

The St. George

Lunch Counter Stories VI



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Introductions

In 1855, Sir John McLean had a hunch that the Grand Trunk railroad from Toronto would lead to the village of Guelph becoming a city, or at least growing enough to permit a boarding house to make some money. Sir John built the St. George Boarding House.

He was right, and he made enough money to marry a lovely young girl of 25 named Lucy MacDonnell. The two were happy, and lived good long lives. The boarding house was expanded and became the St. George Apartments.

Sir John died before the much younger Lucy, and she inherited the property, along with a considerable sum from their other investments. She was comfortable for another twenty years when she called on a friend and said that she was going away for a trip back to the old country.

As it turned out, Lucy never returned from her trip, but papers were found in her desk, that passed her holdings to a child who was found, somewhat diminished in memory, wandering near the lunch counter run by Lucy's friend. The papers asked him to act as guardian to the child, find a family to raise her, and pass the inheritance to her on her twenty-first birthday.

This the friend did, and the St. George Apartments changed ownership for the first time. The friend, named Ashley Childress, was originally from Winchester in England, and a very good businessman. Beside his lunch counter, he owned several other businesses in town. The apartment building was

handed over in good shape after the young girl, named Lori, had a lovely childhood, but she had a somewhat strange habit.

Every so often, she would disappear for a few hours, and a black cat would appear. Ashley, by careful observation, eventually realized that this girl could change, but she didn't realize she was doing it. Ash taught the girl what she was doing, and together they worked out how she could control it.

As to why the couple raising Lori weren't alarmed by her strange habit, Ash found out one day, when they admitted they were fairies, and they knew this young girl as a changeling from the old country. Ash kept Jonah and Lila MacDonnell's secret, as well as Lori's. He had secrets of his own.

Lori grew up and married, and her husband, rich in his own right, made her happy for many years, until he too, died before she did, leaving her with another inheritance. When it came time, Lori in her turn, gave papers to Ash, a good family friend to the MacDonnells, who by this time had changed his name to Jim. Lori went to England to see her ancestral home, and never returned.

Jim kept his eye out, and sure enough, a black cat appeared not too far from the diner. Taking it in, Jim waited and, after a nap, the cat became a young girl. This girl was named Kelly and was raised by Lila and Jonah MacDonnell.

During this time the apartment building was expanded once more. Other investments were made, Kelly came into her inheritance and married an older man who also had money.

Kelly's life followed closely on the pattern of Lori and Luci before her. If you are wondering, yes this is the same person, she cycles through life. Jonah explained it to Jim as a curse gone bad some centuries before in the highlands of Scotland.

It seemed that a witch took a dislike to a family and tried to curse their ten year old daughter to die an early death. As that happened, the family cat launched herself at the witch and took the brunt of the curse. The result was that the cat died, but was incorporated into the young girl. Thus, the girl, when she died her natural death, became a cat, which then turned to a girl of about ten. This girl had no understanding of what had happened, and was raised by kindly people each generation. That is, Jonah and Lila had taken it upon themselves to raise this girl during each cycle of her life.

On this cycle, the black cat was found by a child Jonah and Lila were already raising as one of their own, Okami found her and named her Kitty, but Oki's sister Kitsune decided that two Kit's in a family would be confusing, so Kitty became Kuroneko or Kuri.

Is that right? Yes, Lucy, Lori, Kelly, Kitty/Kuri, that would seem to be the lineage of the owners of the St. George Apartments.

Is anyone really interested in an apartment building? There is nothing particularly interesting about this one, except the rather strange series of owners, or owner.

But so far the people mentioned seem rather interesting, so perhaps we should say a bit more about them.

Okami, Kitsune and Kuroneko are all shape shifters of one type and another. Where we pick up this story, Oki and Kuri are living and studying in Thunder Bay, while Kit is living and studying in Paris. She is living with her boyfriend Dave.

A fellow by the name of Art Pendry is looking after Kuri's property, mostly the apartment building and investments in the market. Art got involved because Jim Childress passed the lunch counter over to him. Art then passed the place to Mike and Liz, and Art ended up involved with Ingrid, who is the Saxon Goddess of War, Love and Crops.

You see, people are much more interesting than buildings.

You may suspect that Jonah and Lila are special, after all they have raised several generations of Kuri, and you would be right. Each generation, Kuri finds out that her parents are Fairies. Not just any fairies, but the King and Queen. There is probably a connection between them and that witch with the curse, but we don't know that.

Kitsune is the oldest and she is a... she's a... She's a lot of things, a European trickster fox, a Japanese trickster fox, a Shaman, and a descendent of Coyote. Look, she's a powerful spirit being. Maybe we'll just say she's a fox.

Okami is largely the same as Kit, but he is also a part of the wolf incarnation of Nanabozo, and trained as such by his biological father Stan. He's not a Shaman, he's a protector. He's a wolf.

Kuri has, over the generations, picked up a cougar form, and a Lynx/serpent form. Kuri and Okami are romantic partners. Kuri is a cat.

Let's not inflict too many more shocks on ourselves, there are other spirit beings in Guelph, it's a strange place. The Attawandaron peoples, those known as the Neutrals, lived here until the 15th century, then the Anishnabe peoples, the Mississaugas until the Canadian government bought the lands in the late 18th century. As you can see, the area is friendly to both spirit peoples from North America, and Gods from Europe.

Did we mention Coyote? He's here too, living with Amber who is a very powerful being herself. Coyote? Who doesn't know Coyote? Sang the world into being? Yes, that one.

Honestly, I think it would be easier to simply roll with it. Accept these people as what they are, when you find out what they are.

The Ghosts of St. George

The St. George, being quite old, has its share of ghosts. There are the two ladies on the second floor who wander about, arm in arm. Quite gentle and totally harmless they are. The wife and mistress of a rich man who came to his afternoon apartment one day to find the two in bed together.

It seems that the wife was downtown shopping and met the mistress. Not knowing they were acquainted through the same man, they struck up a conversation and eventually a relationship which lasted for several months, until the day that they went back to the mistress' apartment, she forgetting that it was the afternoon she was to meet her lover.

Such a fuss, and such a stupid man. Instead of getting undressed and joining the women in bed, (the wife was holding open the blanket for him), like any civilized man would, he took his cane and beat them both to death.

For this idiotic act, he was pardoned on the grounds that both women were lewd and wanton. But fear not, for justice has a way of balancing the scales, this man was married next to a shrewish, religious, hag, someone he thought might be faithful to him. This woman hounded him so much that he enlisted in the army and was killed in the Boar War. But not before he had a threesome with the local Africaans wanton women. It was said he died with a smile on his face, certainly not thinking of his second wife.

A sadder ghost was the young girl who jumped from the roof.

She was to be wedded to a respectable man of the town, a councillor as it happened. One evening this pillar of the community forced himself on the poor girl, and in the morning told her that he was certainly not going to marry a ruined woman.

When she killed herself, after finding out that she was pregnant, this man, this undoubtedly wronged man, denied knowing anything about it.

Does anyone wonder why most ghosts are women? But there were a few boys among the ghosts as well. Those exist in the basement and are the result of exactly what you are thinking. We shall only stop long enough to say they were part of the Thursday Evening Club, a name dangerously similar to the Man-love Thursdays of our allies, that our soldiers were told to ignore in one of those far-away countries where one expects such things to be denied after a thorough investigation.

Although murder seems a good way to make ghosts, it isn't the only way. There is a ghost on the first floor who was decidedly not murdered. Her name is Nadja and should you want to know her story you only have to step into the space where she appears to be.

At first a mist, then it becomes clear, here is beautiful Nadja, standing before you. She smiles at you and invites you to sit down on a bench in a park. It is a warm spring day. It is not too.

Not too warm, not too windy, not too sunny, not too.

The two of you sit and you overlook a tram line, so you must

be in a city. Where else would you find a tram? There are no trams at the moment, and no passengers waiting.

Taking all this in, you turn to Nadja and wait. Soon enough, she begins to tell her story.

“I was a girl from the country, come to the city to work. There isn't much a country girl can do, but I hoped to get some job in a shop perhaps.

While in the city I met a boy, a student. His name is not important, it was just a boy's name, as he is not important, a clerk somewhere, I think. But I met him on the tram, and we sat together as I went to my work and he to his school.

Eventually he asked if we could have dinner, and I accepted. We dated, we made love, I fell in love with him, and then we were no longer together. Such is the life of a young girl from the country.

Long after I left this boy, I met a man in a bar. His name is famous, you would know him, but call him Andre. He was interested in my stories of my life, and so I was interested in him.

He took me to the theatre, and afterward asked me my opinion on the play. As I spoke, he would watch my eyes, as if looking for something, or waiting to see me blink. I was never sure.

On some Sundays, we would walk in the park. Almost shyly, he would take my hand and at my very first twitch he would let go. I tried never to twitch.

He told me he liked the way I walk. He told me he liked the way I laughed at the birds in the fountain, and at the children with their toy boats.

Later, as he lay on my bed, he said he loved the way I put my lotions onto my body, the way I brushed my hair. He said he liked to feel me fall asleep as he held me.

I cooked him dinner and he always asked for seconds, saying that he loved simple country cooking, it had so much more flavour.

One summer we went on a boat to a cottage on an island. All the while we were on the boat he held my hand as he looked out over the water. When he saw what he was looking for, he pointed and told me that was the island of his family's cottage.

We spent the summer there, I cooked for him, I cleaned the house, and he wrote. Did I mention that he was a writer? You would know his work. The book he wrote that summer was wonderful, he let me read it as he wrote, and he never once asked me what I thought about it. It was about me.

At the end of the summer we came back to the city, me to a job in a shop, and he to his house close to the University, where he taught.

Our life continued, he would stay sometimes in my apartment, I would stay sometimes in his house. My future was settled, I loved this man deeply and I believe he loved me.

One morning he left my apartment to go to the school. He told me to wait for him.

And so I wait for him here, by the front entrance.

Doormen and Scholars

We know that before the ghosts arrived, the owner of the St. George was a spirit being, or a serial lifer or, something. She has had some sort of supernatural power for as long as the apartments have been in existence. Then there are the ghosts, and beyond those influences, the apartments have been home to others of the extra-normal persuasion.

That sort of influence tends to leak into the walls. Have we talked about the building being added on to? We haven't said that it was done by workmen with bricks and mortar, although most people would swear it was.

It would be nice if we could know the address of the building, how large it is, or anything else that might let us go look. Unfortunately, this building is rather hard to find. Services are provided, mail delivered, those who live there walk in and out of the front entrance, but most people just plain don't see it.

Those who do see it, are meant to be there, either as residents or guests of the same. That doesn't mean that everyone in the

building is supernatural, they most definitely are not, but the building seems to know who needs to be there and who has no business knowing it exists.

Look there, outside the front door, do you see that little shed? There is a creature in there. He was passing one day and the shed was there, as if waiting for him. If you see this person on the street, he looks like you or I, but perhaps his head is just a little bit bigger than one might expect for that body.

Not that the body is small, on second look, most people are tempted to whistle in shock. This person is huge. Not 'quite large', but definitely, huge. He hulks above the rest when you're looking and paying attention, but as he passes, as you glance away and back again, he's just a guy walking down the street.

He's the doorman. He's been there since... well, he's the doorman and he will open the door for you if you have groceries, or if you are coming to visit, he will tip his hat and say, "Good evening," or "Good morning." He has been known to pick residents up off the sidewalk when they have made it that far and fallen down drunk. He has been known to carry them to their apartment and politely put them to bed. He never has to ask where they live, never has to reach into their pockets for keys.

What is his name? I'm not sure, I've never heard anyone say his name. I'm sure he has one. As for those who call him, "My good man," and try to get past him because they want to get into the St. George, those who have no business there, we will not speak.

Wait, you say, we have decided it is invisible to all but those with business there. True, but even buildings fall asleep sometimes, and perhaps that is why the shed appeared, and why the doorman found the shed. The doorman who sometimes looks as if he had three heads. Dog heads. Best not to think too much about this, the St. George is definitely not Hell.

If there is a doorman, are there other employees of the building? Certainly there are. People who clean the hallways, people who repair the lights, people who register the names of the residents and collect the rent, people who map the hallways, people who clean the windows, people who exterminate the bugs. All the usual folks who work behind the scenes to keep an apartment building running.

As for the residents, there are many of them, and many apartments, but not an infinite number. This isn't Gormenghast after all.

And who does live here? Certainly nobody who is comfortable, not the sheep, not the people who ape one ideology or another. No, those who live there are those who are in crisis, always, who worry about living as if their every decision is critical to the well being of humanity. All the while understanding that they can only decide for themselves, and that nobody else can decide for them. 'Filthy existentialists all' as one clergyman said once in the 1960s.

Where does one find a thread, a string to the middle of this building, this labyrinth of freedom? Most find the place through Jim's Lunch Counter, itself a place of doubtful existence, hard to find, hard to remember once found. The St.

George is not far from Jim's Lunch Counter. Not far at all.

There are scholars in the place. Two of interest to us now, are both writing dictionaries of a foreign language.

“I really am sorry about that.”

“No, it's my fault, I should stop myself from jumping when I get a new thought for the book, nothing to apologize for.”

“Well it's bandaged now, don't forget to loosen it when the blood starts to clot. No sense being erect for the rest of the day.”

A beautiful woman stood up and kissed Hubert on the lips then settled down in a chair beside his bed.

Hubert swivelled his chair back to his desk and said, “Now Lorraine, what I realized was that you have three gender names for each person, one of them would translate to vixen in your case.”

“Indeed, you know, I will be a bit sad to see you finish this dictionary of yours.”

“But there is no reason we can't go on to other books my love.”

Lorraine brightened up, “I'd like that, now don't forget to loosen the bandage, I'm off to start work.”

“Must you work as a prostitute? I would be most willing to support you.”

“You're a dear man, but I like my freedom, and whoring is one of the jobs a vixen Fox can do without trouble. Those who see me change never complain.”

“Very well, here is my contribution to your freedom, will you come again this evening?”

“I'll come to check your bandage, I suspect you will forget it as soon as you start work again.”

“Thank you, dear Lorraine, I look forward to seeing you again, will we go out for dinner?”

“I'd like that, I'll dress.”

In another room Oren Longfang was working on his own dictionary, it was of the wolf language. Oren was grandfather to Okami, father to Stan. At the moment he was discussing his work with Megan, who was pointing out that the first to publication would be the de facto dictionary between Humans and the Canine peoples.

“We are not in a race, Megan, and who doesn't know that Wolves and Foxes are different peoples?”

“Humans, who think that we are both dogs.”

“Ah, well perhaps I will speak with Hubert and we can publish together. We are both nearly finished, and that would solve the problem would it not? I suspect the Fox would not like Humans shouting Wolf very loudly at them any more than you and I would like Fox shouted at us.”

“Or English, as the humans like to shout. 'If the damned foreigners don't understand us, speak more slowly and loudly at them.'”

Oren chuckled, “There is that. And how is my son.”

“He is well, father in law, I truly regret that you have become estranged from each other.”

“Ah well, he has his own nature and it's not bookish. He doesn't understand my obsession with learning. Leave him be, he may one day come to me on his own. Don't push him.”

“Push Stan? He doesn't take hints Oren, I usually have to beat him about the ears just to get him to hear what I'm saying.”

Oren laughed and shook his head, “He is lucky to have you, daughter-in-law. The two of you are somewhat less serious now that you have found each other. Go with my blessing, I shall see you soon, and I will go talk with Hubert. Thank you for pointing out the conflict.”

Megan hugged Oren and stalked out of the St. George, wondering what new nonsense Stan had got up to while he was out of her sight.

A Walk in the Park

Hubert and Lorraine did go out for dinner that evening. The tall, bookish looking professor and the delicate featured, small boned girl, half his size.

They nodded to the doorman as they strolled out of the St. George, and he tipped his hat, which reminded Hubert of a garbage can lid. Perhaps it was.

As they strolled through the streets, they chatted about this and that. Perhaps we should get closer to listen.

“But Hubert, what work I choose to do is no business of the police or anyone else. There is a demand for the service and someone willing to provide it. What business if I'm cleaning toilets or sucking cocks.”

“Language dear, we're outside, and I grant you that there is a demand and a supply, but there are also people in power who wish to impose their morality upon other people.”

“By what right do they impose their morality?”

“By right of force, of course, they have the police and the army, and they have the jails and the gallows.”

“What freedom can there be when such coercion is used to force people to the will of others.”

“Ah, there can be freedom in any circumstance. You choose to ignore the laws. That is your choice within the system as you

find it.”

“Stupid laws deserve to be disobeyed, and laws that go against the nature of beings all the more so. What business do the rich and powerful have in my bedroom?”

“Much business I suspect.”

Lorraine laughed and slapped Hubert on the arm.

“So what you're saying is that I am free as long as I think for myself, decide for myself, even in a system that is un-free.”

“Indeed. Freedom is nothing more than choice. We are condemned to be free, we cannot avoid it. Even following somebody else's rules or orders is a choice, one chooses not to think, one chooses not to resist or disobey. This is what those with power wish most fervently. That people become docile, that they 'go along to get along.' That way the rich and powerful stay so.”

“But what if your freedom, your choice, is between compliance or death.”

“Then there is still a choice is there not? Ultimately, as the stoics tell us, we can choose not to exist.”

“I would probably choose to let the others die instead.”

“Not everyone has your powers my love, and even the powerless have the capacity to choose. But tell me, would you simply kill the tyrant?”

“No that's not in my nature.”

“Why not?”

“Because I recognize a fellow being I suppose, because I wish not to kill to advance my selfish goals.”

“Yet, the tyrant has no problem with killing you for his own personal gain.”

“And this is how the tyrant gains power, he loses the ability to see other beings?”

“Just so. Perhaps he loses sight of his choice, he thinks he has no choice. This is of course, cowardice. To claim that your upbringing, your situation, your race, colour, sex are trapping you into doing something, is to act against your freedom. If you are a bigoted despot, admit that it is your choice to be so. Choose to be so, don't try to avoid or ignore the choice. Don't claim it wasn't a choice.”

“And what of the four skulkers who are following us? What is their choice?”

“Why don't we go into the park where they will be more comfortable in the darkness, and see what they choose. I feel a need to stretch my arms, will you allow me to deal with them myself?”

“Of course my love. I will play the frightened woman.”

“Don't call too loudly, we don't want them to have help too soon. I fear I am getting out of practice and need a workout, ah, here we are.”

The four ruffians surrounded our strolling couple and one of them demanded all their possessions. “I believe I will choose not to comply,” said Hubert.

“Listen to him, a real hoity toity fellow. Right, you've asked for a bruising buddy.”

With that the four closed in around Hubert while Lorraine, smiling, almost forgot to squeak, “Oh please, won't somebody help us?”

Hubert's cane flashed upward and caught one man under the chin, snapping his head back and sending him into unconsciousness, it came down again to break another's arm as he reached for Hubert's sleeve. A third man had circled behind and was just in time to catch a two-handed thrust with the end of the cane in his bladder, causing him to pee himself, with a considerable amount of blood. The fourth man began to back up only to hear a large fox snarl behind him. He stepped away from the fox just in time to catch the cane across the side of his head.

And just like that, all four attackers were on the ground. Alive, but with no interest in continuing the fight.

“Now, where were we love?”

“We were talking about resistance to authority Hubert.”

“Ah yes, not all authority is to be resisted, if the laws are just, applied equally, and enforced fairly at the common consent of the people, what reason would there be for resistance.”

“And where do you find that, Hubert?”

“Where indeed. We find common consent in democracies such as ours, but often what the majority consent to, is tyranny. This is most easily done when a tyrant finds a group to demonize. Then you get a sort of a feedback loop. The tyrant treats the minority group unfairly, this causes resistance from that group, which proves that they are dangerous.

“In places where the Judiciary has been politicized, fair and just laws cannot exist. In areas where the police are poorly trained or corrupted by such things as being allowed to keep seized goods, the laws will not be enforced fairly.”

“But how, how could men with the ability to think, which I assume is all men, how could we allow this to happen?”

“Poverty, catastrophe, inequality can prompt men to seek answers. The simplest answers tend to be from the most extreme political ideas. When 'ideals' and not 'thought' become paramount, when a politician can be faulted for changing his mind, you will soon see tyranny.

“Let's face it, the average person desires stability much more than they prefer freedom. They may think they desire freedom, but when the Tyrant is overthrown, what they often get is chaos. It is then that you will hear a longing for the stability

that existed under the Dictatorship.”

“What are we to do then, my teacher?”

“I, teach you? Not likely love. We choose. We choose to comply or to resist. There is nothing but the choice, because you see, we are doomed to be free. I have yet to meet a God or spirit strong enough to change human brains and create mindless automatons who do nothing but obey. And the moment that happens we will have machines, not men.”

“You are a dear, dear man, and yet earlier today, oh, how is your poor willie?”

“It is fine, not to worry, it is healing.”

“Good. And yet earlier you asked me to stop my whoring.”

“Not at all, I'm sorry if you took it that way, I was, and am, offering to support you purely from selfish reasons. I would like you to come live with me because I love you, not because I disapprove of your prostitution. I accept that you do what you do out of your choice, there is no way you could be forced to do anything you don't want to do my dear. Nor would you allow me to forbid you doing something. I simply express my desire to have you to myself.”

Lorraine stopped and thoroughly kissed Hubert on the sidewalk outside the restaurant. To several tsk-tsks from passing matrons. Hubert winked at one of them and that paragon of public decency gave a tiny smile in return.

“Now behave please, in the restaurant, my strumpet. We have been kicked out of almost every place in Guelph.”

“Who? Me?” said the tiny perfect girl.

The Super

“Ingriiiiiid”

“What is it, Art?”

“Ingrid why are there seals in the pool, and for that matter, why is there a pool on the roof?”

“It was all the rage in the early '70s”

“What, seals?”

“No, a pool. Well also seals, the University had a seal research program, there's still ponds in the arboretum. They're all grown over now.”

“Still not with you, dear.”

“When they shut down the seal program, one of the profs put the seals in the pool.”

“That was decades ago, why are the seals still here?”

“Breeding program? I don't know Art, they're here and nobody has bothered to get rid of them. They don't mind if you swim with them.”

“What happens in the winter?”

“It gets cold.”

“No what happens to the seals in the pool?”

“It gets cold, they keep a breathing hole open and they mess around under the ice.”

“Doesn't the pool crack?”

“I don't know, I'm not a structural engineer Art, I'm a Goddess of War and other stuff, none of which is structural engineering.”

“OK, fine then, what about the crocodiles in the basement?”

