

The Wilmer Valley

Lunch Counter Stories VIII



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Hello and Goodbye to Guelph

Sam Martin had said goodbye to Morris Minor. He had been her mate, all the canine beings had said so, and she believed them, but she had to let him go. He had spent forty years in a tree with a Dryad, and those forty years had started to come back. Not only that, but he would age right to his death and Sam wasn't going to allow that. She had sent him into the Dryad's new tree.

Cleo Kobold and Ben Martin (no relation) helped Sam move from the rooms in the St. George Apartments she had shared with Morris, back to her old apartment. That she hadn't given the old place up, said a lot about her personality, but Cleo was concerned for her.

Sam had lost her martial arts teacher a few years before, she had been terribly in love with him, but he had died of old age. To Sam, it felt like she had been abandoned. Still, she had buried him and moved on as best she could. She had shared some adventures with Cleo and Ben and would again. Cleo would keep an eye on her.

It was good to be back in Guelph for a while, the skateboarders, the guy sleeping on the bench, the guy swinging his arms violently as he walked along, the happy dog splashing through the puddles left from the drained wading pool, the lap dog outside Planet Bean, waiting patiently as his big buddy was inside having a coffee.

Cleo wasn't often in the town, but it always seemed like home.

Perhaps because it was such a welcoming place, both for humans having some problems, and for those with extra-human powers. It all just seemed to mesh.

Ben and Cleo helped Sam move into her apartment and gave her space to grieve. In a couple of weeks she would be back, emotionally. It would surprise some how fragile she was. Sam had one of the toughest minds around, but her heart was a bit less hard. When she was ready to share her bed again, Cleo and Ben would be there for her.

In the meantime, they all continued to work for Ken Kobold at Ken's Keller, the bar under Jim's Lunch Counter, the place that seemed to be the magnet for beings of power in Guelph. Jim had retired to England, Art Pendry, who ran the lunch counter for a while, had retired and was now the supervisor of the St. George Apartments. Art had passed the place to Mike and Liz, who continued to run it.

The bar was dug out below the basement by the Kobolds, led by Ken, and below that was an underground railroad that extended from Europe to Vancouver. I know, it sounds insane, but there are always more things going on in the world than we notice.

Ben also worked for the St. George. Oh yes, the apartment building was alive and had hired Ben as a long-range agent. Ben had drifted around the country for years before meeting Sam and Cleo and now he worked jointly for the St. George and for Ken Kobold. Those two entities had discovered enough common cause to be working together.

Clear so far? Ben, Cleo and Sam had spent some time fighting Giants and Kappa in the West, Calgary and Banff mostly. Ben and Cleo were an item, and Sam was an occasional third, although she was committed to Morris, until she beat up his Dryad and sent him back into her tree.

Sam had taken over as bartender in the Keller and ran 'other' assignments for Ken, who seemed to be some sort of independent intelligence agency for the Kobolds. Cleo and Ben continued running around the country on various jobs, but right now their job was Sam.

Our three heroes were drinking together in the bar, Sam much more slowly than Ben and Cleo as she had to serve the three or four wayward souls sitting around the place.

Ken stuck his head out the office door, took a look around and shouted, "Get your sorry asses out of Guelph for a while you three, you're depressing the customers, take a week."

A real understanding guy, our Ken, but he was right, Sam needed to get out for a while.

"I know a place we ought to go," said Cleo, "There's an iaido and jodo seminar in Calgary, you two can have fun for a weekend trying to hit each other with sticks."

Cleo, being a Kobold, tended to use a very large hammer to fight with, but Sam and Ben had been trained by the same teacher, quite a few years apart of course, Ben having trained before Sam was born, but the two of them looked about the same age. Sam brightened up a bit, "A seminar, where we

aren't fighting for our lives, backs against the wall and all that?"

"You got it girl."

"Sounds deadly boring, I love it, let's get going."

As it happened, Ingrid (Goddess of War, Love and Crops) had decided Art Pendry (immortal and suspected reincarnation of King Arthur, firmly denied by Art) wasn't busy enough, and he was volunteered to take over Sam's job for the week.

Are you keeping up? I'm barely there myself.

It didn't take long to pack, they could use one of Ken's apartments in Calgary. Hopping on to the underground railway, the three were in Calgary in very little time and settled in.

Sam's spirits had risen with each kilometre from Guelph. She had been in Calgary not too long before, on a job, but the prospect of seeing fellow martial artists, many of whom she knew, and visiting the various bars around town was appealing.

They arrived on a Friday, early in the morning and joined a long day of practice. It was Jodo, stick against sword, for the whole day, nine to nine or something like that. Afterward, they went to the Newcastle bar, a place Sam knew well from her student days when her teacher would take her along on instructional tours. She ordered the excellent fish and chips and a Newcastle Brown ale. Such a traditionalist.

Heading back to the apartment, Sam, emotionally and now

physically exhausted, crashed immediately. Ben and Cleo had more stamina and spent the night as they usually did, trying to break the bed. It was Ken's he wouldn't complain, (he'd laugh).

The next day was Iaido inside and Jodo outside, with a Jodo examination at the end of the day. Sam and Ben enjoyed themselves tremendously, trying to take each other's heads off, while sticking to the kata.

That evening they went to a bar downtown and had a good night's sleep after some relaxing chat with a few fellow students.

The next morning was an Iaido grading while Sam taught Jodo outside to a few folks who weren't grading.

The afternoon followed a similar pattern of Iaido indoors and Jodo out. Through the entire seminar, Sam's spirits lifted. Fighting without killing was a lovely change, very relaxing.

On the final night, Sam climbed into bed with Cleo and Ben to sleep between them like a contented cat. No hanky panky, but Cleo could tell that Sam was recovering nicely.

With the assurance that all was going to be well, Ben and Cleo put Sam on the train to Guelph, where she took over the bar from a relieved Art Pendry. Morning coffee wasn't quite the same, as late night beer served to thirsty students.

Crawling On The Trans Canada

Cleo and Ben spent another couple of days in Calgary, just lazing around. Ken had no particular use for them at the moment and they were glad of the downtime. Ken had signed them out saying, “Go ahead, take some time, I suspect you two will find some way to get into trouble, call me if you need help.”

The two had dismissed the idea that they were going to do anything but relax for a week or so. They visited friends in Calgary and then met an old friend of Ben's, Alan Coke who invited them to use his place in Invermere, up in the mountains. Before they got there, Ben started to have micro-dreams. Something like micro naps but each one had a short dream with it.

“Can you remember them?” said Cleo, in a worried voice.

“Not really, just a feeling of dread, like someone is working against me somehow.”

“But no hard images or maybe a name for us to investigate?”

“Cleo, we're on vacation, there is nobody out there plotting, these are just vague feelings, it could be that I am bothered that I can't remember them. They seem to come and go too fast for me to see them.”

“Dreams are something you should pay attention to, Ben, on people like us, they often come in from elsewhere, rather than being just random firings of our brains.”

“Do you get hints of the future?”

“Quite often, you don't?”

“Not that I've ever noticed. I'll try to pay more attention next time.”

“It's probably nothing, but you never know. Is your buddy Iggy in town?”

“No, he's at the three sisters, working for Ken. You want to go visit?”

“No, good lord no, if we show up there, Ken will certainly have a job for us.”

“You're kidding right?”

“Not at all, it happens all the time to me.”

“Alright, we'll avoid work. How about we see if we can go the short way to Invermere?”

“What do you mean? There's mountains in the way you know.”

“Sure, but out of Canmore there's Highway 742 and somewhere along that road there has to be one that goes up and over.”

“You're an eastern boy aren't you? Listen, if you want to try that, let's do it. We'll check out Ken's garage for a good 4x4 and

go.”

With that, they took to the Trans-Canada and got about a half hour out of Calgary before they hit traffic snarls. Just construction and two lanes to one but that was enough in the middle of tourist season.

Cleo was driving, as usual, Ben was the better shot and even though there was no reason to think of such things, they thought of such things.

Ben was drowsing, the sun, the start and stop of the car. He had looked all around and done his tourist duty and now he drowsed.

As he dropped off, he immediately dreamed and woke with a start.

“Dream?”

“Yes, not a good one.”

“Tell me.”

“Long ago, I tried to be a good citizen I guess. I married a girl and bought a house, we had two kids and I had a job. This was in Montreal, no, Moncton, I don't think about this often.”

“Names?”

“My wife was Elaine, the kids were Tommy and Jimmy.”

Cleo made no comment.

“It was a good life I think, I tried hard, worked hard, repaired the house, helped with dishes, played with the kids. It was totally normal.”

Ben stopped. Cleo prompted him, “So what happened?”

“What happened? I don't know what happened. I came home from work one day and they were gone, the three of them. At first I thought that they had gone out, but when I looked, they had packed all their things. The house was half empty, clothes, toys, all gone too. That's how I knew they weren't kidnapped.”

“What did you do?”

“I did nothing. Kept working for a month or two in case they came back, but then I sold the house and moved on. What was I supposed to do, my family packed up and left me without even a word of goodbye. No note, no explanation at all. I sold the house and I moved on.”

Ben fell silent, and Cleo didn't ask any more. She also didn't say something stupid like “I won't disappear from your life.” She damned well might, given their professions. She reached over and gently squeezed his leg.

This seemed to be all that he needed because very soon after that, Ben's head nodded forward again.

He jerked awake once more within a minute. He looked down at his leg where Cleo had squeezed it and breathed out.

“Another dream?”

“Yes, damn it what's happening?”

“Tell me about the dream.”

Ben hesitated, “This was later, but before I started working for the St. George. I was out in the nowhere, moving along a cliff to get behind some people I was supposed to be surveilling. The ledge gave way and I fell, it was a long fall and I broke a leg and a shoulder as well as hit my head of course. I passed out for a long time. When I came to the guys I was watching were watching me. One of them laughed and put a bullet in my good thigh and they left. As they did, another one left me a canteen of water. I'll never know if he was trying to be kind or if he just figured I'd be in agony longer.”

“How long?”

“I was there three weeks, until the shot leg was healed enough and the broken bones had partially knit. With that I crawled out to a road and was found. They had to re-break and set the shoulder but by some miracle, the leg healed straight enough.”

“You should have died.”

“I should have. I guess it's a function of my long life, I heal fast and I'm hard to kill.”

“Did you go after them?”

“Fucking right I did, killed all of them but the guy who gave me the water. I gave him the benefit of the doubt. While killing them I learned I'd been set up by the guy who hired me.

“Before you ask, I kneecapped him. He had a family, but more important, he had a mouth. After that I did a few more freelance jobs but nobody screwed with me. Eventually though, nobody would hire me, that's when I found the St. George.”

“How did you do that?”

“I was passing through Guelph and got picked up by Lorraine. She took me to the apartment building and screwed me, her words. Later she was in my dream, it felt like she was rooting around in my head and when I woke up she said someone would like to hire me. While she was in my dream I somehow knew I could trust her and so I said yes. That someone was the damned building but I didn't find that out for a couple of years.”

“I know Lorraine, do you think she's giving you these micro dreams.”

“It doesn't feel like her, she's been in my head lots and even if I don't see her, I know she's there.”

“Ben, I can stop the dreams for a while, if you want me to.”

“Do you think I need to have them?”

“Not that I can figure, it's just your past, there's no foreshadowing in them that I can see.”

“Then do it, I'm getting tired.”

Cleo put her hand on Ben's forehead for a moment and he dropped off to a deep, dreamless sleep.

They moved down the highway at a crawl and by the time they hit Canmore it was time for lunch.

They pulled in and wandered around, looking for a likely place to eat and a bathroom. They found the Canmore Hotel which seemed good enough for both. As they ate, Cleo was fascinated by a photo on the wall. “I remember that engine, I dug coal around here for years, made foreman eventually.”

“What, they let a woman be foreman?”

“Not at all, but with men's pants, a dirty face and a filthy mouth, I'm as manly as any man. It didn't hurt that I could beat up any of the miners who got out of hand.”

“Anything happen?”

“No, it was just a job, long before I realized my true talent and started working for Ken. He found me working at the mine and recruited me on the spot, he'd been looking for me apparently. The folks had lost track of me.”

“I thought all Kobalds could find each other?”

“Same trick I used on your dreams, Ben, I can turn off the tracking. Thing is, Ken has other ways of looking for someone,

like finding the person who can mine and load twice as much coal as anyone else.”

“Huh, around about that same time, I was not far from here in the Bearpaw reservation. I was trying to forget the woman from PEI, the Dryad who was out of her tree. Too bad we didn't meet then.”

“Nah, too much baggage for us at that time.”

“You had baggage then? I thought the Giants were later.”

“Giants aren't the only monsters in the world Ben. Let's just leave it that Ken didn't send me back to my father after I'd talked with him.”

The Book Store

They wandered around the town after lunch. It was nice that they'd made a couple of blocks into a pedestrian mall. They had a good stroll without worrying about some tourist on a schedule, running them over.

They idled through a jewellery shop where Ben rather hoped to find something to buy Cleo, but it might as well have been Guelph or Halifax. Ben wondered if it all came from China with everything else. He saw nothing local, native or non-native.

Not far from the Canmore Hotel, well, no place is very far from any other place in the town, but not far away, was Cafe Books. They went in to see what they could find. Doubtless the place used to serve coffee, but there was no sign of that now.

What they found were many styles of tarot deck, crystals, books on the occult, de-sanctified church windows, and the usual bric-a-brac of tourist town book stores.

The church windows were unusual, but Cleo figured maybe the locals were looking for that cute feature in their million dollar cottages. Then she saw the cat, and the cat saw her.

“Behemoth, it's been a long time, what are you doing here?”

“Don't call me by that name, that damned Russian made me look like an idiot in that book.”

“It's your name, demon.”

“I go by Boots now.”

Cleo laughed, “You have black feet and a black body, how do you justify calling yourself 'Boots?’”

“I have black boots of course.”

“Bulgakov got it right, cat, you are an idiot. And here is Margarita.”

The woman had appeared with a smile, but she didn't know Cleo at all. “Do I know you?”

“Who knows what you know and what you don't, Moscow wasn't kind to you.”

“Ah, yes I see, and I also see that you have a great secret, and you have destroyed a life before it began.”

Cleo laughed, “Does that work on the women around here who come to buy crystals from you, witch? Do vague hints of scandal keep them under control? My secrets are simply things I don't bother to talk about, and my abortion was a ridding from my body of an unwanted parasite. Don't try your confidence scams on me. You'll fail.”

“I can see we will need more concrete methods with you, woman.”

Behemoth was waving his paws for attention, but it was too late.

Ben was poking around near the back and noticed a willowy blond woman sitting on a throne-like chair. “Do you work here?”

“You can see me?”

“Of course I can see you, why would I not? Are you modelling for a life class?”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because you're naked, I suppose.”

“Why are you here Ben?”

“You know my name, what is yours?”

The woman looked like she was struggling, but said in a strained voice, “Margarita.”

“Have we met?”

“Why are you here, Ben?”

“We're just here for a vacation, Margarita, just to look around and be with each other.”

“You're with that woman talking to my cat?”

Ben looked around and saw Cleo bent over a black cat. “Yes, I presume that's your cat?”

But she had gone, and when he looked back toward Cleo, the cat was gone. In fact, now that he looked, Cleo was going, she was fading, and so was the store, and the town.

Blackness expanded, and it became hard to breathe. Ben inhaled as much as he could, expanding his chest and stomach, and then he was stuck. Seriously stuck, he could move nothing at all.

“Oh shit, magic,” he thought as he faded out of consciousness.

Cleo's reaction was a bit different than Ben's, when she faded

into the centre of the mountain, she grinned, and it was her sharpened, double row of teeth that showed. As the rock solidified around her, she grew. Not as far as she could have, she didn't know where Ben was, but enough to give her some movement when she went back down to her petite self.

Being able to see in the absolute dark wasn't a problem for her and she checked to see if Ben was around. No, but she could hear his heartbeat.

How did she know it was Ben? Please, she'd been sleeping beside him for months, and who else would it be, just a few metres to her right, about as far away as he had been in the bookstore.

He seemed able to breathe, although she had no idea how, and he was fine. Leave him be then, while she worked. She knew which direction he was, so she turned away and started to grow, compressing the rock until she had room to swing her hammer. Then the rock simply disappeared with each swing.

The hammer dis-integrated the rock, and those parts that became hydrogen simply percolated up through the rest of the rock. The oxygen stayed, and the minerals fell to the floor. Her hammer was set for gold and silver, so there wasn't much at her feet. She figured Ken might want a backup base in the area so she carved out a huge chamber while she was there.

She would have been better to select for lead and zinc if she was mining, this was near the Mineral King mine and she connected with one of its levels quite quickly. With that she knew there would be a way out so she went back for Ben.

Meanwhile, Ben had awakened and found himself immobile and in the dark, able to breathe somehow. It was ridiculous, this sensory deprivation. He knew the deal, he'd been in tanks before. The trick was to keep believing there was a body out there, and that he wasn't some disembodied consciousness.

The last thing Ben was going to be was some sort of religious prophet who was convinced there was a spirit and mud disconnect. The world had enough of those hallucinating old men convinced they had touched the divine when all they'd done was lost touch with their body.

While not having any senses didn't separate Ben's mind from his body, the lack of distraction was useful. Ben let go and allowed his awareness to expand, he was in a very small chamber in rock, silly place to be.

He wondered if he was going to have to wait for that little bird to peck the mountain away.

Expanding his awareness a bit further, he grinned as much as he could, there was Cleo, already unstuck and angry. Might as well go back to sleep, she would get to him eventually.

Boots and the Mistress

“Mistress, I don't know if it was a good idea to try and kill those two.”

“Try? What do you mean, Boots, try?”

“I know that woman, Mistress, from long ago and she is lucky. Because of that, she is hard to kill. We don't know if they were here for anything but the vacation the boy claimed, but now she will be angry.”

“She will be dead, I put them into the middle of a mountain, cat, how would they survive that.”

“As you say, Mistress,” said Behemoth, knowing when Margarita was getting near her limit of patience. He truly hoped that they were dead, but he would not have gone to the Stoney Nakoda Casino and put down money on it.

“Boots, you are getting as timid as Beelzabub with his 'don't touch that girl or her friends,' nonsense?”

Behemoth knew 'that girl' and her friends and he figured the Boss was probably right to leave them alone. Besides, Kit and Beelzabub had become friends, somehow.

In the meantime, Margarita had replayed the conversation in her head, “How long ago did you know that woman, who is now dead in the middle of a mountain.”

“Stalin's guards caught her sneaking around the palace, Mistress, that long ago. She was pretty enough to be taken to Stalin, and I was there up in the lights. I do so like lights.”

“And she looks like she did now?”

“Oh yes Mistress, Stalin tried to take her into his bedroom and she killed all the guards, ripped the door off his bedroom and hit Stalin with it. He was never the same. She just walked out of the place, nobody knew any better. You just followed orders and kept your head down, even then.”

“I remember. So you think she can get out of the middle of a mountain?”

“I don't know, Mistress, but if she does, you have an enemy, that's all I'm saying.”

“All right, if she shows up I will put her at the bottom of the ocean, let her walk from there. In the meantime, get back to work.”

Behemoth turned to the shop where a couple of likely prospects had just come through the door. He wagged his eyes, yes his eyes, they rotated in strange circles in quite a sickening way, and the customers lost all their educated sense. No longer believing in science or medicine, they stooped excitedly over the various essential oils, tinctures and creams.

Essential to Margarita of course, they were hellishly profitable, being common cooking oil with some scent, or mixtures of mud and water (shake well), or wax, oil and food colouring.

Useless, in other words, but the customers now believed that they would cure the imaginary ailments and diseases that Behemoth convinced them they had.

The cream that cured shrinking leg syndrome was one of his finest, he thought. It worked a treat to stop the shorter leg from becoming shorter still.

Like all those from Beelzabub's realm, they relied much more on scams than they did on actual power. As the Boss often said, "Miracles are what you make them."

Behemoth was an acknowledged wonder at advertising, propaganda, and politics. He could convince oldsters to part with their life savings using nonsensical and meaningless phrases that he had convinced them meant something else.

All humans had their greed, their desires, their bias, their prejudice, and all you had to do was convince them that you or your product was just the thing. Behemoth had called them cat-whistles, but somehow it got perverted to dog-whistles. That made him furious, it was proof of his theories, but nobody likes falling for their own scams. If you show how it's possible to make people believe that black is white, you can't very well complain when they make cats into dogs.

Still, for a very long time, he had been making a good living at his craft, and since hooking up with Margarita, his income had tripled. Who could have known a woman could be so devious?

He was just making eyes at another couple of customers when he felt it. That damned woman was free and she had rescued

the boy too. Margarita would not be happy to hear that, so Behemoth was not about to tell her. He kept thinking of those guards with their arms ripped off, and the sound that door made when she hit Stalin, knocking him back onto the bed. She had thrown it onto him and jumped on top. He would have suffocated slowly if she hadn't been distracted by more guards coming.

Too bad, Stalin became so nasty after that, even Behemoth didn't like him, and that was saying something. Well that bastard was in a special hell along with a lot of the other bastards from history. Let them fight it out for scraps of food for the rest of eternity. What they invented for each other was much more nasty than anything Behemoth could imagine.

Behemoth turned back to some more customers. They looked like new money, maybe he could get rid of the genuine Ming dynasty roof pieces that were cluttering up the place like so many drainage tiles. Just the thing to distinguish their two million dollar cottage from their neighbour's two million dollar cottage.

Honestly, Stalinism had so much potential, but with Capitalism, the people chopped off their own feet in the mindless pursuit of things to make their friends jealous. It was just too easy.

The Mistress loved her gold and silver, certainly, but she was especially content to hurt the creatures with real illnesses. Those who rubbed her scented cooking oil under their noses, to cure their cancer. "Sell the people what they want," she had said.

The money wasn't the point, the mistress remained true to her upbringing and was a good communist. Well, to the extent that she wanted the same for all, it's just that she wanted the worst for all. Behemoth had tried to explain that her ideas were a bit backward but he'd been dumped into a cold bath for that one.

Well, if she was happy, leave her to it, even if it was a bit undignified for a Prince of Hell to be a soaking wet, shivering cat.

Behemoth just wished he knew why that woman who had just escaped the mountain, smelled so familiar. He was sure he'd smelled someone like her recently.

As that thought arrived, Behemoth's eyes grew wide. She was a Kobold! He'd never seen a female before, but there she was. No wonder. No wonder.

“Better pack my small bag,” Behemoth thought as he turned to the next customers.

Down the Mountain

With nothing to do but wait for Cleo, Ben went to sleep. He passed the time dreamlessly, which was nice. His mind still had a tendency to float away from his body with no feedback, but at least while he was asleep it didn't matter much.

He was glad of the darkness, too. He wasn't claustrophobic, but nobody likes a rock face up against his eyeballs

Ben woke up when he felt a hand grasp his fingers. He felt someone tickling him and sent out some loud thoughts at Cleo. "Oh ha ha, very funny, dig me the rest of the way out will you please."

Eventually he was free enough for Cleo to pull him into a large space, at least it felt like a large space, noises seemed to disappear into the distance. He could see nothing.

"You look OK lover, how do you feel?"

"I'm fine, Cleo, except that I'm having trouble getting my body connected to my brain again."

Cleo held his hand again, "Here, how is it now?"

"I can see, how did you do that?"

"I just taught your brain to see in a different way, I think."

"You think?"

"Well I don't know how I see, how do you know how to hear? How do you know how to feel or smell? It's just there isn't it?"

"Yeah but..."

"Call it echolocation or Cleovision OK? Let's move on out of this place, I don't mind the occasional cave-in but I bet you

won't like it.”

Ben nodded and moved after Cleo. They walked a long way, it was a big mountain. They heard various creaks and cracks, it was more noisy than Ben would have thought for a pile of rock. Cleo nodded when he mentioned it and said, “Rock is sort of alive, it shifts and moves quite a bit, even when it doesn't look like it does. You hear all sorts of things in a dead mine.”

