

# Lietapis Vosienskaj Savany

The Annals Of  
Autumn Savannah

*a new translation*

*Richard Jefferis*

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the  
Writer

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aka Richard The Writer.

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# › Vasmaja Kazka ‹

~ The Eighth Tale ~



# Chapter One

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn Savannah as she sat with her back to the cold hard stones of the wall. The first glimmers of Astauand peeped over the distant horizon and cast a pale golden arrow across the dark sea towards her but her eyelids were closed. Such warmth as Astauand would provide would be long in coming for it had been a cold night. Had her eyes been open she would have seen the fogging of her breath as every exhalation wreathed her in a small, private mist. Not that the mist was thick for her breaths were measured and slow.

Just as her ears had heard the faint sounds of the last of the night's bats returning to their homes among the eaves of the towers dotted along the wall, the calls of the early risers among the gulls began to impinge. They were not quiet as the narrow beach lay only three streets distant and there were food scraps and more aplenty, tossed out from the multitude of dwellings. But otherwise there was peace and the air was cool and fresh from a breeze that came in from the wide sea. The peace broken only by the regular sound of the waves as they rolled ashore and the calls of the gulls.

One gull, perhaps still drowsy and befuddled from the night, landed on the wall and watched her as she sat, silent and unmoving. Perhaps it was confused by the regular little clouds that formed around her face then dissipated. Curious it hopped a little closer, its head cocked and one eye intent. The other pointed at the immensity of the wall. Still there was no movement, save another little cloud that came and went. Closer it hopped then closer still until it was barely a wing length from her. Still no movement. Then, with a whoosh, another gull landed, further along. The first gull hopped around to look at it and clacked its beak. The second gull clacked in return then both abandoned the wall to join the others that glided over the waves.

Then the peace was broken as a voice, a man's, called some greeting or farewell in one of the streets below. Then came a rumble and rattle as a hand cart was pushed along the cobbled surface of the road. The sounds interrupted the thought that was in Autumn's head and she briefly gave the new sounds consideration.

“’Twas likely a farewell,” she thought, “he’ll be off to do something,” then dismissed the man from her mind.

She had experience of life in her Esyup and had passed some time in villages, towns and two cities and knew of the noises that went with groups of people living close to each other. Her mind shifted to thoughts of woods and pastures with no people and the quietness that went with those then her discipline ended that line of thought. She was in a city, perhaps one not as large as Uli-Rratha or Cim-Irsou but cities are by any definition large and filled with people and animals. And it was dawn. The noise that would surround her for the rest of the day was only just beginning and would not die away until long after sunset.

As if to confirm this, a rooster crowed to greet the dawn. It was some way off but others, near and far, acknowledged and added their own cries of greeting. Somewhere on the other side of the wall a pig grunted and snuffled as it made its way to where its food lay. Woken by the roosters’ chorus the city’s dogs added barks and growls. The city was coming alive and the people would be rising soon. A momentary sadness passed through Autumn’s mind followed by a regret for the tranquil peace of a wood beside a stream but again, discipline won out. She was in a city and must accept all that goes with a city. Her eyelids flicked and half opened then closed again as she sought to exclude the sounds around her. It worked for a while.

“Oi, you!” came a voice.

It was close by and Autumn was momentarily distracted but she closed her ears and concentrated on her thoughts.

“You alright?” came the voice again.

It sounded as if it came from the street directly in front and below her. Her nostrils flared slightly but otherwise she did not react. There was no hint of danger in the voice and doubtless it was directed at someone else nearby. She inhaled slowly and deeply and held the breath for three heartbeats then exhaled. Such was her custom at this time of day.

Other voices appeared. The sounds of feet on cobblestones. The sounds of pots and cauldrons being scraped. Splashing sounds from water and other liquids being tossed into the street. The noises of the city began to build and the cries of the gulls shifted into the background. Not too far away several cows began to add their moos as their time of milking approached. Ordinary sounds to be sure but in sufficient quantity to mask the sounds of a man climbing, with some difficulty, onto the roof of the dwelling next door.

It was not without its dangers. Elsewhere in the city were dwellings made from blocks of stone or bricks. Others were built from stout wooden planks cut from the trunks of trees that grew beyond the edges of the city. In this part of the city, however, the dwellings were small and made from branches interwoven with smaller branches to make a lattice then daubed with mud. They were moderately stable and kept out much of the weather. In this particular street, however, and on the side that was bounded by the wall, the dwellings had only three sides and rested against the wall. They were held in place only by dried mud slathered between the last branches and the stones. Vigorous activity could, and had many times in the past, pulled entire dwellings away from the wall. The climbing man was mindful of this and, since he lived in the dwelling whose side he was climbing, he took care.

“Oi!” he called again when he had scaled the side and found support on the roof from the thicker branches. “Oi, Wahine!”

Autumn heard him. He was barely three body lengths distant and there was nothing wrong with her hearing but she ignored him. She was deeply involved with a line of thought and those parts of her mind that monitored what went on around her for danger raised no alerts. This was a city and men called to women all the time. There was no threat in the voice, no suggestion of any violent intent. A tiny part of her mind wondered why the woman he was calling to did not answer him but perhaps she was out of earshot.

The man watched Autumn for a few moments then shook his head.

“Must be bloody deaf,” he muttered quietly then started to edge forward.

He kept to the stout branch that formed the top of the boundary between his dwelling and the one below Autumn. A small area of mud coated reeds cracked beneath his knee and he made a mental note to repair it in the next day or two. It was tiresome as he would have to go down to the beach to get some seawater but those who live in mud dwellings are used to such tiresomeness as it is a regular and frequent chore. When he reached the wall he cautiously stood up then hoisted himself onto the ledge so he sat with his legs dangling over. Autumn was now barely a body length away. She sat on the ledge cross-legged with her hands resting on her knees and her eyes shut. She seemed to be asleep. Using only his arms the man shifted over a little until Autumn was within arm's reach.

“Wahine?” he asked and poked her knee.

Instantly Autumn leapt to her feet and her hand flashed towards the man's throat but she stopped a finger's breath away. The man cowered back against the wall, his face a mask of fear.

“Who are you?” demanded Autumn.

She saw his fear and backed away along the ledge although she kept her arms ready in defence. He was a small man, perhaps of a height with her although it was difficult to tell as he was sitting and his legs hung over the edge. He could have been wider across the shoulders but he was hunched and trying to make himself small so again it was difficult to tell.

“Ummm,” said the man nervously. He looked down at the roofs below then back at Autumn.

“I apologise,” said Autumn, realising that the man was no threat. “You startled me. Please, do not be afraid.”

“’Tis difficult not to be afraid when you do things like that,” said the man, a slight tremor in his voice. “Especially up here. You could have knocked me off!”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Once again I apologise. Who are you and why are you up here?”



“I am Saudade Galeo Eight,” said Galeo, “and I live there.” He jabbed downwards with his finger at the dwelling a little to his right.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “I am Autumn Savannah, your neighbour. I am delighted to make your acquaintance.” She sat down again, this time with her legs dangling.

“My neighbour?” said Galeo. He frowned. “You mean there?” and he pointed to the dwelling directly below.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “We moved in late yesterday.”

“Ahh,” said Galeo, his frown fading. “Me and the girl were away and did not return until after dark. I thought I heard someone snoring.”

“That would likely have been my companion, Logan,” said Autumn. “He enjoys his sleep. What brings you up here?”

“I came to see if you were alright,” said Galeo. “I thought mayhap you had fallen from the top of the wall and were injured or some such. I did call up but you did not hear me.”

“Once again I apologise,” said Autumn. “I was deep in thought. I thank you for coming to my aid.”

“Like as not it wasn't needed,” said Galeo. “How did you manage to jump to your feet like that? There is barely room up here to stand let alone do any dancing.”

“’Twas luck and nothing more,” said Autumn, reluctant to reveal her skills as yet. “Your touch surprised me and I reacted without thinking where I am.”

“I daresay,” said Galeo. “’Twas most lucky you did not fall onto the roof. They were not built to walk on and you would have gone straight through. Mayhap if you be planning on doing this a lot you'd best be getting some planks and strengthening it although I doubt the walls would hold the weight.”

“’Tis a thought,” said Autumn, not intending to dwell on it as she had

no difficulty getting up and across. "I will talk with Logan on the matter."

"Can I ask why you are up here?" asked Galeo. "It is not somewhere you get to by accident."

"I came up here to think," said Autumn. "I like to do that in the open air."

"Ohh," said Galeo. "Thinking. I've heard of that. Can't say there's much call for that sort of thing around here. Them as lives in this part of the city be spending most of their time just getting by and thinking don't be helping much. So you be rich folk then? What are you doing in this pisspot place?"

"We are not rich," said Autumn. "We are travellers and we decided to spend the winter in Schtei rather than in the mountains. I have wintered in the mountains before and staying warm is not without its difficulties."

"And you think you'll be warm here?" laughed Galeo. "Just you be waiting 'til the winter storms start coming in from the sea. If you don't freeze your tits off you'll likely drown from the water what comes off the wall."

"I did wonder about that," said Autumn, looking up at the wall that towered above her. "But Kilig assured us that it would not be an issue."

"Kilig be a lying cheating turd," said Galeo in a manner which implied this was something he had said many times before.

"You know him?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Galeo, "as does everyone who lives in these," and he waved an arm to encompass all the dwellings that butted against the wall in this particular street. "We all be renting from the shit. How is it that travellers such as you be finding such a creature?"

"We met him in an inn on the western side of Schtei," said Autumn,

wondering if she and Logan ought to look for somewhere else to live. "He seemed friendly and obliging."

"Aye, he can seem like that," said Galeo, "but don't you be thinking he has a heart. If you don't mind me asking, what be he charging you?"

"Six kalas for each ten days," said Autumn.

Galeo curled his lip and grimaced.

"Is that a lot?" asked Autumn.

"Tis more than me," said Galeo. "I be paying five."

"Oh," said Autumn not knowing what to say.

"Mayhap it's because you are travellers," said Galeo, "and you likely will move on soon. Me, I can't afford to go anywhere else. So you from Aferraron?"

"Aye," said Autumn.

"Thought so," said Galeo, "seeing as how you have a daft name. You speak Shoxin very well. Where did you learn?"

"The other side of the Xibu Shan mountains," said Autumn, improvising. "We spent some time in Bufon and Daihfew."

"Can't say as I've ever been that far," said Galeo, scratching under his beard. "Can't say I've been outside Schtei more than two, mayhap three times."

"You must like it here," said Autumn.

"Hate the bleeding place," said Galeo, "but I be trapped."

"Trapped?" exclaimed Autumn. "How so?"

"Costs money to live, don't it," said Galeo. "And what little I be getting be paying for the dwelling and a bit of food. Never enough to

be able to put any aside or move somewhere better though.”

“Ahh, I see,” said Autumn, nodding thoughtfully. “Can I ask what you do to make money?”

“Ohh, bit of this, bit of that,” said Galeo evasively. “Speaking of which, I can’t be spending all day up here talking with you, nice though it is.” He started to shift over to the boundary branch again,

“Ahh, right,” said Autumn. “Yes, I understand. You mentioned a girl? Is she your almost?”

“Nah, she be dead these two summers past,” said Galeo. “Girl be me daughter.”

“And just the two of you live here?” asked Autumn.

“Aye, so you’ve no need to be worrying about noise,” said Galeo. “Leastways, not from us.”

“Perhaps if you are not too busy later you would like to join us for a meal?” asked Autumn. “It would be well for us to meet you both since we will be living side by side for a time.”

“That be right neighbourly of you,” said Galeo, cheering up. “Right neighbourly indeed. Thank you kindly.”

“Then we are agreed,” said Autumn. “If I may ask one question before you go?”

“Of course,” said Galeo.

“What do we do with our waste?” she asked.

“Just toss it in the street,” said Galeo, “like everyone else.”

“I mean our bodily waste,” said Autumn. “Kilig told us to get a bucket which we did but he did not say where to empty it.”

“Ohhh, gotcha,” said Galeo. “Down at the end of the street there be a

big tub. Empty it in there. The tanners and dyers come and collect whatever's in there every day or two."

"What for?" asked Autumn, a mix of curiosity and distaste on her face.

"Tanners use the shit for tanning," said Galeo tersely, "and the dyers use the piss for dying. Can't say as I know how but there it is. Right then, I'll be off. Around sunset?"

"Or a little before," said Autumn. "We have no light."

"Right you are," said Galeo. "Until then."

"Fare well," said Autumn as he shifted over a little more and cautiously stretched a foot out to find the strong branch. Satisfied, he lifted himself off the ledge and slipped. Instantly Autumn lashed out and grabbed his arm to steady him. He teetered for a few moments then lowered himself to his knees and crawled away. At the edge of the roof he manoeuvred himself around so he was facing Autumn again.

"My thanks again," he said. "Damned near fell through your roof! You be careful when you decide to come down, you hear?"

"I will," said Autumn.

Slowly Galeo climbed down to the street. Autumn sat for a while longer, taking in the view of her surroundings. With Astauand now fully above the horizon the area didn't seem as comfortable and inviting as it had when they'd arrived with Kilig at dusk.

"Ah well," muttered Autumn. "Accept it for what it is."

She slipped off the ledge and ran lightly across the roof to jump down to the ground. She had to find somewhere fairly quiet to do her exercises.

## Chapter Two

“Ahh, you are awake,” said Autumn, going into their hut. “I did not think you would be for it is still early.”

Logan just looked at her, sleepy eyed and grumpy faced.

“You slept well?” she asked. Logan was rarely at his best when he woke and she was used to it. She picked up their water bottle and took a drink.

“What is all that noise?” he asked, pulling his blanket tighter around him.

“’Tis our neighbours,” said Autumn. She sat down with her back to the hearth which sat at the foot of the stone wall. “They seem an industrious lot.”

“You mean ...?” said Logan with a frown. He pointed a finger at each side of the hut.

“In part,” said Autumn, “although mostly the rest of this city. ’Tis not Galeo however. He has already departed.”

“Who is Galeo?” asked Logan. He blew his nose on his fingers then cleared his throat.

“He lives that side,” she said, pointing. “He will be sharing our meal tonight.”

“Oh,” said Logan. He took a few moments to absorb that then scowled and shook himself. “That was quick work.”

“He disturbed me in my meditations,” said Autumn. “I am thinking I will need to find a better place.”

“And yet he still lives?” said Logan. He shifted so he could rest his back against one of the thicker supporting branches. “He must be a mighty warrior indeed.”

"Is that one of your jokes?" asked Autumn. Her face looked a little puzzled. "Surely you know I would not hurt someone for disturbing me, unless it was an attack."

"Aye, but not one of my best," said Logan. "I venture I have not fully awoken." He yawned and wiped his face with one hand. "Ahh, so where were you meditating? Not in the road outside I hope."

"There is a ledge of sorts in this wall," said Autumn. "Although a ledge is not the word to describe it but I know not the correct word. This lower part of the wall is thick and the upper part is thinner. Where the two meet there is a flat ledge covered in grasses and some of those plants with red leaves and white berries and a lot of small pebbles. It is wide enough for me to sit and think. I had thought I would not be in anyone's way as it would be an unlikely place for anyone to walk. I know not why they built such a wall but there it is."

"And he was walking up there?" asked Logan, looking at the roof of the hut as if he could see the ledge.

"I do not think so," said Autumn, "but I had my eyes shut and my ears were full of the sounds of the city so I did not hear him. He did say he had come to offer me aid so likely he saw me from the road. Ahh, yes, and he said he thought I may have fallen from the top of the wall."

"Well, if he was giving you aid that be all right then," said Logan. "Was anyone else up there?"

"Not that I saw," she said. "And the grasses and flowers seemed undisturbed."

"Then likely you will not be disturbed there again," said Logan. "Now he knows you go up there likely he will leave you alone. What was his name, I've forgotten?"

"Saudade Galeo Eight," said Autumn, pronouncing the name carefully. "I do not like to call people by a number so I called him Galeo although like as not he would be happy with Saudade."

“And he is coming to eat with us today?” asked Logan. “Can I have some water?”

He reached out to take the bottle from Autumn's outstretched hand. The hut was not large.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I said for them to come before dusk as we have no light save that of the fire. I saw no need to tell him of Fiau.”<sup>1</sup>

“And no wood for the fire nor food to cook on it,” mused Logan. “I wager we will need to venture out into this noisy place and remedy that.” He paused for a moment. “They? You said they? How many will be joining us?”

“I think just Galeo and his daughter,” said Autumn, “although I am not certain how many dwell beside us.”

“His daughter?” said Logan, slightly alarmed. “How old is she?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn, “but I wager she is a lot younger than Galeo. Does it matter?”

“No, not really,” said Logan, huddling into himself a little. “’Tis only that girls of a certain age make me nervous.”

“Ahh, we have spoken of this before as I recall,” said Autumn. “I had forgotten. They laugh at you I think you said.”

“Yes,” said Logan. “I cannot think of anything to say to them and they get all huffy then laugh when I do say something. ’Tis like they think I am stupid.”

“Which you are most decidedly not,” said Autumn. “’Tis my fault and I shall remedy this. Do not be alarmed.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Logan.

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1 Both their water bottle and Logan's staff were gifts from Mother Midcarn and have magical properties. The water bottle is always full of fresh water, regardless of how much they use, and Logan's staff is the residence of Fiau, a dryad or tree spirit from Havildar. One of her many abilities is for Logan's staff to burn without being consumed. See *The Annals ~ The Fifth Tale* and *The Second Tale* respectively.



"I shall speak with Galeo and tell him not to eat with us," said Autumn. "I cannot have you suffering because of my thoughtlessness."

"No, don't do that," said Logan. "He will think you rude and 'tis best to get on with neighbours whenever possible. We do not want him to become an enemy."

"Why would he become an enemy?" asked Autumn, looking puzzled again. "Is this one of your jokes?"

"Alas no," said Logan. "Like as not he will be offended if an offer is made and then withdrawn again for no good reason."

"But there is a good reason," said Autumn. "You will suffer."

"He will not think that a good reason," said Logan with a sigh. "In fact it will insult him more. He will assume that we think his daughter not good enough to eat with us."

"I see," said Autumn, not understanding at all. "How then do you suggest we resolve this dilemma?"

"We cannot," said Logan, "although mayhap we could set fire to the city. That would doubtless be a good reason for not eating together." He saw Autumn open her mouth to speak and hurriedly added "that was a joke by the way. Please don't bother to explain the deficiencies of the thought."

"As you wish," she said, pursing her lips.

"We shall just have to feed them," said Logan. "Mayhap we can get a chicken."

His eyes roved around the hut and he groaned. Aside from the fire blackened flat stones that comprised the hearth the hut was bare of anything else. Even the floor was bare and consisted of hard trampled earth that was uneven. There was a channel on one side where, no doubt, water that came off the wall was led to the road outside.

"What ails you?" asked Autumn.

“We will need to buy other things as well,” said Logan. “Firewood for one and a pot or cauldron for another. Some bowls or platters too as we cannot reasonably expect our guests to bring their own. Do you think they will have knives or should we get some more?”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “I did not think of that. I am used to living in the woods where everything is provided.” She also looked around. “Best we be getting a broom as well.”

“A broom?” exclaimed Logan. “Whatever for?”

“If we are going to stay here for long we will need to sweep the floor,” said Autumn. “I remember at the Esiyup we all swept all the floors every four or five days. It will help keep the fleas and lice down as well.”

“Ohh,” said Logan. “I have never stayed anywhere for long, save the cowshed back in Biasdo and that was never swept. 'Twas mostly full of straw and cow shit and all manner of biting crawling things although now I think on it Bumola did clean out the mess and replace the straw every now and then. Should we get some straw as well?”

“What for?” asked Autumn.

“For sleeping on,” said Logan. “Likely it will keep us warmer when it gets colder. The ground can be very cold you may remember.”

“Would it not be easier to keep the fire burning?” asked Autumn.

“Aye, if we were in a wood,” said Logan, “but we are in a city and firewood may cost a lot. We have few coins left after paying Kilig for this place.”

“Have we enough to buy what we need?” asked Autumn, sublimely indifferent to money.

“I do not know,” said Logan. He untied the small cloth that he carried their money in and which he kept under his neck when they slept. “We have thirty one kalas and a few hakina. I have no idea how much the things we need to buy will cost but I venture they will not last long.

We still have the three rings though. Like as not I'll have to try to sell one soon.”<sup>2</sup>

“I begin to wonder if we have made the right choice,” said Autumn thoughtfully.

“What do you mean” he asked.

“Our lives were simple,” said Autumn with a hint of irritation in her voice, “until now. We were free to focus on the things that were important for the woods, the streams and whatever else nature provided were either there when we needed them or were not and we did without. Now we are in a city we have to worry about things that are unimportant such as straw and firewood and having money to buy what we do not truly need and there is this constant noise of people around us and like as not they all have fleas and lice and we will become infested as well. I wager we're also going to have to worry about repairing this place if there is a storm. I have spent the night in hollows and caves better than this place and I have no idea where I am going to be able to do my exercises.”

Logan gawped at her in stunned surprise. He had never heard her complain of anything before, not even when she was in pain from injuries.

“Forgive me,” said Autumn a few moments later, her voice once again calm and undisturbed. “My philosophy has always been to accept that which cannot be changed and I let my disappointment overwhelm me for a moment there.”

“We can go back to the woods anytime,” said Logan tentatively. “Just say the word and I will follow you, as always.”

“I know you will, Logan the Loyal,” said Autumn tenderly, “although I have no idea why. No, 'tis my own foolishness that brings us here and not, for once, my cursed vanity. For some reason which I cannot now remember I had expected there to be more to Schtei than this which is why I proposed we spend the winter here.”

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2 See *The Annals ~ The Seventh Tale*: Logan stole some coins, three rings and a bracelet from some bandits. They were obliged to sell the bracelet to recompense a snake charmer when Autumn killed his snake thinking it was attacking him.

“One reason was the cold,” said Logan, “and I was with you on that for we are some way to the north and it is already cold and winter is barely begun. Why do I not sell a ring or two and we book passage on a ship to the south? Schtei must have a harbour and ships. Mayhap we could work our passage on a fishing boat?”

“It is a possibility,” said Autumn. “What are your thoughts?”

“I know how you feel,” said Logan, “for I feel the same but we have only been here for one night and likely there is a lot more to Schtei than this. I know you seek to find your place and for certain this is not your place but you also seek knowledge of the world.”

“So you say to stay?” asked Autumn. She was watching him with her head cocked a little to one side.

“For a while longer,” said Logan. “We can find a boat at any time or even just walk away if we choose to. If nothing else let us spend a while exploring this city. Mayhap we will even find somewhere better than this where we can stay. Somewhere that is quieter and where you can meditate in peace. We did, after all, take the first place that was offered to us.”

“As always you are right,” said Autumn. “For a moment there I felt trapped by things I do not understand but as you remind me I always have a choice and I had forgotten that. I am unable to explain why.”

“I know why,” said Logan, casting off his blanket. “Tis very simple. You were disturbed during your meditating and you have nowhere to do your exercises. There is nothing we can now do about the first but the second is easily remedied. Come.” He stood up.

“Where are we going?” asked Autumn, also standing up.

“We have to buy some things,” said Logan, “and I have no idea where to get them so let us begin our exploring and find somewhere nearby where you can do your exercises. You’ll feel better then.”

“Likely you are right,” said Autumn. “Why are you rolling up your blanket?”

"I'm taking it and everything else with me," said Logan, stuffing his little bundle of coins and rings inside the rolled blanket. "We have nowhere safe to leave things. Anyone can come inside here at any time."

"Ahh," said Autumn. "I did not think of that. So I should bring my pack as well?"

"I know you do not value possessions," said Logan. "You don't even fully understand what possessions are but you would agree that while we are in Schtei it would be most inconvenient to lose these things, would you not?"

"Indeed," said Autumn. "It will doubtless be difficult to replace things if any are taken. My staff, for example. I have seen no trees around here so it will be difficult to replace. Will this not be true of whatever we buy? It would seem a fruitless venture to buy things we do not need then carry them with us at all times for fear of them being taken by another."

"Oh Sploop," said Logan, sitting down again. "This is getting more complicated. I did not think of that."

Autumn sat down again too.

"I wager there is a solution," she said. "I do not see one immediately but perhaps if we ask Galeo. After all, he has lived here for some time and no doubt has developed strategies."

"That is true," said Logan, "and no doubt he will think them obvious. There must be many rich people in this city, I wonder what they do?"

"There is another matter I would talk with you on," said Autumn. "I was thinking on this earlier but Galeo interrupted my thoughts."

"Oh yes?" asked Logan.

"My robe," said Autumn. "I have been wearing it for almost two summers now, since you gave me the cloth in Pirend. It is getting threadbare and is no longer as warm as it used to be. Mayhap it is

time to replace it?”

“Absolutely not!” exclaimed Logan urgently. “That robe is your protection!”<sup>3</sup>

“That is not strictly true,” said Autumn. “It is the ribbon Mother Midcarn gave me that protects me. I was thinking to get more cloth to make another robe and sewing the ribbon to that.”

“I would not risk it,” said Logan intently. “It could be that if you take it off your robe and put it on another then it will lose its protection. Why not make another robe and wear it on top of this one?”

“Two robes would make it difficult for me to move,” said Autumn, “and be too hot when the weather is warm. I am certain it was not Mother Midcarn’s intention to save me from danger only to kill me through overheating. I wager it will not be too long before this robe is too threadbare to even wear but look at this. Is it not interesting?” She held out a corner of her robe to show Logan.

“What are you showing me?” asked Logan, looking at the corner intently. “It looks much as usual.”

“Look at the cloth,” said Autumn, “then at the ribbon. Do you not see the difference?”

“No,” said Logan after studying it. He looked up at her.

“The cloth of the robe is worn,” she said, “but the ribbon looks as new.”

“I suppose,” said Logan, sitting up again. “What of it?”

“Hems always wear fastest,” said Autumn, “yet the ribbon on this hem is unworn. What does that tell you?”

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3 See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*: Autumn was given a bolt of cloth by Logan from which she made a robe. Additionally she was given a length of silver ribbon by Mother Midcarn with the instruction to sew it to the hem of the robe. The ribbon has the property of allowing anything which might kill Autumn to pass through her without causing any harm. This facility has been put to the test numerous times.

“That it protects the robe as well,” said Logan, very much unwilling to risk Autumn's life.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but perhaps it is also a sign that the ribbon will happily work on another robe for it is in no way worn or even soiled.”

“I find that an unconvincing argument,” said Logan. “It could simply be that you do not move in a way that wears the hem. You do, after all, spend a lot of time twirling and whatnot and the hem flies out rather than catches on things.”

“This is true,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “But I find it hard to believe Mother Midcarn expected me to wear the tatters of a robe for endless summers.”

“I think it most likely that she did not think of that,” said Logan. “No doubt she was thinking of how to protect you against arrows and things and not about what you would wear in old age.”

“Another good point,” said Autumn, “but the fact remains that this robe will not be wearable for much longer. There will come a time when it falls off me and the ribbon will no longer protect me anyway. And do not forget that we have no way of knowing whether the powers she bestowed upon the ribbon will work next time it is needed. Mayhap they have already worn off.”

“That is an old argument,” said Logan, “and loses its meaning as each day passes. So far every time it has been needed it has worked. The longer it continues the more likely it will be that it will continue.”

“That is a false line of thinking, Logan,” said Autumn. “It is entirely possible that the ribbon contains a fixed amount of magic and each time it is used some disappears. Likely there will come a time when it is all gone.”

“I would agree if the magic were like food or some such,” said Logan, “but it is magic and we have no idea how it works. There is no reason to think it will wear off but that is by the by. The question at hand is whether or not to shift the ribbon from one robe to another and I

think it is not worth the risk. After all, your life is at stake.”

“And I will die one day anyway,” said Autumn. “That much is certain. We have talked on this many times in the past.”

“And no doubt we will many times in the future,” said Logan, “but that is still no reason to risk your life unnecessarily. By all means have another robe or use it as a blanket but keep your old robe and ribbon intact.”

“Then we shall keep our eyes open for cloth as we explore,” said Autumn. She got to her feet and gathered her pack and staff. “What colour shall I have this time?”



## Chapter Three

“Who be you then?”

Autumn and Logan both whirled around, Logan noticeably more slowly. An old woman sat on an upturned bucket in the doorway of the hut next door. Her grey hair was twisted up on her head and long tendrils hung down in disarray. She wore a tunic that showed signs of once having been a sack.

“Greetings,” said Autumn, bowing her head. “I am Autumn and this is my companion Logan. We took occupancy of this hut last evening.”

“Oh aye,” said the old woman. She took her pipe out of her mouth and looked at them with tired eyes. Smoke dribbled out of her nose. “Reckon as how I heard that shit Kilig's voice after all then. Thought it were just a bad dream. So, you be the newest suckers then, eh?”

“Suckers?” asked Autumn, glancing at Logan. “What do you mean?”

“I don't mean nothing,” said the woman with a grimace, “and don't you be listening to them as say I do. It all be a pack o' lies, see.”

“I see,” said Autumn, confused. “You have a name?”

“I have names aplenty, ducks, that be certain,” she said and cackled. “Some be not ones worth repeating.” She put her pipe back in her mouth and sucked on it.

“I see,” said Autumn, her confusion deepening.

“Do you live here?” asked Logan, gesturing at the hut.

“If you can call it a life,” the woman said. Her eyes were still locked on them and she hadn't appeared to blink so far.

“You give every sign of not being dead,” said Logan, “so yes, I call it a life, however humble.”

“Well, give the lad a biscuit,” she said and blew a cloud of smoke at

him.

“Take no notice of that one,” called another woman from the doorway of the dwelling opposite. “She be touched in the head although she be harmless.” She propped her broom against the wall of the hut and walked over. “I am Jjivisha and this old fool is Merak. You are the ones who arrived yesterday?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I am Autumn and this is Logan.”

“You are not from around here, are you,” said Jjivisha. “You have the look of innocent strangers.”

“We are from Aferraron,” said Autumn.

“Oh yes,” said Jjivisha. “I been there. Passed through many summers back when I was but a lass. I’m from Sassese’lte originally. So what brings you to this place?”

“We are travellers,” said Autumn, “and we intended to winter in Schtei.”

“Oh yes,” said Jjivisha. “So you won’t be staying long then.”

“They be blessed then,” said Merak, her head lost in a wreath of smoke. “’Tis only the fortunate few what gets out of here alive.”

“I’m sorry?” said Autumn her confusion not lessening. “What do you mean, ‘get out of here alive’? Is this a dangerous place?”

“She don’t mean nothing,” said Jjivisha. “Like I said she be mazed,” and she wagged a finger in the general area of her temple. “’Tis no more dangerous here than anywhere else in Schtei, ‘cept maybe when there are storms from the south.”

“What happens then?” asked Logan.

“We all be drowneded,” cackled Merak, rocking backward and forward on her bucket.

“Oh shut up you old fool,” snapped Jjivisha. “You’re scaring them.”

“I am not scared,” said Autumn. “I only seek clarification.”

“Ohhh, don’t she talk posh,” said Merak, jabbing the stem of her pipe at Autumn. “Reckon we’ve got ourselves a right little missy here. Clarification indeed. And what be that fancy word meaning?”

“Ignore her,” said Jjivisha. “’Tis not overly dangerous up here since the waves do not usually come this high. Them as lives down there on the front get washed away regular like. Mind you, this here wall isn’t helping much.”

“How so?” asked Logan looking up at the wall. It was the first time he’d seen it in the light and it was higher than he had expected.

“Storms from the south send the rain to the north,” said Jjivisha, “so it all be banging against this wall and going back down to the sea. Like as not you’ll be getting a few leaks but them down there get the water off the wall and the water from the sea at the same time and these flimsy huts aren’t up to it.”

“So do many die in these storms then?” asked Autumn.

“Very few,” said Jjivisha, “and only them what has not the sense to come up high when a storm is coming. When it has blown itself out they go back down and rebuild.”

“I see,” said Autumn thoughtfully.

“Why is this wall here?” asked Logan. He’d been staring up at it and could see the ledge between the lower thick wall and the higher thinner wall above it. “It would seem a strange place to build a wall.”

“’Tis the forty somethings,” said Jjivisha. “In times long past when Schtei was small they built a wall all around the city to protect it from attackers.”

“The forty somethings?” asked Autumn. “Forty what?”

"Tis a long word that I do not fully remember," said Jjivisha. "I think it is a fancy word for a wall."

"You mean fortifications?" asked Autumn.

"Something like that," said Jjivisha, nodding. "It goes along the cliff and round to the harbour and out the other side. So you two be a couple then? Have you no babies yet?"

"We are just companions," said Autumn. "Nothing more."

"Then send him round to me when you're done with him," said Merak with a leer. "All my babies be growed up and gone away."

"And what would a strapping young lad like him be wanting with a decrepit old fool like you?" demanded Jjivisha. "He be wanting babies with a young 'un what will be living long enough to look after them."

"What any young lad be wanting from any woman," snapped back Merak, "and what your Hiraeth be not getting from you which be why he be going elsewhere, or so I hear tell."

"Oh, shut your filthy mouth," snapped Jjivisha. "You know well enough Hiraeth died of the flux these two summers past."

"If I may interrupt," said Autumn, sensing an old antagonism between the two women and not wanting to become embroiled. "We are strangers here and need some things. Where can we buy food and a cooking pot and such like?"

"Go to the end of this road," said Jjivisha, "then follow the wall round to the north. In a dozen or so streets you will find a market and some shops what will have most everything you need. If you be wanting fish then go the other way down to the beach when the tide comes in. Some of the fishermen will have some fish to sell you unless you want to traipse all the way round to the harbour where the big boats go. Best you be getting four pots for water as well, unless you want to fetch it constantly."

"We have no ..." started Logan but Autumn interrupted him. "Where is

fresh water, then?" she asked.

"Only fresh water around here comes from Lake Nanikaika," said Jjivisha, "and it isn't that fresh by the time it gets here. Best you be collecting water in the pots when it rains."

"There is a lake here?" asked Autumn.

"If you like walking," sniffed Merak.

"The lake is a half day or more's walk away," said Jjivisha, ignoring her. "Other side of Schtei where the Mo'i's Palace is and where them as can afford it live. There is a channel which brings water down from the lake but it passes through the city and 'tis best you not be thinking about what gets dumped in it by the time it reaches us. That be a fair old walk away as well so best you take as many pots as you can carry. Mind you, boil it before you drink it though. That was what took away my Hiraeth. Drank channel water straight from the channel so he did and it killed him. Damned fool."

"And where is this channel?" asked Autumn.

"Just keep following this road," said Jjivisha. "Can't miss it, 'cept in summer when it runs dry."

"Does it rain much in summer?" asked Logan.

"Not much," said Jjivisha. "That's when we get water from the beach or go thirsty."

"Surely you can't drink sea water?" said Autumn. "'Tis too bitter."

"There are people who make fresh water from the sea water," said Jjivisha, "though they sell it by the cup. It is usually cheaper to drink beer, aye and cook with it."

"I see," said Autumn. "Well, we had best be getting on with our buying. Thank you for your aid and no doubt we will be meeting you again soon."

They made their farewells and headed along the road. Everywhere they looked there were huts and people and animals. Most ignored the two strangers passing by, intent on their activities, but some watched them curiously.

“I venture we made the right choice of dwelling after all,” said Logan when they came to a cross road and stopped to look.

“How so?” asked Autumn. Her expression suggested she disagreed.

“If we had a dwelling anywhere else we would never find it again,” said Logan. “Sploop! Just look at them all! At least where we are all we have to do is follow the wall and sooner or later we will find our hut, although we may not recognise it as they all seem to look much the same.”

“That is a good point,” said Autumn looking back the way they had come. “Although no doubt in time we would come to learn our way around. At least the wall is a good point of reference. To those born here I venture every road and dwelling is distinctive in its own way. I would like to go to the beach before we start buying things if that sits well with you.”

“I was thinking the same,” said Logan. “I have seen nowhere as yet you would be able to do your exercises in peace so mayhap the beach will do. I think I now understand why all these roads have stones. ’Twould be almost impossible to go up or down roads as steep as this in the rain otherwise.”

“And likely these big stones are easier for horses,” said Autumn as they headed down the road that led to the sea. “My first thought was that those who laid them were not skilled but the very unevenness makes it easier to get a grip.”

“It must have taken a lot of people a long time to make all these roads,” mused Logan. “I wonder where they got the stones from? That wall must have been an effort to build as well.”

“I wonder why they felt a need for a defensive wall,” mused Autumn, “and why they did not extend the wall as the city grew larger around

it.”

“Mayhap the danger is long past,” said Logan as the steep road levelled off and the stones gave way to damp sand.

“Then why did they not take down the wall and use the stone to make solid dwellings?” asked Autumn. She stopped and started to dig her feet into the sand. The feel of something other than cold hard stone was pleasant.

“Doubtless it is to do with money,” said Logan. “Everything else in this city seems to be. Did you hear Jijivisha say they have to pay for water?”

“Aye, although that was for water from those who make it from the sea,” said Autumn looking up and down the beach. “No doubt they have to be recompensed else they would not bother and there would be no water at all.”

“True,” said Logan, “and she did not say that we would have to pay for water from the channel. Schtei must be a very big place if it takes a half day to cross to the other side.”

“There is no one on the beach,” said Autumn. “Let us explore down that way, where the wall rises up the cliff and the beach ends.”

They wandered off along the sand. Waves rolled in but none came all the way up to meet them which suggested the tide was going out. A few gulls wheeled overhead, watching in case these two people discarded something edible but most were further along the beach where the fishermen were gutting their early catches.

“This wall is now making sense to me,” said Autumn. “I wager the city harbour is around the headland and the wall was built at the top of the cliff and follows the land downward and inland. The harbour itself would have been well protected and any landing on this beach would have had to breach the wall.”

“I wonder if we can walk around to the harbour,” said Logan.

“By the look of it, I'd say not,” said Autumn, “as the waves hit against the cliff itself but perhaps when the tide is fully out it may be possible. I also understand what Jijivisha meant about the dwellings. These ones that line the beach look very flimsy indeed. One large wave and I venture they will all be washed away.”

“I would not like to live in any of these,” said Logan, casting his eye along them. They were scattered in no apparent arrangement and looked to be made from pieces of driftwood and misshapen pieces of cloth held down by stones.

“Aye and you have to wonder why them as live in them stay there,” said Autumn. “What attractions can this city have that keep them here rather than move to villages and towns elsewhere?”

“I cannot imagine,” said Logan, “but I wager money is at the root of it. I begin now to also see the attractions of banditry if places such as this are the alternative.”

“Yes, this is most decidedly a learning experience,” said Autumn. “Ah well, it is what it is and there is nothing we can do about it. The numbers are simply against us. There must be a thousand or more in this city.”

“At least,” said Logan. “I would not know where to begin to count them. I wager before we were half way through many of those already counted would have died and many more born which would make the counting useless.”

“True enough,” said Autumn, “and to what purpose anyway beyond idle curiosity? Come, let us go find this market. I will come down here in the morning and do my exercises. There are few living this close to the cliff and those that do will think I am a fool and not be alarmed or disturb me.”

“There is that,” said Logan, “and I venture those that know you are not dancing will not come this way often.”

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Astauand was high in the sky when they found the market for it was at the top of the long steep climb from the beach and two roads further away from the wall. Once found however it was difficult to see how they could have missed it for it teemed with people.

“At least there is plenty of food,” said Logan, peering around.

Near where they stood there was a cart with rows of rabbits and fly encrusted lumps of other meats neatly laid out. Several naked chickens and other fowl hung dejectedly from a rod. Further along there were more carts with piles of vegetables and fruits and beyond them another with piles of assorted breads.

“How much for a chicken?” asked Logan, stopping at the meat cart. Autumn continued walking to look at another cart further on.

“A kala,” said the woman pausing in her butchering of a sheep.

“They are scrawny,” said Logan, poking one so it swung on its hook. “I’ll give you a half kala for that one.”

“Take it or leave it,” she said with a shrug and deftly sliced a rib away from the backbone.

Logan blinked in surprise. “I’ll take it,” he said after a few moments of being ignored. He fumbled inside his blanket for his coins. “Is there somewhere here that sells cooking pots?” He handed the woman a coin and she gestured for him to take a chicken. Its lifeless eyes looked sadly at him.

“Other end,” she said chattily and got back to work on the ribs.

“Thank you,” he said.

It was the same at the vegetable and bread carts. No one was interested in bargaining.

“So what is here?” he asked when he caught up with Autumn. She was inspecting assorted small clay pots.

“These are herbs for illnesses,” she said. “Look, he even has hamamielis!”

“Ahh, good,” said Logan. A caran slipped from his arms and fell to the ground. He bent to pick it up and dropped a loaf of janja. “Sloop!”

Absently Autumn picked up the janja and thrust it under his arm.

“What do you want for the jar of hamamielis?” she asked the man.

“I have some dauneywort,” he replied. “Tis stronger than hamamielis and works faster.”

“I am not familiar with dauneywort,” said Autumn. “What is it?”

“It is a seaweed,” he replied, “here.”

He retrieved another jar and took the stopper out before handing it to Autumn. She took it and sniffed the contents.

“Hmm,” she said and dipped the tip of her little finger inside. She licked it and nodded. “How do you use it?”

“If for a wound you just sprinkle some on each day until it is healed,” said the man taking back the jar. “But if it is for the bowels or belly then mix a little with warm water and drink. Tis most effective even though it is unpleasant to taste.”

“Are there any bad effects from using it?” she asked.

The man shrugged. “Some say after drinking there is bad breath for a while but most round here have bad breath anyway so it matters not.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “And the price?”

“Four kalas,” he said.

“And the hamamielis?”

“Eight,” he said. “It has to come from Aferraron.”

“I will try the dauneywort,” she said. “Logan?”

Logan dangled his cloth holding the coins in front of her as his arms were laden. She took it and fished out some coins. The man did not relinquish the jar until the coins were firmly in his hand.

“Thank you,” she said and properly noticed Logan for the first time. “Give me some of those to carry. You would seem to be overburdened.”

“There is a seller of pots and pans on the other side of the market,” said Logan offloading some of his purchases.

“There be two of them,” said the seller of herbs and ointments. “One is my sister and the other will cheat you. They are over there.”

“Ahh, thank you,” said Autumn. “When are you next here? I would like to talk more with you about your treatments.”

“The markets runs every day,” he said, “and I am here most days.”

“Excellent,” said Autumn. “Then we shall talk again. Tell me, is there a seller of firewood here?”

“Back the other way,” said the man. “At the wall end.”

“Thank you,” said Autumn. “Come, Logan, let us see about a cauldron first. We can put these things in it which will be easier to carry.”

“True enough,” said Logan. “Which way was it again?”

“That way,” said the man, pointing.

Logan smiled and headed in that direction.

“What is that?” asked Autumn, spotting a small glossy jar in a corner of the cart.

“That?” said the man. “That is vasblane. 'Tis excellent for inflammation of the eyes.”

“No, I meant the jar,” she said. “I have not seen one like that before.”

“It is new,” he said picking it up and passing it to her. “I forget what it is called but it is harder than clay and does not trap any of what is inside.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn. She noticed Logan was now some way away. “I must go but I shall return. Fare well,” and she handed back the jar.

“What about that one?” asked Logan looking at a smallish bronze cauldron.

Autumn didn't reply so he turned to look at her. She wasn't there. With a sigh he turned around completely.

“Oh Sploop,” he muttered and walked back to where she was.

“Ahh, Logan,” said Autumn, fingering a length of deep green cloth. “Is this not the most delightful colour?”

## Chapter Four

“Greetings, Autumn,” said Galeo, appearing in their doorway.

Autumn had wedged the tattered cloth that served as a cover for the doorway between the sticks above it so that the last of Astauand's light came in.

“Ahh, greetings, Galeo,” said Autumn getting up from the floor where she had been watching Logan cooking. “Please, come in.”

He came in, ducking his head under the low entrance and looked around.

“This is Logan, my companion,” said Autumn. “Logan, this is Galeo, our neighbour.”

“Greetings,” said Logan, turning to smile at him. “You are well?”

“I am,” said Galeo. “Tis a pleasure to meet you. This be my girl.” He stepped further into the hut and made way for his daughter. “Her name is Saudade Komorebi One but most be calling her Komorebi.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Komorebi,” said Autumn. “I am Autumn and this is Logan.”

“Greetings,” said Komorebi looking shyly at Autumn then at Logan.

“Are you not going to welcome our guest?” asked Autumn after a few moments of heavy silence.

“Ahh, umm, greetings,” said Logan hurriedly, lurching to his feet. It was difficult to tell in the fading light but his face seemed to have gained a pinkish hue. “Forgive me, I was concentrating on the cooking.”

He reached out his hand in welcome and, after a slight pause, Komorebi touched the stick he'd been using to stir the pot and giggled a little.

“Oh sorry!” exclaimed Logan, throwing the stick to the ground. “That was silly of me.”

He held out his hand again, this time without the stick, and Komorebi touched palms with him. Her hand felt soft and cool. She looked into his eyes for a heartbeat then looked down at the cooking pot. Logan's face was now decidedly pink in colour.

“Umm,” he said and stepped backwards before leaping forward with a cry.

Galeo and Komorebi both stepped backwards in surprise and Galeo tripped over Autumn's staff which lay beside the entrance. He stumbled but managed not to put his hand entirely through the wall. Autumn's grip on his tunic had stopped him falling.

“Ah, sorry,” said Logan, feeling very stupid. “I touched my leg on the pot and burnt myself.”

“No harm done, lad,” said Galeo. “You be a strong one and no mistake, Autumn. Reckon as how I nearly went through your side here. I be just checking the outside for damage.”

“Show me your leg,” said Autumn.

“No, it is well,” said Logan, conscious that Komorebi was watching. “Twas only the merest touch, nothing more.” He turned and bent over the pot then picked up his stick and started to stir vigorously.

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “Komorebi, that has a nice sound to it. Have you any brothers and sisters?”

“I am the only child,” said Komorebi, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “Komorebi means the the light of Astauand as it drifts down through the leaves of trees in a forest.”

“Ahh, how delightful,” said Autumn. “Yes, that is a most beautiful sight.”

“The mud is cracked and falling away,” said Galeo coming back

inside. "I will repair it in the morning for you."

"That is most kind of you," said Autumn, "but there is no need. I wager these walls are easily repaired."

"Twill be but a matter of moments," said Galeo. "'Twas my fault and I insist."

"Then we accept your kindness," said Autumn. "A kindness offered freely is most precious."

"I daresay," said Galeo. "What is a most beautiful sight?"

"Komorebi was just telling us of the meaning of her name," said Autumn. "I have many times seen the light of Astauand in a forest and it is a most uplifting sight. Please, seat yourselves."

"Umm, where?" asked Galeo, looking around.

"Anywhere you like," said Autumn waiting for them to be seated before she sat herself.

"I shall sit here, father," said Komorebi, sitting on the ground near the hearth.

Galeo grunted and came a little further into the hut before sitting on the ground.

"Is the meaning of your name the same as the season, Autumn?" he asked.

"Aye," said Autumn. "I was found abandoned as a baby and those that took me in named me Autumn for that was when they found me."

"And Logan?" asked Komorebi, looking at Logan. "What meaning has that name?"

"Umm, none that I know of," said Logan, giving the pot another stir. He didn't look at Komorebi so after a few moments she turned back to look at Autumn.

“Reckon as how I might know somewhere you can get some stools and a table at a very reasonable price,” said Galeo, shifting his position a little. “Mayhap even a chair or two if you have a mind.”

“I had not thought of that,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan. He was seemingly absorbed in the cooking and did not return her glance.

“But do you not want to furnish your dwelling?” asked Komorebi. “We have a table and four stools. And we will be having a bench when father makes one. When I have a dwelling of my own I will want to have two tables and proper chairs and all good things.”

“We are travellers,” said Autumn. “Tables and the like are difficult to carry. Our needs are very simple and we make use of whatever nature provides us with.”

“You have not even a bed,” said Galeo, “and you will be needing somewhere to put the babes when they come along. Reckon I could get you a crib or two at a low price if you be interested.”

“There will be no babes,” said Autumn.

“Ahh, you have an affliction,” said Galeo, nodding his head. “Eh, I be right sorry for you. Babes be a blessing and no mistake.”

“I have no affliction that I know of,” said Autumn. She frowned momentarily then decided not to mention her vows. “Logan and I have not that relationship. We travel as companions, nothing more.”

“Ohhh,” said Komorebi. She looked at Logan again and found he was looking at her. He looked away quickly.

“I think the food is ready,” said Logan.

“’Twas my mistake,” said Galeo. “I assumed you were ...” and he tapped the sides of his forefingers together.

“Then let us eat,” said Autumn, not understanding his gesture.

Logan picked up one of the new bowls they'd bought at the market



and dipped it in the stew. He used his stick to prod a chicken leg into it then passed it to Galeo who thanked him. He picked up another and did the same then, after a moment's hesitation, he passed it to Komorebi. She smiled as she took it but he kept his eyes averted. Finally he scooped stew into his own and Autumn's bowls.

"Is all well?" asked Autumn, noticing that Galeo and Komorebi sat holding their bowls with an air of expectation.

"It smells most delicious," said Komorebi. "Did you cook it yourself, Logan?"

"Aye," said Logan. He tried to think of something else to say but his mind had gone blank.

"Logan does most of the cooking," said Autumn, wondering why Galeo and Komorebi did not taste their stew. No explanation came to mind so she lifted her bowl to her lips then blew on it before taking a sip.

With a start Komorebi did the same and slowly Galeo followed suit.

"Tis delicious," she said and took another small sip.

"Aye, reckon so," said Galeo. "Ahh, you be travellers and travel light, of course!"

"I do not follow your meaning," said Autumn.

"Likely I may know someone who makes spoons and forks," said Galeo. "Knives too if you have a need, although likely even travellers have knives."

"Ahh, I apologise," said Autumn as understanding came to her. "We got more bowls at the market but did not think to get spoons. Please do not be insulted by my oversight."

"No insult taken or meant," said Galeo. "Not everyone round here has spoons and the like for there be plenty as cannot afford these things. I had not taken you as being like them but the fault is mine, not yours."

“I do not understand,” said Autumn, holding her bowl in her lap. “What do you mean, being like them?”

“Well, them as be travellers be mostly wealthy,” said Galeo. “Seeing as how it costs money to travel and unless you be travelling for trade then you be not making any money.”

“We have found quite the opposite,” said Autumn. She glanced again at Logan, wondering why he was not joining in the conversation but he was apparently engrossed in a chicken wing. “We have travelled widely and found very little need for money. There was a time in the Mapdil Mountains<sup>4</sup> when we needed to buy warmer clothing but that is about the only time. Indeed, we have found the opposite to be true. We have only been in this city for a night and a day and we have spent almost all what money we have. Is that not so, Logan?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “After buying some food and firewood we did not have enough for a cauldron so we had to get this pot instead. ’Tis not new but it will serve well enough.”

“So you have not the money to buy stools and spoons and the like?” asked Galeo, raising an eyebrow. “How then will you be paying for the next payment on this place? Do you plan to find work?”

“If needs must,” said Autumn, “but we likely will sell something when we need money.”

“But you have nothing to sell,” said Galeo, looking around the bare hut, “unless you be planning on selling your bodies.” He frowned. “Is that your trade? If it is then you are the wrong side of Schtei.”

“We have some jewellery,” said Logan quickly. “We plan to sell that.”

“Ahh,” said Galeo, his face clearing. “I might be able to help you there. I do a bit of trading in jewellery, now and then. Can I see what you have? Mayhap I can offer you a good price this very evening?”

“Umm,” said Logan, looking at Autumn. She shrugged, as always

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<sup>4</sup> See *The Annals – The Second Tale*: On that occasion Autumn and Logan found work as guards for a trader delivering supplies to a mine in the mountains.

money did not interest her. "A moment."

He put his bowl on the ground and got up to retrieve his little bundle, now almost bereft of coins. With his back to Galeo and Komorebi he slipped one of the rings out and returned the bundle to its place inside his rolled blanket.

"'Tis only a ring," he said, sitting down again, "but I venture it is worth something."

"Pass me a light, girl," said Galeo, taking the ring from Logan's outstretched hand. "'Tis getting dark in here." He was about to say something about candles but decided not to.

Komorebi leaned over and plucked a twig that had fallen from the fire. She blew on the end and it burst into a small flame then she passed it to her father. He studied the ring closely in the twig's small light.

"Aye, this'll be worth a fair few kalas," he said. "What do you think, girl?"

He passed the ring and the twig to Komorebi and she blew on the twig again before studying the ring as closely as her father had.

"This would seem a most delightful ring, father, is it not?" she said. "'Tis a fair sized xuiui stone and the ring looks like gold." She passed it back to Galeo.

"Aye," said Galeo. He sucked his teeth then pursed his lips as he gently tossed the ring in his hand. "This be the ring of the era'owen of a wealthy man, like as not. How come you by this?"

"We found it," said Logan. "When we were travelling the other side of the Xibu Shan Mountains. Likely someone else had passed that way and dropped it."

"The Xibu Shan Mountains, eh," said Galeo. He leaned his head back a little and gazed thoughtfully at Logan through half closed eyes. "That be dangerous country. 'Twas fortunate you got through without

this here little trinket being taken off you.”

“You mean the Wodazu?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Galeo, stiffening slightly. “You know of them?”

“We did meet Wodazu Chanwar One and his sister,”<sup>5</sup> said Autumn, “although Chanwar Two no longer lives. Chanwar One seemed a sensible enough sort of man.”

“There is more to this than meets the eye,” said Galeo then he suddenly leant forward and grinned. “But I am not so stupid as to be asking questions of them as knows the Chanwars,” and he tossed the ring to Logan.

Logan wasn't expecting that and the ring bounced off his chest and into Autumn's bowl. He picked the ring up and polished it on his tunic.

“So would you be interested in buying this ring?” asked Logan, putting it on his finger for safe keeping, “or would you know anyone who might like to buy it?”

“Tis out of my league,” said Galeo, not willing to take the risk of trying to cheat anyone who knew the Chanwars. “Best you be taking it to the guild of gemsmiths.”

“Gemsmiths?” asked Autumn. “What are they?”

“You do not know of gemsmiths?” asked Galeo in surprise. “They are people who are most skilled in the making of fine jewellery and such like.”

“I did not know that,” said Autumn. “Such jewellery as I have seen before was made by blacksmiths or metal workers. What is a guild?”

“For certain you must be strangers in these parts if you know not what guilds are,” said Galeo even more surprised. “Guilds be them as makes

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5 See *The Annals – The Seventh Tale*. Chanwar One was the head of the Wodazu family of bandits.

sure their members stay honest and looks after them.”

“I do not think there are such things in Aferraron,” said Autumn, “although there may be in Uli-Rratha which is a big city much like Schtei. How do they keep their members honest?”

“If any complain of being cheated,” said Galeo, “them as is head of the guild look into it and if it be so then that one doing the cheating be cast out of the guild. 'Tis not in their interest to be cheating as they can charge more by being a guild member than not.”

“Are you a guild member?” asked Logan.

“Agav, no!” exclaimed Galeo. “Most be sons or daughters of guild members and them as aren't have to buy their way in and with the likes of the guild of gemsmiths such buying ain't cheap. Likes of me could never afford it.”

“You said the guild looks after them,” said Autumn. “In what way? By keeping prices high?”

“There is that,” said Galeo, “even the guild of night soil collectors charge more than them as aren't members but mostly it be helping if someone can't work. Like if a gemsmith loses his eyesight or a carpenter loses a hand. Their guild makes sure them and their family don't starve.”

“Then guilds would seem to be a useful thing,” said Autumn.

“Aye,” said Galeo, “if you be able to be a member of one. Most aren't.”

“I have an idea, father,” said Komorebi, eyeing the ring on Logan's finger. “What say you we take Autumn and Logan to the street of gemsmiths and help them sell their ring? They are strangers and I would not want them cheated by one who is not a guild member.”

She looked up and caught Logan's eye. She smiled and Logan went the colour of the xuiui stone.

“That be a right good idea,” said Galeo.

“We would not want to put you to any trouble,” said Autumn. “If you tell us where to find them I am sure we will manage.”

“’Tis no trouble,” said Galeo. “I am busy tomorrow for I have people to see and things to do but I can spare the girl. That sits well with you, Komorebi?”

“It would be my privilege and my pleasure,” said Komorebi, putting her hand on Logan’s knee. “What say you, Logan?”

“Umm,” said Logan, her eyes engulfing him.

“Then ’tis agreed,” said Galeo. He raised his hand to put it on Autumn’s knee but saw the look in her eye and put it on his own instead. “You can trust Komorebi, she knows what she is doing.”

“I shall come round in the early morning,” said Komorebi. “The street of gemsmiths lies the other side of the Old City and is a fair walk.”

“We thank you for your kindness,” said Autumn, “although if possible could we change that to late morning?”

“Well, of course,” said Komorebi, a little surprised. “I am sorry. I had not thought that you would have things to do, being strangers here.”

“I wager it is something to do with that there thinking,” said Galeo. “I told you Autumn was up on that ledge.”

“I thought you were jesting,” said Komorebi. “Was Logan up there too?” and she smiled at him again.

“Umm,” said Logan.

“’Twas only Autumn,” said Galeo, “and she was sitting much as she is now only with her eyes shut and her feet on her knees.”

“I do that every morning,” said Autumn. “’Tis a time I look inside myself and think.”

“What do you think about?” asked Komorebi, looking a little puzzled.

“The day ahead,” said Autumn, “and the day past and whatever else comes to mind. It is my custom.

“And you do this until late morning?” asked Galeo.

“I do it for however long my thinking takes me,” said Autumn, “although 'tis rare to take that long. 'Tis also my custom to do my exercises after my thinking but I was not able to this morning and I feel a need so I am reluctant to miss tomorrow as well.”

“Was that because I interrupted you?” asked Galeo.

“Do not concern yourself on that,” said Autumn. “’Twas because I knew nowhere I could do my exercises in peace but I have found somewhere now.”

“Oh good,” said Galeo. “Can I ask where?”

“On the beach,” said Autumn. “Where the cliff rises up. It seemed a place not used by many.”

“Aye, no one goes down there,” said Galeo. “Save a few poor souls with nowhere else to go at night. You should not be disturbed. Well now, night is full upon us and we have eaten well. I thank you Autumn and you Logan for the pleasure of your company and the good food you gave us. 'Tis time we departed even though we have not far to go.”

“It was our pleasure,” said Autumn, “and I apologise for not having spoons or chairs. If we decide to stay in Schtei beyond the winter then like as not we will find such things useful. I do have a question before you depart, if I may.”

“Of course,” said Galeo. He stopped getting up and sat down again.

“’Tis something Logan and I have wondered about,” said Autumn. “While we travelled, if someone wanted something we had it was easily replaced and so of little concern. However, here in Schtei things are not so easily replaced. My staff, for example, or that cooking pot. No doubt here there are them as would simply take without asking and this hut is easy to get in to. What do you do?”

“I am not understanding,” said Galeo with a small frown. “Are you asking if I take things as do not belong to me?”

“Not at all,” said Autumn. “I was merely asking, as you live in a dwelling such as this, what you do with those things you claim as your own. Do you carry them with you at all times?”

“Ahh, now I follow,” said Galeo, his face clearing. “You are worried that someone will come in this hut and take your ring when you are away. Do you not have a Ratanbismet talisman?”

“Likely not,” said Autumn, “as I have not heard of such a thing before. What is it?”

“’Tis a talisman of Ratanbismet,” said Galeo.

“I venture they know not of Ratanbismet, father,” said Komorebi. “Do you, Logan?”

Again she put her hand on his knee and looked him in the eye.

“Umm,” said Logan, quickly looking away.

