

Growing up in Guelph

Lunch Counter Stories V



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Pre-Teen Troubles

“Ray I'm so glad I caught you here,” Jonah said as he came into the lunch counter, “I need to talk to you about Kitsune.”

Ray Keen was the biological father of Kitsune, a result of his short affair with a girl named Tilly Cleary. The girl got pregnant, but her child was transferred by the fairies to Lila, Jonah's wife and she was raised by that couple. Another baby, named Okami, was found in a basket at the lunch counter and adopted by the couple. Okami was the biological son of Stan, mate to Megan, a couple of wolf-spirits. Ray was a European fox trickster.

As you might have guessed, the city of Guelph has a rather higher proportion of the old blood than most places.

“What about Kit, Jonah? Is something wrong?”

“Well, yes I think so. Look, I know you're more than “Uncle Ray,” I know she's your child, and I know you're Raynard the Fox. I was a few years figuring that out but it became clear eventually.”

“Ah, and does Lila know?”

“Good grief no, I'd never tell her, it would break her heart. Anyway, that's not what I want to talk about, it's Kit's behaviour, she's becoming a real handful.”

“She's a pre-teen isn't she Jonah, aren't they supposed to get

difficult around this age?”

“Well sure, but she's more than a pre-teen isn't she? Look, some fathers get some lip from their kids, I get monsters under my bed when I try to discipline her.”

“What? She shouldn't be doing that. Are you and Lila OK?”

“Yes, I figured out after a month or so, that while they're pretty scary looking, her monsters are wimps. One punch from me and they're scurrying out the door. Thank goodness Lila never wakes up.”

Ray was trying not to laugh, “So doesn't that mean she still loves you?”

“Sure, I guess, but what am I supposed to do? How do you discipline a kid who can put monsters under your bed. You know, my heart isn't as strong as it used to be, I get palpitations every time.”

“I'm sure I don't know how to handle this Jonah, I've never raised a kid.”

Jonah looked at Ray in a way that left no doubt he figured Ray should have taken some responsibility for the dozens of children he'd fathered over the last few decades.

“Can you talk to her Ray? She may listen to you.”

“I'll try, but I can't promise anything, she hasn't taken my advice for a while, but I'll try.”

“Thanks, and not a word to Lila OK?”

Ray nodded and Jonah left the diner. As he did, Mike the cook gave a short laugh. “You, being an adult and advising Kit? Really, Ray? How is that going to work?”

“I have no intention of being an adult, Mike, I've never been one and I don't intend to start now. One thing I know for sure, these kids may be tricksters but I've got centuries of experience on them. I'm going to see how they like it when someone pulls a trick on them. Maybe then they'll know how it feels.”

Mike looked over at his partner Liz on the grill. She was a pretty powerful shaman and when she shook her head, Mike figured this wasn't going to go well. Still, he figured the best thing would be to wait for the fallout and pick up the pieces.

Ray was muttering to himself so Mike went back to washing the dishes.

“Mom, Dad just ratted me out to Uncle Ray.”

“Ratted you out?”

“He went to Uncle Ray and told him I was being a brat.”

“You are a brat dear, your Dad is worried that you're getting too much to handle by himself, so he asked your real father for help.”

Kit had a very dangerous look in her eye.

“I'm sorry dear, you're right, we are your real parents, and Ray is, what did you call it? Your body father. It was a slip of the tongue.”

“You guys are my real parents, Uncle Ray is a sweetie, but he's pretty much just a sperm donor.”

Lila tried not to smile at that, “So you're taking health in school now are you?”

Kit ignored that and said, “Dad didn't need to do that, and now Uncle Ray is going to try to pull something clever, you know how he is.”

“Just try not to hurt him when he does sweetie, he means well.”

“He's a brat.”

Lila did laugh at that. “Takes one to know one right?”

Kit stuck her tongue out. “So should I stop with the monsters under the bed?”

“Good heavens no, your father is so cute beating them up while trying not to wake me. Just be careful though, he does need his sleep and he's not getting any younger. Maybe just once a week, OK.”

“Right you are Mom.”

“Now where is your brother?”

“That little hikikomori is in his room as usual, where else would he be. He's playing video games.”

“Now him, I worry about. He spends so much time in his room.”

“It's just that he's terribly self-conscious at school, he's huge compared to the other kids and he has to be so careful around them. But he's got a really good heart, Mom, it's just that people don't understand. You know when he first started school he defended a little girl who was being bullied?”

“I didn't know that.”

“He got beat up doing it, the bully was much older, and then he got called up in front of the principle and disciplined because of the zero tolerance policy. He figures the world is pretty unjust when you defend someone and get punished for it.”

“It is, sweetie, should I go talk to the teachers?”

“No, I told him he was right, and it was a couple of years ago.”

“You are such a grown up girl, my dear.”

“And the teacher's lounge got an infestation of carpenter ants.”

“I take that back,” said Lila, smiling at the thought. At least it wasn't fire ants.

“Look, Kit, to get back to your father, he's probably just afraid he's going to lose you. He knows you're growing up and that's terrifying to a father. If he could, he'd keep you as a baby forever.”

“Is that why he treats me like a little kid?”

“I'm sure it is, dear.”

“But you don't do that.”

“No, that's because I had to do all the diaper changing and bathing and washing up and whatnot. It's a little better now that you can wipe your own little bottoms, but I can't wait for you two to get out on your own so I can have a rest.”

“Mom! You don't mean that do you?”

“No my darling, of course I don't, but you're going to grow up and that's that. Your father and I will just have to deal with it.”

“I promise not to grow up too fast then.”

“Oh lord sweetie, don't do that, grow up at the usual rate, I know you can change that but don't. You two will always be our little girl and boy, no matter what age you are. You grow up for you, we'll remember you as the wonderful kids you are.”

“Now go get your brother and plan your defence against Uncle Ray's trick, and remember, don't hurt him.”

The Trickster Tricked

We all know that Ray is going to be out-tricked by the kids, don't we?

“Hey Uncle Ray, whatcha doing?” sang Oki as he appeared, seemingly out of the woodwork.

Ray hastily threw a cloth over his tools and turned his back to whatever it was he was building. “Oh, hi Oki, nothing much, what are you doing?”

“I was going for a walk, do you want to come?”

“Uh, sure buddy, I'll come along, where are you going?”

“I thought we'd go down by the river and watch the geese eat the grass and poop it out. And watch the little geeselings wander over the road and make everyone stop their cars until someone chases them off the road.”

“Alright, let's go buddy.”

“Whatcha building there Uncle Ray?”

“Nothing much at all buddy, it's a dog house.”

“But you don't have a dog, why are you building a dog house.”

“Well, you've heard of people being 'in the dog house' right? This is the dog house you end up in.”

“Looks pretty big to me. Come on, let's get down to the river and see the birds steal people's food.”

Oki took Ray's hand and off they walked. Of course they had to stop at the Boathouse for ice cream, and then they rented a canoe and paddled around on the river for a while. All the way up to the train bridge, which cost Ray an extra hour's rent.

After that they played on the monkey bars and then walked up the street so Ray could get a Starbucks coffee, and a bit further so Oki could get three McDonald's hamburgers. Ray goggled at how fast he could eat them. He was certainly a growing boy.

After eating, Oki was sleepy and so they found some shade back down at the riverside, Ray sat with his back against a tree and Oki fell asleep on his lap, watching the Trashasaurus.

The next thing Ray knew he was asleep too, and inside Oki's dream. The Trashasaurus came to life and was truly scary, but Oki was there with a garbage can lid and a branch from one of the trees to fight with it. While Ray wondered where Oki got a garbage can lid, he decided it was the traditional kid's shield, and stopped worrying about it.

As he was thinking that, he spotted a beautiful white-furred fox-spirit coming toward him. It wasn't Kit, so he allowed himself to daydream about her a little bit.

She swayed as she walked toward Ray, and greeted him as if she knew him. “Raynard Keen, how are you my love, have you been keeping well?”

“Well hello you, I've been just fine, how are you?”

“You don't remember me do you? Well it was a long time ago, I guess I can't blame you. It's Suziho, we met in Japan just before the war. It was out in the countryside by Nara. We had quite a nice time playing house in my den. Do you remember now?”

“My dear lady, I am ashamed to say I don't.”

“Well, you must have had quite a shock at the end of the war. You don't remember the third atomic bomb that was dropped on Nara? You helped me eat it before it got to the city. You grew huge and threw me at it as it dropped and I swallowed it. You remember that I refused to let my beautiful Nara be destroyed? No? The blast as I ate it must have knocked you in the head. You really don't remember?”

“Suziho, there were only two bombs dropped, and neither on Nara, are you trying to trick me?”

“Well I'm a trickster fox like you, but no, I'm not fooling you, I earned my seventh tail that day, and the Americans just told everyone there were only two bombs. Why admit their third didn't work?”

“I really, truly wish I remembered that, my lady. How did you survive that?”

“I didn't dear boy, I'm not corporeal, just a spirit now.”

“But why haven't you come to see me before this?”

“I don't know, maybe this boy here called me up, I've mostly been floating around without thought or form.”

At that point Oki came walking over and said, “Hi I'm Oki, I'm a wolf-spirit, who are you?”

“My name is Suziho, I'm a fox-spirit. You were very brave fighting that monster.”

“Yes I was, but I had to protect the park and the river, so I did it. You look a lot like my sister.”

Yes, I'm a Japanese fox spirit, and your sister is named after my kind, Kitsune. Does she have three tails?”

“Sometimes, when she's not paying attention she does.”

“I wonder if she is related to me. Do you suppose so Ray? We had five children together.”

“What?”

“Oh, I feel that Oki is waking up now, I must go, goodbye Ray, be well and be happy.”

To Ray it felt like she had given him a blessing, as he slowly woke up to Oki stirring on his lap.

Oki sat up and looked at Ray, “She was nice Uncle Ray, it's too bad you didn't remember her.”

Ray was thoughtful, “Yes, buddy, it's a shame I don't remember, she was beautiful, and brave and noble too.” Ray looked hard at Oki, “Have you ever met her before, Oki?”

“No Uncle Ray, she's your friend. You met her in Japan, remember?”

“Well I have been to Japan a few times, yes, before and after the war, but I don't remember her.”

“That's too bad, she seemed nice. Did she really eat an atomic bomb?”

“I don't know Oki, the Japanese Yokai are very powerful, maybe she did. I'm more curious about the children she said we had together.”

“I think she was tricking you about that, Uncle Ray, you would remember all your children wouldn't you?”

Ray got a bit red around his ears and said, “How about another burger Oki? Are you hungry again?”

“You bet. I want four this time.”

By the time Oki had finished his meal and Ray got him home, it was too late to work on his project. He dropped in to Ken's Keller for a beer and there he chatted with Morris Minor the bartender. “You know, it might be a good idea if I looked into Tilly Cleary's background.”

“What for, Ray?”

“I've got a few questions about Kit and Oki.”

“Well you could ask her, if she will talk to you again.”

“Yeah, maybe I'll let it slide for a while longer. I've still got a lump on the back of my head from that last time I tried to talk to her.”

Kit's Turn

“Uncle Ray, I'm so glad I found you. What are you making?”

“Oh, hello Kit, it's just a doghouse, what can I do for you?”

“It's pretty big for a doghouse. Uncle Ray can you help me with my homework please.”

“I can try dear, but I'm not so sure I can help, it's been a long time since I've been in school.”

“That's wonderful, let's go to the coffee shop and you can give me a hand, and buy me a frappa-lappa-half-decaf-cumin special.”

Ray tried his best not to show on his face what he thought of that concoction. As they walked toward Balzacs Ray asked Kit about school. “It's pretty good, but it's kind of boring.”

“Do you do any extra-curricular things?”

“I’m in the nuclear power club, the time travel club, and the flying club, they meet on different nights of the week.”

Ray looked sideways at Kit, with her, it was hard to tell if she was kidding or not. “Well I hope you are being careful with the nuclear materials and that you’re not messing up the timeline.”

“Like Uncle Coyote you mean?”

“Well sweetie, it’s his timeline I suppose, but yes.”

“We’re careful, don’t worry.”

“And how about boys, are there any nice boys in your class?”

“Uncle Ray, I’m a pre-teen not a post-teen! Ewww.”

They arrived at the coffee shop and ordered their coffee, if you could call Kit’s choice a coffee. They were out of cumin so she had ginger instead, with an aniseeed shot. Ray had to dig into his pocket again to pay for it.

When they’d settled onto the big wooden table, Ray asked to see the homework. “Kit, this is witchcraft, these are alchemical symbols, I thought you wanted help with your math.”

“Oh, didn’t I say I was also in the the sorcery club? We’re trying to learn how to conjure a demon.”

“Why? I know a few demons and they're pretty boring types, all middle management micromanagers.”

“Oh, sorry, I meant we were trying to conjure up an alternative to oil, we're going to make it from sand.”

“Sweetie, believe it or not, there's a worldwide shortage of sand due to the amount of cement we're making, to build who knows what.”

“Really? Why are we making so much cement?”

“Mostly because there's so many people around I guess, we have to put them someplace, and the war in Europe is going to use an awful lot of the stuff just to repair the buildings that are being bombed.”

“That's awful, can you show me how we can change our spells so that we can get rid of lots of people instead, and then maybe we won't need so much oil.”

“Kit! You don't want to spell people away, you should switch to biology and learn how to engineer some horrible virus.”

Kit's mouth dropped. “You don't really mean that do you Uncle Ray?”

“No I don't sweetie, but if you're going to try to pull my leg, you better have hold of your own.”

Kit laughed, “What are you going to do, pull it off?”

“Too late,” said Ray, and lifted a leg up from under the table, causing Kit to scream and look desperately down at her two legs, both of which were still firmly attached. She looked up again and Ray was waving his umbrella.

“Good one, you got me Uncle Ray.”

“Kit do you have some actual homework that you'd like me to help with?”

“I do, actually, I need some help with a history assignment. It's on the first civilizations in Europe.”

“It's too bad Gil isn't here, he's the one who was there as it happened, but I'll do my best.”

The two of them spent a couple of hours and a lot of money on refills of Kit's drink, discussing various cultures in Europe and, at Ray's suggestion, in North and South America. “Of course, Megan would be the one to talk to, about Turtle Island.”

“Uncle Ray, I'm pretty stiff from sitting here, can we go for a walk downtown?”

“Sure we can, honey, where would you like to go?”

“Well there's this amazing outfit I'd like to show you.”

Ray held up his hand, “You wouldn't be about to take advantage of your old body-father would you?”

“Of course, I've got a whole guilt-trip rehearsed for you.”

“How about we just skip that and I buy you the outfit.”

“Oh Thank You, dear father.”

“Enough child, enough, I've already surrendered.”

“But no fairy-gold please, the owners of the store are really nice and I go to school with their daughter.”

“I promise, the money will be there tomorrow morning dear.”

Kit skipped down the sidewalk beside Ray as they walked to where his money was going to magically disappear.

After the shopping spree, which turned into supper at Kit's favourite burrito place, Kit declared she was going to walk home, leaving Ray to wander over to Ken's Keller.

“I don't know Morris, I'm trying to build a trick to teach the kids a lesson but I don't seem to be able to get much done on it. The day just seems to slip away.”

Morris smiled and slid another beer in front of Ray.

As it turned out, this routine continued for the next week, with Kit and Oki trading off day to day, distracting Ray from his 'doghouse'. Still, he got enough work done to finish it.

When Kit came around later that day, Ray intended to trap her in the structure, so that she would learn what it felt like to have a trick pulled on her. He was just opening the special trap door

that she was supposed to go through when she tripped over his hammer, carelessly left on the ground.

“Oops,” she squealed as she stumbled into Ray, sending him into his own trap. “Oh no! I can't figure out how to open the door Uncle Ray. What should I do?”

After about an hour of trying to talk Kit through unlatching the door, Ray finally twigged. “OK sweetie, I surrender, I was going to pull a trick on you, but you turned the tables, now can you let me out please?”

Laughing and clapping her hands, Kit let Ray out just as Oki came running up to them. “Mom says we are to put the poor man out of his misery, Kit”

“Oki! No!” Yelled Kit just as he began to grow into his full wolf shape. “That's not what Mom meant!”

Oki looked disappointed as he shrank back to his boy shape, but he couldn't keep it up. Breaking into a big grin he said, “I wouldn't really eat you Uncle Ray, I was just fooling.”

“Come on you two, ice cream is on me, and I suspect it will soon be on you as well.”

Groaning theatrically, the two junior tricksters fell into step with Ray.

The Violin Lesson

“Why do I have to practice so much, why can't you just magic me into an expert, Amber?”

“Because it's better if you learn it this way Kit.”

“I don't see why, I hate practising and I hate not being good at the violin, don't you want me to be good?”

“Of course I want you to be good, you're my student and I want you to be the best violinist you can be.”

“So play me into your talent, make me like you.”

“Sweetie, you can copy someone else, and if you're a really good mimic you may sound like someone else, but you don't 'have it'.”

“Have what? Isn't it just a matter of being able to play the notes, to do the techniques?”

“Alright, I can see you don't understand, we'll do it now.” With that, Amber played a short passage on her violin.

Kit looked puzzled, “I don't feel any different, Amber, did you give me your abilities?”

“Try playing this piece,” Amber said, putting some sheet music onto the stand.

“Hey, I can read this, it's pretty complicated but I think I can play it.”

Amber started recording on her phone as Kit played. She went through the whole piece without a mistake and when she finished, Amber said, “OK get your headphones and hook up to hear this.”

Kit listened and at first she was delighted, but then she started to frown. “I sound like you Amber, but it's not quite like you sound.”

“Listen to me playing it, Kit,” said Amber as she picked up her violin.

“That was wonderful, how come I didn't sound like that?”

“I learned slowly, Kit, like I asked you to learn, I took in not just the music, not just how to play the notes, but I also took in the feeling of the piece. I can give you the technical ability to play just as well as I can, but you haven't grown up with the music. Not only is your piece not your own, it's not even mine. Do you understand?”

“Maybe, but if I have the technique, can't I pick up the emotion? Can't you teach me to understand the music?”

“Kit it's hard for a technician to learn to feel the music, it really is. You rely on technique, you think it's what music is all about, but you're like a computer, like a robot. You never make a mistake, so why would you struggle to understand the music.”

“Well can't you play the understanding into me?”

“Who are you, Kit? You're still growing, still becoming someone, still becoming Kit. What would you like me to do, make you me? Would that be a good idea? You haven't lived my life. Kit you haven't lived your life yet. There are no shortcuts to becoming the person you will become. You need to grow into it. You have the ability to make yourself thirty years old, why don't you do it now?”

Kit concentrated for a moment and was 30.

Amber smiled and said, “You're going to be a beautiful woman, Kit. How do you feel? Are you the grown-up you?”

“No, I guess not, I'm just twelve year old me in a 30 year old body.”

“No scars, outside or in?”

“Not that weren't there already, OK I get your meaning, I have to grow up and become me.”

“And you will take your music along with you, it will grow with you. As you become older, your technique will get better, but at the proper rate, you will struggle to become who you are and along the way, your music will become deeper and more emotional. Your music won't be mine, or any other teacher's it will be yours. Nobody will be you, and eventually your students will become themselves, not little clones of you.”

“Fine, take it away from me and I'll learn like you want me to.”

“Did you learn anything else from having my technique, Kit?”

“I learned that I can actually do the techniques, there's nothing wrong with my fingers, but you're right, I didn't understand what I was doing. But practising is so hard, Amber.”

“It is? You always smile when we're practising, it doesn't seem like you're struggling, or bored. That's my job really, to make sure you can do the next thing but not to make it so easy that you're bored.”

“So if it's too hard I should tell you?”

“Oh you do Kit, you do.”

“And if I'm bored?”

“Then you should practice harder, so that you get ahead of me and then I'll run to catch up.”

“That sounds like you've got the harder job between the two of us.”

Amber smiled, played a short passage and returned Kit to where she was.

“Oh, but now I can't read these notes, it's too confusing.”

“Were you reading them before? Think carefully.”

“Well, no actually I wasn't reading them, I just looked and

knew what to play.”

“And in school, I hear you're a pretty strong reader, do you read word by word and sound by sound?”

“I used to, but then I kind of relaxed and let the meanings show up. So you mean that right now I'm trying to look too close at the notes on the page, trying to read everything?”

“It's where you have to start, Kit, it's like sounding out the words when you start to read, you sound out the notes in your head and then play them. Later on you will be able to look and know what to play.”

“And I have to grow into that right?”

“You've got it sweetheart, there are no shortcuts to being yourself, to being amazing. You have to grow into it, you'll soon read music like you read books and along the way you'll learn who you are. When you do, your music will become deeper and deeper. You need to absorb the principles and then when you have done that, and have some living experience inside you, the music will be yours. What you play will come from inside, and not from notes on a page.”

“But what about the composer? It's his music, how do I know how he was feeling when he wrote it? How do I play it like he wanted it played?”

“That's an amazing question Kit, and the answer is that you can research his life, read what people say about his work, and listen to your conductor. But ultimately, you can only play what

you feel when you read his music, you really can't tell what he had in his mind when he wrote the piece, you can only play what's in your mind when you read what he wrote.”

“I have to make it mine.”

“Oh you clever girl, you got it. Now let's stop delaying and get back to practice OK?”

Kit grinned and picked up her violin.

Stan Shows Up

“Stan do you ever wonder about Oki and Kit? Like how come their powers are so different than ours?”

Stan looked up from his beer and shook his head, “Nope, why should I? Beings are different aren't they Ray? Why would their powers be the same as ours?”

“I would have expected that their powers were just about half of what ours are, after all they are half human aren't they? At least I know that Kit is.”

“What makes you think that, Ray, you said yourself that Tilly must have some powers, back in her family tree.”

“Well yes, but what about Oki?”

Stan looked at Ray for a long time until the penny dropped,
“Tilly?”

Stan shrugged and ordered a couple more beers.

“But I thought she’d sworn off men.”

“What do you want me to say, Ray, apparently that didn’t stick.”

“So those two are half siblings then, that might explain some things.”

Stan grunted and picked up his fresh beer. “Why are you so worried about this Ray? You’ve had lots of kids through the years, like all of us. They grow up or they don’t, and mostly they die in a few decades. What’s the deal with this pair.”

“I have a feeling they are powerful, really powerful. They may have a big influence on the world at some time in the future.”

“Then let Megan take care of that. She seems to think that’s her job, let her do it.”

“You don’t think she can be a bit harsh? These are our kids, after all.”

“Your kid, I’m happy to let Okami become whatever he ends up being, without me screwing him up.”

“Come on, Stan, you can’t mean that.”

“Of course I do Ray, what have I ever contributed? What am I, except a lazy layabout, content to go with the flow. There’s not a lot here to offer a kid.”

“You’re a little harsh there buddy, I happen to know that you are a pretty reliable source of help when the chips are down.”

“You mean I like fighting? It’s sort of who I am, but that’s no great recommendation.”

“If that’s the way you feel, why did you allow Oki to be conceived?”

“I didn’t, that was Tilly, she called him out of me.”

“What?”

“I don’t think she meant to, or that she knew what she was doing, hence her being in a panic when she gets pregnant, but I had decided no kid and she decided different. Look, do you think I wanted to get Megan down on my head again? She may be my mate, but she’s got a nasty temper and she doesn’t like halflings floating around. It wasn’t me, I’m telling you, it was Tilly.”

“Why would she want to have kids with people of old blood?”

“Maybe she’s got some old blood in her, like you said. Maybe something is there, calling her to spirit beings and tricksters.”

“And you’re not curious?”

“Nah, let the world be what it is, and let it leave me alone.”

Ray shook his head and downed half his beer while he thought about how different Stan was to Megan, who cared about everything. Perhaps there was something to the old saying of ‘opposites attract’.

The next day, Kit and Oki were walking to school.

“You’re a doodie head.”

“No you’re a doodie head.”

“I know you are, but what am I?”

That one usually stumped Oki, but this time he had an answer, something about being a double-dog doodie head, but something stopped him from saying it. He realized it was the man walking past.

Oki turned and called out, “Excuse me sir, do you know me?”

“Can’t say I do, kid.”

“Are you sure, sir, because I can smell that you’re my body-father.”

“What’s a body-father, kid?”

“It’s someone who contributes his body stuff to a baby, but

isn't his father."

"Who told you that?"

"I did," said a visibly disturbed Kit, who was getting more angry by the moment.

"Well I don't know anything about that sort of thing, children, and I'll wish you a good day," Stan said as he turned to leave.

As he did so, Oki was in front of him and growing larger and more wolf-like.

"Oki!" hissed Kitsune, "Not here!"

"Mister," she said, "we have to go to school, but we would appreciate it if you would meet us at Jim's Lunch Counter after school."

"Is that an order?"

"No, of course not, but we would appreciate you talking to us, my brother is upset and it would help if you would meet us."

Stan looked from one to the other, both of them looking ready to pounce on him. "OK kids, I'll meet you at four at the lunch counter."

"Thank you," said Kit as she took Oki by the arm and turned him toward school.

"He's my body-father, I can smell it," said Oki.

“I know, and he will talk to you after school, let’s go before we’re late again, and this time, no pretending you were chased away from the school by a big wolf, OK? Nobody believes you, even when you prowl around the schoolyard, they just think you’re a dog.”

“Well I’m a wolf.”

“Yes you are Oki, but people see what they want to see and they don’t want to see a wolf, so they see a dog, OK Oki?”

Okami smiled and said, “Okie dokie.”

“I’m glad you’re here Ray, those kids are coming to meet me after school, stick around will you please.”

“You need help to talk to a couple of kids, Stan?”

“Don’t make fun, they scare the hell out of me, those two are intense.”

Ray smiled and agreed to stay. Stan was an aspect of Nanabozo, one of the most powerful beings around, and he was intimidated by a couple of kids. Ray understood where he was coming from, the kids scared him too.

When the children came into the lunch counter, Kit spotted Ray and went to sit by him while Oki walked right up to Stan and sat down beside him.

“Mike, can I get a hot chocolate here please for Kit,” said Ray loudly.

Stan took the hint and asked Oki what he would like to drink. “Hot chocolate with marshmallows please,” Oki replied.

When the drinks had been delivered and coffees topped up, Mike headed down to the other end of the counter.

Kit leaned over to Ray and said, “I’m going to let Oki talk to him, but if that man hurts Oki I’ll have his tail for my own.”

Ray looked at her and realized she wasn’t kidding, it was no wonder these two made him nervous.

Oki looked up at Stan with a moustache of chocolate on his face. “I know you’re my body-father, I can smell it, and you can smell me can’t you?”

Stan shrugged and admitted that he knew.

“So how come you haven’t talked to me?”

“I’m not the right person to raise a child, Oki, I’m not a nice man. I’m irresponsible and lazy and selfish.”

“But my father raises me, he teaches me to be a good person, why don’t you help with the things he can’t?”

“I don’t know how I could help, Oki, what do you want from me? It looks like your father is doing a good job.”