“This is a mine?”

“Just ahead, there are levels and so there must be a way out. We're fine unless the place caves in.”

They found the levels, they walked sideways and up and eventually they found an entrance. As simple as that. It was a lot easier now that Ben could see in the dark. He tried letting go of Cleo's hand and could still see, perhaps his brain had figured out what she showed him. He reached for her hand again, not because he was nervous with all that rock over his head, but because he liked her. Yes, that was it.

Cleo made no comment, just squeezed his hand a bit.

Eventually they were outside and Cleo looked around carefully. “I know where we are, this is the Mineral King mine. Where did you say your friend's place is?”

“It's in the Wilmer Valley.”

“Well that's Toby creek below us there, if we follow it

downstream we'll hit Lake Wilmer. That was easy. How's your brain, Ben, have you gathered your body back up again?"

"Now that I've got all my senses back, I seem to be rooted in the world again, and my hearing is telling me we've got company."

"Yeah I heard them, five ATVs coming around the corner to our right."

Ben saw them first and he didn't like what he saw, there were seven men and by the tattoos and the embroidery on their vests, they were some sort of right wing neo-fascists. They had hunting rifles rather than assault weapons so they were likely Canadians.

The group soon spied Ben and Cleo and came toward them laughing. Ben reached down and picked up an armful of rocks. As they got closer, Ben could hear the things they had planned for Cleo and he yelled out, "That's close enough gentlemen."

"Or what, you gonna call the cops? There's nobody out here but us, law of the jungle, dickhead."

"Oh good," said Ben, and threw a rock that caught the lead driver square in the forehead. No helmets of course, too sissy.

The ATV continued for a moment and then rolled over. By the time it had done that, Ben had knocked out four more of the men.

Rather than lean over and pick up more rocks, Ben walked

toward the group, some of whom were groaning on the ground. As he passed each downed man to reach the two still standing, he would kick them in the head and they went quiet.

“Law of the jungle, right?” Ben said as he got close. One of the men was trying to get his rifle off his shoulder but he'd put it on crosswise and was having trouble getting it over his head, he was immensely fat and couldn't lift his arms very well. The other one had his hands in the air.

As the rifle finally came free, Ben was right there in front of the man. He simply pulled the rifle forward and as the man tried to pull it back again, Ben guided it into the man's face. Not very gently. The man fell to the ground and began rolling toward the edge of a drop.

The man with his hands up looked at Ben, who nodded, and that man stepped in front of the rolling fellow.

“You are?” said Ben.

“Constable George Jimson, RCMP.”

“You have the look of someone who can at least walk and chew gum, you have some identification?”

The man slowly and carefully pulled out a card from an inside pocket. Ben looked at it and nodded. “What's with these clowns?”

“Locals, I was hoping they would be connected to something bigger but it looks like they were just reading too much internet

garbage.”

Ben nodded, “Fine, can we leave them with you? We'll take one of the ATV's to get down off of the mountain, law of the jungle and all that.”

“Good with me, call in at the local RCMP office and send someone up for me will you? These guys aren't very tough, but there's too many to bring in by myself.” The fellow didn't ask Ben and Cleo their names, figuring he'd be wasting his breath.

“Fair enough,” said Ben, suddenly remembering that Cleo was with him. He looked around and saw her sitting on a rock, laughing quietly.

“You had your fun?” she said.

“Thanks for the help.”

“With all the rocks flying around I figured the safest place was behind you, buddy.”

As they drove slowly down the mountain trail, Cleo leaned forward and asked Ben, “What was that about a bird and a mountain?”

“You caught my thought?”

“Of course I did, we've been together for a while now and that's one of the things I can do with a lover.”

“Shit.”

“Oh don't be silly, I'm close to 200, I've got no problem with whatever you think. It's what you do that is important.”

“Still a bit creepy.”

“What and a double row of filed teeth isn't?”

“Good point. I was thinking of that story of the little bird that sharpens its beak on a diamond mountain once every hundred years.”

“Ah, the first minute of eternity, cute story. You'd die of dehydration long before that wouldn't you?”

“Probably, but I seem to be able to go for quite a long time without drinking or eating.”

“Handy.”

“You know, the last couple of years my teacher was alive, he would say “I look old, I feel old,” once in a while, as he looked in a mirror. I think he understood that he was dying.”

“Didn't you meet Sam at that time?”

“No, I avoided her and my teacher never mentioned my visits, to her. Don't ask me why, I don't know, but it seemed right.”

“Were you upset when he died?”

“Not really, he's just gone. I don't have any idea what it would

be like to die. I sometimes wonder if I'm immortal or not, and what it does to me to wonder if I'll ever die. Maybe that's why I just drift.”

“If you've got all the time in the world you can put things off forever.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Honestly Ben, even if you're going to live forever you could die tomorrow, I don't think you're un-motivated by a lack of death. I think you just haven't figured out what gives your life meaning, and I don't mean some grand plan from some God or other. I mean doing what you feel you ought to do.”

“Oh, that, well I do feel I'm doing what I ought to do, being an agent for the St. George and Ken gives me plenty of meaning, and then there's you.”

“Oh you marvellous boy,” Cleo hugged Ben hard enough to make his ribs creak.

Bogart the Shaman

It was a long way down, and they talked.

“What about the micro dreams, Cleo? What's with those?”

“I don't know love, but I think Margarita has become a dream-

snatcher. Still, how did she know to look at you?”

“Wide band looking?”

“Now that may be, she looks at all dreams and picks the ones that are interesting to her. Yes that would explain why she hadn’t a clue who you were. Me, on the other hand, I have history with Behemoth.”

“I heard some of that. Wait, did I hear it?”

“I wasn’t quiet, and I was broadcasting toward you, so you probably did hear it.”

“You mean the book was real?”

“No, of course not Ben, but Margarita and Behemoth are. And they’re somehow here, well in Canmore.”

“Cleo, we’re supposed to be on vacation.”

“And we are, love, we are, we’ve got lots of time to get to your friend’s place, let’s just float on the lake for a while shall we?”

“After a trip to the RCMP.”

“Oh, I’d forgotten that.”

The big raft was drifting down the lake slowly when they spotted an island. The strange thing about this island was that it

had a totem pole. The locals didn't make totem poles, did they? The two decided to go find out.

After tying off the raft, they climbed up the island, that was strangely wedge shaped. Sure enough, it was a full-bore Haida pole.

Cleo shook her head, "No way in Hell is that a Haida pole, and yet it is. Do you suppose some white man brought it here? I mean how could the Haida get here, all the way down the coast and up the Columbia? Portaging over the Coast mountains into the Rockies? Damn."

Ben was looking at it. He went around back to see what was there, maybe a signature? It looked old but that could be faked, maybe it was modern, made to look old.

As he was about to dig his thumbnail into the back, someone said, "It's old but not Haida, it was a gift from one of their carvers. It's Shuswap now, belongs to a Shaman."

An old man had somehow walked up behind them without warning. Both Cleo and Ben got a very worried feeling about that.

Then a shock, there was a building on the island, they would have walked through it, if it had been there ten minutes before, but there it was. Ben recovered first, "Sorry if we are intruding, we saw the pole and wondered how it got here."

"No harm done, most people can't see the pole, but you two did. Too bad you didn't see my house, you walked right

through the main room and kicked over my coffee.”

“Oh, sorry about that,” said Cleo.

“No harm done there either, easily cleaned up. Can I help you two in any other way?”

“Pardon me,” said Ben, “But we haven’t introduced ourselves, I’m Ben and this is Cleo Kobold.”

“And do you have a second name, Sir?”

“Lots of them, but I have a feeling I’d better tell you that my first second name was Martin.”

Cleo’s head whipped around to look at Ben, “Sam’s father?”

“No, some sort of distant cousin, I promise.”

The Shaman was grinning, “You two are fun. You can call me Bogart, after my favourite actor. I won’t make you try to say my actual name, and writing it down likely wouldn’t help you. The missionaries decided our language should have question marks and Crosses of Lorraine, and before you ask, not that Lorraine.”

“Umm,”

“I’m a Shaman, I know lots of people dear, now as I said, can I help you further?”

Ben spoke up, “I’d like to know the story of the pole.”

“I’ll bet you would, but you’ll have to earn that one.”

“Earn it?”

“I’ve been watching you two since Canmore. That was nice digging in the mountain, and with the men outside the entrance. I would like you to do something for me.”

“I’m listening.”

“I want you to get rid of the Witch.”

“As in kill her?”

“Good lord no, just get her out of my neighbourhood, she’s a pest of the first order.”

“OK you’re a Shaman all right. As it happens, we do have a reason to kill her, she tried to kill us.”

“What you do for your own reasons is what you do, of course, but just remember all I want is her gone from the area. She’s disruptive, and mostly, it’s that cat of hers. He seems to be able to make people more greedy than they usually are. He makes greed seem like a virtue.”

Cleo broke in, “Look, no harm no foul, we’re on vacation and a story isn’t payment enough for a job, to be frank.”

“It’s a really good story.”

“If you can hide your house from me, you’re not weak. Why not just go beat her up yourself?”

“An old indian squatting on an island?”

“This isn’t your island?”

“This is in the middle of a national wetlands, dear, of course it’s not my island any more. Used to be, but we were moved out years ago.”

Ben had been looking at the pole, “You know, it’s almost like I can read it.”

The Shaman looked hard at Ben, “You two want to spend the evening, have a meal? I’ve got a pallet on the floor for you.”

Neither Ben nor Cleo ever turned down a free meal and a bed, so they stayed. Dinner was good, nice ham steaks and fresh vegetables. Cleo commented, “I wouldn't think that artichokes would grow on these lands.”

“They don't, I got this food from Sobey's in Invermere, you thought perhaps that I paddled around and gathered it?”

“Well, yes I guess so.”

“There's freshwater clams in this lake, a few fish, but reeds and weeds aren't exactly great eating, and the clams are terrible. Even back in the day we had to go over the mountains to hunt buffalo. That Sobey's is the best.”

“Sorry about that, stereotypes are so hard to get rid of.”

“Don't worry about it. There's some big native lawyers who come by sometimes and tell us remnants that we aren't real indians. Worse than the cowboys they are sometimes.”

“So why are you still here, Bogart? Why not move to a Res somewhere so you can do your thing.”

“You figure I've got a thing? I'm a Shaman, who the hell believes in Shamans any more? Why would I want to hang around in the middle of a bunch of believers in the institutions that destroyed them? No thanks, I'll hang out here on my island. Believe it or not, the local women and the tourists love my potions and my advice. I make a decent living here.”

“And the witch?”

“Yes, she's competition, but the difference is that my potions work, hers are shit.”

“How long have you been here, Bogie?” asked Cleo.

“A very long time, I remember you running around these parts about a hundred years ago. You never remember me but you drop in every ten years or so.”

“Seriously?”

“Absolutely, and now I'm tired and I'm sure you two would like to get a decent night's sleep, your bed is in the back room, I'll stay out here by the fire for a while in my big comfy chair.”

To Invermere

Ben and Cleo were indeed tired and fell asleep almost instantly. They dreamed, and in the morning they felt great, both of them. Ben woke up a bit stiff, he wasn't used to being immobile like he was in the mountain, but he did a few stretches and was good to go. Cleo was frowning, "Ben I don't have the pressure in me I had last night, we need to talk to Bogie."

"Pressure? How do you mean?"

"How do you feel, Ben, the dreams you were having, how do you feel about them now?"

"Good, I'm not bothered by anything this morning, a good night's sleep I guess."

"It's more than that, love, let's go talk to Bogie."

They found the Shaman in the main room, breakfast was ready and there was plenty of it, eggs, sausage, bacon, coffee, toast. Bogie looked up from the stove as they came in, "Good morning, hope you're hungry, today is shopping day so I cooked up what was left. If you don't see something you want, just sing out."

"Bogie, what did you do last night?" said Cleo

“Sit, eat, I’ll tell you, but first get something into you.”

Bogie finished the oatmeal and dropped the pot on the table, “Look, I told you I know Lorraine, you know what she does?”

Cleo nodded.

“Well I do the same, a bit of dream adjustment. We used to call it dream-walking or whatever else made people comfortable, but it’s pretty simple, we go in and nudge a bit.”

“You nudged us?”

“Sure, every ten years or so for you, first time for Ben here, who didn’t need much, he seems to be an easy-going type. You on the other hand have some baggage that you love to hold on to. You find your way here and I nudge you a bit.”

“I don’t remember this?”

“Seems not, but you end up here anyway.”

“You want to tell me what baggage I have?”

“Not a chance, you’ll dig it out yourself, but why should I spend another night working, just forget about it for now.”

Ben also knew Lorraine but she had never nudged his dreams around, just had fun with him there.

“Are you sure?” Said Bogie to Ben’s unspoken thoughts. “She’s got pretty light feet, you might not have noticed her nudging

things in there.”

“You two go rooting around in dreams without permission?” said Cleo in a somewhat dangerous voice.

“Sure we do, the ones who would never ask for help are often the ones who need it most. Cleo, you're a repeat customer, you came here a hundred years ago and asked for help, trust me on that. I also explain all this every time you visit. Like I said, you never remember.”

Cleo frowned and was about to speak again when Bogie said, “Oh just get over it and eat your breakfast, you two are going to give me a lift to town.”

For some reason, Cleo shut up and ate. Ben, who was getting to know her, blinked, but realized he was hungry and tucked in to the food.

After they had finished and Ben had washed the dishes while Cleo dried, Bogie declared that it was time to go shopping. The three of them climbed into the raft and Cleo sculled them up the lake to where they had launched. It took hardly any time at all, the girl had muscles and she left a bit of a wake until Bogie shook his head and muttered something about youngsters with no patience. While they were paddling along, Cleo said again that they were on vacation, no promises on the witch. Bogie nodded, “Fair enough.”

When they landed, Bogie declared he was good to walk and set off toward Invermere. Cleo and Ben climbed onto the ATV and drove into town. They dropped it at the RCMP post and

checked on Constable Jimson. He was fine, the boys were tucked into cells or in hospital, and he was off on his next assignment.

The two walked on up the hill into Invermere proper and wandered around the place. It was a hot day, so they dropped into Candyland where Cleo had a Tigertail ice cream and bought a few chocolates. Ben had a capaccino milkshake. They strolled a couple doors up, to a park, and watched people wander by. It was good to sit with each other and relax. Although they could feel some sort of mission forming around them, they were determined to have their time together.

“What's your favourite colour, Cleo?”

“What sort of question is that?”

“Isn't that what normal people ask each other?”

“How would I know that? I'm not even a normal Kobold. But you know, after visiting whats-his-name, I feel more normal than usual.”

“Bogart.”

“What?”

“Never mind, let's explore the town a bit more.”

“That will kill fifteen minutes, it's not a very big place.”

“Should we check out the Toby Theatre? Might be something

playing that's worth seeing.”

“Closed Ben, a while ago, I'm sorry about that, it was a great place to visit. Love seats and all that.”

“Love seats eh? Too bad, making out at the movies is a classic.”

“OK, listen, if we stroll and not walk, it might take us twenty minutes to cover the town.”

“Let's meander dear, and take thirty minutes, then we'll have lunch somewhere.”

“Sounds like a perfect vacation plan. We'll do it.”

They had coffee in the Circle Market Cafe, sticky buns in the Bakery and Sandwiches section of the Blue Dog. It was nice, they said hello to the people on the street, chatted with the folks in the stores, petted the friendly dogs, and generally enjoyed each other's company.

It wasn't long before they were holding hands and swinging their arms, causing the old ladies to smile.

Now you'd think that at this point, some terrible thing would happen, but it didn't. It was just a lovely morning and afternoon. Even heroes get a day off once in a while.

Vision Quest

After lunch, they decided to walk off the calories and wandered out of town toward Wilmer, then on to Vision Quest, the house they were borrowing. Alan Coke was another of Ben's many and scattered friends. He was also trained by Ben's teacher, and was damned good.

The house was beautiful, and Cleo made an 'ooo' sound when she saw it as they walked around the corner of the gravel road. The place was half way up a clay cliff, overlooking the road and a man-made lake, of which about half belonged to the property. Multiple levels of balcony, stone walls, and a greenhouse with vegetables. Ben had the key and instructions, "We have to water the greenhouse right away, it dries right up this time of the year. We have permission to use whatever we wish for food, it should be well stocked."

It turned out it was, and Ben cooked supper while Cleo watered the greenhouse and the various planters around the place. Quite a domestic scene, really.

Ben made chili, trying to use up the leftovers he found in the fridge. It turned out pretty good and they ate on the balcony, overlooking the flatland, the hills beyond, and the lake, which was full of birds. The occasional loon call drifted up to them.

Cleo was more relaxed than she had been for years, "Ben have you ever thought of building a place like this and settling down?"

“All the time. I even started on places like this once in a while. When I was younger I figured I would have a family and so I built a little cabin on some land I'd bought.”

“This is for the woman who left you?”

“It was, and after Elaine and the kids disappeared, I never finished another place. What about you?”

“Oh, I've settled down a few times, but none of them ever stuck. He'd find a more interesting woman or I'd find a more interesting man. Some of them I kept secrets from, and others, who did our kind of work, kept secrets from me. I have nothing against secrets, but when a kill squad bursts into your house without any warning, it tends to disrupt the relationship.”

“Yeah I can see where that would be a problem. You know, you're the first pro I've ever got involved with.”

“Outside the job you mean.”

“Well, yes.”

“Have you lied to me so far Ben? Kept secrets?”

Ben thought a bit, “Only when I first met you and Sam. I don't think I have lied to you since. But then again, it's so natural I might not have noticed.”

“Well it doesn't bother me if you have, I get the problem, trust me.”

Ben grinned, “Trust you?”

Cleo reached over and squeezed his hand, “You know what I mean.”

It was a warm night, and Cleo ended up bent over the railing with Ben behind, doing his interpretation of a rutting Elk, while the wildlife across the valley were making surprisingly similar noises. The two of them ended up laughing and wandered off to bed after loading the dishwasher. It really was a lovely place.

The night didn't involve much more rutting, all the fresh air the day before must have made the two tired. The adjustments by Bogie probably helped them sleep as well.

It was a glorious morning, the sun coming up over the mountains, sending golden fingers down the valley to pick out early morning deer. Ben cooked oatmeal for breakfast and lots of coffee. Once again the two ate on the veranda, declaring that it would be a crime not to enjoy the view.

As they were finishing their second cup of coffee a terrible racket came around the corner of the road. It was a large panel van, kicking up quite a bit of dust.

As the two watched the noisiest and largest thing moving in the scene before them, Cleo muttered, “Shit” in a low voice. Ben nodded, he had seen Boots the cat, driving.

Cleo looked at Ben and said, “Kobolds, I smell them in the back and they're not in good shape.”

“Damn it, things just don't last do they? How the hell does a cat capture Kobolds?”

“Not just any cat, he's a demon. He was one of the architects of the Gulag system in Soviet Russia, he was Ayn Rand's cat, he's one of the founders of the 'trickle-down' economics scam. Bogie was right about him, he's a wizard at manipulating greed, and Kobolds are nothing if not lovers of money.”

“So he promises gold chains and delivers Iron collars.”

“Got it in one, my dear, sometimes I'm not very proud of my people.”

“What do we do? Call Ken?”

“I suppose so, he'll know where that road goes, and likely knows what the witch is up to. Damn him, 'go ahead and have a vacation' he says.”

Ben grinned, “Tell me you didn't see this coming.”

Cleo punched Ben on the arm, hard.

It turned out Ken was in Canmore, at the base behind the Three Sisters when Cleo called. “There have been rumours that someone is working the Paradise Mine for silver. A lot of local Kobolds have gone missing, we weren't sure who was responsible, it might have been the usual Kobold re-working of an abandoned mine. I don't know this witch or this cat you're talking about, but I'd appreciate it if you took care of this, you two.”

“I bet you would. Have we been on the clock all this time?”

“You've been on vacation haven't you Cleo?”

She could almost see him fluttering his eyelashes, “No cousin, we've been on the clock and now we're on double time aren't we?”

Ken grumbled but he agreed. Kobold slavery wasn't something that he condoned, unless it was the Kobolds who worked for him.

Ken sent along topological maps of the area, and Cleo plotted while Ben explored the lower levels of the house. There he found climbing equipment and a couple of machetes. Cleo was never without her hammer and so Ben declared themselves well-armed.

By the time he'd hauled the equipment upstairs, Cleo had a plan, “We're going up the backside of the mountain so we aren't seen.”

“Up over the top?”

“Not exactly, dear. Ken is having a vehicle delivered to us here, turns out he had one handy in Invermere, imagine that.”

“Quite a coincidence.”

“Yeah, we'll start in a couple of hours and work during the night.”

“Is that safe?”

“You forget, love, you can see in the dark now.”

“And so can the Kobolds, who are presumably working to keep the others under control, and so can demons.”

“You're right, but it's still our best bet.”

“Right then, we have time to clean up and water the plants.”

The Paradise Mine

“You ever think there's some force out there just moving us around like little chess pieces?”

“Who, you mean Ken?”

“No, something that moves Ken around too, something manipulating both of us and all the rest.”

“Ben, we do this kind of work, it isn't surprising if some of that work falls into our laps. Somebody else sits on that balcony and sees a white truck go by, they don't think twice about it. We see a cat driving and we're on the job.

It's not supernatural, it's not some entity pushing us around. Don't you think one of the Gods we know would have noticed

some higher level being, some force out there twitching reality into it's preferred shape. I mean seriously, there's more than enough supernatural power having coffee in Jim's Lunch Counter every morning back in Guelph, to take care of anyone trying to manipulate reality."

"It's just that sometimes it feels like we're in the position we are, by some sort of long sequence of directed motions."

"Well, when you look back after saying 'how the hell did I get into this?' you see a long sequence of events, some of which you decided on, some that just happened. From that, your brain figures it's something other than just chance, but love, it's sometimes just chance."

"No green eyed Lady Luck, no Fates up there manipulating Gods and Mortals?"

"If there were, somebody like Ingrid would have found her and smacked her a good one by now. Seriously. It's just us, our decisions, and blind chance and I happen to like where that has got us, you and I."

"Me too, Cleo. But listen, what about connections, doesn't everything seem to be connected somehow? I mean we meet a witch and then a Shaman and then we see her cat driving a panel van."

"My darling, everything is connected, well and truly connected. A few years back there was a wonderful TV show called Connections about just that, how things were connected in unexpected ways, but how can it not be so? Look closely

and you will find connections all over the place. Nothing and no one is off in a vacuum somewhere. No man is an island and all that. Those very connections can maybe give the impression that it's all fate."

"Again, how come you know all this, Cleo?"

"I keep my eyes and ears open and I think, Ben, how else does anyone know anything?"

"Right, I'm spanked, I'll think more often. Here comes our ride."

Cleo gave Ben a quick hug and started to gather up their things. It wasn't likely they were coming back to the house, which was a damned shame.

The young Kobold driving the jeep was thick. He was almost as wide as he was tall. Ben had never seen anyone as solid as this kid. When he got out of the driver's seat the jeep went up eight inches.

He helped load the equipment in the back and pointed out the assault rifles under a blanket. "You going to walk back to town?" asked Cleo.

"Ken said I was to help you."

"OK kid, hop in and drive, you know the roads out here?"

"Lived here all my life ma'am."

“Stop with that, my name's Cleo, and this is Ben.”

“I'm Kevin, Kev for short, or Kevlar.”

“Bullets bounce off you?”

“I wish, are we ready? It's about a three hour drive to the mountain.”

“Right, Kev, we're going up the back side, you know it?”

Kev grinned and gunned the engine.

Cleo was in the front seat, leaving Ben to stretch out in the back, he had a pack set up for a pillow. “No seatbelt lover?”

“Got a lap belt around my hips, not to worry, no sense getting killed before I get killed right?”

“Listen, what you said about connections, let's test. Hey Kev, you pure Kobold?”

“I don't know, Cleo, probably but maybe there's a branch of the old family tree that ends in a coaching inn somewhere.”

