

The Trouble Magnet

Lunch Counter Stories IX



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Kam Kobold

There was a buzz around the cafeteria in the Three Sisters base. A sort of low hum consisting of nudges, nods and “hmm”.

At a table by himself was a big Kobold, he was eating as if he was stoking a steam engine with coal, methodically, mouthful by mouthful, chewed and swallowed. There was no indication that he tasted it at all, it just went in because he needed the energy.

Around him was a dead zone. Rough tough Kobold fighters would begin to walk near him and find themselves moving into another aisle.

The man gave no indication he noticed any of this, he just kept eating until his plate was empty. He stood and walked to the place where you dropped your dishes, rattling, into the bins and as he put his down there wasn't a sound. When he walked he was silent. In fact, nobody had heard a thing from him the whole time he was eating.

The effect was of a big cat, hunting. He didn't seem to be looking for anything but you got the impression he missed nothing at all. The cook nodded to him as he looked that way in thanks for the food. That same cook shook his head as the man stalked out of the door. He had known Kam Kobold for many years, as he knew his brother Ken. While he respected Ken, the cook, like so many others, was just a bit wary of Kam.

When he had come into the base, the usually tight security got a lot tighter. Scouts went out to check the surrounding area. Monitors were checked with special interest. Kam was what is known as a ‘trouble magnet’. Where he was, trouble followed. If he was here, you checked around for danger. The man was as close to a superhero as the Kobolds had.

As far as anyone had known, he was in Europe with Ash Childress, dealing with the cleanup, after the Giant war. If he was in Alberta, there was a good chance something was going to happen in Alberta.

In fact, Kam had finished his work in Europe and he was looking for his cousin, Clara who had gone missing. He had gone to Guelph and Cambridge where he realized she had been rescued from a rogue Elf by her sister Cleo and Ben Martin, Agents of his brother Ken. They had gone to the Wilmer Valley to stay with the Shaman Bogart who was, Kam suspected, healing her.

Kam was on a visit, but that didn’t reassure the folks at the base at all. Trouble had a way of finding him, and they were on high alert.

It was an old base, heavily used, and so several things were discovered, cracked pipes, machinery that had broken down, clogged toilets. Of course, Kam was responsible for all of it.

When he checked out a jeep and left the base, heading west,

there was a general sigh of relief. His reputation was such that if he was leaving, the danger had passed. When the explosion happened in the car park, the cook smiled to himself. “Serves them right for letting their guard down, they ought to know that Kam would check for that as he left.”

Kam drove along the Trans Canada through Banff and on to the Wilmer Valley. As he got to the town of Wilmer, he saw Bogie’s canoe. While checking Invermere to make sure he wasn’t buying groceries, he found Clara, Cleo, and Ben walking around town.

Cleo and Clara ran squealing toward Kam and leapt into his arms. The big Kobold caught one in each arm and swung them around like they were children, seriously impressing Ben.

“Cousin! When did you get into town!” yelled Cleo, happily.

Ben nodded, as if he hadn’t noticed the resemblance between this man and Ken, Cleo had just told him he was family.

“Just now,” rumbled Kam as he put the girls down and held out his hand to Ben, “You’re Ben, glad to meet you, I’m Kam Kobold.”

Expecting to have his hand crushed, Ben was surprised to find a firm grip, one designed not to crush. He smiled and said, “Glad to meet you too, you’re a relative I take it?”

“Been away for a few years, but back now to find Clara, only

to discover that you and Cleo rescued her from an Elf.”

“Glad to have helped, but it was a team effort, Sam Martin did the heavy lifting and Cleo finished it off.”

“So I hear, Clara you mustn’t be angry at your sister for not saving the Elf for you.”

Clara had gone quiet, but nodded seriously. With that, Kam gathered her up in another hug. “Sorry kid, Bogie still working is he? Has he come into town with you?”

Cleo answered, “Just the three of us. We were out getting some air and some lunch.”

“Tremendous, let’s go eat and you can tell me all about what you’ve been doing.”

“We were headed for the Kicking Horse Cafe, that good with you?”

With that, they went for lunch, the three Kobolds amazing everyone with how much they ate. Ben was happy with a single serving and coffee. He let the girls catch Kam up on all the family gossip while he enjoyed just being with Cleo.

Kam looked at him and then at Cleo, who nodded. Kam smiled his approval as he said, “Your father would go ballistic.”

“Fuck him and his opinions.”

Kam smiled again, Bogie was good, he'd have to thank him. He also noticed that Ben had stiffened slightly when he mentioned Cleo's father. Good, that was good, Cleo had told him something, she was opening up.

Kam looked at Ben again and he noticed his body position. 'Serious fighter' he thought to himself, also good, he'd have to check him out.

"Right, we won't all fit into Bogie's canoe, I'll buy us another one and we can head out to the island."

With that, Kam drove to the Canadian Tire to buy a canoe while the other three got groceries. The four of them set off to Bogie's island, the girls in one canoe and the boys in another.

"You're a fighter?" asked Kam as they paddled. The girls had taken off in a fit of competition, but the boys weren't biting.

"When I have to be," Ben replied carefully.

"No need, son, we'll test each other but not too hard and not now. Who did you study with?"

"He calls himself Hubert Stout, but he also used Hubert Heavy once in a while."

"I knew him quite a long time ago, maybe 40 years ago, turn around and let me look at you."

As Ben did so, Kam nodded, “Can’t believe I didn’t recognize you, you haven’t aged from when you were just starting out with Hubert. We really must have a friendly bout, I’m curious what you picked up, and also why you aren’t an old man.”

“It’s a longish story, but Hubert isn’t old any more either, the St. George reconstituted him.”

“Is that so? Well, well.”

They were approaching the island when from the shallows a gigantic sea serpent erupted from the water. Kam was over the side and had the thing by the throat before Ben could say anything. From the shore, Bogie was yelling, “Woah, woah, woah, Kam, that’s Ogotogo over from the Okanagan, he’s just being friendly. I’ve told you before Pogo, you’re going to get in trouble if you keep messing around!”

Kam let go of Ogotogo’s throat and the beast nudged him onto the island, “Sorry about that, Ogotogo, didn’t realize you were playing.”

The monster nodded and slipped back underwater.

“Patient of yours, Bogie?”

“Nah, just a friend, and how are you, my friend,” said Bogie as he hugged Kam.

A Talk with Ben

“There seem to be a lot of Kobolds around here, I thought you came from Europe?” Ben and Kam were sitting at Bogart’s table over a couple of beers.

“We’re miners, Ben, we go with the ore so when we left the old country we came here to the mountains. We’re spread a bit further apart now, but this was our first area.”

“I guess that explains why Cleo was here working.”

“This was her first stop, after she fled from the palace.”

“About that, I’m not sure how much I’m supposed to know about that story.”

“What do you know, son?”

Ben looked at Kam and saw he had used that word deliberately, “I know she was abused as a kid, and likely Clara too. I know she came out here to hide, and Ken found her but didn’t send her back.”

“She told you all that?”

Ben nodded, “Piece by piece.”

“You know more than most, Ben, she trusts you. Look, here’s the full story. Her father was King, and Cleo was first born. Her mother died young and soon after that her father started abusing her, as you guessed. Ken and I saw this and since we were much older than Cleo and Clara, we tried to protect them. Unfortunately it’s hard to protect anyone from a King, so we did what we felt we had to, we destroyed the monarchy and led the drive to our form of democracy. While we were doing that, Cleo fled here to Canada. That left Clara with her father and Cleo feels a tremendous guilt over that. Clara wasn’t happy either, but not long after that, we got Clara away from him as well.”

“You overthrew a government to protect your cousin?”

Kam looked carefully at Ben, “You disapprove?”

“Hells no. I’d have killed the King.”

“I can see that, but the country would have been in chaos, Cleo was too young to take over and there were machinations, as there always is. Killing the King would have put Cleo at risk. I understand your point, but Ken and I had to find a way that didn’t end with the girls dead and the country at war.”

“I suspect Ken didn’t hunt too hard for Cleo when asked to do so.”

“Took him years.”

“You and Ken were high in the government when this happened?”

“About the same position we have now in the new government, the guys who stay out of the limelight and make things happen. We had official titles under the King but after the coup we sort of dropped off the official map.”

“Ken is an independent?”

“We both are, more or less. Several governments tend to use us for the tricky things, like cleaning up the Giant and Kappa resistance to Mufferaw’s rule of the Giants. The things that aren’t part of international relations and treaties.”

“You guys must be good.”

“We were sort of born to be what we are.”

“How does that work? What do you mean? And come to think of it, why are you telling me all this?”

“Well, for one thing, you work for Ken and so you can be trusted. You also work for the St. George and that being can’t be easily fooled. But the main reason is that Cleo loves you, and for that reason alone you deserve to know how things are.

“Now, as to my brother and I, we are twins, born to the Kobold equivalent of a Shaman I guess. Our mother saw things clearly. I don’t mean she saw the future, but when she looked at a

situation she saw it for what it was. She didn't have a misty, wishful, or romantic bone in her body. She 'saw', do you know what I mean?"

"I think I do. You're talking about insight, seeing things without rose coloured glasses, seeing things as they are, not as you wish they were?"

"Yes, exactly, and when Ken and I were born she named us for what she saw in us. Ken means to see things clearly, to see the connections between things, to see both the forest and the trees. Kam, or Kan, my real name, means to understand how things are the way they are. Between the two of us we can pretty much predict the future. We see what is happening, and why it's happening and so a little bit of extrapolation and we can see what's about to happen."

"Cleo told me you were known as a 'trouble magnet', but you don't attract trouble, you go to where it is, don't you."

"You are as clever as Cleo says you are, son, that's right. Ken is the guy with connections, the guy with the organization and I'm the guy who does the stuff none of his agents can handle. The stuff we want to keep in the family. Like overthrowing a King."

"You went right after Ogopogo, no hesitation."

"Yeah, that sort of thing, I take on the monsters, Cleo's father being one of them. I've never killed him because we didn't

have to, he's been a real good boy since he was deposed, and because it's Cleo's call if she wants him dead. She's not sure whose fault the abuse was, which is why she visits Bogart here.

“Ben, I can see it in your eyes, don't go after the King. He's under our protection, but worse, he's under Cleo's protection. If she wants you to kill him, she'll tell you. Until then, you'd have to go through Ken and I as well as her.”

Ben's eyes got a bit wider.

“I told you, I'm the one who has insight, but really boy, who can't see that what happened to Cleo is eating you up inside. It's not your fight, you weren't there to protect her, it happened before you were born. Listen carefully, if you killed him it would not make you feel better. I say it again, it's Cleo's decision, if she wants her father dead, he will be dead and I hope that will give her some comfort.”

“But...”

“Not your decision, Ben and if you want to help Cleo, you support her, you back her up, you fight beside her as hard as you can, and let her tell you what she wants as far as her father is concerned. It's you that has to process what I've told you, she's been living with it for a very long time. Bogart tells me you are helping her process it rather than suppress it. Keep it up and leave the past to those who lived it.”

“That's not easy.”

“It never is, the past is a nasty place, something that can’t be fixed, no matter how hard you try. The best you can do is fix in the present, what was screwed up in the past. Look, Bogart says that you are starting to process your knowledge of Cleo’s childhood. So process it, then move on and help Cleo and Clara now, in the present. Do you understand?”

“I do, Kam, and thanks for that. It helps.”

Kam nodded, got another three beers from the fridge and they toasted whatever you toast to at three in the morning.

A moment later, Bogart came out of his room. He picked up the third beer and nodded thanks to Kam. “They have done dreaming for now, and they’re sleeping quietly. You know, my work would be a lot easier if you Kobolds weren’t so damned stubborn.”

Kam laughed, “They’re princesses, more thick headed than most. You’d be thick headed too if you had to live through mine cave-ins for a few thousand generations.”

Bogart tapped Kam’s bottle and downed about half of his beer at one go, “Thirsty work. Ben, not my business, really, but how do you feel about Clara?”

“I like her, I feel like she’s family.”

“You know she’s strongly attracted to you, almost as strongly

as Cleo.”

“Uh...”

“Oh relax, like I said, not really my concern, but she and Cleo might come to an agreement about what to do with you, I just thought I’d warn you.”

Ben sent a panicked look at Kam, who was stifling a laugh, “That’s what you get for being a charming fellow, son.”

Over Beers

Ben looked at Bogart, “so how did you meet Kam?”

“Oh, a very long time ago, he wandered onto the island and we’ve been friends ever since, him and his spooks.”

“That’s very evasive, Bogie.”

Kam laughed again, “Go ahead and ask, Ben. I’ll tell you.”

“Well before I hear that, is there anything you want to know about me? Since I’m involved with your cousin?”

“I’ve read your file, Ben, there’s not much that Ken misses in

his files, and so far you've matched up with what I've read."

"Ah, well maybe I ought to ask for your file."

"Good luck, you won't find much, but ask away, anything I don't want to answer I'll let you know."

"Fine, Bogie said, 'and your spooks,' what does that mean?"

"Ah, well, I did tell you that I'm a monster hunter, and some of them aren't people. I've been doing it a while and along the way I've met a couple of spirits who have pretty strong wills. One is a Smiladon, a sabretooth, and the other is a Beringian Lion, a Cave lion. I met them during my travels and they seemed to like me so they have been hanging around ever since. They help me in my work."

"You've got extinct cats working for you?"

"I like cats, don't you like cats?"

"I like them well enough, the little fluffy things that purr a lot."

"These guys purr, usually after they've killed something."

Bogie was enjoying this, "You want to meet them? They're here."

"No, that's OK, I might look like prey. Those guys hunted humans didn't they?"

“And humans hunted them. Fair trade. Go on Kam, show him your pets.”

Kam grinned, showing his double row of sharpened teeth and whistled a short, complicated tune that only someone with those teeth could have produced. Behind him were two huge cats, there was no transition, no fading in, they were just there and they were looking carefully at Ben.

“Woah, uh nice kitties?”

“Quiet boys, don’t wake the princess.”

At that both cats looked at the door to the other room, tails swinging.

“Go in quietly, don’t wake them.”

The cats padded silently through the closed door, Ben would have sworn they were solid.

Kam grinned again, “They love the girls, used to give them rides when they were kids. They are solid or not as it suits them. No Ben, they won’t hurt the girls, they think they’re pets and the girls treat them like that.”

Ben sat back down and shook his head, “Pets? They’re covered in scars.”

“Rough and tumble pets. But you’re right, they’ve fought beside me for a long time and we don’t always win easily, but so far we’ve won. I worked alone until I met those two and it’s nice to have backup. They’ve saved me many times but they can be hurt when they’re solid, the scars are proof of that, but they don’t often miss seeing an enemy behind them, they fight together.”

“Were those things even around at the same time?”

“I don’t know, they were together when I met them. I never looked it up. One of the few things I haven’t looked up, I met them after Maude.”

As Kam said that, a look of pain went across his face and he lost his smile. Ben looked at Bogart who was looking at Kam, but he looked away again, apparently not concerned with what he’d seen.

Ben spoke quietly, “You came to Bogart for help?”

Kam looked sharply at Ben, “You see things better than most, son, yes I came to Bogart for help. The Kobolds around here have known him for a long time and I was directed to him a long time ago.”

Ben looked at Bogart, “Go ahead Ben, he said he’d answer what he wanted. It’s a sad story and a long one.”

Ben looked at Kam who nodded. “It was a very long time ago,

when I had first come to this country. I ended up in Guelph where so many of us do. Mostly because of the library.”

“The Massey Hall library?”

“You know it? Have you used it?”

“I did, to find out about the black hole inside me that keeps me from aging.”

“Ah, interesting, that wasn’t in the file. I’ll want your story in exchange for mine.”

Ben nodded, “fair enough.”

“When I was younger I needed to know a lot of things, but mostly why I could see things so much more clearly and deeply than others did. It didn’t take long to understand that most beings only saw the surface, the outside appearance of things but I could see the reasons.

“This was before I started working with Ken, and another thing I wanted to know was why he saw things in such detail, while I seemed to see things in broad outlines. I suppose you could say I was a callow youth at that time.

“When I drifted into Guelph I heard about the library and went to see what I could discover. The first time I visited, I was surprised to learn that I couldn’t see in the darkness. For a Kobold not to see in the dark was disturbing. I guess it’s a

function of the magic of that place. I held out my finger as I had been told and made my request for a book that explained how I could see into things.

A librarian took my finger and it was like an electric shock. I mean it was as if my whole body vibrated, and I could feel her heart beating. Mine instantly matched hers.

“You have to understand, I’m not a very romantic type, I never believed in this love at first sight stuff, but something happened between us.

“I found the answer I wanted in the book she showed me, it was an explanation of Ken and Kan, our names. The author explained Musashi’s definition to me and I finally got it. But I went back to the library.

“The second time this same librarian grabbed my finger and it happened again. I felt electric, and my heartbeat matched hers. I said I wanted the book I need, and she took me to it. I don’t even remember what it was, but every time I went back and asked for the book I needed, she gave me one that took me along a path to understanding. I still understand.

“This went on for two years, and I realized my dark sight had come back. I also got the feeling that this woman, who never spoke, just took my finger and led me to a book, then took my hand and led me back to the exit, I got the feeling she was waiting for me to visit. I started to ask for books on love.

“One day she took me to a book written by Oren Longfang that explained about mates, and how certain people develop life-long relationships. Not that it was love at first sight, it often was not, but that there was a chemical match in certain cases.

“To be honest, I didn’t read it very closely, I understood that the librarian felt the same way about me as I had come to feel about her. I was intrigued when she first touched my finger, but I had come to want her deeply. Apparently she had come to want me as much.

“When I returned that book and held out my finger, I asked for her name. There was a gasp from somewhere off to the side. I had figured she would take me to a book with her name on the title, but she answered me in a whisper. Her name was Maude.”

Ben was surprised, “I thought the librarians couldn’t speak.”

“Just iron discipline, apparently, only Maude broke that discipline. She moved her grip from my finger to my hand and walked me out the door. Just like that.

“We walked off the campus, her holding my hand as if it was a lifeline, and went to a cafe where we sat and talked. She told me that she was in her late twenties when she started working, and that she’d been working from the first day the library was open. I didn’t know then, that was 1903. That made her well over a hundred years old.”

Kam stopped, he dropped his head and after a long pause he

said, “I had no idea, I would never have... I had no idea. I killed her.”

Bogart took his shoulder, squeezed it a bit, and went for more beers.

Ben said, “You don’t have to tell me, Kam.”

“I want to, it doesn’t help much, but it reminds me.”

With a fresh beer, Kam continued, “We moved in together, and we were happy. I never noticed how fast she was aging until about a year later, and then she admitted that she would age fast, faster than normal, because she had left the library. She told me she knew that, and it was worth it to her to be with me for what time she had.

“I dragged her back up to the library but the door wouldn’t open, it was as if they had welded it shut. I was about to break it down with my hammer when she stopped me. She said she wouldn’t leave me even if they would take her back. She said that what time she had with me was worth it and she wouldn’t give up a single minute.

“I had never loved anyone before her and I have never loved anyone since. That’s a lot of years, Ben, but that’s the truth of it. We had an amazing few years together and I learned. Oh did I learn, as a librarian she knew everything that was in the library, and she could see what the visitors needed to know. They had let her keep that. If I knew how to read people

before, I became so much better at it through her. Oh how I learned.

“It was glorious, our time together, we tried to fit a lifetime into a couple of years and I think we did it. When she died, she told me she had no regrets, that it was worth it to be with me. That didn’t help. I went a little crazy and drifted from place to place, looking for trouble. Ken kept an eye on me and steered me to where I was needed, I’m sure. I got into as many fights as I could until I finally washed up in this valley where the Kobolds got tired of my fighting and told me to go find Bogart here.

“It was a while, but Bogart managed to tone down the guilt and made me see what a glorious time we had together. Yes, old man, I understand now that guilt and despair cheapens what we had, what she gave me. But damnit, it still hurts, after all these years.”

“As it should, Kam, as it will. She helped make you the person you are, that pain makes you who you are, if you lose it you will become one of the monsters you fight.”

“No worries there, the boys will tear me apart if I become a monster, I know that and it gives me comfort that they will.”

Ben clamped down on his thoughts. Once again he realized that Kobolds weren’t just short, strong humans.

Kam seemed to read his mind, “Really, son? Look into your own heart, don’t you see the thing that makes you love Cleo?”

We're not that different, you and I."

Puss and Boots

In the bedroom, the girls were on their stomachs, arms over each other, but their other arms reached across the bed and were lying on the heads of two prehistoric cats. The cats were purring quietly, a rumbling that could have been mistaken for a train moving down the valley.

Cleo, still asleep, murmured “Puss” and as if she heard, Clara said “Boots.” The cats twitched their ears and purred a little more loudly.

The girls were sharing the same dream, they were riding their cats, arms around the necks, flat out on their backs. They were racing across a valley high in the Austrian Alps, yelling, their own hair streaming out behind them. The cats were running flat out, as delighted as the girls.

Occasionally one or the other cat would fade, so that his rider could see the ground racing by underneath and this would always result in a scream. Not of terror but of joy, as the girls saw how fast they were moving. As they came closer to the river, the cats looked at each other and back to the water. As they got to the edge they leapt and sailed out over the icy cold torrent. The fearless sisters floated up off the backs and howled their defiance to gravity, making sure they were firmly back on their mounts when they landed on the other side. Cleo had once allowed herself to drift to the side of Puss, and that beast had somehow stretched a paw down just before he landed and

shifted his body so that she landed on his back. Winded but otherwise unhurt. He had stopped, shaken her off his back, turned around and looked at her with such pain and concern that she hugged that giant front paw, and never did it again.

There was a bond, a love between these sisters and the cats that was as strong as any between a girl and her pony. The cats had fought beside Kam for many years, but the moment they saw the girls, Cleo a toddler and Clara a newborn, they had claimed the girls as their own. Each time Kam came near the girls the cats reclaimed their pets, their charges, their friends.

Ben wandered over and opened the door to check on the women. Puss raised his head and looked. It wasn't quite a growl, more like a grumble, and Ben carefully backed out. As he returned to the table, Kam said, "Puss was just warning you that Cleo is still asleep and he didn't want you to disturb them."

"Umm..."

"The cats have known the girls almost their whole lives and they adopted them."

"The cats are pets?"