“From the drains?”

“They must have come up pretty small, they aren't going back down those drains.”

“Well they don't seem to be a problem. Nobody complains, anyway.”

“What do they eat?”

“Oh, I know that one, there's cave rabbits down there.”

“What?”

“Cave rabbits, you know, all white, no eyes.”

“So how do they get around without bumping into things.”

“Ears.”

“Ears?”

“Yes, very long ears, very strong ears.”

“And the crocodiles eat them?”

“Sometimes, and sometimes the rabbits eat the crocs.”

“Ingrid!”

“No, really, VERY strong ears.”

“Ingrid, this place is peculiar, there's a tonne of strange things happening.”

“All old apartment buildings develop a bit of a personality, Art.”

“This one has developed new life forms, including the building itself. Come over some night and you can feel it breathing, the

walls go out and in I swear.”

“Art, my love, what have you called me here for, you've seen lots of strange things.”

“It's this room, it seems to be a storage cupboard but when I opened it, well it's lots bigger on the inside than it seems on the outside.”

“Well there's lots of ways to do that, let's see... oh.”

“It's got to be kilometres.”

“At least. Wow that's a big room.”

“Close the door and forget it?”

“Give me those keys, come on let's explore, what do you need a room this big for?”

“Elephants?”

“Funny... maybe?”

“No, look here, this is Kuri's stuff, toys and things from when she was a kid, and here's souvenirs from Thunder Bay. This is her life, Ingrid, should we be poking around in here?”

“You've got the keys, I don't see why not, the super has to supervise right?”

“You've got the keys,” muttered Art.

“Oh come on, look, this must be her earlier life, things from between the wars. Here's a collection of pipes and pens. Oh my, some of them are marked by Jean-Paul Sartre, they say he had a habit of losing them, did Kuri steal them? Did she know him?”

“This stuff further in seems to be about a hundred years of history here in Guelph, here's the original St. George Boarding House sign.”

“But this isn't very far in at all, come on, let's jump in about half way. Uh, Art how old is Kuri, did Jonah ever say?”

“No he won't talk about it at all.”

“Well she's very old if this is her stuff, we seem to be on the edge of Pictish items, look, there's a treaty with the Romans here.”

“Come on, let's see how far back this goes.”

“Bronze age by the look of it, that's 2500 BCE. Look here, I remember this pottery, this is from the neolithic, it's 4000 BCE. Did they have witches then? OK Art, we lock the door and never tell anyone just how long this girl had been going through lives, agreed?”

“Who would believe us? No wonder she doesn't remember each life, she's go insane.”

“You've got to wonder if that forgetting was in the original

curse, or if Lila added it later.”

“I wonder if Kuri even knows this stuff is here, it looks like some sort of self-collecting museum. How do you suppose it got here.”

“Well if she has been married in each of her lives, there's got to be a powerful wizard in there someplace. How's Merlin sound?”

“Kuri was Gwendolen?”

“You know, Art, for someone who claims not to be King Arthur, you sure know a lot about his times.”

“Purely self defence my dear, you people keep telling me I'm him.”

“You people?”

“You know what I mean, give me the keys, I'm locking the place up and never talking about it again.”

“Still, what would a museum pay for this stuff?”

“You're rich Ingrid, leave it... Oh damn, did you feel that?”

“Yes, we just moved.”

“The last time I counted, this place had 200 plus rooms, and it hops around town like Baba Yaga's hut.”

“It's got to have a reason, Art.”

“Scares the hell out of me.”

Speaking of having the hell scared out of you, a young boy was just then running past the doorman's hut and into the front lobby. The doorman stepped out onto the sidewalk and faced away from the building. A group of four older boys with knives skidded to a halt when they saw the man facing them.

They felt more than heard the rumbling voice say, “Drop the knives on the grass boys, and turn around.”

The boys, deciding it wasn't worth the risk of disobeying, dropped the knives and walked away. The youngster came out and said, “Thanks, man, you just saved my life.”

The doorman looked hard at the kid and said, “Drop the drugs, go home and get out of the business. You understand?”

Baba Yaga's hut indeed.

A Visit Home

Kit slowly woke from a vague dream about being strangled. Oh, Dave was holding her from behind and his hands were jammed up under her chin where her fur was thickest.

During the night she had switched to her fox form and Dave was taking full advantage of her warmth. She had three tails covering and entwined with his legs. Three quilts her mother had made and a down comforter, a gift from her sister Kuri, were not enough. As she stuck her nose out from under the covers she saw a puff of condensation form.

“Every damned morning,” she thought, “it gets harder to get out of bed.”

She changed to human form slowly, so as not to wake Dave, and she slipped out from under the covers carefully, so as not to let the cold air get to him. This season was always hard on him, and his hands weren't getting any better.

She padded out to the studio and lit the kerosene heater, and then spread Dave's clothes on the warming rack. Only then did she get dressed herself. She wasn't impervious to the cold, but she could handle it a lot better than Dave.

Finally, thinking of her brother, she decided to 'huff and puff and blow' some warm air into the bedroom. Dave wasn't keen on her using her powers to make life easier, but she was damned if she was going to watch him suffer in this cold.

When she had first seen their apartment she had fallen in love with the place. She still loved it, with the paint on the floors that had been there since the turn of the century, generations of students and artists, including apparently, Amadeo Modigliani if you could believe the painting on the back of the hall closet door. The knife gouges in the wall attested to some of the wild relationship discussions that must have happened.

But perfect as the place was, Kit found herself missing central heating, or any damned heating at all.

She could hear Dave rustling around, getting out of bed and sure enough, the poor boy burst through the door and rushed to the heater, putting on his clothing as fast as he could. Even with Kit's puff of warm air, even with the heater and warm clothing, she could see the goosebumps on his legs, and his shivering. She made herself and her clothes warm, and wrapped her arms around him to at least stop his shivering.

“Come on, sweetheart, let's get down to the cafe and get warm.”

Dave gave a shaky nod and they headed for the door. Kit sniffed for open solvents or a kerosene leak on the way out as she locked the door. By mid-morning the sun would be coming through the windows and the heater would have warmed the air enough for Dave to paint.

In the cafe they ordered bread and cheese and coffee. The owner dropped two large cups of 'Canadiano' with a laugh. Years ago Dave had very carefully explained that they were Canadian, not American and so he delivered their coffee with

an old joke and a laugh each morning. Usually they had espresso, but in the winters there just wasn't enough volume of warm liquid. Hence the Canadianos.

When he came back with the baguettes and cheese, he made a joke about Canadians who aren't used to the cold. Kit replied in her usual dry tone, "We have real cold in Canada and so we have heat as well."

Again, the owner laughed and left them to their breakfast. Cold as she was, concerned for Dave's hands as she was, Kit wouldn't trade this daily routine, with its corny jokes, for anything.

But enough is enough. "Dave, I haven't got anything on for a few days, let's go visit Oki and Kuri, they're moving back to Guelph now and it would be nice to get some heat back in our bones."

"Alright love, if you'd like to, it is getting hard to get out of bed in the mornings. A trip to tropical Guelph would be nice."

Just then, a dapper looking man, well, dapper for the late nineteenth century, came in the door, spotted Kit and Dave and came over with a smile. Dave, somewhat hesitantly, waved to a chair and he sat.

"Hello Beels," said Kit, "You'll be pleased to know we're going out of town for a few days."

Beelzabub met Kit many years ago when he tried to take Dave's soul. They had since come to an arrangement and later a

sort of friendship. Dave was still nervous about his close call, but perhaps he should be a bit thankful to Beels, as the incident brought Kit back into his life.

Beelzabub smiled and said, “You are trying to tempt the devil, Kit, well it won't work, I know how fast you can get back here from wherever you are.”

Kit laughed, “You just be bad in a good way, and we'll all be happy.” She cupped his cheek with her hand as she said this and Beelzabub flinched just a little. That was where she had knocked one of his teeth out with his own walking stick.

As it turned out, Beels had nothing to report or to ask for help with, and so the talk turned to Dave's painting and Kit's music. “I've got a few days off from the academy and I've told my students to leave me alone for a week. We're going to Guelph to visit family and to warm up a bit.”

“Please, you have never let me show you the new Hell, we have made many improvements after your grandfather scattered all our souls. Now we have to entice more souls back in and we have gone with the 'all inclusive Caribbean vacation' theme. I'm sure you would like it.”

“Perhaps another time, Beels, it sounds lovely. How do you torture the souls?”

“Unlimited snacks, drinks, no food, no fibre. And golf carts to move around from bar to bar.”

“Oh my, give them what they think they want. You really are

evil.”

“Well thank you, we try. Allow me to buy your breakfast this morning. No, no, no bargains, just a going away gesture I promise.”

Kit laughed and Dave relaxed again. Beels looked at Dave, “My boy, did you visit the gallery owner I suggested? He would really like to represent you, your work is just the thing he wants, he is very avant-guard.”

“Not yet, but I will, I promise.”

“Come now, take Kit with you to ensure you I have no deals with this man. We are friends now, I have no desire to lose another tooth,” Beels said with a laugh.

“No, Yeah, I will.”

Beels shook his head, “I can't get my head around some of your Canadianisms.”

Breakfast continued with pleasant chatter and warmth, beautiful warmth, but all things come to an end, Beels paid and bid them bon voyage at their door and the two climbed the stairs to their apartment.

Which felt not a degree warmer. Kit turned to Dave and said, “You're not painting in here with your poor hands, today, gather up your kit and I'll pack our clothes and let's go see Kuri's old apartment. She and Oki are moving in today.”

She turned off the heater and they were soon on their way, which is to say, Kit took Dave's hand and they were in the St. George lobby. As usual, Dave staggered a bit, "I can never get used to that."

Kit smiled, "I've got you lover."

She looked at the listings and there were Oki and Kuri's names. "Apartment 801, wasn't that an old band with Phil Manzanera? Anyway it's different than the apartment we kids used to use. I wonder why? I thought that one was Kuri's"

They wandered over to the elevators and punched the button. As they were going up, Dave got a peculiar look on his face, "Did this thing just shift to going sideways?"

"Too much 'Star Trek' sweetheart, elevators don't go sideways."

As the doors opened right in front of number 801, Kit said "uh oh." There were boxes and bags and furniture piled high in the hallway and through the door they could hear Kuri shouting.

Kuri's Apartment

Kit and Dave stopped at the door of the apartment. The place was very well furnished, and spotless, it was also fifty years out of date.

Art, holding the keys behind his back and trying to fade into the wallpaper, looked panicked. When he spotted Kit and Dave, he almost ran over to them. "I always gave you guys the furnished apartment on the second floor so you could sneak up and down the back stairs. I didn't want Kuri to see this place until she was ready, but I think today might have been too soon."

Kit smiled, "Relax, Art, let her run through her repertoire of swear words and she'll be fine."

Oki, in wolf form, his tail between his legs, slunk over from behind a chesterfield, "I don't know, Kit, she's been ranting for a while."

Kuri wasn't actually throwing anything, but she was probably thinking about it. "What is all this crap! This can't be mine, this place looks like it's my grandmother's place. Look at that wallpaper, and the furniture, and OH MY GOD what are those things in that cabinet. This place belongs in an antique shop!"

Kit pulled the three men out the door and closed it. "Come on, let her wind down, she'll be at least another half hour, she won't notice we're gone. Art, we're here for a few days, is there an apartment open, we could use?"

Art grinned, “Come with me up to the top floor, I've got just the thing.”

They hopped into the elevator which went up for a very long time, and then, yes, Kit now felt it go sideways, “What's with this elevator?”

“You kids always used the stairs,” said Art with a lopsided grin.

The kids in question got a sort of dreamy look in their eyes as they remembered that last year of high school and the summer after. Sneaky sex is always good sex.

The doors opened, again right in front of an apartment door. Art took out the keys and opened it and Dave walked in as if in a daze. Huge, north windows overlooking the river and on the opposite hill, the University. “Wait, that should be the church shouldn't it? The University should be south from here.”

Art laughed, “The directions in this town were always a bit wonky, add in this building's nonsense and you never know what you're going to get. Do you like it?”

“I sure do,” said Kit, “it's warm.”

Oki was wandering around opening doors, “Kit, there's a huge bed here, not like that little shelf you guys have in Paris. Oh, Dave, you have to come look here.”

Dave tore himself away from the view and looked, it was a storage room full of paint, canvas, stretchers, cutters, staplers.

The place looked like an art supply store. He turned around and looked at Art, “Uh, yes, I like it.”

“Kuri thought you two might, it's yours if you want it.”

Kit said, “Rent?”

“No, it's yours, Kuri owns this building, remember, and she decided that you guys might want to move back to Guelph some day. This is your place, all bought and paid for, you own it.”

Oki clapped his hands, “That's great, I didn't know she was doing that. Hey sis, we can live in the same place again!”

“Hang on. Dave, what do you think?”

“Hell Kit, I can paint anywhere, although I'm not sure I'd want to paint out there in the studio, there's no paint on the floors.”

Kit noticed he had called the front room the studio, and as she glanced back out at the floor, she realized that the crazy-quilt carpet was actually wooden floors covered with paint. In a pattern that looked strangely familiar.

Kit looked at the walls and the ceiling and then sent her mind out carefully. Oh dear, the building was smirking. “I'll deal with you later,” she sent out at it, but it kept smirking.

“We'll stay here a week, Dave, and think it over. I'll have to go back to Paris and at least finish out the semester at the academy, and settle my students with other teachers, or make

other arrangements.” She realized Dave had seen the floor and as if hypnotized he was taking an easel and a new canvas out of the store room.

Kit looked at Art and Oki and said, “I guess we'll take it. Come on, he's gone, we better go see what Kuri's doing.”

What Kuri was doing, was hugging her parents, Lila and Jonah had heard that their kids were back in town and come over to say hello.

Kit and Oki ran to join the group hug with squeals. Honestly, you'd think they were ten again.

Once the fussing was over, Kuri got back to her original question, “What is all this crap?”

“These are your things, Kuri,” said Lila gently. “Every time you see this apartment again, you wonder what sort of person you were.”

“It isn't that it's old lady stuff, but some of this isn't even remotely, something that I would have. Are you sure someone else wasn't living here?”

“Sweetheart, someone else was, in fact, living here, it was you. You really did have these things, and every time you see things from your old life, you wonder who the hell that was. It was you, then. But you are you, now. These are not your things unless you declare them yours. You can empty the apartment, but we always leave it so that you can see who you were in your last life.”

“Are you serious? Why?”

“Because you deserve to know.”

Art spoke up, “There's a storage room in the basement... where we can put this stuff.”

He had been waved down by Lila who winked at him for his save. Apparently Kuri wasn't to be told about the museum.

“But how can I be someone who isn't this person, I'm the same person aren't I?”

“Absolutely not. You're free, you start fresh every life, and you are a free person. You make choices each and every day and the choices vary from life to life. They depend on the situation, on the places you find yourself. At the end of twenty or twenty-five years of making choices, you're not the same person you were last time.”

“So by choosing moment by moment, I become someone different?”

“Or sometimes the same. That's why we leave your old things here, so you can decide what you still like and what goes into storage.”

Kuri got a frown on her face as she looked again at the apartment, and Lila waved the rest of the folks out of the apartment. “She'll take a while, go have coffee. Yes you too Okami, she has to make her own decisions now, without your

advice you little pack rat.”

Wreck Beach

Lorraine rolled off of Hubert and looked at the ceiling. “I sometimes wish I smoked.”

“A filthy habit my child, good only to make electronic equipment dysfunctional. As a child I worked in the tobacco fields and believe me, you do not want that tar in your lungs. And yet, curiously, most of my fellow workers smoked.”

“I only meant it was something to do after sex.”

“And what are we doing my pet? What's wrong with conversation.”

“Sweetness, do you have any idea at all, how unusual you are?”

“I'm the most ordinary man in existence, I have no idea what you might mean.”

“To begin with, that statement. To claim to be ordinary is extraordinary indeed.”

“You are a dear woman, Lorraine, but there is nothing more exotic than the ordinary. It is just that most people can’t see what is in front of their faces. The infinite wonder of existence will never cease to amaze me.”

“Really? Then why were you not shocked the first time I accidentally turned into a fox?”

“And why should you not turn into a fox? Or a dove. I know of no reason, based on watching a worm turn into a butterfly, that you should not turn into a fox.”

“Well it's your fault, I lose control when I come.”

“Surely you haven't turned to a fox with every one of your customers?”

“Now you are making fun, why should I come with a customer?”

“You have an orgasm most times when we make love.”

“You, my dear sir, are not like my other customers, with them, they have sex, it's only you who decided we were making love.”

“My dear Lorraine, you are depressing me, truly. Such men are beneath contempt.”

“No sir, they are not, they are simply customers, hiring out a bit of fluff in order to get off. They are not contemptible, most of them are sad, lonely men.”

“Most?”

“Well, there are those few who truly hate women, but they are more to be pitied than the others.”

“How so?”

Here, Lorraine half-turned to a fox and showed her teeth.

“Ah, well explained. This also explains those occasional bodies by the river who appear to have been savaged by coyotes.”

“No more, Coyote had a chat with me about that. He said it lowered the tone of the place and created a prejudice against the small ones.”

“Such a lovely person, thank you for introducing me. To meet the being who sang the world into being was truly a pleasure and a privilege. Speaking of singing, do you have any more customers tonight?”

“You know you are always my last.”

“Very well, we spoke of choices and decisions a short while ago, you have one now. Do I roll over and lick you until you turn into a fox? Or do we go for dinner. Or do we go to the theatre and listen to some singing?”

“Do I have to choose?” said Lorraine, stretching and spreading her legs.

“A non-choice such as that, is one I must also respect.”

After a fox appeared in the bed for the second time, Lorraine stood over Hubert's face and licked it. “Shall I take you to dinner for a change?”

“By all means, where are we off to this evening.”

“I thought perhaps Steveston to eat on the dock, it should be a lovely evening by now, with the tourist diners gone and the cooks warmed up.”

“Lovely, but this time please dress first.”

“You too, last time you watched me dress, but forgot to put pants on.”

“Do you blame me?”

They both managed to dress and, holding hands, faded into being around the corner from the docks. A small boy saw them but Lorraine winked at him and he smiled.

They ate a lovely meal of fresh fish on the dock, and then decided they would spend the night, the next day being Saturday and the Steveston dojo not being far away. “I haven't done either Judo, Aikido or Kendo for a few weeks, it would be a delight to get some exercise.”

“I thought perhaps you might be tempted, look, I packed your things,” said Lorraine as she snapped her fingers. Two small bags appeared and then were gone again.

“You are a delight, tomorrow then, off to the dojo, and tonight?”

“Tonight we simply stroll, surely we will hear someone singing eventually.”

The two wandered hand in hand through the streets of the village and did indeed catch some singing. They spent the night at an inn, and the next morning took a taxi to the dojo. The classes were spread out so that Hubert could attend all three.

Lorraine watched from the side with a small smile on her face. When the last class was over, Hubert went to her and said, “Did you see? Did you see? I almost lost.”

“I saw, and I can smell, go have a shower you smelly big man.”

Hubert kissed her hard and went off to the change rooms.

A student came over and asked, “Excuse me, if you don’t mind, where did he study?”

“As far as I know, he's picked it up in many places in the world, he spent some time in Japan I believe, working on a book, something about kiai and communication of nervous energy, maybe.”

“If he is living here now he would be most welcome to the dojo.”

“I will tell him, unfortunately, he lives in Guelph, we're just

visiting.”

“Too bad, nice to have talked with you.”

“And you too.”

When Hubert got out of the change rooms, Lorraine took his arm and said, “fancy a swim?”

“Wreck Beach?”

“Of course.”

They arrived without a stitch of clothing and enjoyed some time simply soaking up the sun, which happened to be shining that day.

As they were beginning to think about lunch, Lorraine sat up and stared out to sea.

“What is it?”

“Something is coming, something nasty.”

“Will it come onto the beach?”

“Hubert, it's coming for you, it will come onto the beach.”

“For me? What in the world? Lorraine can you put a glamour on everyone here so they don't see?”

“Of course,” she said, and changed to a fox, she moved in a

circle and absolutely nothing happened. Which was the point. Nobody would see anything, just another boring day at the beach.

The wake became a back, and then a rather hulking, bird-beaked creature appeared from the water and lumbered directly at Hubert.

“Damn, a Tengu, come to challenge me no doubt. Lorraine, do you happen to have a katana handy?”

Lorraine yipped and there was a sword strapped to her back.

“You are a peach, I thank you.”

“I have come for a lesson, Gaijin, will you teach me to fight?”

“Did my sensei send you?”

“No, I come on my own.”

“Will you go back? I have no reason to fight you or to teach you.”

“Have you not? If you do not fight I will kill all these disgusting pale people.”

Lorraine grew in size, attracting the attention of the Tengu, who said, “You will stand aside, Kitsune, or you will die as well.”

“Not bloody likely, I'm not one of your pretty white foxes. You

can fight this man, but if you make a single move toward any of these people, who are under my protection, you will be torn into so many pieces the crabs will feast.”

“Your concern is with me, Tengu, nobody else here. Stop your talking and come fight.”

The Tengu swaggered toward Hubert and started to speak, “My name is...” was as far as he got, Hubert was stalking toward him. He was three steps away before the Tengu got his sword ready. Hubert had his sword down by his side, the Tengu jumped into the air and brought his sword down in a mighty two-handed strike onto Hubert's head.

As he was seemingly about to die, Hubert slid quietly to the side and impaled the Tengu through the throat, using its beak as a guide. As that creature fell forward, Hubert's sword ripped out through the side of its neck.

The monster crumpled and smoked and faded away. Hubert shook his head and said cryptically, “Every damned time, do they have no other opening move?”

“I do so like to see you work, my love,” said Lorraine, “but I think it may be time for us to get back to Guelph. Lunch at the Fixed Gear? I fancy wood-fired pizza.”

“After what that thing smelled like as it disappeared?”

“We are all what we are, lover, I'm a carnivore.”

“Well, the luggage is all taken care of?”

“Of course.”

“Pizza it is then.”

All the old Teachers

Kit and Dave spent some time bouncing around the town, going to all their old haunts, but after several years in Paris, it was hard to fall in love with Guelph again.

Still, Guelph had what Paris never could. Friends and family. In Paris they knew colleagues, shopkeepers and cafe waiters, but in Guelph there were people who skipped that day in grade five with you, to go watch them dig up the street.

They went to Dave's place to visit his folks, and Kit was amazed at how proud they were of their boy, the painter in Paris. They also made it clear that they considered Kit their daughter, not an in-law, which made Kit feel quite loved.