“Well let's see, how about relatives, all pure line?”

“Nah, my sister is married to a human, so her kids are mixed.”

“Who's the human?”

“Name's Cole, family's been around here for years.”

“First name?”

“Elias, he hates the name so we just call him Cole.”

“He got a brother?”

“Yeah, Alan.”

Cleo looked at Ben, “and there you go, that's four people between you and the kid here. You ever hear about those experiments where you hand a package to someone and say give it to someone else? Small World experiments they're called. When the packages are delivered it's in about six hops.”

“I remember that, when I was freelance one of my employers figured that was the way to deliver a letter-bomb, through social networks. I pointed out that mostly the bombs would go off half way there when people refused to send it on or opened it. Another problem was that it could be traced back, it was no better than the mail.”

“You sent letter-bombs?”

“No, Cleo, white hat remember?”

“So what did you do instead?”

“Used social networks to destroy the guy's business, easy, legal and mostly untraceable.”

“The big lie?”

“Exactly.”

“You know, Behemoth, sorry, Boots developed that method to a very high sophistication during the Soviet era. Turns out, though, it didn't have to be well thought out, gossip is the base communication method of humans. They tend to believe bad things much more easily than not.”

“Well, maybe I'll thank him for that when we catch up with them.”

Just about then, the jeep turned off the paved roads and onto gravel, then onto logging roads.

The conversation lapsed into silence rather than shout at each other. Ben was soon asleep and Cleo smiled back at him. She was getting fond of the boy, and let her mind wander into future possibilities. That was a bit strange, her mind usually wandered to something, hmm, something in her past, but it wasn't there. That was a bit worrying all by itself, it felt like she had a bad tooth to probe with her tongue and suddenly it was whole.

She took another look at Ben's face. It wasn't spectacular but there was something about the way he had two eyes, a nose and a mouth. They all seemed to fit together.

Cleo shook her head and looked forward in time to watch the jeep slide through a corner and almost over a cliff. “No rush, Kev, better to get there than to die fast.”

Kevin grinned and slowed down a bit, “My first assignment, guess I'm a bit excited.”

“Well let's see what we can do about not making it your last. You got all the standard training?”

“Yes Cleo, all of the usual courses and some others in advanced hand to hand.”

“Well if we get out of this, Ben would probably like to spar.”

Kevin looked into the mirror and said, “He's big for a human but he doesn't look strong enough to fight a Kobold.”

Cleo just grinned, ‘He'll learn,’ she thought to herself.

Into the Mountain

Ben was still asleep when they started up the switchbacks on the back of Paradise mountain. As they drove, Cleo stuck her head out once in a while. Kevin was curious, “What are you doing Cleo?”

“I'm listening, listening for a different sound in the mountain, we need to get into the mine, not just dig through to the other side.”

“We're digging in? I thought we were going to drive up and over.”

“Might as well drive up the front side honking our horn, son. This way we make our own back door to sneak in.”

“Uh, how do we do that?”

“What in the world are they teaching you kids? Have you got your hammer?”

“Of course I do.”

“And you don't know how to mine with it?”

“It's a weapon, isn't it? Something to fight with?”

Cleo had her own hammer out, “You see these rings here? You can set them for any element you want. These over here are the secondaries. What we're going to do is mine for silver, that means we set the primaries for silver. But we need to breathe so we set the secondaries for oxygen, that means the rock is broken down into silver and oxygen.”

“You're kidding, really?”

“Oh dear. You think these things are just to smack people on the head? They are tremendous technology for mining.”

“If they've got Kobolds in there, how come they haven't taken the whole mountain down by now.”

“I suspect neither the workers nor the guards want to tell their masters about the hammers. I suspect they're using

conventional mining tech and doing a slow, sloppy job. Kobolds don't much like working for free after all.”

“But why are we going to mine for silver?”

“Are you sure you're pure bred Kobold, kid? We'll mine for silver on the way in because it's a silver mine, never pass up a chance to earn a couple of dollars while doing a job.”

“We're allowed to do that?”

“Ken is going to wonder who you are, if you don't. Are you sure you've been trained?”

“That all sounds like on the job stuff, Cleo.”

“Or maybe stuff that's so obvious it doesn't need saying? Well never mind kid, it's your first assignment and we'll see you through.”

“We're here,” said Ben from the back.

“What? What are you talking about Ben?”

“I saw it in my dream, Cleo, we're here, the best place to break in to the mine.”

Cleo looked hard at Ben. This dreaming thing was starting to get on her nerves, but she wasn't about to second guess her partner. “Stop here Kevin, we're going to dig.”

Cleo got out and tapped the ground with the handle of her

hammer. Sure enough, she heard a space behind the rock. Was it the best place to enter? She wouldn't know that in any case, so why not follow Ben's dream.

“Give me your hammer, Kevin. This ring for silver, this one for oxygen, the rest will break down to hydrogen and diffuse away through the rock. No it's not going to build up enough to explode, before you ask.”

“Ben, Kev and I will go first, you follow up and watch yourself.”

“Sure, Cleo, just a minute.” Ben collected one of the assault rifles and several clips, as well as a vicious looking hunting knife he slipped down his boot, “Let's go.”

Cleo gestured to Kev to start but he seemed unsure what to do, “Just hit it, Kev, watch how I do it.”

With that Cleo swung the hammer at the rock face and it disappeared. “Look there on the ground for the silver which will drop. Don't be collecting it while we're in a fight, but we've got some distance before we get to the mine.”

Keven bent over to look at the ground and Cleo made a disgusted sound. “No, just swing your hammer back and forth over the ground. Look, like this, the hammer will attract the silver like a magnet picks up iron filings.”

“You're kidding me now,”

“Why, if a hammer can disintegrate everything but silver, do

you figure we can't find an easy way to pick it up? Seriously, what do they teach you kids these days.”

“We going?” said Ben from where he was leaning on the jeep.

“I'll swing, you sweep, Kevin,” and Cleo started into the mountain. Sure enough, Kevin soon found tiny pieces of silver sticking to his hammer.

“So why would any of us work for a living when we could just tunnel through mountains and make money like this?”

“Oh lord,” said Cleo, “Because the price of silver or gold or whatever, would collapse in a week. Then you might as well be mining for gravel. Maybe it's a good thing they aren't teaching you guys about the hammers. Now shut up and let me work, some of the guards might hear us.”

“They won't hear you swinging that hammer into the rock?” Kevin muttered to himself.

As they went deeper into the rock, Ben realized his eyes were adjusting, he could still see in the dark. Handy ability to have, he thought, he'd have to thank Cleo next chance he got, maybe tonight.

They dug for about forty minutes when Cleo called a halt. Kevin had collected a little cloth bag full of silver along the way. Why he had a bag on him, was a mystery, Ben figured it was a Kobold thing. Always have a bag just in case.

“OK we're here, about three feet from the mine. Now we listen

for a while so I can figure out what's happening and who's where.”

Ben and Kevin nodded and settled down, Ben was facing back the way they had come, safety on, but his finger ready.

After a few minutes with her ear up against the wall, Cleo said, “I've got it, there's ten guards and twenty Kobolds plus Boots. Believe it or not, the Kobolds are taking turns being guards so they can work an extra shift per day, they must be under the control of magic for that to work. We need to get to the cat and hope we can release them.”

“You got a plan for that?” said Ben.

“Knock him out, I figure.”

“Good plan.”

“What calibre are those bullets, Ben?”

“The usual Nato rounds.”

“Right, hit them in the helmet and you should knock the Kobolds out, failing that, one in the leg, we're trying to rescue them but they're likely to fight back. Boots is one level up and about fifty yards to the south.”

Ben nodded and Cleo blew the remaining wall to nothing. She slapped Kevin's hand as he started to sweep over the floor and took off into the mine.

Cleo instantly dropped, the guards had indeed heard them coming and three of them were lined up to fire at the hole. Kevin was smart enough to drop as well. Ben fired three times. Cleo heard what sounded like three church bells ring and nodded to herself as she sprinted down the passage. Kevin was right behind her and he dropped when she did, four more guards were just bringing their guns up.

Ben flew over the two Kobolds and hit the first guard while he was still off the ground, he landed in front of the other three who, seeing a human, dropped their guns and moved toward him, intending to rip his arms off. As they reached, Ben seemed to disappear, only to reappear beside them, wrists, as strong and big as the Kobolds were, snapped. The last Kobold caught on and his rifle was coming up when Ben caught it, made some sort of circular motion, and had the gun in his own hands while the Kobold ran head first into the wall.

“Sorry Cleo, I was stiff, needed a bit of a workout to take the edge off.”

“No worries, lover, and thanks for not killing any of them.”

Behind her, Kevin was having a bit of a second thought about having that wrestling match with Ben. Fifty years of dedicated and expert practice.

That was the end of the armed guards, the rest of the Kobolds were supposed to be slaves and so were quite docile while the three ran up a circular stair to the next level. There they found the cat, sitting in an office with a swivel chair, on seeing the three burst through the door, he scowled and spun around in his

chair, when it came back around, he was gone.

Cleo asked Kevin to check the Kobolds and he took off to do that, returning shortly to report that they seemed confused but out from under any influence.

Cleo gathered them in one spot, and explained that they had been kidnapped into a silver mine.

Several of the uninjured took a look around and started to pull out their hammers when Cleo whistled loud enough to make ears bleed, “You guys don't need to be reminded of the laws against unauthorized mining do you? Just get your asses out of this mine and into that panel van. Kevin here will go with you and take you to the town where you will report in at the local Kobold office. You got that?”

She was using her princess voice and so the miners listened, there was, of course, a lot of grumbling, but they filed out toward the main entrance.

“Kevin, make sure you close the mine, will you please, we'll go out the back and take the jeep down the mountain. See you in Invermere very soon, yes?”

Kevin picked his hammer up off the floor where he'd been sweeping and said, “Yes ma'am, see you there,” in a rather small voice.

Ben was smiling when Cleo turned around, “Yes love, Kobolds get a bit excited in a silver mine, even worse if it's gold. Honestly, without the mining laws there's be no more

mountains. Hey, can you see?”

“Sure can, and remind me to thank you tonight.”

“With great pleasure my dear.”

Looking for a Hot Spring

As Cleo and Ben drove down the mountain, Cleo looked over at Ben, who was driving and said, “You know, we don't need to return this jeep right now. Kevin will take the miners down and they'll be debriefed. We don't really need to be there.”

“Well then let's not be there, do you want to go back to the house?”

“It's a lovely place, Ben, and thank your friend for me, but I think it's done for me this trip. I think I'd like to soak in a hot spring.”

“That we shall do then, let's head to Radium Hot Springs and see what we can see, shall we.”

As they drove along the highway, they sang Bud the Spud, Tillsonburg, and all the other Stompin' Tom songs they could remember. They had the top down and scared a lot of mountain sheep as they drove into Radium.

Cleo grew thoughtful, “I wonder how Sam is doing?”

“She's a tough girl, she'll be fine.”

“Do you think she's forgotten us already?”

“Not likely Cleo, we're sort of hard to forget.”

As it turned out, Sam was coping, she had her bartending job at Ken's Keller, and Ken was keeping an eye on her. He found a few small assignments for her around Guelph but kept her close. Of course he would never have told her that he was concerned and she never caught on. Mind you, once in a while she would smile at him when his back was turned. You never know who is watching out for you, but who would have thought Ken was so considerate.

Ben and Cleo pulled in to the tourist office in Radium and had fun checking out the stuffed animals. “You ever tangle with a cougar?” asked Ben.

“An older woman? Lots of them,” laughed Cleo.

“No, no, one of those.”

“Once, while I was hiking, I didn't notice him and he was on my back, didn't get a good bite though, I had my helmet on. I think he broke a tooth, I know he broke a tooth when I turned around and punched him. He was angry but I showed him my teeth and he figured I won the contest.”

“You know, I can just see you punching a cougar.”

“I'm not sure how to take that, are you saying I'm not a delicate girl?”

Ben laughed and turned back to the pamphlets.

Having found no souvenirs to buy for Sam, they decided to head to the hot springs.

“It's a swimming pool.”

“What did you expect Ben?”

“Not a swimming pool, we might as well go to Banff.”

“OK no hot springs here, there's one back up the road at Fairmont, you want to try that?”

“Turn it around and we'll go see. Don't those pamphlets you picked up tell us what these things are like?”

“They tell us that each and every spring, restaurant, campground and public toilet is the best there ever was.”

“Right, of course, well we shall see when we get there I guess.”

As they were driving past the Invermere turnoff, they saw a hitchhiker and realized that it was Bogart, the Shaman from the island. They pulled over and he came trotting up.

“Just on time, you two, nice to see you again.”

“You were expecting us?”

“Of course I was, I'm a Shaman aren't I?”

Cleo rolled her eyes, “Where are you going?”

“I'm heading for Fairmont, same as you.”

Cleo thought to herself, we're on highway 93 and there's no place else to go, of course he knows we're heading to Fairmont. But Bogart continued, “You won't like the hot springs at Fairmont either, it's mostly a pool like Radium. There's a 'secret hot spring' but it will be crowded this time of year.”

“How did you know we're coming from Radium?”

“Well I could say 'Shaman' again, but really, how do you visit around here without going to a hot spring. Listen, what you two want is Lussier, it's well off the tourist path, hard to get to but you'll be fine in the jeep. You're going to want to go there anyway.”

“You're actually a Shaman?” Cleo asked.

Ben looked at her, then at Bogart who said, “I told you she forgets, you won't but she needs to.”

Ben nodded and said nothing. It was nice to know this man was looking out for Cleo, even if she didn't know it.

Cleo shrugged and sat back, content to look around at the scenery.

Bogart said, in an offhand sort of way, “You know, if you were to pee in the Lussier springs, it would be in the USA in about a week. It's pretty much at the headwaters of the Columbia river system.”

Ben thought that was such an odd enough thing to say, that he filed it away.

They drove the length of Lake Windermere and on to Fairmont. Bogart said he was meeting someone in the Bear's Paw restaurant and so they drove up the hill to the resort. Once there, Bogart said goodbye and walked over to a table of four people.

Ben and Cleo were shown to a booth, and they settled down to look over the menu. While they were doing that, Ben heard a familiar voice behind him. He wagged a finger at Cleo and she glanced as if to look for someone coming into the place. When she sat down she leaned forward and whispered, “Boots.”

Ben nodded and listened hard. Cleo, with her Kobold ears, listened as well.

“I've got a great plan, I'm going to poison Washington and Oregon. Canada will get the blame and with any luck, we'll have another war. You still got lots of weapons in stock?”

The man sitting with Boots replied, “Oh always, we can supply every farmer and fisherman in the Northwest and BC with two or three assault rifles, no problem.”

“Good, you supply the firepower and I'll supply the war.”

With that, the damned cat popped out of the room, with a literal pop as the air closed around where he was. The other man got up to leave and Ben looked at Cleo, who shook her head.

“Just a legitimate American businessman, so he will claim, he hasn't sold any guns in Canada yet, I'd bet. No, we need to go after the cat and stop him.”

“But we haven't any idea what he's...” Ben paused, what was it that Bogart had said about peeing in the hot springs?

Ben pulled out his phone and called up a map of the Columbia river system. Sure enough, there it was. “We've got to go, Cleo, now.”

Cleo looked longingly at the menu, she loved poutine, but she got up. As the two left the restaurant, Bogart gave Ben a nod.

Ben, who didn't appreciate the manipulation, decided that he'd leave that witch right where she was.

They got back on 93 and just past Canal Flats they turned off onto a gravel road leading to the Whiteswan Lake Provincial Park.

Cleo was driving and Ben started to worry when he read the road signs warning that it was an active logging road, and that they were to yield to oncoming traffic. He soon realized why, as Cleo skidded around loose gravel corners, spraying stones into deep gullies that seemed to drop away forever.

Still, she had spent a lot of time in these mountains and he trusted her. She didn't have a death wish that he knew of, so he contented himself with watching the scenery.

The road got worse but they were at least, still on it when they came upon the Lussier Hot Springs sign.

Parking, they started down the steps to the creek at the bottom of the mountain and about half way down, they spotted Boots.

“He's getting set to pee in the pool,” said Cleo in some disbelief, “that's got to be how he's going to poison the river.”

“Cat piss?”

As they got further down the path, Cleo handed Ben a good sized rock. “Can you peg him from here?”

“Gimme, it's downhill, I'll see.”

Ben set himself on the steps and took a big breath, with a grunt he let the rock fly and sure enough, he hit the cat square in the back of his head. He spun completely over in the air and hit the hottest pool with a splash.

Ben and Cleo ran the rest of the way down, and were just in time to see the cat splash and sputter to the surface. He yelled, “Yuck, sulphur! I hate sulphur!”

As the two hit the bottom step, a well-dressed, for 1895, man appeared, reached in to the pool and picked up the cat by the scruff of the neck. The cat struggled and yowled, but the man

held him tight.

A Good Soak

“I know you, you’re Kit’s friend Beelzabub. I’ve met you in Jim’s Lunch Counter.” said Cleo

“Please, just call me Beels, I’m getting used to it.”

“How did you end up here? I thought Europe was more your place.”

“Oh it is, trust me, all this fresh air and scenery, very bad for the top hat, too moist. Still, all sulphur everywhere, is connected to Hell, so when this thing fell into the pool, I knew where he was.”

“You were looking for him?”

“I was, Behemoth has been gone from Hell for too long, causing whatever trouble he could, along with my hostess Margarita. I want them both back.”

“Boots. My name is boots, I don’t know this Be he moth person, I’m just a poor lost pet.”

“Do shut up, Behemoth, you’re not clever.”

The cat stuck his tongue out and curled his paws, trying to look

like a cute kitten. It didn't work.

"Did he urinate in the pool?"

"I don't think so, I think we hit him in time," said Ben

"That's what happened? I'll remember that, old Boots always repays his debts."

Beelzabub gave him a little shake and Boots went silent again, "Good, I suspect you don't want another war with the States, after the last one, they built up quite a military."

Cleo nodded, "No indeed, I doubt there is a Tecumseh to unite the peoples this time around, or if there is, I haven't met him."

"Well it is good that you came in time to prevent it. I will be taking this one back with me, and I would very much appreciate it if you would send Margarita back as well. Her writer misses her, although I don't know why, she treats him like she treated her husband."

"How will we do that? The last time we met her she witched us into the middle of a mountain."

Beels reached into the hot pool and picked up a smooth stone, "Brr, a bit chilly that. Here, get her to swallow this and she will return to me, although it's a lot more quiet when she's gone. Still, she belongs in Hell."

"But won't she be likely to lose a tooth if she bites down on a stone?"

Beelzabub grinned and faded slowly out of sight saying, "I'll send you some help."

Ben and Cleo stood quiet for a moment, looking at where he had been, and then Cleo looked around, "Nobody here, we don't have bathing suits but I won't complain if you won't. I want my soak."

Ben started to take off his clothes and the two of them, buck naked, stepped into the pool Beels had declared cold. Ben yelped a bit, "Ouch, big joke, it's pretty hot."

"Good, I need a hot soak," Cleo muttered as she sank down to her chin and closed her eyes. Ben grinned and sank down beside her and that's how they stayed for half an hour until a gaggle of young girls came fluttering down the steps.

Gaggle was the right word, they chattered like geese and as they spotted the two who were ignoring them, the girls made delighted sounds, stripped down and joined them in the various pools, all naked as the day they were born. This is the unwritten rule of a natural hot spring. If you arrive and those there are naked, that's the dress code for the day.

Small waves washed up and down Ben and Cleo's chins as girls got in and out of the hottest pool, but that didn't bother our heroes one bit. Nor did the giggles that erupted as Ben sought out and held Cleo's hand, or at least what he thought was Cleo's hand. It turned out to be the hand of a lovely young duck who laughed and waved toward Ben's other side where Cleo was also laughing, "Not sure how you can blush in this

hot water but you're doing it, Ben."

All in all, they spent a nice few hours relaxing, not thinking of much at all. At one point, Cleo decided to cool off in the river and such was her strength that she swam upstream for quite a way before floating back down. The rocks in the river seemed to bounce off her rear end as she floated. Of course one of the girls tried the same thing and Cleo pulled her back to the springs just before she went over the waterfall a short way downstream. "Professional swimmer," said Cleo to explain it.

It turned out that the girls had packed a full picnic lunch and they shared it with their new friends. This was much appreciated since Ben and Cleo hadn't eaten at the restaurant in Fairmont. There were loads of sandwiches, baked goodies and home made beer. So good that it was worth seconds and thirds.

With the hot pool, the full meal and the beer, Cleo and Ben nodded off.

Cleo woke first, and she knew she was in a deep cavern in a mountain, "Not again, this is getting stupid." She noticed Ben lying beside her and she gently shook him to wake him.

Ben sat up and looked around, "Another hole in a mountain, really?"

"I'm afraid so, now put your hands over your ears, I'm going to see if anyone is around," with that Cleo whistled, which is to say she made a sound sort of like the whistle of a jet engine

heard from about ten feet.

The sound bounced around the cavern for a very long time, and when it faded, Cleo could hear footsteps approaching from a couple of directions. Two girls came close, shaking their heads, “Please don’t do that again,” said one.

Cleo smiled and showed her filed teeth, “Will you stop me, little one?”

“You know us?”

“A Kobold knows another, foolish girl, who is in charge here?”

“I am chief here.”

“No men?”

“They are gone, stolen away from us, imprisoned for no reason.”

“No reason?”

“Well perhaps they stole some small things that were of no consequence.”

“Gold, silver perhaps?”

“Yes,” she said in a small voice.

“And why have you captured us?”

“We noticed that you have contacts with the spirit world, we thought that we could force you to help us.”

“What is your name, girl.”

“You could call me Bacall.”

Ben was laughing. “Bogie and Bacall, you know the Shaman from Wilmer?”

“Yes, he helps us.”

“I bet he does, have you been without men for long?”

“Many years, indeed.”

Cleo looked puzzled, “Who is this Bogart?”

“Not to worry love, you know him but don’t remember him.”

Cleo didn’t look satisfied with that answer but waved her hand to let Ben take over the discussions.

“I am Ben and this is Cleo. You will not force us to help you, but we might help anyway if you tell us your story.”

“But you are trapped here in our mountain, with no way out.”

“We are not. Now, before we leave, tell us your story, Bacall.”

“Very well, long years ago our men went hunting and found a large cache of gold and silver up in the woods. They carried it

back here, but soon after the metal and the men were taken away.”

“Taken how?”

“They simply vanished, all together during the night.”

“This sounds like magic, do you know who took them?”

“We do not, presumably the one whose treasure it was.”

Cleo was bored, “Why did you take us? What do you think we could do for you?”

“You spoke with that being who vanished with the cat. Can you not ask him to find our men?”

Cleo thought for a moment, then said, “We could, but we will not. Let us out of here now and come with us, we will find your men for you. Otherwise we will simply leave.”

“How could you leave?”

Cleo was holding her hammer, and grinning, “Shall I show you?”

“I will go with you, come this way please.”

Bacall showed the way to a serpentine exit at one end of the cavern, they came out above the road leading past the hot springs. The jeep was just below.

As they climbed down to the jeep, Cleo turned to Bacall, “Best you turn into a normal sized girl now.”

Bacall grew and became the girl that Ben had held hands with accidentally. He blushed again to see how beautiful she was, and how naked.

“Clothes too please, and we’ll put ours on now.” Their clothes had been folded and put into the jeep, which was untouched despite being unlocked and the top down.

“You have a plan?” asked Ben as they got started.

“Going to go see Bogie, do you remember the men he was meeting with at the Bear’s Paw?”

Ben thought for a moment, then looked at Cleo, “You’re kidding, and I thought you didn’t know who Bogie was?”

Cleo nodded and said, “I remember when I have to remember, the bastard.”

Bogie and Bacall

As is always the case, the trip out of the logging area took less time than the trip in. Driving beside the cliff and away from the edge made it a lot safer, too.

Ben had taken the back seat to keep an eye on Bacall, and he did so, admiring her thoroughly. She was damned good looking he thought.