Kam laughed, "No, the girls are pets to the cats. Pets and kittens and now family. These cats are as smart as you can get, they have lived ten thousand years as spirits wandering in the worlds of men. When they discovered me, they discovered the Kobolds and they found two girls who didn't die at the first

cuff from their paws. They found pets to play with and they've played with and protected them ever since."

"How did you meet them, wait, Puss?"

"Puss and Boots, the girls named them and the cats won't answer to anything else. I found them deep in the middle of a mountain not far from here. I was hunting them, they were in a cavern and not bothering anyone, they'd given up hundreds of years before, trying to deal with Men, but they would be spotted once in a while, more or less every time they emerged with the number of Men around now, and Men were afraid. So they asked me to go kill them, which is the first reaction from Men to anything that frightens them.

"I found them and they played with me for a while once, that is, they realized I didn't die easily. Then I realized they were old, old spirits, sort of the last of their kind and I just sat down. Since I wasn't fighting back they stopped too. After a week, we knew each other and they have been with me ever since."

"Can they talk?"

"No, but they understand, in the same way that I can look and understand, we communicate quite well."

"What about the girls?"

"They grew up with the cats, so they understand what and who they are, but they don't talk to them, other than through their

dreams I guess. The cats know what's going on in the girl's lives though. The girls are the only thing that has separated them from me."

"How do you mean?"

"Puss saw that Cleo was being abused by her father. I was sent on a mission but Puss refused to go with me, instead he went back and took Cleo from her bed and ran out of the kingdom with her. To my shame, I thought there was nothing wrong so I went after them. When I found Cleo, Puss stood between us, between me and Cleo. We almost fought but Puss would neither fight me nor let me take Cleo, so we went to a cave. It was weeks before Cleo managed to say enough to make me believe Puss about what was happening. I sent Cleo with Puss to go live with friends somewhere else. I told him not to let me know where she was."

"Clara?"

"The Gods forgive me, I figured that was the end of it, but one day Boots took off toward the palace. He wouldn't come back so I went too. I met him coming over the walls with Clara on his back, she was terrified. I sent Boots to a safe place and went into the palace where I pieced together the story. The king had begun abusing Clara when Boots came through the wall. He was slaving, ready to kill the King, but Clara stopped him. Boots walked by the King, dropping one of his fangs over his shoulder and wetting it with his drool. He picked up Clara and threw her on his back and left.

“When I got there the King’s shoulder was burning, the flesh was bubbling and the wound was driving deep into his muscle. The medics flushed it and saved his arm but he had a terrible scar to remind him of how close to death he got, how his daughter saved his life even as he was destroying hers.

“It was shortly after that, Ken and I orchestrated a rebellion and then a coup and the King has been in internal exile ever since. The palace is guarded by Kobolds and by spirit beings. If he tries to leave he will die. We have a sort of democracy, not like the ones of Man, but one where every Kobold is looked after, every one contributes.”

“And the girls?”

“Ken had been ordered by the King to find Cleo, and he did, in Canada but she told him what happened and he raised her as his own, Clara was raised by friends, and she became a bit of a wild child, even by Cleo’s standards. You know enough of the rest.”

“If the King ever escapes...”

“I’ll let you join the hunt, Ben, be sure of that.”

Ben Gets a Gift

Somehow, the men talked the night away. Ben wasn't going to try to get into bed with the cats there anyway, he did manage to catch some sleep in a chair while Kam and Bogart talked. At some point, Bogie left to go into the girl's dreams and Kam sat alone.

Ben woke to find Kam watching him, Kam smiled and Ben went back to sleep thinking, I know a testing period when I see it, it's going to be hard to get Kam's approval. He had a feeling that Cleo listened to Kam. Well, no trying to fool that one, Ben would just have to be himself and hope that was enough.

Kam was actually thinking that Ben was just about the best thing that could have happened to Cleo.

Ben came awake to an outburst from the bedroom as the girls woke to discover Puss and Boots. The bedroom door burst open and both girls came out riding the cats, naked, as it happened. They were out the front door and skimming across the water to circle the lake, screaming and yelling and generally kicking up their heels.

"They rode like that as kids," commented Kam as he helped Bogart take the breakfast, huge and varied as usual, to the

table. “They’ll be back when they get it out of their systems. Sometimes you just gotta be a kid again.”

Ben was thoughtful, “That was quite a sight, somehow I feel lucky to have seen it. Cleo certainly needs to let go and be a kid for a while, she doesn’t get much chance to do it.”

Bogie and Kam exchanged a look and Kam said, in a quiet voice, “She’s a lot more relaxed around you, Ben, than she has been in decades.”

Kam didn’t say anything more, but Ben suddenly felt the weight of responsibility settle on his shoulders. Bogart laughed and said, “Oh just have some of this bacon, Ben, and lighten up, maybe Puss will give you a ride.”

The sudden look of terror on Ben’s face caused the other two men to howl with laughter.

Kam and Ben tucked into breakfast and there was an undeclared pancake eating contest between the two. Ben lost but Kam seemed to approve of his effort. ‘Small steps,’ thought Ben.

‘Did I really just think that? How long has it been since I wanted someone’s approval?’ Ben was a bit confused, he’d been with Cleo for quite a while, and he figured she was her own thing, if Kam didn’t approve of him, Ben could see Cleo telling Kam to butt out. But there was something about Kam that made Ben want his approval.

Bogart had been watching Ben as he was thinking that, and when Kam went for more coffee he leaned toward Ben and said, “He’s a father figure to the girls and now to you.”

Ben didn’t have much chance to think about that as the girls burst back into the house, laughing and talking happily to each other. They pulled up chairs and sat down as naked as they’d gone out the door. With barely a nod to the three men at the table they tucked in to the food. Ben was happy to see Clara eating fast and hard, and the two girls got into a declared pancake contest, which had Bogart running from kitchen to table. Ben and Kam looked at each other and shook their heads, they would have lost a dozen pancakes ago.

Bogart looked pleased, between his dream work and the big cats, the girls were both looking like a pressure cooker with the lid off.

When the girls finally leaned back in their chairs, they really did have food babies, their stomachs positively bulged. Kobolds could certainly eat.

Ben was thinking about how beautiful Cleo would look pregnant, and that made him incredibly sad. Cleo had told him not very long before, that she was sterile, she had aborted her father’s child herself and had ripped up her womb pretty badly, doing it.

Kam rapped on the table once to attract Ben’s attention and

said simply, “Kit.”

Not quite understanding what Kam had said, Ben simply nodded and turned to his coffee.

The girls got into a burping contest that shook the rafters. Mouths wide and that double row of teeth showing. When they pushed away from the table they positively waddled into the bedroom to get dressed for the day.

As they left the room, Kam turned to Ben and said, “Son, there’s a bit of a job I’ve got to do, would you mind coming along?”

Knowing that Kam usually worked alone, Ben felt he had better go, and he nodded, “How soon?”

“Now. Go on in and say goodbye to Cleo, she and Clara should stay here for a while so Bogart can keep working with them.”

A bit put out at the fast pace, Ben walked in to the bedroom to tell Cleo. A moment later the bedroom door burst open and slammed against the wall, Cleo was furious, “Cousin, what do you need Ben for? What job? What the hell are you playing at?”

Ben’s eyes widened and he was about to grab Cleo’s arm but she whipped around and glared at him too. “Don’t even think of it, Ben, you and I are partners and that person over there goes into places that will get anyone else killed. You’re not

going!”

She looked at Kam again but before she could speak, Kam said “Groceries, girl, we’re going for groceries.”

Ben could see Cleo’s brain stumble. “Groceries?”

“Actually pet, no. I have a request from Ken to take care of a bit of a problem, further back in the mountains. It’s not a killing job, at least not to us. Ben and I should get out of the way here for a while to let you three work on things, I swear Ben won’t die. Cousin I swear it, the kitties will be with us.”

With that he whistled and the cats were inside again, they were on either side of Ben and stepped forward in front of him.

Cleo was visibly calmer but, “I still don’t like it, but if Ben wants to go I won’t stop him. Puss, Boots, you better bring him back to me in one piece and breathing.”

The cats grinned and Puss slid the claws from one front paw, being careful to lift the paw so as not to chew up the cabin floor.

“Ben, get back in this bedroom, and Clara, out please.”

Cleo shut the door and asked Ben to sit on the bed. “My big cousin thinks he’s invulnerable and figures everyone else is too. There’s a reason he works alone, all his partners have died. I want to know if you’re good with helping him on whatever

this is?”

Ben nodded, “If he asked, I figure he thinks I can help, I’ll be careful Cleo, I’m coming back to you.”

“You figure this is a test don’t you?”

Ben looked a bit sheepish.

“You idiot, if Kam said I should dump you, I’d dump him on his ass. But I can see you’re going to do this so sit still and close your eyes.”

Cleo put her hands on the sides of Ben’s head and placed her lips on his forehead. She stayed that way for a few moments, then tilted his face up to kiss him hard.

“What did you just do, Cleo?”

“I kissed you. OK I also gave you as much of the Giant’s power as I could. You can get strong and you can get very heavy, you can’t grow because your body isn’t built for that, but it’s as much as I can do for you right now. I hope you don’t need it and I don’t have to remind you that it isn’t something to mess around with. Keep it to yourself.”

Ben held his hand out palm down, Cleo matched it with her palm up. Ben willed his hand to get heavy and Cleo frowned with the effort to hold it up. “You learn new skills fast my love, I really hope you don’t have to use it, but I feel better that

you've got it. The strength should match the weight.”

“Thank you, Cleo.”

“Now get on out there and don't get killed, please.”

A Job With Kam

As it turned out, Ben knew exactly where they were going, to the Kobold mine just above the hot springs where they had returned Boots, the other Boots, AKA Behemoth, to Beelzabub. As they drove, Ben asked, “Is this job really from Ken or is it from Bogart?”

“Good question, Bogart asked Ken to ask us. He can be a pretty roundabout guy.”

“Yeah, so I've noticed. There's a problem in the mine?”

“Nellies.”

“What. The hell. Are Nellies?”

“Relax, you've heard of nervous Nellies right? Well these are deep down creatures that are very shy, but it seems they have somehow been offended by the miners and are fighting back.”

“Oh lord, I know those guys, let me guess. The women are in Fairmont running the resort and the men have gone too deep, into the Nellies’ territory.”

“You’ve got it, you’re along because we mostly have to rearrange the miner’s attitudes, not kill Nellies.”

“How are we going to do that?”

“You’re going to do it, these are old-school Kobolds, they respect fighting skill and so I very much expect that you’re going to fight their champion.”

“Why aren’t you doing that?”

“They won’t fight me. My reputation is much exaggerated, they think that I know what they’re going to do before they do it.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, and I know you do too, I met your teacher and Cleo has told me about some of your fights. You up for a friendly?”

“I am, the only problem is that when Kobolds start to lose, they pull out that damned hammer.”

Kam reached into his pocket and pulled something out, “You mean like these hammers?” He was holding a necklace with

two hammers that looked like one split in half.”

“Stop the jeep.”

Kam did, and got out as Ben got out. Kam handed over the necklace in a rather ceremonial way. Ben said, “How does it work?”

“Put it on, bring out your hands as if you’re going to grip something.”

Ben did that and there was a hammer in each hand. “They’re not as heavy as I thought they’d be.”

“I had these made lighter and as a pair for you, I know your training and thought you’d like them. Together they’re about half the weight of a Kobold hammer, if you use only one it ought to move as fast as we can move them.”

Ben looked hard at Kam, “Why?”

“Ben I know you think I’m testing you, but I am not. I told you I read your file, Ken trusts you and I know that Cleo loves you. You’ve been tested, I want you to know that I approved of you before I met you, and even more so now that I’ve met you. I had these made so you can be a more effective partner to Cleo, not that you weren’t up to the job before, but we have a saying ‘two hammers make light work,’ and now you’ve got three between you.”

“I’m not sure what to say, thank you Kam.”

“You’re very welcome. Now the rings there have some uses.”

“I watched Cleo show one of Ken’s agents how to set it for mining.”

“Good, yours have those settings and a bit more. First, let them drop.”

The hammers disappeared and they were on the chain again.

“Good, now, as you reach for them, think of your swords.”

With a frown, Ben did so and was shocked to find two finely balanced swords in his hands, “Gods, they’re amazing, like they were made for me.”

“They were, son, there are the hammers, the swords and a four foot staff as you use, which can be stretched to any length up to eight feet.”

Ben dropped the swords and held out his hands for a Jo, he tried pulling it while thinking of a staff and it stretched under his hands. He then collapsed his hands and thought of two batons. They were there.

“Damn, I didn’t know they could do that, I’ll have to compliment the smith next time I see him.”

Ben released one of the batons and said, “Kam will you please knock this one out of my hand.”

Kam smiled and did so. The baton never hit the ground and Ben called both up at once. “You really do learn quick, Ben, Cleo was right.”

Ben grinned and bowed deeply to Kam, then he reached into his pocket and handed over a dollar coin. Kam grinned and took it. “Your granny must have been part Kobold.”

They drove on, stopping at the Fairmont Hot Springs for lunch, where the women fussed over them. They seemed in awe of Kam, but were quite free with their hugs and kisses to Ben, who glanced at Kam.

When they had a free moment, Kam said, “Didn’t see a thing, but Cleo’s not the jealous type anyway.”

It was somewhat of a surprise to Ben that he could eat the big lunch the ladies provided, he wondered if his metabolism was a bit higher now that he had some Giant talents.

The ladies sent them off with a big basket of goodies for their men at the mine. Ben was amused to see there was no alcohol there.

When they got to the mine, they parked the jeep by the hot springs and climbed up to an entrance overlooking the river. They stepped behind a rock and disappeared from view of

anyone below. Kam tapped on the wall with his hammer and it slid away.

The two stepped into a large chamber and then into one that was even larger. Ben looked around and thought the mountain was almost hollow now.

Kam wasn't amused, "You folks understand the mining laws don't you? If this mountain collapses in full view of the tourists there will be trouble."

"We get it, we do, look at the walls, they're fused, the whole thing is a unit!"

Kam now looked impressed, "Which of your women figured that out?"

The chief grinned, "It was Bacall, she's a clever girl that wife of mine."

"You've mined out this part and started going down, right?"

"Until the Nellies invaded, right."

Kam frowned but said nothing, Ben could see he was thinking this problem was brought on by greed.

"Take us down to the Nellies then."

The chief took them to an elevator and they dropped as far as it

would go. Kam checked an instrument on his wrist and nodded. As they walked to a slope downward he said, “The elevator stopped at the treaty level, you went below that?”

The chief looked embarrassed, “We’re mined out above, we had to go down.”

Kam said nothing, they went down fifty metres or so and the chief stopped, “They come up almost to here, they’ve wrecked our equipment and have fought us mightily, I hope you can get rid of them.”

Again, Kam said nothing, just continued downward, Ben with him. About a hundred metres further, they heard a rumble and out of the walls came the Nellies.

Two Fights

Think of a worm with a great fringed neck and a head with nasty fangs. Tiny limbs served to pull the creature along. There were five of the creatures and they attacked immediately.

Ben was first, one of them darted at him and without much thought, he made his hand heavy and cuffed it away. It slammed into the wall and seemed to lose the will to fight. Ben glanced over and Kam had two of them by the throat, one in each hand. The other two Nellies were hanging back. Kam

threw the two he had back toward them and whistled. Puss and Boots showed up instantly, but simply stood between Kam and Ben.

Kam watched them as the Nellies watched the four newcomers. “They’re not in killing mode, they’re just defending their territory, as we guessed. Thank you for not killing the first and we’re going to have a talk about that slap, but for now,” Kam spread his arms and bowed low. Ben did the same and the cats faded from view. Ben and Kam backed up the slope for several steps and the Nellies didn’t move, just watched them go.

Kam turned and walked back up to where the Chief stood. “Did you kill them, is it all good now?”

Ben arrived, he had been playing rear guard, and Kam nodded to him before turning a look of disgust on the chief. Kam took out his hammer and swung a single blow to the ceiling, bringing rock down to block the slope.

The chief objected, “we could take them all out, what are you doing, we can open that back up in an hour.”

“You won’t. You are in violation of the treaties with the underworld, you will stop mining in their territory, they fought you only because you were breaking the treaty.”

“I’m in charge here, Trouble Magnet, not you.”

Recognizing his cue, Ben stepped forward and poked his finger

into the chief's chest hard enough to make him take a step back. "You will abide by the treaties, I say you will."

"You are challenging me, human?"

"I challenge you, bring your champion."

The chief looked at Kam but he simply looked back calmly.

"Very well, let's go up to the main chamber, the others are going to want to see this."

When they stepped out of the elevator, the room was packed with men and a few women. In the centre of the room was a big Kobold, stripped to the waist to show some very impressive muscles.

Kam touched a button on the instrument on his wrist and folded his arms. Ben took a look around, as if in wonder at all the spectators, but Kam nodded in approval. Ben had just identified the ground, the obstacles, the lighting, and had started forming a plan.

As Ben was removing his shirt the chief was saying, "Since you are a human, Kary here will not use his hammer..."

He stopped because he was staring at Ben's necklace. The chief looked at Kam and saw nothing, then back to Ben who said, "That is fine by me, shall we start?" He took his necklace off and dropped it on his shirt beside Kam. Kary did no such thing,

and Ben nodded to himself, walking toward the big Kobold. As he got into range, the Kobold lunged and reached for Ben. Ben faded to the side and tapped the Kobold's elbow. He was now behind the Kobold and punched him in the back of the head, just above his neck. This seemed to do little harm, but it enraged the Kobold. He spun around and punched at Ben who spun as if he was dancing and the Kobold was past him again, this time Ben kicked him in the back of his knee and Kary went down on one knee.

It continued like this for a minute, the Kobold attacking and Ben avoiding, but Ben's counterattacks didn't seem to be doing much other than enrage the Kobold. Ben seemed to strike targets just beside ones that would injure.

Kam watched carefully, "He's practising," he muttered to himself.

Eventually, Ben seemed to get a bit more serious. As the Kobold hurled himself toward Ben to try and catch him, Ben stepped in. He seemed only to touch the Kobold's inner arm but at the same time, Ben dropped and the Kobold went over to land awkwardly.

He had had enough, when the Kobold stood up his hammer was in his hand and it hummed, it was powered on and would kill at a touch. The audience gasped, and the Chief started toward the men to stop the fight, but Kam put a hand on his arm. The chief tugged but could not free his arm, "At least give him a hammer, if you won't stop it."

Kam just grinned, Ben had been taunting the Kobold into a fury, and he wasn't done yet. The Kobold swung mightily downward but Ben wasn't there, he had stepped only a few inches to the side and he slapped the Kobold as the swing finished.

The Kobold stepped back and in again, this time swinging horizontally. As he started his swing, Ben stepped forward, inside the arc of the hammer and set himself so that Kary's elbow hit Ben's forearm, reinforced by his other hand. Kary's elbow was hyperextended and would hurt like hell tomorrow.

Ben stepped back out of range and stood still, inviting the Kobold to attack again. When he did, Ben had two batons in his hands, one long and one short. The hammer came in vertically again, Ben's short stick guided it past as Ben stepped off the line and speared Kary in the forehead.

Kobold heads are hard, the thunk could be heard around the chamber.

Kary was a bit more cautious, he swung and his hammer was met by Ben's crossed sticks. Ben couldn't stop the hammer but he didn't try, he stepped to the side, the long stick folding up and it came down with a clang on Kary's skull. Before Kary could recover, Ben's sticks had become an eight foot staff and he hit Kary on the back of the head, hard, overbalancing him. Kary caught himself on his hands and was about to spring back up when he heard a screaming hammer just above his head.

This sounded like maximum and if he lifted his head, it would disappear.

The Kobold fighter very carefully lowered his forehead to the ground and released his hammer. He spread his fingers wide and put his palms on the floor.

The screaming stopped, Ben stepped back, lowered his hammer and opened his own hand.

“I believe I have defeated your champion, If you will not obey the law, or Kam, you will obey the result of this fight. You will not mine below the treaty boundary.”

The chief nudged Kary with his foot and said, “You can get up now. Human, we will obey the laws and will stop mining below the treaty depth. You have won the right to demand this from us.”

Kam spoke up, “That’s good, because Bogart and Ken will be watching. Don’t let your greed cause further problems because you won’t have help again.”

“Call that help?” muttered the chief, but Kam seemed not to hear.

Ben and Kam left the way they had come and Kam said, “How about a soak, looks deserted.”

“Sounds good, let’s go.”

As they sat and soaked in the hot spring, Ben was amazed at the scars that criss-crossed Kam's body, from his legs to the neck. "You've been fighting a long time."

"Not all things are solved by understanding and talk. Sometimes the monsters don't hold back."

They were quiet for a while longer, letting the heat soak into their bones and then Ben said, "I wonder how Clara and Cleo are doing?"

"You would have heard, Ben."

Ben looked at Kam, who said, "It has not escaped my notice that Cleo has shared things with you, son. The first would be a way to communicate with you. I note that you can see in the dark as well as a Kobold can. Oh yes, there was no lighting down in the mine."

"Damn, I need to watch that," said Ben.

"But what I'm most interested in, is the weight of your hand."

"What?"

"Boy, don't imagine I don't know. Cleo gave you some of her Giant powers, as much as she could, I suspect."

"How did..."

“You, me, Ken, and Bogart, that’s it, Ben, everyone who knows. She can’t hide things from us and we aren’t going to tell anyone else. When did she give you this latest gift.”

“Just before we left on this trip. Weight and strength to match it.”

“You didn’t use it in the fight.”

“No, and I won’t reveal it.”

“But you cuffed a Nellie.”

“I was surprised, I’m not proud of that, and they won’t tell anyone.”

“No, I won’t. Ben I want you to slap me like you slapped the Nellie.”

“You sure?”

“I asked, didn’t I? Do it.”

Ben slapped Kam on the face, but Kam blocked the slap at Ben’s forearm, which almost broke, would have broken if Ben hadn’t noticed the block and taken as much power out of the strike as he could.

“Just the hand is fine, if you figure it won’t get blocked.”

Ben bowed, holding his forearm with his other hand, “I thank you for the instruction.”

Kam laughed, then asked, “How did you know you don’t need the necklace on your person.”

“Just a guess, but what good is a weapon like that if you can be disarmed?”

“Any more like you at home?”

“Same training, yes, same life experiences, not likely.”

“You’ll do, son, you’ll do,” and Kam slid under the water.

