

The Wounded God

The Lunch Counter Stories III



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Table of Contents

| | |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Prologue..... | 4 |
| Jim Gets to England..... | 9 |
| Mara and the Starving World..... | 14 |
| Looking for Allies..... | 17 |
| Ashley Childress..... | 19 |
| Mara the Scout..... | 23 |
| Hema..... | 28 |
| Mike's Lunch Counter..... | 32 |
| A Fight on the Train..... | 36 |
| Elfwyn Edwards..... | 43 |
| The Giant Army Marches..... | 47 |
| The Trip Home..... | 51 |
| Looking for Jim..... | 56 |
| Eldwife..... | 62 |
| Hugo the sorcerer..... | 68 |
| Family Challenge..... | 73 |
| Coyote Gets a Bath..... | 79 |
| Jim's Not At Home..... | 83 |
| Kit Talks to Ray..... | 87 |
| Guelph Gathering..... | 93 |
| Eldwife and the Elf King..... | 97 |
| The Drive North..... | 101 |
| Hunting Hema..... | 106 |
| The Perils of Pauline..... | 111 |
| Further North..... | 116 |
| Rescuing Hema..... | 121 |
| Almost Caught Up..... | 128 |
| New Vs Old..... | 133 |
| The Noble Death of Red643..... | 140 |
| The Aid Station..... | 142 |
| Jim Finds the Old Wounded God..... | 146 |
| Guelph Surges Forward..... | 151 |

| | |
|----------------------------|-----|
| Not the End..... | 155 |
| Back to Guelph..... | 162 |
| Things Kept Happening..... | 164 |

Prologue

My name is Art Pendray and I run a diner called Jim's Lunch Counter. It contains some strange and wonderful people, as you'll see, and I've written about it before, but now, I'm away from that business and on to some other business in England. I have told this story before, but here's how we started.

To the Old World

Ingrid was sweating and moaning in the bed. Not in a good way either. Another dream, and I didn't know if I should wake her or let it run.

There's no way I was going to get any more sleep, so I went to the kitchen to start breakfast. It wasn't much later when Ingrid got up and joined me. She downed a coffee and held out her cup for another, it must have been bad.

"I saw the Wounded God again Art, and I saw Jim kill him. Don't look like that, he's done it before. This time though, it will cause a catastrophe, not just for our world but for dozens more. This god is somehow linked to all the portals that are opening up, and if the god dies, the worlds die.

"Jesus, we old gods may as well be fighting the giants, get a bit of fun in if the world is going to end."

"What can we do Ingrid? Can we get hold of Jim and tell him not to kill the god? Has he done it yet..."

"Relax, I dreamed of the future, not the past. We don't want to get Jim by phone, we need to go help him."

“What, you and I? We need to go where Jim is? But we don't know where he is.”

Ingrid looked at me with that special look she gives me when I'm 'being adorable.' “I'm a God, Artie, I can find him.”

“But the lunch counter...”

“Will either be there when we get back, or nothing will be there. It's serious Art, you're going to have to hand it over to someone else for a while.”

“But the bar, the refugees, all the things that need to be done.”

“Art! I'm telling you that none of that matters if the worlds are gone. You and I are leaving for England, that's where Jim is. We don't have a choice in this, we go.”

Ingrid said that in the voice of a God, that inevitable-doom voice she used on me when I screwed up, but this time it had undertones and I started planning.

“Right, let's eat breakfast and have coffee at the lunch counter. We'll see who is around.”

When we got to the diner, it was full. Ray again, but this time I didn't mind his opening the place early. Mike was behind the counter, cooking breakfasts and making coffee. That settled that.

Mike and Liz had both got back into town a few days ago, and they both looked changed. Mike had grown into his seer thing, whatever that was. He was completely comfortable with the

non-human types in the place, I guess it was like he saw them. Before he didn't, and they barely saw him.

I remember when I saw Ray for the first time as a fox, after the local ghosts opened my eyes. Mike was taking it a lot more calmly than I did.

But as much as Mike had changed, Liz had changed much more completely. She was a tiny thing, but I got the impression she was eight feet tall. She had spent several weeks with a shaman, and neither she nor Megan would say what had happened, but now you could tell that she 'knew things'. I don't know how better to put it. There was a self-assurance that radiated from her.

She insisted that she had no special powers, but damn it, when she was around you just knew it was going to be all right. She must have become something, because Megan, who had treated her like a little sister, now treated her as an equal. This is Megan, who, I suspect, was as powerful as Coyote, as powerful as Ingrid.

I left Mike to work the grill and sat down. "Well gang, I don't know how you all knew we'd need a meeting but I'm glad you're here. Ingrid has had another dream and we're in trouble. Jim will find the Wounded God and kill him, but that won't close the weak spots, it will destroy the various worlds that are being linked. There's more than just a few portals here in Guelph. We know about the portal from the Keen family daydream, and the poor creatures there. Mara has gone to help them if she can.

"Ingrid and I need to go and stop Jim, so we need to do some planning here. First, the lunch counter, Mike will you take over

here? Your ability to see supernatural beings, spirit beings I guess, is going to help to manage this madhouse.”

Mike nodded, “Of course I will Art.”

“Thanks, Hugo, will you go with us to find Jim, you're one of his oldest friends and I don't know how easy it will be to stop him.”

“Older than you might know, Art, of course I'll go but who is going to take care of the weak spots here?”

Liz spoke up. “I can help there, the weak spots have happened before, and I know how to handle them. Ray can you touch both Hugo and I so that he can check what I know please?” When Ray touched them both, Hugo looked startled, he nodded deeply to Liz and said, “There's nothing I can add to what you know, Liz. Art, Liz can handle things here.”

Megan nodded, as did Mike. That must have been some crash course in Shamanism.

“Alright, that's settled, Megan will you come with us?”

“No, I need to stay here, Art. There is more going on than we can see. There's a danger to Guelph, it's somehow a focus point, maybe because Jim has been here so long, he tends to attract trouble. At any rate, I will be needed here.”

I wasn't going to argue with that. “Ingrid do you think that you, Hugo, and I can handle things?”

Ingrid nodded, she was frowning a bit and looking at Megan but she didn't say what she was thinking.

“Fine, then it's to England. How do we get there?”

Liz spoke up, “Go to the wooden bridge, exactly a third of the way from the Boathouse side take a sharp right and you'll be in Winchester.”

I started to ask, but Hugo nodded so I said “Thanks Liz,” and we seemed to be set.

I picked up Jim's drinks tray, the one that turned into a shield, and looked for the broken knife, but it was gone. Jim must have taken it. Ingrid put her hand on my arm, “You won't need it love, we're not going after wyrms this time.”

Fine, I put it back, not without some reluctance, I wasn't spear-proof, but I reminded myself that Ingrid had a spear, and a sword, and a flying cloak and she had a cute little pet pig that grew into an absolutely monstrous fighting boar. I suspected I would be safe enough. She must have been reading my mind again and squeezed my hand.

I looked around the place and realized that it was as much a home as any I had ever known. I looked over the crew, and realized that if I had to go somewhere else to protect the place, I couldn't leave it in better hands.

I handed over the keys to Mike with some ceremony, and he grinned. “It will be here when you get back, Art, no fear.” With that the three of us walked out of the shop, crossed the bridge and walked through the park to the covered bridge. I led the way with more confidence than I felt, and when we got 2/3 of the way across I turned hard right and walked straight into the wall. As I staggered back, Ingrid caught me, gave me a bit

of a hug and said, “wrong right, sweetheart.”

We turned the other way and walked through the wall and I wasn't in Guelph any more.

~~

Jim Gets to England

Jim stumbled up the beach, after swimming for three days it was hard to switch from a tail to legs. He turned in time to see Lorelei wave and kick off backward to disappear under the frothy sea. He turned back to the cliffs and there, just a crack, was the entrance to the Europe he came to visit.

Doubtless the England above him had changed in the century or so he had been gone, but the underside rarely changed. Evolution and growth seemed to be a generational thing, rather than an individual thing, and for those who lived centuries, change was an annoyance.

Jim had come to find an answer. There were weak spots appearing around Guelph where he had retired to a lunch counter, and it was getting just a bit too exciting for his taste. He had an idea that the source of the problem was somewhere here in Europe. It seemed a lifetime since he had seen these white cliffs, well, he supposed, it had in fact been a lifetime. They looked the same as when he had first seen them, almost a thousand years before.

As he got to that crack in the wall, and stepped through, he was confronted by a couple of men in uniform. “We need to see your visa please sir.”

“What visa? What are you talking about?”

“We need to establish that you are a resident, and that you are not a refugee sir.”

“Refugee, this whole damned country is made up of refugees, I know, I’ve watched them come.”

“I’m sorry sir, we need to see your visa.”

“I have no visa, and no passport, and since when are those things needed here. Look, I’m a native, I was born here and there’s never been a border check at the wall.”

“Newly instituted sir, so we have a questionnaire here that you can answer please.

“Name?”

“Ashley Childress, now called Jim.”

“Date of birth?”

“I don’t know, who remembers that stuff, some time around 800AD.”

“Ah, er, OK sir, please pass and enjoy your stay.”

Jim looked around and noticed a different official looking his way. The man had just waved him through. “Curious,” he thought, but he went through and was glad to be rid of the new red tape.

As Jim headed into the underground, the officer who had signalled to let him go turned to another and said “Do you know who that was?”

“No, why did you let him through?”

“That was Ashley Childress, and if he’s come back, there’s trouble somewhere close. Find Edwards and tell him Childress is here.”

Jim walked on inland until he came to a post house. “I’d like to get a coach to Winchester, when’s the next one?”

“Coach? As in horse drawn? How long have you been out of the country Pops? We’ve got a nice train that you can use.”

Jim looked the kid over and decided it wasn’t worth punching him, obviously things had changed more than he realized. “Just point me in the right direction sonny and I’ll be a happy man.”

“Winchester would be number ten, down to your right about half way. Should pull out in twenty minutes or so.”

“Thanks, I assume you still use pounds?” Jim said, pulling out his wallet and fanning some bills.

“Never stopped pops, even when we were in the EU. Your money is good.”

As Jim walked down toward the train, the kid pulled out a phone and sent a text. Jim heard the bing of a return message. “I guess it’s not going to be a surprise visit,” he thought.

Jim found the train and settled into a seat, waiting to start the trip. It was about ten minutes later, that someone dropped into the seat next to him.

“Well look who it is, Ashley Childress. What are you doing back here? I thought you’d said goodbye to the old country and moved to the colonies.”

“Jesus, Elfwin, I heard you died.”

“Not that I’ve noticed, Wessex, not that I’ve noticed. But the question still stands. What are you doing here?”

“I’m just here to check up on the family, make sure they aren’t spending the fortune.”

“Not bloody likely, how many generations now, have you terrorized. I suspect the fortune is bigger than when you left.”

“Got to check up, it’s been seventy years, that’s almost three generations without an appearance, so I’m going to pay a visit, is that OK with you?”

“Sure, sure it is, and it’s so OK with me that I think I’ll go along and keep you company.”

“Elf you don’t need to do that, I’m not here to get into trouble, it’s just a visit.”

“Since when have you ever not got into trouble Ash, seriously, you picked one of the most peaceful towns in Canada to retire, and you’re picking up more and more trouble there. No, I’ll tag along I think.”

“Well it would be good to have you Elfwin Edwards, just like old times.”

“Let’s hope not, I’ve still got scars that haven’t healed. So you’re not here for either of the wars?”

“I know about the one in Europe, which other war are you talking about?”

“Giants and Pixies. You didn’t know?”

“No, like I said, checking up on that damned third generation, making sure they aren’t spending my fortune.”

“Ash, you do know that the stupid saying you keep worrying about isn’t true right? Money actually keeps money.”

“Nah, the first generation, that’s me, makes it, the second keeps it and the third spends it.”

“That’s not true for anything but tiny fortunes man, and yours is too big for three generations to spend. Nobody could spend that much, lose it maybe, but not spend it.”

“I don’t care, I’m not having any financially stupid people in my family.”

“That’s another thing, you fool, how much of your blood do you think is still in your family. Have you ever looked at a genetics textbook? Too many generations of out breeding, it isn’t your family any more.”

“Family is what you say it is, family is an idea, and my family is my family.”

“Right, and you haven’t been here for a hundred years. You’ve missed three or four generations of babies.”

“Don’t care. Let’s go.”

Elf sighed and pulled out a cell phone, punched a number and said, “Go.” Shortly afterwards the train left the station.

~~

Mara and the Starving World

Mara was pissed. If she’d been a cat, she would have been hissing, but she was a wolf, and what the crew in Art’s Lunch Counter heard was a rumble deep in her throat that made the hair on the back of Art’s neck stand up.

Hugo, Ray and James had gone into the Keen family daydream world and discovered a weak point. The Keen family couldn’t go through, it was dangerous enough to have a portal like that in a dream world, let alone send one of the dreamers through it, so it was decided that Mara’s partner James would be the one to go in, with Hugo staying behind to pull him back out if needed.

What James saw was horrible, an entire world of starving beings who were asking for help. They were monstrous looking, but James only saw beings in need.

Hugo had pulled him out and they sealed the portal. They had to because the dream world was crumbling at the edges, but James had to be held down while Hugo did so. He was

traumatized, in pain from their distress, and his inability to help.

Mara had been called in when they got back to the Lunch Counter, and had gone to see him at the brew pub in the basement. Hugo, Ray and James were on their third drink when Mara got there, and James collapsed when he saw her. He blubbered out the story and she took him home where it took two days before he could begin to function again.

And now Mara was back in the lunch counter and pissed. She had been James' canoe tripper and had protected him since he was a kid, now she lived with him and was every bit as protective of her partner as she had been of her camper. She was fuming, barely able to speak.

When she ran down, she managed, "Why the hell did you close that portal you bastards, you saw what it did to James, you could have helped those beings, but you just slammed the door on them. Now what do you propose to do? You can't leave them to starve, you have to help them, for James' sake and for your own." This was the polite version of a rant that had gone on for about ten minutes.

Finally, Art held up his hands and said, "You're right, Mara, completely right and we need to find them again to help. There's most of the crew here, does anyone have a suggestion as to how we can find them again?"

Hugo and Ray weren't there, but Mike and Liz had returned from their separate missions to find more help (Mike) and to study with the last shaman of the little people (Liz).

Liz, who obviously felt deeply about a world full of starving beings, spoke up, “I can give you a talisman, Mara, that will let you open and close portals. I learned how to step through the walls and can show you how. In fact I will go along with you on this hunt.”

Mara calmed down a bit, “You will not go with me Liz, I’ll need to travel fast and it might be dangerous. From what you folks tell me I might have to look through hundreds of worlds before finding the right one. I will be going alone, and James, I know you want to go with me but you will not. I need to know you’re here and safe with our friends. Trust me, I will be fine, there is no monster on any world that will stop me from finding these poor creatures. My love, I don’t want you to see what I may have to do to find them. I need you to give me permission to let the monster loose.”

James looked hurt, but he understood. He knew that Mara was convinced that deep down she was a monster. He had seen glimpses of the power she usually suppressed, but he had never, ever seen anything but care and compassion down there. Still, Mara might need her belief in a monster deep within her being, so he nodded to let her know she had his blessing to use it.

Liz promised the talisman the next day, and that seemed to be that. James and Mara went back to their place and spent the evening in bed. Again, James asked Mara to let him go with her, again he suggested that she bite him and make him a wolf too. Again she refused. “James, I hope it will never come to the point where I turn you into a wolf, but if that day comes, I will know it and I will bite you, I promise. You know why I won’t do it now, so shut up and roll over here.”

The next day, Liz explained how to step across the walls into another world. She tried to explain the mechanisms but Mara cut her off. “How, please Liz, I don’t care why, just tell me how.” Liz told her how to find a weak spot, but also how to create a portal, and how to close it again. It seemed like an easy thing to do, so Mara tried, stepping into a different world and back again, then closing the portal.

“Good,” she said, “now does anyone have a hint as to how to find this starving world?”

Ray was there that day, glad he had avoided Mara’s storm the day before, and said, “It felt newly barren, I would follow a path to worlds that have changed recently. I don’t know how you would do that, but it makes sense to me.”

“I know something about change, I can feel it, like others can feel hot and cold, so I’ll work toward change. Thanks Ray.”

With that, and a great big hug for James but without much more fanfare, Mara stepped sideways and was gone.

~~

Looking for Allies

Megan was becoming more and more sure that her world was in danger, and she felt that the critical point was Guelph. Too many things seemed to be drawing lines that crossed there.

For instance, there was her own presence. Megan much preferred being up north, in the woods, but she had been drawn

to Guelph, and she had stayed there for much more time than she usually did.

Then there was Jim, he had been in the city for about a hundred years, and Megan had learned that he was attracted to trouble. Or perhaps the other way around, he gathered in to himself.

The Pixie refugees from the Giant war were moving directly through Guelph on a railroad underground. That had to be connected.

But most convincing of all, the people who congregated around the lunch counter, around Art, were just too powerful to be in one spot. Coyote, Ingrid, Caw, Mara, Ray, Hugo, Liz and Mike, the Kobolds, and yes, herself. There had to be a reason they were all in one place.

Megan didn't believe in poor odds, she wanted more strength to call on, so she had retreated with Hugo to his place after the last appearance of a weak spot in the Keen family daydream. They were looking for allies, the wolf-woman from the new world, and the sorcerer from the old.

To Megan's eyes, Hugo was more than a magician, when she looked at him she saw hundreds of years. She wanted him close so that she could study him more, and so they were working together to look for others. Megan had sent Mike on a walkabout to gather help, and she would soon go herself, but she and Hugo were seeing what they could see.

It might have been the combination of old and new world powers, but what they saw were Giants. Not the old world Giants fighting the Pixies, but Giants that had left the old world and come to the new, Giants who had rejected the power-

hungry leaders in their territories across the ocean, and come for a new start. Some were still active, like the ones that Mike had found, but some were sleeping.

Hugo and Megan decided these were the allies they needed, if they could convince them to help.

Megan went south, to the Cohokia mounds where she had a little chat with the sleeping Giants of that ancient city.

~~

Ashley Childress

Ashley ran. He had been running for hours, his lungs burning, his legs exhausted, like trying to run on two fence posts. God he hated this heathen army, not just the Danes, but the Saxons who were allied to them. Low born scum who hoped to become rich under the Danes. Fools.

He ran, and the enemy chased. They didn't know the country, but that wasn't enough of an advantage. Twice now, Jim had to turn and fight the light-armed scouts who led the invaders. Twice he left men bleeding and dying in the woods, left them for the wolves.

He stumbled and caught himself on a tree, took four ragged breaths and ran on. A mile more, just a mile more. He hoped the fools he had trained were in position. He hoped they had the sense to keep to the plan.

There, the gully, the dry river bed. He hit the entrance and slowed down, letting the chasing warriors see him, they

sprinted to close the gap. Come on you crow-bait, don't look at anything but me, Jim thought as he ran deeper into the gully.

He got half way through when he heard the first battle cries of his men. Idiots, fools, only the first of the Danes were in the gully and now they were warned. Jim sped up and then faded onto the slope, climbing out of the gully as fast as he could, dreading what was to come.

He was tired, tired of this war, tired of trying to make fighters of farmers, whose only experience was a drunken brawl in a tavern.

The Danes, warned of the trap, spread out to the sides of the gully and started to drive along the slopes and the ridge, rolling up the Saxons as they went. Jim heard the screams as his men died by the hand of the much more experienced Dane army.

It had been a good plan, if only the hot-heads had held, until all the Danes were in the trap. Over and over Jim had built a good plan, only to see these farmers screw it up and die.

No sense turning back to fight, Jim was spent, the best he would do was die with his men. He left the ambush and set out for the main Saxon army, and as he went he could only hope that the fools would see the battle was lost, and run away.

This was not working. Men who were good for nothing more than holding a shield-wall were not suited to guerrilla warfare. Jim had hoped that they could harass the Danes as they marched, but all his men had accomplished was to get slaughtered. When the glory-mad idiots would not stay under cover and use spears and arrows, when they broke and attacked with sword and axe, they lost, they died.

Jim had had enough of this waste. The idea was good, no enemy could be on alert all the time, but these men were the wrong sort. Jim needed specialists, he needed men who could fight, but mostly he needed men who could run when fighting was useless. He needed men who could see the war and not the battle. Men who were too war-weary to think about glory.

Knowing this, Jim returned to the army and started to search for these men, and he found them, or rather they found him. The first was Gil Hamish, who was one of the deadliest fighters, one on one, that anyone could ever recall seeing. He was also ageless, he had been fighting for as long as anyone could remember.

Gil found Jim in a tavern, drunk and loudly complaining of farmers who ought to be using their swords to plow their fields. Gil sat and listened, and eventually dragged Jim off to sober up. To Gil's surprise, Jim was living with a strange red-headed woman who claimed to be a Pict. Gil thought it more likely that she was from the underworld.

While Jim slept it off, Eldwife fed Gil, and when he had eaten, she took him to bed. When she ran her hands over Gil's body she was shocked to her core. "You are an ancient, you have lived since the beginning of men, how is this possible?"

Gil just shook his head, "You are mistaken, woman, I am but a man."

"No, you are more than a man, but never mind, sleep with me and we will not speak of this to Jim, for I love him deeply."

Gil was happy enough with the company for the night. The next day the men discussed Jim's plans for a small elite force of cowards who would attack the enemy from the side or the back, and then run away once they had done what damage they could, and before they were overwhelmed by the larger force.

Gil, who had indeed lived thousands of years, fighting for most of them, made subtle suggestions which Jim then thought he himself, had discovered.

That night, Jim slept with Eldwife, and she passed along the pattern of life that she had taken from Gil. In the morning, Jim felt the change. He looked from Eldwife to Gil, but was not a stupid man, he kept his silence.

From this beginning, Jim and Gil found several other men, oddly enough, there were only one or two from each kingdom. Wessex, Essex, Sussex, Mercia, and a few others. As they gathered this band, Eldwife slept with each, claiming to want to experience the variety of men, but in reality, passing to each the pattern of slow death.

With this band of men, Jim began harassing the invading armies, and as the years went on, the men became ferocious fighters.

They also discovered that, like Gil, they hardly aged at all. Hundreds of years went by and there was no shortage of wars for them to fight. They became a unit of mercenaries from "over there", always from some other place, and they were paid well. Some of the men spent their money as soon as they had it in their hands, but Jim realized the chance he had. He began buying land, and eventually he developed an estate around Winchester that was massive. He hired talented men to run the

estate, and since he was rarely there, very few realized that the new heir to the fortune was the old master.

Eventually, perhaps inevitably, Jim sired a good number of bastards around the estate. These became the Childress family, and Jim became the strange uncle with the old-fashioned manners, who travelled the world, dropping in once in a while to check on the family business.

Start a business and keep it running for a thousand years, with regular infusions of cash, and it's hard not to become successful. The Childress estate was eventually one of the largest fortunes in England.

~~

Mara the Scout

Mara changed to wolf form to move fast and quiet. The first world she found looked fine, in fact it was almost like Earth, but without any higher beings. The place was a paradise, covered with trees and in places, vast plains kept clear of trees by bison-like creatures. It was Earth without gods or men.