Dave was indeed a good painter. The art world was beginning to catch up with him, but to Kit's secret delight, he kept moving ahead of the art world. This was actually an advantage to her. Just as the dealers and the collectors began to want a piece, Dave was done with it. As Dave's unofficial agent, it was Kit's job to watch for when he lost interest in a piece, and to whisk it off to the galleries. Dave would have been amazed at what Kit

was piling in to their investments.

Those large pulses of cash were supported by Kit's sessional classes at the academy, and her private students. That income supported them both with a bit left over to invest. Kit made sure that there was always, always, a small sum in the bank account so that whenever Dave thought to check, he saw 'enough' and didn't worry. The rest was tucked away in various places to grow.

Dave also visited Kit's folks and was surprised to see one of his works up on the wall, definitely not a piece of decor. He turned to Kit and she said, "That's your tuition, love." Dave broke out in a huge smile, that had been worrying him since he graduated.

Large chunks of the day were spent with Dave painting, oblivious to anything else. Kit would make sandwiches and coffee and put it near him in the studio for when he reached for it.

That meant she was free to visit her teachers, and she did. Amber was first on the list, and Kit caught her up on all the gossip at the school, plus the trials and tribulations of being a teacher. Amber seemed full of sympathy, but Kit thought that maybe she was laughing on the inside. Especially when she thought of how much trouble she's caused Amber.

She talked about maybe moving back to Guelph and teaching there. Amber assured her that she would crowd nobody, especially not Amber, who never had many students anyway. She also encouraged Kit to keep her students in Paris until they

were well trained and could switch teachers without too much of a wrench.

Liz didn't say much to Kit when she first saw her, just hugged her hard for a long time. Later, Kit told her about her Shaman work in Paris, and about her friendship with the Devil. Liz shook her head and said, "I knew you were a Shaman. You're the girl that beats the demons and makes them her teammates. I'm so proud of you, Kit, you aren't classically trained, but you might be the most powerful of us all."

Kit wasn't sure what to think about that, she dropped her eyes and bowed her head. Liz laughed, reached over and cuffed her gently, as if she was still an apprentice.

Ingrid had been a constant in Kit's life for almost as long as Kit had been alive, almost as long as Ray had been there. She met them both in the lunch counter and over coffee, the two suggested that it was time for her to come home.

Ray said it best when he said, "You can live well anywhere, Kit, and you do, but your roots and your heart are here. Beside that, I miss you." He leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek.

Ingrid's comment on the subject was, "You always overthink it, just decide."

With only a week, Kit didn't get around to everybody, which certainly made her aware of just how rooted she was. She loved that Paris apartment, but as Mara had said, it's not the apartment, it's who's living there with you.

And let's face it, the damned St. George seemed to be doing it's best to make Dave happy. Kit was just waiting for it to put the Eiffel tower outside their studio windows. That would be a mistake, because they couldn't see it from their apartment in Montparnasse.

Eventually, Kit realized that Dave was happy if he had paint. It was up to her to decide where they would live. The chance to live in the same building as her siblings pretty much sealed the deal.

Kuri, in the meantime, had found a few items to keep from her old life, and then filled the place with their new things. Kit was somewhat amazed at the ratty second-hand furniture they had hauled from Thunder Bay, but then again, Kit was nostalgic for paint splashes on an old wood floor, and Canadiano's in the cafe. Who was she to judge what had meaning in someone's life.

It surprised Kit not at all that one day while she and Dave were in the lunch counter for breakfast, Liz put down two big coffees and called them Canadianos while also handing them a baguette and some nice French cheese.

Dave simply started eating, but Kit gave a rather teary eyed thank you to Liz.

If it appears that Dave is somewhat absent-minded, it is not really true. He concentrates. He will paint for hours on end, ignoring everything about him, including Kit. But when he is not painting, for instance when he is talking with Kit, he pays

attention to her. Well that's a bit mild. He bored attention into her in a way that she had never felt with anyone else, and she'd had her thoughts probed by some very powerful beings.

Sure, sometimes Dave was thinking about something else, aren't we all? It's this single-minded attention to his painting that may have let him start talking to the building, if you can call it that. The building started responding to him, if he needed a different light, the windows adjusted. If he needed a different view, like the day he wanted to paint the Eiffel Tower, it was there. Not a photograph projected on a screen, but the real thing, people were going up and down the stairs.

The talk didn't go just one way, Dave started repeating things to Kit, that only someone who had listened to the secrets the building held, could possibly know. Can we say this? They became friends.

We mentioned Kuri's apartment and got distracted, perhaps we should go back to her, and Oki of course, but it was Kuri who came into her own once she got moved into the apartment. Up to now she had been satisfied to be Oki's assistant. She still helped him in any cases he might have, but she began to take a greater interest in her own investments, and in the St. George.

Art kept working as the supervisor, but Kuri helped, and along the way found that the building was actually a part of her. Not that they were attached at the hip, or anything like that. Whole wings did not rise and fall if she flapped her arms, but she understood the place in a deeper way than Dave did. There was nothing unconscious about it.

The building reported to her, just like an enchanted wood might report to a fairytale princess singing with the bluebirds in the middle of a sunny clearing. She knew about problems before anyone else, and she fixed them. Troubled couples, abusive children, dogs with runny sores, it was all reported and Kuri acted on it if she needed to.

There was a period of adjustment of course, the building had nobody to talk to for many years while Kuri was growing up, so she got many complaints about wood-worm, spiders and cockroaches.

“And so, you stupid building, why don't you just eat them?”

“May I?”

The Golden Mask

“You're going to do what?” shouted Sam

“I'm going to grind a good sharp bevel on these two swords.”

“Why? No let me guess, you're going to trim the bushes in your back yard.”

“Yes, I figure they'll be great.”

“Ulrich, get yourself a machete, these hilts are old, old, old,

you'll need to refit them.”

“I was thinking maybe just hockey tape?”

“Ulrich! Look, give them to me, you haven't a clue how to take care of antique katana. Stick with your guns and your damned Smatchet.”

Ulrich grinned, he'd got them years before from a collector of Japanese swords and had finally figured out a way to get Sam to accept them.

They were driving south to the Niagara peninsula. Ulrich was a retired member of an anti-gang unit, and he was still plugged into the information network. He and Sam had spent the last few years doing what regular forces weren't allowed to do. Let's face it, he was an old fire-horse that still ran toward the bells.

Today there was a report of a shipment of pistols coming up from the States, and they were going to stop it.

Ulrich had been doing things by himself for a while, before he met Sam, who agreed to join his little vigilante unit of, now, two people.

As they got to the meeting point, Sam put a small opera mask on, the biggest mask she would tolerate because of the loss of peripheral vision. Ulrich put on his whole-face golden mask, more like a helmet really. He claimed it was see-through, but Sam had her doubts about just how see-through it was.

Ulrich insisted on the masks because he had a wife and two girls at home. He didn't want anyone to figure out who he was. The fact that what they were doing was outside the law, was another reason to hide who they were.

Body armour under loose clothing finished the outfits, except that Sam had her swords at her side.

They got there first, and faded into the shadows by a warehouse near the bridge. Sure enough, a couple of local toughs showed up and then a car that came over the bridge, arrived at the site. There were some tough guy greetings, featuring lots of swearing and gang signs, and the pistols, packed in a bag under the car, were traded for a wad of cash.

Sam and Ulrich strolled out toward the six young men and were quite close before they were noticed. Ulrich spoke first, "You can do this the easy way boys, and drop your weapons, or we can do it the hard way."

Sam rolled her eyes and was already sprinting across the tarmac as one of the toughs raised a gun. She slammed into him and drove his head into the ground as his gun fired into the sky.

She moved to the next one and an uppercut put him unconscious too, but by then they were past her and heading toward the creepy dude with a golden plate in front of his face. Sam checked for more guns, saw one come up and aim at Ulrich. No time, she drew her sword and it flicked out. The kid's arm, hand still holding the gun, dropped to the ground. She left him to bleed out and stepped closer to Ulrich, blocking

him aside and taking the baseball bat on her shoulder.

As she stumbled aside, she saw Ulrich drop one of the kids with the butt of his pistol, and then saw the last kid fire his pistol at Ulrich. Good thing gang bangers didn't practice, because the kid had a clean shot. He hit Ulrich in the biceps and was aiming again when Sam sliced neatly through his throat.

Checking quickly, she saw that it was over, grabbed all the weapons and helped Ulrich into the passenger seat of his car.

She looked at the wound, not too bad, and wrapped a bandage around it telling him to hold it tight. With that she got in and drove, following all the traffic laws, back to Ulrich's lair in the St. George.

He called it a lair.

When they got there, she disinfected and sewed his wound, washed his bloody clothes and discarded them. Stowed the weapons in the locker, then shoved Ulrich into the shower. Getting in after, Sam soaped them both and rinsed. Sam turned up the heat and let it run for a half hour while they soaked in the warmth, letting it run down the backs of their necks as they leaned on each other, ass to ass. The adrenaline slowly drained, and seemed to run away with the water and the blood.

After that, they wandered over to the bed, where Sam massaged his back and legs. Feeling the knotted muscle, the adhesions from past injuries, seeing the numerous scars across his body, she lay down beside him and said "Last mission,

love, this was the last.”

Ulrich, looked at her and realized she wasn't kidding. He nodded and said in a tired voice, “OK.” Nothing more.

Sam had had, almost violent sex with him. It would be the last time, she would send him back to his family.

When they were done and lying on their sides, him against her back with his arm around her, he asked, “Do you want the lair?”

“No, clean it out, give the weapons to your buddies to dispose of, forget me, forget my name. I'm out of the game.”

“My mask?”

“Ulrich, take it home, hang it on your wall or put it on your hall table and never, ever touch it again, do you hear me? I don't want to hear that you've got yourself killed, I love you too much for that.”

“And us?”

“There is no more us, lover, go back to your wife and stay there.”

Again, he nodded. They lay together until dawn, when Sam kissed him while they were still on the bed. “Stay here,” she said, dressed, and left.

She never looked back, never went to that apartment again,

trusting him to clean up and get rid of the place. Trusting that he would go back to his family and stay there.

The St. George made sure the apartment would never be connected with Ulrich or Sam.

She was alone again.

Negotiations

“Hubert?”

“Mmm?”

“I’ve decided that we will live together here in your apartment.”

“Wonderful, I am pleased.”

“And I’ll keep my other apartment for business.”

“Always wise.”

“You don’t mind that the woman you’re living with is still whoring?”

“I mind that you put it in such indelicate terms, but then, you do like to shock me.”

“You are such a dear.”

“And I am a very happy man today, Lorraine, very happy.”

“There is a problem that I thought we might handle for our friend.”

“Negotiations or the other.”

“Negotiations this time, although it might come to the other.”

“And what can we do for our friend?”

“Developers who want to buy one of the riverside properties that our friend likes to jump to.”

“The girl?”

“Doesn't know the significance, and the offer is most generous, the developers want to make condominiums.”

“Well that is the town plan, concentration of population into the downtown area to ease the burden on infrastructure and loss of farmland.”

Lorraine put on a pout, “But it's such a nice location.”

Hubert smiled, “Very well my love, negotiations it is. Just let me get my power suit on and you might want to dress as well.”

“I thought I might go as a pet fox.”

“You did say negotiations did you not?”

“Well one can but hope.”

As the pair walked into a swanky office downtown, they were greeted by a severe looking secretary and were waved into some chairs with the promise that “Mr. Len will see you soon.”

Soon, became an hour and Lorraine amused herself by causing the secretary's typing to become nothing but swear words until Hubert noticed and put a gentle hand on hers.

Eventually, even Hubert seemed to run out of patience. He stood and walked straight past the secretary and into the office where Mr. Len was having sex with another employee. “An hour and counting, I am impressed Mr. Len, but we have business.”

Lorraine grinned at the woman who made a dash for another office door while Len zipped himself up. To his credit he wasn't too flustered and managed, “What can I do for you?”

“To the point, good tactics that, after making the other party wait. What you can do for us, Mr. Len, is to stop trying to buy the riverside property that you are negotiating for with Miss Kuri MacDonnell.”

“I don't think I can do that on your say-so, two strangers walking into my office without even an appointment, Mr...”

“Ah, rude of me, Mr and Mrs Heavy.” Hubert said, to a giggle

from Lorraine, “Hubert Heavy at your service.”

“And what would you offer me to stop this purchase? My company stands to make a considerable profit on a set of condominiums on that land.”

Hubert, a bit irritated by this blatant appeal, looked at Lorraine and said, “Negotiations?” then looked a bit disappointed when she nodded. At that point he'd be happy to simply make this man disappear.

“We are in a position to make it so that you, personally, will see a considerable profit if you drop the deal.”

“A bribe?”

“Please, a bonus. Let us not be crude,” and Lorraine giggled again.

“Well there are considerable penalties for withdrawal...”
Lorraine was laughing into her hand.

“These will be paid.”

“And the bonus?”

Hubert stepped aside and Lorraine swayed toward Mr. Len. The man seemed to go cross-eyed and reached for a folder of papers on his desk.

A short while later, Hubert and Lorraine were walking back to the St. George and Hubert commented, “Nice of him to state

his price as we walked in to the negotiations. Did you know?"

"Oh yes, he's famous for his bonuses."

"And did you give him a nasty disease?"

"Please, I'm a professional, I was asked to stop the deal, nobody has asked me to stop him."

"Very wise, my love, very wise, in business one should always be trustworthy."

"With, of course, a wedge."

"With a wedge, and what does our client think?"

"He's happy, our leases are extended another year."

"Excellent, long enough for another book. What shall we work on, it must be a collaboration now that you are living with me and are not just a correspondent."

"Let me give it some thought, love, we have time to decide. In the meantime we seem to have arrived back home."

"Good evening Mr. Doorman, we are undecided at the moment whether to go in or back out. What would you prefer my dear?"

"I think I would like to go dancing, will you take me?"

"Do you doubt it?"

The doorman tipped his hat as they turned around and walked arm in arm back toward the town.

The week was up, Dave and Kit were packed and ready to head back to Paris. It would be another half year before they could move back to Guelph, but they had decided to move.

As they got into their Paris apartment, Kit remembered why they had left. “Dave, for heaven's sake, for your sake, let me heat this place, it would take no effort at all. What's the difference if I do it, or we install central heating?”

“I'd prefer not, Kit, you know I don't like too much magic flying around, I don't really trust it. Fairy gold and all that.”

“Hey, that's my parents you're talking about, they never cheated anyone with fairy gold... that I know about.”

“Sorry, you're right, but I'd still rather just put the kerosene heater on. I'll be fine.”

Kit, who rarely got cold, looked at Dave opening and closing his hands to get them warmed up and made a decision, “Dave if you won't let me heat this place for you, you need to move back home now, I'll visit often and in the meantime, finish up my work here. It's mechanical heating there, so it will be OK, right?”

“If you think that's best, Kit, it is easier for me to paint there than here, in this weather.”

“Right, off you go, I’ll be home tomorrow.”

With that, Dave was back in the studio in the St. George, heading for the cupboard. Kit asked Oki to make sure he had food and coffee and then turned to her own business. She gave notice to the academy that she would not be asking for a renewal after this semester, and she started weeding through her private students, to see who needed her, and who could go to another teacher at the end of the term.

She blew out and the apartment was warm, but the place was so full of leaks it soon started to get cold again. With a sigh, Kit gathered her notebooks and headed down to the cafe.

Once there, it wasn't long before Beelzabub joined her, “Just here to say hello, I know you're working on a concerto.”

“Nice to see you, Beels. How have things been?”

“Well, it's only been a week, not enough time for vaporous apparitions of stone age men to arise from the old sewers.”

“That was fun wasn't it? I shall miss Paris and you, my friend.”

“So you’re decided then? Back to Guelph.”

“We think it for the best.”

“You, you think it for the best Kit, Dave will be happy wherever you are. I have become quite fond of him these last few years. I'm actually glad you stopped me from taking his soul, his work is quite extraordinary. If you like, I will continue

being his agent here in Europe.”

“I appreciate that, Beels, thank you. I can send you the paintings or you can come over and look at them yourself. It would be nice to stay in touch.”

“I will do that, Kit, and now, back to work for you. Adieu.... oh hell.”

Kit laughed as he faded out rather than use the front door.

Dave Gets His Own Breakfast

Dave woke somewhat confused, it wasn't cold, and Kit wasn't beside him. He soon remembered that she was in Paris and had sent him back because the cold in their Paris apartment was getting too much for his hands.

Hmm, not having Kit to tell him what to do in the morning was a bit confusing all on its own. Where were his clothes, ah, on the floor where he dropped them. “Wake up you lazy man,” he thought to himself, “you can still take care of yourself can't you? Just get your head out of the clouds for an hour.”

Dave wandered down to Jim's Lunch Counter in search of breakfast. Habits were hard to break and if it wasn't Cafe Flore, or Deux Magots it would still have coffee.

Mike greeted him by name and said, “One Canadiano, one baguette and some smelly cheese.”

Dave looked up from his sketch pad, blinked three times and said, “Mike!” he looked at his breakfast, then out the door.

Mike laughed and said, “You're in Guelph, Dave, but Liz and I figured out what you and Kit have been having for breakfast while you were in Paris.”

Dave laughed too, stood and shook Mike's hand. “Will you sit with me a moment?”

“Of course I will. How is the painting going?”

“It's good, I think, Kit says so, so it must be true.”

They both laughed again, and then Dave got serious. “Mike, you're familiar with all the spirit beings around here, yes?”

“I'm what they call a seer, Dave, I can see those with power, while the normal folks see but instantly dismiss it from their heads.”

“I can see them.”

“You're living with one, it's kind of hard not to see them in that case.”

“OK so do they all live forever?”

“No, not at all, Liz is very powerful but she and I will both die someday. Mara is very healthy, but will die of old age.”

“But Kit will live forever?”

“She can die, Dave, but not of old age, right.”

“What about me, you can see things, what do you see in me?”

Mike gazed at Dave for a while, “You're not a spirit being, you're normal so you'll die of old age someday, and before you ask, I haven't a clue, I'm just telling you that you aren't immortal.”

“But could I be, if Kit or someone else made me?”

“You're worried that you'll die and Kit will live on.”

“No, that would be fine, I'm worried that Kit will be unhappy if, no, when I die, but even worse, that she'll have to nurse a sick old man for years and then bury me. I don't want that for her.”

“I can see that, she does love you dearly and when you die she will be devastated, but Dave, she'll get over it. They all do, the immortals, they get over it.”

“But Kit told me Ingrid made Art immortal so she wouldn't have to watch him die.”

“That's true, but she's watched a lot of mortals die, she will tell you herself that she was a coward to make Art immortal, but he

was ageless from working here at the lunch counter, they both thought he would stay ageless, but when he retired and gave the place to us, he started to age again. It was a wrench for them and they decided to put things back where they thought they were.”

“Mike, what about me? Should I... wait a minute, you said you and Liz would die of old age.”

“And we will, when we retire from this place, but while we're running the lunch counter we don't age.”

“My head hurts.”

“Join the club, look, you're going to ask me if you should see about becoming immortal so that you and Kit can stay together forever, right?”

“Well, yes.”

“It may work out, but immortals do split up, after a thousand or two years you might grow apart. Ingrid and Woden did.”

“A thousand or two years...”

Mike smiled and waggled his eyebrows.

“Will Kit get tired of me? This is hard.”

“Dave, I saw something else in you that might make a difference. I'm not sure if I should mention it, but tell me to, and I will.”

“Please.”

“It's your talent. You need Kit to be your full creative being, that's awkward but you know what I mean. She makes you the best you can be.”

“Oh hell, I know that.”

“I saw that a while ago, but now I see something else, you need to die as well.”

“What?”

“You need to know that you only have one lifetime, that you will die. Somehow that pushes you to work, just like Kit pulls you to work, if that makes sense.”

Dave was silent for a while and Mike went to get him another coffee. Finally Dave looked up and said, “Thank you Mike, that really does help me. Please don't mention this to Kit, I'm happy with things as they are, but I think she would be upset to have to choose between having me around or having me be a good painter.”

“You're a great painter, Dave, and I thank you, I really would hate to tell Kit about this. Are you going to tell her?”

“No, she knows I'm stubborn, so I'll just refuse to let her make me immortal when she asks.”

“If I'm around after you're gone?”

“Yes, tell her I wouldn't make her choose.”

“You're a good man, you know that Dave Robbie.”

“A selfish man, I can't stand to see Kit upset. You know, some of that urgency is on me now, I should go work. Thanks so much for the talk Mike and honestly, I really appreciate how thoughtful you and Liz are, getting this breakfast in for us.”

Mike shook Dave's hand and said, “It's a pleasure, my friend.”

As Dave got back to the studio he somehow thought that maybe the place was happier. It seemed to know that he'd made a great discovery and a decision about his life. “Thanks, Studio,” he called out as he pulled another canvas from the seemingly inexhaustible supply. Kit was coming home tonight, he'd better have something to show her.

Battle at the Dam

“Hugh, Hugh wake up please.”

“HmMMM.”

“Hugh, he says we need to call Longfang, we're going to need all four of us.”

“Oren, what for?”

“And Nadja.”

“Lorie, that's the whole crew, what's happening?”

“He says there's something nasty coming from the bush, it's heading for town.”

“For me?”

“Not this time, it's just something ravenous, something that is barely real but deadly, and a lot of them.”

“Stan? Megan?”

“He says not, they shouldn't bother about this, the things aren't their concern unless we fail.”

“Fail? Since when does he think we fail?”

“It could happen, you know it could.”

“I never let myself think that, I'd be dead decades ago if I did.”

Lorraine didn't point out the flaw in that argument as she rolled out of bed and got dressed in her armour. How a woman her size found military grade armour that fit both her and her fox form was a mystery.

“You called Oren?”

“He's on the way, love, get into your armour.”

“Weapons?”

“Not sure, bring all ranges.”

“But Nadja?”

“I think they're half real, Hugh, we'll need her to translate.”

Oren Longfang was knocking on the door, “You two good?”

Lorraine explained quickly as they took the elevator to the front door where they found Nadja. Lorraine looked at her and was amazed that a ghost could look whiter than a ghost. “You know what it is, Nadja?”

“I can feel the filthy things, they're coming along the river from the North and they're getting more solid as they get closer.”

“Plan?”

Hubert thought a moment, "If they're getting more solid as they come, they must be heading for the Blacksmith's Fountain, or rather the stone that's inside. We have the best chance to stop them just past the dam on Guelph Lake where it narrows and where there's not so many people."

