

Ray and Tilly

Lunch Counter Stories XI



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Paris 1873

“After almost 900 years I’m getting a little tired of France.”

“Ray, I don’t know how you can say that, it’s France, it’s Paris, you’ve always loved it here.”

“My dearest cousin, I’ve lost too many friends, first in the war with the Prussians, and then in the Commune. I can feel a hundred years of war coming on.”

“There’s always war, it never bothered you before.”

“It was never industrial killing like it is now. Fucking Gatling guns, you know?”

“I know, I was there with you.”

“I’ve had it. Look there’s this Japanese delegation flapping around Europe, they’re here in Paris and they’re going to head on home soon. I’m going with them.”

“Well it’s not like we won’t see each other in the family playground, but damn Ray I’m going to miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too, Tomas. Are you sure you don’t want to come with me, see a new country?”

“Not me, I suspect they don’t know how to make a decent

baguette and they drink tea rather than coffee, so I hear. You know what you're going to do?"

"They've hired me as a military advisor, and don't look at me like that, I know I'm running away from a war just to advise a backward country how to become a modern mechanized killing machine. The irony isn't lost on me, but what other skills do we have after so long in the army."

"Well you know your own mind best, when are you heading out?"

"They're messing around all over Europe for a couple of weeks, then they're heading back by way of the Suez, I'll pick them up as they start sailing the Mediterranean."

"So we can go for a drink? How about the Consulat?"

"Fine, but if Van Gogh is there we're going somewhere else, the man is seriously morose."

"Agreed." And with that Tomas took Ray's arm and walked him down the street.

Reynard Keen was a trickster fox, and his cousin Tomas Keen had been his friend for hundreds of years. They had been through a lot together and Tomas had the feeling he was about to lose a good friend and squad mate. They had been soldiers for a very long time, they'd campaigned through Europe with Napoleon and stuck with the army until the destruction of the

Commune, where they'd called it quits by arranging to die in the fighting.

It wasn't as if they'd lose touch. They would meet in the family play-world, a common world all the Keen family foxes went instead of dreaming, Foxes didn't sleep and didn't dream, but they needed to take a break from reality once in a while. It was hard to maintain human shape and even harder not to play tricks. It had been easier in the middle ages when Humans believed in spirits and demons. A trickster fox wasn't anything to be shocked about. These days, Humans seemed offended by the idea that anything they didn't believe in, could exist. That was the enlightenment for you. If you're going to reject the church, you're rejecting all the spirit beings as well. Everyone who didn't register on your scientific instruments.

Ray enjoyed the walk to the cafe, he'd walked these streets forever, but saying goodbye made them seem more real. When they got to the Consulat, Van Gogh was not there, to Ray's relief, he owed him money. Nonette was there, so Ray thought he'd get a start on his good byes.

"My sweet Nonny, I'm going away for a while, I hope you won't miss me too much."

"Who? Oh Ray, I heard you were leaving, I shall indeed miss you," and with that she gave him a peck on the cheek and wandered off.

"She doesn't remember you, Ray."

“Apparently not, ah well, such is life. Come, let’s split a bottle and charge it to Monet.”

They spent an agreeable afternoon in the cafe and wandered out when the place closed down late in the evening. Tomas went home to his current girlfriend, a model for Picasso, one of the very few that artist wasn’t bedding. Ray got a start on his good byes. He wasn’t living with anyone at the moment, so he started at one end of the street and worked his way down.

Some of the women decided he would be back soon and were quite happy to send him off with kisses and more. Others, those who knew him, were much more sad. “I won’t see you again will I,” said Marie.

“I suspect not, my love, I am going half way around the world.”

“I will miss you my fox, come on in and we’ll have a last night together.”

Ray had not bothered to hide his true nature from his lovers. Most of them forgot he was a fox very quickly, but some remembered. Those girls he treasured, it was a relief to be himself for a few hours. He had been a regular with Marie for many years and he stayed the rest of the night, the other girls could wait. During the night, Ray realized that she really did love him, she wept quite a bit and Ray tried to be as tender as he could. He loved her too, perhaps.

In the morning the two of them went to the Cafe where they walked in on an argument.

“But I wasn’t even here last night, that cannot be my bill.”

“Mr. Monet, the bill is quite plain, you put it on your quite considerable tab and now I would like some of it to be paid.”

“But...”

“Claude, my friend, that is the problem with having a tab, all your friends make use of it. Let me see that Mr. Manager, ah yes, well let me pay for that.”

“YOU, You drank on my tab last night!”

“I must confess that my cousin and I had a bottle of wine last night, yes.”

“A bottle, it was twenty plus food.”

“Well. Allow me to make amends, here is payment for everything on that tab, and a bit more. That for playing tricks on you my friend.”

“You don’t have to do that, Ray, your own part would be more than enough.”

“I think you will find that the most part of your tab is my

drinking Claude. Allow me to clear it. You are recently back from England and have not yet settled.”

“Can you afford it?”

Ray smiled, at his age, he had accumulated a vast fortune, which was tucked away in various investments and properties. He would leave it all with Tomas to manage.

“You would be surprised at how much money you save by being in the army. I can afford it my friend. Come let us have breakfast together, you have met Marie?”

“Oh my dear, you are exquisite. Would you, by any chance, agree to model for me?”

Marie looked at Ray who said, “He is married and a wonderful painter. Furthermore, we served together in Algeria, and I can say that he is an honourable man, despite being an artist. I should say yes if I were you.”

“Very well then, I would be happy to model for you. Did you know that Ray is heading off to Japan?”

“Is this true Ray? You must write me and tell me about their art, I have seen their exhibitions and am fascinated by their woodblock prints.”

“Ray smiled, I will do what I can, Claude, I have no idea what I will be doing, but I will send you letters when I can.”

With that settled, they had a lovely breakfast and Ray sent Marie off arm in arm with Monet while he headed toward his next girlfriend's place.

Three Friends

Ray arrived at the house to hear Josephine saying, "He is not here, this is my house and you will not enter. If you have a problem with him take it to the police."

Ray took cane in hand and as he approached, he split it into a sturdy shaft and a short vicious blade which he carried low on his right side, "What is your business here gentlemen."

As he arrived, Jo faded back into the house.

"There he is, we have come to pay you back Reynard Keen, for defiling our women."

"Ah, yes, the ownership of women, well gentlemen, you are welcome to try, here I am."

At that moment, Josephine appeared in the doorway with a blunderbuss tucked under her arm and aimed at the crowd, "I have filled this gun with salt and nails, if it doesn't kill you it will make you wish it had. I suggest you people move along

and be reassured that Ray is going overseas. He will not be around for you to blame for your wives' and daughters' indiscretions any more."

Ray looked sharply at Jo but then back at the crowd which was reluctantly leaving.

"Josie?"

"Oh don't be shocked, Marie sent a boy to tell me you were going abroad, and I sent him on to Louise, Marie will come by later today. I know you're leaving."

"Those men..."

"Were after your head, and I'm not having it, nor are they smashing up our house. Come inside Ray, and close your mouth, you'll catch a fly."

Once inside, Josephine set the gun down and went into the kitchen to put the kettle on. When she came back, Ray was just putting the gun back, "It is loaded, you weren't bluffing."

"Of course not, you are a special man, and no crowd of short-sighted idiots is going to end you while I'm around to stop them."

"Their complaints..."

"Are justified, I have no doubt. We three who know who and

what you are, have never been jealous of those women, they will forget you exist in a few weeks, but we will remember you for the rest of our lives, and not just because you're a fox. We'll remember you for your kindness and generosity. For our houses, all three of them, and for your support all these years."

"You know about each other?"

"Of course we do you dear man, how could the women who love a thousand year old fox trickster not find each other. We have known and loved each other for years, in fact, now that you are leaving, we have come up with a plan to support ourselves."

"Tomas has my investments, he will continue to support you, I've given him instructions."

"And we appreciate it, but without you to come visit, what would be the point. No, we will begin our own business and support ourselves. Should Tomas wish to invest, we will gladly take advantage of your money."

"And your business?"

"Ah, here is Louise, and I see Marie has walked Claude home and has come too. How timely."

The three women sat on a couch facing a red-faced Reynard, "Ladies, I hardly know what to say."

Jo, clearly the leader of the gang, replied, “You need say nothing, Ray, we are here, we know each other and we have a plan. You are to help us in this plan, as you’ve helped us in life for these many years.”

Ray sat confused but attentive.

“We intend to join Mr. Charles Worth to learn his secrets and then we will open our own fashion house. We can all sew but you, dear Ray, will show us your own tricks, since you were a tailor for many years.”

“How did you know that?”

“You see three lovers before you sir, and you have talked openly with each of us for years, do you dare to think there is anything about you that we don’t know? This is our plan, you will stay with us here, as our hostage if you will, and teach us until you go and board your ship for Japan. We will study each day and night to become the best seamstress’ we can be.”

Ray’s face fell at the thought of all that work.

Jo stood and put her hand on Ray’s cheek, drawing him up out of his chair, she gave him a tender embrace saying, “You dear man. We will pay you handsomely each night for your instruction, have no fear. And as for those other women you think to bid farewell, there is no need, without you there, they will forget you quite soon. We three have no intention of letting you out of our sight, this much we will indulge our jealousy of

those other women.”

“I seem to be at your mercy, ladies, please be kind to this old man.”

“From the shape of your pants, you are no old man. Have no fear, we will be kind but demanding taskmasters, you will go to your ship tired but happy. And when you are done in Japan, if we are not old ladies, come back to us. No, come back to us in any case, if only to share a cup of tea for we love you dearly.”

The other two smiled and nodded their heads in agreement.

“By all means then, do your worst, or rather your best, ladies, here I will stay with those I love best until I must, reluctantly, leave.”

And so Ray spent his last weeks with the women who knew him for what he was, and he was pleased to do it. He would truly miss them when he left, and truth be told, if they had asked him to stay he might have done so. In fact, he asked Jo one evening why they didn't ask.

“Because you don't age, and we do, Ray. Let your memories of us be of vital young women who can match you thrust for thrust in our bed. You wish to go and we understand why. Remember us fondly and if the wars you foresee come about, remember that you have taught us well, how to fight as well as how to love. We will be but humble shopkeepers and we will leave Paris should we have to. We will live through it all. If

you come back to us as old ladies, we will sit and tell our tales to each other with no regrets.”

Ray could not reply, but instead folded each woman in turn into the gentlest embrace he could. Seeing the pouts on each face, he embraced them somewhat more enthusiastically, to smiles all around.

As it turned out, the women did indeed have a successful mid-level fashion house. Along the way they collected many lovers and eventually two of them married well. Jo never did marry, but she had the business and her memories of her fox to warm her heart in her old age. Ray never made it back to live in Paris, or even in France, circumstances prevented that.

Tomas kept him up to date on the gossip and attended the three funerals. He was the dapper man at the back, with a large slouch hat and a sword-cane. Most presumed him to be the distant young nephew who occasionally collected debts and defended the business from the toughs of the neighbourhood.

Egypt

“Tomas, I remembered the sand.”

“Oh Gods, that march from Alexandria to Cairo, we lost a lot of good men.”

“Not to mention Pepe, he changed to a small fox and I carried him but there was just not enough water.”

“I remember, he managed to change back to human form just before he died.”

“I’d have liked to go visit his grave but how would you find any of them out there in that damned sand.”

Ray and Tomas had been with Napoleon when he invaded Egypt. They were in the Keen family playground, sitting in a cafe like the ones in Montmartre they had frequented for so long together.

“Thank goodness it was different this time, you should have seen those Japanese gawking at the pyramids. They didn’t find much of use in Egypt, but they got a good look at the stones.”

“Ray, is the...”

“They haven’t cemented the nose back onto the Sphinx, it’s right where you blew it off.”

“Ah, good times, there weren’t many of them in that place.”

“Still aren’t, this place is going to explode, you can feel it. The common people are starting to get sick of the Ottomans running the place. Ishmail the Magnificent as he calls himself, is trying to drag the place up, but he’s in bad financial trouble,

too many loans from Europeans. There's talk he'll sell his share of the Suez to the British, and all that will do is give the Europeans a bigger stake in colonizing the place. From the Ottomans to the Europeans, what's the difference. You know, in a hundred years since we were there, not a damned thing has changed except that the cities are bigger."

"Ray, you see war everywhere, are you sure things won't settle down there?"

"Not a chance, the world is going crazy, all I see is war in Europe, war in the colonies, we'll see about the rest of the ports, but I see war all over the world, and I want no part of it any more."

"Let's not talk about war any more, you know your women have gone to work for Mr. Worth and all they can talk about is opening their own shop. Do you want me to bring them into the playground to talk with you next time?"

"No, leave them be, they need to move on with their lives. Protect them Tomas, I can feel big changes coming."

"You know I will. They won't lack for anything, our fortune is well dispersed, even war can't wipe us out."

"I know you'll do your best, thank you my good friend, it's only a few decades."

"Hey, I like them too, don't worry. What else have you done in

Egypt?”

“Well I told you I wanted to visit Pepe, but I’d never find his bones, still, I called on Wepwawet, and he told me he had collected Pepe’s spirit as a warrior and a canid. I’m pleased by that. He wouldn’t let me talk to Pepe, saying he’d crossed over, but he assured me he was in a proper place.”

“We didn’t see any of the Egyptian Gods when we were there, how did you find him?”

“While the Japanese were messing around at the front of the pyramids, I went around back and dug a hole. Wepwawet showed up and told me to stop. It seems the old ones just want to be left alone. I don’t know what they will do when Cairo starts growing toward the pyramids, and I’m sure it will. Maybe go back to the deep desert.”

“Did you get any occult knowledge from Wepwawet? Any secret spells?”

“Don’t be daft, I’m not one of his, you know the rules.”

“I also know how well you lie, cousin.”

“Well I didn’t. I just wanted to know that Pepe was taken care of properly, since we couldn’t do anything for him but leave him in the sand.”

“I’m glad you told me about that, it’s bothered me for decades.

Did you meet any of the other spirit peoples?”

“No, centuries of the Abrahamic religions, and the Greeks before that, I think the Egyptians hadn’t even remembered they were Egyptian, not until the scientists with Napoleon told them about their own culture. Their Gods just want to be left to drift away, they do very little these days. Perhaps if the people do revolt, they will call on the old ones to help, that might wake them up.”

“It’s not much better here, with the new religion trying to remove us from the memory of the Humans.”

“Tell me about it, of all the women we bedded in Paris, only those three actually saw us. I hope it’s different in Japan, they don’t seem to be much interested in Christianity as an aide to modernizing, they seem to want to keep the old culture separate from the new machinery. Good luck to them I say.”

“Well, go lightly, you’re there as a military expert so I’d say war is coming to Japan too.”

“Up to now they’ve been doing that the old way, it’s only been about thirty years since the west has bestowed modern weapons upon them, Gods help them. At least they aren’t swallowing all of our so called civilization wholesale, they are trying to pick and choose. I just hope they choose wisely.”

“Where are you off to next?”

“Aden, then Ceylon, Singapore, Saigon, Hong Kong and Shanghai before we get to Yokohama. From there we get on the new train from Yokohama to Tokyo and I’ll see what happens.”

“I thought Japan had no trains?”

“This line opened last year, it’s the first in the country, I’m looking forward to seeing it.”

“Ray, I know you, Japan is modernizing, don’t try to guide them too much, you know how disappointed you are each time you try that.”

“How can I not, Tomas, how can I not, knowing what we know?”

“Just be careful, I don’t want to lose you.”

“Like a mouse in the walls, they’ll never know I’m there.”

Tomas snorted loudly, Ray was as delicate as an Armstrong Gun.

“So how is that model of yours, is she still allowing you to bed her?”

“You know she is, although Picasso tries constantly to drag her away from me.”

“And my girls?”

“You know they are loyal to you Ray, but I’m trying.”

Ray laughed and squeezed Tomas’ arm, “Well good luck to you my friend. They’re worth stealing, those three.”

“It’s just that they know we’re cousins, and they know all my best lines, the ones you stole from me.”

“I stole from you!”

The two cousins drank and talked for several hours more, they could go back to the world at any time they wished, so there was no rush.

Coyote on Tour

“Hello Cousin.”

Ray turned around to see a tall, strikingly handsome man in a cowboy hat and boots, a string tie and a buckskin jacket.

He held out his hand, “Hello, Ray Keen.”

“Coyote, I saw you earlier and thought I’d introduce myself. Are you going to India?”

“Japan, actually, and you?”

“India, I’m on a bit of a tour to check out the world. I’m wondering if it needs fixing again.”

“Well it certainly could... Wait, I’ve heard of you, you’re from North America, you sang the world into being right?”

“A few times now, yes.”

“Oh, I see, well, I can assure you that the world is just peachy, no need to do it again. You really can sing it out of existence and back again?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Oh dear, come let me buy you a drink and you can tell me what you’ve found so far.”

“Why thank you, Ray, that’s most kind of you.”

When they had obtained a bottle of whisky in the dining room, Ray poured and they drank a toast to each other. Ray said, “which way are you leaning, Coyote, will you try it again?”

“Well I’ve tried several times, but somehow no matter what I change, it all goes to shit again. Usually it’s because of the greed of the Humans, they end up fighting and blowing the hell out of the world. I tried one time to make them peaceful, but that only made them stupid, they bred until they overran the

place.”

“Uh, have you tried leaving them out?”

“Yes, several times, but then it either runs down to nothing, or some other beings decide to fight or overpopulate the place.”

“Can I ask why you’re doing a tour now?”

“Well it seems that we’re on a path to another pile of shit. They’ve invented machine guns and artillery that can really do a number on each other.”

“That’s good isn’t it? Knock down the population?” Ray couldn’t believe he was saying that.

“Never far enough, it always ends up with even more Humans and even more powerful weapons, which means the world goes out of balance and I’ve got to start again.”

Ray poured them drinks again, to give himself time to think, mostly. They drank and he poured again. If this man really was who he said he was, Ray had to convince him not to destroy the world. His girls, not to mention himself were at stake.

“It has always gone wrong?”

“Every damned time.”

“How many times?”

“I don’t know, I go as well, and end up having to sing myself back into existence along with the world. I never remember how many times, exactly, just that it didn’t work.”

“Look, Coyote, I can see your point, I’m sick of war, sick of Humans, and I think they may be going off the rails, but maybe that’s the way it’s supposed to happen.”

“What? That’s not what I intended. I wanted a nice peaceful place to bring up pups.”

“Have you ever done that?”

“Had pups? Not that I can remember.”

“How about a lover, a wife?”

“Never seemed to have the time, too busy tweaking things until I had to scrap it and do it again.”

Ray thought fast, “Well I’m a fellow who can see the future, and I can see, dimly, mind you, that you will find a mate some time in the future, and that you will have beautiful pups. Now if you decide to scrap this world and start again, that may never happen.”

Coyote was looking very closely at Ray, who poured them another drink.

“Ray Keen, I think that is a bald faced lie you’re telling me.”

“Well, yes it is, but it could be true, and trust me, when you find someone to love, you won’t want to scrap the world, you’ll want to keep it around for as long as you can.”

“You’ve been in love?”

“Oh yes, many times.”

“You’ve had pups?”

“I have, mostly they’re a surprise, but yes, usually with those Humans who are so problematic. The women are just so, so, handsome when they are pregnant. Sometimes the pups have powers, and those are the real scamps. Talk about tricksters, they just love life so much. Yes I’ve had pups and I want the best for each and every one of them.”

“You want to keep the world around?”

“Absolutely.”

“Even if you hate the wars and the destruction and the terrible things that you feel are about to happen?”

“You can see my mind, can’t you?”

“Of course I can, we’re both tricksters.”

“Then yes. Yes, damnit, even if I hate the wars and the deaths and what I think is going to happen. I want to try to make it better.”

Coyote drank and poured for them both again. He held up his glass, “Ray Keen, I’m putting you in charge. You fix the world, I’m going back to Canada and see if I can find some being to love, you fix the world and if you can’t, you call and I’ll try again. Deal?”

“Me? You’re putting this on me?”

“Why not? You think I like doing it? You do it this time and see if you can do better than I did. You’re a clever fox, you may just get it right this time, and if you don’t, I can wait to start again. I have a feeling it takes a thousand years from this point. I know you can see what’s happening and can imagine what will probably happen, give it a try.”

“Me?”

Coyote slapped Ray on the shoulder, almost propelling him out of his seat and across the room, “Yes, why not, what a great idea. I have faith in you cousin, you can do it.”

“Just one thing,”

“Sure, whatever you want.”

“Can you make sure I don’t remember what I’m trying to do? I

don't think I could do anything for fear of screwing things up if I knew what was at stake."

"What a great idea, I have faith in you, son, let's drink up and when the bottle is done, I'm going home and you'll forget. Now, tell me what you've been doing lately."

As they finished the last of the whisky, Coyote faded away and Ray was left to wonder if he'd drunk the whole bottle himself. He didn't feel that drunk so assumed he'd bought a part bottle.

That didn't explain the second shot glass on the table. "Two fisted drinking?" He said out loud.

The cook leaned out of his window, "Nah, you were drinking with your buddy, where's he gone?"

Aden

In Aden, Ray entered the nearest bar he could find. Something was bothering him, and he didn't know what. It felt like he was responsible for something and he hated that feeling. His women, sure, he gave them houses and money to run them, but that wasn't hard. It also shouldn't be bothering him, Tomas was looking after Josie, Marie and Louise. They were fine. Had the war Ray was expecting started in Europe? No, there were current newspapers here and nothing was going on.

Aden was a British colony, was that it? Ray had fought the British with Napoleon, but that was a hundred years ago, and as far as Ray knew, France and Britain were getting along. They'd fought the Russians together with the Ottomans in Crimea twenty years ago, and they were using the Suez Canal together.

Was it just this place that bothered Ray? Maybe, there were the Arabs, they'd been taken over and ruled by the East India Company and now directly by the British. There was lots of resentment, but no more than in any colony. One day the weaponry would be powerful enough that civil wars would erupt.

Ray ordered another beer and turned to the men he was drinking with, "What's happening here? Anything about to explode?"

"With the British here? Not likely, the ships in the harbour could bomb the place back to dirt."

Ray finished his beer and wandered through the town until it was time to get back on the ship. There weren't enough people in the bar to let him think. Just the one table of people and a guy muttering at the bar. The world's most distracting noise, a mutterer.

Back on the ship he felt worse. There was definitely something that he had to do. 'The blazes with it,' he thought as he went to

his cabin and headed to the daydream world. Tomas wasn't there but he found some other cousins to talk with. None of them had a clue what he was talking about, so he decided to forget about it. Another trip, onward to Ceylon to look forward to. More passengers throwing up over the rail.

Ray was thoroughly depressed, he decided he hated travel and wanted to be in Japan. Or maybe back in Paris with the girls. Heading out of his cabin, he met one of the Japanese who had hired him. "Mr. Keen, are you looking forward to Japan?"

"I certainly am, Mr. Suzuki, tell me, what will you do with the arms you have arranged for?"

"We only want to preserve our society from the Europeans, we have watched so many oriental countries get chopped up. Ever since the Americans sailed their black ships into our waters and forced such one sided treaties on us, we have been thinking how to change them. In this mission we were unable to even start negotiating, we are too weak for the great powers to talk to us, so we must become a great power ourselves."

"You are researching?"

"We are indeed, we are trying to decide how the west got so far ahead of us in their industrial production."

"I wish you well in your endeavour, we have seen two colonies and I can understand why you don't want to become one yourself. I hope I can help you stay independent."

“We will try, militarily, to become strong enough to prevent that. We are a small nation, I fear we are poor in raw materials and so we must find them in Asia.”

“You will make alliances and trade partners?”

“We will do that if we can, but many feel we must become a colonial power ourselves.”

“And this is why you are inviting military missions?”

“It is. I hope that you will be able to help us modernize our army, I understand your experience is extensive.”

“I have seen a lot of death, yes.”

“And yet you are still alive.”

“That is true. I fear I am becoming chilled here by the rail. Shall we return to our cabins.”

“Indeed, it has been instructive to speak with you, Mr. Keen.”

“And with you sir.”

Ray returned to his cabin a troubled man. These men had learned from the Europeans, certainly, but perhaps they had learned the wrong lessons.

“Tomas, I am troubled, these Japanese seem to have the idea that to resist the Europeans, they must become Europeans.”

“Why would that bother you, Ray?”

“It will lead to more war, and I was hoping to avoid that for a while.”

“So get out of the business. We’ve been soldiers for a long time, be something else.”

“Will you get out yourself, cousin?”

“I won’t get in, you and I are dead as far as France is concerned, our new identities are just civilians. We need not volunteer.”

“And if you are called up, will you leave France, Tomas?”

“Not while the girls are alive, rest assured, I will take care of them. If I am called up, you and I know how to keep our heads down, I will not be a hero, and neither should you be.”

“Very well, I will have to report to the French military mission, but as a civilian advisor, which is how I presented myself to those who hired me.”

“Be careful, cousin, make friends in the right places. Remember that you can always disappear into the woods if need be.”

“From what I’ve been learning, there may not be many places in Japan where the government can’t find you. I may well have to disappear into the woods. Perhaps in the north, but even there they are moving people in as fast as they can. I will be fine, I doubt that civil war will break out again in Japan, although there is now, apparently, a rather heated debate about invading Korea.”

“I fear the entire world is being divided into colonizers and colonies. And if it’s not colonies, it’s civil wars. There may be no place to go and live peacefully.”

“Well France is still strong, perhaps I was wrong, perhaps all will be good for you there.”

“Let us hope, Ray. Now, would you like to hear what those clever girls of yours have been doing?”

Ceylon

‘No sand, so much better than Egypt and Aden,’ Ray thought as he walked off the ship. The air was moist, but in a way that promised vegetation. There was a lack of salt, promising more than just the moisture of the sea, frying over the desert.

As Ray wandered through Colombo, he felt a tug. Looking

around he saw a small woman with incredibly black skin and a long braid frowning at him.

“I don’t respond to magic, my lady, what is it you want?”

“Who are you, how is it that I can’t influence you?”

“My name is Ray Keen, who are you?”

“My name is Yamika, what are you? You’re no British man.”

“I’m a Frenchman, thank you.”

“No, you’re more than that, I’m sure of it.”

“What was it that you wanted from me?”

“What else would I want from any foreigner, money.”

“Have dinner with me and we will discuss that.”

“How do you speak our language? I’ve never met an Englishman who can speak as well as you do.”

“I am French, as I said. You are full of questions. Why don’t we get off this dusty street and go someplace cool, or at least in the shade.”

“Just around here, my uncle’s place.”

“Very well, but please tell your uncle to step away from the door, I would not like to break his arm.”

“You could see him?”

“Questions on questions. I told you we will talk about money, please stop trying to rob me.”

“Very well, come sit and we will have tea.”

“I would prefer Arrack.”

“Yamika blinked, I saw you come off the new boat, how do you know of our drink?”

“It is not secret, and I have had enough tea to last a lifetime on the boat, shall we have a bottle?”

The uncle brought a bottle and two glasses, not without a suspicious look at this man. He went back to the bar and returned with coconut water and limes, then at a look from Yamika he disappeared into the back room.

Mixing the alcohol and coconut water with lime, Yamika handed a very strong drink to Ray and a very weak one to herself. Ray smiled, downed the drink and held out his glass for another. “You will not get me drunk, girl, but you are welcome to try.”

The girl shook her head and mixed him another, “What are

you?”

“An answer for an answer, how about that? Tell me how you got magical powers.”

The girl looked at Ray for a very long time before deciding to tell him, “I am a Dakini, you would call me a witch perhaps, or a spirit, a goddess, a demon.”

“I will call you Yamika if that is all right with you. Very well, I am a fox.”

“You have the spirit of a fox in you?”

“No, I am a fox spirit, a Reynard, I am French and I have lived long enough to know magic when I see it. I am also a soldier.”

“Are you spying? Will you fight the English?”

“I have fought them in the past, but France and England are allies for now. I am here on my own behalf, going to Japan to find a new life.”

“A new life... that sounds wonderful, is such a thing possible?”

“I hope that it is. Is your life so bad here?”

“My people no longer believe in the old religion, no longer believe in me. I am reduced to using my magic to steal money.”

“What of your uncle, does he not own this place?”

“Look around you, Ray, do you see customers here?”

“I see. How were you going to steal my money?”

“By making you see me as attractive, and then you would give me money for being with you. When that didn’t work and you suggested food, I signalled my uncle to knock you out.”

Ray smiled, “I have had my money stolen both ways. Yamika you don’t have to cast a spell to make yourself attractive to me, you are beautiful.”

“I am the wrong colour, too small, and without a fancy dress, I don’t believe you.”

“I can change neither your colour or your size, nor would I want to, but I can buy you a dress. Would that convince you that I find you beautiful?”

“I would sell the dress for the money that is in it.”

“Very well, shall I give you money instead.”

“And I will take you to my bed?”

“You will not. The money is yours, if you take me to your bed it is for free, can we agree on that?”

“And if I don’t find you beautiful?”

Ray laughed, “For that sting alone you have earned the money. Now, would this be enough for a dress?”

Yamika’s eyes grew large, she looked around the empty room and said, “Put that away, there are those who would kill you for that much.”

Ray put it in her hand, “Then you must hide it for me. Do you suppose your uncle is cooking? I am hungry, and my glass appears to be empty again.”

Yamika made a movement with her hand that would have put a magician to shame, the money was gone, she was yelling to her uncle, and pouring Ray another drink. He was impressed, “You are truly a magical being.”

Shortly, food arrived and Ray ate with gusto, the rations on the boat were both poor and poorly prepared. This was a delight, spicy and full of heat.

When they had finished their meal, and Ray had paid the uncle twice what he asked, he said, “Uncle, if you should wish to go to Paris, look up my cousin Tomas Keen, he will finance a restaurant and you will have lots of customers for your fine food.”

Yamika tipped her head to one side. “Are you simply a rich man, used to throwing his money around?”

“I am a rich man, but I never throw my money around. I am trying to win your affection, not buy it. Your Uncle is a fine cook, I think he would be a success in Paris.”

“Why is it that you are trying to win my affection, when you could simply buy it?”

“Perhaps because I am French, and not English.”

It was Yamika’s turn to laugh. She rose and held out her hand, “Come then, Frenchman, my room is upstairs and you are invited to spend the night.”

Ray smiled, rose and bowed from the waist, causing Yamika to laugh once more.

On to Singapore

Ray spent the rest of his stay with Yamika, wandering around the town, seeing the sights. Nights he spent in her room. When it came time to board the ship for the next leg of their journey, Ray was genuinely sorry to leave, so much so that he considered staying.

“You would not like being here with a native wife, Ray Keen, and I will be sorry to see you go. Why not take me with you?”

“You would go away from your home here?”

“I have no reason to stay, my family is long gone and Uncle isn’t really my Uncle. I would like to see a little bit of the world beyond Ceylon, to tell you the truth.”

“Then you shall. Pack what you must have and we will buy you the rest.”

“Can you book me passage?”

“No need, my cabin is big enough for both of us.”

Three hours later, they were walking up the gangway. Ray had his hand lightly on Yamika’s arm and it looked like it was only him. The sailor at the top smiled, but that changed to a frown as Yamika stumbled a bit, causing Ray to lose his contact. She became visible and then disappeared once more as Ray touched her again. The sailor blinked, shook his head, and convinced himself that he had not seen what he had seen.

Ray smiled and as he passed, gave a handsome tip to the man, who promptly forgot seeing a woman. Of all the magics in the world, money is one of the most powerful.

“Teach me how not to be seen,” asked Yamika as they got into Ray’s cabin.

“Ah, I’m not sure if I can, it’s part of my trickster powers,

illusion. I will try, sit on the bed and I will look into your mind.”

Yamika sat and looked at Ray who put his hand on her shoulder. “You have defences, I cannot get through to see you.”

“I do? How shall I let you in?”

“Close your eyes. Yes they are softer, imagine that you are opening a door to me. There, Gods! How old are you girl?”

“I don’t know, I’ve always been as you see me. I know I am older than most people I know.”

“You may be as old as I am, and that is very old. There is something here, a block, no, I will not tamper with that, it seems to be here for a reason. How much of your life do you remember?”

“Not much more than the last 60 years.”

“And you were the same age for all of that?”

“Yes, but I never thought much of it, I am a Dakini after all.”

“You certainly are. Where were you when you first remember things?”

“I became aware in a monastery, deep in the mountains. I was there until I learned how to live, then they sent me out into the

world.”

“It is too late to go ask at the monastery, what was done. Yamika I could try to remove that block, but it was put there for a reason I’m sure. What would you like me to do?”

“The monks were kind and gentle, if they put it there it must have been for a good reason. Leave it be and show me how to become invisible. That way I will never have to fear again.”

“Very well, close your eyes again, this is how I make an illusion, can you see it?”

