

# Where Angels Fear to Tread

By Bill Wolfe

*Their Holy numbers were legion, and growing. The Names were beyond infinite, though Some among Them now referred to this Heavenly Host as The Castaway Gods, and Some preferred The Olden Gods. By popular demand, it was currently anathema for any of the Divine Gathering to use the terms 'Abandoned Gods' or 'The Forgotten Ones.' All Names were accurate, none True. In any case, The Gods approached Bethdish with trepidation. This world was unlike any other; great power had been wielded here in the past. Remnants of dread energies-spent, but still potent-seemed to shroud the planet like the murky odor of an abandoned charnel house. By Divine Nature, Gods can sense when one of Their Ilk has perished at the hands of Another. Indeed, there were Few among this Host Who had not vanquished at least one other True Deity over the millennia. Gods, far too many of Them, had been slain upon this orb. And then there was the problem of The Active Gods, creators of the Immortals, of Whom the Gods approaching were, at best, unsure, and Who perhaps maintained some interest in the affairs of this world. This gathering of currently nomadic Gods knew little about these Actives, there was even some heated deific dispute as to Their existence, Their presence, and even if They were, indeed, the Creators of this world. The consensus among the Aband. . .uh. . .Castaway Gods was that These particular Actives had made the Final(?) Transition and were thus beyond interference with the affairs of the corporeals of this planet. And these Gods were in great distress. They feared. For if there is one aspect common to all true Deities, it is that They despise Their own fear, even as They crave the fear of Their supplicants. Be that as it may, The Castaway Gods needed information and Their search had brought Them here. Overwhelming were the choruses that cried out that the risk was too great. And equally immobile were Those maintaining that action must be taken. Heavens were rent and countless realities sundered by the heated diatribes, which raged for eternities (in some dimensions) and minutes. But in the end, Those who approved of this plan overruled Those who opposed. And it was so. But the debate continued.*

**Excerpt from Orfin's Guide to Bethdish p.2209:**

## **The Festival of Change**

**"Of the 8 sentient species "native" to Bethdish, all but the sea-dwellers share exactly one cultural event, The Festival of Change. Although the Immortals zealously limit the introduction of off-world technology and culture to the "naturally" developing societies of Bethdish, the obverse is not true. From ancient times, the planet's Aphelion-when its elliptical orbit is at the farthest point from Antuth, its primary-**

has marked the beginning of the time of harvest in the Northern hemisphere, and the beginning of spring in the Southern. Traditionally celebrated with wild parties and bizarre costumes, the custom has grown-in both scope and popularity-over the millennia. The Festival of Change is the holiday on Bethdish. Even the three alien colonies (pp. 568-604) and the Valley of the Three Peaks Resort (p. 1036), wholeheartedly embrace this weeklong, rotating party/parade/costume ball/orgy. And nowhere on the planet are the participants as wildly guised, rowdy, bold, brash or intoxicated than in the City of Lights. The population of the district always doubles, at least, with sentient beings from a thousand worlds converging on the city to parade around wearing (or bearing) whatever their culture considers bizarre, strange or outlandish. The variety is absolutely astounding. Many of the costumes are powered, and the visitor can expect flashing lights, shrieking sirens, lasers, grasers, masers and bells. Those sensitive to sonic or psionic tissue rupture are advised to take. . ."

*A cautious few among the Olden Gods argued that the remnants of some of the Ancient Forces that remained on this world, which obviously did not originate in this galaxy, were more focused than most. They pointed out that there were beings and artifacts there that contained significant slivers of The Power, and these individuals could interfere with even the Gods, Themselves. An honest, straightforward Minority maintained that They should approach openly and merely ask the Immortals for what They wanted. But there were Others among Them who wanted to remain hidden, or, as Some insisted, forgotten. As a compromise, it was proposed that a small party go to the planet and attempt to make contact with the Immortals, but anonymously. . .at first, anyway.*

*And again the debate raged. Abounding were They Who fervently wished that the sanguine worshipers who once flocked to Their temples, altars and cathedrals had not outgrown Them. . .er, uh. . .that They-the Gods, that is-had NOT outgrown the need for the continuous, sniveling susurrations of the prayers of the hapless and weak. And Many were the Gods who longed once again for the sounds of Their armies of righteousness, marching to mindless slaughter in Their Holy Name (or Names-and especially He/She/It/They Who Must NOT Be Named-if you get the drift.) For if these Deities still possessed such followers, They would order an immediate Holy War against the heathen and the blood/sap/ichor/coolant would soak the ground as fragrant testimony to the might and glory. . .Yadda Yadda Yadda. All of which usually led to long bouts of commiserations woebegoning times long past and culminating with the empyreal equivalent of a group hug.*

*And so it came to pass that an Immortal was chosen by the Castaway Gods. He was picked because of his accessibility, his relative youth, and most importantly, because he was not currently in the company of other Immortals. They would conceal Their divinity, at first, and try to ascertain whether the Immortals of Bethdish even possessed the information that They so sorely required. And so it was that a small party representing most of the factions of the Forgotten Gods, usurped the bodies of a handy group of Abvarnan farmers and marched them purposefully into the Mare Inebrium on the busiest night of the Season.*

