

# Ken's Keller

## Lunch Counter Stories VII



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# Table of Contents

Prequel (we meet Morris Minor).....	1
Sam gets a job.....	7
Fancy Drinks.....	14
First Assignment.....	19
An Investigation.....	24
Highway 17.....	33
Ulrich Drops In.....	38
A Hitchiker.....	44
Ben's Story.....	46
The Skipping Child.....	54
Who is Ben.....	58
A Plan Comes Together.....	64
The Skater.....	70
The Big Heist.....	77
Debriefings and De-Briefings.....	82
The Lion Man.....	88
The Massey Hall Library.....	94
A Day Off.....	100
How the World Started.....	105
Rescue in Calgary.....	111
The Three Sisters.....	118
Cleo's Story.....	124
The Eternal Hero.....	130
A Banff Visit.....	141
The Battle of the Banff Springs Hotel.....	147
Drinks on the House.....	152
A Drive to the Beach.....	159
The Darkness.....	166
The Blackened Library.....	173
A Good Book.....	178
The Crisis.....	185
A Last Week.....	195

## **Prequel (we meet Morris Minor)**

Morris and the Oak Tree (As told by Art Pendry)

“This is the place where you know all about the spooky stuff right?” he asked as he came into the diner.

“It’s the place where you get breakfast and lunch” said Jim with a smile. “What can I get for you?”

“Well I am a bit hungry, I haven’t eaten for three days. Can I get the breakfast special and a coffee please.”

“Coming right up, can I ask why you haven’t eaten for three days?”

“It’s a long story, and I came here to tell it to you guys, maybe you could explain it to me. My name’s Morris by the way.”

“That’s an unusual name, you don’t hear it much any more” said Jim

“What, Morris? It’s pretty common, but my dad was a bit of a joker, my last name is Minor, so it’s Morris Minor.”

He paused as if waiting for a laugh, but we weren’t laughing. Jim was grinning, but he grinned a lot. Morris seemed a bit confused, “Like the car?”

“Do you mind telling us when you were born Morris?” Jim asked.

“Sure, I was born in 1949 so I’m twenty-four now. My dad bought his car the first year it came out, in 1948 and he loved it, hence the name. He said he named me Morris so that he could remember my name since it was the same as his car. Sometimes I think the guy is a bit too much of a joker, especially in 1973 when the things aren’t even made any more.”

Jim nodded to himself and said “I know this is going to sound a bit strange to you Morris, but can you tell me what year this is?”

“It’s 1973 of course.”

“And where did you come from to get here.”

“That’s the strange part, I came from a tree by the river where I’ve been for three days.”

“How did you find out about the lunch counter.”

“Are you kidding? I used to eat here once in a while, you may not remember me but I remember you quite well.” Morris was frowning now. “Why wouldn’t I remember you?”

“Hang on” I said, “You ate here in 1973 and you remember Jim? Does he look the same now?”

“What do you mean now? Of course he looks the same, why wouldn’t he?” Morris was getting more confused.

Jim waved me down and poured Morris a coffee then turned

around to start making his breakfast. “Why don’t you go on with the story you want to tell us Morris?”

“Right, well, when I was a kid, my grandmother told me that when I was being chased by spooks I was to run to an oak tree and put my hand on it, that way they couldn’t get at me. Three days ago I was walking by the river when something came out of the water and started toward me. Don’t ask me what it was, I didn’t take time to look, anything coming out of that river has to be nasty, so I ran.

“About fifty yards along the river was a gigantic oak, and so I never slowed down as I put my hand out to touch it. Only I didn’t touch it, my hand went right through, and so did the rest of me.

“It was insane and I knew it, but there I was, in some sort of half-light in the middle of the tree. Except that it couldn’t be inside because it was a wide field of flowers and there was a girl there who looked a bit surprised to see me.”

Jim was nodding, “I knew that tree” he said, “go on.”

“This girl got over her surprise pretty fast and took me by the hand. She told me I was safe from the beastie, that’s what she called it, the beastie, and that she would take me to her home. She put a bunch of flowers into my arms and we walked about half an hour to this little shack, only it wasn’t, it looked like it was made of willow trees, it was woven and planted and woven some more, and it was a hut plus a bush and a tree sort of all put together.

“She took me inside and sat me down and put the flowers into

a pot. Then she said she was going to eat but I wasn't to eat anything as long as I was in the Oak, or I'd never leave again.

"I believed her, I mean why would she lie and there was no doubt in my mind that I was in some sort of ghost world. The strangest part was that I wasn't panicking. I think it was because she was so matter of fact about it all, she seemed to know I was running from something and that I'd fallen into the tree.

"By the way, she was beautiful, very thin, willowy maybe, she looked like Twiggy or Jean Shrimpton. She may have been part Asian because her skin was a bit yellowish, although it also looked a bit like oak bark in the right light.

"I did make a pass at her, by the way, but she said the same thing as about food, if I slept with her I'd never get out of the oak, so I didn't.

"She did ask me to help her, and I was quite happy to do that, she was easy on the eyes and I wanted to spend time with her. That first day she asked me to take acorns from a hollow in the ground and scatter them around the fields. As I did this I found out that I was indeed in the tree, I could see a hazy sort of barrier that I assumed was the outside of the trunk. The light filtered through here but I never tried to go back out. At first I thought maybe the beastie was there waiting for me, and later I wanted to spend time with her.

"She only had the one bed so I slept beside her that night, and she was as soft and cool as you might imagine. I had to put my arms around her because the bed was so narrow but she seemed

OK with that.

“The next day I helped her spread compost around the fields and the third day I helped her gather up hay from the fields that had somehow grown up overnight. I asked about that and she just shrugged. We were careful not to cut any trees down in the process so I think we cut the hay just to give the trees more light.

“I chatted away while we worked and she seemed happy to hear all about my life, but when I asked her, she would just shrug and ask me another question.

“It was a nice three days, but at the end of the third day we went to sleep as usual, and in the morning I woke up on the ground outside the tree. Actually there was no tree, it was somewhere else. So I got up and came here.

“Now I would like to know if any of you know where that tree is, I’d like to go back some day and visit. I figure she dumped me out here because I was pretty hungry, so maybe she will let me back in later.”

Jim put his breakfast down on the counter and said “Son I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but that oak was cut down last year, that’s why you are here now.”

“What! I was just at that tree, what the hell are you talking about?”

Jim held up his hands “You came here for an explanation, so here it is from what you told me. You went into the tree in

1973, that was more than forty years ago... no, eat and listen. Look at how we're dressed, look around, you've been in that tree for a long time, we don't wear bell bottom jeans and knitted vests any more... well most of us don't.

"The girl you met in the tree was a dryad, and I'm very sorry to say she would have died as the tree was cut down. She kept you there for as long as she lived, but by not letting you eat or sleep with her, you didn't die with the tree. I'm sure she was trying to be kind.

"So now you're a young man when the rest of the world is older. You will have to catch up, but on the bright side, people are no better than they were, it's just the stuff you'll have to learn about."

Morris looked devastated, he looked like he was about to cry. "Shit, I believe you, there wasn't a Morris Minor in sight out there, and the cars are really ugly.

"You know I cared a lot for that girl and now she's dead. Oh hell, so are most of the people I knew. What am I going to do now?"

"You are going to do what any 24 year old can do. I will hook you up with a friend of mine who can fix you some papers. You can get a job or go back to school, or whatever you wish," said Jim softly.

"It just seems so unfair that I only remember three days with her, when I could have remembered forty years. Life sucks doesn't it?"



Jim smiled and said “often it does, but it is what it is. Just remember that if she had let you eat or slept with her, you would have died with her”

Morris looked like he was weighing up the choice.

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Some time after this, Ken's Keller was excavated by the Kobolds and Morris became the bartender. This is his story.

## **Sam gets a job**

“Where's your partner today Sam?”

“I fired him, Morris, the last job we did, he was slow and damned near got killed. It was time for him to get out before he got killed.”

“That's too bad, you guys were together for a long time.”

“Yeah, it was good, but he had two girls and a wife that would have missed the hell out of him if I'd let him get killed.”

“You miss him.” It wasn't a question, Morris was a good bartender.

“I do, I got used to being in his bed, and he was a decent partner. We did a lot of contract work along with the free stuff to help out his old buddies, I'm going to have to find another

job. I can't make a living at the dojo any more.”

“You know we can always use help here right?”

“What, as a bouncer?”

“No, the kobolds love throwing people out almost as much as they like getting their money off them, before they throw them out.”

“From what I've seen, some of the people they throw out, come here just to be thrown out.”

“No accounting for taste is there? Well as my granny used to say, it takes all kinds.”

“Morris, are you saying I should be a waitress for you guys?”

“Why not? We pay well over minimum wage and the tips are good. You'd earn your rent and we feed you a meal a day.”

“If it's such a good job, why do you need someone?”

“Are you kidding, you know our clientele, regular humans tend to run screaming from the place, the first time they watch someone shift to a wolf or a leopard.”

“Kuri?”

“She's collecting cats I think. Each new shifter she meets she asks for their pattern. She changed to a leopard just as the last girl was serving her a beer. Kuri ended up wearing it.”

Sam was laughing, “Let me guess, Kuri just licked it all off and ordered another.”

Morris laughed, “She did indeed. You see, you'd be perfect at the job, none of this would bother you at all.”

“I'll think about it, Morris, I appreciate the offer but I'm going to see if I can find another fighting gig first.”

“Nothing says you can't combine it, Sam. The Kobolds often have side jobs they need done. Why don't you talk with Ken and see what you can work out.”

“Thanks, I'll do that, is he in now?”

“No, he's back in the old country doing some charity work.”

Sam's mouth dropped open. Ken Kobold giving money away?

“Not his money, Sam, he's working for another group as an advisor.”

“You just rocked my world view there Morris.”

Morris grinned and put another beer in front of Sam. “Here, shocks mean beer is on the house.”

Sam lifted the glass and drained half of it. She was depressed, Ulrich wasn't a great fighter, she had to keep an eye on him, but he was great in bed. She wasn't looking forward to finding someone else to warm her toes, her tastes were rather specific.

Well she'd been sleeping alone before, she would survive. She looked up to find Morris looking back at her. As if reading his mind, she said, "I appreciate the thought, buddy, but you're carrying a torch for a dryad."

"True, but if you need a cuddle, I'm here."

"You're a good friend, Mo, thank you."

It was mid-afternoon and the place was empty, but you never can tell. The front door opened and about 30 students came in. They were on a pub crawl, which would, by early evening be exactly that, a crawl on hands and knees back up the hill to the university, but for now they were all upright.

The strange thing about Ken's Keller is that it's very hard to find. Spirit people, Gods and Goddesses, and drunken students seemed to be the default customers. As for the others, you had to be an odd person, to even see that front door.

Morris was quickly overwhelmed trying to pour and serve, he looked at Sam and lifted his eyebrows.

Sam hopped off the bar stool and grabbed a tray. "Isn't there some law about drunks serving drunks?"

"Please, since when are your faculties ever less than a hundred percent, even when you're drinking."

"OK, you don't have to rub it in, I just have a hard time letting go."

Morris grinned and loaded up a tray. “You need a pad to take orders?”

Sam shook her head and went off to deliver the beers. She found she didn't mind the waitress job. The bar had a certain reputation and the customers behaved themselves. Sam was there the night when one of the waiters got some lip from a customer. He asked the rowdyman to stand up, which the kid did with some swagger. As he stood up, customers from every other table also stood up. The kid sat down with considerably less swagger.

Stories like that got around town, and let's face it, the Kobolds were always there, working in the back on food and stocking the fridges. If you were a problem it rarely took more than a smile from a Kobold to solve the problem. A double row of filed to a point, teeth tended to do that, even without looking at those bodies which were as wide as they were tall, and heavily muscled. Oh and let's not forget, if there was real trouble, the Kobold was usually carrying his hammer. A, big, hammer.

Sam served for maybe an hour and the leaders were starting to make noises about finishing the beer so they could move on to the next bar. She noticed one young girl who wasn't keeping up very well with the rest. Probably her first time at a bar, Sam thought. She leaned over to deliver a beer to the table and whispered into a bookish looking fellow's ear.

“Look after the girl beside you, she won't make it all the way, when she's in trouble, bring her back here to me. You understand?”

The fellow glanced at Sam's face and she saw his understanding. He understood that this dangerous looking waitress had just made him responsible for the girl. "I got it," he said.

As they left, he held out his arm for the girl and she took it with a look of surprise. "Yep, frosh," thought Sam to herself. The guy was a few years older, he ought to be careful enough.

Sam bused all the tables and then loaded the washer like she'd done it before. Morris asked and Sam said, "I have done it before, sometimes waitress is the job you can get. I worked my way across the country when I was a kid."

Morris nodded and let her get on with cleaning up while he restocked the fridge and changed a keg.

A few of the regulars drifted in and Sam kept working, apparently she'd taken the job. She poured too, when Morris was busy, and she mixed a fancy drink for Mara, who was in a mood.

Shortly after the umbrella was put into the glass, the bookish guy came into the bar with the girl under his arm. Sam went over and got her into a chair with ice on her neck. Alcohol poisoning, but she ought to recover as soon as she threw up a few more times. She put a bucket between the girl's feet and then looked at the fellow.

He didn't look good. He was bruised and scraped around the face and his knuckles were bleeding. Sam sat him down and

got a new cloth to clean him up. When he'd caught his breath she asked.

“Nothing dramatic, when she'd had a few more drinks she got a bit friendly and four of the guys thought they'd have a bit of a party. They didn't like it when I told them to back off, so I had to knock them out.”

Liz had finished work upstairs and was down for her evening drink, “I overheard, I'll go check them, just in case,” and went out. Sam looked at the kid again and decided he was fine, bumps and bruises, and he seemed used to it.

“From a rough town?” she asked.

“You could say that, from a place where a bookworm seems to be a good target to harass. I learned how to disagree in a language they could understand.”

“Well I appreciate what you did for the girl, you've got friends in this bar now.”

The kid smiled, winced at the cut by his mouth and said, “It would be great if I also had a beer in this bar now.”

Sam laughed and got him one before checking the girl again. She would have a throbbing head, but nothing worse. Sam hoped she would remember the guy who looked after her. He seemed a good sort.

## **Fancy Drinks**

Mara was depressed. She had a fancy drink with an umbrella in it, and she was sitting at the bar, alone. It wasn't hard to spot.

“You OK Mara?” asked Morris.

“Broke up with James,” she mumbled.

Morris shook his head and tsk tsk'd, “I'm sorry to hear that Mara, you two have been together for what? Ten years now?”

“Seemed like thirty,” came the reply.

“Uh Oh,” thought Morris, one of those.

“Well that's a long time, still, it's a shame it's over.”

“Yeah. Don't get me wrong, there were some good times in there, but everything has to end, right?”

“True, true, you're right there.”

“Well, it was time for us to move on and find a new path.”

“You two certainly found a lot of new paths, Kit and Oki were in here for dinner the other day and they were just raving about that world you two took them to. The one with the 'tinkly winkleys' I think Oki said.”



“That was a good trip, for sure. We had a lot of fun and Kit learned to talk with the natives with no powers at all.”

“It sounds like you and James are pretty fond of those kids. Almost like you consider them your kids.”

“Now don't you start, Mo, James is all up in my face about having a couple of kids. We're not ready.”

“I see, it certainly is a big step, Mara, and you two have only been together for, what was it, thirty years?”

“More like ten.”

“Right, hardly any time at all.”

“I know what you're doing Morris.”

“Doing? I'm just mixing you another drink.”

“Thanks, look, I like our lives, I just don't think that bringing a kid into the mix is a good idea right now.”

“You're not good with kids?”

Mara looked at Morris for a long time. “I spent fifteen years as a trip guide, I still get asked to go on trips, I'm good with kids.”

“Other people's kids.”

“Well of course, I don't have one of my own.”

“Other people's kids that you could hand back to their parents at the end of the trip.”

Mara stared again, “Yes like an aunt, I spoiled them and handed them back, right, just like that. Morris, you do know that I took a lot of kids with terrible problems at home, out on those trips. I wasn't the tripper who got the spoiled rich kids, I got the criminal rich kids and the broken poor kids, that's who they gave me.”

“And your own kids might just be like those kids.”

“Morris, I'm warning you, stop pushing.”

“Can I just push this drink with an umbrella across the bar here? I'll go wipe glasses just over here for a while OK?”

Mara laughed. “OK fine Mo, I get it, yes James and I have been arguing about having kids. Yes, I'm scared shitless. Yes, James is being way, way too understanding about all this. And yes, I'm thinking about running away from something I should be facing head on. Were you a psychiatrist in a former life?”

“Just a guy in a tree for forty years, but also a bartender so maybe?”

Mara's ears went up, along with her head. “You called him didn't you?”

“When you ordered your first drink from Sam, yes, sorry about that.”

“It's fine. I was going to have to go home some time, thanks for the drinks, Mo.”

“On the house, Mara, don't bite his arm off.”

Mara laughed again and slipped off the bar-stool, she caught James' arm just as he came through the door, spun him around and they walked on out.

Sam looked at Morris and said, “You're good at that.”

“Back in my day, there was a bartender who would shout out, “Just a minute, I'll ask him.” whenever one of the wives called looking for her husband. It got a laugh, but I never knew if it helped or just got the women to stop calling. I always figured a wee chat with the husbands ordering their fourth beer might be a good thing. I mean how embarrassing is it to call a bar and ask if your husband is there? For him too. Well it was another time, men and women were supposed to be on opposite sides I guess.”

“So Morris, now that I'm working here it would be inappropriate for us to fraternize wouldn't it?”

“Yes, work mates should never be bed mates, that's frowned upon these days.”

“Well in that case, I quit, you can hire me again tomorrow.”

“You can't quit, I'm firing you, but not for three more hours. We're still open and it's getting busy.”

“Fair enough.”

After the place had closed, there was another hour of cleanup, which Sam had never liked much, chairs up on tables, floors mopped, “You just wanted help to close didn't you Mo.”

“Well I'm not stupid, Sam, and we're done so you're fired.”

“Good, my place or yours?”

“Well I live in the St. George...”

“Don't worry about it, if we meet Ulrich in the hallway I'll kill him. He should have moved out and back to his family.”

“If you're not bothered, my place is closer.”

“And you know that how?”

“Bartender, Sam, and I checked. It's not exactly a secret and yes, I've had my eye on you for a while girl.”

“Girl? Oh, yes.”

“I'm thinking of writing a book titled 40 years before the Oak, but it would be short. To me it was only three days.”

There were no opening night jitters, the two had been friends for a long time. Just a nice roll in the hay, which Morris obviously enjoyed very much.

Sam was watching Morris who was gazing up at the ceiling,

“Don't take this the wrong way, Mo but how long has it been?”

Morris laughed, “Well considering my Dryad wouldn't let me have sex with her, I'd say close to 45 years, but to me it's more like five.”

“Are you thinking of her just now?”

“No, why would I be thinking about someone other than you, Sam. That was lovely and I thank you for it. You're good at sex and I was thinking of maybe seeing if I could get a second helping.”

“Aside from being compared to Ice Cream, I'm agreeable to that. Ladies choice?”

“Absolutely.”

## **First Assignment**

Sam wasn't sure why, but she always seemed to sleep a bit better in the St. George, like she didn't have to be quite so alert. She knew that a lot of the spirit beings lived there, it would be a damned hard place to invade. Take the Doorman for example, Sam wouldn't want to tackle him on her own, she could see just how large and powerful he was, even if others didn't seem to.

Maybe she should see about moving in, her place was great, she loved it, but she didn't sleep well there, especially if she was alone. She was usually alone there, she didn't much like

anyone in what she thought of as her private space. She preferred to go to her lovers' beds.

She and Morris had breakfast at Jim's Lunch Counter, and as they walked in together they caused absolutely no stir at all. There was such a thing as privacy, but sometimes she wished someone would at least grin.

She leaned over the counter toward Liz, "So how come nobody seems to notice I walked in with Morris?"

"Oh they all noticed, Sam, we just figured it was better late than never."

"What?"

"Sam, Morris has been making eyes at you for a long time now, we figured as soon as you noticed him you'd be in his bed."

"Seriously?" Now she was thinking that privacy was a good thing after all. Still, these were all friends. She put it out of her head and turned back to her table where Morris was just finishing his first coffee. Sam turned back and Liz handed her the pot. She refilled Morris and thanked Liz as she went back to sit down.

"Thanks Sam," Morris said, saluting her with the cup.

Sam smiled and thought to herself, "My pleasure." It was nice to have someone else to think about once more, someone who wasn't mainly a fighting partner. Sam was usually into older, involved men. Morris was with a nymph in a tree for 40 years,

Sam figured maybe that counted.

After breakfast, they drifted downstairs to start getting the bar together for the day, Sam was dropping the chairs she'd put up the night before and was wiping down the tables. Morris was taking inventory in preparation for the daily deliveries.

The kitchen staff were clattering around when Sam heard the rumble of the underground train. Not long after, Ken Kobold came stamping up the stairs from the station. As usual he knew everything that was happening in his bar, even if he wasn't there. Sam just figured he had the place wired for video and sound. She never failed to give the presumed cameras the finger when she was using the washroom.

Ken came over to where Sam was scrubbing at a chair, wondering what could make a sticky mess like that, "Has Morris remembered to hire you again this morning?"

"What the hell, do you have his place bugged too?"

Ken smiled, "Well if he hasn't, you're hired. I'm very happy to have you here, Sam. Come on in to the office, I want to talk about your compensation."

As they were going through the door, Sam said, "Morris told me the waitress rates, Ken, it's fine."

"Not those rates, Sam, I want to talk about your contract rates for the other sort of work."

"Wow, no working up to it eh?"

“Look, Sam, the sort of contract work you've been doing is both dangerous and necessary. I have no interest in dancing around. Whatever you were charging with Ulrich, I'll give you fifty percent more. Would that be acceptable?”

“More than fair, Ken, but I have some stipulations...”

Ken held up his hand. “All jobs outlined fully, no changes during the job, you agree or refuse, no consequences, and if a job goes sideways it's your decision to go on or pull out.”

“Ken...”

“Look, Sam, you're going to be risking your life at times, I have no, none, zero, interest in taking advantage of you. I know what you can do, and I sometimes need that. I will need that for a long time to come. I expect you to say go, no go, and I'll respect that.”

“You have other agents to do the stuff I won't?”

“You know I do.”

“I think we can work together, Ken.”

“Good, have a look over this file and let me know what you think, take your time, but you'll see that it's somewhat urgent.”

“You want me to look at it now?”

“Good lord no, you're on the clock! Look at it on your own



time.”

Sam grinned and went back to work after storing the folder safely on a shelf in the office. Ken nodded approval and headed to the kitchen to yell at the cooks.

Sam and Morris handled the day by themselves, and it was always a long day. “Mo, I've never seen the place without you behind the bar. Do you open and close the place?”

“Usually, Sam, I mean what else do I do? I'm happy with the job, so I don't really need to learn new skills. The skills of bartending haven't changed that much in the last thousand years.”

“I suppose not, I wonder what it was like when we first invented beer?”

