

This year's story was inspired by my son Tim, who is 9. Earlier this year he asked me to help him write a comic book series. He's doing the drawings. His ideas for his comic books are wonderfully huge. To help him, I offered to write a back story that would help create boundaries around his comic book universe. The ending is therefore a big cliff hanger.

The image of Hermes that comes with this story is by Tim.



Christmas with Hermes

By Robert Ford

In *Bulfinch's Mythology*, around 1850, Mr. Bulfinch felt it necessary to write, "The religions of ancient Greece and Rome are extinct. The so-called divinities of Olympus have not a single worshipper among living men."

Bulfinch was silent on whether such beings had actually ever existed. Having lived from 1796 to 1867, one presumes Bulfinch felt the Greco-Roman gods were the fancies of pagans who had yet to have their spirits lifted by God and Christianity.

He would have been so envious of Sienna.

December 18, 2017

Sienna was not expecting to learn an alternate history of ancient Greek and Roman gods at a Starbucks in Vancouver. Regardless, there she sat, sipping a Chestnut Praline Latte and listening to someone claiming to be Hermes. Or Mercury, if she preferred. She had asked him **his** preference, which turned out to be Hermes.

"I was a witness to Ares and Heracles being taken away. It was 79 AD in Pompeii," said Hermes.

"The volcano that erupted?" she asked.

"Vesuvius, that's the one. It didn't *erupt* so much as *was detonated*."

"Really," Sienna said.

"Absolutely. I was there. Kind of hiding. Ares and Heracles were fighting what I'm calling the shadow god because he's so literally and figuratively in the shadows that no one really knows where he's from or what he wants."

"I really should be getting to work," said Sienna, trying to find a way out of the conversation.

Hermes knew for his plan to work that he would have to use some magic – his term. She'd likely use the words "mind control." He needed her to stay long enough to listen. He lightly touched her hand and said, "Please stay a while longer. I need your help."

Sienna's mind was abruptly filled with a powerful belief that this person was in honest need of her help. She rarely turned away when anyone needed help. Her nature was to do what she could for people. And now her overpowering desire was to understand his problem.

"Shouldn't you start at the beginning?" she asked.

"About 4 and a half billion years ago the sun started to form and stabilize into what we see today. The planets were forming too. As our star was in its final stages of instability, some usually coherent energy fields were released. Normally atomic helium/hydrogen fusion reactions do not have much coherence or persistence, but in the case of me and my fellow gods, we are living fields of energy, with the same lifespan as the sun itself. We were blasted out of the core of the sun and landed on Earth.

"Of course, organically speaking, not a lot was happening on this proto Earth. Nevertheless, we lingered, admiring the slow pace of development of the planet. Things were very exciting for us when the first bacteria emerged. We started to mimic the appearance and behaviour of the new organisms. They were so much more interesting than the floating energy fields we were. And, as things moved along, we upgraded. I tell you, I truly miss the dinosaurs. I spent a long time being a velociraptor.

"Humans, as you'll understand, changed everything. Your kind allowed us to be expressive in new ways. And of course, reproduction. The gods could share their energy with each other and, like me, I'm a combination of two of the originals. With such a ridiculously long life span, the gods didn't mind giving up some of their energy to have children. But, could you imagine making a demigod T-Rex? Fascinating creatures, but they would be raging bombs with our power levels."

"Wait," said Sienna. "Mythology tell us that the gods created people. That's not true then."

"Good grief, no," said Hermes. "Our presence and, ah, *interference* had a huge impact on your cultural development. But create. No, we're sadly not that creative. Energetic, long lived, but not very imaginative. Why do you think it's taken me 2000 plus years to come up with this plan?"

"I'm not following," said Sienna.

Hermes suddenly looked rattled. Sienna, for the first time, really looked at him. He had long curly hair, which was greying, peeking out from underneath an Ottawa Senators ball cap. He was in dark jeans, plain blue shirt and long lined rain coat. He could be anyone anywhere.