Movie Night

Ben had an ice pack on his arm, and Cleo was making a fuss over him. She would ask Ben if there was anything he needed, maybe an aspirin, and then she would glare at Kam as if it was his fault. Well, actually, it was his fault, but Kam laughed anyway, every time she glared.

“How would you folks like to watch Ben’s fight?”

“You filmed it? I hate watching my fights,” Ben complained.

Kam put his wristband on the table and aimed it at a white wall. He hit a button and there was Ben, facing Kary. Cleo growled, “That guy is huge, what the hell, Kam!”

Kam grinned, “He’s not as big as Ben.”

“He’s much stronger though.”

Kam sent Cleo a mild look, “Is he?” This earned him yet another nasty look.

As Cleo watched, she feared Ben would be hurt at every passage, yet she knew he was fine, and sitting beside her. For his part, Ben was critiquing his own performance. Kam had already seen it so he was enjoying Cleo’s distress. “You know, Cleo, you’ve fought beside Ben many times, how come this bothers you?”

“Because I was there to pull him out of trouble,” Cleo said, before bringing her hands to her mouth, as if she could stop the words that had already escaped.

Kam roared with laughter, while Ben leaned over and hugged her.

Clara, on the other hand, was fascinated with the fight. She would look between the video and Ben, holding ice to his arm.

Both the women and Bogart gasped when Ben suddenly had two metal baton in his hands. Cleo pulled his shirt aside and looked closely at the chain with the split hammer on it. She turned to watch the fight more carefully and when Ben joined the baton to make a staff her eyes got wide.

As the video ended, Cleo looked at Kam who had a small smile, almost a smirk. “Kam, the smith doesn’t forge weapons for Humans, how did you get this?”

“He forged it for me.”

“Ben, may I?”

Ben nodded and Cleo put the chain around her own neck, after taking hers off. She held out her hands but nothing happened. She tried again and then looked at Kam, who nodded, “Only Ben, no other human or Kobold can use it. Ben?”

Ben flexed his hand and two short batons were in his hands. Cleo jerked back from him, “That can’t be done, I’m wearing the hammers.”

Two weapons like this have been forged, Cleo, Ben has one and I have the other. Mine is simply a hammer but his will manifest any weapon he has used.”

“How long have you been building this?”

“From the day Ken noticed that you and he were getting close, which is probably two weeks before you two noticed it,” Kam laughed.

“Why?”

“At the risk of being boring, I read his file, and I talked with Ken and with that building of his that’s alive. Cleo, I know people, I know you and now I know Ben. I wasn’t wrong, Human or Kobold, he’s a rare being and I know you know that.”

Ben mumbled into his chest, “No pressure, eh.”

Cleo had gone silent, but not for long, “Did you two old women push him at me?”

Kam smiled, “Not a chance, he’s all yours little one, you found him now you have to feed him.”

“Hey! Not a pet,” said Ben, but as he did, Puss faded in beside him and honest to Gods, meowed, before fading back out again.

“See, Puss likes him too.”

Cleo was about to say something more but Ben hugged her hard, squeezing the air out of her chest. She looked at him in surprise, then grinned and leaned her head on his chest.

“Could we see the movie once more, please,” said Clara.

They spent a pleasant couple of weeks with Bogart, who was getting quite sleep deprived. He was working on all of his guests which meant very little nap time during the nights. The guests noticed this and pushed him into his bed during the daytime while they took care of themselves.

They spent a lot of time on the beach, lazing around and swimming in the weedy waters. When Ogoopogo noticed the weeds near the beach he ate them down to the roots. The girls convinced the monster to give them rides, unsurprisingly.

Mostly though, they just enjoyed the warm sun and sand, even Kam, who seemed to be enjoying his break.

In the nights, Ben slept with the two sisters. They had moved from Clara in the middle to Ben in the middle, which Ben took to mean Clara was getting over her latest relationship, an Elf that had figured out how to put a glamour on her. Still, things were a bit awkward with Clara in the bed.

Ben was reminded of when he was young and a girlfriend had invited him to her family cottage. They had ended up making love on the dock with the mosquitoes as company. He and Cleo would sneak out of bed and find a stretch of dry sand once in a while.

Once, on the beach during a particularly sweaty bout, Ben came up with a mouthful of sand. As he was sputtering they heard a giggle off to the side.

Instantly alert, Ben and Clara looked carefully around the area and discovered extra footprints. Without signalling each other the two flanked the prints and then lunged. Suddenly they were holding a squirming, giggling Clara.

“What the Hell?”

“Sorry Cleo, I seem to have picked up some of that Elf’s powers, I can turn invisible.”

“That doesn’t explain what you’re doing here spying on us, Clara.”

“Hey, I got cold in bed by myself so I came out to find you.”

“Don’t give me that lost little girl stuff, how long have you been watching us?”

“Um, since I first noticed you guys gone from bed.”

“Oh for... OK back to bed, I’m certainly not horny any more.”

Ben looked a little disappointed but tagged along.

In the morning the breakfast talk was about Clara's powers. "I don't know how I took them from that Elf, I really don't."

"I wonder if it runs in the family," said Kam, looking at Cleo.

"Oh hell. Clara, I took powers from the Giants who captured and tortured me, it looks like it's a family trait."

"What do you mean, Giant powers?"

Cleo grew tall enough to fill the room. "Oh, that must be handy."

"I don't have to get a chair to reach the top shelf any more, but I do. Clara these powers are no good if everyone knows about them."

"Yeah, I figured that out, sis, does anyone but us know about your growth spurts?"

"Growth spurts? Yes, Ken knows but that's it."

"That's good, it's damned hard to keep a secret from Ken."

Kam turned to Bogart, "You knew about this?"

"I saw it in her dreams, but I didn't know she knew, consciously, so I didn't say."

"Clara, do you have other Elf powers?"

“I don’t know, I discovered I could go invisible by thinking I should hide. Should I try?”

“Their most dangerous power is their glamour, can you weave illusions?”

Clara frowned and the entire group was suddenly on a roller coaster. She released it almost immediately.

Bogart whistled, “That’s powerful, I’m resistant as hell to illusion, that must have been a powerful Elf.”

“He’s a dead Elf. Sis, we need to talk about a change in your lifestyle.”

“Shit, I should never have giggled.”

News, Perhaps Not Sad

“But I don’t know how to fight.”

“That changes now, Clara, Ben is going to teach you. If his style can match a professional Kobold fighter, I want to see what it can do with someone of your strength and speed.”

“Cleo, you know what a ditz I am, I’d mess up any jobs you

guys gave me.”

“First, you’re not a ditz, you just play one, and second, you’re going to team up with Ben and me. Our third has found another pair to work with, so we’re short one and you’re it. I want to keep a close eye on you with those new powers of yours. Listen, are you sure you don’t resent them?”

“Hell no, they’re what that bastard used to make me a slave, I’m glad I’ve got them off of him.”

“That’s my sister! Now go practice with Ben.”

“Oh, if we’re fighting do I take my shirt off?”

Clara skipped out of the way of Cleo’s foot which was aimed at her ass, and out the door she went, to where Ben was waiting on the beach.

Kam came in from his room and he looked serious. “Sit down Cleo, please, I’ve got news. Your father is dead, he was poisoned.”

“Shit, do we know who?” Clara didn’t seem too upset that her father was dead, not surprising since she hadn’t talked to him from the time Puss took her over the walls and out of his palace.

“Yes, he was caught almost instantly, he’s a member of a pro-monarchy faction.”

“How does that work? Pro-monarchy so you kill the King?”

“The King could never rule again, not after what he did to you girls, we used that to overthrow him. No they want a new King, Cleo they want you to rule.”

“Are they fucking nuts! Even if I wanted to be King I’m a damned spook, a spy, an assassin. People like me make horrible leaders. We make great tyrants, and dictators, but never, ever good Kings. Kam you know this, how did you and Ken let this happen, and how is there a faction that wants me as a ruler!”

“Cleo, I understand that you don’t want to rule, but I disagree, I think you would make a good King.”

“Kam are you one of them? Seriously, how can you think I would be a good King. Hell I would just kill anyone who disagreed with me until someone killed me. Look what happened to the damned Giants, that jumped up little spy took them into an insane war and now he’s dead and their country is a ruin. It’s all Joe Mufferaw can do to keep it from going under.”

“They’re getting help, they’ll be fine, but I take your point Cleo, and I am NOT a fan of you as a new King. I just think that you would be smart enough, kind enough under that cement skin, to be able to learn the job. But honestly, I don’t want to find out.”

“So what are we going to do?”

“Do? Nothing at all. We’ll worry about it if some idiot introduces a bill to hold a referendum. If it’s not legitimate we’ll deal with it accordingly. If it’s legitimate and it looks like the people want you as their leader, you can make some insane statements to swing the vote back the other way.”

“Kam, for someone who has toppled as many governments as you have, that’s a stupid plan. Me making insane statements would bring more people over to my side. Someone is behind this, and they figure they can control an insane King. Hell they probably were. No, if it comes down to it I will make a few statements about taxing the hell out of the rich and bringing the poor out of poverty.”

Kam looked at her with newfound respect, “Aside from the fact that we do tax the rich and we don’t have anyone that poor, that’s a genius plan. Hell we have nobody who considers themselves poor at all, even the poorest would hate that plan.”

“Well let’s hope it doesn’t come to that or I swear I’ll reinstate the secret police and hunt down all my supporters and disappear them.”

“You really don’t want to be King do you?”

“No Kam, I don’t. I’m an agent by every inclination in my body, and so is Ben... Oh, now that’s a thought, I’d hate to do it, but the King with a Human consort? The speciesists would

absolutely hate it.”

“You say you’re not a politician?”

“No, I’m not, but I deal in destroying societies and handing power to those on our side.”

“A politician.”

“And you’re a damned cynic. Why did you two create a democracy then.”

“The real answer? Democracies, don’t start wars. They have agents for that sort of dirty work and make sure the dead are somewhere else, a long way away.”

“Gods, and I agree with that. You see why I say I’m an agent and not a King.”

“It’s in your file.”

“Screw my file.”

“No, I mean I’m putting that in your file, it’s brilliant.”

“Oh go to Hell, better yet, go tell Clara.”

Curiously, Clara, who had not talked to her father for many

years either, cried for him. When she could speak, she told Cleo, “He’s family.”

Cleo shook her head, thinking that this is probably the source of Clara’s toxic man choices, but held Clara anyway because, well, because she was family.

When Cleo told Clara that someone wanted the monarchy back, and that Cleo didn’t want to be King, Clara looked at her with absolute terror in her eyes. “Please don’t make me, Cleo, please!”

Cleo hugged her tighter and said, “Never squirt, I’ll never let that happen.”

“Cleo, I don’t want any more jerks. Can you help me with that, I mean you’ve got such an amazing guy, can you help me get one like that?”

Cleo thought about all the jerks she had hooked up with over her lifetime. Granted, some of them were nice, but in that case, she was the jerk. It took someone like Ben... Cleo sighed and hugged Clara a bit tighter. “We’ll see what we can do, OK squirt, now get on out there and practise some more.” With that guy, she thought to herself, with that guy.

“I need to talk with Ben,” she thought to herself, but first she called Bogart.

When he appeared from his room, yawning and scratching his

chest, Cleo handed him a coffee and said, “Sorry to wake you, but I’ve got a question. Ben and I are going to team up with Clara and she wants to find a good guy for a change, so...”

Bogie held up his hand, “Yes, it will work out as a threesome, neither you nor your sister have any sexual desire for each other but you both can share Ben without jealousy and he will be fine with it.”

“Um, thanks Bogie, are we already there in our dreams?”

“For weeks now.”

“Really? Bogie do you ever get tired of this work?”

“Just tired, C. Just tired.”

“Sorry, go on back to sleep, I’ll go outside and spar with Kam for a while.”

“I’ll put my earplugs in, thanks for those, by the way, they work a treat.”

He was back through the door before Cleo could tell him he was welcome.

The Wilmer Lake Base

“Kam should I go back home?”

“No, the further you are away from the throne, the better. There’s nothing you can do back there but be a symbol for one or the other side.”

“That’s what I figured, but I’ll go back if I should. What about here, should I be looking at the Kobolds around here?”

“Cleo you know Ken’s organization will figure out what’s happening here much faster than you could. Just relax and enjoy the time off.”

“I’m not sure I’m enjoying it any more, Clara is far too busy figuring out what to do with a ‘Good Guy’. I swear, I saw him first.”

Kam chuckled, “Things will settle down, surely your first days with Ben were pretty much the same.”

“To be fair, I think Clara is trying to be polite and sensitive.”

Kam looked at her doubtfully.

“I know, right, Clara thinking about others, it’s sort of scary.”

Kam dropped his hand on Cleo’s shoulder and gave her a little shake, “Come on, let’s see if we can find some trouble to get into.”

“You know something?”

“No, but you know I’m a trouble magnet right?”

Pogo gave them a ride to shore and they decided to hike up into the mountains. There were lots of roads, and even more trails, but the ground cover was dry, desert-like so they set off cross country. They had rations and water for a couple of days and they could extract water from the ground moisture with their hammers. They were well set up.

About a day’s walk away from the lake, they came on an old shack. Cleo snorted and said, “By your reputation that thing is not abandoned, it’s a fake entrance to an underground lair of some international criminal.”

“You sure you haven’t seen the place before?”

“Never, why?”

“Look and tell me what you see.”

“There’s no sign of daily usage, but there was an old track leading back down the mountain, it probably joins another trail.

The door hinges are rusty but not rusted shut. There is a faint scuffed area just in front of the door so someone knows the place is here and uses it. Hunters? Kids?”

“Not bad, Cleo. Look closer at the track.”

“Damn, it’s not dirt, it’s some sort of composite with dirt glued on, the breeze isn’t moving the dust.”

“Good, how much weight could that track hold?”

“At least a good sized tractor trailer I’d say. What have we found, Kam?”

“Damned if I know, Norad base? Mining operation? Want to find out?”

“Stake it out?”

“How about asking,” and with that Kam started walking straight for the front door. When it became obvious he was going toward the door, it opened, and a man stepped out with an automatic rifle.

“Interesting, wonder what the story will be.”

“Hey, you’re trespassing and this area is dangerous, too many old mine shafts, turn around and go back the way you came.”

“Now if we did that, we’d lose hiking time, I don’t think so.”

How about a drink of water to tide us over?”

“Mister, I meant what I said, this is private property, stop and turn around.”

“I don’t think I’m going to do that.”

Kam leaned over to Cleo, “This is where the bigger boss shows up or he starts shooting. Whoops, he’s shooting at us.”

Cleo was diving to the side but Kam caught her and pulled her toward him. The bullets were bouncing off some sort of transparent shield that Kam was holding up.

“Kam, I want the name of your shop.”

“What, this old thing? It’s saved my life more times than I can remember.”

The man stopped firing and seemed not to know what to do next. Kam shot him, so what he did next was fall to the ground. “Tranks,” he muttered to Cleo. “Go left fast and watch the side and back.”

With that, Kam was sprinting to the front door. When he got there he had his hammer in his hands and hit it with a tremendous blow. The door and half the front wall fell inward.

“Well armoured, and half way through the wall, good work, professional, now, who are you idiots.”

He was facing several men, well armed. They were waiting for an order.

“Who’s the commander, ah, you must be him, you’ve got a sidearm. By all means, open fire.”

The man with the sidearm waved the rifles down, “What would be the point, we’d probably kill each other from the ricochets off that thing you’ve got. You’ve got in, now how about telling me what you want?”

“Me, I just want to know what this base is, out in the middle of nowhere.”

At that moment, the side wall caved in and Cleo said, “Something heavy coming up a ramp toward the back wall.”

Kam turned to the man in charge, “What would happen if we flooded that tunnel with propane and set it alight?”

“Well if you could do it, a lot of men would die.”

“Cleo?”

“What, again?”

The officer was on a radio and the rumbling stopped.

“Seriously, who are you people?” He said as he stopped giving

orders.

“Independent contractors, and you?”

“Alberta government, and I’ll thank you to keep that to yourself.”

“You’re not in Alberta, although that’s all I see around here are Calgarians, so nice try.”

“Seriously. We’re getting ready for separation, setting up a perimeter.”

“Oh come on, your government is setting up military bases to defend Alberta after you separate? From what? Canada?”

“Yes,” the man replied, looking deadly serious. “Look, if you’re independent contractors, are you willing to take a job from us?”

“Don’t know, we’re sort of particular about who we work for.”

“I told you, Alberta Government.”

“Well let’s have a look then, I want to see if you can pull this off, or at least pull it off long enough to pay us. Show us the base and then we’ll talk fees.”

Another man whispered in the officer’s ear, “What if they’re feds, we shouldn’t show them the base.”

The officer whispered back, “How do we stop them? And besides, if they work for us we can figure out who supplies their tech.”

Cleo glanced at Kam and he gave a smile out of only half his mouth. Kobold sight and hearing was so much better than Humans, and they ought to have picked that up when Cleo heard the armoured vehicle coming up an underground ramp.

Looking around, Cleo noticed that Kam had wrecked the exit from the base, the floor was to rise up and the front wall hinged down to let the vehicles out. Kam had broken the hinges by hammering it inward, and she had collapsed the side wall, wrecking the lifting mechanism for the floor. Interesting, two hits and the place was useless, unless there was another exit.

They went down a flight of stairs to the ramp, and walked downward. There were guards in front and behind them but Cleo wasn't very concerned, one step sideways and Kam's shield would cover them. She really did intend to have a chat with the smith, after all, she was the Princess, if Kam could have his toys, she should have them too.

As they walked down, she said to Kam, “Preppies?”

“Preppers, and no, not unless they are very rich.”

Walking further, Kam reached out casually and brushed his hand along the wall. Cleo looked closely and realized that there

were hammer marks where it had been carved out of the rock. They had Kobolds working for them or these guys had taken over an old Kobold mine.

Kam mumbled, “Ken, you seeing this?” A single click came back from his hammer on the chain around his neck. Cleo thought, ‘My necklace never spoke to me.’

“Blow it up?” Kam muttered, as if talking to himself. Two clicks this time. Then a third.

Cleo figured that meant no, but they should use their own judgment over what to do with these guys. She came even more alert, dropping back a little bit nearer the rear guards. If Kam moved, they were done for.

The End of the Alberta Army

It was quite a long way down the slope into the mountain, and they came out into a large cavern. There were light armoured vehicles and artillery there, along with several dozen men. Only the guards were armed, so perhaps these guys were a little more professional than they appeared.

They went into the officer’s cubicle, it looked like he was the local fellow in charge. “Now, what are your rates?”

“Woah, my good fellow, I told you that we are picky which jobs we do. I want to know what’s with you and your presumed other defensive bases.”

“Well, uh, I guess...”

“And another thing, have you checked out our identities yet? Have you even asked us for identification?”

“Ah, you see, that’s why we could use you.”

“Son, just who are you?”

“Well, I’m the Premier’s first cousin, actually.”

“I see, and this is the first and only defensive base is it?”

“How did you know that?”

“Son, where were you trained?”

“Well, I was a member of the Sons of Thunar and we did lots of training.”

Kam looked at Cleo, the Sons of Thunar were a bunch of preppers who thought it would be they who came out on top come the apocalypse. That they were a ragtag bunch of bigoted rich kids, didn’t seem to dawn on them.

“Who’s your next in line, Gerry is it?”

“How did you know my name?”

“Nametag, son, it says Gerry. Who’s your next up the line?”

“Uh, the Premier, sir.”

“No kidding, and where did the money for this come from?”

“I don’t really know, I was told it was a special fund.”

“A slush fund?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“So you would want us to set up more bases and train the men how to run them, right?”

“That’s right, and maybe sell us that fancy bullet repeller.”

“Two questions, first who sold you the equipment?”

“It was a fellow who was an agent for a supplier called ‘Mr. Boots.’

“Right, and who dug the cave for you?”

“Oh, we contracted it out, something called KKK, Kobold Kontracting Kompany.”

“You maybe got a name or address for those fellows?”

“I’ve got a card if you’d like to see it.”

“Oh yes, I would. Now my partner and I are going to go over there and discuss whether or not we work for you.”

“Oh you will, you know too much,” said Gerry in his best tough guy voice.

Three of the guards moved in and Kam responded in a blur. Before Cleo could react, all three were on the ground unconscious and Kam was aiming an assault rifle at Gerry. “Like I said, we’re going over there to decide if we work for you, threats come under the minus column son.”

No more threats were made as Cleo and Kam walked across the armoury. “I’ve cut Ken in on this Cleo. What do you think Ken?” Cleo heard laughter from Kam’s hammer.

“Yeah, I think I’m going to collapse this so-called base, unless you want another base Ken? No, fine down it comes, we’ll get the idiots out first.”

As Kam was walking back to the officer, he spotted a fire alarm. He flicked a sign to Cleo and she stumbled into it, setting it off.

“Come on you lot, get your lazy asses outside this base, you

know the drill, this one's real, there's been reports of earthquakes around here. Move it."

Kam had such a strong command voice, Cleo almost ran for it, then she thought and did run, yelling, "I can feel it, get out of my way, I'm getting out of here."

There are always a few who don't believe a fire alarm, maybe they were better trained than most here and were distrustful of Kam, maybe they were just the denial type, the type who wouldn't believe it was a fire until they got their asses singed. Cleo got most of them running and she dropped back like a weak woman who couldn't run as fast as the men.

Seeing the hangers-back, she took a note from Ben and picked up some tools (not finding any handy rocks) and threw them quickly. The three or four men were unconscious in an instant and Cleo picked them up one by one and passed them off to other men saying that they had slipped and fallen, "Get them out safely."

Kam and Cleo were alone in the cavern after about ten minutes of bumbling evacuation. Kam fiddled with his wristband and with his hammer and said, "Get beside me and kneel down, Cleo."

As she did so he triggered a half dome of something on his wrist and set his hammer to vibrating. The hammer went through sound from high to low and soon found the resonant frequency of the local rock. The cavern collapsed, crushing all

but the dome around the two.

“How is that so strong?” Cleo asked.

“It’s not, this setting disintegrates rock and leaves oxygen, when we turn it off we should have room to swing our hammers.”

As it turned out, the rock was looser than Kam expected, when he turned off his dome, rock began to fall. Cleo instantly grew and took the falling rocks on her back, protecting Kam below. She grunted, “Maybe get a setting that fuses the rock too.”

Kam was setting his hammer and said, “Sorry girl, it’s new, I’ll have them put it into yours.”

“I’ll be happy to have it if we get out of here before I collapse.”