“He loves me and he makes me do my homework and my chores but he can’t teach me the other stuff I need to know. Kitsune teaches me as much as she can but she’s not a wolf, she doesn’t understand how I feel sometimes, how I just want to run and kill.”

“That’s your human side Oki, not the wolf, a wolf kills to eat, not for fun, cats do that because they are half human anyway.”

“See, you’re teaching me.”

“I’m not the man to help you Oki, I would teach you to be like me and that’s not a good thing to be.”

Oki looked very seriously at Stan and said, “Tell me what will happen if I can’t control what I am. If I start killing.”

Stan was silent for quite a while, and then decided on the truth. “Megan would destroy you, Okami.”

“And if she can’t?”

“Then I would help her.”

“Do you want to destroy your own body-son?”

It was at that moment that Stan, overwhelmed by this conversation, yelled for help. In his thoughts he said, “What am I supposed to do here Megan?”

“You do what you are supposed to do Stan, you help raise your

son.”

“Can I do that without screwing him up like me?”

“You stupid wolf, there’s nothing wrong with you that a little growing up wouldn’t fix. You help raise Okami and you might just raise yourself a little. Think of how it would have gone if your father had stuck around to help raise you.”

“I’d probably have ripped his throat out.”

“Just do it, Stan. Do what your heart tells you is right and you’ll be fine.”

Facing Oki again, Stan shook his head, “No, I would not like to help destroy you Oki, if you think I can help you, I will help you.”

“Do you promise?”

“Yes, my body-son, I promise to help as much as I can.”

Oki nodded in a very grown-up way, and then, unable to help himself, hopped off of his stool and hugged Stan, much to Stan’s embarrassment, but eventually he hugged him back.

Kit nodded and Ray could see her whole body relax. This had been important to her. She seemed to feel his question and whispered to him, “I have had you to help raise me, Oki has had nobody, you have been a friend to him, but he needs someone like Stan.”

Oki and Stan

Ray talked with Jonah and Lila, and told them about the agreement between Okami and Stan. He told them he thought it would be a good idea for Okami to spend some time learning from Stan. He didn't mention that Oki would be learning to control his considerable powers, that would just worry them.

With that, Oki began his training with Stan. "Keep up, boy, you're falling behind, pay attention and stop looking at the flowers."

They were running down the Speed to the Grand river and on down to Lake Erie. They were not running the trails but in and beside the river itself.

"This was all Mississauga land originally, and bought to give to the Six Nations, but over the years everyone fought over the meaning of the land grants, some parts were leased, some sold, the argument being that it was too big for the Mohawk to farm and too small to provide a living by hunting. Just remember that the people belong to the land, not the other way around, different groups have come and gone, but the river stays. Damnit boy, keep up."

Oki was having trouble shrinking and growing, changing from man to wolf to something in between like Stan was doing. Stan was testing the boy and what he saw was disturbing. The boy was as powerful as Stan was at a much older age. He had his work cut out for him, to train this boy. He actually wished he had started much earlier, the boy was barely within control, his

sister had done a damned good job but he was outgrowing her training.

“Once we get to Lake Erie we’ll swim west to Port Dover and eat, and I’ll buy you a silly hat to wear.”

Oki just grunted, he was going flat out and barely staying in touch with Stan. How could this being be so much more powerful than he was? It was a good thing that he didn’t fight him, like he had wanted to.

When they got to the lake, Stan said, “You can dog-paddle, swim, or run along the shore, or you can follow me and do what I do.”

Before Oki could be confused by this, Stan shifted into a serpent’s back end and moved out into the lake.

Oki had never seen such a shape, but seeing Stan do it, he knew it could be done and so he tried. Nobody was more surprised than Oki when he shifted to a serpent’s tail. He had watched Kit change into all sorts of things, but neither of them thought that Oki could do the same. Boy and wolf seemed to be his limit.

But no more, Oki loved the water and in his new form, soon caught up with Stan. “Ah, you’re here, let’s go then,” Stan said as he left Oki behind once more. Once more, Oki struggled to keep up, but he never lost sight of Stan, much to Stan’s surprise.

When they got to Port Dover they strolled around the town a

bit, before having a foot-long hot dog, and an Orange Glow. As Stan pulled out some money to pay, Oki whispered, “Why don’t we just disappear back to Guelph.”

Stan looked stern and said, “Do you ever want to come back here? Do you want to hold your head up high or do you want to slink away like a thief?”

Oki was visibly ashamed that he had suggested it, and Stan smiled to himself. There were a hundred places around the country where he’d done exactly what Oki suggested. He could disappear without paying and so thought nothing of it, but this trying to raise a boy made him think twice about his past.

They got some ice cream and, as promised, a silly hat for Oki, and to both their delight, one for Stan. After that, they turned a corner and were back in Guelph where Stan dropped Oki off outside his door.

That night, Oki slept like a log, although he couldn’t imagine how a log slept. His parents were happy that they got a good night themselves, without wondering what their restless little boy was up to.

Kit had been watching the day from her dream place with Ray. “Thank you so much for arranging this Uncle Ray, I was getting worried that I soon wouldn’t be able to control Oki.”

“Well, guidance is better than control Kit, but I think you two are more intertwined than you might suspect. You’ll help each other your whole lives.”

Stan met Ray in Ken's Keller a few days later. "So how is it going with Okami, Stan?"

"He's a bright kid, and a lot more powerful than I gave him credit for. He's pushing me as I try to push him, but he sticks with it. Got a lot of grit."

"That sounds like a bit of pride there dad."

"No, I can't take any pride in him, that was his father and mother who raised him properly."

"True enough, and I get you, but Kit says you're becoming a real positive influence on him."

"Maybe not as good an influence as he is on me. I swear I want to be a good example when I'm around him, he's making me grow up, you know?"

"I do know, I'm not the selfish trickster I once was, now that I'm around those kids. I think that's what being a dad is about, as much as we're dads and not Uncles."

"Well, Uncle or body-father, I have to admit I am starting to look forward to my time with him."

Ray lifted his mug and Stan raised his.

It was many months of training later, Stan had taken Oki to the deep woods of North Ontario, miles from any roads. They were roaring through the bush, dodging trees, scaring moose, and in general being a couple of maniacs. As they rounded a thick bush beside a stream they came into a clearing with a cabin. As they approached they heard the roar of a rifle from inside.

Stan told Oki to fade into the bush while he went toward the front door. What he found inside was a mess. A man lay on the floor with his chest ripped apart and another man stood to one side holding a gun. A woman was terrified, torn between going to the dead man and trying to disappear in fear of being shot.

The man swung the rifle toward Stan as he came through the door. Stan stood still as the man shot him full in the chest.

As Stan remained standing, the man realized he was in trouble and started to stammer something about a fight over the woman as he dropped the gun on the floor.

Normally, Stan would have ripped his head off instantly, on the grounds that anyone trying to kill Nanabozo is too stupid to be left alive. At that moment, however, Oki was through the door. "I heard another shot," was all he said as he looked at the scene.

Stan turned to the woman and said, "do you have a phone line to the nearest town?"

"No, no phone."

"Then I will call on Megan to come sort this out."

The man with the gun dropped to his knees and started to plead, “It was self defence, he came at me because I was stealing his woman.”

“Oki, please pick up and unload that gun while I talk with Megan.”

Oki did so, keeping an eye on the sobbing man and on the woman. “Do you have any more guns in the cabin?”

“Yes, in the cabinet over there.”

“Where is the key?”

“In that cabinet drawer, with the ammunition.”

Oki locked the gun in the cabinet and put the key in his pocket, then glanced at Stan who said, “Oki, Megan refuses to come, she asked that you and I decide this. You are still a boy, so I’m not sure if you should be here.”

“I will do my best to help you Nanabozo.”

That was the first time Oki had ever called Stan that, and Stan nodded at the formal tone. “Very well, Oki please remove the body to the front porch.”

Oki did as he was asked and when he came back in, the blood was gone, the woman and the man were in chairs at opposite ends of the room.

“This seems a pretty clear situation to me, but we will see if you can decide it, Oki. Please ask what questions you feel are necessary.”

“But Nanabozo, he shot at you, surely that proves his guilt.”

“No, he shot at a stranger coming unannounced through the door. He said he used the gun in self defence. Men will shoot at another man bursting through the door if defending themselves, or if committing murder, we do not know which. Ask your questions if you feel up to this. As I said, I feel you may be too young and so I will ask if you wish, but you can learn here. Your first lesson has already been learned.”

The man looked terrified, “You can’t let a child judge me!”

Stan turned a hard gaze on him, “I am Nanabozo, your life was forfeit when you shot at me, but I give you a chance for the sake of my student. I will judge you, have no fear.”

The woman was clearly still in shock and sat with her eyes on the floor.

Oki looked from one to the other, “Please ma’am, tell us your side.”

She seemed reassured by Oki’s gentle voice and said, “My husband and I live here, away from the world. We heard an ATV drive up and welcomed that man into the cabin for company and a meal. He put his gun in that corner there, and we ate a meal. When we were finished, he said that he thought Esquimo rules should apply and made a grab for me. My

husband stood and I said ‘We are not Esquimo’ but this man just laughed and turned his gun on my husband. My husband was a brave man and went for him, but this man shot him dead.”

With that, she collapsed in tears.

Oki asked Stan, “Esquimo rules?”

“He wanted the husband to give his wife to the man for sex.”

Oki nodded, turned to the man and said, “What do you have to say to her story?”

“She is lying, that’s not my gun, I saw the cabin and knocked on the door to say hello, but the man had a gun and told me to come inside, she shut the door and he said he was going to take my ATV and my money. When he looked away at that woman I grabbed the rifle, we fought and I got control and shot him. It was self defence, they are thieves.”

Oki thought that he could be telling the truth, he looked at Stan for help. Stan simply said, “Look with eyes that see.”

Oki looked at the table, there were three place settings. He unlocked and looked in the gun cabinet, at the gun he had locked away, and he looked at the ammunition in the drawer. There was no ammunition for the murder weapon. “Nanabozo, his story seems to be a lie. I believe that on the evidence that I see, not because he shot at you.”

“Good, now what can you do to make sure that you know the

truth?”

Oki looked confused. “Oki can you look into my mind?”

“Yes of course.”

“Look into theirs.”

Oki turned to the woman and frowned, then to the man. “I did not know I could do that, Nanabozo but their minds tell me that the woman is telling the truth.”

“Good, thank you my student, now please take the woman out the back door and keep her there until I ask you to return.”

As Oki helped the woman out the door, he heard one brief scream and then nothing. Stan came out the back door and said, “Much better air here. Woman, that man is gone. I can do nothing about the death of your husband, do you wish me to bury him?”

The woman straightened up and said, “No thank you Nanabozo, I will bury him and say some words over him. I thank you for your judgment, and you too, young student. What should I do about the ATV?”

“We can remove it if you wish, so that there are no questions later, but I can also make it so that it was always yours. What is your wish?”

“With no husband, I may need it to get into town or to do other chores. I will stay here for now, by my husband, until I can feel

what he would want me to do.”

“It will be as you wish. Do you want us to stay with you for a while?”

“Thank you, but no, we came for the silence, I will bury him in the silence, and think what to do, in the silence.”

“Then call ‘Nanabozo’ if you need us again, and we will leave you in peace.”

As they walked away, Oki asked, “Will she be OK?”

“I hope so, she has decided what she wants for now and she can call me. I have left her with a full tank of gas and several Jerry cans more, and I have filled her cupboards with food. She will not starve before she decides what to do.”

“What if the police come, what if that man’s family says he is missing?”

“She seems intelligent, she will say her husband died in an accident and as for the murderer, men go missing in the woods all the time.

“My body-son, you have learned a hard lesson today. This is part of what I am, and what Megan is. I don’t know if this is your path, but you have seen it today. You have the power of life and death and nobody can take that from you. If you kill without cause, Megan and I will hunt you down. You must not take this work on by yourself, until you are ready, but if you need to act, call on Megan or on me, we will help.

“Today you learned that you can invade the minds of men. Do not do this lightly. The European Gods will not do it without permission except in dire circumstances. We do not ask permission, but we only do it to find the truth. Do you understand me?”

“I do, Nanabozo, and I will do my best to understand the lessons from today. I also thank you, body-father, for offering to let me put this lesson off. I know that would have caused trouble between you and Megan.”

Stan laughed, you can call me Uncle Stan again, or just Stan, you have earned that. As for Megan and I, there are few days when there is not trouble between us. Now, I believe I was winning the race.”

“Nah uh, I was winning.”

The Canoe Trip

“How would you kids like to go on a canoe trip?” asked Jonah.

“Aww, I'd rather go running with Uncle Stan,” said Oki.

“You do that at least twice a week, son, Mara has offered to take you two on a wonderful trip she's found, James will go with you to make up a second pair, what do you say, it will be fun.”

“Come on Oki, I want to learn how to paddle on a river, we learned in Outdoor Education last year but we never got to go on a trip. Let's go.”

“Well OK if you're keen to go Kit, than let's go.”

“Fine, Mara will meet you two in the lunch counter in an hour to talk about it.”

As the kids walked into the diner they spotted Mara and James right away. The place wasn't very large that day anyway. It tended to shift in size according to how many customers were there.

“Hi Mara, how are you today? Oki and I are excited to go. I thought you had given up on the camp trips?”

“Hi Kit, hello Oki, I haven't been at the camp for a while, but James and I have been tripping when we can, and we have found a great route that I thought you two might want to explore with us.”

“How exciting, is it in Algonquin? Temagami?”

“Neither, it's on another world. We found it when we were exploring the other places after the war. The place is empty and it has some incredible rivers. One is not too difficult for beginners, at least as far as we've explored, how would you like to try it?”

“Another world? Oh boy, you bet we would,” exclaimed Oki,

“will there be monsters to fight?”

“Not that we've noticed Oki, but who knows, maybe,” smiled James.

The next week was spent gathering up the camping equipment and stuffing clothing and food into waterproof barrels. “But I can make us all the food we need,” said Kit after she had gone over the fourth checklist.

“We don't know if your powers will work on this world,” said Mara, “we'd better pack as if you had no powers at all.”

Kit looked at Oki and the two of them looked a bit worried. They had never been without their powers and the idea of being helpless wasn't a comfortable one.

Mara smiled to herself, she had seen that same look on countless trippers over the years. It would be good for these two to have to rely on their own devices for a while, without the crutch of their special abilities. The kids she'd guided along all had that sense of loss when they realized they would not have their video games and their moms to provide food for them. It was for that reason that she'd asked Liz to give her a talisman that suppressed powers. It would be an interesting trip, since Mara had never been without her wolf either, and James would be without his healing ability. Mara wondered if her own face showed a bit of worry as well. At least she would have Liz' portal talisman to get them out of trouble if they needed it.

The day finally arrived and the trippers did the long portage to a different world. Kit gasped at how beautiful the place was. The trees didn't look alien, but they weren't anything she'd ever seen. The same was true of the insects, they may not have been blackflies or mosquitoes but they sure bit like them. "Our repellent works on them, cover yourselves," said Mara.

"I'll just change to a wolf," said Oki, before he looked confused.

"No powers, remember?"

Oki groaned and reached for the Deet. Covered with repellent, they jumped into the canoes and headed off up the lazy river. After a few hours Mara had them land and make camp at a clearing. She looked at it carefully and decided it was probably made during the spring floods, but it was mid-summer so should be fine. Still she made sure they had an escape route to higher ground.

The kids cooked while Mara and James set up camp. In the week before the trip, their Mother had taught them a few simple recipes and the two were very proud of their efforts. Mara and James declared it good enough to eat.

That evening, Kit had a hard time. She never slept, but she went to the Keen family dreamtime to relax. This night she couldn't reach it. In the morning she was beat, but she had to cook breakfast, make lunches and help pack up before getting back into the canoe. She was paired with Mara and wasn't a lot of help, but Mara seemed to understand, she didn't say anything

about the extra paddling she had to do.

After half a day they pulled over for lunch and Kit, having found a log to sit against, fell into sleep for the first time in her life. The others were quiet and Oki was worried about his big sister but Mara told him it would be fine.

Kit dreamed, for the first time in her life, she dreamed. It was terrifying, she had no control at all, images came and went and some of them were terrifying. She called out for her Uncle Ray but nothing happened, she had to deal with them on her own. "I don't like this," she said to herself, and just like that, her dreams changed to scenes of her Mother and Father at home, singing songs to her, hugging her, loving her.

The others let her sleep for about four hours so that it was mid-afternoon when they set out again. Mara said, "This is the furthest James and I have gone, from now on we need to be careful, we don't know what the river is like ahead."

Kit, being quite refreshed by her nap yelled, "bring it on!" which made Oki laugh. He was usually the enthusiastic one.

About an hour later the four saw a tributary that joined the main river, about half a kilometre from them was a waterfall. The biggest waterfall any of them had ever seen. The water roared over the lip of a small mountain and bounced, sparkling in the sun down at least four hundred feet to the stream that joined the river. They stayed in one spot, watching this wonder for half an hour, as if to burn it into their memories.

That evening they stopped and set up camp at a sandy bend in

the river. The four of them hopped into the river and had a good scrub with sand and soap before dinner.

As Kit left the water, she felt a jab on her left arm. Having pretty good eyesight, she didn't swat, but looked to see what these insects were like.

To her shock, she saw a tiny winged person with a needle-like spear. Bringing her arm close to her face, she felt a thought, "...bring your poisons into our place will you? Take that," and jabbed Kit again.

"Please don't stab me," said Kit, as she turned to the others and said, "don't swat, these are beings, not bugs."

"You can understand me?" appeared in Kit's head.

"I can, she said aloud, and you can understand me?"

"It would seem so, beast, although I don't know how."

"We mean you no harm, what poison do you mean?"

"That filth you put on your skins, it harms us and rubs off on the things around you."

"We only put it on because we thought you were dumb insects, we use it all the time on our world."

"Your world?"

"Yes, we come from a different world, all this around us is a

world, but ours is different.”

“It must be poisonous if you have such things on your skin, no wonder your 'insects' fight back. Perhaps in your world, beasts are intelligent.”

“We are, certainly, some beasts are not able to communicate as well as we do.”

“Well, what are you doing in your contraptions floating up our river.”

“We are exploring, enjoying your world, it is very beautiful.”

“It is the world, sometimes beautiful, sometimes not. Is yours not the same?”

“Well, I love my world, it is similar to this one, but as you suspected, not so pure, we have poisoned some of it.”

“I see, you beasts seem harmless enough, if you promise not to put poison on your skin, we will stop fighting you.”

“Thank you, do you have a name?”

“Name? We don't know what that is, so perhaps we don't have them.”

“Very well, can I call you 'the folk'.”

“Of course, that is what we are. And we shall call you 'big folk' since that is what you are.”

“That seems fair. May we continue our trip on your world?”

“If you wish, just stop using the poison. I will come with you and see what this 'trip' is like.”

With that, the big folk ate their dinner and relaxed amongst the glitter of hundreds of folk. That night, Kit slept again, and dreamed of jewels dancing in the air.

The next day was to be the last going upstream, then they would turn around and head back to the place where they started. As they paddled, the folk danced around their paddles and their heads, seemingly delighted at the movement through the water, and the splashing.

The folk kept up a stream of description for Kit, telling her which plants grew where, what they were for, and how the folk played around them.

In the mid-afternoon the big folk encountered a beast. It was what could only be described as a flying snake. “Beware, stay down and we will protect you,” shouted one of the folk as they drove at the beast, stabbing it with their tiny spears. It was a tough battle, and the snake snapped up several of the folk before they drove it off.

“That is terrible,” said Kit who had tried desperately to help. Oki was shaking with rage. We will try to find a way to rid your world of these beasts.

“You must not do that,” said one of the folk. The beasts are part

of our world. We eat the world and the world eats us. It is all a balance. The beasts take only what they need and they help the plants grow. If they were gone we would be too many and the plants would be gone. We know this because some clever folk in another place found a way to kill the beasts, their place is now a desert.”

Kit thought for a moment and then said, “I had not thought of the long term result. You have taught me a valuable lesson and I thank you.”

“You are welcome, and we thank you for your offer of help.”

The rest of the trip was uneventful, but it was decorated with the folk flitting around them, making rainbows and, when Kit listened carefully, beautiful tinkling music.

“What are they saying,” asked Oki.

Kit was shocked, “You don't hear them? They are singing. When we get back to our world I will show you all they have said and sung.”

Oki was content with that, and Kit turned to Mara and James. “Do you hear them?”

“No Kit, but you have spoken and heard for all of us, by looking carefully we could understand what was happening. It would seem you have discovered another power, one that works on this world.” said James.

As they reached their long portage back to their world, Kit

thanked the folk for their company and their wisdom. The folk tinkled and twinkled brightly which the others took to mean, “come back to visit.”

As they stepped out to Guelph, Mara cancelled the talisman and Kit showed the others all that the folk had said and sung.

“Beautiful,” said Oki, “can we go back to visit again?”

“We certainly can,” said Mara, “we seem to have new friends, thanks to Kit.”

Oki looked at Kit and seemed to swell with pride for his sister.

Mara was talking with Liz in the lunch counter, it was long past closing time but they sat at the far end of the counter.

“Thank you, Liz, for the talisman. I believe we have learned that Kit and Oki can get along without their powers.”

“We have learned something even more important about Kit.”

“Indeed, even without powers she could communicate with an alien species. This seems unusual.”

“It seems as if she may become a Shaman.”

“Do you suppose there was a Shaman in her lineage?”

“Be careful of assigning too much importance to genetics. A

person can accomplish incredible things without a scrap of genetic help. The talisman should have negated any communicative powers she inherited, and yet, on her own, she spoke to aliens, to a collective people who communicate by mental means, telepathy if you will. This is not common.”

“Megan and Woden can do it. So can Ingrid and Stan and Oki.”

“They can root around in the brain of a human, but communicate? Perhaps, but they are Gods and Spirit Beings with great power. Kit did it with none, we must watch and help when we can. And what of Okami?”

“He seemed almost relieved not to have his powers, as if he could let go without the fear of destroying everything around him. Stan is pushing him hard toward an iron self-control. I guess Stan had to learn that himself. Oki is becoming incredibly disciplined, and it's forcing him to miss being a little boy.”

“And this trip?”

“It let him laugh and relax for a while.”

“Perhaps these trips with you will need to be a regular thing, to a world where their powers don't work, just to let them be children.”

“Well as they say, it takes a village to raise a child.”

The Cute Boy

Kit was truly a teen now, she had discovered boys. Specifically the cute boy in her class. She mooned about quite a bit, and her studies were slipping. From this, she decided it must be true love.

Unfortunately, the cute boy was pretty much owned by the Alpha girls, a group of four of the hens that ruled the roost. Their leader was out, every school break, kissing and cuddling with the cute boy. Kit watched this from across the schoolyard and got depressed.

One day she got her chance, it was an after school gathering in someone's basement, and the cute boy was there without Alpha girl. Kit got bold and sat on the couch beside cute boy. He was interested and the two of them were soon necking. Kit was in heaven, she figured she was now the one, after all, she had let him kiss her.

Of course the other kids saw this, and it was duly reported to the Alpha girls.

The next day at school the cute boy got an earful and when Kit met him outside, she greeted him warmly. He wasn't so warm. In fact he told her that she was too small, too fox faced, too weird and a lousy kisser.

That was as far as he got, Kit, angry, hurt, embarrassed, told him to shut up.

Unfortunately, she didn't just shut his mouth, she shut his airway too. She was crying and panicked, all the things you would expect from a young girl spurned at the height of her romantic blossoming. She wanted this cute boy dead.

Oki came running from the other side of the yard, “Kit, Kit, stop you're hurting him! Kit you have to stop, I need you, sis.”

It wasn't working, and as he got to her he took her arm, “Kit, please stop, open your eyes, look what you're doing, the red curtain is in front of you, look through it, LOOK AT HIM!”

The boy was still choking, he was almost passed out, and Oki squeezed.

Kit cried out in pain, her anger suddenly pierced by Oki's grip on her arm. She saw the cute boy drop to his knees and she let go. He coughed and started to breathe again while Oki dragged Kit to one side, “Kit, look again, look at him, look at his thoughts!”

Kit looked, and saw all the insecurities and bravado of a young teen boy. She saw that most of what he did was out of fear of being excluded, that he wasn't some sort of manipulating monster, but just a kid who wanted to fit in. He had meant no harm, he was, to a real degree, just defending himself from the chaos of the world he saw around him.

And he was powerless.

Kit looked into Oki's eyes and began to cry. “What have I done? Oh Oki, I'm a monster, I wanted to shut him up, I wanted

to kill him.”

Oki wrapped his arms around her and held her until she was calm enough to hear him. “You and I are just kids, Kit, kids who can kill. Stan is teaching me self-control, I know what you felt, but you can control that, you can. You have to, I need you Sis, I need you to help me grow up, so I'll tell you what Stan taught me, but please, please don't do that again.”

Kit looked down at her arm, there was already a bruise there, and there would be a mark she carried for the rest of her life. She would keep it as a reminder of how she had lost control, and how close she had come to killing someone.

Nobody but Kit and Oki knew what really happened, nobody saw. As for the official story, the boy had choked on something and dislodged it as he fell. Still, the rumours went around, Kit had done something. She had no more trouble from the Alpha girls, but her friends were just that much more distant. She became the outsider girl that day.

“Ingrid, how do you do it?”

“What's that Kit?”

“How do you stop the red curtain from coming down? How do you keep from blasting somebody into bits?”

Ingrid realized that this was going to be 'the talk' and she settled back a bit on the lunch counter stool.

“Liz, can I get another coffee and a hot chocolate for Kit please?”

“Could I have a coffee too please Ingrid.”

Ingrid looked at the young woman sitting in front of her and said, “Two coffees please Liz.”

She turned back to Kit and said, “I heard about the schoolyard incident, and to answer your question, sometimes I don't control it. We call it Berserking, to let the spirit of the, well of me, the Goddess of War descend like what you called the red curtain. Sometimes it's the only way to deal with overwhelming odds on a battlefield. The problem is that it gets easier and easier to slip into, and then the Berserker needs to be shunned or sometimes killed. If he doesn't first die on the battlefield of course.”

“Ingrid, I'm afraid I'm going to end up like that, out of control. If Oki hadn't been there...”

“Kit, unless I'm very much mistaken, that was the first and only time this has happened. You were hurt and humiliated and you reached out with the best weapon you could find. Most kids might punch the person they see as their tormentor, but you reached for your power. The difference between a schoolyard scrap and a dead boy is not your reaction, it's the weapon.”

“Can you take my power away from me? I don't want that weapon around, I don't want to become a killer just because I lose my temper.”

“We can't, Kit. We don't even know what your full power is, or Oki's. Stan is teaching Oki to be a protector, he's incredibly powerful, Stan thinks maybe even stronger than he is, so he has to channel his strength into something that lets him live in our world. Unfortunately, that means he's losing his childhood as he builds that sense of responsibility.”

