

Goddess My Goddess

Lunch Counter Stories IV



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Art Fights a Dead Tree

Art and Ingrid were walking through the Arboretum. Art looked around and said, “This is where we met, and this is where you fought the Wild Hunt for me.”

“I remember dear,” Ingrid said, with a smile.

“I always wondered why you did that.”

“Because you were with me, Art, you invited yourself along for the walk and my idiot husband thought he would have some fun hunting you down. Basically, dear, you were under my protection, so I chased them off.”

“Yes but one against so many...”

“I was angry, Art, and they weren't all that serious, I mean, yes, they would have run you down and killed you, sure, but they would have had to kill me too.”

Art hugged her, “Well I am very glad that you decided to keep me alive, Ingrid.”

“As am I dear, it worked out well.”

“It has been a lovely few years, hasn't it? You still happy to be with me?”

Ingrid gave him “the look” and Art chuckled.

“Listen, I want to talk to you about your sword, something Hugo said has been worrying me for a while now. You've given me your sword a couple of times, and said not to use it if I didn't have to. And then Hugo told me to let go of it if we were attacked, and let it fight on it's own. I know it's got a lot of power in it, but what would happen if I was to actually use it?”

“You're curious? OK here it is, and over there is a dead tree, let's find out, shall we?”

Art looked at Ingrid, then at the sword that had appeared in her hand. The thing seemed to be vibrating with power. Art was doubtful, “Really? You're not tired of me and this thing is going to suck out my soul when I use it?”

Ingrid laughed and threw the sword to him. Art caught it easily. He looked at the tree and felt just a tiny tug on his hand, as if the sword was offering to chop the thing down on its own. With another look at Ingrid, he said, “I don't know if it's a good idea to cut this one down, they like to leave dead trees up for the birds and the bugs.”

“This one is leaning over the path, and you're just procrastinating, go ahead, I'm curious what will happen.”

That didn't make Art feel any better, but he walked to the tree and before he could change his mind, swung hard. May as well see if the thing drank his soul or not.

What happened, is that the sword cut through the tree, and then as it started to fall, directly onto Art, the sword wrenched itself out of his hand and chopped the thing into bits before it landed

on him.

Ingrid was doubled over laughing. “Tree falling skills a little rusty, Art?”

Art had to wait until his heart slowed down a bit, “I guess so, thanks sword,” he said to the blade that was back in his hand.

“Well now you know what will happen. Look, that sword is mine, and I love you, Art, so it will protect you like it would protect me. I just didn't want you to go killing any beings if it could be avoided, that is what eats your soul, not the sword, but the killing you do with the sword.”

“Yeah, I've noticed that Sam is a bit more subdued than she was, after the battle with the Giants. She's not damaged, that I can tell, but she doesn't laugh as much as she used to.”

“I've noticed that too. And you've noticed, I suspect, that Jim, Gil, and the rest of them are slow to warm to people they've just met. They have killed and killed and killed, and it does affect you. One reason they aren't crippled is that they have tried to fight for good causes, and killed only when they had to, which, admittedly, is most of the time. As you know, they do laugh, but only if they're with each other or with people they trust. Look, killing damages you, but you can adapt. Men are nothing if not adaptable, but it's how you adapt. Some end up not caring and become monsters, others regret killing, always, but will kill if they need to.

“I want to spare you from finding out which you are, for as long as I can. Sam hates it, but killed out of duty and training,

she'll be OK eventually.”

“She is a hell of a lot more serious about our training, that's for sure. She does still teach her kids, but that's almost a game to her now, where she was once serious. Gil sort of suggested that would happen, that the kata stuff would become more of a relief, a game, while the principles would come out when she needed them. She tried to explain that to me once.”

“When do you two practice next? Maybe I'll come along and watch.”

“Tomorrow evening, we've got a room booked out in the Athletics Centre after her regular class.”

“OK good, now let's move along before someone notices we've left a pile of firewood on the path here, and you can give my sword back, dear.”

Art looked at his hand in surprise and let go the sword, which promptly disappeared.

~~

Musashi

The next evening at their practice, Sam and Art were working on some Niten Ichiryu kata. They were a bit bruised up from their last meeting, so were trying to be precise rather than practical.

Ingrid watched for a while, and at a rest break, she said, “Do you two want to talk with Musashi himself?”

Art looked at her a bit doubtfully, “You're not going to tell me you can time travel are you Ingrid?”

“No of course not, I can flit around from place to place, but not time to time. But I knew Musashi, and I can, oh I don't know how to describe it, I can channel him for you, and let you talk to him.”

Sam actually looked frightened, “I'm not sure that would be a good idea.”

“Because you're afraid you're not worthy? That you aren't living up to his ideals? You'll never know unless you speak to him, Sam,” and with that, Ingrid was gone, the room was gone, and they were in a field in Japan some time in the early seventeenth century.

“What the hell?” said Sam.

“Ah, a couple of hyohosha from the future. How very nice to meet you,” said a well dressed and elegant man. A big man, whose swords looked like toys in his belt. “And what can I do for you two?”

Sam was dumbstruck, so Art spoke up, “We are students of your art, of Niten Ichiryu, and we would like to study with you if you would allow us.”

“Well asked, and your names?”

“I am so sorry, my name is Art Pendry and this is Samantha Martin.”

“Very nice to meet you, I am Miyamoto Musashi, to be brief as you were brief. Now, why don't you show me what has happened to my art over the years.”

Sam came out of her trance when Art bowed to her and took up a stance. She responded and they went through the first set. Art then took his short sword and they did the second set, finally Art took a long and short sword and they performed the third set. By the time they finished, they were going at it hard. Each trying to find the target, each teasing that target before defending it.

When they finished, Musashi bowed and smiled. “Your kata are not exactly what I developed, but that's to be expected, how many headmasters away from me are you?”

Sam found her voice, “Twelve according to tradition, but we don't really know, it is almost 400 years since you died.”

“Well a drift is expected, in my own lifetime my art drifted a lot, as I found new ways to teach my principles. Shall we practice together?”

Musashi borrowed Art's bokuto and held it loosely by his side as he walked, no, stalked, toward Samantha. It was like facing Gil, no hesitation, no calculation at all, just a supreme belief that he would win. And of course he did, as he approached,

Sam felt compelled to attack and the moment she did, Musashi's sword was at a target.

After several turns with the same result, it was Art's time to try, and with the same result. The man was simply overwhelming in his confidence that he would see an opening and be able to exploit it.

Musashi laughed, "Enough, you are both still young and wish to see the rest of your days. I was never worried about living a long life, death was beside me always, and that is the difference here today. I envy you both for your desire to see what the future brings to you. I really do. And now I expect you want to know what I think of your art?"

Sam and Art bowed toward the big man.

"Very well, I think your sword-work is quite elegant. I can see that the look of the thing has been very important over the years. Still, your practice is somewhat beyond nice looking. I can see you have grasped the principles underneath the kata, the Hyo Ho. You, Samantha, you have killed, this I can see, you have an underlying seriousness in how you use the sword. Art, you are a good student, but you don't have the sadness that comes with killing and I can feel that in your sword.

"I am very pleased that you have continued my art, and that somehow my principles have gone along with the art."

"Your book, the Go Rin no Sho is still reprinted and widely read sir," said Sam.

Musashi looked surprised, “Book? That was a menkyo, a license to my students, and to my Lord Hosokawa. When did it become a book?”

Ingrid's voice came out of the air and said, “It was published first in the early 20th century, about 250 years after you died.”

Sam looked startled and said, “That recently?”

“Ah, I see,” said Musashi, “carried down the generations as menkyo until then I suppose. That is quite interesting.”

“Your other writings have been translated as well, but quite recently,” said Sam.

“Those were menkyo as well, from my earlier days. Well, well. Do you two practice my art to learn how to kill? Samantha?”

“No sensei, not until very recently when we had a need to learn how to fight. But before that, I used your art to search for self-understanding.

“We were taught by Gil Hamish, and after that Art and I practised Niten in a different way. We searched for the practical in the kata, I'm not sure how to put it, we tried to “break” the kata, we practised very close to injuring each other so that we weren't worried about making tiny mistakes in the form, but only about surviving. Of course, before that I had always considered myself to have died at the end of any kata where I was uchidachi, the attacker, but that was to teach me to accept my inevitable death.”

“An excellent way to remind yourself that all in impermanence. Good for you, that is clever. And how much did you change the kata when you practised in a more practical way?”

“Not at all, sensei, we simply changed our attitude to the practice, we knew our forms, but sort of forgot them and worked on the function instead.”

“An excellent way to describe it. I am so pleased the practical went forward with the art. But tell me, why were you learning sword? The gun is surely the main weapon in this time.”

“But sensei, you said it yourself, of all the weapons, the sword is the best place to learn the principles.”

Musash chuckled and said, “A good student's answer. Wait, you said Gil Hamish taught you? So he still lives. I met him once, a fascinating man, he wanted to learn my art but I must confess, I think I stole more from him than he got from me. Tell me about killing, Samantha.”

Sam looked down and went quiet. Her eyes lost the shine they had earlier.

Musashi nodded and said, “It is good that you feel as you do Samantha, killing is not a small thing. I once thought it was, but I learned as well. Please tell me about it.”

Sam looked at him and said, “I recently had to fight to protect my home, and used my two swords to do so, partly based on what you taught, and partly out of invention as targets presented themselves. I don't know how many frogs and lizards

I killed but it made me sick afterward.”

“Child, you should never speak of your enemies as less than human, it shows a damaged soul.”

Art spoke up, “No, no, sensei, these were actual beings, you might call them Kappa, they were the old races come to fight with the Giants against us.”

“Actual Kappa?”

“Yes sensei.”

“I never believed in them, but I believe you. I apologize Samantha.

“I find your progress in the art fascinating, I myself started out killing, it was how my father taught me, and as a young boy, it was what I thought fighting was about. Mind you, I grew up in the age of the great battles as the various countries in Japan were being conquered and unified into a single country. It was a time when great glory was something to be desired.

“By the time I was 30 and had won 60 duels, I realized there was no point in being a killer. I had wanted to make a name and get hired on with a Daimyo, but the age of war was over. Since fighting was all I knew, and I did know it well, I decided to use my skills to understand the ultimate principles of fighting. But I quickly came to understand that the ultimate principles of fighting were the same as what the Buddhist masters taught, and what the great artists discovered as well. In short, I learned about life.

“So you, Samantha, began with a search for understanding and went to fighting, while I went from fighting to the search for understanding. Well, balance is balance I suppose. Samantha, you are young, as I was when I killed. I promise you, what you are feeling now will fade as you continue to learn more about yourself. Please think of me and my life and when you do, I hope those thoughts will help you.

“I am so pleased that my old friend Ingrid has given me a chance to speak with you two. Please thank her when she returns, and please keep practicing my art.”

With that, Musashi bowed and was gone. Ingrid was back, as was the practice studio.

Sam was quiet for a few moments and then looked up, “Thank you for that, Ingrid. I think it helped.”

Art looked at Ingrid too and said, “Was that real? Was that Musashi?”

Ingrid smiled, “You know I gather up the souls from the battlefields don't you, Art? Well I retain the essence of each fighter. No that wasn't Musashi in the flesh, but that was certainly his soul. You can consider that he was actually talking to you, or perhaps just my memory of what he might have said to you. Regardless...” and she nodded slightly toward Sam, who was walking toward her sword bag with a bit of a bounce in her step.

Art smiled back at his friend and lover, thinking, “She really is

a special woman.”

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Sauble Beach

They were walking downtown in the rain, and once again Ingrid was dry. This was how Art had met her, the girl from the coffee shop who stayed dry in the rain.

“How is it that a Goddess of war has control of the rain? Is it so that you can make sure fights happen without mud?”

Ingrid laughed, “Read your history, Art, most battles are fought in the mud, between the finish of harvest and winter. Didn't I ever tell you that I'm the Goddess of weather as well as of War?”

“I thought that was the other guy?”

“The Thunder God? I'm weather, all the weather, not just the Goddess of electrical charge differentials. Anyway, why do you ask?”

“Well you're doing it again, like the day I met you, you're walking in the rain and not getting wet.”

“Aww how sweet of you to remember that. I don't mean to have the rain avoid me, I think it does it out of respect.”

She was smiling, so Art wasn't sure if he bought that one.

They continued on, and now the rain was avoiding Art.

Nothing much was open, it being a Good Friday in April, but Art loved tourist towns in the off season. They had driven in from a friend's cottage, just to see what was open. The grocery store, and the Sauble Dunes bar was pretty much it. They wandered into the bar and checked out the renovations, there was a free-floating bar with benches attached and not much else had changed.

They sat down for lunch and were served by a pretty girl who may have been from the Saugeen Nation. Long black hair and dark eyes. As was usual for the first weekend open, there was no pulled pork or mashed potato, so Ingrid had her poutine plain and Art had fish and chips. Both were, as Art's grandmother had said about one of his old girlfriends, “no better than they ought to be”.

Art thought of that and laughed, the food wasn't bad, and certainly a lot better that day, than the places that were closed up.

On the way home, they drove the long way through Hepworth and Wiarton, just to see what was new. (Not much). Then once out of Wiarton they took the back way through Colpoy's Bay. Again, not much new, and finally across the gravel road to the cottage.

Once there, they decided the chores would keep until tomorrow and Ingrid spent some time gluing up her WarMallet pieces. Art

decided that a nap was his best move, and took one in the big soft chair beside Ingrid.

Maybe later they would go for a hike, no, never mind, they'd drifted the afternoon away and it would soon be time to meet Sam for a practice over the internet.

Supper was somewhere in there as well.

“Tell me again why the Gods are playing WarMallet?”

“Do you remember I told you once that the Gods dreamed up men so that they could be pieces in our games? And how Man had surprised us by having thoughts of their own? That was a result of the random moves we wanted, the thing you guys eventually called 'free will'.

“Well we figured Man made a crappy game piece after all, there's a big difference between a random move and deciding not to fight at all, or to start your own wars while we're trying to sleep.

“So we thought it would be a lot easier if we made our own pieces out of inanimate things, like wood or plastic and then used dice for the random movements and hits.

“Well, Gods being Gods, it soon became a competition to see who had the best made, and prettiest painted pieces. Of course, lazy being a big part of Godhood, Wayland the smith saw a commercial opportunity. He makes sets of pieces that only need to be glued and painted. I figure he's making a fortune, that's where I got my little men, er, pieces.”

“I'm surprised the Kobolds don't make pieces.”

“Oh, they figure it's sissy to play WarMallet with pieces, they get together and play it live, they split up into teams of about ten each and go at it 'Hammer and Tongs' as they call it. They play in the park on a ball diamond and make it look like a pick-up game of baseball.”

“But what if someone wanders in on the game and wants to play?”

“Oh they let them play, and swear them to secrecy, after all 'What goes on in WarMallet stays in WarMallet'. There's quite a few of the young folks in Guelph who play, and some of them even make up their own teams.”

“I wondered about that, about how so many injuries could come from a game where you stand around most of the time.” Art had a close look at the pieces Ingrid was working on. “You know, you do good work sweetheart.”

“Thanks Artie, I had a great teacher, Krito, who is still pretty famous.”

“Wait, isn't he the guy who made the leap from static to realistic statues?”

“And a lot more than that, but yes, he's famous for the Kritios Boy.”

“You studied with him?”

“Sure, I traded modelling for lessons. Did you ever take a good look at the Kritios Boy?”

Art was looking online and soon muttered, “Damn.”

“No girls in the atelier, it was a rule, so I was a boy.”

“And...”

“Don't go there, Art.”

Much later in the evening, Art laid a fire in the sauna. The two spent a nice hour sweating and chatting, then a shower on the deck with the portable shower heater. After that it was off to bed in the new sheets they had donated to the cause. All in all it was a great day.

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The Silence

They were fighting. It didn't happen often, but Ingrid would say something that annoyed Art, and then Art would say something to anger Ingrid and suddenly there was silence in the apartment.

This time, Ingrid had made a comment that Art was underfoot, which Art took to mean he ought to get a job. “When was the last time you had a job, Ingrid?”

And they were off. Long periods of silence with short, sharp questions, “You want dinner?” followed by “Don't care.” “What do you want to eat?” “Anything.”

This day their bickering was interrupted by the toilet running on. Jiggling the handle didn't work and Art became angry at it, pulling off the lid and putting it roughly onto the seat, then pulling up the float and leaving the lid on the seat.

Next the tap started to drip badly. Art turned the feed off and was removing the cartridge to replace the seal, when the tap exploded, water hit the ceiling and flooded all over Art. Seems he had turned off the hot water, thinking it was the cold.

Ingrid was in the shower when it suddenly ran cold. Thinking that Art had done it, she came stomping naked into the kitchen to give him what-for when she saw him there, soaked, trying to turn off the cold water feed.

Both of them shouted, “Did you do this?” at the same time. That silenced them and they both turned an eye on the taps. Ingrid was frowning slightly and said, “Lorelei, get away from our pipes you minx.”

Through the front door they heard delighted laughter. Art pulled it open and there indeed, stood Lorelei, water sprite and friend of Jim, the owner of Jim's Lunch Counter before Art took over.

Lorelei howled as she pointed a finger at Art, soaked from head to toe, and Ingrid, dripping wet and naked.

“Get in here, you,” said Ingrid as she grabbed Lori's arm and pulled.

Lorelei laughed again as she saw Hildy trying to drink out of the fountaining kitchen tap, he was on his hind legs and his little tongue was flicking in and out rapidly.

“Lori!”

“Ok, ok, I'll stop it,” said Lori as she waved her hands and the water stopped.

Art replaced the washer on the tap, just because he had it apart, and put things back together.

“And what can we do for you, Lori?” said Ingrid, hands on her hips.

“I dropped by for a coffee and heard you two fighting, or rather didn't hear, normally there's a constant chatter in here but today was 'the silence of the lovers'. Hey that's good isn't it, 'the silence of the lovers'. So what are you arguing about?”

“I'm going to get dressed,” said Ingrid with a look at Art as she walked out of the room.

“Ingrid made a comment about me being underfoot because I'm not working,” said Art, quietly.

“What? You guys need money? But Ingrid is rich, she's been playing the markets since they traded in Tulips.”

“She's rich? So how come I pay half the rent?”

“Because you're a guy, Art, and Guys like to pay their share.”

“Not me. Anyway I don't think it's about money, I think it's about me moping around the place bored. I've got to admit, she has a point. I ran the lunch counter for years, and then all that fighting the Giants and hunting down Jim. These days it's pretty quiet. I thought I'd like quiet and it was great for a few months, but now I'm getting a bit squirrely. Ingrid is right, like she usually is, I guess I am underfoot.”

“So you need a hobby, or a job, or an adventure right?”

“I guess so.”

“Well you've got your martial arts, and you build stuff, what more do you want?”

“I guess that's not enough, I need to be a bit more creative I suppose.”

“Why not write down your adventures?”

“Who would believe what I write?”

“Does it matter? Call it fiction, or don't call it anything at all, let people decide for themselves, or not. You don't have to write for an audience you know, just write for yourself and be done. Writing is creative, and it really soaks up the time if what I see in the coffee shops in town is any indication. Lots of writers

checking out the ceiling, lots of talking to anyone that will listen.”

“Oh ha ha. So I need to get out of the apartment and go talk to people in the coffee shop.”

“Why not?”

“Or we could go for a walk and get chased by the Wild Hunt,” said Ingrid as she came back into the room.

Art grinned at her and took her onto his knee, even though it hurt like blazes every time he did that. She was not a delicate flower.

“I’ll get my own coffee than, shall I?” said Lori as she headed for the kitchen.

Ingrid squirmed a bit, just to grind his leg muscle into his bone, “She’s right you know, you should write this stuff down.”

“Would you read it?”

“I doubt it, but what does that matter? Write for yourself, lover, don’t worry about me, I’ve got perfect memory.”

“Especially when you claim I said something a month ago and I don’t remember it at all.”

“That’s just girl stuff, we make it up and you guys fall for it.”

“I KNEW IT!”

“Do you two want coffee too?” asked Lorelei from the kitchen.

When they had all settled down to drink their coffee, Ingrid asked Lorelei why she had come around.

“I need a favour, actually. I was bitten by a poisonous snake and I'm slowly dying. I'd sort of like to be cured.”

~~

The Port Burwell Blues

After that bombshell landed and scattered the magazines from the coffee table to the floor, Ingrid looked hard at Lorelei. “You are sick. How did that happen?”

“I'm not sure who sent it, but a snake came straight down from the surface and bit my tail. Look, you can see the fang marks on my leg.”

Lori showed a very shapely ankle to the pair and sure enough, it was starting to fester. Ingrid whistled and said, “It's a good thing you're resistant to poison or you'd have been dead before you got here. When exactly, and where did this happen?”

“I was down in Port Burwell on Lake Erie yesterday. They make the absolute best Coleslaw in that area, also the HMCS Ojibwa submarine is pretty cool. I hopped back into the Otter Creek and that's when I got bitten.”

“Lori, were you flirting with anyone while you were there?”

“Maybe just a little, the guy who served me the hot dog and Coleslaw was pretty hot.”

“Damn it that sounds like you got bitten by a Knucker, a cousin of yours, they look like Nixe sometimes and are wyrms at other times. They're also jealous as blazes. You were probably hitting on her boyfriend.”

“But I was just flirting, I wasn't serious.”

“Lorelei?”

“Well OK I would have been serious if he had shown some interest, but he was a bit dim if you ask me.”

“He'd probably under the influence of the Knucker, maybe even bitten, they can enslave men that way, it's faster than talking to them, and a lot less boring.”

Art looked shocked, “Ingrid!”

“Oh not you pet, you're intensely interesting all the time.”

It's a good thing you got bitten in Port Burwell, Lori. I know that Heka is a fan of nude beaches and Burwell has one of the least known in Canada. We can get her here with her snake.”

“Uh, you know about the beach?” said Lori

“Uh, yes, I do, and I bet that's where you were before you went for a hot dog.”

“Well, yes, there's not many places I can just pop out of the water without all the extra work of creating an outfit.”

“Nude beach?” said Art.

“Do try to keep up pet, you're from that area, don't tell me you've never been there?”

“Nude beach?”

“Shh, let me concentrate. Ah, I'll just pop out for a moment,” and with that, she actually did pop as she vanished.

“Nude beach?” Art said to Lorelei.

“Yes indeed, and Lake Erie is great, it's shallow so it's warm, with big sand that dries fast, not like the smaller grains around Sauble that stay wet for a long time after a rain.”

“How come I never heard of a nude beach in Burwell?”

“You probably never looked, Art it's not a big deal, nothing goes on except people are naked rather than dressed in skimpy bathing suits. I mean there's not a lot left to the imagination with a bikini is there?”

Just then a displaced air kind of sound announced that Ingrid was back, and with her was another woman who was saying, “Nude beach?”

“Yes dear, one that you probably haven't visited yet. Apparently it's quite a secret, now please look at Lorelei's leg and tell us what you think.”

Heka was brown skinned, slender, maybe five feet tall. She had an Egyptian crown and makeup on, no beard though. She was dressed in a toga sort of thing and, oh yes, she was carrying a white snake.

“I think you were bitten by a snake, and that it's poisoning you dear. Well we can soon fix that. We'll go to the beach and then I'll have my snake bite the one who bit you, and then Draccie will bite you and you'll be just fine Lori.”

Ingrid cleared her throat, “poison...”

“OK then, antidote first, beach second.”

“And then a hot dog, Ingrid you have to see this guy, he's scrumptious.”

Art was trying hard to keep up, “The Coleslaw was scrumptious?”

“Yes dear,” said Ingrid with a small smile to the other two women.

Hildy, who loved trips, came bounding out of the bedroom where he'd been dusting under the bed. That is, he was covered in dust.

