

Summer Vacation

Lunch Counter Stories XIV



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Summer Vacation

“This place is dead in the Summertime. The students are gone and I swear half the regulars are somewhere else.”

Liz looked over from where she was wiping a table, “What’s your point, Mike? There’s not much going on at the University any more for the Summer Semester, so no kids, and it’s summertime. The locals who aren’t tied to a job are gone to beaches, forests, or whatever suits them. So yes, it’s slow around here.”

“Oh I’m not complaining, it’s nice not to be busy, but sometimes I miss the excitement.”

“Didn’t your mother tell you not to jinx things by mentioning them?”

“That was you Liz, you tell me that all the time.”

“Well I’m a Shaman, I ought to know, right?”

Liz looked around the lunch counter, there were ten or twelve more tables to wipe. She made ‘come here’ motions with her hand and the place got smaller, the tables disappearing somewhere as it did.

“Aren’t you going to have to wipe those down the next time you expand the place?”

“Depends on who’s wiping tables when I expand it, dear.”

Mike shut up. He never benefited in that sort of discussion, his only hope was that Liz forgot and wiped them down herself. Not that it was a big chore, but these little domestic fights took the edge off the boredom of long summer days with few customers.

“Art says the place is boring too.”

“Well Art can come back and help run this place.”

Mike laughed, “I doubt he’ll do that, he grew up in the lunch counter, when Jim was running it. He’s got his job over at The George anyway, although he says it’s half empty too.”

“Mike! It’s Summer, folks are gone, get over it.”

“I know, I know, but a lot of the regulars are away, Art misses Ray, he just mopes around here when he drops in.”

“He could have gone with Ray and Tilly’s kids, they have lots of room up at the camp.”

“After all that shape shifting and running he did last spring with Stan and Oki, he says he’s going to rest for a couple of months.”

“Well its his own fault, he wasn’t born to it.”

“He says it’s weird that he’s got muscle bulges in places he’s never had them before.”

“Yeah, that bull-neck of his is a bit disturbing, I have to admit.”

“You become a bull, you get a bull-neck Stan said, serves him right.”

“What does Ingrid think of it?”

“If she didn’t like it, she could just change it I suppose.”

Liz looked around the place and waved her arm. There, it looked like the old Massey Hall Coffee Shop. She and Mike had spent a lot of time there, in fact, that was the place where she first took Mike into the tunnels under the University.

Mike looked around and sighed. There were the pillars, the wide booth chairs that he used to sleep in, despite the nine or ten Styrofoam cups of black coffee he’d drink every day. The pinball machines tucked away beside the broom closet door that actually led to the tunnels. Liz had even raised the counter so that it looked like the old walkway where students collected their food and coffee before getting to the cash register. All it needed was Sally and the other ladies who ran the place.

“I always feel a bit teary-eyed when you make the place look like this, Liz.”

“Teary eyed at the girls you talked into bed from the place, you mean.”

“I never...”

“Mike, I watched you seduce at least eight girls right there in that booth.”

“Seduced! You’re thinking about someone else my good woman.”

“Yes, seduced, you listened better to their problems than any other boy I ever saw. Seduction was exactly what it was.”

“You were watching other boys?”

“Until I saw you and decided you were mine.”

“What? I didn’t seduce you too?”

“You’re adorable. I took hold of your pecker and walked you straight to my bed.”

“You.... I....”

Liz grabbed Mike’s face and kissed him. “You OK with this shape for the place?”

“I guess so, why?”

“I’m heading out with Megan to do some Shaman stuff. I also want to look around for my people, Megan says they’re gone, but Robin said he met them. If they’re around I need to find them.”

“So you’re leaving town too?”

Liz kissed him again, “You say the most romantic things, yes I’m leaving town too. You’ll be OK by yourself, you said there’s few people around. You sure you’re good with this shape?”

“Maybe, I guess so. Maybe there will be a cute girl come in that I can listen to in the centre booth.”

Liz smiled and said nothing. She knew Mike would do no such thing, but she also knew he needed to feel that he could still be that wild fellow she knew in school. She looked fondly at him and could see that he was thinking hard about her seduction comment. He thought that listening carefully was just what you did, it had never occurred to him just how much of a turn-on that was to a girl in school.

Megan walked in through the front door that looked like you had to go down a flight of steps, “Massey Hall again?”

Liz shrugged, “Nostalgia I guess, how are you Megan?”

“Fine, fine. Hello Mike, good to see you.”

Liz noticed Mike pull back inside just a little, but to his credit he stood his ground and said, “Just fine Megan, glad you’re feeling well.”

“Just a little hungry.”

Liz grinned as Mike now did step back a bit.

Megan grinned, showing normal human teeth, “A panini would go down a treat if you can manage it Mike.”

“Coming right up,” said Mike, turning to the grill.

‘Stop teasing him, Megan, you scare him every time,’ Liz commented in Megan’s head.

Megan laughed, “Well if he didn’t want to be frightened, he should never have seduced me.”

Mike froze, panini press half closed, “What?”

“Taking advantage of a poor wolf girl in her hour of need.”

“What?”

Liz put her hand on Megan’s arm, “She’s teasing you Mike, wow you’re really sensitive today.”

“What?”

“Close the press and cook the panini dear, Megan likes you.”

“And for the seventeenth time, Mike, I never intended to eat you. You were kind enough to bed me and keep me company on my trip down from the north and I appreciated it. You weren’t bad either, very attentive lover. It was Jim who told you I was going to eat you.”

Mike turned with a doubtful look on his face.

“Oh come here, child.”

Mike moved to the counter and Megan took his face in her hands. Mike suddenly saw himself back in bed with Megan in a Wawa motel room. More than that, he saw that Megan was indeed appreciating him as a lover, and he saw no ill will toward him at all, especially no urge to eat him.

When he’d seen that, Megan pulled his face to hers and kissed him in a not very motherly way. As she did, Mike felt the blessing of Nanabozo and he smiled.

Megan turned and kissed Liz full on the lips in exactly the same way. Liz blushed as she felt the affection of her friend and teacher for the two of them. For all that Megan was a rather frightening person, she could be surprisingly tender.

Mike set the panini on the counter-top and Megan collected it with a thank-you then walked over to a table to discuss their trip with Liz. Mike grabbed the coffee pot and a couple of

mugs and took them to the table. After he'd poured the coffee, Liz took his hand and pulled him down to another chair, "You may as well know our plans, it will save me telling you later."

For maybe the first time, Mike sat next to Megan with no feelings of caution. Megan reached out and patted his hand.

Camp Tilly

Anyone coming down the gravel road would have assumed there was a wild animal war going on. The snarling and screaming could be heard for kilometres. When Ray had realized he was going to be step-father to Tilly's kids, he had used some land he bought decades earlier to build a large cabin and a bunch of bunkies. He took the kids there each summer.

Lila and the Twins were helping, Lila was older sister and sometimes step-mother to the younger kids, and the Twins were along to help out. There was a range of kids from four to twenty-four at the camp. A lot of them were shape-shifters and they were the source of the noise as they engaged in the usual rough and tumble they were allowed at the camp. Back in Guelph they had to be careful when and where they showed their powers but here they were in the middle of nowhere with nobody to see.

Ray and Lila were sitting on the cabin porch as they watched another bunkie door fly open and the kids tumble out. Tilly was not along, she had stayed home to take care of the toddlers, and to chase down yet another spirit being to have a kid with. She was a Mother of Gods, or Moggie as she called herself. Ray was her first mate, and they had produced Kitsune, one of the most powerful beings in town. Okami was her next, produced with Stan, Megan's mate. Lila was her third. She had one child by each man, whether they wanted a child or not. It was a complicated web of relationships that more or less knit the town together.

Ray made Camp Tilly after being introduced to the fifth or sixth child, to get the kids away from the city and let them be themselves, although he provided lots of training in their powers during the fun and games. Mostly to make sure they could control themselves.

Lila smiled at the erupting cabin, "There are the youngest, finally awake and likely hungry. I hope the Twins are ready at the cook tent."

Ken and Kan, the Twins, were the sons of Ken Kobold, they were identical and very few people could tell them apart. They themselves didn't help much, they finished each other's sentences and made sure they dressed alike. Most people just called them K. and since they were always together, it worked out. They were in the cook tent, a cabin set aside for eating. The twins were spooning oatmeal into bowls and herding the kids onto seats at the long table, making sure each finished

their oatmeal and toast, milk and juice. They'd need the food, the younger kids seldom got around to eating again until suppertime.

The Twins were handy, they had built The Cookstove, a rather frightening looking contraption which took raw materials in one end and spit out food at the other. The kids loved watching as their meals were prepared. The Twins had put in lots of bells, whistles and blinking lights, just to amuse the youngsters.

Right now one of the Twins was standing by the exit door with his staff, turned up to a mild hum as he sent kid after kid back to their half finished breakfast. As each ate the last of the food and gulped down their milk, the kids would bolt out the door with a whoop. Those who were lippy to the Twins got a bit of a zap from the staff on their backside as they went through the door, causing double whoops and rude hand gestures.

It was a happy place. It usually looked like barely controlled chaos, but the older kids made sure the youngsters were learning their lessons while they screamed around the place thinking they were free to do anything they wanted.

"What's on for today?" Lila asked as she sipped her second coffee.

"A hike up Spook Mountain I think, it's early in the season and we've had no broken bones yet, best get up there before we have to leave someone behind."

"Sounds good, the older kids have been whispering stories about the hike to the youngsters and they are properly scared."

Ray grinned. He didn't really have to be here, Lila and the Twins could run the place, but he loved the kids and loved watching them grow up. He leaned back and put his feet up on the railing as he reached for his own coffee. He had noticed the cord running from the back leg of his tipped up chair when he sat down, but he said nothing. As he lifted the coffee he heard giggling from under the deck and two of the youngsters pulled hard, tipping the chair out from under him.

Ray did not fall as the chair clattered to the deck, he remained in mid air as he sipped his coffee. Yet another failed trick on the head trickster. Ray chuckled to himself as Lila launched out of her own chair.

"Matt, Liz, I see you. You're in so much trouble, just wait until I get my hands on you! How dare you pull a trick like that."

By the time her speech was done, the kids were half way to the horizon, laughing and screeching. Lila sat back down and picked up her cup once more. It was a nice day. With a bit of a giggle, she picked up her own staff and offhandedly shot a bolt that caught the two troublemakers in mid-stride. A mild smack on the backside sent them sprawling and rolling across the grass.

"Little Beggars, let that be a lesson to you," said Ray, to finish the traditional play. This wasn't the first time someone had

pulled that trick and it wouldn't be the last. The lesson? Tricksters always paid the price. That was something that was an essential piece of knowledge for those with powers. There was a price on every bit of nonsense in the camp. The idea was that the kids learned to think hard before they did something that could hurt someone else. Ray and Lila were always looking over the kid's shoulders, always ready to make them pay a price for their tricks.

In the evenings, around the campfire, the kids got traditional stories about tricksters from all lands, and there was always a price the trickster had to pay. Anansi, Coyote, Raven, Reynard, Loki, Narada, Prometheus, Hermes, Br'er Rabbit, Eris, and so many more were ultimately seen as those who twitted the Gods and paid the bill for their cleverness, usually to the benefit of humans or others who needed protection from the pride and cruelty of those Gods.

At Camp Tilly, a whole generation of kids were being trained to be clever, to tweak the nose of authority, and to expect to pay for that cleverness. Somebody had to keep those in charge from being too cruel, after all. They learned that they themselves should be on guard against being cruel, the greater the trick, the worse the punishment.

Art and Ingrid Have a Good Sweat

Art and Ingrid were in the sauna at the St. George apartments, nicely hot and sweaty. Art was admiring Ingrid's shape, and there was a lot of it to admire. She was a big girl.

"Ingrid, you're the Goddess of War, why are you showing all your scars?"

"When I'm out in public in a skimpy outfit I get rid of them, but here with you, love, I like to be reminded of our lives together."

"Oh, this again. I've only had the one amazing and special life, with you Ingie. I know you say we've had hundreds of lives together but I don't remember them."

"Doesn't mean they didn't happen sweetheart, you sometimes remember and sometimes don't. It's OK, I remember for the both of us, and these scars all represent a life together."

"That one on your leg?"

"I stepped in behind you when a Scythian was about to cut you down from behind. The bastard went low when I guessed high. Still, while he was cutting my leg, I took his head."

"You see, that's where I've got you. You're a Goddess and you can't be cut, and even if you meet a magic sword or something

you heal right away, no scars."

"Love, don't take this the wrong way, but I like those lives where you remember our past ones, better. Not just because in this one, we have this sort of argument all the time, but because we can't share all the fun times we've had."

Art looked down at himself, no more than the usual mishaps with a knife or barbed wire showed on his body. "So why don't I have scars then?"

"New body, no scars, Art. That's sort of obvious."

"Would I have them?"

"Oh my, we've been through a lot of battles, a lot of wars together. You'd look like a patchwork quilt."

"Show me."

Art looked down and saw some absolutely horrible scars, many of which were from wounds that would have killed him. "This one should have killed me."

"It did, you didn't always end up as a wise old king, sometimes I couldn't be there to be your shield. That one you got from a lancer while you were part of a shield wall, he got between you and the guy beside you and thrust right through you, ripped your entire side open as he rode by."

"Where was that?"

"Somewhere in France, one of the smaller wars with England. That was the first time you met Ray, well sort of."

"Don't tell me..."

"He was the lancer, yes."

Art groaned, "No wonder I don't want to remember things."

"There was nothing personal, Art, you were just on opposite sides. He is a damned good horseman."

"And he killed me?"

"He did, you died in my arms, I was too late to patch you up. I hate those times, but I always knew we'd find each other again in twenty years or so."

"But you did sometimes? Fix me up?"

"Sure, you always healed faster than anyone else on the outside. On the inside, I fixed that instantly."

"Why didn't you just make me immortal?"

"You wouldn't let me. Even the times you remembered our lives together you didn't agree."

"But you made me immortal this life."

"You agreed Art, I don't know why you changed your mind this time, maybe because you aren't a warrior and you don't have those stupid ideas about glory and honour."

"But I let you heal me?"

"I healed you."

"Oh."

"Art, I've loved you since you first met me back in the Roman times in England, back when you looked into the pit. I didn't know we were going to meet life after life, but when I found you next, I vowed not to let you live with wounds if I could fix you without going against your wish to live and die normally. You remembered that life, that we had met before. I swore not to save you from death but I never promised not to heal you faster than you would have done naturally."

"Ingrid, these stories I make up in my head..."

"Are generally true, at some level you do remember the past."

"Mike has been after me to write them all down."

"I wish you would, love, you're a good storyteller, and I think the 'real and true lives of King Arturus' would be a lot of fun to read."

"What, a story with multiple King Arthurs over multiple lives with his constant shield maiden companion? Um, you know when I put it like that it does sound like fun."

"Well?"

"Sweetheart, I'd much rather live this life with you, than write about the past. Anyway, you remember it all, what would be the point."

"Think of the kerfuffle when the Arthur historians read it. All the arguments."

"Ray is the trickster, Ingie, I'm just Art, the handyman at the St. George."

"Well, you could tell me the stories, and I would remember what you said, and then I could dictate them."

"Wouldn't you be tempted to correct all the inaccuracies?"

"Never. I'm not a storyteller, not like you, anyway. My stories would be drier than dirt."

"Uh, this scar here is starting to bother me, where did I get that one?"

"In a harem in Turkey when you were fighting for the Russians. A Eunuch caught you a good one, split you and your

manhood almost in two. I had a good laugh when I saw it."

"I don't remember that."

"I don't blame you, really. It was pretty painful."

"You didn't fix me?"

"I was angry with you, you were in a harem and not with me, you'd told me to go soak my head in the nearest river."

"Oh dear, no wonder I don't remember, I'm sorry Ingie."

"Water under the bridge. That's where I stuck my head while you were being split down the middle."

"Are you making this one up?"

"Better than just a chunk of shrapnel your first day on the battlefield."

Art laughed, "And you say you can't tell a story."

"So are you starting to believe me about our lives together?"

"Look, with all the things I've seen since I started hanging around the lunch counter when I was a kid, things like being chased by the Wild Hunt after I met you, I have no real reason not to believe you. I mean, why would I not search you out life after life, you are the sweetest thing to happen to me this life,

why not all the others?"

"Come on over here you lovely man."

"Ingie, it's too hot. Let's do a couple laps in the pool and then we can do whatever you have in mind."

"Can we keep the double-thingie?"

"Woman, you are as perverted as they come. Fix our scars now so we don't scare the tenants, and we'll talk about it later."

What We Can't Do

"You OK Kit?"

Kitsune had come into the lunch counter and sat down heavily at the counter. She looked upset. "Is Ray around Mike?"

"He's out of town for a while, can I help?"

"How about Liz?"

"Sorry, off somewhere with Megan doing Shaman stuff. Can I help?"

"It's Julius, the little guy is dying of cancer."

"The sweet little kid you brought in last week for a muffin?"

"Yeah. He's got stage 4 pancreatic cancer, and he just got the news that he's only got months left. Gods damn it! Why?"

Mike was quiet for a moment, "Uh, could you...."

"I'd fix him in a heartbeat, Mike, but he's way too far gone for a 'miracle cure' and they've tried everything else. I feel helpless, like I'm a fraud. What's the point of having all this power if I can't save a sweet, innocent kid like Julius?"

Mike put down an Irish coffee, "Kit I don't think your power was given to you 'for' anything. There are enough Gods around this place that you would know if you had a God-given duty. Is there no wiggle room for you to fix him?"

"I waited too long, Mike, it's my fault he's dying. To cure him now would violate every rule Megan has laid down for getting along with the humans, there's no way the medical profession would buy a cure now. I'm helpless."

"Is there anything..."

"I've made him as pain free as I dare, and I've given him a violin that takes away the rest of the pain when he's touching it. Apparently he sleeps with his hand on the bow."

"Well I guess that's one way to get him to practice... oh God I'm sorry I said that Kit, please forgive me."

Kit smiled at Mike, and took a big swallow of her coffee. "I just don't see why him, Mike. Why does a kid like him have to die when there are so many shitheads out there still alive?"

There was a rustle in the air, Beelzabub was sitting on the stool next to Kit. He put an empty coffee cup down on the counter-top and then put his hand on Kit's. "It doesn't work like that, Kitsune, my brother and I don't control every little thing. Sparrows fall all the time and we don't notice, that's just wishful thinking on the part of those who believe in us. Sweetheart, you don't want us controlling everything that happens, we're no different than the other powers around here. We exist, and we can affect what we notice, but we don't control it all."

"I know that Beels, I wasn't blaming you or your brother, or any other Gods or Goddess's around here. I really do wish there was someone in charge, I'd punch them a good one."

Beelzabub put his other hand to his jaw without thinking about it. Kitsune had knocked one of his teeth out when he had tried to make a deal for her husband Dave's soul. He could well imagine Kit punching some supreme being in the mouth. He squeezed Kit's hand. "I can make it a painless death and I promise his soul will go to a good place afterwards. I know how hard this is for you."

"It's just that he's so good about it. I mean he understands that he's going to die and he spends all his time comforting those around him, including me. He comes to every lesson and tries his best. He tells me it's OK, and I start to bawl, he comes and hugs me! Shit I wish I could just fix it, or destroy some evil spirit or something."

Mike put an Irish down for Beelzabub, "Kit you aren't responsible for the world, shitty things happen but you're not responsible for that, and you aren't supposed to fix it all. I know you're one of the most powerful beings here, but just because you can beat up almost everyone around, that doesn't mean you're in charge."

"Oh Mike, I know that, if Liz taught me anything it was to do what I can and try to let go of the rest. But it's hard. I love that little guy, I really do."

"I can make you forget when the time comes."

"Don't you fucking dare, Beelzabub, don't you take him away from me!... I'm sorry, I'm sorry, that was kind of you, but I don't want to forget him, or the pain of losing him. It just hurts so damned much."

The three of them sat in silence for a while, thinking about how unfair the universe is. Mike cleared his throat, "Uh, Coyote?"

"Oh Hells no, Mike. Megan would have my head on a stick."

Coyote could sing the world around but I know it's just me and Julius here, could you imagine if Coyote was to change the universe for every kid who didn't deserve to die? It's sweet of you two to try and fix this, I love you both for trying but there's nothing I can do about it. I'm going to have to watch him die and I'm going to cry for a month, and every time I think about him for years after that. Then I'm going to remember how brave he was, how much he tried to comfort his family and me, and I'm going to think that I was really lucky to have known him.

"Humans die, sooner or later, and it's unfortunate that some die before their time, and some live far beyond when they should have gone wherever it is they go. I get that. Thanks you two, for being here to listen to me."

Beelzabub leaned over and for the first time in their relationship, kissed Kitsune on the top of her head. A sort of Devil's blessing. Kit hugged him and then turned to Mike, "Can I have a mac and cheese panini please Mike?"

"Make that two," said Beelzabub.

Spooky Mountain

Lila was leading the hike up Spooky Mountain, and Ray was bringing up the rear. The Twins had done a lovely job of

making the hike into a ghost ride, with animated monsters that the kids could fight. It was a highlight of the camp season.

Ray caught movement from the corner of his eye and Robin Goodfellow was there beside him. “Hello Ray.”

“Robin, nice to see you, I’ve spotted you around here and there at the camp, are you keeping an eye on Lila?”

“And the kids too. Ray that’s what I want to talk to you about, I sense something old, really old and nasty around the place.”

“What, like a spirit, a monster maybe?”

“I don’t know, Ray, that’s why I think it’s old, I can’t get a read on it.”

“It’s probably nothing, there’s lots of lost souls wandering around these woods.”

“Ray, you’re a youngster, but still in ten thousand years you have surely encountered some of the old ones, the urges that are left over, that haven’t been eliminated yet.”

“Are you sure? There can’t be any of those around, surely not. Coyote has sung the world in and out of existence several times, those old ones can’t take that.”