“You guys are discussing and controlling us behind our backs?”

“We are doing what we have to do to let you become yourselves, Kit, so yes, we're working to guide you to yourselves.”

“What do you guys want me to become, what do you want me to do?”

“It's not like that Kit, we can help but we can't control, even if you and Oki had no powers, we should not control you, we have to let you grow into who you are.”

“I don't know who I am! I only know I almost killed someone.”

“And how do you feel about that, are you proud of your power, your ability?”

Kit looked at her in shock, “I feel sick to my stomach.”

“You're not a killer then, Kit. I'd say you're a helper, a teacher, a healer. I know this because you have taken charge of your brother, and you're still helping him. Just because Stan is

teaching him to be a protector, maybe even a manifestation of Nanabozo, it doesn't mean Oki is done learning from you.”

“But it was Oki who saw what was happening and saved me.”

“You're brother and sister, you will help each other all your lives, nothing is going to change that.”

“But how do I learn how to control my temper, how do I make sure I don't hurt someone who makes me angry?”

Liz came by to refill the coffees and said simply, “Sam.”

“Yes, Kit go and see Sam, see what she can do for you.”

“But Sam doesn't have powers, what can she teach me?”

“Who knows, Art still practises with her, he must see some value in what she does. Think about it and go see her if you decide to. I'll tell her to perhaps expect you.”

The Backyard Battle

“Hello Kit, nice to see you,” said Sam Martin, what can I do for you?”

“I don't know,” said Kit, “did Ingrid talk to you?”

“She did, and it seems that you are worried about what you

called the red curtain which came down and made you strike out blindly.”

“That’s right, but I’m not sure what you can do for me, you don’t have powers so you probably can’t advise me.”

“Well perhaps not, but I can fight you.”

“What! No, that’s not going to happen, I’m way more powerful than you, I’m not going to fight you, I’ll hurt you!”

Before Kit could say anything more, she was flat on her back on the ground, the wind knocked out of her. She got up slowly, watching Sam carefully.

“Good, you’re paying attention now. What were you saying about hurting me?”

“You surprised me and you were right next to me.”

“Are you ready now? I’m way over here, can you stop me from dumping you on your ass again?”

Kit felt her anger building up, “Don’t, Sam, I’m not kidding.”

Sam just smiled and started to walk toward Kit. No, walking is the wrong word, she stalked, and as she did so, it felt to Kit like she was making a strange warbling sound. Kit felt like she was falling under some sort of spell. She reminded herself that she was a powerful being and began to gather herself to stop Sam. But the moment she started to fight back, Sam was there and Kit was on the ground again.

This time it took longer to get her breath back, Sam had thrown her a lot more heavily. Kit felt humiliated, how dare this girl!

As she started to get up she took her eyes off Sam and felt a knock on her head, a hard one.

She shook her head and looked up to find Sam holding a bamboo kendo sword. Now Kit was furious, now the red curtain descended and she struck out, but Sam wasn't there. She felt the bamboo across the back of her left calf and she went down on one knee.

She spun around and used her power to lash out like she had with the boy, but again, Sam wasn't there, it was like Sam was reading her mind and Kit felt the sword across her back. She stumbled forward several steps and as she did, she unconsciously called on the Keen family to help her.

“No, this is your fight Kit, you have more than enough power on your own to defeat Sam. Do it if you can,” said her Uncle Ray.

Kit was so angry at that refusal to help, she stopped thinking, she could hardly see, her heart was racing, her arms were shaking. She turned and lashed out at everything in front of her. Trees exploded, bushes were torn from the ground, and an arm went around her neck. Sam squeezed and Kit passed out.

When Kit woke up, Sam was there holding her head on her lap. “Shhh, it's OK Kit, you're fine, stay calm and breathe deep.”

“Sam? What did you do to me?”

“Nothing much, I just triggered your rage and used that to beat you up a little. You’re fine, maybe a couple of bruises but they will heal. I could have killed you, you know.”

“I believe you, but why did you do it?”

“To show you that going out of control isn’t a very good idea. Control is the first thing you need to learn when you’re angry, without it, you simply give others a tool to defeat you. This is the very first lesson you must learn if you’re serious about the martial arts, or if you simply want to go through life without hurting people. You control your anger, which is, in fact, yours. Nobody else can make you angry, only you can do that. It may be the result of pain, physical or psychological, but you can control both of them.”

“Did you tell Uncle Ray not to help me?”

“No, if you asked him to help I didn’t hear it, and if he didn’t help, you’ll have to ask him why.”

At that moment, Ray was standing to one side of the girls. “I didn’t, Kit, because I would have been eyes that you could use to find and hurt Sam. You were blinded with your rage, and I didn’t feel like helping you hurt Sam, who, by the way, is one of the bravest people I know. To show you something about yourself, she risked death or injury.”

“But why? Why would you take such a horrible risk, Sam?”

“Because it was necessary, Kit. If you are becoming as powerful as Ingrid says, you need to learn that your anger can hurt you just as much as it can hurt others.”

“But how could you fight me, knowing I could really hurt you badly, how did you overcome your own fear and pain?”

“They are part of me, and they come from my mind, so I can deal with them. They don’t come from outside. I can decide what to let affect me, I can make my own story.”

“Your own story?”

“I decide what to think about what happens to me, nobody else. I make my own interpretation of my life. If someone hurts me it’s my story. Look, my teacher sometimes told the story of the evening a very good female friend of his got him really drunk and took advantage of him. By any definition it was date rape. Because he was a man, well, a boy at the time, he found it easy to make a funny story of it. He says he got a lot of free beers to tell that story over the years.

“The point is not that he got taken advantage of by a friend, or that he turned the experience into a lot of free beer. The point is that he, and he alone, defined the experience. Nobody else.

“You opened up to a boy you really liked and he slapped you down. You lost control and almost killed him. Just think about that for a moment. He said some words and you allowed yourself to lose control. You, who are so much more powerful than he, you let words defeat you. And then you let me trigger that same reaction. How do you feel, are you OK now?”

“Yes I think so.”

“Get up then, take a deep breath, and face me once more. We'll have one more round of our fight, only this time you will take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Pay attention to me, don't be distracted, don't lose control. Are you ready?”

“Must we do this?”

“I think so, just once more. Are you ready? I'm going to attack.”

Kit looked at Sam and nothing at all happened. Sam had a slight frown but that was all Ray could see. “OK Kit, you can let her go now.”

Sam relaxed and smiled, “That was masterful, Kit. To stop a fight without fighting, to 'win in the scabbard,' is one of the highest forms of fighting. You could have done whatever you wanted to me, but you were under control. The only way for me to defeat you is for you to defeat yourself. Do you understand?”

“I think so, but I could never hurt you Sam.”

“You could, you tried to, that's my point, Kit. By letting me anger you, you lost control and tried to hurt me. You have to understand that, you have to own that. If, now that you are calm and you have no wish to hurt me, then in the future you need to keep your cool so that you don't go against what you know is the right thing to do.”

“But how do I keep from losing control?”

“You've just had the first lesson. You have seen the difference between how you are, under control and how you are, out of control. The second lesson is to understand just how powerful you are. Why should you get angry when you could rip apart almost any being on the planet.”

Kit thought about that for a few moments and then said to Sam, “Thank you for beating me up.”

Sam laughed and hugged her. “You are a good person, Kit, you just need to keep working on it. While you're at this age, the emotions, the hormones, are going to make you miserable once in a while. Just remember that it gets better. Come see me any time and I'll happily beat you up.”

As Ray and Kit walked away from Sam's house, Kit asked, “How did she get to be the way she is, Uncle Ray? So much skill, so much control?”

“She has studied her martial arts since she was very young, and she helped in the Giants war, she killed a lot of beings and she's had to deal with that ever since. The very fact that you might have to deal with killing someone, was enough for her to risk her life to teach you that lesson. I hope you appreciate it.”

“I hope I do too. Uncle Ray, how do I keep learning to be like her?”

“Look around you, Kit. Think about the people you know. Every one of them is teaching you, if you stay open to the lessons. Ingrid sent you to Sam for this lesson, perhaps she has other lessons for you, or Mara, or Liz, or even Oki. He saw what was happening to you, and he did what he had to do to stop you. I see you have left a mark on your arm where he squeezed you. Why did you do that?”

“To remind myself of that lesson, of course.”

“Well don't feel you have to have a scar for every lesson you learn. You'll be covered in them by the time you grow up.”

“Is that it, Ray? Is that growing up? Accumulating scars?... Oh, I'm sorry, I should have said Uncle Ray.”

“Kit you're old enough to call me Ray, and yes, to a large extent, growing up is collecting scars from lessons learned. If you have no scars you have probably not learned much.”

“You know, Amber said something like that about my violin playing, that I had to have some life lessons before the music will be mine.”

“Lessons are everywhere, sweetie, you just have to pay attention.”

The Cross Country Run

Oki watched his sister walk around on pins and needles. He could feel the stress she was putting on herself, the iron control that she was imposing so that she didn't hurt anyone.

He knew what she was going through, because he was like that before Stan began training him. He knew what she needed.

“Kit, come on, I want to show you something really cool.”

“What's that bro?”

“Uncle Ray, can you put us into the woods near my special place?”

Ray smiled and moved them. Kit looked around and saw not much at all, but trees and mosquitoes.

“So you wanted to show me bush and bugs?”

“Hush, sis, just change and follow me. If you can.”

With that Oki changed to a wolf and was accelerating away from Kit.

Kit snarled, changed to a fox and took off after him. There was no way she was going to let her little brother outrun her.

Soon the two were neck and neck, dodging and weaving around trees, branches whipping past their faces. Oki howled

and Kit barked in response, she was alive, she poured on the speed and Oki laughed as he kept up.

Not too long after that, they came to a lake and without any hesitation Oki dove in, changing his legs to a serpent's tail as he did. Kit screamed in protest but dove in anyway, and to her astonishment, she could grow a serpent tail too. It was glorious, the two of them went straight across the lake, twin wakes spreading out behind them, ducks and loons exploding out of their way.

Kit had a huge grin on her face as she felt the pure pleasure of pushing herself to the absolute limit of her ability, and finding that there was more. As they got to the far shore, they had their back legs again and Oki started to shift his size, larger, longer legs when he had the room, smaller to squeeze through thick bush. Kit barked again and found she could do the same.

The absolute pleasure of running, soaked into her, covered in burrs, scratched and bruised where she couldn't avoid a tree, it didn't matter, she was tear-assing along beside her brother and the world fell away, there was nothing but the run, the absolute joy of burning muscles and aching lungs.

On and on they ran, an hour, two, three, and they kept running. Finally they dove into another lake, this one deep and very cold. Kit could have sworn that it steamed up around them, as they floated up to the surface and lay on their backs, looking up at the blue sky. Totally exhausted, and yet, she somehow knew that if they wanted, they could go on and on.

“Did you find the click, Kit?”

“You mean that place where it stopped being hard and you suddenly know you can go forever?”

“That's the one. It's glorious isn't it?”

“It is, thank you Oki, for showing me this.”

“How could I not? You're my favourite sister.”

“I'm your only sister, doodyhead.”

“Yeah, and I don't want you having a heart attack from stress. Give yourself a break, you don't have to try so hard all the time. We're still teen-agers, we don't have to be under iron control all the time. You don't want to end up like a robot do you? Look at Stan, he's under control but he can laugh. Same as Ray, the two of them are pulling tricks all the time to relieve the pressure. I think they don't even mind when the tricks explode in their faces.”

“Hey, how did you get to be so smart, kid?”

“I had good teachers, Kit, you and Stan. You taught me to care enough to try to control myself, and Stan is teaching me that there are all sorts of ways to control. One is to lock yourself down, like you've been doing, but that takes a lot of energy. Another way is what we just did, to run and run until everything falls away and you're exhausted. Another way is to laugh, to play tricks. Sam is teaching me to stop the stupid cycling around my brain does, going over and over the same things.”

“You’re learning from Sam?”

“Sure, she’s teaching me all sorts of things about breathing and not thinking and letting things go.”

“I thought she taught how to fight.”

“She uses fighting to teach that other stuff, didn’t you notice that when she kicked your ass?”

“I guess I did. Like I said, bro, how did you get so smart?”

Oki splashed her.

After they had recovered while floating in the lake, Oki had Kit sit cross-legged with her hands in her lap. “Put your left hand on top of your right, and put your thumbs together to make a circle. Put your tongue on the roof of your mouth, and take the air out, that stops you from having to swallow so much. Now straighten yourself up so that your ears are over your shoulders, mostly close your eyes, but look down toward your nose. Now count as you breathe, in on one, out on two, count until you reach ten. If you lose count, just start again, no biggie. If you have a thought, don’t chase it, see it and let it go, if you lose count, start again at one.”

Kit did as she was told, she was willing to learn from her brother, he had earned her respect years before. Kit was surprised to find her mind mostly quiet, if she just said hello to

a thought but didn't chase it around, it simply drifted away. Perhaps it was because they had tired themselves out on the run, but she felt peace and a warmth rising from her belly. When she told Oki about it later, he said, "It's just warmth, it happens or it doesn't, don't pay it any attention, and don't chase it."

"This sitting and breathing is nice, and I can see the use of this Oki, but what is it for?"

"Sam says it isn't for anything, it's a Japanese thing, to do with enlightenment. She says that if you are sitting, you are enlightened, there's nothing else to try for. I have no idea what that means, but maybe someday I'll figure it out. She has a lot of these sort of things she does that don't have any purpose, or maybe I just don't see the purpose yet, but they're nice to do."

"Do you think I should practice with Sam too? Or would you want your big sister hanging around?"

"I'd love it, but I already asked Sam and she said that what she does is suitable for me because I'm a fighter by nature, whatever that means. She said you should ask Ingrid to help you find what you need to find. I'm not sure what that means, but maybe Ingrid will know. Anyway, I can teach you the things that Sam tells me to do, but it's mostly about this breathing thing. She has one where she walks around the room, and one where she does her fighting patterns over and over again in the dark. Lots of fun things like that."

"But you can see in the dark, Oki."

“Don’t tell Sam that, she thinks I’m amazing.”

“Not that amazing after I beat you back to the start, bratkin.”

Oki laughed and took off after Kit.

Choices

“Ingrid, I heard that Kit has asked you to teach her.”

“She did, and I said no.”

“She told me, can I ask why?”

“I’m not a teacher, Ray, never have been. I don’t know what Kit is, anyway, none of us do. Why aren’t you teaching her, she’s at least half yours, you should be teaching her.”

“I am, I’ve taught her as much as I can about the Keen family, but Ingrid, she’s more powerful than all of us.”

“Well Stan is teaching Okami, what about him teaching Kit too.”

“Oki is learning, certainly, Stan is working him hard, but he doesn’t think the two of them together would be a good idea.”

“Because they’d gang up on their teacher?”

“Exactly, and Oki is teaching Kit what he's learning anyway, the two of them think they're pulling a trick on the grownups by sharing what they are learning.”

“That's a good strategy. Look, I sent Kit to Sam, why doesn't Sam teach her.”

“Sam isn't sure her methods are the right answer. Kit isn't really a fighter and so isn't likely to be interested in her lessons. Oki, on the other hand, is eating them up. Sam suggested Kit ask you to teach her.”

“And what experience do I have teaching youngsters, Ray? I'm the Goddess of war.”

“And the Goddess of love and the Goddess of crops and who knows what else if you try. That's just it, Kit keeps finding more things she can do, maybe you can help her. As for teaching youngsters, give me a break, you've had dozens of kids over the years.”

“Well, OK I'll give you that. Look, how about I advise and guide rather than teach her. I can suggest who, when she needs help. Would that do?”

“It would, thanks Ingrid, you were always my favourite Goddess.”

“Lying fox, your favourite is the one you can talk into bed. I'm your least favourite.”

Ray laughed and said he'd tell Kit.

When Kit next saw Ingrid in the lunch counter she sat next to her. “Thanks for taking me on, Ingrid, I appreciate it.”

“I’m not your teacher Kit, I’ll answer your questions and send you to whoever you need to see but don’t think of me as more than that.”

“You sent me to Sam and that helped me a lot, so I trust you. I think that maybe I just have to get through my teens and then things will settle down.”

Ingrid, not for the first time, wondered just how sharp this kid was, “They usually do, just hang in there.”

“Did you ever have trouble when you were a teen?”

“Well I was never a teen that I can remember, but in the first few centuries I was around, yeah, I had trouble figuring it out.”

“Did you have boy troubles?”

“They weren’t boys back then, this planet wasn’t formed yet, but there were other Gods and yes, I had boy troubles, especially with those Greeks. Oh my they are pretty beings with their curly hair and their greased up bodies. They thought a lot about themselves too, vain and egotistic. Me, I was just some hick from the north. They made fun of my accent, telling me it sounded like a bunch of BaBaBa. Barbarian they called me.”

“What did you do?”

“Do? I beat seven kinds of hell out of them.”

Kit smiled and said, “Are you sure you're supposed to be telling me that?”

“Like I said, kid, I'm not your teacher, but listen carefully, they were Gods, equal in power to me, or at least close. That makes a difference, believe me.”

“Did you ever get mad at a human?”

“Of course I do, but you're asking me if I ever had the experience you did with the cute boy, the one you almost killed right?”

“Well, yes I guess so.”

“Not a human, but a pre-human. I wasn't exactly young, but I was sort of teenaged in my brain. This Homo erectus boy was living with me, when he got a bit rough. He'd found another girl and thought he could treat me like dirt.”

“What did you do?”

“Well I'm not proud of this, but I exploded him, there were bits of him all over the trees.”

Kit's mouth dropped open and she gasped.

“Goddess of war, Kit, Goddess of war. Look, that was a loss of temper, not supporting my side in a war, so I'm not proud of it. In a war there's usually another God on the opposite side, we fight each other while the humans fight their fellow humans. Each side calls on their divine being for help, both sides always claim divine favour and both are always right.

“Seriously, if you want to learn how not to kill, you're talking to the wrong being.”

“But do you ever feel bad about all the fighting and killing?”

Ingrid sat quietly for quite a while. “I do, Kit, I do, but I have ways to deal with it. First, I've got Art who is a lot more important to me than he thinks, and you better not tell him that. Before Art I had Woden, who is my rock. Still is. And second, oh hell I'll show you. Open your mind to me please Kit.”

Kit found herself in a lovely wooded area, with a river flowing softly by and a clearing. Ingrid tapped Kit on the shoulder and pointed, then put her finger to her lips. Kit nodded and whispered, “That's you?”

Ingrid nodded, “There's a lot of war, and so I have to be in many places at once, one of those places is here, I'm almost always here, just sitting and watching the water move past.”

They were back in the diner and Kit wanted to hug Ingrid, “I didn't know it affected you so much.”

“Ingrid reached over and squeezed Kit's hand, “I didn't have a lot of choice about what I am, but I found ways to cope. The

river bank is one of them.”

“It's sort of like the sitting and breathing Oki showed me how to do. He learned it from Sam.”

“It's very similar, I learned those techniques from holy men in India.”

“Why don't you stop being the Goddess of war?”

“Oh my dear, I'd stop in a second, if only beings would stop having wars. The thing is, it's what I am. After a while, I started taking men who were dying, off the battlefield to my 'heavenly hall' or whatever they want to call it. They are healed and live out their lives doing whatever they figure is their reward for dying on the battlefield. It's not much, but it's something I could do.”

“So is it all just destiny?”

“No, destiny would need an omnipotent god. The universe is chaos, we exist and are small points of order. I sort of drifted into being the Goddess of war, and don't forget, I'm also love and crops. I went with what I was good at and became those things. As much as I hate war, I'm good at it. I'm also good at love and gardening.”

“You had a choice?”

“As do you, love, as do you. You make choices, or choices are made for you, and those choices become what you are, if that makes sense.”

“I think it does, but I don't know what I want to be.”

“You don't have to decide, you're still young, you have loads of time, and you can do what I did, just 'go with the flow' and see what you become. Although somehow I can't see you doing that kiddo.”

“I guess I'm not good at drifting, but... Oh no, is that the time? I'll be late for school! Thanks Ingrid, can we talk again soon?”

And she was gone out the door.

Ingrid looked over at Liz behind the counter. Liz smiled and shook her head.

“Liz, you know you're the one she needs to study with, why are you hanging back?”

“Because she doesn't know it yet, Ingrid, she has to come to it in her own way.”

“Well she's exhausting.”

Liz laughed, “Hang in there, she's got a lot of teenage to get through.” Which earned her a dirty look from Ingrid.

Oki Sees a Problem

Oki was a bit depressed. It seemed like every day he saw some person, men or women, complaining, shouting, getting in other people's faces. Several times he was on the verge of stepping in, but didn't. It was simply, well, depressing.

It might have been the area of town he had to walk through to get to school, but when he went to the mall, he saw the same thing.

“I don't understand it, Uncle Ray, why are people such jerks. It's not as if there's a war going on, or that people are starving, and the arguments are all stupid.”

“If there were a war, Oki, or if people were starving, you'd see a lot of good behaviour. Most people will help out their neighbours in a crisis, but when things are good, people seem to want to complain. It doesn't make any sense, I know, but I've seen it for centuries. The better off, the more peaceful a society, the more resentment, the more arguments.”

“So what causes it?”

“Often it's mental illness, there's a lot of low-grade maladjustment out there, but I think the main problem is perceived inequality.”

“What's that?”

“It's the perception that there are people out there who are

getting something that you aren't. Like people who have more money, and you deserve what they have.”

“What, like 'it's not fair, he got a bigger slice of cake than me?' That's just stupid, that's kid stuff.”

“You nailed it Oki, lots of people never get over being kids, they never grow up. They never think that some people are born into rich families, have better luck, or whatever. When everyone has nothing, people get along, but when there's inequality, things like someone staying too long in a parking spot really bothers some folks.”

“Do people like being upset? That's what it seems like to me.”

“I think people get into the habit of complaining, if it's someone else's fault, you don't have to fix it, you can just tell other people to fix it. Lots of people want someone else, like the government maybe, to give them stuff, but they don't want to help pay so the government can give other people stuff.”

“Uncle Ray, you're telling me that people are greedy aren't you?”

“Well, yes, I guess so. But why are they greedy, that's the question. Can you think of a reason why?”

“That's easy, we just took media studies in school. Advertising creates expectations. If you have a fancy red car you're a success and pretty girls will fall all over you. So what they're saying is that if you don't have a fancy red car you're a failure, right?”

“Hmm, we never had classes like that when I was growing up, that's pretty good.”

“What did you study?”

“Mostly how to read well enough to figure out what the town signs said, and then they kicked us out to go work in the fields.”

“Didn't you guys have advertising and social media?”

“No, we had priests to tell us how to live our lives. Come to think of it, I suppose it isn't much different now, only it's big companies telling us what we want, not the church.”

“So what should I do when I see people getting in each other's faces?”

“Well, if it seems to be an equal match, nothing much. Maybe just keep an eye on it. If it's a mismatch, maybe step in between.”

“Like when that guy started calling the new kid in our school bad names?”

“That's the thing. Do you want to tell me about that?”

“Well, the new kid is from another country that is at war, so his family came away to here. He's a nice kid, and really smart. He tries hard because his family can't speak English so he's got to be the one who will make a living, that's how he explained it to

me.”

“And the man?”

“He was a real loser, I don't think he'd been to school at all, he couldn't say three words without a swear word. I didn't like him at all. The kid seemed to be smarter than him already.”

“There you go, Oki, a classic case of someone trying to find somebody else to look down on, so he could feel better about himself.”

“Well all he did was look like a loser.”

“So what did you do?”

“This guy was on school property, so I told him to get off or I'd call the police. He started yelling at me then, and left the new kid alone.”

“Oki I hope you didn't hurt him.”

“Nah, I didn't have to, he just flapped his lips for a while and then left when he saw some teachers coming. I wanted to, though, I was hoping he'd take a swing at me.”

“Don't look for fights, Oki, you'll find too many of them. I think you did pretty well.”

“Yeah, but it left a bad taste in my mouth, I really wanted to shut the guy up.”

“I get it, kid, me too, but that's not the way. You just have to understand that there are people like that everywhere, you're going to keep meeting them, so take a big breath and let it go.”

“I can't poke them just a little from the inside?”

“Much as it's tempting, kiddo, it's best not to. Can you do that? Poke people inside?”

“Sure, Kit taught me how.”

“Ah, I see. Do you want another hot chocolate?”

“I better get home now, but thanks Uncle Ray.”

As he wandered out the door of the lunch counter, Ray reminded himself once more that he intended to look into Tilly's ancestors.

“It's hard when you're that age, not to try and fix the world,” said Mike as he topped up Ray's coffee.

“Hell I still want to fix it, it's just that after centuries of trying I've realized it's not going to happen.”

“That's tough, you have to wonder what Coyote feels like, making the world and then wiping it out to try again, over and over.”

“Oh lord yes. Do you ever wonder if you were here for each of his tries?”

“Never, my brain hurts if I think about that sort of thing.”

Ray smiled and raised his cup in salute.

A Sudden Emergency

Kit was in the kitchen with her mother. She was cooking a recipe she had found in an old magazine at school. Her mother was doing her best not to interfere, but it was difficult. Kit was good at a lot of things, but cooking was, so far, not one of them.

Still, she was making the effort, and any help was better than none, right? So she didn't comment, simply handed Kit the ingredients as she needed them. So far it didn't look like anyone would be poisoned.

And where is Oki, one might ask? He had been banned from the kitchen a year ago, after a particularly spectacular flour explosion as he tried to make pancakes for Sunday breakfast.

He was in the living room with father, a similarly talented non-cook. Still, the two of them did the dishes every day, so best not to ask for more than one is likely to get.

The cookies eventually came out of the oven and were shared around the household. Mom and Pop praised the qualities of the baking while Oki made a sour face and pretended to stick his finger down his throat. One can imagine that the results

were somewhere in between these reviews.

Kit had switched to helping her mother with dinner, which would be served momentarily, when Okami yelled to Kitsune, “Come look, look at the Television.”

Kit moved into the living room, looked, and saw that a volcano had exploded on a faraway island. The news story said that rescuers could not get to the island in time, that if the volcano did not stop, all lives would be lost.

“I have to go, Kit, I can help.”

Kit was horrified, what could anybody do against a volcano. She looked to their parents to back her up, but Oki was gone, he had moved himself to the island, Kit could see that through his eyes. She looked at her mother and father, huddled together now and her mother said, “Go.”

Kit followed. Neither of them had known they could move themselves, but needs must, they were both on the side of the volcano that had remained intact.

“Kit I have to stop it until the rescuers can get here. I have to.”

“Oki, this is not your job, you can’t, call Stan, call Megan.”

“They can’t do it, Kit, I called, they can’t help, they won’t help.”

“Oki, no, if they can’t...”

“Kit go home, I have to try but I don’t want you here in case I can’t.”

“Oki please...”

“Kit, I’m a protector, I know that, but if I can’t protect these people I’m no good for anything, now go.”