“What is Ratanbismet?” asked Autumn.

“’Tis the deity of Schtei,” said Galeo. “It protects the city and them what hangs Its talisman over their doorway. Without a talisman any may enter without fear but if there be one hanging then few, if any, will enter without your blessing for fear they be struck dead or worse.”



## Chapter Five

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

Logan stirred and rolled over, pulling his blanket back up over his shoulder.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

“Grrr,” he muttered and pulled the blanket over his head.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

“Oh Sploop!” and he pulled the blanket back down. All he could see was the mud encrusted side of the hut.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

He rolled over onto his other side and peered blearily at the doorway. The cloth was hanging down but bright light shone in through its jagged rents. Dust motes moved lazily through the patches of light.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

“Voqev!” he muttered with feeling. “Who is making all that noise?”

He looked around and Autumn was not there. Her pack was where she had left it but her staff was gone as well.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

“Blurgh,” he muttered and reached for the water bottle. He took a long drink then wiped his hand over his eyes.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

He sat up and gazed absently at his feet. Something scraped against the mud wall and his head twisted to look but all he saw was mud

wall. A piece of twig was protruding through the mud but it didn't move.

He waited but the tapping seemed to have stopped.

“Good,” he muttered and lay back down.

Scrape-scrape.

“I must be in the Land of the Undead,” he said with a snarl staring up at the roof. “And this be my punishment.”

The roof quivered.

“What?” he exclaimed, sitting up.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

The roof quivered again.

“That tapping is not coming from the roof,” he thought, looking up.

Scrape.

“But that scrape is.” He frowned. “Sploop! There is someone on the roof!”

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

He threw off his blanket and got to his feet, picking up his staff in the process. Cautiously he made his way to the entrance, his staff in front of him with an end in his armpit, just as Autumn had taught him.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

The roof quivered again.

He slid the other end of the staff around the cloth hanging and pushed it to one side and peered out. There were a few people walking around and he could see Jijivisha inside her hut opposite.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

The tapping seemed to be coming from a little way along the road. It was definitely not coming from the roof. He pushed past the hanging and looked each way. Merak was sitting on her bucket with wisps of smoke coming from her pipe. She looked at him and sucked on her toothless gums but did not speak.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

“Be brave,” he muttered to himself. He stepped out into the early morning light and turned to look up at the roof.

“And a good day to you, Logan,” called down Galeo.

“What are you doing up there?” asked Logan, lowering his staff.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

“I am fixing the roof,” said Galeo. “I cracked some of the mud when I came up to speak with Autumn yesterday. There be rain coming and it will leak if I do not.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “I wondered who was on the roof.”

“Worry not,” said Galeo. “I will fix your wall as well.”

“Thank you,” said Logan. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap. “What is that tapping?”

“What tapping?” asked Galeo, pausing in smoothing the mud.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

“That tapping,” said Logan.

Galeo frowned and listened for a moment then his face cleared.

“Ohh, that be Flaner, four huts along,” he said and pointed up the road with a muddy hand. “Can't say as I hear him tapping these days. You get used to it after a time.”

“What is he doing?” asked Logan. He looked up the road but the stone wall curved away and the huts further along were out of sight.

“Go see for yourself,” said Galeo, slapping another handful of mud on the roof. “It be right clever.”

“Oh, right then,” said Logan.

He watched Galeo smooth the mud for a few moments then looked up the road then back in the hut.

“Best I take them with me,” he thought and went inside to get his bundle with the rings. He stuffed it down the front of his tunic and propped his staff against the wall. The roof quivered again then the wall.

He went back outside just as Galeo jumped down to the ground with a platter of thick mud.

“Just up there,” he said, jerking his thumb up the road.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

“I will be back shortly,” said Logan.

“Right you are,” said Galeo, looking at the cracked and flaking mud on the wall where he'd fallen the previous evening.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

Logan set off, his curiosity aroused. The tapping wasn't loud but it was persistent and regular.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

Logan stopped to watch. There was a man, fairly young by his look, sitting cross legged in the entrance to a hut. He had a largish dish of what looked like brass clasped between his knees and which rested on his feet. He was bent over the dish and hitting it with a small hammer.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

Whatever he was doing he stopped for a few moments to inspect then with a curious jerk of his knees and feet he shifted the dish around a little then resumed tapping.

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

Unexpectedly the man looked up. He must have sensed Logan watching and not walking past.

“Hello,” he said. “Who are you?”

“Oh, hello,” said Logan. “I apologise for disturbing you. Are you Flaner?”

“Aye,” said Flaner. “Are you wanting something made?”

“I, umm, was wondering what that noise was,” said Logan. “Only it woke me, you see.”

“What noise?” asked Flaner, frowning.

“That tap tap tapping,” said Logan.

Flaner looked startled. “You mean this?” and he bent over his sheet. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

“Yes,” said Logan.

“Agav, you must have the ears of a bat!” exclaimed Flaner. “I can barely hear it.” He did his jerk and the dish shifted around a little more.

“What are you doing?” asked Logan, coming closer.

“Decorating this dish,” said Flaner. He flicked the dish with a big toe so it jumped off his knees and held it out to show Logan. Around the edge was an intricate pattern of small dents. “Looks good, eh?”

"I suppose," said Logan, for the strip of dents was quite narrow.

"You suppose?" barked Flaner. "You suppose? I am a craftsman!"

"Ahh, sorry," said Logan stepping backwards. "Is it nearly finished?"

"Aghh, I dare say you are right," said Flaner and spat in the road. "'Tis barely enough to see as yet. It will be glorious when it is finished though."

"And when will that be?" asked Logan.

"Ohh, another two, mayhap three days," said Flaner.

"Oh joy," thought Logan. "Three more days of tapping?"

"Well, I'd best be leaving you to it," he said.

"Stuff some mud in your ears if the noise be bothering you," said Flaner irritably. "I got mouths to feed and I ain't stopping just so you can sleep all day." He started hammering the dish again.

"No, I suppose not," said Logan sadly but Flaner ignored him.

He turned and walked slowly back to the hut, the tap-tap-tapping following him. Galeo was nowhere to be seen although a fresh wet patch of mud glistened on the wall beside the entrance. He looked up at the ledge above the hut but Autumn was not there either.

"She must be down at the beach doing her exercises," he thought. "Shall I wait for her?"

He went inside the hut and looked in the pot to see how much of the stew was left. The tapping continued and he couldn't settle so he grabbed his staff and Autumn's pack and marched off. As he passed Flaner he ignored him pointedly but Flaner didn't seem to even notice. He just tapped away remorselessly.

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“Is it not a beautiful day?” asked Autumn when she finished her exercises. There was the faintest of perspirations on her face for she had worked extra hard to make up for missing the previous day.

“Galeo said it is going to rain,” said Logan, “although the clouds don't look like rain clouds.”

“Likely he knows the clouds here better than we do,” said Autumn, looking at him thoughtfully. “How is your leg?”

“Oh it is well,” he said. “I had forgotten about it.”

“Then what ails you?” she asked.

“Nothing ails me,” said Logan. “Why do you ask?”

“I know you well, friend Logan,” said Autumn, sitting beside him. A few gulls watched in case there was food around. “There is something in your air that says you are not happy. Did you not sleep well?”

“I slept well,” said Logan, “although I was woken before my time. Oh, Galeo has put fresh mud on the wall and roof. Hopefully it will dry before the rain he forecasts arrives.”

“He is a kindly man,” said Autumn. “And his daughter too. Did you not like her?”

“Aye, she seemed nice enough,” said Logan.

“You did not say much,” she observed.

“Ahh, well, that is true,” said Logan. “I know not what to say to pretty girls.”

“So you found her pretty?” asked Autumn.

“Who would not?” asked Logan. “Why do you ask?”

“I was merely curious,” said Autumn. “Perhaps we should invite her to eat with us again so you can practice talking with pretty girls.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, “although I wager it will make little difference. By the time I think of something to say she will have grown bored and gone home.”

“That is always a possibility,” said Autumn, “although she did seem to like you. Mayhap that liking will make her less easily bored.”

“Can we not talk about it?” asked Logan. “I find it ... dispiriting.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn, “although I suspect the talking to girls is much like my exercising.”

“You mean like a battle with a deadly foe?” asked Logan. “Yes, I would agree with that and I would be the loser every time.”

“No, I meant only that you would improve with practice,” said Autumn. “Mayhap next time you meet you could ask her of herself.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

“Oh, perhaps of her life in Schtei,” said Autumn, “or of what she would like in the future. She is young and her life is yet to unfold. Mayhap she has plans or dreams.”

“Why would she tell me of such things?” asked Logan. “I am a stranger to her.”

“’Twas only a thought,” said Autumn. “Oft times people are only too happy to talk about themselves.”

“I suppose,” said Logan. “I shall think on it. Anyway, why do you want me to talk to her? Are you trying to be rid of me?”

“Not at all, Logan companion,” said Autumn. “I think only that you have told me of your affliction several times and I wonder if that is what is giving you your air of melancholy. If you like Komorebi then talking with her may improve your mood.”

“Ahh, no, ’tis not that,” said Logan. “It is more that I find the ever present noise gets inside my head.”



"I know what you mean," said Autumn. "It was generally very peaceful at the Esyup and I wager it was in Biasdo for you. Most of our travels since have been in solitude so we have not become accustomed to the noise of a lot of people in a small area. Do you not remember the endless noise of Cim-Irsou?"

"Aye, but we were not there long," said Logan.

"And we will not be here long," said Autumn. "That thought alone should strengthen our resolve. Come, let us be off. Komorebi is doubtless waiting to take us to see the gemsmiths."

"And the day gets better," said Logan morosely. "What should I say to her?"

"I fancy she will speak to you first," said Autumn. "Listen and say something that follows on from what she says."

"She will laugh at me," said Logan. "I know it."

"Then it doesn't matter what you say," said Autumn, "and mayhap she will enjoy the laughing and think fondly of you."

"You are trying to get rid of me, aren't you," said Logan irritably.

"Oh Logan, you are determined to think ill of everything today," said Autumn, getting to her feet. "Accept the world for what it is and if she laughs at you then let her laugh. Come, I venture you will enjoy exploring the city and in time you will become accustomed to girls. After all, you have become accustomed to me."

"But you never laugh at me," said Logan, getting up as well.

"And yet you see that as a fault in me," said Autumn, "for I never understand your jokes."

"And the joke is on me," said Logan. "I think that is her up ahead."

"Yoo-hoo!" called Komorebi and waved.

“She seems pleased to see you,” said Autumn, waving back.

“You have a cruelty in you sometimes,” said Logan.

“How so?” asked Autumn. “I merely noted she was looking at you when she waved.”

“Hello Autumn,” said Komorebi breathlessly for she had run towards them as soon as she'd seen them. “Hello Logan.”

“Hello Komorebi,” said Autumn and surreptitiously shoved Logan.

“Hello Komorebi,” said Logan and gave Autumn a dirty look. “We were just talking about you.”

“Oh yes?” said Komorebi. “Nothing bad, I hope.”

“Only that Logan likes to make you laugh,” said Autumn mischievously.

“Do you, Logan?” asked Komorebi looking at him with wide eyes. “Do you really?”

Logan went red and didn't say anything.

“He is in a bad mood,” said Autumn. “He was woken too early by the noise.”

“What noise?” asked Komorebi, falling into step beside Logan.

“All the noise around,” said Autumn. “The city is a noisy place.”

“Is it?” asked Komorebi. “I can't say I've ever noticed.”

Autumn poked Logan.

“What?” he demanded.

“Were you born here?” asked Autumn.

“Oh yes,” said Komorebi. “Although not where we live now. We used to live further up, past where the market is.”

“Ask her why they moved further down,” muttered Autumn under her breath.

“Oh, umm, why did you move further down?” asked Logan.

“My mother died,” said Komorebi. “Father got sad and could not make any money for a time so we had to move where it was cheaper.”

“Oh,” said Logan.

“Is your father still sad?” asked Autumn.

“Sometimes,” said Komorebi, “but not as much as he was.”

“He always has a choice,” blurted Logan. “It is up to him how he chooses to respond to things.”

“Well, I suppose,” said Komorebi, looking at him curiously. “But is it not sad when someone dies? I cried for days. What of your parents? Were you not sad when you left them to go travelling?”

“Both my parents died when I was young,” said Logan. “I was sad but there was no one to look after me so I had to learn to fend for myself.”

“Oh!” Komorebi looked shocked. “You poor thing! That must have been terrible.” She stroked his arm and he went red again. “How did you manage with no one to look after you? How old were you? Did you not have any brothers or sisters or uncles or aunts?”

“Umm, no,” said Logan.

“Logan had a sister,” said Autumn, “but she had moved away and he did not know where she was. How old were you, Logan?”

“I was ten or thereabouts,” said Logan.

“I could not have looked after myself when I was ten,” said Komorebi.

“You must be very brave.”

“Umm,” said Logan.

“How old are you, Komorebi?” asked Autumn when it became clear Logan had dried up.

“Sixteen,” she said. “How old are you?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “I wager about twenty three though. Logan is seventeen.”

“Ohh, that is nice,” said Komorebi. “I like older men. How is it you do not know your age Autumn?”

“I was found as a babe,” said Autumn, “but no one knows how old I was when I was found.”

“But you were looked after, were you not?” asked Komorebi. “Not like poor Logan.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. She paused for a few moments but Logan remained silent. “You have lived here all your life then, Komorebi. Tell me of this wall. When was it built and why?”

“Ohh, I don't know,” said Komorebi. “It has always been here. Father did tell me it was built to protect the city when it was a lot smaller than it is now but I know not who it was to protect from.”

“Probably us,” said Logan.

“What do you mean?” asked Komorebi. “Do I need protecting from you?” and she giggled.

“No, I mean us Onamans,” said Logan. “We are from Aferraron, me and Autumn.”

“Yes, father said,” said Komorebi, “but there are people from Aferraron in Schtei and from Sassese'lte. Have you met Flaner? The one who decorates dishes? He is from Danornor. There are people

from all over here.”

“Where is Danornor?” asked Autumn.

“Oh, it is a big island to the south,” said Komorebi. “Father says it is part of Wase now although it used to be part of Aferraron. I would like to go there one day.”

Autumn poked Logan again and he jerked a little. Komorebi pretended not to notice.

“Umm, why would you like to go to Danornor?” he asked.

“I have never been outside Schtei,” she said, “except once to Japiasok. We went on a boat across the sea which was great fun. Father was seasick but I was not. I would love to travel and see more of the world, just like you. All those places you have been and things you have seen. Oh, such tales you must have to tell, Logan, and I hope one day you will be telling me all of them.”

“Umm,” muttered Logan. “Well, umm, maybe.”

“You must tell Komorebi of the scorpion that bit you in Neander,”<sup>6</sup> said Autumn.

“What is a scorpion?” asked Komorebi.

“Tis like a lobster,” said Logan hesitantly, “but it has a sting at the end of its tail which is poisonous.”

“Ohhhh!” exclaimed Komorebi, stopping and clutching Logan's arm. “Poisonous? That must have hurt. Did you nearly die? That must have been so scary! How did you manage?”

“Autumn saved ...” started Logan.

“We stumbled across some desert traders,” said Autumn interrupting. “Logan was unconscious by the time we found them and 'twas fortunate they had the cure.”

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6 See *The Annals – The Fifth Tale*.

“Ohhhh,” exclaimed Komorebi, her eyes wide, “so you are not only brave but favoured with good fortune as well, Logan. I would love to hear that tale and more. Promise me you’ll tell me?”

“Umm, I suppose so,” said Logan, looking miserable. “But that was really all down to Autumn.”

“I only helped you walk the last little way,” said Autumn, “but you must also tell Komorebi of when you saved me from Lord Loheckle.<sup>7</sup>”

“Why? What did that man do?” demanded Komorebi.

“He had me tied to his bed,” said Autumn. “Logan crept in and managed to untie me.”

Komorebi’s eyes widened even more.

“Ooooh, I would so love to hear that tale,” she said. “You saved a damsel in distress! How romantic!”

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<sup>7</sup> See *The Annals – The First Tale*.

## Chapter Six

Some way to the south they could see the sea and the city wall as it curved around and down. The beach itself and the dwellings nearby were out of sight however, hidden by the drop of the land and by the dwellings up at this higher level. The roads still teemed with people going about their business but the dwellings themselves were both larger and more solidly built. Some were made of brick and a few were two stories high. Many also had a walled off section wherein dwelt a cow or a pig. This was decidedly a more prosperous area.

“The street of gemsmiths is just up there,” said Komorebi, “or at least this one is.”

“There is more than one?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Komorebi. “The other is on the other side of the city near the Summer Palace but 'twill be a waste of our time to go there. This street is closer and will serve your needs better.”

“Is the Summer Palace where the Mo'i lives?” asked Autumn.

“Indeed,” said Komorebi, “and around be all them as is rich beyond belief. 'Tis actually called the Kauwela Palace but most still call it the Summer Palace. The gemsmiths there will likely not even look at your ring, Logan, for they will see it as a trinket beneath their contempt.”

“Yes, we have met rich folk before,” said Logan. “I confess I have no desire to be one of them for they seem to lead lives of great complexity and forever worry about their money.”

“Likely 'tis better than being poor,” retorted Komorebi, “and having to worry about food and shelter. At least them as is in or around the Palace don't have to think about who has pissed in their water before it gets to them.”

“Jijivisha said something about that yesterday,” said Autumn. “Is the Summer Palace near Lake Nanikaika?”

“Aye,” said Komorebi. “The Palace is on the shore and I have seen it

only the once. Father took me. Never have I seen anything so big. 'Tis as big or bigger than the wall around the Old City. What could one man possibly do in such a big place? I wager he could live a day in each room and still have rooms to spare. I see no point to it."

"I daresay many others live there as well," said Autumn. "Mo'is and Roinads and the like seem to have the need for others to do things for them. Where is the Winter Palace?"

"There isn't one," said Komorebi, stopping at a crossroad. "Father did say there used to be one inside the Old City but it is there no more. Here we are, the street of gemsmiths."

She led them into a narrow road lined with small, squat brick buildings. It was quieter here. Fewer people walked the street and there were no sounds or smells of animals. There was almost no shit on the cobbles either.

"So what do we do?" asked Autumn.

"Pick one," said Komorebi. "Then we go in and talk to whoever is inside."

"They all look much the same," said Logan looking around. "How do we choose?"

"It matters little," said Komorebi. "If you do not like what one offers for the ring then we go to another. Likely that one will offer the same but they may offer more."

A youngish lad passing by heard this and his ears twitched. He did not stop walking but he glanced at Logan and his companions.

"This one, then," said Autumn, pointing to one that lay roughly halfway along the short street. "Come."

"Best let me do the talking," said Komorebi. "Seeing as how you be strangers here."

As they went inside the building the youngish man met up with his



friend who was lounging against the wall at the other end of the street. He was picking his teeth with a piece of straw and watching the girls go by.

“Hey, Deven,” said Ufga quietly as he joined him.

“Hey Ufga, you been taking your sweet time,” said Deven sourly. “See that one over there? The little one with the blue scarf? What you reckon?” He nodded in the girl's direction.

“Forget her,” said Ufga. “We might be onto something.”

“Oh aye?” said Deven losing interest in the girl immediately. “What be that then?”

“Back there,” said Ufga quietly. “Heard a lad with two girls talking about selling a ring. They be inside one of the smithies.”

“Which one?” asked Deven turning to look.

“Don't look,” snarled Ufga. “Act natural, like. They won't be coming out for a bit yet.”

“Two girls, eh?” said Deven turning back. He rubbed a finger against the side of his twisted nose, the result of a break the previous spring. “Young lad with two girlies, should be an easy touch. Had a sword did he?”

“Nah” said Ufga. His nose was still straight but he had an old knife scar on his cheek. “He was carrying a staff and so was one of the girls but he didn't look like he knew how to use it. I reckon we waits for them to come out then we follows them. Find a quiet spot then do him and take the coins.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Deven with a leer. “Two girlies eh? That be one each then we can swap. Bit o' fun like. A ring, you say? Wonder how much he be getting for that?”

“Dunno,” said Ufga, “but he wouldn't be here if it were a bit of crap, would he. Stands to reason.”

Komorebi pushed open the heavy wooden door and a small bell tinkled. A small brazier sat in one corner and radiated heat. Nearby was a solid table littered with small pots and pans and assorted fine tools. Against the opposite wall sat a very large, very solid wooden chest bound with brass strips. Its lid was firmly closed. Between the chest and the table was a narrow doorway with a cloth hanging.

“Seems there is no one here,” said Komorebi. “Let us try next door.”

She turned just as a tall, thin man pushed aside the hanging. He hustled in, anxious not to lose a customer then his face fell when he saw them. He preferred his customers to be older and with more obvious signs of prosperity.

“Greetings,” he said anyway as a customer was a customer however young and poor they looked. “Moolupe Gigil One at your service. How may I assist you?”

“Ahh, we have the right place,” said Komorebi, turning back. “Greetings Moolupe Gigil One. I am Saudade Komorebi One of Schtei. My friends here are nobles from Aferraron who have been travelling long and hard. They are in Schtei on business and expressed a desire to meet you.”

“Ahh, indeed?” said Gigil, not fooled for an instant. “’Tis always a pleasure to meet those from faraway lands, especially on business. How is it you have heard of me?”

“The family of Moolupe is known and respected in Aferraron as well as Wase,” said Komorebi. “A reputation for honesty that is widely renowned.”

“I am delighted to hear it,” said Gigil, flattered despite his reservations. “May I know the names of your friends?”

“Logan of Uli-Rratha and Autumn Savannah of the same,” said Komorebi. “As I said they have travelled long and hard and, a most unfortunate circumstance, but they find themselves in temporary need

of ready coins. Purely to tide them over, you understand, until certain business matters are concluded.”

“Ahh, so you are selling not buying then,” said Gigil with a quiet sigh. “May I see the item or items?”

“Tis a ring,” said Komorebi, “a trinket but of no little value nonetheless. Show Moolupe Gigil One the ring, Logan.”

“Ahh, yes,” said Logan hurriedly. He held his hand out to show Gigil the ring on his finger.

“If I may?” said Gigil, holding out his hand, palm up.

“Oh, umm, yes,” said Logan. He passed his staff to Autumn then slipped off the ring and put it in Gigil's hand.

“As you say, a trinket,” said Gigil, studying it. “What value do you hold this ring to be?”

“Umm,” said Logan.

“Five hundred kalas,” said Komorebi boldly.

Gigil looked at her for a few moments. He would have laughed but he was not the laughing type.

“Excuse me,” he said and went over to his table. He laid the ring down on a corner so it was clearly visible to all then lit a candle from the brazier. Picking up the ring again he studied the gem with the candle held close behind it.

“Hmm,” he said and blew out the candle. “Let us go outside where the light is better.”

He picked up a needle embedded in a small piece of wood and, keeping the ring in plain sight, led the way through the door. Komorebi, Autumn and Logan followed.

“There they are,” muttered Ufga. “Don't pay any attention mind.”

He turned back to the crossroad and Deven glanced at the trio before doing the same, their faces and manner of dress now embedded in his mind.

Gigil inspected the ring then used the needle to make a tiny scratch inside it, just beneath the stone.

“Hmm,” he said, thoughtfully. “Let us return inside.”

They all trooped back inside and Gigil put the ring back on his table. He sat on his stool and gazed at the ring, mainly to let the tension rise.

“I will offer you one hundred kalas,” he said when he judged the time was right.

Logan was impressed by that amount although Autumn was indifferent. Komorebi smiled happily.

“The family of Moolupe is also famed for its sense of humour,” she said. “’tis an honour for us to see it expressed in this way.”

“What was the joke?” whispered Autumn, frowning.

“I have no idea,” whispered back Logan.

Gigil ignored them as it was quite obvious who was conducting these negotiations.

“The family of Moolupe is perhaps less well known for its charity,” he said, making a pyramid with his fingers, “but we are charitable none the less. As a concession to our esteemed visitors from Aferraron I would be willing, under the circumstances, to go to perhaps, shall we say, two hundred kalas?”

“I am bereft,” exclaimed Komorebi, her face collapsing into an expression of despair. She turned to Autumn and Logan and held out her hands pleadingly. “I most humbly apologise. Please do not let the good reputation of Schtei be lost because one gemsmith cannot bring himself to offer the four hundred kalas your ring is so clearly worth.

Come, let us depart this place.”

“You speak of quality,” said Gigil, noting that Komorebi had not moved to retrieve the ring. “The ring itself, while gold, is not of the finest quality and the gem, while a xuiui, has green flecks and not the preferred blue but I am a generous man and well understand the plight of strangers in a strange land. Come, let us agree on two hundred and fifty.”

“Alas, no,” said Komorebi. “A generous man you undoubtedly are but I am not a stranger here. You have many brethren in this street who will, I am sure, be most upset and disgusted to hear how you tried to take advantage of foreigners in their time of need. Three hundred and fifty.”

Gigil hissed and sucked his teeth. “So,” he said sadly, “you seek to disparage me in front of my brethren? I had thought better of you, Saudade Komorebi One of Schtei.”

“Perhaps this had best be put before the guild,” said Komorebi sharply. She stepped forward and reached out to take the ring. Gigil put his hand over it.

“Let us not be too hasty,” he said as she stepped back. “A guild enquiry will take time and your friends, as you say, are in need of money sooner rather than later. I am mindful of this and I take pity on their plight.” He picked up the ring and held it in front of the candle again. “Hmmm. Perhaps, in view of their circumstances, I could let my children miss a meal or two. Three hundred kalas and that is my final offer.”

“Agreed,” said Komorebi happily. “Your reputation remains intact, Moolupe Gigil One.”

“Excellent,” said Gigil, keeping a tight grip on the ring. “One moment.”

He crossed the room to the chest and, with a grunt, lifted the heavy lid. He dropped the ring into a smaller box within then lifted out three bags of coins. The lid fell with a solid thump and he turned to give the

bags to Komorebi. She took them and hesitated for a moment.

“Perhaps you wish to count them?” asked Gigil, a touch sarcastically.

“You misunderstand me,” said Komorebi, handing the bags to Logan. “I was merely overcome for a moment by your kindness. 'Tis no wonder your fame has spread to Aferraron and beyond.”

“Quite,” said Gigil drily, “and likely yours will too before you are much older. Is our business concluded?”

“Yes,” said Komorebi. “We will bid you a good day, Moolupe Gigil One.”

“And I you,” said Gigil. “If your friends should find themselves in such straits again you know where I am.”

“Thank you,” said Logan. “We will certainly remember that next time.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “No doubt we will meet again, Moolupe Gigil One. Fare well.”

Gigil ushered them back into the street again and closed his door, well satisfied with the outcome.

“Logan, quickly,” said Komorebi urgently. “Hide those bags, there are eyes all around.”

“Ahh,” said Logan and he dropped them inside his tunic. “That was foolish of me.”

“I don't think anyone saw,” said Komorebi, looking around. None of the passersby appeared to have noticed anything and the two men waiting at the end of the street had their backs to them. “Is there anywhere else you would like to go or shall we go to the Mahala of Ratanbismet to get you a talisman?”

“I would like to go to the market on our return,” said Autumn. “We were unable to complete our purchases yesterday.”

“Then we shall go to the market first,” said Komorebi. “The Mahala is a few roads further to the east so the market is on our way.”

“Did we get a good price?” asked Logan as they headed off for the market. Deven and Ufga followed but were unnoticeable among the others who walked the streets.

“Aye, a very good price,” said Komorebi happily. “Father thought we might get two hundred kalas, perhaps two hundred and twenty. Three hundred was more than I had hoped for.”

“You have been most kind and helpful,” said Autumn. “Perhaps we could give you some of these coins as a way of expressing our thanks?”

“Twas my pleasure,” said Komorebi, “both in the besting of that smithy and in helping you both. I ask nothing more than you extend the hand of friendship to me. Does that sit well with you, Logan?” and she smiled up at him.

“Um, um, yes, of course,” said Logan nervously.

“I had hoped we were friends already,” said Autumn, “you and your father both. Are you sure there is nothing else we can do for you? You have been most generous.”

“Oh, no,” said Komorebi, “think nothing of it. What are friends for, eh?” She paused for a moment. “Although there is something.”

“Yes?” asked Autumn.

“You are strangers here,” said Komorebi. “Likely you have never had flamdim?”

“What is that?” asked Autumn.

“They're delicious,” said Komorebi. “Tis little pieces of lamb mixed with spices and wrapped in pastry then fried on a hot stone. Perhaps you could get some for us when we reach the market? Alas I have no money with me.”

“It would be our pleasure,” said Logan, pleased he had thought of something to say.

Autumn smiled, also pleased. “Tell me of Ratanbismet, Komorebi,” she said. “It is the deity of Schtei?”

“That is right,” said Komorebi. She pulled away from Logan briefly to go around a man who was standing on the road looking at something in his hand. “Ratanbismet be our protector.”

“I would wonder at the need for a protective wall then,” said Autumn.

“I had not thought of that,” admitted Komorebi. “Mayhap Ratanbismet built the wall for us.”

“Yes, that is a possibility,” said Autumn. “For certain the wall shows signs of being of no small age.”

“True enough,” said Komorebi. “Every now and then a bit falls off. I remember two summers past a cow was killed when some of the wall fell on it. ’Twas a terrible commotion but the Mo’i agreed to recompense the cow’s owner.”

“But not the cow, I would imagine,” said Autumn, “even though it was the one that suffered.”

“It was just a cow,” said Komorebi, giving her a puzzled look.

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “And these talismans? Why do we go to a Mahala? Can we not get one in the market? I wager they are for sale much as everything else would seem to be.”

“We could,” said Komorebi, “but ones from the market are not as effective. If we get you one from a Mahala it will be blessed and have all the power it should. One from the market will likely be lacking.”

“Why would anyone get one from the market, then?” asked Logan.

“They are cheaper there,” said Komorebi, “and no doubt many put their trust in Aloidia as much as Ratanbismet. Ours was blessed by a



Mahala and even though we have had our troubles we have not had our dwelling lost or robbed.”

“That is good,” said Autumn. “I looked before I went to the beach and could not see one on our dwelling. Likely if there was it was taken by those who dwelt there before us.”

“Did you look at ours?” asked Komorebi.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “It looked like a figure with three faces.”

“That’s right,” said Komorebi. “Ratanbismet has the form of a snake but upright like a man and has a face pointing forward and one to each side.”

“And the markings on those faces?” asked Autumn. “What do they signify?”

“The three faces are the faces of love, strength and honour and the whiteness of the body is a sign of Its purity,” said Komorebi. “The black lines are Its scales. What is it you wanted to get at the market, Autumn?”

“Some cloth,” said Autumn. “I need a new robe and I saw some nice green cloth yesterday but we did not have enough money to pay for it.”

“Ahh, yes, green would suit you well,” said Komorebi, “although I wager a pale green would be better than a dark green. You have a darker colouring than is common in Wase and the pale green would look very fine on you.”

“Ahh, it was the deep green that caught my eye,” said Autumn, “and I wager the deep green will show the dirt less and last longer.”

“Perhaps,” said Komorebi, with a sniff, “if you do not care what you look like. We are almost at the market now. The seller of cloth is this side, a little way on from the seller of flamdims. What say you to going and getting your cloth while me and Logan get some flamdims? They take a few moments to cook. Then we can go on to the Mahala.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn.

“You will need some money,” said Logan. “How much is the cloth?”

“Three kalas should be more than enough,” said Komorebi, “unless you want to make something else as well.”

“A robe will be sufficient,” said Autumn as Logan felt around in his tunic to retrieve some kalas. “We are travellers and 'tis best to travel light.”

“I suppose so,” said Komorebi, “although 'tis nice to have pretty clothes.”

“Here are four kalas,” said Logan handing Autumn two coins.

“I thank you, Logan,” said Autumn.

“And here is the flamdim seller,” said Komorebi. “The cloth seller is a little way down there. Shall we meet back here when you are done with your buying?”

“That sits well with me,” said Autumn. “I shall return shortly.”

“A dozen if you please,” said Komorebi to the flamdim seller.

“Twelve hakina,” grunted the woman, flipping twelve of the pastries onto her stone with practised skill.

Logan handed her a kala, conscious of Komorebi standing close beside him.

The woman flipped the flamdims over and handed him his change at the same time. A few moments later she flipped half of them onto Komorebi's outstretched hand then looked expectantly at Logan.

“Oh,” he said and shifted his staff to his left hand before holding out his right. She flipped the rest onto it then turned to the next customer.

“Four,” said Deven, watching Logan.

“Shall we go over there?” asked Komorebi, pointing to a broad alley a little further along. “It is quiet there and we will be able to see Autumn when she returns.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, his palm beginning to sweat even though the flamdims were warm, not hot. “If you wish.”

“Come, then,” said Komorebi, leading the way. “We can have a nice chat.”

“Yes,” said Logan, following.

“Have a care,” said Komorebi sharply as Deven and Ufga came up close behind and jostled them further into the alley and away from the street. Deven’s discarded flamdims lay on the ground a few paces further back.

“Shut it, bitch,” said Ufga, giving her a hard shove which sent her sprawling. He pulled out his knife. “You, blondie, give us them coins what be inside your tunic.”

## Chapter Seven

Logan jumped back in alarm and glanced at Komorebi. She seemed unhurt although her face was very pale.

“Come on,” snarled Ufga, waving his knife slowly from side to side in a menacing way. It glinted in a way that suggested it was of quality and sharp. Deven pulled a set of rings joined together with a bronze bar from inside his tunic and slipped it over the fingers of his hand. “I don't wanna hurt you, pretty boy. Give us the coins.”

“I have no coins,” said Logan, stepping back again.

“I can see 'em round your belly,” said Deven raising his loaded fist and stepping forward.

A sudden vicious snarling caused Ufga and Deven to momentarily pause and half turn as several stray dogs started to fight over the discarded flamdims and as they turned back Logan hurled the flamdims he was holding at Ufga's head. One caught him on the cheek, just above his old scar.

“Get him, Dev,” snarled Ufga and lunged forward.

Caught off guard, Logan had not yet assumed the ready position with his staff but he was able to slam it forward and caught Ufga on the side of his ribs with one end causing him to grimace and stumble. Logan ducked as Deven's knuckleduster came perilously close to the side of his head and he managed to get his other hand onto his staff. With a two handed grip he swung the staff around, completely missing Deven and nearly hitting Komorebi who was trying to get to her feet. With a gasp and great presence of mind she dropped to the ground again and rolled up against the wall of the building out of the way. The dogs ignored them and snatched away the rest of the flamdims before running off.

Deven swore and advanced on Logan again, his fist raised and drawn back but this time Logan was ready. He was balanced on his feet and had the staff held out in front of him with one end in his armpit as Autumn had taught him. He backed away from Deven, trying to get

into a position where he could see both of them. He didn't have time. Just as Deven jumped forward and rammed his fist at Logan's head, Ufga leapt in with his knife, aiming for the back of Logan's neck.

"Logan! Behind you!" screamed Komorebi and Logan lashed his staff around as hard as he could.

It smashed across Ufga's face, flattening his nose and splitting the old scar wide open again. He dropped to his knees moaning, his hands trying to keep the blood from spurting. Deven's blow missed Logan's head but caught the back of his shoulder, pushing him hard into the opposite wall. His staff clattered against the bricks and fell to the ground. Instantly Deven was upon him, his hands around Logan's throat. Logan stamped down with his heel on Deven's foot and rammed his elbow backwards into Deven's side just as his staff leapt off the ground and rammed itself into the side of Deven's head. Deven howled and let go of Logan and the knuckleduster fell off as he clutched his head. Logan pushed himself away from the wall and spun, lashing out with his fist. He missed Deven completely and lost his balance, crashing headlong into Deven, throwing Deven into Ufga. Logan managed to stay upright and grabbed his staff as Fiau readied herself for another assault.

"Thanks, Fiau," he muttered and positioned himself for another attack, the staff pointing at both of them.

Deven disentangled himself from Ufga and got to his feet. His head was agony and he could feel blood trickling through his fingers. He took one look at Logan and decided enough was enough. He turned and half ran, half stumbled up the alley. Ufga struggled to his feet, using the wall to help.

"I'll get you, bastard," he growled through his blood soaked fingers, "if it be the last thing I do," and took off after Deven.

"Oh Logan, are you alright?" cried Komorebi. She leapt off the ground and came running over.

"I think so," said Logan, slowly relaxing his stance. He was shaking and his head felt foggy and confused.

“You were so brave!” exclaimed Komorebi, hugging him tightly and making his ribs hurt. “Did you see him, Autumn? He twisted and whirled and beat them two robbers with his staff! He was so fast!”

Logan tried to twist around but Komorebi's grip was too strong. Truth be told he was also feeling a little weak and faint. “Autumn?” he gasped, “Autumn?”

“Release him, Komorebi,” said Autumn, coming round into view. She put her bundle of cloth on the ground. “Are you hurt, Logan?”

“I do not think so,” said Logan, staggering slightly as Komorebi let go. He put his hand out and leant against the wall.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” asked Autumn, studying his eyes.

“Three,” said Logan. She nodded and felt around his head.

“You have a graze on your forehead,” she said, “and I wager you will have a lump there come morning. I saw the blow to your shoulder and the hands around your throat. Do either pain you?”

“Not that I am aware of,” said Logan, “although I am feeling weak.”

“That will pass soon enough,” said Autumn. “Sit down and rest.”

Logan lowered himself, his back to the wall and his staff clutched tightly in one hand. Komorebi stood back a little and watched as Autumn let Logan sip from their water bottle.

“How much of that did you see?” he asked, looking up at Autumn.

“I arrived just as you hit the one in his ribs,” said Autumn, squatting down beside him.

“I did not do well,” admitted Logan. “I tried to get into position but there wasn't time.”

“You did very well, Logan Warrior,” said Autumn, holding his hand. “I

confess it was not the prettiest of fights but you bested them both with no great injury to yourself nor to Komorebi here. That is all anyone can ask of a fight.”

“Komorebi!” exclaimed Logan. He struggled to get up. “Where is she? Is she hurt?”

Autumn held him down with her hand on his shoulder. “She is well,” she said. “Are you not, Komorebi?”

“I am well,” said Komorebi, coming forward. “Was not Logan the bravest of the brave?”

“Oh that he was,” said Autumn. “Why did they attack you both?”

“They were after the money,” said Komorebi, dropping her voice out of habit even though no one else was there. “They must have followed us.”

“Hmm. Then we need to take more care,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “There may be others and 'tis possible those two have friends who will be here shortly. Did you know either of them?”

“One looked familiar,” said Komorebi. “That one with the scar. I fancy I have seen him somewhere before although I know not where but it was all so quick. Quite likely he could have been anyone with a scar on his face. There are many such in Schtei.”

“And what is this?” asked Autumn, picking up Deven's discarded knuckleduster.

“'Tis a knuckleduster,” said Komorebi. “They be quite common in some parts of Schtei.”

“What does it do?” asked Autumn turning it over in her hands.

“You wear it like rings,” said Komorebi, “with the bar on the top of your hand so when you hit someone with your fist it makes it more effective.”

“Ahh, interesting,” said Autumn, slipping it on to her fingers. She smacked it into the palm of her other hand. “Yes, I wager that could be quite effective.” She took the knuckleduster off and slipped it inside her pack. “Do you feel up to walking yet, Logan?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “My feeling of faintness has passed. 'Tis a shame about the flamdims though. I could eat a handful right now.”

“You see, Komorebi?” said Autumn standing up. “'Tis a reliable sign. When Logan's thoughts turn to food you can be sure there is little wrong with him.”

“I shall remember that,” said Komorebi looking down on Logan. Autumn glanced at her with a raised eyebrow.

“Come, Logan,” she said. “We shall get you some more flamdims. Shall we go to the Mahala or shall we return to our dwelling?”

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“Ahh, there you are, child,” exclaimed Galeo when Komorebi walked into their hut. “'Tis almost dark and I was beginning to worry for your safety.”

“'Twas a useful day, father,” said Komorebi. “Come, let up go down to the beach. We may be able to find some shellfish to eat.”

“We have food here,” said Galeo, puzzled. “Why do we need to look for shellfish?”

“Because I have a fancy for them,” said Komorebi, looking intently at him and jerking her head at the entrance.

Galeo scowled then his face cleared. “Then let us go shellfish hunting,” he said.

He marched out of the hut and almost collided with Logan who was standing looking at the entrance to his hut.

“Ahh, Logan,” said Galeo. “Went the day well?”



“Aye, well enough,” said Logan. “We sold that ring and for a good price, thanks to Komorebi. Where is the best place to fasten this talisman?”

“Directly over the entrance,” said Galeo. “Tie it in place with a bit of twine. Do you have any?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “Inside.”

“We are going to look for shellfish,” said Komorebi. “If we find any would you like some?”

“If you have any to spare,” said Logan, “but do not deprive yourselves. We are not short of food.”

“Twill be our pleasure,” said Komorebi. “Is Autumn inside?”

“Yes, she is playing with her cloth,” said Logan.

“Then we will not disturb her,” said Komorebi. “Come father, 'tis nearly dark.”

Logan went inside the hut to fetch some twine and Komorebi and Galeo headed off up the road. They did not speak until they were at the beach. No one else was there.

“I fancy you have something to tell me,” said Galeo quietly. He started to dig his toes into the sand in case there happened to be some shellfish not already found by others earlier in the day.

“Aye,” said Komorebi, matching his quietness. “Much and more besides and little that I understand.” She, too, was feeling in the sand with her toes but with no great expectation.

Galeo waited for her to speak again.

“We sold the ring,” said Komorebi after a few moments. “Three hundred kalas.”

“Better than I expected,” said Galeo. “Did they give you a share for

your aid in the selling?"

"No," said Komorebi. "They offered but I turned it down."

"What in Agav's name for?" asked Galeo, staring at her in astonishment in the gloom.

"When the deed was done," said Komorebi, ignoring him, "the smithy said we knew where to find him another time."

"Is that not what you would expect him to say?" asked Galeo. He felt something under his toes and bent to dig it up but it was only a stone.

"Aye," said Komorebi, "but Logan said he would remember that next time and Autumn said they would meet again. I wager they have more to sell. That is why I declined their offer."

Galeo thought about it for a moment. "Mayhap she was just being polite," he said.

"There was something in her tone of voice," said Komorebi, "and I am fairly sure she said they would be certain to meet again. 'Twas the 'certain' that caught my ear."

"So you thought to get them in your debt by refusing a handout?" asked Galeo.

"Aye," said Komorebi. "Mayhap they will come to trust me and Logan will give me an entire ring or more in time."

"That be right clever thinking," said Galeo, nodding. "But you said there was something you did not understand?"

"Aye," said Komorebi. She moved away to a patch of sand left wet and smooth by the outgoing tide. Galeo followed.

"We were attacked after," she said. "Down by the market. There was two of them and one was Ufga from Iflinbar. I knew not the other. They were after the money."

“Did those thugs get the money?” asked Galeo in alarm. “Neither you nor Logan looked injured.”

“No, Logan beat them off,” she said. “I had not expected that for he does not look the type.”

“Logan beat that shit Ufga?” exclaimed Galeo. “That does surprise me. Yes, I can see how you would not understand that for I find it hard to believe myself.”

“Tis not that that I do not understand,” said Komorebi. “Turned out Logan is a right handy fighter with that staff of his and bested them both smart enough. I would not of expected that but then again they be travellers and no doubt have encountered other tribulations in their travels. If they are travellers.”

“You think they are not what they claim?” asked Galeo, abandoning his search for shellfish.

“This is what I do not understand,” said Komorebi. “Autumn was not with us when the attack came. She had gone to get some cloth while we stopped for food. She was not the least little bit alarmed when she came back and found us. She watched Logan best Ufga and his friend as calm as anything.”

“What is there not to understand?” asked Galeo. “Likely she knows his skills and was not concerned.”

“That is what I thought,” said Komorebi. “Twas their talk afterwards that I do not understand. Logan said he did not fight well and Autumn reassured him. Mayhap there was nothing more to it than that but it seemed to me that the manner in which they spoke was that of a child and a teacher.”

“I do not follow,” said Galeo.

“Neither do I,” said Komorebi thoughtfully, “but it seemed to me that Autumn did not reassure Logan as one who is protected would reassure the skilled fighter who protects her but rather as a teacher reassures the child when they have done well enough but not overly

well.”

“So you think Autumn taught Logan to fight?” asked Galeo. “That would seem right strange.”

“Aye,” said Komorebi, “I thought so too but I watched them both closely as we went to the Mahala to get the talisman of Ratanbismet and thence to return to our dwellings. She has a way of moving that is both graceful and poised, like a cat, and she has great confidence. She, too, carried a staff and showed no sign of needing one nor of being unfamiliar with it. Now I think on it she also had no hesitation in going for the cloth alone in a strange place and without her protector, if indeed Logan is such. I have a fancy she is the protector, not Logan. What do you make of it? Am I imagining this, do you think?”

“I do not think you are imagining it, Komorebi,” said Galeo thoughtfully. “You have always been serious and not given to flights of fancy, even as a toddler, and since your ma died and I lost my mind for a time you proved most stalwart and perceptive of others. I wager if that is what you think then likely it is so. That there Autumn is a fighter, is she? That is most interesting.”

“And now I think on it,” said Komorebi, “mayhap she is something of a healer as well. She did not look for blood on Logan after the fight. She checked his eyes and showed signs of no little knowledge of injuries.”

“That could be simply that Logan has been in many fights,” said Galeo. “I do not think of itself it means much save she has experience of tending injuries.”

“Likely you are right, father,” said Komorebi, also abandoning the search for shellfish. “What do you think it all means?”

“I am not sure,” admitted Galeo, “but let me add what little I can to our talk. While you were away I have been asking around about the Chanwars. None that I spoke with knew anything of the death of Chanwar Two.”

“So you think they were lying about that?” asked Komorebi.

“That was my first thought,” said Galeo, “for it is easy to claim an acquaintance and difficult for the likes of us to show otherwise but after listening to what you have told me another thought comes to my mind.”

“What is that, father?” asked Komorebi.

“The Wodazu are a close mouthed family by all accounts,” said Galeo. “Mayhap Autumn and Logan have news of Chanwar Two's death that has not yet arrived in Schtei. If they are travellers and passed that way then mayhap they heard something.”

“So you think they are travellers as they claim?” said Komorebi.

“When the day comes that I have no more than two thoughts,” said Galeo, frowning in the darkness, “you may kill me and feed my carcass to the fish.”

“Ahh,” said Komorebi. She waited patiently.

“We know that they had a ring of no little value,” said Galeo slowly, “and you think they have other rings or trinkets, perhaps of even more value. We know Logan is a fighter of some skill and you think Autumn has more skill and may be Logan's teacher. Aye, and if we join those and the supposing that they be truth telling about Chanwar Two then a very interesting thought comes into my mind.”

“I confess none come into mine, father,” said Komorebi.

“Think on it, child,” said Galeo. “They are from Aferraron. Their manner of dress and talking mark them as such even had they not told us which means they must, if not recently but at some time, have passed through the Xibu Shan Mountains and the territory of the Wodazu. If Chanwar Two be true then I wager it must have been recent so how is it that two travellers, alone and with wealth managed to retain their wealth? No matter how skilled they both are at fighting I wager they could not except by the greatest good fortune.”

“Perhaps they are honoured by Aloidia,” said Komorebi.

“Perhaps,” said Galeo, “but think on this. How can they know Chanwar Two is dead unless they have close relations with the Wodazu?”

“You think they are of the Wodazu?” asked Komorebi, both startled and intrigued by this possibility.

“’Twould fit the facts as we know them,” said Galeo. “Fighters with wealth and knowledge of the inner secrets of that family. I be not saying that they be Wodazu themselves but like as not they be in the outer circle.”

“But if that be true,” said Komorebi, “why would they be in Schtei? And why just the two of them?”

“Mayhap there are others around,” said Galeo, “and who knows why they are in Schtei. Mayhap the Chanwars be planning a raid on the gemsmiths or the Mo’i’s palace. I wouldn’t put it past them.”

“Or they could simply be looking for new ways of selling what they take from travellers,” said Komorebi. “Hmm, ’tis a shame.”

“Why?” asked Galeo.

“I rather like Logan,” said Komorebi. “He is shy and uncertain and I like that. He is sweet, not like that oaf Ufga. ’Tis a shame we’d best be keeping our distance.”

“And that is another thought I have,” said Galeo. “I know ’twould be sensible for the likes of us to stay away from the likes of the Chanwars but ’twould also be sensible not to rush into staying away.”

“What do you mean, father?” asked Komorebi.

“This may be our chance for riches,” said Galeo with a touch of excitement in his voice. “Rather than staying away, what if you get closer to Logan? What if you become his almost, or better yet his actual era’owen? What then?”

“I do not follow,” said Komorebi, although she did not wholly dislike the idea. After all, the lads she knew in Schtei were mostly oafs like Ufga.

“It could only do you good to be wedded into the Wodazu,” said Galeo, awed by his thought. “Mayhap in time us Saudade could become a dynasty! Would that not be magnificent?”

“So you are saying I should wed Logan?” asked Komorebi with a slow smile. “Rings and all?”

“Aye,” said Galeo, “and mayhap I should try for Autumn myself.” He laughed. “And how likely is that, hey? No, girl, I fancy this will be all down to you.”

## Chapter Eight

The blow came close to breaking Logan's neck. That it did not was entirely down to Autumn's skill in her timing. That Logan did not react in turn was entirely down to his absolute faith in her skills. As always, her practice blows stopped a finger's breadth away from harm and Logan did not even twitch. He just smiled.

"Is it not a beautiful day?" asked Autumn, dropping to sit beside him on the beach a few moments later. There was a sheen of perspiration on her forehead and her ponytail was dishevelled.

"Why do you always say that?" asked Logan good naturedly. "Even when it is a foul day you say it is a beautiful day and today is grey and cold and that wind coming from the sea chills me to the bone."

"Because every day is beautiful whatever the weather," said Autumn, "and the acknowledging of that puts cheer in the heart. Go on, say it." She pulled the thong from her ponytail and ran her fingers through her hair several times before gathering it back into a ponytail.

"It is a beautiful day," said Logan. He tossed a handful of sand in the air and the wind snatched it and dashed it against the cliff behind them.

"And does not your heart feel cheered now?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Logan, "but it was already cheerful when I came down here." He half laughed.

"Ahh, so you have slept well?" asked Autumn. "I thought you were later here than yesterday."

"No, I am still waking earlier than I used to," said Logan, "and I venture that will not change until we are in more peaceful places. Flaner was tapping his things when I left."

"And that bothers you less?" asked Autumn.

"Aye, likely I am getting used to it," said Logan. "Anyway, I have been



busy.”

“How so?” she asked, picking up a discarded shell and inspecting it. There was nothing inside so she wet it with spit and rubbed it with her finger to make it shine.

“I have hidden our coins and the other rings,” said Logan, dropping his voice. There was no one within earshot but he felt it a necessary precaution. “I have put some aside for food and the like for the next few days which I shall keep with me but the rest is safe, or at least I hope so.”

“Where are they?” asked Autumn, more from idle curiosity than protectiveness. If someone took the money she would wish them well and hope it covered their needs.

“That is for you to find out,” said Logan, grinning at her. “When we go back to the hut I want you to try to find the coins. Mayhap they are not as well hidden as I thought.”

“You think I am skilled in the ways of a thief?” asked Autumn. She used the shell to scoop some sand into her hand and let it dribble through her fingers. Two tiny insects ran across her palm and she studied them for a few moments before putting her hand on the sand so they could run home.

“No,” said Logan. “I wager you would make a dreadful thief for you care nothing for what you are trying to take but you are clever and mayhap you will discover their hiding place. Think of it as a challenge.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “Shall we return now or is there anything you wish to do here?”

“All I wish is to get out of this wind,” said Logan, getting up. “Come on.”

Several people acknowledged them as they made their way to the hut as they were beginning to become known but Flaner ignored them. Likely he saw them pass but he resented Logan. Jijivisha waved and

came out of her dwelling briefly to discuss the weather and exchange insults with Merak, something they both enjoyed. Both of them returned to their dwellings, Jijivisha to get out of the wind and Merak to fetch a bowl for she had run out of tobacco for her pipe and had to go begging for more.

“So,” said Logan, pulling aside the door cloth, “your challenge begins.”

Autumn looked thoughtfully at him then slowly stepped inside. It was gloomy for the day was grey but there was light enough to see, not that there was much to look at. Logan's blanket lay on the ground beside one wall. His staff was propped against the wall nearby. At the back, beside the stone hearth, was the cooking pot, a small pile of wood and their supplies. Autumn's pack sat neatly on top of the cloth she had bought, in a corner.

She scanned the hut, looking for disturbances and saw none. Then she picked up Logan's blanket and shook it but nothing fell out. She rummaged through the pile of wood and their supplies and found only a mouse which hurried away. She watched it go as Logan stood smirking beside the entrance then picked up her pack and rummaged through that. It was an unlikely place to hide coins as it was easily taken but she checked anyway. Then she unfolded her cloth and re-folded it.

“I wager there is only one place left,” she said, looking at Logan, “but is it not somewhat obvious?”

Logan shrugged. “Best check anyway,” he said.

“How did you lift the hearth stone without disturbing the ashes?” she asked.

“Mayhap I did not lift the hearth stone,” he said.

“But where else can the coins be?” she asked, squatting beside the stone. “There is nowhere else to look save under here and I wager that is true of most of these dwellings.”

“Ahh,” he said. “’Tis a fair point.”

Autumn felt around the hearth stone then wedged her fingers inside a small crevice. She lifted the stone and peered underneath. Much of the ash on top of the stone slid onto the ground.

“Oh,” she said in surprise then let it drop. “Hmm. Now my curiosity is roused.”

“Excellent,” said Logan. He hadn't moved from where he stood.

Autumn rose and slowly turned full circle, scanning the inside of the small hut. Then she picked up Logan's staff and asked Fiau for some light. She scanned the hut again, to no avail.

“Thank you, Fiau,” she said with a frown. “That is enough.”

Fiau went out and Autumn propped the staff against the wall again. She studied Logan.

“Are they hidden behind you?” she asked.

Logan stepped aside with a flourish of his hand.

“’Twould seem not,” said Autumn, pursing her lips. She thought for a moment. “Aha! You said they are hidden at the hut but you did not say inside!”

“True enough,” said Logan as she marched outside. It was still grey and windy.

Autumn studied the front of the hut and peered behind the talisman of Ratanbismet. Then she stepped back and tried to see what was on the roof.

“’Tis not up there,” muttered Logan. “That would be foolishness as everyone would see me.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn, her frown deepening. She went back inside and started tapping over the floor with her foot.

"I did not bury them," said Logan coming back inside as well. "If I did you would see where for the earth would be disturbed. Do you give up?"

"Certainly they would seem to be well hidden," she said looking carefully around again. "They are inside the hut? Not up on the ledge or some place else?"

"They are inside the hut," said Logan looking very pleased with himself.

"Then I wager no casual passerby would find them," she said. "Where are they?"

Logan pointed to one of the corners where the roof met the stone wall at the back of the hut. "Up there," he said.

Autumn went over and studied the corner then felt around with her fingers.

"Ahh," she said. "The mud is still soft. That was right clever."

"I am pleased you think so," said Logan beaming. "Some are there, some in the other corner and some in the corner at the front. The rings are in the other corner. I was afraid you would see the wetness of the mud when you lit Fiau but it should dry soon and will look the same as the rest of the walls."

"Like as not no one will ever find them unless they pull the place down," said Autumn, turning around to look in the various corners. "Even though I know where they are I still struggle to see them."

"I tried to follow the lines of the branches," said Logan, "so they didn't stand out."

"Will that not be difficult when we need to retrieve some?" asked Autumn.

"Perhaps," said Logan, "but it will be a simple matter to break the mud then cover them again with fresh."

“You have done well, Logan,” said Autumn, “although it saddens me that you felt the need. I am slowly beginning to understand this since leaving my Esyup. Trust is not universal and some are filled with deceit even when there is no need.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “and the world is a sorrier place for all that. Would you like some calhouny?”

“Calhouny?” said Autumn in surprise. “I did not know we had any calhouny?”

“I saw some at one of the stalls at the market yesterday,” said Logan. “When we were heading to see the Mahala and I picked up a small bag. I’ll make another fire.”

“But we did not stop at any of the stalls,” said Autumn.

“Well, true,” said Logan, putting some sticks of wood on the hearth stone. “But do not forget I have never had the trust that you have in others and if something should happen to fall into my hand then that is unfortunate for the seller, isn’t it.”

“That is an interesting point,” said Autumn, watching as he used his flint to get the fire going. “I trust you completely so it never occurs to me that others might not and you yourself admit you are not to be trusted.”

“I have no answer to that,” said Logan. He stopped and looked at her. “Mayhap them as we cannot trust are fully trusted by others. I wager even those within the Wodazu trust each other. ’Tis a funny old thing, trust.”

“I daresay we should only trust those who show themselves worthy of trust,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “but would it not be better to trust others until they show themselves not worthy of trust?”

“Probably,” said Logan, blowing on the sticks to get them burning, “but them as do will likely get robbed and here in Schtei we are surrounded by strangers and know not who to trust so I reckoned ’tis better to trust no one and keep our coins than to trust all and lose

them.”

“And I notice you do not put your trust in Ratanbismet,” said Autumn, “even though you fixed the talisman outside.”

“Well,” said Logan, pouring water from their water bottle into the cooking pot, “it seemed to me that as we are not of Schtei there was a chance that Ratanbismet might not be as caring of us as one of Its own. Mayhap if a thief of Schtei came in here Ratanbismet might protect them against us rather than the other way around.”

“There is that,” said Autumn, “and that was a point I did not think of even though I spent some time this morning thinking on Ratanbismet while meditating.”

“Oh aye,” said Logan, putting some of the ground calhouny into the water and putting the pot on the fire. “And what thoughts did you have?”

A gust of wind blew the entrance cloth into the hut and little swirls of dirt danced.

“I think we should get a few stones to hold that cloth down,” said Autumn, “or even find some reeds and weave a door. I see little point in spending the winter in a hut when it is as easy for the wind to come inside as it is for us.”

“We could have a look for some later today,” said Logan, sitting back on his heels. “I was thinking on this earlier. Now that we are not travelling we have nothing to fill our days.”

“I had intended to spend today working on my new robe,” said Autumn, “but I am happy to go looking for reeds. The robe is not pressing.”

“Is there nothing I can say to dissuade you?” asked Logan looking over at her. “I worry about you.”

“Needlessly,” said Autumn, “but thank you for worrying even though you should put worry aside. What will be will be and 'tis fruitless

worrying about it. There will come a time when this old robe cannot hold the ribbon any longer and it will fall off and I venture its protection will come to an end if it has not already.”

“Hmm,” said Logan wrinkling his nose. “One thing I have learnt is that when your mind is set then there is little I can do about it.” He sighed. “There is no need for both of us to go in search of reeds. You stay here and work on your robe and I will go alone.”

“Or you could ask Komorebi to go with you,” said Autumn mischievously.

“Very funny,” said Logan drily. “Anyway, she is somewhere else and likely will be all day.”

“Which reminds me,” said Autumn, leaning over to grab her pack. “I thought this would serve you better than me.” She rummaged inside her pack and pulled out the knuckleduster. “As you are becoming a fighter.”

“Would it not be better on your hand?” asked Logan. He looked closely at it then slipped it over his fingers and waved his hand experimentally.

“I have no use of such things,” said Autumn, “and I prefer to feel what I hit. I am better able to judge the hitting if I can feel it.”

“Aye, and I daresay this would not make much difference,” said Logan hitting his hand with the other. “I’ve seen the power of your blows. Are you sure?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “You now have some skill with your staff but there may be times when you have to use your fist and this will aid you. ’Twill add more impact to your blows.”