“Starting now, watch your arm,” and Kam began digging them out, swinging his hammer back and forth and turning the rock into breathable air. Cleo was soon able to shrink back to her normal size and help with the digging.

They were heading at a slant away from the men of the base, and came out on a wooded slope.

“Nice to get out from underground, if that isn’t an un-Kobold thing to say.”

Kam laughed, “I agree with you, I prefer air that isn’t

processed from rock.”

“Kam, your shield there bounced bullets back but disintegrated rock, what’s with that?”

“The mark 1 version was a transparent metal shield, then we added the dome for cave-ins. The next modification will be fusing the rock with the dome.”

“And you said something about me getting one of those cool gadgets?”

“Yes, little one, you shall have one. Maybe for your birthday.”

“Good, I was beginning to think you liked Ben more than me.”

Alex Island

Kam checked in with Ken and yes indeed, they had found the Kobolds who had built the base. The problem was, they had done it all legally, at least as far as being hired and paid by agents of the Alberta government. The only questionable part was that they built the base in British Columbia. A bit of a hitch, but that wasn’t strictly the problem of the construction company. It wasn’t likely that either province would bother bringing legal proceedings against the construction companies.

And who were the Kobolds? “OK Cleo, we need to go back and have a talk with our friend the Shaman. It was his pet clan of Kobolds, which doesn’t surprise me a bit.”

“You’re kidding, well they’re willing to work, you have to give them that. How did they get the time to dig out that base while they were digging out their own mountain and violating the underground treaties?”

“I don’t know, if only Bogart could get them into more legitimate business practices. They seem to love being on the edges of legal.”

“Higher profit margins?”

“Let’s get back, I suspect Bogart will have some ideas. He usually does, I mean the women are doing well with the Fairmont Hot Springs, they’ll own the whole thing in a year, I suspect.

Catching a ride from Pogo, they were back on the island before nightfall. Bogart wasn’t impressed with the news, “I have a good mind to drop them as clients, they seem to have a way of getting into trouble and then I have to bail them out.”

Kam laughed, “And give up that income stream?”

“Bogart, these Kobolds around here, do they have anything to do with the monarchists?” asked Cleo.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Cleo, but they have been over here so long they don’t remember that there was a King back home, or that you’re a Princess.”

“Oh. You know, I’m not sure how to take that.”

“Well, the situation back home doesn’t really affect them, they’re a long way from the old country. I’ll have a talk with them tomorrow. In the meantime Ben and Clara have cooked dinner for us.”

Cleo gave a worried look at Kam, who laughed, “Ben would make sure we aren’t poisoned, Cleo.”

When they sat down to supper, the food was lovely. Cleo made sure to complement Clara, “You did a great job, sister mine, I didn’t know you could cook.”

“It was Ben, as I’m sure you have guessed, but I’m learning, I really am. I figure if I’m going to get into a decent relationship I ought to learn how to do some of the work. Ben’s showing me that cooking and cleaning aren’t as hard as I thought they were.”

“How did you live up to now?”

“Take out and maid service mostly. My men were jerks, but they were rich jerks, I’m not completely stupid Bigsis.”

“Now there’s a name from the past, you haven’t called me that for a hundred years.”

“I’d forgotten it. Bogart is helping a lot.”

Bogart smiled gently, “Speaking of which, how would you four like to give me a break. I’m getting exhausted and now I have to go sort out the hot spring clan. I’ve done as much as I can for now, why not head back to Guelph and work with Lorraine for a while.”

“Oh, Bogie, I didn’t know you were getting that tired,” said Cleo.

“Well, one or two aren’t much trouble, but the four of you are a bit much.”

“Four?”

“Ben has his issues, which I’m not going to talk to you about, Cleo, but yes, all of you have been under care.”

“Bogie, I’m so sorry, can we do something to repay you?”

“You know Ken pays me well, and I’ve got the girls in the shop in Canmore now, I’d say we’re even, dear. I wasn’t getting a lot more sleep than I am now, when that trio was staying here.”

Ben and Cleo gave him a look.

“Purely therapeutic, I assure you.”

“For whom?” said Cleo, to a big grin from Bogart.

“All good to leave tomorrow, Bogart?” said Kam.

“Yes, nothing delicate going on, and you can give me a ride out to the road.”

“Least we can do is take you where you’re going, Fairmont or Lussier?”

“That would be appreciated, Lussier I think, no need to bother the women, I suspect the men are trying to compete with the women. Ego can be a terrible thing. Pogo can give us all a ride to Wilmer.”

With that they all headed to bed with strict instructions to Bogart not to be in anyone’s head.

In the morning, after the usual big breakfast, prepared this time by Ben and Clara, they headed for Wilmer and the Jeep. Ben drove with Kam up front, and Bogart somehow managed to get wedged between the girls. He didn’t complain too much.

On the trip to the Lussier hot springs, Bogart had some suggestions. “Clara, you should stay with Cleo and Ben for a while, at least while Lorraine is looking in on you, being in the same place will reduce the variables for her to juggle.”

Cleo, who knew this for a fib, looked at Bogart but said nothing. ‘Matchmaker,’ she thought to herself.

“Kam, I’m going to have a chat with Ken, when you get back I firmly recommend that you go visit the Massey Hall library, the dark one.”

“What? What is this, shock therapy?”

“No of course not, just go and follow the clues, it’s what you do best.”

“Fine, I’ll give it a shot,” but Kam sounded a bit doubtful.

Bogart stopped talking and after a few minutes, Ben asked, “Any advice for me, Bogie?”

“Viagra.”

When the Jeep pulled into the parking spot for the hot spring, the group piled out and looked up the slope. You had to look carefully, but figures could be seen pouring out of the mountain and running up-slope, darting from rock to rock, trying to be invisible.

Bogart suddenly had a thick staff in his hand and thumped it hard on the ground. Even Ben could feel the vibrations that ran up the mountain and froze the group in their tracks.

Bogart didn't speak much more loudly than normal conversation, but his voice seemed to carry, "Inside you lot, I don't have the patience for your nonsense today. I said inside now!"

There were puffs of dust as the Kobolds headed for the entrance.

Bogart turned to the group around the jeep, the three Kobolds looked like they wanted to head for the entrance too. "Oops, sorry, a bit of spill over. Do you four want to take a soak? I won't be more than a couple hours here, or I'll be a couple of days banging heads together, if I'm not out by the time you finish, go on without me."

The Kobolds shook their heads to clear them, and nodded. Ben was impressed, "You have hidden depths Bogart."

"Well I don't like using the bossy voice but I'm grumpy and these guys have pissed me off once too often. We're going to have a little heart to heart, which is going to cost them big in consulting fees. If I'm not here when you guys are done, you have a good trip to Guelph."

"Thanks for everything Bogart, you sure you don't want us to wait longer than that?"

"No, it's quick or it's a couple of days, take care of the girls, Ben."

Ben nodded and the four turned to the path down to the spring, there was steam coming off of the hottest and Ben was looking forward to a long soak.

Back to Guelph

Wrinkled like prunes, the four spent three hours soaking in the heat, and then swimming in the river. Ben would never have tried swimming in that current, but with his new-found strength he had no trouble keeping up with the Kobolds, they'd swim a couple hundred metres upstream and float down. Ben was careful to stay in the same track as his friends, they would create a furrow in the rocks which his human skin was happy to follow.

“Nice hard butt,” he called to Cleo, who made a face at him.

When they'd finished their final soak, Bogart was still gone, so they dressed, packed up and got back on the road.

“I'm going to miss Bogie, I've never met Lorraine, is she as nice?”

“Oh, Clara, only you would describe Bogart as nice,” Cleo said, shaking her head.

“But he is.”

“Then yes, you’ll like Lorraine who is every bit as twisty as Bogart, but a lot kinder. She’s a Fox spirit, the European type.”

On the drive back, Clara tried out her new illusion powers on the four. Ben was driving and, being human, saw the various scenery Clara created off to the side of the road. Her control was already good enough that she left the road as it really was, so Ben could see it. Cleo saw the illusions but Kam could resist if he wished. He could see it coming and block it. So the Elf’s powers were only good against Cleo and Clara. This was something that Kam took careful note of. He would get Ken to look into the possibility that there were other Kobolds like Cleo and Clara who could block the connection with other Kobolds and were thus unprotected against the Elf powers.

Every ‘power’ came at a price, it seemed. For instance, Ben had improved strength, but he had to take the increased weight as well. If he used the strength to swim upstream, he had to remember to give it up when he floated down or he sank onto the rocks.

Cleo could get bigger and had the strength to go along with it, so she remained the same density, or she could increase her weight and density without getting larger. But it exhausted her.

Kam’s empathy, his ability to read people’s true intentions had almost driven him crazy when Maude, his librarian, had aged and died after moving in with him.

Cleo was going to take Bogart's advice and keep Clara close until they could figure out what her Elf powers cost her. From big-time victim she just might become a big-time abuser, although she gave no indication yet, that would happen.

They drove to the Three Sisters base and hopped on the train for the trip back to Guelph. They were a bit put out that they had to sit one behind the other, until Kam pulled a lever on one of the seats and it folded down to a flat bed. That was news to the rest of them and it caused a bit of a stir when Ben had to drop two seats to fit his long frame. Then there was a fight over which woman slept on top of him. That was solved by taking turns while Kam chuckled to himself.

As they pulled into Thunder Bay, they decided to stretch their legs and got off. Wandering around the harbour they stopped for lunch and then did the tourist thing. As they looked out on the Sleeping Giant, Cleo suggested that Clara make it look like he'd woken up. Clara concentrated and sure enough, the Giant sat up, but Ben yelled, "Look there, did you make the ground fall away as he did that Clara?"

"Dirt?"

"Oh my Gods, you woke him up! Clara, put him back to sleep now, quickly," yelled Cleo while Kam was going through his gadgets wondering what would work on a Giant made of rock, essentially a Troll.

Luckily, Clara was able to send a lullaby and he lay back down to sleep. The landslides were later put down to heavy rains.

Cleo looked at Kam, who got a bit defensive, “Look, not every bit of trouble is my fault, cousin.”

They got back on a train and Clara shouted, “Shotgun,” and jumped onto Ben while Cleo sat up with Kam and pouted.

“It’s a good thing we have a great big bed back at the apartment.”

“So you’re going to move Clara in with you?”

“I figure we’d better, at least for a while. She seems a lot better, but I want to keep an eye on her.”

“Well you’re both pretty tough, it should work out.”

“I just wish she would get used to having a good man around, I’d like my turn.” This last was said in a louder voice and got a raspberry back from Clara.

When they pulled into Guelph and climbed up the stairs to the bar they found Ken waiting for them. It was strange not to have Sam flying across the room for a hug, but she was at the St. George with Hubert and Lorraine. Ken saw Cleo looking toward the bar and said, “She sends her love you two, she

hasn't forgotten you, and expects you to visit today."

Cleo's face lit up and she turned to kiss Ben, "That's from Sam."

Ben grinned and turned to Clara, "We told you about Sam?"

Clara pouted and said, "The one I'm substituting for right?"

"What? Never! You're our favourite, Clara!"

"Alright, cut it out," said Ken, "Kam, I got a message from the library, they want you to go visit."

Cleo frowned, "Overdue book?"

"Overdue librarian."

Kam looked like he was about to punch someone.

"Calm down Kam, they want some compensation from you, it's been a bit difficult for them since Maude left, they never found a replacement. We talked it over and they would like you to spend a bit of time there as a librarian."

"What! You mean as a collector, surely?"

"No, they want to train you to be a librarian, they think you'd be a good one."

“Ken that’s a job forever. Once you’re there you stop aging and you don’t leave.”

Ken was on thin ice and he knew it, “No Kam, this is a limited time offer. They want you for a hundred years only. They think that you can learn fast because you’re empathic, and they’ve finally got a new recruit who ought to be trained by then.”

“A hundred years. And you agreed to this Ken?”

“No, my brother, I agreed that I could do without you for a hundred years, I did NOT agree that you would do it. Only you can do that.”

“An overdue librarian, did they say that?”

“Of course not. Look, think about it, Bogart thinks it might be a good idea, and I tend to agree. After all, you’re not pounding me into the ground right now.”

Kam shook his head, “You can do without me for a hundred years?”

“There’s nothing serious on the horizon, Kam, the Giants and the Kappa are settling down, and nothing else as serious seems to be in sight. They did say that if I really needed you they would release you for as long as it takes.”

“The library would let me out? Ken did you negotiate that?”

“I did.”

“What did it cost you?”

“A lot, Kam, but this might be good for you and think about it, you come out with that training, you will be three times the agent you are now.”

“Ah, I see the shape of this deal now. You had me worried for a moment, dearest brother. OK I’ll think about it, give me a couple of days will you?”

“You know I will, Kam. Go have a beer and we’ll talk later.”

Ken turned to the others, “Now, you three, get on home and settle in, I want to see you back here tomorrow, we’re short staffed in the bar, and I want to talk things over with you two girls, I hear you’ve got Elf powers now Clara.”

They walked out of the bar and to the apartment. It was nice to be home, the trees were turning colour and that seemed to suit the mood of Ben and Cleo. They were happy for Sam that she’d found her teacher, but sad that she had a new family.

As they walked into the apartment all their sadness vanished. Sam and Lorraine were there to greet them.

After hugs and introductions and more hugs, Lorraine said, “That is a really big bed!”

Sam and Cleo said, more or less together, “Ben is a big boy.” which got laughs and grins all around.

Kam Meets Lucy

“I’m going to do it, Ken.” Kam was sitting in Ken’s office having a coffee.

“Good, you should.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing that needs me, nothing going on these days?”

“Not a damned thing, I’m going to have to let some of the boys go if nothing comes up. You go and figure out what they want, and we’ll keep a lid on things Kam, I promise you.”

“Well, you’ve got a good team with the girls and Ben. They’ve picked up some powers on their own, and the smith has promised to keep working on the projects we’ve discussed. They’ll have lots of toys to play with.”

“If I haven’t known you forever Kam, I’d say you relied too much on those toys.”

“They are tools, and often damned handy. That hammer you designed for Ben was brilliant. He had it jumping through

hoops at Lussier, you saw how he got it to give him a couple of batons. Did you design that in?”

“No, I just told the smith to attune it to his brain and he did the rest. The smith just about fell off his chair when I told him, and now he’s bragging about what a genius he is.”

“Well, let him, he does good work.”

“Kam, when are you going up to the library?”

“No sense putting it off, I’m going today.”

“I’m going to miss you brother mine.”

“You want a hug little bro?”

“Damned right I do.”

It was mid morning by the time Kam got his affairs in order. Ken had always taken care of his business affairs, so that was easy, but packing away his gadgets and clothing took a while. He knew he wasn’t going to need any of it in the library, Maude had come out with nothing but the clothes she entered with.

He sat on the edge of his bed and thought about Maude for a long time. He wasn’t sure he was ready for this, but he was damned sure he didn’t want to let her go. He knew that being in the place where she worked for so many years might make her

weaker in his memory, just as easily as it might make her stronger.

He slammed his hands down on his knees and stood, “Let’s go,” he said to the room he was using.

He stuck his head into the office as he headed out, “Take care of the girls Ken.”

“You know I will, you take care of you, Kam.”

With that, Kam walked through the bar and out the front door. “Strange, I’m usually a back door sort of guy,” he thought.

He arrived at the library in the middle of a school day and the drama students, yawning and stretching, were going in the front door. Kam went around the back and stopped at the rear entrance. “Well, here’s a rear door for me.”

He didn’t knock, just stood looking at the door through which Maude had stepped into his life. He could see her face, smiling at him, and her old fashioned clothing. He could feel her step into his arms. He could...

The door opened and Maude stood there. No, not Maude, but she looked almost like her. Kam’s heart started to ache.

The woman said nothing, she stood waiting to see if Kam would enter. Kam didn’t know if he could. “I...”

“I’m Maude’s sister, Kam, my name is Lucy and I asked for you. You have to come in voluntarily, I can’t invite you. You know what’s being asked of you.”

“I do,” said Kam as he stepped forward into the brightly lit room. “You know this is hard for me?”

“Oh yes, we both loved Maude and it was hard for both of us. We will talk, we need to talk, but not now. There will be time for both of us to heal, and we need to heal.”

Kam nodded and followed Lucy into the library. He knew it was larger than expected, he had been there before. He wondered if Lucy knew he had seen it all before, with his Kobold sight.

“Yes, we knew. You looked at things, you were not blind. I wonder if that was part of the reason Maude left with you.”

“You can read my mind?”

“We read the person, the face, the body, and you know what that is, Kam.”

“I do, I was born knowing that and never knew that others could not read people. If it wasn’t for my brother I might have become a very bad person.” Kam wondered why he was opening up so quickly to Lucy.

“You say you are a good person when so much death follows

you?”

“Yes, I could have gained political power and then my destruction would have been as large as countries. I could have been a hammer instead of a scalpel. Ken wielded me so that I would not wield myself. I have always known this.”

“You will learn quickly here, you are half trained. Perhaps you will find answers.”

“You don’t want payment for what I did to Maude?”

“Kam, this is the first lesson I think. My sister left here with my blessing. She loved you and I told her to go.”

“Oh Gods,” moaned Ken.

“You came here looking for punishment, hoping that would give you peace. We don’t punish, we do what is so much more painful, we educate.”

Kam looked at the floor. He didn’t know what to say. Lucy lifted his face, “You thought it would be easy? Healing is never easy. We will learn together, we will heal together. Not punishment or forgiveness, although that may come with understanding.”

“I’m not sure I can forgive myself, even if you do.”

“Forgiveness is empty without understanding. We will learn

and see what comes with that.”

“What is it that you will learn?”

“I will learn you, Kam. You will learn what Maude was, what the library is, what she gave up for you.”

“You say that’s not punishment?”

“You know this place. You know you came here to learn about your ability to see into others. You eventually came to accept it, but you never learned. Our job was half done then, Maude wanted to help you learn and ended up loving you. I wonder if you know how much you learned from that, or has your grief hidden what she gave you.”

“Please, I’m not sure I am ready for this.”

“The adventurer, the hero, the lone agent.”

“Yes, I understand, I am not so young that I don’t see what that is.”

“Be more brave yet, you know she would want you to be brave.”

For the first time in a very long time, Kam cried. Lucy joined him with her tears, and the two of them walked to the room Kam would use for the next hundred years as he learned what Maude wanted to teach him.

Sam Gets Preachy

“What about Hubert?” asked Ben when he realized that Sam and Lorraine were going to stay the night.

“Do him good to spend a night alone,” said Lorraine.

Sam grinned, “Probably would, but the George has sent him on a little scouting mission. He’s taken Nadja with him.”

“Well maybe I’ll take the couch for tonight, let you girls have the bed.”

“It’s a great big bed, Ben.”

“Oh lord, you guys keep saying that, is it some sort of metaphor?”

The girls fell about laughing and Ben shook his head, going into the kitchen to cook supper, thinking to himself ‘I’ll never understand them.’

Another burst of laughter filled the apartment as he started peeling potatoes.

Sam came in to give him a hand.

“Are you happy, Sam?”

“You know I am, Ben. What about you? It looks like you’ve got two women in your bed again.”

“I’m not sure how that happened.”

“I am, you’re a teacher, Ben, as good as our sensei ever was.”

“A teacher? I’m an agent, I go around beating people up, how’s that a teacher?”

“Look at Clara, Lorraine told me about her life and how you met her. She was a damaged girl, and even if Bogart and Lorraine will be working with her, it’s you that Lorraine says will to the most good.”

“What?”

“You can’t see it, can you Ben. Just by being you, by being the man you are, you teach. Clara sees things in you that she wants in herself. You may be a stone killer, but you are as kind as anyone I’ve ever met. Both Cleo and Clara love you deeply. They find things in you that they’ve never seen before, and they aren’t going to let you get away.”

“You’re scaring me, Sam. I swear you are.”

Sam laughed, “Don’t let it bother you, I see what they see,

you're blind to it. Just be who you are, the best teachers are simply good examples."

"Some example, my wife and kids just disappeared one day. How good a man can I be?"

"How long ago was that Ben? Decades right? I know that you have been working to make yourself a better, more empathetic man since then."

"Yeah, but I just turned my back on them after they left."

"You know that's not true, you waited, you searched, it was your wife who left, not you, and you tried to find them. When they wouldn't be found you left them alone. It was what she wanted and you let her go."

"Yes but what had I done to make her leave."

"Ben, seriously. You're an old man, surely by now you will know that there are people who want to be unhappy. Maybe something in their past, maybe they just like something to blame their problems on. Someone other than themselves. Your wife may not have had anything to complain about, but she might just have invented something. That isn't in your control, wasn't in your control. But it did spur you on to become a better person, and I suspect you have."

Sam didn't mention she thought Ben's wife may have left him because she just couldn't live up to his standard. That he made

her feel like a bad person.

“That’s kind of you to say, Sam, it really is.”

“But, but, but. Never mind your butts. You can’t see your own face without a mirror, you can’t know what sort of a man you are without someone telling you. I’m telling you that the majority of people in this apartment right now think you’re someone worth being around, someone we can learn from. Just by being around you we become better through your example.”

“Seriously, Sam, enough already. OK I’m a nice guy and I work at it I guess. What am I supposed to do with that? What happens if I become a shitty person, does the world fall apart?”

“No Ben, what happens is that I tell you that you’re being a shit. You’re not responsible for the sorrows of the world, any more than you’re responsible for the goodness. I’m telling you, just being you, just by being kind, by being compassionate, you provide an example of how the rest of us can live, and from that example, maybe others come. If the world doesn’t get better around you, that’s not your responsibility, any more than it’s your doing if it does. You’re a good man, that’s all it is.”

“So what’s all this about being a teacher.”

“A teacher as an example, not some dry lecturer telling people to be good.”

“Good, I guess. All I’ve ever done in the lecturing thing is

imitate others. I don't have a pipeline to goodness or to evil."

"You know Beelzabub, but yeah, I know what you mean. There's a lot of gurus out there, a lot of preachers who just spout words. They don't understand the words and they don't live up to them. I'm talking about you being a good man, not telling others to be good."

"Sam the only teaching I have ever done is in how to beat people up."

"You think so? You never taught self defence?"

"Well of course I have."

"You teach your budo as a way to kill, to beat people up?"

"No, that's not how I was taught and that doesn't interest me, I've killed with my skills but I've also killed with a screwdriver through someone's eyeball. That's not the function of budo or screwdrivers. Only fantasizing little boys think that."