When he looked at Cleo driving, he detected a certain stiffness, and as he glanced at the mirror she was looking back at him with the proverbial 'flashing eyes'. Not the least bit chastised, Ben waggled his eyebrows and grinned, which he could see almost made Cleo smile.

Still, he could tell she was irritated by the way she drifted across the road and sprayed gravel into the canyon at the next bend in the road.

Bacall seemed to be thinking hard. Cleo asked her, "Are you sure you want your men back?"

"One of them is my husband, and a lot of other husbands too, are missing. Of course we want them back."

Cleo just nodded but Ben caught a hint of doubt, 'of course we want them back'. The thing of it is, they had been on their own, without the men for many years. Some things you get used to, maybe Bacall had been thinking about that.

"Bacall, has a Shaman been visiting you over the past few years? One named Bogart?"

"Sure, he is our Shaman, it was he who suggested I call myself Bacall to anyone who doesn't understand our language."

"And do his visits include conjugal relations?"

“I don't know what that means.”

Cleo snorted, “Does he share your bed.”

Bacall looked down and blushed, “Well one does miss the feel of a man once in a while.”

Cleo laughed, “One does, that's for sure. Does Bogart share the bed of anyone else?”

“Well there's Katherine H., Bergman, and Audry H.”

Ben could hardly keep from laughing, he knew where they were going, for sure. He wasn't sure who was going to be in more trouble, her husband or Bogart.

They hit the main road and roared through Canal Flats, then on to Fairmont Hot Springs. Cleo wheeled the jeep right and up the hill, coming to a stop outside the Bear's Paw.

She slammed the jeep door and stormed into the restaurant where, against all odds, Bogart was still hanging out with the men he'd met earlier in the day.

As Bacall walked in she froze. Ben could see her temperature rising as easily as if he'd been watching a thermometer. She was moving from shocked to furious with very little in between.

This was no shrinking violet, no betrayed lover. She picked up a chair, ran across the room and slammed it across the back of

one of the men Ben had to assume was her husband. She still had a piece of the chair in her hand and she was headed toward Bogart when Cleo took it out of her hand saying, "He's human, you'll kill him."

That didn't stop Bacall from winding up and slapping Bogart out of his chair and half way across the restaurant.

She roared, "You son of a ferret. You lying magpie, you mouse, you louse on the furry ass of a packrat! Get up, I'm going to beat you down until you can't get up any more. You swore our men were gone, you convinced us and we asked you into our beds, you snivelling, dribbling little shit. You weren't even that good in bed!"

About this time her husband had managed to get up off the floor and tried to help, "But we did it for you girls, Bogart helped us set up this business with the money we found, we're making a fortune."

Bacall spun around, Bogart forgotten, "You did it for us? You did it for us! You spitbug, you weasel-shit, you did it for us? Well I'm going to do this for you!" Bacall reached for another chair as her husband scrambled behind the other men.

While this was going on, Bogart had ducked behind Ben, "It was my job to help, and even Shamans need a little love once in a while."

Cleo turned to Bogart and said, "Listen you bastard, I'd better not find out you were screwing me in my dreams or I really will tear your head off."

“She remembers?” Said Bogart to Ben.

Ben nodded and said quietly, “I’ll hold you down while she does it.”

“No, no, I swear to you, nothing but healing, I have my professional standards you know.”

Ben looked pointedly at Bacall.

“That was on my own time, I swear, not professional at all.”

Cleo snorted, “Damned right not professional. And now it looks like it's your turn again.”

Bacall was stalking toward Bogart, who stepped out from behind Ben, as if to take his medicine.

“Bogart, you will tell me now, who owns the title to this business that you helped these idiots set up.”

“Your husband and the others, Bacall, I promise.”

“And you aren't on the deed?”

“No, never, I just set it up, took a small commission but I wouldn't try to take advantage.”

Bacall looked him up and down.

“Financially, I wouldn't take advantage financially, just a small

commission, I swear.”

“Let's see the deed.”

Bogart went to the office and returned with the document. Bacall read it carefully, “Five percent of profits for five years.”

Bogart winced but didn't try to run.

“I suppose that's reasonable given the profits these idiots are making. Right, you men are going to sell this business to us women right now for...” Bacall dug into her pockets, which were empty, Cleo handed over a fifty dollar bill. “For fifty dollars, you got that?”

A female voice from across the room said, “I'll witness that, I'm a lawyer, and I recommend changing that commission to 0.5% of profits for one year.”

As it turned out, the men weren't all that comfortable with the cooking and cleaning they had been doing since the supply of Australians had mostly dried up. They made no fuss as they were sent home and their wives took the place over.

Cleo looked at Bogart, who was trying to be invisible up against the wall, “You want a ride back to the Invermere turnoff, Shaman?”

“If that would be convenient, yes please.”

As they drove back onto the highway, Ben asked, “Are you going to be in any danger, Bogart?”

“Danger? No, not at all, I'm their Shaman, I'm supposed to sort things out for the best. Those guys were going to piss the money away in the bar, I convinced them they would get rich and get rid of their nagging women at the same time. I just had to get the women here to find out what their men were doing. You two did a fine job.”

“Like wet pond slime, you are slippery Bogart. What about the commission, and what about the women?”

“Hey, I have to take what perks I can, you think Shamaning is a high paying job? And like I said, even Shamans get horny. You think the girls are going to complain? The boys were usually too drunk to have sex anyway. I wouldn't be surprised if I get a visit or two here, now that the women are just down the road.”

“Cleo?”

“Oh leave him be, Ben, leave him be.”

Alex Island once more

As they drove closer to Invermere, Bogart grew a bit more quiet. Suddenly, he reached forward and put a hand on the shoulders of both Cleo and Ben. He kept them there for a moment and then leaned back, “You two should come to the island and sleep there tonight before you go back to Canmore.”

“What makes you think we're going to Canmore?”

“Nothing, nothing at all, but come for dinner, I haven't told you the story of the totem pole yet.”

It had been a long day and the thought of spending a night asleep before driving on did sound appealing. They could have used Ben's friend's house, but they would have had to open and close it again.

It was Cleo, with a somewhat strange expression on her face, who agreed to stay the night with Bogart. Ben figured she must be troubled again, with whatever it was that Bogart was fixing.

So they turned off and drove into Invermere to get groceries, and then on to Wilmer and parked the jeep to get into Bogart's canoe. Cleo paddled and in no time at all they were back on that island. Ben still saw the pole, but as before, he didn't see a house. As they walked up the slope, it appeared and Bogart led them in.

He was quiet, as if he had something on his mind, he wasn't the chatty joker they had seen before.

Cleo seemed to accept him too. He may be a seducer and a scoundrel, but he wasn't evil in his soul. At least she hoped he wasn't. She had remembered that she came to him regularly, it was the forgetting about it later that worried her.

Still, she had remembered him when she needed to, so into the house she went and rolled up her sleeves to help with dinner.

Ben set the table, somewhat surprised that he knew where everything was, as if he'd been there many times.

As dinner began, as good as it was before, pork medallions, fresh asparagus with ginger, a lovely salad and an excellent wine, Ben asked if he'd been to the place more than once.

“Just the one time Ben, but if you're wondering how you knew where to find everything, the place is put together that way. There's only one place for each thing, and someone like you would find it easily.”

Ben wasn't sure quite how to take that, but he shrugged mentally and started eating.

Once the hunger pangs were gone, they slowed down and Ben asked Bogart about the totem pole.

“Well, when I said it was a good story, I might have been exaggerating, but here it is. Around here the food could get a bit scarce in the old days, so the Shuswap used to go over the mountain and hunt buffalo. Sometimes it went well, and sometimes there would be a fight. After all, the tribes over there figured they owned the buffalo.

“One year the hunting party came across another group that was hunting. A fight erupted, and the Shuswap won. When it was all over but the running, they found a captive that the Stony Nakoda had taken, he was from Haida Gwaii, a man who was as lost, as much as he was a wandering seeker after knowledge.

“The Shuswap took this man back with them over the mountains and in thanks for freeing him, he carved the pole you see outside.”

Ben looked at Bogart, “That Haida was you wasn't it?”

“You got me, it was me, I had an itchy foot until I set it on this island, and aside from a few floods and run-ins with the government, I've been here ever since. Watched the paddlewheelers go by, watched them build the railroad. I became Shaman to the tribes around here, eventually.”

“Just how old are you, Bogart?”

“Oh no, I could ask you the same thing but it would be rude. Listen, do you two want to play some cards?”

“Not for money, not with you.”

“Oh, I was thinking Uno, you know?”

Eventually, Cleo and Ben went off to bed and fell into a deep sleep, full of dreams.

Ben was climbing a mountain, he had what he called his war pack on his back and strapped across his shoulders, comic book hero style, his two swords. This made no sense to him at all, so he figured he was in a dream.

He soon realized it was Cleo's dream. He heard her cry out

once, and then grunt, just around the corner and inside the mountain.

As he entered, he saw Cleo with five Giants. She was naked and held down while the Giants raped her. They had to shrink down to human size to get between her legs, which made Ben smile grimly. His swords were in his hands and he attacked the Giants fast, giving them no time at all to react. In moments there were five decapitated Giants bleeding on the floor.

As he walked toward Cleo to help her up, he woke with a start.

Cleo was sleeping beside him, so he slipped out of bed and into the main room where Bogart was drinking tea.

“What the hell do you think that's going to do for Cleo? You figure she needs some hero to come rescue her? She got out of that situation all by herself, that's what she needs to remember, not that I came and saved her. Are you an incompetent healer or what?”

Bogart just sat and watched him until Ben wound down and sat, pouring himself a cup of tea.

“It wasn't Cleo's dream, Ben, it was yours. You are falling in love with Cleo and it hurts you down deep that you weren't there to help her. You would have, if you'd known her then. You'd have died for her, died in the attempt to save her from that ordeal, and now you know it.”

“Why the hell would you give me a dream like that? I know I would have tried to save her, I don't need you to tell me that.”

“I did nothing of the sort, Ben, that was your dream, I'm just here to talk to you about it. You would never talk to Cleo, but you need to talk it out with someone, so here I am.”

Ben stared at Bogart for a long time, “It's just that I feel so damned helpless, why wasn't I there to save her from that.”

“You're used to solving things, Ben, you're good at it, whether it's stealing secrets or killing monsters, you're that guy. This is different, this is something in the past, and you can't get there to help.”

Ben dropped his head and stared into his tea.

“Ben, she wasn't damaged by that rape. She was under control, she knew what she was doing, the only violation that happened was when she stole the Giant's size and rammed that pipe up their asses before killing them. It was her show all the way.”

“You know about the size thing?”

“Don't be stupid, of course I do, I've been inside those dreams many times. Look, that is not what I work on with her, that was just another fight, another battle in her long career of battles.”

“So what do you work on?”

“Something much earlier in her life, something that really was a violation of her trust and her love. Something that she keeps screwed down tight, something she thinks is her fault somehow.”

“Is this something with her family?”

“She's told you that much? Good. Don't push, Ben that's a lot further than she's ever been with anyone, just let her tell you in her own time. There's a reason she forgets me, it's not anything I do, it's her. She comes here when it becomes bad, and when she leaves, she's so ashamed of being weak, she blocks me out. When she needs to, she remembers.”

“Damnit, I almost wish you hadn't told me that. I figured she was fine.”

“She is, mostly, but it's something that sneaks up on her. Just leave it and let her process things. I can tell you that you are in her dreams quite a lot now, and one day you might just show up to help her when she actually needed someone to help.”

“You'll do that? You'll put me in her dream?”

“Never, she'd know I was pushing, and she'd never come back. No, she'll bring you in when she's ready, just let her move at her own pace. This thing is not crippling, Ben, her job keeps it well under control, it's just in those small quiet hours of the night, when thoughts can sneak up on you. You're doing a hell of a job there, I've watched her start to dream and your arm somehow comes around her to hold her. You're connected to the girl more firmly than you might think.”

“I do sometimes catch what she's saying, without her actually speaking, if she directs it at me.”

Bogart looked hard at Ben, “are you sure you don't have any spirit beings in your ancestry?”

“Not that I'm aware of, just this timeless hole in my gut the Dryad put there.”

“Interesting, well she's getting restless, reaching around for you, best get back to bed, Ben. Be careful of her, she's ten inches of hardened steel around a soft core.”

“Aren't we all.”

Bogart smiled and waved toward the bedroom.

Goodbye to Wilmer

Ben went back to bed, trying not to wake Cleo. She shuffled across to him and banged his chest a couple of times with her head, then she made a purring noise and fell back to sleep. It made Ben feel like crying. He put his arms around her and gently hugged her. Cleo wiggled closer, even if there was no more space between them.

Ben went to sleep, wondering if she was going to dream about what was stuck in her head. What had happened when she was a child.

Bogart whispered somewhere in Ben's dream, “She's dreaming

about you, how she feels safe and protected with you, how she would do anything to protect you. Basically it's your typical, fighting hoards of Kappa, back to back, dream.”

Ben grinned and said, “Get out of my dream old man.” Instead, he found himself dreaming the same thing, the fight in Banff. Not only that, he felt what Cleo was feeling, and he knew that he felt exactly the same.

How often do you find a mate who will literally fight back to back with you, one you know will go down fighting with you. Ben knew that if they ever split up, it wouldn't be him doing the leaving. He caught the same echo from Cleo and the two of them were suddenly in a canoe on a calm lake, out of reach of the blackflies and mosquitoes, getting ready to see if they were Canadian or not.

You know, the one about making love in a canoe.

“Pervert,” said Ben, just in case Bogart was still around.

“Mrmph... mmmm,” said Cleo as they answered the question.

Next day, the two were up early, both feeling good. Bogart had worked his magic, Ben figured. The Shaman was awake and had produced another massive breakfast.

“You eat like this every day?” said Cleo.

“A bit of gravelly granola and a cup of coffee, usually, but when I've got company I like to send them off bloated. Big

food baby.”

Cleo grinned and started eating. Ben looked at Bogart and raised an eyebrow. Bogart shook his head and said, “You might put me out of a job, son.”

Ben smiled, “Well thanks for the talk, I feel better today.”

Bogart nodded and pushed the bacon toward him.

Cleo looked up from her pancakes, “Bogart. You're Bogart. I'm not having any trouble remembering who you are today.” She looked around as if surprised to recognize the cabin.

Bogart nodded, “When you forget me, come on back for a visit.”

Cleo frowned, that made little sense to her, but Ben grinned with his head down as he sliced up an egg.

As they left, Ben took another close look at the totem pole. There was Eagle, Beaver, and.... Ben started laughing. “May a great bird crap stones on your tepee so often it looks like a beaver lodge?”

“You sure you don't have any spirit being in you?” said Bogart as he walked them to the canoe.

“I've got leftovers, just leave the canoe in Wilmer, someone will bring it to me when they come visit. You guys have a good time in Canmore, and get rid of that witch for me, will you.”

“We haven't said we're going to Canmore.”

“Yeah, no problems, off you go before the flood.”

Cleo hopped in and grabbed a paddle, in no time at all they were back at their Jeep.

“Should we return this to the office in Invermere?”

Cleo shook her head, “Ah, hell, let's return it to the Three Sisters and hop the train from there.”

“We're going to Canmore, aren't we?”

“I have a feeling I owe Bogart, and I know I should do a favour for Beels, he's a good friend of a good friend. Have you ever met Kitsune?”

“I've seen her in the St. George, she and her boyfriend have a top floor apartment.”

“That's the one, OK lie back and sleep, I'll drive us to Canmore, you must be tired after all that sex in a canoe last night.”

Ben wasn't sure how to take that, so he just closed his eyes and went to sleep.

When he woke up, they were driving into Canmore. Traffic was slow, the tourists were looking for something, fun maybe, enlightenment perhaps.

They drove directly to the parking lot near the Book Cafe and walked to it, but not before they had poked through a jewellery store or two, looking for something for Cleo. “It's just the usual stuff I can get anywhere, where's the local craftwork?”

“Wrong crowd? There's a lot of money floating around this town, probably why Margarita is here. I'm going to buy you these earrings, they are so gaudy it's a shame not to.”

Cleo laughed as he paid for them, “Well let's go then, first the witch, then lunch.”

As they got close to the shop, the crowds seemed to thin out, the flow of tourists seemed to be taking a small detour around the entrance. Ben and Cleo could see no reason for this, so they walked straight in, not knowing if they would be dropped into an ocean or a volcano this time.

The place was empty, except for one customer and Margarita. The witch looked up and said, “I'll be with you in a moment,” as if she didn't recognize them.

The customer was a child, no, just a small woman who was talking quietly to Margarita. Ben and Cleo drifted closer, and Ben fingered the stone in his pocket, the one that would let Beels locate and then relocate Margarita. The idea of holding her down and forcing the stone into her mouth wasn't really appealing to Ben.

“It's a very nice business, congratulations on your hard work building it up, Margarita,” said the woman, who Cleo had recognized as Kitsune, the friend they had just been discussing.

“Well thank you, it has been a long hard road, and I've had to put quite a bit of extra money into it to keep it going.”

“I'll bet. Books to tourists is a hard sell.”

“Oh the books just break even, it's the lotions and potions that make the money.”

“I can see where they would, this one, will it truly cure dementia?”

“Oh yes, eventually.”

“Still, it's not an easy life, being a shopkeeper.”

“Shopkeeper?” Margarita hadn't considered that she was a shopkeeper now. She was above that sort of common work. Just what had Boots got her into. Where was Boots, there was another rent payment coming due and she needed some extra cash to pay it.

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” said Kit, “I meant to say proprietress, not a common shopkeeper. I'll bet your family was very proud of you when they found that you'd built such a lovely business.”

“Family?” Margarita hadn't thought of the Master for a couple of years. Her dear, talented author, brilliant writer, and the man worth abandoning her husband for. Why hadn't she thought of him? Just what had Boots talked her into this time?

“Yes, haven't you told your family about your great success?”

What great success, thought Margarita, I barely get by from rent payment to rent payment. I sell fake potions and cheap lotions and maybe a deck of tarot cards a week. A few books go out the door each month. What is this?

“Of course, the big money in a successful business like this is to build it up and then sell it. That's when you realize the profits of your hard work isn't it?”

“It is? Perhaps I should consider selling it.” Margarita seemed to be thinking of these things for the first time. Where was that cat, he always explained things so clearly.

Kit looked over at Ben and Cleo, “Why I bet these two venture capitalists would love to own a business in Canmore.”

Ben caught up fast as he finally recognized Kit, “Absolutely. Why we would jump at the chance to own such an establishment.”

Kit nodded and said, “I'll bet they have payment enough in his pocket right now, they're so rich.”

“Indeed, here in my hand, I have a shiny black stone that, if placed in your mouth, will instantly take you back to the one you love.”

Margarita stared at the stone as if it was a giant diamond. She missed the Master, she even missed the devil who had taken her and the Master to Hell to live with him. But she was

nothing if not quick-witted. “But what about my cat, Boots, I would also like to see that he has got what he deserves.”

“Oh, that's already taken care of,” said Cleo.

“Really? He's being punished for his mistreatment of me?”

“As we speak.”

“Well then, if you would like to buy this magnificent business, I will need just one further premium on the deal.”

Cleo brought out the earrings they had bought at the jewellers, “We thought you would be a hard bargainer, I will throw in these magnificent earrings, bought for me by my partner here, but to have the chance to run this lovely shop, I will offer them to you.”

Margarita's eyes grew wide, “They are truly magnificent, I hate to part with this shop, but you seem to be lovely people. We have a deal.”

Ben handed over the stone and Cleo the earrings. Kit was smiling and said to Margarita, “All you have to do to complete the deal is to put the stone in your mouth and you will be taken to the one you love most in the world.”

“You are so kind, I look forward to seeing him.” With that, Margarita, clutching the earrings in one hand, put the stone in her mouth and vanished.

Lunch With Kit

“Poor woman, she is a bit unhinged by all the nonsense Beels and Behemoth put her through, but she'll be happy when she gets back to her writer,” sighed Kit.

Ben frowned, “In Hell?”

“Oh yes, Beels is quite a sentimental type, underneath all that fire and brimstone, he can't resist a good love story. Behemoth, on the other hand, loves to give Beels a hard time when he can.”

Cleo smiled, “Well, I guess she's back where she should be. Thanks for the help Kit, I figured we'd be fired into orbit or some such.”

“Yes, Beels was a bit worried and asked me to lend a hand. Glad to have been helpful. This is my first time in Canmore, it's beautiful. I'll have to store up some memories for Dave to paint.”

“Good idea, the mountains are wonderful, and they change every hour or so. Now, I wonder who is going to run this place, or if it's going to go up for sale for back rent.”

“Oh, I heard someone named Bogart, was the owner, I think he's got some new managers for the place all lined up, three lovely young women.”

“Bogart. Why doesn't that surprise me? Well now we know why he wanted the witch out, he's looking for a place to put his

girlfriends.”

Ben was grinning, “Good for him.” Which earned him a frown from Cleo.

“We were just heading for some lunch, would you like to come along, Kit?”

“For sure, look a mountain,” Kit was pointing, and then turned, “look, another mountain.”

Ben and Cleo looked at each other, it might be a long walk to the restaurant.

Once more they settled into the Canmore Hotel, yes they were eating at the same place, it was worth the stories they could tell Kit. She appreciated the old photos of the trains and the miners, listening intently to the history of the place.

“I always had the impression that this town was just a ski area for the technocrats from Calgary.”

“Oh, long before the oil boom there were a lot of hard-scrabble types who made money the hard way. Not so many of them here any more, a lot of them sold their land and moved away to places where they didn't have to see a mountain everywhere they looked.”

“But Cleo, how could that be, the mountains are so pretty.”

“Well I suppose to them it was like seeing your workplace no matter where you looked. Impossible to get away from the reminder.”

Kit grinned, “Well I think they're wonderful, I'd like to get Dave out here but he's so attached to his studio.”

“He works a lot?”

“Oh yes, constantly. You know, I felt quite a lot of sympathy for Margarita, she has her writing master and I have my painting master. Of course I never call him master, it sounds so wrong these days.”

“You believe in him do you?”

“Absolutely, I model for him, I sell his work, Beels is his European agent, which is why I felt I should do a favour for him. I feed Dave, pick up after him, make sure he's got no distractions.”

“Don't you ever get annoyed doing all the work?”

“Sure I do, we have some great fights, but he looks so much like a kicked puppy I end up taking him to bed and doing the work myself later. He really is a nice guy and would do all the housework himself if I let him, but why should he be wasting time doing things I can do?”

“What about your own work, don't you need time for that?”

“I'm mostly composing, which I can do in my head while

washing dishes or sweeping, and I teach violin, so that's a set time of the day Dave doesn't expect to see me. If he gets hungry during that time, he makes himself some food. He's not helpless, but I like to see him painting. If something needs doing and I can do it, why take him away from his painting?"

"You really are a muse aren't you Kit?"

"You know, I've been called that before, I guess I am, I believe in Dave and I push his work forward, but he's just as much a muse to me. Most of my best compositions are about him. We're a team I guess. Just because I consider him a master, I don't take the role of a slave."

"But you can do magic, why not just have a self-cleaning house?"

"Because it creates the wrong mental attitude I guess. I mean in Guelph there's people who live in walking distance of work. Once in a while they drive, then they drive all the time, then they have three or four cars for the household because they can't wait for someone to come home with the car.

"All that makes it super expensive to live, all those cars to repair. They're working more and more, having less and less time to drive others around, and so this time-saver sucks up all of their time. I mean, if they'd just walk to work they'd be a lot happier. I sure would, I can compose while walking but not while driving a car through town."

Ben was thinking, "I never looked at it that way, time saving devices ending up being time-sucking devices. You seem happy

with your relationship, Kit.”

“More like ecstatic, I knew him early, then he want to Paris, and when I met him again I fell head over heels for him. Didn't know it for a while after that, but it was true. There's no doubt in my mind that he's the one for me.”