“Mmmm, I think so.”

At that moment the cabin filled with flowers and trees and from a long way away a tiger roared.

“Oh, girl I think you have it. In fact, I think you have all of it, are you sure you’re not a fox?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to take so much, was I too greedy?”

Ray thought about it, “As I said, I’m not sure how I do what I do, perhaps being invisible is tied up with the rest of it. Be careful how you use this, Yamika, there are those who aren’t fooled, not many but some.”

“I will be, thank you Ray. This is quite a comfortable bed, shall we see if we can both fit?”

Yamika spent the voyage trying out her new powers of illusion, they weren't so different from what she had been able to do before and soon she could eat with Ray in the mess hall without anyone knowing she was there. The cabin boys never counted the plates after mealtimes, so they never noticed the extra set.

Ray had another chat with Mr. Suzuki and as he suspected, the Japanese were seeing the colonialism of the Europeans as they travelled. They saw the exploitation of the colonies, and Ray was afraid they were learning those lessons much too well.

Ray and the rest of the passengers had been keeping a close eye on the stock market crash in Europe, this financial crisis meant that Europeans were selling their investments in the United States where there was a railroad boom. The railroads were being built on borrowed money and several were moving toward bankruptcy. Ray feared that the Japanese would decide that having colonies to supply their raw materials, and to buy their manufactured goods, was the solution to such international trade problems. He had to admit that might be true, it had worked for a long time for France and England. England especially had made a spider's web of colonies that made it immensely rich.

Ray knew that France wanted to expand from Cochinchina north and west into the rest of the Indochinese lands, to do the same as the English had done in India. As soon as they landed in Saigon, the Japanese would see this too. It would be hard for

Japan not to try the same thing for themselves.

In the meantime, they docked in Singapore, yet another British colony. While the Japanese toured the official sites, Ray and Yamika wandered the streets. Singapore was changing, Indian convicts were no longer being shipped there to help build the colony, but some had stayed on. Those prisoners had built much of the public infrastructure, but being prisoners, had very little.

Yamika met with several of the Indians and seemed to be of comfort to them. Ray tagged along on her missions of mercy and wondered if she would decide to stay in Singapore when he left. He could see that she was of real help in the city.

As it turned out, she decided to stay with Ray when they left for Saigon. The evening they left, Ray took Yamika into the Keen world to meet Tomas. On seeing her, Tomas was shocked, “Ray she’s half fox!”

“What are you saying Tomas, that can’t be right?”

“No, I can see it, she’s as much fox as human, did you not wonder why you could teach her to throw illusions so easily? I’m telling you she’s half fox.”

Yamika looked confused, “I’m fox? I’m sure that can’t be, I’ve never been pulled toward any fox.”

“Never? What about Ray?”

“Oh, yes, but he was kind and generous and I didn’t know he was a fox.”

“Well never mind, so you are both heading to Saigon. Be careful you don’t get recruited while you’re there, Ray, there are rumours that the French administration is trying to open the Red River. Do you remember Francis Garnier from the German War? He is back in Cochinchina and has tried to open trade with China through Hanoi. Just stay clear of it, cousin.”

Ray was still looking at Yamika, wondering how much fox he saw there. “I will cousin, love to the girls.”

Tomas grinned and waved goodbye as Ray and his new woman faded out of the Cafe.

Saigon

Ray and an invisible Yamika were leaning on the rail, watching the water slide past. They were watching the monsters swim alongside the boat, there were several deer-headed fish that looked quite disappointed at the speed and hardness of the boat. Some of them tried to rip open the hull with their horns and simply bounced off.

“I fear they will starve and die off, these creatures, as more and more boats are made of metal.”

“We all have to adapt I’m afraid Yamika, even you and I.”

“Well it is sad anyway that such lovely creatures must fade from the world.”

“Perhaps they will find a new source of food. Ah, there they go, a wooden fishing boat. See it?”

“Now I don’t know who to cheer for, the beasts or the men.”

“In my experience, my dear, many men are beasts, so they are one and the same.”

“That too, is sad, Ray, that you feel that way.”

“War will do that to you, I’m afraid.”

“Ray let’s go back to the cabin, I’m not used to this much space, it makes me feel a bit queezy.”

Ray offered his arm, “With pleasure, my love.”

Once in the cabin, it was filled with jungle, far from the emptiness of the ocean.

As they sailed into the harbour of Saigon, there were several naval gunships docked. It would seem Tomas was correct, the French were going to try and take the North. However, as Ray asked about, and the Japanese inspected the ships, Ray found

that Garnier had been killed by Chinese Black Flag pirates, hired by the Hanoi government to free that city. The Saigon governor denied any knowledge of the attempt, which surprised Ray not in the least.

Ray wasn't sure how to feel about his fellow soldier being denied as he was. On the one hand, he was acting against French official policy, but doubtless, he had local support and would have been a hero if he had succeeded. About the only thing Ray was sure of, was that he was becoming sick of the military, the wars, and colonialism.

He seemed to be arriving at the opposite conclusion as the Japanese delegation. That may not have been surprising, Ray being from a colonial power, and the Japanese seeking to avoid being a colony.

"I don't see a solution, Yamika, surely there is a third way. Neither exploiter or exploited."

"The monks talk of a middle way, but that was not the way you seek Ray. Still, you and I are but two people, what are we against the entire population of a country?"

"If we had a solution, could we not convince rulers of it?"

"But we don't. I have never seen anything but a ruling class and my people obedient to them, they would certainly never listen to me."

“And I have seen too much of leaders who sit comfortable in their big houses and government buildings, sending their own people out to die.”

“Perhaps the middle way is for you and I to live our lives well, to be kind to each other and to others. If we cannot fix the world from above, perhaps we can fix it from below.”

“You are a good person, Yamika, don’t ever change.”

Hong Kong

The ship sailed on to Hong Kong, another British colony, and Ray was getting quite sick of flipping back and forth between British and French rule. Perhaps it was Yamika’s influence, but he was becoming an anti-colonialist.

“I’m not going to advise the Japanese on weaponry when we get to Japan.”

“Can you simply quit, Ray, will they let you?”

“If worse comes to worse, I’ll get myself fired for poor performance. I have to report to the military mission but with any luck, I can avoid all of it.”

“What will you do then?”

“I’m a pretty good engineer, I’ll see about getting a job that helps the people instead of the government.”

“Very well then Ray, if you want to do that, I’m sure you will succeed. Shall we go ashore and explore the city?”

“As you wish, although from here it looks like every other colonial city we’ve seen so far. By all means, let’s walk.”

As they went through the rich areas into the poor, Yamika seemed to be looking for something. She found it in a Buddhist temple, tucked away behind a rather neglected garden which screened it from the street. “Come, Ray, let’s see what they have to say.”

Ray wasn’t so sure, he was still worried about what had been blocked in Yamika’s lifeline, but he followed along.

Once inside, they were greeted by a junior monk who, on hearing that Yamika was from Ceylon, offered to take them to the abbot. That worthy fellow took one look at Yamika and went pale. Yamika was angry, “What is it, venerable one, are women not allowed in your temple?”

“Women? No, but you are no woman, Dakini, you are a demon.”

“Do you think so? How is it that you name me a demon?”

“It is plain to see, the signs are there, and you have the look of

someone who is from the underworld.”

Ray was becoming angry, “And you sound like a prejudiced old man. Shall I show you what someone from the underworld looks like?”

Yamika put her hand on Ray’s arm, “Calmly my friend, he sees what he sees, that is nothing to us, unless he has something he can say that helps us.”

“Do you, monk? Do you have something that will enlighten us or can you do nothing but insult visitors to your temple?”

For the first time, the monk took a good look at Ray, “You are not a follower of Buddha, but you are a demon too, I can see that. What manner of being are you?”

“I am French, is that demon enough for you?”

“I apologize, visitors, I was startled by your appearance here today, and I have terrible manners. I am but a country monk, please, come have tea with me.”

Yamika shook Ray’s arm and he tried to calm himself enough to follow the monk.

When they had been seated and served tea, the Abbot asked, “What can I do for you today, visitors?”

Yamika smiled, “We did not come with a reason, sir, I simply

felt a tug toward your temple and wondered why?”

“Can you tell me who you are? Truly?”

Yamika looked at Ray who shrugged and nodded.

“I am a Dakini, from Ceylon as you saw, and this is my companion.”

“I am a fox, a Reynard from Paris. No demon, but a trickster.”

“Pardon my use of the term demon, it is not meant as you would understand it as a Christian.”

“I did not take it so, I have met the Devil, he lives in Paris.”

The Abbot smiled, but did not mention that he would expect nothing less, still Ray caught the thought and smiled back. “He is actually a rather pleasant being. Can you tell us why my friend would be attracted to your temple?”

“Perhaps. We have certain artifacts and records here that might be of interest to a Dakini. The Buddha who freed the Dakini from cannibalism was in our line and by some strange circumstances, his records and instruments are here.”

“I know nothing of that, only that Ray saw a block in my mind that we decided to leave there. I think it was put there by a temple in the centre of Ceylon, half way up a mountain.”

“I would not advise removing it, I would need to consult the records but it may have been placed there to free you from the need to consume the flesh of the dead.”

“What!”

“The Buddha convinced the Dakini to stop eating humans but in order that they not starve, he taught them how to eat the newly dead. I have perhaps heard of the order in Ceylon that you mentioned, and they are seekers of historical knowledge. They may have found a way to free you.”

“For what reason? They took away my memory of my life before then and I have been living as a beggar and whore ever since.”

“There are many ways to serve, child, perhaps you were helping others during your life?”

“I... perhaps.”

“And you, fox, what have you been doing with your life.”

Ray was rather shocked at the rudeness of the question but there was something about this monk, “I have lived many lives, but recently I have been a soldier.”

“No more?”

“No, I am going to Japan in the hope of avoiding more

European wars.”

“You feel it?”

“That the entire world will be in flames? For a hundred years?”

“You’ve seen that before, haven’t you?”

“Yes, but the weapons were not as evil as they are now, the scale of destruction and death has not been as it is now.”

“Yes. We may be apart from the world, but we see it here as well.”

“Just what sort of a temple are you?”

“We are also research monks. Dakini, would you like to see the relics and histories that drew you here.”

“No, I don’t think knowing my history would help me much, but I thank you for your offer.”

“I feel that you would be of service here, if you ever wish to return you will be welcome. What will you do now?”

Ray answered, “Our next port is Shanghai and then Yokohama. Once in Japan I will try to decide how to live a quiet life far from war.”

“And you, will you go with him?”

“I think I will, as long as he will have me.”

“Well I wish you both a long life, although that seems a bit silly. I hope you both find what you have been looking for. When you get to Japan, child, look up the temple on Mount Omaru near Yokohama, it is small and not well known but they are part of our order. You would be welcome there.”

With that the two left the temple and after a bit more wandering, returned to the boat.

Shanghai

Shanghai did nothing at all for Ray's mood, seeing the multiple foreign enclaves was painful. Ray was far from a do-gooder, but seeing what the Opium trade was doing to China completed his conversion to an anti-imperialist.

It seemed like most of the European powers had a concession in Shanghai, and the Japanese would soon have their own, if Ray was any judge.

He and Yamika tried to stay away from the horrible politics of the city and presented themselves as tourists. It was the longest summer on record for the city so they had good weather at least. They were in the Huxinting Chashi for tea when Ray

asked Yamika, “Tomas called you a fox, are you a trickster?”

“In as far as I would trick men into falling in love with me and giving me money, I suppose I was.”

“Yes I remember you trying that on me when we first met. I’m pleased that you tried, by the way, or I wouldn’t have met you.”

Yamika examined Ray’s face and saw only honesty there, “Are you falling in love with me?”

“I suppose I am. I certainly want to stay with you.”

“And I with you, Ray, do you think we will stay together then?”

“Nothing is certain, but perhaps. It would be something I want. Have you ever stayed with anyone?”

“Not that I can remember, not for the last 60 years, who would I stay with? I don’t age, this would be noticed eventually.”

“It is a problem for us, that is certain. We have found each other now, and perhaps we can remain the same together forever.”

“That is a very long time, Ray, why not say we will stay together for as long as we are together.”

“I remember a thousand years of my life, but you seem to be

older than I am, my love.”

Yamika smiled and moved into Ray’s chest. She stayed like that for a few moments and then lifted her head for a kiss.

“There is an open table, shall we sit?”

That evening, Ray spoke with Tomas in the Keen world. “You may be right, cousin, she seems at least half fox, or at least she has enchanted me.”

“You are in love with her, that’s not surprising, Ray, you fall in love easily.”

“But she could stay with me for a long time.”

“Beware of making such long term plans Ray, you haven’t the concentration. You drift away from people, you haven’t asked about your three beauties, have you forgotten them already?”

“No of course not, I trust they are fine?”

“They are indeed, and they send their love.”

“You are a terrible liar, Tomas, and I thank you for that.”

“You are almost in Japan, do you have a plan yet?”

“Only that I won’t be a military advisor. I’m done with war.”

“Beware that it may not be done with you.”

“I won’t go looking for it, I’ve had my soldiering, cousin.”

“Well and good, make sure you keep your head down. Give my love to Yamika, I notice she isn’t here today.”

“It was a tiring day, she has gone to bed early.”

“Waiting for you?”

“I very much hope so, farewell Tomas.”

Yokohama

Yamika and Ray were once again leaning on the rail, looking out at the ocean. “It is still too large, too empty, too open.”

“I have you, love, you will not fall in.”

“I know you won’t let that happen Ray, but don’t you have the urge to jump in?”

“And to jump from high cliffs, yes. Tell me, Yamika, can you shift to another shape?”

“I don’t know, can you?”

“Yes, love, have I not shown you my fox form yet?”

“Not here you crazy man!”

“Not to worry, who would believe what they saw? But we will wait until the cabin and I will show you. Then I will show you how, perhaps you can do it too. Perhaps we will change to dolphins and swim alongside the boat.”

“And get back on board how?”

“Ah, good point, you truly are the smarter of us.”

“Come and show me your fox, may I pet you?”

“I would be sad if you did not.”

As it turned out, Yamika easily learned how to change, she was a pure white fox with two tails, which surprised Ray greatly. He himself was red with black accents, a perfectly ordinary fox.

Ray changed back, expecting Yamika to do the same, but she looked up at him and tossed her head, lifting her tails. Ray changed back quickly, and we will leave them to their privacy now.

The lovers spent most of the last voyage in their cabin, and Ray didn't speak with the Japanese much at all before they entered the harbour at Yokohama.

As they were leaving, Mr. Suzuki asked Ray if he would be joining them on the train to Tokyo, saying that it was the pride of Japan, the first line the country had built, the first of many.

“I will come along in a few days, I have some places I would like to visit first. It has been a pleasure speaking with you on the voyage.”

And so Ray detached himself from the mission and Yamika faded into view beside him.

“Are you sure we should not go with them to Tokyo, they might help you to find employment with the government.”

“I have no desire to be part of what I’m sure they will be doing very shortly. I fear they have learned to be Europeans and I hope they won’t have too much influence on the country. Although this is only a hope.

“Come, Suzuki told me about the island of Enoshima. There is a shinto shrine there and a cave. The place is holy, let’s see what we can see. I have been told that white fox in Japan are Kitsune, spirit beings, let’s see if there are any on this holy island shall we?”

“Are you sure, Ray? I am not Japanese.”

“Spirit beings are of no particular nationality, love, I have lived in many countries without moving far from Paris. I am French now, but have not always been.”

“If you are certain.”

“I am never certain, but I am always ready for an adventure, shall we walk? It’s about five hours, or shall we run?”

“As foxes? On the road? Won’t the people try to drive us off?”

“Let them try, they will be fighting dragons.”

Enoshima

With a giggle, Yamika changed to a fox with Ray and they took off running down the dirt path to Enoshima. They did indeed cause many astonished looks, the pilgrims would shout, but they were never chased. Just a couple of Kitsune heading to the island to worship or to be tourists. Ray liked this place, it was a lot closer to the old Europe, the one that still believed in spirit beings. Beings like him.

They stopped on the outskirts of Kamakura for lunch, enjoying a lovely open air tea house with rice balls and pickles.

As they approached the island, they changed to human form again, and Yamika lightened her skin and became much more Japanese looking. Ray didn’t bother, he was just another foreigner amongst many in the country. They had to wait for

low tide in order to get across, and so they had another snack in one of the many businesses set up for the tourist trade.

While they were there, a priest sat beside them and asked if they were going to the island.

“I ask because I see that you are not humans, but Kitsune. You would be welcome to come and chat with the head priest, there are many Kitsune who visit the island.”

Ray smiled, “And you would be the head priest?”

“Indeed, I am. Please come with me when we cross, I would very much like to show you the temple.”

“We thank you, priest, we will do that.”

“Could I have your story? If that would not be too rude of me? We will be here for a while, and it would pass the time.”

“Since you know that we’re spirit beings, why not?” and Ray told the story of his trip from Europe and his meeting with Yamika.

“But you are Japanese surely?”

“I have taken this form so as not to attract attention, I am Tamil, very dark skinned.”

“Ah, I see. You are accompanying Ray then? Not on a

pilgrimage to the Iwaya caves?”

“I had not heard of the caves, should I visit?”

“Most definitely, I will show you the path after you have seen the temple. Now, Ray, I am most interested in your impressions of the Iwakura mission, what did they learn?”

“I’m afraid they learned the lessons of colonialism from the Europeans. I fear for their future plans.”

“Ah, yes, well Japan has been on that path for many generations I’m afraid. They have been expanding the Imperial rule both north and south in Japan, much to the harm to the Ezo peoples, and before that the Emishi who were absorbed into the Japanese warriors centuries ago. The Shimazu clan invaded the northern islands of the Ryukyu kingdom and I fear that our government will absorb the rest of the islands soon. We have invaded Korea in the past and are considering it again now. So you see, we did not learn that from the Europeans, please don’t feel too upset about that.”

“And I hoped to escape war.”

“Ah, you should have come two hundred years ago, under the Shogunate there was peace. Now, we will have war I’m afraid. Each new generation must repeat the mistakes of the past.”

“Is there a way to avoid it?”

“Perhaps, with education, and our new government seems in favour of education, but one must be careful what one learns, and why one learns it. Our long peace left us complacent about our military power I’m afraid, and so in our arrogance, we were slow to respond. When the Americans forced their way into Edo harbour, we could do little, despite those who had warned such a thing was inevitable.”

“The Iwakura Mission was sent to see just how far behind Japan was, so that it could catch up and prevent itself from becoming a colony. My fear is that they will decide they should have colonies of their own.”

“You may be right. The common people will follow where the new government leads them, just as they followed the old Daimyo. What else can they do? Ah, the tide is low, shall we cross?”

When they had got to the island, picking their way around tidal pools, through the Torii gate and up the stairs, they came to the temple buildings themselves.

“Tell me, how is a country priest so up to date with the doings of the government?”

“Ah, that answer lies here, in this building.”

They entered a large residence and inside they discovered many strange looking beings.

“These are yokai, various spirit beings that are being chased from the cities already in this new enlightened era. They have a home here and in return they bring news of the rest of the country. Some can come and go as they wish, most can disappear at need. The island has a long history with spirit beings, starting with Benzaiten, the deity you see there, whose shrine this is.”

Yamika gasped, “It’s Saraswati, I know her from Ceylon.”

The priest smiled, “She is indeed, here she is known as Benziten, the goddess who tamed the Dragon Gozuryu who wished to marry her. He was a destructive dragon and she told him to reform or she would not marry him. He reformed and lived here for a long time before dying.”

Ray nodded, “You have a long involvement with the spirit beings.”

“Indeed, and now that they are under pressure, we provide a holy place for them. The pilgrims come here expecting to find the spirit world and so they are accepting of them. Come, I will show you the rest of the temple, then you must go visit the Inari caves.”

“One moment, sir, I would like to ask these yokai how long they have been alive.”

“That would be a difficult question, they are of various ages. May I ask why you wish to know?”

“I myself am almost nine hundred years old, and I would like to know what happens to those of similar or older age.”

“I see. Does anyone remember being more than 900 years old?”

A few put up their hands, and one spoke up. “I remember being aware of my life in the 700s as you would count it, but not earlier.”

The others with their hands raised nodded their heads. The priest looked at Ray and said, “The God Izanagi with his sister Izanami created Japan. Later, Izanami died and went to Yomi, Izanagi followed her there and tried to get her out, but he did not and when he got back to the world, he bathed to purify himself. As he bathed he gave birth to many of the gods, and the water that fell from his body made the land fertile and from that came the Yokai. This is the story and so the Yokai should be as old as Japan, but they don’t remember further back than the first book, the Kojiki which was written in 712. Words really do have power.”

Ray was thoughtful, “I see, this puts these Yokai at four hundred years older than I, that they can remember. I am 900, what can I expect in the next four hundred years?”

“Ah, I see, you are worried about the future. I too wonder how these yokai would answer that.”

The one who had spoken up, said, “I have talked with the other old ones and we have no answer for you. We all have much different stories from each other. Some have loved and lost, some have loved and kept loving, some have fought and some have been healers. I sense you were a soldier and now want to become a healer, possibly a lover. We cannot advise you on this, be what you are today, present and alert. Seek for your answers honestly but move with the tides as you must. We have watched many of our brothers fade from existence because they were determined on one course of action when the world dictated another.”

Ray looked at Yamika and nodded, “I thank you all, I hope I can live your advice, it is indeed what I desire.”

With that they went to look at the rest of the temple.

Iwaya Cave

When they had finished their tour, the priest sent Ray and Yamika along a path that led to the other end of the island from the crossing. Not knowing what to expect, other than a cave, they simply enjoyed the walk. Soon enough they spotted a wave-carved opening and entered. They were greeted with statues of the Buddha, and of Benzaiten and Gozuryu.

“This must be the cave, shall we continue? Be careful of the

pond here.”

“I sense nothing here, Ray, are they simply caves where men worship?”

“Let’s keep walking, Here it splits, what do you feel, left or right?”

“Left I think.”

Shortly after that the cave ended but Ray’s ears wanted to grow and swivel, “There’s something, go back a little... ah, here, do you see it?”

“I see nothing, Ray, what is it?”

“It’s a door, take my hand and we will see what’s there.”

“But it’s solid.”

“Not to us, come along,” and Ray stepped into and through the wall.

On the other side, Ray was immediately grabbed by two burly men. Ray attempted to shift to fox form to escape but he found he could not change, “What is the meaning of this, we came here on the invitation of the priest.”

“We have no need for a Yako here, we are Zenko Kitsune, dedicated to Inari, we are messengers of that god. Why have

you come here?”

The speaker was a large, brilliantly white fox with nine tails. She was so white it was hard to look at her, and the cavern was lighted by her alone. There were no candles or other sources of light.

Yamika looked from Ray to the fox and changed to her white, two-tailed form, “We have come here peacefully, why do you hold my mate captive, what sort of hospitality is this?”

“He is a trickster, surely you don’t claim him as mate?”

“Surely I do, he has told me he is a trickster, but he had been nothing but kind and considerate to everyone he meets. I know him and I know that your guards could not hold him should he wish to be free. Why are you being impolite?”

“Sister, do you vouch for him?”

“Without hesitation, I do.”

“Very well, let him go and we will see what the trickster will do.”

What Ray did was nothing. He could see that Yamika was kin to this giant fox, and he wanted her to know what she was, perhaps the answer was here. Ray bowed deeply and said, “With your permission, I will change.”

When the white fox bowed, Ray changed to a fox every bit as large as she was. The guards took a step back in panic. Ray looked around as if confused, “I beg your pardon,” and was the size of a field fox.

The large white fox smiled a bit to herself, “I see you are a trickster but I detect no evil in you. Very well, you are both welcome to this temple.”

When they were taken to an inner room, the white fox shrank to the size of Yamika and then changed to human form, as did Ray and Yamika. They were seated around a rough table that was obviously very old but well cared for.

“My name is Shiyo, and I am the chief of this den. May I have your names?”

“I am Ray Keen, I am from France, and have come to Japan to seek a way to live in peace.”

“I sense you were a warrior.”

Ray bowed but did not explain. He looked at Yamika and Shiyo did the same.

“And you, little sister?”

“I know not what I am yet, but my name is Yamika, I am from Ceylon and this is my true aspect. I only remember the last sixty years of my life, I have no idea how old I really am.”

“I will look, but by your two tails I can tell you that you are in your third century.”

With that, Shiyo grew quiet and gazed at Yamika, “Interesting. Please allow me past your defences, child, so that I can see.”

Again, Yamika closed her eyes as Ray had taught her, and somehow relaxed her mind.

“Oh yes, you are a Dakini, and you have been blocked so that you can live without eating the flesh of men. A crude block but it has allowed you a life free of defilement. I know this sect of Buddhism, they are not without skills, if a bit crude. Child do you assent to me removing the block and giving you back your heritage?”

“I do not want to eat dead men, Priestess.”

Shiyo laughed, “I do not blame you, I can remove both the block and the need to eat flesh, do you wish this?”

Yamika nodded and then swayed sideways so that Ray caught her. She had fainted but recovered quickly. Ray frowned, “Are you OK love?”

Shiyo looked sharply at Ray, “So it really is that way. Do you claim her as mate, Trickster?”

Ray looked at Shiyo defiantly, and after a moment, nodded.

“Good.”

“Child, you and I now see your full lifetime, I will not repeat it here in front of your mate, it is your decision what you tell him. Your life has been difficult and lonely. You have nothing to be ashamed of, you were made as you were and have managed as best you can. Your Trickster has taught you how to change, and this is good, but it may be best if you stay here and learn from us for a short while.”

Before Yamika could answer, Shiyo looked at Ray. “I suspect someone of your age would have little to learn from us, but you are welcome to stay, or you may go on your mission in the knowledge that your mate will be safe here with us.”

“You can read me?”

“Easier than you might think, warrior. Go and deal with your countrymen.”

“Will I return here for Yamika?”

“I sense that she will learn quickly, when she is done here she should go to Nara to study.”

“To study what?”

“Japan and Buddhism and Shinto and whatever she wishes. There are many temples around Nara. I will say that her birth

in Ceylon was unusual, she was intended to be born here.”

“In Japan?”

“In this den, Ray Keen, she is one of ours, she was intended to be a scholar, but somehow she was born as a Dakini in the heart of Ceylon. Still, small harm done, she is young yet and can learn. Her experiences in Ceylon and with you on your voyage may be of benefit. Like the rest of this country, we beings must learn to change and adapt or we will fade to nothing, the Yokai are already fading and I fear the Priest above may not be able to do enough to save them.”

“Yamika, are you content to stay here while I go to Tokyo and come for you later?”

“I feel that I must stay here, Ray. Will you come for me later?”

“You know that I will, love. Look in my mind and I promise not to look back.”

Yamika smiled so broadly she seemed likely to outshine Shiyo. Ray kissed her and said, “You can talk to me directly, or you know how to go to the Keen world, we can meet there. We will not lose touch.”

“I will study hard, and will meet you when you have finished your business, Ray. I shall miss you.”

Shiyo rolled her eyes, “Mates!”

Yokohama to Tokyo

Ray stayed that night in the caves, Shiyo provided them a private room and there was a lot of late night murmuring. “I’m a bit nervous about studying here Ray, I can feel that I was indeed intended to be born here, but somehow I was born in Ceylon. Am I too old to learn now?”

“You love learning new things Yamika, you will be fine, you have an agile mind that will let you learn quickly, as the priestess says.”

“They told me my proper name is Suzume, would you mind if I used that?”

“Dear sweet girl, I would love you if your real name was Frogspit, although I am perhaps a bit happy that it isn’t. Suzume is a beautiful name and so you shall be called by me. May I call you Suziho as a pet name?”

“You may call me Frogspit, love, if you wish, I will come to you.”

With that, the conversation grew quiet, except perhaps for the odd grunt and ‘ooh’.

In the morning Ray set out on the path back to Yokohama.

Once there he found the train would be a few hours, so he went up Mount Omaru to find the temple that the priest in Hong Kong had recommended they visit. Once there, the abbot sat down with Ray, “I sense that you have limited time and have questions my son.”

“Thank you, I do indeed have questions for you.” Ray outlined the story of Suzume and the recommendation of the priest in Hong Kong to visit.

“I see. We are of the same order so I am familiar with the records that priest referred to. I am also familiar with the Kitsune who live in the Iwaya caves. You are most fortunate to have survived your visit, Shiyo has little patience with foreigners. Your friend may indeed have been intended for Iwaya, rather than for Ceylon, these things can happen, often through the intervention of the Gods, indeed Inari may have intended Suzume to have grown up in another country. As I said, the chief Kitsune on Enoshima is not the most accepting of beings. Perhaps Suzume is intended to teach her while she is being taught.”

“That seems convoluted, but perhaps you are correct.”

“And you, Ray Keen, what will you do now that you are in Japan?”

“I don’t know yet, I have a strange feeling that I must help somehow, that it is important.”

“You have a calling to help? That is not what I’d expect from a Trickster.”

“Nor I, but the impulse remains. I left France simply because I was war-weary, but since being on the voyage here, I feel an urgency, that I perhaps have a mission to improve the world.”

“A lofty goal. One that I approve. I would suggest that you stay here for a while to study the scriptures, but I feel that your urge to help is a bit less self-directed than our efforts.”

“It feels like it has little to do with me, and much more to do with saving the world, if that doesn’t sound like the ravings of a madman.”

“I don’t sense you are mad. You are welcome here any time, Ray Keen. I know you are long lived, and so I will record our visit in the temple records. In the meantime, I see that the train has arrived, you had best hurry down the mountain.”

Ray thanked the Abbot and ran down the mountain as a fox, thoroughly enjoying the chance to stretch his legs.

When he got to the train, he was entranced, it was the first engine and line in Japan and it looked like it. The engine was small and the track was narrow. Ray quizzed the engineer closely and by the end of the trip, had decided that his background as an engineer would allow him to help build the railway system in Japan. The next line would be from Osaka to Kobe, which was near enough to Nara for Ray’s purposes.

First though, he needed to report to the French military mission in Tokyo. Lieutenant Colonel Charles Antoine Marquerie was in his office when Ray walked in.

“You! What are you doing here Keen! I heard that you died in the Paris Commune.”

“It seems that you missed Colonel.”

“Much to my regret. And so you’ve landed here, well I won’t have it. I heard the Iwakura mission hired you as an advanced weapons expert, but you are not welcome here.”

Ray was happy, but didn’t show it. “Will you inform the Japanese government that you don’t want me then, sir?”

“Damned right I will. Now, I suggest you make yourself scarce around here, get out of Tokyo. Knowing you, you will find work somewhere else. Go do so.”

And as simply as that, Ray’s military career in Japan was over. He left the Colonel’s office with a light step and walked back to the train station.

While Ray was getting himself fired from his job, Suzume was at a desk in her room with a scroll in front of her. "This isn't Japanese," she said to Shiyo.

"No it's not, it's Sanscrit."

"But I can't read this."

"Of course you can, we can read anything, look at it again and expect to read it."

"Oh!"

"And you can call me Mother, as we aren't very formal here."

"Are you..."

"Your mother? No, I may have been intended to be your mother. I was due for another child about the time you were born, but I fear Inari has played a trick on me. Not a very clever trick I might add."

"I'm sorry, Mother."

"Oh it's nothing to do with you, child, but when next I talk with Inari I will be asking some questions. Now, read that scroll and I will return soon to answer any questions you might have."

"Yes Mother."

"Don't overdo it, brat."

Suzume smiled to herself as Shiyo walked out of her room. She

returned to the scroll, which she could now understand. It concerned the various magics that Kitsune and Dakini could perform. As she read, Suzume realized she could do many of the things that were mentioned. This was very interesting.

When Shiyo returned, Suzume asked, "I don't understand the relationship of Dakini to Kitsune. I knew I was Dakini but had no idea I was a fox until Ray showed me."

"That is what puzzles you? Not the various feats of magic?"

"Mistress, much of this I can already do, and what I didn't know I seem to know as I read about it."

"Brat. Well I said you might be a fast learner. Very well, as to your question, Kitsune may be Dakini, but not all Dakini are Kitsune. If a Kitsune is a Dakini, it is usually because she hasn't been educated. She can do some magic and so gets called a Dakini, but when she learns to change, she usually reverts to Kitsune."

"Is that why Ray's friend could see that I was a fox, even before I knew it myself?"

"That is likely so."

"And when Ray showed me how to change to a fox, that is when I started being able to do what Kitsune can do?"

"Indeed, and your second tail was a clue, you will get one more

tail for each hundred years you live."

"I will have nine tails eventually?"

"No child, you were not born Japanese so you will never have nine tails, seven is where you will stop."

"Why is that, Mother?"

"It is just what it is, only those born on these islands will reach 9 tails."

Suzume kept her thoughts about that to herself.