Mara knew this could not be the starving world, and moved on quickly. In the very next world, she came through the portal she had created, and saw several Giants guarding a weak spot close by. Through the talisman Liz had given her, Mara could sense that this portal was one that opened to Earth, in fact, it opened to Guelph. This was not a good thing.

In the distance, she could see a vast army of Giants. They were disorganized, as if they had just arrived, and Mara hoped that

was true. She realized this was the danger Megan had been sensing.

Without any more thought, Mara let loose the monster inside. She grew massively in size, and in complete silence, she attacked the Giants who were guarding the weak spot. She killed them from the portal outward so that it would look like a force from Guelph had come through and attacked.

Mara hoped that this would delay the Giant attack for long enough that she could get back and warn Megan and the others.

Keeping her primary mission in mind, she closed her portal and opened another which led to the world the Giants had come from. This was easy, now, she simply had to follow the weak spots the Giants had used. In the next world she saw devastation and death. It seemed that the Giants used a scorched-earth method of warfare. Kill everyone and destroy everything.

If Mara had felt bad about killing the squad of Giants, she no longer did. She went from world to world and saw the same thing repeated. These worlds had been defenceless, totally unsuspecting of the attack until it happened.

As she moved along the path, she saw only small squads of Giants left behind to protect the route. She left these alone, but in one world, she suddenly sensed that there was life to one side. Not wanting to leave an enemy where they could discover her, she killed these guards. She had no reason to be quiet, and she let loose a howl that echoed off the hills in the distance. That sound had the same effect on the Giants as it did on men, and some of them dropped their weapons in an attempt to surrender. Mara was not in the mood, and killed them all.

Stepping through to the side world, she found the starving beings that James had seen. The Giants had sent raiding parties and stripped the world, but had not bothered to kill all the natives. It would appear that they were completely peaceful, that they had no reason or understanding of fighting. Still, Mara could see large numbers of dead natives. It would appear that the Giants were just like Mankind, quite happy to kill the defenceless.

It was sickening, an entire world left to starve to death. The natives had no idea of the weak spots, and so could not escape their fate.

The Giants had left no soldiers to guard this world, and Mara was sorry about that, she was in a killing mood.

There was no organization among the beings that Mara could see, only vast numbers of starving, panicking beings. She gathered what individuals she could, and opened a portal to the empty world she had found. As the beings started to run through the portal, Mara stopped them, turned them around and indicated that they were to gather others to send through.

Starving and hopeless, the beings understood and with a sadness that Mara could feel, returned to their ruined world to spread the word of salvation.

Mara felt bad about sending them back after showing them their new home, but it was necessary. The entire world would be saved, for James' sake.

Once she saw that the exodus was well under way, Mara stepped back to Guelph to give the warning. As it happened,

portals slid along the easiest route, and she stepped right into the cold world Art had used for the freezer in the lunch counter. Mara had to bang on the door so that someone, it turned out to be James, would let her out.

Shivering a little, and hugging James tight, as much for warmth as for love, she sat at the counter. Mike put a large cup of coffee down and Mara gave her report.

“James, the starving world is saved, they are moving to an empty world that hasn’t been destroyed, so it’s done my love, you can breathe again. The Giants stripped their world and left them to die, the other worlds the Giants have crossed were stripped and all the natives killed, there is nothing but destruction wherever they have been. The Giants must have biological or chemical weapons to kill entire worlds, or else they have been at this for decades.

“Megan, you were right to be worried about an attack. There is a Giant army one weak spot away, I have delayed them I hope, they will see their guards torn to pieces by somebody from the other side, but they are too large a force to turn away. They will attack once they can get organized. I can tell you which portal.”

Megan looked around the diner and said, “Do we kill them as they come through the portal, or do we go through and kill them on the other side.”

Mara looked shocked, “We can’t let them through, the very thought of them here, tearing up my city, turns my stomach. We need to go through and fight them on a world they have already ruined. There is no more damage to that world that we can do. We will be free to kill them all. They must be after the Pixies

and I tell you, I will not have them here, digging for the refugee railroad,”

James looked at her and put his hand on her back, making a small circular movement in an attempt to calm her down. He had rarely known her in a bad mood, and this was the worst he'd seen since he was a child and she went after the drunken hunters who had threatened her canoe trippers. He had seen the starving world and he understood. He hoped her monster inside would be enough to keep her safe, because he knew for certain that she was going back to fight.

Megan looked around and saw agreement with Mara's plan and nodded. “So be it, Mara has given us some time, but make your preparations quickly. There are allies coming, Mike you will be here to greet them and tell them what we plan. Let's move.”

That wasn't enough for Mara, she stood and began to make a portal to go back and fight an army by herself. Megan roared, “No sister! You must not, you would waste your life and warn the enemy. Peace, give us one day and we will go in such force as we have. Fight beside me my brave wolf, do not give me the sorrow of finding you dead tomorrow.”

With that, Mara finally let go her anger and collapsed into James. Closing her eyes, she surprised everyone but James and fell instantly asleep.

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Hema

Hema had no idea where he came from, or how old he was. Maybe he showed up when the world was created. All he knew was that he was old, incredibly old.

He also knew that he could see danger coming, and so he watched. Sometimes he could do something about that danger, sometimes not. He had seen the collision that put the moon into the sky, He had seen what men eventually called the Permian Extinction.

He had watched as a few bad years caused the dinosaurs to collapse down to the birds, and the rise of the mammals. That eventually meant the rise of the various tribes of man which rose and fell back again.

But there were some things he could do something about. Smaller things than extinction events, things like the flooding of Doggerland, the end of the land bridge between Europe and England. He had managed to warn many of the people living there. Well, some. Most didn't believe him.

He happened to be in Herculaneum when Vesuvius erupted, and he managed to get hundreds to safety, but again, most of the town refused to believe a crazy man with delusions.

For the last hundred years, Hema had been watching the Omnicide. Cute name, that, invented by the very men who were causing the latest extinction level event. The stupidity of that never ceased to astound him. They knew it was happening, they even put a name on it, and yet they did nothing. What was he supposed to do with that? He knew there was nowhere he

could tell people to run. This one was likely to be the end of Man, and only Men could prevent it.

Hema had his doubts, you can't argue with stupid.

He had been wandering around England when he joined up with Ashley Childress and his strange little squad. Those had been useful times. He had of course learned how to fight over the millennia, and he fought with the squad. The night that Eldwife tried to give him the pattern, she had touched him, gasped, and then slept with him anyway. She had never mentioned it to the rest of the squad, who thought Hema was just another man.

A man who was useful, someone who can see disasters before they happen, is of great benefit to a guerrilla band, and they avoided trap after trap. Often turning the tables.

Eventually the squad became suspicious that Hema was something more than the rest of them, but they never discussed it. One of the hints they had was that Hema was truly immortal, the weapons of humans might put holes in his body, but they healed with incredible speed.

In other words, Hema was one of the old gods, and in the centuries before he had joined the squad, he had been worshipped occasionally and in various places under many names. He had of course, met the old gods, you couldn't avoid them, really. They bred with each other and with Man, they wandered bored all over the place, and they all craved attention.

Hema had never liked them much, these gods. Most of them thought too highly of themselves, even though they were just

remnants of the energies of whatever had created the world. There was always one of these bored super-beings turning himself into a swan to rape some young girl, when he wasn't screwing his sister. Bored and boring.

Hema preferred his own company.

When the squad finally broke up, Hema went back to his wandering life, watching for disasters. He kept in touch with Elfwin Edwards, and would warn Elfwin of impending problems, but Elfwin had the same problem as Hema. He would tell his bosses about things like the start of the First World War, and they would simply ignore him. Elfwin's facts and figures didn't fit their pre-conceived opinions about the world, so he was ignored.

Stupid, an almost infinite capacity for stupid.

As he saw these latest men work toward extinction, he was reminded too much of the Neanderthals. He had liked them, they were gentle, family types who didn't breed like cockroaches, but they had the same blind spots all the various types of man seemed to have. He warned them about the sapiens coming into Europe and all they could see was a new batch of women to screw.

Now that those sapiens were heading for a similar end, despite all Hema could do to warn them, he decided he wasn't going to watch any more.

So Hema wandered into the Alden Valley, over the border of the Elf lands and found himself a brothel where he could eat decent food and screw the workers, and forget about what was happening outside where time ran on.

He was aware that someone was trying to find a poison that would work on him, and he almost hoped they would succeed. Life wasn't much fun any more, the world he was watching just kept getting beat up. Volcanos, Asteroids, and being overrun by sapiens seemed to be all there was to its existence. It was enough to make an old god weep.

No, he was going to stay in this brothel until this last tribe of Man ran themselves down to a decent population size, and then he'd go back over the border and see if the remainders were any less stupid than everyone who had come before.

He wasn't overly hopeful, but what else was there? He didn't think he was going to die any time soon.

So here was Leaf, and Twig, and Mushroom, and Rick, come to share his bed. Stupid names of course, but they were traditional for those working in a brothel. It was actually Leaf the 23rd, but who was counting. You can't fight tradition right?

Stupid.

It wasn't all sex, some of the kids read to him, sometimes he read to them, and then there were the other long term guests. Philosophers, scientists, and the like. Those would often decide to stay around beyond the pleasures of the flesh, while the businessmen and the farmers would be in and out for a bit of in and out. They were welcomed by the brothel because they gave the place a touch of class. Learning is always classy.

Hema himself, was actually working on a theory of everything that was based on the universal power of stupid. He was serious about it, he had a world full of experiential data to

crunch, but he wasn't getting very far. He kept having the sneaking thought that his research was stupid.

He picked up his book, patted Lily on her lovely round butt, and started reading to her while she waved her shapely feet lazily in the air as she listened.

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Mike's Lunch Counter

Megan and the rest of the crew had moved out of the lunch counter and down to the bar to do their planning. James followed carrying the sleeping Mara in his arms. It was a good thing they moved, several people filtered in to the diner over the next two hours and the place felt like it would burst.

It wasn't the numbers, it was the size of them, both men and women who were all well over six feet tall. As they came in they would look hard at Mike and then nod. They recognized him as a seer, and he recognized them as old blood. They were content to sit, eat and drink coffee for the most part, but there was some chatter as well, as they greeted each other as old friends.

“Why Anna Swan and Martin Bates, you two finally got married eh?”

“Joe Mufferaw, who pried you out of the Ottawa Valley, I thought you had one foot stuck in the Rideau Canal!”

“Louis Cyr, what's the matter, you run out of train car axles to show off to the girls?”

“Hey It’s Édouard Beaupré and Angus MacAskill, damn I haven’t seen you two since we came over on that stinking Basque fishing boat.”

“Joshua Doan, I thought you went back to the Faith after they hung you in London. Does your pa know you’re here?”

Mike, thinking that everyone had arrived, called for attention. “Please, listen, we have an army of Giants just outside the world who are about to invade...”

Joe Mufferaw interrupted, “What! Are they here to take us back? Well it will take an army to get me back to that asshole of a leader. The man is an idiot and an egotist. I left for a reason!”

And Joe was joined by the others in objecting to being taken back by their countrymen.

Mike yelled, “No, nobody is here to take you, so shut up. You guys are Giants? You, Joe Mufferaw, explain what the hell is going on, we’re going to fight Giants, your people, apparently.”

“Good,” Joe said, “I owe them a debt and I’ll collect with my axe. Look, Mike, we all left centuries ago and came here to be gone from the Giant lands. I don’t know what has been happening back home, but I’ll bet the bastards who run the place are talking about reclaiming old lands that once belonged to them. I’ll even guess they’re fighting the Pixies again, am I right?”

“Jesus Joe, how far back in the woods are you living these days?” Said Joshua Doan, “That’s exactly what’s happening,

and it's the one thing that can get this Quaker out to fight in the field again. That and the damned Family Compact."

"The what?" said Mike.

Louis Cyr leaned over and said, "let it go, it's a hundred years ago but they hanged him for taking part in the rebellion. He can't get over it.

"Just understand that we are all rebels, we left because, like in any country, the capacity for the ruling classes to abuse their own people is boundless. There are more Giants who disagree with this war than you might think, but mostly they go along to get along. We won't."

Mike nodded and tried again, "OK guys, so you're Giants who are here to fight Giants, right? Well we're glad to have you, and..."

"I'm not a Giant," said a voice in the back, my name is Joe Makwa and this is Jane. I'm Bear Clan and I'm here to fight. Jane here will stay home, right my sweet dove, or else."

Suddenly there was a space around a guy who wasn't as tall as the Giants, but certainly as wide. He had his arm around the most lovable looking woman Mike had ever seen... "Oh damn," Mike thought, "just what we need, another love goddess."

Joe Mufferaw spoke up, "Joe Bear, it's been a long time my friend. I'm glad to see you here, last I heard you were in the Siberian woods."

"Was in Manitoba when Mike there found me," Bear said.

“OK as I was saying, could everyone please.... Oh Jesus above!”

Through the window, Mike had spotted a gang of even bigger Giants than were inside, heading for the door. Not one was less than eight feet tall, and they moved like water in a stony creek, they seemed unable to move in a straight line. They were carrying bows and spears, and Mike would have bet money that if he'd fired an arrow at them, it would have hit none.

They stopped outside the door, which Mike felt thankful for, and waited.

“Cohokia,” said Louis Cyr, “Oh Dieu, you woke them? Do you have any idea what you've done? These were the first breakaway Giants, they went to sleep in their mounds half a millennium ago. I'm not certain we can even talk to them.”

A booming voice from outside said, “We have been sleeping, cousin, not dead. We can understand you well enough. Megan came to wake us. We twelve are here, and we will fight.”

Mike tried once again, “OK we all seem to be up to speed on the situation, everyone please go on down to the pub where Megan and the others are gathered to plan.”

“Pub, did you say pub laddie?” said Angus MacAskill as several of the Giants rolled their eyes.

When the ‘big gun brigade,’ as Mike thought of them, were headed down to the pub, he started to pick up the place. Jane, Bear's girlfriend, had stayed in the diner and she moved to help. “You don't have to do that,” said Mike.

“Why not, I’m a waitress in one of the pubs downtown, I have skills too you know.”

Mike, thinking about the two of them in the diner, and the powerful warriors in the pub below, started to giggle. He was soon joined by Jane. Yep, there’s those who do heroic deeds, and those who pick up the mess afterwards.

Just then, proving that life is exactly like a novel, Liz popped her head in the door and said, “Mike can you come down and help Morris serve beer to those drunkards. You’d think they’d never seen a free drink before.”

“Go on,” said Jane, “I’ll finish up here and close the shop, then head down to help.”

~~

A Fight on the Train

Jim turned to Elf, “OK Essex, just who the hell are you, I mean what position do you hold that you can stop and start trains.”

“Ash, or should I call you Jim now?”

“Use Jim.”

“Right, Jim there’s been a lot you haven’t heard about I guess. I suspect you know that England pulled out of the EU, but what you might not know is how much harder that makes it for the old blood. As above, so below right.”

“I’m listening.”

“We get more and more refugees coming up the coast, they end up finding the underground and we have to control what they see and do in order not to be detected by the normal men above ground. These are normal humans I’m talking about, they land on the beaches and start looking for ways to get around immigration controls upside. That’s why we have what looks like border controls at the underground entrances. We either throw them right back in the sea... Not Often! Wow you’ve got pretty soft in retirement. We throw them back if we can, or we get them upstairs as fast as possible and let those guys handle it. We can’t have them coming through our lands, Jim.”

“Fine, I can appreciate that, you don’t want the riff-raff seeing that there’s an underground country, but we never worried about the politics upside before, why now?”

“Like I said, they got out of the EU, so the red tape is horrendous, the old blood have to have bloody papers now. There’s no free movement, it’s getting to feel like we lost the Second World War, not won it. ‘Little Britain’ is gaining the upper hand. Hell they are even talking of changing the national dish from Chicken Tikka Masala to boiled beef of all damned things.”

“Ugh, I think I’ll go back to Canada. But that still doesn’t tell me who the hell you are.”

“Believe it or not, I’m the Director of Security for the underside. I think they gave it to me because nobody else wanted the damned job. I’m also high up in the English secret service, not director but I’ve got an office right down the hall.

“Above and below, I’m supposed to be looking out for subversives here, but the subversives are from other countries and they don’t have to be here. They broadcast false information, confuse our folks, convince them that there are pixies under the doormats waiting to stab them in the foot. The best foreign agents are the population of your target country, these days. Convince them the government is their enemy and you don’t need to infiltrate anyone, the population will do your work for you.

“All the while the rich are getting richer because nobody is paying any attention to what they’re doing, they’re all looking under their doormats, which is why the rich don’t really want me to clean up the mess.”

Jim looked around, “Elf are you sure you should be saying that sort of thing in public? It sounds like there should be secret police hanging about if it’s that bad.”

“There are, and I’m in charge of them, that’s what I’m telling you Jim, it’s got bad, and since I’m the worst of the lot, saving yourself of course, I’ve ended up as the head sneak.”

Jim smiled crookedly and sat back to think. Elf may be the head spook these days but he’d known him for longer than England was a country. He was about to explain the problem with the weak spots when Elf held up his hand.

“Everyone, get out of this car, through the door behind me. Move now!” Roared Elf.

Jim was instantly alert, checking forward and behind. Elf was swatting the late-movers out of the car and slammed the doors shut.

There was a nasty pistol in Elf's hand and he was pointing it at the far end of the car. Jim automatically checked the other end, and above, even though there was nothing but an overhead shelf.

Jim's Saex was in his hand and his other hand was on Elf's shoulder so he would know when and where he moved. Move they did, Elf was suddenly charging down the car and he began to fire as the doors flew open. Several men dropped and just as suddenly, the door was empty.

“Oh Mr. Director, we have a dozen innocent civilians here, maybe you should throw your gun through the door and they won't die.”

Elf flicked a look at Jim, then pointed to the left side wall of the door. Jim nodded and moved to his right.

Elf reloaded quietly, then pulled another gun from his belt and threw it through the door. As he did that he faded through the wall. Jim caught three men as they came through the door to shoot Elf down. A volley of gunshots, then silence, told him Elf had got the rest.

“Clear”

“Clear”

Jim stepped into the next car and automatically checked to make sure the men were dead. Elf was checking the passengers, all of whom were fine, if shaken.

“You can still pull those elf-tricks can you Essex?”

“When I need to, what the hell are you doing with that old pig-sticker, Wessex?”

“It’s good for onions. Who the hell are these guys?”

“There’s factions Jim, people are taking sides. I told you the politics above were coming down, like sewage through a weeping bed.”.

Jim picked up Elf’s second gun and raised his eyebrow. Elf nodded and Jim tucked it into his waistband. “What about these?”

“My people will take care of it at the next stop. Let’s go get a drink in the bar car and I think maybe we better fill each other in.”

“You don’t want to check them over?”

“I’ve got people for that, Jim, let them do their job,” Elf said as he wandered down the train. Jim automatically checked for more trouble as he followed Elf to the bar.

“Your story first,” Jim said, as he picked up his whisky.

“I wasn’t kidding about foreign disinformation. Certain people are exploiting whatever divisions they can, to create factions. Normally it wouldn’t work, but the rich seem to want to get

richer. A lot of the top brass owe a lot of that brass to outside interests. Privatized medicine is hellishly profitable, as you know from watching the States. That's the end goal, privatization of everything so that the poor get more poor as they struggle to get less poor. And the rich get richer.

“And you make sure the poor think their problems come from those Pixies under the doormats. We've seen it countless times Jim, you and I.”

“Jesus Elf, I never thought I'd see a socialist secret policeman.”

“Look, enough with the jokes, even if I cared nothing for those who are in need of help, I'd still want socialized medicine and education, my job is to keep the peace, not to provoke a civil war so some dickhead of the moneyed class can get richer. Speaking of which, one of the richest men in England can now tell me what he's doing on my train.”

“Helping you do your job?”

“Never mind that, spill.”

“Weak spots, Elf. There are weak spots appearing all over Canada, and especially around Guelph where I retired. I need to find out whether they are aimed at me or if there's some other reason for them.”

“Nice, good to see your ego is as big as ever, but they're not about you Jim, they have appeared here and in Europe too. Not just one or two, which seems about normal, but dozens, maybe hundreds.”

Jim nodded, “I had a feeling the source of the problem was here, do you know what’s causing them?”

“Not a clue, Jim, not a clue. None of the so-called experts knows, they just keep showing up. We’ve got a couple of sorcerers closing them down but it’s a barn door sort of thing. They can’t get ahead of it.”

“Where’s Hema? When did he report the first one? And where was it?”

“Hema’s gone Jim, that’s why it took so long for us to notice them, he’s not around to warn us.”

“What do you mean, gone? He’s Sussex for god’s sake, he should be as hard to kill as you or me. He can’t be dead, I’d have heard.”

“I don’t think he is, I think he’s just missing somewhere.”

“Well then, maybe he ought to be found. I’d say these holes in reality are more of a problem than a bunch of rich folk who will be for the axe in the next revolution.”

“I agree, Jim, but let’s not go rooting for the CEO terminations just yet OK? I’m going with you to find Hema, but remember what my job is.”

“Yeah, keep the rich bastards alive and well.”

“That includes you, you rich bastard.”

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Elfwyn Edwards

Edwin Edwards was depressed, he had been on the run for months. An outlaw in Essex, now under the Danes, he had been fighting, running and fighting ever since London had been attacked. These raids and wars were stretching on forever and Edwin was tired.

Stumbling into a village pub, exhausted, he only wanted a place to sleep for a week or so, even a single night would be good. Sleep was something that he wasn't sure he could do any more.

In the pub, he saw a big man and a woman who looked like she was half elfin. A coincidental observation, as she really was half elf. The big man looked him over and called to Edwin to join them at the table.

“You look like you're on the run, sit and have a meal with me, tell me about it.”

Edwin supposed it wasn't hard to tell he was running, but he wasn't sure he could trust this Saxon. There were too many who had aligned with the Danes, through local spats or the hope of spoils. Short sighted idiots, as far as Edwin was concerned.

“I'm no Dane-friend, if you're worried about that, my name is Ashley Childress and this is Eldwife. We are stopping here for a few days, but are ultimately headed into Wessex.”

This was the legendary Ashley Childress? He didn't seem ten feet tall, but he seemed solid enough for a ghost. For ghost he

was, according to the Danes who had been harassed by him. This man had supposedly stopped raids single handed. What was he doing here?

As if reading his mind, Childress said, "I have been waiting here for Edwin Edwards, have you heard of him?"

"What do you want with him?" Edwards asked, suddenly suspicious once more.

"I want to know if he has been fighting the Danes on his own, I want to know if he's a ghost who flits from wood to wood and kills whole armies by himself."

Edwin laughed. "And I heard that Ashley Childress was this man who kills whole armies on his own."

"It would seem that I have found this Edwards, and that he is me. Let's eat and talk. I have a proposition for you."

Eldwife smiled, Edwards was a good looking man.

Edwards joined Childress, and they traveled back to Wessex where they joined Gil Hamish. The three of them spent some months fighting the Danes, sometimes alone, sometimes attached to units of Wessex, but always fighting.

