

Lietapis Vosienskaj Savany

The Annals Of
Autumn Savannah

a new translation

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aka Richard The Writer.

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› Piataja Kazka ‹

~ The Fifth Tale ~

Chapter One

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn Savannah. Her skin felt the warmth of Astauand's blessing even as the cool night breeze sought to dispel it. Her eyes did not flicker although a few loose tendrils of hair fluttered and tickled her cheek. She did not react. Such things were normal and needed no response. As she sat sideways at the front of the boat, facing Astauand in respectful greeting, the breeze gently flowed around her. It carried no trace of a smell beyond that of the ever present salt. High overhead, unseen and unheard, several birds circled. Their sharp eyes looked down on the tiny craft, wondering. It was no fishing boat for their sensitive sense of smell detected no odour of fish guts and it was too small to be a trading vessel. The likely pickings from discarded food were seemingly non-existent so one by one the circling birds stopped circling and headed towards the South East. Perhaps the pickings closer to the coast would be better.

Autumn rose and fell with the motion of Fiau on the swell of the sea, her body gently moving to stay balanced. Her stomach was now used to the movement of the boat on the water thus freeing her mind from controlling the impulses of her belly and the distractions they caused. Freed of such bodily concerns, her mind soared untrammelled as thoughts arose, were examined and considered. Some were discarded, others put aside for later contemplation. This time of the day was reserved for unrestricted absorption. Despite this, her senses were, as always, unconsciously alert to everything around. Any sign of danger and she would be instantly ready to face it.

A faint snore from the back of the boat was no sign of danger. As always, Logan was asleep at this time and his snores and stirrings and other small noises were reassurance that all was well. Soon he would wake and the sounds change but that was still yet to come. Aside from Logan, the sigh of the breeze and the faintest of smacks as Fiau, descending a swell, touched down again on the surface of the sea, there were no other sounds. Autumn's breathing continued, slow and measured, deep and calm.

Then came the splash. Autumn's breathing stopped as her mind sought the cause through her ears, skin and nose. Still she did not

open her eyes, for doing so would break her reverie but her awareness heightened. Something had splashed the water, that much was certain, and this far out to sea there was no likely candidate. It wasn't Logan as the slight whistle in his breathing was still coming from behind. The splash seemed to have come from her right. Perhaps it was merely something dropped by a bird high in the sky. Slowly she let her senses subside to normal levels of awareness and her contemplation of a thought continued.

There was another splash, this time not so far to the right. Her eyes snapped open and her head twisted slightly, her muscles ready to react with blinding speed and power. There was nothing there, save the ceaseless sea, stretching to the horizon in all directions. Ahead of her a shimmering path of silver-gold led to Astauand but other than that the sea looked much as it had for the past few days. She looked up and scanned the sky. To the South there were smudges of cloud but otherwise there were no signs of any birds, just endless shades of blue. An infinity surrounding the boat in all directions.

Her meditation disturbed, Autumn lifted her arms above her head, inhaling deeply, then slowly lowered them, exhaling until her arms rested back in her lap and the last vestiges of air were expelled from her lungs. She closed her eyes again, lifted her hands, palms together, and gave silent thanks for the dawn of a new day and the continued blessings of her gods, and Logan's of course, then opened them again. The merest flash of something bluey-silver caught the corner of her eye and she was already reacting defensively before there was another splash. Fiau rocked at the sudden disturbance and Logan's head banged the wooden side.

“Wha?” he said sleepily, rubbing his head.

“I saw something,” hissed Autumn, her arms raised in preparation for an attack and her body balanced on the balls of her feet.

“Oh,” said Logan disinterestedly.

He rolled over and closed his eyes again. He was almost asleep when the significance of Autumn's words filtered through. Abruptly he sat up, making the boat rock again. Autumn did not lose her balance.

“What?” he said, his eyes wide open.

“I do not know,” said Autumn, scanning the sea all around with narrowed, searching eyes. “But there is something out there and 'tis splashing the water.”

“Birds?” asked Logan, scanning the sea as well.

“I see none,” said Autumn. “I fear it may be something from the depths.”

“Voqev,” muttered Logan. He scrambled to his knees and peered over the edge of the boat.

Another bluey-silver flash flickered in the corner of her eye and Autumn whirled to catch sight of the ripples from two, minutely separated splashes.

“Over there,” she hissed.

Logan jerked up and twisted to look just as Autumn began to smile.

* * *

The same morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Subota as he lay in bed sleeping. His window opened to the East and the shutters were wide open to let in the richly delicate scent of jasmine from the shrubs that surrounded it. Subota's eyelids flickered and his arm rose to cover them but it was uncomfortable and he half awoke. He groaned and lifted his other arm to scratch his nose but it caught in the light cloth that spread in a tangle over the bed. Irritably he pushed it aside and scratched then rubbed his nose again then let his hand fall. It landed against the back of Kishli lying beside him, curled up and sleeping peacefully, as always. Subota grunted again then rolled on his side to stroke Kishli's skin. Kishli sighed but didn't wake and Subota snuggled in, his hand roaming. Then it stopped and he smacked Kishli's bottom.

“No,” he said, his voice mid-way between decision and laziness. “I have work to do. Wake, Kishli, my loveliness. Wake and fetch some

shayi. A new day has dawned and there is much to be done.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Kishli sleepily, rolling off the bed and heading towards the doorway and the staircase to the lower levels.

Subota watched him go, admiring his lithe suppleness and soft, smooth skin and his relative youth for Kishli was all of twenty summers younger than Subota, perhaps more. He rolled back to lie on the bed, one arm behind his head, watching Astauand rise, unwilling to leave the bed as yet for he did not like flying. He tried to focus on the tasks he should do that day but instead his mind drifted, disconnected thoughts interweaving and sliding off each other like clouds building up to a storm. He belched loudly and patted his mouth.

“There is something in the flow,” he muttered, his brow furrowing. “There is definitely a flux somewhere.”

“Your shayi, Magide,” said Kishli, padding softly into the room on bare feet.

“You are kindness itself, Kishli,” said Subota touching the hand that held the glass bowl.

He looked up into Kishli’s eyes and was discomfited to find his face a dark smear against the tapestry behind. No doubt it was the after-image of Astauand in his eyes but it rendered Kishli headless and eerily malevolent.

“Which attire do you wish today, Magide?” asked Kishli, standing unconcernedly naked before Subota.

“The green tufafi, I think,” said Subota, letting the bowl warm his hands.

“Ahh, you are flying today, Magide?” said Kishli. “Perhaps some warm socks as well? You know how cold your feet get.”

“You are all thoughtfulness and care, Kishli,” said Subota, reaching out with one hand to stroke Kishli’s arm. “I do not deserve you. Yes, I

must fly, there is a redness to the day.”

Kishli smiled and sat on the edge of the bed. “It is I who does not deserve your benevolence, Magide. Today is Towasiku. You have told me that Towasiku is always red.”

Subota let his hand rest on Kishli's thigh then pulled it away quickly.

“Ahh, you are too much of a distraction, desired one,” he said then sipped his shayi. “There is a redness beyond the day and it concerns me. Put some clothes on, there is much to do this day. Go and prepare some food, some fruit perhaps and yogurt.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Kishli, not moving, his face emerging from the dark smudge. He was smiling.

“Go,” commanded Subota. “You are temptation itself.”

Kishli inclined his head and sauntered off to his own room to dress.

* * *

’Tis fish,” said Logan in disbelief. “Fish with wings!”

“Aye,” said Autumn as four or five broke the surface and flew for a few moments before splashing back into the sea. Their bodies shimmered blue in the light of the dawn and their wings were like spun silver. “Are they not magnificent?”

“I am all astonishment,” said Logan, gripping the side of the boat hard as he leaned over to watch more closely. “Are they fish that fly or are they birds that swim?”

“I venture they are fish,” said Autumn, watching in fascination as another group took to the air. “They do not appear to have feathers and fly only a short way.”

Some more leapt out of the water and flew over the front of the boat where Autumn had been meditating. One didn't quite make it and thumped into the side. It fell back into the bottom of the boat,

momentarily stunned. Autumn jumped over and grasped it gently.

“Look,” she said holding it up to show Logan. “No feathers and it has the mouth of a fish, not a beak.”

“’Tis wondrous indeed,” said Logan, staring at it. “I wonder if it is good to eat?”

“Not this time,” said Autumn, leaning over the side and sliding the fish back into the water. “’Tis a thing of beauty and deserves more than to fill your belly. Besides, we cannot make a fire and I wager not even you will eat fish raw.”

“I would willingly eat aciui stew¹ again rather than another coconut,” said Logan, watching the fish disappear into the blue.

“I somehow doubt that,” said Autumn, “although I confess the thought of coconuts does not excite me either. How many do we have left?”

Logan opened the sack at the back of the boat and peered inside. “Four,” he reported.

“So, enough for two days,” said Autumn, her eyes looking to the South. “And still no sight of land. Mayhap this current will not take us to Neander after all.”

“Two days of coconuts,” said Logan, “but less than half a day of water. One water skin is empty, as are the extra gourds and the other almost so. Mayhap the milk from the four nuts will see us through to dusk but if today and tomorrow be as hot as these days past then we shall be cooked without a fire.”

“Well, there be nothing we can do about it,” said Autumn. “We have no way of returning and ’twill take several days even if we could. We have little option but to float on and see where this current takes us. ’Tis a shame we cannot drink the water that lies all around us but Grimme² said not to.”

1 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Third Tale*; The stew Logan refers to here is that made from the eggs of the aciui, a spider/ant hybrid, bred by the Esuaqi who live within the volcanoes of Western Aferraron.

2 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Fourth Tale*.

“I have already tried,” admitted Logan. “The water is too salty and made me thirstier.”

“It pleases me that you do not blindly accept another’s word,” said Autumn, “but it saddens me that you are thirsty. Here, take the water skin and finish what we have.”

“No,” said Logan. “I will not let you go thirstier than I. We share the water equally, and the coconut milk, or I shall throw it into the sea.”

“Now that would be foolish,” said Autumn, patting his arm. “Mayhap a solution is on its way for there are clouds ahead and they may bring rain.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, not bothering to look at the clouds still hanging on the horizon. “Most likely they will be like the last clouds we saw that passed us by and did not shed one single tear for our predicament.”

“You do have a certain view of life, do you not,” said Autumn. “Where I see hope, you see tribulation.”

“I would not agree with you,” said Logan. “I merely speak from experience. I know, for example, that in a fight you will always win because that has been my experience. You can be depended upon to prevail, whatever the circumstances.”

“Then apply the same thinking to rain,” said Autumn. “It is indeed the case that the last clouds we saw when at sea did not rain but before that they did.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “and that storm threw us out of the boat and damned near killed us. ’Tis my experience that, whether it rains or not, clouds at sea bring tribulation and not even Autumn Savannah can do anything about that. Shall I open a coconut?”

* * *

“I have prepared your study, Magide,” said Kishli, staying a respectful distance from where Subota sat at his meal.

They were at the lowest level of the house and could be seen by passers-by if any should chose to look inside. Not that many passed by this part of the palace grounds but those who did were generally influential and their word would not be readily dismissed. And Subota was not entirely without enemies.

Subota fastidiously dabbed his mouth with the square of clean cloth Kishli had laid beside him.

“Then I must be about my business,” he said rising. “Come.”

“Do you know how long you will be, Magide?” asked Kishli as he followed Subota out into the garden and along the path between the neatly tended flower beds.

“As long as I must,” said Subota. “I must find the cause of the redness, for it is taking on a purple hue.”

“Indeed, Magide?” said Kishli. “That sounds very ill. What should I tell any who call upon you?”

“Tell them to come back another time,” said Subota, dismissively. “I am not to be disturbed.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Kishli.

He darted ahead of Subota so that he could have the door to Subota's study open before he reached it.

“Definitely purple,” growled Subota, pausing to look around at the sky. “Hmm.”

Kishli glanced around. The sky seemed its normal blue to him but he was used to Subota's ways. Subota gave the sky one last scowl then went inside. Kishli had managed to clear a smallish space of clutter and laid a comfortable mat on the floor, just big enough for Subota to lie on, with a richly embroidered pillow. At each corner of the mat a cone of incense burned, one sweet and sickly, one thick and musky, one thin and acrid and the last sour and reminiscent of cats.

“Here is your tufafi, Magide,” said Kishli, lifting the heavy deep green robe from where it was draped over the back of a chair. He helped Subota get his arms into the sleeves and eased it over his shoulders. Then he spun the chair around so Subota could sit.

“If I may, Magide,” said Kishli, kneeling at Subota's feet.

Subota lifted a foot and Kishli slipped off his slipper then eased on the warm sock before replacing the slipper. He did the same with the other foot.

“My hat?” asked Subota.

“Ready and waiting, Magide,” said Kishli, picking up a floppy hat made from the same material as the tufafi.

“Excellent,” said Subota.

He eased himself down onto the mat and made himself comfortable then lay down.

“Is the pillow to your liking, Magide?” asked Kishli.

“A touch too far down on the right,” said Subota so Kishli adjusted it. “Ahh, that is perfection itself. My hat.”

Subota lifted his head a fraction and Kishli gently positioned the hat. Then he went over to the table beside the door.

“Here is the salt, Magide,” said Kishli, picking up a solid lump. It had been carved into the shape of a pineapple.

“Thank you, Kishli,” said Subota, taking it. “You know where my Instructions are?”

“Indeed, Magide,” said Kishli, “and I shall pray during your absence for your safe return.”

“There is nothing safe about flying,” said Subota. “If I should not return you will ensure that my Instructions are properly executed.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Kishli. “Can I aid you any further?”

“Give me your hand,” said Subota. “Be certain, should I not return, that you will live forever in my memory,” and he kissed Kishli’s hand.

“You shall return, dearest one,” whispered Kishli, squeezing Subota’s hand. “Don’t be so melodramatic!”

“That is no way to speak to your Magide,” whispered back Subota with a warm smile. “Now go and see I am not disturbed.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Kishli.

Subota let go of his hand and he quietly left the room, pulling the door closed behind him.

“Ahh, I do love you,” whispered Subota, then he settled himself and held the salt on his chest with both hands, his fingers caressing its serrated edges.

“Jadugarini sakti dvara, mari bhavana mara sarirathi mukta thava do,” he intoned, closing his eyes.

Moments later he stood up and looked down at his body.

“You are getting old, old man,” he muttered. “But it is good you are not getting fat. That would be intolerable.”

He looked around at the faint reddish-purple haze that filled the room then floated through the roof.

Chapter Two

“Why do you suppose all these fish are flying here?” asked Autumn, watching the shoal in fascination as more and more fish leapt out of the water.

They glittered and sparkled in the early light like a cascade of topaz before splashing back into the water and gliding before leaping again. The sea boiled and frothed and the little boat rocked.

“There must be hundreds of them,” said Logan excitedly. “Whooo!”

He leaned over the front end of the boat so as to be closer to the main body of the shoal and banged his fist repeatedly on the wood. He had never seen such a spectacle and was enthralled.

“They are like lines of wagon wheels riding on the sea,” said Autumn, her years of training not letting her get as excited as Logan but even she was not unimpressed. “There must be thousands, not hundreds. Look, there be even more coming along!”

“Ohhhh,” said Logan, turning to look with wide eyes.

Another group, on the edge of the shoal, skimmed towards him, just under the surface of the water then, as one, they leapt, seemingly directly at him. He lurched backwards and fell in the bottom of the boat, laughing uproariously, as the tip of a wing of one narrowly missed his face. He felt rather than heard the buzz of its wings as it streaked by.

“Sploop, that was close,” he shouted and drummed his heels on the boat before scrambling to his feet again.

“I remember a fisherman telling us that the fishing be best when the fish are running,” said Autumn, reaching out as though to try to touch some of the darting fish. “I did not know what he meant at the time as fish cannot run but I wager this be what this is.”

“They are like stampeding cattle,” said Logan, “rushing madly as a herd and knocking down whatever gets in their way. What do you

suppose they are running from?"

"Mayhap more than thousands," said Autumn as the numbers increased still further. It was as though they were heading into a wall of glittering blue and silver. "Why do they not crash into each other?"

Suddenly she grabbed Logan and yanked him to the floor of the boat. A buzzing blue-silver wave rose out of the water beside them and washed over them and suddenly they were knee deep in struggling flapping fish.

"Quickly, we must aid them," cried Autumn, starting to grab and toss fish out of the boat. Logan knelt to help her and quickly the boat was clear of fish, save one. It had a broken wing and was flapping desperately, its mouth opening and closing as it sought to breathe out of water. It was going round in jerky circles, its broken wing useless.

"Ahh, you poor thing," said Autumn, softly.

She reached out to calm it but the fish was dying, suffocating and no doubt in pain. Sadly Autumn grabbed it by its tail fin and smacked its head against the side of the boat.

"May peace be with you, little one," she murmured.

"Are those sails over there?" asked Logan, pointing off in the direction from which the fish were coming.

"Sails?" said Autumn, looking where he was pointing. "Fishing boats perhaps?"

"I see no sign of boats," said Logan, standing up and peering. "Just the sails."

"Yes, I see them too," said Autumn. She sounded puzzled. "I can see the water spraying around them so they be not far away. If they are not boats then what are they? Oh!"

"Vogev," exclaimed Logan. "They be sharks! Four or five of them. They be chasing the fish! Wah, look out!"

A dark grey shadow loomed in the water as one of the sails turned slightly and started heading directly towards them.

“Oh no,” said Autumn, a touch of alarm in her voice. “I do not like the look of this. That thing is huge! Get a strong grip on the boat before it hits!”

Logan gripped the edge of the boat as tightly as he could and stared in horror as the dark shape sped towards them.

“It be about to ...” he started then stopped. The sail-like shape sticking out of the water above the shadow had slid below the surface with barely a ripple and a gigantic streamlined shape went under the boat. He lurched to the other side to watch the sail re-emerge from the water and carry on as though they had not been there.

“Look at the size of the thing!” he muttered in awe. “It be three, mayhap four times bigger than me!”

“Size does not matter,” said Autumn, holding onto the side of the boat beside him. “But did you see that?”

“Aye,” said Logan, as the shark surfaced and its cavernous mouth engulfed a mass of flying fish. “Even its teeth have teeth!”

Its mouth full, the shark slowed down and started to turn, its front end tossing as it sought to swallow the fish, one large flat eye gazing incuriously at them. Then it started to circle slowly back towards the boat.

“I think it is coming this way,” said Logan. “Did they teach you how to fight a shark at that Esyup of yours?”

“No,” said Autumn. “And I venture there be no talking to this beast either. Umm, mayhap we should hide?”

“Where?” asked Logan, staring at the shark.

The shark did a sharp turn and swam parallel to the boat for a few moments and Autumn and Logan watched it closely.

“Mayhap it is going away,” said Logan, nervously.

“It seems to be waiting for something,” said Autumn, turning to see if there was anything behind them.

There was and she reacted instantly, sweeping Logan to the bottom of the boat then landing on top of him. A mass of fish, desperately running from another shark chasing them, rose out of the water and arched over them, the sea boiling. Logan twisted to look, just as the shark came out of the water, so intent on its prey that it tried to fly as well. It had no wings and, snapping viciously at the hindmost of the fish, it crashed down heavily on top of the boat.

* * *

From a distance it looked as though Subota was standing on the roof of his house. It was deceptive though, for two reasons. One was that he was actually suspended over his study in the middle of the geometrically laid out garden, some way from the house. The other was that no one could see him, except another sorcerer and there were no others in the vicinity. Still, it was a goodly height and it enabled him to see over the house towards the sprawling palace and, beyond it, the sea in the bay.

The Palace of the Golden Camel looked its normal faint green despite the redness of the day so clearly the purple hue was not emanating from there, nor from the sea beyond it. He slowly rotated a little to the right to look over the tree tops at the sprawling city beyond them. Even this early in the day its narrow winding streets were awash with people, as tiny as ants from this distance. No doubt the incessant noise of hawkers, traders, criers, gossips and emotional shriekers was in full flow but one advantage of living in the palace grounds was that the noise of the hoi polloi rarely reached this far. If it did then there was probably a riot going on. Still, there was no sign of a riot and Cim-Irsou looked its usual shade of ochre so Subota rotated a little further.

The Palace of the Golden Camel had been built perhaps two hundred summers before and had had innumerable extensions as Karoi after Karoi had produced children that needed accommodating away from

mere mortals. It had been a day's walk from the city to the newly constructed palace back then but it was not just the palace that had been extended. The city now reached out and surrounded the palace grounds. Still, those who lived around the palace were the city's elite, or so they thought of themselves even if those who dwelt in the many poorer parts of the city did not wholly agree. More to the point, elite or not, they lived generally quiet lives, save for the occasional party, so their noise did not encroach unduly on those who lived in the palace or its grounds. It was just as well as Subota hated noise and it is never a good idea to make a lot of noise near a sorcerer who hates noise. Still, the elite suburbs were their usual dark grey with a hint of lemon. The purple was not coming from there either.

Slowly Subota turned a full circle. The purpleness seemed a little thicker off to the West and was not discernable off to the East but he could see nothing to which he could attribute the cause. With a little kick of his feet, warm and snug inside his socks and slippers, Subota rose a little higher so he could see further. Not much higher as he had a mild fear of heights. Even though his body was securely resting on the mat in his study below, the fears and emotions that even highly skilled and experienced sorcerers have not managed to entirely erase lingered with him. Twice the height of his house was enough for anyone was his view on the matter. Besides, above that height the air got discernably colder.

From here Subota could just discern the edge of the desert to the South but the purpleness was definitely not coming from there either. Nor from the North and the Sea of Looncan. It was definitely coming from somewhere along the coast, to the West. Subota rose even higher, his irrational but nonetheless present fear increasing disproportionately with height. Still he could not see anything that might be the cause. With a sigh he descended, slowly, to a height he could live with and made a mental note to tell Kishli that some tiles on the roof of the house were missing. With a swirling motion of his arms he tilted forward and began to fly, heading West.

* * *

Fortunately the shark did not land across the middle of the boat. If it had it would have broken Fiau in two and left her irreparably crippled.

It landed across the back end of the boat causing the boat to tip up dramatically as its back end disappeared under the weight of a ferocious grey-skinned shark. The shark rolled off and sank back under the water, momentarily surprised. The surprise did not last long, however. With flying fish all around the shark's instincts took over and it forgot the strange little thing that had got in the way. The fish were fleeing and the shark gave chase. Barely had the front of Fiau touched back down again than the tail of the shark caught the back end and flipped it high in the air. What had not been thrown out when the shark fell was thrown out now.

Autumn had gone in the first throw. Being on top of Logan and closer to the back end of the boat she fell on top of the shark but, as it rolled, its dorsal fin flicked her away from the boat. Logan went in the second throw, tossed in the opposite direction. Fiau, upended twice and taking on water from the turmoil in the sea around, began to sink. The other shark, the one that had been swimming in parallel, came slowly closer, intrigued by the commotion. And the fish blood in the water.

* * *

Due West of Cim-Irsou lay the desert. It was some distance away, many days travel, and Subota knew there was little there. Heat, sand, a few nomads, some creatures that eked out a basic existence, nothing that could possibly cause purple in his life so he flew slightly North of West, following the coastline. Perhaps the cause was in one of the towns or villages that dotted the margin between the sand of the desert and the sand of the coast. Whatever it was it needed investigating and he would venture into the desert only if the coast proved fruitless. One thing was certain, the purple was not fading. Whatever the cause, it was not going away.

* * *

Logan landed on his head. Fortunately there was only water there, salty but softer than rocks. A fountain of spray shot into the air as he hit the water and he sank, breathless from the sudden tossing of the boat. Instinctively he opened his mouth to gulp in air but the salty wetness stopped him and he started to thrash, seeking the water

above. For a few desperate moments he was disorientated and his thrashing only took him deeper but a certain level of fear control, the result of his time with Autumn, brought him to his senses and he stopped thrashing for a few seconds, enough to allow the water to start pushing him upwards. Then he kicked with his feet and, a few scant moments later, his head broke the surface. It was almost calm again, the shoal of flying fish gone. Gasping, he sucked in air and spat out sea water and tried to calm his pounding heart. Swells of water kept smacking him in the face making calm breathing difficult and forcing him to keep shutting his eyes.

Beating the water with his arms he managed to turn round and saw Fiau bob to the surface. She appeared to be upside-down but at least she was still floating. Clumsily he started swimming towards her, his head as high as possible above the water, his eyes searching for Autumn. It took forever and a day to reach the solidity of Fiau but he did and clung to her, panting. His body felt drained of all strength and he hung there, gathering himself then, with a mighty heave, he managed to get a leg on top of Fiau. That done it was relatively easy to haul himself up. It was only then that he saw, on the other side of the overturned boat, the grey sail slowly knifing through the water.

“Vogev,” he exclaimed staring at it while scrambling to his knees.

The shark was perhaps twenty paces away, zig-zagging through the water and coming closer to the boat. It wasn't in feeding mode. Its belly was replete with flying fish but it was intrigued by the large, strange smelling fish not far away. There were still traces of fish blood in the water but this large fish wasn't behaving like an injured fish and the blood coming from it wasn't fish blood. The shark was curious. It came closer.

Unlike Logan, Autumn hadn't been tossed clear of the boat. When the shark crashed down she had fallen on top of it then been flipped as it rolled off. The shark's fin had cut her head and stunned her for a few moments. When she came too she was already some way under the surface.

Autumn could not swim. Logan had tried to teach her, not that he was a good swimmer, but she had an underlying fear of water that

inhibited her learning. On the other hand, she had been shipwrecked before and survived so she fought her panic, bringing every last shred of her training and will power into play and refusing to be overwhelmed. She kept her body still and waited until the rushing, tumbling stopped then, using her legs in the way Logan had tried to teach her, she kicked for the surface, her lungs burning.

* * *

It wasn't until Subota had crossed the Northern-most tip of the desert that he realised the source of the purple was out to sea. Not far out, mind, but enough to make him keep heading West rather than continue to follow the coast as it started to curve South. He stayed high, high for him at any rate, so he could scan a wider area. He nearly missed them.

A tiny dot on a vast sea, seemingly lost and alone. The coast wasn't too far away but from the surface whoever was on the dot wouldn't be able to see it yet. Subota was sure it was a whoever. This colour wouldn't be just a thing, not to have spread all the way to Cim-Irsou. He started to circle like a hawk, slowly descending.

"Ahh, some luckless fisherman will rue this day," he muttered to himself. "This is just another shark attack and does not deserve my attention but the source of the purple is near. I can taste it now."

He cast around, wondering which way to head next when he noticed the person on the boat hurl itself into the water and strike out for the one in the water. He paused, mentally placing a small wager on which would get there first, the one who had jumped or the shark. It was an intriguing sight for the shark was unhurried yet the one who had jumped was making little progress despite its seemingly frantic efforts, considerably more than the one it was trying to reach.

Subota drifted lower, intrigued. The one between the jumper and the shark seemed unusually calm but it was difficult to tell. Perhaps that one was injured.

"Surely not," muttered Subota. "If that one is injured the shark would be on it in an instant. Ah well, no matter. I lost that wager."

The jumper had reached the other and seemed to be holding it up. The shark was still approaching, however, and Subota lost interest. The shark was going to get two meals instead of just the one and he had no desire to watch the ending. There was work to be done. He started to rise again, once more scanning for the source of the colour.

“By the nose hairs of my forefathers,” he muttered. “This infernal hue must be coming from down there! 'Tis weaker in every other direction.”

Irritably he looked down as the shark closed in; its simple philosophy of life being no matter how full you are, eat when you can for starvation may not be far away. It was a valid philosophy that had served it well, until now at least. It was the sudden commotion and vigorous splashing of water that caught Subota's eye. It seemed one of the two in the water had hit the shark and it had twisted and turned in shocked surprise before reacting in the only way it could to something so wholly unexpected. For the first time in its life, perhaps even in the history of sharks, the shark turned tail and fled.

“Oh, well done,” said Subota admiringly.