Cleo and Ben looked at each other and Kit smiled at what she saw there. Just then the burgers arrived and they were as good as promised. Kit had a mouthful, swallowed and said, “If I ate like this every day I'd have to walk to work or I'd be dead in a decade.”

The other two nodded and kept eating. When they had finished lunch and wandered around the town to give it a chance to settle, Cleo offered, “We're heading back to Guelph by train from the Three Sisters, do you want to come along with us?”

“Thanks, but Dave ought to be ready for another coffee about now, I'll just pop back. Can I take you two?”

“Thanks, but no, we have some things to process along the way, we need a few more hours just the two of us.”

Kit smiled again as she looked at them, she nodded, “Well say hello to Ken for me, he's in the Three Sisters at the moment, been spending a lot of time there.”

“We will, Kit, you take good care,” said Cleo as she hugged her. Kit stepped back, winked at Cleo turned her eyes toward Ben, and half waved to him as she disappeared.

“She sees a lot more than you'd think she does,” remarked Cleo as she and Ben turned toward the jeep.

“What, you mean like she sees we're becoming a serious couple?”

Cleo looked shocked, “Are you sure you don't have any spirit beings in your family?”

“Don't need special powers to know I'm falling for you, beautiful.”

Cleo jumped up into his arms for a kiss.

Toward Guelph

The jeep started nicely this time, and they drove through town to the 742 and ducked behind the Three Sisters. In no time at all they had returned the jeep and were in Ken Kobold's office.

“So now we're working for Kit's Devil are we?” Ken began.

Cleo held up a hand, “You said we were on vacation, Ken, so what we did isn't your concern is it?”

Ken grumbled a bit and admitted that it wasn't, “But I told you, you'd find some trouble to get into.”

“It wasn't much, Ken, relax, we had a good time.”

“Not much? You prevented a war between Canada and the USA.”

“Ben threw a rock.”

“So you don't want this bonus I was going to give you then?”

“Bonus? Oh, speaking of which, the Paradise Mine is still producing silver should you feel the need for more financing.”

“I'll keep it in mind, meantime, I'll put your bonus and active duty money into your accounts. Trust you two to cost me extra while you're on vacation.”

“We really did intend to take a break, Ken, things just happened. A whole bunch of things, sort of like life I guess.”

“I suppose you two want more time off since you really weren't off.”

“You have work for us Ken?”

“Surprisingly, no. The Giants are under control, as are the Kappa. I can let you two have some more time, maybe you'll stay out of trouble for a week or two.”

“Maybe. How's Sam doing?”

“Apparently good, are you going to visit her?”

“Thought about it.”

“Good, it might be a good idea to do so, she's got a bit of a story to tell you.”

Ben had been quiet, but that worried him, “Sam is OK though?”

“Yeah, yeah, fine. Just a story.”

Ben wasn't so sure there was such a thing as 'just a story', but they'd see soon enough, “By the way, do you know a Shaman named Bogart out in BC, Ken?”

“Sure, old friend of the firm. Likes money enough that we call him an honorary Kobold, but a good fellow otherwise. You run into him?”

“You know we did, Ken, especially if he's working with or for you.”

Ken grinned, he had received daily reports on what happened, “I'll have to have a chat with Beels the next time he comes in to the Keller for a beer. Now you two get on that train, it's waiting for you and if it doesn't leave in five, there will be an accident.”

Cleo and Ben grabbed their bags and headed for the station. Nice of Ken to hold the train for them, they thought. But on second thought, was there some plan? Wheels within wheels, best not to think about it too much.

As they settled into their seats, Ben commented, “Your boss

sure seems to be connected to everyone.”

“Every time I go out on a job I find people who know him, he's a connection machine.”

“Seems like it's better to work for him than against.”

“Probably is, I wouldn't want to go up against him. Listen, Ben, forget about Ken for a while, I want to talk to you about something.”

“I'm all ears.”

“Well I don't mind, they're nicely shaped, but listen, we like each other don't we?”

“I like you, certainly.”

“And we're going toward something together right?”

“More than just being business partners and bed mates and friends you mean?”

“Cripes, Ben, yes, you know what I mean, I'm not so good at this kind of conversation.”

“Cleo would you like to move in with me?”

“Is that where this is going? I'm not very good at this relationship stuff, is that the next step?”

“I don't know. I'm not much better at this, I told you I was

married with two kids and they disappeared, am I good at relationships? Look, why don't we just do what seems to be the thing to do next. We spend most of our time together anyway, move in with me and we'll take it from there."

"OK but just one thing, you should move in with me."

"Cleo, neither of us have a place, we're always out and working somewhere new. Why don't we move in with Sam."

"Great idea! She's going to love it."

That settled, the two of them leaned back in their chairs and closed their eyes. With any luck they'd be back in Guelph when they woke up.

When they woke, they were not in Guelph. The train had stopped and the windows showed nothing but blackness outside. Not surprising, they were travelling in a tunnel, still, the stations were lighted so they were not in a station.

Cleo triggered the communication system but it seemed that they were cut off from Ken or anyone else, including the rest of the train. There was nobody there.

"I suppose we'd better go look," whispered Cleo.

"Why are you whispering," answered Ben.

"I'm not sure, if there's nobody here, why is there nobody here? Is there somebody here?"

"My head hurts when you put things like that."

"Just grab a weapon and let's go."

Ben had a knife in his boot, he grabbed a cane and Cleo took a sword from her pack.

'A sword? That's my weapon,' thought Ben.

"Cleo, are you asleep?"

"Sure I am, aren't you?"

"Probably, so we're dreaming together?"

"Ouch, are we going to spend our dream time together as well as our domestic time and our work time?"

"Do you mind?"

"Actually, no, I don't. Still, are all our dreams together going to be this boring?"

"Since we seem to be aware that we're dreaming, how about that vacation on the beach?"

"Great idea, Big Beach at Port Stanley, meet you there, I've got a thirst for an Orangeade."

“Nice, sun, sand, warm water, sailboats, seagulls, this is good.”

“Even better here on the blanket with you Ben. Not only that but the place seems deserted, come on over here I've got something to show you.”

“I've seen them, but you know, beautiful things are always worth seeing again.”

“Just get those shorts off.”

The train rolled on toward Guelph, the sound of its passage bouncing off the walls sounding just like waves hitting the beach.

A Visit with Sam

The two made love, then walked into the water for a swim. Cleo was impressed, “This is warm, I expected cold water from a lake I can't see across.”

“It's hellish shallow, in storms the waves whip up really fast and they can snap a freighter in half. There's a lot of dead boats at the bottom of that pond.”

The two of them dove under and looked for wrecks but found

nothing but sand. After a while they got back out and found their blanket, it seemed a bit narrow so Ben rolled on top of Cleo and they made love again. It turned out Cleo had a bit of a surprise for Ben, one he hadn't seen before.

Ben rolled over on his back and sighed, "Never a dull moment with you, Cleo."

She rolled toward him, "Right back at you. Now who is that?"

In the distance, walking out of the late afternoon sun, was a figure. It was coming toward them but took a long time to approach, as if the beach was twice as long as usual.

Cleo half stood and yelled, "Hello."

The figure seemed to notice them for the first time. It waved back and kept approaching.

"Should we get dressed?" asked Ben.

"It's a dream, the hell with it, let them see."

"Lots to see, babe."

"Shut up and slide your boot a bit closer, just in case."

"But it's a dream right?"

Cleo gave Ben 'the look' and he used his foot to drag his boot with the knife a little bit closer to his hand.

The figure had come close enough to see that it was a woman, and soon Cleo leapt up shouting, “Sam, it’s Sam.”

With that, Cleo was running down the beach, followed closely by Ben. In three steps they were on her, Sam was buried in hugs and kisses as the three of them fell to the sand.

As it happened, Sam was naked too, and the three of them lost no time seeing how much sand they could get in the various places you get sand when making love on a beach.

You know those places don't you?

When they had finished saying hello, Cleo sat back and looked closely at Sam, “Not that I’m not delighted, sweetheart, but what are you doing here in our dream.”

“You shouted, so I came. That’s been happening to me a lot these days.”

“Us calling you?”

“No, no, it’s that alarm clock I have, in the morning I wake up to seagulls and waves. A week or two ago I heard a voice in all that noise, and I answered. I’ve been bouncing from beach to beach every morning since, meeting various people. The first was my teacher, then I met Morris, several of my other lovers and now you two. I have no idea what’s going on but I find sand in my bed when I wake up, sometimes seaweed or driftwood chips.”

“Is this fox dreams do you think?”

“No, the fox hasn't been in my dreams for a while, I honestly haven't a clue what's going on.”

“And just lovers?”

“No, I never slept with my teacher, and he was the first, but there have been others.”

“Do you make love each time?”

“To my old lovers, yes, but not to the strangers.”

“And you don't have any idea how this is happening?”

“Not at all, but how are you here? You're not just part of my dream, like the others were, I can feel that you're really here with me.”

“Not to sound like I'm being competitive, but we were here first Sam. You walked from the far end of the beach but we saw you after quite a while.”

“I only walked a few steps, Cleo, you shouted and I answered, I only walked a few steps.”

“So you arrived when you waved, interesting. I wonder who was walking toward us before that?”

“I don't... Oh, I'm waking up, give me something to hold so I know this one is real.”

Ben flipped his knife so that it landed at Sam's feet and she scooped it up just as she disappeared.

“Any idea what's happening Ben?”

“Well it wasn't too surprising that we dreamed together, but Sam? I haven't a clue.”

“When we get back to Guelph we'll have to ask around, somebody ought to have an idea.”

“Do you think we should have asked Sam if we could move in with her?”

“What, so she would spend two days cleaning up a clean apartment? No, we'll ask when we get there, harder to say no in person.”

“You think she will want to say no?”

“Not for a moment.”

Ben grinned, “Should we get dressed and back on the train?”

“This really is an actual place, isn't it? This is so weird, let's get dressed and grab an handful of sand so we know it was real”

Ben and Cleo got dressed, Ben put sand in one of his pockets and they opened their eyes in the train. It was just pulling into the Winnipeg station. Sam checked his pocket and it was full of sand. He checked his boot and the knife was gone.

Cleo had been watching and nodded, putting her finger to her lips. No sense letting anyone listening, know what was going on.

The rest of the trip was uneventful, they drifted into Guelph and walked up to the Bar where Sam had opened and was on duty as usual. The three flew into each other's arms, much to the amusement of the few students who were in the place early to stay late. Mid-terms hadn't started yet so they were burning off their loan money as quick as possible.

Sam stepped back from the hugs and said, "It was so weird to see you two..."

Cleo kissed her hard and then whispered in her ear, "Talk later."

Sam nodded and then said, plenty loud enough for the students to hear, "So do you two have a place to stay? I've got a nice apartment with a great big bed."

A couple of the boys fell off their chairs, even though they were on their first beers.

Cleo glanced at Ben and grinned, "Done lover, thanks so much."

"Wonderful, I had a spare key made up for you both, just a minute and I'll get them, and you two can go settle in. I'll be back later today, we've got staff to cover the evening so I'll see you for supper."

Cleo looked at Ben again, then asked Sam, “What would you like Ben to cook for you?”

Home for Supper

“Grilled cheese, thanks Ben, it’s my comfort food.”

Cleo rolled her eyes, Ben was a good cook but Sam loved grilled cheese and Ben was good at it. He cooked it just like she liked it. Well no wonder Sam was such a cheap date.

“Very glad you like it, would you like another?”

“Maybe?”

Cleo grinned, with these two she felt as comfortable as Sam’s sandwich. She hadn’t been as attracted to anyone in a very long time. It was such a wonderful decision to pick the boy up along the road.

After supper, the three cracked a quart beer and poured for each other, fetching another from the fridge as soon as it was poured. No, they weren’t Sam’s, Ben had picked them up on the way home.

“Home,” he thought, “What a nice feeling.”

They settled in for some serious sitting-together time, shoulder

to shoulder, sipping their beer and not worrying about the next several hours. They would happen.

“Tell us about the dreams, Sam.”

“I’m confused as hell about them, your knife is on the coffee table beside your boot, Ben, so we can be sure we were all on that beach. I wondered if it was Morris’ alarm clock that was doing it. I took it to Megan to look at, Kit too, but they said it’s just a clock, it lights up and then plays waves and seagulls.”

“I know that type, but the waves are ocean waves and we were on Big Beach in Port Stanley,” said Ben

“Were we? I’ve never been there, just figured it was a generic beach.”

“I’m hurt, it’s the best beach in Ontario, a real hidden treasure.”

Sam smiled, Ben wasn’t very well rooted in his original stomping grounds, but he was hella proud of it.

“Sam is it the same beach every time?”

“No, there are lots of them, none that I recognize, of course I would know Bag Beach again in an instant.”

“Big Beach,” mumbled Ben.

Cleo picked it up, “What about people? Your old and present lovers make sense, but who are the strangers?”

“Well they tell me their names, but I don’t know them. They’re just folks.”

“OK let’s go over this with some sort of system. Your first was your teacher?”

“Yes. No, that’s not true, I was mixed up, the first was Morris. I was so lonely for him and I heard him call. I answered and we were on a beach somewhere.”

Ben spoke up, “If it’s not the clock, could it be a malignant creature? I read in Terry Pratchett’s books about Dromes, creatures who live on dreams or some such. Could it be something like that?”

“We’d have to be able to look outside a dream we’re already in. Tricky to do,” Cleo said.

“I can see that might be a problem. What about one person punching the other to wake them up.”

“Pinch, Ben, you pinch someone to wake them up, not punch them.”

“Tell that to my first girlfriend.”

Cleo looked sideways at him and asked Sam, “Was there anything there that felt like it was controlling you? Or taking something from you?”

“More like giving something to me, I mean it was so wonderful to have Morris with me again.”

“Dauphine? Could she have been giving you time with Morris?”

“It didn’t feel like it, more like we were connecting in a dream.”

“What about the others, your teacher?”

“He was practising, I guess he even works out in his dreams. I think he was just shouting a kiai rather than calling to me, but I heard it and answered. We practised together and he showed me some new moves.”

“Were they things you’d learned since he died?”

“No, they were new to me, like he had worked them out since then. Look, this is getting spooky, was he feeding me new techniques from beyond the grave?”

“Easy girl. We know that Hell exists, and that people are there after death. Nothing supernatural about it.”

“I suppose he could be there. He could be a real bastard sometimes.”

“Sam we have no evidence that there’s anyplace else to go after you die, but we’ve met Beels, so we know Hell exists. Who else have you met?”

“Old lovers, just ‘hello, how is it going, nice to see you,’ some of them I screwed on the beach, some not.”

“Wet dreams maybe?”

“I don’t think so, more like I dropped in on them, they weren’t thinking about me. One of them was painting, gave me the canvas, it’s on the wall over there.”

“Nice, a beach scene and, oh, that’s you cavorting naked in the water.”

“Yes, he said he always wanted to paint me but was scared to ask.”

“High school?”

“Yep. He was a sweetheart, I just drifted away from him one year.”

“I can’t see anyone getting any advantage out of those encounters, they were friendly?”

“Sure, all of them. ‘Good to see you’ things. Unless there’s some creature that lives on kindness...”

“I suppose that’s every one of us, really. What about the strangers?”

Ben took the two empties and got another quart out of the fridge and topped up their glasses while Sam talked. He noticed a driftwood lamp in the kitchen.

“That lamp doesn’t look like something you would buy, Sam,

was that another gift from an old lover?”

“From an old fellow who collected driftwood and made lamps. He has a few in the trunk of his car and gave me one after we’d talked for a while. Almost a whole day actually, I helped him find driftwood and cut it off, he used the roots mainly.”

Cleo brightened, “A day, do you ever spend more than a day there?”

“No, time seems different there, never more than the same day, but I’ve checked and sometimes I fall asleep and wake again in an hour while it’s been half a day there.”

“OK this is curiouser and curiouser as Alice said.”

“Alice?”

“Somebody in a book, don’t distract me Ben.”

“Sorry.”

“Ben how about some snacks, the sandwich was nice but I’m hungry again.”

Ben refrained from saying that Cleo was always hungry, she had the metabolism of a steam engine. Instead he went to make cheesy toast and garlic bread.

They talked for another two quarts of beer and then went to bed where they had their usual enthusiastic reunion rituals before falling asleep.

Another Beach

In the morning, half awake, Cleo heard what Sam heard, someone shouting while the waves were rolling in. She grabbed the hand that was next to her and answered.

She and Sam were on a beach, so it was Sam beside her.

Cleo had a good look around. She shivered, “I remember this place, it's up north, way up north. This one seems to be my dream, if that's what these are.”

“First time I've wished I didn't show up naked, it's cold.”

“You show up naked all the time?”

“Yeah, I sleep naked, as you know.”

“And Ben and I showed up with clothes because we were sleeping on the train. Interesting.”

“Not if we freeze to death, let's get out of the wind at least, there's a cave over there.”

“Damn, I'd forgotten about the cave, don't be alarmed by what might be in there.”

Sam looked at Cleo but said nothing. She'd find out what was

there soon enough.

As they walked, Ben came around the corner of a cliff. “What's the idea going along without me? I woke up and you two were freezing and unresponsive so I figured you'd gone somewhere.”

“You brought blankets.”

“Sure, I covered the two of you good, grabbed hold of an extra couple of blankets and then grabbed Sam's hand, here I am.”

Sam took one of the blankets with a nod of thanks but Cleo said, “Keep it for yourself, Ben, I can stand a lot more cold than you can.”

Ben shrugged, “If you say so, I believe you.”

They reached the cave mouth and heard tremendous snores from inside. They went in cautiously, Ben and Cleo leading Sam by the hands, it was dark. They didn't go too far when they found the source of the noise, a massive brown bear. As they approached, it stirred and woke up. “Hello Urzu,” said Cleo.

“Cleo! How long has it been.”

“Fifty years or so, at least. Have you been sleeping since then?”

“Must have been, nothing to do here since you left. You OK? I didn't think you'd ever come back.”

“What do you see?” said Sam to Ben in a whisper.

Urzu answered, “Oh, sorry, 'light', is that better?”

Sam saw Urzu and was amazed at the size of him. He was the biggest bear she'd ever seen.

“Not a bear, my dear, I'm a Shaman, a shape-shifter. My totem is Bear so here I am.”

“You can hear my thoughts?”

“Sure, and I see now that this isn't the real world, what's happening Cleo?”

“We aren't sure, this is Ben and Sam by the way, and this stinky fellow is Urzu.”

“Stinky? I've been asleep for a long time, I suppose I must be, let me change.”

Urzu sort of shimmered and before them was a giant of a man, at least seven feet tall and massively built. He still looked a lot like a bear, but he smelled better.

Cleo turned to Ben and Sam, “I should explain, this has to be my dream. Urzu and I spent a few years here on this beach, he had been trapped here by a rival magic user when I found him, we tried for a long time to free him but eventually I abandoned him.”

“You did no such thing, Cleo, I begged you to go and get on

with your life, you would have stayed if I hadn't kicked your beautiful ass out. You weren't trapped, I am.”

Ben looked at Urzu, “And you have been here alone for over 50 years?”

“Sure, two or three hundred before that, before Cleo here found me and decided to help me get out.”

“How?”

“Oh my rival is a nasty person, I stay nourished, I just can't leave. Fortunately, as a Bear I can hibernate as long as I want. It's not bad, I walk about in my dreams.”

“I didn't forget you, Urzu,” said Cleo.

“I know love, I know, you're in my dreams, and I seem to be in yours.”

Sam had been thinking, “Urzu, are you causing these half-real dreams?”

“Good question, not as far as I know.”

Ben spoke up in a rushed voice, “We're waking, everyone grab hold of Urzu, maybe we can get him back with us.”

Cleo and Sam acted instantly and hugged themselves to Urzu tightly. An instant later all four were on Sam's bed, which collapsed under the extra weight.

“Holy merde, it worked!” said Urzu, “Sorry about your bed.”

“Beds are easy, friends are more important,” said Sam, looking at Cleo who was crying.

Urzu gathered Cleo into a massive hug that would have broken lesser spines, “Peace, love, it’s all good. Am I really here or still in my cave I wonder, or both places.”

Sam was thoughtful, “Joe Bear is in town, we could ask him.”

Urzu turned to her, “No, Joe is with Jane now, he’s out of the business, he’d have to become Bear spirit again to answer. Leave him be.”

“Well Megan then, or Ingrid.”

“It doesn’t matter, child, I am content to be out and around in the warmth again, I’ll say thank you and be on my way.”

Cleo looked shocked, “Surely you’ll stay with us.”

“I can see you have those who love you here, Cleo, this is all I ever wanted for you, we had our time and now it’s over. I love you still, make no mistake, but you have found what I wanted for you. My place is elsewhere, like someplace with my foot up the ass of the jerk who trapped me.”

Cleo was shocked, “I love you too, Urzu, I just got you back, how can you leave?”

“Shamans are solitary beings, my girl, let me go now as I let

you go. And you two, take care of her, this one is special.”

With not another word, Urzu stalked out of the room and out of the apartment. Sam could have sworn the floor shook with each step. Whoever his rival was, she felt a bit sorry for him.

Cleo was crying again. Sam gathered her into her arms and Ben, with a nod from Sam, went out to start breakfast. Once it was cooking, he called Lorraine to ask what she knew of these half-real dreams, but Lorraine refused to help. “Things are coming to a crisis here, Ben, I can't reveal myself to Sam yet, but call Kit, she can dream-walk too, although she doesn't know that yet.”

“Is she involved in the crisis?”

“Yes, as is her mate, Dave.”

“We'll muddle along for a while here and see what we come up with, I don't want to distract you. Do you know what it is?”

“No, I can't see the future, but it involves the George.”

“Alright, you'll call if you need me.”

“Absolutely, take care Ben.”

Ben scooped the scrambled eggs and sausage onto plates and added toast and butter. When he got back into the dining room Cleo was composed again. She was about to speak when Ben held up his hand, “I don't need you to tell me Cleo, I know you and I'm happy your lover is out of his trap.”

“You worked that out, Ben, and you didn't know know if I'd leave you for him.”

“Love isn't Pie, Cleo, you know that and so do I, it grows. I know you love me, and now I know you love Urzu, and you love Sam, and we love you.”

“Stop! Enough of your enlightened preaching, how about some more eggs?”

Sam was looking from one to the other, enjoying the show thoroughly.

After they'd filled their bellies, Ben told them he'd asked for help but was refused, “We're on our own for a while with this one. Is it something that we ought to seek help with elsewhere Cleo?”

“After what we did with Urzu, I think we ought to keep investigating, there's a difference between a boot knife and a giant bear.

“Well the nice thing is that we only have to deal with it once a day, and for the rest of this day I'll repair the bed.”

Sam smiled, “Don't bother, it was old and not valuable, just someplace to flop, we'll go find another one.”

“No we won't, I'll build you another one, I was a decent furniture-maker in one of my lives, and I have a friend with a shop.”

Cleo grinned, “I want to see this, I’ll help Ben and you get along to the Bar, Sam, you’ll have to open soon.”

“Oh damn, I forgot, OK you’ve got your keys, see you both later,” shouted Sam on the way out the door.

“What do you think, cedar?”

“After what just happened, that thing was Pine Ben. No we’ll make it from Oak. Now, who did you call?”

“It was Lorraine, she doesn’t want to reveal herself to Sam yet, she says there’s a crisis coming and we should call Kit, but she’s involved too, so maybe we work on this ourselves for a while.”

“Do they need help?”

“They’ll call if they do, you know that. In the meantime our mystery doesn’t seem too dangerous yet, although it could be. We know now, you can bring people back from wherever that place is.”

“What if someone is weakening the separation between dreams and the real world, Ben.”

“Let’s hope not, that is a truly chilling thought. You think Urzu will be all right?”

“Oh yeah, his rival was a woman he fell in love with, and he dropped his guard. She’s going to regret messing with him.”

“You think we ought to keep an eye on him?”

“Nah, he’ll get payback but he won’t actually kill her. Leave them to work it out between them.”

“Love sure is complicated.”

“No it’s not, Ben. Beds, now beds are complicated.”