“I asked Gil one night, Ale Wives were the ones who brewed the beer and the men would come around to buy it, trade for it actually, but it wasn't long before there was a bench or three outside for everyone to sit and gab. That was, what, ten thousand years ago? Beer and War, that's what we're good at.”

“Oh thou cynic, you forgot sex.”

“Well some are good at that, your good self included there.”

“Dude, you don't have to fish, I'm swimming in your pond again tonight.”

Morris grinned and went back to polishing glasses.

At the end of the night, Sam retrieved the folder Ken had handed her. “Morris, how familiar are you with Ken's other work?”

“We've been working together for a long time, but what do you mean?”

“I'm asking if I can share this folder with you, or does Ken keep you apart from his, oh, call it wet-work?”

“Ah, I don't know how much he lets me know, but anything he's asking you to do is probably fine. You've got principles. Some of his other agents may be doing work I'm not told about.”

“OK then I can look this over at your place, let's go.”

## **An Investigation**

“This looks pretty straight forward, just a bit of investigation. It will take me away for a few days.”

“Then don't take the job.”

Sam looked hard at Mo and he smiled. “Just meant that I'm going to miss you when you're gone.”

Sam still had a frown on her face, she didn't like getting too involved with anyone, but Morris went on, “Look, a joke, OK, I will miss you, but you have your life and your job, I will

make a note not to make jokes about me telling you what to do any more. Yes?”

“Two nights doesn't make a relationship Morris, but you don't have to walk on pins and needles, as long as I know you're not getting clingy.”

“No suckers on these fingers babe.”

Sam smiled and went back to the file, she was looking for the catch, and she might have found it. “Ken wants me to work with his cousin Cleo. You ever meet her?”

“Not often, she seems a nice but no nonsense person. She's a lot better looking than the men, that's for sure.”

“Morris, don't drop those straight lines in front of me, I might not be able to resist while standing in front of the boss.”

“Point taken, but no straight line intended, she's a good looking Kobold.”

“Well I'm not sure when Ken wants this job done, it seems pretty open ended.”

“He asked me if I could do without you from tomorrow. I think he's pretty keen for you to get going.”

Sam looked up at Morris. “Can we agree that whatever you know, I know as soon as possible? That sort of information is important and can keep me alive.”

“I understand, Sam. What I know, you know.”

“I'm liking you more and more.”

“Hey, whatever keeps you alive is good with me, Sam.”

Not too long after that they called it a night and moved to the shower then the bed. The second night featured a bit more sleep than the first had.

As Sam and Morris set up the bar, Ken and a young woman walked into the place. Sam thought she must be Cleo.

Sure enough, Ken introduced her and asked Sam to come into his office.

“Have you read over the file?”

“I have, but what's not there, Ken. A bit of surveillance, a bit of intelligence gathering doesn't need two people. Where's the catch?”

“Giants.”

“You'll have to use a few more words, please Ken.”

“The company you're going to investigate is owned by a breakaway group of Giants, ones who want to continue the wars.”

“Ah, and you're keeping an eye on them. For Mufferaw and his buddies?”

“Their hold on the Giants isn't as firm as we'd like, there's politics I'm afraid, so Joe asked me to do some spying for him.”

“OK so far, and Cleo, what's your job?”

“Giant killer.”

“Excuse me? Look, I ran up against the Giants and was quite happy to fight their little allies, the Giants were a bit beyond me.”

“So I'm coming along just in case.”

“Have you killed many Giants?”

“Yes.”

Sam filed that away for later and turned to Ken. “Why the rush? Something coming up?”

“You guessed it, these 'Oil Giants' as they call themselves, are about to shut down most of the oil fields in Alberta.”

“How are they going to do that?”

“Nothing so dramatic as a nuclear bomb in a big underground cave, they're going to spike the electronics.”

“That's subtle for giants.”

“Yes, which is why it might work, and why we think they've got help. They're not known as electronics wizards.”

“Tell me there's no wizards.”

“No, just Giants and Kobolds on this job, and whoever the programming genius is.”

“Giants are just big?”

“Just big, no other powers.”

“And Kobolds?”

“Not so big,” said Ken

“But long lived,” said Cleo, “sometimes.”

“Giants?” said Sam.

Cleo smiled.

“OK Ken, I'm in. Tell me what I need to know.”

“You'll be driving out there, tourists. There's too much attention on the underground rail and commercial aircraft, Unfortunately they can detect magic so we can't have someone just poof you there. Once in Calgary you get into the company, copy the mainframe and get out.”

“Too simple, what's the rest.”

“We're hoping it's that simple, but all the data is on an air-gapped mainframe so that they can guard the hell out of it.”

“That's more like what I figured. Do you have any special equipment for getting to the mainframe? Lines dropping from the roof down ventilation shafts? A team of magicians to spoof the way in?”

“Just you and Cleo, Sam. You two figure out how to do it.”

“Right, blackmail or seduction it is. How fast?”

“Can you go today? The car is loaded and waiting out back. I can explain to Morris for you.”

“Damn it, it's only been two days, why does everyone assume we're a couple.”

“I won't be sympathetic then.”

“I assume there's money and clothing in the car?”

Ken nodded and so Sam and Cleo went out the back door, up the ramp to the parking lot where a rather beat up van waited for them. Sam popped the hood and the engine was new. She got inside and while it looked like a beat up old camper van, everything was in working order. It would be good cover, especially with the scuffed but brand new tires.

“It looks good, the money should be in the glove box and there are clothes in the back,” said Cleo.

With that they drove off. They would take the all Canadian route, the US customs system was too big, too fancy and so, too hackable to risk.

Cleo took the first shift driving and Sam had a close look at her. Much more like a small human than a female version of Ken. Morris was right, she was good looking.

“In case you're wondering, I'm as strong as any Kobold, but faster. I can pass for human unless I grab someone's wrist and crush the bones.”

“You do that often?”

“Been known to happen if that hand was on my thigh.”

“I think we'll get along,” Sam said.

“We'd better, it's a long drive.”

They settled down and spent the first part of the trip in silence. They took the public highway, rather than the toll road. No sense leaving records on the collection computers, but it added a couple of hours to the trip, and a lot of frustration. Thankfully the air conditioning worked properly.

They turned north and headed up along Georgian Bay until they reached Sault Ste. Marie and pulled into a Walmart parking lot for the night.

As they got out of the van, a good old boy from Georgia in an



auto moose made lip smacking noises and started to suggest the girls might like to join him.

Without seeming to hear him, the girls stretched, hugged and kissed each other quite lewdly. This caused the hopeful fellow to run back into his vehicle.

The kiss seemed to break the ice. Sam and Cleo wandered into the store to buy groceries and get a coffee. When they came back out, there were three more fat boys standing in front of the van.

“We know how to treat your kind back where we come from,” said the original good old boy.

Cleo handed her bags to Sam and said, “Mine.”

Turning to the four men she said, “You're not back where you came from gentlemen, I suggest you move on, we'll be parking here tonight and I don't want to hear the screaming from the broken arms.”

“Well lookie here boys, a feisty one.”

Cleo sighed and walked toward the men. The first one reached for her arm and she caught him at the wrist. She really could crush bones. That one screamed and dropped to his knees. The second got angry enough to take a swing. Cleo blocked it and Sam watched his forearm bend to 90 degrees. More screaming.

The third pulled a knife and it ended up in his leg, while the fourth had pulled a gun. As he was raising it, Cleo pulled the

knife from the leg and threw it into the man's biceps, slicing it pretty much in half.

In four beats, all four were on the ground screaming. Cleo walked over, kicked the knife the rest of the way through the muscle, and picked up the pistol while putting the knife in her boot. The gun was a lovely gold plated Desert Eagle, available for several thousand dollars by mail order in the USA. Stupidly heavy she thought to herself, as she walked into their trailer and came back with several clips of ammunition and another pistol.

“I'm confiscating these boys, they're illegal in Canada, and now I'm going to throw you into your vehicle and I suggest you drive yourselves to a hospital. We'll be here for the night if you have any buddies you want to call to teach us another lesson.”

As they drove off, the first guy seemed to be able to drive with only one hand, Cleo collected her bags from Sam and said, “Let's get fed and to bed.”

“And if the boys have friends?”

“The van has a security system, but from what I've heard about you, Sam, and after that kiss, I don't think we'll get to sleep until late. We'll see them coming.”

## Highway 17

“Trees and rocks, rocks and trees. Miles and miles and miles of trees and rocks.”

“Cleo, while you have a lovely singing voice, that's about the hundredth time you've gone through that song.”

“But we have no radio reception at all.”

“You don't have a phone or something? There's a media plug on this system.”

“Spoilsport.”

They were headed for Kenora and the border with Manitoba. It really was just rocks and trees, and now that song was stuck firmly in Sam's head.

“So just how old are you Cleo, if that isn't a rude question.”

“I'm a hundred and eighty, just a youngster, that's why I got into this sort of work. Plus the pay is great and the hours are, well the hours are shit, as you know. But the pay is great.”

“How long do Kobolds live?”

“Ken's getting on for five hundred, which is rather old.”

“Cleo, how do you stand it? Being around that long?”

“It's how long we're around, that's all.”

Sam was quiet for a while, then said, “I don't know if I could take it. Living that long.”

“Your brain is set for a hundred years, that's all, for your whole life you've had that end point in your head. For us it's six hundred. For the Gods it's eternity. As far as I can figure it, you're born with a 'best by' date that you believe in.”

“So if I believe I'm going to live forever, maybe I will?”

“Not a chance, everyone lives as if they're never going to die, but somewhere down deep is that limit. You'd have to change your cell structures to change your expiry date.”

“If you're going to live for six hundred years, why are you doing this sort of work? Surely that's a lot of years to miss if you get killed.”

“But I'm never going to get killed, I'm never going to die... Except of course that I know that I will die, so I choose to live while I'm here. I love this work, I'm good at it. Now you, I don't understand you working at this, you're not going to live long at the best of times, how come you risk your life?”

“I do wonder about that, but I figure that living in fear of dying, trying to pull every last second out of your life means you're not really getting much.”

“Better to die a lion than live as a lamb?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“You got a religion, Sam?”

“You mean one of those Gods who tell you what to do? No. I mean I've met Gods and Goddesses but none of them has, is, whatever, a religion any more. I met Kit's Devil once, the two of them were having coffee in Jim's Lunch, but he didn't seem to be the type to moralize.”

“I think he's the other one, it's his brother that sets the moral rules.”

“Oh, well 'I don't have morals, I've got ethics,' is what my teacher used to say.”

“Nice. There's a roadside, let's pull in and have breakfast, it's been a while.”

“This is the third breakfast you've had.”

“Fast metabolism, don't be speciesist.”

“OK, OK, in we go, maybe we can get a cassette tape for the system here.”

“Willie Nelson's greatest truck songs, volumes one to twelve, probably.”

“I'd settle for Stompin' Tom.”

Half an hour later, Sam was staring at her breakfast. Cleo said, “Sausage, eggs, home fries and toast.”

“Thanks, I'd lost the word for sausage. In fact, until you spoke, I wasn't sure what I was looking at.”

“Ah, that one. Does the world often flip into 'what the hell is that thing' mode?”

“Thankfully not when I'm on the job but yeah, sometimes I just don't know what something is. I mean it doesn't make any sense. Like the sausage, I couldn't connect it to anything.”

“My dear, you're seeing the thing itself, without the brain connecting it to all the concepts and labels you've accumulated during your life. It suddenly stops making sense.”

“How can you lose the name of something?”

“Are you kidding? That happens all the time to all of us. Sometimes we go through all the names of our family before we get to the right one we want to call for. Sometimes a thing, something out there, just doesn't have a name for us. 'Grey poop shaped thing' for instance. Sometimes we know it's edible, sometimes not.”

“What the hell is that? What's it mean.”

“It's nothing. Look, we live in the world, we organize it in and around ourselves, but sometimes we get distracted, and we lose the thread. It's no big deal, we mostly don't lose it when we

need it, only when we maybe shut down the post office for a moment and all the little slots for names of things get closed.”

“I have trouble remembering things that happened to me.”

“Sam, you live in the present, you live in a world where you have to focus on what that guy with the knife is going to do next. Of course you have trouble remembering the past. You don't rehearse it. If you don't tell your stories, you forget them. Somebody smart once said you can live your life or you can write about it. You can't do both. I had a buddy who used to watch the world through a camera viewfinder. One day he just put the thing down and said he was going to live for a while. Twenty years later he picked it up again but only in a studio. The thing is, he lost his past, what he didn't photograph, what he didn't write down in a journal, drifted away. You know, some of those Gods remember everything, they're like big computers, but you and I, our brains don't work like that.”

“I get flashes sometimes, images of people, and they sometimes unfold into memories, but yeah, nothing like full stories. I'd never be able to write an autobiography.”

“One of the old Greek philosophers said an un-examined life isn't worth living, but I say an examined life isn't lived. Look, your senses are real, but your brain interprets them. The world is real, but your brain puts things where they should be. Can you reach out and grab that coffee cup? Yes? Good, your brain and your muscles figured that out. Now, if you're making up stories about grabbing that coffee cup you're very likely to knock it off the table.”

“Where did you pick this stuff up?”

“What pick it up, pay attention Sam, how else do you live in the world rather than in your head? The world is both you and what's outside your bag of skin, what's in your head is an abstraction, it's playing around with words. Out there is the guy with the sword.”

“Seems a bit much for me, I guess I was never much of a thinker.”

“Well that's good, we may survive this job if you don't think too much about things that are too abstract.”

“Right now I think I perceive a tape of Stompin' Tom's songs that I'm going to buy.”

“You don't like my singing?”

“I love your singing, just get another song.”

## **Ulrich Drops In**

“They're only half way there, Morris, will you relax. Have you got it that bad for Sam?”

“I guess so, I don't know. I sure got used to her fast.”



“Well slow down or you'll have to get used to her not being around. She's the skittish type, and she just came off a couple of years with Ulrich.”

“She doesn't seem too upset about it.”

“Lives for today, does that girl, she'd forget you just as fast, so go easy.”

“What about that job? How much risk is there?”

“Look, are you going to turn into one of those worriers? She's competent, and Cleo's with her. There's not much those two can't handle. Relax and get back to work will you.”

Once the customers started to show up, Morris stopped worrying, he was busy.

About mid-afternoon, Sam's old partner Ulrich dropped in. He wandered to the bar and asked Morris if he'd seen Sam around.

“Not for a while, Ulrich, she's on a job for Ken, be gone for about a week if all goes well, maybe longer.”

“Ah well, I just wanted to check in and see if she is all right.”

“She's good, she's working here at the bar, we hired her on a few days ago.”

“That's good, that's good. Has she got anyone she's seeing?”

“Me, Ulrich.”

Ulrich looked at Morris for a few beats and then said, “You know, that’s good. Be good to her will you, she’s special.”

“You know I will. Do you want a beer?”

“No, thanks, I don’t think so, I just wanted to know she’s OK.”

“Do you want me to tell her you asked?”

“No, I don’t think she’d appreciate that, I know she’s good so that’s good enough.”

Morris dropped the beer he was pouring in front of Ulrich.  
“Here's one for you on the house. How have you been my friend?”

“Good, well, it's hard not working, it's like I lost the meaning of my life, but Sam was right to retire me. That last job, I was slow and sloppy, she saved my life. She told me to go catch at least some of my girl's growing up, before it was too late.”

“Good advice.”

“She's a good person, for sure. I'm going to miss her a lot.”

“Why not bring the family in for dinner some time?”

“Oh I couldn't, I never told my wife about Sam.”

“Ulrich, Sam and your wife talked a lot. Your wife knows about the two of you, knows that Sam was keeping an eye on

you, knows she stitched you up and sent you home in the morning after you'd calmed down.”

“You're kidding!”

“Talk to your wife, and look, before you think about getting back into the business, you need to know that Sam told her you're out.”

“Well, listen Mo, if Sam ever gets into trouble and needs an old gun hand with connections, give me a call will you. She'd never call me herself.”

“Thanks, Ulrich, that means a lot, and I will.”

“Right, well I better get back to those growing girls, see if I can catch up a bit on the father thing.”

“It will be fine, you do what you can when you can. You grew up and your choices pushed you toward your anti-gang work. You can choose to be a father now. It's that simple. Your life gains meaning with your choices, pretty soon the meaning of your life will be 'father', you know what I mean?”

“I think I do, thanks and you take care Morris.”

“You too buddy, you too.”

As Ulrich walked out the door, Ken said, “That seemed awkward, you implied that you and Sam were a firm thing.”

“Yeah, well it might help him let go, Sam really doesn't want

him back in the game, I think she'd be OK if I pretended we were together more than a couple of days.”

“Well she won't hear a thing from me about it. You know me, the soul of discretion.”

“Ken you're the worst gossip I know, but thanks.”

“You just be careful that you keep it loose with Sam, I don't want anyone hurt.”

“I'd never hurt her.”

“I was talking about you, Sam is always fine, but you, I'm not so sure of. Just don't put too much into it too soon.”

Morris grunted and turned back to wiping glasses, the universal barman's signal for 'bugger off, I'm done talking to you.'

“Hey Ken,” shouted Kit MacDonnell from the door, “how would you like to host an art show. Dave's got a lot of new work that I want to get out there.”

Beside her, Dave Robbie was dying of shame, all he wanted to do was paint, he hated the idea of an art show, and beside that, he figured Kit just wanted to clear out the studio a bit. Well to be honest, it was getting a bit cluttered.

Ken caught Dave's embarrassment and said, “Absolutely Kit, let's do it.” Ken knew that Dave's stuff was good, and the boy should push it a bit. Ken also knew that being the home town opening of Dave's show would bring in a lot more customers,

not to mention the fifty percent gallery fee he was going to charge.

Dave moaned and headed for the bar while Kit negotiated with Ken.

“Absinthe?” winked Morris, who had somehow found a French beret under the bar.

“Oh don’t tempt me,” said Dave as he accepted his beer. “I swear that Kit is determined to make me famous.”

“That’s what a muse does, Dave, don’t you know that. Pose for you, pitch for you, and punt you in the backside if you slack off.”

“Don’t I know it, well, at least I contribute a little to the family funds, it’s not all Kit with her music students and her composing.”

“Dave you want to get some of yours back?”

Dave nodded and Morris said, “So get some of her more experimental work and arrange for a group to play it alongside the art show.”

Dave had a huge grin on his face as he spun around and hopped off the barstool, “Hey Ken, I’ve got a suggestion.”

Morris laughed and wiped the bar.

## **A Hitchiker**

Meanwhile on the road to Kenora, the girls were singing 'Sudbury Saturday Night' and were going to circle around to 'Bud the Spud' when they spotted a hitchhiker. They could see he was a young man with a big pack.

“Pick him up?” Sam said.

“Camouflage,” said Cleo.

Sam pulled over a dozen yards in front of the boy and he came running. Cleo leaned out the window and said, “We're heading for Calgary.”

“Good enough,” came the reply.

“OK stow your pack and hop in back,” Cleo said, in the time honoured invitation.

As they got moving again, Cleo half turned in her seat and started the traditional inquisition. “Where you headed, and where you coming from?”

“I'm headed to Burma Shave, and just now I'm coming from Peterborough where I was visiting an old girlfriend.”

“How'd that turn out.”

“Crap. She wasn't happy to see me at all, and I ended up

sleeping on some guy's floor. Good guy, he found me just moping around in the lounge and give me a place to crash.”

“Tough luck,” Cleo said, but then laughed. The guy didn't seem to mind, “what's your name?”

“It's Ben.”

“Hi Ben, I'm Cleo and that's Sam, welcome to the van. So you're a Tom Waits fan?”

“I am.”

“Well that's too bad, this is a Tom Connors only zone.”

“Tillsonburg? 'My back still aches when I hear that word.' I picked tobacco around there too.”

Cleo laughed again, “Sorry, 'Bud the Spud' is on the turntable.”

“Just as good. I rode a bike around PEI a couple years back. That was a good trip.”

“So what do you do, Ben”

“I'm like Tommy Hunter, I'm a travelin' man.”

In the driver's seat Sam mumbled, “Oh God, save me.”

Cleo poked her in the side and said, “How old are you Ben? You seem to know a lot about a generation or two ago.”

“I'm 60, seriously, although I doubt you'll believe me.”

“You'd be surprised, Benjamin, you'd be surprised. But for now, another round of 'Bud the Spud' in honour of your bike trip.”

The windows were rolled down and the trees were serenaded loudly.

Three or four hours later, they were in the Walmart parking lot in Kenora. In that time, they got a bit more of Ben's story.

## **Ben's Story**

“How did I get to be 60 and look like 24? Are you sure you want to hear it?” Ben looked a little nervous.

“Dude, we're from Guelph,” said Cleo

Ben seemed to know what that meant, “Well, OK, just understand that this may be a bit mixed up. I don't think I live my life in a straight line, or at least I don't remember it that way.”

“Spill, Ben.”

And Ben told his story.

I was on my way to Prince Edward Island, I was going to work there in the fields. No, no that was later, I was on the Ferry with my bicycle. I was going to travel around the island for a



few days.

I went on deck to watch for the island, but there was a woman on the bench in front of me. She was twisted around and watching the sea through binoculars.

I was watching her.

Since she was right in front of me I couldn't see where the ferry was headed, but for most of the voyage there was nothing to see but the water, so I watched the back of her head and the front of her legs. Eventually she seemed to be excited and so I moved to one side to see what she saw.

Of course she saw the coastline. "It's pretty isn't it?" I said to her.

"Yes, very," and that was it for a while. Eventually she said, "I'm going home to be married, why are you going?"

I told her I was going with my bicycle to ride around the island for a while.

"Oh this first part is really boring, why don't you put your bike in my car and I'll drive you out and away from the ferry so you can get started in some good scenery."

I wasn't sure, but she was kindly, and insistent, so I agreed. When the ferry docked I got my bicycle and walked over to her car where she'd stopped and we wrestled it into the trunk.

"PEI is a magical place," she said, "I've been away for much

too long and I've missed it. Perhaps I should get a bicycle and ride around with you, just so I can see the island slowly again.”

“How do you mean, slowly?”

“Like when I was a girl, I only saw parts of it at well separated times as my family went from place to place. When I grew up I would drive around but that's fast, it would be nice to ride a bike and see the scenery go by slowly.”

“Don't you have someplace you need to be? People who are expecting you?”

“Nobody knows when I'm coming, the wedding isn't for a month. Yes I will join you on your adventure.”

I didn't seem to have any choice in the matter, it was decided as she pulled into a bike rental place that seemed to appear beside the road. I followed her into the place and she turned to me, “What sort of bike do I need?”

“I don't plan to race, so get something comfortable, with good suspension and an upright riding position.”

The clerk brought out a nice cruiser with a rack, and adjusted it to her body. “Can I leave my car here until we're done?” she asked, and was told that yes, that was fine.

“What else am I going to need?”

“I have a tent, but just one sleeping bag, will you need another tent for yourself?”

“If you don't mind, I can share yours, and I'll buy a bag from these folks. Is there anything else we need?”

“I have the cooking equipment and I planned on shopping each day so no, I don't think so.”

She bought the bag and some quick-wash clothing. She rented a pannier for her bike and we were set. “How long will the trip take?”

“I had planned on three weeks, is that too long for you?”