He hung in the air, several body lengths above the victors, silently applauding them then brought his mind back to his problem. He started to drift around, criss-crossing, tasting the air. Then the purple hue quivered, perhaps more of a twitch or a jerk, and Subota fell out of the sky. He managed to catch himself just before he hit the water, not that it would have made any difference. His body was back in Cim-Irsou but it was more difficult to see underwater. Perhaps more importantly he was just above the surface of the sea, partway between the upended boat and the two people struggling in the water when a branch growing rapidly from the boat impaled him.

Having no substance it made not the slightest bit of difference but it surprised Subota. He rose up a little and twisted round in time to see the branch reach the people and for one of them to grab hold of it before it grew backwards, pulling the people through the water towards the boat.

“Fascinating,” breathed Subota watching intently. “Never have I seen

such as sight as this before.”

He followed the two people, up close he now saw they were young people, one of each sex, and watched as the branch neatly lifted them out of the water and deposited them on the upended bottom of the boat.

“There is some strange magic in that boat,” said Subota to himself, knowing he had found the source of the purple. “I wonder what it will do now?”

He did not have to wait long. No sooner than the two people were safely on the boat the boat started to change shape.

“It is turning itself inside out,” muttered Subota. “That is a most thoughtful and intelligent boat.”

One of the people laid the other on the bottom of the now the right way up boat and turned momentarily towards Subota.

“Ye gods!” exclaimed Subota, recognising the face. “What is he doing here?”

Chapter Three

“Are you hurt?” asked Logan anxiously peering into Autumn's face. “You fool, of course she is hurt otherwise she would not be lying there,” he muttered to himself. “What to do, what to do?”

He squatted back on his heels and tried to force his mind to remember how Autumn had dealt with other injured people. She struggled feebly and tried to sit up but flopped backwards.

“Ahh, check for broken bones,” cried Logan, pleased to have thought of something, anything.

He quickly ran his hands over her legs and arms and they seemed to be intact.

“Her back cannot be broken, nor her neck,” he reasoned. “Else she would not still be alive. Now what?”

“Autumn?” he said, patting her face. “Autumn?”

“Wha?” croaked Autumn, her eyes half open.

She started to cough and water trickled out of her mouth.

“Water?” said Logan. “Why are you coughing up water? Oh, Sploop! You must have water in your lungs. Come on, Autumn, cough some more, cough.”

She tried to push him away and sit up again but there was very little strength in it.

“I know,” said Logan suddenly. “I've got to get you upside-down so the water comes out.”

He grabbed her round the shoulders and hoisted her to a sitting position then pushed her so she hung over the side of the boat then hastily pulled her back when her head went under water.

“Fiau,” he cried urgently, “make the side of the boat higher.”

Obligingly Fiau raised the side of the boat and Logan let Autumn drape again, her hips on the boat's edge. Her arms hung in the water but this probably didn't matter. He was about to tell her to cough again when she was sick and brought up copious amounts of water. She groaned loudly then started coughing.

"Ahh, that is good," said Logan, "very good. You stay there for a bit and see what else you can bring up."

He patted her reassuringly on the back and she started coughing again. Logan slumped down on the bottom of the boat and grabbed her ankle tightly in case she fell over the side.

"Let go of my ankle," said Autumn throatily and shook her leg.

Logan grinned in relief and grabbed the hem of her malu instead. "So you are still alive then," he said.

"That is debatable," said Autumn then threw up again.

"That is a relief," said Logan.

He relaxed and stared idly at the pool of blood on the bottom of the boat. It took several seconds to register then he stared at it in puzzlement for a few more.

"Blood?" he muttered. "That is a lot of blood for a fish or two. Oh no. Autumn!"

He leapt up and hauled her back into the boat. Fresh blood, thinned by salt water spray, streaked her right cheek.

"Vogev," he muttered and wiped the blood away with his hand.

There didn't seem to be any injury on her cheek so he put his hand under her neck to lift her head.

"Autumn, you are bleeding!" he said. "Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere," she said, her eyes opening. They opened fully this time

although they seemed to be unfocused.

“That is no help,” muttered Logan.

He eased her head back down and saw his hand had blood on it. “Ahh!”

Gently he rolled her on to her side and inspected the back of her head. There was a gash there, running from behind her right ear and downwards along the hair line. It wasn't particularly deep as Autumn did not have a fat neck, but it was still bleeding.

“I need a bandage,” he muttered, his eyes searching the boat. “Aha!”

He grabbed the sopping wet blanket and tried to tear off a strip but it was a well made blanket with a hem and he couldn't tear it. He threw it down and lunged at Autumn's backpack and pulled out his knife. He slashed at the blanket, tearing the hem and narrowly missing stabbing himself in the leg then threw down the knife and lifted Autumn into a sitting position.

“What are you doing?” she asked, still a little woozy.

“I need to bandage your head,” said Logan. “You are bleeding.”

“Oh,” said Autumn.

Logan started to wrap the strip of blanket around Autumn's neck then stopped and unwrapped it. He lifted her ponytail and draped it over the top of her head then started again.

“Ugh hernt theethe,” said Autumn.

“What did you say?” asked Logan, pulling the bandage down from around her mouth and nose.

“I can't breathe,” said Autumn.

“Oh,” said Logan. “But it has to go there. If I put it around your neck it will slide down at the back and if I put it around your forehead it

will slide up the back of your head. It has to stay where the cut is or you will bleed to death.”

“Do both,” said Autumn, before starting to cough again.

She didn't bring up any more water which Logan felt was a good sign so he started to wind the strip of blanket around her throat, then her forehead and her throat again. It didn't seem long enough so he tore off another strip and added that as well then tore the end in half to tie a knot.

“That should do it,” he said, leaning back to admire his handiwork.

“There is just one little problem,” said Autumn, her voice stronger.

“Oh,” said Logan disappointedly. “What is that?”

Autumn got onto her knees so she could face him.

“Ahh, sorry,” said Logan. “I can fix that!”

He lifted the ponytail which hung down over her face and was held in place by the bandaging around her forehead and draped it over the top of her head. The hair slid off and covered her face again.

“A little more blanket, I think,” said Logan and tore off another thin strip. He held her ponytail over her head and tied it in place.

“Thank you,” said Autumn. She started to feel around her throat and the base of her skull.

“It suits you,” said Logan, relaxing back against the side of the boat. “Tis like a hat of some sort. Does your neck hurt?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and my throat and my chest and my back but no matter, I am still alive. Is there any water left?”

“Yes,” said Logan, reaching for the water skin.

“Nothing seems broken,” said Autumn. “Was the cut deep? Could you

see any bone?"

"No," said Logan, "but I confess I was more concerned with stopping the bleeding than peering inside to look at your bones."

"You did a good job," said Autumn, experimentally trying to move her head from side to side. She winced and stopped quickly. "What happened?" She rinsed her mouth with water and spat over the side of the boat then drank some.

"Do you remember the shark?" ask Logan.

"It was going from side to side out there," said Autumn pointing vaguely out to sea.

"No, the other one," said Logan.

"What other one?" asked Autumn. She pushed a finger under the bandage around her neck and pulled it forward to loosen it slightly.

"There was another one," said Logan. "It was chasing fish and it landed on top of the boat. You got thrown out and I wager it hit you with its tail or something. I got thrown the other way and Fiau got turned upside-down."

"So why did the shark not eat me?" asked Autumn, drinking some more of the clean water.

"Umm, well, I umm, hit it," said Logan, going a little pink. "On its nose."

"That was foolish," said Autumn, squeezing her eyes shut and rubbing the back of her neck. "Its jaws most likely were bigger than you. You could have been killed."

"You are right," said Logan a little miffed. "Next time I will just leave you to be eaten or drown."

"Ahh, Logan," said Autumn, opening her eyes to look at him. "I am most grievously sorry. You saved my life and here I am chastising you

for risking your own. You did a most brave and skilful thing and I am most grateful.” She took his hand in hers and kissed it.

“Oh,” said Logan, his pink face going almost magenta, “it was, umm, it was nothing, umm, really. I just reacted, like you say you do. It annoyed me.”

“I must remember to never annoy you, Logan Hero,” said Autumn, smiling. “How did you get the boat the right way up again?”

“I did not,” confessed Logan. “Fiau pulled us both out of the water then turned herself inside out. She be right clever.”

“Indeed?” said Autumn. “I must thank her. Fiau?”

“How may I aid you, Autumn?” asked Fiau, materialising in the centre of the boat. It rocked slightly.

“I would like to thank you for saving us,” said Autumn. “I am most grateful.”

“As I am,” said Logan. “We would both have died without you.”

Fiau's long, thin face softened slightly and something that may be said to resemble a smile crossed her thin lips.

“I regret the loss of some of your things,” she said, the smile disappearing.

“What things?” asked Logan, puzzled.

“When I was turned things fell,” said Fiau in her thin quivery voice. “I caught some but others fell too far. This stream is excessively deep.”

“We give thanks for whatever you caught, Fiau,” said Autumn. “You saving yourself is a blessing more than we deserve. I thank you again.”

Fiau nodded then merged back into the boat.

“I never thought of that,” said Logan, looking around. “Of course

everything would fall out. Let me see. Ahh there is your pack and your staff, but one of the blankets is gone and the other I used for the bandage. No matter, 'tis warm enough and I venture we can get more before the chill returns. I do not see your robe, however, and the empty water skin is gone. So are the coconuts.”

He opened Autumn's pack and checked. Everything seemed to still be there although it was all soaked.

“’Tis a great shame about your robe,” he said. “I always feel better when you are wearing it.”³

“That may be it over there,” said Autumn, pointing to a dark blue thing floating in the water not far from the boat.

“Ahh,” said Logan, standing up. “I wager it is.”

He jumped into the water and started to swim over. It took a while as he was not a strong swimmer but he made it back, dragging the robe with his teeth.

“You are full of bravery today,” said Autumn as he draped the robe over the side of the boat before climbing in. “I thank you once again.”

“Your robe is the only thing I value,” said Logan, dripping all over the bottom of the boat.

“More than me?” asked Autumn, mischievously.

“Without you the robe has no purpose,” said Logan. “Besides, you are not a thing.”

Autumn opened her mouth to speak but Logan held up his hand.

“No,” he said firmly. “Now is not the time for philosophy. The robe is a piece of cloth and you are you and quite different so I care not what fancy arguments you may have. The robe may keep you alive but to me that only shows you are the more important. You can lecture me

3 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*. The robe is hemmed with a ribbon given to Autumn by Mother Midcarn which protects her from death from objects such as arrows and falling trees.

on the nature of objects and the meaning of consciousness another time.”

“Are you done?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Logan.

“I was only going to say your feelings warm my heart,” said Autumn, “but I wager that is too philosophical for you. No matter, let us turn to practical things.”

“Oh,” said Logan. He paused for a few moments and scowled. “What practical things?”

“It seems we have no food and very little water,” said Autumn. “And we are still a long way out to sea.”

“Ahh,” said Logan.

* * *

Kishli knew Subota had returned when his feet twitched. For some reason it was always the first sign of Subota's return, never the hands or the head.

“Perhaps he climbs back into his body feet first,” he wondered.

Regardless of the reason, Subota's feet twitched and Kishli, sitting by the closed door, watching and waiting, was ready. He kept a small brazier burning with shayi for Subota always needed fluids when he came back from flying. Just in case, Kishli always had a small tray of sliced fruits, yogurt and finely chopped meat prepared but it was rarely wanted.

Subota sighed and sat up just as Kishli knelt beside him, a glass bowl of shayi held out.

“Ahh, light of my life,” said Subota, taking the bowl. He took several sips and smiled at the lad.

“Did your journey go well, Magide?” enquired Kishli. “You were gone a long time. I was starting to worry.”

“Yes and no,” said Subota, taking off his floppy hat. “Send someone to the palace. I need an audience with the Karoi at his earliest convenience.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Kishli, rising. “Shall I instruct the messenger to say the matter is of the utmost importance?”

“Ah,” said Subota, pursing his lips and thinking. “No, 'utmost' is the wrong word, I think. Hmmm. No, tell the Karoi I desire an audience on a matter of some significance.”

“Some significance, Magide, as you say,” said Kishli suppressing his curiosity. If by some chance it was necessary for him to know what had transpired then he would be told. If not, he would get it soon enough through the usual palace gossip. “More shayi?”

* * *

Logan persuaded Autumn, not without some difficulty, to finish the last of the fresh water. She wanted to share it equally but Logan's final argument was that she had swallowed a fair amount of salt water and her body needed cleansing of the salt. To his surprise she conceded to the logic. What she categorically refused to do was take a nap although she did consent to sit and rest. Mainly, Logan suspected, because there was little else to do on a small boat drifting on the current.

They sat in silence for a while, watching the clouds on the horizon that never seemed to come closer or move away.

“This has been a learning experience of great significance for me,” said Autumn after a while.

“You have learnt that you are not wholly invulnerable?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn. “I have always known that I have vulnerabilities even as I seek to find ways to lessen them. No, my learning is to do

with my beliefs and understanding.”

“How so?” asked Logan. “You have, perhaps, overcome your fears of the sea?”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, after thinking that over for a few minutes. “Although I suspect my irrational fears of the sea are turning into entirely rational ones. I wager there is no shame in being afraid of sharks.”

“So what have you learned?” asked Logan. The sun was hot and he was starting to feel thirsty.

“A matter that was often debated at the Esyup,” said Autumn, gingerly poking the back of her neck as though it might have healed in the short time since the shark cut her, “is the impermanence of life and the continuity of existence after the moment of death. We have talked on this before.”

“Indeed,” said Logan. “I am not yet entirely convinced but you tell me that death is but a transition from one moment to another and of no special significance.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “And that has been my belief for as long as I can remember. But today I have learned a new aspect to the idea that was never debated.”

“You surprise me,” said Logan. “I thought your elders debated every possible aspect and many impossible ones. How is it that you have found something new?”

“I was thinking on it earlier,” said Autumn. “All the debates invoked the mind and held the mind superior to the body in matters of understanding. But today, when I was in the water and some way below the surface I found my body took over and rejected my mind. I was not aware of it at the time but I venture my mind accepted that this was the moment of transition from this world to the next and, had I been aware of it, I would have welcomed the moment. But my body did not. My body refused to accept such a thing and did what it could to delay the moment.”

“I am not certain that I understand,” said Logan.

“I did not want to die,” said Autumn. “Or at least my body did not want to die, regardless of what my mind wanted.”

“I am delighted to hear that,” said Logan. “’Twould seem your body has more sense than your mind, then.”

“Oh I do not agree with you there,” said Autumn. “The body takes nothing but its own immediate needs into account at any given moment. It is the task of the mind to overrule the body and take a broader perspective of the issues.”

“But you are still alive,” said Logan. “Although it worries me that you felt there were broader issues beyond your survival after the shark hit you.”

“Oh, there are always broader issues,” said Autumn, “but my point is that when my mind was unable to take control because I was nearly unconscious, my body did what it felt it needed to do regardless of any consequences beyond survival.”

“And why do you find that significant?” asked Logan. “Is that not what you would expect any body to do?”

“Actually no,” said Autumn, looking faintly surprised. “For some reason I expected my body to understand that it would continue to exist beyond that moment of my death and to be unconcerned. After all, is it not so that hair and nails continue to grow after death? I had always believed that death was purely a thing of the mind but now I doubt that. It was my body that did not want to die and responded, not my mind.”

“I confess I find it hard to believe that this point was debated at length at your Esyup,” said Logan. “I would think it to be obvious.”

“That is my point,” said Autumn. “The debates never took the body into consideration. We were only concerned with the mind and the controlling of the body through the mind. I find it strange now, looking back.”

“Aye, well,” said Logan with a sigh. “The important thing is that you are alive and able to think these thoughts. Tell me, have you wondered why those clouds on the horizon do not behave like clouds?”

“I confess not,” said Autumn. “My mind has been dwelling on why I did not drown.”

“That is understandable,” said Logan. “I, on the other hand, am thirsty and I have been wondering why those clouds do not come our way and rain on us.”

“And what conclusions have you come to?” asked Autumn.

“Well,” said Logan, “I was wondering if mayhap those are not clouds. They do not move and clouds always move.”

“So what are they then?” asked Autumn, leaning forward as though that would help her see them more clearly.

“I am wondering if that is land,” said Logan. “The coast of Neander, just on the horizon.”

Chapter Four

Kishli helped Subota into his best formal tufafi. Strictly speaking it was not a tufafi as it did not have the wherewithal to support a sorcerer's craft but, being crimson with black piping and embroidered silver images of Plakill and Plifal and other symbols, it looked the part. In the unlikely event that Soros would require Subota to actually perform any sorcery over and above common sense which, in the Court of a Karoi, was little short of sorcery in itself, he could always change into his working clothes.

Word had come back that the Karoi would receive Subota just before the midday meal which was something of a relief as it was a fairly precise time and Subota liked precision. An audience after the midday meal could mean any time in the afternoon or even early evening depending on who the Karoi was dining with.

"I think the canary yellow slippers, Kishli," said Subota, looking down at his bare feet. It was nearing the time he had his toenails cut he realised and his mood darkened. He hated having his toenails cut. In fact he hated having his feet touched for they were very ticklish.

"Your wish, Magide," said Kishli, hurrying to Subota's robe room.

He returned with a pair of yellow slippers, looking worried.

"Magide, I regret there is a small stain on one of them," said Kishli, deferentially. "A thousand pardons for my failure to notice and have it removed.

"Then fetch the sand yellow slippers," said Subota grumpily. "They lack grandeur but will have to do."

"Magide, do you not recall that you ordered the sand yellow slippers destroyed?" asked Kishli, having sold the slippers for a slightly more than modest sum.

"Destroyed?" said Subota frowning. "Why would I have them destroyed? They are most comfortable."

“They were soiled by the leavings of a royal hound, Magide,” said Kishli. “At the time of the banquet for the envoy from Nagitere.”

“Ahh, I had forgotten,” said Subota. “The Karoi was somewhat upset that I turned his dog into a lizard for its inexcusable behaviour.”

“No doubt his gracious majesty has forgiven you, Magide,” said Kishli, standing patiently with the slippers. “The royal bitch has given birth since then.”

“That is no way to refer to ...,” started Subota sharply then slapped his forehead. “Ahh, I take it you mean the dog not ...”

“Magide!” exclaimed Kishli in agitation. “Never would I presume to insult the Karena in such a way! Would that my tongue be torn out at its very roots before such a thought could even enter my head. I am distraught that my clumsiness led you to misapprehend my meaning.”

“The fault was entirely mine, dear boy,” said Subota, taking the slippers. “Calm yourself. The Karena has produced no children these fifteen summers past and it was remiss of me to forget that.”

He studied the stain on the slipper for a moment. “Do you know what stained this?” he asked.

“Alas, no, Magide,” said Kishli. “Although you last wore them at the unveiling of the funerary plaque of the Deputy Minister for Inundation Avoidance.”

“Then most likely it is usos,” said Subota. “That man never once avoided the chance to be inundated by his favourite elixir.”

Subota breathed on the stain then rubbed it with his thumb while murmuring some minor incantation under his breath. The pinkish stain slowly disappeared. He inspected the slippers thoroughly in case there was another stain then tossed them to Kishli and lifted a foot, ready to be shod.

“Will you be returning for your midday meal, Magide?” asked Kishli a short while later as he followed Subota to the main door of the house.

“I do hope so, Kishli,” said Subota. “The Karoi’s meals go on for an eternity and put a great strain on my digestion.”

“Perhaps I could have you sent for, Magide, on a matter of great urgency,” said Kishli.

“Ahh, your concern pleases me greatly,” said Subota wanting to stroke Kishli’s cheek but very conscious of the open door. “Sadly the Karoi will see nothing as more urgent than an audience with him.”

“As you say, Magide,” said Kishli bowing formally. “And I will await your speedy return, light of my life,” he added, very softly.

Subota smiled then curtly dismissed him in case anyone happened to be watching.

As usual it took some time to walk across the palace grounds. In part this was because the grounds were extensive but, in equal measure, it was because everyone who was anyone stopped to greet and discuss matters of great importance with the Karoi’s Sarauta Matsafa. Great importance to them, that is, but of profound unimportance to Subota as his political influence was almost as low as his interest in such matters. Once at the palace it took almost as long to walk around it to get to the main entrance as someone of the eminence of Subota could not possibly be permitted to enter through one of the many rear entrances.

As usual the main foyer of the palace was thronged with people but they parted before him as he strode through; the main reason for wearing that particular tufafi. A fat unctuous eunuch showed him into the Karoi’s second best reception room and ingratiatingly offered him some shayi. Subota declined as his bladder was not as strong as it used to be. Left alone, Subota stood on the veranda looking out at the city of Cim-Irsou and the waters of Kwan ul Cimsour. There was no hint of purple left.

“A thousand blessings be upon you, Sarauta Matsafa Subota,” said a high pitched voice unexpectedly.

Subota jerked out of his reverie and turned.

“And a thousand times a thousand blessings be upon you, oh Great One,” he said, bowing deeply.

Soros nodded in acknowledgement and strolled into the room. A full head taller than Subota and more than double his width, Soros rarely went faster than a stroll. Besides, to hurry would be undignified.

“You are well?” enquired Soros.

“I am most extraordinarily well, oh Great One,” replied Subota.

“You really should get married,” said Soros, frowning.

“Indeed, Great One,” said Subota. “Might I enquire why you say that?”

“It allows me to show my magnanimous nature by enquiring after their health as well,” said Soros, sitting on a large, relatively unornate chair. It creaked loudly. “And it delays discussing matters of some significance particularly if there are several wives to enquire after.” He waved at another, more normal sized chair, and beamed at Subota.

“I would take a wife,” said Subota, sitting, “but it is a sad life being joined with a sorcerer. I would not wish such a life on any.”

“I daresay,” said Soros. “A life of noxious smells and strange noises and irregular meals. Ah well, what is this matter of significance?”

“He has come, Great One,” said Subota. “The Roinad of Aferraron approaches.”

Soros' face fell and he stared at Subota.

“The Roinad?” he said. “Are you certain?”

“Yes, Great One,” said Subota. “I saw him myself this very morning.”

“Send for my clerk,” said Soros, raising his voice very slightly.

There was a sudden scuffle as an attendant hurried to find Buxar. Soros slowly drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair and stared

pensively out across the bay.

“Your wish, Great One?” asked Buxar striding into the room.

“Why was I not informed that the Roinad of Aferraron is coming?” asked Soros quietly.

Buxar opened his eyes wide in astonishment.

“No such visit has been arranged, Great One,” he said. “There has been no invitation nor request and no arrangements would be made without your approval.”

“You are calling my Sarauta Matsafa a liar?” asked Soros, even more quietly.

Buxar went pale. “Indeed no, Great One,” he said, his voice trembling slightly. “Where, pray, is the Roinad now? I must hurry to make arrangements for his reception.”

“Subota?” asked Soros.

“Far to the West,” said Subota. “He travels in a small boat with but one companion.”

“Far to the West?” exclaimed Buxar then shut up when Soros looked at him.

“How do you know this?” asked Soros.

“There was an unusual colour to the day,” said Subota. “So I went to investigate.”

“You are certain it was the Roinad?” asked Soros.

“Yes, Great One,” said Subota. “I watched his coronation, you recall.”

“Hmm,” said Soros. “In a small boat with only one companion? There was no fleet, no army?”

“No, Great One,” said Subota.

“And he is not heading for Cim-Irsou?” asked Soros.

“I cannot say where he is heading, Great One,” said Subota. “Only that his boat was just off the coast far to the West and nowhere near the usual route from Uli-Rratha to Cim-Irsou.”

Soros thoughtfully stroked the short beard that half covered his broad face.

“If I might ...,” said Buxar quietly.

Soros looked at him.

“Our last information is that the Roinad was travelling in the Western mountains of Aferraron,” said Buxar. “Perhaps he moved on to the Zuit Islands.”

“It is possible,” said Soros. “Those islands have been Aferraron's territory these last hundred summers. But why would he come to Neander unannounced? We are at peace and there has been no intimation of a desire to renegotiate our trade agreements.”

“I wager there is more to this than meets the eye, Great One” said Buxar. “If his intent is hostile he would bring an army and come directly. If his intent is trade he would send representatives and follow the established protocols. Why would he travel incognito?”

“That is the conundrum,” said Soros. “Why indeed? And another is why only one companion? Even incognito I would take a score or more. This one man must be of great significance to be the Roinad's companion.”

“The companion is not a man,” said Subota. “She is a woman.”

“A woman?” said Soros, his face creasing in puzzlement. “I can understand taking women along on a journey but only one? And no other companions?”

“There were only the two, Great One,” said Subota. “I recognised the companion as well.”

Soros raised his eyebrows and gestured for Subota to continue.

“She was his apiakun at the Mundulgen,” said Subota.

“Remind me what a Mundulgen is,” said Soros looking blank.

“It is where challengers to the Roinadship fight it out,” said Subota, “or at least the apiakun do. They do the actual fighting on behalf of the challengers. Whichever one wins becomes the Roinad.”

“What a strange system they have,” said Soros. “Very uncivilised. It would be much more sensible to have the Roinadship hereditary as we do. But you say this woman was the apiakun? A woman did the fighting?”

“Yes, Great One,” said Subota. “And in remembering that I now make sense of something else I saw which puzzled me at the time.”

“Go on,” said Soros.

“Their boat was being attacked by a shark,” said Subota. “I fancy this woman must be a very skilled fighter for she beat it off.”

“That beggars belief,” said Soros. “A mere woman can beat a shark?”

“She was his apiakun, Great One,” said Subota, “and she did beat the others. There can be no doubting she has great skills.”

* * *

“That would make sense,” said Autumn. “At least I think it does although I am having trouble thinking properly.”

“If it is land then I venture we are drifting along the coast rather than towards it,” said Logan.

“I may be wrong,” said Autumn, “but I can only think of one way to

find out and that is to go over there and see. At the very least if it does turn out to be cloud it might rain on us.”

“That sounds good,” said Logan, “but how do we get there? We have no sails.”

“That I do not know,” said Autumn.

“If we had oars I might be able to row,” said Logan thoughtfully. “I wonder if this would do?”

He picked up Autumn's staff and sat at the back of the boat and tried to row with it. He had no discernable effect on the direction of the boat and gave up quickly.

“Well, it was worth a try,” he said.

“Mayhap you could do something with the blanket,” said Autumn, “or what remains of it.”

“How?” asked Logan. “Oars need to be stiff.”

“I was thinking mayhap throwing it out and pulling it back in,” said Autumn, “like climbing a rope.”

“But would it not need to be tied to something?” asked Logan, picking up the blanket.

“I do not know,” said Autumn sadly. “I have half an image in my head but it is not working properly so I cannot tell what I am seeing.”

“Hmm,” said Logan.

He threw the blanket in the water, keeping hold of one end, and pulled it back in. The boat quivered very slightly in that direction.

“I wager the sea will have dried up before we get to shore this way,” said Logan. “Although, perhaps if I do this ...” and he held both ends and scooped the water. The back end of the boat swung sideways as the scoop dragged the water.

“Sploop,” he said and tried again. The boat swung a little further. Excitedly Logan started to use the blanket over and over again to scoop water towards the boat, thereby moving the boat towards the scoop.

“Are we any closer?” he asked after putting in a considerable amount of effort.

“Not as far as I can see,” said Autumn. “We may have moved closer but it still looks a long way off.”

“Pah,” said Logan, tossing the blanket on the bottom of the boat and sitting back down. “It is exhausting and thirsty work for no great benefit.”

“Mayhap if we tied our malus to the blanket it would work better,” said Autumn.

“Now I think on it,” said Logan, “if it was a good way to move the boat fishermen would do that rather than use sails or oars.”

He glumly look at the front of the boat, seeking inspiration.

“What is that?” he asked.

“What is what?” asked Autumn, not looking up from contemplating her throbbing neck and head.

“Those things in the front of the boat,” said Logan. “I have not seen them before.”