With that the young boy changed to wolf form, he was enormous, and he set his four paws so firmly they seemed to root down into the rock. He looked up to the top of the mountain and reached. With his mind he reached around the mountain and he squeezed. As he did, the volcano tried to burst out of a weak spot, he dug and dug his hold into the ground, down and down the mountain and he squeezed.

Kit could see the effort, and she could see that it wasn’t enough, the volcano would kill Okami, it would kill her brother. She changed to a massive fox and took Okami’s tail into her mouth and poured every bit of her power into him.

It wasn’t enough.

Kit opened her mind and gathered every Keen together as quickly as she could, and sent their massed power into Oki, but it still wasn’t enough, her brother was being torn apart. She screamed in her mind, “Amber help me!”

She screamed again as she felt Oki begin to rip into pieces. She knew he would not let go, but would hang on to that volcano for as long as he was alive.

Amber and Coyote were there. Coyote took one look and said, “No, this is mine, not the boy’s.” He turned to Amber and said, “Stop time!”

Amber panicked, “Coy I can’t do that.”

Coyote said “Do it girl, play, gather it all up and then lift your bow.”

Amber looked even more scared, but because of her trust in Coyote, she began. Her notes went quickly from the subsonic to the supersonic and then lights, like the Northern Lights, began to appear, strands of light up into the sky vibrated. The lights became more and more bright, blinding anyone who had eyes to see. On and on she played until Coyote said, “Now, stop it!”

Amber tried to lift her bow. She dug deeper into herself than she had ever dug, she tried to lift her bow. “Coy, I can’t.”

“Do it, Amber, lift your bow.”

Amber tried again, more effort than she had ever made before, it was as if her bow had infinite mass. She took a breath and as she let it out, she yelled, at first low and then, like her music, into the supersonic. She lifted. Pure white light was streaming from her mouth as she shouted. She felt sweat burst out on her forehead, but as it ran down her face she tasted blood. She ignored it and lifted her bow.

The universe went black. Coyote saw that Okami was still holding the volcano back. “Son, you can let go, time is

stopped.”

Hardly believing it, Oki eased his efforts, and sure enough, nothing happened. He let go, and nothing happened. He collapsed, a boy now, bleeding from a dozen places on his body.

“Coy!” shouted Amber, “I don’t know how long.”

“Long enough,” Coyote said, and gently moved Okami aside, then stepped over the volcano. He had grown to several miles high, his body seemed to have it’s own light, but the light revealed something that wasn’t there, or was half there. He said, quietly, “Now my love, release it.” As he did so, he opened his jaws, those mile-wide jaws just over the volcano.

The light came back, the mountain exploded, and Coyote swallowed. Rock, gas, lava, went down that monstrous gullet, and he kept swallowing. Two days he stayed there. Two days while the island was evacuated. Two days, until Kitsune and Amber could heal Okami enough to move him away and back to Guelph.

They went directly to the lunch counter where Liz was somehow waiting. She immediately took Oki’s face in her hands and removed the pain, then she set about healing what had only been roughly patched. As she did so she asked Kit to put her hand on her shoulder. Kit did so immediately and Liz channelled Kit’s power and her love into the wounded boy.

As soon as Amber saw that Okami was being treated, she began to play herself back to Coyote. Megan grabbed her arm

and pulled her into an embrace. “Stay, my sister, trust in Coyote, he is outside this universe, a little volcano will not harm him. Stay, he will come for you.”

Megan sat and pulled Amber onto her lap. Amber lay her head on Megan’s shoulder and began to cry. “Coy, he’s eating the Volcano, I should go to him.”

“Shhh, shhh my sister, you would distract him. Coyote will survive, this I promise you. It is only a single volcano on the whole world, he will sing a little song and when the people are safe, he will come to you.” As she said this, Megan healed the wounds that Amber had given herself when she lifted time from her violin. “She lifted time!” Megan thought to herself, and never said it again, to herself or to anyone else.

Mike had phoned Lila and Jonah and they came quietly into the diner. They saw Kit and Liz bending over Okami and looked at Mike. “They will be fine, come sit here, it will probably be a while, but they will be fine, Liz and Kit are healing Okami, who held a Volcano until Coyote got there.”

“They will both be fine?” asked Lila, in a trance-like voice.

“They will, they will.”

Ray was in the corner, being quiet but ready, with the rest of his family, to lend what help he could. The whole clan had given everything they had, and not a few of them were singed, but they waited in their various places around the world. Jonah saw Ray had scorch marks across the left side of his face, he held out his hand and Ray took it, sitting down beside him as

they looked on while Okami, before their eyes, became better and better.

The door opened again, and Coyote in his human form walked in, making one of his famous 'Entrances'. Amber flew out of Megan's arms and hugged Coyote fiercely. She pulled back long enough to pound her fist into his chest and say "You scare me Mutt, you scare me!"

Coyote smiled and then burped hugely.

The Teachers Meeting

After the children had left with their parents, both in good health and chattering away about the great adventure, the rest of the adults sat and looked at each other.

Amber spoke up, "I'll be the first to say it, those two are getting damned strong, they almost pulled it off."

"Almost being the operative word," said Ray, "if you and Coyote hadn't shown up I'm afraid our whole clan would have perished, trying to keep Kit safe. She called on all of us."

"She called on me, too, and I would have found it very difficult to resist. Coyote, don't think I missed you calling Okami 'son'. Was that just an adult speaking to a child or was there something else to it?"

“I'm not sure what you're asking, Amber.”

“Look, when I said it was difficult to resist Kit's call, I mean it. A lot of my power comes from you, so why are we so pulled to those two kids?”

“Ah, well I'm not sure, I mean my memory is so...”

“Oh for heaven's sake Coyote, you're an ancestor for Tilly, and you know it.”

Amber looked at Megan, a question on her mind, and Megan blew out a sigh. “Because I keep track of all your whelps, all of you. Because I'm the one who has to clean up the mess, and it's always better to know where the mess is.”

Ray was shocked, “Coyote is ancestor to Tilly?”

“Yes, and not so ancient, her Grandmother.”

Coyote looked at Amber and ducked his head away from her, “It was before I met you 'Ber, I swear.”

“It was before I was born, Mutt, but why keep it a secret when we were all trying to figure those kids out?”

“You were?”

Amber grabbed his ear which instantly lengthened for an easy grip, and pulled, “Never mind Oops, never mind.”

Ray was frowning and more or less counting on his fingers,

“So Kit is old world fox and new world Coyote, and Oki is part Coyote and part Nanabozo?”

“Don't bother,” said Megan, “you know it doesn't work by math, not even genetics works like that. We won't know who they are until they become who they are. It's pretty obvious that Okami is a protector, like me, like Stan, and yes, like Coyote in his “fix the world” moods. But how much more is he? He's obviously taking after Stan, how much, we won't know until he notices girls.”

“Oh ha ha,” said Stan who was sitting almost unnoticed back in a corner.

“I think Kit is going to be a much more difficult question. She's got a temper, but it's buried deep and getting pushed deeper. She doesn't get that from Coyote, that's for sure.”

“What?” said Coyote, and Amber tugged his ear again.

Ray looked sheepish, “I may have a bit of a temper sometimes.”

“It could be hers. Like I said, we have no idea how the old blood has mixed in those two, or anyone.”

“She's going to be a healer, no matter what else she is,” said Liz, “she was pushing her own healing through me into Okami, not just lending me strength. I don't know how much of that was deliberate, but she is certainly a healer, as powerful as I am, perhaps as powerful as Lilith.”

Those who had watched Lilith perform surgery on the wounded, during the fight with the Giants, were impressed. Wounds seemed to heal as they were being sewn closed.

Ray looked at Megan and said, “I don't mean to be rude, but when Kit and Oki called on you and Stan, you refused, can I ask why?”

Neither Megan, nor Stan looked offended in any way. “We could offer no help for what Oki was doing, and so we didn't help.”

Coyote's eyes widened a bit, then he frowned, but he said nothing. Sometimes those two were too clever for their own good, and Coyote promised himself that he would get together with Amber to concoct a serious trick. They had risked his kid's lives just to force him to acknowledge them.

Amber must have been thinking the same thing because she let go Coyote's ear and nodded at him. She then said, “Stan, you need to discuss this with Okami, he's not much of a protector if he destroys himself. I will speak with Kit, although she was simply trying to help her brother. Does anyone else have any suggestions for their education? No? Then I suggest we all get on with our day. Ray, can I speak with you a moment?”

Since Amber was using her teaching voice, everyone did as they were told. Ray looked a question at Amber and she said, “Megan and Stan could have lent their strength, but it would not have been enough, Ray. The only one who could respond and stop a volcano was Coyote. It was good that Kit knew he would come when she called me. Don't be too angry with

Megan or Stan, they are dispassionate to a fault, totally reasonable, but not unfeeling.

“Now, what I want to ask you is permission to start teaching Kit how to play the world.”

“Play the world?”

“I think she is almost ready to see the musical patterns underlying reality. You saw me play time to a stop. I had no idea it could be done, but Coy told me to do it and I did. Long ago he showed me the way he had sung the world into being and when he did, I could play it. I can sing it too, come to that. Now, Kit doesn't have Coyote living with her to keep her from really screwing things up, so I'm asking your advice, should I do it?”

“Kit, playing time to a stop? Opening portals to other worlds? Do you think she's that powerful? I mean you actually were Coyote for a while, and you have his experience with how many ways messing around with the world can screw things up. Kit is just a kid.”

“So you think it's a bad idea?”

“I think it scares the hell out of me right now, in the future? Who knows, if she's as strong as we think she is...”

“Fair enough, thanks for your input. I'll stick to traditional violin lessons for now. As she learns, she will become better and better at pattern recognition. Hell she knows I can play the world and she just saw me stop time. Since she knows it's

possible, she may figure out how, on her own.”

“Promise me that if you see that, you'll warn me. You know my biggest concern here is that she's my kid, right?”

“Trickster, yeah I get it, I promise to tell you,” Amber said, smiling. “Come on Mutt, wake up, it's time to go home.”

The Waterfall

They were floating down another river in the world of 'The Folk'. Kit and Oki had become quite good paddlers and campers. They were out with Mara and James at least once a month, and one of the favourite places to trip was this strange-familiar world.

Mara secretly invoked the deadening talisman that Liz had given her each time they went to this world. That way the kids would think the world was what made them just ordinary kids. Mara thought nothing of it since the world was so benign, she could revoke the talisman, and she could return to Guelph via a portal she opened, at any time.

Oh the folly of confidence.

They had been out about a week, the river sparkling in the sun, and the folk dancing around their paddles as they usually did. Kit loved them dearly, with their constant chatter about the world around her, and she made sure to give the others the

highlights each time they stopped for lunch or for the night.

When you are the most relaxed, when there is nothing that can go wrong, that's when it happens. They were paddling side by side, and went around a bend directly into a ten foot high waterfall. The falls were somehow silent, maybe due to the amount of water that was falling, maybe the depth of the river at the bottom, but no matter, both canoes dumped. All four got their hands on a canoe and since the water wasn't rough, it wasn't hard to get them to the bank, flip them and then go to get the waterproof barrels with their food and dry clothing.

In fact, it was more an amusing incident than something to be frightened of. Except for one small detail. As soon as they collected everything together, Mara noticed that both talismans were missing. They had been on string around her neck, but somewhere between going underwater and surfacing again, they were gone.

In surprise and perhaps a touch of panic, Mara changed. But she didn't. Now she was reminded just how important those talismans were to them. No way to get back home, no way to use their powers. "Kit, can you ask your friends to find two medallions that were around my neck please? They're gone."

"They say they saw them drop into the water here, which they say is bottomless, and they are afraid of that water. Does it matter? You can still open a portal for us to go back home can't you?"

"I can't, Kit. One of the talismans was what I used to open portals, and it's gone. I have to be touching it. The other one,

I'm ashamed to say, is one that takes our powers away, otherwise we could use our powers to get the first talisman. Now I'm afraid I've got us into a real pickle. Still, nothing is bottomless. Stay here and I'm going to see if I can find them.”

Mara stripped down to her underwear and dove deep. She was a strong swimmer and went down as far as she could. Almost at her limit, she touched the bottom, but it was hopeless, there was too much bottom, too many old snags, and not enough light. The talismans were powerful, so the one that cancelled their powers could have been anywhere within a mile.

When she surfaced, the group had built a fire and she warmed up beside it. “I can't find them, they could be anywhere down there and I could dive for a month and not find them.”

“I have been talking to the folk and they say there are creatures under the water, like our fish. I can sense them, but they aren't intelligent so I'm not sure I could talk with them, sorry Mara.”

“Don't be sorry love, it was me who lost them. I'm warmed up now, I'll dive again.”

“Don't, please,” said Kit, “those fish are big, and they start to feed about this time of the afternoon, the folk say. That's why they don't go in the water.”

“What about in the morning? Can we dive again then?”

“Yes, we can camp here for the night and try again in the morning.”

This they did, they kept the fire small out of respect for the woods, as they always did, and they ate and told stories. Kit made sure the folk could hear the stories through her. Tonight it was James' turn, and he told the story of when he was a child, on a trip with Mara, when some drunken hunters had threatened the trippers. He told of the white wolf who scared them off, and how he had leaned against it as he kept watch over the river that separated the drunks from the kids. That was the first time he knew that Mara was a wolf, and maybe, he said, the first time he knew for certain that he loved her.

Mara smiled as he told that story, it was an old favourite of his. The folk were very excited that Mara could change and very much wanted to see it. Mara explained that she could not, because one of the things they lost prevented her.

The folk turned to Kit and said “You can change, please show us.” They asked several times and Kit couldn't answer.

Eventually Mara realized Kit was hiding something and said “What is it Kit, what are they asking and what won't you tell them.”

Kit looked unhappy, “We're sorry Mara, we really are, we so liked tripping with you on our own, without our powers that we never told you.”

“Told me what, Kit?”

“That one time, as we went back, you released the power inhibitor before we got back to Guelph. That's when we knew about the talisman, and if you know about something, you can

adjust for it.”

“Girl, do you mean you have your powers? You can use them?”

“I'm sorry Mara, we knew how important you thought it was for us to do things on our own, so we never told you. We never used our powers on these trips, ever.”

“But you can use them now?”

“Well, yes.”

“And the folk? What are they asking?”

“They want to see us change, they knew we could, I guess.”

“Kit I think it would be fine if you showed the folk how you can change.”

“I'm sorry Mara, I really am.”

“It's all right dear, you don't have to hide it any more.”

With that, both Kit and Oki changed. The folk were delighted and Oki said “land on me and hang on.” When they did, he took off through the woods, a large group of twinkling beings screaming in delight as they hung on tight to his fur.”

Kit turned to Mara and nodded, changed her back legs to a serpent's tail and dove into the water. She was down for quite a long time, but eventually came up with two strings in her mouth. When she had come ashore and handed them to Mara,

she changed back and said once more, "I'm really sorry Mara."

It was James who spoke up. "Don't be sorry, Kit, you knew what we were doing and you understood why, you're good kids to go along with it for this long. But more important, when we needed you to tell us, you did. You guys are pretty special."

Mara nodded and hugged Kit. She then cancelled the dampening talisman and she and James were back to their own selves. James, for one, was thankful because there really were biting insects that had figured out the humans were edible, despite their strange smell. His itches were gone in a moment.

It was early dawn before Oki got back to the camp. He had run all day and all night with waves of the folk riding him, "There must have been two thousand of them wanting a ride. It was great fun."

The folk thanked him through Kit, and as the group got back into the canoes, the folk resumed their delighted dancing around the paddles.

The School Dance

“You can't name it that, doodyhead.”

“What's a doodyhead, Kit?”

“It's you Oki, you can't have a Father-Daughter dance.”

“What about Father-Daughter, Mother-Son?”

“Oki, what about those kids who don't have a father, or a mother, what about those kids who aren't in traditional families? What about us? Who do I take, Daddy or Ray?”

Okami was getting along in school. Getting along really well, actually. He was the biggest, cutest boy in school, and was just starting to notice the many girls that flitted around him. He had become a leader in the school by the simple strategy of finding would-be bullies and making friends with them. If you were Oki's friend, you didn't bully the smaller kids.

Right now, he was organizing a dance and wanted to have the parents involved. Somewhere he'd run across a reference to a Father-Daughter event, and thought it was a great idea. Until, that is, Kit called him a doodyhead. While he thought that was a bit undignified from an almost high-school aged girl, he had to agree with her.

“OK then, how about a 'Bring your Bestie' dance? We'll make sure everyone knows it's for their parents, whoever that is.”

“Perfect, my clever brother, absolutely the right tone.”

“Who will you bring, Kit?”

“Daddy of course, what about you?”

“Mom, obviously, Tilly isn't even around and it wouldn't make any sense to ask Stan, he'd just say no. Anyway, can you imagine him at a dance?”

Oki mimicked a sour-faced Stan stomping around, while Kit giggled. She waved as she ran down the street to meet Ingrid in the lunch counter. “See ya, Bro.”

As she sat down beside Ingrid, Liz put a coffee down for her and went back to the grill.

“How are you doing today, Kit. I hear Oki is organizing the class dance.”

“Yep, he's going to do a parent thing, we were just talking about the name.”

“Oh dear, I remember one of those from years back, a Mother-Son thing. One of my kids asked me to go and I ended up in a huge fight with the parents of some of the kids who bullied my boy. Ah, good times.”

“You want to tell me about it?”

“Not much to tell, the humans were out on the street in a couple of minutes, but there was this one parent who was a God and we ended up in a magic sword fight. It was pretty funny, really, we sat on the horrible little stacking chairs at the side of the gym while our swords went at it.

In the end the school was wrecked and we had to rebuild it, this other God and I. After that, the human bullies left my son alone, and he became good friends with the God's daughter. Sometimes it just takes a good fight to settle things out.”

“Ingrid, can we put War away for a moment and talk about Love?”

“Uh Oh, that sounds like trouble.”

“No, it's just that I've met this really nice boy and we like each other a lot. I'm just wondering if I should go out with him if we're both going off to different schools after this year.”

“So no danger of choking this one to death?”

“Aunt Ingrid!”

Ingrid laughed and held up her hands. “OK sorry that was a cheap shot. Look are you madly, crazily in love with this guy?”

“I don't think so, I like him and it's nice to be around him but I don't think he's 'the one'.”

“Well I'd say go for it, Kit, there's nothing wrong with a little friendship fling. You'll meet many thousands of boys through

the centuries, and you'll fall in love with some of them. Why not just take it for what it is?"

"So you figure I'm going to live as long as you?"

"We know it, sweetie, we've checked both you and Okami and you're immortal I'm afraid. You'll just have to deal with it."

"So you're saying I should go out with this boy as practice for losing everyone I care about, forever? That's cold."

"Yes, dear, it is cold. Look, even if you were fully human, you'd still have to deal with losing people you care about. Human's die, Goddesses die, just not in the same time frames. It's best to understand that early."

"Don't you miss all the people you've hooked up with over the years?"

"Hooked up with? I'm the Goddess of Love, I don't 'hook up'."

"You know what I mean."

"I do, and if I'm honest, I have hooked up with a few people over the years. Look, I made Art immortal for that very reason. I don't want to watch him get old and die like I've watched so many before him. This might sound strange to you, but I'd really like to have someone out-live me. That way I don't have to do the grieving all over again."

"You're not sick are you Ingrid?"

“No, no, just tired. And it could be that Art out-lives me. Being the Goddess of War isn't exactly a safe job, I can be killed, after all.”

“I don't want to talk about that, Ingrid.”

“I get it, so tell me, is this guy in your class?”

“Um, he's way out of my class.”

“I doubt that, I meant is he in your school.”

“Well, no, he's in high school already, he's an artist and he will be going off to study art next year in Europe.”

“He's about to Graduate High School?” said Ingrid, pronouncing the capital letters.

“Yes, what of it?”

“I see, how did you meet this fellow?”

“At a bar downtown. I er mmm made myself a bit older so I could get in. He asked me to dance.”

“You haven't talked about this with your parents have you?”

“No, I couldn't do that.”

“Yeah. Kid you know what you're getting into, don't you. I should never have let you drink coffee here.”

“It's just that everyone in my school remembers me as that witch that tried to kill someone, none of the boys will even talk to me, they're so afraid.”

“And they are all childish anyway, yes?”

“Yes, that's right, you understand then don't you?”

“I understand that you're in a huge rush to grow up. Look, things have happened to you kids that would grow anyone up, and just trying to manage the emotions and the powers together is a lot of responsibility, but you should be trying to hang on to being a kid, not rushing to be grown up.”

“Well this boy is all grown up, so he should be able to handle all the emotional stuff for both of us.”

“Oh my sweet child. A boy at the end of high school, just going to University, is absolutely not all grown up. He's got a couple of years before he hits his twenties and that's a horrible decade. The hormones might be settling down, but not the existential angst.”

“Well he's got to be more emotionally stable than me, right?”

“Don't bet on it. Girls are far in advance of boys until they both get into their late twenties. Trust me I've watched enough kids grow up. Girls have it all their way until the boys get big enough to beat them up.”

“Oki is bigger than me and he doesn't beat me up.”

“Were you mean to him when he was young?”

“Well, not really. Not like some of the girls treat their brothers.”

“Look, to get back to this boy, he's going to want to have sex with you, Kit, what are you going to do about that?”

“Umm.”

“You're kidding me. You really want to grow up fast don't you? Well for Goddess' sake, take it as just another bodily function. Don't let the world put any ideas into your head. You took precautions didn't you?”

“What, like against disease?”

“No, since when have you even had a cold, I mean against getting pregnant.”

“Oh, yeah, sure that's easy. I just closed off my tubes and flushed my body when he was done.”

“Right, right, I guess that's as good a way as any. You can re-arrange your plumbing now?”

“Sure, ever since I had my first menstruation and scared the hell out of myself.”

“Alright, don't tell me, I'm not sure I'm old enough to handle that. Just remember what I said about getting all goo goo about sex. It's just sex, OK? And watch out that your partners don't

get the wrong idea about things. If it's love it's something else beside an orgasm. Sex is scratching an itch.”

“OK thanks Ingrid, I appreciate it.”

As she left, Ingrid looked at Liz with pleading in her eyes.

Liz just laughed, “In her own time, Ingrid, in her own time.”

The dance was announced, and Oki asked Stan if he was OK if Oki didn't ask him. Stan laughed and said, “take your real mother, body-son, I'm not offended, in fact I'm relieved.”

Oki laughed and asked his mother to the dance.

Kit talked to Ray in the dream-world and it was Ray who instantly put up his hand, “Go with the one what raised ya,” he said and winked.

When Kit walked into the room on Jonah's arm she swelled with pride. Oki had done a wonderful job on the school gym and she was being escorted by the man she loved most in the world. It was great.

And the band, oh my, the band was Amber's and the lead singer... the lead singer was Coyote! Kit would never have thought to ask, but Oki had the confidence of a King.

The place was packed, parents and children mingled and when the band struck up, they went out to dance. Coyote had a

twinkle in his eye as he sang, and all the couples were, literally, dancing on air. They floated upward and circled the disco ball. Somehow Oki had found a disco ball.

As the song ended, they all floated down and clapped for the band as if they had never even noticed they were floating. Amber noticed and poked Coyote with her bow but he just laughed and did it again and again through the evening.

In the end it was a great success, and nobody ended up fighting anyone else with magic swords. The school survived.

A New Cat

A few days after the school dance, where Okami was declared a local hero, he was walking downtown, kicking at stones and thinking about not much.

As he passed an alleyway, he spotted a cat and said “Hello kitty”

“You know my name?”

Oki stopped, had he heard that? He looked around but there was nobody, “Is that your name?”

“It must be, how did you know it?”

“Uh, kitty is sort of a general name for cats.”

“Ah, that explains it then, and how can you hear me?”

“I don't know, I suppose I'm reading your mind a bit, I can do that now. It doesn't work on most cats though.”

“Cat? Do I look like a cat?”

Okami hesitated, was this some kind of a test? “Yes, you look like a cat.”

“Oh damn, how about now?”

Suddenly, in front of Oki was a Mountain Lion. “Woah, now you're a Puma.”

“Cougar actually, I think. I get a bit confused.”

“So are you a shape shifter?”

“Wow, you're a perceptive one aren't you. But what are you, if you can talk to me in my animal form?”

“I'm a wolf-boy, I can change too.”

“Oh great, a dog, you're not going to be tiresome and try to chase me around are you?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Don't dogs chase cats?”

“I'm a wolf, the only reason I'd chase a cat is to eat it, but I get fed at home so I don't chase cats.” This creature was getting tiresome, a dog?

“Oh, sorry, look do you mind if I change to human form?”

“I don't care, I'm heading for the lunch counter, you can do what you want.”

“Right, here I go.” In front of Okami was a very beautiful, and very naked young woman.

“What are you doing? You don't have anything on!”

“I don't? Oh, dear, I seem to have forgotten how to make clothes.”

Oki looked around fast and then waved his hands, the girl now had a t-shirt, jeans and sandals. Still, Oki seemed to continue seeing her body underneath the clothes.

“Oh, that's a nice trick, thank you.”

“My sister taught me how, it saves her a lot of time when she's shopping for clothes.” This girl really was pretty, she had long shiny black hair and lovely legs and arms, along with some nice bumps on her chest. But her best feature was her cat eyes.

“Kitty, my name is Okami, would you like to go to the lunch counter with me?” Now why did he say that? Was it that he hadn't put any money in her jeans' pockets? Maybe she was hungry.

“Sure, where is it?”

“Just down the street here, across from the train station.”

Putting her arm through Oki's she said, “Let's go then.”

Oki noticed that she was quite a bit smaller than he, both in height and width. It seemed to him that she fit nicely along his side. In fact, after a few steps she leaned her head on his shoulder and purred. Yes, purred was the right word, a low rumble as she put her other hand on his biceps and hugged his arm a little.

That purr might have been a bit magical, it made Oki feel a lot older than he was.

As they walked into the diner, Oki announced, “This is Kitty everyone, she's my friend.” He wasn't sure why he'd said that last bit, but it felt right.

Art and Ingrid looked up and Art said, “Kitty, you're back, how was the journey?”

“You know me? We've met before?”

“Oh dear, again? Yes Kitty I know you, you have visited this lunch counter many times, and then you go on a trip. When you come back you sometimes have no memory. This time you were going to Europe. You don't remember?”

“No, not at all.”

“Well, for some reason you always find your way back to Guelph to start over again. I think your apartment is still waiting for you.”

“Oh, I have an apartment? How lovely.”

“I see you've met Okami, maybe I'd better have a chat with him while you have some lunch. You like pastrami and tuna paninis. Mike can make you one with lots of olive oil.”

“That sounds yummy, thank you.”

“It's on my tab, Mike, she won't have any money. Oki, come on over here please.”

Okami seemed reluctant to leave Kitty, but drifted over to Art and Ingrid's table.

