

Mike's Lunch Counter

Lunch Counter Stories XIII



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Kids, Kids, Kids

Kuroneko slammed into Jim's Lunch Counter. She sat down heavily at the counter and called "Whisky, large."

"Downstairs."

Glaring at Mike, she said, "Fine, coffee, black, hot, bitter."

Mike dropped the coffee in front of her and wiped the already clean counter-top with a rag. She'd talk when she was ready.

Kuri drank her coffee and fumed. Mike didn't need to be a seer to understand she was angry. Very angry. He waited.

"Could I have another please Mike, and sorry about snapping at you."

"Coming up." Mike had almost said 'sweetie' as he had when she was a child, but she was no child now, and Mike supposed that technically, she hadn't been for centuries. Mike knew, from stories he'd overheard, that Kuri had been cursed somehow well back in the middle ages, but a cat had somehow got in the way, and she spent a very long time going through a life, returning to Europe, and coming back as a black cat, with no memory of her earlier lives.

It was a confusing story in a confusing town, Guelph was home to students and spirits in addition to the regular folks, and Mike

knew that part of it was due to this coffee shop. It had been bought by Ashley Childress and rather than change the sign, he'd changed his name to Jim. Hence Jim's Lunch Counter. Jim had drifted back to Europe, leaving the place to Art Pendry, who handed it over to Mike and his partner Liz.

Like Mike said, 'complicated'. He was waiting for Kuri to get around to it, she would eventually.

"It's my mother, she just makes me so mad."

Mike changed her to decaf and refilled her cup, "Ah."

Kuri's stepmother was Lila MacDonnell, wife of Jonah. They had taken in three kids, Kitsune, Okami and Kuroneko. It had turned out that the MacDonnells were King and Queen of the Fairies, and had adopted all three kids. The thing is, they had raised Kuri countless times over the centuries. This last time, Kuri had somehow managed to get out of the life and death cycle and she was now more or less immortal, like her siblings. Kitsune was a fox and Okami was a wolf. Did we mention that it was complicated?

"Mom wants another baby to help raise, Mike. She says if I'm not going to cycle around any more, then it's my job to give her grandkids."

"Um, that doesn't sound like something Lila would say, Kuri."

Kuri glared, "Well it's what she means."

"Ah."

"I mean, why can't Kitsune do that, she's married to Dave, why can't they give her grandkids, damnit, why does she have to pick on me?"

"Are you sure she isn't asking Kit for grandchildren?"

"Look, whose side are you on, Mike."

Mike held up his hands in surrender, "Panini?"

Kuri was an accomplished shape-shifter, she'd gone from a black cat to having many different forms. She'd caught the knack of picking up patterns from other shape-shifters, and so she was always hungry. Shifting took a lot of energy.

While Mike was putting the Panini together he caught a glimpse of Liz, she was coming out of the store room, had caught the conversation, laughed and headed back through the door. Mike thought, 'thanks, we'll talk about that tonight Liz.'

Kuri stewed some more behind Mike's back and when he put down the food and refilled her cup, he wiped the counter some more.

"You're going to wear that steel top out, Mike, sit down, I'm calm, I promise."

Mike sat on his stool behind the counter, "What does Okami say about it?"

"The bastard says it's my decision, he's good either way."

Mike thought that it was good she was so calm, "So not very helpful."

"Aw he's a nice enough guy, he just says that I'm the one who's going to be pregnant, and I guess he's right to leave it to me. It's just that we're both immortal, we've got centuries to have kids. Mom is just missing us being around."

"She adopted the three of you, has she thought about adopting again?"

"I suggested that, but she says she's fine."

"Family can be tough."

Kuri looked at him for a moment, "Thanks, Mike, for listening, and thanks for that super helpful bit of advice."

Mike grinned and turned around to wipe dishes and put them away.

Liz noticed it had gone quiet and came out of the storeroom. "Oh hello Kuri, I didn't hear you come in."

That earned her a dirty look from Kuroneko as she finished her

panini and drained her cup. She paid Mike and wandered out the door.

"Liz, there seems to be an epidemic of couples thinking about having kids."

"I know what you mean, Mike, Kit and Dave are talking about it, Art and Ingrid, Megan and Stan for goodness' sake."

"What, no that can't be right, Megan as a mother?"

"It's weird, Mike, and I'll tell you something that's even more weird, I'm getting a bit nesty."

Mike's eyes went all soft as he looked at his partner. They'd been together for a long time, since University. Of all the spirit beings in the town, they were sort of on the edge. Mike was a seer, he could see the others, and Liz was the last of her people, the little people from around the lakes, she was a very powerful shaman. The two of them didn't age while they ran the lunch counter, that was something that nobody had explained to them when they took over.

But kids? Now Mike was thinking about it. Living for a long time made it a rare topic of conversation. "Liz do you suppose something is going on in town? Some sort of outside influence? I mean who else would be in a position to notice this, we hear from everyone."

"I'd hate to think it's outside pressure, Mike, that's not a reason

to have kids. It ought to come from inside."

Liz stared off out the window for a time, "You know, let me look at why I'm thinking about it. Then we better have a good look at the rest of the town. You might be right and if you are, I want to know who's doing this."

New Door Bell

'Ting-ting' the bell on the door to the lunch counter rang, which was peculiar, because they didn't have a bell on the door.

Mike looked up from the book he was reading and saw nobody. 'Oh dear, another invisible customer,' he thought.

"Hello, is anybody there?"

But there was no answer. OK a door bell rings, and nobody is here. "Liz!"

"Yes dear."

"Can you feel my head and tell me if I'm having visions again please."

“I don’t detect any problems. What makes you think you’re seeing things.”

“I heard a door bell and I don’t see any one.”

“The door didn’t open, Mike. Did you change your ring tone? Timer alarm, maybe?”

“Oh damn, I changed the notification sound, sorry Liz.”

“It can get to you, this job, can’t it? You’re seeing all sorts of supernatural explanations for perfectly normal things after a while.”

Somebody cleared his throat.

“What is it Art?”

“But I heard it too.”

“Of course you did, it’s my phone, it’s right here on the counter.”

“Oh, do you suppose I could have a refill?”

“Sorry, sure buddy.”

“I like what you’ve done to the place today, by the way. It freaked Ray out though. He said he’ll come tomorrow when it doesn’t look like a Cafe in Paris in 1926.”

“Too many memories?”

“I guess so, he said, ‘Marie’ and turned around. Must have had something to do with a girl.”

“He’s got it all back then does he?”

“Either that or his brain is making up memories to fill in the gaps. Just think of all the things you’d forget if you lived ten thousand years.”

“No, no thanks, I can’t remember what I had for breakfast last Tuesday.”

Liz shook her head, “Oatmeal. You have oatmeal every single day, for as long as I’ve known you. You had oatmeal last Tuesday.”

“Oh yeah.”

“I’m going shopping, you two try not to forget your names please, while I’m out.”

“Bye dear, we need oatmeal and yogurt.”

“Thanks Mike, I’ll remember.” Liz was muttering as she went out the door, “that’s what I’m going out for.”

Mike turned to Art with a grin, “That’s what she’s going out

for, I told her we needed them this morning.”

“What?”

“I’m trying to get her to believe I’m forgetful.”

“Why on the earth would you do that?”

“So if I do forget something, she’ll figure it’s just natural.”

“Are you in the habit of forgetting things?”

“Not yet, but I don’t want her to worry if I start.”

“Start what?”

“Forgetting things.”

“Ah.”

“Art, are you and Ingrid getting serious about having kids?”

“Well Woody, her ex, really wants kids to be an uncle to.”

“Isn’t he living with Mishelle?”

“Yep, still together.”

“So why doesn’t he have his own kids?”

“Uncle, you know, go feed them candy, give them noisemakers and then piss off home.”

“Ah. I wonder what sort of kids Woden the Thunder God and Mishelle, the Great Lynx would have.”

“Any damned kid they wanted to.”

Mike took a moment to absorb that, then he laughed, “Where does an 800 pound gorilla sit?”

“Yep.”

“Does Ingrid want kids?”

“She says she’ll have kids with me any time I want.”

“And do you?”

“What?”

“Want kids.”

“Eventually, yeah, actually I’ve been thinking about it more these days.”

“Aha! There’s a lot of that going on these days. Kuri was in here complaining that her mom Lila was pushing her to have kids.”

“Isn’t that what mothers do?”

“Yeah, but now you and Ingrid, Stan and Megan...”

“Ting-ting.”

“What?”

“Don’t assume some sort of magical explanation for something that is perfectly boring. Folks eventually have kids.”

“Yes, but everyone, all at once?”

“So what do you figure it is? A child-eating monster who is getting hungry? Got a little peckish?”

“What, like a Bunyip?”

“What?”

“It’s an Australian water monster that comes out and eats naughty kids out camping. I heard about them when I was down there.”

“Sure you aren’t thinking of a Crocodile?”

“Maybe?”

“So a child eating monster is causing all of us to have kids and then it’s going to eat them?”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“Mike, imagine if you will, a monster coming for one of Ingrid’s kids.”

“Oh.”

“Or Mishelle, or Megan, of Kitsune, or Kuri?”

“I get it. Probably no baby-snatching.”

“Probably no baby-snatcher about four seconds after it tries.”

“Right, right, but hey, Liz and I are thinking about it.”

“Mike, Liz can take out a Windigo, Megan can’t do that.”

“Right, right. So no bother Jimmie.”

“You feeling OK Mike? You seem a bit jumpy.”

“I don’t know, Art, I suppose the job may be getting to me, I’m starting to see strange monsters behind every door. I could always see spirit folk, but this town... I dunno, it just seems to get stranger each year.”

“Tell me about it, when I was sitting in here with Jim running the place it was pretty normal, then I started seeing more and more ghosts, tricksters, and who knows what else. I met Ingrid

and the next thing I know I'm being chased by the Wild Hunt. Then Ingrid turns into some sort of War goddess and Hildy becomes some sort of giant flying boar. Now all I have to do is hold out my hand and Ingies magical sword is in it."

"Put it away, Art, before you wipe out the lights again."

"Sorry."

"But I know what you mean. One day I'm just a kid in school, wondering where the woman in the fur coat is, and the next I've got a girlfriend who lives down the tunnels and then you're helping Jim fight a Wyrn."

"Compression."

"What?"

"Don't forget all that stuff happens over years and years. It sort of sneaks up on you. Frog in a pot."

"So try to remember all the boring, routine days in between the moments of sheer terror?"

"Yeah, sort of I guess."

'Ting-ting,' both Art and Mike looked toward the door.

"Morning Stan, do you want kids?"

"What? No, I want a coffee."

"Sure, but have you got a strange urge to have kids?"

"You're kidding, Okami was enough for a while, thanks, he was a handful growing up. That's enough."

"Tilly!"

"What?"

"Maybe Tilly is broadcasting, she's a Mother of Gods right? Maybe she's sending out some sort of influence that's causing folks to want kids."

Art shook his head, "First, her influence is on men, there are no "Fathers of Gods" because men don't carry babies. I mean there are fathers of gods of course, but not like Tilly is a Mother of Gods."

"What?"

"Tilly takes the essence from a man and has a kid because that's how her powers work."

"I know how it works, Mike, but there are no male Moggies, what would they be called, Foggies?"

Stan stood up, "I'll just have my coffee over by the window, OK?"

Megan Says No to Home Fries

'Ting-ting' The door opened and Ray came in.

"Ray!"

"What? I think it adds a bit of class to the place."

"You talked to Liz didn't you?"

"Saw her on the way to the grocery store. So what's up gents?"

"Mike here says that there's some sort of influence on us so that we want to have kids. Have you had that urge lately Ray?"

"To have kids, or for the mechanism of having kids?"

Stan guffawed over by the window.

"Seriously, have you had an urge since you and Tilly had Kit?"

"Well, I do like kids, I've had quite a few over my lifetime but I automatically shut down the old baby squigglers."

Mike goggled at Ray, "Baby squigglers?"

"Yeah you know, the sperm."

"Ray I know what you mean, I've just never heard anyone call it that."

"Yeah, well Tilly hauled Kit out of me, I wasn't intending to have her."

"Amen Brother!"

"Stan are you in or out of this conversation."

"Out."

"Not that I minded having Kit to help raise, she was a lot of fun, still is, although she's a lot more serious these days."

"Funny how teaching kids music, makes you that way isn't it?"

"Mike what's this all about?"

"Well a lot of folks are in here lately talking about having kids."

"What about Liz?"

"She's out getting some things from the store."

"Mike..."

"She has mentioned it."

Ting-ting

"You know, I'm sort of getting used to that bell. Hello Megan."

"Mike, can I have a coffee please, I'll be over here with Stan."

Stan lifted his head, "Oh hello Megan."

"Stan, why do you have your usual face on?"

"What?"

"You didn't come home last night, I assume you were out with one of the youngsters, why did you bother to switch back to your ugly face."

"Ruggedly handsome, thank you very much. I wasn't out with anyone, I was on a job up on the Bruce."

"Oh, doing what?"

"I was up there for a wife beating, I sorted it and came back here. They ought to find the guy later today and cut him down."

"Stan..."

"No, no, I strung him up by his feet. I left him puking all that cheap whisky he'd drunk onto the ground. You know, guys like

that just play into the stereotypes."

Megan looked at Stan as if she was checking him for the truth. She nodded and Mike put her coffee down.

"Thanks Mike, can I have bacon and eggs, brown toast and a couple of home fries please."

"You don't like my home fries?"

"Watching my figure, I seem to be putting on a bit around the middle."

Mike's eyes snapped to her abdomen, "You're not uh, with child are you Megan?"

Stan looked at Megan, Megan looked at Mike, and Art hauled Mike by the arm back to the counter where he was out of reach, as much as anyone can be out of reach of Megan.

"Well with all the influences going on around here..."

"Megan, he didn't mean anything by that, he thinks there's some sort of influence on all of us, making us want to have kids."

"No home fries, Mike."

"Uh, coming right up, Megan."

Stan was still looking at Megan, "Are you..."

Megan looked at Stan and Stan got very interested in his coffee, "Uh, I'm just going for another coffee, dear."

When he got to the counter he made wiggling motions with his eyebrows.

Art frowned, "You got an itch, Stan?"

Megan said, "He's trying to tell you that kids are a sort of sensitive subject for me. I haven't had many over the centuries, they tend to go bad."

Stan was, not exactly waving his hands, but it looked like he wanted to. Art ignored him, "Sorry to hear that Megan, what happened?"

"Nothing much happened, Tricksters, remember? Well often they get a bit too far over the edge."

Megan was looking at Ray when she said that. Ray was a European Trickster, a Reynard Fox. Megan and Stan were Nanabozo, North American Tricksters, they usually took the form of a wolf, although they were sometimes Crow, or Raven, very seldom, Coyote. Mostly they left that form to Coyote.

"So what do you do?"

"I destroy them."

Ray was a bit shaken, "Like when you put Kit on trial?"

"That wasn't a trial, Ray, but yes."

"You would have destroyed her?"

"Probably not, considering the forces against us, but I'd have tried."

Stan had his head in his hands, elbows on the counter.

"Cripes, Megan, for a Trickster you're just a bit serious."

"You spend thousands of years trying to fix what Coyote has broken and then tell me how much fun you are."

"But your own kids."

"Look, there was one, his final name was 'Asshole-Breaks-World' who thought it would be a nice trick to knock out the ice dam in the St. Lawrence. He drowned hundreds of thousands of humans. Big joke, I took him as he was planning to split this country in half so that the East and the West were truly on either side of a divide."

"He was causing geologic events?"

"Yes, Ray, he was breaking the world."

"Yikes, that wouldn't even occur to me, even if I had the power to do it."

"Kitsune does."

Ray stared at Megan, "Seriously?"

"She knows how, but Liz taught her how to control herself. You do know that Amber taught her how to stop time right?"

"What? That was Coyote wasn't it?"

"No, Amber stopped time so that Coyote could eat that damned volcano that Okami and Kitsune were trying to hold together. Later she taught it to Kitsune so that she wouldn't figure it out on her own."

"You're..."

"Still keeping an eye on her? Of course I am, and so is Coyote. She's still young but we don't expect she'll go over the edge, she's found Dave and is way too focused on him. This may sound sappy, but love solves a lot."

Mike shivered, before he had met Liz, years ago, he had caught a ride with Megan and spent a couple of nights with her. Later he found out just how dangerous she was. Stan patted his hand and pointed at the stove. Mike was quick to get the eggs and bacon off and onto a plate. Stan winked and said, "I'll take it over."

Jerry and the Sprite

Ting-ting.

“I got somebody else’s teeth last night.”

“Ray you’ve still got your own teeth, and why is that bell still hooked up on the door.”

“You don’t like it? I swear I have someone else’s teeth. I got up to go pee last night and my teeth wouldn’t fit together, they were strangers in my mouth.”

“What about this morning, to they feel OK? I guess it can stay.”

“Well I can take it away if you don’t like it. They feel OK today,”

“Were you dreaming? No, I said it’s OK.”

“Good, not too high pitched? I can make it more of a bong-bong. You know I don’t dream.”

“One of your cousins playing a trick? It’s fine as it is.”

“OK I’ll leave it as it is. I checked around with the cousins and everyone thought it was a great trick, but not theirs.”

“So maybe you pulled it on yourself.”

“I think you’ve got it Mike, I pulled it on myself. That must be it, I’m brilliant.”

“Oh yes, absolutely brilliant. No doubt about it. You want coffee?”

“Can I get a half-decaf frappachino with a hazelnut shot please.”

“Starbucks is just down the block.”

“Black then, and the farmer’s breakfast please.”

“Do we have that?”

“Sure, eggs, bacon, beans, sausage, toast and of course the coffee.”

“Since when?”

“It’s up there on your menu board.”

“What... oh cool, thanks Ray.”

Bong-bong

“Ray!”

Jerry walked in. Jerry was a mutterer, he talked to the voice in his head. Liz was treating him, but it was a long process. He wasn't just a guy with a chemical imbalance in his head, he had been possessed when he was a kid, and the sprite had integrated hard into him. Usually, Jerry was pretty harmless but today he was arguing. As the volume rose, Ray looked at Art and said, “Let me take it out of him.”

“No, Liz says that would damage Jerry and kill the sprite. She's building a life for the sprite and easing it out. I suspect Jerry's starting to notice that the voice in his head isn't him. She says that him arguing with it is a good sign. She says it's lucky Jerry was never religious, the real problems come when someone figures their possession is by a God, that's when they start looking for devils and demons to hurt.”

“Well he's loud.”

Mike had poured a coffee, “Jerry, over here, on the house buddy.”

“Hey thanks Mike, I appreciate it. It's in a to-go cup, should I go?”

“It's a nice day buddy and your argument is pretty loud. How about you take the bench outside and Liz will be out in a few

minutes.”

“Oh, sorry, yeah I’ll wait outside, thanks again Mike.”

“Any time Jerry.”

Ting-ting. “Nice new bell Mike.”

Ray was frowning, “Why does Liz take the time with a sprite? When I was working in Japan I’d just throw the Yokai out and let them fend.”

“I don’t know, Ray, but she’s like that. She shoos flies out, moves spiders to safe places, she just doesn’t see the difference between life. She says that we’re too selective, that everything deserves a chance.”

“But you guys cook meat here.”

“Sure, but we make salads too. Liz doesn’t see the difference between dandelions and us, having a chance means not killing for no reason. To eat? Sure.”

Ray thought about that for a while and decided he liked it. You live and let live, or you grow food to eat, but you don’t kill for fun. He had lived a bit like that, but he was lazy, he’d still just throw the sprite out of Jerry.

“Yes, but at what damage to Jerry? Physically and psychically, he’s been talking to the little thing all his life, who knows how

much of Jerry is the sprite and how much of the sprite is Jerry, best to ease them apart.”

“Hi Liz, uh I was thinking that, not saying it aloud.”

“Oops, sorry Ray. I’m going out to talk with Jerry now Mike.”

“Take him a refill,” said Mike, handing her a carafe.

Liz nodded and went out.

“Teeth still good? Breakfast is up.”

“Yeah, thanks. Any more word on the baby pusher?”

“The day is young, you feeling any urge to have a kid?”

“I’ve got nobody to have a kid with, Mike.”

“What about the girl you were with last night?”

“How do you know I was with a girl?”

“You were in bed, you told me. And you aren’t usually attracted to men.”

“She’s someone I just met, no feelings of building a nest, sorry Mike. I’ll tell you if it happens.”

“Listen, we’re alone in here, can I ask you something private?”

“What, and you don’t other times?”

Ting-ting.

“Oh thank god you’re here Stan, Mike was about to ask me something personal.

“How did you know it was me?”

“I heard the bell and turned my head, there you were.”

“But I’m in disguise.”

“Well I’m a Trickster, and Mike is a Seer. Besides, it’s not much of a disguise. You just got rid of your scars.”

“You think it looks better?”

“It’s awfully pretty now, Stan. You were ruggedly handsome before, now you’re just pretty.”

The scars were back, “Thanks Ray. Hey Mike, what were you going to ask Ray?”

“Well it was kind of private.”

“Spill, I won’t tell.”

Both Ray and Mike laughed, Stan looked a bit hurt, “What, I

didn't tell about the rash on your ass, Ray, or the bad lunch meat you had me sterilize, Mike... oops."

"Mike you may as well ask me, this cafe is gossip central anyway."

"Well I was just going to ask why you never found someone, a mate, you know?"

"That's not particularly personal Mike, I had a wonderful girl in Japan, Susume, had five kids with her. Then I lost my memory, as well as a bunch of years and came to Guelph where I eventually met Tilly and had Kitsune."

"Yeah but that was a while ago, Kit is all grown up."

"Well, Tilly is still having kids, I found that out, when I found out from Stan, that he'd sired Okami with her."

Stan's head whipped around as if he was looking for someone, although Megan had forgiven him for Oki long ago.

"Since then I've more or less been in Tilly's life, helping raise the kids. So you see, I do have someone steady in my life."

"Did you ever think of having more kids with her?"

"She told me 'one to a customer.' But I think her power more or less pushes her toward one kid with each father."

“So Mothers of Gods really are gene mixers.”

“They sure are. There’s a whole town here of inter-related kids.”

“Wait, she’s a descendent of yours isn’t she?”

“Sure, four or five generations between. When you live a long time the old family ties get pretty knotted.”

Stan snorted, “Amen brother.”

The Kid from Port Stanley

The kid was sitting on a stool at the counter. No bell, no door. He looked around and smiled, “Any chance you could spot a new kid in town a coffee, sir?”

Mike nodded and dropped a mug in front of him. As he was pouring the coffee, Stan said, “Put it on my tab Mike. Hello Robin.”

The kid spun around, kicked his feet a couple of times in obvious delight, “Hey Stan, great to see you. I was hoping to run into you. How are you doing? Can I live here in your town now?”

“I’m fine kid, and it’s not my town so I guess you can stay here, why would you leave Port Stanley?”

“Aw Port isn’t my town any more, it’s insane, the size is doubling every damned year it seems, and the big shots from the city are coming in, pushing out the locals. Me included I’ll tell you. Tourist season is coming up and I don’t think I can take another year there.”

“But we’ve seen it before haven’t we? Someone builds up the town and then it collapses again.”

“That’s true, but all the tourists are buying houses now, we’ve lost two parks for condos. You ever been to White Rock?”

“Sure, wall to wall condos all down the beach and up the cliffs.”

“Well if the cliffs weren’t clay they’d be building on them. The only green left in the town are the trees holding the gumbo together.”

“That’s an Alberta term, gumbo”

“Well I’ve been there, you know what I mean, a rock when it’s dry, soup when it’s saturated.”

“Oh I know it. I’m sorry you got chased out of town.”

“Yeah, well there’s hardly a handout in the place any more.”

Ray was listening closely, “You’re that kid that Stan talked about to Art and me. The one who sent Jessica here to Guelph.”

Robin looked at Stan who nodded, “Yeah I guess I am. How is she doing?”

“She’s working for a husband chaser, a detective named Sam Jones, she’s his secretary and mostly his nurse.”

“I thought she was a healer, she was kind to me.”

Ray nodded, “She’s nice, and she’s quiet about her powers.”

“Got you, lips sealed.”

“But Robin, I want to know, if you’ve lived as long as I figure you have, why are you panhandling on the streets? Why haven’t you built up enough money to invest and provide an income.”

Stan smiled, “He has, Ray. He’s got lots of money squirrelled away, but he likes being outdoors.”

“Well, not lots. Enough though. I just like being where I can keep my finger on the pulse and all that. I also don’t like houses much, I’d rather be out in the weather.”

Ray frowned, “Robin... Goodfellow?”

Robin bowed low in his chair, “The very same, Puck to some. I’m hoping, Stan, that you could put in a good word with Lila for me.”

Mike groaned, “Oh no, please not in my cafe.”

“No, no, it’s just a small thing, she told me to get out of her sight for a while. I figure a couple hundred years, surely she has forgiven me for such a little thing.”

“The last time there was a little thing, Lila and Jonah showed up with a hundred Fairy warriors outside my door. There was almost a war.”

“No, no, it won’t come to that...”

Ting-ting, Lila Cleary (the younger Lila) walked through the door in full fairy armour with her staff from the twins. It was humming with a terrible sound.

Mike held a dish-rag up in front of his face as if to shield himself, then he remembered and lifted the serving tray off its hook. It became an ancient wooden shield, the very one used by Art to fight the Wyrms with Jim in the tunnels below the University. He was reaching for the broken knife that became Jim’s seax when Lila said, “Robin, my parents are coming. Give it to me now.”

“Give you what, my pretty maid?”