Larrye was in the groove. The *Mare* was packed to the gills, orders were coming in faster than he thought possible and yet he was fielding them like a true pro. He was working up to ten drink orders simultaneously... twice his usual number-he was still the assistant bartender, after all ...and feeling like an important cog in some fabulously efficient, well-oiled machine. It was during one of the infrequent lulls, when he was completely caught up with every order, every task; when all the fizzies were topped-off and the branches brimming, that he took the time to look around the bar with a deep sigh of satisfaction. Memories... His last holiday at the *Mare*, when the bar was almost empty, flitted through his mind as he absently rubbed at the tiny scars on the back of his neck. Who knew that Krupnick bottles were so delicate? The paper-thin glass had lacerated an interesting pattern in his skin that had reminded more than one patron of the bartender who worked the Pantheon, but that's another story.

*Bruce, the bouncer, eyed the Castaway Gods suspiciously as they entered; but then again, he looked at everyone that way. Most of the Gods ignored him although One noted in him a tiny sliver of The Power-rare in a living mortal-denoting that in some reality, at least, he was currently the stuff of legends. And the place itself had a subtly welcoming, homey quality to which apparently even Gods were not immune. Some among Them even dared to marginally relax Their everlasting vigilance for a moment or two. And yet there were Some who pondered and feared this unidentifiable feeling. From whence did it come? Why could They not immediately determine its source? Did it represent a threat? Among a Few, vast energies were summoned and stored in nearby dimensions, within easy reach should flight, battle-or Armageddon, be warranted.*

Larrye spotted them the moment they walked in. They tried to hide it, of course, they always did. But Larrye was proud of his burgeoning powers of observation. The group showed all the signs: new but out-of-style clothing, the timid, wide-eyed and unsure way they looked around the place as they entered, their reluctance to disperse into the crowd, preferring instead to attempt to navigate as a cluster in the general direction of the long, sturdy, and crowded bar at the back of the room. Larrye was sure of it, these were definitely *out-of-towners*, probably a bunch of agribusiness machine parts salesmen from some backwater farm world. Here they were, off-planet for the first time, they probably hadn't even heard of the Festival of Change and were completely bewildered by the crowds, the noise, the lights and perhaps just a little confused by the accent of the taxibus driver who must have dropped them off at the street entrance. No doubt one of the fellows had, trying to impress his pals, ordered the driver to take them to "where the action is," or something along those lines.

*The interior of the Mare Inebrium was a surprise to Many of the Castaway Gods. And this was a Group unaccustomed to surprises. There were some items and artifacts displayed in this place that had originated in realities so diverse that even the more experienced Gods had never encountered the like. Some required actual seconds to comprehend every facet of the totalities represented by some of the more interesting offerings. Omniscience has its limits, after all. The God who sees even the falling of a single sparrow won't necessarily see it: ALL. RIGHT. NOW. They had Each, long ago,*

*learned to allow Themselves awareness to only that portion of reality that They decide They need to know about any given situation. Most information, even a mortal can tell you, is meaningless trivia, anyway. For this reason, the Gods would perceive only what They, in Their infinite wisdom, choose to perceive. And in such minutiae, can be found salvation.*

If Larrye had a soft spot for rubes in this situation, it was because not so long ago, he too had been lost and wandering in the Big City. He'd been robbed and rolled his first day off the transport and was just at the point where he was desperately hungry and considering the complexities of picking a dumpster lock when Max had taken him in at the *Mare*. Larrye had begun by busing tables and cleaning the staff kitchen and had slowly progressed to assistant bartender. Whenever he got the chance, he liked to try and help people like these get their bearings and had even been known to loan out a few credits to those in real need. And Larrye judged this group to be unusually pathetic. They were rudderless and nearly foundering in an intense storm of sentient revelry. Irresistibly swept by unimaginably relentless tides, they were about to be swamped by the pull and the press of the crowds. So Larrye looked around for something he could do to help. Thanks to his aforementioned keen powers of observation, long hours learning the crowd nuances in the *Mare*, and the fact that that his tab screen showed that the Dervillian Diplomatic Delegation's credit had just been cancelled, he spotted a table that was about to clear and decided to help the helpless.

Max, the bartender and manager of the *Mare*, was also enjoying the temporary lull. He was only mixing fifty diverse drinks while apparently attempting to seduce a set of human twins in town for the festivities, and hadn't noticed the party of bumpkins as they entered. Larrye tapped Max's shoulder and pointed in the bewildered group's general direction. "I better get them a table, hey boss?" Larrye turned and started their way as Max glanced over at the group. So Larrye didn't see the startled, ashen look that momentarily overtook Max's countenance. A consummate professional with countless millennia's experience at controlling his reactions, he still had to struggle to hide the terror that coursed through his being like he'd swallowed the electroworm from a bottle of Mintak tequila. His circulatory organ-you wouldn't call it a heart if you looked at it really closely, even if you'd never actually seen a heart-was pounding against his ribs (those, you'd recognize) hard enough that he was afraid it would burst out and run out the door on its own. And the *Mare* had been written up for that twice, already, this week.