“I just know what I can feel, Ray, and it’s not friendly, please take care.”

“No, no, look you have told us that Lila is destined to meet you in some crisis a long time from now. That’s true right?”

“It is.”

“So we’re good, nothing is going to happen to Lila until then right? And therefore the kids? I mean, it’s prophesy.”

“Ray, listen to me carefully, prophesy is horse crap. You know how many religions have had prophesies about the end of the world, and how many of them have done horrible things because they figured the world was ending. That was just the prophets being greedy for whatever was promised, or afraid, or looking for power. Whatever it is, prophesy like that is intensely selfish, it really only applies to one person. With no Gods looking after every detail of existence, there can be no prophesy. There’s only extension of the timeline, like science fiction, take a trend and run it out a thousand years. Now imagine a trend from a thousand years ago, is it true?”

“It would depend on the trend, but I get your point, it couldn’t be very specific except by accident. So what about your prediction that Lila would need you.”

“Ah, looking into the future, being there, that isn’t prophesy, it’s just reporting what’s there. I went to the future to get Lila, and saw that she would need me, she came back along the same path.”

“Yeah, I still don’t get this time travel thing, I can’t imagine how it would work.”

“Coyote, and the rest us who have been around since before Coyote created the world, are outside the time of this world Ray.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, we can slide around if we work hard enough, it takes a lot of energy to get out of this world and into the wider existence, but it can be done.”

“If that’s true, why did you go for future Lila? Especially since you told me the future can be different if you tell us too much about it?”

“Because Lila today is still in awe of the King and Queen, I needed to hand the necklace to a Lila who had grown beyond that.”

“Come to think of it, Robin, why are you not in awe of Queen Lila, and why were you not still under her command?”

“I stole the necklace, remember. And let’s face it, it’s hard to be in awe of someone you’ve slept with for years, someone for whom you’ve picked up and washed their dirty underwear.”

“Well, relationships are something I’ve never figured out so I guess I’ll leave you with yours. Can you tell me anything else

about this threat you feel, other than you feel it?”

“I suspect it’s like me, been in existence longer than the world. That means it slips around when I try to see it, in and out of existence, more or less.”

“Should we take the kids back to camp?”

“I don’t think the camp defences would matter much to this thing, Lila’s up front, you’re here and the Twins are somewhere in the middle, I’ll range around and keep an eye out. You go ahead and enjoy the hike, the kids seem to be having fun.”

“Yeah, but now I’m wondering if we’re teaching them self control or training them to fight.”

“Ray there’s never been a difference between those two, you know that.”

Ray sighed, “Don’t I just.”

Robin faded out of sight and Ray could feel him moving around in the woods. He could sense nothing dangerous, but like Robin said, he was a youngster and might not even recognize the danger. He listened to the kids ahead of him and didn’t hear anything but the usual high spirits. As he walked along deep in thought, he almost missed the arrow that came for his head. He slapped it away as it was a couple inches from his ear and made a note to tell the Twins it was aimed too high for the kids. Unless they had set it deliberately to catch Ray.

Well he needed practice too he supposed.

Ray wondered if this threat Robin felt was directed to anyone in particular. The kids, the Twins and Lila were only just arrived on the world, surely anything that old would not be after any of them specifically. Ray yes, he'd made plenty of enemies over his lifetime, but one of the old urges? That left Robin, but surely if it was after Robin he would simply lead it away from the kids.

Ray had to believe that the thing was after the kids, for whatever reason it had, maybe no reason at all. Well let it come, if they couldn't handle it, Ray had friends he could call on.

He snatched another arrow out of the air and looked at it. Engraved in tiny letters was "Hi Uncle Ray." Hi indeed, he was going to have a chat with the Twins. He looked into the woods and saw a mechanism duck behind a tree. A robot? Really? Ray changed to fox form and slid through the brush like a silent breeze. As the thing stepped out from behind the tree to locate its target once more, Ray reached in from behind and ripped out the wiring. The thing collapsed in a heap on the ground.

'Be nice if all problems were so easily solved,' Ray thought to himself.

Art Tells Ingrid a Story

Art and Ingrid were lying in bed. Art was lazily moving his hand up and down Ingrid's back and she was pretty much purring. Sure it was mid-afternoon, but if the George needed Art, he would notify him.

“Ingrid, that story I told Mike, about our first meeting. What was that hole and what happened to me when I looked in?”

“No mortal should have looked into that pit, Art, I didn't get you away from it in time. I was in love with you by then, and so I protected you from being destroyed by giving you some of myself. That's why you keep coming back.”

“How did you survive then? I remember seeing you jump into the pit just before I passed out.”

“Goddess, remember? Woden had sent me to find and close the gate, and he was with me, I had his power as well as mine.”

“He was with you?”

“Yes, don't worry about it, he and I had, long centuries before, stopped being jealous of each other's love affairs.”

“But the wild hunt...”

“Oh I didn't say we aren't involved in each other's lives.”

“Wait, you said gate, was that hole some sort of gateway?”

“To another place, yes, one where the life there, is incompatible with the life here.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that they would kill every single piece of life in this universe, should they ever get through, so that they could live here.”

“And you closed it.”

“Sure, that was my job, and I did it. It seemed like I had to kill half the life in that Universe to do it, but eventually I closed it.”

“So nothing got through?”

“I didn’t say that, what do you think the Wild Hunt went after when it wasn’t chasing you?”

“So those beings from another universe are all gone now?”

“If they’re not, they’re very quiet. We hunted for a very long time and killed thousands of them. They weren’t hard to find, just look for a big patch of dead and you’d find one.”

“That’s good, I’d hate to run into something like that.”

“They can die, Art, and you’ve always got my sword, or in a

real desperate time, you could call Excalibur.”

“It would have to be a very desperate time, I’m not fond of that sword.”

“Well...”

“Shall I tell you a story of our past lives?”

“Why Art, I would love for you to tell me a story.”

“You won’t correct it?”

“Never.”

“Will you tell me if I just made it up? If it didn’t really happen?”

“Art, a good story is a thing of reality by itself, it doesn’t have to be something that happened.”

“All right. This time I was a student at Oxford. It was 1170, and I was reading history, of all things. I had no recollection of my early lives, so it was all brand new. I was living in the town, in rooms by myself. Don’t get mad Ingie, but I bedded quite a few of the girls from the town. This went on while I was at the University, for maybe five or six years. I eventually came home one day and found some of my chests were full of women’s clothing, that’s when I realized that Anne had moved in. We hadn’t discussed it, but she was easy to get along with, and

easy on the eyes. I found work at the University and she worked in the town as a seamstress. I had a legacy and a minor name from a relative in Normandy, so we were fairly well off.

“I studied the sword and fought in a few tournaments, collected a few scars, but all that stopped when Anne got pregnant. I still practised, but I didn’t fight formally any more. Anne gave me a boy and a girl and I loved them all.”

Art paused and looked at Ingrid, who had a crooked smile. “I was there, Art, and I’m not jealous, go on.”

Art laughed, “Well it was a good life, but not so exciting as some we’ve had, apparently, and yes, I’m starting to believe you that I’ve had many. The kids grew up and moved away, to lives of their own, and somewhere in there I met a woman named Ingrid. This was quite late in my life and I started an affair, which Anne didn’t appreciate at first, but as she got older, she was happy not to have sex so often.

“Honestly, I don’t know why I’m telling you this one, except that I’m fond of the memory of Anne, the kids and you. Also the lack of a war. Tell me though, you were usually my first love, how did I get involved with Anne? Not that I’m complaining, you liked her too.”

“I was very fond of Anne, she made you happy. The reason we didn’t meet earlier was because I was pissed off at you.”

“What, why?”

“Well first, a hundred years before, you fought for Godwinson at Hastings, after the long march back from the North. You died in the first hour. Then you ended up fighting the Normans as they subdued the country, but you died about four times before I could get to you. I have to admit that made me angry.”

“So you weren’t with me in every life?”

“Not a lot of them, you had a talent for getting killed as a very young man. If there wasn’t a fight going on in England, you went over to the continent and died there.”

“Sorry.”

“So by 1170 when you want to University instead of into battle somewhere, I figured I’d just let you die again in a tournament, but you didn’t. By the time I’d forgiven you, the family was well under way, so I stayed out of the way until I could see that Anne wasn’t all that interested in sex any more.”

“Well that was mighty decent of you, woman.”

“Yes, I thought so myself.”

“I’m very pleased that you got over your anger, and that you didn’t just give up on me.”

“Well it wasn’t so much your fighting, it was your ability to get killed before I could worm my way into your bed.”

“I’m very pleased you did as often as you did. Thanks Ingie.”

The Hole

“Back, step back now.”

“What is it, Liz?”

“That I don’t know. Beyond this point, in the dead area that looks like a clear-cut to me, there’s nothing.”

“Well I can see that it’s dead, but what do you mean nothing?”

“No people, no trees, hell Megan, no insects, there’s nothing at all.”

Megan took a step forward and immediately recoiled, "Damn, it's like falling into a vacuum, like some sort of hole. Have you ever seen anything like this before?"

"Never, it's not good, bad or indifferent, it's just the absence of anything at all. What could do this?"

"Nothing on this world, there's no background, no insects, no bacterial indications. Let's figure out how big this is."

The two began walking carefully around the area. Twenty minutes later they were still walking and arrived at their starting point. "It's a big, and getting bigger, see that tree there, you can watch it die."

"Let's see if we can find anyone who can tell us how long this has been here."

"I wonder if the people in that cabin we spotted, were able to get out in time."

"I suppose it would make a difference how fast this thing appeared, Liz, where's the nearest people?" Megan reached out and grabbed Liz by the arm, they were a kilometre away. "The damned thing jumped, I could barely feel it, and it felt like it was reaching for us. I don't have much hope that the people in that cabin got away."

"There's people about half a kilometre from here, in that direction. Do we go there?"

"To warn them, if nothing else."

Liz knocked on the door while Megan stood a short way from the cabin, all her senses wide open. She could feel it now, she simply had to look for the absence of life, the blank spot.

A woman opened the door to Liz and invited them in. "I'm Lillian, up here by myself from the city, my husband is in town

working. What can I do for you?"

"Megan, and Liz, how long have you been here?"

"I came up last week, I'm a writer so it's nice to have the peace and quiet."

"Have you walked around much?"

"I wandered toward the clear cut three days ago but it gave me a really bad feeling and so I have mostly stayed indoors."

Megan frowned, "Do you know how far away the clear cut was?"

"About three hour's walk. It's funny, it wasn't very big, it looked more like a lightning strike or something, but that cabin in the centre wasn't damaged."

"Did you go to the cabin?"

"Are you kidding? The closer to that cabin I got, the worse I felt. I turned around and came home."

"Lillian, I don't think that's a clear cut, it's a dead area of some kind, and it's getting bigger. I think it's time you went home and joined your husband again. It's not safe here."

"Pardon me, Megan, but who are you? I'm not sure I should be going home on your say-so."

"I'm Nanaboza."

"I don't know who that is."

Liz smiled, "Megan is a spirit being, Lillian, shall she show you?"

"Maybe... Yes please."

"Don't be afraid, Megan is going to change."

With that, there was a large white wolf in the room, Lillian jumped back and her hands flew to her mouth as she stifled a scream. "I'll start packing, how much time do I have?"

"Judging by the speed it's growing, you should leave today."

"Thank you both for coming to warn me. I'll start packing, will you stay until I leave?" Lillian was shaking, making an effort not to freak out.

"If you wish. You have nothing to fear from us."

Megan stepped beside the woman and Liz told her to stroke her fur. The woman did, and suddenly was calm, she smiled and looked at Liz again.

"Do you know if there are any more people in this area, Lillian?"

"No, we bought the place because it was away from anything else."

"OK, go get packed now. If there are any small things that you can't lose, take them with you. We're not sure what this thing is or if we can get rid of it."

Lillian nodded and went into the bedroom to start packing. Megan changed back to her human shape and nodded to Liz, "Women and fur eh?"

Liz smiled, "Do we need help? I have to admit I haven't a clue what to do here."

"Nor do I, let's get this woman on the road and we'll call Stan."

The two went out onto the front porch and sat on a bench there. As they were watching they noticed a vast rustling in the bush. Megan nodded, "What is big enough to go, is going, the animals and the birds are heading away from that thing. When I was a wolf I could feel it better, it's something to get away from. It's like it can't be fought, and the animals know that. All they can do is run."

"I don't blame them, I want to run too."

Megan nodded, "But we won't."

"No, we won't."

Lillian came out with a couple of suitcases and announced she was ready. Megan and Liz helped her take her packages to the car and load them in. "You have all your writing materials?"

"And the photos, and Jim's fishing equipment. There's nothing else there that's important. Should I lock the place up?"

"Go ahead, I'm hoping we can stop whatever that is, and you will be able to come back."

"Should I stay and help you?"

Megan took her face in her hands and kissed her on the forehead, "Go home, forget. There's a wildfire nearby, you need to get back to your family."

Lillian nodded and got into the car. As she drove away, Liz said, "A brave woman."

Megan nodded, "Shall we go see what we can do with that thing?"

"Don't take us too close, it has probably grown."

Megan took Liz by the arm again and they were gone.

Perimeter Patrol

It was a fairly normal hike at Camp Tilly. One of the kids ended up with a broken arm from trying to jump on top of one of the robots to strangle it, and a couple of kids ended up with bloody noses from fighting with each other.

There was no sign of the danger that Robin sensed, and Ray sensed nothing at all. Without mentioning Robin, Ray asked Lila if she had felt anything unusual.

As she leaned back in her chair on the porch, she frowned. “Nothing that I can say was unusual, Ray. Just the normal amount of anxiety over the youngsters. The Twins were a bit rougher this year with their mechanisms, I’m going to have a talk with them. Four year-olds shouldn’t be wrestling with robots the size of cars.”

Ray frowned, “OK I was just checking, maybe it’s nothing but keep your eyes open will you?”

“Always, we’re pretty well set up here but something can always go wrong.”

“The bumps and bruises all sorted out?”

“Yeah, the healers finished half an hour ago, everyone is either doing crafts or having a nap.”

“That’s good, I think I’ll have a look around the perimeter just

to check up on the wards.”

“You’re really spooked, you’re sure there’s nothing?”

“Just a feeling, Lila, just a feeling. Maybe I’m getting old.”

Ray leaned forward and dropped his front chair-legs to the porch. The afternoon seemed peaceful enough, but he checked his wrist band as he stepped down to the yard. The Twins had been tweaking them lately, and they were more efficient than ever. Powered by a couple of hairs of Coyote, they drew from an energy source outside the world that Coyote had sung into being.

Satisfied that he had a shield, and confident of his own fighting ability, Ray set out for a walk. As he moved along, he gradually started to feel like he should be looking for what wasn’t there. That seemed crazy to him, but suddenly Robin was beside him.

“Where did you come from?”

“I was here, but not here. We oldest ones aren’t completely of this world, so we are in it, and not.”

“What the hell does that mean? I’m not really in the mood for riddles, you’ve got me on edge.”

“If you don’t see it, I can’t see it for you, Ray. You looked for what wasn’t there and you saw me.”

“You mean you’re not here?”

“Of course I am, but you didn’t see me, and now you do.”

“Riddles again.”

“Sorry, I think I’m speaking plainly. Those who are outside the world and inside it, are never completely in either place.”

“Robin why are you here, why were you here beside me?”

“Because I’m thinking you can see what I can only feel.”

“An invisible threat.”

“Yes, like I was invisible and you saw me.”

“You were outside the world?”

“Yes.”

“And you still are?”

“Yes.”

“Well get in here, I’m getting a headache.”

“Sorry about that. I’m here and I’m now.”

“Look, I don’t like these things I can’t figure out, we’re

supposed to be the things humans can't figure out."

"Yes, Ray."

"And don't get all patronizing."

"No, Ray."

Ray stopped talking, he really was getting a headache. Look for what isn't there? Robin is inside and outside the world? Ray checked his wrist band again, and suddenly remembered that it was powered by hair from Coyote. Now there was a being who was both inside and outside the world, he had sung it into existence.

Ray looked closer at the band. It was a shield, it could be projected, it could be used as a light. It could turn Ray invisible... how did it do that? Did it move Ray into that place outside the world where Coyote was, partly? Where Robin was?

If that was true, could it be reversed, could it allow Ray to see into that place that wasn't there? Damn now he was talking like Robin. The wristband could be controlled by thought, fine, let's see. Hah, let's 'see'.

Ray looked at Robin, "Go back into the place outside the world, where I can't see you please Robin."

"But you can see me there and here."

"Just do it will you?"

Robin nodded, "OK I'm there."

Ray frowned, he could still see Robin, but he said to himself, "Stop letting me see into the other place." Robin disappeared.

"Let me see into the other place." Robin reappeared.

"Good grief, how clever are the Twins anyway?"

"Sorry, the Twins?"

"I saw you through the wristband, Robin, the Twins made it, I don't know if they have any idea it can do this, but it can project light or something else to let me see you when you're not here in this world."

"Seriously? How can it do that?"

"I doubt the Twins know, but they used a couple hairs from Coyote's coat to power it, and he's..."

"One of the oldest, he's outside and inside the world. Got you. Let's carry on and see what we can see."

The two walked on around the property. It was a lovely afternoon, the sun drifted down through the leaves and dappled the ground. The birds were singing, small animals scurried

away as they came near, all seemed normal.

Almost half way around, Robin stopped, "No, oh Gods no."

Ray looked at him, "What is it?"

"There, over that way, there's no animals, they are scattering away from that. I've seen this before, but not for centuries. Cernunnos please let it be something else."

Ray stared in the direction that Robin was pointing, but could see nothing. He ordered the wristband to magnify the scene but there was too much brush. He looked at Robin and saw something that would look like terror on anybody else. "Come on, let's go."

Robin nodded and set off through the brush. As they walked, the bird song got more and more quiet, something Ray wasn't happy to hear. They walked a good kilometre and a half before Robin grabbed Ray's arm to stop him. "There!"

Ray looked, he didn't know what he was seeing, some sort of creature that didn't make sense, too many arms and legs, not enough torso, not enough head. There were a dozen of them, and they seemed to grow and shrink as he watched.

Robin moaned and sat down heavily, his back against a tree and his head in his hands.

The St. George Moves

"How about another story?"

"Tonight, lover, tonight. We've got things to do today. I swear, you have the ability to drop right into a project with everything you've got. Now that you believe me about your past lives and your stories you want to tell them all at once."

"Well, I'm sorry. It's just that I get the feeling that I don't have much time."

"Don't be sorry, your ability to throw yourself into a project is one of the things I love about you. We've got time, tell me another story tonight. Right now you've got things to do here in the St. George, and I've got things to do in Europe."

"The war?"

"Unfortunately, a war Goddess' work never seems to be done."

"But you can be two or three places at once."

"I can, but if I'm here you get distracted love."

"I suppose you're right. You'll be here tonight for supper?"

"You know it, shall we go to the Keller? They've got a new menu and some new brews to check out."

Ingrid liked nothing better than trying out a new brew or, sometimes a dozen, in an evening. Art learned long ago not to try to keep up but he worked at it for the first half hour or so.

Ingrid kissed him and gave him a hug, then was gone. Art did indeed have things to do, when an apartment building jumps around the city, there are bound to be problems, today it was the plumbing. It seemed like all the toilets in the place plugged up at once. Art was supposed to be the manager, working for Kuri, but he was an all around handyman as far as the St. George was concerned.

He grabbed his tool belt and his box and headed out to spend the afternoon trying to get antique plumbing to run like it was fifty years old. Just as he got a major line running in the basement, it stopped and he felt a wrench. The St. George had moved.

"George, what's up?"

Back came the thought, 'I don't know, Art, my defences kicked in and I don't know why. Is everything OK down there in the basement?'

Art took a careful look around, the St. George was very good at defending itself, sometimes even shifting position and then back onto whatever was threatening. There were old bones in a

building site being excavated right now from where a team of thieves tried to break in a hundred years ago.

"Nothing out of the ordinary George. What do you feel?"

'Nothing.'

"Well that's good then."

'No, I feel nothing in the northwest corner of the lot I was just in, as in nothing at all. As far as I can tell, there's nothing there.'

"That doesn't sound right. Your senses are really good, I know, the Twins helped upgrade them. Do you mean there's nothing but air, or a vacuum?"

'No, I mean nothing, no air, no vacuum, just nothing at all, a hole in the world.'

"A hole? Oh shit that can't be like the hole Ingrid and I were just talking about can it?"

'I don't know what you were...'

"Oh stop it, you listen to me and it's OK, George, you need to know what your people are doing. When I first met Ingrid, there was this hole and I looked into it."

'What did you see?'

"Uh, things, I saw things, but I haven't a clue what they were. But I saw things, some seemed close, some were kilometres away."

'Not likely the same kind of hole, if there were things in it, I'd know it.'

"Yeah, I guess so. You want me to go have a look?"

'I've asked Hubert and Lorraine to go check it out. Sam is going along as well.'

"Those three will see something if there's anything to see."

As it turned out, the three saw nothing but a dead patch of dirt where the St. George had been sitting on an empty lot. Hubert was reporting back, "Just dirt, George, nothing else to see."

'It's what's above the dirt, please be careful, I sense nothing at all above the dirt up to about two metres.'

"Above the... "

Lorraine pulled Sam back from where they had been approaching the northwest corner of the lot, "Back, please Sam, George is right, there's nothing there, nothing alive, no air, and I've never seen anything like it."

"No air..."

"Nothing alive. No way anything could be alive. Look, I'm one of the old ones, almost old enough to remember Coyote singing, and I've never seen anything like this. I don't mind telling you, this scares me."

Sam looked at Lorraine in astonishment. Nothing scared Lorraine, she had survived being banished from the Keen family, she had survived madness and who knew how many life and death fights. If Lorraine was scared, Sam was damned well scared too. She took another two steps back from the area.

Lorraine cocked her head, trying to see something that wasn't there, "George is it growing?"