“No that seems fine,” and she paid the rental up front plus a deposit.

I was a bit bewildered by this sudden decision of hers, but we unloaded my gear from her car, locked it and got on the road. I had a repair kit for my bike, but was secretly relieved that the rental shop had said they had a repair service, if we broke down we only had to call and they would come fix things.

She seemed to know how to ride, she followed me with her blinking lights and flag on the rental, and although the roads were not marked with bike lanes, the cars seemed to be careful enough to pass us.

As we rode she stayed close enough to chat, but not close enough to touch wheels. I had personal experience of how fast you were on the pavement when that happened, so I was happy with her skills.

As we rode, she pointed out various farms and the occasional fishing boat. It seemed that she had grown up on a farm and when she was a teen, she had worked on the boats. I quickly learned that she was not your typical rural girl, or perhaps she was.

We stopped at a gas station grocery, had coffee at the lunch bar and bought groceries enough for a day or two.

The rest of the day passed pleasantly, and we pulled into a campground as the sun was beginning to go down. There was a shower which she used as I set up the tent, and then I washed the day's grit off me.

She seemed to know how to use the cook set and by the time I got back she had dinner well under way. She was a good cook, and she told me that she had worked in a lumber camp in New Brunswick as a cook.

“What is it you do now?”

“Oh a bit of this and that,” she would answer me like that for the rest of the trip. I never did learn much about her life.

As we cleaned up and got into the tent to sleep, she suggested we see if the bags would zip together.

“What about your marriage?” I asked.

“When I get married I'll promise to be faithful, but until then I've made no such promise. Do you have a problem with that?”

I didn't, and we had a very pleasant evening and a great sleep.

The next morning the dawn sky seemed to have a lot more purple in it than I'd ever seen, it was truly beautiful. We ate, packed up, and got back on the road. There seemed to be fewer cars on the road, and those that went by were out of date by twenty years it seemed, I supposed there was little salting of the roads, so little rust on the bodies.

The riding was good and we had got into a more wooded area of the island. We found a roadside cafe all done up in '50s style, and had coffee. We bought sandwiches to eat for lunch and dropped off the main road into a small port to eat them.

The afternoon was easy riding, as most of the trip would be, and we found a farmer's field to camp in the evening.

The next morning had that amazing dawn light, and the traffic seemed to be a bit surreal. There must have been a classic car show somewhere nearby, the cars were all very old, but well kept up. There was no worry about being run down, the cars were moving barely faster than we were.

The countryside was feeling even more clean than it had when we started. Not much road grime at all in the ditches. The exercise seemed to be doing my companion a lot of good, she looked younger, healthier than she had when I met her, although I should say she looked just fine then. She seemed to have a lot more energy too, she wheeled around me and led the way for the rest of the day.

I commented on that as we camped in yet another farmer's field

and she said the fresh air must be doing her some good.

It was the next morning I started to think something was odd. There was the same amazing dawn, the same great breakfast, but the traffic now seemed to be horses and buggies. I asked her about that and she said that we were around Cavendish Beach, where the Anne of Green Gables themed area was.

I didn't buy it. I looked closely at her and she looked even younger. The night before she had been positively ravenous in her lovemaking.

“No, something strange is going on, can you tell me what it is?”

“Are you upset, Ben? Is the trip not going well for you?”

“No, that's not it, the trip is great, especially the lack of being blown off the road by the Automoose campers.”

“And me? Are you tired of me?”

“Good lord no! You've been amazing, I'm just wondering why we seem to be going back in time.”

“And me, does it bother you that I'm going back in time too?”

That's when I twigged, she was doing it, and as I realized that I stopped worrying about it.

Ben stopped, obviously lost in his memories of this woman.

“What about you, Ben? Were you getting younger?”

“No, I stayed the same, about 24, and I’ve been the same age ever since.”

“So that was about 40 years ago.”

“Weird isn’t it? I just started drifting and never stopped.”

Sam glanced around from her driving, “What about the woman, did she keep getting younger?”

“No, she went to about 20 and stayed there for the rest of the trip. We spent our three weeks cycling around and then for the last few days time seemed to return to the proper place. She got in her car and I rode onto the ferry and that was that. I never saw her again.”

“And she didn’t mention that you would stop aging?”

“I’m pretty certain that she didn’t know that, she was a truly kind person. Or maybe she thought I’d appreciate being 24 forever.”

“You don’t?”

“Oh, sometimes, then at other times I think I’d like to be able to have a normal life, with someone to get old with and all that.”

Cleo looked him over, “We often want what we don’t have, Ben. Eternal youth seems to be what most people want, but I wonder if they’ve thought it through.”

“Well I don't mean to complain, it's a good life, I wander around and take what jobs I need to take, the rest of the time I have fun.”

## **The Skipping Child**

Morris moved down the bar serving drinks and collecting empties. At the end of the bar was an older gentleman who did not look good. Was he sick? “Are you OK sir? You're looking a bit run down.”

“I guess I am. I don't sleep well these days.”

“I hear you, it's a good thing we're underground here, it's hot, hot, hot out there.”

“Well the heat doesn't bother me so much as a dream I keep having.”

“You want to tell me about it?”

“I'm not sure you'd want to hear it, it's a bit strange.”

“Try me.”

“Well OK, I remember a child, a little girl. I think she was mine, I remember watching her skip, and then she stopped.”



“Frozen in mid-jump, had I taken a photograph? But I walked toward her and no, she had stopped in mid jump.

“Was it that I didn’t want her to grow up and grow away from me? I’m sure all parents wish that, but what is it to have a child held timeless as if she was a photograph?

“I looked, nothing was moving. I listened, no sounds were there. Only my tinnitus to keep me company.

“I picked up a rock, and tossed it into the air, it fell to the ground, I tossed it away from myself, it fell to the ground. But she stayed in the air. I was afraid to touch her then.

“When my daughter was a baby, I would carry her on my hip. She was blond hair and two arms, the arms reaching out for the world. Those were happy days for me, I was unemployed and had nothing but time for her.

“Eventually I got a job so that I could feed my family. Food, clothing, a house, a car, these were things that I felt I needed to provide, and if I was to provide them, they had to be the best. We lived in the best neighbourhood, drove a fancy car, and had a fully loaded freezer in the basement. I was proud that I could provide so well for my family.

“When she was young, my daughter would ask for hugs, but I was an important man with important things to do and sometimes I would put her off for later. 'Not right now sweetheart, Daddy is busy,' and I would go back to work. She would want to play and I would say the same thing. She would want to go for a walk...

“Sometimes while I was at my desk she would ask me if we could talk a little, and I would say 'Later dear, I'm busy now.' Sometimes I would say this if I was watching TV, 'after the show dear.'

“Eventually, when she saw me she would look, hopefully. She stopped speaking first and would wait for me to say 'Can I have a hug?'

“Eventually, she stopped looking up when I came in to the room. She found ways to amuse herself and I assumed she didn't need me any more.

“It wasn't for years that I realized what I had done, how much I needed her, even if she didn't need me.

“But of course she needed me.

“I walked to this girl who was suspended and reached out to her. I circled my arms around her, in case she fell suddenly, and touched her, but she didn't fall, she didn't move, she was frozen where she was. I didn't want to hug her because she couldn't say yes, but she was my little girl. I cried because I so wanted to hug her one last time, but I could not.

“She was my little girl.

“I had been an important man, I had demands on my time, and she would always be there, so we could catch up, there would be lots of time. This is what I had thought. Now all I have is this frozen image of my little girl skipping and this image

breaks my heart. I am no longer an important man, I am just an old man who is waiting with his broken memories. Here is my child, I would so much like to hug her, to talk to her, to play with her, to watch her do whatever it is she wanted me to watch her doing, while I was so busy being an important man.

“She was my little girl.

“All I have is this image of a frozen jump. As I look further I see that she is at school, but she is alone. There is no grass, only barren dirt. A lone house, a power line in the distance, but no friends, no grass, no trees. Was her life so bare? Did she not make friends?

“Did I do this to her?

The man wound down and looked deep into his beer, as if there were answers there.

Morris shook his head and put a hand on the man's shoulder. “We all have regrets about our lives, we all have people we have lost, but a child, that's rough.”

The man looked up, “Every night, this same dream.”

“Do you mind if I ask whether you have a daughter sir?”

“I do, but she's grown up and moved far away”

“Have you talked to her about her childhood with you?”

“We don't speak much, her mother moved out with her when

she was young, she doesn't really know me.”

Morris took a scrap of paper and wrote down a phone number, “Go and see Lorraine, her number is here, she might be able to help you.”

A small hopeful light appeared in the man's eyes, “Thanks, I'll do that.”

Morris turned away and went back up the bar, taking orders and cleaning up, but his own mind had turned to a certain oak tree by the river. One that wasn't there any more.

## **Who is Ben**

Sam, Cleo, and Ben pulled into the Walmart parking lot and settled down to dinner and later, coffees from the McDonald's, just for the novelty. Ben had talked their way into the Lakehead University gym so they could shower. After two days of driving, the girls were more than pleased to scrub down.

They could have looked up Okami and Kuri, but Sam wanted to keep the lid on the security, so they'd sleep in the van again.

Cleo declared, “We'll do a straight shot across the prairies tomorrow, that's going to be 16 hours, so we ought to get some sleep tonight.”

Sam laughed at that. There was one bed and Cleo had been eyeing Ben and his big pack all day.

As it turned out, they did get a few hours, toward dawn, and the girls went to sleep in Ben's arms, one on each shoulder. When they woke up the next day, Ben's arms were asleep and he couldn't get up. This caused much laughter as the girls left for McDonald's pancakes and sausage. Ben showed up ten minutes later with glares for the girls. Of course this brought more laughter.

"Anybody need anything? Toothpaste?" asked Cleo after they finished.

"Is that a comment on my breath?" said Sam.

"I need a couple of things, I'll be out very soon." Ben took off down the aisles.

Cleo and Sam looked at each other. "Nice boy, but maybe we leave him here," Sam suggested.

"No, I'm not sure he's working for the other side, we ought to find out. We can always dump him in the middle of Manitoba."

"If you think so, you sure you aren't letting your crotch decide?"

"He is yummy isn't he? Still, you're woman enough for me Sam Martin."

"Such bullshit."

Ben came bounding out of the store with a bag of, oh dear,

toothpaste.

As they got underway, Cleo driving, Sam said, from the back seat, “What did you get?”

“Toothpaste, I remembered I needed some.”

“Have you been in the spy business long, Ben?”

“What? What do you mean?”

Sam just stared at him with a disgusted look.

“I don't know what you mean?”

“Ben, you're not very good at this,” said Sam.

“You're busted,” Cleo chimed in.

Ben had the good grace to look sheepish. “I'm usually a lot better, it's just that you two take the guard down, and I'm on your side anyway. I suppose I wasn't trying very hard.”

“Who are you working for, certainly not my boss,” Cleo said.

“I don't know who that is, so maybe?”

Sam tapped Cleo on the shoulder and said, “drive, I've got it.”

Cleo shrugged and looked to the road again, just in time to wrench the van back into their lane while a transport whipped by, horn blowing.

“Ben, you say you're on our side, let's get that straight before Cleo kills us shall we?”

“Right, unfortunately I don't have any secret sign, or code word to give you.”

“Let's start with who you called back there. You've got a full tube of toothpaste, I used it this morning while you were lying in bed.”

“You used my toothpaste? That's not very hygienic.”

“I've had my tongue down your throat, now answer the question please.”

“I called a man in Guelph. One who hires me once in a while, I'm always moving around the country so nobody pays much attention to where I go. That makes me useful to him”

“Name?”

“No, he said he didn't want you to know.”

“Me, or us?”

“You, Cleo doesn't know him.”

“You're not convincing us here Ben.”

“Look, he called me and said to get picked up hitching or to follow you two to Calgary. I'm to back you up, I've got contacts

all over the country who are clean, not known for spy work as you put it, because they aren't spies.”

“Still looking like you're getting out soon.”

“He said to tell you that you picked on top for ladies choice.”

“Morris sent you?”

“Who's Morris?”

Cleo half turned and said, “What's ladies choice?”

Sam was silent for a while. How the hell would anyone know what she and Morris had talked about in bed?

“Give me your phone, Ben.”

He handed it over, and Sam checked the last number, it was to the St. George front desk.

“I don't know what's going on Cleo, ladies choice is something I said to Morris in bed. Maybe his apartment is bugged. We've been through his pack, he has no weapons, damn it, pull over will you?”

As Cleo pulled into a roadside turn-out, Sam tapped Ben on the shoulder and said, “Get out.”

“My pack too?”

“Just you, out.”



Once outside the van, Sam told Ben to move to the grassy area and stalked after him. “You trained, boy?”

“Yes.”

Sam lashed out with her fist, Ben, having been warned, turned it aside easily and reached to grab the back of Sam's neck. She turned into his attack and caught him under the arms, intending to throw him, but he sagged so all his weight was on her arms, then threw a knee at her chest. Sam leapt back and held up a hand.

“Who taught you?”

“Your teacher taught me before you were born.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” Sam said as she turned her back on Ben. He could see that she was crying, her shoulders shaking. Ben left her for a few moments, then approached carefully, and said, “I miss him too,” as he then put his arms around her.

“Shit, shit, sorry, just, to be reminded of him so suddenly, damn it! Damn him for dying!”

In a moment she was calm again and they walked toward the van where Cleo was standing with her arms folded.

“So he's OK?”

“He was taught by my teacher, for sure, and I can't imagine my teacher taking on a student who wasn't OK, I'm inclined to

believe him, Cleo.”

“Good enough for now. We'll see about later, Ben. Now, you two got some exercise, anybody want to help me work out the kinks?”

## **A Plan Comes Together**

A certain tension was lifted as they continued across the prairies. It's hard to distrust someone you've been fighting down in the dirt. Sex you can fake, but when someone has your neck and doesn't break it, well that tends to build trust.

They seemed to drift, almost like being on a boat on the ocean, it was hard to tell what time it was or how long they'd been driving except for the position of the sun. Ben now took his turn, two hours apiece, they wanted to get there in one piece, no nodding off and crashing into the ditch.

Some driving changes were done on the highway, some in a town or at a restaurant. They added a few more hours than they'd planned, but they weren't worried, they were planning for something else.

It turned out that Ben had more resources than they'd thought. He had a buddy who owned a coffee shop near the office tower they were interested in. Not only that, but he knew a computer security expert who ran his own company. A long haired type that wasn't particular about which side he helped.

Sam and Cleo tended to be the types to improvise, they had planned to romance one of the computer techs and then blackmail him into giving them access. Ben was a bit more methodical, he had done this sort of thing before.

They rolled into Calgary late in the evening, and headed straight to an apartment that Ken Kobold owned downtown. They were tired, but that didn't stop Cleo and Ben from heading into one of the bedrooms to make a bit of noise before going to sleep.

Sam, with her head still full of thoughts about her teacher, didn't much feel like joining them. Instead she called Morris.

“Hey, Mo, you still awake?”

“I am now, Sam, how are you?”

“I'm good, things are going well, tomorrow we start working in a coffee shop.”

“One waitress job to another eh?”

“I miss you Mo.”

Morris was stunned, he hesitated and then said, “I miss you too Sam.”

Sam smiled, she had caught that hesitation and figured she'd caught him off guard. That was good, let's see how he handled this one, “Better good get some sleep, love you Morris.”

She laughed as she hung up before he could think of a response. She had wanted to ask him to check out Ben, but didn't dare on an open phone line.

Well some things you just took on faith, like her decision to tell Morris she loved him. She was certain she did, they'd been good friends for a long time and she was happy to be in his bed. "Might be a bit tricky to be together day and night," she thought and then laughed again. Two days and then a week apart. Yeah it probably wasn't going to be a problem, all this time they were spending together.

There was silence from the main bedroom. Sam wasn't much interested in sex at the moment, but being cuddled was another story. She let herself in and snuck between the other two, who made room and threw arms over her. Perfect.

The next morning, early, Ben insisted they drive across town to an internet cafe far from their target. He logged in and soon had a complete set of plans for their target. When Cleo asked, he said "Buildings know buildings."

They had to be content with that, because he wouldn't say more. The three of them drove back across town, missing the morning rush and the two girls were dropped at his friend's coffee shop. They could see their target across the street. After introductions, the girls started serving coffee and Ben left to talk to his security buddy.

The oil executives wandered into the coffee shop and ordered their fancy drinks from the pretty new girls. They were quite proud of their skills at chatting up these girls, who soon had an

excellent idea of who worked where, in the building.

“So you're new here?”

“Just started today,”

“Well you'll like it, it's a nice place. I work just across the road.”

“Oh, really, well I guess I'll see you again.”

“You sure will my dear.”

“And where in that big place do you work.”

“Just up there on the fifteenth floor, you can just see the window from here.”

“Oh, it must be nice, what do you do there?”

“I'm head of data management.”

“Really! How exciting.”

It didn't take long for the girls to know who had offices next to the mainframe. They had a few prospects if they had to seduce anyone, but they'd see what Ben came up with.

It turned out that Ben had come up with Iggy.

“I'm a grey hat” Iggy said over dinner.

“What's that when it's at home?”

“I work for money, sometimes hacking, sometimes doing security work. I break into computers.”

“How do you break into an air-gapped mainframe?”

“Romance or blackmail, usually.”

Sam and Cleo looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

“So we don't need you, and I'm not sure we trust you.”

“I'll vouch for him,” said Ben.

“Yeah but nobody's vouching for you,” said Sam.

“Too late, we've told him and he's told Iggy,” said Cleo, we keep them around, trust or not.

Iggy looked from one woman to the other and said, “Fine with me.”

“All right, Jesus are all men horndogs?” said Sam.

“Makes it easier to do our jobs,” said Cleo.

Ben held up his hands, “Can we get back to business, we've got the plans, we've got the owners of the offices next door and we've got Iggy to crack the mainframe. We don't have a key.”

“We'll have one tomorrow. Buddy data manager will be in

early, I'll get his keys, make impressions and we'll have copies in an hour.”

“Man that seems pretty old school,” said Sam.

“It's Calgary,” said Iggy and Ben together, “But there's time locks to get around and a wall to go through,” said Iggy.

“Are you ready to go tonight, Iggy? You need any special equipment?”

“I've got a screwdriver.”

“Seriously?”

“Breaking in from across the world needs special skills and tools, breaking into the back of a computer in the same room needs a screwdriver.”

“What about other security measures?”

“Giants, in the front lobby and at the door to the computer room.”

“That's it?”

“Calgary, and let's face it, there's few beings with as much ego as a Giant, they figure that's all they need.”

“This seems too easy.”

“Don't jinx it.”

“Alright, tonight we take a hotel room so we can keep an eye on Mr. Iggy here, and tomorrow we go to work.”

They had to go to Iggy's place to pick up his screwdriver, and the other equipment he'd need to copy the drives, but that didn't take long, and it gave the women some confidence that he wasn't a plant. He let them see where he lived.

Were there a dozen ways each of them could think of, that he might be misdirecting them? Sure, but let's face it, it was Calgary.

## **The Skater**

“Hey, I haven't seen you in here for a while, welcome back,” Morris said, dropping a beer in front of the customer.

“Thanks Morris, I've been away at our cottage for a few months, working on the place and trying to write my novel.”

“Always a good thing to do. Did you have any success?”

“Not really, a very strange thing happened, and it completely threw me off.”

“I'd love to hear about it, just let me catch up on the other customers and I'll be right back.”

The customer started right in on his story as Morris returned:



It was so cold last winter, the river froze all the way to the lake. She came gliding up the glassy surface with her speed skates, her hands behind her, rocking smoothly from leg to leg as she ate up the miles. Her skates left cryptic signs in the ice where the wind had blown the snow onto the banks.

I walked to the river and looked at those marks, wanting to know what they meant, but I never did find out. She was a neighbour from a mile down and one day I saw her skating. I thought “that ass” as she lifted one leg and glided toward the rocks.

One day she saw me and said hello. She mentioned where she came from and asked me if I lived in the house over the hill. I said yes, and she said she knew my wife from long ago when they were in college.

I said my wife is gone to visit her folks with the kids and she asked why I didn't go.

“I'm trying to get some work done on my novel, but it isn't working, which is why I'm down here at the river.”

“Not to throw yourself in I hope.”

“No, no, I was just looking for some fresh air and inspiration.”

“Well you can't get one without the other,” she laughed, “what are you writing about?”

“Me, mostly, I'm trying to make sense of my life, it has been

broken up into chunks that I mostly can't remember, just flashes here and there.”

“So you're trying to find another memory?”

“I guess so. They come and go, and they're hard to get hold of.”

“Would you like another?”

“I would, but they seem pretty elusive today.”

“Very well, you go put some coffee on and I'll go home and come back with some boots. It won't take me very long, and I'll meet you in your house.”

I said goodbye and walked home, wondering if it was a good idea to have this strange woman in the house while the family was gone. Still, if I had nothing to show my wife, it would tell her what a lazy bastard I was. Not that she didn't know that already.

I put some coffee on and laid out a plate of muffins on the theory that this woman would be hungry after all that exercise. As the coffee was dripping, she came into the house without knocking, stamping the snow off her boots onto the hallway mat. “Yoo hoo,” she called.

“In here.”

“It's cold out there today, coffee will go down nicely.”

I put a cup in front of her and pushed the muffins toward her.

“Thanks,” she said, taking one and laying it beside her coffee.  
“You really don't remember me, do you?”

I must have looked embarrassed, I'd never seen her before in my life.

She laughed and said, “It's all right. It was a long time ago, but you were visiting your future wife at the college. I was her girlfriend at the time, and I knew about you. You look shocked.”

“But my wife was never gay.”

“Hmm, I wonder if I should tell you this story, it might shock you.”

“No, no, please, that was rude, it's not like I have anything against gay women.”

She smiled and said, “Bisexual, after all, she married you right?”

I wasn't sure what to say so I hid my confusion behind a cup of coffee and just nodded.

“You two weren't very serious back then, and so your wife and I had a long relationship. We'd met while swimming and she liked what she saw. I've been an athlete all my life and was in better shape then than I am now.”

“Hard for me to believe that.”

“Ah, that's the charmer I remember. Your wife and I went out a few times and eventually one evening after too much wine, we ended up in bed together. She told me about you and I told her about my other relationships, boys and girls.

“When you came to visit, I was curious about you and so we all met up at a local bar. I liked your looks, and when you started talking I saw what she liked about you. You were quite the charmer.

“After several beers, you were obviously getting horny and you didn't know which of us to look at. We girls went to the bathroom together to discuss you...”

“That's what you women do in there?”

“Oh come on, surely you know that. Anyway, we decided that since you were such a yummy boy, we would share you that evening.

“We got you a little more drunk and then dragged you to your wife's place where we wasted no time at all getting naked and jumping into bed.”

My eyes must have been popping out.

“You really don't remember that? Well you taught me to give a blowjob, and declared that I was as good as your wife, which started a contest. You gave us both a couple of rogerings each after that. Needless to say, nobody got much sleep that night.

“The three of us spent the rest of the weekend together having a great time, and when you went back home, we girls continued our affair for a couple of months until we graduated. We didn't know that our family homes were almost side by side on the river here, not until we met in the grocery store a couple of years after we'd moved back home.