*The Group-and therefore all the Forgotten Gods, All presently engaged observing the efforts of Their Fellows-immediately sensed that They had been detected by the Immortal. A minority of Them called for an immediate Sodom and Gomorrah upon the City of Lights, but were soothed when Others among Them indicated the fear that accompanied the recognition. The fear They understood. And fear was always appreciated. There was a tiny Fraction Who liked the fear, and wanted to create more, but They were generally ignored and easily dismissed. From the direction of the fearful Immortal came one who was truly different. This creature beamed recognition in all directions like a beacon. Briefly, one of the Gods considered reading brute's poor excuse for a mind, but dismissed the idea. Surely one of the Party had, or would soon do so. Besides, it was always*

*unpleasant to skrye the thoughts of lower life forms. The Gods also recognize One Another by the relative measures of True Power possessed by each, and yet this impetuous being-who was apparently tuned to Their holiness-approached without any fear at all! In fact, he seemed to exude an air simultaneously condescending and slightly paternal, and this cavalier, and even superior attitude was most definitely directed at the very Gods, Themselves.*

Larrye had never met an Abvarnan farmer before, so he didn't recognize the species. However, his bartender's instinct told him that a few dollops of plain old alcohol would soothe their jangled nerves without too much fear of cellulotoxic reaction.

"Good Evening gentlebeings," Larrye started. He had found that his concerned, innkeeper-*slash*-host persona worked best when dealing with the slightly dazed-*slash*-confused clientele who regularly wandered into the bar. Though he had to admit that this group wasn't responding well. They seemed to be studying him like he was a particularly repulsive bacterium on a microscope slide-especially the fellow with the bright red unibrow near the back of the group. "There is a table opening up over this way," Larrye indicated a floating platform which was, even then, being evacuated by the pod of Dervillian dignitaries who, though feigning indignation, were secretly pleased that their Government credit chit had lasted as long as it had. Though perhaps using it to rent three rooms at Madame Sherri's Cathouse for a month-in advance-had been a bit excessive.

*"Blasphemy," chorused the more aggressive-and slightly larger?-minority of Forgotten Gods. "Destroy them all!" It seemed that this puny mortal-though he knew Their glory-was treating Them like mere guests! He should have immediately prostrated himself at Their holy feet/fins/tendrils/pads. The Minority calling for annihilation was now a more significant voice and Their strident demands impossible to ignore. Never! Never in all of Their vast and everlasting history had a mere mortal knowingly treated any of Them in so mundane a manner! While Some cried for blood and Others for pestilence, a marginal Majority counseled patience and forgiveness. For after all, this lesser being had been sent by the Immortal, and the Gods had come seeking answers, not worshippers. And again the Gods clashed. Eternities and nanoseconds are equally inconsequential in the realms of the Most Holy, so in the reality of the Mare Inebrium, no time at all passed before saner, calmer Gods prevailed upon Their Brethren to stay Their righteous wrath. .for now.*

Larrye, in his rush to be helpful, also failed to notice that Max's dazed, wary gaze followed his progress as he expertly intercepted the group and guided them to the only and suddenly (mysteriously? miraculously?) free table large enough to accommodate them all. As Larrye cleared the mess and, apparently, took drink orders, Max marveled at his assistant's aplomb. It was obvious that Larrye had somehow recognized the immense power surrounding the little group, it was the sizzling and unmistakable aura of True Divinity. Max had encountered this unique sensation only once before, over one and a half million years ago, when he was summoned to the hidden city of Albion, to stand before the Gods of Bethdish. Though Max remembered little of the encounter past the point that he'd crossed the Broken Bridge and actually entered Albion, he could never

forget the sensations he'd experienced when his own Gods had briefly turned Their gaze in his direction. But how did Larrye know? By now, the *Mare* was almost an extension of Max's nervous system. He could gauge the mood and temperament of a crowd by the way they held their drinks, by the tone of the din created by hundreds of voices, speaking simultaneously, which accompanied a night like this one, by the very smell of the air, state-of-the-art ventilation system or no. And Max was positive that nobody else in the bar was in the least aware that there was anything unusual going on. Max was no theologian, but he was sure that The Gods-the real Ones, anyway-never did anything without a reason. And he also knew that that They could be supremely dangerous.