'No, it seems to have appeared there just an instant after I moved, but it hasn't changed since.'

"It's beyond us three, George, we're going to sit here and watch, tell us if it starts to grow please."

'Of course, and I'll see if I can find someone else to have a look.'

"The old one's George, they might know what it is."

Sam looked puzzled, "The old ones?"

"The ones who listened to Coyote when he sang the world into being, there was nothing before that, maybe this is part of that nothing left over. Look my loves, I'm grasping at straws here,

I've never seen anything like this before."

Hubert leaned over and hugged Lorraine, "We always work this stuff out, don't sweat it."

"Not always," muttered Lorraine.

Sam looked worried, "Not always?"

"Sam, I've heard Coyote say he's sung the world out of and back into existence several times. Surely not all of those were on a whim."

Sam snuggled into Hubert's other side, as if it was a cold day. She certainly had just felt a cold breeze run up her spine.

Back to the Lunch Counter

The clear cut, the hole, the blank spot, whatever they were going to call it, had grown when Megan and Liz got back to it. They looked, they tried to get some sort of handle on it, but they couldn't seem to find a handle.

Megan had the wristband that the Twins had given her. She tried putting a force field right in front of it, but the hole just moved past the field as if it wasn't there. Perhaps to whatever

this is, the things of this world weren't there. Liz suggested that it might be something other than of this world, and Megan had to agree. Neither of them had ever run into something that refused to be seen or influenced by them. What they couldn't touch or see or hear, they couldn't influence.

Megan tried a different setting on the band, she tried to surround and isolate a piece of the nothing. Again, no effect, but momentarily, before the things disappeared, both women saw something, some sort of creatures of too many limbs and not enough heads. As soon as they saw them, the creatures had disappeared. Megan tried again, with similar results. It was an effect, at least. They could catch glimpses of whatever it was that was doing this.

Megan called Stan, who appeared beside her, looking a bit sleepy. He wasn't sleepy for long, he caught sight of the hole and gasped. "Megan, get back. Liz, we need to go."

"You know this thing?"

"Megan, don't argue with me woman. I don't ask much of you, but I'm telling you right now, back to the lunch counter, now!"

Megan looked like she was about to argue, she didn't like backing down from anything. Stan blew out a breath and grabbed their arms, the three were back in the lunch counter, causing Mike to blink at their sudden reappearance.

"Stan, love, what was that about. Do you know what that is?"

"Stories, old, old stories told in the men's lodge. That thing is the end of the world."

"What?"

"It's a hole, it grows, Men and Gods try to resist it, they die, everything dies."

"Stan you're not making any sense, if it's the end of the world how are you standing here telling me about it?"

"I don't know how. Maybe there was something that could stop it, but the stories just say we're finished. This is the end of the world, a hole nobody can see, where nothing can live, that gets bigger and bigger and finally there's nothing."

"Stan, we saw creatures inside."

"What? How? I looked and saw nothing."

"So did I, but I used the Twin's wristband and when I surrounded them with a field, we saw them. Just for a moment and then they were gone somewhere else."

"Show me."

With that Megan and Stan were gone. Liz turned to Mike and put her arms around him, squeezing hard.

"That bad?"

"Mike it was horrible, just a gap, like I'd gone blind in all my senses, and you couldn't feel any life at all."

"But you saw creatures."

"Yes, I saw them too when Megan used the band."

"If you can see them, you can fight them."

"Mike, as soon as we saw them they turned and then were gone. How do you fight something like that?"

"I don't know, but if we see them, we've got a way to affect them."

At that moment, Stan and Megan reappeared. Stan was excited, "I saw them, we can reach them, we can fight." He was as happy as he ever was, Stan was built to fight.

"Megan, go get the Twins, they have to see these things."

Megan nodded and was gone, she was back moments later with Ken and Kam. "Look you two, there's a problem, we have to figure out how to see and then how to fight some sort of creatures that are making a hole in the world."

"What do you mean," "a hole in the world?" "You mean like an excavator," "making holes in the dirt?"

"Just come with me, and watch yourselves." With that Stan took them to the hole in the woods.

"See that?"

"Don't see" "anything, Stan."

"That's the point, there's nothing there. Just a clear cut or something but trust me, nothing lives in there, nothing is alive or I'd feel it. That's a dead zone. Now, take one of your wrist thingies and throw a field around a part of the dead zone."

"Holy" "Crap, what are" "those things?" "Where did" "they go?"

"Just so, what are they and how did they get away, I thought your field there could cut off even air, so how did they get through it to disappear, or did they somehow negate your field?"

Stan was talking to himself, the Twins had their heads together and all he could hear was a steady rumble of muttering. They had tools out and were messing with one of the wrist bands. Every so often one of them would look up and try something, the creatures would flick into existence and then be gone. More muttering, more adjustments and they would try again.

Stan watched the Twins and he watched the hole. They were a long way away, but the edge was getting closer. Stan looked

again and realized the growth was getting slower. He mentioned this to the Twins who seemed excited by this.

"I think" "you're right, Stan" "it's slowing down." "No, it's growing at a steady rate, but the perimeter is getting wider" "so it's linear progress is slowing, yes!"

"That means?"

"It's going to take more time" "to devour the world" "than we thought."

"How much time?"

"Months" "instead of weeks."

"Oh that makes me feel so much better. Can you two get hold of those things with your field?"

The Twins shook their heads, "We need to talk" "to Father."
"He's got more resources," "and information." "Please take us"
"to him."

Stan nodded, took a last look at the lifeless hole and took the Twins by the arm.

Ray Feels Helpless

“OK Robin, what is it? It must be bad. Come on lift your head and talk to me.”

“I know what those things are, I’ve seen them before. They come from somewhere else, outside. They are the end of the world.”

“What are you talking about? There’s only a dozen of them and they don’t see us.”

“We can’t do anything to them, Ray, they aren’t here in this world, but when they finish that thing they’re building, they’re going to start changing our world to theirs.”

“Look, if you have seen them before, the world didn’t end.”

“It did, Ray, it did.”

“All right, they’re working on something, so we don’t let them finish it. I’ve got my wristband, I’m going to contain them, capture them and maybe squeeze them to nothing if they’re that dangerous.”

“Don’t. It won’t do any good.”

Ray shook his head and reached out with the force field, putting a bubble around the creatures. They completely ignored him, and he was able to get the field around them. At that point,

still without looking up at Ray, they were gone.

“What? Are they gone back to wherever they came from?”

“Widen your field, Ray, as wide as it will go.”

Ray did so, but there was nothing, the creatures were gone.

“Are they gone? Where did they go? Are we finished with them?”

Robin looked sadly at Ray, “Likely somewhere else on the time line, I’m afraid. Still, I’ve never seen anything affect them at all, the wristband must have some affect on them. But Ray, they aren’t gone, they never go.”

“You can time travel, where are they?”

“I can’t track something over time, Ray, not if they have gone back, and they’ve probably gone back to some earlier time now that they’ve been discovered. You can bet that right now their machine or whatever it is has been completed and somewhere the world is dying.”

“What are you saying? Robin there is nothing in this world that we can’t defeat, not when we all get together.”

“You’re not listening, Ray, those things aren’t in this world, they’re from outside but they have got in and now they’re making the place theirs. Terra-forming I think they call it, only they’re making this world look like theirs. We can’t live on that

world, Ray. It's not possible for anything of this world to live on that one."

"Robin, the kids."

"No sense worrying them, Ray, there is time, they can't kill a whole world quickly, but they will."

"Look, you said this has happened before, how were they stopped."

"You don't want to know, you really don't."

"Robin, how were they stopped."

"They weren't. Think about it Ray, how can a world cease to exist and then exist."

Ray was still, staring at Robin. He moaned, "Oh Gods, not that."

Robin nodded.

"You're sure about this, there's nothing to be done?"

"They reacted to your wristband, that's something I've never seen before. Maybe? But it didn't stop them, it's just something they noticed."

"What do we do?"

“I would suggest we act as if the world is going to exist forever, that we’re going to live forever. What else can we do?”

“I’m not good at that, Robin, I fight, all my life I’ve fought.”

“I’ve fought too, Ray, but you can’t fight something that isn’t there, this isn’t something we can deal with, it’s not something that’s ever been dealt with.”

Ray thought hard, what had he heard lately, a story. From Art, about when he met Ingrid.

“Robin can you take me some place else, some place in the past? I think I might know where these things came from, or at least where they broke through. Art told me a story about a hole in a hill, and how Ingrid jumped into it with a sword in her hand. Something evil, he said.”

“You’re kidding, that can’t be it, Ray. If Art saw it, it existed, it wasn’t these things.”

“It’s the only place I can think of right now, can you take us there?”

“Just a minute, let me go and ask Art where this was.” Robin was gone and back in a minute, “OK let’s go.”

Ray found himself in a deep wood, he could tell he was back in Europe, and he could tell he was in the Roman Empire. Beyond

that he didn't have a clue. "Where are we?"

"Doesn't matter, Ray, the hole is up there."

Just up the hill, they saw a light, spilling out of a hole in the top of the hill. They also saw two figures approaching. Ray recognized his friend Art, but before he could call out to him, the other figure, it had to be Ingrid, turned and punched him hard enough to throw him several metres from the hole. Ingrid then jumped into the hole.

Ray ran forward to check on Art, he seemed fine, physically, but his mind was strange, scrambled and something... Ingrid, she had given Art something of herself. Why hadn't Ray seen that before?

Robin cleared his throat. "If he's going to live, we need to look for our creatures."

"Are they there, in that hole? Can you sense them?"

"Damn, they are, or at least something that smells like them. How did you know they came here?"

"Just a thought, Robin, that appeared in my head."

"Ingrid can fight them. She's gone in to fight them. Do we follow?"

"Neither of us are Gods, Robin, despite what people say. We

wait here, if that place is as hostile as you say it is, we would just be throwing our lives away.”

And so the two waited. Art woke up, but he didn't notice the two people from the future watching from a distance away. He took a look toward the hole, but didn't go near. Instead he walked back down the hill with a firm stride, as if he had something to do.

“Good he didn't look again.”

“Art is brave, but not stupid, I suspect he felt what was in there and realized there was nothing he could do but report back.”

“Do we wait here? There is no sign that Ingrid is coming back any time soon.”

“Can you jump us forward by a month?”

Robin did so until they came to a time where the hole didn't exist. Moving back by weeks, they stopped when it was there. They waited three days until Ingrid came out of the hole, she was in full Goddess mode, armour and a sword that seemed to burn, as well as a shield. As she exited, she turned and spoke something in a language Ray didn't know, but Robin cowered back. The ground shook, and the hole was gone.

Robin turned to Ray, “Pray you never hear her speak those words at you.”

Ray nodded and looked at Ingrid, who was right there beside them. Ray jumped, he had heard nothing at all. Robin bowed deeply, and Ingrid nodded at him.

“We come from the future, Goddess, these creatures have reappeared, and I fear the world will end once more.”

“Years or centuries?”

“Millennia, Goddess.”

“Good, they are badly hurt, but not destroyed, I have bought time. There are those who escaped me and came out of the hole, but we will ride them down.”

“My Lady?”

“The Wild Hunt, we will find them.”

“Yes Lady.”

“The man who was here, where did he go?”

“He went down the hill, long months ago, Lady.”

“We will meet again, he and I, I will find him or he will find me.”

“Yes Lady.”

“There is nothing more for you here, leave it to me, go back to your own time and find me, warn me that the time has come again.”

“As you order, Lady.”

Ray had kept silent, this was not the Ingrid he knew and drank with, she was a Goddess, in her full power. When Robin bowed, he bowed too.

Ingrid smiled, “We too will meet again, fox.”

Ingrid and Woden

Ingrid was in Europe, she had gone there to talk to Woden, her husband. “Woody, it’s happening again, I felt it.”

“As did I, the death is near Guelph. What have you done?”

“Nothing yet, I haven’t told Art, although I reminded him of the time we met. That will prepare him. Is the Hunt ready?”

“I’m afraid the Hunt will be useless, the creatures have gone up and down the timeline too many times for us to track them. The trail is too muddy.”

“What of the present time, we know their death is spreading, they will be inside that death.”

“It is too large, we have no way to ride into that, and they can create too many of themselves, they would scatter.”

“Let them scatter, we will ride them all down.”

“They have learned to cover their tracks, we can’t see them any more. They have become clever.”

“No, I refuse to let this world be destroyed again. No.”

“My love, I have no desire to lose those I love either. We will fight, of course we will, but I warn you, we fight with little hope.”

“We have been there before, husband.”

“You’re thinking of Art. You love him deeply.”

“As you love Mishelle.”

“Then we will fight all the harder.”

“Why now, Woody, why have they begun now.”

“A perfect storm, I suspect. The humans have continued their terrible wars, the earth is at a breaking point, they crawl over the planet like ants, the stress on reality is as high as it has ever

been. We have no breathing room, no depths to call on. I suspect this is what has allowed them to come.”

“It is true that more and more humans are pushing at the reality, believing things that are false, expecting lies to be true. Whenever that happened, reality snapped back, but are you telling me that reality is too stretched, pushed too far from its centre to snap back?

“I’m afraid so, Ingie, whenever half or more of the population is living outside reality, it is reality that collapses. The creatures have used that to break through.”

“Still, we have some time to consider our moves, at least.”

"There is that. In the past we have done this ourselves, perhaps it is time to seek out help. You will talk to those in Guelph?"

"I will, I will... do you feel that Woody?"

"I do, go, see what it is, even if the world is ending, we have our duties."

Ingrid hugged her husband and vanished onto the battlegrounds. She spread her awareness over the many areas of conflict and gradually narrowed it down. A broken village, no buildings left standing, and the shelling hadn't stopped yet. The bricks and blocks were being hit, moving them around in an insane dance. Ingrid winced, even in the most violent wars she had seen, this level of useless destruction wasn't needed. As

far as Ingrid was concerned, it was a coward's way to fight, to bomb everything to rubble and then move in to claim the rubble-strewn dust.

The problem was that the other side would bombard the guns. War had become a matter of trying to destroy the other side's equipment, and when there was no more equipment, no more shells, the leaders would send their men in waves against the other side, hoping against hope that they could reach the other side with a few live soldiers.

Ingrid shook her head, to waste warriors like that, what sort of greed, what sort of monsters could do such a thing. She had seen it in the past, but then the soldiers would revolt. In this world, they had been so brainwashed by lies, religion or patriotism they would walk into the meat grinder rather than turn and fight those who cared nothing for them. Perhaps Woden was right, perhaps reality was breaking and the lies were winning.

As she was thinking, she searched. There, she felt it in a basement, but it was gone again. Ingrid went to the hole in the ground that was once a house, and waited. There was nothing there, but this was the place. There, a small girl flickered into reality and then out again.

Ingrid reached out and as the child appeared, Ingrid took her hand. Now they both moved in and out of the world together. Ingrid brought them into the world and moved to an area that wasn't under fire. "Who are you child?"

The girl looked at Ingrid for a long time, as if to decide whether she was real or not. She squeezed Ingrid's hand and nodded to herself. "Are you here?"

"I am, child, do you have a name."

"Once, I think, once, yes, I was Ganna. What is your name?"

"You can call me Ingrid, are you from here, child?"

"I think I was, I was hiding when everyone left, and then the bombs came and then I was somewhere else. Somewhere safe."

"Can you take me there, to the safe place, Ganna?"

"No! It's no good, there are horrible things there and you can't breathe, it's a bad place, but there are no bombs."

"Is that why you were flickering in and out of this world?"

"I don't know what you mean, but I go there when the bombs fall, and I come back here when I can't hold my breath any more."

"If you take me, I can bring us back here, Ganna."

Before Ingrid could blink, the girl had taken a big breath and took them out of the world. Ingrid took a quick look around and flicked them back. This was the world that she had half

destroyed, she should have finished the job. As they got back into the world, she moved Ganna and herself to Woden's house.

Ganna gasped, "Where is this?"

"It's just outside your world, child, the home of a God. There is a great hall where warriors from all times feast."

"Can they fight against the people who killed my village?"

"They are done with fighting, Ganna, they wait for the last days when they will fight and die one last time."

Woden spoke up, "And perhaps this is that time. Why did you bring this child here, Ingrid? She is still living."

"She can see them, Lord Woden, she can see the others."

"Lord Woden? That is more formal than I'm used to from you, Lady Ingrid."

"Is it not the time for formal duties?"

"Let us not end the world just yet, Ingie. Do you think this child can help?"

"You said the hunt cannot see the creatures, this girl can, not only that, she can move to their world."

"How is she still alive?"

"She goes there and back again."

"I see, and you think the hunt can use this?"

"In the movies you love to watch, the humans somehow get an atomic bomb into the Alien's ship, could we use the girl to transport one of those to the other world?"

"I considered that, but their reality is not ours, the human's bomb would not work there, it couldn't exist there. More's the pity."

"How is it that this girl can go there and back again?"

"Life is resilient, it tends to persist, that's why these dead spots don't instantly cover the world, the living things resist."

"But surely if she can see the creatures, the hunt could use her as their eyes on this world?"

"Child, would you like to hunt the creatures of that other world with us? To defend all life on this world?"

"I don't care about the rest of the world, I want to destroy those who killed my village."

"Your creatures will destroy more than a village, they will destroy everything on this world."

The girl looked at Woden, who looked back. She never blinked, which surprised the God, she had more courage than most mortals. Finally, she nodded.

"Call the hunt, Ingrid, we ride."

"I will call Hildy as well, and ride with you."

"You will not, my love, you will return to Art and the rest in your town, and prepare to fight there. For all the power of the hunt, these creatures are a match for us, as you know, and they have stolen a march on us. We will fight with Ganna as our eyes, but we need to prepare to fight on many fronts.

"Go tell your Arturus what is happening, he has been a strong warrior for many lifetimes, you must trust his power. He has faced these creatures before. Do not seek to protect him, be his shield maiden once more."

"As you command, my Lord."

Coyote Gets Involved

Stan and the Twins appeared in Ken's Keller. Ken was in his office as the Twins tumbled in.

"Father, there are things," "creatures from outside the world," "they are going to destroy it." "Our wristbands can make them appear" "but can't contain them." "We tried everything we could think of," "but can't get any further," "will the Smith help us?" "Do you know anything" "about the end of the world?"

"Stop, you're giving me a headache. Stan what's this about?"

"There's an old story about the end of the world, and this looks just like it, Ken. A hole with nothing alive in it that grows until it consumes the entire world. The story says it's happened before."

"Really, the world has ended before but is still here?"

"Coyote."

"Oh shit, OK, let me check the records and I'm going to get hold of Kam as well, if there's anything about this, it will be in his Darkened Library."

"What do you want" "us to do, Father?"

"Get out of my office and let me work. Go check up on all the powers around here, see who might be able to fight these things. I'll talk to the smith and will tell you if he's willing to work with you, he's still pretty angry that you stole his tech."

"But we improved it." "Yes Father."

Stan nodded and flicked the Twins back to Camp Tilly so they could tell Ray and the kids. He climbed the stairs to the Lunch Counter where he'd left Megan with Liz and Mike. He'd better check with Megan before he went to talk with Coyote.

As he got upstairs, he saw that he wouldn't have to talk with Coyote, he and Amber were there, talking with Megan. Almost instantly, Ray appeared with Robin Goodfellow.

Coyote looked over at Robin and nodded, "Hello trickster, starved any villages lately?"

Robin bowed deeply, "Once again, I thank you, Coyote, for your help with my mistakes."

Coyote smiled and nodded back. As he did, his smile faded and his frown came back. "Are you certain, Megan. To do what I might need to do is no small thing. You know I can't keep everything in my head, not a whole world, many things will be lost. Ray here convinced me that the world should not be destroyed and recreated at my whim."

Megan nodded. "Very few remember you doing that, Coyote, but I believe you, when you say it is a change, after all that's what you told us you were doing, changing things to see if you could make it better."

"Robin here will tell you that I very seldom improved things."

Megan nodded toward Robin, "If this one is an indication..."

Amber said, sharply, "Megan! This is no small matter of fixing tricks."

Megan ducked her head, "I apologize, Amber you are correct, please ignore my usual bitchiness."

Stan just about fell off his chair. If he hadn't realized how serious this was, he knew it now. Megan being humble was not something he'd seen very often in their long time together.

Coyote grinned, "She's correct, Amber, I've screwed up more often than not, which is why I won't sing the world away and back again on a whim. I see these creatures, and I don't want them on my world, but they have been defeated before. Right now I feel Woden's Wild Hunt riding out, and Ingrid is on her way here. We have a chance, let's fight these things and hope we can defeat them."

The Pack, as Ray thought of them, got down to planning, who was available, who could perhaps get a grip on these creatures. Ray wasn't a lot of help, so he stayed quiet.

Ray had convinced Coyote not to destroy the world once before, now he looked closely at Coyote. He could see that the man wasn't hopeful they could save it, but Ray said nothing. Instead he decided to make sure Xaalajaat and Suzume were aware of what was happening. The Keen family in Europe would know what was going on already. He would do all he could.

As he thought that, Suzume whispered in his ear, “I watch, we have seen nothing but we will be ready.”

Ray has Supper

Ray was not surprised that Suzume already knew, she kept an eye on him. He would have to go see Zaat and Julie, but that was tomorrow. Tonight, he was more than a little depressed. Yes they had some time, yes the kids would be fine with Lila and the Twins, but in a few months?

Ray realized he was hungry for food and some comfort. What was that girl who was after him? Joan, that was it, Joan-Marie, a lovely 25 year old who had gone out with him a few times now. And she liked? Ramen, that’s it, she was a big fan of Ramen.

Ray would have preferred a steak, but Ramen would do fine. He made his goodbyes to the group in the lunch counter and phoned Joan-Marie, who was delighted to hear from him. His spirits were rising already.

“I’d love to go for Ramen with you now, Ray. I wasn’t doing a thing. Shall I meet you there?”