It was a lovely warm day so they decided to drive. Hildy stuck his snout out the window like some dog, but in order to do that, he had to grow a bit larger. This of course caused a certain amount of squashing up in the back seat. Art was happy he was driving.

They pulled into town past the lighthouse and down to park on the beach. Walking up again to the town, they followed the river, keeping an eye out for the Knucker. Not seeing her near the mouth of the river, they decided to take a more direct approach and went to the Hot Dog stand. Sure enough, a good looking fellow was on duty.

They all ordered, making sure they each got a bowl of Coleslaw, on Lori's urging, and when the orders arrived, Lori turned on the charm.

Art had to move away from the three women as they fussed around the poor vendor. It was probably just a summer job for him and here he was, being assaulted by three great looking women.

The thing was, as Art eventually saw, he wasn't responding at all. "Even I am," thought Art as Ingrid and Heka got further into the act.

About three minutes into this, Art noticed a woman climbing up the hill from the creek. She was soaking wet but drying fast as she was obviously fuming. Art cleared his throat loudly and the women noticed her.

In a lovely move, Heka stepped back and out of the line of

attack as this woman headed straight for Lori. Ingrid stayed beside Lori just in case, but the woman hardly saw her.

Claws came out of the woman's fingers, and she snarled, revealing some impressive fangs. Just as she reached Lori and was about to grab her, Ingrid stepped in front, blocking her. Hildy moved quietly behind the woman who recoiled back from Ingrid and promptly landed on her ass in front of the booth.

Art was impressed that she made no sound when she fell, she was that shapely, and that well padded.

Before she could get to her feet, Heka's snake had bitten her on the leg.

This seemed to shake her out of her anger and she took a close look at the women, "Who the hell are you three, and what are you doing around my Louis?"

"Calm down, I'm Ingrid, this is Heka and the girl you bit is Lorelei, now who are you?"

Art was aware of some sort of force bouncing around and Ingrid said, "It won't work on us dear, we're old blood too. Now I'll ask again, who are you?"

Visibly subdued, the woman said "Kelly, Kelly Knucker, if you must know, and this is my town."

"It's a tourist town dear, not yours. Now that Heka's little pet has digested your blood we're going to have him bite Lori to

neutralize your poison, and then we're going to the beach. You are going to go about your day and ignore us right?"

"You're not after Louis?"

"Oh dear," sighed Ingrid, "How old are you girl?"

"I'm sixteen," Kelly said, in a challenging voice.

"That would explain it," said Ingrid to herself. "Look, Kelly, this guy is your first love, right? Well you'll have others, he will have others, and between us three, we've had thousands. Relax girl, you can't go killing everyone who makes a pass at your boyfriend, and take that 'fluence off of him. That's abuse dear, not love. You'll need to learn the difference, and now is a good time."

Ingrid waited with hands on hip and after a brief stare-down, the boy seemed to sag a little. "Oh, hello ladies, I didn't see you here, can I get you something?"

"No thanks, dear, said Lori, except maybe a nice hug and a kiss?"

The boy went bright red and stammered, "I, I shouldn't miss, I have a girlfriend."

At that moment Ingrid nudged Kelly gently forward. Kelly caught her balance just before she smashed into the booth and stopped in front of Louis. "Kelly," he said in a relieved voice, "so good to see you, are we still on for a swim when I get off work?"

The three older women smiled and drifted over to Art. “But she's gorgeous,” he said.

“Yes, she is, but even spirit beings, as Megan calls them, are nervous about the other sex at sixteen, and even we have self-esteem issues. Growing up is hard no matter who you are.”

“Ingrid I can't imagine you were ever that insecure.”

“Does that mean I can take the 'fluence off of you Artie?”

Art stood with his mouth open until Lori laughed and said, “Ingrid, don't tease him, he doesn't know what to believe now.”

Ingrid scooped Art into her arms and gave him a big sloppy kiss. “Let's go check out that nude beach sweetheart, and you can compare us three. You get to decide who's got the best body.”

All three were laughing as they walked toward the bridge over the creek, leaving Art frozen to the spot, visions of two upset super-women beating up on him, running through his head.

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The Forbidden Forest

“Let's go for a walk, Ingrid, my legs are getting stiff.”

“How would you like to walk through a forest of monsters,”

said Ingrid

“What, as in a fairy tale? Why would I want to do that?”

“A little girl named April did it once, so how about it.”

“Well I really wanted to get the exercise, rather than watch a story.”

“We can do both, lover, hop on your stepper and we'll go.”

“Why not?” thought Art, what could happen?

The next thing he saw was a dark forest. Really dark, also gloomy, scary, threatening, and dangerous looking. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Why not, it's the way April went in.”

“And we're supposed to save her? Or find her body?”

“Oh ye of little faith, we're just going to do the same walk she did, and we'll see what happens.”

Art wasn't sure about this at all, Ingrid had a strange sense of humour, and she often seemed to forget that Art wasn't immortal, just slow to age. She sometimes seemed to be trying to speed up that aging process through scaring Art's hair white.

“Fine, let's go, you and Hildy are coming along right?”

“Of course we are love, and we'll protect our Arty-Warty.”

“Oh lord, she's in one of those moods,” thought Art.

They walked from the field they'd landed in to the edge of the forest and stopped. There was no way in. Thorn trees formed a continuous barrier.

“There's not a chance I'm trying to push past those things, I know those thorns, I grabbed one when I was a kid and got blood poisoning, they're nasty.”

“Here,” said Ingrid, handing Art her sword.

“Whoa, that's your sword, Ingrid, I can't use it as a machete, the thing will probably fry my soul.”

“It didn't when you cut down the tree with it, and besides, what do you think swords were used for during most of history. There's much more hacking your way through the bush than hacking up your enemy during a war.”

Art looked doubtful but took the sword and chopped. The thorn trees cut easily and he soon had a passage cut. Which closed up as the branches grew together again.

“Are you kidding? How did a little girl go through here?”

“Maybe by stepping forward before they grew together?”

“OK no need to be sarcastic, let's go.” Art started hacking enthusiastically as he walked forward, Ingrid and Hildy following close behind.

After about twenty feet the thorns gave way to a closely spaced set of trees that were so thick there was almost no light. It was like trying to walk around by starlight.

“I can barely see, Ingrid, how about a little help.”

As he said that, the sword began to glow brightly. So brightly that Art was more or less blinded. “Are you kidding? Glowing swords? What good is that if you can't see past the glare.”

“Art, you're so picky. Hold it over your head.”

As he tried that, the sword caught on every low-hanging branch they passed. “Nope, that doesn't work, Ingrid.”

“So picky, what do you want then?”

“Maybe if the sword glowed on one side only?” and as he said that, the sword became instantly dark on one side so that Art could now aim it like a flashlight.

“Oh.”

“Fun isn't it?” said Ingrid.

“There's still no path that I can see, how do we know which way to go.”

“I said the little girl walked through here, not that there was a path.”

“So where do we go?”

“We go the way she went.”

“Got it, OK sword, go where the little girl went.”

Nothing happened, and Art looked at Ingrid.

“You've got to say 'hey sword' not 'OK sword'.”

Art looked at Ingrid for a very long time.

“Hey sword, go where the little girl went.” Art said, as he felt a tug from the sword. “So this thing is a map app as well as a sword is it?”

“I don't know, I've never tried that Art, I always know where I'm going, but it's pretty cool.”

Hildy had been snuffling around off to one side and now ran back, his bristles standing straight up. Right after him came a massive lizard which made a lunge for the little pig. Art instantly chopped down on the thing's neck but the sword just bounced off. “What the living hell?”

The lizard turned toward Art and backed up. It was obviously going to make a run at him and wanted a bit of space to do it. “Hey sword, get rid of this monster,” shouted Art as he backed up himself. The sword lowered its point to aim at the lizard and a ball of lightning spit out the end. It hit the lizard in the face which must have confused the beast, as it ran straight into a tree, instead of into Art.

Art looked again at Ingrid and started, “Did you know...”

Ingrid shook her head, “Are you kidding, Mr. Thunderface would freak, keep this to yourself Art.”

They continued walking, following the tug of the sword and kept walking and after a while they continued walking and eventually Art said, “Wait, stop, look over there, that’s the dent the monster put into that tree. What’s the deal, sword, why are you taking us in circles?”

Of course nothing happened.

“Hey sword,” tried Art, “why are you taking us in circles?”

A voice that was more vibration up his arm than sound, said “That’s where she walked.”

“Well can we skip the circles and go toward she ended up please?”

“Of course,” the sword vibrated.

Art whipped around, but what he thought was a giggle was Ingrid clearing her throat.

They set off once more in a slightly different direction.

It wasn’t too long before they noticed a walnut falling near them. This wasn’t your average walnut, it was about twice the size of the usual little green head-bonker. Almost immediately,

the sword in Art's hand flew upward and started to spin. Not wanting his wrist to be broken, Art let go and the sword went into a wobble that covered Ingrid and Hildy too. "Run," shouted Art, and they did.

A two hundred yard dash later the bombardment stopped and the travelers also stopped to catch their breath. Hildy was snuffling ahead when he grunted in surprise. Vines were growing out of the ground and tried to wrap around his feet. Hildy grew some sharp tusks and made short work of this trap, so that there was a clear path for Art and Ingrid to follow.

"This is nuts," said Art, "how did this little girl get through all this."

Ingrid shrugged and then pointed to a building nearby. It was stone, with a lot of the characteristics of a castle. Well, all the characteristics of a castle except a front door. The walls were uninterrupted on the two sides they could see and as they walked around to the other side, those walls were blank as well.

"So we're here to rescue this little girl?" Art asked Ingrid, who shrugged again.

Art walked up to the wall and pounded on it with the pommel of Ingrid's sword. Big booming sounds, along with some annoyed humming from the sword which didn't appreciate being used as a door knocker.

High above, a small girl leaned over the wall, "Oh, hello, do you want to come in?"

Art was confused, but said, “Yes please.”

The girl slapped the wall she was leaning on and said, “Let them in you naughty thing,” and a door appeared in the wall right in front of Art.

Art looked at Ingrid who was walking into the castle. He followed her in and found a lovely hall with a jolly fire in the grate and other homey touches. “This doesn’t look like any prison I’ve seen,” he remarked.

“Seen many prisons, have you?” Ingrid replied with a grin.

As April came down the stairs to the room, Art said, “Hello, we’ve come to rescue you,” but as he said it he realized it didn’t sound right. He looked at Ingrid and said, “From what?”

In the meantime, April had walked to Ingrid and hugged her saying, “Hello Aunty Ingrid. It’s good to see you, and hello Uncle Art. Do you like my hiding place?”

By now, Art was more than suspicious. He looked much more closely around himself, and at April. Slowly a smile came over his face, “Hello Kitsune, this is a great place. Do you use it to keep people out?”

“I sure do, mostly that annoying Okami, sometimes he’s just the worst little brother, but he always manages to find me eventually. In fact he should be here pretty soon. As Kit said that, there was a mighty crash where the door used to be and the wall partly caved in. A huge white wolf stood there for a

moment and then it was Oki, Kit's little brother.

"Hello Aunt Ingrid and Uncle Art, how are you?" he said politely, "and hello dear sister."

"Hello beloved brother, you're just in time for tea," and sure enough, there was a massive table set with tea and biscuits in the centre of the hall.

While eating cookies and drinking root beer from fine china cups, Art leaned over to Ingrid and said, "give."

"Megan and Ray noticed these two were stretching their powers and asked me to look in on them so I thought it would be an excuse for you to get a bit of an adventure. You've been a bit restless lately."

"Are we still in the apartment?"

"No, and we're not in the Keen family daydream world either, this is real, Kit raised an island in Guelph Lake that nobody can see, and the boaters move right through it. The girl is seriously powerful, which is why we're here to check on her."

"So all those obstacles?"

"All real dear, but this is Kit we're talking about, none of them would have injured you, they're for Oki to get through."

"Wait, would they hurt Oki?"

"Absolutely, Art, these two play rough, but Oki is a pretty

tough little boy with a lot of the same powers that Kit has. We're starting to wonder if he and Kit are both Tilly's kids."

"Oh my lord."

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Art Decides to Write a Book

"Art, you seem lost, you're living from practice to practice with Sam."

"That's not true, I'm reading"

"Reading what?"

"Well at the moment I'm reading all the South American authors that were my heroes in the late '70s when I was going to school."

"Why in the world would you do that?"

"Mostly, I'm trying to figure out how to write a book. I want to write a book."

"Really, so you're reading in order to learn how to write."

"Well no, I know how to write, although I'm not sure about the grammar of direct speech, quotes and all that, but mostly I guess, I'm hoping I get an idea for a book."

“By reading books that have already been written, isn’t that a bit of a waste of your time? Unless of course, you figure you can tell the story better than the original.”

“I suppose to a certain extent, every book is a re-telling of an older story isn't it?”

“You've got a point, lover. I remember reading stories in Phoenician that would be considered pot-boilers today.”

“What, you mean bronze-age folks lying on the beach reading a big fat romance novel?”

“Oh God no, that would be too risky, don't forget books were hand written and very expensive. No there would only be a couple of copies, ever, and you'd read them in your home if you were one of the very rich.”

“But in that case, pot-boilers? Why would such expensive things to create, be wasted on silly romance stories.”

“How much to make a super-hero movie, Art? Now there's a hell of a lot of money spent on something that is watched once by most people and then forgotten. Granted, there are a hell of a lot of fans that watch the things dozens of times, but mostly they are watched and forgotten.”

“OK I take your point, if someone will pay for it... but most of the books we see from ancient times are pretty worthy things aren't they, philosophy books and such, books like the bible.”

“Have you read the bible Art? It's 'the story of several generations of a family, their loves and heartaches in a time of war.' If it didn't have all the political attachments hanging off of it, it would be great beach-time reading. You can't tell me that Gilgamesh or Beowulf are philosophy books. Pot-boilers both, and orally transmitted for thousands of years before they were written down. No, what you see now are just the books that weren't thrown out or burned in a fire, either accidental or a book-burning, of which there were multiple thousands.

“You know, I'm arguing your side now, aren't I? Stories get written and forgotten and written again, thousands of times. I guess all we need to do is look at television series. Same story every week, just different characters.”

“So do you remember any stories you read thousands of years ago but haven't seen lately? Maybe that's my story.”

“I dunno Artie, a story told by an ancient Mycenaean author about a shepherd hunting around the hills for his goat and finding a girl who's running away from home and they fall in love and live happily ever after? That sort of thing? It's the same old boy meets girl story, but the names are strange, the geography is strange. That's what most science fiction is, right? A very old story set in a strange new world. Fighting and fucking in the future.”

“You are terrible. So maybe I should just give up on the project?”

“Oh sweetie, not at all, just write to see if you can write, that's all. Pick any story you want, go online and find a plot from one

of these plot generators and fill in the words.”

“You're kidding, I actually tried that, and sort of got sick to my stomach. 'A fairy princess gets stuck in New York City and finds love with a werewolf-vampire hybrid.' I can't see me writing that.”

“Well why not write what you know? That's the usual advice isn't it? Just write from your experience?”

“What experience, what have I done?”

“Um, well I guess everyone thinks their life is boring, but seriously dear? Think back on your life, you practically grew up in Jim's lunch counter with all the nonsense that happened there, you fought a Wyrms with Jim, ran the lunch counter yourself and met even more strange people, fought in the Giant-Pixie war, and dude, you live with a Goddess. Now all men should consider that they live with a Goddess, but I really am a Goddess.

“You can't seriously believe that your life is boring. More like unbelievable, but who cares, you think your author heroes wrote things that everyone thought were real? The definition of Magical Realism is “not real” but I know for a fact that several of your South American authors were writing autobiography, not fiction when they were talking about the spirit beings they met. Just write it, and let the readers decide for themselves.”

“Write what I know. Well there were a lot of stories in the lunch counter, that's for sure. I could write about those.”

“Good. Listen, when you and Jim fought the Wyrn, do you remember what he was reciting?”

“Sure, it was Beowulf, that's how I knew what to do as his shield bearer.”

“Do you figure he was quoting some obscure ancient story? That's like picking a kata to fit some battlefield situation.”

“Are you trying to tell me he was re-writing an ancient story?”

“No, dear, he was reciting his story, one that recurs every few years. The Wyrn shows up, Beowulf kills it. Art, darling, he was reciting his autobiography.”

“Jim is Beowulf? He's not that old is he?”

“Why not? I'm supposed to be as old as the Universe. Coyote is as old as 'the world' whether that's the Universe or just this planet, who knows. Things are not as they seem, you of all people should know that.”

“Ingrid you are freaking me out, I'm just a poor little human and my brain isn't supposed to process this sort of thing.”

“Process? Who says you're supposed to process it. You just live it. Processing your live is an attempt to make it fit into categories, and life isn't categories. Linnaeus drove himself nuts trying to put all his animals and plants into little slots. Carl was a nice man, but his belief that putting all his books into alphabetical order because God wanted him to, was a bit silly. Still, it kept him busy and he was famous for organizing things.

Later generations of scientists made a living putting things on their correct shelves, into their correct boxes.

“Still, if you take the classical categories, you have to put the Gods in with Man, after all we can breed together. So does that mean Gods were descended from Homo Habilis? Art, processing is over-rated, but still, one of the best ways to process is to write what you know. Every art-work is a self-portrait the experts say. Maybe it is, but every act of creation helps the creator to understand himself better.”

“So I should stop reading and just get on with writing?”

“There you go love, now you're on the right track.”

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Art Has a Dream

“Hildy! Get your tail out of my mouth. What are you doing here anyway, you've got a nice bed of your own to sleep in, why do you have to sleep with us?”

“Because I get lonely.”

There was a long pause before Art said, “Uh, Ingrid, are you awake?”

Nothing but Ingrid's soft snores answered Art, and by soft snore, it was a sound like a chainsaw every thirty seconds or

so. Her breathing was extra slow, but her snore was extra loud.

OK it wasn't Ingrid, so maybe it was Hildy.

"Is that you Hildy? Can you talk?"

"Of course I can't talk Art, I'm a pig, with a pig mouth shape. I can't make words."

"So how come you're talking to me all of a sudden."

"I'm not, Doofus, I've been talking to you ever since I met you, I guess Ingrid is rubbing off on you, you can hear me thinking at you now."

"Well do me a favour and get your tail out of my mouth will you please. So now I'm Dr. Doolittle? I can talk to animals?"

"Doolittle, that's who I meant, not Doofus. How would I know if you can talk to animals? I'm part of Ingrid, part of her Godhood. Why not try talking to the cat... oh wait a minute, a cat not answering you would be meaningless, try talking to the dogs next door."

"Tomorrow. Right now I just want to go back to sleep. I don't suppose you could go down to the other end of the bed could you please, you'll still be between us but your butt won't be in my face."

"Hey, anything to oblige, buddy, have nice dreams."

"I wish I could, I need story ideas."

“I thought you were writing what’s happened to you in the past?”

“Yep, ran out of things, now I have to make it up.”

“Well having lived with your imagination for a few years, I wish you good luck with that.”

“Oh ha, ha, go to sleep, Hildy”

It turned out that Art did dream that night.

He was in a glen, a lovely thing, and there, on the bank of a quiet stream, was Ingrid. She was looking out over the water.

“Don't,” said Hildy, “a war Goddess needs a quiet place, and even you should leave her to her silence, not even I go there.”

“Have you put me into her head, Hildy?”

“No, of course not, this is your head, it's your dream.”

“Ah, so the stream is the stream of time, and Ingrid is sitting outside of time, is that right?”

“Sure, if you say so Art, me, I just think it's a nice place to sit.”

Art stood and watched for quite a long time. It was pleasant to see Ingrid so calm, he didn't realize just how tense she usually was. You'd think that Gods were uncaring about what went on

in the world, but Ingrid cared, and it showed more than Art realized. As he looked at her face, he realized all over again just how beautiful she was.

He turned away and noticed a path that looked like he was supposed to take it, so he did. Just as he reached a small rise, he saw himself at the apex of literally tens of thousands of men and women and, well, near the back must have been the older races of Man.

Art was in no confusion here, just behind him was Ingrid's husband, unmistakable. This was not some symbol of the evolution of mankind, it was a gathering of all the beings Ingrid had bedded. He stood there with his mouth open and Hildy nudged him on the leg. "How old is the Universe, Art?"

"I don't know, four billion years?"

"So, for that amount of time, that's not so many lovers is it?"

Art blinked and looked down at the little pig, "No, I suppose it's not."

"She doesn't give her affections lightly, Art, and you're lined up in front of her husband. Think about that for a minute."

"I think about it every day, that man tried to hunt me down and kill me. Ingrid makes a joke out of it, she says he wasn't really serious, but if she hadn't been there to fight, and you too of course, I would be a smear in the Arboretum."

"Never, they would have taken you away and killed you

someplace nice and private.”

“Oh thank you for that, nice to know I wouldn't have caused any problems for the University.”

“Anyway, you weren't a virgin when you met her were you?”

Art looked to one side and saw Ingrid at the head of a crowd of about twelve women. He looked from one group to the other and back again. Twelve to tens of thousands to twelve.

“You know, year for year, I might be winning that contest.”

“Hey, the man has taken a stats course or two. Good for you Art.”

“I'm not sure I'm happy with this talking thing, between me and you, Hildy.”

“So don't listen.”

“So is this my dream about Ingrid and me? Am I going to learn things?”

“Dreams are just dreams, Art. Make of them what you want, they usually relate to what you're thinking about or doing, but they don't necessarily make sense. Random firings of neurons in your brain. A little psychedelic trip every night. Learn or don't, see connections or not.”

“And what are you representing in this dream, are you my interpreting mind?”

“What? No I'm me, Art, I'm here in your head with you. I told you earlier tonight that you can hear me in your head, I can't speak, I'm in your head with you here.”

“Are you kidding me? I was going to ask how that was possible, but on second thought, I don't want to know.”

“Art, I'm part of Ingrid, part of what makes her a Goddess, and you know she can read your mind.”

“I thought she could read my thoughts, do you mean...”

“Yes Doofus, er Doolittle, she knows you were noticing that tall Vet student in the coffee shop the other day. She also knows how a man's brain works and she doesn't hold it against you. Experience, see, lots of experience, look out there.”

“Instead of that, how about we move on, what's next?”

“Art! It's your dream, I'm just here with you, I'm not creating this.”

They moved along the path, why a path? A journey? Or just someplace to walk where they weren't likely to pick up burrs or ticks? Around the next bend... why scenes and little hills and bends to separate them?... Around the next bend they came across a battlefield, it was the fight with the Giants outside the building where the Wounded God sat. Art took one glance and said, “moving on,” to Hildy and he did.

“Nothing to learn from the war?” said Hildy.

“Nothing to learn from any war, and you know that. Best to just forget it.”

“Good man, you won't, but certainly don't talk about it. Kids only hear the exciting parts and are more likely to go to war themselves. Best to leave them in the dark, you can't talk them out of 'the adventure' no matter how horrible the stories.”

“Hildy, how does Ingrid stand it? She's a war Goddess, she's involved in wars constantly, how does she handle it?”

Hildy looked at Art for a moment and said, quietly, “You and that stream, Art.”

Art wiped something out of his eye and walked a bit faster away from the battlefield. Around the next bend, or over the hill, or as the scene changed, Art saw a playground with hundreds of kids. He looked at them for a long time and turned to Hildy saying, “What's this?”

“Do you want kids, Art?”

“I've never really thought about it. I mean I guess, someday. I'm pretty young yet.”

“Ten thousand years ago you would have been a father many times over.”

“It's not ten thousand years ago, Hildy, and all that, 'having kids as soon as you can,' has got us into the damned mess we're in. If we had the infant and maternal death rates of ten thousand

years ago we could afford to pop them out as fast as we can, but not now.”