*One of the calmer among Them, curious as to how She had been so easily recognized despite Her efforts, divined the Truth-it's a God thing, you wouldn't understand-and, shocked, shared this Truth among Her Peers. The Immortal had intimate experience with the Divine. He had been Judged by his own Creators and found acceptable. The Olden Gods' efforts at concealment were not meant for one such as he. He was, in fact, one of precisely four corporeal beings in all the Omniverses who had faced Judgment, and who still lived. The results of a Judgment usually involved the denial of an unspoken application for continued existence. The rare few who managed to survive a Judgment would-for the rest of their lives-retain the ability to recognize true divinity in all its myriad formulations. And if this young Immortal had survived the scrutiny of his Gods, then perhaps Their assumptions about the Others having made the Final(?) Transition could be legitimately questioned without fear of heresy. The possibility of the presence of Active Gods-which even vast powers of the Forgotten Gods were unable to detect-had a quieting effect on Those who counseled destruction. A single voice, a relative newcomer to the group, posited the question: "How much more powerful would an Active God have to be to conceal True Divinity from Us?" It was the pondering of this enigma, more than any other factor, which stayed the hands of even the most volatile of the Gathering.*

**Excerpt from Orfin's Guide to Bethdish, P. 103:**

### **The Gods of Bethdish**

**". . .only the Immortals know all the details, and they aren't telling.**

**Cryptotheologists studying at the University of Bethdish and the Collegium Lux, propose several theories as to why Bethdish's so-called gods are currently absent.**

**Chief among these theories is that internal strife, some eight-to-twelve million years in the past, vastly reduced their powers. Various accounts of the battle between the 'good' gods, led by Antuth (also the common name for Bethdish's sun), an heroic figure in the Bethdish pantheon, and Valleor, a spectral "evil" god, have appeared throughout. . .**

**P. 112:**

**. . .other theories point to the historical record of the miraculous absence of 'nuclear winter' after the asteroid bombardment of 1840 (Local Calendar) wherein the ejecta from the impact cratering unaccountably vanished. This is thought to be the best historical proof of the Living Gods. . .'**

For many reasons, the Immortals of Bethdish know more about heavenly matters than any living species. And Max knew more than most. The Gods who had just strolled into

the *Mare* were no minor deities, the product of imagined tales, mythological from the very beginning. These were True Gods, created by millennia after millennia of reverent, absolutely faithful worship and unstinting personal sacrifice by entire populations of sentient life. The one Great Religious Truth is that only sophonts create God in his/her/its own image. Bawdy bar tales and a little pre-battle farm animal sacrifice may suffice to create a minor deity like Mugwump, Zeus, TrisTillan, Odin or the many others who frequented The *Mare's* Pantheon room. But the nested, triple reality-locked suppressor fields protecting the universe from small-cap gods, writers and other reality manipulators would be completely ineffective against the Truly Divine. These were most probably Gods that had outlived the very species that created Them. Though often the cause of Their hosts' demise, these Forgotten Gods were rumored to be autonomous; Their existences no longer dependant upon the blind, unthinking beliefs held by their dutiful billions. These Gods, though close enough to omnipotence that no corporeal being could tell the difference, were said to be easily angered, incredibly petulant, and more than anything else, almost dementedly insecure. And Max had absolutely no idea what to do. "Odin on roller-skates," he muttered angrily under his breath.

*"What if He is one of the Active Gods?" The question, once asked by one of Their holy body-though None were quite sure Which, or Whom was the first to ask it-resonated throughout the heavens. Not One would admit it, but try as They might, and with every passive means at Their considerable disposal, they could sense nothing of the Divine in the creature who was, seemingly, about to treat them as equals. More active means of testing his (His?) divinity were suggested by Some, perhaps emboldened by Larrye's apparent harmlessness, but These were shouted down most vehemently by the Majority. For there were Those among Them who well remembered the danger in risking the anger of an Active God on Their/His/Her/It's home turf.*

*"In My day," intoned one unusually ancient and stentorious God. "I could have hidden Myself from the likes of Us. Easy as manna and quicker than a lightening bolt." And although Most of the Listeners scoffed, an undercurrent of uncertainty was generated by the Old Timer. "And I want to know what kind of God makes His worshippers Immortal? Eh? No fear of death? No need for an afterlife? No relief from this veil of tears? What do they even have to **pray** for? I wouldn't want to mess around with any God with **that** much confidence in His abilities." The ease at which the Voices of moderation won the moment surprised All Who deigned to consider it. And, as noted earlier, even the saner Gods dislike surprises.*

As Larrye had expected, the group could not even decide what to order. On a hunch, Larrye suggested a pitcher of Pernish mead, on the house, of course. He didn't feel obligated to mention that a free first drink was a *Mare* tradition. He also forgot to add that he was supposed to ask Max before he made the offer. But Larrye was feeling generous and, perhaps, a bit caught up in the Festival of Change. Besides, the worst that could happen would be that Max might make him pay for the drinks. Larrye's recent fiscal fortuity had engendered a certain boldness in the young man that Max had, of course, immediately noticed and actively encouraged. Larrye collected the previous group's mess, ignoring the plastic, triangular three-millicredit chit left behind by the Dervillian

group. Using his improving bartender's arithmetic, he calculated that the tip had worked out to less than one fiftieth of one percent of the bar tab. Larrye wasn't even sure why they'd bothered. He decided that they had probably been counting their ready cash and had accidentally left the coin behind. It had been left under a napkin, after all.