“Where did you find her?”

“Just up the street, she was in an alleyway and she was a cat, then she was a cougar.”

Ingrid put her hand over her mouth to cover a grin. Cougar indeed.

“Oki, she's a lovely girl but her life is a bit complicated. She is quite old, but every seventy or eighty years she goes off somewhere and starts over.”

“Starts over?”

“She takes off for a few months and when she comes back she's young again, with no memory. By my guess, right now she's a couple of years older than you are. When I first met her, Jim told me about her. She disappeared a couple of months ago, a very old woman, and now she's back.”

“She's really pretty, will she be all right?”

“Sure, she has to remember a few things, and learn a few others, but we keep an eye on her in between lives. She's got an apartment and quite a fortune. Apparently she made a lot of money in the stock market.”

“And rich husbands,” said Ingrid, to nobody in particular.

“So what will happen until she figures all that out?”

Art took a good look at Okami, and then at Kitty, who was looking at Okami. He glanced at Ingrid who shrugged, and Art said, “Would you like to help her until she gets it all together, Oki?”

“Would that be OK?”

“I think so, you already know that she's a shape shifter. We don't know where she came from or how long she's been around. She will have to go to school, but she learns fast. Are you sure you want to look after her?”

Oki looked over at Kitty who was enjoying her panini hugely. He nodded.

Art smiled and said “We'll be around if you need any advice, Oki. In the meantime we can show you where her apartment is, we have the keys behind the counter. We can help her with bank accounts and other things until she gets the hang of it, but I have a feeling your family just got a cat.”

Kitty was walking to the table, having finished the panini and a big glass of milk. When she got there Art said, “Kitty would you like Okami to take care of you for now?”

She looked Okami up and down and nodded before sitting beside him and taking his arm once more.

“I'll have a talk with your parents to let them know. What's one more kid in the family eh?”

A few hours later, Art explained Kitty to Jonah and Lila. They were willing to take her in, and to register her in the school as a distant cousin from Europe. Kitsune, however, took one look at how Kitty was hanging on Oki's arm and dragged Art to one side.

“What is she, how is she putting the glamour on Oki?”

Art smiled, “She isn't, Kit, Oki is growing up and you have to admit, he's pretty impressive now, he's a big fellow, and handsome too. Kitty really does need some guidance, and you two can keep her out of trouble, she's sort of brand new. She won't remember anything from her past lives, so she has to have some advice. Honestly, she doesn't have Oki under a glamour, I think the two are genuinely attracted to each other.”

“Well she'd better behave, Oki has never had a girlfriend, if she hurts him...”

Art smiled again and left, figuring the three of them would work it out.

Hanging Out

“Is your name really Kitty?” Kitsune said, as they were walking to the park.

“I don’t know, maybe? Is it a good name? It’s just what Oki called me.”

“It’s confusing, you’re Kitty and I’m Kit, short for Kitty would be Kit, you see the problem?”

“I guess so, can I change it?”

“Yes, you haven’t been registered in school yet, so you can pick another one.”

“Can you pick a good one for me?”

“What do you think of Cheshire? That would be Chessy for short... oh wait a minute, that would become Chesty really fast at school. Hmm, this may be harder than I thought. Behemoth maybe, from a book I’m reading. That would be Bea, but who

is named Behemoth? Anyway, it's a beast from the Bible."

"Does it have to be a cat name?"

"No I suppose not, but Okami is Japanese for wolf, and Kitsune is Japanese for fox. I just assumed you would want to have the same sort of name."

"What would cat be in Japanese?"

"Neko"

"Hmm, that's pretty short, what about cougar?"

"Well tiger would be 'tora'"

"No, I'm not a tiger, what about black cat"

"That would be Kuroneko"

"What would be my short form?"

"Well, Kerry I guess, Kuri maybe?"

"I like Kuri, it could be Oki, Kit and Kuri."

"Well then, we'd better tell mother and father."

Kuri began taking classes in the same grade as Oki, for the last part of the year. It has to be said that she stayed pretty close to Oki, which did not please the gang of girls who usually hung

around him. This girl was cutting in on their territory, but two or three attempts to get her away from him, ended with Kuri giving them a nasty hiss and a snarl.

This, the girls put down to the strange customs of her native country, whatever that was, and they gave up trying to get her away from their boy.

For Oki's part, he hardly seemed to notice. He was happy with just about everyone, and it had to be said that everyone was quite comfortable with him. There had been a couple of incidents of raving adults wandering onto the school grounds, but when Oki came stalking toward them, they tended to beat a quick retreat. The kids considered him their protector.

Kuri made friends, the strange cousin became the new girl, and then just one of the girls. She was good at school, too. If she stayed a bit close to Oki, that was only understandable, everyone liked to be close to Oki.

It was a boring Thursday evening, so the three kids switched to wolf, fox and cat and were soon chasing each other around the living room. Clouds of fur and dust rose into the air and the noise levels rose until Jonah roared, "OUT" and opened the door.

Out they tumbled, into the yard, changing to kids as they went through the door, so as not to shock the neighbours.

They started walking and chatting as they headed for the park.

“Doesn't it bother you, Kuri, that you are so much older than Oki?”

“Bother me? No, I'm only a couple of years older than he is, and he's pretty grown up.”

“But you're hundreds of years old, Art said so.”

“Maybe, but I don't remember that, Kit, I hardly remember being back in Guelph before Oki said hello to me.”

Oki was a little annoyed at Kit's line, “What about you, you're going out with a guy who is six years older than you are.”

“Well I told him that I'm only a year younger than him, and I make myself older.”

“Same thing don't you think?”

“No, it's me, not you, that's not the same thing at all.”

“And you're drinking and dancing and having sex with him. I've seen it through your eyes.”

“Oki! You stop doing that!”

“Why, you do it to me.”

“Yes, but I'm your older sister and I have to keep an eye on you.”

“Well I don't look for long, but seriously Sis, you sometimes

broadcast pretty loudly.”

“I do?”

“Anyway, what shall we do tonight? It's hot and I don't feel like going home just yet.”

“We could go hang out in the park, are you sure you don't have a date with your boyfriend?”

“He's not allowed out on school nights.”

“What's sex?” asked Kuri.

Kit rolled her eyes, “You just took health class, Kuri, you know darned well what it is.”

Kuri laughed and said, “Race you to the Boathouse, it's still open and I've got money.”

Art had access to Kuri's bank accounts and made sure she had some money in her pocket, enough to buy treats once in a while, but not enough to get into trouble.

“Why don't we go to your apartment, Kuri?”

“No, no, Art says I have to live with you guys until I'm ready to live on my own.”

“Well what about if I borrow it?”

“Not a chance, Kit, no using my place as a love nest! Do you

like sex that much?”

“It's nice, and Dave is great, but it's more like it would be nice to just spend the night together.”

“What about our folks? Wouldn't they worry?”

“They worry too much, when I come home Mom is waiting up for me. It's a drag, I can take care of myself.”

Kuri frowned and after a moment she said, “You know, I have a feeling that when I got older, all the people who worried about me disappeared, and then it was a real lonely feeling, that nobody worried. I know that when I came back, and before Oki found me I was super sad that there was nobody who cared about me. When Oki said hello it was the best day of my life.”

Kit looked down at her ice cream and thought a bit about that. “I guess you're right, Kuri, it's nice that Mom and Dad worry about us.”

Oki looked up, ice cream all over his mouth and chin, “Well some of the things we've got into, they have a reason to worry.”

Kit banged her shoulder into him and laughed.

Oki had never got out of the habit of fighting the Trashasaurus, and so he was getting his workout while the girls sat on top of a picnic table watching him.

“Kit can I ask you something?”

“Sure, anything.”

“Can you teach me how to kiss?”

“What? You want me to teach you how to kiss my brother? On top of wearing my clothes to school and causing a fashion faux pas?”

“Well, I want to do a good job.” Kuri said, looking a bit hurt.

Kit laughed and said, “Come over here, now make sure your lips are soft, and no tongue!”

Okami had a little bit of a hiccup in his technique, as if he was distracted by something, and the Trashasaurus caught him a huge blow on the side of his head.

“Serves you right for looking,” shouted Kit, and went back to the lesson.

Around about then two young men came walking by and noticed the girls. They made some rude comments and as Oki was about to go after them, Kit waved her hand vaguely. One of them slipped on some of the goose poop covering the walkway and slammed into the other one. They both went down in a heap onto the grass where they were thoroughly covered in more goose poop. Oki smiled and thought, “Good one Sis.”

It was a little late when they got home, and as Kit had

predicted, Lila was waiting up for them. Before she could make her disappointed face, Kit ran into her arms and said, “Thank you for staying up to make sure we're OK Mom, you're just the best. We'll rush and get ready for bed, it's a school day tomorrow.”

Oki and Kuri lined up for their hugs and went straight to bed, leaving Lila a bit confused, but smiling.

As she climbed into bed, Jonah grunted and Lila said, “Do you ever regret having those kids?”

“Never, not for a minute,” came the sleepy reply.

“Me neither.”

Great Changes

At the end of the school year, Dave declared that he was not going to Europe the next year, he was going to stay with Kit.

Kit declared just as loudly that he was not going to be a damned fool, that he was going to Europe where he would become a great artist and would have dozens of girlfriends who would love him dearly because she was not going to do a long distance relationship.

She had not acquired the power to look into the future, she just knew he was a great guy and she would be a bit sad to see him go, but she was not going to be the one to 'ruin his life', which she was certain would happen should he give up his dreams, for her.

As it happened, the two of them did spend a few summer nights in Kuri's apartment, scratching that itch. Being cooked breakfast by Kit may have convinced Dave that he should indeed go to Europe. Kit told her mother that she was staying over at a friend's place. A story her mother pretended to believe.

That summer there were a lot of canoe trips, which turned Kuri into a real outdoors girl. She loved being in cougar form with the special backpack that Oki had sewn for her. Yes, Okami learned to sew, but mostly things like backpacks and bags. Clothing was somewhat beyond his range of interest.

Kuri, on the other hand, seemed to pick up cooking and sewing

quite easily. It was like the body remembered, even if the mind had forgotten. On the camping trips, James and Kuri had a bit of a competition going as to who could cook the best meals with locally found ingredients.

Another two years of school and all three young adults, we can't call them kids any more, although we probably will, were comfortably into High School. They had continued their lessons out of school as well. Oki studied with Stan and became very well versed in the legal systems of both the Canadian and the indigenous peoples of Ontario. It wasn't always the big run through the woods.

For all his fooling around and laziness, Stan had a fine legal mind, able to thread the difference between the two main cultural streams.

Megan also talked with Okami about ethics and morality, educating him on the responsibilities of being Nanabozo. Although they were still not sure he was an actual aspect of that spirit, he was close enough.

As for Kit, Ingrid continued to advise her, but so far Kit seemed to be educating herself. Or rather, she seemed to absorb instruction from everyone she spoke with. She remained a mystery to the various people around her, sort of a Swiss army knife of powers, but her kindness shone through it all. The adults kept an eye on her romantic adventures, mindful of the time when she almost killed a boy, but after the way she handled Dave, they more or less relaxed.

As for the boyfriends, she had a few, but only one at a time, she wasn't interested in playing around, and the ones she picked were good people, better for knowing her.

Okami and Kuri remained together. Art had told Kuri that she had learned enough to move into her apartment should she wish to, but Kuri asked Jonah and Lila if she could stay. The two of them were happy to have her.

Kuri spent a lot of time with Mara, learning the ins and outs of shape shifting, and listening to Mara's stories of exploring the many worlds. She also gave Mara a way to talk about her inner monster, that killing machine that came out during the Giants war. Kuri flatly rejected the theory that Mara was a monster. She simply did what had to be done to protect her home.

James, who found it hard to get Mara to talk about this, appreciated the way Kuri could draw Mara out. It didn't hurt that Kuri actually did have that apparent cruel streak of all cats. It was Mara that explained to Kuri that cats needed to learn how to hunt, since they were mostly solo hunters, and so they had to practice. Dogs and wolves had the pack to work things out, and so simply killed and ate.

Kuri could have rocketed through High School, she was picking up her studies very quickly, but Okami was there, and she worked with him on his studies every night. Even Kit had come to understand just how well those two, a wolf and a cougar, fit together. Instead of fearing that Kuri would break Oki's heart, she realized that Kuri would always protect his back.

In school, the three of them were called 'the trio' because they were rarely apart. This wasn't strictly true, sometimes Kit was seen with her boyfriend, sometimes walking hand in hand with Kuri. Okami was with his sister or holding Kuri's hand. Their close friends suspected that Kuri had both a boyfriend and a girlfriend. Kit's boyfriends dreamed of threesomes, but were always disappointed.

The days slipped by, full of interest, always busy, until one Christmas vacation when Megan and Stan came into the lunch counter to talk with Okami.

Megan took the lead, as she usually did, "Oki, we've heard some stories from the far north, some bad rumours, and we'd like you to look into it."

"Why don't you go, Megan? Why me?"

"You're ready to go yourself. One of us could go, but it's time for you to see what you can do."

"What is it that's happening?"

"If we knew we would certainly tell you, but all we're hearing is that it's bad, evil. I suspect it's a murder case, but Stan thinks it might be something more. Are you ready to go?"

"Of course I will, if you want me to. Do I have to go alone?"

"No, not at all, you can take your sister and Kuri if you wish. The three of you ought to be able to handle anything, but be

mindful that you are the one who has been trained for this.”

“I can call on you if I need help?”

“Of course you can, but try your best without us, think of this as another training exercise.”

Okami went home and told his parents, who told him to be careful, but didn't fuss any more than that. When he told the girls, Kit was fine, but Kuri was worried. “The far north, in the middle of winter. Are you nuts? I'm a short furred cat, you guys have lots of fur, but I'm going to freeze.”

Okami hadn't thought about that, “You could stay home, Kuri, if you don't want to come.”

Kuri was devastated. The very thought that Okami would leave her home on his mission gave her an anxiety attack. What if something happened to him and she wasn't there to protect him!

Kit took her arm and led her out of the house, “I think I might have it, Kuri, let's go see Megan.”

“That's a good idea, Kit, I'll call her,” said Megan on hearing the story. Shortly after that, Mishelle showed up.

“Mishelle this is Kuri, she is a cat, but she can become a cougar too. She's heading into the north and is afraid she'll freeze, can you help?”

“You want a Lynx?”

“That's what I'm thinking.”

“Let's see what we can do,” Mishelle said, turning to Kuri and looking deep into her eyes.

“There's someone else in here, one is you, Kit and, ah, Okami. You are living together?”

“Yes Mishelle, we are.”

“A strange pack. Well this will be simpler for that. Kuri I'm going to give you a pattern, you three are interpenetrating anyway, so you should be able to become a lynx like me, maybe not a Great Lynx, but one with the fur to take the cold.”

With that, Mishelle took Kuri's face in her hands and closed her eyes. She opened them again immediately. “So many years in such a young body!”

“Sorry,” said Megan, “I should have explained.”

“No matter, her body is well used to change, this should be easy,” and closed her eyes again.

In a moment, she let Kuri's face go and smiled. “Change,” she said.

Kuri was a lynx, then she had a serpent's tail, a lynx again, a cougar, a cat, and then Kuri.

Mishelle smiled, “There are not many of us left, I am so pleased that you asked me to do this, Megan. Welcome sister, you were not born a Great Lynx, but you have become one. You will find the cold no longer bothers you.”

With that, the trio was ready to go.

Hunting a Rumour

“But go where?” Okami asked Stan.

“We’re not sure, we think the rumours started up toward James Bay but we really don’t know. I’m afraid that’s the nature of rumours, they don’t come with a reliable address.”

“So, then what? We just start asking about a rumour, ‘excuse me, have you heard a rumour, and where does this rumour take place.’ It sounds a bit dodgy, Stan.”

Stan smiled, “If it was easy, Megan would send me, Oki.”

“But James Bay is Cree, do I have jurisdiction there?”

“Oji-Cree, Oki, but you’ve got jurisdiction anywhere, no matter what peoples, you are going in our name. My best advice would be to try working upstream on the Albany, into the wetlands, but you must go where your nose leads you.”

“Alright, it would be good to go by canoe, but the rivers are frozen so I guess we go cross country.”

“Trouble like this usually happens when you can’t canoe out, when you’re trapped for the winter. I wish you luck.”

“We’ll probably need it, OK Stan, we’ll leave today and pop back if we need supplies or advice.”

“Take care of yourself, son,” muttered Stan.

With that, Oki went back home where the girls were packing their Oki-made backpack-saddlebags and saying goodbye to the parents. Lila was keeping a brave face and said, “Take care of each other.”

Jonah wasn’t as stoic, he cried as he hugged each one and said, “Try to come back at least for Christmas day, your mother loves Christmas so much.” Of course he fooled nobody, he was well known as Mister Presents-Under-Tree.

Kit took Kuri’s hand and the three of them landed in the snow and the wind. They instantly changed to animal form and the backpacks became saddlebags. Kit and Kuri, as agreed, took the north bank and Oki the south as they began their run upstream.

Each camp they came across, they stopped and listened carefully outside the walls, hoping to find a clue to this rumour. What they heard mostly, was griping about the cold.

They zig-zagged from camp to camp, village to village across

the sparsely populated area. Checking in with each other, Oki and Kit reported nothing and nothing for days. The only positive thing was that they were making good time upriver.

On Christmas eve day they were close to Marten Falls when Okami called a halt. He decided they should go home to open presents and he told Kit of his decision. When he didn't get an immediate answer, he went to where the girls were, listening outside a cabin. The three of them listened and heard the first news of the rumour. They were on the right path.

Someone was talking about a few people who had left another settlement to go live traditionally, to be free. Another said, "Free to starve is more likely."

Still, Okami said that the news would wait, and that they should go home to be with their parents. The girls weren't about to argue.

On the way, Oki decided to stop in at the cabin he and Stan had visited so long ago, the one where he was asked to be a judge. As the three popped into the yard, they saw the cabin lit up cheerily, smoke rising from the chimney.

Oki knocked on the door and the woman he and Stan had left, opened it. She looked for a moment, then recognized the student of Nanabozo who had helped when her husband had been killed. She set her rifle beside the door and smiled, "Nanabozo, you've come to visit."

"I'm not sure I'm Nanabozo ma'am but I thought I would check in to see if you were still here."

“I am, come in, come in, please meet my new husband and our children.”

“We can’t stay long, we’re heading to our own home. You’re doing well then?”

“I met my second husband very soon after you left. He was from the town and came to help me around the place. One day he just stayed. We’re doing fine, thank you. Please come in and bless my children.”

Okami looked a bit panicked, that wasn’t the sort of thing he did. Kit leaned over and said, “Just kiss them on the forehead.”

So they went inside and Okami took each child in his arms and kissed them on the head. Kit added, “May these children grow up to be the best people they can be.”

That seemed to satisfy the woman and her husband, and so the trio went back outside and disappeared back to their own home.

Okami was well pleased that the woman had moved on with her life, and remained in the cabin she loved so well. Before they left, he asked Kit to fill their cupboards with extra food. It was a hard winter and extra was always welcome. Kit also filled the wood shed at the same time.

As they appeared in their home, Okami turned to Kit and said, “Why did she ask me to bless the children?”

“Because you are a powerful spirit-being, and she wanted your best wishes for her children.”

“But I have no power to help her children.”

“You helped her, you saved her life, you just filled her cupboards, and so she knows you are a powerful being. It doesn't matter that you can't give her children anything to help them along in the future, it gives her comfort that you have wished them well. Ingrid tells me that ordinary people think the Gods can guide their lives, when in reality, all they usually do is make trouble for them.”

“I don't want to make trouble for that woman and her kids.”

“And you won't, Oki, you won't, but you remembered her, and now you know her children, one day maybe you will help them if they need help. Would you help them?”

“Of course I would.”

“That's enough for her, more than she could have expected. I doubt she would want you dictating her children's lives, but to know that you might help them if they need it, that's enough.”

“Well I don't want to be a God.”

“You're not, nobody is. It's just that ordinary people make the spirit beings, Gods. You know, in many places the people put out offerings to the spirits so that the spirits won't notice them. They understand that the powerful usually mess things up, even when they are trying to help. It's the so-called sophisticated

people that make their Gods the same as their chiefs and kings, some sort of being that can give favours as well as kill them.”

“I don't want to be that sort of being,” Oki repeated.

“You're not, bro, you're just Oki, a really good person.”

By that time Lila and Jonah had got into the entryway and Kuri was soaking up the hugs. Kit and Oki then got theirs and Jonah, wiping a tiny fleck of something out of his eye said, “Come on in, sit, enjoy the tree while your mother and I make dinner.”

“I'll help, said Kuri.”

Dave and the Devil

It was a wonderful dinner, everyone was happy that they were together, able to enjoy their family time. Jonah and Lila especially knew just how precious these last few years would be. Once the kids graduated high school they would probably scatter. It was a heartache that every parent had to face, but that didn't make it any easier.

The next morning there were lots of presents under the tree to be opened. Many of them were silly, some of the boxes held one sock, with another one being found later in another box. Jonah said he had a poor childhood, and it was important to him to have lots of presents to unwrap. The kids went along with it, unwrapping them one at a time and making squeals of

delight over things like nail clippers and books they'd already read. It was tradition.

Over mid-morning coffee, Kit's head came up like she'd just realized something. She went into the kitchen and hugged her mother, "I have to go for a couple of hours, Dave has got himself into trouble."

"You haven't seen him for a couple of years."

"True, but this is important, I'm sorry Mom."

"Go, sweetheart, and don't hurt him too much."

"Who? Dave?"

"No dear, the other one."

"A deal is a deal," said the elegantly dressed man with a gold walking stick. He wore a neatly trimmed goatee, a morning coat and there was a top hat on the table in front of him. A pair of pince nez set off the attire. In short, he was the very caricature of himself.

"But I didn't know we were making a deal," said the other man, obviously a student with his jeans and a t-shirt. He was a handsome boy but certainly not wealthy, his shoes were scuffed and the laces were knotted a couple of times each where they had broken.

They were sitting in a nondescript coffee shop somewhere in Rome. A place called the Cuppa Joe or some such nondescript name. It was a bright sunny day but the cafe was dark, overstuffed black chairs soaking up any light that managed to get through the dirty windows.

“You made a pact, my friend, you would give your soul to get a close look at the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, and I arranged that. I said I would collect your soul in a year, and on this day, in this place I will have it. Don't pretend you didn't make the agreement. I don't like trouble.”

The boy was scared, there was no doubt of that, and he believed this man would do as he said. It had been a marvellous year, full of work and wonder as he got to see the great masters of Europe, but now it was all to end.

As he was ready to give up and hand over his soul, he thought once again of the girl he had left behind to become an artist. “Why did I leave Guelph,” crossed his mind. Just at that moment, a woman at a table behind the two men, rattled her newspaper, folded it and laid it on her table, “I'm pretty sure you won't be taking his soul,” she said as she rose to walk to their table.

The boy looked up, “Kit? What are you... Get out of here, you don't know who this is.”

“Some second-rate conjurer I suspect, with delusions of grandeur.”

“Young lady, I am here to take this man's soul, there is nothing

you can do to prevent that, we made a pact and he will honour it.”

“He will not.”

“Girl do you know who I am?”

“I suspect you're the being who calls himself the Devil. My Mother is a good Catholic woman and she has asked me not to hurt you too much, but I don't see that I will have to hurt you at all.”

“Girl you are bold, I give you that. Tell me how you will prevent me from taking this man's soul.”

“Look for yourself, he has none.”

“What do you mean? All of you have souls.”

“I mean his soul is mine. Look for yourself, if you can. Can you look into me? Can you see his soul here?”

The man was becoming angry, he flourished his cane and said, “Shall I just take both your souls at once?”

“You can try.”

The man turned a piercing look onto Kit, but nothing happened. He then looked confused.

Kit smiled, “I do not consent, and that is what you require isn't it, magician. Without my consent, you are powerless, as all con

men are powerless. You who calls yourself the ruler of the world below, as your brother, your fellow con man, says he is the ruler of the world above. You are quite a pair. Oh I grant you, you are both somewhat powerful, but your main power is to get people to believe in your power. You may have millions of followers but you are still con men.”

“How can this be, there is nobody but Him and Me.”

“A capital? That's your argument? I have met many Gods and Goddesses, and they exist, capitals or not. None of them are interested in such nonsense as souls. Markers in a silly game that you and your partner play. And what do you do with them? Nothing, just throw them into a basket and count them. This man before you is mine, his soul is mine, would you like to try again, to take his soul from me?”

“I will simply destroy you and snatch the souls as they drift out of your ruined body.”

“Oh do please try that, remember that my Mother has said I am not to hurt you much, try then, in the knowledge that I will not destroy you.” As Kitsune said that, the cafe seemed to get even darker.

The man did not try any mental tricks this time, he rose and lifted his gold-tipped cane. As he brought it down on Kit's head, he froze. A look of panic crossed his face as Kit walked to him, lifted the cane out of his unresisting fingers and struck him across the side of his face. Still he was frozen in place, a tooth fell out of his mouth along with some blood.

“That is to remember me by. Look hard at this boy, memorize his face, you will not come after him again or I will disobey my Mother. Do we understand each other?”

The man nodded. Kit threw his cane to him and he could move to catch it. As he did so, he was gone.

Dave finally came out of his shocked immobility, and the first thing that came across his mind was, “Where did he go?”

“He’s in Antarctica, let him get himself back to wherever he wants to be. Strange, I must have cold on my mind.”

“Kit, it’s you. Do you really have my soul?”

“You idiot. All you’re asking is if we love each other, and the answer is yes.”

“Have you, who, did you...” His mind was finally working again.

“Dave, I am a spirit being, I have powers, I always have had, but you never saw them. You would never have seen them if you had not made that stupid bargain. Was it worth it, to see Michelangelo’s work up close? Was it worth your soul?”

Dave hung his head and in a small voice said, “Yes.”

Kit softened, she took his cheek in her hand and said, “You gentle, lovely boy, you will be a great artist one day. Promise me though, that you will be more careful. I may not be able to come next time.”

“Why did you come now? Shall I come back to Guelph with you?”

“Oh for... You stay where you are. We had fun, I loved you and still care deeply for you, but 'we' are not a thing, you have moved on and so have I, but that doesn't mean we were never a 'we'.”

With that, she took his other cheek and pulled him in for a kiss. “Now, you silly boy, I have an hour, buy me a coffee and tell me about your life, and don't ask me about mine because I won't tell you a thing. Deal?”

Dave grinned and said, “I've missed you Kit.”

The Rumour Found

When Kit returned to her home, her mother asked after Dave.

“He's fine now, and his studies are going well. It was good to see him again. He had a bit of trouble with one of the local Gods but I sorted it.”

“Yes, I could feel that, thank you for not destroying him, the Devil is necessary in the world.”

“You knew? What do you mean you knew?”

“Your mother is not without resources, my love. In my day I was called a witch as well.”