“Thank you,” said Logan. He slipped the knuckleduster off and tossed it onto his blanket. “If there is any of your cloth left over, mayhap I could make a little pouch for it so I can hang it from my belt. ’Twill not be of much use if I have to fumble inside my blanket searching for it when someone leaps upon me.”

"I will make sure there is some cloth left over," said Autumn. "I got more than I need anyway as I want the new robe to be a little longer than the old one."

The water in the pot began to boil so Logan carefully manoeuvred it off the fire and tipped some calhouny into their bowls. He handed one to Autumn then blew on his own to cool it a little.

"You were thinking of Ratanbismet," he said after taking a cautious sip.

"Aye," said Autumn. "'Twas a strange tale the Mahala told us."

"How so?" asked Logan. "At least it explained why this wall is here," he tapped the stone wall, "and why it is in two levels. 'Twas built that way to resemble the coils of a snake."

"That much made sense," said Autumn. "A snake coils itself around a thing and sits on top of itself. 'Twas the pestilence I did not understand."

"Pestilences happen," said Logan. "No one knows how they start or how they go from person to person but they do."

Aye," said Autumn, "but if the wall was built at Ratanbismet's order to protect the old city that lay within Its coils then why did the farmers outside the city survive the pestilence and most inside did not? I would have expected it the other way around and those inside to be protected not those outside."

"I had not thought of that," said Logan. He peered thoughtfully into his bowl of calhouny. "Mayhap Ratanbismet gave protection against other things and not pestilences."

"Likely so," said Autumn. "I wager even deities cannot predict the ebbs and flows of a pestilence. Still, 'tis strange that this one killed all the elders of the city. 'Tis stranger still that the Mo'i should decide to build another palace and move outside the protecting wall. And why call the old palace the Winter Palace? The new one is not far from the old so why call them Summer and Winter?"



“Like as not he built a wall around the new palace,” said Logan, “and mayhap he intended to spend the winter here, by the sea, and the summer there, by the lake. Mayhap the view is better there in the summer.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but why then have the old palace taken apart only a few summers later? The Mahala said a lot of the stones were used to build houses for the wealthy over by the lake.”

“I cannot answer you,” said Logan. “I agree it is a puzzle but it was several hundreds of summers ago and I doubt anyone can answer now. For certain the Mahala admitted that they have little knowledge themselves of that time.”

“And doubtless what little records that were kept will be long lost,” said Autumn. “Not even recaisn would survive that long.”

“If you do have any cloth to spare,” said Logan, voicing a thought that had begun in the back of his mind, “mayhap I could use it to make a pack? ’Twould be easier to carry what I carry than rolling it inside my blanket.”

“Of course,” said Autumn, “or we can make you a pack from the old robe. It could be doubled over to make it stronger.”

“Thank you,” said Logan. “Is that rain?” He put down his bowl and went over to peer out of the entrance. “Aye, ’tis raining. Not heavily but the sky is darkening. Likely it will get heavier.”

He went back to sit beside the fire and picked up his bowl again.

“I reckon we will be finding out about leaks soon enough,” he said looking at the roof. “I hope the corners don’t leak and wash away all my work. They haven’t had time to dry properly. So what is recaisn? You have spoken of it before and I know it is used to write on but I know not what it actually is.”

“Oh, ’tis grass stalks,” said Autumn, her eyes drawn to the corner opposite her by the thought of the mud slowly dripping away. “They are dried and beaten flat then woven and beaten again and dried

again. After a few beatings and dryings they can be written on.”

“That sounds a lot of work,” said Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “although it be easier than scraping, drying and stretching skins for parchment.”

“So why use skins?” asked Logan.

“Because skins last longer,” said Autumn, “and the ink doesn't soak in and become unreadable. Skins can be stitched together as well. Recaisn has to be rolled up but skins can be made into books and stored flat.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. He finished his calhouny and put his bowl down beside the hearth. “I confess I have no wish to go looking for reeds in the rain.”

“Then don't,” said Autumn. “It will not rain forever.”

She started to put her bowl down as well then there was a sudden thump and a loud scream rent the air.

## Chapter Nine

Autumn was out the door before Logan got to his feet but he chased after her. He nearly crashed into her outside as she stood in the rain listening. From further up the street they could both hear shouts and screams and a horse whinnying.

“Are we under attack?” asked Logan staring up the street. Because of the curve he couldn't see a thing.

“Like as not it be an accident,” said Jjivisha, drawn to her doorway by the commotion. She looked at the rain and decided to stay inside her hut. “Happens every now and then.”

“That would explain the horse,” said Autumn, “and I venture that is a child's screams. Come, Logan, we may be able to offer aid.”

She strode off at a fast walk and Logan followed, his bare feet slipping every now and then on the wet cobbles. The child's screams changed to howls and a woman's wailing joined the noise.

“What has happened here?” asked Autumn as she reached a group of people standing where the road to the beach crossed the wall road.

“Reckon that 'un be a goner, right enough,” cackled the old man nearest her. “Whole bloody Agav cursed lot fell on 'er, like.”

“Let me through, let me through,” exclaimed Autumn, pushing people aside. “Oh, Vallume!”

“What is it?” demanded Logan, close behind. “Ahh.”

A woman was on her knees, wailing and crying while cradling the head of a howling child. Much of the body of the child was covered in red stained sand. Some sort of wooden contraption lay across the child and bags of sand, some burst and some intact, were scattered around. Nearby a man was trying to calm a frightened horse, still foaming at the mouth and eyes wide with fear. Despite the rain none of the onlookers moved, save to keep clear of the horse. They all watched the woman and child with avid attention.

"Please! Someone! Help us!" screamed the woman looking desperately around. She tried to push the wooden contraption and the child screamed. "I cannot shift it!"

Instantly Autumn leapt forward and grabbed the contraption. She heaved and it toppled towards her and thumped on the cobbles. The child screamed and thrashed momentarily then, mercifully, she fainted. Autumn jumped over the contraption and knelt beside the child.

"She still lives," she announced and started to brush the sand away as gently as possible. Then she sat back on her heels and studied the body. "Is there one skilled in healing nearby? This child's injuries seem grievous."

"There be one a few streets away," said a woman nearby, "but he be a waste of time. Douleur ain't never gonna be able to pay him. Best let the child die quickly and get it over with."

The woman nestling the child wailed and tried to hug the child to her body but Autumn would not let her.

"You will only injure the child more," she said gently. "Let me do what I can." She studied the child once again. "Logan!"

"Yes," said Logan. "I'm here. What can I do?"

"Find a blanket or something we can carry the child in," said Autumn, gently running her hands over the sand encrusted child. "I dare not pick her up until I know better how she is injured."

"Yes," said Logan.

He looked around wildly and spotted someone wearing a cloak.

"You there," he exclaimed. "Let me have your cloak."

"Bugger off," said the man backing away. "Can't you see it be raining?"

“We need to carry the child,” said Logan urgently, going over to the man.

“Waste of time,” said the man, clutching his cloak tightly. “Sides, you’ll only get blood on it.”

“But, but, ...” spluttered Logan. “Sploop! I will buy it from you!”

“Hey, how much?” asked the man coming forward again.

“How much do you want?” asked Logan.

“Ere, use this,” said a woman coming over. She thrust a filthy and torn blanket at Logan. “I were going to burn it anyway.”

“My cloak be much better,” exclaimed the man. “Tis almost new and I only want a kala for it.”

“Logan!” shouted Autumn. “Quickly!”

Logan grabbed the filthy blanket with a terse “thank you”. He ran back to Autumn as the man started to curse the woman for depriving him of a kala.

“Ahh good,” said Autumn, looking up. “Lay it flat beside the child. Now, I will roll her onto her side and you push the blanket as far under her as you can. Douleur, please let go of the child. Douleur, I cannot help if you do not let go.”

Gently she prised Douleur's arms away from the child and Douleur looked blankly at her, her face puffy and tear streaked. Her rain-soaked hair clung in a bedraggled mass around her head.

“Is she going to die?” she whispered. “Is my baby going to die?” The child started to squirm and whimper pitifully

“We must get her out of the rain,” said Autumn softly. “Get her clean and see what her injuries are. Will you help me?”

“Tell me what I must do,” whispered Douleur forcefully. “Tell me!”

“We must get her onto the blanket,” said Autumn, “and take her to my dwelling where I will do all I can. I need you to hold your hand under her neck and keep her head steady. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” whispered Douleur. “You can save her?”

“I will do all I can,” said Autumn. “Logan, get the blanket under as far as you can. Ready?”

“Yes,” said Logan. He wiped the rain from his eyes then grasped the blanket firmly.

Very gently Autumn rolled the child towards her. The child screamed and fainted again.

“Quickly,” muttered Autumn as Logan shoved the blanket as best he could under the child then Autumn carefully let her roll back again. “Excellent. Now we can carry her. Logan, you take this end and keep the blanket tight. Whatever you do do not drop it. Careful now.”

Keeping the blanket as taut as possible, they carried the child back to their hut. Douleur, lost in a world of fear and worry, stumbled alongside keeping her hand under her child's head. The onlookers started to disperse as it was apparent the day's entertainment was over.

\* \* \*

“Her name is Renao?” asked Autumn as Logan ground some calhouny to make hot drinks.

“Aye,” said Douleur. “She will live?” She was holding Renao's uninjured hand and nervously stroking it.

“Likely to a great age,” said Autumn, “with Aloidia's aid. Her injuries look bad but they should heal in time. Her arm is broken and two or three ribs but I have set and bound those and, with rest, they will mend. 'Tis her legs I am more concerned with. Did you see what happened?”

“Aye, but it was all very sudden,” said Douleur. She still looked fearful but the colour had come back to her face. “We were walking to the market when that damned horse slipped on the wet stones and fell on her.”

Renao's face was taut with pain and her eyes were locked on her mother's face.

“It was carrying bags of sand?” asked Autumn.

“Must have been,” said Douleur. “I know not where all that sand came from otherwise.”

“I think I can guess what happened,” said Autumn, sitting back and looking at Renao. “The horse slipped and the weight of the wet sand pulled it over. The wooden frame that held the bags likely caught Renao across her chest and arm which would explain those broken bones. The damage to her legs is more of a puzzle. I venture the horse when struggling to get to its feet again ground Renao's legs on the cobble stones. Her legs are not broken but there were many cuts and tears. Still, I have stitched the worst of them and used all the dauneywort so with Aloidia's aid none should fester and go bad. Do you live nearby?”

“Aye,” said Douleur. “Down by the beach and up away. Just me and the three young 'uns.”

“Where are your other two children?” asked Autumn as Logan added some calhouny powder to the pot of hot water on the fire.

“They be out foraging,” said Douleur. “They be older, see. My Renao be only five summers.” She lifted a corner of the old blanket and wiped Renao's face gently.

“You have no man to aid you?” asked Autumn.

“He died of the flux three summers past,” said Douleur. She sighed deeply. “Ahh, my thanks,” as Logan quietly proffered a bowl of calhouny. “So, let us now talk of terms. I do not know how I will manage to pay you but I will find a way somehow although it will take

some time.”

“Pay me?” exclaimed Autumn jerking her head around to look at Douleur. “Pay me for what?”

“For your healing,” said Douleur. “What is your fee?”

“I ask no fee,” said Autumn. “I have some skills in healing and I give them freely to any who have a need.”

“Do not jest with me,” said Douleur heavily. “Name your fee and I will do whatever I have to do to pay it. All I ask is your goodwill in giving me time for kalas do not grow on trees.”

“There is no fee,” said Logan. “Autumn gives her aid freely to any who need it.”

“Is he serious?” asked Douleur, her face showing her disbelief.

“Aye,” said Autumn turning to look at Renao again as the child moaned. “I am not happy with this dauneywort. Mayhap it is good for stopping festering but it seems to do little to numb pain. I will go to the market shortly and get hamamielis and ask what else that man has. For certain with these injuries Renao will be in pain for some time.”

“And you would buy these things for us?” asked Douleur, her face creased with puzzlement.

“Of course,” said Autumn. “I know not where to find the herbs so I will have to get them from the market.”

“I do not understand,” said Douleur, shaking her head slowly. “Never have I heard of a healer who does not demand money for their healing. How is it you do not?”

“I have some skills in healing,” said Autumn, turning her attention back to Douleur, “but not great skills. Mayhap those you speak of have great skills and spent much time and effort acquiring them and seek recompense for that time and effort. 'Tis not something I do. Such



skills as I have I offer to all.”

“Then I will be forever in your debt,” said Douleur. “I know not how to thank you for you have saved the life of Renao,” and she burst into tears and dropped her bowl of calhouny.

“Please, do not cry,” said Autumn, looking helplessly at Logan. “Come, dry your tears for we must talk more of Renao.”

“What else is wrong?” demanded Douleur staring at her.

“Nothing as far as I know,” said Autumn, “but I am thinking it would be best if Renao stayed here for a few days. It would be best not to move her until her wounds be starting to heal and I will need to change her dressings frequently until good scabs are forming. If they should become foul 'tis best I find out sooner rather than later so I can do something about it.”

Douleur stared at her in alarm. “You want to take my Renao away from me?” she demanded. “Be you slavers or what?”

“Decidedly not,” said Autumn, greatly startled. “I am only thinking what is best for Renao but if that alarms you we will take her to your dwelling and I will visit each day to change her bandages. 'Tis not my intent to take your child from you.”

“Do you give me your word of honour on that?” asked Douleur, looking suspiciously from Autumn to Logan and back again.

Autumn watched Douleur thoughtfully.

“What manner of place is Schtei?” she asked suddenly.

“What do you mean?” asked Douleur.

“I remember something I heard when first we came to you,” said Autumn. “Someone among the onlookers said 'twould be best to let the child die quickly because you would not be able to pay a healer and now you seem to think that it is my intent to take your child from you. What manner of place is this where those with skills to heal will

not heal without payment and where children are taken from their families?"

Douleur stared at her for a few heartbeats. "You are not of Schtei?"

"No, we are from Aferraron," said Autumn. "We are travellers and intend only to spend the winter in Schtei before resuming our travels."

"Mayhap that explains a lot," said Douleur slowly, "or mayhap not, I have no idea. I have heard of Aferraron but know nothing about the place save that it is a long way away. Mayhap things are different there but here in Schtei money is everything and the lack of it is the end of everything."

"So you are saying a healer would not aid Renao if you have not the money to pay them?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Douleur. "Or if they did then they would want something else in exchange."

"Such as the child herself?" asked Autumn.

"Like as not," said Douleur.

"Like as not?" said Autumn. "So you do not know of such a thing actually happening?"

"I hear things," said Douleur. "Mayhap they be only rumours but I hear things."

"But what would a healer want with someone else's child?" asked Logan. "We have come across slavery before but small children eat a lot and are of little use."

Douleur shrugged.

"Well, this is not getting us anywhere," said Autumn, "beyond the fact that Schtei is ruled by money and in truth most places are. Tell me, Douleur, do you know what an Esyup is?"

“No,” said Douleur. “Is that some sort of money? Like a kala?”

“Decidedly not,” said Autumn. “An Esyup is a place and I am from one but if you know not what they are then it will mean little to you if I swear on my honour as a member of an Esyup that I will not take your child. Still, it is no great issue. If we take care we can carry Renao to your home on the blanket and I am happy to visit you there.”

“Truly I did not mean to cause you any offence,” said Douleur. “After all you have done for Renao.”

“You do not offend me,” said Autumn. “I am a stranger here so inevitably you can only judge me by what you know or believe of those around you. I go to the beach every day and if I can ease the suffering in your mind by going to your dwelling then I shall. All that remains to be decided is whether we take Renao home now and go to the market after or leave Renao here while I go to the market and take her home later.”

“I venture 'twould be best to take Renao home first,” said Logan. “Douleur will only worry all the time we are gone and she has her other children to think of as well. Best she is going home sooner rather than later.”

“Well, there is that,” said Autumn. “If we carry her carefully she should suffer little more pain and although the rain has stopped it may yet rain again and complicate things.”

## Chapter Ten

“Knock, knock,” called Komorebi.

“Come in, Komorebi,” said Autumn, pulling the door hanging aside.

“You are supposed to say 'who's there?'" said Komorebi coming in.

“Why?" asked Autumn tucking the end of the hanging above the doorway. “I recognised your voice.”

“Well, that's no fun,” said Komorebi. She turned to beam at Logan. “Hello Logan.”

“Oh, umm, hello,” said Logan, suddenly nervous. He looked at her then quickly looked away.

“I do not understand,” said Autumn.

“That is why I said 'knock, knock,' and didn't just knock on your doorway,” said Komorebi. “You are supposed to say 'who's there?' then I say 'something' and you say 'something who?' and I make a joke.”

“Why not just say your joke and be done with it?" asked Autumn. “'Twould seem a lot of effort for little purpose.”

“I was going to but you have confused me now,” said Komorebi with a self conscious giggle. “It was a good one too.”

“Perhaps if we start again?" said Autumn.

“No, the moment is gone,” said Komorebi. “How are you Logan?"

“Um, yes, good,” said Logan. “Umm, yes.” He paused for a few moments then blurted “and how are you?"

“Disappointed,” said Komorebi, pushing out her lower lip.

“Ahh,” said Logan. “I am sorry. What did I do?"

“Ohh you could not disappoint me, Logan,” said Komorebi putting her hand on Logan's arm. He tensed but she left it there for a few moments. “There was some excitement here today and I missed it.”

“You mean the horse falling and someone being injured?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“Aye,” said Komorebi happily then she saw Autumn's frown. “Oh! I do not mean that it was exciting for someone to be hurt. Please do not think that I would wish that on anyone! No, no, no, what I meant was that you two came along and saved the poor child. That is the exciting part. To think that my special friends were able to save that poor, poor little girl. I would have liked to have seen you in action, Logan. Aye, and mayhap help you if you would have let me.”

“I did nothing,” said Logan going pink. “All I did was help carry the child and heat some water. 'Twas all Autumn. She cleaned the child's wounds and stitched her cuts and everything.”

“But even to have got involved shows a greatness in you,” said Komorebi. “Few around here ever do and that speaks much of your character. I will sleep better at night knowing you are but a wall away from me.”

“As I say, it was all Autumn's doing,” said Logan, picking at the ball of his thumb.

“Oh I am certain you are just being modest,” said Komorebi with a laugh, “and that does you credit.”

“Autumn, tell her what you did,” said Logan with a hint of desperation in his voice.

“Ohh, I did only what I could,” said Autumn, “but you are right, Komorebi. There is a greatness to Logan's character yet for some reason he is unwilling to acknowledge it.”

“Is that not so typical of men?” asked Komorebi. “They pretend a toughness for fear of showing the world their true selves, not that I know much of men. Please be not getting the wrong idea about me.

"Tis just something I have observed in those around me."

"Umm," said Logan, feeling he was supposed to say something but having no idea what.

"And 'tis fortunate you have come to visit us," said Autumn, "for Logan has a kindness he would ask of you."

"Have I?" blurted Logan as Komorebi looked at him with anticipation written all over her face.

"The doorway," said Autumn.

Logan looked blankly at her and Komorebi frowned slightly.

"You wanted some reeds to fashion a door," said Autumn patiently.

"Did I?" asked Logan.

"We were talking of it earlier," said Autumn. "Before it started to rain. You wanted to ask Komorebi where to find some reeds."

"Ah," said Logan. "As I remember it was ..."

"There are none at our market," said Komorebi, anxious to seize the moment. "This be one of the poorer areas of Schtei and there is little call for reeds. Like as not there will be a seller at the market in Siakin."

"Is that far from Schtei?" asked Autumn.

Komorebi frowned. "Siakin is in Schtei," she said. "'Tis a more prosperous area a little to the north. Likely the people there have money to spend on improving their dwellings."

"How is it that Siakin is in Schtei?" asked Autumn. "Is it not confusing to have two names for the place? Do them as live there say they live in Schtei or in Siakin?"

"Umm, I suppose it depends on who they are talking to," said

Komorebi after a pause for thought. "If they are talking to another from Schtei then they would say Siakin but to an outsider such as you they would say Schtei."

"How strange," said Autumn thoughtfully. "Are there other places within Schtei with their own names?"

"Everywhere in Schtei has its own name," said Komorebi. She looked a little puzzled. "How else would you tell one part from another?"

"So here has another name?" asked Autumn, pointing to the ground.

"You mean where we are living?" asked Komorebi. "This is City Beach. If you go anywhere in Schtei and tell people you live in City Beach they will know what part of Schtei you are from."

"Ahh, no doubt this is because Schtei is so large," said Autumn. "That makes sense. Do you know a place called Iflinbar?"

"Iflinbar? You don't want to be going there," said Komorebi, raising her eyebrows. "'Tis a right bad part of Schtei and like as not you'll be robbed and killed the moment you set foot there. How do you know of that place and yet not know where you are?"

"We met someone on our travels who mentioned Iflinbar," said Autumn. "I thought it was a place near Schtei rather than in it."

"Like as not it was once," said Logan.

"What do you mean?" asked Komorebi.

"Umm, well, I mean, umm, there must have been a time when Schtei was small," said Logan hesitantly. "When it was all inside the wall. Likely Iflinbar and Siakin and the others were small villages around Schtei and as Schtei got bigger those villages became part of Schtei but kept their names."

"Ohhh, you are clever," said Komorebi admiringly. "I would never have thought of that." She smiled at Logan. "I can take you there, if you like. To Siakin."

“Umm, thank you,” said Logan. “Is there nowhere nearby where reeds grow?”

“Nothing grows in Schtei,” said Komorebi. “Tis a place for dwellings and people not for the growing of things. If you want things picked fresh then you’d best be going a day or more from the city and I know not where reeds would be grown. Mayhap on the other side of Lake Nanikaika but like as not what’s there is for the rich who live round the lake. So when shall we go? I am doing nothing in particular tomorrow. Will you be coming too, Autumn?”

“I? No,” said Autumn, “unless you think there is a particular need.”

“Oh I am sure Logan is quite able to carry enough reeds for a door,” said Komorebi with a smile. “We can make an outing of it. Mayhap even stop somewhere for some inuwela and a honey cake if you would like that.”

“Umm,” started Logan.

“Good, then that is settled,” said Autumn. “I shall spend the day here and work on my robe and you two can go to Siakin for some reeds.”

“What is inuwela?” asked Logan.

“Tis a delicious drink,” said Komorebi. “Do you not know of it?”

Logan shrugged.

“Then you must have some,” said Komorebi happily. “Tis made from milk thickened with tapioca and full of crushed berries and spices. Tis delightful cold on a hot day but to my mind it cannot be bettered hot on a cold day. It warms your insides and brings good cheer. You absolutely must try some. I am certain you will love it as much as I.”

“Umm, sounds good,” said Logan.

“But I must not be overstaying my welcome,” said Komorebi. She hesitated for a moment but Logan didn’t react. “Shall I meet you at the beach in the morning? Twill take a fair while to get there but we



should be returned by dusk. Does that sit well with you?"

"Umm," said Logan.

"He means yes," said Autumn firmly. "And mayhap you will have remembered your joke. Logan likes jokes, don't you, Logan."

"Ahh, 'tis good to have a sense of humour, don't you think, Autumn?" said Komorebi.

"I venture a sense of anything can only be good," said Autumn, "although I would like to talk more on this with you another day."

"Oh," said Komorebi, a little taken aback. "Well, yes, if you wish although I am not skilled in the art of telling jokes."

"Autumn does not understand jokes," said Logan. "I have tried to explain but ...," and he shrugged again.

"Well, yes," said Komorebi. "If it has to be explained then it stops being funny for some reason. I know not why. I had best be going. Father will be back very soon and wanting his meal. Until the morning, Logan." She touched Logan's arm again and he glanced at her face briefly before turning pink again. Komorebi smiled. "And no doubt I will see you at the beach tomorrow as well, Autumn."

"Aye," said Autumn. "Like as not."

With a twirl Komorebi left and Autumn pulled the door hanging back over the entrance.

"Well now," she said softly. "That was interesting."

"It was your idea to take Komorebi to get reeds, not mine," said Logan. "Why did you say it was?"

"An innocent mistake on my part," said Autumn. "Although you will need a guide to find reeds unless you plan on wandering in the hope of stumbling upon some."

"I had moved on to thinking perhaps of some boards," said Logan, "but not yet thought of a way to attach them. Ah well, no matter. Reeds will do and 'twill be easy enough to weave them and bind them to the doorpost. What was interesting?"

"Komorebi came to talk of the excitement she missed and yet barely mentioned it," said Autumn. "For certain she did not ask after the welfare of the child nor how the accident happened nor want any of the details. It makes me wonder if she had some other reason to come here."

"What other reason could she have had to visit us?" asked Logan looking intently at Autumn.

"None that I can think of," said Autumn with a mischievous glint in her eye. "But then I wager it wasn't us she was visiting."

"You think she came to the wrong dwelling?" asked Logan with a frown. "That seems unlikely. She must know this area very well."

"Oh, she did not come to the wrong dwelling, that much is clear," said Autumn. "She would not have mentioned the accident if she had intended to be elsewhere."

"And now you are speaking in riddles," said Logan. "She came here but not to visit us? I think your logic is failing you."

"Is it, Logan?" asked Autumn. "Aside from us, who else is here?"

Logan frowned. "There is no one but us here," he said. "What do you mean? You think there is a ghost here?"

"Ahh, Logan, I wager it is your logic that is at fault here," said Autumn. "There is us here indeed, but are we not both individuals beyond 'us'?"

"Ohh, now I follow," said Logan. He paused and looked puzzled. "But why do you think she came to visit you? She barely spoke to you?"

"Oh Logan!" exclaimed Autumn with a smile. "Think on it for a time.

See if any other thought comes to you.”

Logan scowled at her then wrinkled his nose. “Surely you do not mean me?”

“I do not know what Komorebi does with her time but I venture she keeps herself occupied in some way,” said Autumn, “and yet she was willing to discard whatever she does in order to help you find reeds and spend the whole day doing it. She did not seem unhappy that I would not be going with you both.”

“All that means is that Komorebi is a kindly well intentioned person,” said Logan. “Nothing more.”

“I am sure you are right, Logan,” said Autumn. “And if nothing else you can spend the day practising talking to a girl which will doubtless serve you in good stead in the future. And it is an opportunity for you to taste inuwela and honey cake. On that she was most insistent.”

“Oh Sploop!” exclaimed Logan as realisation struck. “The whole day. Vogev, what am I going to say?”

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A movement in the corner of her eye caught Autumn's attention as she sat on the ledge above their dwelling. Further along, where a tower rose above the wall, several bats had emerged and begun their evening labours. Their blackness stood out against the pale darkness of the sky. The bats stayed as a cluster then, as Autumn watched, they parted and went their separate ways, swooping effortlessly over the dark mass of dwellings. Few lights were visible although, far out to sea, one light flickered. No doubt those on board the boat had a fire going to cook some fish they had caught.

As the dusk had fallen those moving about had returned to their dwellings, save only a few who had business after dark. The sounds of the city had diminished as the noise of people moving and working had changed to people preparing their food and talking of their day. Even Flaner's endless tapping had stopped and the streets were quieter but still some way from silent.

Ah! A shape appeared with another close behind. The one in front had little to distinguish it but the darkness behind it could be taken for a man with a large bundle on his back. Autumn watched as the two shapes made their way along the road, merging with shadows here and there. Then there was a burst of light as a door hanging was briefly pulled back and the leading shape was revealed to be Komorebi with a handful of what looked like sticks in one hand. Her voice called a greeting to the occupier of the dwelling which was returned then the hanging cut off the light again and Komorebi returned to being a dark shape. Autumn had not been worried by their absence, after all Komorebi was very familiar with the neighbourhood and Logan was becoming adept with the use of his staff but nonetheless Autumn had felt disquieted. Their return relaxed her.

The two shapes stopped in front of this dwelling and Komorebi's voice proclaimed the place to be the right one. Then Logan's voice thanked her for her efforts and Komorebi's voice said it had been a lovely day and how much she had enjoyed it. Then there was silence and Autumn smiled as she imagined Logan's confusion. Then Komorebi's voice bid Logan to sleep well and Logan's thanked her again. There was a brief patter of footsteps as Komorebi went to her own dwelling and a swish as a door hanging was pushed aside. Then came a clatter as Logan dumped his bundle of reeds on the ground. Autumn counted to ten then ran effortlessly along the roof divide and jumped gracefully down onto the cobbles below.

"Ahh, there you are," said Logan, turning around from the fire. "I wondered where you were."

"I was up on the ledge," said Autumn.

"Were you watching out for me?" asked Logan.

"In part," said Autumn, "and in part I went up there to think. Did you have a pleasant day? You seem to have brought back a goodly number of reeds."

"Aye," said Logan. "We found some that were still green and soft so I will flatten them and weave a door tomorrow. Have you eaten?"

“Not as yet,” said Autumn, “although I have prepared some food. I wagered you would be hungry on your return. Did you have inuwela and cake?”

“Aye,” said Logan, “and very nice they were too but that was some while back. Shall we eat now?”

“Assuredly,” said Autumn. “Sit yourself down for you must be tired. Tell me of your day.”

“There isn't much to tell,” said Logan as he sat and watched Autumn scoop some vegetable stew into a bowl. “Thank you.”

“You found the market at Siakin?” asked Autumn, scooping a bowl for herself.

“Aye,” said Logan. “’Twas much like the one here but it did have a reed seller.”

“And you enjoyed Komorebi's company?” asked Autumn.

“She is a nice girl,” said Logan. He slurped some of his stew thoughtfully. “And your day?”

“I finished sewing my robe,” said Autumn, “although I did not have time to attach the ribbon. I will do that tomorrow. What did you talk of?”

“Oh, Komorebi did most of the talking,” said Logan, “although she did not chatter endlessly. It was a little like walking with you for we had times when we walked in silence. I confess I worried that she felt insulted because I couldn't think of things to say but she said she enjoyed our companionable silences, whatever they are. What were you thinking about up on your ledge?”

“I had a visitor today which gave me cause for thought,” said Autumn. “’Twas an older woman called Sobremesa who came to ask if I could help her with her pains in the head.”

“Could you?” asked Logan.

“She told me she had had a fall last summer and had been having the pains ever since,” said Autumn. “I felt her back and neck and one of the bones in her neck was out of place so I manoeuvred it back into place. Only time will tell if it cured her affliction.”

“Ahh, interesting,” said Logan. “Komorebi told me why she has short hair. She said she used to have long hair but when her mother died and he father lost his mind for a time she went to a buyer of hair and sold all hers. She showed me where the buyer of hair lives for we went near there. Anyway, her hair has not yet grown long.”

“Why would someone buy hair?” asked Autumn with a puzzled frown. “Does it not just grow normally?”

“I asked that,” said Logan. “Komorebi said that some people have little hair of their own and the buyer of hair sews the hair he buys onto thin skins so people can pretend it is their own hair. Is that not strange?”

“Aye, that is strange,” said Autumn pausing in her eating. “I wonder what it feels like to wear hair that is not your own.” She pulled her ponytail round and stared at it for a few moments before tossing it behind her back again.

“What did that woman say that gave you cause for thought?” asked Logan. “I wonder what Komorebi looked like with no hair?”

“I wager she would have been just as pretty,” said Autumn, “but in a different way. My thinking was on the nature of money.”

“Money?” asked Logan. “How did that woman's pains in the head lead you to thinking of money?”

“After she had gone it struck me that had I needed to give her some herbs or ointment I would have had to buy it myself,” said Autumn, “as she made it clear she could not pay for a healer or ointments herself. It came to me that money is in some ways an insidious poison that once it has a grip cannot be removed.”

“So you think she is pretty?” asked Logan.

“Sobremesa?” asked Autumn.

“No, Komorebi,” said Logan.

“She would seem so to me,” said Autumn, “on the inside as well as outside but what of you? Do you think she is pretty?”

“Mmm,” said Logan evasively. “An insidious poison? How so?”

“I have lived almost my entire life without the need for money,” said Autumn, “and the few times I have used money it has been for convenience and no doubt we could have found a way to manage without. For certain any suffering we had for the lack of money was our own suffering and no one else's but it came to me after she had gone that had Sobremesa needed any herbs we would have had to buy them for her, much as we did for Renao. This lead me to thinking that if we did not have any money we could not provide the aid they needed.”

“Ahh, so our lack of money would be the cause of another's suffering?” asked Logan. “Is that what you are saying?”

“Not as such,” said Autumn, “for in neither case were either of us the actual cause of the suffering. However, our lack of money would be the cause for continued suffering since we would not be able to provide the aid we should be able to provide.”

“An interesting point,” said Logan. “But how does that make money an insidious poison?”

“I am not clear on this,” admitted Autumn. “But it seems to me that although you or I may be able to live without any involvement with money we would have to remain somewhat isolated, much as I was at my Esyup or we have been on our travels. As soon as we join a large community where the fruits of the world are not readily available then we have to have money if we are to manage. It would be difficult to survive here in Schtei without money to pay for a dwelling or for food. And those whose suffering I could relieve cannot be aided without money. Truly I do not understand how money came to be invented nor how the need for it became widespread but it seems to me that

since it has been invented its tentacles are wriggling into all aspects of life and cannot be removed. I cannot see how money can be removed from Schtei and yet leave Schtei still living. Take away the money and most here would suffer greatly for the lack of it. Even those who do not need money for themselves need money for others.”

“And now you talk of this it makes me think of what Komorebi was saying,” said Logan thoughtfully.

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“Oh, when I was wondering what to say I remembered you said to ask her of her dreams,” said Logan.

“Komorebi dreams of money?” asked Autumn. “That surprises me, although in some way I am also not surprised.”

“Nooo, she does not dream of money,” said Logan. “Or at least I don't think she does. Actually it got a bit confusing when I asked because she thought I was asking what she had dreamt of last night and told me a strange tale of things I could not comprehend but I don't think money was involved.”

“I am confused myself,” said Autumn. “How does this fit with my thoughts on money?”

“Well, after she told me of her dreams last night,” said Logan, “I asked her of her dreams for the future as you said to do. 'Twas quite interesting if confusing in its own way.”

“My own confusion is in no way lessened,” said Autumn. “What of her future?”

“Well,” said Logan taking a deep breath. “It seems she has many dreams for the future. She would like to travel widely as we do and set up a business selling hot food or perhaps a hostelry and meet a man who will look after her into her old age and have four or five children and any number of other things. I got lost.”

“She would seem to be not lacking in dreams then,” said Autumn.



“Indeed,” said Logan. “She talked at great length on them but one thing kept coming up in all and that was the need for money. It seems whatever dream she wishes to follow is going to need money and she couldn't understand how we are able to travel as we do and yet have no money. She asked me about that several times.”

## Chapter Eleven

Cautiously Logan opened an eye. Everything looked normal. He slowly rolled over and peered through his scrunched up blanket with his other eye. The view was better as he was now facing into the hut rather than the mud and stick wall. There was, however, little to see. As was to be expected Autumn was not there. She would have got up before dawn and it was clearly after dawn as a depressing grey murky excuse for Astauand's light seeped through the doorway where she had left the hanging loose. Something was definitely amiss however.

The water bottle had been moved. This was not unreasonable. Autumn would have had a drink before leaving to do her meditating although she would not have eaten. Unsurprisingly the janja had been moved although this would not have been Autumn's doing. With people as closely packed as they were in Schtei rats were ever present and not overly scared of people. A loaf of janja could easily move from one side of the hut to the other in the course of a night and reduce considerably in size. The fire in the hearth was out. That explained the chill in the air and the dampness on Logan's blanket around his mouth but it was not that that was amiss.

Perhaps it was Autumn's old robe that hung from the protruding end of a branch at the end of the hut? It had a certain lifelike quality but after dwelling on it for a few moments Logan dismissed the thought. It had been there the previous night and he had not felt its presence in his dreams. Her new robe, now replete with its silver ribbon, was gone and doubtless with Autumn. Logan sighed and his breath misted a little. It was definitely getting colder at night. He rolled onto his back and gazed up at the roof, wondering if Autumn was above him, sitting on her ledge and lost in her private world of abstract thoughts. Quite possibly she had already gone down to the beach to do her exercises as the noises of a new day were already building outside. Voices, rumbles, the occasional lowing of a cow and the grunt of a pig. These sounds were now part of the background of life in the city and nothing was apparently amiss even though the feeling persisted.

Logan's eyelids drooped and the blackness of sleep began to drift over him again. He pulled his blanket a little tighter and then it happened. A metallic clang, a pause then tap-tap-tap-tap. There was another

pause, sufficient for Logan to groan, then tap-tap-tap-tap. Flaner was awake and back at work. A little later than usual perhaps but there he was. Persistent, unvarying, seemingly unending and oh so insidiously annoying. The blackness of sleep now banished, Logan threw off his blanket with unaccustomed vigour for the time of day and swore. Not just at Flaner, although he was at the centre of Logan's cursing, but also at Schtei, people generally, the day and noises that got inside the head.

He had thought of spending the day weaving the now flattened reeds into a mat that could be hung in the doorway but Flaner's tapping had made Logan irritable. Had the tapping been going when he'd awoken then likely his mood would have been better but the absence of the tapping had given rise to false hope and that hope was now dashed.

Logan took a long drink of water from the water bottle and stuffed a hunk of janja inside his tunic for later. His eyes checked the four upper corners of the hut but saw no sign of any mud flaking away to reveal their hidden wealth so he grunted and picked up his staff. Going outside he saw the day was as grey and unappetising as it had seemed. Like as not it would rain soon.

Merak cackled from her accustomed place beside her doorway and Logan flapped a hand at her by way of greeting. Opposite, a flash of movement suggested Jijivisha was up and about but she did not call a greeting and Logan did not call one himself. He was more interested in the dwelling next door. He paused for a few moments watching as Galeo's door hanging fluttered in the chill breeze but there was no sign of any movement within. Practising a cheerfully casual 'good morning!' in his head, Logan slowly stepped forward and, in an agonising mixture of dread and anticipation, rapped his knuckles gently on one of the door posts. Komorebi did not pull aside the hanging. Nor did Galeo for that matter but Logan had no great desire to wish Galeo a good morning. Greatly relieved and hugely disappointed Logan glanced up at the ledge above. Autumn was not there either.

"Pah!" he exclaimed and strode off along the road, pausing only to ignore Flaner with great intensity.

"You progress well," said Autumn.

Logan whirled in surprise and would have hit Autumn in her belly with the end of his staff if she had not had such excellent reactions and an expectation that this might happen.

"Oh, sorry," he exclaimed. "Where did you come from?"

"Douleur's dwelling," said Autumn. "I am concerned with Renao's injuries so I went to check on her before doing my exercises."

"How is the little girl doing?" asked Logan. "Oh, I have some janja for you if you are hungry." He fished around inside his tunic for the hunk.

"Thank you, Logan the Thoughtful," said Autumn, taking it from his outstretched hand. "The breaks to her bones were clean and will doubtless heal well in time. 'Tis the injuries to her legs that worry me. The deeper ones that I stitched were well enough but the others look angry and there is more suppuration than I would like although there was no blood oozing."

"That is not good," said Logan screwing up his face in concern. "Twould be a grievous shame for one so young to lose a leg."

"I doubt it will come to that," said Autumn with a thoughtful shake of her head, "although if the herbs do not halt the festering it may become necessary to cut away the bad part of the flesh which will likely leave her lame and scarred. I cleaned away the suppuration and laid fresh hamamielis and wrapped her in clean cloths so we can but wait and see."

"Is she in a lot of pain?" asked Logan, leaning on his staff. "For some reason a child in pain seems worse than an adult in pain although I would not wish pain on anyone."

"Aye," said Autumn. "Logically pain is pain but, as you say, pain visited on a young child seems somehow worse. No, there my news is much better for that yotagalmen the man at the market proposed is

very effective at making Renao sleep and sleep is the best thing she can do for now. Douleur tells me that Renao has slept almost constantly since the first draft so she feels no pain.”

“That is good,” said Logan, “but how does she eat? What if she wastes away while sleeping?”

“The yotagalmen wears off after half a day or so,” said Autumn. “I bought a chicken which Douleur made into a broth so when Renao wakes Douleur gives her some broth then some more of the yotagalmen. 'Tis good for Douleur as well for as long as Renao is asleep she does not have to worry about her.”

“That is good,” said Logan. “You think the child will be improved tomorrow?”

“We can only hope,” said Autumn. 'Tis down to the gods now for there is little more I can do for now except continue with the cleaning. Either the wounds will improve or they will worsen and if they worsen mayhap I can do more but there are no guarantees. Tell me, what were you doing when I arrived?”

“Hmm? Oh, I was trying out an idea,” admitted Logan. “It occurred to me that there may be times when I am fighting two or three with my staff and they are too close for me to swing it.”

“Very likely,” said Autumn, “and there are ways of dealing with that that I have not yet taught you. Show me your idea.”

“Ohh no, I think not,” said Logan, a little shamefaced. “'Twould be better if you taught me the right way to do things. I venture my little ideas have no value.”

“That is bad thinking, Logan,” said Autumn. “If you only practice what someone has taught you then you will only ever know what they know and no more. 'Tis far better to have your own ideas and to practice those for they will suit your body better and be the more effective for that. Show me.”

“Umm, well, if you insist,” said Logan. “Umm, I was thinking if there

was one in front of me and one to the side.”

“Like this?” asked Autumn planting herself directly in front of Logan, “with my staff as the other?” and she held it out to one side.

“Aye,” said Logan. “Umm, I thought to do this ...” and he rammed the side of his staff into Autumn’s face and immediately slammed it back to clatter against her staff.

“That is good,” said Autumn as she had managed to avoid being hit in the face by lurching backwards and ducking. “Do it again.”

They worked on the move several times with Autumn making small suggestions for improved balance and speed.

“And if you have had time to put on your knuckleduster it will be even more effective,” said Autumn. “Especially if you loosen your hand a little so when the staff hits the second person your hand follows through and hits them a second time.”

“So you think it was a good idea?” asked Logan.

“Well now,” said Autumn. She leaned on her staff and looked at Logan appraisingly. “Tis the mark of a trained fighter to choose the right move for each situation and perform it well but a trained fighter is not always a skilled fighter.”

“I do not follow,” said Logan. He was breathing a little heavily from his exertions.

“What if a situation arises for which the trained fighter has not been trained?” asked Autumn. “He or she cannot then choose the right move and will be bested. A skilled fighter on the other hand is able to improvise and move in ways that they have never been taught. Mayhap in the doing they will also confuse their opponent which is always good for a confused opponent will make mistakes. No matter. My point is that your new move has good features to commend it and is well worth practising on that account but more than that, you thought of it. Mayhap when the time comes and you are faced with a situation for which neither I nor yourself have prepared you you will be able to

improvise something and gain the upper hand.”

“Sploop!” said Logan, his face lighting up. “You are saying I am a skilled fighter?”

“No,” said Autumn, firmly and rather brutally. “You will never be a skilled fighter for you have started too late and your body does not have the suppleness it would have had if you had started as a young child. I would be doing you a great wrong if anything I said led you into situations where you cannot win.”

“Oh,” said Logan, crestfallen.

“Do not take it amiss,” said Autumn, putting her hand on his arm. “If you cannot avoid a fight then you have a better chance of winning or of suffering lesser harm if you are able to improvise as well as implement what you have practised but never forget 'tis better to avoid a fight in the first place. If you find yourself up against a skilled fighter you are unlikely to win and I would not have you suffering any harm.”

“As always, you are right,” said Logan. “I got carried away with my own brilliance there but I know I could never best anyone with even a small part of your skills.”

“But that is no reason not to continue to practice or to stop thinking and having ideas,” said Autumn. “There are plenty who may try to pick a fight with you who fancy themselves as skilled but are not.”

“Aye, and I have not the heart for fighting,” said Logan. “You are right. 'Tis best to avoid a fight in the first place.”

“That said, 'tis time I did my own practice,” said Autumn. “Stand back or join in as you prefer.”

\* \* \*

Autumn had been practising for some time when Logan first noticed the boat out to sea. It was some way distant and barely visible against the darkening grey of the heavy sky but it seemed to move in strange

ways. He sat on the beach watching as Autumn twirled and pranced and vanquished invisible enemies and occasionally he glanced out to sea. Sometimes the boat was closer, sometimes further away. For a time it headed parallel to the shore then went backwards without seeming to turn around. It was most strange.

As was so often the case when Logan was watching Autumn practice she attacked him. This time she took on a wave first and shredded it before it crashed on the beach writhing in mortal agony then she leapt at him, hitting and kicking with countless blows yet doing nothing more harmful than splattering him with sea water. Then she somersaulted over him to attack the foes that advanced from behind him before tossing seaweed in the air and kicking it while it was still some way above her head. Even the gulls paused in their endless quest for food to watch and be impressed by her airborne antics.

"This beach is too unvarying," said Autumn suddenly dropping to sit beside Logan. She was breathing slightly more heavily than usual. "There is not even a tree to challenge me. I think tomorrow I will go to the foot of the cliff and practice amongst the rocks and boulders."

"A thought has just come to my mind," said Logan, watching the boat. "Schtei is a very large place and filled with a lot of people."

"You have not noticed until now?" asked Autumn, pulling off the leather thong that tied her hair back. "You surprise me."

"Very funny," said Logan drily. "I am explaining myself badly. What I meant was that with all these people here there may be someone who teaches fighting for money."

"And what of it?" asked Autumn, running her fingers through her hair. "You want me to become a prize fighter?"

"You wouldn't anyway," said Logan. The boat seemed to be heading into shore again. "But my thought was that if there is someone then they may be willing to fight you for your practise in exchange for money. Someone who would challenge you but without the intent of hurting."



“That is not a bad idea,” said Autumn. She paused for a few moments then started to squeeze the water from her hair. “At my Esyup we all fought with each other all the time although Noxu would get angry if we did not try to hurt each other. He insisted that we needed the realism in order to improve.”

“I can see the sense in that,” said Logan, “but I would not think anyone here would have skills that compared with any at your Esyup. Do you think that boat is trying to land here?”

The boat was getting quite close to the beach but seemed unable to make up its mind on any particular direction.

“I wager there is no one on board,” said Autumn. “It seems to lack purpose and although there is a sail I do not see anyone. I wonder if there is an Esyup of Mizule in Schtei?”

“Mayhap it is a fishing boat and the fisherman has been washed overboard,” said Logan. “Do you think we should tell someone?”

“If it continues as it is then likely it will be with the other fishing boats before we can get to them,” said Autumn as the boat veered off to head further along the beach again.

“True enough,” said Logan, “but we could also buy some fish for our meal tonight.”

“Do you have any money with you?” asked Autumn. She quickly combed her hair with her fingers then retied her pony tail with the thong.

“Umm, no,” said Logan. “I left in rather a hurry and did not think to bring any.”

“No matter,” said Autumn. “I will need to get more hamamielis and yotagalmen today. Renao's need is great. Ahh, the boat is coming back. Look.”

“If it goes much further it will crash into the rocks at the foot of the cliff,” said Logan. He jumped to his feet. “Should we do something?”

"I see little point in risking ourselves for a boat that can easily be replaced," said Autumn. "After all, I cannot swim and you can only swim poorly so how will we reach the boat? Best we keep a watch on it and if it does come to harm on the shore then we can attend to any that are on board although I still cannot see anyone. Mayhap it was not tied properly further up where the other boats are and broke lose."

"And no one seems to be looking for it," said Logan looking along the beach. "We are the only people here. Ohh, the boat is heading for us again. There must be someone on board otherwise it would surely move with the wind and the waves."

"So I would think, Logan," said Autumn, watching the boat. "But one thing I do know about boats is that I know nothing about them."

"We could always ask Fiau to become a boat," said Logan. "Then we could float out and catch that one."

"We have no rope to tie it with though," said Autumn. "Hold. Did I just see someone on the boat?" She jumped to her feet as well and peered intently.

"I thought I saw someone as well," said Logan, holding up his hand to shield his eyes from the non-existent glare. "Behind the sail. Shouldn't they be taking the sail down by now? They're getting very close to the beach."

"Mayhap they are," said Autumn. "Mayhap it is jammed or some such which is why it is coming in so fast."

"Umm, I think we should be moving back," said Logan, stepping backwards, "or to the side or something. That Voqev cursed thing is coming straight for us!"

"Aye," said Autumn, stepping backwards as well. "And it seems to be bigger than it was when it was out to sea."

Suddenly the sail snapped round with an audible crack and a larger than usual wave picked up the boat and threw it along the coarse sand at Autumn and Logan. Logan turned to run but Autumn leapt on him

and dragged him out of the boat's path. The boat crashed down onto the beach where they had been and the foam of the wave boiled and bubbled then returned to the sea with an angry hiss. Its wave gone, the boat toppled a little to the side, threatening to fall on Autumn and Logan as they lay on the beach staring at it. With a snap the grey white sail rolled itself tightly to reveal a familiar figure.

“Hello, my dears!” called Mother Midcarn. “Nasty day, isn't it! Could you give me a hand with the anchor?”

## Chapter Twelve

Autumn recovered from her surprise sooner than Logan and leapt to grab the heavy stone bound with rope that sat in the bow of the small vessel. Effortlessly she lifted it out and dropped it on the sand.

"Tis a pleasure to see you again so soon, Mother Midcarn,"<sup>8</sup> she said, turning back to the figure in the boat.

"And you, my dear," said Mother Midcarn, smiling sweetly. "Are you not pleased to see me, Logan?"

"Yes, I am," said Logan coming up to the side of the boat, "but you have me worried."

"Fear not, dear," said Mother Midcarn. She looked suspiciously at the side of the boat then hoisted the bottom of her robe and clambered over. Logan caught her as she fell the last little way. "Thank you dear. I really must think of a better way to get in and out of this thing." She rearranged her robe and drew herself up to her full, albeit still somewhat low, height. "What was I saying?"

"You said not to fear," said Autumn. "Although I am not aware of anything to be afraid of."

"Tis Mother Midcarn," said Logan. "Like as not some trouble will soon be upon us for it always is. Have you brought a gift to aid us yourself this time, Mother Midcarn?"

"As I said, Logan the Untrusting," said Mother Midcarn, "you have nothing to fear. I have seen no further ... shall we say, adventures? ... for either of you in my Window. This is just a chance meeting of old acquaintances."

"Tis just chance that brings you in a boat to a stretch of beach that is deserted but for us?" asked Autumn. "'Twould seem highly fortuitous."

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8 Their last meeting was at Mother Midcarn's dwelling in Gleard when Autumn mediated a meeting between the deities Xanthous and Zeeth; see *The Annals ~ The Sixth Tale*. After the meeting Autumn and Logan stayed with Mother Midcarn for an unspecified time before resuming their travels.

“Well, yes and no,” said Mother Midcarn. “I knew you were in Schtei, of course, for I checked my Window and saw you here but my visit to Schtei is on other matters entirely. ’Twas only as I approached the beach I saw it was you two so here I came although not without some difficulty for this vessel, while comfortable, is difficult to manage. I much prefer to drift far out to sea than head for a particular place. ’Twould seem this boat has a mind of its own and I have yet to find the time to conquer the vagaries of tides and winds and currents and what not. But that is all by the by. What are you doing here in Schtei? Do you still explore the world or have you found your place, Autumn?”

“We still travel,” said Autumn. “For certain Schtei is not my place although we decided to winter here and we will move on in the early spring. Will you be here long?”

“That is in the lap of the gods,” said Mother Midcarn. “I am here to consult the library of the Mo’i of Wase and gaining access alone will no doubt take some days as the Mo’i is not generous with his library. Assuming access is given to me then what I seek may or may not be readily found. I have no way of knowing.”

“Can you not see it in your Window?” asked Logan.

“Oh come now, Logan,” said Mother Midcarn tetchily. “We have talked on this often enough. My Window shows a broad sweep of what may come to pass but the finer the details the coarser the focus becomes. ’Twould be easier to find a particular grain of sand on all the beaches of Wase than to find a single document using my Window.”

“Oh,” said Logan. He looked up and down the beach as if assessing the likelihood of finding a particular grain of sand and clearly reached the conclusion that it would not be overly easy. “So you’ll be here a while, then?”

“Like as not,” said Mother Midcarn cheerily. “But what is time for than to find things to do to fill it, eh? Tell me, you have a dwelling here in Schtei or are you camping on the beach?”

“We have a dwelling not far from here,” said Autumn. She pointed behind her. “You see the wall of the Old City? We are in the eleventh hut from the end in the street up against the wall itself.”

“11 Wall Street, eh?”<sup>9</sup> said Mother Midcarn. “I shall remember that and come visit you soon.”

“Will you be wanting somewhere to sleep?” asked Autumn. “You are welcome to stay as long as you desire but our dwelling is small and somewhat frugal. You may not find it to your liking.”

“Not at all, child, not at all,” beamed Mother Midcarn. “I shall stay on my vessel which has every comfort and amenity that I desire but thank you for your kind offer. Now, which way is the Palace? I must be off for I have things to do.”

“Would you like us to help you move your boat to a safer place?” asked Logan. “It is somewhat exposed here and there are many in Schtei who would no doubt like to acquire a boat for themselves. Mayhap it could even be damaged by a storm.”

“Ahh, Logan,” said Mother Midcarn, putting her hand on his arm in appreciation. “As always you are attentive to the needs of an old woman but you are forgetting who I am. None here can see this vessel save ourselves and no storm will touch it.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. He felt slightly embarrassed but Mother Midcarn just smiled at him.

“I know not where the Palace is,” said Autumn, “save that it is beside Lake Nanikaika and I know not where that is either although I am told that it is a half day's walk or so from here.”

“Doubtless there will be many who do know,” said Mother Midcarn,

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9 *Translator's Note:* In a universe of almost infinite dimensions it is inevitable that coincidences will abound. There is a certain irony, however, in the coincidence that the one and only time Autumn has a specified address within *The Annals* that it is 11 Wall Street. Autumn is, after all, someone who has neither a working concept of money nor any need for it and yet 11 Wall Street in Lower Manhattan in New York (or to give it its correct postal address, 11 Wall Street, New York, NY 10005, USA) is the address of the New York Stock Exchange, perhaps the ultimate monument to money ever created.

“and doubtless there will be someone who will be kind enough to take me there for I am too old to go walking for as long as a half day. In fact, if I am not much mistaken I see someone with a horse on that flattish stretch beyond the sand over there. Remind me, what coins do they use here?”

“Kalas,” said Logan. “Do you need some?”

“Thank you but no,” said Mother Midcarn. “I have an ample supply of coins of all types in my baggage.” She gave a casual wave of her hand and a small bag appeared in her palm. “Fare well and I shall see you both again very soon.” She beamed at them both and started to stride determinedly across the sand, her small ankle boots kicking up little puffs yet leaving nothing in the way of footprints.

“Do you suppose there really is no trouble awaiting us?” asked Logan after watching her clamber onto the road that ran up to the market and beyond.

“I confess I find it unlikely,” said Autumn. “Even though 'trouble' can be defined in a variety of ways we are both yet still young and trouble-free lives ahead of us would seem almost certainly an impossibility. Shall we go back and get some money then venture off to the market?”

“You know what I mean,” said Logan, picking up his staff. “Trouble of the kind that Mother Midcarn brings upon us.”

“And therein lies a difficulty in itself,” said Autumn moving off along the beach. “You attribute cause without knowing all the details. 'Tis possible that we would have been involved in such troubles as we have done without Mother Midcarn.”

“And how likely is that?” asked Logan. “Whenever there is trouble for us we have a gift from Mother Midcarn that aids us in some way. 'Twould seem highly likely to me that even though whatever it is already exists she guides us into it then helps us to resolve it.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but I cannot begin to think how we could determine the truth of it. Mayhap there are endless such troubles in the world and because we travel we stumble into situations which

others who stay in one place would not.”

Some way further up the road Mother Midcarn was in earnest conversation with a small man sitting on a cart.

“But do you not think it an odd coincidence?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but coincidences do happen. Take Renao. Was she put under the horse at the moment it fell by some deliberate act or was it sheer chance? Would any child have served whatever purpose there was to it or was Renao the only choice? In order to arrive at an answer to that we must first fathom a purpose and I wager the horse falling was simply some random act and by chance alone Renao was underneath it. Until such time as we discover the horse was made to fall for a purpose and we know that purpose we cannot assume that Renao was the chosen victim.”

Some agreement seemed to have been reached for Mother Midcarn climbed into the back of the cart and it began to move away.

“I am not certain I agree with you,” said Logan thoughtfully. “As far as I know this world is full of horses and many if not most do from time to time fall and 'tis likely that when one does someone is nearby and gets hurt in the falling. The things that have happened to us would seem to me to be very rare and the chances of us being close by at the time would seem very remote.”<sup>10</sup>

“I disagree, friend Logan,” said Autumn. “Take our recent trouble with Chanwar<sup>11</sup>. There are endless bandits throughout the world and doubtless endless people have been and will be robbed by them. That said, had we been ordinary travellers like most when we first encountered Chanwar's men we would have been bested and that would have been the end of it. However it so happened that we were able to best them and that led to consequences that ultimately

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<sup>10</sup> In point of fact Logan's logic here is a little faulty. It is, for example, fallacious to think that the probability of winning, say, a lottery is a million to one. In fact the probability of someone (ie anyone) winning is more or less a certainty (depending on the specific rules of the lottery). It is the probability of a specific person winning that is a million to one. The fact that one thing happens frequently and another happens rarely is incidental.

<sup>11</sup> See *The Annals ~ The Seventh Tale*.



concluded with Iuo helping us against the entire Wodazu family. I do not see the need for Mother Midcarn's hand in causing that."

"But what about Xanthous?"<sup>12</sup> asked Logan. "Was that not something that could only have been resolved by you since your name was on the box that held Xanos' letter?"

"I do not know how old Mother Midcarn is," said Autumn, "but I fancy she is not older than the deities themselves and so she could not have had a hand in that. I concede there was some element of direction since Mookuku the donkey directed Xanos to write to me but that was a long time before Mother Midcarn was likely born. And what of Ibu'oden?"<sup>13</sup> Surely that was simply someone who had a sickness of the mind and we happened along at the right time? In fact, as I recall, Mother Midcarn did not give us a gift on that occasion."

"Actually she did," said Logan. "Not only did she return our lost packs to us but she sent us Iam the ariu to guide us to Ibu'oden's realm."

Autumn stopped walking and turned to stare at Logan.

"What?" said Logan, stopping as well.

"I had forgotten that," said Autumn looking quizzically at him. "And you do well to remind me. If it were not for Iam we would not have found Ibu'oden and ended the travesty of Foqoo's Tears. I think you may be right after all in saying Mother Midcarn may have a guiding hand in our destiny, if only on that one occasion."

"One occasion?" said Logan. "Surely she has a hand in our doings on every occasion."

"Surely not every occasion, Logan," said Autumn resuming walking. "Certainly there have been a few times when a situation has developed and Mother Midcarn has had a hand in resolving out predicament but there have been countless occasions when we have been in situations and she has not become involved."

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<sup>12</sup> See *The Annals ~ The Sixth Tale*.

<sup>13</sup> See *The Annals ~ The Seventh Tale*.

“Such as?” asked Logan as they turned the corner into Wall Street. Flaner's tapping became audible.

“Such as when we arrived in Schtei with nowhere to dwell,” said Autumn. “’Twas Kilig who found us a dwelling, not Mother Midcarn. Or when we had nothing to eat. It was Jjivisha who told us where the market was. And is it not true that we had money to buy food and a pot and other things because you took money from Ebin and Leryn as well as the rings and was it not Komorebi who helped us to sell one? We have received aid from many people not just Mother Midcarn or are you going to claim that Mother Midcarn sent us Komorebi in order that we could sell a ring that you took from someone else who was also sent by Mother Midcarn?”

“Well,” said Logan slowly, “if you are going to put it like that.”