*In an irrational dimensionality created by the Olden Gods for their own use, a concursion of the Most High was convened. But this was not the clash of omnipotent wills that had been seen before. For the first time ever, the Gods spoke in earnest, respectful and almost hushed tones to one another. They were striving as never before to decide how to deal with the Active God, most likely one of the Creators of this world, who was posing as a mere tavern servant. There was now little doubt that one of the Creators of the Immortals would be able to answer Their questions. And although it is absolute truth that all things are possible with God, no Deity would ever forget what it was like to be Active and taking mortal form. All had played this game from time to time and for various reasons, and All knew the risks of interrupting an Active God's game. The Castaway Gods were almost evenly split in their debate, one side wanting to play along with the charade until the Active God chose to reveal Himself/Herself/Itself-(ves?) and the other side maintaining that this must be some kind of worthiness test. One of the main reasons any God took corporeal form was to determine whether a supplicant deserved the boon that had been-or was about to be asked. If this was a worthiness test, perhaps it really would be better to reveal Themselves in all Their Holy Glory lest They be judged too weak, too easily fooled to be worthy. It was this latter Group which was about to hold sway when that absurdly observant Goddess asked another pointed question: "If He is supposed to be a servant, shouldn't He have taken the gratuity?"*

Larrye made his way back to the bar and entered the mead order into the computer, he wasn't going to be able to spend much more time with these losers-not on a night like this-and he wanted to be able to dispense his wisdom without too much discussion and without answering a load of questions. As he waited for the pitcher, he started filling one of the several orders that were starting to back up. Oddly enough, it looked like Max hadn't done anything at all during the last minute, or two. He was a little startled when Max whispered in his ear. For a large man, Max could be as stealthy as a cat.

*"Oh my god- Larrye,"* Max's intense whisper barely betrayed the anxiety he was feeling. *"What do they want here? Is there anything I can do?"*

"Just routine, Max. Don't worry about it." Larrye was momentarily distracted by the Dragon's Bane Double Meltdown he was trying to concoct. Too much fire stone and the Sidhe High Huntress who ordered it would spontaneously combust, and she *was* one of Trixie's distant cousins, after all. "I've dealt with this kind, before." Larrye pointed to two or three of the easy orders, appearing on the screen, "I've got other things to do when I'm done with them." The complicated drink was finished, it was a perfect purple hue with tiny fiery vacuoles dancing throughout the medium. Larry paused to admire his work for a moment and commented, "Beautiful, aren't they?" After all, the Double Meltdown was Larrye's favorite drink to mix. He was a little proud of himself for mastering the technique and could spend hours watching the diminishing bubbles of flame surrounded

by liquid. It had cost him his best apron and a few flash burns to his face and neck learning how to do one just right. Max was considering Larrye's strange answer and even more bizarre attitude when his assistant snatched a pitcher from the main conveyor and trundled off toward the most powerful, and dangerous beings in all existence.

As the realization struck him, Max's knees almost buckled. Could he have been wrong about Larrye? Did the poor sap have any idea what he was about to do? "Not a clue," Max croaked. "Not a clue."

*The subether buzzed with excitement. The Active God was fallible! He should have taken the tip left by the table's previous occupants but He had left it behind. If this God could make mistakes, perhaps He wasn't as powerful as They had feared. They were All listening when the Immortal approached his God and asked if there were anything he could do to help. They heard the God reply that this was a routine event and would handle it. But handle it how? And if there were any lingering doubts about with Whom they were dealing, the Immortal's words had dispelled them all. He had even addressed his "employee" as "My God, Larrye." And They already knew that this Immortal had been sensitized to The Divine. The true clincher, though unspoken by Any, was the Active God's exclamation as to the beauty of the Olden Gods. He was obviously a Celestial Being of tremendous wisdom and superior judgment. After only a few centuries of cautious debate (in the irrational time frame created for just this purpose), the Gods decided to play along with the game. They would show humility by pretending to take advice from a lowly mortal, and They would preserve the Active God's self image by pretending they had not seen through His ruse. For if the Gods knew anything about Celestial Matters, it was that the appearance of omnipotence is at least as important as the reality. It is unspoken, of course, that should the Gods feel that they have been duped, especially by a mortal, They would sterilize this planet, this system, perhaps this arm of the galaxy unto the tenth generation in their Righteous Wrath. But of course, they were Gods. And such considerations were so very far beneath their Holy Estate, that they warranted not the slightest expenditure of thought or energy, although the supply of both was, quite literally, infinite.*

As Larrye approached the table, he could tell that the group had come to some sort of consensus. They all seemed to be looking at him in anticipation. That unibrow guy in the back, however, still seemed to be scowling like he'd just gotten a whiff of a D'rish waste pellet. Larrye decided to keep an eye on him and to slap him down, hard, at the first sign of contention. But first, he was still their host.