“Robin Goodfellow, hand it to me now or I won’t be able to stop them. My father trained me, to face both he and Lila would be foolish, now hand it over and shut up.”

Robin reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out an incredible necklace, it glowed with inhuman jewels. Every eye in the place went to it, every hand in the place reached for it.

Lila quickly put it around her neck and tucked it under her chain mail shirt. She finished that and picked up her staff once more as the King and Queen of the fairies walked through the door.

Ting-ting.

Lila looked at Mike, who had moved from behind the counter to stand beside Lila the younger, who was standing in front of Robin. Ray and Stan had stood up and were shifting in a menacing way between human form and their Fox and Wolf forms. “Mike, you got a new door bell, I like it.”

“Thank you Lila, Ray gave it to me.”

“Ray, Stan. We have no quarrel with you, or with you Mike. We are here to talk to Puck. Lila, why are you here?”

“Hello my Queen, I am here to prevent an injustice.”

“Oh? Do please explain, my husband’s daughter.”

“This is what you come for, here around my neck. It was given to me by Robin Goodfellow, as a gift to the newest child in the line of MacDonnell.”

Jonah’s mouth was quirking upward.

“Darling Lila, that necklace is mine, and it was stolen by Puck centuries before you were born, child.”

“Mother, you come here armed, and with my father to take back my birth-gift? Did you expect me to fight you for it?”

Jonah was openly grinning now, but carefully behind Lila, who would be venting steam out of her ears if that was possible.

“Child of my husband, now you accuse me of trying to take back a gift by force? You really are your father’s daughter. Very well you may keep the necklace, I do hope you know what it is. In the meantime, Puck has returned without permission and for that there will be punishment.”

Stan, Ray and Mike took a small step forward but Lila didn’t take notice.

Robin opened his mouth to try and talk himself out of the situation and at that moment, Lila the younger lifted her staff and without looking, drove it backward into Robin’s groin. He fell to his knees coughing and retching, hands clutched to his injured parts.

This time the Queen's mouth quirked up into a smile. "Oh I see you are indeed your father's daughter. Very well done, and so we will call this justice shall we?"

Lila went onto one knee and bowed her head, "As you declare my Queen, so shall it be."

Jonah was trying very hard not to laugh. The Queen glanced at him and laughed herself, "I must admit, you two make a fine pair. My child, come see me tomorrow and I will teach you just what that gift you wear really is. You gentlemen can go back to your coffees. Puck, come here."

Robin waddled over to Lila on his knees. She placed her hand on his head and he was pain free, "Behave yourself man," and she ruffled his hair.

With that, the two walked back out the door and vanished.

Mike put his weapons away and Stan shook his head before looking at Robin, "You took a hell of a chance, boy."

Robin bowed to Stan and Ray, turned and bowed deeply to Mike, "I thank you for your support of a boy who didn't deserve it."

He turned to Lila and went down on his knee. "My lady, as your mother will tell you tomorrow, that necklace around your neck commands me to your service. To come here all

unknowing and defend me means that I have chosen well, a lady to serve.”

Lila roughly hauled Robin up saying, “What the hell are you going on about man! You are no servant of mine, and I will command no one.”

Stan and Ray smiled, they had some experience with this.

Lila was trying to take the necklace off, but it would not come, in fact it slipped between her fingers and then vanished, although she could feel the weight still.

“My lady, you will not get rid of me so easily, there will come a time when you will be glad of my service, and this your parents know well. You have chosen me and I have chosen you, this is settled. Now you must return to the time whence you came, you are back a few years from where you think you are. We will meet again soon, and in the future you will remember the necklace around your neck, the moment when you will need me.”

“Just stop that. What will I know when I meet Lila tomorrow?”

“The tomorrow she means is decades from now, go to her when you return to your own time. She will tell you a story of great risk and small reward, and then you will forget until you remember.”

“Oh good lord, I came from across town, I don’t time travel.”

“Then my lady, for your kind treatment of me, I thank you, and I bid you return across town. We will meet again soon.”

“Fine, thank you gentlemen for helping me, watch over this idiot, he seems a bit addlebrained. Good day to you all.”

With that, Lila was gone. Ray turned to Stan, “She turns out wonderfully doesn’t she?”

“Well she’s wonderful now, caring for Tilly’s brood, but yes, she will be magnificent, and facing down the King and Queen like that. Quite extraordinary. And now my young Robin, you have a story to tell us. Mike here may even spot you a meal for a good story.”

Robin’s Story

“Story first? Very well. This was centuries ago, before we came to this new country. Back home there were clans who fought and fought and fought. I was one of the greatest heroes of that age.”

Stan grinned, “Robin you know that Ray and I are Tricksters and Mike is a Seer, please tell your story as you see fit but we will know the lies.”

Robin laughed loudly and then grinned, “I see I am indeed amongst friends. Very well, I was a fellow who was somewhat useful, perhaps even somewhat skilled.”

“You were a thief.”

“And a good one. Do you want to tell the story?”

“No, I want another coffee and then I’ll shut up and let you talk.”

“Very well. In this time there were many clans of the Fae and they fought each other for territory, for wealth and for fun. Lila was a Princess, not a Queen yet, and from her Grandfather she had received that necklace. She loved it because she loved him. As you saw, the necklace becomes invisible except for the weight of it.

“It happened that one of the warring clans had the chance to kidnap her, intending to hold her to ransom. She had gone far from her people, into the empty woods. At least she thought they would be empty, but of course they were not. She was caught by a band of about thirty warriors and although she fought, and fought well, she was taken.

“As she was being carried away, tied hand and feet, she called out, ‘I call upon any creature of earth or air to help me,’ a powerful call that was picked up by the necklace, as it was a talisman. As it happened, I was nearby, watching the fun, all

unknowing that she had a necklace of binding.

“The magic caught me and I was bound to Lila at that moment. The necklace chose well, because I was not Fairy, and so could not be touched by their magic. Yes, yes I know, the necklace was a Fairy thing, but her grandfather asked Cernunnos, the old man of the woods to help make it. Since the Green Man owed him a favour he gave some of himself to the necklace. Now I happen to be of the forest myself, and so the necklace reached out to me.

“These Fairies thought they knew the woods, but I owned the woods and so they were soon lost. One by one I took the raiders until there was only the leader of the band. I showed myself to him. I must admit, I was showing off to Lila, just a bit, she was young and very beautiful. At any rate, the warrior tried all he could but I avoided his attacks and eventually I took his head.

“I went to the girl, released her from her bonds, and thought to kiss and love her, that’s when I discovered that I was bonded to her, much to my dismay. For trying to make love to her she caused me to dance for half a day.

“When we got back to Lila’s people, and I capered all the way there, the King and his father wanted to reward me, and the grandfather asked Lila to return the necklace. Lila refused, and so I was bound.

“Now, you might think this story is of a selfish young girl, but

you would be wrong. Lila had kept the necklace so that she could keep me. After she had proved she was my master, she put me to use in her bed, where I was quite happy to lie. I will tell you that I taught her well, the arts of love. She was a sweet young thing so it was no hardship.

“I was content for decades to be at her side, until she met Jonah, and shortly afterwards became Queen, when her father retired. Jonah was King shortly afterwards of his own people. The two of them were head of the most powerful tribe of Fairies and I was advisor, but no longer in her bed.

“You can probably guess what happened then, I waited and one day she took the necklace off. I stole it from her room as she and her husband were distracted in her bed, and I was free. She was angry and banished me from her realm just as I was heading over the border. I have kept out of her way ever since.

Mike shook his head, “That deserves a meal, Robin, what would you like.”

“The Farmer’s Breakfast if you please.”

Liz had come into the cafe as Robin started his story, “What will you do now, Robin? Will you move along into the forest?”

“No, I will stay near Lila Cleary, to protect her.

“But you are free for a generation, until she receives the necklace, you’re free until then.”

“Oh, you are a clever woman. Yes I called to her from the future so that I could be free until then.”

“But you will stay close?”

“Indeed I will. There are heavy penalties for such bargains as I just made, should they be unfulfilled.”

“If Lila doesn’t receive the necklace because she does not live long enough?”

“There are those who have tried such things in the past, to avoid an obligation.”

“And what penalty would there be?”

“You know the Wild Hunt?”

“Ah, yes. Mike, perhaps we won’t talk to Art about this.”

Mike laughed, “Can we help you get a job or a place to live, Robin?”

“Oh no, I prefer the streets. There was a fellow on the bench outside, perhaps I will go find the best spots from him.”

“That’s Jerry, he’s under Liz’ care.”

Liz stepped forward, “Robin, give me your hands.”

Robin held out his hands, right upward and left down.

“You know the way of my people?”

Robin winked, “I have been around this area for a while, Shaman.”

Liz took his hands and looked up quickly, “You are a very old, being. You might be older than Coyote.”

“Perhaps I know him, although he never remembers me. Perhaps I watched him sing the world into being a time or two.”

“You knew my people, I am the last.”

“Who told you that?”

Liz looked at Robin for a long time, but could find no lie there, perhaps her people still lived.

“They are very good at hiding, Shaman.”

“You will not harm Jerry.”

“I will not, I will protect him as I protect Lila, have no fear.”

“Will you let Lila know who you are?”

“No, time enough when she receives the necklace. Then she will need to know I am here.”

“And the Queen?”

“Oh, she will know I am here, but she will do nothing.”

“Because you are protecting her namesake.”

“You really are clever, Shaman, yes because I protect her husband’s daughter. She told me that relationship quite clearly, that the Cleary girl was Jonah’s daughter, knowing that would bind me more tightly. We are all very clever.”

Mike wanted to know, “How does that make us clever, I’m not quite up to speed here.”

Ray smiled, “King, Queen, Canadian, Japanese, French, Mason, Odd Fellow, these are all fictional, unreal things Mike. What matters is the loyalty of one being to another. To protect Jonah’s child was done from a loyalty between Jonah and Robin. Robin is also loyal to the Queen, despite being banished by her. It is being to being that creates the spiderweb of our loyalty, not membership in some created group.”

“I guess I understand that, do I understand that?”

“Mike why did you stand with Stan and I beside Lila?”

“I’m not sure, really, I guess because you stood up.”

“And Liz was behind you, although you might not have seen her. I was protecting Lila, Stan was protecting Robin, you were standing with me.”

“Ah, I see, you don’t risk your life for an abstract idea, but for the guy next to you. And if Art was here, he’d have stood with you too.”

“He was on his way but I waved him off, I saw where it was going.”

“I didn’t.”

“And for that, thanks Mike, for standing with us.”

The Lost Brother

She looked to be about six, although in this town it's hard to tell. She was sitting at the counter and her feet were a long way from the floor. Mike had given her a milkshake and was waiting to find out what she would say. She was there for a reason, there was no doubt about that.

"Are you Art or Ray?"

"No love, my name is Mike, I run this place with Liz, who is wiping tables behind you there."

"The detective told me to talk to Art or Ray."

"Do you want me to call them?"

"Yes please."

Liz made a small movement with her hand. Mike said, "They will be here soon. Can I help you in the meantime?"

"Do you know about fairies?"

"I know a little."

"Well the fairies have taken my brother. I need to get him back."

"I see."

"You're not laughing at me."

"I'm not."

"The detective laughed at me, I don't think he believed me that my brother was taken into the fairy lands."

"And he sent you here?"

"Well it was the woman who works in the same place, she sent me here."

"I see. Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"I have some fresh doughnuts here, or would you like a panini?"

"Doughnut please."

Ting-ting.

"Here's your doughnut and here are Art and Ray. The woman is Ingrid, she is Art's wife. Perhaps you would like to sit with them at a table."

The girl walked over to the table with the three newcomers, "My brother was taken by the fairies into their secret place and I would like to get him back please."

Ingrid sat down beside her, "What's your name, dear."

"My name is Elsie and my brother's name is Edward James Johnston Junior."

"My goodness, a very good answer. Can you tell us the story of how your brother was taken by the fairies?"

Ingrid glanced at Mike, who nodded. He phoned Megan and outlined the situation to her, "Any child snatchers around?"

Mike hung up and said, "She's checking."

The girl looked from Mike to Ingrid and started talking. "We were in bed last night. We had been sent there after dinner because we were a bit naughty, and mother said we needed to have a good long sleep. I woke up and there were lights moving around in the room, and then when I looked, my brother was gone."

Art spoke up, "Did you tell this to the detective?"

"No I just told him the fairies had taken my brother and he laughed. That's when the lady told me to come see you."

Ingrid took over again, "Was there anything else you saw or heard, Elsie? Was anyone talking?"

"No, just the lights and my brother was gone."

"Did you look for him?"

"Oh yes, I looked all over the apartment for him but he was gone. I even peeked into Mommy's room but he wasn't there."

"Under the bed?"

"How did you know he went under the bed? I looked there

too."

"Does your mother know you're here Elsie?"

"No, she went to work and I went to the detective who sent me here."

"All right, I will walk you home and Art and Ray will look for your brother, would that be OK?"

"Thank you."

"You're very welcome, come on then."

As they left, Ray shook his head, "There are no fairy lands, these are all the lands there are."

Art nodded, "But there are places here that aren't quite visible to humans, I remember thinking that the world was a lot bigger than I thought it was when I started seeing spirit beings."

"That's true, I guess we'd better check." Ray disappeared as he went to visit Lila MacDonnell.

"Tell me."

Ray outlined the story and Lila's face grew thunderous. "I would know if my people took a human. That sort of thing is strictly forbidden, has been for hundreds of years, but I will check. In the meantime, tell me where this girl lives, I'm going

to take a look."

"Ingrid is walking her home."

"Good, she and I can both look."

"Coffee, Ray?"

"We might as well, our jobs have been taken by Ingrid and Lila, I would not like to be a child snatcher who was tracked down by those two."

"Breakfast too please Mike, the usual."

Liz was frowning as she folded serviettes, "Does it occur to you fellows that a mother would not go to work if her child was missing?"

Mike was breaking eggs onto the griddle, "How do you mean, Liz?"

"I'm just wondering if there is a brother, or if the mother has had her memory wiped. Otherwise she would be searching for her son, don't you think?"

"Did you feel something from the girl?"

"Nothing except for a deep sense of loss, she truly believes her brother has been taken."

"But perhaps not? Has she invented an imaginary brother?"

"We need to consider it."

"Ray, you've had lots of kids, did any of them invent imaginary siblings?"

"Yes, but Mike, none of them imagined they had been stolen by Fairies. They just sort of forgot them."

Art was thinking, "Yokai, sprite, some sort of real but invisible companion?"

"But she mentioned her brother's bed, why two beds in one bedroom?"

Ingrid and Lila had returned to hear that last. Ingrid said, "There were two beds there in her room. No doubt there was someone there with her once, but the second bed was dusty, nobody had slept there for a long time."

"Is the girl OK?"

"Yes, she's calm, she believes we'll find her brother."

Lila had been paying attention to something else, "There is no involvement of my people in this. I've checked."

Ray was still thinking, "No fairies, no brother last night, but a second bed. I think we need to talk to the mother."

Ting-ting, just on cue a woman walked into the cafe. "Hello, Elsie phoned and told me she has asked you people to find her brother?"

Ray looked hard at the woman, "You're her mother?"

Ingrid put a hand on his arm. "Yes, Elsie came in and asked us to find her brother who she thinks has been taken by the fairies."

"Oh dear, not again. This happens from time to time. She had a brother but he died four years ago, she hasn't been able to accept it, I'm afraid."

"Do you mind if we ask a few questions?"

"You mean will I break down? Look it was four years ago, I've accepted it. He had leukemia and nothing we tried, worked. Since then Elsie hasn't let me take the second bed out of her room. She insists her brother is there with her. I've taken her to therapists but there's nothing they can do."

Lila said, in a soft voice, "I'm going to ask some strange questions, please just answer them. Have you ever heard noises, sounds, that might make you believe that there was someone with your daughter in her room?"

"Sometimes in my imagination I believe Edward is still there, yes."

"Do you have to make his bed?"

"Yes, Elsie rumples it up and I have to make it once in a while."

"Food?"

"I think Elsie eats for two once in a while. Growing girl I guess."

"I see. It's going to be all right, if you don't mind we'll have a talk with Elsie, I think we can explain things to her."

"Would you? I've been worried sick, it's just the two of us and it's been quite a strain with her thinking her brother is still alive."

"If you don't mind, we'll talk with her today in your apartment."

The woman looked a bit suspicious, but Liz made a pass with her hand and the woman smiled, "That would be fine, thanks."

As she left the cafe, Lila turned to the others, "Not a ghost, but a sprite, and one that Elsie is creating, only she can't make it quite real."

Art looked confused, "Can you do that, create something from nothing?"

"Oh yes, if you're determined and you have a bit of old blood in you. I suspect this girl creates and loses her brother over and over again."

Ingrid frowned, "Make it last, or try to explain to Elsie that she's making him?"

Liz shook her head, "neither of those are good for her. Bring her here and we'll do a leaving ceremony. She's old enough to accept it."

Lila looked at Liz, "I don't know that ceremony, you can do it?"

"Oh yes, it's not uncommon, I can use the fact that she came for help to allow her to accept."

"Any help you need, we'll be here."

Liz smiled, "Go get the girl, she will need you here as her friends."

Copper Woman

Art was playing with a penny he'd found somewhere, spinning it on the counter, flipping it between his fingers. Ray seemed deep in thought, so Art flipped it at the back of his head.

Ray caught it without looking, and rubbed it between his fingers while getting a faraway look. Art regretted throwing the penny but had to ask, "A penny for your thoughts, Ray."

Ray looked at the penny, "I'm thinking of Xaalajaat."

"Copper woman? Wow that was a long time ago, you told me about her. Did you ever see her again after the thing with the eyes?"

Ray thought for a bit and shrugged, Art was his friend, "I did. It was a few years afterward, I had gone up to the parking spot in the woods to sit and think for a while and she was there in the car beside me."

"Just like that?"

"She's a Goddess, Art, she can be quiet when she wants, although she usually stomps through the world like she owns it."

"I remember you saying, she still had her copper legs and eyes?"

"Just like I remembered her. When she appeared I realized I was thinking about her, actually. I turned to tell her I was happy to see her, and she kissed me, she said, 'I know.' Did I ever tell you how spooky she was?"

Art nodded, "Did you..."

"Oh yes, I still had the same blanket in the car and so we spread it where we did before. When we were done, she told me that if more men were like me she'd be a lot happier."

Art smiled, he had an idea of how much his friend liked this woman and he was happy for him.

Ray was quiet for a moment, "I waited for her to say more and she just rolled on top of me. After that I asked her if she had come just to make love. She laughed, I hardly ever heard her laugh, it was lovely, and she said, 'Not just, I need your help.' I told her "anything, any time."

Art smiled again, he knew that she hardly needed to ask, Ray would help anyone he figured deserved it, and sometimes he'd help his friends even when it was a very bad idea. Art and Ray had been on some poorly thought out adventures in their time.

Ray had a smile as well, remembering, "She smiled and told me that she'd lost something and couldn't get it back. She said that she was too direct, and she needed her fox to be clever."

"What was it, Ray?"

"You know she's the Goddess of her people's underworld right? And that it's underwater? Apparently one of her symbols of power was a copper shield. The Haida chiefs would throw them into the ocean and the original was hers, one she'd made. Well

there was a being underwater who had stolen her shield, and she couldn't get it back.

"We got dressed and she took my hand. We travelled out to the island, she said the creature was offshore right where we were, and she gave me a copper mask, saying it would let me breathe underwater. I put it on and we jumped in.

"We had no trouble finding this creature, it was squid-like, with tentacles and a hell of a beak. It was also a spirit being. I changed to a fox with three tails, like Susume taught me and went for it, but this thing could steal my powers, steal my strength. I found out pretty fast why Zaat couldn't defeat it.

"The longer I fought it, the weaker I got. I finally broke off and we went up to the surface where Zaat had to heal my wounds. This thing drained me badly. She dragged me onto the beach and I recovered, but it took a while. She told me not to try that again, she had fought it many times and it always turned out the same way.

"As I was recovering and she was healing the wounds the thing had given me, I was thinking how to defeat it. How do you beat something that steals your power? It was then that Zaat said something, 'Be careful love, I don't know if I can bring you back if you die here, I don't want you in my underworld, I truly do not.' That was it."

Art could see that Ray was still there, but he was frowning, "Ray?"

"I've died before, Art, so I had my plan. I hugged her and told her that I loved her and that what I did was my choice. She thought about that and grabbed for me but I was gone, back in the water. I had my copper mask on and turned to a water-fox again, but this time my tails were long enough to wrap up the creature.

"I started fighting like I had before and I swear I could feel this thing grinning in my head. I waited until we were completely wrapped up in each other and it was draining my strength when I ripped the mask off and inhaled the ocean. Like I hoped, when I drowned, the creature drowned too.

"When Zaat felt that, she was there, she took the shield and me and we were on the beach again. She told me afterward, that a part of her didn't want to give me up, that she was mightily tempted to keep me in her underworld, where we could be together, but she knew that I was counting on her to give me up. When I came back to the living, she was crying, from those copper eyes she was crying copper tears.

"She said, 'That was a hard thing that I did, Ray Keen, to give you up to the living again, but I had to, you died for me.' I hugged her for a long time and told her that I would have been happy to stay with her in her underworld."

"Oh my, well I'm glad she didn't keep you, buddy."

"Sometimes, though..."

"You really loved her."

"I still do, Art, how could I not?"

"But Susume, Tilly?"

"Art, do you think love is turned on and off? That there is only so much? Love is infinite, there is enough for every person you love, the more the better. Do you only love one person at a time?"

"I don't know, Ray, I was only with a couple of women before I met Ingrid, I suppose I'm still fond of them."

"Were you only fond of them one at a time?"

"OK I guess that I still love them, at least I still feel affection for them."

Mike had been listening, "Well I love Liz deeply, and before her, there was my trip with Megan. I like Megan but damn Ray, she scares the hell out of me."

Liz, with her usual sense of timing, was standing in the back door and laughing.

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ

The Writer

He looked like he blew in on the wind, hair and shirt askew, and his eyes looked like he was trying to see three things at once.

Liz noticed him the moment he came through the door, she waved him to the counter and set a coffee in front of him.

He cupped the mug in his hands as if it was a lifeline, as if he was going to fly back off the stool and right out the door. But he wasn't in any danger, Liz would know.

“Are you hungry? Something to eat?”

“Eat? I guess I should eat, yes thank you.”

Liz waved toward the board, “What would you like?”

“Oh, anything, I don't know, you know, whatever.”

Liz broke some eggs onto the grill and added sausage. She waited with her back turned and sure enough he started to talk.

“My name's Harry, I'm a writer, or rather I was a writer, I can't write any more.”

“Hello Harry, I'm Liz. Did you write anything I'd know?”

“Oh probably not, I write mostly for myself, it keeps me sane. I

put it up on a website so people can download it.”

“What do you do for a living then?”

“I work at the University, I’m a course coordinator, setting up labs, that sort of thing.”

“And you write.”

“I used to, but I don’t seem to have any ideas any more.”

Liz set a breakfast in front of him and refilled his coffee. “Tell me what you used to write.”

“Fantasy mostly, dragons and fairies, that sort of thing.”

“But you’ve run out of ideas?”

Harry was forking in the eggs and nodded, his mouth full.

“Harry, when was the last time you ate?”

He swallowed and rolled his eyes upward, “I don’t know, when I’m writing, trying to write, I sort of forget the time. I forget to eat.”

“Ah, and tell me, do you read a lot?”

“Oh no, I don’t have time for that.”

“So watching movies, taking walks, sitting quietly?”

“No, I just want to write, that’s all.”

“Do you sleep, dream?”

“I’m usually up late writing, I don’t think I dream much.”

“Not even daydreams?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Would you like some more eggs?” Liz cracked three more and added some bacon.

“Thank you, I seem to be a bit hungry.”

“Tell me, does your mind wander when you do your job?”

“Can’t, I have to concentrate to set things up for the students, mix the reagents, make sure they have the equipment they need.”

“I see, well get that food into you and we’ll see how you feel.”

Liz let him eat while she took care of another customer. By the time she had cashed her out, Harry had finished.

“Would you like more, Harry?”

“No thanks, that was great. I feel much better.”

“I’m not surprised. Tell me, if it’s not too personal, do you have a partner in your life?”

“You mean a girlfriend? No, nobody like that.”

“Friends you go drinking with?”

“No I don’t drink alcohol, just gallons of coffee to keep me awake when I write.”

“So tell me about your writing, what did you do while you were writing?”

“I would just start and the writing would take over. I never had a problem with ideas, it was like the characters told me the story.”

“And now?”

“Now they don’t.”

“Harry, you looked pretty rough when you came in here, can you guess when the last time you ate was?”

“No, like I said, I don’t know.”

“It was four days ago.”

“How do you know something like that?”

“I know.”

“Oh. No wonder I didn’t feel good. I feel a lot better now, maybe I can go back to writing.”

“I doubt it, Harry, you’ve starved your muse.”

“I’ve what?”

“You know what a muse is?”

“Yes of course, the personification of inspiration, the Greeks invented them.”

“Yes, and they are young women for a reason. Harry a muse needs care and feeding. You have to take care of them just as you have to take care of your own self.”

“But muses aren’t real, they’re just an explanation for where ideas come from.”

“That’s very true, they are explanations, but Harry, they are very, very real. Just because they aren’t flitting around the room in their see-through nighties, doesn’t mean they aren’t real.”

Harry’s eyes lit up, but then died again.

“An idea?”

“Yes, but it went away again, that’s what’s been happening.”