One evening, after a bloody skirmish where Edwards received a nasty wound on his left arm, Eldwife came to him to bind it. She stayed the night, and Edwards was glad of the relief, it had been months since he had a woman.

In the morning, he felt different, and his wound was healing much more quickly than he'd ever healed before. By the end of

the week it was simply a scar. Asking Gil and Ashley one evening, they explained that he was now almost immortal. When he looked at Ashley, Ash shrugged and said “I don't seem to age.”

But when he looked at Gil and asked, Gil said, “I'm not sure, but I think I'm almost ten thousand years old.” Edwin laughed, thinking he was joking, but eventually came to believe him.

Eldwife seemed to take a shine to Edwin, and stayed in his bed for a month. Ashley didn't seem to mind, so Edwin didn't think much about it.

After a few weeks, and after a night of enthusiastic lovemaking, Eldwife turned to Edwin and said, “I would give you a gift, Edwin Edwards. I would give you a new name, and it is Elfwin Edwards.”

Not having been attached to his name, Edwards told her that he would be delighted to have her gift, but the moment he said so, things changed. For one thing, Eldwife no longer looked like a middle-aged camp follower, she became young and beautiful. “What is this?”

She said, “I have given you what Elf powers I can, you see me without my glamour, for I am half Elf myself, and I have some power over patterns. It was I who gave you your long life, based on what I learned from Gil Hamish. I hope you don't mind this gift, I wanted you to see me in my true form. You are the first man I have ever given it.”

Edwin, now Elfwin reached for her in reply.

During the long years of fighting, Elfwin had cause to use his powers, and became a friend of the Elves. The squad, led by Ashley and advised by Gil took on more fighters and became feared through the Dane armies, who eventually saw ghosts behind every tree.

After hundreds of years of fighting, the squad eventually went their separate ways. Ashley went north to find a shaman to ease his mind, Gil had the habit of fighting and so found other wars, and Elfwin drifted into the service of various governments, mostly as one of those advisors and information gatherers who became known as spies. He would change his name every so often, staging his own death and working his way up through the ranks again, usually becoming head of whatever department contained those who knew things. If the circumstances seemed to require it, he would use his Elfin powers to change his face.

Along the way, almost inevitably, he saw each new government become corrupt and contemptuous of its own people. He did what he could, advising where he could, revealing bribes to officials by foreign agents, and even leaking information that would help change those governments, but the pattern always repeated. A ruling party that stayed in power for too long would become corrupt and corruptible.

Still he remained, doing what he could to reduce the worst of the damage. Making sure that his own department was as clean as he could reasonably expect it to be. Each incarnation he created, he was known as an honest man, one who was incorruptible and who expected the same from those under him. In return, his people became almost fanatical in their loyalty to him.

When Ashley Childress showed up again, Elfwin was almost happy, it was likely there would be some honest fighting, and not the usual skulking around in the shadows or worse, standing around at official functions, playing politics.

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The Giant Army Marches

Red643 was bored. He had been waiting for a day to get through the portal. The Giants could only go through one at a time, and he was near the back of the line.

He supposed it was better than fighting house to house in Pixieland, those little buggers were nasty, they fought for every inch of their rubble. Red643 wasn't sure how a people who had their entire country flattened could keep fighting. That wasn't the way it usually happened. A quick show of force, a sprint for the capital, the military melts away, and they surrender. That was the way it was supposed to be.

Red643 had heard that the glorious leader had bribed the hell out of the Pixie military to lay down their arms as soon as the Giants marched into their country. "We need the living space," he had said, "and so we will take the Pixie's land, it was ours five centuries ago and should be ours again. They are not real people anyway, they are only animals and it is our right to rule them."

But Red643 had heard rumours that the spies who were to bribe the Pixies had stolen the money for themselves, and most shockingly, the Pixies had fought back hard. The Giants were

at a standstill, fighting for each meter of ground, and those damned Pixies were under every rock.

“Time for a glorious flanking move,” the General had said, “we will go through the portals we discovered and we will destroy the fleeing women and children. That will demoralize the Pixies and they will surrender to us.”

It was lucky that we found these portals, thought Red643, but they were tight.

The Giants had indeed discovered a portal, and had found others by the simple method of throwing a soldier through. If he came back they knew they could go. Sometimes they never came back, so that one was marked and left alone. By long trial and error, they had found their way back to Earth on the other side of the world, where their agents had reported access to the underground railroad the Kobolds were using to shuttle refugees further on to the west.

Kobolds, those scum, those tough nuts, had been hard to crack. They should have killed every one of them, now they were helping the Pixies escape.

Well no more, the Giants would take this city of Guelph and the railroad station beneath, and kill the Pixies as they came down the line. It was brilliant, and the Pixie living space would soon be under the control of the Giants.

The plan was brilliant, it could not fail. There was nobody in the new world to oppose the Giants. A small thought crept in, something his captain had said. It better not fail, the Giants were losing far too many soldiers in those Pixie cities to keep going much longer.

At least the Giants didn't have to fight the Gods. They had done that eons ago and the Giants had lost, but it was a close thing, and in the fight, the world was almost destroyed. The Gods dared not fight the Giants again. They were too weak, too full of fear for the world. Well the Giants would get around to the Gods, that was for certain. The Giants were strong, they would break the world rather than admit defeat, better to die gloriously and take the world with them, than accept defeat as they had, and live with their heads bowed to the Gods.

They had half the Kobold lands, and when they had the lands of the Pixies, they would move on to the lands of men. After that, even the Gods could not resist them.

Red643 had heard the Giants had the Elves on their side. After too many years of contact with the Men, the Elves had become weak, sick, their lands lost. Now, with the help of the Giants they would regain what they had lost, and their people would flourish again. At least this was what the Glorious Leader had promised the fools.

The Giants had other allies too, reptiles and amphibians who had crawled out of their deserts and swamps on the promise of better lands. Like that would ever happen, thought Red643. Not those disgusting things, not in my lands.

Finally, it was time for Red643 to go through the portal. As he did, it felt like someone was in there with him. He shivered, how could that be, there was no one there, but the door was hardly open at all.

Once on the other side, he gloried in the sight of the army, forming up and moving toward the next portal. Just behind

Red643 the Captain stopped the rest of the line, telling them to stay and guard the portal. Red643 sneered, what did they need a guard here for, they were not going to retreat, they would go on to victory, the Glorious Leader and the General had both said so. After all, who could oppose them.

Still, a small doubt remained in his mind. Who could have thought that the Pixies would hold out against the massive power of the Giants. Well, a momentary setback, victory was inevitable, they were Giants after all.

Already the army was stripping this world and killing the creatures who lived here. They had not needed supply lines, they were living off the country. There was always another world to ravage, and this one had plenty of food and drink.

Move forward as fast as possible, that was the ticket, get through and win, the portals were too small to bring through the big weapons, let alone supply trains. Fast and light, that was the ticket. Chemical and biological weapons were portable, and they would take care of the pathetic native population, leaving the world safe behind the army.

Red643 looked around himself and thought that maybe he had better get out to the side and find himself some food and maybe some loot, being at the ass end of the army wasn't a great place to be. Already he could see those ahead of him sprinting to the sides, and he took off after them. The bastards up front had taken the best loot, he was sure of that, and once again he cursed his luck to be at the back of the army.

He had thought that maybe it was safer at the back, but he was hungry and had no gold in his pocket. Best to start working his way forward and leave those poor guards to starve.

~

The Trip Home

There were no more incidents as Jim and Elf finished the train trip and got off at Winchester.

As they rode the long escalator up to the surface, Jim commented “I need to go home and check on the family, as well as get kitted out for the search. From the reception so far, I think I had better get out some of the old fighting equipment, much as I hate doing that.”

“Probably a good idea, although you know Jim, I could have a squad of my men come along, that way you wouldn't need to worry about fighting.”

“No, I don't think so Elf, how many of your men know how old you are, and how many know about the world below?”

“Not very many, OK we'll do it the old fashioned way.”

On the surface, Elf hailed a cab and as he was about to get in, Jim took his arm. “Just how much have you forgotten? How long has it been since you've been in the field? We'll take the next one that comes along,” and he waved the cab off.

“Oh for lord's sake Jim, just who do you think would have a clue that you're here in the country?”

“You did.”

“Alright, good point, we'll take the third one along, how's that?”

“Second.”

“Jesus Jim, I'm on your side.”

“Maybe.”

They took the second cab and rode out toward Jim's estate. Along the way Jim looked at the town, which hadn't changed much in the core, tourist attraction that it was, but in the outer city and beyond, there were far too many changes. A hundred years in the life of a city was a lot of time.

Once they were into the countryside things looked familiar once more, and suddenly Jim leaned forward and said, “Stop, we'll get out here at this pub.”

“I'm sure there's booze at the estate, Jim, do you need a drink that badly?”

“No, but I need to see if I can get a line on the old squad.”

As they walked into the Kobold's Head, the nostalgia hit them both hard. This had been one of the places where the squad planned their raids, and tended their wounds afterwards.

The bartender looked vaguely familiar. “Would you be a descendent of George Wilcox son?” said Jim.

“I am George Wilcox, you daft old man.”

“What? How.”

“You don't remember me Ash? I ran the place when you were fighting the Danes.”

Elfwin was laughing behind his hand when Jim looked at him. “She slept with him too?”

“You'd be surprised who she slept with Jim, and sometimes she wasn't all that careful with the pattern distribution. George here has been running this place, well, a place for about a thousand years. He had to burn it down a couple of times.”

Jim looked at the bartender.

“For insurance purposes or to sell the land to a new owner. Surely you do the same Jim.”

“Mostly I move. Alright, fine, how are you George?”

“As good as I should be, Jim. What can I get you?”

“Two pints of Bass please, and some information on the old squad. Have you seen any of them around?”

“The only ones left are you, Elf here, Hema, and Gil. The others are gone, died long ago. Oh, and Hugo of course.”

“Damn, how did that happen?”

“A couple of world wars, how do you think? Hard to fight your way out of a tangle with an artillery shell.”

“That's a shame. What about Hema and Gil, what do you hear about them?”

“Hema has dropped off the map, Jim, and Gil is over in Europe at the war there.”

“I thought he was done with war?”

“Well this one has a pretty clear aggressor and defender, just the sort Gil feels he has to fight. Not only that, it's mostly hand to hand in the cities. His type of fight.”

“Damn, it would be useful to have him with us.”

“What's going on Jim?”

“We're going after Hema, there are weak spots opening up and he should have seen them coming, but as you said, he seems to be gone. We want to find him again.”

“I can try to get a message to Gil for you, at least tell him you're on this side of the planet again.”

“Thanks, and George, one thing occurs to me, why are you running a pub? Someone as old as you ought to have some money put away by now?”

“Got more money than I'll ever need Ash, but a man's got to have something to do right? Plus it amuses me to give advice to my fifteen or twenty times grand-kids.”

He wandered away leaving Elf and Jim to talk. “How many more like him, Elf?”

“A few, I think I’ve found most of them over the years. They make great informants, it’s amazing what you can see from the distance of a few hundred years. Some of my best assets.”

“You ever miss her?”

“More than I’ll admit most of the time, Jim.”

While they finished their beers, George called the Manor for a car. Jim would have liked to surprise the family, “catch them in the act,” he said, but too late.

George waved them off when they tried to settle up at the bar, and they got into the car for the final couple of miles to the house. Jim watched out the window and wasn't surprised to see that very little had changed. His rules were quite specific about what could be changed and what had to stay the same.

Just then, from the woods came small-arms fire. The car was armoured of course, so the driver simply rolled on. As they approached the house, they saw ten or twelve men with automatic weapons heading into the woods. “More of yours Elf?”

“Not mine, not in the woods either, Jim, I'd say we have some more agents of whoever wants Hema to stay hidden. No, let your people take care of it, I trained them.” said Elf as Jim reached toward the door.

Jim grunted, let go of the door handle and looked toward the house.

They rolled up the drive and got out in front of an impressive front entrance. Elf was grinning, and Jim didn't trust him for a moment. "Something you want to tell me Elf?"

"No, not a thing, Jim, welcome home."

"Oh hell," Jim said as they went through the doors.

~~

Looking for Jim

Art, Ingrid and Hugo stepped out of a wall in Winchester, England. Not so very far from where Jim and Elfwin came up from below, but they didn't know that.

There was some difficulty in locating where Jim was, mostly because he and Elf were in a cab, driving out of town.

Art turned to Ingrid, "OK my Goddess, you said you can find Jim, do your stuff."

Ingrid grinned at him and then did a slow circle while she stood on the sidewalk. "There," she said, pointing, "right over there," as she started walking toward a pub.

Hugo and Art followed along, Hugo grinning. The three of them walked into the pub and up to the bar where Ingrid ordered three pints. As Art and Hugo reached for the glasses, Ingrid said, "Order your own, gents, this shifting from one side of the world to the other gives a girl a thirst."

Rolling their eyes, they ordered their own pints. Hugo leaned over to Art and whispered, "It's an older joke than you could possibly imagine."

Art looked around the place with an eye to seeing an authentic English pub ambience. He spotted several antique looking items that he had ordered, obviously from the same catalogue, for his own pub back home. Taking his fingernail to the old smoke-stained beams, he realized they weren't so much smoke-stained as nicotine-stained paint. Ah well, atmosphere is atmosphere he supposed.

In the meantime Ingrid had started a conversation with the barman while she took a bowl of peanuts and put them on the floor for Hildy, who tucked in noisily.

The inevitable half-drunk old character sitting in the corner commented, "That's a strange looking dog," as Hildy looked up and made a woof sound as best a pig could.

Hugo looked right at home. In fact, Art thought he looked an awful lot like the sign hanging outside the place that declared this as the Falstaff Arms. Art looked again at the logo on the menu and then up at a grinning Hugo who turned his head to the side so Art could compare a bit more easily.

"I own the place," he said eventually, "but I haven't been back for quite a while. Dunno who this guy is at the bar, but the manager is sitting over there doing the books. It's part of a chain you know."

Art didn't know, but he was beginning to suspect. "Are you going to check up on the place while we're here?"

"Whatever for? The manager is probably skimming the cash, the bartender is stealing the booze to take home, his buddies are getting free beer that goes down as spillage. Hell Art, I've

been running pubs for hundreds of years and if the staff isn't getting their perks, they aren't happy and if they're not happy, there's no customers.

“You know, there's still plenty that goes back to corporate and to the family-owned company that owns the chain. That, by the way, would be me, my father, my grandfather, his great grandfather.”

“I get the idea, Hugo, it's you. Listen, speaking of family, do you have any?”

“Long ago and many times Art, but not now,” and that seemed to be as much as Art was going to get out of him.

Ingrid turned back from her chat with the bartender. “I asked him if he'd seen anyone that looks like Jim come through here. He hadn't, but suggested we talk to the manager.”

Hugo laughed, “That's your location method? Drop into every pub in the city and ask if they've seen Jim?”

Ingrid scowled at him.

“Never mind,” said Hugo, “if you want to visit pubs, I'm all for it, but forget the managers and the bartenders, I know where Jim will be. He'll be heading for home.”

“He's got a home near here?”

“Sure, he once owned half this city, still owns a big part of the land outside of it. Let's go visit another pub and then we'll go find Jim.”

“Another of this chain of pubs?” Art asked.

“Good lord no, let's go to one with good food and better beer, these chains are terrible, they buy the meals in bags and microwave them. I have a hankering for some real pub grub.”

And so the three wandered around the corner to a place that looked like it had been there for three hundred years. As they went in, Art read a plaque that said it had been there five hundred. “I renovated a couple hundred years ago,” said Hugo.

“You own this place too?”

“Of course, it's my first place, and I was the first bartender and cook. The recipes are still mine.”

It turned out that the food was amazing, the beer even better, and the decor had a patina that no supply store could have replicated. Art couldn't resist sticking his nose on a beam to smell hundreds of years worth of wood smoke, as Hugo smiled.

After identifying himself, Hugo told the kitchen to send out a massive bowl of scraps for Hildy, who was in hog heaven.

They enjoyed their food, and were on their second round of beers when a couple of shady characters, right out of a dime novel, showed up and flashed a gun. “Out the back you three,” was all they said.

As they walked toward the back, Hugo shook his head at the bartender who was pulling a cricket bat from under the bar. He also touched the arms of Ingrid and Art and said, “This will be fun.”

As they walked out into the back alleyway, the gunmen waved them toward some trash bins, their intentions clear. About half way, Hugo spun, he had a walking stick in his hand and suddenly the gunmen were without guns. As fast as it showed up, the stick was gone and Hugo posed like some 1800s boxer, both hands up high and his fists rotating in a strange motion.

The men attacked together, obviously not accepting the invitation to fight fair, and Hugo jabbed the first, snapping his head back and breaking his neck with a nasty sound. The second was too close to escape and Hugo kicked him hard in the knee which bent the wrong way as the joint was destroyed.

Hugo bent over the man and said, "One chance, who sent you?"

The man stared back defiantly, and said nothing. Hugo shrugged and was lifting his foot to crush the man's windpipe when a voice from further down the alleyway said, "We would appreciate having him to question please Mr. Zembini.

Hugo lowered his foot and turned around slowly. The four men weren't acting in a threatening way, but Hildy made a nasty sound deep in his throat.

"And you are?" said Hugo.

"Elfwin Edwards sent us sir. We picked you up on CCTV and you are on our list of people to contact when they come back into the country."

Hugo seemed to know what was going on and said, "And these men?"

“Sir, you know there is a war going on in Europe, these fellows are agents we've been keeping an eye on. They are buddies with some of our richer politicians, but I suspect, no more. We would appreciate having them for evidence.”

“For your blackmail files I suspect you meant to say.”

The man gave a half bow and smiled.

“And where is Elfwin now?”

“The last we heard he was heading for the Childress estate sir, and we'd be happy to take you there.”

“I can find it, thank you, and I would appreciate you cleaning this up, some of my customers like to come out here to throw up.”

“As you wish sir, we will trouble you no more.”

Hugo rubbed his hands together and turned to his companions saying, “Right, well as much fun as this is, it's time to go chat with Jim, and maybe I'll have a chat with Elfwin Edwards too, the man put me on a list. Me, a list, shameful.”

Art was absolutely mystified, but Ingrid was thoroughly enjoying herself. Hildy was heading for the dead man when Ingrid said, “You just ate you little pig, leave it.” At which point, the men trying to collect the body seemed to relax.

Going back through the pub, they were met with just about every employee heading for the back door with quite an assembly of knives, cleavers, an antique pike, a replica cutlass and even a couple of vintage revolvers. “Put them down please

gentlemen, all is good, but thank you for your support,” said Hugo with an extravagant bow.

Heading back to the main road, Hugo hailed a taxi and gave directions.

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Eldwife

Again and again the knotted leather sap came down on her. She was covered in bruises, new and old, and her right arm was broken. Her leg as well, from where he had stomped on it.

“Conniving bitch, defy me will you? No more, you half-breed witch.”

The next blow landed on the right side of her head, she could no longer fend it off and she fell stunned to the ground. This didn’t stop her attacker, he kicked her hard in the side, and raised his leg to stomp once more on her broken leg.

A hand grabbed his hair, a knife came across his neck and he was tossed away to bleed to death.

Ashley Childress knelt down by the broken girl, checking her for signs of life, and was surprised when her eyes fluttered open.

She was healing right before his eyes, all but the bruises.

“What are you girl?” asked Jim.

“My name is Eldwife, and I'm half human sir, although I am also half Elf, that dead Elf being my father.”

“For that, I am sorry girl.”

“Don't be. He captured my mother and used her as a slave and for sex. Eventually he beat her to death because she was slow to do something or other, it never mattered what. After that, he began using me, it's been several years and I thank you for killing him.”

“How old are you, you don't look anything over sixteen.”

“I'm fourteen of your years, a lot more years than that while we were in the Elf lands.”

“Well you're free now Eldwife, you may go where you wish.”

“And where would that be sir? All I know is being a slave to my father, I know nothing and no one.”

“That's not my concern, I simply saw a man beating a child, you may go where you wish.”

“Fine, I wish to go with you sir. I have heard of kindness but you are the first to show it to me.”

“You cannot come with me, I am a fighter, heading to war, no place for a child, even if I should wish for one. Beside that, you're crippled, you couldn't keep up.”

The girl stood up and stepped toward Ashley. “I heal quickly, faster than either Elf or Human. I will not slow you down.”

“I still don't need a child.” Jim said gently, “but perhaps you can come with me until we find a place for you. A farm perhaps.”

“Will you not take me as a wife, sir. I was bred to be a wife and a servant, it's what I know.”

“You are a child to me, and I am no lover of children.”

With that, her appearance changed, she now looked like a rather ordinary young woman. No special beauty, the sort that would make a good camp follower. Ash was startled, but looked thoughtful.

“Try me for a month sir, and see that I can be a useful woman to you. I can cook, wash and keep you warm at night. I ask you to let me try.”

Ash had no intention of taking on a soldier's wife, but he was touched by her offer. How bad was her life with her father if she wanted the life of a camp follower.

“Very well, girl. You can call me Ashley and you can travel with me until I decide what to do with you.”

That night, they slept in the woods and Eldwife cooked and washed Ash's clothing, hanging it to dry over the fire. Ash, in his light underclothes was somewhat cold as they tried to sleep. Eldwife came to him and said, “We are both cold, please let me lie beside you.”

Ash agreed and it was not long before Eldwife had him hard and he made her his wife. “Witch indeed,” he thought as he dropped off to sleep.

In the morning she was up before Ash, which was a surprise to a man who slept little and lightly. She had packed up the camp and cooked breakfast. As he ate, he considered that perhaps she might be useful.

He was about to say so when she leapt to him and clamped a hand over his mouth. “Danes,” she whispered.

As he nodded and crouched, looking for them, she moved her hands as if closing a set of doors. She then put her hand on Jim's arm and her finger to her lips.

A squad of Danes came marching into the clearing and Jim tensed, but Eldwife squeezed his arm and shook her head. He stopped, and then realized that the Danes were walking by the camp. They didn't see the campfire, the pack, or the two people crouched immobile by the side of the clearing.

As they passed by and crashed through the bush into the distance, Ash looked at Eldwife.

“I am half elf and I can see patterns,” she said, “further, I can make others see patterns that I have changed. Those men saw only bush.”

That settled it, Ashley had another companion for his fight. He had not yet begun to form his band of guerrillas, so Eldwife was to be the first.

The two of them travelled to the Wessex camp and fought side by side for about a year, and they grew comfortable with each other. Yet at the end of that year, Eldwife was concerned about Ash, he was fatigued, the constant fighting was affecting his

mind and it was getting hard to sooth him. He drank more than was good for him. One night, after an evening in the tavern, he was brought home by a rather frightening man who seemed to be menace itself.

As Ash snored drunkenly in another room, Eldwife decided she needed to know more about this man. She approached him and found she was attracted to him sexually. There was an aura of ancient understanding on him and so she decided to bed him. It wasn't that she was in the habit of bedding Ash's companions, but Ash wasn't particularly jealous either.