"Many more than you might think, Ben. More budo students than you might think, believe it's all about techniques."

"That's stupid, that's like thinking dance is all about learning the steps, or about losing weight, not about artistic expression."

"Oh you sweet man, tell me what budo is then."

“It’s about using the techniques of violence to become a better person, same as if you sit still and meditate by counting your breath.”

“To become a better person.”

“Are you done chopping the carrots?”

“Chop wood, carry water?”

“Get out of my kitchen.”

Sam walked out to join the other women who had found a bottle of wine and were seriously in need of finding another one. Lorraine handed Sam a glass, “Saved one for you, that was quite a lecture you gave Ben.”

“You heard? Yeah, I don’t know, he just doesn’t understand how important he is.”

“You think that knowing that will help him? Sometimes if you tell people they’re doing good, they end up with a big ego and do more harm than good.”

“Why didn’t you stop me?”

“I didn’t say Ben was one of those, his goodness is part of who he is, he doesn’t have an egotistical bone in his body, I know, I’ve looked. He’s simply not going to believe you, so no harm

done.”

“It’s just that he beats himself up.”

“He doesn’t, you know. He knows what he is, and what he can do. There’s no modesty there, not false at least. The modesty you see is him not believing that others can be less than he is. He figures you ought to be able to do what he does, be what he is, and so we try to live up to that. He doesn’t want to be better than anyone else, so we try not to disappoint him.”

“That’s twisty, Lorraine.”

“Humans are twisty, Oh boy don’t I know that. A combination of past and present and desires for the future.”

As Ben walked in with the first of the plates of supper, he said, “And what have you guys been discussing?”

Lorraine raised her eyebrows to Sam and said, “We’ve been talking about nail polish and hair styles and fashion. You know, girl stuff.”

Ben looked a bit startled, “You have?”

Sam dissolved in giggles.

Kam Reads

Kam didn't need much time to organize his room. He brought nothing, and there was little in the room, a bed, a washstand, and a shelf of books. In the closet, three uniforms that would fit him.

Glancing at the books, he realized they were for him. Authors he had never heard of, but he could see that they were research on the psychology of empathy.

Lucy was in the doorway, she had made no sound as she walked, but Kam could feel the change in air pressure as she arrived. "These are for me."

"Yes, they are the books to the right, the books you should have read after the one you did. Why did you not choose them?"

"You know the books I picked?"

"Yes."

"Then you know I chose books to tell Maude what I felt for her. I chose love poems and romance novels."

"That was dangerous, she was punished for that, they were not the books you needed."

"She never told me."

“I stopped it. She was my sister and I could prevent the punishment, and so I did. Still, she eventually chose the ultimate punishment, she left the library.”

“Why do you tell me this?”

“Because you wish to know, because you need to know.”

“That I hurt her?”

“That she loved you.”

“What do I do now?”

“Read, and tonight you will work. You know the library from your visits, but not how it is arranged. You will take the specific questions, you will take the finger and I will take your other hand and we will lead them to their book.”

“Will I know what book they need if they ask for that?”

“Read, you will learn that.”

“Wait, how do you see in the dark? Maude’s eyes were no different than others.”

“No different than humans, you mean.”

“You know?”

“That you are a Kobold? We knew that, the first time you came into the library. Of course we knew, how could we not?”

“But I was an agent, trained in disguise.”

“We knew, Kam, Maude knew. We must know. To answer your question, we know where the books are, even in the darkness. We must know. And now read, I will come for you when the darkness arrives, read until then.”

Kam nodded and selected his first book from the middle of the row. As he did so, Lucy nodded, as if he had passed a test.

Kam changed into a uniform and spent the afternoon reading. Toward the end of the afternoon his Kobold metabolism reminded him he had not eaten since breakfast. As he thought that, a tray was wheeled into his room. The woman was a stranger to him, he had never seen her in his visits, but then again, he'd never seen Lucy either.

“Thank you for the food, I did not know how to find something to eat.”

“You will be brought food until you are done your reading, then you will be shown the kitchen where we share the duties. This is the usual process for initiates.”

“I am an initiate?”

“Of course you are, you will be trained as we all were, there is

nothing else involved in your time with us. The only difference will be that you can leave at the end of one hundred years.”

Kam bowed, he had been an initiate many times, he had never stopped learning. His bow was returned.

Kam looked hard at the cover of the first book, which he had finished. He wasn't sure what he had read, it didn't seem to be in his memory, but he opened the book at random and read again. He remembered, and he understood what it said.

‘This is a different reading,’ he thought to himself.

“It is. These are books that reveal what you already know,” said Lucy, who had returned. “They were written for you, to remind you of what you know, it will be difficult to quote them, difficult to remember passages because you know what they say, yet you must read them. Pick the next.”

Kam looked at the shelf, put the first book back and selected another. Again, Lucy nodded and left without saying anything further.

Kam decided that he must trust that he knew which books to read in what order. He was tempted to rearrange the shelf but somehow he decided that would be a mistake, an attempt to show off, perhaps.

He spent the rest of the day reading, not noticing that time was passing, not trying to memorize the books. He came to realize

that, while he understood what they said generally, he was acquiring nuance, he was building on what he knew and what he was learning. All learning is like that, but this seemed to be rearranging the shelves in his head. Placing books into an order he didn't know existed.

At the correct time, the library grew dark. This wasn't a matter of turning off lights, they remained, but a darkness crept in and overwhelmed the light. It did so slowly, as if it were water flowing somehow from one side to the other. Kam could still see. He could see that the lights were still on, just covered, like they might be if you put a thick black cloth over them to prevent any light from escaping.

When Lucy came for him, Kam started to ask about that darkness, but found that he could not speak. No that wasn't quite right, that he would need a tremendous effort to speak into that darkness. He wasn't sure he was strong enough, and yet Maude had spoken her name when he asked.

Again, Kam was forced to see just how much Maude had cared for him. How much she was willing to do to be with him.

As Lucy turned and walked away, he stood and followed. He watched her carefully and realized that she hadn't simply memorized the library, she could see. Yet she was human, she was using no gadgets, she could see through that strange darkness.

Lucy led him to the back door and they waited. After a few

minutes it opened, and the darkness spilled out, covering the girl standing there. Her eyes grew wide, she was frightened. Why? Was she afraid of what she would learn? Was she told that she might learn what she needed to know?

Lucy nodded and Kam approached her. She seemed not to know he was there but she gathered her courage and said, “I want to know about love.”

Kam was surprised, was this a legitimate question for the darkened library? Surely this was trivial. He thought hard, he looked at her and realized why she was afraid. What could she need? He could see what she wanted, something all bluebirds and tinkling music, and he knew that was not what she needed. Suddenly he knew.

He grasped her finger lightly and Lucy took his other hand. They walked through the shelves and there it was, Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliette. Lucy nodded and Kam put her finger on the text. To the left, a volume of Rimbaud’s poems and on the right, a copy of Moby Dick. Kam saw it clearly. This girl was about to experience her first love, and she would be devastated, as many are. She would consider suicide because of her rejection. She might choose the romantic poetry and begin to understand obsession, she might come back for Moby Dick.

Kam understood the library. It truly was a place where you found the book you need, rather than the book you want. For the clients to get the book they wanted, they were likely to

reinforce their opinions, the book they needed was to explain those opinions, those obsessions.

Kam took the girl back to the door and wanted to tell her, “It gets better, after the loss, it gets better,” but of course he could not speak, and he realized that if he said that, it would be a lie. He had not got better, he had stayed where he was when Maude died.

They continued waiting at the back door but nobody else came.

Eventually the door locked and the darkness rolled back to wherever it had come from. Kam could speak again, and he turned to Lucy to ask about the darkness.

She shook her head, “You will understand it soon enough, it’s best if you learn on your own. Come, now we will do the returns and you can start understanding how we shelve the books.”

They walked to the returns desk and Kam saw a few books, not many, on the table. “We have few customers, but each is important, we have almost no late books because very few want to keep what has disturbed their lives so much as our books. These were borrowed yesterday, pick up that one and tell me what you feel.”

Kam reached for the book she had pointed to and as he touched it he pulled his hand back fast, as if he had got a shock from static electricity.

“Best to grasp them firmly, to avoid the sting.”

Kam did that, and felt something, “Sadness, I feel great sadness.”

“Look at the title.”

“Current treatments of Breast Cancer.”

“What do you know about this book now.”

“Someone is losing their mother, or someone has breast cancer themselves.”

“Which is it?”

“The mother, someone is losing their mother, nobody who has learned they are going to die would be this sad, unless they were terribly vain, a narcissist, and in that case, there would be more anger here than there is.”

“Why did they get that book, which tells them their mother will likely die.”

Kam was confused, but made a guess, “So that they will not make their mother fight a hopeless fight. So their mother can die peacefully and with dignity.”

Lucy nodded, “Can you find your way to your room and

continue your reading? I will help re-shelve the books here.”

Kam nodded and walked slowly back to his room, thinking hard.

Ben on the Couch

Ben was serious about sleeping on the couch, “You girls go giggle and tickle each other, I want a good night’s sleep.”

The women pouted, but headed into the bedroom without him. Ben sighed and lay back for a good night’s rest.

About an hour later, Lorraine came out of the bedroom and stretched out on top of Ben. She wasn’t very big so Ben hardly noticed, just wrapped his arms around her to keep her warm and to make sure she didn’t roll off onto the floor.

Lorraine snuggled into his chest, her head by his chin, “You know, Sam is right about you.”

“Werzmpf”

“I knew who you were the very first time I slept with you, Ben.”

He was awake now.

“I was simply a whore who had picked you up on the street, yet I knew physically, that you were a good man. You cared about my pleasure more than you did about yours. When you fell asleep with me in your arms, I joined your dream and you were dreaming of me. Dreaming of a whore, and you cared.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

“No you don’t, because you are who you are. You have never thought about why you act the way you do, you’ve always figured everyone is good, and knowing otherwise was something you had to learn over the years.”

“Go to sleep, Lorraine, and you’re not a whore.”

“I’ll own my labels, sonny boy, don’t tell me who I am.”

“Yes, Ma’am”

“OK go back to sleep, the girls are starting to dream.”

“Lorraine, do you work on Sam too?”

“A little, much less than I used to, a bit of tweaking and she recovers, she’s like you, you know, she’s a teacher.”

“She certainly is, a good teacher.”

“Like you.”

“If you say so, OK sleepy time now.” and just like that, Ben dropped back to sleep. Lorraine shook her head, the boy really could just turn off.

The women were all dreaming. Lorraine checked them one by one and was surprised to find them all dreaming of Ben. She almost woke him up to tell him but decided to look into those dreams instead, just in case there was anything she could use for therapy and, yes she had to admit it, a little voyeurism.

Sam was dreaming that she and Ben were in class with their sensei. They were at some sort of seminar with students. Hubert was supervising, his term for standing around watching others do the work. Ben and Sam were doing the teaching, Sam’s group were all looking over at Ben’s group while his group were improving by leaps and bounds.

‘Uh huh,’ Lorraine thought. Everyone is an expert on others but idiots about themselves. Sam ought to be as confident in her ability to teach as she was in her ability to fight. Still, Lorraine didn’t see anything to nudge there. This was just natural deference to a senior student. If Sam was teaching on her own, her natural strong ego would have her teaching like a wizard.

She left Sam to work it out, she’d check later to make sure nothing came up. When she moved on to Clara, things got a bit more interesting. Clara was a damsel in distress, tied to a rock on a beach and here, oh my, on a white charger, came Ben riding down the beach, water splashing up from the hooves,

coming to rescue her. As Lorraine watched, Ben rode right by Clara as if she weren't there, and jumped off the horse beside Cleo.

Nothing unusual there, just a bit of big sister, little sister trouble. 'She gets all the good toys.' Lorraine thought a bit and decided that was actually a good sign. Clara wanted Ben, but knew she was going to have to share him with Cleo. Should Lorraine nudge that pair to go rescue Clara? No, there they went to do just that. Good, Bogart had done good work with Clara, she didn't feel she was alone and worthless, and she was willing to wait for Ben to collect Cleo before coming to her. Nothing much to do there.

As Lorraine turned to Cleo's dream, Bogart's expertise came blasting through. As Bogart had hoped, Ben was there, helping a very young Cleo to escape from her father's palace. He was on Boots and Cleo on Puss as they leapt over the wall and rode fast into the forest, now a beach, now a field of snow. Oh my, now they were riding up onto a pirate ship with Ben as the captain. Who knew Cleo had such a romantic inclination? Bogart likely. That old Shaman had tied these three, Ben, Cleo, and Clara, into a very tidy bow. Lorraine expected to see bluebirds at any moment.

She chuckled and wondered why Bogart had asked her to look in on these friends. They all seemed to be doing well.

But then she looked in on Ben who had started to dream and she understood. Bogart had used Ben to help Cleo and Clara,

but in doing that, he had put huge pressure on Ben. The poor man was struggling up a mountain toward both women, fighting bears, Puss and Boots, and a wicked blizzard, trying to get to them as the girls huddled shivering on a ledge with a huge drop below them.

‘Ben, you don’t have to take the world onto your shoulders,’ Lorraine thought. She nudged just a little. Puss and Boots ripped the bear to pieces and stood between the wind and Ben. Puss said, ‘You have friends, Ben, follow us, we’ll break the trail.’ and they did just that. Puss went first, Boots followed and Ben held Boots’ tail as he almost ran up the mountain.’

Lorraine was a bit surprised to hear a quiet chuckle near her ear. “How come I’m always getting my tail pulled,” said Boots.

Lorraine opened her eyes to see the two great cats fade partly into view beside the couch. “You’re here?”

“We are. Kam is in the library doing boring things, so we came to the girls.”

“Well hush, we’re almost at the ledge.”

“Let us help,” said Puss, and Lorraine watched as the two cats drew Ben near the ledge. He started out onto the ledge, but it was the ledge he’d fallen from so long ago. Just as he was about to miss-step and fall, Puss roared and leapt in time for Ben to catch his neck and be carried onto a further part of the ledge, close to the girls. Boots followed and Ben was able to

put both girls on the cats, who leapt back to safety.

Ben made his own way safely back and the three people discovered a hut just around a corner with a roaring fire and a warm bed.

Lorraine left the dream to its own logic and turned back to the cats. “Can you manipulate dreams too?”

“No, little one, we are dreams. A cave lion and a sabretooth? How can we not be the stuff of dreams.”

“Well, you are hams, you know that?”

The cats laughed and bowed their heads to her. “We’re around, call on us if you need us little fox, either in life or in your dreams. We have tasted your mind, and you are worth our help. We’ll leave you to your people now,” and they faded from view once more.

Lorraine wondered about that last offer. In her own dreams? She had no dreams, she lived only in others. She couldn’t even sleep except through others, she had been exiled from the Keen family dream world. Well, something to think about in the morning, that cabin on the mountain seemed inviting, maybe she’d join Ben there.

As she dropped into her own sleep, Lorraine was knocking on the door.

The Darkened Library

It had been a few days, Kam learned fast, and he found that once he had been asked for a book, and had understood what book the visitor needed, he knew where it was. The curious thing was that he knew this even if the book had been written for the visitor.

Who wrote the books and how it was known who would need it was a mystery, but he suspected outside help. The library wasn't separate from the world, it was something 'beside it'.

As he stood one night, waiting for a visitor, he realized this wasn't just a human thing. A Kobold came to ask for a book on politics, a book on monarchy. Kam realized he was one of the faction that wanted Cleo on the throne. As he began to think that he should get in touch with Ken, he was shocked to learn that he wasn't going to do any such thing. He led the visitor to a book on monarchy, what it was, how it was established and maintained.

He asked Lucy about his reluctance to show the Kobold a book detailing the problems with monarchy, or to get hold of Ken to warn him.

"We can have opinions and judgments, Kam, but we are our

jobs here. We provide the books people need, the books to learn and grow with. We are forbidden to direct, or to attempt to change the visitors. They must learn for themselves. Those who want to learn how to build a table are easy, a book on carpentry. Those who we are convinced will become bad people, are much more difficult to serve, but serve them we must. What do you think will happen with this person you just served?"

"I fear he will become more of a monarchist and will cause trouble for our nation and specifically for my cousin."

Kam didn't bother trying to hide the fact that Cleo was the princess, he understood now that Lucy would know who she was, through him.

"And what do you suppose the next book on the shelf is?"

"I saw it, the one he should read next is an analysis of different government models. There I suspect he will learn the problems of the monarchy model."

"Will he come get that one?"

Kam thought carefully, "Yes he will come and ask for the next book because he will want to know how to overthrow a government and establish a monarchy, or he will begin to have doubts on his own, and want the next book."

"So you see how this works, we do not direct or dictate, we

provide the chance to learn.”

“There is no direction, no intent to sway the visitors in any way?”

“Of course there is Kam, you know what our mandate is. We educate, we create the conditions for personal growth. We don’t dictate the direction of that growth.”

“So if someone comes and through their growth, their education here, they become evil, this is fine?”

“Of course not fine, but what is evil, Kam. Can you answer that for me?”

Kam actually stopped mid-answer. He thought he knew, but he was beginning to understand that opinions are not truth. His form of evil was someone who upset the carefully guarded status quo that he defended, but he himself had engineered the downfall of a monarchy. He remained convinced that what the King had done to his cousins was evil, but he could envision a monarchy with Cleo as King that would work.

He knew that he himself had done questionable things, necessary things, but when is killing ever anything but evil. It was a matter of ‘greater good’ and not good and evil.

He looked at Lucy who gave him one of those small nods. “You are much quicker to learn than anyone I have seen. You have had a lifetime of questioning, this much is obvious. Have

you finished your shelf of reading?”

“I have finished the books you first gave me, but you are placing more books on my shelf.”

“Observant too, good.”

“Lucy, the darkness is ignorance isn’t it?”

“Almost, it is self-delusion, the willing ignorance we all carry with us. Initiates must learn what they don’t want to learn, same as many of our visitors must learn a bit of self-knowledge. Your Kobold who wants a monarchy may simply want someone to tell him what to do. Perhaps he misses being a child when his father made the world make sense. Such a person needs to learn to leave his father behind. Perhaps his father didn’t teach him how.”

“People like that can fall under those who wish to have power over others, cult leaders, dictators.”

“Yes. Do you see now why you did not give him the book which gave him the problems of monarchy?”

“He would not have understood the book. His self-delusion, his desire for a strong voice to tell him what to do would have prevented him. Yes, I can see he must be led to understanding, rather than be told.”

“You are a quick student, Kam.”

“But, there is a ‘but’ there. I do know that I have spent my life doing what my brother tells me to do. I choose to do that because my understanding of others makes me see, not black and white, but grey. I would be frozen, unable to act, if I did not have someone who knew black and white and could tell me which shade of grey I was looking at.”

“Did you know this before you came here, Kam?”

“I have known it most of my life.”

“You will find different books on your shelf. I will also need to change my thinking, I must confess to you that my own love for my sister may have coloured my opinion of you.”

“You saw a brute. Lucy I am a brute. I do brutish things, and I took Maude out of here, away from you.”

“You try to make simple, a very complex man, this is my bias to overcome, don’t make it yours. My shelf will have different books as well, when I get to my room.”

“You?”

“Of course, me. I may be in charge but I must continue to learn.”

“I had no idea you were in charge.”

“Maude and I founded the library, and I begin to see what, perhaps, my sister was teaching me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I, my brother, but we will learn together.”

Kam was stunned, Lucy had never referred to him as family in any way, just as the man who left with Maude. She had acknowledged that Maude loved him, but she had never claimed a relationship with him before.

He had a hundred years to figure this out, so best to leave it for later.

Lucy tipped her head to one side and said, “Come and eat with the rest of us, you have finished your shelf, no need to be alone any more.”

As Kam walked into the dining area, he was surprised to see that there were many different people there, not just humans but the other peoples as well.

Lucy smiled, “All sorts have found the library and chosen to do our work. This is another way of learning, different peoples have different ways to think. Our Kappa have ways to see water that our Elves would never know, otherwise.”

“I can see that in my understanding, I am but a child.”

Lucy took his arm and guided him to a table.

“Maude showed me compassion, and was kind to everyone she met while we were together. She taught me the beginnings of this, but I see now just how much I took away from the library and how stupidly slowly, I learned from her.”

Kam suddenly realized that Lucy was holding his arm, he was very careful not to react, and Lucy sat him down beside her. Some of the librarians brought them food, and Kam started to go through his recipes in his head.

Again, Lucy gave one of those nods and Kam realized he was eager to earn more of them.

Clara and Ely

Ben, Cleo and Clara were working in Ken’s Keller. Clara had done some barista work, and was waiting tables. She was fascinated at the mix of spirit people and students from the University. Humans didn’t normally see people like, well like her. The students just took it all in stride, even when Kuroneko and Okami, a cat and a wolf, would start arguing and the words descended into snarls.

The students seemed content to ignore the weirdness and

concentrate on drinking the Kobold brews, as fast as they could.

Clara found she liked them, they were no trouble, usually made it outside before throwing up, and those who passed out never seemed to be resentful when Clara picked them up and put them on one of the benches outside the front door. They'd be back the next evening.

Clara also liked the lunch counter upstairs. Mike and Liz were good people, and you almost had to tell a story if you stayed longer than half an hour for a coffee.

She was sitting at a table in the corner when an Elf walked in. As she rose to kill the thing, Liz was beside her. Small as she was, Liz put a hand on Clara's shoulder and somehow pushed Clara back down into her seat. Liz sat beside her and said simply, "Listen."

The Elf sat at the counter and asked for a herb panini and Mike poured him a chicory coffee, without being asked. The Elf sniffed and tasted it and his eyes grew wide. "How did you know?"

"Has it been a long road you've been on?" said Mike instead.

"Very long. I've come from the old country, I was up in the mountains but I couldn't stay."

"Many of you left there?"

“You know what I am?”

“I do, my friend, my name is Mike, by the way.”

The Elf seemed to relax a bit. “You’ll understand why I don’t give you my name I hope.”

“I do, will Ely be acceptable?”

Clara looked at Liz, who smiled, “Carefully,” she said.

Clara blinked and Liz nodded. Clara softly, slowly, extended her Elf-stolen senses toward this being she had intended to kill. She only tickled the edge of his mind and what she found was immense, profound sadness, with none of the cruelty and sadistic malice she had felt from her Elf captor. She withdrew and the Elf at the counter only shook his head and looked around as if he’d heard a fly.