“Your muse is still trying, she still loves you Harry, but you’ve used her up.”

“You make it sound like she’s a girlfriend.”

“Let’s go with that, would you keep a girlfriend locked up in your room, doing your laundry and cooking and cleaning and never feeding her, or taking her out for some exercise?”

“No of course not.”

“Your muse is that girlfriend.”

“Isn’t that pushing a metaphor a bit too far?”

“Harry, I’ve known many beings who are called muses, and starvation is more common than you might think. Your muse lives in you, simple as that. You have to feed her just like you have to feed yourself.”

“Well, OK, let’s say you’re right. How do I feed my muse?”

“What does she eat?”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on, think, you’ve taken things from her and never given those things back. What are they?”

“I, well, ideas, inspiration, dialogue, description, that sort of thing, I guess.”

“And you’ve emptied her out. How would you refill the well?”

“You mean put in more ideas, that sort of thing? I guess I would uh, read books, watch movies maybe.”

“And for the other things, dialogue and description?”

“Get out more? Go walk around, talk with people?”

“Now you’re getting the idea, and once you’ve fed your muse, how do you talk with her? Up to now you’ve just made her do the work, you force her to write your stories for you.”

“That’s not fair, I sweat buckets when I write.”

“Do you really, you told me your stories more or less wrote themselves.”

Harry sat silently for a while, and it was like something was talking to him. “I sit quietly and listen, I hear things from my muse, from my imagination.”

“You know, Harry, I’d be the last person to suggest this, but a lot of writers drink to shut their brains up, so that they can hear

their hearts. That's how they sometimes put it. But you can shut your brain up by sitting quiet and just breathing in the spring air, appreciating the growing things."

"OK I can see that. I can also see that all the things that you asked me were really the things I should be doing."

"Like going out with friends, living a life instead of just writing about it. You can only write so much about what you've done so far, you have to experience more of it, you have to feed the muse."

"And a girlfriend?"

"Have you had a girlfriend, Harry?"

"Yes of course, what a lot of drama, some of them were like being around a soap.... op... era. Oh, I see."

"Harry, maybe your muse hasn't deserted you, maybe she's just plain out of gas, out of energy. Just like you were when you came in. You've had a good meal, how about one for her?"

"OK, thank you Liz, I'll go for a walk right now, maybe read a book later."

"Not so fast, give me the address of your website first, I will look for your next book."

Harry grinned, "A bit of a push, or maybe a pull, I get it. Here's

my card, thanks again and how much do I owe you?"

"You owe me a good book, Harry, a good book."

As Harry went out the door, he might have felt a presence, maybe a girl in a thin dress, that looked back at Liz and breathed "thank you". He might even have seen Liz nod back.

ZZZZZZZZZZZZ

Kitsune Catches Up

Ting-ting

"Hi Kit, we don't see you in here very often these days."

"Sorry Mike, pretty busy at the studio, lots of kids these days."

"No sweat, you're welcome any time, what can I get you?"

"A strong coffee and a mac and cheese panini please."

"Really?"

"I feed a lot of these kids and they love mac and cheese, so I've developed a taste for it."

"I'm going to make two, might just have to put it on the board."

How are things these days?"

"Dave and I have had some, how shall I put it, non-discussions these days."

"Anything special? About kids?"

"How did you know that, Mike? Yeah about kids, mostly me saying 'should we have them' and Dave saying, 'what, you don't have enough kids around here already?' You know what I mean?"

"I do, you know there's a lot of talk about having kids going on these days, I'm getting a bit concerned about it."

"Concerned why? Don't people talk about kids all the time?"

"It seems to be more often than usual, I'm wondering if there's some sort of influence going on."

"Mike are you and Liz talking about kids?"

"Sure, which is part of why I noticed all the talk."

"That's it right there, don't you think? You're noticing it, like when you get a new car, suddenly you see that model car all over the place."

"You think? I wonder if that's it, thanks Kit, I'll see if that's what is happening."

"Any time. Have you seen Ray lately?"

"Hasn't been in yet today but he's usually in. You need him?"

"No, not really, just wanted to catch up, see how he's doing. I sensed he was a bit, I don't know, nostalgic maybe, the other day."

"He told Art about seeing Copper Woman a while ago. That might have been it."

"He did? I thought it was just that one time."

"Apparently at least once more."

"He's full of surprises isn't he. Keeps to himself a lot these days."

"Maybe more like he has lived so long he can't remember who he has told what."

Ray appeared on a stool beside Kit, "You called pet?"

Mike bobbed Kit's panini, "Cripes, Ray, what's wrong with the door?"

"Don't like your bell."

"Then change it, you put it up there."

"I thought you liked it."

"I do, but if you don't like it, change it. I'm not married to the thing."

"Maybe I will."

"Good."

"Good."

Mike thumped a coffee down in front of Ray, who looked at Kit's panini, "What in the world is that?"

"A mac and cheese panini, Ray. Want a bite?"

"Sure, always up for classy food."

Mike had bitten into his, and smiled. "Put it on the board, Ray, it's good."

Ray looked from Mike to Kit and saw that they both liked it. He shrugged and it was on the board.

"Want another bite, pops?"

"Thank you no, you enjoy it kiddo. Did you want me for something?"

"Just wanted to catch up, I haven't seen you for a while. Anything happening lately?"

"Not too much."

"Mike tells me you saw Copper Woman again."

"That was a few years ago, didn't I tell you?"

"Getting old pops?"

"I'll pops you. How are you and Dave doing?"

"Same old same old, he paints, I teach music."

"Writing anything?"

"Sure, always. Got a debut performance at the River Run next weekend."

"Got my tickets, I'm looking forward to it."

"So tell me something pops, and I don't care if I've heard it before, there's a good chance I haven't."

"Well let's see, the Twins are looking after my 'vette these days. I keep telling them I don't want it to fly."

"What! You're kidding, a flying Corvette, what's not to like?"

"Look sweetheart, remember how old I am, horses didn't fly, men didn't fly, automobiles shouldn't fly."

"So have you talked to Susume or the aunts lately?"

"Sure, I visit regularly, and Susume shows up a couple times a week, mostly to brag about the great great grandkids. She's fine, they're fine. She always asks about you."

"That's great. Anything happening in Japan?"

"You mean other than getting more and more stodgy? Honestly, compared to the '60s the place may as well be some sort of historical village. You'd expect them all to be walking backward they look back so much."

"Ray, you can't be serious. It's supposed to be a happening place."

"It's a happened place, it just keeps looking inward, you'd expect it to disappear up it's own fundament any time now. Look, they've got a badly declining birth rate and they can't bring themselves to open up to immigration. They are as condescending as they ever were to.... oh never mind kid, they'll get a huge shock one of these days, either that or the robots will take over when all the old farts die."

"Maybe the Yokai will take over."

"Gods no, you don't want that. They would be right back to the

feudal age, warlords and fighting all over the place. You know, on second thought, that might be fun, I sort of miss the middle ages. Lots of excitement."

"And war, and disease, and slavery and serfdom."

Ray smiled, then remembered who he was talking to, "You're right sweets, terrible idea."

"The ArtRay detective agency doing anything lately?"

"The... hey I like that, I'll have to tell Art. Our last case was a lost dog."

"Uh, OK, tell me about that."

"Well, this lady asked us to find her lost dog, it had slipped its collar and run off. She brought us the collar for some reason, but I caught the scent and we were off tracking it. I should have been a bit suspicious when I saw the name on the collar was 'spike' but I just figured it was some cuteness."

"Uh, Ray?"

"Yep, we followed it all over town and out into the country. We finally cornered it in a chicken coop out near Erin. Turned out our friendly little pup was a full blown werewolf. Not very friendly at all. Art took one look and had Ingrid's sword in his hand but I knocked him aside and went Big Fox. Thanks for that, by the way, it's pretty handy. Anyway, I cuffed it around

the ears a couple of times and it settled down.

"We took it back to it's owner, who turned out to be his wife. I suggested she get a bigger leash and a tougher collar."

"Ray..."

"True story, I swear Kit. Ask Art next time you see him."

"Did you get paid?"

"Oh yeah, Art negotiated a bigger fee on the argument that the dog was bigger than we expected."

"Really?"

"Yep, Jim trained the boy well when he was here running the place."

Mike wandered away to wipe dishes, leaving them to it.

Earth 2

Tok-tok

Mike looked up at the door, there were a couple of wooden

clappers there instead of the bell. He looked over at Liz who tipped her hand back and forth to indicate she wasn't hugely enthusiastic. Then she looked out the window.

Mike looked at the girl who had come in, she was in bad shape, it looked like she'd been in a fight and was in need of a couple good meals.

Liz turned away from the window and went downstairs to the bar.

"Come sit down, what can I get you?"

The girl seemed confused. "What are you, what is this place doing here? Can you lock that door?"

That was when Mike looked out the window. It was deep forest, no street, no city, just a deep, dark forest, not even a pathway that the girl might have walked over. Mike pressed a button under the counter and the door was firmly locked. When the girl heard the bolts going home, she relaxed a bit.

"Sit, tell me what's going on. I'm going to get you some food."

The girl sat a bit shakily on the stool and smiled her thanks. "I've been running for a couple of days, I woke up in that forest, under a big tree, and then those things started chasing me."

"Things?"

"They're not human, they sort of walk like men, but they aren't, they have teeth and claws."

"And they're after you?"

"For two days, I haven't had any sleep or food. Thank you."

Mike had set a plate of eggs and greasy sausage down in front of her, she looked like she needed calories. He was pouring her a coffee when the first of the creatures hit the window. It was vaguely man-shaped, but there was no way you would confuse it for a man.

Mike watched it trying to break the window for a few moments, then it went to wrench at the door. Not stupid then, it could adapt.

As soon as Mike had locked the door, he had called for Ray. Now he said "Megan, Stan" but to his surprise, they didn't appear.

"I don't think we're in Kansas any longer Toto." Liz had returned and behind her was Ken and a few of his Kobold kitchen staff. They were armed to the teeth. Filled, wicked looking teeth that matched what Mike saw out the window.

"Hello Ken, did you know the lunch counter could bounce around like the St. George?"

"It can't, Mike, and yet, here we are."

"Here we are. Do you know where we are, uh..."

The girl looked up, "Erin, Erin Groen, with an o-e in it."

"Do you know where we are, Erin?"

She shook her head and put another fork-full of sausage in her mouth.

"OK where are you from?"

"I was staying at a B&B in Elora."

"And you woke up here."

She nodded and took a sip of coffee, "Could I have some water please?"

Mike turned and with some uncertainty turned a tap. There was water, and now he thought about it, there was electricity. Ken said, "Emergency supplies from the bar, they kicked in the minute we moved."

"Do you know where we are, Ken?"

"I have an idea, those things tapping on the windows look a lot like some form of Kobold. We may be shifted sideways into a place that didn't quite get civilized."

"Shifted?"

"Pulled, more like. Or maybe pushed by the St. George. I don't know how linked these two buildings are, but maybe the George sent us to pick up Erin here, in which case we ought to be moving back any time now."

The group looked around in anticipation but nothing happened.

"And then again, maybe not. Oh hell, they've discovered sharp rocks, gentlemen, light weapons."

The kitchen staff lifted what sort of looked like rifles and one of them fired a shaft of light at the creatures carrying the rock. They fell in a smoking ruin which caused Erin to gasp and quickly turn her face away.

"They are probably trying to eat you, Erin."

"Yes I know, but they're alive."

Liz nodded her approval while she concentrated on the creatures milling about, "I can't feel anything. Mike we're not on Earth, there's nothing on Earth that I can't feel, and I can't feel these things."

"Could they be shielded from you? Preventing you from feeling them?"

"There's always some sort of background. There's nothing there."

"What about the trees?"

"Good point, they're just trees."

Ken nodded, "Sideways then, not that it helps us."

"I don't think they liked the shot through the window."

"No, it's stopped them for a moment. Those windows are tough, but they can be broken. A few more of those fellows and they can lift us up and go under."

"Ken, does that look like a leader to you?"

A taller being with a robe was approaching.

"Can you feel something from him, Liz?"

"Something, maybe, it's getting stronger."

"Let him come up to the door, boys."

The creature stopped just outside the door, it opened its hands and spread them, then pointed to the handle but didn't touch it.

Mike looked at Liz who nodded, while the Kobolds kept the rest of the creatures covered, Mike released the bolts.

The being nodded and slowly opened the door. Nobody moved, as he let the door close behind him, Mike locked it again.

"Greetings Chaps."

"What?"

"Ah, do you have a spare cup, I'd very much appreciate a coffee."

Erin was leaning back away from the being, but she was keeping herself under control, sort of.

Mike nodded and poured a cup, putting it down on the counter. The being nodded toward a stool and Mike said, "Please, sit."

The creature sat and sipped the coffee, "Oh, heaven, we can't grow coffee here, wrong climate. Sometimes some slips through and I must admit I keep it all for myself. I tell the chaps that it's poison. Wicked of me, I suppose."

Ken took a step forward, "You came to bargain?"

The being looked up and was obviously considering this, "What a wonderful idea. I came to tell Erin that we have been chasing her to send her back where she belongs, but this is a much better idea. Let me see now... Ah. You shall never leave this place unless you pay tribute to me, the leader of this hive."

Liz nodded and smiled at Mike. Mike grinned, "Let me guess, coffee? How many bags would you be willing to take to release us?"

"Twelve."

"Six," said Ken.

"Eight."

"Seven."

"Done! You shall be freed from this place on delivery. Now, Erin, I want to congratulate you on your cross country running ability. Quite impressive, and two days worth. Really amazing."

Erin nodded uncertainly.

Mike was pulling bags of coffee off the shelf, "So what happened here?"

"Erin dreamed, I'm afraid, and when she dreamed she took herself here. It happens sometimes. When we couldn't catch her we were afraid she would hurt herself so we brought you here so that she could find refuge and we could talk."

Liz shook her head, "Coffee."

The being grinned. "OK yes. You're good, dear. We go fishing

for coffee and we caught Erin. It happens, we're not terribly accurate."

"Now that is the truth. Listen, this blind fishing isn't very healthy, Erin here is exhausted, this has happened before?"

"Unfortunately yes, fortunately the others weren't such good runners and we sent them back."

"You can be accurate sending them back?"

"Oh sure, they have a very clear notion of where they came from. It's the random grabs that give us trouble."

"All right, how about this? You can see our shelf there, where we keep the coffee? Can you fix on that from here and take a bag when you need it? Without taking a chunk out of our wall?"

"Yes, we can do that."

"Then let's make a deal that you take a bag from us when you need it and not grab randomly, that way no more people or buildings come here that don't belong here."

"And your side of the deal?"

"Ah, how about this, if we ever need your help, we put a note on your coffee and you come help."

"We can do better, how about a call button, you ring, we'll answer."

"Done."

Ken held up his hand, "Wait, we killed two of your people, do you require compensation?"

"We are a hive culture, they are drones, but I will take another bag of coffee as compensation."

Mike smiled as he handed another bag over, "You're addicted to the stuff aren't you?"

"I'm afraid so, yes. OK back you go."

As the lunch counter reappeared, Ray, Stan and Megan were at the door. As they came in, Tok-tok, Ray made a face, "Not quite right. You called?"

Mike smiled, "Yes, thanks for coming, can you give Erin here a ride back to Elora please."

Ray grinned as he held out his arm for Erin.

Chaos

As Erin took Ray's arm, Ray froze, then stepped back. "You."

Erin smiled and bowed, "Hello old friend."

"Why are you here?"

"I rather believe that your friends invited me into their cafe."

"You know what I mean."

"I do indeed, I'm here to do what I have done since the beginning."

Ray didn't seem to like that explanation very much. "Friends, this is Eris the Green, God of Chaos and we really need to get her out of here."

Erin was pouting.

Mike had taken a liking to her, now that he could see she was a spirit being, he asked Ray, "Aren't you a trickster, isn't part of what you do, mixing things up?"

"It's a matter of degree, Mike. I play tricks, Eris here..."

"Erin, please."

“Erin here pretty much takes things back to the primal condition. She’s the end of everything.”

Erin giggled, “So that’s what you really think of me, you seemed to like me the last time we met.”

“I didn’t know who you were.”

“But I told you around about 4am.”

“Eris, Erin why are you here?”

“I was working you dear man.” Erin glanced over at Megan and Stan who were looking at her rather intensely, Liz had her arm out between them and Erin.

“Ah, Nanabozo, good to see you, how’s tricks?”

Megan growled deep in her throat, “We have enough trouble with Coyote around here, I’d like to know what you’re doing here too.”

“Well, I’ll tell you I guess, I was being a fish.”

“What...”

“The hive beings on that Earth, what do they say in the comics, Earth-2, were fishing around for coffee, just like they said, but I thought I’d maybe get caught instead. When I got there I

could see what was happening and so I ran, I love a good run. It was fun, too, and then I thought that maybe the Kobolds of this world would like to meet their neighbours.”

“Why?”

“You’re Ken right, the true leader of the Kobolds on this world? Because it was right that you meet the leader of that world.”

“Never mind who leads, why should we meet them.”

“Ah, not, as my lover Ray is thinking, so that I could make more mischief. Ken you are the logical brother, you see things as they are, where did the world come from?”

“Chaos, there were beings who drew order from that chaos, and around here, Coyote sang the world into being.”

“Correct, order must be created from chaos and order must be maintained or chaos returns.” With that Erin nodded toward Megan and Stan, who had relaxed somewhat.

“Thank you, Megan, you would not have destroyed Chaos, but you would have tried, I know.

“Ken, the Kobolds you met on Earth-2 are what result from too much order. They are nothing but order, just a single entity who directs everything else, and they are going to be in trouble very soon.”

“How?”

“They are going to get hit with the chaos of climate change, massive, catastrophic climate change and they may not survive. They don’t have the science that you have, the ability to figure out what the problem is, and how to fix it.”

“Where do I come in?”

“You know they have the ability to step sideways right? Well what do you suppose they’ll do when their world starts breaking up.”

“We’re overpopulated and have our own problems with that, with climate change.”

“You see, so much alike your two worlds are. How fun.”

“And we will work together to solve the problem will we?”

“No, but you can solve theirs, all you have to do is convince one person, their leader and things can change for them. For this world, well you have to convince too damned many leaders and those who are really in charge, and don’t want things to change because they’re doing OK and don’t care for others.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

Mike looked offended, “We’re on Bullfrog power, Ken, have been since they put up the wind tower in Ferndale.”

“So you’ll help them? I can see that you will, excellent, perhaps you can fight against me on this world for a few more years. I do so love a good run.”

Erin turned to Ray and took his arm again, “Weren’t you going to take me home?”

Ray looked at her beautiful face, then noticed the innocent expression, Erin actually batted her eyes. Ray sighed and said, “Let’s go then,” and they walked out the door.

Bong-bong.

“Better,” Mike said before asking Ken what he would do.

“Call the big wig here and talk, I guess. What else can I do, that woman set it out so that I can’t really ignore the hive Kobold.

Megan shook her head, “Sure you can Ken, but you won’t.”

“Well if they suddenly show up here, you’ll have to deal with them won’t you?”

“Yes we will. So much better to get them to fix their own problem yes?”

“Before it becomes yours, yes Megan, I understand.”

Megan grinned with perfectly normal, not wolf-like teeth at all, which made Ken laugh. “Push the button, Mike, we may as well get started, and I’ll show his nibs what this world looks like, maybe he won’t be so keen to come here.”

“Will you get the world-hopping technique from him?”

“Megan, I’m a stupid man, but never that stupid. Who needs more work?”

Mike pushed the button, “Will you be able to help, Ken”

“He can talk, that means he can think if he wants to.”

“I can’t help thinking about Erin, it almost seems like she wants us to fix things, you’d figure a goddess of Chaos would want things to get chaotic.”

“Maybe she’s the Goddess of managing and using chaos, or maybe she just doesn’t want to work herself out of a job. You know that complete chaos wouldn’t contain the organization to support a Goddess right?”

“Ah, and the Goddess of ‘a little bit of order in a sea of chaos’ doesn’t exactly trip off the tongue.”

“You may have it right there, Mike.”

Trivia Night

The supernatural crowd was out in force at Jim's Lunch Counter. It was trivia night, and they played it just a little bit differently than in most bars. Not surprising, perhaps.

The idea was to have someone come in, and through asking questions or being told a story, the contestants were supposed to guess who it was.

First through the door was a man in a long robe with a hood that covered his face completely. He had a staff and there was a Raven on his shoulder.

"Oh, oh, I know," said Ingrid, "It's Taxet, and the Raven is just about to steal the moon and put it up in the sky."

Ray Keen was acting as quiz master, he shook his head with a grin.

"Oh, then it's Shani, controller of thieves and rider of ravens."

Again, the quiz master shook his head and could barely suppress a laugh.

From deep in the hood, a rumbling voice said, "I don't think you're funny, Ingrid, nobody thinks you're funny."

“Oh, now he’s insulting me, then it must be Woden of the big moustache, with his spear and his Raven.”

The place burst into laughter and applause. It had been painfully obvious that the stranger was Woden, Ingrid’s husband. “Woody, you’re not very good at this, we’re not supposed to dress up as ourselves.”

“I’m in disguise, obviously, Ingie.”

“That disguise hasn’t fooled anyone in ten thousand years, love, you need to do better.”

“Fine, you wait.” Woden went out the door and back in came the stranger. He was carrying a wooden mallet and a barrel. He was an older man with a full, white beard and had a cloak over his shoulders.

“Much better,” said Ingrid.

Ray laughed, “Disqualified, Ingrid, you’ve had one, does anyone know who this is?”

There were frowns all around. “Very well, you may ask questions.”

Kitsune raised her hand, “Are you married?”

“I am.”

“Tell us the story.”

“I was an old man when I looked for a bride, I asked one maid but she refused me, telling me I was old and she would stay single. Later she married, but not me.”

“That is who you are not married to, how did you marry?”

“When I asked my maid to marry me, there was a woman who watched me do so. She felt sorry for me and invited me to her house, which was built on poles in the water and was round like a beehive. She fed me and fed me and fed me until I was as round as her house and she was such a good cook I stayed with her.”

“And your symbols, the big mallet, what is that for?”

“It is to drive posts into the ground.”

“Not Thor then.”

“What, that upstart, never.”

“And the Barrel, is it for wine?”

“Indeed it is.”

“But not Bacchus, because he doesn’t have a mallet.”

“Catch that layabout doing work? Never.”

“You’re not the Dagda, his wife the Morrigan has little to do with homes... I must confess, I am stumped.”

Ray smiled, “That is one to you, Succulos of Gaul.”

“Oh dear, the hammer put me in mind of war,” lamented Kitsune.

“And why not, pet? Succulos is another aspect of Woden, and seeing as he has dozens, perhaps he should sit down and let someone else be the stranger.”

“Well, now I’ve got this barrel of wine, anyone have a barrel-opener?”

Mike reached under the counter and pulled out a tap. The wine was soon flowing.

As they were drinking, a Dong-dong announced someone had come through the door. It was obviously a woman, in a long flowing robe a kerchief up over her hair and sunglasses. Ray gave a small choking sound but managed to get his wine down without spraying it all over Okami and the Twins.

“We seem to have another stranger, does anyone wish to guess?”

Stan let out a huge sigh, “Cannes, 1964, Catherine Deneuve

who starred in the Umbrellas of Cherbourg.”

Megan looked at Stan with a certain thunderous air.

“What, it was just a brief fling, I promise you.”

“And you’ve still got the poster up on your wall, oh yes, just a fling.”

Ray thought he maybe ought to cut that discussion short, “No, not anyone from France, ladies and gentlemen.”

Stan looked disappointed, but under the steamy gaze of Megan, steamy in a not-good way, he sat down.

Art stood and raised his hand, “I’d like to question please.”

Ray nodded and Art continued, “Stranger, are you here to play the game?”

The woman nodded.

“Your voice would give you away?”

Again she nodded.

“Not historical then, very well, yes or no questions only. Do I know you personally?”

She shook her head no.

“But someone must. Is that person in this room?”

She nodded.

Art looked around, but there were puzzled looks on all faces. “You are shielded from us, have you shielded yourself?”

She shook her head.

“The one who knows you has shielded you then. Ah, are you indeed female and in your own shape?”

She nodded.

Art stared at her for a long time, thinking, “Would we know who you are if you took off the sunglasses?”

She nodded.

“The kerchief?”

A shrug.

Art glanced at Ray, as if confirming something, “Your dress, would we know you if you lifted your dress?”

She nodded and lifted her dress up to her knees. Bright copper legs appeared. With her other hand she took off her glasses and the most amazing copper eyes were looking out over the

crowd.

Art nodded, “It is nice to finally meet you, Copper Woman. Ray has told us stories about you.”

Stan was shrinking back, trying to hide behind Megan. Zaat looked his way and laughed. “I didn’t come to take your eyes, trickster, you can relax. I have no further use for those, Ray here has let me see that my copper eyes are so much better.”

She turned to Woden, “I was hoping that Mishelle would be here tonight, please tell her that she and I made an amazing thing together.”

Woden was half standing, ready to fight this woman if she was going to harm Mishelle. He smiled and nodded, “I certainly will, she will be happy you are pleased with them.”

Xaalajaat turned to Ray, “Don’t look so concerned, Fox, I’m not here to ask your help, I’m just here to visit, and I noticed the game. I hope I played well enough for you.”

Ray broke into a smile, “You were, as always, perfect Zaat.”

Xaalajaat laughed, “Do you wonder why I visit you? Shall I take a seat for the rest of the game?”

Kitsune stood, “Come sit here beside me, we can chat.”