“And another thing,” said Autumn, “Mother Midcarn has a life of her own and doubtless has many things that occupy her. Is it not supposing an importance in ourselves that is not justified to assume that her every move and action involves us in some way? You heard what she said. She is in Schtei to consult the Mo's library and happened to see us on the beach and said hello. She is someone of immense learning and I wager that learning has come from somewhere so doubtless she has visited most places of learning at one time or another. Mayhap it is only your vanity that makes you think she is in Schtei because of us.”

“Umm, ...” said Logan.

“And did you not hear her say that she has seen no troubles ahead for us?” asked Autumn. “I grant she is not generous with explanations and refuses to tell us of things which have yet to happen but to the best of my knowledge she has never told us untruths.”

She strode past Flaner, hard at work on his decorative brass dishes, indifferent to Logan and Flaner pointedly ignoring each other.

“Perhaps you are right,” said Logan, trying to shut his ears to the tap-tap-tapping, “although I wager it is not just my vanity. Just as a dog which has become accustomed to the blows of an unkind master will

be wary of a raised hand I, too, get a little worried whenever Mother Midcarn is around.”

“You see her as an unkind master?” asked Autumn, stopping to look directly at him again.

“Perhaps that was a bad example,” said Logan, “although mayhap she is in some ways master of our destinies. No, I did not mean that she is unkind. All the aid she has given us tells a different story. I only meant that I think I have learned to be apprehensive.”

“Mmm, perhaps,” said Autumn, resuming walking again, “although for one who is normally filled with logic there is a flaw in your reasoning.”

“How so?” asked Logan.

“You say that you have learned to be apprehensive whenever Mother Midcarn is involved,” said Autumn, “and yet you have not learned that whenever she is involved we prevail. Should you not by that token be joyful that she is here for if some trouble does arise soon 'twould seem the more likely we will prevail than if she were not here?”

“I wager you are right,” said Logan, “but 'tis my nature to prefer to avoid troubles than to assume we will overcome them. The mere fact of having to try to overcome them raises the likelihood of not succeeding. That has been my experience of life, notwithstanding the short time that I have been travelling with you.”

Autumn stopped walking yet again to look at him. This time her eyes were gentle.

“Ahh, Logan, I owe you an apology,” she said softly, putting her hand on his arm. “Truly I had forgotten that you have had a hard life filled with troubles and difficulties and few, if any, to aid you. I had even forgotten the reason you are here. If it were not for the death sentence laid upon you we would not be here now nor would I have had the joy of your companionship since.<sup>14</sup> I come from a very different place,

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14 See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*. Two days before meeting Autumn, Logan was given the option of exile from his home village of Biasdo or death. Needless to say he chose the former and, while wandering aimlessly, he came upon Autumn and tried to rob her.

filled with deliberate difficulties designed to encourage and support me in their overcoming whereas you ... ahh, that you managed to overcome your difficulties and survive is a feat in itself. 'Tis wrong of me to be critical of how you perceive the world now. Had our lives been the other way around I venture I would not have survived and if I had I would not have anything like your fortitude or optimism."

"Now you are embarrassing me," said Logan feeling decidedly embarrassed. "You are Autumn Savannah! How could you possibly be otherwise to what you are?"

"Very easily, Logan, very easily," said Autumn. "I was found and trained to be as I am now and so can take little credit for that. You, however, were abandoned and left alone and with no support. That you are now who you are speaks volumes of the strength of your character."

"Oh faff," said Logan turning bright pink. "You are a Krisana and of two Esysups whereas I am no one of any consequence, just a silly little thief and not a very good one at that."

"And yet you are the Roinad of Aferraron," said Autumn, "and beloved by Yammoe and Zeeth as well as Mother Midcarn and I and mayhap even Komorebi. No small feat for a silly little thief cast out from a village so small no one has ever heard of it."

"K-K-Komorebi?" stuttered Logan, his face going so red Autumn started to get alarmed. "What ... umm ... what?" He stumbled and nearly fell but Autumn grabbed him and held him upright.

"Take a deep breath," said Autumn. "Good. Now let it out slowly. Good. And another. That's right." His face started to return to its normal colour. "One more. Hold that breath. And slowly breathe out. Good. How do you feel?"

"Speechless," said Logan. "What did you mean about Komorebi?"

"Nothing," said Autumn, "save only that she seems to like you and I have not yet noticed her laugh at you."

“Oh,” said Logan, going pink again. “Umm ...”

“Is that not our dwelling up yonder?” asked Autumn, pointing with her staff.

Logan tore his eyes away from Autumn's face and forced himself to look up ahead.

“Umm, yes,” he said. “’Tis the one just before where Merak is sitting.”

“I thought so,” said Autumn. “’Twould seem we have visitors. I wonder who they are?”

## Chapter Thirteen

“What do you want?” growled Naufe, snatching up her broom and brandishing it at Deven.

Deven stepped backwards out of range. Naufe didn't like him and he knew it. Besides, his head still hurt and a blow from a broom handle wouldn't help.

“I only be here to see Ufga,” he said trying to smile placatingly. “Is he home?”

“And where else would he be?” demanded Naufe. “Seeing as how his face be all swollen and him unable to see round what's left of his nose. You do that to him, did ya? Bastard!”

She jabbed at him hard with her broom and he jumped back a little further, holding up his hands protectively.

“Weren't me,” he exclaimed. “I were defending him, like. Got me head smashed for me trouble. Hurts something terrible, it does.”

“So who was it, then, eh?” demanded Naufe.

“Who does Ufga say?” asked Deven cautiously.

“He says he don't know,” said Naufe. She glared at Deven then spat on the ground. “Like as not it be your fault regardless. You always be leading my boy astray and getting him into trouble.”

“Weren't me,” exclaimed Deven. “Me and him was just minding our own business, like, and them there sods jumped us. Didn't have a chance, we didn't. So you gonna let me in or what?”

“I ain't letting the likes of you in here no more, Deven,” snarled Naufe, tightening her grip on her broom. “You's nothing but trouble and I curse the day you and him become friends. Get you gone, boy, and don't you be coming back here no more.”

“Who is it, ma?” called Ufga from the back of the hut. “Be it Deven?”

“Aye, 'tis that misbegotten spawn of Vogeve,” called back Naufe without taking her eyes off Deven, “but he be on his way right smart.”

“Let him in, ma,” called Ufga. “I want to talk to him.”

“He ain't here no more,” called Naufe, scowling at Deven. “He's gone.” She wagged her broom threateningly.

“Ufga!” called Deven, backing off another half step.

“Go away!” ordered Naufe. She stepped forward and raised her broom. A neighbour watched in amusement from the safety of her own doorway.

Ufga appeared from the gloom and towered over his mother.

“Let him in, ma,” he pleaded then groaned and put his hands to his head.

“Get you back to bed,” ordered Naufe giving Ufga a backhander that caught him in his belly. “Only rest will cure that face of yours not gallivanting around with scum like this. Go on, back to bed.”

“Yes, ma,” said Ufga submissively. Her backhander hadn't hurt but he maintained the illusion she was in charge as it was more peaceful that way. He made a hand signal to Deven behind Naufe's back then meekly turned and went back into the gloom.

“I'd, umm, best be going, then,” said Deven, turning away.

“And don't be coming back,” snarled Naufe to his back. Satisfied she went back inside and propped her broom against the wall. “Why aren't you in bed?”

“Just gonna check the chickens, ma,” said Ufga. “'Twas a bit of a commotion that woke me, see. Mayhap they be laying again.” He slipped through the door-hanging at the back of the hut before she could reply.

His head throbbing, he slowly made his way through the piles of

rubbish that had accumulated over the years and paused beside the rickety enclosure that held their three remaining chickens. A scrawny goat looked at him then resumed its attempts to eat some leaves from a neighbour's tree that hung over the fence. Very cautiously, so his nose wouldn't start bleeding again, Ufga bent down and lowered himself to his knees so he could feel around for eggs. Unexpectedly there was one and he pulled it out. A hen pecked his hand gently and he swore at it. He cautiously got to his feet again and groaned as his world spun crazily for a few moments.

"Your ma still don't like me, then," said Deven at the back fence. He laughed. "Stupid bitch."

"Aye," said Ufga. "She be thinking I'm going to lose me job 'cos of this and blames you, like. Daft cow."

"What, that job you said you had at slaughterhouse?" said Deven, studying Ufga's face. "Don't reckon as how your looks have improved."

"Aye," said Ufga. He gingerly prodded around his nose and winced. "Still, keeps the old bitch quiet and she don't be asking too many questions. Reckon I can keep her fooled for a few summers yet. Anyways, sod her. Got more important things to talk about."

"Oh yeah?" said Deven. "What's that then?"

"Remember that girl what was with that bastard who busted me nose?" said Ufga, squinting at Deven.

"The sod what was selling the rings?" said Deven. "Yeah, I ain't likely to forget. What about her?"

"I know her from somewhere," said Ufga. "Looked familiar, she did. Been racking my brains trying to remember her name, like."

"So what is it?" asked Deven. He saw a shadow move behind the back door hanging of Ufga's hut and shifted closer to the neighbour's fence so Naufe didn't spot him.

"Komorebi," said Ufga. "I think she be daughter of Galeo of the



Saudade family but I ain't got no idea where they live.”

“Galeo?” said Deven, his face creasing in thought. “Isn't he that man who fences stuff down by the Old City?”

“Reckon so,” said Ufga. “Reckon I've seen her with him a couple of times. Nice looking bit she is, or was. She won't be when I've finished with her.”

“Oh yeah?” said Deven, disinterestedly. His aching head and half healed tear where his ear had been partially ripped off when he hit the wall made him less interested in physical activity than he usually was.

“Yeah,” said Ufga vehemently. “Cepting we'll do her after we've done that bastard and taken the rest of his rings and whatever else he's got.”

“Who is he, then?” asked Deven.

“Dunno,” said Ufga. “But that little bitch will.” He waved his clenched fist towards Deven. “Find her, Deven, find her for me then we'll find out who he is and go visiting. Bastard's going to suffer for busting my nose and making me a laughing stock. Find him for me and you can do what you like with the bitch. Mayhap we be making him watch, eh?” He sniggered and clutched his face again.

“Yeah,” sniggered Deven. “Yeah, make him watch, yeah.”

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Autumn studied the trio waiting outside the hut as she approached. All three were dressed poorly and it was clear two at least were in pain. One, an older man, had a hand pressed against his cheek and his face was drawn and pale. The other was a woman who matched him in age and held one hand clasped tightly in her armpit. Her teeth were clenched and her eyes narrowed. The third, a pretty young woman with a coloured scarf over her hair and shoulders appeared normal and held her head cocked quizzically to one side as she watched Autumn and Logan approach. She, at least, had an air of anticipation although the other two seemed withdrawn and resigned. Autumn surmised the young woman was likely the daughter of the

older couple.

“Greetings,” said Autumn. “I am Autumn and my companion is Logan. Do you wait for us?”

All three looked at her then at each other.

“You be the healer?” asked the older woman after a few moments. “Her as what aids people for nothing?”

“When I can,” said Autumn, “although my skills are limited. What ails you?”

“Tis my hand,” said the older woman and nodded downwards at the hand in her armpit. “I fell awkwardly these two days past and I reckon it be broken or some such.”

“Can I see?” asked Autumn, moving closer.

Very gently the woman withdrew her hand from her armpit and held it out to Autumn. The hand was wrapped in a filthy cloth and trembled.

“I will need to take off the cloth,” said Autumn, not touching it, “and likely it will hurt when I do. ’Twould be best if you sit on the ground in case you feel faint.”

“Oh get on with it,” growled the man. “There be others waiting.”

“Are you not all together?” asked Autumn, looking at him.

“I do not know them,” said the older woman firmly, “but I was here first,” and she scowled at the man.

“I see,” said Autumn and glanced at Logan before turning her attention back to the older woman. “What is your name?”

“Make way, make way,” shouted a man angrily as he tried to push past with a laden hand cart. “If you want to chat get off the street and leave it clear for them as what needs to get by!”

The older man made a rude gesture and grunted but the young woman stepped aside without changing her quizzical stance. The cart pusher seemed to lurch into the older man as he passed and clipped him with his shoulder and the older man yelped but did not let go of his cheek.

“Omijen,” said the woman, her hand firmly back in her armpit for protection.

“Then, Omijen, step inside my hut,” said Autumn and held the hanging out of the way. “Who came after Omijen?”

“Me,” growled the man as Omijen went inside the hut.

“Your name?” asked Autumn.

“Mangata,” said the man and groaned.

“If you could stand beside the wall,” said Autumn, gesturing with her hand. “It will be easier for passers by and you will be less likely to be knocked.”

Irritably the man moved closer to the wall.

“I am Feiseanna,” said the younger woman softly before Autumn could ask. “I am last,” and she gracefully moved behind the older man. She had an air of quiet dignity even though her head stayed tipped to the side.

“Thank you,” said Autumn. “Logan, would you help Omijen sit in the doorway where there is light?”

“Of course,” said Logan and leapt to do Autumn's bidding but managed to get entangled in the door hanging as Autumn was in the process of trying to tuck it out of the way. He fell against Omijen, jarring her arm and making her cry out in pain. “Oh, Sploop, I'm sorry!” he exclaimed, aghast. Helplessly he looked at Autumn.

“'Twould seem most painful,” said Autumn putting her arm around Omijen's shoulders. “Come, sit in the doorway and let me see your

injury. Logan, hold Omijen under her armpits and lower her to the ground.”

Carefully Logan lowered Omijen who only cried out once and cradled her injured hand in her good hand.

“Let me see,” said Autumn, squatting in front of her.

Omijen held out her hand and flinched as Autumn touched the cloth covering.

“I will be as gentle as I can,” said Autumn and very carefully unwrapped the cloth.

Omijen's hand was swollen and heavily discoloured. Her first and second fingers stuck almost straight upwards although the uppers joints of those fingers were bent tightly back in. The other fingers appeared normal although also somewhat swollen.

“You said you fell?” asked Autumn, studying Omijen's hand. “What did you hit your hand on?”

“’Twas a stone post,” whimpered Omijen. “I was going home from the market and slipped in a pile of horse shit and fell forward, like.”

“’Twas fortunate you did not hit your head,” said Autumn. “I wager you have not broken any bones though. ’Twould seem when you fell against the post your first two fingers got bent back too far and came out of their sockets which is why they are sticking up like that. What we need to do is get them back into their proper place. Then the swelling will go down.”

“Can you do that?” asked Omijen, fear and pain roughening her voice.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but it will hurt mightily for the flesh around the joints is already tormented. I think it would be best if I do this while you sleep otherwise the pain will make you thrash about and make it more difficult.”

“How am I going to sleep with this?” demanded Omijen, holding up

her hand. "I have not slept since it happened for the pain."

"Fear not," said Autumn. "I will make you sleep for a short time and you will feel nothing. Logan, I will need your help. Sit behind Omijen. Support her as she sleeps and hold her arm tightly so it does not move."

Obediently Logan sat behind Omijen and wrapped his arms tightly around her. He had helped Autumn once before with a broken leg that needed setting and knew what to do.<sup>15</sup>

Autumn put her hand behind Omijen's neck and Omijen whimpered in fear.

"Ready?" she asked.

Logan nodded and braced himself. Omijen stared to moan then Autumn pressed hard between the second and third vertebrae and Omijen went limp. Quickly Autumn pulled on her second finger while massaging the joint until the finger slid back into position then did the same with the first finger. As each returned to its rightful place the other joints straightened out again so the fingers looked more normal although they remained swollen.

"Tis done," said Autumn, sitting back on her haunches. She quickly checked the whole hand for breaks while Omijen remained oblivious. Omijen stirred and her eyes flickered and Logan relaxed his grip.

"Best you be getting on with it," she muttered, bracing herself.

"Tis all done," said Autumn. "Your hand will be sore for a few days but that will pass, as will the bruising and swelling. I fancy the pain is already a lot less."

Omijen stared at her then at her hand. Cautiously she moved her fingers the tiniest amount then gasped.

"My hand!" she exclaimed and tried to waggle her fingers before

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15 See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*. Autumn had to reset the broken leg of a soldier who had foolishly tried to take her captive. Unfortunately Autumn had misjudged her blow and broken his leg rather than simply numbing it.

grimacing in pain.

"Twill be a few days before the pain is gone," repeated Autumn, "but there is no permanent harm done to your hand."

"Oh thank you, thank you," exclaimed Omijen and burst into tears.

"It was my pleasure," said Autumn. "Now, if you will excuse me, Mangata is waiting. Logan, could you help Omijen up?"

"You are truly a daughter of Ratanbismet," said Omijen as she got to her feet with only a little help from Logan. "I will sing your praises throughout Schtei."

"I do not seek praise," said Autumn. "'Tis enough for me to be able to aid you. Be gentle with your hand until it is back to normal."

"I cannot thank you enough," exclaimed Omijen, clinging on to Autumn's robe with her good hand.

"Ahh, get out of here," snarled Mangata. "You be cured so be off with you. Go on, get lost."

"I spit on you, viper," snarled Omijen back at him. "I hope this one cannot cure whatever ails you."

"Please, everyone stay calm," said Logan, holding up his hands. "Tempers will not help anyone. Omijen, if you could please step outside and let Mangata inside?"

With another dirty look at Mangata and a smile for Autumn Omijen stepped outside the hut and wandered off up the street holding her hand against her chest so it did not get hurt again. As soon as she'd gone Mangata came inside.

"'Tis me teeth," he said belligerently.

"Ahh," said Autumn. "There is little I can do for teeth. I have not the skills. What is wrong?"

"I was chewing on a bone and broke a tooth," said Mangata, pointing in the general area of his back teeth on one side. "Then my jaw started to swell and there be a foul taste in my mouth."

"Can I see?" asked Autumn.

Obligingly Mangata opened his mouth and exhaled a putrid breath into Autumn's face. She recoiled a little then peered inside.

"Yes, I can see the remains of your tooth," she said. "Your gum has gone bad and there is pus oozing. Likely that is the cause of the foul taste and smell."

"So you be fixing it?" asked Mangata. A corrupt odour hung in the air even with his mouth shut.

"Sadly I cannot," said Autumn. "What remains of that tooth needs to come out and the gum allowed to heal but I have not the skill or knowledge to do that."

"So you be no bleeding use then?" yelled Mangata angrily. "What in Agav's name do I do now? Cut my own jaw off and starve to death? You must help me for I am going mad with the pain and cannot work nor feed my children!"

"Calm yourself," said Autumn. "Yelling will not solve anything. I can give you some herbs to chew which may help with the pain and go some way to slowing the corruption but it can only be stopped by taking out the remains of the tooth and that needs someone who knows of these things. I do not and will likely only make things worse if I try. Is there not someone in Schtei who knows of teeth?"

"There is Kreng Jai Two in Siakin," said Feiseanna, peering around the doorpost. "I know he fixes teeth for he fixed those of a friend of my uncle but he is expensive."

"I have no money," growled Mangata. "If I did why else would I be here seeking aid from this little upstart of a girl who claims she can fix them as is sick but cannot. Healer be damned. Fraud and cheat more like."

“In what way do I cheat you?” asked Autumn. “I ask nothing from you and you came to me uninvited.”

“Pah!” exclaimed Mangata and spat on the ground before putting his hand back over his jaw. A waft of corruption made Feiseanna and Logan flinch.

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “Feiseanna, how much does this Kreng Jai Two charge?”

“I do not know,” said Feiseanna, “but I seem to remember my uncle’s friend paid two kalas or thereabouts.”

“Two kalas!” exclaimed Mangata. “Where am I getting two kalas? I have not two hakina to rub together.” He groaned as if the price of two kalas hurt more than his mouth.

“Logan,” said Autumn. “Give Mangata two kalas so Kreng Jai Two can fix his teeth.”

“Are you sure?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I cannot aid Mangata directly but we can spare two kalas and aid him in that way. ’Tis the aid that is important, not the manner in which it is given.”

“As you wish,” said Logan. He went over to where his blanket was and, keeping his body between the blanket and the others, retrieved two kalas.

“There you are,” he said, handing the coins to Mangata. “Best you be going to see this Kreng Jai Two as soon as you can.”

“Well, thank you kindly,” said Mangata in astonishment. He stared at the coins blankly with his mouth hanging open, much to the distaste of the others. “Thank you kindly, indeed.”

He abruptly clenched his hand and hurried away as if frightened Logan would take the money back.



“I hope he does see Kren Jai Two,” said Logan, “and not spend it all on drink.”

“That is his choice,” said Autumn. “Come in Feiseanna. How may I aid you? You seem well enough.”

Feiseanna came inside and stood before them. She was of an age between that of Autumn and Logan and was undeniably attractive despite her worn and poorly made clothes. The scarf over her head and shoulders enhanced the shape of her face although she still held her head quizzically to one side.

“Tis my neck,” she said softly. “I have seen other healers but none can help me.” She slipped off her scarf to reveal a large growth on the side of her neck which forced her head over. “Can you?”

“Vallume!” exclaimed Autumn.

## Chapter Fourteen

“Ah well,” said Feiseanna sadly. “It was too much to expect, I venture,” and she began to arrange her scarf over her head again.

“A moment,” said Autumn, putting her hand on Feiseanna's arm. “I must apologise for I was not expecting ..., well, that is by the by and my expectations are of no consequence. Please, remove your scarf again and let us consider.”

Feiseanna raised an eyebrow but pulled away her scarf and held it loosely in her hand.

“I wager you have not encountered such as this before?” she said in her quiet voice.

“No,” said Autumn, “and yet it is in some way familiar but how I do not know. Tell me, how long have you had this ... lump?”

“More than two summers,” said Feiseanna. “It started no more than a pimple but has been growing and grows still. I fear one day soon it may push my head off my shoulders.”

“You said you have seen healers,” said Autumn, stepping behind Feiseanna to look at the lump from another angle. “What have they said?”

“I have seen two,” replied Feiseanna. “The first when the lump was no bigger than a egg. He gave me ointment to rub on it which I did with great dedication until there was no more ointment but still it grew bigger. My parents could not afford more ointment for it was a grievous price.”

“And the other?” asked Autumn coming round in front of Feiseanna again.

“He said he could cut the lump off but that it would cost 19 kalas,” said Feiseanna. “That is an impossible amount for us to raise.”

“And would likely kill you in the process,” said Autumn thoughtfully,

“for this lump is over the path your blood follows to reach your head and to remove it with a knife would be much like cutting your throat. Like as not it would have left you with no voice either for the lump is pressing against where your voice comes from.”

“I thought so,” said Feiseanna. “My voice has become quieter of late and this is now the loudest I can speak. It seems my voice is also higher in pitch as well but 'tis difficult to say.”

“Is there pain?” asked Autumn.

“Of the lump? No,” said Feiseanna, “but there is in my neck and shoulders from having my head pushed this way.”

“That is interesting,” said Autumn. “Will you permit me to touch it?”

“Do what you must,” said Feiseanna. “My life is already falling apart and I doubt there is anything you can do to worsen it.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn.

“'Tis a disfigurement,” said Feiseanna sadly, “and my man has already left me for another whose looks do not suffer this affliction.”

“Then he is no great loss,” said Autumn firmly. “A man who cannot see you past this lump is a very shallow man indeed and not deserving of your affections.”

“That is what my mother said,” said Feiseanna, “but it was a painful parting none the less.”

“Can you feel this?” asked Autumn, gently putting her finger on the skin of the lump.

“Yes,” said Feiseanna.

“But it does not hurt?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Feiseanna.

“And if I push hard?” asked Autumn, pushing against it.

“I know you are pushing,” said Feiseanna, “but there is no pain.”

“That is strange,” said Autumn, pursing her lips. “Tis not solid like bone and it yields much like flesh but there is no pain as you would expect from a swelling. Omijen's hand was swollen and had I pressed it as I did your lump she would have screamed. I confess I am puzzled and yet ...”

“And yet?” asked Logan who had been watching carefully. He had an urge to poke the lump but managed to restrain himself.

“Hmm? Oh, and yet I still have a feeling of familiarity,” said Autumn. “Feiseanna, would you turn so the light is behind you? I want to have a closer look where the lump is under your hair.”

Obligingly Feiseanna turned in the doorway and Autumn began to part Feiseanna's hair and peer closely at the skin between the hairs.

“Logan,” said Autumn suddenly. “Look here.”

Logan moved close and studied Feiseanna's neck but could see nothing in particular.

“What am I looking at?” he asked.

“Here, just above my finger,” said Autumn, “among the hairs above the hairline. Do you see anything?”

“You mean that?” asked Logan, pointing with his little finger. “Is that not a pale freckle or perhaps a small mole?”

“It could be,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “but there are no freckles on Feiseanna's face and it is right on the edge of the lump. You see it as well so my eyes are not deceiving me.”

“I do see something,” said Logan, “but I know not what I see.”

“It feels slightly raised as well,” said Autumn, scraping the mark with

her fingernail. “Hmm.”

She let Feiseanna's hair drop and slowly backed into the hut.

“It bothers me that I am unable to say why this is familiar,” she said. “Feiseanna, come inside and sit with us and let me ponder for a time. It may yet come to me. Perhaps if we share a hot drink? Logan, would you put some water on to ...” and her voice petered away as she gazed abstractedly into a dark corner of the hut.

“Of course!” she exclaimed suddenly, slapping her thigh and making Logan spill the water he was pouring into their cooking pot. “A boil! Now it comes to me!”

“Now what comes to you?” asked Logan turning his back on the spillage. It would dry soon enough.

“When I was perhaps five or six summers old Enupri suffered an affliction of boils on his backside,” said Autumn. “I remember being intrigued that they did not hurt him, not even when he sat on them but they had the look of this lump although much much smaller.”

“Who is Enupri?” asked Logan, “and what are boils?”

“Enupri is of my Esyup,” said Autumn going over to study Feiseanna's lump again. “He is still there, no doubt, as he was not able to fully grasp the teachings of our elders but the boils did not last long. I wonder ... tell me Feiseanna, were you bitten or stung by an insect on your head just before this lump appeared?”

“I do not remember any in particular,” said Feiseanna, “but in the summer we are all bitten by insects every day. 'Tis a part of life.”

“True,” said Autumn. “Come back into the light so I can see again. Ahh. Interesting. Logan, give me your knife.”

“What are you going to do?” demanded Feiseanna in alarm, jerking away.

“My apologies,” said Autumn, raising her hands in supplication. “I

was getting carried away with my enthusiasm. I have a suspicion that this mark in your hair is where you were bitten or stung and that this lump has grown as a consequence as your body tries to heal itself. My intent was only to scrape the top off the mark and see what lies within. 'Twas not my intention to cut off the lump itself. Mayhap once the mark is gone whatever is inside the lump can come out."

"You think the insect laid its eggs in Feiseanna's neck?" asked Logan, fascinated.

"Ewww," exclaimed Feiseanna screwing up her face in distaste. She put her hand to the lump and started prodding it.

"It is a possibility but I doubt it," said Autumn. "Any such eggs would have long hatched by now and the insects gone."

"So what is inside then?" asked Logan.

"I do not know," said Autumn, "but if it is like one of Enupri's boils then it will be thick pus and mayhap beneath that there still lie the remains of a stinger which is causing ever more pus to be created."

"So if you cut the mark you can get out all the pus and the lump will be gone?" asked Feiseanna with hope in her voice.

"I do not know," said Autumn, "but for certain something is making the lump grow and it has the look of Enupri's boils. We cannot know until we look inside."

"If it is from the sting of an insect," said Logan, "would not that sting be at the centre rather than on the edge?"

"Aye, so you would think," said Autumn. "But that mark was right on the edge of Feiseanna's skull so doubtless it was easier for the pus to go down her neck rather than all over her head."

"Makes sense, I suppose," said Logan. "I'll get my knife."

"Will this hurt?" asked Feiseanna anxiously.

“The cutting of the mark may hurt a little,” said Autumn, “but if I am right then the ridding of the pus should not as the lump does not pain you. 'Tis your choice and I will not if you prefer.”

Feiseanna bit her lip for a moment.

“Do it,” she said with determination, “and if I should scream do not stop.”

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“Pray tell me, my good woman, is this the dwelling of Autumn and Logan?” drifted in from outside.

“Mayhap it is, mayhap it isn't,” came Merak's voice followed by her customary cackle of ill humour. “Ain't never heard of 'em. Spare a few hakinis for an old woman?”

“That sounds like Mother Midcarn,” said Autumn. She jumped up and pushed the door hanging aside. “Greetings!”

“Ahh, there you are, dear,” exclaimed Mother Midcarn. She gave Merak a scornful look before walking over. “I went to the wall and counted back eleven but it is difficult to distinguish one hovel from another and I thought I had miscounted. So this is where you live, is it, dear?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “'Tis sufficient for our needs to pass the winter. Come inside.”

“Let us hope it is a mild winter then,” said Mother Midcarn cautiously stepping through the doorway. Her eyes locked on the hearth. “What is that atrocious smell?”

“Logan is burning some soiled reeds and scraps of cloth,” said Autumn. “I gave some aid to a woman who had a large growth filled with pus and foulness on her neck.”

“I see,” said Mother Midcarn. She looked around. “And this woman is now fully healed? I see she is no longer here.”

“Alas no,” said Autumn. “At least half the growth has gone but her neck was becoming bruised and tender so I told her to come back in a few days when her flesh had settled down again. Come, sit by the fire and join us. Logan, put water on to heat. Doubtless Mother Midcarn is tired and desires a hot drink.”

“Perhaps later, dear, when the smell has gone,” said Mother Midcarn, her nostrils flaring slightly. “I wager it would taint any water heated for a while. You have no chairs?”

“Ahh, I apologise for that lack,” said Autumn, looking pained. “We are lacking in hospitality and that is remiss. 'Tis no excuse but Logan and I have no need for chairs and we have few visitors, save those who come seeking aid.”

“Like this woman who was here earlier?” asked Mother Midcarn. A comfortable looking chair materialised beside her and she sat wearily in it.

“Aye,” said Logan, tossing the last scrap of pus stained cloth on the fire with a twig. “We seem to be getting quite a few of them.”

“You have set up in business then, dear?” asked Mother Midcarn. Her face, while still cheerful, looked a little drawn.

“I would not do that,” said Autumn calmly, sitting on the ground in her usual cross-legged way. “I have some skills in healing but I would not charge any a fee for doing so, especially them as have no money.”

“Autumn also buys any herbs or ointments that they need,” said Logan, his tone a curious mixture of pride in Autumn and concern for a wasted opportunity to make some money.

“Then I fancy you'd best be getting some chairs soon,” said Mother Midcarn. “Aye and a bench or two to put outside for you will be inundated before too long.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn, her brows creasing.

“Cities are full of poor people with many ailments, dear,” said Mother



Midcarn, folding her hands neatly in her lap, “as you would know if you just looked around you. As word spreads of a healer who makes no charge you will find they come from far and wide to have you heal their ills, both major and minor, real and imagined.”

“Why would people imagine ills?” asked Logan. He scraped a few unburnt scraps into the fire.

“All manner of reasons,” said Mother Midcarn, “and not the least is a desire to simply talk with someone who is sympathetic. Like as not many who can afford to pay a healer will also come in the hopes of avoiding parting with their money for them as has money rarely like to part with it.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. She frowned. “My intent was only to help those with great need not those who just wish to talk although I am also happy to talk with whoever wishes to talk with me.”

“You will likely find that you end up with little time to talk,” said Mother Midcarn cheerfully. “Such folk are the scourge of healers and sorcerers the world over. I fancy either the smell is going or I am becoming used to it.”

“That is much what Toby said,” exclaimed Logan. “You remember, Autumn? He said he had to live in a cloud because so many people pestered him for love potions and whatnot that he could get no peace.”<sup>16</sup>

“Aye, I remember,” said Autumn. She pursed her lips and contemplated the fire for a few moments. “So are you saying I should charge a fee for my aid?”

“Doing so would reduce the numbers seeking your help, dear” said Mother Midcarn. “Those with trivial ailments likely will not seek you out if they have to pay for your aid.”

“Is that necessarily so, though?” asked Autumn. She tapped a finger on her knee. “Could it not be that someone with a serious ailment and

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16 See *The Annals ~ The Seventh Tale*. The sorcerer Orgajatoby Miunitou Lopel Bai was charged by Mother Midcarn to add magic to a bracelet that would aid Autumn in her dealings with the Chanwars but was unable to do so.

so likely not able to earn enough to pay such a fee would thereby suffer when another with a trivial ailment but sufficient money will come to me.”

“I daresay,” said Mother Midcarn. “What of it? That is the way much of the world works.”

“That would be contrary to my beliefs and vows,” said Autumn. “I give what aid I can to those who suffer and not to gain from them. By charging a fee those who suffer greatly cannot be aided and those who suffer only a little will benefit in their stead. That seems wrong to me.”

“As you wish, dear,” said Mother Midcarn. “’Tis your choice and none other’s but do not be alarmed to find hordes beating down your door in the hope of getting something for nothing.”

“There is much wrong in that,” said Autumn. “Aid should go to those who suffer the most not to those who have the most money.”

“I have an idea,” said Logan. “What if you say your fee as soon as someone comes to you for aid and if they are able to pay it you send them to another healer. Them as cannot pay that fee and turn to leave, you can then aid them for they will be the more deserving.”

“’Tis an interesting idea, Logan,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “I fancy that would work.”

“Likely not, dear,” said Mother Midcarn wryly. “For word will soon spread and people will claim they have no money in order to convince you to aid them for nothing.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. She scowled.

“Oh dear,” exclaimed Logan. “There was a man earlier today who Autumn could not aid so she gave him the money to see a healer who could aid him. Does that mean that he will tell others and we will get people coming here simply in the hope we will give them money?”

Mother Midcarn sighed. “’Twould have been best if you had not done

that, dear,” she said looking sadly at Autumn. “Ahh well, what’s done is done.”

“Truly I do not understand money,” said Autumn, shaking her head. “It seems that money turns people’s heads and makes them deceitful and grasping when there is no need and causes those with real need to be ignored. Where is the sense in that? Surely if money is to have any real value it should work the other way around?”

“I confess I have no answer to that,” said Mother Midcarn. “Mayhap those who will be great thinkers in times to come will find a better way but as yet no one has.”

“Mayhap the fault lies not in money itself,” said Logan slowly “but in the minds of people for letting money become something which drives them to its acquisition rather than as a convenient tool for solving problems.”

“Alas I am too tired and hungry for a discussion such as this,” said Mother Midcarn. “I have had a tiring day and, aye, a disappointing one at that. Come, join me for a meal on my boat and let us talk of more enjoyable things.”

“Gladly,” said Autumn, “although we have food here and you can rest with us as long as you wish.”

“’Twould be a pleasure, dear,” said Mother Midcarn, “but alas you have few comforts for an old woman and my vessel has all the comforts anyone could desire. ’Tis only a short walk and all downhill.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn, rising gracefully to her feet. “If it is not rude of me to pry, what disappointments have you had today?”

“Ahh, I had hoped the Mo’i would grant me permission to use his library, dear,” said Mother Midcarn getting slowly and heavily to her feet. “Sadly his principal aide has said I must make formal application to speak with the Mo’i and only if that is approved will I even be able to ask.” Her chair disappeared as quietly as it had arrived. “Which reminds me, I knew no other address in Schtei and thought a boat on the beach would not be sufficient so I gave him your address. No

doubt in a few days a messenger will be sent from the Mo'i's aide saying that an audience has been granted so could you let me know?"

"Of course," said Autumn. "You will stay at the same place on the beach?"

"Yes," said Mother Midcarn. A twinkle came into her eye. "And doubtless the appearance of a messenger from the Mo'i will add to your standing as a healer of great repute. Perhaps you should find a bigger hovel to live in."

## Chapter Fifteen

“Aha! I thought so,” said Autumn, her voice tense with concentration.

“What is it?” asked Logan, his voice hushed and equally tense even though he had nothing to do beyond watch.

“I feel something hard,” muttered Autumn, probing around the now small lump on Feiseanna's neck. “I do believe ... a moment ... ahh ... yes, there it is.”

“There what is?” asked Logan, craning forward to see.

“That tiny black mark in the centre of the ...,” began Autumn then she went quiet as she tried to get more to emerge. “Ah! Got it!”

Triumphantly she pulled a tiny black sliver from Feiseanna's neck with the nails of her thumb and first finger and held it up. Feiseanna twisted round to see.

“That tiny thing was the cause of all that?” she asked, staring at the sliver in fascination. It was barely the length of Autumn's little finger nail and the thickness of two or three hairs.

“I would think so,” said Autumn. “See? Near the end? There are two little barbs which likely made it work its way inside as you moved your neck.”

“What is it?” asked Logan.

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “Likely it is the sting from some insect or something and mayhap it had some poison which caused all the foulness inside. Hmm. Logan, would you pass me my jar of salve?”

“What for?” asked Logan, reaching for Autumn's pack which lay near the doorway.

“I am curious to know what manner of creature has such a sting,” said Autumn, “for it is bigger than the sting of a wasp and yet Feiseanna did not notice when she was stung. Thank you.” She removed the wad

of grass from the jar and carefully laid the sting on the surface of the salve. "Mayhap Mother Midcarn will recognise it."

"Who is Mother Midcarn?" asked Feiseanna.

"A friend of ours who has much learning," said Autumn. "Now, Logan, would you wash Feiseanna's neck while I prepare some hamamielis? With Aloidia's aid that thing was the cause and her lump should disappear in a day or two."

"Certainly," said Logan. He jumped up and fetched a cloth and the water bottle. Autumn rose and went to her supply of herbs at the back of the hut and Feiseanna, for want of anything else to do and feeling much excitement and pleasure at the end of her disfigurement jumped up as well and started to feel her neck with her fingers.

"Could you stand in the light while I wash your neck?" asked Logan, moving to the doorway.

Feiseanna beamed at him and twisted so her back was towards him. She gathered her hair and pulled it to one side so it was not in Logan's way. Carefully he dampened the cloth and started to gently wipe Feiseanna's neck.

"Hello Logan!" called Komorebi happily.

"Oh, hello Komorebi," said Logan, twisting round with a nervous start. He dropped the piece of cloth and bent awkwardly to pick it up. His cheek accidentally touched Feiseanna's bottom and she twitched forward causing him to lose his balance and grab her leg.

"What are you doing? Who is she?" demanded Komorebi, her voice hardening like ice. "Why are you kissing her neck and fondling her legs?"

"Sorry? Umm, oh, I am washing ..." stuttered Logan, his face going deep red. He peered up at Komorebi as he felt around for the cloth which was now under Feiseanna's foot.

"You are washing a woman in the street?" demanded Komorebi, her

voice getting even colder and harder. She stepped backwards. "I thought better of you, Logan. I really did."

"I, um, yes, what?" stuttered Logan, straightening up. He stared at Komorebi with a look of blind panic on his face.

"Hello," said Feiseanna happily, turning to beam at Komorebi. "I am Feiseanna. 'Tis is pleasure to meet you." She held out her hand in greeting. "Are you a friend of Logan's?"

"'Twould seem I am not as good a friend as I thought," said Komorebi icily. She ignored the proffered hand. "Oh Logan! Your guilt is written all over your face."

"Oh, hello Komorebi," said Autumn, coming to the doorway with a poultice of hamamielis in her hand. "What guilt is this?"

"'Tis Logan!" exclaimed Komorebi, her face showing her hurt. "I am returned and caught him doing things with this hussy right in front of my eyes!"

"Who are you calling a hussy?" bridled Feiseanna, her good humour rapidly disappearing. She shoved Logan to one side and stepped towards Komorebi.

"You, you little bitch," snarled Komorebi, jabbing a finger at Feiseanna.

"Hold!" exclaimed Autumn loudly.

Everyone froze, except Merak who cackled softly to herself and tapped the stem of her pipe on her few remaining teeth with delight at the free entertainment.

"I do not know what is happening here," said Autumn, "but tempers seem to be rising. What is the cause? Logan?"

"I am lost," said Logan worriedly. "I was just washing Feiseanna's neck when Komorebi came along and got angry with me."

“And that foul creature called me a hussy and a bitch,” exclaimed Feiseanna.

“And what is she doing here in the first place?” demanded Komorebi, pointing at Feiseanna. “What call has Logan to be fondling her legs and washing her? Eh? Tell me that!”

“Feiseanna came to me for aid with a sickness on her neck,” said Autumn calmly, “and I asked Logan to wash her neck while I prepared a poultice. I know not why he was fondling her legs though.”

“I was not fondling her legs!” exclaimed Logan. “Komorebi startled me and I dropped the cloth.”

“Twas just a touch and not a fondle,” said Feiseanna, angrily, “and what is it to you, anyway?”

“Knowing Logan as I do,” said Autumn, stepping forward so she was between the two girls, “I think it most unlikely he would fondle a girl's legs. I venture it was an unfortunate accident and was neither intended nor welcomed.”

“But ...” began Komorebi then she fell silent and visibly brought herself back under control. “You say she has a sickness?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and I would like to put this poultice on her neck if I may.”

She waited a few moments then turned and busied herself tying the poultice to Feiseanna's neck with a strip of cloth. Komorebi watched until she had finished.

“’Twould seem I am in error,” she said, her voice back to normal although a trifle stiff. “I apologise.”

Feiseanna gave her a long, cold look.

“Accepted,” she said brusquely.

“Excellent,” said Autumn. “Come back tomorrow, Feiseanna, and let



me check your neck. There may still be a piece of that stinger in there.”

“Yes,” said Feiseanna still looking coldly at Komorebi. She turned to go then turned back. “Oh, and thank you again, Autumn. You have done me a great kindness and I know not how I will ever repay you.” She glanced at Komorebi then added pointedly, “and you, Logan. Thank you.” She put her hands together and bowed before them then turned and headed off up the street.

Komorebi watched her go for a few moments then turned back to Autumn and Logan.

“I must apologise to you both as well,” she said, her voice fully back to normal. “I hope you do not think ill of me. You in particular Logan,” and she reached out to take his hand.

“Me?” said Logan, going pink again. “No, I do not think ill of you at all, Komorebi, although I have no idea what just happened.”

Komorebi looked appraisingly at him.

“No,” she said slowly. “I see now that you don't and that does you great credit, my friend. I can still call you my friend, can I not?”

“Umm,” said Logan, looking nervously from Komorebi to Autumn and back. Komorebi still had hold of his hand.

“I venture nothing has changed in that respect,” said Autumn. She glanced up the street. “I wonder what is happening there?”

Feiseanna had stopped walking just before the bend and was watching something happening further round. Two or three other people had also stopped to watch and one of the hut dwellers had come to her doorway. Even Flaner's endless tapping had fallen silent. Komorebi's grip on Logan's hand tightened slightly and she stepped forward to stand beside him before turning to look up the street.

“'Tis strange,” she said. “Why has everyone stopped?”

A moment later a short clean shaven man dressed in a spotless and embroidered tunic appeared. He carried a bundle of sticks held upright in one hand and a small crimson bag in the other. He was closely followed by two tall bearded men, both very broad, who wore polished leather jerkins and swords slung from broad belts. Each carried a spear. The clean shaven man walked with confidence although his face indicated some measure of distaste.

“They be soldiers,” said Komorebi, with puzzlement in her voice. “And that one in front be in the dress of the Mo’i. What devilment brings the likes of them to this place?”

“Is someone under arrest?” asked Autumn as the man stopped and looked around.

“Likely not,” said Komorebi. “They’d send more than two soldiers to make an arrest round here.”

The clean shaven man moved over to talk to a woman in her doorway. She scuttled inside immediately and it was some moments before the man persuaded her to return to the door. He clearly asked her some question and after some hesitation she raised her hand and pointed at Autumn. The man turned to look at Autumn then walked towards her, the soldiers following.

“Oh no,” said Logan uneasily. “I knew Mother Midcarn boded ill. We are going to be arrested again!”

“Fear not, Logan,” said Autumn. “Likely this is just the messenger from the Mo’i.”

“Ahh, yes,” said Logan. “I’d forgotten.”

“Again?” asked Komorebi, twisting to look at him. “You have been arrested before?”

“’Twas a misunderstanding in Aferraron,” said Autumn watching the messenger walk self-importantly towards them, “and of no importance.”<sup>17</sup>

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17 See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*. Their arrest was, in fact, on charges of treason.

“You must tell me all about it, Logan,” said Komorebi, squeezing his hand.

The clean shaven man stopped in front of Autumn and the two soldiers thumped their spears on the cobbles, making Logan jump. The clean shaven man looked at the hut contemptuously then at Autumn without changing his expression. Komorebi watched with wide eyed amazement, her lips frozen in a perfect 'O'.

“I bring a message from Esper Kowring One, much beloved Mo'i of Wase and Danornor,” he said haughtily. “I seek the one known as Mother Midcarn. Are you she?”

“Greetings,” said Autumn. “My name is Autumn. Mother Midcarn is not here at present. Can I take the message for her?”

“The Mo'i's messages are only to be delivered to the one so designated,” replied the messenger. He tried to look down his nose at Autumn but she was slightly taller than he was.

“Tis only a message about whether or not an audience with the Mo'i has been granted or not,” said Autumn, “and you have my word that the message will be delivered to Mother Midcarn.”

“You expect the Mo'i's messenger to take the word of a commoner?” snapped the messenger.

Autumn stared at him.

“You have a name, messenger?” she said with an edge to her voice.

“My name is not your concern,” snapped the messenger. “It is sufficient that I am the messenger of the Mo'i.”

“Then, messenger of the Mo'i,” said Autumn, her voice and eyes hardening, “let it be known that I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup and my word is my bond. Return to your Mo'i and explain your reasons for doubting me.”

Komorebi looked greatly impressed and the messenger locked eyes

with Autumn for a few moments. His self confidence wavered and he glanced away and spotted the small pile of blood and pus soaked cloths in the doorway. He quickly decided that if this Mother Midcarn failed to turn up for an audience it wasn't his problem and if the audience had been declined then it didn't matter anyway.

“Then I entrust this message from the Mo'i to your safe keeping, Autumn Savannah, Krisana of, of ...” and he stumbled over the unfamiliar words.

“Krisana of Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup,” said Logan proudly. “And founder of the Yeinoba Vyliacennie ...”

“That isn't necessary, Logan,” said Autumn softly, not averting her eyes from the messenger's.

“Harrumph,” grunted the messenger and held out the crimson bag. “I entrust this message to you in the name of the Mo'i for safe delivery.”

“It shall be delivered,” said Autumn, taking the bag. She waited a few moments then raised an eyebrow. “Was there anything else?”

The messenger glared at one of the soldiers although it had been the other who had snickered softly. He nodded officiously at Autumn then turned and stalked away. The small crowd that had gathered to watch parted to let him through.

“Oooooohh,” said Komorebi finally finding her voice. “The Mo'i! You are going to see the Mo'i!”

“Not us,” said Autumn. “Mother Midcarn, and it may well be that this message declines her request for an audience. Why is everyone watching us?”

“We've never had a message from the Mo'i before,” said Komorebi, still holding Logan's hand tightly. “I am surprised the Mo'i even knows this place exists. Ooooh and to think I know someone who knows someone who knows the Mo'i! Father will be so impressed!”

“I don't think you made a friend there,” said Logan, watching the

messenger go round the bend.

“Aye, that was remiss of me,” said Autumn sadly. “’Twas my vanity again. It angered me that this messenger would not trust me to pass on this message,” and she shook the bag gently. “Should we meet again I shall apologise to him. ’Tis unfortunate he would not give me his name.”

“I would not give it another thought,” said Komorebi. “He was a pompous ass. So what does the message say?”

“It is not for us,” said Autumn. “It is for Mother Midcarn.”

“Oh,” said Komorebi, disappointed. “Can you not even show me? I cannot read but I would dearly love to see what a message from the Mo’i looks like.”

“Like as not it is over filled with words that say little,” said Logan, “and written with so many flourishes that it is almost unreadable. Such things usually are.”

“You have had messages from the Mo’i yourself?” asked Komorebi, looking at him with something that approached awe.

“Not the Mo’i,” interjected Autumn, “but we had a letter from the Karoi of Neander which is like the Mo’i.<sup>18</sup>”

“Oooohh, can I see it?” asked Komorebi.

“Sadly we discarded it when we left Neander,” said Autumn. “Still, that is no matter. I have here a message for Mother Midcarn and I venture she is most anxious to read it. If you will excuse us, Komorebi, Logan and I will take it to her directly.”

“Can I come too?” asked Komorebi. “I would very much like to meet all Logan’s friends. And yours too, of course. And Mother Midcarn sounds a most interesting person. Mayhap she will let me see the message after she has read it? Where does she live? Why did she tell

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18 See *The Annals ~ The Sixth Tale* and *The Seventh Tale*. After various misunderstandings in Neander, Soros gave a letter requesting the assistance of any in Neander should Autumn have any difficulties while travelling in Neander.

them your address?"

"I daresay she will not mind unduly," said Autumn thoughtfully. "She is a friendly person and from Aferraron as well. She sailed here in her boat and is living on it at the beach. She thought it would be easier to use an address in Schtei than simply say 'the beach'."

"That sounds sensible," said Komorebi. "Is she rich? She must be if she has her own boat for I am guessing she is not a fisherman."

Autumn glanced at Logan. "Mother Midcarn is a wise and learned person but whether or not she has a lot of money I do not know. For certain she has sufficient for her needs."

"Which is all anyone needs," said Komorebi, a touch unconvincingly. "Shall we go now?"

"Yes," said Autumn. "Why are all these people still here?"

"You fascinate them," said Komorebi. "They will be talking of you and the Mo'i's messenger for many summers to come. Little excitement happens round here apart from a fight or two."

"A moment," said Logan and darted back inside their hut. He reappeared with Autumn's jar of salve and their staffs. "You wanted to ask Mother Midcarn about the stinger you pulled from Feiseanna's neck."

"Will you forgive me for doubting you, Logan?" asked Komorebi, taking his hand again.

"Of course," said Logan, not understanding her meaning. "I would forgive you anything."

Komorebi beamed happily.

## Chapter Sixteen

“Why are we going this way?” asked Komorebi as they stepped off the road and onto the damp sand. “All the boats are that way, where the jetty is.”

“Mother Midcarn's boat is over here,” said Autumn. “Do you not see ...? Ahh. This is a difficulty I had not foreseen.” She stopped suddenly and looked at Logan.

“What is the difficulty?” asked Logan, also stopping.

“Komorebi, would you excuse us for a moment?” asked Autumn. “I would speak privately with Logan about a matter.”

“Have we come to the wrong beach?” asked Komorebi. “’Tis easily done for they all look much the same.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “A moment if you please?”

Reluctantly Komorebi released Logan's hand and she walked all of two paces away. Autumn moved further away in the opposite direction and Logan followed.

“Do you recall Mother Midcarn saying her boat was visible only to us?” whispered Autumn, leaning close to Logan's ear.

Logan's eyes widened and he glanced at Komorebi. She was watching them out of the corner of her eye.

“You mean she cannot see ...?” he whispered and nodded slightly towards Mother Midcarn's boat.

“’Twould seem she cannot,” whispered Autumn. “I venture we should have warned Mother Midcarn before bringing her here.”

“Oh Sploop,” muttered Logan. He looked at Komorebi again and she turned and smiled at him. “What are we going to do?”

“We could say we were mistaken and come back another time when

Komorebi is not with us,” whispered Autumn.

“We could,” whispered Logan, his brow furrowed, “but what if that message is urgent? What if she has to go straight to the Mo’i now?”

“A valid point,” whispered Autumn. “As I see it we have no choice but to grip the viper by the throat but reveal as little as possible until Mother Midcarn can decide what she wishes to reveal.”

“What if she wishes to reveal nothing?” asked Logan, barely moving his lips.

“Then we may well end up being turned into vipers ourselves,” whispered Autumn, “or Komorebi at least but let us hope it does not come to that.” She raised her voice. “Komorebi?”

“You have finished your private discussion?” asked Komorebi. She took a step towards them then hesitated.

“Aye,” said Autumn and glanced at Logan. He shrugged to show he had no other ideas. “There is something you need to know,” and she walked back to where Komorebi stood.

“Your friend has gone?” asked Komorebi.

“No, she is here,” said Logan and pointed to the boat. “Over there.”

“Over where?” asked Komorebi, seeing only the empty beach and the sea.

“Her boat is a special boat,” said Autumn. “Ahh, it can only be seen by those who Mother Midcarn wishes to see it.”

Komorebi looked blankly at her for a moment then smiled. “Ohh, 'tis a game of 'let's pretend'! So I am to pretend there is a boat there and that your friend is on it?”

“Umm, yes,” said Logan. “Something like that.”

“If you wish, Logan,” said Komorebi with a giggle. She took his hand



again. "But are you not a little old to play 'let's pretend'?"

"You are never too old to explore what the mind can offer," said Autumn. "Come, let us go and see if there is a boat there, hidden behind the, umm, seaweed."

As they started to walk towards the boat, which was still some way distant, Autumn saw Mother Midcarn appear on deck with a bucket in her hand. She started to toss the contents of the bucket overboard but stopped when she saw Autumn and Logan. It was clear from her stance that she was frowning. Autumn waved and held up the crimson bag then waved it in the general direction of Komorebi. A moment later Mother Midcarn put down the bucket and appeared to wave back.

"Ratanbismet!" exclaimed Komorebi and let go of Logan's hand in alarm. She started to back away and made protective gestures with her hands. Her face had gone pale.

"'Tis nothing to be afraid of," said Logan going after her. He grabbed her hand. "Mother Midcarn has seen you and is letting you see her boat. Do not be afraid. It is just an ordinary boat. Come."

"But where did it come from?" asked Komorebi. She'd stopped backing away but would not move forward and her face showed her fear.

"Aferraron," said Logan, gently pulling on her hand. "'Tis just an ordinary boat and sailed here like any other. Come and meet Mother Midcarn."

"But, ... but ...," exclaimed Komorebi then put her hand over her eyes. She held it there for a few moments then peeked out from behind it. "'Tis still there!" she muttered. "Am I going mad?"

"You are not going mad," said Autumn gently. "It is just that Mother Midcarn is a very private person and does not like strangers watching her. Come." She took Komorebi's other hand and Komorebi allowed herself to be pulled forward, if reluctantly. Her entire body was tense.

“Ooooh, I do not like this,” she muttered. “By the grace of Ratanbismet I hope I wake up soon.”

“We are almost there,” said Autumn. “’Tis not a dream. Be strong.”

“Greetings, my dears,” called Mother Midcarn. “Who is this you bring with you?”

“She is our friend and neighbour,” said Autumn. “Her name is Komorebi and she was most desirous of meeting you and, if you permit, seeing the message from the Mo’i.” She held up the crimson bag again.

“Ahh, it has arrived,” said Mother Midcarn. “Good. ’Tis a pleasure to meet you, Komorebi. That is a beautiful name. If I am not mistaken it means the sunlight that trickles through the leaves in a glade. Come aboard, if that is the correct term.”

Autumn jumped over the side of the boat and between them she and Logan lifted Komorebi over.

“’Tis solid,” said Komorebi in wonder. She tapped the side of the boat with her hand then the deck with her foot. “How can this be? Are you a sorcerer?”

“Ah, no, child,” said Mother Midcarn, beaming although her shrewd eyes were assessing Komorebi. “I am as ordinary as you or anyone else. I merely bought this boat from a sorcerer who no longer had any need for it and he left it so I could choose who could see it and who could not. How it works I do not know but it is a useful feature in strange places where it may otherwise come to harm.”

“Ohhh,” said Komorebi. She looked around again and rapped the side of the boat with her knuckles. “How do you make it so people can see it?”

“With great difficulty, my dear,” said Mother Midcarn. “’Tis a temperamental bugger. Come and sit with me and let me read my message. Autumn, would you fetch some drinks for us all? You will find some already prepared inside that little tent. Aye, and likely there

is some cake left as well.”

“Certainly, said Autumn, handing her the crimson bag. She strode the two paces to the small tent and slipped inside, pulling the flap behind her quickly so Komorebi did not see the large room that lay inside.<sup>19</sup> A tray with four mugs and a platter of sliced cake sat on a table nearby.

“It seems my request for an audience with the Mo’i has been granted,” said Mother Midcarn as Autumn returned with the tray. “That is good news. Help yourselves to refreshments. Komorebi, you wanted to see the message?”

“If it is permitted,” said Komorebi shyly. “I have only twice before seen anything written and never anything from the Mo’i.”

“There is nothing secret about this,” said Mother Midcarn. “It says little but it is a pretty thing nonetheless. Feast your eyes, child.”

Komorebi took the proffered scroll and unrolled it. The writing was in a rich green colour and pretty wavy lines seemingly went all over the place. Komorebi studied it carefully, tracing some of the lines ever so gently with her fingertip.

“Can you read this, Logan?” she asked, glancing at him.

“Alas, no,” said Logan. “I can read my own language but not yours although I wager that fancy squiggle at the bottom is the Mo’i’s name.”

“Oh,” said Komorebi, turning her attention back to the scroll.

“It says little,” said Mother Midcarn. “Mostly it is a listing of all the titles the Mo’i has given himself but it does say I and my entourage are to present ourselves before him tomorrow and that my petition will be the last to be presented before his midday meal. Best I get there early for he will not be happy if I delay his eating.”

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19 Having some skills in manipulating space and time (see *The Annals ~ The First Tale* and *The Sixth Tale*), Mother Midcarn’s dwelling is small when seen from the outside but considerably larger inside and she adds and removes rooms at will. The same is true of her boat. It is quite conceivable, although there is no evidence for this, that the tent on the boat’s deck is simply a gateway or portal to her house just outside Glead.

“What is an entourage?” asked Komorebi. She carefully rolled the scroll up again and reverently touched the green ribbon that tied it.

“Those I choose to accompany me,” said Mother Midcarn, “although I have none.”

“Would not the Mo'i think the less of you if you arrive unaccompanied?” asked Autumn. “There are those that see having followers as some sign of importance and likely the Mo'i is one of them. I would be happy to go with you if you think it could be of some use. We have been in Schtei some ten days and not yet seen much of the city. I would welcome an opportunity to visit the palace. Likely Logan would too.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “Twould make a change from mud huts and sick people. We could be your bodyguards,” and he grinned. “Only important people have bodyguards.”

“Tis a thought,” said Mother Midcarn, tapping her finger on her thigh. “Yes, I can see benefits to not going alone. Mayhap the Mo'i would take me more seriously although why would a scholar need bodyguards?”

“Anyone of importance seems to have bodyguards,” said Autumn, “and likely the Mo'i has many hundreds and will not question your having two.”

“If you are both willing then it is agreed,” said Mother Midcarn decisively. “I will arrange transport for us.”

“Ooooh, you are going inside the palace to see the Mo'i,” exclaimed Komorebi, squeezing Logan's knee so hard he winced. “I would love to see inside the palace! I have only once seen the palace and that was only the outside.”

“Then come with us if you wish,” said Mother Midcarn expansively. “You can be my secretary.”

“What is a sekrrery?” asked Komorebi.

"Someone who follows me around and listens to what I say," said Mother Midcarn, smiling. "No doubt the Mo'i has hundreds of those as well. You live near Autumn and Logan?"

"Next door," said Autumn.

"That makes things very easy," said Mother Midcarn, rising to her feet. "I will meet you there and we will all go on together. Now, if you will excuse me, I have much to prepare for my, that is, our audience tomorrow. I need to be able to counter every argument the Mo'i may raise to deny me access to his library."

"Then we shall leave you in peace," said Autumn. "There is one small matter before we go, however. 'Twill only take a moment of your time."

"Yes?" asked Mother Midcarn. She sat back down and took another slice of cake.

"You have my jar of salve, Logan?" asked Autumn.

"Oh, um, yes," said Logan. He fumbled inside his tunic and pulled it out.

"I had a woman come to me for aid," said Autumn, taking the jar. "She had a large growth on her neck which was filled with much foulness. At the root of it I found this," and she held out the jar to show Mother Midcarn the sliver. "Have you any thoughts on what it might be?"