“By that time you two had married and I stayed single.”

I was almost afraid to ask, “Have you and my wife continued your affair?”

“Affair, such a loaded word. We're still friends and occasionally we snuggle, but we're all a bit old to worry about that sort of thing don't you think?”

“I can't believe I forgot that, you're not just pulling my leg are you? I mean surely I wouldn't forget something like that.”

“It happens, dear, people forget. I've forgotten lots of things over the years. It's enough to live in the present isn't it? Which makes me curious why you're writing an autobiography.”

“I'm not sure it is, all I have are images, flashes that trigger something. I'm not sure they're real memories or stories I make up, so I'm following them along.”

“Well now you have an image of me skating on the river, and you have a story to go along with it. Will you put the story into your book?”

“I'm not sure, is it my story or is it yours?”

“It’s something that happened now, in the present, surely it must be true.”

“Well I remember you telling me the story, that’s true enough.”

She smiled and finished her coffee, “Thanks for the break and the talk, I must get back onto my skates and head home. I hope to see you again, may I drop in some time?”

“Of course, I would be delighted.”

She nodded, pulled her boots back on, and went out the door.

Later that week, when my wife came home I told her about meeting her old friend from college who lived just down the river. She gave me a very strange look and said, “Who?”

Morris shook his head, “Now that’s a story worth putting in a novel, did you do it?”

“I don’t know, what if my wife reads it?”

“You haven’t spoken to her about this skater?”

“No, since she said she didn’t know her.”

“You think she does, but just doesn’t want to admit it?”

“Oh lord Morris, just give me another beer.”

Morris laughed and pulled another pint, “On the house, man,

on the house.”

## **The Big Heist**

The next morning early, Cleo served the Data Manager his fancy drink and came around the counter to show him where the sprinkles were. As she did so she bumped into him a couple of times. He was quite satisfied that his charms were working on the new girl.

Cleo was quite satisfied that her pick-pocketing skills were still up to the job. With the keys taken and returned as he got up to go, he was none the wiser.

In the meantime it took almost no time at all for Sam to make keys using a quick-setting strong plastic. None of these grind and match jobs with the new materials available.

The girls finished their shifts and thanked Ben's friend for the help, then headed back to the apartment to meet Ben and Iggy.

Those two were all set, Iggy had his flash drives all ready to go, and yes, an actual screwdriver.

Going out for supper at a restaurant near the target, they tried to find a salad, but had to settle for steak, it was Calgary after all. Looking around they could spot the occasional Giant. They weren't hard to spot, they had big Stetson hats and string ties. But there weren't so many as they had expected. These guys were either a tiny splinter group, or had egos to spare.

Cleo spoke up between mouthfuls of bloody steak, “I still don't know how these guys intend to ruin the oil business through an air-gapped computer.”

“They'll plug a line in when they need the connection, and then run a virus to all the other oil companies,” said Iggy

“I don't think that would work, why would they be connected to each other?”

“You think they coordinate the gas prices by driving around and looking at each other's stations? It's all done by software, if there's a news story about oil shortages anywhere in the world, the software cranks the prices.”

“Is that legal?”

“You're asking about legal?”

“Hey, if we get caught I'd be happy to debate legal questions, but the Giants will just smear us across a wall.”

“So let's not get caught, shall we?”

They waited until they were sure all the executives who wanted to get promoted had left for the evening, and then walked to the building. They were sure they wouldn't be noticed since absolutely nobody walked in the land of Oil, that's what gigantic pickup trucks with big steel balls on the hitch were for.

They avoided the Giant in the front lobby by using the back



door, the one where the cleaners went in and where the girlfriends came out. Checking for girlfriends, they opened the door and went up the stairs.

Stairs, they were there for building code and those same girlfriends. Executives used elevators. For that very reason, there were no cameras on the stairs, who wants evidence of extra marital nonsense for the wife's lawyers.

Fortunately the data manager's office was next to the rear wall of the computer room. The Giant sitting in the hall in front of the computer room remained asleep and undisturbed.

Iggy ran a detector across the wall and said, "Here is where we go in."

Cleo walked to the wall and pulled back her fist. Sam caught it and said, "What are you doing, we can't just punch through the wall, the guard will hear."

"So?"

"So why fight him when we don't need to. Let's be elegant." With that, Sam pulled a stud-finder and a box cutter from her pockets.

"Oh, oh, point that thing at the boys."

Sam rolled her eyes, "Serious face now Cleo."

"Fine, let's do it."

Sam found the studs, identified the electrical cables and sliced through the drywall. She exposed two studs-worth and let Cleo bend the metal stud in the way, out of the way.

A bit more time with the box cutter and they were in the room. Here there was a camera, and Iggy ran some sort of jamming thing at it until they could take a photo of the room and put that in front of the lens. As long as they didn't knock the cell phone down, they'd be fine. Iggy said that sort of camera glitched all the time. "Why spend lots of money on a good surveillance camera when you have a Giant at the door, right?"

Cleo went to the front door and listened. The Giant was still snoring so she gave a thumbs up.

Iggy took almost no time at all to remove the back of the computer. Sam whispered, "There's usb ports here on the side."

"Sure, but their use is logged, I'm jacking into the hard drive directly, no trace."

Sam figured he knew what he was doing, and let him do it.

You think this is going too well? You want a fight? Fine, Iggy had put the screwdriver on the top of the computer and just as he finished up and reached for it, he knocked it off onto the floor.

The Giant exploded through the door to see what was going on and grew to almost ceiling height when he saw the foursome.

Cleo said, "Go," as she faced the Giant. Sam hesitated but Cleo

waved her out with the boys. As she turned back to the Giant, she grinned and suddenly she had a mouth full of razor sharp teeth. Worse than that, she had a very large hammer in her hand.

One swing at a knee and the Giant was down at her height, another swing at his head and the Giant was down on the floor.

Cleo changed back to a lovely young woman with a hammer-charm necklace and walked out the back wall.

As they left, Cleo wrote a short note and left it on the data manager's desk.

“What was that?” Sam asked.

“I said 'thanks for the help'”

“That was mean.”

“Well he had his hands all over my ass while I was returning his keys.”

No alarms were raised, and our heroes walked down the back stairs and out the door. They went to the coffee shop and waited for a while, but nothing much seemed to be going on across the way.

Still, the Giants would know their computer program had been compromised. If they tried to spike the oil companies, one of Ken's computer types would have inserted an anti-virus program that would stop it.

Just to be safe, they went to the secure internet cafe and sent the code to Ken, Iggy was paid, Ben said his goodbyes without explaining anything further about who hired him, and the two women caught the red-eye back to Kitchener where Morris picked them up in his vintage car.

Cleo offered to fill Ken in on their job, including the information on Iggy and Ben so he could check them out. Sam and Morris declared a day off, asking Cleo to tell Ken they'd be in for the evening shift.

Cleo smiled and said, "Have a good nap you two," and wandered into the bar.

## **Debriefings and De-Briefings**

Sam was lying on Morris' shoulder feeling very dreamy, "It's good to be back."

"In Guelph?"

"In your bed, Mo."

"So..."

"So I'm moving in if you don't mind, with side jobs from Ken it might be a bit hit and miss, us getting together, so why waste the time we're together. Are you OK with that?"

“Absolutely, so when you called me...”

“I meant it, Morris, I do love you, have for a long time. No, before you say it back, don't. It makes me squeamish, I know you care for me, all you have to say is yes.”

“Yes.”

“Good, I'll move my stuff over if you'll clear a bit of space, a drawer and a bit of closet space would be good enough.”

“You got it. I'm happy you're here, Sam, although I'm not sure what's changed.”

“I dunno, maybe I'm getting old. I met one of my teacher's students out west, and it reminded me how much I miss him.”

“You loved him a lot didn't you?”

“Yes, but Mo, don't start thinking you're a rebound guy, or second choice or anything like that. I like being with you, I want to be with you, and you put extra booze in my drinks.”

“Not any more, I like you the way you are, no extra calories.”

Sam dug her finger into Morris' ribs.

After a while, Sam said they'd better get to work.

As they walked into the Keller, Ken looked up from fixing the bar railing and said, “I didn't expect you two until tomorrow.”

“You need us Ken, you're a terrible bartender.”

“Well that's true enough, I can't seem to get the hang of pouring a full ounce. Sam, let's go on into the office, Cleo is still here and has filled me in but there's more information. Sam can fill you in later, Mo.”

Cleo had just hung up the phone when Sam came in, she got up and hugged the other woman and sniffed, “Good work you, he's a nice guy.”

“Just how sensitive is your nose, Cleo?”

“Never mind. Listen, we figured out who the Giant's computer whiz is.”

“Iggy?”

“No moss on you, is there Sam.”

“Stands to reason, and I bet Ben was in on it somehow.”

“Right, turns out the code would have fried the Giant's computer and nothing else. Iggy had already spiked them. I think that Ben somehow knew that and came along so that we wouldn't be working against each other.”

Sam turned to Ken, “Did you know this?”

“I did not, but you can bet I'm going to be in touch with both Iggy and Ben, if we're going to be working on the same projects, we need to work together. Iggy trashed their computer

while he was inside it. He can blame it on 'unknown agents' and still keep working for the Giants. This could be a sweet operation. I've talked with Joe Mufferaw and he's happy with our results, dropped a big payment in our account."

"So who the hell is Ben?"

"That's a question isn't it? You say he was a student of your teacher? And someone here sent him? I think I know where to look and I'm going to send Cleo to talk to folks."

"Do you want me to go along Cleo?"

"No, stay and work, I'll let you know. Remember that Ben said his boss didn't want you to know who he is, so I'll be more likely to get answers alone.

"Right, anything else Ken?"

"No, go on out to work and we'll talk later."

A few minutes later, Cleo went out the front door and turned right. She was headed to the St. George, since Ben's call went there. As she walked past the Doorman's shed he stepped out and gave a small bow. "Go on in, he's expecting you, he's in the front entrance."

Cleo nodded back and went through the doors where there was nobody. No, there was something, Cleo squinted and saw a ghostly shape to one side. The shape waved and Cleo stepped into the apparition.

“Hello Cleo, my name is Nadja and I'll be your conduit to him today. It's nice to meet you.”

“Fine, thank you Nadja, you're a ghost right?”

“Yes, miss, I'm an agent for him.”

“Him being?”

“Me, Cleo, I'm the St. George.”

“The what, you say?”

“I'm this building, Cleo, I'm owned by Kuri MacDonnell and she has owned me since I was built. I became sentient a long time ago.”

“OK. Are you a good building or a bad building?”

“I'm on Megan's leash, if that means anything to you.”

“It does. Now, did you send a guy named Ben to us while we were going to Calgary?”

“I did, and I provided building plans for you.”

“Ben works for you?”

“Iggy too, on a freelance basis.”

“So why didn't Ben tell us this? I mean aside from how nuts it sounds to say 'I work for a building' that is.”



“I didn't want, no, he didn't want Sam to get curious. ‘He’ being Sam's teacher.”

“He's dead, George.”

“Well, he worked for me and I didn't want him to be dead so I sort of rebuilt him.”

“You can do that?”

“It wasn't easy but he's damned good.”

“And he doesn't want Sam to know he's alive?”

“He doesn't want to hurt her. It was tricky keeping her away from him while she was here with Ulrich, more than once I had to reroute a hallway.”

“Jebus, you can do that?”

“There's a hell of a lot of power floating around in this place, Miss. Yes I can do that. It looks like I'll have to do it in the future, she's moving in with Morris Minor.”

“Is she now, that didn't take long. So I don't tell Sam her teacher is alive. I can work that. She's a nice girl but she just got involved with Morris, so we'll leave her alone. Now to the main topic. What the hell are you doing stamping all over one of our operations?”

“I think you might find that it was you who stomped on my

operation, Miss.”

“Hmm, well, how about we don't do that again?”

“Agreed.”

“One more question, where is Ben now?”

“Can I ask why?”

“I like him, he's great in the sack, he might live as long as I do, and we're about the same age. Also, he fights like a demon.”

“Ah, I can send him a message if you'd like to give me your number.”

## **The Lion Man**

Art and Ingrid were sitting at the bar so Morris was, of course, eavesdropping.

“So Ingrid, tell me, do you have a religion?”

“I've had lots of them Art, when are you talking about?”

“Well, how about now? Do you have one now?”

“Sure I do, I believe in an all powerful Goddess.”

“And what is her na.... oh”

“Yes, love, I believe in myself. I’m a damned good religion, you should believe in me too.”

“Oh I do sweetheart, every time I look at you I believe in you. I mean you’re right there. But you said lots of them, did you not always believe in you?”

“Of course I’ve always believed in me, but I wasn’t always a Goddess, not always all powerful, not always with followers.”

“Wait a minute, are you saying you had another religion beside Ingridism.”

“That’s an ugly neologism Art Pendry, you take that back.”

“Yes dear, Morris, two more beers here, and one for me too, I need to take something back. Now seriously Ingrid, did you believe in a god before you believed in your own Goddesshood?”

“Godhood, Artie, don’t hurt yourself trying to be gender inclusive, I’m not keen on that, especially since there’s not that many Gods I can’t thrash.”

“Ingrid, are you evading?”

“No, no, it’s the Lion Man.”

“What is?”

“The first religion I believed in.”

Morris arrived with the beer and set them down, then leaned on the bar, “I want to hear about this too Ingrid.”

“Alright, but listen, this was 40,000 years ago, you understand, and it was after one of the big changes for humans. You two know I’m supposed to have been around forever, right? Well forever is how long I’ve believed in myself. When the Earth formed and cooled enough, I arrived.”

“Hold on, didn’t Coyote sing the world into being?” asked Art.

“Yes, he certainly did. He’s a good singer, and after he did that, I arrived. There were various beings on the planet, of various intelligence, but none recognized me as anything special. The different species of man rose and fell, they saw me, I did miraculous things, but they didn’t know they were miraculous.”

“What are you talking about Ingrid,? You mean you flew through the air or rode on Hildy and they didn’t think that was miraculous, how could that be?”

“Art, do you think that a dog watching you drive along the street thinks that you are doing something miraculous?”

“But dogs see that all the time.”

“Exactly it’s just normal, how about if I float up into the air in front of a dog, what does he think?”

“Not much I suppose, just another thing going on in the

world.”

“Right, man was like that for millions of years, so there was no religion and I wasn’t a Goddess, I was just that good looking female over there that was really strong. No big deal.”

“Always and ever a big deal Ingrid.”

“Aw you’re sweet, but I’m saying I was just another part of the world, which was full of things we might call miracles, like rain and volcanoes and other such life threatening events. Only you guys weren’t capable of recognizing them as life threatening before you were running from the lava or trying to get out of the flood.”

“So you’re saying something had to happen before humans could have religion?”

“You had to develop an imagination. You had to imagine something beyond today, beyond yourself, something beyond simple burial rituals, which happened when you stopped eating your dead and wanted the stink to go away, and that was when the Lion Man showed up.”

“Wait,” Morris said, “I read something about that a while ago, some sort of statue. A lion’s head and a man’s body carved from Mammoth ivory.”

“Right you are, Morris. It was in Europe, and the one most people know, was made 40,000 years ago. Give or take, but the fact is that Man, some time before that, started getting ideas beyond those of the other basically intelligent animals.

“At that time, there were cave lions around, big, ferocious beings, and somebody, don’t ask me who, got the idea that he’d like to be a cave lion. It was around the same time that humans started painting spirit animals on walls. People argue about these things but think, your brain somehow flipped, from just seeing the dull old world, to seeing the things in your dreams. Imagination, like I said. The Lion Man was a Shamanic religion, the Shaman would carve the Lion Man and then hold it while going into a trance. When he came back he interpreted his visions.”

“So this wasn’t a religion like we know today, old grampa telling us what to do?” asked Art.

“No, this was the original religion, this was man with a brain that fizzed and popped and created visions, one of the first was the Lion Man. Those other, those organized religions, came with writing, with stories that didn’t change, that were written down and interpreted by experts called priests, and argued over.

“If you look at them carefully you see something that’s almost anti-visions. Something that’s against the first religions, but there are still snips and pieces around, the mystic traditions, the slippery, direct things that appear in every major religion. Those sects that believe in a direct contact with the divine, or the spirit, or God or whatever you want to label it. If you go to those sects, you find a common thread running right back to the Lion Man.”

“Is that your religion then, Ingrid? The mystery cults of Greece, the Sufi, the Zen monks?”

“If you want to nail me down, then yes, the direct apprehension of the miraculous nature of the universe. I always had it, but humans got it only just over 40,000 years ago.”

“Just,” said Art.

“To me, yes, that’s like last month.”

“Oh lord, I’m flipping out again at those time lines.”

“Go with it, Art, imagine the age of the universe, imagine how old Coyote is, how old I am, skate back on all those years. Yes, I can see you’re both moving into that special mental state that let humans become religious. Some place that you could visit and bring back a radically new idea.

“OK both of you, come on back, Morris three more please, and remember, beer was one of those drugs that humans have used to get to the other place. They sure didn’t create beer and wine because the water was bad, they didn’t know about bacteria then.”

“So all our fancy pants brains are, is the ability to imagine other worlds?” Art said as he nodded thanks to Morris for another beer.

“All? Look what it let you apes do. Look around you. Yes, for tens of thousands of years you were little better than drug addicts with the visions and what not, but about five thousand years ago you figured out how to use those visions to work together and the world has been shaking ever since.”

“Ingrid, are we going to die off and leave you to watch what happens next?”

“Maybe, I don’t know, but I’ve watched a lot of things rise up out of the mud and fall back again. I’ll tell you one thing for sure, it’s going to be you idiots that wipe yourselves out, nothing else on this planet can challenge you. Well, maybe an asteroid, that’s happened before, but that’s not on planet is it?”

“Can we go back to the comfortable stuff please?”

“How about them sports teams eh?”

“Thank you Ingie.”

## **The Massey Hall Library**

As Sam looked over to the bar, she saw Morris in conversation with a woman. No big deal, but this one looked a bit desperate. She wandered over to see if she was needed.

“I don't know where else to go,” she was saying, “I've looked at every database I can find, every newspaper archive, every library. All I know is that he was in the Korean war, and that when he came home I was born, then he disappeared.”

“Your mother knows nothing?” Morris said.

“She refused to talk about it. Wouldn't even let me ask a



question before she shouted at me to let it be. She's gone now and I looked all through her papers but it was as if I'd never had a father.”

“Why is it important to you? That war was a long time ago, even for me, and you've made it to now without knowing. Why are you so sure you want to know?”

“When I was younger I had my job and a family of my own, it wasn't important at all, but somehow over the last couple of years I have to admit that it's become an obsession. I can't seem to let it alone. I need to find him.”

“He'd be ancient by now, are you sure he's still alive?”

“Alive or dead, I need to find him, find out what he did after he left us, why he left us.”

Sam sat on the edge of the next bar stool. “Sorry to butt in but are you sure you want to know? My father left early, like when I was four, and my mother died a few years later when I was fourteen. I was on the streets to grow up. When I eventually found the bastard, I realized I was better off without him.”

“But you know. You see what I mean? You know.”

Sam laid a hand on her shoulder and ordered a round from Morris for the students off in the corner. “I hope you find him then,” she said as she walked over with a table of beer for the students.

For fifty dollars, in Ken's Keller you can buy enough eight

ounce glasses of beer to cover one of the circular tables. The deal was especially popular with students who were in a hurry to get drunk. There was never any particular reason for them to rush, but they seemed to be desperate to forget their studies.

As Sam laid down the last one, two of the students picked up four glasses and tried to do a waterfall. One glass on the mouth and three more cascading into that glass. Of course most of it ended up on their laps and on the floor but that was fine with Ken, that meant they bought more beer, and the floors were easy to mop up at the end of the shift.

Sam shook her head and left them doing boat races, two teams had formed and each member would drink a beer, the next starting as the first slammed the glass back down on the table. One of the women at the table was far and away the fastest, and her team won every time.

When she got back to the bar for another table full, having left them to put their empties on the next table over, she heard Morris giving the woman some advice.

“If you're absolutely determined to find out what happened to your father, there's a place you can go. It's the Massey Hall Library, up at the University.”

“That's gone, it's the McLaughlin Library now. The Drama department uses Massey Hall.”

“Well, they thought they moved all the books over in 1968, but some remained,” said Morris.

Sam looked at him in surprise, she'd been in the building and it was just a few offices, a stage and storage rooms. The basement had been a coffee shop at one time but now it was full of props.

“What you need to do is use the door at the back of the building between 1:30pm and 2:30pm. When you go in it will be absolutely black, the light from outside doesn't go through the windows during that hour. State your request and then hold out your hand. Someone will take your finger and lead you to the book you need, they will put your finger on it.

“To the left, will be a book you can read to understand the book you need. To the right will be the next book you should read. Pick one of the books and then you will be led back out of the building. You must return the book the next night or the collectors will come get it.”

“Are you kidding me? That sounds pretty crazy,” said the woman, and Sam nodded too.

“There are books that you will never find anywhere else but this library, they are the books that you need,” said Morris, and picked up a glass to polish.

That seemed to be the end of the discussion, the woman finished her drink and left the bar.

Sam delivered another table of beer and picked up the empties. As she was loading the dishwasher she looked at Morris, “That was a very strange thing to tell that woman.”

“Look, from the day that Massey Hall was built, the blackened library has been there. In and between the daylight books, there were the books you need. I know, I used to use the place.”

“Are you kidding me now?”

“Sam what is so weird about a library of the books you need? Is it so much more strange than a coffee shop that changes size and has a bar in the basement and a railroad in the basement of the bar? This town is full of that sort of thing, if you know where to look.”

“So why have I never heard about the place?”

“Have you ever needed a book so badly you would do anything to find it? You have to be in deep need to hear about the library. They don't have the sort of books you read on the beach at the cottage.”

“What if you don't know what book you need?”

“You say, 'take me to the book I need,' and they will.”

“That sounds dangerous, you know that?”

“I know it's dangerous, I asked for the book I needed and I got it.”

“Why do I get the feeling you're not going to tell me anything more about it?”

Morris grinned and picked up another glass to polish. Sam took

the hint and went to pick up the glasses from her student's table, and a couple of the students who had fallen off their chairs.

When they finished their shift that evening, Sam insisted they walk up the hill to the University. It was 2:15pm when they got to the back of Massey Hall. As they watched, the door opened and a man came out. Darkness also came out, it was like it spilled out the door and onto the sidewalk, just like light would have. Sam frowned as the man blinked a few times in the dim light of a lamp over the door and then walked quickly away.

“OK it's there, but what is it, Morris?”

“I already told you, it's probably one of the worst traps on this earth, a place where you will learn what you need to learn.”

“That's a bad thing?”

“Oh yes, my dear, it absolutely is.”

Morris laid a hand gently on Sam's arm, “I know you, and I advise that you don't go in just to find out. You'll know when you need to go, go then.”

With that mysterious comment, Morris took Sam's arm and they walked back down the hill to their apartment.

That night Sam had disturbing dreams of her old teacher, and one about a brown fox who seemed to be watching her. It just looked, tipped its head and smiled.

## A Day Off

Morris and Sam had a day off. Ken had grumped and groaned, but eventually smiled and said, “I guess we can spare you two for a day, the customers really like to see my smiling face behind the bar.”