The four took off, the coward father of Stan, the lonely ghost, the reconstituted man and the fox who lost touch with her people. All refugees in the St. George, all working for their room and board.

Up the river they ran, or in the case of Nadja, flew. Hubert hung onto Oren's mane as he barely touched the ground with his feet, Lorraine was far ahead as scout. As they crossed Victoria street and plunged into the bush, Lorraine heard a deep ringing sound.

"Damnit," she said as the other three caught up, "it's Rompo."

"What's that," growled Longfang.

"Near enough to Windigo," said Lorraine, "from southern Africa, look like some sort of obscene rabbit/bear cross, I ran into them a century ago, they are not nice. You're right, Hugh, they're heading for the Blacksmith."

"There," said Nadja, pointing, "still faint but I can firm them up enough for you to kill."

"Do it, I'm up the middle, Oren and Lorraine left and right, don't let any get through or we'll have a hell of a time tracking them through downtown. They mustn't get to the stone."

With that, Hugh took out an automatic pistol and a short sword from his waist and waited on the path. Oren and Lorraine would herd them his way, killing the outliers. Soon they stampeded down the path, penned by trees on both sides, Hubert began firing with the gun in his left hand, and those that staggered close enough were stabbed in the eye.

When he ran out of ammunition, he buried the pistol into the side of one Rompo's head, passed the short sword to his left hand, and drew his long sword, with two swords he could cover the width of the path and he started to walk forward, driving the beasts toward the dam. Lorraine and Oren were squeezing them in from the sides. Both of them had grown in size and were not bothering with niceties, just bite and rip. Nadja was a sensitive girl, but she did her job and managed not to throw up or pass out.

The fight went on for a long time, there were hundreds of the beasts pinned against the dam, but finally, they were done. As Nadja let go her hold, the lifeless bodies faded out of existence, back to wherever they had come.

“I wonder if they were overpopulated and trying to spread out,” said Oren, ever the scholar.

“Who cares, as long as they don't get to him,” replied Lorraine, ever the pragmatist.

Back in the St. George, the residents had no idea what had erupted and been dealt with by their apartment building. Not even Kuri, as the St. George didn't bother her with things he

could take care of himself.

Megan was awake and looked at Stan snoring beside her. There was no way she was going to tell him what his scholarly coward of a father had just done. Let the hothead sleep, one day things would become more clear to him.

Sam Martin rolled over and came instantly awake, an overwhelming feeling that someone needed her help, but there was nothing, all was quiet, nobody on the streets around her apartment. She lay dead still and stretched her awareness to the limit, but there was nothing. With a shrug she thought “bad dream,” rolled over and went back to sleep.

At the front entrance of the St. George, Nadja asked the doorman if anyone had come looking for her. She was relieved to hear that nobody had. “I have to be here to meet him when he comes.”

Oren went back to his books and Hubert turned to Lorraine, “Bed or breakfast my little vixen?”

“Always with the choices, I need coffee to get the taste of those things out of my mouth. I'd forgotten just how vile they were.”

“Breakfast it is, my gentle pet, and my treat.”

“It's always your treat, you won't ever let me pay.”

“A gentleman never does.”

“If I ever meet one, I'll check that out.”

Hubert merely smiled and took Lorraine's arm. The doorman tipped his hat as they walked by.

Breakfast at the Vienna

As they walked toward breakfast, Lorraine asked, "Do you ever wonder why we were chosen to do his dirty work?"

"Never, it's usually work of some value to society at large as well as to him."

"Would you refuse a commission?"

"From him? It would depend on just how bad the commission was. I can bend my ideals without any problem, if I find the reasons sufficient to warrant it. Convince me and I'll do it. But if I feel the commission is beyond my ethics, I will refuse, certainly."

"If it means he will de-constitute you?"

"Surely. To live a compromised life is rather cowardly don't you think? It's not much of a life, this living in fear of death."

"I won't insult you by suggesting you might refuse a commission out of fear then."

“Why the question? Is it just academic or has he asked us something you find questionable?”

“No, nothing from him, I was thinking of the past. I’ve lost my people because of a decision they took a thousand years ago, one I disagreed with vigorously. In the end I was proved right, but my habit of isolation was well set by then, and I never asked to return.”

“Had you been compromised before that? What I mean is, were you asked to give in to small things, things you didn’t like but felt it wasn’t enough to fight over?”

“Very few, if any.”

“Then your separation probably wasn’t difficult. It’s the small compromises that build and build until you realize you’ve gone so far down a poor road you can’t go back, and the best thing seems to be to try that rotten bridge ahead of you.”

“My grandfather used to drive us over a bridge like that, he’d make us all get out and drive over ever so slowly, ‘to see if it was safe’. Used to scare the bejeepers out of us. But I get your point, it’s the chipping away at the integrity that does the real damage, so that when a large problem arises, you have no resistance left.”

“Just so, but it can be used the other way too. In a situation where, for instance, your country is occupied by an enemy, you can refuse to go along in small ways, slow things up, make enough resistance to cause irritation, but not enough to get

yourself killed. ‘Strangled by red tape’ as it were. It can work both ways, given enough determination.”

“I suppose so, but the ideologue always seems to have a simpler time at the constant chipping away.”

“Indeed, if you have a set of fixed rules that give you a guideline for attack each and every day, it’s a lot easier to keep chipping. When you need to think, when you aren’t a believer, it’s hard to keep up the resistance to that chip, chip, chip. Nobody ever said that freedom is easy, it requires constant vigilance, yet we can’t avoid it.”

“I’m sorry I asked, we seem to be bringing our mood down when we ought to be celebrating.”

“Constant vigilance my dear, attacks on your freedom come just as you think you have won a victory.”

“Do you really see the world as so black and white?”

“My dearest Lorraine, I don’t, and it’s not. What I see is a world full of lazy people, some being taught to think, some being led by the nose, all to different degrees at the very same time. Sometimes it’s the brass ring on the merry-go-round, and sometimes it’s the nose ring.”

“Should I get a nose ring?”

“You shall have neither nose ring nor wedding ring from me, my girl. I have no desire to own you in any way.”

“You’re a sweet man.”

“Here we are at Jim’s, do we dare go in? We might meet ghosts from our past.”

“Not now, please, I’m tired from the fight, let’s go on to the Vienna, I need sausage, eggs and home fried potatoes with seconds and thirds, and bitter, bitter coffee to wipe the taste from my mouth.”

“Of course, my love, of course. It’s lucky their blood and guts faded with them or I’d need to be hosed down.”

“Hubert, when I mentioned the Vienna, I sensed some hesitation from you. Is there a story?”

“Not much of one, the restaurant was the favourite of a girl and I a very long time ago. When she left, I lost the habit of going there.”

“And now you are going back in, for me?”

“Yes, and if you’re fishing for a compliment, please be assured that you are well worth whatever shivers, caused by old ghosts, are running down the back of my neck right now.”

“Aww, that’s one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me.”

“I suspect you haven’t been listening, then.”

The two sat in a booth near the back, Lorraine first making sure

it wasn't the booth Hubert had used with his old flame. "I really can't remember where we sat, it was too many years ago."

After three plates of the standard breakfast and four cups of coffee, Lorraine declared her mouth fit for living with. Hubert had French Toast, in celebration, he said, of Lorraine. This had earned him a lovely smile.

The two of them walked slowly back to their apartment. It had rained and the sidewalks and streets were clean, the trees and gardens dripping and becoming luscious. The smells were well worth a slow walk, just to experience them.

It was mid-morning when they got back to their rooms, and Hubert asked, "Do you have any customers today?"

"I don't. I have been cutting back on the business because, you evil man, you have been chipping away at my independence. I find myself wishing to spend more time in your bed with you, than earning my keep in my own bed."

"I would hate for there to be any financial shortfall, due to my selfishness, can I assist with your debts?"

"What debts, you silly man, we live rent free and he provides pay for each job he asks us to do. Beside which, I am terribly old and have accumulated a vast pile of gold over the years."

"Ah, then perhaps I should ask you to support me."

"I would, in a heartbeat, but I happen to know that you have no

need of support.”

“I might need a little support getting to the bed, I find myself suddenly exhausted from our battle.”

“You poor man, let me help you in your time of need.”

We shall leave them now to their recovery. It’s so important to allow time to recuperate after killing monsters.

There is much in these tales that I don’t know at the beginning, and you know when I know. I have discovered the name of the doorman. I might have known it earlier, but it is tricky. You see, his name is Don Doorman. You will forgive my confusion, I never meant to deny you this knowledge.

Dreams

Kit opened her eyes and closed them tight again. Her skin was burning, the sun was impossibly bright. She felt sand all along her body, this was not the Keen family world.

Turning away from the light, and shading her eyes from the sky, she opened her eyes again. Sand, dunes as high as houses stretching on forever. Ripples in the sand where a hot wind moved it, grain by grain, she could feel the heat against her cheek and as she felt it, she pulled her hand down to protect her face.

Where the hell was she? It was hard to focus on anything, three feet away or 3 kilometres, it was like looking at fractals, the waves in the sand at her legs were the same as the dunes in the distance, and it was hard to see where small waves became big waves.

Kit searched for something, anything to fix her eyes upon. She scanned from side to side, afraid to look behind, to look toward that cruel sun for fear that she would be blinded.

There, in the distance, a mirage. It had to be a mirage, camels with impossibly long legs, with riders whose legs hung down almost to the ground. Those legs could straddle a bus, and they were moving toward her. Each step covered hundreds of metres and seemed to take minutes.

They grew close enough to see the riders, not human, not animals, all women with fox heads and long flowing robes, plus those impossible legs. On each ankle a bell and Kit could hear them tinkle now.

As she heard the bells, she became aware of another sound, a vast, empty scream, as if something was trying to tear a hole in the world. Kit put her hands over her ears and screamed herself, just to keep from going deaf.

Hours, for hours she screamed, it screamed, and the riders never seemed to get to her.

A hand gently touched her arm, “A dream, it’s a dream Kit.”

Kit took her hands from her ears, and opened eyes she had squeezed shut once more. She stopped and took a cautious breath, afraid the heat would hurt her lungs that had been squeezing out a scream for so long.

She looked where the camels were, and there was just an oily sheen as if there were a big hole in the sand. She turned toward the voice, and she saw a fox, not white like her, but brown. No, this was a woman, not a fox, Kit had looked too deep.

“Where, what?” Kit managed to stammer.

“Easy, you’re not used to dreams, you fell asleep with Dave and slid into his dream, instead of the family world. It’s a dream, it’s Dave’s dream, you’re OK. I can wake you when we’re finished talking.”

“Who? I know every Keen, who are you?”

“I’m the Keen you don’t know, I left the family and the dream world long before you were born. My name is Lorraine.”

“You left? But you go insane if you leave.”

“Perhaps I am insane then, or perhaps I learned to dream. Certainly most Fox would call me insane for leaving the collective, but I couldn’t stay. There are compensations for being an outsider, for one thing, I’m free, as Hubert is teaching me.”

“Hubert?”

“Not important that you know who he is, he’s my mate, as Dave is yours.”

“Dave, is he all right?”

“Fine, this is a lovely dream, I especially like the camels, and you, multiple you riding them.”

“But that scream?”

“That I didn’t like so much, and your answering scream is what woke me so that I could come for you.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in the building, it’s not important where, but I was asked by him to help you.”

“Him? Who?”

“He watches over Dave. For some reason, he is very fond of Dave. Perhaps because he is family to Kuri through you, but I think it’s more than that.”

“I appreciate your help, I think I understand where this is now, but why don’t I know you? I made contact with every Keen I thought, why weren’t you there?”

“Like I said, I left and left so completely that the rest of the family doesn’t think about me any more I guess.”

“But why, why did you leave?”

“It was a family decision a very long time ago. I would not go along with it, so I left. Beyond that, ask your reynard, he should remember, it’s not my place to speak about it.”

“Can I speak with you when I wake?”

“No child, I am not in the family any more, it is not appropriate for us to meet. Now that I have your scent, I will come to help should he allow it. Wake now, child, and know you are safe beside your mate.”

Kit lost the desert world and slowly came awake on their massive bed, Dave gently breathing beside her. She checked lightly on his thoughts and all was well.

Not daring to go back to sleep, she carefully got out of bed and padded into the studio. There, on an easel, was the desert world, the camels were there, and on each, a being with Kit’s fox head, blazing white in the sun. Looking at the sun, Kit could almost feel it’s warmth. Look as she might, she could see no black hole in the sand, nor, of course, could she hear a scream. Perhaps those were from her fear as she found herself in this place.

Dave must have painted it late in the evening, after she went to bed. Why this? He must have been thinking of the Surrealist, Dali, it looked vaguely like one of his creations. Kit looked again and swelled with pride. Dali was a technician, but nowhere near the skill of Dave.

This was not Dave’s style, now or earlier, so Kit took a

photograph of it. He was likely to paint it over to do another. Kit wanted a reminder of this painting, her dream, and of that other fox woman. It was far from clear whether she was part of the dream, or if she had come into Kit's dream from somewhere outside. Strangely, Kit didn't feel her usual burning desire to work out a puzzle, she had no need to find out Lorraine's story, and that in itself was a mystery.

Kit moved back to the bed. She would have to leave for Paris in the morning, after she and Dave had breakfast and she had made his sandwiches and a thermos of coffee. She dropped her robe and slid under the covers. Feeling slightly naughty, she left herself a bit chilled so that when she lay her skin all along his backside, she felt the tremor of his shiver. He backed into her and they were both soon warm.

At that very same time, Lorraine moved into Hubert's backside and gave a contented sigh.

Hubert stirred and said, "All good pet?"

Lorraine squeezed him tight for a moment and then smiled as she felt him fall back to sleep. She waited until he was dreaming and then joined his dream. It wasn't the family world, but that didn't make it less, not at all.

As she joined Hubert in his dream, she could feel him smile back in his real world. She took a deep breath of the back of his neck and knew once again that he was her mate.

Doing the Books

“You need what?” said Kuri, looking up from the books on her lap.

“Two million dollars,” the St. George replied in her head.

“What for?”

“Taxes, repairs, and a new boiler, before the old one goes.”

“Goes where?”

“Boom.”

“Oh, and this is over and above income from rents, right? Just where is this money supposed to come from. I don’t have that kind of liquidity in my investments, most of my wealth is right here, in you.”

“An asset sale, I suggest. We have various assets in the store rooms that have that sort of value, I’m thinking of a statue from the Roman era that used to sit in the front lobby.”

“And who would buy such a thing?”

“The museums in New York are favourite, they have cash, but I know of a couple of oil princes who buy this sort of thing. Fancy themselves Emperors, and this is a bust of Nero, right up their fantasies.”

“And where did we get this bust?”

“One of your ancestors bought it in the 1600s, it was dug from Pompeii and still had the paint. That was stripped off of course, as nobody believed roman statues were painted.”

“How do we know it is Nero?”

“Right time, right style, and the freshness is explained by being underground. Explains the lack of provenance too.”

“Uh, that sounds more like a swindle than an antique sale, tell me what’s going on, all of it.”

“We really do have the bust, but you might also say we have a copy or two. We could sell the original to a museum, but as I said, we have a couple of oil princes who would bid against each other. They won’t bother to get it authenticated, our agents will have a nice story of a distressed widow in dire need of death taxes. Anyone who would buy a supercar to drive around the city streets won’t pay much attention to provenance.”

“You’ve done this before, haven’t you George?”

“We are still here, Kuri.”

“Very well, I will leave the sale, and the disposal of the cash in your hands. I don’t want them showing up in our official books.”

“Never miss, never.”

“I wonder if I should get a supercar to drive around Guelph.”

“Miss, really. There are two in the sub-garage.”

“What?”

“From your past husbands. One of them was quite rich and reckless.”

“Don’t you dare tell Okami. Why don’t we sell those?”

“If you wish, they would fetch quite a nice sum now that all the extra cash is flowing in from the spiking oil prices.”

“Do it fast, before that maniac finds them.”

“As you say, Kuri.”

“There’s four salaries and free rent here under employees, I see. But I don’t recognize them. Should I ask?”

“You may ask anything you wish, miss, but you will need to be willing to hear the answers. As it happens these four are the agents I mentioned. They receive room and board for doing jobs that we need to be done. One of them would be selling the items we discussed.”

“I take it these jobs are the kind of jobs we don’t hire out?”

“Yes, Kuri, for instance, they negotiated our release from the land sale you changed your mind about.”

“The one you demanded I drop, you mean?”

“The view, miss, the view.”

“You are a pirate, George, a pirate.”

“A saint rather, miss. Miss I do have oversight, our agents recently went on a job that Megan wanted kept quiet. It had the potential to get very ugly, very fast. Our agents could respond in minimum time and they performed very well.”

“Megan oversees you?”

“Yes miss, from the day I became sentient and she decided that I didn’t need be returned to non-sentience.”

“That’s interesting, I suppose that would tend to keep you more saint than pirate. And your mandate?”

“Keep myself for you between ownerships, assist you and yours during ownerships, and any other civic duties we see fit or she assigns to me.”

“Interesting, and you stick to this bargain?”

“I don’t want to become non-sentient, miss.”

“Evasion. Very good. How much do you know about my past?”

“Just that you own me always, miss.”

“And the large storeroom in the basement?”

“Miss?”

“Look, George, let’s get this sorted right now. I’m a Great Lynx. I can smell a lie in the next county, and I can certainly smell a room full of my old things.”

“Oh miss, please don’t tell your parents you know that, they so much want you to have a normal life each time. I promise they will explain it to you in about 50 years.”

“Well it doesn’t seem worth confronting anyone about it, so your secret is safe. God knows I’ve got a bunch of them myself.”

“Yes miss.”

“Kit is right, you are a smug bastard.”

“Yes miss.”

“You know about Gerald?”

“You brought him here, miss.”

“You have a tell, you know that George?”

“Yes miss.”

“Well it was before I had mate-bonded with Oki, and by the way, he knows about it.”

“Kuri?.....”

“I know about her, George, we don’t have all that many secrets so you can be a bit less Victorian about it all.”

“Yes Kuri.”

“Smug bastard. Tell me one secret. Art thinks I was married to Merlin, and that room is some sort of Museum he set up for me.”

“That was of course, before my time, Kuri, and your parents don’t explain such things to me, but I think that makes sense.”

“I wonder if he taught my body any magic. I wonder if I tried, I would be able to do things, like Ingrid does. When she tries a new power, she’s usually got that new power.”

“Try for invulnerability first mistress, just in case your tries blow up in your face.”

“Wow, good thinking, and why would you know to try for that first, George?”

“Megan helps stomp out the occasional mistake, Kuri.”

“I’ll just bet she does. Now, let’s get down to these books, I need to get my cooking started for the dinner party tonight. No cracks about me doing it by magic, OK, I was just idly wondering.”

“Yes miss.”

Inspiration

Dave lay on the bed and shut his eyes. Kit wasn't home and there was a blank canvas sitting in the studio. He never had trouble with inspiration when Kit was around, but he was damned well not going to ask her to come home. She had things to do, she would be home when she was home.

Sometimes a nap helped with the ideas, and even if nothing came, it would chew into the time until she did come home.

No ideas came.

He sat on a posing stool and stared at the white canvas. Nothing. He flicked a bit of paint at it from his brush. Nothing. He took his palette and slapped it on that so-insulting white, and screwed it as he dragged it across the surface.

Nothing.

Dave picked up his phone and went into the bathroom, just in case the constipation wasn't in his brain. Two games of solitaire later, he realized he was blocked at both ends.

Just as he was about to stand up, a voice said, "I can give you inspiration, for a small price."

"Beels, dude, a bit of privacy man, I'm on the biffy."

"Biffy? Is that another Canadianism? Anyway, for a small price, I can give you all the inspiration you need to be on your way to fame and fortune. And you left the door open."

“Like the guy you inspired to do the sad clowns on black velvet?”

“He sold millions, made millions too.”

“They’re worth about a dollar apiece. Look, Beels what are you doing here?”

“I had lunch with Kit and she asked me to drop in on my way home to let you know that she would be a couple hours late, she has make-up classes for her students.”

“Wish it was make-up sex,” said Dave, not as quietly as he meant.

Beelzabub waggled his eyebrows and said, “You’d have to have a fight, and I know for a fact, you two rarely fight. Look, my friend, she’s only got a month left in Paris, and then she’ll be here full time. Just a month.”

“Yeah, I know, but honestly, when she’s gone all I can do is wait for her to come back. It’s pathetic, I know, and clingy, and needy.”

“It’s sweet. Now how about this, you put another canvas up on that easel and you paint that feeling, that longing for her to come back. Paint ‘Kit gone’ and see what happens. While you’re doing that, I’m going into the storage room and look over your finished paintings. The galleries back home are longing for your work as much as you’re longing for Kit.”

But he was talking to himself, Dave was at the easel and his brush was a blur.

Beelzabub shook his head and walked into the closet. He saw a lot of nice things, but stuck to the four with a yellow dot in the corner. Those Kit had marked as work that Dave had left behind. Work he was no longer interested in.

As he came back out to the studio he looked again at the painting on the wall, it was of Dave and Kit, nude and in a style that was completely unique. With a sigh, he went into the kitchen where he made sandwiches and coffee to put beside Dave. As he did so, he looked at the already half finished canvas and shook his head yet again. The boy had chops.

He tucked the four pieces under his arm and vanished back to Paris. When he got there he sent a small nudge to Kit saying, "He's fine, painting, don't rush."

Kit sent a thanks back, then turned to her student and said, "Is there some place you have to be?"

"No maestro."

"Then slow it down please, going fast to slur over your mistakes only makes them stand out. Own your mistakes, use them, play with them."

"I can do that?"

"I don't know why not. Technical perfection is fine, and you're damned good, but you focus more on the mistakes than the

music. Just let them slide by, or put them into your work if you're soloing, but for preference, leave them behind like a used serviette."

"Pardon Maestro?"

"Just play it again would you please, and leave in the mistakes."

As she listened, Kit thought, "Wasn't that one of the lectures Amber gave to me?" She smiled and thought that maybe this student would be a decent performer one day. She'd have to find a teacher to match her temperament.

"Maestro, could I play one of your pieces for you now?"

"What? Where would you get one of my pieces?"

"You left it in the studio last class. I borrowed it because it looked interesting, can I play it for you?"

With some hesitation, Kit nodded. The student took the music from her bag and set it up on her stand. As she started to play, all Kit could hear was the mistakes she herself had written into the music. The piece wasn't finished, still. "Sorry, stop, could you start again please I was listening to the wrong thing."