The moment she lay down beside Gil Hamish and touched his body she realized that he was ancient, an immortal fighter, not like the Gods or the Elves, but something entirely different. As they made love, she teased out the pattern of his antiquity and realized he wasn't actually immortal, but he aged extremely slowly, and more than that, he healed quickly, body and mind. His mind was clear and balanced, even though she could feel thousands of years of war in him.

She told him what she had discovered and asked him if she could give it to Ash. He looked at her and said, "I don't know what it is I have, but you are welcome to give it to Ashley if you can do such a thing. I feel he's a fighter that we need in this war."

The next night, Eldwife went to bed with Ash and passed the pattern along into his body. In the morning Ash noticed the change. His mind was no longer troubled and his various wounds seemed to be healing more quickly. He mentioned this to Eldwife a few days later, and she told him she had slept with Gil to obtain the pattern and that she had passed it along.

Not knowing what to think about that, Ash decided to simply see what would happen. What happened, eventually, was that he found several men who were fighters, and Eldwife slept with them to pass along the pattern.

Eldwife, Ash and Gil fought for several months when they met Edwin Edwards who joined them. By this time, Eldwife was in love with Ash, although she hardly knew what that was, but the kindness he showed her, and the freedom he gave her was something that constantly amazed her.

She slept with Edwin in order to pass along the pattern, after he had proved himself worthy of it, but she kept sleeping with him, simply because she found she was fond of him as well. Eventually she gave him a new name and as many of her Elf powers as she could.

This was surprisingly useful to the squad, as Elfwin Edwards became a superb scout, able to tease out patterns in the landscape and in the minds of those Danes they sometimes captured.

A few other men joined the squad and Eldwife gave them the pattern and the little band was as dangerous as any unit in any army. Gil passed along his fighting skills, Elfwin would gather the information on the enemy, Ashley would plan, and when the fight began, Eldwife would cast illusions to confuse the enemy. Because she had slept with everyone in the squad, they saw through those illusions and their small unit could eliminate much larger numbers of opponents in a very short time.

This went on past the Danish wars, and the squad became more mercenaries than defenders of their homes.

Eventually, inevitably, some of the squad were killed, and others drifted away. Eldwife also wandered away one day, after kissing Ash and saying she would see him again. He understood, after 200 years of fighting, it had become a bit difficult to maintain a relationship without getting a bit bored.

She disappeared, and after another hundred years, during which she didn't come back to him, Ash and the others assumed she had died.

Ash and Hugo went north, Gil found work in the European religious wars, and life carried on. Elfwin realized that he was an excellent spy, and worked for both the upper and lower worlds. Living a double life was no problem for him.

After a while, he began to notice other long-lived men. They were always careful to hide themselves, but he could see them, or rather he learned to see the pattern of their lives. He began to suspect that Eldwife wasn't dead after all, and he said a silent thank you to her as he recruited these men as informants.

Eventually he did meet Eldwife again, and they were occasionally useful to each other, but neither felt any particular need to share any information about each other with anyone else.

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Hugo the sorcerer

Once the trio were in the taxi and underway, Art turned to Hugo and asked, "Hugo, why are you such a good fighter? I thought you were a sorcerer."

“Can’t a man be both, Art? Look, how much has Ingrid told you about Jim and myself?”

“Not a whole lot, just that you two argued over a girl who disappeared through a portal a long time ago.”

Hugo looked at Ingrid, who nodded. He looked back at Art and said, “Art, Jim and I have argued over thousands of girls. We were both born around 800, nobody kept track back then, but that’s what the historians say about the date of the wars. I was from East Anglia and Jim from Wessex. We met up and with a few others, ended up mostly immortal, and we fought in the Danish wars. Having survived that, we kept fighting for a vary long time.

“Eventually, Jim and I got tired of the killing, and so we went north to try and find some peace. The Church wasn’t much for peace and goodness then, or at any time, really. It was too closely allied with the various governments who were addicted to war. You’ve heard of Militant Christianity? Well that was the middle ages in a nutshell.

“No, Jim and I found we wanted something outside war, and so we went to the Orkney’s where we had heard there were holy men, shamans, who dealt with the spirit realm. By then we weren’t certain if we had souls or not, and we thought maybe a shaman could tell us.

“The Orkney’s were no good. The Pagan Danes, and then the Christian Danes had wiped out the old culture ages ago. Have you heard of the circumpolar cultures?”

Art nodded slowly, he'd heard something about it, but not much more than the name.

“It was a culture that went right round the arctic, Europe, Asia and North America, and it is ancient. Various peoples came and went, but the shaman tradition remained. That was what we were looking for. We drifted further north and east until we got somewhere between what's now Finland and Russia. Who the hell knows where you are up there.

“We found a shaman who would take us on, and we spent ten years with him. Jim found peace, and he ended up mostly out of all fighting after that. Eventually he drifted to Guelph where you met him running a lunch counter that's more mental health clinic than a coffee place. Without even realizing, you've been carrying on the tradition.

“I didn't find peace, so much as knowledge. I found power, I guess Jim did too, he can see things most men can't. I found something beyond that. The things that most shamans leave alone, I found fascinating. They usually stop at explaining and adjusting, but I manipulate and change. I don't know how else to put it, but Liz knows too. I was shocked to find her in Guelph, but like I say, circumpolar, the shamans were in North America long before the Europeans stumbled onto the east coast.

“So a few hundred years of fighting and killing, and I ended up pretty good at it. Then a hundred years of study across the arctic, and a few hundred more to practice and you have the handsome sorcerer you see before you.”

Art wasn't sure how much of that to believe, and looked over at Ingrid. “All of it,” she said, reading his mind yet again,

although she would say it wasn't hard to read at any time. "I've known Hugo for as long as I've known Jim. Met him when he was fighting of course, and watched the two of them as they headed up into the arctic. I'm usually more concerned with fighters than shamans, but I'll tell you something, a man who can fight, but can resist, a man who can promote peace instead, is a damned good fighter. I keep track of those types, especially if they're nearly immortal."

Jim and Hugo as immortal fighters, was an idea that Art was having trouble getting his head around. Gil yes, there was no doubt he was a fighter, but Jim, and especially Hugo. It would take a while for Art to adjust to that.

"And the girls?" Art asked.

"Oh lord, don't get him started on the women he and Jim argued over," said Ingrid, "he'll never shut up."

Too late. "There was this one time that Jim and I were living together with our girlfriends. What Jim didn't know is that every chance she got, his girlfriend would come to my room and give me a tumble.

"Of course, I suppose fair is fair, my girlfriend was doing the same with Jim. We figured that one out one night when the two girls both screamed at almost the same time.

"Now it wasn't all rivals, there was the time we had a set of twins in bed, the two of us. It was all going quite well, until the Mayor of the town showed up with the guard. Turns out the twins were his daughters.

"And then there was the time..."

“Enough,” Art begged, “please, enough. Didn’t you have any actual long-term relationships?”

“Sure I did, Art. I had three wives that I spent a lifetime with. Their lifetime, I’m afraid. Raised seven kids among the three of them. After the third wife died, I decided no more. It’s just too hard to watch them grow old and die.

“And yes, I told them I wasn’t going to get old with them. They said they didn’t mind, and I suspect they didn’t. At least they never complained. The kids knew too, and they would say I was a friend of the family when I visited them and my grandkids.

“None of the descendants turned out long-lived, which also broke my heart. I was sort of hoping the pattern would pass along, but it’s not in the genes I guess.”

“Did you keep in touch with the families?” asked Art.

“For a couple of generations, and then they had no idea at all who I was, so I stopped. Look, living practically forever might sound like a fun thing, but you know what you feel like when you lose a pet? Yeah, well imagine losing a wife, or your kids, or the grandkids. It gets old fast, let me tell you.”

Hugo dropped into silence, and Ingrid reached forward to pat him on the shoulder.

“Wine, women, and song, remember Hugo? That’s the ticket,” she said.

“Yep, the good things in life, today and today and today, the past is only a shadow.”

Ingrid patted his shoulder again and leaned back.

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Family Challenge

“Oh hell, he’s been in the library hasn’t he? You might have warned me Elf, it seems there’s one in every generation.”

“It is his right to challenge for the head of the family Jim.”

“Damnit, those rules were put into place in case I got mentally incompetent or weak, do I look either?”

“Not to me, but again, they’re your rules.”

“Damnit doubled. Did someone explain to you kid, that this is a duel to the death?” The kid nodded. “And you still want to do it?”

“I do,” said the kid, holding out two rapiers.

“I haven’t even got my bags unpacked. All right kid, it’s your funeral, I suppose you’ve been taking lessons with those things? Some sort of re-creation group with a couple of the old manuals?”

The kid nodded solemnly.

“And did anyone tell you I wrote a couple of those manuals?”

The kid looked a little uncertain, but he lifted his chin bravely.

“Fine, fine, hold on to those and let me get my coat off,” said Jim as he took a step toward the kid. He got one arm out of his jacket and kicked the kid hard on the outside of his knee. As the kid went down Jim swung the jacket off his other arm and over the kid’s head, spun him around, and booted him into the fireplace which, fortunately, wasn’t lit.

Elf winced and shook his head. “They never read the rules closely enough do they?”

Jim made a disgusted sound and grabbed his jacket, dusted it off and put it back on.

When the kid finally came around, he looked surprised to be alive. Jim smiled a smug smile, “Don’t sweat it kid, death at the end of the duel is sort of an option, that clause was put in there to keep the time-wasting down to a minimum. You know you lost, right? What’s your name?”

“John, sir,” he said nodding.

“Well John, can you use those things you were holding?”

“Yes, sir,”

“Stop with the sir, my name’s Jim, Uncle Jim to you I guess. You know any other ways to fight?”

“Yes, s-Jim, I’ve been training all my life to challenge you for the head of the family.”

“Whatever for?”

“Not really sure, for being a second son I guess, and Grandfather told me I had to challenge you.”

“Name of Bertram? Damned dirty fighter if I remember right. Is he still alive?”

“That’s him sir, and no, he died about ten years ago, a very old man. He had my father late.”

“And you kept training? Good for you, and good for your grandfather, I owe him one. John, you’re one of the gang.”

“Sir?”

“Never mind, son, go get that cut on your head stitched and lie down, you look a bit concussed.”

“Now, in the meantime, who’s in charge around here? Come on, I know you are all watching in the secret passages, I can see all the eyeballs moving in the pictures. You know I put those there as a joke right? The real surveillance is done by hidden camera, or at least it had better be or someone isn’t keeping up.”

Doors and panels opened in the walls and several family members appeared, looking sheepish.

“Front and centre, the lot of you. I want reports, I want the most recent audit, the real one, not the ones you give to the government.”

Elfwin rolled his eyes upward and stuck his fingers into his ears.

“Oh don’t give me that Elf, if you don’t know my worth to the penny you’re crap at your job.”

Elf grinned and said, “Shall we move to the boardroom? It’s a lot more comfortable than here in the main hall, and there are chairs.”

“And beer and food damnit.” Grumbled Jim.

Once they were seated in the boardroom, the reports were read and after each one, Jim glanced at Elf, who nodded.

“Fine, good, keep it up,” said Jim, causing Elf to look over and raise his eyebrow. “OK more than good, excellent, bonuses all around.”

“Now where is John, I want him here for our next discussion, and he’d better have a good idea of what’s in the arsenal.”

An older man spoke up, “He’ll be here soon sir, and you can rest assured he knows what weapons we have on hand. We are well aware that your rules about fighting for the head of the family, are to keep one young man ready to assist you in any ‘wetwork’ required.”

“Does he know that?” said Jim.

“Of course not sir, as per family tradition, he was kept in the dark about the wetwork, so that he would train hard to win the family headship.”

“Fine, good, and my compliments to whoever arranged his training schedule, he’s in good shape for his age. I take it his ‘dirty fighting’ skills haven’t been needed yet?”

“No sir, he’s still young and strong. They were scheduled for about five years from now.”

“Well, he’ll learn on the job.”

Elfwin spoke up, “He is rather good Jim, we’ve got an eye on him for the service, your little helpers make good black ops guys.”

“Oh, glad to be of service to you and your spies, Elf.” Jim said rather sarcastically.

After John arrived with an armload of personal weapons, Jim handed Elf his gun back, and put on a pair of automatic handguns. He also stored a couple of expandable batons and a second knife in the holsters. “Now I don’t feel so naked.”

“John, you, Elf and I are heading out tomorrow morning to find a guy by the name of Hema. Look, what do you know about my history?”

“Mr. Edwards gave me a dossier about a month ago sir. He said you were coming and that I had better learn the real history of the family.”

Jim shot a look at Elfwin who shrugged and said, “Of course we keep an eye on you, Jim. If just to see what my old buddy is doing.”

Jim looked back at John and said, “In a paragraph, son.”

“Well sir, you are centuries old, you founded the family and fought in hundreds of wars and skirmishes alongside Mr. Edwards and several other men who are also very long lived.”

“That will do I suppose, and I’m telling you right now, drop the Sir, that’s how you get your commanding officer killed, do you understand?”

“Yes Jim, I did a stint in the Royal Marines and understand the principles.”

“Good, anything you’d like to ask me?”

“Yes Jim, could I get the long life treatment too?”

“Sorry kid, that woman has sailed. Wasn’t that in the briefing? Well never mind, go and pack then get a good night’s sleep. We’re leaving after breakfast.”

“Yes Jim.”

Jim turned to Elf, “He can make my name sound like 'sir' can't he?”

That night, both Elfwin and Jim were visited by chambermaids. It was another family tradition that if a maid got a baby from the founder of the family, or his friends, they would become members of the family.

However, if these women had been asked why they climbed into the bed, they would have said it had little to do with the money, and everything to do with the appeal of a man with

hundreds of years of experience, and an aura of menace that movie spies would never be able to match.

As it happened, these two girls had tossed dice with the other staff and by means of good old-fashioned cheating, had won the boys for the night.

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Coyote Gets a Bath

Amber spent less of her free time out of the apartment these days. She would teach her classes, and then go back to Coyote. Morning and night she walked him, with a leash on for the look of the thing. Coyote didn't object, and he remained in shaggy old dog form. Both things that worried Amber. Since Coyote had transferred his power to Amber and she, angry at the time, told him to become a mangy old mutt, he had been subdued. He certainly wasn't the arrogant, swaggering being she had first known.

She really regretted all her nagging at him to fix the world. She hadn't believed he would not do it, she knew he had the power to change it. But when he gave her the power, and the ability to predict what would happen, Amber had become as morose as Coyote.

She knew what he felt like, trying to fix things and watching them go wrong. That he had given her the ability to see what would happen if she changed something, she thanked him often in her thoughts. She could think up a fix and then see how it would go wrong, so she didn't make that fix. The one time she had fixed something she had the help of Ray and Kit in Kit's

dream world. Somehow the three of them together had worked it out.

Unfortunately, just because Coyote could give her the power to see what her actions would produce, didn't mean he could predict such things himself, so the poor being had watched all his efforts to fix the world, fall apart. No matter what he tried, it seemed to screw up.

Because of the depression that caused in the both of them, Amber had become devoted to him. Spending her free time at home with him. He seemed happy when she was there, and she had become used to him. She would lie on the floor and use him as a pillow when she watched TV or read a book. If she was on the couch, he was curled around her feet. If she was doing dishes, he was out of the way on the kitchen floor. When she was in bed, he was flopped over her feet, keeping them warm.

She had taken to talking to him often, sometimes even reading him her book if she came across a good section.

“Hello old fellow, did you get a good rest today. You just take it easy OK, Amber is here to do the worrying. Are you happy to see me home? It's good to see you too, let's check your bowls and then take you for a walk. Good boy, you got your leash.”

When they walked down the street they would sometimes meet someone who knew that shaggy dog on the leash was Coyote, and their eyes would grow big. Coyote on a leash! It was unthinkable, yet there it was.

One night, as Amber was trying to get to sleep, Coyote in his usual place across her feet, she almost kicked him. “What is it Coyo? You’re usually not so restless, what’s the problem.”

What Amber didn’t realize, on a conscious level, was that Coyote answered her. She knew he could understand what she said to him, and suspected he could root around in her brain if he wanted, but he had never spoken in this dog form. Still, she would ask and somehow know his answer. It was Coyote who had suggested the leash when Amber had proposed walks for the two of them, she felt the need for some exercise but didn’t want to spend the time away from him.

To have him walk free was unthinkable. Amber had heard of the dog-catcher who had tried to net him one day several years ago. The poor man still had nightmares about rabbits.

Now, Amber seemed to feel even more upset at the world situation, as if it was about to get much more dangerous. She had heard about the starving world, and she wondered if it were something to do with that? But it felt like her own world was in danger. She had learned to pay attention to such feelings, but there didn’t seem to be anything to do at the moment. “Come on Coyo, come on up here so I can hold you,” Amber said, as he moved up and rested his head on the pillow. Amber put her arm around him and eventually they both dropped off to sleep.

Amber had felt uncertain enough about her feeling of danger, that she had mentioned it to Megan, who had nodded and said “I feel it too.”

Well, what would come would not come unanticipated.

A few days later, Amber lay back on Coyote to read her book and got about a page in, when she said, “What is that horrible smell!”

Coyote managed to look even more abashed than he usually did, and Amber laughed at how pitiful he looked. “Come on Coyo, let’s run you a bath so I don’t have to open all the windows, it’s cold out.”

Coyote trotted into the bathroom and sat quietly as Amber filled the tub. He had a bit of a gleam in his eyes, but Amber didn’t see that in time. “There you are fellow, now let’s get you in the tub and give you a good scrub.”

She checked the water temperature and decided it was fine. With that, she picked him up and was just about to put him in when he galloped in her arms. Several things happened just before he hit the water. He knocked a whole bottle of bubble bath into the tub, he knocked the soap onto the floor, and he turned on the water again.

As he hit the water, Amber stepped on the soap and fell into the bath on top of Coyote, but not before she had been soaked by his splash. The tap and the bubble bath, not to mention Coyote’s continued flailing around in the water, combined to fill the bathroom with suds.

Amber emerged with a face full of foam and after wiping her face with her hands, burst out laughing. Coyote was looking at her with his mouth open and his tongue flopping out of one side, his tail slapping the side of the tub and the wall. Seeing him, Amber laughed even more and said, “Very funny, Coyo, a real howl. Well let’s get you scrubbed, and I’ll get in too, since I’m half washed already.

It was a small tub but they managed.

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Jim's Not At Home

About an hour after leaving Winchester, Hugo, Art, and Ingrid arrived at the front door of the Childress manor, and were greeted by a couple of old men who didn't look much like servants. "Mr. Edwards' men told us you were coming, Mr. Zembini, but I'm afraid you are a bit late. Ashley and Elfwin have already left, they are looking for Hema. Please do come in and spend the night, tomorrow you can follow Uncle Ashley."

"Most of the squad, now that's interesting," said Hugo as he walked into the house.

The senior members of the household made quite a fuss over Ingrid and Hildy. They knew, of course, who she was, she had visited many times over the years, and stories of her visits were legend.

To make another one, she and Hugo got into a drinking match, and gallon upon gallon of beer was drunk. Somewhere along the way Art had to drop out of the contest, and lay back on a couch to watch. Shortly after that, the knives came out, with Ingrid and Hugo throwing at the various paintings and trophies hung on the walls of the room.

Hildy climbed up on the couch and onto Art's lap, he had been through many of these drunken nights and was soon snoring.

There were so many tales thrown from one to the other that Art had trouble remembering even one. It didn't help that they were in shorthand.

“Do you remember Harry in London...”

“That bastard...”

“Yeah, the time he...”

“Oh God yes, and when he...”

At which point the two of them would burst into laughter and slap their thighs.

The housemaids kept up a steady stream of beer, but otherwise the family kept out of the way. Two of the maids did tend to linger around Hugo for slightly longer than strictly necessary to provide him with his next drink.

Art wasn't sure, but another maid tended to hover a bit around Ingrid, who didn't seem to notice. Art wondered about that and filed in under “not going to ask”.

Eventually, Art was too tired to keep listening, and asked to be shown to a bed. One of the maids followed him up and showed him to his room. She came in with him and turned down the bed, then offered to draw him a bath while she started to undress him. Art politely refused the bath and whatever else was on offer and dropped into the bed where he crashed. Hildy on his feet.

A few hours later, Ingrid came in and woke him. She was about as drunk as she ever got, and asked Art “did one of the maids offer herself to you?”

“She did, but I told her no thanks.”

“Shame, she’ll be disappointed, there are some interesting house rules around this place. Still, you’re a dear for being faithful.”

Taken a little by surprise, Art said, “Well, I was a bit tired.”

Ingrid laughed and cupped his face in her hand, “dear, dear boy, you are a delight,” and grabbed him by the waist.

After they’d had their fun, bouncing the bed around enough that Hildy snorted and moved to a couch, Ingrid lay back with a smile and said, “You know, Art, I’m not especially jealous, you could have taken the maid.”

“I’m quite happy with you my love, thank you for the offer. But tell me, you seem to be very old friends with Hugo, and the folks in this house certainly know who you are. What’s the story?”

“Oh, you want a bedtime story, do you?”

Art smiled and waited, Ingrid loved telling stories.

“Yes I know Hugo, Jim, and the whole squad as they called themselves. Jim isn’t the only one who has lived a very long time, and he isn’t the first. That would be Gil Hamish, and the longevity pattern got passed along to Jim, then a fellow by the name of Elfwin Edwards, Hugo, and a few others.

“Yes, Hugo is a very old friend of Jim’s. They were all Saxons from the various English kingdoms, and formed a guerrilla cell to harass and assassinate the Danes who were fighting their kingdoms. The lot of them got into the habit of fighting and they kept at it for hundreds of years, but a man can only do so much killing before he gets tired of it.

“Some of the group were killed, and I gathered those up when they died, some wandered away between wars and didn’t show up for the next one, and eventually everyone but Gil got out of the business. It really was a business for those men, by the time they had been killing for a hundred years, they were mercenaries, they fought for money and were very good at it. Not that they didn’t fight for causes they thought were good, but they didn’t fight for their own causes any more.

“They were extremely good at what they did, but there were some times where I must admit, I helped out just little. I was very fond of that squad in my role as goddess of war.”

Art wondered just how fond Ingrid had been of those men and she read his mind just a little. “Art my boy, think of how old I am, and how old those men are. It’s much better my love, to think about today, and forget the past. Even a goddess can’t remember every drunken night over a thousand years.”

She was grinning madly and Art decided if she wanted to tell him something, she would. If she could remember, that is, the poor doddering old lady. At that point in his thoughts, Ingrid swatted him on the top of the head and jumped on top of him.

In the morning, Art was bruised and sore and quite happy. He and Ingrid were at breakfast when Hugo came into the room.

The two maids who were being attentive last night practically ran over to him to help him sit and serve him his breakfast. Hugo soaked it up like a lord, a happy grin, and not a few pats on the bum for the girls.

After breakfast the crew packed up and were ready to follow Jim.

“How do we find them?” Art asked.

“I can find them,” said both Hugo and Ingrid at the same time.

One of the old men said, “Take one of the estate cars please Mr. Zembini, Uncle Ashley would be pleased if you did so.”

Art wondered how these men, who had never met Jim since the day they were born, would know what Jim wanted or didn’t want, but he kept silent. It was obvious they ran the estates and Jim was happy to let them do it.