Ray agreed and Joan-Marie turned off the stove, put her supper

in the fridge, shut down her computer and put away her sewing. She opened her closet and laid out a nice dress and fresh undies, then she got into the shower to have a good scrub.

Dressed and perfumed, she walked out of her apartment and downtown to the Ramen shop. Ray was there waiting for her, but he looked a bit down.

“You OK lover?”

“It’s nothing, just a bit of a problem a long way from here, and it’s getting further away as I look at you in that dress. Wow, you look like an ice cream cone on a hot summer’s day.”

Joan-Marie could feel a tingling start in her chest and run down to her hips. Damn this guy was delicious. She had been warned by several of her friends that the guy was a terrible rake, and she knew it, but it didn’t matter. As long as it lasted, it was worth it to be with him. Those same friends had nothing bad to say about the guy except that he loved women and they loved him.

She ordered a tan tan men and a beer, while Ray ordered the same with a glass of water.

“Ray what is it? I didn’t think you drank water.”

“Water? Oh my, I’ll have a beer too.”

“Oh no, nice try but no, something is bothering you, big time.”

“OK you got me, it is, but there’s nothing I can do about it right now, you want some gyoza too?”

“You know I do. Let’s get six and I won’t ask any more about whatever it is.”

“Thank you Jo, you really are a treasure.”

“What, something you’ve dug up out of the mud somewhere?”

“Yarr, all shiny doubloons and jewels.”

“Oh, nice save. Right, what have you been doing this week?”

“Has it been a week? Sorry. I was up in the camp with the kids I take care of. Being a camp councillor.”

Joan detected something in how he said that, but refused to push him. Something happened at the camp but he would tell her if he needed to.

“If you’re with your kids, you don’t have to apologize, I love it that you are running a camp for them. More people should help get kids out in the country to learn about nature.”

“With these guys it’s more about kicking nature in the teeth, but you’re right, it does them a lot of good. I’d hate for it to end.”

Joan was concerned at how Ray had said that, “Will it end?”

“Not while I’m still breathing, love. Now have a gyoza and don’t let me get morbid again.”

“Yarr, aye aye, captain sir.”

Art Goes to Paris

Ingrid was back at the St. George with Art. She found him at work in the basement, still fighting with the plumbing. As she flicked into the room, he lifted his hand and her sword appeared, he pulled it back, obviously aiming at a sewage pipe and as he was about to swing, Ingrid called, “Art!”

Art spun around and released the sword, “Oh, hi Ingie, that damned blockage.”

“Art you know the sword doesn’t like to get dirty.”

“Neither do I.”

It was then that Ingrid realized Art was covered with waste, one of the clean-out joints must have blown back on him. Ingrid began to laugh, King Arthur, lord of the Britons, covered in shit from a blockage in the pipes.

Arthur waited patiently for her to stop. “Hey, when the pipes are blocked, even a King has to get a bit smelly.”

“Oh dear, I’m sorry, it’s just too silly,” and Ingrid waved her hands toward the pipes, which were suddenly clear.

“You couldn’t do that before you left for Europe?”

“Art you know the George could have done it for itself, right?”

Art went to a sink and washed his hands, then stripped his dirty clothes. “I suspected, but he’s mad at me.”

Ingrid cleaned him up and waved fresh clothing onto Art,
“What for?”

“Who knows, what does an apartment building get angry about?”

“What indeed. George, Art is off duty now, I have to talk to him.”

Ingrid moved them into their apartment. “Art there’s something I have to warn you about.”

“The blank spot that is growing and will destroy the world?”

“You knew?”

“Sure, you mentioned Excalibur, and you never do that unless it’s serious, so I asked around.”

“This town runs on gossip.”

“What else, we can’t very well put our news in the papers or on the net now, can we?”

“Well Woody has a young girl who can see the creatures that are the threat, and he is leading the Wild Hunt. He’s not hopeful but they’re going to try.”

“You said the hunt killed the creatures that got through the hole you closed when we met first. Why not now?”

“Apparently this time they have a jump on us, and they’ve muddied their tracks. At the same time, they seem to be learning how to avoid us.”

“But you defeated them before.”

“This one might be different.”

“Ingrid, there’s a hole in the corner of the George’s last resting spot, Herbert, Sam and Lorraine are there keeping an eye on it, but they say they can’t do anything about it. Can you go take a look, they wanted one of the originals to check it out.”

“I’ll go, but I don’t want you to come along, Art. I don’t know how long we have, but I want every minute of it with you and

that's not going to happen if you get destroyed.”

“Cripes, Ingie, drama much?”

“I'm serious, Art, if Woden figures we're in trouble, we're in deep shit.”

“Was just there. OK, fine, fine. I'll go for lunch, I'd like to get out of this town anyway, you can get me any time right?”

“That's a good idea, thanks Art.”

“Sure, no problem, the King of the Britons will slip quietly away while his wife takes care of things.”

“Oh Art, you know that's not what I'm saying.”

“I know it, Ingie, I just feel useless sometimes.”

Ingrid hugged Art until his ribs creaked and then she was gone. Art shook his head and called out, “George, I'm taking the sedan and heading for Paris. All right?”

Hearing no objections, Art took the car out of the garage and headed down Highway 24, or whatever the counties were calling the road since the province downloaded it. He wheeled along and with every kilometre from Guelph, his spirits lifted a bit. He loved the scenery along the Grand River, and always took the riverside road. Driving through Hespeler he stopped and watched the Speed river for a while, then through the Galt

strip, checking out the new stores, the old town where he picked up the east bank of the Grand river.

As he went over the bridge to downtown Paris, he felt a lot better. He parked on the main street and took a stroll, worrying a bit at the empty shops and the old-fashioned habit of closing stores on the Monday so everyone could have a day off.

He turned the corner and headed to Lion's Park, stopping on the foot bridge to look at the Nith river as it headed toward the Grand. Turning around, he walked back to Wincey Mills market, which was closed, but Detour Coffee was open so he went in for lunch. Ordering a Caprese sandwich, he ate it while looking out the windows at the day, which was alternating from pouring rain to bright sun.

Finishing the sandwich and salad, and visiting the washroom, he walked back over the bridge and turned left to stroll over the Distillery Hill path. He got into the woods, swatting at mosquitoes and enjoying the day when he started to feel a bit anxious. Thinking it was worry about Ingrid, he tried to forget it, but with each step it got worse.

A woman appeared in front of him, out of nowhere. He was used to such things and said "Good afternoon" and tried to walk past her. She was in his way again.

"I know you, from stories in the old country. You're the King under the hill, and I need your help."

Art stopped and looked properly at the woman. She was dressed in a nightgown and her hair style screamed mid 19th century. “Who are you?”

“I don’t remember my name, I haunt these woods where my husband got drunk on the whisky and killed me. I beg you, help us.”

“How can I help?”

“There is a tear in the world, just where my husband killed me, it was only a pinprick for a hundred years, but it is growing.”

Art didn’t like the sound of that, and he considered calling for help, but this woman had asked him for help, believing he was King Arturus. He would look. “Show me where.”

The woman led Arthur off the path and up the hill a short way. As he feared, Art saw nothing but a dead patch of ground, as if someone had dumped a toxic liquid on the plants. It wasn’t big, but Art could feel nothing at all. “What do you see in that place, Mrs?”

“I see nothing, I am nothing, and so should see something in a place where there is nothing, but I see nothing at all.”

“Have you approached?”

“I tried, but when I reached my hand out, it burned like fire, as if I could feel again, like the time my husband held my hand on

the wood stove.”

Art was instantly angry. That some men would do such things was intolerable, that they would allow themselves to do such things and blame it on the drink was unforgivable. He brought his feelings under some sort of control and looked again at the hole. He had no doubt this was the hole Ingrid spoke about.

He reached his hand out for Ingrid’s sword, but it did not appear. Ingrid was holding it, which set off a feeling of panic in his chest. If Ingrid had her sword, he needed to go to her. Art looked at the woman, then back to the hole and his fury rose once again. He swore a curse that was old when he was first born and held his hand out again. “Excalibur!”

The sword was in his hand, and the sickening power of the thing once again ran up his arm. Art hated this sword but there was no denying that it was his.

The woman shrieked and moved back away from Art, and he didn’t blame her. This sword had been forged with more power than any mortal should ever touch. It would bring death to anyone else who held it, except a God.

Art looked at the tear, it was about a meter wide, without any more thought, he swung the sword through the patch. He was sure he heard the wails of souls as they were sucked into that terrible sword. No matter what world, what universe, the thing would feed.

Art felt sick, he fell to his knees, his anger gone and he opened his hand. The sword was gone. When he could raise his head again, he noticed a butterfly drift through the place where the hole had been. It even landed on the dead undergrowth and took off again. Art was surprised, but grateful and he turned to see the woman fade from his view, gone back to wherever she usually existed, perhaps nowhere at all.

Getting unsteadily to his feet, Art felt confused and full of doubt, but at that moment an insect bit him on the cheek. Slapping it seemed to wake him up. This was the world, he lived, it lived. He walked the rest of the way along the trail and crossed the Nith bridge into downtown Paris once more. The people on the street moved along as they usually did, the old geezers in their cars honked at the other cars. None of them had sensed anything wrong in their town.

Art shook his head, 'Probably best they don't know what may happen, what might have happened,' and he got into his car.

Company for Breakfast

Joan-Marie kept Ray from thinking about holes and the end of the world for most of the night. He had to admit that she was pretty wonderful, and he was more than half in love with her.

The sun was shining into the bedroom window when Ray became aware of someone in the doorway. He opened his eyes and carefully climbed out from under the sheets, and from under Joan-Marie, to pad naked into the kitchen behind Xaalajaat.

She smiled and said, “You’re more than half in love with her Ray, you’ve fallen for yet another lovely person.”

“She is, isn’t she. Nice to see you Zaat, where’s Julie?”

“She’s in charge now back in my underworld, and she’s doing a good job.”

“What? She’s not old enough yet is she?”

“She’s our daughter, Ray, grew up very quickly, she’ll be just fine while we help with your problem holes.”

“We?”

“Suzume is here with me, ready to help.”

Suzume’s voice went into both their heads, “Along with most of the Yokai of Japan who loaned me their power, and keep it down you two, the girl is starting to wake up.”

Joan-Marie was in the kitchen doorway, “I’m awake, should I start some breakfast?”

Ray looked confused, “Uh, Jo, this is....”

“Xaalajaat and Suzume, your wives.”

“What?”

Xaalajaat laughed, “She’s a seer, Ray, didn’t you know that? How do you think she puts up with you, she knows what you are.”

Joan gave Ray a hug, “Relax, Zaat and I have had a few chats, and I’ve seen Suzume checking in on you. I know who you are Mr. Fox.”

“But...”

“You are so cute when you’re confused, I’m going to make eggie sandwiches for all of us now, you three talk.”

“Not for me please, Jo, I don’t eat.”

“Of course Sue.”

Ray looked around and muttered, “I hate it when you guys gang up on me. You could have warned me that you knew each other, it would have saved me a bit of a heart attack when Jo walked in the room.”

Zaat laughed, “Ray you aren’t nearly as clever with secrets as you think you are. Most of your women know who you are.”

“All right, all right. I get the picture.”

“As do all of us, and it would be a shame to lose it.”

Ray looked from Zaat to Joan, by the stove and raised his eyebrows.

“Joan is a big girl, Ray, and she knows there is more going on in the world than most humans think. She is a seer, remember, we can let her know what’s going on.”

“Like the world may be ending?”

Joan-Marie looked over from the stove, “Will I be in eternal torment in some sort of hell after it ends?”

Zaat smiled, “No love, you will simply not be, any more.”

“Well then I’m not going to worry about it. Are you guys going to sort it?”

“We’re going to try our damndest.”

“Good, if you do I’ll be here, if you don’t, I won’t know about it. That’s well sorted then. Sandwiches will be up soon.”

Ray goggled at the girl he thought was an innocent young woman.

“She’s an old soul in a young body, Ray.”

Ray looked at Zaat, “What, like Art?”

“Not exactly. Ah those look wonderful, Jo, come on Ray, let’s eat and then we can get to the hole in Guelph here and see what we can do.”

Ray’s mouth dropped open again, “Here in Guelph?”

“Oh dear, try to keep up, there was a hole that tried to take a chunk out of the St. George, would have, if it hadn’t jumped to another location. Ingrid and Lorraine are looking at it now.”

“Lorraine?”

“She found it with Herbert and Sam.”

“Lorraine Keen? But she will be about as much help as I am.”

“She’s much older than you are, Ray, has seen a lot more, and by the way, you’re not helpless, Dude. You know people, like Suzume and I.”

Joan sat down with her plate and a coffee, “Do you think I could help?”

“Come along, who knows what seers can see. If we can see them we can destroy them. The problem is that they come from outside, and most of us can’t see them. Plus they move along

the timeline and so they're hard for us to track.”

Joan nodded and started eating her sandwich.

Ray looked up, “How do you know so much about them, Zaat?”

“Suzume is non-corporeal and she keeps an eye on everyone, Ray. Part of protecting you is knowing what's going on. We talk.”

Ray nodded and looked down again, muttering, “Probably know what colour underwear I had on last night...”

All three women answered, “Blue and black stripes.”

“Did I?”

Jo nodded, “And they're hideous, Ray, are you attached to them?”

“No, I buy them when the old ones wear out and I don't pay much attention to what they look like.”

The three women laughed and the group finished their breakfast. Ray and Joan got dressed and Suzume flicked them all to an empty lot where a group of beings stared at nothing.

Joan's hand flew to her mouth and her eyes got wide. Zaat put her arm around the girl and said, “You see them?”

Joan nodded, “they’re not from this world, they’re tinkering with something.”

Ray started to lift his wristband to encircle them so the rest could see them, but Ingrid put a hand on his arm. “Don’t, Ray. They will only jump in time and space and that will make it harder to find them again. Woden and the Hunt are trying, but they’ve moved so often their tracks are more or less mud.”

“You mean Robin and I screwed up?”

“No. Well, a little, but you weren’t to know you were chasing them around. Look, Joan-Marie can see them, that’s enough for us to destroy them.”

“You know Jo?”

“Ray, it’s a small town and I’m a Goddess.”

Joan-Marie had recovered enough to say, “Nice to meet you, Goddess.”

Ingrid smiled and held out her hand, “Ingrid, Goddess of war and weather and a bunch of other stuff.”

Joan shook her hand as her eyes got wide, “I know you.”

“European stock then, did you know that Xaalajaat is Copper Woman, Goddess of her underworld?”

“Oh Gods, and I’ve been sleeping with her husband?” Joan’s hand flew to her mouth.

Zaat laughed and hugged her, “I don’t blame you, he’s dreamy.”

Ray blushed, causing Lorraine to grin hugely. Ray was one of the few Keens she liked, so she didn’t say anything to him. In fact, she thought she’d save him from further teasing. She cleared her throat and pointed toward the hole.

The Hole in Guelph

Ingrid walked toward the hole and drew her sword. Her shield and armour were on her and she was obviously going to enter the dead zone.

As she walked forward, Ray stepped in front of her. “Ingrid, my lady, you must not.”

“Stand aside Ray, this is my duty.”

“Ingrid, you will remember that I saw you at the hole many long years ago.”

“I remember little fox.”

“And at that hole, you could see the creatures.”

“Indeed, and I killed them.”

“Can you see them now?”

Ingrid stopped walking toward Ray and looked at the hole. There was nothing, nothing she could see.

“Ray I must try.”

“You can’t kill what you can’t see, my lady. Wait and think with us. I can make them appear for brief moments but they escape, and so I made it worse than before.”

“Than do so again, I will kill them before they can flee.”

As she was saying that, Ingrid stopped and looked slightly up and away. Art was asking her to reach out and get him. Ingrid waved her shield arm and he was there, the car in the garage.

As Art appeared, Ingrid took a step back, “What has happened!”

“Ingrid I had to call that cursed sword and it drank more souls, and I’m afraid I will do it again.”

“Not souls, Art, life energy, but not souls.”

“Whatever it is, it makes me sick to my core. Where is the hole?”

“There.”

“How wide is it?”

“About a meter so far.”

Without another word, Art stalked toward the hole. Ray was about to stop him but Ingrid grabbed his arm. She shook her head. Still, she looked like she would stop Art if she could. She could not, she didn't like what this would do to him, but it had to be done.

Art held out his hand, he did not name the sword this time, it was waiting, hungry. Excalibur was in his hand and without any hesitation, he swung through the dead spot, making sure he reached the other side. Again, he felt the sickening feeling of the sword taking the life energy of creatures that weren't even in the world.

He made a return swing to make sure he had covered the entire hole, and felt one more life be destroyed. Again, Art fell to his knees and this time he lost his lunch. The sword had disappeared and Ingrid was there, holding his shoulders and crooning to him. Old, old words to a children's song that she had sung to him many times in many ages.

Art slowly got up from all fours, tears streaming down his cheeks as he turned to Ingrid, who held him tightly, “My love, my love, I am so sorry my lord, I am sorry for your duty, and for what it costs you.”

Art buried his face in her hair, not caring who saw his weakness, “No more than yours, my shield maiden, you would have died in there, these are so much more powerful than the first time you fought them. I can feel their power, Excalibur can close small holes, but even that cursed thing isn’t enough this time, I can feel bigger holes opening.”

“Not cursed, love, but forged half in this world, half outside of it. The Hunt is riding, and they have a child who can see the creatures, we have hope.”

“Send my sword to Woden, it will be of use to him.”

“He will not take it, Art, he wants it with you so that you will protect me and the rest of this world.”

Art stared at her for a time, “Will you lose him then?”

Ingrid slowly nodded, “He says he may die this time.”

“Ingrid...” Art pulled her head to his shoulder and this time Ingrid cried.

Hearing this, the rest of the group, who had been cheered by Art’s closure of the hole, began to doubt their ultimate victory.

Ray spoke for all of them, “Can we not win this fight?”

Art stood up, lifting Ingrid as well and with his arm around her he spoke, “Win or lose, we will fight. Small holes are opening and we can find and destroy them while Woden and his Hunt fight the main hole. For now, we must understand how to find the small holes and go to them. Ray, you felt the hole at Camp Tilly?”

“No, Robin did, he could feel it and took me.”

“Robin, will you go with Ingrid and me to find these holes?”

Robin was there at the mention of his name, “I will, if Ray will look to Lila and the other children.”

“You know I will.”

Art nodded, “Will the rest of you go to the Lunch Counter and plan for our defeat?”

A general look of shock came over the crowd, but before anyone could shout their objections, Art held up his hand. “We must prepare for our defeat. We must look to Coyote, to whatever help we can give him. The old ones especially, Ray and the originals you must go to him when you are needed, Ingrid will go when she is called, as will Robin. In the meantime, we will hunt down the smaller breaks in reality.”

Ray nodded, he had an idea what Art meant. He would protect

the kids as well as he could and he would help Coyote, as would the Keen family, Zaat and Suzume. “Lorraine, will you come?”

“When called, you know I will.”

As if remembering something, Ray looked at Joan-Marie, “You saw them?”

Ingrid shook her head, “No, Ray she can see them but she can’t survive in there, she is mortal.”

Ray nodded, “Very well, go on back home and hope we win this fight.”

Joan looked stubborn, “I will not. There are more beings of power in this town than you know, I will go and talk with them. We will all be there when you call on us.”

Ray nodded, looked at his friend Art, who had become a leader once more, and waved as he was flicked to Camp Tilly.

Ingrid spoke up, “Those of you who can detect these holes and move instantly, please scatter and find them for us, you only have to call my name and we will come. Robin, Art, are you ready?”

Robin closed his eyes, turned slowly and pointed, “There, in Patagonia.”

Ingrid looked eager, her full armour once again and Hildy was with them. She was going into battle once more and she was happy. Art looked grim, his hands were clenched, he would do what had to be done. Ingrid called out a deafening war cry and they were gone.

Woden by the Hole

Woden and the Hunt were at the hole where Megan and Liz found it first. He could see across it, but could see nothing inside. He was frustrated, and blew his huge moustache out.

“Ganna, can you see them?”

“I think I have to be there, in their world to see them, I don’t see anything from here.”

The hunt was restless, about to drive into the dead zone, but Woden held them back. “I can’t see a way forward here, the hole is too wide, if we swing without seeing, we will miss them. They will simply run away.”

Ganna shook her head, “They can’t see you, they didn’t see me when I was there, they didn’t know I was there, I think our world is as invisible to them as theirs is to us, they pulled themselves further away from us, made themselves invisible

but lost sight of us as well.”

“Child, are you sure?”

“I can take you there to see for yourself.”

With that, Ganna took a huge breath and moved Woden into that other world. Woden could see the creatures working on their machine, but they didn't seem to notice him. “We have them,” the God shouted and started to stride toward them, but Ganna, who was behind him, started to choke. Woden instantly took them back to their world so the child could breathe and recover.

“This is a problem.”

“I'm sorry, Woden, but I can't stay there very long. Perhaps if I was a spirit I could. If you kill me maybe I can guide you.”

“Brave girl, that I will not do.”

“But you said the world is at stake.”

“It is, but I will not kill a child on a chance that you would still be able to move and let me see the creatures. We will find another way.”

Woden had no idea what that other way might be. He called one of the huntsmen to him, they were dead souls, half in this world and half in the afterlife. “Go into the dead zone, tell me

what you see.”

The huntsman bowed and stepped across into the dead zone. Woden saw him for a few moments as he looked around, but then he disappeared. Nothing came out.

“I can survive in there, but not the Hunt. This is not good.”

The Twins and the Smith

The Smith was sitting at his workbench with his head in his hands, “Shut up you two, just shut up and let me think. And get away from that equipment!”

The Twins looked hurt, all this technology and they couldn’t take it apart and look at it.

“Sit down and put your hands under your ass, you brats, and shut up.”

The smith was staring at the wristband the Twins had given him to look at, the one they adjusted but couldn’t show the creatures for more than a moment before they escaped.