He looked again at the kids, and noticed they all seemed familiar to him. “These are Ingrid's kids aren't they?”

“Good eye, yes they are. Some of them are Gods, some are Demi-gods and some are full human. Genetics work with the Gods too. Why are we seeing the kids, Art?”

“I'm not sure, could I have a child with Ingrid?”

“Of course you could.”

“Is she pregnant?”

“Oh for... of course not Art, she would never allow herself to get pregnant without talking to you first. She's seen what's happening to the earth. These kids are all from hundreds or thousands of years ago.”

“But, would she stay with me long enough to have a child?”

“You doubt she loves you?”

“Uh, I guess I must...”

“Look you, even if she didn't love you, staying with you for your whole life, even if you live a couple thousand years, is just a blink of an eye to her. Think about how old she is!”

“I'm not sure that makes me feel better, Hildy.”

“So talk to her, or remember that I'm part of her and listen. Yes you fool, she loves you and she will stay with you for as long as you live, she's incredibly loyal and understanding and tolerant and yes, she will have a child with you if you ask her to have one.”

Art sat down on a suspiciously handy rock and watched the kids for a long time. After a while he looked up and said to Hildy, “What's over that hill?”

“A great adventure, something that will test you to the limits, something that you can then write a book about and it will be thrilling to read. Just what you want isn't it?”

Art looked again at the kids, and thought about the battlefield and then about Ingrid watching the stream, Ingrid sleeping beside him. “I think, my little friend, I will dream about sleeping beside Ingrid and when I wake up beside her it will be the greatest adventure of my life.”

As much as a little pot-bellied pig could smile, Hildy smiled.

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Dinner With the Ex

When Ingrid woke up the next morning, Art wasn't in the kitchen, as usual, he was right there, watching her sleep.

“What’s up lover,” she said.

“Just having a great adventure, sweetheart,” Art said before hugging her.

“Mmmmm, somebody had a good night.”

Later, Art did get up and make breakfast for the two of them.

“Hey Ingrid, let’s go out for coffee this morning.”

“No sweets, let’s have coffee right here.”

And again, later, they were hanging out in the living room, Hildy and Ingrid that is, Art was in the kitchen washing up the breakfast dishes.

Coming out with a third coffee, he set it down by Ingrid and said “Ingrid?”

“Oh, oh.”

“No, it’s nothing super serious, but I just wanted to ask if we can have a child together.”

“That’s not serious?”

“No, no, I meant is it possible for us to have a child?”

“Of course it is Art, you’ve met Demi-gods and I’m sure we talked about the Gods being classified as Homo Sapiens since we can interbreed, silly as that is. Why are you asking this?”

“Just a strange dream last night, that’s all.”

Ingrid looked at Hildy but he was snuffling around the leg of the coffee table with every appearance of having no idea what they were talking about.

“Art are you thinking about having a child, because if you are, then yes, we can have a child, I’d like that.”

“You wouldn’t mind? It wouldn’t be a problem?”

“Look at me, Art, I’m a big woman if you haven’t noticed, and I’ve never had a problem with pregnancy. I don’t get sick, never have complications. It wouldn’t be a problem. You want to get started right now?”

“Please, you’re going to break me in half, let me have a couple of hours to recover.”

“Sissy.”

“Anyway, I had a dream about kids last night, your kids actually, and I was just wondering if you were interested in having another.”

“Just how many of my children were in your dream last night?” Ingrid said, as she looked again at Hildy who was just disappearing around the door into the bedroom.

“Ten or twenty, they were all running around on a playground.”

“That’s actually pretty accurate Art, except that they wouldn’t

all be the same age. Is that what prompted the question? Not a desire to have your own kid now?"

"Some day I think sweetheart, but there's no rush is there?"

"None at all, let me know and we'll start."

"But I've been thinking..."

"About my husband, right? He won't come hunting for you again you know, I promise you."

"You're sure? I don't know him, or how he would react to us living together, let alone having a child. I was just wondering if it might be a good idea for us to meet, just so he could get to know me?"

"What, so he can see for himself that you aren't going to break my heart or abandon me with a child? For goodness sake, Art, he's a God and I'm a Goddess, it doesn't work like that... Well OK it does, but Woden isn't especially jealous, he's... Look, are you serious, you want to meet him?"

"I think so, is that a bad idea?"

"No, not really, but the man did try to run you down and kill you, you're not afraid he'll smite you the minute he sees you?"

"Will he?"

"I don't think so, who knows, he's a God. Who knows what gets into their heads."

Art bit down hard on his tongue.

“Oh ha, ha, dude,” said Ingrid, reading Art’s mind again. Alright, I’ll call him.”

Before Art could say another word, there was a pop of displaced air and a huge man with a huge drooping mustache, a shield and a spear showed up in the middle of the room. The spear ended up in the middle of the overhead lamp and that exploded sending glass flying across the room.

“Oh for...” said Ingrid who waved her hand and restored the light fixture, “put that stupid thing away Woody.”

“Well, well,” boomed the God, rubbing his hands together, “where is the little nipper?”

“There’s no child Woody, we were just talking about kids, you’ve got your timeline messed up again.”

“What, what, do I?”

“Art, this is Woden, my husband, Woody, this is Arthur Pendray.”

“Call me Art,” said Arthur, holding out his hand, “nice to meet you.”

“Hello there cowering mortal, you can call me Almighty God, Lord of the Universe,” shouted Woden, grabbing Art’s hand and shaking it so hard that Art’s head bobbed.

“Wo!” said Ingrid, in a dangerously quiet voice.

Woden looked at her and grinned. “Call me Woody, Art. So you’re the new fellow. She’s still got a temper does she?”

“I do not have a temper!” said Ingrid as the two men glanced at each other. “Art here wanted to meet you to make sure that you weren’t going to pop up around a corner with the Wild Hunt and chase him down.”

Woden slapped Art on the shoulder, “Great fun, what, what, so that was you when Ingrid fought us, she was so cute, we just had to let her win.”

Ingrid’s stare would have burned a hole in steel, as it was, Woden’s mustache was starting to smoke.

“Just kidding my dear, just kidding,” he said as he patted his face.

“Well, Art, are you going to break my girl’s heart? Are you going to leave her to raise a child all on her own?”

Woden laughed a great echoing laugh as he watched Art’s face. “I’m a God, dear boy, a God, I can see you two like each other, don’t worry, I won’t run you down and run you through, I promise.”

Art looked at Ingrid and mouthed “He can see us any time?”

Ingrid shrugged.

“Oh dear, my boy, I can see you when you’re bad and I can see you when you’re good.”

“That’s Santa Clause, Woody,” said Ingrid.

“It is? Oh well. Look, Art, watching you have sex with my wife, it’s possible for me, but not advisable, she doesn’t like it. She doesn’t watch me having sex with my women either... do you Ingrid?”

“I did once, but I fell asleep.”

Again, Woden laughed loudly and winked at Art.

Art was getting a sore neck swiveling his gaze from one to the other and said, “Would you like to stay for dinner, Woody”

“Call me Almighty God,” said Woden, “listen, is she going to cook?”

“Woden Allfather, you will behave or I swear to You...”
muttered Ingrid.

Woden leaned over to Art and whispered, in a voice loud enough for the neighbours to hear, “She was never much of a cook, is all.”

Art grinned back and said, “I do most of the cooking and cleaning, after all, she’s a Goddess.”

Woden slapped him on the back again and laughed, “That’s the

ticket! Right then, I'd be happy to stay to dinner."

Art retreated to the kitchen while Woody and Ingrid settled down on the couch.

"Do you love him Ingie?"

"I actually do Wo, I actually do."

"Then I'm happy for you, and you want to have a child with him?"

"I don't know about that, it just came up this morning, but if he wants to then yes, I think I'd like to raise a child with him."

"Good, it's been too long since I bounced one of yours on my knee."

"You know Woody, you really are the best."

"I know." said Woden, "He seems a nice sort, watch out for him, and if you ever need your favourite wing-man again, just you call."

Ingrid squeezed Woden's arm and kissed him on the cheek.

"What, what"

~~

A Shopping Trip

Ingrid was powering up and down the aisles in the Metro. Art was trailing behind with a cart and Hildy was, as usual, snuffling around in the produce section for anything that might have been dropped.

It was a good thing that nobody who saw Hildy, ever remembered seeing him, because he was always wandering around on his own.

Ingrid hated shopping, but insisted on going with Art, and so there were a lot of arguments. Since Art did most of the cooking, he didn't appreciate Ingrid adding the weird things she liked to buy but never, ever ate.

Still, it was nice to get out and about with the family, thought Art as he took yet another massive bag of frozen lamb chops out of the cart once Ingrid's back was turned. They could only stuff so much into their small freezer compartment. There were times when Art would have sworn Ingrid's shoulders were moving suspiciously, as if she was laughing, when he replaced yet another strange item.

As they walked up the condiment's aisle, Ingrid froze. She was just behind a young girl who seemed unable to decide between two brands of relish, even though they were identical relish and made by the same company. Having seen Ingrid do this before, Art stopped and waited quietly.

Ingrid shook her head, glanced back at Art, and grabbed his arm, saying, "We're done for today Art."

Art didn't argue, just turned the basket around and headed for the checkout. As he walked, Hildy trotted by in the opposite direction and stood about ten feet from the girl, watching her.

Ingrid said, "I'll meet you outside, Art, you can catch up to me."

Wondering what was up, Art just nodded and headed for a line.

When he was checked out, he walked out the door and saw Megan walking into the store.

"What's up?" he asked Ingrid when he found her sitting on a bench outside.

"That girl is in agony, and she's dangerously powerful. She has no idea how to use her power but she's killed. I called Megan because this is her thing."

"Her thing?"

"Haven't you noticed her looking closely at those of us with power? She exists because too much power in anyone, spirit being or God, tends to upset the balance. She fixes that, and she needs to have a good look at this girl."

As they were talking, Megan walked out with the girl. Her purchases forgotten, she was following Megan and bawling.

Megan came over to the bench and sat down, indicating that the girl should sit between her and Ingrid. When she sat, she

seemed to wake up, and looked from Megan to Ingrid.

“We are friends, my name is Megan and this is Ingrid. That's Art over there and the little one is Hildy. None of us are a threat to you, we simply want to talk.”

“What the hell, I was shopping and then I was here, what did you do to me?”

“Don't. I told you we are no threat, believe it.”

The girl seemed to make an effort to relax, it was clear she had tried to do something, but Megan blocked it. Art could tell that Ingrid was stunned, but he said nothing.

At that point, Hildy jumped up on the girl's lap and snuffled at her. The girl laughed and cradled him. Art had never seen Hildy do that before to anyone but him, but this time, there was something underneath.

“I won't let her, Art, don't be nervous and say nothing,” Art heard Hildy say to him.

Megan was looking at the girl closely and said to her, “You carry a great sadness, a burden that you can barely stand. We can help you, girl, what is it that hurts you so.”

“What? I'm fine, nothing has ever hurt me, what are you talking about?” The girl made as if to go but somehow she couldn't stand. It didn't help that Hildy was suddenly many times heavier than he was when he jumped onto her lap.

“Tell us,” said Megan, in a voice that had undertones.

“I'm telling you, I have no problem, why are you bothering me? Why can't I get up?”

“We will let you up after a talk, you say you are fine, that there's no problem, but look inside and tell me that again.”

The girl was suddenly racked with sobs, she couldn't breathe, her face twisted as if she was in agony. Almost as soon as it started it stopped.

“I have put it back where you have it hidden, even from you, but now you see. Tell us girl, what has put that pain there.”

“I don't know,” she said when she could catch a breath, “I don't know. The memory doesn't come, there are blanks in what I remember, but sometimes I feel that something terrible has happened to me, yet I know it hasn't. I'm sure it hasn't.”

“I can help with the gaps,” Ingrid said, but I want your permission, you have buried things, I can uncover them but I will not, without your permission.”

Megan looked sharply at Ingrid, but Ingrid looked back at her and shook her head. Art was sure there was a lot more going on than he was seeing.

Hildy said, in Art's head, “There is, Ingrid is much more kind than Megan, if this girl doesn't remember, Megan will destroy her. They don't know what power this girl has, but it's God-like and she can't control it. Look to your right.”

Art did, and saw Stan, Megan's mate, leaning against a wall, watching closely. Art suddenly had the urge to be somewhere else.

Hildy spoke again, "I will take her throat if necessary, while Megan holds her back, you will be fine, but it would be best not to do that."

"I should think so," replied Art.

The girl looked like she was having a hard time deciding, she had felt the full brunt of the pain when Megan let it go. She didn't realize she was deciding if she lived or died. Finally, she nodded to Ingrid.

The girl moaned, "Oh my God, no."

Megan laid a hand on her arm, "Share!"

The girl looked panicked, "It's too evil, I should be locked up, I should be killed."

"Share!"

"I was little, just a kid, my uncle... I made him go away."

Both Megan and Ingrid snapped their heads back.

"And when I was a teenager, there was a gang of boys, and after that it got easier and I've made so many men go away!"

"Sleep," said Megan and the girl slumped forward onto Hildy.

Megan looked at Ingrid and said, “Did you get that?”

“I did but I don't believe it, she doesn't kill, she erases their entire existence, they never were. No wonder she hasn't been noticed, they are just gone. I might be able to do that, but I would never...”

“Yes, and perhaps we should do this to her now. This is worse than murder, far worse, children have vanished.”

“Can she control it? Can we teach her?”

“Control or not, should anyone have that power?”

Stan had come over to the bench, “You do.”

Megan looked up at him, then at Ingrid. “Can we take it away from her without killing her, this power?”

Ingrid shook her head, “That would be like trying to strip a God of his power, can we three do it?”

Art spoke up, “She scares the hell out of me, but then again, so do you three. She obviously didn't know what she was doing, you three can do what she does, but you don't, because you know what you're doing. Have there been Gods who abuse their power? Have there been others who can do what she does, but know it and still do it?”

Megan nodded in a way that made Art sure that there had been, and that Megan had destroyed them. Stan put his hand on her

shoulder.

Art continued, "Give this girl a chance. I know she's killed, but her power was hidden from her. Can you teach her to control it and watch over her so that she doesn't do it again?"

Megan looked at Ingrid who nodded but said "Can she live with the knowledge? It is obviously tearing her apart even hidden deep."

Megan looked at Stan, "There are three of us, we can decide, what do you say, Stan?"

"Give her the chance and the choice, Art's right, she didn't know. If she knows, she may choose to kill herself, if she lives, she will live with the knowledge, if she doesn't repent, we kill her."

"Wake," said Megan, "Do you remember, girl, all of it."

The girl looked horror stricken, she managed to nod.

"We can end your life now, or you can end it yourself, or you can live with what you have done. You didn't know but you do now, what do you wish?"

"Kill me," she said, "if you can do it, make it that I never existed, like I did to those poor men."

Art turned her face toward himself and said, "That's the easy way out, do you deserve that? You didn't know what you were doing, and those men attacked you. Think, what is the worse

punishment for you, to cease to exist or to live with what you have done.”

“But what if I do it again.”

“Then you will know what you are doing, look at these three, they will be watching, if you use your power they will know, then they will do what you wish. Do not use them to end your life though, end it yourself should you find you can't live with your past. Do you understand?”

The girl nodded. She looked at Megan again, “I want to live, can you teach me not to use my power?”

Megan said softly, “No, but I can teach you to use it, do you understand the difference.”

The girl's eyes went wide and she nodded, “I understand.”

~~

Tuesday Morning

Ingrid came out of the shower, towelling her hair and Art waited to hand her a coffee. “Good morning beautiful, did you sleep well?”

“I did, Art, thank you, I hope you slept OK after I let you over to your side of the bed.”

Art laughed, handed Ingrid the coffee and took the towel from

her. “Go get yourself dressed, breakfast is ready.”

When Ingrid came back to the table, Art had another coffee for her and started to load up a plate. The girl could eat.

After she got a bit of food into her, Art asked, “Ingrid, what's the deal with Gods and Spirit Beings. Megan and Stan seem to be almost as powerful as you are, why aren't they Gods?”

“Art they can call themselves whatever they want. They are as powerful as a lot of the Gods, but you know that they don't want worship from Humans, they are happy to be what they are. A lot of the Gods have an ego on them, they like the bowing and scraping. It may be an old world thing, you know how they like their class snobbery. Anyway, 'God' or 'Spirit Being' are just labels, just something to say in modern English. The name God comes from old English, usually referring to the Christian God. We 'Pagan Gods' were called the Ese, Woden was usually just called Allfather. The various native groups have their own names. It's just a word, Art, just a label. You know that in modern English you tend to capitalize the Christian God and leave the rest of us in lower case god. As if that mattered to any of us.”

“I guess that makes sense, what was your old name?”

“You're kidding right? From what era? I was called Frigge when Woden was called Allfather, but elsewhere I was called Freyja. Lots of names for lots of peoples. Megan is called Ma'iingan sometimes, and Nanabozo and Nanabush in other places. Coyote and Caw are sometimes called Nanabozo too. Look, there isn't a label that applies in all times and all places

to anyone. Are you Art or Arthur or Artie?”

“Yeah, I get you. So what's the deal between Megan and Coyote?”

“Over breakfast? We'll be here until Supper, but OK in a short form, Coyote screws it up and Megan fixes it.”

“Could I have that in a slightly longer form please Ingrid?”

“You know that people say Coyote sang the world into being right? Well that may be true, I certainly didn't create the world, or the universe. Is what Coyote sang into being the world or the universe? Who the hell knows, the stories began when Man was able to create stories and that was before they knew the difference between the world and the universe. So Coyote sang the whole damned thing into being. There have been other gods who claim to have done that, but most of us admit that we don't know.

“Now, since Coyote sang it all into being, it makes sense that he can sing it all away right? Maybe even by accident? Maybe because he's trying to fix something. Who knows, maybe he's created it and sung it away thousands of times. How would we know?”

“One person who might know is Megan, she's the one who keeps Coyote in line. I don't mean she tells him what to do, nobody can do that, so nobody tries, but Megan keeps a very close eye on him and when things start to break, she patches it.”

“Wait, Amber tells Coyote what to do all the time, can't Megan?”

“Art, you have no idea how powerful love is. Coyote loves Amber and she loves him. They now seem to be the same being, and she has that gift of foresight that Coyote gave her when he gave her his power. Coyote tried to forget what he was, but still screwed things up. Amber let him remember but she stops him. That's one main reason that Megan has been more relaxed these days.”

“It seems complicated.”

“Welcome to love, dearheart, you're in love with the Goddess of War and Love and the Weather and who the hell knows what else I've been blamed for over the eons. It is complicated. Just now, Coyote has Amber, Megan has Stan, and I've got you. None of us are going to complain if it gets a bit complicated.”

“But if Amber has taken over Megan's job...”

“No, Art, Megan's job potentially just got tougher. She's got to deal with Amber and Coyote as a pair, and don't forget how powerful Amber is now. If the two of them went off the rails, Megan would have to call in a bunch of us. Amber's power isn't something split off from Coyote, it's hers.”

“Well, you and Woden...”

“Were and are married, sure, but neither of us sang the world into being Art, Coyote was here to sing before there was a 'here', think about that. Did you ever wonder why, with all

these Gods and Spirit Beings around, why the world isn't a very weird place of intersecting realities?"

"Sometimes it seems like it is, but I get you."

"It's because we run into Coyote. We run into his reality, his rules. If he made the world, only he can change it because only he is outside."

"I think I liked the short form, where he was a bumbling trickster and Megan fixed it."

"We all like the simple story Art, we don't have to think so much. Unfortunately life and love aren't simple, and we have to think all the time. Now I think I'd like to head down to Balzac's before they sell out of those lovely almond croissants."

~~

Over Coffee

Art finished soaping Ingrid's back with the loofah and set it aside. He drove his knuckles into her muscles as hard as he could, trying to get them un-knotted. One thing he could say for sure was that she was magnificent, her muscles weren't as well defined as a body builder's but she wasn't trying. She hadn't cut her body fat or dehydrated herself. If she ever did, she'd take a few trophies, that's for sure.

She grunted as he drove his elbow into that spot just below her shoulder-blade and he grinned. “Take that for the bruising you gave me last night Missie,” he thought.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to do your back Artie?”

“God no! I want to be able to walk today.”

He was kidding, Ingrid could be quite tender and she rarely hurt him when she did his back, but Art liked to lay it on thick when he could.

After breakfast Ingrid suggested they go to Balzacs for coffee and to “watch the writers agonize” as she put it.

“Shouldn't we go to the Red Brick?” said Art.

“No, too angsty, too hipster, too young. I like to watch the old guys write, the experienced ones.”

“But why would I want to go watch writers trying to write?”

“Misery loves company, Art.”

“Oh thanks, but you know, you're right.”

Not long after, they were comfortably seated by the window, Art looking out at the traffic and the trains, Ingrid looking at everyone else in the place. She seemed to have an infinite capacity for people-watching.

“Live as long as I have, and you need new faces, plus you need

to listen to the everyday conversations. Nobody can live an exciting story forever, sometimes you just have to be ordinary for a while.”

Art stared at nothing for a while and then looked back at Ingrid. He did that a lot, he would try to forget what she looked like, and then get a shot of joy when he looked at her face again. She really was magnificent.

“Ingrid, about stories, are the stories of the Gods really true? All that eating their own children and changing into animals to rape mortals. That doesn't sound very 'everyday' to me.

“It's not, love, it's quite unusual, but that's why it's a story. Nobody tells stories of the gods sitting around drinking coffee and playing WarMallet, those are not good stories.”

“Sure, I get that, I keep thinking I ought to be writing about our exciting adventures, but you know, sitting here with you, having a coffee, that's much more appealing to me.”

“You are such a dear.”

“But the eating of their children?”

“Yes, sure it's true, and sometimes those children cut their way out of Daddy God's head. You're talking about all the power madness of humans put into the hands of a super-powerful being. Of course it goes sideways, more often than it probably should.

“But the stories are true because people tell them. Even if no

God ever ate his children, the story is true. All stories are true. You've read Science Fiction and Fantasy and just straight fiction. All those stories are true, you read them so they must exist, they must be true."

"That's stretching it a bit, Ingie, I mean the events behind the story, not that there is a story."

"Well OK, let's take the least 'real event' story you can think of, what's that?"

"I don't know, pretty much all Science Fiction and Fantasy would qualify, no wait, how about 'Kafka on the Shore' by Murakami?"

"Magic Realism, there you go, a story set in an ordinary place but with unreal events. That's great, some things that are true, some not. So what's true?"

"All the places in Japan that are mentioned, the big bridge to Shikoku, cars, things like that."

"And what's unreal?"

"Crow Boy, the forest and clearing Kafka goes to, the WWII soldiers I guess."

"You don't believe that part?"

"No, of course not."

"What if I was to tell you there's no bridge to Shikoku? You've

never been there, you've never seen it yourself. You're just taking Murakami's word for it that it's there, but that could be part of his magic side in the story.”

“Why would he not... why would he... What are you now, a Cartesian? Begin from doubt? I don't know that there's a bridge there, you're right.”

“Let's go to a fantasy story, you like Terry Pratchett right?”

“Absolutely, his stories are amazing, I've read and re-read them for years.”

“Diskworld?”

“Unreal.”

“Angua the warewolf?”

“Unreal... oh, I know where you're going with this.”

“Yes, you know Mara, you know she loves James. You know that's true. But what about Angua and her love for Carrot. Isn't that a true thing.”

“OK I get it, stories have real elements, even if what they're describing doesn't exist. The themes are true, the being-interactions are true.”

“Nice, Art, being-interactions instead of human-interactions. Very good.”

“After what I've seen the last few years, what else can I use, I mean I'm sitting here having a coffee with a Goddess.”

“But Art, you might not be, you might be insane, imagining it all.”