Morris carefully said nothing, causing Ken to laugh and make shooining motions at them.

Not every day is exciting and adventurous. Some days it's just a couple being together.

“Where shall we go?” said Sam.

“I don't know, it's just rained and the air smells pretty good, do you want to take a walk along the river if it's not too muddy?”

Sam looked at him carefully. Morris did not go to the river, that's where his dryad in the oak tree was, where he spent 40 years, although it felt like three days to him. Well, maybe he was recovering.

They walked along the path that the kids had made along the edge of the river and chatted. For all their living and working together, they didn't really know each other all that well. At work they were usually busy and at home they were usually busy.

“How was it, growing up on the streets, Sam?”

“Who said I grew up on the streets?”

“You did, the other day when I was talking to that woman who's looking for her father.”

“Oh, that. I was just trying to get her to consider that her father might not be worth finding.”

“So....”

“So I had a pretty ordinary childhood in Kitchener, Mom and Dad had their arguments but mostly it was pretty good. I wasn't all that sure of my direction in life, but who is? I went through high school and then some college before I found my teacher, after that I was pretty much full time in the dojo, every class of every art he taught.”

“Were you living at home?”

“No, no, I waitressed at the Huther Hotel and lived in a student house.”

“Didn't you hitch across the country at one point?”

“Yeah, I'd had enough of my teacher's bullshit one day and took off. I hitched and waitressed all the way out to Vancouver Island. I was gone about three years. I was working in Port Hardy at the Nax'id Pub, thinking about taking the ferry to Prince Rupert when he walked in. I don't know how he found me, but he told me that he wanted me to come back and train.”

“You did?”

“Of course I did, I was so in love with that guy I would have done anything he said.”

“You've been in Guelph ever since?”

“More or less, sometimes I would go for jobs elsewhere, sometimes I would go to seminars with my teacher. We went all over the world, more or less. Then I started going for seminars on my own, sometimes to teach, sometimes to challenge a rank.”

“Must have been exciting to see all those other places.”

“Well, a city is a city. Anywhere you go in North America the cities are newish, the chain stores are the same and the suburbs look like every other suburb. South America has it's look, and so does Europe, older buildings but the same chain stores. You don't dare lose your airline ticket or you'd never figure out where you were.”

“Having never been anywhere much, I envy you your travel, but you're not making it sound very interesting.”

“Oh it's OK, all I'm saying is that a city is a city, it's the people you want to see.”

“Got it, unless it's the George, a building is a pile of bricks or stone or steel.”



“What's up with the St. George, Morris?”

“It's alive, been alive for many decades. It was a place where the spirit beings lived and so the power sort of soaked into the walls. Because of that, it's alive and quite powerful.”

“Well that explains why it bounces all over town, is that also why we seem to know where it is?”

“Yep. You know, Guelph has always been a bit of an attraction to the spirit beings from both sides of the ocean. It's the sort of place where you end up putting down roots without realizing it.”

“What about you Morris? Have you always been in Guelph?”

“Oh yes, I grew up in the '60s here in Guelph, never been anywhere else.”

“No urge?”

“No reason, more like.”

“Listen, you OK to talk about the Oak tree?”

“Sure, but everybody thinks I spent 40 years there and so it must be really important to me. As far as I'm concerned, it was three days. My biggest memory is of being hungry at the end of the three days.”

“What about the Dryad?”

“What do you want me to say? I fell in love with her and I miss her terribly. Is it like you with your teacher? I suspect so.”

“Well aren't we a pair. Come on Mo, up out of this river valley and to the Wooly, I'll buy you a beer.”

“Busman's holiday is it?”

“I don't know what you mean, it's an entirely different pub.”

“Sold, let's go.”

When they had seated themselves at a table and ordered beers and nachos, Sam looked at Morris and said, “I'd like an honest answer, Mo, and you won't hurt me, I promise. Would you go back to your Dryad if you found her again?”

“What kind of question is that, Sam? She's gone, I've accepted that, what's the point of idle speculation?”

“I have a reason, Mo, listen, I love you and I don't say that very often to anyone. I always will love you, but I'd like to know if you would go back to your Dryad, I really would.”

“Not if I was still with you.”

“Are you serious? You were pretty deeply in love with her for a very long time. I know because I watched you suffer for years.”

“It was three days, so mostly It was a fantasy I was in love with. Look what's this about Sam?”

“I had some very strange dreams recently, of my teacher. I know he's gone, I buried him, but still, I've been wondering what I would do if he showed up alive.”

Morris stared into his beer for quite a long time, “Look, Sam, I love you deeply and yes, I always will love you, but your teacher was very important to you. If he showed up still alive I think I might tell you to go to him.”

“You know I wouldn't Mo.”

“And I know you would be torn up inside. Look, I tell you what, let's make a promise to each other that if my Dryad and your teacher ever show up again, we'll go to them with no regrets at all. OK?”

“Is it any wonder I've been in love with you for years Morris Minor? You are such a good person.”

“You sure it's not because I comp you a lot of free beer?”

“Well there's that too.”

## **How the World Started**

As Sam and Morris ordered another beer, Ingrid walked in with Art. The newcomers spotted their friends and came over to join them at their table.

“Surprised to see you here Mo, I hardly ever see you out of the Keller,” said Art.

“Has been known to happen, we had a day off and went for a walk, ended up here.”

“Not a bad place to end up.”

Art and Ingrid ordered and they traded gossip until the beer arrived. The Wooly was well acquainted with Ingrid and two of their largest mugs arrived in front of her.

“Ingrid, while you're here, I remember you talking to Art about the oldest religion, in the Keller. I've been thinking about that,” said Morris.

“I wouldn't think too hard about religion, Morris, especially the Lion Man, he's long dead but I liked him a lot, being a simple fellow.”

“Did the Lion Man religion have a creation myth?”

“Not that I ever heard, the world was just there for you to find when you woke up in the morning.”

“But you've been here since the beginning, how did it start.”

“You're kidding right? That's a Zen Koan, 'show me your face before you were born'. You can't know the creation story if you're involved in that creation. We Gods came into being at the same time as everything, we don't know what happened before that and frankly, we rarely bother to think about it.”

“But there's creation myths in the old Germanic religions aren't there? Didn't someone kill a Giant and create the world out of his body?”

“Sure, humans love to tell stories. Around here Coyote sang the world into existence, which, to tell you the truth, is probably accurate, but other stories have a woman falling out of the sky, landing on the back of a turtle and then one of the animals dredged up some mud which grew to become the world.

“It's amazing just how many of the stories involve mud. I am certain humans have a mud fetish. There is a story of a great buzzard flapping his wings to create the mountains from the mud. In other places some God or other, always the one the story-tellers worship, created man from mud or clay. Out west an eagle did that and then lay a feather next to the first man to become the first woman. You should ask Coyote about that one because he was the first to sleep with the woman, and it damned near killed him.”

Ingrid was grinning, you could tell she was starting to warm up, she loved stories, “The Celts and many others made men from trees, rather than mud. I guess it depends on what you've got around you to use.”

“Do you have a story yourself, Ingrid?”

“I don't worry about it, really, I lean toward the scientific theories, first there was nothing, then there was everything. At the core, that's pretty much the same as every other story. The difference is that the religions have some being doing the

creating and science is silent on that. Otherwise, it's something from nothing.”

Sam spoke up, she was still thinking of her discussion with Morris, “My teacher used to say the world was destroyed and recreated instant by instant, and we see that as time, it has no reason to be anything at all, but humans have guided it into a stable shape because we like that, so the world is whatever most people think it is. He used to call that “truth by democracy.” He said that the world actually changes a lot but humans hate that, so they just ignore the changes and they go away.”

“I like that one,” said Ingrid, “It substitutes a bunch of humans for a big chief-figure, God that is. There are lots of God-creators in Africa, but one story has the world coming from a big drop of milk. A God creates a stone which creates iron which creates the next thing. This sequential creation is also very common, after all you plant seeds and crops grow, you build a house from the foundation up, so of course your God has to go step by step.”

“It sounds like humans aren't very creative, the same story from all over the place,” said Morris.

“Well there's those who say everything started once and spread out with humans. The creation myths started along with religions after humans started to think in stories, that had to start somewhere, so why not?”

“Well what's your creation myth Ingrid, which one do you believe in.”

“Coyote is a good singer, and I've seen him sing a lot of things into and out of being. I also love the idea that he's sung the world into and out of existence hundreds of times, trying to get it right. I think that's my favourite. Unless of course I'm talking to modern thinkers, and then I go with the scientific explanation.”

“That all sounds sort of cynical,” said Art, “Not that I'm surprised.”

“Well, maybe so, Art, but if you want my opinion, the world is, existence is. What else is there. You pick a religion and that's your meaning of life, or you don't, and you create your own meaning. It comes to the same thing.”

“A Goddess who is not religious, what a concept.”

“Look, I didn't declare I was a Goddess, humans did, before that I was just another thing in the world.”

“Well Thing, we ought to get going and leave these two to their evening, we can catch up next time we're in the Keller.”

“You don't have to go on account of us,” said Sam.

“Nah, we ought to get home early, closing down every bar we're in gets a bit boring.”

“Says you, old man, come on I'll help you home.”

Morris and Sam stayed for one more pint and relaxed into their

day off. “Morris, you didn’t say what you believe?”

“I believe in you, and this town, and all the people in it. I believe the universe exists and the things in it are here so I believe in that. And I believe that the world and especially those I know, all define me.”

“You grew up in the ‘60s, not a religious family?”

“No, kiddo, I grew up in the heyday of Existentialism. ‘God is Dead and we Killed Him’ and all that. Nietzsche and Husserl and Sartre and de Beauvoir. That bunch. You define your own life, in relationship to others.”

“That sounds like my teacher.”

“It was pretty strong, made lots of sense to lots of people, so I’m not surprised. You’re still thinking about him.”

“Can’t seem to forget him, sorry.”

“Don’t be, Love isn’t a pie to be sliced and eaten, love endures, and just gets wider without losing depth.”

“Morris Minor, you are a poet.”

“I was, certainly. A long time ago.”

“Why did you stop?”

“You mean why did I start again? The answer is you, would you like to read some of it?”



“You know I would.”

“You know what? I think that not only religion started when that flip happened in our brains, I think love started then, and I think that was the beginning of everything.”

“Love is the creation of the universe?”

“And vice versa, what else?”

“Romantic, you’re a romantic.”

“With reason, Sam, with good reason. Come on, I’ll settle up and we can go home... God I love the sound of that, you and I will go home now.”

“Romantic, type incurable.”

## **Rescue in Calgary**

Cleo was just pulling in to Calgary. Apparently the Giants weren’t finished, Ben had contacted the St. George and that being had contacted Cleo. The Giants somehow, possibly because he was the nearest involved being, decided that Iggy had something to do with the foiling of their plans. They had snatched him and Ben couldn’t find where.

Cleo met Ben at Ken's apartment where he was staying, Ken

Kobold and the St. George having come to an agreement to share resources, and not work at cross purposes. As she walked in, Ben launched himself from the chesterfield and gave her a huge hug. Cleo enjoyed it for a while and then hugged back, causing Ben to gasp and wheeze for a few moments. When that was done, Cleo headed for the shower and Ben made a light meal for the two of them.

“I didn't know you were coming Cleo, it's so good to see you.”

“Of course I came, it's Giants, you're going to need my help.”

“I don't know how much more we can do, Cleo, they seem to have him well hidden.”

“Tomorrow we'll head to your buddy's cafe and I'll see if I can pick up anything from the oil execs there.”

“Are you sure that's wise? They'll remember you won't they?”

“You're kidding, right? Ben do you know if your barista this morning was a man or a woman?”

“Oh, I guess you're right, but some of those guys were hitting on you.”

“They were hitting on the girl who served them their coffee, noticing her would be like noticing the toilet you used this morning. Look, to someone with money, servers are just facilities, don't worry about it, if you want, I'll put my hair up, there's no way in the world they will recognize me then.”

“You make me feel ashamed of not knowing who served me this morning.”

“Why? We've got much more input to our senses than we can possibly process. Large swathes of what comes in is dismissed as 'not a problem' and that's how you get through your day. If you noticed everyone you met you wouldn't have the brain processes to keep walking.”

“Well, I guess you've got a point, just be careful.”

“I always am, now, do you think you could stop noticing the wallpaper long enough to walk over here without falling down? I'd rather like you in the bed.”

“I'll try my best.”

“Claudine, eh? You're new aren't you. I like your hair.”

The Data Manager had no recollection of the girl he'd met a couple of weeks ago, the girl who stole his keys and then gave them back. The girl who got him fired. He was re-hired of course, when they decided that he was irreplaceable, but he was told not to flirt with the girls in the coffee shop any more.

The warning had the expected result. “So when are you off shift? Do you want to go for a beer?”

He screamed. He hadn't meant to, but it wasn't as if screaming was frowned upon here, wherever here was, after all he was being tortured. His left little toe had just been stepped on by a Giant.

It had started out as a giggle, but the scream sort of snuck out. He wanted to giggle because he'd convinced the Giants who were torturing him, and had wanted to break his fingers, that he needed his fingers to work for them. This after they had kidnapped him and threatened to kill him if he didn't tell them what they wanted to know.

So the fingers weren't really something that he, in his future dead state, needed. But they let go his hand, and then stepped on his foot.

He would have confessed right then, but he was in trouble. You see, he had no idea what they wanted, what information they were trying to torture out of him. He had indeed asked, but the torturers didn't seem to have a clear idea either. They just knew that there was something he was supposed to tell them.

He had tried "My name is Iggy," and, "I wrote the software for you, I didn't know it was going to be stolen," and, "The data manager is my third cousin," and even, "It's Saturday," all of which was true, but apparently wasn't what they wanted to hear.

He rather suspected they wanted him to tell them who helped him steal the software, but that would mean he would have to admit he'd helped steal it, and unless they asked him that directly, he wasn't going to volunteer that information.

Iggy just hoped that the idiots that had stolen his carefully written spike code, would come and rescue him while he still had a couple of toes.

“He's in the basement.”

“What?”

“Seriously, the basement of their office building.”

“You're kidding? Who would hide a prisoner in the basement of their corporate headquarters?”

Cleo waited.

“Giants.”

“Alright we know where, let's go get him. Do we still have the keys?”

“I've got a new set off of my new boyfriend, we're going to meet in the back stair and he's going to show me his big office tomorrow night.”

“Well that's helpful, do we need anything else?”

“Probably, but we won't know until we need it, at which time we start fighting. Let's go now.”

With that, Cleo handed Ben one of two talismans that the St. George had given her. “Touch this with your hand and say 'invoke', it's a disguise, makes us look like Giants.”

The back door was still unlocked, the stairwell was still camera free. Apparently nobody had figured out they had a massive security hole because the execs liked to bring their mistresses to their offices.

Going down this time, they came to a locked door, which Cleo opened carefully with her master key. If you suspect a man of helping the enemy, give him a master key, seemed to be the thinking.

Looking through the crack in the door, Cleo saw a hallway with a Giant on guard. He seemed to be in front of an important door, Cleo figured she'd found Iggy. A scream from behind that door confirmed it.

Cleo was through the door and in a run toward the guard. She was half way there before he noticed and he did what all Giants do when startled, he grew to enormous size. In an eight foot tall hallway.

His head went through the ceiling tiles just about when Cleo hit him in the knee with her hammer. As his head came down out of the ceiling, she finished him off.

Ben was behind her by then and put a hand on her shoulder to let her know. Cleo turned to the door, realized it was a combination lock, and shrugged Ben aside. A swing of her hammer blew the door off of its hinges and into the room.

Iggy was the first to see his rescuers, since he was tied to a chair facing that direction. The two giants soon turned as well.

These didn't seem to be quite as stupid as the guard, they didn't try to grow, but instead reached for pistols. What? You figured they would have clubs? Not indoors.

Cleo went left and Ben went right, splitting their attention. One gun apiece to worry about. Ben drew a throwing knife and sent it directly at his Giant's face where it hit, unfortunately hilt first, but he wasn't worried about that, the Giant's aim was disrupted and his free hand went up toward his face.

Ben was on him, he swung a machete, purchased for a reasonable sum from Bass Pro Shops in the Crossiron Mills Outlet Mall. (He had a sponsorship contract.) The Giant's gun hand went flying in one direction and the Machete came back the other way, cutting across his throat.

In the meantime, Cleo had used her hammer in a similar way, sending it toward her Giant's face, only this time it hit business end first and crushed that Giant's skull.

Not a long fight? That's good isn't it? The less exciting the fight, the better chance of surviving it.

They had Iggy, out of the chair in a moment, and after explaining things, walked him slowly out the door. Coming on a wandering employee, they yelled, "Out of the way, prisoner transfer," and left the building.

## **The Three Sisters**

“Alright, we need to get the geek someplace safe, and I think I’ve got the right place,” said Cleo when they had got back to the apartment.

“Tomorrow? He needs time to heal, none of his toes are broken, although I don’t know how they aren’t. Too small to be crushed maybe?”

“Who knows, let him sleep. Order in some Chinese Ben, and we’ll have an evening together.”

Ben looked at her, and looking, he realized just how much he liked her. It looked like she felt the same way from the tilt of her head. He grabbed his cell phone and sat beside her on the chesterfield. As he did, Cleo leaned sideways and put her head on his shoulder.

Chinese ordered, Cleo asked, “How much time do we have.”

“Long enough, I suspect.”

Moving to the bedroom, the two of them found that there wasn’t quite enough time. The doorbell rang while they were still engaged in relations, as Ben’s granny used to put it.

Cleo shrugged Ben’s shirt on and padded to the door. Outside was a delivery boy with a large bag. As she opened the door,



she moved aside, the kid shoved a gun forward and fired, hitting the chesterfield. That was his last move, Cleo had his wrist and twisted, spiral fractures went up his forearm and as he started to scream, Cleo crushed his throat with stiffened fingers.

“Damn it, and no food,” she said as she opened the bag. “Ben, when was the last time you replaced that phone!”

Ben was in the bedroom doorway with a gun of his own in his hand, “Last week, but it looks like I need to toss it right now.”

“That sort of eavesdropping and a single shooter isn’t Giant style, there’s some other group in play here.”

“We have to move out, I’m afraid, is your safe house ready for us tonight?”

“It will take us a few hours to get there, they’ll know we’re coming.”

“Well let’s get moving, somebody is going to miss this kid.”

“Check his pockets, I’ll wake up sleeping beauty and we’re out of here in ten.”

As they were heading down the back stairs, Iggy over Cleo’s shoulder and Ben leading the way, gun out, he asked, “Find anything?”

“Driver’s license, nothing to tell us who sent him. His gun was something you could buy on the street, again, no clues there.”

“Technique?”

“Typical low-level killer, could be anyone.”

“I knew him,” said Iggy as he bounced up and down with Cleo’s steps.

Cleo stopped, spun around so Iggy could talk to Ben. “Who?”

“One of ours, a grey hat, he was after me I suspect, that also explains Ben’s phone, it wasn’t bugged, just hacked. He would have turned on the GPS and found us that way.”

“Who hired him?”

“That I don’t know, I’ve seen him in the cafe you guys used last time you were here.”

“You grey hats make a habit of shooting each other?”

“Absolutely not, at least not most of us, I suppose there are a few government agents floating around with some sort of training.”

“If you’ve got some support can you find his boss?”

“Depends on whether he left any breadcrumbs.”

With that Cleo turned again and went down the rest of the stairs. At the garage, she pushed the key she’d taken off the hook in the apartment and a beat-up old Toyota Landcruiser

honked. “That one.”

“They got Iggy into the back seat and told him to stay low, Cleo took the wheel and they flew out of the garage doors onto the street, just in case there was someone else waiting.

Nobody shot at them, so Cleo slowed down and they drove west out of Calgary, heading to the mountains. Keeping up with the flow of traffic, they stayed on the Trans Canada, there not being enough country roads to bother using them.

They drove for about an hour and turned onto the Smith Dorrien trail at Dead Man’s Flats, using this road to go around behind the Three Sisters. Once there, Cleo turned on a goat track toward the mountain and they drove to a mine head. They stopped in front of the rotted gate and Cleo got out, let out a massive whistle and faced the gate. It swung open and Cleo drove a long way in. They passed a few more gates that opened and closed behind them, eventually coming to a stop deep inside the mountain.

“All out,” said Cleo as they were met by five Kobold men, complete with massive hammers and modern rifles.

Cleo picked up Iggy and led the way to a door in the rock, this opened as she came close and once inside they were in a modern industrial office. Ben looked around and said, “How long has this been here?”

“About a hundred years, said a voice from behind them,” They turned to find Ken Kobold walking toward them.

“Ben, this is Ken Kobold. Ken, this is Ben, agent from the St. George and the guy who is helping us.”

“And the flatfoot?”

“That’s Iggy, the hacker, Ken why are you here?”

“It’s on the railway line, easy enough to get here so here I am to see what’s going on.”

“We got Iggy back, obviously, but there’s another player, they tried to kill us earlier today. Iggy recognized him. By the way, your apartment is compromised.”

“No problem, I own the building, we’ll just change the locks and the new safe house is somewhere else in the building.”

“Right, again, sorry about that.”

Ken waved his hand in dismissal and then called, “Get a healer in here, that guy hobbling around looks like he’s in pain, and then I want to talk to him, and you two, get some sleep.”

Cleo and Ben turned around and Cleo led them to a residence wing, “We can use this room, now, where were we?”

“Jesus woman, I’m an old man you know.”

“You’re younger than me, quit your complaining and get over here.”

“OK kid, who the hell are you and why are you mixed up in this,” Ken growled.

“I’m an old friend of Ben, I was working to screw up the Giants when Cleo and Sam showed up with Ben.”

“OK, so what are you, exactly?”

“I’m a hacker, I work both sides but I’ve got ethics, a bit of industrial sabotage, fine, but no crashing systems or blowing up power plants. I work a lot for the good guys like Ben.”

“You’re an independent?”

“Yep, I pick my jobs carefully, you work for someone else and eventually you get caught.”

“Who was the guy at my front door, tried to shoot you?”

“I’ve seen him around in an internet cafe in Calgary, but he must be a government agent or a military contractor. Hackers don’t often go around trying to shoot other hackers, we usually just rat them out to the police.”

“No idea who ran him?”

“Not really, I just saw him around.”

“Right. You, go get the pocket litter Cleo collected and see who that guy was... Not now you idiot, she’ll be busy, give them an hour.”

## Cleo's Story

Cleo and Ben weren't particularly busy, just lying back in bed and resting. Ben had some questions, "Who the hell is Ken Kobold and how does he have these resources?"

"Good question, he's my cousin but that doesn't mean I know what he's up to. I know he's on the side of light, always has been. He's got a lot of money and even more power. Our government, that's the Kobold government, which covers anywhere Kobolds are, uses him for all sorts of jobs they don't want to be seen doing. As far as I know he's officially unofficial."

"So an independent like the St. George?"

"As I understand it, but neither are really independent, Megan oversees the St. George and Ken has a lot of people that keep an eye on what he does. What about Iggy and his friend in the apartment? Who are they working for?"