Kit thought about that, and decided that she must be some sort of a witch to have raised her strange children. “And what is that charlatan needed for?”

“Mankind invented him to explain their nasty impulses, he is someone to blame.”

“You think that's needed? What about taking responsibility for your actions?”

“Many people can't do that, Kit, they would collapse under the guilt.”

“Pah, well never mind. Thank you for telling me not to destroy him, I might have, he made me so angry for attacking Dave.”

Her mother patted her cheek and said, “You're a good girl.”

Kit was in time for lunch, and the family enjoyed it mostly because they were all together, but also because Kuri and Lila were excellent cooks. As usual, Oki and Jonah did the dishes while Kit sat on the couch feeling just a bit guilty for not helping. Just a bit.

The afternoon was spent on the traditional games, the pieces and the boards well worn from years of use. Each family member had their win, each being best at one or the other game.

Supper came and went, and the trio rolled themselves onto the couch to compare 'food babies'. The family holiday movie was faithfully watched and then, just to be wicked, all the kids had a glass of sherry to toast with.

The next morning, the kids were up very early to get back to the hunt. Jonah was still in bed, but Lila had coffee with the trio and said goodbye as they popped back to the northern bush.

Marten Falls was as cold as they'd left it. Listening at walls again, they picked up the location of a camp far outside town. A small group of cousins had decided to return to the traditional ways. The general feeling in the town was that the traditional ways would get you dead if you weren't born to them.

When they found the group, living in bark lodges and hunting, they found nothing of any concern. The group had settled close enough to the town that they could make regular trips back for supplies. They weren't the source of the rumours that Okami had been sent to find.

Disappointed, but also relieved, the trio resumed their zig zagging path upriver. Another hundred, two hundred kilometers and nothing.

As Kit and Kuri ran on, they passed a small wood by a frozen stream, and heard a shout, "Great Lynx, wait a moment."

They turned to see a hare running to them. "There is a problem, it is terrible, just upstream from here."

“I can talk to you?” said Kuri?

“Why ever not?” said the hare.

Adjusting quickly, Kuri said, “What news do you have for me?”

“There was a group of Men who came here last summer. They seemed to be running away from somewhere, and built a camp about a day's run from here. The summer was fine, they hunted poorly but managed not to starve. Now, though, the hunger has set in and we fear a great evil has come for them.”

“Can you tell me what evil?”

“It is Wendigo, he has them.”

Kuri looked at Okami and asked, “Wendigo?”

Okami frowned, Stan had mentioned such a creature, but hadn't said much. “Ask about it please,” he said.

“Tell me about this Wendigo,” said Kuri.

“Surely, Great Lynx, you know Wendigo.”

“I am from the south, and I am young, I need to grow.”

The hare looked dubious, as if he was about to run. But then again, that is the natural state of hares. Nevertheless, he explained, “Wendigo comes to the starving, he takes the

weakest and makes him kill and eat men. Each man he eats makes him larger so that he is still starving. Wendigo gets strong as the man gets weaker until there is no man left, only Wendigo.

Kuri told Okami this and the boy grew stern. “Where.” was all he said.

The hare told the group and nodded before retreating to his wood.

It was a matter of moments before the group found a camp of two bark lodges. Listening at the walls, they heard nothing in one lodge except the ragged breathing of those too weak to move about. In the second lodge they heard terrible sounds. Some creature was bound and trying to get loose.

Changing to human form, the three entered the first lodge and found three starving people, two men and a woman. They took rations from their packs and fed the people. This took an hour or more, the people could barely move, they hadn't eaten since the start of the winter. They had water from melted snow but they didn't even have a fire.

Okami made a fire while the girls fed the people. He boiled up some tea with lots of sugar.

Eventually, the people were strong enough to speak and Okami, who had checked the other lodge, demanded to know what was happening.

One of the men answered, “My cousins and I came here to get

away from the law. Our father had abused us for years, and we finally burned his house down as he lay drunk in his bed. Unfortunately we were seen so we took off. We are murderers so we became outcasts. We came here and made lodges but the hunting was no good and so now we are starving.”

“And what of that creature in the other lodge.”

“There were five of us, but as we began to starve, Henry, who was too weak to travel, seemed to go crazy, he killed and ate part of Joseph while we three were out hunting. When we came back he was insane. We tied him up and left him in the other lodge. That's all.”

Okami asked, “Who set the fire that killed your father?”

“It was Henry, but we all agreed.”

“Murderer twice, and cannibal,” said Oki, “is there anything else you can tell me?”

“When we found Henry standing over Joseph, he was speaking some language we had never heard before. We assume he is possessed by Wendigo.”

With that, Okami made up his mind, he walked out of the lodge and toward the other one, but Kit caught up with him. “You intend to kill this man.”

“That is my duty Kit. He is a double murderer, he has given up the right to live. We can't take him back to a town, it is up to me to settle this.”

“Brother, you are not alone here. Let me examine this Henry, to see what I can see.”

“I will come with you, just in case.”

“There is no need, but I welcome your company.”

Kit entered the lodge for the first time and what she saw shocked her. Henry was bound hand and foot and tied to the bed. His eyes were red, his hands were curled into claws and his fingernails had thickened to points. He was foaming at the mouth and there was dried blood all over his clothes. There was no doubt that the story the others had told them was true.

Kit stood still and probed. She was shocked at the vile, vicious creature she found in Henry's mind. This was not human, this was an elemental hunger, a greed for flesh, human flesh. So this was Wendigo.

Kit probed some more and found, cowering in a dark corner of this body's mind, a scared boy. Henry was still there. Kit made a decision.

“Okami, my brother, I will try to save this boy. You must be prepared to destroy him and me as well if I fail and the Windigo takes me, but I will try.”

“Kitsune my sister, you are my elder and I must respect your wishes but please don't try to do this, what is there to save? This creature has killed twice.”

“Oki, you and I had a gentle, loving childhood. We have no experience of the horrors this boy, and the others, have grown up with. Our judgment is not enough, if I can, I will save this boy and we will take these people back to their elders for better judgment than we can give here.”

“I fear for you, Kit, please don't try this.”

“I will try, younger brother. Now, there is a tent here in this lodge, set it up outside, a little way from the lodge and then send Kuri to me.”

Okami was not happy, but he did as his sister asked.

“Kuri, I am going to try to kill this Wendigo. Can you feel it in this boy?”

“Kit, it is ancient, and it is powerful, are you sure you want to try this?”

“I am. I feel somehow that I have to try. We will take this boy to the tent and then Oki will stand guard at the door, I would like you to become a serpent and circle the tent. Let nothing out, not me, not this boy and certainly not the vile creature who has him.”

Kuri looked at Kit's face for a moment, and then said, “Nothing will get out.”

When the tent was pitched, Kit asked Oki to carry Henry and the bed inside. Oki nodded and grabbing bed and all, carried it across. When he had done that, she said, “Okami, I want you to

stand guard at the door. Let nobody come in and be especially careful of anything that tries to come out. If it is not me or this boy, kill it, even if it looks like me. Do you understand? I may fail and if I do, you cannot let this creature have my body. Ignore any sounds, and under no circumstances look in. To do so, I feel, would be to invite disaster.”

Oki nodded and Kit knew that if he had to, he would kill her. She was satisfied with that and went inside the tent. Kuri circled the tent so that her lynx head and claws were at the entrance. She would be ready to help Oki, should she need to.

All the preparations made, Oki drew the entrance shut and tied it. Nothing would go in or out until Kit said so.

All was quiet for a while, then the tent began to shake, the sides flapping but the bottom firmly held by Kuri. Strange animal sounds, and then unearthly sounds began to be heard. Oki stood solidly through all of it, never blinking, no emotion on his face. Kuri watched him and knew he was with Kit, lending his strength.

The three other people stayed in their lodge, their eyes firmly shut, their hands over their ears. They would never speak of what they were hearing.

In a shorter time than expected, Kit’s voice said, “It is over, you can let me out, Okami.”

Okami made no move.

“Okami, let me out.”

Still he remained, unmoving and unmoved. Suddenly a massive bark was heard, then Kit's voice shouting, "No more, vile creature, you will torment men no longer." This was followed by a terrible scream.

"Okami, come in and help this poor boy."

Okami moved, that was his sister. Her concern was for the boy, not herself.

He took the boy, Henry, back to the lodge and began to feed him broth. The boy seemed sick and confused, but there was no sign of the creature he had been. Kuri flowed into the tent and saw Kit standing tall and strong. She was not fooled, and coiled around her sister, generating heat with each turn. In a few minutes, Kit stopped shivering and kissed the Lynx head on the nose. That nose became Kuri's lips and the two kissed as young women do. "I was afraid for you Kit, but I watched Oki and knew he was with you."

"Wendigo was powerful, Kuri, as powerful as any creature I've yet seen, but its power was hunger. An elemental who gains access through starvation and guilt. This boy felt he had no choice but to kill a demon who was hurting his family, he felt he deserved to starve, and Wendigo dug his way inside like a worm."

"How did you pull him out?"

"I offered him a healthy woman's body, and when he left the boy to come into me, I changed to a fox with nine tails. I have

never seen this fox before, but Wendigo was no match. This monster is no more, banished from existence with a single bark. You must tell nobody outside this tent what happened, I feel strongly about that. What happens in the shaking tent must not be revealed.”

“I don’t care what happened, Kit, just so long as you’re back.”

The trio stayed three days, nursing the people, who were not much more than young teens, back to health. When they were strong enough to travel, two poles were found, and strapped across Okami’s massive shoulders. The four teens got onto blankets between the poles and with Kit and Kuri breaking trail in the snow, Okami pulled them all back to their settlement.

Along the way, the hare came out of his wood and bowed as they moved past. In Kuri’s mind she heard, “I would have sacrificed myself, but it would only have delayed the Wendigo by a day. Thank you for saving those people.”

The town was pleased to see their teens helped into the settlement by three strangers. Okami talked with the elders and told them of what happened to Joseph. When the elders asked about the Wendigo, Kit told them that she had destroyed it. The elders seemed to accept her claim and even nodded solemnly to her.

Asking them to stay for a short while, a boy was sent to one of the larger houses. When he came back, he was carrying a box. This was given to Kit with the words, “This is the blanket of Jack Fiddler. We have not had a Shaman since he hanged himself. We hope that you will accept this.”

Kit said, "I am no Shaman, I am not worthy of your gift, although I deeply respect your wishes."

At this the elders took back the box but said, "When you are ready for it, it will be here for you."

As the trio made ready to go, Kuri shyly approached one of the elders. "Out by where these people camped, there is a Hare that cared very much for them."

"I thank you for telling me, he will be welcome here, should he wish to visit. No hare shall be harmed during the wintertime."

With that, the trio went directly back to their home and continued with what was left of the winter break.

A Hard Decision Made

Okami was giving Megan his report on the trip to the north. She seemed pleased, until he told her about Kit taking over and destroying the Wendigo.

“She destroyed it?”

“Yes and she saved the boy.”

“Are you sure she destroyed it?”

“I felt it become nothing.”

“Stan!” Megan called and he was there in the lunch counter beside her.

“It’s as we feared, she is too powerful.”

Stan shook his head, “It’s unfortunate that we have to do this.”

“Do what?” demanded Okami, “what are you talking about?”

“Oki, we can only banish a Wendigo by killing the one it took, neither Megan nor I can destroy a Wendigo, it’s beyond us. That Kitsune can do this, means she is much too powerful. I’m afraid we must destroy her.”

“YOU WILL NOT!” stormed Okami, drawing the attention of Liz, who was behind the counter. She stopped cleaning and waved her hands to push back the walls of the diner.

Sure enough, Kit and Kuri were there, drawn by Oki's shout. "They want to destroy you Kit! I won't let them," and he grew so large that the diner could hardly contain him.

Kuri went to stand by Okami, while Kit went to sit at the counter beside Liz. Next into the diner were Ingrid and Art. "You will not touch my student," Ingrid said in a dangerously soft voice. She stood by Okami in front of Megan and Stan, and Art sat at the counter but he reached for the drinks tray and a cleaver.

Amber was there with Coyote and she said, "Kit is my student too," as she took up a stance beside Ingrid. She turned to Coyote and said, "Go sit down Coy, you should not take sides here, you may need to judge." With that she handed Kit's violin to Coyote with a look. Coyote sat and handed the instrument to Kit.

Ray was there in front of Megan and he said, "The entire Keen clan is here with me, Megan. Consider well what you do next."

Mishelle was standing beside Kuroneko and she said, "I will stand with my fellow Lynx in this."

Ingrid looked, "Woden? What business do you have here?"

"I was with Mishelle when she was called, I will of course stand with the two of you."

Megan backed up not one bit as she said, "Kitsune has become what we feared, she has destroyed a Wendigo, and not even

Nanabozo can do that. She is too powerful, she is too dangerous. None of us can destroy Wendigo.”

Okami shouted, “Is that your answer to everything, to destroy it. Well you can try, but you will have to destroy me as well,” and he changed to wolf form, snarling.

Liz stood up, tiny as she was, she seemed to grow larger than Okami. “Peace, all of you, I can destroy Wendigo, I know the rites.”

Behind her, Coyote muttered, “I can too,” but as usual, nobody listened to him.

Liz continued, “Kit performed the shaking tent ritual, and she lured Wendigo into herself, then destroyed it with a change. I know not how she did this but it is the act of a Shaman. I know, I am a Shaman.”

At that moment, a blazingly white fox with seven tails appeared beside Kit. “I am here, returned from the spirit realm. I claim Kitsune and Okami as kin, she was named for me and I have a claim on them, as they have a claim on me. Will you fight the Yokai?”

Liz turned to Suziho and said, “I say again, peace, visitor, there is no need for fighting. Megan you sent me to be trained, you know what I can do.” At that moment Woden began to speak up but Liz said quietly, “Silence, I ask you all, hear me out.”

Woden looked as surprised as he had ever looked in his life, and Ingrid echoed his expression. Yet he relaxed his face and

nodded.

“I believe Kitsune has found her vocation. She can call on the spirit realm,” and here Liz bowed to Suziho, “and she can call on those with power,” she bowed to Ray, “and that is the work of a Shaman. If she chooses, I will train her and that will be the end of it.”

Coyote let out a huff of air, Woden and Megan, almost together turned to Liz and bowed. Woden continued, “I bow to your wisdom youngster, and I bow to your power, that you can bid the Allfather be silent. I bow indeed that you have remained unknown to me,” and here he turned to Ingrid who looked as impressed as Woden.

“I had no idea, Wo, she was hidden to me as well.”

Megan looked around the room, then at Kit. “Kitsune, do you accept Liz as your teacher? If you do, she will be responsible for you, you will not disobey her or she will discipline you.”

Kitsune carefully handed her violin back to Coyote and said “I thank you ancestor, I will not need it.”

She turned to Suziho, bowed deeply, and said, “I thank you twice, ancestor, once for today, and once for your help with the Wendigo.” Suziho smiled and bowed back.

Kitsune then addressed Megan and Stan. “Great Nanabozo, I respect your judgment, and I would have submitted to your decision rather than see this group fight.”

Stan smiled, as if something had been confirmed for him.

Kitsune went on, “I must confess that I have been waiting for Liz to invite me to become her student. I know that it is appropriate for the student to ask, but in explanation I can only say that I have the pride of a young woman.”

Kit turned to Liz and said formally, “My apologies Shaman, for not asking sooner, I beg to be allowed to learn from you.”

Liz beckoned Kit closer and Kit bent her head deeply. “I accept you, apprentice,” as she laid her hands on the top of Kit’s head.

There was a period of silence, and then from the doorway came Lila’s voice. “This is a happy day for me, that my child has found her way. I invite you all to come celebrate with me at my home with my husband.”

As the group turned to look, they saw hundreds of fairies in full battle gear fading out of sight. Nobody was more shocked than Kit and Okami, but Lila said, “Child, I told you I have resources.”

“Father?”

“King, as I am Queen.”

Art spoke up for the first time, saying, “Did Jim know?”

“Of course he did, we are old, old friends.”

Megan turned to Stan, who shrugged, “We seem to be here

still, love,” and he laughed.

Okami, Kit and Kuri moved to Lila and the three kids tried to hug her at the same time.

Woden clapped his hands together and rubbed them, “I find myself hungry, where is this feast.”

Coyote looked at Amber and said, “Music?” While Liz turned the ‘open’ sign around.

The Next Days

“Mother?” said Kit as she helped clean up the house after the party.

“Now look, sweetheart, I never lied to you kids, you just never asked.”

“Would you really have started a war between the fairy folk and Megan and Stan?”

“Yes of course dear, I’m your mother.”

“And who else knew you and Father were fairy folk, the King and Queen no less.”

“No one, dear, not even Ray. Jim knew that Tilly needed help,

and he knew that we love children. It was a simple solution, sweetie, your father and I didn't think about it for long at all. What we didn't know was that you had powers. Then your brother came along and we figured you could help with his powers, and then Kuri. It was lovely to have a house full of chatter once more."

"But..."

"Oh come now, dear, what has changed, except that now you know, how we knew, what you three were up to? You're home again from the little kangaroo court, you have made up with Megan and Stan, is there something else bothering you?"

"No I suppose not. I'm just a bit miffed you never told us."

"What? And have us miss the fun of watching you three sneaking around being clever?"

Lila opened her arms and Kit stepped into them. A Mom is a Mom, after all.

Later that day, Kit went for her regular violin lesson with Amber, and before they started, Kit said, "Amber, you had Coyote give me my violin in the lunch counter when it looked like there would be a fight. Why did you do that?"

Amber looked hard at Kit, "Did you really think you could play with the world and Coyote wouldn't notice? You have been watching me for too many years not to have picked up on the

patterns of reality.”

“But you never said anything.”

“No. Look Kit, you and Oki scare the hell out of the others around here. You especially, you’re too clever to have all the powers you have. Nobody needed to know you can play the patterns like Coy and me.”

“But you’re smart, and you have massive powers. Nobody is scared of you.”

“Yes, but I’ve got Coyote beside me. Ingrid is powerful and smart, but she’s got Art, and she’s been alive an incredibly long time. Long enough to become smart, instead of clever.”

“So if I get hooked up with a goof-ball, everybody would relax?”

“Hey, I know you’re kidding Kit, but Coy is no fool. And by the way, he also loves you, he wasn’t sitting on the sidelines, he was guarding you. I would have liked him to stay neutral, but all I could count on was him looking like he was neutral.”

“Jesus Amber, with Coyote, my parents, and the rest of them, Megan and Stan didn’t stand a chance.”

“No, they didn’t, but they stood up for what they felt was best, they would have died, but they would never have given up. This is what makes them what they are. Do you remember many years ago when I told you that you had to learn your violin day by day, let the growing up happen?”

“I never forgot, Amber.”

“Part of that learning is to figure out who you are, and that comes out in your music, but it also comes out in doing what you feel is right. Megan and Stan would have died for what they felt was right. No, what they absolutely knew in their hearts, was right. And when you decided to study under Liz, they changed their minds, because that was right.”

“But Amber, I know lots of people that only want money and power, who lie and cheat so much they can’t see the lies any more. They don’t do what is right.”

“Yes, and because most people are like you, who will do the right thing, they can often lie and cheat their way into power. Would you act like them to stop them?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then you have your answer. Now, if you can do it without blowing the roof off of my home and into another world, start playing please.”

While Kit was at her lesson, Okami was with Stan for his regular class. It was awkward, to say the least.

“Look, Stan, I was just trying to protect my sister, there are no hard feelings OK?”

“Okami, you did what you felt you had to do, you’re a protector, but you have to figure out what you are going to protect. You chose to protect your sister because you love her, that’s to be expected, but even your sister was willing to stand and be destroyed if that was the correct solution. She saw the bigger picture and she already had a plan to fix the problem by getting a proper, steady teacher. You’ve had me and that makes a difference. We’re not concerned that you will go off the rails.”

“What? Even if I was willing to oppose you and Megan?”

“Especially because you were willing to oppose us in the way you did. You didn’t just attack from blind emotion, you were willing to give us a chance to back down. You have become what you were meant to become, someone who is powerful but thinks, someone who judges carefully.”

“But you think I judged wrong.”

“Sometimes there is no right judgment, only a judgment. Sometimes you just go with the best information you have.”

“And if you’re wrong, if you find out later you were wrong?”

“You live with that, son. You live with it. Now, where do you get off thinking you could beat Megan and me?”

“I had to try, win or lose.”

“Good boy, let’s find out just how strong you are now, shall we.”

“Wait... no... damn!”

Okami was suddenly fighting as hard as he'd ever fought.

Kuri, who was watching, bit her lip at first, but then grinned. Stan wasn't trying to hurt Okami, but was soon concentrating on not getting hurt himself. “That's my Oki.” she thought smugly.

Mishelle had promised to stick around for a while to help Kuri with her new form. As it turned out, it wasn't just a form, there were a host of new abilities to get used to, and tracking was one of them. As a Great Lynx, Kuri could smell better than any canine, it seemed as if she could smell what day of the week someone burped, a block away. It was overwhelming and Mishelle was teaching her how to ignore what she didn't need.

Kuri was also learning just how well her abilities complemented Oki's, and Mishelle was teaching her how to be a tracker and investigator for a judge.

Woden seemed to take an interest too, and he was giving her advice on how to be an investigator and judge. Between these two, Kuri was almost able to predict what people would do.

“If I can tell that someone will murder someone else, should I stop them at that time?”

“That has been tried,” said Woden, “and it is always a mistake.

We may be able to see murder in someone's mind, but they seldom kill. Men's minds are a mess, only their actions mean anything. If they have killed, you can see it in their mind, you can see the past with accuracy, but are they going to kill? You cannot know that because they don't know that."

"Surely the intent is enough for punishment?"

"Some would say so, certainly, but some will also say that simply being a man is enough to convict that man of abuse toward women. Being black, or brown, or red, or any religion at all, is enough to assume criminality. Being a woman is enough to know that once a month they will become unhinged, and should be put into a shed until their menstruation passes."

"I think I see, if I am to judge, I must judge myself first, my own prejudice."

Woden grinned widely and nodded, "Just so, just so."

Leaving Home

It had been a busy couple of years for all three of the teens. Kit stayed for an extra year in school to pick up a few courses, she was still not sure what she would do in University.

Oki was certain that he would go to law school for both aboriginal and western law, and Kuri would go with him. He had concentrated on what he needed and so that pair would graduate at the same time as Kit.

Oki and Kuri had taken to spending about half the week at her apartment, the two were almost inseparable now, and almost always happy. Spats were rare. They had talked about Kuri's cyclical life style, but decided that they would have a lifetime and then Oki would find Kuri once more and they would do it again.

Kit had her many boyfriends, but like her decision on what to do after high school, they were briefly considered and left behind.

Lila and Jonah were well prepared for the kids to leave home, Oki was already half gone, but Kit remained. Still, the parents didn't worry too much, like her whole life, she would make the right choice when she needed to.

The canoe trips with Mara and James continued, but were not quite as often as before, as the trio became more busy. Oki and Kuri went more often than Kit, and Kuri loved going to the world of 'the folk' to paddle those gentle rivers and give the

twinkling people rides. Kit had passed along the trick of understanding them to Kuri, but all four had started to learn their tinkling language.

Kit, when she missed the canoe trips, was in the wilderness with Liz. That training was intense, and extremely private. The results were spectacular. Kit's ability to speak with the folk went far beyond anything Liz had expected, Kit could communicate with just about anyone now. Liz could walk between worlds and Kit could as well. It had to be a strange creature indeed for Kit not to understand it.

By the time Kit was in her last year of school, Liz declared that Kit had learned what she could teach her, and that from now on, Kit would continue to learn from the world around her.

At the end of school, that strange, twilight world of the last summer at home arrived. Oki and Kuri, sensing the time they had with their parents was drawing to a close, actually spent most of it at home. By unspoken consent, they slept in Oki's room. Kit rather missed Kuri in her bed, but she could not be unhappy that her two siblings were next door cuddling and cooing.

As for Kit, she was single again, and happy about that as well. Nobody had 'stuck' but she was unconcerned about that. Came the day that she walked into the lunch counter and called hello to Mike. As she sat down she felt someone was looking at her. She turned and there, in the corner, watching quietly was Dave.

As Kit got up and walked over to his table, his smile appeared, looking, Kit thought, like the sun coming out on a stormy day.

“Hello Dave.”

“Hello Kit, I was hoping to see you, I’m home for the summer.”

“Have you finished your schooling?”

“The first bit, yes, but now I’m going into Grad School. I asked for the summer off and they said yes, I haven’t been back for so long, and my parents are getting older.”

“That’s good, we’re almost gone and our folks are being brave, braver than me. I’m going to miss them.”

“Do you know where you’re going from here?”

“I haven’t decided, I was accepted to several programs, one was biology here in Guelph, but I think that maybe I’d like to study music. I got accepted to Laurier and McGill.”

“Have you considered studying overseas, Kit?”

Dave had an intense look in his eyes, as if he was willing Kit to consider it. Kit was tempted to read his thoughts, but she did not. She knew what he was asking and why. She knew because she felt it too. To put him off until she could get her thoughts together she asked, “Where are you studying now?”

I’m at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts. It’s just across the river from the Louvre, and is a pretty good school.

From the counter, Mike snorted, “It’s one of the best anywhere, Kit.”

Kit grinned, and Dave looked embarrassed. She said, “And you delayed starting your studies there, to come visit your parents?”

Now Dave looked uncertain, “Among other things, Kit.”

“Like maybe to see me again?”

“Yes, to see you again. Look, I know you told me to move on, but there’s nobody else that I’ve ever been with that compares to you, Kit. I know you don’t want to hear that and I’m sorry, but I wanted to come and tell you that.”

“You know how old I am now, Dave, how old I was when we were going out together, figure it out, I was lying to you.”

“Yeah, after you saved my ass in Rome, I worked it out. I don’t care, you were more grown up then, than any woman I’ve known since. And we’re not so far apart now.”

“Oh lord, why didn’t you move on? Surely there are thousands of women in Paris that are amazing, smart, sexy, why me of all people?”

“Because none of them are you, Kit. Look, I’m sorry to come back and bring this up, but I never, ever stopped thinking about you. I also wanted to thank you for kicking my ass out of Guelph, I have been studying with amazing artists and it’s been a rare privilege to be there. It wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t pushed me over there.”

With that, his face crumpled, and his head dropped. “I’m sorry, I won’t bother you any more, I’m happy I got a chance to tell you how much you meant to me and to tell you that you’ve been my inspiration, my muse for all these years.”

Kit shook her head and reached for his hand. “Still stupid. Take me downstairs for a beer and you can tell me what you’ve been doing these last couple of years.”

Dave lit up, there was that smile again, and he said, “Are you old enough?”

Behind her, Mike laughed. As Kit looked daggers at him Mike said. “What? It’s a small town.”

Kit told Dave to go get them a table, “I want to talk to Mike for a moment.”

Dave said, “If it’s any consolation, I never caught on.”