The smith was muttering, “Do you want to see them or prevent them from moving, I say trap them. Maybe that will work. How do you trap something that isn’t in this world? Coyote is

not in this world, so his hairs let us see them. Can we use him to stop their movement?"

"No," "we thought about that" "but it might drain Coyote of his power." "It might take too much from him" "and hurt him."

"Shit, you're probably right. See them it is then." The Smith took a few components from his bins and added them to the wristband. He turned it this way and that, nodded to himself.

"Take this to the dead spot and carefully see what you can see, don't use it at full power you idiots, start low and sneak it up so you don't attract the creature's attention, come tell me if it works, you understand? Don't talk, just nod, I've got a headache already."

The Twins nodded and took the band, they called on Woden to take them to the hole and they were there.

"What have you got, boys."

"We think it may show them," "let us try."

"Don't chase them away, we need to have them here to kill them."

The Twins nodded and then bent over the wristband. Just as the creatures came into view, they seemed to see the Twins and they vanished.

Woden pounded his fist into his hand, “Damn, but they didn’t go far, just to the other side of the hole. They don’t want to give up this hole. They know it’s too big for us to close.”

“What if we chased them” “from this hole,” “would that help?”

“They would scatter and we’d have to spend years chasing them down again. It might come to that, but I’d like to kill them here. Can you make them appear and keep us hidden from them? That way we could go after them.”

The Twins nodded and Woden sent them back to the Smith.

Woden looked at the hole again. Ganna tugged on his sleeve, “You are magical, you and your friends, can’t you just go back and destroy these things when they first start building this hole and their machine that makes it?”

Woden looked down at the girl and knelt, taking her shoulders in his hands. “You are clever and brave, Ganna, but we tried, the problem is that this hole is in several times, not just one. We can’t find the original machine because it’s in more than one time.”

“What about attacking it in all the starting times?”

“Do you know how hard..... No, we could do that, but you will only be in one time, Ganna, unless...”

“Yes?”

“Unless we split you into many parts, but that would make you insane.”

“Dear sweet God, do you think that I’m not insane? The bombing of my village made me insane, the moving from this world to that one made me insane. Make me into many parts and use me.”

“We still have a problem with you not being able to stay in that world for very long.”

“So fix it, you’re a God, make it so I can live in that place. You can live there, stay there, why can’t you make it so I can too.”

“I could give you part of myself, but you are a mortal, it would...”

“What, make me insane?”

Woden looked deep into the girl’s eyes, “What makes you want to do this, child?”

“My village is gone, but I can kill those who killed it. If these creatures aren’t stopped, my revenge won’t happen.”

“Child there is a good chance that you will not survive here.”

“Is your chance any better than mine when we go in there?”

Woden dropped his eyes and squeezed her shoulders, “No child, we will both most likely die.”

“But I will die anyway, isn’t it better to die trying to save the world?”

“Child, you put me to shame. We will see what the Twins bring back, and if it is useless, we will try your plan. I swear to you, Ganna, that if we die in that world, but I survive to return to my realm, I will take you with me as one of my most honoured warriors.”

The child smiled, “I would like that.”

Joan-Marie Looks for Help

Joan-Marie was sitting in a cafe on the other side of town from Mike’s Lunch Counter. It wasn’t a well known place, in fact there were only two people in the place, Joan and a fellow by the name of Bill.

Joan started a little as a coffee appeared in front of her. “We can’t find good help, so we do for ourselves here, Joan. You like a dark roast, black if I remember right.”

“Of course you do Bill. You’ve got complete recall, which is

why I wanted to talk to you.”

“No. You know I don’t get involved, JM. Never have. I was behind Coyote’s back when he sang this world into being, so even old Coy-Boy doesn’t know about me.”

But why do you hide? You’re one of the very oldest of the ancients.”

“Oh thanks a lot, remind me how old I am.”

“Seriously, Bill, why do you want to hide out. What’s the benefit in nobody knowing who you are?”

“For one thing, girl, I don’t have to get involved in fights like this one. I’m not the only one you know.”

“I know, Bill, I can see you and your friends. I just don’t know why you don’t want to help.”

“For one thing, helping gets you killed. At least five of my friends have died trying to save the world, only to have Coyote sing it back into existence They’re gone forever.”

“Bill, don’t you like this world?”

“It’s OK, about as good as the others.”

“Isn’t there something you’d like to save?”

“The Pennywhistle, but the covid pandemic closed that down. I miss that bar.”

“Anything that you’d miss, other than a bar? Any people?”

Bill thought for a moment, “No, not really. Most of my friends are ancients, they’ll be around after the world ends. Look, Joan, you’re new and you figure this is the only world, but it’s not. Not for us.”

“But it is the only one for me, I’m mortal. I can see you but I can’t go with you if the world ends.”

“Who says, we can take you along.”

“Bill, I’d rather stay in this world, there’s things I like here.”

“Yeah, I heard about you hooking up with the Keen boy. You watch out, he’s a heart breaker.”

“Thanks, Bill, I appreciate the warning, but I’m a seer, remember, my eyes are wide open and he’s a guy worth being with for however long it is.”

“Not much longer from what I hear.”

“Cripes, Bill, that’s harsh.”

“Life is harsh Jo, but it goes on.”

“For you maybe, are you and your buddies going to make another world?”

“Nah, can’t do that, we’re here in the one Coyote sang up, so we have to stay in this one.”

“Bill what if he doesn’t sing another one up, what if he gets like you, all cynical and says it isn’t worth creating another one?”

“Now who’s being harsh, he always sings them back again.”

“What I’m saying is, what if he waits too long, what if he gets caught in the nothing and dies. What then?”

“Jo are you saying he’s become that foolish?”

“Maybe. He’s awfully fond of this world, he says he’s gone way past when he usually changes it.”

“I wondered about that, this one is getting a little tatty around the edges, I wouldn’t mind a new one.”

“You wouldn’t mind.... Jesus Bill, why?”

“Well for one thing, maybe he’d remember to put the giants back.”

“We’ve got giants, Bill.”

“Not real big ones like we used to have, these guys aren’t much more than puffed up humans, the way they go to war thinking they’re so big and all.”

“There were bigger ones?”

“Jo they were as tall as mountains.”

“Oh yeah, back when the streets were paved with gold and whisky came out of the fountains.”

“You were there? I thought you said you were mortal, this world only.”

“Bill!”

“All right, all right, I’ll help, it’s not like I’ve got much on these days. Maybe it’s time to chat with Coyote anyway, we knew each other before he started taking singing lessons.”

“Listen, thanks Bill, and if the worst comes true, maybe he’ll sing the Pennywhistle back into business.”

“You think so?”

“Maybe. When the call goes out, just go see him at the Lunch Counter OK?”

“Yeah, yeah, I said I’d be there.”

“Thanks Bill.”

Joan walked out of the cafe and into town again, she looked up Jessica Gunn and met her coming out of her building.

“I heard, Joan, I’m not exactly one of the hidden ones, and I’m not one of the ancients, but I’m a healer and I can fight some. I’ll be there.”

“Thanks Jess.”

“They won’t call until it’s hopeless, will they? I’d like to stay here and protect Sam as long as possible.”

“I understand, they won’t call unless it’s time to fight.”

“Good, are you going to see Percy?”

“I don’t know, Jess, he sort of scares me.”

“He scares everyone, but he’s older than most of the Gods, they say he watched the first light appear in the sky.”

Joan sighed, “I guess I have to go see him.”

“Good luck.”

“You’re not helping, Jessica.”

Joan walked, slowly, a couple of blocks until she came to a

very narrow space between buildings. She walked about half way down and then sort of squatted and fell sideways so that she could speak into a mouse hole. “Percy, are you there?”

“Where else would I be? Come on down, Joan-Marie.”

Joan was suddenly underground in a space barely large enough for her to breathe.

“Oh, sorry, is that better?”

Joan drew a large breath and almost regretted it, she was underground, surrounded by dirt and by Percy. Or at least part of Percy, he went for miles and miles under the city, and each year he got a little bit bigger. He wound around the sub-structure of the city, taking heat and nourishment when he needed it.

“What brings you here, girl?”

“We need your help to save the world, Percy.”

“You’re joking, why would you want to do that?”

“That’s what Bill said.”

“Bill, he doesn’t want to save it?”

“Not much.”

“Then I’m in.”

“Wait, to be fair, he said he’d help.”

“Yes, but first he said no, right?”

“He said no first.”

“Then I say yes.”

Joan groaned to herself, “That’s great news Percy, we’re hoping Coyote won’t have to sing the world away and back again.”

“Is it still Coyote? He’s been at it for a while now.”

“OK I hate to ask, Percy, but was there someone before him?”

“Sure, of course, several actually, and someone will come along after him.”

“Stop, don’t tell me, you’re scaring the hell out of me.”

“Oh relax child, you don’t have to deal with it, once you’re dead you’re gone, so just live day to day and be happy.”

“Not helping, not helping.”

“Look, imagine those of us who have had to live through a thousand worlds, a thousand cycles of nothing and something.

So, what's the threat this time?"

"Some sort of creature that's making holes in reality, holes with nothing in them."

"Oh those idiots again. You'd think they would get tired and just stay where they are."

"You know them?"

"I remember them, you can't know them, they're from outside."

"So I gather, so you'll come when called to help?"

"No."

"Sorry, so you'll be there in spirit when we ask for help?"

"Sure, I said I would."

"OK thanks Percy."

"No problem."

...

"Uh, Percy?"

"Yes?"

“Could you help me out of here?”

“Oh, sorry, see you later. Thanks for visiting, it’s always nice to see a cute young girl.”

Joan shivered as she appeared on the street again. It may have been because the street was so much cooler than underground with Percy.

Eli and His Hole

Joan-Marie soaked in the sunshine as she walked back past the coffee shop where she had talked to Bill. That being stepped out of the door as she passed, and called to her. “JM, come on in here, would you please, there’s someone you should talk to.”

Wondering what was happening, she went from the bright sun to the dim light inside, her eyes adjusted quickly and she noticed a young man sitting at the table with a coffee. There was nobody else inside, so she made a leap of deduction and sat down with him.

He smiled and said, “My name is Eli, Bill tells me I should talk to you.”

Joan took another look at him, Eli was an old name. She saw that this was no kid, he was old, maybe even older than Bill. She glanced at Bill, who nodded. “My name is Joan-Marie, how can I help you, Eli?”

“Not much help for me,” he said, grinning, then he got serious and waved a coffee in front of Joan.

“I was driving out in the country to the south of here, just drifting around seeing what there is to see, when I drove right into some other place.”

Joan’s hair rose up on the back of her neck.

“It was a different landscape, and there were creatures there that were working hard on something.”

“What? Some sort of machine?”

“More like they were disassembling the landscape.”

“Sorry to interrupt, please go on.”

“I drove around, watching them do their thing. They didn’t pay any attention to me, even when I tried to call to them from my car. It was like they weren’t interested in anything but their work. I drove down the road for about half an hour and then turned around and drove back out again. I came out of that place at a different spot than I went in.”

“What? You were in a different place?”

“No, but it was like the place they were, was getting smaller, I came out further in than where I went in.”

“What?”

“The place where I went out, used to be inside their territory.”

“Oh, I think I see, that’s what the dismantling of the landscape was all about.”

“I think so.”

“When was this?”

“That’s the weird part, I went in ten years ago, according to Bill here, and came out about half an hour ago.”

“You lost ten years in an hour?”

“Seems so, now I’ve lost decades before, but mostly it was because I was drunk. This time I was just driving around.”

Joan wondered how you stayed drunk for decades, but decided not to ask. “These things can dismantle holes.”

“Apparently.”

“Eli can you take me there?”

“You’re kidding, why do you want to go there, you got someone to forget or something? Ten years didn’t pass for me, it passed for you guys out here.”

“No, we’ve got problems with some other sort of creature that’s trying to kill the world, it sounds like these guys may be able to help with that.”

“They wouldn’t talk with me.”

“I have to try, can you take me there, Eli, please.”

“I guess, I’ve got nothing else to do. You figure it would be OK Bill?”

“Yeah, she’s a grown-up by her own standards, and she knows about us, why not.”

“OK Joan-Marie, let’s go for a ride.”

Eli held the door for Joan as they got into his Triumph Spitfire. Joan wondered what it was with these old ones and their vintage sports cars. Eli grinned, “They’re pretty and they’re finicky, but they don’t argue with you like a girl does.”

Joan said nothing to that, but if he could read her mind, he’d know what she thought.

Eli laughed, “Introduce me to this Ray some time, we can

compare cars.”

Joan scowled, thinking about how Ray would fight these things and probably get killed. Eli held his tongue as they twisted out into the countryside. After a while he said, “It’s moved further.”

Five minutes later they came around a corner and Joan could see the border, “Stop here, it’s right ahead.”

“You can see better than I can, Joan-Marie.”

“Call me Joan. Can you take me in there without us losing ten years?”

“You think the world may be gone when we come out?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah, now I know it’s a different time stream, I can take you in and out without losing years. Give me your hand.”

Joan did so and they were inside the hole. She saw the creatures dismantling the landscape, just like Eli said, and just like he said, they were ignoring the strangers.

Joan called to one, and she saw its ears twitch. They could hear them. “Hey, I’d like to talk to you, we could use your help.”

The being ignored her and went on with his work. Joan pulled

Eli closer and reached out to touch the creature on the arm. That being jumped like he had been bitten. “Yow, you’re real! What are you?”

“We’re beings of the outside world, we came into yours to talk with you.”

Eli looked puzzled, Joan was talking, apparently, but it was gibberish to him.

“Why would you want to talk to us, we’re leaving, is that not enough?”

“But why are you leaving?”

“Isn’t it obvious, this world is about to be destroyed, we need to be elsewhere when that happens. If it appears again, we will return.”

“You know about this?”

“It’s happened before, yes we know about it.”

“Do you know how it’s going to be destroyed?”

“The dead zoners are here and they are building their machines again.”

“You know about them, can you fight them so you don’t have to leave?”

“No, they are outside our reality, we can’t touch them.”

“So you can’t help us?”

“We can’t fight them, and we know of nothing that will hurt them, so we leave. Some force ends this world, and them, and then builds another one. It’s the nature of things. Then after a while, when things get broken on the world, the dead zoners find a way back.”

“And there’s nothing you can do to help us defeat them.”

“You try each time and it never works.”

“OK thank you for talking with me.”

The creature nodded and turned back to its work.

Joan squeezed Eli’s hand and they were back beside the Triumph. Eli was curious, so Joan told him what they had discussed, which wasn’t very helpful at all.

Joan got back in the car and Eli drove them back to town. “I don’t know you, Eli.”

“I’m not surprised, if I’ve been gone for the last ten years. Good thing I’m immortal. That would be a long time out of a life.”

“So what do you do?”

Eli thought, “Just about anything that comes along I guess. From stacking boxes in a warehouse to hijacking ships. You name it and I’ve done it.”

“Do you have any special powers?”

“You mean aside from being immortal and moving you from one place to another, and being able to isolate you from time?”

“Oh, yes, sorry.”

“It’s all right, most folks figure I should be put to work.

“Is that why you’re hidden?”

“What, no, I’m not hidden, just not very well advertised. I’ve got no particular reason to avoid people like Bill does, but then again, I’m not very sociable, so a lot of folks don’t know about me.”

“Especially since you’ve been gone for ten years.”

“Yeah, there is that.”

“Will you help us, when the time comes, Eli?”

“Sure, just call me.”

Life Goes On

Life goes on. There was a holiday, and the streets in Guelph were almost deserted. The people who migrated every day would not have believed that most of the time, the place was easy to get around. If they had been driving early on a holiday Monday they might not have been calling for more lanes, more highways, and higher speed limits. It's amazing just how different the world is, depending on when you're driving. Those who are alone in their car with thousands of others, crawling along the streets, have a very different world than those who ride their bike an hour later to go for coffee.

Nobody had any idea what was going on north of town as the Wild Hunt tried to close the hole that was threatening the world. If they had, the old men in the coffee shop might have complained a bit less about immigrants, politicians, and the twinges they had in their backs.

Lori wasn't thinking about any of that, she was thinking about her new girlfriend. Patty had just smiled at her across the bar last night, and had agreed to come home. Lori yawned, it had been a late night, and there was Patty, lying asleep in the bed next to her. What to do, wake her up by running her hands over her body and having yet more sex? Let her sleep, sneak out of bed and make breakfast? Or maybe just close her eyes and get

a bit more sleep. Neither of them had to work today, they could spend the entire time in bed.

Except for her damned bladder. Lori eased out of bed and went to sit on the toilet while she thought about Patty's hair, how it fell half way to her ass when she took the pin out and shook it down as she got undressed. The way she kissed Lori's nipples and ran her hand down between her legs, the way she threw her head back when...

'Oh dear, I'm horny again' thought Lori as her hand slid down between her legs. She had just closed her eyes when Patty came through the door.

"You beat me here, God I have to pee."

With that Patty stepped into the tub and let it go. Seeing that, Lori got even more turned on, she watched wide eyed as Patty grinned at her. When she was done, Patty turned on the shower and said, "Get in here you."

Lori shut the lid and stepped in as Patty grabbed the soap and started to lather Lori's back by hugging her. "Good morning," one of them said.

Across town, Kitsune was crying. Julius' parents had just called her to say that Julius had died that night. He passed peacefully, and with his hand on the bow of the violin Kit had given him. "It was a miracle that he was pain free up to the last. You know, Kit, he was worried about you, he said you were not to feel too

bad, that he had fun in his life and he was looking forward to the next thing. We're not religious people, but Jules said that he had a visit from the Devil who promised him he'd take care of him after he died. The Devil! Jules wasn't a goth kid or anything, but he seemed to believe it, and it gave him comfort so we didn't argue."

Kit somehow got through the conversation, and then she sat on a kitchen chair and put her head down on her arms. Dave sat beside her and softly rubbed her back. Other than that he let her cry.

Dave was a little worried, what would Kit feel like when he himself died. They had agreed that Kit was not to keep him alive, not to make him immortal in any way. That meant that Kit would have to watch him die some time in the future. Well he would prepare Kit as well as he could and hope that someone would comfort her.

In the meantime, there were preparations to be made for Julius' funeral. Beelzabub had promised that he would make sure Julius' soul would carry on. Dave knew that didn't happen for many, but Beels was fond of Kit so he was going to do this for her. Maybe Beels would let Kit know how the little guy was doing.

Dave had finished the portrait of Julius, and they would give it to his parents after the funeral. He had also made a miniature which he would give to Kit when she had finished grieving. This was always so hard, especially for those who didn't get

sick, didn't die. They had to go on. Not for the first time, Dave wondered if he should let Kit make him immortal, but that prediction from Mike, that Dave needed to know he was going to die so that he would be as good an artist as he could be. Damn it, why was this so hard.

Kit had become more quiet, Dave rubbed her back once more and then went to prepare breakfast. He dropped a coffee beside her on the table and she mumbled thanks. When he looked back from the stove he noticed that she had drunk a bit. Life goes on.

Dave wondered if the tear in his eye was for Julius, who was an amazing little guy, or for Kit. Both he supposed.

Ray walked into Tilly's house to find the kids all equipped with full battle armour. "What the hell is this?"

Lila shook her head, "They know there's a fight coming, Ray and the Twins made them the armour. They want you to train them how to fight."

"They know how, we train all the time."

"Self defence and for fun, they want to know how to fight in formation, Ray. They insist."

"They're not going into battle and that's it."

Rupert stepped forward at attention and said in the loudest

voice a three year old could manage, “Sir, you are asking us to die without fighting. This will not do, we want to fight, if we are to die, we want to die fighting.”

“Oh snakes, who has been talking to them.”

“They’re not innocents, Ray, they know what’s going on, and I happen to agree with them. They want you to train them, and Father has agreed to help.”

“You go along with this?”

“You know I do, I’m training as a battle fairy with my father, how can I deny that to my siblings?”

Ray shook his head, “All right, I suppose you have a set of that armour for me? Give it to me so I can figure out what the Twins have done, and then send them on a four mile hike with full packs. If they want to be an army squad they can learn what that means.”

Lila handed over the pack she had been holding and shouted the kids out the door to go on their hike.

Ray opened the pack, muttering to himself, “I’m supposed to be protecting them...”

Woden Begins the Fight

The Twins returned to Woden with the new wristband. It didn't work any better than the last time. Woden was getting angry, "Can you not do this?"

"I don't think we can, sir," "I think they can see us" "the moment we can see them," "and they slip away."

Woden's face was growing red, but Ganna took his arm and hugged it, as she did that, he calmed down a bit. "Well what about making it so my men can survive in that hell hole? I can do it, Ingrid can do it with my help, can you adjust that thing to make it so they can?"

The Twins put their heads together, and eventually looked up. "Maybe" "if we take a few hairs" "from you to add to" "Coyote's hair," "maybe we can adjust it."

Woden glared at them, then reached up and ripped a handful of beard hairs from his face, "Here, try it then, may the other Gods let it work."

As the Twins got to work with their little screwdrivers and other tools that seemed to change shape fast enough to make your eyes water, Odin called over another of his men. "We will try something, are you willing to go into the dead zone at risk of your existence?"

Without any hesitation the man knelt, “I am my lord.”

Woden took his arms and lifted him back to his feet, “I thank you Aetheling, step in and if there is trouble, step out again.”

The Twins handed Woden the wristband, “Please wish it” “to protect you from the other land,” “and then try.”

“I so wish,” and with that Woden handed it to his hunter. That man put it on, clasped his sword and stepped into the hole. Moments later, he emerged, dragging the first hunter by the collar.

“He was immobilized but near the edge, I grabbed him and pulled him back. I will return, my lord, and see what happens.”

With that the spirit stepped across the edge once more and in two minutes, he returned. “I can survive there, and act my lord Woden, I swung my sword a few times but have no idea if I hit anything.”

“Very well, we have a chance. You boys, go make fifty of those wristbands and bring them back quickly.”