Mother Midcarn took the jar and studied the sliver. Then she scraped it out with a fingernail and studied it some more.

"I am not entirely certain," she said after a few moments, "but it looks like part of one of the spines of a weeo fish. 'Tis long and thin much like an eel and has spines such as these along its back. They are poisonous but not highly so. I did not think such fish came this far north but mayhap some do now and then. This was in the woman's neck?"

"Yes," said Autumn.

“Then likely the fish brushed past her when she was in the sea,” said Mother Midcarn, “and part of a spine broke off. You see it has barbs near the tip? They would have made the tip work its way ever deeper into her flesh.”

“Would it have killed her?” asked Komorebi.

“I think not,” said Mother Midcarn, “as its venom is not strong and tends to have more of a numbing effect but I daresay in time this piece could have worked its way into some important part of her. Mayhap even inside her head and driven her mad. Who knows?”

\* \* \*

A weak burst of Astauand's light managed to struggle through the clouds as the cart laboriously crested the small rise. The lake ahead shimmered with silver grey.

“Be resting the horse here a bit, like,” said the carter. He jumped off and pushed a stone under one of the wheels then got a water skin for the horse.

Logan jumped out of the back of the cart to help Mother Midcarn down from the narrow bench at the front. Autumn and Komorebi remained standing in the back so they could see. At the bottom of the gentle downhill slope lay Lake Nanikaika, its far side and the small island within it vague in a thin distant mist. The packed dwellings that had lined the streets on their way through Schtei stopped before the crest and gave way to scattered large buildings, solid with brick and stone, which squatted within lush gardens. Some even had streams with walkways and decorative bridges that led nowhere beyond emphasising the wealth of those who dwelt within. Such people as were visible toiled to keep the gardens neat and the walkways clear of leaves. To the left the dwellings continued as far as the eye could see, stopped only by the edge of the lake but to the right the dwellings stopped suddenly part way down and gave way to manicured lawns and static patterns of flowerbeds. Far to the right and stretching all the way down to the lake lay a dense forest. Almost directly ahead sat the Summer Palace, wide and squat. Its many curved decorated roofs seemingly like boats floating on the lake behind.

“Tis smaller than I expected,” commented Autumn.

Komorebi looked at her incredulously. “Tis by far the largest building in Schtei,” she exclaimed. “They say over a thousand people live there as well as the Mo’i and his whole family. Likely there is no bigger anywhere in Wase either.”

“I meant no disrespect,” said Autumn mildly. “If there is a fault it lies in my expectations, nothing more.”

“What do you think, Logan?” asked Komorebi, jumping off the cart to stand beside him. She took his hand and swung it gently. Logan smiled.

“Tis a goodly size and looks magnificent,” he said thinking its damp looking painted exterior lacked the glistening grandeur of the gold encrusted frontage of the Palace of the Golden Camel in Neander. The upward curving layered roofs reminded him of stacked slices of melon despite their dark colouring.

“Astauand is still some way off midday,” remarked Mother Midcarn looking at the sky. “We will make good time going downhill and should arrive long before the Mo’i’s lunch. I venture the clouds are thinning and it should not rain.”

Autumn jumped out of the cart as well and went to stand beside the carter.

“What are those smaller buildings between the palace and the forest?” she asked.

“That be where the soldiers be living,” he grunted. “Lot of the buggers, ain’t there.”

“You mean the whole of the Wasian army?” asked Autumn.

“Nah, just that bugger’s personal guard,” said the carter and spat on the ground. “Army itself be spread around, like. Right then, let’s be off. No sense hanging around here.”

Four large guards stood at the main entrance in the wall around the Summer Palace. The two inside the doorway held long curved swords across their chests. The blades of the swords broadened away from the hilt and looked exceedingly sharp. The other two held spears and stood beside the doors. They all looked very bored. Another man, slight and with a harried expression watched the cart arrive. He held a single thin stick in one hand and a strip of parchment in the other. The guards ignored the cart. One of them yawned surreptitiously.

“Who are you?” demanded the thin man. He scowled at Mother Midcarn but kept his eyes on his parchment.

“I am Mother Midcarn,” she replied sternly. “I have an audience with the Mo’i.”

The man looked at his strip of parchment and nodded.

“Them with you?” he asked, glancing at the others in the back of the cart.

“They are my entourage,” said Mother Midcarn, keeping her voice level.

“Just four?” he asked. “Is that all?”

“Three,” said Mother Midcarn. “The driver is not included in my party.”

The thin man scratched something on his parchment without fumbling or dropping his stick. Doubtless he had had a lot of practice.

“Right then,” he said, looking up. “You can go in.” He nodded at one of the guards and the two inside the doorway parted to make room.

Once again Logan helped Mother Midcarn from the cart and they followed her through the door. Komorebi’s eyes darted everywhere as she tried to keep her excitement under control.



“Is there some meaning to the sticks some carry?” asked Autumn quietly as they walked across an area of short grass edged with flower beds.

“Tis a sign of rank,” said Mother Midcarn. “A single stick is the lowest rank and the Keewa Due has seven as he is second only to the Mo’i.”

“Twould seem an awkward way to show rank,” said Autumn. “Would not seven sticks get in the way?”

“I daresay that is the point,” said Mother Midcarn. “Having seven sticks to hold means he can’t be expected to do anything menial.”

“What if one of the sticks gets broken or lost?” asked Logan. “Would he lose his rank?”

“I daresay they have spare sticks,” said Mother Midcarn, “and doubtless them as have several protect them most carefully.”

“There’s a funny smell here,” said Komorebi. “I always expected the palace to smell of flowers and perfumes yet it smells more of dirty men and piss.”

“Enough,” said Mother Midcarn quietly. “Once through that door we will be inside the Palace and none will take kindly to any criticisms.”

There were six guards at this door. Each carried a drawn sword and looked more alert. Beside the door was a pale faced man with straggly hair around a bald patch. He was perched on a three legged stool behind a small table. Beside the table lay a row of assorted weapons. Several staffs and a spear were propped against the wall behind them. Another man beside the door carried three sticks.

“Your credentials,” he demanded, blocking Mother Midcarn’s way.

Mother Midcarn looked coldly at him then pulled out the crimson bag. The man snatched it and pulled out the scroll.

“You are Mother Midcarn?” he demanded after glancing at it.

“Yes,” she said.

“And these?” he said, gesturing at Autumn and the others with the scroll.

“My secretary and bodyguards,” said Mother Midcarn.

“Right,” said the man. “Deposit your weapons. You will get them back when you leave.”

“We have only our staffs,” said Autumn.

“Put them against the wall,” said the bald man wearily. “Your names?”

“Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, propping her staff against the wall beside the others.

The bald man noted this then looked at Logan.

“Logan,” said Logan anxiously. “Will my staff be safe here? No one will take it by mistake?”

“No,” said the bald man abruptly and wrote down Logan's name.

“Anything else?” demanded the man.

“I have a knife,” said Logan hesitantly.

“That too,” said the bald man impatiently. Logan pulled out his knife and put it neatly beside his staff.

“You?” demanded the man.

Komorebi giggled nervously and shook her head.

“Right,” said the three stick man. “I need to check. If you will permit me, Mother Midcarn?”

“Is this really necessary?” she asked irritably.

“Fraid so,” said the man. “There be rumours of a threat. No one goes in without being checked.”

“Oh very well then,” she said and fumed as the man ran his hands over her.

“All good,” said the man, straightening. “You next,” and he beckoned to Logan.

Logan stepped across and the man started to pat him down. He paused when he got to the small bag hanging from Logan's belt.

“What's this, then?” asked the man.

“Ah!” said Logan in alarm, suddenly remembering.

“’Tis a knuckleduster!” exclaimed the man, feeling the bag. “Guards!”

## Chapter Seventeen

Instantly the six guards leapt forward with their swords brandished and pointing at Logan but Autumn was already in front of him protectively, pushing the three stick man aside. The bald man at the desk merely gawped. Komorebi screamed but no one took any notice.

"Please remain calm," said Autumn calmly, holding up her hands. "'Twas nothing more than simple forgetfulness. No harm was intended."

"I'm sorry!" exclaimed Logan over Autumn's shoulder. "Look! I'm taking it off and putting it over there!"

There was stony silence as everyone watched Logan undo the thong of the little pouch and hurriedly put it on the ground with his knife and staff. The bald man pulled himself together and went to inspect it.

"'Tis indeed a knuckleduster," he announced. "And a pretty good one at that."

He climbed back on his stool and noted it down.

The three stick man sighed and signalled to the guards who raised their swords but did not step back.

"Can't say as I see how a knuckleduster is going to be much of a danger," he said, scratching the back of his head with his sticks. "Not like the Mo'i be going to get in a fist fight. Right, best I be searching you all properly. You first, lad."

They waited patiently while he thoroughly searched Logan then Autumn then turned to Komorebi.

"You think they be weapons?" she asked caustically when he hesitated as his hands moved from her shoulders to her chest.

The man went red and several of the soldiers laughed.

"Oh, Voqev," he exclaimed angrily, jerking away from Komorebi. "This

be absurd. No maid such as this is any danger nor that fat one either.”

“Who are you calling fat?” exclaimed Mother Midcarn, glaring at him.

“No offence intended,” he said hurriedly. “I, umm, I was referring to a man who arrived earlier. Guards, let them pass. Mother Midcarn, the wahaju inside will guide you and your party to the Audience Chamber.”

“Thank you,” said Mother Midcarn coldly. She stepped haughtily through the doorway, her entourage in tow. As she passed the three stick man she twitched her little finger and the man's sticks disappeared, much to his consternation and the guards amusement.

“This way, if you please,” said the wahaju bowing obsequiously. He'd been watching though the doorway and had thoroughly enjoyed every moment. He led them along a wide passage lined with colourful wall hangings of hunting and battle scenes and intricate carvings. Komorebi's eyes tried to take in every one of the glories as she passed, the earlier unpleasantness already forgotten, as was Logan's hand although she stayed close to him. Only with the greatest difficulty was she able to refrain from exclaiming at every new sight.

“The Audience Chamber,” murmured the wahaju as they reached an open doorway. Two bored guards, swords sheathed, stood on either side. They perked up when they saw Autumn and Komorebi. “If you would care to take a seat the Keewa Due will announce your name when the time is right.”

Mother Midcarn nodded dismissively and stalked in before pausing to look around. The room was silent. A row of simple chairs lined the wall, facing a raised platform. A woman with a younger woman beside her stood in the centre of the room facing the platform with an air of anticipation. At the far end of the room a solitary man sat in one of the chairs. He had a large scroll on his knees and one foot jiggled nervously. A man, by his appearance on the cusp between vigorous old age and merely old, sat on the raised platform. He was simply dressed and was staring at the women standing before him, deep in thought. Another, younger, man, more richly dressed and holding seven sticks casually in his folded arms, stood to one side next to the

platform. His sharp eyes noted every movement in the room.

Mother Midcarn chose a chair and sat. Komorebi sat next to her with Logan beside her and Autumn next to him, closest to the door.

“Be that the Mo’i?” whispered Komorebi, staring wide-eyed at the man on the platform.

“Yes,” whispered Mother Midcarn. “The man standing next to him is Jotune Gres One, the Keewa Due.”

“Ooooh, isn’t he old!” whispered Komorebi.

Jotune’s eyes flashed to Komorebi then shifted to Autumn and Logan before sliding over to Mother Midcarn.

“Shh,” hissed Mother Midcarn.

“Sorry,” mouthed Komorebi and sank a little further into her chair. The Mo’i cleared his throat noisily and Komorebi jumped.

“Granted,” he said wearily. His voice had a querulous edge to it and was no longer strong.

The women standing before him almost wilted in relief. The older squeaked as she tried to speak then cleared her throat as well.

“You are the wisest of the wise, Most Venerated One,” she said before bowing and backing away. The younger did the same.

The Mo’i watched them expressionlessly until they were near the door.

“How many more must I endure today, Gres?” he demanded, his voice still flat. “I grow weary.”

“Only two, Most Venerated One,” replied Jotune.

“Then get on with it,” said the Mo’i. He wiped a hand over his almost completely bald head and stared at it for a moment before looking directly at Autumn. She noticed that despite his apparent age and

weariness his green eyes were bright and alert.

“Your Veneration,” replied Jotune. He snapped his fingers and a clerk hidden behind him passed him a document which he glanced at quickly before barking, “Tuala Selem Four come forward.”

The nervous man sitting alone jumped up and nearly dropped his scroll. He hurried forward and stood before the Mo'i.

“State your purpose clearly and concisely,” commanded Jotune.

“Umm, yes,” stammered Tuala. “Ahh, Most Venerated One, I come before you to seek your, umm, consideration, for the construction of a time machine, umm, please.”

“A what?” barked the Mo'i, showing some life at last.

“I venture, Venerated One,” said Jotune smoothly, “this man proposes a machine for the measuring and marking of time. That is to say the placing of regular indicators to show the passing of time throughout the day.”

“To what purpose?” asked the Mo'i, looking baffled.

Tuala looked at Jotune.

“Speak up, man,” barked Jotune. “Your Mo'i asked you a question.”

“Ummm, of course,” said Tuala nervously. “Well, Most Venerated One, at the moment we only have three definite points during the day, umm, that being when Astauand rises, when It peaks and when It, umm, sets. 'Tis my idea to divide the day and, umm, of course, the night, into, ahh, ten divisions of equal duration. I propose to call these obaz and each obaz would thus be one tenth of an entire cycle of Astauand.”

“Again I ask, to what purpose?” said the Mo'i.

“Oh, umm, well once established,” said Tuala, “it would make it easier for people, and you, of course, Most Venerated One, to know when

things would happen or when to meet others and such like. If I might give an example, umm, an audience such as this could be set for a specific time such as the third obaz of the day and then everyone concerned would know exactly when the audience is and not have to wait.”

“If I might venture a question, Most Venerated One?” asked Jotune.

The Mo'i gestured with his finger.

“The tenth part of a full cycle of Astauand would seem a somewhat long time,” said Jotune. “Would not people be waiting just as long for this third obaz as they would anyway?”

“Ahh, well, that is the beauty of my proposal,” said Tuala, warming to his theme. “I further propose to divide each obaz into ten equal parts which I call ezils. Then people can arrange meetings or suchlike for the second ezil of the third obaz and another for the fourth ezil of the same obaz and know that they will not be late or early for either and how long there will be between each.”

“Well, 'tis an interesting proposal,” said the Mo'i, “although I am not yet convinced for the need for such a thing. Tell me, how would everyone know when the second thing of the first thing would be?”

“Ahh, your wisdom brings us to the core of the problem, Most Venerated One,” enthused Tuala. “'Tis all here in my drawings,” and he held up his scroll. “'Tis a machine of my own design which is a system of rolling balls and joined levers which will mark when each ezil and obaz occur. Once constructed it need only be set in motion and thereafter, with your most venerable condescension, all in Wase will note their motion and know what the time is. I propose that my machine be built outside your Palace so all will know that you and you alone are the centre from which all time emanates.”

“I see,” said the Mo'i, rubbing the side of his nose. “Well, perhaps it is worthy of some consideration. You expect me to pay for this, this ... machine?”

Tuala spread his hands and looked hopeful.



“The cost?” barked Jotune.

“A mere trifle for one who is known to be most generous in all things,” said Tuala obsequiously. “And what price can one put on being the centre of all time?”

“How much?” said the Mo'i, his voice strengthening.

“Umm, perhaps no more than, shall we say, umm, ten thousand kalas,” said Tuala nervously, shrinking slightly.

The Mo'i stared at him and tension began to rise in the room.

“Umm, mayhap seven thousand would be suff ..., or five,” said Tuala hurriedly.

“Denied,” barked the Mo'i.

Tuala opened his mouth to protest. Jotune glared at him and, reluctantly, Tuala began to back away, his scroll dragging on the floor.

“That was the last?” asked the Mo'i watching him go.

“One more, Most Venerated One,” said Jotune. “Mother Midcarn of Aferraron come forward.”

“Just Mother Midcarn,” barked Jotune as Mother Midcarn, Autumn and Logan rose to their feet. Komorebi was too overwhelmed to react. Autumn and Logan sat down again and Mother Midcarn walked four paces forward to stand roughly where Tuala had.

“State your purpose clearly and concisely,” commanded Jotune.

Unintimidated in the presence of the superficial powers of royalty, Mother Midcarn gave Jotune a level stare then turned her attention to the Mo'i.

“I am a scholar from Aferraron,” she said, enunciating clearly. “I seek your permission to access your library.”

“You will refer to the Most Venerated One as such,” barked Jotune icily.

“My apologies,” said Mother Midcarn, inclining her head in the Mo'i's direction. “I am a foreigner and unfamiliar with the protocols here.”

She paused and after a few moments the Mo'i lifted a finger to indicate she may continue.

“I seek the permission of the Most Venerated to access his library,” said Mother Midcarn.

“Most Venerated One,” barked Jotune with a heavy emphasis on the 'One'.

“Leave it, Gres,” remarked the Mo'i, holding up his hand. “I am weary and do not wish to sit through a lesson in court procedures. The woman is respectful, leave it at that.”

“Most Venerated One,” said Jotune softly, bowing his head towards the Mo'i.

Some soft footfalls behind Autumn made her turn her head. Four guards had joined the two already there and there were some whispers.

“Why are you here?” asked the Mo'i turning his attention back to Mother Midcarn. He sounded puzzled.

“To ask the Most Venerated One's permission to use the library,” said Mother Midcarn. She sounded equally puzzled.

“I do not understand,” said the Mo'i, looking at Jotune. “Why is she here?”

“I fancy she does not refer to the Palace Library, Most Venerated One,” said Jotune. “As Your Veneration knows the Palace Library is available to all and application need only be made to the Librarian.”

“Quite,” said the Mo'i, now beginning to look irritated. “I ask again

and for the third and last time, why is she here?"

There were some more faint footfalls and Autumn glanced back to see the two original guards leaving. The four new ones took up position in the doorway. One, Autumn noticed, wore a green neckcloth and the other three wore red ones. Autumn turned her attention back to the Mo'i and noticed Jotune's eyes were fixed on the guards. She also noticed a very slight movement in his robes as he tensed.

"Mother Midcarn of Aferraron," said Jotune, his voice a touch thicker than it had been. "As has doubtless been explained to you the Palace Library is accessible through the Librarian. Why do you come before the Most Venerated One unnecessarily?"

"Because you told me to," retorted Mother Midcarn.

"What is going on here?" demanded the Mo'i. He leaned forward irritably and scowled at Mother Midcarn.

Jotune sighed and jiggled his seven sticks in exasperation. The damned fool woman was not delivering her lines as he had instructed her.

"Tell the Most Venerated One which library you wish to use," he said, his nostrils flaring.

A slight metallic sound caused Autumn to twist again. One of the guards, the one with a green neckcloth, was slowly pulling out his sword, trying to do it as quietly as possible. He looked at her and smiled. She noticed the smile did not appear in his eyes. Perturbed she looked back at Jotune in time to catch a flicker of a glance over at the guard in the green neckcloth. She tensed in readiness as she felt something untoward was about to happen.

"I desire access to the library in the Old Palace," said Mother Midcarn, "not the library in the Summer Palace."

The Mo'i's eyes narrowed and he stared at her for a few moments before slowly leaning back in his chair. Logan shifted in his and Autumn instantly leapt to her feet before she realised it had only been

Logan who moved. The green neckcloth guard stepped in front of her, using the movement to fully pull out his sword and the other three stepped forward in readiness.

“I apologise,” said Autumn, looking up into the guard's eyes as he towered fully a head and half again higher than she. There was something odd in his eyes but she couldn't make out what it was.

“Sit you down,” said the guard quietly. “You have no part in this.”

“No part in what?” wondered Autumn as she sat back down. The guard gave a hand signal to the other three who retreated to the doorway. He turned and saluted Jotune before stepping back himself.

“Why are there four guards today?” asked the Mo'i.

“They ready to deliver you to your Dining Room, Most Venerated One,” said Jotune smoothly. “Now if we may return to the matter at hand?”

“Ah yes,” said the Mo'i, his eyes on the guards, “the Old Palace Library.” He watched the guards for a few more moments then his eyes flicked back to Mother Midcarn. “What possible business have you with the Old Palace Library?”

“I have heard that there are records there pertaining to the history of Schtei,” said Mother Midcarn, “and the times before the Palace was moved to its present location.”

“Very likely,” said the Mo'i, “but I fail to see your need to refer to them. Doubtless they are very old and fragile and unable to be read, if they are still intact. No, none are permitted entry therein now.”

“If none are permitted to see,” said Mother Midcarn, “what purpose do they serve?”

“Records are records,” replied the Mo'i. “Destroying records is a crime.”

“I am not entirely certain of that, Most Venerated One,” said Jotune.

“I do not recall any legislation on that point.”

“Then it should be a crime,” retorted the Mo’i.

“And would not that mean you yourself are guilty of a crime, Most Venerated One?” asked Mother Midcarn, irritated that her request was being denied. “By not permitting the records to be seen and copied you are yourself assisting in their destruction!”

Jotune gave a half smile and glanced at the guards. He gave the merest suggestion of a nod in their direction, which puzzled Autumn.

“The Most Venerated One cannot commit a crime,” he said smoothly. “Your Most Venerated decision?”

“Denied,” said the Mo’i flatly.

“Pah!” exclaimed Mother Midcarn angrily. “I always said you were an old fool like your father before you!”

“She has a knife!” shouted Jotune, leaping forward in front of the Mo’i. “Guards! Guards!”

## Chapter Eighteen

No sooner had Jotune uttered his cry than a long thin dagger appeared in his hand from under his robe and he leapt at the Mo'i.

“You die, old fool,” he cried and lashed out wildly.

The Mo'i, no stranger to assassination attempts, was no longer there. At the sound of the words “she has a knife” he had instinctively and instantly thrust his chair backwards. He rolled on the floor and became entwined with Mother Midcarn who had been shoved unceremoniously forward by Autumn who had reacted faster than anyone. Even the guards who were ready and prepared were slower to react. Their confusion at Autumn's unexpected appearance did not help.

“Hold!” cried Autumn, regaining her balance.

She twirled to face Jotune and narrowly missed being caught by his flailing dagger. As it flashed past her face she caught Jotune's wrist and jerked it around, pulling him off balance. The leading guard's sword caught Jotune's upper arm and he screamed as he fell. Autumn released his wrist and spun, pushing herself backwards and to the side to avoid the Mo'i's chair then rolled and leapt to her feet to face the four guards.

“I say again, hold!” cried Autumn, holding out one hand as a sign to stop. “There is no ...,” but the guards took no notice.

The one with the green neckcloth jumped over Jotune and went for the Mo'i, his sword ready to thrust. Autumn did not hesitate and spun to launch a side kick at the guard's sword hand, knocking the sword from his hand. Another guard, faster to react than the others, swung his sword at Autumn's head and she jumped backwards and slipped in some of Jotune's blood on the polished wooden floor. She crashed into Mother Midcarn who was trying to get up, using the Mo'i's head for leverage. Mother Midcarn collapsed heavily on top of the Mo'i again, pinning him to the floor. Autumn landed on her back on the other side of Mother Midcarn, momentarily winded.

The four guards rallied and, at a sign from the green neckcloth man, formed a semi-circle around the pile of bodies, the green neckcloth guard pulling a short stabbing knife from his belt.

“Kill them all,” he ordered.

“Noooo!” screamed Logan as he hurled himself onto the man's back. He hung on tightly as the guard tried to stab him in the face with the point of his knife but it snagged in the cloth of Logan's robe. The pair lurched wildly from side to side, Logan hanging on tightly, his head buried in the nape of the guard's neck. At the same instant Autumn launched a double scissor kick at two of the guards, catching one on his forehead and the other at the top of his chest. Both fell back, stunned and winded. Autumn landed on one foot but off balance and stumbled forward. Using her forward momentum she aimed a flurry of blows with both hands at the head of the last of the guards. One caught him on the side of his head and with a gasp he slumped to the floor. Unable to regain her footing Autumn fell over him and rolled back to her feet, twisting in the process to face Logan and his guard.

It was not a pretty sight. The guard had managed to bend fully forward and charged the wall, no doubt intending to crash Logan's head into it. Logan had managed to twist just enough so his shoulder hit the wall instead and the guard was repeatedly punching at Logan's other shoulder and neck while he was trapped against the wall. Autumn ran three steps forward, her acute senses aware of other men running into the room. She spun to kick the guard in the belly just as a now familiar quivery chilled sensation filled her chest. She managed to complete the kick and doubled over to put one hand on the floor to maintain her balance but caught the end of a spear shaft in her belly. The spear itself was embedded in the wall.

“Desist now!” roared the Mo'i. He was propped on one hand behind his chair, the other hand reaching over it. “Desist, I say!”

The room was now half filled with guards, all with drawn swords or spears held ready. There was some confusion and jockeying for position but they obeyed the power in the Mo'i's voice and stopped, tense and watchful. Autumn got to her feet, as watchful as the others. Her belly hurt but she ignored the pain. Logan still had his arms and

legs wrapped around his guard who now lay on the floor. Logan's eyes were tightly shut and the guard, now realising that all was lost, just lay there. No doubt he hoped no one would notice him.

"You there!" demanded the Mo'i, jerking his hand at the nearest guard. "Help me to my feet, curse you!"

The guard dropped his sword in panic at being spoken to directly by the Mo'i but hurried forward to grab the Mo'i under the armpits. He hauled the Mo'i to his feet and the Mo'i scowled.

"Stay here," he ordered as the guard began to back away. The guard stepped forward and the Mo'i grasped his shoulder tightly and looked imperiously around the room. Logan opened his eyes cautiously and also looked around.

"You," barked the Mo'i suddenly, pointing to another guard with a green neckcloth. "Your face is familiar to me. What is your name?"

"Kydon Dusugey," barked Dusugey, jumping to attention.

"And where do your loyalties lie, Kydon Dusugey?" demanded the Mo'i, glaring at him.

"With Your Most Venerated Person," barked Dusugey without hesitation.

"Very well, very well," said the Mo'i, suddenly tired. He slumped a little and his supporting guard gripped his upper arm. "My chair, if you please. And someone get me a drink. I am parched."

The guard lifted the chair with one foot so he did not have to let go of the Mo'i then grabbed it with his spare hand and flipped it the right way up. Then he helped lower the Mo'i into it before stepping back. The Mo'i acknowledged him with a flip of his hand then sat back and surveyed the room again slowly. His eyes came to a rest on Jotune, who sat on the floor holding his sliced arm and moaning gently.

"Kydon Dusugey," said the Mo'i without looking away from Jotune.



“Most Venerated One,” barked Dusugey.

“You are now Head Kydon Dusugey,” said the Mo'i. His eyes flickered over to Logan and the guard he was still hanging on to. “Put those two in that corner.”

He pointed to a far corner and Dusugey stepped forward then realised he was now Head Kydon. He pointed at two other guards and gestured. One grabbed Logan who let go of the former Head Kydon and the other grabbed the man himself.

The Mo'i's eyes went back to Jotune and narrowed.

“Put the women in that other corner,” he commanded, staring at Jotune. “With the other one.”

Dusugey nodded his head at two other guards but Autumn was already walking over to where Komorebi huddled nervously. One picked up Mother Midcarn and helped her limp across. Logan started to move to join them but the guard put a heavy hand on his sore shoulder so he stayed where he was.

“Find the three who were with him,” said the Mo'i, pointing to the former Head Kydon, “and put them with him again. And find a maid to clean up all this blood.”

“Your drink is here, Most Venerated One,” said Dusugey noticing a scared looking servant hovering in the doorway.

“Bring it to me,” commanded the Mo'i.

Dusugey brought the drink and stood before the Mo'i, his head bowed. He held out the goblet.

“Taste it,” commanded the Mo'i.

Expressionlessly Dusugey took a drink and everyone watched to see how he reacted.

“Very well,” said the Mo'i after what seemed an eternity. He took the

goblet and sipped.

A maid appeared with a bucket and several cloths and a guard whispered to her and pointed to the blood on the floor. She scurried over and dropped to her knees. The Mo'i watched her for a while, taking occasional sips of his drink. Then he looked over at Mother Midcarn.

“Was your intent to kill me?” he asked softly.

“No, Most Venerated One,” said Mother Midcarn.

“How can I know the truth of this?” he asked.

“If such had been my intent you would be now dead,” said Mother Midcarn. “None here could stop me.”

“How so?” asked the Mo'i. “You do not have the look of a skilled assassin.”

“So you want proof?” asked Mother Midcarn. She shrugged and waved her hand. Five swords appeared in the air, each pointed at the Mo'i's heart. They hung in the air for two heartbeats then disappeared. The Mo'i spluttered but managed not to spill his drink.

“A useful skill,” he said, trying to stay calm. “So you are a sorcerer?”

“Of a sort,” said Mother Midcarn.

“And your companions?” asked the Mo'i. “I saw that one was a useful fighter. I venture she would have few difficulties either.”

“I could not kill you, Most Venerated One,” said Autumn. “'Twould be against my vows.”

“Your vows?” said the Mo'i softly. He inclined his head towards her. “By what manner of things do you have vows?”

“I am a Krisana of Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup,” said Autumn, “and I do not kill except in the most dire of circumstances.”

"I see," said the Mo'i flatly. He sipped his drink again. "A sorcerer and a krisana, eh." He suddenly pointed at Logan in the other corner. "You, what manner of skills do you possess?"

"Oh, umm," said Logan with a start. "I am nothing in particular. Just companion to Autumn."

"Just a companion?" asked the Mo'i. "Somehow I doubt that but no matter. What about the wench? I noticed she took no part in all this."

"She is my friend," said Logan. "She had no part in this."

"Companion to the companion, eh?" said the Mo'i. "Ah well." He returned his gaze to Jotune who was still sitting on the floor clutching his arm. "So, Gres, why did you say that woman had a knife when it is readily apparent she had no need of a knife nor any ill intent?"

Jotune ignored the Mo'i. He knew his time was over and was beyond caring.

"If I may speak?" said Mother Midcarn.

"'Twould seem no one else will," said the Mo'i drily.

"I venture Jotune Gres One saw an opportunity when I enquired about using the library," said Mother Midcarn. "He gave me ill information, doubtless with the intent of using my audience with you as an opportunity to assassinate you and have that act blamed on one from Aferraron. Doubtless he also arranged this audience to be the last of the day to make it easier. I venture the intent was to embarrass the Roinad of Aferraron in the process thereby putting Aferraron in a weaker position for your successor."

"And what do you say to that, Gres?" asked the Mo'i. "Do not deny it. I heard what you said and I saw the dagger in your hand." He paused and waited for a reaction from Jotune. None was forthcoming, beyond the dripping of more blood from between his fingers. "And the guards? They were in your employ?" Jotune still did not react.

The Mo'i finished his drink and tossed the goblet behind him. It

landed on the floor with a clunk and cracked.

“Oh take him away,” said the Mo'i irritably, “and do not let him bleed to death. I need him alive for his execution.”

“And the others, Most Venerated One?” asked Dusugey.

“Execute the guards who were part of the plot and release those from Aferraron,” said the Mo'i. “Let them come before me then clear the room. It is too crowded in here and that irritates me.”

“Most Venerated One,” said Dusugey. He gave his orders and, with remarkable speed, the room was emptied apart from Mother Midcarn, Autumn, Logan, Komorebi and two guards left at the entrance. Unnoticed, the maid continued her scrubbing diligently. The blood had spread and was congealing.

“From what little I saw,” said the Mo'i, “it was this krisana who fought off my attackers. Is this so?”

No one answered. The Mo'i's nostrils flared.

“Come, tell me,” he said impatiently. “It could not have been the sorcerer for she spent much of her time pinning me to the floor and I fancy the companion and his friend had little hand in this unless they are more than they claim.”

“I did tackle one of the guards,” said Logan hesitantly, “although I do not claim to have bested him.”

“Umm, and I was held fast in my chair by fright,” said Komorebi, holding Logan's hand tightly. “I was so scared I thought I was going to wet myself!”

“Quite,” said the Mo'i. He looked shocked then chuckled and beamed at her. “I thought I was going to do the same so do not fret, my child.” He looked expectantly at Autumn. “Well?”

“I do not seek praise or reward,” said Autumn. “I do what needs be done and move on.”

“Doubtless,” said the Mo’i, “and I would expect nothing more from a krisana but surely there is something I can give you as a token of my thanks? Money? A position in my household?”

“There is nothing I desire,” said Autumn, “except an end to suffering and I venture even you, Most Venerated One, cannot do that.”

“Aye, ’tis beyond my powers,” said the Mo’i. “But perhaps there is something. Your name, sorcerer? I have forgotten in the excitement.”

“Mother Midcarn,” said Mother Midcarn.

“As I recall I denied your application,” said the Mo’i. “Something to do with a library, was it not?”

“Indeed,” said Mother Midcarn. “I desired to visit your library in the Old Palace.”

“Ah, yes, the Old Palace,” said the Mo’i. He glanced up as the maid scraped her bucket while getting up. She noticed his glance and fled. “And yet you would not tell me why you wish to visit.”

“To read what is written,” said Mother Midcarn. “Beyond that I have no motives as I do not know what is written there.”

“And that the records are very old and fragile does not alarm you?” asked the Mo’i.

“I have ways of reading the records without disturbing them,” said Mother Midcarn.

The Mo’i nodded thoughtfully.

“So, krisana,” he said after a few moments. “You would like me to grant your sorcerer’s request as a reward for your actions?”

“No,” said Autumn. “A gift given freely is most precious but I do not seek rewards or favours. The granting or denying of Mother Midcarn’s request is your choice and yours alone. Do not grant it against your wishes out of some sense of duty to me for I did not seek to put you

under any obligation.”

“So you would accept my continuing rejection of the request?” asked the Mo’i, glancing at Mother Midcarn.

“Of course,” said Autumn. “What is yours to give is yours to give freely or not at all.”

The Mo’i looked thoughtfully at her then at the others in turn.

“Gres,” he barked suddenly then looked around a trifle sheepishly. “Pah, I forgot. ’Twould seem I need a new Keewa Due.” He sighed then looked at Autumn from under his eyebrows. “Perhaps you would like to be my Keewa Due?”

“Thank you, no,” said Autumn in surprise. “I am in Schtei only for the winter and will continue my travels after that.”

“Very well,” said the Mo’i decisively. “When a new Keewa Due is appointed his first task will be to find the key to the library of the Old Palace and convey it to you. Doubtless we have your address somewhere. You may leave.”

## Chapter Nineteen

“I think Komorebi and Galeo have gone out,” said Autumn soon after they had returned to their dwelling. She got up and looked out the doorway. “Aye, they are both walking along the road.”

Logan sat back on his heels and watched the tiny flames of the fire begin to build for a few moments. Some vegetables sat on the floor beside him, ready to become their meal when the fire had become strong enough. Then he twisted to look at Autumn.

“So, did what I think happened happen?” he asked quietly. Merak on the other side was hard of hearing and, if truth be told, lived not entirely in this world, but the walls were thin and casual talk easily overheard.

“The spear?” asked Autumn quietly, coming over to sit beside him. “Aye, I felt the chill and quivering as it passed through me.”

Logan exhaled in relief. “I am right pleased,” he said and poked a root with his knife. “That can only mean your robe still has its powers despite being a new robe.”

“Well, 'tis not the robe but the ribbon,” said Autumn, “but yes, 'twould seem so. I venture it has not changed in any way either. Look.”

She lifted the front of her tunic to show Logan the livid bruise on her belly where the shaft of the spear had caught her as she got to her feet at the end of the fight. Logan grimaced in sympathy then grinned.

“The first throw of the spear would likely have killed you,” he said, “but walking into the butt of it would not. Your robe, or at least the ribbon, would seem as selective as always. Does it hurt?”

“Naturally,” said Autumn, “but soreness can be ignored and will pass in a day or two.”

Logan nodded sympathetically then put the cauldron on the fire. He poured in some water and added a few herbs. Autumn watched as he started to peel and chop the vegetables.

“Mother Midcarn said we could join her in the old library if we wish,” she said after a while.

“Oh yes?” replied Logan. He looked up. “When was that?”

“’Twas while you were dallying with Komorebi,” said Autumn absently. “When we were waiting for the cart to come back.”

“We were not dallying,” said Logan, a slight edge to his voice. “There were some flowers Komorebi wanted to look at and she would not let go of my hand.”

“Oh yes?” asked Autumn, not really listening. “I wonder what Mother Midcarn is looking for in the library.”

“Did she not tell you?” asked Logan. He dumped a handful of chopped vegetables into the cauldron and picked up another root.

“Hmm? Oh, no,” said Autumn. “She said only that there may be things recorded there beyond our comprehension.”

“And that makes you ever more desirous to see them?” asked Logan. He glanced over at her but her face was expressionless in the fire light.

“Of course,” said Autumn, “although I am unlikely to be able to read them for I doubt they are written in the Old Tongue. ’Tis possible they are even written in the tongue that was spoken by them as lived here before this place became Wase. Mother Midcarn seems to think that there are records in the Old Library that go back to that time. Perhaps even before the Old Palace was built. Mother Midcarn said this land was occupied by a people called the Oreacuachi.”

“Oh yes,” said Logan. He added the last of the vegetables and gave the cauldron a stir with a stick he kept especially for that purpose. “So there were people here before it became Wase? How is that possible? Has it not always been Wase?”

“Decidedly not,” said Autumn. She rubbed the bruise on her belly through the cloth of her tunic. “I know nothing of the history of Wase



but something of the history of Aferraron. Many many summers past there was no Aferraron nor Wase, only a number of groups of people spread up and down the coast. Among them was a group who called themselves the Ciyat. Among them was a man of uncommon ability called Buyayciyat who became leader of the Ciyat and later persuaded many of the neighbouring groups to form a loose alliance for cooperation and trade.”

“So this Buyayciyat started Aferraron, then?” asked Logan.

“In part,” said Autumn. “The alliance under his guidance and that of later leaders was called the Zachad and expanded to include most of the peoples along the coast of what is now Aferraron and Wase. I do not know if the Oreacuachi were ever part of that alliance.”

“So when did Aferraron become Aferraron?” asked Logan. He prodded a lump of vegetable and decided it was not ready yet.

“Some while later,” said Autumn. “When Ptemsesnis III was ruler of Zachad there was some sort of trouble. No one knows what for there was nothing recorded, or if it was it has not survived but her era'owen was exiled and he led his followers north. Ptemsesnis stayed in the South and became the first Roinad of Aferraron.”

“So her era'owen founded Wase?” asked Logan

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Most likely the Oreacuachi were already in this area and gave Aqineer and his followers sanctuary or mayhap Aqineer simply invaded them and took control. Mayhap this is what Mother Midcarn wishes to find out.”

“And no one knows why Aqineer was exiled?” asked Logan. “It must have been pretty dreadful for the Roinad to exile her era'owen.”

“All we know is that there were unspecified crimes against her person,” said Autumn. “That at least is written although it is only on a scrap of recaisn with much missing.” She paused and thought for a moment. “That scrap is not even certain to refer to Aqineer.”

“Then why do people think it does?” asked Logan. “Our meal is

ready.”

He scooped a bowl in the cauldron and passed it to Autumn. She took it and put it on the ground before reaching over to get her spoon.

“The scrap refers to someone called Aqineer The Lewd,” said Autumn. She blew on her spoonful of stew before sipping it. “Ptemsesnis' era'owen was Aqineer do'h Raspusny so the scrap may possibly refer to a different Aqineer although there is another scrap of recaisn which says that Aqineer do'h Raspusny was also known as The Lewd but does not say why. Most scholars accept that the two are the same and there is no doubt Aqineer was exiled by Ptemsesnis or that he was the founder of Schtei which later included the outlying lands and became known as Wase.”

“Tis quite interesting,” said Logan. “It had never crossed my mind that countries have beginnings and there were people there before the countries began.”

“Aye, and there are those who dedicate their lives to tracing those histories,” said Autumn. “Not many, I believe, but them as do freely share their knowledge and speculations with others and some, such as those at my Esyup, follow their teachings and teach in turn. I had not thought Mother Midcarn to be one of them.”

“Knowing her skills,” remarked Logan, “I wonder she would grub around among old records. Could she not simply go back and visit these places whenever they were and see what's what?”

Autumn dropped her spoon back in her bowl and stared at Logan in the light of the fire.

“Aye,” she said thoughtfully, “and we know she has some powers over time itself. Hmm. Does that not make you curious, Logan?”

“Curious?” asked Logan. He screwed up his face and moved his jaws for a few moments then pulled a particularly tough lump from his mouth. He looked at it in distaste then threw it in the fire. “Curious about what?”

“About what Mother Midcarn is really looking for in the Old Library,” said Autumn. “If she wants to know about the Oreacuachi why does she not simply go back and ask them?”

Logan made a rude noise with his lips. “Me? Sploop no!” he exclaimed. “There is much in this world I do not understand and even more I do not want to understand. I prefer to leave Mother Midcarn to Mother Midcarn.”

“So you will not be coming with us?” asked Autumn.

“Of course I will,” said Logan, “for where you go I go and that is one of the few things I do understand but I am content to let you and Mother Midcarn ferret around and disturb that which has lain undisturbed for longer than I can imagine. Like as not there is nothing left there but dust and sneezes. When are we going?”

“Not before the key is found and delivered to us,” said Autumn. “Mayhap that may take a day or two, perhaps longer.”

“What if the key cannot be found?” asked Logan, scooping a second helping from the cauldron.

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “Mayhap the Mo’i or the new Keewa Due will order the door broken down or mayhap they will leave the place locked up forever although I doubt Mother Midcarn will allow that to happen.”

\* \* \*

“Not this beach,” said Komorebi as Galeo turned to step off the road. Astauand was almost fully below the horizon and the beach lay in the gloom of a cloudy twilight. “We will go to the next beach. This one has that sorcerer’s boat and I do not want her overhearing us.”

“I see no boat,” said Galeo, scanning the beach.

“I told you, she has ways of hiding the boat from view,” said Komorebi. “When Logan and Autumn brought me here the boat appeared quite suddenly in the middle of the beach and disappeared

when we left. I do not know if it is there now but like as not it is.”

“Tis difficult to believe a thing without seeing it,” said Galeo, scratching his head. “And did you not say she was not a sorcerer? Now you say she is?”

“Then do not believe me,” said Komorebi tartly. “I have seen it and I believe it but if you choose not to that is your business. Regardless, we will not talk on that beach.”

“I believe you, child,” said Galeo, “for you are not one who is given to fantastic tales without good reason. The next beach it is.”

They walked on in silence until they were a goodly way along the next beach. A solitary gull watched them then took off slowly. The day's pickings had been poor and it was still hungry.

“So, what of the day do you wish to tell me?” asked Galeo. “Why do you now call her a sorcerer?”

“She admitted it to the Mo'i,” said Komorebi in a rush. “There was an attempt on the Mo'i's life which Autumn averted yet blame was put on Mother Midcarn so she made five swords appear to show the Mo'i she could kill him any time she wanted and so it could not have been her so it was the Keewa Due and some guards and they could not go to some place in the Old Palace that I know not what of and what to make of it all is beyond me.”

“Woah, you make no sense, child,” said Galeo, holding up his hands in the gloom. “Sit on the sand and tell me all, slowly and we'll see what's what.”

So they sat and Komorebi told Galeo everything she could remember of the day, including how the Mo'i had chuckled when she had said without thinking that she had nearly wet herself in fright.

“I nearly died with embarrassment, father,” she admitted, going red again. “Twas not seemly to admit such a thing, and to the Mo'i himself! Oh, Ratanbismet!”

“Aye,” said her father glumly then he slapped his leg. “But the Mo’i chuckled, did he not?”

“Aye, and said he nearly did the same,” said Komorebi, “although he had just cause.”

“So he was not offended then,” said Galeo thoughtfully. “I wonder if he had taken a fancy to you?”

“I wager not,” said Komorebi. “He must be surrounded by beautiful ladies all day. Why would he take a fancy to a lowly man’s daughter who does not know how to talk properly?”

“Stranger things have happened,” said Galeo, “although likely only in tales of fantasy and not in real life. Like as not it will be impossible to get you in front of him again so I don’t see how we can turn this to our advantage. Ah, well. Tell me more of Autumn. You say she bested four guards?”

“I think so,” said Komorebi. “It may have been only three for Logan took on one and it was all so quick and sudden but even three is a lot and they were armed and we were not.”

“Are you sure you have that the right way around?” asked Galeo. “I thought you said Logan was the fighter?”

“Aye he has skills,” said Komorebi. She absently let some sand trickle through her fingers. “But you may remember that I also thought Autumn spoke to him after that fight in the street as a teacher. From what I saw though Autumn could best Logan with both hands tied behind her back. Aye, and one leg too.”

“Well, now, that is interesting,” said Galeo deep in thought. “How does this fit in with the Chanwars?”

“I am beginning to think that we were wrong there, father,” said Komorebi. “Mayhap they have no involvement with the Chanwars. I do not see them as mixes with sorcerers and Mo’is be getting involved with bandits.”

“Aye,” said Galeo, “I follow your thinking but I heard something today. There be a rumour going around that the younger of the Chanwars be dead after all, like Autumn said.”

“Oh really?” said Komorebi, becoming intense. “So how does Autumn know of such a thing long before it reaches those in Schtei who make it their business to know?”

“I know not,” said Galeo, “but there's more. The word is that the younger Chanwar died after some sort of dispute with a young woman who was travelling with her companion. Them as I heard this from wager it be nonsense for how could a woman and her friend best the Chanwars but I immediately thought of Logan and Autumn. Now you be saying that Autumn has great skills as a fighter.”

“Surpassingly great, father,” said Komorebi. “I have never seen the like and she is fast too. Blindingly fast. She went from her chair to push the sorcerer out of the way in less than the time it took for the Keewa Due to strike with his knife. How do you reckon this?”

“Aye, yi yi,” said Galeo, rubbing his head. “Well, think on this. Suppose it be true what Autumn says. She and Logan be travelling and meet the Chanwars by chance and best them then come to Schtei and meet up with a sorcerer and go to see the Mo'i. What odds would you put on that being true?”

“None,” said Komorebi, flatly. “’Tis so unlikely a tale as to be nonsense.”

“That be my thinking as well,” said Galeo. “But I have another idea. What say you to this? Autumn is a fighter of surpassing skill and she was hired by the older Chanwar to get rid of the younger. ’Tis well known they did not like each other. Then she is hired to assassinate the Mo'i and the sorcerer was brought in so as to gain admittance to the Mo'i.”

“Mayhap the first,” said Komorebi dubiously, “but not the second. She could easily have killed the Mo'i but she fought to protect him. Doubtless she could have used the same ploy to get an audience without the need of a sorcerer. After all, she is from Aferraron as

well.”

“Pah,” exclaimed Galeo and spat on the sand. “What ideas have you, then?”

“I do not know,” said Komorebi, picking up another handful of sand, “but I am convinced this all fits together. What say you that Autumn, rather than Logan, is an agent of the older Chanwar and, having rid him of the younger, he has sent her to somehow make some arrangement with the Mo’i? Mayhap Chanwar One has designs on being Mo’i and Autumn is to find some way of making the Mo’i accept him as his successor?”

“Mayhap,” said Galeo thoughtfully. “’Twould be a goodly ploy to earn the Mo’i’s gratitude and all know there is no heir and the Mo’i is too old to make one now. Mayhap Autumn is to convince the Mo’i to adopt Chanwar One. But how does the sorcerer fit into all this?”

“Mayhap she is here to put a spell on the Mo’i as well,” said Komorebi. “But then we are forgetting this thing in the Old Palace.”

“What was it again?” asked Galeo.

“I know not,” said Komorebi. “I think they called it a libby or labry or some such but what that is I know not. There was some talk of records as well but what records I do not know.”

“Records?” asked Galeo. “Records of what? And what is a labry? And why would the Chanwars be interested in records from the Old Palace?”

“I have no idea,” said Komorebi then she stiffened. “Ohhhhhhh.”

“What?” asked Galeo.

“Do you suppose that mayhap there are records in the Old Palace that show that Chanwar is the rightful heir to Wase?” asked Komorebi excitedly. “And that Autumn and Logan are charged with finding those records?”

“Well, now, that be a thought,” said Galeo slowly. “That be a right interesting thought indeed. And what do you think Chanwar One will do with someone who finds proof he is the heir to Wase?”

“Like as not it would be most beneficial,” said Komorebi.

“So how goes it with you and Logan?” asked Galeo.

“Surpassingly slowly,” said Komorebi. “We held hands for much of the day but he has not even tried to kiss me yet. Mayhap he doesn't like me after all for how is it possible that any man is so shy?”

Galeo laughed. “There speaks the voice of a pretty girl who does not know men as much as she thinks she does. With some men the prettier the girl the shyer he is. Has he shown any interest in any other girl?”

“No,” said Komorebi. “I have watched him closely and he does not even look at another.”

“Then you stay with him, child,” said Galeo. “And be sure you are there when whatever is going on comes to a head for I'm sure Logan will lose his shyness when fortune and riches come his way.”



## Chapter Twenty

The morning mist touched lightly on the sand and swirled like ghosts as the incoming tide moved the air over each small wave that rolled in. The past two mornings the early mist had been thick enough to call fog but this, ahh, this was barely a silver grey haze. Astauand, low in the sky, added a golden glow above the silver grey and the occasional seagull that had not followed the boats out to sea shimmered in shades of black against the pale background, sometimes disappearing as it turned.

Logan sat, as had become his custom these last few days, with his back to the rocks and the city behind him. Autumn would soon appear and do her exercises and until then he was content to sit and watch. The previous morning he had seen a turtle ponderously make her way back to the water after a night spent laying her eggs. Today there were only the gulls and three small children playing with their dog. Doubtless they had been sent to find food and occasionally one would poke in the sand with a stick but mostly the stick was thrown in the air. The dog, yapping excitedly, would then chase it only to return, its tail wagging in a frenzy and its head held proudly high and beg for the stick to be thrown again. Sometimes it was and sometimes it would be used as a sword for a brief play fight before being thrown again. Every now and then the dog or one of the children would run through Mother Midcarn's boat, still resting on the sand, unseeing and unaware the boat was there. Logan laughed each time for the sight amused him. Mother Midcarn herself did not appear however. She had not been there since returning from the Palace some three days past.

Logan's attention wandered to the southern end of the beach where the City Wall rose high above the jumbled boulders at the bottom of the low cliff. There was something forbidding about its craggy heights and Logan wondered why this was so. He imagined himself on a boat out to sea, heading for the Old City and decided that, from that vantage, the Wall would look safe and protecting. Likely it was only from close up and from the foot of the cliff that it seemed a little ominous. A cry drew his attention back and he saw the stick thrown high into the sky as the child tried to hit a gull. The dog, wild with excitement, pelted headlong after it and Logan marvelled once again at how it did not hurt its head as it ran right through the timbers of

Mother Midcarn's boat.

"Seeing is believing," he muttered to himself, "and I see it but I still do not entirely believe it."

He belched and shifted his backside in the sand a little before freezing as a spear embedded itself in the sand a scant hand's breadth away from his foot. He wasn't afraid, doubtless it was only Autumn's staff, but an unexpected movement on his part could mean a misjudged blow from behind by Autumn which could be painful. Slowly he turned and there she was, mayhap fifteen paces distant. She was standing watching the children.

"Autumn!" called Logan happily. He waved then reach over to pull the spear from the sand. As expected it had no point for it was, indeed, Autumn's staff.

"Is it not a beautiful morning, Logan?" she called, waving back.

She ran lightly over the sand then pirouetted and kicked out at her staff as Logan threw it at her. Whether through luck or skilled judgement, she caught the staff a third of the way along its length and sent it flying back at Logan. There was no danger. Logan had learnt through long association with Autumn and had shifted out of the way, grabbing his own staff in the process. Autumn laughed happily and praised him for his reflexes.

"What is that?" he asked, pointing to a small broach pinned to the front of Autumn's robe, midway to her shoulder.

"Tis a gift from Douleur," said Autumn.

"Ahh," said Logan. "Then Renao is improved?"

"Aye," said Autumn. "She is greatly improved. Her cuts are healing nicely and the pain is now only a constant ache. Likely she will have scars on her legs for the rest of her life but that is nothing compared to having no legs at all. Douleur gave me this broach to express her thanks."

“I thought she had no money,” said Logan, studying the broach. “Although small it is finely made and carved. It looks quite valuable.”

“Like as not she stole it,” said Autumn cheerfully, “but that is not my concern. My concern is with Renao and a gift given by Douleur, however she came by it, was given freely and with her appreciation. As such it is most precious. Is not the design most curious?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “I fancy it is of Ratanbismet for, although small, it seems to have a figure with three faces. Like the token in our roof.”

“Ahh, yes, you are right,” said Autumn, pulling the broach forward and craning her neck to look at the broach again. “It seemed familiar but I could not place it. Good.” She looked over at Mother Midcarn’s boat. “Has she returned?”

“No,” said Logan. “I went on board when I came to the beach but there is no sign of her. The box was still where we left it though. It had not been disturbed.”

“I venture no one will find it as they cannot see the boat,” said Autumn, “and those children show no sign of seeing the box hanging in mid air. I wonder if we disappear when we go on board?”

“Twould be easy enough to find out,” said Logan. “I can go on board and you watch to see what happens.”

“Aye,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “although it would be best to wait until there is no one else here. Those children may become alarmed if they see us together then you disappear then reappear.”

“I hadn’t thought of that” said Logan. He laughed as the dog and a child held a tug of war with the stick through one side of the boat. “Are you going to do your exercises now?”

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“Hello,” said Logan as Mother Midcarn’s familiar figure walked along the street towards him. “You’re back! We wondered where you had got to.”

"I had some errands to run," said Mother Midcarn. Her voice sounded as usual but her face seemed a little tired. "Is all well with you?"

"Aye," said Logan. "Autumn is inside our dwelling with someone. Shall I fetch her?"

"Ah no, do not disturb her," said Mother Midcarn. She cast her eye at the narrow bench Galeo had made for Autumn. It sat beside the entrance and four people in various states of distress were sitting on it. "May I sit with you for a while? My feet are weary from all these cobbles."

"Of course," said Logan jumping up. "Rest yourself all you want. Can I bring you some straw from inside to sit on? Perhaps a drink?"

"Some water would be nice," said Mother Midcarn. She glanced around to check no one was watching then sat on the three legged stool that unobtrusively appeared and dropped her shoulder bag on the ground. "Ahh, that is better," and she waggled her feet in front of her. "Never grow old, Logan. 'Tis a most tiresome thing indeed."

"How do I stop it?" asked Logan, pausing in the doorway.

"'Twas a figure of speech only," said Mother Midcarn looking at him with a smile. "Not even I can delay that."

Logan patted her sympathetically on the shoulder. "I will be back in a moment with some milk," he said, "or would you prefer a hot drink? We have some vegetable stew if you would like. 'Twill only take a short time to heat it."

"Milk will be more than adequate, Logan," said Mother Midcarn. "Thank you. You are a good lad."

Logan nodded and disappeared inside. Mother Midcarn could hear him talking to Autumn. One of those waiting groaned and put her hand to a livid bruise three fingers wide that ran from above one eye to her jaw. Mother Midcarn raised an eyebrow and looked away.

"Ahh," she said when Logan reappeared with a wooden bowl in his

hands. She took it and drank deeply. "Most refreshing and much appreciated."

She handed the bowl back and Logan stifled a giggle at the white moustache of milk that now sat on her upper lip. He pointed to his own lip and wagged his finger and Mother Midcarn wiped her mouth with a corner of her shawl then looked enquiringly at him. He nodded to show the milk had gone.

"So who are all these?" asked Mother Midcarn, tilting her head towards the people sitting on the bench.

"They are people who suffer in some way and have come to see Autumn," said Logan. "Those she can aid she aids and those who she cannot, well, we try to aid them in other ways."

"What other ways?" asked Mother Midcarn.

"If there is another who can aid them but for money then we give them money," said Logan, sitting on the ground. "Beyond that there is little we can do save offer words of comfort. Fortunately most times Autumn can help."

"I see," said Mother Midcarn. "And you have this many each day?"

"Today there are more than usual," said Logan, "although 'tis rare we have less than two. They are a patient lot in the main though. They just sit and wait until Autumn can see them."

"I venture they think Autumn will not aid them otherwise," said Mother Midcarn. "Have any died?"

"Not that I know of," replied Logan. "Why do you ask?"

"Greetings, Mother Midcarn," exclaimed Autumn, emerging from the hut. A young woman, aged beyond her years by the hardness of her life, followed her out, a babe in her arms. The babe was wrapped in a cloth although broad leaves were wrapped around its legs.

"Thank you," muttered the woman, still disbelieving of her good

fortune after a lifetime of strife and ill luck.

"No thanks are needed," said Autumn. "Now, remember. Do not take the leaves off, no matter how much you want to. The healing works best if left undisturbed. Come back in three days and we will see how the babe's legs progress."

"Three days, yes," said the woman. "Aye, three days. Be that including today or starting tomorrow?"

"Including today," said Autumn gently. "Come back not tomorrow nor the day after but the day after that."

The baby opened its eyes and glared at Mother Midcarn before falling into a doze again. The woman nodded and opened her mouth to say something then hurried away leaving much unsaid.

"What ailed that one?" asked Mother Midcarn.

"The child fell into the fire," said Autumn. "'Twas fortunate she pulled him out straight away but he had some burns on his legs. They will heal, of that I am certain. Did you find the box we left for you?"

"Ahh, that was you, was it?" asked Mother Midcarn. "I assumed it was but you never know. Yes, I have it. 'Tis the key from the Keewa Due although I wager it will be of little use."

"Why is that?" asked Autumn.

"I will show you," said Mother Midcarn. She took the narrow wooden box from her bag on the ground and slid the lid off. Inside, under a flattened scroll, was a large wooden key of very simple design. It was obvious that worms had been feasting on it for a very long time and any attempt to use it would cause it to fall apart. "I wager this will open nothing."

"Mayhap the lock is in a similar state," remarked Logan.

"Perhaps," said Mother Midcarn, "but it is no great problem if it is not. By the looks of the key the lock will be easy to open in other

ways. The important thing is the scroll which gives me permission to enter the Old Library although doubtless the one who guards the door will not be able to read.”

“You seem lacking in optimism today,” commented Autumn.

“Tis only from tiredness,” said Mother Midcarn. “These past few days have been a trial and no mistake.”

“What happened?” asked Autumn.

“Nothing you need concern yourself with,” said Mother Midcarn. “Twas only some trifling but tiresome matter somewhere else that has now been dealt with. No, I am here to ask if you still desire to accompany me to the library?”

“I do, very much,” said Autumn, “for I am most curious about what lies within but, alas, there are still some here who suffer and seek my aid. Perhaps tomorrow? Likely there will be fewer of them and I will be able to get away.”

“I see you have lost none of your optimism,” said Mother Midcarn. “I fancy the number will rise each day until you have no time to call your own but it is a situation of your own making and doubtless you will deal with it in your own way.”

“I cannot ignore those who come to me for aid,” said Autumn with a slight frown. “That would be most wrong and would not sit well with me.”

“Indeed, child,” said Mother Midcarn, heaving herself to her feet. “That is why you are who you are and not someone else. And you, Logan? Doubtless you will not leave Autumn's side to go rooting around in forgotten dusty chambers but the opportunity is there if you so desire.”

“You know me too well,” said Logan with a grin. “I confess dusty forgotten chambers hold few attractions for me.”

“No matter,” said Mother Midcarn. “I shall enquire again in the

morning for it is possible you will have fewer obligations. Now, where can I find someone with a cart, or a mild mannered horse at the very least?"