Kit smiled and turned to Mike as Dave went downstairs. “Mike, I know you can detect powers, does Dave have any?”

“You figure he’s put a love potion on you?”

“Seriously, Mike.”

“There’s something there, not the usual old blood powers, but something of real potential. Do you want my opinion Kit?”

“Please.”

“He’s got the potential to be a great artist, I can feel that, but I can also feel he is missing something, a muse maybe.”

Here Mike looked seriously at Kit and said, “You sure you want to hear it all?”

When Kit nodded, Mike said, “I think he needs you, Kit, and I think he knows that. Whatever you do, be gentle to him, you could shatter him and from what I’m feeling, that would be a damned shame.”

Kit looked thoughtful and said, “Thanks Mike, I don’t know if it’s helpful, but at least I know a bit more.”

Mike nodded and went back to wiping dishes.

When Kit got downstairs and walked to Dave’s table, Morris Minor called from behind the bar, “Excuse me miss, can I see some ID please.”

“Oh, ha ha, Morris, is this the joke of the day? How about my usual please.”

“One Shirley Temple coming up,” he said as he put her Guinness on the table.

Kit sat and looked at Dave for a long time. Dave kept quiet, waiting for her to get done whatever it was she was thinking. He was used to these pauses. “Dave, tell me which music school you think I should apply to in Paris.”

“How did you know I meant Paris?”

“Oh please.”

Dave smiled, she was always a step ahead of him, “The Conservatoire de Paris”

Kit blinked, “You’re kidding? They let in like fifteen students a year. Do you know who has studied there?”

“I do, Kit and it’s more like 30 students. I’ve talked with Amber and she thinks it’s a good idea for you to audition.”

Kit was silent again, then said, “How far?”

“Sorry?”

“How far from your school.”

“Oh,” Dave was astonished, “About five or six kilometres I think.”

“I see. And when are the auditions?”

“Today, I’m afraid, I was just going to call you if you hadn’t come in to the lunch counter.”

“Today.”

“Yes, sorry.”

“Do you know what I’m supposed to play?”

“No but Amber does.”

“She’s in on this? Never mind, of course she is, drink your beer we’re going to visit Amber.”

“It’s the Offenbach and the Satie, Kit.”

“The ones we’ve been working on lately?”

“Yes of course.”

“Of course. How long have you been preparing me for this, Amber?”

“All your life, Kit. You can do this. Look, play the first ten bars of the *Gymnopedie #1*.”

Kit did, and Amber shook her head. “Not like you’re trying to do it technically perfect. Kit look over there, look at Dave, he’s been gone for years, and now you’ve seen him again after all that time. What do you feel like, seeing him. Play that.”

As Kit played, Dave began to cry as quietly as he could. Amber smiled. “That, Kit, that is why you grew up, that’s why no amount of magic or technical wizardry could ever replace a lifetime of growing up. Go, play.”

Kit, looking a bit confused at what Dave and Amber could have heard, nodded, put her violin away and said, “Please tell my

folks I'll be gone overnight.”

“I will,” said Amber.

As Kit disappeared with Dave holding her hand, Coyote came into the room. “That was good Amber, different than I’ve heard from you before.”

“It was Kit, she is going off to an audition in Paris.”

“An audition eh.”

Amber put her arm around Coyote’s neck. “No, Coy, if she wants to cheat, she can do it herself, but I know she won’t.”

“It was terribly good, like seeing someone you love after a long time away.”

Amber hugged Coyote hard and said, “Take me to dinner, Coy, I’m as nervous as a teacher can be.”

“Me too. Isn’t that interesting, me too.”

The Audition

Kit and Dave popped into an empty hallway. Dave stumbled a bit and Kit grabbed his arm. “Steady there, you’ll get your feet under you in a moment.”

“Kit that was, umm.”

“Yeah, and you won’t have any jet lag, that’s part of the process. I figured out how to put that in, you’re good for Paris time.”

“Umm, is speaking fluent French part of it too?”

“Am I?”

They walked to the audition studio and Kit looked at the list. “Well I won’t have time to get nervous, or even to warm up, I’m on next.”

Kit took out her violin and went through her fingering to warm up as much as she could. “Can you come in with me, Dave?”

“You’re nervous?”

“Can you come in please Dave?”

“We’ll try it, I don’t think I’m supposed to but they can only tell me to get out.”

As they walked in, the adjudicators didn’t seem to see Dave at

all. Kit nodded her head toward a stray chair to the side, and he sat down quietly.

Kit tuned a bit longer than usual, trying to warm up, and then, at the request of the panel, she played. With each piece she tried to keep the appropriate image in her mind. On the final, Satie piece, she looked again at Dave and put all her feelings for him into it. Ready for it this time, Dave managed to only get a bit moist in the eyes. As she finished the last note, the panel was silent for longer than seemed usual to Dave, and then the chair thanked Kit and asked her to remember him to Amber.

“You will hear from us soon, please leave your local contact information with the secretary on the way out.”

Having given the woman his information, Dave asked Kit if she would like to see a bit of Paris.

Kit came out of her thoughts and nodded, taking his arm. As they got into an empty corridor she said, “Is your place safe? I want to get rid of my violin.”

“Sure, I have my own room in the apartment and it's got a lock, although I may not have locked it.”

“OK think of your room and your lock... You have it?”

Dave nodded and the violin was gone. “Locked now. Walk me from here to your place, Dave.”

They did just that, in no hurry, it was still mid-afternoon. They walked past shops and coffee houses and book stores and all

the wonderful things that make a city. As they got near the Louvre and the river, Kit felt a tingle, she poked it like you might poke a raw tooth and realized that it was a love spell. She looked at Dave with some suspicion, but it wasn't him, it was all around her.

Well, she decided she could resist the poor wee thing and filed it away.

Dave kept up a running commentary on the city, he was obviously proud of the place and wanted Kit to understand why. She had to admit it had a lot of charm, and more than that, there was history. If she was going to study music here, she would be able to tap into a tradition that went back hundreds of years.

“Where is your apartment, Dave?”

“Are you getting tired?”

“Not a bit, just curious.”

“It's in Montparnasse, past my new school on the other side of the river.”

“I've heard of that, why do I know it?”

“In the 1920s, it was a cheap place to live, in a cheap city, there were artists from all over the world. Lots of ex-pats lived there and became famous writers, painters and other creative types.”

Kit nodded and fell silent again as they walked over the bridge

and on up the hill to Dave's apartment. It was in an old building, on the top floor with huge windows. He shared it with two other art students and the large central room was splashed with paint and littered with canvasses.

“It's not our mess, it was like this when we rented it, there have been painters in here since the first world war and the owners never bothered to refinish the floors.”

Kit looked down and could feel the decades of work that went into making a floor that messy. She loved it.

“Show me your paintings, Dave.”

“Oh, are you sure? There aren't many of them here at the moment.”

“Come on, Dave, I know you, stop being modest and trot them out.”

Dave went to a huge pile of canvases under a tarp and one by one put them up on an easel so Kit could see them.

She was stunned, they were wonderful, very refined, and in each and every one of his landscapes, somewhere, there was a white fox. “What's with the fox?”

Dave looked a bit sheepish, “That's you Kit, you have always reminded me a bit of a beautiful fox, I'm not sure why.”

Kit changed to a white fox and looked quietly at Dave while he got over the shock. When he had settled down she turned back

and said, "You saw me in my other form, Dave, nobody else has ever seen that in me." She didn't say any more for fear of going too far down that line of thought.

"Kit this apartment is a bit far from the music school, if you get accepted and if you want to stay with me, we can get another place on the right bank that's closer."

"Not a chance, I love this place, and I just remembered why I know the area. If I get in I'll stay with you and I'll be your Kiki de Montparnasse."

Dave went weak in the knees but tried his damndest not to show it.

It didn't matter, Kit saw and smiled. "Are your roommates here?"

"Gone for the summer," Dave managed.

"Good, we can make some noise, which room is yours" said Kit as she took Dave's arm once more.

As they got into Dave's room there was, of course, only one bed. Dave looked like he was about to say something, but Kit put a finger to his lips and said, "It's not like we haven't been here before."

Late into the night, Kit rolled over and said, "You've learned a few new tricks."

Dave laughed, "So have you."

Making Plans

Kit was back home, and she had been accepted to the music school. Amber was absolutely delighted. Kit wasn't so sure. It was nice being back with Dave but she was seeing problems ahead.

“Mommy, I'll be so far away”

“Oh don't be silly, Kit, you could live here and go to class in Paris every day. It's just that the time difference would screw up your sleep. Go, come home when you feel like it, it's not like it's hard for you to do.”

“Well, OK but should I live with Dave?”

“I like Dave, I always have, you've got our blessing to live with him. Look, I know your worries, but consider it as if you're just a normal girl with no powers. Would you be with him? Follow your heart my love, don't think so much.”

“It's just that I thought it was over.”

“You mean you're worried because he's your first and you always get romantic about your first. Look, honey, think of it like you set him free to find his own heart, you didn't trap him, you let him go and now he's come back. Now, did you use that time to decide if he is the one or not. Only you can decide that. Just remember that you went to him without hesitation when the Devil wanted his soul. You told the Devil that it was yours, is it?”

Kit was in Ken's Keller with Dave, having a beer. "Dave, if we do this, I want you to understand that I'll stay young, and you'll get old."

Dave smiled, "That's perfect, the old painter with his young model/muse/lover, it's the dream come true."

That seemed to be that, as far as Dave was concerned, but Kit still wasn't sure. She went to Ingrid.

"The first time I was walking in Paris with Dave, I felt a love spell, I'm worried, Ingrid, did I maybe not block it out completely?"

"You blocked it? Kit that's a very old spring under the city and it's the reason why so many people fall in love with Paris. It's also why love blooms so often there. It's not very strong any more, and it certainly won't make you fall in love, just reinforce what you already love. Don't block it, enjoy it."

"But I'm worried about what happens when he gets old, that's going to be a problem isn't it?"

"It never was for me dear. Look, what's the alternative? To reject him now? Or worse, to reject him as he gets old so you don't have to watch him die? If you want my advice, take what time you have with him, that's all anyone gets, no matter if they're immortal or not. I'm not with Woden any more, immortality is no guarantee that you'll be together forever."

“But you made Art immortal.”

“I did, it was a tough decision on his part, and I was a coward so I did it. But I'd still be with him if he was mortal, despite the heartache of seeing him die. Look, you love Dave don't you?”

“Yes, I guess I do.”

“Then be strong and think who better to nurse him when he gets old. Would you want to be living somewhere and suddenly have the thought that Dave was out there getting older and more feeble by himself?”

Kit went silent as she thought about Dave in a nursing home or worse, freezing to death on the street. She looked at Ingrid, who nodded, “It's worse isn't it?”

When Kit talked to Sam, she got laughed at. “Kit, I seem to be attracted to older men and/or married men. My sensei, Art, you name it, if I can't have him I want him. You really don't want to ask me for advice.”

Mara was a lot more helpful. “Mara how did you know that James was the one?”

“Wow, you've really got the yips haven't you?”

“Don't make fun, Mara, I've talked about stuff with you my

whole life, please, I can't seem to stop worrying about Dave."

"Well All right, do you remember that story James tells about the time when he was a kid and the drunken hunters threatened our trippers?"

"I do, he tells it a lot."

Mara laughed, "He does doesn't he, well the fact that he was willing to stand up to hunters with guns, really made me notice him, and after I got the local wolves to scare them away, he and I just sat and watched. He put his arm around my neck and leaned into my fur. That's when I knew."

"But how did you know, he was just a kid then."

"I smelled him, and I knew he was my mate. I waited for him after that and eventually, when he was ready, he called me."

"You smelled him?"

"Oh for... Kit the next time you're with Dave, change to a fox and let your nose tell you if he's the right one or not."

"Alright Dave, I'll do it. We'll live together and I'll be your nurse when you get old."

"That would be wonderful, I hope I can be the guy who keeps you around that long."

“Dave, is this why you came home? To get me?”

“Not entirely, Kit, I have to earn enough money to pay rent and tuition. You know my family isn't very rich, they could pay for my undergrad, but I've got to pay for my own grad school.”

“OK let's go talk to my family, we have to figure out our finances too, might as well do it all at once, and Mom wants you to come for dinner anyway.”

Lila and Jonah were delighted to see Dave, and also pleased to be included in the financial planning.

Kit had a proposal, “Dad, if you guys are going to pay my tuition and living expenses like you said, then that takes care of Dave's living expenses too, and all he has to do is earn his tuition.”

Kuri spoke up, “Kit I'll pay Dave's tuition, I'm rich and if I'm rich, you're rich too. In fact, I intend to pay for Oki and I to go to school so it isn't so hard on Mom and Dad.”

Jonah laughed. “You kids are the absolute best, but do you think we're penniless? Stop worrying and let us pay all your ways, we want to do that. We've been saving up since each of you came along so stop worrying about money. Dave, we're taking care of food and rent, no arguments, but what about your tuition, are you going to earn enough?”

“I think so, I hope so.”

“Let us pay it, and you can pay us back with a painting for the

living room, something blue to match the chesterfield.”

“DAD!”

Jonah was cackling, “OK, OK we'll figure it out when you have all graduated, is that good?”

The youngsters all nodded in turn and Jonah added, “But I do want one of your paintings, Dave. Kit has shown us photos, I'll pay for it.”

Kit said, “Are you guys sure you can afford this?”

Lila smiled, “You forget how old we are sweetheart, we can afford it.”

Kit looked thoughtful, “So I could have had a pony?”

Finding New Homes

In the Fall, Oki and Kuri headed to Lakehead University in Thunder Bay for Law, a program that included aboriginal law.

After taking one look at the student residences, Kuri declared that they were buying their own house. They found one just outside of the city, a small place on a large lot which backed onto the bush. It was perfect, the two could step out the back door and run together for miles without meeting another person.

Kuri cooked, Oki washed up, which made both of them happy. They accumulated some furniture from thrift shops, and spent their money on good food.

Early each morning they would run into town to the law faculty, but since it was in the centre of the city, they were sometimes seen by their fellow students. A wolf and a lynx were the usual forms.

Funnily, the students never mentioned these wild animals with packs on their backs. Packs that looked a lot like the ones that Oki and Kuri wore into class.

The two of them became popular on campus, Oki had a genial manner, and Kuri was known for her wonderful dinner parties. Still, it was their ability to solve problems that was their most appealing ability. The two of them soon became the informal arbitration panel for the students. Coming up with innovative and always funny solutions to the usual student problems.

One roommate a night owl, the other an early bird? Somehow one of them would walk through their usual room door and be in another residence room, with someone who matched their sleeping habits. Yet none of the students involved ever questioned the magical doors.

Having been around Coyote for so many years, Oki had no trouble at all making sure that the practical jokers' tricks backfired on themselves, resulting in fewer jokes and fewer complaints.

But these solutions were never offered, they were always requested, which may have explained the lack of questioning of the methods.

Kuri had an especially calming effect amongst the girls. Her advice always seemed to come from decades of life experience. Being so very obviously paired with Oki didn't hurt either. Kuri was soon the agony aunt for the campus.

And if there was ever a deck to be built, a wall to be painted, or furniture to be moved, Oki was there to help.

For the years Oki and Kuri spent at the University, dating problems and partner abuse dropped almost to nothing. Not to mention the stress of being in law school. The pair seemed to know the exact right time to invite someone to dinner, followed by a late night chat over beers. In the morning, the couch crashers were always ready to hit the books again.

Needless to say, with Oki's training under Stan, and Kuri's

natural ability to absorb instruction, the two were comfortably in the top half of their class, although they never, ever made it to the very top of the list. Their professors suspected they would deliberately throw a few marks away, but they could never prove it.

It wasn't all school and socializing. The two were often hiking, paddling and winter camping. One year Oki decided to build his own birch bark canoe. It was terrible, it leaked and twisted and was constantly in danger of folding in half.

One of the Elders who taught the canoemaking course took one look at the thing and suggested they might best send it over Kakabeka falls as a tribute to Princess Green Mantle.

The two looked at each other and were off to the falls, but instead of just pushing it out, they hopped in and went over the falls as if they were towing a war party of Sioux behind them. Before they hit the bottom, they moved themselves to the bank so they could take pictures.

They visited Nanabijou and tried to wake him, they paddled around the three sisters, and they changed to their serpent forms and tried to find the lake under the lake. With no light, little oxygen and a lot of water pressure, they found very little but a few lazy Sturgeon. Still, what there was to explore, they explored.

Mostly though, they were students for their time at the school, and when graduation day came, they were offered positions as student councillors. It wasn't a hard decision for the two to say yes, they had found a comfortable place.

They kept the apartment in Guelph, well the apartment building actually, Art had 'forgotten' to mention that Kuri owned the building. He hadn't wanted her to worry about it while growing up.

Kuri decided that since Art had done such a nice job while she was growing, he could go right on managing the building. While Art didn't really want the job, Ingrid told him he needed some excuse to get out of the house once in a while.

And so our Wolf and Lynx/Cougar/Cat had grown up in Guelph and moved away, perhaps not forever, but for a while.

News travels, and every so often an Elder would ask Oki for assistance. Oki would politely decline, saying the Elder has more right to judge, but if the name Nanabozo was mentioned, Oki and Kuri assisted.

Occasionally the two went back to Guelph and Oki reported to Stan and Megan on what he had been doing. On one occasion, Megan said, "Your training is excellent, Oki, there is no need for you to report to us."

Solemnly, Oki replied, "Even a judge should be judged. Nanabozo will, I request, judge me."

Stan bowed low to his son and Megan smiled. When Oki had returned to the north, Megan said, "That was well done Stan."

"What part?"

“From start to finish you philandering man, from start to finish.”

As for Kit, life was a bit more... interesting. While Oki and Kuri had been companions for their whole lives, Kit was adapting to a serious relationship. On top of that, she was in a tough music course and Dave was in grad school, with all the pain and frustration that carries with it.

Kit had genuinely thought she was sending Dave off to make a life without her, and she had no thought that they would ever be back together, yet there they were, living in an apartment in Montparnasse. Where Oki and Kuri had fallen into a stable life, Kit's was more chaotic than ever.

“It's the hardest thing I've ever done, Amber, but I do it on my own, even when I'm tempted to wave away my exhaustion, I don't. And being with Dave doesn't help, he's as tired as I am.”

“This period of your life will be tough, Kit, but you're right not to cheat. Everyone has gone through the same thing you're going through. I did it too. The Conservatoire de Paris is my Alma Mater.”

“It is? You never told me.”

“I guess it never came up, but yes, I asked for your audition.”

“You...”

“Yes, as an alumni I could do that, but that’s all. They had to know who taught you, and so they gave you a chance, but that’s it. You got in on your own, Kit. Never forget that.

“As far as being in a relationship now, that’s just as tough. It’s brand new, and you’re both working hard, tired all the time, and straining to be creative. Just remember that you need to support each other. It’s you two against the world, and if you can do that, your relationship will be far stronger than you can imagine. You both know how hard you are working, how tired you are, just be very careful not to take it out on each other.

“Kit, in this case, cheating is allowed. You can read Dave’s thoughts, let him know you can, so it’s not abusive, and only do it when he seems to be attacking you. If you look, you will probably find there’s some other problem. Stay calm and help him. Remember that he can’t read your thoughts, so tell him, tell him, tell him, until he hears you and can help you.”

“Do you do that with Coyote?”

“He never gets upset, but he read my thoughts for a long time as we were getting used to each other, and he never failed to support me, no matter how stupid I was being. The one time he taught me a lesson it was out of love. That was when he made me Coyote and that explained him so well to me we’ve almost never argued since.”

“It’s to do with understanding and acceptance?”

“It sure is, my love, now, tell me all the gossip from school.”

Dave in Crisis

Dave had been sketching and painting for a week, Kit had to remind him to take bathroom breaks, but this wasn't a good session. Kit could see that he was getting more and more frantic, whatever it was that he was working on wasn't going well at all. He pushed and pushed himself to sketch, crumpled what he was working on, and then threw the paper away. He started a painting, and soon stabbed a hole in a canvas with his brush. He started over and over again.

Finally, he pushed the easel to the floor and spun around to face Kit. "I'm a fraud, a fake. Did you give me my talent back in high school?"

Kit stood silent for a beat, then pulled her hand back and slapped Dave hard enough that the mark was there for three days.

She turned around and stormed out of the apartment.

Dave was rocked back on his heels. He stumbled back and sat hard on the couch, where he slowly, slowly realized what he had said, and what he had done. Was she gone? Oh my dear God, was she gone?

Dave got up and grabbed a jacket blindly, it turned out eventually to be his roommate's but it didn't matter. He was out the door and flying down the stairs to find her.

He checked their usual places, the coffee shops, the book

stores, the local pubs. Then he panicked and checked the bus station, the train station. Why would she be there? He wasn't thinking clearly, he wasn't thinking at all. He had lost her and he had to find her.

Hours later, Dave stumbled into a pub they used once in a while, and there she was! His heart thumped in his chest, there she was!

As he rushed to her table she looked up with blazing eyes, "You think I would do that to you? Give you a talent like yours? You think I'm that cruel? That stupid?"

"You're not a very nice muse," was all that came out of his mouth.

"You want someone nice? Pick up one of the tourists that swarm around here, like maybe that blond over there. Go ahead, she'll gush and tell you how talented you are if that's what you want!"

Dave's thoughts were leaking, his desperation, his fear of losing her. She could see him begin to speak and immediately regret what he had said. Kit softened, "Oh sit down you stupid man, I bought you a beer but I drank it, order another one."

Kit fumed some more, but Dave thought maybe he hadn't lost her, as he ordered two more beers. He was quiet, watching Kit from under his eyebrows, watching her anger, until the drinks arrived. He took a big drink and then a big breath, "I'm sorry Kit, I'm sorry, I know you would never do that to me, you're right, you could never be that cruel. It's just that I feel like I'll

never reach what I'm looking for, what you think I can find. I'm so sorry. I'm afraid, afraid of losing you, afraid of never being the artist I want to be, so very afraid of disappointing you and not being the artist you think I should be... Kit, Kit... do you think you could take my insecurity away?"

Kit looked at him more softly, her eyes more like candles than forest fires, "I know this one, Dave, Amber explained it to me when I was a kid and I wanted her to give me her talent for the violin. I wanted the shortcut. She explained to me that if she did that, I'd never be anything but a tape recorder, a copy machine, I would be able to play anything, and it would forever be boring. I had to grow up with the music.

"I remembered that, for all my life, and I have accumulated scars and a lot of good things too. One of those good things was you, Dave, I thought about you, I played my feelings for you at my audition. You got me into the school Dave, you did that.

"Now you're sitting here, in a real crisis, and that's good. You have to get to where you are now, full of doubt, full of fear, so that you can go beyond where you are.

"You are as good, technically, as anybody in the world, I think you know that, but you can see there's something beyond that. The only thing that will get you past perfection is to stop looking for perfection, you can only look for what's better.

"From now on, what you're looking for, where you're going, I can't give it to you magically, and neither can your teachers. We shouldn't, even if we could, we should be giving you the

tools, the techniques, and then kicking your ass, hard, so that you can go on.”

Dave put his hand on his cheek where Kit’s bright red hand-print glowed. He could feel the heat coming off of it.

“Oh suck it up, I could have hit you harder,” said Kit, “I wanted to, damn, you make me mad sometimes. Look my sweet boy, I’ll make you a deal. You start using the academy rather than let them use you. You think you’re no good now, fine, I will support you until you’re good. If that doesn’t happen, you will do caricatures on the street to support me. Does that sound like a good deal?”

“Kit I will do anything I have to, just so long as you don’t leave me, I swear it.

“Good, we’ll see how it goes, but understand me now, Sonny-Jim, I’m not going anywhere. We aren’t good at saying this, you and I, but I love you. Now, drink your beer and take me out to dinner, someplace cheap where Dalmatians slurp spaghetti until they kiss each other. I feel like finding a grungy, dirty, dive tonight. You know what I want? I want the place where Audrey Hepburn danced the Apache with all the beatniks while Fred Astaire tried to drag her out.”

“We might be able to find an Apache dance, Kit, but it would be an upscale place where the tourists go.”

“Well we’re damned well going to look anyway, let’s find a place where we need a beret and a sailor shirt to get in. It’s Montparnasse, surely some of the Old Paris Underbelly must

still exist.”

Kit got up and climbed onto Dave’s lap, put her arms around him and shouted, “Take me dancing and get me drunk you beautiful man!”

The waiter was running toward them with the bill.

The Party

Ingrid had been visiting Jim at his manor in England, and had dropped in to see Kit. Art had remained with Jim, to catch up.

Ingrid looked around as if she knew the place. She turned to Kit and said, “it looks the same, I played chess with Marcel Duchamp in this apartment.” She looked behind her shoulder, as if to make sure Art wasn’t there, “He was as good in bed as he was at chess.”

Kit looked vaguely embarrassed, as if Ingrid had confessed to using her bed for the assignation. Dave was just standing with a stunned look on his face. Now that he knew about Kit, he was finding out about all her friends from Guelph, and it was difficult to adjust.

“You knew Paris in the ‘20s, Ingrid?” asked Dave.

“I did, it was a glorious time, Paris was one of the cheapest

cities in the world to live in, and all the best and brightest came to bounce off of one another.”

“Ingrid, do you suppose you could, uh, Sam told me about her visit to Musashi and how you could call up someone from what you know of them, do you think that you could...”

Ingrid laughed her window-rattling laugh and said, “You want me to send you two back to the golden age of Parisian art do you? I don’t blame you, Paris, between the wars, was without doubt the centre of the art world. Of course I can send you back.”

“Really, thank you so much Aunt Ingrid.”

Ingrid smiled at this reminder of the little girl who was niece to everyone. There wasn’t much Ingrid wouldn’t do for her. “Tell me why you want to go, it will make it easier to decide.”

“Dave is at a bit of a sticky place right now, caught between the Academy and his desire to create something new.”

Ingrid thought a moment and then brightened. “I remember a party, yes, the very place. I shall not go with you, because I was at the party myself, I will remember you though, and will introduce you around. You can stay as long as you like, well, until the party breaks up but if I remember, that was about noon the next day. Would that suit you?”

“Dave close your mouth, please. That would be wonderful Ingrid, should we put on different clothes?”

“Don’t be silly, this is an artist’s party, have a great time.”

And with that, they were in a very posh apartment, with dozens of people milling around and jazz coming from a small group off in an alcove. They didn’t have much trouble finding Ingrid, she was in the middle of the room, on a raised dais, naked as the day she was... well, very naked. Her beautiful blond hair was braided and wound about her head. She was posing, moving slowly from one position to another as several artists fought to capture her. There was a lot to capture, she had the body of a Goddess, obviously.

Almost instantly, Dave let go Kit’s hand and moved to an empty easel with charcoal and paper. He began sketching quickly, a bit here, and then another bit as Ingrid turned, a multi-angled view beginning to build up. A man behind him called out, “Hey Braque, this fellow has your technique down pretty well.”