Mike put the panini down and wiped a few dishes dry while the Elf ate. He stopped after a few bites and Mike said, “A bit rich?”

“Sorry it’s wonderful but I’m not used to such food, it will take me some time to eat.”

“Not a problem, you can stay as long as you like here, you’re among friends.”

“Now that’s a place I haven’t been for a very long time.”

Mike put down a plate he’d been drying, flipped the towel over his shoulder and refilled the Elf’s coffee. He then looked at the man and ever so slightly raised his eyebrows.

Clara thought it was magic, the Elf started to talk. “We were content to live apart for many centuries, my tribe and I, away from the Men who took the best lands and then away from my own kind who became cruel. We lived on the mountainsides and ate what the mountain provided and we were happy.”

He paused to take a bite. “But the Elves who remained below became reckless, they aligned with the Giants and fought the Humans, and they lost. It seems so long ago.”

Mike nodded and again refilled the coffee. Clara could see that his movements were almost hypnotic, she felt a desire to tell Liz a story, but she kept listening to Ely.

“When the Giants were defeated, the Elves scattered and the lowlander Elves came looking for us. We would have shared what we had, little that it was, but that would have meant we all went hungry. The lowland Elves still had their weapons and slowly they hunted us down and killed us. Their own kind. Well perhaps we were not the same any more. They brought what they called laws and government and they found ways to make us criminals to be executed. Many were killed and the rest, myself included, ran. We have been wandering for a long time, looking for some place to settle, but the places of

Humans are not friendly places.”

The Elf froze, as he had eaten, his wits became more alive and now he spun around and stared at Clara. He seemed about to flee out the door when Mike said, “That is my wife Liz, she has deep roots here in this country, her people were well acquainted with dislocations due to wars, long before the Europeans came here. The little people fled the southern tribes and found shelter here on the north of the lakes. She is the last Shaman of her people.”

The Elf flicked his eyes to Liz but instantly looked back at Clara.

“And that is Clara Kobold, who has reason to hate Elves, as you can feel. Clara, will you kill Ely today?”

Clara looked at Liz and answered, “My first instinct was to kill him, but thanks to Liz, I didn’t. No, Ely, I won’t fight you, I have heard your story and, pardon the intrusion, I have looked into your mind a little.”

Ely was shocked, “A Kobold who can see into my mind?”

“I too, have a story, shall we open our minds? I have never done this and I don’t know if it is possible, but I know that Elves can share their thoughts. I have some Elf powers, as you suspect.”

“You could kill me, or I could kill you, Clara, and you will

know my true name.”

Liz spoke up, “Trust must simply be given and the consequences will come. I can supervise this, there will be no killing and there will be no theft of names. Both of you, do you feel my truce?”

Mike had stepped back away from Ely, he had experienced Liz’ power before and knew just how strong she was, even Nanabozo respected Liz as a powerful Shaman.

Both Ely and Clara winced, both looked at Liz who said, “It’s up to you whether you do this, but there will be no harm done to either of you in this place.”

It was Clara who opened her mind first, saying “I have seen your mind, Ely, and I trust you to see mine.”

Almost on an instant, both of them were crying, and Lorraine appeared in the room. She looked at Mike who shook his head and nodded to a chair in front of him, away from the three.

“What the hell,” whispered Lorraine to Mike.

“A chance meeting, if you believe such things.”

“I felt her, felt the shock even though she’s awake. They are at each other’s core, this is very dangerous Mike.”

“Liz has it. I trust her.”

Lorraine nodded and flicked her head, “Kit was on her way too.”

The Elf and the Kobold slowly stopped crying and smiled. Liz sat back and Lorraine blinked, “How is that possible, Clara is healed of the damage that Elf did to her.”

Liz smiled, “They are both relieved of prejudice toward each other, their tormentors were similar, but they both know each other as people and not as stereotypes. This is not a miracle, but it is rare that people can share their stories so directly.”

Lorraine nodded, “Prejudice can’t survive understanding.”

Liz smiled, Lorraine of all people knew the damage that could be done when one group tried to destroy another, she had been exiled from the Keen family for refusing to destroy Humans through their dreams. A heavy price what should have killed her, but the kindness of others saved her.

Clara seemed to have her emotions under control, “I am not without influence among my people. There are mountainsides in this country that could be made available to yours. Will you trust me to arrange this?”

Ely nodded and whispered, “This is more kindness than we deserve from you.”

“Kindness is never too much.”

Lorraine looked like she was about to cry too.

The Book I Need

Kam had to wonder how often in the history of the world, so many different peoples had worked together on a common goal. There were dozens of librarians, and they all worked toward a better self-knowledge for the clients and for themselves. The Massey Hall Library might be frightening for some, but Kam decided that had more to do with the darkness than with what they would find in the book they received.

Self-delusion is comfortable, to ‘see the light’ was often painful because it ripped away that delusion that was like a warm blanket on a cold night.

Kam was suddenly ashamed to realize he was thinking of a blanket being pulled from Lucy in her bed. He squashed the thought as fast as he could, but it was too late. Lucy was beside him and laughing.

“You can read my thoughts.”

“I swear to you, Kam, I cannot but it isn’t hard to read your face. I usually sleep in pajamas so the loss of a blanket

wouldn't reveal much of any interest to anyone.”

Kam laughed too, and turned to pull a book from his shelf. ‘Freedom and Creativity, collected essays.’ He showed it to Lucy and said, “Restriction of options makes for creativity, is what most of these essays conclude. I suppose I can see that, too much chaos around oneself can be distracting, we spend our time dealing with the chaos and have no time to think. But why is it here? I’m not sure why I need to learn that, I’m not very creative or wish to be.”

Lucy was thoughtful, “That should have been on my shelf, not yours. How was that mistake made? Was it so that you would say what you just said? I have suddenly understood that despite what you said, your life is incredibly creative. You must get a result from the chaos of your missions, I see that now. You were just telling me about taking Ben to fight a Kobold, you made the treaty, and you allowed Ben to learn something about himself. That was a very creative act, even if it seemed to be pointless violence to me at first.”

“How is that something you need to learn? Surely you are a creative person, you create understanding from ignorance in the visitors, and you write beautiful poetry.”

“How do you know that?”

“I asked myself what you do when you are not working, and I saw your books in the library. I am sorry if I have overstepped, they were shelved and so I thought I could read them.”

“They’re not private, but why did you search them out?”

Kam thought he ought to be silent, but something made him say, “Because you are Maude’s sister, and because you took my arm.”

“Did you feel what you felt with Maude when I took your arm?”

Kam looked closely at Lucy’s face, but could see nothing beyond the question. “No, I felt comforted, I haven’t had much physical contact since coming here, except for fingers of course. It was a relief to be touched, but I also felt trust. I didn’t want to read too much into it.”

“To me it was simply natural to take your arm, Kam. I believe we are friends, which surprised me. Even if you are here for a hundred years, you are not like the rest of us, and I am surprised that I feel the way I do toward you.”

“I don’t quite understand.”

“You are here, acting as a librarian so that you can learn to let go of the past, of Maude, but I find that I am learning as much from you as you are from us.”

“What was your life like before creating the library?”

“You see, that is a question that would never be asked by one

librarian to another. No, you didn't offend me, I'll tell you. Our life was cold, remote. We were raised by nannies and they didn't stay long. We rarely saw our parents, who were high on the social ladder and were away most of the time. It was no great sacrifice for Maude and I to found the library and take ourselves out of society, and that is the same for most of our librarians, I suspect. We never ask but each must have some reason to remove themselves, and come here."

"I don't belong here, do I? I am too ensnared in the world."

"And yet, out there, you are cut off, removed from the sort of love you had for our sister, because of the guilt you feel about her."

Again, she said 'our sister' thought Kam. "I suppose that is true, I haven't missed the world outside during my time here, so I suppose what you say is true."

"And yet, by being with you I begin to wonder what I have missed by being here."

"Lucy, no. What is out there is aging, sickness and death."

Lucy looked at Kam and took his arm, "We will be working soon, I think it is time that you take a request for 'the book I need'. You have the skills now."

"As you say, I will try my best, will you supervise me?"

“Do I need to?”

Kam paused and said, “No, your trust is supervision enough.”

They walked to the door as the darkness flowed in. They waited on one side while the first three visitors came and asked for specific topics. Lucy kept her arm through Kam’s and he was glad of the warmth.

As the door opened again, Lucy slipped her arm out and walked away. Kam stepped forward as a small girl, looking frightened but brave, asked for the book she needed.

Kam looked, and he opened up his senses as much as he could. He could see that she had made a great effort to be here. She would have heard about the library from someone who felt she should come. She would have been warned. She was dressed well enough, young, maybe high school.

Not love, she would have enough advice there from her friends. Not school, she would have asked for the subject she needed help for. ‘The book I need,’ what would it be at her age? Suddenly Kam had it. She had lost someone, a family member, and she didn’t know how to deal with it. It wasn’t recent or she’d know that was the problem, this was underneath, she wasn’t processing the death.

Who? Not mother or father, on the surface she was stable, none of the signs of having lost a parent, she would expect to lose them eventually, it had to be a sibling. She seemed to sense

Kam somehow, and looked up and down as if measuring him for a suit. Her brother.

How? He would be older, she was confused, she hadn't pushed a younger brother over a cliff. She didn't know why the death had happened. Sickness? No, that's not confusing.

An older brother who had died suddenly, leaving her with a feeling of imbalance, of not trusting the world.

What book? Religion? No, she had no symbols on her body that indicated she believed in an afterlife, he was gone. Why was he gone? Existentialism? Not at her age. Suddenly he had it. There was a book on the shelves named 'The Probability Of Bad Things Happening To Good People'

He could see them on the shelf, the leftward book a textbook on probability and the right a text on existentialism. All this had taken place in Kam's head while she was hesitantly raising her finger. He took it as gently as he could and led her to the book. As she touched the middle book she moved her finger to the left then back again, as if she had seen the titles. She picked up the middle book and Kam gently took her hand to lead her to the door. As she grasped his hand, Kam heard her sigh and she held his hand firmly, as if afraid she would lose him. Kam wanted to hug her, but simply led her to the door and she left.

Later, he told Lucy what had happened and she gave him one of those small nods. Kam almost didn't notice, he was close to crying. The trouble magnet, the beast, the killer of monsters,

brought to tears by the confusion of a small girl.

He didn't notice the tears in Lucy's eyes.

The Inheritance

“She did what!” Cleo said, but Ken put a hand on her arm.

“She can you know, your father is dead and you now own what he owned. He owned more than half the mountains in this country.”

“I suspect the Canadian government would have something to say about that.”

“They are unaware they claim Kobold mountains, but that isn't a problem. We ignore them and they don't know who we are. When they mine, we step out of the way. We are so much more efficient, we can come in after they mess around and extract almost as much more ore, as they did.”

“What happens when they find our shafts?”

“They assume they're old shafts made by Men.”

“Still, what will our people say about Elves in their mountains?”

“They’ll say nothing, you and your sister own the mountains, the Kobolds who work and live there do so with your permission.”

“I never knew this.”

“Your father owned it when he was alive, why would you know anything about it? Now it’s yours.”

“Still, Kobolds and Elves?”

“We use the inside, they can have the outside. They know how to avoid Men, and they live lightly on the land. They are gentle beings, not like the Lowlanders who fought in the war, or the abomination that enslaved your sister.”

“How can she have even stayed in the same room as an Elf?”

“It was upstairs, Mike and Liz were there, and Clara chose to share her mind with the Elf.”

Cleo looked like she was about to go into shock, “She what?”

“Cleo, there comes a time when hatred has to be turned aside, very few of us are rich enough or stupid enough to keep hating for a lifetime. The Elf has offered to train Clara in her Elf powers, he seems to think it is compensation for what the Lowlander did to her. He also says that Elf powers in a Kobold might be dangerous. Liz is also helping them.”

Cleo glanced at Ben and took his arm, “Well stranger friendships have happened I guess.”

Ken smiled, “Right. Now, if you wouldn’t mind, I’ve got a bit of housekeeping we should tidy up, I have a small document here that requires your signature, Cleo.”

Cleo looked at Ken and put her hands on her hips. “I don’t suppose it has to do with a certain Kobold base in the Three Sisters does it? And maybe a couple more, one in Banff?”

Ken actually looked sheepish, “Your father wasn’t very concerned with his lands over here, but since I’m about to give you the deeds, I figured we ought to formalize things.”

“Ben, you read it and see if this old grifter is cheating us.”

Ben took the document, read it quickly, then more slowly and turned to Cleo, “Sign it, Cleo, and tell your sister to sign it too.”

“Really?”

“Cleo the rent alone will mean that you won’t have to work any more, and neither will the next generations should you have kids. Ken are you serious?”

“Fair recompense, and the back rent we never paid to her father. I hasten to add it’s not my money, it’s government money and already negotiated in good faith, by me.”

It said a lot about her attitude to money that Cleo simply signed it and handed it back to Ken. She honestly hadn't cared about the deal, she just wanted to give her cousin a hard time.

“While we're talking about these things, Cleo, do you have a will?”

“Ken if you're going to get me killed so you don't have to pay rent...”

Ken held up his hands, “Later then.”

“Who would I leave things to?”

“Well, there's your sister, and Ben here, and any children...”

“Why are you two bringing up children, you know I can't have any, I ripped up my womb aborting that thing my father got on me.”

Ben gathered her into his arms, “Soft, love. There may be a way, Kam told me to talk to Kit, but not today, maybe not ever, you must decide.”

Cleo wasn't so easily derailed, “Do you want children Ben?”

“I had them once, I told myself never again, but with you? Then again, look at what we do, would it be wise to have children when we could be killed on the job?”

Ken rattled the paper in his hand.

“I know, Ken, but can you see Cleo and I settled down in a big house with fancy drinks in our hands, a maid and a nanny?”

“I’d dearly love to see that,” said Ken.

“Fat chance, we would burn the place down out of boredom,” said Cleo.

She turned to Ben, “Come on Romeo, there’s customers in the bar.”

Ken winked at Ben as they walked out of the office.

Clara, in the meantime, was with Liz and Ely. Liz was no slouch at illusion herself but she was fascinated by what Ely could do, what he was teaching Clara.

“It was necessary for us to survive in the mountains, we needed to be invisible, but much more than that, we needed to leave no trace, so we learned to walk without footprints, to fade to nothing on an instant or to stay invisible for years if necessary. We can multiply ourselves to escape being killed with guns or other weapons, we can be invisible in ourselves but make a whole lot of other selves. We can reach into someone else’s mind and pull out their deepest nightmares then make them

come true. I am deeply ashamed, but we can also kill. We can make other Elves walk off a cliff that they think is a field, but worse than that, we can actually reach into a mind and turn it off.”

“You have done so?”

“Never, none of my people has, we think the power would make us as bad as those we fight so we resist using it, but we know it is there.”

Liz looked in Ely’s eyes “What you say is true, is this something you will teach to Clara? If she had known she could kill like this you would have been dead the second you walked in the door.”

“I know that, and I was too weak to have resisted. She will know how to do it whether I teach her or not, it is simply there and with the other skills I will teach her, it will manifest. Our own people would kill others of our kind if they could not prevent themselves from doing it, but who could prevent Clara?”

“She must learn, herself, how to resist using that power.”

Clara spoke up, “I don’t know if I can do that, can you stop me from learning it, Liz?”

“If Ely says you will discover it on your own, I doubt I can stop you, but there is one who can teach you how not to kill.

You must keep studying with Ben, his training prevents him from killing unless he chooses to. If he decides he must, his opponent is dead. He is much more powerful than most people realize and he has just been given abilities and a weapon that make him even more deadly.”

“Ben, but he’s the most gentle, good man I know. Sure he teaches me antique fighting methods, but he hasn’t taught me anything deadly yet.”

“Hasn’t he? Think about the principles, not the techniques.”

Clara frowned, then her eyes got wide. “With the things he has taught, and the abilities I stole from the Elf...”

“Yet until now, killing hasn’t entered your mind, killing, that is, by your mental abilities. How did you intend to kill Ely when you saw him.”

“I was reaching for my hammer, I would have crushed his skull.”

“You see, with these powers or without, you can kill. Whether or not you do, is your choice. Killing by reaching into someone’s mind, hitting them with your hammer, or by shooting them with a gun, it’s easy. All that prevents you doing it is your control of your temper.”

“Oh that I am learning quite well with Ben’s lessons. So many times he has embarrassed me and I’ve had to stop from taking

my hammer to him.”

“How did you stop?”

“I would never, I love Ben, I want to be with him.”

“That may be true, but most murders outside war, are between those who know each other well.”

“My temper then, I’m learning to control myself.”

A Perfect Jewel

“Can I tell you about a day with Maude?”

“Yes,” was all Lucy said.

Kam sat back, he had been leaning forward nervously, over the table. “It was just a day, long before I knew she was going to age. I was so in love with her.

“I woke up beside her and looked at her beautiful face, she was sleeping and her lips were ever so slightly parted. The sun was shining on her face and she looked like an angel. I got out of bed quietly, to let her sleep, and made myself some coffee. I sat where I could watch her sleep and wrote some. I wrote quite a

bit back then, poetry and novels along with the reports I did for Ken.

“After a while she came out naked, and stretched. I had to stand and go to her. As I did I said, ‘how did you ever pick someone like me?’ I hadn’t meant to say that but I absolutely meant it. She was perfect, and she was with me, and I had no idea how that could have been.

“She said nothing, but when I hugged her it felt like she had shrugged, just a little. Not, ‘I don’t know,’ but ‘love is strange.’ That moment my whole life seemed to be complete and I hugged her a little harder. She groaned like I was crushing her and looked up at me with a grin.

“I cooked a bit of breakfast and joined her on the couch, we often ate shoulder to shoulder with the food on our laps, the table seemed so separate.

“Is this all right Lucy?”

Lucy smiled and reached across the table to touch Kam’s hand.

“We stayed in, that morning, and later I washed the dishes while she worked on her project.”

“She had a project?”

“Always, at that time she was working out a weaving pattern, she had taken up weaving and had built her own loom in the

spare room. I washed the dishes, wrote a little more, and then sat by her as she worked on the pattern.

“Later she made lunch, it was a goulash, she put it together with whatever she found, sausage from the evening before, elbow macaroni, crushed tomato and a lot of spices.”

“She used to make that here.”

“Yes, she told me whenever she made something like that, ‘I’d make this in the Library, I hope you like it.’ As if anything she cooked could be anything but wonderful to me. After lunch we both sat together and read a little, then we decided to go downtown to the bakery and get some treats.

We wandered around the hardware store, looking at cabinets, mirrors, and outdoor grills. As if we had forever, as if we were looking at what we would put into our house one day. She bought some sandpaper. We also visited the crafts market and she found a pair of earrings that she said you would love. I’ve kept them, and here they are.”

Lucy took the box with trembling hands and when she opened it she gasped, “They are perfect.”

“I hoped you would like them. She couldn’t give them to you herself, she could never come back here, but when she got older and we knew it was getting close, she gave me that box and told me to keep them ‘just in case.’ I’m so glad I could give them to you.”

Lucy took one and hesitantly held it up to her ear, “What do you think?”

“It suits you, it’s beautiful.”

“Tell me about the rest of the day.”

“We came home and I sat to read some more while Maude went for a run. She had started running, saying... saying...”

Kam had to stop for a moment and Lucy waited, “Saying that it would keep her young. When she got back, she was hot so she stripped right down to nothing at all, washed quickly and then cooked dinner. She made fish, and we had the leftover goulash as a side. I didn’t get any work done, I was watching her as she cooked. She knew it, and twitched her rear end every so often with a bit of a grin.”

“Maude?”

“Yes. I think she liked how much I enjoyed her body, and I did, young and old, so very much. She put on a sarong and a skimpy light blue top to eat, and it was delicious, the food too. Afterward she said that she was tired, what with the run and the cooking and I said we should go have a cuddle. ‘Only a little one, I have things to do and I don’t want to get groggy,’ she said, and I agreed.

“I tidied up the dishes and we went to the bed, lay down and

threw the covers over ourselves while I held her in my arms. It was a nice supper and a bit of a burp rumbled up my throat. This is often followed by a belch and she turned her head away, but nothing. I blew out a breath and said ‘I was aiming it away.’ She said, ‘I like it on my neck, but not in my ear.’ After about ten minutes I said we should get up but she lifted her head, looked at me sideways like she did, and made the ‘not yet’ sound and so I waited. A few moments later she was snoring gently. Her snores were never loud, but a small buzz which she always denied, saying I snored like a train going by under our window. That was true, but she buzzed gently, like a garden of bees.

“After about an hour I kissed her shoulder and got out from under the covers, she didn’t seem to be moving so I let out a tremendous fart and she rolled her eyes.”

Lucy’s hands flew to her mouth, “Oh my, just rolled her eyes?”

“From the first day we spent together, she was never hesitant, even a fart in bed didn’t bother her. After that, we got up and spent a very quiet evening. I made coffee for myself and went back to writing. When it had dripped, she got up and poured it for me, putting it down quietly beside me so as not to disturb me. I looked up and smiled, I didn’t trust myself to speak for fear I would cry. She was such a gentle, loving soul, full of attention for my worthless hide. She smiled back and returned to her project. Later we split an apple fritter. By the way, at one point during the evening we got into a farting contest, she would fart and giggle and I would respond.”

“Oh Maude! You were a bad influence, Kam Kobold.”

“Not a bit of it, but when you are together like we were, bodily functions are just another part of life.

“About ten in the evening, we played a game of scrabble, where she beat me by over a hundred points. When we went to bed, she went a bit later than me, and when she got under the covers, it felt like a bright sunny day. She dropped off to sleep and I listened to her buzz for as long as I could, then fell asleep myself.”

Lucy reached over and squeezed Kam’s hand, “Thank you for that day, it was good to hear about it.”

“Of all the years we had together, that ordinary day has stuck in my mind as a perfect jewel, I’m very glad I got to share it with you. There is nobody else I have told that story to, but you deserved to hear it.”

That Same Day

Kam looked down at his hands, deep in thought. Lucy stood and came around the table where she held out her hand as if guiding a visitor back to the door. “Come with me.”

Kam took her hand and followed her out of the dining area and down the hall to the sleeping area. She stopped at a door, same as all the others, and took a key out of her pocket. "This was Maude's room," was all she said.

As Kam went in, he saw the same room he had, bedding, a little dusty, a closet with a couple of uniforms, desk, lamp. There were no books on the shelf.