He got up and walked the short distance to the front of the boat.

“How strange,” he said. “Tis some sort of bottle and two lengths of lumpy cord.”

“What was that?” asked Autumn, lifting her head. “Show me.”

Logan brought the objects over.

“This is a bottle for certain,” he said, “although it is flatter than most, but I know not what these are.”

“What is in the bottle?” asked Autumn, taking the two cords.

Logan pulled out the cork and sniffed. “It was no smell,” he reported and tipped the bottle gently. A clear liquid dribbled out.

“It looks like water,” he said dubiously.

He dipped a finger inside the bottle and licked it. “It tastes like water as well.”

He put the bottle to his lips and sipped it. He rolled the sip around in his mouth then swallowed and held his breath.

“It tasted like water,” he said, his mind focused inwardly on his belly. “And I am feeling nothing strange inside.”

He lifted the bottle to his lips again but Autumn stopped him.

“Give it a short while,” she said. “We know not for sure what it is and it may take a while to do harm.”

“I suppose you are right,” said Logan, his thirst craving more water. Reluctantly he put the cork back in the bottle and sat down. “What you you make of those?”

“They look to be stones joined with twisted metal,” said Autumn, inspecting one of them. She handed the other to Logan.

“Aye,” said Logan. “This metal looks to be thin strands of copper although these be strange looking stones. They are long and thin, not round like normal stones. Except for this one.” He held up the circular stone to show her.

“These stones look to be like your thinking stone,” said Autumn. “They are the same smooth black with no markings, although there seems to be something on this round one. I know not what it is.”

She held it closer to her eyes then turned it round. "Oh, it looks like an 'L'" she said.

"This one looks to have an 'A' on it," said Logan, examining the one he held. "Oh no."

"What is it?" asked Autumn.

"An 'A' on one and an 'L' on the other?" said Logan. "You know what this means, don't you."

"No," said Autumn. "My mind has stopped working."

"Mother Midcarn," said Logan. "The A is for Autumn and the L is for Logan. I know not what they are but there is one each."

"They are necklaces," said Autumn suddenly. "I have seen one before, at a market."

"What is a necklace?" asked Logan.

"It is an ornament that goes around your neck," said Autumn. "'Tis like a thong but the ends join together rather than being tied. That must be what these strangely shaped hoops at the ends are."

"How do you join two hoops together?" asked Logan, fiddling with them. He tried a few times then suddenly they interlocked and he grunted in surprise. "Ohh, yes. Now how do I get them apart?"

He fiddled some more while Autumn watched quietly then he chuckled.

"That be right clever," he said, joining the ends together and undoing them again to show her. "I like that. You wear it round the neck?"

"Yes," she said, "if they are necklaces."

Logan wrapped the one he was holding around his neck and fiddled with the clasp.

"Tis not so easy when you cannot see what you are doing," he said, bending his head forward. "Ahh, there we go."

He let go of the necklace and it stayed around his neck.

"It feels strange," he said, touching it with his fingers, "but it is not tight. What do you think?"

"It looks well," said Autumn, "although I venture this one is meant for you."

"Ahh," said Logan. "The one with the L, aye."

He fiddled with the necklace again and managed to get it off after several attempts.

"I wager this will not be falling off by accident," he said, inspecting it again. Then he handed it to Autumn and took the one with the L on it.

"Why would Mother Midcarn give us necklaces?" he asked. "And you cannot deny it was Mother Midcarn. Who else could give us gifts in the middle of the sea without either of us noticing when it was done?"

"I know not," said Autumn, running her necklace through her fingers. "How do you feel?"

"Fine," said Logan. "You think these necklaces are harmful in some way?"

"No," said Autumn. "I was thinking of the water."

"Ahh," said Logan, picking up the water bottle. "No, my belly feels fine. Emptier than I would like but nothing of any ill. Shall I try some more or would you like to try it?"

"It is only a small bottle," said Autumn, eyeing it, "and will not last us both long. I cannot decide. I would prefer you to have it all if it is water but if it is harmful then I would prefer to find out first."

"I feel the same," said Logan. "I want you to have more water but I do not want you to come to harm either. 'Tis a dilemma."

They both contemplated the bottle for a few moments.

"No," said Autumn. "This is absurd. We agree that only Mother Midcarn could have given us these things, do we not?"

"Aye," said Logan.

"And she would not give us anything harmful," said Autumn. "We may well not know the significance but we can be sure they will not harm us."

"Well, most likely not," said Logan. "Not deliberately anyway. She does make mistakes every now and then though."

"She will not make a mistake with something as simple as water," said Autumn. "You have tasted the water and come to no harm. Drink half the bottle and give the rest to me and let that be the end of it."

"Well, if you say so," said Logan dubiously. "Mayhap it would be better if I washed your cut with the water?"

"Drink," said Autumn. "I wager we will die of thirst before this cut goes bad enough to kill me. Make the most of what water we have now. If nothing else it may help us think of a way of getting this boat to the shore."

"I suppose we could write a message and put it in the bottle for someone to find," said Logan, "but as we do not know where we are we cannot give directions so there seems little point in that."

"Drink," said Autumn, "or I will throw the full bottle in the sea to get rid of the problem."

"Oh very well," said Logan, drinking from the bottle. He had two mouthfuls and pretended he'd drunk about half. "The rest is for you."

He passed the bottle over and Autumn peered inside then handed it

back.

“Drink, I said,” she said firmly. “Do not pretend with me.”

“I did,” said Logan, faintly puzzled. “Why do you say otherwise?”

“The bottle is still full to the brim,” said Autumn. “Look.”

Chapter Five

Soros pursed his lips and stared blankly at Buxar who visibly wilted. Soros was not, by nature, a cruel man but sometimes circumstances dictated actions and Buxar was well aware of the reason for the unexpected vacancy that had led to his promotion. Quite understandably he did not want another unexpected vacancy.

Soros let the silence hang. He had learned in his youth that silence was a very powerful weapon and infinitely preferable to an ill considered remark. Staring worked well too. The tension grew palpable and Buxar began to sweat. Subota, on the other hand, just let his mind drift. He was used to Soros' silences and stares and knew that they meant only that he was thinking. Then Soros cleared his throat and Buxar nearly fainted.

"Go," said Soros and Buxar forced himself to make the required obeisances and leave the room.

"Your thoughts, Subota?" asked Soros when Buxar had gone.

"I have none, Great One," said Subota. "This is a political matter and I have no jurisdiction nor, I confess, the interest."

"But why incognito?" exclaimed Soros, smacking his huge hand on the arm of his chair. He got up and strode to the verandah. "And why so far away?"

"Perhaps he wishes to have a holiday, Great One," said Subota, scratching his belly. It felt like a flea was wandering and it would be impolite to invoke a banishment spell in the Karoi's presence. "Perhaps he is on his way to somewhere else, Sassese'lte for example.

Soros turned to stare at Subota, his clenched fists firmly on his hips but Subota took no notice.

"Perhaps," he said. "You know where the Roinad is now?"

"No, Great One," said Subota. "I know where he was this morning and I daresay he will not have moved far but his precise location at this

moment, no.”

Soros sighed. He found Subota's need for absolutes irritating. “You can find him again?” he asked.

“Assuredly, Great One,” said Subota looking up to see Soros glaring at him. He briefly wondered why. “I placed a beacon spell on the Roinad before I returned so he will be easy to track. Unless, of course, his companion is a sorcerer as well.”

“It will not auger well for you, Matsafa, if you lose him,” said Soros, his eyes narrowing.

“On the contrary, Great One,” said Subota. “It augers well if I do for to be forewarned of another sorcerer is a definite benefit for both of us. Although I venture no sorcerer of any distinction would remove such a beacon. Most likely they would seek to divert it elsewhere to mislead.”

“Hmph,” snorted Soros. He turned to look out over the bay again. “I must assume he is coming here by devious means and with malice in his heart. To assume otherwise would not be prudent. Still, time is on my side for he will be a while getting here. Watch over him, Subota. Let me know his movements. It may be as you say that he travels to another land and only chance has brought him to my coast but until such time as I know for certain precautions must be taken.”

“Your wish, Great One,” said Subota. He leaned forward in his chair, ready to stand. “Do you further desire my presence?”

“No,” said Soros, not turning around.

“Then I take my leave, Great One,” said Subota with a stiff bow as befitted his station.

“Subota,” said Soros as Subota was about to leave the room.

Subota paused and Soros turned to look at him. Then he walked over to stand close.

“I hear things, old friend,” said Soros quietly. “Only veiled comments at the moment but have a care lest I am forced into a situation we may both regret. In such matters my hands are tied.”

“Great One?” said Subota, an icy barb shooting through his bowels.

“Take a wife,” said Soros, pouring as much significance into his look as he could. “Tongues wag and spit poison more often than not and a wife would be an antidote if you follow my meaning.”

* * *

Autumn awoke before dawn as was usual for her. The throbbing in her head had eased to a dull ache but, as she discovered when she tried to sit up, there was a stabbing pain at the top of her neck when she moved. She lay still, focusing her mind on exploring the pain, opening up to the experience of it, appreciating its depths and subtleties and building a relationship with it. Then she gave the pain a name, an identity of its own, defining its existence in the here and now and repeated that name several times. Then, with no effort at all, she changed its name, redefining the relationship on her own terms. A simple technique but one that required much practice and Autumn had had much practice.

She sat up and looked around. The pain called and she acknowledged it by its new name and passed on. The pain no longer had any power over her. She could appreciate the lapping of the water against the boat, the faint shimmer of the sliver of Plakill over the sea, the distant splashing of some creature, the coolness of the pre-dawn air. A sea bird of some description circled overhead, curious, and she wished it well before it swooped off to the South.

“Tis a beautiful day,” she whispered, not wanting to wake Logan.

She reached behind her, a hand searching for the water bottle stored with her pack in the front of the boat. It was still full despite their having drunk its contents three times over the evening before. Autumn held it gently, appreciating the generosity of the gift and awed by its simplicity. An abundance of life giving water, fresh, sweet and cool. She drank then cupped her hand to wash her face, or at least that part

not covered by the blanket bandage. She replaced the cork and twisted to return it to the front of the boat. It was only then that she realised Logan was not there.

“How strange,” she muttered, looking behind in case he was crouched at the front of the boat even though she knew there was no room there for him. He was not anywhere else in the boat either. There was nowhere to hide and the boat was small.

In the growing pre-dawn light she noticed the water behind the boat was a little ruffled and choppy. Not much but enough to be different to the smoothness of the swells elsewhere and she realised that the distant splashing she could hear was closer and quieter than she had first thought. Curious she went to the back of the boat and peered over.

It was Logan. He was lying on his back in the water, his eyes closed and his arms folded over his head, pressed against the boat. His legs were moving slowly up and down as though he was walking and his feet were making the splashing sounds and stirring the water. His breathing was slow and even and he looked almost serene. It was seemingly as if he was asleep, yet strolling.

Very gently Autumn reached down and tweaked his nose. With a squawk his serenity vanished. He doubled up, his arms covering his face, and sank beneath the surface. Then he reappeared and grabbed onto the back of the boat.

“So you are awake then,” he said, wiping his face.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “What were you doing?”

“I was pushing the boat,” he said. “How are you?”

“I am good,” said Autumn. “How long have you been doing this?”

“Oh, a while,” said Logan. He hauled himself back into the boat and went in search of the water bottle. “I woke in the night and could not go back to sleep thinking of ways to reach the shore. Then it occurred to me that I might be able to swim there and if I could do that then

why could I not push the boat.”

“Were you successful?” asked Autumn.

“I know not,” said Logan cheerfully. “It was dark and I could not see but it was something to do and after a while I got into the rhythm of it. It has been surprisingly restful, lying there in the water.”

“Then it was good,” said Autumn, “even if we are no nearer.”

“We will know soon,” said Logan, peering out to where he thought the shore would be. “It is nearly dawn. There is a shadow over there but it is not yet light enough to gauge the distance.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I see you are wearing your necklace.”

“Oh!” said Logan, touching it. “I had forgotten about it. I hope the sea water did not damage it.” He fumbled behind his neck and took it off and inspected it. “No, as far as I can see it looks exactly the same.” He hesitated for a moment then put it back on.

“Have you noticed anything different?” asked Autumn. “Mayhap in your swimming?”

“No,” said Logan. “Everything is just as before.”

“I wonder what the significance of the necklaces is then,” said Autumn. “The bottle is readily apparent. It has powers that keep it full no matter how much we drink, but the necklaces. Ahh, nothing comes to mind.”

“Mayhap they are just pretty things Mother Midcarn thought we might like,” said Logan. “After all, we have done much to aid her and perhaps she is simply acknowledging that or mayhap she thinks we will forget our names. Do you plan to wear yours?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but not until my neck is healed, or at least this blanket is away. It makes my neck too thick for the necklace.”

“Ahh, yes,” said Logan. “How is it?”

“Sore,” admitted Autumn, gently pushing the back of her neck with a finger, “but it does not have the burning of a cut going bad.”

“Should I take the bandage off and look at the wound?” asked Logan. “It may still be bleeding.”

Autumn pushed a finger up inside the bandage and felt around then inspected her finger.

“’Twould seem to have stopped bleeding,” she reported. “There is dried blood here but nothing fresh. I think it would be better to wait until we land. There may be hamamielis or caradace to help the healing. Another day with this bandage should do no harm.”

“As you wish,” said Logan looking at her sternly, “although you will tell me if it worsens in any way?”

“Of course, Logan Healer,” said Autumn with a smile. “Do I not always?”

“No,” said Logan. “You never tell me. Remember that time in the Mapdil Mountains when you were stabbed by that thorn? You did not tell me until you fainted from the thing some days later.”⁴

“Ahh, that was some time ago and a consequence of my vanity,” said Autumn. “I believed then that I never needed the aid of another but I have learnt since. ’Tis a balm to my essence to know that you are always here and will always aid me, no matter the situation. Now, do my eyes deceive me or are we decidedly nearer the shore?”

Logan twisted to look then stood up to be able to see further. Astauand was peeping over the horizon and the full light of day was beginning.

“Aye,” he said. “It still does not look to be much but I fancy I can see flecks of white from waves breaking on the shore, if that is the shore. I see nothing green though, and it looks very low.”

4 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Second Tale*: Autumn was stabbed by Ta’umboq, an augetreinn, in an attempt to kill her slowly and bypass the protective power of her robe ribbon. On that occasion Autumn was only saved through the healing powers of Khimera, a water naiad.

“Then it seems your efforts have worked,” said Autumn, “and you have pushed us some way closer although the boat is now drifting along the shoreline again. You rest for a while and I shall have a try.”

“Oh no,” said Logan, putting his hand on her shoulder to stop her getting up. “You are injured and should rest and you cannot swim anyway. Besides you have not had your dawn thinking time. You stay on the boat and do that and I will push some more.”

“‘Twould seem unfair though,” said Autumn, frowning.

“Think on the logic of it,” said Logan. “We have plenty of water and can easily last another day or two without food but it would be foolish to overtax you without sustenance. You stay on the boat and do your thinking. Mayhap you will think of a better way.”

Autumn pursed her lips in thought for a few moments. “Aye,” she said after a while. “The logic is clear. I venture ‘tis only my vanity again.”

“Good,” said Logan. “You stay up here and tell me if I need to change direction. I cannot see down there.”

* * *

Astauand was close to its zenith when Logan noticed a change. He had been happily lying in the water, gently moving his feet up and down, his eyes closed and thoughts a long way distant when he noticed that he was no longer pushing the boat. He reached back with an arm and felt its smooth surface a little ahead of him and kicked a little harder to catch up before settling back into his old rhythm. It didn’t last long. Only a few splashes later he realised the boat was gone again.

He rolled over in the water and grabbed the back of the boat.

“Do you see anything, Autumn?” he called.

Autumn was sitting cross-legged at the front of the boat repairing a small tear in her malu.

“We are getting close to a beach,” she said, turning. “We are still going sideways but the shore gets closer all the time. How goes it with you?”

“Tis strange,” said Logan, hauling himself into the boat. “I am going to stop and rest for a while but it seemed the boat was going away from me.”

“Really?” said Autumn. She put aside her mending and stood up to peer intently at the shore. “I was in error,” she reported after a few moments during which Logan refreshed himself with fresh water. “We are not going sideways anymore, we are heading directly for the shore.”

Logan came and stood beside her to watch for himself. “I wager we must have caught the edge of the tide,” he said, glancing around. “That is good. The wind and waves are now taking us to shore. It looks like we are heading for a long sandy beach with no trees or anything.”

“It is difficult to tell from this distance,” said Autumn. “It could be the sand rises sharply and there are trees and much else on the other side.”

“Very likely,” said Logan. He sat down with a sigh. “Ahh, 'twill be nice to get onto dry land again though, and walk about. This boat is accommodating but confining. You have not been able to do your exercises for days.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and I feel the lack. No matter, we shall be there soon enough.”

Autumn was wrong. They had, indeed, caught the edge of the tide and it did take them some way in to the shore then the tide turned and took them back out to sea. No great way but enough to tantalise and frustrate. Astauand had not long set and Its last rays still glowed when the next tide took them close enough for them both to jump over the side and wade through the surf, dragging the boat.

“Aloidia!” exclaimed Logan, dropping to his knees and kissing the wet sand. “Dry land at last!”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “’tis nice to not be moving up and down all the time,” and she jumped up and down a few times then ran along the beach for the sheer pleasure of running.

“Fiau, we have landed,” said Logan, turning to look at the boat. “You can go back to a staff again.”

“That is good,” said Fiau materialising briefly. “Some unpleasant things were attaching themselves to my bottom.”

“What things?” asked Logan but she merged back into the boat as it shrank to being a staff again, leaving four barnacles and some green stuff somewhat disorientated on the sand. Logan quickly picked them up.

“What have you found?” asked Autumn, running back.

“Dinner,” said Logan. “Not much but better than nothing. Did you see any firewood on your run?”

“No,” said Autumn. “The sand rises as you see but behind it there seems to be nothing else but more sand. Mayhap when it is full light again we will see things further away but there seems to be little close by.”

“Then we shall have to eat them raw,” said Logan. “Shall we sleep on the beach tonight or walk for a while?”

“It would be best to stay here, I think,” said Autumn. “In the morning we can see how the land lies and decide what to do then. We are strangers in a strange land and it would not be good to wander into a swamp or some such in the dark.”

“Aye,” said Logan, picking up Autumn’s pack, “although I wager there are no swamps around here. We have not seen any clouds let alone rain.”

“I suggest we go further up the rise,” said Autumn, picking up the two staffs and the water bottle. “The incoming tide should not reach us there.”

* * *

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn Savannah. She belched and ignored the turmoil going on inside her belly. By the sound of it Logan was suffering the same affliction. His snores were intermixed with other sounds of gases escaping. Autumn belched again and decided that pure thought was beyond her reach that morning. Despite her belly the ache in her head had disappeared and her neck no longer stabbed. She stood up and bent and twisted a few times to remind her muscles they still existed and ran along the beach, jumping and somersaulting a few times. Feeling strong and tight again she started to do her exercises, kicking and chopping at imaginary foe. Then she fetched her staff and practised with that for a while. It was good to be active again. Logan was awake and watching when she returned.

“How goes it?” he asked, then belched.

“I am slower,” said Autumn, “and a little stiff in my movements but I wager that will improve with some work. How is your belly?”

“Like a storm at sea,” admitted Logan.

“Mine also,” said Autumn. “Most likely it was those raw shellfish. I keep bringing up the taste and smell of them.”

“Aye,” said Logan, belching again and waving his hand in front of his face with an expression of distaste. “Do you do more than belch?”

“No,” said Autumn. “Do you?”

“Aye,” said Logan sadly. “I have the running squirts as well.”

“Great joy,” said Autumn, curling her lip. “Mayhap I have that to look forward to as well.”

“This is a benefit of malus,” said Logan. “They are easy to pull up when the need arises. How is your neck?”

“It feels good,” said Autumn. “It hurts, of course, that is only to be expected, but it is a good hurt, not one foretelling badness.”

“That is good,” said Logan. “Have you been to the top of the rise?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “It is not an encouraging sight.”

“No,” said Logan. “There seems to be nothing but sand in all directions save back out to sea.”

“There are some plants,” said Autumn. “I have not looked at them closely for I felt in need of exercise but from where I was they looked scrubby and stunted. I wager there be little around here that we can eat or use for healing.”

“I was hoping you had seen something I had not,” said Logan. “A flour mill or cheesery perhaps. Ohhhh, here we go again. A moment.”

He jumped to his feet and disappeared over the top of the sand dune, pulling up his malu as he ran. Autumn waited patiently then walked up the sand dune to join him when he reappeared.

“At least we have plenty of water for drinking and washing,” she said, handing him the water bottle.

“Aye,” said Logan. “Tis a blessing and no mistake. I wager there be no fresh water anywhere near here. I find it encouraging.”

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“I would say Mother Midcarn saw us in this place and gave us water to survive,” said Logan, “and not to aid us in some desperate struggle against a fearsome foe. That be a blessing as far as I am concerned.”

“You are forgetting the necklaces,” said Autumn. “Who knows what foe they may aid us against.”

“Sploop,” said Logan, his face falling. “I had forgotten them.”

“No matter,” said Autumn. She belched loudly again then surveyed the vista ahead. “We have endless sand to the horizon on all sides and the sea behind. Which way shall we go?”

Chapter Six

“I wager Astauand is no hotter than it has been these days past,” said Logan, feeling the sharp bite of its rays on his shoulders, “but we have not the cooling sea nor the breeze. What say you we find some shade and sit until it is cooler?”

“Show me a tree and I will gladly sit under it,” said Autumn, fanning her face with her hand.

“Astauand is near its peak and a little behind us,” said Logan. “I venture if we climb to the top of this dune there will be a little shade the other side.”

“You could be right,” said Autumn. “I confess I am a little confused about which way to go. We started out heading East and North and following the coast but if Astauand is behind us then we are heading North and West instead. I do not know how we changed direction.”

“Mayhap it was when we went inland to investigate that patch of green,” said Logan. “If we had followed our tracks back we would have returned to the sea. We must have taken the wrong direction from there.”

“I dare say it does not matter,” said Autumn. “This sand must end sooner or later and then we will find more to eat than a few leaves. At least they cured us of the belly aches. Come on, let us see what is the other side of this dune.”

She started to climb and Logan followed, their feet slipping in the sand and making it difficult. The other side was steeper and afforded a little shade part way down. Enough to lie in at any rate.

“Look,” said Autumn, lying on her side with her head towards Logan's. She drew a line in the sand with her finger. “If that is the shore which went more or less East to West and this side is the sea,” and she scratched some wiggles to mark the water, “then we must be somewhere this side,” and she poked a hole to mark where they might be.

“Obviously,” said Logan squinting at the sketch a hand’s breadth from his nose. “If we were the other side we would be in the sea.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Which means the sea is to the North therefore to return to the sea we must head North and so we must keep Astauand behind us. Astauand rises in the East, goes to the South and falls in the West.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “although Astauand seems to be rising higher than it used to.”

“Mayhap it be all this sand,” said Autumn. “Back in our land and on Zuit there were many trees and things looked different.”

“So shall we bide here a while in the shade then head full North or keep heading North and East?” asked Logan.

“I see little point in going full North,” said Autumn. “Most likely we will just end up back around the place we landed. If we go North and East we will at least be further along the coast. Far off to the East there looked to be the edge of the bay and mayhap there is a fishing village along there.”

“I never thought I would say this,” said Logan rolling over and lying on his back, one arm out to stop him rolling down the side of the dune, “but ’twould be nice to see the sea again. Beaches be all very nice but when there is only beach and nothing else it gets a little tedious.”

“I grew up on the savannah,” said Autumn. “It was much like this only grass. Waist high grass everywhere you looked and little else, except there were no dunes like these. It was all flat.”

“No wonder you argued philosophy all day,” said Logan. “Why do you suppose there are all these dunes? Was this once under the sea and the waves left their imprint in the sand?”

“I wager it is the wind,” said Autumn. “This sand is very dry and light enough to be carried on the wind, look,” and she tossed a handful of sand into the air. The breeze carried the sand a short way down the

side of the dune. "Mayhap as the wind blows it carries the sand and builds the dunes."

"Then why is there not one huge dune?" asked Logan. "Why are there a lot of smaller ones and why do they all seem to lie in the same direction?"

"A good question," said Autumn. "I have no answer. Mayhap in times past Aloidia farmed this land and ploughed deep furrows that turned to sand when It left."

"So you be saying this land is cursed by Aloidia?" asked Logan.

"No," said Autumn. "It was just an idle thought. This land looks a little like a ploughed field, that is all."

* * *

It was late in the afternoon when they came down the side of yet another sand dune and found strange tracks. They followed the valley between this dune and the next and the tracks seemed to stretch in both directions.

"What do you make of these?" asked Logan, scratching his head. "These look like people, four I would say, but the rest?"

"Tis difficult to say," said Autumn, following the trail for a short way. "There are several and they would seem to be following one behind the other so the sand is all messed but there are a few prints that are to the side. There be one, and there be another. They are definitely not horses nor anything with claws. They look more like cows or deer."

"Aye," said Logan, squatting down to look at one print more closely. "But they be big footprints for deer and cows have the two parts separate. See? The two parts here are joined most of the way. It looks like something with a foot broad as it is long and two toes. I know no creature like that."

"Mayhap it is a cow with a deformed foot," said Autumn wandering

further along the trail. “No, two deformed feet. This one has a toe curving slightly to the other side.”

“This one is different again,” said Logan pointing to another. “One toe is slightly longer than the other. Do you suppose four people have driven a herd of deformed cattle along here?”

“These are not cattle,” said Autumn. “There are some droppings here. They be large deer I reckon.”

“Oh yes,” said Logan, “although deer droppings are more like pointy eggs. These are more rounded and larger, more like potatoes.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, frowning, “but this makes no sense. The feet and dung say the deer is huge and the messing of the tracks say there be several of them but why are there so few droppings? Several big deer should produce a lot more droppings than this little amount.”

“Mayhap they be starving,” said Logan. “After all, there is not much in the way of food around here.”

“Which begs another question,” said Autumn. “Why would people be herding deer with deformed feet in a place where there is no food?”

“Well, they have definitely come from somewhere,” said Logan, “and are heading somewhere. Shall we follow them?”

“There is no sign of wavering,” said Autumn looking along the trail. “I wager these people know where they are going.”

“Should we go the same way?” asked Logan, “or back to where they came from?”

“If they are starving I wager where they are from is a long way off,” said Autumn. “More likely where they are going is closer.”

“We are making an assumption here,” said Logan, looking the way the tracks were heading. “Mayhap there be no food up ahead either and they are being herded to be used for food when the people run out.”

“True,” said Autumn. “And that would suggest that sooner or later there will be deer meat to eat.”

“If they are willing to share,” said Logan.

“There is that,” said Autumn. “And it occurs to me there is another assumption we are making. The people may not be with the deer. They might be following their tracks as well. If it rains little here then there is no way of telling how old any of these prints are.”

“No, they are together,” said Logan going on a little further. “There is a human footprint here with a deer's on top of it and back there I saw a deer's with a human's on top.”

“It could be that the people are following the deer that are following other people,” said Autumn, “which is getting rather silly.”

“We shall never know,” said Logan, “unless we catch up with them and find out.”

“They seem to be heading East,” said Autumn, “Going North seems to have led us nowhere so we might as well go East for a time. If nothing else these people might be able to tell us what direction to head.”

* * *

“What say you we stop here for the night?” asked Autumn. “There is no sign of catching up with these people.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “My belly has given up telling me it needs food.”

“I expect we will catch up with them tomorrow,” said Autumn, setting down her pack and sitting on the sand, “assuming these tracks are not days old. Herding animals is slower than walking and they will need attending to when they make camp and before they set off again. When it is dark I will climb to the top of the dune and see if I can see any sign of a fire.”

“That is good thinking,” said Logan. “I wonder if it ever rains here? I have not seen a cloud for some days.”