Visit with Tomas

Ray was resting on the train back to Yokohama, on a whim he checked in to the Keen world and Tomas was there, as was Suzume, to his surprise.

"Ray, good to see you, Suzume here was just telling me about her new name, and her studies. I can't believe I spotted her as a fox before you did."

"Don't crow about it cousin, I was distracted. I am on a train from Tokyo to Yokohama, on the way back to you Suzume."

"Oh, Ray there's no need to rush, I will be weeks more here, I had no idea how much education I have missed. We won't have much time together."

"Well, I did call in at the Buddhist temple in Yokohama as the fellow from Hong Kong suggested, perhaps I will stay and study there for a while."

Suzume clapped her hands, "Yes, I would like that, I would feel ever so guilty neglecting you here."

Tomas was shaking his head, Ray could always find women who devoted themselves to him, while he had to be content with those who were not quite so attentive.

Ray caught his thought, "You look for beauty, cousin, you don't look past the surface, if you look for what is deeper you will find someone. Perhaps three someones?"

"I am working on it Ray, I really am. The girls send their love."

Suzume interrupted, "Ray Keen, are you suggesting I'm not beautiful on the outside? That is not what you said when you took me to bed the first time... and what girls?"

Ray pretended to cower in his chair, causing Suzume to laugh.

Thinking to change the subject, Tomas asked Ray about his meeting in Tokyo.

"Do you remember Captain Marquerie, from the Paris Commune?"

"That bastard, the one who led the bombardment, I certainly do."

"Well he's a demi colonel now, and he fired me before I could quit."

"He remembered you?"

"After I knocked him down in Paris? Of course he did. My military career in Japan is ended I'm afraid."

"Well congratulations, what will you do long term?"

"I still have that feeling I must improve things, so I thought perhaps working for the railroads, they have an ambitious building program."

"Good, I never understood you giving up a decent profession for the indecencies of soldiering."

"Patriotism, I claim, although you know I hate the Prussians, puffed up, strutting little machines."

"Now, now, they are Germans these days."

"Don't see how the others let the Prussians fool them into the alliance."

"Most of them had little choice, as you well know, Ray." With that, Tomas ordered another bottle of wine which appeared instantly on the table.

Suzume was content to rest her elbows on the table and let the two friends banter back and forth. She was in a rest period and had taken a small nap, only to find herself in the Keen world with Tomas, who had welcomed her warmly saying, "It seems you can visit our little playground on your own. Well welcome to you, please feel free to visit at any time."

"I'm not sure I can do this consciously, but to dream myself here is quite delightful. While I am here without Ray, can you tell me something of his past life? He is reluctant to speak of it."

"Lady, I would never betray my cousin's confidence... very well you have forced me to speak."

Suzume laughed brightly as Tomas regaled her with tales of the cousins' adventures over the years. He had just got to the three girls who were now starting their fashion house, when Ray showed up. Tomas thought to himself, 'he's got ears, that one.'

The three chatted for another half hour or so about the gossip in Paris when Ray's train pulled into the station. "I must depart, love to you both, you can go back to gossiping now."

Ray walked up to the temple in a good mood, he was quite

happy that Suzume had found her way to Tomas. As for himself, he would see what the Abbot had in mind for him.

"It is good to see you again, Mr. Keen. I had not expected that you would come back so soon."

"Suzume is studying hard on Enoshima and she suggested I stop here to study a bit."

"I doubt we will have anything new to offer you, after 900 years, but we might have a different way of looking at the world."

"I look forward to it, and I thank you for the hospitality."

"Oh make no mistake, you will be earning your way, there are things we need doing and you ought to be able to do them for us."

"Such as?"

The abbot took Ray's arm and said, "Come with me, I will show you."

As they arrived at a hall, built some distance from the other buildings, Ray understood. The place was filled with the mad.

"Some you might be able to help, the others, well, please do your best."

"This is my test?"

"Not at all, but no sense wasting time, Ray. I will stay with you today and will show you to your quarters in a while."

Ray grinned at the Abbot, he liked this man. Then he approached the first man who seemed to be muttering to himself. As Ray touched the man's arm, a Tanuki shot out of his body, looking quite confused and angry.

Ray thought that was quite easy, and addressed the Tanuki while the Abbot took the man aside to explain what had happened to him. "And what manner of fox are you?"

"I am a Tanuki and a Yokai, not a fox. The Americans called me a raccoon, why would you say I'm a fox?"

"I don't know what a raccoon is. Perhaps the Americans have them in their country. Never mind that, what were you doing in this man?"

"Hiding, if you must know, at least this man believed in me, it seems few others do."

"You gave him little choice, being inside him. You know that humans don't handle possession well, don't you?"

"What am I supposed to do? I don't want to fade away."

"Stay right here, if you run I'll find you," and with that, Ray

walked to the Abbot to discuss things.

"In Enoshima the priest is sheltering Yokai, should I send this Tanuki there?"

"You just touched the man and exorcised the Tanuki."

"I'm much more powerful than that Yokai, I could have destroyed him so he left. He really had no choice. He was in the man because he is afraid of fading away now that the new Japan is here."

"I am afraid this is happening to both men and Yokai, change always brings problems and some become unable to handle their life."

"Are all these people possessed?"

"They are those we failed to exorcise, but beyond that we're not sure."

"And that Tanuki?"

"Tell him he is welcome to stay here, if he will help us in our work, and as few tricks from him as he can."

"I will. Shall we move on to the next?"

This man was not possessed, he was unbalanced, as the Abbot had said, by change. He could only cope by inventing what

would come to be called 'conspiracy theories'. He saw plots everywhere, and all directed at him. This was why he lost his farm, his family. This was why he drank too much, why he gambled his savings away. It was the plots against him.

Ray was at a loss, "What should I do to cure him. He sees enemies behind every tree, and he alone is the only innocent human. It's hard to understand how someone could get to that state."

"If one refuses to see one's part in the problem, the problem must be other people. Can you pry open that part of his mind that is closed to his own actions which brought about the madness?"

"You are asking me to do something that could be dangerous, if he truly believes himself innocent, seeing his guilt may drive him further insane."

"What good is he now?"

"Very well," and Ray opened the man's mind, all the problems that he had decided were not his, were suddenly his. The man collapsed unconscious on the ground. The Abbot checked, he was breathing, so he rolled him onto a futon.

"We will check him later to see if he can accept what he is and what he has done. This is the main part of what we do here, so there may be hope for him."

"I'm not sure I want to do this work, his mind was twisted, it wasn't pleasant in there."

"You feel you need to improve the world, where will you start? Are you powerful enough to fix the world all at once?"

Ray was silent for a long time, "I feel that trying to fix it all at once would be useless. I'm not that powerful but what would you do, destroy it all and start again? What would you change to make it any different."

As Ray was saying that, he had the feeling he'd heard himself say it before.

The Abbot took his arm, "Enough for today, we will return tomorrow if you decide to help. I can only say that if you can't fix it all at once, you must fix it a little at a time. The world is a complex mixture of competing impulses. Just as Japan is struggling to decide what is best for its future, I feel you are thinking on a much wider scope. It is easier for me, I am but a man, I work on myself and help others work on themselves when I can. You have power, your urge is to fix it faster and more widely, but perhaps both of us can only work on one person at a time. I will say this Ray, I have been trying to help those men for a very long time. You make a difference."

As the Abbot walked Ray to his room, Ray was deep in thought.

Ray Finds Silence

The Abbot put Ray in a small hut separate from the other buildings saying, “You can be alone with your thoughts here, I sense that you haven’t had much time in your life to become familiar with yourself. I will come get you when it’s time to eat, and in the meantime, I will give you the occasional scroll to read, but mostly, please try to understand what it is you need in life, and who you are. I will discuss things with you whenever you feel it may help.”

“This sounds like it may not be easy.”

“I can assure you that it is not, very few people want to encounter themselves. Instead they surround themselves with others and have hobbies and habits to distract themselves from themselves. In a few days I will teach you how to meditate, should that seem to be a good idea, but for now, please just enjoy the silence as much as you can.”

Ray was doubtful about this, but he was there to learn, so he bowed and said he would have a chat with himself. The Abbot smiled and bowed back before leaving the hut.

Ray spent the rest of the day, aside from meals, alone in the hut. At night he had a futon on the floor to sleep on, but of course he didn’t sleep. Instead he thought of what the Abbot said about meditation. Ray was familiar with the Christian practices, having known several of the medieval creators of

devotional practices. While he was not Christian, could not be since most of the priests he'd met labelled him a devil, he was familiar with the devotion to an image or an object. He decided that he would try this, since his day had been nothing but boring.

He settled himself into a comfortable position and then placed his candle about ten feet in front. This he watched while keeping his breathing relaxed. Soon he was breathing slowly and deeply, and while thoughts drifted across his mind, he simply let them go, he wasn't looking for them.

Toward morning, the thoughts stopped, and he realized that for the last hour or so he had been looking at nothing. There was nothing in his mind until he thought to himself 'there is nothing here'. Was this the silence the priest talked about when he suggested Ray 'enjoy the silence?'

The sun was coming up and the Abbot came to get Ray for the first meal. When he came in, Ray said, "Last night I sat and breathed, and eventually my mind became silent. Is that what you meant by enjoying the silence?"

"Tell me what you did."

"I simply sat like this, watched the candle while it burned and then saw nothing. I breathed normally and as thoughts came to me I could tell they were not what I wanted so I let them go. Eventually the thoughts stopped and there was nothing at all."

The Abbot was quiet and watched Ray for a long time. Then he sat down opposite him. “What do you think that silence is?”

“I’m not sure, is it what I’m looking for?”

“When you were looking for something what happened?”

“Thoughts arose, but when I stopped looking, the thoughts stopped.”

“Then, if you weren’t looking and you found the silence, what do you suppose it is?”

“Is it me? Am I nothing?”

“Do you feel like nothing right now?”

“No, I’m here, I’m here at the end of a long life, with lots of experiences, I’m not nothing.”

“But are you the sum total of those experiences?”

“In a way, I am that person, but there is something else, isn’t there, that’s what you’re trying to get me to understand.”

“Ray Keen, you have come to a place that takes many a very long time to get to. I want you to think about that silence you told me about. I want you to tell me what it is. In the meantime, let’s go and eat, and I’d like you to help with the mad again today. Would one day of work and one of contemplation be a

good rhythm for you?”

“I feel that I can help today, like my distaste and uncertainty have been washed away, so yes, that sounds like a good rhythm.”

“Good. Try to keep the silence in your mind as much as possible while you go about your work today.”

After they had eaten, the Abbot took Ray to another madman. “We are fairly certain that this man is possessed by a yokai, could you look into him?”

Ray walked toward the man, and realized that he seemed to be opening up as he got close. Like he was moving ahead of himself and wanting to embrace the man. This was no occult projection, Ray knew magical projection, this was simply compassion, a desire to help the man. As he got closer, Ray saw that the man was a priest and asked, “Was this man one of your monks?”

“He was indeed, one of our best.”

Ray nodded and grabbed the man’s shoulder. The man instantly looked at Ray and snarled, not unlike a dog. What manner of Yako do we have here? Go away back to your field little fox or I will pull out your tail.”

Ray said nothing, but kept holding the creature’s shoulder. This seemed to infuriate it, “Insolent creature, I shall cut you down

for that.”

The madman shifted shape and the Abbot gasped, “Tengu, beware Ray, he is an expert swordsman.”

Ray said nothing in return, but kept looking at the Tengu as it manifested a long curved sword. Ray switched his face to that of a fox, and grew a tail, which he swished toward the Tengu. This enraged the creature who, with a roar and a beat of its powerful wings, rose toward the ceiling and came down toward Ray, cutting with both hands.

Ray stepped forward and had a nasty thin straight blade which was at the Tengu’s throat. It was only by another powerful stroke of his wings that the Tengu stopped himself from being thrust through the throat, “What is that overgrown needle? That is no proper sword.”

“You attacked an unarmed man, with a slight thrust I could have killed you, creature, but this is a temple. I chose not to.”

The Tengu had been jittering back and forth, trying to get away from the epee but the point followed no matter where he went. Finally the creature’s sword vanished and he spread his wings in surrender, “You have bested me with the sword, Yako, can you compete with my magic?”

With that, a blast of hatred meant to roast Ray in fire, swept over him. Ray reached for the silence, and made himself nothing at all. It took much less time than when an artillery

shell exploded next to him and he had to let it pass through his body. Ray felt like he was already nothing at all. When the attack had passed, he grinned at the Tengu and said, "Shall I try?" With that, the Tengu was transported to the fields outside Paris, between the Germans and the French. The machine guns and the artillery raged across the field, along with volleys of shot from the soldiers. The Tengu cowered, covered himself with his wings, but countless bullets ripped through him. He whimpered.

Ray took away the illusion and said in a gentle voice, "This is what is coming to Japan, are you willing to let your country be ripped apart like that? Even a Tengu would need special training to survive, the age of the sword is passed."

Ray looked at the Abbot, who nodded, "I will let you live, but only if you join this temple and help the priests resist this horror as much as they can. The Abbot says you may stay and be of use. What shall it be?"

The Tengu faded, the monk appeared and beside him the Tengu faded back into existence, "To prevent that in Japan is a worthy goal. I will help."

Ray could tell the Tengu meant what he said. The Abbot went to attend to the monk and Ray nodded at the Tengu, "The Abbot will tell you where you may stay here."

The Lonely Monk

"You will do it, you must learn how, you must be experienced in this and you will do it because I say you will."

"Mother, I have no desire to possess a man, and it is not something that Zenko do, you have taught me this."

"Yet we sometimes expel Yako or others who have possessed a man. You must know what the pathways to that possession are. You have learned but you don't know. It is time now for you to know."

"I do not wish to do so but if you say it is necessary, then I will of course do it. Who shall I enter?"

"There is a monk above who has been possessed many times, use him."

"Very well, I will try." Suzume closed her eyes and sent her essence questing upward. In very little time she found a monk who had been visited many times by a Yuki-onna, a snow woman acting as a succubus, who entered him for sex. This was too much, did Shiyo think that she would pleasure this man just because she had been a whore in Ceylon?

Since the Yuki-onna had left a very clear trail into the man, Suzume simply followed along and was soon inside. She could see how the succubus touched there, and there, to cause the

man to have a nocturnal emission. Suzume carefully stayed away from those places. Was this it? Was she to simply follow along the trail of a Yokai who entered before her? It wasn't hard.

She was here, perhaps she would look a bit further, how did the Yuki-onna get in, with no path to follow. She probed the man's mind and found a lonely boy, he had been placed with the temple at a very young age, there was no food and no room for a fourth son, so he was given away. He looked desperately for the love of a mother, and the monks were no such things. No wonder he let the succubus in, she probably gave off the feeling of a comforting mother while looking like a desirable woman.

Suzume was familiar with this, many of her customers confessed their innermost secrets to her while in her bed. Some didn't even bother to fuck her, they just needed someone to connect with. She understood that many of the men were in arranged marriages and that the wives wanted nothing to do with this sort of intimacy. Sex was what they owed to their husbands, but not friendship. The men often felt like donkeys, fit only to provide a ride and when too old, discarded.

It would be inappropriate for Suzume to be this monk's connection with a woman, but she could help. She took the love of Buddha as she had always understood it, and placed it where the man's desire for a mother's love was. She left it small, and hoped that it would grow as he continued his studies.

With that, she left the man, using those same pathways the succubus had used so that there would be no trace.

"What did you do?" asked Shiyo when Suzume had opened her eyes.

"I entered the man."

"I am aware, I was watching, but you interfered with him. This is wrong, we don't interfere with the development of monks."

"I did not change him, I put a small suggestion where he could see only emptiness and pain."

"What gave you the right to do that?"

Suzume was getting angry, "This is what I have done for many years as a whore, I have placed a small seed of love in the emptiness of men's lives. Sometimes it grows, sometimes it dies, I do not change them, I simply offer them a small choice. Is this any different than giving them a sutra to read?"

Shiyo looked hard at Suzume, "I must think on this, I did not take your early training well enough into account. I may have to adjust our lessons. For now you may return to your room and continue reading."

Now Suzume was truly angry. She went back to her room and searched through all the scrolls that were there, looking for the

place where it said you cannot help another. Suzume was aware that the Europeans she had met considered Buddhism to be a selfish religion, concerned only with one's own enlightenment, but that was not how Suzume saw it.

She had seen too many so-called Christians who set about 'improving' the natives, while considering them as no more than children, and taking advantage of them shamelessly. Those men were hypocrites of the worst kind, preaching to others what they did not understand themselves, all to their own profit. Suzume even had a term for them, Prophets of Profits.

No, to work on oneself, to understand one's own mind was the only way to help others. Not just as an example, but to nudge, to guide at most, others toward their own enlightenment. After all, what was Shiyo doing? Was she just repeating a formula without thought? Was she simply teaching as she had been taught, with no understanding that there was anything outside 'tradition'?

As Suzume read and read, Shiyo smiled to herself. She had been right to provoke the girl, and now she was studying harder than ever. She was bright, this foreigner, and she strained against the restrictions Shiyo gave her. This was good, an angry student was a motivated student. She would soon enough find that Zenko were there to help.

Her instincts with the monk had been quite impressive, she found the root of the problem quickly. That most monks had

the same problem wasn't relevant, Suzume didn't know that, she had found it for herself. Shiyo would indeed have to adjust her training, it would be faster with more gaps for her to fill in. What is learned oneself is so much more valued than what is given in lessons.

And possessing the monk from here. Shiyo and a few others could do that at a distance, but most would have to at least be in the same room, if not in physical contact. How had this girl learned to project herself like that, it must have to do with her connection with that French fox. She could talk with him over a distance, and didn't realize just how difficult that was. What you don't know is impossible, you just might do. The important thing here is never to reveal just how advanced Suzume was in that aspect.

Shiyo walked up to the temple and had a word with the chief priest, telling him to speak to the monk about Buddha's compassion, so that seed might grow quickly.

"This girl did that for the monk?"

"Without my instructions. You may find that he is no longer so easily possessed."

"I would very much like to see that boy have some peace, and I would also like to see that Yuki-onna have a bloody nose the next time she tries to enter. She doesn't mean him harm, but she doesn't do him any good either."

"Is she one of yours here?"

"She is."

"Suzume seems to understand how to help through being a whore, perhaps you could teach the snow woman to truly help."

"You were with the girl when she helped?"

"Here, this is what she did."

The priest's eyes grew wide, "So subtle, so elegant. I am so happy to have sent her to see you. I will try to pass this along to the Yuki-onna, I'm sure she will try to use it, she really does want to help."

"Priest, you were a gift to the temple, I remember when you arrived. Are you in need still?"

The man smiled gently, "I remember a certain fox who befriended me in my need, I remember sitting on the rocks and confessing my fears and my loneliness. That fox sat with me and listened to a frightened young boy and let herself be hugged while I cried. I am a better man for that good friend."

Shiyo smiled as gently and stroked the priest's cheek before walking away down the path to the cave.

Ray's Dream

Ray dreamed. He never slept, his kind didn't, and yet he dreamed. Perhaps it was his nightly meditation that somehow jogged something loose in his head.

He was on a flatbed train car, behind him was an artillery piece chained down. Beside him was a fellow soldier. They were about to pull out of the station. On the flatcar was a man, curled into a ball, perhaps sleeping.

The soldier with him said, "What if the poor had armour?" Ray was wondering about that statement as the train gathered speed. When it was going good and fast, the soldier kicked the man off the flatbed where he landed and rolled into a heap of broken and mangled bones.

Ray said nothing, just looked at the other man, raised his rifle and shot him dead. Only after kicking the body onto the tracks did Ray look around and see the artillery piece he was supposed to be guarding. It was huge, much bigger than the Armstrong gun he was supposed to be teaching the Japanese how to use. Seeing nobody else, Ray decided he would roll the thing off the car, and let all the tie-down chains loose. With the last one gone, the gun rolled about gently until they came to an incline with a curve. The gun rolled gently and majestically to the back of the car and off.

It was at that point, Ray thought he'd better get off the car

himself, after all, the following cars were beginning to derail. Ray changed to a bird and flew to a tree on the railside, leaving his rifle behind. He watched as the train wrecked. "This would be a good time to wake up," he said to himself, but he remained a bird.

'What if the poor had armour,' he thought, is that supposed to mean something? How do the poor get armour? They pick it up off battlefields, he decided, at least that's what they did in Europe. It was probably the same in Japan.

What did they do with it? They sold it or they used it to join the ranks of whatever army would have them. Armour gave you a job and food in your belly. These were normal things, hardly worth a dream. Just what did the soldier mean?

If the poor had armour, perhaps they would not be as easy to exploit. Or kill, as the soldier had done. Ray had seen his share of peasant revolts, bloody, ruthless things they were. Usually when the poor were starving and the rich were careless about showing off their wealth. It's funny how the upper classes never saw the revolutions coming, they figured things would be the same forever. Ray guessed that rich doesn't mean smart, especially for those who had the riches handed to them.

Japan had been ruled by an armed upper class for centuries, now the supposed aristocracy had come back to the top, the old rulers were being shoved aside. Except not all of them. A goodly number of the old ruling class was now the new ruling class. Would the new rulers make the same old mistakes?

Change was being forced from above, if the peasants were pushed too much, they might explode. As might the old Samurai classes who didn't make it into the new system, if they couldn't adapt.

Ray took off from the tree and flew as high as he could. Where was that train going? He realized it was coming from Yokohama and heading to Tokyo. What did that tell him? Not much, there was only one train line in Japan at the moment, Yokohama was a port, and Japan would be buying arms from the Europeans until they could develop their own industry, and they would be hard pressed to get the coal and ore to make steel, until they developed trade agreements with the continent.

Armour and the poor. Armed peasants, a conscript army. That must be it. Ray shuddered when he remembered what universal conscription had done in France, it had saved the Republic, but allowed Bonaparte to rise from the ranks and take over the country. An endless supply of soldiers led to an endless series of wars, the country became the army. He could see it coming in Japan.

At that point, the dream ended, and Ray stood up from his meditation. Now that was weird, probably worth discussing. He found the Abbot and asked about conscription.

"It was introduced last year, but the old Samurai are resisting it."

"Damn, war will come sooner than I thought, once you have a

large army you will find things to do with it."

"You may well be right, Ray, but the army is feeding a lot of the poor already."

"It will feed them and then kill them, I've seen it before."

"Perhaps, but in the meantime they will eat."

In the meantime, they will eat. Ray had never had to worry about food in his life, he would have to think about what the Abbot had said. Is it better to help a man now, while he starves, or later, perhaps when it's too late? He went back to his room and sat once more.

Suzume gave up on the scrolls, she went out and listened carefully to the other Kitsune in the cave. From them, she realized that they did indeed help. They helped the monks, they helped the Yokai, and they helped the pilgrims to the island. What was all this about not helping.

She told her concerns to one of the senior students. "Oh that one, Shiyo uses that on all of us. We help and she tells us we were wrong to do it, then we go back and read the sutras where we find out that helping is allowed. I think she does it to make us study harder, or perhaps she wants to make us cautious. Perhaps too much help is no help at all. What do you think, Suzume? Can you indeed, help too much? Can you tell me how

we might help too much?"

"We can adjust minds, so we could change someone beyond what was intended for them. We could make them dependent on us. We could be wrong about what help they need."

"Good, now come along, a lesson learned is a dip in the sea."

"What?"

"Come along, some of us are going swimming, join us."

This Suzume did with great relish. She had always loved swimming in the waters of Ceylon, these, while colder, were just as delightful.

When they got to the beach, many of the single-tailed foxes bowed to Suzume, who was quick to bow back more deeply. She may be older, but she was not a senior in the school. Her reaction received a nod from the senior fox, who then nudged Suzume toward the water and ran in herself.

Suzume was in fox form and found that she could use her tail to help her fly through the water. As she dove under and rolled, she got the shock of her life, she no longer had tails, but tails! She had the sinuous tails of a serpent. In her shock, she stayed underwater for a long time and eventually realized she could also breathe the water, she had gills. This was too much, she broke the surface choking and coughing, much to the delight of her senior. "So you have discovered your water form. It is

always a bit of a shock. You moved quite a way from the shore while you were admiring your tails, shall we race back?"

Suzume smiled and dove under the water.

Ray Fights a God

Ray was fighting the Tengu, a friendly match, Ray was teaching the European style and the Tengu was teaching Ray the Japanese styles.

"That two sword style is intriguing, is it common?"

"Not at all, I learned this from Miyamoto Musashi, one of the few times that a Tengu learned from a man. He claimed he developed it from his father's sword and jutte style. He never used it to fight, but it is an excellent training method. I have developed it into a fighting method."

"I shall have to learn it from you. In the meantime, I think I see a way to counter it."

The two went back and forth across the temple grounds. They were invisible so as not to upset the visitors, because they were in their normal shapes. The Tengu again used his wings to fight up and down as well as side to side. Ray would grow in size to counter his flights. The two were enjoying themselves hugely.

The Abbot, who could see them, wondered at how they allowed themselves to be cut, but healed instantly. No wonder Tengu were so good at sword, the cuts hurt but didn't kill, they could practice at full intent and unless they were decapitated, they would not die. The fox seemed to be very well experienced in all the fighting arts.

As they were making their seventh passage, a tremendously heavy tread was felt by the swordsmen and the Abbot. They looked up the slope of the mountain and saw a huge man coming down through the trees. He carried a long straight sword, wide and sharp on both sides. He was shouting as he came closer. "I am Bishamonten, I have been watching you, little fox, since you entered Enoshima. I see you think you know something of the sword. I will try you."

The Tengu glanced at Ray and then back at the God and said, "You will not fight my friend alone, I will stand with him."

"Very well, little crow, you too shall feel the power of my blade."

With that, the God reached the temple grounds and took up a stance. The Abbot walked between the combatants and said, "This is holy ground, there will be no killing here today."

The God seemed surprised to hear the man speak, for a moment it seemed that he would strike him down, but then he saw that he was the Abbot. The God bowed to him and roared,

"It will be as you say, priest, there will be no killing, provided these too-proud beings admit defeat when they are defeated."

The Abbot bowed in turn and stepped back off the field. There were visitors wandering about, but they saw nothing, and as the God moved forward his foot went right through several men as if he were mist, the men shivered but were unharmed.

Bishamonten took two steps and Ray grew to a similar size, both men topped the highest roof in the temple. At the same time, the Tengu took off flying and his weapon, now a single edged sword, grew to enormous size.

Bishamonten seemed a bit startled to see Ray grow that big, Kitsune did not usually get that large, but Ray was not Kitsune.

The God, used to winning by strength and size, swung his sword like a great scythe. Into that circle, Ray stepped and, having released his sword, grabbed the God by the shoulders, driving his knee into that being's abdomen and then twisting sharply to throw him to the ground.

Rather than landing, the God simply floated ten feet above the ground and then dropped his legs to turn and gave a small nod, "Well thrown, fox. I shall have to be more careful."

As he said that, his left hand flew up and over his shoulder, he caught the Tengu just as he was about to chop into the God's right arm. "Also good, but you have forgotten that I can see in all directions. You are now thrown into the side of the mountain, prepare yourself."

With that, the Tengu was hurled at a tremendous speed up the slope, it was all he could do to make himself insubstantial enough not to be broken into pieces. When he finally came to rest, after going through about a hundred trees, he bowed to the God and sat cross legged in mid air, slowly drifting back downslope to watch the rest of the fight.

As he threw the Tengu, the god spun in the same direction and his sword came through the air toward Ray. Ray made the same move, stepping inside the swing, but this time the God was ready for him. The god released his sword and caught Ray by the shoulders in a flash. He spun Ray around and had him in a choke hold. There was nothing Ray could do about it, and he tapped the God's thigh to give up.

As the God let him go, Ray too, turned and bowed.

The God looked at the two and grinned, "Thank you for the exercise, I may return, in the meantime, I recommend you continue to practice, I will not be so kind next time."

As Bishamonten turned to go, he winked at the Abbot, who grinned and bowed. Again, the ground shook as the God walked back up the mountain and disappeared.

The Abbot straightened up and clapped his hands, "What an exciting day. Shall we get back to work with the tortured souls in our care?"

With a great deal of suspicion, Ray and the Tengu began to walk toward the building housing the mad. The Abbot tried not to laugh as he followed behind.

Ray had spent two years at the temple, he liked the Abbot, he felt useful helping with the mad, and he enjoyed meditating. All things change, however. The numbers of madmen ran out, and the occasional new person who came to the temple was attended by the Yokai who had gathered there.

Ray had a formal interview with the Abbot who asked, "What is this silence in you?"

"Master, it is my original face before I was born."

The Abbot, somewhat surprised at this answer, betrayed nothing as he bowed, "Allow me one more question. Can you show me this face right now?"

Ray disappeared, and the Abbot clapped his hands and laughed out loud.

"We shall miss you, Trickster, but you have learned as much as you will here. Please remember us as you move on to the next part of your life."

Ray came back into view and bowed low, "You have given an old soldier much to think about, and my pride at fighting has been transferred to a deeper satisfaction at healing. For this I owe you a great debt. Is there anything that I can give to you in

thanks?"

"I have the memory of meeting and talking with you, Ray Keen, and that will stay with me for the rest of my life. That is gift enough."

"Very well, but if there is anything that I can do for you in the future, please ask. I will hear and answer."

With that, the Abbot gave Ray a robe and a begging bowl. "These are given to newly arrived monks. I feel you may find them of use in times to come."

With a final deep bow, Ray left the Abbot's room and left the Temple grounds. As he turned one last time to see the place, the Tengu waved. Ray waved back.

Enoshima Again

Wearing the robe and carrying his bowl, Ray walked back down the path to Enoshima. As he went, the occasional person gave him food in his bowl, for which he bowed, as he had been taught at the temple. In this way, he was not short of food and as he passed the many beggars, he shared what he had been given.

As Ray got back to Enoshima, he went straight to the caves to see Suzume. As he entered the hidden cave, Shiyo intercepted him, "I see you wear a monk's robes, that order gives the robe to initiates and to those who have achieved enlightenment. Which are you, Trickster."

"I don't know, Master fox, I am certain that I know less now than I did before."

Shiyo smiled, "A Trickster's answer for sure, I can see that you have memorized all the lessons, as I would expect, but have you truly learned."

"I have read all the answers to the questions, if that is what you mean, how can I not give the correct responses, having read them."

"Ah yes, book learning, but that is not experience. We could play word games for a few hours, but rather than that, will you open your mind to me?"

"As you wish, you are welcome to what you find there."

Shiyo nodded and looked, Ray's mind was truly open to her and she blinked, "You have found your way to the silence. Do you understand what that is?"

"It is that from which we came and to which we go."

"Nothing more?"

"Do you mean, can it be used as a source of power? Of course it can, how can it not be, it is the universe itself, all creation comes from the silence, and all creation will return. We simply borrow from it."

"That is a Trickster's answer, but you have come far. I have a request of you."

"As you wish."

"Suzume needs some more time with us, I would suggest you stay here on the island, meditate, look into this silence you have found. Suzume will be finished her studies in another two years."

"I will do as you wish, Master fox, may I see Suzume?"

"Of course, go through to her room."

With that, Ray bowed and went to find Suzume. She was reading, and looked up in delight to see Ray enter the room, "You have come back to me, is it time for us to go?"

"Shiyo wishes you to stay for another two years, are you willing to stay?"

"Only if you remain too. It has been lonely without you, only seeing you in my mind."

"I will remain on the island. I won't stay here in the caves, I want to see the stars, they are so much brighter here than in Paris with its smoke. I will build a hut in the woods and be alone with my thoughts."

"Not all the time, surely you will find some small time for me?"

"Gladly, if Shiyo permits it."

"Whether or not she permits it, I will see you."

Ray smiled and opened his arms.

After a while, Ray sent Suzume back to her studies and he went up to talk with the Priest.

"May I build a hut in the woods to meditate in?"

"Of course, and if you wish to discuss what you find, I am here."

"I thank you, I will certainly come and speak with you. In the meantime, what news from the country? I was somewhat out of touch at the temple."

"There is no war, if that is what you wish to know. The Emperor Meiji declared that he wanted no war in Korea, and so the matter has been dropped. We have conscription now, again the old guard has been frustrated, and the army and navy are

now building quickly. I am afraid that many of the Samurai in the government have resigned and gone home in protest of these measures. There have been small uprisings and protests, and many have been arrested so far."

Ray shook his head, it was not as bad as he had feared, but not as good as he had hoped.

He took his leave of the Priest and went looking for tools to build himself a shelter. Being a fox, he settled on a small cave half way up a wooded hill, it was dry and he roofed it over with a bamboo frame and cedar branches to keep out the rain. When he had finished, he declared it good enough and moved in to sit. Each time he did, he could find the silence, but he knew it wasn't enough, when he rose again, he lost it as the world came crowding in. Talking with the Priest, he described his problem.