The Twins surprised themselves by bowing just as they were sent to the Smith by Woden.

The God then turned to Ganna. “Are you sure about this, child? You must agree, and once agreed, there will be no turning

back.”

“You are a good being, my Lord Woden, but you are long winded, split me among your hunt and let them fight.”

Woden looked like he wasn't going to do it, but then he nodded and moved his hands apart, as he did so, more and more of Ganna appeared, until there were eleven of her.

“We have found ten other times with holes, we will split to groups of five, one of you for each squad, and with the bands, we will attack. Can you check to see if you are protected by me.”

The original Ganna nodded and was gone. She reappeared about four breaths later, “I seem to be able to survive there, Lord, and I saw them. They did not see me.”

“Excellent, we have a chance, Ganna, you and I will fight here, and we will send the rest of the hunt to the other times.”

With that, Woden called the Hunt around and told them the plan. The men split into groups of five and Woden approved each group. “Get to know Ganna, you will take her with you, and you must protect her, she can see the enemy, she will tell you where to strike. You will be hunting blind so listen to your eyes and ears as she directs you. Do you understand?”

Each group in turn put fist to chest and then placed that hand on their child's shoulders.

Wait for your wristbands, and then go to your assigned time. We must attack at the same time or they will simply scatter. Do you understand?"

The Hunt all nodded, their silence saying more than shouts would.

Eventually the Twins got back with fifty wristbands. Woden activated them all and they were distributed. He sent the Twins back to their family and turned to the Hunt.

"Go, and good hunting my faithful men. We begin in fifteen minutes, you have that long to work out your plan. Attack as hard as you can, we will wipe these vermin from our world."

One by one the squads moved in time and were gone. Ganna watched herself disappear with each squad. 'If I was not already insane, I would be now,' she thought to herself.

Woden reached down and took her hand, "Are you ready little warrior?"

Ganna nodded, and then they were inside. Somehow she had a connection with the other parts of herself and so she saw what they were doing. She had little time to realize that before Woden had his spear in his hand and said, "Where?"

Ganna looked, and pointed to a group of the creatures. Woden grinned and aimed his spear, a massive bolt of energy came

from the tip and those creatures were burned. One remained and Ganna said, "Again!" The bolt caught the creature just as it was multiplying. Ganna turned and pointed to another group and Woden fired. The two kept this up for many minutes but then the creatures seemed to catch on.

"Move!" Ganna said, and Woden took them to a different place inside the dead zone. "They can find us by your bolts."

"We will rest a moment, I have no source of power here, and so much catch my breath."

Ganna made sure none of the creatures could see them, and then checked her other selves. The squads had organized differently. Some were fighting with Ganna yelling directions, a single huntsman beside her for protection. Some were fighting in a wedge, Ganna behind it, as they drove into the creatures. One group had somehow managed to link mentally with Ganna, they could all see, but Ganna was blind, stumbling along behind them as if drugged.

As she looked, three of the huntsmen were touched by the creatures and were gone. "Woden, some of your men are dying."

"I can feel them, little one. Let us continue, we must all win or none."

Woden continued to send blast after blast out his spear, but with each one, it became weaker. Finally, he let it go and it

went wherever it had come from. He had a sword in his hand. "This I can fight with as long as we need. Where, child, where next?"

Ganna stumbled, one of her had died. Those huntsmen fought on blindly until they were gone too. One by one she felt her selves die while she directed Woden. The last of the squads to die were the ones who had taken the sight from Ganna.

"Woden! You must take my sight into yourself, this is our only chance, one squad did but they are gone, gone now after the others."

Woden replied through gritted teeth, "That I will not do, child. We have no chance to win, and I will not diminish you further. If we have a chance to be reborn in the world, you will be born again with me."

"I don't understand, we will die, take my sight."

Woden only grunted and then said, "Where?"

The two fought on for another hour, but the creatures multiplied faster than they could cut them down. Finally, one of them touched Ganna and she was gone without a sound. Woden was finally blind. He growled deep in his throat and then spread his arms. A tremendous explosion destroyed at least half of the dead zone over every time line. When a God dies, the worlds know of it.

Art Catches Ingrid

Art, Ingrid and Robin were in Southern France, Art had just destroyed a hole and was about to ask for the next, when Ingrid collapsed unconscious. His own distress forgotten, Art caught her before she hit the ground.

"Woden is gone, Robin. He is half of her and he's gone. Have we failed?"

"What shall we do?"

"Do? We fight on, what else can we do. How much power do you have, Goodfellow?"

"What do you mean?"

"She is half gone, Robin, and I love her, I will give her what she needs."

"Ah, and what of you, Arthur?"

"Me, I will give this cursed blade what it has wanted since it was forged."

Robin nodded, "I can do this."

Without any more discussion, Robin moved Art into Ingrid. He tried to keep this to a minimum, but Art pushed, he would give his entire being if that was needed, and it might be, there was a God to replace in her heart. Before he could give all of himself, Ingrid was awake. She slapped Robin's hand off of her head, "Stop, Greenwood! You will kill him."

It was then that Ingrid noticed Excalibur in Art's hand. What Art had given her, the sword had replaced. Ingrid gasped, how much of her Arthur would survive?

As she watched, the sword grew dim and stopped glowing. Arthur's hand opened and the sword was gone. Ingrid reached out and took Art's hand. His eyes flicked open and he smiled to see her awake, but then it faded. "Ingrid, I grieve for your loss."

"Oh my love, if I had lost you too... Are you whole, are you... you?"

"Am I that stinking blade? No. It tried, but like it or not, I am its master. Who knows what I have lost, but what does that matter, you're here."

"Woden is gone, and a part of me has gone with him, but you have stepped into his place, only to be here at the end times. It might have been kinder to let me drift away."

"No. Woden has bought time, his sacrifice has weakened the

enemy, and we must do the same. We must continue to destroy their holes to buy time for the rest, for whatever plan they come up with. Are you well enough to continue?"

"I am your shield maiden my lord."

"Robin?"

Robin nodded, closed his eyes and pointed, "Siberia".

Art paused, he didn't like the look of Ingrid, she looked in need of rest, "Shall I tell you a story before we go, Ingrid."

Ingrid could read Art's mind before, now she knew as much about him as she had known about Woden. She could feel his concern for her, and she realized she was weak. "A story would be a good thing right now, my lord."

Robin looked from one to another and settled into a comfortable squat.

"Shall I tell you of our family?"

Ingrid nodded, closed her eyes, and Art began. "This was many lives ago for me, it was one of the few times when I was not a soldier. We were in the far north, for no other reason than I was born there. You arrived at the village leading a dozen children. I was a smith, on the edge of the village so that my forge would not burn everything down if it went out of control. I saw you first, you were exhausted, as much as you are now my love, but

the children were worse.

"I showed you all into the smithy where it was warm. What water and food I had I offered to the children. You refused anything, telling me to feed the children. I did not know you, except to know that you had brought the children from the next village, where there was a raid, where the children hid while their parents were taken as slaves."

"I could not leave them."

"Of course not, I was the village smith, somewhat magical they thought of me, somewhat of a Shaman because of my control of fire and metal. For that, I was alone. When you arrived, I gained a wife and a large family all at one time."

"We changed your life."

"In so many ways that I never told you. You taught me love, and I loved you so very much. You warned me of the raiders, and so I turned from buckets and knives to armour and swords. Some of the children were old enough to swing hammers and so I taught them all.

"In that life I knew nothing of war, but you trained the villagers and the children. We had time, when the raiders arrived we killed half and chased the others off. They never came back.

"Ingrid, I grew old with you there in the smithy, the children grew up and wandered away to other villages to become smiths

or the wives of smiths. We stayed and I grew old, but we kept the smithy going, you took over when I could not swing a hammer any more. No man in that village ever commented that my wife was doing my work, instead we sat and talked about the state of the world, all that place that we could walk to in a day. When I looked up you would smile at me as the sparks flew. You were never more beautiful to me than when you had soot on your face."

"You never told me."

"A man didn't, in front of his friends, but it was true. Ingrid I had a good life that time, and it was a good life every time I met you again. Each life was precious, as this one is, and I will fight for it just as hard as I can."

"Then I should stop listening to stories and help you, my lord. My shield and sword are yours, in this life and every other."

"In the memory of Woden, then, let us go to Siberia."

The Lion Man

Joan-Marie was still gathering up the old ones when a man approached her on the street. "You are looking for the ancients."

Joan could see he was an old one, but she had never met him,
"I am, Venerable, but I've never met you before."

"I'm not surprised, few know me today, but I was the very first
God."

"What?"

"I am the Lion Man."

"I'm sorry, I've never heard of you."

"Not surprising, but I am. Ingrid remembers me. I was a God
before she ever was."

"What?"

"That doesn't matter, I can help you. I understand what is
happening and I will help."

"You are the very first God?"

"Yep, half man, half Cave Lion"

"Were you here when Coyote sang?"

"No, but for what you are planning, I am better than that."

"Can you fight the holes?"

"No."

"Then..."

"I told you, I am the very first God, that means that every God that came after is an aspect of me. Child, I am the root, I claim every single human alive as one of mine."

Joan was speechless, she suddenly understood what this Lion Man meant.

He nodded, "Every other God figures they are It, but I was the very first, they are all aspects of me, I came into being when the Humans were first able to think of a greater power."

"You have power?"

"Nah, something even more important, I have connection."

Joan wasn't sure what he was saying, but she felt that he was critical to whatever plan the others came up with. She took his arm and walked him to the Lunch Counter.

As they went in, Coyote's eyes lit up. "My old friend, I thought you had departed."

"Still here Singer, still here thanks to those like Ingrid who still believe in me."

"This changes things indeed. Come, sit, help us plan."

Joan shook her head, these beings were speaking well beyond her experience, but there were still a few of the hidden old ones that she knew about. As she walked out the door, Coyote looked after her. "I wonder if she knows how important she is right now?"

Amber smiled, "She is doing what she can, I doubt she cares for importance."

"All the more important for that."

Coyote turned to the group sitting around the tables, "Nanabozo, Shaman, allow me to introduce the first."

The Fight at Rockwood

Ray had declared that day's training would be at the beach, and so his little army travelled to Rockwood. As luck would have it, a brief, intense rain shower had chased everyone else away, and the kids had the place to themselves.

"You will need to learn to move through any terrain, and to fight in water, so get yourselves into the lake and get used to swimming."

Lila grinned, she figured that Ray had taken them to the beach so that they could be children. She was wrong.

After making sure that everyone could swim, Ray sent them across the lake and back. For their part, the children swam with gritted teeth and determined frowns. They were serious about learning to fight as an army.

After they had swum the lake, Ray had them put on their armour and packs filled with rocks. Lila wasn't sure about this but she knew the Twins had made the suits as well as they could. The children couldn't swim with that weight, but they could walk, and walk they did, across the bottom of the lake. The suits could filter oxygen from the water.

The children loved this, but while they were marching, they kept their formation and a sharp lookout. Not that there was anything in that lake more vicious than a sunfish.

Training went on through the afternoon with formation fighting on the beach and under the lake. With squad against squad they realized that their fighting ability was multiplied many times over what they could do on their own.

Lila had snacks and made sure everyone kept hydrated as the kids worked themselves to exhaustion. Ray watched for that and declared that a good soldier can fall asleep in minutes. Saying that, he instructed the kids to nap on the sand, while he put a few clouds in the sky to prevent sunburns. Even the kids

who hated naptime were asleep in moments.

"You're a good man, Ray, for doing this. The kids needed something to take their minds off of the situation."

"This something is a preparation and training to handle what's coming, Lila. Even children need to have a feeling of being in control and able to cope, and with these kids, they ought to be able to cope with a lot. They were never the type... you were never the type... to feel that someone else will take care of them. You always assumed you could take care of yourself."

"Well, being willing to try thumping the school bullies always made me feel better."

"And you did it with your human attributes."

"Of course, relying on my magical powers would be as bad as expecting you to show up and protect me."

An absence of water in the middle of the lake interrupted Ray's thought. He and Lila stared at this column of nothing, where the water should have been.

"Lila get the kids out of here, quickly, I'm going to see what the Twins' armour can do."

Lila started to wake the kids, but they would not go. Instead they were in the armour and heading toward the water before Ray got going himself.

"No, kids you need to get out of here."

Lila put a hand on Ray's arm and shook her head. "Don't command the tide not to come in, Ray."

"Hah, I was there, and you're right."

Ray ran to get in front of the kids, Lila right beside him, her long legs easily moving ahead of Ray by the time they hit the water. "Air tanks, they said the armour was an extension of the wristbands. Think of air tanks, kids."

There were tanks, full of oxygen.

Scream Queen

Back in the lunch counter, Lila, Queen of the Fairies lifted her head and screamed, she had felt the children go into battle and she was not happy. Lila was her husband's child, but she had proudly accepted her as her own. That made the rest of Tilly's kids hers as well, since they were Lila's siblings.

The rest of the planning committee were startled by this outburst, and several questioning looks came Lila's way. "The kids are going to war with the creatures."

Amber looked from Lila to Jonah, "Go."

The King and Queen of the Fairies along with two hundred of their warriors were in Rockwood.

Where they were met by kids just walking out of the water, shaking off the armour and flopping down on towels to fall asleep.

As Ray and Lila came out of the lake, having made sure everyone got to shore, Lila waved the battle fairies away. She and Jonah walked down the hill to chat.

"What the bloody homelands are you doing taking my kids into a fight with the others!"

Lila stepped in front of Ray and held her hands out as if to stop the Queen from running right over Ray, "My Queen, Ray sent them away, but they joined battle anyway, they acted as proper battle fairies would, and they won without a single loss. You would have been proud of them."

Not for the first time, the Queen wondered just how her husband's child could manipulate her so well.

Behind her, Jonah smiled, but the Queen chose not to notice.

"Tell me then."

Ray, having been forgotten in the exchange between the Lilas, walked up the beach and flopped on the sand. Jonah stepped over, "You OK Ray?"

"Tired, but no damage.

Jonah nodded and walked back to hear the story.

"The hole suddenly appeared while the kids were napping, Ray tried to send them away with me, but the kids were suiting up and heading for the water. The suits can take air out of water, but not the dead zone, so I told them to create air tanks.

"They walked into the lake and it was all Ray and I could do to keep ahead of them. Ray stepped into the hole to make sure it was possible to exist in there. It was, thanks to the Twins and Coyote.

"Ray came back and had the kids surround the hole, he and I went in, and in the light coming through the water, we could sort of see the creatures. We started killing them and some of the creatures, thinking to escape us, ran straight into the children who hacked them to pieces as they came through the wall. I'm not sure how the kids saw them or if they just made an interlocking barrier with their sword swings. As we killed the last creature and then destroyed their machine, the hole collapsed. A couple of dead fish floated to the top of the water and went over the dam. The kids were all fine, they had kept discipline and followed orders."

The Queen had gone from a thunderous frown to a gentle smile, "They shall have ice cream and cake, take them to my house when they are done their nap, and I will see about sending them home with stomach aches."

"Mother!"

"Don't argue with your Queen, it does children good to eat until they get sick once in a while. It reminds them not to do it."

Lila bowed, "As you command."

The Queen laughed, "We should go report this to the committee, have the Twins send a set of armour to us, perhaps we could use it to continue the fight at the main hole. Let me know when the kids are heading to my place."

Kitsune Goes to War

"Why didn't you tell me about this Ray?"

"Because you had other things to think about Kitsune, and I didn't want to add to your sorrows. I was hoping we could fix this before you heard about it."

"You figured it was unimportant? That I wouldn't care? That I was too sad about Julius to add more sadness? Come on Ray,

I'm a grown woman now."

"As you have reminded me before Kit, but still, there are many who are on the job."

"And how is it going?"

"Not well, Woden is gone, along with the Wild Hunt."

"What! No! He's a God."

"And he's gone, these creatures are powerful Kit, if mindless."

"Oh no! Ingrid, how is Ingrid?"

"She is coping, she's with Art and they are destroying the small holes as they appear, the problem is the main hole."

"Where is it, Father, I'm going to close it."

"Kit, I know you're hurting about Julius, but these things aren't cancer."

"The hell they aren't, they are a cancer on our world and I'm going to cut them out."

"Kit..."

"Who knows where it is? Megan?"

“Kit!”

“No, I’m going, you’ve said I have a unique combination of powers due to your complex family history. I’m going to go, Megan!”

Megan was there, “Child, be a bit more respectful in how you call me.”

“Sorry Aunt, but I need you to show me where the main hole is, so I can destroy this cancer on our world.”

Megan looked at Ray, who shook his head, “I tried, I told her that Woden and the Hunt had perished, but she insists.”

Megan gave Kit a stern look, “You are angry, Shaman, and you know what can happen when you allow your anger to rule you.”

“Nanaboza, I was a child then, but I have come into my full power, and you have no idea just what can happen when I am angry now. Do not presume to hold me back, I will destroy these things.”

Megan shook her head, shrugged and then the three of them were at the hole. Ray started to object, but Megan held up her hand, “She is a Shaman and will do as she feels is right.”

The Twins were off to one side, trying to adjust their wristbands so that they could see the creatures, but all they

were doing was pushing them from one side of the hole to the other, or from one time to another. It was like trying to gather water with a rake.

Kit was very still. She was looking hard into the hole. Ray watched her carefully, ready to haul her back from the edge, but she never moved. Finally, Kit's eyes narrowed, "I have them, I can see them."

"Kit, there is more than one time..."

But it was too late, Kitsune had spread her arms and black clouds appeared for as far as you could see. She closed her hands slowly and the lightning started. Strike after strike on the creatures in the hole, the lightning slowed and became weaker as it crossed into that other place, but enough remained to incinerate the creatures. Soon, they all disappeared and the hole was gone.

Kit looked grim, but nodded. Ray looked at her and said, "Watch."

Sure enough, in two minutes the hole was back. "They have holes in multiple time lines, they just flee from one to another and then reappear. You would have to kill them all, in all the time lines at the same time. This is what Woden tried, and he failed."

Kit frowned, "Suzume, Grandmother, lend me your power."

The thought came back to all of them, “My child, we cannot, even with your power to help us, we cannot strike at all the times and in all the places.”

Kit lifted her head and screamed, “Beelzabub!” As she did so, the Twins became agitated, they had seen the creatures for a moment as Kit screamed, and they had seen them wince. Maybe sound was the answer.

Beelzabub appeared beside Kit. “My dear, you shouted?”

“Why can’t I destroy these things!”

“Kit they don’t even exist in our universe, that you can kill some of them is miraculous, but they slip away. Woden found that this time, he could not deal with them. There are too many of this hole through the timeline.”

“Borrow my power and curse these things.”

“I cannot, I have tried, I am now working with Coyote and the others to formulate a plan.”

“What plan?”

“The ultimate plan, the one to use at the end of all things.”

“Coyote is going to sing the world away and back again? But that changes everything, he has sworn not to do it.”

“There may not be a choice, we have not been able to defeat these things, and believe me, we have tried, as you did just now.”

“No, he must not do that, there is too much to risk, I could lose too many.”

“As could we all, but it may come to that. We are creating a plan to minimize the losses, minimize the changes.”

Kit looked back at the hole, this time she screamed at the creatures and they were gone once more, but not before some of them came apart. Kit waited and when they reappeared, she screamed again. She seemed to be prepared to do this forever. In one interval she looked at her companions, who had their hands firmly over their ears, “Go make your plan, I will stay here and disrupt their damned work. Go and make sure I don’t lose any of you, or Dave or the rest of my family.”

Ray noticed that she had no worries on her own account, and he supposed that she might be right. If anyone would survive the destruction of the world, it might just be Kit, through willpower alone. He looked at Megan who said, “Let her do her work.”

Wincing at Kit’s next scream, the three moved. The Twins were hauled away as well, they would have gone deaf just trying to find the right adjustments for their gizmos.

When they got to the lunch counter, it was twice the size as it

was a few minutes before. More and more of the ancients were coming in as Joan-Marie continued her recruitment. She herself wasn't sure why she was doing it, but she felt that finding them and sending them to Coyote was the right thing to do.

Ray was amazed, he had no idea there were so many old powers in the city, but then again, he himself had drifted to Guelph. Maybe it was the water.

Art Steps Away

“Art, we can't, they're appearing faster than we can shut them down.”

Art growled, “The next one, where is it?”

“Art, there are four more now, we've lost, we can't keep up.”

“Damn you, Goodfellow, point to the next one.”

“Art, you must stop and look to Ingrid. She will follow you but she is done, she must grieve for Woden. It is you who must stop, she will not.”

Art looked at Ingrid, her eyes were sunken, she had shed her armour, as if it was too heavy for her. Hildy was looking at Art

as if to plead with him.

Art let go his sword and walked to where Ingrid was resting on one knee, balanced between collapsing and standing to follow Art.

He knelt beside her, “My love, it is time to return and help plan for the next phase of the war. You are my dearest love, and I thank you for the fight we have made, but it is time. Now we rest.”

Ingrid looked at Art and then buried her head in his shoulder. To weep for their failure, yes, but mostly for Woden, her husband, who was gone. “We have both failed, Woden and I, what hope is there if Gods fall.”

“They fall to rise again my love. I know something about falling and rising again. We will see your Woden once more. This I promise you.”

“Will we my lord? Will we see Woden and each other again?”

“I would not lie to you, shield maiden, not about this. I have some idea what is being planned.”

“Then shall we step into a hole and be done with this grief?”

“No, this we will not do, we are needed. This fight is over, but the war is not. We will continue the fight, the time for swords may be over, but there are other ways to fight.”

Ingrid looked at Art, nodded and stood up, ready again for the next phase.

Robin had been watching and he understood, not for the first time, the incredible power of love to renew hope. He thought of Lila, his Fairy Queen, and decided it was time to be by her side once again.

“Robin, take Ingrid and Hildy back to safety in Guelph. My sword has the scent of these things, I can find the holes, and it will take me there, if for no other reason than to drink more souls. Go and take care of her my friend.”