"I expect not," said Autumn, letting some of the dry sand dribble between her fingers. "Although there was a dew before you woke this morning. It vanished quickly."

Logan lay back on the sand and gazed at the clear sky for a while. Autumn gently massaged her neck then drank some water.

"Water?" she asked, holding out the bottle.

"Aye, thank you," said Logan sitting up and reaching for it. Then he froze. "Do not move," he whispered.

Autumn went rigid and slowly started to edge her foot underneath her, readying for instant movement.

"What is it?" she mouthed, her senses alert and her eyes on Logan.

"A lobster," whispered Logan, his eyes focused behind her and to her left. "Coming down the side of the dune. Stay still."

Autumn relaxed and slowly put down the water bottle as Logan slowly got to his feet and very cautiously edged towards the lobster. Then he pounced.

"Aha! Gotcha," he cried and proudly held up what could, charitably, be called a funny looking lobster.

"Are you sure that is a lobster?" asked Autumn dubiously. "Why would a lobster be where there is no water?"

"I have no idea," said Logan cheerfully. "But it will give us something to chew and I wager where there is one there will be others."

He waved the lobster at Autumn and its two large claws snapped angrily at her. He laughed then suddenly dropped it and clutched his hand.

"Owwww," he said, "the cursed creature stung me."

"Lobsters do not sting," said Autumn watching the creature as it

scurried away, its curved jointed tail arched angrily over its back. "Show me."

Logan took his hand away from his mouth and held it out for Autumn to look at.

"Where did it sting?" she asked, flattening his hand in hers.

"There," said Logan pointing to a small pink area on the ball of his thumb. "It stings a lot."

"I do not know if such creatures are poisonous or not," said Autumn, examining the patch. "It did look a little like a lobster but I have never heard of a lobster sting. I think a swelling is coming up."

Logan pulled back his hand and examined it closely, poking the tiny swelling with his finger.

"Aye, it is," he said, "and I venture the stinging part is getting bigger as well."

"That could be because you are looking at it," said Autumn. "But on the other hand it could be that the poison is already beginning to spread."

"Am I going to die?" asked Logan, looking worriedly at her.

"Assuredly," said Autumn, undoing the thong around her pack. "All living things die."

"You know what I mean," growled Logan looking anxiously at his forearm. He fancied that too was beginning to swell up.

Autumn pulled her small knife out of her pack and took hold of Logan's hand.

"Owww," he said, pursing his lips. "My thumb hurts." Then he saw the knife. "What is that for?" he asked suspiciously.

"If the lobster is not poisonous then there is no harm done," said

Autumn, “save perhaps a day or two of soreness. But if it is then you may not live to see the dawn.”

“Well, mayhap,” said Logan, watching the knife. “But what is the knife for?”

“I am going to cut your hand and suck out the poison,” said Autumn calmly.

“But there may not be any,” said Logan snatching his hand away again.

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “in which case you will have a small cut on your hand which will heal soon enough. But if there is poison and I do not suck it out you may die.”

“May,” said Logan, cupping his injured hand protectively with the other one. “But may not as well.”

“True,” said Autumn. “You may just lose the use of your arm or have to have it cut off entirely. We do not know what this creature is nor what its effects are but if you are happy to wait and see 'tis your choice. I will not force you although it does not sit well with me.”

“But,” said Logan, “but ... oh Voqev!”

He held out his hand and shut his eyes tightly.

“Be brave,” said Autumn, taking it gently in her own hand.

“Will it hurt?” asked Logan, turning his head away.

“No more than a feather in the night,” said Autumn, holding the blade of her knife directly over the now quite noticeable swelling. “Ready?”

Her hand gripped his very tightly very suddenly and she slit the swelling before Logan had time to say “yes”, or “no”. Her mouth was on his hand an instant before his yell split the air.

“You said it would not hurt!” he cried trying to jerk his hand away. It

was as though his hand was embedded in rock and did not move the tiniest bit.

"I may have been mistaken," said Autumn, spitting out a generous amount of blood and saliva. She bent to the task again three more times and Logan gritted his teeth and tried not to whimper.

"I hope that is enough," she said, releasing his hand.

"Enough?" said Logan, waving his hand agitatedly in the air. "I wager you have emptied my entire arm of blood!"

"Oh be quiet, Logan Baby," said Autumn. "Show me your hand."

"Did you call me a baby?" said Logan, scowling and giving her his hand back.

"'Twas a term of affection," said Autumn, studying his hand. The cut was quite deep, as it needed to be, but the swelling seemed to have got a little larger. The vein in his wrist looked bigger as well. She grasped his other hand and looked at it for comparison. The vein was definitely thicker and darker. She put her thumb over the cut to stop the bleeding.

"How does it feel?" she asked.

"'Tis numb," said Logan sadly. "I cannot feel the cut nor your thumb on it."

"Ahh, this is not good," said Autumn. "Hold your thumb here."

Logan did as he was bid and she used the knife to tear a strip off the bottom of her malu and bound his hand. Then she sat back on her heels and regarded him intently. Logan sat on the sand, nursing his hand with the other and trying to look brave. His forearm was beginning to throb.

"I do not know what this creature was," said Autumn after a while, "and even if I did I have no herbs or potions. How does it feel now?"

“My forearm is throbbing,” said Logan.

“Tis possible that is because of the cutting,” she said. “I see before us only two choices.”

“What are they?” asked Logan.

“We stay here and wait,” said Autumn. “Mayhap your arm will stop throbbing and the numbness go.”

“And mayhap it will get worse,” said Logan glumly. Some blood had seeped through the cloth and he couldn't seem to take his eyes off it. “Or?”

“Or we press on,” said Autumn. “I venture these people ahead of us will likely know what the creature was and what the effects of its sting are. They may also have a cure with them if the effects are bad.”

“So the choice is stay here and die or move on and likely die,” said Logan scowling.

“Your outlook on life appears to remain unchanged,” said Autumn. “It could be the choice is stay here and recover or move on and recover.”

“Which do you think?” said Logan.

“How does your arm feel now?” asked Autumn.

“The numbness is on my wrist,” he said, pinching it, “and the throbbing is up to my elbow.”

“Then we move on,” said Autumn. “It has been several minutes and the effects should not be spreading any more. I venture I did not suck out enough of whatever went in you in time.”

“You did what you could,” said Logan, getting to his feet. “Best we be moving on while I still can. 'Tis a crying shame it is not getting any cooler though. I wager it is hotter than ever.”

Autumn raised her eyebrow but said nothing. Astauand had set and

the air was definitely a little cooler than it had been, especially with the gentle breeze.

“Come,” she said, taking her pack, both staffs, the water bottle and Logan's elbow. “Let us get going. These people cannot be too far ahead.”

Chapter Seven

There was a stillness among the dunes as darkness fell. There was the faint sound of the breeze and the fainter sound of shifting sands but no rustling of trees or calling of night birds. There was little to hear save their footsteps, muffled and, from Logan at least, perhaps a trifle uncertain. Plakill would not rise for some time yet and Plifal not until near dawn and the scattering of stars lit the overarching sky but dimly. Not enough to follow the tracks so Autumn called on Fiau to light their way. She was reluctant to do this as it marked their presence and their passage but needs must. If the light brought others this could be a benefit and it seemed unlikely any large predators, save humans, would travel in this desolate land.

Logan walked on, his mind lost in the pain of his arm. It was spreading down his side and he wedged his injured hand in the waist of his malu to reduce its movement. His other hand supported the elbow, holding it pressed tight against the side of his belly. Much of the time his eyes were closed. There was little to see beyond the flame of Fiau and that dancing light was a distraction, an irritation. It was much easier to simply forget what was around and stumble on, guided by Autumn's touches or murmured commands when he lost direction. And stumble he did. Infrequently at first but more often as the night wore on. His feet began to drag in the sand and snagged on any unevenness and there were many unevennesses. Whoever and whatever had left the trail had churned up the sand. Not enough to hinder someone walking tall but sufficient to catch at the shuffling feet of one moving blind and lost in misery.

"We will stop here," said Autumn quietly after an unknown time. She gently caught his shoulder to stop him and pushed Fiau into the sand.

"Have we found them?" asked Logan, his eyes opening briefly.

"Nay," said Autumn, "but you need to rest a while and have water. Sit."

She helped him sit down and she could feel the quivering of his muscles under his skin.

“Drink,” she said, passing him the water bottle.

He groped for it and fumbled with the cork so she helped him drink then felt his forehead. It was hot. She tipped some water into her cupped hand and let it run over his head and face.

“That is nice, thank you,” he whispered so she did it again.

“Where does it hurt now?” she asked.

“My arm burns,” said Logan, slumped untidily on the sand. “All across my chest and down to my hips is sore and this arm is a mass of tingles.”

“Not good,” thought Autumn although she did not say that. Instead she said “look at me.”

Wearily Logan turned his face towards her voice and forced his eyes open. In the light of Fiau she could see his pupils were wide and he seemed to be looking into the distance.

“Can you see my finger?” she asked, holding a finger in front of his eyes.

“Aye,” he said and closed his eyes again.

“Look at my finger,” said Autumn firmly. His eyes didn’t open so she tapped him on the nose. “Look at my finger.”

He opened his eyes again and she slowly moved her finger in front of his face. His eyes tracked the movement but they were jerky and seemed to be going in and out of focus.

“Can I sleep now?” he asked plaintively.

“No,” said Autumn, afraid that if he slept he might not wake up again. “We have to walk some more. Can you do that?”

“If I must,” said Logan, his voice empty of emotion.

Autumn waited a few moments but he made no movement to get up again.

“Come,” she said, putting her hand under his better arm, “stand up.”

“In a minute,” he said.

“Now,” said Autumn firmly.

He still made no attempt to rise so she went behind him and pulled him to his feet. He gasped as his bad hand fell out of his malu but stayed upright. She lifted his hand to tuck it back inside the malu and paused. Even through the clumsy bandage she could feel his entire hand was now swollen so she tipped Fiau over to look more closely at his finger tips. They were dark and noticeably larger than usual. She gently twisted his hand to look at the inside of his forearm and he groaned. The veins running up his forearm were distended.

“Tis definitely a poison,” she thought, tucking his hand inside his waistband. “What kind I do not know but it is not fast acting which is good.”

“Come on, Logan the Brave,” she said as cheerfully as she could. “I be certain we will find these folk very soon.”

“Yes,” said Logan not opening his eyes. He stumbled forward and fell to his knees. He would have fallen further but Autumn caught him.

“My legs ...,” he muttered. “I ... oh Sploop, I am going to be sick.”

He brought up all the water he had drunk then slumped back on the ground.

“My head spins,” he said, putting his other hand to his temple. “Make it stop spinning, please, Autumn.”

“Can you walk?” asked Autumn, helping him to a sitting position.

“Yes,” said Logan forcing his voice to be clear and firm although it didn't come out quite that way. “Just let me get up.”

He made himself get to his feet and staggered a few paces before falling to his knees again.

“Give me a moment,” he muttered. “I just need to ...”

“Mizule,” said Autumn watching him, her face etched with worry. “This is no good. Come on, stand up.”

She helped him to his feet and he stood there swaying.

“Stay,” she commanded, then picked up the water bottle. She stuffed it back inside her pack and put the pack over her shoulder then bent to pick up her staff. Then she hoisted Logan over her shoulders.

“This may be uncomfortable,” she said, gripping Fiau with her free hand, “but I venture it will be quicker.”

She took a deep breath and started to walk.

* * *

In due course Plakill rose and, a while before the dawn, Plifal joined It in the sky. Their combined light was enough to see the tracks and Autumn was able to douse the light from Fiau. It made it easier to hold the staff and, with one staff in each hand, she trudged onwards. She concentrated her mind on keeping her breathing deep and steady and away from any negative thoughts about not finding the people who had left the tracks or how Logan's ills may develop. Such thoughts were not constructive. As long as the people lay ahead and Logan made sounds there was still hope. At dawn she rested and meditated for a short time to refocus her mind then pressed on with increased hope. Logan had not improved but he had not significantly worsened beyond indistinct mutterings and twice calling out to his mother.

It was not until Astauand was high in the sky, almost at its peak, that Autumn began to have doubts.

The tracks had run in the valley between the dunes all this time then, unexpectedly and for no readily apparent reason, had veered to the

side and ascended the dune. She had been so focused on walking and ignoring her muscles that she had gone twenty or thirty paces before realising and had had to break her rhythm to turn and retrace her steps. When she had seen the tracks lead up the dune she had stopped to rest, laying Logan as gently as she could on the sand.

“Drink some water,” she had said holding the water bottle to his lips.

He had groaned but opened his mouth and let her tip in some water. He'd swallowed and she had fed him some more. He was wreathed in sweat and his face radiated heat. She had checked his arm and had been pleased to find that although the swelling had encompassed his wrist it had gone no further. A quick check of the rest of his body had assured her that there were no swellings elsewhere, which had been a good sign.

“Mayhap it has completed its course and will soon start to abate,” she had muttered to herself before hoisting him back onto her shoulders and beginning the ascent of the dune. It had been far less easy than it was to carry him along the flat at the bottom of the dune. The doubts had begun when she reached the top.

Far off in the distance was a patch of green. She stopped and stared when she noticed it.

“Surely not,” she said out loud.

“Urghh?” said Logan draped across her shoulders. He did not sound overly inquisitive and was most likely only responding to the sound of her voice.

“Tis nothing,” said Autumn, staring at the patch of green.

Then she started down the side of the dune, following the tracks.

“I am losing my mind,” she thought to herself. “If this be the end of the sand then there would be great swathes of green in the distance, not a tiny patch. I am imagining it.”

The patch preyed on her mind, however, as she followed the tracks

along the next valley and she convinced herself she had imagined the green. When she breasted the top of the next dune and saw the patch again she stared at it in disbelief.

"Tis the heat," she said. "My mind is playing tricks on me."

Logan did not respond this time so she laid him on the sand and gave him more water. He seemed to be asleep.

"Or is he unconscious?" she asked herself, looking down at his face. "Oh Vallume, I am too tired to think properly."

The swelling seemed no bigger, but no smaller either, and his face still radiated heat and his hair was soaked with sweat. She wiped his face with the torn hem of her malu and splashed water on him in the hope it would cool him a little. His face twitched but his eyes did not open. Then she made herself drink extra water to try to counteract the effects of the sun before sitting back to try to calm her mind. It was difficult. Her mind was lifted by the idea that ahead lay a patch of life, perhaps even people as the tracks seemed to be heading towards it and that idea battled her logic which could not accept that there could be a patch of growing things here. A tiny patch of green in an endless sea of sand. It made no sense.

"It cannot be so," she muttered, gazing at the patch from the top of the dune. "'Tis an illusion. 'Tis the heat and all this forsaken sand and, aye, worry about Logan. I must be strong for him. I must not let this illusion get the better of me."

She hoisted Logan back onto her shoulders again and denied the green. She trudged along in the sand keeping fully focused on following the tracks. As she climbed and descended more dunes, endless dunes and endless sand, she refused to look at the green patch. Refused to let her mind be controlled by falseness until she topped yet another dune and knew it was undeniably an illusion. With Astauand half way down its descent into night she saw trees, she saw plants, she saw people. And she saw fantastic, misshapen beasts and water and the whole shimmered and wavered. A cool green fantasy amidst the hot golden-brown reality.

“Hah! I was right,” she said aloud, exulting, pleased she had seen through the falsity of her own mind. “’Tis proof of the power of rational thought. Logan is real, this sand is real and these tracks are real. Ignore what is not there.”

She continued to ignore the fantasy until the man got up from where he was sitting with his back to the illusory tree.

“Svagata ajani vyakti, sum tamane sahayani jarura che?” he said.

“You are an illusion,” said Autumn fiercely, standing tall with Logan draped over her shoulders. “Begone!”

She stepped forward and tripped over a scrubby plant on the edge of the greenery and fell sprawling. Logan landed on his bad arm and screamed. Three other men appeared as the first ran over. They joined him and between them they picked up Autumn and Logan and carried them to the edge of the lake and laid them in the shade of some large palm trees. Logan was moaning and clutching his arm. Autumn had fainted.

* * *

“What is happening?” demanded Autumn a short while later. “Who are you? Where is Logan?”

“Santithi sui jao,” said the man kneeling beside her. “Tame behosa thai gaya.”

He laid a large soaking wet cloth over Autumn and she realised her malu had been removed. Instantly she rolled to one side, away from the man and leapt to her feet. Except that she didn't. She rolled slowly and the leap didn't work and she fell on her side.

“Santa thao,” said the man, gently pulling her back.

Bewildered, Autumn allowed herself to be laid back where she had been. This man was clearly trying to help and he had a kind face.

“Who are you?” she asked, relaxing slightly under the cool dampness

of the wet cloth in the shade.

“Te tyam ja che,” said the man, waving towards another tree.

Autumn looked over and saw Logan lying under the tree. There was a man kneeling beside him and another was standing watching.

“Logan!” cried Autumn, leaping up again.

This time was more successful although still fairly slow and the wet cloth hampered her as she hurried over.

“A stri pagala che!” said her man, slowly wandering after her.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, pushing aside the standing man and focusing her attention on the one kneeling. “Leave him alone!”

“Sum tene bita?” asked the man, pointing to the swelling on Logan's hand. He had removed the bandage and held Logan's hand in his.

“What are you saying?” demanded Autumn. “I do not understand you!”

“He asked what bit me,” said Logan, in a weak voice. His eyes flicked open briefly and he smiled at Autumn.

“How do you know what he said?” asked Autumn, surprised.

“Why would I not?” muttered Logan, his face frowning even though his eyes were closed. “Te lobastara hato.”

The man laughed. “Mane lage che ke teno artha vinchi che,” he said. “Te kayo ranga hato?”

“I do not remember,” muttered Logan. “Do you, Autumn?”

“Remember what?” asked Autumn, puzzled.

Another man appeared with two cups of a steaming pale brown liquid.

“What colour it was,” muttered Logan.

“I do not understand you either,” said Autumn.

The man gave one cup to the man kneeling and the other to the man who had been helping Autumn. The kneeling man put his on the sand beside him and the man who had brought them walked away again.

“Oh, leave me be,” muttered Logan irritably. “He said it was a scorpion that bit me not a lobster and wants to know what colour it was. Why do you not talk to him and leave me alone?”

“What is a scorpion?” asked Autumn.

“Sploop, I know not,” muttered Logan, opening his eyes again. They were bloodshot and dark ringed.

“It was dark pink,” said Autumn, “if you be talking about the lobster.”

“Sum?” asked the man frowning.

“Tene kahyum ke te ghero gulabi ranga hatu,” said Logan tiredly closing his eyes again. “I want to sleep. Autumn, please make them let me sleep.”

The man scowled and reached inside a large leather bag beside him. He rummaged through it searching for something then pulled out a small, wooden box. He opened it and tipped a generous amount of a fine brown powder into the cup and stirred it with his finger. Then he tried to make Logan drink it but Autumn's hand gripped his arm very tightly.

“What is that?” she demanded.

“Te tene vadhu sarum thavamam madada karase,” said the man obviously understanding Autumn's concern.

“What?” said Autumn, not releasing her grip.

“He said it will make me feel better,” said Logan weakly. “Why do you

not understand? Why won't you all just let me die and get some peace?"

Slowly it dawned on Autumn that she had found the people she had been looking for and that they might actually be able to help Logan. She let go of the man's hand and he nodded and smiled and started to feed the liquid to Logan.

"Ugh!" said Logan, spitting it out.

The man laughed and gave him some more. The man who had been with Autumn touched her shoulder.

"Tene tena jadu kama karava do," he said gently and beckoned her away. "Avo, avo."

Autumn allowed him to entice her away although she kept a close eye on Logan. The man offered her the drink and she took it absently. The man beside Logan managed to get most of the drink inside him and pulled out a pot of something. He started to massage whatever it was into Logan's hand.

"Pivo," said the man beside her, miming drinking, "pivo."

She looked at him and saw no malice in his eyes so she drank. The liquid was hot and sweet yet bitter and she felt some strength start to come back to her body.

"E sarum che," said the man, smiling. "Tamaro mitra svastha thai jase. Thoḍi sleepngha lo ane tame pana."

"I have no idea what you are saying," said Autumn.

The man put his hands together and laid his cheek on them, miming sleep. Then he smiled again and took Autumn's empty cup.

"Sleep?" said Autumn. "No. I will not sleep until I know Logan is safe."

The man who had brought the drinks returned carrying a large piece

of bread with dark flecks in it and gave it to her.

“Thank you,” she said automatically and he nodded and took another over to the man kneeling beside Logan. He tore off a small piece and put it in Logan's mouth. Autumn tensed, ready to launch herself again then she saw Logan start chewing and a smile come over his face so she relaxed again and unthinkingly broke off a piece of hers and ate it.

“’Tis bread,” she said in surprise. “Ohh, Logan will be so happy!”

Chapter Eight

Autumn woke with a start. It was a little before dawn and there were strange noises. Groans and snorts and the sounds of feet on packed sand. She lay under the tree listening then, when she heard a distant voice, she sat up. To her surprise she was under a tree, its outline silhouetted in Plifal's light, beside a pond. The surface of the pond glimmered and shimmered. The sounds seemed to be coming from the other side of the pond.

"Ahh, you are awake," came Logan's quiet voice from nearby.

She twisted and saw an outline of someone sitting against the tree.

"Is that you, Logan?" she asked quietly.

"Aye," said Logan. "You have slept long but you needed it. How are you?"

"I feel well," said Autumn, "but confused. I do not know where we are but that can wait. How are you? How is your arm?"

"I still feel very weak," said Logan shifting over to sit beside her. "But most of my pains are gone. Only my hand and wrist pain me now."

"Ahh, that is good," said Autumn. "And the swelling?"

"It seems to be going down," he said holding out his hand.

Autumn took it and examined it as best she could in the pre-dawn light. "'Tis difficult to see," she said, "but it feels smaller."

"Aye," said Logan, "and I can bend it now too. Oh, I nearly forgot, Dhru brought you some shayi. It is probably cold by now but you will be thirsty no doubt."

He leaned over and picked up a cup and passed it to Autumn.

"Thank you," said Autumn. The cup felt strange in her hand. "Who is Dhru?"

“He is the man who brought the shayi,” said Logan with a half laugh. “Beyond that I do not know although I fancy he has some healing skills for he poked and prodded me and said I was well enough.”

“I see,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “What is shayi?” She became aware that the cloth loosely covering her was coarse and itchy and, as an inevitable deduction of being itchy, she clearly could not have her malu on underneath. She slipped her hand under the cloth to check. “And where is my malu?”

“I do not know,” said Logan, “but the shayi, whatever it is, is quite nice and thirst quenching. My malu is gone as well and this other thing is very itchy.”

“There are many questions here,” said Autumn, feeling the warmth of the cup in her hand, “too many. Where is this Dhru now?”

“He went the other side of the water,” said Logan. “I have been sitting here watching for a while, waiting for you. There seem to be several people and a lot of animals over there.”

“I heard their noises,” said Autumn, twisting the other way to look. “I wonder what they are doing? 'Twould seem they have no bad intent else we would not be alive and being fed this shayi.”

“There is some bread and fruit if you want some,” said Logan. “I would have said but I know you do not like to eat before your meditating and exercising.”

“Ahh, yes, I will have some,” said Autumn. “I have not eaten for several days. You have eaten?”

“Yes, I had some just now,” said Logan, pulling over a cloth which had a piece of bread and a few small fruits. “Dhru said not to eat much and let the medicine do its work.”

“This Dhru seems to say a lot for a stranger,” said Autumn, picking up the bread. “Still, he and his companions have given us aid at a time of great difficulty and I would like to thank him.”

She sipped her shayi and frowned. "I have tasted this before," she said, "but I do not remember where or when. Hmm." She had another sip then broke off a piece of bread and put it in her mouth. "This, too, I have tasted before. It tastes of bread but has an unusual flavour to it. How strange."

"I wager they gave us some when they found us," said Logan. "My head is confused on that but I have a memory of falling from a height and people talking."

"It comes back to me now you say that," said Autumn thoughtfully. "I have no memory of getting here, save walking a long way, but I seem to remember there were several men and they attended to you. There was some talk of what colour lobsters were for some reason."

"I do not remember that," said Logan, "but I do remember wondering why you did not understand what was being said. It was like you and they were talking but all the words had to go through me. Most likely I was dreaming. My head went very funny after that lobster bit me. Ahh, a lobster. Do you suppose they wanted to know the colour of the lobster that bit me?"

"Mayhap there be different coloured lobsters in these parts," said Autumn, "and some be poisonous, but now you speak of it I am now remembering that they said words I did not understand but that you did understand and you spoke strange words as well. 'Twas like another tongue."

"You mean the Old Tongue?" asked Logan. "I cannot speak the Old Tongue."

"No," said Autumn. "If it were the Old Tongue I would have understood. They were words I had never heard before."

"It must have been a dream," said Logan, picking up a piece of fruit. "How is it possible I know words that you do not?"

"I venture we will find out more shortly," said Autumn, finishing her shayi. "'Twould seem Dhru is coming to talk with us again."

“Where?” asked Logan, twisting. “Ahh, that is not Dhru. He be much younger than this one.”

“Tamane namaskara,” said the man, a smile on his dark weather-beaten face. He squatted down on the sand beside them. “Tame aje savare mrtiyuni najika ocha joi rahya cho. Tame thodi vadhu ca mango cho?”

Logan waited a few moments as Autumn usually did the talking when they met strangers but she did not seem to want to reply.

“Ha, apane ghana sara chie,” he said when the silence started to grow. He smiled at the man. “Mane thodi vadhu ca gamase,” then turned to Autumn. “Would you, Autumn?”

Autumn stared at them in astonishment. After a couple of heartbeats Logan also looked faintly puzzled.

“Would you like some more shayi?” he asked. “He is offering us some.”

“Oh, yes, please,” said Autumn hurriedly.

The man looked at her expectantly, also with a faintly puzzled expression. Autumn thought for a moment then held out her cup with a beaming smile. The man's face cleared and he took her cup and Logan's.

“Hum pacha avisa tyara vata karisum,” he said and stood up.

“Ame te mate agala juo,” said Logan wondering why Autumn was not speaking. The man strode away, his long white robe fluttering behind him.

“What did he say?” asked Autumn.

“Are you unwell?” asked Logan. “Are you loosing your hearing?”

“I hear you clearly, Logan,” said Autumn, “just as I heard that man but he said words I did not understand.”

“How did you not understand?” asked Logan, frowning in puzzlement. “He was talking perfectly normally.”

“What did he say?” asked Autumn.

“He said we looked a lot better and did we want some more shayi,” said Logan. “Oh, and then he said he would be back to talk to us.”

“And what did you say to him?” asked Autumn, looking at Logan intently.

“I said we were well,” said Logan. “Did you not hear me?”

“Oh I heard you,” said Autumn, “but that is not what you said.”

“Pah,” said Logan. “What do you think I said?”

“A meaty mat haggle duo, or some such,” said Autumn. “It made no sense to me.”

“Why would I say nonsense like that?” asked Logan, his piece of fruit still uneaten in his hand.

“That is what puzzles me,” said Autumn, resting her chin on her hand thoughtfully. “It would seem that this man speaks in a different tongue to us, which is not unexpected now I think on it, as we are in a different land. But how is it that you can speak his language? I did not know you had been to Neander before.”

“I do not understand,” said Logan, staring at her. “He was speaking the same as me and you.”

Autumn stared at him thoughtfully and Logan started to feel uncomfortable.

“What?” he said, perhaps a little aggressively.

“If you could speak another tongue, you would not hide that from me, would you?” asked Autumn.

“Sploop no,” said Logan, “but what other tongue are you talking of? There is only the Old Tongue and I cannot speak that.”

“Noxu has told me that the people in far off lands speak in other tongues,” said Autumn. “I had forgotten as, truly, because of all our travels I had not thought that Neander might be such a far off land. It seemed only a boat distance away, but that is beside the point. The point is, how is it that you understand him and he understands you? Surely it cannot be the lobster?”