"Iggy is freelance, and I haven't a clue about the kid with the gun, neither does Iggy, as he told us on the drive here. The kid had to be an agent for someone, hackers don't usually shoot each other."

"Well maybe Ken can dig up something from his license and the other stuff in his pocket.... Oh damn, there's going to be somebody outside the door waiting for that stuff, I forgot to

hand it over. Just a minute.”

Cleo padded over to the door, not bothering to put anything on, and pulled it open to reveal a Kobold with eyes like pie plates. “Oh get over it boy, here’s what you were sent to get, now get.”

“You did that on purpose,” said Ben as she hopped back into the bed.

“Damn right I did, Kobolds are so uptight. They need to get used to seeing women naked. The men control the women through the old women, who make a huge fuss if you show an ankle. It allows things like rape as control. If sex were no big thing, if women weren’t told they were soiled and that it was their fault, then rape as a military weapon would disappear. It’s our own damned society that hands that power over to our enemies.”

“That sounds pretty ominous Cleo, were you... uh”

“Yes, in the last Giant war I was uh. Say it Ben, I was gang raped for three days. The thing is, they really didn’t want to do it, me being a filthy Kobold, but they figured I would break. I didn’t.”

“And...”

“And I got my chance, got my hands on a good strong piece of pipe and shoved it up a few asses, then caved their heads in. I had to wait three days until they figured I was subdued, and then I paid them back. Later, after the war was over I made sure they heard my testimony. Even my own damned side

wanted me to shut up. 'Too soiled. Nobody will marry you if you tell, you'll be ruined.' Well fuck that, this culture needs a kick in the testicles and our women need to do the kicking."

"By the look on that Kobold's face it might take a while."

"I've got time."

"And the experience hasn't upset you?"

"Of course it has, not the rape, but the reactions to it by my own people. I'm so mouthy about it that working for Ken is about the best job I can get. He doesn't employ idiots. The rest of them? Let's just say they don't want to employ a "fallen woman."

"You don't look too fallen to me, rather you look about six inches taller than you usually do."

"Oops, sorry about that. While the bastards were raping me I stole some of their ability to get bigger."

"Well I like big woman, but uh, how big can you get?"

"Full Giant size and I'll thank you not to repeat that. It's a little surprise that has saved my life a couple of times."

"My lips are sealed."

"They'd better not be, this wanton woman, this soiled dove, has something in mind that requires them to be unsealed."



An hour or so later, the two of them wandered back to the main room to see what had been happening.

Ken looked up from the table and nodded. “The kid wasn’t very good at his job, that was his real ID, but he works for the Kappa.”

“The Japanese are involved?”

“Just the Kappa, the rest of the Yokai are neutral, but the Kappa are aligned with the anti-Mufferaw faction of the Giants.”

“What’s in it for them?”

“The usual, better ponds, victims with bigger balls of soul up their bums, people who don’t know enough to fart at them when they attack.”

“But nobody has ever given them that.”

“Everybody lives in hope that the other guy will do what he promises, kid.”

“Kappa?” said Ben.

“Water spirits in Japan, not very bright.” Cleo answered as Ken smiled.

“Hence the kid carrying his real ID.”

“What did they want with a hacker?”

“Probably wanted a back door into the Giant’s database, who knows.”

“Was Iggy working for them?”

“I doubt it, the boy is smart but a terrible liar. I’ll probably keep him here, he loves our equipment, and he seems to have a thing for Kate, one of our nurses.”

“You’re calling Kate a nurse?”

“Well she doesn’t like ‘crusher’, so yes. Anyway, Iggy has already managed to scrape up the kid’s code and now we’ve got our own back door into the Giants through the Kappa.”

“So you’ll know their moves when they know them, very nice.”

“Look, why don’t you two bugger off to Banff for a day or two, relax and recreate while we finish this project.”

“Ken do you even know what recreate is?”

“Opposite of procreate, get out of my mountain will you?”

Cleo took Ben’s hand and walked him out to the cars, grabbing a pass to the park and a set of keys to one of Ken’s apartments in town.

“You like rattlesnake, Ben?”

“The Grizzly House?”

“You’ve been there?”

“Way back when it was a swinger’s place, are the phones still at the tables?”

“Sure are. There are still old folks who remember.”

“Like us, right?”

Cleo gave him a quick hug and jumped into the Land Cruiser, “Come on old timer, let’s have some fun.”

As they roared off up the road, skidding and swerving on the washboard gravel, Ken was talking to a young Kobold, “Look, you little shite, you’re lucky all you did was pop out your eyes. One wrong word to Cleo and she would have sent you down to Kate with a broken arm. Once there Kate might have broken the other one.”

“But it’s not decent.”

“Kid, do you like your job here? Yes? Then get that garbage out of your head. Cleo has been fighting the Giants since before you were born. If she wants to parade around naked, I’m good with that, more than good, she’s got a wonderful body. You will stop thinking that women are frail and need your protection and approval to walk around, or one of them will snap you in half, you get me?”

The kid seemed to think about that, to his credit, and then said, “I think so boss.”

“Good, next time Cleo or any other woman does you the favour of showing you her body, say bloody thank you and get on with your day, now get on with your day.”

## **The Eternal Hero**

Sam had another dream, not of her teacher, but of the brown fox. It, no, not it, she, she didn't do or say anything, just sat off to the side and watched as Sam's normal dreams drifted by. It was as if she was watching for something. Sam wasn't sure what, but Sam was sure she meant no harm.

When she had told Morris about it, he suggested that perhaps Sam had her spirit animal. “Maybe you should go talk with Megan, or with Kit.”

“I don't know, Morris, why should I get a spirit animal? I'm nobody special.”

“You know Sam, sometimes I think you mean that. You are absolutely not, ‘nobody special’. Not to me, not to anyone around here that knows you.”

“Oh you know what I mean, Mo.”

“I don't, I absolutely don't. Isn't part of your training to know who you are and to read other people?”

“It is.”

“So read my mind, girl, tell me what you see.”

“I don’t have to do that, I get it, I’m special to you, and you’re special to me. And I’ve got a lot of friends.”

“A lot of friends who would be very upset to lose you. Look, if you’ve got a spirit animal to look after you, accept it OK? Do it for me if you don’t think you’re worth it.”

“Next time she shows up I’ll ask her, how’s that?”

“Good, now let’s get to work.”

“Hang work, we can have another hour in bed, lover, let’s have it.”

“You didn’t get enough sleep last night?”

“None at all, as you well know... well maybe an hour or two, I had that dream in there some time. I think.”

Morris grinned and reached for her.

Later that day, Megan and Stan came in for a pint. They usually sat at the bar where Morris caught them up on all the gossip. It was a fairly slow afternoon so Sam wandered over and sat on a barstool.

“Megan, is there any reason I would have a spirit animal?”

“All sorts of reasons, Sam, why wouldn’t you?”

Morris frowned a warning at Sam and she smiled at his concern. “It’s just that I’ve dreamt of a fox a couple of times.”

“Doing what?”

“Just watching, watching me, watching my dream I guess. Just watching.”

“Describe the fox please.”

“Small, brown, magnificent tail, and I’m sure it’s female.”

Stan laughed, “That would be Miss Generica.”

Megan glared at Stan, “Not a lot to go on, Sam, but we don’t know every spirit fox around, there’s a lot of the Keen family over here from Europe, and then there’s our own foxes. If it’s a spirit fox and not just something in your dream, then I don’t think it’s doing much but the obvious, watching over you. Be happy, accept gifts graciously, never feel you aren’t worthy of spirit protection.”

Morris grinned at Sam, who frowned, “Thanks Megan, I appreciate it.”

Megan squeezed her hand, and Sam went back to the tables.

“What’s up, Morris?”

“That’s really it, Megan, just a recurring dream about a fox, or rather dreams that include the fox watching. She doesn’t know anything more.”

“All right, I’ll check into it, I’m sure it’s nothing, but Sam does have enemies.”

“Thanks Megan, the next round’s on me.”

“I’ll take yours if you’ve had enough Sweetie.”

“You’re really asking for it Stan, I swear.”

Sam walked to a new customer and asked what he’d like. “A beer and an ear if you don’t mind.”

“Well I can do the beer, why do you want to bend my ear, people usually talk to Morris at the bar, I’m kind of busy waiting tables.”

The fellow looked around and Sam said, “point taken, I’ll be back with your pint.”

When she came back, she pulled out a chair and sat down, “I may have to go do a bit of work if it’s a long story.”

“No problem, as you can see from my big professional camera here, I’m a photographer. There was a fire across town earlier

today, so here's my story."

As I walked by the scene, the fire was still raging on the second floor, fire hoses blew water through the windows and onto the roofs of the buildings on either side.

I was on a side street that had somehow not been blocked off, so I got quite close to take pictures. As I approached, I heard snatches of conversations.

"...two kids, one on each shoulder..."

"...a real hero, too bad..."

"...ran straight in..."

"... must have been agonizing..."

I was looking up at the second floor and just about tripped as I hit the stretcher with my foot.

"Ow, watch it shithead," I heard and then "Aw shit, not again."

I looked down and the body bag was moving. I almost ran but that voice said "A little help buddy? The zipper is on the outside."

I knelt and, holding my breath just in case, I started to unzip the bag. Hands grabbed the bag from inside and ripped the zipper open.



“Every damned time, they put me in a bag and just leave me off in the dark, well I suppose it’s better than being in a damned morgue and having to kick a door off its hinges. Thanks buddy, you’re a peach. I’d get out of here if I was you, someone will get snippy when they find a body gone.”

She was wearing clothing that was half burned off of her, as she sat up I saw hunks of burned flesh fall off her back, but underneath was ordinary skin.

“What the hell,” I started.

“Look, find me some clothes and buy me a coffee man, I’ll tell you the story but I’m begging you, let’s get the hell out of here before someone notices the body is gone.”

We hurried down the street and I asked her what size she was before I went around the corner to the bargain store. Coming back with Jeans, shirt, sweater and wind breaker, I handed them over.

“What, no socks and shoes? I guess these will do for now. OK I’m dressed, let’s go get a coffee and something sweet, I’m always low on sugar when I come back.”

“Come back?”

“Dude, seriously, keep up, a dead body just came back

to life and if that dead body doesn't get some coffee and a sticky bun it's going to be cranky, and you know what that will mean."

"Come back?" I said again, proving just how fast I think.

"Right," she took my arm, "this way, I see a sign."

Once we got to the coffee shop and got settled, she seemed to calm down. She went to the bathroom and came back with her face washed and her hair slicked back so that the singed ends weren't so obvious. She still smelled like an apartment fire, but that could have been the smoke drifting in from up the street.

"Now you want to know what's going on right?"

I nodded and raised my camera, "No," she said, "no photos, my face never changes so I never let anyone photograph me any more.

"OK this is going to save some time, have a look at this photo on my phone. Yes, that's me in 1880, and again in 1903, and then in 1936. You can see why I don't want to add to the collection."

"But maybe someone photoshopped..." I stopped at the look on her face.

"Do you accept that I'm very old? Well I'm older than that. You can write this down, just don't take pictures.

Nobody is going to believe a story like this anyway, but a few people have managed to make a buck or two, you might be able to sell it.

“It happened like this. I was just a damned slave in Egypt when there was a fire and just like today, I ran into the storehouse and dragged three or four people out. I died from the wounds, but shortly after that I woke up, my skin seems to shed the dead skin and there’s new stuff underneath.

“Burns are the easiest for me to heal. Crushed limbs or getting my head severed takes a while, especially if people put my head somewhere away from my body.

And you know what? That’s pretty much the story.”

“So you’re some kind of eternal hero then.”

“Are you joking? Look at me, I can feel the burns, I feel the arms cut off and I feel it when I die of blood loss. I feel it every God Damned Time. And it hurts.

“Look, I die painfully, I wake up, something else happens I have to rescue someone and I die again. Over and over for five damned thousand years.”

“It does sound horrible,” I said, trying to be sympathetic, “but can’t you just not run into burning buildings and die?”

She gave me a look so long suffering, so almighty tired,

I regretted asking.

“I tried, believe me, I tried. Thing is, I save people or I don’t save people, I die that day. The fire makes the building fall on me as I run away. The soldiers find me and rape me to death, and those people I could have saved are dead. I still try every hundred years or so, but it doesn’t matter. I save people or I don’t, I die. So I just give in and save people.”

“Jesus,” I said, “is that what being a hero is? That’s rough. And you have to hide your identity as well?”

“No, I mean I used to try to hide who I was, I’d move, I’d change my name, but what’s the point? Nobody ever believes me anyway.”

“So what’s with the photos?”

“Photos make the army types interested. Every few years some government agency or another finds me and kidnaps me into a facility where they pull me apart trying to figure out how I lived so long. They never seem to get it that I don’t live long at all, and when they eventually kill me, they figure that’s just their mistake and they usually dump me in an alleyway somewhere, just another dead junkie.”

“What if you get buried?”

“I wake up and either dig myself out or I die again and show up somewhere else. Same with cremation, I wake

up, die in agony and wake up somewhere else. And before you ask, yes I've tried killing myself. I wake up.

“One time I tied rocks to my feet and fell into the ocean after shooting myself. I woke up in time to be crushed just before I drowned. AND I WOKE UP SOMEWHERE ELSE.

“I got married a few times, even tried to have kids, but I always die before they are born. Good thing I figure, what if they turn out like me? By the way, it's usually my husband or wife that I have to rescue, and if they see me wake up again, it usually gets explained away as them being hysterical and seeing things. Sometimes they end up in a mental hospital so I try to play dead until they're out of eyesight.

“So there you are Ace, one story in return for a hand with a body bag and some clothes. You got any spare cash on you? I usually get a job to pay my way until I die again, but I'd really like to just sleep for a day instead. I'm tired.”

“You could come home with me,” I suggested.

“Absolutely not! Didn't I explain about my attempts at having a family? Look the people I rescue are those that are close to me, I mean I don't drive to the next town and run into a burning apartment. Those kids were my next door neighbours. Ask yourself, am I that lucky to be beside the folks I rescue, or do I cause the situation? Do you want to take that chance?”

I pulled a hundred dollars out of my wallet and gave it to her. She said thanks and walked away.

Sam shook her head, “Are you shitting me? I’ve never heard of that and I usually hear about the weird shit in this town.”

“I don’t know, it was only this morning, maybe it’s her first time dying in this town?”

Sam thought a moment and then said, “Come with me over to the Bar.”

After having the fellow repeat his story, Megan frowned, “I know that poor creature, her story is true, one of those idiot Egyptian gods figured he’d reward her by bringing her back to life. Often that sort of reward can be a curse. Just leave her be, she’s saved countless lives at a stupendous cost to herself.”

“Can’t the other Spirit Beings help her?” asked Sam.

“We tried, believe me, but it’s too late, maybe at the beginning, but her fate is mostly habit now. We even tried to end her existence, but life has a power all its own.”

“It’s a wonder she’s not insane.”

“She was a slave, grew up as a slave, this probably just seemed to be a continuation of her life as she knew it. How you react to the world is mostly in your own power, she has accepted her world as it is.

“The best thing we can do is be kind to her and not remind her of her fate. Also, before you argue Sam, it's best not to remind us just how powerless we are to help her.”

“So comp her meals and drinks and slip her some cash so she can get some rest?”

“That's the best we've been able to do. Sometimes that's all we can do.”

## **A Banff Visit**

Cleo rolled into Banff and went straight to the parking lot behind the Rose and Crown. They went in past the empty beer kegs and found a table away from the window.

“You realize what we just did don't you?”

“We're both still alive Ben, don't knock paranoia.”

Ben grinned and ordered them a couple of beers, “What shall we do Cleo?”

“A few beers here and then to the Grizzly for some meat on a hot stone. It's been a few years. After that, we'll wander and see what there is to see, we'll pretend we're Gorbies and annoy the locals with our tourist antics.”

“Sounds like you've been here a few times.”

“You want to spend the night? Ken will spring for the Banff Springs, he really doesn't grudge his agents a bit of luxury. He grumbles but pays up in the end.”

“The last time I was here it was in the Hostel. Sure, and let's do the Hot Springs, we can have a soak with the other tourists, I'll wear a wool bathing outfit and you can laugh at me, then the Hotel.”

“Perfect. Why were you in the hostel?”

“A buddy and I drove out to do an Aikido seminar, and I went on to the Queen Charlottes, oops, Haida Gwaii now, as it should be. That was about forty years ago.”

“Well, the band is assembling, one more beer and then dinner, shall we?”

“I follow your commands my queen.”

“Princess, actually.”

“What! Are you kidding?”

“No, daughter of the last King of the Kobolds. We don't have Kings any more, but they let me keep the title, not that I use it.”

“Oh dear, should I bow or something?”

“You do and I'll ding you on the ear. What better way to announce me to the Giants, maybe a big sign too?”



“OK no respect for you.”

“Ding, Ear.”

Ben grinned and finished his beer. They walked over to the Grizzly House and ate their fill of exotic meat fried on a hot stone. A couple of times, Ben looked up and saw a double row of sharpened teeth in Cleo's mouth. If she noticed she closed her mouth grinned, and opened it again with some perfectly normal human teeth.

“You ever get confused while making love?” asked Ben.

“Depends how excited I get.”

“So I'm safe?”

“You really are going to get a ding, sonny.”

After supper they wandered up and down Banff Avenue, checking out the rock shops, the expensive cottage clothing, the Japanese tourists and the shopkeepers trying to keep a smile on their faces.

As they faced the other way, Ben pointed and said, “We walked up the ski slope on Norquay when we were here. At one point we had to go up on hands and knees.”

“Exciting times, you never visited in the winter?”

“Are you kidding, I'm still alive, a slope that steep terrifies

me.”

“Not a skier then.”

“Once, in Collingwood. Knocked out a tooth and split the side of my mouth.”

“I was going to ask you about that scar.”

“My buddies said 'go on, you're a natural athlete,' it was spring ice and dull rental skis, back when they tied them to your ankles.”

“And I bet you tucked and rolled.”

Ben grinned, “Too much Aikido I guess, wrong instincts for skiing.”

“Well it gives you a bit of dash. You ready for a dip?”

“Yeah, let's go, I'll show you the bathing suit styles of my youth.”

“Dude, you're not that old, on the other hand, I remember them and you're not getting me into one of those things.”

At the Hot Springs they had a nice soak, and Cleo took lots of photos of Ben in his silly outfit. When it was wet it just hung off of him, still she had to admit his muscles filled it out nicely.

Eventually, they decided to get out of the pool and go to the Banff Springs Hotel. They arrived and parked, wandered into

the front entrance. Ben started for the desk but Cleo tugged his elbow to the elevators.

They rode up to the fourth floor and got out, Cleo led Ben around a few corners to a very decrepit looking stairwell. Up one landing and they were facing what looked like a broom closet. Ben nodded toward a security camera and Cleo said, "Smile."

She showed that double row of filed teeth while Ben tried his best.

A door opened and they stepped into a large storeroom. As the hall door closed, the back wall slid aside and they were faced with two serious looking Kobolds holding quite large hammers.

A red light was blinking which soon turned green. One of the guards looked down at his wrist, "Welcome Cleo and Ben, you have been identified, please follow the hallway down to number 65."

Ben turned to Cleo, "By my reckoning, we're between the fourth and fifth floors."

"You're right, this place is well over a hundred years old and entire floors have been lost, including this one that Ken owns."

"Owns?"

"One of the original builders, this floor has always been lost."

As they approached number 65 a ragged cheer erupted from the

room. When they got there an older Kobold waved them in, “Welcome visitors, you came at an excellent time.”

“We were just looking for a room for the night,” said Cleo.

“You shall have it, but look you, the Giant’s bases in Canada are falling.”

“What? I thought we were sent here to work?”

“You would have been, certainly, but Ken, over in Canmore had some Computer hacker that managed to get a complete list of Giant and Kappa bases, we’ve just got a couple to go, in the Yukon and Newfoundland. A bit more difficult to get to but there, you see? The Yukon base just fell, and the last one in Cornerbrook is about to collapse. We’ve done it.”

“What’s that mean for the Giant rebellion?”

“Canada was the last, Europe was pacified, Mufferaw has the nation.”

“Peace?”

“Yes, Princess, peace at last. You can rest.”

“Not before we drink with you to this.”

It was quite a party, Ben fell asleep, thankfully before he could do brain damage but Cleo kept up their side and drank most of the base under the table. When the night was finally called, she picked Ben up and carried him to their room.

She didn't wake him, just undressed and climbed in with him. Threw her arm over him and murmured, "Mine" before she dropped off.

She didn't notice the small smile on Ben's face.

## **The Battle of the Banff Springs Hotel**

"So what do we do now?" asked Ben as he stretched in the bed, his spine popping.

Cleo was obviously appreciating the way his thigh muscles moved under his pants, and the shape of his shoulders, "Well I think first we get you undressed, then we hit the shower and then we're back in bed here until we get too hungry to stay any longer.

"Well I guess that's as good a plan as any other I can think of."

Two hours later Cleo was hungry, Ben could tell because her filed teeth started to appear, "Right, let's get breakfast before you take a chunk out of me."

Cleo grinned, "Shower first, we need another one."

It didn't help, the Kobold men in the cafeteria threw envious looks at Ben as they walked by. Kobold noses were quite sensitive. Ben was walking behind Cleo and it seemed like her

hips were swaying a bit more than usual.

Piling a couple of trays high, Ben realized the food was spectacular, he looked a question at one of the servers who said, "Catered by the hotel today, compliments of Ken."

Ben grinned and joined Cleo who was already sitting at a long table of Kobolds. Cleo seemed to know most of them, "Ben, these are the agents who took out the Giant base up under the waterfall in Johnston canyon. That's where we were headed."

"Well thank you Gentlemen, while we were playing tourist you were working, we appreciate it."

"Our pleasure," said one of the larger beings, "We aren't much for sneaking around, so this one was a real pleasure."

The rest of breakfast was spent in happy conversation, and the coffee pot came around several times. As they were finishing up, a terrible wail began. The entire table of beings stood at once and looked toward one of the officers who had a communicator to his ear. He put it down and shouted, "Kappa, coming from two directions, out of the Bow and the Spray."

Cleo turned and said, "Armoury." She and Ben followed the group down the hall to a blast door which was already open. Automatic rifles, vests and knives were being thrown out from the room by someone. Ben caught a rifle and vest with knife attached and was shocked to find two Japanese swords coming at him. They must have a damned good database, he figured.

By the time he was belted up, Cleo said, "We've got the Spray,

heading south to get away from the tourists, come on there's tunnels."

With that six bruised, Cleo, and Ben jumped into three drop shafts, poles running down five floors to the basement. Ben wrapped his legs and arms against the friction while the Kobolds just grabbed on with one hand and dropped fast.

The basement showed two large doors open and Ben's group thundered down the closest. The tunnel must have run two or three hundred metres and emptied into a small gully where the first two Kobolds stopped and checked cameras. "Clear."

Cleo pulled Ben into the centre of the formation and they ran, the Kobold's boots striking sparks from the rocks.

The gully emptied just at the river bank and below they could see Kappa climbing as fast as they could. It was tough going for them, with their short limbs and those shells on their backs, they had to be careful not to spill the water off their heads too.

"What the hell are they doing?" asked Ben.