While Ray cleared his throat, Zaat bowed to Kit, “It would be a

pleasure, daughter of Ray.”

“And this is my husband, Dave Robbie, who is bouncing in his chair to ask you an entirely predictable question.”

Xaalajaat laughed again, “I would be most happy to pose for you, master painter Robbie, I promise to do my best.”

With that, the audience turned again to watch the door for the next stranger to walk in.

A Quiet Discussion

Kit and Zaat sat talking quietly while the group waited for the next stranger. Zaat seemed to approve of Kit. “You are the girl who went on trial here with Megan.”

“Yes, I was young and I had expelled and destroyed a Wendigo from a boy up north. Megan thought that I was undisciplined and should be destroyed myself.”

“A Wendigo. That is impressive indeed, they are very strong.”

“Well, I had some help from my great, great Grandmother, who is also very strong. She’s a Kitsune from Japan and she swallowed an atomic bomb.”

Zaat stared at Kit, she knew she wasn't lying or exaggerating but she had a hard time accepting that this girl, who hadn't lived even a century, was that strong. "You have an impressive list of powers, Ray tells me."

"Well most of them come from him, he's my father and my great great grandfather."

"Indeed, but I understand you have some of Coyote as well."

"Through my grandmother, yes. Ray and Susume had five girls, one of them, Aiko was a healer. She moved to Guelph with Ray as her child, he had almost killed himself in grief after Susume stopped the bomb and disincorporated. It's pretty complicated and I have a hard time remembering the sequence."

"Anyway, Aiko married a doctor and they had Mavis, my Grandmother. She was a mother of gods, and she had a son with Coyote. That son had a daughter named Tilly who was also a mother of gods and she had me with Ray Keen."

"I can see that you would have quite a mix of powers."

"Well, generally I reach for something and it's there, but I'm not all powerful. Okami, my brother and I tried to contain a volcano but we would have died if Coyote hadn't swallowed it."

"I understand Coyote's mate stopped time so he could do that."

“Oh yes, Amber was Coyote for a while, and she learned to play the world, like Coyote can sing it. Coyote told her what to do and she did.”

“And Amber taught you?”

“Well, she taught me violin, yes, but Coyote told her not to teach me how to play the world, but I learned that on my own pretty soon, so Amber taught me without Coyote knowing.”

“That I doubt, he doesn’t miss much. You are quite an impressive young woman. Especially since you are so quiet with your powers.”

“Well, as a result of the trial, I became a Shaman under Liz’ teachings. She taught me the value of being invisible, of going lightly through the world.”

“Most impressive indeed, I am pleased to have met you.”

“Me too, I want to ask you about Uncle Ray... oh, Megan is the next stranger.”

“So she is, I know who she is but I will not spoil it, she probably chose because of me.”

“Well I am baffled.”

Megan was dressed in a feather cloak and had a fearsome bird

mask on her face. The Europeans were busily discussing, and Okami spoke up, “May I question?”

Ray nodded, “Your turn Okami.”

“You are North American?”

The bird head nodded.

“From here?”

The bird shook its head.

“A great bird, not a raven or crow, not any actual bird... you are from the west?”

A nod.

“Would you tell us a story?”

Megan spoke in a serious tone, “This is a tale that does not reflect well on me, but I will tell it anyway. Raven seduced a girl and they had a daughter. That daughter was beautiful and I paid court to her, winning her affection. She came away with me but Raven accused me of kidnapping her. Well, perhaps Raven was right. Raven became enraged and he made a wooden whale, he asked pine pitch to cover the whale and then he threw it high into the air. I thought to capture this whale and take it to my bride, but when I took it in my beak, I became stuck in the pitch, the more I tried to get free, the more I

became stuck. Finally I fell into the sea and I drowned.”

Okami nodded, “Thank you Thunderbird of the Northwest Coast. That was an excellent story.”

While the audience clapped, Stan stood with a twinkle in his eye. “I have met Thunderbird, madam, and you are no Thunderbird!”

With that he dove to the side as a tremendous roar and a bolt of lightning destroyed the folding chair he was using. The lightning spread out, but Copper Woman opened her arms and the extra bolt was grounded in her.

Megan raised her hand to her mouth, “Pardon me, beings, I guess I am not Thunderbird, I thank you Xaalajaat for your help.”

Zaat laughed and gave a small bow while Stan, having changed to a wolf for protection, rose with his fur smouldering. He got another chair and sat somewhat more quietly than before.

The audience roared with laughter and applause at this bit of foolishness.

“A point to Okami for an excellent guess, and one to Megan for that lively response to a heckler.”

Stan scowled and folded his arms.

As Zaat sat down, Kit went to touch her arm, curious at the power she had just absorbed, Zaat smiled and said, “Careful, it will be a bit stronger than a static electricity shock.”

Indeed it was, Kit jumped a bit as a spark flew to her finger and through her body, Kit’s hair was standing straight up as she said, “Oopsie, that was a tingle.”

Zaat laughed, “I can see you have some questions, little one, feel free, they are still cleaning up the soot.”

“Ray hasn’t ever told me how you two met.”

“Ah, that was long before you were born I think, I came here to revenge myself on Stan, he had stolen my real eyes and so I asked Jim where I could find them. Jim would not say and told Ray to take me. Ray agreed, but I knew he would not take me to Stan, instead he distracted me from my task in a most delightful way.”

“Did you forget to collect your eyes after your um, distraction with Ray?”

“He is good, but not that good. Oh, perhaps I should not say that to his daughter.”

Kit laughed, “I am a wife, no longer an innocent girl. What happened then?”

“Ray gave me one of his eyes to look through and I realized

my copper eyes were much better, and that I didn't want my original eyes any more. Actually, I could tell that Ray didn't want to give my eye back, which also made me appreciate them all the more."

"I am told you met him once more."

"I did, I needed his trickster powers to retrieve something of mine that had been stolen. He died to do it, and that showed me just how much of a friend he is, and how much I love him."

"Have you come to be his mate? Susume won't be upset, she has no body and is not jealous."

"No, he has another responsibility, but I have come to see if he will give me a child. Perhaps I should ask permission of you as well."

"Are you kidding, you have my blessing, but you must promise that I can babysit."

Zaat smiled and stroked Kit's cheek, just as a mother would do. "Between you and Ray I am becoming quite a tender creature. Thank you Kit, I am so glad Megan didn't destroy you."

"It would have been a horrible battle. Just the thought of it made me grow up and ask Liz to train me. Zaat, you will do Ray a great kindness if you convince him to give you a child, he is a wonderful father and will enjoy another child immensely, I think he may be missing something since I grew

up.”

“Perhaps. When the game is over I will buy him several beers and then ask him.”

Kit giggled like a schoolgirl and hugged Zaat tightly. The rest of the lightning grounded through her body and Kit hooted, “Whooo!”

The Next Contestant

Ray was about to restart the game when he glanced out the window, "Is that a contestant?"

A huge blobish creature hit the window with a gigantic fist and cracked it. Those windows were magically tough, so this thing had been trying to smash right through, no contestant then. Ray disappeared from the room and reappeared outside, behind the creature and in the shape of a gigantic fox. Without any hesitation, after all, his friends and family were inside, he bit the creature's head off.

At least he got its attention, it turned and as it did so it grew another head. Ray spat the old one out and it too began to grow.

"Hydra," said Ingrid as she stood.

You would think this creature would be defeated in an instant with all the spirit beings in the lunch counter, but they were jammed up trying to get out the door. Before it was battered down, Liz waved her hand and the door was gone, along with the broken window. Okami dove through the window in wolf form, followed by Megan and Stan. They formed a triangle, Oki in front, and the three drove into the creature, tearing and ripping. The blob didn't seem to notice, as bits were torn off, they became small blobs, growing quickly and new bits were grown to replace the missing parts.

Ingrid had finally got outside and shouted loud enough to be heard over the battle cries, "Hydra, you hotheads, stop making new ones!"

The Guelph crew stopped, but the creature did not, it kept fighting, and several people were hurt. The twins finally woke up and combined the power of their two wrist bands to throw a shield around the main creature, it held. Several other wristbands were used to trap the smaller creatures, and finally there was a lull.

Ray was panting, "What the hell is that and why is it here?"

Someone else shouted, "those fields won't hold them forever, we need Coyote."

Copper woman held up her hand and said, "No need to disturb Coyote's nap, I know what this thing is. It's a starfish from my

home waters, although I don't know why it is here. Kit can you take my hand please, I must borrow your powers."

Kit, who was just getting ready to blast the thing, stopped moving her fingers, as did Liz. She took Zaat's hand and gasped. Zaat had opened herself up fully to Kit, and Kit now knew just how powerful this woman was, and how old. She was one of the original beings who had been there when Coyote sang.

Ingrid turned sharply to look at Copper woman, she recognized her as a fellow goddess and stood back to watch, putting her hand on Megan's arm.

Kit turned to the creature and looked. She could see the thing, she could see its pain, she could see it was being controlled from a very long way away. She could see that it had been sent by an old enemy of Xaalajaat, the Being that had stolen a bride, the being that Zaat had rescued that bride back from. Kit saw that this was the God who had stolen Zaat's copper shield. Whose creature had drowned her father.

Copper woman tried to let go, but Kit had her, and had her full power. Kit was more angry than she had ever been in her life. Without any mystical movements, without any words, without any warning, Kit threw pure power at the creatures, that power destroyed them entirely, but the link to their master wasn't allowed to drop.

Kit threw power down that link to the underwater God by

Haida Gwaii, and kept pouring it toward him. Near that island, the ocean boiled as she took that God apart, atom by atom, while he did his best to stop her.

The beings outside the cafe could see what was happening. Several of them tried to stop her but Kit could not be stopped, she had set up her own shields. The power flowed, minute by minute as Kit tore apart the God who had killed Ray Keen.

Finally, Amber arrived with Coyote, those two and Ray walked through the shields around Kit and Zaat. Ray put his arms around Xaalajaat, and Coyote put his around Kit. Amber took Kit's cheeks in her arms and leaned in to kiss her. Awareness came back into Kit's eyes and she dropped Zaat's hand.

They stood there for long moments, as if frozen. Finally, Kit began to cry, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. My family..."

Amber gathered her in and crooned to her. Ray looked at his daughter and saw that she was unharmed, he turned his attention to Zaat, "Are you unharmed, love?"

Zaat nodded, "I am, she did not drain me, she was careful, even in her rage, she was careful."

Coyote looked at Megan and Stan, "Did you hear?"

Megan nodded and let the tension out of her body, "She was protecting family and friends, even in her rage she had control. She has not destroyed this God, but has reduced him, he will no

longer attack Xaalajaat. This is settled."

Kit had stopped crying and Amber had handed her over to Dave who, with a chair leg in his hand, was obviously ready to fight anyone who would question Kit's actions. Kit turned to Zaat, "I am sorry for the liberty I took with your powers, are you OK?"

Zaat touched Kit's cheek, "Are you unharmed, my child? It was me who asked you to look through me, I would never have wanted you to do such psychic damage to yourself, but I must admit that I did not try to stop you from harming my old enemy. Put any blame on me. You would not have been in such a rage if I had not used your father so badly. I can see that you have much to teach this old woman."

Ray turned Zaat's face toward himself, "You must never think that you used me. I helped you out of love and it was my decision to drown, knowing full well that you would send me back from your underworld. My choice, never think otherwise."

Zaat closed those shining eyes and nodded. "If any blame or punishment is due to anyone here, let me pay the price. I will accept it willingly. Kit is blameless."

Coyote grinned that lopsided, beautiful grin of his and said, "I'm not sure I can stand all this good will. Perhaps we should all go back to the game. A point to Kit for identifying this stranger, and the being who sent it to participate, yes?"

A New Life

The beings began to return to the lunch counter, through the restored door, past the repaired window. As they went, Ray and Zaat vanished. Kit was watching, and they simply disappeared. She could feel no energies from either of them, in fact she felt surprise from both of them.

Kit yelled in panic, “They’re gone! Can anyone tell how or where?”

It was no good, nobody could detect anything at all, just the absence of the two. They were there and then they were not. Every being there tried to determine what had happened, but after five minutes, they understood that there was nothing to find.

Mike announced that the game night was over, and many people went home to bed, but Kit and her close friends stayed behind. Mike started cooking, he knew that they would stay all night, in the hope that the missing duo would return.

Kit looked desperately at Coyote, who had to shrug, even he could not see them. Amber put her arm around Kit who was close to tears. Kit turned to her, sniffed, and said, “Zaat told me she was here to ask Ray for a child. How can this happen, it

was supposed to be a happy evening, how can things like this happen.”

Dave took her hand and hoped that she knew he was there. Of course she did, she squeezed his hand tightly. Ingrid, after thinking a bit, called Art to them and asked him if he could detect anything, some feeling of his friend. She took his hand and supplied him with her power. Art began to shake his head but then said, “Something, I sense something, they are all right, I think we just have to wait, I think they will be back.”

Ingrid hugged him and there were smiles all around. Ken, sensing the mood, came upstairs carrying two casks of his best beer on his shoulders, and they settled down to wait.

“How long, Art?” asked Kit.

“Before morning, I’m sure of it.”

With that it turned into a party, for these beings, a promise of a good outcome was enough. Word spread around town and there were good wishes coming in. With this crowd, good wishes actually meant something, they carried a strong magic.

The inside of the lunch counter was fairly crackling with potential by three in the morning, when the air split. There was no other way to describe it, it was like a curtain was opened and Ray came through, ready and looking for trouble, only to be hit by Kit who hugged him tightly. Ray relaxed and hugged her back, “What year is it, what day? How long were we

gone?”

Kit looked a bit startled, “You were only gone a couple of hours.”

“Ah, well, I see, good.”

With that, Ray reached back through the split and two more beings came through. Xaalajaat appeared, holding Ray’s hand and carrying a beautiful bronze baby.

The place went silent, and then a wall of coos and oohs hit the returned pair. As the soft sounds rose, Coyote began a song of welcome. His voice was barely above the noise at first, but it grew and grew. Amber joined, taking the high parts. After a moment, Megan and Stan joined in, then many others. A chorus of welcome. The baby looked toward them and its golden eyes grew wide. A smile every bit as wonderful as Coyote’s appeared on its face. The song was of love and acceptance and the baby obviously felt it.

Ray and Zaat held each other as they listened, and the baby reached for Ray, taking his finger.

Kit reached tentatively toward the baby who turned that smile on her. Kit felt like she had been hit, she collapsed into a chair and bawled. She had never felt such warmth from a baby, from anyone except Dave.

The song of welcome went on and on, people slowly going

silent, until Coyote sang the last verse solo. As he stopped, the song seemed to go on and on, it spread through the town until every spirit being knew something wonderful had happened.

Liz quietly enlarged the cafe as people started to appear with baby gifts. Each person who came through the door stopped and gasped as the baby looked at them. The gifts piled up on the counter and each person greeted the new baby formally. Some bowed, some curtsied, the young ones waved shyly.

Art turned to Ingrid, “Why do we feel this way, is this a new God?”

“Perhaps, but more important, she is a new life, as strong a life as I’ve felt in centuries, she is pure joy, Art, pure joy. You can feel it can’t you?”

“Oh yes, I loved her the instant I saw her.”

Ingrid took his hand and squeezed, then she motioned toward Woden. That supreme God, that ultimate judge, had tears in his eyes, and wasn’t the least bit ashamed to let them show.

Mike had a Cheshire Cat look on his face. Liz moved beside him and nudged him, “Go ahead, say it.”

“I told you there was some sort of force making us all think about babies.”

“You’re going to be insufferable for a month, aren’t you.”

Mike just grinned at her.

Folks drifted in, dropped off a baby present and then, after greeting the baby and others in the place, drifted out again, it was very late, or perhaps early as folks defined it. Still, very few people got any more sleep that night, they were filled with the joy of a new life. Who knew what this baby would become, but it had arrived with love, that much was certain. Each being in the town felt a connection, after all, each being had contributed toward bringing Ray and Zaat home.

It was dawn when Megan declared that the baby should go home and rest. Ray and Zaat smiled their thanks as Megan waved. The presents were sorted, baby things were arranged in one of the rooms in Ray's apartment, and the parents, after promising to tell the story the next day, were swept to Ray's bed. A baby crib beside it, his lounge-lizard stereo rearranged into the main room.

When they arrived in the bed, Ray laughed, hugged Zaat and said, "Welcome home love."

Zaat smiled, put the baby in the crib beside her and said, "I have told you this before, but it is a curious thing to welcome a new life, when I usually welcome the newly dead to my realm. Thank you Ray for this gift, would you like to try again?"

The Sun Goddess

"Black, as black as the inside of your guts, it was lucky that we were standing close, because I couldn't see Zaat at all, there was nothing. I reached out and found her arm. Zaat could see, she can see into the other wavelengths with those eyes of hers, and so she described it to me. A vast dead land, towns and fields, dead and dying."

Ray was in the lunch counter the next morning. Zaat was home with the baby, doing mother and baby things. She had sent Ray out to tell the story, saying that people would need to know what had happened.

Mike sat behind the counter, Liz and a few others were scattered around, Kit was beside Ray. It was just past dawn, but it was as if everyone was drawn to the place, knowing Ray was going to be there.

"What was it, or rather where was it Ray?"

"We had no idea where we were. We both tried to reach back, but nothing, Zaat took my hand and we tried to combine our powers but there was just nothing. We then tried to reach out to whatever had dragged us there. That's when we found what had pulled us, a whole dying world. It wasn't any one person we could identify, they weren't there, really. We could detect people, but they were more or less absent. Dying I suppose.

"We found the nearest settlement and Zaat started walking toward them. I stumbled a few times when she realized I couldn't see, so she turned one of her eyes into a flashlight. That was so much better I gasped. Then I saw what she was seeing, She had said it was dying, but all I saw was a dead world. We walked to the town and found a door that was open. We went in and found a couple on the bed, they could hardly open their eyes.

"Zaat is the master of the underworld in her area, as you know, when she said a few words and chased the souls back into this couple, or whatever you'd like to say about that. They became much more awake and could answer some of our questions.

"It turns out, the sun just stopped rising. These people were sun worshippers, and they had lost their faith. There was another religion that had risen, and most people converted to that. It was one of these 'reward after death' cults and so the place was quite happy to be dying after the sun stopped rising."

Kit was frowning, "Ray that's not how it goes, if people stop believing in a Sun God, then science takes over, everything keeps happening, but the romance and mystery is gone."

Ray smiled at his daughter, "There are places love, where that doesn't happen, the Sun really does need worship to exist and without that, nothing."

Kit looked doubtful, but "What happened then, did you leave

them to their beliefs?"

"We asked this couple and many more about the new religion. Turns out it was one of the old scams, 'since you're going to get your reward after death, give us your money now so we can convert everyone else.' They ended up with quite a large network of scammers, and converted enough people that the Sun stopped rising. You can imagine their surprise at that. They admitted their scam, and they wanted the people to go back to Sun worship so that they wouldn't die with all this wealth and no place to put it.

"Of course the people didn't convert back, they had nothing now except the possibility of endless rewards after they died. They had nothing in life, they'd donated it.

"Well they were far enough gone that some of them figured that dying in the dark and the cold, of starvation and the pain that causes, maybe they'd like to live like they did. The ones who saw Zaat with her shining eye began to call her an avatar of the Sun."

"Did you..."

"Of course we did, Zaat found out his name and started preaching about the Sun God. She's a pretty good orator, and she told the people that the Sun God was angry that they had turned away from him. We had found out he wasn't so much angry as too weak, we could just reach him, and he was almost gone. He asked us to bring him back so he could protect his

people and so we did what we could.

"To be fair, it wasn't a hard sell, what with the new cult admitting they had pulled a scam. In fact, as we travelled around, showing Zaat's light, these con-men became preachers for the Sun God, and Zaat, his messenger."

"What about the money?"

"Oh they couldn't hand it back fast enough, once Zaat's companion, the Giant Fox of the Apocalypse showed up and bit a few of the reluctant in half."

Kit stared, "You did that?"

"I did, pet. You're damned right I did. This is a world you're talking about here, one that was dying and the scammers were guilty as blazes. It was only five of them anyway, the word got around ahead of us and these guys were lined up to give back the money on our prompting.

"I swear we walked half way around that world before the Sun started to wake up, but a light as dim as starlight was enough, the rest of the world started to believe again and it wasn't long afterward that the Sun was in the sky once more."

"So how did you get back here?"

"Not from there, pet. They wanted to make Zaat and I into some sort of holy messengers on their world, but Zaat had a

chat with the God and made it quite clear that she wanted no part of that. She convinced him to send us toward our home instead. She told him to find his own messenger on his own world. Turns out some of the young children could actually hear him, so they became the messengers. The God, who as you might expect was pretty strong, sent us as far as he could."

"What did the children say, I can't imagine the people would believe them, and they would have a lot of power over those who did."

"They could actually hear the God, and so they told of his love for the world, they said that the people on the world should love the God in return and that's it. No money need change hands. You know how innocent children can be about money. They didn't want any, and the God had no use for it, so all went back to the way it was, the adults loved the Sun and the Sun provided what the world needed. The kids who could hear the God had respect but no power."

"That doesn't seem fair, what about what you had done, didn't you get anything?"

"We got off of that world, and we got the rare gift of being forgotten. By the time the God was strong enough to send us away, the people believed in the kids, those who remembered us, said we had our power through the kids."

"That hardly seems fair."

"You'll understand one day, Kit, that being forgotten can be a rare blessing. I know you remember absolutely everything, so do I, but some things you are happy to forget."

"Like Coyote?"

"Just like Coyote, sweetheart."

The Gods of Justice

"Did the Sun God give you absolutely nothing?"

"Like I said, he sent us on, but he also gave us a blessing, one that would manifest later."

Kit just nodded, she had a pretty good idea what that blessing was. "Where were you after the God sent you on?"

"We were on another world, one where there seemed to be no hope at all. It was quite disturbing, actually, sort of like going from the frying pan to the fire. I mean the first world had hope, but of an afterlife, this world had nothing at all. The place was just 'take what you can' and damn the rest. It was organized, if you can call it that, into tiny little enclaves of no more than a hundred or two hundred people with a strong man. He got everything and those around him got protection."

"Groups no larger than that?"

"Couldn't be, we were baffled ourselves, but after a couple of months, we found out that they had no idea of laws or rules. No concept of justice at all. You got protection if you had a strong man to fight for you. If he was killed, someone else took over or you were sold into slavery. It was your basic animal model."

"It must have been awful."

"Not as bad as you might think. I said the animal model, the bulls have cows and they fight for them, but not unless they have to. The strong men would try to avoid fighting because that put them at risk of dying. If they had enough, they left the guys around them alone. It wasn't so bad for those under their protection either. They were free to wander off if the strong man was too nasty."

"So it was all right there."

"Not really, they had their insane people, those who wanted to accumulate. You get them in any society and you have to prevent them from doing too much harm. There were those who wanted things, and more things, and they generally considered those people under their protection to be things. So there were those few who were not protecting their people, but were accumulating things."

"They had greed."

"Yes, greed without laws, without rules, without justice, exactly."

"I get the feeling you and Zaat did something about this, father."

Ray grinned, "Zaat decided they needed Gods, somebody who was over and above all the strong men, crazy or not. Somebody who could hand them a set of rules."

"So you two became their Gods?"

"Absolutely not, what makes you think that your father is in any way fit to run a world?"

"I think so because you're you, Father."

"Well thank you pet, but I'm not. Zaat said that if there were people greedy and crazy, there must be people who were as much kind and gentle and wise somewhere. So we set out to find the thinkers, those who felt the opposite about people, that they were not things, not just animals to be taken advantage of, but people, deserving of respect and protection."

Art shook his head, "You mean you were looking for philosopher kings? Like Plato?"

"Of course not, anyone who is a thinker of the kind you'd want ruling you, is too smart to want to be a ruler. No, it was just a

matter of trying to set up a system that the people wanted. It's never a good idea to drop into a society and try to arrange it like the one you have. We've got lots of that 'white man's burden' nonsense here on this world. That's just another greedy insane person trying to accumulate things, with a fancy name."

"So did you find your philosophers?"

"We found some people who believed in a God, yes. This God was someone who gave advice, and judged if actions were for the greater good of the people."

Art shook his head, "You found a religion that worshipped justice?"

Ray smiled, "Go far enough and you will find the strangest things. Yes, there was a sort of underground idea that there was a God who judged, not for the favoured people, but for the greater good. In other words, this God wasn't the ultimate strong man who defended only those who worshipped him. He was a god who didn't care about worship, or bribes of money or flattery, but who cares about justice.

"Zaat and I became prophets again, once we figured out just what sort of laws and justice would fit with this society, we started preaching that."

"Pops, don't tell me you were biting people in half again!"

"No pet, they had their own ideas of justice, we just backed up

the judges. How it worked was that those who wanted to have that sort of justice, put themselves under the judges. Their numbers started to grow, and soon they had a civilization based on what they wanted. The greedy ones soon found themselves being judged and those who were slaves under them, became people under the legal system."

"That had to be the only time justice and laws came before brute power during the creation of a mass civilization."

"Art, you'd be surprised, over the time I've been around I've found as many, if not more, Human civilizations that grew from laws as those that grew from the tip of a spear. What you're seeing now is the triumph of the greedy over the just, but it wasn't always that way."

"But 'power from the tip of a gun'... "

"Is something else again. Guns allow weak people to dominate those who are stronger, they tend to pervert things and create nothing but a society of fear. You get the 'white man's burden' idea from that. If you have a society where the judges are independent from those who want power, you can get justice, and from justice can come hope."

"Did it happen on that world?"