“What does the lobster have to do with this?” asked Logan, thoroughly confused.

“Tis a difference between us,” said Autumn. “Assuming you did not know this tongue before we met, I am thinking of ways in which we are different. The lobster sting is one such and it happened here in this land.”

“You think the lobster bite taught me to speak in another tongue?” asked Logan. “That is surely absurd. How could a lobster do such a thing?”

“It could if it be a magical lobster,” said Autumn, then she frowned again.

“He is coming back,” said Logan. “I suppose you want me to do the talking?”

“It would seem wise,” said Autumn, reaching for her pack which lay beside the tree trunk. “You would seem to be the only one who understands us both.”

“Marum nama Inyanasi,” said the man, handing them the cups of shayi. “Have ame vata karisum.”

He sat down beside them and made himself comfortable. Autumn smiled a greeting and undid the thong around her pack.

“Hum chum Logan,” said Logan, “ane a che Autumn.”

“A thousand blessings ...,” said Inyanasi as Autumn touched her necklace. Startled at understanding what he had said she let go of it again. “... tame ane tamara kutumba para.”

“Ahh, abhara,” said Logan, “ane eka hajara blessings on you and yours.” He touched his hand to his forehead in imitation of Inyanasi.

“Well now,” thought Autumn, keeping hold of the necklace, “that is interesting.”

“We would like to thank you most humbly for your aid and hospitality,” she said, wondering if he would understand.

“The desert is a dangerous place and it is beholden on all to render aid to fellow travellers,” said Inyanasi, looking at her politely. Clearly he had.

Autumn deliberately let go of the necklace.

“Is this your pond?” she asked, careful to not point to the water.

“Mane samajatum nathi,” said Inyanasi, raising an eyebrow and turning to Logan.

“Autumn puchyum ke sum a tamaro talava che,” said Logan.

Autumn grasped the necklace again.

“Ahh, would that I had such wealth in this place,” said Inyanasi. “No, this is Bini ul Demir, an oasis in a sea of desolation. Tell me, for I am puzzled. Are you from Sassese'lte?”

“No, we are from Aferraron,” said Autumn.

Politely Inyanasi turned to look at her again and nodded then turned back to Logan.

“But her manner of headwear,” he said. “Is this not of the women of Sassese'lte?”

“I have a cut on my neck,” said Autumn. “This is a bandage, not headwear.”

“Indeed,” said Inyanasi, looking at her again with the faintest hint of irritation then he turned back to Logan. “So, you are from Aferraron. That is a land I have not yet been to. Tell me, is it the custom in Aferraron to let your women talk for you?”

“Most definitely,” said Logan with a smile, “but Autumn is not my woman, she is her own woman.”

“A most strange land indeed,” said Inyanasi, raising an eyebrow. “So she is not your era'owen?”

“No,” said Logan, “I am her travelling companion, nothing more.”

“Then where is her father?” asked Inyanasi. “Is he still out there in the desert?”

“No, we travel alone,” said Autumn.

“How ... strange,” said Inyanasi, not bothering to look at her. “A cut? I imagine it is not a minor cut to be worthy of such a bandage. Would you like Dhru to look at her neck for you?”

“Umm,” said Logan, looking at Autumn.

“No,” said Autumn.

Inyanasi raised an eyebrow at Logan again.

“No,” said Logan.

“As you wish,” said Inyanasi. “It would seem to be her neck is not severely injured for her tongue still waggles.”

Logan drew in his breath sharply and glanced at Autumn again. She smiled serenely at him.

“No matter,” said Inyanasi, not noticing. “We must move on today. No

doubt you have heard our preparations as we must be on our way before Astauand is too high. Dhru tells me that you are recovering but still unwell. Is that indeed so?"

"I am feeling much better," said Logan, "although I feel very weak and my hand still pains me."

"We head for Waaj," said Inyanasi. "You are welcome to accompany us if that fits in with your intentions."

Logan looked over at Autumn, clearly passing the decision to her. Inyanasi frowned at him.

"Autumn makes those decisions, not I," said Logan, by way of explanation.

Inyanasi stared at him then slowly turned his head to look at Autumn.

"How far is Waaj?" asked Autumn.

"It is five days to the North East," said Inyanasi.

"Is there anywhere nearer?" asked Autumn.

"Only the desert," said Inyanasi, "and that is all around."

"What is a desert?" asked Autumn.

Inyanasi stared at her in bemusement. "This is the desert," he said pointing to the sand beneath him.

"I thought you said that this was Bini ul Demir," said Autumn.

Inyanasi looked at Logan as if to say "and you leave the decisions to her?"

"We are strangers here," said Autumn, accurately interpreting his expression. "Our boat drifted to these shores. We know not where we are."

“Ahh,” said Inyanasi, “that explains much and, at the same time, very little. All this sand around us, that is the Sabon Mutum Desert, a place of great heat and desolation. It is forty days or more across although few venture to cross it and fewer still arrive the other side. This lake and the little that lives around it is the Bini ul Demir oasis. It is one of several that sustain those who travel across the desert, if they know where they are. This is the last before Waaj going East. If you are heading West it is seven days to the next oasis and more to the South. To the North lies the sea.”

“So the nearest place is Waaj?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Inyanasi, “unless you plan to end your days in the sand. If that be so then there are endless places nearby that will meet your purpose.”

“Then we will take up your offer and accept your hospitality,” said Autumn.

Inyanasi looked at Logan.

“It is a kindness,” said Logan, “and one that we greatly appreciate. There is just one small difficulty.”

“How so?” asked Inyanasi.

“I do not think I can walk for five days at the moment,” said Logan. “I can barely stand.”

“Dhru warned me of this,” said Inyanasi. “We are almost halfway to our journey's end and have used much of our provisions. There is room on our camels for you both until we find more provisions in Waaj.”

“What are camels?” asked Logan.

“Indeed you are strangers here,” said Inyanasi, taken aback. “Camels are our beasts and there is nothing better for crossing the desert.”

“Are they like horses?” asked Autumn.

“Horses are for the soft folk in the towns and cities,” said Inyanasi. “They do not survive long in the desert.”

“I think I would prefer to walk,” said Autumn.

“As you wish,” said Inyanasi, “although Dhru warns against it for another day or so, especially for a woman.”

“Why?” asked Autumn.

“You were suffering from heat exhaustion when you came upon us,” said Inyanasi. “It was a remarkable feat I confess. Not many women could carry their men in this heat. It is lucky you did not have to carry him far.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “I could not have carried Logan indefinitely.”

“A moment,” said Logan, looking thoughtful. “How far did you carry me?”

“It seemed a long time,” said Autumn, “but I wager it was not far at all. Inyanasi, is there any manner in which we can repay you for your hospitality?”

“No,” said Logan before Inyanasi could speak. “This does not sound right. I was stung by the lobster at sunset and I think it was before sunset when we arrived here and I do not remember camping anywhere after the stinging.”

“It is of no consequence,” said Autumn. “What is important is that I got you here before it was too late.”

“Why do you talk of lobsters?” asked Inyanasi. “Logan was stung by a scorpion. There are no lobsters in the desert.”

“It looked like a lobster,” said Logan, “and I know not what a scorpion is.”

“Lobsters have flat, wide tails,” said Inyanasi, “and scorpions have thin tails that curve up over their backs. Their sting is at the end of

their tail.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “’Tis good to know that. Tell me, are scorpions poisonous?”

“Some are, some are not,” said Inyanasi. “You said it was a dark pink in colour.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Are they one of the poisonous ones?”

“Assuredly,” said Inyanasi. “And fairly quick to kill. Was it you who cut the sting and drew out the poison?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “It seemed sensible at the time. Did I do wrong?”

“No,” said Inyanasi. “The only reason Logan’s whole body did not swell up as his hand did is because there was so little poison left in him. There is a simple cure and travellers in the desert carry it but if, as you say, you were shipwrecked you would not be knowing that. You saved his life, that is certain. Twice over, I would venture.”

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“Even with so little poison left in him he would surely have died had you left him and gone in search of aid,” said Inyanasi. “At sunset the night before, you say?”

“Yes,” said Logan.

“Hmm,” said Inyanasi thoughtfully, then he got up. “I shall go and prepare a camel for you. Are you certain you wish to walk, Autumn?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “A question before you go.”

“Of course,” said Inyanasi.

“What happened to our malus?” she asked.

“Malus?” asked Inyanasi. “What are they?”

“Our clothes,” said Autumn.

“Ahh,” said Inyanasi. “Tejas washed them for they were filthy and sweat soaked. I will send him to you with them.”

“That was most gracious of you,” said Autumn.

Inyanasi inclined his head in acknowledgement and walked off.

“How was it that you were able to talk to him?” asked Logan, realising he still had the piece of fruit in his hand. He bit into it and looked at it suspiciously then decided not to spit it out.

“I venture Mother Midcarn gave us gifts of extraordinary power,” said Autumn, lifting up her necklace. “All the time we spoke while I was holding this I could understand him and he me. When I let go I lost the understanding.”

“Sploop,” said Logan going wide-eyed. He put a hand to the necklace around his neck. “So we have been talking in the tongue of Neander?”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, looking at her necklace and fiddling with it. “Or mayhap of Sassese’lte. I wonder where Inyanasi is from?”

“I daresay we will find out soon enough,” said Logan then looked at her intently. “Did you carry me all night and all the next day?”

“No,” said Autumn. “Can I have some fruit?”

“How long did you carry me?” asked Logan, handing over a choice piece.

“’Twas barely half the night,” said Autumn, taking it, “but you were suffering and I was able.”

“Barely half the night,” said Logan, shaking his head in disbelief, “and all the next day I warrant. No wonder you had heat exhaustion.”

“You miss the essential point once again,” said Autumn.

“Oh aye?” said Logan. “And what exactly is the essential point then?”

“You are alive and well,” said Autumn, “and so am I. What else matters here?”

Chapter Nine

“A thousand blessings be upon you, Sarauta Matsafa Subota,” said Soros striding into the reception room.

Subota had been waiting most of the morning and was irritated but, of course, one could not express that to the Karoi. The mere appearance of the Karoi was the greatest of blessings regardless of when he deigned to turn up.

“And a thousand times a thousand blessings be upon you, oh Great One,” said Subota bowing formally.

“May all the gods forgive me but they try my patience today,” complained Soros going to the verandah to stand beside Subota. “You there, bring me shayi.”

A waiting attendant leapt to do the Karoi’s bidding.

“I am most concerned your famed patience is being put to the test, oh Great One” said Subota stepping out of the way a little in case he should accidentally touch the Karoi. “Although I have no doubts you will surpass the ordeal exceedingly well. May I enquire who they are?”

“Supplicants, Subota, supplicants,” sighed Soros. “Be glad you are a matsafa and no one comes to you to plead their case for some trivial benefaction that will, or so they believe, in some way improve their impoverished lives.”

“Do you not derive satisfaction from improving the lives of those who are impoverished, oh Great One?” asked Subota. “You are beyond any doubt the most enlightened and beneficent of Karois.”

“I try to be, Subota,” sighed Soros as two servants came in bearing a large ornate urn and a tray with two glass cups. He scowled at them and the one with the tray nearly dropped it. “Listen to this one. A supplicant came before me, this very morning, asking that I intercede in the matter of a rent increase on the place where he and his family dwell. He claims that his business has slowed and that he is struggling to pay the rent as it is so an increase at this time would be unjust.

What am I supposed to do, eh?"

"I sympathise with your predicament, oh Great One," said Subota, accepting the steaming glass that was proffered to him without noticing who was proffering it. "Might I enquire how you resolved the matter?"

"I judged that the man must pay the increase," said Soros. He sipped the shayi and scowled at the man with the urn who stared at the floor. "No doubt the landlord has debts to pay as well and, besides, if word got around that I cancelled a rent increase then I would be inundated with supplicants all requesting their rents be decreased due to penury and where would we be then?"

"I do not know, Great One," said Subota.

"My point entirely!" said Soros. "No one thinks around here! Imagine if all the rents were reduced. Why, the landlords would then have to sell their properties because there would be no profit in keeping them and no one would be able to rent anywhere to run their businesses. We would have chaos, total chaos and the economy would collapse! All because one greedy little man claims he is too poor to survive. Pah."

"I venture that would not be a good thing, Great One," said Subota, sipping his shayi. It was surprisingly good which was unusual. Normally the shayi served to Soros was barely drinkable because of the mixture of antidotes in it.

"It would be the end of everything," said Soros morosely. "And do you know what that fool did?"

"I cannot begin to imagine, Great One," said Subota, presuming that the man had not been overly pleased to have his application rejected.

"He argued with me," said Soros. "Can you believe that? He comes pleading to me for judgement and then argues when it is given. What does it truly matter if the landlord is the seventh richest man in Cim-Irsou? By all the gods, do they not understand that the wealthy have correspondingly higher bills to pay?"

“I can see how your patience would be tried,” said Subota. “Your pearls of wisdom questioned as though you were a lowly sheep herder.”

“It has been like this all morning,” complained Soros. “Not one application was worthy of serious contemplation. You know, Subota, I have no idea what the world is coming to. Everyone is becoming so mean spirited. No matter, that infernal arguer will argue no more.”

“I am comforted to know your benevolence has shone forth once again, Great One,” said Subota, handing his empty glass to the waiting servant.

“Some may consider me harsh,” said Soros, ignoring him, “but the world will be a better place when those who argue for the sake of arguing have been silenced. Let this fool be an example to those who bring an unjust application before me.”

“I am certain that the news of your magnanimity will spread like a sandstorm, Great One,” said Subota.

“It will not from that man,” said Soros. “At dawn tomorrow his tongue will be removed as a lesson to all who plan to argue an unjust claim.”

“A move worthy of your ancestors, Great One,” said Subota. “I venture the number of such claims will reduce dramatically.”

“Let us hope so, Subota, let us hope so,” said Soros. “Now, you bring me news of the Roinad?”

“Indeed, Great One,” said Subota. “At dawn this morning I ventured forth to check on the Roinad's whereabouts. It would seem that he and his companion have made a rendezvous.”

“Interesting,” said Soros, forgetting his troubles with the morning's supplicants. “Who with?”

“I do not know, Great One,” said Subota. “I did not recognise any of the four but it is certain that it was a clandestine rendezvous as the four were in the guise of traders.”

“Perhaps they were traders,” said Soros.

“That would be unlikely,” said Subota. “Neither the Roinad nor his companion have been to Neander before and yet they were able to travel unaccompanied to the Bini ul Demir oasis and arrived at the exact time of the caravan. There can be little doubt that it was pre-arranged for such an encounter to be by chance would be remote. It is, after all, two days travel from the coast where they landed to the oasis and to be there at the right time would require substantial coordination.”

“Indeed,” said Soros, “the vagaries of desert travel being what they are. And why traders? Surely if there is anything the Roinad desires it would be sufficient for him to send word and he would be supplied.”

“Perhaps what he desires is not for sale,” said Subota. “I know little of international relations but it would seem that Sassese’lte is involved.”

“Sassese’lte?” exclaimed Soros. “What is your reason for thinking that Sassese’lte be involved in the Roinad’s machinations?”

“The men he met were in the guise of Sassese’lte traders, Great One,” said Subota. “A worthy disguise for that oasis is one commonly used by traders coming from the South of Sassese’lte and would be remarked upon by few.”

“Indeed,” said Soros going to sit in his large chair to think. “And were it not for the presence of the Roinad there would be no remarking upon them now. Four, you say?”

“Indeed, Great One,” said Subota, “and thirteen camels.”

“Thirteen?” exclaimed Soros. “Thirteen? Why so many drivers for so few camels? Thirty or more would seem more normal.”

“So I believe, Great One,” said Subota. “The only reason I can think of is that the men are not experienced camel drivers, or mayhap only one is in order to give validity to their appearance.”

“But if they are not camel drivers, what are they, Subota?” asked Soros.

“Why would these men from Sassese'lte come to a desert oasis to meet clandestinely with the Roinad? Why are they posing as traders and the Roinad is incognito? This bodes ill. Was their meeting at the oasis long?”

“I venture not, Great One,” said Subota. “Given the travel involved I cannot see that they met much before sunset yesterday and when I saw them they were preparing to leave.”

“Separately or together?” asked Soros.

“Together,” said Subota. “The Roinad and his companion have joined the caravan and it would appear they are to travel together. For how long I cannot know.”

“Do they return to Sassese'lte?” asked Soros, “or perhaps to the coast to return to Aferraron?”

“From the direction they were heading when I saw them, Great One,” said Subota, “it would seem they were heading for Waaj.”

“Fetch me a map,” said Soros glancing at the waiting servants. He stared out over the verandah at the sea, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair while he waited. Subota stayed silent.

“Show me,” said Soros when the map appeared. Two servants held it against the wall by its corners and Subota peered at the Western side then tapped it with his finger.

“There is the oasis,” he said, “and the Roinad landed somewhere along this section of the coast.”

“I see,” said Soros. “Yes, a chance encounter with traders there would be most unlikely. And there is Waaj.”

“I am informed that Waaj is the point from which most traders come out of the desert,” said Subota, “assuming they are heading for Cim-Irsou.”

“So you think they are coming to Cim-Irsou?” asked Soros studying

the map.

“I cannot know their plans,” said Subota. “I have not the gift of augury. But if they wish to hide their movements under the disguise of normalcy then Waaj would be the sensible point to leave the desert. Where they go after that, we will have to wait and see.”

“Indeed,” said Soros. “First the Roinad, now Sassese'lte. Do they both have designs on my land?”

* * *

“How went your meeting with the Great One, Magide?” asked Kishli when Subota returned.

He helped Subota off with his tufafi and followed him into the ornamental garden that lay behind the house. It was bordered with high shrubbery which afforded some privacy while outdoors.

“It went well, Kishli,” said Subota. “The Karoi was intrigued and concerned by my news but did not lose his temper. Bring me a cool drink and something for yourself. There are matters we need to discuss.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Kishli hurrying away.

He was faintly alarmed as Subota did not discuss things with him as a rule, one didn't with servants, but he had not appeared angry. The juxtaposition with a visit to the Karoi was concerning. Could it be the Karoi or some other high ranking person had made a complaint?

Subota sat in a chair made of a piece of cloth suspended from a simple wooden frame. It was not ornate or luxurious and was definitely not suitable for entertaining visitors but it was comfortable and Kishli had placed it in the shade.

“I have brought paolim, Magide,” said Kishli, returning. “I have added crushed ice to soothe your mind should it need soothing.”

“You are kindness itself, dear one,” said Subota. “Ahh, I shall be

loathe to part from you.”

“Part from me?” exclaimed Kishli, forgetting in his shock to add the customary 'Magide'. “But, but ...”

“Sit, joy of my life,” said Subota, “and drink with me in this garden. The Karoi raised a matter with me this Towasiku past and it concerns you.”

“A thousand apologies if I have offended the Great One,” said Kishli, too anxious to sit. “And ten times a thousand apologies if I have brought shame upon your house, Magide.”

“Sit, Kishli,” said Subota, waving his glass of paolim at Kishli. “Your bouncing is irritating.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Kishli, sitting down abruptly and nearly missing his chair. His knee continued to jitter in agitation and Subota glared at it. Kishli put his hand on his knee and tried to stop it but it wouldn't so he wedged his foot under the chair which seemed to do the trick. “What have I done and how may I atone?”

“You have not done anything,” said Subota, holding the cool glass to his forehead. “Well, that is not strictly true but no matter. The fault lies with me as had I not taken you as my servant the issue would not arise.”

“We are undone, Magide?” said Kishli anxiously, looking around as though palace guards were about to rush in and arrest them. “We are to face a Court of Iniquity?”

“I think not,” said Subota with a sigh. He put his glass on the grass and leaned forward. “Calm yourself, beloved. It may well come to that in time, as we have both always known, but that time is still some way off. The Karoi has suggested that I take a wife.”

Kishli just stared at Subota for some moments then gulped some of his drink. A drop of chilled water fell from the bottom of his glass and Subota watched it slide down his hairless chest, restraining the urge to stroke it away with his finger.

“Why would the Karoi suggest you take a wife?” asked Kishli, his mind beginning to work again.

“He said he had heard comments,” said Subota. “Nothing as yet that he has to deal with but comments, none the less. I have enemies, as do you as my servant, so I expect it will not be too long before those enemies hear these comments and go in search of evidence. I imagine Soros suggested I take a wife, he actually said two or three, as a means of obscuring the facts should any be presented. It would be difficult to sustain any charges against you and I if there are several wives to attest to my, ah, morals.”

“So it would seem that Soros is not wholly disapproving?” asked Kishli.

“I have known him a long time,” said Subota. “He is not by nature a harsh man but his situation often forces intolerance upon him. If charges are brought before a Court of Iniquity he will not be able to subvert it but I fancy he will avoid it as long as possible. A wife would help in that respect.”

“Perhaps he could loan you one of his,” said Kishli, thoughtfully.

“That would most likely increase our chances of being charged,” said Subota. “A Karena downgraded to the wife of a Sarauta would be unlikely to relish it and could well seek revenge. Besides, Soros has not yet a hundred Karenas and has his own reputation to uphold. He is not his father.”

“And blessed are we all for that,” said Kishli. “That man had so many wives there were few women left over to keep the population going.”

“He was certainly a man of prodigious appetites,” said Subota with a snort, “which was his undoing, of course, but that is irrelevant. What concerns us is what I am to do about it. Have you any thoughts?”

“You have the advantage, Magide,” said Kishli, “as you have had four days to think on this but one thought does immediately spring to mind. Well, two in fact.”

“And they are?” asked Subota.

“Do you wish me gone?” asked Kishli softly. “If that is the case then say it and be done. I shall leave you free to take as many wives as you want.”

“Do you want to leave?” asked Subota. “I know I am much older than you but ...”

“As much as Astauand wishes to leave the sky,” said Kishli, putting his hand on Subota’s. “Astauand’s place is above us and mine is by your side but I would not see you die for me. Do you wish me gone?”

“Not for all the knowledge in the heavens,” said Subota. “There is no room in my heart for any but you and I would die for you if that is what the fates decree.”

“That pleases me greatly,” said Kishli, smiling at Subota and they could each see the truth in the others eyes.

“Then let us speak no more of separation,” said Subota. “And your other thought?”

“Perhaps I should take the wife,” said Kishli. “Would that not serve the same purpose and keep you free? It is not common for a matsafa to be wed and a maidservant would be disinclined to testify against her employer, especially if she is well paid.”

“Alas no,” said Subota. “I have thought on that but much as the Court of Iniquity pretends to apply an even hand to the morality of the people it is still influenced by rank. If someone of high rank brings a charge against me, and no one of low rank would dare, the Court will be more inclined to accept their arguments than they would the counter arguments of my maid. No, a wife would have to be mine although it occurs to me that if you were to take a wife as well that could only thicken the veil.”

“And by that argument your wife would have to be of high rank as well,” said Kishli. “While a woman of low birth would be greatly indebted to you for marrying her and raising her station she would

still be of low birth in the eyes of the Court. Perhaps even of higher rank than yourself.”

“This is true, Kishli,” said Subota. “She would need to be of unblemished reputation as well. It would be of no benefit to us if my high born wife is found guilty by the Court of her own acts of immorality as well.”

“Indeed, no,” said Kishli. “By the magnitude of Yashi, this is going to be a difficult task. Where to find a high born woman of untarnished reputation? That alone will be difficult, but one who is willing to wed a matsafa and be accepting of me for it will be impossible to hide our love from one living in the same house and expecting to share your marriage bed. Ahh, the marriage bed, that will raise a new problem I foresee although I will do my best to fight it.”

“That has occupied my mind much these days past,” said Subota, looking faintly disgusted. “Unpalatable though it will be I daresay I will have to do my duty and give her one child at least. But how would you fight it? There is little you can do in my marriage bed to aid or hinder.”

“That is not what I meant,” said Kishli, “although my heart goes out to you for submitting to such distasteful acts on my behalf. No, the problem I foresee is that I will scarce be able to accept anyone in your bed other than me.”

“That is a fair point I had not considered,” said Subota nodding thoughtfully, “but now I think on it I would have the same issue were you to be the one to wed. Let us hope that Ziasolo will smile on us in our search for such a woman. It will be the most difficult of journeys to find one of high rank with unblemished reputation, willing to wed a matsafa and all that that entails but who has no desire for children and yet is tolerant of our forbidden love. It will be easier to find a grain of gold in all the desert than one such as she and yet she must be found.”

Chapter Ten

“Stop!” cried Logan after the camel had walked barely ten paces.

Inyanasi held up his hand and the line of camels came to a halt. The last three hadn't even started walking.

“I cannot do this,” said Logan, trying to slide off the camel's back.

“Down,” commanded Inyanasi, tapping the lead camel with his stick. The camel flopped forward onto its front knees and Logan fell forward, his arms clutching blindly at the camel's neck, and landed heavily in the sand. The camel spat at him and dropped its hind legs as well. Inyanasi sighed and look somewhere between disbelieving and disgusted. Reyansh, who was three camels further down the line, laughed.

“What is the matter?” asked Autumn.

“It sways from side to side,” said Logan, picking himself up from the sand and rubbing his injured wrist. “'Tis making me feel sick and look.” He pulled up his malu to show the insides of his thighs were red and sore.

“The thing's fur is like a porcupine,” he said, “and its back makes my arse hurt.”

“Clearly you are not of this land,” said Inyanasi, “but the choice is yours. Up.” He tapped the camel again and the beast jerked its hindquarters into the air then levered its front up to match. It moaned loudly then grumbled before spitting again. As it lurched forward it tried to bite the top of Logan's head and he jumped back out of range.

“Camels be scary beasts,” he said ruefully. “It must sense my fear.”

“Pah,” said Inyanasi. “She does not care about you or your fears. All camels are like that. Rakumi made them foul tempered and constantly complaining. Keep your distance, Farimi, they can kick hard with any leg in any direction.”

“What is Rakumi?” asked Autumn as Logan backed away, well out of kicking range.

“The deity of camels,” said Inyanasi, walking beside the lead camel, “but they are worth their weight in precious stones in the desert.”

“Why is that?” asked Autumn, walking beside him.

“They can last for twenty or thirty tanos without drinking,” said Inyanasi. “A hundred and fifty days which means we need carry no water for them.”

“That is a long time,” said Autumn. “How do they manage that?”

“They store it on their backs⁵,” said Inyanasi.

“That is very interesting,” said Autumn. “So why do you carry so many water skins?”

“They are for us,” said Inyanasi. “Between the four of us we get through six skins a day and there is no more water until we get to Waaj. Be not alarmed, however. I noted you had no water skins so we filled extra for you.”

“That is most kind,” said Autumn. “How are you coping with walking, Logan?”

“Tis better than riding,” said Logan, “but I may have to stop to rest on the way.”

“Stop and rest all you want,” said Inyanasi, “but I will not be stopping the caravan. If you fall behind just follow our tracks. We will not stop again until nightfall.”

“I will stay with you, Logan,” said Autumn, smiling at him. “You might decide to play with another scorpion.”

5 In fact Inyanasi is mistaken. A camel's hump is filled with fat, not water. Camels are very well adapted to dehydration and their organs use water very efficiently. For example, the cells in a camel's blood are oval rather than spherical allowing the blood to keep flowing even when the camel is seriously dehydrated.

“That I will not do,” said Logan ruefully. “Given the choice I think I would rather stay with the camels, although it is a close run thing.”

“Dhru!” shouted Inyanasi without turning his head.

“Magide!” shouted Dhru back from halfway down the line.

“Put a dose of madoe in a twist,” shouted Inyanasi, “and bring it here.”

“Your wish, Magide,” called Dhru.

“Carry it with you, Farimi,” said Inyanasi. “If you have fallen behind when Astauand is at Its peak then take it with some water for your ills.”

“Madoe is the medicine?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Inyanasi.

“Can I ask why you will not be stopping before nightfall?” asked Logan. “Will you not need to rest the camels and yourselves on the way?”