Ingrid looked quickly at Robin, who nodded. He made a small motion with his hand and Art fell into Ingrid’s arms, asleep. “Thank you Robin, I am his shield maiden and could not go against his wishes to do that myself. But I am his shield maiden and it is my duty to protect him.”

“Indeed, lady, he would have fought until he was gone. We will take him home and I will explain it to him.”

Ingrid smiled her thanks, reached for Robin’s hand. Hildy jumped on her lap and they were back in Ken’s Keller where Ingrid asked for the largest mug of beer they had.

At almost the same time upstairs in the lunch counter, Megan lifted her head, "I must go."

Ray looked a question at her.

"The Twins are gone, Kitsune can't go on, I must bring her back."

Ray was devastated, the Twins must have gone back to the hole, he shut his eyes and cursed himself that he couldn't save them.

Megan called Dave to her and they went to the main hole. Kitsune had done well, it was barely larger than it had been days before, but it was large enough to have swallowed the Twins.

Kitsune was asleep on her feet, when Dave touched her she woke crying, "I killed the Twins! I killed them!"

Dave gathered her to him while Megan looked around and knew the story, "You did not kill them, child. They were messing with their armour, trying to find a way we could use it. They didn't notice the hole and it took them."

"I fell asleep! The hole returned and I didn't scream, I killed them!"

Megan glanced at Dave, who nodded and she put Kitsune back to sleep. "I'll put you back in your apartment where you can care for her."

"No, she won't accept that, take us to the lunch counter where

she can help with the next phase. She will need to be doing something."

Megan nodded and the three of them were there. "We have failed to stop the holes, Kitsune is exhausted and so are Ingrid and Art. I am afraid the moment where Coyote must act is nearing. Will you do it, Lord of the World?"

Coyote looked tired. Amber stood beside him, stroking his back and neck and watching him carefully. He shook his head, "Is there nothing we can do, I will go and see what I can do."

Megan shook her head, "You cannot."

Amber leaned toward Coyote, "She's right Mutt, we can't risk you, too much depends on you. Your world depends on you as do we all."

"But I screw it up, I've always screwed it up."

Robin stood up to his full height of not very much. "My Lord, you have not, ever, "screwed it up". I have known this from many long years ago when you saved my friends from starvation. The rest of us screw up, you save our asses, if you will forgive the expression."

Around the room there were nods from the tricksters.

Amber smiled at Robin, "Thank you Goodfellow, we all need reminding of Coyote's power. I think even Megan might agree

that Coy does more good than harm."

Megan looked down, "It pains me to say this, but she is right Lord Coyote, this is, no matter what the rest of us might think, your world and you cannot screw up what is created by you. This is truth."

"You are all my friends, I have lost so many with each song, how can I lose you again?"

Now Megan looked up, a fierce gaze pinned Coyote, "You are losing us even as we speak, Coyote, you will lose us all, now let us form a plan and no more talk. You will sing!"

King Under the Mountain

When Art woke in the bar, Robin had managed to explain to him, what they had done when he caused him to sleep. Art was determined to go back into battle, no matter what Robin said, when Robin made him look at Ingrid, slumped at the bar with her third beer. "Will you make her a widow twice? Think before you throw your life away Arturus, King. Think of your responsibility before your desire to fight."

Art was as angry as he'd ever been. He felt helpless, and he could see that the rest of the beings in the room felt the same.

This would not do. Ingrid was silent, Ken was sullen. He racked his brain for something to lift their spirits.

He started speaking in a very old style. "Listen to me as I tell you a story. It is the story of the King under the mountain."

Ken spoke up quickly, "We know it, Art, it is one of ours."

Others hushed him, "Let him tell the story."

Art nodded thanks and continued, "Long years ago, a great King lived. He was just, and kind, and formed a great country, an empire of countries. He ruled well, and fought well, but only in just wars. In time he grew old, and forgetful and so when the time came that he was no longer able to rule well, he called in his sons and told them that he would go and sleep. They would now rule the empire."

Ken shook his head, "Not ours then, no King of ours would give up power."

Art smiled, "This King went deep into a mountain, and sat down on a rock, put his head in his hands and went to sleep. His sons ruled for many years, but eventually fell to bickering among themselves. This allowed the enemies of the empire to attack and begin to destroy the peace the King had built. The sons fought their enemies for many years, but they could not get along with each other and so they failed. When all seemed lost, the sons went deep into the mountain to wake their father, saying they had failed and all was lost.

"The King looked at them and asked who they were, he had forgotten they were his sons. The sons all despaired, 'He has forgotten, he can no longer save us.' On hearing this, the King said, 'Tell me your story.'

"This the sons did, and of course, each story was different. They each blamed the others for the problems. The King listened carefully to each, and just before the sons started bickering with each other, the King silenced them all. 'You each have a small piece of the answer, if you would only listen to each other, instead of thinking you know everything, you can solve this puzzle. Go away and come back when you can tell me what I need to know.'

"The sons were in despair, but they were also desperate, so they went away and looked at what they each had. Some had horses, some had spears, some had guns. When they sat down and listed what they had together, they realized they had a powerful army if only they would put it together.

"They went back to the King under the mountain and said, 'We have enough for a great army, if only we had a leader who could bring it all together.' The King nodded, 'Can you not find a great leader?' The sons had to admit that they could not. 'We fight too much with each other, we need someone who has the magic of knitting together all that we have, all that we know, so that we can be led to victory.'

"The King nodded, 'until you find that man, I cannot help you.'

The sons were horrified, 'But father, you are that man.' The King shook his head, 'I have forgotten how to lead, I have forgotten all of you, and what you have, I have forgotten this Empire you tell me I built. What can I do for you.'

"The sons went away and discussed things, 'We have all we need, we just need the magic of a leader, we must convince our father.' With that they returned to the King and said, 'We will be your memory, Father, we will be your understanding, we know what we have, we know what the empire was, you must use us to recover what we have lost. Will you do this for all our sakes?'

"The King looked at his sons and said, 'With your understanding, your advice and your knowledge, I think that we might do this thing.' With that the King stood and walked out of the mountain.

Art stopped talking, his story ended there. "But what happened?" asked Ken.

Art shook his head, "I don't know, the story ends there, perhaps they won back the Empire, perhaps they lost."

"But what sort of a story is that?"

Megan, who had come downstairs with Coyote to get away from the planning for a while, smiled and said, "A true one. Art you have become wise somehow, from the days when you hung around Jim's Lunch Counter. Do you not all see, he has given

us our plan.”

Most did not see, but Coyote looked up. “It cannot be, Megan, we have not the ability to do what you are suggesting.”

Ken looked from one to another, “What, what are you suggesting?”

Megan shook her head, “Perhaps you are right, Coyote, but we must try. Ken, the plan is that Coyote will not sing by himself and try to remember the world, he will have help.”

“What help could any one of us give to him?”

“This we must discover, but look around you, we each have a piece of the world, we each remember our lives, and the stories of other lives. Together, the whole world is contained in the memories of those who live in it. Can we give that to Coyote?”

“Are you insane? All the spirit beings together can’t remember the whole world. And where does that leave the Kobolds, the other races, the humans?”

“Some of the old ones will survive and find their way back to the world. The other spirit beings will need to be remembered, the Kobolds too, even the Giants. All have those who can remember them. But the humans I don’t know about. There are too many of them, and they flit in and out of existence like Mayflies, is it important that they survive when Coyote sings the world away and back again?”

The Lizard-Men are Real

Joan-Marie was still prowling the streets of Guelph. She had spotted three more spirit beings who somehow could not hide themselves away any more. Perhaps it was the reduction in the world as more and more holes popped into existence. Some of those beings were fighting back and as they did, their powers made them visible to Joan.

The holes were appearing in no pattern that anyone could determine, and Humans could not even see them. They would walk right into one and disappear before their friends would finally notice the dead zone. After that, word got around and they would avoid the area if they could.

Some could not stay away, some, in that spirit of human adventure, jumped in deliberately, thinking they were going to a promised land. There were so many promised lands in so many religions, they never even considered that it may be someone else's promised land. In a way it was, the promised land of the dead zoners.

In other cases, the humans saw a way to get rid of bodies, or even live enemies and many people were pushed into the holes. In some areas of the world, whole groups were forced into the

dead zones in the name of ethnic or religious purity. The opportunity to clean up the world was just too tempting. That the groups being disposed of, pulled some of their killers in with them, was a small act of resistance. Most of course, simply walked in when ordered, not believing they could fight back, even at the point of death. Perhaps believing in death from a gun, but maybe a chance to live, in this hole that simply vanished those who entered. Maybe there was another side, another place in the hole. Better the unknown than the certain death from a bullet. Perhaps some humans saw the holes for what they were, and entered with calmness, knowing that their killers would join them soon.

Guelph seemed to be a hard place for the holes to appear. Joan realized that she was finding hidden spirit beings because of the holes. If one happened to show up when a spirit being was close, and that being noticed, and had the power, they would collapse the hole. But that use of power made them visible to Joan. She would see them and introduce herself. She would ask them to join the rest in the lunch counter. Why, she wasn't sure, but she somehow felt it was important for all of them to be where Coyote and the rest were.

As the strangers continued to arrive at the meeting, Ray could feel that Joan was still looking, and he was glad she had a job. He felt useless, he had brought the Tilly kids to the lunch counter, but Tilly herself said she was not going to leave her house. She explained that as a Moggie, a Mother of Gods, she was soon going to allow herself to die anyway, and she'd rather die at home than in some strange new world. Ray could not

talk her out of it, and finally, Suzume and Xaalajaat told him to leave her to her wishes.

Ray returned to the meeting in a foul mood. He was mostly a soldier, fighting to defend those who needed it. This thing, these holes, were beyond him and he felt the frustration of the useless. Something he was not accustomed to. Zaat was there, and she leaned close, “This is your town, you’ve been here a long time, your family is searching out powers in Europe, Suzume’s in Asia, why don’t you join your friend Joan and see what you can do here.”

Ray’s ears perked up. “Will you watch the kids?”

Zaat nodded and Ray hugged Zaat before he was gone. To be able to do something was a blessing.

As it turned out, some beings didn’t want to be recognized, Ray appeared beside Joan just as she was trying to talk herself away from a large, angry fellow. He was just reaching for her neck when Ray changed to a fox of about the same size. That being changed to a lizard of equal size which caused Ray to laugh, “So the humans were right, there are lizard men hanging around on the planet!”

This enraged the lizard and he lunged at Ray, reaching his clawed forelegs toward him. Ray grinned, finally, here was his chance to fight something. Ray changed to human form, but kept his size. He punched the Lizard hard over his reaching hand, and then grabbed that limb. Looking quickly, and more

importantly, feeling how that limb moved, he rolled the thing forward so that the shoulder socket was endangered. The lizard staggered past him into the street. Ray laughed.

Cars screeched to a stop at the sight of a giant man and a lizard fighting. Ray didn't bother hiding the two of them, 'let them watch' he thought perversely, they'll all be gone soon anyway, might as well have a bit of a show. He stamped on the lizard's tail before punching it on the back of its neck.

This worked as Ray intended, the being howled with rage, and attacked him blindly. Ray showed the being his teeth as he moved inside, shoving stiffened fingers into the lizard's throat and grabbing its jaw so that it couldn't open its mouth. Pulling the head downward, Ray slammed his elbow into the junction of its beak or whatever you call it, and its eyes. This did it, the lizard dropped to the ground, unconscious. Ray grabbed it by the tail and tossed it into an alleyway, then walked back to Joan.

"Are you OK?"

"Sure, I'm fine, thanks Ray, talking wasn't working and I thought I'd have to fight or run."

"Can you fight? Did I stamp all over your fun?"

"It's fine, his human form I might have got away from, but I'm not used to fighting lizards."

“First one for me, and I feel much better. Zaat sent me to help you hunt down your hidden ones.”

Joan nodded thanks and smiled, “Ray do you know why I’m doing this? I just feel like I should, but no matter how big an army of powerful beings we assemble, we can’t fight those holes, as big as they are getting. The little ones as they show up, sure, I’ve seen these beings close them down, but if we miss them and they get big enough, it just seems useless.”

“There’s another way, Coyote can sing the world away and back again without the dead zones.”

“Yeah? But what about his memory problems? Some of these ancient ones remember him doing that before, and it is always different, the world ends up changed. Ray I don’t mind disappearing, won’t bother me when I’m gone, but I’d just as soon hang around with you for a while longer.”

“Feeling’s mutual, J. I feel like I’m just getting to know you. Look, Megan and the rest have an idea, they want us to help Coyote this time, to remember what he forgets.”

“How is that going to happen, can Coyote absorb the memories from everyone on earth?”

“He says no, so we’re working on it.”

“In the meantime, the world dies. Wait a minute, is the Lion Man there?”

“He is, hasn’t said much except that he’s the original God of the Humans.”

“Yes, I see, he can help remember us. And for the spirit beings.... Ray I might have an idea.”

The Plan Has Not Come Together

Robin saw Jonah first, as he, Ingrid, Art and the others walked into the lunch counter. You could hardly recognize the place, it was the size of an auditorium, with people coming in all the time. Jonah waved Robin to him and Robin went, somewhat hesitantly. After all, this was the man who had married the woman Robin was bound to, the woman he loved.

"Robin, it is good that you're here. Lila will stop worrying."

Robin was a bit unsettled by this. "She worries?"

"Always and still a fool, aren't you. Of course she worries about you, you were her first love and that will never change. Come and sit with me, Ken has opened up his best casks, says there is no sense worrying about them surviving, they'll survive well enough in our stomachs."

"And you, my Lord? What do you think of me?"

"Fool again. My Queen has a big heart, together we have raised children for centuries and her love encompasses all. I have enough room in my heart to share a drink with you. Oh, and I don't forget that you will be bound to my daughter, for that alone I owe you friendship."

"I thank you my lord, and thank you for the ale, our work was thirst-making."

"This is good Kobold brew, I suspect enough of them will quench your thirst. Now tell me about your fight."

"My Lord, it was truly frightening to see Arthur with his sword. He became a different being, not the jolly fellow you and I have come to know, but some sort of demon, bent on protecting the entire world. Ingrid, goddess that she is, acted as his shield maiden, following him, protecting him, supporting him. Once only did she falter, when Woden died and then Art had me give part of himself to her, to fill the void."

"She is indeed a Goddess of War, to support when she should, to keep going when there is no more hope. As Woden did. I hope my own death is as good."

"Will we, my Lord, will we die."

"Oh yes, there is no doubt about that. If the Gods of War fail, how can we small ones hope to succeed."

"Then if you will permit me my Lord, I will die by your side."

"I thank you, Robin Goodfellow, we will make a good account of ourselves. Wife! Come greet your old lover!"

"Jonah, I swear I'm going to kick you out the door. There are discussions going on, this is not a tavern."

"Today it is a tavern, my sweet wife, I will let those who are smarter than I am, do their plotting, I will spend my time until we fight and die, in good drink with good company."

Robin had stood and knelt as Lila approached, she lifted him upright and kissed him well. Jonah smiled and Robin almost fainted. Lila laughed, "It's the end of time, Robin, old arguments are null and void, now pour me some of that beer if my husband hasn't drunk it all."

Across the room, Art was reporting their failure to keep up with the holes that were appearing. Coyote nodded, "It's like this every time, they get their machines running and the dead zones appear in no pattern that makes sense to us. Is there nothing we can do? No trick we can pull, no machine of our own we can make to do to them what they are doing to us?"

Ken shook his head, "We don't know how they can affect our world when their own is so far away from ours. The Twins and the Smith could design no useful machine."

Kitsune had been quiet for a long time, but spoke now, "That's wrong, Coy, they are difficult for us to affect not because they are different, but because they are the same. I felt them and they are like cancer, they are of us, but gone wild. We create them, humans and spirit beings together, we create them and so they are hard to kill."

Dave winced when Kit mentioned cancer, she was still angry about Julius, "Does that help us?"

"I'm afraid not, except to help us understand what happens. There are some things that work, some that don't. I could cure cancer in most people, as could many here, but this is a cancer of the world. There is only one here who could cure it."

Coyote looked sad, "And the cure can be much worse than what came before, as I've seen many times."

From his table, Jonah shouted, "Well you have to die from something. If you live long enough and win enough fights, you die of cancer."

Lila swatted him on the back of his head, "Let your betters talk and have another beer."

Coyote smiled, "He's not wrong. When a world gets too old, too crowded, something always shows up. But I have come to the understanding that I don't want to lose this one. I will not sing unless I have to."

Megan frowned, "You must not wait too long in the hope of a miracle. Woden and his Hunt have done good work for many thousands of years, but I fear this world is coming to an end. We are here to make the best of what we can do, not hope for some last minute saviour to show up like in a bad story."

"But they sometimes do turn up, which is why there is a minute past the last minute."

Megan had a sour look on her face and turned to Amber, "Talk to him."

"No, Megan, he's right. I've been Coyote and he's right. There is so much randomness in what he does. We must have a plan before he sings."

"Does anyone have this plan? Will we plan until it's too late?"

"There is time yet. There is time until time itself stops."

Outside the cafe there were events, proving that time had not ended yet. With nothing to stop them, the dead zones were appearing and getting bigger. The people of the world began to notice as their communications systems became spotty. News travelled in various ways to most people and they began to do what people do as their world ends.

In the meantime, Ray walked through the streets hand in hand with Joan-Marie. "Where are you taking me now, Joan?"

"To visit someone who might help. At least I feel that he can help in a way that I don't know. You should talk with him."

"And he's down this little space? He must be tiny." Ray shrunk himself so he could walk between the walls while Joan gave him a sour look. She was scraping both her back and her chest.

"Yes, tiny. His name is Percy, you'll meet him soon. He's already offered to help."

The Glimmer of a Plan

Coyote wasn't happy. "I don't want to sing the world away, I thought about singing a part of it away, the part with the main hole, but that makes for weird geography that doesn't work with the rest of the world. They always fall apart."

Amber looked at Coyote softly. She put her hand on the nape of his neck, as if she were petting him, "It may come to that, my love, and if it does, for the sake of a world, will you sing?"

Coyote looked fondly at her, "Only as a last resort, but yes of course I will, I have learned hope recently."

Amber smiled and rubbed his neck gently, "I too have hope, my love."

Ingrid watched the debate in the lunch counter, it seemed endless. How do you get so many beings with so much power to agree on anything. It's not that they were fighting, or even that they didn't like each other, but they were used to doing what they wanted, and being right for so very long. A long life can lead to being a bit stubborn.

Then she thought Art's story of the King under the mountain. She cleared her throat for attention and then told the group Art's story, about how to get things done by cooperating, about the importance of a single focus, a leader, who may be flawed, but who can be helped. She didn't tell anyone that the story was true, but a few of the people looked from her to Art when she was speaking. Art kept quiet, it was Ingrid's argument to make.

When she was finished, there were thoughtful faces. Megan took the lead. "Who is this King under the mountain? Is it Art, is it King Arthur?"

Before Arthur could deny it, Ingrid smiled, "No, it once was thought that King Arthur was under a hill, with his knights, waiting for the day they were needed, but Art is right here, and even if he now believes he is Arturus, we know that he and his sword can't defeat the dead zone creatures."

"Then it's Coyote. But he has told us that he can't remember enough, that he can't replace the world as it is."

Several of the younger beings, the ones who still believed in a

fixable world, spoke up and suggested that might be a good thing. "He may get it right next time."

Coyote groaned and his mouth twisted painfully, he knew just how much he screwed up when he tried to fix things. It was Megan who put a hand on his shoulder and said, "It's never that bad, Coy, each world has its charms."

Amber blinked, "But you spend so much time fixing his mistakes."

"Not mistakes, Amber, never mistakes, just things that need to be adjusted a bit. He's never made a completely dysfunctional world."

Coyote grimaced, "Not one that lasted very long, anyway. I have been known to have a bad idea."

Amber switched gears, "But what about helping him? What about Ingrid's story. Can we all, all of us here, help Coyote remember this world? Honestly remember it so that he can sing it back?"

"What about the Humans, they remember nothing, who will remember for them?"

The Lion Man stepped forward, "I will. I was the first, I have a connection to the humans on this world, there were not so many of them when I came into being, and every one born since carries a little bit of what I represented."

Ingrid turned in surprise and stepped to him, "My Lord, I did not know you were still in the world, I didn't know you were in the room. It is good that you are here."

The Lion Man reached down and lifted Ingrid back to her feet, "It is good to see you, child. Do not kneel to me, you who are so much more than I ever was, you who existed before I did, and became so powerful afterwards. I thank you for believing in me these long years, but you must not kneel to me."

"This, this is why I still believe in you, Lion, I have had worshippers, I have had power beyond thought, but I have never been half the God you are. It is you that I hold in my heart when I judge."

Turning to Coyote, Ingrid said, "Here is your voice for the humans. Here is the very heart and soul of them. He really does have the connection to all humans that ever lived. He was their God before they found these lands, before they found the rest of the world, his followers wandered even back to their original lands. Listen to him."

Coyote nodded, "I will gladly accept the help of an old friend. We need only work out how this may be done so that I can sing as many humans as we can back into the world."

"And the rest of us?" Megan waved her arm around the room.

"That will be more difficult, each of us remembers a piece of

the whole, I have never grasped the whole, I started things but I have forgotten what I sang many times, and it always moves and changes from when it first appears. This you know. Who could deal with all the memories?"

While this discussion was going on Mike and Liz were sitting behind the counter. "What's happening here?"

Liz started, "Jerry? I didn't notice you were here."

"Well I came in and sat down because it was so busy, but I'm used to being invisible. When you live on the street you sort of figure you've got a super power."

"Um, yes I can see where that happens. Sorry I didn't notice you."

"That's OK, what's happening? These guys are all magical aren't they?"

Liz figured there was no sense hiding it, "They are, we're trying to figure out how to save the world I guess."