"Who knows, it was starting at least. Don't forget Zaat and I were looking for a way back here, we weren't looking to rule a world. Zaat is already a God in her society, and I am best suited

to be a trickster. One of the guys who keep Gods in line."

"Father, you are not an agent of chaos like some tricksters, you're more a guy who likes to twit those in power."

"Oh, a Jester, thanks kid."

"Jesters were very important around absolute monarchs Ray."

"Thanks Art, I knew a few who lost their heads twitting kings."

Art grinned, Ray had risked his neck more than once to point out an injustice.

Kit poked Ray in the arm, "So how did you get off that world?"

"Pretty simply, actually, we hadn't tried what we did on the first world, using our powers together to find somewhere closer to home. We had climbed a mountain to carve some of the new laws into the side of it, and when we'd done, Zaat got a hint of a direction, we joined hands and we were at the next world."

"Just like that? Hey I'm hungry, Mike can I have a Panini please?"

Ray shook his head kindly as he looked at his daughter. He thought about his baby at home, and about the five daughters he'd had with Susume and he smiled.

The Return Trip (Where Babies Come From)

“It seems like you went from one bad place to another, Ray.”

“No, the next place we went was quite nice, very few people, mostly living in peace because if a fight broke out, they would just walk away to another place.”

“Something we can’t do these days when someone owns every square inch of the world.”

“Yeah, or you’re quite welcome to live on the street, until you annoy someone and the police come along and tear your shelters down. Funny how property rights only apply to those with money. Anyway, this world had none of those problems because it had no need for property, or accumulating anything at all. There was enough for all and nobody was insane yet, probably a population density trigger that is required before greed for power and possessions kicks in.

“We built ourselves a shelter, you didn’t need much, just something to keep the rain off. It didn’t seem like there was a lot of insect borne disease yet, not that it bothers us. We started a garden, which fascinated the locals. Who knows, maybe they will start farming. If they do, I’ll feel a bit guilty, farming means excess food and that means babies, usually. Who knows, maybe those people will be smarter than most others.

“We lived there quite happily for a couple of years...”

“Years! Pops you were there for years?”

“Afraid so pup, it may have been time running differently there, or more likely, when you pulled us back, you pulled us back in time.”

“We pulled you back... Ray had you settled down? Were you no longer trying to get back here?”

“Pretty much, Kit. I had some regrets, and so did Zaat, but yes, we had found somewhere that we could live without too much stress, without having to be involved in the world. It’s much less boring than you might think, to be able to relax and breathe, no urgent problems to solve.”

“So what happened?”

“We lived, you know, chop wood, carry water. We got involved in the mechanics of day to day living. Each day was slightly different, changes in the food that was ripe, growing the garden. It was nice. We started working on our musical skills, and our writing. We would play for each other, read what we’d written.”

“How did the baby happen?”

“In the usual way, pet.”

“No, I mean what’s the story, Zaat told me she before you disappeared, she was going to ask you for a child.”

“Ah, well in those circumstances, she didn’t have to ask. The body senses when there’s space, I would have had to consciously prevent myself from making her pregnant. It’s not an automatic thing in that situation, and so in the natural course of things, she got pregnant and we had a baby.”

“When are you going to name her?”

“That’s up to Zaat, I’m happy with Baby, or just giving her a name, but Zaat wants a naming ceremony, and she wants the name to mean something. That means she needs an elder to choose the name, Liz I think she is going to ask you.”

“I’m honoured, but why me, Ray?”

“Zaat says the baby is of two worlds, hers and mine, and so she says that Guelph is the meeting place, and you are a Shaman raised Western.”

Megan had been following the story and now she nodded, “Xaalajaat is very wise, this is a good choice, Liz. As you know, names are important, and you are a very good choice as name-giver.”

Liz nodded, “I will give it some consideration.”

Kit turned back to Ray, “But I don’t understand, if it was so

comfortable on that world, why did you come back?”

“Because we heard the call. We could feel the fear and concern of the whole town, and especially you, Kit, and so we decided we should return. You had no idea we were fine, so we had to put your mind at rest.”

“But you came through looking for trouble. I’ve seen that stance before.”

“How could we know the call was really from here? It was an offer to return, but there were no ‘signatures’ for us to know what was waiting for us. We had to go but I went first, and if I was killed, Zaat would raise our child where she was.”

“To put our minds at rest, you risked that?”

“To put your mind at rest, love. Yes, and I’d do it again.”

This earned Ray another big hug. “But did you leave friends behind? You were there for a long time.”

“We left people we knew, but we were strange beings, to stay in one place, the people are nomadic, they are hunter-gatherers and we would know someone, then they would move on. They might return, they might not. When someone we know comes to our house now, they will simply assume we have moved on. As we have.”

“Will you miss it?”

“As I miss other places I’ve lived, sure, but where I am now, where we are now, is my home. Zaat and the baby define where I am, properly. They are here, I belong here.”

Art had been, not exactly frowning, but had a look of concentration on his face, “Ray, you seem changed, I’m not sure how, maybe more serious? Not as playful?”

“It’s not hard to understand, buddy, I’ve got a baby to take care of, you get serious until the baby can take care of itself, then you maybe go back to being Mr. Fun Guy. With me it seems that each kid leaves me a bit less of a trickster. Who needs to create their own laughter when there’s a kid to laugh with?”

Several of the tricksters in the place nodded, some of them actually believed they were more serious than they were in their youth, which just proves how faulty memory is, even perfect memory.

Mike banged his spatula on the grill, “OK folks, let the man eat his breakfast, there’s bacon, sausage, eggs and toast on the house. Come and get it, grab a plate, take some tomato and beans from the side, toast is there, and I’m here with my big spatula to give you want you want.”

There was a roar of approval, and a general movement toward the stacked plates. Liz smiled at everyone as they filed by, she was pouring milk, juice, or coffee as folks wanted it. The place was huge that morning, but the grill had grown too, and there

was plenty for everyone.

Ray paused in his eating long enough to raise a fork toward Mike, who grinned back. Adventure was fine, but a decent breakfast with friends, that was a thing of beauty.

The Naming Ceremony

The next day, Zaat held centre stage in the Lunch Counter. She was fielding questions about the baby, “She’s really the product of four worlds, as I see it, Two here, Ray and I, then the world she was born on, and the world of the Sun God.”

Kit was questioning, as usual, “How do you figure that? She wasn’t even born when you were on that first world.”

“Ray probably told you that He had given us a gift, but didn’t tell us what it was when he sent us on. I knew when the baby was born. She was born generating her own light, in fact, she lit my womb up brightly enough for Ray to see the light through my skin. You all experienced what that light is, it is the manifestation of the love the Sun God had for his world. We saw that effect with each visitor to our home, every single one was affected, some went to their knee to bow, some gave gifts, but nobody simply made baby noises to us or the babe.”

“So that’s why the bronze colour?”

“Oh no, that’s her showing off, when she feels she’s the centre of attention, or when she feels she’s not, she changes to my copper, but with Ray’s ‘tin’ if you can call it that, the colour of his eyes when they go grey-white. Copper and tin make bronze, which shines like the sun. In that aspect, she takes after her father, a natural born show-off.”

Ray wasn’t sure if he should be pleased with that comment or not.

“Is it just her skin colour?”

“Oh no, her skin is living bronze when she changes, as tough as my copper. I think she has her father’s shape shifting and my ability to make metal live. I also think she has my eyes, she looks around at things even in the pitch black.”

Art looked at the baby, “She has some powerful magic already, especially the love she radiates. Even the devil himself would love this baby.”

Kit ducked, she muttered “oops” and sure enough, Beelzabub appeared in his full ‘serious’ devil’s appearance. He nodded to Art and smiled at Kit before looking at the baby. He took a step forward and then that fierce face collapsed into softness. In a surprisingly gentle voice he said, “May I hold the baby Ray?”

Ray handed the baby over after a glance at Xaalajaat, who

nodded. Beels held the baby who giggled and grabbed his goatee. After rocking from foot to foot a few times, Beels cleared his throat and said, “Yes, even this devil loves this baby. If she needs me, she has but to call and I will answer.”

With that, the baby gave a little tug on the beard and Beels smiled, “No need to tell her that, she knows.” He turned to Zaat and bowed carefully before handing the baby to her. “It is not often that we caretakers of the underworld are gifted a child. I am happy for you, sister.”

Xaalajaat smiled and bowed back, “I wish you the same joy again one day, my brother.”

With that, Beels waved his cane in a salute and vanished. Mike noticed that the coffee he was pouring vanished as well. He smiled, Beelzabub was a regular, he’d bring the mug back next time.

Kit was slightly confused, “Again, what did you mean by that, Zaat?”

“He rocked the baby, did you not see, swaying from foot to foot, he has been a father.”

“He never told me.”

“He has had a lot of years before meeting you, Kit. You might be surprised at what he hasn’t told you.”

“We will have words,” Kit said ominously, just as a booming laughter was heard in the cafe.

Kit looked at Ray, “Not me.”

Kit shook her head, “I’m surrounded by tricksters and secret keepers and I don’t know which is worse.”

Megan, the assumed master of ceremonies for most things, stood up, “Does everyone have coffee or tea and whatever breakfast they have asked for? Yes? Then perhaps it is time to get on with the naming ceremony. We are all here to provide our good wishes and to witness the name of this infant. I expect us all to support her in her growing years, we are all aunts and uncles now.”

Xaalajaat smiled as Megan sat down. Zaat stood and walked to Liz, handing the baby over and bowing in acceptance of what Liz would give her as a name.

Liz remained sitting with the baby on her lap. She looked around the cafe and cleared her throat. “I have been considering the proper name for this babe, and I would like you all to think of a name. I have had trouble and perhaps you could help me to become clear.”

Liz looked from face to face and then she nodded. “It has been decided. This baby is the product of four worlds, as Xaalajaat has said. Her birth world will remain with her and no name need be provided. She will always be of her birth world.

“As to the worlds of her parents, and of the Sun God who gifted her, the name Juuyaay Solail Keen seems correct. The parents agreed she would have Ray’s family name. As for her other names, Juuyaay means the sun in Xaalajaat’s original language, and Solail means the sun in Ray Keen’s original language. With that I believe we have recognized three worlds.”

Liz held up her hands to stop the buzz that had begun. “As for her Guelph name, the one we will know her by, it will come to be Julie. I believe you all had in your minds something similar to this, and I thank you all for your help in this naming.”

The place erupted in applause and cries of ‘welcome, welcome Julie’. The girl Juuyaay turned her smile onto her audience and her skin became so shiny bronze that people had to hold their hands in front of their eyes. As they did that, Julie laughed and became even brighter.

Zaat and Ray took the baby from Liz and both bowed to her, Zaat said, “It is a good name, I thank you Shaman and Elder.”

Ray nodded his agreement and offered his hand. In it was a brilliant gem of the deepest bronze, “It is from Julie’s birth world, please accept this from her as thanks for her name.”

Liz looked at the stone in her hand, it glowed and seemed to have a warmth of its own. She bowed to Ray and husked, “Thank you both. I will treasure it.”

With that, Ken spoke up from the back of the crowd, “Downstairs one and all, the first drink is on the house, and as long as you toast to the good health and long life of Julie Keen, the next are free too.”

Catching Up

Life went back to the normal routine after the excitement of the new baby. Zaat settled in to Ray's apartment, although she would have to go back to her underworld at some point. For now she was happy to be with Ray and the baby.

Kit was over just about every day to help, she had her lessons to teach in the studio, but she could compose while babysitting, and she did. She played her new compositions to the baby and she could tell just how well she was doing by the glow that came off of Julie when she listened. There was nothing that Kit wrote that the baby didn't like, but some pieces were positively brilliant. According to Julie, anyway.

This meant that Dave was somewhat more on his own than usual, and he wandered into the lunch counter to chat with Mike.

"Don't usually see you around here as much as we have lately

Dave, are you in a slump?"

"Just the opposite, Mike, I've done three portraits for Ray and Zaat and the baby, one for the group and one each for the girls. They're quite a challenge, especially the painting of Julie, I mean how do you depict those sunny rays... hey, Julie as a sunny version of Ray... OK not brilliant, anyway, when I try to paint the rays it ends up looking like some sort of religious icon. I keep starting and taking a break to think up some other way to do it."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out, you always do."

"Yeah, I just need that brand new technique and I'll be there."

"Anything else?"

"Oh yes, I'm doing a portrait for some tech bro, one of those guys who are in it for the money. He wanted me to 'capture his true essence'."

"Oh dear."

"Yes, I did that and came up with a half-rotted dragon collapsed on top of a mountain of gold and jewels."

"You didn't show it to him did you?"

"No, what we do for money is not show the real image, right? So that one goes into my private collection, or maybe Beels

will want it for the fantasy market. No this guy is paying a bit more than triple rates, so he gets the Feudal Baron treatment."

"Big poofy chair that looks like a throne?"

"And some sort of hunting dog at his side, heroic look into the middle distance."

"I know you, Dave, what did you do?"

Dave grinned, "Well if you look at it from a certain angle, there's a rotten fish on a pile of cabbage, if he ever sees it I'll claim it's traditional, a Memento Mori."

"And he'll know what that is?"

"I suspect not, but he can use the fancy search engine that he paid to have made, to find the answer."

"So you're not a fan?"

"I'm a fan of the pay, did I mention he's paying triple?"

Mike dropped a breakfast in front of Dave with a chuckle and refilled his coffee.

Dong-dong

Mike looked up and saw Art coming in. "Hi Mike."

"Art, you're looking spiffy, you want the usual?"

"Yes please, but light on the sausage please, Ingie made a crack about my waistline the other day."

"You're usually pretty active, something happening?"

"Something not happening. Ray is spending most of his time with Zaat and Julie so we aren't getting around as much as we used to."

"Can you blame him?"

"No of course not, but I think I got a bit dependant on Ray's energy to get me going."

"Yeah I can see that."

"What, you too, am I really getting fat?"

"No, never buddy, I meant I could see that it would be easy to let Ray take the lead and find trouble to get into."

"Do you know it's been months since I was in a fight?"

"Rough, buddy, rough."

Dave smiled, "You could always get back into training, let Hubert and Sam beat you up for a while."

"You know, that's a good idea, I'd hate to think I was getting rusty."

"They're in town, the George seems to have a pretty tight lid on things these days. I was thinking I might want to suggest a move, I'm looking out at the same scenery."

"Dave, you can change the views without the whole apartment building moving."

"I can?"

"Sure, Kit told me that, she said that the George set it up for you so you could do landscapes from anywhere at all. You mean you don't know that?"

"Um, maybe Kit does it for me? Oh dear, I guess I'll ask the George when I get back in the studio."

"You miss her, don't you?"

"So much, but don't tell her that."

"I suspect she knows buddy, it's that whipped puppy look you get when she's away."

"What?"

Art was chuckling, "He's teasing you, Dave."

Megan appeared on the next stool down, "Hello boys."

Mike jumped, "We've got a perfectly good door, Megan, it goes dong dong."

"Don't like it, and you jumped because it was me."

"You're never going to let that go are you?"

"I told you at the time I wasn't going to eat you."

"Liz! Megan is picking on me again."

"Man up, Mike. Hello Megan."

"Hi Liz, you busy for the next couple of days? I've got a village that needs a bit of adjusting, they're slipping into despair."

"If it's the one I'm thinking of, I don't blame them. Of course I'll come, Mike can hold the fort here can't you dear."

"Absolutely, off you go, want some sandwiches?"

"I want a coffee, dear boy, we'll be gone soon enough."

"Yes Megan."

Megan looked sideways at Mike, it was sometimes hard to tell if he was serious. She decided he wasn't being a smart ass."

"So tell me the latest gossip boys."

"Megan, you're more plugged in to the gossip than any of us."

"So I guess I'll tell you the gossip shall I? Thanks Mike. You know that Tilly Cleary is pregnant again?"

"You're kidding!"

"Not a word of a lie. And Coyote has taken Amber off to Europe, he's going to show her the sights."

"You mean Amber is going to show him, she studied in Paris, was there for years."

"This is Paris 1900."

"Megan I thought you told him not to mess with time any more."

"If he listened, I wouldn't have so much to do. Amber's with him, she'll keep an eye on him."

"Megan how do you know all this stuff?"

"Nanabozo, Art, Nanabozo, I'm supposed to know this stuff and so I do."

"Well it's kind of scary."

"Why, all I do is check out your social media accounts, it's not like the old days when I had to spend time and energy sneaking around listening to folks. Now everyone falls all over themselves telling me what they're doing, minute by minute.

Liz came out of the back, hung her apron up and kissed Mike on the cheek, "Back in a week or so sweetie."

As they vanished, not using the door, Mike noted, Art spoke up, "You don't suppose they're just going somewhere to drink and gossip do you?"

"Fattie."

A Year is a Short Time

Art looked down at his belly, which caused Mike to add three sausages to his plate. "You're not fat Art."

Art looked at Dave, who said, "It's always nice to sketch someone with a bit of meat on their bones, if you're bored, you could come pose for me."

Art said nothing, just turned back to his sausage and ate them. His head rose again as he listened to something, "I'll pick some up on the way home, Ingie.... What? You guys don't get calls to

pick up milk on the way home?"

"Didn't say nothin'," Mike grinned as he turned to put on some more breakfast things.

Dong dong, Stan came in looking around the place. "She's gone with Liz, Stan, and your breakfast is on the grill."

"Oh, thanks buddy, I hate all that sweat lodge and sweetgrass stuff."

"Stan, you're Nanabozo, you're supposed to be doing that sort of thing."

"No, no, that's Megan's job, mine is judgment and punishment. She's better at prevention and improvement."

"So what's the deal?"

"Coffee, that's the deal, thanks Mike. They are heading to a village that is flooded, water's no good, hunting's no good and there's a diesel spill. They're pretty bummed out about things."

"I should think so. You don't think you could help?"

"Last time I went to a place like that I beat the hell out of the local officials and destroyed the local mining company who were dumping their tailings into the river."

"Oh, here's your breakfast, best stay here and enjoy."

"Art here was telling us that he's getting fat because Ray isn't taking him out to get into trouble."

"Ingie said I was getting fat, I didn't, and thanks a lot for the support, Mike."

"I'm going for a run along the river with Okami later today, you want to come along Art?"

"No thanks, Stan, I saw you two running last week, I can't switch from wolf to fish to bird. My running is strictly man-shaped."

"I can teach you how if you're willing to put up with the learning pains."

"Maybe next month, but thanks."

Mike laughed, "Don't do it, Art, he's not kidding about the learning pains."

"Hmm."

Stan cocked his head, "Gotta go boys, Megan says it's my kind of situation now."

As he vanished, Liz showed up. "Damn it, damn it, damn it."

"Sit down love, here's an Irish coffee, just breathe and take

your time."

"Thanks Mike, it went to shit really fast. Megan didn't want me to see what she and Stan are going to do, but it's not going to be pretty. Turns out the flooding was caused by a bunch of big city developers cheaping out on the construction of a hydro dam."

"Ah, expensive cars crashing at high speeds?"

"Something like that. Sometimes I'm ashamed to be a capitalist, you know?"

"We're not, are we?"

"We run the lunch counter, Mike."

Both Mike and Art spoke together, Mike called jinx and continued, "Not a business, love, more of a charity, we lose money on free meals and coffee, and we provide a place where folks can get along together."

Liz didn't look convinced, "Well I'll give you that we run at a loss."

Art grinned, "Sort of, but if you count the rent Ken Kobold pays, and the bank account that Ray and the others contribute to each month."

"Is that where that comes from?"

"It was running that way since before I took over, I asked Jim about it and he told me the place was more a social club than a restaurant. Membership dues."

"Well, fine, but you know, even if I'm supposed to be Ms. Sweetness and Light, I hope Nanabozo takes them apart."

Mike choked a little, "Yes, Sweetness and Light, indeed."

That earned him a scowl, but Liz just drained her coffee and went into the back.

"Dude, you getting tired of life?"

Mike grinned, and life went on.

It was a year later, Art and Mike were talking when Ray came in the door. No chimes. They could see that Ray had been crying, but they would never mention that.

Mike put a coffee down in front of Ray, who was staring at the counter. Art had said nothing either, the lack of a door chime was information enough.

When Mike put a second coffee down, Ray looked up, "Thanks Mike. They're gone, Zaat and Julie are gone back to her underworld."

"I'm sorry Ray, I truly am. You didn't go with?"

"I can't, it's underwater, which I could handle, but it's the underworld, no living people allowed."

"But Zaat and Julie?"

"Are now the Gods of that realm. Julie being Zaat's daughter."

"No exceptions?"

"Oh I'll visit for a couple days a month, but anything longer and I'll die. We had a year, with Zaat going back each month, but it's not enough to maintain her underworld. She'll spend half a year there and then come back here for half a year. She figures that will work."

"I'm truly sorry about that."

"Well I knew it wasn't forever when we came back to this world. It's just hard, you know?"

Mike nodded and Art put his hand on Ray's shoulder. Ray put his hand on Art's and nodded.

"It was a great year, along with the time Zaat and I spent on the other worlds. A great adventure. I really am grateful for that time, it's just that I'll miss them."

"You'll see them regularly, and you've got the other kids to help

raise, Tilly's kids."

"You're right, but honestly, waking up to find breakfast on the table, or to make coffee for someone, or to get up late at night and change nappies, I'm going to miss that, I always do."

"Ray, finish your coffee and we're going to head downstairs to Ken's and get really drunk, then we're going to go running down the river with Stan and Oki, Stan's going to teach me how to shift."

"Aww, you'd do that for me, buddy?"

"Of course, what are friends for, other than to do stupid, dangerous and painful things with you."

"Thanks buddy!"

Mike figured Ray would be OK. He looked into the back to see Liz shaking her head and he grinned again.

Stories in the Cafe

Art had his head in his hands and his elbows propped on the counter.

“How are you feeling, Art?”

Art lifted his head and opened his mouth, “Mike, are all my teeth in the correct place?”

“Seem so to me.”

“Well they don’t feel like it, oh damn that was exactly as painful as it was promised.”

“Rough time then?”

“Oh lord, you’d think it would be great switching from human to wolf to fish to bird, I mean who doesn’t want to fly, but the switch is terrible. Okami says it will get easier, but honestly, I’d never want to do that again, just to do it.”

“Wait, you can’t do it yourself now can you? Stan was lending you that power right?”

“Absolutely, look, as far as I can tell, I’m pure human. Ingie gave me a long life so she wouldn’t have to bury me, but this, this is beyond anything I could do, ever.”

“What did Ingrid say about your changing?”

“She laughed at me, what else would you expect.”

“Yeah, sorry. What was I thinking, Ingrid being sympathetic?”

“Hildy was, he climbed up on my lap and snuffled me.”

“That was nice of him.”

“The pain in my legs with his weight on them was almost unbearable. Are you sure my teeth are in properly?”

“You’re fine Art. You need some protein, here’s some nice kelp juice Liz has been making in the back. Give it a good swallow.”

Choking, Art looked daggers at Mike.

“Yeah that’s what I thought too, terrible isn’t it?”

“It’s like liquid natto Mike, why would you give that to me?”

“Took your mind off your teeth.”

“Took my teeth down to nubs it feels like.”

“Yeah, sorry about that. So tell me about the run.”

“We do that, don’t we?”

“What’s that?”

“We chat but it’s only to fill in the space between stories.”

“Oh. Yes I suppose you’re right.”

“Well here it is, Oki and Stan took off down the Speed, running when it was shallow and swimming when there was enough water. Down the Grand to Lake Erie and along the lake before flying back.”

“You were changing when you wanted?”

“No, Stan linked me to Okami, so each change was a horrible surprise to me.”

“What was it like?”

“Have you ever had to hiccup and throw up at the same time as you’ve had to burp?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“Well it was nothing like that, I could feel my bones sliding over each other. I could feel the muscles letting go at one place and reattaching at another. I would have passed out if I wasn’t going full-ass-tilt down a river, heading for a crash with trees, rocks, dams and ducks.

“A quick burger at Knechtel’s in Port Dover and then they switched me to a Canada Goose and we flew back to Guelph.”

“Well those things seem to be able to find this place like homing pigeons. You should have been OK.”

“Except that they made me fly point all the way. Let me tell you, I just flew in yesterday and my arms are killing me.”

Mike stared at Art for a few beats, “You’ve been waiting all day to say that haven’t you?”

Art grinned and wolfed down another sausage. When he did so, Mike thought he might have seen a wolf’s head on his friend. ‘Uh oh,’ he thought. Sometimes magic stuck.

Art looked up and said, “Your turn Mike, there’s nobody here but you and I so you have to give me a story now.”

“What, I went for a run and it hurt? That’s a story? You’re going to have to do better than that my friend.”

Art sat in thought for a moment, “All right, how about one that I make up, one that never happened but is still a story.”

“Stories don’t have to be true, I suppose, but around here they tend to be. Very well my friend, let’s have some fiction.”

Art ate his last sausage, closed his eyes and when he opened them, Mike could swear they had a sort of glow. It took a lot for Mike not to take a step back.

“This happened many hundreds of years ago, it concerns the last days of the Roman occupation of Brittania. I was a soldier, a mid-level Celt who had a few men in a village near the end of the world, a few miles from Segontium in Brittania Secunda.

We heard of remnants of the Druids on Mona and I was sent to root them out.

“As it turned out, they were looking for me. Not me specifically, but a soldier. There were indeed Druids deep in the woods, but these were not the Elders, the leaders and judges, these were those who had been hiding in the wild since the invasion. Generations of them living and studying in the deep forest and on the hills.