“OK Descartes, I see you a Samuel Johnston, and kick a rock.”

“Ever my Existential-phenomenologist hero.”

Art made a sour face and said, “If you can't trust your senses, you have to believe in.....”

“Goddesses?” laughed Ingrid.

“OK the world is full of magic and magical beings. I'll give you that, I mean, how can I not? So how about fake news. That's a straight out lie isn't it, at least some of it.”

“There's a truth there too, isn't there? Let's take the absolutely unbelievable the complete, obvious and transparent lie. It's there to change someone's world-view, that's the truth of it. Propaganda is all about 'the big lie' as that asshole put it, and it works. 'There's no way such an obvious lie would be said over and over, therefore there must be some sort of truth behind it.' And it works, because stories are true.”

“Ingrid you are such a cynic.”

“Just an observation sweetheart, not a theory. Look at advertising research, seven repeats of an ad and you're heading for the store. Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes your

truth.”

“OK I don't want to live in that world, Ingrid. Let's drop it.”

Ingrid shrugged and went back to watching the 'ink stained wretches' while Art visited the bathroom. When he came back he said, “Magic, Ingrid, what's the biggest piece of magic you ever performed.”

“What am I, a magician?”

“You know what I mean, what's the best thing you ever did?”

Ingrid looked closely at Art, obviously thinking hard, “OK Art, in all seriousness, and without trying to make you feel good. The most impressive thing, the best magic I ever performed or experienced, was to fall in love with you.”

“Aw, that's sweet of you to say....”

“Art, I am serious. Of all the things I've ever done, all the magic I've ever performed, the best is falling in love with you.”

Art ducked his head and mumbled, “Jesus Ingie, pressure much?”

~~

The Magical Walk

As they walked back home from the coffee shop, Art suddenly

stopped and turned to Ingrid. He had a little trouble speaking, but he did his best, “You know, I feel exactly the same way about you, Ingie. You are the absolute best thing that ever happened to me, the most magical and the most ordinary.”

Ingrid smiled, and being Ingrid said, “And?”

“And I love you more than I've ever loved anyone before.”

“Except your mother?”

“It's close, sweetheart, it's close.”

Ingrid laughed and hugged him.

“You know, Ingrid, I feel sorry for those people who can't remember seeing the the magic, the ones who go through life not believing the crazy, amazing things that I've seen.”

“They can see magic, Art. Maybe not beings like me, but people can see the magic in the world. It's just that most of them close their eyes. Some of them only see what they're told to see, others decide for themselves what they see. People see what they expect to see dear, but some, a few, can see what's really there.”

“Like Pratchett's witches.”

“Yes, exactly that, Art, and what they see is astonishing. Look at a small child in a room with light beams hitting the floor. That is magical, and sometimes you can see the shadow of a bird right there on the floor. Think of the story you could make

up about the shadow world right there in your room, or make it a cage. Make it Plato's cave, where you're chained to a wall and can only see shadows on the wall in front of you.

“Or the story of our lives, a bird flying in a dark window, across our lighted room and out the other window. What most people would see is a bird in the house, but a child would see something magical indeed. Life on its own, is magical if you think about it.”

“So imagination is magical?”

“It is, but more than that, the world around you is magical Art, truly magical. You spent some time in Balzacs staring out the window. What were you looking at?”

“Not much at all, I was thinking.”

“Think a bit more, Art, what were you seeing.”

“Well I guess I was seeing the sun glisten on the dew of the grass. I was seeing the wind move the blades and the dead leaves, I was seeing the sun reflected off of the flashing on the roofs and the cars.”

“What moved the grass?”

“The wind of course.”

“Did you see it?”

Art was quiet for a moment, “I see what you mean, if you look,

the world is full of magic.”

“And who sees it, Art?”

“Well I guess kids, before it's all explained to them.”

“Indeed, if you've got a label for something, a slot you can fit it into, you don't have to pay it any more attention, and so you don't see it any more. But sometimes, if you're just staring into the distance and not putting the world into its neat little cubby-holes, you just might see something magical. You don't need imagination for that, all you need to do is stop dismissing the input and let yourself see what your five senses are showing you. The frost on the roof over there, you see it melting in the sun but still there in the shade. Amazing, if you don't explain it all to yourself.”

“Writers of magical realism, do they see the world like that?”

“Some, probably, but it's the poets that really see the magic. Poetry irritates the hell out of most people because you can't taste the orange of a sunset, or feel the love of a good being.”

“I expected you to say 'a good woman', when you said 'a good being' it startled me.”

“You understand what I'm saying then.”

“But that's not real magic is it? Not like changing reality or defying the laws of physics, like when you fly or Hildy gets big and turns into a boar.”

“It's just the way we are, it's not the real magic. What you're calling magic is just stuff that people refuse to see, or if they see it, they refuse to remember it. It doesn't fit their idea of the world, so it doesn't exist. When they are forced to see it, they put it into the category of 'magic' or 'God' or some other box they can close and put into the storage shed of their mind. The real, amazing magic is when they can look at the sun reflecting off of water and actually see it. If Hildy transforms into a boar, that's not so impressive as someone's mind or heart transforming when they see snow disappear off of a roof, or when they are changed by love. That's the real magic.”

“Here's the Arboretum, do you want to extend our walk?”

“Of course, having nothing to do but stroll and enjoy each other's company, is that not magical.”

“Oh yes, to spend un-distracted time with you is the most magical thing I can imagine, love.”

“You know, the sun going down and coming up each day is pretty magical. Not the rotation of the world, but the fact that we see yet another dawn. While we're walking we might see the sun go down. I hope I see it come up again while lying in bed beside you Art.”

“Me too Ingie,” was all Art could manage.

“Look over there, see the kid the beside the pond with a butterfly net, she's going to catch the Heron, see... oh, so close. It doesn't matter that she's a dozen meters away, she'll get it next swipe. That's magical.”

“Here's the swamp, what do you see over there?”

“That branch half out of the water?”

“Are you sure it's not a serpent?”

“Yep.”

Ingrid clapped her hands and a serpent's head rose out of the water, dead leaves in its mouth. It swung its head toward them and nodded before dropping under the water again.”

“That was you Ingie.”

“Let yourself look again, Art.”

He did, and this time he saw the exposed skin of the serpent rippling with wet, and he saw the water move. He jerked his head back and looked at Ingrid, “Did you make me see that?”

“No, not at all, you just had a different way to see the world, to interpret what you see. Look over the edge of the boardwalk, what do you see?”

“My reflection, then dead leaves and branches, stuff floating on top.”

“All things you can choose to see, but they can't all be there at the same time can they?”

“Yes, they can, it's just that I select what I see from what is

there.”

“And what if I told you that water doesn't reflect, that what you see there is a Nixe, mimicking what you do, looking at you while you look at him?”

Art looked again and smiled, “What's his name?”

“I don't know dear, I've never met him.”

Art had the hang of it now, as they walked along he saw dryads in the bark of the trees, he saw Caw become Crow as he flew toward them. He saw a goose come in and land on the pond, but it wasn't a pond any more, it was a sheet of glass and the bird ripped a long gouge in it. Leaves drifting down were fairies, flitting around.

The rest of the walk was a magical excursion and no Gods or Spirit People were necessary.

When they got home, the food tasted better, the water was softer in the shower, and when he looked at Ingrid with his new eyes, he was astounded to find that, impossibly, she had become even more beautiful.

“Thank you for showing me the real magic,” he said as he lay down beside her.

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The Yard Sale

Art picked up the breakfast dishes and carried them into the kitchen. When he returned, Ingrid said, "There's a yard sale around the corner, do you want to go check it out?"

"Sure, always up for snooping on the neighbours," said Art.

"We could... "

"No, dearest, that would be cheating, we're only allowed to see what's public, no peering into their houses."

Ingrid pouted a little, but cheered up at the appearance of a second cup of coffee on the table in front of her.

When they had finished their seconds, they headed out on the big adventure of the day.

"Oh dear, nylon shirts from the '80s, do I ever remember those," said Art, "I'd spend a night in the disco and be covered in sweat that absolutely reeked, but the girls never seemed to mind. Look at them, as shiny and colourful as the day they were made."

"No, dear, no nylon for you."

"Shaggy fur boots for you dear? I can just see you doing the Frug in those, shaking your bootie."

"That's not what that means, Art."

“Oh goodie, woodworking tools. Drill, another drill, a third drill with tape around the cord, hammer, slot screwdriver, sanding pad, jar of odds and ends... Ingie there's the entire set here!”

“And you've got three sets at home dear, put them down.”

“Do we need a fondue set?”

“Not unless we're getting married, and then we'll have four. You're not allowed to have fondue sets if you're not married. They're marital arts equipment.”

“Speaking of which, there's a collection of swords here.”

“You're kidding, oh look at that... Art come away, let's go to the mall right now.”

“The mall's not open, don't you want to check out the swords? I thought you liked swords.”

“Shit. I do Art, but not that sword.”

“What? Hey, look at that, that doesn't look newly made, it's a hand and a half. What do you think Ingrid, is it an antique?”

“It's trouble Art, come away and leave it alone, I'm not kidding.”

Art looked at Ingrid and realized she was serious, she looked frightened by the sword, and concerned for Art.

“What is it love? It's just an old sword, nothing to be afraid of.”

“Who's in charge of this sale, that thing shouldn't be here, I'm serious Art, don't touch it. Somebody is playing silly buggers, someone who wants me dead.”

“What! Are you kidding me? Who,” said Art in a low voice as he looked around the yard. All he saw was customers and most of them were old folks. It was much too early for the working-age to be up and around.

“There,” they both said at about the same time, spotting a black-haired woman who was watching them closely.

Ingrid began stalking toward the woman and Art followed along behind, prepared to back her up in whatever this was. Hildy was running wide to the left in an attempt to get behind their target, but she was gone.

“Damned witch,”

“Who was it Ingrid? Who was that woman.”

“Someone who wants to make trouble, a thousand years later, someone who can't let go of a war that was over by 600. Damn her, and she left it here.”

“Left what? The sword?”

“Yes, the sword.”

Art looked toward where it sat on a table, tatty, well used for

something, probably chopping brush in someone's back yard, scratched and chipped. There was no scabbard for it, just a blade and a wire wrapped hilt. "What is it, Ingrid, what's wrong with it?"

Ingrid sighed, "We might as well get this over with. Art that's Excalibur."

"Are you kidding, is this a joke? Are you and Ray putting me on again?"

But Ingrid was not smiling, far from it.

"Gods damn it. Go pick it up, Art, let's find out."

"I'm not sure I want to do that, Ingrid. I talked with Hugo about this thing and he said that it would find me if I was King Arthur, and that I wasn't to go looking for it. If it's found me, there's some terrible thing about to happen isn't there?"

"Yes, but not what you think, Arthur. Give me a hug and let me kiss you and then go pick it up. Time to get this over with."

As he held Ingrid, Art said, "You're scaring me Ingrid, that can't be Excalibur and I'm not King Arthur, damnit, that's not possible."

"Let's find out, love. No harm will come to you, I swear it, go pick it up."

Something in the way she said that, "But something may happen to you?"

Ingrid looked sad, “Yes, something might happen to me. I have many enemies and one of them is trying to hurt me badly now.”

“I won't touch it. Let's go.”

“It's not that simple, my love, now that they have that damned sword they will get it into your hands. Just pick it up and we'll be done with it.”

Art thought a moment. “Ingrid tie my right hand tight to the side of my body so that I can't use it, I will not touch a magical sword without some idea that you will be safe from it.”

“It's not like that Art, but I'll do it.”

To anyone else at the yard sale, it looked like Art had his hand in his pocket. Hildy was looking from one to the other and jiggling from hoof to hoof. “Hildy, come with me and if I threaten Ingrid in any way, take out my leg. Do you understand?”

Hildy trotted over to Art and followed him to the table where Art, after a brief hesitation, grasped the hilt tightly with his left hand. He was ready to prevent any movement of the sword toward Ingrid, but he was not ready for what happened.

Images came flooding into his head, memories of the long wars between the Welsh and the Saxons. The bloody battles as Wessex tried to subdue the Briton lands to the west. Art was in one of those battles, Excalibur in his hand. He looked up and saw the Morrigan above him, and across the field, he saw

Ingrid, above the invaders.

For a brief moment, he felt hatred for Ingrid, a hate that was set in his bones. “NO,” he screamed as he threw the sword onto the grass. “No, you foul piece of metal, I will not bend to your will. Once I was foolish and wanted only power and fame, but you will not drag me back. Morrigan! Come collect your trash, it is not for me.”

With that, the sword vanished and Art stood as angry as he had ever been in his life, staring at where it had been. Hildy, who had grown to battle size as soon as Art had touched the sword, moved once more to his pet form. He lowered his head and butted Art on his ankle several times. Art finally looked down at him and burst out laughing, the anger gone. “You aren't going to break my leg like that you silly pig.”

Art then turned and walked to Ingrid who was frozen in fear, eyes wide. Art gathered her into his arms and whispered into her ear, “Did you think a Goddess could come between us? You're my Goddess, only you. If I am indeed some Welsh king from the past, if we opposed each other on a battlefield, we no longer do so. It will take much more than a sword to separate me from you.

“Understand this Ingrid, I love you now, and there is only now. Let's go to the mall and get some lunch.”

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Lunch At The Mall

The food court in the Mall was as crowded as ever. Art got his vaguely Asian food and Ingrid, as usual, went for the shortest line and ended up with something vegan. As they sat to eat, they were both quiet, as if they were reluctant to discuss the yard sale.

Eventually Art had to ask, “So am I King Arthur?”

Ingrid looked up, a fork-full of sprouts half way to her mouth. She put it down and said, “Absolutely not, you would remember if you were alive since 600 or so, and that would put you a couple hundred years older than Jim. No, you’re not King Arthur.”

“What about being asleep in a cave until England needs me some time in the future?”

“First, there was no England in 600, and you were born here in Canada. I mean born, you remember growing up, right? I think if you woke up in a cave, you’d know.”

“Reincarnation then.”

“Ah, there’s a thing, maybe reincarnation, but it would have to be pretty random to be you, here in Guelph, as King Arthur. There’s no particular crisis here, well OK the Giants were a crisis, but... well maybe. You did take the lead while you were here in the lunch counter, and you did end up going to England to fix the weak spots and the Wounded God. I don’t know, maybe, but when you held Excalibur, you rejected it.”

Art reached across the table and took Ingrid's hand, "Is that what you were afraid of, that I'd suddenly be King Arthur once I touched that sword?"

Ingrid dropped her eyes to her plate, "Yes, I was afraid you'd hate me and I'd lose you. That was why the Morrigan put it there for you to find."

"So King Arthur's soul drifts around and finds me, and I find you, and the sword finds me and suddenly I'm full blown King Arthur fighting the Saxons once more? Jesus Ingrid, that seems pretty lame."

"Sure, when you put it that way, but you did feel things when you picked it up, I could see you did."

"I did, I saw that I was fighting an army and you were overhead and the Morrigan was over me and a lot of people were dying. But I also, even then, saw a wonderful woman over there across the field. I also knew, with absolute certainty, that fight was useless, the Britons and the Saxons formed a country, the Danes came in, then the Normans, and the more it was invaded, the more united, the stronger the country became. If it's divided now, it's over modern desires for power and money, not because of some antique tribal ideas of Celts vs Germans. Those ideas get dredged up to separate people, not to unite them.

"Power and money, Gods damn it, and I want neither, or rather I have both, I've got you, you're a Goddess and you're filthy rich." Art said with a grin.

Ingrid squeezed his hand, “I’ll show you filthy later Artie.”

Hildy, under the table said to Art, “If you two are going off somewhere to rut, hand down your food, I’ve finished my burgers.”

The three wandered around the Mall for a while and then started the walk home. As they got to the bridge over the river, Art asked, “Do you ever have an urge to throw money or other things into the water?”

“Not really, except to maybe hear it go plonk, and see the rings go out from the splash. Offerings in the water are a Celtic thing Art, do you get the urge?”

“Yeah, it’s like coins in fountains or wishing wells. It’s just something I’ve always done.”

“Understandable, men need water to live, fresh water is something you can’t go without, and the seas will kill you with storms. It’s a very basic animist instinct, to give things to the spirits of nature. Mostly it’s, ‘please don’t kill me,’ but later it developed into all sorts of negotiations through organizations.”

“You mean churches and paying the priests to talk to the Gods for you.”

“Well why not, you pay lawyers to talk to judges for you don’t you? Trying to get the Gods of the Sea to leave your boat alone by chucking a few coins overboard might not work, but if you’ve got an entire church hierarchy pleading for you, that

voice might be loud enough. I mean a few coins in a spring, sure, but the ocean is huge.”

“Does that work? Can you pay the Gods to leave you alone?”

“No of course not, Art, why would an all-powerful god need a few pennies, or a few prayers? You’re not going to get anything from a bakery if you come in with a few stones from the road. On the other hand, it might make you feel better to give a little to the spirits, maybe give you a bit of comfort, a sort of ‘here’s my dues, now leave me alone’ activity. Think of it as spiritual taxes, which I suppose, tithes to churches actually are.”

“Shiny things are always appreciated,” said a voice from below the bridge.

“Who are you?” said Ingrid.

“You can call me Nibi, this is where I live, in this river.”

“You’re kidding, it’s all damned up and with the traffic noise down Edinburgh, I wouldn’t think you would want to be anywhere near here.”

“Where else am I supposed to go?”

“Oh come on, you can go upstream to Guelph Lake or up the Eramosa to Rockwood. You can go down to the Grand and on to Lake Erie. You’re not stuck here in this poor bit of water.”

“Yes you’re right, and compared to 200 years ago, this river is pretty lame. Still, it’s a place to live. You guys wouldn’t have a

handful of change to throw into the water for the poor water spirit to get a cup of coffee and a meal would you?”

Art looked at Ingrid and dug into his pocket.

“Artie, water sprites don’t need food or drink, let alone coffee, if you want to help the girl, clean up her waterway, sprites get their nourishment from the water, they need it as much as you do.”

“Everyone needs coffee, Ing.”

“Well fine, I suppose you’re right.”

The two continued their walk toward home and Art said, “What about reincarnation, does it happen like that, you touch something and it recalls your past life?”

“You’re kidding, right? There are whole lives floating around the place in second-hand socks, looking for their reincarnated owners? No, that was Excalibur and that was the Morrigan who wanted to mess us up. I’m afraid, Art, that this still doesn’t tell you whether or not you’re King Arthur. But you know, King Arthur wasn’t King Arthur until the legend grew up around him. When I saw him across the battleground I just saw a Romano-British warrior chief, not particularly Celtic, let me tell you. He was thoroughly Christian. All this Celtic stuff came after.”

Art grabbed her hand and said, “Good, I don’t need thousand year old problems, I’ve got some of my own, and a hell of a sweet solution to all my worries.”

“What’s that?”

“You, plum blossom, you.”

~~

The Dinner Party

Art was out buying groceries and admiring all the furniture that had sprouted on the sidewalks. The students had moved on to wherever they are going back to or forward to.

“Do we need a broken down fake leather couch that folds down to a bed, Ingrid?”

“We do not, Art, our ratty old Ikea couch is just fine. Leave it alone.”

They wandered on, “Desk chair?”

“No, Artie I swear you are the cheapest man I've ever met.”

“What? I just never got out of the habit of living like a student. Why should I? Just because we've got money doesn't mean we should replace stuff that doesn't need to be replaced, or turn down free stuff.”

“But the economy!”

“I’ll spank you for that, when we get home.”

“No you won’t, we’re shopping for dinner tonight, remember, you invited Amber and Coyote.”

“Hmph, there’s got to be ten minutes in there somewhere.”

“Since when did a spanking take ten minutes, it’s usually about two hours, so I’m safe, dude.”

“Keep it up... OK here we are, what do you suppose Coyote would like to eat?”

“Road kill?”

“Oh you are so going to get it later.”

“I like road kill,” said Hildy.

“Stop it, I’m begging you, both of you,” said Art, “behave in the store.”

Later that evening, Amber and Coyote arrived and Amber was sitting on the tatty Ikea couch. Amber had a beer and Coyote had a bowl of water he was sharing with Hildy, he was in his old floppy dog shape and the two of them were having fun bumping each other’s head out of the way.

“Come to the table Coy, come sit with us,” called Amber as the table was set.

When the four beings had served themselves and eaten enough

to cut the hunger pangs, they caught up with each other.

“How is the teaching going, Amber.”

“Good, very good, busy. You know, thirty years of schooling and I've ended up as a babysitter. I really need to get hired by the Guelph Youth Music Centre and get some serious students. These private studio gigs are just so depressing. Even if I do get a kid who actually wants to learn, the parents haven't a clue and pull them out for the next fad, like soccer or chess club.”

“Why don't you play up some good students who will come regularly?” asked Coyote.

Amber stared at him for a long moment, “You're serious? Come here you.” She grabbed his ear and in a moment, he nodded his head.

“Oops, Frankenstein's monster, I get it.”

From under the table, Hildy said, “He means well, he really does.”

Amber seemed to hear Hildy too, and nodded as she let go of Coyote's ear, ran her fingers through his hair then patted him on the shoulder. “You've got a good heart Oops,” she said.

Art and Ingrid pretended not to hear that nickname, Art could just imagine what would happen if anyone else called Coyote 'Oops'.

To change the subject, Art asked, “So Coyote, did you really

sing the universe into being?”

Ingrid slapped him hard on his shoulder, but Coyote just smiled and answered, “I really don't know. I might have, I have some sort of vague feeling of doing that a lot of times, singing it in and then out again because I'd screwed it up so much. The thing is, I decided I needed to forget that I did it, so that I'd leave it alone and not sing it away again.”

“Do you think you could sing it away again if you tried?”

Amber was looking dangerously at Art, Ingrid was smiling nicely at Amber and Hildy bit Art hard on the ankle.

Coyote laughed, “I think Amber would be a bit cross with me if I tried.”

“I'd get the rolled up newspaper, Mutt.”

“Well I think that this universe is quite nice anyway. I wouldn't want it to go away, Amber is here, you guys are here, and I've learned to just let things be, since I gave my powers to Amber.”

Amber squeezed his shoulder and said, “And I learned just what a hard time he's had. I nagged him and nagged him to fix things but once I saw how things screwed up when you tried that, I've learned to let things be, too. Men screw things up, Gods screw things up, let them fix it.”

“How about you two, what have you been doing?”

Art and Ingrid looked at each other and Ingrid said, “Not a lot,

really. Just hanging out with each other and being happy. We have sort of thought about having a child, but we're still talking about that.”

Art looked at Ingrid and was about to say 'we are?' when Hildy bit him again.

“That's great!” said Amber, “Isn't that great Coy?”

Coyote was looking out the window and said, “Hmmm?”

To change the subject, Art said, “I have a friend who has asked me to use his cottage any time I want, would you two like to visit it some time?”

“I do get tired of the city once in a while,” said Coyote, “too many people and not enough trees.”

Ingrid, Amber, and Coyote must all have had the same idea, because in the next moment there were three sets of dinner guests around the cottage dinner table. “Oh hell, bad guests,” said Amber and then there was just one set.

“Oh boy,” said Coyote and bolted out the door.

“He'll be gone for hours,” said Amber, “still, it's good for him to get a run once in a while.”

“You're quite fond of him aren't you?” Ingrid said gently.

Amber smiled, “At first he was just a mutt that followed me home, but I fell for him hard, and then when I realized one of

his forms was a man, well...”

“I don't suppose it hurt that he was such a handsome man.”

Amber giggled and leaned forward, Hildy and Art bolted for the living room at the same time.

~~

Morte d'Arthur

“Do you suppose we should have left them at the cabin, Ingrid?”

“Coyote was gone runabout, maybe still gone. Amber is content to sit and enjoy the place for a while, and she'll lock up, she's a very responsible person.”