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There was but one person still sitting on the bench when the man appeared. He was short and stout and wore a thick robe despite it being obvious he was kept warm by his own self-importance. He walked slowly with obvious distaste and a faint air of uncertainty. Logan watched him with interest for it was clear he neither belonged to the area nor desired to belong. The floppy hat the man wore and the colourful feather that stuck straight up from it only added to his attractions.

The man jerked back as a pot of filthy water, or worse, flew out from a doorway and narrowly missed him. He glared at whoever was inside then looked around. He spotted the bench with its lone occupant and Logan squatting the other side of the doorway and hurried over.

"Pray forgive me for interrupting you," he said in a strangely high pitched voice, "but is this the dwelling of the healer that lives in these parts?"

"Aye," said Logan. "I know of none other in this street."

"And are you, by any chance, the healer?" asked the man, "for there seems to be little that ails you."

"No," said Logan. "I am Logan and there is nothing wrong with me. Autumn is the healer although I wager there is little wrong with you either."

"Ahh, Autumn," said the man nodding. "I did not know his name only that there is a healer here. Pah, I am forgetting my manners! I am Malvern Dumphul Two of Viaben." He snatched his hat from his head and bowed. The feather fell to the ground and Logan picked it up.

"I am Logan, as I said," said Logan, getting up, "and inside is Autumn Savannah. We are both from Aferraron. Here is your feather."



“My thanks,” said Dumphul with a scowl. He fitted the feather back in his cap and planted it firmly on his head. They both eyed each other for a few moments.

“I have business with this Autumn Savannah,” said Dumphul after a few moments.

“I daresay she will not be long,” said Logan. “She is only changing a dressing.”

“Hmmpf,” snorted Dumphul irritably. “A woman!”

“Oh,” said Logan taken aback. “Umm, perhaps if you'd like to sit?” and he waved a hand at the bench. “Autumn will see you after she has seen to this man.”

“I am not accustomed to being kept waiting,” snapped Dumphul.

“Oh,” said Logan. He paused. “Well, umm, I'm afraid there isn't much else to do,” and he shrugged his shoulders.

Dumphul stared at him for a few moments through narrowed eyes then gathered his rich robe and sat firmly on the bench. It was a while before Autumn appeared.

“Keep using the salve until it is all gone,” she said to the stooped old man who followed her. “If your leg still bothers you come and see me again.”

“Right you are, missy,” said the old man and put two fingers to his forehead. “Thank 'ee kindly.”

“You are Autumn Savannah, healer of Wall Street?” demanded Dumphul, jumping to his feet.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn in surprise, “but I do not claim what else you said.”

“This is Wall Street, is it not?” said Dumphul, “and you are a healer?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and I am a healer of sorts. Might I ask who you are?”

“I am Malvern Dumphul Two of Viaben,” said Dumphul. “I would speak with you.”

“Certainly,” said Autumn, “although you do not appear to be suffering in any way and there was another here before you.”

“Not so,” said Dumphul. “I am suffering greatly and I was here long before you.”

## Chapter Twenty One

Deven sauntered along the road, giving the impression of having not a care in the world. He rounded the corner and spotted Ufga standing outside his dwelling, talking to someone. Deven walked past, pretending not to notice. He rounded the next corner then loitered so he could see Ufga and his visitor out of the corner of his eye. Some sort of business was being transacted and Ufga liked to do that on his own.

A short time later agreement had clearly been reached and both nodded sharply then gripped each other's forearms. The stranger broke away from Ufga and marched up the road, trying to look inconspicuous. Not easy for he was well dressed in eastern Iflinbar, the roughest part of a rough part of Schtei and seemed a little nervous. Deven sauntered back towards Ufga who was watching him.

"Ya ma around?" asked Deven.

"She's at market," said Ufga. His nose was still puffy but the blackening around his eyes was fading and he was able to breathe again, albeit with some difficulty, while talking. "Be a while yet."

"So who was that then?" asked Deven. "Customer?"

"Aye," said Ufga and grinned. "Easy money this. Bastard wants his era'owen out of the way, like."

"You mean ...," and Deven surreptitiously drew his finger across his throat.

"Yup," said Ufga with a nod. "A hundred kalas, fifty tomorrow and the other fifty when she be deaded."

"So why's he wanting her gone?" asked Deven. He glanced around but no one was listening. No one listened when Ufga and Deven were talking. It was safer.

"Didn't ask," said Ufga with a shrug. "Don't know, don't care." He paused and looked around as well. "Should be piss easy, this un."

Reckon just you and me. No sense splitting the money more.”

“S'all right,” said Deven. He thought for a moment. “When?”

“Tomorrow night, I reckon, after I gets the cash,” said Ufga. “After dark, make it look like a robbery. You in?”

“Straight up,” said Deven. “Ain't got nothing on tomorrow night. Knives?”

“Yeah,” said Ufga. “I'll bring a hammer as well, case we needs to bust in a door or sommat.”

Deven nodded then leaned a little closer.

“I got word on that little girlie,” he said, a little more quietly.

“Komorebi?” asked Ufga, his attention quickening.

“Yeah,” said Deven. “She be living with her da down in City Beach. They've got a dump what's leaning against the wall. Tenth from the end, I'm told.”

“And that bastard what bust me nose?” asked Ufga, rubbing it gently with his fingers.

“Don't know where he lives yet,” said Deven, “but word is he's often hanging around with her. Reckon she's his doxy, like. So whadaya say? Go round one night and catch 'em at it?” He grinned and licked his lips.

“Don't be thick in the head,” snarled Ufga, slapping him on the side of his head. “Don't want that Galeo know it was us, do we. Shut it and let me think.”

Deven lost his grin and stared balefully at Ufga who stared balefully back until Deven looked away.

“Go find Kej,” said Ufga suddenly. “She's just a kid and won't stand out. Tell her to keep a watch on Komorebi and that bastard and find

out where they go and what they do. Specially where they go to muck around as they won't be doing it in the shack with her old man there. Tell her there's a couple of kalas in it for her if she does a good job. I wanna know somewhere quiet they go regular like."

"Kej?" asked Deven. "You sure?"

"Yeah, she's a good kid," said Ufga. "Then we'll get some muscle together and take that shithhead out." He tried to grin but his nose turned it into a grimace. "Slowly."

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Autumn opened her mouth to speak then closed it again. Her brow creased.

"Those two statements do not fit together in a way I was expecting," she remarked. "Please explain."

"As I said," said Dumphul with more than a hint of irritation in his voice, "I am Malvern Dumphul Two, healer of Viaben and have been these twelve summers past."

"I see," said Autumn. "Or rather, I don't see. What has this to do with me and how are you suffering?"

"You are taking my business away from me!" exclaimed Dumphul. "Have you permission from the Guild of Physikers to run your business here in my district?"

"Ahh, now I understand," said Autumn. She put her arm placatingly on Dumphul's sleeve. "You need have no worries on that score for I am not running a business."

"Do you take me for a fool?" exclaimed Dumphul, snatching his arm away. "You think I am stupid? You expect me to deny the evidence of my own eyes?"

"I would doubt you are a fool," said Autumn, "but the evidence you claim you see is not what you think you see."

“Pah!” said Dumphul. “You have a bench outside your place of business wherein those seeking healing sit and wait and I see one of them waiting as we speak. How can you deny you are running a healing business? I ask again, do you have permission from the Guild?”

“I know nothing of this Guild of which you speak,” started Autumn, “but ...”

“You are not a Guild member?” said Dumphul in astonishment. “You are not licensed to heal?”

“I am indeed not a Guild member,” said Autumn, “and I daresay I do not have a licence as if I did I would then likely know what one is. But in any event I still do not see how this affects you. Those who seek my aid are those who cannot afford the aid of such as you.”

“Cannot afford? Cannot afford?” spluttered Dumphul. “How is it that they can afford to pay you but not me, eh? You take the very food out of my children's mouths!”

“No one pays me,” said Autumn calmly. “I give what aid I can freely and seek nothing in return. So I ask again, how are you suffering?”

Dumphul stared at her, his mind struggling to come to terms with the unthinkable. No fees? How was this possible?

“But, but, ...” he stuttered.

“So you see,” said Autumn, “if you are indeed suffering from a loss of business,” and she glanced at Logan to check she had the words correct, “then it must be from some other cause.”

Dumphul pulled himself together.

“Do not play games with me,” he said icily. “You know as well as I do that people will always find the money when their pains get bad enough. Anyway, what checks do you make to ensure that your clients are as poor as they say they are? I wager most of them have money hidden somewhere and I demand my share if it. I'll not have some

unlicensed charlatan operating out of my district!”

“Well, I am sorry if that is the case,” said Autumn, “but if someone comes to me for aid and I am able to assist then I shall do so and money has nothing to do with it. How can you tell me to not help others?”

“Because that is the whole point of physiking!” exclaimed Dumphul. “What is the point of spending time learning the arts of healing other than to make money from it? Are you stupid, woman?”

“I learnt what I have learnt in order to help people,” retorted Autumn. “I cannot begin to comprehend your motives. Tell me, would you really refuse to help someone who cannot pay you?”

“If someone cannot pay me then they get nothing from me,” hissed Dumphul, rising on tip-toe and clearly wanting to strike Autumn. “I shall report you to the Guild for this, you, you ... snake!”

“Then report me,” said Autumn, her eyes blazing. “For I will never stoop to your level and exploit those who suffer when I am able to end their suffering!”

“Excuse me,” said Logan, stepping between them. “I think it is best you leave us now.”

“Oh, I’m going, all right,” expostulated Dumphul, jabbing his finger at Autumn, “but I’ll be back. You can count on that, you misbegotten spawn of Yammoe, and I’ll be bringing the Guild with me. You’ll be run out of Schtei and made to ply your trade among the lizards and other carrion and we’ll soon see how you like that!” He was fairly dancing with anger and skipped backwards as Logan slowly stepped forward. The feather fell unnoticed from his hat again. “I’ll get the Mo’i onto you, you see if I don’t, you dried up old harlot!”

He tried to spit at her but his mouth was too dry and in rage and frustration he slammed one fist into the other before turning and stomping off. Autumn and Logan watched him go.

“What is a harlot?” asked Autumn as he vanished around the corner.

“And what is the significance of them being old and dried up?”

“I do not know,” said Logan. “But I wager it was not intended as a compliment. Mayhap a harlot is like an apple. They’re not very nice when they get old and dry.”

“Ah well,” said Autumn, picking up the feather. “Perhaps he will return and enlighten us. Should we keep his feather safe until then?”

“Likely he will accuse us of stealing it if we do,” said Logan. “Foul mannered fart that he is.”

“And I apologise to you,” said Autumn, noticing the woman who was still sitting on the bench. “I should have made him wait his turn. What is your name?”

“Don't you be saying sorry on my account,” she said. “’Twas good fun watching you take that grasping sod down a peg or two. Quite took me mind off me foot, it did,” and she lifted her foot onto the bench. It was wrapped in a filthy, blood encrusted cloth. “Took off a couple of me toes with me axe, didn't I. Can you help me? Me name's Atooa, by the way.”

“I will help in any way I can,” said Autumn. “I am Autumn and this is Logan. Let me get some water.”

“Likely it be the storm that's coming,” said Logan, looking at the sky above the wall behind them.

Autumn paused in the doorway and looked enquiringly at Logan.

“I was just thinking,” said Logan, noticing her look. “His temper got hot very quickly and you did not stay as calm as I have seen you, Autumn. Likely that storm that is coming worsened things. Can you not feel a tension in the air?”

“Aye, I can,” said Autumn coming back out to look at the sky. “I thought it was caused by Dumphul but I still feel it. You think it is going to be a bad storm?”



"'Tis difficult to say," said Logan, "for we can see little of the sky over there as the wall is so high but what I can see is growing ever darker and thicker."

"Then best I be seeing to Atooa right smart," said Autumn. "I don't want her going home in a storm."

"Oh, don't you be worrying about that," said Atooa. She eased her foot back to the ground. "I be living just down there aways," and she jerked her thumb down the street. "Be the first dwelling against the wall. Even with me foot it be only a moment or two to get back. 'Sides, we be overdue for one of the big winter storms. Be nice to get a decent drop of fresh water."

"I think I'll climb up to the top of the wall," said Logan worriedly, still peering at the sky. "I don't like the look of this at all."

"If you wish," said Autumn. "Go up this side of the hut. 'Tis the way I go to my perch and 'tis the stronger built. Galeo went the other side and broke the roof. I will attend to Atooa."

She disappeared inside the hut as Logan took a firm grip on the thick branch that served as the corner. He hauled himself up, scrabbling for footholds and heaved himself onto the roof. It creaked and threatened to give way but did not.

He twisted himself round and got to his knees. He debated for a few moments on whether to cross the roof on his knees or to get to his feet and decided that, although less dignified, hands and knees were safer.

"Autumn does this every day and in the darkness," he thought to himself. "Ho hum."

He changed his mind and decided to walk. Cautiously he pushed himself upright and swayed for a few moments, his arms held out for balance. Then, one foot at a time, he slowly made his way along the stout branch that lay at the top of the dividing wall. It was entwined with thin twigs and reeds and coated in dried mud but was fairly visible. That said, it was a relief to feel the solidity of the massive cut stones that formed the lower part of the wall. Three stones went from

the ground to the roof of the hut and three more went from the roof to the ledge where Autumn meditated. How many hundreds had been cut, shifted and fitted into place to build the wall did not cross Logan's mind. He was only glad that they were solid.

Stretching up he felt the ledge against his wrist so he stood on tip-toe and felt around for a handhold. There was none save the edge of the stone itself so he let go. Bracing his feet firmly on the branch he bent his knees and jumped. The branch sagged under the onslaught but he managed to get the top edge of the stone under his arm pits. Still, he was able to wedge a couple of toes of one foot into the crack between two of the stones and managed to push himself up. Once his hips were at the edge he was able to scramble over and lie fully on the ledge, breathing heavily.

"In the darkness," he said aloud to himself, peering over the edge. "How does she do it? And, more importantly, how do I get back down?"

He sighed at his own foolishness then cautiously got to his feet. The ledge was barely half as wide again as his feet were long and was filled with gravel and scrubby grass. The upper part of the wall, which did not look overly high from the street below, towered in front of him and he had to crane his head back to see the top. Still, the stones were considerably smaller and there were more toe and finger holds than had been in the large stones of the lower part. Thunder sounded in the distance.

"I was right," he muttered to himself. "There's a storm coming. Did I really need to climb up here to know that? Well, I'm here now so I might as well go all the way. With Aloidia's aid I will be back on the ground before the rain begins."

Not far off to his left, perhaps twenty paces if he'd been walking along the road, the wall kinked and made its way down the cliff. There, where the last of the dwellings against the wall lay, was a tall tower which soared up into the sky and provided a home to bats, gulls and other creatures that are not earthbound. More usefully, the kink and the tower provided a second surface and would make the climb easier. Carefully, Logan edged his way along, keeping his backside firmly in

contact with the stones.

“Don't the dwellings look funny from up here,” he thought to himself. “That one must be where Atooa lives for it is the last. Must be nice to have two stone walls instead of just the one we have. But then, mayhap twice the rain comes down the walls. Sploop!”

A foot slipped and he lurched but landed on his backside with one foot dangling over the ledge. A scattering of gravel pattered on Atooa's roof.

“That was close,” he muttered. He stayed where he was to let his heart slow down a little then got to his feet and carefully twisted around so he was facing the kink in the wall. The tower soared overhead, seemingly reaching as high as Astauand to pierce the dark clouds above.

“You are a Yammoe cursed fool, Logan,” he muttered. “Go back to the ground. Autumn and Komorebi will not think the worse of you.”

In his heart though he knew, regardless of what Autumn and Komorebi thought, he would think ill of himself if he backed down now. His battle with himself had become personal. Looking up he could see the tower had been made of stones a little smaller than those of the upper part of the wall. Being smaller there were more joints between the stones and they had weathered, leaving any number of finger holds and all within easy reach of each other. Slowly he began to climb.

It seemed to go on forever but in reality it did not take long for Logan to reach the top of the upper part of the wall. He hoisted himself onto the edge and realised there was a platform on the other side. He swung his legs over and stood there, breathing heavily. At one time, now long distant, people must have stood on this platform to look at and fire upon those outside the wall who were attacking. How they got up there was a mystery for there were no steps behind the wall nor doorways in the tower. Perhaps they used ladders? Still, the view over the rooftops, the beach and out to sea was magnificent. On the beach he could see a smudge that was likely Mother Midcarn's boat. Closer in were dwellings, crowding in and seemingly crushing each other into

insignificance. Far in the distance he could see the fishing boats bobbing on the dark waters as they rushed to land before the storm came. Turning he could see, far to the north, patches of green and black beyond the furthest edge of Schtei but it was only when he turned completely round and looked at the sky that he gasped in dismay. The storm heading toward the city was vast, black and angry. Already the Summer Palace was in its grip and Lake Nanikaika was boiling as the rain and lightning slashed down. There was another rumble of thunder in the distance.

“Oh Sploop,” muttered Logan, as the first pattering of light rain touched his face. “I need to get down from here!”

## Chapter Twenty Two

“Logan! Logan!” drifted up from below. “Where are you?”

Logan tore his eyes away from the storm. Even though it was still some way away the power of it fascinated him. He turned and looked over the parapet. Autumn was on the ledge below, some way over to the left. She was looking up to the top of the upper wall but in the other direction.

“Autumn!” he yelled. “I’m up here.” He waved with both arms. “Autumn!”

She heard him and jerked around, scanning the top of the wall. When she saw him she waved back and started to make her way to the tower.

“Is all well?” she called. “I was worried about you.”

“A tremendous storm is coming from the north west,” shouted down Logan. “The view from up here is magnificent! Come up and see for yourself.”

It was only a matter of moments before Autumn pulled herself over the parapet. The upper wall was barely three body lengths high and Autumn had no difficulty jumping from a standing start to get a solid handhold on the top.<sup>20</sup> She dropped down onto the walkway below to stand beside Logan. Her eyes lit up as the power of the storm became apparent. Even though storms were ruled by Chaahk the controlled power of the more ferocious storms always filled Autumn with reverence for Mizule and Morath, the deities of war and warriors. They were her personal deities and the ones to whom she had made one of her life vows. She stared at the distant storm and slowly raised her arms as if to embrace it. A few early drops of rain dampened her face.

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20 It should be remembered that Autumn came close to death while travelling in the Mapdil Mountains after being stabbed with a thorn imbued with the evil magic of Cysciec. Autumn was saved by the aid of Khimera and the dryads of Havildar. In the process, the seeds of a Salodkaja tree were embedded under Autumn’s skin. In time, the sap from the Salodkaja tree imbued Autumn with some of the strength and suppleness of trees. The story is recounted in full in *The Annals ~ The Second Tale*.

“Tis magnificent,” she exclaimed then roared “Mizule!” at the top of her voice and stretched her arms high above her head. “Mi-zu-le!”

Although Logan's personal deity was Seiliu, the deity of cowsheds, and he fully agreed with the view that cowsheds were an excellent place to ride out a severe storm he also felt the power of the storm and Autumn's need to exalt in it. So, it was some while before he suggested they went down and sought refuge before the storm reached this side of Schtei.

“I wager this wall will offer some protection,” he said. “We will be in the lee of it and, with Aloidia's aid, the rain will not dissolve too much of our mud dwelling nor the wind rip it to pieces.”

“Likely those on the shore will lose their homes,” said Autumn, turning to look over the parapet.

“There is little we can do,” said Logan pragmatically, “and you've seen their lean-tos. They will be easily rebuilt and doubtless there will be much washed up on the beach to rebuild with.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “And them as live there are not unfamiliar with that. Few will have had no experience of storms. Let us go down. I venture this storm will be upon us very soon.”

“How do you suggest we get back down?” asked Logan, peering over the edge of the parapet.

“The same way we got up here,” said Autumn cheerfully. She slung a leg over the edge of the parapet and let it dangle.

“Twas easy enough for you,” said Logan, “for you are right skilled in jumping and things but I have not your skills. There do not seem to be as many toeholds going down as there were coming up either.”

“Ahh, Logan,” said Autumn, putting her hand on his shoulder. “You trust me with your life, do you not?”

“Aye,” said Logan, still studying the wall. The rain got heavier and the stones of the wall and the tower started to look slippery. “But there is

little we can do save climb.”

“Not at all,” said Autumn cheerfully. “We can jump!” and she flung her other leg over the parapet and dropped to the ledge below. She landed neatly and needed no more than a slight wave of one arm to maintain her balance.

“I don't think I can do that,” called Logan nervously. “I'll fall off the ledge or miss it entirely.”

“Then I will catch you,” said Autumn. She stood on the edge of the ledge with her knees a little bent and her arms stretched out over the roofs below. She adjusted her stance then looked up and back at Logan. “Come on. Have no fear.”

“I am seven kinds of stupid,” muttered Logan as he stared down at Autumn's expectant face and outstretched arms. “Why do I get myself into these situations?”

“Come on, the storm will be upon us soon,” called Autumn. She waggled her arms invitingly.

Reluctantly Logan climbed onto the top of the wall and sat there, his legs dangling.

“Or would you rather stay up there all night?” called Autumn. “I will count to three then you jump. One.”

“Umm,” called down Logan. “That might not be such a bad idea after all.”

“Two,” called Autumn, ignoring him. She adjusted her stance again before clapping her hands encouragingly.

“Oh Sploop!” muttered Logan. His hands clutched the top of the wall and he thought he could hear his heart pounding in his chest. He closed his eyes tightly.

“Three!” called Autumn.

Convulsively Logan pushed forward with his heels and up with his arms and half fell, half slipped off the wall. A moment later he crashed into something hard and the air was knocked out of his chest. Before he could react he was hauled sideways and his head thumped against stone.

"I have hit the ground," he thought sadly. "Autumn missed me and I am dead."

"Ooops, sorry," said Autumn's voice. "Did that hurt?"

"Am I dead?" asked Logan. His legs felt shattered and seemed to be drooping badly.

"Not at all," said Autumn. "I just knocked your head against the wall. Come, stand up."

"My legs," muttered Logan. "I can't feel them."

"Stand on your feet and I can let go of your tunic," said Autumn.

Logan didn't move beyond vaguely waving his legs so Autumn used one of her feet to push his legs under him. Then she let him go and he fell back against the wall. His eyes jerked open and he clutched at the wall with both arms.

"Tis all good," said Autumn. "Come, let us return to our dwelling."

She moved confidently off along the ledge and Logan followed cautiously, after checking he was indeed on the ledge and not under the smashed roof of Atooa's hut.

"That was, ahh, fun," he remarked to Autumn's back.

She didn't answer. Instead she just stepped off the ledge and landed gently on the branch that was part of their roof. She ran nimbly along the branch and jumped down to the cobbles below then turned and waved up at Logan. Then she disappeared inside their dwelling as the rain was getting heavier. He did much the same, although considerably more slowly and with a lot less grace.



“Where is Atooa?” he asked when he was inside as well.

“She has gone home,” said Autumn. “Dry yourself while I put water to heat.”

“Were you able to help her?” asked Logan, taking off his tunic. It was damp rather than wet and he hung it over a thin branch that stuck out of the wall conveniently close to the fire.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “’Twas as she said. Two toes cleanly removed although the wounds were none too clean when she got here. I tidied the ends up and stitched them and I tried to give her herbs for the pain but she refused them. She said she felt no pain.”

“Felt no pain?” exclaimed Logan, pausing in the wrapping of himself in his blanket. “How could she feel no pain? She had lost two toes!”

“I confess I do not know,” said Autumn. She too was now wrapped in her blanket and her tunic hung from the branch beside Logan's. “I thought perhaps the cutting had just happened and her body was yet to feel the pain but she said not. She cut her foot early this morning but was too busy to do anything about it save wrap her foot in a cloth. The amount of blood on the cloth attested to that. Moreover, and this was interesting, she said she never feels pain and does not know what pain is.”

“Sploop,” said Logan, staring at Autumn. “That would be a right useful thing.”

“That was my first thought too,” said Autumn, “but she said otherwise. It seems she is often injuring herself and not noticing until someone else points out the injury. She showed me some scars on her hands from when she was working in the fields and did not see the tools rubbing and chafing. ’Twas only when she could not grip the tools because they were wet with blood that she realised. She has many such scars over her body caused in the same manner and when that happens she has to rest until they heal even though she feels no need for rest and frets all the while. She also said ’tis fortunate she has never broken a bone, or if she has not one of any significance, for likely she would do great damage to herself not realising the bone was

broken.”

“How would you not know a bone was broken?” asked Logan. “Surely it would be obvious if you broke your arm for you would not be able to lift anything. It would just flop around,” and he waggled his arm to make it look like the bone was broken.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” said Autumn. “Now that we talk on it I venture that if you had broken your arm and did not know you might stoop to pick up something heavy and the weight of it would keep your arm straight. But at the same time there would be no solid bone to help with the lifting and the muscles of the arm might tear because they take all the weight. Maybe if the thing was heavy enough it could even pull that arm apart, ripping the muscles where the break is.”

“Splorp, nasty,” muttered Logan. He felt his arm muscles and tried to imagine pulling something off the ground and the muscles tearing. He grimaced.

“Aye,” said Autumn noticing. “There have been times when I have had to overcome pain in order to perform some manoeuvre in a fight but if I did not know I had the injury I could have made it many times worse. Maybe even finish the task myself that my opponent set out to do.”

“So what you are saying is that pain is good?” asked Logan. He looked dubious.

“Aye,” said Autumn slowly. “I think that is indeed what I am saying. I have always believed pain is bad and the removing of pain to be good but I have only ever thought of pain as something that comes after an injury.” A flash of lightning lit the inside of the hut and they both paused to wait for the thunder. It came a short time later, suggesting the storm was not far away. “After hearing Atooa I wonder if pain is also a way for the body to tell us of an injury and to take steps to avoid making it worse.”

“I can follow that thinking when it is a major injury,” said Logan thoughtfully, “such as a broken bone or a knife to the belly or some

such, but what of a silly little grass cut? They hurt most viciously but the damage is slight and there is no harm to continuing. Or a bee sting?"

"I have no answer to that," said Autumn.

"And what of the pain that comes through healing?" asked Logan. "I have seen you set a broken bone several times now and the pain of that seems excruciating but is it not remedying the problem rather than making it worse? Would it not make sense for the body to feel no pain when the injury is being repaired?"

"I have no answer to that either," said Autumn. "Logically I would have to agree with you."

"And what of that man with the problem with his teeth a few days ago?" asked Logan.

There was a sudden howl of wind and they both looked towards the doorway. The rain began to get heavy and they could see it splashing upwards after hitting the cobblestones outside. A thin rivulet appeared in the narrow ditch that ran from the bottom of the stone wall at the back of the hut and around the hearth. This only happened when water cascaded down the stones of the City Wall and some came through the join of the roof.

"Hmm," said Logan. "I venture we'll be in need of repairs in the morning. I hope the mud over our money doesn't wash away and take the money with it. Do you think I should get the coins and rings down now?"

"Tis only money," said Autumn. "Leave it for I am more interested in your thoughts in the man with the teeth."

"As you wish," said Logan, glancing at the corners of the hut where their small supply of valuables were hidden in the mud plaster. They looked a little damp but no mud seemed to be peeling or flaking away. "Ahhh, yes, that man. Yes, his teeth were paining him greatly and making it difficult to do anything for the pain interfered with his mind and thinking. Yet even if he chewed with the damaged tooth 'tis

unlikely he would make it worse yet the pain of doing so was making it difficult to do anything. I wager the same is true of an injury where the pain leaves you unable to move and so at the mercy of another when the sensible thing would be for the pain to lessen long enough for you to make an escape. Surely any possible worsening of the injury would be less damaging than being killed.”

“That is exactly why I have learnt to control my own pain,” said Autumn. “’Twas part of my training to overcome pain in order to protect myself from further injury.”

“And yet few have that skill,” said Logan. They both cocked their heads as another flash of lightening lit the hut. Through the doorway they could see the cobble stones were awash and there was a stream now flowing along the street.

Autumn got up and went to the doorway. It was almost as dark as night and there was no one to be seen in the street. Opposite, the entrance to Jijivisha's hut was covered with a dull dark cloth that shook as the rain lashed against it. Intriguingly the ground immediately in front of Autumn was still dry in places. She looked up and could see that the rain wasn't coming straight down. Instead it angled down and the dwellings opposite were getting the worst of it, leaving the dwellings up against the wall relatively untouched. Turning back she noticed the rivulet in the narrow ditch that took water running down the wall away and into the street was now in full flow. She bent and stuck her finger in. The small stream came almost to the first joint of her finger.

“I hear all you say, Logan,” she said, sitting back down beside the hearth. “This matter of pain, now I think on it, intrigues me. I can see its benefits but also, as you point out, its many disadvantages beyond the fact that pain hurts and is a distraction. It seems to me, at first consideration at least, that pain should be sufficient to be a warning and yet not so debilitating as to become a hindrance. There should be a balance in this, as there should be in all things.”

She gazed into the fire for a few moments then got up again.

“I confess I am distracted,” she said. “Mizule in Its guise as Chaahk is

calling to me. Come, let us go outside and watch the storm.”

“We’ll get soaked,” said Logan, looking up at her in alarm.

“Then we go naked,” said Autumn, dropping her blanket. “I have always found skin to be waterproof and if we stay near the entrance we should miss the worst of the rain.”

“Likely only to be blown away,” muttered Logan darkly. “Hark how that wind howls.”

“No matter,” said Autumn, walking over to the entrance. “Mizule calls to me not you. Stay here in the dry and keep the fire going.”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan. “I go where you go so be not trying to make me feel guilty.” He got up and left his blanket on the floor as well. The water in the narrow ditch in the floor was getting near the top so he bent and retied the blanket and hung it from a twig that protruded from the roof. For good measure he hung Autumn’s there as well then followed her out.

The rain was now big heavy drops that not even the strongly gusting wind could greatly stop from coming straight down. It fell in sheets almost as though Chaahk was throwing down giant buckets of water then refilling them before throwing another.

“Mizule!” exclaimed Autumn stepping out into the middle of the street. She held out her arms and lifted her face to the rain as jagged lightning ripped across the sky immediately behind their hut. Moments later there came a deafening clap of thunder.

“Ragghhhh!” roared back Autumn, slowly pirouetting in the driving rain. “Come Logan! Come and feel the power of the gods!”

Cautiously Logan ventured out and stood miserably in the street, the rain stinging his skin. His hair was slickly plastered against his head and water cascaded off him.

“Look at the sky,” called Autumn as another flash of lightning rent the dense black clouds.

“Whatever for?” thought Logan but obediently he looked up, just as another flash hurtled down towards the tower.

“Did you see that?” he called to Autumn.

“See what?” called back Autumn.

“The tower,” called Logan, grabbing her upper arm. “Look, up there.”

“I cannot see ...” started Autumn then came another streak of lightning, wider and more jagged than those before. It hit the top of the tower.

“I think ...” shouted Logan but his voice was drowned out by the roar of thunder almost overhead.

Three flashes of lightning lit the sky. One from behind their hut, the other two slightly later and further over.

“Oh Sploop,” shouted Logan in alarm. “Voqev, no!”

“What?” screamed Autumn.

“The tower is falling!” shouted Logan.

Two more flashes of lightening lit up the sky and they watched in horror as a huge stone, hit by a bolt of lightning, fell slowly from the top of the tower. A third bolt of lightning showed the stone crash heavily onto the ledge below and break in half. Then everything went dark.

“What ...?” exclaimed Logan, staring upwards, the rain pelting into his face making it difficult to see.

Then came another flash of lightning, just in time to show the two halves of the stone from the tower come off the ledge and start to fall. Part of the ledge followed. A stone bigger than the one from the tower, its immenseness caught in stark relief by the lightning as it twisted.

“No!!” screamed Logan as Autumn started to run towards the falling

stones. “No!!!”

## Chapter Twenty Three

Before Logan could start after Autumn there came a dull heavy thump and the ground trembled. A sudden rush of air from the end of the street threw rain in his face and blinded him. As he lurched forward several steps, wiping his face and blinking, he heard some screams and shouting. People began to come out of their dwellings and peer along the street. Some came together to talk and point. Another flash of lightning lit up the area and there was Autumn! Barely ten paces away, her naked back glistening as she stood and stared at the scene in front of her. Logan dashed up to her.

“What happened?” he asked.

“I fear those stones we saw falling landed on some dwellings,” said Autumn. “Tis difficult to see in this darkness and rain but ... I must go to them. There may be survivors.”

She darted forward again but Logan managed to grab her arm and pull her back.

“Aye, and there may be more stones falling,” he said urgently. “You are not wearing your robe.”

Autumn yanked Logan's hand off her arm and started forward again then stopped.

“No, wait,” she said, her face twisted with indecision. “Think, you fool!” She stared down the street again then turned back to Logan. “You are right. A few more moments will make no difference to them as are injured but if I am killed by another stone I can do nothing to aid anyone. Come!” and she ran back to their dwelling. Logan followed as the heavy rain was painful on his bare skin.

“What has happened?” called Jijivisha from the doorway of her dwelling.

Autumn ignored her and disappeared inside. Logan paused for a moment to explain then jumped over the widening stream of water flowing along the middle of the street and bumped into Autumn as



she hurried back out. She was struggling to get one arm through the loose sleeve and accidentally shoved Logan against the doorpost. He felt it crack.

“My apologies,” she said hastily and ran off.

“’Tis all good,” called Logan to her back then grimaced. “Damned fool thing to say,” he muttered under his breath. “This Voqev cursed wall is falling down on our heads and you say ’tis all good. You be a fool, Logan, and no mistake.”

He struggled to pull his tunic over his soaking wet body then ran to the doorway. Then he stopped and turned back to grab their staffs then changed his mind when he realised their staffs would likely be of little use shifting the huge stones. He hesitated then decided the stones may have broken when they landed. He grabbed his staff and reached for Autumn's then changed his mind again.

“I do not want Fiau broken,” he muttered and propped Fiau against the wall again.

He stepped back, turned towards the doorway and inadvertently put his foot in the channel that carried water running off the wall to the street. The water came up to his ankle and a soaked rat squealed and bounced off his shin before streaking away.

“Ugh,” he muttered and grimaced again.

“Oh there you are!” cried Komorebi as he emerged from the dwelling. “I saw Autumn down there but not you. I was so worried you were hurt! Ratanbismet be praised.”

“Are you unhurt?” he asked, grabbing her shoulders. Her short hair was soaked and clung to her head. Droplets flew everywhere as she shook it in denial. “We are fine. We heard the crashes and came out to see but nothing landed this far away. ’Tis all down at that end. Two dwellings be crushed and more damaged. Come.”

“Your father,” said Logan as she took his hand and started to pull. “Where is he?”

“Up there,” she said. “They are looking for survivors. Come on.”

They ran up the street where a small crowd had gathered despite the pouring rain. Lightning rent the air again but the crash of thunder was a little delayed and came from further away. Most were standing watching but several men were picking through a mess that had once been a mud and branch dwelling. Of the dwelling that had abutted the Wall and the Tower there was no sign. Just a large shattered stone and a scattering of sticks. On the opposite side of the street the front of the dwelling had caved in when a large section of stone cannoned into it. Logan could see Autumn's robe moving around on the far side of it. He pulled Komorebi that way just as Galeo appeared supporting a heavily dazed woman. His face lit up when he saw Logan and Komorebi.

“Autumn said to take this 'un to your place,” he said. “She don't appear too badly hurt but she be out of it, like. You two take her and I'll go back to help Autumn. There be a man trapped under that there stone.”

“No,” said Logan hurriedly. “You two take her. I'll help Autumn.”

“Be you strong enough, lad?” asked Galeo. “Stone'll need shifting.”

“I can get others to help if needs be,” said Logan. “Go. We will be along shortly.”

“As you say,” said Galeo doubtfully but Komorebi put her shoulder under the woman's arm and forestalled any more debate on the matter.

“Ahh, there you are,” said Autumn glancing up when Logan appeared. “Twill be easier with the two of us. I need you to pull him out.”

In the dim light Logan could see a man on the ground. He was surrounded by and covered with bits of twig and mud and chips of stone but even in the poor light Logan could see he was white faced and sweating heavily.

“The stone is on his foot,” said Autumn, pointing. “Take his shoulders

and pull when I say.”

Obediently Logan grabbed the man under his shoulders and pulled him when Autumn effortlessly lifted the large chunk of stone.

“’Twas best the others didn't see that,” she muttered, pushing it out into the street, “and I wager this one won't remember. Let us get him back to our dwelling.”

“What about the other dwellings?” asked Logan, staring at the crushed foot in fascination.

“Likely there are no survivors,” said Autumn, “for both be flattened. The third dwelling is mostly intact although some may have injuries. I have left word for any to be brought to me if there are. ’Twas unfortunate for poor Atooa though.”

“Atooa?” said Logan, momentarily confused. “Oh Sploop! She lived in that one at the end!”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “But it would have been quick. You take this one's legs and have a care for his foot.”

\* \* \*

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn Savannah. She felt Astauand's light through her eyelids but there was no trace of warmth there. It was early winter and such light as the clouds of Chaahk permitted was chilled by the coldness of the air that came down from the north. Galeo had been predicting an early fall of snow for some days but had failed to predict the massive storm.

Up on her ledge above their dwelling Autumn sat, her heels on her knees and the backs of her hands on her heels, her usual posture when sitting. Her back was straight and a little forward of the wall that continued above her. Despite her disciplined and logical mind she had a vague reluctance to add any pressure to the Wall but that would likely pass quickly. As usual, her mind wended its way among thoughts that few, if any, would ever think, questioning the seemingly obvious and searching for that which was not obvious or, oft times, even

unthinkable. Ignorant of what went on inside her head, gulls strutted the ledge. They called to each other and watched as this part of the city slowly came awake. As always, a cow nearby lowed, a pig or two grunted and an occasional voice drifted over from somewhere. The world continued for most in its usual routine as though the storm had never happened. Food still had to be found and bellies fed.

“’Twas the worst in living memory,” many had said but others had scoffed and reminded them of other storms that had raged and ravaged in the distant and not so distant past. For certain some had died, in collapsing dwellings or out to sea, but death is all around and life goes on regardless. The man Logan had pulled from under the stone, Epis, still lived but much depended yet on his strength. Autumn had had to remove his shattered foot and he had lost a lot of blood. It would be a while yet before anyone could be sure he would recover. His woman, Ryta, had been knocked unconscious by a roof branch and she had been peppered with stone chips of various sizes. Her injuries had been many but slight and she would quickly recover although the memory of the stone crashing into her dwelling would linger, as, no doubt, would the loss of her man should he not survive. And, truth to tell, she worried how they would both survive if Epis did live, for it is difficult to labour as he did with only one foot. Others would help with food for a time but they could not do so indefinitely. Mayhap in time word of their misfortune would reach their grown-up son, a soldier in the Mo’i’s employ, and he would have some suggestions. Ryta was tending her man now, her mind on these thoughts and, in the process, freeing Autumn to let her mind dwell on her own thoughts. As yet only two nights had passed since the storm and much was held in abeyance. Doubtless time would resolve everything, one way or another. It usually did.

Slowly Autumn’s thoughts came to an end and perhaps even with one or two new conclusions although more time would be spent thinking about such things in the mornings to come. More importantly, no new thoughts came to her mind and so, after a period of thoughtlessness, she slowly opened her eyes. A gull, about to hop onto her lap and investigate this strange creature, squawked in alarm and hopped backwards before throwing itself off the ledge.

“Go in peace, little one,” whispered Autumn then stretched her arms

high above her head. Slowly she lowered them, exhaling as she did. The world, at least that part of it within range of her senses, seemed much as usual and there was no apparent cause for alarm.

Some way in front of her, visible over the densely packed roofs, lay the beach. Some of the roofs were damaged but many bore the signs of recent repairs. The storm had been harsh but dwellings such as these were easily and quickly repaired and the rain had provided more than enough mud and sticks. Indeed, their own dwelling had only suffered minor damage to its front and, although Logan and Galeo had quickly made good, Logan fretted that some may have seen their small cache of coins secreted under the mud on one of the front corners. For certain Galeo had seen and he had chuckled. Whether at Logan's ingenuity in finding such a hiding place or at the ease with which he'd be able to relocate the cache when no one was watching Logan had no idea but he hoped it was the former.

More significantly, Mother Midcarn's boat was still not to be seen on the beach. Logan had gone there the previous morning to check on Mother Midcarn's welfare and found it gone. Autumn wondered if that was because Mother Midcarn had left before the storm, as likely she had seen it coming in her Window, and had not yet returned or if the boat had been washed out to sea. This was a possibility as her Window could not and did not allow Mother Midcarn to see everything the future held and, when she did see something, there was always doubt as to whether it would come to pass. As she had tried to explain to Autumn and Logan several times, the future depends on the collective actions and inactions of every living and non-living thing and prophecy could only be made in broad terms.

A vision rose momentarily in Autumn's imagination of Mother Midcarn's boat, far out to sea and drifting with its mast broken. Perhaps even taking on water. Autumn repressed the vision for Mother Midcarn had immense skills and doubtless even if the boat sank she would transport herself to dry land in an instant. Another vision arose in her mind of Mother Midcarn trapped on the sinking boat, injured and unable to use her skills.

"What ails me today?" muttered Autumn, vigorously suppressing that vision as well. She shook her head briefly to banish all unfounded

negativity. “Until such time as I know otherwise, Mother Midcarn is perfectly well and going about her business.” She looked again and the boat was still not there so she dismissed such thoughts from her mind.

Perhaps not as importantly but certainly with more immediacy, this was the first opportunity Autumn had had to come up onto the ledge in daylight since the storm. Off to her right she could see the wreckage of the two dwellings destroyed by the falling stones. Across the street the stone she had lifted from Epis still lay in the street where she had thrown it. Kindly neighbours, for Epis and Ryta were not disliked, had rebuilt their front wall and the thickly smeared mud was still drying. Galeo had said that the two destroyed dwellings would not be rebuilt until someone with enough need of a dwelling came and took away the stones and rebuilt them. He had assured her, with a fair amount of unconcealed enjoyment, that it would be some time before that happened as there were at least four bodies under the stones and few would be willing to rebuild there until enough time had passed for the worms and maggots to return those bodies to the soil.

“After all,” he had said, “who wants to cart away a stone all covered in blood and guts and shit? Best they be left until they be clean again.”

That still left the third dwelling that lay against the Wall. It had suffered extensive damage when the second dwelling came down and from where she sat Autumn could not see that side. Her natural curiosity aroused, for she had not heard anything from the neighbours' gossiping, Autumn got gracefully to her feet and walked along the ledge to see what repairs, if any, had been made. The dwelling had, fortunately, been unoccupied at the time so no one had been injured. Her thinking was that if no one else had made any repairs, she and Logan, perhaps with some help from Galeo, would make them. That thought was quickly crowded out by another and she stopped to look up at the tower. There was a large gap at the top where a stone was missing. It was too high for her to see the state of the stones that still sat either side but doubtless their solidity had been weakened. The fallen stone had come from the side.

“’Tis likely that if the ones further to the front come lose they will fall on Epis' dwelling and the one behind it,” she thought, “although likely they will miss this ledge as they will fall in front of it. Ahhh, and that

must be where the stone hit the ledge. I wonder how badly damaged that is.”

Some way ahead and directly above where Atooa's hut used to be she could see a gap in the front of the ledge. She cautiously continued walking, aware that the stones next to the gap could well be loose. They seemed solid enough when she prodded one with her foot so she continued to the next and that seemed solid as well. The last before the gap shifted slightly and she withdrew her foot quickly but it stayed put. She prodded it again and nothing happened. Cautiously she put her foot on it then pushed. It didn't move. The gap beside it though looked deeper than it should. Curiosity, as so often before, drove her on. Ready to jump backwards instantly, Autumn put her other foot on the stone. There was the faintest of creaks and a little dirt trickled down the Wall to add to the rubble below. The stone stayed firm so she took another step then another before peering into the gap.

“Autumn! Woo hoo, Autumn!” came from behind her and below.

She turned and saw Logan waving from the street outside their dwelling. She waved back and walked along the ledge to be within easy earshot.

“You are still here,” called up Logan. “Are you not doing your exercises today?”

“I will shortly,” called back Autumn. “I was long in my meditating today and then I found something. Come up and see.”

“What is it?” called Logan, reluctant to go up there again.

“Tis a hole in the Wall,” she called down.

“Why would I want to see a hole in the Wall?” called Logan.

Jijivisha peered out of her dwelling to see what all the shouting was about.

“Damned fool foreigners,” she muttered when she saw them and snorted before going back inside.

“Have you no curiosity, Logan?” called Autumn.

“None,” called back Logan. “I have seen enough of holes in walls already. What is so special about this one?”

“’Twould seem there is something inside,” called Autumn. “Come up and see.”

“What sort of something?” asked Logan, even more reluctant. A ledge was one thing but a hole in the ledge?

“I am not sure,” called Autumn. “Or would you rather I explored on my own? And bring your staff. Likely we’ll have need of it.”

“Oh Sploop!” muttered Logan. “Here we go again. Like as not that Wall will fall down and this time with us inside.”

“Come on,” called Autumn again.

“Oh, all right,” called Logan as Komorebi came out from her dwelling. “I’ll just get my staff. Oh, hello Komorebi. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, thank you,” she said, giving Logan her best smile even though she still felt tired. “I am just off to work. What are you doing?”

“I’m going up on the ledge,” said Logan. “Autumn wants to show me something.”

“Oh,” said Komorebi. She looked up and saw Autumn who waved at her so she waved back. “But there is nothing up there.”

“Likely not,” said Logan, “but Autumn gets interested in the smallest of things sometimes. What work are you doing today?”

“Father heard there was a shipment of amurk coming in from the Zuit Islands,” said Komorebi. “I am going to buy some then sell it around Schtei.” She paused then seized the moment. “Would you like to come with me?”

“Umm,” said Logan, rather liking the idea of spending the day with



Komorebi. “When are you going? I wager this thing Autumn wants to show me will not take long.”

“Now,” said Komorebi. “If I delay much longer there will be no amurk left.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. He looked up at Autumn who was watching something going on further along the street. He sighed. “Then perhaps tomorrow? I cannot let Autumn go alone.”

“As you wish,” said Komorebi irritably.

She was suddenly annoyed with Logan and looked up at Autumn again. Then it dawned on her that Autumn may, possibly, be a hindrance after all. She looked back at Logan and beamed happily.

“Yes, I would like that. Very much.”

She stepped forward and kissed Logan on his lips before quickly walking off. Logan stared after her in shock, his face burning.

“Logan!” called Autumn. “Are you coming or not?”

## Chapter Twenty Four

“Why are you red in the face?” asked Autumn when Logan climbed onto the ledge. “Tis not a warm day and the climb is easy. You are not even sweating.”

“I, umm, ahh, yes,” said Logan feeling his face go redder. “I, umm, brought your staff as well,” and he offered it to her.

“Thank you,” said Autumn taking it.

A slight frown crossed her face as Logan was rarely reluctant to talk to her about anything then her face cleared as she remembered he had been talking with Komorebi. Even after all this time he still found it difficult to relax in her presence. Doubtless she had said something that coloured his face.

“When the stone fell from up there,” she said, pointing to the top of the tower with her staff, “it hit this ledge over there and dislodged another stone. I went to see how likely another stone would fall and there is a strangeness about the gap. Come and see.”

“What sort of strangeness?” asked Logan, following her along the ledge.

“The shadows of the gap seem too deep,” she said. “I venture there was a hole under the stone but that would be strange for what would support the stone?”

“So you would think,” said Logan not thinking about it for his thoughts were elsewhere. “Ahh, is that why you wanted Fiau? To get some light in the gap?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. She stepped onto the stone beside the gap then nimbly jumped across to the other side to make room for Logan. “You see? Astauand's light is still low and gives too much shadow.”

“I see what you mean,” said Logan giving the gap only the briefest of glances. “Ahh, did you see Komorebi just now?”

“I saw her talking with you,” said Autumn, poking around with her staff, “but my attention was drawn to someone going inside Epis’ dwelling. I feared they may be plundering the place but ’twas only a neighbour checking the dryness of the mud. Ahh, ’tis as I thought. There is a deeper gap here than the size of the stone would warrant.”

Logan pulled his mind away from Komorebi. Much as he wanted to sit in a dark corner and think long and hard on what had happened and what it might mean he also knew that Autumn’s curiosity was aroused and if he left she would question him at length. He was not yet ready to talk about the ... thing. He sighed.

“Fiau, can we have some light?” he asked.

Immediately the end of his staff burst into flame and he waved it around in the gap. The sudden flame made him think of Komorebi’s eyes just before she ... did what she did. What did that mean?

“’Tis definitely a hole,” said Autumn.

She knelt on her stone and peered in closely.

“Look, Logan,” she suddenly said excitedly. “The stones in the layer below are wider and flat slabs were laid across then gravel put on top. See? Where this stone is gone the slab has broken and fallen into a gap underneath.”

Logan knelt down for a closer look.

“Oh yes,” he said, “but the slab is still held up at that end, just under where you are. At my end it has fallen further and there is gravel piled up but under you there is a definite hole.”

“Pass me Fiau,” said Autumn, lying down on her stone. She edged forward so she hung over a little and pushed the staff into the hole underneath the slab. “I can feel it hitting the sides but the hole continues under where I lie.”

“Do you think the wall is hollow?” asked Logan.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “but would not a hollow wall be weaker? Why build such a wall as this then deliberately weaken it?”

“Unless the hollow part does not go all the way to the ground,” said Logan.

“I wager you have the right of it,” said Autumn. She got back onto her knees. “I fancy this is a hidden passage that runs just underneath this ledge. The upper part of the wall must be built on the solid part of one side of the lower wall and the slabs put in place to cover the passage. Likely it goes that way as well but it is blocked by the fallen slab and gravel. This way must go inside the tower.”

“Why would anyone build a passage inside a wall when they could easily walk along the ledge?” asked Logan.

“That I do not know,” said Autumn, “but if the city was under attack then it would be safer to walk this passage than on top of the ledge, would it not?”

“True enough,” said Logan. “Ah well, shall we go back down now?”

“Is not your curiosity rising?” asked Autumn, looking at him intently. “We have found a hidden passage inside this wall. Do you not desire to know where it goes and what lies at the end?”

“It goes to the tower,” said Logan a touch irritably. “You said so yourself.”

“And where from there?” asked Autumn. “Mayhap this is a way into the Old City without having to go all the way around the wall to the City Gate.”

“Like as not,” said Logan, “but so what? We have no desire to go into the Old City and if we did we can easily walk around to the gate. It is only the other side and not that far.”

“You are right, as always, Logan the Incurious,” said Autumn. “You go back to our dwelling and I shall join you there later.”

“Where are you going?” asked Logan. “Oh no. Please tell me you are not going to squeeze inside that little hole.”

“I cannot tell you that,” said Autumn seriously, “for that would be a lie and I would not lie to you.”

“Then let us visit the Old City through the gate,” said Logan. “Who knows what lies inside that passage and it may not even be a passage. It could be, oh, I don't know. Mayhap it is where they put prisoners to die in olden times and there is no way out and it is filled with the bones of criminals.”

“Tis a possibility,” said Autumn calmly, “but I venture there are easier ways of executing prisoners than burying them inside a city wall. No, this passage, if it is indeed a passage, was put here for a reason.”

“And you are determined to know what that reason is, aren't you,” said Logan.

Autumn shrugged.

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan and his shoulders drooped. “Then best I be coming with you. You may find yourself trapped and end up pushing the whole wall down to get out.”

“You overestimate my strength, friend Logan,” said Autumn with a smile, “but, yes, I venture we will both be safer with each other as company. Best you go first since you are a little broader in the shoulder than when we last went exploring caves and by the feel of it this passage is narrow. If you get stuck I can pull you back.”

“You think there is no danger inside then?” asked Logan, a little nervously.

“From fearsome creatures? No,” replied Autumn. “Tis a hole in an old wall and likely there is nothing inside save a rat or two.”

“Very well, then,” said Logan.

He took a deep breath and stepped onto the angled slab. It settled a

little and some gravel and a tuft of scrub grass slid off and fell on top of the wreckage of the dwelling below. Cautiously he stepped forward and took the proffered staff. He put the burning end inside the gap and gently lowered himself until he lay on the slab then began to worm himself inside.

The passage, if that was what it was, was exceedingly low and narrow. It was wider than his shoulders but not by a great amount and was perhaps as high again as he was thick but not by enough to kneel. The roots of grasses and other small growing things hung down. A pair of eyes gleamed at him some way ahead then disappeared among faint scurrying noises. Likely the alarm of this creature at this unexpected intrusion would alert whatever else lived inside. With an effort Logan squeezed his hips under the slab then edged forward in relative freedom. After a few moments he heard Autumn squeezing inside as well.

“Ugh,” he said in distaste after he had crawled a short way.

“What is it?” asked Autumn from behind.

“A puddle,” said Logan. “There must be a leak around here.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. “Is there any sign of the tower? It was only two or three paces from where we were.”

“I cannot tell,” said Logan. “All I can see is the light from Fiau right in front of me. Ahh.”

“What?” asked Autumn.

“She will go no further,” said Logan. “We seem to have reached something at any rate. Let me feel ... umm, this feels like a hole. Let me get a little closer and ... yes. It is a hole going downwards. I cannot see the bottom.”

“Like as not it is inside the tower,” said Autumn. “Is there any way down?”

“We may be able to scramble down,” said Logan peering down. “It is

quite narrow so mayhap with our backs on one side and feet on ... no, wait. Ahh, it looks like there are spikes in the sides. Let me just ... this one feels like metal and there is another further down but out of reach and I think another beyond that. I wager they are foot and hand holds. I suppose we are going down?"

"I am surprised you feel the need to ask," said Autumn cheerfully. "Are you able to twist around and go feet first?"

Logan tried to draw his feet up underneath him but the passage wasn't quite high enough to let him so he ended up crawling across the hole then backing down into it. Autumn, being more flexible, had no difficulty.

"That is better," said Logan when he reached the bottom. "We seem to be in another passage but one high enough to stand in."

He stepped forward to give Autumn enough room to jump down as the passage led in only one direction.

"We must be some way under the Old City," said Autumn looking around. The passage was dusty but dry and there was not a root to be seen. "By my reckoning we have come down eight or nine body lengths and the ledge was less than three lengths above the road."

"Aye," said Logan. "So, do we follow this passage or go back up? I dare say that is a foolish question."

"There are no footprints or other marks in the dust," said Autumn, "save our own. I venture no one has been along here for a very long time although it must have been built for a purpose. There must be an entrance at the other end for who would build a passage inside a wall with no way in or out?"

"Unless it was a prison of sorts and sealed," said Logan, "but if that were so we would surely have found some bones by now."

"True enough," said Autumn. "Let us follow this passage then." She took Fiau from Logan and set off. "At least we will not get lost if we have to track backwards. Mayhap this was used by soldiers to man the

walls during an attack on the city.”

“If that were so then why are there not holes in the wall to fire arrows through?” asked Logan.

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “Perhaps there were but they were later filled in.”

“Oh,” said Logan, following her. “I did not think of that. So, umm, you saw me with Komorebi?”

“I saw you talking and waved,” said Autumn, “but I did not watch you all the time. What happened?”

“Oh, nothing really,” said Logan, feeling his face go red again. He was glad Autumn was in front.

Much as he desired to discuss what Komorebi had done he was reluctant to tell Autumn yet. She would likely find fifteen reasons why ... it ... was of no significance and Logan was certain it had been significant. He just did not know how. Or why. Moreover, even though Autumn had had at least four offers of marriage<sup>21</sup> to his knowledge he was certain she had even less understanding of what men and women did together than she had of jokes, if that was possible. He needed to talk to someone but Autumn? No, best not. In fact, the more he thought about it the more Logan thought he was wrong. It had seemed like a kiss but he must have misunderstood. After all, why would Komorebi kiss him? Most likely she had stumbled and touched his face by accident.

“Yes, a stumble,” he muttered.

“You stumbled?” asked Autumn, turning to look at him. “Your foot is injured?”

“No, no, I am quite well,” said Logan hurriedly. “My mind was elsewhere.”

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21 From Nirwa of Veobad in *The Annals ~ The Third Tale*; Ibu'oden in *The Fourth Tale*; Dhru, son of Inyanasi the trader in *The Fifth Tale*; and Subota, Sarauta Matsafa to Soros VII, the Karoi of Neander also in *The Fifth Tale*.



“Ahh,” said Autumn. “Have you noticed this passage is quite straight and does not deviate to the left or right? It seems perfectly level as well and does not go up or down. I venture it is heading deep inside the cliff under the Old City. Mayhap it leads to a storage area for the city's food or to a water supply.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan distractedly. “I daresay we will find out soon enough.”

But if it was a kiss, and Logan hoped it might have been, what did the expression on her face mean? Why had she looked angry before she did it? Why did her eyes flash? Surely she wasn't angry when she ... did it?

“I thought it was a smile,” he muttered.

“Who smiled?” asked Autumn. “Did you see something down here? A drawing on the wall?”

“Oh, umm, I thought I saw something,” said Logan hurriedly. He cast around for something he could have seen but the walls were unadorned with anything save age. “It must have been the flickering of the flame.”

“Aye, flames can cause the strangest of shapes in shadows,” said Autumn. “No matter. I think we are coming up to something. The shadows ahead begin to look different.”

“But why would Komorebi get angry with me then smile and kiss me?” thought Logan, “that makes no sense unless she did stumble. But she wasn't moving so how could she stumble?”

“Oh, umm, are we?” he asked, realising Autumn had said something.

“You are behaving most strangely,” said Autumn stopping to look at him. “Are you feeling unwell?”

“No, I am quite well,” said Logan. “I just do not like being underground. Have you noticed the air is quite dusty and tastes old?”

“Aye,” said Autumn moving forward again. “And there is no movement of air either. It makes me wonder if there is a way out but then, if there is not, then how is it the air is still breathable? There is a puzzle here and no mistake. Ahh, what have we here?”

She stopped and held up the staff. The passage had widened out suddenly and they appeared to be in a room or cavern of some sort. Walls stretched away to each side although there appeared to be nothing ahead of them.

“Can we have more light, Fiau?” asked Autumn.

Obligingly the staff’s flame brightened and the entire space became dimly lit. It was indeed a room, not a cavern. It was square in shape although the roof was no higher than that of the passage. In the centre of the room sat a large pot-like object on a low plinth and against the wall to the left sat a pile of what seemed to be split tree trunks. Directly opposite where they stood, on the far side of the plinth, was what looked suspiciously like a heavy wooden door.

“Well, now,” said Autumn quietly. “What do you make of this?”

“It looks like a room for worship,” whispered Logan, suddenly afraid. “Perhaps this is where they attended Ratanbismet before it became the Old City.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “That would explain the pot. It may have a relic in it but those tree trunks?” She moved along the wall to inspect the trunks. “Oh! They have been carved. What do you suppose they are?”

“I have seen such as these before,” said Logan. He reached out to touch one then pulled back. The wood was clearly badly eaten by worms and would likely fall apart if he touched it. “They look like boats cut from the solid trunks of trees.”

“Ahh, I see now,” said Autumn running her eyes along them. “And one it sitting atop the other. I wonder why. It seems surpassingly strange to leave two boats in a room this far underground.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “and look at this.” He pointed to where the top boat rested on the bottom boat. “You see that smooth glossy stuff? It is on the edges of both boats. It looks like at one time they were both joined together and sealed but that seal has broken. Most likely with age but I wonder why anyone would seal two boats together in such a way?”

“Mayhap there is something inside,” said Autumn, studying the join. “Or was and the seal was broken to get it out again.”

“Or whatever was inside broke out,” said Logan ominously.

They both looked around the room again but nothing had changed.