Ben laughed and they headed out the door to his friend’s place.

A Chat in the Bar

It was early afternoon when Stan came into the bar and sat down. Sam was at the bar, they had a new girl on the floor.

Sam pulled a pint for Stan and then shouted “Kuri, Oki,” and flicked her head at the waitress who was watching in horror as the two of them were starting to turn into a wolf and a leopard.

“No fighting in the bar!” The last thing Sam wanted was another waitress chased out of the place by the strange customers.

The two looked sheepish and settled down. They were young and although they had known each other all their lives, they were still working out some of the rough spots in their

relationship.

Stan shook his head, “The boy's dad should have taught him better than that.”

Sam stared hard at him until Stan grinned and held up his empty glass, “Mea Culpa” he said. Stan was Oki's father, something that he hadn't admitted until Oki was half grown up.

As she dropped the glass in front of Stan, Sam folded herself onto a stool behind the bar. “Stan I've got a question, maybe a problem of my own.”

“You want me to call Megan?”

“Stan you're as much Nanabozo as Megan is.”

“Well I can listen, if it's too much for me I can call Megan.”

Stan deferred to Megan most of the time out of laziness, they had been together for a long time and she was known as the brains, Stan as the brawn, but Sam knew better. Stan had a good brain, himself.

“I've been going into some sort of semi-real dream world, Stan, one where I can bring back objects, and this morning we brought back a Shaman.”

“We? And which Shaman?”

“Sorry, Ben and Cleo are involved, they slipped into the place on their own and called me. Cleo went this morning and took

me with her, Ben came along later by grabbing my hand, and when we were waking we held onto Urzu, a big bear of a fellow who can turn into a bear.”

“I know Urzu, very powerful fellow, he disappeared quite a while ago.”

“He'd been trapped on a northern beach by some woman, Cleo found him about fifty years ago but couldn't free him so he sent her away.”

“I told him that woman was trouble, but he just wouldn't listen. He's out now?”

“Yeah and looking for her.”

“The idiot will probably end up back on that beach, he's mad in love with her.”

“So what do you think about the dreaming, Stan?”

“How did it start?”

“Morris' stupid clock that lights up and plays wave and Seagull sounds. I heard someone call and I answered. I was suddenly on a beach.”

“Who called, was it Morris?”

“Yes, and I thought maybe it was him doing it somehow through his clock, but I've been called by others, old lovers and strangers, and then Cleo and Ben slipped onto a beach by

themselves, from the train out west.”

“So whatever it is, it's getting less specific. Who else have you visited?”

“The second was my teacher, we practised and he showed me some new techniques.”

“What did Morris give you?”

“Um, a real good rogering?”

“Nothing concrete?”

“Bruises? But no, I came back covered in sand. One guy was an old boyfriend from high school, he painted me and gave me the canvas, it's on my wall.”

“More than old lovers you say?”

“There was an old man who gave me a lamp, a girl who gave me a sweater.”

“Tell me about her.”

“She called and I answered, I always answer and I'm there. She was sitting on the beach looking out at the water. She was crying, actually. I sat with her and asked what was wrong. She told me about her troubles, and she gave me the sweater to wear since I was naked. I didn't get it off in time to give it back before I woke up.”

“Her problem?”

“She had just pushed a boy away because he tried to kiss her. Turns out she had been abused as a child and she couldn't let anyone get close. I taught her a few self defence moves and she seemed a lot calmer. You know learning how to defend yourself, helps against the mental trauma damage?”

“I do. Do you help all the strangers?”

“Uh, let me think. Maybe I do, I don't do much, but yes, I guess I help them.”

“And the old lovers? Do they help you?”

“I guess so, just by being there they help me feel better, certainly.”

“Cleo went to Urzu and helped him. Are any of these things nightmares?”

“Well Urzu was pretty scary.”

“Scary isn't the same as evil, dear. Some folks think you're pretty scary.”

“I'm a bartender, I can cut them off, that's scary to some,” said Sam as she dropped another pint in front of Stan.

“OK I'll give you that, but these dreams don't seem to be with bad intent, at least not yet. Do any of those you've met seem to be capable of creating the dreams?”

“I don't know, Urzu seemed powerful but he was surprised to see us. Morris is with his Dryad in the tree now, maybe her?”

“You get on with her?”

“She said I could visit any time.”

“You get on with her, I've never heard of a Dryad inviting someone in unless they wanted to keep them. Maybe you should ask her.”

“I could call on Dau....”

“DON'T tell me her name, Sam. She told it to you?”

“Sure, I asked and she told me.”

“Sam be careful, never, ever betray her trust. You have a very powerful ally there.”

“Really? Well I could call on her after work. Stan do you have any idea what's going on?”

“Frankly, I don't, Sam. I'm a dreamwalker myself but I've never heard of dreams as real as yours. I'm going to talk with Megan, but I think this is something new. Have you tried not answering?”

“Yes, and I don't go anywhere.”

“Good, like I said, it doesn't seem to be ill-intentioned. As for

how Ben and Cleo ended up there, how close are you three?”

“They're living with me as of yesterday.”

“Did you call them into the dream-world?”

“No, they called me I think.”

“Lean over here and let me look,” said Stan, leaning forward. He looked at Sam's eyes for a long time and then leaned back, “Well it seems to centre on you. Keep looking, maybe who or whatever is causing it will show up.”

“OK thanks Stan, I appreciate it,” said Sam as she walked down the bar, wondering once again at the difference between his reputation and his analytical mind. He wasn't the fool he pretended to be.

After Sam had closed the bar, she walked down toward the river and stood in front of Dauphine's oak tree. Dauphine and Morris' tree, she reminded herself firmly. Should she knock?

Taking a deep breath, Sam pressed her hands against the bark and as it gave way, she walked through into the strange, twilight world of the tree.

Dauphine was there laughing, “You will never have to knock, Sister-wife, this tree is open to you always.”

Sam smiled, she had forgotten just how beautiful the Dryad was, outside and in. She stepped forward into an intense embrace. Only after they had stepped back did Sam notice Morris standing a bit to the side and behind Dauphine.

Suddenly shy, Sam hesitated and Dauphine laughed once more, she took Sam's hand and turned her toward Morris. "Should I introduce our husband, Sam?"

Sam stepped into a powerful embrace and was shocked at Morris' strength, before she could ask, he was kissing her, again to laughter from Dauphine.

When the 'introduction' had been made, Dauphine grew quiet, "You are here for more than a visit, Sam, what can we do?"

"For now, just let me look at the two of you, I have never seen such beauty. You are magnificent, I am stunned."

"Oh Sam, have you never seen your own inner beauty? Have you never understood how strong, how wondrous you are? Give me your hand and look through my eyes, my sister."

Sam suddenly saw herself as Dauphine saw her, she was every bit as beautiful as the Dryad, and she knew that the Dryad considered her the elder sister. Sam was overwhelmed and was crying as she was guided to a seat. It was only then that she noticed the tree, so bare the last time she saw it, was now complete with a house, barns and tilled fields. Morris saw her looking and said, "We have been busy, Sam, I'm so happy you are here to see it."

“Can I stay?”

“No my love, this is not your destiny, not yet. You have things to do, some of them concern your reasons for this visit. Shake your head and tell us what you need.”

Sam gathered herself together, she had never wanted to be anyplace as much as she wanted to stay here, but Morris was right, she had come for a reason. “Dauphine I came to ask if you have sent Morris to me in a dream.”

Morris seemed to be relieved at the question, he looked at Dauphine who said, “I did not, my love, but I would have happily done so. Morris told me of his dream of the beach where he met you, I thought it was just a dream, but I am pleased that it was as real as it was. Is it a problem?”

“No, of course not, but that half-real dream world seems to be spreading, and we are afraid that it will become a problem, not that I met Morris, but that beings can move between that world and this,” As she said this, Sam realized she knew more about the problem than she had thought.

“It isn't a dream, is it? It's another world that is poking into this one?”

“That would seem to be the case, you and Morris seem to have met in another world, one that looks like dreams. I will ask my kind and see what they know, but most of us are solitary creatures, not prone to dreams of others.”

“Thank you, sister, this seems to be something we must

understand, I appreciate your help.”

“Not at all, Sam.”

With that, and with many tender embraces, Sam left the tree.

“She may return forever one day, Morris, and I would welcome that.”

“Will she be very old?”

“You and I and the tree will have the years to give back to her.”

Morris smiled and Dauphine felt the love he had for both of them.

Bed and Breakfast

“Oh,” said Ben.

“What?”

“This is the same style bed that I made for my wife and I. I had forgotten.”

“It’s a lovely bed, but a bed is a bed, Ben, I wouldn’t read much into it.”

“Still, I think I would have preferred some other design.”

“You have never processed your family’s disappearance, have you love.”

“No I suppose not, just set it aside and went on with my life.”

“They would all three of them be grown up or old and moved on by now.”

“That doesn’t help Cleo.”

“No, but it’s true, you have no unfinished business there. Let the bed be our bed.”

“I promise not to break down over the bed, Cleo, but there’s obviously something deep in my head that is unresolved.”

“Could it be the unresolved stuff? Look, it’s a good style of bed, was then, is now, are you sure there’s something in your brain trying to worm its way out? Or is this just a coincidence?”

“Coincidence?”

“Not everything is related in a meaningful way to everything else, even if everything is related to everything. Yes, you made a bed the same style as you made for your wife, is there anything more to it?”

“It is a nice style isn’t it?”

“And your family?”

“I wonder if it was me. Did I do something wrong, did I have some sort of lack or failure to be a good husband and father?”

“And your wife? She was a simpleton? She had no independent life of her own?”

“You're really not helping Cleo.”

“Look, she left you, maybe you didn't give her something, but equally likely is that she found some other guy she preferred over you. Either way, she left you. You can beat yourself up for an eternity but you'll never know why, the answer is with her, not in your brain.”

“But shouldn't I have felt worse, that they left?”

“Did you feel good about it?”

“No, of course not, I was hurt and confused and angry and all sorts of other things.”

“And then you got over it and moved on.”

“Well, yes.”

“So keep moving on my friend, what else is there, it's not your fault that you aren't a gibbering pile of regret and sorrow.”

“You're not much of an enabler are you?”

“Oh shut up and finish putting the bed together so we can make an early breakfast for Sam, she's likely to be hungry and I'd like to think she'll need the calories with this new bed that you also got a great big mattress for.”

“I'm not keen on my feet hanging out the bottom of a bed.”

“Don't blame you, I like a bed I can wallow around in like a swimming pool myself. Sam's going to like it.”

“Speaking of, I was thinking that maybe it wasn't the clock but the bed that was making the dreams, we can test that in the morning.”

“You forget that we went there from the train, there's something else going on.”

No further along than they had been that morning, they got busy making eggs and bacon sandwiches for the late night snack. Cleo had two before Sam came walking in. High metabolism, she said.

Sam embraced her friends and sat to eat. While they did, she told them of her conversations with Stan and with Morris.

Ben was impressed, “You really went into an oak tree?”

“With permission, yes. Anyway, I realized that we're not dealing with dreams here, but with another world that seems to be bumping into or alongside our own. The experiences aren't dream-like, they're too logical, too organized.”

Cleo looked thoughtful, “That world is biting off chunks of this one? Is that what you mean? Is that why Urzu got there and we got him back?”

“I think so.”

“But why are we going there from dreams?”

“Not from dreams, from waking up or falling asleep, maybe we're somehow more able to move there during a transition state. Neither awake or asleep.”

“Still doesn't tell us what or who is causing it. Are you sure you aren't weakening the walls or whatever they are, by moving back and forth, Sam?”

“No I'm not sure at all. But you two went from the train.”

“We were heading back to you, Sam, you were on our minds, I think you are the key.”

“Can we take things to that world? Let's take some weapons and blow things up.”

Cleo gave Ben a disgusted look, “That's your contribution is it?”

Ben grinned, “I thought you'd be all for that one, how about a cell phone, see if we can video the place.”

“Better, let's try it and in the meantime, let's go from another angle. Who do we know that could do this?”

“Dreamwalkers you mean?”

“Maybe one of them can make worlds?”

“Not dreamwalkers, but maybe somebody like Beels, he made Hell.”

“Good point, can we call him and ask?”

A sudden puff of smoke and Beels was there, waving his hands back and forth, “That wasn't as dramatic as I thought it would be, sorry about that. Just to make it clear, whatever it was, it wasn't me.”

Sam opened a window and said, “We're looking at a bit of a problem, Beels, we think someone has made a world that is bumping up against ours, one that looks like, or is entered through dreams and memories.”

“That would take a tremendous amount of energy, making Hell just about killed my brother and I. Are you sure it's a whole world?”

“Well all we've seen so far are beaches.”

“That would be a lot easier. Sand, water, a few buildings or trees.”

“Who could do that?”

“Some Shamans, all the demons I know, quite a few people

could do it, actually.”

“How would we know who it is?”

“Any signatures on the place?”

“You're suggesting someone would sign a world?”

“No, no, but it might smell like the maker, or maybe a colour scheme.”

“Nothing we've noticed, you think you could come with us next time?”

“Ho, ho, ho, four of us in that big bed?”

Sam looked confused, “Big bed?” and she looked into the bedroom. “Holy cow, there's more bed than bedroom!”

Ben looked hurt, “You don't like it?”

“I love it, that's a real playground, but Beels, much as we like you...”

“Fine, but you don't mind if I keep the fantasy do you? In the meantime, just call my name as you go over and I'll be there.”

“Thanks, Beels, you're a real good egg.”

“No need to be insulting, I'm the evil one, remember.”

“Sorry, I meant a real bad egg.”

Ben was fanning the smoke out the window before the alarm went on, “Smells like it,” he muttered.

Beels in Bed

It didn't work, Cleo and Ben tried to move over to the world as they were falling asleep but it wasn't working and it was nearing dawn.

“Nothing to do but wait for the alarm I guess,” said Sam.

“I can't sleep, and if we do, who's going to remember to call Beels?”

“Oh Hell. Beels!”

Beels appeared, goat legs, hooves and his usual suave look on his face. He was naked and had a massive penis on display.

Sam sighed, “Seriously? If you rip my sheets I'm going to be very upset. Now, put us to sleep so we can wake up at the alarm.”

“Umm, did I miss the fun part?”

“Afraid so, maybe next time,” said Cleo, leering at his crotch as Ben laughed.

“I look forward to it, this really is a big bed, now everyone go to sleep,” Beels snapped his fingers.

The alarm rang, the seagulls sang and someone shouted.

Beels was not asleep, so he answered. The four of them were on a beach, as expected, what wasn't expected was that it was the small beach on Alex Island where Bogart the Shaman lived.

“Bogart! I might have known,” said Cleo.

“Let's not be hasty, I seem to smell the non-wine version of cat piss. I think this may be one of mine,” Beelzabub said with some anger.

“Behemoth! Get your furry ass here in front of me right now.”

“It's Boots now, master, if you don't mind.”

“That's what you're going to get if you don't start talking, and fast.”

Sam leaned over to Ben and said, “What's happening?”

“Ah, well we told you about the Shaman we met here in the Wilmer Valley, and about the cat and the witch? Well this is the Shaman's island and Beels seems to have lost hold of his cat again.”

“Ah, clear as mud I guess.”

“Behemoth, what have you done?”

“I was trying to please you master, and created a world just as you and your brother created Hell and all us demons.”

“You are a bad cat. Do you have any idea how dangerous that is? If you're not careful you will create interference waves and the adjacent worlds will cancel each other out.”

“What?”

“Stuff will get fucked up.”

“Oh, but master, it didn't get fucked up, it's fine.”

“It's nibbling, you idiot, it's biting into the real world. I want to know why it isn't worse than it is now.”

“Perhaps I can answer that,” said Bogart as he walked down to the beach.

“I knew it!” said Cleo.

“Hello dear, still remember me?”

“Oh yes, and I see you're involved in this scheme too.”

“Only to protect the real world, Cleo. All beaches everywhere are connected, you know that right? The sand talks to itself. Well I was down here on my beach when I felt this micro-world come into existence. I didn't know who created it, but I could warn someone, I sent a call to Sam, who I'd met in your

heads. You and Ben were awake so unavailable to me, but I could reach her. Unfortunately, she didn't come here, she met another man instead.”

“Morris, that's when I met Morris on the beach.”

“You would be Sam then, yes you met Morris, quite vigorously I might add.”

“Bogart...” Cleo warned.

“Right, right, I tried several more times but you never came here. Then I caught Ben and Cleo falling asleep and sent for them, but they went to you, Sam. It's taking almost all my strength to keep this world from growing too much so I don't have much control, but finally, someone came to the right place.”

“I've got no baggage, I guess. My name is Beels, yes I know it's silly but I sort of like it now, short, snappy.”

Sam muttered, “So now I'm baggage?”

“You'd be the devil then, judging by the hooves and the big tonker?” Bogart laid a consoling hand on Sam's arm.

“Oops, better?” Beels was dressed in his usual top hat and tails.

“I don't know, the other was a good look too.”

Cleo was grinning behind her hand.

“Look, not to disrupt the party or anything, but are you saying that I’ve got nothing to do with causing all this problem?” asked Sam.

“Not to cause it my dear, I’m afraid the problem has started with my associate here, and he will now fix it, won’t you Behemoth.”

“Uh, I can’t master, I’ve been here with Bogart and we’ve been trying to shut it down. Unfortunately it keeps nibbling into the real world faster than we can shut it down. I did a pretty good job,” Boots said proudly.

Beelzabub did boot him, far out into the lake. “Dolt, idiot, fool.”

“But he is rather cute, don’t you think,” said Bogart.

“He won’t be, once I skin him and use his pelt for a hat.”

Ben and Cleo wandered down to the water, reasoning that there was nothing they could do so they should do nothing.

Beels turned to Sam with a calculating look. “You seem to have some sort of connection with this world, Sam, would you mind if I work through you to see if I can fix this?”

“Will it hurt?”

“Probably.”

“Do it anyway.”

Beelzabub pinched her on the arm, hard. Sam jumped and said “ouch”.

“Damn, I thought that might work, but you didn't wake up.”

“Just how long have you been in the devil business, Beels? You thought pinching me would solve the problem?”

“Well no, not really, but I did promise it would hurt.”

“Oh my God, are all spirit beings idiots?”

“No call to insult me, I'm not a God dear, I'm a devil.”

“Well devil this world out of existence will you, and stop messing around.”

“All right, Boots, get over here.”

A dripping wet cat isn't a good look, even if that cat is a powerful devil, but he came. Beels picked him up by the scruff of the neck and pinched him hard on the paw. As he did that, the world started to fall away into nothing.

Bogart looked impressed, “Huh, I would never have thought to wake up the cat.”

And then all four of our heroes were back in Guelph in the big bed. Well five, the cat was still in Beels' hand, dripping water on the sheets.

“Right, you stupid cat, you're grounded for another thousand years, and you'd better not be escaping through any other micro worlds or I swear, you'll be a hat.”

Beels was back in hooves and Cleo was once again admiring his crotch. Ben nudged her hard.

“Sorry Cleo, no time to dilly dally, I need to get this sorry excuse for a devil back into his cat carrier in Hell. Maybe next time.”

Ben laughed as Beels disappeared in another cloud of sulphurous smoke. “There goes a real drama queen.”

Sam looked at the alarm clock, “We've got another couple hours until I have to go to work, anybody want to catch a nap?”

Ben and Cleo grinned, “Not a chance,” they said almost in unison as they pounced on Sam.

Sensei Stories

Over breakfast, Sam turned to Ben and asked, “What was it like to practise with our sensei?”

“You sure you want to discuss him Sam?”

“Yeah, I think I do, I've avoided thinking about him for a while

now, but with you two and Morris I've rejoined the living, I guess you could say. I'm curious what he was like when he was younger."

"Painful, in a word. He taught hard and didn't have a lot of patience, I guess he was learning too, so he was as hard on us as he was on himself. He never injured us, don't get me wrong, we did that ourselves, but he was careful."

"It never occurred to me that he was learning, for some reason."

"Oh, I suspect he was learning while he was teaching you, he always said that when you figure you know it all, you are dead. It's just that I could see him getting better every class."

"Did he teach at the University?"

"I heard he did later, but we were in a dance studio downtown. Got a lot of walk-in students, so he was always having to prove it worked, until some of us took over that job."

"I was at the University, we very rarely saw that sort of challenge."

"Well, even then he was pretty scary, I always thought he was bigger than me, until I saw him in the shower one day, I was a couple inches taller. It was just that he stalked, rather than walked. He just looked like someone you didn't want to mess with. Of course people tried anyway, usually kids who were practising the pre-MMA stuff."

“How did he handle them?”

“Honestly, if they wanted to wrestle he'd punch them, if they wanted to punch, he'd throw them. He just didn't fight the way they wanted to fight. Mostly though, he'd talk. It was rare that one of the challengers got as far as trying to fight him, he'd talk and they'd sort of melt back to normal and usually end up in the class.”

“What about you, you're huge, did you challenge him?”

“Never, not on purpose. One time we had one of his old buddies in for a seminar, the guy said, 'I see you're still beating up your students.' I thought that was sort of funny, we were all big guys, and young, so of course we went at it hard. He took care of us though. One evening at this seminar we ran out of regular booze and at about 4am we got into this bottle of 100% ethanol one of my roommates had put into the freezer. You had to keep it there or it would evaporate. Pour it into a shot glass and you could see it dropping before you threw it down. Nuts, alcohol poisoning stuff, but we drank it.

“The next morning I was a bit late for the class, and when I bowed in he waved at me to attack. I misunderstood and came flying in hard, swung at him even harder. He changed what he was going to do and threw me, but half way there he realized I was going to break my neck, I was upside down and dropping. He pulled me into himself and the two of us collapsed onto the mat together, he looked a bit silly and he was still drunk, like me. His arm was around my neck and he started to choke me, but instantly let up.

“It's funny, he impressed me more in that instant by saving my ass at the expense of looking foolish and clumsy, than any other time. That taught me a lot about being a kind human being.

“Of course, the very next technique, we reset and he drove me into the mat so hard my eyes leaked, I swear I wasn't crying, but tears just escaped. God that hurt.”

Sam was laughing, “Yep, he did that to me too, but the instant he let up it didn't hurt any more.”

“Weird, eh? I always wondered how he did that.”

“I was just happy when he stopped.”

“Sam, you obviously loved him, can I ask if you ever slept with him? If that's not too private that is.”

“Never. I wanted to, desperately, and would have jumped his bones instantly, but he never invited me. I could tell he loved me too, but he wasn't going to ruin our relationship for a roll in the hay. When he died I had a massive hole ripped into my chest and into my groin, I have to admit.”

“You're better now?”

“Let's just say that losing Morris is a lot more fresh, a lot more raw than losing sensei.”

“What would you do if you ever saw him again?”

“Ben, he's dead, I'll never see him again, but if I did, I'd be in his bed. It's one of my biggest regrets that I didn't just jump in there, never mind the consequences. We were together for decades, it wouldn't have wrecked our relationship, but I didn't see that then.”

Ben looked at Cleo, who shook her head slightly, if Hubert wanted to hide from Sam, he had a reason. Lorraine had also warned them not to tell Sam yet, that the time would come.

“Ben, was he travelling to go to seminars back then?”

“Oh lord above, he was, and I was his bag carrier. What a shit show that was, every time.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah, I was a horrible traveller then, couldn't plan my way out of a paper bag. One time we went to England and I got the tickets, we jumped onto the plane and landed with not a clue what was happening next.”

“What?”

“This was before smart phones. Yeah, I had nothing in the way of contact information, I'd arranged to attend the seminar by email and hopped on the plane, nothing else.”

“I can't imagine what that would have been like.”

“Well he simply looked at me like, 'Fix it'. I was panicking but then I saw a guy holding up a sign with his name on it.”

“You are shitting me!” Sam was howling with laughter.

“Be nice, I was young and stupid.”

“So what happened?”

“We got in this cab and started driving to another city and this guy said, 'so where are you going?' Of course I had no clue, no address, no name, nothing.”

