming along well. She went into the kitchen to cook supper.

Clara made a slide appear down the stairs from the lunch counter and into the bar, which she then slid down. She looked

at the three, who looked at the other customers in the bar, but nobody seemed to notice.

“Those are some serious faces, you didn’t like my slide?”

“It was actually pretty cool, Clara, glad you’re back, we were just discussing the government.”

Ken said, “What slide?”

“Oh ha ha, you didn’t block it, you saw it.”

Ken grinned and hugged Clara who said, “You’re really going through with it, Cleo?”

“We have to Sis, but you’re not going to be part of it unless you want to be. We thought that since you’re getting to be such an independent agent, you could work with Ken while we’re the public face of things.”

“Oh, right, Cleo here’s your wristband back from Kit. Ken you know how to adjust these things right?”

“You let Kit have your wristband?”

“Sure, Kam adjusted it for her. I was here so I didn’t need it.”

“Do you know how secret those things are?”

“Everything is a secret with you Ken. Do you think Kit

wouldn't know about it? Or know how to keep her mouth shut?"

"Yeah, well, OK, give it here."

Turning back to Clara, Cleo gave her a sort of sad smile, "We think the baby thing is going to be delayed for a couple of years. I'm really sorry about that Sistermine, I know you were looking forward to being a doting aunt."

Clara smiled, "Well, about that, Ken I don't think I can be your agent for a while, I'm going to stay near my family here."

Cleo's jaw dropped as Clara shared her mind and her physical condition with her. Ben caught the edge of it and instantly stood up, which caused Ken to go for the gun that was always on his hip. He saw nothing, but turned back to see Cleo crying and hugging Clara.

Ben had sat down again and looked a bit faint, causing Ken to see what was in front of him.

"You're kidding! Congratulations all three of you!" and Ken went to the bar to get a large brandy for Ben, that being the usual restorative for such occasions.

Clara looked relieved, "I wasn't sure how you'd react, Cleo, or you, Ben. I was afraid you would be angry that I was forcing the decision on you."

“Don’t be silly, Clara, how could we be anything but happy.”

Ben managed to find his tongue where he’d almost swallowed it, “It’s mine?”

Cleo turned ‘the face’ on him and said, “Oh Gods, only a man would ask that, of course it is, you idiot.”

Ben blushed scarlet, “I mean even if it isn’t, it is, you know what I mean?”

“Stop talking now Ben, and drink this,” said Ken as he returned from the bar.

Ken turned to Cleo, who was positively glowing, “Does this change anything, if you’d rather not be King, I suspect the nation would survive.”

“It frees us, Ken, now I want to get things straightened out, if our baby is going to grow up a Kobold, he’s going to be a proud Kobold in a strong and righteous nation.”

Ken looked a bit taken aback, “You’re going to be just fine as a King, Cleo. That was as pretty a turn of phrase as I could have crafted on a good day.”

Ben put his hand on Ken’s arm, “I think she meant every word, Ken, and I agree with her.”

Clara looked at Ken and said, “So will he be a Prince?”



“You three are married under Kobold law, Cleo is King, your son will be the first in line.”

Ben looked at Ken and said, “We haven’t done any sort of ceremony, are you sure about that?”

Ken shouted to the barkeeper, “Throw that broom over here will you.”

To the three he said, “Hold hands and jump over that, right where it lies. Go ahead, do it now.”

And they did, and they were married in the most formal of Kobold ways. The deepest meaning being that if you decide you’re married, you’re married.

To everyone’s surprise, Papa Legba was at one of the other tables and he shouted “Huzzah and Hooray,” while a shower of rice and confetti came down from the ceiling. He threw back his head and boomed with laughter, “It’s a Wednesday, the best of all, I call upon Erzulie Mansur now, come and dance with me and bless this wedding. Now, you three, put this broom aside and you sweep your house good when you get home tonight, and you’ve had a proper Voodoo wedding, you hear me?”