The car was pulled around and Hugo dropped into the driver’s seat. Art took shotgun after trying the wrong side door, and Ingrid sat in back with Hildy, both of them promptly dropping off to sleep. Art could say this for Ingrid, she could drink anyone under the table, and she could sleep in the middle of a battlefield.

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Kit Talks to Ray

“Uncle Ray!” Kit called as she got into the dream world.

Ray was in the lunch counter and excused himself for a moment from the planning session. “Back in three minutes,” he said and vanished.

“What is it darling?” said Ray on finding Kit.

“There’s trouble coming, Uncle Ray, I know it. I can feel it when I’m here, and it’s much worse than when the weak spot tried to disappear us. The spot didn’t know who we were, it was just there, but somebody is really trying to hurt us.”

“Don’t you worry about that Kit, your friends are going to fix it. You just be a good girl and look after your family OK? Look after Mamma and Pops and Oki for me.”

“I will, I’ve been thinking of how I can help everybody and I will help them. I just wanted to warn you about the bad things to come.”

“Thank you pet, I appreciate that. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?”

“Not really, just that I love you very much Uncle Ray, and I want you to think about me when you need to. You told me to think about you when I needed to, so you think about me OK?”

Ray gathered Kit to him and hugged her tight, kissing her on the forehead. “I always think about you, sweetie, and I’ll be thinking about you if I need to, for sure. Now you get on back to bed and give everyone a big kiss when they wake up in the morning.”

“I will,” said Kit and vanished.

Ray was in a thoughtful mood when he got back to the lunch counter.

“Kit feels it,” he said, “she knows there’s trouble coming.”

Megan thought a moment, “I know she’s young Ray, but in times of crisis, spirit beings can grow up awfully fast. You said yourself you think she might be more powerful than you are. And you thought that maybe Tilly might have had some old blood somewhere back in her line. Why not assume that’s true. Take Kit at her word and call on her when you need her. How strong is your connection to your family.”

“Very strong when we’re in the dream world, but not so much when we’re outside of it. Someone in the world can call out, but if you’re outside you don’t know who’s inside and you can’t call to them.”

“Well Kit said call out to her if you need her. Nothing to lose if you do. Don’t forget she’s your daughter and father daughter links are especially strong.”

“Yes but she doesn’t know I’m her father.”

“Are you sure about that, Ray?”

Kit sat cross-legged on her bed, Okami was in his crib breathing softly. She could feel his dreams, even if she didn’t dream, herself, and she enjoyed being there with him.

She touched her mother and father, and realized they were also sleeping peacefully, no nightmares tonight for her to fight.

She left the family and started to go from Keen to Keen, from one family member to another, to everyone she loved and who loved her. They were awake of course, but she tickled each in turn. She had learned to do that shortly after she had realized that Ray was her body father and that she was part of his family. She didn't touch anyone too hard, she was just checking in. She had a feeling she would need to call on all of them quickly, and some time soon.

She then went back to Okami's dream and wondered, did he have a dream place like she did? She didn't find one, but she touched something, someone, and she realized it was his body father. She was very careful, this was a stranger, but she felt someone like him, someone he loved very much. It was Megan! She knew Megan and she loved her too.

That brought her back to Ray, Kit could feel that Ray was talking to Megan. She could feel that they were both worried, something was coming for sure. Well she would be ready. Kit started going around the Keen family once more, just a touch, just enough to know that she could call to them when she needed to call, when Uncle Ray called her. She reached up and held the little silver fox around her neck, the one Papa had given her, the one she knew was from Uncle Ray.

Megan was surprised when her boyfriend Stan walked into the lunch counter saying, "Megan I'm worried."

"What about?"

"Okami nudged me, he's just a baby but he nudged me and then he looked at you."

“That shouldn’t happen, Stan, are you sure.”

“It was gentle, like someone checking in, but yes I sure as hell felt it. Should he have that kind of power at his age?”

“No, he shouldn’t, but I think I might know who does, his big sister Kitsune seems to be much more powerful than we thought she was. It’s possible she nudged you through Oki.”

“Well it’s damned disturbing,” said Stan

“Well it’s your own fault, it’s what you get for screwing around!”

“OK, OK, I promised not to do it any more and I’ve kept my promise.”

“Only because I’m staying here in Guelph you jerk. Anyway, it’s probably just Kit checking in, don’t worry about it, and remember what we agreed.”

“I do, I will stay here in Guelph as a backup just in case the Giants break through you and your fighters. And I will keep a low profile, no sense having a surprise reserve if I’m not a surprise. Sometimes woman, I wonder if you don’t plan way too many steps ahead.”

“Somebody has to clean up the mess Coyote makes my love, now get on home and let the adults talk.”

Stan grinned and left. His visit had been sub-real so that nobody else saw, but Megan noticed that Liz was grinning. She grinned back and winked.

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Guelph Gathering

In Guelph, Megan was gathering the peoples as she called it. The lunch counter had become a staging area, with the Bar below, and the freezer space for those who were partial to the cold.

The Giants were in the bar, Joe Bear, Mara and Sam were in the diner, along with Mike and Liz. Sam had just happened by but was invited to stay and help serve the crew, which got bigger with each passing hour. Coyote and Amber were called for, and Caw was there.

“Oh shit, who invited that egotistical bastard?” said Caw.

“Who are you talking about?” said Mike who was behind the counter making pot after pot of coffee.

“Him, old Croak, my cousin Raven from out west.”

“You don’t get along?”

“Never have, he talks about his people being ever so rich, and ever so cultured with their canoes and their totem poles and their bentwood boxes. But my people are just as cultured. Their canoes were just dugouts but my people figured out how to build from birch bark, we had longhouses as nice as theirs, we had beadwork and quillwork that would blow your head off, while they had buttons on blankets. What we had was people who had to work for a living, not just go and dip the food out of the sea. He’s insufferable.”

“Yes, well I can see the problem,” said Mike as another crow landed outside the diner. “Where is he?” asked Mike.

“Right there,” said Caw, and then looked disgusted, “you think that’s a crow don’t you, it’s obviously my cousin Croak. I guess we all look alike to you eh?”

“I’ve never been able to tell raven from crow, Caw, sorry about that.”

“Look, it’s easy, crows are more handsome and smarter, right.”

Mike nodded quickly and turned back to the grill. Caw went out the door and there was a great deal of croaking and cawing and jumping up and down with wing battering. Mike presumed Caw was filling his cousin in on the situation.

James sat beside Mara, and Mike could see he was having a hard time keeping her calm. “It’s all good, Mara, you’ll be off soon, and I want you to promise me that you’ll be careful. Do what you have to do but come back OK?”

James didn’t look fearful, so Mike figured he was just trying to distract Mara from going after the Giants by herself. He was reminding her that he was going to be waiting for her, so that she would understand her chances of coming back were greater if she waited for the group.

Mike looked up as the door opened again and was pleased to see John and Lilith come in. John was a big fellow, with lots of experience of fights in the logging camps, but Lilith, she was someone who could stitch up just about any wound. Liz had been organizing the medical supplies and Mike asked Lilith to

go see her. Once there, the two women began to plan their little field hospital.

Coyote and Amber came in and with that, Megan stood and said, "It's time, call down for the Giants. Mara can you open us a portal to the Giant army?"

Mara stood and said, "It's about time, yes, let's get going before they're ready."

Megan nodded and said, "Can you open it so that it is behind some cover but in sight of the weak spot where you killed the scouts?"

"Easy," said Mara and turned to James, hugging him so hard his spine cracked, making those around him wince. "I will come back to you love, I promise you."

"OK we go," Megan said quietly, "Mara and I first, then Amber and Coyote, Raven and Crow, Raynard, then the Giants and Bear to take up the rear and pull out anyone he can, if we meet a problem. Come through and we will assess the situation, but it looks like we simply meet them head on as we discussed. Are we all ready?"

Those in the diner nodded, and there were rumblings from the stairs down to the bar as the Giants arrived.

Mara closed her eyes for a moment, and then said, "Through the door." She and Megan stepped outside the diner, and never got there, they vanished, along with the rest of the fighters in turn.

Once they were all gone, Liz spoke up, “Away from the walls, everyone, we’re setting up.” And with that she faced three of the walls and made a sort of shooing motion with her hands. The diner was more than twice the size it had been.

Mike muttered, “So how come we’re living in such a tiny place?” but not loud enough for Liz to hear.

The kobolds showed up outside the door running operating tables, bins of scrubs, drapes, and surgical instruments up the walk. Not to mention a strange contraption that looked like a megaphone but with an eyepiece at the narrow end.

Ken swept in with the equipment and nodded to Mike, “We forged this stuff last night, and we’ve converted the bar into a recovery room. Lots of beds and such, the Giants were a great help shifting things around, especially the kegs of beer.”

Lilith was delighted with the quality of the work, and she told Ken so just before kissing him on the forehead. The little Kobold very nearly swooned at the force of her gratitude.

Liz declared, “time to close up shop,” and made a movement that was too difficult to look at, with her hands. “The crew will be coming back through the door, Mara said she would leave it open and I can close it if necessary. Lilith will be in charge of surgery, John will assist her, and I will be comfort and anaesthesia combined. Mike, James, and Jane, you’re on orderly duty, get them onto the tables and off again when we’re done. Larry, grab the mop, there’s likely to be some blood on the floors.

“I’m about to open a portal in the freezer door that will take you directly to the bar below, just watch your step when you’re running patients down there.

“If we can’t patch them, the kobolds will take them further down the line to the west where we have some hospitals that are ‘sympathetic’ to non-human patients.

“Are we all clear? Good, be ready, the wounded could come through at any moment.”

Of course life isn’t as snappy as that. It was a good three hours until the first patients began to arrive. Until then, the crew at the lunch counter drank coffee, ate sandwiches Mike had prepared ahead of time, and talked.

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Eldwife and the Elf King

“How do I get into these situations,” Eldwife asked herself, “all I wanted was a quiet place to study, and all I ever find are jerks and assholes.”

She had come to the Alden Valley to work on her pattern-making skills, she was down to the DNA level after a long study. She’d started as soon as Rosalind Franklin had told her about the discovery. The building blocks of life, it was too much for Eldwife to resist.

It wasn't that she had some reason to mess around with the patterns of life, the study was enough. After more than a thousand years, she had found that study, learning, was the one

thing that kept her interested in that life. The longer she lived, the more important it was to 'keep her hand in'.

She had kept loose tabs on the rest of the squad relying on second hand reports and the occasional peek using her powers. Elfwin was the eternal policeman, Gil a warrior, Jim was happy to be a short order cook, although he was really a therapist, Hugo was a aesthete, wine, women, and song.

Hema was a hard one to understand. He seemed content to drift, he was a passive kind of man, content to watch life go by. Eldwife supposed that was why he was the one to keep an eye out for potential dangers. He didn't seem to want or need anything more to do.

Elfwin watched too, but he had to interfere, he couldn't just stand by. As she thought this, Eldwife realized that every one of the squad had a different way of dealing with their long lives.

Hers was study, so she had come to the Alden where she thought her old friend the king would give her a quiet place to work. Eldrin the fourth was a distant relative to her monster of a father, but he was a decent enough sort. Too bad he wasn't King any more, his cousin, Eldley the first, had succeeded to the throne in the traditional way. He had snuck up behind Eldrin and stabbed him in the back.

Still, Eldwife had a place to work and had been happy for a few decades. And then Edley the second, the King's son, had decided that he was going to have her in his bed. The boy was worse than her father had been, cruel, stupid and with all the charisma of a dog turd. Fortunately, she wasn't a child any more.

The night he tried to rape her, she warned him three times. As he came at her the fourth time she had locked up all his muscles and then torn him apart, starting at the feet and saving his heart for last. Without a tongue he didn't make too much noise, but he certainly got her bedroom messy with the blood and muscle being flung around.

His father, when he heard, didn't seem too worried about what Eldwife had done. The boy had been told by his father to leave her alone, and had gone after her anyway. Some people are determined to kill themselves. Still he was an heir and Eldley was determined to have his dynasty.

This was why he had made his bargain with the Giants. The Giants had a plan, they and their allies would have the entire world, no more above and below, no more men, no more gods. The lesser races, the Pixies, the Kobolds, and the others would be dead or slaves, and the Elves had a place in this new world.

The Giants had promised that the Elves, for their help, would get back the lands that Men had taken from them. Land they needed to recover, the people were fading, penned in further each year. In this glorious new world, Eldley wanted his dynasty.

“Make me another heir, witch,” he had told Eldwife.

“Look,” she said, “I had a cat once, he was a really nice cat, and so when he died I cloned him. It turned out that the new cat wasn't anything at all like the old one. There's more than genetics involved in this, a clone will never, ever be the same as the original.”

Somewhere in that speech, Eldwife realized that Eldley was quite happy with that. A new heir that wasn't as stupid and cruel as the old one would suit him just fine. She had shrugged and set to work, thinking it would be a good chance to learn a lot more about her new craft.

She had a blob in a vat so far.

During her time in the valley, she had talked a little bit about her past life with the new King. It wasn't as if she gave him an autobiography, but she had mentioned Ashley Childress and his squad in passing. Hearing those stories, the King began to wonder if those men could frustrate his efforts to regain the glory of the Elven race. He had sent agents out to watch for any signs that these men were moving against him, or the Giants, and they had found those signs.

He didn't need Eldwife to see a pattern emerging. These men were coming and he was going to stop them. He had one of them already. The one named Hema had spent that last fifty years in one of the Elf brothels near the border. He hadn't noticed it was 50 years of course, the king had made sure of that, or perhaps it was just that the man didn't care.

In those decades, the King had tried to poison Hema, but failed each time. He was beginning to wonder if this man was a man at all. He continued to search for something that would work, but Hema seemed ignorant of the attempts and of the poison itself.

Eldwife was silent on the subject, she said she was no longer interested in the men she had spent so long fighting beside, and the king believed her.

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The Drive North

As they left Winchester and headed north, Art glanced back to make sure Ingrid was asleep and said, “Hugo something has been bothering me for a while, it’s something that Ingrid told me, and I figure you might know. Did Jim really kill a god?”

“Oh, that. Yeah he did, it was a minor war god but yes. This god was fighting for the Liutizi when they revolted against the Holy Roman Empire. We were fighting for the Empire, and this god was commanding quite a large contingent of pagan Slavs. Gods were a lot more hands-on back then.

“We were scouting through the forest when we came upon the headquarters of these tribesmen, if you could call it a headquarters, they were never very well organized. Anyway, we saw a chance to get in and do some damage, so we raided them.

“Well this god comes roaring out of a tent, straight for Jim. There wasn’t any question that Jim had to kill the guy, or he’d have killed Jim, so Eldwife threw up a thicket in front of the god and by the time he took down that illusion, Jim was behind him. Before he could turn around Jim cut his throat, and with that, we were off back through the woods.”

“But how can you kill a god? They’re immortal aren’t they?”

“Immortal sure, but they can die, and the closer a god fights with men, the more likely it is to get killed. You know that big seax Jim fights with?”

“Sure, he cuts up the onions with it.”

“Well he took that weapon off of a demigod, it was a sword originally, with the tip broken off, so this hero chucks it away and Jim grabbed it. The sword was a gift of this guy’s God father... damn I can’t remember his name, so it is pretty magical, but the hero managed to run up against another hero with a more powerful father. The sword was broken in the same swing that took the poor sod’s head off.

“Anyway, the broken sword looked like a seax and it has some magic left in it, enough to slit the throat of a god.

“Years later I was talking with Ingrid who showed up to collect the fallen in that skirmish, she always liked our little band and made sure she was nearby when we fought. Anyway she went to collect this fallen god and realized he wasn’t a man. Apparently she booted him hard in the backside and called him a fool for fighting alongside men.

“So yes, Jim once killed a god, and yes, he’s as likely as not to try to kill this god that Ingrid is dreaming about.”

Art fell silent after that as they drove on. Eventually, they pulled off the main road and dropped into the town of Stoke on Trent. “Just a little pit stop, Art, Ingrid would never forgive me if we didn’t grab lunch here.”

As they pulled to a stop Art saw that the Bass brewery was right across the street. Ingrid snuffled a couple of times and then woke up with a start. She looked around and spotted the brewery and said “Hugo, you’re a peach, let’s go, I want a plowman’s lunch and a beer.”

As they walked toward the doors, a woman inside looked at Ingrid and Hildy, looked down at a list on her desk and back up again while calling one of the senior management. “It’s her, sir, she’s coming in. Yes I’m sure, big woman with a pet pig, yes wild blond hair. Yes sir I will.”

She rushed to the door and greeted the travellers with a smile “Lovely to have you here to visit, won’t you come this way I have a special room for you where you can see the brewery floor while you have lunch. I assume you will want a beer as well, miss?”

Ingrid smiled and nodded a yes, making “I’ve caught a fish this big” motions with her hands. Art looked at Hugo who said “Just stay out of the way, people have been known to drown.”

The manager was in the room to greet them and shortly afterwards a man came with cheese, bread, chutney and pickles on a large platter, another had four plates and cutlery along with a bucket of kitchen scraps for Hildy, who gave a little hop of joy toward the fellow, causing him to stumble back four steps.

And after those men, five others with huge steins of beer in each hand came in, dropped the glasses on the table and ran for more.

“Oh you remember me,” said Ingrid, clapping her hands, “I’m so pleased.”

The manager gave a sort of half bow and said “if you would look out on the floor, miss, you will see an extra vat of our best. That is yours, always kept full for your visits.”

Ingrid laughed and clapped again like a schoolgirl with a new backpack. She sat and reached for two of the steins which she drained quickly and reached for more.

Hugo told Art, “She loves Bass, she found the place in the 1780s and drinks it whenever she finds it.”

The manager spoke up, “After a few visits to the brewery, we realized that each time, we were short of enough beer to fill our orders, so a few years ago the management decided we would put in an extra tank and keep it on hand for when the lady drops in.”

Another ten tankards were arriving just as Ingrid reached for the last two when Hugo asked, “You don’t suppose you could find a couple of pints for Art and me could you?”

“Of course sir, they’re on their way, we figured we should make sure we took the edge off of the lady’s thirst first.”

“Very wise,” Hugo said with a bow, “sit down Art, before she eats all the lunch as well.”

When their pints arrived, Hugo picked his up and just as he was about to drink, threw it down and knocked Art’s glass out of his hand as well. “It’s poisoned,” he shouted.

Art looked to Ingrid with panic in his eyes but Hugo put a hand on his arm “It won’t hurt her, boy, let her drink.” He turned to the manager whose eyes were wide and his skin even more white than usual.

“Poison? Are you sure sir?”

“Of course I am. I can smell poison when it’s right under my nose, otherwise I wouldn’t be as old as I am.” He grabbed one of Ingrid’s steins and smelled. “It’s in her tank, man, how did that happen? Look, bring me samples from your other tanks right now, and don’t ship anything until we’ve checked.”

Ingrid put down the stein she was drinking and looked over at Art, “did you drink any?” Art shook his head and she smiled, then went back to drinking.

The samples started to arrive and eventually Hugo declared all of them safe, it was just Ingrid’s tank that was affected.

“Who was working on that tank today?” Hugo asked.

“We have a new apprentice brewer who checked it this morning,” said the manager.

“Get him here, now.”

It turned out the man was not to be found. Hugo sat and thought a moment. “No way to tell who’s behind this, too many people know we’re here and what we’re doing, but I’m going to notify the Childress manor so that they can check for outgoing calls to the brewery. Anyone who knows Ingrid would have no trouble guessing that she’d visit here if she was within a hundred miles of the place. Damn, this is getting complicated.”

“Ingrid love, put the beer down, it’s poisoned and it will give you a headache if you drink the whole tank.”

Turning to the manager, Hugo said, “As for you, drain the tank carefully and dispose of the rest of the beer in a toxic waste

facility, warn them it's cyanide, and clean the tank accordingly. No harm done, and for your extra trouble, my pubs will take a ten percent increase in their orders for the next month."

The manager almost hit the table with his forehead, he bowed so low.

With more beer supplied from other tanks, and the lunch eaten, the four got back on the road and headed north once more.

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Hunting Hema

Jim, Elfwin and John took a car and left the estate early in the morning. John had filled the back of the car with assault rifles and ammunition.

Jim asked, "You expecting a war, son?"

"You never know, Jim, I just feel better having lots of firepower."

"Well, we are heading through the Midlands I suppose, and maybe on into the wild lands of Yorkshire. I suppose it makes sense to be well armed."

"Give the kid a break, Jim, its his first time with you and he's heard the stories. You're a trouble magnet, you are," said Elf as he drove.

Jim grinned at the kid and then turned to Elf, "Hema's not dead, we'd know, but we can't find him. Elfwin, this stinks of Elf

magic and you're driving in a very definite direction. I hope you have an idea of where to find him, and you're not just relying on movie magic.”

“What, you mean drive around until you stumble onto where you're going? You used to do that all the time.”

“I always knew where I was going, what are you talking about? I was going forward, I very rarely walked sideways or backward.”

John decided it was a good idea to get some sleep so he closed his eyes and did so.

“Now look what you've done, you've bored the boy to sleep.”

“Jim I agree with you, this feels like Elf magic, I can't find Hema but it's not that he's not there, it's like there's a blank spot. I have a feeling he's in the Alden Valley. He's been getting more depressed than usual over the last few decades, I think he's starting to wonder if humans are worth the trouble. Whenever he gets that way he drops out of touch.

“There's a brothel just over the border into Elven lands I think we should check there first.”

“Can't you just ask the Elves? You have a connection to them, why not just check in.”

“It's been a bit awkward the last few years, Jim. The Elves have shut me out. Normally I would have been able to see into that brothel and know where Hema is, but they've put up blocks.

“I've been meaning to check into this myself for a while now, not just because they aren't talking to me, but because we've lost a few agents up near the valley. There's something going on, and it worries me that I don't know what that is.”

“Crap, I don't like it when you don't know what's happening, Elfwin, it makes me nervous.”

“You and me both... aw shit, we've got a tail.”

“A tail? You Phillip Marlow now?”

“Shut up Jim, there's only one car, I'm going to go country roads and see if they follow.”

Elf turned hard right onto a dirt road and gunned the engine, spitting dust for half a kilometre behind. He turned again into a farmer's lane and slammed on the brakes, slewing the car into a field just behind a small wood. John was wide awake and the three of them dove out of the car, John popped the back and threw rifles to the other two, grabbing one himself, and a pouch of clips. Jim and Elfwin split and faded into the brush away from the car, and John ran straight into the wood.

“Good reactions,” Jim thought as he snuggled down behind a pile of dirt and rock scraped there by the farmer.

It wasn't long before the chasing car came into sight. They almost missed the stopped car and skidded to a stop, wide open in the field. John stepped into the road behind them and waited on one knee. Jim and Elf watched as the men in the car dove out the doors with automatic rifles of their own.

It was over in just a moment, Jim and Elf fired together and John was a heartbeat behind. John had a good line to the car and he blew out the back window just in case there was anyone left inside. Jim and Elf had the two sides of the car and soon downed the men who had got out.

John ran straight up the road, rifle at his hip, relying on Jim and Elf to cover him. He checked the car and the men down in the field, the one in the car had been hit in the chest and the neck, dead, and the three outside were very dead. John was amazed at the accuracy of the other two, all head-shots, no misses that he could see.