“I confess I am tempted to lift the top one up and see inside,” said Autumn.

“Best not,” said Logan. “These trunks are rotten and will likely crumble to dust if we touch them. If this is a shrine or temple to Ratanbismet we do not want to offend anyone by breaking their relics.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn reluctantly.

She moved away and started to study the pot on the plinth. Logan moved over as well to be where the light was brightest.

“Tis an unusual pot,” she said, walking around it. “It looks like a plain drinking cup but is far too large and has no handles or any markings save a lid and what looks to be the same stuff sealing the lid as was on the edges of those boats.”

“Oh yes,” said Logan peering at the rim of the lid. “Is it the same stuff? It looks to be a different colour.”

He edged forward to get a better look and tripped over the edge of the plinth. He righted himself but touched the pot with his forearm and with a whispering sigh the pot crumbled to dust. There was the faintest of shimmers in the air but it disappeared instantly.

“Sploop!” exclaimed Logan. “I’m so sorry! I barely touched it and it just fell apart!”

“Aye, ’twas unfortunate,” said Autumn, “but I venture it was almost as old as time itself and was ready to fall apart. Still, at least we know what was inside. Absolutely nothing.” Apart from dust and a few lumps of the resin substance there was nothing else on the plinth. “Why would anyone seal a pot with nothing inside?”

“Perhaps it was filled with a liquid,” said Logan, backing away a little even though the damage was already done. “And that liquid has seeped out over all the summers the pot sat here.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “Ah well, what’s done is done. Best we go through the door and apologise to whoever is on the other side. Mayhap they will be philosophical about this.”

“Or would it not be better to go back the way we came and pretend we were never here?” asked Logan looking at the door. It had now taken on a forbidding and slightly dangerous aspect.

“There speaks the thief in you,” said Autumn. “No, ’Tis best to be open and honest about this. Come.”

“Oh very well,” said Logan. “But if they are angry, remember that it was me that did this, not you. I will not let you take the blame.”

“We are in this together, friend Logan,” said Autumn. “I brought you here and share the blame equally with you.”

She grasped the thick handle attached to the door and pulled. To her surprise it swung open quite easily despite its thickness and obvious weight.

“Mizule!” she exclaimed as it opened. “Why would they brick in the doorway?”

## Chapter Twenty Five

“Tis unexpected certainly,” said Logan, reaching out to touch the bricks. They were rough hewn but still solid. “Still, it has its advantages.”

“How so?” asked Autumn, scratching a fingernail along the stuff that bound the bricks together. It didn't crumble.

“No one comes in here,” said Logan with a half smile, “so no one will notice the pot is missing.”

“A fair point,” said Autumn, “but to run away and pretend this did not happen is not honourable. The fact this door is sealed gives some measure of the importance of what was in this room even though it seems of little importance to us. We must tell someone, although in truth I have no idea who to tell nor how to find the other side of this wall. I venture we will have to return through the Wall and enter the Old City and ask whoever we find there.”

“How did I know you were going to say something like that?” asked Logan. “Ah, well. Let us return.”

“A moment,” said Autumn, staring at the bricks. “Bring the light closer.”

“What is it?” asked Logan, stepping closer.

“There is a crack here that was not there before,” said Autumn. “There, near the centre.”

“So there is,” said Logan peering at it. “And another there.”

“There are cracks appearing everywhere,” said Autumn with puzzlement in her voice. “They are running through the bricks and the stuff that holds them together.”

Unexpectedly a partial brick fell the other side then, moments later, another.

“Step back,” said Logan urgently as Autumn bent to inspect the widening hole. “I think the whole thing is about to collapse!”

A large section of the brickwork suddenly gave way and a cloud of dust filled the air. There was a whooshing sound and the dust was sucked through the hole.

“Did you hear that?” asked Autumn, her voice tense. She rotated quickly, her arms raised defensively. “Someone laughed!”

“I only heard a whoosh,” said Logan, looking around as well. “There is no one here.”

“I am sure I heard a laugh,” said Autumn, looking back at the doorway. “But mayhap it was just the rush of air. Why would there be a rush of air?”

“I have no idea,” said Logan, “but the bricks have stopped crumbling and there is a hole big enough for us to get through.”

“I know that voice,” said a familiar voice from the other side. “Is that you, Logan?”

“Mother Midcarn?” exclaimed Logan with a frown. “Aye, 'tis me, Logan, and Autumn.”

“What are you doing to the wall of the Library?” asked Mother Midcarn, appearing on the other side of the hole. The light behind her made it difficult to see her expression but she sounded more curious than annoyed.

‘Twas not us,” said Logan. “We opened the door here and then the bricks started to crack and crumble.”

“Door? What door?” demanded Mother Midcarn.

“There is a door here,” said Autumn.

“Don't be absurd, child,” said Mother Midcarn. “Who would put a door against a wall?”

“I know not,” said Autumn, “but there is a door here nonetheless. Come in and see for yourself.”

There was a brief pause while a few more bricks fell out of the wall to make way for Mother Midcarn's stout figure then she squeezed through. Five thick candles on an ornate candelabra followed her.

“Interesting,” she said, looking around. “I did not know there was another room here. How did you get in?”

“We came through a passage through the Wall and down inside the tower,” said Autumn. “The passage is over there.”

“Show me,” demanded Mother Midcarn so they led her through the passage back to the hole that went up through the tower.

“Surpassing strange,” said Mother Midcarn, fingering one of the metal spikes embedded in the stone. “Clearly these were meant for people to go up and down and yet no one constructed steps. You say this goes into the Wall above the ledge?”

“No, there is a small passage just below the ledge,” said Autumn. “It was just big enough for us to get through by crawling.”

“Then it would serve no purpose for me to go up,” said Mother Midcarn. “Hmm.”

She gazed up the hole for a few moments then walked back to the room.

“And there is nothing in this room apart from that wood and a pile of dirt,” she muttered. “Why brick it up?”

“If you will forgive me asking,” said Logan deferentially, “how is it that you are here?”

“I am visiting the Old Library,” said Mother Midcarn. “’Tis on the other side of the doorway. I wonder if these passages to the outside are to allow air to get in but keep the rain and snow out? That would make sense for the skins and recaisn stored here are remarkably dry

and well preserved. There is barely any mould.”

“We thought you had gone,” said Autumn. “Your boat was no longer on the beach.”

“Oh, I just moved it because of the storm,” said Mother Midcarn absently. “Why did you knock down the wall instead of simply going back the way you came?”

“We did not,” said Autumn. “It fell apart on its own after I opened the door.”

“I distinctly heard thumps against the wall,” said Mother Midcarn. “That is why I came over to investigate.”

“Twas not us,” said Autumn. “Cracks started to appear then the bricks fell in but we were not the cause. Why did you laugh?”

“Laugh?” said Mother Midcarn, taken aback. “I did not laugh. Why would I laugh?”

“I heard someone laugh after the bricks collapsed,” said Autumn.

“You are sure it was a laugh? said Mother Midcarn looking at her intently.

“No,” said Autumn, “but it sounded like a laugh.”

“There is more to this than meets the eye,” said Mother Midcarn, pursing her lips. “So, you came in through the passage and went over to the door and opened it. What else did you do?”

“Nothing!” interjected Logan.

Mother Midcarn just gave him a cold look then turned back to Autumn.

“We looked at the canoes,” said Autumn, “then at the pot but that fell to dust.”



“That pile?” asked Mother Midcarn, pointing to the plinth.

Autumn nodded and Mother Midcarn went over to inspect it. She stiffened then eased herself onto her knees and started sniffing, moving her head from side to side. Then she slowly moved her hands over the plinth without touching anything.

“There was strong magic here once,” she muttered. “Tis faded now but I sense it was strong a long time past. Help me up, Logan.”

Logan helped her to her feet and she went to inspect the wood without thanking him.

“Here too,” she muttered, again moving her hands, “although this was broken long before it faded.

“Why would there be magic on these things?” asked Autumn.

“I know not,” said Mother Midcarn.

She walked back to the door, the candelabra following.

“There is no magic here,” she reported after inspecting the door and the bricks. “These are just what they seem to be. You say you did not touch the bricks?”

“We both touched them,” said Autumn, “but 'twas only a touch. For certain we did not hit them and make them fall. The cracks came by themselves.”

“And yet I heard thumping and you heard a laugh,” said Mother Midcarn. She looked back at the remains of the pot. “And you, Logan? What did you hear?”

“Nothing,” said Logan. “Only a faint whoosh as the bricks gave way.”

“Hmm,” said Mother Midcarn.

“Actually, no,” said Logan. “The whoosh I heard was after the bricks fell. There was a lot of dust, you see, then the whoosh came and

sucked all the dust out.”

“Out?” said Mother Midcarn intently. “You mean from in here to out there?”

“Yes,” said Logan. He glanced nervously at Autumn. He always got worried when Mother Midcarn became intent.

“Oh dear,” said Mother Midcarn. She walked over to the pot dust and dragged a finger through it.

“What does all this mean?” asked Autumn.

“I am very much afraid it means trouble,” said Mother Midcarn quietly.

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn.

“I suspect something was stored in this pot,” said Mother Midcarn, “and perhaps something else inside that wood or mayhap whatever was in the pot was in the wood first and moved to the pot. Either way, the magic that trapped whatever it was inside likely faded with time and the pot collapsed, freeing it.”

“You mean it is still in here?” asked Logan, brandishing his staff and looking around. Autumn also readied herself for attack although that involved little more than a slight adjustment of her feet as she was always ready for an attack. She had been trained that way.

“Alas no,” said Mother Midcarn. “I fancy the thumping I heard was the thing breaking down the brick wall and Autumn heard it laugh when it made a hole and escaped. Likely your whoosh, Logan, was the thing passing through the hole. Doubtless it is long gone by now. For certain nothing here remains save a few ancient traces of magic and dirt.”

“What was ... the thing?” asked Autumn.

“I have no idea,” said Mother Midcarn looking around. “There is nothing written here to give any clue unless there was something

written on the pot?"

"No," said Autumn. "The pot was completely smooth and featureless save for a lid."

"Perhaps those who did this felt their task complete," said Mother Midcarn. "Unless they left a record in the library but if they did I know not where to begin looking. Such records as are here are not in any sensible order. 'Tis something of a mess, quite frankly. I took the librarian to task over this but he did not care. No one has been here in living memory save me."

"Do you think it is dangerous?" asked Logan.

"No, Logan," said Mother Midcarn rounding on him. "Sorcerers are constantly sealing harmless things in pots for the fun of it!"

"Oh," said Logan, crestfallen. "Sorry."

"Ahh, 'tis I who should be sorry, Logan," said Mother Midcarn. "That was nasty of me. I apologise."

"I was being stupid," said Logan. "'Tis I who should apologise."

"Then let us both agree to be friends again," said Mother Midcarn, patting him on his shoulder.

"This is all very well," said Autumn, "but should we not tell someone what has happened? Raise the alarm?"

"Who?" asked Mother Midcarn. "The librarian seems a fairly useless fellow and what would he be able to do anyway? No, with good fortune whatever was in here has learned from its entrapment and is far distant now. Mayhap it is on its way back to wherever it came from originally. I shall return to my boat and look in my Window. Mayhap I shall see something in your futures if it still lurks."

"And doubtless you will give us a gift to help us if it does," said Logan apprehensively. "I shall look forward to that."

“You do not find my gifts helpful?” asked Mother Midcarn caustically. “You would prefer I left you unaided?”

“I think that Logan is anticipating future difficulties and expressing dismay,” said Autumn diplomatically, “rather than criticising your role in them.”

“As well he might,” said Mother Midcarn, “although life is sufficiently full of difficulties as to not warrant looking for more.”

“Ours seem to be more than most,” said Logan.

“Aye, so it would seem,” said Mother Midcarn, “but it is only to the most valiant that the greatest troubles fall. Remember that, both of you, and remember also that in times to come songs will be sung of your exploits and praises heaped upon you.”

“Really?” said Autumn with a frown. “I most assuredly hope not for I do not seek praise nor favour. I merely seek to reduce suffering as and where I find it. Rather I would prefer others to do the same than sing songs about me then cause suffering to others.”

“And best you forget what I said,” said Mother Midcarn, “for it was very wrong of me to divulge anything of your futures. Whatever happens, please do not go forward expecting songs of praise for that way lies disaster. Always do what you both feel best under the circumstances and leave the singing of songs to those who wish to do so. Now, I'd best be getting back to my boat. I venture whatever the thing was it no longer has any harmful intent for it has done nothing to us but my Window may offer up something of interest.”

“The Library is through the door?” asked Autumn. “Can I see? I have never seen a library save for the one at my Esyup and that was small and mostly filled with the thoughts of past elders.”

“Aye,” said Mother Midcarn. “Come, I will show you around although it will not be as interesting as you think. Most of what lies here is written in languages spoken before the Old Tongue and by those whose skills at writing were not good. Indeed, some of the oldest writings I have ever seen are on some clay tablets heaped in a corner.

Most are broken and some have been defaced but they are interesting nonetheless when you can find some pieces that fit together.”

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“Hello,” said Komorebi when she saw them walking along the street. She jumped up from Autumn's bench and hurried to meet them. “You are returned at last! I have been worrying about you.”

“What for?” asked Autumn. “You think we are in danger?”

“Ohh, I think not,” said Komorebi. “I fancy you are both well able to look after yourselves. No, I was just looking forward to seeing Logan this evening and Astauand is already gone. And you, Autumn.”

“Ahh,” said Logan then fell silent. He wanted to talk to Komorebi as well since he needed to know what the meaning of her kiss had been but he did not know how to bring the subject up. He also, truth to tell, hoped she might kiss him again but would never admit that in case she thought him foolish or, worse, said she did not want to ever kiss him again.

“We have been exploring the Old City,” said Autumn. “For some reason I thought no one lived there but it turned out to be otherwise. There are many people there and they live as closely as we do here.”

“It was deserted for a time,” said Komorebi happily. “There was some trouble in the past and the Mo'i built a new palace and moved there and everyone moved out of the city but people have moved back since. There is a dreadful shortage of dwellings and it makes no sense for the Old City to stay empty.”

“I see,” said Autumn, giving Logan a glance but he was staring at Komorebi. “Do you know why they all moved out?”

“Likely because the Mo'i wasn't there any more,” said Komorebi. “Oh and you are becoming quite famous around here!”

“You mean someone has written a song about me?” asked Autumn in dismay.

“A song?” said Komorebi. She frowned. “Why would anyone write a song about you? Have you been fighting dragons or sending suitors on quests to prove themselves or something?”

“Well, not recently,” said Autumn seriously, “and it never developed into a fight.”<sup>22</sup>

Komorebi stared at her then burst out laughing.

“Oh you are funny!” she exclaimed then slapped Logan on the shoulder. “And you said Autumn does not understand jokes! Shame on you!”

“I was not jok ...” started Autumn but Logan interrupted, rubbing his shoulder because Komorebi, for all her smallness, was very strong.

“How is it we are famous?” he asked.

“There was another of those messengers from the Mo'i to see you, Autumn,” said Komorebi. “How is it none of them ever come to see you, Logan? Are you not important like Autumn?”

“I am not in the least little bit important,” said Logan. “No one has even heard of the place I was born.”

“Well, you are important to me,” said Komorebi, slipping her hand into his. Inevitably Logan went bright red. “Where were you born? Doubtless it is a big important place and you were born in a big house with lots of servants and things.”

“Umm, 'twas a little place called Biasdo, in Aferraron,” said Logan, “and I lived in a cowshed.”

“I confess I have never heard of Biserdo,” said Komorebi, upset, “and I do not believe you lived in a cowshed. You are making fun of me,” and she pulled her hand from Logan's and turned away.

“'Tis true,” said Autumn. “Biasdo is a very small village<sup>23</sup> and Logan's

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<sup>22</sup> See *The Annals ~ The Sixth Tale*. Autumn mediated in a dispute between the deities Xanthous, in the form of a dragon, and Zeeth.

<sup>23</sup> In fact Biasdo was burnt to the ground and all the inhabitants killed or taken prisoner

parents died when he was but a small boy. A farmer let him live in his cowshed although Logan had to find his own food.”

Komorebi's jaw dropped in disbelief.

“This is truth?” she demanded and Autumn nodded.

“Oh, you poor, poor thing,” she cried and hugged Logan tightly. “That must have been so dreadful! How did you manage all on your own? Were you hungry all the time? Were the cows nasty to you? Oh! I will not sleep now for worry over the things you must have suffered.”

“Umm, 'tis all over now,” gasped Logan breathlessly, putting his arms rather cautiously around Komorebi. “There is no need to worry.”

Reluctantly Komorebi released him and even more reluctantly Logan let go of her as well.

“If you will not let me worry about your past,” she said coyly, “then let me worry about your future.”

“Umm, well, ahh, if you must,” said Logan, “but there is no need.”

“You need someone to look after you,” said Komorebi, taking his hand again.

“Umm,” said Logan worriedly. He looked desperately at Autumn for help.

“You said there was a messenger from the Mo'i,” said Autumn.

“Oh yes,” said Komorebi, “and two sick people wanted to see you but I sent them away when I returned. They were cluttering up the place. I told them to come back tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” said Autumn. “What message did the messenger bring?”

“Oh, I don't know,” grumbled Komorebi. “Messengers from the likes

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by Lord Loheckle shortly after Logan was exiled. Because he had not returned, Logan did not know Biasdo no longer existed. See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*.

of the Mo'i do not give their messages to people like me. I am not important enough."

"And neither am I," said Autumn. "Likely it was for Mother Midcarn not for me."

"No, it was definitely for you," said Komorebi. "He showed me your name written on it although I cannot read and had to take his word for it. I left it inside your dwelling. Do you want it?"

"I daresay," said Autumn, "although I cannot read your language so it will not help. Can anyone around here read?"

"Father can read and write his name," said Komorebi proudly. Then her face fell. "Oh, I do hope his name is not in the message from the Mo'i! That could not bode well for us."

"I venture it is unlikely," said Autumn. "Can anyone else around here read?"

"Not that I know of," said Komorebi. "But cannot your friend Mother Midcarn read?"

"Aye," said Autumn. "I suppose it will have to wait until we next see her which is unfortunate. I cannot imagine what the Mo'i is sending me a message about but likely he thinks it important even if it isn't."

"I will get it for you," said Komorebi, releasing Logan's hand. "I left it beside your hearth."

She dashed inside then reappeared almost instantly with a small crimson bag in her hand.

"There," she said, a little breathless with excitement.

"Thank you," said Autumn. She toyed with the bag for a moment then opened it and took out the small scroll.

"Oh!" she exclaimed after glancing at it. "'Tis in our tongue. How considerate of the Mo'i to think of that."



“What does it say?” asked Logan, as consumed by curiosity as Komorebi.

“Only that I am to present myself before him three days hence,” said Autumn. “I wonder why.”

## Chapter Twenty Six

Esper Kowring One, Mo'i of Wase and its dependencies, glared at Esprine Ogliani Three, Moun'i of Wase as she pushed around the large piece of barely heated red meat on her plate. He couldn't stand the girl but as she carried his baby and heir he had to put up with her. For now at least.

"Eat your damned food," he growled. "You want the child to be born weak and sickly?"

Ogliani looked at him nervously but obediently sliced off a tiny corner of the bloody meat and put it in her mouth. She was almost full term with child and even the sight of the blood made her want to retch but she valiantly fought the urge and chewed. Waves of nausea passed through her and she closed her eyes.

"More," demanded the Mo'i.

Ogliani swallowed the morsel with a shudder and again regretted, as she did a thousand times every day, her youthful dalliance with an overly handsome courtier two summers before. That dalliance had proven her fertility and drawn the Mo'i's attention to her. She'd never seen the child that had come along afterwards and now she was pregnant again with the child of a man, many many summers older than her, who terrified and hated her. She ate another morsel dutifully and prayed to Ratanbismet that the child would be strong and healthy. She never wanted to go through all this again.

The Mo'i glared at her once more but she was eating, albeit slowly so he transferred his glare to the dish in front of him. The breaking of his fast consisted of small lumps of janja soaked in warm milk and dusted with various aromatic things to make it more appetising but it was still janja. He hated janja. Alas, his stomach couldn't tolerate more interesting foods. He took a mouthful and grimaced then glanced at his era'owen again. That was a mistake. Even though she was young and pretty and by no means stupid he still hated her and his indigestion became more intense.

"You try my patience, girl," he shouted, slamming down his spoon.

“Eat your cursed food or I will have a guard ram it down your throat! My child must be fed!” and he thumped the table with a fist to emphasise his point.

“Y-y-yes,” stammered Ogliani, her face panic-stricken. Hurriedly she cut off a larger chunk of the meat and shoved it in her mouth. As she chewed some of the blood and juices trickled down her chin and dropped onto her garments. Her face was pure misery.

The Mo'i put his hand to his head and closed his eyes with a groan. Every meal was a torment.

“What?” he shouted as Linilla, his new Keewa Due, came into the room.

“My apologies for disturbing your morning meal, Venerated One,” said Linilla smoothly. She had been conniving and waiting for Jotune to make a mistake and when it happened she had slipped into the vacant position of Keewa Due like a greased knife through cold milk. “News has arrived that I felt you would like made known to you before your morning appointments.”

The Mo'i's jaw clamped and his nostrils flared. His flinty eyes narrowed. Linilla stood quietly waiting. She was not unfamiliar with the Mo'i's habits and knew he liked to let tensions rise.

“Oh very well,” exclaimed the Mo'i and spooned another lump of sodden janja into his mouth without thinking.

“Your Veneration,” said Linilla inclining her head. “It seems that there have ...” then she paused as Ogliani suddenly threw up all over her plate of meat and the surrounding table.

The Mo'i stared at her in disgust as she retched again then sank back onto her chair, holding her extended belly. Sweat stood out on her face and her ornately arranged hair sagged limply.

“Oh, get her out of here,” he shouted, waving at some orderlies. “And get her some more food. Make sure she eats it all!”

Four servants rushed to help Ogliani, two to assist her in walking away and the others with cloths to clear up the mess.

“And make sure she keeps it down this time,” he shouted to their retreating backs. “Pah! Fools!”

Linilla kept her face dispassionate although her own two pregnancies had not been without their difficulties and she sympathised with the poor girl. Still, the heir was at stake and the girl was merely an unfortunate vessel and had little importance beyond that.

“Perhaps, Most Venerated One, we could talk on the way to the Audience Room,” said Linilla. “The air in here is ...” and she waved a hand casually under her nose.

The Mo'i scowled then looked down at his bowl. His scowl deepened and he tossed his spoon away in disgust.

“Come,” he said simply and pushed back his chair. He stalked off and Linilla hurried after him. “What news?”

“There were some deaths in the night, Most Venerated One,” said Linilla. “Within the Old City.”

The Mo'i stopped in the doorway and stared at her.

“And what has this to do with me?” he demanded. “People die all the time.”

“’Twas the manner of their death, Venerated One,” said Linilla, unruffled. “And their number.”

“Explain,” said the Mo'i. He grimaced as a wave of indigestion hit him. He tried to belch but couldn't so he started walking along the corridor. His belly felt distended.

“Most Venerated,” said Linilla. “Each of the three was apparently in good health when they went to bed yet each was found shrivelled and dried up in their beds in the morning.”

“Unusual,” said the Mo'i, keeping walking, “but what of it?”

“Three died the same way the previous night,” said Linilla, “and three the night before, making nine in all. All within the Old City.”

“And you see significance in this?” said the Mo'i. “I ask again and for the last time, what has this to do with me? I know not how many are in this city but nine surely can be spared, can they not?”

“’Tis not the numbers as such that concern me, Venerated One,” said Linilla, “but such deaths have never been known before and yet we have had three such in each of these last three nights. I am concerned that we may be at the start of an epidemic.”

“An epidemic?” exclaimed the Mo'i stopping again. “Oh Agav spare me! Have I not troubles enough without having to move the Palace?”

“So far all have been within the Old City, Venerated One,” said Linilla, “but if it is an epidemic then it may escape the Old City and may encroach this far. The life of your heir might be at risk.”

“Really?” said the Mo'i, his mood lightening as he walked on. “You think I should send that infernal child far away until the babe is born? For the sake of my heir's safety, of course.”

“If such is your wish, Venerated One,” said Linilla, “but we must not forget that your own life may be at risk as well. It would be wisest for you to accompany her.”

“Ugh,” said the Mo'i, his mood darkening again. “Do we know the cause?”

“Alas, no,” said Linilla. “None who have attended those who have died in this way are willing to express any opinions on the cause. For certain none have seen the like before.”

“Hmm,” said the Mo'i. He stopped outside the Audience Room. “Perhaps if we just closed the Old City until all are gone. That would stop the spread, would it not?”

“Perhaps,” said Linilla. “On the other hand we only lose three each night. If that number stays the same we will like as not notice much difference.”

“Aye, there are plenty to spare and no mistake,” said the Mo’i. “Let me think on this and keep me informed. The nightly numbers may well increase.”

“Your wish, Venerated One,” said Linilla, inclining her head.

She followed him into the Audience Room and stood beside the dais as he took his seat. Once he was settled he gazed around at the people standing on the far side of the room. His eyes were not as good as they once had been but one in particular looked familiar.

“You there,” he barked, pointing. “Come forward. Identify yourself.”

Autumn glanced at Logan then stepped forward.

“I am Autumn Savannah of Aferraron,” she said, forgetting to add “Most Venerated One” or similar.

“I remember you,” said the Mo’i as she came into focus. “What brings you here before me again? You see another plot on my life?”

\* \* \*

Ufga was leaning against a wall, trimming his nails with a knife when Deven appeared. He had a skinny young girl in tow, perhaps eight or nine summers old.

“Deven, Kej,” said Ufga in acknowledgement. He nodded and looked around before resuming work on his nails.

Deven also looked around but no one was paying any attention, as usual.

“Kej has some information, like,” he muttered.

“Oh, aye,” said Ufga, not looking at Kej. Someone might be watching

after all and it was best he was seen talking to his friend Deven rather than to Kej. She was, after all, known to help out on occasion and some might put two and two together and jump to some unfortunate conclusions. It never occurred to him that her mere presence there could make those same people reach the same conclusions.

“So what's it worth to you?” said Kej.

“Depends what it's about,” said Ufga.

“What you want it to be about?” asked Kej.

“Can't rightly say,” said Ufga.

“Oh Agav take you both,” exclaimed Deven. “’Tis about that girl Komorebi and the lad.”

“Might be worth a few hakina,” conceded Ufga.

“Hakina!” Kej spat on the ground.

Ufga shrugged so she turned and started to walk away.

“A kala, then,” said Ufga, pretending not to care.

Kej thought about it then turned back.

“You be wanting to know about a lad what is seeing Komorebi,” she said.

“Aye,” said Ufga.

“His name be Logan,” said Kej, “and he lives in the hut next to Komorebi.”

“That be no bloody good,” exclaimed Ufga. “You got the wrong sod. The lad I be interested in be wealthy and wouldn't live in a dump along the Wall.”

“So you be not wanting to hear the rest then?” said Kej.

“What else be there?” asked Ufga.

Kej just looked up at him. Ufga sighed and pulled some coins out from inside his shirt. He selected two and tossed them to Kej who smiled.

“Word is he has money hidden in the dwelling but none have found it yet,” said Kej, “and they be giving coins away each day.”

“They?” said Ufga suddenly alert. “Who be they and who be they giving coins to?”

“Logan lives with a woman called Autumn,” said Key. “She be some sort of healer but don't charge for the healings.”

“Oh, get away with you, you stupid child,” exclaimed Ufga. “You expect me to believe there be a healer what don't charge? You take me for a fool?”

“S'right,” said Kej. “And I hear tell them as she can't be healing she be giving coin to pay for another healer who can.”

“The lad was with two girls when we first saw him,” said Deven. “Komorebi be one. Mayhap he be living with the other. Like as not Komorebi shares their bed at night which is why he be next door. Randy little bugger.”

“Still don't believe it,” said Ufga, scratching his head. A jagged edge on his nail caught him and he scowled at it.

“You ain't heard the best of it yet,” said Kej.

“Oh aye? What's that then?” asked Ufga.

Kej just stared up at him again. Ufga shook his head then tossed her some more coins.

“People in the street say there's been a messenger from the Mo'i to see him three times now,” said Kej, “and he ain't been there long. The Mo'i. Three times,” and she held up four fingers to emphasise her point. “I don't reckon that be happening to them as lives in Wall Street



usual like.”

“The Mo’i?” said Ufga in surprise. He worked hard not to show surprise at anything. Surprise wasn’t part of his image. “The Mo’i?”

“S’right,” said Kej. She paused then added, “there be more.”

Ufga sighed and tossed her some more coins.

“They be with the Mo’i now,” she whispered. “Him and that girl he be living with.”

“You’d best not be lying to me,” growled Ufga, pointing a threatening finger at her.

“S’right,” said Kej, backing away a half step. “Followed ’em meself, I did. Came over here when they went inside the Palace Gate. Guards seemed to know ’em and all.”

Ufga gave a low whistle and stared thoughtfully at his feet.

“So what you reckon?” asked Deven.

“I reckon Kej be trying to cheat me,” growled Ufga. He looked dangerously at Kej.

“Swear on Ratanbismet, I ain’t cheating you,” she said nervously. “You go and ask yourself. It all be true. I ain’t gonna lie. You be killing me if I do.”

“That be right enough,” said Ufga darkly. “You know I be finding you if you been lying.”

Kej just stood there, watching him. She was scared but not overly so for she knew the truth of what she had told him.

“There be more?” asked Ufga after a while.

“Not yet,” said Kej. “You want more?”

“Aye,” said Ufga, “but don't you be getting caught, you hear? Be a kala in it for you if you find out why this bastard be with the Mo'i.”

“Two,” said Kej instantly.

Ufga scowled at her then agreed. She scampered off happily, her earnings clutched tightly in her hot little hand. She hadn't made this much money in one day for a long time.

“You reckon she be lying?” asked Deven watching her go.

“Nah, Kej don't lie,” said Ufga. “She be a good girl like that. You know what I be thinking?”

“What?” asked Deven. He was confused by it all.

“I reckon this here Logan be working for the Mo'i,” said Ufga. “Mo'i brought him in from Aferraron to do something special like and he's living somewhere rough so no one knows.”

“Why would the Mo'i bring in someone from Aferraron?” asked Deven with a puzzled frown.

“Only one reason I can think of,” said Ufga, punching Deven on the shoulder happily. “He be brought in to spy on someone what is near the Mo'i. Has to be else they'd know who he was. That's why he's living in Wall Street so he don't get seen around the Palace.”

“So why's he at the Palace now?” asked Deven, confused.

“Mayhap he's being paid, or getting more instructions,” said Ufga. “Listen, I have an idea. I was going to just kill him but seems to me he'd fetch a pretty price if we take him instead. Mo'i can afford to pay a lot to get him back. Then when we get the money we can kill him anyway. What you reckon to that, eh?”

“Reckon that sounds good, Uffy,” said Deven with a slow smile. “So what we going to do about it?”

“Bide a while,” said Ufga. “Wait for Kej to find out more then we take

him in the middle of the night.”

“Why not during the day when it's light?” asked Deven.

“Cos of all them as are there to be healed,” said Ufga patiently. “Don't want no one seeing us or trying to be heroes, like.”

“Oh yeah,” said Deven with a snigger. “No heroes, yeah.”

\* \* \*

“I know of no plots,” said Autumn then added “Most Venerated One” after seeing Linilla's frown. “I was instructed to be here.”

The Mo'i looked puzzled and relieved at the same time.

“Keewa Due?” he said turning to Linilla.

“Ahh,” said Linilla rapidly scanning her documents. She was a little flustered as Autumn Savannah was not the first on her list. “Yes, here it is, Most Venerated. The accused is brought here today to answer charges brought by the Guild of Physikers.”

“Oh,” said the Mo'i. He frowned. “What charges?”

“Conducting the business of a healer without the approval of the Guild,” read out Linilla. “Conducting the business of a healer without due training by the Guild. Conducting the business of a healer without charging fees.”

“What's that?” asked the Mo'i. “No fees?”

“So it would seem, Most Venerated,” said Linilla.

“Twould seem there is no case to answer then,” said the Mo'i. “If this one is not charging fees then she is not running a business. Who brings these charges?”

“I do,” said a man who had been hovering nearby. “I am Apgru Binaj Five, Assistant Head of the Guild of Physikers.”

“Explain,” said the Mo’i. He grimaced as his indigestion stewed.

“Gladly,” said Binaj. He drew himself up to his full height. “This criminal was brought to the Guild’s attention by one of our members, Malvern Dumphul Two, who heard of her practices and took it upon himself to visit her premises. There he found a bench outside for her clients to ease themselves while waiting and the tools of a healer’s trade inside. Moreover, when challenged, she admitted that she was in the frequent habit of aiding those with illness or injury. These points quite clearly constitute the running of a business else why would she have these things and perform these tasks?”

“That is a fair point,” said the Mo’i. “What say you to these charges, girl?”

“I say nothing for they are true, save that I am not running a business,” said Autumn. “I seek only to aid the suffering of them as suffer as far as I can and money is of no consequence to me.”

“If I might add?” interrupted Binaj. The Mo’i nodded so he continued. “Upon questioning by Malvern Dumphul Two, this criminal admitted that she was not only refusing to charge the rates laid down by the Guild but was refusing to charge those unfortunates anything at all. I might add that she is not a member of the Guild nor has she followed any training approved by the Guild. Why, I wager she has no idea how to even apply a leech!”

“Do you know how to apply a leech?” asked the Mo’i.

“No,” said Autumn, “although I venture it is not difficult as leeches know how to bite. I do not use leeches in my healing as they serve no purpose other than to add to the suffering of the sufferer. Blood is best kept inside the body rather than outside.”

“I rest my case,” said Binaj happily. “She condemns herself out of her own mouth!”

“I confess I have not found leeches to be of any use myself,” said the Mo’i drily, “but that is beside the point. This girl is from Aferraron and doubtless knows practices and techniques that we do not. Tell me,

Autumn Savannah, what training do you have? You are a krisana of some sort, as I recall?"

"I am a Krisana of Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup," said Autumn.

"And does that involve training in the healing arts?" he asked.

"Primarily in the healing of injuries," said Autumn, "but many of those skills apply to other illnesses."

"I see," said the Mo'i. He thought for a few moments. "Keewa Due, is it a requirement that healers are members of the Guild of Physikers?"

"No, Most Venerated One," said Linilla. "If that were so then the entire population would be committing an offence as most treat their own illnesses and injuries and those of their families and friends. 'Tis only for the more serious that the skills of a physiker are sought."

"Hmm," said the Mo'i. He gazed at Autumn for a few moments, deep in thought. "No, I confess I cannot see any need to take this matter any further, particularly as we may have the need for as many healers as possible in the days to come. I dismiss all the charges, except one."

Binaj opened his mouth to protest and the Mo'i stared at him with an eyebrow raised.

"You have something to add?" he asked, his voice dangerously quiet.

"No, no," said Binaj quickly.

"Hmm," said the Mo'i. "As I was saying, I dismiss all charges except one, that of not applying a fee to those whom you heal or attempt to heal. After all, this proud land is built on business and the earning of money and all would fall apart if people did not charge for their services. I therefore enjoin you to charge fees on all whom you heal or attempt to heal at a rate, shall we say, of a half plus a half of a half of the appropriate rate charged by guild members. It is so decreed."

He turned to nod at the scribe who was recording all that was said.

“No,” said Autumn in a loud clear voice.

The room went silent and the Mo'i's head jerked around in surprise.

“I give aid to those who suffer wherever possible,” she said firmly.  
“Tis wholly against my training and my vows to require anything in return. I shall not start now.”

## Chapter Twenty Seven

“You refuse to accept the judgement of the Most Venerated One?” exclaimed Linilla, shock written all over her face. Such a thing had never happened before.

“I do not ...” began Autumn but Logan quickly stepped forward and put his hand on her shoulder.

“If I might be permitted to intervene?” he asked. “There is doubtless a misunderstanding here and no disrespect was intended.”

“And who are you?” snapped Linilla flapping her documents. She knew of no precedence for this behaviour and was uncertain what to do.

“Does this one from Aferraron intend to presume upon my benevolence?” growled the Mo'i. His expression was decidedly non-benevolent.

“That I am trying to ascertain, Most Venerated One,” said Linilla, glaring at Logan. “Identify yourself!”

“I am Logan, also from Aferraron,” said Logan trying hard to remember he was in fact the Roinad of Aferraron and as such was at least the equal to the Mo'i. “I am companion to Autumn and her adviser on all matters to do with money.”

“Is this so?” asked Linilla looking at Autumn.

Autumn pursed her lips and glanced at Logan.

“Yes,” she said after some moments.

“Very well,” said Linilla. She looked through her documents to gain a little time. “You have something to add?”

“I merely wish to ask a question,” said Logan, his heart pounding. “If I may?”

“Oh, very well,” said Linilla. “What is it?”

“The, ahh, Most Venerated One said, umm, decreed, that Autumn here must charge fees?” asked Logan. “Is that right or was there any other condition?”

Linilla's eyes narrowed then she stepped back to look at the recording made by the scribe.

“That is correct,” she said.

“Why am I being kept waiting?” demanded the Mo'i, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair.

“I venture we are nearly done, Most Venerated,” said Linilla, returning to stand beside the dais. “Autumn Savannah, you have not yet replied to my question. Do you refuse to accept the judgement of the Most Venerated One?”

Logan squeezed Autumn's shoulder and whispered “accept the judgement”. Autumn twisted to frown at him then looked back at the Mo'i. Doubtless Logan had a good reason and she trusted him.

“I accept the judgement of the Most Venerated One,” she said clearly. Linilla exhaled in relief. “And I apologise for any misunderstanding.”

Logan gave her shoulder another squeeze then dropped his hand. He felt a little weak with relief himself.

“It is so ordered,” intoned Linilla. She looked down at her documents again. “You may leave. Lashan Umbis One, come forward.” She beckoned a guard over and whispered in his ear.

“Oh Sploop,” muttered Logan as he and Autumn walked towards the public entrance to the Audience Room. “We're going to be arrested.”

“Perhaps,” whispered back Autumn. “We will deal with that when it happens. Why did you want me to accept the judgement? You know I cannot and will not charge people for my aid.”



"I'll tell you later," whispered Logan and forced an ingratiating smile as the guard intercepted them. "Hello."

"Keewa Due says for you two to wait in the corridor," said the guard. He held his hand on the hilt of his sheathed sword in an encouraging way.

"Then we shall wait," said Autumn. The guard looked disappointed.

They did not have to wait long.

"Ahh, there you are," said Linilla appearing in the doorway. She nodded to the guard who stepped back out of the way. "I would speak with you."

"Do you not have urgent matters requiring your attention inside?" asked Autumn.

"My assistant is dealing with today's petitioners," said Linilla. She looked undecided about something. "Come, we will talk in a quiet place further along."

"As you wish," said Autumn and they followed her along the corridor to another room where three scribes were copying documents at crude tables. All three looked up in alarm as Linilla appeared in the doorway.

"Leave us," commanded Linilla.

All three instantly dropped their quills and fled the room. Linilla moved over to one of the tables and picked up the document that was being copied. She grunted and tossed it back.

"You are a healer?" she asked, looking at Autumn.

"Of a sort," said Autumn.

Linilla grunted again.

"And you also?" she asked, looking at Logan.

“No,” said Logan.

“You just deal with money then?” she asked.

“When we have some,” said Logan, trying out a smile. It didn't seem to work.

“And you are both from Aferraron?” asked Linilla.

“Yes,” said Autumn, wondering where this was going. Logan just nodded.

“Hmm,” said Linilla.

She walked over to another table and picked up a document but didn't look at it. She let it drop then looked hard at Autumn.

“I have an unusual request to make of you,” she said, her face hard, “but I would ask, on your words of honour, that no knowledge of this is passed by either of you back to the authorities in Aferraron. There may be ... repercussions.”

“You have my promise on my word of honour that I shall not speak of your request to any in Aferraron,” said Autumn. “Logan?”

“I too,” said Logan trying not to look at Autumn, “on my honour.”

“Very well,” said Linilla. She picked up the document again and stared at it. Then she frowned and tutted. “The quality of scribes is not what it was. Where do we get these people?” She tossed the document back down in disgust and turned to face Autumn.

“You are a healer from another land with skills that differ from those of our healers,” she said. “I do not know what your companion said to you but you showed by your first response that you are of an independent mind and not intimidated by those in positions of power.”

“It was just a misunderstanding,” said Logan quickly. “I am ...”

Linilla dismissed him with a wave of her hand and focused on Autumn. “We have a, shall I say, a situation in the Old City and I would like your opinion. Your independent opinion.”

“What manner of situation?” asked Autumn, her boundless curiosity roused.

“There have been ... deaths,” said Linilla.

“Deaths are sadly all too common,” said Autumn. “We all die, sooner or later. Why do you want my opinion?”

Linilla sighed. “Our top physikers are baffled,” she admitted. “They have not seen their like before.”

“You say 'deaths',” said Autumn. “There have been more than one of this nature?”

“Aye,” said Linilla. “Nine in all, three on each of the last three nights.”

“I see,” said Autumn, not really seeing. Then inspiration hit her. “You fear this is the start of an epidemic of an unknown illness?”

“Perhaps,” said Linilla.

“And you do not want Aferraron to know in case they take advantage?” asked Logan.

Linilla nodded. “I would remind you you both gave your word of honour.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, intrigued. “So what do you want me to do?”

“I would like you to inspect the bodies of those who died last night,” said Linilla, “and tell me all that you know or suspect of their deaths. Those from the earlier nights have already been burned.”

“Gladly,” said Autumn, “although I cannot promise anything. What can you tell me about them now?”

“Nothing,” said Linilla. “I must return to the Audience Room and get the permission from the Most Venerated to do this. You will remain here while I do so. You will be amply rewarded for assisting us.”

“I seek no ...” began Autumn but Logan interrupted her to thank Linilla for her generosity.

“This is an unexpected turn of events,” said Autumn after Linilla had gone to see the Mo'i, “but 'tis fruitless to speculate. Tell me, why did you want me to accept the Mo'i's judgement?”

“I saw no future in annoying the Mo'i and refusing to abide by his ruling,” said Logan. “I wager not even you, Autumn, could defeat the entire might of Wase.”

“But I will not charge for my aid,” said Autumn, picking up the document that had offended Linilla. She couldn't read it so she put it back down.

“Well, that depends what you mean by charge,” said Logan with a grin. “The Mo'i was very clear that you had to charge a fee but he made no mention of what you were to do with the money.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn, pursing her lips. “I would give the money to you, as always. How would that help the situation?”

“And if I gave it straight back to the person who came to you for aid?” asked Logan. “What then?”

Autumn was about to speak but hesitated then her face lit up.

“Then I would have met the Mo'i's obligation but not have added to the sufferer's burden,” she said happily. “You are a wise man, Logan the Resourceful.”

“I'm glad you approve,” said Logan. He felt quite pleased with himself.

“But what if the afflicted has no money to begin with?” asked Autumn. “If they have none they cannot give it to me to give back to them.”

“True,” said Logan, “but there is nothing stopping me giving them the money first so they can give it to you.”

“That is right clever,” said Autumn, nodding admiringly. “I see no reason why it would not work.”

“Oh, I wager that Dumphul man will find out eventually and report us,” said Logan, “but like as not we will have moved on by then.”

A sudden thought of Komorebi crossed his mind and his pleasure dissipated.

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, “although winters here last a long time. Still, we will deal with that when the time comes. You will think of some other clever thing.”

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“All three bodies were brought to the building I am taking you to,” said Linilla as she led the way through the streets of the Old City. “I do not know what it was once used for but it is now unoccupied.”

“What can you tell me of how they died?” asked Autumn.

“Nothing save that they died in their beds,” said Linilla. “Their manner of death is for you to say.”

Logan was uncomfortably aware of the four guards that accompanied them and the possibility that, if Autumn failed to come up with any satisfactory answers, the guards might have other orders. It didn't occur to him they they might also have other orders if Autumn did know how they had died but he was not skilled in the nuances of inter-country politics.

“Can you tell me of their lives?” asked Autumn. “Did they live in the same dwelling, for example, or close by? Did they have the same occupations, eat the same foods?”

“Two were men,” said Linilla, reading from her ever present bundle of documents, “one a girl child. One of the men was fresh from youth

and the other much older. All three lived within the Old City but were widely separated. Of foods I cannot tell you but likely their foods came from different markets. The older man lived with his almost and children, the child with her parents and the other man shared a dwelling with his brother. He and his brother were both animal slaughtermen and worked beside the harbour. The other man was a maker of quills and scrolls and worked from his dwelling. The child sold bread and herbs in the streets.”

“So there is nothing obvious that connects them,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “And were all in good health when they went to bed?”

“The quill maker had a soreness in his hand,” said Linilla, referring to her documents, “but his almost says that was true every night because of the nature of his work. The slaughterman had spent the evening drinking with his brother and was doubtless drunk. For certain the brother recalls nothing untoward. The child had a winter chill from walking the streets but by all accounts not a severe one.”

“So it would seem that they were three people who differed in every respect,” said Autumn thoughtfully, “or if there is a connection it lies elsewhere. And of the other six? What do you know of them?”

“Much the same,” said Linilla. “As widely varied a group of people as you could hope to meet. Here we are.”

She briefly spoke to the two guards standing beside the doorway trying to look inconspicuous. They moved away and went to talk to the four guards who had accompanied her.

“They are in the back,” said Linilla, “or so the guards tell me.”

She pulled aside the door screen and peered inside but it was dark for there were no other openings. She withdrew and called for the guards to bring torches. One, the largest, stomped over to a neighbouring dwelling and barged inside, returning moments later with a stick with an oil soaked rag wound around one end that was burning. All inconspicuousness lost, people started to gather to watch.

“Move along, nothing to see here, move along,” intoned the other

guards as they tried to herd people away but their actions only attracted more people.

“Oh, keep them distant,” snapped Linilla as she took the torch. “Let no one in.”

She went inside and Autumn and Logan followed. Logan let the door screen fall back behind him. In the flickering light of the torch, Linilla made her way to the back room.

“Ugh,” she said in distaste when she saw the bodies. “How unpleasant.” She handed the torch to Autumn and stepped back into the front room.

“Well now,” said Autumn looking at the bodies.

They lay neatly arranged on the floor. All three were naked. Their bones were clearly visible under their withered taut skin and showed no sign of any flesh.

“Interesting,” said Logan. “There is no smell. There should be by now if they died in the night.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “It has been at least half a day if they died at dawn and even in this chill weather there should be some smell of the beginnings of decay. Look,” and she prodded one of the men, “this one is stiffened in death so it has been a while.”

She gave each of the bodies a cursory inspection but it was readily apparent that each had no significant injuries.

“Look,” said Logan, pointing to the ground beside the girl. “There are some ants here but they are avoiding the body.”

“Oh yes,” said Autumn peering closely. “Most strange. There are few insects in winter but ants do not neglect the opportunity for food when it arises. I wonder why they are avoiding this one.”

They looked over the bodies more closely and found no signs of any other insects, not even the body lice or fleas that afflicted most of the

people living in Schtei. Neither Autumn nor Logan had lice or leas because they washed their bodies frequently but most did not.

“There is little more to be seen here,” said Autumn after a while.

“Have you any thoughts on this?” asked Logan.

Autumn sucked her teeth and looked at him. His eyes glinted strangely in the dying light of the torch.

“Aye,” she said quietly. “Best we talk to Linilla.”

“This is not good,” thought Logan as he followed Autumn to the front room.

“Let us go outside,” said Autumn. “This is a dark place and the light of Astauand will help, I venture.”

“So you have seen the like of this before?” asked Linilla, going into the street.

The onlookers were still there, gossiping amongst themselves, but were blocked from coming closer by the guards’ spears. Autumn left the torch to burn itself out on the cobbles.

“I have once seen similar,” said Autumn quietly. “Similar, I stress, and not the same.”

“And what was that?” asked Linilla.

“’Twas two summers past,” she said and Logan jerked his head around to look at her. He had been with Autumn two summers past and had not seen death such as this. “A woman died at my hand and she withered after death in but a few moments until she was nothing but dust.”

“Do you mean Cymogene?” asked Logan.<sup>24</sup>

“Aye,” said Autumn. “You were not there.”

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<sup>24</sup> See *The Annals ~ The Second Tale*.



“No,” said Logan. He sucked his teeth as well. “But you think this is the same?”

“No,” said Autumn. “As I said Cymogene fell to dust very quickly whereas these,” and she gestured behind her with her hand, “have withered but are still a long way off being dust.”

“But you think they have the same cause?” asked Linilla. She wore an intent frown.

“Likely not,” said Autumn, “or at least I hope not. You asked if I had seen similar and I have but these are not the same so likely the cause is not the same.”

“And what was the cause of the death of this Cymogene?” asked Linilla.

“I broke her neck,” said Autumn matter of factly, “but her death is not the issue here. It was what happened after that is the issue.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” said Linilla sharply. “Explain.”

“Cymogene had entered into an agreement with a creature from the Land of Cysciec,” said Autumn and Linilla blanched and put a knuckle to her mouth. “In this agreement she was guaranteed a long life in return for, well, for other things that don't concern us. When I killed her she had already lived many many summers past her natural death and so she withered and crumbled quickly.”

“So you are saying these people had dealings with the Land of the Cysciec?” whispered Linilla, her eyes wide. “All of them?”

“I think not,” said Autumn. “These three have the same withering but they are not crumbling and, in truth, from what you tell me they had none of the trappings of such an agreement either. These would seem to be ordinary people leading ordinary lives whereas Cymogene lead a decidedly not normal life. Moreover, Cymogene withered only after death and the cause of her death was readily apparent. With these three there is nothing to indicate how they died. No bones are broken

nor are there any wounds. I should not have told you of Cymogene for I am certain she is unrelated to these but you did ask if I had seen similar.”

“And where was this Cymogene?” asked Linilla. “Tis a Wasian name. Was she in Schtei or nearby?”

“No, she was in the Mapdil Mountains, far to the west in Aferraron,” said Autumn. “Likely as far from here as you can go without falling into the sea.”

“Hmm,” said Linilla. “So what do we do about it?”

“I have no idea,” said Autumn. “Much as I would like to help you I cannot.”

“I find that singularly unsatisfactory,” said Linilla coldly.

“I have told you all I know,” said Autumn. “Much as I regret not being of any greater aid there is nothing I can do.”

Linilla glared at her then let out a long sigh and clicked her fingers several times in agitation.

“Very well,” she said. “Where do you dwell? I may have further need of you.”

“We are in City Beach,” said Autumn. “We dwell in the eleventh hut on Wall Street.”

Linilla's lip curled in distaste at the mention of City Beach as it was not a district that she would find desirable.

“And when do you intend leaving Schtei?” she asked, her tone making it clear that leaving was a preferred option.

“At the end of winter,” said Autumn. “A while yet.”

“Good,” said Linilla curtly. She turned to leave then turned back. “And I thank you for what you have told me. I have much to think about.”

She turned again and gestured to the guards.

“A question, if I may,” said Logan hurriedly.

“Yes?” asked Linilla impatiently.

“How do we get back to City Beach from here?” he asked. “We are unfamiliar with the Old City.”

“Use the East Gate,” said Linilla, “then follow the smell. You,” and she pointed to one of the guards, “take these two to the East Gate.”

The guard saluted and loitered while Linilla marched off with the other three. The two who had already been there returned to trying to look inconspicuous.

“I notice she did not make any mention of a reward again,” remarked Logan as they followed their guide.

“I venture none with be forthcoming,” said Autumn, “for she didn't seem overly happy.”

“Well you did not give her the most encouraging of news,” said Logan. “Still, at least we are still alive.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I am most desirous of talking with Mother Midcarn, however.”

“Because there would seem to be magic involved?” asked Logan quietly.

“Aye,” said Autumn, matching his quietness, “and because of a coincidence.”

“What coincidence is that?” asked Logan, moving closer to Autumn as they walked.

“Linilla said these deaths started three nights ago,” said Autumn. “Likely it is only a coincidence but what happened to us the day before the first of those three nights?”

“I had the same thought,” whispered Logan so quietly Autumn could barely hear him. “What in Voqev’s name was in that pot?”

## Chapter Twenty Eight

“Logan,” said Autumn, jabbing him in the ribs with her elbow.

Logan winced and ignored her but did not let go of the sack of flour.

“Four hakina is my best offer,” he said to the flour man. “I will not go higher.”

“Then go hungry,” said the flour man, feigning indifference, “for I will not go below six.”

“Logan!” said Autumn again. This time she pulled his sleeve.

“What is it?” he asked, glaring at the man.

“There is Mother Midcarn,” said Autumn. “With Seph, the man who sells potions and the like.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, turning to look. There was indeed someone with the shape of Mother Midcarn where Autumn was pointing. He turned back and dumped the sack of flour on the man's cart. “Keep your flour. 'Tis too expensive and doubtless mouldy and full of grubs and weevils. I have more important business to attend to.”

He turned to walk away but this time it was the flour man who grabbed his sleeve.

“Don't be like that,” he said ingratiatingly. “My flour be the finest in this here market. What say you we agree on five? It be robbery but I be letting you have that sackful at friend's price. What say you?”

“I say it be robbery sure enough,” said Logan, “and it be me that be being robbed! But very well. I am in a hurry and cannot dally. Five it is.”

The man smiled and held out his hand. Logan counted out some coins and handed them to him.

“And if there be one grub in it I will make you eat it,” he said, picking

up the sack.

"'Twill be the only meat I eat this day," retorted the man, well satisfied with the price.

Logan twisted his lip in a sneer and marched off towards Mother Midcarn.

"I got a good price there," he remarked, very pleased with himself. "The last sack of flour cost us seven hakina."

"Well done," remarked Autumn. Prices didn't interest her but she knew Logan worried about these things and liked to be reassured from time to time. "Greetings, Mother Midcarn, Seph."

"Ah, hello, dear," said Mother Midcarn glancing round. "And you, too, Logan. What do you think of this?" She held out a small jar. Seph, the seller of potions, nodded and smiled happily. Autumn was his best customer.

Autumn took out the stopper and sniffed it. "'Tis vasblane," she said. "'Tis good for inflammation of the eyes. I tried it on someone and her eyes were back to normal the next day."

"No, no, dear, I meant the jar itself," said Mother Midcarn. "Do you know what it is made of?"

"No," said Autumn. "I have not seen its like before but it seems good for pastes and potions for the smoothness stops the stuff inside soaking in and it is very hard and seems unbreakable."

"Aye," said Mother Midcarn. "'Tis a new invention I have heard of and I have been looking for it. 'Tis called aniani and is made by a man who lives near here, or so Seph tells me."

"S'right," said Seph. "'Tis made by the brother of a friend of my cousin. 'Tis very strong and cheap to make." He picked up another jar and let it drop on the ground to prove how strong it was.

"Impressive," said Autumn. "Mother Midcarn, we would speak with

you in private.”

“Of course, dear,” said Mother Midcarn. “Just let me pay for this. Your best price, my man?”

Seph glanced at Autumn and immediately halved the price he'd been intending to ask. “Kala seven.”

“Oh, dear,” said Mother Midcarn, not batting an eye. “I seem to have come out without any money. Logan, would you be a sweetie?”

Logan scowled and reluctantly counted out the money. He handed it to Seph who beamed and dropped the coins into a small bag on his belt.

“Thank you,” said Mother Midcarn and patted his hand. He felt something slide unobtrusively into his palm. “Keep the change.”

“Thank you kindly,” said Seph. He was puzzled by this remark since Logan had given him the exact amount but he didn't let it show. A good customer was a good customer, whatever their foibles.

Logan glanced down and saw a two kala coin in his hand so he quickly clenched his fist and smiled at Mother Midcarn.

“Let us walk on,” she said. “We can talk as we walk. What brings you here?”

“We are returning from the Old City,” said Autumn. “We came to the market because we have run out of flour. Umm, ...” and she quickly looked around but no one was paying any attention. She lowered her voice. “Have you heard?”

“Heard what, dear?” asked Mother Midcarn. matching her quietness.

“Of the strange deaths in the Old City?” said Autumn quietly.

“Ah,” said Mother Midcarn. “So it has begun.”

Autumn and Logan stopped in their tracks and stared at her.

“Come along, dear,” said Mother Midcarn, noticing they’d stopped walking.

“So you do know?” asked Autumn, catching her up.

“No,” said Mother Midcarn, “but I knew something was going to happen.”

“You saw it in your Window?” asked Logan.

“I saw something in my Window,” said Mother Midcarn, “which is why I wanted to look in the Library.”

“So you have known for a long time?” asked Autumn.

“Time is neither long nor short,” said Mother Midcarn. “Tis not like cloth even though it can be folded and twisted.”

“What happens when time gets twisted?” asked Logan. It sounded intriguing.

“Things get very complicated,” said Mother Midcarn evasively.

“That is all very well,” said Autumn, “but you knew of troubles here before you came to Schtei?”

“Why else would I come to such a place?” asked Mother Midcarn, waving her hand to encompass the entire city. “No, that is not entirely true. It seemed a good opportunity to track down this aniani as well. So, tell me, what is strange about these deaths of which you speak?”

“Several have died in the night,” said Autumn. “Their bodies were found all dry and fleshless.”

“Really?” asked Mother Midcarn, stopping to look at her. “You mean as from a soska?”

“In some ways,” said Autumn, stopping as well. “But in other ways different.”



“Hmm,” said Mother Midcarn. She started walking again and travelled several steps deep in thought.

“Did you not see it in your Window?” asked Logan.

“Hmm?” said Mother Midcarn absently. “Oh, no. All I saw was a mistiness that was centred on the Old Library.”

“So you do not know what it is?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Mother Midcarn. She stopped again and looked around. “We are going the wrong way.”

“Our dwelling lies this way,” said Autumn.

“And the Old Library lies back that way,” said Mother Midcarn. “That is where we need to go.”

“Why?” asked Autumn.

“Because I have read much there that is only now beginning to make sense,” said Mother Midcarn, “and whatever is happening has its focus in that library.”

She hurried off in the opposite direction leaving Autumn and Logan standing in the street beside a seller of hides.

“Doesn't look like we're going to get any dinner,” said Logan sadly. “I suppose we must follow her?”

“She seems to expect us to,” said Autumn. “Mayhap we will pass the flamdim seller on the way.”

“Ahh,” said Logan brightening. “They are nice.”

“Come on!” called back Mother Midcarn, stopping to beckon to them. “We haven't got all day!”

They had left the market and were heading towards the East Gate of the Old City when Logan felt his staff twitch. He ignored it, thinking

he had knocked it against something inadvertently. Four paces further along the staff twitched again. He glanced down but nothing untoward was apparent. Several paces later he was dragged into a narrow alley between the backs of two rows of wooden houses and fell onto his hands and knees. He let go of his staff which clattered against a wall but managed to retain a grip on the sack of flour. The place stank of piss but Logan was too surprised to notice.

“Voqev,” was all he managed to utter. He got to his feet and checked he had not lost any flour.

“Logan,” came a voice. It was thin and whispery. “Logan.”

“Is that you, Fiau?” he asked, looking at his staff lying on the ground.

“Ahh, there you are,” said Autumn, appearing in the entrance to the alley.

“I would speak with you,” whispered Fiau as she materialised from the staff. She noticed Autumn and added, “You too.”

“Now what are you up to?” demanded Mother Midcarn, appearing beside Autumn.

Fiau hissed and her silver bark shimmered brilliantly. The green rings of her eyes seemed to pulsate.

“’Tis the greatest of pleasures to meet with the one who fashioned me,” said Fiau extending both her twig-like arms. “You are well? Your sap flows freely?”

“Ahh, Fiau,” said Mother Midcarn, taking both Fiau’s hands in hers. “’Tis also my pleasure to see you again. You are well?”