There was suddenly a band in the place, Amber and Kit and some of the other musicians. Coyote began to sing and after a bit of confusion, followed by a shove from Ken, the three

newlyweds went out to dance. Soon they broke apart, Ben went to Sam and she shouted with glee as he spun her onto the floor. Lorraine and Hubert followed quickly. Art and Ingrid went out with Mishelle and Woden. The whole town seemed to be showing up, and the bar became bigger and bigger because Liz was there to push out the walls.

Bogart was there with his three girlfriends, Kam and Lucy showed up, Kam put a finger to his lips, they were playing hooky, but somehow you could tell the library was in on it.

In the meantime, Cleo and Clara had gone over to Papa Legba and they sat one on each leg and hugged and kissed him. It didn't last long though, as Erzulie showed up with her hands on her hips, "Legba you old rooster, these two are too young for the likes of you, come and give me the dance you promised to me."

"Erzulie, we will dance so well, you will not cry today!"

Ken was still in the chair he'd sat down in earlier that evening. Someone had set a big glass of Kobold brew down in front of him and he was tapping his foot. He almost wept to see Kam and Lucy there. Almost? He'd dropped more than a few salty tears into that brew as he lifted the glass to cover up his feelings. Cleo came to his table and held out her hand, "Come dance with me on my wedding day Father Ken. You have been a better father to me than ever my own was and I love you for it."

## Epilogue

Gabrielle stood, hands on hips, head tipped to one side, on the edge of the River Plate. Yes that River Plate. She was looking out toward the ocean but she was seeing the wreck of the Graf Spee deep below.

A Nguruvilu had taken up residence there among the dead bulkheads, and it had taken to drowning those who would follow it into the water.

Further back from the shore and invisible were three short women, one of them terribly pregnant. They watched the young girl with interest. Kit spoke quietly, “Do you think it’s really cricket that we watch her while she does this? We have all agreed she’s ready.”

Liz kept her eye on the girl and said in a whisper, “If you think I’m going to miss our girl’s first mission...”

Clara giggled as she heard in her head, as they all heard in their head, “I’m right here you know, I can hear you.”

Liz responded, “You just get on with your mission, we’re your teachers, of course we’re here to watch.”

“Did you watch me during my first days after you trained me?”

“Kit, you know I did.”

“She’s learned very quickly,” said a tall man who had just arrived with the sound of air sliding aside.

“Beels, why are you here? I didn’t call,” said Kit, checking out his top hat, cane and spats with approval.

“I thought I’d come and check on how Gabby is doing.”

“How did you find us?”

“You’re kidding right? I’m supposed to be everywhere, right behind you. ‘Don’t turn around or you might see the devil catching up to you,’ and all that.”

“Well it’s nice to see you here, and thanks for helping with Gabby’s training.”

“Glad to do it, every Shaman needs a spirit being to help and she’s Catholic, or at least her priest says so. He’s a good one, by the way, even if he misses half of what’s going on around him.”

“Beels, are you my spirit helper?”

Liz looked at Kit and said, “Of course he is, I asked the spirits for help for you and the next thing I know you’re knocking the

tooth out of the devil.”

Beels grinned and waved toward Gabrielle, who was ignoring the chatter from the invisible beings behind her. She took her hands from her waist and spread them as if she was testing the strength of the wind. Offshore a fox-headed serpent rose above the waves and was dragged toward the beach. It was obvious the Nguruvilu didn't want to go, but no matter how he struggled, he continued to move toward the little girl standing on the beach.

Beels whistled, “She's strong. That one's fully grown.”

He heard ‘shhh’ in his head and grinned hugely. Not since Kit had anyone blown past his defences so easily.

The serpent was being dragged up the beach now, a furrow in the sand behind him. Ten feet from Gabby he stopped and she dropped one arm but pointed at him with the other, “You will not drown any more people in this place.”

She said it in a small voice, calmly, so that the monster opened its mouth to strike at her, thinking she wasn't as strong as all that. As his mouth opened, his upper fangs snapped off at the root. Through the pain of that, the serpent saw the little girl smile.