“So unlike Coyote, it's amazing how such different people end up attracted to each other, isn't it?”

“Yes dear, just amazing. So how is Sam doing over in Europe?”

“She's still pissed off that she had to spend that much money to challenge her next grade. After all, she said, there's enough rank here to do the gradings but they won't do them for some reason. She's getting a bit tired of the nonsense but she still wants to help out, so she spends the money.”

“But she's really good, and having a piece of paper isn't going

to make her any better. If the organization doesn't want people to get the rank, it sounds like someone wants to hold everyone else down, probably to keep a position. That's more or less a universal human instinct, why does she put up with it? It's not like she needs the organization to teach, does she?"

"No, she doesn't, there's nothing to hold her there, but I think part of it is that she wants to get the rank just to piss off the guys in charge. Since it's an international organization she can just step around the do-nothings. All it takes is a lot of money to travel. Unfortunately she doesn't have a lot of money, but she saves for a couple of years so she can do this stuff."

"Doesn't she run seminars and things?"

"Sure she does, but they're so expensive to run that it's a crap shoot whether she breaks even, and if she doesn't, it comes out of her pocket."

"What, this organization she's so supportive of, doesn't support her?"

"She says that if the organization gets involved she won't be able to do the seminars, too much micro-management, too many committees, it would take years to do something she can do in a month."

"Well, she seems to like it."

"She likes the practice, she's still in the organization because her teacher was in. Stubborn girl."

“Yeah we saw that when she followed the big guns into battle.”

“About that, I want to thank you sweetheart, for setting up that meeting with Musashi. I think it helped her a lot.”

“I'm very glad it did, Art. You know, this fresh air with dinner thing made me sleepy, do you want to turn in early?”

“Sure, I'm a bit tired myself, it was a long day.”

Eventually they did actually fall asleep.

Art knew it was a dream, but he wasn't sure he wanted to dream it. “Hildy” he called and the little pig was beside him.

“What the hell is this, and why am I dressed like this? Is Ingrid messing around again?”

“It's not Ingrid, and at a guess I'd say you've decided to see the truth about the noble shining castle on the hill and all that. You're King Arthur and this is definitely not the movie version.”

“Not Camelot?”

“No, this is some god-forsaken castle in the depths of Wales, and from the looks of things, it's under siege by Wessex. Look, you want me to wake you up? This battle is not going well for you.”

“No, not yet Hildi, I think I might be trying to teach myself a lesson.”

“Might be a hard lesson, do you have any idea what these sieges were like?”

“Very nasty by the look of it. These soldiers look half starved and diseased.”

“You shut the gates and hope the enemy goes away, if they don't, you starve to death. It wasn't like the movies.”

“That looks like a big open area inside the walls was that for parades or something?”

“Horses, some would have been ridden out so that the knights could die in battle, the rest would have been eaten long ago. This looks like the end game here, not many men left.”

At that moment, a contingent of men came up to Arthur with a bowl of something horrible looking and offered it to him.

“Don't,” whispered Hildy

Art caught on and said, “Give this to another, I will not accept food while others are hungry.”

“Nice save,” said Hildy after the men had stumbled away, “you might not have liked long pig.”

“Long... oh.”

“Doesn't look like there's much water left either, they're drinking rainwater and it hasn't rained for a while.”

“Why haven't they surrendered? It looks hopeless.”

“They're waiting for relief, probably, help promised but still on the way, or not coming at all. A hell of a lot of these sieges ended with the help never arriving. As for surrendering now, why would the Saxons bother? These are the walking dead. Maybe if one or two are left alive they let them go to tell the story so the next castle siege ends with surrender and slavery.”

“Wait, are you telling me this is the death of King Arthur?”

“Look down at your arms, Art.”

Art did, they were covered with open sores, and now that he paid attention, he could tell he was weak as a kitten, and had a powerful urge to throw up while evacuating his bowels.

When he had done that, Hildy said, “take your pick of diseases, you might have two or three. This is how most soldiers died, and their leaders too. But don't worry, over the years this godforsaken pile of stone will become Camelot, these wretches will become noble knights and you'll become the savior of England. Huzzah.”

“Let's look at the enemy.” Art said, starting to get up, but he fell back into the arms of two men who helped him to the wall. Looking out, he saw a large number of men sitting around campfires. Nowhere near the numbers he would have expected.

“There look like a couple hundred at most out there.”

“Yep, which is why they never tried to take the castle, they just have to keep you in here.”

“They don't look to be in much better shape than we are in here.”

“No trucks full of food and drink, no hospitals, those guys have to forage for what they eat and their streams are probably pretty polluted by now so their water is also crap. That's why there aren't huge numbers of soldiers out there, just enough, they hope.”

“Hildy, would you do me a big favour?”

“Butt you awake?”

“Yes, please.”

Ingrid woke up to Arthur hugging her tightly, “Wazzurp,” she mumbled into her pillow.

“I really and truly don't want to be King Arthur.”

“That's nice, dear.”

And with that they both went back to sleep, joining Hildy who was already snoring quietly.

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Grey Hairs

“Ingrid,” called Art from the bathroom, “could you come here please.”

Ingrid strolled over and said, “What is it?”

“Grey hairs, look, there's grey hairs on my head.”

“Yes? They do appear on men of a certain age, Art. I think they look quite distinguished, they give you a certain air of maturity.”

“But Ingrid, I'm not supposed to be aging, working in the lunch counter made me like Jim right? Really long lived?”

“Let me look, dear,” Ingrid said as she took Art's face in her hands and looked deep into his eyes. Art thought that maybe he could feel her rooting around in his head.

“Hmm, you're right Art, you are aging. I hadn't noticed.”

“But how? I stopped when I took over the lunch counter, how come I'm aging again?”

“You haven't been working for several months dear, maybe you're not getting the perk any more. Maybe it only works while you're there working, rather than being the owner.”

“So what do I do? Go back to work?”

“I suppose that's one solution, if you figure you want to do that.

Mike and Liz are doing a pretty good job there, helping folks in trouble. It's not like they need you to be there.”

“Damn, I thought it was because I owned the place, but come to think of it, I never got a deed from Jim, he was supposed to come back. I guess it is because you're working there. That means Mike and Liz aren't aging. I wonder if they've noticed.”

“It hasn't been that long, Art, and let's face it, everyone thinks they are going to live forever until the day something breaks. Or grey hair shows up.”

“I thought I had centuries...”

“Oh Art, even if you were immortal you might still die in an accident or a fight. Even I could be killed, given enough power facing me, like maybe Megan, Coyote and Stan combined.”

“And Amber?”

“Oh I can't see Amber ganging up on me, can you?”

“I suppose she'd too nice to do that without a hell of a reason.”

“And I could end myself I suppose.”

“Don't talk like that Ingrid. Look, I'm not going to have the time with you that I thought I was going to have, this is really upsetting.”

“Nonsense, Art, I'll just make you immortal.”

“You can do that?”

“Why not? I've never done it before but I can't imagine it's impossible. Most of my powers I discovered by trying something. My rain-control that you love so much happened when I had a new hairdo one day and no umbrella.”

“Ingrid don't joke. This changes everything, all our plans, and I'm not so sure I want you to make me immortal.”

“What are you talking about, Art? You were just upset at finding out you aren't immortal, and now you're not so sure you want to be?”

“When it happened, it was a surprise, and I had no choice in the matter. Now you're asking me if I want it or not. I just don't know.”

Ingrid got quiet, and Art realized she was crying.

“Ingrid?”

She waved her hand at him and said nothing.

“Ingrid, please.”

“But why would you choose to be mortal again, don't you want to be with me any more?”

“Ingrid I'll be with you until I die if you'll let me, what are you talking about? You've had mortal boyfriends before haven't you?”

“Yes, and they're like butterflies, here and gone. If you're mortal again you'll be gone in a moment. Art I don't want to lose you, I thought you'd be with me forever, or at least a thousand years or so until you get tired of me.”

She turned her back and cried some more.

“Ingrid, I would be with you forever, you know that. It's just that now I'm mortal again I'm not sure I should be immortal. What right do I have to live more than I'm intended to live.”

Ingrid spun around, angry.

“Intended by whom? Art, intended by whom? Some God who declares you've only got three score and ten? Well this Goddess says you can have thousands more, you hear me. I'm doing it right now!”

“Ingrid, don't. I have to think about this. Let's talk, please.”

Art put his arm around her and took her to the couch. He left her to calm down a bit and went to the kitchen to make some sandwiches and coffee. When he got back, Ingrid wasn't crying or yelling at least. She still looked upset.

“Art what's your problem? You were immortal before and you had no problem with it. Coyote made Amber a Goddess and now she's immortal, although I'm not sure she realizes it yet. Why all of a sudden are you hesitating?”

“I'm not sure, sweetheart, just a moment ago I was upset

because I wasn't going to live forever, now I'm not sure I want to. It doesn't make any sense to me either, but something is bothering me.

“Look, we're pretty sure I'm not King Arthur returned, I'm just a kid from Guelph. What do I have to offer you forever? Forever is a really long time. You and Woody aren't together any more, I'm not sure you will want me around forever, which would mean that I'd be without you forever. God this is freaking me out.

“Do I deserve to live forever, while the rest of the world hardly makes it to 80 or 90? What makes me special?”

“Oh Art, you are such a good man. The very fact that you're worried about those things makes you good enough to live forever. It really does. Most men and women in history would jump at the chance to live forever, and you're worrying about it. You have no idea how rare that is, you're the most unselfish being I've come across, ever.

“You are worried about losing me forever? Well what do you think I'll feel like, living forever while you were here and gone like a flicker of heaven given and snatched away from me. Artie please, I don't want to think about it.”

“What if we have kids, Ingrid, and I outlive them? Parents should never outlive their kids.

“What if our kids are immortal? They'll spend their lives without a clue who you are.”

“Ingie, I just need to think about this for a while, and I can't say why. I just wish I hadn't been given the choice.”

“And I wish I'd noticed and just made you immortal without you noticing, my love. But now we need to deal with it.

“Look, if you decide to stay mortal, I will love and take care of you for your whole life. If we have kids, I will cherish them like I cherish you. You know, even Gods have no real knowledge of the future. We can be destroyed, relationships might not endure, we might fall in love with a mortal. All of this is tough, but we live with it. I'm no different than a human girl talking with a boy.”

“Well maybe a little, love, maybe a little. But why didn't you make your mortal boyfriends immortal? Why don't other gods?”

“Not everyone can do that, and I have a feeling that if I make you immortal it will cost me a lot. I told you I'm not sure I can, but it feels like I can. It also feels like it won't be easy. I don't know, but maybe I lose half my immortality, maybe I lose half my power, maybe you end up a God. I just don't know.”

“But you want to do it.”

“Of course I do Artie, if you don't know how much I love you by now, you're a stupid, stupid man.”

“We men are pretty stupid, that's for sure. And I guess I have trouble believing anyone could love someone like me.”

“Stupid,” said Ingrid as she hugged Art hard.

“OK you've convinced me that I would be selfish to stay mortal, and that it would hurt you, so go ahead and make me immortal.”

“No.”

“What?”

“No, Art, I'm not going to do that because I've made you feel guilty. There's a couple of years before you die, when you decide what you want, for yourself, then we'll do that. Anyway, like I said, a little grey makes you look damned good.”

“Ingie, I'm overthinking this aren't I?”

“What else is new, my love, but I'm going to wait for your decision. Go talk with Amber, or Jim or whoever you want. Hell go talk to John Childress, who is just panting to get in bed with Eldwife and get the pattern so he can stay with Penelope forever. But make up your own mind.”

Art decided a topic change would be a good idea, “You want to go out for dinner and a movie tonight?”

“Hell yes, I do.”

Hildy was in the bedroom rolling his eyes and shaking his head. He hoped it was a good movie.

~~

Art's Decision

“Ingrid I ache all over.”

“Oh come on, I wasn't that rough on you last night.”

“We could discuss that, but I'm not talking about bruises, I ache, my joints are not talking to me, they're complaining at me.”

Ingrid looked as if she was going to say something but gave a small shake of her head and said, “Maybe an aspirin sweetheart.”

Art looked down, then back up again, “It's only going to get worse, isn't it?”

“Oh Artie, don't take this the wrong way, but it's in your head. You're a young man still, you're probably paying attention to aches you always had but never noticed.”

“You mean I'm a hypochondriac now?”

“No, not at all, I mean when you know you've got years and years, you don't pay attention to little pains, but when you're getting older, you feel them.”

“So if I went back to the lunch counter the pains would go away?”

“You're not listening, no they wouldn't go away, you would just ignore them. This return to mortality is really bothering you, isn't it? Look you've got decades left, it's just that you don't have centuries left, and so you're reacting to that. Your body hasn't changed since yesterday, your attitude has.”

“I'm sorry for that Ingie, I really am. I just don't know what I want. I'm pretty sure I want you to make me immortal, but I've got to be honest, I'm still worrying about it.”

“What can I do to help? What are you worrying about?”

“First, will it hurt you? You mentioned that making me immortal might diminish you in some way and I wouldn't want that.”

“Art, we don't know that it will, and even if it does, the Gods aren't going to have to fight the Giants any time soon. Even if we do, it won't matter if I live or die, if the Gods win or lose, the world will end either way.”

“OK but what if I end up immortal but my body ages, and I end up a million year old husk begging to die.”

“You've been reading again haven't you? Art I'm not a Djinn, I'm your girlfriend. I'd kill you long before you get to that stage.”

Art stared at Ingrid for a long time before she smiled and said, “Joke, lover, a joke.”

Hildy butted Art's ankle as if to say 'I knew it was a joke.'

“Ingrid I think I should go talk to Jim, can we visit him?”

“Hey, Art and Ingrid, how are you guys I haven't seen you for quite a while. How are you both?”

Art barely got his balance in time to drop into a chair in Jim's front hall. He threw a dirty look at Ingrid who was the picture of innocence. Hildy hopped up on his lap.

Ingrid looked around and said, “Where's Hugo? I have a thirst and I'm sure he knows where you keep the beer.”

“So do you Ingrid, he's in the billiards room.”

“Cool, see ya.”

Jim turned to Art, “How are you doing son? You want a beer too?”

“It's coffee time for me, but yes, I would love a beer and a talk Jim.”

When the beers were delivered and Jim was sitting beside Art he said “Chimo, Artie.” They both drank, Art a lot deeper than Jim would have expected. He signalled for refills and said, “What's up kid, what's bothering you?”

“Jim you know that I was ageless while I was working at the lunch counter, yes?”

“I knew no such thing, is that true?”

“Yes, I thought you would have noticed that, it seems like the lunch counter keeps you from aging.”

“Why would I notice? I was ageless when I bought the place, you can't be double ageless can you?”

“Oh hell, well anyway I was ageless, but now I have started aging again. I'm getting grey hairs and aches and pains, the whole deal.”

“Yeah? I hear that happens.”

“Thanks for the sympathy, but I didn't expect that it would. Anyway, I'm aging again and Ingrid has said she can make me immortal.”

“She can? That's news to me, I've never seen her do it for anyone.”

“For, not to. That's interesting you would describe it like that Jim. So you think it would be a good thing?”

“Oh, it's like that is it? Artie, you always did over-think things. You don't know if you want to be immortal right?”

“Well yes, I didn't have any choice about being ageless in the diner, it just happened to me, but now that I have a choice...”

“A choice? Art do you know how many people would lie, steal, and kill to be immortal?”

“But they don't know what they're getting into, they're just afraid to die.”

“Art, it's good to see you haven't changed, you're still a nice guy. People want to live forever for power, and folks like that don't really believe they'll ever die because they figure they're too important to die.”

“You're not like that Jim.”

“I sure as hell am, when I realized I was ageless I started changing the way I fought, and I started accumulating money big time.”

“But you don't spend your time bossing people around.”

“Ask my family about that, but Art, being in charge isn't power. Being able to say ‘go to hell’ to those who want to boss you around, that's power. Doing what you want is power, and money lets you do that. Mind you, having no desire for money also gives you that. Knowing you will outlive every stupid person you know, now that's real power.”

“Does power make you happy?”

“Nope, but it doesn't hurt. I know lots of people with no power at all who are happy, and I know lots of powerful people who are miserable.”

“What about you, Jim, you seemed to be grumpy most of the time while I was growing up.”

“Being stressed and irritated isn't prevented by happiness Art, I was always a grumpy person but I'm damned happy now I've got Elly back.”

What about the other immortals, are they happy?”

“You mean, will you get bored and unhappy if you live forever?”

“Well, Coyote... “

“Coyote is one of the happiest beings I know, Art, he was just stressed and upset that he couldn't fix the world. Now he's got Amber he's, well, he spends most of his time as a big, friendly, floppy old dog. They tell me he walks around on a lease, with Amber holding it.”

“He does, it freaks everyone out, but maybe that's why he does it.”

Jim laughed and called for a couple more beers.

“Jim I just don't know, I'm a little bored now that I'm home with Ingrid all the time. What will happen in a hundred years?”

“You'll figure it out. All of us have found things that keep us interested in life, you will too. You're still young, you figure you ought to work and now that you're not, you're a bit lost. That's the way you were raised, Art, and I probably helped promote that by insisting you do your homework and work around the diner for your meals. But that was to make you

understand that you're in charge of your own happiness.”

“You mean, in charge of earning the food I ate?”

“Food makes you happy son, work makes sure you don't get bored or fat getting it.”

“Jim I don't know if I can decide this. What should I do? What would you do?”

“First, I didn't have a choice, and neither did anyone else I know who is ageless, so it's got to be your choice. You know, you might actually be the first being that had a genuine choice, as opposed to those who ended up getting suckered by tricksters.”

“I kind of worried about that, like I can't die but I can get old.”

“Do you honestly think Ingrid would do that to you? Second, since you're asking me, I watched you grow up, you were a nice boy and you're still a nice man. From a selfish point of view, I'd like you to stick around. I can't think of anyone who deserves it more. I honestly don't know why you're thinking about it. Just because you have a choice doesn't mean you have to make a choice. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, I think it does. You say I over-think things, maybe I should just do what you and Ingrid want me to do and be happy with making you happy.”

“Yeah, something like that kid, or just understand how unhappy your death would make us.”

“Alright, I’ll get Ingrid and... “

Ingrid and Hugo were in the room, along with Elly, John and Penelope.

“This is cool,” said John, “watching someone be made immortal, what an amazing thing.”

Jim looked disgusted, “Elly, sleep with him and put him out of his misery will you? Please?”

Elly and Penelope grinned at each other.

Ingrid was looking serious, “There are some others who should be here, can I call them Jim.”

“Of course you can, and you’re right, they have a stake in this too.”

Ingrid closed her eyes and soon Amber, Coyote, Megan and Stan were in the room.

Ingrid smiled and said, “Art has decided that I can try to make him immortal. You probably noticed that he had become mortal again, and he’s thought it over. Since you are the powers in Guelph, I thought you might have something to say before I try this.”

Amber spoke up, “Can you do this Ingrid? Will you be all right?”

Megan and Stan looked hard at Ingrid who replied, “I’ve never done it, but why not? So far, I’ve been able to do anything I’ve tried. You four and Hugo can keep an eye on Art and on me to make sure it doesn’t go sideways.”

Coyote looked around and said, “Who’s Art?” Which earned him a tug on the ear by Amber.

Megan and Stan looked at each other and nodded, “Go ahead.”

They all looked at Art who said, “Um, hang on, you all seem to think this could hurt Ingrid, I’m not agreeing to it if there’s a chance she could be hurt.”

The assembled crowd gave a chorus of “Oh shut up Art,” and “Attaboy,” and “Isn’t he nice.”

And that was it. Art felt nothing, Ingrid smiled, and Jim said, “Beers all around.”

“Any super powers?” John said hopefully.

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The Morning After

Ingrid and Hugo had spent most of the night in another of their epic drinking contests so Ingrid had got to bed late and horny. That meant Art was somewhat bleary-eyed as he peered into the mirror that morning.

“Ingrid, there’s still grey hairs.”

“So pull them out, did you want me to give you reverse-aging? That would mean that you would be a baby and pop out of existence in about forty years.”

“Um, no I guess I’ll just leave them there. Has anything changed? Like, am I now this age forever rather than aging super slowly?”

“We never bothered to figure out what kind of non-aging the diner gave you dear, so we don’t know. We could go check Mike and Liz if it’s important.”

“Well what about other things, will your sword still recognize me?”

“Hildy does, but come on out and we’ll see.”

As Art stepped from the bathroom to the bedroom he jumped, “What the... who is that in bed with you?”

“What? Oh she’s one of the staff, she was serving Hugo and I last night and she passed out. Hugo wouldn’t take her like that, so I threw her into our bed. You don’t mind do you?”

“I guess not, just don’t ask me to sleep with her when she wakes up, even if you say you don’t mind and the girls get made part of the family if they get pregnant, it bothers me. Shit, wait, that was you last night wasn’t it?”

“You’re a peach, Art. Yes it was me, but I was kind of hoping...”

“No you weren’t, you’re just yanking my chain now.”

“Yes of course, that’s it Artie, I’m kidding, sure, absolutely.”

Hildy, denied a show, hopped off the bed and trotted out the door to find some food.

“You know, Jim has some weird house rules.”

“They’re really not, Art. Consider that the girls are tremendously attracted to Jim’s squad, even if they don’t know their history, those guys have an aura of bad-boy around them. Making the girls part of the family if they get pregnant is only fair, and Jim has strict rules about anyone forcing any of the staff into bed, not that the squad would ever do such a thing.

“The fighters have no need to prove themselves in any way, their manhood is as secure as you’ll ever see in anyone. In a word, Artie, rape is not something a man or a woman associated with this bunch would think of. But if anyone ever does, well there’s a certain field way at the back of the estate where crops grow really well.”

“Jesus, Ingrid...”

“You think of Jim almost like a father, Art, but fathers often have some pretty nasty history. Jim started out as a guerrilla fighter, and stayed in the profession for hundreds of years before going off to find a shaman and some peace. He’s a

lovely being now, but that hard core is in there somewhere.

“Anyway, here,” the sword was in her hand and she threw it at Art.

Art caught it by reflex, but then thought how stupid that was. Still, nothing happened, it sort of vibrated like it was snuggling into his hand and it managed to look smug.

As Art was wondering how a sword might look like anything but a sword, the girl in the bed woke up, looked at Art waving a sword around and screamed in an ‘eek’ sort of way.

Ingrid fell back on the bed laughing and said “Shame on you Art for scaring poor Marie, now you owe her a hug.”

Art opened his hand and the sword vanished, he was confused enough to move around the bed to the girl’s side and open his arms. Marie threw off the covers and revealed a very nice body that was completely naked as she threw herself into Art’s arms.

Art staggered back three steps under the impact while Ingrid kicked her feet and howled.

Art looked at Ingrid and said, “alright you minx, you’re going to get it now. Marie, grab her arms and roll her over, she’s getting a spanking.”

Marie instantly dove across the bed and grabbed Ingrid’s arms. Ingrid was rolled onto her stomach and Art wailed away on her lovely butt while she kicked her feet and squealed.

When her ass was glowing red, Art stopped and said, “there, now behave,” as he walked back into the bathroom to shave.

Marie was saying, “Oh your poor bum,” and reaching for it when Art closed the door.

When he opened it again, the covers were pulled up and mysterious things were going on under them. Art decided to follow Hildy and find some food.

The breakfast room was well supplied and the seats around the table were mostly occupied. There was a lively debate going on about something or other, but Art ignored that as he found a seat next to Jim.

“How do you feel this morning Art?”

“No different, really, which I take to be a good thing.”

“No urges to fly around or manifest a big spear?”

“You don’t think I’ve got Ingrid’s powers do you?”