“I am well,” whispered Fiau. “I sleep soundly and these companions for whom you fashioned me keep me highly entertained.”

“I am delighted to hear it,” said Mother Midcarn, releasing Fiau’s hands. “What rouses you in a place such as this?”

"I know of that of which you speak," rustled Fiau. She quickly merged back into Logan's staff as someone walked past the alley and looked curiously at the three standing there. Mother Midcarn looked coldly at him and he hurried away. Fiau re-emerged cautiously.

"You were saying?" asked Mother Midcarn.

"Tis a boq-hasuva," whispered Fiau.

"A what?" asked Mother Midcarn, frowning.

"A spirit of the tree killers," breathed Fiau, the concentric green circles in her eyes expanding and contracting rapidly. "I know not the name in your tongue."

"Do you mean people who cut down or burn trees?" asked Autumn.

"I know of people," whispered Fiau, "and the form of the boq-hasuva does resemble you but they come from vines and creeping things that entwine the bodies of trees and their tendrils dig deep within and drink our sap until we wither and die."

"I think she means something like the uegalli creeper," said Logan.<sup>25</sup>  
"You have them in Havildar?"

"They are few and far between," rustled Fiau, "for their seed is bourne from far off places on the winds and provide nourishment for the birds but some survive and destroy us until they too wither and die."

"So they do die?" asked Autumn.

"Only when the tree they torment dies," breathed Fiau, "and the vital sap within is no more. Only then does the dwelling of the boq-hasuva die and the boq-hasuva with it."

"You are certain about this?" asked Mother Midcarn.

"I saw it," said Fiau with a shudder that made her twigs and braided

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<sup>25</sup> In fact Fiau was referring to the alkar masu creeper of northern Sassese'lte which sucks the sap from other trees. The uegalli creeper merely smothers and suffocates other vegetation. See the Glossary for more details.

moss jitter, “and the pestilence in turn saw me.”

“You saw it? Where?” demanded Mother Midcarn.

“In the hole in the ground where roots dig no more,” sighed Fiau. “Three of your days past.”

“You mean in the Old Library?” asked Mother Midcarn.

Fiau had no appreciable shoulders but it was clear that she shrugged.

“Twas in a nest that dissolved,” she said. “The boq-hasuva leapt forth and saw me. Did you not hear its laughter before it fled?”

“I did,” said Autumn. “No one else did but I heard that.”

“Yes, I remember you saying that,” said Mother Midcarn absently. “I wonder why only you and Fiau heard it.”

“The salodkaja tree seeds!” exclaimed Logan. “Autumn has them inside her.”

“That may well explain it,” said Mother Midcarn. “Autumn, did you see anything as well?”

Fiau faded as someone else walked past the alley but she didn't look in. She was too engrossed in her own affairs, her lips moving agitatedly as she argued with someone else inside her head. Fiau firmed up again as she disappeared from view.

“No,” said Autumn. “I saw nothing.”

“Hmm, that is unfortunate,” said Mother Midcarn. “Twill be difficult to find this boq-hasuva if only Fiau can see it.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and it could be anywhere. Linilla said the deaths were happening all over the Old City and mayhap this creature has now moved out past the City Wall.”

“No, I don't think so,” said Mother Midcarn. “Tell me, Fiau. Have you

any thoughts on how we can find the boq-hasuva? I venture we could search the Old City from top to bottom and never find something we cannot see. What is the matter?"

Fiau had started to fade then reappear then fade and her silvery bark had gone dull.

"There is one way," she whispered, "but that way lies great danger for me and I am afraid."

"Then we will find another way," said Logan protectively. "I will not put you at risk."

"What way is that?" asked Mother Midcarn, holding out a hand to quieten Logan. He pulled a face at her but she didn't notice.

"I saw the hunger in its eyes when it saw me," said Fiau, curling her thin arms around her trunk and vibrating anxiously. "Like as not it has not feasted on tree sap for an eternity. If you take me to that place then it will find me and I will wither and die as it feasts on the sap that is my essence."

"None the less that is what we must do," said Mother Midcarn decisively. "However, we will take what precautions we can. Logan, I charge you with the safe keeping of Fiau for she has been and remains your responsibility. When the boq-hasuva arrives you take Fiau to a place of safety and leave myself and Autumn to deal with it."

"Me?" exclaimed Autumn. "What can I do against an invisible spirit?"

"I do not know," said Mother Midcarn. "I do not know what I can do either but you are a resourceful girl. I'm sure you will think of something."

\* \* \*

"There is something here that bothers me," said Mother Midcarn.

She'd been wandering around the chamber beside the Old Library where the pot had been, studying the walls and muttering to herself.

Logan wanted to do the same but he forced himself to sit quietly with his back against the wall and his staff cradled in his arms. The sack of flour sat next to him. Beside that sat Autumn, betraying as much emotion as the sack of flour. She was in her usual position with her heels on her knees and her eyes closed. She gave every sign of being asleep save that she wasn't snoring.

"What is that?" asked Logan when it became apparent that Autumn wasn't going to reply.

"There are references to Ratanbismet in some of the oldest records," said Mother Midcarn. She turned to face Logan and rocked gently back and forth with her hands behind her back. "Clearly Ratanbismet is what the ancients called the boq-hasuva but if it was such a thing to be feared and ultimately trapped and kept here why do the people of Schtei worship Ratanbismet as a deity now?"

"Mayhap it was not Ratanbismet," said Logan. "Mayhap Ratanbismet was the one who trapped the boq-hasuva which is why they worship it as their saviour."

"No, the records are quite clear," said Mother Midcarn. "You can read them if you want."

"No I can't," said Logan. "I do not know their language."

"Ahh, unfortunate," said Mother Midcarn. She whistled a tuneless little tune and tapped her hands together.

"What do the records say?" asked Autumn without opening her eyes.

"I thought you'd never ask," said Mother Midcarn happily. Her favourite armchair appeared and she settled herself comfortably. "Have either of you any knowledge of the Oreacuachi?"

"They were the people who lived here before Aqineer took over," said Logan.

"You impress me no end, Logan," said Mother Midcarn in surprise. "How is it that you come to know a thing like that?"

“Autumn told me,” said Logan drily.

“Quite,” said Mother Midcarn. She paused for a moment. “The oldest of the records, the clay tablets, date from their time. It seems that they were living happily around this bay when inexplicable deaths started to occur. There are also reports of crops failing and plagues of insects and such like but such things often happen and the ignorant generally put them down to the disfavour of the gods. However, I digress.”

“What does digress mean?” asked Logan.

“Getting off the point,” said Autumn, her eyes staying closed.

“Humph,” said Mother Midcarn. She shifted in her chair. “As I was saying, people started to die strangely, and I daresay they withered much as you described, Autumn. In time their numbers started to decline and the people became fearful and worried. But, and this was quite interesting, someone came along called Kb’irp. The records don’t say if Kb’irp was a man or a woman but whoever he or she was Kb’irp grew up to be quite an accomplished sorcerer. No, sorcerer is the wrong word. Their word was Mganga which more properly translates as medicine man or person, as Kb’irp didn’t have sorcery skills in the sense we know them today.”

“But Kb’irp did have some skills?” asked Logan.

“Oh, most definitely,” said Mother Midcarn. “It was Kb’irp who worked out that the deaths were being caused by a spirit and it was Kb’irp who gave it the name Ratanbismet. There is a lengthy account of Kb’irp’s life which explains much of this although many of the important parts are missing.”

“Such as?” prompted Logan as Mother Midcarn seemed to have gone into a reverie.

“Hmm? Oh, such as exactly how Kb’irp trapped Ratanbismet,” said Mother Midcarn. “The account details how Ratanbismet was held between two hollowed out tree trunks which were sealed with something but how Kb’irp got Ratanbismet inside the trunks and what the seal was made of remain a mystery.”

Logan's eyes shifted over to the two canoes that still sat against the wall.

“So how did Ratanbismet end up inside the pot?” he asked. “Was that Kb'irp as well?”

“Not at all,” said Mother Midcarn. “They buried the tree trunks inside the cliff and, as the deaths stopped, their lives returned to normal. However, and this is the crucial part, they had lost a sizeable proportion of their population so when Aqineer and his followers came along they found it quite easy to subdue the Oreacuachi. Those that survived the invasion fled to the far north and Aqineer set up his base on this very cliff top.”

“So it was one of Aqineer's people who did it?” asked Logan, intrigued.

“Not at all,” said Mother Midcarn. “For many generations Schtei was just a small settlement that slowly grew. In the time of Khander Nenjen One they built a palace a little to the side of where we are now and Ratanbismet was not disturbed. It was only when Rasmusny Kentan Two, three generations later, was Moun'i that she ordered the Palace to be extended. When they were digging the foundations they uncovered this chamber where the canoes had been buried. Obviously they had no idea what was inside so they separated the canoes and released Ratanbismet. Needless to say Ratanbismet was furious and went on a rampage. That was why Rasmusny Kentan Two had a wall build around the city to contain whatever it was and at the same time had the city evacuated and a new palace built. It must have cost a fortune.”

“So how did Ratanbismet get inside the pot?” asked Logan.

“That was Rasmusny Kentan Two's brother's doing,” said Mother Midcarn. “Rasmusny Kentan Four had been travelling in Neander while all this was happening. When he return he requested the leading sorcerer of the day from the Karoi. It was this sorcerer, a man called Uswonla, who trapped Ratanbismet a second time and sealed it in a pot. His magic was much stronger although, as it turned out, not



strong enough to protect the pot against Logan!"

"It was not my fault!" exclaimed Logan.

"No, I know," said Mother Midcarn, smiling. "It could have been anyone but, as it turned out it was you so to you will go the credit."

"Does this sorcerer still live?" asked Autumn.

"Alas no," said Mother Midcarn. "It was a long time ago. You've seen the size of Schtei now. Cities like this do not grow overnight."

"I am beginning to learn something of how those who are leaders work," said Autumn, opening her eyes. "I venture that Raspusny Kentan Two wanted to keep things quiet and not alarm people. They might rebel or something like that so she kept the truth quiet. Then, once Ratanbismet was trapped again and things quietened down people started to move back to the Old City and slowly people came to think Ratanbismet was a saviour and likely the founder of the city because the truth was suppressed."

"Quite possibly," said Mother Midcarn. "I would not be surprised if the name Ratanbismet got spread around but not its ill doings as you say. Likely it began as a small cult and grew as the city prospered. 'Tis an intriguing example of how facts can become distorted over time."

"So did Uswonla leave any record of how he trapped Ratanbismet?" asked Logan.

"Alas no," said Mother Midcarn. "He lived at a time in Cim-Irsou when sorcerers competed against each other for their livings and never divulged any of their techniques. Much knowledge was lost during that period."

"So have you any thoughts on how you ..." started Autumn then stopped as Fiau appeared. She seemed nervous and shimmered and faded rapidly. "What is it, Fiau?"

"The boq-hasuva comes," whispered Fiau. "I can feel its hunger."

## Chapter Twenty Nine

Instantly Autumn was on her feet in her defensive posture. Her staff, one end in her armpit, reaching out in front of her and her other arm raised with her palm held forward. On slightly bent knees she slowly rotated, every sense taut and probing. Logan, too, had leapt to his feet, albeit more slowly. Mother Midcarn remained seated but she, too, was studying the room intently.

“Where” asked Autumn sharply.

“Tis beyond that hole,” whispered Fiau, pointing at the entrance. The broken bricks still littered the ground.

Autumn twirled to face the entrance and took a step forward.

“Get in that passage, Fiau,” commanded Logan, pointing to the narrow passage that lead to the Wall. Fiau didn't react. She just stared at the entrance, rigid with fear. “Fiau!”

Uncertain what to do, Logan hesitated then unceremoniously grabbed Fiau around what passed for her waist and dragged her to the passage.

“Get in there,” he shouted, unaware he was shouting. Then he slapped Fiau across her long thin silvery face. Fiau's concentric green eyes pulsed then focused on him.

“Get in!” shouted Logan again, pushing her hard.

Fiau came back to life and started backing into the passage. With relief Logan watched her go two or three paces then held up his hand.

“At the end of the passage there is a shaft,” he cried. “We will stay and guard this way but if anything happens to us go up the shaft and along the other passage. That will take you to a hole in the Wall and you can escape into the city. Hurry! Get out of sight!”

Fiau quivered anxiously then disappeared into the darkness of the passage. Logan turned and blocked the passage as best he could. He felt very vulnerable with an invisible foe approaching. Autumn was

still intent on the entrance, moving slowly from side to side to keep her balance optimal, her staff still raised and ready.

“I think I hear something,” hissed Mother Midcarn. She was rigidly upright in her chair and her hands gripped its arms tightly. “A faint scraping on the stones.”

“I hear it too,” said Autumn quietly. Her head cocked and her ears intent, she slowly edged over to the entrance.

Logan spotted his staff, now just a staff as Fiau was some way down the passage. He leapt to retrieve it and hurried back to the passage. He felt more confident as he brandished it the way Autumn had taught him. Even though he couldn't see the boq-hasuva he was sure he'd feel it if it tried to pass.

Suddenly Autumn's staff slammed against the sides of the entrance as she sensed something come through. The staff reverberated and made her hand tingle.

“Hah!” said a strange, empty voice contemptuously.

“’Tis in the room,” exclaimed Mother Midcarn, staring sightlessly to the side of Autumn. “There!”

Instantly Autumn twirled, her staff slashing round. It stopped suddenly in mid air and there was a faint “uhh”. Then the staff was ripped from her hands and flew across the room at Logan. He parried it with his own staff. Autumn spun round, her foot a little lower than her staff had been but something grabbed her calf and pulled hard. She crashed to the ground confused but her body reacted as it had done ten thousand times in practice and she rolled and was on her feet again instantly.

“Where is it?” cried Logan in anguish. He was hopping from one foot to another desperate to hit something with his staff but he could see nothing to hit.

Autumn began circling again. Mother Midcarn remained in her chair but her eyes were shut and she held one hand up in front of her, the

thumb and one finger stiff, the other fingers loosely curled. She was mouthing something. Then she cried out a single harsh syllable and jerked her hand.

“What happened?” she asked, opening her eyes.

“I do not know,” said Autumn, standing a little straighter. Then she gasped as something hit her hard in the belly and threw her against the wall. She crumpled to the floor, half dazed and Logan screamed and dashed forward, his staff slashing wildly. He, too, went flying but landed on the floor and slid a short way.

“I venture that did not work,” exclaimed Mother Midcarn and held out her hand again. This time she intoned a different invocation.

Autumn clambered to her feet and shook her head to clear it. Out of the corner of her eye she sensed a movement and instantly threw herself the opposite way as her staff slashed at her head. Instinctively she curled and rolled as she hit the dais. She came off the other side and leapt to her feet again. Logan was slashing the air, ineffectually, where her staff had been. She twisted and saw something, perhaps a foot, perhaps not. She didn't stop to think, just spun round to kick hard at the foot. She made contact and instantly did a scissor kick and her other foot landed on something higher up.

“This time?” shouted Mother Midcarn.

Autumn heard a laugh but the echoes of the room made it impossible to place. Then something grabbed her ponytail and pulled hard. Immediately she grabbed the base of her ponytail so her scalp would not be ripped off and twisted backwards with the pull so she faced the puller.

“Didn't work!” shouted Autumn and headbutted the boq-hasuva. It let go of her hair and she lashed out with both hands. One made contact with something slippery and fibrous and the other missed. She sensed Logan dancing nearby, desperate to lash out but afraid he'd hit her.

“Get back, Logan!” she shouted as Mother Midcarn started yet another invocation. She jumped back and tripped over the edge of the

Dais. She sprawled in the dust of the pot and a cloud blew up, revealing a partial figure. It was difficult to tell but it seemed to be kneeling. Autumn didn't stop to observe. She did her back-flip jump to land on her feet and hurled herself at the dusty figure, her hands and elbows slashing and chopping.

"Damnation!" exclaimed Mother Midcarn as it became apparent that yet another invocation had done nothing to slow the boq-hasuva. She slapped the arm of her chair angrily then put a hand over her eyes in thought.

A savage kick to the dusty figure by Autumn threw it back and it hit the wall hard. Most of the dust exploded off and only the faintest of outlines remained. The outline hesitated a moment then seemed to slither along the wall. Autumn followed, watching closely, waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Logan ran to the dais and tried to scoop up what little dust still remained. There wasn't much but he collected what he could in the palm of his hand and ran at the faint dusty outline. Much of what little he had collected blew off his hand but he hurled the rest and part of a dusty arm and hand appeared. The fingers were long and gnarled and the swipe caught him at the top of his chest, knocking him backwards. Autumn did a spin-kick, aiming at where she estimated the head would be if the hand had belonged to a human but her foot smashed into the wall and she cried out in pain.

"I need dust, I need dust," Logan repeated to himself as he got to his feet again.

Something hit him solidly on his backside and he sprawled on the ground again, his head banging into his sack of flour. He jumped up and tried to do a backwards kick the way Autumn did but there was nothing there.

"Logan!" shouted Autumn, backing away towards Mother Midcarn. "The flour!"

"What?" called Logan. Mother Midcarn seemed to be in a trance.

“The flour!” screamed Autumn. “Throw it in the air!”

Logan stared at her for a moment. The flour? Something caught Autumn on her hip and she was pushed on top of Mother Midcarn. The chair went tumbling.

“Sploop!” cried Logan grabbing the flour sack. “The flour!”

Feverishly he scrabbled with the neck of the sack then thrust his hand inside and grabbed a big handful of flour. He ran over and threw the flour in the air in front of where Autumn and Mother Midcarn were trying to disentangle themselves. Some of the flour caught on something that looked like a tangle of vines. Autumn broke free and hurled herself at the tangle, head first. She caught it and both fell to the ground. Autumn let her momentum take her and rolled forward, slamming her elbow down where she thought the head might be. It wasn't and the jarring crash of her elbow on the ground numbed her arm.

Logan jumped forward just as Mother Midcarn started to incant another spell. He threw another handful of flour as the boq-hasuva was getting up from the floor. It glared at him then turned its head to look at Autumn, who was backing away and rubbing her elbow. Another face glared at Logan. He, too, backed away. This wasn't what he had been expecting.

The creature was a head shorter than he was and it did have a head but, alarmingly, it had three faces. Each was white with flour which highlighted the faces' gaunt cheeks and thin lips. Each of the mouths' were twisted in snarls. The head twisted again, this time bringing a face to look at Mother Midcarn while keeping a face locked on each of Logan and Autumn. One head, three faces and a lot of bodies. The head sat atop what looked like a bundle of thin woody vines although it was difficult to tell from the coating of flour. The good news, however, was that the boq-hasuva only had two arms although each also seemed to be made from several vines twisted together. The bad news was that all of the vines, body, arms and legs, had tendrils that sprouted. They writhed like snakes.

“Did that work?” cried Mother Midcarn, opening her eyes. “Ahh,

'twould seem not. Think, you old fool, think!"

She started to declaim another spell then shook her head angrily and slapped herself. Then she held up both her hands and opened her mouth then dropped them again.

"No, no, no, that wouldn't work," she muttered.

Autumn made a sudden lunge at the boq-hasuva, feinting left, and as it twisted and raised an arm she went the other way and her side kick crashed solidly into its main trunk. One of the vines ripped and a tendril fell to the floor. A cloud of flour filled the air as Logan tossed another handful.

"Logan, get behind me," cried Autumn, her eyes locked on the boq-hasuva. "I cannot see that side."

Logan started to edge around and the face toward him followed, watching him closely while the boq-hasuva lunged at Autumn, the hands of both arms going for her throat. The faces shifted disconcertingly as the one facing Autumn lost its view of her and sought to see her again. It didn't really matter as Autumn easily ducked under the outstretched hands and rammed her body upwards so her shoulder caught the boq-hasuva under the chin of its side face. The hands clamped down and squeezed Autumn tightly to its body while its central face bent and twisted to bite the side of her neck. She rammed one knee into its midriff and head butted its central nose. Dark green sap oozed forth and made a mess of the flour. The hands didn't lose their grip. Instead they tightened and the other side face twisted round to attack her neck.

Autumn suddenly made herself go limp so her weight pulled her down, sliding her out from the boq-hasuva's grip and leaving a smear of green flour paste on her cheek. At the same moment, Logan leapt onto the boq-hasuva's back. He managed to get an arm around the creature's neck. It began to lash around and tendrils snaked out to curl around Logan's arms as he repeatedly rammed his thumb at its eyes. It was difficult as the faces kept changing places and he was fighting to avoid its mouths at the same time but he scored several direct hits before everything became chaotic as Autumn grabbed one of the boq-

hasuva's legs and thrust upwards as hard as she could.

Both Logan and the boq-hasuva's heads smashed into the ceiling of the room. Logan blacked out and fell off. The boq-hasuva was made of sterner stuff and kicked out hard, throwing Autumn against the wall again. She was winded and fell but managed to land on her hands and knees. The boq-hasuva lashed out again with its foot and caught Autumn on the side of her head, smashing her head into the wall. She cried out and tried to lift herself with her arms but the effort was too much and she collapsed on the floor. A dozen tendrils snaked out and began to wrap themselves around her. Behind the boq-hasuva, a dozen more tendrils were wrapping around Logan. He groaned and tried to rub his head but his arm was tightly bound across his chest.

Then everything stopped.

The tendrils stopped wrapping themselves around him. The mouth of the face that was facing him stopped moving. Even the eyes stopped moving although they didn't lose their inhuman look of hatred. He struggled but the tendrils still held him tightly. With one eye he could see part of Autumn around the boq-hasuva. She too was not moving.

"Autumn!" he cried out. "Autumn!"

"Stay still," commanded Mother Midcarn. "I've stopped the beast but I don't see for the moment how to unbind you. 'Twas foolish of me not to bring a saw."

Autumn groaned and tried to move but couldn't.

"Are you hurt?" called Logan.

"I am not sure," said Autumn. "My head pounds but the rest of me lacks any feeling. What happened?"

"The boq-hasuva kicked you into the wall," said Logan. "I think you were unconscious."

"That makes sense," said Autumn. "Why is nothing happening? Did we best it?"



“Alas no,” said Mother Midcarn, fussing around Logan. “I did however finally find a spell that immobilised it. I should have you both free in a moment or two.”

“What took you so long?” asked Logan.

“None of the spells I tried had any effect,” said Mother Midcarn, “although fortunately the last one did although I did not expect it to.”

“What was the spell?” asked Autumn. “The one that worked?”

“’Twas a spell to rid a harvest of vermin,” said Mother Midcarn. “I have no idea why it worked but it seemed to. Hold still now. Yes, when nothing else seemed to work I tried to put myself in the mind of a Mganga from times past and what he would likely know. Ridding a harvest of vermin seemed the sort of thing he would be called upon for.”

Logan felt the last of the tendrils give way and he clambered unsteadily to his feet then hurried over to Autumn.

“You are going to have a lovely black eye,” he said, taking her hand. “But you are alive.”

“Aye,” said Autumn as Mother Midcarn began work on the tendrils that bound her. “And so are you by the look of things.”

“I have a few aches and pains,” said Logan, “but they will pass.”

“And Fiau?” asked Autumn.

“Fiau!” exclaimed Logan, slapping hi forehead. He winced. “Sploop, I had forgotten her!”

He jumped up and ran to the passage calling her name. He found her half way along.

“Fiau, there you are!” he cried happily. “Are you well?”

“I am well,” said Fiau gravely. “And the boq-hasuva?”

"Tis trapped and disabled," said Logan. "You can come back now."

"That is good," said Fiau. "You are unhurt? And Autumn and the one who fashioned me?"

"We are all unhurt," said Logan, leading Fiau back along the passage. "Twas a tremendous battle but we were victorious. Come. I wager you need to get back to your home."

"In truth I do," said Fiau. "If I am too long away I grow weary and anxious."

"Well, here it is," said Logan as they emerged into the room again. He picked up his staff.

Fiau stared at the boq-hasuva and shuddered.

"It is indeed rendered harmless?" she asked.

"For the moment," said Mother Midcarn cheerfully. "And if it stirs I now know the spell to stop it again."

"That is good," said Fiau. She stared at the boq-hasuva a little longer then merged back into Logan's staff with relief. He carefully propped it against the wall and patted it reassuringly.

"Ah this is not good," he said, spotting the pieces of Autumn's staff. He walked over and picked them up. "Tis broken and riddled with worm holes. Look."

Autumn took the longer piece and Mother Midcarn took the shorter and they both inspected them.

"I wager these holes were made by the tendrils," said Mother Midcarn. "Likely the boq-hasuva was looking for sap. In any event the holes weakened the staff and likely it snapped when it hit the wall."

"Would it have done the same to mine?" asked Logan with a shudder. What would have happened to Fiau didn't bear thinking about.

“Very likely,” said Mother Midcarn.

“So what happens now?” asked Autumn, tossing her section of her staff beside the remains of the two canoes. “What do we do with that?” and she pointed at the boq-hasuva which was still motionless.

“Now I know the type of spell I will find one that is more permanent,” said Mother Midcarn.

“Will we leave it here?” asked Logan, inspecting it from a distance.

“I think not,” said Mother Midcarn. “Doubtless it will be found again in the future and released inadvertently. I have in mind to find the inventor of aniani for that stuff is very strong and impervious. If the boq-hasuva is encased in aniani I wager it will not get out and I will take it to the deepest part of the Looncan Sea and drop it overboard so none will ever find it again. I venture if the Sea ever dries up and it is found then we will have bigger problems than the return of a boq-hasuva.”

“Well, yes,” said Logan. “There is a powerful lot of water in that Sea.”

\* \* \*

It was late in the day when Autumn and Logan finally returned to their dwelling and Astauand was well into Its descent.

“Oh, what fresh nightmare is this?” asked Autumn wearily when she saw the two horses waiting patiently outside the hut.

“You are Autumn Savannah of Aferraron?” asked the figure that emerged from behind the horses. He had been waiting quietly on the bench thinking happily of how he would spend his overtime pay.

“Aye,” said Autumn. She sighed and stretched her back. “Doubtless you are a messenger from the Mo’i.”

“That I am,” said the man. “The Most Venerated requires you to attend him immediately.”

Autumn closed her eyes momentarily. "If I am to be charged for more transgressions," she said heavily, "can it not wait until the morning? I have had a very tiring night and day and need to rest."

"You are not charged with any offence," said the messenger. "The Mo'i has been poisoned and requires your healing."

"Then likely he is dead already," said Autumn irritably. "Has he no healers of his own?"

"Alas the Mo'i does not discuss matters of state with me," said the messenger with a grin, "and if the Most Venerated has already passed away by the time you arrive then you will have done your best but attend him you will. I have brought you a horse to speed our travels."

"I cannot ride a horse," said Autumn. "I never learned that skill."

"Then you can ride behind me," said the messenger.

He stepped onto the bench then climbed onto his horse. He reached over and grasped the rein of the other horse then held out his hand. Autumn hung back. "Come on, come on. You are going to the Mo'i, whatever it takes."

"Oh, very well," said Autumn. She took the man's hand and he pulled her up.

"Hang on tightly," he said cheerfully. "We don't want you falling off, do we. You might hit your head."

Logan winced and Autumn's nostrils flared.

"I venture I will be back before long, Logan," said Autumn. "Leave a little food for me."

"I will," said Logan, "and we still have a little flour left." He held up the half empty sack and waved it.

He stood and watched as the horses disappeared up the street then sighed when he saw Komorebi come round the corner backwards. She,

too, was watching Autumn and the horses.

“Hello!” she called cheerfully when she turned and saw Logan. “Was that Autumn on the back of that horse?”

“Yes,” said Logan wearily. “The Mo’i sent a messenger to get her.”

“You must both be very important,” remarked Komorebi. “That is the fourth time the Mo’i has called on you.”

“Not really,” said Logan. He was as tired as Autumn and wanted sleep even more than he wanted something to eat. “Tis just misunderstandings, that’s all.”

“If you say so,” said Komorebi, taking his hand. “Ohhh! Have you heard the rumours about those people dying in the Old City? ’Tis the most terrible thing!”

## Chapter Thirty

“Bout bloody time,” snarled Ufga as Kun wandered over. “Always bloody late, you are.”

Kun just shrugged. He rarely spoke and when he did it wasn't usually worth listening to. He and Tanne relied on their fists and knives more than their tongues and they were skilled in the use of both.

“So what's the score then, Uffy?” asked Deven.

“We picks up a joker and brings him back here to Iflinbar,” said Ufga.

“Just one?” growled Tanne with a sniff. “What you need me an' him for then? Can't handle it on your own, huh?”

“This 'un be right handy with a staff,” snapped Ufga. “I need you two to shut him up but no killing, mind. Hurt him all you like but I need him alive.”

“Right,” said Kun. “That it?”

“Likely there'll be a girlie with him,” said Ufga. “Not interested in her so you can do what you like. Best bring her here as well, too many neighbours out there.”

Kun just nodded. He knew how to deal with girls and he liked it when they struggled.

“What about Komorebi?” asked Deven. “She be only next door. Likely she and her dad will come and stick their noses in.”

“That be your job, Dev,” said Ufga. “You get them back in their hut, nice and gentle like. Don't wanna go upsetting Galeo. Nor his kid, neither.”

“What if they start any trouble?” asked Deven.

“They won't,” said Ufga. “Galeo knows which side his janja's fried. Ready?”

“Nah,” said Kun. He scowled as he thought. “Two girls? How do we know which is which, like?”

“If there are two girls,” said Ufga, “take the one with the long hair. The short haired one stays. Got it?”

“Take the long, leave the short,” said Tanne. He nodded and grunted. “Got it. And me money?”

“When we get back here,” said Ufga. “If the lad be dead you be not getting paid.”

Tanne looked at Kun then they both nodded.

“Right, let's go. City Beach be a fair way,” said Ufga. “Be dark when we get there.”

\* \* \*

It was dark when Autumn slid off the messenger's horse. She thanked him and he trotted away. She watched for a moment then went inside the hut. The fire had burnt low and she could just make out Logan's shape curled up on his straw.

“Are you asleep?” she whispered.

There was a long silence then Logan quietly said “No”. His voice was muffled.

“The Mo'i wasn't poisoned,” said Autumn, taking off her robe. “’Twas a strange situation though. He was moaning and groaning and holding his belly and getting angry with his era'owen. It seemed as though he didn't like her but then why would she be his era'owen?”

Logan didn't reply but he shifted a little so he was still awake.

“’Twas only wind,” said Autumn after glancing at him. She hung her robe on the twig that protruded from the wall. “His belly was blown up and that was causing the pain. I made him lie down and massaged his belly until he belched and farted and that seemed to help. I

showed his era'owen how to massage him should it happen again and he brought up more wind. He was in a much better humour after that." She sighed and went over to the hearth. "I got the impression he liked her more then too. Still, no matter. Is there any food left?"

She picked a stick from the fire and stirred it back into life. With the better light she could see their food was untouched which surprised her. Logan liked his food.

"You have not eaten?" she asked, glancing over at him.

"No," said Logan after a long pause. His voice was still muffled.

"Are you unwell?" she asked. She moved over and held the burning stick above him. The reason for his muffled voice was apparent; he had a corner of his robe over his face.

"Logan," said Autumn, pushing his shoulder with her foot. "Are you well?"

"I am well," said Logan in a strange voice. He still didn't move.

Autumn pursed her lips. This was most unlike Logan. She stooped and tweaked his robe away from his face. He stared up at her, his eyes clearly puffy and red even in the light of the burning stick.

"Have you been crying?" asked Autumn incredulously.

"Leave me alone!" snarled Logan, jerking the cloth back over his face.

"Logan!" called Autumn in alarm. She dropped to her knees beside him. "What has happened? Why are you crying? Are you in pain?"

Logan just rolled back onto his side and pulled his robe more tightly over his head.

"Logan! Talk to me," pleaded Autumn worriedly. "Are you hurt?"

"I am fine," said Logan vehemently. "Just leave me alone."



Autumn sat back on her heels and pondered. Clearly if Logan was hurt he would tell her, he always had. There was something else amiss.

“Logan,” she said quietly and laid her hand gently on his shoulder. “What has happened? I cannot help you if you don't tell me what has happened?”

“You can't help anyway,” said Logan from under his robe.

Autumn pondered this then rolled him gently onto his back and slid the robe off his face.

“Perhaps not,” she said softly, “but you are my friend and if 'tis possible for me to help in any way then I will help or die in the trying. Why are you crying?”

Logan's body tensed then relaxed a little.

“Oh, what does it matter?” he said resignedly. “You will find out soon enough anyway.” He swallowed convulsively. “'Tis Komorebi.”

“Komorebi?” said Autumn in surprise. She looked at the wall as if trying to see through it. “Has something happened to Komorebi? Is she hurt?”

“No, she is well,” said Logan tiredly. He sighed and his eyes glistened in the torchlight. “She came home just after you went to the Mo'i. She took my hand and we were talking and ...”. Tears started to trickle down his cheeks.

Autumn's face hardened.

“She has upset you?” she asked, keeping her voice low. “She said something?” Her hand sought his and gripped it firmly.

“'Twas right strange,” said Logan after a few moments. “She said how much she liked me and ... and ...” He choked as his throat constricted momentarily.

“Go on,” said Autumn quietly.

“And she asked if I liked her too,” said Logan. His eyes flicked open and stared into Autumn's. “I do like her, I really do.”

“I know,” said Autumn. She squeezed his hand. “So why are you crying?”

Logan flipped his other hand then let it drop back on the straw.

“Ohh, I started to get confused then,” continued Logan. “She started to talk about us living together then she said we couldn't live with her father and how nice it would be to have a place all of our own.”

Autumn felt a chill run through her. Although in her head she knew Logan was free to go his own way any time he wanted the thought of him doing so filled her with dismay.

“Go on,” she whispered.

“Why would Komorebi think we are rich?” asked Logan.

“I have no idea,” said Autumn. She forced her mind to think about that. “Mayhap it is because of the ring we sold?”

Logan groaned and shook his head.

“She started talking about buying a dwelling, somewhere in the wealthy part of Schtei,” he said slowly, thinking back on their conversation. “That's was when I got really confused and I tried to explain that we were but poor travellers and had no money and she started talking about the Mo'i and the Chanwars.”

“Ah,” said Autumn, lost for words.

“And then she started to get angry with me,” whispered Logan. “She started saying that I had just been playing with her and leading her on. She said I was a liar and a cheat and what a nasty cruel person I was and that she'd never liked me and her Da didn't either and that I had just been wasting her time and ... and ... and, oh Autumn, it was so horrible!”

"My poor Logan," whispered Autumn, her heart breaking. She smoothed his hair with her hand feeling totally helpless, perhaps for the first time in her life. "Oh, my poor, poor Logan."

"And then she slapped me," whispered Logan. "She slapped me in my face and she screamed she never wanted to see or speak to me again and ran away."

"She hit you?" asked Autumn, her voice hardening. This was something she did know how to deal with. "She hit you?"

"Where are you going?" asked Logan as she jumped to her feet.

"To see Komorebi," said Autumn grimly. "There will be a reckoning."

"No!" cried Logan, struggling to sit up. He held her hand tightly. "No! Do not hurt her. Please! 'Tis not her fault if that is how she feels. 'Tis my fault for thinking she really did like me. Please, do not hurt her!"

"Oh Logan," said Autumn, looking down at him. She looked at the entrance then back at him then dropped to her knees again. "No, you are right. 'Tis for the best that she has revealed her true feelings to you."

"Aye," said Logan bitterly. He turned his face to the wall. "Am I truly a nasty cruel person?" he whispered.

"No," said Autumn, wondering what she could possibly say to help Logan. "No, you are a kind, caring person. That Komorebi is a fool if she cannot see that."

"Oh, Autumn," cried Logan as his tears started again. He rolled over and buried his face in her lap. "I did like her, I did. I liked her ever so much and I thought she liked me back and now 'tis all over and she hates me. Everybody hates me!"

He started to sob and his body shook convulsively. Autumn stared down at him, her logical mind barely able to comprehend his pain. Slowly she put her arms around him and hugged him tightly, rocking gently back and forth. They stayed like that for some time as the fire

died away.

“Hssst!”

Almost asleep, Autumn jerked awake, her senses struggling to keep up for her exhaustion ran deep.

“Hssst!”

There it was again. It seemed to come from the doorway. Gently Autumn eased Logan's head from her lap. He'd stopped crying and was now lost in a world of misery.

“Autumn!” called a voice softly from outside. “Are you there?” Someone started to tap on the door frame.

Slowly Autumn got to her feet. Her mind and body were both exhausted.

“Who is it?” she asked, walking the three paces to the door.

“Shhh!” hissed the voice. “’Tis me, Douleur.”

“Douleur?” asked Autumn pushing aside the door reeds. Then she remembered. “Renao? She is in trouble?”

“She is well,” said Douleur slipping inside. She studied the street then let the reeds swing back into place. “We must not be seen! ’Tis only because of my endless debt to you for helping Renao that I am here at all.”

“What is going on?” asked Logan disinterestedly.

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “But whatever it is I hope it ends soon. Why are you here Douleur?”

“They're coming,” exclaimed Douleur, peeking through the doorway again. “They be coming to get you!”

“Who are?” asked Autumn.

"That fool Dumphul and some others," said Douleur. "You must leave. Now!"

"Hold," said Autumn, holding up her hand. "Why is Dumphul coming here?"

"He hates you," said Douleur. "He hates you for being a better healer than he is and taking away his business! They're going to kill you."

"Whatever for?" asked Autumn, confused.

"You've heard the rumours about the killings in the Old City?" asked Douleur. Autumn nodded. "Dumphul has been stirring things up all day and saying it be you what be doing the killings."

Logan sat up and began to listen properly. After all, he had experience of being run out of town. Even though he didn't care if he lived or died, and at this moment he rather thought the idea of dying was preferable, there was still Autumn to think of.

"You mean a lynching?" he asked.

"Aye," said Douleur, looking worried. "Them as heard him ranting didn't take a whole lot of notice but after dusk the drink came out and the young toughs who like a bit of fun. They still be drinking and swearing at you, Autumn, but Dumphul be working on them and soon enough they'll be coming here to get you."

"Then best I be talking to them," said Autumn. "Explain the error in their thinking."

Douleur stared at her in astonishment.

"You think a bunch of drunkards with the blood lust on them will be listening to you?" she exclaimed. "I did not take you for such a fool."

"She's right," said Logan, getting up. "This is not a time for philosophical debate." He blew his nose on his fingers and wiped them on his leg. "Best we leave, and quickly."

He grabbed his staff and started knocking down the mud in the corners that hid their coins and rings.

“Anyway,” said Douleur, “I be away from here. Only wanted to warn you, not get mixed up in it all. Get you gone and quick.”

She peeked out the doorway again then disappeared.

“Gather your things,” said Logan as Autumn stood there watching him. “’Tis time we left this place. I hate it here, what with all the people and noise and smells and ...” He jerked his thumb at the wall between their dwelling and Komorebi’s. “I do not want to stay here any more.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “My being yearns for the tranquillity of the forests too. Let us leave the pots and other things and take only what we brought with us. The rest is just an encumbrance.”

“Aye,” said Logan. He rolled the money and rings in his blanket as Autumn put her few possessions in her pack and put on her robe. He grabbed Fiau. “’Tis a shame you do not have a staff but we will find you another.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. She slung her pack over her shoulder. “Leave the fire. ’Tis almost out. You have our water bottle?”

Logan waved it at her.

“Good.” She peered through the doorway and could see no movement in the street although a light rain had started. “Come.”

They slipped through the doorway and hurried along the cobblestones.

\* \* \*

It was only a very short time before the reeds in the doorway were ripped from their fastenings and four men charged inside. They kicked the straw from Autumn and Logan’s beds around before slowly coming to the conclusion no one was there.

“Agav curse them,” snarled Deven. “There be no one here.”

“Reckon they'll be back soon enough,” said Ufga looking around. “Fire's still going and there be food ready. We'll wait and grab them when they return. Kun, Tanne, you stay either side of the doorway and jump 'em when they come in.”

He went outside to pick up the reed door then backed inside so it stayed in place.

“What if they don't come back 'til morning?” asked Deven.

“Then we take them in the morning,” said Ufga. “There be food. We won't starve.”

“What's that noise?” asked Tanne.

“Hmm?” said Ufga, cocking his head. “Sounds like there be a party going on further down the street.”

“Mayhap that be where the lad and the girl be,” said Deven. “Why don't we go to the party and take 'em on the way back?”

“Stay here, you Agav cursed fool,” snarled Ufga. “Once you lot start drinking you be a useless pile of turds.”

“It's getting louder,” said Tanne, helpfully. He peered through the reeds. “Seems to be a crowd coming up the street.”

“Let them pass,” said Ufga. “Ain't none of our business.”

“They seem to be chanting something,” said Deven, listening. “What they saying?”

They all listened for a few moments as the chanting got closer.

“Sounds like 'kill the witch',” said Tanne. He grinned. “Hey, reckon it be a lynching? This could be fun!”

“Shut it,” said Ufga. “We got a job to do.”

“They ain't going past,” said Tanne. “Looks like they be stopping right outside.”

“Ignore them,” said Ufga.

They listened as the mob's chanting became more frenzied then, without any warning, the reed door was ripped away again and the drunken mob surged in, crushing the front wall and pulling down the sides of the adjoining dwellings. Tough as they were, Ufga and his lads were no match for twenty or more enraged drunken rioters intent on destroying a perceived evil. Galeo and Komorebi on one side and Merak on the other did have time to get away, however, even though their dwellings fell apart quite easily.

\* \* \*

“Where are we?” asked Logan. He wasn't overly interested but it was something to say.

“I think we are near the fishing boats,” said Autumn. She stopped walking. “I need rest, Logan, and you must be exhausted too. What say you we find a boat to sleep under out of the rain then move on when we are rested?”

“If you like,” said Logan. He sighed and tried not to think about Komorebi.

They walked on a short distance.

“That looks like an overturned one over there,” said Autumn. “Come.”

It was indeed an upended fishing boat, sitting on blocks while its owner made some repairs. They crawled under and made themselves comfortable as far away from the hole in the bottom as possible.

“Where shall we go next?” asked Autumn, hoping to catch his interest and break him out of his black mood. Even she knew now was not the time to try to explain the mental disciplines that would help him overcome his dark thoughts.



"I don't care," said Logan dispiritedly.

"Shall we follow the coast?" she asked. "Perhaps head north? Or shall we find a fishing boat in the morning that will take us south to warmer climes?"

"Whatever you like," said Logan tonelessly. "I go where you go, as always."

They lay under the upturned boat, listening to the rain and the waves and their thoughts.

"Autumn," whispered Logan after a long time. "Are you asleep?"

Autumn dragged herself back from the sleep she had almost sunk into.

"No, I am awake," she whispered.

She was almost asleep again when Logan next spoke.

"I do not think Komorebi is a bad person," he whispered. "I think she just doesn't understand me."

"Likely you are right," whispered Autumn.

"I am glad we are going though," whispered Logan. "I would not like living next door to her and seeing her everyday."

"I can understand that, Logan," whispered Autumn. She cursed her inability to think of any way to help him.

There was a long silence.

"Are you asleep?" whispered Logan.

Autumn was now wide awake and filled with sadness.

"No," she whispered.

“I am glad you are my friend,” whispered Logan. “Please don't ever leave me.”

Autumn's hand sought Logan's and she gripped it tightly.

“I never will,” she said, her heart breaking. “You are my companion and dear friend and we will face the world together or not at all.”

Logan smiled in the darkness and he squeezed her hand.

“Good,” he whispered.

# Glossary

*{Pronunciations given in curly brackets}*

*(OT refers to Old Tongue terms, N to Neander terms, W to Wase terms)*

*[where an entry is specific to a particular Tale, that Tale is in square brackets]*

**Agav** {ah-gav}: The Wasian deity of misfortune, known as Sploop in Aferraron.

**Alkarmasu** {al-car-ma-su}: A highly destructive creeper found only in northern Sassese'lte. Its seeds are occasionally found in northern Aferraron but the soils, climate and fauna there prevent the alkarmasu from becoming established. Alkarmasu creepers can grow as long as 30m in perfect conditions but generally only rarely exceed 3m. The creepers are relatively short and thick with multiple tendrils which branch out at regular intervals. Its flowers are brown and funnel shaped and resemble human fingers. While the alkarmasu gets much of its nourishment through its root system, the tendrils above the surface bore into trees and suck their sap, killing the tree in a matter of months.

**Amurk** {am-urk}: A tropical plant grown primarily on the Zuit Islands. The amurk typically grows to some three metres in height and has a smooth, brown, tough, fibrous outer stalk of approximately five to seven centimetres diameter. The inner pith varies from pale green to dark yellow and is very sweet, although not quite as sweet as Earth based sugar cane. Amurk stems are harvested for the pith, as the leaves, roots and stem husks are inedible.

**Aniani** {ah-nia-ni}: An early form of glass invented by a Schtei artisan and, at the time of *The Annals*, just being introduced for containers and small pots etc. Due to impurities, aniani was dark green in colour.

**Apgru Binaj Five** {ap-ge-ru bi-na-je 5} [8]: Assistant Head of the Guild of Physikers.

**Aqineer do'h Raspusny** {OT: aka Aqineer the Lewd}: Era'owen of Ptemsesnis III, ruler of Zachad. Aqineer was exiled from Zachad by Ptemsesnis for unspecified 'crimes against her person' and he and his followers established what would become the State of Wase.

**Atooa** {ah-too-ah} [8]: A woman who lost two toes in an accident with an axe and sought Autumn's help. Atooa lived in the first dwelling in Wall Street in Schtei and was killed when a section of the City Wall

fell on her dwelling during a storm.

***Biasdo*** {bye-as-do}: A village in Aferraron with a population of approx. 30 people. Logan's birthplace and the place from which he was exiled for persistent thievery.

***Boq-hasuva*** {bok-hass-oo-va} [8]: A tree nymph (dryad) specific to the alkarmasu creeper and native to northern Sassese'lte.

***Bumola*** {be-um-ol-ah}: A farmer who let Logan live in his cowshed after Logan's parents were killed.

***Calhouny*** {ca-leh-ow-ny}: A native bush which produces a cherry-like fruit whose stone (called the nut) is dried and ground to produce a beverage similar to coffee, but milder in flavour.

***City Beach***: A suburb of Schtei that stretches from the south eastern side of the Old City Wall to the sea. City Beach is one of the poorer suburbs of Schtei and is notable only for being where Autumn and Logan find lodgings during their sojourn in Schtei.

***Dauneywort*** {door-knee-wart}: A seaweed with antiseptic properties. The weed is dried and powdered for use on wounds and similar injuries or mixed with water and drunk for bowel problems.

***Deven*** {deh-ven} [8]: A Schtei street tough who tries to rob Logan.

***Douleur*** {dow-lur} [8]: Mother of Renao, the child aided by Autumn in Schtei.

***D'Pomet Linilla Two*** {de-po-me-te lin-ill-ah 2} [8]: Keewa Due to the Mo'i of Wase following the execution of Jotune Gres One.

***Dusugey*** {do-soo-gay} [8]: A Kydon in the Wasian Palace Guard.

***Enupri*** {en-oo-pri} [8]: A member of Autumn's Esyup. For a time when Autumn was young, Enupri suffered an affliction of boils which passed away as suddenly as they began.

***Epis*** {eh-pis} [8]: Epis lived in Wall Street in Schtei and lost a foot when part of the Wall collapsed during a storm and a large stone fell through the front of his dwelling.

***Esper Entest One*** {ess-per en-tez-te 1} {aka Entest the Great}: Moun'i of Wase following the death of her father, Esper Kowring One, when she was 14. Esper Entest One was the only ruler of Wase to ever be given the honorific 'The Great' by public acclimation due to her highly enlightened rule and widespread reforms. Many, of course, claimed

such a title but without any justification or widespread recognition.

***Esper Kowring One*** {ess-per kow-ring 1}: The Mo'i of Wase during the time of *The Annals*.

***Esprine Ogliani Three*** {ess-pr-ine og-li-ani 3}: Era'owen of Esper Kowring One and Moun'i of Wase during the time of *The Eighth Tale*. Records of Esprine Ogliani Three are scarce but it is known that the Esprine family originated from one of the grand-parents of the Esper Kowrings. Ogliani Three was significantly younger than Kowring One and was known to be fertile through an unfortunate liaison with a courtier. The courtier disappeared shortly after the liaison was discovered and the resulting child similarly disappeared immediately after birth. What became of Ogliani Three after her child, Esper Entest One (aka Entest The Great) with Kowring One was born is not known but rumours within the Court suggest that she also disappeared once it was established that the child was healthy and likely to live to adulthood. Certainly she was no longer alive when Entest One succeeded her father on his death.

***Ezil*** {es-ill} [8]: A proposed time division that was never implemented whereby a full day would be divided into ten obaz and each obaz further divided into ten ezils. As Mottle Blue has a spin of some 22¼ Earth hours, an ezil elapsed on Mottle Blue would be the equivalent of 13½ minutes elapsed on Earth.

***Feiseanna*** {fey-is-ee-an-na} [8]: A woman who seeks Autumn's aid for a large disfiguring growth on her neck.

***Flamdim*** {flam-dim} (W): A triangular shaped delicacy of Schtei that is quickly and easily prepared and cooked thus making it popular for sale on the streets. Flamdims are made from minced lamb mixed with spices and wrapped in lupah pastry. They are best eaten warm.

***Flaner*** {flan-er} [8]: A neighbour who beats decorative patterns into brass plates and dishes.

***Hakina*** {ha-ki-na} (W): Unit of Wasian currency. One hakina is a 16<sup>th</sup> of a kala.

***Hamamielis*** {ha-ma-me-el-is}: A tree that produces small yellow-green petals, similar to Witch Hazel. The petals have antiseptic properties.

***Hiraeth*** {hi-ra-eth} [8]: Almost-era'owen of Jjivisha who died from an

unspecified illness.

***Iflinbar*** {if-li-ne-ba-re}: One of the poorer sections of Schtei notorious for the buying and selling of stolen and contraband goods.

***Inuwela*** {in-you-well-ah} [8]: A syrupy drink popular in Schtei made from hot milk thickened with tapioca and flavoured with berries and spices.

***Janja*** {jan-jar} (W): A dense heavy unleavened bread which is almost black in colour. Similar to rye bread and is unsuitable for pastry.

***Japiasok*** {jap-ee-ah-so-k}: A town in Eastern Wase.

***Jijivisha*** {g-g-v-shah} [8]: The woman who lived opposite Autumn and Logan in Schtei. Jijivisha was originally from Sassese'lte.

***Jotune Gres One*** {jo-tu-ne grez 1} [8] Keewa Due to Esper Kowring One. Executed for conspiring in an assassination attempt on the Mo'i.

***Kala*** {ka-la} (W): Unit of Wasian currency. There are 16 hakina in one kala.

***Kb'irp*** {keb-urp}: Mganga of the Oreacuachi who succeeded in first trapping Ratanbismet.

***Keewa Due*** {key-wa doo} (W): The most senior civil servant serving the Mo'i. The title is equivalent to First Secretary, Chief Aide or similar.

***Kej*** {kedge} [8]: A child informant occasionally used by Ufga and Deven.

***Khander Nenjen One*** {can-der nen-jen 1} [8]: Mo'i of Wase at the time of the building of the original Palace.

***Kilig*** {kil-ig} [8]: The owner of a number of low quality dwellings in Schtei and Autumn and Logan's landlord during their sojourn in Schtei.

***Kun*** {kun} [8]: A Schtei street tough occasionally used by Ufga as 'muscle' for a job.

***Kydon*** {ky-don} (W): A senior military rank in the Wasian army. The precise level is unclear but was probably equivalent to a Captain or similar.

***Lake Nanikaika*** {nan-ee-ki-ka}: A large freshwater lake in southern Wase that is fed from rivers from the Xibu Shan mountains. Lake

Nanikaika forms the north western limit of the City of Schtei.

**Lashan Umbis One** {la-shan um-bis 1} [8]: A petitioner before the Mo'i.

**Linilla** {lin-ill-ah} [8]: See *D'Pomet Linilla Two*.

**Lupah** {lu-pa-ah} (W): A dark yellowy brown grain similar to corn but with a decidedly earthy taste which many find mildly unpleasant. Lupah is generally ground into a flour and used for pie (savory or sweet) pastries rather than bread as the other ingredients used in the pie hide the taste of the lupah. Lupah also has the advantage, once cooked, of sealing the contents and keeping them fresh and untainted for extended periods, provided it remains unbroken.

**Mahala** {ma-ha-la}: A priest of Ratanbismet. Similar to a Shamsadam.

**Malvern Dumphul Two** {mar-le-vern dum-fool 2} [8]: A professional healer and member of the Guild of Physikers who takes umbrage with Autumn's charity and reports her breaches of the Guild's Code of Conduct.

**Mangata** {man-ga-ta} [8]: A man with toothache who seeks Autumn's aid.

**Merak** {me-ra-k} [8]: The old woman who lives next door to Autumn and Logan in Schtei.

**Mganga** {em-gan-ga}: A shaman or sorcerer in the Oreacuachi tribal language.

**Mo'i** {moy}: Title of the male ruler of Wase.

**Moun'i** {mo-ooh-nee}: Title of the female era'owen of the Mo'i of Wase.

**Moolupe Gigil One** {mo-oo-loo-pay gig-il 1} [8]: A gemsmith in Schtei.

**Naufe** {now-fey} [8]: Mother of Ufga.

**Obaz** {oh-baz} [8]: A proposed time division that was never implemented whereby one obaz would be one tenth of a full revolution of Mottle Blue and would correspond to approximately 2.225 Earth hours, given that the daily spin of Mottle Blue is approximately 22½ Earth hours. Under this proposal, each obaz would be further subdivided into ten ezils, each therefore corresponding to approximately 13½ Earth minutes.

**Old City.** Technically that part of Schtei that was occupied and developed by Aqineer do'h Raspusny and his successors until the Palace built by Khander Nenjen One was abandoned and a new Palace built by The area of Schtei enclosed by the City Wall and the harbour. In more modern times the Old City became the colloquial term for the central business district.

**Omijen** {om-ee-jen} [8]: A woman with an injured hand who seeks Autumn's aid.

**Oreacuachi** {or-ee-ah-koo-ah-chee}: The original tribe who occupied the land that subsequently became Schtei after the arrival of Aqineer do'h Raspusny. Those Oreacuachi who survived moved to northern Wase.

**Pirend** {pi-re-ned}: A town in Aferraron with a population of approx. 250 people.

**Raspusny Kentan Four** {ras-pus-nee ken-tan 4}: Brother of Raspusny Kentan Two. At the time of Ratanbismet's release, Kentan was travelling in Neander. On his return he surmised correctly of the need for a skilled sorcerer and arranged for Uswonla to be sent from Neander, thereby entrapping Ratanbismet again.

**Raspusny Kentan Two** {ras-pus-nee ken-tan 2}: Moun'i of Wase at the time of release of Ratanbismet. Kentan ordered the City of Schtei to be surrounded by a wall and abandoned. A new Palace was constructed on the shore of Lake Nanikaika.

**Ratanbismet** {rat-ann-bis-met} [8]: A being worshipped by many in Schtei, erroneously, as the Deity and Protector of Schtei.

**Recaisn** {re-ca-is-ne}: An early form of writing material that pre-dates animal skin parchment. Recaisn was made from the scraped and pulped pithy centres of the stalks of the flowering recaisnasc plant. Similar to papyrus.

**Renao** {ren-ay-oh} [8]: A young child severely injured by a falling horse who is aided by Autumn.

**Ryta** {ree-tah} [8]: The almost era'owen of Epis. Ryta suffered minor injuries when part of the Wall collapsed and a large stone fell through the front wall of their dwelling.

**Saudade Galeo Eight** {sow-da-de gal-ee-oh 8} [8]: Father of Saudade Komorebi One and Autumn and Logan's neighbour during their stay



in Schtei.

**Saudade Komorebi One** {sow-da-de ko-mor-eh-bee 1} [8]: Daughter of Saudade Galeo Eight and the cause of Logan's eventual heartbreak.

**Schtei** {sh-tay-ee}: The capital of Wase.

**Seph** {sef} [8]: A seller of medicinal herbs, potions and so forth at a market in Schtei.

**Siakin** {see-ah-kin}: A moderately wealthy suburb of Schtei.

**Sobremesa** {sob-re-mee-za} [8]: A woman who seeks help from Autumn for her recurrent head pains. Autumn identifies the problem as a displaced neck vertebra and manipulates it back into position.

**Soska** {so-ska}: An evil creature from the Land of the Undead that preys on humans by sucking their souls out through their mouths. The victim becomes a soska in turn. Autumn and Logan are the only people whose survival from a soska attack is documented.

**Tanne** {tan} [8]: A Schtei street tough occasionally used by Ufga as 'muscle' for a job.

**Tuala Selem Four** {too-ah-la sell-em 4} [8]: A petitioner before the Mo'i.

**Ugalli** {oo-ee-gal-lee}: An invasive species of creeper found primarily in the cold northern reaches of Aferraron and Wase. When conditions are right it grows profusely and suffocates other vegetation by its sheer volume. The ugalli is similar to the Cat's Claw creeper of Queensland, Australia.

**Ufga** {oof-gah} [8]: A Schtei street tough who tries to rob Logan.

**Uswonla** {oos-won-la}: The sorcerer brought in from Neander by Rasmusny Kentan Two to help with the problem of Ratanbismet.

**Vasblane** {vaz-blane}: A plant common to central Wase. A paste made from its stem is often used to treat eye inflammations.

**Viaben** {vee-ah-ben}: A moderately wealthy suburb of Schtei that borders the City Beach suburb.

**Wahaju** {wah-hah-joo} (W): A low level member of the Wasian Royal Household; a page or footman.

**Weeo Fish** {wee-oo-ahh}: A species of fish that lives in the warmer tropical regions of the Looncan Sea. Weeo fish can grow as long as

three metres but are rarely thicker than 2 to 3 centimetres. The fish has a line of spines around 1cm long which extend along its back which are sufficiently poisonous to deter a predator.

**Wodazu Chanwar One** {woe-da-zoo ke-han-wah 1} [7]: The older (by a few minutes) twin brother of Wodazu Chanwar Two. Chanwar One was a warlord on the Eastern side of the Xibu Shan Mountains, inheriting the position of leader of the Wodazu from his father and holding it through strength and cunning.

**Wodazu Chanwar Two** {woe-da-zoo ke-han-wah 2} [7]: The younger twin sister of Wodazu Chanwar One. Chanwar Two was a bandit leader with aspirations to being a minor warlord and had a reputation for unusual cruelty and viciousness. It is said that her brother was unable to control her and when she threatened his position of leader of the Wodazu he expelled her from the family. Chanwar Two then moved to the Western side of the Mountains and formed her own band of brigands, none of whom were from the Wodazu family. Some scholars claim she intended to form her own dynasty; the Western Wodazu, but others say she had no long term intentions. Either way, she and her followers spent each winter on the Eastern slopes in preference to the Western because the climate was better. It is said, although there is no extant evidence for this, that Chanwar Two liked to decorate her home with the tanned and painted skins of those she captured and skinned alive.

**Xuiui** {zu-ee-oo-ii}: A precious stone found only in the mountains of far Eastern Wase. Xuiuis are dark red in colour and are flecked with either blue or green depending on the local geology. When polished they have a shiny, almost waxy, surface and are highly resistant to scratching.

**Yotalgalmen** {yo-ta-gal-men}: A creeper that grows in the marshlands of north eastern Wase. Each vine can grow as long as fifteen metres and typically has offshoots that grow out every half metre or so. The yotalgalmen produces small dark pink berries which, when dried and powdered can be added to a warm drink as an effective sleeping draught.