"Do you think you are Buddha? The world of things is here, you will find it each time you leave your silence, as you call it. The trick is to learn how to keep the silence in mind as you move through the world."

"Is this a Shinto teaching?"

"No, but I am not ignorant of Buddhism, Ray, I studied for many years. Here, my job is to keep Benzaiten happy, so she does not destroy us."

"You do not call on her for favours?"

"No, we ask her not to notice us. The Gods are capricious, the best outcome is for them not to notice us, and perhaps become annoyed."

"I met Bishamonten, who defeated me in a fight."

"I heard of that, the Abbot speaks with me regularly. You and the Tengu obtained some good training that day."

"We certainly got a battering to our pride, I didn't think the Abbot would have been so forceful in his lesson to us."

"You knew he had called on the God?"

"I saw the god wink at him. It was a good lesson."

"If all Europeans were as self-aware as you, many problems would disappear for us."

"Nine hundred years will give you a bit of patience."

The Priest smiled, "Go on back to your hut and be satisfied that you found the silence. You are still not where you could be, but you are on the way."

Ray bowed and backed out of the room, causing the Priest to smile, a very Japanese thing to do for a European, while the Japanese were forgetting it. He hoped Ray didn't move too far away from who he was, there was no benefit to anyone if he pretended to be Japanese.

With that, he was reminded of the government's movement toward a State Shinto, which was very much a movement toward making the Emperor into a God. Aside from being a pain in the backside for the local shrines, it was all of a piece with the conscription laws. The country was only loosely united under the old Edo rule, but this new rule from Tokyo was starting to look a bit monolithic.

Soon, more Yokai would be coming for refuge, perhaps a larger building to accommodate them would need to be built.

Let's Jump Ahead

Two years of study sounds a bit boring, why don't we skip that and assume our heroes learned some things. In 1877, Ray was in Satsuma to watch what came to be called the last stand of the Samurai class. He watched as Saigo Takamori and 40 of his remaining followers were destroyed by the hated peasant conscripts. Saigo committed suicide, and his followers charged downhill to be killed by the rifles of the new government. Saigo had been in favour of a war with Korea and had offered to go insult that government. Being killed, Japan would have the excuse to invade. Being refused, and citing government corruption, he had retreated to Satsuma and became involved in the rebellion.

As a result of the fight, Japan was almost bankrupt. They sold off many government assets to connected merchants which led to the Zaibetsu industrial conglomerates. The right wing supporters of Saigo and the war with Korea formed movements that Ray thought very dangerous. He had seen the rise of reactionary groups in France at the fall of the Paris Commune. Groups always ready to resort to violence to further their aims. The Dark Ocean Society and the Black Dragon Society frankly dismayed Ray.

One thing that he did find interesting was the Battotai, a group of ex-samurai of the police forces of Tokyo who fought in the rebellion on the side of the emperor. They were not armed except for wooden batons and swords and they held their own against the Samurai on the other side, winning the battle of Tabaruzaka. They had been used in the fighting against the Satsuma swordsmen who were devastating the conscript army at close range.

As a swordsman, Ray was interested in the old sword styles he was learning from the Tengu, and was pleased to see that the police forces showed every sign of keeping the sword alive. Up to that point, the sword arts were in danger of being forgotten.

Ray wondered if the study of the sword might counteract the modern mass-slaughter attitude created by the industrial warfare of the day.

In fact, he was to see the Police develop a unified, country-wide version of sword practice that became known as

Gekkiken. In 1895 a national organization was created to preserve the old samurai arts, including the sword.

This was encouraging to Ray until the whole enterprise became subject to the more right wing influences of the army, and the new sword arts became little more than recruiting and training schools for the Imperial Army. That was in the future, and would disappoint Ray terribly. All of his efforts to derail the country's movement to colonialism were doomed from the start it would seem.

Meantime, Suzume and Ray had left Enoshima and moved to Nara where Suzume busied herself with her studies. Ray found employment in the various public works in the area, and tried to ignore the military as much as possible.

“I had a hard time watching, Tomas, it was like the fights in Africa, swords and shields against our Chassepot rifles. The rebels fought bravely, but the government had stripped their armouries before the fighting started. Almost all they had left were their personal arms, their swords and spears.”

Thomas shook his head, “Why did you go? You could have predicted what would happen, we’ve seen it often enough.”

“I thought that if the new conscript army were defeated, the government would pull back on its aggressive growth. When they won, it was at great cost, but they seem all the more emboldened.”

“Stay out of it, Ray, are you sure you don’t want to bring Suzume back to Paris? Things are quiet here.”

“Nara seems to be a backwater, Tomas, many of the Buddhist temples are becoming Shinto shrines, but that doesn’t seem to upset too many people. The Shinto the government wants to install is a transparent attempt to create a state religion. I wonder if the mission picked that up in Europe, where they saw how Christianity could unite the country.”

“Did they not get the lesson of the two hundred years of the religious wars?”

“The Japanese seem a bit less inclined to fight the government than we are, all these reforms are going from the top down, and the people are more or less silent. I was hoping that a loss in Satsuma would stir up some questions from below, but it didn’t happen. The new army is bleeding off young men from the countryside, it’s a job and three meals.”

“Conscription bought us a lot of wars, be careful Ray.”

“Yes, as you say. How are the girls?”

“Thriving, they have opened their own shop and I am the kind uncle who is backing them.”

“Wonderful, I’m sure you are treating them well.”

“So well, in fact, that they have forgotten you, cousin.”

Ray laughed, “Suziho will be pleased. She is pregnant, by the way.”

“Good for you! The Gods alone know what will result from Fox and Kitsune, but I’m sure your child will be as lovely as they always are. It’s been a very long time since I’ve held one of yours on my lap.”

“Will you come to Japan to see?”

“Perhaps, if I can get away, but you and Suzume can come visit here in our cafe. Suzume visits some nights on her own, as you know, I will congratulate her the next time I see her. In the meantime, Ray, be good to her, she is a good catch for you and from what I can see, she’s every bit as smart and as powerful as you are.”

“It makes for some interesting arguments in the kitchen, my friend. Fare well.”

Ray and Suzume had taken up residence on one of the slopes overlooking Nara. They had a small country style house that Suzume had named ‘Kitsune no Sokutsu,’ Foxes Den. Suzume worked in one of the temples, researching further into the history of Dakini and Kitsune. She was looking for how she wound up in Ceylon rather than Japan. So far all she had come up with was the old theory that Inari had some sort of lesson for Shiyo.

Perhaps it was true. Shiyo had become good friends with both Ray and Suzume, although her tolerance for foreigners didn't seem to extend much further than those two.

Ray had found a temple with connections to those he had visited around Enoshima and Yokohama. His reputation as a healer had provided him with a vocation when he arrived at Nara. He also worked as a civic planner, a position that provided him, as a foreigner, a measure of tolerance. That he had a Japanese wife helped a lot. Suzume kept her Japanese appearance outside their home.

It was a good life, one that was to last for many years.

Nara, 1879

“Is he treating you well?”

Suzume was in an interview with Shiyo, who had come to Nara on business. Suzume was just serving tea.

“He is the kindest, most gentle man I've ever met, and he loves little Chinatsu, if he's here, he has the baby in his arms.”

“Because she was born in Summer?”

“Yes, is it a good name?”

“Very nice, if you have questions you can always ask me.”

“Thank you Mother.”

“But you haven’t answered me, how does he treat you?”

“As always, he has not forgotten me and we spend much of our time in each other’s company, with Chinatsu of course.”

“In Bed?”

Suzume dropped her eyes and blushed, “I believe he wants another child. He is as wonderful as he always was in our bed.”

Shiyo raised her eyebrows, “So it is all sweetness and light.”

Suzume looked up, “Well no, of course not, we fight sometimes.”

“And do you give as good as you get?”

“I often win the arguments, I am stubborn and Ray is easy-going, willing to accept and change his mind.”

“Make sure you do not try to dominate him, Suzume, he will have his pride.”

“Yes Mother, I will keep that in mind.”

“Brat. I don’t know if you have noticed, but Ray will get his wish for a second child.”

Suzume beamed, she couldn’t quite tell, but if Shiyo said so, she believed it. Ray would be thrilled.

“I worry a bit about him. He is a trickster, and yet his tricks are mild.”

“I would agree with you about that, he is even more serious now that we have a child, more serious than he was.”

Shiyo nodded, “Perhaps he has reason to be serious, he has seen all this before. You must be careful, as you know, the idiot men who rule this country have attacked China, and taken Taipei, they’ve also taken the rest of the Ryukyu islands. I fear there will be more war soon. Is your husband still determined to stay out of war?”

“More than ever, he says he has seen all of this before, the Government trying to unite the population. The formation of Germany during the Franco Prussian war was similar to the overthrow of the Shogunate and the invention of Japan. Those who rule will try to create unity by inventing enemies, and Ray says the State Shinto is very dangerous.”

“I fear he is correct, these men may speak about democracy and the rights of all men, but they are as autocratic as they ever were. Most of the new leaders are the old Samurai, little has

changed. I fear our country will always be mired in the past, even if it has a shiny modern surface. If it comes to it, you are welcome in Enoshima, we are well protected there and are insignificant to military matters.”

“I thank you for that, Mother and I will keep it in mind.”

“Very well, I sense that your husband is on the way home from the cholera hospital, I will depart and let you greet him with the news of your second.”

Suzume bowed deeply, and Shiyo was gone.

Ten minutes later, Ray entered and said, “Shiyo was here but didn’t stay?”

“She wanted us to have a talk alone.”

“That sounds ominous, Suzyho.”

“No, no, just the opposite, I am pregnant again, Shiyo could tell but it’s too soon for me to know.”

Ray grinned hugely and snatched Suzume into his arms, swinging her around, much to the delight of Chinatsu who demanded the same treatment, and got it. “You’re going to have a brother or sister, little apple, what do you think of that?”

“Oh yes please! I want someone to play with.”

“You will have to wait a little bit for Mommy to do her magic.”

Chinatsu became serious, “I will wait and I will help Mommy if she needs help.”

“You are such a good girl, I’m sure you will be a big help.”

After Chi was in bed, her story read, and her soft breath whispering over her pillow, Ray and Suzume moved to the veranda. They sat on the stair in silence, listening to the breeze curling through the leaves of the wood around them.

“It will be a girl,” Suzume said, in a voice barely audible.

“They will all be girls.”

“You know this?”

“I do, Shiyo has explained.”

“Do you mind?”

“Why would I mind, they will all be strong, healthy and handsome. They will all look like you.”

Suzume leaned against Ray and put her head on his shoulder.

“There are your stars, so bright and clear.”

“Never so bright as you are right now. My life is yours, Suzume, ask for it at any time and you may have it.”

“Never, love, I will never ask that of you.”

“Should the time come, you must not hesitate.”

“Never.”

They fell silent and looked out over the town. The sounds of hyoshigi clapped together, drifted up to them as the wardens moved around town warning of the dangers of fire.

“It is beautiful, is it not? Do you regret coming to Japan, love?”

“Not for a moment, it is, as you say, beautiful. Do you ever miss Ceylon?”

“What would I miss, the hunger, the whoring? It is hard to see the beauty of a place if you are worried about where your next meal is coming from. Was Ceylon beautiful?”

“Oh my love, the country is pretty enough but all of its beauty walked up that gangplank and left with me.”

Suzume giggled and squeezed Ray’s arm, then lifted her face to be kissed. Ray was happy to comply.

As the evening grew cold, and without even being aware, both of them turned to foxes and their tails were wrapped around each other for warmth.

“Shall we check to see if Tomas is in the cafe?”

“Tomorrow, love, will be soon enough. I am content here with you. Tomorrow we will tell my cousin, and the day after that all my cousins will know.”

“It must be so wonderful to know you have family.”

“They are your family now, Suzume, and you have Shiyo and the others on Enoshima. You have family, never doubt that.”

“I have you, Ray, that will always be enough for me.”

The quiet conversation went on for most of the night. Neither felt any great need to go to bed, so they watched the town sleep and they watched the stars, and they were content.

Happy Families (1882)

"Mother, the kids at school make fun of me, they call me a Tengu because I have a big nose."

"You have a wonderful nose, Chinatsu, you have your father's nose. When you were a child, your father used to pull your nose because he loved it so, maybe that's why it got so long."

"That's not what happened. I was born with a big nose, and that's what they say to me that I'm a dirty foreigner and a Tengu. I want to hurt them."

"You can't do that, my love, they are just being children."

"I want to take their flat little Chinese faces and push them even flatter."

"It bothers you that much?"

"It does, they exclude me, they tell me I'm not Japanese, they call me a gaijin."

"Well you are different, Chinatsu, you're a Yokai and you could hurt them terribly but you don't. That proves you're better than they are."

"Why should I be the only one who's hurt? Can't I stay home and read, Mother, I can educate myself. Those teachers aren't saying much anyway, just that we have to listen to the government, and I know the government is stupid, Father says so."

"You are in school so you can learn self control, my love, and you are learning that. You learn lots at home here, but during the days I am at the temples, and your Father is working at his temple."

"Well I could stay home and look after Chiaki."

"The Tanuki does that dear, you're not old enough yet to deal with your sister, she's a bit wild."

The Tanuki keeps calling 'Chi' and I think he means me, why doesn't he call her 'Aki' like you and Father do?"

"I honestly don't know, sweetheart, perhaps you should ask him."

"He doesn't like me and I don't like him."

"Now dear, you know that's not true."

"It is, just because I can beat him in a fight."

"You've been fighting with Taeko?"

"Only pretending, but he fights dirty so I thumped him."

Suzume turned away so that Chinatsu would not see her smile. Chinatsu certainly took after her father, that man loved to fight. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to take Natsu along when he had his classes with the local Tengu. The girl picked things up.

Or maybe it was time to let Taeko thump her. She could use an outlet for her frustration, and Taeko was a hell of a fighter. She would talk it over with Ray when he got home.

In the meantime, "Go on to school, Natsu, it's getting late, and

don't hurt the other kids."

Suzume got such a pout in response that she relented a bit, "Your father has talked to you about tricks, nothing that will hurt, you hear me!"

Chinatsu gave her mother a smile that said, more plainly than words, she had been planning things. Well, as long as she didn't do too much damage, those kids were cruel. As Ray said, they'd make excellent soldiers when they grew up.

Suzume wished she hadn't thought that. Not only Ray saw where things were going, Shiyo saw it too, and she was making preparations, the caves at Enoshima were being fortified with even more magical protection than was there now.

Ray put down his swords and wiped his face. These Tengu really were tricky, and damned hard to tell apart. With no names, it was very hard to know who he was fighting. No sooner had he figured out the weakness of one of them, than another was fighting him the next class. He had been cut and punctured so many times he was starting to wonder if there was a limit to how many wounds his body could heal. But he was learning. These Tengu were teachers, much more than they were tricksters. They took the occasional too-proud priest or monk down a peg, but what they really liked to do is beat seven hells out of him. He wondered if it was revenge for the fellow he'd beaten in Yokohama. Ray knew now that it was surprise

and a new weapon that had let him win that fight.

His latest wound healed, he wiped his face once more and picked up his swords. 'Oh hells' he thought, this one looks a bit different, have they changed up again? He was convinced they did that, they stayed fresh and rested while he just got more and more tired. Well, nothing for it but to take his medicine.

Later that evening, the family went to visit Uncle Tomas in the Keen world. Tomas was bouncing the baby on his knee, he had sent Chinatsu off to play with the youngsters, where she more than met her match in both fighting and tricks.

"I hope she doesn't learn too many new ways to torment her classmates," said Suzume, sipping her coffee.

Tomas smiled, looking up from tickling Chiaki, "More likely she'll teach the Keens a thing or two, she's a little frightening you know."

"Tell me about it, Taeko has been teaching her how to fight and says she's already half way to beating him."

Ray sat beaming with fatherly pride, which earned him 'the look' from Suzume, who figured he could do a lot more to curb his daughter's naughty streak. She was 'his daughter' more and more often these days.

Tomas saw and laughed, "You should have seen Ray and I when we were small. The adults around us figured we'd never make it to our first hundred years."

"Well now I know where it comes from."

Ray smiled, Suzume had a wicked sense of fun herself, but would never admit it.

'Life is good', Ray thought as he leaned back in his chair and watched Tomas dandle Chiaki. Tomas had changed to a fox head just so the baby could get a good hold on his beard and yank it. He was also playing 'bonk' with her. He would lean in and the baby would drive her forehead into Tomas' while Tomas said 'bonk'. Taeko did not appreciate that, the first time Chiaki had caught him on the nose.

Ray looked at Suzume and as usual, he blessed the day he met her. There was no doubt in his head that she was his mate for life, however long the two of them lived, it would never be long enough.

Sounds of a squabble in the distance sent Suzume out of her seat and stomping toward the noise. Ray and Tomas grinned at each other. Tomas said, "It's good?"

"It is, it really is, I've never been happier, although Japan is sliding toward a lot of trouble, the wars are about to begin."

"It isn't any better here, squabbles between the empires are

starting, and alliances are being made. These men are too short-lived, and they lack the imagination to do anything but repeat their mistakes."

"You've said it enough to me, now I'm telling you, Tomas, keep your head down. I'd hate to lose you."

"I'm going to stick around to see your kids grow up, Ray, have no fear. I enjoy watching the grey hairs appear on your head."

Ray's hand flew to his head before he noticed Tomas' grin. He grinned too.

Trip to the Zoo (1885)

Chinatsu and Chiaki were floating high over Nara. Mother was watching and a Tengu was close by trying to be inconspicuous. Chinatsu pretended she didn't know he was there, it made the poor man feel better.

The city was pretty from this high up, and not as messy as it was down at street level. Chinatsu was bored, and sent a message to her mother, "We'd like to go to the zoo, please. May we step through to Uncle Tomas and back again to the zoo?"

"You know how to do that?"

"Sure, the cousins told us they can do it, they'll show us how."

"Be a love and take the Tengu with you, it will make your father feel better if he's there."

"Do I have to warn him?"

"No, it will do him good to be surprised, he played a nasty trick on me last week."

Chinatsu drifted to the supposedly invisible Tengu and suddenly grabbed his foot. Just like that the three of them were in the Keen world, beside the Cafe where they usually met Tomas. He wasn't there, so Chinatsu and Chiaki sat down to have a coffee, they were thoroughly addicted to the bean, something they didn't get often in Nara.

The Tengu was indeed surprised, but recovered quickly. In fact he laughed and Chinatsu indicated a chair. The Tengu changed to human form and sat while Chinatsu handed him an espresso saying, "Pardon, we're going to the zoo, please try this."

"Do you have permission to go?"

"Mother said yes, but to take you."

"Ah, pulling a trick on your mother always gets paid back, how did she know it was me?"

"She always knows, but how? Don't ask me."

The Tengu tried the coffee and his eyes lit up. He finished the cup and asked for another, Chinatsu grinned and said, "One more but then wait and see. Three is too much for us."

"Not for me!" said Chiaki, in her usual belligerent tone.

"Quiet Brat, the last time you had three you didn't sleep all night."

"I don't sleep, I'm like Daddy, I stay awake all night."

Chinatsu glanced at the Tengu and shrugged a little. Chiaki slept like a log, but her dreams were so lively she thought she was awake.

As they enjoyed their second coffees, a couple of fox kids showed up and yelled, "Chinatsu! You're here, come play with us!"

"As you can see, Chiaki is here and also a guest."

"They can come along, we're playing hide and seek, we are using all of Europe to hide in, but you can use magic to search."

"Thanks, but we're heading to the zoo, can you tell me how to drop out of the dream world to somewhere else than when you got in?"

"That's what we're learning when we play hide and seek. Sure we can tell you, you know you can drop out at any time in the past too right?"

"Really? How about the future?"

"One of the kids tried that, but we've never seen him again, Tomas says the dream world doesn't exist yet in the future, so he'll never get back."

"Ugh. OK let's not do that. Hey Tengu you want to play hide and seek?"

"No, I'll wait here for you if you are going to be OK."

"Sure, the kids will look after us, I've never been to Europe, it will be fun."

"OK, you can come back here if you get into trouble right?"

"We'll look after them, we promise mister."

"Chiaki, are you going with your sister?"

"No, I'm staying here and drinking six more coffees."

"Don't be a brat, Chiaki, come with us."

"Look after your sister, OK Chiaki," said the Tengu.

Just then, Tomas showed up and Chinatsu made introductions.

"They will be fine, there are always a couple of adults who keep an eye on the kids. We can have a beer and you can catch me up on the gossip from Japan."

With that the kids were gone, running over the grass toward a huge pole that was home base. "Chinatsu, don't run so fast, you might slip and fall," yelled Chiaki who was now looking after her big sister.

As they got to home base, Louis, Chinatsu's friend, explained the rules. "We will go anywhere in Europe we want, then the five chasers will try to find us, we can't move once we land, and when we're found, the chasers need to get to home before we do. Oh, and you aren't allowed to go anywhere in time, just today. I'll show you guys how to move to somewhere else and then we can start, it depends on you having a good idea of where you want to be in your head. If you've never been there before, you might miss, that's OK you can move back here and try again until you hit the right place."

With that they made a short trip to Paris and back again. Louis took one look at the girls and said, "Don't go to Paris, that's the first place the chasers will look. You can go back later."

Tomas had felt the girls in Paris and smiled, when they got back from the game, maybe he would take them to the salon for new dresses. The girls would love them.

When the game started, Chiaki asked to pick the place. She closed her eyes and the three of them were in the Savoy theatre in London, England.

"Why here, Aki?"

"Look, look at the costumes!"

Chinatsu looked at the stage, there were some absolutely outrageous sort-of Japanese gowns and some hilarious acting. "This isn't at all like the theatre back home, and what the hell are they singing about?"

They had dropped in on the first run of *The Mikado*, and the folks in the nearby seats were shushing them.

They dropped into some empty seats and watched as *Nanki-Poo*, *Yum-Yum*, *Ko-Ko* and all the rest, put on the story. After getting over the shock of seeing such an exaggeration of Japan, the three enjoyed the performance tremendously. So much so that when a chaser found them, they dragged him down into a seat to watch as well.

The four of them arrived back at home base and amidst much laughter and singing of the silly songs, declared a tie in the game.

After snacks and congratulations, the girls went back to the cafe to meet Tomas and the Tengu.

"Did you enjoy the game?"

"Oh Uncle Tomas, we went to London and saw The Mikado, it was funny," and the two girls sang 'Three Little Maids' with great gusto.

Tomas laughed, "I shall have to go see that for myself. Now, I know you two went to Paris, would you like to go and shop for a new dress?"

The girls fell over themselves with excitement and they grabbed the hands of Tomas and the Tengu and demanded to go straight away.

As soon asked, as granted, they were outside the shop that Ray's former girlfriends had opened. When the street was clear the four faded into view and walked into the shop. As soon as they did, the three women seemed to know that the girls were Ray's. They fluttered and coo'd over the girls and insisted they have the best they could make for them.

This lasted all of two minutes until the women took a good look at the Tengu, who was quiet handsome. Well, incredibly handsome. The women knew him as some sort of spirit being and while two of them looked after the girls, the third would be fluttering and flattering the thoroughly confused Tengu.

Tomas grinned and said, "Just enjoy the attention my friend, these are old flames of Ray, and they see us for what we are. They've closed the shop so perhaps you would like to change to

your true form."

This the Tengu did, causing the woman with him to swoon into his arms, to much general merriment.

The girls had multiple fittings and a very hard time choosing a dress, so as would be expected, ended up with three each in their arms.

At the end, with Chiaki dropping off to sleep in the Tengu's arms, the day ended very satisfactorily. They never did get to the Zoo, but they could do that another day.

Paris 1900

"Another? You're having another child? Did you miss the little feet scampering around the house? Are you two lonely now the girls are out and making their own way?"

"Oh dear Tomas, it's not up to me, it's Suzume who decides, you should ask her. Yes I do miss the girls terribly, but they come to see us, when they're in Japan gathering cloth and the clothing that they sell here in Paris."

"They have more or less taken over from the ladies, who are happy to turn over the business."

“I worry a bit, when the girls come through the dream world and get things from Japan, there’s no records, no taxes paid.”

“Don’t bother yourself about it, they can produce records should they need it, and all the right people have been paid.”

“Well, I trust you to keep an eye on them, Tomas, you have been a great friend these years I’ve been in Japan.”

“What else could I be? You accumulate such charming women, it’s a pleasure to help.”

“You haven’t...”

“Ray, I would never do that, you see the nice side of Chinatsu, but if I ever made a pass, she’d turn me into a frog. She looks out for Chiaki too. No, I have not, my friend.”

“And others?”

“Young women, Ray, you know they can take care of themselves, and it’s not my place to tattle is it?”

“Torn loyalties, I see. Well shall we go in?”

As the cousins walked into the shop, they were greeted with loud shouts of ‘Daddy!’ followed by great hugs and many kisses. “What do you think? What’s your first impression on seeing the shop?”

“It’s lovely, I’ve never seen so many colours in a salon, it’s wonderful, and so are you girls.”

“Ladies, Papa, ladies, please.”

“My deepest pardon, my brain is going soft with old age.”

“And look what you’re wearing, we will make you a new suit and you shall pick it up in the shop in Nara.”

“Yes Lady, many thanks.”

“Oh go back to girls, it doesn’t sound right when you call us ladies, Papa.”

“As you wish my pets, you are, as usual, anything you wish to be.”

The girls took the men by the arms and walked them into the back of the store for tea.

“Uncle Tomas tells us you have some news.”

“Ah, my memory is failing as well.”

“Father!”

“Well my girls, you are to have a sister. Your mother just told me and sent me to tell you two.”

As the squeals erupted, Ray had a terrible vision of the future, the baby would be dressed and dressed and dressed like a doll by her older sisters. Sure enough, the women soon retreated further back into the shop to start planning baby clothing, which left the men to look at each other, down at the tea, and at each other once more.

“Beer?”

“Absolutely.”

They called goodbye to the girls and got a sort of half wave, which they took for permission to leave.

“Come, I will show you around the Exposition, you have yet to see the great tower, and perhaps we will go and laugh at the swordsmen who are here for the second world sports event. You have missed a lot cousin.”

“Yes but on the bright side, I’ve missed a lot. Nara is mostly the same as it has been for a thousand years.”

Tomas laughed and took Ray’s arm, the two friends were off to see the changes.

“And the rest of Japan?”

“They are fighting in China and will soon fight the Russians. That is a war they might not win and perhaps if they don’t, they will give up their ideas of an Asian empire.”

“Surely you don’t think the Russians would lose?”

“Much as I hate to admit it, Tomas, Japan has become a world military power in just 40 years.”

“Amazing to think of that.”

“Priorities, my friend, the people suffer and starve. There is more and more taxation on the peasants, and revolts happen, but most of the people will support the government until they lose a war. The whole country seems geared toward war, the schools teach sacrifice, the old martial arts have been turned to places where the ‘Samurai Ideals’ are taught as if loyalty is required and expected toward the country, That is a loyalty that certainly didn’t exist while the Samurai fought each other. It’s as if they are fighting for their existence already.”

“Well perhaps the Russians will teach them a lesson in humility and they will settle down to your ideals.”

Ray grinned, then sobered, “Tell me of Europe?”

“It is not good, Ray, alliances continue to be made, the countries scramble for colonies in Africa, and everyone is arming as quickly as they can. I fear anything could set off a global conflict.”

“How long?”

“Not more than a generation, maybe less. The anarchists want it all destroyed, the various cultures in the empires, especially the Austro-Hungarian empire want it destroyed. It seems that damned few, except the rich and powerful, what to preserve what we have. But let’s not speak of that. So tell me, what has Suzume named this new child?”

“She hasn’t, do you have a suggestion?”

“Tomasina comes to mind.”

Ray’s mouth dropped open, “Go have your own child if you wish to name her that, what a horrid thing to do to a brand new person.”

As the men walked bantering toward the tower, a woman burst into the dress shop in a panic.

Chiaki looked at her sister and nodded, “What is the problem Miss?”

“There’s a man, he’s...”

“Sit, my sister will bring you tea.”

“OH you mustn’t go out there, he has a knife and is ever so big.”

“Don’t worry, have your tea, we have had problems like this before,” and with that Chiaki went out the door, as she stepped

onto the street she looked wealthy and helpless.

She soon spotted the man, hand down by his side to hide the knife. He wasn't hard to spot, he was throwing off a nasty aura of resentment and domination. He was determined to prove what a man he was to some poor girl who was powerless to fight back. Well today that poor girl was a rather helpless looking Chiaki who conveniently turned up a narrow alleyway that was a dead end. The man followed instantly, forgetting his previous victim.

As he got to the end of the darkening alley, he wondered where the girl had gone. She stepped out behind him.

“I have you now, tart, you have no place to run.”

The girl didn't turn and run as he expected her to do, in fact he'd taken two steps toward her and now she was in reach. He could see her face clearly, and she wasn't afraid. This bothered him somehow, it wasn't the way it was supposed to go, but he reached for her anyway.

Her hand was on his throat. He hadn't seen her move at all, but she was holding him firmly and bending him back. Now he was beginning to feel a panic.

This girl grinned and that grin kept growing larger, she slowly changed into a huge wolf, and now its front paw was on his throat, pinning him to the ground.

He remembered the knife in his hand but the instant he thought to stab with it, the wolf pressed down on his throat and the jaws were an inch from his face. The thing drooled into his open mouth and with that, he soiled his pants.

He squeezed his eyes shut and the next thing he knew, the wolf had crushed his wrist, the one with the knife, into a bloody mess.

With that the wolf was gone, and the girl was there, looking at the man, “I should get to the hospital quickly if I were you, they should sterilize that wrist, you can catch some nasty infections from a wolf.”

And with that, the legend of the Montmartre Loup Garou grew a bit larger.

Moriko 1910

Moriko was a problem child, Ray and Suzume named her 'forest child' because she was a bit wild. More than her sisters, even. For one thing, she refused to speak. Susuma had taken her to Shiyo, thinking something was wrong, but Shiyo said she simply didn't want to speak. She could communicate well enough with animals and with spirit beings, but she saw no reason to talk to humans. It wasn't hard to see that Shiyo agreed

with that.

As a result, she was never sent to school, and although her parents tried to teach her, she mostly taught herself. She also spent a lot of time with Shiyo, who seemed delighted with the child.

Moriko was an expert shapeshifter, taking many forms, and she could move between Japan and Paris through the Keen world ever since the first time her sisters taken her.

She loved her sisters, and they doted on her. When she was in human form she was always dressed well, having a constant and ever growing supply of clothing.

Today, though, she was a koi, swimming happily in one of the temple ponds. While drifting around the edges, being fed by the visitors, she was listening to one of the monks giving a lecture on Buddha. He wasn't supposed to be doing that, but Moriko liked that better than the State Shinto most of the other shrines had to teach. She thought long and hard, as only a koi can, about the impermanence of the world. As a koi, she was a pretty long lived fish, but she understood that long lived is relative. She would probably live much longer than anyone else in the world, except perhaps her family. She knew her father was over 900 years old. Since she was barely nine, that seemed a very long time.

When she got home, her mother asked, "What did you do today?"

In her head, Suzume heard, "I was a koi, and I listened to the monk talking about the beings in the world and how the world is changeable, how none of this will last."

"The world itself won't last, it will eventually disappear with our sun, but there are countless worlds in our heads that will be gone long before then."

"Father talks about Japan, and how it will be gone soon, but we defeated the Russians and we have Chosen and Formosa now."

"Yes, but your father says that it is the nature of empires to reach too far and be torn apart, from within or from without."

"There's nobody in Asia who could beat us."

"No, but across the pacific is the United States. Don't forget they were the ones that forced us to open our country and caused us to change."

"But they say they aren't imperialists."

"Tell that to the Spanish, who lost much of their empire to the USA, empires are what the world seems to want now, they are either being colonies or taking colonies, there are few countries in the world that are not an empire or a colony."

"That almost sounds like you approve, mother."

"It's the way of the world, but your father is probably right, empires are dangerous, as are alliances between empires. He's seen it in Europe and he fears he's seeing it here in Japan."

"Surely if we're strong enough, and have alliances like the one with England we will be fine."

"I hope so, but Japan is not white. Right now we aren't a threat to the Europeans, but if we become strong enough, who knows."

"Well I will make sure we will be fine forever, don't worry mother."

Suzume hardly knew what to say to that. She would let Ray deal with it, perhaps he would be able to reason with a ten year old who was so strong willed.

Moriko 1916

"Moriko has been in Paris for a long time Ray, with her sisters, but I worry that the war is so close."

"I will go check, my love, and see that all three are well. It is as well she is there and not trying to help the Navy fight the Germans, or to help the army fight the Chinese. She is too patriotic. I'm sure her sisters will keep her safe."