The student smiled and started again, and once again Kit stopped her. "I am sorry, but you did want to play for the composer. Now, your technique is, as always, good, the mistakes are mine and I'll fix them, but, well... Look do you have a boyfriend?"

“Husband, actually.”

“Do you love him very much.”

“I do, I asked him to marry me two years ago.”

“Right, picture him, now picture him gone away for a long time and you have just caught sight of him walking toward the cafe you have agreed to meet in. Can you see him?”

The student nodded, closed her eyes and started again. After a few moments she opened her eyes and turned the page. When she finished, both women were quiet for a long time, each in their own thoughts.

“Did you write that for somebody?”

“For my own mate, my husband, there was a time when he was gone from me, and then he came back.”

“I liked it, and I thought I would suck up to you and play it. Now I have to apologize, I didn’t see how personal it is. I didn’t see how much emotion was in it.”

“Don’t apologize, I thank you for playing it for me. You know, each and every piece of music contains the sweat and tears of the composer. As a player you have to find the emotion behind the piece, or you have to feel what the conductor wants you to feel. You won’t always have the composer there to tell you what he felt, but that doesn’t matter. Once it’s in front of you, it’s yours. Not all pieces will speak to you, but some will

become yours. Let me have the piece back and I'm going to tweak a few things and then I'm giving it back to you."

"Maestro?"

"This will be yours, you've earned it by the way you just played it. Think of it as my parting gift to you."

"Maestro."

A Philosophy Lesson

"You watch."

"I do."

"What are you seeing?"

"I see you applying your lotions."

"And for what reason?"

"The sight is wonderful, beautiful, to see your hand moving over your body, but the feeling is exquisite."

"You have no powers, Hubert, how can you feel what I feel when I apply my lotions?"

“You are mistaken my perfect vixen, I feel your skin under your hand, and I feel your hand on your skin.”

“I believe you are being mysterious.”

“No, not in the least, come here to bed, and turn off your extra powers, allow yourself only those of a human.”

“When I finish my lotions.”

“Of course, please do not deprive me of the pleasure of watching.”

“Very well, I am here, will you teach me the magic of feeling you put on some lotion over there, while I am here.”

“It is exactly here that I will reveal the secret. Are you ready?”

“Show me, my teacher.”

“Very well, turn away from me and onto your side. Do you feel my body all along yours? The small sheen of sweat cooling your back, and then making it slightly sticky?”

“I do, and I also feel your prick between my ass cheeks, becoming larger.”

“Excellent, do you feel my hands stroking your belly, your breasts, your neck, your face?”

“I do, indeed.”

“Now concentrate on the feeling of my hand, separate from your skin.”

“Yes, I feel your hand, but I don’t feel what your hand feels.”

“Do you not? It feels your skin.”

“I see, but I still do not see.”

“Roll toward me now while I lay on my back.”

“I do love your chest, with it’s almost fur.”

“So you feel my chest, and you feel what your hand feels.”

“I like what it is feeling now.”

“Good, but you will not distract me yet, vixen, do you feel what your hand feels.”

“I do.”

“Close your eyes, do you still feel it?”

“Yes, eyes closed or open.”

“And do you believe that, at this moment, with only your human senses, we feel and are felt the same?”

“I have no reason to believe that our senses are somehow different from each other, although I know the tip of your left little finger is dead from an old injury.”

“It is, can you imagine that your own little finger is slightly damaged?”

“I can do it...”

“No my love, nothing less than perfection for you, but can you say to yourself, my finger is slightly dead, I don’t feel his skin quite like I do with the others.”

“I can,” Lorraine said with a note of surprise.

“Now, let us see if you have learned. May I use some of your lotion?”

“You should, my handsome man, a woman’s skin is not more delicate than a man’s but is usually softer because of those very lotions.”

“Very well, here is some in my hand, do you feel how it is slightly cool on my fingers?”

Lorraine nodded, obviously concentrating.

“Relax yourself, and look, see my hand move over my arm. You have felt my hand on your arm, you have felt my arm with your hand. Do you see?”

“It is like we are connected. I can feel you smoothing the lotion. I can feel it on my own arm. You are a wizard, my love, I am positively flushed, embarrassed that you have known me so intimately for so long.”

“And now you know why I watch you apply your lotions, I have begun making love to you while you are still getting ready for bed.

“I truly am blushing now. Stay there and tell me what you feel now.”

“I feel the softness of the fur between your legs, the lushness of your tail, the springiness of it as I squeeze gently. I smell the musk in the fur at the base of your neck.”

“I feel you becoming engorged while you look at me, I feel your need to penetrate me. Oh my dear, this is too intimate, how do you stop?”

“Why would you stop now that you know the connection between us? It is the same connection between ourselves and your hair brush, your lotion bottle, can you feel the bottle now, it’s weight, the smoothness, the roughness of the label? What I have shown you is nothing special, and yet it is everything.”

“But I thought your philosophy was everything to you.”

“My philosophy starts with my connection to the world. I don’t live in an idea, I don’t live in isolation, I live here, in the world, as do you. I see something, I know what it is to lift it, I drive a car and I know where it can go, through which spaces. I am in the world and it is in me. I see you, you see me.”

“Is this part of how you fight? I have always wondered at how well you fight.”

“It is the whole of it. I see my opponent, I know what he is about to do and I am there before he is.”

“This connection?”

“Of course, when you fight, do you not touch your enemy’s mind and use the knowledge of what he will do, to defeat him?”

“If he is strong, yes. If he is weak, I just bite.”

“I am not strong like you, I must watch and see.”

“You are a liar, last evening you lifted me on your shoulders and walked me to the doorframe so I could hang on while you did terrible things to my pussy.”

“My dear, you will not shock me, and I can do that because you allow me to do it.”

“Any time. Your philosophy seems odd to me. I thought all philosophy started with the assumption that your senses betray you, and so you must argue from first principles, as in ‘I think’ which asserts your existence.”

“It would assert that I am a dead man. I have no time to think and certainly no time to doubt my senses while I live in the world, let alone fight some being. I have no reason to doubt what my senses tell me, they have got me this far, so I shall live ‘as if’ they are accurate.”

“But your senses do lie, you cannot feel with the end of the little finger on your left hand, for instance. Touch something with that and your senses tell you there is nothing there.”

“Aside from the other senses, pressure receptors, proprioceptors and such, you are correct. But you and I both know that my little finger is injured, it is not normal. I live with it like that, and make adjustments. When I wear shoes I cannot feel the ground beneath me, yet I have no reason to doubt that it is there, unless I have the sensation of falling. We are born in the world, with other beings, not alone on some ideal plane. Why would my senses not be adapted to that world?”

“I believe I can understand what you are saying, and your lesson has remained with me. I can feel the pressure of your cock, and I wonder how you can still think with that much blood away from your brain. Please come back to bed and we will continue the lesson of connection.”

“Vixen.”

Back for the Weekend

When Kit got back from Paris on Friday night, Dave was still painting, he was on his second canvas and it just about broke Kit's heart to see them. "Dave, I'm here, I'm never going to leave you, these are so, so sad. I'm back and we have the weekend together. It's only another month, I promise."

Dave spun around and without thinking to put the brush down, hugged Kit hard, painting the back of her shirt. "Beels was here and suggested I paint what it felt like to have you gone, and I just got into it. You know, it made me feel better, but not as good as seeing you now."

Kit's heart melted, how could she be so cruel as to leave this guy alone for even a minute. "Dave the weather in Paris isn't bad now, why not come back with me on Monday."

"No, no, I distract you when I'm there, I'm fine Kit, I really am, I just sort of lose momentum when you're gone, but look at these. I think I'm on to something here. I can see a whole series on longing."

"They are good, Dave, but they make me sad."

"Really? Is that good?"

Kit squeezed him, and then stroked his cheek. "Of course it's good my lovely big man. They're magnificent. Now, did you work all night and day on them?"

“What time is it?”

“It's Friday.”

“I guess so,” said Dave with a sheepish grin.

“Right, into bed with you, I'll come for my cuddle and then I'm going to do some work around the place while you sleep. I'll join you later.”

“Promise?”

Kit took him by the hand and led him into the bedroom. She lay down on her side and squirmed herself into the curve of his body. She could feel a little bit of a belly starting to show up and thought to herself, “It fits my lower back nicely.”

Dave dropped his arm over her, closed his eyes and buried his nose in the back of her neck. Kit could feel him relaxing, he really did suffer when she wasn't there. It took a few minutes but soon she felt his breathing smooth out, and then that twitch he always had just before he fell asleep.

She stayed where she was for another ten minutes, soaking up the feel of him. She missed him as much as he missed her, but she didn't tell him as often as maybe she should. Dave was such an open book, she didn't need powers to know what he was feeling, between his paintings and his face, there was nothing hidden at all.

His skin against hers, his arm curled protectively around her, seemed to be radiating peace into her. Somewhere deep down,

he knew he was a big man, and a brief flash of the room exploding, with him shielding her, went through her head.

Kit knew she overthought things, ever since she was a child, she had to keep poking things, like a chipped tooth, she would probe and probe. But here, beside Dave, she could let it go.

Her job in the world was to be with him. If she helped him to paint, he helped her to write and play her music. If she babied him a little, looked after him, it was her choice, she knew that and loved that he let her baby him. Cooking wasn't her thing, but he ate everything she ever made and praised it. "It's made with love," he would say when she made a face at how bad it tasted.

With those thoughts drifting through her mind, Kit dropped off to a human sleep. Not something she did often, but to hell with the dirty apartment, Dave was there, surrounding her, protecting her, and she felt warm right through.

Her last thought before sleep was that maybe she would wander into Dave's dream.

"You again?" She seemed to have wandered into that brown fox's dream.

"Hello Kitsune, I can put you into Dave's dream, but I wanted to speak with you again. I have been thinking about Dave's dream, that black hole, and I think there may be a problem there, but I don't think it is a problem for now, some time many years in the future. Just be watchful of him."

“Can you tell me what sort of problem?”

“I'm sorry child, I don't know anything beyond that.”

“Lorraine, you have called me child, is it because you are older, or are we family?”

“All Raynards are family, pet, but yes, many generations ago I was a vixen in Ray's line. We share a direct family connection, it's why I can share your dreams.”

“If you can't go to the family world, should I dream more often so you can share my dream?”

“You are a love, but I have my man's dreams to live in, as you have Dave's. Now, before you ask again, I also have the feeling that you and I will meet in the flesh quite soon. He may have a job for both of us.”

“Who? What job?”

“Even in your sleep, you work and work to fix the world. Be quiet child, leave be for a short time, the world will come back to you soon enough.”

And with that, Kit found herself in Dave's dream. This one had nothing to do with a painting, and everything to do with Kit herself. Dave was indeed protecting her from something, she didn't know what, and she suspected he didn't know, but he was holding her tight. Terrible blows were being struck on his back.

She could see that all he knew was that she was small, and

needed him to protect her. He didn't see that she was a spirit being, or the extent of her powers. Should she help? No, it was a dream, he would be fine, let him protect her, she could feel his joy at being able to do so. Perhaps he did know just how powerful she was.

Kit didn't do anything as stupid as squeak “help me, help me”, but she sent wave after wave of thanks toward Dave as he endured that pain for her.

She thought that maybe dreams held truths, as much power she held in the outside world, there was a core inside that she needed him to protect. At the centre of her being, there was a small hole that he filled, and because of that, her being was safe. She had a loving childhood, with several parents and many teachers growing up, but there was always that tiny, empty spot that threatened to become larger. He stood exactly in that spot.

On Saturday mornings Kit and Dave had a bit of a routine. First Kit would make French Toast and cut it into shapes like the Eiffel Tower and the Pyramid. They would laugh, every time, and chat about their week. Then to Planet Bean for coffee, brewed coffee this time, not espresso, with whatever sweets the place had managed to snag for sale.

After that they would wander down to the Farmer's Market, saying hello to every vendor, looking at the sausage, the knitting, the artwork. They would pick up lunch and dinner, usually dumplings and some sort of meats. Oops, watch out for the small boys fighting in the aisle, giggling and pushing each

other. Then it was outside to pick up some fresh vegetables.

The two were looking over the new potatoes when Kit felt a huge wrench. She looked at Dave who said “I felt it too, what could make me feel it too?”

“The George, I think it's gone.”

“What? How could it be gone, it's a great bloody apartment building, where would it go?”

“Come on, we need to get there.”

A Bare Field

Okami was going over some case files with Stan and Megan. They were a mess, and Oki had insisted that they update and file them all properly, “For ease of auditing.”

“But Oki, there is nobody to audit us. We are the highest court of appeal. We have perfect memories and never even wrote this stuff down until you insisted,” complained Megan.

“Well it's unprofessional, and we ought to audit it ourselves if there is nobody else. Being the highest court does not give us permission to be arbitrary. What would happen if we simply started to change the way we judge just because we were tired, or irritated, or wanted to push our own agenda.”

“I’m tired and irritated all the time,” said Stan, “and my agenda is to punish those who take life, as well as those who treat others as less than beings. I don’t need all this bookishness to do that.”

Megan looked at Stan with a crooked smile, “If you came home from the bar and stopped chasing skirts all night, you might not be so tired.”

Oki looked from one to another, “That’s an act, you two, what are you not discussing?”

They both looked at Oki with surprise, but he said, “You didn’t raise a stupid kid, you two, and neither did Mom and Dad. I see a lot more than you think I do.”

Megan looked at Stan who shrugged, “Oki, we have books, going back centuries, but Stan has a different temperament from his father, and so there was a bit of a discussion and his father retired, turned the Nanabozo business over to Stan. It works the way we do it, you said it yourself, we have perfect recall, there’s no real reason to write it down.”

Stan looked at Megan and said, “Except for the books you create and send to Oren each month. It looks like temperament, as you called it, really does skip a generation. Oki is a lot like Oren.”

Oki was getting angry, “There are books I could have used for precedent? Who is this Oren, anyway?”

Megan tried to calm the situation, “You could always ask us, Oki, we told you what had been decided and why, you had your precedents. Oren Longfang is your grandfather, Stan’s father.”

“He’s no father of mine, preferring a book to a fight.”

Oki took a couple of steps toward Stan, “You never told me...”

Megan stepped in front of Okami, “It seems some things come down each generation. Oki, Stan, enough. Stan we should have told Oki about his grandsire, and we should have given him the books, they would have helped him.”

“How?”

“Because, father, I can only ask you two specific questions about a case, but if I read through the books, I can find similar cases, similar situations and associate them to help make a better judgment.”

Stan wasn’t convinced, “What’s wrong with us just deciding at the time?”

“Because, father, that makes the law arbitrary. Do you decide a case one way on Monday and another on Thursday?”

“That would mean there is no law at all, just a dictatorship.”

“And what of decisions that bend the law one way and then back again another way, some years apart. The law should be a straight line, or perhaps a curve, not the path a sick or wounded elk would take across the tundra, weaving all over when there

is a straight path.”

As he did when he lost an argument, Stan folded his arms and blew out through his lips.

Megan smiled, despite their tendency to fight first and think later, they both had good minds. Stan wasn't the world's strongest reader, he never got the hang of it, but there was nothing wrong with his mind, and Megan did the reading and writing for both of them. It was good to get that out in the open.

Oki looked fondly at his father and said, “I will respect your wishes, Stan, and proceed as we have been doing.”

“Oh for... you're worse than Megan. We'll meet your grandfather and you shall have his books and Megan's to read to your heart's content.”

Just then the three of them froze, there was a wrench and suddenly they were outside, or rather the inside disappeared, the building disappeared.

What was left was a bare lot, no hole, no utilities, it was as if the place had never been there. Kuri, sleepy cat, was lying curled on the ground as if she was still in their bed. She had been in the next room during the discussion and now she woke and said, in a just woken up voice, “Whaaa?”

Art was stretching in bed, Ingrid was softly making a sound like an old propeller driven fighter from the movies. He loved Saturdays, a day off to spend with his Goddess. He was just about to roll over and make her even louder when he felt it. Ingrid's eyes popped open and Art said, "Get us to the St. George, now."

Amber had finished her practice and was cooking breakfast with Coyote curled up on the rug by the kitchen door. When they felt it, Coyote said, "Let the kids take care of it, they'll call if they need us."

Amber considered that and said, "if they can't handle it on their own, it will be pretty serious, but they'll call, you're right Coy," and she went back to the pancakes. Coyote noticed he was drooling and pulled his tongue back into his mouth. Saturday morning pancakes were just the best.

Curiously, Beelzabub in Paris felt it and thought to himself, "perhaps I'd better go check on the paintings." As he arrived in the studio in Guelph, he realized he was many, many floors above a bare field. As he started to fall, he extended a hoof quickly down to the ground and then lowered himself as gently as he could. Landing on his ass in a small puff of dust, he looked around, but nobody seemed to have noticed him land.

Just about half a second after that, Kit and Dave showed up and Beels felt a lot better for that. He'd thought that perhaps they had disappeared with the building.

What Kit and Dave saw when they arrived, was Hubert, kneeling on the ground, and Lorraine standing. He had his arms wrapped around her waist and she had a dreamy smile on her face. She was bouncing between woman and fox. When the two of them finally noticed that they were outside, Hubert stood up, completely oblivious to the fact that he was naked, and nodded a greeting to everyone.

Oren Longfang, who had also appeared on the field, along with his desk, pulled his glasses down his nose and peered at Hubert, "Pants, dear boy, pants."

Lorraine quickly put clothes on both of them and gave everyone a lazy smile.

Curiously, the last to show up was Nadja, who always had a hard time figuring out whether the building was real or not. Being a ghost, the building's moves tended to make her lag a bit in the last place before she caught up. "Oopsie," she said.

Stan turned to Oki and said, "And here's your Grandfather now."

Introductions and What the Hell

After a few moments of “What the hell just happened,” the folks moved together and said, more or less at the same time, “What the hell just happened?”

Hubert nodded, cleared his throat and said, “Perhaps introductions, and then maybe Lorraine might have some answers, in the absence of the St. George, she has been here the longest. We four here, Oren Longfang, Nadja, Lorraine, and myself, Hubert, are agents for the St. George.”

“Aha, you’re the employees that the George told me about.”

“Which would make you the lady, named Kuri this time, our ultimate employer. So nice to meet you. Megan we know, which would make you Stan and Oki.”

“We’re Dave and Kit.”

“The other two,” said Lorraine.

“Sorry?” said Kuri.

“There are always eight, four agents and four owners if you wish, or four in the shadows and four in the light, to be more precise. It appears that he has somehow expelled us as he was pulled somewhere else.”

“And me,” said the Doorman as he walked from his hut.

“That settles it, this was not one of his normal jumps around, he would never leave the Doorman behind.”

Hubert, ever the gentleman said, “And our others?”

Kit replied, “The fellow with one hoof is Beelzabub, from Paris. Art you probably know, he’s the manager, and Ingrid, his Goddess.”

Beelzabub looked down, said, “oops” and now he had two feet.

Hubert rubbed his hands together and said, “Right, Lorraine can you give us any idea as to what happened.”

“I don’t know, I suspect not. The St. George is alive, as you might have figured out. Megan was there when it happened, and she told him that he had to look after the lady, that’s you Kuri, and that he had to do some civic good if he acted at all. This he does through we four agents. As to us, Oren Longfang came to find someplace quiet to do his research, I came earlier, looking for a refuge, Nadja is a ghost, waiting for her lover, and Hubert, well, he was of such use to the George, that when he died, he was reconstituted.”

Hubert looked embarrassed, “It was old age, and since it wasn’t reincarnation we had to find a new name. Makes me think of frozen orange juice”

“Right, so that’s some history, but I’m afraid that doesn’t get us much closer to knowing what happened to him.”

Kuri frowned, “A theft? There was a lot of loot in the

basements, including my museum.”

Art looked at Ingrid, “She knows?”

Kuri overheard and said, “Really, adults figure kids are blind and deaf, of course I know.”

Lorraine had been thinking, “Not a theft, anyone who could steal the St. George could make their own treasure. This took a lot of power.”

Art suggested, “The Giants or the Elves?”

Ingrid nodded, “Could be, they might have the power, but I thought the Giants were still ‘discussing’ their constitutional reforms.”

Kit spoke up, “Not the fairies, I asked Papa. He says call if we need him. Ingrid, what about one of the Gods?”

“I’ve got Woden working on that, if it’s one of the old ones, we’ll know,” and with that Ingrid looked pointedly at Beelzabub, “As for the new ones?”

“Not my brother, certainly not me, I just about broke my tailbone falling from the penthouse that wasn’t there.”

Nadja shyly raised her hand, “I sort of went along with him for a while before I was squeezed out. It didn’t feel like our planet. It was strange, and I didn’t like it. I feel sorry for those who didn’t get thrown out.”

“Oh lord, the tenants!” said Kuri as Oki hugged her to his side.

“Dave, can you run to the lunch counter and get Liz please, she knows as much about other worlds as any of us, and I’ll ask Mara.” As Dave took off, Kit said to herself, “That will keep him away, in case something happens here.”

Hubert had been looking at Dave, “I don’t think you have to worry much about him, I remember him.”

“You do?”

“I was a trainer for the Foreign Legion and I remember him. He’s an artist right? He went through his training and then the commanders realized his talent for painting, they gave him leave to go to school on the condition that if he’s needed they’ll call him back.”

“What!”

“Give him a rifle and a knife, he’ll be fine, Kit.”

“He never told me any of that!”

“It happens, was he heartbroken? Trying to forget someone? I know it’s corny but a lot of recruits came because of that, they try to discourage it, and if they’ve got other talents, like Dave, they encourage them to go ‘get a life’ as they say. Speaking of rifles, Mr. Doorman, is your arsenal intact?”

“Yes sir, you know the combination, please help yourself.”

Hubert and Lorraine wandered to the shed and were soon heard rummaging. When they came back they were wearing their body armour and had a double armload of weapons.

“Art? You will want these I suspect?” said Hubert as he handed him a pair of swords and a pistol. “And some body armour.”

“How did you know?”

“From the way you stand, you’re already in a position where you can fight anything that comes out of the field. I suspect you trained with my student.”

“With Gil Hamish, but mostly with Sam Martin.”

“Good, please don’t call her, it would upset her to know I’m alive.”

Lorraine looked disgusted, “You, would be upset Hubert, she, would be ecstatic. If we need her, call her.”

It was at that time that a rumbling could be felt in the ground. Hubert looked at Nadja who said, “Nasty, same as before.”

“Damn it, and we’re so much closer to the stone. OK people, we need to surround the field and don’t let any of them get through. Nadja?”

“More solid than before, I don’t need to translate them.”