Sam and Cleo were clinging to each other, tears running down their faces.

“It gets better, I swear ladies. We explained that we were going to a martial arts seminar and the guy said, 'I know where there's a club'. He drove us to a place and dropped us off. I think he might have just left us then. We pounded on the door but nobody answered, so we picked up our bags and walked over to a restaurant we saw and had a proper English breakfast.”

“Oh, mushy peas, sausage, eggs, fried slice, beans, canned tomato...” howled Cleo.

“That's the one. They told us that the building we'd knocked at was indeed, a dojo so after eating we went back. When we knocked this time someone answered, they had been drinking until late and so were still asleep when we knocked. It was the right place.”

“So it's true, the Gods look after fools.”

“Oh ha, ha, Sam, I was young and not very experienced travelling.”

“Did you get any better at it?”

“Well, no.”

“Was that it? No more stories?”

“No more horror stories about that trip, but it was pretty fundamental to my education, that's for sure. We were in an apartment above the dojo, staying with the guy who was teaching. Sensei and he spent what seemed like two days yapping. I finally had enough and got dressed to go to the dojo and practise. Not ten minutes later the two of them came clomping down the stairs and I ended up with a four hour private lesson.”

Sam laughed, “They can smell a student practising a mile away, can't they.”

“And they can't stay away, that's for sure. The rest of the trip was pretty good, but the start is what I remember best. Or worst.”

Sam's Story

Sam figured it was her turn. “I was his student, and before I could become his lover, I became his nurse. I basically spent

my whole adult life with him, or at least the first part of it.”

“You grew up with him?” asked Ben.

“I did, I was a timid, inexperienced girl when I happened upon his class, and I grew up there. I mean, I had my family too, but he was just there, teaching me all the time. Well, when I say he was just there, it was me, I went to every single one of his classes for two decades.”

“That’s a lot more time than I spent with him, you must be a clone of his later style.”

“I was, until a while ago when I met Gil Hamish and he started teaching Art Pendry and me. We didn’t study with him for long, but it was intense, he taught mentally, I’d guess you could say he taught the attitude of combat.”

“Well your moves are still sensei’s moves.”

“That won’t change I suspect, it’s deep in the bones. Anyway, I went on trips with him, just like you, but I was obsessive about making everything run smoothly. There’s no way I’d ever arrive somewhere without a plan. Having said that, though, sensei would sometimes just wander off to explore some back alleyway, and I’d have to run around to find him.”

“You were a secretary, a student and a parent.”

Sam laughed, “That’s our boy, his brain was always somewhere else, but oh my he was sharp, he missed nothing at all that he considered important. Sometimes he’d pick up on a passing

comment from across the dojo and he'd riff on that for an hour."

"And you never ended up in bed with him? Even on the trips?"

"I didn't say that, I slept beside him a lot on those trips, often when other students had the second bed in a hotel room. But he never let me have sex with him. By the time that would have happened, I was too much of an apprentice. He told me that it was much more important to him that I learn what he knew, he was at the end of his career and he really wanted someone who knew what he was all about, so no complications, no sex."

"Was he right? Would it have been complicated?"

"I don't know, but I got angry because it wasn't his decision alone. At least that's how I felt about it from a potential lover's point of view. I suppose, since he considered himself my sensei, it was his decision."

"You taught with him?"

"Oh sure, as his demonstration partner, and he kicked me out to run my own classes, eventually. Funny, he never once checked up on me, even if he could have, he just said, 'go teach' and left it like that. At seminars I'd look over and he'd be asleep in a chair in the corner while I taught. You know, I sort of resented that at first, but then I realized he really did trust me. That was even worse, I had to try twice as hard, just to make sure I lived up to his trust."

Ben laughed, "They can be right bastards, can't they, these

teachers.”

“Those were good years, when we were travelling around teaching seminars. Especially when I got to sleep beside him at night. Even if it was frustrating, at least I had my arms around him, or his around me. He seemed quite comfortable that way, the bastard, he seemed to have no idea what I felt.”

“I suspect he did, Sam, but he probably valued you highly as a student.”

“You know, there is one story that might have some bearing on the way he treated me, it was when I was early in my studies, we had invited a big sensei to come teach a couple of times. This sensei also travelled to other places and someone from one of them, told us an interesting story. It seems that the sensei had suggested two weekends for a seminar and these good people arranged it, only to have sensei cancel one weekend. It turned out that he had spent the second weekend at his girlfriend’s place, a student of his. This so that his wife thought he was elsewhere.”

“It’s a shock when you find out sensei isn’t a god, isn’t it.”

“Sure, but you know, it didn’t bother us much, not as much as this other group who were scandalized. Shortly afterwards, this sensei asked us to change the weekend of our seminar. We assumed it was the same thing, tell his wife he was on a two week seminar and spend the extra time with the girlfriend. We told him, ‘We can’t change the weekend sensei, we’ll see you next year.’ Of course, he told us that he had rearranged things and the original plan was fine.

“When they arrived, his student pulled Sensei and I aside and said, ‘he isn’t really my teacher.’ This seemed to us a naked plea to be brought over if we dumped his teacher for being morally inferior or some such thing. We remembered that when the big teacher died and we had to pick someone else.”

“You didn’t pick the student.”

“Of course not, that lack of loyalty and blatant desire to be the big teacher, was not what we wanted in an instructor.”

“You may be right, that perhaps Sensei was thinking about that when he wouldn’t take you to his bed. Surely you weren’t a virgin, Sam, did you have boyfriends you had sex with?”

“Sure I did, and I’m sure he had his girlfriends too. At that time he was living in the St. George, and I’m pretty sure he had someone there he slept with, although I never met her. I was never allowed to sleep with him at his apartment.

But it wasn’t about sex, it was about love, really. When we were in the University, we’d have class and then go out for beers afterwards, most of the class would come along. They’d ask him questions and he’d talk for hours. Eventually though, he got quiet in the bar, I would sit next to him of course, and then it seemed that he would make sure to sit next to me. I’m not sure he knew it, but I finally realized he was going deaf, that kind where you can’t distinguish voices above the din. I’d sort of prompt him when someone asked a question, otherwise I’d join in and guide the questions away from him.”

“So how long did this go on?”

“Oh ten years or so, and then I found myself giving him backrubs and I taught myself massage. I’d do his legs and make him yell, his muscles were so knotted up. His back too, and he said I extended his teaching career by years. Eventually though, we found out why his back was so messed up, it wasn’t the damage from martial arts, it was cancer. That’s when I became his nurse. Funny thing, it seemed like I was the only one who knew how sick he was, he’d let down his guard around me, he even cried once in a while in my arms, but his other students never seemed to understand, they kept inviting him to teach, kept going to classes. He’d straighten right up in class, like he was fifty again. God it used to take it out of him though.”

“He never let up, did he.”

“You know it, he just kept teaching and in the evenings he’d collapse. I made sure he took his pills, kept track of his appointments for him, and tried to do as much in class for him as I could. He started using me to show how to do a technique, that helped a lot, but I think it was upsetting to him not to be able to show what he was talking about. Every once in a while he’d demonstrate something and he’d injure himself. God I hated him when he’d do that, but there were still some things I just couldn’t show. I was learning from him right to the end.”

“Well you learned it all right, you’re as good as he ever was from what I remember.”

“Thanks, but I’m still trying to understand some of the things

he tried to teach me. Are you sure you aren't seeing him in a different light after so many years of your own study?"

"Of course, I mean when you start, your sensei is a God, and then he's a Man, and then a Partner."

"And if you stick around long enough, he becomes your Child," Sam said with some sadness.

Ben got quiet, "Would you have had it any other way, Sam?"

"No, no I guess not, but damn him for getting sick and dying before he took me to his bed. I mean, after twenty five years, I wasn't going anywhere, even if we'd been married and divorced, I'd still be his student."

"Men aren't always very bright, no matter how talented they are," Cleo muttered.

"Maybe, but he probably didn't want to take the chance with Sam, I mean how often do you get a student like that?"

"Well, he's gone and I've cried for him and I met and lost Morris and I cried for him and now I've got you two as roomies and a great big bed. Life isn't so hard, and before you get any ideas, Cleo of the big soft eyes, I've got to go to work. Sex isn't everything you know."

Sam Meets Boots

Sam was in the cooler, taking inventory of the stock. She had just begun counting up the cask beers when the world faded out.

“An endless plain, oh dear, and look, black sand and a grey sky, nothing else, as far as I can see. Why just about now... yes there we have it, a figure approaching from out of the distance. Have we not done this one already?”

She looked, and of course the figure approaching was doing so slowly, and was back lit so that the face was in shadow.

“Right, I’ve got work to do, how about we stop with the dramatic entrance and you tell me what the hell you want, whoever you are.”

The figure was in front of her, a life-sized cat standing on two legs, “You don’t like my entrance?”

“It was new a hundred years ago, but it’s a damned cliché now. What do you want? As I said, I’m busy.”

“Counting casks of beer?”

“It’s a job, I like it and I get paid for it.”

“Right, right, well what about if I tell you that I can pay you ten, no twenty times what you will make here in a week.”

“I’d say you’re going to pay me in magical gold, the kind that

is gone the next day. Look Behemoth, I've read the book, and I know Beelzabub, your master. You doubtless want me to break you out of Hell. You know, you're living up to your reputation, cat."

"But wouldn't it be a challenge for you to break me out? A bit of fun, perhaps?"

"No. Look, Ben and Cleo have told me the story of their trip out west, you've got nothing that I want, 'Boots', nothing at all, and I'm not inclined to piss off your master just for fun. He may be a nice guy but he's the Devil."

"I may just have some information for you about a certain someone here in Hell..."

"A name, cat, now."

"Uh, your mother would like to speak with you."

"Then she can call me, you idiot. Beels! Is this yours?"

"Hello Sam, and look who it is. Behemoth what are you trying to do, you ought to know these folks are smart enough to see through your games. And seriously, the endless plain? And the black sand? That's for death, not for business deals, where do you get these ideas? Incidentally, Sam has known the death of lovers, both real and unreal deaths, and she is quite capable of killing spirit beings, Cat, do you understand me?"

"Do you mind, you two, I've got beer to count before the evening rush."

“Oh, sorry Sam,” Beels waved his hand and Sam was back in the bar. She turned around and Ken was right behind her. Sam jumped, “Cripes, Ken, what was that?”

“Alarm, some sort of spiritual event happening, are you OK?”

“I’m fine, it was Beelzabub’s cat trying to get me to break him out of hell.”

“Your middle name Orpheus or something?”

“He probably figured that since I’m a mortal, he could manipulate me.”

“Dumb as his reputation, for sure. Listen Sam, are you good working here for now, because I’ve got a potential job for you.”

“Ben and Cleo too?”

“Not that kind of job, there’s a Kobold girl who’s living rough on the streets, we haven’t been able to get her away from the guy who is supplying her and pimping her out.”

“Ken, I’m not a social worker and you are perfectly capable of killing a scumbag, so why me?”

“She’s protecting him, we can’t get at him, she’s got higher powers of detection than anyone we’ve seen so she knows when we’re coming for her boyfriend.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

“I don’t know, Sam, but she’s failing, and I trust you to find a way.”

“Ken, I just got Cleo and Ben settled into my apartment, how urgent is this? Can I have a week? Oh Shit! Really? I just asked for a week?”

Ken stepped forward and shocked Sam by gathering her in and hugging her gently, “Of course, as long as you want and need child.”

Sam was again shocked to find herself crying into Ken’s chest. After a few minutes she took a deep breath and stepped back, “Thank you Ken, I guess I still miss Morris.”

Ken nodded and went back to his office while Sam went back to the inventory. As Ken got into his office he was muttering, “So fast to recover, so tough, but she shouldn’t have to be, damnit she deserves a break.”

He picked up the phone and dialed a number, “What’s the situation on Cleo’s sister? Stable? Good, let me know if it changes.”

Sam worked the rest of the afternoon and then went home when Ken told her he had the evening covered, “Go spend time with your buddies, we’ve got it covered here.”

As Sam walked into the apartment, she was shocked for the

third time that day. The place was immaculate, spotless. Supper was in the oven as well. Ben was just carrying out the grilled fish, steamed vegetables and Dim Sum.

“We figured that you might like dinner when you got home, Ken phoned and said you were off for the evening, so Ben got cooking.”

“That’s great you guys, but you didn’t have to do this.”

“Just paying our way, I got a little bored so I tidied up while some people sat on the chesterfield,” said Ben.

“Reports, you hate reports Ben.”

Sam hugged Ben quickly and said, “Where did you learn how to cook like this?”

“I’ve worked in a lot of restaurants in my day, and I also worked as a chambermaid, so cooking and cleaning comes easy.”

“Well it all looks great, thanks Ben.”

Cleo looked a bit pouty, “And you too for doing the reports, Cleo.”

Amid laughter, the three sat down to eat.

After they had finished, and Cleo took the plates into the kitchen, Sam sighed, “It’s nice to have family in the place, I like being alone but it gets a bit old after a while. Thanks for

coming to live here guys.”

As Sam dried the dishes, Cleo turned to her and said, “Speaking of family, would you two like to meet mine?”

“You mean Ken? We’ve met.”

“Come on, we’ll take a walk and I’ll introduce you.”

With that, the three of them wandered a few blocks out of the centre of town and came into an older neighbourhood. Cleo walked up onto a porch that had comfortable chairs and a table, and rang the bell.

An older woman opened the door and flowed into a hug with Cleo, “So good to see you sweetheart, how are you?”

“Good, Mom, we’re all good. Kyle is out at the moment but Dad will be so pleased to see you.”

“These are my friends, Ben and Sam, this is Louanne, my daughter.”

They went into the house and Louanne said, “Go on in, he thinks he’s with you.”

“He is, love, I’m always with him.”

Cleo went into another room and Louanne offered tea, which was gratefully accepted. As the three of them sat around the coffee table, Louanne asked, “Do you know our story?”

“We don’t, sorry,”

“It’s a good one, without a nice beginning. I’ll tell it to you because you look like family to me.”

“Thank you Louanne.”

“It was too damned many years ago, Cleo was walking down the street when she came on my father and I being quite badly abused by my mother. She had very poor impulse control and was pounding on my father’s chest, calling him all sorts of nasty things, but it was when she spun around and slapped me so hard I fell down, that Cleo walked up to us and took me and my father by the hand. My mother went silent and didn’t object, I found out years later that Cleo had grinned at her with her filed teeth.

“I suppose I could believe that she was too shocked to try to get us back from the monster, but in reality I suspect my mother just didn’t care enough. At any rate, Cleo bought this house and we three moved in.”

Sam was a bit startled, “Your mother never found you? Never tried to get you back?”

“Never. She had her problems, lots of them, and she killed herself a few months later, even though my Father sent her money to live on. I guess she was going that way when Cleo rescued us.”

“Cleo stayed with us as a family until both my brother and I were well grown up, into our twenties, and then my Father told

her to get out and get on with her life. She had more things to do than take care of an old man, he said. By that time Kyle and I had our own jobs and so we stayed to take care of Dad who was already getting sick with Alzheimers. Cleo moved out but she never moved on, she visits regularly and makes sure we're never without. Uncle Ken also checks in to make sure we're OK."

"And Kyle?"

"He's Cleo's adopted son, my half brother. He was with Cleo when she found us. He stopped aging when he was about twenty-five, so he's been my big brother, my son and now my grandson. The neighbours change, so there are very few people who know the truth of it."

Sam glanced into the other room and saw Cleo holding an old man's hand with her other hand on his forehead.

"Mom comes regularly and calms Dad down. I think she's giving him memories to hang on to as he loses his way. Whatever she does, it works. I'm glad she does, I would hate to see him in a home, and I think he'd have been there by now. When the time comes, Mom has said she will end his life gently and painlessly so it looks natural."

"Louanne, why are you telling us this?"

"Because I can see you two are family to Mom, and if you're hers, you're ours, and you deserve to know."

"Thank you for including us."

“Look, like I said, Cleo became my Mom, she loves my Dad and us kids, and we love her. Anyone Cleo loves is family, it’s that simple. Do you guys want more tea?”

“Thank you, yes. It never bothered you that she left?”

“Mom never left, she just doesn’t live here. She’s truly my mother, she was right here until we didn’t need her any more and then she came regularly. When Dad dies, which won’t be too long now, maybe it will be the same as if both our parents have died. I don’t know, I’m so much older than she is now, I feel more like her mother, and I want the very best for her. More than anything I don’t want her to feel bad when I die before she does. I think Kyle will go on for decades, but parents aren’t supposed to outlive their kids, are they?”

Ben cleared his throat. “She won’t be alone, Louanne, I promise you.”

“I could see that from how you look at her. Thank you, Ben.”

Cleo came out and looked at the three of them. “Good, you’ve met my family, I wanted you to know, thank you Louanne for telling them. I’ve done what I can for Dad, he should be calm for another week or two, make sure you call if it gets worse.”

“You know I will Mom. Stay a while and tell me all about your adventures if you’ve got the time.”

“Me too, I haven’t heard the long version,” said Sam.

A Visit With the Devil

Sam now knew why Morris loved working so much, it was a bit overwhelming, living with Ben and Cleo. For one thing, being both very old, over a century in Cleo's case, they both had history, a lot of history. It had been quite a discussion this morning over breakfast.

"Cleo, I had no idea you had a family here in Guelph."

"Why not, Ben? Is it that unlikely that I would have a family, with kids?"

"Not unlikely at all, but you never mentioned a thing about them."

"Well I never intended to have a family, especially not then, but I have a bit of a problem seeing a child abused and walking on past. I saw that they needed help and so I helped."

"Was the mother that bad?"

"She had a lot of problems, she had been unbalanced since she was a child, and having one of her own threw it all to hell. I made sure I explained that to Louanne when she was older. It was one of those generational things, the woman had been abused herself, when she was young."

Ben looked at Cleo, but didn't say anything.

“Yes, me too Ben, some can recover, some can adapt, some get lost. I was lucky, I ran and cousin Ken didn’t send me back.”

“You’re a good woman, Cleo Kobold, you know that?”

“Keep telling yourself that love, it might help when you find out what a bitch I can be.”

“Oh I never said you weren’t a bitch.”

It was around that time that Sam wandered out of the apartment, to go to work, as she went out the door she noticed that her roommates were heading back for the bedroom. Being quite sore herself from the night before, she didn’t feel much envy. Maybe a bit of a desire for a nap though.

Once she was at the bar, she asked Ken what was happening with the Kobold girl. Ken said it was the same, no changes, and Sam was somewhat reassured, but she felt guilty that there was someone at risk and she was just working in the bar.

Ken could see that, but didn’t push. He needed Sam focused, there was something very strange about the situation. It was an ordinary day at the bar but Sam was distracted, her mind wasn’t on the work at all.

In the late afternoon Ken asked, “How are the roommates? Is it all shaking out?”

“There’s no doubt that those two are a couple, Ken. They seem built for each other.”

“Good, Cleo needs a break, she hasn’t been with a good man for a long time. It’s good that she’s found someone she won’t out-grow.”

Sam looked sharply at Ken, he smiled a rather crooked smile, yes he meant someone she wouldn’t outlive. “How about you, Sam, are you happy?”

“I love them both, Ken, but I’m a bit of a third wheel.”

“Just remember, kiddo, that three wheels are damned stable. Like that three legged stool in the corner, it never rocks, all the legs are on the ground all the time.”

“You’re a bit of a philosopher, aren’t you Ken?”

“Nah, just been around a very long time. If it’s the right people, threesomes are damned long-lasting relationships. If it’s the wrong people, they blow up very quickly.”

“Well it’s good so far, I have the feeling I could be happy with those two.”

“I’m happy, Sam, you deserve a break.”

“What, you mean now?”

“No, you just had your break, back to work with you!”

“Now there’s my Ken Kobold.”

Sam was laughing as she went back to the bar. Again, Ken booted her out of the place at the end of the afternoon shift, “You’ll work all night if I let you, Sam, get on home and say hi to your buddies.”

On the way home, she thought idly about Boots and whether he was still under control or out somewhere trying to talk someone else into rescuing him.

“He’s here, Sam, firmly under control.”

“Jesus, Beels, that’s not creepy at all.”

“Sorry, I don’t listen to you all the time, I assure you, I was just attuned to Behemoth’s name.”

Sam thought that maybe that was true, but he was the Devil after all. Beels laughed, “Fair enough, but I’d need to be pretty amazing to sort through all the thoughts of all the beings on this planet.”

“Hmph”

“Sam, now that I’m here, I’d like to warn you about the job Ken has for you, he hasn’t told you but it involves family. Be careful would you please.”

“Beels, why are you warning me? What am I to you?”

“Oh that’s a bit hurtful, I consider all of you friends, I really do. Kit and all the rest of you.”

“Well thanks, then, I’ll be careful.”

“Call my name if you need me,” and Beels was gone from her head.

If Sam was reassured by that, she couldn’t tell. Still, you take your friends as you find them she figured.

As Sam entered the apartment, her nose almost clapped and jumped for joy. There was a truly amazing aroma coming from the kitchen. Cleo noticed and looked smug.

“What is that smell?” asked Sam.

“You’ll have to wait, he’s been cooking all afternoon, he won’t even tell me.”

Ben came out of the kitchen with two beers and handed one to Cleo and one to Sam. As she took it he hugged her hard and kissed her, “Welcome home Sam, have a seat and I’ll have supper out soon.”

Sam sat beside Cleo who demanded a kiss as well. They clinked bottle necks and drank, “The beer you drink at home after work always tastes better than the beer at the bar.”

“You got it love, it certainly does.”

“Cleo, I need to talk to you about a job Ken has for me.”

“Now?”

“No, in a few days, I told him we were just settling in here and I wanted to spend some time with you two.”

“So it’s not for all three of us?”

“That’s one of the things that concern me, he said it wasn’t that sort of job. It’s about a Kobold girl who’s living on the streets and some guy who’s supplying her with drugs and pimping her out.”

“Why doesn’t he just have the guy killed?”

“Apparently the girl is protecting him, but that’s not what I’m worried about, I just talked with Beelzabub and he said the job involved family. The thing is, you guys aren’t involved so I’m wondering what’s up.”

“Ken can be a devious bastard, that’s for certain. You got a brother?”

“Do you mean is someone in my family a pimp? No, but that also worries me. How does a human get that sort of control over a Kobold?”

“Love is strange, I’d protect Ben pretty hard, you too.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean.”

“Sam you know that thing I do with Ben to calm down his dreams? I can do the same to you so that you can call me any time. May I?”

“Of course you can, thanks. You know, Beels said the same thing to me, I could call him for help.”

“You’re worth helping, Sam Martin, never forget that,” said Cleo as she put her hand on Sam’s forehead.

Ben came out of the kitchen with a huge pot, “Green curry tofu and venison.”

“Oh my Gods, how did you know,” shouted Cleo.

The Job

The next morning, Sam couldn’t wait any longer, “Do you guys mind if I go on this job today, I was going to wait to the end of the week but the thought of someone being abused...”

“Oh, sweetheart, of course not, Ben and I will cover for you at the bar, and I’ll be ready to come if you need me.”

“That’s a relief, I have a feeling that calling on Beels would be something I do as a last resort. This ought not be a tough one, all I have to do is convince someone to get off the streets and out of the life.”

“Just remember she’s a Kobold, Sam, hard heads, we’re hard to convince.”

“Right, wish me luck then, I’ll go tell Ken.”

It turned out the girl was in Cambridge, not far at all. Sam asked for a ride and prepared to live on the streets for a while. She’d decided to approach the girl first, and see for herself what she needed to do.

From a photo Ken gave her she spotted the girl fairly quickly, and she set up close by. It was two days before she approached her, long enough to give her the idea that Sam was harmless.

“Hi, my name is Sam, I’ve seen you around.”

“Piss off.”

“Fine, but I’ve got a bottle of wine over here if you want some.”

Sam ended up drinking the wine herself, but she stayed in sight. That evening, like every evening the girl disappeared into one of the surrounding hotels when a tall, thin man came to get her.