“As my men and I rode toward the deeper forest, we were met by these Druids in peace. Or at least in supplication, they offered themselves up to the sword should we require it. Being a curious man, and dear lord I wish I were not, I let them live and asked them why they offered their lives to us. They told us that they were afraid of living, that there was something they had found, or called up or that had found them on a hill, in a hole on a hill.

“We camped where we met them, they were afraid to go further in, and they asked us to take them out of the woods, off the island. They were that afraid.

“When we camped, I was offered a slave, a girl from across the Oceanus Germanicus, to care for me. Since we were there for several weeks, trying to get these people to make sense, I naturally fell in love with this girl and took her to my bed. She seemed to be a witch of her own country, which I took to be north of the Roman lands in Germania.”

As gently as he could, so as not to disturb whatever it was that was making Art's eyes glow, Mike said, "May I ask your name?"

"Did I not say, my apologies, I am Arturus."

"Ah, and the slave girl?"

"Her name was Ingrida, which meant beautiful, and she was."

"Pardon me, please continue your story."

"No need. As I said, we spent several weeks there but I could find nothing to tell me what they were afraid of. I began to suspect they were sent as sacrifice to protect a greater Druidic settlement deeper into the wood. I sent them off to the mainland with most of my men and rode deeper into the forest with three men and Ingrida, who I would not leave behind.

"There were things in that wood, things we never saw but heard, and I wondered if they were Druids, blowing on horns or similar, to scare us off. Ingrida said no, they were true beings, monsters, but she would not let them approach. In time we needed food, and two of the men rode out to hunt.

"They never returned, but Ingrid went out alone and came back with a small deer. She had not killed it, she walked back to our camp and it followed her. It stood quiet as we killed it. The second time this happened, my last man became mad and tried to kill Ingrida, shouting that she was a witch. I knew she was,

and so did he, but he tried to attack her anyway. I drew my sword and killed him.

“That left only Ingrida and me to carry on. We were following something, not a trail, but a sort of feeling, an impression that there was someplace we had to go. I asked Ingrida and she said it was not her, but that she felt it too, and that we should go there.

“It was many days later, Ingrida feeding me along the way, that we were at the foot of a hill. Here there was a path, and here Ingrida asked me to stop. She said that she would go on alone, that her witchly powers would protect her. Of course I refused. She bowed her head and said ‘you are my master’ and we climbed together.

“At the top there was indeed a hole, and in it a light, you could see it reflect off the trees around the hole. In all this time we had seen no other Druids or men of any kind. Just those noises in the wood. The path led directly to the edge of the hole and as we got there I looked in.

“Such power. I can’t tell you exactly what I saw, but I know it was drawing me toward itself. I knew that I was seeing the underworld, I was sure of it. If this was not Hell, than it did not exist. As I was falling inward, to my certain death I am sure, Ingrida grabbed my arm, she spun me around and kissed me, then she said ‘we will meet again’, and slapped me unconscious. As I was passing out and falling I saw her leap into the hole, a magnificent sword in her hand. That was the

last thing I remembered until I woke up on a perfectly ordinary hill. No hole, no strange sounds in the wood.

“Did you ever meet her again?”

“Oh yes, many times, through many lives. In some of them she was named Gwen, in others, Frua, but mostly she was my Ingrida.

“Many lives, so you have lived a long time?”

“No my friend, I have lived many lives and in most of them I died in war. But in some I was a king and I died an old white-haired man with children around me. Always though, my Ingrida was there with me.”

“Is she with you now?”

“She waits at my home, my once and always love.”

“Arturus, I thank you for your story. I will prepare a meal for you and then you can rest once more.”

This Mike did and his friend ate it. With that, the light seemed to go slowly out of Art’s eyes and when it had gone, Mike said, “Thank you for that story Art, it was very good.”

“I’m glad you liked it Mike, I seem to be able to come up with these things once in a while, not really sure where they come from but they seem to hang together. Maybe I should write

them down.”

“I’d read them, Art.”

King Arturus

“Hey Ingrid, how are you? Where’s Art?”

“He’s off messing about with Okami and Stan. I think he’s getting a bit hooked on this shape shifting thing, either that or he’s more of a masochist than I thought.”

“Well let’s hope he doesn’t hurt himself. The usual?”

“Sure, please, but put some extra vegetable on the burger please, Art has been hinting that I’m getting a bit fat.”

“Ingrid, that is plainly impossible, you’re a Goddess, you choose your shape.”

“Yeah I know, but I told Art he was getting fat so he would get out and have some exercise. He tends to run to seed early.”

“OK, extra vegetable for the Goddess who is making herself a bit pudgy to be fair.”

Ingrid looked sharply at Mike, who shrugged, “No I don’t read minds, but I can see the shape of things Ingrid. And I hear things, like your comment that Art tends to run to seed early. Art told me a story the other day, he told me it wasn’t true, but you’re making me wonder.”

“Glowing eyes?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, and he told it from his own point of view.”

“Arturus and Ingrida?”

“When he first met you.”

“Yeah, look, he doesn’t often remember his past lives, but yes, he’s that Arthurus Pendragon, it got shortened to Art Pendry a while back. All the memories are there, but he usually finds it easier to think of them as stories he’s made up.”

“I didn’t challenge him on that.”

“Thanks Mike, it usually bothers him. Yes I’ve been with Art for a lot longer than he thinks, or should I say more often than he thinks. He told you I was a slave girl?”

Mike nodded.

“I was, or at least I was playing one. Saxon princess captured and all that. I was looking for the hell-hole.”

“What? Beelzabub’s Hell?”

“No, a much more ancient one, basically a rip in reality, another reality bleeding over.”

“Like how Ray and Zaat went to other worlds?”

“Pretty much, yes. I was sent by Woden to close this one down. I didn’t get Art’s face away from the hole fast enough and it affected him. He tends to come back now, only maybe now that he’s more or less immortal it might break the cycle.”

“That’s.... interesting, Ingrid.”

“It’s a great romance you dunce. I really do love him and I’ve loved him over countless lives. Well I could count them but doing that makes me feel old.”

“Ingie, you’re as old as the universe.”

“Rude!”

“Sorry. So you’ve found Art during each of his incarnations?”

“Yep, or he finds me, it’s about half and half.”

“And he was the legendary King Arthur?”

“Several times. He’s often a soldier and he tends to rise through

the ranks. This time I guess he is taking a break.”

“So the tales of King Arthur...”

“Are mostly a bunch of hooey, made up alongside the other great Celtic Inventions. Honestly, I don’t know why the English can’t just accept they’re Saxons. I guess it was mostly the Scots who made up the great Celtic romances.”

“So the Celts and the Romans...”

“Were just the same as most invasions, local bands or tribes or even nations looking for help against the guys over the hill, and the invading force tends to use the local divisions. There was never a united Celtic people for the Romans to lose to. Same with the Germans, except when they found a great leader to unite them, and then they smashed the Romans. But the Celts and the Germans always split apart and the Romans just kept coming back.”

“That’s unfortunate that the Celts didn’t have a unified nation.”

“Why? They loved the Romans, mostly. The common people got a lot more than they lost. So did the Germans and the Gauls and all the other peoples under the Empire.”

“But they lost their culture.”

“Not really, cultures change, it’s the romantics who invent a golden age that was destroyed all at once. The Celts were Celts

until they were Romans. Arthur the King was usually Roman rather than Celtic.”

“You’re blowing my mind here, multiple King Arthurs?”

“Sure, why not? He seldom remembered he’d lived before so he never numbered his reigns, it was all ‘King Arturus’ and he wasn’t always king.”

“Want to tell me one?”

“If you’d like, there was a time when he was an iron-smith.”

“Swords and that sort of thing?”

“That sort of thing, mostly. He was apprenticed at an early age, like was usual, and after many years I wandered into the village and found him. At the time I was a traveller, a gypsy girl. As usual, we fell in love and he came to believe I was a witch. He usually did. We were together for many years before he got his freedom, and some time after that, came a commission to make a sword for a great lord. He had a reputation for good swords.

“He asked me to help with the work, not unusual, I was a handy bit of unpaid labour and I was as strong as any man. I could see that this lord was the type to take the sword and refuse to pay, so I put a bit extra in the sword. Damned if Art didn’t put his magic into it as well, I think he may have figured out this customer, like I had. Anyway, he finished the sword and it was gorgeous. One of the attributes it had was that it

would not be owned by a dishonest man. By the way, the stories usually put that as ‘only one worthy can possess it’.

“Came the day we delivered it, and as I thought, the bastard refused to pay, and he had his men run us off his land. We went home, and about a week later this guy came back complaining. Seems he had been riding by a lake and the sword jumped out of its scabbard right into the middle of the lake. He wanted us to make another but we refused, saying we had no money for ore. He was about to get down to teach us a lesson when his horse bolted and he ended up breaking his neck. His men saw, and didn’t do much about it, the man was a jerk to everyone. The son was a much nicer lord.”

Mike had been absorbed in the story but suddenly had a thought, “Wait, ore, stone, you just told me where the story of the sword in the stone came from.”

Ingrid smiled, “So we went to this lake to see what had happened to the sword...”

“Oh no, the Lady of the Lake?”

“Nimue, yes, she gave us back the sword.”

“And that was Excalibur”

“No, there is no Excalibur. I kept the sword after Arthur died that time, and it’s just my sword, the one you’ve seen.”

“But that thing...”

“Is highly powerful, it can fight on its own, it appears when called, yes yes. Over the years it’s had some alterations, but it’s still the sword my smith made all those years ago. It’s a good sword.”

“Ingrid, why isn’t this recorded somewhere? Why are there all these old stories that aren’t correct.”

“I don’t know, why would I write them down? I have a perfect memory.”

“Art said he had thought of writing them down.”

“He should, he’s a good story-teller, get him to do it.”

“I’ll try, I really will try.”

Bzzzzz “Oh blast, I’m going to talk to Ray. Hello Art, ah, you’d better sit down buddy.”

Art staggered over to sit beside Ingrid, who smiled and laid her hands on him.

Wings

When she walked in, Art could see wings. Now wings weren't all that rare in these parts, but they weren't exactly common either. She seemed a bit lost, perhaps she was one of the many street people who lived in the area, human and spirit beings, both. They would come in for a meal and a coffee and sometimes they would have the money to pay, but if they didn't, Mike would feed them anyway.

In some places the regular customers might be a bit frightened of such scruffy visitors, but the regulars here weren't afraid of much, and so welcomed those who had no place to stay, or who couldn't keep a job. In fact, Liz spent quite a bit of time with those who were in mental difficulties.

Mike thought this girl might be in need of that kind of help, she seemed very confused and he had to guide her to a seat at the counter.

“Are you hungry?”

The girl nodded, and nodded again when Mike waved a coffee pot toward her. She was soon set up with a meal and was happily eating it when there was a scratching at the door.

Mike looked and saw one of the little brothers of Coyote in pretty bad shape. He thought that it might need to warm up a bit, and he sometimes fed the ones who couldn't hunt for themselves. There was a family or two not far away by the

river.

He let the coyote in, but it didn't look for food, it went straight to the girl and sat. The girl turned in her seat and looked down at the animal, her eyes were soft and shiny with almost-tears. She reached down and Mike was about to warn her, but the coyote never moved. She ran her hands over its head and down its back and the animal was suddenly in the best of health. It dropped its head in a bow and trotted back to the door where Mike let it out.

“That is quite a gift of healing you have there.”

The girl looked at Mike and made a half smile but said nothing.

She was there all day, and came back early the next day, never speaking at all. Mike wondered if she could, but she understood well enough. She seemed content to sit and watch people come in and out.

Part way through the second day, a girl came in, obviously in bad emotional shape, she wasn't well physically either, bruised and cut with mud on her clothing. She went directly to the winged girl, as if she had been looking for her. The girl healed the wounds and her clothing was clean and repaired too. Again all she did was run her hands over the girl's head and torso.

When the girl was healed and had taken a seat, Mike put some food down for her, and a tea, she had waved off the coffee. Mike left her to cry to herself for a while and as he turned he

noticed the mystery healer walking out the door. Her wings, invisible to most, were now a terrible black and Mike could feel rage from the girl. She went out the door and headed for the river bank. Mike followed.

As she got there, she changed, she became taller, thinner and he could see talons on her hands instead of fingernails. She was staring at a man who was frozen, as if she had paralyzed him. She must have done exactly that because he never moved, never made a sound as she ripped him to pieces. She was silent too, while killing this man. She pulled his head from his body and held it up to her face, which Mike now saw was that of a monster, needle-sharp teeth, eyes like a cat, barely any nose, just holes in the face. She stared into the eyes of the man and Mike thought that face moved into a terrible look of fear.

Then she threw it into the brush where Mike saw the coyotes were waiting. As this winged girl turned to go back to the lunch counter, Mike watched as she transformed into the girl who had been there for two days, nice looking, calm features, white wings, soft hands. Worst of all, there was no indication that she knew what she had just done.

When they went back to the counter, this girl looked into the eyes of the one who had been attacked. That girl stopped crying, stopped shivering, and was calm again. Mike hadn't called Liz but she was there, and she saw the same thing.

“What was that, Liz, do you know?”

Shaking her head, Liz said only, “Megan.”

Megan was sitting in the back of the place then, and Mike went over to sit with her. “I saw her change to a creature and rip that girl’s attacker to pieces, but I also saw her heal a coyote and heal that girl. Do you know what she is?”

“I don’t, Mike, I can sense that she’s not human, and not old, maybe two thousand years. She’s from the other side of the ocean, but then again, she’s not. She wasn’t wrong about that man, he was the one who attacked the girl, if we were in the bush, I’d have killed him myself, but here in the city? Not good. Mike I don’t know what she is, I’m going to need some outside advice here.”

With that, Megan vanished again. While Mike had been talking, Liz had checked the girl who was attacked, but she was fine, and the girl walked out the door. Liz had not approached the winged girl, however, which Mike thought strange.

“The girl is fine, she doesn’t remember the attack at all, but she has a sense of rightness, so at some level she knows what that being did.”

“You haven’t approached the other one?”

“No, I won’t lay a hand on her to see what she is, I can’t. She isn’t hostile, but I simply can’t go near her. I’m not sure what it is, she isn’t doing it but it’s as if I’m not part of her world in any way at all.”

“Megan has gone to find help. What about Kit? Could she help, she dealt with a lot of beasts in Paris.”

“I’ve called her, she should be here about now.”

Sure enough, Kit walked in the front door and took in Mike, Liz and this winged girl who was sitting at the counter, watching Kit walk in.

Kit nodded to herself, and bowed to the winged girl. She looked at Mike and Liz and said, “Beels.”

Beelzabub was there and so was Megan, “Megan told me, Kit.”

He looked at the girl who was looking at Beelzabub in an interested way, as if she recognized him. “Hello child, are you lost?”

The girl nodded.

“I will take you home, would you like that?”

Again, a nod.

Beels turned to the others and said, “I’ll be back to explain,” he held out his hand and the girl took it, they were both gone.

Almost immediately, Beels was back. “Mike could I have a coffee please, that took a lot out of me.”

Mike handed one over and Beels sat down heavily. “That creature was an Angel, my friends. A being created by my brother in one of his, how shall I put it, more ‘helpful’ frames of mind. They are immensely powerful, and about as bright as a two year old human. This one was pure compassion, and you can see what that can bring.”

“But she looked so delicate when she came in here.”

“Her real aspect is one you don’t ever want to see, both humans and spirit beings as you call them will translate its true aspect into something a bit less frightening. They have no conscience, no second thoughts. They see only black and white, and they see only my brother. I had to be very careful not to reveal that I was who I am, or she would have attacked me, and trust me, I’d have had a hard time destroying her.”

Kit drew a sharp breath.

“Yes Kit, that powerful. Fortunately they are, as I said, pure compassion. They don’t think for themselves, they heal the sick and kill the sinners. As simple as that, and so they themselves, are simple. I have asked my brother what the hell he was thinking when he created them and he couldn’t remember. Honestly, he’s a bit simple himself. Sees things in black and white.”

Megan frowned, “But she made the correct decisions, heal the wounded, kill those who need to be killed.”

“Perhaps, but if you or Liz had got close enough, she might have decided that you were not of my brother’s faith, and she would have killed you.”

“She might have tried.”

Beels nodded, “but you see the point, they are simple, they believe in good and evil, they believe in sin. They have no judgment, they don’t know how to weigh things, and they have only two responses, heal or kill.”

Mike was shaken, thinking of Liz fighting that thing he saw by the river, “What have you done with her?”

“I returned it to my brother, who should have kept it firmly under control. He realizes they were a mistake and that they have no place here on this world. Mike could I have a refill please and could you see your way to putting in just a dollop of that fine whisky you keep under the counter?”

Kit took Beelzabub’s hand, “That bad?”

Beels squeezed her hand back, nodded and drained the cup, which Mike had made almost all booze.

Sally

You would think that the beings in Guelph would be able to handle anything at all. After all they had defeated the Giant invasion. Yet there is a danger in over confidence.

Mike was pouring another coffee, "How are you Ray, have you adapted to Zaat and Julie being away?"

"Well enough, I guess, it doesn't make me happy, but it's what we have to do, she's got her job. Not that I know what one of those is."

Mike smiled, "Ray you have been a working soldier most of your life, jobs are not a foreign land to you."

"Fair enough, fair enough, but these days I've been a fox of leisure. Not used to taking orders any more."

"What about Tilly's kids, you work pretty hard helping to raise them."

"OK yes, and some of those kids are pretty bossy, what a crew."

"How is Lila doing? I hear she's taking care of the smaller ones."

"She is, and she doesn't complain either. Sometimes I wish she

would. She's got way too much sense of responsibility for a kid. Tilly does what she can to get her to have some fun, but Lila won't have it."

"Is Robin Goodfellow around?"

"I see him occasionally, he's keeping an eye on Lila and the rest of the kids I suspect. They're well protected, especially since some of them are exhibiting their powers. Any thief that walks in there is going to get the shock of his life."

"Good to hear, my friend, and I'm glad you're staying busy."

Ray lifted his coffee in salute of Mike's good wishes.

Clash clash. Mike looked daggers at Ray, "Chains? Really, Chains?"

The girl who had been escorted into the place by a fellow passenger on the train, smiled. "I can understand what they are saying."

Mike looked at the girl, and immediately knew she was blind, he could also see waves of power surrounding her but no particular shape to them. "You do? What are they saying?"

"Welcome, glad to have you here."

Mike glanced at Ray, "Seriously, you can speak chain?"

"No, but what else would a doorbell say in a shop."

She turned to the man who was helping her, "Thank you so much, I can make it from here."

The fellow nodded and walked back out the door. Ray had a smug look on his face, "They really do say welcome."

"You're full of it Keen, to me they say 'it's Halloween in six months' I like the bong bong, put that back."

Ray laughed and got up to help the girl to the counter, putting her bag beside her.

"What can I get you?" Mike said in a friendlier voice.

The girl looked to her left, toward the shelf with the food for the ghosts, "All right, I'll try it. Could I have the farmer's breakfast please."

Mike looked at the shelf, he and Liz kept items of food and drink there, replacing them each day, but neither of them had ever talked to the ghosts in the place. "You can hear the ghosts?"

"Sure, can't you? They seem nice."

"Well they're no trouble, certainly. Very well, one farmer's coming up."

The girl was pretty, with pure white eyes. Somehow she reminded Ray of Xaalajaat. Ray asked if he could sit with her and she patted the seat beside. "My name's Ray, that's Mike behind the bar and the ghosts can introduce themselves, they don't talk much to us."

"Hello Ray, I'm Sally.

"I haven't seen you around town before, and I'm sure I'd have noticed. Are you new to the place?"

Sally looked toward Mike, who shrugged, and Sally seemed to understand. "Thank you for the compliment, yes I'm new to town, I'm from a little place out west, I was told to come here and just got off the train."

"Do you have someone meeting you?"

"No, I'm on my own."

"Oh, do you mind if I ask what you came here for?"

"Not at all, but I don't know why I'm here, I'll know when I know."

"Who sent you?"

"You're not very good at flirting are you?"

Mike just about dropped the plate he was drying.

"Sorry, you're right, none of my business."

The girl's laugh sounded like tinkling bells, "It's all right, Ray, ask me anything, it might tell me why I'm here. As for who sent me, I listen to my inner voice, and that's who sent me here, just a feeling I will be needed. Oh, and the ghosts warned me you were a terrible flirt."

"They did, did they, we might have a word later."

Again the girl laughed.

Ray liked the sound, but what she'd said worried him. "Sally if you've been asked to come here, I can't imagine why. We have our share of trouble, but nothing we haven't been able to handle."

"Well I've been known to be wrong about things, my voice isn't always accurate, and maybe I'm here to have a vacation."

Ray was even more worried, "From what, if I can ask, what is it that you do?"

"Whatever is needed. The last place I was, there were a lot of nasty spirits, I talked with them."

"You're a Shaman?"

"Hardly, I don't often fix problems or speak to the spirits for

people."

"Pest removal?"

"Sometimes."

"Look, Sally, you've got me a bit worried here, I can tell you're a being with quite a lot of power, but I can't get a read on it at all. Gods this is not a thing I usually need to ask, but what are you?"

"Well the ghosts also told me you're pretty forward, I can see that's true. To be honest Ray, I don't know what I am. I've never met anyone like me, I'm sort of whatever I need to be. For this place I'll know what I need to be when I know why I'm here."

Ray was wondering if this woman could be any more mysterious. "Right, well let's see if we can get you a place to stay. I know a couple of places in town that have extra rooms, or there are bed and breakfast places, do you have any feeling as to how long you're going to be in town?"

"Now you're starting to understand me, Ray. I really don't know how long I'll be here, but if someone has a spare room that would be fine. You've got a spare room don't you."

"Uh, well yes but uh."

"Good, that will do nicely, let me know how much per month, I'll pay you a month in advance."

Mike was grinning, Ray had a real talent for finding women who just took over his life.

"Uh, let's discuss rent later, when we find out how long you'll be in town."

"Fair enough. Thank you Mike, that was an excellent breakfast. Ray what are you doing now? Any chance we can take a walk around town, it might trigger something."

"Of course, that sounds like a good idea, we'll go on patrol."

Mike grinned to himself, old soldier indeed, but he was going to have a chat with Liz when she got in, he was worried too.

Order

Megan was happy. "It's great, there's no disorder at all these days, people are obeying the rules, I don't know what I've done to deserve this, but I must have done something right."

Mike served her coffee and agreed, "No disruption in the lunch counter, everyone is polite, waits their turn, you're right, Megan. It's quite a change from the chaos we usually have around here."

It had been about a month since Sally came to town and there had been changes. For one thing, she had been living in Ray's apartment and she was still in the guest room. Ray hadn't made a pass. Maybe he was too worried about why she was in town, it sounded like it would be a problem that nobody in town could fix.

For her part, Sally seemed amused that Ray hadn't made a pass, it seemed like she wasn't worried about it either way, but she wasn't going to help him, she liked seeing his confusion. The two of them had patrolled around town each night for a month, but couldn't see anything wrong. In fact, things were getting more and more quiet.

Ray went to visit the kids, and he took Sally along. The school-aged ones were not happy, in fact, where they had usually looked forward to going to school, they were digging in their heels.

"Uncle Ray, we get bullied. We never got bullied before but now the other kids call us freaks and exclude us from everything. The teachers help them too."

"What do you mean help?"

"The teachers tell us we should be like everyone else, act like them. They keep saying things like the nail that sticks up gets hammered down. Uncle Ray can we hammer them down?"

"What? No, you can't hammer someone for being mean to you, you'd be doing it all the time."

Sally had been quiet, with a thoughtful look on her face, almost to herself she said, "Is this it? That's more subtle than usual."

Ray turned to look at her, then turned back to the kids, "Endure it children, you have to get high marks so that you can get into the good high school."

As he went out the door, Sally spoke quietly, "Did you hear yourself just now? There's no competition to get into high school here, that's Japan you're thinking about."

Ray stopped, "You're right, the talk of bullying and fitting in must have made me think of that."

"Ray we need to go around the town again, this time we need to pay attention to the opposite of what's going wrong."

"What?"

"We've been looking for problems, now we need to look at what's not a problem. Oh blazes, I'm not sure how to put this, haven't you commented that there's less and less trouble in town?"

"You're right, the place seems to be turning into some 1950s propaganda movie about suburbia. It's a little boring, but what's wrong with that?"

"Who would know best if the trouble was disappearing, Ray?"

"Megan. Definitely, she's the one who fixes it when things go wrong, she's the one who has kept an eye on Coyote and the rest of us tricksters for decades."

"Where is she now?"

Ray lifted his nose, "She's in the lunch counter. That's strange, she's usually home at this time of day. Let's go and talk to her."

"Take the long way around, Ray, let's see what we can see."

"First thing I see is that there's no street people around. That's weird, they're always downtown. Ah, there's a lot more police patrols, I wonder..."

They went a block over to a place that provided meals to the homeless, and it was full. Next door was a computer cafe and looking in, Ray could see that it was full too. "They've driven all the homeless off the streets."

"Isn't it nice and neat."

Ray looked sharply at Sally, "What do you mean by that?"

"Kids being forced to conform, homeless pushed off the streets, does this sound familiar to you?"

"Sounds like Japan, but what's wrong with that?"

"Why is it like that? Do you think Japan is perfect?"

"No, it definitely isn't, it just looks perfect, but at a great cost to a lot of people who can't fit in. Hikikomori come to mind."

"I wonder how many kids are in their rooms right now, Ray, refusing to go to school."

"Let's drop into the thrift shop, I want to ask Albert what he's seen."