"I do hope so, her idea for mining German ships while being a fish was madness itself."

"The war in France is a stalemate and soon the Americans will enter, let's hope it all ends soon."

Ray went to Paris to see his daughters, and got a bit of a shock, "You are thin, you usually present as a bit plump so as not to outshine your customers. Are you both in good health?"

"Of course we are Papa, it would be impolite to be fat when those around us are hungry."

"I see, and what are you doing now? Those don't seem to be dresses."

"Bandages are a better use for our material now, we roll them and deliver them to the front. Many of the artists we know are driving ambulances so we help them."

"They let women go to the front?"

"Heavens no, father, we go as young men who are not old enough to fight, but old enough to help. Oh it is horrible Papa, just horrible."

"Can you not stay here and let your friends go to the trenches?"

"How could we do that? What sort of people would we be?"

And we can go in the night to find those who have been caught between the trenches."

"You are careful? Please tell your father you are careful, it would kill your mother and I if you were hurt."

"Papa, you know bullets pass right through us. We are safe, please don't worry, but also please don't tell Mama what we are doing."

Ray gathered both daughters to him and hugged them, "You make me proud, girls, very proud."

"Hardly girls any more, how could we be girls after seeing what we have seen. Oh I hope it will be over soon."

"Stay safe, stay safe, even we can die if we aren't careful."

"We will, we promise, and we are keeping Moriko safe, we don't let her come to the front."

"Where is she now?"

"She is at the hospital, she met a boy who was just about to sign up and fell in love with him. He was wounded and she found him in the hospital where she is tending to him."

"A human?"

"Yes, Papa, a human, really, she can fall in love with a human."

"But..."

"Hush, come and eat, she will be home soon."

It was a quiet dinner, with none of the laughter and joking of previous years. The girls truly had seen the horrors that Ray had experienced, that he wanted so much to avoid. Here were his children, caught up again in war.

He was there when Moriko came home, and she was heartbroken.

"He died, Papa he died, why did he die?"

Ray was startled that she was speaking and then his own heart broke. It was clear that his little girl, not even twenty, had lost a loved one. This was too much to bear, not his little girl, not so soon.

Chinatsu and Chiaki smothered Moriko with their arms and let her cry until she was empty. Ray dropped into a chair and grieved for the loss of his daughter's innocence. To have known war before they were fully grown, it was too much.

"Girls you must come back to Japan, the war is far away from Nara, come home to be safe with us."

"Dear, dear Father, we can't do that. We are helping here with our friends. We cannot go home until this is over."

Ray turned his face to Moriko, but the hatred he saw there, the desire for revenge, made him drop his eyes. She would not listen to him or anyone else. He turned again to his older daughters and whispered, "Try to keep her alive."

They nodded, they had seen the same thing as he did.

In the remaining years of the war there were stories of a huge black dog who attacked a certain unit of German soldiers from out of the nighttime. In a year not a single man who had been fighting in 1916 was left alive.

Tomas, 1918

"When the taxis were carrying the reserves to the front lines, I just jumped into one, what can I say, an old fire horse perhaps."

"Oh, Tomas, we were done with war."

"I know, I know Ray, but what could I do. I should have gone to Japan with you, you kept out of it."

"But not my daughters, I'm afraid. How are you my friend?"

"Injured in spirit and in body, I was too slow to avoid a piece of shrapnel in my left leg. Thankfully I could get it out before there was a problem. Ray it was horrible, worse than anything

we experienced before. You were right, the industrial scale of the killing was inhuman.”

“I am so sorry you went through that.”

“Never again, I tell you, and there will be an again. The armistice is a joke, Germany can’t accept the humiliation or the reparations. They say this was the war to end all wars, what insanity, it is only the first of many. The next will be every bit as large.”

“What will you do, would you like to come to Japan?”

“Ray, the next time, Japan will be destroyed, you said it yourself, they have too much of the European disease now, they must grow and grow and grow just to keep pace, and as the European empires collapsed, so will theirs.”

“What of the League of Nations?”

“If the Americans join, it has a chance, but it doesn’t look like they will, despite it being their idea. They will hold back again, I’m sure and the world will be at war again. I can’t see the League doing much more than stop a few border skirmishes. You are right, my friend, the industrial manufacture of arms is too profitable, we will have more wars.”

“And you, Tomas?”

“I am going to South America. They have finished their border

wars and are now settling down to be nice little economic colonies of the United States. In their case, war is bad for business, so things should be stable enough for a while.”

“I wish you luck.”

“Thank you, and I am sorry to leave your daughters and the girls alone in Paris.”

“Chinatsu and Chiaki will look out for the girls, and they have their own lives to live. They may miss you but they will understand, there is only so much death a being can endure.”

“As you tried to tell me, cousin. Please stay in touch and be careful in Japan.”

“We will meet in our quaint old Paris cafe in the dream world, I’m sure we will, Thomas.”

Moriko 1920

Shiyo looked at Moriko who was a young woman now, but still grieving for her lost love, “You remember your lectures on impermanence child? All things pass.”

“He was too young, Mother, too innocent, it is unfair that the Buddha took him.”

“The Buddha did not, Moriko, his fellow men took him from you, and you have avenged that, despite all your training.”

“I am not proud of that, but I hoped it would stop the agony I was feeling.”

“And...”

“It did not, to my shame, I took many lives in revenge and anger, and it did not bring me back my Jean. Now I have that stain on my karma.”

“I notice you are still speaking as humans do, I would have thought you would go back to silence.”

“What for, I no longer have a child’s hate for anyone, Jean was human and I loved him with all my heart.”

“Come walk with me along the shore, and we will talk. I would like you to consider staying here to continue your studies with us. You have experienced loss in a foreign land, and also the horror of war. You are confused and this is understandable, to have experienced such things at 16. It is four years since then and you have understood much, but allow yourself to heal further.”

“I would like to stay here, but my parents grieve each time I separate from them.”

“Your mother will give birth to another child, she will become aware of it soon. Stay here and study until the birth, then go with joy to help your mother with your new sister. I am sure we can clear this darkness from your soul in that time.”

“If you wish me to do this, I will study with you, but I am unsure I will ever truly understand the lesson of impermanence. I fear I may hate the Buddha as much as I hated the Germans who took Jean from me.”

“You understand my child, I see it within you. Tell your mother you will be with us for a short time and we will see if you can find what is already within you. In the meantime you can help the priest above us with his work, there are many who were damaged by the war. You learned much in France, you will be a healer for a while.”

Moriko bowed in acceptance.

In Paris, her sisters were once again running their shop. Shiyo had allowed them to listen to her talk with Moriko and they fully approved. Their young sister had been a serious child, and had become much too brooding after her too few weeks of giddy love. If she could regain some inner peace, there was a chance she would gain happiness.

In the meantime, they had each other, as they always had. They continued to make dresses, to model for the artists who had returned from exile or the war, and they continued to enjoy affairs of the heart, and of the bed. They were truly their

father's daughters. Not to say they were not worried about that father. He had been faithful to Suzume, as far as they could tell, and that was, they knew, against his nature.

Well, children had no business in their parent's love lives. Chinatsu turned to Chiaki, "Shall we go visit Picasso, he is working on a new stage production."

"Natsu, you must be careful with Pablo, he will break your heart if Olga doesn't shoot you first."

"Aki, where is your sense of adventure, and what of you and Coco?"

"Coco? A fling at best, and who knows, perhaps she will become someone we can work for. She has wonderful contacts."

"Or perhaps she will come work for us, our own business is recovering well."

"Except that we are too lazy and too busy socializing to make it the success it could be."

Chinatsu laughed, "It's true, it's true. Well after that horrid war, who wants to be serious."

"And those Americans who have been coming, some of them are so tall and handsome, who can resist."

“A bit full of themselves, but I agree, they are so enthusiastic, if a bit naive in the bedroom.”

“Still, not hopeless, they can learn.”

With that the two sisters collapsed in laughter in each other’s arms.

Aiko 1924

“All Right, you’ve been here for five days in a row, what is it you want?”

Moriko was taking Aiko for a stroll, they were in Nara Park. Aiko was three and loved the deer. She had long conversations with them that sounded like the babbling of a toddler, but Moriko knew they understood each other very well.

Moriko had largely put the war behind her now, partly through study and meditation, but mostly through taking over Aiko from her mother. New life overcoming death and all that.

“I... er...”

“Speak, man, or I will thrash you, and don’t think that I can’t. I see that you’re a Tengu, and you know I’m Kitsune so don’t

bother trying to lie to me.”

The poor man was completely tongue tied, he had indeed followed Moriko through the park, but now she had confronted him, he didn't know what to do.

“Oh, for... come over here and sit. Aiko, go talk with the deer, but don't wander far sweetie.”

The man sat down as if he expected the bench to explode. Moriko was looking him over carefully, which didn't help his nervousness at all. What she saw was a pleasant young boy. More than pleasant if she was honest with herself, and he was younger than her own 24 years, and oh so much more innocent of the ways of the world.

“My, my name is Daranibo.”

“It's not you know, Daranibo of Fuji is one of the Daitengu, you're much too young to be him. Besides that, you don't go telling your name to strangers, Tengu. Stop with the tricks.”

“No, I, er, I like you, and so I wanted to give you my name. It really is my name, my parents asked Daranibo if they could use his name when they named me. He gave me his blessing.”

“I see, you like me do you? Is that why you've been following me around?”

“Yes.”

“Well instead of creeping along behind us, you can walk with us, I see Aiko has wandered away, even though I told her to stay close. Honestly that child.”

“Is she your child?”

Moriko stared at Daranibo for a long time, trying to see if he was kidding. Apparently not, and for some reason, his assumption that she was old enough to have children didn't bother her as much as she thought it might.

“She's my sister, and thank you for assuming I'm an old lady.”

“Oh! But I would never...”

Moriko smiled and said in a loud voice, “Come along, let's find our child.”

“What!”

In the dojo that they used for training, Ray looked at the Tengu and smiled, “That is the first time I've seen my daughter smile and joke in a very long time.”

“I hope she doesn't break my son's heart, he's not very experienced in this sort of thing.”

“I suspect she will be gentle, I wouldn’t worry. Shall we get back to our practice?”

As it turned out, neither parent had a need to worry. Moriko walked with Daranibo each day in the park with Aiko, and after a week or so, she took him home to meet her parents.

Soon after that she met his parents, and realized that Ray and the Tengu had been somehow involved in this arrangement.

“Father, did you set the boy on me?”

“I would not do that, Moriko, I swear, he saw you in the park, it was only afterwards that I realized he was the son of one of my training partners. I wish I could take credit, you like him don’t you. Unfortunately your Father isn’t that clever.”

“Well, fine then. I do like him.”

“Be kind to him, he is young.”

“Father...”

“Right, not my business, sorry Mori, I will keep my nose out of it.”

“Hah, with your Tengu-nose, that will be difficult.”

Ray snapped his eyes onto Moriko's and realized she was teasing him. Oh this was a good sign indeed. He smiled and hugged her before going out to train on his own in the back yard. The boy's father had introduced Ray to a whole other level of sword, and he needed to get it into his bones.

Moriko watched her Father go with tender eyes. He was a good man, and she knew he had been worried about her.

Suzume walked in quietly, "He didn't set you up, truly, but we are both pleased that you have found a friend."

"I'm glad, mother, he is a kind and gentle boy, very good with Aiko."

"And with you."

"Yes, and with me."

"Come help with dinner, your sisters are coming, they want to meet your friend."

"Oh no they don't! Those tarts will eat him for dinner."

Suzume laughed, "I will make sure they are on the best behaviour, Mori, why not invite him now."

Several months later, Moriko and Daranibo were racing

through the forests as fox. Tengu could shift as well as Kitsune and they had a game they played, racing as humans, dogs, fox, and flying. Moriko had long been able to fly in bird form, but since working with Daranibo, she had learned to grow wings as a human so that she approximated his Tengu form.

They stopped at a hidden pond they had found and created a picnic for themselves. A blanket, food, and sake. Ray had told them of such things and they found it was a very pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

“Are your parents watching?”

“No, why are yours?”

“They’re not. Moriko I love you deeply and truly.”

“I love you too, Dara, where are you going with this?”

“Well...”

“Ah, I see. Daranibo, I have been with only one man before, and he died. I don’t know how I will react if we make love.”

“I have been with nobody at all, Mori, but if you guide me, well, I promise to try my best.”

Moriko laughed, he really was sweet. “Very well, we shall see what happens. But first, I promise that if there is a Yokai in this area, thirty seconds from now, I will use their skins for our

blanket!”

A great scurrying with much yelping could be heard. Moriko was known for having no patience when her commands were not carried out. When she was a child there was indeed a time when several Yokai were beaten senseless for annoying her.

She smiled at the rush, and when it was quiet, she turned to Daranibo and kissed him gently. After a few minutes, she sighed to herself. He deferred to her often, as a matter of course, she was, after all, the older one, but there were some things that she would prefer he take the initiative.

She was sure he had done his research, and so she sat back, looked into his, okay she had to admit it, very handsome face, and said quietly, “Go ahead, you know what I want.”

Shortly after that she said, “Not like that, you’ll rip the fabric, let me show you.”

A little while later she said, “That’s real?”

And later, well there were no words, but there were some loud noises which caused a few of the braver Yokai to move even further away from the pond.

Finances, 1929

“I’ve seen this before, Suzume, a great financial crash, and now it’s not just Japan but the rest of the world. The financial barons will be calling for war, it’s one of the only things that lift the countries out of depression. A way to get the money circulating again. There’s nothing like producing and then blowing up that production to get an economy booming.”

“But we are fine?”

“As far as our money and food? Of course. I have been investing since the Tulip mania in the Netherlands. I bought in when I saw the money to be made and I got out when I had tripled my profits. I have been doing that ever since, speculation and then buying gold or property.”

“What happened to the tulips?”

“It was simply a frenzy, tulips were newly introduced from the Ottoman Empire, and prices of bulbs went up, especially new varieties. The middle class saw a way to make money and so money flooded into the market. When it all crashed in, let’s see, I think it was 1637, many investors lost everything, I suspect some ended up eating their tulips.”

“How did you know it would crash?”

“Oh my dear, that was the question, many thought it never would, but I had seen things become expensive and then

worthless for hundreds of years before that. I decided that tripling my money was safe in a frenzy and so I got out in time. I ended up with some nice properties in Amsterdam as well.”

“But surely the records were there to teach humans about, what did you call them the other day, booms and busts?”

“Humans are not known for doing research, or for looking at long term investments, they see a way to make a fortune, and right away they are borrowing money to lose it. At least the tulip market was real, there are endless scams that have been invented to make it appear that money can be made, which make the inventor rich and everyone else poor.”

“Such as?”

“Ah, I remember a man named Gregor MacGregor who invented an imaginary country named Poyais that was supposed to be in Central America. He claimed to be the leader of the country and got many people to invest, some even went to the place where the country was supposed to be, only to find jungle.”

“What happened to him?”

“Nothing at all, if you steal a loaf of bread they cut off your hands or hang you, but if you steal millions from the rich and powerful, they pat you on the back.”

“Seriously?”

“I’m afraid so, love, but not to worry, people don’t know who we are, let alone how wealthy we are in gold, property and stocks. We are out of this crash, and soon I will be buying property with our gold. The secret is to buy what people are selling cheap, and sell when people are desperately buying. And if it should ever be that we are penniless, we can live on the air, being Yokai and Reynard. It is the understanding that we will not starve that lets us invest prudently, not getting caught up in wild schemes.”

“Well I am glad, husband, because as you say, another great war may come.”

“And Japan may not pick the winning side this time. The army and the navy have much too much power and the men at the top are not great thinkers.”

“And our children?”

“Are provided for, the girls in Paris have the bulk of my fortune made in France. They are immensely wealthy and are managing Tomas’ properties as well. Moriko and Daranibo have been well set up by his father and by us, Dara has a good head on his shoulders for finance. The three girls have Aiko’s happiness in their minds, and she will have more than enough from us when the time comes.”

“What of us? Will we be penniless if we give all our money to the girls?”

Ray smiled, “You know we have more than enough, and what do we need anyway? We have our home here, and our garden which will feed us, we have the temples to support us should we need more, and our children love us.”

“Plus that massive chest under the bedroom.”

“You know about that?”

“Oh my dear, the two older girls and I watched you bury it. You are not as sneaky as you think you are.”

“Then yes, there is the chest under the bedroom.”

By 1931, Aiko, the youngest, was spending her time between Paris, Nara and Moriko’s home in the country, not far from Nara. Aiko was by far the fastest learner of all the girls, at ten she was fully capable of shape shifting, and she was a mathematician of some repute. She had been well trained by her older sisters and was outside the Japanese educational system. Moriko had declared that she would not be indoctrinated in the Japanese militarist school system.

Suzume had commented more than once that Aiko was Moriko’s first child, and she was fine with that. But now Moriko was pregnant with her own child. Daranibo was ecstatic, but made sure to talk with Aiko.

“You are our first and favourite child, Ai, we love you very much.”

“Don’t be silly, Dara, I love you too, but I’m not yours, you should concentrate on your own child when he arrives, I know you both love me, and so do Ray and Suzume, and so do Chinatsu and Chiaki. I have lots of love to go around. Don’t you worry about me. And I want to help with your baby.”

“You said ‘he’ do you know?”

“It’s mathematically certain that you will have a boy, besides, I peeked.”

“You... can you do that?”

“Of course, it’s not hard once you learn how to do it. I have fixed a couple of the kids around here.”

“Fixed?”

“Some of the neighbour kids had problems inside, so I made it right.”

“Inside?”

“Sure, it was easy, I just reached in and rearranged things to make them like everyone else. One had a badly healed bone, one had a cleft palate, and one had something wrong with his

lungs. Since I knew what they were supposed to be like, it was easy to fix them.”

“Aiko, nobody has had that ability in our families.”

“Really? Maybe they just didn’t look deep enough inside.”

“She is frightening, Moriko, she has powers nobody else has and simply accepts them.”

“She has been raised by folk with different attitudes, different powers and in different cultures, I’m not surprised she simply accepts her powers as they appear. She’s got an open mind, and nobody has ever told her ‘you can’t do that’ or ‘that’s impossible’. She’s not frightening, she’s amazing.”

“Of course you’re right, also surprising and way more advanced for her age than any of us ever were.”

“Don’t forget she hangs around with your family a lot too, they have a much different view of life than the Kitsune do.”

“Father says she’s half Tengu.”

“Well, take a Fox and a Kitsune and maybe you are pretty far along the path to being a Tengu.”

“Now you’re scaring me, Mori, what will our child be?”

“Loved, you dear sweet man, loved.”

“He will be at that.”

“And don’t worry about Aiko, she is very much attached to Father, and she will be a healer, like he is. She has a focus and as she gets older, she will find her way. She knows she is loved by us, and despite what she says, she considers us her second parents. Be proud of her.”

“How could I not be.”

We may wonder that the book has not been much about Ray Keen for a while. This is normal and natural. At least it is for Ray and as she found out, for Suzume. It is normal that when children arrive, a parent’s life is put on hold until the children are ready and able to leave the house and have their own lives.

So we will learn of one more child, and then perhaps we will return to the parents.

Aimi 1931

Suzume was in pain, the family had gathered around in the Enoshima cave, along with Shiyo, and Daranibo's father to watch the birth, but something was wrong.

The labour had been going on for too many hours, and Suzume was covered in sweat, despite the cool air.

The older sisters were pale with fear but Aiko was frantic, "Mama, mama!"

Ray was holding Suzume's head in his lap, and he could feel her weakening. He looked up at Shiyo, who nodded, it was time.

Aiko was more frightened than she had ever been, she was ten, and always in control, but this was her mother. She didn't know what to do.

Shiyo said, in a commanding voice, "Aiko!"

Aiko shouted, "Mama!" once more.

Shiyo spun Aiko around and slapped her hard across the face. A heavily pregnant Moriko took a step forward but Daranibo put a hand on her arm and shook his head.

"Aiko!"

This time Aiko heard, and stared at Shiyo.

In a calm voice, Shiyo said, "Aiko, it is time to put away your childhood fears, your mother is here, there is something wrong, look to her."

Aiko looked at her for a moment more, as if waiting for the words to make sense, then she nodded. She turned to her mother and gently moved Ray's hand away from her belly. Aiko placed her hands on Suzume's swollen stomach and said, "No pain."

Suzume's face cleared and she smiled at Aiko, then looked at Ray with concern for him.

"The baby is sideways, he can't come out, I'm going to turn him."

With a frown of concentration, Aiko's hands moved in a complicated circle. She relaxed and waited. When her mother's next contraction came, she moved her right hand downward and the baby came out all at once. With her other hand, she caught the baby and the placenta came rushing out as well.

Aiko placed the baby in her mother's arms and Shiyo covered them both in a blanket she had made with her own hands. They waited and the umbilical cord dried and fell off. As that happened, Ray gathered his daughter to him and kissed her on the forehead.

Before he could say thank you, the rest of the family was crowding in, and Daranibo picked Aiko up to get her out of the

rush, "You have saved your mother and your father as well as your sister."

Aiko looked troubled, "Why didn't I do it earlier?"

"My sweet child, who has always been so grown up, in this case, you were a young girl, afraid for your mother. You must not feel bad about this."

"She might have died"

"Yes, but because of you, she did not. Look, the baby is reaching for you."

Daranibo carried Aiko to her mother's side and set her down. Suzume waved her close and handed the child to her. The baby grabbed some of Aiko's hair and pulled, as if trying to get even closer.

Through her tears, Aiko heard her father say, "We will call her Aimi, after the one who saved her life."

Suzume and Shiyo nodded their approval, and the rest of the family relaxed at last.

Suzume was weak, and Mariko moved in to the house to help look after the baby, once they had moved back to Nara. Aiko was there, and whenever she came into the room, the baby

exploded with laughter. There was no doubt that there was a bond between the two.

There was also no doubt that Aiko's childhood was done. Ray was a bit sad to realize that, but it would only have been another few years anyway. Still, he had hoped she would have that much more time.

Moriko gave birth to her son Chiharu in the usual easy delivery that all the girls would have. Her sisters were over the moon with joy, two new babies to dress and spoil shamelessly. Aiko helped with both children and the two oldest sisters also stayed more often at home.

There seemed to be a constant stream of Tengu and Kitsune men and boys visiting to see the two babies, and perhaps, if they were lucky, to be invited to tea by Chinatsu and Chiaki. The house was filled with joy and laughter, despite the events in China, with Japan invading and occupying Manchuria. A wider war would begin soon and the military was gaining more power each month. It also looked like the military favoured Germany as an ally this time.

Aiko 1942

Aiko became a healer, working in the same temple as Ray. He taught her to go into the mind and nudge it toward stability, he

also taught her to expel Yokai, although she hardly needed to be taught. The first time she performed an exorcism, it was an Oni, a very powerful demon, Ray had no idea. As it exited the poor man who was possessed, the Oni was crying. Aiko didn't stop there, "If I ever catch you in anyone again, you will never have existed, your ancestors will never have existed, your children will never have existed, do you understand me?"

Ray doubted the Oni would ever come near to Aiko again. It was gone in a blinding flash and as it left, Ray felt the psychic boot that Aiko sent after it. This was his gentle little girl?

Aiko also worked on physical problems, both on humans and on Yokai. She became famous at a time when there was great need. The war appeared to be going well, but Aiko told Ray that she could feel the tide turning. The Americans had begun their push back along the islands that Japan had taken, and Aiko could feel the supplies of oil and rubber being choked off.

Ray believed her, "Is it time for us to send the family to Enoshima, before it's too late?"

"We have some time left, the Navy is still strong, despite the defeat at Midway, I suspect we have a year."

"We need to start preparing. I want all of you safe with Shiyo when the end comes. You weren't there in France to see what a juggernaut the Americans are in a war. They will burn Japan to the ground."

"Will Shiyo be able to protect Enoshima?"

"She has been strengthening the place for decades, if any place in Japan is safe, it is there, and if it comes down to that, you can all escape into the Keen world. It is beyond reach of war."

"Father you sound like you will not be there with us."

"Your mother and I have discussed this, we will stay and do what we can for Nara. As long as you children are safe, we can do a lot."

"I will stay as well."

"You will not, child, it would kill Mariko to know you are in a war as she was. Do not disobey your father and your mother on this. You are a healer, not a killer, stay that way, please, for us. After the war there will be much for you to do, for me as well, we will need all our healers."

"But it will be dangerous for you both."

"We can go to the Keen world if we must, and we are not without strength, the two of us."

"Very well, we will talk about this again when the time comes."

"Obstinate daughter, we will not. I am firm on this."

"Very well Father, I will obey you."

Ray looked hard at his daughter, perhaps she would, he hoped she would, from the stories the wounded soldiers were telling them about the war, there would be no mercy for Japan, come the end.

The End of Imperial Japan

The family was in Enoshima with Shiyo. So far they were safe, but the firebombings had destroyed most of the cities of Japan. Nara was not spared, over half the city had been burned to the ground.

The Americans bragged of their strategic bombing skills, but they had no real precision and so they settled for killing whole cities. This they were very good at.

"They have a new bomb, one that will destroy a whole city. Trust the Americans to be even more efficient."

Suzume was shocked, "What have they bombed?"

"They have destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and still the military thinks they can fight on. After all, the destruction was no greater than the fire bombings."

"The Russians have entered the war, surely that will make the Army realize they have lost."

"I am afraid they have come to believe their own propaganda, they seem to want to fight to the last child."

"Will the Emperor step in?"

"He has been unable to resist the military, why should he become strong now? I am afraid we should think of going to Enoshima."

"No, I will not leave our home, Ray, I will stay, but you should go."

"You know I will not my love."

The yokai had been recruited to help warn of the bombings and Suzume froze at that moment, "There is a silver plane, only one, and it is high up. It is coming for Nara, Ray. They are going to use their new bomb on us, and I will not have it!"

"My love, the power is unimaginable, pure energy, how can we resist? Even the Tengu cannot reach those planes."

"I will stop it, you must go now."

"I will not."

"There, you see it? Ray you must grow, grow as large as you

have ever grown and then larger. When they drop that bomb I will catch it and stop it."

"What? No. You cannot Suzume, you cannot do that."

"Husband, do not argue with me, grow, grow now and throw me, there it is!"

Ray grew as large as he could, and threw Suzume toward the bomb. He hoped she had a plan.

Up she went, and as she got close to the bomb, she grew, she opened her mouth, she swallowed the bomb.

"No!" Ray screamed and grew even larger, spreading his atoms thinner and thinner in an attempt to reach Suzume.

In the meantime, Suzume called on every Yokai in Nara, Every Tengu and every Kitsune in Japan to lend her power to contain this thing.

In Enoshima, the children lunged for the entrance to the cave, but Shiyo turned the defences inward and they could not leave. Daranibo took three steps toward Shiyo and was slammed back against the cave wall by her power, "Your father requests you stay here and protect your family."

Ray stretched farther and farther, and Suzume saw that he would destroy himself, either in an attempt to reach her, or to die with her when the bomb exploded. She stretched her power

downward to protect him, but in doing so, she compromised her own body.

The bomb exploded.

Suzume had contained it, and she was gone.

Her children screamed in pain.

Ray fell back unconscious to the ground, to the garden behind his house. Nara was safe, Ray had survived, but Suzume was gone.

Every Yokai in Nara flicked their attention from the bomb to the plane and they screamed. That plane was ripped to pieces, it lasted just long enough for the pilot to report the Japanese had some sort of weapon that could stop the bomb and then the crew died.

Daranibo's father appeared and picked his friend up off the ground. He took him to Enoshima where he glanced at his son, just managing to pick himself up off the floor, "Thank you for staying here as I asked, son."

He looked at Shiyo, who smiled, "Welcome, Zenki, put him down here."

The children were in shock to see their father unconscious, and

stayed close to him, not quite knowing what to do. As Ray regained consciousness, he groaned. Suzume was dead. The children watched as he began to dissolve and dissipate, an atom at a time, he would be with his Love, wherever she had gone.

Nothing his children or Shiyo did or said would stop him, he would not outlive his wife, he was determined. He dwindled, grew smaller. The children cried out in pain once more, they were to lose both their mother and their father, and they were helpless.

"Stop," came a deep voice, as Coyote appeared in the cave. What was left of Ray was frozen in place.

Shiyo and Zenki knelt and bowed, "Lord Coyote."

Coyote stepped forward and put his hands on their arms, "Rise sister, rise brother, there is no call to bow to me, I am just a fool. I have been trying to stop this war and so was late here. I offer my apologies."

"Coyote-dono you are lord to us all, to all tricksters everywhere, of course we bow to you."

"No, rather I am your creation The ultimate trickster and greatest fool, without doubt. No matter how many times I have created and destroyed the world, it ends like this."

The children barely had any idea what was happening, but Aiko had taken Ray's head onto her lap and was trying to heal

him. There just wasn't enough left of him, most had been scattered to the winds. She poured her essence into him.

Coyote nodded to Ray, "I would have destroyed this world too, but I asked Ray to give me a reason to let it continue. Looking at you all here, I see that he has answered me. There is reason to hope as long as love exists, and there is the sacrifice of a good being for the lives of others. Right now, this child sends her life into Ray's body in an attempt to heal him. Stop, child, I will heal him in a moment."

Aiko looked at Coyote's face and saw that she could believe him. She relaxed and cried instead, her tears falling on her father's face.

Coyote continued, "I will leave the world to you tricksters from now on, I will retire and let those who are wiser than I am, who love the world, take care of it. Ray is a child now, I cannot give him back what he was, but he will recover and grow up once more. As to your mother Suzume, do not mourn her, I was able to gather her essence and she is here now should she wish to reveal herself to you."

With that, Suzume appeared, much to the joy of her children. She smiled at them, and then turned to look down at Ray. Her eyes became infinitely sad, "Coyote-dono, make him forget, make him be a child in his mind as well as his body, or I fear he will try to kill himself again. He must go away from here, away from me."

Coyote nodded, "It is done, and I too will forget, so that I am not tempted to fix the world again."

Aiko looked at her mother, "I will go with him and raise him as my own child."

Moriko spoke to her mother, "Dara and I will take Aimi and raise her as our own."

Suzume nodded, "Please take care of our house in Nara for us. It contains enough love for any hardship to come, and don't forget the chest under the bedroom."

Shiyo looked as if she wanted to ask, but did not. "I know a man in Canada, his name is Ashley Childress and he will help as Ray grows up, he is a good man."

Suzume smiled, "I am content. I feel the call of the entire universe, and so I will depart now."

"Please do not, my daughter. Please stay with me here and continue your studies. I suspect you will be free to move deeply into the Yokai magic. I have touched all the council and we award seven tails to you for saving Nara. I am sorry we could not award you nine."

Suzume was already far deeper into the Yokai magic than she had been, she looked around Japan, at all the destruction of the war, and she considered Shiyo and the council, still clinging to their old prejudice against outsiders. Still, with a wry smile,

Suzume bowed and thanked Shiyo for the honour.

As it turned out, Suzume did become a great magician, and she could have given herself a new body at any time, but without Ray, what would be the point. She remained disembodied.

Aiko and Ray, Canada 1945

After the frantic events of the bombing, the family spent a few days saying good bye to Ray, all the kids holding him and smothering him with kisses. During that time, the Emperor ordered a surrender. The Russians had taken a couple of northern islands, but no more. The world seemed to be in limbo.

Coyote had vanished, and Aiko moved Ray to their new home through the Keen world, where she explained what had happened. The cousins promised to keep silent about his past and allow him to grow up again in peace. Aiko was in the cafe with Tomas, Ray asleep in a basket beside them.

"I am so very sorry about what happened to you and to the family, Aiko. You know I have been a friend to Ray for centuries, and it hurts me to see him this way."

"Thank you Tomas, we will wait and see how he grows. I hope

back to a good man again."

"He seems to be a good baby at least. This may be a good thing for him, he was heart-sick of war and his past. He once told me that he saw all the faces of those he loved, moving past like a time-lapse movie. He can grow up in Guelph where the war has touched only lightly. Canada is under the umbrella of the Americans and war will not reach that land any time soon."

"Do you know the place? This Guelph?"

"I know Ashley Childress, he has been alive for much longer than Ray and I, he's a fighter who seeks to rest. He is a good man and will watch over you. You won't be alone in your new home, there are many spirit beings, as the Canadians call them, who find their way to Ashley. Look for a place called Jim's Lunch Counter, that is where he is now."

"What of you, Tomas, are you content?"

"I am, I grow cattle, I ride, and sometimes people visit my house far from any city. I come here to visit, and I hope to see you here, often."

"I will certainly visit you here. I've known this cafe all my life. Now, before he wakes up, I should take Ray to our own new home and meet this Ashley."

"He goes by Jim, tell him everything, trust him completely, he will help you get settled. Goodbye Aiko, and grow well cousin,

I will perhaps meet you again when you have grown enough to roughhouse with the other children."