"Hang on a second." Hermes looked about like someone observing small stinging insects that no one else could see. "Damn. We have to go."

"I'm going late for work."

"Yes. Sorry. Please stand and pick up your drink gently but firmly."

"Uh ... Why?" she asked.

Hermes grasped her hand and space folded. Sienna felt as if the floor had fallen and tilted like a strange funhouse. She dropped her drink but Hermes caught it.

They were in a Starbucks. But not the same one.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Starbucks," he said. She glared at him. "Starbucks at 1380 Massachusetts Ave," he elaborated.

"In Boston?!"

"Yeah. Cambridge Mass, technically. It's a good one. Young crowd, decent amount of seating."

She looked out the window. Flakes of snow and people wearing warm weather clothing walked past. She listened to the chatter in coffee shop and could hear the Massachusetts accents.

"How?"

"I'm Hermes. I was the messenger of the gods. I was the best at folding space. There was always this assumption I was running or flying but honestly why bother when you can bring two points together and take a step. Now, where were we? I left my triple espresso behind; I'll get another." He went to the front.

Sienna sat, sipped her drink, and took time to breathe. She pondered the challenges of explaining this to her husband. It would be easier to explain it to her 5-year-old son.

Hermes was back.

"That was fast. Did you jump the line?"

"No, I asked the barista directly," he said.

Sienna looked unimpressed. "Did you pay for that?" she asked.

"No," he replied, "but the barista knows me."

"I'm sure she does," said Sienna.

"I brought us here," said Hermes, "because I can't stay in one place long or the shadow god tries to intercept me. Since Pompeii I can always feel him coming. You see, a few thousand years ago, demigods and monsters started disappearing. They were the less powerful ones but, eventually, we started to notice that people (and things) we used to hang out with were not to be found. Anywhere. And I looked.

"It was when Poseidon was captured that we knew there was a malevolent entity at work. And it was not without cost. Atlantis was Poseidon's favourite place and the struggle between them sank that island state and Poseidon was sucked into a dark cloud in the sky.

"I delivered a lot of messages that day, I tell you."

"And Pompeii?" Sienna asked.

"By that time, the shadow god had grabbed everyone but me, Heracles and Ares. Those two had escaped being snatched a couple of times and decided to team up and try to destroy the shadow god with the volcano. It wasn't much of a plan, honestly. Pompeii and Herculaneum, ironically, were covered under 20 feet of volcanic ash as a direct result."

"Are you the last one?" Sienna asked.

"Pretty much. I know of a few low-powered Asian deities but they are so subtle that I can never be sure if they've been snatched too.

"Uh oh." Hermes abruptly growled, chugged his triple espresso, and grabbed her hand without warning.

They were gone.

"Holy shit it's hot," Sienna said.

"Welcome to Darling Harbour," said Hermes.

"Australia?" She started taking her coat off as she saw an early morning worker stop by the Starbucks for a coffee.

"I'll get you an iced drink," Hermes said.

A couple minutes later he was back with the drinks. She was in a bit of shock and needed to adjust to the heat.

"Do you *only* go to Starbucks?" she asked, taking the iced drink from him.

"No," he said. "I like the coffee."

"How often do you change location?" she asked.

"Since about 1000 AD, the longest I've been in one place has been about 35 minutes."

"You must be ..."

He finished her sentence. "Exhausted and lonely? I don't actually ever tire, but this is tiresome."

"And you have no idea who this guy is?"

"No. Which is my plan. I'm going to find out and be the inside man for the jail break."

"If you are on the inside, who's on the outside?" Sienna asked.

"Yes. Um, this is where you come in."

Sienna took a puzzled pause. She flicked a stray hair from her face. And, in much the same volume and tone as someone who just cottoned onto the meaning of a very rude joke, said, "Oh no, no! No. I am not bearing you a child!"

"Bloody hell mate, what's going on?" A fellow patron had overheard her outburst.

"Nothing to worry about," said Hermes. The fellow looked dazed and wandered away.

"It's time to go anyway," said Hermes.

"No! Already? I'm not done my drink."