The three searched the men and the car but found nothing. No clues as to who they were or who sent them. Elf grabbed the man in the car by the sides of his head and closed his eyes.

“Elves, Giants, and an old god, portals. What an odd mix of images,” Elfwin said as he let the man's head drop.

“Good call John,” said Jim, “let's collect the artillery and get back on the road.

As they got to the main highway Jim said, “Now I could use a beer, isn't Stoke on Trent near here?”

“Not a chance, Jim, Ingrid drinks there and I end up paying her tab, every time. There's a pub a couple of kilometres down the road, we can stop in there.”

As they walked in, John was looking around like he wanted to clear the room, his hand wandering toward his jacket.

Jim put a hand on his arm and said softly, “Let us check the room, son, lots of practice, it's clear, and we made a random stop so it's even less likely anyone is waiting for us.”

As he said this, a pint glass came sailing across the room, straight for his head. Jim caught it while still looking at John and then looked to see where it had come from. “Oh dear, hello Penny, how long has it been?”

Jim set the glass on the bar and walked over to Penny's table. “Centuries you bastard. You left me pregnant, you know that? Jesus I get mad at my husband, take one lover in thousands of years, and you get me pregnant!”

Jim was speechless as she continued. “Not only that, but now she's missing, you need to help me get my daughter back.”

Elfwin was doubled over at the bar, laughing, and John was looking confused. He thought he was ready for anything, but hundred year old affairs? Was she that Penelope?

Elfwin pushed him toward a table and grabbed a couple of beers from the barman. When he sat down he looked at John and said, “Get used to it kid, Jim has never been able to keep it in his pants. The only one of the squad who was worse was Hugo, and not by much.”

“You know, I wondered why I felt the urge to stop here, Penny must have had her little threads out looking for Jim. I told you he was a magnet, didn't I? I forgot how much fun it was to hang out with him.”

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The Perils of Pauline

Jim was stunned, “I have a daughter?”

“Oh don’t be stupid, Ash, you’ve had hundreds of daughters, and sons. What’s one more?”

“No, seriously, I haven’t had a kid that I know about in over two hundred years. You’re telling me I’ve got a daughter still living?”

“Of course you do, she’s my daughter too, she’s immortal and will outlive you if we can find her. I told you, she’s gone missing and I want you to help find her.”

“Right, I’ll help you, of course I will, how long has she been missing? The thing is, we’re heading for the Alden Valley to look for Hema, Elf figures he must be there because he can’t locate him and he thinks the Elves are hiding him.”

“That’s where Paul was headed, to the Alden.”

“Paul? As in Pauline? No, of course it is. My life is a bad movie.”

“Yes, Pauline you jerk. What of it. You don’t think I was going to name her Ashley did you? I happen to like the name Paul.”

Jim had his hands in the air. “But why was she headed to the Alden Valley, Penny, what was she doing? As far as I can recall, you didn’t like the Elves much.”

“You’ve had kids, Ash, what did they do when you told them not to go somewhere?”

“They went straight there as soon as they could. OK I get it. By the way I go by Jim these days.”

“Let me guess, that lunch counter you bought was named Jim's and you were too tight to change the sign.”

Jim looked a bit hurt, “It was time for me to make a name change anyway, no sense making it easy for people to find me.”

“Well you're buying me a beer to replace the one you spilled you skinflint.”

“You mean the one you threw at me...” Jim stopped as Penelope reached for a nasty looking bow, “Is that what I think it is?”

“My husband's bow, yes, and I can use the damned thing as well as he ever could.”

“I believe you Penny, I believe you. Look, let's get Elf and the boy over here to talk,” Jim said as he waved.

Elfwin and John carried their beers over to the table and on the way Elf waved at the barkeep for another round.

“Big ears,” muttered Penelope.

“Hello Penny, good to see you. This is John Childress. Paul is missing?”

“Yes, and I don't know where she's disappeared to, I was actually looking for you, not Ash, I figured you could find her if anyone could.”

“Alden Valley, I'm sure of it now, the Elves are blocking me. I think Hema is there, and maybe Paul too. We've been attacked a couple of times, so something is happening, they probably took Paul as leverage against Jim here.”

“Stupid move,” said Jim, “I didn't even know she existed.”

“Well you know the Elves,” said Elfwin, “they always pretend they are playing the long game.”

“Yeah, stupid.”

Penelope had been looking at John, “Childress, are you one of Jim's whelps?”

“Yes ma'am, about four generations from the last time Jim was home we guess.”

Penelope made a disgusted sound and shook her head, but there was a certain speculation in her eye. “You married, John?”

“Back to the topic please,” said Jim, “you coming along with us? We've got a seat but not a lot of room for baggage.”

“Oh my god Jim, get your head out of the fifteenth century. I've got an overnight bag and my bow. I'll fit.”

John, keeping his eye on Penelope, leaned over to Elfwin and asked, “Can she take care of herself?”

Elf nodded and said, “She ran ancient Ithica for 20 years on her own, she's a tough girl.”

John stared at Elf, “That Penelope?”

“The very same, and watch yourself, John, she seems to like you.”

John looked doubtful as he picked up his pint.

The group finished their beers, settled up and got back on the road. Penelope was as good as her word, and had only a small bag so the bow fit in the back along with John's arsenal.

As they drove, Jim filled Penelope in on the weak spots opening up all over the new and old world.

Elfwin then told her of the two wars, the one above in Europe, and the one below between the Giants and the Pixies.

“Thank goodness neither of those are going to affect us in Canada,” said Jim.

Penelope looked thoughtful, “Do you think the holes might be related to the wars?”

“I don't see how, the Giants couldn't make holes like that, and those above don't have a clue about that sort of thing. Maybe the Elves, but I have never heard of them being able to create weak spots. The only person I know that could maybe do that is Hugo Zembini, but he's in Guelph closing them up,” said Jim.

“And a couple of our sorcerers are closing them here in Europe, but none of them can open them,” said Elfwin, “I'm sure the Elves can't open them but they are somehow involved, otherwise why are they trying to prevent us from figuring it out.”

John spoke up, “You don't suppose the Elves are involved in the wars do you? It seems to me that they could have aligned with the Giants, that would explain why we're being attacked, and why they are blocking Elfwin's powers.”

“He catches on fast,” said Jim.

They drove for a while longer in silence, and then Elfwin pulled the car over and said, “Right, we're close, and I don't like going into a situation blind. If John's right, and he probably is, we'll likely have a reception committee waiting. We ought to dismount and hike into the valley rather than expose ourselves to a nasty surprise.”

They got out of the car, loaded up on firepower, and began to move forward parallel to the road they were on, but in the woods to the side.

It wasn't long before they discovered a large number of well-armed Elves covering the road. John hissed through his teeth when he saw what had been waiting for them.

“Around?” said Elfwin.

Jim pointed to a hill a bit further on, where reinforcements were blocking their path, “No, through.”

Jim waved and Elfwin went left, toward the road, John went right to try to flank the elves on the hill. Penelope faded into the woods and appeared on a hill behind the advancing trio.

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Further North

While Jim was heading into the Alden Valley to find Hema, Art and his companions were hunting for Jim. They had got to the outskirts of Rochdale when they had a blowout on the left rear tire. Hugo pulled it off the road and Ingrid told the men to get out on the right side.

“They're on the left, up the hill. Hugo stay here with Art, I'll deal with this, I'm tired of getting shot at.”

Art and Hugo found some cover in the trees and waited while Ingrid shouted, “Hildy, to me.”

As the pig grew into a monster boar, Ingrid mounted up, drew her sword and threw it at Art. “Only if you must!” she said, and then rode straight up the hill, a spear in her hand and her cloak on her shoulders.

“I love it when she does that,” said Hugo as he shied away from the sword in Art's hand, “be careful with that Art, if we get attacked, just let it go, if you kill someone with it in your hand, I don't know what will happen.”

“Are you serious?” said Art. “She gave it to me once before but didn't tell me anything would happen.”

“And yet you didn't use it, did you? You're smarter about this stuff than you think you are, it's not your sword and so you shouldn't use it.”

“What might happen if I use it to kill?”

“I have no idea, it might kill you too, there's more power in that sword than any sword I've ever seen. It can fight itself, let it do its thing, I suspect it's as fond of you as Ingrid is, since it's her sword. Let it go if you have to.”

“You said it wasn't my sword, do you think I should get one?”

“Boy, do you like your life now?”

“Very much.”

“Then don't go looking for your sword. If you want to learn how to use one, get a katana and ask Sam to teach you, but trust me, don't look for your sword.”

Art was thoroughly confused, but at that moment they heard the fight start up in the hills. Art had seen Ingrid fight, so he had some idea of what was happening. Hildy would be on the ground and Ingrid would be flying overhead using her feathered cloak, and using her spear.

There must have been a lot of opposition, because the fight went on for far longer than Art would have guessed. She had chased off the Wild Hunt much faster.

Suddenly Art felt the sword wrench itself out of his hand, and it flew into the woods to their right. There were some sickening sounds from that direction and then the sword flashed across the road and up the hill.

Art would have sworn he heard the sound of its first clash with whoever was opposing Ingrid. Another few minutes and it went quiet.

Hugo sighed and remarked, “I do love watching Ingrid go into battle. It happened a few times when Jim and the rest of us got ourselves into trouble. Usually because we were attacking forces that were larger than we had guessed. Just as we thought we were dead men, Ingrid would show up and take out the opposition. She always said she 'didn't want us stinking mercenaries in her hall.' She claimed we would lower the tone too much.

“I just think she liked watching us screw up, and of course she always had a soft spot for Jim...” Hugo stopped talking abruptly as he looked at Art.

Art grinned at him. “She's a bit older than me Hugo, as she explained a while ago, I have no business asking her about old relationships.”

Hugo laughed quietly as he looked around for any stragglers.

As Ingrid walked back to the car in her usual form, with Hildy waddling along behind, doing his pot bellied pig act, and somehow looking pleased with himself, Art and Hugo came out of the woods. Ingrid smiled on seeing them and hugged Art hard enough to make his back crack.

“Elves,” she said, “harder to kill than most, and they had some pretty heavy weapons. They were serious about killing us. I'm pretty sure we must be close to Jim, this was a powerful ambush.”

“We're not far from the Alden Valley,” said Hugo, “let's get there as soon as we can.” He waved his hand and the tire re-inflated with no sign of the bullet hole. He bent over to see if there was any damage from a ricochet, but found nothing.

Hugo jumped back into the driver's seat and Ingrid took the back with Hildy. Almost instantly, Ingrid was asleep again.

As they drove, Art looked at Hugo and said “Jim once made some passing remark about King Arthur and now you're talking about my sword. Are you two having me on? Is the sword you're talking about Excalibur?”

Hugo thought for a moment and then said, “If you were the reincarnation of King Arthur, what would you do Art?”

“Probably nothing. I mean what if I was, there's nothing for him to do today is there.”

“What about the stories that he would reappear when England needed him?”

“From what I know, Hugo, I would be fighting against you and Jim, Arthur was Romano-British, and you Saxons would be the ones I was fighting. How does that make any sense?”

“How does any war, or any myth for that matter, make any sense? People have stories, some make you feel better, some give you hope, and some just make things worse. All we have are stories, so we shouldn't be surprised if some of them contradict others and some get so garbled they just don't make sense any more.”

Art was quiet for a moment and then said, “So where is Excalibur?”

“Oh dear, it's with the Lady of the Lake, you know that.”

“And where's that?”

“Who the hell knows, Art, everywhere and nowhere, but that doesn't matter. If you're the reincarnation of King Arthur and you need Excalibur, you'll have it. What I'm telling you to do is not go looking for it. Excalibur is like the Grail, it's the excuse for a quest, not something to be found. It's a quest story. You're in a fight story, obviously, and if Ingrid keeps throwing that damned sword at you, you'll never need Excalibur. I'm just thankful that thing doesn't sing while it fights. Some of them do you know.”

Art turned around and looked at Ingrid, he could tell she was sleeping because the car windows were rattling. “Listen, Hugo, about Ingrid and Jim...”

“Are you kidding? She's ancient, her husband is a dick and a god, in that order, she's a goddess, do you really want to know how many and who she's slept with? If you want some advice, leave it alone. She's with you for however long you can make it last, as far as I can see, she's happy with you. I've seen that a couple of times, not often, but if she loves you, she stays with you. Leave the past where it belongs, especially hers, if you make yourself crazy with jealousy you're going to lose her and that would be a shame. She's wonderful in the original sense of that word.”

“Um, I was just going to ask if she and Jim had ever gone off to her hall, or if you had.”

“Oh, right. Well the answer to that is no, you have to be dead to go there and neither of us have ever been dead. Like I said, she figured we mercenaries would lower the tone anyway.”

With that the two lapsed into silence and behind them, Ingrid had a tiny grin.

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Rescuing Hema

The three rescuers crept toward the Elves spread across the road and up the sides of the valley. They were obviously expecting to attack a car, but they would get a surprise as Jim, Elfwin and John hit them on the flank.

And it might have worked, if there weren't far more Elves than they thought. They might not have tried it if Elfwin's senses weren't being blocked, or if he had seen more of the pattern.

Whatever the reasons, their attack was a bad idea. As they hit the Elf lines and started fighting they were engulfed by sheer numbers. The three men had automatic weapons and killed large numbers of the Elves, but changing clips meant their enemies got closer. Ducking into cover meant the Elves got closer. It was a lost cause.

Penelope kept up a rapid fire with her bow, she seemed in no danger of running out of arrows, they appeared on their own, but there were just too many Elves.

As the bodies piled up, movement got difficult for the men, Penelope could fade away into the woods, but she wasn't going to do that until those three were dead, so she kept firing.

It started as a sort of ripple toward the back of the Elf ranks, and it shuddered toward the front lines. A sort of hesitation, a sort of looking over the shoulders which slowed their movement toward the three attackers.

Jim and Elfwin had felt this before and Elfwin smiled, Jim frowned.

Came the time when the Elves were shooting each other, into the air, or throwing down their weapons. John, who had no idea what was happening, but knew an opportunity when it presented itself, went forward firing.

Penelope, from her spot on the hill, could see two women moving forward from the Valley, and one of them was her daughter. Paul had two Elf blades and she was making good use of them, there was a line of bodies right through the middle of the Elf ranks, heading toward the three men. Beside her was a red-haired demon who was waving her arms and fire, ice, demons and dragons were appearing all over the field. It was damned hard for Penelope to find targets to shoot, except that the Elves were so tightly packed by this time, that she could hit them without aiming.

It wasn't long before the two groups linked up and the remaining Elves were running. The demons and dragons disappeared, and Penelope was running down the hill to her daughter.

Elfwin shouted, "Elly you beauty, so good to see you!"

"Glad to pull your ass out of it once more," said Eldwife, turning to Jim, "Good to see you again Ash."

Jim turned on Elfwin and punched him hard in the side of the head. “You son of a bitch, you let me believe she was dead!”

“Ashley Childress, stop, leave him alone, I told him not to tell you I was still alive. Now come here and let me hug you or I swear to God I'll turn your insides out.”

Jim engulfed Eldwin in a huge hug and kissed her as well. Nobody would have said so later, but it certainly looked like the old fighter was crying.

While Jim and Eldwife were getting reacquainted, Penelope had reached Pauline and they were having their own reunion.

Meanwhile, Elfwin was telling John about this woman, who had saved his life. John looked over at her and said, “This is the woman who made you all immortal? Jim said she was dead.”

“He thought so, but she just wanted to simplify her life. She also wanted Jim to get on with his, he loves her, even after the hundreds of years they were together, he still loves her, as you can see. She's been an operative for me once in a while but mostly she just works on her research. I didn't know she was here in the Valley.

“And if you've got ideas my son, you would be well advised to put them back in your pants for a few years. I don't think your Uncle Jim is going to let her out of his sight for a while.”

John looked embarrassed that Elfwin could read him so easily.

Penelope was talking to Paul, “What the hell were you doing here anyway?”

“I wanted to see what all the fuss was about, mother, so I came to visit the Elves, but they caught me and stuffed me into that brothel, they said something about me being a hostage to my father. What father? He died centuries ago didn't he?”

Penelope pointed at Jim and said, “Meet your father, dear. Were you mistreated at the brothel? I'll kill the lot of them.”

“No, no, mother, in fact I got bored and realized the chance to learn a few things about men was too good to turn down. I was working while I was there, making pretty good money too.”

“Well it's always good to pick up another profession dear, good for you. I also did my time in a brothel, before I met my husband.”

“Your husband who is not my father right? Mother you and I are going to have a little talk. Are we heading home?”

“No, not yet, these three that I came with are on what sounds like a pretty serious mission, I thought I would tag along and you will come too. I don't want to lose you again for a while. Now tell me, did a man named Hema ever visit the brothel?”

“He's living there, mother, been there for fifty years now. Seems pretty depressed about something.”

“Well good, let's get over there and get him, these guys need him for something.”

Elfwin and John walked back for the car and drove up so that the group could put the weapons in the boot, and then Penelope

and Paul got in for the drive to the brothel. Jim and Eldwife walked the few hundred yards.

“What about the Elves, will they attack now they know we're here?” said Jim.

“There aren't that many of them left, Ash, they have been pushed into smaller spaces and they don't breed well when they get pressed for space, unlike Men who breed no matter what. They are desperate to get more land and they've aligned with the Giants who plan to go to war with Men after they defeat the Pixies and the other old ones.”

“Are you kidding? They figure they'll take the entire underworld and then move up? That's insane.”

“They have been insane ever since the Gods defeated them Jim. They plan to go after the Gods once they have the entire world. The Elves don't know that, but I can see the patterns, the Giants are determined to win and they'll destroy the world to do it if they have to.”

Jim was stunned. “Damn it, Elly, I just got you back, I'm not letting those idiots destroy the world just when I've got you back.”

“Ash, I'm touched that I still mean that much to you. I figured you would have moved on. You screwed Penelope I know.”

“Witch, how do you know that?”

“A woman knows, and her daughter is the spitting image of you, that was a clue.”

“It didn't last, Elly, none of them lasted.”

“Well let's fix the world and then we can talk about us OK lover?”

They got to the brothel with no further trouble, and they found Hema sitting in his room, lights off, obviously brooding.

“Hema, what the hell, why are you here?”

“Good to see you too, Elfwin, and why not here? Good food, good sex, and the world can go to hell without me watching it.”

“Still pissed at Mankind are you? But Mankind hasn't changed since it showed up, what's different now?”

“Look around you Elf, Mankind finally got its wish, to have the power to destroy the world. They're poisoning it and it's going to shrug them off. God it's depressing, and the worst part of all is that they know they're doing it. Shortest term greed of any species I ever met. They don't even think in terms of their kids, just their own fat selves. I'm done with them.”

“That's a nice speech Hema, and I tend to agree with you, but Eldwife here figures the Giants are going to go up against the Gods soon, there are weak spots all over the world, and there may not be a world to shrug off Mankind, if that happens.”

“Really? Well maybe its time.”

Elf turned to the rest of the group and whispered, “I've never seen him this bad.”

Paul moved past Elfwin and sat down beside Hema, “Heemie my pet, I happen to like the world, you and I have had some fun hiding out here but don't you think we ought to get out and do something again. We can always come back and rest some more afterwards.”

Penelope leaned over to Jim and said, “What is it with you jerks, what the hell makes you so attractive?”

Eldwife overheard and said, “Bad boys, women can't resist a bad boy, they're a project, so much room for improvement.”

Hema was standing up, he let out a huge sigh and squeezed Paul's arm, “Fine P. We'll go fix the world again, but I'm back in retirement after you have your fun OK?”

“Deal, lover, back to retirement. Some place with some sun and warmth though.”

“Just wait for it, the climate will be hot enough here soon,” said Hema with a gloomy face.

The group filled Hema in on the weak spots and the Giant – Pixie war, as well as the one in Europe. He sighed and said, “Let's get over the border so I can see again.”

This they did in a minimum of time, figuring the Elves would be back to fight, reduced numbers or not. As they got over the border Hema located a nearby car dealership and Jim bought another car so the group could get back on the road.

“Right, further north,” said Hema, “the original weak spot is in the old Pictish lands. Right where you'd expect it to be.”

The group shared out the arsenal and got started on the drive.

~~

Almost Caught Up

Art, Hugo and Ingrid drove toward the Alden Valley. They were about to enter when they saw the destruction left from the Elf attack on Jim and his group.

“Damn, it looks like the old days,” said Hugo, standing on a rise overlooking the valley, “we're on the trail, only Jim and Elf could cause this much carnage.”

“Sure, but they're on the move again, I can feel them, and there's two cars,” said Ingrid, “Hema is with them, and, damn, so is Eldwife. I thought she was dead.”

“So did I, Jim, Elf, Hema and Elly? That's half the squad. What's happening? There's got to be more than a couple of weak spots to draw the squad back together like this, and we're catching up, that's you and me in the mix. I'm not liking this Ingrid, not at all.”

Art looked from one to the other but saw a deep concern, not the reassurance he had hoped to find.

They bypassed the Alden and continued their chase to find Jim. Not exactly speeding, but not driving slow either. There was a feeling in the car that they were getting close.

Unfortunately, close is relative to how far you have to go, and it was quite a drive up to Hadrian's wall, beyond which were the Picts at one time.

Past that landmark and on to the Antonine wall, Art was getting a history lesson from a couple of people who were there to watch the history. The walls were both old when Hugo was born, but Ingrid remembered them being built.

“Damn, damn, damn,” said Ingrid, “they're on the ferry to Stromness, they're heading for the Orkneys. Oh, wait, Highland Park Distilleries are there, I love their whisky, it's in Kirkwall.”

“I know where it is love, you and I have been there more than once,” said Hugo, “but I rather doubt your wounded God is there. We're going to have to stop overnight somewhere, it's eight hours from Hadrian's Wall to Stromness and I'm getting tired.”

“I'll drive,” said Ingrid.

“Not a chance, you drive like a goddess dear, like you can't die.”

“I can drive,” said Art.

“Right, then, you figure you can stay on the right side of the road?”

“You mean the left, right?”

Ingrid groaned in the back seat, “We need to stop to eat anyway, you two clowns can switch when we do.”

They did stop, and were mildly surprised that nobody tried to kill them. In fact, the rest of the trip was pretty uneventful, except for the endless recitation of battles from Hugo as they drove the main road to John 'o Groats.

Jim's little convoy drove off the ferry at Stromness and headed for the Ferry Inn. They spent quite a long time eating and drinking, as the local cask ales were quite astounding, not to mention the single malt collection.

Jim looked at Eldwife after the third pint and then looked around at the rest of the group. Elfwin shrugged and said, "A night probably isn't going to hurt, go on you two."

Jim and Elly were up the stairs before the next round appeared, and were soon in bed. After some particularly frantic lovemaking, Jim rolled onto his back and caught his breath, "I didn't quite believe that it was you Elly, it's been so long that I thought you were dead, it's hard to believe you're here. But you are, no doubt about that. Why did you let me think you were gone?"