“We have food for four days,” said Inyanasi, “and five days of travel until we get more. At least we did before you came along. With you two we have only food for three days so we need to be there in four or go hungry.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “I confess it did not occur to me that there would be no foraging on the way. No matter, Logan and I can go without food for several days.”

“So you spurn my offer of food, then?” said Inyanasi affronted. His hand fell on the handle of the knife he carried at his waist.

“Indeed, no,” said Autumn. “We accept your offer of food with gratitude. I only sought to reduce your hunger because of us. Please do not be offended.”

“Hmm,” said Inyanasi, eyeing her. He let go of his knife. “You are not of Neander so I must make allowances but know that the refusal of hospitality we take as an insult.”

“Twas not my intent,” said Autumn. “When strangers meet, allowances must always be made for differing customs.”

“Is that a criticism of our ways?” demanded Inyanasi, his hand going back to his knife.

“Indeed not,” said Autumn. “It was a criticism of myself, my lack of knowledge and awareness. Please, I wish no hostility between us. We are already most grateful for your aid and desire to impose on you as little as possible until such time as we are able to reciprocate.”

“The madoe, Magide,” said Dhru, coming up behind them.

Inyanasi gave Autumn a long look then waved his hand at Logan. “Give it to him.”

Dhru handed the twist of cloth to Logan who thanked him and stowed it inside his malu.

“Is Dhru your son?” asked Autumn, seeking to change the subject to something safer. “I see a certain resemblance.”

“All three are my sons,” said Inyanasi. He spoke gruffly but his hand fell away from the knife handle.

“They do you credit,” said Autumn.

“They honour their father as they should,” said Inyanasi, tersely.

They walked on in silence. Logan's mind was mainly on keeping up and not falling over. Autumn's was leafing through the many questions she had and considering how to phrase them without giving offence. It was impossible to tell what was going through Inayanasi's mind as he was a skilled and experienced trader and well versed in keeping his face unreadable.

“Reyansh be the eldest,” he said after a while. “He will be taking over the business in the not too distant future. I am getting too old for this travelling.”

“You give the appearance of great health,” said Autumn cautiously.

“The appearance only,” said Inyanasi, seemingly not taking offence. “These travels through the desert take their toll. It nears the time for Reyansh to be given his head.”

“And what of the others?” asked Autumn. “Will they continue in your business?”

“Tejas will,” said Inyanasi. “He is still too young to take a lead and this is his first journey outside Neander. In time he will have the experience to branch out and find new markets. Dhru will not. This life is not for him and he has not the temperament and will never be a successful trader. His skills lie in other areas but, I venture, he will still yet bring credit to our family.”

“Can I ask what areas?” asked Autumn.

“He has an enquiring mind that cannot settle on money and trade,” said Inyanasi, “and this will be his last journey. When we return to Cim-Irsou he has the hope of joining a school of learning, mayhap in the ways of medicine and healing or perhaps sorcery or some other trade of the mind. I only hope he enters an honourable profession.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Can I ask what goods you trade?”

“Only knick-knacks of dubious quality,” said Inyanasi. “It is barely worth our while to make this journey.”

“You surprise me,” said Autumn. “You have spent much time in the desert and no doubt there was time in Sassese’lte and in the crossing to Neander and you have some distance to go to your destination after Waaj. ’Twould seem a lot of effort for the four of you to go to for little benefit. I do not know how much a camel can carry but you have thirteen of them which does not seem overly many.”

“You ask a myriad of questions,” said Inyanasi, his hand straying towards his knife again. “Why is it you are so interested in our goods?”

“Once again I apologise,” said Autumn, stopping walking. She put out her hand to stop Logan and he looked at her with slight puzzlement as he had not been listening to the conversation. Inyanasi stopped as well and let the lead camel follow its head.

“We are strangers in this land,” continued Autumn, “and you are the first we have spoken with. ’Twould seem that my manner causes you affront at every opportunity. I venture it would be best if we part company before I unintentionally push you too far. Please accept our most heartfelt thanks for your aid.”

Inyanasi looked at her then glanced at Logan. “Reyansh,” he called. “Take the lead.”

Reyansh hurried forward, looking quizzically at his father, to walk beside the lead camel. Inyanasi let his hand rest on the hilt of his knife and scratched his head with his stick thoughtfully. Logan decided to make the most of the opportunity and sat on the sand to rest.

“By the moustaches of Musafir, I am most sorely chastened,” said Inyanasi, almost apologetically. “If the manner in which my hospitality is offered is the cause of its rejection then it can only be I who is at fault. Please, continue your journey with me and we will consider ways in which my manner can be improved.”

Dhru came alongside as the caravan continued unabated. He grinned broadly, having heard his father's remark, and stopped beside Logan.

“How do you feel, Farimi?” he asked, squatting beside him.

“Like an empty water skin,” said Logan.

“It will pass,” said Dhru, “but may take another day. It would be better if you rode.”

“No,” said Logan. “’Tis easier to walk despite my weakness than ride on the back of a camel.”

“As you wish,” said Dhru. “I would suggest then that you walk with me and hold on to the camel’s straps. It will make the walking a little easier and allow me to assist you where I can.”

Dhru looked at Inyanasi who looked at Autumn who looked at Logan who looked at his feet. Tejas, beside the last of the camels, looked at all of them and decided to keep on walking. As the youngest he knew his place in the decision making hierarchy.

“I would like to continue journeying with you and your sons, Inyanasi,” said Autumn, “but I would implore you to make allowance for our lack of knowledge of your customs and would ask you to believe that any insult we give is not intended.”

“I have been lacking in that respect,” said Inyanasi, jerking his stick at Dhru who immediately helped Logan to his feet and helped him catch up with the camels. “Come, walk with me and we will talk of things as equals.”

“I thank you,” said Autumn, following him as he strode past the line of camels to take his place at the front. Reyansh dropped back to draw level with his assigned camel and the caravan continued to wend its way through the dunes, silent save for the padding of feet and soft swishing of sand.

It was Autumn who broke the silence first.

“Logan and I are travellers,” she said, “and we travel to experience the world and gain knowledge and insight. We have travelled much in Aferraron and the Zuit Islands and have encountered many unusual things. I ask questions to aid my understanding but have no motive beyond that.”

“And I am too suspicious,” said Inyanasi, “but I can give you two points of understanding that may aid you while you are in these parts. The first is that in this land women are for the bearing of sons and do not take part in the affairs of men. I am of Neander and hold that to be truth. I have heard that it is different in Aferraron but hearing and experiencing are not the same.”

“I did not know this,” said Autumn, “and I make no judgement on your customs. Am I to understand that you would prefer to talk to Logan rather than me?”

“I confess to being uncomfortable in talking with you,” said Inyanasi, “but Logan is unwell and he has explained already that you are the leader of your expedition. I should therefore be talking to you as one leader to another and not as a man to a woman.”

Autumn decided not to argue this point, at least not for the time being, although it was a custom which she felt would need no little justification.

“And the other point?” she asked.

“We are traders,” said Inyanasi. “The wealth and prosperity of the family is tied up in what we carry. The desert is a hostile land which carries many dangers and where any mishap will most likely end in the death of men or camels. Moreover, there are bandits who would seek to take our goods for themselves and have no qualms over the spilling of blood.”

“And you fear that Logan and I are bandits?” asked Autumn.

“It is a foolish fear,” said Inyanasi. “You are a woman and when we found you you were both likely to die. No bandits would walk in the desert and for certain one would not carry the other but still my mind found it difficult to be trusting.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “I understand. We could have been part of a ruse leading to an ambush.”

“Then you admit the possibility,” said Inyanasi, “and by admitting it lessen its likelihood. Truly the time for such an ambush would have been when we were distracted by you last night but I confess the fear of it has been in my mind.”

“Do you still fear us?” asked Autumn.

“I will not be truly at ease until we have sold our goods,” said

Inyanasi, “but my mind grows easier.”

“That is good,” said Autumn. “In our travels we have come across deceptions so I have some knowledge of your fears although having no care for money I do not understand what underlies these things. But I have come to understand the truth of deception lies in the actions of the one who may be a deceiver and not in their words for one who seeks to deceive will say anything. I would hope in the time we travel together you come to see that our actions are trustworthy even if you do not believe our words.”

“You have no care for money?” asked Inyanasi, “I find that hard to believe.”

“It is your choice whether or not you believe me,” said Autumn. “I cannot force belief upon you.”

“It is of little importance what I believe,” said Inyanasi. “For you would seem to be clever enough to spin any web you should desire but I shall accept your words as they stand. I will also make a confession and one that shames me but, as I say, I am the leader of this caravan and the weight of profit and my sons' lives weigh heavily upon me. As you and your companion slept I searched your belongings.”

“If you found anything of interest you are welcome to keep it,” said Autumn.

“I found a great deal of interest,” said Inyanasi, “but nothing I can keep for what I found was nothing and that is what was interesting. You carry no weapons, save two small knives, no money whatsoever, no food and only a small bottle of water. If your intent is deceit then you take it most seriously. Your necklaces are the only things of any value and that is small. A grinar or two at a country market perhaps but no more.”

“You are welcome to my necklace,” said Autumn, “and I venture Logan would say the same although I do not speak for him.”

“Keep your ornaments,” said Inyanasi, “but I thought you did speak for him. Did he not say that?”

“He and I are companions,” said Autumn. “We travel together and both have equal say in most things but each of us is free to go our own way when the time arises.”

“I find this entirely strange,” said Inyanasi.

“Magide,” called Dhru from further back along the line.

“Yes, my son?” called Inyanasi, turning and walking backwards to keep up with the camel.

“Logan has stopped to rest for a time,” called Dhru. “I have left him a water skin and a little fruit.”

“Ahh, then I shall stop as well,” said Autumn. “I do not wish to continue and leave him alone.”

“Stoooppp!” called Inyanasi, holding up one hand so the others could see and simultaneously tapping his lead camel with his stick. The entire caravan ground to a halt. “We will rest for a short time.”

“There is no need for you to stop,” said Autumn. “Logan and I will catch you up when he is rested.”

“I will forever be condemned in the eyes of Musafir and Yashi if I abandon a sick traveller in the desert,” said Inyanasi. “We will wait.”

“But you have not enough food to delay,” said Autumn.

“Logan will be well tomorrow,” said Inyanasi, “and we may make up some lost time and it would be ill fated to risk your lives for the sake of a meal or two. We are no strangers to hunger.”

“You are a most honourable man,” said Autumn, putting her palms together and bowing to Inyanasi. “We thank you once again.”

“Besides,” said Inyanasi with a twinkle in his eye, secretly delighted with her deference, “I would much prefer to have you both where I can see you and not some way behind, following unseen in our tracks.”

* * *

“Come, Dhru,” said Inyanasi after they had eaten their evening meal. “What thoughts came upon you this day that will delight and tantalise our minds?”

The meal had consisted of coarse bread made from the maize flour they carried and the last of the fruit but, aided by shayi, it sufficed to quell the rumblings of hunger. The camels had not been fed and they conveyed their displeasure with incessant grumbling amongst themselves.

“I know not if this will tantalise,” said Dhru, “but I found myself this day remembering the boat that carried us from Sassese’lte to Neander.”

“It was no delight,” said Reyansh. “It was older than I am and falling to pieces. How would such a vessel tantalise us?”

“Dhru has an enquiring mind,” said Inyanasi, noticing Autumn’s look. Logan had already fallen asleep. “He thinks strange thoughts in the day and, to fill the time between eating and sleeping, he tells us of his thoughts and we think on them.”

“A dangerous exercise before sleep,” said Autumn, “if such thoughts provoke keen dispute.”

Inyanasi laughed, reasonably content with the day’s travel despite the delays to let Logan rest. “There have been times when tempers have flared,” he admitted, “but it is good to exercise the mind as well as the body. Tell us, Dhru, how is that old boat going to tantalise us?”

“It is not so much the boat that I was thinking on,” said Dhru, “but more a speculation about the boat if Navik had repaired it. I do not know when he acquired it but let us suppose that it was some summers past and in the time since he has replaced each board and spa as it rotted and fell apart.”

“A most unlikely supposition,” said Inyanasi. “I find it hard to imagine Navik has replaced a single board.”

“But suppose he has,” said Dhru, sipping his shayi. “Suppose in that

time he has replaced every single board and nail and sailcloth so nothing remains from when he acquired it. Is it still the same boat?"

"Of course it is," said Reyansh. "It is his boat and he can do what he likes with it."

"Indeed," said Dhru. He held out his shayi cup. "But suppose my cup got broken and I tossed it away and got another. Is that the same cup?"

"Of course not," said Inyanasi. "You threw the broken cup away. How can it be the same?"

"But if this cup were a boat," said Dhru, "and I replaced every part of it, you say it is the same boat. So why is a replacement cup different to a replacement boat?"

"But it must be the same boat," said Inyanasi. "Navik paid for it, or at least I think he did although he is an old thief and it is as likely that he stole it. But say he bought it and as he still has it, it must be the same boat."

"But if he kept the old pieces in a pile behind his house?" asked Dhru. "Is that pile not the original boat?"

Reyansh curled his lip while Inyanasi stroked his beard and both thought about it.

"I suppose it must be another boat," said Reyansh after a while. "If he still has the old boat in a pile, what is floating on the water must be a different boat."

"I confess I have forgotten the name of the boat," said Dhru, drinking the last of his shayi, "but let us suppose its name was The Water Spirit and that was painted on the boat. When the official comes to collect the licence fee he will check the name of the boat and demand the fee and will ignore the rotting pile behind the house. How is it possible that a licence collector will charge only for one boat when there are two?"

“My son has a twisted mind, Farima,” said Inyanasi. “No doubt you see why he will not make a good trader. He would end up convincing a buyer to pay less than he should, not more. What say you to the boat problem? Is it the same boat or not?”

“I confess I do not understand the problem,” said Autumn. “It seems to me to be a simple matter of confusion.”

“How so?” asked Dhru. “It seems a straight forward enough question to me. Is there one boat or two?”

“The confusion lies in the fact that there are actually three boats,” said Autumn.

Tejas burst out cackling and Reyansh looked contemptuous as though he had expected a mere woman to come up with an absurd answer like that. Inyanasi, on the other hand, rested his head on his knuckles and stared at Autumn while Dhru looked at her thoughtfully with an eyebrow raised.

“Are you going to end there?” said Dhru, “or are you going to explain yourself? Why three?”

“It is quite simple,” said Autumn. “There are two boats made of wood, one floating on the water and the other in a pile behind the house. The third is only in the mind, the idea of the boat. Navik bought the old Water Spirit and replaced every part of it so there is a new Water Spirit and clearly they must be different as it is quite possible that the new boat has a different shape to the old one and so cannot be confused with it. However, the official is only interested in the name of the boat so whenever he comes to collect the fee he looks at the name and takes the money. To him the idea of a boat called The Water Spirit has remained unchanged and is quite independent of whatever wood or cloth has gone into the making of it. At the same time, even though Navik owns both the wood of the old Water Spirit and the wood of the new Water Spirit he also has the idea of the Water Spirit in his head so he thinks and says he owns the one boat of that name even though there are actually three.”

“By the foreskin of Wahah,” exclaimed Inyanasi, thumping his free

hand on the sand beside him. “Your mind is even more twisted than Dhru's!”

Chapter Eleven

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn as she faced Astauand's new dawn. She sat, her legs crossed and her hands relaxed in her lap, atop a dune. A warm breeze dusted the dune top, unfelt in the valley below, and it smelt of nothing save dryness and the muskiness of camel piss and the merest hint of faraway places. The sounds of cantankerous beasts being loaded drifted up, interlaced with the occasional murmur of a human voice.

"What occupies her on the crest?" came faintly to Autumn's ears. It sounded like Inyanasi.

"She is thinking," came another faint voice, without a doubt Logan's.

Moments later a piecing whistle rent the air followed by the grunts of outraged camels. Autumn's eyelids twitched then opened. She turned her head to look down the slope at Inyanasi.

"Come," he shouted, beckoning with his arm and, without further ado, started the lead camel moving. The others followed, each tugged into motion by a rope tied to the pack of the one in front.

Autumn rose to her feet in one sinuous motion and ran down the side of the dune, her feet slithering in the sand at each impact. Logan waited for her at the bottom.

"Hello," he said. "You've taken your bandage off. How is your neck?"

"It feels well," said Autumn, "and the bandage was getting smelly. How are you today?"

"Hah!" said Logan. "As if you could smell anything other than these rank beasts. Let me look at your neck."

"First tell me of yourself," said Autumn. "Mine was just a cut, yours was the more serious injury."

"I feel very well," said Logan, smiling. "My weakness is gone and I have no aches and pains other than a soreness in my hand where you

cut me.”

“And the swelling?” asked Autumn, taking his hand. The pronounced swelling of his hand, fingers and wrist was down to a slight pudginess except for around the edges of the cut. They looked the healthy pink of healing and not the angry red of disease nor the yellow green of corruption.

“As you see,” said Logan, flexing his fingers to show they were working again. “Your neck?”

Autumn bent over and flicked her hair out of the way so Logan could see the livid half healed wound that ran from behind her ear to just past her spine. It ran just under her hairline and there was still dried blood encrusted on her hair.

“There is no sign of any pus,” he said, inspecting the cut, “and it is scabbing nicely. Does it hurt?”

“No,” said Autumn straightening up again, “although there is a tightness when I turn my head. Ayah, but it would be nice to wash my hair. It feels matted and clumpy.”

“Mayhap there will be water to wash in when we get to Waaj,” said Logan. “There is no sign of any bruising and the edges are straight so I would say that fish sliced you rather than clubbed you. ’Tis fortunate it did not go deep into your neck bones.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I wager we have both been fortunate. What is Tejas doing?”

“He is collecting the camel dung,” said Logan. “Apparently that is his job which is why he is at the back of the line. He carries it all in a sack.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, watching Tejas searching the sand with his feet and putting the lumps into his sack. “That would explain the absence of dung when we were following them. Why do you suppose he collects it?”

“They burn the stuff for cooking,” said Logan, wrinkling his nose.

“How interesting,” said Autumn. “I wondered where they got the wood for burning last night but did not ask. It had a smell unlike that of wood but there are many kinds of wood. I daresay we should catch them up, Inyanasi is watching us.”

“Aye, he is a quick tempered old bugger,” said Logan.

“He carries much responsibility,” said Autumn, “and has taken us into his care. Do not be critical.”

They left Tejas rooting around in the sand and caught up with Dhru who was walking beside the fifth camel from the end, patting its shoulder.

“Greetings, Dhru,” said Autumn.

“Ahh, peace be unto you Farimi, Farima,” said Dhru. “I am just attending to this camel's injury, forgive me.”

“What ails the camel?” asked Autumn.

“It was bitten on the shoulder by one of the others,” said Dhru. “I am putting on an ointment.”

“The bite does not look serious,” said Logan, peering at it.

“Camels have long teeth,” said Dhru. “Their bites go deep and corruption can be hidden for some time. When discovered it can already be bad. I have found this ointment, if applied quickly, can be very effective.”

“What goes into the ointment?” asked Autumn.

“It is the ground petals of the hamamielis mixed with oil of joander and the wax of bees,” said Dhru. “I carry a large amount as the hamamielis does not grow in this land.”

“We use hamamielis a lot in Aferraron,” said Autumn, “but I am not

familiar with joander.”

“I know of it only from Southern Sassese'lte,” said Dhru. “Its leaves are used to deaden pain. It is only mildly effective but any relief of pain is better than none.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn.

“There,” said Dhru, giving the camel a last pat. He put the top back on the pot of ointment and slipped it into the bag slung from its pack. He stopped walking to look at Logan. “Now, Farimi, how do you feel this morning?”

“I am much better,” said Logan, stopping as well. “All of my weakness is gone.”

“As we expected,” said Dhru, smiling. “Most who are stung by that scorpion die but those who survive follow a pattern. If I may look at your hand?”

Logan held it out while Dhru poked and prodded it extensively.

“You cut this?” he asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I had to suck out the poison.”

“You are skilled in this,” said Dhru. “Your cutting was just enough but not too much. I commend you. Where did you learn?”

“I have never had to suck poison before,” said Autumn, “but I have dealt with many minor injuries and it seemed that such a cut would be sufficient. 'Twas mostly guesswork, I confess.”

“The guesses of the skilled are often better than the knowledge of the unskilled,” said Dhru, turning to catch up with the camels. He caught sight of the side of Autumn's neck and sucked in his breath.

“What manner of hurt is this?” he asked.

“'Tis only a cut,” said Autumn. “It is healing well.”

“Why have I not seen ..., ahh, you have removed your headwear,” said Dhru.

“The cloth was a bandage,” said Autumn, “not headwear.”

“It looks healthy,” said Dhru, pushing back Autumn's hair without warning. She suppressed her instinct to react to the unexpected touch. “It is fresh but not too fresh. How did you get the cut?”

“I was hit by a shark,” said Autumn, “some five days past.”

“A shark?” said Dhru in surprise. “We are a long way from the sea. Ahh, yes, you were washed ashore which is why you were wandering in the desert.”

Tejas hurried past with his bag of dung and Dhru glanced up to see the last of the camels some way distant.

“Come,” he said, “we should catch up. Magide will not be pleased with us idly talking.”

He set off at a fast pace with Autumn and Logan following closely.

“So, you carried the Farimi while you had that injury,” said Dhru thoughtfully. “An impressive achievement of itself but with a neck wound such as yours, to carry a man over your shoulders is most remarkable.”

“I did only what was necessary,” said Autumn, “as I am sure you would have as well.”

“There is a wealth of difference between knowing what is necessary and having the fortitude to do it,” said Dhru. “I can think of few men who could have managed such a feat. I do not count myself among them.”

“I wager you have the skills to have made such an effort unnecessary,” said Autumn. “There is a wealth of difference between knowing what is necessary and not doing what is unnecessary. Had I known how to heal Logan's sting I would not have needed to carry him.”

Dhru laughed. "Yes, you do like to play with words, do you not. Tell me, how is it you are skilled with our language? As I recall you said you have not ventured outside Aferraron before yet you are in Neander and speak Janire as though born to it."

"Janire is your tongue?" asked Autumn, wondering how to answer his question.

"How is it you speak Janire yet not know what it is?" asked Dhru. "Janire is my language, the language of Neander."

"That is a difficult question to answer, Dhru," said Autumn thoughtfully.

"We have all day," said Dhru, "and there is little to occupy the mind while walking beside a camel in the desert. Difficult questions can often be most enlightening."

"Indeed," said Autumn, glancing at Logan. "What say you, Logan?"

"I say nothing," said Logan. "I wondered if this question might come up but I have not an answer to it."

"I had hoped ...," started Autumn then changed her mind. "No matter. The moment is here and I see no great benefit to deceit. The truth is, Dhru, that neither of us can speak your language. In fact I did not know Neander had a language different to our own until we met you."

"You play word games with me," said Dhru. "You say in my language that you do not know my language. Pah, how is such a thing possible?"

"It is the truth, Dhru," said Autumn. "In my land we have an old language we call the Old Tongue which I am familiar with, but I knew not that other lands would have different words, save perhaps for local things of interest only to themselves. When we first spoke with you I did not understand your words, nor you mine."

"I put that down to confusion," said Dhru. "You were far gone with exhaustion. Logan here spoke with us directly."

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Umm, that was because he was wearing his necklace.”

“What has a necklace to do with this?” asked Dhru, plainly puzzled.

“I do not know for certain,” said Autumn. “But we have a friend who is uncommonly powerful who gave us these necklaces. When we first encountered you and your father Logan was wearing his but mine was in my pack.”

“I do not remember,” said Dhru. “But what of it?”

“That is why I did not understand your words,” said Autumn. “I know not how but the wearing of the necklace allows me to understand you and you to understand me.”

“What manner of power does your friend have?” asked Dhru.

“She calls herself an auger,” said Logan, “but in truth she is a matsafa.”

“Ahh, a matsafa,” said Dhru wonderingly. “I have heard of such people but I have never met one. Do you speak truly?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I wager I could learn your language but it would take much time.”

“What does it feel like?” asked Dhru.

“It does not feel like anything,” said Autumn. “I speak as I have always spoken and you hear as people have always heard me. I would not know you spoke in a different tongue if I had been wearing the necklace from the start.”

“If this be true then it would be best if you do not speak of it to others,” cautioned Dhru, his face showing his concern. “Such a device would be worth a Karoi’s ransom and be worth killing for.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “although I see no great benefit to it except to a traveller and those who travel widely in these parts will most

likely have already made arrangements.”

“You may be right,” said Dhru, “but do not underestimate the power of avarice, especially for things no one else has. My father could sell this necklace for a fortune to someone who has no need of speaking your tongue but simply for the knowing that they can do what no other can.”

“You may be right,” said Autumn. “People do seem to operate on a basis other than need and I have never understood why.”

“Can I try it?” asked Dhru, pointing to the necklace.

“Assuredly,” said Autumn, taking hers off. She handed it to him and showed him how to work the buckle. He put it on.

“Have hum sum kari sakum?” he asked.

“I do not understand,” said Autumn in puzzlement.

“He asked what he should do now,” said Logan. “Why is it not working?”

“Mayhap it is translating his language into his language,” said Autumn, “although that makes no sense. Let him try yours. Mayhap that will work.”

“Give Autumn's back and try mine,” said Logan, undoing his.

Dhru passed Autumn's back to her and put on Logan's.

“Is it working?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“What did he say?” asked Logan.

“He asked if it is working,” said Autumn. “I said yes.”

“I know what you said,” said Logan, “but he was talking nonsense.”

“That is interesting,” said Autumn. “How is it you understand what I am saying without your necklace?”

“Because we speak the same language,” said Logan, frowning. “As we have always done.”

“Yes,” said Autumn patiently. “But do you not see what this means? It means that the necklace is not translating what I speak. If it were you would not understand me for I would be speaking in Dhru's tongue.”

“But you are speaking in my tongue,” said Dhru. “I understood every word of that.”

“What did he say?” asked Logan.

“He said he understood every word I said,” said Autumn. “But you did not understand what he said?”

“No,” said Logan, “although I understood what he said you said in his language. I am getting very confused.”

“Give Logan's necklace back, Dhru,” said Autumn. “It is too complicated to hold a discussion this way.”

Reluctantly Dhru took off Logan's necklace and gave it back to him.

“So what does all this mean?” asked Logan.

“Two thoughts occur to me,” said Autumn, stopping walking to think, “The first is that these necklaces only seem to work with us. When Dhru is wearing them we cannot understand him.”

“That is true,” said Logan. “I wonder why?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “But my other thought is that the necklace is not translating the sounds of our speech. If it was you would not have understood me. It would seem to be translating in the mind of the person listening.”

“I do not understand,” said Dhru.

“I had not realised this before,” said Autumn, “but it is obvious now. Last night, for example, when we were talking of the boats we could all understand what each of us was saying. You, Dhru, explained the problem and your father and brothers understood your words and yet at the same time Logan and I did and you all understood my replies.”

“I was asleep,” said Logan. “I did not hear anything about boats.”

“Ahh, it was a most fascinating discussion,” said Dhru animatedly, “and I want to talk more on this with you, Autumn.”

“Later,” said Autumn. “Let us concentrate on these necklaces for now.”

“I confess I see little to discuss,” said Dhru. “If these necklaces do as you say they do they only seem to work when you wear them.”

“But did it not work when you wore it?” said Logan.

“No,” said Dhru. “You could not understand me, remember.”

“But Autumn did,” said Logan. “Does that not mean ...?”

“She was wearing her necklace,” said Dhru. “I wager she understood me through her necklace, not through the one I was wearing.”

“Oh,” said Logan, “right.”

“Which makes me wonder,” said Autumn, taking off her necklace and looking at it. “Logan, swap necklaces with me.”

“As you wish,” said Logan, undoing his necklace and handing it to her. She gave him hers.

“Say something, Dhru,” said Autumn.

“Tame sum boliya?” asked Dhru.