The ground twisted and shifted and they were in yet another Starbucks. This time 10 Russell Street, London.

"Jeezus," said Sienna. "Where's my coat?"

"Right here." Hermes put her coat in her hands and her drink from Sydney on a table.

"Aren't you afraid he's going to be waiting for you at one of these some day?"

"With over 26,736 stores worldwide I'm not too worried. I'll get myself an espresso."

Sienna thought: *I would totally bolt for the door except for the fact I'm in the UK with no passport.*

Hermes was back. "Now I know you've likely read a lot of Greek mythology and how the gods would take wives and make offspring willy-nilly."

"Yeah. Wasn't one of yours half goat?"

"Oh yeah. Pan. That's a long story. Anyway, the point is I prefer this arrangement to be consensual which is as unusual for gods as it is Hollywood producers."

"That joke would have been funnier last year," she told him.

"OK. Sorry. Perhaps *surrogacy* might be a better description. I want to leave some of me behind so that a break out can be staged. To do that a child needs to be hidden until maturation. I have a way of combining donor DNA, synthetic DNA and my own energy field to make a seemingly normal human child that won't give off signals that the shadow god would detect.

"Donor DNA? You mean you need one of my eggs? Uh, they're kind of tied off. We had three miscarriages after our son and stopped trying."

"Yes," said Hermes, "I know. I can fix that."

"Really? I guess I shouldn't be surprised," said Sienna. At this point Sinead O'Connor's rendition of *Silent Night* came on the speakers. Sienna couldn't help but think of the "round yon virgin mother and child" line.

"You're not trying to start a new religion or anything?" she asked. "I'm hardly a virgin birth candidate. Which makes me wonder, do we have to have sex or anything?"

"There's enough religion to go around without adding a new one," said Hermes. "If you *want* to have sex I'm certainly willing, but it's not necessary."

"But you are telling me I could be a Mom again. Would I be raising this demigod?"

"Yes, but the term demigod is inaccurate," said Hermes. "With the synthetic DNA the child would not be similar to anything that anyone has ever known. But this child would need a strong mother. Unconditional love. And support when his or her true nature starts to appear."

Sienna had a dilemma. She wanted to be a mother again more than anything. Originally she assumed that she'd have a big family. She felt blessed to have her one son and had resigned herself to her one miracle. But this opportunity was insane. No reasonable person would agree to bring to term an entity that was equal parts actual Greek god, artificial human and real human.

Hermes was making that face again.

"We have to go again, don't we?" asked Sienna.

"Yes." Hermes grabbed her hand and they were in a Starbucks in an airport.

"And this is ... ?" she asked.

"Singapore," said Hermes.

“You must thrive on 24-hour locations.”

Hermes smiled weakly. Sienna could not imagine living this way, even if one was effectively immortal with unlimited energy.

“Do you believe in God?” asked Sienna.

“Which one?”

“No, I mean do you believe in a conscious entity that created you? That helped you and your kind be released from the sun?” Sienna was geekily thrilled to be able to ask an effectively immortal person about their spiritual beliefs.

“I’ve been alive for billions of years and have no direct experience or evidence to guide me in any way on that question. This is one of the reasons why my kind love your kind so much,” said Hermes.

“OK,” said Sienna, “one thing that’s worrying me is the safety of this proposed child. This shadow god might come looking for her or him. What do I do?”

“The plan is for that not to happen, but his or her job will be to protect you,” said Hermes. “Assuming you agree, I’ll modify your memory so that the information I’ve given you only pops into your mind when you and the child need it. You can’t reveal a secret you can’t remember.”

“That makes sense I suppose,” said Sienna. “My husband won’t feel so bad.”

“He will be the real father. I am but a donor,” said Hermes.

“This is really way more advanced than the three-parent situation they had in the UK where a third parent was donating mitochondria,” mused Sienna.

“Quite,” said Hermes. “Oh, wait.” He grabbed her hand.

“Oh here we go,” Sienna said.