“OK they’ll come out able to kill, they’re Rompo, they can be killed.”

Beelzabub looked up, “Do they have souls?”

“I doubt it.”

Beels looked at Kit, “Mine?”

“No souls, no use to you.”

“Your Grandfather?”

“All right, Coyote, do you have a moment?”

“Of course grand-daughter, what can I do for you?”

“Do you feel the things coming?”

“Yes.”

“Beels wants them to have souls so he can harvest them for his Hell.”

“Oh, the nice man I met in Paris, very well, would souls for two months be long enough?”

“Long enough to count, thank you,” said Beelzabub, and then turned to Kit, “Afterward I’ll take my leave my dear, I can’t wait to see my brother’s face.”

Coyote took a deep breath and sang a note that was not unlike the bell-tone the Rompo made, he aimed that note to the ground.

“Thank you Pappy.”

“No, no, Amber says you can’t use that one. She said, ‘how about Gramps’.”

“OK thanks Gramps.”

Shortly after that, the Rompo erupted from the ground, but they were confused, with a soul they were conflicted about eating men’s flesh. Coyote must have given them men’s souls.

But being human souls, they soon reoriented toward killing humans. It was too late, in that hesitation, Beelzabub had grown to gigantic stature, horns, a goat head, hooves and a massive flaming scythe. As they emerged, he swept through hundreds of them at a time. The rest of the beings kept well back as Beels roared with glee, each stroke of the scythe caused him to swell and soon he was on fire as well.

Ingrid looked at Kit and said, “Who’s this guy?”

“He’s Dave’s agent in Paris.”

“Ah,” Ingrid nodded.

A Plan of Action

“Two questions,” said Kuri, “one, why did those things come out of the ground here? And two, what is this stone?”

“Spirit channels,” said Liz, who had arrived with Dave, “around here there are underground pathways for spirits to follow.”

Megan nodded, “One of the things the St. George does is squat over those channels. You know how he’s always going on about the view? He means the view underground, so when he jumps for seemingly no reason, he’s dropping his basement on the heads of something that shouldn’t be above ground.”

“And the stone?”

“Ah, that would be my fault,” said Hubert, “I took a stone from Southern Africa and put it in the Blacksmith for safekeeping. It allows proto-nasties, pre-spirit beings to become real. Basically, it gives life to bad ideas.”

“So that stone attracts nasties and the St. George sits on them,” said Kuri.

Liz laughed, “Balance my dear, balance in all things.”

Hubert walked to Dave and said, “You might not remember your old drill sergeant, but...”

Dave punched him, or tried, at the very last minute, Hubert

turned his head and the punch whizzed off into space. Hubert laughed, “Well perhaps you do, anyway son, here’s a rifle, a knife and some body armour.”

“Wait, Hugh, there may be something else he ought to have instead of a gun.”

“What’s that Lorraine?”

Lorraine pointed to an easel, a canvas and a box of paints. “He does tend to see things in the long view, perhaps he left those here for Dave, they do have a pretty tight connection.”

Kit seemed to wake up, she was still trying to get over Dave as a soldier, and one who enlisted to forget a past love. Oh dear, what had she done. She said, “Dave, I think maybe you’re supposed to paint the St. George. Can you do it as real as you can, what do they call it?”

“Photorealism, Kit, and yeah, I think that’s what I am supposed to do.” With that, Dave handed the weapons back to his sergeant and walked to the easel.

Mara had arrived, she and Liz were in a conference and had just called Nadja to tell them as much as she could about the world that had stolen the St. George when Nadja called out to Hubert, “Something else is on the way.”

“Do we need everyone?”

“Scout I think.”

“Right, the eight, minus two, we six will take care of it, the rest guard Liz, Mara and Dave.”

“Seven, said the Doorman.”

“Eight,” came a voice coming across the field, “Eight you son of a bitch.”

“Sam! who called her!” demanded Hubert.

“Nobody called me old man, I felt you, I was asleep and suddenly I knew where you were. You let me believe you were dead. Bastard! You let me grieve for you.”

Lorraine was suddenly beside Sam, talking fast, “He was dead, Sam he was dead, you buried him and he was dead. The St. George put him back together because he was the best human agent he’d ever had. Sam, he was shielded by him, you couldn’t feel him until the George was gone. He wasn’t hiding, he was working as an agent for the St. George.”

At about that time Sam stopped walking, turned to Lorraine and said, “Who the hell are you and why are you talking to me.”

Lorraine smiled hugely and said, “So nice to meet you Sam, please don’t kill him, we need him right now, and you too. We’ll talk later.”

“Jesus, do you intend to talk something to death?”

And just then, because sometimes events do have a sense of

timing, the already churned up ground erupted again.

“Grootslang, this channel must go to the south of Africa,” shouted Lorraine over the trumpeting of the giant serpent, “What is it doing above ground?”

“Stone. Humans to me, wolves left, dogs and cats right, it will go for the stone.”

Okami and Oren went left, the Doorman and Kuri went right, and as usual, Hubert went right up the middle, this time with Sam.

“Shit, stupid plan!” shouted Lorraine, “Kit, to me, up the middle!”

Kit responded instantly, growing to a giant fox, Lorraine right next to her and the two of them stepped in front of the humans. “Sit! Stay!” Lorraine shouted to them, and then she was at the serpent’s face, tearing and slashing, as it rose higher, trying to get away from Lorraine, Kit went for the throat. The others were tearing at the sides, Kuri had moved to a Great Lynx and was matching the serpent coil for coil. The Doorman, as suspected, grew to a huge, three headed dog. He did tremendous damage, two heads grabbing and ripping the serpent’s skin apart, the third head diving in to rip out the insides.

The thing was down and dead in seconds, and as they all moved back to their human forms, Lorraine could be heard spitting and retching, “Damn I hate the taste now, even more than back then, am I getting allergic to these things?”

“What, the hell, was that,” asked Hubert in a dangerously low voice.

“Don’t be mad, Hugh, but I’m damned if I’m going to let you kill yourself again, especially since Sam just found you once more.”

“Woman, do you know how wrong it is to countermand a command during a fight?”

“You’re not my commanding officer, you’re my lover and you can bloody well shut up now. Is there coffee, my mouth is vile.”

A coffee appeared in her hand, she didn’t bother to ask who to thank, she just took a huge gulp, swished and spit, then took another gulp.

Sam was doing some fast thinking, her head whipping from Hubert to Lorraine and back again. Kit touched her mind and saw that she was receiving shock after shock today. She really needed to kill something, just to get her footing back. She had been ready to fight the Grootslang and now all that combined with the shock of finding her teacher and then knowing he had a lover, was too much.

Kit did something she rarely did, in any circumstance. She reached in to Sam’s brain and turned her off. Then she scrubbed the adrenaline, and slowly woke her up again. When her eyes came open, Kit’s arms were around her and she was saying, “Sorry, sorry Sam, your heart was about to explode, sorry, I had to reset you.”

Sam returned the hug, dropping her swords on the ground and cried into Kit's neck fur for a very long time. When she got that out, she looked at Kit and said, "Thank you, thank you my friend, I'll be OK now, no killing him just yet," which made Kit laugh.

In the meantime, Hubert and Lorraine seemed to have settled their issues and were waiting for Sam. She walked over to Hubert and said, "In the movies I should kiss you and then slap you. I greet you my teacher," and she bowed deeply.

"Oh Sam, you don't know how badly I wanted to tell you I was still here, but I couldn't let you grieve for me twice. Will you forgive me my mistake?" With that he opened his arms and Kit stepped into them.

When she stepped back, she turned to Lorraine and bowed saying, "I greet you sister and thank you for your assistance."

Lorraine was taken aback, but bowed as was proper. She tipped her head to one side and then straightened it again as she said, "Greetings sister-wife."

Sam stepped back, she was so stunned by this, but stepped forward into Lorraine's arms as she opened them. Lorraine went below the belt and gave Sam a good squeeze on her ass which caused Sam to laugh.

Kit walked to Dave and said, "How is it going?" He just held out his hand and said "Sandwich?"

Who Dunit

A sandwich disappeared from the fridge at the lunch counter and Kit handed it to Dave. He hadn't finished it, but she could see that the painting would be as close to the St. George as the real thing.

Meanwhile, the searchers were having no luck locating the world the building was on. There were just too many worlds and Mara hadn't visited them all.

Stan turned to Megan and stared at her. They had sat out the fights so far, as had Art and Ingrid. No sense getting in the way, but now Stan was staring at Megan. She looked at him and with a lopsided smile said, "You're the one who called him a coward, Stan. He never told you he was, he just wanted some space to do his research so he resigned. But he never said he was a coward!"

"Megan, he's magnificent, I've never seen anyone move that fast."

"He got the name Longfang for a reason, did you think it was a literary prize? He had a whole life before you came along, you never saw him fight, you only saw him with his glasses and a book in front of him."

"Will he... "

"Oh just go to him, you idiot, he's your sire."

When Stan got to Oren, he was just finished telling Okami that

he was a damned good fighter, “Who taught you?”

“Stan taught me, and thank you sir. Do you really have casebooks?”

Oren laughed and nodded, “They are at your disposal.”

Oki was beaming as he turned away to find Kuri.

Stan bowed low and said, “Father, I must apologize for thinking less of you than I should have, for all my life.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, get on up Stan, before you roll over on your back. Fathers and sons get it wrong, it’s a tradition, I should never have pushed you toward the books.”

“May I visit?”

“I would be very happy, son, and may I say you did a wonderful job with Okami.”

“He takes after you, father.”

“Nonsense, he is yours, he fights like you and his mind is sharp, like yours.”

As Father and Son introduced themselves to each other, Liz was frustrated, “I don’t know if we can do it, we have no clue.”

“You may be hasty, Shaman.” said Kit, “Come look at this.”

The search committee gathered behind Dave who was still

working hard. Nadja gasped, "That's the place!"

Sure enough, the background of the building wasn't Guelph, it wasn't anyplace on earth. "Can you get a fix?" Liz said to Mara.

"Not yet, not yet, I'll keep looking."

The exciting parts just keep going, don't they? In the centre of the blasted field was a figure in black flowing robes. She fairly glowed. Ingrid looked and said "Her."

"Her who?" asked Art.

"You don't recognize her?"

Art looked hard at Ingrid, who laughed and said, "It's Morgan, your sister."

"Please, Ingrid, enough."

"No it really is, although what she's doing here I can't imagine, she was banished with Merlin."

"Banished. Banished where Ingrid?"

"Uhn, oh dear."

"Gwendolyn, I have come to speak with you," boomed the

figure.

“Who the hell are you?” yelled Kuri.

“I am Morgan, student of the man you drove mad, hussy.”

“Hussy? Who's a hussy?” said Kuri to Okami.

By this time, Ingrid and Art had walked to Kuri, as had the woman who called herself Morgan. “You! Pendragon! What is your part in this?”

“None at all, I don't know you or whoever you're talking about, but I get that a lot.”

“Where is my building,” said Kuri in a furious tone.

“Gone, gone to where my teacher and I are gone. I came to tell you that it will never return. Now, be prepared...”

Ingrid stepped in front of Kuri, “Do you remember me girl?”

Morgan went white.

“Return to your exile, or be utterly destroyed, child, you have not the power to do more here. Go before you anger me.”

Morgan faded, cringing, into nothingness.

“Uh, Ingie, the building?”

“Oh hell, I forgot, that woman always irritated the blazes out of

me.”

“Can you get her back?”

“Not without giving her power here, sorry Art.”

“Well let's hope we can get the St. George back ourselves.”

In the meantime, Kuri was fuming. She spread her arms and shouted, “Appear before me Morgan le Fay, I command it.”

“Oops,” said Ingrid, “duck.”

Sure enough a massive thunderclap and lightning strike chewed up the poor field even further and Morgan was there, on one knee, head bowed before Kuri.

“Rise, Morgan, and hear me. I was to care for your master, I did not make him insane, I cured his madness and for that, he divorced me and forbid me to marry again. Do you hear me, sister?”

“I hear, but why did you banish us?”

“I did not, Merlin banished himself, took himself out of my reach because he killed my husband on our wedding day and I was about to rend him. Go back to your banishment and give me back what is mine, all my people as well.”

“I cannot, Gwendolyn, it took all my skill to take what is yours and to send myself here. I cannot undo it.”

“Child, begone then, and tell that bastard that I’ll bite him in half if he ever shows his face here.”

With that, Morgan vanished just before another lightning strike hit where she had been kneeling.

Ingrid muttered, “Showy but well done.”

“Kuri, are you back?” asked Okami.

“Yes, sweetie, I’m back. I guess I had some of the magic Merlin tapped into after all.”

“You’re not going to start dropping into your past lives are you?”

“Goddess I hope not.”

“Your mother will adjust it again,” said Ingrid, “she has to do that every few decades. But before she does that, can you pull the building back?”

“I don’t think so, maybe with help?”

“Right, sorry I stomped on your parade.”

Kuri reached out and hugged the Goddess, “Never Auntie Ingrid, never.”

A Picnic

“Busy day,” said Kit, “How are you doing, Dave?”

“It will be a couple of hours before it's done, I can see it, I think the St. George is helping. Another sandwich?”

Kit laughed and shouted, “Picnic, it's going to be a couple more hours!”

A cheer went up amongst those who were hanging around the lot. Ingrid winked at Art and made a huge blanket appear under the trees to one side of the site, spread with all sorts of good things to eat,. “We can have some shade and keep an eye on that damned tunnel or channel or whatever Megan called it.”

Kit had a sandwich, a thermos of coffee and a table in her hands, she set it all beside Dave and waved thanks to Ingrid.

Art looked at Ingrid who said, “What? What's the fun of being a Goddess if you can't show off once in a while, I'll clean it up later, it came from my Hall, I'll just send it back there when we're done, they won't notice the mess.”

“So you didn't cook this?”

“My darling boy, I've got people up there for that.”

Art sniffed a chicken leg and took a small bite, “It's OK people, she didn't cook it,” he said as he ducked a slap aimed at his head.

Along with the blanket, Woden had appeared with a big grin. “I hear there's a picnic. Hello Ingrid, I found no Gods responsible for this, it must be something or someone else. Good to see you Art.”

Art smiled and took Woden's hand, trying not to wince as the God squeezed a bit. “It was Morgan le Fay,” he said.

“Your sister?”

Kit wandered over to Lorraine who had quietly stepped away from Hubert and Sam. “I thought perhaps we could have that chat,” she said.

Lorraine nodded, took Kit's hand and they walked over to an empty place on the blanket. As they ate, Lorraine said, “What can I tell you?”

“For one thing, why aren't you with the family?”

“Not one to dance around the issue are you?”

“Why aren't you with the family?”

Lorraine sighed, “You really should ask your sire about that, it's not a great story.”

“Lorraine, I'd really like to hear it from you.”

“Fine. You can enter Dave's dreams, do you know how rare that is?”

“What? Why, can't all of us do it?”

“No, as far as I know, only you and I can do it.”

“Hunh, but so what?”

“OK here's the story, many generations ago our family were being hounded by humans, and I mean hounded, as in being run down and torn to pieces by hounds.”

“Surely not, we're too powerful for that.”

“You, are too powerful for that, you have no idea how much more powerful you have made the family. Back then, with enough dogs running us, we could be caught and killed. When I was born and it was discovered that I could get into the dreams of Humans, the family decided that I would stop them dreaming.”

“What, all Humans?”

“Those who were killing us. It would have driven them insane.”

“What happened?”

“I decided to show the family what that would be like, so I shut down the dream world.”

“You what!”

“I'm not proud of that, but they made me so damned angry. They had no idea the damage it would cause, the damage to me, to drive that many humans mad.”

Lorraine was visibly upset, and Kit took her hand again. “Tell me, please.”

“I let up on the dream world after a week, and the family cast me out with a warning not to do that again. I left, but I stopped the Humans dreaming for a short time and let them know that we could do it at any time.

“They stopped hunting us, but kept on hunting the little brothers. I wasn't happy with that, but I hoped it was enough, occasionally I would lead their dogs astray for fun, but I was slowly going insane myself.

“I left the old country and came here, where I found that I could enter the dreams of men. I became a therapist of sorts. A prostitute and a healer, basically I became a Shaman. By entering other's dreams I could remain sane, and I directed their dreams to heal them. But I was too strong. I could never be out of control, never submit to another's dream.

“Until, that is, I met Hubert. I can't control his dreams, he's just too strong, too well trained to ever submit to me. Sure he lets me drive once in a while, but it's by his permission. Does this make sense?”

“I think it does, when I first learned to sleep, I was terrified, but then I learned to enjoy that feeling of being out of control.”

“You can dream on your own?”

“Yes, it was when I was stripped of all my powers as a kid.”

“I wonder. Anyway, after I met Hubert I realized that I could become fully sane again, not just sane enough. He didn't exactly save my life, but I certainly owe my happiness to him, which is why I jumped us in front of him, he's an idiot with his own safety, always taking point. When I saw that the Grootslang would kill him, I just acted. Thanks by the way for coming with me.”

“Any time. I talked with Sam years ago about her teacher and she said she was in love with him. Is that going to be a problem?”

“It's going to be fun I think, she seems willing to make it a threesome and that means more dreams to get lost in, as well as more possibilities for sex.”

Kit laughed, “You really are the vixen Hubert calls you.”

“Well, not all of us are lucky enough to find our mate as early as you did,” Lorraine said, looking over to where Dave was busy painting.

“Would you like me to talk to the family about you coming home?”

“That's nice of you, child, but it was a very long time ago, a lot of water under the bridge, I doubt I'd like the dreamworld any more, I prefer the chaos and freedom I've got with Hubert. He

really is quite something, that rare combination of scholar and warrior.”

“Well let me know if you change your mind,” Kit said, giving Lorraine's hand a squeeze.

The Transport Unit

Dave waved to Kit and the rest of the transport unit, as they'd been calling themselves. It was done.

They gathered around the painting and had a hard look. Nadja said that it looked like the place she saw just before the George kicked her out and back to this world.

“Mara do you think you could get a fix on this place?”

“I'm not sure, it's a huge space out there, a lot of worlds.”

“Maybe I could,” said Kuri, sounding suspiciously like Gwendolyn.

“Kuri?” said Okami in a worried voice

“Just for long enough, pet, and Kuri will be back.”

“Thank you Gwendolyn.”

“I’ve got a pretty good lock on him, thanks to Morgan. I think I can get hold of the building but I can’t pull it through that much time and space. I will need help.”

Megan spoke up, “We’ve done this before, Kit, Liz and Lorraine, you are Shamans and can jump the worlds...”

“I’m not sure I can do that, Megan,” said Lorraine.

“Dreams are worlds, my girl, you can do, what you suspect you cannot.”

“Ingrid, will you help me to guide them? We may need to balance things carefully, we are talking about hundreds of lives within him.”

Ingrid nodded and took Megan's hand. The three Shamans and Gwendolyn faced the painting while Ingrid and Megan watched them. “I can’t... quite... Mara!” Mara instantly grasped Gwendolyn's arm and held her talisman tight with the other hand. “There!” said Gwendolyn, “We have it. Carefully, let me draw your strength.”

There was nothing to see, no sparks or smoke, but slowly, in the field, the St. George began to fade into view. With it, came something else.

Hubert grunted, “Ah, Humans, to me quietly please, don't bother them. Those things are ours. Arm yourselves and move. Dave, you're one of the best marksman I've ever seen, take as many clips as you can carry and get to the cover of those trees there, so you are covered but can sight.

We three, Art are you with us? We three will hold back until they start to come at us, then we use our swords. Agreed?”

Sam settled her swords, Art and Dave showed a single moment's hesitation and then nodded.

The building was still fading in, and all over it were creatures that seemed to be all teeth. Hubert looked at Woden who shook his head, “No powers, no souls, have fun.” With that the four gathered their equipment and headed toward the St. George, which was almost completely solid.

A minute later, they were set and the building was present. A moment after that, Lorraine was beside Hubert who shook his head at her. “No, my bloodthirsty little vixen, this is ours.”

She looked at the creatures, nodded, and was back beside Ingrid and Kit.

Kit now saw what was going on, she cried out and was about to go drag Dave back to safety when Ingrid caught her arm. Kit shouted at her, “Those two are insane, but Dave and Art?”

Woden was beside her and said, “Let them do this, Kit, and don't interfere, they have no powers but that doesn't mean they are powerless, Ingrid and I have some experience in this. Allow them to fight.”

Kit looked in panic at Lorraine and Ingrid, and noticed that both of them were wiggling their fingers. She looked back at Woden who winked and said, “It's allowed, favour of the Gods

and all that.”

“Dave made me promise not to...”

Ingrid smiled gently, “He didn't make me promise a damned thing. He might get wounded but he's not going to die today, Kit, none of them are.”

Lorraine said, “I've got Sam, I'm not losing her before I get her in bed, but Hubert can take his chances, he'd be very angry if I didn't let him. I think the George would reconstitute him though, he's just so damned useful.”

With that, Kit relaxed some, as Beelzabub showed up beside her. “Mine?”

Kit actually smiled but didn't take her eyes from Dave. “Not this time you maniac, there's tenants in the building and a giant flaming scythe isn't a precision weapon is it?”

“Is that Dave?”

“Yes, hush.”

“Kit I'd like to talk to you about something.”

“Hush.”

Right about then, Dave began firing. He was on one knee and had a pile of ammunition at his side. Three round bursts, target and fire, target and fire. He had killed thirty or forty of the things before they noticed what was happening. He killed as

many more before they did anything.

As he was on his last clip, the other three spread their arms and created a wall of razor sharp steel. Sam screamed, "Come you lovely creatures, meat, come get it."

They might not understand the language, but mindless eating machines that they were, they understood that there were three humans standing and waiting for them. They dropped off the building and ran toward the helpless victims.

Did we say helpless? They met a whirlwind, Art must have picked up more from Ingrid than anyone suspected because he looked like a berserker and as he drove into the mass of creatures he disrupted what little organization they had. Woden muttered, "well done boy."

Sam and Hubert were much more methodical, nothing got past them. A moment later Dave, armed only with a knife, danced into the rear of the creatures. Danced, indeed. He spun and twisted and that knife flashed red death wherever it moved. Creatures would grab for him and catch nothing at all. They would bite and bite only one of their own. He never stopped moving and Kit, watching, forgot that he was risking his life, or his body at least. She simply stared at what seemed to her an incredibly beautiful ballet. She was stunned.

Ingrid watched Art and thought to herself, "That's my man there." Woden nudged her with his elbow.