“Can’t say, if she’s never done that before, maybe you do. The others were there supervising, maybe they know. Hey Megan, do you think Art got some of Ingrid’s powers?”

Megan looked up from her oatmeal and frowned. “Ingrid’s powers are mostly hidden, she just tries and it either happens or it doesn’t. It would likely be that way with Art.”

Jim looked at Art with speculation in his eye, “Then maybe we

ought to test the boy, who's got a gun handy, shoot him and see what happens."

Megan grinned but Art waved his hands and shouted, "No, let's not."

Jim laughed and said, "Hmm, no mystical shield manifesting."

The rest of the table was watching by then, and Coyote said, "Maybe I can try biting him."

That set off a round of suggestions as to how to test Art's possible powers. Art bent his head to his oatmeal and muttered, "If I'm going to die I want to do it on a full stomach."

Just then Ingrid showed up looking a bit flushed and said, "Nobody is to test my boyfriend, that's my job," to general laughter.

When she collected her first plate of breakfast and sat down on the other side of Art, she looked up and down the table. She noticed John sitting next to Eldwife. "Hey, maybe we ought to test John."

Jim looked up sharply at John, like he was seeing him for the first time that morning and then looked over at Elly, who winked. Penelope leaned in from the other side and hugged John's arm.

Jim looked back at John and said, "We know damned well what your powers are kid, and you can die from pretty near anything so don't get cocky."

John had the decency to look sheepish, or as sheepish as he could, with two women hugging his arms from either side. Jim shook his head and went back to his breakfast.

As Marie brought another heaping plate to Ingrid and got a pat on the bottom for her efforts, Art asked, “What’s happening around here Jim?”

“It’s all pretty quiet. We’ve got the usual repairs to the manor house and the outbuildings, and we’re re-wilding some of the fields that have been farmed for five hundred years. They need a rest. Beyond that, it’s blissfully boring.”

“Have you heard from Gil?”

“No, and we probably won’t until that war is over.”

Before Art could get broody about that, Ingrid said, “Who’s for a walk to the pub for lunch?”

“Good lord, Ingrid, you’re not even done your third plate,” said Jim.

“Well the walk will give us an appetite won’t it?”

At that point, Hugo walked in flanked by a pair of lovely girls. He looked at John and said, “It’s getting damned crowded around here Jimmy.”

Jim smiled and said “too bad we’re out of the business, the squad would be up to full muster.”

Before Hugo could reply, Ingrid said, “Not a chance you old goats, you got out of that business, so stay out. And stop looking at Art!”

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The Symphony

“It was really nice of Amber to give us tickets to this show,” said Ingrid, loudly.

“Shh, you’re supposed to be quiet at the symphony.”

“Are you kidding Art? How does the composer know if his work is any good if we don’t hoot and holler and throw vegetables? There’s a good soup in the vegetables for the musicians after the show you know, that’s why a good composer would write a crappy section, or one that’s too modern, to get the audience to unload onto the stage.”

“What, you’re kidding me, and you’re still too loud.”

“Oh relax, I’ve silenced us, we won’t disturb anyone, not like that woman over there checking her cell phone, or the guy behind us coughing his lungs out.”

“Well OK. I guess we can talk then.”

“What would be the fun if we couldn’t, right sweetie?”

“Look, there’s Amber in the violas and hey, she’s got a braid just like yours Ingie.”

“That’s so nice of her, I think she really wants us to see this, whatever it is.”

“It says there that this is Mahler’s Second symphony.”

Ingrid clapped her hands, “Really, Mahlie was such a show-off, and had no respect for us Gods at all, I loved him. He called this one the Resurrection or some such, but he really made the priests angry by saying that everyone gets to rise up at the end, not just the ones the church said were eligible. You should have heard the stink.”

“Here’s the conductor, apparently he’s new here at the KW symphony, it says here he’s got the job for the next four years.”

“Really, let’s hope he makes it, he looks too skinny for a conductor, but at least they gave him a rail to keep the audience off him.”

“What are you going on about Ingie, the audience doesn’t attack the conductor!”

“No? Hey, things have changed since I was hanging around with Mahler. He used to enjoy the fights, there was one conductor that could put your eye out with his baton quick as a wink. Get it, ‘quick as a wink’,” said Ingrid, elbowing Art hard.

“I got it, now be quiet, they’re starting, wow that’s a lot of taka

taka taka for the strings.”

“Yeah, Mahlie once yelled out ‘We’re really sawing now!’ at one of the performances.”

“He did not, Ingie you’re terrible.”

“I swear, Artie, he really did. He also wrote instructions like ‘Stubborn, but just kidding’ in the score, where others would have written ‘slow’ or some such. He was a lot of fun.”

“It says here there’s over 200 down there counting the choir, is that usual?”

“Not since musicians got unionized. Did you hear the guy beside Amber when they said they’d be delaying the start because there were so many people still in line to get in?”

“No of course I didn’t, what did he say.”

“The instant they announced it, he poked the guy in front and said ‘overtime’.”

“He never.”

“He did, you ask Amber after the concert.”

“Symphony.”

“Whatever.”

“Oh lord, they’ve put the solo singers right in front of the

French horns. I can't watch those guys, they look like they're pretending to drive a car as they flip those things around and pull the spit valve out, look at them shake those things. I can't watch."

"Oh Artie, you have no appreciation for a being with that much moisture in their tongues. I knew one horn player that..."

Art put his fingers in his ears and repeated, "Lalalala" while Ingrid smiled and nudged him with her shoulder.

"Now what are they doing, they keep getting up and going backstage."

"That's where the beer is Artie."

"What? The conductor lets them go for a pint in the middle of the performance?"

"No, not really, he'd never get them back onstage. No there's a lot of backstage music in this piece, it's really huge."

"Oh, that's why I couldn't figure out who was playing just now, they're off stage. I just thought my eyes were failing."

"Look, see, here come a lot of french horns back onstage."

"Ewww, there's more than ever and they're all shaking out the spit again."

"This is the Resurrection, Artie, not the Underwater. They have to do that."

“But they’ve plugged up the exit, the percussion guys can’t get out now.”

Ingrid was laughing, “plugged up!”

“Oh grow up woman. Damn, there’s someone’s phone again, talk about rude.”

“Artie, that’s the triangle. For a guy who loved making as much noise as he could, Mahler was in love with the triangle. Or rather with a triangle player. He put a lot of triangle into his work.”

“Weird, and what the heck was that? Those two percussion players just switched places, one guy was playing the edge of the bass drum, that tightener bar, tap tap.... Tap tap... and then the other guy came in and played a whole string of taps.”

“Oh, that’s union rules dear, percussion players get paid by the note and the second guy has more seniority so he plays when there’s lots of taps.”

Art looked suspiciously at Ingrid but she was looking quite serenely toward the stage. He kept staring and she cracked, a huge laugh as she said, “You should see your face.”

“Yeah, well it looks like the drummers are getting paid well, half the french horn players have their fingers in their ears now.”

“You would too if you were sitting right next to the snare

drums.”

“You know, there’s a hundred people in the choir and they haven’t sung a note, are they going to get paid at all?”

“Wait for it baby, it will come.”

And sure enough, the choir started some sort of rumble in the background. “So that’s why they’ve all got masks on, to muffle their voices?”

“Yes dear, Mahler wrote ‘choir of hundreds with cloth over their faces’ here.”

Art just let that one go. As the music built and built, Art could swear he saw the trombones hitting the heads of the players in front, with their slides, and the bass players trying to play the instrument next to them. He elbowed Ingrid and that stopped. “So was that you, when the violas were all playing like guitars?”

“No, that wasn’t me Art, that must have been the conductor’s choice, it was cool wasn’t it? All string players secretly wish they played guitar anyway.”

“I’m telling Amber you said that... Woah, look at that, Amber is floating up over everyone else, this must be the resurrection scene, are they doing it by wires?”

“No dearest, you and I are the only ones who see that, Amber is saying hello to us. She’s got a pretty wicked sense of humour herself, Mahler would have loved her for that move. Not to

mention her playing.”

“You can pick her out of the rest?”

“Sure, and she’s great, I bet the conductor loves watching her, she’s totally into the music. A lot of older professionals play it safe, but not Amber, she’s pushing it.”

“Well I hope she’s being careful, it would be a bit of a shock if she played a couple hundred coyotes into the hall.”

“Might wake up some of these oh so quiet audience members. To hear this silence Mahlie would have figured he had a failure.”

“Holy doodlebug, he’s got every singer and instrument just pounding it.”

“Yep, always leave ‘em astonished, and a little deaf, that’s what my boy always said. It was good wasn’t it?”

“All except those french horns.”

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Weasels in the Kitchen

“Hildy, get in here.”

“What’s up Art?”

“Just look, I opened the oven to make some cheesy toast and weasels came out, I went to the closet for a broom and more weasels, I opened the cupboard to get some pots to hold them, and even more weasels. What the hell, Hildy.’

“It looks like you've got weasels Art.”

“I know that, where did they come from!”

“Well you said the oven, the closet and the cupboard.”

“Hildy chase them down and get rid of them!”

“Can I eat them?”

“No! Just let them go, down in the Pits or get Ingrid to magic them into the woods or something, get them out of my kitchen... wait, Ingrid, did she do this?”

“She's still asleep Art, unless she dreamed them up it wasn't her.”

“Well get rid of them, will you please.”

While Hildy ran the weasels down, generally making a mess of the place, Art went back to making breakfast. Just as he was flipping the last of the eggs and loading two plates for Ingrid and one for himself, the girl in question wandered out of the bedroom. “I had the weirdest dream last night,” she said.

“Not wounded gods, please tell me not that guy.”

“No, no it was about...”

“Let me guess, weasels.”

“How did you know that?”

“Lucky guess, take a look out the window.”

As she did, Hildy was running down the street, herding thirty or forty weasels like they were sheep and he was a sheepdog. Ingrid had a good laugh as she said, “Yep, good guess Art.”

“Sit down sweetie, here's your breakfast and the coffee is just about done.”

“Art Pendry, you are a peach.”

“I sure am, and here's the newspaper. I don't know how you can read the news, it seems to be getting worse these days.”

“How do you mean, love?”

“Well, in my mother's time the Planned Parenthood organization was illegal, and women had got the vote not too long before that. When I got to this town we were fighting against the Vietnam war, and women's rights were improving, not to mention abortion became legal a decade later. Same in the States, but now it looks like the Supreme Court down there is going to ban abortion again, and our right wing party wants to ban it too. They're just real quiet about it, like the judges who said the law was established and clear, and then said

different once they were appointed.”

“Oh sweetie, culture is not an unbroken series of improvements, it's a jangled mess of forward and back again. Humans love to get upset about things, and they are some of the worst manipulators of all beings. Lots worse than the Gods.

“Mostly it's a few men or women who want to get into power and stay there so they can line their pockets. Those guys often campaign on “cleaning up the corruption” and then get stuck into the trough like Hildy once they get elected. The folks rising to the top these days are the 'holier than thou' types who want to go back to the 'good old days' where women were no better than slaves.”

“Jesus Ingrid, that's such a cynical thing to say.”

“Art, cultures advance or decline by generations, and by charismatic leaders who, once in a while, have the interests of their people at heart, rather than their own bank accounts. Look, you complained a while ago that society seems to be getting split into two camps that can't talk to each other. Well that's good, it means you can figure out who's on which side. Stupid or smart, greedy or generous, call it what you want. One group will be for women's rights and one will be against. That makes it easy to pick, one way or the other.”

“What happens if the wrong side wins?”

“Things go their way for a while, and when the old men who are making money off of this stuff die, it often swings the other way. During your lifetime things improved quite a bit, your

generation as a whole, wasn't particularly interested in 'going along to get along,' like their parents were. They made waves, they fought for what they thought was right. Well the next generations, unsurprisingly, rebelled against the parents, they wanted money, not words. And your generation, once they started raising kids, mostly shut up too, so they could raise those kids. It will change.”

“It's just so unbelievable that people let this stuff slide backward.”

“What are you willing to do about it, Art.”

“Well I vote to keep the backward forces out when I can.”

“And when they get so much power that they can't be voted out? Will you go and assassinate their leaders? Will you break the law to fix the elections?”

“You're nuts, I won't do that.”

“And now you know why this stuff whipsaws back and forth. The true believers are willing to do that because they know they are right, and if they're religious, they figure they will be rewarded in heaven.”

“Oh my God, let's not talk about this any more I'm totally depressed now.”

“OK, but just remember Art, each generation improves the culture, provided they get an education. It goes backward when education becomes something to be despised. The key is right

there for any culture. So, what are we doing today?"

"Well I thought we'd have a walk downtown, maybe drop in to the lunch counter to say hello, and then in the afternoon Sam and I are heading down to Port Credit for the monthly class."

"How is Sam? Did she pass her grading overseas?"

"No, she said she had to try but didn't really expect to pass, she was a stranger to the grading panel and they had a maximum percentage of folks they could pass. So of course they passed their own. They like it when foreigners come, that means they can pass more of theirs."

"And she goes along with that?"

"I don't get it either, but she says it's part of supporting the system her teacher was in."

"I wonder if her teacher would support the system he was in, if it's changed as much as you say it has."

"From what she's told me of him, I somehow doubt it, but it's her life. Anyway we're headed down to practice so I'll probably be late back."

"Well try not to hurt yourself again, you know I like you healthy, and remember you're ageless not immortal."

"How do we know?"

"How's your leg?"

“It hurts like hell, who would have suspected you could wrench your knee in bed?”

“Well it's your own fault.”

Art's mouth dropped open. “Well it is,” said Ingrid, “you're the one who said yes to a new position.”

Art turned away to get them some more coffee.

~~

An Ordinary Day

You know when it says in a book, something like, 'It was just another ordinary day.' You know something is going to happen right? Well this was just an ordinary day for Art and Ingrid. As much as their days are ever ordinary.

The lovebirds were heading into Jim's Lunch Counter. Mike was behind the counter and dropped a couple of coffees on the counter as they walked in.

“Hey guys, haven't seen you around for a while. Have you been avoiding the place?”

“As a matter of fact, we have been. It's always exciting around here and we've wanted some quiet time together,” said Art.

“Fair enough,” said Mike, “but you picked the wrong day to come in. They found a dead Goddess over on Water Street.”

“What? How could that happen? Who is it,” said Art, snapping his head around to look at Ingrid.

“I'm right here Artie, not dead. But we can die, lover, from many things.”

“Well don't. I just got my mojo back thanks to you, and I want to spend a lot of time with you. Do they know who it is, Mike?”

“Not yet, it's nobody Megan recognizes and she keeps track of the old blood.”

“Could it be someone new, someone who's just come into Godhood like Amber?”

“No idea, Art, Megan has called in some help from across the pond to see if someone from over there can tell who it is. Ingrid, maybe you can take a look, you're from Europe. She's just downstairs in the big freezer.”

Ingrid sat still for a while and then said, “I don't think so Mike, I'm sure I wouldn't know who it was, and anyway, looking at a dead Goddess would depress me a lot.”

Art looked at her with a frown, and when Mike walked down the bar to pour Larry another cup, said, “That's not like you Ingrid, you're usually quite helpful.”

“Just leave it Art, I don't want to get involved.”

“Aren't you even curious to know who they've called in from Europe?”

“It will be Woody. He's the judge, arbiter and executioner for us. Look, let's get out of here, take a walk in the Arboretum.”

Art watched her for a few more moments and then said, “Sure, let's go.”

Before they could get out the door, Woden walked in behind Megan. He looked the same as when he was over for dinner, but Art thought there was something different, something more. He had the same features, was the same size, but something... It was the eyes, they were hard. Where they were kindly and friendly in a rough and ready sort of way before, they were, well there was no other way to say it. They were hard like diamonds. There was no mercy there, certainly no friendliness.

“Ingrid, who is it?” he said as he entered, without even a look at Art.

“I don't know Woody, I haven't looked.”

“What, why not? Come with us.”

As they went down to the bar, Art followed along. He didn't have a good feeling about this at all. As they got to the freezer, Ingrid was hanging back but Art was sure he was the only one who noticed.

Woden took one look, whipped his head around to look at Ingrid, and said "I'm sorry love, it's the Morrigan."

Art was shocked, "What, we saw her just a couple of days ago, she got me to handle Excalibur and tried to convince me I was King Arthur. Trying to cause Ingrid some problems."

He looked at Ingrid and was shocked again to see her crying. "What is it Ingrid? She was an enemy of yours, wasn't she?"

"Woody softened up a bit, "She was her sister, Art."

"What? No that can't be, Ingrid is from a different set of Gods isn't she? Celts and Saxons."

"Boy, those are boxes you humans put around us. The Morrigan and Ingrid were sisters, same powers, same meanings for Men. Ingrid, I am very sorry, and I will find who did this and kill them. This I promise to you."

Ingrid nodded and said, "Artie, let's go, I need to get into the woods and clear my head."

With that, Art walked her back outside and they headed to the Arboretum. Once there, Ingrid sat on a bench and stared off into the shadows for a while. Art sat quietly beside her.

Eventually she leaned into his arm and sighed. "Can you talk about it, Ingrid?"

"I guess, I could feel her loss as soon as Mike said she was

dead. I was hoping she had just gone back to the UK but, oh damn it all anyway.”

“But you said she was trying to kill you when we saw her. She was your opposition in the old days, and she tried to split us up.”

“Shit, Art, it's family, surely you know about that? We fought, she hated me, we picked sides, but we were the same essence. Sure I disliked her, she was horrible to me, but Artie, she was family.”

“Will Woody find who did this?”

“Absolutely he will, and when he does... oh hell, just hold me will you please.”

Art opened his coat, put it around her as much as he could and squeezed hard. They sat for a long time and then Ingrid stood and led them past the place where she had fought the Wild Hunt for his life.

During all this time, Hildy had been quiet, he kept out of eyesight as well. Art sat down by the tree where he had waited while the fight went on, and Ingrid wandered a little. “Hildy, Ingrid seems really upset about this.”

“Of course she is, Art, Gods and Goddesses don't die, they just don't. They can, but who would do it? It would have to be someone with tremendous power, or several other Gods together. Megan can hurt any of the Gods badly, but she would need Stan and probably someone else like Ingrid to destroy

one. Maybe Coyote could do it by himself.”

“Is she worried that there is some sort of God killer out there.”

“No, she's a war God, she's quite willing to fight anyone, any time. It's her existence. No she's more worried about not being able to fight whoever did this. She's got to leave it to Woden, that's the rules. She's feeling helpless and she really is mourning for the Morrigan, despite the fights they have had through the centuries.”

“I still don't get how those two were sisters.”

“It's not like humans, Art. They came from the same, oh call it an urge, they came from the same urge, the same primal category? Look, Man wages war, right? War is made when the crops have been harvested, and after a war, you have to replace the dead fighters. So War, Nature and Love. That's where Ingrid came from and that's where the Morrigan came from, or rather, that's what they came to represent to humans. Damn it, that's too simplistic.”

“I think I understand a little, Hildy, thanks. What can I do for her?”

“What you have been doing, Art, be here for her.”

~~

The Investigation Begins

Woden turned to Megan and said, “This is your side of the

ocean, I thank you for calling me, and since it is one of ours I feel I should be judge. Do you agree with that?"

"I have no objections."

"Good, but this is your country, so I would like to ask you to help me investigate, and to witness all that I do here. Is that agreeable?"

"It is. We have no idea who did this and it could be one of ours as easily as one of yours. I will assist and I will witness."

"Good, now what do you see here?"

"I see a dead Goddess, but no wounds on her front. However, if we turn her over, there is a large slash across her back, upper right to lower left that has split the spinal column."

"Not suicide then?"

"Not suicide, and I detect no poisons or drugs in her body. No signs of a defence, so I would say she was surprised from behind, death would have been very quick. Could this be an ordinary blade?"

"No, the Morrigan was as powerful as Ingrid, and no ordinary blade could kill her. This was a God's blade. Or it was self-inflicted, a Goddess could let her defences down, but a Goddess could not slice herself across the back like that. I agree with you on all that you see. She was surprised from behind and she was killed with a God's weapon."

“Megan turned to the Kobolds and said, “We have seen all there is to see here, you can put her back into the fridge. We are sorry for this trouble to you.”

Ken shook his head, “Not a problem, we need to find whoever did this, and figure out why. We'll help all we can.”

Woden spoke up, “May we use your bar to interview witnesses?”

“Of course, it's yours for as long as you need it, Allfather.”

“I thank you. Who found the body?”

Megan answered, “It was Nibi, the water spirit, she is one of ours and she lives in the river near where she found the body.”

“Perhaps you should question her.”

“Very well, Nibi.” The mermaid walked in from the hallway where she had been waiting.

“How did you discover the body?”

“I was swimming and noticed the smell of death near the water, I left the river and found the body. When I did I could tell it wasn't human so I called on the Kobolds to come get her and take her to this place where the old peoples gather, Megan.”

“Very well, what position was the body?”

“It was face down, and the wound was still seeping so the

death had happened recently.”

“Perhaps, and did you see anything else?”

“Do you mean did I see the killer? No. There was trampled grass down to where the body was, but that is normal, there is a running trail beside the river and many people go to look at the ducks.”

“How long were you in the area before you discovered the body?”

“I was there all day, Megan, swimming and chatting.”

“Chatting, you are invisible to humans yes? Who were you talking to?”

“I don't know their names, but they were spirit beings. They talked to me over the bridge.”

“On the day of the death?”

“Yes indeed, they were coming from the Mall apparently.”

“Do you remember their faces?”

“I do, because the woman told me to leave my home and go up or down the river.”

“Why did she say that to you?”

“I don't know Ma'am, but she was very powerful, I could feel

it, and so I pretended to leave.”

“Describe her.”

“She was tall, thick blond hair in a braid, and he seemed just a man, they all look alike, but he had some power in him. Oh, and a small pig was with them. The man threw some coins into the river when the woman told me to go away.”

“Do you have the coins?”

“I'm sorry Ma'am, I used them for a coffee.”

Woden spoke up, “No need to scry the items, this is obviously Ingrid and Art with Hildy. You may go girl, unless you have any more information for us?”

“No sir, thank you sir.” and Nibi practically ran out the door.

“Ken, were you one of those who collected the body?”

“I was, Allfather.”

“How quickly were you there after the girl asked for you.”

“Not long at all, she walked here and we walked there, it's not far.”

“And did you see any of the old blood on your way there?”

“No sir, we did not.”

“Is there anything else?”

“Well, yes sir, Nibi was a bit confused I believe, she did not spend her coins on a coffee, she came down here and had a whisky.”

“Curious, and why would she be confused like that?”

Ken looked at Megan who nodded at him. “Well sir, the girl is a bit feeble minded, confusion is not unusual for her, and she seemed a bit upset.”

“This was before she found the body?”

“Yes sir I believe it was.”

“I’ve known you from the old country, Ken, you have a good nose. Did you look around the body?”

“Yes, sir I did.”

“And? Did you detect any persons of power beside the girl?”

Ken looked reluctant to speak, but at a warning glance from Woden, he said, “Yes sir, Ingrid was there.”

Megan nodded, “We know that from Nibi, she walked over the bridge.”

Ken looked miserable. “She was also near where the body was found, Ma’am.”

Woden was looking particularly stormy and Megan held up her hand, “Woden do you have a seer that you can call on, before we talk with Ingrid?”

“I do, I will bring him here.”

The next instant Hema was standing in the bar. “Hema, the Morrigan has been murdered. What did you see?”

“Good to see you too, Allfather, I was quite busy with work of my own.”

“Hema, don't try my patience, what did you see in this incident?”

“I will not answer you Woden, as is my right.”

“Hema, there is some question that my wife may be involved. Ingrid is an old friend of yours, again I ask, what did you see?”

“And again, Woody, I will not answer you.”

“Why?”

“That also I cannot tell you.”