"You can see that Maude lived as simply as you are now, her shelf is bare because she's not here any more. This was her life before she met you. This is my life."

Kam looked at Lucy, wondering what she meant. "I want to thank you for the story of the perfect day, Kam. I know now that in her years outside, she had a lifetime of experiences, and you gave her that. I often wondered why she left our 'oh so stable' life, and it was obvious she left because she loved you. If I had any doubt you loved her, that is gone. But still, I wondered if she ever missed our life here."

"She missed you, Lucy, although she never told me she had a sister, I know she missed someone terribly. Not the library, not that she ever mentioned to me, but you."

"I was her big sister, and I looked out for her our whole life. When we came to Massey Hall, it was Maude who noticed the books between the other books. The books that nobody else but the two of us were able to see. She also found the living area that was here, waiting for us. I was the one who thought I

looked after her, but in so many ways, it was Maude who looked after me. She is still leading me I think.”

Kam looked hard at Lucy, “She is not leading you out of the library, Lucy. There was no escape for her there, just a brief time with me and then old age and death. You heard a story of two young people in love, I won’t tell you about the last days, where she was frail and sick, I did what I could, but I couldn’t stop her from dying. Lucy I don’t want that for you.”

“You are a good man, Kam despite what you think of yourself, and I have no reason to go outside now, but I will. How many decades can anyone remain ageless and do the same job? Maude was not the first to go back to the world outside, but I think she was the first to go for love. I envy her that, I envy her that perfect day.”

She turned and led Kam back out of the room. “Come, there is nothing of Maude here, there never has been since she left, I will open the room to another initiate.”

Kam took one more look around and saw that Lucy was right, he could feel nothing of Maude here, but she lived on in his memory, in that perfect day and many others. “I just remembered the morning after that day. I was awake and heard something, then felt a mouse run across our blankets. I had a tremendous fight with that mouse, which I lost, and Maude slept through the whole thing. I was so happy that she didn’t see my defeat.”

Lucy laughed and clapped her hands, “The great monster hunter, defeated by a mouse! Oh I wish that I had seen that.”

Kam smiled as Lucy realized she would have been in the bed to see it, her cheeks turned red and her mouth became a perfect O. He said nothing, but offered his arm for Lucy to take as they walked to the library to help re-shelve the returns and to see if any new books had appeared.

As they walked, Kam looked over once to see that profile he had loved so well, Lucy even blushed like Maude did. He wondered if he felt at ease around Lucy because she was so like Maude, or because she was so like Lucy.

That evening, the girl who had been given *Romeo and Juliette* came back and asked for a book on grief. Lucy took her finger before Kam could move, and she led the girl to one of the new books. Kam saw the book as she took it out the door, and realized it was titled ‘Kam and Maude.’

When the darkness had withdrawn, Kam stood squarely in front of Lucy and said, “What was that?”

“That book appeared last night, Kam, it is what she needed.”

“My life? My life with Maude? Who wrote it?”

“We often don’t know, I didn’t look at the author, I just knew it was the book she needed. Come, let’s sit and talk about this unless you’re going to punch me in the nose.”

Kam realized he was in a fighting stance and instantly dropped back onto his heels, “I’m sorry, Lucy I would never...”

Lucy touched his cheek with her hand, “I know that.”

They sat in a nook and Lucy spoke first, “I know you gave that girl Romeo and Juliette, and you wanted to tell her it would be all right, that life goes on, but that was a lie wasn’t it?”

Kam nodded.

“Is it still a lie?”

To his shock, Kam realized that it wasn’t. He was starting to heal. He would never forget Maude, but he didn’t feel so guilty about her leaving the library. There, he thought ‘her leaving,’ not ‘I took her away.’

“You are helping with that, Lucy, showing me that it wasn’t my fault she died, so yes, I guess now I believe that it gets better.”

“And I am learning the same thing from you, Kam, I am learning to give up the grief. I suspect that book reveals that very thing through your story.”

“But who could have written it?”

“We can look when it comes back, but my guess would be Lorraine, or possibly Lorraine and Bogart.”

“Is that allowed, to take someone’s story like that?”

“It is in here, as you know. Books are written, extended, modified as they need to be. A word on paper is not sacred, not to us, we simply wish to answer the questions that need to be answered, as do our authors. Tell me, do you resent your story being written?”

“No, perhaps yesterday, but not today, not after telling you my story, not after delivering your gift, finally.”

“And the book appeared.”

“Damn, this place...”

“Has the sponsorship of some powerful beings. Who write what needs to be written without much worry about ownership and copyright.”

“Should I read that book?”

“I would advise against it, remember that this place is dangerous, even to us. The book might contain parts of your life that haven’t happened yet.”

“Will you read it?”

“Perhaps in a hundred years, but not now. I myself might be in there.”

Kam looked carefully, seeing nothing but innocence on her face.

Company for Dinner

“Can I sleep with you three tonight?” asked Lorraine, drifting through the door into the apartment.

Through the door. Sometimes the girl forgot how spooky she could be.

“Sure you can, but what about Hubert?” said Cleo.

“Sam is home, he’ll be fine without me for a night.”

“What’s up? You guys have a fight?”

“What, never, and that’s the problem. I can’t sleep unless I’m sharing someone else’s dream, I’ve given up the whoring and don’t have much other healing work to do, so I spend most of my time in Hubert’s dreams.”

“Is that a problem?”

“It is when I start wondering which is the real world and which is his dream world. He’s got such a strong mind that I can’t

make any changes to his dreams, and to tell the truth, I don't want to. I'm wondering if he's taking me over."

"That won't be a long term problem will it? Not to be indelicate or anything, but you're going to outlive him right?"

"Provided the St. George doesn't reconstitute him again, but I'm not concerned with seventy years from now, I'm losing myself today."

"Have you talked to him about this?"

"Sure I have, but no matter how much he understands this, he can't help being who he is. And I don't want to change him, either. So I've decided to get away from him once in a while."

"Well you're welcome to sleep here any time you want, as far as I know, the three of us have dreams that are random as hell, you ought to be able to play around all night."

"Thanks, you know my biggest concern is that I want to be lost in his dreams, that I'm starting to hate waking up in the morning."

"That really doesn't sound like you Lorraine, you're so strong yourself."

"It's the letting go, it's so tempting to lose myself in him. I want to do it."

“Well, you know...”

Ben groaned.

“Well it is, Ben. You made the bed for your size and even with we three women it’s big enough, we’re not so big you know.”

“So you keep saying. Speaking of our third, where is Clara?”

“She’s off with Ely, he’s teaching her to talk with the animals.”

“What like Eliza Doolittle?”

“That was Pygmalion, dear, you mean Dr. Doolittle.”

Lorraine laughed, “Well, maybe both, Clara has certainly changed since being around you two.”

“I’m going to start dinner, Clara is coming back for dinner is she Cleo?”

“She said she was.”

“Well let’s hope she doesn’t bring any furry friends along, I’m not skinning them.”

“Ben! Ely would be horrified you even suggested that.”

“Yes, I’ll go check the lawn for some choice grass in case he’s coming too.”

“Not funny you caveman, you need any help?”

“No you two stay and talk, I’ve got it.”

Lorraine was laughing, “You guys are a lot of fun, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told. So how is Sam?”

“Cripes, Behemoth, you’re not really a cat, and you can speak my language.”

“I just thought I’d help with the lessons.”

“Well don’t. Does Beels know you’re out of hell again?”

“Yes of course, he said, ‘Go have some fun, Boots, you’ve been a good boy’ and so I’m here to have some fun.”

Behemoth suddenly spun around, behind him was Boots the sabretooth who grinned and thought, “That’s my name you stole, cat, maybe you don’t use it any more.”

“Uh, I just remembered something I was doing back in Hell, bye bye.”

Boots curled his lips in a snarl and bobbed his head at Ely and

Clara before disappearing. His opinion of the little cat from hell wasn't very high at all.

Ely was looking a bit nervous and Clara said, "He's really a nice tiger, he gives me rides and everything."

Not for the first time, Ely wondered about this crazy Kobold he'd met. "Maybe we'll stop with the lessons today, you've done well and it's getting toward suppertime."

"You're right, and I get a bit cranky if I get hungry, you want to come along to eat?"

"I'd be honoured, Ben is a fine cook."

Clara nodded and sent a thought toward Cleo, who said Ben was expecting Ely.

As the two walked from the park where they'd been talking with the squirrels (crazy, every one of them) they ran into a group of teens who blocked their way. The leader spit out his cigarette and cocked his hip before saying, "What do we have here, a couple of midgets?"

Clara was reaching for her hammer when Ely tapped her on the shoulder. Clara opened her hand again and said, "Just waiting here for our friends, you have a problem with that?"

"I don't see any friends, just my friends."

‘Preserve me from bullies,’ Clara thought and from every bush and behind every tree came dozens of images of Clara and Ely, she was getting good enough to dress them differently and change the faces a bit so that they looked like other people.

“Oh, here’s my friends,” she said.

The bully looked around, some of the images were carrying baseball bats and others had bicycle chains hanging casually from their hands. The kid’s friends were already running when the leader turned to do the same.

“Hey, nice, thanks for the hint Ely, that was so much easier than usual.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I mean I don’t have to hide any bodies at all.”

Ely rolled his eyes, but then looked at Clara, “You’re not kidding are you?”

Clara took his arm, “Come on, let’s see what trouble the roomies are up to.”

No trouble, just Lorraine and Cleo chatting on the couch and Ben in the kitchen. Clara sat down beside Lorraine, “Hey you, how are you today, you come for dinner or are you going to

stay for the night?”

“I’ve left Hubert, I’m going to live with you guys now.”

“Really! So much fun, you can have half my closet! Oh, no, you’re kidding. Now I’m sad.”

“Don’t be love, she’s not far away and can visit often,” said Cleo while Lorraine was hugging Clara.

Clara hadn’t had a lot of friends so far in her life, so she was easily confused.

“Come on you folks, set the table will you, supper is ready,” Ben was carrying plates of food out of the kitchen.

Clara jumped up and had an armful of plates as she was heading for the table.

“No, Clara, your imaginary plates disappear and then we’ve got to wash the tablecloth, go get the real ones.” Cleo turned to Lorraine and said, “We’ve got to watch her all the time.”

Ely grinned and got the cutlery from the drawer.

As they ate, Ben asked, “How are the lessons going?”

Ely smiled, “Clara is a fast learner, I think we’re pretty much done.”

Clara looked a bit upset, “Does that mean you’re leaving?”

“I would like to, Clara, I’d like to get to the new lands you so wonderfully gifted to us.”

Clara seemed somewhat happier with that, “Well I’ll miss you.”

“And I’ll miss you, my friend, my prize student.”

Clara beamed, “Can I come visit you?”

“Of course you can, you’d better or I will be hurt.”

Lorraine smiled gently, ‘sometimes you heal yourself,’ she thought.

That night she checked on Clara and found little sign of damage from the time she was enslaved. It was like the time Cleo was captured by Giants, faded almost away. Of course their childhood trauma was still there, swamping most else, but she was working on it, and while she was, the four of them were having a hell of a time, romping from one dream to another, knit together by Lorraine, who was guiding them along. It was almost like the Keen world, where the foxes created and played in their own creations. Lorraine had been missing that, and now she had found willing participants.

Lorraine thought maybe she had better not get too raunchy, too soon, but then she remembered who she was asleep with.

A Book of Poetry

The weeks and months slid by for Kam as he read, cooked, and worked in the library. His understanding deepened with each book he read, and the grief? Well that remained, but it seemed a little further away than it had.

Lucy too, seemed to be changing, letting go of her own grief. There were times that she found herself laughing until she almost cried, at something Kam had said. If they were in public, some of the other librarians would look over with concern. Lucy was the heart and soul of the library and the library was a solemn place. What was this laughter?

And Kam? He laughed because Lucy laughed, and that surprised him. He was not known to himself as a fellow who laughed, although his family had sometimes seen him do it.

One afternoon, Kam was not laughing. He carried a book to Lucy's room and showed it to her. It was a volume of Italian love poems, hundreds of years old. "This is one of the books I picked out while Maude was helping me."

"I know it was, I put that on your shelf," Lucy said simply.

"Why?"

“I don’t know, Kam, I really don’t know. Are you angry with me?”

“Never. You know I never read this? It was just meant to be a declaration of my love.”

“I know Maude read it, cover to cover more than once when you returned it.”

Kam grew thoughtful, “Should I read it?”

“I have.”

“Should we read it together?”

“Kam I’m not sure how wise that would be. You read it and if you think we should, you can read it to me.”

Kam went back to his room and, with confusion, opened the book. The first thing he saw was a dedication. ‘Thank you my love, after so many years of solitude, you have shown me that I am not alone in the world.’

It was in Maude’s handwriting. Solitude? What did Lucy think when she read that? Kam very much hoped that she was not hurt. In no way did Kam want to be the reason for her hurt.

And that very thought shocked him. When Maude wrote that, Kam had not even known Lucy existed. Yet he was afraid he

might have...

Kam went back to Lucy's room with the book. "The dedication..."

"Was not written to me, Kam, but to you. I understand that and it didn't hurt me. I understood enough even then, to know that Maude was talking about a different sort of love than that between sisters."

"I was afraid..."

Lucy put her hand on Kam's cheek and said, "No, you have not hurt me, then or now."

Kam wanted to gather her in his arms but Lucy dropped her hand and stepped back. "Shall we dine together tonight?"

Kam recovered as best he could, "Of course, I would like that." He made his retreat back to his room and read the book.

When he finished, it was close to suppertime and so he walked by Lucy's room and the two of them went to the dining hall. Kam had the book in his hand and put it on the table. "It's beautiful, but I'm not sure what it means to me. Too much longing, too much unrequited love, Maude and I never had that between us. Now the remorse, the regrets, those I understand."

"That's interesting, I had the opposite feeling about the book, I got the longing and the unrequited love."

Kam felt an electric shock go through his body, he understood why Lucy had given him the book to read, he understood what Maude saw in the book when she read it. “It was just a book at random, I didn’t know what was in it.”

“That wouldn’t have mattered, Kam, it’s what you bring to a book that influences what you hear, what you understand, when you read it. You feel regret for the loss of Maude, she read it before you were together, she felt the longing for love.”

“Lucy...”

“No, we won’t go there, will we Kam? I feel what Maude felt, sure, but I’m not sending messages to you.”

Kam realized he was disappointed to hear this, and as soon as he realized that, he realized he had feelings for Lucy. Feelings he hadn’t had for anyone since Maude died. “I’m confused, I really am, I don’t know what’s happening here, Lucy. Should I be honest?”

“You can’t be dishonest in here, Kam.”

“No, but I can shut up.”

“Tell me.”

“Lucy I’m having feelings I haven’t had since Maude died, I think I’m starting to care for you, and it feels wrong. It feels

like a betrayal of Maude and a betrayal of your trust. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Better than you might think, Kam. What will you do about it?”

“Do? Nothing. Well, I’ll try to understand it, but I won’t betray you or the memory of your sister.”

Lucy said nothing, her face was a blank.

“Do you think that I’m just having trouble adjusting to this place? That I’m focusing too hard on a restricted set of people I interact with?”

Now Lucy showed a flash of hurt. Kam saw it but then it was gone. “That may be, Kam, after all you tend to fall for those who are available to you. It’s a restricted group in here and relationships aren’t unusual.”

“They’re not? I thought they were forbidden, I’ve never seen any couples.”

“They’re not forbidden, but the urge for privacy is very strong in a place where it’s impossible to hide feelings. All the librarians can read each other as easily as they can read the visitors, so what we feel and think is obvious to all. Have you looked at your fellow librarians?”

Kam looked around the room, what he’d assumed were

professional pairs now dissolved into romantic couples. He realized instinctively that a great deal of discretion was needed to allow everyone to work together. There must be an incredible network of couples forming and dissolving down through the years. Kam looked again at Lucy.

“No, neither Maude nor I ever participated. We were the founders and held ourselves aloof, and the times we grew up in weren’t very tolerant of casual relationships.”

“That’s why Maude left with me? To avoid complicating things here?”

“No, she left because she had decided to spend her life with you. She may have spent many more years here, but when you came along she wasn’t prepared to wait. I resented her for that, for leaving me to run the place without her, but I understand now. You were worth leaving for.”

“Lucy you are confusing the hell out of me.”

“Yes.”

The two fell silent as they finished their meal, and Kam gathered their plates to return to the kitchen. When he turned around, Lucy was gone.

Kam was half relieved, half disappointed and he thought to himself that this self-knowledge stuff is a pain in the ass.

Sleepytime

Lorraine was in trouble. She had intended to mess about in the dreams of her friends, but aside from pulling them together, she couldn't bring herself to change anything. Where she used to direct dreams for her own amusement, she realized she couldn't do it. Well maybe she could, she did nudge a bit, but she just didn't want to divert anyone's dreams to suit herself.

Was she losing herself so much? Had Hubert affected her that deeply?

They were at breakfast and Cleo was looking at her closely. When they had finished eating, Cleo took her by the arm and walked her back into the bedroom.

“Tell me what's going on Lorraine.”

“It's that obvious?”

“Clara and I expected to be on a roller coaster of a night while you played with our dreams, but they were just our normal dreams.”

“You two... “

“We share a sort of consciousness, like all Kobolds, so we can compare dreams with each other when we wake up. You either did nothing but ride along, or you were too subtle for us to feel it.

“I couldn’t. I don’t know what’s wrong but like with Hubert, I couldn’t bring myself to direct your dreams. Nudging, sure, for therapy, but to amuse myself? I don’t seem to be able to do it any more.”

“Lorraine, do you feel like you’re sleep deprived? Separated from dreams like you felt when you were separated from the Keen family world?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Maybe you should talk with Kit about this.”

“I will, if it seems to be a problem, but honestly, I’m not feeling any bad effects, I just worry that I don’t want to play with your dreams.”

“This may sound strange, but do you think that maybe you just want to let go? Like we let go with our dreams, maybe you just want someone else to be in charge.”

“Is that what dreaming is? A letting go of control?”

“For most of us, yes. We can’t direct our dreams and we can’t connect with others, unless we’ve got some sort of extra

powers. I wonder.”

Cleo called Clara into the room. “Clara do you think you could direct a dream like Lorraine does?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t tried. You mean somehow with my powers of illusion?”

“Yes, do you think it’s possible? Maybe also put Lorraine to sleep?”

“How would we know she’s sleeping and not just under an illusion?”

“Wow, um, OK put me to sleep and Lorraine can check to see if I’m really asleep.”

Cleo dropped back onto the bed, she was out instantly.

Lorraine whistled, “That was impressive Clara, let me check.” After a moment Lorraine said, “She’s asleep for sure, not under a glamour.”

“Well let’s see if you can still manipulate dreams if you want to, go and make her dream of being on an island in the middle of a lake with Ben, she’d like that.”

Lorraine lay down and closed her eyes, she was soon with Cleo and she pushed her into the dream Clara suggested. After ten minutes, Clara gave Cleo the illusion of being pinched on the

bum and woke her up. Cleo's face was thunderous, but Clara put her finger to her lips and pointed to Lorraine, who didn't wake when Cleo did.

Clara whispered, "I think she's really sleeping."

"Can Foxes do that?"

"Maybe she's learned."

"Let her sleep," said Cleo and put a cover over Lorraine before heading back out to the main room.

Lorraine was confused, she was in a vast black space. No noise, no light, nothing. She had been having fun creating an island for Ben and Cleo and then suddenly, as if the lights had gone out, there was nothing.

Having been in situations where her clients could not dream, she wasn't afraid. She made a small lamp appear beside her and she realized she was alone, there was nobody dreaming with her. That was a bit concerning. She brought up a sun, which illuminated nothing but herself.

Let's have the island then, and Cleo's island was there with the lake around it. She was alone on the lake, what about animals? The place exploded with noise, birds and heffalumps, whatever those were. Hubert came walking out of the bush onto the

beach where she stood. ‘No, not Hubert, if this is me dreaming I don’t want the first dream to be about him. Sorry love, nothing personal but this is personal,’ she called.

Hubert changed into her old fox mentor when she was a child. ‘You’re late for class again, Lorraine, get along.’

Lorraine started running along the beach, but as hard as she tried, she couldn’t find the space in the woods they used to use for a classroom. ‘This is stupid,’ she thought to herself and stopped searching. As she did so, she woke up. She didn’t come suddenly out of someone’s dream, she actually woke up.

“That was weird,” Lorraine said as she walked out to where everyone was having coffee at the kitchen table.

“Well hello sleepyhead. Want a coffee?” Ben got up and headed to the kitchen to brew another pot.

Cleo smiled at Lorraine, “Congratulations, you’ve learned how to sleep, did you dream?”

“I did, I dreamt about running around trying to find my classroom.”

Ben almost dropped the coffee pot, “You’re joking! The first personal dream you’ve ever had and you had that one? Oh dear, you shall have a shot of almond in your coffee you poor thing.”

“Well, it started out as Hubert, but I said no and it turned into

my old mentor telling me I was late for class.”

Cleo and Clara were obviously trying not to laugh. Cleo said, “It will be fine, Lorraine, I only have that dream about once a week.”

“But I haven’t been in school for over a hundred years!”

This time Clara and Cleo were laughing, and Ben joined them.

Lorraine looked at them and said, “Are all dreams so stupid?”

“No love, most are even dumber, but more fun,” said Cleo.

“Well I want to try again. I tried to direct the dream but it twisted up on me.”

“Interesting, you got the island and Ben just right for me, maybe your brain isn’t going to let you get away with directing your own dreams.”

Ben was confused, “Island?”

“Why not try again, it’s a lazy day and we don’t have to go to work until the evening shift. Back you go to bed, Lorraine, see what you find out. Maybe you’ll have the one where you keep looking for a toilet,” said Clara, giggling madly.

Cleo frowned at her sister, “Don’t ruin the surprises squirt, let her find them on her own.”

“But what does this mean?” Lorraine looked a bit concerned.

“I suppose it means you don’t need anyone else to sleep with. You can sleep now on your own. You were worried that Hubert was absorbing you, now you know you don’t need him to survive.”

Lorraine thought for a moment and then said, “But I don’t want to be apart from him, Cleo, he’s my mate.”

“Well, not to act the therapist with a therapist, but maybe your worries that you were being absorbed into Hubert, were the result of you realizing that you can sleep alone now. A sort of reverse concern. Maybe you were worried that if you didn’t need him you’d lose him.”