The next day the girl approached Sam, “My name is Clara, I’ve got a bottle if you want to share it.”

“This is good stuff, thanks a lot.”

“No troubles, I don’t like wine much but I got this one off of a trick who thinks he loves me.”

“If you’re turning tricks why are you out here,” said Sam, but

seeing suspicion form on Clara's face she said, "unless your man is as cheap as mine. He can't even keep me in business, mine is so bad."

That seemed to calm Clara down, and the two chatted about nothing at all until the wine was gone. "You want to join me under the bridge? It's out of the wind and dry, at least drier than this overhang."

"Thanks," said Sam as she moved her pack to the bridge where she set up beside Clara. Later that night she claimed she had to pee and moved away from Clara. She used her cell to phone Ben and told him he was now her pimp, but a poor one, and he ought to come get her during the afternoon.

"Aw shit, here's my guy, he's such an asshole but I love him," said Sam as Ben showed up.

"Come on bitch, I've got a job for you. Who's this?"

"This is my friend."

"Well don't get too friendly. Hey you, you want a job too?"

"Fuck off, I've got a man and he gives me lots of jobs."

"Fuck you too, come on Sam, let's go."

As they walked to one of the more distant hotels, Sam clung to Ben's arm and he shook her off. When they got to the hotel, he checked that Clara hadn't followed and the two of them went to a room Ben had rented.

Sam hit the shower and stayed there so long Ben came to check on her. She pulled him in with her saying “better look like I’ve had sex.”

Later, Sam ate a decent take-out that Ben had ordered in, and lay back on the couch. “Her name is Clara and she’s suspicious as hell but trusts me a little. I can’t get a read on her pimp, he stays away about a block, but she seems to know when he’s there for her. She never talks about him.”

“I’ll stick around and tail him tonight, see where he goes after delivering Clara.”

Sam napped for a while on Ben’s shoulder and when she woke figured she’d better get back. “Do you want me to keep this room open for you?”

“No, too tempting. Check this guy out tonight and come back for me tomorrow for another job.”

Ben kissed her bye and watched her go back to the bridge. That evening the pimp came for Clara and Ben followed the two of them to a hotel, he then followed the pimp for a while but the guy faded out of the world as he walked down an alleyway.

Ben called Cleo, “He’s an Elf, a fucking Elf, he just faded right in front of me.”

“You’re kidding, Elves have no power over Kobolds.”

“This one does, she’s not in love with him, she’s under

control.”

“Shit, no wonder Ken couldn’t get at her, if this thing can control Kobolds... Ben be careful, I’ll be there soon, but you know Elves have no trouble controlling humans. Get Sam out of there and meet me in a hotel room in an hour. I’ve got to talk to Ken before I pick you two up.”

Cleo stormed into Ken’s office, “Did you know you sent Sam up against an Elf?”

“What? No, Elves have no power over Kobolds.”

“This one does.”

“I’ll get a squad together...”

“No, the three of us ought to be able to handle a single Elf, I’ll call if it’s more than that.”

Ken hesitated, seemed to decide something, “Cleo, you should know that the girl is Clara. That’s why I sent Sam.”

“Ken you really are a bastard, you sent Sam to rescue my sister? Damn it, I’ll...”

“Cleo! That’s why I sent Sam. You need to cool down and think carefully. Don’t storm in there and make a mess of it. I truly thought it was just a human supplying Clara with drugs.”

Cleo stared at Ken and he stared back until he could see her temper coming back under control. He nodded, “You three are

a damned good team, I'll have people within range but you've got point on this. If Elves can control Kobolds we need to know how."

"She's my sister, Ken, that thing may not survive."

"I understand, Cleo, just try to figure it out before killing him."

The Rescue

Ben collected Sam from under the bridge, "It's an Elf, I've called Cleo and she's on her way, we're heading to another room in the hotel Clara's in."

"There are Elves around here?"

"Can't be many or we'd have known, probably a refugee from England."

"What's he doing pimping out a Kobold? He can't need the money."

"For the humiliation? To prove he can control her? Who knows? Cleo is going to be pissed when she gets here."

They rented a room in the hotel where Clara was, they had no idea which room she was in, but figured if they were on the top

floor they could drop down to any of them. Cleo would be able to find a Kobold.

When Cleo showed up at the room, she was not pissed, she was a block of ice. Ben would have sworn he saw strands of mist coming off of her. He'd never seen her this way but it didn't take a genius to see that someone was going to hurt.

"It's my sister," Cleo said simply.

Sam was furious, "Ken didn't tell me, what sort of stupid game is he playing."

"He didn't know it was an Elf. Leave it, we can deal with Ken later. We've got backup but we're on point. Now let me find her."

It was hard, Clara seemed to have a talent something like Cleo's for hiding herself from other Kobolds. Was this the way in, the Elf had found? Still, there were wisps, Clara must be fighting. That was good.

"You guys picked the right room, they're right below us."

"The john?"

"He's there but he won't be for long, I'm going over the balcony in two minutes, you two take the door."

Cleo walked out onto the balcony while Ben and Sam ran for the staircase. They had all armed themselves, no guns but they didn't need them, Ben and Sam had boot knives and Cleo had

her temper combined with the ability to grow like a giant. Not to mention her hammer. The girl was always well armed.

Cleo waited until she heard the door splintering below, that would be Ben. She went over the rail and inward, her boots hitting the balcony with a crash.

It wasn't a john, it was the Elf in the room. Ben and Sam were flattened against a wall, he had seized control of them as soon as they came in the door, "Come in, Kobold, I've been waiting for you. I felt your scummy boots the instant you walked into the room above."

Cleo came in and moved toward Ben and Sam, then she saw Clara, splayed out on the bed. "Clara," she called.

"She's out, she's mine Kobold, you won't take her."

Cleo moved, but the Elf hit her with the same control that he'd used on her sister. She couldn't take a step, her will to resist was gone.

"Yes, you must be a relative, interesting, I wonder how many other Kobolds I can control."

But to take control of Cleo, he had to release Ben and Sam. Sam had instantly snatched her boot knife and threw it at the Elf. He ducked and put her back under control which gave Cleo just enough time to launch herself at the Elf. She was in the air when he tried to control her. All that happened was that she was motionless as she hit him and the two blasted through the outside wall.

Five stories down, they hit the ground. Sam stayed with Clara while Ben raced down the stairs. When he got there, he saw Cleo standing up, the Elf wasn't moving at all. He wouldn't be moving again, his head was crushed.

Ben looked at Cleo, "Are you all right."

"Take more than five stories to hurt me. He released control and my hand was on his face, I made it heavy, grew it without letting it get bigger. Didn't know I could do that."

Ben folded her in his arms and hugged her tight as two Kobolds ran up to them. "We'll clean it up."

Cleo pushed Ben away, "Clara," she said as she ran back into the hotel.

Ben and Cleo got to the top floor to see Sam holding Clara in her arms. Cleo gasped, "Is she..."

Sam shook her head, Clara was crying. Cleo made to go to her but Ben held her back, whispering, "You're family."

Cleo understood, Clara had been humiliated, she wouldn't want to deal with family right now, and she certainly wouldn't want to know that her big sister had killed her tormentor. She'd want to do that herself.

At around that time, Ken showed up at the broken door, took a look around the room and muttered, "Better get to the front desk and sort this."

Clara was still in Sam's arms but her tears were shed. Ken walked in and said to Ben, "You guys are an alt-folk band, your manager has sorted things with the hotel. We'd better mess the place up a bit more."

Ben looked at the door and the hole in the wall, "More?"

"Right, I suppose not." Ken spotted Cleo sitting on the couch and sat down beside her, not too close. "Cleo?"

"You know I can block myself off from being found? Clara can do it too, I think that's how he got in, or rather how Kobolds resist Elves. They can't control the whole damned bunch of us at the same time."

"Clara?"

"She's alive, but it will take a while. The Elf humiliated her and made her hurt herself, I don't think the prostitution will make much difference to her, but he brought out all sorts of shit from when we were kids. That is going to leave scars."

"Damn it, what can I do to help?"

"Ken, you've done it, she's free, I think I know a place where she can recover."

"Bogart?"

"You know about him and me? No, of course you do. Yes the

four of us should go there.”

“I’ll arrange transport.”

Sam had been listening, “Beels.”

“Here, Sam. How can I help.”

“You remember the beach where Behemoth was messing around?”

“Bogart’s beach, yes.”

“Can you take us there please.”

“No, Sam, not you, but the other three, yes.”

Sam said nothing, but nodded. She was confused but figured Beels had his reasons.

“Now?” said Beelzabub.

Cleo looked to Ken who said, “We’ll sort it, go, take care of Clara.”

Cleo nodded and Beels, Clara, Ben and Cleo faded out.

They materialized on the beach. Bogart was there to greet them, Clara was unconscious again, and in Beelzabub’s arms.

“Good to see you all. I asked Beels not to bring Sam, she has someone she has to meet.”

“It’s time?” Asked Cleo.

“Almost, and Beels, you will want to attend as well.”

“Oh?”

“Trust me on this, you’ll have fun, you’ll know when, but for now, please join us, I’ve made lunch.”

Lunch at Lake Wilmer

Beels lay Clara on the chesterfield, she had dropped into a deep sleep. Beels assured Cleo there was no physical damage.

“I hope you reserve a special place for that Elf,” Cleo spat.

“Sorry my dear, maybe if I’d been there I could have taken him. Unfortunately, I’m the devil of humans, my brother and I decided to specialize. The Elf will be wherever Elves go when they die. Do they go anywhere?”

“He’d better not be anywhere I can get to.”

“That’s the spirit, I approve.”

Ben had tucked in to the appetizers and commented to Bogart, “This is really good, you’re a great cook Bogie, do you suppose I can get the recipe for these bacon bites?”

“No sweat, they’re Sobey’s specials.”

Cleo sat down on the couch and put Clara’s head in her lap. Ben took her a plate of food and joined Beels and Bogie at the table.

“Can you help her, Bogie?” Ben asked.

Bogie kept his voice low, “Oh I suspect so, I know the family history through Cleo, and I know what they respond to. We should be able to help her, but I’d like you and Cleo to stick around, that will help Clara to trust me. This may bring up some things for Cleo as well, so best to keep her close for a while.”

“Sure, if it’s no imposition.”

“None at all I’ll just add a room to the place.”

“You can do that?”

“Why not? I create the place each time I come back anyway, what’s another room.”

“Angel food cake, how did you know?”

“I guessed, glad you like it Beels.”

On the couch, Clara started to wake up. She opened her eyes and saw her big sister. “You bitch, why didn’t you come for me sooner.”

“Hello pumpkin, I love you too, I would have come sooner but I didn’t know you’d got yourself into another mess.”

“Yeah, well.”

Beels grinned, “Families, you gotta love them, it sounds like Clara will be fine.”

Ben nodded toward the sisters. Clara was clinging hard to Cleo and crying into her chest. Cleo was stroking her hair and making soothing sounds. “Maybe not quite yet.”

It was two days before Clara could fall into a proper sleep and Bogie could get into her head to start sorting things out. In those two days Clara had been introduced to Ben and seemed to trust him almost instantly. “He’s yours, Cleo, I can tell, and he’s a really good guy.”

“Well your choices...”

“Don’t go on like that, I like the jerks, I really do and I can tell they’re jerks. Ben’s not a jerk.”

Cleo looked at Bogie and he nodded. Another issue to address when he got to work.

Just before she fell asleep on the first night she did, Clara was

sleeping beside Cleo and said, “My backside is cold, why don’t you rescue Ben from the couch and let him sleep in here.”

Cleo had smiled and called Ben in. As soon as he had settled and put an arm over both women, Clara had fallen asleep.

Ben followed, but Cleo stayed awake, listening to Beels and Bogie in the next room.

“Finally, I can get to work.”

“You don’t mind that I come along? I am the devil you know.”

“And I know you do a lot of good in the world, despite the stupid contest you and your brother started.”

“Bored, what can I say. I could have put her to sleep before this.”

“No, those girls know when someone is messing with them. Just like Cleo knows what we’re saying right now. Go to sleep girl, I know what I’m doing.”

Cleo dropped off and Bogie got to work. “This is one on one, Beels, you work on thousands at a time, it might not be useful to you but you’re welcome to the method.”

“You, Kit and Lorraine can do it, is it something a lot of people can do?”

“Very few. Some of us who were dreamwalkers, and those two foxes are all I know. Looking at someone’s dreams, and

adjusting them are quite different things. Lorraine had to figure it out just to stop from going insane, while Kit learned it out of love for her mate.”

“You’re working now?”

“Yes, can you see now?”

“Oh hell, that Elf really worked a number on her. You can clean this up?”

“It will take a while, I will have to go back to the reasons the Elf could get his claws so deep into her, the reason she likes jerks so much. I need to wait for that dream to come around.”

A while later Beels whistled, “What these humans can do to each other is so much worse than anything I can devise for them. They are their own torturers in Hell you know.”

“That’s because you are a fundamentally good being, Beels, now this is ticklish, I’ve got practice with Cleo but let me work.”

When they woke in the morning, Cleo could see that Clara was a bit better. She wasn’t as skittish, and she even smiled a bit.

“Is that what you do for me, Bogie?”

“More or less, you were as much a mess as Clara when you first got here, but in the last few years it’s more like a tune-up.”

“Why?”

“Why did I start working on you? Because you found me.”

“Have I ever thanked you?”

“Yes of course, and every time you help someone else, you thank me.”

“Well thanks again, and thanks for my sister.”

Bogie smiled and passed the oatmeal. Clara, on the other hand, seemed a bit confused, but grinned anyway.

“I’d like you three to stay for a while if you can. I’ve talked with Ken and he says, and I quote, ‘tell those three to stay until they can give me a good day’s work again,’ end quote.”

“What a sweetheart cousin Ken is.”

Just then, Ben stiffened, and a moment later, Cleo looked at Beels. “It’s gone, the St. George is gone.”

Beels looked at Bogie and raised his eyebrows. Bogie nodded and said “in a few minutes you’ll be of great use while being totally selfish.”

Beels laughed, nodded, and vanished.

Bogie looked at Ben and Cleo and said, “Listen carefully, they have all the help they need. If they need you they will call, just sit tight and have another round of sausage and eggs. You’re on

medical leave and I told Ken to keep paying you.”

Cleo goggled at him, “And he agreed? Bogie I’m so glad you’re on our side.”

Clara looked around the table and said, “Someone going to explain this to me?”

As they started to explain, Bogie smiled, “She knows.”

Sam Finds Out

Sam was confused, she didn’t know why Beels would have left her behind, but she figured he had his reasons. She’d know when she knew.

She went back to work and Ken was happy to see her. “They’re with Bogart the Shaman, in the Wilmer Valley, so Clara will be in good hands, don’t worry. That was a good job you did, and now I have a few things I need to discuss with you.”

“Is that why they left me back here?”

“Part of the reason, I don’t know all of it, but Bogart has a feeling you are going to be needed here quite soon. No, I don’t know why, but I trust that Shaman, he has good hunches.”

“OK if you trust him, I trust him.”

Ken looked at her seriously and said, “I hope that’s true, Sam, that you trust me, you might soon have reason to doubt me, and again, no, I’m not telling you why, you’ll know in a couple of days, Bogart says. Believe me when I say there are multiple forces at work here.”

Sam made a face and Ken laughed. “Yeah, it’s like public school isn’t it? Secrets everywhere. Anyway, what I want to talk to you about is money.”

“You’re cutting my pay?”

“Oh, ha ha. I am not. In fact I want to tell you that I pay you a lot more than you figure. I pay all the agents twice what they think I pay them.”

“What?”

“Look, Kobolds are an old race, and we love gold, we’ve been accumulating it for a very long time and we love using it even more than we love collecting it. We’re very wealthy, Sam, so yes, I pay the agents twice what they think. The other half goes into a fund for each of them.”

“A fund?”

“A retirement fund, or a widow’s and orphan’s fund. Whichever one is needed. Most agents aren’t the type to save for retirement or to think that they might be killed. I damned

well think about it, so they get a bit of forced savings. You've accumulated quite a sum from working for me here."

"Why are you telling me this Ken?"

"So you can make some decisions when you need to make them. Now listen carefully, Morris left his estate with me to give to you, when the time came."

"What!"

"Sam, really. He loved you deeply, you know that, so of course he thought about you when he went off back to the tree. He knew he was going to have to leave you."

Ken held up his hand, "Just listen will you. He earned a lot while he was working here, and he had the same retirement fund all my agents have. Yes he was an agent for me. Information is as valuable as shooting Kappa my girl. But all that is peanuts. He was a smart boy, he started saving and investing in the market when he was very young. He also had a damned good money manager."

"You?"

"Yes, me, and while he was 40 years in that tree, he made a very large amount of money. Now some of that goes to protecting the place where the tree stands. We made sure of that, seeing how the old tree was cut down. You now own that property, and I'll make sure it stays owned. We were a bit sloppy, but no more."

Sam was silent, she was thinking about Morris and how he worried about her enough to provide for her. “Sam, you are his family, not were, but are. Now here’s the sum of what you have right now.”

Sam had to sit down.

Ken laughed for a long time and said, “You want me to keep managing your money?”

Sam could do nothing but nod. It was a shock just how much she now had.

“You want to quit your job now, have a life of leisure?”

“What would I do with that, Ken? Manage the money for me, and if I ever need it I’m sure you’ll give it to me won’t you?”

“You know I will, child, always remember you’re one of mine.” Ken said in a soft voice, followed by, “Now, are we going to get ready for the day’s business or what?”

“Yes boss, I’m on it.”

That evening, Sam was not lonely in her big empty bed. She thought about Cleo and Ben and sent good wishes Clara would recover. Cleo answered in her head, “It’s good Sam, I think it will be fine, remember we love you.” Sam had forgotten Cleo had established a connection.

Sam also thought about Morris, and Ken, and how lucky she was to have friends like that. She also thought a lot about her

Sensei, which was a bit strange. There was no reason to think about him and she usually didn't, not unless something jogged her memory.

The next couple of days were spent in routine, waking up, work, and back home to the apartment. Since Ken had mentioned that there was a reason she was in Guelph and not with Ben and Cleo, she was expecting something. Ken telling her about her money didn't help, that made her a tiny bit uneasy.

It was mid-afternoon. Ken was messing about, rearranging tables and chairs, trying to figure out how to get a few more customers in the place when he froze, his head came up and he looked toward the St. George Apartments.

"It's gone!"

"What's gone?"

"The St. George, it's gone. Not moved, but gone!"

Sam felt it then, an absence from her normal awareness of where things were in the town. She didn't have the connection to the St. George that Ken did, but she could feel it now. It was as if she'd been asleep for weeks, and had just awakened.

Then she took a step back, as if someone had shoved her hard.
"That son of a bitch!"

Ken looked around to see who she was talking to, but saw nobody, "Ah," he said softly.

Sam walked quickly out of the bar, collecting her swords on the way.

“Damn, there goes a good bartender. I hope she doesn’t hurt him,” and Ken smiled. He kept a lot of secrets but the fact that Sam’s Sensei was alive wasn’t one he had liked keeping.

Epilogue

Sam forced herself to walk from the bar to where the St. George was. It wasn’t far and she was far too wise to run into an unknown situation, and this one was unknown for sure.

She came upon a battleground, and half the spirit-beings in Guelph.

She was close enough to hear, when Nadja said there was something on the way, a scout. Then she heard it, for the first time in so many years, she heard her Sensei’s voice, “Right, the eight, minus two, we six will take care of it, the rest guard Liz, Mara and Dave.”

“Seven,” said the Doorman.

Sam was ready to fight, if not some threat arriving, than her Sensei, “Eight... Eight you son of a bitch.”

“Sam! Who called her!” said Sensei.

“Nobody called me old man, I felt you, I was asleep and suddenly I woke up and knew where you were. You let me believe you were dead. Bastard! You let me grieve for you.”

Lorraine was suddenly beside Sam, talking fast, “He was dead, Sam he was dead, you buried him and he was dead. The St. George put him back together because he was the best human agent he’d ever had. Sam, he was shielded by the George, you couldn’t feel him until the George was gone. He wasn’t hiding, he was working as an agent for the St. George.”

At about that time Sam stopped walking, turned to Lorraine and said, “Who the hell are you and why are you talking to me.”

Lorraine smiled hugely and said, “So nice to meet you Sam, please don’t kill him, we need him right now, and you too. We’ll talk later.”

“Jesus, do you intend to talk something to death?” But Sam recognized the brown fox from her dreams. She was even more furious than she had been. She looked around for something to kill.

And just then, because sometimes events do have a sense of timing, the already churned up ground erupted again. “Grootslang, this channel must go to the south of Africa,” shouted Lorraine over the trumpeting of the giant serpent, “What is it doing above ground?”

Hubert called out, “Humans to me, wolves left, dogs and cats right, it will go for the stone.”

Okami and Oren went left, the Doorman and Kuri went right, and as usual, Hubert went right up the middle, this time with Sam.

“Shit, stupid plan!” shouted Lorraine, “Kit, to me, up the middle!”

Kit responded instantly, growing to a giant fox, Lorraine right next to her and the two of them stepped in front of the humans. “Sit! Stay!” Lorraine shouted to them, and then she was at the serpent’s face, tearing and slashing, as it rose higher, trying to get away from Lorraine, Kit went for the throat. The others were tearing at the sides, Kuri had moved to a Great Lynx and was matching the serpent coil for coil. The Doorman, as suspected, grew to a huge, three headed dog. He did tremendous damage, two heads grabbing and ripping the serpent’s skin apart, the third head diving in to rip out the insides.

The thing was down and dead in seconds, and as they all moved back to their human forms, Lorraine could be heard spitting and retching, “Damn I hate the taste now, even more than back then, am I getting allergic to these things?”

“What, the hell, was that,” asked Hubert in a dangerously low voice.

“Don’t be mad, Hugh, but I’m damned if I’m going to let you

kill yourself again, especially since Sam just found you once more.”

“Woman, do you know how wrong it is to countermand a command during a fight?”

“You’re not my commanding officer, you’re my lover and you can bloody well shut up now. Is there coffee, my mouth is vile.”

A coffee appeared in her hand, she didn’t bother to ask who to thank, she just took a huge gulp, swished and spit, then took another gulp.

Sam was doing some fast thinking, her head whipping from Hubert to Lorraine and back again. Kit touched her mind and saw that she was receiving shock after shock today. She really needed to kill something, just to get her footing back. She had been ready to fight the Grootslang and now all that combined with the shock of finding her teacher and then knowing he had a lover, was too much.

Kit did something she rarely did, in any circumstance. She reached in to Sam’s brain and turned her off. Then she scrubbed the adrenaline, and slowly woke her up again. When her eyes came open, Kit’s arms were around her and she was saying, “Sorry, sorry Sam, your heart was about to explode, sorry, I had to reset you.”

Sam returned the hug, dropping her swords on the ground and cried into Kit’s neck fur for a very long time. When she got that out, she looked at Kit and said, “Thank you, thank you my

friend, I'll be OK now, no killing him just yet," which made Kit laugh.

In the meantime, Hubert and Lorraine seemed to have settled their issues and were waiting for Sam. She walked over to Hubert and said, "In the movies I should kiss you and then slap you. I greet you my teacher," and she bowed deeply.

"Oh Sam, you don't know how badly I wanted to tell you I was still here, but I couldn't let you grieve for me twice. Will you forgive me my mistake?" With that he opened his arms and Kit stepped into them.

When she stepped back, she turned to Lorraine and bowed saying, "I greet you, sister in my dreams, and thank you for your assistance."

Lorraine was taken aback, but bowed as was proper. She tipped her head to one side, Sam felt her gently questioning her mind, and then straightened it again as she said, "Greetings sister-wife."

Sam stepped back, she was so stunned by this, but stepped forward into Lorraine's arms as she opened them. Lorraine went below the belt and gave Sam a good squeeze on her ass which caused Sam to laugh.

This was indeed the little brown vixen from her dreams.

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