“I did not understand that,” said Logan, looking at Autumn’s necklace. “It proves something I am sure, but what I do not know.”

“It shows that my necklace only works for me,” said Autumn, “and as I did not understand what he said either, I wager your necklace does not work for me. Vy heta rozumiejecie?”

“What?” said Logan as Dhru said “sum?”

“I said ‘do you understand this?’ in the Old Tongue,” said Autumn.

“Why?” asked Logan.

“Let us swap necklaces again,” said Autumn.

“Do you understand this?” said Autumn when they had done so.

“Yes,” said Logan and Dhru together.

“Interesting,” said Autumn.

“Why?” asked Logan.

“I said that in the Old Tongue,” said Autumn, “and you both understood.”

“Which means?” asked Dhru, looking bemused.

“My necklace translated what I said in the Old Tongue into Janire and Onaman at the same time,” said Autumn.

“Not necessarily,” said Logan. “It could have translated it into Janire and my necklace translated it from Janire into Onaman.”

“That is a good point,” said Autumn. “Take your necklace off and put it on the ground.”

“Why put it on the ground?” asked Dhru as Logan did as he was bid.

“Jany pracujuc, tolki kali my dakranajemsia da ich,” said Autumn.

“Ahh,” said Dhru, “which is why they are necklaces, I suppose.”

“What do you want me to do now?” asked Logan.

“Did you understand what I said?” asked Autumn.

“Of course,” said Logan. “You said they only work if we are touching them.”

“I said that in the Old Tongue,” said Autumn. “And you both understood.”

“Sploop,” said Logan. “That is most wondrous! I understood the Old Tongue!”

“It also explains why the necklaces have A and L on them,” said Autumn. “We have to wear the right one else they do not work. They must somehow fit in with our minds or something.”

Logan picked up his necklace and put it back on. “Mendis from sani blat hisk,” he said.

“What?” asked Autumn.

“I made something up,” said Logan. “I wondered if the necklace would make sense of it.”

“No, it did not,” said Autumn. “Why would it?”

“I was curious to see if they could translate from a language I made up,” said Logan. “It would seem they can only work with real languages.”

“You are a philosopher, Logan,” said Autumn, “as I have said many times. All languages are made up by the people who speak them which is why people no longer speak in the Old Tongue. How do the necklaces know what words are in a language and what words are not?”

“Logan, make up a word and give it a meaning,” said Dhru, “but do

not tell us what the meaning is.”

“Cheese,” said Logan.

“No, make up a word,” said Dhru. “Don’t use a word we already use.”

“I did,” said Logan. “I made up cheese and it means cheese.”

“I do not understand,” said Dhru. “What do you mean, cheese means cheese?”

“I wager Logan did not say ‘cheese’,” said Autumn, “but the necklaces translated its meaning into our languages so we thought we heard him say cheese because he meant cheese.”

“That is right,” said Logan, “I said cheese, not cheese.”

“Ahhh, now I understand,” said Dhru. “Ziasolo, that is very clever. Make up something else.”

“The camels have disappeared,” said Logan, looking around.

“I do not know what you actually said,” said Dhru beaming, “but what I understood was you saying ‘the camels have disappeared’.”

“I did not make that up,” said Logan. “The camels really have disappeared. Sploop!”

Chapter Twelve

Inyanasi seemed both suspicious and irritated when they caught up with the caravan again. It had climbed the side of a dune and descended the other side but the tracks had been easy to follow. Nothing else marked the smooth windswept surface of the sand.

“What delayed you?” he demanded of Dhru.

“We fell to discussing the boat problem, Magide,” said Dhru smoothly. “It came to me in the light of Plifal that there was a fourth boat and I was desirous of sharing that thought with the Farima.”

Inyanasi’s nostrils flared but he contained his temper.

“As you see, Farima, I indulge my children most shamefully,” he said, piercing Dhru with his dark eyes. “The idle discussions of the camp fire are as naught to the safe transport of our precious cargo but my indulgence has allowed that lesson to go unlearned.”

He poked Dhru sharply on the shoulder with his stick and gestured for him to return to his post. Dhru got the message and complied.

“They have work to do,” said Inyanasi. “I would see it as a kindness if you did not distract them.”

“I apologise, Inyanasi,” said Autumn. “The fault is entirely mine for exciting his mind.”

“If you could excite his mind with thoughts of profits and costs, I would be in your debt forever, Farima,” said Inyanasi, “but alas the joyous delights of trade will be forever beyond his reach.”

He speeded up to return to his place at the head of the caravan.

“Do you not wish to know the nature of the fourth boat, Magide?” asked Dhru mischievously as he passed.

“You think my old mind cannot follow your convolutions?” demanded Inyanasi, poking Dhru with his stick again. “You seek to make your

father the butt of your misbegotten humour?”

“May Iyali curse my descendents to the end of eternity if that is so,” exclaimed Dhru. “I sought only to earn your praise in seeing at length that which you undoubtedly saw straight away.”

Inyanasi saw the trap but couldn't immediately see a way out of it.

“Then tell me of your fourth boat, my son,” he said. “Let us all hear the spawn of your thoughts and if it be praiseworthy you shall be praised accordingly.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Dhru. “You agree that there is the old boat behind the house and the new boat floating on the water and, although they have both the same name they are, as the Farima explained, entirely separate from the idea of the boat in the minds of Navik and the official?”

Inyanasi wasn't entirely sure he did agree but he also wasn't sure he could explain why so he nodded and waved his fingers for Dhru to continue.

“My thought, Magide,” continued Dhru, “is that there is a fourth boat, different to and separate from the other three that is the idea of the boat in the mind of the person who first conceived and built it. That idea of the boat will be pure and perfect and in so being will be different to the boat that was built with its imperfections and compromises of construction. Moreover the idea of the boat as exists in the mind of the official will be as a thing for the levying of a licence fee and less of a boat. To the official it could be anything capable of being licenced. To the official and to the designer the idea of the idea of the boat are not the same.”

“Indeed,” said Inyanasi, trying to work out what the idea of an idea of a boat would be. Then he had an idea of his own. “And what are your thoughts on this idea of an idea of a fourth boat, Farima?” he asked.

“The thought certainly has merits,” said Autumn. “And by extension we could say that there are actually as many different ideas of the boat as there are people as each will have their own understandings of the

boat as seen through their perceptions and experience. Even if two people see the boat in their minds as the same they may envisage that boat in their minds as being used in different ways. One for fishing, one for the carrying of passengers, perhaps. Mayhap there be not two boats here, or three or four but however many as there are people as can have an idea of the boat. And two more for the actual wood of the boats."

"I know not what you are talking about," said Logan, "but would it not be the case that for every idea of the boat that is floating there is also the idea of the boat behind the house?"

"You have all spent too long in the warmth of Astauand," said Inyanasi, scowling. "Navik has only one boat and that is the end of it!"

He strode off to the head of the caravan, muttering to himself about the lack of profit in such discussions and Dhru winked at Autumn before returning his attention to the camels.

"What was all that about?" whispered Logan.

"I think it was not so much Dhru trying to impress his father, as challenge him," whispered back Autumn, "although I know not why for he does not wish to take the lead in trading."

"Perhaps," whispered Logan, watching Dhru, "or perhaps he has some other motive in mind."

"What do you mean?" whispered Autumn.

"He knows his father has no interest in things not related to trading and money," whispered Logan. "Mayhap Dhru was really trying to impress someone else."

"Who?" whispered Autumn.

"I give you three guesses," whispered Logan, "although there be only one here who is not a man."

* * *

“And now what is that Cika doing?” said Inyanasi pausing to watch Autumn go leaping and tumbling past on the far side of the valley between the dunes.

“She is only a woman,” said Reyansh, catching up and stopping beside him. “Who knows what absurdities excite their minds. Most likely she is dancing although what manner of dance that is, Rakumi alone knows.”

“Indeed, women do like to dance,” said Inyanasi, scratching the back of his head with his stick. “Although to what purpose she dances here is beyond my imagination, unless she seeks to entice you with her charms, Reyansh,” and he laughed.

“She has no charms for me, Magide,” said Reyansh contemptuously. “This one knows not her place and talks too much. My Anasil is a thousand times her worth and knows how to delight a man in ways that are proper.”

“Autumn is doing her exercises,” said Logan catching them up. “She does them every day although she has not been able to for several days past.”

Inyanasi rolled his eyes and strode off to lead the camels again.

“Exercises, pah!” said Reyansh. “What need has a woman of exercises? Tell me, Farimi, do all women in Aferraron do such things?”

“No,” said Logan. “I know no other who does but then, Autumn is like no other woman.”

“That is truth,” said Dhru. “I wager none of us could have carried this Farimi for a night and a day and although she is free with her tongue and lacks respect for her betters what she says is intelligent and wise.”

“Wise?” exclaimed Reyansh, “you think saying there are three boats when there is only one is wise?”

“I notice you did not find a sensible argument against her case,” said Dhru.

“When you argue with a woman you only make a fool of yourself,” said Reyansh. “One day you too will learn that basic truth for one day you will find yourself a wife and your days of tranquillity will end. It is not for me to point out the obvious.”

“And what is the obvious, brother?” asked Dhru.

“There is only one boat,” said Reyansh. “The pile of rotten wood behind the house is not a boat, it is a pile of rotten wood.”

“Ahh, but that was not the question,” said Dhru watching Autumn kick an imaginary foe then twist to chop another with her hand before spinning into a somersault. “The question was whether or not the repaired boat is still the same boat or another one but then one such as you could not be expected to understand the subtleties of the problem.”

“You try my patience, brother,” snarled Reyansh, grabbing the front of Dhru's robe with his fist. “You need to learn respect for your elders, Cika!”

“You are only my elder by one summer, *Fariima*,” growled Dhru, squaring up to Reyansh and reaching for his knife.

“You call me a woman?” barked Reyansh, reaching for his knife as well.

Logan jumped back out of the way just as Inyanasi's stick slashed down on Reyansh's back.

“Get back to your camel,” he commanded, his voice strong with authority.

“Your wish, Magide,” said Reyansh stiffly, his eyes flashing with suppressed rage. He glared at Dhru then turned and stalked off to his camel.

“And you,” said Inyanasi, pointing his stick at Dhru's eyes, “do not bait your brother. One day I will not be here to protect you.”

“Magide,” said Dhru, looking insolently at his father. The faint smile on his face clearly said he did not think he needed any protection.

Inyanasi stared at him until Dhru dropped his eyes then prodded him in the belly with his stick. “Back to your camel.”

Dhru grabbed the end of the stick and started to push back then thought better of it and let go again.

“Your wish, Magide,” he said with a semi-formal nod and turned to walk away.

“And you can stop your laughing,” growled Inyanasi, pointing his stick at Tejas who was standing some way away watching. It was not clear what his expression was but he certainly was not laughing. Tejas, some summers younger than his brothers, turned and scampered after the last of the camels.

“Pah,” said Inyanasi, scowling after them. “You are married, Farimi?”

“Umm, no,” said Logan, a little intimidated by Inyanasi’s overt authority.

“Keep it so,” said Inyanasi, “and never have sons. They are more trouble than they are worth. They fight each other constantly and test me at every opportunity.” He spat on the ground. “Although daughters are worse.”

“I shall bear that in mind, Inya ..., umm, Magide,” said Logan. “Do you have daughters as well?”

“Four,” said Inyanasi. “That is why I am old and grey before my time.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, wondering what to say next. “Are any of them married themselves?”

“Three are,” said Inyanasi. “I have three grandchildren now. The fourth is not much older than Tejas,” then he groaned. “Now where is that misbegotten turd cast out from Rakumi’s flock heading?” He hurried off to bring the lead camel back on track.

“Tell me, Farimi,” said Dhru as Logan caught up with him again. “Is the Farima dancing as my father says?”

“It is a form of dance,” said Logan cautiously, realising that Autumn had not mentioned that she was a Krisana. He was reluctant to explain further in case she was hiding the fact for some reason.

“It is a strange dance,” said Dhru, watching her, “but it would seem to require some considerable skill. Does she dance for the joy of living or for some other purpose?”

“She dances to keep her muscles strong and supple,” said Logan.

“Intriguing,” said Dhru. “Tell me of your life in Aferraron. One day I will visit your country and I would like to know more of it for my ignorance is great.”

* * *

“How was your exercising?” asked Logan when Autumn rejoined him.

“It was good,” she said, wiping the sweat from her face with the hem of her malu. “Twas good to be able to move freely again although I am slow and sorely in need of more practice.”

“It looked well to me,” said Logan, “although you did stumble several times.”

“That was the sand,” said Autumn, drinking from their water bottle. “It is not a firm surface and I had some difficulty getting a good footing, but it is well to practice on such ground. If I only practice in perfect conditions I will suffer when I have to fight in less than perfect conditions. With good fortune I will never have to fight in sand but should bad fortune appear it would be worse fortune to be unprepared. Still, a few days more practice and my speed should return and my timing improve.”

“I wager you are still faster than any other,” said Logan.

“It would be very ill to think so,” said Autumn. “There will always be

another who is better and to think otherwise would be to open the jaws of defeat.”

“There was nearly a fight here,” said Logan.

“I saw you come together,” said Autumn, “but a fight? Why so?”

“Reyansh said you were dancing and condemned you for such frivolity,” said Logan, “and Dhru seemed to take exception to that. Am I right in thinking that they call a woman a Farima?”

“That seems to be the case,” said Autumn. “They call me Farima and you Farimi and never use our names but I know not why.”

“Neither do I,” said Logan, “but Dhru called Reyansh a Farima and Reyansh got angry and Dhru seemed to be saying Reyansh was not all that clever. Inyanasi had to come over and break it up.”

“I imagine Reyansh would not be impressed with being called a woman,” said Autumn. “Inyanasi told me women are not held in high esteem in this country for some reason.”

“Dhru asked me why you were dancing,” said Logan. “He seems to show an interest in you although it could merely have been an opportunity to bait his brother. Can I ask why you have not told them you are a Krisana?”

“I have not thought to,” said Autumn, looking at him in some surprise. “The need has not arisen. Should I have?”

“No, 'tis your choice what you tell them,” said Logan. “Only I did not know if you had not told them for a reason so I told Dhru you were dancing to exercise your muscles, nothing more.”

“I venture it would make little difference to their opinion of me,” said Autumn, with a small smile.

“Inyanasi and Reyansh, likely not,” said Logan, “but I have a feeling Dhru has a higher opinion of you. I confess I would have liked to have told them of your prowess but I did not think you would like me to do

that.”

“Unless there is a need it is best not to,” said Autumn. “Tis only your vanity towards me that makes you want to do so. Inyanasi has already told me something of his fears about our motives and I wager if he has some knowledge of Krisanas that may increase his fears not lessen them.”

“He is afraid we will rob him?” asked Logan. He grimaced. “That could be a difficulty.”

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“Dhru was asking about our lives in Aferraron,” said Logan. “He wanted to know how we came to be travellers and I told him we took up together after I was exiled from my village on pain of death for thievery.”

“Ahh, that may excite their fears,” said Autumn. “Still, the truth is the truth and we must all accept the consequences. I wonder if there is some way we can reassure them.”

“I would think not,” said Logan. “I knew as soon as I said it that it would have been better not to but that is the way of it. Certainly if we seek to reassure with words they are likely to see that as us trying to bluff them.”

“Likely you are right,” said Autumn, thoughtfully. “I believe we are due to arrive in Waaj in two days. I had thought to keep with Inyanasi further but perhaps we should part company there. Staying with them might cause more suspicion.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “Have you any thoughts on where to go after Waaj?”

“No,” said Autumn, “beyond somewhere with water for washing. I can smell myself and feel filthy. I had never imagined there could be a place as dry as this.”

* * *

“That is the last of the food,” said Inyanasi the following evening, making himself comfortable on the sand. “We will not eat again until Waaj although we still have plenty of shayi.”

They had hobbled the camels and unloaded them and Tejas had lit a fire. He was busy making bread from the remnants of flour in the forlorn looking flour sack. There was no other food to eat and, judging by the sack, there wasn't going to be much bread either.

“Is Waaj much further?” asked Autumn, sitting a respectful distance away.

Logan sat beside her and Dhru elected to sit between her and Inyanasi. Reyansh sat the other side of Inyanasi.

“We will be there tomorrow, Yashi willing,” said Inyanasi. He rinsed his hands with water then dried them on his dirty robe.

“How do you know?” asked Autumn. “All I can see is sand and no way of telling where we are.”

“The sand grows coarser and is changing colour,” said Inyanasi, “if you but have eyes to look. We are not far from the start of the grasses at the edge of the desert.”

Autumn picked up a handful of sand and studied it in the light of the fire. It seemed much the same as the sand had been since they had landed. Perhaps the grains were a mite larger but it certainly wasn't obvious to her inexperienced eyes. The colour of the flames made it difficult to see exactly what shade of yellow the handful was.

“Your bread, Magide,” said Tejas peeling a rather small disk of flat bread from the pan he had over the fire.

Inyanasi took the bread and looked at it sadly then watched as his son followed the correct protocol by giving the guest Farimi the next piece then down through the sons in order of age. Women got their food last. Protocol also dictated that the size of each also got smaller.

“And what delights have you to tantalise us with this evening, Dhru?”

asked Inyanasi, pulling a piece off the bread and eating it.

“Alas, Magide, I have none,” said Dhru. “My thoughts did not crystallise on anything today.”

“Your thoughts never crystallise on anything practical,” snorted Reyansh.

“The practical is never as tantalising as the impractical,” said Dhru not bothering to look at him.

“Enough,” said Inyanasi and they both shut up. “I have a thought, Dhru. Tell the Farima of your thoughts on going half way. Let us see if she can shed any light on that matter.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Dhru. “A thought came to me, Farima, when we were travelling the other way to Sassese’lte. We had just left Tulbeq and it came to me that Waaj was half way between Tulbeq and the Bini ul Demir oasis.”

“Oh yes,” said Autumn. “Is Tulbeq in the desert as well?”

“No, it is on the coast,” said Dhru. “A small place but quite pleasant. There are some nice gardens there with shady places and cool ponds. Perhaps if you still travel with us I could show them to you?”

“That would be nice,” said Autumn then, pointedly, “would it not, Logan?”

“Yes indeed,” said Logan unenthusiastically. He’d already finished his bread and could have eaten a lot more.

Reyansh muttered something that sounded sarcastic and Dhru gave him a dirty look.

“My thought, however, was that in going from Tulbeq to Bini ul Demir we would have to go to Waaj first,” continued Dhru. “And, from Waaj, we would have to go to the half way point between there and Bini ul Demir. From that point we would then have to go half way again, and

then again and again. Each time going to the half way point.”⁶

“Well, yes,” said Autumn. “Clearly.”

“And just as clearly, the half way point is only ever half way to where we want to go,” said Dhru. “So, my difficulty is this. If we always have to go to the half way point first, then to the next half way point then the next, there will always be another place that is half way between where we are and Bini ul Demir and so we can never get to Bini ul Demir, because no matter how far we travel we will still have some place that is half way between where we are and Bini ul Demir.”

“Clearly this is absurd,” said Inyanasi, “as we reached Bini ul Demir and went on to Sassese’lte and have come back.”

“I agree it is absurd,” said Dhru, “but I cannot explain it and nor could the Magide or my brothers.”

“You wish me to explain it to you?” asked Autumn.

“If you are able,” said Inyanasi in a lazy challenging way. Reyansh snorted, quietly but derisively.

“It is not a difficult problem,” said Autumn, “although I am not certain I am able to explain it to your satisfaction.”

“You think us incapable of understanding?” demanded Reyansh, leaning forward belligerently.

“Be still, boy,” said Inyanasi. “You have not been able to explain it, nor I, even though it is clearly false. Mayhap the Farima has the way of it and if she does we will find out if you are able to understand. Farima?”

“The difficulty lies in the way the problem is presented,” said Autumn. “You are somewhere and go somewhere else and stop to look for the next half way place. Then you go to that place and stop there and

6 Intriguingly this is, more or less, a rewording of a paradox first stated on Earth by the Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea in the 5th century BCE. Autumn’s explanation is not without flaws but as Aristotle himself was unable to satisfactorily refute Zeno, Autumn should not be condemned for her efforts.

look again for the next half way place. By stopping each time and only going on to the next half way place you will never get to Bini ul Demir because that is never your destination. Your destination, the way the problem is presented, is always only the next half way place.”

“But if we pick a place that is twice as far away as Bini ul Demir, Bini ul Demir will be half way there,” said Dhru, “but we will still not reach it as we still have to go half way to Bini ul Demir before getting to Bini ul Demir.”

“Clearly,” said Autumn. “But you have excluded time from the problem and time is always a factor in travelling for you must travel through time as well as places. If you do not think in terms of stopping at each half way place and instead think about the movement through time you will see that all of these half way places you talk of are but places you pass through in the time it takes to get to your destination, not stopping places in their own right.”

“So you are saying that if I take one pace forward,” said Logan, “my foot will land one pace away on the ground and one pace away in time as well?”

“That is right,” said Autumn. “You have moved forward but at the same time you have aged. And in taking that pace you have covered all the places between where your foot was and where it will be but you have also covered all the times between where your foot was and where it will be. You are not moving your foot to half a pace away then half of half a pace further on. You move your foot one pace and encompass everything in between in that one pace in both time and ground. If you ignore time then the problem is as Dhru stated but you cannot ignore time.”

“But surely if I move for an amount of time I must have moved for half that amount of time first,” said Dhru, “and before that half of that half amount of time. Surely it is the same problem only in terms of time instead of distance?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, “but only if you think in terms of time. To understand the explanation of the problem you have to think in terms of time and distance together. It takes a certain time to travel a

distance and a certain distance to travel a time and between them all the places in distance and time between leaving and arriving become part of one continuous movement.”

“Hah,” said Inyanasi with a laugh. “I wager the Farima was right, Reyansh. Most likely you still do not understand.”

“I still say there be only one boat,” said Reyansh huffily, “whether or not it is half way to anywhere.”

“Think on it while you sleep,” said Autumn. “I did not mean to cause any offence, only to explain the problem as given. Mayhap we can talk on it again in the morning before we leave.”

“I think not,” thought Evincar, as he lay, unheard and unseen, at the top of the dune watching them. “You will all be dead before dawn.”

Chapter Thirteen

The attack came in the pre-dawn light as Astauand prepared to walk the sky.

The camels were dotted around, squat on their bellies. Inyanasi and his sons had just finished their shayi. Tejas was kicking sand over the burning dung. Dhru and Reyansh were walking over to the wooden racks to put them on the camels. Inyanasi was facing a dune, relieving himself. Logan was still snoring quietly, oblivious to the movement around him. Autumn was three paces up the side of the other dune, heading for the top and a period of quiet meditation. The traders would not let her help with the loading.

It was more likely chance than destiny that left only Autumn facing the attackers when they attacked. It made very little difference to the outcome.

The attackers, eleven of them, ragged but armed to the teeth and mounted on camels, swept over the crest of the dune and surged down on the traders' camp. Led by Evincar they were confident that their eleven on camels plus the element of surprise would be more than a match for the five traders on foot. The presence of a woman was barely noted except, perhaps, for some entertainment after the important work, the division of the spoils, was done. It was an oversight that Evincar lived to regret.

Autumn became aware of the swishing of sand as the camels topped the crest and started down. The attackers stayed silent, hoping for a few extra seconds of surprise but it was instantly apparent that they were not casual travellers descending for casual conversation in the dim half light. She hefted her staff and shouted "Attack!" and prepared to do battle.

Inyanasi, caught mid-pee, was the slowest to react and had barely managed to turn before Logan, not far away, was sitting up and reaching for his knife. Reyansh and Dhru reacted faster and ran to get their swords which were propped in the sand beside the pile of luggage. Tejas did not have a sword but he did carry a long knife which he kept slung from a cord around his waist.

The main thrust of the attack was slower in arriving than planned. Evincar was at the front and in the centre with his men spread out each side of him. In the few instants it took for him to descend Autumn had moved to intercept him, thrusting her staff between the camel's front legs. As the camel fell she twisted and kicked high at the one beside it, avoiding the down slash of the rider's sword. She caught the second camel on the side of its head and knocked it unconscious. Both camels fell to the ground. Evincar was thrown forward and landed face down in the sand, winded and befuddled by the unexpected development. The rider of the other camel was not so lucky. He fell as his camel collapsed underneath him and its weight, pulling down the slope, trapped his leg beneath it. The camel to his side, unable to react in time, kicked him in the head, killing him instantly. That camel then veered over and ran into the one next to it and they became briefly entangled.

One dead, one dismounted and two entangled, and they had not yet reached the bottom of the slope. It was not the attackers' lucky day.

Autumn rolled in the sand after kicking the camel and used the downhill slope to launch herself at the closer of the two remaining that side. The man had let his sword arm drop to help him manoeuvre and she caught him squarely in the side of his chest, pinning his sword to his side. He fell off the camel, Autumn's arms firmly gripping him and she managed to kick the haunch of the last camel as she fell with him. That camel bucked and threw its rider on top of her then both camels, riderless, ran off. Autumn landed on her back in the sand with the attacker on top of her. She thrust upwards with her hips and tossed him away then leapt to her feet. The other, the one she had forced off his camel, was lying in the sand, winded and clutching his shoulder. She kicked him in the head, knocking him unconscious then, sensing the other getting to his feet, lashed out backwards with her arm. He was slower than she had expected and consequently she missed completely, but she followed through with the turn and he thrust his sword at her belly but she twisted out of the way and caught his sword hand and pulled him off balance before chopping down with her hand on the back of his neck, breaking his spine.

The five riders on Evincar's other side were forced to head a little back up the side of the dune to avoid their fallen leader but they

remained focussed on their targets and were joined moments later by the two from the downhill side who had become entangled but had managed to disentangle themselves. They swept on, leaving Autumn behind. She gave chase, pausing only briefly to clip Evincar as she passed. He collapsed unconscious, his days as leader ended. Whatever the outcome the men would not accept such ignominy.

Little Tejas did well. Unseen by the rider he thrust up with his knife, slicing the camel's chest. Not enough to do it serious injury but enough to dismount the rider. Astonished with his success and fairly bursting with youthful enthusiasm, Tejas stabbed a burning camel turd with his bloodied knife and pushed it into the man's face causing him to scream and drop his sword, allowing Tejas to bury his knife, still encrusted with burning dung, in the man's throat.

Dhru was not so lucky. He had snatched at his sword and dropped it. As he bent to pick it up a camel's knee caught him on the side of the head and he fell, unconscious. But then, perhaps he had been lucky. If he had not bent he would have caught the downward swing of the rider's sword and may well have ended his days in that lonely stretch of sand.

Reyansh, however, was more of a fighter than his brother. His grip on his sword was strong and secure and he faced two riders bravely. He leapt at the one to his left just as the one to his right slashed downwards and its tip managed little more than to cut his upper arm. The other rider's sword was on the wrong side and Reyansh was able to stab the man deeply in his thigh and catch his foot in his hand, pulling him to the ground where they struggled to end each other's life.

Five attackers alone from the original eleven remained on their camels and they all descended on Inyanasi and Logan. Experienced in the ways of desert fighting Inyanasi threw himself to the ground, dragging Logan down with him for camels will not step on things if they can possibly avoid them. The five attackers swept past, their swords slashing down at empty air. They carried on some distance then dragged their camels around. Reyansh, fresh from his kill, joined his father and Logan the merest fraction of a second after Autumn who had snatched up Logan's staff as she ran.

“Get back and lie down,” shouted Autumn leaping over Inyanasi and Logan to face the riders.

She planted the staff in the sand and leapt upwards, kicking out with both feet. One foot caught one rider in the head, the other on his shoulder. Both were knocked to the sand as Autumn used the staff to land on her feet. Instantly she pulled the staff from the sand and stabbed it at another rider, breaking two of his ribs. The remaining two riders urged their camels away then reined them in some way distant. In the increasing light they could see they had lost the advantage and that they alone remained. They looked at each other then, in wordless accord, wheeled their camels and urged them up the dune and away. Moments later the man Autumn had knocked unconscious at the beginning chased after them, on foot.