"Gentlebeings," Larrye began. "I think you will all really enjoy this Pernish Mead." He poured the golden liquid and placed the glasses with practiced ease. "Cold as *between* and smooth as a dragon's egg, we are quite proud of this little number." When he had finished, he waited for them to take their first sip, compliment him on his choice, his knowledge of fine refreshment, *et cetera*, and he would then use that to segue into his speech.

And they were just sitting there, ignoring the drinks and staring at him, waiting. "Uh. . . is there. . . something else that you want?" Larrye was completely at a loss. This wasn't the way he had expected things to go and, unlike Max, wasn't exactly an expert at controlling his reactions. "If the mead isn't to your liking I could maybe find an Andromedan Ale, or. . . uh, something."

*"He's really good with that mortal act," noted one of the Gods who was not currently controlling a body. "I always tended to give myself away by acting divinely serene or by wearing the halo. Always a dead giveaway, those halos."*

*The awkward pause lasted a few seconds when one of the Gods cried, "For My sake, taste the damn drinks and let's get on with this. For some reason He seems to think it's important." And it was so. . .but one observant young Goddess, perhaps the same whose insights had been so useful, before, began to have some disturbing suspicions.*

All at once, the whole group seemed to come to life and they all reached for their glasses. Larrye allowed himself a deep sigh of relief when he saw the look of surprise on their faces at the taste and quality of the brew. The *Mare Inebrium* never settled for second best. And this time, their reactions were what he had expected. He nodded at the complements-though that unibrow fellow thought it a bit sweet-and gathered his thoughts for his grand speech. "I couldn't help noticing that you all seem a bit. . . out of your element, here."

*"He does have our answer!" cried a God who had once directed his priests to burn alive anyone who showed overt excitement. His name among his followers had translated as: Stone Face God, for millennia. The name had been quite accurate. He was summarily "shushed" by the rest of the Forgotten Gods.*

"Don't feel badly about needing a little guidance," Larrye continued. "It's a big universe out there and I can tell that your travels have been long and vexing." Larrye really wished he had asked Max where this species called home. He didn't know if it was an orbital platform, farm world, water world, desert. Sheesh, he'd have to be as general as possible or he'd look like an idiot. "I know that the farther you get from your. . . uh. . . origins, the more vulnerable and out-of-place you all feel. And all I can tell you is. . . you're right. You are more vulnerable."

*"I haven't felt truly safe since the last of my true believers exsanguinated himself on my second-favorite altar," confided a Deity of tremendous spiritual stature. Which One made the comment doesn't really matter for Most were thinking something along the same lines. Besides, you've never even heard of this particular God. . . since you're still alive. The ranks of this gathering of Forgotten Gods had grown even as Larrye had seated the Mare Inebrium Group. They trickled "in" by ones and threes, small bands and lone stragglers would enter, divine the purpose for this intense conclave, and quietly take Their place. Omniscience has its advantages, after all. And so it was that this diverse group of almost all the loose, wandering and homeless True Deities in the universe gathered in a nearby empyreal reality to listen to advice from One of Their Active*

*Brethren. And although They all knew that omnipotence has no limits, They also realized that Some were more omnipotent than Others. One of Their Holy cohort, Who claimed vast experience in such matters, was elected to act as spokesgod for Them All. And thus, He spoke.*

"So, common human tavern drudge of no apparent divine distinction. . . relate to us the mechanism by which We shall find, encounter, or create the Final Transition to the status of safety which we crave." *This Should-Be-Forgotten God would have continued His barely comprehensible prattling if Some of His Compatriots had not pulled Him from the corporeal vessel He was inhabiting and flung Him-all but physically-into a deep and SILENT limbo. It took Him actual milliseconds to escape, by which time He quietly joined in with the stream of Castaway Gods from throughout the Omniverse, Who were still converging on this spot in space-time. Meanwhile, several Gods, at once attempted to speak through another of the party, with almost equally confusing results.*

Larrye barely had time to assume his number-four puzzled frown when another of the party interjected, "Methinks, mayhap. My befuddled friend has misspoken. His terrible grammar, lowly lackey." And now Larrye was at a complete loss. They all seemed to speak with a surprising, and apparently variable diversity of accents. He was beginning to doubt whether this group needed his help, or maybe just a quiet rest in the rubber room, when the unibrow in the back piped up.

"We beg your indulgence, kind sir. We have traveled far and seek your council." Unibrow had undergone an instant and almost total transformation right before Larrye's still-puzzled eyes. Whereas earlier the fellow had seemed gruff and somewhat common, he now spoke and moved with a gentle, wise and subtly feminine manner. And she. . . um. . . he wasn't the only one. Larrye noted that several of the party were looking about with fresh, and suddenly more comfortable demeanors. Yeah, he was on top of *THIS* situation. He just knew that a few sips of the Pernish mead would do the trick.