"Likely no other choice, where would they escape to, the Bow runs east, that's a long damned swim to the Atlantic."

With that the squad split right and left, the Kappa were obviously heading for the gully, they must know about the tunnel. Good thing, too, there were no tourists or hikers here.

There were forty or fifty of the Kappa coming but the squad had plenty of ammunition and they started firing three round

bursts, the Kappa climbing had no chance. Still, six beings can only cover so much ground and some came up the flanks.

The men on the ends turned and began firing but here there was cover and it soon got down to hand to hand.

Kappa are tremendously strong, almost as strong as the Kobolds, but those beings had their hammers in hand now. Cleo and Ben had a small break during which they checked the river for any more coming but they were all on land now.

Cleo had a toothy grin as her hammer appeared in her hand, Ben lay down his rifle and drew his swords. Cleo told him later he looked just like a Kobold, his lips pulled back and his teeth flashing.

The Kappa had claws and short swords, a nasty beak, and somewhat disgustingly, a triple anus which meant they could fart quite a bit of gas, which they lit. Bright flares were appearing all up the line, but the Kobolds weren't much affected by the flames. The smell was another matter and some of them were gagging while they fought. When those hammers came down, the shells on the back of the Kappa were shattered.

Ben, unfortunately, was affected by fire, and caught a disgusting combination of flatulence and flame. He took off the hind limb and tail of that attacker and from then on never gave them a chance to turn around. Using the short sword he would block their sword and slice across their beaks with his longer blade, opening their mouths wider than usual. A return slash took the head as he moved on to the next one.



He looked to his left to see Cleo surrounded, instantly he drove into the Kappa behind her, crossing his swords at the thing's neck he drove it up into the gully wall, keeping it there with the short sword he pulled the long back and thrust straight into its belly, twisting and slicing down before he pulled his short sword across it's throat and then let it drop. Cleo had hammered the other two while he was doing that and then there were none.

As the squad checked around to make sure, reinforcements came from the tunnel. They gave the news that the Kappa from the Bow were all killed as well.

Cleo nodded and said, "You got the cleanup?"

"Sure, you guys head back and we'll finish off here."

Cleo turned to Ben and her eyes widened in alarm, he had burns across half his face and his shoulder. She quickly reached into her vest and pulled a healing spray which she used quickly. Ben was instantly pain free and he could feel his skin healing.

Only then, Cleo said, "Thanks, I knew I was right about you."

Ben grinned and said, "Any time, after all, I'm yours."

Cleo actually blushed, "You were awake?"

## Drinks on the House

Another yummy night with Morris. Sam stretched lewdly and made a growling noise as she did so.

“Oh, my.”

Sam’s eyes snapped open and she was ready to fight, but it was the brown fox, “You’re talking now, and I must still be dreaming.”

“I knew you were sharp, Sam, you’ve got it in one.”

“Fine, good, have you been watching all night?”

“No of course not, I’m part of your dream, I didn’t see what led up to that stretch, but I wish I had.”

“You’re not part of my dream, you’re just in it.”

“I can see that I’m going to have to watch what I say.”

“Are you my spirit animal?”

“Ah, Morris or Megan?”

“Morris suggested it.”

“Well I’m a spirit being and I do check in on you once in a while, I’m not yours, sorry.”

“Who are you then?”

“No, he doesn’t want me to say.”

“He, the St. George? You work for him?”

“Just too sharp... Yes I work for the George, but I’m not here for that. I’m here about Morris Minor.”

Sam came half off the bed, one fist clenched, “What about him?”

“Softly, girl, softly, I am not your enemy. I’ve seen things in Morris and I’ve come to warn you to watch him closely.”

“What things.”

“Sam you can’t compress time and expect it to remain compressed, he spent more than 40 years in a tree, but it only showed up as three days for him. I’ve seen signs that time wants to un-compress.”

“What, he’s going to become old all of a sudden?”

“Not all of a sudden, reality is largely what you decide it is, ‘you’re only as old as you feel,’ sort of thing. Look you’re waking up, just watch him, you’ll see it and I hope you can do something about it.”

“How long?”

“I don’t know that, nobody does, the future isn’t fixed, just watch him.”

And with that, Sam woke with a violent start. Morris stirred and mumbled and Sam threw an arm and a leg over him, hugging him to her. He smiled in his sleep.

That day they worked as usual and Sam kept a close eye on Morris.

“Do I have something in my teeth?” he said.

“No, no. How do you feel, Mo?”

“I feel just fine, Sam, how are you?”

“Good, good.”

“What’s got you spooked?”

“Just a dream I guess, a bad dream.”

“All right, let’s get the place set up for the band tonight.”

Amber, Coyote and Kit were playing, the two women were on violin and viola and Coyote was singing. It was unusual, but it was Kit’s composition so it worked.

There was a healthy crowd and Sam was hustling to keep up with the drinks orders. She was still a bit on edge and she threw a couple of students out the door on her own, even though the Kobolds would be upset when they found out. They so loved doing that themselves.

Between sets, Sam herded Kit to an empty table and told her about the dream and the brown fox. Kit frowned, “I had the same kind of dream, this brown fox warned me about some oil slick in the desert and told me to keep an eye on Dave. Nothing is wrong with him though, nothing that I can see.”

“The same brown fox?”

“I don’t know, Sam, maybe, maybe not, I wasn’t in your dream. I didn’t know I could go into Dave’s dream, it’s not something I have done before.”

“So what should I do?”

“Just watch Morris, and I’m watching Dave. I mean, we do that anyway don’t we? Men just don’t look after themselves.”

“Not if there’s a woman in their lives to do it for them,” Sam said with a laugh.

Kit gave Sam a quick hug and got back to the stage.

Sam again looked closely at Morris behind the bar and he frowned a bit. “Fine, I’ll keep a watch,” thought Sam.

Not long after that, one of the kitchen staff came out and whispered to Morris.

Morris called Sam over and asked, “You ready for a rush of drinks? Ken just got in touch, they are cleaning out all the Giant bases in Canada, the Kappa bases too, apparently they were working together. Ken’s declared free drinks for

everyone.”

“What! You’re pulling my leg, Ken?”

“Just sit for a moment and get ready, your legs are gonna be tired.”

When Sam nodded to Morris at the end of a song, he rang the bell. “Not last call folks, and sorry to interrupt the music. Ken Kobold has just declared free drinks for everyone in celebration of a great business deal he’s just concluded. Drinks are on the house!”

Sam had three pints ready and delivered them to the band, then started running for orders as the bar was mobbed by the remaining students.

When the drinks had been delivered and a few refills to the clever ones, Morris raised a glass and said, “To a great business deal!”

This was followed by a din as everyone tried to get it together, and then just gave up and drank.

The band struck up with some good old Irish Jigs and Coyote danced while he sang. The bar was soon up and clogging like pros. Well, they figured they were doing it like pros, the beer was flowing.

The place had cleared out, the last drunk helped through the

door, the band had finished packing up and had their last drinks, and it was just Morris and Sam with their own, end of shift, drinks.

“I’m sorry about that Sam, we should have had some extra staff on hand that was a hell of a crowd, especially when one of the students went outside and called the rest of the herd down on us.”

“We should maybe extend the damping field past the entrance a bit.”

“Wouldn’t help, for free beer they would run back up the hill and down again.”

“Yeah I suppose you’re right. But I didn’t mind, Mo, I’d rather be busy.”

“Well you got your workout for the day.”

“You too, leg-rubs for both of us when we get back home.”

“Wow, it never gets old when you say ‘home,’ Sam, never.”

“I love you too, Mo.”

After their usual drink, Morris declared that Ken needed to buy them another for the extra work, then they started the clean-up. As they did, the kitchen staff came out and lent several hands, which was greatly appreciated by the two front-line workers.

As the two walked to the St. George arm in arm, Sam thought

back to her dream that morning. Was that fox in Morris' dreams too? How did she know about time compression? When they got to the front lobby, Sam sent Morris ahead, "I've got something to talk to him about."

As Morris got on the elevator, Sam found Nadja and said, "I'd like to speak to him if I may please."

Nadja nodded and Sam stepped into her field. "What is it, Sam? How can I help?"

"George, what is all this about time compression and Morris?"

"I keep a discrete eye on all the tenants, and I noticed certain signs in Morris. How did you know it was me?"

"It doesn't matter, but I work with you, and noticing goes both ways. When you're looking at me, George, I'm looking at you."

"Ah. As for your concerns, I don't know when, sorry, I'd recommend you keep a watch and I'll do the same."

"All right, thanks George."

Nadja moved back and Sam thanked her before going up to Morris' apartment. To home, she reminded herself.



## A Drive to the Beach

Ben and Cleo spent a couple more days in Banff, just kicking around and pitching in with the massive information dump they got from the Giant and Kappa bases in the West.

When they had got most of it done, Ben suggested, “Why don’t we go off-grid and hitch across the country.”

“Ben, nobody picks up hitchers any more.”

“Well let’s just wander back then, I don’t know, pick up jobs and buses, drive away cars, whatever. It’s been a long, long time since I’ve been free to wander.”

“Alright my friend, but we do it right, the train system goes to Victoria, we go there and then we have to figure out how to get on the Ferry system back to Vancouver.”

“Well, let’s just pay and walk on, OK?”

“Oh, the sissy trip, well if you want.”

As they rode the train to Victoria, they sat comfortably together in the single row seats on the narrow gauge train. Thanks to the skill of the Kobolds, the rails were continuous and the train was moving faster than any other train in Canada, although you might not know it, there were no windows to let you see the tunnel walls flash by.

“Is it too soon to talk about us?” asked Ben.

“Probably,” said Cleo, “we've got hundreds of years, there's no rush is there?”

“Fair enough, I was just...”

“You wondered about me saying 'mine' to you when we were shit-faced.”

“OK drunk, got it.”

“You don't, I meant it Ben, I liked you the first time we picked you up, and when I learned you were going to live longer than a butterfly, I liked you even more. I don't mind saying it, but we haven't known each other long, and there are the differences.”

“What Human and Kobold?”

“I was thinking more Princess and Commoner.”

Ben looked, and Cleo was grinning.

“Yes, I can see that, what with you attending all those balls and doing all that waving out of car windows. Not to mention the diplomatic functions where I'd just say something stupid and start a war.”

“Exactly.”

They couldn't tell, but the map on the wall told them they were going under the Georgia Straight. As they did, a nasty growl began, and a light flashed on the side wall.

“Shit,” said Cleo as she opened the door and picked up the phone.

“What! ... No, we're on vacation... Damnit Ken, there's got to be someone else... Shit.”

Ben waited as she hung up the phone and stewed a bit. She turned and said, “Sorry lover, it just never stops, Ken wants us to go to Long Beach and check out a sighting of turtles landing. He figures the Kappa might not be done.”

“I take it we're the only agents heading that way?”

“For our sins, yes. He'll have a car and details waiting in Victoria. We're to camp and watch.”

“But there's no camping on the beach.”

Cleo looked sideways at Ben, who laughed, “OK that's never stopped me before. Where?”

“Across on 4 and then down Wick Road to Florencia Bay.”

“Nice, I've been there. Listen, this is as good as trying to hitch across the country. If there's nothing there we'll have a great road trip and spend a couple days on the beach. If we're lucky there might be a storm.”

“You have a death wish, Ben?”

“Log jumping, they shift around like crazy at high tide in a

storm.”

“You have a death wish.”

“Well look at me, hanging out with Royalty, I could lose my head at any moment.”

They got into the terminal at Victoria and emerged into the basement of yet another building Ken owned. There they picked up a Land Cruiser that was pre-packed with their gear.

Not wasting any time, they drove north out of the city and enjoyed themselves, somehow Cleo still had the Stompin' Tom cassette and they sang along at the top of their lungs.

As they turned off on the Pacific Coast Highway, Ben remembered, “I was, I dunno, twenty maybe and hitched out here to Long Beach. One of the scariest rides I've ever had, looking out the side window and down forever it seemed.”

“Did you make it?”

“Yes, actually, this was a buddy and I, we slept on the beach and hitched back, slept again around Winnipeg and made it back to Guelph in four days.”

“That was good time, even for back then.”

“Lucky, got a few good rides, and a few bad ones, but yeah, good time travelling, didn't speak to my buddy for a month afterward.”

“And you wanted to hitch home with me?”

“Different person, different reasons, I just wanted some time alone with you.”

They made it across the island without falling into a gully, parked at the end of Wick Road and got the backpacks out, followed the trail down to the beach.

As they approached, they kept looking for Kappa, but saw none. As they got to the beach itself, there were tourists, surfers, but no Kappa. Not what they would expect if there was an invasion. Ben pointed, “Further down there's nobody there.”

They walked, and saw a hand printed sign that said, 'Turtle nests, no not use.'

“There's our invasion,” said Cleo.

“Hmm, best set up the shelter in the woods and watch for a couple days just to make sure.”

“Yep, you can't be too careful,” grinned Cleo.

“Changed a bit in forty years.”

“I imagine, might as well be in Port Dover, except for the surfers.”

“What is this thing? It's self inflating?”

“Here, give it to me, it digs down into the ground and self-

camouflages, pretty hard to see.”

“First time I was here we just slept between the logs to get out of the wind.”

“You're kidding.”

“That's how I found out about the log jumping.”

“It's a wonder you lived as long as you have.”

“Yeah, fire-fights with Giants and Kappa aren't a problem at all right?”

“I'm starving, let's eat and go lie on the beach like tourists, on the other side of the sign.”

As it happened, as often happens, the two agents spent several days watching the coming and going of tourists, seals and surfers. Nobody bothered them and they had their time together. When they'd had their fill, they packed up and walked out.

On the trip back Cleo said, “I wonder if Ken just sent us here to relax where he could find us if he needed to.”

Ben laughed, “From what I've seen, that sounds like it just might be true.”

“Do you still want to wander back?”

“I've been thinking about that Cleo, maybe not. Look, I was

asking before about us, I'm going to ask again."

"Yes, Ben, there is an us. I'd have thought that obvious by now."

"It seemed so, but I'm asking for a reason. Cleo, there's a darkness inside me, deep down but I know it's there."

"What are we talking about Ben? Depression? A germ of doubt about us? Some sort of monster raging to get out?"

"I don't know, I don't know. It's why I mostly stay away from people, I feel it but I don't know what it is. Maybe that woman, that witch put it in me and that's why I'm not aging. I don't know."

"And me, you were concerned about us being off grid together?"

"Usually I can turn nasty and chase women away when I feel it stir, but you, I suspect you wouldn't go."

Cleo was silent as she thought this through. "You are probably right, Ben, I don't chase away easily, but on the other hand, I don't get hurt easily either. A lot of things have tried to take me out and failed. Look, you just spent several days alone with me, any urge to become a monster and eat me?"

"Don't joke, Cleo, please. Not a peep from whatever it is, but maybe it knew we were in contact with Ken. It's out in the wilderness I worry about."

“All right Ben, no joking. Look I see two ways for us here, we go into the wilderness and see what happens, or we go back to Guelph and talk to a couple of people I know.”

“You’re willing to be around when it comes out?”

“If, when, I told you Ben, I don’t break easily, but I think it’s time you asked for help. I’d hate to break you if I had to. You told me, have you told anyone else?”

“Nobody.”

“Then you’re asking for help, let’s take the train back to Guelph and get some.”

## **The Darkness**

Cleo came stamping up the stairs to Ken’s Keller and Sam’s head snapped around. “Taking a break Mo, Cleo’s back.”

When Cleo came through the entrance, Sam flew full speed into her, wrapping her legs and arms around her and planting a huge kiss on her lips. She hit with enough force to make Cleo take a half step back.

“Woah girl, good to see you too. Did you miss me?”

“You know I did. How was it?”



“Good, piece of cake. Ben’s right behind me, he’s got the bags, the idiot.”

Sam stepped aside and planted another big kiss on Ben as he came up the stairs. At the bar, Morris grinned. Sometimes the girl was just happy. Sam had told him the full story of their adventures out west, and he knew she worried a bit about Ben and Cleo when she wasn’t there to take care of them.

Like they needed taking care of. He set up pints for the three of them at the bar and scanned the floor for empty drinks. Nobody seemed in danger of dying of thirst so he leaned on the bar and waited for them.

As the three walked to the bar, Morris picked up a mood at the same time as Sam did. Sam turned to Cleo and said, “What’s wrong? What are you two worried about?”

“In a minute, Sam, first a toast to a job well done, and the three of them drank. Morris nodded and refilled the mugs. When he came back Cleo said, “Were you expecting Ingrid or Megan here tonight?”

“Not specifically, you want me to call them?”

“If you would, please Mo, we’ve got a maybe problem.”

Morris told them to go sit at the big table and picked up the phone, after he’d called he made the rounds of the bar and Sam quizzed Ben. “Cleo isn’t saying, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing new, Sam, I’ve had a darkness in me for a long time,

I just told Cleo about it and we came back here to see if anyone could figure it out.”

“What sort of darkness?”

“I don’t know, just that it’s there and I don’t know what it is.”

Megan was first to arrive and she brought Stan and Oren both along, “We were visiting Oren,” she said in explanation.

Ingrid and Art arrived and nodded to everyone as Morris put down another round of drinks. “Sit please, Morris,” asked Sam, “I want some advice too, while Ingrid and Megan are here.”

Ben explained his situation to everyone and both Megan and Ingrid had a good hard look at him. Ingrid spoke first, “It’s a hole, but I don’t know what kind.”

Oren said, “Megan, can you see it? It looks for all the world like a black hole, but it can’t be.”

“If it’s a black hole, wouldn’t Ben be sucked up his own fundament?” asked Cleo.

“But he’s not,” Cleo noticed Kit and Amber in a corner table and called them over.

The both of them looked hard at Ben. Kit said, “There’s no music.”

“What does that mean, no music?”

“Everyone has a time, a rhythm at their core, Ben doesn’t have one.”

Amber’s eyes got wide, she took out her violin and played. She played the music she’d played when she stopped time, and as she lifted her bow, time stopped for everyone in the bar except Ben, and, damn, and Morris.

She looked to her side at Coyote who had appeared as soon as she stopped time. “What are you doing, Amber, time is not something to screw around with.”

“Look, Coy, look at those two.”

Coyote did and then sang three low notes, time flowed once more. “Interesting,” he said.

“So you agree?”

“I do, I’ve never seen it before, or maybe I never noticed, most interesting.”

“Could someone explain things to us please?” said Cleo. Ben and Morris looked frightened out of their wits. They had just seen everyone in the bar except Amber and Coyote freeze.

Amber looked even more serious than usual. “Whatever that blackness is, it sucks in time. Not only that, but when I stopped time, it was like it fed time back out again to keep Ben and Morris going.”

“Morris?” snapped Sam, taking his arm.

“Yes, Sam. Ingrid, Megan, look at Morris will you please.”

“The same thing, The same thing but not quite the same thing, it’s pulsing,” said Ingrid.

“Like maybe it’s storing forty years?” said Sam.

“I don’t know, this is new, Sam, we’ve never seen it before.”

“A hole in the centre of someone that can suck up and release time,” Oren was fascinated.

Sam was horrified, she stuffed her fist into her mouth to keep from screaming in fear.

Cleo was happy, “So no big monster that will pop out to try to eat us?”

Ingrid frowned, “No, but I don’t know what it means, I mean it explains I guess, how Morris and Ben aren’t forty years older than they are. Did something happen forty years ago to cause this?”

“Dryad,” said Morris, “I went into the tree.” Sam was shaking.

“A woman I met on PEI who seemed to control time, she must have put it in me.” said Ben.

“Magic then,” said Ingrid. “Megan have you heard of this?”

“No, Oren?”

Oren shook his head.

“It must be old world then, witchcraft?”

“Dryads aren’t witches,” said Art.

“No, you’re right. Old magic then, original magic.”

Amber looked at Coyote, “Coy?”

“I don’t know, I’ve never seen it, but if it’s old world... There was a lot of spillage.”

Kit had been looking from one to the other, compared to these beings, she was just a child, “Surely you know, you guys know everything, I’ve never seen a question you guys couldn’t answer.”

Amber, who had been Coyote and had experienced his mind, put her arm around Kit. She knew an existential shock when she saw one, she’d had enough of her own.

At that point, Morris gathered Sam in and hugged her hard. “Sam, calm love, be still, whatever it is, we’ll deal with it.”

“My dream Mo, the fox in my dream said to watch you, said that forty years could leak, Mo what if it’s leaking now?”

“I don’t feel it, love, do I look older?”

Ingrid looked again, harder, then she looked quickly away.

“No. Ingrid, tell me,” said Sam who didn’t miss much.

“Morris, you’re aging normally now, as you have been, but perhaps a tiny bit faster.”

“Oh my God, did I do that?” asked Amber.

“No dear, no it seems to have been happening for a while now, maybe it’s the usual thing.”

“Not accelerating?” pleaded Sam.

“No Sam, it’s steady.”

Cleo looked a bit more concerned, “Ben?”

“Stable as a rock, he’s not aging a day, Cleo.”

“So that woman wasn’t a Dryad?”

“No Ben, she was far away from a tree when you met her on the boat,” said Cleo with obvious relief.

“What will we do, how can we figure this out, what if it accelerates?” Sam was murmuring into Morris’ chest.

“Massey Hall Library, We’ll ask for a book that I need, but not yet, if I’m aging a little fast, that’s not a problem. You don’t go to the library lightly.”

Ben asked about this library and Morris explained, Ben thought

for a moment and then said, “I’ll go tonight.”

## **The Blackened Library**

“Look, Ben, are you sure you want to go to the library? Morris said you don’t get the book you want, you get the one you need.”

“Isn’t that a good thing Sam?”

“Not necessarily, Morris seems to think it’s not about what makes you happy. Think about it, a library, or the librarians maybe, give you the book you need. How do they know? Not only that, but we believe that it’s the book we need, what if it’s not?”

“Technical question Sam, should be fine.”

“Alright, if you’re determined, I’ll walk you up the hill, Morris can handle the bar for a while. He explained the process to me. We’ll head up at 1:20”

With that Sam continued on her rounds of the tables. By 1 o’clock the place was pretty quiet and at 1:15 Morris told Sam to head on out. He warned, “Be very careful what you say, Sam, the Librarians have excellent hearing.”

As Ben and Sam walked up the hill, Sam asked, “When did you study with our teacher?”

“Well, I guess it was about 1980 I started, I wandered in to his class and I liked what I saw. I spent as much time with him as I could, took all his classes. A few years later he seemed to notice me and really started to push.”

“That sounds exactly like my experience, Ben, but decades later. He seemed not to notice beginners, but if you hung around long enough he took an interest in you.”

“Why waste your time on beginners, I guess. He wasn’t running a commercial dojo so he didn’t have an interest in keeping students around.”

“He was a strange man, why did you quit?”

“He quit me, Sam, he moved away, overseas I think, and I drifted out of Guelph. I heard he came back after a while, but I was gone wandering. Did you like him?”

“I loved him with all my heart, Ben, I really did, but he never seemed to notice me.”

“I suspect he did, you’re hard not to notice, he didn’t take advantage of students but I suspect he was fond of you too. Must have been. Listen, your moves are a bit different than mine, or something, did you train with someone else?”