“Are you protecting Ingrid? You know I cannot allow this murder to go unsolved, I ask you a third time.”

“And I refuse to answer, a third time. May I go?”

“Go and be damned, man.”

Megan looked at Woden and said, “Perhaps a beer and some silence might restore some balance.”

Woden looked at her as if he'd just seen her, “You have some wisdom, that is an excellent idea, and I see that with wisdom you have great beauty.”

Megan smiled and said, “Look into my mind, Woden Allfather, before we continue this conversation.”

Woden looked at her and took a step back. “My apologies, I meant no disrespect Megan.”

“You most certainly did, but I take it as a compliment, now let's have that beer.”

“Damn it Elly, Woden just called me in to tell him what I saw when the Morrigan was killed.”

“Woden Allfather is investigating? Well that's good isn't it? He won't hurt his wife.”

“Elly, he's the Allfather, he will destroy her if he decides she killed the Morrigan.”

“But she's in a different pantheon, why would he care?”

“Because he's the Allfather, Elly, that's what that title means, he'll do it.”

“Damn, did you tell him?”

“No, I will if it goes too far but we gave our word. Jim doesn’t know does he?”

“Good lord no, he’d better not.”

“Alright, we carry on as per the agreement and hope for the best.”

~~

Art and Ingrid Testify

Ingrid walked to where Art was sitting under the tree, “Art, I’m sorry, Woody has called us to testify in the Morrigan’s death. We have to go.”

Art stood up as Ingrid embraced and kissed him, “Whatever happens Art, remember that I love you and I’ll protect you as much as I can.”

“What? What are you saying Ingrid?”

“Just remember.”

Ingrid put her arm around Art and they were near the Speed River, close to the Edinburgh bridge. Woden and Megan were there as well, waiting for them.

“We’re here Woody, how can we help,” said Ingrid, but Woden held up a finger. Megan was down on all fours.

“No,” she said, “there’s nothing here but the Morrigan’s scent, and her blood. There’s nothing else except Nibi and the Kobolds of course.”

“Thank you, Megan,” said Woden, turning to Ingrid and taking a breath. “Now, Ingrid, we have reason to believe you were near here when the murder took place.”

“If you say so Woody, we didn’t see either a murder or a body.”

“Did you talk to a water spirit named Nibi as you passed over that bridge?”

“Yes, we did.”

“And you saw nothing here, in the grass.”

“No of course not.”

“Did you see the Morrigan at all that day?”

“What day? The day we walked over the river and talked to Nibi? That was almost a week ago.”

“Not yesterday or today?”

“No, yesterday Art had a bout of weasels and the day before we were in England and then at the Symphony.”

“Yes, you and I can be in many places in a short period of time, can’t we Ingrid?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Never mind for now, so you met the Morrigan, what did you talk about?”

“We didn’t talk, Art and I were at a yard sale and she put Excalibur on a table for him to find. We saw her but she disappeared before I could get to her, and then she removed the sword after Art had picked it up.”

Woden looked at Art. “You held Excalibur?”

“Sure I did, and I threw it down. That woman wanted me to think I’m King Arthur and to hate Ingrid. I did for a moment but that’s all, I threw the sword down and told that woman to take it away.”

Woden looked at Megan. “In the right hands, Excalibur could have killed the Morrigan.”

Ingrid almost yelled, “There’s no way Art did this. Read his thoughts!”

Megan nodded, she had already read them, and Woden said, “Do you consent, Art?”

“Of course I do, look and see that I am telling the truth.”

Woden looked, and nodded, “And Excalibur was gone, as you said. Then it wasn’t you.”

“Ingrid, how did you feel about the Morrigan putting Excalibur into Art’s hand.”

“I was furious, and also frightened at what Art would do.”

“You were going after her?”

“Of course I was, she wanted to destroy my happiness.”

“And do you consent to me reading your thoughts?”

“I do not.”

“You deny me? You deny the Allfather?”

“I deny you.”

Woden looked thunderous, “Megan, you do not ask, have you read her?”

“I cannot, she prevents me,” said Megan.

Woden now looked resigned, “Ingrid, you make yourself our prime suspect. You realize this of course. I hereby bind you to this time and place so that we can investigate further.”

Ingrid bowed her head, but Art was furious, “You can’t investigate Ingrid, she’s innocent, she was with me, but aside from that, you must excuse yourself, she’s your wife!”

Woden almost smiled, “That you defend her does you credit, Art, and you are correct, she is my wife and I love her. But I am the Allfather. I am a God, but more than that, I am the Allfather boy, and I am the final appeal. I will do my duty.”

“You are investigator, judge and executioner? How can this be? How can you act when you say you love her?”

Woden looked like he was about to blast Art from existence, and Ingrid stepped between them. Woden hesitated, and Megan put a hand on his arm. You could see Woden slowly gain control of himself and he said, “I am not used to having my judgment questioned boy, or my authority. Very well, I do proclaim this. You, Arthur Pendray shall be the judge in this matter. I will lay the facts before you and I will carry out your sentence. This will happen.”

Ingrid went pale, “Woden Allfather, do not put this burden on Art, I beg you, have mercy.”

“Ingrid Wodenwife, he questioned the impartiality of the Allfather, and therefore he shall share the duties. There is no appeal.”

Ingrid fell to her knees and wept. Hildy looked at Art and said to him, “You have no idea what you just did. Should you find Ingrid guilty, there is only one possible punishment, you must order her death.”

Art was curiously calm as he replied to Hildy, “Ingrid, the woman we both love, is innocent, this I know for a fact because

I feel it. But should it somehow happen that I must find Ingrid guilty, I will share her fate. Woden will have two people to destroy if that day comes.”

Ingrid must have heard because she fell forward crying harder than ever.

Art turned to Woden and said, “I accept your command, Woden Allfather, and I will judge correctly. Gather your evidence and I will gather mine. Is Ingrid free to go to our home.”

Woden nodded, “She cannot leave this town, but take her home Art, and gather your evidence well.”

Art helped Ingrid to her feet, and they walked across the bridge to their home. As they crossed, Hildy lifted his leg and pissed through the railing into the river.

Megan turned to Woden and said, “Was that less cruel than blasting him into death?”

Woden looked ashamed, “I was angry, and did not immediately consider that he might have to sentence Ingrid to death.”

“Is that all?”

“No, if I am honest with you, Megan, I was thinking that I would not have to do that myself, a very selfish thought and act. I regret it, but cannot change it now.”

“He will follow her into death.”

“Yes, that was obvious, but I will not hurt him further, I will allow him to do so.”

Megan smiled a not very nice smile and the two of them walked back toward the bar. “I do not envy you this Godding thing that you must do.”

Woden was quiet until they got back to the bar and he called for beer from Morris, the bartender.

“You said ‘this Godding thing’, what did you mean?”

“We do not handle things in quite the same way that you do. We help or not, hurt or not as it seems correct at the time.”

“But what would you do in a case like this, a case of murder?”

“I would do what we are doing, nothing different, and I would destroy the guilty. But there would be no second thoughts, I have no second thoughts, and I would not refer to any rules or precedent. So, I suppose, I might make mistakes. However, this sort of thing we do now, is not common for me, my existence is usually trying to patch up the world when Coyote decides to fix it.”

“Aside from me talking a lot more than you do, Megan, I’m not sure we are so far apart.”

Megan laughed and picked up her beer.

~~

Art Investigates

Art was at a loss, he didn't know who to approach, and he didn't have any other suspects than Ingrid. He only knew that she was innocent. In the iron core of his being, he knew that.

Was it just because he loved her? Was it wishful thinking. Let's face it, she argued with the Morrigan, she had a temper, and a sword that could have done the deed while Ingrid was someplace else. Were there any other swords around that could have done the job? Any other beings powerful enough to have killed a Goddess?

“Ingrid, can you bring out your sword please?”

“Art, I didn't do it, I promise you.”

“I know that, but I have to judge, so I have to ask, I hope you understand.”

“Art you should know it wasn't me just by looking at the body.”

“We didn't do more than glance at it love, we didn't look very deeply.”

“We saw her front, that's enough. Art would I cut someone down from the back? There wasn't a mark on her front.”

“Yes, but what if she was running away.”

“Here's my sword,” Ingrid said, handing it to him hilt first.”

Art took it and looked closely, there was no blood or any other blemish on it. He wasn't sure if that meant anything, maybe all the gore dropped off when it disappeared.

“Ask it,” said Hildy. Art did, but the sword was silent, not a movement, certainly not a voice in his head.

“What about your spear,” said Art, letting go of the sword.

The spear appeared in his hand and it sounded angry. “That was a sword wound, boy, a slash and not a thrust.”

Art was getting tired of being called a boy but let it go, “A spear can slash,” he said, as he examined it, but like the sword, there was nothing to indicate it had ever been used.

“Hildy, I'm asking you now, did Ingrid murder the Morrigan?”

“I would lie to you if I knew she had, but I don't know Art, truly.”

Ingrid was quiet through all this questioning.

“Hildy do you know of any other power around who could have killed a Goddess?”

“Sure, Megan, Stan, Coyote, Amber, maybe even Ray, certainly Ray if he had the power of his family through Kit.”

“Would any of those have a reason to kill the Morrigan?”

“Perhaps, if they felt she was hurting Ingrid. But they could simply have banished her back to Europe.”

“Damn it, who had the motivation to kill a Goddess? This is ridiculous. Ingrid, will you tell me the truth?”

“Yes, love, always.”

“Did you do this?”

“No.”

“Do you know who did?”

“I suspect.”

“Who?”

“I will not say, Art.”

Art didn't ask the usual next question, the why would tell him who.

“You didn't let Woden read your thoughts, you blocked both him and Megan, you could have cleared yourself, why didn't you?”

Ingrid was silent, and looked like she might never speak again.

“Damn it, I'm going to go look at the body, please come along with me Ingrid, so that you're never out of my sight.”

“I can't move like I used to Art, Woody has bound me here.”

“I can't believe he is investigating you Ingrid, he's your husband.”

“He has no choice, Art, don't be angry with him, he is the ultimate authority for the Gods, that's what Allfather means. It hurts him to have to do this. To put you in this position, that was cruel, and he's not a cruel person. I don't know what could have made him do that, I really don't.”

“I'm glad he did, the instant he made me Judge I knew for certain you were innocent. I might have doubted, otherwise. Let's go to the diner.”

As they walked through the diner and downstairs, Art saw Ray Keen and asked him to come along. “Will you help me investigate, Ray?”

“Of course I will, Art, there's no need to ask.”

They got down to the bar and pulled the body out of the freezer. It wasn't frozen, just perfectly preserved, the Kobolds really did know how to make machinery.

She looked not alive, not exactly dead. There was no tell-tale facial expression, no image of the killer in her eyes. The Morigan was simply there. This was certainly the woman he had seen at the yard sale.

There were no pocket contents, no specific amount of change, no notes, receipts, cellphones with video files, nothing at all. Ken Kobold said that nothing was found on the body or around it.

When they turned the body over, Art gasped, the slash was deep and vicious, and certainly fatal. The spinal cord was severed and the heart cut in half. One slash delivered with hatred, but to the back. Ingrid had said she wouldn't cut her in the back and Art believed that, as surely as he believed she was innocent.

He put his hand on the shoulder and tried to feel what had happened. Of course there was no answer. "Ray can you see anything?"

Ray looked carefully, and at one point he said "Kit don't look, but get me a grownup please?" After a while he said, "There is nothing to tell who did this Art, it might have been suicide for the lack of any trace of another being here. She seems to have been killed earlier today, as the water spirit said, and that's about all I can tell you. There's no trace of magic swords or anything else."

Art came alert. "Can you tell if a magic sword did this?"

"Yes of course, Art, there are traces. This was an ordinary sword."

"But one that was super sharp? Like one of Sam's swords?"

“No, Art, Sam could not kill a Goddess unless that being let her. Look, take this scalpel and try to cut Ingrid.”

“What? No, I won't do that.”

“OK then, try to cut me.”

Art laid the scalpel on the back of Ray's arm as he offered it. He drew it lightly across and nothing happened. He drew it across much more forcefully and still nothing.

“Now I will let my defence down, go ahead.”

“No, I don't want to cut you Ray.”

“Just do it, Art.”

Art cut into Ray's arm and the wound closed up as soon as it opened, not even a drop of blood appeared.

“This is how it works, Art. I could shut down my healing and my protection, and you would wound me, but not otherwise. I am immortal like the rest of the Europeans. I suspect the locals are the same. Sam didn't do this, nor did any other being with a normal sword, and yet someone did.”

“Woden seemed interested in Excalibur, but I thought it was a magical sword. Would you know if it was Excalibur?”

“Not unless it was in the hands of the true King, it's an ordinary sword unless it's held by King Arthur, and then the combination would be magic. So it wasn't you, Art, unless you're not King

Arthur and the Morrigan let her defences down. What I mean is that Excalibur could have done this, unless the true King was holding it, then I'd see the magic.”

“This is nuts. Ray, Ingrid can't move out of town, would you do me a favour please and ask Jim to come here?”

“Sure, I'll do better than that, I can go get him, thanks to Kit and the boost from the rest of the family.”

“Thanks Ray, in the meantime I need a beer and I bet Ingrid could use one.”

“Two,” said Ingrid.

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The Tracker

Woden and Megan were at the lunch counter, interviewing all the spirit beings in the area. This was a long process, given the number of them hanging around Guelph. Amber and Coyote were first, when asked if they had a sword Amber replied, “I wonder if I were to sharpen the tip of my bow, if that would do it?” Coyote simply snapped his jaws.

Stan, who was waiting to be interviewed, laughed at that, and when called up said, “You want to get rid of me Megan? Should I hide my big sword that I've got under the bed?”

“Stop messing around, Stan,” said Megan, “did you see or hear anything about this murder?”

“I’m afraid I didn’t, Megan, I didn’t know this woman who was killed and I didn’t feel any surges of power today either, if it had been someone with a magic sword I’m pretty sure I would have felt it, like you would have.”

“Right, we have to assume it was an un-powered sword then.”

“Well the only one I know who could have made a cut like that is Sam, and maybe Art since he’s studying with her.”

“We talked to Art, checked his thoughts and he’s not the one. We also talked to Sam but she hasn’t got the powers to hurt a Goddess, and she says her swords were undisturbed today.”

“What about Ray?”

“Can’t see him having a reason, but we’ll talk to him later.”

“You can’t believe it’s Ingrid, that would be totally against her nature to cut someone down from behind.”

“We know that, but she’s the only one who seems to have a motive.”

“Not good,” said Stan as he walked out of the diner.

Megan turned to Woden, “Do we know when the Morrigan got to Guelph?”

“It seems it was the day of the yard sale. I felt her leave the UK on that day, and I didn’t feel her come back at all.”

“You keep track?”

“I do, it’s part of how I keep the damned beings under control. They know I watch, and they know that Hema is supposed to be watching too, but lately he’s been unreliable. In any case, I think we can assume that the Morrigan showed up here the morning of the yard sale, when Ingrid had her disagreement with her. After that, I have no idea of her movements, the next I can tell, she turned up dead and discovered by the water spirit.”

“I wish we had someone keeping track over here. It would be helpful to know who she had been talking to in the last few days.”

“There are no trackers here?”

“Damn, of course there are. I’m a decent tracker, but I know one who is better. I’m going to call Mishelle down from Manitoulin, she’s a Great Lynx and the best tracker I know. Give me a moment.”

Mishelle appeared and Woden was literally stunned. She was beautiful, white hair but tanned skin, and she was wearing a white fur coat and boots.

Megan kissed her on the forehead and said, “Thank you sister, for coming to me, we have great need for your tracking skills.”

“In this cess-pit? How can I smell anything here?”

“We need you to try, this is Woden Allfather from Europe, and he is here with me to investigate a murder of one of the European Goddesses.”

“Murder? I greet you Woden Allfather from Europe. Megan asks and so I will try to help you, what can I do for you?”

“Call me Woody my dear. We have her body here in the freezer, and we know she was here for several days before being killed this morning. We can take you to her to get the scent and then to the place where she died.”

Megan smiled a bit as Mishelle said, “The dead woman through there? I have her scent, no point in looking at her, please let’s go to the place you want her tracked from.”

Woden glanced at Megan and was obviously impressed. Megan smiled again and said, “I did mention that she was a better tracker than I.”

Woden took them to the river bank and Michelle turned into a Water Panther. She moved around the area briefly, then dove into the water, her serpent limbs kicked up just a bit of water as she went under. She remained there for a few minutes and then resurfaced down the river where she called for the other two. When they got there she said, “This river is disgusting, I almost could not track the scent, but the body was taken underwater from here to the other spot. I smelled a water spirit as well, but no other spirit being.”

“We know about Nibi, she is the one who found the body,

doubtless her scent is all over the river.”

“Indeed, but it is closely matched to the dead body as well, as if she carried the body to its final place.”

Woden looked at Megan, “She moved the body? Why would she do that?”

Megan shook her head, “I don’t know, Mishelle is there anything unusual about this spot?”

“Only that the scent of the dead body seems unusually strong here.”

“Was she killed here?”

“It is possible, killed here and taken upriver.”

“But why?” said Woden.

“To hide the true murder scene, perhaps,” said Megan.

“Mishelle, is there anything unusual about this place?”

“No, nothing but the unusually strong scent. There are dozens of scents here, all ordinary people. No other spirit people except the body and the water spirit.”

Woden looked thoughtful, “Can you scent metal? Maybe a sword?”

“I can scent a trap from a mile off, there has been lots of metal

past here, and rubber too, bicycles on the path. Right here, though, perhaps. Iron and blood are somewhat similar, this scent seems to be mixed. If she was killed by a sword, I would say it is likely this is the place.”

“Can you track the sword?”

“No, it is here and then gone. I didn’t smell it in the water and I don’t smell it anywhere around here.”

“Can you tell if it was magical?”

“No, I detect no magic, just an old steel sword. Quite old in fact, traces of rust and very old blood. If it appeared and disappeared, someone made it do so.”

“Still not suicide then, the Morrigan could manifest a sword perhaps, but to slash herself in the back and then make it disappear...”

Megan nodded, and looked to Mishelle, “Can you track the murdered woman from here?”

“She moved here from that dam,” she said, walking toward it, “and then across that field toward the houses.”

“Let’s follow along then.”

Megan and Woden followed Mishelle through residential streets, until they came to a place where the Morrigan apparently stood for a long time, pacing back and forth.

“Where is this?” said Woden.

Megan shook her head sadly, “Across the street is the place where Ingrid lives.”

“Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Mishelle can you tell where the dead woman came from to get here?”

“She seems to appear here, Woody, and then she went from here down to the river.”

“Can you say how long she was here?”

“I would say about half a day, she must have been watching this Ingrid across the road.”

“Long enough for Ingrid to have noticed her, damn it. Mishelle, could you track Ingrid for us?”

“I haven’t got her scent, who is she to you?”

“My wife of many thousands of years.”

“Ah, then yes, I can smell her on you.”

“Er, that is probably not Ingrid, we haven’t lived together for some time.”

Megan grinned and asked Mishelle, “do you detect the power of the dead woman here, her magic?”

“Yes of course.”

“And is there any other magic here? Any magic following her to the river?”

“No not at all, like down at the river, only the dead woman and the water spirit.”

“Again, Ingrid seems to be involved, and again, we can prove nothing, Woden.”

“So it would seem. We thank you Mishelle, you have been most helpful, although I’m not sure how. Can I buy you a beer to thank you?”

Mishelle exchanged a glance with Megan, tucked her hand through Woden’s arm and said, “You can buy me several.”

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Jim Gets Involved

While Art was waiting for Ray to return with Jim, he turned to Ken and asked, “Ken could your smiths make a sword that would be able to kill a Goddess?”

“Sure, it’s just a matter of the right alloys.”

Art was stunned, had he solved it? “Do you think one of your smiths did that, maybe for a customer?”

“Not a chance, Art, everything that gets made here is accounted for, every bit of raw material, every finished product, nothing comes in or goes out without paperwork, and before you ask, there is no extra-curricular manufacture going on. We’re running shifts around the clock and that would be noticed. Anyway, I checked.”

“What about Kobold smiths elsewhere? What about Kobolds around here that you don't know about?”

“Not a chance that there's one of us nearby that I don't know about, as for someone elsewhere, bring me the sword and I'll tell you if it was Kobold-made, but other than that, I've heard nothing about God-killing swords floating about. Sorry Art.”

Ingrid ordered another beer from Morris, and Ray popped back into the Bar with Jim.

“Hey there Art, nice bar, we’re right below the lunch counter aren't we.”

Art made introductions and got Jim a beer, then sat down with him, along with Ray and Ingrid.

“Has Ray filled you in on the situation?”

“Just to say that Ingrid has been accused of killing the Morrigan.”

“It's looking bad, Ingrid here seems to be the only person with

a grudge against her, and the ability to kill her. Woden and Megan are investigating and they've made me the judge."

"Are you kidding me? They can't do that."

"Apparently they can, so I'm investigating on my own."

"You don't trust Woden and Megan?"

"Oh I do, but the situation is weird. Ingrid here won't let Woden read her thoughts, and she's blocking Megan."

Jim looked at Ingrid, who downed the rest of her beer and looked back at him, before ordering another beer.

"And Woden called in Hema who refused to help. On top of that, there seems to be no evidence at all. Woden and Megan sent word they had traced the Morrigan from outside our place down to the river, under the river and to where the body was found by a water sprite. Nothing to indicate anyone else was involved at all."

"Who was the tracker?"

"Mishelle."

Jim frowned, "I know her, if she found nothing, there's nothing. Ingrid what's going on, why aren't you cooperating?"

"Because I wanted the Morrigan dead, that's why. If I open my thoughts that's what's going to show. I'm not going to make it easy for Woody, he can damned well prove I did it."

“Did you?”

“Jesus Jim, I don’t know, I really don’t. I gave Art here a case of the weasels in the kitchen while I was sleeping and I didn’t know it. Maybe I did kill my sister. I don’t know.”

“I’m pretty sure you would know. Art what’s the body look like.”

“No defensive wounds, big slash on the back.”

“There you are, Ingrid didn’t do it. She’d want to beat the Morigan to death, not ambush her. Why wouldn’t Hema help?”

“He didn’t say, just refused. I don’t think it’s because he has withdrawn from the world again, he wasn’t apathetic like he was when I met him, he’s interested and involved, he just refused to say what he saw.”

“That is damned strange, he’s a friend of Ingrid. Ray, take me back I’m going to ask our boy a few questions. Hang in there Art, we’ll get to the bottom of this.”

As they popped out, Ingrid said, “Let’s go home Artie, I want to forget about this for now, let’s make dinner and I’ll wash up afterward.”

That made Art truly nervous, Ingrid never washed up, he wondered just how depressed she was.

When Jim got back to England, he found Eldwife in her lab, working. She covered whatever it was with a cloth and turned to kiss Jim, “What’s up lover, you look thunderous.”

“Ingrid is being accused of killing the Morrigan and Art has been named judge. If she did, he’s going to have to sentence her to death, there’s no other sentence allowed.”

“What the hell kind of deal is that? They can’t be serious.”

“They called in Woden, so yes, they are serious.”

“Oh dear, well look Jim, I know you think of Art as a son, but it’s really not your problem.”

“Not my problem? Are you kidding? Ingrid is part of our squad, and so is Hema, that bastard, he won’t say what he saw. It’s like all her friends and family are conspiring against her, and all because of that bitch the Morrigan. Is Elfwin still here?”

“Yes, he’s heading back today but I think he’s still here.”

Jim stomped out of the lab, leaving Elly to look thoughtfully at the sheet she had draped over a vat.

Jim found Elfwin on a terrace outside his room and without any preface said, “What do you know about the Morrigan’s murder, Elf?”