Jim was just wiping down the counter-top when he looked up at the door. A moment later, a pretty young girl walked in with a baby in a basket.

"Welcome to the lunch counter, what can I get you?"

"I would welcome a coffee, thank you, are you Jim?"

"I am indeed. I have been asked to look out for you, are you Aiko?"

"I feel I should be Aileen, now that I've taken on a more western appearance."

"Clever, Aiko and Keen, it's good to meet you Aileen, and this is young Ray?"

"He's my father, but needs to grow up again. Can you help us to settle here?"

"Of course I can. First sit and breathe for a while, there's no rush any more. The war is fully over and it's the time to allow some space for healing."

"You are not what I expected, Jim, Tomas said you were a

soldier."

"Ah, well I am, I suppose, a bit of whatever you need. I trained long ago as a Shaman, so I know a bit about healing. I feel that you are also a healer."

"I worked with my father to heal the wounded and the sick in Nara and..."

Aiko dropped her face and began to cry quietly. It was all too much, the war, the terribly wounded men and women, and here she was in a strange place, cut off from her family. Jim quietly set a piece of banana loaf, and some napkins beside her and moved down the counter to look in on the baby. "Hello Ray, I have a feeling you are going to grow into a good man, you certainly have a wonderful family. You're going to be loved and you will get into all sorts of trouble. It will be fun."

A tall, strikingly handsome man came into the lunch counter. Jim was startled that he didn't know he was coming toward the door, but in the next moment, he recognized Coyote.

"Good to see you old friend. What can I get for you?"

"Coffee please, and a bit of advice."

"Coffee is easy, for the advice, I will try my best."

"Do you think I could live here? I seem to be attracted to this town."

"You will fit right in, you've forgotten again haven't you?"

"I think so, I think so. This is a lovely baby, I feel like I might know him."

"You will, my friend, and this is his mother, Aileen."

Coyote bowed, and offered his hand. Aileen looked at Jim, who knew the whole story from Shiyo. He nodded and she shook hands with Coyote as if meeting him for the first time.

Jim wrinkled his nose, "We just happen to have some baby things here, in a box that someone left behind. There are diapers and some formula which you might find useful, the diapers especially, I suspect."

Aileen smiled her thanks and took the baby over to a table to change him. While she was doing that, a tall young man came through the door. "Hello Jim, my usual please."

"Hello Nick, glad you dropped in, there's someone you should meet, a new mother in town. She will probably need a doctor at some point. She certainly needs a room to live in, and you've got that spare bedroom."

"Lovely, and is this the wee patient?"

"This is Ray, and I'm Aileen."

“I’m Nick. He’s a beautiful baby, may I check him?”

“Yes of course.”

“He’s strong, has muscles like a much older child. Those eyes, it’s like he’s seen a lot, this one will be a handful, but he’s perfectly healthy. Extremely healthy, actually.”

Aileen looked at Jim, who said, “Dr. Scott has seen many spirit patients, Aileen, you can trust him. Coyote here could vouch for him but he’s forgotten too much again.”

Nick looked up, “Really? Is he all right?”

“He’ll be fine, it will come back to him, as much as he tries to forget who he is, he remembers what he needs to, eventually.”

“You know best, Jim, if he needs my help, let me know.”

“You know I will. How about that spare room?”

“What? Oh yes of course, it would be a great help. Doctors get lots of respect, but not a lot of money. You’re most welcome to come live with me Aileen.”

“That’s settled then, I’ve got her first two month’s rent right here, Nick. That should be enough time to get you settled in, Aileen.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that, I’ve got some money with me

here.”

“It’s not charity, dear, Tomas has given me a large sum from Ray’s, shall we say, inheritance and I’ve promised to manage it for him. One of the things I do around here for some folks.”

Aileen looked like she was going to cry again, “I thought I’d be alone and a stranger here, you have been so kind, all of you.”

“Never alone or a stranger in Guelph, Shiyo sent you here where you would find friends and support, girl, you are among friends, even Mr. Scruffy here, when he remembers, will be your friend.”

Coyote seemed to understand and smiled a brilliant smile.

Nick picked up Ray’s basket and said, “Shall we get you settled, my house isn’t far from here and it’s a lovely day for a walk.”

He offered his arm to Aileen and she took it happily. The two strolled through the town, Nick pointing out things of interest, and the people of the town pointing out the woman of interest on the doctor’s arm. It was a long way from the destruction of Nara and the rest of Japan.

Doctor Nick Scott

"Glad you're here Dr. Scott, I'd like you to have a look at Stan's arm."

Stan scowled, "I'm telling you Jim, I'm fine."

"You're not you know, you snapped that tooth off in the muscle and it needs to come out."

"A what? Oh never mind, Stan I'm a pretty good doctor, almost never lose a patient, let me have a look."

Nick took Stan's arm and looked carefully at it. He probed it from both sides with his thumbs and Stan never winced. Fine, no need to freeze it, he took a pair of forceps from his bag and poured alcohol over them, and over Stan's arm. Inserting them in the wound he got hold of whatever it was and wiggled it out. It was like the muscles were already growing over it, yet the wound was fresh.

Getting it out, Nick took a good look at it, "What the hell kind of animal did this come from?"

Stan snorted, "Werewolf, the little shit thought he could run me off my territory. I left him out past the town limits as a warning."

Nick had been getting sutures out of his bag when he froze,

"Werewolf?"

"Sure, big teeth, little brains."

Nick looked at Jim, who shrugged, "You won't remember this tomorrow, so I might as well tell you that Stan here is a native spirit, Nanabozo in fact, and the Werewolf was newly arrived from Europe."

Nick looked at Jim for a moment longer, "I see, well I'll just..."

Stan's wound had healed over and you couldn't tell he'd been bitten, "Uh, if that was a Werewolf bite, will you turn into a Werewolf?"

"Nah, sissy little things, if I bite them they turn into me. Thanks Doc, I'll head out now, see ya Jim."

Nick put his things away and sat down at the counter, "I don't suppose you've got anything stronger than coffee back there do you Jim?"

Jim grinned and pulled a bottle of rum from under the table and filled a cup half way up, topping it off with coffee.

"Thanks, you say I won't remember this tomorrow?"

"Nope, it's the way most humans work, don't see what they don't believe."

"Well I believe I need this coffee," and the doctor drained the cup.

As it turned out, Dr. Scott did remember. The next day he dropped in to the lunch counter, asking Jim how Stan felt.

"Interesting, I wouldn't have pegged you as a seer, Nick. Stan's just fine. Listen, can I call you if any of the other spirit beings around here need some medical help?"

"I'm a doctor, Jim, of course you can."

As it turned out, Nick had quite a few patients from both worlds, and developed a good reputation as a man who could sew up a wound and keep silent about it when he should.

Several years later, Jim asked him to come meet someone at the shop, and when he did, he was stunned. Aileen was beautiful, as was her baby. When Jim suggested they take his spare room, Nick didn't hesitate.

Several months later, Aileen had more or less taken over Nick's life. She washed his clothes, cleaned the house, revived the gardens, which had fallen into ruin, and generally reorganized the place. Nick was making his notes one evening when Aileen came to perch on the arm of his chair and watched for a few minutes. "I can keep those records for you Nick, if you'd like me to, no sense you staying up late to do it."

And so she took over half his work in his practice. Not only

that, but one day when a patient came in with some behavioural problems, Aileen happened to bustle in to the treatment room, as if she'd forgotten it was occupied. "Oh, I'm so sorry, I'll just tidy up a bit, OK?"

Nick looked at her closely, he could tell something was happening. He kept quiet as Aileen bustled around and stopped in front of the patient.

"Oh, you have something in your eye, let me see."

The next thing Nick knew, the patient was frozen while Aileen hummed a little tune to herself and continued to stare into the patient's eyes.

"That should do it," she said as she turned and walked out of the room.

Nick looked at the patient who was blinking, looking confused, then smiled. "I feel like a vast cloud has lifted from me, Doctor, thank you."

Nick nodded and did a general checkup, all seemed normal. He escorted the patient out and then went into the kitchen to find Aileen waiting with two cups of tea. He sat and looked at her.

"A chemical imbalance, I adjusted it. I used to do that sort of work with my father back in Japan. I hope you aren't upset, I could feel the problem, it wasn't hard to fix."

Nick lifted his tea and sipped, he shook his head and smiled.

After that, Aileen would bustle in sometimes and while seeming to be a bit of an absent minded housekeeper, would make a small adjustment here and there.

The two walked through the town every day, and the large fire damage that had happened earlier that year never failed to bring tears to Aileen's eyes as she remembered Nara.

With little more than 20,000 people in the town, the couple was noticed, mostly with kindness. Dr. Scott was getting on in years, and it was good to see him with a young woman. It surprised nobody that he had taken in her baby as well.

More than once, during their strolls, someone ran up to the couple, and told them of a medical emergency. They were never out of touch it seemed, and the Doctor took to putting his medical bag in the baby carriage.

On one of those calls, they found a workman had fallen on a railing spike from the floor above, and was in considerable pain. Aileen got there as several men were trying to lift him off the spike. The man was in agony and she shouted for the helpers to stop. As Nick arrived to look at the wound, Aileen took the man's head in her hands. To the onlookers it seemed as if the man had fainted at that moment. Nick finished his examination and told the men to lift slowly and steadily. As the spike came out of his body, Aileen could see the internal damage, and she repaired it as the spike passed.

Nick looked at her and she nodded, by then the two of them had developed a sort of telepathic understanding. Nick sewed the outside wounds shut saying, "Thankfully the spike missed the important bits."

The man was taken to Nick's home and he was well on the way to recovery by the end of the week.

"You can do that?"

"I've always been able to repair internal damage, ever since I was a kid. It amazed me that my sisters and parents couldn't do it, it seems simple to me, just look at what's different and make it the same."

It was a good thing that records weren't very widespread in those days, from that moment on, Nick Scott had an almost perfect accident survival rate amongst his patients.

The day the workman was helped back to his own house, Nick asked Aileen to sit down at the kitchen table.

"Aileen, you and Ray have been the best thing to happen to me in my life, I mean that. Would you marry me?"

"Nick, Doctors don't marry their housekeepers."

"You'd be surprised, but who cares, I love you and I want you to be with me always. Please, marry me."

"I won't, but I will happily share your bed."

With that, Aileen stood and took Nick's hand, as she was leading him to the bedroom she looked up at him and said, "You'd better know what to do, because I certainly don't."

Nick and Aileen get Married

"I'm using a condom so she doesn't get pregnant, she keeps telling me she won't marry me."

Jim looked hard at Nick, "You of all people should know that birth control is illegal, Doctor."

"Of course I know, and I also know the damage that law causes, the deaths it brings."

Jim smiled and nodded, "Well you don't have to use a condom, spirit beings like Aileen can control their pregnancies, unless Japanese spirits are different. She won't get pregnant until she wants to."

"Well I'd love to have a baby with her, and before Ray gets too old to enjoy a sibling, but why won't she marry me?"

"For one thing, she won't get older while you do. These beings

live forever unless something kills them. Hell you know I'm the same, and it's why I'm not married. Sex yes, attachments that are brief, yes, but we outlive too many people."

"I don't mind that I'll get old while she doesn't."

"You're missing the point. You will get old and die and she will still be there. I'm telling you, burying hundreds of years worth of loved ones is not fun."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that."

"And she doesn't have papers, she just dropped in to town one day. Now if it comes to that, I can get papers for you, but you really need to talk to her about what happens in fifty years, and you need to listen to her side of it."

"Damn it, I love her so much."

"Then tell her so, I suspect she loves you too, or she wouldn't be in your bed."

Late that night, while Nick and Aileen lay in their bed, relaxed, Nick said, "I'm sorry 'leen, I was being selfish, I didn't understand the problems with human and Kitsune marriages. I'll withdraw my question of marriage."

"You will like hell, Nick Scott. You do that and you'll drift away from me and I don't want that. I've seen lots of friends die, and I'll pay that price again. I was most worried what

would happen if we tried to marry and it was found out that I'm not even Canadian. I talked to Jim and he says he can fix that, so if you still want to marry me, I want to marry you and all the good people of this town can stop gossiping."

"Really, and what about a baby? Is that possible? Would you like to have a baby with me?"

"Yes it's possible, Nick, and we can have dozens if you want... in fact..."

"What? Jim said you can prevent getting pregnant."

"And I can allow it too, you dear sweet man. Yes, as of right now I'm pregnant, will a girl be OK with you?"

"You're damned right it will be. Um, should we be careful?"

"You're a doctor? It's about two cells big right now, I think a bit of jostling would be just fine."

Young Mavis, named after Nick's mother, was born in the proper number of months after they were married, as befit a respectable doctor in a small town. Mavis and Ray Scott grew up happy and very healthy, they got a few of the usual childhood diseases, but avoided Polio and the other serious illnesses.

The two were like twins, although a year or two apart, Mavis

was the bigger sibling, while Ray was a year ahead of her in school. Between them they fought the bullies and Mavis especially made it a special point to beat the hell out of any kid that called Ray a bastard.

The kids always had the time to speak with the disabled veterans that sold pencils on the street, and they always found a bit of change in their pockets as well. To the tsks and clucks of the neighbourhood women, the kids seemed to grow up wild, although they were always polite to adults. It was just that they always seemed to be muddy from the river, or scratched from climbing trees. Still, when the local pervert tried to feel up Mavis, he developed a terrible case of twisted limbs and burning, itchy skin. Mavis winked at Ray when this happened, she had been about to punch her attacker in the throat.

Aileen, who had studied with the Yokai, taught both kids to fight in the normal way, so they really had no trouble with anyone growing up.

Aileen wondered that Mavis seemed totally human. She seemed to have no powers at all, except that she was a seer, like her father. Mavis knew many the spirits in town and when she was fourteen, she started working with Jim at the lunch counter.

While the kids grew up, Nick grew older, and Aileen grew older along with him. They were just another family in the town, nobody remarkable.

Although, things did seem to go a bit haywire when that Ray Scott boy was around.

A couple of years after she started to work for Jim, Mavis met Joey Cleary, a handsome fellow who worked in a car repair shop. They went out for several years, and Joey worked his way up to owning a car dealership in town. When Mavis was 19, she married Joey.

She was never sure what had happened, but once she married and moved into their new house, Joey seemed to have less and less time to spend with her. He was busy with the business and, Mavis suspected, with certain other women in town. Still, he was kind to her and they got along well enough.

In 1965, Dr. Nick Scott died peacefully in his bed, after a long and happy life of service to the town. Aileen buried him, and then, a year later, left town for South America with Ray. Mavis stayed with her husband and was sorry to see her mother and brother leave, but such was life.

“We have to go, Ray, Guelph is too small for us to stay, we will go stay with your uncle Tomas in Argentina, it will be a break, and I can be young again.”

“What about Mavis, why isn’t she coming along?”

“She has her own life now, she’s going to stay.”

“She’s not very happy though.”

“If she wants to come to Argentina, Jim can get in touch with us, don’t worry.”

Ray seemed about sixteen, younger by several years than his sister, his recovery had been difficult, but he was getting there. The prospect of going to South America did appeal to him, the girls in town were starting to wonder why they seemed to be growing so much more quickly than he did. Fine, he’d find other girls, he was sure.

Still, Ray talked seriously with Mavis, “Are you sure you don’t want to come, that husband of yours isn’t much use to you.”

“He’s fine, Ray, he will settle down soon I’m sure. Anyway, I’ve got too much of a life here, you and Mom go and start over, I’m not a spirit being like you two, I’m going to grow old here in Guelph.”

“OK as long as you’re sure, if you change your mind, get Jim to get hold of us.”

“You know I will baby brother, you take care of Mom and you take care of you as well. Now give me a kiss and get going.”

Ray held on to Mavis for a long time, she gave him a small nudge, “Go on,” and he stepped away. With a wave, he stepped sideways to the Keen world where his mother and Tomas were waiting in the cafe.

Mavis Cleary

“Don’t fret, Ray, you can come back to this world as much as you want, you have friends here.”

“But Tomas, I’ll miss Mavis, you say I can’t go back to Guelph.”

“It’s for the best, there needs to be a break for you. Your mother can ease the memories if they bother you.”

“Maybe, but not now.”

As the three moved to Argentina, Ray didn’t need to have his memories of Guelph altered by his mother. He forgot naturally. In all the time he was growing up, he had never been told his mother was actually his daughter. Nobody thought much about it, to tell the truth. Tomas seemed to treat him more as a friend than as a nephew, but that wasn’t terribly surprising, as far as Ray was concerned, he was happy enough that Tomas didn’t try to be a father to him.

Argentina was big, and empty, and quiet out on the ranch. The Keens avoided most of the country’s political disruptions and lived a peaceful life. Aileen and Tomas became close, and Ray was happy for them both. As it turned out, Ray kept growing very slowly, but he learned how to dance well, giving him a constant stream of dance and romantic partners who never

stayed long enough to discover his slow growth. In short, it was a happy time.

Mavis Cleary had no complaints. She had a husband and a house, she had a part time job at the lunch counter that got her out to meet people. Unfortunately, she had no children, something she would have loved. The reason was that her husband, for all his playing around with the women of the town, was sterile, the result of a sexually transmitted disease he'd picked up in his teen years.

Mavis had a close friendship with Jim, but it was uncertain that she had an intimate relationship with him. Still, Joey was the jealous type, as most philanderers are, and he heard rumours which made him tell Mavis to quit her job. Since he earned lots of money, it wasn't a hardship to quit and so Mavis did.

They drifted along for several years, until a meeting on the street with Coyote made Mavis start to think. She had first met Coyote years before, at the lunch counter, and she had always admired his looks. She invited him for lunch.

"Hello, nice to see you again, thanks for coming."

"A pleasure as always fair lady," Coyote grinned that impossible grin of his, which made Mavis' heart flutter.

"Would you like to order lunch?"

Mavis, being a seer, recognized that Coyote was a spirit being, which made her wonder why he had never taken a human

name. Yet no humans ever seemed to notice and they called him Coyote in the same way they'd have said 'John Smith'. Part of his power, Mavis thought. Just what was the rest of his power, she wondered, he was strong, she could feel that, but he never seemed to do anything much. He wandered around town somewhat absent-mindedly, and Jim seemed to keep an eye on him. Mavis wondered if he had somehow had an accident that made him lose his memory.

“Let’s eat and then go for a walk, I enjoy walking with you Coyote, maybe along the river?”

“Of course, let’s do that.”

One day Mavis asked, “You’re a spirit being, I know that, but what are you, or should I say who?”

Coyote looked at her, “You know, I’m not at all sure. Jim says I made myself forget what I can do. I mean, I’m Coyote, and the legends say I sang the world into being, but I really can’t see me doing that sort of thing.”

“That would make you the most powerful being on this world wouldn’t it?”

“I suppose so, but honestly Mav, I haven’t a clue. Jim says I may remember some day.”

They were down by the river, and something came toward them, something large, stinking and loud. Mavis called, “Ray,

stop messing around,” before she realized her brother was a long way away. She looked at Coyote, who seemed not to have noticed the creature.

“Coyote, what’s that thing?”

“Oh, it’s Wendigo, funny, you don’t usually see them this far south, wrong sort of place for people to starve enough to eat a human.”

“What!”

“They’re spirits that inhabit humans who have eaten other humans, usually because they are starving.”

“Uh, it’s coming at us, Coy.”

“Oh, yes I guess I should...” and Coyote waved a dismissive hand at the thing. There was a horrid scream, and some sort of wisp came out of the creature. The creature itself fell in a heap and seemed to be one of the veterans that hung around outside town in a bush camp. Mavis had seen him begging downtown.

The man seemed not to know where he was, Mavis looked at Coyote who didn’t seem concerned. She walked over to the poor wretch, dug five dollars out of her purse and said, “You know where Jim’s lunch counter is?”

The man finally focused on Mavis and after a moment, nodded yes.

“Go there and Jim will feed you and take care of you, OK?”

The man nodded again and shuffled off toward the diner, which wasn't far away.

“Coyote, did you know you could do that?”

“Do what?”

“Destroy a Wendigo?”

“No, well yes, now I remember, I can do that.”

Mavis took his arm again and shrugged. She now had an idea of how powerful he was, she guessed.

Over the next few weeks, Mavis found herself more and more attracted to him, and he seemed to return the affection. Eventually, on one of those weeks when Joey was ‘on a business trip’, which meant he was shacked up with some girl, Mavis took Coyote to her bed.

It was every bit as wonderful as she'd imagined it would be. Sex with Joey had been OK, but Coyote made her explode, she actually saw stars when she, well, Mavis figured that was an orgasm. When she had an orgasm.

Coyote showed every sign of having enjoyed it as well, and he suggested that they repeat the performance again some time.

Mavis suggested the next afternoon at his apartment.

The affair went on for a couple of months, and one day Mavis discovered she was pregnant. This was a dead giveaway to Joey that she had been unfaithful, after all, he knew he was sterile so it must have been someone else's kid.

Joey was furious, he ranted and raved and worked himself up enough that he walked over to Mavis and pulled his fist back to hit her. Mavis dropped him with one punch.

Joey's face showed shock and surprise when he looked up at her from the floor. His stupid, obedient wife seemed to be someone else.

Mavis was also a bit shocked, she hadn't punched anyone since she was a kid, but she felt no guilt about doing it. In fact, since she was pregnant, she had been feeling more strong and definitely more assertive. She wasn't going to take any shit from anyone, especially if they threatened her baby.

By the time Joey got onto his feet, Mavis had it worked out, "You can keep your business and you can move in with one of your girlfriends. This house is mine. You've got thirty minutes to get your stuff out, after that you're gone. Do you understand me?"

Joey nodded, but with a sly look in his face that told Mavis he had convinced himself she had sucker punched him, he lunged at her. She hammered him in the solar plexus and as he doubled

over, she broke his nose with her knee, for the second time in as many minutes.

“Listen you shit, I can take you, so unless you want to sneak up and knife me when I’m not looking, you’re out of here. And if you ever do try to attack me again, I will break both your arms and cut off your useless balls before I stomp your throat. You understand me?”

Joey was convinced, and he was out of the house in minutes. Mavis dumped his stuff on the front lawn, so that the townsfolk saw that she had finally got rid of the jerk.

Mother of Gods

“Jim, I don’t know what the hell made me knock him down, or what made me threaten to stomp his throat.”

“Mother of Gods.”

“What?”

“It’s an old and very rare sort of magical condition, I suppose it could be called ‘mother of heroes’. It’s a woman who is attracted to Gods, and who can pull a child from them.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“No, I’m serious, every few generations you get someone who appears to be perfectly human, but who seems to be catnip to spirit beings. You’ve heard of Heracles? Son of Zeus and a supposedly mortal woman. There are lots of examples, they’re sometimes called the Demi-gods.”

“So what makes you think I’m one of those?”

“Well, your increased tendency to defend yourself while you’re carrying Coyote’s child, for one. The fact that you got Coyote into your bed for another, he’s really not all that attracted to anyone, but he’s in love with you.”

“I love him too. Jim what’s wrong with him? Why is he so vague, I’m sure he’s lost his memory.”

“He has, Mavis, he made himself forget what he is. He really did sing the world into being, and he’s destroyed and created it several times in an attempt to make it right. The problem is, he cares too much, and he has to fiddle with it. It always screws up because of the creatures in it, us humans this time.”

Mavis’ mouth dropped open, “But why did he make himself forget that?”

“Believe it or not, because of your brother. He put Ray in charge of deciding if he would destroy the world again, and Ray convinced him that he should leave well enough alone. I hear Coyote told the other tricksters to look after it instead.”

“Tricksters?”

“Coyote is the original trickster, always fooling around. It’s actually him trying to fix things, and things screwing up, mostly because of us clever humans. So he got called a trickster, and those who share his attributes are called tricksters as well, Crow, Raven, your brother, the Reynard, Kitsune, there’s always a trickster in every culture, some spirit being that tries to help humans be a bit less... well a bit less human. A bit less likely to screw things up permanently.”

“Jesus, Jim, that makes Coyote seem frightening.”

“Oh he is, but like I said, he makes himself forget. He really can end the world, he can bend reality, mess with time maybe. He’s frightening.”

“But he’s always so gentle with me.”

“He’s a good being, massive power doesn’t always corrupt. It’s just that he wants too much to help, and so he forgets.”

“That is one of the saddest things I’ve ever heard, Jim.”

“That’s because you’re a good woman. Most people would just want to destroy him out of fear.”

“You’re joking.”

“No. Look, don’t worry too much about it. He’s a bit outside of reality, he created the world so he’s a bit outside of it, there’s very few beings who could hurt him. Not only that, there are beings that look after him, try to keep things from spinning out of control. He’s one of the reasons we have some very powerful beings here in town.”

“Jim, I’ve asked him to move in with me.”

“Good, he’s a bit of a lost child on his own, you will do him a lot of good.”

Mavis nodded, she had a lot to think about, but mostly she was even more concerned for Coyote. She would move him in with her and protect him as well as his child.

This she did. Coyote moved in and the town gossiped for a while, then accepted it with a grin and a nudge. Coyote really was a handsome fellow and Mavis was a lucky woman.

They had a son, and they named him Carl Cleary. Mavis had learned a thing or two from her brother, and had saved quite a lot of money over the years through buying and selling cars on the side. She also invested in several businesses in town.

Carl grew up to be a normal kid as far as anyone could tell, but one incident when he was three was to mark him forever.

Apparently Joey Cleary couldn’t handle Mavis being happy, with a new man, and worst of all, with a son. He came into the

house with a gun and yelled for Mavis. Carl saw him standing there, ready to kill his mother and he didn't know what to do. Mavis, worried for Carl, did nothing, but just as Joey's finger was tightening on the trigger, Coyote was there. He had the rifle in one hand, and Joey in the other. Coyote squeezed and the gun was a wreck, bent and then snapped in half. Neither of the pieces hit the floor, they were gone.

Coyote looked into Joey's eyes, and Joey began to scream. He was going to come back and kill all three, and then burn the house down.

Coyote listened for a few moments and then said, very calmly, "Oh fuck it."

Joey was gone, as was any memory of his existence, as was any record that he had ever lived. Just gone.

Unfortunately, Carl was not included in the forgetting, and he screamed. He had watched his father make a man disappear, and he could never convince anyone that he had. For the rest of his life, he would deny what he knew to be true. Apparently Carl's power was that no amount of magic, even from Coyote, could affect him.

Mavis was now the owner of Mavis Motors, and Coyote? Coyote looked an apology to Mavis and turned himself into a scruffy dog, who lived with the family until Carl was grown, then wandered off. Mavis, who was not included in the forgetting, let him go. She had a good idea of what that had

cost Coyote. When she saw him around town she would sit with him for a while and pet him, talking all the time about her life, and about Carl.

Because of that, she got a reputation for being a bit odd, but the businesses she owned were doing well, and employed many people. Success and respect bought a lot of tolerance toward a woman who talked to dogs. It was a shame that Coyote had left her, but he was like that wasn't he? Here one year and gone the next.

Carl kept mostly to himself after trying to tell people about that day when he was three. He went to school, came home and played with his dog, who went everywhere with him, and when he was old enough, Carl took a job in the family car dealership.

Mavis, the Mother of Gods never had another child. Coyote had become a dog, to avoid hurting Carl any more, and by the time Carl had grown up and Coyote left, Mavis had no desire for another man. Being comfortable around spirit beings, she did eventually meet many of the beings in the town, which alienated her a bit from her son. She could see them, knew they existed, but since magic didn't work on Carl, she could never convince him that they existed.

In actual fact, he knew they did, he'd seen his father turn into his dog, but he pushed the knowledge down deep and it would stay there. He loved his mother and didn't argue with her about her strange friends, but he would have nothing to do with them.

Carl and Lucy

“It just won’t run,” Lucy said, and not for the first time. She had taken her car to Carl’s dealership ten or twelve times since she had bought it.

Carl would check it over and find nothing wrong, he would take it out for a drive, usually with Lucy beside him and he would ask her what was wrong. She would never answer, but would just look at him and smile.

Lucy was a classmate from high school, and had always been sweet on Carl. Carl, on the other hand, was a little bit thick.

"Lucy I can't find anything wrong with the car, would you like me to take it back and you could have another model?"

"No, I like this one just fine."

"But you bring it in two or three times a week?"

Lucy sighed, "Maybe, Carl, we could talk about it over dinner tonight."

"Dinner? We can talk in the office here right now if you'd like."

Lucy was having trouble believing the boy could be that dense. There were several boys in town chasing after her, but she had

set her eyes on the one guy who seemed to be oblivious to her charms. She stepped beside Carl and put her arm through his, "No, Carl, I would like to discuss my car over dinner tonight. Are you free?"

Carl wasn't completely stupid, he just had a hard time believing that any girl could be interested in him. The message was slowly filtering through.

"How about Jim's Lunch Counter? That's where I usually eat dinner before going home."

Lucy almost gave up right then, but she was stubborn. Carefully enunciating every word, she said, "Carl I will pick you up at five o'clock tonight, in this lemon of a car, and we will go to a decent place to eat. I will pick it, and I will pay, OK?"

Carl nodded and Lucy let go of his arm. Shaking her head, she got into her car and drove home to get dressed. "This is a lot more work than I thought it would be," she said to herself.

That dinner was followed by a few more, then a couple of drives out to Rockwood, to the beach at Port Dover, the market in St. Jacobs, where Lucy would buy things to cook for Carl. They did all the things that dating couples do, mostly because they were a dating couple.

Eventually came a drive to Lucy's apartment for dinner, but somehow Carl didn't get home that evening. He had spent the

night with Lucy. He would spend every night with her from that evening on, especially when Lucy told him to get his clothing from home and store it in the space she had made for him in her closet and her dresser drawers. Carl was a bit surprised to find his mother had folded and packed his things.

Shortly after that, Lucy told Carl they were getting married and he nodded. He still didn't know what Lucy saw in him, but he wasn't stupid enough to turn down the chance to be with her. Carl had long before noticed just what a wonderful girl she was.

Lucy, for her part, was amazed that Carl had resisted every single charm she had. She was certain that he was completely immune to her magic, and that he loved her for who she was, not for what she could do. Still, she shook her head at the amount of work she had done to get him to marry her. 'Well, anything worth while is worth working for,' she said to herself.

Mavis was over the moon that Carl had found someone. She approved of Lucy, who was obviously a girl with some sort of magic in her. It was mild, but perhaps she could bring the magic into Carl's life that Mavis had never been able to do.

As it turned out, Lucy was no more able to affect Carl than any other magical being, but she brought magic into his life nevertheless. She understood instinctively that with a couple, it was the two of them against the world. So many other couples seemed to feel it was their duty to bite at one other one until the other one got better. Lucy understood that it wasn't her job to

change Carl, or his to change her. It was their job to appreciate and support each other, and that was magical indeed. Lucy brought Carl love, companionship, and she was a partner in his work. It turned out she was a damned good mechanic in her own right, and she was in the dealership with Carl most days.

When Carl thought back on the days when she was bringing in her car to be fixed, he would smile at that idiot boy who couldn't see what was in front of him. Thank goodness Lucy was stubborn.

Mavis had long ago signed over the dealership to Carl and Lucy, keeping her investment portfolio going. Her brother Ray would be proud of her, he had taught her well. Mavis wondered, once in a while, where he had learned, but the boy read and read and read. He probably picked it up from books.

She hadn't seen Ray or her mother for decades, but she knew they were with Uncle Tomas and would be safe. There were few people in town now who asked how she was doing since Coyote left, and almost nobody knew she had a brother somewhere. It was best that way. Mavis focused on her son and his wife.

Mavis had almost reconciled herself to not being a grandmother when Lucy dropped in for tea one day. "Mother, how would you feel about being a grandmother?"

"You're pregnant dear?"

"Not yet, but I think it's about time."

"What does Carl say?"

"Carl? What's he got to do with it?"

Mavis laughed, as did Lucy. Her daughter-in-law had a point, Carl was either happy go lucky or oblivious, Mavis had never quite decided, but he would go along with whatever the women decided.

"My dear, I would be delighted to be a grandmother, and I claim rights to babysit at least seven days in every week."

"OK it's a deal, now I just have to get Carl into bed and working hard."

Mavis covered her ears, "You're not supposed to tell me things like that, Lucy."

"Considering the advice you've given me over the years, I would think that's exactly what I should be doing, Mother."

Lucy had lost her parents at a young age, and even before she was married, had turned to Mavis for a lot of the advice her own mother would have given her. It was Mavis who had suggested moving Carl out of the house and into their apartment. Mavis, for her part, was known in town as being a

famous advice-giver, whether or not it was desired.

Both women had a good laugh and finished their tea with the gossip around town. This did not include any of the goings-on of the spirit beings. Out of respect for her son, Mavis never talked to Lucy or Carl about that.