“Yeah, a fellow named Gil Hamish showed up at the University one day and asked me if I wanted to train with another student he had been asked to take on. Gil was terrifying, I couldn’t touch him so I said yes right then.”



“I’ve heard rumours, who is he?”

“The Eternal Warrior, I suppose, he’s immensely old and has been fighting for as long as civilization I think. He was asked to train Art Pendry.”

“What, the guy with Ingrid? Why does someone who’s with a Goddess need to learn to fight?”

“I don’t know, the guy who raised him, Jim Childress, figured he should learn. Self-esteem maybe? He learned though, and I kept training with him after Gil left.”

“Back to a war?”

“He can’t seem to stay away. He was, as I said, terrifying, he didn’t bother giving us kata, he worked somewhere beyond that. You know the stages of learning, shu, ha, ri, well he didn’t give a crap about shu or ri, wasn’t interested in giving us techniques, he said we knew lots of them. Wasn’t interested in the ri, the principles, either. He used to say ‘you know the principles the instant you learn the technique.’ He just taught us how to analyze on the fly. Anything coming at us, we had to know how to understand what it was instantly, and you know, when we did that we could handle it. Or I could, I had to teach Art the techniques.”

“He does sound scary, it must have been tough training.”

“It was a lot of bruises for those few months he was here, for sure. The only person who came close to him was Musashi

himself.”

“What! That sounds like you met Musashi personally.”

“Through Ingrid, she showed up for training one day and said, ‘I knew Musashi, you want to meet him?’ She has this thing she does, it wasn’t the real Musashi but she gave us a half day with his essence I guess you might say. Turned out Musashi had known Gil as well.”

“Sounds like you and I need to do some serious training together.”

“You do all right, you’ve worked hard since our teacher left you, but sure, I’d like some training with you, maybe we can drag Art into a class with us, he’s got this sort of instinctual grasp where he just disappears and this beast comes out. Yet it’s a very smart beast.”

“Looking forward to it. Now, what’s with the Library, there’s Massey Hall.”

“Right, around back, what time is it?”

“1:45”

“Good, the door will be open. See it there? Now we’ll go in, it will be dark, so dark the darkness spills out when the door opens. Just wait you’ll see. After we get in someone will come, and you ask for the book. Be specific if you know what you want, or say ‘I would like the book I need, please’. Someone will take you by the finger and walk you through the stacks,

they will put your finger on a book. What did Mo say? Ah, the one on the left is the one you need to understand the book, the one on the right is the next book you should read. Take it, read it and return it the next day or the collectors will come get it.”

“Collectors?”

“I got the impression you don’t want to try to keep the book, just get it back the next night.”

“Alright, let’s do it.”

With that, Ben pulled open the door and stepped in. It was black, as black as any place he’d ever been, and he’d been deep underground when the lights went out. They could sense a couple of bodies close by so Ben said, “I need a book on a black hole that sucks in time, and lives in me.”

Sam sensed him walk off with one of the bodies. She was thinking ahead to when she might need to figure out how to fix Morris and she must have muttered out loud. Her finger was taken and she could not pull away, she tried to say she didn’t want a book right now, but her voice was gone.

Best just go with it, she would take a book and return it the next night along with Ben but she wouldn’t read it. Wouldn’t even look at it. That should be OK.

They stopped, her finger was placed on a book and the pressure on her finger lightened. Sam considered taking the left book, but thought better of it, if she wasn’t going to read it, it didn’t matter which book.

She pulled the book out and took it with her other hand. The librarian slipped her (his?) hand from her finger and took her hand to guide her out.

Before she left, she heard the librarian whisper in her ear, “Read it, this is the book you need.” and placed her hand on the crash bar of a door.

As she went out the door, Sam shuddered violently, it was as if someone had dumped ice cubes down her spine.

As she looked around she found Ben waiting for her, “I came back to the door and was told you had asked for a book, so I waited.”

“I didn’t mean to, I really didn’t, but I must have spoken my thoughts.”

“I really get the feeling that it wouldn’t matter if you said it out loud or not. The place scares me, I don’t mind admitting.”

“Right, let’s get back to the bar.”

## **A Good Book**

The walk back down the hill was a lot more quiet than the walk up. Sam refused to look at the book in her hand, but as they went over the bridge, she held it tight, lest she drop it in the

river.

Both of them were spooked, it was quite obvious, and as they walked into the bar, they saw that Morris had drawn two tables close to the bar, there was a large whisky and a coffee on each table.

Morris didn't say a word, but waved toward the tables. Both Sam and Ben sat and drained the whisky.

Ben opened his book.

Sam put the book face down on the table and folded her hands over it. She was not going to read it.

Morris had arranged the chairs so that she looked at nothing, and Ben was looking at her back. She'd sat down without thinking about that. Behind her she could hear Ben flipping pages. She refused to look down at the book, but there wasn't much to look at, just the side wall of the bar. She looked down at the back of her hands. They seemed to have a faint glow coming through the fingers.

Morris said nothing. He brought another whisky to Sam and refilled Ben's coffee.

Flip, flip, flip, Ben was reading steadily. Sam moved her hands. She turned the book over and read the cover. It was a book on dryads, with a forward by Ashley Childress.

She opened it and read the forward. It was Morris' story.

Morris put down a fresh coffee, the other had become cold.

Sam turned to the book itself, it was a history and life cycle of the dryad race. She began to read, and a few pages in she looked at the author. Oren Longfang.

Why was she reading this? The dryad was dead, the oak tree cut down, Morris was here, and according to her dream fox, was in danger of aging fast. What possible good could this book be to her, she didn't need it, she was sure of it. Yet she read.

A second coffee, and she couldn't seem to stop reading. Eventually she found what she perhaps needed. Dryads didn't die. They just seemed to, but as they lived in their tree they planted seeds and when their tree died, they moved into another tree, one that had sprouted from the seed of their old tree.

They didn't die, that meant that Morris' dryad was perhaps still alive, if she had moved to a young tree.

Sam read further. If a young tree wasn't big enough to sustain a dryad, she faded, sustained by a black hole within herself that spun time out for her like a spider's thread. She lived on this time while she waited for the tree to grow.

There were stories of humans that the dryads had given this black hole. Special humans that the dryad cared for, that stayed near the dryad. When these humans left, they began to age as usual, but the stored time remained in that black hole.

Sam stopped reading, wiped her eyes, looked at Morris with panic and somehow he knew to give her another whisky. She downed it in one gulp and read on. Sometimes, when the nymph went into a new tree, the humans she had given the gift of time, received it all back, within a few months or a year. They aged to their real time.

Sam understood, Morris had started getting his age back.

She closed the book and Morris was there, beside her chair. She stood and he wrapped his arms around her. She cried.

Later, she asked if this was the same book he had got from the Library, he nodded. She hugged him back and then suddenly released him. Oren Longfang! She knew him!

“Morris, I’ve got to go talk to Oren.”

“I know you do Sam, but not yet, I have some time with you yet. Please don’t go.”

Sam looked deeply at Morris, he wasn’t lying, they had some time. “Why didn’t you tell me? If you knew, why didn’t you let me know?”

“How could I, Sam? How could I let you know that we only had a short time together?”

“But you’ll only go to sixty-something right? I like older men.”

“It doesn’t work like that, Sam, I’ll age until I die, the tree was everything and it’s gone. I have no anchor left in the world

once the time starts spinning out.”

Sam shouted, she pounded his chest with her fist, she cried again. Being Sam, she recovered quickly and dried her eyes, kissed Morris and said, “However long we have.”

Ben had closed his book and his eyes were soft as he looked at them. He hadn’t known them long but these were his friends and he felt their pain.

Morris whispered, “customers,” and gently backed away from Sam to go back to work.

Sam spun her chair around and sat down opposite Ben, “Damn him, if he had ten minutes to live he’d pull another four pints.”

Ben smiled and took Sam’s hand, “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have taken you in with me.”

Sam looked at Ben and saw him for the first time in a while, “Oh, I’m sorry, what did you find Ben. Was it what you needed?”

“It was, I found out what that blackness is inside me and now I know where it came from.” He showed Sam the book in his hand, it was entitled ‘Myth and Folklore of Prince Edward Island’. “It’s got her story in here.”

“Tell me,” Sam said.

Ben looked at her, nodded and began.



There was a dryad who fell in love with a fisherman. She watched him from her tree for many years as he built his boat. As she watched, she fell in love. His hands, as they caressed the planed planks seemed to caress her.

One day, he finished the boat and put out to sea to fish. He was not the best fisherman, he never made much off of his catch, but he loved the sea.

The dryad, watching from her tree, was sad when he sailed away, and joyous when he returned.

One day he returned with a leak in his boat, he had barely made it back to shore. He had no catch, no money to buy lumber. He sat down with his back against the dryad's tree and wept. This made her more unhappy than she had ever been and she marvelled at her tears. On the other side of the tree she made a large branch break and fall to the ground.

The fisherman was overjoyed, he used the branch to repair his boat and set sail once more. The dryad found that she could go with him on his voyage and so she walked from the tree to his boat and said, "Young man, I have admired you for many years as you built your boat and sailed in it. Would you please take me on your next voyage?"

She was beautiful, so the young man took her out in his boat and they enjoyed each other as he fished. "May I come with you again?" she asked, and of course he agreed.

They sailed together for many months, the dryad and the fisherman, until eventually he fell in love with her. "Will you

marry me?” he said as they landed one day.

“I will,” she said, “in one month. I must prepare our home while you fish, so I will see you in one month.” They kissed and parted as usual, he to his father’s home and she to her tree.

The next morning he set sail and the dryad set about doing all the things she should have been doing while she was with him in his boat.

As for the fisherman, that very day, while he was in the straight, a squall came up and sank his boat, drowning him.

The dryad waited for him to return that afternoon but he did not. Being able to, she moved herself into the boat, but she realized she was underwater, and that her fisherman was dead, caught in the rigging. His dead arms waved in the breeze as if he wished to embrace her.

The dryad moved back to her tree and vowed to wait for her fisherman to come home. It is said that she sometimes rides the ferry between PEI and New Brunswick, looking for her fisherman. It is said that she can move time around herself so that sometimes, on the back roads of the island, it seems to be an earlier age.

“This must be the woman I met,” said Ben. “That would explain the darkness in me, she put it there so that I would not die, I must have been close enough in likeness to her fisherman that she loved me just a little, and gave me a gift.”

“How does it not let you age then, like Morris?”

“She was out of her tree, she must have learned to live outside of it, and so perhaps she is truly immortal and not tied to a tree.” Ben paused for a moment and then squeezed Sam’s hand, “I’m sorry Sam, that doesn’t help Morris, does it?”

## **The Crisis**

Sam spent a rough night with Morris, or rather, a rough later evening and early morning. She couldn’t sleep. She half expected a visit from the brown fox to say “I told you so,” but her fitful sleep was silent.

At about six in the morning she’d had enough, she knew where Oren Longfang lived and she went to his apartment, and tapped on his door lightly. The door was answered almost instantly, “Ah, Sam, so good to see you, come in, please.”

“Hello Oren, I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“Not at all, I’ve been up for hours working on my book. How can I help?”

“It’s Morris, I’m too worried about him to let it be, I was warned that he might start aging quickly, because of the forty years compressed in him, that was by a brown fox in my dreams.”

Oren betrayed not a bit of emotion, and waved Sam to a seat

while he went to make coffee. When he returned, Sam continued, "I know you said you had never heard of a black hole in a person, but I went to the Library and they gave me a book, written by you, on dryads. It seems you do know a lot about what's happening to Morris."

"I wrote that, but it was quite a long time ago, long before you were born, I didn't know any copies were left. I doubt if even I have one."

"No, that's not right, Jim Childress wrote the foreword for it and he described Morris' case. That was not that many years ago."

"I recall no foreword, the book was just a small study of dryads. I swear to you, Sam there was nothing about a black hole."

"But the book said that dryads used a black hole to sustain them between trees, and that they could give it to humans."

"My dear, the Darkened Library has a certain reputation amongst those of us who write a certain type of books. Information often leaks into the books as needed. We don't complain because the information is always needed by the reader, and we write for that same reason, to be useful."

"So you don't know how to fix Morris?"

"Sam, he's not broken, he's lived all his years, it's just that forty of them appeared to be three days when he passed out of the tree. In the absence of time, the mind must play tricks."

Sam was getting upset, Oren hurried on, “Please, Sam, I’m not saying I won’t help, of course I will. I have a certain background and I have acquaintances who can assist. Please, go back to Morris, I’m sure he won’t want to wake and find you gone. I will be in touch very soon.”

Sam looked at her watch and gave a small cry, “I must go, thank you Oren, I appreciate it.”

Oren closed the door quietly and called to Lorraine, who arrived at his door minutes later.

“Lorraine, you have been in Sam’s dreams?”

“I have, I could feel the dryad stirring and thought I should warn her to watch.”

“I’m afraid what you thought might happen, has happened. Did you help the Darkened Library to extend one of my books?”

“I did, I added what I knew, and asked Jim to add the context.”

“Good, Sam is primed with the information, what must she do?”

“She must let go of Morris, the dryad has gone into a new tree, it took a while to grow, she picked one that Morris helped plant.”

“You know the dryad?”

“From my first days here, after I was expelled. She sheltered me.”

“Will she take Morris back into her tree?”

“She hopes he will go, but she will not push, persuade or threaten. She was quite clear about that. She wants only his happiness.”

“He is in quite a state. He loves both women, but he must choose one.”

“Oren, it isn’t his choice alone, the dryad has chosen, she wants him back but not unwilling. It is a choice that Sam must make too. Morris is loyal to her, and he loves her. If she wants him to, he will stay with Sam, even if it means his death.”

“Would it be easier for her to choose to let him go if you told her that her old teacher lives?”

“NO, I have shared her dreams Oren, knowing Hubert was alive would make the decision worse for her. Of this I am certain. No, we must simply give her the information, and let her do what she will know she must do.”

“This will be hard, I believe she and Morris are mates, as you and Hubert are mates, as are Kit and Dave.”

“They are, of that there is no doubt, but some decisions you make despite the cost. In this, Sam is not lesser than any being I know.”

“Very well my child, I can see this is difficult for you as well, I will leave it in your hands.”

“Thank you for calling me Oren, I will take my leave and see if Sam goes back to sleep.”

As it turned out, Sam did go back to sleep, comforted that Oren was researching, confident that there was some time, she relaxed into Morris’ back and drifted off. She certainly needed the relief.

As she drifted, her brown fox faded into view. Sam called to her, “Morris is aging slightly faster than he should, do you know what that means?”

“I do, it means there are weeks.”

Sam slumped to her knees, “Weeks?”

“Morris knows this, but he would spare you the pain you feel right now. He is truly your mate, and you his, I am sorry child for this choice you must make.”

Sam’s head snapped up, “There is a choice! Tell me!”

“Come walk with me, there is someone you must meet.”

Just like that, they were walking along the river path, and just like that, they were in front of a young oak, one that looked like it would be strong some day.

“Take my hand Sam, and we will enter. This way I can take

you out again.”

As they entered the tree, Sam saw what Morris saw, a whole world, it was fresh, new, beautiful, but there was not much there, no house, no fields, just a meadow. “Greetings Sam, I was told you were coming.”

Sam spun around and saw the most beautiful creature she had ever seen. “You are the dryad?”

“I am.”

“You kept Morris here for forty years?”

“No, I tried to push him out, but he would not go, I forbade him food and my body so that when my tree died he could return to his world.”

“But you put the black hole in him, why?”

The dryad looked at the fox. The fox said “She speaks of time.”

“Ah, but I had to do that, he would have starved to death, I gave him enough so that he could live.”

“He came out of the tree thinking three days had passed.”

“Yes, in here it was forty years he stayed with me.” Sam saw her smile, so full of longing and love, and Sam’s heart nearly broke.

“You love him.”



“Yes.”

“I love him too, but now he will age and die quickly.”

The dryad dropped her head, “You love him too.”

“I do, I thought we had time, but now there is none.”

The dryad said very quietly, “He could have time again.”

Sam realized what they had been discussing, this was the choice, “He comes back here with you.”

“Yes, that is what I hoped, but we both love him, I see that. I can bleed off those years and he can stay with you.”

“You would do that?”

The dryad nodded, but the fox squeezed Sam’s hand.

Sam thought quickly, “At what cost?”

“I would acquire those years, I would be an old woman.”

Sam seemed to come to a conclusion, “You are not old now. Are you strong?”

“Yes, stronger than ever in the young tree.”

“I will fight you for him.”

Sam was whipped around to face the fox. “Are you insane, girl. Do you have any idea?”

Sam looked back and said, “This is a dream, look into my mind, we must do this.”

The fox looked, hesitated, shook her head and said, “Incredible, wait a moment. Dryad, are you willing to fight this woman for the man you love?”

“Yes.”

“If she wins, you will take Morris’ years onto yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Will you release this woman if I let her go?”

“I would do that anyway, fox, you know me better than that.”

“Very well, I will stand witness to a fair fight. Sam you must understand that even though this is a dream, you can be injured and die.”

“I understand and accept the terms.”

“Damnit, then fight.”

The dryad turned to Sam and bowed. With some small hesitation, Sam returned the bow. The dryad said, “I love him and will fight for him, if at any moment you feel you are in danger of injury or death, say, and I will stop.”

Sam grinned and walked toward the dryad. Just out of reach, she said, “same” and struck with fists and feet. The dryad seemed to sway like a tree in the wind, but one of the kicks landed. It was like kicking a tree.

Sam smiled and became still. The dryad wasn’t sure what to do, it was like Sam was a rock, or a massive oak, she seemed so still. The dryad reached out for Sam’s arm. As she touched it, Sam pivoted, added only a little energy, and the dryad fell to the ground.

When she got up, she had changed, no longer certain she could defeat this woman without hurting her, she would hurt her. She struck, her arm coming around like the boom of a sailboat, Sam grinned and just before it was about to strike her head, she faded in, toward the dryad. She turned her hip and suddenly, the dryad was off the ground. Sam became still once more, with the dryad on her back, she waited.

The dryad shook, struggled, but could not get off Sam’s back. She said, “How did you know?”

“I looked, the fox did not tell me, I looked and I thought.”

“I yield, he is yours, I will take his years from him.”

Sam carefully put her on her feet, “You will not.”

The dryad drew herself up, “Do you doubt my word?”

“I do not, but you will not take his years onto yourself, you will

give him lifetimes.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I needed to know that you would risk your existence to fight for him, I needed to know that you love him as much as I do. I would not give him to anyone less, but hear me, I will not have him at that cost, to someone he loves.”

Turning to the fox, Sam asked, “How fast is he aging?”

“A year to a week now.”

“Shit, will a year matter? Can I have a week?”

“Another year won’t matter, Sam, take your week.”

With that, Sam turned to the dryad, “May I embrace you, my sister-wife?”

The dryad was crying, she held open her arms. When they parted, Sam said, “What is your name?”

The dryad was shocked, “Nobody has asked me that, ever. My name is Dauphine.

“Thank you Dauphine, Morris will be here in a week.”

## A Last Week

Morris was still asleep when Sam woke from her dream of the oak tree. She lay beside him with her head propped on her arm and watched him sleep. A week, only a week to spend with him, to say goodbye. This was going to be hard, and getting him to go into the tree was going to be harder still.

Morris had built a life, a new life, while he was out of the tree. He and Sam had found each other and Sam knew he wasn't going to go quietly. She needed a plan.

She watched as he stirred a bit, he was dreaming. Sam wished the fox was here to send her into his dream. For a week they could spend all their time together, but that would be selfish wouldn't it?

Damn, should she tell his friends that he was disappearing? No. That would complicate things, and she wasn't sure she should even tell Morris. She would not. Neither that he was going into the tree, nor that his rapid aging had come. A week shouldn't be noticeable, a week would be fine.

Sam was crying, now that wouldn't do, if Morris woke he would want to know what was wrong. She scrubbed at her eyes and buried her face in her pillow. As she raised her head again, their alarm went off, damn the thing.

She smiled, "Good morning sleepy-head. Time to rise and shine."

"Already? I was dreaming of you."

“Me? Why are you wasting time on me, you could be dreaming of flying or some such.”

“You. It was a wonderful dream.”

“Well, wonder-boy, we need to get to work.”

Sam had considered trying to get him to take a week off so they could do something together, but couldn't think of a thing to do. They worked and they spent what time they had free, with each other. A change would be stressful and the last thing Sam wanted right now was more stress.

“Shower, come join me.”

“With pleasure, my lord.”

The shower took a bit longer than usual, and as they dried and dressed, Morris said, “Does it bother you that we don't have much time together now Sam?”

“I have had a world of time with you, Morris Minor, and any more will be sugar on top of ice cream.”

“Well my fine poet, let's go open the bar.”

It was a busy week. All their friends seemed to drop in repeatedly. Sam had told nobody, but they somehow seemed to know. Morris took it in stride, after all, he wasn't certain how much time he had left, and they knew that too.

Each evening, they would grab a drink at another bar, the bartenders would stay open a bit longer for them, or they would walk together. Sam guided them to the river path several times, Morris seemed not to care where they went, they were together.

The first three nights Sam kept Morris up far into the early hours, but after that she was content to simply sleep with him in her arms, or with his arms around her. The week flew by, as they tend to do when you'd like them to last forever.

On the very last day they finished their shift, cleaned up the bar and went out arm in arm. "Let's walk," said Sam.

She once again guided Morris down the river path but this time she took a few steps off the path to a handsome young oak tree. She put Morris' back against the tree and kissed him hard. As she was doing so his hand sank a bit into the tree.

Morris shoved himself away from the tree, looked around and back at Sam, angry, "No! No Sam, we had a deal, what is this? What are you doing?"

"Morris, I love you and I won't see you die. I don't care about our deal, this is what's best."

"Gods damn it Sam, I will not go back into a tree, I will not leave you."

"Morris, please, I beg you, don't let our last moments be a fight. This is what has to happen. Please, I couldn't live with myself if you stayed with me and died so early. Do this for me."

Morris took a breath to argue, but suddenly stopped. He pulled Sam to him and kissed her as hard as she had just kissed him.

After some time, Sam drew away a bit, put her hands on his chest and shoved him into the tree. As she did so, she said, "Her name is Dauphine."

As Sam's hands touched the trunk, she saw Dauphine take Morris' hand. He realized this was his dryad and he smiled. He turned to Sam and said, "Thank you my love, you too will be happy in your life."

Dauphine smiled as well and said, "Sister-wife, you are welcome at any time and should you need help, call on me. I wish you joy."

With that the tree became just a tree, yet when Sam poked a finger at it, it sank into the bark and she felt a gentle pinch. Sam smiled, turned around, sat with her back to the tree and cried for a very long time.

Lorraine turned to Oren and said, "I told him Hubert was alive."

"That was kind, child. Will he adapt?"

"He will, he remembers the forty years he spent with Dauphine. This time he will eat and share her bed. He is a drus



now.”

“Will she be all right?”

“Sam has the strongest will, the strongest mind I have ever encountered. She beat the dryad inside her own tree. She will cry but she will be fine. Soon I suspect Hubert will meet her again, he can't hide behind the St. George forever.”

“And you?”

“Me? I've been in her mind, I can't wait to get into her bed.”

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