“Don’t give up your day job sis.”

“No, Cleo may have something there,” said Lorraine as she picked up her coffee which did indeed have a shot of almond in it.

“Ugh, I hate flavoured coffee.”

A Book I Haven't Written Yet

Kam was alone at the back door, it had been a busy night. The door opened and he saw Hubert Stout there. Assuming he was doing some research, he walked over to hear his request.

“Ah, Kam, I see you’re on your own, so you’ve learned have you?”

Realizing Hubert could somehow see him, Kam nodded.

“I have a somewhat unusual request today, I need a book that I haven’t written yet.”

Kam was dumbfounded. Was this a joke? An author requesting a book that he hadn’t written yet? How did that work? Should he take him to a book on how to write? No, half the special books in the library were written by Hubert or by Oren Longfang.

Kam realized he needed research books, but why put it that way? Ah, he knew he needed to write a book, but he didn’t know what book he needed to write. Damn, no pressure eh?

Kam opened up. He looked closely at Hubert, and he could see some confusion, some fear, some hurt. This was not the Hubert he knew, what could cause that? He had a great relationship with Lorraine and Sam, what... Kam had it. What made a

strong man fear was always the same. He was afraid of losing... not Sam, it was too soon, Lorraine. He was afraid of losing Lorraine.

Why? Lorraine needed Hubert, she would go insane from lack of downtime if she left him, Hubert was her dream world. Kam did what he knew he should never do, he reached out past the library walls to Cleo, and suddenly he knew. Lorraine had started sleeping and dreaming on her own. Hubert would have noticed.

What book did Hubert need to write about this? There were hundreds and thousands of relationship books out there. There were dream analysis books.

Then he had it, Maude had written what Hubert needed to see, the dedication in the book of poetry. It wasn't about need, Hubert had become confused about why Lorraine was with him, it wasn't because she needed him, it was because she wanted him, he made her feel as if she wasn't alone in the world. She had found her mate.

Kam took Hubert's finger and led him to the shelf that held the poetry book. While he was there, he put another of Hubert's fingers on the next book, written by Oren Longfang on an analysis of the concept of a mate in wolves and foxes.

As Kam took Hubert back to the entrance, Hubert examined the books in his hand. As he went out the door, Hubert squeezed Kam's hand briefly to tell him that he understood.

When Kam turned around, he was startled to see Lucy standing behind him. “You loaned out our book?”

Kam took a step back, “It’s just love poetry, I loaned out Maude’s dedication.”

As he said that, he realized what Lucy had just said to him. He took her hand and led her to a private nook, usually used by the librarians who were tired of reading in their rooms.

He sat her down and took a seat beside her, turning to look at her. “No more messages, no more hints, OK? I loved Maude more than the world, and when she died, part of me died with her. That part seems to have come alive again, in you.”

“No hints?” Lucy was laughing.

“Right, damnit, Lucy I love you, is that plain enough for us?”

“It is, Kam, and it has been for a while now.”

“What will we do about it?”

“Well you said we would do nothing about it. Do you still feel that way?”

“You know I don’t.”

“Kam, I’m a virgin, physically and emotionally. Don’t play

with me. I think we both need to know if I'm a substitute for Maude, and whether I'm attracted to you because of what you meant to her. Can you understand that?"

"Of course I can, give me some credit for a bit of self-understanding. I've asked the same questions. What answers have you come up with?"

"Kam, you are the most difficult thing I've ever encountered in a long, long life. You are also the most difficult problem this library has ever faced."

Kam looked down at his hands, they were knotted together. "I'm sorry," was all he managed to say.

"Damn you for a good man, Kam Kobold, why didn't you just screw me the first time you saw me, it would have made things so much easier."

"Made it easier for you to see me as the villain that I am?"

"Yes, but you're not, more's the pity. You're, you're... Oh hell, I'm in love with you."

"And what are we going to do about that."

"Nothing, for now. I have to think about this, think about this more, I should say."

"Is that what this needs, to think about it?"

“Stop, no more,” said Lucy as she got up, but she leaned back in and kissed him on the mouth, hard.

The darkness was still there, Kam went back to the entrance in case they had any last minute visitors, but another librarian was available to help. Kam stood aside and suddenly said quietly, “I want the book that I need.” As he did, he realized that he had spoken during the darkness. Not only that, but Lucy had spoken as well. He doubted she noticed she had, any more than he had noticed.

He looked around the library, and wondered, not for the first time, just what the hell the place was. As he looked, he saw the other librarian looking at him with wide eyes. Kam was tempted to hold up his finger, to let the poor man try to figure out what book Kam needed, but he just smiled and waved him off. Thankfully, the door opened to another visitor, and Kam was able to escape any further complications.

He wasn't sure just how long he'd been in the library, time was strange there, but he felt like it had been a year or two. That left almost all of the hundred he had promised. Almost a hundred more years with more confusion about Maude than he had come to resolve. A hundred more years with Lucy. And what must she be thinking?

Kam thought, ‘thanks for the insights into insight, you damned library, but I see more poorly than I did when I entered you.’

Was that a chuckle he heard, almost too low pitched to hear?
'Oh piss off,' he thought.

Perch Burgers

Lorraine had a regular coffee in her hands, black and dark roast, 'as bitter as hatred', as she said. "It's just a bit of a shock that I can sleep and dream, after all it's been hundreds of years without either, my whole life in fact."

Cleo nodded, "I suspect after sharing sleep and dreams with so many people for so many years, your brain just learned how to do it."

"I suppose so, I wonder how this will end up. I hope I don't start dragging people into my dreams, that would be a bit much, especially if I can't control what happens."

Sam, who had come to visit, smiled, "I had a little brown fox in my dreams for quite a long time, it didn't do me any harm that I could see. Lorraine I suspect that people will just shrug it off as a dream of their own, like I did for a long time. It was only when you started talking to me that I realized it was something more."

"Enough sleep, I'm awake and so are you guys, what are we

going to do today? Can we get a day off from Ken?” Clara was itching to go do something.

“A day off? Ken?”

“Union action, out sisters out, we won’t give him a choice.”

Sam laughed, “You know he’s probably got this place wired, he always seemed to know what I was doing and thinking.”

Cleo nodded, “It is, I swept for bugs long ago, they’re all Ken’s.”

A disembodied voice came out of one of the lamps. “You swept for bugs? I’m hurt, you don’t trust me?”

“Are you kidding? You taught me not to trust anyone, especially you, Ken. We’re going to take the day off, the lot of us, can you look after the bar?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Vacation pay, and you said yourself there wasn’t anything much going on.”

“Oh, pierced through the heart. Yeah, go on with the lot of you, and don’t cost me too much money, when you people go on vacation it gets expensive for me.”

“No trouble, Ken, we won’t get into any trouble, I promise.”

“Well, all right, go on. The perch burgers are on me.”

“What? We haven’t decided...”

“Port Dover,” Ben muttered.

Cleo looked at him, “What about Port Dover?”

“Perch burgers at Knechtel’s, Orange Glow at the Arbor. What is it, Ken, the Lake Erie Chompers? Bessie has been misbehaving?”

“No, no, I just figured you guys would want to go to a beach, you love them so.”

“Ken...”

“Swear to the Gods, Ben, nothing happening except a bunch of tourists and even more locals enjoying the sun.”

Ben looked doubtful, but called for a vote, “All those who want to go to the beach?”

All the hands went up and so they finished breakfast and walked to the bar where they nodded at Ken, who was taking chairs down from tables. “Oh hell,” said Sam, and they all spent ten minutes setting up the bar.

Into the car park where they picked up a van and they were on the road, down highway 24 through Simcoe and on to Port Dover. They took it easy and got there in time to do a bit of shopping around the main street. The girls tried on hats and bathing suits and wraps and... and Ben sat on a bench on the sidewalk and watched them buzz around. It was definitely a girl's day out.

Eventually they invaded Knechtals and took over a couple of tables, got perch burgers, fries and salads depending on each person's whims. Cleo made sure she kept the receipt, she intended to get some cash out of Ken, that being, after all, one of her favourite challenges.

As they were finishing their lunch, and were heading out to get an Orange Glow, (not as nice as an Orangeade from Mackies in Port Stanley, Ben declared, but good enough) Sam looked toward the beach.

What she saw was a general movement toward one spot on the beach, and everyone looking out over the water. "Guys, we need to go check out the beach, something is happening."

There was a general groan, and they all turned right to walk the twenty metres to the beach. Once they were there, they soon understood what people were looking at. There were fingers pointing and comments about capsized boats.

Ben turned to Cleo and said, "Who in your family is the trouble magnet?" which earned him a very nasty look.

“It’s not a boat, it’s Bessie,” Lorraine said. Bessie was kin to Ogopogo and several other leftover beasts, including Nessie, the Loch Ness Monster. “She’s in trouble.”

Sam turned to Clara and said, “Can you hide everything from the crowd?”

Clara nodded and suddenly it was a clear, sunny day on the beach, nothing else to see, and the crowd started to disperse to sun themselves on the sand.

“We’ve got to get her out right now,” said Lorraine and Puss was there beside her. The cave lion kicked up sand and flew over the water to the unconscious monster. Picking her up by the scruff of her long neck, the big cat pulled her across the water and up onto the beach.

Dropping her gently, he stood back and waited. Lorraine and Sam looked at Bessie’s head and Sam said, “Gas, I smell natural gas, and it’s sour. There must be a broken pipe at one of the wells.” She looked up at Cleo who nodded.

“Come on Ben.”

“How are we going to get out there? I could go get a boat.”

“I’ll take Puss, you take Boots, have you any welding experience in that wandering life of yours?”

“I can weld, but ride a sabertooth?”

Boots grinned, lowered his head and butted Ben in the stomach, hard. As Ben doubled over, Boots ducked under him and headed for the water. Ben had no choice but to swing over onto his back and ride. Puss and Cleo were right behind.

On the beach, Lorraine had probed Bessie and said, “She’s alive but not breathing, I can’t get her started.”

“Water,” said Sam. “We’ve got to get her turned around and rolled over. Clara, release the illusion, we need help.”

Lorraine was shocked, “We can’t let these people see monsters!”

“Don’t be silly, Bessie is their monster, they know who she is, Clara, release it.”

As Clara released the illusion, the people on the beach looked at poor Bessie collapsed on the beach. Sam yelled, “We need help turning her around and rolling her over, let’s go people.”

To Lorraine’s surprise, a wave of people moved to the monster and surrounded her.

“On my count, lift and spin her around, head down the slope! Now!”

The monster was lifted by a hundred pairs of hands and slowly, carefully the crowd spun her around.

“Now, this side, roll her over and you others, catch her and ease her down.”

The crowd did as they were told, some tucking her flippers under her as she rolled, others cradling her head as if they were holding a child.

When she was on her back, Sam shouted, “Now, you folks by her chest and stomach, easy, easy, press down.”

As they did so, a large quantity of water poured out of Bessie’s mouth. They let up and then pressed down again without direction, they had caught on.

Lorraine looked again and said, “That’s it, she’s breathing.”

The crowd did not step back, instead they all put their arms around the monster and warmed her, showing just how much love they had for their ‘sea monster’.

Lorraine turned to Sam and said “I’ll be damned.”

“People may be afraid of strangers, but Bessie is their monster, a lot of these people will have played with her out on their boats.”

“Should I make the tourists forget?” said Clara.

Sam waved toward the beach, half those who had helped were tourists, and those who had hung back afraid, were now moving toward Bessie, towels were being soaked and the big girl was being massaged.

Before Sam could direct anyone, the crowd had rolled Bessie over and they were massaging her back. The monster was making unmistakable sounds of pleasure.

In the meantime, Puss had led Boots to the place where he had grabbed Bessie. Cleo could see bubbles of gas churning up the water. She waved at Ben and shouted, “Use your wrist band and make a bubble, we’re going down, and increase your density as we get deeper.”

The cats sank. This far out in the lake the water was clear and they could see the pipe, ruptured and spewing raw gas. The two cats had a bubble of air as the Kobold technology converted water to oxygen and hydrogen. Ben worried for a moment about breathing that much oxygen under pressure, but they weren’t that deep. He trusted the toys the smith had made for them.

As they got to the pipe, they realized it wasn’t an explosion, but a break, as if a trawler net had snagged the pipe and carried it along until it broke. The two cats and Cleo nudged the ends together and Ben took his hammers in hand. He called up the

kobold equivalent of metallic epoxy and sealed the pipe, no sense risking a fire with an arc welder.

As he finished, and the gas stopped escaping, Cleo attached a beacon to the pipe so that it could be repaired properly at a later time.

It was just about then that the cats disappeared.

“What the hell?” said Ben.

Cleo moved over so their bubbles merged and Ben repeated himself, “What the hell?”

“They’ve gone to Kam, Ben, some sort of emergency at the University. That’s all he would say.”

“So we’re walking back to shore?”

“It looks like it. I’ll tell Sam we might be a while.”

Back on shore, Bessie was well recovered and was simply lying around enjoying the treatment from her humans. She had always considered the humans on the beaches as her pets.

Sam got Cleo’s message and turned to Lorraine, “Could you ask Bessie to go get Ben and Cleo? The cats have disappeared.”

Lorraine nodded and turned to Bessie, at first the beast was reluctant to go where she had passed out from breathing the gas, but Lorraine reassured her that it was fixed. Bessie nodded and gave a grunt that the people rubbing her down seemed to understand, they stood back from her and she went to the water. A very short time later, she arrived with Ben and Cleo hanging onto her neck. As they got off in the shallow water, Ben remarked, "I may prefer Boots."

Bessie splashed a tremendous amount of water up into the air and all over the laughing crowd before heading back out into the lake.

Sam watched as the crowd drifted away and she hoped they would remember how they had helped a monster. Some might forget but she thought that the locals would remember and tell stories to their grandkids.

She looked around at their group, who all seemed to be happy, all except Clara who looked distracted. Sam touched her arm and Clara seemed to come out of a trance. "We all ready to head home?"

On the way back, Lorraine leaned into Ben and whispered, "She really took charge."

Ben nodded, "like teacher like student I guess."

Lorraine smiled and leaned back to have a nap.

When they got back to Guelph, Ken had wristbands for all of them, reading “Trouble Magnet Team.”

“I swear, I’m going to forbid you people from going on vacation. You just cost me a million dollars!”

The Great Statue Fight

Kam opened his eyes slowly, he felt like he hadn’t slept at all. As he opened them, he was confused, his room was rearranged. No, it wasn’t his room, it was Lucy’s. He rolled over and there she was, in bed with him. Not only that, but she was naked, and so was he.

Her head was propped up on her arm and she was watching him, just like Maude used to watch him sleep.

“What... Lucy I’m sorry, what...”

“Hush love. It’s not what you think. You came to talk last night and I was already in bed. I moved the sheets aside and you, well I guess you passed out from too much mental conflict. I undressed you and rolled you into bed. Nothing happened, I promise you.”

“Nothing...”

“Kam I offered myself to you and you passed out. I suspect I should be offended by that.”

“I’m sorry, I...”

“Stop, you said ‘Maude’ just before you dropped. I get it, are we so close? She and I?”

“In almost every way.”

“Well then I forgive you for fainting the moment you saw me naked.” Lucy was smiling, which made Kam feel a little better.

“What, uh.”

“You poor dear, you really are conflicted, I’m sorry I did that to you. I’ve been thinking most of the night, when I wasn’t sleeping on your chest, and forgive me that liberty, I couldn’t resist.”

“Maude...”

“Yes I know, you put your arm around me and said her name. It’s all right, I should not have done that, it was wrong of me.”

“No, I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you, even asleep or unconscious, truly sorry.”

“Well now that we’re both sorry, I have something for you.”

Lucy got out of bed and Kam almost fainted again from the sight of the sun shining across her back and hips. She returned with a small box and handed it to Kam.

“This is a key to the library, I’m not ready to leave, but I’m kicking you out. I want you to go back to your old life and think about me, about us I should say. No, to be honest, I mean think about me. If and when you are ready to come to me, come. I will be here.”

“Maude...”

“Maude is gone, Kam, if I thought before, that I knew why she left the library to live with you. I most certainly know why now. I love you, and I suspect you love me, but you still see Maude when you see me. When that changes, come back, we will figure it out then, whether I go with you or you come here.”

“Lucy you are not leaving this place, not for or with me.”

“I will leave it one day, Kam, we all will, but I understand what you’re saying. I won’t have you here now, not when I can see how torn apart you are. As for me, I am certain, right now, what I want. Never doubt that, I want you to come back, but you need to go.”

“I don’t want to go, I don’t want to leave you Lucy.”

“It’s not your choice, Kam, the collectors will chuck you out if

I have to tell them to. You will go and think and come back to me if you settle it in your mind.”

“Is that allowed? Can I leave and come back?”

“You were always here temporarily, but you forget who created this place. And I understand now, what Maude taught me when she left with you. Some things are worth bending the rules, and you’re one of those things.”

“What about your agreement with Ken?”

“I’m the one sending you out, he’s not requesting you, there will be no payment.”

Kam glanced around the room, but he was seeing the library. He understood what it meant, what it was doing, visitor by visitor it was changing the world. Creating understanding, for each person who understood their life a bit more deeply, that person made the world a little bit better. “No, I think that my brother will make a little donation while we’re at it.”

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that Ken is expecting his trouble magnet of a brother to attract some crisis. I always do. I’m thinking that if you are throwing me out, it will be for a crisis.”

Lucy was smiling, “You’re going to manufacture some trouble? Do you know how much your brother would have to pay?”

“If you’re the bargainer I think you are, it’s going to be a lot. Don’t worry, he’s good for it.”

With that, Kam gathered Lucy into his arms and kissed her as hard as she had kissed him. As he stood up, her arms clung to him, just a little, and he almost got back into the bed, but as he had that thought, Lucy put her hand on his chest and pushed.

He found his clothes neatly folded on a chair and dressed, leaving for his own room with a last look at that magnificent woman in her bed. He didn’t fail to notice that she had left the sheet draped half on and half off of her body. He inhaled sharply as the sight hit him like a punch.

When he got to his room, he sent a mental request to Clara. In a few minutes, Ken was at the door of the library. Lucy had dressed, she answered and asked what he wanted.

“I’m sorry, I need Kam. All my usual trouble shooters are off at the beach, there is a problem in town here, and Kam is the best agent for the job. I’ve come to buy him back from you, I hope that you will understand.”

“If there’s a problem in the town, I can’t refuse, Ken. He’s yours, I’ll go get him.”

“Thank you Lucy, the money will be transferred to the library’s accounts and once again, I apologize for taking him away.”

“He may be back some day.”

Ken was a bit confused by that last remark, but he let it slide for now, he needed Kam to get the damned statues under control. You see, a lot of the statues in town had come to life.

The Family group downtown was throwing their bronze baby through the windows of the buildings around the square. It would yell ‘whee’ as it flew, and then it would run back and climb up to its mother who threw it again.

The Blacksmith was pounding the metal street-posts into tines for plows.

And the University... every animal statue had come to life and was making trouble. Ken needed his trouble-shooting brother to fix this.

Lucy went to Kam’s room and gave him a look. “You are a devious man, be careful, there are statues all over town causing trouble.”

“All over town? It was only supposed to be on campus here, I guess Clara doesn’t have the fine control over that distance yet. OK I’m off.”

“You have the key?”

“Of course I do, love.” With that, Kam kissed Lucy once more and ran for the entrance.

When he got there, Ken was looking a bit suspiciously at his brother. Kam said “Where?”

Ken said, “front of the campus mostly, and downtown.”

Kam nodded and called Puss and Boots to head downtown while he took care of the Campus. As he ran toward the road, he was hit in the back of the head by a log. The beaver from in front of the indigenous centre had pegged him hard. Kam caught the little pest and tapped it on the head to knock it out. He then went to the art centre where the Gryphon was fighting with the Begging Bear. He let them go at each other while he concentrated on the horse and the goose who was protecting the human baby. That baby didn't need protecting, when Kam bent over to put it back where it belonged, it punched him hard.

He kept at it for a few minutes and when he'd got his exercise, he called on Clara to stop, and to repair all the damage that had been done. The various emergency forces in town would figure it was a student prank, and anyone who had seen flying metal babies would soon forget it.

Kam walked back to the library where Ken was waiting with a phone to his ear. “Clara stopped it from Port Dover?”

Kam nodded, “She's more powerful than we thought.”

“And you're a pain in my ass, Kam. That stunt cost me a million dollars.”

“Stunt? Me? What do you mean, Ken?”

“Don’t, just don’t. I’m considering that payment as a donation, and a damned worthwhile one. I hope you learned what you needed to learn in there because you’re back out now. Or did you get tired of the place and set this up?”

“They do good work, Ken, and I may join the place when I get older, it’s a worthwhile project. As for learning? You got your trained agent. For instance, I can tell that you’re really not angry about my stunt, and that you are happy to have me back.”

Ken just shook his head and turned Kam toward the bar, “What are your plans now? You still working for me?”

“Of course, what else would I do?”

“No urge to start your own library?”

“Not yet, like I said, I may go back there one day, but until then I’m all yours.”

“You’ve always been all yours bro, but never mind. I’ve got a problem in South America and I think I’d like to see you someplace a long way away for a while, at least until we can replenish the slush fund.”

“South America, I love South America, it may be just the place

I need to be for a while.”

Again, Ken gave his brother a long look.

Epilogue

It had been several years, but Kam was back in Guelph. He used the key and entered the library. He padded down the hallway to Lucy’s room and went in quietly. Lucy was sleeping and he sat in the chair, watching her for a long time.

He asked himself carefully, ‘who do I see?’ and the answer was always Lucy. He saw Lucy. It was Maude who looked like Lucy now, not the other way around.

He thought some more and realized he didn’t love Maude any less, he hadn’t forgotten her, or anything about her, but here, here was Lucy, and there was room in his heart for both of them.

Lucy’s eyes fluttered open and she saw Kam watching her. “You’re back, how was your time outside?”

“It’s strange, I seem to have lost my special talent for attracting trouble. I mean there’s the usual amount of trouble out there, but it doesn’t come looking for me any more.”

“That’s good, and so here you are, who do you see?”

“I see you, Lucy, you.”

“Good, and I see you, but you have your clothes on.”

Kam smiled, stood up and undressed, folding his clothes carefully and piling them on the chair. When he had finished, Lucy lifted the covers and Kam’s breath caught in his throat.

“Lucy.”

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