Lorraine, for her part, wasn't thinking about fighting and death, she was fascinated at how Hubert and Sam moved together.

They picked up each other's opponents, always guarding each other, one going out, the other holding back and waiting as the creatures tried to get behind, then switching. Back and forth across the chaos that Art was creating and always, always the two were in contact with each other.

Meanwhile, Dave came dancing closer and closer to the swordsmen until finally, there was nothing left to do.

Dave dropped to one knee. Art ran around looking for something else to kill. Hubert and Sam stepped sideways while checking the field and they gently leaned into each other for support and comfort.

Woden looked at Ingrid and said, "With two un-blooded, that was well worth watching."

Ingrid grinned and said, "Someone ought to go stop Art before he starts chewing his shield."

Debriefing

Kit was beside Dave. She laid one hand on his back and another on his knife hand. "Dave?"

"Yes, I can hardly breathe, Kit"

Kit flushed the adrenaline and the lactic acid from his body. As

she did, he slowly raised his head and she saw his eyes for the first time. Not crazed, but focused more than she'd ever seen before, and he could paint for three days straight. "Who the hell is this?" she thought to herself.

Aloud she said, "Dave?"

His eyes slowly unfocused enough to see her, "Kit, thank you," and he drew a huge breath. Kit helped him stand and hugged him. He hugged her back and looked around. "Someone should clean this up."

Woden heard and waved his arm. The creatures spread out and became a huge net, that net sank into the ground, "Should help keep the beasties from coming through, I imagine they taste awful."

"Dave? Can you explain?"

"There's not much to explain, Kit. When you sent me to Paris, I asked for a deferral at the school, and joined the Foreign Legion. It was supposed to let me forget, at least that's the theory. What it did was give me an outlet for my frustration and anger. I spent a couple of years in, trying harder and harder to forget by taking every combat course they had, including Hubert's course which almost killed me. But I never forgot you, it didn't work."

"You never told me."

"Kit when you took me back I knew you would be upset that I'd joined up, so I never told you. I'm sorry, are you angry with

me?”

“The dancing? What the hell was that? Surely they didn't teach you that.”

“Years of ballet when I was a kid. That was a better training for fighting than I got in the army, all those kids calling me a sissy,” Dave said with a grin.

“Dave, do you have anything else that I should know?”

“I'm a lousy swordsman?”

Across the field, Ingrid had managed to catch Art and had taken his swords away. He was none the worse for wear, quite a few cuts and scrapes, some from the creatures, but Ingrid fixed them quickly enough. They walked back to Woden and Art got a huge slap on the back, “Nicely done my boy, I watched you fight, back in the day, but you're much better now.”

Ingrid flashed Woden a look and he said, “Not that you're King Arthur, not at all, no sir. But I'm telling you, you're a much better fighter than that guy.”

Art turned to Ingrid and kissed her hard. Woden looked away and cleared his throat, “Hrrumph”

Ingrid whispered into Art's ear, “Good one.”

And then there were Hubert and Sam. Lorraine got there and caught the first whisps of Sam's distress. Lorraine reached into her brain and turned her off. "Jesus, Hubert, you know how she reacted to the fight with the Giants. She's not built the same as you."

"I know, Lorraine, can you help her?"

"I will, I'll flush the toxins and we'll tell her she passed out OK? Tonight I'll go into her dreams and start working to make sure this doesn't stick. You know she's wanted to fight beside you for years right?"

"Did you see her? Oh my goodness, did you see her? It was like fighting with an extension of myself."

Lorraine slapped him across the face, hard, "She is NOT an extension of you, you stupid man. You trained her but she's a woman who is in love with you. You will NOT treat her as anything else but an independent person. Do you understand me!"

Hubert didn't react to the slap, instead he smiled, "I thought maybe you would like her, she likes you. I wonder if he will take her on as an agent too."

Lorraine stepped back, put her hands on her hips and shook her head. "Impossible, you're impossible. Now shut up while I work on her."

While the humans were chatting, Kuri, who was Kuri again as promised, was asking the St. George what had happened.

“I barely had time to spit you out as I was dragged to that other world. I could only hope that you'd figure out the connection I have with Dave, and it seems you did.

“When we got there, some of those swarming creatures got in through the windows. I shut myself down, sealed all the doors and windows, and then I'm afraid I had to let some of our tenants loose to take care of those that got in.”

Kuri was confused, “Let them loose?”

“As you know, our tenants are those who need to be here, some of them are a bit, um, out of balance. I give them a bit of balance, help them keep control, while Lorraine works with them.”

“How does she do that?”

“Well, mostly she gets into their dreams to help them.”

“Have we always done this?”

“Yes miss, for a very long time.”

“That might explain the downtown core. So you let them loose?”

“Yes, I'm afraid so, with the agents and you owners outside, I had no choice but to let the violent ones protect the others.”

“Were any tenants hurt?”

“No Kuri, I'm afraid that the creatures looked like some of the things the tenants see in their nightmares. The creatures didn't last long.”

“Maybe it will help them. When you get a chance, please coordinate with Lorraine, we need to minimize the effects of this.”

“Not to worry too much about that, miss, most of the normal tenants will pass this off as a bad dream, they were locked in their apartments and thought they were asleep.”

“You are a devious building, you know that.”

“Thank you miss.”

“Not a compliment.”

“Yes miss.”

“Well done anyway. How are you, I saw those things chewing away on your outsides.”

“The infrastructure is fine, Kuri, I go self-contained when I move anyway, so nothing worse than scuffs and scratches.”

“Makes you look more dignified.”

“Miss!”

“OK, we’ll give you a polish, George.”

“Thank you Kuri.”

The Aftermath

“Dave, are you all right?”

“How do you mean, Kit? I feel fine.”

“I mean after the fight, after killing all those creatures?”

“They were dangerous, not intelligent, and had no souls, so Woden said, so we killed them.”

“But it hasn’t bothered you? Killing things?”

“Well I didn’t like doing it, but I was trained for it Kit, and it had to be done. Look, I really, truly, didn’t like doing it if that’s what you mean.”

“No, no, not at all, just the opposite, I’m worried that it will start to bother you. It bothered Sam, and a lot of the tenants here are suffering PTSD.”

“I’ll let you know, Kit, but I’ve got you, and I’ve got my painting, and you know that I don’t brood much. What about you, you killed that elephant-snake thing, are you OK?”

“Strangely, I hadn’t thought about it until you asked me just now. Is that weird?”

“I don’t think so, you have killed spirit beings before, the Wendigo, those spirits in Paris, that sort of thing.”

“Well, sure, but I was protecting people, and protecting you.”

Dave looked at her and waited.

“That’s what Woden meant when he said we should let you guys defend us for a change.”

“As far as I can figure it, Kit, women are ferocious, they kill to protect their families. It’s men who get all sorts of romantic ideas about fighting and the glories of war, and end up traumatized by the horror of killing. I was trained to know exactly what I was getting into, no romance involved. The only romantic thing about the Legion was me thinking it would help me forget. That was knocked out of me in about two days.”

“Was it terrible? I just can’t imagine you in the army.”

“Gentle, decent, kind, artistic type Dave? Yeah, you know there were a lot of those in training. They didn’t try to knock that out of us, not like in the movies, they just trained us really well to concentrate and do our jobs. To tell you the truth, Kit, and you may think less of me, but the more combat training I had, the

more I wanted. I wasn't interested in sitting around and doing a desk job, I loved the training, it was, I'm sorry about this, but it was about the only place where I did forget about you. I was happy in the middle of a fight."

"I'm so sorry about that Dave."

"Don't be, I know you did it for my own good, it's my fault I couldn't let go, not yours, but I'm damned glad I didn't."

"Me too, love, me too."

"I heard that Lorraine knows how to do therapy on the tenants, and she's working on Sam. She's a fox like you, why not see if she needs any help, and then if I do need fixing, you'll be an expert."

"Don't make fun, Dave, you know I worry about you. I will talk with Lorraine and see if she thinks I can do it. Apparently we're the only two foxes who can move into other people's dreams."

"Well you've never moved out of mine sweets, not ever."

"Aww, David Robbie, you big..."

"Let me put the paintbrush down, woman!"

"Lorraine, do you have to have sex with the guys you have in therapy?"

“Good lord no, some of them would get worse if they had sex with me. I mean, you can do both, and if the problems are sexual and screwing will help, why not? But no, it isn’t necessary.”

“So how do you get into their dreams?”

“We’ve got a therapy room, they go to sleep and I sit next door where I can look in if I have to, but basically I wait for them to dream and then nudge their dreams.”

“Does it work?”

“Yes, usually, it does. Most of their problems are their brains not being able to let go of something or other. Their dreams are often about their problems, and so when I nudge, they readjust.”

“But Dave tells me he doesn’t remember most of his dreams.”

“Almost all, probably. Most people don’t, but they happen anyway, the dream doesn’t need to be noticed to sort things out. Dreams do their thing whether you remember them or not. In fact I prefer that the clients don’t see me in their heads. I like to sneak in and out, it saves a lot of nonsense about ‘the woman of my dreams.’”

“Ah, I never thought of that, I can see where that might happen.”

“More often than I’d like, that’s for sure. I mean, the woman of

most men's dreams is their mom, even if they don't know it. Why are you asking, Kit? Are you interested?"

"Dave suggested I might want to help, what do you think?"

"I think that I've got all the work I can handle and more. Two or three dreams a night and the night is gone. If you're willing to help, let's see if you can do it. You can shadow me tonight."

"You're not working on Sam?"

"I will, she's been sleeping well into the morning and we're letting her. Part of that is fatigue poisons that she's got to work out of her body, and part is her keeping Hubert up to the small hours. She's got a lot of loving to catch up on it seems."

"And you..."

"I've been keeping out of the way until she feels comfortable with Hubert. In the meantime I work in the George and catch some sleep with her in the mornings."

"How is she?"

"Dunno, like I said, I've been staying away... oh you mean mentally. She's tough, she knows she can recover, she's done it before, and so she will again. She's very sweet, you know that? I mean her normal dreams contain fluffy bunnies."

"Lorraine I never can tell if you're taking the piss, you're talking about the girl who beat seven kinds of hell out of me when I was a kid."

“She could have killed you, Kit, you can see that in her dreams, and you can also see that she worries that she caused you mental stress because of it.”

“Oh, hell, I needed it. It was a good lesson, one that started me down the right path. I learned a lot about power and the responsibility I ought to have. She really could have killed me that day and that slap in the face woke me up to what that felt like, after all I'd almost killed that poor boy. If you get the chance, tell her I appreciate it.”

“I will do that, it's not a big problem but we may as well clean up what we can clean up.”

“How will you do that?”

“I'll probably have you tell her it's OK, no sense being subtle with that girl.”

Time Flows On

Kit flipped back and forth to Paris almost every night for the last month of the academy semester. She didn't want to leave Dave alone, and watched him closely, but he seemed fine. Some people just move on, and he seemed to be one of them.

With the teaching, the flipping to another time zone, and her work with Lorraine, she ended up getting tired. It was like when she was a student. Well Amber had said it was good to know how to handle it. Even if she kept the jet lag down, the time difference messed with her.

Dave noticed, and he took over packing up their Paris apartment. He stayed overnight several times 'to paint here for the last time'. He wasn't sentimental, but he wanted to help Kit cope. It did help. Kit realized that she was going to miss their Paris life more than Dave was.

The first few times with Lorraine in someone's dreams were interesting. One poor man was quite a frightening person on the streets, he would mutter and yell and flail his arms around. Drugs helped balance his brain chemistry, but they didn't quite solve his problems.

Fortunately, Guelph was a small enough city that people kept a tolerant eye on him and told others he was harmless enough.

Once Lorraine and Kit slipped into his dreams, Kit got an

appreciation for just how fragile this man was. It seemed to stem from his father leaving the family early, and his constant fear of his mother leaving too. She took her abandonment out on her son, who, not surprisingly, looked like his father. Fear of abandonment combined with constant criticism and punishment, set up a lovely vibration in his head that came out in violent outbursts.

He was one of those that the St. George had set loose on the 'demons', but he hardly seemed to notice that. It was several sessions until Lorraine noticed that the 'demons' were actually his mother in his dreams. Only then did she nudge him into seeing them as what they were, and then she nudged his mother to apologize for treating him as she did. After that, it was back to the demons where Lorraine nudged him to see them as a threat to others, and himself as a protector of others.

Kit's head was spinning, “Lorraine how do you sort all that out? It's a mess, a bunch of cobwebs in the corner.”

“Yes, dreams are like that, random threads from all over the place. I pull one and see what happens, mostly. There's sure as hell no formula for doing this stuff. Just pay attention and do what seems the right thing to do.”

“It's not like the Keen dream world, is it?”

“It is not. Do you go back there often Kit?”

“It's funny, I really only go back there to talk with the family, the fantasy worlds I used to create aren't so interesting to me any more.”

“And why is that?”

Kit smiled, “Don't analyze me ancestor, it's because my fantasies are here, in this world. They are so much more interesting than what I created, and if I want some randomness, I just have to dream, or if I want it even more weird, I can go into someone else's dream. Honestly, total control is something that was important to me as a child, but as an adult, I love swimming in the chaos.”

Lorraine nodded with her own smile. “Kit you're going to be just fine at this work.”

As it turned out, Kit was pretty good at it, she had the experience of creating her own worlds in the Keen dreamland, and the understanding she had developed during her training as a Shaman. Combined with that was her music, an underlying order to any mind that she could tease out and adjust.

She and Dave finally moved back to Guelph full time, and they were as happy as anyone can be. They had each other and old friends. Kit had her music lessons and her new profession amongst the tenants of the St. George.

“The St. George will take me on as an agent?”

“Yes, he has agreed that we can have five agents rather than the traditional four. There's certainly enough work for us.”

“It won't cost too much?”

“What cost, you're with us, you don't need an extra room, and besides, Lorraine has given up her little love den.”

“Hugh, you're being coy again, it was a brothel and I'm a whore.”

Sam blinked, but said nothing, she wasn't going to get between Hubert and Lorraine for any amount of money, they just enjoyed needling each other way too much.

“Crude vixen, anyway Sam, all it's cost is your salary and a bigger bed.”

“Good, I was worried that I wouldn't be doing my share. With the martial arts losing interest these days there aren't enough students to keep a dojo open. I was feeling bad about leaching off of you two.”

“Leaching? Girl we take your share out of your hide. Surely you know that?”

“It's always money with you isn't it L. Sex and money.”

“What else is there.”

“Ice cream, said Sam. Let's get some ice cream at the Boathouse, I'm buying.”

“You most certainly are not, it's a gentleman's treat.”

Sam and Lorraine looked at each other and said together, “Oysters!”

Hubert sighed, “This is going to be a long decade if you two keep ganging up.”

Nobody was listening, the two women were flouncing down the street arm in arm, leaving him to wander along behind them with a big grin on his face.

Kuri and Oki settled in to their life as owners of the place, and they still worked with Megan and Stan when they were needed. As it turned out, Oki's plan to wait for Kuri to return as a cat after she died of old age, wasn't needed. It seemed that her acquiring of the Great Lynx pattern from Mishelle also messed up the curse. She had stopped aging.

This of course, was a great disappointment to Jonah and especially Lila, who wanted another kid to enjoy, but the arrival of grandchildren, a boy wolf and a girl cat made up for it. There were other strays to be found as well, after all, Ray and Stan may have grown up a little, but never that much.

Woden and Mishelle remained together for a a long time, but we won't try to follow everyone for the next several thousand years. That would be too much.

Time slid by for the St. George, and life flowed on. Our four owners of the place flowed with it.

The years slid by.

As Dave got older, Kit took several courses in nursing. She had promised Dave she would not do what Ingrid had done for Art. She would leave him to age and die. Kit wasn't happy with that, but she accepted it. She would do what she could to make his time as comfortable as she could, without using her powers.

As for Dave, he painted. What more can we say?

Beelzabub continued to sell his work in Europe, where there was a steady market for it, and he also managed to find a few outlets in New York.

Dave had his illustration work as well, he reconciled with his love of the mindless (his words) perfection required. The careful attention to detail was a nice balance to the bursts of creativity he had in his own explorations of the limits of his art.

Sometimes he just had to shut his brain down and give it a rest, as he put it to Kit one day.

But, in his mid 60s, he lost Kit. Kit was still there, but in his mind, she was gone. It might have been all the supernatural things that had gone on during his life, who knows how these things work, but as she watched, Dave come to believe that he was mad, and worst of all, believe Kit had left him, her heart

broke.

She had promised, she would not try to fix him, but her heart broke.

Ingrid and many others offered to fix Dave. After all it was Kit who promised, not them, but Kit refused. Seeing just how torn apart Kit was, her friends were ready to go against her wishes and fix Dave anyway, but Megan, ever constant Megan, stood in front of them and said no. Woden too, agreed with Megan, saying that a man had the right to choose his path. Dave must have had his reasons, and only Kit had the right to go against his wishes.

Kit refused, she would not betray Dave like that, just for her own happiness. She still shared Dave's dreams and felt that maybe she could nudge him a bit. She brought herself back to him several times but eventually she was gone for good.

Her heart broke.

Dave Sees Kit

Through all the time Dave thought Kit was gone, he kept painting. If anything, his work became more powerful, but immensely sad. He dreamed of his lost white fox, and the paintings expressed his longing for her.

When Kit looked at the paintings she was sad, but also just a bit comforted. Dave had lost her physical presence but he hadn't forgotten her.

Maybe it was the paintings, maybe the St. George, an accomplished healer himself, or maybe one last nudge from Kit. We will never know, but one morning when Dave was in his early 70s, half a decade after he lost Kit, Dave woke and saw her beside him in the bed. He was terrified, he clutched at her arm, "Kit. Kit save me!"

Kit looked into his eyes and then dipped into his thoughts. There in that ruined brain, full of paranoia and fear, he saw her, he meant it, he was asking her to help him. She could see what it was costing him to reach out to her, the effort he was making to maintain a connection with her, and she acted instantly.

Kit went deep into his brain as a white fox.

She had never intruded this far, and she was horrified at what she saw, vast plaques creating holes in his brain. Here were the oily pools in Dave's desert dream that Lorraine had warned her about so very long ago. Kit knew what she had to do.

She began pulling fur out of her body and laying it across the gaps. With each gap covered she made sure that Dave wouldn't lose anything, almost all his memories were with her and she never forgot anything.

She gave him back the affair he had, she loved that he tried to keep it a secret from her to avoid hurting her. She gave him back his school days, the days in Paris. He had told her about

the training in the legion and she gave him as much of that as she could. She gave him back the affair she herself had, which Dave discovered, and which hurt him so much. She made sure he knew what he had done and thought in the last five years as well. The nurses, the home carers were all her. She let him see her so that he knew for sure, she had never left his side. She wanted Dave back, not some edited version.

Mostly, she gave him back herself, the love she had for him, that had only grown deeper with the fifty plus years they had spent together. She wanted him to know that she was there, would always be there.

As she worked, an old movie came into her head and she thought, “Where is Rachel Welch when you need her while messing around inside someone's brain.” She laughed and it helped. She wondered if Dave would remember her laughing in his brain.

She checked three times and then again to make sure she had bridged every gap in his brain, and she went over their life together once more. He might lose a bit of his childhood, but who remembers all of that anyway. It seemed to be all she could do.

As she backed out of his head, she shouted, “Heal” and returned to her body. Dave was still there beside her, looking at her face. He knew her, she could see, “Rest.” she said as he started to lose consciousness, “Rest.”

Dave was unconscious for three days. Kit fed him intravenously, and kept a constant watch. She could see his

brain healing, but had no idea how fast it would happen. She waited.

Ingrid came to visit, “Tell me again exactly what Dave told you when you decided not to help him as he aged.”

“Ingrid, I was crying, yelling, furious with him. I told him I would fix him anyway, but he just kept repeating, “Kit please don't make me live longer than I will, I need to die one day, and I need to know I'm going to die. Please promise me.”

“But he came out of his delirium and asked you to cure it?”

“Yes, I don't know why he changed his mind.”

“He might not have. Kit my love, he may not have meant let him get sick, just let him die.”

Kit stared open mouthed at Ingrid and would have clawed her hair out, if Ingrid hadn't been ready and hugged her tight.

When Kit settled down again, Ingrid said, “Good, better with me than when you learn it from Dave. Kit you don't know why Dave told you not to keep him longer than his natural time, so you didn't know what was in his mind.”

“I should have looked, I should have asked, but it hurt, it hurt so much that I'd lose him, and I was so angry at him. I just never wanted to talk about it. Oh Ingrid, I've caused him so much pain.”

“Kit, stop. You respected him as a person, as an equal, he's not

a pet for you to take care of any way you want. He's your husband, your partner, now get this out of your system because when he recovers, he's going to feel horrible that you blame yourself for his pain.”

Kit still looked frantic.

“Kit, he's a man, and a damned good one. You kept your promise to him, that's enough. He will understand. When he clawed his way up from where ever he was, he went to you. Remember that.”

Lorraine came and checked on Dave, she also stayed a long time with Kit, and slept beside her to share a dream. Kit's mind wanted to go to her guilt at not understanding what Dave wanted, but Lorraine nudged it aside into a beautiful summer week when the two of them went to a cottage by the ocean. Dave set up an easel for Kit and she painted the waves beside him. Kit woke with such joy that she felt that maybe she could face Dave when he became conscious.

Kit was in bed again when Dave finally woke. He opened his eyes and saw her smiling face but fearful eyes. He stroked her cheek and said quietly, “I see you Kit, I see you.”

After that he fell asleep and Kit buried her face in his neck, falling asleep beside him.

The Talk

Kit slept beside Dave for the first time in years, at least the first time she knew he saw her there. She took him into the dream of the summer at the ocean and in it, he picked her up and swung her around, both of them laughing in the sun. He carried her behind some trees, and made love to her on the warm rocks.

When they woke in the morning, Dave looked serious. “Kit, I heard, I remember every word you said to me while I was sick. My love, don't blame yourself, please, I wasn't clear, do you understand me Kit, it's on me. And now you've fixed my poor brain so I can see you again. That's all that matters, I am so, so sorry I caused you pain, listen to me, I wasn't clear. Do you hear me?”

Kit nodded and kissed him.

He was weak from his coma, but after a day he was up and around slowly, eating and looking at the paintings he'd done while suffering his dementia. Kit found him standing in the studio, looking at the canvases propped up against the walls. Tears were running down his face. Kit handed him a coffee and he turned to her, “I'm so sorry to have done this to you Kit.”

She looked at them and said, “How could I not know how much you love me, look at them, you thought I had left you and you still painted this. They broke my heart and comforted me at the same time. Let's not do this again OK?”