A man who seemed to be directing the sketching came and nodded as Dave worked. “Nice, very good sir, and who might you be? My name is Georges Braque.”

“Dave Robbie sir, not ‘the’ Georges Braque?”

“I suppose I must be,” Braque said with a laugh. At that moment, Ingrid got down from the dais and said, “Dave, I’m so glad you came. Please let me introduce you around. The rascal you just met is Georges, and around the dais are Cocteau, Picabia, Picasso, and, oh who cares, come have a drink with me. Ah, that mopey group over there are the Dadaists, no doubt planning their next party at Paul Poiret’s place.” Dave was

dragged away by the model, but not before she snagged her drawing from his easel. This did not go unnoticed by the other artists.

In another corner, Kit had managed to find a group around Igor Stravinsky and sat herself down on the outskirts. That was not to last though, her jeans and t-shirt were noted, and Stravinsky demanded to know who she was. “Just a violin student sir, who loves your music.”

“You know it?”

“Indeed, your Rite of Spring is one of my favourite pieces.”

“Well, perhaps we’ve found the only person not to riot. Someone find me a violin.”

One was soon handed over, “Do you play the Rite, my dear?”

“Certainly,” said Kit and began.

“She’s not bashful, this one, girl who taught you that phrasing just there?”

“I’m sorry Maestro, I was thinking of my friend Ingrid who has been modelling.”

“Interesting, can you play variations on my piece?”

“As you wish Maestro,” and Kit played for about five minutes, working through variations.

“Enough, girl, you put me to shame. Sit here, tell me, are you studying composition?”

“I am early in my studies, Maestro, I have not thought about composition.”

“Well do so. Now, off with you and get into trouble, don’t waste time here with an old man.”

Kit smiled, handed back the violin and bowed as she left to find Ingrid and Dave.

They had drifted to the Dadaists, and Dave was delicately teasing out their reasons for breaking away from the Academy.

Ingrid saw Kit and patted the floor beside her, “He has just been told that Dada means nothing, and that’s what has happened as a result of the war, the world has come down to absurdity, to nothing. There is no meaning at all and the only way to deal with it is to mock it.”

“But without order and tradition, what meaning can there be to life?” Dave said.

“What have we just been saying? Look, I can see you’re a fan of the Academy. Grab some paper and a charcoal.”

Ingrid leaned back and took some off the nearest easel.

“Right, now draw her!”

Being familiar with the exercise of exquisite corpse, Dave

turned and drew Kit without thinking. To his shock, he drew a very pretty fox. He was startled, and without thinking, passed the materials to the next man. This man looked closely at the paper and then at Kit. He added a bit of background and Kit's upper torso. He meant to pass the paper back, but Dave was staring at Kit, so he passed it to the next man, who also smiled and filled in a little bit. The last man to draw was Leonard Foujita, who gave Kit 9 tails. By the time the paper came back around to Dave, it was totally alien, yet it was the essence of Kit.

Dave looked around the circle and said, "I wish I could draw as freely as you can, this image is incredible."

"But you started it my boy, why not just draw like we do?"

"But that would be copying would it not?"

"It would be stealing, but so what? You steal from the classics at that Academy you love so much, what difference?"

Kit took the drawing and saw the nine tails, she looked at Foujita, who looked back and bowed.

Ingrid could see that Dave was just about as full of inspiration as he was going to get, and announced, "This session is hereby ended, gentlemen, I must get my friends off home and return to the dais."

This caused a certain amount of grumbling, and a certain scramble for one of the six easels.

On the way to the door, Marc Chagall stopped them and asked Kit if she would pose for him. “I can’t, I am leaving this Paris in a few minutes, I am truly sorry.”

Chagall looked disappointed and bowed, but another man said, “A photograph, surely you have the time.”

Kit recognized Man Ray, and said, “Of course, a few minutes is never out of reach.”

Ray was delighted with her turn of phrase, and ushered her into his makeshift studio off the main room. Kit spent a few minutes looking at his props and chose a piece of fruit. She held it up to her nose and Ray disappeared under his cloth, as he did so, Kit’s nose grew to that of a fox as she smelled the fruit. Ray’s head came back out, and it was just Kit. The photographer finally seemed to be ready and just before he snapped the shutter, Kit changed to a fox face again. The photographer shouted with delight and thanked Kit enthusiastically.

Ingrid frowned a little scold at Kit, who hugged her and at that moment, Kit and Dave were back in the present. Dave was dreamy eyed, but Kit was full of life. “It was so free, Aunt Ingrid, and so were you.”

“Kit that was naughty, Man Ray was so excited about that photograph that he dropped the glass plate. For the rest of his life he dreamed about that little fox.”

“Serves him right, he was ogling me.”

Ingrid said, “No more than he ogled anyone, ‘Kiki of Montparnasse’.”

Kit giggled for quite a while. Eventually, Ingrid left to go collect Art. Dave and Kit were alone, and Dave came out of his trance. “Will you pose for me Kit?” he asked shyly.

“Of course I will,” came the instant reply. With that, Kit took out Dave’s sketch and tacked it onto the fridge.

“Oh, the one I did of Ingrid!”

“Dave, have you never noticed that drawing in the hallway at Ingrid’s. Apparently she kept it.”

Kit had fun modelling for Dave, but he had less fun. “Kit please, please, stop moving.”

“OK fine, how’s this?” Kit’s voice came from the air somewhere because she had turned herself into a mannequin.

“And it will look like a mannequin Kit. Come on and play nice.”

Dave never realized that with every session the two of them had, he was relaxing, allowing his brain to function without constant supervision. His work became more free. Watching Ingrid model, Kit had learned that the model was just as much a part of the process as the artist. She was moving and posing in such a way as to break up Dave’s habits of seeing.

It wasn’t just the modelling Kit did with him. They also

invented their own version of exquisite corpse. Kit would play a phrase and Dave would draw what he felt. Then Kit would respond to the drawing. After a few times, they started to film the game, and post it on the internet. After they gathered a large enough following, Dave started to believe in his ability to draw from emotion.

A Few Sales

Kit stirred so Dave knew she was awake. He murmured, “I love this last hour before the sun comes up, the dreaming is done, the body is ready, but you can still have a few moments. It’s so peaceful.”

Kit stretched and snuggled up to Dave’s side, put her head on his chest and rumbled deep in her chest. But when she opened her eyes she sat bolt upright, “Dave close your eyes.”

She bounded out of bed and got his sketch pad, then sent out a call, “Kuri, Oki, can you come right now?”

When they popped into the room she pointed. Across the way, just behind the building opposite, was a huge moon. Kuri said, “Oh my gosh, it’s too perfect.” Kit grabbed a broom and was on the wall, Kuri changed to a lynx and Oki to a wolf and joined her.

“Dave, open your eyes now and look out the window,” Kit projected into his mind.

When Dave did, he snatched up the sketchpad and started drawing. The painting would eventually be called “A Canadian Witch in Paris.”

As it turned out, Oki knew a bit about commercial law. He took the painting to a card company that did Halloween events. They loved the painting and asked for more. After doing a series of paintings all over Paris, scenes like ‘Werewolf on the Eiffel Tower’, or ‘Lynx in the Louvre’, the company bought the series from Mr. Robert Mutt, Dave’s little tribute to Marcel Duchamp.

Yes, he thought, they are very academic, but money is money, and he and Kit had enough to live independently. They did not, of course, live on that money, they used the money Kit’s parents gave them. What they did instead, was invest every dime of the royalties into mutual funds recommended by Art, and Kuri. It was a start for their future.

Dave continued to work on the academy paintings during the day, and at night, he tried to find his emotion. When he went there, he found a large series of nudes of Kit. He wasn’t the first painter to have a muse, but he felt like he was. He painted her in as many experimental ways as he could, he even bought some Yves Klein blue and dragged a naked Kit, covered in the stuff, all over big sheets of paper. He made paintings of Kit as a fox, and as a serpent. He had her change just her head and did surrealist works. Always, always the works were about Kit.

One day, Kit asked him to join her on her stage. Dave set up a mirror beside an easel and he worked from life, he used

watercolours and let them drip, and he painted the two of them in love. Now that painting was damned close to what he was looking for.

Looking at it, Kit remarked slyly that it wasn't very saleable. Dave replied instantly, "I don't care about selling it, I would never sell it!" Kit had to stop herself from whooping and doing a fist pump. The man who hated everything he was doing, now had a painting he wouldn't sell.

With Amber's blessing, Kit began taking courses in composition, and she loved it. She composed works to go along with Dave's paintings, and put them on videos showing the works. Dave began doing more elaborate video works to fit Kit's compositions and they fed off each other more and more. It didn't matter now, how much time they spent together, they no longer got annoyed with each other. In fact, the time apart seemed more and more stressful for them. When they met for lunch they would suddenly begin planning a musical piece or a new painting. It didn't matter, their collaboration was what mattered.

Came the day Dave got sick. It was nothing serious, a bad cold, but it laid him out in bed for two days. Kit was in an absolute panic, she didn't know what to do. Dave tried to tell her that it was just a cold, but the girl who had never been sick a day in her life was frantic. She sent out such alarm bells that Ingrid showed up ready to fight the hoards of demons she was sure caused this distress call. When she found Dave in bed with a cold, she lost it. Laughing for several minutes straight, she got

worse every time she caught sight of Kit's face as she glowered at Ingrid.

As she finally got herself under control, she gathered Kit into her arms and squeezed her tight. "Oh my pet, I thought maybe you were being judged again for some world-shattering crime. It's only a cold, humans get them and they go away on their own with a bit of loving care. Or total neglect, they just go away. Kit's tear stained face almost set Ingrid off again but she managed, "Go see Mara, somehow James acquired a resistance to sickness from Mara. You're a smart girl, you might figure out how and then you can make sure Dave doesn't have another sick day in his life.

Relieved, Kit thanked Ingrid, who leaned over to Dave and said, "She'll get over it in a couple of days, Dave, hang in there," and walked down the stairs howling with laughter.

From the beginning, Kit was able to help her fellow students with massage and exercises to treat their repetitive strain injuries. In addition, she also helped council many of the girls about their relationships, and once or twice, a persistent young man may have ended up in the river.

Word got around, Paris had someone, some said shaman, others witch. Kit didn't mind either name, she was trained as a shaman, but her mother had claimed the title of witch, it was good enough for Kit.

While Kit never asked for money, it was usually offered and, as

she had been taught, Kit accepted with thanks. Sometimes that money was turned around when, for instance, a student fell behind in their rent payments and hadn't eaten for a week. Kit would make sure they had some groceries, and this too, became known, so that often Kit would have a few Euros pushed into her hand with the words, "I've got extra this month," or similar whispered into her ear.

For those who showed up wanting what Kit called, 'normal help,' she sent them to the medical profession if they needed it, or to the quacks where the placebo effect would help them as much as anything Kit did. But mostly, only those who truly needed her help came to her. It would seem that her fellow students and the others she helped were quite willing to screen those who heard rumours about her skills.

There were those who made deals with the spirit world, not knowing how dangerous that was. Kit saw many cases of petty greed and spite which, after supernatural help, turned to panic and dismay. She helped them if she felt they really needed help.

There was a girl who had wanted to be a famous beauty. She found a spirit which lived in a graveyard, who had promised she would have the looks of the woman who modelled for Marianne.

The poor girl began to age, rot, and was near death before Kit got to her bedside. Pushing everyone else out the door, she put a hand on the girl's head and another on her stomach. With both hands she pulled the spirit out of the girl, ripping it in half as she did so. She had felt just how many insecure young women it had killed over the decades.

In another case, a strong-willed young woman had asked for clear skin from a whisp who lived in a mill-pond. This girl had not been happy with the results, her skin was clear, but not as white as she had wanted. When she came to Kit she did nothing but complain, both to Kit and to the whisp who was now trapped inside her body. Kit decided that the poor spirit was suffering enough to teach it a lesson. She need do nothing more except chide the woman for ignoring her heritage. Her skin was a wonderful olive hue from the Mediterranean.

Although it wasn't as bad in France as in Canada, the young men and women were still susceptible to the nonsense pushed at them by advertising. Some of the patients Kit saw were being prescribed, at their own request, drugs that were best reserved for those with actual chemical imbalances. Kit would gently suggest that mood swings were natural in twenty-somethings. But as we have mentioned, those with a true need, she referred to the Doctors.

One incident made Kit feel she might have over-reacted. She had never come across a teacher who took advantage of his students. She had heard such stories, of course, but this was her first personal experience. The fellow began kindly enough, adjusting her bow hold and such, but soon progressed to stroking and lingering on the skin of Kit's arms and neck. As he slid his hand down the side of her blouse, he found the tips of three fingers sliced off, and the palm of his hand opened up so that there was blood everywhere.

The rumours were that he had got to the hospital soon enough and that the stitching was successful, he would once more be

able to play his violin, but never as well as before since he had lost the feeling in two fingers.

When Kit told Amber about this, Amber clenched her fist and said, “Good, I’d have done far worse when I was his student, if I could have.”

A Deal with the Devil

Kit was walking along the street when she became aware of a man walking with her. Looking over she saw the Devil who had tried to take Dave's soul.

“I thought you had gone back to Canada, but here you are, stealing my souls again.”

“It's you. If you're after Dave's soul...”

“No, no, no, not at all, but you're interfering in other transactions. A lot of my agents are complaining and I recognized your work.”

“Well I'm here now, and have no intention of not interfering with your agents, whoever they are. Look, why don't you go someplace like Africa where there are lots of missionaries around recruiting for you guys. There ought to be lots of souls for you to pick up there.

“Are you kidding? Those guys are teaching people to burn

witches alive. That's got nothing to do with me, or my brother. That's mankind in a nutshell.”

“Aside from how cynical that is, I tend to agree with you. What is it that you want?”

The devil was fiddling with a chain and Kit asked, “what's that, surely not a cross.”

“Why not? I can believe, but no.” He pulled out a tooth, “It's the tooth you knocked out.”

“Why didn't you just put it back in?”

“You know why, it won't go, I tried but somehow you hexed it. You know, I rather like you Kitsune, you're nasty. Anyway, it's a good reminder not to mess with your boyfriend, not that he's called on me lately.”

“Oh, you know my name do you, I guess I ought to be flattered. Here give me that thing.” Kit took the tooth, pried open the Devil's mouth and shoved it into the gap. Closing his mouth she put her hand on his cheek and said, “Bite. Good now?”

The Devil felt around in his mouth with his tongue and nodded. Kit looked at him a moment and said, “I don't know your name, I probably should, since you know mine.”

“It's Beelzabub, my lady,” he said, bowing deeply.

“Well, good to meet you Beels,” Kit said, bowing a little less

deeply while the Devil winced at the new nickname. “And now we are such good pals, what is it that you wanted from me?”

“I came to propose a deal, on the souls that is.”

“You're joking, I'm going to do a deal with the Devil? Were you a lawyer in an earlier incarnation? What's with the deals?”

“Hear me out, you'll like this. I promise not to take any more souls off the gullible, like your boyfriend.”

“Not gullible, just unsuspecting, Jack, be careful who you insult.”

“OK the gullible and the unknowing, how about that, and you leave the rich, powerful and greedy to me.”

“I'm not going to do that, my reason for being is to help. If someone asks for help, I'll help them.”

“Listen, do you charge money?”

“No, I'll take it if offered afterwards, but I don't charge.”

“Fine, fine, no problem. You help whoever asks for help. The thing is, the guys I'm after won't ask for help, they hire people to perform services, they're not going find you, and they're certainly not going to ask anyone for help. Look, those guys are my main source of souls anyway, the ones you're saving are small potatoes, it's just that every time I get one... well frankly, you scare the hell out of me.”

“Apparently not, but fine, we can agree on that, as long as you understand that if the rich and powerful start asking me for help, I’ll give it.”

“Good, agreed, agreed. It will be good to do my job again without looking over my shoulder for you.”

“Now is that some of your famous flattery?”

“Sorry, habits.”

“Listen, as long as you’re in a chatty mood, I’d like to know if one of the spirits I’m dealing with is yours. It seems to be some sort of ghoulish that takes the flesh off of young men.”

“Doesn’t sound like one of ours, too personal. You sure it’s not illegal steroids?”

“Yes I’m sure, there’s no consent involved here, just some murderous spirit that wants to kill.”

“For sure not ours, consent is our big thing. Let me look around and see what my agents can find. Give me an hour maybe. Listen, can I buy you a coffee?”

So Kit went for coffee with Beels while his minions searched for this monster, and as promised, as they were finishing their drinks, Beels said, “Got him, we took care of him, he seemed to be some sort of elemental from before our time. I thought we’d cleared them all out of here.”

“Thank you Beels, and thanks for the coffee,” said Kit as she

stood up and put out her hand. Beels flinched, but took her hand when he realized she wasn't going to take another tooth.

As it turned out, Kit's business dropped off a bit. About once a month, she and Beels had coffee, both of them agreeing that it was good business to keep track of the opposition. But if Kit had to be honest, she rather liked the fellow.

A few months later the two were having a quiet coffee and comparing notes when the cafe faded out of existence and a fiery landscape appeared.

“Oh hells bells,” said Beels, “not him.”

“Who is this?”

“It's the master of tortures in Hell, he's been complaining that the souls we've been sending aren't properly subservient, all they do is complain about the service. Here he is, I'll just be over here, well out of the way.”

“Don't run away, Beels, we have an agreement, I'm not going to hurt you. Oh dear, this guy is an avatar of you, what's up with that?”

“Well it's just easier that way, look, I can't be collecting souls and torturing them at the same time, can I?”

The figure was now looming over Kit with Beelzabub just behind her making waving off motions with his arms, “Listen,

Shai, you don't want to do this.”

“Shai, what is this Shai, my name is Shaitan you pathetic loser, and I'm here to take this worm to Hell.”

“I'm a worm?” muttered Kit, and as she did so, Beels took a big step back.

“Cower, bitch, before the power of Hell!”

“Bitch? I'm a vixen you idiot.”

“You defy me? I call the legions of Hell.” and with that the place, wherever it was, filled with tortured souls, wishing to please their master in hopes of some relief. They strained to be let loose on this girl.

Kit looked around at Beels, “Did he just empty Hell?”

Beels was shocked, “That's a couple thousand years of hard work there Shaitan, what are you thinking?”

“Silence, I will crush this insolent child that has caused you so much trouble.”

“No trouble, no trouble... oh dear.”

“Bitch, never let it be said that I was unfair, you may call a champion.”

Kit laughed, “I thought unfair was your thing, Shai, I mean look at this lot. Do they deserve this?”

Beels spoke from behind her, “Well some of them do.”

“Choose your champion!” thundered Shaitan and Kit shrugged.

“Coyote, are you busy at the moment?”

Coyote was there and said, “Hello Kit, how's school going? Amber is ever so proud of you, she brags about you all the time.”

“Who is this creature? Is he the Emperor of your lands, the King of your Gods, The Lord of your heavens?”

“He's my Grandfather.”

Beels buried his face in his hands and muttered, “Dear God, her grandfather? Two thousand years work...”

Coyote nudged Beelzabub with his elbow, “Who's the loud person?”

“He's the Warden of Torment in Hell. He punishes the souls.”

“Oh, and those poor creatures?”

“They are the souls who are damned to eternal torment.”

“They look like people, but no bodies, are they dead, the bodies rotted in the ground?”

“Yes of course.”

“Well someone has been sloppy, those things should be gone, back to the world. Those over there, they look like people who once looked to me for guidance and instruction. How did they get here?”

“My brother sends missionaries to teach those who have other gods, the ways of our religion. Those souls were converted.”

“Well, is that your brother?”

“No, my brother is in the world above.”

“So why are these wretches here?”

“The missionaries explain hell and sin to the converted and those who are named as sinners come here. So we have them.”

Coyote looked at Beels and then at Shaitan. He seemed to think about it a moment and then said, “No. I will finish the job for you, don't be so sloppy in the future.”

Coyote sang, and just like that, all the souls of Hell were gone, leaving only a sense of peace and thankfulness.

Shaitan screamed, “I am the Lord of the World below, I will destroy you, pagan abomination, utterly and completely!”

Coyote listened politely and then turned to Kit, “Shall I leave this to you, granddaughter.”

“Sure, thanks Pappy.”

“Oh, I'm not sure I like that name, dear, I'll check with Amber to see if she approves.”

He smiled at Kit and was gone while Kit laughed.

Turning to Beels, Kit said, “Can you do with one less avatar?”

Looking around, Beels replied, “It seems he has nothing to do now, but what would your Mother say?”

“You're right, how about two teeth?”

Beels laughed.

Epilogue

With the Devils staying well away from Kit, and the last few ancient spirits learning to keep their heads down, Kit had far less to do as a Shaman. Not that she was bored, by any means, her studies just got more and more heavy. She was amazing as a violinist, Amber said she was very proud that the student had surpassed the teacher. Kit really didn't know what to say to that.

But Kit realized that she would have to leave Dave alone, or drag him around from hotel room to hotel room, if she wanted a career as a performer and she wasn't willing to do that. He seemed to be half of her being. She owned his soul? Well he owned hers.

Kit dug deep into the composition courses. She could compose anywhere, and that meant she could compose where Dave was. As with her performance skills, her writing became quite good. She spent some extra time in school to pick up the courses she felt she needed, and so Dave graduated before she did.

Dave had no reason to go anywhere, so he painted. He had graduated with good marks, and his technique was spotless. He had many offers of commissions, but he refused most of them, especially those that would take him away from Kit. Let's face it, they finished each other's thoughts, they had no interest in being separated.

Paris was perfect for them, especially when they could just pop back to visit family. They went to Guelph a lot, staying with

Kit's parents, and they visited Thunder Bay to see Oki and Kuri.

It was an ideal time in their lives, there was no drama, no crises, just time together. They had their work, they had each other, and they had their apartment. As the roommates drifted away, they weren't replaced, the occasional job with an orchestra, or painting a commission, plus the royalties from the greeting cards, provided enough for them to pick up the extra rent. Eventually it was just the two of them. The main room remained as Dave's studio and one of the other bedrooms became Kit's practice area, complete with soundproofing. The third bedroom, as is traditional, became filled with stuff. Mostly Dave's paintings.

Dave never became famous under his own name. Robert Mutt, on the other hand, was much in demand for his illustration work. Dave was content to do his own, unfashionable work. Perhaps in a hundred years it would become appreciated. Kit would know.

Kit scored some plays, small art films and worked on various orchestral pieces but, like Dave, she was content to please herself. They had each other, what more could they possibly need.

All three of our kids have grown to become what they were meant to become, which was whatever they were. Destiny, genetics, labels, or the opinions of others, be damned. They were themselves and that was good. It would seem then, that our story is complete.

Dave's Story

My name is Dave. I have to write this quickly because my hands are becoming crippled, soon I won't be able to type. I don't know how old I am, but I'm sure the nurse here in the hospice would be able to tell me. It's one of the things I have lost.

I have my good days and the not so good days, I am writing this now on one of the good days.

My name is Dave, I was born in Guelph and went to school here. It was a nice town to grow up in, and school was pretty ordinary for me. Until, that is, my last year of high school. I had decided that I would try to get into a good art school, and was working on both my portfolio and in the drug store. If I got into the academy in Paris I would need the money.

It was during that last year that I met the woman I'd spend most of my life with. Kitsune was in the Albion bar and she was the prettiest girl in the place. I thought she was wonderful, and when she came over to my table, bold as brass, I thought I had gone to heaven.

That's a funny thing to say, I think, considering I almost went to Hell, but that's later.

Kit and I spent a few evenings in the bar, and I finally got the courage up to invite her somewhere during the day. I think, no, maybe it was a picnic? Anyway, we spent more and more time together, and one night when my parents were gone, she let me

make love to her on my bed. Until then I thought I knew what happiness was, but I was a fool. I'm pretty sure I didn't change the sheets for a month.

When school ended, and I had been accepted to art school, Kit found an apartment that we could use in that last summer. I thought I was the luckiest boy in the world. She taught me so much about sex and about love. That summer I decided I could not go away from her. To be on the other side of the ocean was unthinkable.

But she suddenly broke up with me. She told me that she didn't want me to stay with her, that I was to go study in Paris and forget all about her.

I tried, I really did. I had lots of women in Paris, but all I could think about was Kit. In my second year, it started, the madness that has led me to this hospital bed. I imagined that I had sold my soul to the Devil, but as he was about to take me, Kit showed up and beat the Devil with his own walking stick.

Like I said, I think this is where I began to go mad. Kit disappeared again, if she was ever there, and I didn't see her for another two years.

When I graduated with my degree, I was offered a place in grad school and I took it, but I needed money so I took the summer off and went back to Guelph to work.

That's when I saw Kit again. That was when her music teacher told me that I should tell Kit to audition for a music school in Paris. Not knowing why her teacher had not told her, herself, I

found Kit and told her about it. We flew to France for her audition, but even then, my madness was growing, I imagined at the time that we had simply disappeared from Guelph and appeared in Paris. Impossible, of course.

Kit got into her school and somehow I convinced her to live with me. I had never stopped loving her and I suppose she had some feelings for me.

The best and worst years of my life happened in Paris. Kit was with me and I asked nothing else of life, but the visions kept coming. Kit on a broomstick, talking with the devil, time travel. I was terrified of these visions but Kit didn't seem to notice them, so I said nothing. I didn't want to lose her.

When we moved back to Guelph, we got a studio apartment where I could paint, and she could make her music. We lived for about five years before our first came. Dear, dear, Vicky. A year later, my handsome boy Cubby. They were fine strong babies, but the visions came back, after years of thinking I was somehow cured. The babies flying through the air and such other horrible illusions. My brain was betraying me.

Regardless, the kids grew up and Kit had her music once more, I had my painting.

That went on until I was in my late 60s, I think, and then Kit left me. She never said why, she just vanished for a few days, would be back, and then be gone again. It tore my heart apart to watch her grow away from me and finally vanish. I have never heard from her again.

That must have been when I was moved here to this nursing home where my nurses take good care of me.

But I'm getting old, the arthritis in my hands getting worse, and the bad days are becoming more numerous. I think that I may have one day in a week to write this.

No, I think it's written, yes I was a young man, then a family man and now I am a dying old man all alone. Oh how I wish my Kit were here with me, and my children. Where did they go? They don't visit. But who wants to see a sad old man who has gone insane anyway. I'm glad they don't visit.

I am getting tired, perhaps I will stop for the day and pick this up tomorrow.

Oh Dave, Dave my love, I am here. I have always been here and you are in our home. We have spent a lifetime together and I would not trade one minute with you, for a thousand more years of life. Dave I love you, please come back to me.

Damn, damn the day I let you make me promise never to cure you, or to allow you to live. Damn you, damn you, damn you.

I'm here my love, and I will be here until the end. I wish you knew that I am here with you. My heart is breaking to know that you think I would ever leave you. I am here, your Kit is with you forever. My love, I am so sorry, and I miss you.

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