But it wasn't a thrift shop any more, it was a vintage clothing shop. Albert was there behind the counter, "Hello Ray, can I help you find something?"

"No thanks Albert, I want to ask you a couple of questions."

"Are you sure, I can find you a much more suitable hat than the one you've got on."

"What's wrong with my hat?"

"Well, you have to admit, it sort of sticks out like a sore thumb."

"Albert you sold me this hat, I've worn it for years."

"Well here's a nice fedora that is much more in fashion these

days."

"OK, thanks Albert, I think I've got my answer."

As they left, Ray turned to Sally, "Albert is the least fashion conscious person I know, the more outrageous the clothing, the more he likes it, but look at him. He looks like he works in a bank. Now for Albert, that is outrageous, but he loves my hat."

"It is pretty tacky, Ray."

"That's the point. OK I'm getting a bit freaked out, when did all this happen?"

"You tell me, Ray."

"Well it was pretty normal around here before you showed up."

"I promise you I'm not doing this Ray, I came because something was going to happen, remember."

Just then some older kids came walking down the street. They were dressed almost identically, obviously heading for school. More or less in one voice they shouted, "Freak" at Sally. An instant later they were all in a pile on the sidewalk, Ray had made the cement into ice and then back again just in time for them to land heavily.

He leaned over and said, "Your clothes are ripped, better run along home and fix them or you'll get laughed at, at school."

The kids scrambled up and ran back the way they came.

"Weird," said Ray, "Those kids aren't exactly hoodlums, but they sure aren't concerned with clothes."

"Ray let's go find Megan, maybe she'll know more."

As they got into the lunch counter they were shocked. The place was spotless, every patron was lined up and sitting with perfect posture. It was more like a movie set than Jim's Lunch Counter. In fact, the doorbell said ting ting just like it should.

Megan looked like a canary-swallowing cat, very pleased with herself. "Ray, behaving yourself are you?"

"Since when were you worried about me, Megan?"

"Well just make sure you are, I've finally got the place running like I want it."

"Megan, when has this town ever run like you want it to?"

"Shows what a little effort can accomplish."

"No, no there's something wrong. Sally, what's going on?"

"I don't know, Ray, but I'm willing to bet this is why I'm here."

Sally walked over to Megan and touched her shoulder. Megan

started, as if she was waking up. "What am I doing here with the breakfast crowd?"

"Megan there's something wrong, everything is perfect, everybody acts the same, even you were acting as if you were in some sort of movie of the perfect town."

"No such thing, Ray."

"No kidding, Sally what did you do?"

"I let her see, Ray, that's my power, I can communicate and I can let people see."

"Can you broadcast it?"

"No I have to touch people to let them see."

"Megan?"

"Give me your hand, girl. Let those in here see."

Sally nodded and the crowd in the diner seemed to wake up. Mike and Liz included.

Megan called to Liz, "What do you feel, Liz."

"Something, some very diffuse power that has crept over the town."

"Is there a focus, something I can destroy?"

"No, nothing, it's like it spreads from person to person, I can feel it trying to get back in here. There's nothing to get hold of, nothing to fight. It will come back to us."

Megan looked at Sally. "You said there was something coming, and you came to help us. We can't get hold of it, what help can we give you?"

"I can let you see, but if it comes back, as Liz just said, I don't think I can do anything."

"What if you let the whole town see at once?"

"I can't do that."

"You did this place, through me, I think we can reach the whole town. It's worth trying anyway."

Ray shook his head, "Megan, things are where you have always wanted them, peace and order, are you sure you want to go back?"

"Ray, do you think a homogeneous society is a good thing?"

"It's stuck, no creativity, no I'm here because I like a bit of chaos."

"And I'd be bored with nothing to do, I can't see me at home

ironing Stan's shirts, can you?"

Ray shook his head, "All right, can we do this? Do you and I have enough power to reach the whole town?"

"We can try, take my hand and give me what you've got."

Ray took Megan's other hand, then Liz took Ray's, and they reached out. As they did, Kit was there, she literally screamed in anger and pulled in the entire Keen family, as she had when Ray fought the giants. Stan was there in the cafe as soon as they reached him, holding Liz' hand.

With each block and street they reached, more and more power was added to their efforts. Over it all they heard Megan saying, "Careful, nobody burn out."

Eventually, they reached Coyote, who was being served breakfast by Amber. Both of those beings shook their heads and roared. The power doubled, Art and Ingrid were next, and again a jump.

Sally shouted, "I can feel it, whatever it is, it's frightened, it's never been opposed before, it's confused, we're almost at the edge."

Suddenly it was over, Sally dropped Megan's hand, "That's it, it's gone."

"Gone away or gone forever."

"Forever, it couldn't hold on to anything, it's destroyed."

Megan frowned, "Are you sure, what was it?"

"Honestly, I think it was us, the urge for acceptance, the urge to have peace and quiet. The intolerance for difference. I think it manifested here because of so many powerful beings in one place, a little bit of power here and there and it started to grow. Now that everyone has seen it, it's gone."

Ray said, almost to himself, "Anti-chaos. Eris was right, chaos and order have to balance, too much one way or the other and it's no good."

Sally nodded, "that sounds like it. You folks here will need to be careful not to agree too much with each other."

Megan groaned, but was smiling.

"Sally, are you being called somewhere else at the moment?"

Sally smiled toward Ray, "Come on you, let's go home, I'll be here until I'm called away, in the meantime I've got an idea how we can kill some time."

Mike shook his head and whispered to Liz, "How does he do that?"

"He didn't."

Robin tells a story

"Shall I go with you, Sally?"

"No love, you stay here with your family, you stay so I have a place to come back to. It's my job to drift around and find things that need to be fixed."

Ray nodded, he knew Sally believed in a destiny for herself and he would never suggest otherwise. She had a purpose for her life. "Be very careful please, and come back to me."

"Ray, you know I will, and if I need you, I'll call."

"Be sure I'll come."

With that, Sally got on the train and was gone. Ray turned around and went into the lunch counter to sit again with Art. They had taken breakfast together before Sally headed out to wherever she was called, some small town in Northern Quebec this time.

Art patted Ray on the arm, "She's like that old TV show, The Littlest Hobo, drifting around helping people."

Ray flashed on Sally as a German Shepherd but he knew Art

didn't mean it that way. "I'm actually quite jealous, she's got a purpose in life. I seem to just drift."

"Ray, your drifting has connected with thousands of people over the years. You're connected to three families right now, Tilly, Zaat and Susume, I'd say you've got purpose to spare."

"Thanks Art."

Ting Ting, Robin Goodfellow came walking in. He wasn't quite a regular but he was in and out often enough that nobody forgot him.

"How's it going Robin?"

"Good Mike, good. I've found a couple more spots to sit and ask folks for a handout. It's so much more friendly than the tourist season in Port."

"You want a coffee?"

"Thanks, can I make a contribution to the sandwich fund please?"

"Of course you can. Here's your coffee."

The Lunch Counter made and distributed sandwiches to the street people, had done for years with the regulars kicking in to make them.

"Robin, come sit with us."

"Hello Ray, Art, what's up?"

"Sally just took off and Ray is bummed."

"Well, my old nanny said that women were like buses, there will be another one along in a minute."

"Thanks Puck, that makes me feel so much better."

Robin grinned and sat down.

Art carried a couple of empty cups back to the counter and came back to say, "How about a story, Robin?"

"Do I look like a library?"

"No you look like a taxi, tell us a story."

"One from the past or one from the future?"

Ray looked sharply, "Can you see the future?"

"No, but I see possibility, bits and pieces. Art's lady, now she can move about in time, she could tell you the stock prices next year."

"I asked, she told me no."

"I'm not surprised, the future tends to squirm around when you nudge it too much."

Ray asked again, "But you can feel that Lila is going to need you in the future."

"Oh that's a long story Ray, full of twists and turns. But it comes out all right, I promise you."

"You're not going to tell me are you?"

"She'll come out fine, Ray, you know that already. She's responsible, she's powerful and she'll have the full backing of her father and her namesake. Those are beings to reckon with. This is what I feel now, but if I tell you the story..."

"It might twist, OK thanks for telling me it will come out well for her."

"You're fond of the girl?"

"Of course, who wouldn't be, fond and proud, she's raising those kids well. Look how the twins turned out."

"Oh lord, now there's a scary set of boys, good thing they have the garage to keep them busy."

Art shifted around in his seat, "Well how about a tale of the past then."

"Oh those are easy, the past hardly changes at all. Shall I tell you of my first days here in this new world?"

Art and Ray sat back and folded their hands over their bellies.

"Very well, I came to this land from the old one because of a small misunderstanding. I believe I may have told you of the little difficulty I had with Lila the Queen? Well I came here so as not to upset her with my presence. How was I to know she would follow many long years after.

"Being a creature of Cernannos, I gravitated to the woods, the deep woods to the north and west of here, to be precise. Finding a jolly group of people, I was tempted to tease them, and this I did for a summer. There was much laughter.

"When winter came, things changed. Winters are harder here than in the old country, as you know. The village I was living with got into trouble. My tricks had distracted them and they didn't collect enough to survive that cold time. I meant no harm, I assure you, but harm I caused.

"I took it upon myself to fix the problem, so I set out to find help. The cold doesn't bother me, so I travelled comfortably for many days, but I found nothing. I kept going until I saw a bark home with a fire burning. The place looked well kept and so I approached, calling out that I was a friend. The being inside invited me to come in and so I did.

"That was the first time I had met Coyote, and he was a good

friend instantly. We ate and drank, and he told me many stories as we did. When we had finished our meal, I told him about my village and the trouble they were in. Coyote was sympathetic but he said he could not help. By attaching myself to the village, he said that only I could help them, they were no longer in his care.

"This angered me. You may not know it, but I have a tiny bit of a temper, and so I told Coyote that he was a slacker, an addlepate and a scoundrel. I picked up the stew pot and threw it at him. Coyote laughed, and as the pot got near him, it split into five pots. He taunted me, saying I had a weak arm, and so I threw another pot, that one also split into five. I continued to do this until there were two hundred pots in his house.

"By that time my temper had fallen, and so I stopped. Coyote looked around and said 'you have made a pretty mess here, you need to clean up my home.' I had no idea how to do that, but I started throwing the pots out the door. At the end, I had thrown all 200 out and I decided it was time for me to go.

"When I went out the door, I realized I was in the middle of my village and I saw no pot at all on the ground. Soon though, I saw people poking their heads out of their homes and waving the pots at me. It turned out there was enough food to get through the winter.

"I realized what Coyote had done and I turned to thank him, but he and his hut were gone."

Art sat forward, "Our Coyote? The one living here?"

"Is there another? Sure your friend here. I've seen him around town but he seems not to remember me. I certainly remember him and his kindness to my village."

Art smiled, "Thank you Robin, can I get you another coffee, maybe some lunch, that story deserves a reward."

"Art, you are a gentleman, I'll accept with pleasure."

Chenoa

"You should go find someone younger and healthier, why would you stick around a sick old man. Go on, go get a life with someone that's going to keep up with you."

"You let me worry about that, I'm content to be exactly where I am, OK?"

At the counter, Art hooked his thumb toward the couple at a table, deep in conversation, "What's that all about Ray?"

"What those two? They've been together for 25 years, he was a vigorous young 50 year old when they met, but now he's pretty sick, won't last much longer. He figures she should leave him."

“She looks like one of the people, can’t she get someone to heal him, or do it herself?”

“He won’t have it. He says he’ll live as long as he’ll live and not a minute longer.”

“But why would he...”

“Art, you had a hell of a row with Ingrid before she made you immortal, why?”

“Oh, I see, same with Dave.”

Mike spoke up, “Almost the same, I’m afraid I caused that one, I saw that Dave would only reach his full potential if he knew he was going to die.”

“Or he’d slack off, not work so hard? But that guy at the table has done what he wanted to do or it’s too late for him to do it now. Why not let her fix him?”

“Maybe, maybe he just wants her to go away and find someone else.”

“He doesn’t love her?”

“Oh he does, and his problem is that she loves him. She won’t leave him. It’s a very old argument between the two of them.”

“Life and love are funny, aren’t they?”

Ray got a faraway look in his eye, “They certainly are.”

Both Art and Mike looked at him, Art grinned, “Spill.”

Ray held up his empty cup. Mike nodded and filled it.

“Look, this was a long time ago, a couple, three hundred years. I was a soldier, fighting in North America in the War of the Conquest, you’d call it the French and Indian war, or the Seven Year’s War although I didn’t fight in Europe. I was part of the French Garrison here in Canada, allied with the Wabanaki confederation and the Algonquins. I was stationed at Louisbourg during the siege in 1758, 48 days that took. The idea of that fort was great, but it was situated in the lowlands and wasn’t very well defended to the landward side.

“By that time the British had begun the Acadian expulsion which included a lot of our native allies. When Louisbourg fell, Quebec was doomed, and so were the French in Canada. I slipped out one night and ran west. I had no desire to be scattered with the Canadians. That’s when I met Chenoa, who was also on the run. I walked into her camp one night, she was alone and she invited me to eat with her once she knew I was French. She wanted someone to help her against the British and their Iroquois allies, who were wandering around.

“That first night we slept apart, but toward dawn, we were attacked by a small group of Hurons. I turned fox and killed

them, and that's when Chenoa knew I was a spirit. Her religion was Midewiwin, she'd never been converted, so she accepted me as one of the minor spirits, not that my being a spirit impressed her at all. She was more or less a Shaman herself, and so it was no big thing to take a spirit to her bed. Which she did that night.

“The two of us wandered, avoiding camps and villages for years, and we were happy together. I wasn't fighting a war, and we developed a reputation for being witches, which kept most of the attacks on us down to a minimum. We learned from each other and we studied with those we met, those who had knowledge.

“As Chenoa got older, we settled down near a remote village. I told her that I could heal her and give her a long life, and I very much wanted to, but she said no. She had her allotted time and she would take no more. Like that old fellow, she did ask me to leave her, and go off to continue my life, but I wouldn't leave, how could I?

“I had fifty years with her and they were some of the sweetest of my life. We never had children, I asked her after about ten years together but she said no, they would settle me down and she wanted no part of her fox settling down. When we did settle down it was much too late for her to have children, but the two of us told stories to the village children and ended up being aunt and uncle to most of them.”

Ray fell silent, obviously thinking of his time with Chenoa.

Mike refilled his cup and asked gently, “What happened then, Ray?”

“Then? Then she died of course. I buried her in the proper way. She told me that she would go on and chase the fox spirits. She knew I wasn’t going to die for a long time, but she would chase the foxes anyway, to remember me. After that I went back to France, back to war.

“I have had many loves before her, and many after. I try not to fall in love with humans but like with Chenoa, sometimes I can’t help it. The only thing we can do is love them for as long as we can, and then say goodbye. Look, I’ve got more stories like this than I ever want to tell you guys, but it was nice to remember Chenoa again.”

“Ray do you think she’s on another plane, waiting for you?”

“I certainly hope so, Art. I really do, she was so full of life I’d like to believe it is still going on.”

“Did you ever think of making her immortal?”

“Never, she would have left me with a bitter heart toward me. No, I would never have done that to her. But you know something Art? You made the right choice for Ingrid. It’s so very hard to watch someone you love die, knowing you’re going to go on without them.”

“Yeah, I think it was the right choice, I worried a bit about

what I would do with my time, but when I think of Ingrid, I know that centuries won't be enough. Don't tell her that will you?"

"Somehow, buddy, I think she knows how you feel."

"Yeah, you're probably right, so let me buy your breakfast for you, I appreciated that story."

Mike smiled, "Already covered, Art."

Art and Mike

"I've got nothing."

"What do you mean, Mike?"

"I've got nothing for a story, I told you guys the story of my hitchhiking encounter with Megan, and you were there for the fight with the Wyrms in the tunnels below the University, and then I work here in the lunch counter. There's nothing else to my life, nothing I can tell you guys for a story."

"Stories aren't everything buddy, look, you and I haven't lived for a thousand or ten thousand years like some of these guys around here. You think they've got an adventure once a week?"

They would run out of tales too, if they were our age.”

“Well yeah, Art, I can see that, but I still feel like I should have at least another story or two.”

“Look, working here is a story in itself. You’ve welcomed a lot of the people into town, and said goodbye to a lot of them too.”

“Sure, but collecting other people’s stories isn’t any big deal is it?”

“It is, Mike, who else is going to know these stories. Who else is going to record them.”

“Because they don’t record their own?”

“Exactly, they don’t think what they’ve done is anything special, it’s just the life they’ve lived. You can gather the stories Mike.”

“What about you, Art, those stories you have made up in your head, what about writing them down?”

“Ah, you’ve been talking to Ingie, she’s always on me to write them down. I don’t know, I might, but she’s basically my best audience and if I’ve told them to her, she remembers them.”

“I wonder what that’s like, to remember everything, to never forget anything.”

“Blessing and curse, from what I see. You remember what and when, when you need to, but then again, you can’t forget the nasty things that happened, or that you did. Still, I’m pretty sure Ingie has to work at remembering something from a hundred thousand years ago. Her face goes kind of, I don’t know, ‘away’ when I ask her about things that happened before the world existed, and it takes her a little while to answer.”

“Do you suppose the really ancient ones have a storage place somewhere else, like a gigantic library, where they store things from so far back that they don’t need them every day.”

“Who knows, Mike, all I know is that her mind is way different than mine.”

“Yeah, but Liz’ mind is way different than mine and we’re only ten years apart. And you know, she remembers things I said five years ago, things I don’t remember any more. Sometimes I think she makes them up.”

A voice drifted out of the back room, “I heard that Micheal.”

Art grinned, “Anyway, don’t you like running this place? You do a lot of good.”

“Oh I do, I like it well enough, but hey, I mean I inherited the menu, let alone all the things we do and the way we do them.”

“I hear you, I inherited things from Jim. But I was here when the Kobolds dug the bar, and you were here when Liz started

shifting the size and shape of the place around. Not to mention the decor.”

“Oh, and the ever changing door bell, thanks to Ray.”

“Well that’s it isn’t it? We’re not here to tell our own stories, we’re here to witness theirs, to listen to them, and because they’re good friends. You and I are mostly human, but this place makes us a bit more than that.”

“I guess you’re right. I’ve often wondered, what is it that keeps us from aging when we run this place? Did you ever find out?”

“I never did, Jim certainly didn’t need to be kept young, he’s been around for thousands of years, he didn’t know it would keep me young when I took over. No I think that it might just be all those spirit people that come in here, that have such a stake in the place. I think it might be just as simple as they don’t age and they don’t expect to see you and Liz age, so you don’t.”

“I wonder, you might have it there Art. I’ve never asked too much about it, for fear of jinxing it. I mean who wouldn’t want to spend eternity with Liz?”

“I heard that too you lovely man, but you’re still doing the dishes later.”

Art laughed out loud, “You ever notice how people are paired up around here? Have you had any more thoughts about the

great baby urge?”

“I don’t remember who told me it was probably because Liz and I were talking about it that I noticed others too, but I suspect that might be it, although maybe we were anticipating Ray’s Julie as well.”

“So have you two decided anything?”

“No, not yet, how about you and Ingrid?”

“Same, you know, I don’t think there’s some sort of urge, I think you’re right, just a normal amount of people talking about kids.”

“What do you figure, we’ll all decide at the same time and create a little powered baby boom?”

“Don’t joke, Mike, can you imagine the problems?”

The two of them went on chatting for quite a while. Eventually, Mike did the dishes while Art watched. Just another exciting day in Mike’s Lunch Counter.

Until Megan came in. “Ray one of your whelps is wearing a cape.”

“What, no, surely not, and they’re not my kids.”

“They’re yours by way of being a father to them, and that one

who calls himself Beemer has decided to be a hero.”

“Bemised? I can’t believe that, he’s a good kid, listens to me real carefully.”

“And what are you saying when he’s listening to you? Are you, Ray, by any chance telling him tales of your heroic deeds?”

Ray sort of collapsed, “Oh Gods, he was listening to the stories and missing the lesson?”

“So it would seem. You’ll need to have a chat with the boy.”

“If for no other reason than a cape is going to get him beat up at school. Damn. All right Megan, I’ll take care of it. First thing to go will be the comic books.”

“Ray if they’re your comics, don’t throw them out, your old friend Art here would love to read some golden age originals.”

Ray gave Art a dirty look.

The Dreaming

The door crashed open and two students came in, half dragging another between them. Mike pointed to a table and they

dropped into the chairs.

"What's up guys, a bit early in the morning to be drunk isn't it?"

"He's not drunk, he's been starving himself to have visions, and now he's gone like this."

Mike looked, the kid was obviously alive, but it looked like nobody was home. His eyes were open but not focusing on anything. "Megan?"

Megan and Liz sat opposite the kid and looked closely. Liz took his head in her hands and stared carefully into his eyes. She looked at Megan and nodded. Megan turned to the friends, "Did he have a question? Any idea who or what he was looking for?"

"Not that he told us, he just read about having visions when you starve yourself and so he stopped eating about three days ago, and then for the last day he just stared at a wall, and then this morning he was like this."

"No Shaman to advise him?"

"What?"

"Stupid, all right, leave him with us, you two go back to school, we'll see if we can get him back. Go on, off with you."

"But..."

Megan growled deep in her chest and the two bolted for the door.

Liz turned to Mike, "he's gone into the Dreaming."

"The what? That's an Australian thing isn't it?"

"It's a human thing. You've been to the Keen world with Ray haven't you?"

"Well yes, but that's not the spirit realm, there's no such thing, you guys told me that."

"No such physical place, but the Dreaming is just that. If you go there when you're awake, and you don't have a guide or a specific anchor, like a question, you can get lost."

"This kid is lost?"

"In the Dreaming, yes."

Megan nodded, "That's pretty much it, and we need to deal with the body first. Those burgers cooked Mike?"

"Yes, why?"

Megan waved her hand and they were gone. Into the kid's stomach, Mike hoped.

"Can you get the kid back?"

Megan shook her head, "Not me, Ray is going to do it."

Ray looked sharply at Megan, "I don't know crap about the Dreaming, that's your realm, Nanabozo."

"He's yours."

"He's not, he's English and I'm French."

"He's from over the water, he's yours."

"Damn it. Will you go with me?"

"No, but you should take someone, how about that boy of yours, he wants to be a hero, here's his chance."

"Megan, you want me to get lost in there too?"

"You'll be right here, a good slap or two and you'll find your way back."

Ray looked daggers at Megan but she just folded her arms with that annoying half smile she had on her face when she had decided someone else was going to do something.

"Damn it, alright get Beemer here."

The kid's stomach rumbled, Megan waved at Mike, "How

about some broth, I think he can drink it."

In the meantime, Beemer appeared, cape and all. He looked around, confused.

"Hello boy. Your papa has a job for you."

"He's not my real papa."

"Boy, don't give me any lip, he's as much papa than the guy who sired you. Now shut up and listen, you want to be a hero, here's your chance."

To his credit, Bemised sat and was quiet. Megan nodded, took the soup from Mike and started to carefully spoon it into the kid's mouth, making sure he swallowed it. She would wipe his chin with a napkin in a rather gentle way.

Ray shook his head, "Megan are you sure about this? I don't do this kind of Shaman thing."

"Liz and I are here if you get lost, it's just like the Keen world."

"The blazes it is, the Dreaming is insane."

Megan just stared at Ray, who stared back for a while, and then turned to Bemised. "You want to be a warrior, son? It looks like Megan is going to give you your chance. When we go in there, stick close to me, it's going to be tricky."

"But Ray, you're a trickster, we'll be OK won't we?"

"Not my world, son, just stick by me. Megan are you sure about this? What if we screw up the kid's head?"

"Look, the kid starved himself, he didn't take any chemicals on board, his brain should be fine, but if it's not, well, who the hell goes into the Dreaming without a guide?"

Ray was fairly certain Megan would step in if they got into trouble, but maybe that little speech was for Beemer, who was looking a bit uncertain.

"Come on son, let's do the job."

With that, he grabbed Beemer's hand and the two of them froze. Megan looked at Ray's eyes and nodded, "They're there."

Liz looked too, and checked Bemised, "They're together. Megan are you sure about this?"

"Oh stop worrying, Ray needs a challenge, he's getting lazy, and the kid needs a good bloody nose. We'll go get them if they get into trouble."

"And this boy?"

"Will be just fine, maybe he'll actually find whatever it is he's not looking for. Idiots, these students, wandering around without any goal or aim."

"Megan, were you never young?"

"Never, I came into being just like you see me now."

Liz turned away before she muttered, "Stan."

"I heard that young miss." but Megan was grinning, of course she was young once, Stan was proof enough of that.

Art looked at his friend who was motionless and unblinking, "Will Ray be all right?"

"Well if he gets into trouble, we'll send you in after him."

To Megan's surprise, Art just nodded. 'He would go, too,' she thought, 'he really would.' As she thought that, she heard Ingrid's voice in her head, "Megan..."

"Hush, we better keep an eye on our rescuers."

With that, the cafe became quiet as Liz and Megan settled back to watch the kid lost in the dreaming. Mike noticed that his two friends had left the cafe but were sitting outside on the bench. He nodded to himself, the kid had friends, Ray had friends, it would turn out just fine. With that he turned back to the grill and put a few more burgers on. He had a feeling everyone was going to be hungry by the end of this.

Ray and Bemised

"I really hate the Dreaming," said Ray as he and the boy appeared inside.

It was like watching the ceiling of the pool while sitting underwater, everything swam around. Nothing was in focus. It was obvious this kid had no internal discipline, he was exactly the wrong person to go into the dreaming, and the most likely sort to do it.