As it turned out, Lucy got pregnant that very night.

Tilly Cleary

Tilly Cleary was a beautiful baby. The birth was easy, maybe the famous smooth pregnancies of the Keen girls included the wives of the Keen boys.

Mavis doted on the new baby, taking her for most of the day while Carl and Lucy ran the business. The child was quiet, happy, and definitely alert.

When Tilly was about the same age her father had seen Coyote make a man disappear, Tilly was in the garden at her grandmother's place. She was quite a way from the house when she spotted them.

"Who are you?"

"We're fairies, looking after the flowers."

"You're looking after them by taking them."

"Well, er, yes, we have to take the blooms so that the plant grows big and strong for next year."

"You're not going to take my head so I grow big and strong are you? I think I need it."

"No, no dear, we wouldn't do that."

In an aside, one of the fairies muttered, "What's up with this kid?"

"Would you like to see a magic trick little girl?"

"I'm not little, you're little, and my name is Tilly Cleary."

"Oh! This is Mavis Cleary's garden?"

"Yes my Gran takes care of these plants."

"Amscray, boys, and put the blooms back before we get seen."

Tilly plucked one of the fairies right out of the air by its wings, "Hang on, I don't think you are supposed to be taking the flowers, I'm going to call my Gran."

"Candy, quick boys, candy."

Tilly let go of the fairy she had in her hand to pick up the candy from the grass. As she did so she heard tiny little pops as the creatures disappeared from view.

The fairies reported right away to their Queen. This kid would need to be watched, and the warning signs needed to be put back up, they had no idea whose garden it was.

Tilly, in the meantime, went to show her grandmother what she'd been given by the nice creatures in the garden.

"Fairy candy, that's the best, Tilly. You can eat as much as you want, and tomorrow it will be gone. Are you going to share?"

"Of course, here you can have half."

Mavis smiled, her part was not even close to half, but Tilly had shared.

When Tilly told her parents about the creatures she'd met, Carl's face grew thunderous. He said nothing at all, but Tilly could read the signs. She never again mentioned fairies or any of the other spirit beings she could see.

For his part, Carl told Lucy that Mavis must have been reading stories to Tilly. Lucy, who had watched Carl looking at things that weren't there, nodded and smiled, "What a good imagination Tilly has."

Lucy later had a long talk about family history with Mavis.

That was when Tilly started to learn how to fight from her Grandmother. If she could see spirit beings, she was likely to be in trouble, after all, her Grandfather was Coyote, the original trickster. Mavis had no illusions that Tilly would have an ordinary ride through life.

If her brother Ray was slow to grow, Mavis watched in amazement as Tilly bloomed. She went from cute to captivating in a couple of years.

It was in the middle of elementary school when Tilly discovered boys, and they took notice of her. She was one of the few girls who had breasts. There was a great deal of running around the school yard, with hugging and kissing. A couple of knees to the groin taught the boys that Tilly was in charge of such goings-on.

Better than the human boys she mostly met, were the spirit boys. Now they were fun, and along with the hugging and kissing went a bit of groping and feeling. It never went much further, much to the disappointment of Tilly.

"Samial, I'd like to talk to you."

Samial tried to run, but his feet were glued to the sidewalk. The Queen of the Fairies walked up slowly and Samial just about peed his pants. The things he had heard she did to people.

"I see you have been playing with Tilly Cleary, boy, and trying to get a bit further than playing."

Samial couldn't speak, he tried, but he couldn't.

"A nice big Ogre boy like you, trying to take advantage of my gods-daughter..."

Samial did pee his pants at that point, he had no idea.

"And you pushed her a bit further than she wanted to go. Tsk tsk, good thing a teacher came along isn't it?"

Samial nodded, how was he going to explain to his Da that he was missing an arm.

"I tell you what my boy, you tell the other spirit boys that when Tilly drives a knee toward your crotch, you are to let her hit you. No blocking it by magic or other means, do I make myself clear?"

Samial nodded again.

"And now, I'd like you to use your full magic on me right now, this is just to make up for the one you blocked."

Samial folded up, hit the sidewalk and puked. He had used his full defensive magic, and the Queen blew right through it. She wasn't big, but Gods, she was strong.

When the starbursts of pain died down a bit, and he could look up again, the Queen was gone. The other spirit boys got told all right. Samial was the biggest and strongest of the bunch, and he made sure they felt what he had felt. A nicer, more polite group of boys you never saw after that. They waited to be invited by Tilly to play with her.

Eventually they realized that the nicer they played, the further along they got, but they were ever so sensitive to any twitch from that famous knee. Tilly was in charge.

"Another one? That soon?"

"Absolutely, Jim. She was almost strong enough to get a knee through Samial's defences, and she's like catnip to the boys, she's a Mother of Gods for sure."

"Like her grandmother."

"Yes, I know it's unlikely, but Mavis only had the one child. We're going to have to keep a close watch on Tilly. She's going to be tearing through the boys very soon."

"Can you block her?"

"Not without causing her a lot of frustration and distress, Jim, it's her nature. She'll have kids, but nothing will harm her, I swear it, I'll look over her but if she's a full blown, she will take

care of herself. We're about to have a little baby boom of spirit beings."

"What should I do, Lila?"

"I've told Mavis to send Tilly to you when she needs help. You can call me. You know how much I love kids."

"All right, I'll keep an eye out. Thanks for looking out for the family, Lila."

"What are we here for, eh Jim?"

Ray Keen Returns

About the same time Tilly was finding out about boys, Ray came back to Guelph. He was no longer Ray Cleary, but Ray Keen. He couldn't have told you exactly why he returned to the city, but it probably involved a desire to see the place where he grew up.

He came back to a great deal of money, Jim had invested well, and he handed over the bank account to Ray without comment. Jim figured it wasn't his place to advise anyone.

There were hundreds of beings who might have disagreed with that.

Ray found an apartment for himself, and from an old barn outside of town, he reclaimed his original, red and white, 1960 Corvette.

With a town full of Cameros and Firebirds, that Corvette was distinctive. Ray was noticed. Tilly, a fan of sports cars, due to the family business, noticed that car the first day Ray drove it through town. She was still in Elementary school, but as it went by she thought to herself, "I'm going to drive that car some day."

Ray was still having trouble getting things sorted in his memory. He knew he had grown up in Guelph, but he didn't remember Mavis. Ironically, he was staying in one of his sister's apartments. Mavis knew who he was, of course, but she left him alone. Jim told her he had lots of money, but was still a bit vague, as if he were a sixteen year old. Mavis figured she'd keep an eye on him, and if he got into trouble, well, she knew some people in town.

Ray took a job at a horse boarding farm out toward Rockwood, where he got on well. His horse skills were considerable, and he loved the animals. He also spent some time in the games arcades and was friendly with whoever he met. He didn't have anybody he'd call a best friend, but he was generally known as a good guy.

He was handsome, and the girls loved both him and his car. He spent quite a bit of time driving out into the country with a girl

beside him on the seat. He never took them back to his apartment because he figured that was reserved for someone special. He never quite met anyone special.

In all his time with the girls in Argentina and Guelph, he never got any of them pregnant. He had heard somewhere that you can't get pregnant your first time and he figured that was as good an explanation as any. It had never occurred to him that he was preventing the pregnancy, nobody had explained that to him, his family just assumed he knew.

It wasn't that he was completely ignorant of who he was, his Mother and Uncle Tomas had explained most things. He could change to Fox shape, step into the Keen world, and throw illusions like a good trickster. In fact, that was partly why he was back in Guelph with the 'blessing' of his Uncle. Things would probably cool down in Argentina in a couple of years.

It was doing Ray some good, being in a city, his people skills weren't great, living out on a ranch, and he was learning how to make friends.

Jim at the lunch counter was more an older advisor than a friend, but Ray learned to listen to him. In fact, Ray became one of Jim's 'irregulars', a fellow to call on when trouble showed up.

Ray parked his car and headed toward the lunch counter. Outside was a crow who was hopping from foot to foot, head to one side and then to the other.

"Jim called for me, what's up, Crow?"

"The name's Caw, Fox, and there's trouble inside, Ray."

"Should I go in?"

"Just a warning, Jim might need some help, it's Xaalajaat."

"Who?"

"Copper Woman, she's in there wanting Jim to tell her where Nanaboza is."

"Who?"

"Stan. Are you slow, boy?"

"I just don't get the native names, that's all."

"Well at least you didn't say Indian. Look, just watch your ass, she's damned powerful, been around over ten thousand years."

"How should I play it when I go in?"

"I dunno, maybe don't be yourself?"

Ray rolled his eyes and pulled open the door. Inside he found Jim leaned on the bar, right next to the drawer that held his broken knife, the one he cut onions with. Ray wondered if that

was just chance, or if he wanted it handy.

Ray looked at the woman sitting on the stool. There was something... as he looked further he realized she had metal legs. They didn't quite bend far enough at the knee, like they were a bit rusty. No not rusty, corroded, they were copper.

Ray sat down right next to the woman, she was gorgeous. She was also pissed and Ray figured he might calm things down a bit by being himself.

"Hi. My name's Ray, mind if I sit here?"

She turned her face to him and he almost fell off the stool. She had eyes. Amazing eyes. Shiny, golden eyes that seemed to look right through his skull. Were her eyes copper too?"

"Fox, you can sit anywhere you want. What the hell are you anyway? You look like a kid but there's years on you."

"What? Um I'm sixteen."

"You're not you know. Don't play games with me."

"Well, OK I was born in 1945."

"Still lying."

The woman turned back to Jim, "Nanaboza. Now. I don't have a lot of time."

"What do you mean? I was born in 1945. Why are you calling me a liar?"

Jim laid a hand on Ray's arm and shook his head. "Xaalajaat was just telling me a story, Ray. It's quite interesting."

The woman looked at Jim again, "I was?"

"Yes, the one about the baby and why you are here."

"That was centuries ago. Mouse woman and I married a couple of men and went underseas to get a Haida woman back from the God there. Mouse woman ended up pregnant and I ended up with my legs cut off, I had to make some new ones. When we got the woman back, the Sea God captured me and traded me. I got traded all the way back here to the lakes where I was forced to tell the Great Lynx how to work copper. While I was here, Nanabozo treated me poorly, and that's the story."

"To hear Mishelle tell the story, she taught you how to work copper."

The woman's eyes flashed, "She and I are due for a discussion, right after I take my eyes back from Nanabozo."

Jim looked sharply at Ray, who thought 'here it comes.'

Sure enough, Jim said, "That's quite a story, it sounds like you may have left a bit out, but we value stories in here. I tell you

what, Ray here knows where Stan lives, maybe he can drive you over there."

Zaat, as Ray was beginning to think of her, turned those eyes on him again. 'Here goes,' he thought to himself.

"Sure, but what kind of eyes does Stan have? I can't imagine you wanting to have regular eyes. Would you mind if I looked through one of yours to see what you see?"

The woman stared at him, and it felt like she was inspecting the inside of his skull again. "You have a car?"

"Sure, it's parked outside."

Zaat looked at Jim, "You and I will have a talk later."

Jim didn't look too worried, Ray hoped that didn't mean he figured Ray was in for the beating he was due, Ray had no more intention to giving up Stan than Jim had.

Is This a Date?

Ray walked to the door of the diner, and held it for Zaat, then showed her into his car, opening and closing the door for her. She nodded thanks and ran her hands over the car interior, "This is original, it is very pretty."

"I bought it new, it's been in storage for a while, no need for repairs on it yet."

"Let's go for a drive. Revenge can wait a bit."

"You are a pretty intense lady, you know that?"

"You think so? Maybe I am, and you are a frivolous child."

"Is that a bad thing? Listen, what you said earlier, I really was born in 1945."

"Very well, perhaps you have an older soul."

Ray shook his head, he'd have a chat with Jim later too, should he survive this woman. Should they both survive her. Ray was getting the feeling she wasn't the forgiving type.

"What would you like to see on our drive?"

"Just get out of this city, I want to see some trees, scrawny as they are around here."

Ray started the car and drove. When they got out of Guelph, toward the north, Zaat said, "Mishelle is on this road, perhaps later you will drive me to her."

"I don't know this woman you're talking about."

"Not important, I can find her."

"Look, can we talk about you for a while? Did you really make your legs?"

"I did, I learned to work copper a long time ago and these legs were almost the first things I ever made."

"Do you think, I mean, would it be all right if I touched them?"

"You like the girls, don't you?"

"Uh, yes I guess I do."

"Yes, I guess you do."

Ray drove a while longer, just taking random country roads. The woman looked at the farms they passed with interest. After a while she said, "You can touch my leg."

Ray started, he'd forgotten his question. He slowed down a bit and checked the traffic, then he reached over and gently touched her left leg, making sure to touch it by the knee. "But it feels real!"

"Why would it not?"

"It's warm. Can you feel my hand?"

"Of course."

Ray took his hand away before he got the urge to run it up her leg. Zaat smiled, "Find a hill and park where we can see the countryside. I'm sure you know all the good parking spots."

Ray flinched, just how much could she see when she looked inside his head. He drove to a nice spot, pulled off into a small wood with a spot to park and turned off the car.

"Would you like to see how they work?"

Ray nodded, and Zaat lifted her leg to put it on the side of the car, in front of Ray. Ray looked at her and she nodded. He ran his hand from above her knee downward toward her foot. He could feel the hinge at her knee. As he got near her foot, she said, "Take the shoe off."

Ray did, she had no socks, and he saw that the foot was complete, toes and all. He had thought there might be corrosion, but the copper was clean and shiny. And beautiful. He had never seen such exquisite workmanship, and he loved well made machines.

"It's magnificent, and wonderful."

Zaat nodded, then she nodded again, as if deciding something. "Would you like to see how it attaches?"

Ray nodded, not daring to speak. Zaat swung her leg down and got out of the car. Ray noticed that she was a lot less stiff, in

fact she was now lithe as a cat as she moved. Without bothering to look around for other people, she unzipped her pants and let them drop.

Ray gasped. The copper ran seamlessly into flesh about mid-thigh. Zaat walked around to Ray's side of the car and stood beside the door. "Go ahead."

Ray put his hand on the copper near her knee and ran it slowly up toward her hip. He gasped again, there was no difference between copper and flesh, they were the same warmth, and her skin was almost as hard as the copper. It was almost as if flesh was becoming copper, and copper was becoming flesh. He looked up into her face.

"Almost ten thousand years I've had these legs. We have grown together."

Ray looked down and back up to her face. Zaat smiled. "Feel them now."

Ray ran his hand from her hip downward and now the skin was soft, as was the copper. He breathed out, not realizing he'd been holding his breath.

"You like them." It wasn't a question and Ray nodded.

"I like you, young man, shall we? I expect you know how to make love in this car."

Ray looked into those bronze eyes and she smiled, "I promise not to eat you, as I said, I like you and I have not had a man for too long. Come, get out of the car and out of your clothes."

Ray nodded, got a blanket from the car and spread it on the grass. "Ah, that looks more comfortable than the back seat."

When they were spent, Ray lay propped on his elbow, running his eyes up and down Zaat's body. He didn't see copper any more, just her.

"When I first saw you, your legs seemed a big stiff, they are anything but that now."

Zaat laughed, "They become more 'me' as I get aroused. I guess you turned me on. Let's say that as you grew hard, I grew soft."

Ray looked again at her face, at those eyes. "I can't imagine anything more beautiful than your eyes. Did you make them too?"

"I did. You really like them? Most people can't look at them."

"I like them, truly."

"What you said earlier, do you want to look through one?"

"Yes. The eyes you are looking for, are they normal eyes?"

"They are, Nanabozo has them, he stole them from me long

ago, he thought it was a clever trick. We will see how clever when I take mine back, and his as well."

"Did he steal them from your head?"

Zaat laughed again, "Now that would be a good trickster's tale, to steal the eyes out of someone's head. No, they were in a jar, one of my owners put my eyes out. He thought it would make me docile. Mishelle helped me to make these, and that's how she learned to work copper. The legs are from Haida Gwaii, and my eyes are from the back of the Turtle."

Ray looked confused again. "From the West Coast and from Lake Superior. You're really not from here are you?"

"I thought I was."

Zaat stood up and helped Ray get up as well. She walked a bit away from him and then back again. "Ray will you lend me one of your eyes if I let you see through one of mine?"

Ray hesitated, made some adjustments to his eye, and then took it out of his head. He held it out to Zaat and she nodded. She reached up and took her left eye out, she put it onto Ray's hand and only then did she carefully pick up his eye and put it into her empty socket. She closed her copper eye and looked.

Ray put the copper eye into his socket and gasped. He could see much further into the spectrum than he had ever looked, not only that, he could see the essence of every living thing around

him. The rocks and dirt didn't escape, he could pick out all the various minerals. Then he looked at Zaat.

She was incredible, Ray had thought that he'd seen Goddesses before, but she was, well, incredible. He saw love, kindness, and nothing else, no desire for revenge, no negative emotions at all.

He looked at her head and saw his own eye looking back. He really considered not giving her eye back, but knowing what he knew now about her, it was just a passing thought. With sadness, he took her eye out and held it in his palm.

Zaat gently took Ray's eye out, and again, put it on his palm before taking hers back. She sighed. "It has been thousands of years since I have seen with a real eye. I had forgotten."

"I would say that your eye is the real one, these are poor, poor things."

Zaat smiled. She reached out and stroked Ray's cheek. She took his hand and led him back to the blanket.

When they were dressed again, Ray opened her door but Zaat didn't get in. "Tell Nanabozo he can keep my eyes on a shelf, I think I will keep these."

Ray nodded, "And Mishelle?"

"She was a good friend, let her claim she taught me about

copper, she certainly taught me much about how to make the eyes better than the originals. I remember now how thrilled I was when first I put them in."

Again Ray nodded, "Shall I drive you back?"

"No, I'm going home. I seem to have lost the desire for revenge, and I have found some tenderness from a fox who was born here but isn't from here at all. You will be my mystery, Ray."

"Will I see you again?"

"Perhaps, some day. Perhaps I would like that."

Zaat stepped sideways with a small nod, and she was gone.

High School Days

Tilly Cleary grew up to become a willowy, shapely young woman. She was in her first year of high school when she learned all about cars and the uses of car doors. She was friends with one of the older girls who had her own car and there were four of them driving up and down the main street in town. While the spirit boys were well aware of Tilly's knee, the human boys were not.

One evening, the girls were stopped at a street light when a very drunk man leaned in the window and made a rude suggestion to them. The other three cowered back in disgust, but Tilly smiled a rather wicked smile. "Just let me get out and I'll go with you," she said.

With a bit of a start, the man began to pull his head back out of her window, when he was in just the right place, Tilly threw her whole weight against the door, hitting him on the side of the head as he was bent over. He managed to stay on his feet, but his head was in just the right place for Tilly to hit him again with the door. Throwing it shut, she kicked him in the side of the knee, dislocating it.

As he howled on the ground, Tilly turned and looked at his drunken friends. They were not keen to help their buddy, or to do anything about Tilly. "Your buddy was rude. You shouldn't be rude, are any of you rude?"

There was much shaking of heads, no.

"Well you better get your buddy to the hospital, I think he's about to... yep, throw up. He likely has a concussion and his knee is certainly fucked up. Well bye bye, we're going now."

And with that she got back into the car. The next week there was a self-defence club at the high school.

A few months later, Tilly was walking home from a date. The boy was boring, and so she had left the bar while he was in the

toilet, (yes, she was under age, no she wasn't drinking, yes, she looked old enough). As she was walking she noticed a car with a single driver, following slowly behind her. Since she was still angry about her date, and how it had so quickly become a drag, she turned down a dark alleyway. Sure enough the car followed.

She crossed to the other side of the road so that the driver would have to be crossing the road to get to her. In a nice place, with good footing on the road, Tilly stopped to tie her shoe. Sure enough, the man stopped his car and opened his door. Timing it perfectly, Tilly shot across the road and kicked the door shut just as his face was between the door and the roofline.

Bleeding and reeling from the hit, the man was dragged out of the car and Tilly kicked him hard, first in the head and then she stomped his knee.

The fairy who had been watching over her winced, he turned to his companion and said, "She's got something against knees."

"The bastard deserved it. Still, she's a reckless little thing isn't she."

"I remember a certain little fairy girl who used to hand out lessons to the boys."

"Yeah, well, I was stupid too."

"Oh I dunno, you did all right."

"Oop, there she goes, on home as if nothing had happened."

"You suppose we should tell her Gran about this?"

"Nah, I suspect she knows what she's doing, after all she taught her how to fight."

"Do you suppose Mavis was like that when she was a kid?"

"Are you kidding, she and her brother were a famous tag team, they went looking for fights just to practice. Ray would step into that world of his and step back out again behind whoever they were fighting, while Mavis kept their attention. It was brutal."

"What a family."

"You know Ray's back in town right?"

"OK let's not lose the kid, I don't want him or his sister on my case."

"Never mind the Queen."

The year Tilly turned sixteen, she met Ray Keen. He was handsome, he owned that red Corvette she had seen running around town, and he was a spirit being. She could see his fox

nature, and she loved the look of that, too.

They were in the dairy bar, he was sitting alone having a hamburger, and she had just come in with her friends. She spotted him and left her table, heading right for him. Her friends didn't try to stop her, but they knew his reputation and held their breath.

For Ray's part, he was still getting over Copper Woman. He hadn't been with a woman in months, nobody seemed to measure up.

"Hi, my name's Tilly and I've seen you driving around town, I love your car."

Ray looked, and saw a high school kid. 'Nope,' he thought to himself. "Thanks, kid, I like it too."

Tilly didn't miss that 'kid' but she wasn't going to be put off, she wanted to drive that car and she was going to do it. She turned on the charm, even though she didn't know she'd done it. "I don't suppose I could get a ride some time could I?"

"Look, kid, you're a bit young for me aren't you?"

"Why, you look to be about eighteen and I'm sixteen, and you haven't told me your name."

"Ray Keen, and I'm older than I look."

'No kidding,' thought Tilly, "Nice to meet you Ray, can I sit down?"

"I guess so, it's a public place." Despite himself, Ray was getting interested in this girl.

"Listen, I'm done school at five, after clubs, how would you like to give me a ride home, I'd really like to have a ride in your car, it's such a classic."

"You know sports cars?"

"Sure, my folks own Cleary Motors, and I work on the cars all the time."

Ray looked again and this girl was looking more like a young woman. He wondered if she was older than she said she was.

"Listen, are you hungry? I'm just eating a burger here, can I get one for you?"

"Thank you, I just came in to eat, that would be lovely."

Something was tickling Ray's memory, but he couldn't pin it down, something in the way she said 'that would be lovely,' but he'd heard it many times. He ordered her toasted western and fries with a milkshake, and watched in fascination as she wolfed it down. By the time she had finished, his mind was made up. "I'll meet you here at five, we'll take a turn around town and I'll drop you off at your house."

"Thank you Ray, you're a peach. I look forward to seeing you then."

Something about how she said things. Ray shook his head and paid for the lunches as Tilly pranced out the door with her friends.

Tilly Drives the Corvette

That first drive turned into many drives. Eventually the day came when Tilly was allowed to drive the car. Ray wasn't comfortable, but she was persuasive, he found it hard to say no to her.

They were out in the country, tearing around on the gravel roads when Ray remembered there was a ninety degree turn ahead, with loose gravel. He got out "You'd better..." when she hit the curve and spun out. Ray, not the world's most cautious fellow at the best of times, was thrown out of the car to land back first up against a tree. Although he could protect himself, and heal almost instantly, he hadn't 'turned it on'. Nor was he wearing a seatbelt.

Tilly opened her own belt and ran from the car to where Ray was lying, "Shit, oh shit, oh shit." As she got there she realized he wasn't moving, he was lying awkwardly twisted. As she

knelt down she realized he wasn't breathing.

Not understanding what she was doing, she laid her hands on his neck and she could suddenly see the broken bones. 'Knit,' she thought, totally concentrated on fixing this man, 'Knit!'

To her shock, the bones started to come together. She must have triggered his healing powers, she thought, not knowing that her great-grandmother Aileen was exactly that sort of healer. When the bones began to come together she ran her hands down his spine. Yes, high on his chest, the spine was broken, she healed that and the spinal cord as well, slowly straightening out his twisted body, she could see things coming together. But he wasn't breathing.

'Heart' she said to herself, and it was as if she had reached into his chest and squeezed. She moved the blood around until she felt the heart take over and she felt Ray breathe. She sat and took his head on her lap to wait.

Tilly watched things repair themselves for a long time. Eventually, Ray's eyes opened, and he saw Tilly above him. Her relief was plain on her face, and Ray smiled.

At that moment, he was caught. Tilly made him lie still for another half an hour while she checked his progress. When he was fully healed, Tilly said, "Sorry, sorry, I'm going to make this up to you, we're going to make love now."

Ray blinked, he wasn't immune to magic, but he could have

resisted. He didn't. He just nodded and Tilly continued, "I'm a virgin, I'm kind of worried about getting pregnant."

Ray found his voice, "You can't get pregnant your first time."

The smile on Tilly's face was like a reward to Ray. At that moment he would have done anything she wanted. Tilly helped him up and back to the car, she drove them up to one of the places where they had parked to neck and turned off the engine. Tilly got the blanket out of the back and spread it out, then she alternated taking a piece of her clothing off and a piece of his. Ray was hypnotized, he wondered if he'd bumped his head too, but Tilly seemed to read that thought. "Your head's OK, I looked."

She looked? But at that moment, the last piece of clothing dropped to the ground and Ray stopped thinking.

A couple of weeks later, Tilly was visiting her grandmother, when Mavis looked sharply at her. "You're pregnant, Tilly."

"I'm what? No, I can't be."

"Tilly I know you are, I can feel it. Who was it?" It had to be a spirit being, Mavis knew that as a Mother of Gods, Tilly would not have children with ordinary men.

"But I've only been with Ray the one time."

"Ray, Ray Keen?"

"Yes, we've been going out for a while and then there was an accident and somehow he healed and then, then it just happened, but I was a virgin so I can't be pregnant."

Mavis stared at Tilly in disbelief, "Who told you that?"

"Ray did."

Mavis sat down. How did her brother not know basic sex education? Now Tilly, sure, the school didn't teach it, but... Damn it! This was her fault wasn't it? She had been meaning to have the talk with her grand-daughter but she thought she had some time yet.

Her brother... no there wouldn't be any genetic problems, the relationship wasn't that close, and spirit beings tended not to have problems, even with brother sister matings. Still.

"Tilly, I've got to tell you that Ray Keen is my brother. You can't go having kids with him."

"Gran, I don't want to have kids with anyone, I'm only sixteen for goodness sake, I'm... What? He's your what?"

"Look, you know he's a spirit being right?"

Tilly nodded.

"Well he's a bit older than I am, he just grows slowly so he looks like a young man now. He and our mother moved to South America a long time ago, before I had your father. He moved back a few years ago. I didn't tell you about him because he doesn't need more pressure on him, he's always been a bit delicate, but damn it, you weren't supposed to start going out with him."

"I knew he was older than he looks, but I didn't know he was that old."

"Don't get smart, girl."

"So what do I do? Do I have to have a baby now?"

"You're too young, girl. Look, you know Jim at Jim's lunch?"

"Sure, we've been there lots, you used to work there right?"

"Good, go see him tomorrow, don't wait any longer, you hear me?"

"Yes Gran."

"Lila, it happened, and with Ray!"

"Relax, we planned for this long ago, Mavis. We know what

she is, and we have a plan. Jim will promise to fix it, and I'll take the child myself."

"You want to do that?"

"I actually do, I haven't had a child for far too long. It will be fun, and there will be no reason to tell Tilly what she is yet. Let her enjoy her life. Eventually she'll have to know what's going on, but for now we can let her be a kid for a while longer."

"I appreciate this, Lila, it makes me feel much better to know that Ray's child will be raised by you. He's too young still to have a child as well."

Lila, who could see a bit more than Mavis, just nodded. Ray may be close to a thousand years old, but he was a kid now, and would be for a few years more. Eventually he'd find out, but like Tilly, he could enjoy his innocence for a while longer.

When Tilly broke up with him, Ray assumed it was because she had got pregnant, and with advice from his friend Art, he started to grow up a bit, socially.

The Interview

Having meant to do it for many years, Kitsune went to visit with Tilly Cleary. When she was invited into the house, Kit was

surprised to see an old lady.

A girl introduced as Lila set a tea on the kitchen table. “So much more family than the dining room don’t you think?” said Tilly. Kit was interested to see that the girl had fairy wings, but was as big as Kit herself. She’d have to ask about that later.

Sitting down to tea, Kitsune was at a bit of a loss as to how to speak with this woman who was her birth mother, well not really, but maybe conception mother? Kit had been transferred from a sixteen year old Tilly to Lila, not this Lila, who had brought her to term and had raised her.

Kit knew her birth father Ray Keen very well, he had helped raise her, but Tilly was a mystery.

“You’re embarrassed, dear, you don’t need to be. I’m a spirit being just as you are, although I didn’t know it when I got pregnant with you. I have had a couple of children over the years and there’s not much that can upset me in my old age. Please ask away, I know you’re here to find out about your family. Do you want to find out about you first?”

Kit nodded.

“I’ll tell you, but first catch me up on what’s been happening with you and your family.”

Kit told Tilly, who was obviously pleased to see that things were still going well for Kit and Dave. There had been a scare

a while back.

“Well, dear, first I want you to know that even though I was sixteen and astonishingly, shockingly, innocent, it was me who seduced Ray. I honestly didn’t think I would get pregnant, but I did. Your birth father was a sweetheart, and he was quite hurt that I broke up with him. I might have stayed with him, and it might have worked for a while, until my true nature came out, anyway. You know I’m a Moggie don’t you?”

“A cat? Like Kuri?”

“No, no dear, I’m a Mother of Gods, an M.O.G. so I call myself a Moggie. Not very flattering, I know, but I am a bit of a cat as far as sex is concerned.”

Kit looked a bit shocked.

“Oh don’t be like that, I told you I’m old and can look at my life honestly. I am a bit of a cat, half succubus if truth be told. My nature that is, although way back there’s some Japanese Kitsune and some of them really are succubus so who knows.

“Anyway, Mavis, your great grandmother, told me Ray was her brother and that I had to break up with him. She never knew Ray was actually her grandfather.”

Tilly cackled and sang a line, “I am my own Grandpa”

Kitsune was starting to like this old lady.

“Mavis and Lila had it all set up, Lila took you into her own womb and I was to tell everyone in the lunch counter I’d had a miscarriage. Big joke, they all knew what was going on, but I was supposed to pretend I was stupid. I wasn’t, but I still didn’t know who I was. It’s even more silly that I said that. Moggies don’t have miscarriages, we just fix the problems if they’re small, or we don’t get pregnant at all.”

“That seems pretty handy.”

“It’s a pain in the ass, dear, it means that every time we have sex with a spirit being we have another kid. You know that old joke about boys seeing a women with a child? They had sex at least once? Well with me it’s true.”

“You can’t block a pregnancy?”

“Not unless it would be a child so damaged I can’t fix it, no. I can’t block it any more than the man can, I can pull a kid out of a spirit being no matter what he tries. Hell condoms don’t work, blowjobs don’t work.”

Kit’s eyes got wider.

“Moggie, OK? And old lady. No filters. Look you’re no innocent, I know so. Have another biscuit.

“Anyway, not long after you were born, I got involved with Stan, with Nanabozo, and this time Mavis said I had to have

the child. I think she was trying to teach me a lesson. I had Okami and left him at the door of the lunch counter.”

“That might have been hard for you, but to just abandon him...”

“Oh, dear do you believe that? I was there until he was picked up and taken inside. It was hard to give him up, very hard, but I was still growing up. He was better with Lila and you by far. Lila told me all about your life, all three of you, and before you ask, no, Kuroneko is not one of mine, she really is what Lila told you she was.”

“I’m relieved to hear that, since she and Oki got married.”

“I’d have said something, trust me. I was not uninvolved with your life Kit, just there behind the scenes, and others knew I was around. Megan came to give me a big slap when she found out Oki was Stan’s. She would have, too, if she hadn’t fallen in love with the baby. She gave me a blessing instead, stroked my cheek instead of slapping it. She said the baby might grow Stan up a bit. You know, I think she was a bit shocked to find out how young I was.

Anyway, I don’t mind telling you now, you’re my first born and I couldn’t be more proud of you. I love all my kids of course, but you were special, as is Ray.”

“He told me you saved his life.”

“I didn’t know it at the time, but yes, I seem to be able to use

my own self-healing powers on someone else. Aileen, Ray's mother and daughter was a healer."

Seeing Kit's confusion, Tilly spent a while telling her the family history, and the reason Ray was in Guelph. Kit's eyes threatened to take over her entire head, they got so wide.

"You didn't listen to Suzume at your trial?"