"Because I was gone Jim, when I walked away from you, I intended it to be for good. Look, we were together for two hundred years and I'd spent my entire adult life with you. I figured I ought to find out who I was."

"But when you left you said you'd see me again."

"I did, and I meant it when I left, but after a couple of decades I figured you would move on with your life, and so I moved on with mine."

“Well, I changed my name. I got that far but not much further. Did you find your life?”

“I did, not with another man, you’re a hard act to follow, Ash, as I realized after a while, but I discovered my passion, which is research. I study, I learn and I’m happy.”

“Right,” said Jim, “well I have no claim on you, and so I suppose we should just let it be and see how it works out from now on. I’m so happy to know you’re still alive, and that you have a life you enjoy, I suppose I’m content with that much.”

“Oh you stupid man, you still can’t hear what I’m saying can you?” said Elly as she rolled over on top of Jim.

Elfwin headed to the front desk to get rooms for everyone. “And there will be a couple from our party in the closest empty room up the stairs.” The clerk grinned and said, “Not the first time that has happened Sir, we’ll book that room to you.”

There was a folk band playing and the group listened for a while, then headed up to their rooms. Paul and Hema grabbed one, and Penelope grabbed John. Elfwin shrugged and said to the suddenly deserted room, “I’ll take first watch shall I?” and settled into an easy chair in the lobby.

As Penelope and John walked into their room, John remarked, “I thought there would be twin beds, there’s only a King.”

Penelope looked at him for a long time, “Are you really that young, John. We’ll only need one bed. Now listen to me, I’ve been a widow for a very long time, but I was never particularly virginal before my husband, or especially faithful afterward. You and I are going to have some fun tonight and you will be

able to say to your friends that you have bedded an older woman. Just don't tell them how much older please.

"Now, I am not invulnerable and neither are you, we've both been through a firefight, and probably will be again before this mission is over. I don't intend to die wondering if you're any good in bed. Are you getting your ass over here or not?"

John might be a polite man, but he wasn't inexperienced and he was half undressed before he got across the room.

In the morning, a decidedly bleary-eyed Jim and the rest had breakfast and headed toward Twatt, where Hema assured them the first weak spot had appeared.

"Twatt? There's nothing there, it's a bloody crossroads and nothing else," said Jim as he read the map.

"Was a navel base at one time, but what does that matter, weak spots are weak spots, they can be anywhere, Jim," said Eldwife, "Just relax, we're close and when we get there Hema will find it."

As they pulled into the village, not much more than a couple of houses really, Hema said, "It's in the old naval airbase, HMS Tern, there's some buildings left and it's in the basement of one of them."

"Good, let's get this thing cleaned up," said Jim as they pulled off the road.

The group piled out of the cars and were instantly met by an attacking group of Giants.

In the meantime, Art, Hugo, and Ingrid drove off the ferry and found the Ferry Inn (it was hard to miss). As they were having breakfast they learned they had just missed the group they were chasing and so they finished up quickly, grabbed coffee to go and got back into the car.

~~

New Vs Old

As the crew from Guelph stepped through the doorway, they were confronted by a horrifying sight. Thousands of Giants were marching forward, almost to the weak spot where they could go through to attack the refugees. Their intent was clear, devastation and terror and the deaths of the Pixie women and children so that the men, fighting back home, would give up in despair.

Facing them were about twenty beings. Far too few to stop them, but not one of the crew stepped back. They formed a line in front of the portal and prepared themselves.

Amber stepped forward to fight, but Coyote changed from her raggedy dog to a tall man who could only be described as beautiful. His black eyes held Amber's and he said "No, my girl, release my power, this I ask out of love for you."

Amber looked back just as sternly and said "Coyote my heart, you are not well, I cannot let you fight, I will do this."

“I am rested, Amber, you have carried my burden long enough, I am rested and healed and I thank you, but you must release me now to do what I must.”

Amber hesitated, she lifted her hand to Coyote’s face, she had never seen him as a human. No one had seen this aspect for hundreds of years. He was no longer the shabby trickster trying to fix what he screwed up eons before. Here was a man in the full vigour of his life, and she saw that.

She nodded and stepped back and Coyote swelled, he shone. Still he looked at Amber who said “I will not stay behind, I will fight with you my love, and you will not stop me.”

Coyote’s handsome mouth quirked into a crooked smile. “The habit of godhood is not easily dropped, is it my sister.”

There are old gods and younger gods but it must be a rare thing to see the origin of a goddess. Like she was just understanding something inside of herself, Amber swelled to match Coyote. She smiled and reached out to grab his ear, which became a coyote’s ear. She tugged it a little and Coyote’s eyes gleamed. “Come,” she said, taking out her violin, “we shall see what we can accomplish today.”

With that, Coyote grew to enormous size, and beside him, Megan grew too, no longer wolf, but still a wolf, her forms sliding over each other. The two of them towered over the new world giants and Joe Mufferaw whispered, in a voice that caught in his throat, “Nanabozo is here.”

Joe Bear matched Megan and Coyote for size, but he somehow managed to look more solid than either. He let loose a tremendous roar and stood up on his hind legs. He had become

a cave bear, something that had terrified humans since they became aware. He roared again, swinging his massive head from side to side.

With that, Amber began to play, and through a dozen portals flowed thousands of coyote, led by the family that she had saved so long ago outside the diner. Not just coyote, but wolves, dogs, mules, horses, llamas, mountain lions, bears, all the animals of the Americas came pouring out of portal after portal which opened up behind her.

Croak and Caw became their true selves as well, Raven and Crow, growing to the size of Coyote and launching into the air with terrible screams, they flew for the giants. From those portals that Amber had opened up, thousands of ravens, crows, hawks, and other birds flew behind the two great birds. In an instant, the small band of defenders had multiplied to impossible numbers.

Seeing this, the strong men and women of the Americas grew to their proper size and, led by Joe Mufferaw swinging his massive axe, charged their former people in a thundering wedge of glistening weapons.

This was a battle of the new world against the old. The gods of Europe could not participate, but the spirit beings of the Americas had no such restrictions. Nanabozo, Bear, and Coyote punched into the Giant lines sweeping them aside in hundreds. Raven harried them from the left side, knocking them down with his beak, sweeping them aside with his massive wings. Crow, screaming, refusing to be out-done by his cousin, did the same from the right.

Another gap opened as the rebel Giants followed Mufferaw and his axe, their formation driving deep into the Giant lines to disrupt and confuse.

Into those gaps charged Amber's warriors. The birds went for the eyes, the animals swarmed over any who fell, and they did not rise again.

Raynard was not a European god, but he was not without power, he cast illusions that confused the Giants, disrupting their lines, causing them to turn on one another. He was laughing, he hadn't had such fun for centuries.

Amber was directing her animals, but she lost sight of much of the battle. Through a portal came thousands of hummingbirds, they settled on her shoulders and back, making it look like she had a cloak of feathers and they lifted her high into the air so that she could direct her animals.

One of the giants broke free of the fight and came toward Amber. Coyote noticed and turned, but Amber played four notes and the Giant fell, clutching his ears and moved no more. Coyote let out a tremendous howl and Amber responded with a string of notes that resonated in the bones and raised the fur of every fighter on her side. Coyote turned back to the giants and opened his jaw, taking three of them in one bite, he cut them in half.

Ray watched all this and thought to himself that even the old world gods could not have defeated these enemies so quickly, he almost felt sorry for the Giants.

Almost, for at that moment he saw the Giant's allies rushing across the ground. All manner of pitiful creatures, mostly

powerless themselves, but allied by the hope of wealth or influence. Alone, they were worthless, easily brushed aside, but the Giants had managed to convince them to fight, and in the numbers Ray saw coming toward him, they could do some real damage.

Ray reached for his family, and was shocked to find Kitsune in his head. She screamed in anger and defiance, and through her flowed the power of those who loved her. Feeling the impact of that power, Ray changed to human shape, but almost as tall as the giants. He then split into four beings and, with swords in all eight hands, he waded into the allies. He opened his mouth and screamed with the voices of a hundred trickster foxes and above them all, the soprano voice of Kitsune.

Seeing the smaller enemies charging for the weak spot, Mara moved from where she had been fighting Giants, to Ray's side. Changing to a woman she spit and said "I can't get used to the taste of their blood, maybe these little ones will taste better, and with that, changed back to wolf form and began killing.

The giants had no more surprises, and as they realized how powerful the Guelph forces were, they tried to retreat. Unfortunately for them, the portal they had come through wasn't large enough and they were trapped against that door and those bearing down on them.

They fought as best they could. The sheer number of Giants in that attacking force meant the battle lasted for three hours, but in the end, only those few who managed to fight their way through the portal, past their fellow soldiers, were left alive.

As the fighting slowed, the Guelph forces looked around for someone else to kill, but slowly they came out of their rage and realized that this battle was ended.

Amber was stunned by the number of birds and animals who had died in the fighting. She raised her head and sang a lament for them. Coyote and Megan joined her and Coyote moved beside her. “You called them my sister, but it was they who fought. Never forget that you gave them the chance to fight for their world, but you did not force them to fight. Now, perhaps you should go see to Sam, she is here and she fought hard beside Ray.”

Ray thanked Kit with a thought, and released the power he had been given by his family, becoming his usual form. As he did so he was shocked to see Sam Martin, covered in blood and gore, a pile of the giant’s allies around her.

“Christ on the cross, Sam, what are you doing here! If Gil ever found out we’d brought his student along to be killed he would never forgive us.”

“It is my fight too, Ray, I came through behind the rest of you, I wasn’t going to just sit home and wait to be killed.”

“Damn it, you have no special powers, how did you expect to survive?”

“These poor things around us had no special powers Ray, our animal fighters had no special powers beside teeth, beak, and claw. Just back off OK, I think I’m going to throw up and I don’t need you giving me shit.”

Amber had arrived and put her arms around Sam. She flicked her eyes at Ray and he left to check on the rest of the crew. “Brave, powerful girl, I’m so proud of you. It took courage to come with us.”

“Courage be damned, I had no choice. You know that, I saw your argument with Coyote, you didn’t know you had become powerful, and you were going to fight at his side anyway. God the blood! I really am going to be sick.”

Amber sang a quiet song to remove the shock and most of the raw memory from Sam’s mind and then said, “You did well, Sam, now we need you to go back to Guelph and stand ready to protect our home, in case we missed any of this crow-bait. We will go on to find the main force. Ingrid and her lot can’t fight them but we sure as hell can.”

With that she kissed Sam on the forehead and sang open a portal that took her directly back to her apartment where she could clean up.

Coyote, back in his human form walked to Amber and looked up at her. “You know you are a foot taller than usual my love, you might want to come the rest of the way to yourself so that I can kiss you.”

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The Noble Death of Red643

Red643 looked right and left. Hundreds of Giants, lined up and ready to advance gave him a feeling of pride and power. Who could stop such an army.

They had found the dead guards at the weak spot they were headed toward, but who cared. Anyone could kill a few, but nothing and nobody could kill the numbers who were now marching toward the next world, his home world, where they would kill the damned Kobolds and the Pixie refugees.

They were in battle formation just in case whoever had killed the guards was still on the world, but surely that made no difference. Once they got to the portal they would encircle it and the elite forces would go through to meet whatever pitiful opposition they would find there. The war was as good as over. It had taken weeks to find their way here and now that they had, there was nothing to stop them.

Even now, as they marched, their pathetic little allies were pouring out of the last world to this one. Anybody the Giants didn't kill, these creatures would finish off. They couldn't send the biologicals and the poisons through, they needed their own world, but that didn't matter. The Gods dared not fight them and there was nobody else with the power. The victory was theirs.

Red 643 had good eyes, and there, in the distance, must be those beings who killed the guards. Pathetic, so few there, to be dealt with quickly.

But those few grew, three beings and two birds were suddenly bigger than his people. He could see the first lines of the army hit the opposition and begin to fold. And Giants, Giants who were fighting with these monsters. It was unbelievable, the lines of the army were wavering, folding.

Then the animals struck, and the attack collapsed. The captains sent such allies as had come through so far, to the front to route these animals who were almost too small for the Giants to fight, but no, the allies did no better than the Giants.

Thankfully, Red643 was near the back of the army and he turned and ran. He dodged the sword of his Captain who tried to take his head off for running, and he made straight for the other portal.

He almost made it, but there was another of the monster beings, a gigantic wolf who seemed to shift to a man and back again to a wolf. He killed scores of Giants and allies alike, so many that the portal was buried, it was shut. There was no way Red643 was going to try to dig through those bodies while that thing was there killing. He hung back, between two killing zones and waited.

The monster grinned as he killed a last few Giants and threw their bodies onto the pile and then stepped sideways and vanished.

Now Red643 ran forward and started to dig through the bodies to get to the portal, but it was too late. The collapsing army fell upon him and the Giants tore themselves apart trying to get away from the destruction that awaited them. Sheer numbers insulated Red643 for a while, but eventually they reached him and he was no more.

Back in Guelph, Stan came through the wall into the Lunch Counter and, grinning at Liz, said, “Don’t tell Megan, please,” then went out through the back door.

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The Aid Station

Sam walked to the lunch counter, it had taken quite a while to clean the blood off of herself, and much longer to rinse the metallic taste of adrenaline out of her mouth. Amber had done something to her mind, she felt insulated from the slaughter she had witnessed, that she had participated in, but she knew it was still in there, and she could taste the result. There was no fooling the body.

Now that she had washed and dressed, she was once again more angry than sick, and she checked her swords. They would do, a few chips but no cracks. They would do.

The door to the lunch counter was closed but she called out and slapped the window with her hand. Larry opened it, he was in scrubs and holding a mop. “Glad to see you Sam, I don’t know how much good I could do with this mop against any enemies coming through the portal,” he said.

As the door closed, the wounded once again began coming through the portal Mara had opened at that spot. Liz was further into the room, which had somehow grown much larger. On tables were the animals Amber had called up, bleeding but alive and none was frightened or in pain. Liz would put her hand on a panicking creature and it would settle down. Several

animals were waiting for Lilith to finish sewing a nasty gash in the side of one of the new world Giants.

Lilith and John were working with smooth, unhurried movements that got the job done much more quickly than it appeared. As they moved to the next table, Jane, James or Mike would run the table into the freezer and return shortly with it empty.

Larry turned to Sam and said, “They’re taking the patients to the bar, the Kobolds are looking after them there, and any that aren’t healing well, they’re putting on the train to hospitals further west, hospitals that have some spirit beings on staff. The most badly injured animals are heading to the Vet hospital at the University. Some of the staff there understand what’s happening.

“I’m sure glad you’re here, Sam, the folks on the other side of the portal say that they don’t know if they got all the attackers. We’ve left the portal open so the wounded can come through but I’ve been worried about enemies coming through too.”

With that, Larry went back to his mopping, there was plenty of blood on the floor for him to clean up.

Sam walked to Liz, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“We’ve got Giants on the other side to send patients through, Kobolds in the recovery room and we seem to be pretty well organized here. Go sit down and eat something Sam, you’re exhausted.”

As Liz said that, Sam realized it was true, she was crashing, her muscles felt as if they were giving up, so she staggered to the counter and grabbed a sandwich from the pile.

She had eaten one and was reaching for another when Larry yelled out in surprise. There were lizards coming through the portal, one of them swung a sword at Larry but he brought up his mop to block it. The handle was cut on a diagonal and Larry shoved both cut ends down the throat of the lizard who had opened his mouth to bite, to yell, who knows. He didn't do either but collapsed and died on the floor instead.

Sam grabbed her swords and stepped in front of Larry, "Back," she said as she started to swing at more lizards coming through the portal. She was back in fighting mode instantly, and somewhere in the back of her mind she thought "She'll pay for this later," but then she realized it was Liz who had thought that. Liz had somehow kick-started Sam who now fought harder than she ever had. She was the only defence for the wounded and their carers.

And she was being slowly driven back. The floor was piled with lizards she had wounded or killed, but more were coming through. "What the hell is going on through the Portal?" she thought.

One lizard got past her and headed for Liz. Sam heard Liz say "Stay!" as she was about to turn. As she turned back to the portal, she saw Liz look at the creature and it froze. In an instant, Lilith had cut its throat with the scalpel in her hand, and John kicked it into a corner.

Jane had grabbed a knife and was heading for the door when Lilith shouted "No, Jane, you must not," and lunged to drag her

back. “Bear explained this to you, let Sam fight and you help with the patients.” Almost regretfully, Jane put the knife down and got back to work.

“Could have used the help,” thought Sam as she had to back another step, but just then she was joined by Mike, who had a cleaver and a drinks tray. As Sam glanced over, she saw the tray transform into a shield. Mike stood to one side of Sam, where he could cover them both with the shield, and he hammered down on the lizards with the cleaver.

Larry was there on her other side with a knife. Then James, stepped into the line and killed two, but was then cut horribly on his arm. Jane stepped toward James to help, but as she reached him she saw that his arm was already healing. She dragged him back out of the way and Lilith glanced at him, saying, “He’ll be fine, leave him to heal, it looks like he’s picking up some of Mara’s skills.”

Lilith then glanced at the lizards still coming through the portal and turned on her own charm, which apparently also worked on them. The lizards sagged, lowering their weapons as lust hit them. Again the defenders could take a step forward before the attackers recovered and fought once more.

Up from the stairs, yelling battle cries, Ken burst in leading several of the Kobolds in armour and carrying war hammers.

They slipped between Sam and her defenders and began to drive the lizards back, those they didn’t simply crush. They fought right through the portal and onto the other side, where they stayed to defend the wounded along side the Giants.

Mike, James and Larry were fine, and went back to work. Sam, after fighting in the main battle, and being given a boost by Liz for this one, simply fell to the floor unconscious.

After making sure she was fine, Mike and Larry carried her behind the counter and made her a bit of a nest with spare sheets and pillows. She quickly dragged a pillow to each side and one under her head as she fell into a deep, deep sleep.

Liz smiled gently as she checked her, then turned back to her patient. "She's really going to feel that tomorrow."

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Jim Finds the Old Wounded God

"What in the seven hells," said Jim, "Giants, here?"

"So it would seem, do you suppose we ought to get away from the cars?" asked Elfwin.

"Go. Go, everyone, take cover and fire! Damn Elf, I'm getting old, was a time when I wouldn't have stood around gawping and instead, started fighting."

"Just out of practice, my friend."

"Same thing. Right, everyone, we'll work out to the sides so we're not so concentrated. Elly will throw some illusion, those of you who can't see through it, be damned careful who you're shooting. Everyone armed yet? Move then."

There was a ditch beside the road, so they could work their way along that, John faded back away from the road to cover their rear and Penelope went with him. “I can shoot from any distance,” she said to John’s questioning look.

With that, the group started to fight back, but there was no way they were going to fight through that many Giants. There was too much open ground between them and the building.

Open ground that was suddenly filled with a dense bush that would have been more at home in the tropics, but blind is blind and the Giant’s firing slacked off. While this allowed Jim’s group to spread out, it didn’t allow them to move forward.

Hearing automatic rifle fire, Hugo pulled the car over before they could see what was happening. “Out,” he said, “we’re not driving into whatever that is. Does the military still have a base here?”

“Not military, Giants.” said Ingrid.

“Oh hell, crack the boot and see what’s there will you Art?”

Art did so and whistled, “There’s an arsenal here Hugo, I wonder if all the Childress estate cars have one?”

“I’d doubt it my boy, I suspect we’re loaded because Jim was loaded. Give me a rifle and a pistol and take one yourself.”

Ingrid showed up and held out her hand.

“You can’t Ingrid, you’re a God and you can’t fight the Giants, remember?”

Ingrid grinned, “I’m not a Goddess, I’m Art’s girlfriend, now give me a gun.”

The three left the road and headed across the fields to flank whatever was happening. Hildy shifted into a nasty looking boar, not his usual fighting shape, but it would do. He went even further wide.

As they came over the last small rise in the land, they saw a group of Giants trying to flank Jim’s fighters. Ingrid, Hugo and Art set up and started picking them off from cover. That got the Giant’s attention, and then Art saw a tropical jungle off to his left, between the Giants and the road. “What the hell...” he said.

“Illusion, ignore it,” said Ingrid, “here, try this.” She touched Art on the eyes and suddenly he could see the Giants stumbling around looking for their attackers. “Now fire, before they figure it out and cancel the illusion.”

Art opened up again and then looked to his right as a largish boar started to rip into the Giants from their rear.

In the general chaos, the three worked closer and finally got behind the Giants who were now in a crossfire.

Seeing they had lost the skirmish, the Giants broke and ran for the ruined building, disappearing inside and down.

Jim’s group hit the door first and Jim was down the stairs to a basement room that contained a wounded man and a woman,

with a somewhat transparent boy. He drew his saex and stalked toward the man, as the rest of his group covered the corridor against the retreating Giants.

“This is the cause,” said Hema, “but the first weak spot is down the corridor with the Giants.”

“Well we’ll just fix the problem from right here,” said Jim, advancing on the God, who seemed oblivious to anything happening around him. The woman stepped between the God and Jim and spread her arms.

As Jim was about to toss her aside, he heard a pop of air being displaced. He looked and Ingrid was beside him.

“Don’t, Jim, if you kill him it will probably get worse.”
At that moment, Art and Hugo came pounding into the room. Hildy was back to his cute pet mode and waddled over to Ingrid.

“Ingrid? What are you doing here, and Arthur? Who’s minding the store.”

“I’m just here for a short time Jim, Mike is minding the lunch counter.”

“Probably poisoned half the customers by now,” Jim scowled.

Elfwin spoke up, “Hugo Zembini? I thought you two had a feud going on, over some woman?”

Penelope and Eldwife looked at each other, and Elly made a sort of “told you so” face.

“That was a hundred years ago, Elf, I asked him to come to Guelph so that he could close up the weak spots.”

“Damn, I’m glad to hear that. We had a lot of fun, even if he couldn’t figure out how to lift our curses.”

Hugo gave a small bow and shrug of apology, along with a grin of recognition for the squad members.

“Our curses will lift when we’re killed,” said Jim, “just like for the rest of the squad. But never mind that. Ingrid what are you doing here? And why can’t I kill this God, we figure he’s the cause of the weak spots.”

“Jim, I’ve had dreams about him, and I think he’s the God of Unintended Consequences.”

“The what?, There is no such God is there?”

“Not one who ever got worshipped, that’s for sure, but call him Murphy if that helps.”

“Oh hell.”

“Yeah”

Just then, firing erupted in the corridor, as the Giants had regrouped and were attacking once more.

Penelope, seeing that the Giant officers were there urging their troops on, calmly skewered each officer as they showed up. The rest of the group could hold the Giants back, but there seemed to be an endless supply of new troops and officers.

Paul, her two elf blades in hand, started to head down the corridor, but Penelope caught her by the back of the shirt and shoved her into Hema's arms, "You sit on her boy, or I've got one of these arrows for you." Hema grinned and shoved Paul behind himself.

"You heard your mother, sweetheart, stay put, first rule of urban warfare is not to attack a blind alleyway. Why don't you and I go see if we can sneak around and attack from another direction. These good folks can hold their own here."

As they turned to look for another passageway, Hema said, "Besides, I think I see some help coming. Very scary help, but help for us."