Ray sniffed. Yes, no focus, no direction, no idea where he wanted to go, this was a typical 20 year old boy.

Who read too much sci fi, here came a bad approximation of a tentacle monster. He looked sideways at Beemer and smiled when he saw a bow in his hands. Well at least he was quick. Ray held out his hand, and in it was an arrow with a peculiar head, a kabura-ya from Japan. "Announce your intention to fight"

Beemer looked at the arrow, shrugged and fired it over the monster's head. To his surprise, the thing folded all its tentacles into a ball and fell to the ground where it stayed.

"First lesson kid, don't kill things in the Dreaming unless you have no choice, no telling what you're killing."

Beemer looked confused, but nodded. Ray thought, 'good, he's listening.'

They had a look around but nothing else was coming at them. When they looked down at the monster, they saw a middle aged woman sleeping there. "His mother I suspect. He's got help in here at least." muttered Ray.

Beemer's eyes grew wide, "If I'd killed her?"

"Never, ever assume the right to kill anything, son. No matter how ferocious, it could be mother or father to something."

"Yes, but what would have happened here?"

"Good question, if we killed his mother in the Dreaming, would she die? I doubt it, but would this kid appreciate it? What do you think would happen?"

"Everything in the place would turn against us and crush us?"

"And we would never get out again. Remember that. Killing is the very last resort."

"But why is she sleeping there?"

"Maybe by announcing we were ready to fight her, the kid made her no threat to us. I think he may have more control in here than we assumed. Can we use that?"

"Hey Kid!" Beemer yelled, "You in here?"

Ray smiled, It might actually work. But of course it didn't. Too bad.

"Which way Beemer?"

The boy looked around carefully, "My dad taught me to track, but did we come in where the kid came in?"

Ray stifled a laugh, 'the kid...' Bemised was ten years younger. "I don't know, do you sense any tracks to follow?"

"No, there's nothing, it's like the place just came into existence."

"It probably did. Think of the dreams you have when you sleep. Everything is new and unscuffed. What do you feel about this kid?"

"He's wandering, he's lost, he would go in any direction at all. But he somehow has control of the place, so..." Beemer turned around again and looked hard into the distance. "There's an edge, he's creating the place and there's an edge, so maybe there's a middle and I'd bet that's where he is."

Ray nodded, "Good, find the middle."

His son looked hard at the edge, then turned ninety degrees,

then again twice until he'd looked at the four directions. "It feels thicker there," he said, pointing.

"Then that's where we go."

"But what if I'm wrong?"

Ray smiled, the boy had doubt, that's good, "Then we'll know when we come to the other edge. Beemer do you dream?"

"Sure, doesn't everyone?"

"And when you dream, can you control it?"

"Sometimes, not always, mostly not I'd guess because I don't always remember my dreams."

"Good, well this is the Dreaming, you're in someone else's dream, but you're awake and so is he. That means you're unprotected by sleep, you can be hurt, but it also means you can control the Dreaming."

"What? That doesn't make sense."

"Trust me, believe me, and remember, it doesn't make sense."

"Can you control it Ray?"

Ray thought about it for a moment, best be honest, "No son, I don't dream, so I can't control the dream, I'm also from across

the ocean, so this dreaming isn't the same, although it is. Look, the simple answer is that you're here to find the kid and I'm here to protect you."

"Geeze, pressure much Pop?"

Ray cuffed Beemer's head gently, "Go, that direction."

They walked for quite a while, until they were stopped by a great chasm. Ray took a look and sighed, "Cliche, honestly doesn't any dream have something else to overcome."

"Ray? What do we do? Can we go around?"

"There won't be an around, we have to go across right here."

"But how, there's no path..."

"Hush, boy. Look, tell me what is there to get across, do NOT list everything there's not or we're screwed."

"What?"

"Look, you're Ojibwe, your name means 'one who flies' and you've got a cape. What should you do?"

"But even if I fly over, you're still stuck here and I don't want to leave you."

"OK, what's as likely as you flying over there?"

"I'm not sure, I don't, I can't think of anything."

"Well you're descended from Coyote, why don't you sing us up a bridge?"

"What? I can't..."

Ray clamped a hand over the boy's mouth, "What did I tell you about can't? Now, did your father teach you any songs?"

Beemer shook his head.

"Oh sorry, how about Coyote?"

"No, a couple of country and western songs."

"But you've heard him?"

"Sure, he sings all the time."

"Then sing, son, sing, make it up as you go along and think about a bridge."

Bemised looked open mouthed at Ray, and then wide eyed behind Ray. Slowly, coming along the edge, was a gigantic six legged beast that looked vaguely like a hippopotamus.

Ray looked and said, "Sing, boy, now."

Beemer started singing nonsense syllables that sort of sounded like what he'd heard Coyote sing. Slowly, as if board by board, a bridge began to appear. Beemer sang more loudly, ignoring the monster who was taking its time getting to them and the bridge firmed up.

Ray stepped out onto it, "Keep singing until we're across."

This Bemised did, and just as they stepped onto the other side, they felt the monster put a foot on the bridge. Beemer shouted, "No, you'll fall."

He had stopped singing, the bridge disappeared, and the monster stepped back. It nodded as if in thanks and continued following the edge of the canyon.

Beemer turned to look at Ray, "How did you know I could do that?"

"I didn't, but your big sister Kit was able to find powers when she needed them, looks like you have the same ability. Now, which way to the centre from here?"

Still Dreaming

Bemised pointed and Ray walked in that direction without any hesitation.

Brown, it was nothing but a light tan brown, hard soil, almost like rock and it looked like it hadn't rained for, well for ever. Ray and Beemer walked for hours, was it days? The sun never moved, the sky was cloudless, and eventually, Beemer complained that he was thirsty and hungry.

"Why didn't we bring some supplies with us?"

"Can't, you can't take anything in or out of the Dreaming, our bodies are still in the cafe, and they'll feed and water us if we need it."

"So why am I so thirsty?"

"Because you expect to be, same reason you're sweating, you expect to sweat. As to hungry, you're always hungry B."

"Oh ha ha. So you're not thirsty?"

"I didn't say that, now that you've put it in my mind, I'm thirsty too. Oh and here comes the sweat."

"So our minds are doing this?"

"Well there's nothing else here except our minds, so yes."

"If I think that I'm not thirsty, will it stop?"

"Depends on how experienced you are, go ahead and try."

Bemised stopped and closed his eyes for a time. "Nope, still thirsty. What about you Ray?"

"I've had a couple more years to work on this stuff, I'm fine."

"Now I'm so thirsty it's starting to affect my thinking, what should I do?"

"Find us a spring, you're the tracker, track one down."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not, this is the Dreaming, if you go looking for a spring, you'll find one I suspect."

Bemised looked around and muttered, "Now if I was a spring, where would I be? It's all flat, no, it's not, there are higher and lower parts, so water goes for the low spots..."

Ray grinned to himself as he watched the boy go through his logic. At least he wasn't the sort to just wave his hand and expect a spring to appear, even though he probably could in this place. He followed his son as he walked to a depression, noticed some soil that looked a bit more moist, and looked behind a rock.

"Here, Ray, I've found water."

"Good, is it sweet?"

"What do you mean?"

"In the desert, sometimes water picks up alkaline minerals, and sometimes it can burn your mouth it's so strong."

Beemer cupped a hand and brought a bit of water to his mouth, he gingerly stuck his tongue on the water and declared, "It's sweet."

"Good, any sign of dead animals or other bacterial or viral contamination?"

Beemer frowned, "We're immune to it all, aren't we?"

"We are, but what if you're travelling with a human? What if the kid lost in here was with us now?"

"Oh, how do I tell?"

"Well if we had Zaat's eyes, we could just magnify to check, but we have other ways. Do you see anything dead, anything growing? More important, do you feel that there's anything wrong with the water?"

"No, it seems sweet and clear."

"Go ahead and drink then."

As Beemer was leaning toward the water, it erupted toward

him, a massive set of sharp teeth in a huge jaw came directly at his face. He snapped his head back with a yell, "What! What is that!"

"Looks like some sort of worm, probably waiting here for something to eat."

"So what do I do about it, you said don't kill things, should I just ask it if I can have some water?"

"It's the Dreaming, why not?"

"Hey toothy, can I have some water?"

The thing shook its head back and forth.

"Well that didn't work."

"Toothy? You don't suppose that might be a bit rude?"

"It's a monster! Can't I just kill it?"

"I don't know, maybe nothing would happen, maybe the kid would be lost forever."

"Oh yeah, the kid. Excuse me oh dweller in the well, might we have some water? I will perform something for you in repayment."

Ray smiled, the kid was learning fast. The worm nodded and

opened and shut its mouth several times.

"Sing? You want me to sing to you?"

Again the nod. Bemised went though his collection of songs and came up with very few. 'Well fine, how about something made up, a bird-song perhaps.' Beemer started singing, he really did have a fine voice and after a few moments there were several birds flying around his head. The worm looked pleased, and even more pleased when he lunged out of the water and snatched three birds from the air.

Beemer stopped singing in shock. He looked at the worm who seemed to be grinning as he slipped down under the water again. Beemer looked at Ray, but Ray just shrugged. "Not our world, son, you sang a song, birds came, got eaten. I'd drink some water before the worm gets hungry again."

"But what if, you know, he eats my face?"

"Sometimes you just have to trust."

Beemer looked skeptical, but bent and drank his fill.

"Still hungry?"

"Not any more, but thanks for asking."

Ray grinned, "Which way now?"

Bemised again turned four ways and pointed, and the two continued on their way.

"Ray where did the birds come from? I haven't seen any before or since the well."

"At a guess, I'd say you created them with your song."

"I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse."

"The Dreaming is not a place where you can expect things to make sense, son. I've never been in the same place twice, or been under the same set of rules when I've gone into it. Each person has a different logic and you have to figure it out."

"You've been here before? But I assumed you had no experience with the Dreaming from what you told Megan."

"Don't like the place, it is insane, compared to the Keen world, but I've been here before, mostly in Japan when I was working as a healer. This place isn't too bad, just try going into the Dreaming of an insane Yokai." Ray shuddered with the memory.

"No thanks, Pop, this is weird enough."

"Sometimes you've got no choice, son, you just have to go in."

"Like when Megan doesn't give you any choice?"

"Yeah, like that."

The two grinned at each other as they walked on.

Friends and Enemies

The ground became a bit more green, and in the distance the travellers could see a treeline. Ray stopped, he stared unblinking at the trees for a long time, then turned and grabbed Beemer's arm, pulling him to a small pair of rocks that were about head height.

"Down, boy, and don't stick your head up."

"What? What's going on."

"Enemies, this is why I hate the Dreaming, Son, I want you to stay down and stay quiet. This is my fight, nothing to do with you. When it's over, find the kid and take him back. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't understand, what are you talking about?"

Bemised stuck his head above the rocks and pulled it back again fast, "There's thousands of beings out there, it looks like some sort of display of soldiers and warriors over the years.

Some of those guys are in skins and have spears. What's going on!"

"Son, those are the beings I've killed over the years, over ten thousand years. I was mostly a soldier, and as a soldier you kill. Every single being that I've killed is inside my head, and in the Dreaming they can come out. I'll have to fight them again, and I'll likely die in here. You stay out of it, our job is to find the kid, so find him, this doesn't concern you."

"What? No! I'll stand beside you, I'm not going to sit here while ghosts kill my father."

A voice behind them said, "Bemised, that is noble and very stupid. You do not want to be a dead hero at your age, there is no good to be done with that. Turn and look."

Ray and Beemer looked, and there were thousands of beings behind them. Women, children and a lot of soldiers. Many more than there were enemies.

Bemised took a look at the enemies who were slowing down, they had seen the other crowd as well.

The woman spoke again, "Son, you may have thought that Ray wasn't a hero, but you would be wrong. He has lived a very long life with a good heart, and that is best. Each of the people you see behind me has been a lover, friend, companion in arms, or a ward of Ray. All of us were helped and loved by him. He was no hero in the small sense of that word, someone who dies

famously, but he is a hero to all of us."

"Marie, I can't ask you and the rest to fight my fight..."

"Shut up, Ray, you fought for every one of us when we couldn't fight for ourselves. This is not your fight, do you hear me love, this is not your fight. We will open a path and you will go through, and that is the way it will be."

Beemer looked from one to the other, "I will help."

Marie turned furious eyes to him, "Were you not listening child? You will go with Ray, and you will be the sort of hero he is, give up your childish ideas of fighting evil. Do you think those beings over there are evil? They are simply those on the other side in a war. Some evil, most good. Now, to be perfectly plain, you can die here, for real. We have already died, we cannot die again, we are happy to have the chance to fight for Ray, and since you are his ward, we will fight for you too. But you will not die here! Do you understand me child!"

Ray put his hand on Beemer's arm, "Best do as she says, son, she is more ferocious than any sergeant I ever served under."

A soldier had come forward and said, "Not only that, son, but I see over there the bastards who killed me beside your father. He couldn't stop them, and it has pained him ever since. I'm looking forward to meeting them again. Marie is right, this is our fight, not yours. And not yours private Keen. Not Yours!"

"Thank you old friend. I hope you have fun taking them on."

"We will, Ray, and we will see you the next time you need us in the Dreaming."

Marie leaned over and said "vive la commune" as she suddenly had a wicked sword in her hand and plunged forward, toward the centre of the opposing lines.

The rest of those behind her strung out in a wedge and as they hit the other line, Ray dragged Beemer to his feet and said, "Run boy, run."

Behind the wedge they went through the line of enemies and Marie turned, kissed Ray ferociously, then slapped him on the ass as she laughed and turned to one side to hit the enemies from the rear.

Ray ran forward, Bemised beside him, until they were well into the trees, where they slowed to a walk.

"Ray, what was that?"

"That was a fight that goes on in my mind somewhere, all the time."

"What does that mean?"

"Look, son, I've mostly been a soldier, you know that. Well soldiers kill. They kill to protect the man to their right in a

shield wall, or they kill to protect the others in their unit. There's no honour or glory in it. There are no heroes on either side. You saw my enemies, I know each and every face in that crowd. On the other hand, you saw those I fought with, those I loved and were kind to. Deep somewhere in my mind, there is a very precarious balance between the two. Do you understand?"

Beemer nodded.

"In the Dreaming, they come out, no matter whose Dreaming I'm in, they come, and I have to watch them fight once more, each time the balance might tip one way or the other."

"Who was Marie?"

Ray got a little misty-eyed, "She was a lover who fought with us in the Paris Commune. She died beside me, she died in my arms. Pray you never experience that, or any of the thousands more who have died while I lived on!"

Ray had to turn away and was silent for a long time. Bemised kept quiet, but looked around the wood, keeping watch over the man who was supposed to keep watch over him.

Eventually, Beemer said quietly to himself, "There's more good in living a long life with a kind heart than dying as a hero."

Ray heard that and finally lifted his head. He gathered Beemer into his arms and hugged him, "Marie was a very clever

woman. She told me that as she pushed me away from a cannon shot. She was a Gods-damned hero and the heart of the Commune. She was my heart."

Ray lifted his head and listened, "They've finished their fun and gone back to sleep. Time for us to find our lost boy."

"Ray, this Dreaming is as much about us as it is about the kid, isn't it?"

"You learn here or you die here, of course it's about us as well as the kid."

Beemer nodded, took Ray's hand and pointed, "Over there."

John Finds Himself

There was a clearing in the wood, and in the centre was a figure, it was the kid they were looking for.

"You were right, son, your instincts were spot on, here's our goal."

"Or maybe I just made it happen."

"Good, you're learning, maybe you made it happen this way."

Regardless, we found him.”

“So how do we get him out of here, there’s no ‘here’ to drag him out of.”

Ray looked at Bemised and nodded with a smile, “Good again. Why don’t you go talk to him.”

“Me, but you’re the one with experience.”

“Sure, but you’re a lot closer in age to him than I am. Remember how old I am.”

“You’re thirty-nine, you told me that last year.”

“Go on, go talk to him.”

Bemised walked to where the boy was sitting, cross legged, his eyes lowered, he was in a meditation pose. Beemer sat down in front of him and waited. Eventually the boy looked up at him. “Hello, my name is Beemer, I’ve come to collect you.”

“Collect me? What do you mean?”

“You’re lost inside the Dreaming, you starved yourself and then meditated until you went into here. What’s your name?”

“John, my name is John.” The boy said it like he was just discovering the fact. “I’m not lost, I’m just sitting, waiting for a vision, are you vision?”

“I certainly hope not, I’m just a kid, I’ve got no advice for you.”

“Is that what a vision does, give advice?”

“You’re kidding, you went on a vision quest and had no idea why you were going?”

“Well, I wanted a trip but I don’t want chemicals in my body, so maybe?”

Beemer almost lost it, but he held his tongue, not everyone had training in this sort of thing, and he realized that Megan and Ray were training him right now. His birth father had told him some things but he’d never gone on a vision quest himself. He’d better give this kid some advice after all. “Look, John, you’re in the middle of a vision quest, you’re in the Dreaming, but you don’t know it. What happens is that you get lost in here because you don’t know you’re here. Does that make sense?”

John slowly nodded.

“So now we have to do this sort of backward, you need to find the reason you’re in the Dreaming, and then maybe, I hope, that will show us how you can get out of here.”

“I’m really stuck in here?”

“You are, your body is in Jim’s Lunch Counter in downtown

Guelph, your friends took you there and we're helping you find your way back."

"Oh. So what will happen to me if I don't get back?"

"I don't know, your body will die I suppose and so will your mind here in the dreaming."

"What about you?"

Beemer was about to say that he and Ray would be fine, but he stopped. "I suspect that we will cease to exist in here with you if we don't all get out together."

Beemer watched the boy slowly understand that, "You mean you came in here to get me but you will die with me if you don't get me out?"

"We'll cease to exist in this dreaming, yes."

John slowly nodded, "Well that's no good. So how do I get out?"

"We need to answer the question that sent you in here in the first place."

"But I was just looking for an experience, a trip, I read that you would see visions if you starved yourself and so I tried it."

"No, John that's not it. Starving yourself is not easy when

there's food around. Something made you want to enter the Dreaming. Think."

"I'm... I don't know."

"Why were you reading the book that told you to starve yourself?"

"Um, well I suppose I was looking... no, I was looking for some purpose in my life, that's it."

"Good, are you still looking for that?"

"Sure, I mean I went to school because it seemed to be the right thing to do, but now I'm here I don't really know what direction I want to take."

"Good, that's a question. Have you tried to answer it before this?"

"Oh sure, I've read course descriptions, I've drawn Tarot cards, tried the Ouija board Al has, I even went to guidance councillors."

"And nothing, I presume."

"Nope, not a thing. I'm still lost."

"Literally, but that's good, maybe we can work with that."

“Hey, Beemer, how do you know so much about this?”

“Cripes, I don’t know anything more than you do, John, I’m just asking questions and seeing where it takes us.”

“Well it seems to be working. So can you tell me what I’m supposed to do with my life?”

“Not a chance. I don't know what I'll do with my own life, I thought I was going to be a superhero, but being in here I’m not sure any more.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well I have certain powers, and I’ve discovered a couple more while I’m here, so I was going to go fight evil, but now I’m not sure what that is.”

“Cool. I wish I had powers.”

“John, you just entered the Dreaming, and you are in University, I don’t know if I will ever be smart enough to get in to University.”

“Really? You seem plenty smart to me.”

“Thanks, that makes me feel better, but back to you, did you ever think that just going where you end up, being kind to those around you, helping when you can is a good enough way to live your life?”

“Really? My dad wants me to be a lawyer and my Mom wants me to be a veterinarian. They say that those professions make lots of money.”

“John, can I ask some personal questions here?”

“Well you’re my vision, isn’t that what you’re supposed to do?”

“Right, fine. Are your parents professionals?”

“Yeah, doctor and nurse.”

“So enough money?”

“Well, they keep buying bigger houses and stuff, so they’re always in debt, but yeah, they make lots of money, it’s just that they’re always stressed.”

“By the debt?”

“Yeah, they’re always worried about making more money.”

“What about you?”

“I don’t want that, I mean it seems to me that the more money you make, the more stuff you have to buy, and the bigger your debt. I just wish they’d be happy with what they have, sell the big house, move to a condo and stop hounding me to make big

money.”

“Have you ever told them that?”

“Oh sure, we argue all the time.”

“Maybe they’re happy with their life, maybe they want the stress?”

“No, man, it makes them miserable.”

“And you too.”

“And me too.”

“What should you do about it?”

“Save them from themselves?”

“Do you think you can, have you made any progress?”

“No, none.”

“John do your folks want you to be happy?”

“Sure, of course.”

“But they want you to have their life, professionals making good wages.”

“Yeah, they want for me what they have.”

“Can you see a way through this?”

John stared at Beemer for a long time. Finally he said, “Live my own life. My parents should accept that, if I’m happy.”

Beemer smiled, “Have you found a question and an answer for your quest?”

John nodded, “I didn’t know what I was looking for, but yeah, I think I found it. Thanks Beemer, will you disappear when I wake up?”

“I’ll be there with you. Are you going to wake up now?”

John nodded, and in the cafe, Megan and Liz watched his eyes slowly come to life. “Damn, I’m starving.”

Back Home Again

John's friends came tumbling through the door when they saw that he was awake. They bustled around and Megan moved away to let them sit down, as did Liz. At the grill, Mike put together six burgers and dropped them on the table for the boys.

John looked at Bemised and said to his friends, "This is my spirit guide, Bemised, he helped me with my quest."

"You were on a quest?"

"I guess I was, only I didn't know it."

"Nice to meet you Bemised, I'm Joe and this is Fred."

"Call me Beemer, glad to meet you both."

"So are you a real Indian?"

"You just shook my hand, do I seem real to you Joe?"

"Uh, OK I guess that was rude wasn't it. Sorry about that."

Ray left the boys to talk and eat the burgers, he noticed that Beemer had helped himself too, and Mike was at the grill making more. Ray signalled to Liz to put them on his tab.

Megan looked at Ray, "You've done that before haven't you?"

"Picked up a tab? Sure."

"Gone into the Dreaming. Liz and I were watching. I have to admit that you're good at it, and even better at being a father. You taught Bemised a lot in a very short time."

"Well I've had some experience in both."

"But you don't like the Dreaming."

"Not when I find my dead fighting with each other every time I visit, no."

"But they seemed to enjoy it."

"That's weird isn't it?"

"It's you, adding up your pluses and your minuses. You come out with a plus, Ray. You should just let it be so."

Ray thought for a moment, then said, "I think I'm reminding myself that I have to make the pluses outweigh the minuses, Megan. It would be too easy to slip, I've got a lot of death on my hands."

"As you would, being a soldier for so long. Much as I hate to admit it, you're a good man Ray Keen."

"I'm working on it."

"Good. I'm going to tell you something, you're a better man than I am. I've always had more minus than plus."

"Different jobs, Megan."

"Oh, I'm not saying I mind, just that you're a better being than I

am."

Ray nodded. Liz came back from the counter with three coffees. "So what do you think about Beemer now, Megan."

"I think he's maybe figured out that there's more types of hero than he finds in those comic books he reads."

"Ray are you going to talk to him about the cape?"

"Not a chance, you've seen my hat haven't you? A man needs a signature piece, even if it gets him beat up at school."

Liz nodded, "It is a horrible hat, Ray. definitely a signature."

Over at the other table, Joe and Fred were asking Beemer if he would be their spirit guide. Beemer was looking at Ray in a panic. "Talk to your father, learn how, B.' Ray sent back.

A week later, Beemer was talking with Ray over breakfast.

"Thanks Ray, for taking me into the Dreaming with you, I think I learned a few things."

"Like what, son?"

"Like I think I'd like to try and get into University, I mean if those guys can make it, maybe I can too."

Ray smiled, "I never doubted that, B. You going to stop cutting so many classes?"

"You knew about that?"

"Ten thousand year old dad, what do you think?"

Beemer grinned, "You're kind of a pain, you know that Pops."

"I see you've still got the cape."

"You've still got the hat. I have given up on the whole 'fighting evil' thing though. I got in touch with Father, and he's agreed to teach me about vision quests, although he said you probably know more about the Dreaming than he does."

"Beemer, bumbling around in other people's heads doesn't make you an expert. Trust me on that, anything I know has been learned by making a lot of mistakes. I was never trained."

Bemised looked skeptical, he'd watched Ray push his brothers and sisters toward getting to know their birth fathers and he suspected that's why he told him to study with his father. Still, it was some common ground to share, so why not.

Ray looked at the clock and Beemer smiled, "Right, gotta get to class, see you Pops."

Art watched him go, "Good kid."

"He is, and I think he's going to make a good man."

"All your kids are good people, Ray, haven't you noticed that?"

"Lucky I guess. Art when are you and Ingrid going to have a kid?"

"Oh not you too, Woody had been at us about that, says he wants some nephews and nieces to spoil."

"What about Mishelle, why not have his own kid?"

"Not the same, he says, you have to raise your own kids, but you can spoil others."

"Well, he's not wrong."

"Anything interesting happening with you?"

"Not a thing. You?"

"Nope, it's great isn't it?"

"Sure is, how about you, Mike, anything going on?"

"Not a thing, it's heaven isn't it?"

From the back room, Liz called, "Don't you boys jinx it. You hear me?"

A chorus of voices answered, "Yes Liz."

Epilogue

It is here that I think we will leave our Lunch Counter crew. They have had a lovely run, but for your story-teller, it has rolled around to another spring and that means it would be a shame to sit inside in the dark and write tales. Perhaps we will see the Lunch Counter crew next winter, but for now, after thirteen volumes, we will bid them adieu and wish them a happy summertime.

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