Sienna could tell from the accents that they were in New York. “Are we in Manhattan?”

“Yes,” said Hermes. “575 5th Avenue to be precise. This may sound strange, but it’s too risky to be seen with you. All over the world.”

“You want me to decide,” Sienna said.

“Yes please.”

“I have one last question,” she said. “Let’s assume when the sun was forming that the creation of your parents, what I’ll call the original Greek gods, was a natural process as a result of the development of the solar system. Could any of you have landed on another planet like Neptune or somewhere?”

Hermes paused. “We never thought of it.”

“Really.”

“It would be speculation,” said Hermes.

“Your entire species of, er, energy creatures have been abducted. I think you can afford some logical guess work. Seriously, if the shadow god is not a god you recognize, he’s got to be from away. Another planet is more likely than another star system. Because if our dwarf star produced you, surely another star somewhere in the galaxy produced others like you.”

“This is another reason why we need people,” said Hermes. “Fresh thinking.”

“One last question,” Sienna said. “What would you guys do if you escaped?”

“Hard to say, given I have no idea what conditions they have suffered, but for me I think I’d linger in a coffee shop for longer than a couple of minutes. However, I’m sorry to press, but what is your answer?”

“I feel more like a participant in an experiment to save an endangered species than the mother of a pseudo-demigod,” said Sienna. “But, yes. I will. I’ll be the mother of your half god, half android, half human baby. What do we have to do?”

“It’s already done,” said Hermes.

Sienna was back in the Vancouver Starbucks. *Was I just talking to someone?* She looked around. Her latte was gone. She checked her watch and realized she was late for work. What had she been doing for the last 35 minutes? *No more late night talk shows for me*, she thought.

December 21, 2017, the Winter Solstice

Hermes was sitting at the Starbucks at Utrechtsestraat 9, Amsterdam, known as The Bank due to it having been a bank vault in a former life. He had been there 35 minutes and enjoyed every second of it because even he was weary of constant movement.

Then he felt the shadow coming. The urge to flee was intense. He clenched his hands and dug his nails into the palm of each hand until he felt blood. But he stayed put. He wiped his hands on the side of his chair.

A tall slender young man, dressed all in black, abruptly sat across from him. "Hello, Hermes," he said.

"Hi, whoever the hell you are," said Hermes. "It took you long enough."

"I was checking for a trap or trick, which I'd expect from the 'divine trickster'."

"You must have me mixed up with that Norse guy. Regardless, this is a surrender, not a battle and not a trap."

"Why?"

"It may take another few hundred years, but eventually you will be able to catch up to me. This continuous moving is tedious and unfulfilling."

"Are you looking forward to seeing your divine family?"

"They still exist?"

"Of course. Imprisoned."

"Then get it over with," said Hermes.

A dark shadow fell over the Dutch Starbucks. The other guests wondered if the lights were broken, but all returned to normal. One fellow was certain there had been two guys sitting near him. They must have left quietly, he thought, returning to a video on his smartphone.

The blood on Hermes' chair persisted only for a moment. The blood from the left hand vanished, heading west and the blood from the right hand headed east.

December 24, 2017, Vancouver, Canada

Sienna was getting ready for bed and felt an unexpected tenderness in her breasts. *You've got to be shitting me*, she thought.

She knew what *that* feeling was.

December 24, 2017, Seoul, South Korea

Seo-yun was making dinner for her husband and son when it hit. She recognized the rumbling in her stomach, ran for the bathroom and let it go. 너 나 지금 놀리는 거지!

She knew morning sickness when it hit, but she was not supposed to be able to become pregnant anymore.

In the next couple of days two women 8,150 km apart would confirm their improbable pregnancies with home test kits and later with doctors. The medical profession would remind the women that tubal ligation effectiveness was not 100%.

Hermes clearly had felt that he needed two offspring for his plan. Failing to tell the mothers of the existence of the siblings reduced the risk of failure.

It would be a while before Hermes discovered if his title of “divine trickster” would hold.

To be continued in Tim’s Zip Comics, someday.