That was all it took, the fox head nodded and the Nguruvilu slid back into the water. Gabby watched him go back to the Graf Spee and curl up in a corner, tucking his snout into his

shoulder.

Beelzabub looked hard at Kit, “Who taught her that little move?”

Kit grinned and winked at him.

“Ladies, that seems a very satisfactory graduation ceremony. I congratulate you all, and especially you, Gabriella. May I treat you all to a meal?”

“You certainly may,” said Liz, “as long as you pay for it this time.”

“I’m wounded, I was called away suddenly last week, I’m mortified that you would think I would stiff you on a bill.”

Clara laughed, “That’s all right Beels, I covered it, after all I’m rich and now I’m the King Mother.”

Beels glanced down at her swollen belly and a softness came into his eyes. Kit had never seen anything but a hard cruelty there, and she was startled. She had never seen how Beels looked at her when she was walking away, but we’ll keep that to ourselves shall we, appearances and all that.

Under a mountain in Eastern Europe, Cleo was furious, “Bean, I want you to disappear those idiots!”

“Cleo, you said it yourself, that agents don’t make good politicians. You’ll have to accept that you won’t win all the fights. We’ve got most of what we need to get out of them, you have to let them win a little as well, or they’ll figure you’re a dictator.”

Cleo sighed, “Oh Ben, you’re right, of course you are, but honestly, sometimes I want Bean to just wipe them all out.”

“I know love, but that’s not always the solution.”

“Well it damned well was last week when those snakes sent someone along to kill us.”

“We had the shields Kam gave us, and I’m kind of ashamed to admit this, but it was fun to be Bean again for a little while.”

Cleo looked at Ben for a long time, “You’re certain you’ve integrated Bean into Ben?”

“I have, my King, his skills are available to us at need, but I have come too far as a human to be the brute he was, I promise you.”

“Well don’t become too much of a Kobold, Ben, you know how nasty we are, Bean would fit right in with this pack of vipers.”

“It’s not that bad, Cleo, and there’s always Ken to do what we

can't. You may be frustrated at times but it's going quite well, it really is. Another few weeks and we'll have it worked out."

"And then what? The palace is ours, but I don't want to live here."

Ben hugged her, he had no interest in living back in his old house either, even if it still existed, "Make it a museum, or a government residence. We'll live where we've always lived, Cleo, in our apartment amongst our friends in Guelph. Your job as King isn't going to be a day to day thing, so you can come here when you need to, Clara can pop us here and back instantly.

"And Guelph has another benefit, can you imagine that assassination attempt being tried in Guelph? Not only is Ken there most of the time, but there's Gods and Spirits all around. If anything can get through them, we've still got Clara, Bean and the most combat-experienced King in centuries."

"Perfect. You always know how to say the sweetest things, my love."

"How's Clara?"

Cleo paused and closed her eyes, "Just fine, they're out with Beels for dinner. It seems that the Devil has found another friend to help."

"That's good, he doesn't have all that many, according to him.



He's got far more friends than he realizes though doesn't he?"

"Including a certain King of the Kobolds."

"And her Consort."

"Ben are we done for the day?"

"One more meeting, love, and then we can retire to the drawing room to rest."

"You're getting way too good at this regal-speak dude, I want to hop into bed with you and have a good snog."

"Language, Majesty, language."

Ben walked to the side of the audience chamber and picked up a guitar there. He began to practice some of the licks that Papa Legba had taught him. Cleo tried not to wince too much as she smiled gently. She looked down at the briefing notes and shook her head.

Ben kept an eye on her and also on the doors and windows of the room. Ken had given him the guitar and it had several surprises for anyone who tried to mess with his family. Not to mention the listening devices installed in it. They had been handy as the various big shots who came to visit would sweep the room for bugs but never bothered with the guitar left carelessly on a side bench.