"Sounds like you're getting ready to destroy it. Were those kids right? Should we get rid of all the humans while we have the chance?"

"That's not what they said, Jerry, they wanted to make some changes but I'm sure they didn't mean get rid of the humans."

“Well maybe you should, if we’re the problem, with our wars and our overpopulation and our pollution. Maybe we don’t deserve to be here.”

“Jerry, I know you’ve had a hard time...”

“Oh hell, everyone has a hard time, Liz, every single person on the street has had a hard time. So what. Some of us find it easier out there than in an office, but I’m talking about humanity as a whole. What have we ever contributed to this world?”

“A lot, Jerry, and these magical beings? They fight and pollute and waste their lives as much as anyone else. You’re seeing the good ones here.”

“Well, OK, Coyote is certainly one of the good ones, and I remember when Ray tried to help the homeless, poor kid. So you think humans should be saved?”

“I’m one of them, Jerry, and so is Mike. So yes.”

“So does somebody need a brain to eat or something?”

“Pardon?”

“You know, to model the next humans, I’ll volunteer.”

“Jerry, you are a good man. You see that gentleman over there with the hair?”

“He sort of looks like a lion.”

“Look hard, look really hard at him, do you know him?”

“Jesus, I feel like I do, I feel like I ought to go and do something for him, or at least bow to him. What the hell is that all about?”

“He’s the first God of the Humans, he’s going to speak for you when the world gets rebuilt.”

“Is he a good God?”

“Why not ask him?”

Jerry walked to Lion Man and nodded politely. “Are you the one who is going to speak for us humans?”

“Hello Jerry, I am going to do my best.”

“You know me?”

“I do now.”

“Are you a good God?”

“Just a God, Jerry, but I will do my best for the Humans. I promise.”

“Can I help? Can I offer myself to the cause, like a sacrifice or something?”

Lion Man looked like he was going to cry. “Just the offer is more than enough, Jerry, and I thank you. I was unsure if I could do it, but your offering has filled me with joy. You stay here with us and if I look like I am doubting myself, you tell me not to, OK?”

Jerry nodded his head sharply, “I’ll be right over here out of the way.”

Ray meets Percy

In that narrowing alleyway, Joan-Marie and Ray had come as far as she could squeeze. She put a hand on Ray's head and said, "Percy, we have come to visit." And shortly after that she said, "Percy, it's a little tight in here again."

"Oh, sorry Joan, I keep growing. Ah, and Ray Keen, hello Reynard, it is good to meet you."

"You know me?"

"We've never met, but I know you. I hope that we can be friends."

"Percy, what are you?"

"Time is that short is it?"

"I'm sorry, but it is, I apologize for being rude."

"No, it's fine, I have destroyed a few of those holes that tried to take a part of me, so I know it's getting close to that time again."

"You can fight them?"

"No more than the rest of you, the small ones as they begin to appear are easy enough to close down, but I am aware of the larger ones that you have been unable to stop."

"Again, not intending to be rude, but what are you Percy?"

Ray felt a smile in his head, "I'm what I look like, Ray, I'm a worm."

"A damned big one."

Again that smile, "Yes, a damned big one. I've been around for a vary long time and I just seem to keep growing. Would you like to hear my story then?"

"Please, it would help me to understand."

"I don't know how many worlds I've been in, maybe just this one, it's hard to tell when you're underground, dirt is dirt, after all, so the trip from one to the other is sort of seamless. I don't get the clues others get that they have switched worlds. From what clues I get, from what I feel of the world above, I think maybe I've been in more than one world.

"A very long time ago, I was a worm, just a normal worm, eating leaf matter and crapping out fertilizer, when one day I realized I could hear the thoughts of others. Then I realized I could eat those thoughts. The thoughts of worms aren't large, but there are a lot of worms, and when animals were near, I could eat them too. No, Ray, I was not some sort of parasite that ate brains, just the thoughts.

"Later I encountered Humans and they were delicious, unfortunately, what I ate seemed to damage them. This I didn't know for many long centuries, and when I did understand, I tried to sip rather than gulp. I grew bigger and got, I must admit, a bit lazy. It's hard to move this bulk through the earth."

"I can imagine, what about the city?"

"Ah, as it grew, I grew into and around it. I learned that the City makes the ground warm year 'round. And then one day another kind of being showed up, the spirit beings as you call yourselves, the Shamans and the Gods and the rest. Such strong thoughts, such long lives, but even there I could take too much and cause damage. Eventually, I learned how to eat the City instead, the warmth of the ground, the water that leaks from the

pipes, the electricity that hums through the lines. I don't absorb much in the way of thoughts these days, just enough to keep up with the news. And that's me in a nutshell, or rather in a worm hole."

Ray looked right and left at the bulk of the creature. "Just how big are you Percy?"

"Well I can tell you that Wreckless Eric just opened in Elora, and Eric the Baker has opened for the day here in Guelph."

"Lordy, OK and you can drink thoughts."

"Yes."

"Memories?"

"Yes."

Ray had been keeping track of the meeting through Kitsune, he looked at Joan and squeezed her arm, "You may have solved it."

Putting his hand on Percy's back, or whatever, Ray said, "take my memories."

"It's my back, Ray, not to worry."

With that, Ray felt something like someone licking the inside of his skull. It didn't hurt but he rather felt like he was being

turned inside out, a scream would have helped.

"You can scream, Ray, I don't have ears."

Joan shook her head no. She'd heard Ray scream.

Once the licking stopped, Percy spoke again, "You're a young man, Ray, but your memories go back ten thousand years. That's quite unusual."

"A rather long story, I am that old, but had to re-grow at one time a few years ago. My memories eventually came back."

Joan put her hand on Percy's back. "I'm not sure what's going to happen, Percy, or why we're doing this, but please take my memories too."

Percy was gentle, very careful not to damage the girl. "Oh, well, that was interesting, I didn't know that you two..."

"Percy! Did you get my memories?"

"I did, Joan, and I'm sorry, I just didn't know you two were a couple."

"You didn't see that in Ray's memory?"

"Well, OK yes I did, but he's not worth teasing."

Ray frowned, "Tell that to my wives. Percy we're going to go

back to the meeting and tell them about this. Do we need to do anything else?"

"I'll help in any way that I can, I've been listening in, tell them I'll help."

With that, they were above ground again, outside the narrow alleyway. Ray looked at Joan, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, he was very gentle, I think I'm all here, but I feel sort of opened up."

"Me too, as if someone else has a part of me, I suppose that's what it's like having our memories in two places now."

"It's not a bad feeling, just strange. Let's get to the meeting, I'm still not sure what you're going to do, or how I've helped but I'm glad I did."

"I think we've got a chance now, stay close to me Joan, I want you with me when things happen."

"Thanks, Ray, I'm kind of nervous about all this."

"The end of the world and you're nervous? Girl I'm petrified."

At “The Only” cafe.

Somewhere in the bush in the Yukon, a man set out on snowshoes from his cabin. Behind him was nothing, and the nothing was coming closer. He could stay ahead of it if he walked briskly, and so he did. He walked for four days without rest, but at the end of those four days he turned to see he wasn't going to out-walk the thing.

"I'm tired, and I'm tired of walking, let's see what you are then." With that he took his rifle off his shoulder and went down on one knee to wait for the next chapter of his life.

In Chile, a man sat on a rock, high up in the Andes mountains and watched as something chewed the bottom of the mountain into nothing. "How does it do that so that the rest of the mountain doesn't fall over?"

He watched as it got closer and leaned forward. Just as he was taken by the hole, he understood, "It goes straight down, like a cliff."

He was gone.

All over the world, the small holes were expanding and joining together. The world was disappearing. The army in most nations stood and fought and were gone. The humans in most countries fought, did nothing or walked into the nothing, depending on their basic impulses. Psychologists would have loved to study the phenomenon but they turned to their own

coping mechanisms as they vanished.

In the UK, and the rest of the Northern European nations, places where a lot of spirit beings lived, many of them revealed themselves to the various armies who were fighting back. They contributed where they could, and tried to save as many as was possible when the fights were lost. The problem was that there was less and less of the world to retreat to. The Keen family, scattered all over the old and new worlds, gathered as many of the older spirits as they could, into the safer regions, with the promise that Ray and the rest around Coyote had a plan.

Lenore was glad all she had on was a bra and a vest, the place was hot, and outside it was getting hotter still. The patio was full, the cafe was full. The rest of the crew had stayed home, but she and Sarah had come in. No matter what, people had to eat. Sarah was cooking as fast as she could, but they were 45 minutes from order to food on the table.

Lenore ran from table to table, somehow keeping it all together. It was easier than thinking about what was going on just outside Peterborough. That emptiness that kept coming closer and closer.

It was funny, she wasn't getting a hard time from anyone, and nobody was hitting on her. The regulars came in, ordered and sat talking quietly. Even the ones who could be counted on to complain about the slow service, or a greasy glass, or not enough salad on their plate, were polite. Everyone spoke softly and the strangest thing of all, everyone smiled.

Sarah called another order ready and Lenore dumped the empty plates in the sink as she ran it out onto the patio.

She was happy she had spent the night with Gary. He had been hanging around for months, and she finally decided to give him a chance. He was good, tender and attentive, even though they were both drunk as lords. He made sure she was satisfied before he came himself. You don't find those very often. He had gone to work himself, or he said he was going to go. She had left him early in the morning. He was asleep with a goofy grin on his face. Good. They had agreed to meet again at her place that night. Too bad it wasn't going to happen, but she would have liked it to.

She almost bobbed the plate on her arm as she forgot about the hump in the floor, but Old Spice, as she called him, reached out and steadied the plate as she got to his table.

“Thanks.”

“Don't mention it, Lenore, you're damned busy today.”

“You know it, but we'll manage.”

“I'll finish my meal and then do your dishes, would that help?”

Lenore looked at him and could see he was serious, “You're an angel, that would be amazing.”

Old Spice nodded and tucked into his sausage and eggs. Lenore knew he had a problem with greasy food, but he loved it, and today it wasn't going to bother him.

As she got back to the cash, she noticed a few bills on the counter. Much more than a meal would have cost. Just then Mr. Johnston came by with his dirty dishes. "I'll be paying you now, Lenore, and I'll have an extra coffee to take back to my table. I can see the nothing coming so I'd better pay."

"You're going to have a coffee while it comes?"

"Where else would I go, love, I'll wait for it here."

"You keep your money, we won't be charging if it's that close."

The old man nodded thanks, and went back to wait. Lenore turned to Sarah, "It's getting close."

"Yeah, do you want to take off?"

"I don't think so, where would I go?"

"Same here, and I've got a few more orders to finish."

Lenore reached out and squeezed Sarah's hand, then took the next order to the back table.

When she got back with the dirty dishes, Old Spice was washing, "I don't know your name, I'm sorry."

“No reason you would, it’s Jonesy.”

“Thanks Jonesy, you know the nothing is coming?”

“You need help right here, Lenore, I think I’ll stay.”

Lenore smiled and set her plates on the sideboard. As she looked up, Gary was there.

“My boss sent everyone home to be with their families.”

Lenore paused, realized what he had just said, and hugged him.

“Sit there at the bar, I’ll get you a coffee, are you hungry?”

“No thanks, I ate some from your fridge.”

“Good, I’m glad you did, I hate it when things go off.”

A few minutes later, the nothing started to come through the back wall of the cafe. There were no songs sung, no prayers offered, no group hugs. These were regulars, who had done a lot of living with each other, there wasn't much to say. If someone happened to notice the nothing about to take them, they might say good-bye to their friends.

As the nothing got to the main cash, Gary took Lenore in his arms and said "I wish we'd had more time."

Lenore smiled, "Me too," and kissed him.

Back in the Lunch Counter

The group in the lunch counter were still working. There must have been a hundred people there, all, it seemed at times, talking at once. Nobody had come up with a way that Coyote could use to tap into the memories of the spirit beings. It was generally agreed that Lion Man would speak for the humans, he was remarkably in touch with the human race, seeming to be able to place many of the several billions alive today into their lives. Or at least, he said that was so.

Kit was starting to recover, to gain a less emotional reaction to things. "Grandfather Coyote, what is the process of singing the world away, and back again."

"When I sing it away, daughter, it loses cohesion, rather like what the dead zones are doing to it now. The component atoms come apart into a cloud of potential complexity. When I sing it back, the atoms come together again with an order. Of course there are random bits and only someone outside the process, like some of the ancients here, can tell it has been done. Each world is entirely complete, and whole within itself. Much of it happens without my direction, simply continuing after I start it."

"But that sounds like what happens with Humans, with Julius."

"We all come apart in disorder, child, and perhaps in the future, Julius will be back as part of hundreds of people. His atoms are permanent. We are all just temporary assemblies of complexity."

Kit looked at Beelzabub, "But you and your brother have souls that you collect after the body is gone."

"We do, Kit, but it takes tremendous energy on our part to keep those souls together. They are complexity in a special place where it can happen, our Heaven and Hell. Without us it falls apart like everything else. Coyote sings the complexity into the void, he provides the information that lets things happen, we are part of that. When he sings the world away, our parts of it will also go. I will do my best to bring it back when Coyote sings."

Kit asked, tentatively, "Is Julius with you?"

"He is, I promised you and he is with me in Hell."

"Does he remember?"

"No, child, I would not do that to him. He is himself."

"What about the rest of the Humans?"

Coyote nodded, "There are so many of them, what do you say,

Lion Man, you will speak for them."

"You are correct, there are too many, but I have their essence, and I can see the bright lights of those who have the most effect, or perhaps I should say, the most life, those I can give to you when the time comes."

Kit looked at him, "Can you select the good ones?"

"That would be nice, but no, those who have an effect are those I can see, the effect can be good or bad. The rest are just a general background and I am so very sorry that they are. I feel so useless, but there are just too many now. Once I could keep them all in my mind, but no more."

"What of the ones that refuse to believe the world is ending, there are those who, even while seeing the holes, are saying it's a conspiracy, that they aren't there, that some politician is lying to them."

Lion Man shook his head, "There have always been the ones who refuse to learn, to see, to be less than borderline insane. This is the nature of Humanity, I sometimes think that stupidity is a disease, like a cold. Humans can catch it. I can't do anything about that, never have been able to, they will come along with the rest, be saved by the rest, despite their best efforts to exterminate themselves. This has always been the way of Humans, it is their strength and, as we are seeing, their ultimate downfall."

Kit could feel his pain, "We will do our best. I will not ask for Julius to be back with me, but I will be happy if he is with Beels. Is this selfish of me?"

Megan smiled, "It is our very selfishness that makes us attempt this plan, Kitsune. It is our desire to have those we love, around us in the new world. If we were not selfish, Coyote would have sung already, and the dead zones would be gone for another world's life. To be honest in ourselves, we are all selfish here, to want to preserve ourselves, or others. Those of the ancient lineage can step outside Coyote's song and come back again, yet all of us here are trying to preserve others, other beings that cannot step away, those we love."

The younger ones who had wanted to change things for the better looked thoughtful. Megan noticed, "Yes, those of us who remember past worlds, remember those we have lost. Think of those who may disappear from you in an instant. We fight for them, even if we ourselves will continue."

As those in the room grew thoughtful at this, for Megan, surprising speech, Ray and Joan-Marie came in.

Ray stepped forward, "Where are we in the planning?"

Amber spoke up, "We feel we can do as well as is possible for the Humans, but the rest of us are at a loss. Those who can step outside the song will remain, the others may be lost simply because Coyote can't remember them, or rather all their lives."

"Joan may have found the answer. Does anyone else know a being named Percy who lives under the city?"

Coyote seemed shocked, "He lives still?"

"He does, and he may be our answer for the spirit beings. He can take our memories and our way of thinking into himself, and perhaps he can provide a single conduit for Coyote to tap into."

Coyote made a sour face, "It is not so simple, Ray. Percy himself has a huge mind, much larger than anything you might imagine, and perhaps he could absorb the memories of all of us here and beyond, but that information might shatter my own mind."

"Will you try?"

"Of course I will, I am as selfish as any other here, and as foolish, but I warn you all, if my mind is shattered, there will be no next world, and unless one of the Ancients can sing another into existence, there will be nothing beyond that."

"Percy said something about other world builders before you Coyote."

"There were, and when one failed, I stepped forward and sang."

"I know this is a bad time to ask this, but just what are you Coyote?"

Coyote laughed, "Just a trickster, Ray, just a trickster who learned how to sing."

"A bit more than that," Megan muttered and Robin nodded.

Megan spoke louder, "Very well, we shall all go visit this being named Percy and pass him our memories."

A voice appeared in everyone's heads, "No need to visit, I am here, I have always been here underneath the city."

Ken looked shocked, "I know you, for some reason I know you. You are the white wall that moved away from our excavation as we built the bar! I did not realize, I apologize for our aggression."

"I was that wall, indeed. As your people shoved me aside, I fed a little on your memories, it was a fair exchange."

"Very well, how shall we do this? One at a time?"

"No need for that, as the Singer has said, my mind is vast, I will open to you all, if you let me, I will take in your memories. Please remember the animals in the woods, the cities, everything you've seen."

One of the younger ones asked, "Will we retain our selves?"

Percy laughed, "Retain it for what? Coyote will give it back in

the new world, but if you choose to stay here, memory or not, you will be lost. If you are an ancient and can step out, when you step back you risk the loss of all those you love. Some of you may not retain your memories for now, but you will retain the world. I will not force my way into anyone's head, you must all decide for yourselves where your best chance lies."

Ray nodded, "My family will assemble all the spirit beings they can around the world and send them here to contribute their memories to you Percy."

Coyote spoke again, "I remind you all, this may not work, I may be shattered with so much information."

The End of Days

Having admitted he may not be strong enough, Coyote held up his hand and spoke to the air, "Before you start, will you survive this, Percy. Your mind is vast, but can you handle hundreds or thousands of full memories? I seem to recall you were not quite so large as that?"

"I thank you Coyote, my old friend, only you would worry about me at a time like this. Do not be concerned, in each world you have created, I have continued to grow. I may need to expand into the lakes around here but I will hold together for

as long as you need me to. I will also try not to, as they used to say, 'blow your mind'"

Coyote laughed, "Very well, if you will be gentle, I will try my best."

Percy opened his mind, and the first thing that all the beings understood was how Joan-Marie had found him, and shared her memories with him, all unknowing of what she was doing and uncaring of the risks she took.

Amber looked at her, standing rather confused beside Ray, "You have done so much more than you know, Joan, you have made what we do today, possible. It is sometimes hard to understand why we do things, and what is happening when we start them, but you will be remembered here, and perhaps in the next world. You have our thanks."

Ray looked at Joan and squeezed her hand a little. Zaat took her other hand and smiled at her, as did Suzume from her plane of existence.

One by one at first, then in groups, the spirit beings in the lunch counter opened their minds to Percy. Some groaned, some giggled. There were, as Percy had predicted, some who lost their memories and the others guided them to seats and reassured them, insisting that they were all right. The healers in the room watched closely and calmed those who began to panic. Everyone understood that this was a time when all must come together.

Ken began to hear creaking sounds from the basement, "Oh dear, there goes the fermentation tanks. Percy must be growing."

Stan grinned, "Don't remember that, Ken, remember them intact so that they reappear with that lovely brew. We'll have a few when Coyote sings."

Ken grinned back, "I'll remember them finished, there is a good brew there and we'll see if we can drink the tank dry."

Ingrid roared with laughter, "I'll help!"

It took a long time to get all the spirit people to donate their memories. As they did, the nothing became larger. Villages and towns disappeared, then counties and countries. The political divisions vanished, as if they were ever real anyway. People fought back, but the dead zone continued to grow.

Kitsune had lost her anger and sat in the back with Dave. "Hang on tight to me when this happens, I have no intention of losing you."

Beings from other parts of the world began flickering in, often in groups with one person leading them, they would open their minds to Percy and then be gone to make room for others. All those perfect memories of the details of the world continued to flow into one vast being.

As if they sensed something happening, the dead zone creatures tried to open holes in Guelph. Percy would grunt as he destroyed the small holes, but at one point he asked for help, "There's a dead zone south of town that threatens to become too big for me."

Art and Ingrid were gone, Ingrid with a bright war cry of "Woden's Beard", and they were there at the hole. It was indeed large and growing, but Ingrid called up her spear and armour. Hildy was there to become a massive boar with terrible tusks and she and Art climbed aboard. With Art's arm around her waist, Ingrid and Hildy could see the creatures. This gave them tremendous joy as they could finally counterattack the threat.

They drove into the hole, Ingrid throwing lightning, Art taking swathes of creatures to their oblivion. Even so, the creatures in their turn, could see their attackers and they began to multiply themselves as quickly as they could.

It was almost too much, but Kit arrived, still holding Dave's hand and she too called down lightning to help. Having Kit's hand in his, Dave could feel the power she was using, and he almost fainted. Almost, until he decided that he could help. The instant he began to contribute whatever help he could to Kit, his weakness disappeared. He was shocked at the depths of will he could call up to support her.

Between the three fighters, they managed to close the hole, but not before Percy said that he had lost a part of himself, and

some memories. As they got back to the lunch counter, Megan declared that they would do the best they could. Nobody knew which memories had been lost, but the plan was never foolproof anyway. They would do what they could.

It felt like days were passing as the beings gave their memories to Percy, but it took much less time than that. Even so, the nothing grew closer.

Finally, Percy declared that nobody else was contributing. Coyote asked if he could hold the memories and Percy promised that he could handle what he had.

Coyote raised his voice, "Anyone who must say goodbye, should do so now, the time has come. I don't want to do this, but I am afraid that I can't avoid it, please come here Amber."

Amber could feel his anxiety, "I know, Coy, I know. But you are not alone this time, you have the memories of so many others, and I am here my love. Lion Man, take my hand."

With that, Amber embraced Coyote and felt herself becoming Coyote again. The two of them looked deep into each other's eyes and Amber nodded. They opened their mouths wide and their breath passed from one to the other.

Coyote began to sing.

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