~~

Guelph Surges Forward

Once they had got the wounded to the portal, and organized a triage, the Guelph crew started toward the weak spot through which the Giants had entered this dead world. Amber had sent her animals and the birds back to their homes and closed those portals.

Mara and Amber tried to close the weak spot to earth, but they couldn't do it. They needed Hugo or Liz for that. One was gone and the other was busy patching up the wounded.

The group decided the best way to protect their home would be to clean out all the Giants in the trail of dead worlds. With that, they moved to the other weak spot.

Mara would examine it, then open a portal nearby to the exit, from there she would quickly kill any guards and lead the group to the next weak spot.

Megan kept a closer and closer eye on Mara, she was worried that the beast would truly take her over, and at one portal, where Mara was practically drooling at the idea of killing more Giants, Megan took her aside, “Mara my sister, I ask you now to consider your wolf, and your lover James. Let me take over the point duty from now on, allow your monster to fade back to where it belongs.” With that Megan took Mara’s face in her hands and gently kissed her on the forehead.

Mara seemed relieved to let go the beast. She nodded and stepped aside saying, “Thank you Megan, for watching over me, I was not sure how much further I could go without losing myself.”

After this, they changed tactics slightly. Ray and Amber, who was riding Coyote would go through first. Ray and Amber would conjure up illusions to make the Giants on guard at the weak spot see nothing. It was curious that sometimes Ray could do this, and at other worlds, Amber.

Once the guards were blinded, Megan went through and killed them. Megan had no second thoughts, no hesitation, and they died quickly. Nobody, not even the New World Giants objected that this was unfair or dishonourable.

Mara had been scouting in the meantime, and she reported back that the Giants used only the weak spots, and that they had been using them to flank the Pixies in several places. Deny

them the weak spots and they would have to fight the Pixies head on, under equal terms.

They were surprised at how many Giants were guarding the entrances, they seemed an overly cautious race, but fine, even the strongest guard units were no match for the Guelph fighters. Although, they did seem to be more numerous as the crew went from world to world. Perhaps they were getting to the beginning of the chain.

They were indeed, but Mara soon reported that there was another army like the one they defeated. It appeared that the Giants were sending another wave through, each of the next several worlds had many more enemies than the last. Soon there were too many for just Megan to kill, and the others began to join in. Raven and Crow were still with them, and the New World Giants.

Amber didn't bring in her animals, but she rode on Coyote and played notes that deafened the opposing Giants without hurting her own. Without being able to hear orders, the troops were disorganized and easy prey. Those who got near the crew had their brains scrambled if they got close enough to Amber.

Once, the crew were surprised to find a world that hadn't been poisoned. They realized it was an ice-covered, ocean world and they could see seal-like creatures. Since these were not obviously intelligent, the Giants hadn't thought it worth the trouble to destroy them.

As they moved across the snow, the Guelph crew was suddenly trapped in a valley. Giants on both sides and no cover but the snow. Amber and Ray tried, but there were no illusions to throw here.

Joe Bear called to Amber, “Look into my mind, open portals in the areas I’m thinking of, we will find help there.”

Amber did, and sure enough, there was help. Hundreds of Polar bears came through. They were starving, but that had not made them weak, it had made them angry. The bears fell on the Giants from the rear and the ambush was no more.

“Please leave the portals open, Amber,” asked Bear, “this world is a second chance for the Arctic bears and others. There is ice, and there is food in the oceans. This will set my mind at ease over one of my peoples at least.”

Eventually, they found the world the Giants were using to stage their movements through the weak spots. There were far too many thousands of Giants to defeat, it seemed that perhaps half of their military might was there.

Pausing to think, Mara came back once more to report she had a way around this world, to the next one in the line. Hearing this, Megan looked at Amber and said, “You are just coming into your power, my singer, and you have Coyote to sing with you, can you see the way to close these weak spots? Hugo and Liz could do it, so we know it can be done.”

Amber leaned over and put her forehead on Coyote’s head, grabbing both his ears. “Can you lend me power without blowing my brains out of my ears, mutt?”

Coyote laughed deep in his chest and said, “Perhaps.”

Amber laughed, picked up her violin but instead of playing it she held it close to her chest, then she started to chant. Coyote

joined her and suddenly, the weak spot was closed. They quickly followed Mara to the other side and closed that weak spot too.

Nobody said it, but they all thought about that vast army on a world they had destroyed. It would surely starve to death. Perhaps there was some justice in that.

Beyond that world, they found a few guards on a weak spot that didn't go anywhere but back to Earth. Mara stuck her head in and reported that this weak spot seemed to exit in the Orkney's and that Jim was there fighting a larger group of Giants. As they were talking, they watched a few more of the guards go through the weak spot. Megan killed the last bunch and they were at the end of the chain.

Jim had gone to Europe to find the source of the weak spots, Ingrid had spoken of her dreams of a Wounded God who must not be killed. This must be where the lines intersect, this must be the place where it came together.

~~

Not the End

“Hugo, what do you see?” asked Jim

“The old man is wounded, the woman is half mad, and that kid is transparent, but he's connected to the weak spot down the hall. Ingrid, back me up here, do you see him in both places, here and in the weak spot?”

“He’s there, Hugo, he’s why the weak spots exist, and why they are so damned hard to close. You have to push him out to close them. He’s half in and half out.

“That’s what it feels like all right. So to close all the weak spots we’ve got to get him out of this one and back together. But how did he get into so many spots?”

The woman spoke up, “I might have something to do with that. I was born out of my father’s side and wounded him. To heal him I thought that having a child by him would give me the power to fix his wound. I was going to use the child to seal the wound, give him back what he lost when I was born.

“But when my son was born, I tried but found I couldn’t do it, he was somehow transparent and I couldn’t get hold of him. The more I tried, the more fixed in place he seemed to be, and the less solid. I think now, listening to you talk about weak spots, that he tried to get away from me, out of this world, and got stuck. Then each time I tried to move him he reached out to another world and now he’s spread all over.”

Jim spoke up, “So it’s not the old man, what if I kill this boy, would that close the holes?”

Ingrid shuddered, “No. That’s what I saw, these three are connected too tightly, if you kill any of these them, the worlds are ripped apart, every one that has a weak spot is connected and they rip themselves to pieces trying to get away from this dying family.”

“Fine, so I don’t kill any of them, how do we fix it?”

“I don’t know that we can, Jim, not from here. We need to get to the weak spot where I can see if I can get that part of the kid out of it. If it’s the first, all the rest of him might come loose too. It would take centuries to chase down all of him, weak spot by weak spot, and if you miss a branch...”

Jim looked at the woman, “What’s the story on the Giants?”

“They found the weak spot somehow, and started exploring, many thousands of them went through the spot and have never come back. I think they are trying to find a way around behind the Pixies they’re fighting, at least, that’s what I worked out, based on what they’ve said around me. They want the weak spots kept open.”

“It seems we need to get down that hall then, troops, what do you think?”

“I think we ought to hit the Giants from two directions,” said Mara who had just dropped into the room from the far side of the weak spot.

“Who is we?” asked Jim

“The crew from Guelph, Megan was right, the Giants were about to come through a weak spot and attack us, so we killed that army and worked our way up the chain killing others along the way. We figure we’ve wiped out about half the Giant warriors and now we’ve come up the chain to here.”

Jim looked at Hugo and said “How did she get here?”

“Liz?” Hugo guessed.

“Who?”

“Leave it now, Jim,” said Elfwin, “more pressing problems right?”

Jim looked disgusted with himself once more, but said nothing.

“We’ve got a big force just the other side, but we don’t have to use the weak spot, we can come out to one side of the Giants here and flank them while you keep them looking at you.”

“Do it.”

With that, Mara was gone and a short, sharp battle was heard. It didn’t last long. Jim stuck his head out the door and saw Joe Mufferaw’s Giants, Coyote, Bear, Croak and Caw head outside to check for more Giants. On the way out they were joined by Hema and Paul, John and Penelope.

Megan and Amber walked into the room and invited the group to inspect the weak spot. The woman joined them.

“Amber?” said Jim, “you were coming along with the fighters?”

“Later, Jim,” said Megan

The weak spot looked like a piece of the wall, nothing more. Hugo could feel it though, and now he could sense the boy stuck half way through. “I don’t know if I can do this, the spots further away weren’t as strong as this one. I guess because it’s the first.”

Mara had looked at the Wounded God and gone back to Guelph to pick up Liz in the hope that she could heal him. The two of them walked to the weak spot just as Hugo was speaking. He saw Liz and called her over.

“Liz?” said Jim.

“You’ve been away for a while Jim,” said Art, smiling.

Liz shook her head. “He’s become part of the portal, we can’t just rip him out of there or he’ll be torn in half.”

Eldwife and Amber both stepped forward, they both ran their hands over the wall. Amber looked at Eldwife who said “I can see the pattern.”

“I can play it apart,” said Amber and continued quietly, “Coyote, I need you.”

Coyote was there in his human form, put his arm around Amber and said, “What do you need my love.”

Jim sat down on a packing crate and shook his head, “Coyote talking?”

“Take my waist, and her hand love, we need to work together. I will need to borrow your power again. Ray please join Liz and Hugo so they can see what we’re doing.”

With that, Amber picked up her violin and played a few notes. Those who were just standing around made a dive for the exit. The sounds went straight to the bones and promised to rip them apart. It was not a place to stay.

The six faced the wall as Amber played. Eldwife saw the pattern, Amber teased it apart, Hugo and Liz snatched the boy as he came free.

“Leave the portal open,” said Eldwife, “I can see him coming.”

Sure enough, the boy, step by step, was becoming visible. Hugo waved his hands back toward the original room and the solidifying boy vanished from the portal room.

Jim had moved back to the room with the Wounded God and the boy, he watched as the boy’s body became more and more solid. The woman gasped, not since he was born had she seen him so real. She reached for him but Jim warned her, “wait, he’s still forming.”

At the portal, Eldwife said simply, “now.” Hugo and Liz looked at Amber and with a sound like thunder that went on for minutes, they closed every weak spot in all the worlds.

“Yikes,” said Ray, “what you folks could do to the worlds...” and then he looked at Megan who had stayed. Her eyes were hard as she watched them, but they softened as Coyote turned to her and smiled.

Ray decided that perhaps no single being’s power was ever intended to be too great. A balance was always needed. Coyote and Megan felt like two sides of a teeter totter, with certain beings, Amber and Kit, he suddenly understood, on the balance point. “Oh hell”, he said quietly, as he decided he’d never quite get it. The whole thing squirmed like jumping worms but somehow it stayed in balance.

One thing he did know, was that the Wounded God had thrown the balance off.

Liz seemed unaffected by the feeling of powers flowing around the room, and squeezed Ray's hand to reassure him, as she walked out to where the Wounded God sat, a huge man with his side ripped open.

Liz put her hand on his cheek and a tear ran down his cheek. "Mara" Liz whispered, and Mara was there, "he is wounded, body and soul, please get Lilith and James and bring them here."

"James?"

"Go."

In an instant they had returned. Lilith took a look at the wound and started stitching, working from deep inside and out to the skin. As she did this, Liz said "Mara and James, take his shoulders, you must help him heal."

Mara did so, looking closely at James but he grasped the old man's shoulder without hesitation. Liz again put a hand on the God's cheek and this time she cried along with him.

In time, the God showed signs of life, as if he was waking up from a long dream. Liz reached out for James and Mara and took their hands. They had looked on the verge of collapse as they used their recuperation powers to help the God, but now they were waking up themselves.

Liz smiled at Mara and said, “It’s about balance, and before you ask, James is moving toward you, he has your recuperation powers, we saw them not long ago.”

Megan stepped to Liz, “Balance indeed, sister,” she said as she cupped Liz’ face and kissed her on the forehead. Liz, who had been giving for far too long, received the blessing thankfully.

But Liz wasn’t done yet. She looked hard at Amber and said “Jesus Amber, breathe, focus on Coyote.” She then turned a dirty look on Coyote, “Nobody should have that much power who wasn’t born to it!”

Coyote looked hurt, “It wasn’t me.”

“It damned well was!” said Liz as she turned back to Amber. “Give him back enough so that you can handle it. Take it back as you get used to it and you’ll be fine. The feeling that you are slowly exploding from the inside will settle down, I promise you.”

With that, Liz and Lilith walked out to tend to the wounded.

~~

Back to Guelph

Mara took off her talisman and held it out to Liz, who shook her head and said, “Keep it, you are having too much fun being a scout. Besides, you are much the best of us at opening portals.”

Mara grinned and put it back on. She looked at Joe Mufferaw who said “I think it’s time for a regime change in the Giant’s land. They will be losing the war to the Pixies now, and that means the leader will be deposed by his “loyal allies”. Maybe we will see about some reform, get some leaders that aren’t so stupidly egotistical.”

Mara opened a portal for some of the New World Giants, but the Cohokia group said, “Back to sleep for us,” and so Mara sent them home.

As for the rest, Bear took himself back to Guelph to pick up Jane, saying something about “time for us to give up the titles so we can settle down.”

Jim and Elly took one of the cars and went back to his estate. “Lots of research room, and lots of funds,” said Jim while Elly made as if she was melting in his arms. As it turned out, Elly continued her research and the Elf King’s blob developed into quite a handsome young man.

The Wounded God, who had renamed himself Murphy, was happy enough with his daughter and her son, but they sensed something was missing. That something showed up one day for a visit, and the Kings son fell for the God’s son. So it seemed that Ingrid’s dreams had come fully true, the woman had married off her son.

As for the rest of them, I’m sure we will forget some of the characters, but you can provide your own stories for them.

Mara opened a Portal to Guelph, directly to the Bar in a bit of a show-off move and the Guelph crew stepped through.

Amber stepped up to the stage and began to play a polka. The Kobolds started off their signature slam-polka and were soon joined by the rest.

Coyote was in man form and took a turn on the dance floor with Megan, when they started to slam, several of the Kobolds went through the front window.

Mara and James were off in a corner, as were Ingrid and Art.

Look, seriously, the story is over, make up your own “ever after” Trust that things happened that evening.

And kept happening.

~~

Things Kept Happening

All right, yes, life carried on beyond the story.

Ray went into the daydream land to visit with Kitsune. He was a bit startled to see Kit with Okami, both apparently three years older. Kit had made a picnic on a blanket and with the two children was Megan.

Megan, Nanabozo, sitting on a blanket with a couple of children having tea and cakes. Ray shook his head in wonder.

Kit saw Ray and ran to him, hugged him tightly and said “I am so glad you're safe Uncle Ray, Auntie Megan has been telling

Oki and me about the fight with the Giants when I helped. I told you to call on me when you needed me.”

“And I want to thank you Kit. You were right, you helped a lot, more than I would ever have thought, so you are my hero.”

Kit swelled up with pride but then said, “You mustn't say that, or I will get a swelled head.”

“So you’re fine, Kit, you feel OK”

Megan spoke up, “I've been checking, Ray, she's fine. In fact, she's stronger than she ever was. That was a lot of growing up that flowed through her to you.”

“You noticed that?” said Ray.

“That much power suddenly appearing, of course I noticed. Part of what I do is notice that sort of thing. I wanted to check on these two and make sure they were OK and as far as I can see, they are just fine.”

“I was a bit worried, I don't think any of the family has ever dealt with that much help before, I'm not sure how I was able to use it, actually.”

“We find a way when needs must.” said Megan.

“Come on Uncle Ray, come join our picnic, Oki is talking now that I've made him three. Come have some tea and cakes.”

“You will put him back when you go home won't you Kit?”

“Of course I will, silly. Mommy and Daddy would be very upset if we grew up too fast.”

Ray shook his head yet again at how mature this child was.

“It's not just her,” said Megan, “she's linked to Okami, we will need to be very careful as these two grow up. I have a feeling they are going to bounce off of each other and cause no end of trouble.”

“Oh don't be a poo Aunt Megan. Oki and I will be good, we promise, right Oki?”

Through a big mouthful of cake Oki said, “Yeff.”

After Ray had had some cake and tea, which tasted suspiciously like root beer, Kit declared it was time to go on a hike. As they stood up, the nice grass they had been sitting on became a dense tropical forest. Ray was slightly surprised that Megan came along, but he soon saw why.

From the forest came ominous sounds and suddenly a big tiger leapt out at them. Oki didn't flinch, but he turned into a fox about twice the size of the tiger and he yipped which chased the beast away.

Ray looked at Kit, and Kit was looking at Megan.

Next was a nasty big snake dangling down out of a tree. Oki grew to giant size and grabbed it, gave a yank to get it out of the tree and threw it into the forest.

An elephant was met by a white wolf, a giraffe was met with a monkey that jumped on its back.

Ray was amazed, he had never suspected Oki would be able to do that at his age. He looked at Megan who whispered, “Quite impressive isn’t it, apparently Kit is training him. The war must have had some effect on her, she and Oki are training themselves to be protectors.”

Kit, whose hearing seemed to be excellent said, “Yes, if anybody tries to hurt our families, we’ll be ready.”

“Well don’t forget to have fun too my pets. I need to go now, but Uncle Ray will hike with you a bit longer. We are both very proud of you.”

With that, she simply moved out of the daydream world and left the three adventurers to their hike.

Megan appeared outside Stan’s house and let herself in. There were no signs of a woman around, and Megan smiled to herself. She found Stan in bed, alone, and so she bounced into bed with him.

“Nice to see you alone here Stan.”

Stan gave her a dirty look.

“You know, I saw you there at the first Giant battle my boy, and after I told you to stay back here.”

“You’re not the boss of me,” said Stan with a grin.

“Well it worked out well for a change.”

“For a change? Who do you think you’re talking to, Coyote?”

“Alright, maybe I take that back a little, and maybe I will even forgive you for Okami. I was just visiting him, he and his sister are going to be quite a pair, he’s very powerful already.”

Stan had ducked when Megan mentioned Okami, now he stuck his eyes up, just above the covers, “You mean you’re not going to give me another hiding for that?”

Megan laughed and said, “No, I don’t think so, now come here my big bad wolf.”

With that, Stan grew long ears and a big snout and was wearing a nightgown. Megan laughed even harder and grabbed his ears.

We will leave the two alone and get out of their bedroom with, perhaps, a few good wishes for the bed-springs which were already starting to say “gloing”.

Well perhaps one more peek.

Megan and Stan lay back on the bed and Megan turned her head toward Stan. “It’s nice not to be on alert for problems for a few moments.”

Stan smiled back and said, “I’ve got you”.

It’s curious how our characters have seemed to pair up.

Amber and Coyote were back at home. Amber was on the couch reading and Coyote was in his old scruffy dog disguise. He said it was a comfortable shape. As he curled around Amber’s feet (she always had cold feet) she reached down and gently tugged his ear.

Coyote seemed to have a new interest in life, and Amber, despite now being a Goddess, had to, as she said “earn a living” so she had even more students than before. She was also being invited regularly to play in the various orchestras in the area. Life was busy, but she always had Coyote to come home to in the evenings.

James and Mara had gone “trekking” as they put it. They were travelling from world to world to see what was happening. One good thing they had found was that the worlds the Giants had killed, weren’t really dead. The biological and chemical weapons they had used didn’t, as was thought at first, reach the entire world. This was an immense relief to them both.

As for the battle sites, they were well on their way to being cleaned up. The returning wildlife on most planets stripped the dead to the bone. The more advanced races gathered up the weapons and the spent gun casings and turned them to plow shares, thus proving that they were alien to Man. As ever, with battle sites, the dead fertilized the land.

Not all the worlds they saw were friendly, and James was glad to have discovered his recuperation powers. As, of course, was Mara.

Mike and Liz went on running the lunch counter. Art had declared he needed a vacation and had not asked Mike to return the keys. This suited Mike, he found he liked being a short order cook, and he was studying with Liz, some of the things that she had learned.

At the moment, he was in a park with his nose quite close to the ground, examining all the living things that he had not

bothered to see for most of his life. Liz was telling him to see the balance of the creatures he was watching, to understand how they lived or died with each other. Contrary to what he had thought at first, Mike was loving the lessons. He was beginning to understand just what a Seer is.

Back in England, Jim was quite happy to play the lord of the manor with Elly as the lady. It turned out that John and Penelope showed up about a week after Jim had returned. The two of them promptly installed themselves in John's room and life in the manor went on as it had for centuries.

Paul and Hema returned to their brothel in a much subdued Elf kingdom. The Elf King was happy to have his heir, and to have a God for a relative. They would not be getting their ancient lands back, but thanks to Jim and the others, they were no longer crowded. Not being overly sentimental, the Elves seemed to be satisfied with the outcome. It would take quite a long time before they were once again crowded enough to become nasty.

Hema seemed not quite as depressed at the state of the world, Paul saw to that. She had decided that the trick was to keep him occupied, that way he couldn't start to brood. Being so much younger, she simply involved Hema in her discovery of the world. He seemed to find new interest through her eyes.

As for Elfwin, he didn't pair up at all, did he? Still, he was hard at work both above and below, being a sort of double agent for himself. His life was terribly complicated and he liked it that way.

The Giants had ended their war and their lands were closed to visitors. We hope the New World Giants are doing some good.

The war above raged on, nothing like humans to keep going when any civilized being would have stopped fighting. Hema was right, the greatest danger to Mankind was itself. Gil hadn't been able to get away to join his old squad mates, but he was still ghosting through destroyed cities, looking for the enemy.

As for the Kobolds, they were in their element in Kens Keller and were content there. Ken had lost a leg during the fighting with the Giant allies, and had forged himself an absolutely hideous prosthetic. You could hear him coming as soon as he started walking, no matter how far away you were. He loved it and sometimes wore an eye patch he didn't need, "to complete the image", he said.

Perhaps, gentle reader, we can let our characters have a bit of time to themselves as we go do our daily chores. "Those dishes aren't going to wash themselves are they?" Amber would say as Coyote pretended to sleep through her question.

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Elfwin Edwards, Old squad mate from Essex.

John Childress, fighter, descendant of Jim

Eldwife

Giants:

Joe Mufferaw (Joseph Montferrand)

Louis Cyr

Édouard Beaupré

Angus MacAskill

Anna Haining Swan and Martin Van Buren Bates

Joshua Gillean Doan, a member of a Quaker family from

Sparta

Ray Keen
Art Pendray
Jonah and Lila and Kitsune

Jim -owner, real name Ashley Childress

Regulars

Arthur, narrator

Larry – annoying slob

Jonah and Lila– new baby, Tilly and Ray

Megan – white wolf -stan boyfriend

Mike – student – met Megan

Liz – tunnels, Mike’s girlfriend

Amber – violinist, friend of Coyote

Ray Keen – Raynard – Tilly pregnant

Lonnie – 75, Ray’s old flame

Ingrid – Freya, and Hildy her pig

Steve – photographer Mishelle – great lynx

Morris Minor – lived with dryad 40 years – bartender at Ken’s

Cellar

Mark and Nessie – plagues in Guelph

Rose and Sage – ghost doesn’t know

John and Lillith – labrador cabin

James and Mara – wolf moon, together

Ken Kobold – ken’s cellar

Hugo Zembini – magician

Al Thundercloud

Nerissa – mermaid

Gil Hamish – eternal warrior – Sally, girlfriend.

Juan and Carly, - fairy bar

Sal – talks to objects