Ben had to admit that it was a bit of a change to be on the receiving end of what he used to do. Being an agent, a spy and an assassin was a lot easier than being a target, but the life-long experience gave him a certain edge, gave him a better chance of protecting his family.

Family, he thought it again and felt the warmth move through his chest. Even Bean, the abused child, the heartless killer, felt it. Bean was ready to use every nasty skill he'd been taught, to protect his new family.

During the next meeting, Ben sat on the side of the room, quietly picking out tunes. When it was appropriate, he'd make a horrid mistake which would cause Kobold ears actual pain. That happened when someone got a little too clever, and after wincing, they would often have forgotten their clever thoughts. Then there were those certain notes that Cleo and Ben had worked out as a code. The Human pet sitting at the side of the room, the one the King seemed to be fond of, was much more involved in the meetings than anyone suspected.

After the meeting, which went better than the one before, Ben and Cleo retired to the drawing room. Cleo sent a message to Clara and she showed up shortly afterwards, slipped out of her clothing and joined the two of them in bed.

“Only a couple more weeks, girls, I promise, and we'll be free of this mess.”

Clara was resting on Ben's shoulder, “And we can go home?”

“I promise, we’ll go to Guelph as soon as we can.”

“Good, I don’t want our baby to be born in this place.”

On the other side, Cleo nodded her agreement, “Damned right, this palace has too many bad memories.”

Clara was quiet for a while but then said, “You know, that’s all they are, bad memories, they aren’t sitting deep down there eating my guts any more.”

Both Ben and Cleo grunted, “Me too,” said Cleo.

“I wonder, I guess we’ve had a lot of help over the years, Papa Legba for me, Ken and Kam and the cats for you two, and of course Bogart for all of us. They all did the heavy lifting but you know what I think was the best medicine, at least for me?”

The girls shook their heads.

“You two. They say the love of a good woman will cure most ills and I think that having someone to care for, someone to love, was what tamed my demons.”

The women both turned and kissed Ben on his cheeks. Cleo whispered in his ear, “You brought me back to life and brought my sister back to me. The happiest day of my life was when you married us, no wait, it was when Clara told us we were pregnant, or, oh hell, Ben, you’ve been the best thing to happen

to me in my life, and I want to spend the rest of it with you. Bad memories just don't stack up."

Clara was crying on Ben's shoulder, she reached over and hugged Cleo. She made the bedroom into a spring day, flowers, birds, a waterfall.

Ben looked from one to the other and squeezed them both as much as he could. He lay back, stared up into the limitless sky and smiled.

Which lasted about five minutes, then Clara changed the illusion to a psychedelic pattern of confusing lines and colours. The doors burst open and four Kobold assassins came in, only to be popped out through the wall and drop a hundred feet to the ground.

Cleo had a nasty little handgun in her hand and Ben was half way to the door when the danger passed.

Ben turned to Clara, "you popped them out without touching them? I didn't know you could do that."

"I didn't either. I was just going to knock them out so we could question them, but they snagged the two guards with piano wire and pulled them up off the ground. One of them kicked the wall with his foot and the other screamed 'alarm' in his head as they died. I figured those bastards could think about

that on the way down to the ground.”

Cleo shook her head, her timid sister had changed. “I wonder if we will get any more royal guards after this?”

Ben said, gently, “After the last three were killed, volunteers showed up in the dozens. Cleo, you have more supporters than you realize.”

“Well I don’t want any more of them to die. Get Ken here to clean this up. I want these attacks stopped.”

“Yes my King.”

Cleo looked sharply at Ben but he wasn’t joking, he was taking this advisor role seriously. Good thing too, Cleo leaned on him much more than she wanted to admit.

“Should I clean up the bodies?” asked Clara.

“No, leave them to be found, the story will get around soon enough, Ben chucked them out the window. No sense revealing your powers.”

Clara smiled at Ben and batted her eyelashes, “My hero.”

The waterfall and birds were back, most of them flying around Ben’s head.

Just a few more weeks.

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