“I know of it, Jim, but I don’t have any fine-grain information, my agents are spread pretty thin in Canada. I know she left

here several days ago and turned up dead today, but there's not much in between."

"Well they're fitting up Ingrid for the murder."

"What? That doesn't seem right, those two didn't get along but I didn't think it was that bad."

"Ingrid told me she wanted the Morrigan dead, and she's afraid she did it in her sleep. Something about a plague of weasels."

"Is she all right? That doesn't sound like the Ingrid I know."

"I don't think she is all right. I think she's worried as hell. The other thing is that Hema is refusing to say what he saw."

"Well that isn't surprising, he hates watching men."

"No, Art says he's involved, just refusing to talk."

"Hmm."

"Come on Elf, what do you know."

"Look, not to be stirring the pot, but Hema and Elly have some sort of project going on between them. Maybe that's why Hema isn't talking."

"Damn it, I just talked with Elly and she said nothing. I think it's time to go talk with Hema."

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Over the Same Ground

Megan came in to the coffee shop and Mike put her usual herbal tea on the counter. She nodded to Mike and said, “Those two been here long?”

“No, they came in about ten minutes ago. You’d think that a fellow who was investigating his wife for murder would maybe not be sleeping with someone else while he’s doing it.”

“Welcome to Godhood Mike, all the power and no shame. Don’t worry about it, he hasn’t slept with Ingrid for hundreds of years, this won’t affect his judgment. Well maybe the lack of sleep but he can throw that off, you watch, as soon as he sees me he won’t be Mr. Sleepy Eyes any more.”

Sure enough, Woden brightened up and said, “Good Morning Megan, did you sleep well?”

“Not a wink, how about you?”

“Dropped straight off and slept like a baby all night.”

Mishelle gave him a look of absolute shock, and then winked at Megan, “Like a baby,” she said.

Megan smiled and said, “I’ve caught Art up on what we’ve

found, but it doesn't seem to be much. We've got a timeline with a big hole in it, a murder that would be a suicide if the victim had hands on her backside, and Ingrid, who had a motive but can't be linked to the murder physically, and won't let us check her thoughts."

Woden shook his head, "I don't know what to do with it, I really don't. It was a lot easier when everyone expected us Gods to be unreasonable and unjust. I could just blast someone and call it a day."

"I tend to agree, I'm really not all that comfortable with this plodding, I'm used to just reading someone's thoughts, but having a suspect who can resist that, is frustrating."

Mishelle sipped her coffee and spoke up, "You have an argument where the Morrigan tries to break up her relationship, or even kill Ingrid through her boyfriend, then nothing happens for several days, and then the Morrigan watches Ingrid for hours, goes down to the river and is killed. What's with Nibi probably dragging her body underwater for twenty yards?"

"By Jingo, what indeed," said Woden, "let's drink up and get back to work."

"If you don't mind, Mishelle, can you stay a bit longer, we may have further use for your nose," said Megan.

"Nose, yes indeed," said Woden.

Mishelle nodded to Megan and glared at Woden in turn.

“Let’s get Art to help with this questioning, don’t want him to miss any of the evidence.”

“Are you comfortable Nibi? Do you want more food? Another coffee?” said Woden.

“No, I’m fine thank you. How can I help you?”

“Well, we have a question we’d like to ask you. How did the Morrigan get from where she died, to where you found her.”

“What do you mean, she died where I found her, didn’t she?”

“No my dear, she did not, she died downstream and we know you moved her body, what we want to know is why?”

“But I never... oh hell. I moved it because somebody paid me to move it. They were on the bank too and called to me in the water.”

Woody jumped on that, “Who was it that was there with the body?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never seen her before.”

“Was it Ingrid? The woman who tried to send you away?”

“No, I just said, I’ve never seen her before, she had black hair and an accent like from in England somewhere.”

“Ingrid in another shape?” said Megan.

“We don’t shift that easily, we can do it, but we’re not good at it. Nibi was this woman as big as Ingrid?”

“No, much smaller.”

Art spoke up, “Nibi you told Woden that Ingrid tried to send you away. I was there, and she did not say that, she asked you why you stayed under the bridge in that ugly section of the river when there was better water upstream and downstream. Why did you lie?”

Nibi looked confused. “What? I don’t, I didn’t, I thought she was trying to send me away.”

Megan growled deep in her chest.

“OK, sorry, that woman who paid me told me to say that the blond woman tried to send me away.”

“Ingrid, did you detect any spirit beings beside Nibi when we were on the bridge?”

Ingrid looked up from her coffee, as if she hadn’t been listening very closely, but now she frowned, “I wasn’t looking, really, just enjoying our walk.”

“Ingrid you’ve got perfect recall and you can put me back into a situation, can you do it now with Woody and I?”

“Sure, here you go,” and Art was looking at himself talking to

Nibi. Art looked around and saw several people on the trail, jogging and riding bikes, cars pulling in to the skate park, and there, one person not moving, watching the bridge.

“Do you see that woman Woden? Over there watching the bridge?”

“I see her but she could be watching ducks under the bridge, Art.”

“Can you tell if she’s got power? I ask because I think that’s the woman who gave me Excalibur.”

“The Morrigan? I can’t tell if she’s got powers because this is just a memory, but I’m damned if that’s not the Morrigan. But Art she might have followed you here just to see if her plan to hurt Ingrid had succeeded. Not only that, but if Ingrid had seen her here she may have become even more angry.”

“Yes, I see your point, this doesn’t help much except that we know that the Morrigan knew about this meeting with Nibi. OK Ingrid, take us back.”

When they became aware of the lunch counter, Megan was looking closely at Nibi, “What she said is true, she was paid to move the body and point the finger at Ingrid. This is starting to smell, which in my case, is a good thing. Ingrid, will you now let us read your thoughts?”

Ingrid shook her head and Woden said, “What is it that you're hiding girl? That you didn't like the Morrigan? That you

wanted her dead? We already know that.”

“No Woody, I won't let you in.”

Art was looking thoughtful, “Woden, Megan, can Ingrid hide herself, her body, from you as well?”

Woden said, “Certainly she can, but why should she, unless she was guilty.”

“So location, not just thoughts?”

“Both, but she's just shielding her thoughts. Why do you ask, Art?”

“So you could tell where she was for the last few days? Like you can track all the Gods and Goddesses in Europe?”

“I could have, but I didn't. Like I told you Art, I usually give Ingrid, you and everyone else their privacy, and I expect it in return. I take note of large changes in location, I don't keep track of folks going to the grocery store.”

“Can you think back and track her?”

Woden looked thoughtful for a moment and said, “She was with you yesterday and most of the few days before. We knew that... Well, she didn't pop away from you, but that still leaves her sword, she could have sent that.”

“But whatever killed the Morrigan wasn't magical, we checked that over and over.”

“You're right. What are you suggesting?”

“That Ingrid was framed.”

“Does that get us any further? Who would frame Ingrid? We're still looking for the murderer, whether it's Ingrid or someone who killed to frame Ingrid. Sorry dear.”

“Do your job, Woody, don't worry about my feelings.”

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The Plot Revealed

Jim was angry, “Where is Hema now, Elf?”

“He's in the pub down the road, do you want me to send for him?”

“The hell with that, I'm going down there to get the story out of him, probably best if there's people around so I'm not tempted to beat it out of him.”

“Well I could use a walk too.”

As they walked, Elfwin asked, “You're convinced that Ingrid didn't do it?”

“Not completely, we know she's got a hell of a temper and the

Morrigan pulled a really nasty trick on her. Apparently she got Excalibur into Art's hand.”

“Hmm, what did Art do?”

“Sensibly, he refused it and the Morrigan plus the sword disappeared, a few days later she's dead.”

“There was never any love lost between those two, they picked opposite sides through the wars, and I can see why Woden thinks Ingrid did it.”

“But she'd beat her to death, not cut her down from behind, right?”

“I'd say so, but with that temper of hers, and with her being so attached to Art. Hell, if that damned sword or the Morrigan convinced Art he was King Arthur and he hated Ingrid, he might have taken a swing at her. The best outcome might have been him ending up hating Ingrid. You know, I feel like killing the Morrigan myself. The damage that could have caused!”

“Let's see what Hema saw,”

As the two entered the pub, Hema looked up from a table in the back. He stood up with his hands in the air and said, “There's beer on the table gentlemen, and it's for you. I'll tell you what you want to know, but before I do that, I want you to know that it was supposed to be a joke. I didn't know what that Goddess was planning, or that Woden would be called in or that Ingrid would be at real risk. Please believe me.”

Jim stared at Hema, who was standing perfectly still, and his anger drained visibly. He sat and reached for a beer, still looking at Hema. When they had all picked up a glass, they drained them together. Jim called for another round and said, "So talk."

"Again, it was supposed to be a joke. Look, the Morrigan is still alive, or two of them are, at least. She's up in the Elf lands, shielded from everyone.

"A couple of months ago she came to Elly with a proposition to grow a clone of herself. You know Elly, she can't resist a challenge and since she'd done the Elf Prince, she figured why not try a Goddess. She agreed.

"The Morrigan then came to me and asked me to see and remember everything about one of them. When the clone was grown, she was going to transfer that knowledge into it, so that there would be four of them. The joke would be that nobody would know there were four and she was going to do the identical twin thing."

"So what happened?" said Elfwin.

"I swear, neither Elly nor I knew what she had in mind. She went to Guelph and pulled that trick with the sword on Art, then she hid for a few days and finally, two of her killed the third one, the one Elly is growing again. I saw it of course, but I still figured it was a joke.

"And then Woden was called in and I realized she was framing Ingrid. I didn't say anything when Woden questioned me

because I had to talk with Elly, but it's gone far enough.”

Jim exploded, “You idiot crow-bait. You know Art has been named judge. He's likely to sentence both you and Elly to death, along with the Morrigan. Damn, damn, damn, are you that bored with life that you'd try something this stupid? And what about Paul? You bored with her so soon that you're willing to be killed by Woden?”

Elf lay a hand on Jim's arm and he stopped shouting, meanwhile at the mention of Paul, Hema winced and then just stared at his beer.

“Alright Elf, can you get word to Raynard to come get us? We need to go to Guelph and try to smooth this over. In the meantime, I'm going to tell Elly to stop whatever she's doing and lay low in the house. I'm not losing her again to this nonsense, Woden will have to go through me to kill her.

“You, Hema, are coming with us to take your medicine.”

As Jim got back to Elly's lab and explained things to her, she refused to stay behind.

“Do you have any idea how bad that would look Jim? There's no way you could prevent Woden from getting to me anyway. You know that. I'm coming with you and I'll take my medicine. If Art figures I should be destroyed, well I've had a great run.”

Jim argued for half an hour but eventually he realized that Eldwife was right. He couldn't protect her and the best chance

was to explain things to Woden and Art.

“Well at least make sure that blob there stays healthy so that Art can see it and decide what to do with it. If he decides to kill the two Morigans, and I can't see him not doing that, he'll want to make sure he kills that thing as well.”

Elly nodded and made the necessary adjustments, “It will be fine for a week or so.”

It wasn't long before Ray showed up with Hema and Elfwin. Jim looked at Ray and said, “How bad is it?”

“Ingrid looks guilty as hell, Art is holding it together and trying as hard as he can to prove her innocent, but what do you figure his mood is? I'd say the sooner you get there and explain things, the sooner Ingrid will be cleared and that might, just might, improve his mood.”

“Yeah, all right, let's get this over with.”

With that, the four of them headed across the pond to Guelph.

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The Trial and Verdict

The pub had been set up as a courtroom. Several stools had been placed behind the bar, Art sat in the middle with Woden and Megan on either side. Ingrid was off to the side at a table,

and everyone else was scattered about the floor in chairs, at tables or standing up.

Jim quietly filled in the investigators on what he had discovered from Hema, and the accusatory pressure on Ingrid that had started to fade, seemed to dissipate.

Art spoke up, “As judge, I believe we need all parties present, Woden, can you cause the Morrigan to attend us?”

Woden seemed impressed by Art’s seriousness, and nodded his agreement, “Ingrid, I will need your help on this, we must get through her defences and also the Elves.”

Ingrid nodded and went to stand by Woden. They both closed their eyes and a few moments later Woden smiled. Right after that, the Morrigan appeared, looking surprised. Also surprised was Art, to see two identical women.

Woden announced, “She is here and restrained, Art.”

The two women looked around the room and spotted Eldwife and Hema. Her faces fell and both of them sagged into chairs.

Art said, “Is there anyone else who needs to be here?”

“I don’t believe so,” said Woden.

“Then we will begin. First, the facts of the murder please, Megan.”

Megan recounted what the Guelph investigation had

uncovered, and the reasons Ingrid was suspected.

Art thanked her and asked Hema to come before the bar. “What can you add to this Hema?”

Hema outlined the story of the prank, the part he and Eldwife played in it, and then told the panel what he had seen of the murder scene.

“What do you say to answer this charge, Morrigan?”

“We have nothing to say, you are going to destroy us Woden, so get it over with. We are missing our third and the pain is too much.”

Art continued, “Apparently there is a clone, and the memories of the murdered woman are intact with Hema. If you can demonstrate to us that you are innocent, your third can be restored. Do you not wish to speak in your defence?”

“I will not.”

“Very well, we will speak for you.”

Woden looked in surprise at Ingrid who kept a neutral expression. She knew that Art would not allow his anger and hurt to interfere with what he considered a proper investigation of the facts. She also knew that if she was Art, she would have blasted the Morrigan out of existence the moment she had appeared in the pub.

Art said, “We know the sequence of events, let’s look at those

things that may be in question. First, I did not know that the Morrigan was three people. Did you Woden?”

“Of course, but I don’t think of her as three, and neither do the rest of the Gods, she’s just “the Morrigan” which may have confused our thinking. We had been saying it looked like suicide but could not be. For the Morrigan it could indeed be.”

“We must not jump to conclusions. What about Nibi telling us she saw Ingrid the day of the murder?”

Megan said, “Nibi is easily confused, certainly, but she could have been told to mislead us.”

“Either way, it takes suspicion away from Ingrid. Nibi, why did you take part in this?”

“For the shiny money, of course, and that woman there told me it was a joke,” Nibi said, pointing at the Morrigan.

“A murder is a joke? Again, no matter, this puts less suspicion on Ingrid and more on the Morrigan.”

“Ken, you said you smelled Ingrid by the body when you collected it, but Megan and Mishelle smelled no other old blood. Why is this?”

Ken looked sheepish, “My smell is not time-stamped, it’s not so good as these trackers, for that I am truly sorry.”

Art looked at Mishelle, “As to that, Mishelle you said the smell of the body was unusually strong where the death occurred.

Could it have been because there were three identical scents there at once?”

“Yes, it doubtless was, I smell the double scent of those women sitting there.”

“So the Morrigan in three bodies was probably at the murder scene. Hema and Eldwife, why in the world did you go along with this trick?”

Hema answered, “We are truly sorry for our role in this, Art. For us it seemed an interesting experiment, it went wrong when I saw the Morrigan kill herself.”

“And you have explained why you didn’t come forward when you first learned of this. That was unfortunate, as it could have prevented much wasted time and stress.”

Hema looked even more regretful than he had been.

Hema we have days missing from the story, from when the Morrigan arrived in Guelph, to when she was killed. Did you see what she was doing during this time?

“I did, she was following you two. She kept herself well disguised.”

Art continued, “We must still explore every possibility that the Morrigan is innocent. We know an ordinary sword was used, could Ingrid kill a Goddess who had her defences up, without a magical sword? How can we test this?”

Woden spoke up, “She could not, but you should not take my word for this. Raynard, are you willing to show Art?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

Woden looked at Ken, who pulled a chef’s knife from behind the bar and handed it to him.

“Wait,” said Art, but it was too late, Woden had plunged the blade into Ray’s chest with enough force to propel him across the room, but the blade had broken, and the piece not in Woden’s hand was rattling around on the floor.

When he got over his shock, Art said, “Right, so we have seen that if there was no magical sword, a normal sword would have failed to hurt a Goddess who had her defences up.

“What sword was available? Morrigan, would you make Excalibur appear please.”

The Morrigan glared at Art and did nothing.

Ingrid looked at Art sadly and said, “Take Excalibur in your hand Art.”

Art frowned and then to his astonishment, had Excalibur in his right hand. This time he felt no such confusing emotions as he had the last time he touched it. Excalibur was nothing but a blade. “This is certainly a special blade, if not magical, I have been told that in the hands of King Arthur, it could have killed a Goddess. I just manifested it, this begs the question of whether I killed the Morrigan.”

“Can you block your thoughts from me, Art?” said Woden,
“Try now.”

Art thought about blocking Woden’s probe of his thoughts, but felt nothing.

“Art you are still innocent.”

“Mishelle, can you smell this sword,” Art said while offering her the blade.

“No need to hand it to me, I can smell it and yes, it’s the same blade that killed the woman.”

“Can anyone else manifest this sword beside the Morrigan?
After all, I can call it up.”

Woden cleared his throat, “Art, you appear to have developed more powers than being ageless. The Morrigan has a connection to the sword, but as far as I knew, no one else could call it except King Arthur, and now you. Are you King Arthur?”

Art ignored that question, released the sword which disappeared, and said, “Woden please manifest the sword.”

Nothing happened, and Art said, “Anybody?”

Art looked at Ingrid, “How did you know I could do that?”

“Because my love, I believe that you share many of the same

traits as that King. I had a feeling.”

“Very well, we can leave that for another day. Today I would ask Woden and Megan to tell me who the murderer is, and I will then make my own judgment.”

Both Woden and Megan said “The Morrigan,” without hesitation.

“I think so too. Now the question of guilt and sentencing must come. First, Nibi is blameless, she can go.

“Eldwife and Hema, By your neglect and reluctance to speak, you have caused Ingrid and I quite a bit of pain, but I truly believe you thought this was just a project, and not an elaborate suicide, for suicide this is. Your project must end, the Morrigan is guilty. I charge you, Eldwife, to destroy the clone, and I charge you, Hema, to forget the memories and personality of the dead woman.

“Which brings us to the Morrigan. We believe you concocted this plot to destroy Ingrid, your sister. You did not succeed in this, and so you did not murder anyone, instead, as I said, this is a suicide, and as a suicide we will consider it. You will not be destroyed.”

Ingrid sagged into her chair, and even Woden seemed relieved. But Art continued, “You killed one of your three, you shall not have her back, you will go on with the constant reminder of what you attempted.”

The Morrigan stood and screamed, “Kill me, I cannot stand the

silence of my third, if you are to make me live, give me the clone!”

“This I will not allow, your plot had criminal intent, but it came to nothing, you have committed a third of a suicide and that will have consequences, that is enough, what you do now is your own choice.”

The Morrigan collapsed, and Ingrid moved a chair between them and brought their heads to her shoulders, “Calm my sister, calm, you will adapt.”

Woden watched with his mouth agape. He turned to Megan and said, “Ingrid? Merciful? And Art has delivered a punishment worse than death. I could not have devised such a cruel punishment.”

Mishelle, standing behind him put her hand on his shoulder and said, “No, Woody, you are not a cruel man.”

“Often,” added Megan, thinking of the role he forced on Art.

When the room had been cleared, and the Morrigan had been moved back to her home under the care of Woden's servants. When Jim and his crowd had gone back to his home with Ray, Art sat with Ingrid at her table. They had a beer and a plate of wings Ken had quietly put down for them.

“Ingrid, love, why did you refuse to let your thoughts be read.”

“First, I truly wanted her dead for what she did to you, Art. Second, since I was mostly sure I didn’t kill her in a dream, it must have been her suicide, and three, I didn’t want my sister dead. I know that doesn’t make sense Art, but do your thoughts make sense all the time to you?”

“No love, they don’t. Explain to me why I was so sure you were innocent?”

“When Woody made you the judge it must have awakened a deep quality of truth-seeking in you Art, you are more now, of what you always were I would guess. You’ve been a just man since you were a child, Jim told me that. And that may explain Excalibur, we’re pretty sure you’re not King Arthur, but you may be the true king the sword looks for.”

“Oh Goddess I surely hope not. Let’s get out of here shall we?”

“I have all my powers back, Artie, we can go wherever you want, a tropical island, perhaps, where we can lie about on the sand.”

“If it’s all the same to you sweetheart, let’s go home.”

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Home Again

Art sat beside Ingrid on their couch. They both had their feet up on the coffee table, the hell with scuffing it, Art would wipe it

down later. For now they were content to lean against each other and drink their beers in silence.

Hildy seemed happy, he was chasing the sword around the room, snapping at it like a dog.

“Ingrid, why didn't the sword speak up for you when I asked it to, and why didn't Hildy know what was in your mind?”

“The sword and the spear are part of me, Artie, they don't act against my will, they can't. Hildy, on the other hand, has his own mind, he's attached to me, hell he loves me, but he doesn't read my mind if I don't let him.”

“He seems to read mine without too much trouble.”

“Well, perhaps mine is a bit stronger than yours dearheart.”

“Oh ha ha. Do you really not hold a grudge against your sister? She tried to break us up and destroy you. I would be a bit pissed off at that.”

“I told you, she's my sister, it's a family thing. She has always tried this sort of thing on me, it's not the first time she's tried to kill me. But I love her, and I am so grateful you didn't have her killed. You could have, you know.”

“Yes, I realize that, but she didn't succeed in framing you. The only thing she killed was part of herself, and I did remember that you said you were connected, that you were family. I might have had Woden kill her if I thought you wanted that.”

“Woody is happy you didn't ask him to. I think he was happy you decided as you did.”

“But was it cruel to make her live without a part of herself?”

“She is adapting, Art, and as these things go, she may manifest her lost part in a couple thousand years.”

“Will she keep making trouble for you?”

“For us, dear, and yes. I suspect she's plotting right now and I look forward to her next attempt. After all, it keeps a girl on her toes. This time it was pretty good, a lot more complex than her usual 'drop from the roof and try to break my neck.' She even got Hema and Elly involved this time.”

“They apologized to you, but they don't seem to be very regretful. I would have thought they'd feel worse about what they did.”

“Artie, when you live thousands of years you really can't carry much regret along with you, or many grudges either, come to that. Life would become hellish if you did.”

“So I'm going to become callous and have no regrets?”

“Not you love, never you. You're too good a man to become callous. You will have to learn how to leave your regrets behind though. You do the best you can, when you can, and forgive yourself if you come to dislike what you did. I guess what I'm saying is that if you live a thousand years, you need to live in the present, there's too much past for you to drag around

with you.”

“Well, Sam says the same thing for a normal lifespan I guess. Live in the moment, don't think too much. You know, she was sort of disappointed that she wasn't accused more strongly.”

“Art, she's a proven killer, her skills aren't in doubt. But to be accused of killing a Goddess and having Woody root around in your mind to determine your guilt, that's not something she should wish for.”

“But he didn't do that to you. Can he do that?”

“He could have, and he would have, if necessary, husband or not. I think he trusted you to figure it out. He likes you, you know, but more than that, I think he trusts you.”

“Not that it matters, but I trust him too. Still, I wish he hadn't picked me to be judge, I was really panicked.”

“You weren't, sweetie, I know. You just assumed, like you always do, that you would figure it out.”

“Well, knowing you were innocent, as certainly as knowing I'm breathing, helped a lot. All I had to do was prove it.”

“How is that truth-scriving going for you? Does it bother you to know when people are lying to you?”

“Not really, it's irritating to know how many people lie almost all the time, but I think I knew that before.”

“Well I'm not so sure I like it, that I can't lie to you any more.”

“Sweetie, I've always been able to tell when you're lying to me. You're not very good at it, and I don't mean that as an insult. You're an open book, and I love that you are.”

“Wow, I'm offended that you think that, no sex for you tonight.”

Art just grinned. She was lying.

“Hildy! Don't you dare bend my sword!”

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