"I did, but I didn't understand."

"Wonderful person, Suzume, she told me that she was very happy that I had given you to Ray to help raise. He had five children with Suzume and loved them dearly, but Coyote took his memory away so he could heal again. He tried to join Suzume when he thought she had been blown to atoms by that bomb."

"He never told me that."

"He didn't know until later, Coyote is great at the forgetting stuff. Ray knows the story now, ask him about it. Did you know that my father was Coyote's child?"

"Oh my goodness. Tilly could I start taking notes?"

"Later dear, I'm getting a bit tired, why don't you come back tomorrow, and bring your violin, I've been to a few of your concerts but I've never been up close. Didn't want to disturb you."

“I would love to do that. Um, would you mind if I hugged you and maybe called you Mother?”

“Come here you dear sweet child.”

As Kit was being shown out, Lila asked, “Would you mind if I hugged you too? I’m your sister.”

Kit was in shock, “Of course, but...”

“Tomorrow, I have to go make Mother comfortable, she’s not as strong as she used to be.”

Kit went out the door with tears in her eyes.

Sister Lila

The next day, Kit was back with her violin and a notebook. Lila met her at the door and lunch was on the kitchen table. Tilly wasn’t quite up yet, so Lila sat with Kit at the table.

“You’re my sister.”

“I am, half sister I suppose if you want to be accurate, like Okami is your half brother.”

“And, um...”

“You really don’t have to be delicate, I’m as crass as Mother is. My father? He’s Jonah, Lila’s husband and the man who raised you. You know what? You could say we’re full siblings in a way.”

Tilly’s mouth fell open, “Dad?”

“Got snared by Mother’s powers. She didn’t know he was Lila’s husband at the time, and you know he’s sort of soft spoken, anyway, they had a one night stand about two years after she had Okami. When Lila found out, she was furious, she told Mother that there’s no way she was going to raise the child, Mother had to do it herself this time. That’s when she and Mavis explained just what a ‘Mother of Gods’ is, and told Mother to try and keep it in their pants when she met spirit men.”

Kit snorted, “Keep it in their pants, oh my.”

“When I was born, Mother named me Lila, and when Lila saw me, apparently she melted. She’s still a good friend, but I don’t think that Jonah ever forgave Mother.”

Kit was having a hard time, “My father and Tilly...”

“You have to understand, Tilly is immensely powerful. She ‘has the power to cloud men’s minds’ as they say. Honestly, she can’t control it. Her power clouds her own mind too, although

even if it didn't, I think she'd have lived her life just like she did."

"How come you never introduced yourself?"

"I left at an early age to go explore the world, I'm half fairy and so can pop around, as well as fly. I came back a few years ago to take care of Mother, she'd dying. Most of the kids left and scattered."

"Because I'm a nasty piece of business," said Tilly as she came into the room.

"You know damned well you're not, Mother, you're sweetness itself and we all love you to pieces."

"All except what's his name, he says I ignored him."

"Rufus is invisible, and he makes even you forget him Mother, of course you ignored him, and he doesn't hate you, he loves you too."

"Really? Rufus, I named him Rufus, no wonder he hates me."

"You named him for his father, and he loves his name." Lila turned to Kit, "He lives with his father now, his father is invisible too, and was just walking by Mother one day, invisible. They ended up going under a bush on the University front lawn, and Mother doesn't even remember."

“I did not, I would never... did Rufus senior tell you that?”

“A few years ago, yes.”

“Oh dear, Moggie indeed. Come on, let’s eat lunch and Kit can play for me if she feels like it.”

Lila got up and served the lunch, it was delicious and there was an egg pie that was so good, Kit asked for the recipe, “Dave will want to cook this up I’ll bet.”

When lunch was over, Kit asked Tilly what she’d like to hear. “What you’re working on now, love, your work is amazing and I want to hear what’s next.”

Kit was flattered, and she played through the piece she was working on. After that, she played the shape of a brand new piece.

“What was that last one?”

“It’s the first movement of something I started just today, do you like it?”

“It makes me feel like a girl again, still in school.”

Kit smiled, “It will be called ‘Tilly’”

“Don’t you dare, nobody knows me, that title wouldn’t mean anything. Call it something less specific, like ‘a Mother’s Life.’”

Oh dear, Lila could you hand me a tissue please.”

While Tilly wiped her eyes, Lila smiled at Kit and mouthed, “Thank you.”

Kit put away her violin and took out a notebook. Tilly looked at it, “That’s a big notebook dear, do you need it? I know you’ve got a perfect memory.”

“Well to tell you the truth, it’s to write down feelings. It’s for your tune. I hope you don’t mind that I’m writing a piece for you.”

“I know you well enough to know you’d do it even if I said not to, but of course you can write me something. I love the idea and I look forward to hearing it. I’ll hang around long enough for that.”

Kit snapped a look at Lila, who gave her a thin smile.

“No ganging up on my you two. I’ll go when it’s time.”

Kit said softly, “Mother Tilly, I can make you young again, and let you live forever.”

“You will do no such thing, but I thank you for the thought. I guess I’d better explain. We Moggies could live forever and be young forever, but did you ever wonder why there aren’t lots of us around?”

Kit looked confused.

“Think about it, hundreds of Moggies, producing thousands of new demi-gods or heros or whatever you want to call them. There would be a baby-boom of spirit beings, and what happens when there are too many of us around?”

“Oh, the Giants war.”

“Indeed, so for the good of the planet, we eventually let ourselves grow old and die.”

“But just you, that wouldn’t be so bad would it?”

“Right, being a brood mare for eternity. No thank you, it gets old eventually, not that I haven’t loved every single one of my kids, but enough is enough. Do you know that Zeus found out what I was, and came to me as a damned bull? Honestly, the man thinks he’s a trickster, but really he’s just a dickster. Hera should have cut it off millennia ago. Anyway, you wouldn’t believe what a pain in the, well in everything it is to give birth to a bull. Little Asterisk was born with horns for goodness sake. I mean really, why not a swan?”

“Asterisk”

“I was pissed at his father, You know, it was a good thing that I’ve got self-healing powers, like most Moggies. He ripped me up good.”

“Uh, where is he now?”

“Making a fortune over in Crete, being the Minotaur. Tourists pay a lot to go see him, and then they pay even more to un-see him. It’s a great wheeze. Don’t get me wrong, he’s a great boy and he met a lovely Greek girl, a history buff.”

“Is it hard to keep track?”

“Lila makes sure the family visits regularly, or takes me to see them. She’s a good kid, the first I raised myself and she taught me a lot about being a good mother. When she puked, she’d have to tell me to clean it up and hold a wet washcloth on her forehead.”

“Tilly Cleary, I swear hearing you talk yourself down gets tired sometimes. You were a fine mother to me and the rest of the kids.”

“Old lady gotta have a hobby,” mumbled Tilly as she winked at Kit. “Lila here came back to take care of me, she’s a great kid, but I really wish she’d find a boy and settle down.”

“Mother, you know I’m here to make sure I inherit your house so my girlfriend and I can live here.”

“Oh you little liar, she’s rich and has four houses.”

“Yeah, well we want this one.”

Kit watched this for a while, turning her head like she was at a tennis match. She figured they had been going at each other for decades, it had that kind of loving familiarity to it.

‘Why didn’t I come visit years ago,’ she thought.

Tilly looked at Kit and said, “You would have been welcome, and you’re here now. Anyway, you never left, you’re still here in town so I never needed to catch up on your news. Same with Okami. Don’t you worry about that stuff.”

“You can read minds, can’t you.”

“Only my kids, dear, and it’s not hard, mothers know, even if they didn’t raise you.”

Kit reached over and squeezed Tilly’s hand while Lila, laughing, made coffee.

Afternoon Coffee

Over coffee, Kit said, “What about keeping you alive, I could do that too.”

“So could I, dear, but even old, I have a hankering for the boys. Listen, I’m not the first Moggie to figure this out. I’ll go soon, in the middle of a big party with all the kids there. You’ll come

with Okami won't you?"

"Of course, but you promised you'd wait for your tune."

"Oh my dear girl, I don't have to read minds. Yes I'll wait, but no, you will not take years to finish it, will you?"

Kit ducked her head, "No Mother."

Tilly laughed, "There, a lifetime's scolding all at once. Now you've got the full Mother treatment."

Kit had to laugh too.

"You know that Okami and I checked in every couple of years, just in case you needed our help."

"I did know sweetheart, and I loved you for it."

"But why do Mothers of Gods exist? Surely spirit beings can create children the usual way."

"Say Moggies, dear, it's a lot simpler. You know, I've thought about that for a long time. Sure spirit beings can have kids, but they don't have many of them, and they're quite often the same type. I mean, wolves mate with wolves, foxes with foxes, that sort of thing. Moggies produce many kids, and they are all sorts of mixed up. The long lived spirit beings might have three kids their whole lives. I've had that many in a decade, and my kids have mixed powers too."

“Oh, I see, Dave and I didn’t have kids for decades.”

“No urgency, you see? But you’re a great case in point. Your powers come down from many different sources, Ray, Suzume, Coyote. Did you know that Grandmother Mavis was a Moggie too? She only had one child, my father, which is probably why I’m one. Kit, you’re hellishly powerful because of that combination, and then you were trained as a Shaman, which made you even more powerful.”

“Me? I’m not that powerful.”

“You scared Megan, and that’s not easy to do. Trust me, you’re powerful. I was so proud when I heard that you knocked Beelzabub’s tooth out.”

“I think he let me do it.”

“That’s not what he said.”

“He... did you...”

“I met him on one of his visits to you, we had a son. Before you ask, he’s not the antichrist, he’s just a guy that likes surfing. He’s in Australia now.”

Kit filed that away for later consideration, “I was put on trial, That’s not something to be proud of is it?”

“I was there, dear, your mother Lila took me along. The way you handled yourself, the way you were willing to accept Megan’s verdict, despite there being a literal army there to defend you. But what made me most proud was when you gave up your stubborn streak and asked Liz to teach you. That’s when I knew you were going to be one of the great ones.”

“Oh dear, am I blushing? One of the great ones?”

“Trust me, I’ve met a lot of them, and you’re better than most right now. In a couple hundred years...”

Kit was stunned, well, she’d been stunned for two days now, this woman had kept her off balance from the moment she met her, no wonder she could seduce such powerful men.

Tilly smiled, “It’s all in the balance, dear. My Gran taught me that when I was a kid learning to fight. But I can’t have every man I meet. Ray could have blocked me, but you know, saving his life sort of put him off balance.”

Kit laughed at that, she was adapting to the way Tilly went from topic to topic, she was catching up.

“And then there was Suzume’s family. All Ray’s kids and their families came over to tell him about his past and I was invited. After all, I was one of his descendants and the mother of his youngest too. Anyway, before they came, Suzume warned all the husbands about me, mostly Tengu for some reason. Well, have you ever seen a Tengu, they are seriously yummy, and

damned powerful. Anyway, it was a bit frustrating for me, all that manhood there that I couldn't have. They were all very kind though, they knew what I was going through."

"So you can be blocked."

"Oh yes, if the man is powerful enough and I can't sneak up on him, sure."

"So you..."

"Oh there were some of the lads who weren't married. The family didn't mind if the boys got a little experience in the world."

Lila rolled her eyes, "You're terrible, Mother. I didn't know that. Where is the child, and do you want to visit him?"

"Children never know all about their parents, do they. Haven't I been telling you that for years, what a terrible person I am? Anyway, he never left town, he's here and his name's Saburo, after his father. He's called Sam for short."

"Sam Cleary! I know him, he takes music lessons from me. He's not a spirit being is he?"

"He's a Tengu dear, very much like Ray, so I'm not surprised you didn't know who he was. Why would you look closely?"

"Does he know I'm his sister? Oh we're going to have words."

Tilly smiled, “I let him grow up without explaining the family rat’s nest of connections, Kit. If you’re going to tell him, be gentle please.”

Lila refilled the coffee cups and set the pot down with a tiny bit more force than Kit figured she needed, ‘How does she think I feel about all this?’ Kit thought.

“I didn’t keep you in the dark out of meanness, Lila, Sam doesn’t know anything about the spirit world, he never had any interest. I think he’s like his grandfather, doesn’t want to know. He’s got lots of friends, is very sociable.”

Lila’s face got a bit less thunderous and Kit smiled. She was certainly the glue that held Tilly’s family together, and she’d just discovered a piece of the puzzle flapping around in the breeze. “He’s a good kid, Lila, I’ve kept my eye on him since he started lessons with me. He’s fine.”

Lila reached over and squeezed Kit’s hand.

“Any more surprises Mother? Any more children around the place?”

“How would I know? I never was very good at keeping track.”

“Oh, you wicked woman.”

“Come here and hug me, love, you are the rock I cling to, don’t

be mad.”

“Wicked... Kit when the time comes will you invite him to the party?”

“Oh, he’s in touch Lila, he’s here at least once a week.”

“What?... The guy who delivers flowers? So who does he think I am? The maid?”

The Sisters Bonding

The next day, Kit came for lunch once more, and again, Tilly wasn’t quite up yet. Kit helped Lila set the table.

“Have you forgiven Mother yet for keeping Sam a secret?”

“Oh yes, I just wonder how many more kids I missed while I was flitting around the world.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but they aren’t your kids.”

Lila sighed, “Yeah, I know that, but sometimes I feel like I’m the Mother and she’s just a big kid.”

“How many children do you know about?”

“It’s hard to tell, some of them come in and out of my awareness, like Rufus, for instance. Most of them are quite powerful. More than a dozen, less than thirty.”

“Oh dear.”

“Indeed, you know they are a little trouble-shooting force all on their own, sort of like those beings around Megan or Jim when he was here. Only they are world-wide.”

“Really? I’ve never heard of them.”

“Well they don’t have a superhero team name, and no leader to speak of, Mother doesn’t direct them. It’s more like someone notices a problem and calls in a couple of the family to help sort it. That’s kind of how Mother raised all of us, to not look the other way when there’s a problem. She was a great fan of the Spiderman comics, you know, ‘with great power comes great responsibility’. She used to read them to us.”

“I missed all that.”

“You didn’t, you know. You are part of the Guelph beings who sort things, like the Giants war. You were just a kid but you got all your father’s family together to make him truly amazing during that fight. This family, Mother, me and the twins, were keeping a close eye on you, and we almost stepped in but you held it all together. Not just Mother is proud of you, Kit, we all are.”

“I didn’t know what I was doing was such a dangerous thing, I just did it.”

“Look, that’s a big part of your power, you accept it. You need something and you try and because you aren’t standing in your own way, you can do it.”

“Heh, I tell that to my students a lot. ‘Don’t get in your own way with doubts.’”

“It’s powerful magic. All the rest of the kids were raised that way, to believe that when they need it, they can do it.”

“I guess I was closer to this family than I suspected.”

“We were never more than a thought away, big sis.”

“Lila, should I be bringing Okami here to visit?”

“He’s been coming for years, no need to worry about that. You remember his need to find Stan? It wasn’t long before he found Mother as well.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Little brothers don’t tell big sisters everything.”

Kit smiled, remembering all of Okami’s secrets, but mostly she knew them anyway. Well good for him.

Lila apparently had Tilly's ability to read thoughts, "If it's any consolation, I don't think he figured it was a secret. Just something he did once in a while, like climbing a tree."

"Ah, I knew when he fell out, but not when he was climbing."

Kit and Lila were having coffee, Tilly hadn't come out yet and Kit was concerned. "Does mother sleep late a lot?"

"She and I manage her pain quite well, but it seems like there's nothing we can do about the tiredness. She says she likes to sleep anyway, she has wonderful dreams."

"With her life, I can imagine."

"It wasn't all wickedness, Kit, she truly loved all her children, in fact, her life has been full of love and kindness and it's not all due to being a Moggie, it's just the way she was raised. Her father was immune to magic so he saw all the spirit beings around, but he didn't admit they existed, still, he was never more than loving and kind to Mother, and Grandmother was amazing. Everything you'd think family should be."

"I'm sorry I never got to meet them."

"I am too, but your own family was the same, Jonah and Lila, and Coyote is your Great-Grandfather."

"He was always kind to Oki and me, but he never said, until the trial."

“Well, he was a dog for most of the time we were growing up. He’s got a lot of hurt in him, Amber’s taken a lot of it out.”

“Mother Tilly is right. What a rat’s nest.”

“What, my hair? Could you fix it dear?”

“No, your hair is fine, Mother. Good morning. Come, sit, have some breakfast.”

“You spoil me dear, thank you. Hello Kit, all ready for another interview?”

“If you’re up to it?”

“Well, it will have to be short today, Ray is taking me out for a ride in that Corvette of his.”

“What? He’s still got it?”

“Sure, he leaves it with the Twins at the garage.”

“Lila mentioned the twins. Have I met them?”

“Well they took the garage into the spirit world when they took over from my parents, so maybe not. They are genius with cars, they’ve kept Ray’s going for much longer than it should have. If it needs parts, they make them. They’re Kobold you know.”

Kit frowned, 'Oh no.'

"Oh yes my dear, I snuck up on Ken one night in the bar. I named them Ken and Kam after the brothers. They seem to have inherited the Kobold ability to work with machinery and so they took over the garage."

Kit groaned.

"Roll with it dear."

"But Ken Kobold with children."

Tilly grinned.

"Is it OK for you to ride with Ray? I mean..."

"I'm an old lady now, and beside, he knows what I am, he could always resist. Who knows, maybe it was all the girls he'd had over the centuries that made him able to resist my charms."

"So he liked you for who you are, apart from your powers."

"Oh girl, you are not slow at all, are you? That's exactly why he's like catnip to my Moggie cat. He actually likes me."

A car horn sounded outside, "Oh that little trickster, he's here early. Kit go call him in for breakfast will you? I've got to go fix my hair."

Kit and Lila smiled at each other and Kit headed out to call Ray into the house.

“Kitsune, you’re visiting Tilly?”

“I am, Father, come on in and have some breakfast, we’re half way through.”

“All right, I could use another coffee. Are you learning all about what a nasty trickster I am?”

“From what I hear, it was Tilly who seduced you.”

“After breaking my neck and my spine, yes.”

“And whose fault was that, Father?”

Ray laughed and jumped out of the car. He took Kit’s arm and they marched into the house.

Kit and Lila

Tilly walked out on Ray's arm with a parting, "Now have a good chin-wag girls, Mother will be back in a while."

As she drove off, Lila said, "It was like that all the time, growing up here. She'd just walk out with a 'la di da' and maybe come back later, maybe next morning."

"Were you guys OK?"

"Oh sure, Jonah is a battle fairy, nobody ever touched any of the kids, and when I left, the twins took over raising the other kids."

"Raising!"

"I mis-spoke, it felt like I was raising them but I should have said protecting them. You know how kids resent having to do anything."

"Oh do I ever."

"Another coffee?"

While Lila poured, Kit asked, "Did Tilly ever get married?"

"No, I asked her about that once and she said it wouldn't have been fair to her husband, she'd cheat on him every time a spirit boy went walking by. She had a full life raising us, and never lacked for male companionship, shall we say. Ray was always around too. For a trickster, that man is pretty responsible."

"He's a terrible trickster, but a good man."

"He was more or less our father figure when we were growing up, until we met our own fathers. Some of them took to their kid, others not so much."

"Jonah?"

"Yeah, a couple of things, I figured out eventually. One, he felt incredibly guilty for cheating on Lila, and he is a battle fairy, not a lot of forgiveness in him. I guess that's where I got it from, Mother says I can't forget a betrayal. I try, I really do, but..."

"Yeah, I saw that in him, but then there was Lila, who could be ferocious, but could forgive like crazy. You should have seen those two at my trial."

"I was third row back, Sis."

Kit took a sip of her coffee while she digested that, "Thank you," she said in a quiet voice.

Lila pushed the cookies across the table.

"You know, she regretted giving you and Okami up. I think it bothered her a lot."

"We didn't know when we were toddlers, and when we did, we were old enough to understand that she was too young. We looked her up and checked in, and I guess Okami visited."

"She knew, and she appreciated that. I used to watch you, I wanted to come up and say hello."

"I wish you had, why didn't you?"

"Mother said you had your own path to walk. I didn't want to intrude."

Kit smiled. "So what does a battle fairy do?"

"Fight. pure and simple, we fight when we have to. I haven't had my full training, but I'm strong, fast, and have amazing senses."

"Why haven't you been trained?"

"Jonah, remember?"

"I'm going to have a chat with him. But why not ask Ray? He's an amazing fighter, or Sam and Hubert, they're still in the St. George. Sam beat seven kinds of hell out of me when I figured I was hot stuff."

"After you choked that kid, Mother told me about it."

"There's a few really good fighters around, Ben and Cleo are often here, they're two of the best."

"I'll look into it, what about you?"

"Me, now you just want to beat up your big sister since you're old enough to do it."

Lila grinned.

"OK change of topic before you talk me into letting you beat on me. What about Mother, did she do things other than be a Moggie? You know, I'm not fond of that word."

"Me neither, but she can call herself anything she wants, I figure. She worked the Garage, invested our money, brought us up, and she would get called in as an advisor by some pretty high Mucky-Mucks."

"Advisor?"

"She was a peace-maker, as she said, 'there isn't a male of any shape that I don't like.' She could find common ground anywhere. You know she was called in for the talks after the Giants war?"

"You're kidding."

"And she's done a lot of work in other places around the world. She's just good at it. I don't think it's her Moggie powers, I think it's just because she's smart. Not one of us kids can out-argue or out-think her. She's twisty. While I just want to blast right ahead and tear up the opposition, she will see a way to move a couple of steps one way or another and go straight to the goal."

"I never knew."

"She didn't want it known, it's better to come from nowhere, she said, it takes people off-guard and off-balance."

"I'm glad she had a life beyond being a Moggie."

"Oh don't get me wrong, she was never above a bit of seduction and blackmail to get the agreements signed."

Kit's mouth dropped open for about the hundredth time during her visits.

"She gets the job done, no matter what it takes. She's terribly stubborn."

"I can't believe I haven't... I mean why didn't..."

"Kit, she never felt you were far away from her. She has followed your life. Please don't think that you were ever less than loved, by Mother, and by the rest of us."

"Thank you, Lila, I still feel bad for not coming to visit sooner."

"But like Mother said, you were right here in town, you weren't far away. You know she and I would visit you while you were in Paris. We watched you fight the spirits and saw how hard you worked. Don't ever think you were missed."

"Still, I think I missed some things."

"You can't regret any of your choices, Kit. You are who you are because of them."

"Who's the big sister here? Thank you Lila, that makes me feel better."

"Oh look at the time, Ray's usually got her back before this."

"Do you think it's OK?"

"Yes, the two of them are probably talking about the past or having a picnic or something. She's with Ray, it will be fine. Listen, how is the musical piece coming, I know Mother is flattered as hell about it. She is ever so proud that you studied in Paris."

"You gave me a lot today, I think it's just a matter of writing it down. Should I delay it a bit though?"

"She's getting more and more tired, I think she really wants to let go. She's not afraid of death, she figures it's balanced by all the life she brought into the world. You know she's right about Moggies letting themselves die. I looked into it, not a single one ever went beyond a hundred years. But will you be able to finish it?"

"It's in my head. I just have to write it down. I'm torn about the ending though."

"Whether to make it sad? Don't. Seriously, she would hate that."

She lived her life on her own terms and it was a glorious life. She's going out on her own terms. Make it a glorious ending."

"Thank you Lila. That's exactly what I needed."

The Battle of the Corvette

Lila's head snapped up as she and Kit were clearing the table. "They're in trouble!"

Kit instantly took Lila's hand as Lila took them both out into the countryside. Sure enough, Tilly and Ray were ducked down behind the overturned Corvette while they took fire from a couple score of fairies, their lances spitting needles of flame at the car.

Kit grew large and threw the plate in her hand, and then Lila, at the main group. Using her wings to guide herself, Lila smashed knees first into two of the attackers. Counting the one Kit had hit with the plate, that was three down.

Kit changed to a fox, and with a snarl, she launched herself at the back of the group. Lila had a lance in her own hand and she was going wild, breaking up the group around her. All the fairies turned their attention to the two attackers.

Kit plowed into the fairies, who were the size of Lila, and tossed them side to side with her head. When she got to Lila, they stood back to back, Kit guarding and Lila firing what looked like laser beams. She would sweep it back and forth, cutting down several bodies at a time. As each fairy was hit by Lila's lance-fire, they popped out of existence. Kit would get one in her jaws and as she squeezed, it would also disappear.

In almost no time at all, there were no more fairies and the two women relaxed a bit, Kit into her human form and Lila retracted her wings and got rid of her lance.

After a careful look around they both turned to see Ray and Tilly leaning casually against the Corvette, the car was neither damaged nor on it's side.

Lila caught on first. "Mother!"

Tilly was howling with laughter.

Kit twigged, "Ray!"

"Not much of a trickster eh?"

At about that time, Jonah and a squad of fairies showed up, ready to fight. "What the hell!"

Lila and her mother held up their hands while Kit stepped in front of her father. "Sorry Dad, sorry, there's no fight, it was Ray pulling a trick on me, my fault I said he wasn't much of a

trickster. He was teaching me a lesson, I'm so sorry you came for no..."

She kept up a steady flow of words until Jonah held up his hand. With a flick, his fairies were gone. He looked at Lila.

"Daughter....!"

Although there was menace in that voice, Lila's heart leapt. "Yes Father," she answered instantly.

"Some of your lance work was sloppy, come and see me tomorrow, you need a bit of training."

"Yes father."

"And bring that lance of yours, the Twin's work I presume?"

Lila nodded, a huge grin on her face.

"Are you all right, Tilly?"

"Yes Jonah, and thank you."

"Well....."

With that he was gone. Ray was grinning hugely, his luck had held yet again, or he thought it had, until Jonah's head popped back into view, "And we will have a chat, Ray Keen."

Oops.

Lila and Kit started to gather up the remains of the picnic, while Tilly and Ray sat in the car, chuckling to each other. By the time they had packed things up, Kit was over her anger, and Lila had digested what happened with her father.

"Did you intend that Jonah would come, Mother?"

"I called to him, dear."

"How did you know he would come?"

"Manipulative bitch, dear, you know that."

"Oh good Gods, you are terrible."

"Really?"

"No, thank you Mother."

"Well, you better show up for training tomorrow if you know what's good for you."

"Yes Mother."

Kit and Lila popped back to the house and finished cleaning up from the lunch. When Ray brought Tilly into the house, she excused herself and went to bed for a nap.

Ray sat down with a coffee and looked at the girls, "She's getting worse, and she refused any help from me. Stubborn as ever."

Lila nodded, "How long?"

"Maybe a month, perhaps a bit more but not much. I think it's time to organize the party."

"I'll start tomorrow."

"Make sure you visit Jonah first thing, Lila, your mother set that little scene up. She figured it was time for you and Jonah to get to know one another. She talked to him after you two left, and said that his beef was with her, not with you. Don't you dare hint to Jonah you know that."

"Yes Ray."

Kit had been frowning, "A month?"

"I'm sorry pet, I've been keeping an eye on her condition and that's about all she's got left."

"It just seems so unfair."

Lila took her hand, "Look, why don't you and Dave come live here until the end. That way you can get to know her a bit better."

"Would she be OK with that?"

"She'd be delighted, and if I can ask a favour, would Dave paint her?"

"Try to stop him."

The Party

It was a busy month. Tilly declared that they would have a party and she would punch out that very day. Her words, and she told the Twins to bring the punch clock at the car dealership along to the party. She was really going to punch out.

Kit worked furiously to finish the composition, she found that it felt like the most important work she'd ever done. Dave, on the other hand, was as relaxed as always. He would sit and chat with Tilly for a while, then disappear into the back room where he had set up his easel. After an hour or so he would back out and chat some more.

Lila was glad for the help around the house, she was spending a lot of time training with Jonah, who took personal charge of her instruction. She came back bruised and beaming each day. One day Jonah and Lila came back with Lila junior to have coffee with everyone. Tilly asked how Lila was getting along

with her training.

"You did a good job, Tilly, she's mostly trained already. I'm just putting on some polish. I think she'll be one of my best very soon."

Both Lila's, mother and daughter, caught that 'one of MY best' and they smiled at each other.

Meanwhile, Ray was helping with the arrangements for the party, he had ordered a big tent for the front lawn, anticipating that many of Tilly's children would come.

When the day arrived, the family started showing up early in the morning. Kit was astounded to count at least eighteen children, but most of them also arrived with their fathers, and not a few of the stepmothers also showed up. Tilly said that they were there to make sure she really was dead, but Kit saw a lot of tender conversations Tilly had with the fathers and with their wives.

The kids pitched in, almost without direction, and arranged the house for the events that afternoon.

About eleven in the morning, Amber and Coyote showed up with an impromptu band. They set up off to one side and played some very merry tunes. Coyote sang in that beautiful voice of his, and he looked often at Tilly, obviously proud of his grand-daughter. Amber would squeeze his hand when she

saw him look, and nod toward this or that child of Tilly as they arrived.

It seemed like half the spirit beings in Guelph were related to Tilly somehow, and the other half had showed up for the party.

For lunch, the kids acted as servers, pretending to fight for the privilege of serving their mother. Tilly smiled at each and every one as she sat on a chair arranged the front porch, and presided over the day. She has a long conversation with each of her children, with a gift for every one. Not a few of the fathers drifted by with a few words of kindness for her, telling her of their kid's accomplishments and how proud they were.

After the lunch, Lila and her father asked for a place to be cleared, and they gave a demonstration of combat. The Twins were pleased to see that both Jonah and Lila were using their staves. The fight was on many levels, on the grass, up into the air, and at one point the two of them were popping in and out of thin air trying to get the advantage.

At one point, Tilly frowned, "Careful," she said, but it wasn't clear if she meant that warning for Jonah or for Lila. There were some very heavy blows landed on both sides. At the end, to tremendous cheers, the two came and knelt in front of Tilly, who put a hand on each and healed the various cuts and bruises and, Lila admitted to Kit later, a broken arm.

To more cheers on seeing the fighters stand up unharmed, the band struck up and the dance began. Ray came to Tilly and

took her hand, bowed, and she nodded. He gave her enough strength and youth to let her have a whirl around the yard. He passed her on to Stan, who passed her to Jonah, and on it went until she had danced with every father there. At the end, she sat like a queen. In fact, when she sat, every man there bent a knee, and every woman curtsied.

After that, Dave's painting was unveiled. As he lifted the cloth, gasps were heard all over the yard. Somehow Dave had painted Tilly as a young girl, as a voluptuous woman and as the proud matriarch she was now. In fact, each man there saw her as she had been when he had fallen for her charms.

There were tears, many of them from Tilly, who was in awe of what he had done. She saw herself as she had seen herself through her whole life.

The time had come for Kit's composition, and chairs were arranged while Kit, Amber and their students gathered. Coyote joined the group.

The piece began with a solo violin, Kit played and everyone saw the young girl that Tilly was. As the piece went on, more and more instruments joined in as if the years were passing. Ray astonished everyone except Kit by singing the youthful and mischievous Tilly. By then the whole group was playing and Coyote joined Ray. The two of them sang Tilly's life of love, kindness, and peace-making.

The piece wound to the end, and finished with a mournful solo

by Ray which went on just long enough for Tilly to start to frown, but as the crowd started to tear up, Kit came in with a cheerful jig, joined by the rest, and ending with such joy and happiness that Tilly was clapping before the last note sounded.

As the applause died away, Tilly stood up. She needed no amplification, or rather, everyone heard her, “You have no idea how much pleasure it gives me to see you all here. I won’t even try to try to thank you all for the love you have given me, for the kindness, for the wonderful life I have had. I sometimes make fun of myself as a Moggie, as a tart, as a manipulating old woman, but seeing you all here, talking with you, seeing these wonderful gifts, I know that I am one of the luckiest beings on this planet. You all know what I am, and why I can’t stay here, but you know, I’m damned tempted.”

There was a roar of approval, nobody seemed to want Tilly to go.

“Oh stop it, you’re going to make me cry, and this isn’t an occasion for crying. I’m punching out today, and as a matter of fact...”

She nodded to the Twins, who brought her the clock.

“This is the punch clock from the Cleary Motors garage. I punched in there when I was about eleven years old. Looking at this time card, I don’t seem to have ever punched out. Well I’m going to do so now, I’m tired and I need a nap. But I want you all to promise me that you will continue this party until at

least midnight. I'd say until the neighbours complain, but I see them there in the third row. Now, no sad faces, I love you all, I will always be with you."

With that, Tilly inserted her punch card in the clock and punched out. She sat down and as she did so, she began to dissolve. A stream of particles began to rise and Ray looked up to see Suzume there, gathering them to herself.

He nodded to Suzume and watched the last of Tilly move upward. "Goodbye my love," he whispered, and then turned to the band.

"Fire it up!"

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