*In the realm of the Divine, a shuffling of characters had taken place. Those who wished to interact with the Active God auditioned for the gathered Host. The Few Who had not completely lost the ability to interact in a mortal manner were given control over the bodies and Those Who failed were pulled-in some cases forcefully-back into heaven. And again the Gods clashed. Immense egos were bruised and Names were called. A very Few left this gathering of the Almighty to strike out on Their own, once again. But More were still arriving. And All that departed kept an awareness of the events transpiring in the Mare Inebrium; though They traveled to the furthest reaches of the Omniverse. Just in case something important was achieved. . . and also, perhaps, They might still find a target for their Wrath.*

"Now look, folks," Larrye began. "I know what your problem is and I'm here to set you straight."

*In the Heavens, there was silence. So densely packed with assorted Deities was the ether above the City of Lights, spacecraft reported 'turbulence' where none could exist. Ships needed extra thrust just to maintain velocity in what SHOULD have been freefall.*

"Where you come from, no doubt, you were-individually-a force to be reckoned with. But now here you are, surrounded by. . .uh. . . other entities that never heard of you, don't particularly care about you, and who could, quite frankly, bowl you over and trample you to mush without even knowing you were there. And this frightens and confuses you, doesn't it?"

*The Olden Gods 'looked' suspiciously at the Multitudes crowding around. As powerful as They were, individually, All knew that None could withstand the might of even a fraction of The Host, were It to band together. The Active God was making sense.*

"If you want to survive in this big old universe," Larrye continued. "You're going to have to learn to keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. Don't ever forget that no matter how tough, how smart or how successful you are, there is ALWAYS somebody out there who can eat you for lunch. And in a place like this, you shouldn't necessarily assume that I mean that figuratively."

"What are you suggesting?" interjected the stout fellow who had already finished his mead and was reaching for the pitcher. "Should we just pull our heads into our shells and hide for the rest of etern. . . er. . . our lives?" There was only about half a glass left in the pitcher, but when others motioned for a refill he managed to top off the rest of the glasses, including his own. If Larrye hadn't been busy wondering where this obviously mammalian species kept their shells, he probably would have noticed something odd. But bartending wasn't really Larrye's strongest suit. Though he was improving.

"Look around you," Larrye swept out both arms to encompass the entire bar full of revelers. . . or maybe all of Creation. "Do these folks look like they are hiding from life?" He thought he'd made an excellent point but the group just looked confused. "There are only two real choices. Either you go back where you came from and resume your old, sheltered lives. . . Or, or you realize the fact that you are just a tiny fraction of the cosmos and go out there and accept the risks inherent to all mortal life."

"We cannot go back," said the stout fellow, his voice melancholy and a little sad. "No, there is no going back. Not for Any of Us," echoed the unibrow. And they all drank deeply from their glasses, as if toasting a past life, forever lost. Larrye wondered if perhaps this species was one of the many wandering peoples who had, due to some catastrophe or another, lost their homeworld. In the back of his mind, an idea began to form. "Not here, of course," he began, slowly. "But maybe you could find some place that needs your. . . uh. . . skills and make a new start for yourselves?" They seemed receptive to this line of reasoning and he knew that he had to get back to the bar, soon. He was a little surprised that Max hadn't already yelled for him. Whatever he was going to say, it would have to be quick.

*The Gods rejoiced! At last, an answer had come. They would find Godless civilizations and FORCE them to worship their new True God. Of Course! It was simple! The Final(?) Transition wasn't to some higher plane of existence! It was merely a transition from one hapless populace to another! The armies of righteousness would march again! The*

*nonbelievers would be slain and driven before Their might. And Many extended Their holy awareness throughout the Omniverse searching out likely candidates. . . and found far too few. It seemed that almost all cultures developed their own pantheon as soon as sentience was achieved. Of course, many of these deities were still relatively weak, easily vanquished by a True God. And still, some civilizations were considerably more desirable than others.*

*Claims were staked, and challenges made. And again the Gods clashed. But this time, it was serious. Temporary alliances were formed and shattered as omnipotence was pushed to its limit. Gods vanquished lesser Deities only to find Themselves too weakened by the conflict to withstand assault by Powers they would have scoffed at, only milliseconds before. The universe quaked under the tremendous stresses placed upon its very fabric by Forces able to easily defy its basic laws. Mass, time energy: ALL were created and ALL were destroyed.*

And in the *Mare Inebrium*, Larrye was afraid he'd really screwed up. Half the group started twitching and jerking like Orgasmatron addicts. He'd heard that some physiologies couldn't handle mead, but for this many to all react at the same time. . . well, that just wasn't how it worked. And those who were unaffected seemed not to even notice what was going on. Could this be their equivalent of laughter? Anger? Dance?

"Are. . . are they okay?" he asked unibrow. Of all she. . . he? seemed the least affected.

"Your idea will not work," was the stern reply. "There are far too many of Us. And too few places We might find a home without interference from those already there."