Dave laughed, “It's a deal, please fix me when I need fixing.”

“I'm going to, Dave, starting tonight I'm going through your innards and I'm fixing everything that needs fixing.”

“OK but no slipping immortality in there, I'm still looking for something in my painting.”

Kit almost missed it. “Dave repeat that!”

“Oh Kit, I didn't mean to say that. Now I'm going to hurt you again aren't I?”

With that, he told Kit about what Mike had told him so many years before, about how his painting would move toward where he wanted it, with Kit pulling him on, and his own death pushing from the other side.

Kit was silent for a moment, then she turned and walked out of the room without saying a word. Dave heard her start to play her violin and knew he had to wait for her to process that.

He sat in a comfortable chair, drank his coffee and then fell asleep.

When he woke up, Kit was sitting in a kitchen chair watching him. Dave started to speak but she held up her hand.

“I understand, Dave. I called Mike and he told me you were afraid you would hurt me, you asked him not to tell me and you know, I appreciate your efforts to spare me. But you didn't, did you? We fought for a week when you told me not to fix you, to let you die, and that was when we still had all the time in the

world.”

“But...”

Kit held up her hand again, “Let me finish. I understand why you made me promise, you are your painting, always have been, much more than I am my music. I get it, I really do, I fell in love with you, and you wouldn't be you without what drives you on.”

Kit shifted in her chair and leaned forward, “I'm not angry and I'm not hurt. You are who you are. But Dave, I would have understood back then, I swear I would, and even if I hadn't understood, I would still have respected your wishes. You didn't have to endure my pleading eyes all these years.”

“Come here,” said Dave and Kit sat on his lap.

“Not too heavy?”

Dave got up and carried her to the bed, “Not dead yet, girl.”

Afterward, they lay beside each other, Kit's head on Dave's chest. “Dave, that thing you wrote about losing me, and about our children?”

“I remember, I really thought we had children, but they were Kuri and Oki's weren't they?”

“Dave, do you want children?”

“It's too late now, Kit, but yes, I think I wanted kids. We were

so busy in our lives I never really thought about it, but now I'm older, I suppose I was finally thinking about it.”

“Why do you think it's too late? You just proved you can still get it up, and there's nothing wrong with your sperm, I just checked. Dave I want your children, I really do, let's have six.”

“Two, Kit, one to replace each of us and no more.”

“Deal.”

“Wait, I wasn't saying I agreed to having any, yet. What if they end up with dementia like me?”

“Dave, I can check your sperm, I really can, I've taken a lot of courses in the last five years, I can recognize defects and screen those out. Do you understand? No dementia, no other genetic diseases, I can do that. Colds and flu, I can't guarantee, I've never been sick in my life so maybe...”

“Enough, enough, woman, if you're going to do the work, and you should you're still 28, then I'm willing to do my share.”

“What, contribute the sperm?”

“As is only right.”

“And I can keep you healthy and sane so you see them grow up.”

“Yes please, mother.”

“Mother?”

“Have to start practising, like 'go ask your mother,' and 'mother, this diaper needs changing,' you know, fatherly phrases.”

“Well you aren't going to become a father by talking, boy, just give me a moment to turn on the reproductive organs and we can get started on this latest project.”

As it turned out, Kit didn't get pregnant for a while, but eventually they had two beautiful children, one boy and one girl. That was just chance, Kit screened for genetic disease as she said she would, but nothing else. Dave did more than just watch them grow up, he was a great dad, full of life and he was there for every big event in their life. The benefits of being a professional painter and working from home.

Kit helped a little. They cleaned the poopy butts, dried the tears, fixed the scraped knees, all those amazing things parents get to do. The kids eventually left home to go on with their own lives, and once again it was just Kit and Dave.

Oh, and the St. George. Let's not forget that Dave had a connection which only got deeper over the years. He could eventually hold a conversation with the building, and a lot of his paintings were based on George's memories. Those had pride of place in the hallways, and the mappers used them as breadcrumbs when they got lost.

An Evening Stroll

Dave was pushing along into his 80s but as healthy as Kit could make him without cheating. She was tempted to just sneak a few more years in there, but always caught herself before she did it. They would have what time together they had, and no more.

After learning about his fighting skills she worried a bit less than she might have when they went out walking. Anyway, she was allowed to fix him and she was pretty sure she could fix a broken neck if she was there. She never told Dave, but she kept a lock on him. If something happened she had a sort of reflex to catch him.

That was literally what happened one evening when he was working on a tall canvas, a commission piece for a massive bank entrance. He got careless and reached out a bit too far rather than move the ladder. His foot slipped and he was heading fifteen feet for the ground when he stopped about ten feet down and sort of drifted the rest of the way. Kit was in the kitchen doing the dishes and Dave never mentioned what had happened, he was embarrassed, he knew better than to reach. Kit smiled to herself and carried on with the dishes, she never mentioned it either.

It was one of those soft summer nights when they wandered around town. Something seemed to be in the air, there was a guy with underpants on his head outside the coffee shop. No kidding. Shouty guy was on the street, the guy that all the kids were convinced was acting as a lookout for the Mafia. There

were police chatting with citizens and being told “he went that-a way”.

As the two headed into the park, a guy with a knife jumped out from behind a bush. Before Kit could react, Dave was on it. He pulled a small sketch pad from his bag and a pencil.

“Just stop right there, no push the knife a bit further forward. That's great, now more menace. Perfect, just hold it there.”

The poor fellow couldn't do anything but pose for the crazy artist. Dave sketched away while Kit folded her arms, surprised once more by this man. She hadn't done anything, there was just some sort of magic that happened when Dave wanted someone to pose.

When the sketch was finished, Dave walked right to the would-be mugger and tore the page out of his book. “Here, have a look, oh maybe two hands, here I'll take that for you.”

The attacker handed his knife to Dave and looked at the sketch. “Wow, that's great, can I keep this?”

Dave had slipped the knife into his boot and said, “Of course, of course, thanks for the good work. Well we must get going, you have a great evening.”

As they walked away, Kit shook her head and said, “So how do you do that? Is it some sort of hypnotism?”

“Do what?” Dave sounded genuinely puzzled and Kit would have fallen for it if she hadn't seen a half smile on his face. She

took his arm and swelled up just a little with pride. Not for the first time, either.

“I miss the kids,” said Dave as they walked further along beside the river.

“They visit often, and they have their own lives to lead, we shouldn't wish them back too strongly, it might come true.”

“Maybe for you, my little witch, but I can wish all I want in the certain knowledge that nothing will happen.”

“Must be nice.”

Dave laughed, “Do you remember that story of my life I wrote when I had dementia?”

“Yes of course.”

“Remember when I figured my kids were flying around the room?”

“And then they did, for real. Oh lord Dave, the look on your face.”

“Damn it's been a good life Kit.”

“It's not over yet Dave, you're still doing great work, still pushing the boundaries of what's possible.”

“Yeah, I guess so, but when the kids were around and I had a lot less time to paint, it seemed like a lot more fun.”

“Of course it did, you goof, playing with the kids was fun, and you got it just right I think. Those kids remember nothing but good things from when they grew up. You know, Gramma Lila once told me that there is no such thing as 'quality time' with kids, there is only time. I loved having them, I mean with kids I got to sit on the curb of the road and throw stones into the middle. If you and I did that now we'd be carted away.”

“You want to do it and see?”

“Beautiful, silly man.”

“Kit do you think you'll have more kids some day?”

Kit looked at him to see what sort of question that was. She saw nothing but curiosity. “Yes, maybe someday, but not for a long time, Dave, not unless they're yours. Do you want more kids?”

“I'd, ah, I'd love it Kit, but I'm not as energetic as I once was, so maybe not. Oh hell, I'm sorry I asked, are you disappointed?”

“Oh love, of course not. Hey, we can always hope for grandkids, that way we get to spoil them rotten and send them home.”

Dave smiled.

“You know, you're really good at managing people, like that mugger back there, and me, you always know just the right

thing to say.”

“Pay attention and have a flexible mind. I had to learn how to think on my feet from that first time I knew you were supernatural, that time when you knocked the tooth out of Beels' mouth.”

“Dear sweet Beels, He's been a good friend ever since.”

“He's been a good business agent you mean. He's made a mint on my paintings.”

“So have we, dear, and if he wasn't your agent we'd have a warehouse full of canvas.”

“Really?”

“Dave you have no idea how many paintings you've done. You're a one-man production line, sometimes you're working on three and four at a time. The George would have to dig out a new storage room just for you if Beels wasn't selling them for you.”

“Oh, have I thanked him?”

“Yes, dear, you have,” said Kit as she touched Dave's thoughts and brain just to check. No, just his usual absent-mindedness, all good.

Yo Ho Ho

“Hugh, I think we’ve got a problem.”

“What’s that, pet?”

“He’s started to dream.”

“What are you talking about, buildings don’t dream... do they?”

“I don’t know, I only know one who is sentient, and I suppose that means he might dream. We know he shuts down once in a while, that’s why he got the Doorman.”

“Yeah, but shutting down is one thing, sleeping and dreaming is quite another.”

“What’s going on, what are you two talking about?”

“Not a thing, Sam, go on back to sleep and we’ll go out to the front room. Sleep tight sweetheart.”

“Lorraine, I know you go into other people’s dreams, but what made you think to go into his?”

“I didn’t, I was in Sam’s and then I was there, in his.”

“Weird. What was it about? Local building codes?”

“Funny, no it was about a pirate ship.”

“OK that’s not funny Lorraine, we’re working on the new book tomorrow, we need to sleep.”

“I’m not pulling your leg, Hugh, a pirate ship.”

“He was the captain?”

“He was the ship.”

“Oh, well we do have plenty of kids in the building, do you suppose he picked up on their dreams?”

“Maybe. God I hope he isn’t thinking of a change of profession, I hate the water.”

“What about Kuri, she’d never let him be a ship, she’s a cat. Don’t cats hate water?”

“Then what? It’s been very quiet for the last few decades, do you think he wants a bit of adventure?”

“What? We got him those radio controlled cars and he ran them up and down the hallways for months.”

“Yeah my shin still throbs, but maybe it’s not enough.”

“What if we let some building inspectors in, he loves chasing them around the hallways with broken pipes and wobbly stair-rails.”

“This felt like more than that, I wonder if we should talk to Kuri?”

“All right, you do that in the morning, Sam and I will keep on with the History of Jock Straps in Guelph.”

“I still say we should include the flotation vests”

“And the raincoats? Too broad, pet, let’s stick to the Jocks, we’re half way there anyway.”

“What, just above the knees?”

“Oh ha ha, away with you back to bed, Sam is probably getting cold.”

“And you?”

“Getting old, I’ll be there after I tinkle.”

“He’s dreaming of being a pirate ship. Are you sure?”

“I am, Kuri, I got dragged in as a deck hand.”

“I hate the ocean, something to do with being a cat I suspect.”

“Yes, but it was a dream, I don’t think he’s going to jump into the ocean, he’d leak.”

“Don’t even think it, oh dear lord. No it must be something else.”

“Why not ask him, you’ve got the clearest communication with him.”

“George! You there?”

“Where else would I be Kuri, I’m always here.”

“Not on the high seas, chasing after a fat merchant vessel?”

“What are you talking about, miss?”

“I explained about a tell, right?”

“Yes miss.”

“What’s going on?”

“I really don’t know, I think I had a dream last night, but I don’t dream. I think I was a pirate ship and Lorraine was there too.”

“Yes, we know that, but why the dream?”

“I don’t know, why any dream? Aren’t they just random things?”

“In humans, yes. In apartment buildings?”

“I’m sure I don’t know Kuri.”

“Maybe you just want a good wash? It’s been years since we scrubbed your outside walls.”

“Maybe... oh, I see. No it’s not a wash, there are people heading this way who intend to take over the building by force.”

“Apartment building pirates? Are you sure you’re not losing it, George?”

“No they’re thieves, they must have heard about the store rooms in the basement.”

“Do you need the agents?”

“No, I don’t think so, I’ll get the Doorman to delay them while I modify the basement stairs, I’ll slide them down to the channel that will spit them out in Patagonia.”

“Isn’t it mid-winter there?”

“Send jackets with them?”

Lorraine had been following along and was now laughing uproariously, “Need some bait?”

Hubert shook his head, “He let you lead them down the hall and then opened a hole under them? Nasty. I wonder though, is he now a seer? Are his dreams going to predict danger to him?”

“We don’t actually know anyone who can do that, Hubert, he’d be the first if he can. More likely his senses caught their

intentions ahead of time. He's stretched out all over this town, there's not a lot gets by him. I'm still not sure if I like his dreaming though."

"Well, pet, there's not a lot we can do about it."

"Fingers crossed," laughed Lorraine.

At about that same time, Dave was finishing another portrait of Ingrid. She loved posing for him and he loved painting her. "All done, so soon?" said Ingrid, "are you sure you don't want to do a bit more?"

Dave laughed, "Don't be a greedy model, girl, we'll work again soon, I promise."

Kit came into the room from her practice studio, she wiped down her violin and put it away the humidity cabinet. Ingrid had given her the instrument, saying, "I got this off of some guy in Italy, he worked next door to Stradivarius. It's not a Strad, Kit, but this guy was a lot more fun than Stradivarius was. I always intended to learn how to play but never quite got around to it. In fact, the guy promised to teach me, I wish I could remember his name, but we never quite got around to the teaching part. Lots of playing though."

Kit looked at the painting, then looked at Ingrid. "Have you told Art?"

"Told Art what?" said Dave.

“No, not yet, I didn’t think I was showing that much, I thought I’d give him another month of no worrying about me.”

Dave looked closely at the painting, then at Ingrid who hadn’t bothered to dress yet, then back at the painting. “Oh dear, congratulations.”

“Absolutely,” said Kit, hugging Ingrid and reaching for Dave’s hand. She and Dave were thinking about their own kids. “I take it we’re not to tell Art just yet?”

“I’ll do it soon. The poor dear will likely freak out. I think he’s forgotten that he said yes to kids. You two started a sort of fad for doing it ‘natural style’, and it’s taken a while to get me pregnant.”

“Does Woden know?”

“Oh lord, he’s more excited than I am, he loves kids. He and Mishelle are trying right now. You know, if I don’t tell Art soon, Woody is going to spill the beans. You should see him squirm around when they come over for dinner.”

“Well that’s great Ingrid, come on over a few more times and let Dave do a series.”

“That’s a great idea, I’d love to do that, Ingrid.”

Have My Heart

The St. George continued to provide a home for many people, some moving in, some moving out, some getting lost and ending up on another continent. The Owners and the Agents took care of the place, put out fires when needed, helped Megan when asked. And the years slipped by.

Dave had just celebrated his 120th birthday. A hundred and twenty, and still as healthy as Kit could make him. He had slowed down in his painting, and enjoyed more time with Kit. It had taken him a lifetime, but he finally realized that it was the search for that ultimate style that was important. He would never reach the thing he was looking for, because he was searching for the search itself. He worked to see what he came up with next.

He slowed down and savoured every moment he had with Kit, because he knew it was almost time.

Kit knew it too, she could see in his eyes and in his dreams. Dave was getting tired, worn out. She wasn't happy about it, but she accepted it. They had had a century together and she had watched him grow up, grow old, and grow more than wise. She could see why he had chosen to die one day, in many ways, she herself was still a 28 year old, the age she'd decided to stop growing older. She had suggested she age along with Dave, but he wouldn't hear of it.

“What, after sleeping with all those sexy young nurses and caregivers, I'm not going to be sleeping with an old lady, I'll

continue to have the conservative types in this town tsk tsk at me for my bit of young fluff. The old artist with the young lover. No way I'm settling for less."

Kit had laughed and agreed to be his many conquests for as long as he was conquering. After all, Hubert and Sam were getting on, and were now wandering around town claiming that Lorraine was their grand-daughter.

Dave hadn't done any painting for a couple of weeks, and Kit stayed close, she sensed he was nearing the day.

Sure enough, he woke beside her one morning and said, "Today, Kit, it should be today."

"Are you sure Dave?"

"I'm tired, Kit, I have lived the life right out of me, it's time."

Kit refused to cry, "Do you want me to call the kids?"

"I talked to them already, and Jonah and Lila, they know sweetheart, we've said our goodbyes. I just want it to be you and me today."

"What shall we do?"

"Breakfast like we had in Paris, a walk, and then I want to do one last portrait of you."

They went to the lunch counter and Mike brought baguettes, cheese and Canadianos. He and Liz didn't say much, just

squeezed Dave's shoulder and left the two alone. Of course Liz knew.

As she bit into a baguette, Kit looked up at Mike who mouthed "Ingrid."

Ingrid had gone to Paris to bring them back their breakfast.

As they strolled slowly along, it seemed like everybody they knew was out for a walk. Nobody said much, just 'good morning' or 'lovely day,' smiled and walked on.

As they walked, the memories of their life together came flooding back. Dave pointed out an ancient bush that was newly planted when they had made love one night underneath it. The downtown alleyways where he'd lifted her up and set her back against the rough bricks.

The picnics they'd had with the kids, the swings that were still there, maybe three generations replaced, but the same swings.

The boathouse, rebuilt twice, but still where they bought their ice cream.

Okami's trashasaurus was long gone to rust, but a new monster was waiting for some other young boy to fight.

They walked past their high school, where Dave was just graduating and Kit was not yet enrolled. Their age difference had seemed so large back then. It was nothing at all, now. The Albion, where they'd met so very long ago. Closed for renovations.

As they walked back to the St. George, the Doorman tipped his hat with an extra flourish, and Dave bowed in return.

Once in the studio, Dave set up a canvas and Kit made a thermos of coffee and two sandwiches. These she put on a posing stool beside him, ready for when he reached out.

Kit stayed extra still, and Dave took extra time. There she was, in the Paris studio, beautiful as ever. And behind her, not small and in the corner somewhere, but life size, was her fox. It was photo-realistic, impeccable technique, and the most loving painting Kit had ever seen. He had brought together his academic technique and his emotion. She couldn't help it, she took Dave's hand, guided him to the stuffed chair, got onto his lap and cried for a very long time.

After that, when she had cried herself out, they went to the bed. Kit made one attempt only, "Might you find a new interest my love?"

Dave stroked her face, "My dearest Kit, I love you so very much, and I am so sorry to leave you, but it is time. I can't cheat my whole life away. There's nothing more than the time I had with you. It's time for you to move on, and for me to say goodbye to the most incredible life anyone could ever hope for, my life with you."

Kit looked down and in a very small voice said, "Dave I don't know if I can."

Dave kissed her softly, then very hard, "Kit, do you remember

in Paris when you rescued me from Beelzabub. You said that you had my soul. Well my love, you did, and have always had it. Now take my heart. Reach into my chest and stop my heart.”

“Dave...”

“I love you, please Kit, only you can do this, I want to give you my heart, it’s all I have left and it’s yours. Reach in. Do you feel it beating my love, it has always beat for you, it has always belonged to you. Take it now.”

With that, Kit squeezed and Dave’s heart stopped. He was looking at her with a smile when she saw the life go out of his eyes.

Her heart did not break. She had an extra heart with her now and she knew that she would have it always. Her first and always love would be with her. She did not cry.

Her heart did not break.

Epilogue

Two weeks later, Beelzabub came to see Kit. She was sitting in the stuffed chair and looking at the last painting Dave had ever done.

“How are you Kit?”

“I’m OK, surprisingly, I’m OK. Aside from that one patch when Dave didn’t know me, it was a great hundred years, and I know that’s much more than most people get. I miss him, but I’m OK. He lived and died exactly as he wanted to, exactly as I wanted him to. It was a hell of a ride, as you might say.

Beelzabub looked at the painting on the easel, “You should hang that beside the other one, the one with you and he.”

Kit looked at him, “I thought maybe you would want this one to sell.”

“Never. Nobody deserves to have those two paintings but you, Kit. Nobody. They are what you were to Dave, this one almost makes me feel that same love for you, and you knocked my tooth out.”

Kit laughed, got up and made some coffee. When they sat again, Kit said, “It’s nice to see you Beels, thanks for coming.”

“Of course. I didn’t want to come earlier, I suspect you’ve had a lot of visitors, and the kids with their brood.”

“True, it’s been almost too busy for me to brood myself, which I guess is the point.”

“You’re truly OK?”

“I am, I really am. He was great with people, and he guided me to acceptance and then gave me the best day of my life. Then he was gone, but he’s still here, you know? Still here with me.”

“Good, because Kit, I’ve got something I wanted to talk to you about quite a while ago, but we never got to it.”

Kit refilled his cup and looked a question at him.

“Kit, a long, long time ago, Dave and I had a talk about me trying to get his soul. Kit I swear to you, this was Dave’s idea, he said, ‘maybe at the very end, you get my soul anyway.’”

“What are you saying Beels? Exactly.”

“Kit this will never happen if you don’t agree to it, but we talked and Dave thought that maybe after he was dead, he’d like to go to Hell and paint for another hundred years.”

“What!”

“Kit I loved Dave, and you, but Dave was one of a kind, and a one of a kind talent. I offered to set up his studio in Hell. No strings attached, no tricks, he paints for another hundred years and then I let him go, his soul dissipates, like Coyote made them go. I told Dave at the time I’d talk with you about this, but like I said, we never got to it.”

“Beels, if this is some kind of...”

“I swear it isn’t, Kit, I wouldn’t do that to you, especially not right now.”

“What else did you agree.”

“Well that’s the thing, Kit. There is something else, I’m to remove all his memories of you. They don’t go with him. Also, you are not to have a relationship with him. You can visit, but as a stranger. I think he wants you to get on with your life. This isn’t so he can spend more time with you.”

“OK now I believe Dave said that. But I don’t believe that you agreed to it, no matter how much you like us.”

“Well, yes, I get the paintings.”

Kit laughed, “OK, so it’s true.”

“Well look, new paintings by Dave? How are you going to explain that? Whereas I can have maybe, a warehouse full of them that are sold gradually but never get near the family here.”

“What if he doesn’t paint as well as when I was with him?”

“We will see, but honestly, do you see his ability dropping after all these years.”

“What will he do for inspiration?”

“Are you kidding, he can talk to all the guests in Hell, he’ll have loads of inspiration.

“So he paints, you give him a place to do it, and he’s not distracted by anyone.”

Beels smiled, Kit smiled.

The studio twitched, “No George, not here, it wouldn’t work but thank you for the thought. If he wants me to move on, he can’t be here, or in the building anywhere. I know you miss him but we need to let him go.

He can go to Hell.”

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