"Of course not," Larrye was getting a bit indignant, now. "You will almost certainly have to get along with the current. . . ah. . . residents. It might not be easy, but you'll have to try and blend in. You can't expect to just waltz right in and take charge of the whole show."

"But I MUST be Supreme, I share my authority with no Other," interjected one of the party who had not spoken much, up to now.

"Nor I," said another. Choruses of the same were echoed from around the table.

"It is not in Our nature to do as you suggest," said unibrow, in tone both adamant and strangely speculative. "And You should know this, already. Should You not?"

Larrye felt a mild stab of trepidation. The attitude of the group was changing. The twitching stopped and all faces turned to him. And the looks were not friendly. Not friendly at all.

*Time runs differently in the realms of the Divine. Though great battles had been fought, True Gods had been slain at the hands of Their Equals and lengthy treaties negotiated,*

*broken and reforged, All paused in Their struggles within the time between heartbeats in the Mare Inebrium. The Gods awaited the answer to that question.*

Larrye had never felt anything like the focused, angry, intense scrutiny directed at him by this small group. He noticed, absently almost, that Bruce had picked-up on the tension and was making his way warily across the room. He felt, rather than heard, Max take a deep breath and hold it: waiting. And Larrye got mad. Just who were these bums to come in here and kibitz his hard-earned wisdom? Hey, the advice was free and it was worth every millicredit. He was a busy man, and if they didn't want to waste their precious time with him, then they could just order drinks or go join the party someplace else.

"Now listen here, all of you," Larrye's voice was low and, he thought, quite threatening. "You didn't make this universe, it made *YOU*. If you have to control every facet of every aspect of your existence, then there is no place anywhere, in *any* universe where you'll be happy." The animosity from the group was real, now. Unconsciously, Larrye found himself leaning forward into the palpable waves of pure anger emanating from the group. Perhaps if he'd considered the strangeness of the feeling, he would have paused, noticed that there was something dangerous and huge lurking behind those glaring eyes. But you know what they say. . . Fools rush in. . .

"If you can't find anyplace that suits your fancy in *THIS* universe, why don't you make us all happy and just go and create your *own*?"

*And from the temporal perspective of the rest of the universe, that is exactly what They did, all of them. For the Gods can move quickly when motivated to do so. All, that is, but One who lingered for a brief moment in the Mare Inebrium in order to thank the Benefactor who showed all the Forgotten Gods the nature of the Final(?) Transition. For as soon as it Larrye said the words, They All knew that it was right. It's a God thing, and no, you really wouldn't understand. The Omniverse was immense, but finite. And now, because they transitioned their Godhood, there were countless new, young universes in the process of being born. The Omniverse, and all of Creation would be a richer, fuller place. And so the true Festival of Change was celebrated. As it always has been and ever shall it be. Amen.*

In the bar, the tension collapsed like a silently-bursting balloon. The Abvarnan farmers, a bit tipsy to start with, seemed not at all surprised to find themselves comfortably seated in a bar. They passed around the mead pitcher and a little while later passed it around again, and again. Max eventually had to lock the thing in his personal safe. Later, his suppliers would wonder why he never felt the need to order more Pernish Mead. The *Mare* only served the best and everyone knew that Pernish Gold had no equal.

Within a fraction of a second of finishing his diatribe, Larrye stumbled forward toward the table. Odd, he hadn't realized he had overbalanced. The group was completely different now. All but old unibrow, anyway. He. . . she? Well, Larrye didn't really think it mattered much but he'd never seen any man, not even Bruce, who was now meandering

back towards the main entrance, move with such fluid grace. In any case, unibrow approached and gently placed a hand on Larrye's chest.

"We have much to thank you for. . . young man. . . Young. Mortal. Human. Man." She seemed as surprised to say it as Larrye was to hear it said. "You'll never know how close you came to. . . well, suffice it to say that perhaps ignorance is a virtue that even the Gods must respect. Bless you, young man. . . truly."

Larrye felt a warming sensation that reached deep into his being. And then she was gone. Oh, there was a staggering, clumsy, red-headed oaf standing there asking where the men's room might be hidden, and he had one shaggy red eyebrow stretching from temple to temple, but the difference was unmistakable. He directed the fellow toward the front, and cautioned him to stay away from the doors that looked like airlocks. Some species had some very special requirements when it came to "facilities."

Larrye returned to his post at the bar to find an unprecedented hundred and twenty-drink backlog on the screen. Max wasn't being too helpful, either. He seemed to be having an intense conversation with the Reeve on the main vidscreen by the accounts register. Seemed the Reeve was upset about something, but the snippets of conversation he could overhear as he rushed to fill special orders, made no sense at all. It sounded like he said that the sun had contacted the Reeve and asked if They- whoever "They" were -had gone? That couldn't be right. And just who or what was Albion, and why was it important that it had suddenly reappeared? From where? Larrye knew that something strange had just happened, but at the *Mare Inebrium*, strange is just another day at the office.

The End