“I got one, my father!” screamed Tejas excitedly, running over. “I got one!” He was waving his knife alarmingly.

Inyanasi and Logan climbed to their feet as Autumn slowly walked back.

“What did you say, my son?” asked Inyanasi.

“I killed one of them!” said Tejas proudly. “That one over there, look.”

“Ahh, my boy, my boy, come here,” said Inyanasi, hugging him. “By the blood of Wahah you have done well. Are you hurt?”

“No, father,” said Tejas proudly. “I got him in the throat, come and see!”

“In a moment, my son,” said Inyanasi. “Reyansh, Dhru, Farimi, are you injured?”

“Reyansh is cut,” said Autumn, going to look at his arm. She had already seen that Logan was unhurt.

“It is nothing but a scratch,” said Reyansh. “I regret I only killed one of the scum.”

“And you, Dhru?” asked Inyanasi.

“I was kicked in the head, Magide,” said Dhru, “but otherwise I am unhurt, save my pride. I dropped my sword.”

“You are bleeding!” said Logan suddenly, seeing blood on the side of Autumn's neck. “Did one of them get you?”

“Where?” asked Autumn, looking down at herself.

“Your neck,” said Logan, pulling aside her pony tail. “Ahh, your cut has reopened. Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“No,” said Autumn.

“Dhru, attend to the Farima's wound then Reyansh,” said Inyanasi. “Farimi, if I can prevail upon you we will see how these others fare. Tejas, you come too.”

* * *

“There was no need to kill him,” said Autumn, running over. “He was no longer a threat.”

“He had broken ribs and would not live long in the desert,” said Inyanasi. “Such scum are not worthy to live anyway.”

“Ah well,” said Autumn, “the deed is done. But you will not kill the other three. I will not permit it.”

“You have a soft heart, Farima,” said Inyanasi, “but you do them no favours. They will die when we get to Waaj. All you do is prolong their misery for a day.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but we will at the least take them to Waaj.”

“Reyansh, bind them,” said Inyanasi with a shrug. “Then join us at the fire for we will have an accounting and the laying of praise and blame.”

“Why do we waste time binding them, Magide?” said Reyansh crossly.

“Because I say so,” said Inyanasi firmly. “Do I need to repeat myself?”

“No, Magide,” said Reyansh. He scowled and went to find some rope.

Inyanasi went over to where the fire had been and flicked some still glowing embers out of the sand. He added some more from one of Tejas' bags of droppings then unpacked the kettle and cups to make more shayi. Autumn and Logan sat on the sand, waiting. Reyansh joined them a few minutes later.

The shayi was made and poured before Dhru and Tejas returned from rounding up the loose camels.

“We found some food in their saddlebags, Magide,” said Tejas, carrying over some dried fruit and flour.

“Good,” said Inyanasi. “We will eat then continue on our way.”

Tejas ran to get his bread pan and Dhru sat.

“How many?” asked Inyanasi.

“Seven,” said Dhru.

“That is most excellent,” said Inyanasi. “Now, to business. Of those who attacked, five are dead, three are tied and I saw three get away. Did any of you see more get away?”

There was a general shaking of heads.

“Good, but we must not tarry here long as those three may meet up with others and return,” said Inyanasi. “But on the profit side we have seven camels which can be sold when we get to Waaj, as well as weapons, clothes and whatever else they carried. As to losses, well, we were most fortunate to suffer nothing more than a scratch to Reyansh's arm. It is now time to lay praise and blame.”

“What blame is there to lay?” asked Autumn. “We were attacked and

we prevailed. Is that not the end of it?"

"There is much blame to be laid," said Inyanasi standing up. "I am the head of this caravan and I failed in my duty to protect the goods and the people and it is only due to fortune that we are not all dead and the goods stolen. I am wholly to blame and I step down as head. Reyansh, it falls to you to take over."

Reyansh stared at his father for a few moments, a mixture of expressions on his face.

"No, father," he said quietly. "You are Magide and you will continue as long as you are alive."

"Is this your final word?" asked Inyanasi.

"Yes, Magide," said Reyansh.

"Very well," said Inyanasi, sitting down again. "Tejas!"

"Yes, Magide," said Tejas sitting up proudly beside the fire.

"Today you killed for the first time," said Inyanasi. "I am proud of you, my son."

"Thank you, Magide," said Tejas, looking as though he was about to burst.

"Reyansh," said Inyanasi. "You, too, killed today. I am proud of you, my son."

"Thank you, Magide," said Reyansh, "but I should have killed more."

"Perhaps," said Inyanasi, "but there is no shame upon you. Dhru."

"Yes, Magide?" said Dhru.

"You killed no one today," said Inyanasi, "but that is not where your skills lie. Most importantly, you survived unhurt. I am proud of you, my son."

“Thank you, Magide,” said Dhru. “I am sure I would have killed at least one of them but I dropped my sword in my hurry.”

“Then remedy that with more practice,” said Inyanasi, “but do not forget that you were able to get to your sword whereas I, your Magide, was caught pissing. Carry my pride in you with honour, my son.”

“Yes, Magide,” said Dhru.

“Now, to other matters,” said Inyanasi.

“Is that all the praise you are going to give?” burst out Logan in surprise.

Inyanasi scowled at him and held up his hand for silence.

“Tejas killed one,” he said. “Reyansh killed one and yet there are five dead. There are also three others who are bound. These numbers need some explaining do they not, Farima?”

“What explanation do you want?” asked Autumn.

“I would like to know how it is that you, a Farima and a stranger among us, both aid us in an attack by bandits and prevail with such effect,” said Inyanasi.

Autumn shrugged. “I am a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume,” she said, “of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup.”

Inyanasi and the others stared at her.

“Do not forget the Yeinoba Vyliacennie im Rozum ny Duch Esyup,” said Logan.

“They do not want to know about that,” said Autumn.

Logan snorted. “Autumn is also the founder of the Yeinoba Vyliacennie im Rozum ny Duch Esyup,”⁷ he said proudly.

7 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Fourth Tale*.

“Do not be impressed by that,” said Autumn. “That Esiyup has only one other besides myself and it has no Krisanas.”

“You are a Krisana?” said Inyanasi in disbelief. “Of Mizule and Morath? Warriors and wars?”

“And Vallume,” said Autumn. “Umm, is that a problem?”

“Truly the gods have smiled upon us,” said Inyanasi. “Ayeyyayeyah, that explains a lot.” He paused for a moment. “That which I thought was dancing, it is not dancing, is it.”

“What is dancing but a style of movement,” said Autumn. “That is all I do, move my body in certain ways. I am content to call it dance.”

“Hah,” said Inyanasi. “No dance I have seen can kill a man or fell a camel. Farima, tell me, no, I cannot call you Farima any longer and yet Autumn does not seem a worthy name for one with skills such as yours.”

“Autumn is my name,” said Autumn. “I would be pleased if you knew me as such.”

“Then so be it,” said Inyanasi. “From this moment on you will be known as Autumn in my family. I would be proud if you knew me as Inyanasi and I beg you forgive the great wrong that I have done you.”

“You have done me no wrong,” said Autumn with a puzzled glance at Logan.

“To my undying shame, and indeed this is a day of shame I will never forget,” said Inyanasi. “I have doubted your motives since when we met and that contributed to this attack this day. Had I been less watchful of you and more watchful of the desert around we would not have been caught. In my vain stupidity I suspected you of ill intent towards us. It is now clear to me that had you meant us any harm you could have wiped us from the face of this land at any time. Even in your exhausted state at our first encounter I wager you could have bested us.”

“You gave us aid,” said Autumn. “The skills to which you refer I use only to protect those who need protection. It would be no more possible for me to do you harm or take your goods than it would be for Logan here to fly in the air like a bird.”

“Ahh, Logan,” said Inyanasi, looking at him. “You are a Krisana as well as a thief?”

“Oh, Dhru told you, did he?” asked Logan. “I should not have said that. No, I am not a Krisana.”

“But you are a thief?” asked Inyanasi.

“I, umm, have been known, from time to time, to take things that do not belong to me,” said Logan.

“He does not tell the entire story,” said Autumn.

“And what, Autumn Krisana, is the entire story?” asked Inyanasi.

“Both his parents died when he was but ten summers,” said Autumn. “Logan only took what he needed to survive.”

“She speaks truth?” asked Inyanasi, then “but how could a Krisana lie?” before Logan could answer. “I accept your words. So, Farimi, you will permit me and my family to call you Logan henceforth?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” said Logan. “Umm, should I call you Inyanasi?”

“No,” said Autumn and everyone, including Tejas, looked at her in surprise. “Inyanasi is the head of his family and welcomes us. We should call him Magide. It is only fitting.”

“It does not sit well with me for one such as you to call me Magide,” said Inyanasi. “Please, call me Inyanasi.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “Is there anything else you wish to know about either of us?”

“Yes,” said Inyanasi. “There is the matter of payment for your aid in

our time of peril this dawn.”

“No payment is required, Inyanasi,” said Autumn. “I have vowed to protect those in need where possible. Moreover you gave us aid and did not ask for payment.”

“I fancy your aid to us has been far greater than our aid to you,” said Inyanasi.

“That is arguable,” said Autumn, “for how do you measure aid when the need for it arises? Either you give aid or you withhold it. There is no in between.”

“That may prove a fruitful topic for discussion next time Dhru is unable to think of a way to tantalise us,” said Inyanasi. “But, if you insist, I shall not press the matter.”

“On reflection,” said Autumn, “there is a payment you can grant me and one that would accord with my vows.”

“If it is within my power it shall be so,” said Inyanasi. “What is it?”

“The three who are bound,” said Autumn. “Release them and give them back their camels.”

Chapter Fourteen

“How was your flight, Magide?” asked Kishli, slipping off Subota's slippers and easing off the thick socks.

“It was unusually cold today,” said Subota with a shiver, “but then it always is when the day is tinged with blue. Fetch me some hot usos for I need something more warming than shayi.”

“At once, Magide,” said Kishli then, in a whisper, “would you like me to warm you in our special way, orchid of my life?”

His hand strayed to touch Subota's neck then started to slowly slide down his chest. Subota sighed and took Kishli's hand.

“Ahh, you offer more temptations than, ohh, I know not what, something that is overly tempting,” he whispered back then kissed Kishli's fingertips. “Perhaps you should be the simile and people will come to say that something offers more temptations than a Kishli. What do you say to that, eh?”

“It would be a false simile,” whispered Kishli, “for it is you that are the temptation, not I.”

“Ahhh, enough,” muttered Subota, reluctantly dropping Kishli's hand. “Now is not the time although I pray it is cold in our bed tonight. When you have brought the usos, send word to the palace. I have some news the Karoi may wish to hear.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Kishli. returning to his role of the efficient servant.

Subota watched him leave then picked up his draft copy of the *Proceedings of the Guild of Metamagikers*. The scroll had been delivered the previous day from the scribes for his approval and there was an item he wanted to consider more carefully before its final copying. The item was by a young matsafa by the name of Picsel who was beginning to make a name for himself on the fringes with his highly speculative opinions and ideas. This particular item, though short, was very radical and intrigued Subota but he had to take care. The

addition by the scribes of any comment from the Sarauta Matsafa to an item in the *Proceedings* was considered a great honour for the person commented on but the ramifications could be considerable. For this reason, Subota was reluctant to give his endorsement of Pítsel lightly.

When Kishli returned, Subota was sitting on the grass in the garden outside his study tapping the scroll and staring at a stake in the nearby flowerbed that was supporting a newly planted bloom.

“Your usos, Magide,” said Kishli, approaching softly.

Subota seemed not to hear so Kishli put the cup on the grass beside him, close enough to reach but not so close as to risk being knocked over, and retired to a shady spot to wait. Subota did not move, beyond the tapping of his finger, until a messenger came into the garden to whisper to Kishli. He saw Kishli suddenly look anxious then dismiss the messenger.

“What did he want?” asked Subota, noticing the glass of usos. He picked it up and sniffed it then put it back down again. He had warmed up in the sun and no longer needed a stiff drink, and certainly not one that had gone cold.

“The messenger was from the Karoi, Magide,” said Kishli, torn between waiting on Subota and going to the front of the house. “The Karoi is attending a ceremony in the city shortly and will visit here on his way past.”

“Soros is coming here?” asked Subota, raising his eyebrows in surprise. “Here?”

“Indeed, Magide,” said Kishli.

“How strange,” said Subota, looking down at the scroll. “Why is he coming here?”

“The messenger only said he will be coming past, Magide,” said Kishli. “Perhaps he wishes to spare you the walk.”

“Unlikely,” said Subota. “Is the house presentable?”

“Of course, Magide,” said Kishli, slightly affronted by the question. He kept the house in perfect order.

“Do we have suitable refreshments available?” asked Subota. “Not that it matters. Soros never eats away from the palace unless he brings it with him but we have to play the part.”

“Of course, Magide,” said Kishli. “We have a few delicacies that may tempt his palette.”

“Then there is nothing else to do except wait upon the Karoi's pleasure,” said Subota. “When he has gone, take this to the scribes,” and he tossed the scroll to Kishli who caught it dextrously, “and tell them to copy it without the item by Picsel.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Kishli. He hesitated then quickly skimmed the scroll. “The one entitled *On Unbound Umbra*, Magide?”

“Yes, yes,” said Subota getting stiffly to his feet. “Tell them to put it in the next edition instead.”

Kishli inspected Subota and neatly removed two grass clippings from the back of his tufafi.

“Shall I give them a reason, Magide?” asked Kishli, re-rolling the scroll.

“I wish to give it further consideration,” said Subota. He stooped to pick up his glass of usos. “Oh, and send word to Picsel that I wish him to dine with me.”

“Will this be alone or in a party, Magide?” asked Kishli.

“Alone,” said Subota. “I wish to ...”

“Somewhat early in the day for drinking, is it not?” came Soros' voice. It should have boomed, as befitted his stature, but it was a little too high pitched. “You have a new passion I should know about?”

“Great One,” said Subota, startled. He turned to look to where the voice had come from. “This? This is purely to warm me after my travels and I do not touch the stuff otherwise. You honour me with your presence in my humble garden.”

Soros was standing in the side entrance to the garden, looking around at the floral arrangements. Immediately behind him stood the Royal Shader, holding an embroidered cloth on a stick to protect Soros from the light of Astauand. Behind him in turn were two bodyguards, each even larger than the Karoi. Soros flicked his hand at the bodyguards and stepped inside the garden then stood waiting impatiently while the Royal Shader disentangled the shade cloth from a protruding twig that had snagged it. Soros made him nervous and he fumbled with the cloth. Soros sighed and pulled the cloth from the twig himself.

“It is his first day,” he said casually to Subota, “and may well turn out to be his last.”

The Royal Shader quivered, acutely aware of the bodyguards behind him, each armed with keen swords and keener ambitions, and nervously picked at some loose threads where the twig had snagged.

Soros strode into the garden and looked around while Subota made flicking movements with his fingers at Kishli who rapidly disappeared to get refreshments.

“What are these?” asked Soros, going to stand in front of some tall and highly ornate plants.

“They are a new plant of my own design, Great One,” said Subota joining him. “As you doubtless recall my pleasure is to garden when I am not otherwise engaged. This one is based on a bird I have seen on my travels in the East. I have been attempting to replicate it through cross-breeding and this is the result of my endeavours thus far.”

“The shape and colours are what caught my eye,” said Soros, reaching out to touch the bloom. “I have seen such a bird myself and this blue green leaf much resembles its beak, as do the yellow ones the feathers adorning its head. What do you call it?”

“I had intended to call it the Bird of Paradise, Great One,” said Subota, “after the bird itself but if it pleases you I would be honoured to name it after you.”

“The Soros,” said Soros, thoughtfully. “No, it does not capture the beauty of the plant. How about the Paradise of Soros?”

“A most noble and descriptive name, Great One,” said Subota.

“I am glad you approve, Subota,” said Soros sardonically. “My First Gardener will attend you and you will make arrangements to have some planted outside my sleeping chamber so I can enjoy them when I rise.”

“Your wish, Great One,” said Subota. “May I offer you some refreshments? My servant is ...”

“This is only a short visit, Subota old friend,” said Soros interrupting him. He turned to look at some other plants. “Ahh, it has been a long time since I last visited you and that is remiss of me. I should come more often and talk with you of learned things, but, alas, affairs of state take up much of my time. You have news for me?”

“Indeed, Great One,” said Subota, noticing Kishli reappear with a large tray replete with many dishes and cups. He waved him away. “I observed the Roinad this very morning. There would seem to have been developments.”

“Tell me,” said Soros, turning his eyes directly on Subota. They were normal in size but looked small because of the size of his head.

“It would seem that the Roinad had a secret meeting in the desert,” said Subota. “Regretfully I was not observing when the meeting took place but it occurred in the night which is highly suspicious of itself and involved at least six other persons. I followed their tracks and found two groups of three, each travelling in slightly different directions but both groups heading generally to the South East and deeper into the desert.”

“What manner of people were they?” asked Soros, frowning.

“They were ragged,” said Subota, “but that is an easy disguise for there are many ragged people around the desert.”

“Could they not have been bandits?” asked Soros. “The desert is infested with such rabble.”

“I did think on that, Great One,” said Subota, “but the Roinad's party seemed unharmed and their camels intact. Moreover, I cannot see that the skilled fighters the Roinad undoubtedly has with him would beat off a raid without injury or loss and yet permit such attackers to retreat. If they had been bandits they would most certainly have all been killed.”

“A good point,” said Soros. “So it was a meeting, then. But with whom, I wonder.”

“There is one other thing, Great One,” said Subota. “Beyond the meeting in the night I was also disturbed by something else. There were signs that some quantity of things had been buried at the site of the meeting.”

“What manner of things?” demanded Soros.

“I do not know, Great One,” said Subota. “As you know, when I fly I can only observe and I was not there to observe when the burying was done, but the area dug up was quite large. Perhaps a cache of food or weapons. For certain those heading to the South East carried no burden so I venture they delivered whatever was buried. They also left some additional camels which no doubt had been used for the delivery and may well be used when the cache is retrieved.”

“Food? Weapons?” said Soros, puzzled. “Why would the Roinad come to my land in secrecy and bury food and weapons?”

“I cannot be certain it was food or weapons, Great One,” said Subota. “Mayhap it was treasure.”

“You think he seeks to raise a rebellion and needs treasure for funding?” asked Soros, scowling. “No, this makes no sense. If he has treasure to pay for an army why not carry it with him? Why bury it in

the desert?"

"Perhaps it is in preparation for the future," said Subota. "And when the time comes these caches of buried treasure or weapons can be quickly retrieved rather than sent over from Aferraron."

"There is more than one such cache?" asked Soros quickly.

"I know only of the one, Great One," said Subota, "but the Roinad has not been long here. No doubt he plans other such caches."

"Hmmm," said Soros, stroking his short beard. "And the ones he met? They were of Neander or somewhere else?"

"They had the appearance of men of Neander, Great One," said Subota. "For certain they were not of Wase or Sassese'lte although they could be of Nagitere or further to the South. Such people are similar to us in features."

"And they were heading South," mused Soros. "Surely that churlish bastard would not be plotting against me?"

"Do you mean the Bistup of Nagitere, Great One?" asked Subota.

"Raotou has not the subtlety nor wit to plot," said Soros, irritably flapping his hand at the Royal Shader, giving the man momentary heart palpitations. "But he could be manipulated by those that have designs and this Roinad would certainly seem to have more subtlety and guile than his predecessor. You, fetch Buxar."

The bodyguard bared his teeth and went to collect Buxar from the Royal Procession waiting patiently outside Subota's house.

"You say the Roinad is heading for Waaj?" asked Soros.

"Yes, Great One," said Subota. "He should be there this very evening."

Soros stared at him, thinking. "And after that?" he asked as Buxar entered the garden.

“I would expect him to continue on to Tulbeq, Great One,” said Subota. “If he continues to maintain his guise as a trader then that would cause no comment. It is also the quickest way to Cim-Irsou if that is his intent.”

“Buxar, send word to Waaj and Tulbeq,” said Soros. “I want information concerning this party of traders, but send people with wit and discretion. I do not want the Roinad to know that enquiries are being made about him. I do not want to force his hand as yet.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Buxar, making a mental note to get the details from Subota.

“And send someone to uncover what was buried,” said Soros.

“That will be difficult, Great One,” said Subota. “The cache was buried in the desert and it will be difficult to find for I cannot give accurate directions. It would be necessary to find their tracks and follow them back but there are many tracks leading out of Waaj.”

“But you know where the cache is, do you not?” barked Soros.

“Indeed, Great One,” said Subota, “but I regret I cannot talk with anyone when I am observing, save my servant Kishli who is trained in such things. To lead a searcher there I would need to send messages back through Kishli which will take many days to be delivered to the searchers.”

“That is unsatisfactory,” said Soros, glowering at Subota.

“That is the nature of my realm, Great One,” said Subota. “There are few points of contact with this world. Perhaps you should take up the matter with the Creator of the Cosmos.”⁸

“Do not be insolent with me, Matsafa,” said Soros coldly. “Being Sarauta does not protect you entirely.”

8 Interestingly, although the pantheons of the various peoples on Mottle Blue are extensive, only one, the people of Wase, have a creation myth. In Aferraron, for example, there is a presumption that the deities and the world have been in existence since the beginning of time.

“My humblest apologies for giving the impression of insolence, Great One,” said Subota bowing deeply before Soros. “I was merely trying to illustrate the difficulties inherent in such undertakings.”

“When you are Karoi you cannot entertain difficulties.” said Soros. “Buxar, send men to follow every track out of Waaj and look for signs of anything buried and dig up whatever is there.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Buxar, wondering just how many tracks out of Waaj there actually were and how far the diggers would have to keep looking. The manpower and the cost would be considerable.

“Is that everything, Subota?” asked Soros. “Oh, Buxar, instruct the First Gardener to attend Subota. He is to arrange a planting of these outside my bedchamber. Are they not lovely?”

“Indeed, Great One,” said Buxar.

“How are your matrimonial plans progressing, Subota?” asked Soros.

“But slowly, Great One,” said Subota. “There are many women and the choice is daunting.”

“Leave it not too long,” said Soros. “There are clouds gathering on your horizon. I must be off. There is a delegation waiting for me in the city.”

He strode towards the garden entrance, his Royal Shader in tow.

“Why is he going to the city, Buxar?” asked Subota quietly. “Do not delegations always go to the palace?”

“There is a dispute currently in progress between three of the Karena,” muttered Buxar. “The Karoi will get no peace at the palace until it is resolved. I will visit you on our return for details about these enquiries that are to be undertaken.”

“BUXAR!” came the Karoi’s voice. Buxar rolled his eyes then hurried away.

“Did you hear that, Kishli?” asked Subota when Kishli emerged from the house.

“I regret not, Magide,” said Kishli. “It was not seemly for me to be in the presence of the Karoi.

“It would appear that not even the Karoi gets peace from his wives,” said Subota sadly. “If he cannot, how will I?”

“The Karoi has ninety three wives,” said Kishli, matter of factly. “I wager no man could keep that many women quiet.”

“Ahh well,” said Subota. “One it will have to be, and soon. The Great One raised the matter again. He said that there are clouds gathering on my horizon and I do not think he meant I will be receiving the blessings of rain. Have you had any more thoughts on the matter?”

“I did occur to me, Magide,” said Kishli, “that it might be wise for me to spread word of your search quietly and see who comes forward. That way you can make your choice from those already pre-disposed to the idea.”

“I suppose it would be easier,” said Subota. “It would be embarrassing to offer marriage and be rejected.”

“Indeed, Magide,” said Kishli. “And worse, if it became known you had made such an offer to several and been rejected, others may bear you ill will for not having approached them sooner and be less amicably inclined towards you. I know little of women but I do not believe that any would like to be the last choice rather than the first.”

“Well, logically, the one who accepts will of necessity be the last choice, Kishli,” said Subota, “even if she is the first to be approached. I will not go through this more than once.”

“I do not think in these matters it is a question of logic,” said Kishli. “I think it is more one of status among the lady's peers and to be approached after another has rejected you will not auger well.”

Chapter Fifteen

Inyanasi grunted as though he had made a decision.

“Tejas,” he called, turning to beckon him from the back of the line of camels.

“Magide,” called Tejas, running forward.

“It is time for you to take on new responsibility, my son,” said Inyanasi, putting his arm on Tejas' shoulder. “Do you think you can find due East using only Astauand?”

“Yes, Magide,” said Tejas.

He glanced to check Astauand was still where he thought it was then raised his arm and pointed reasonably accurately to due East.

“Good,” said Inyanasi. “Take one of the new camels and head due East until you see Waaj then go to the village. Buy food for us then find a place for us to spend the night this side of Waaj. We will find you there.”

“What food shall I buy, Magide?” asked Tejas, looking a little worried at the new responsibility being thrust upon him.

“I leave that to you, my son,” said Inyanasi gravely.

Tejas pursed his lips then straightened his back.

“Your wish, Magide,” he said very formally then turned and scampered back to the end of the line to select a camel. He didn't bother to make the camel kneel, he just untied the end one and leapt onto its neck and slid down to its hump. The camel tried to bite him and spat its disgust. Tejas whacked it on the back of its head before urging it forward and into a trot.

Inyanasi held up his arm as Tejas drew level and he slowed the camel to a walk.

“Are you not forgetting something?” asked Inyanasi.

“Magide?” asked Tejas, his face a mass of confusion as he tried to think of what he might have forgotten.

Inyanasi snorted and pulled a small leather pouch from inside his robe. He counted out some coins and handed them to Tejas.

“The first rule of trade,” said Inyanasi, not letting go of the coins. “Always check the buyer has money before trading. Remember that, Tejas.”

“Yes, Magide,” said Tejas crestfallen.

Inyanasi released the coins and Tejas juggled them in his hand for a few moments then wrapped them in the corner of his robe and tied it into a knot.

“When am I to expect you, Magide?” he asked, hauling on the camel's rein to stop it returning to the comfort of its companions.

“Not before Plakill is risen,” said Inyanasi.

Tejas nodded and whacked the camel again. It broke into an ungainly trot heading a little to the West of North and Tejas had to fight to make it go East. The lead camel watched with disdain and continued its plodding. Inyanasi watched Tejas as he swayed from side to side until he was barely visible in the distance.

“May Musafir guide you safely, my son,” he whispered softly.

“You seem troubled, Inyanasi,” said Autumn, drawing level with him.

“The desert is no place for the inexperienced,” said Inyanasi. “But how else will he gain experience other than by experiencing?”

“Ah,” said Autumn. “This is very true.”

“I had another son,” said Inyanasi, his face showing his pain. “Balén was his name and between Dhru and Tejas in age. I sent him alone

into the desert on just such a mission as this and he did not return.”

Autumn hesitated then put her hand on Inyanasi's arm by way of comfort. Inyanasi looked at it and raised an eyebrow and she withdrew it again. Inyanasi was not a man who sought the comfort of others.

“So this is in the manner of a test?” she asked after a few paces.

“Indeed, Autumn,” said Inyanasi with barely the slightest hesitation with her name. “We will not be arriving at Waaj until late in the night. I could make a camp but we have no food and it is a good opportunity for the boy. In this way I can test more than his sense of direction.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn.

“I have left it up to him to decide what food to get,” said Inyanasi. “We may end up with little more than sweetmeats but I have faith in the boy. I expect he will take his responsibilities seriously.”

“He seems a sensible lad,” said Autumn, “although I find it difficult to find my way in this land when there is little but sand in all directions. Is there a secret to it?”

“There is no secret,” said Inyanasi. “Mostly it is just using Astauand by day and the Sisters and the stars by night.”

“When Logan and I came from the sea,” said Autumn, “we followed the coast for a while then ventured inland when we saw some green things growing but lost sight of the sea and could not find it again. It should have been to the North but we travelled North for a whole day but there was nothing but sand until we found your tracks.”

“We have travelled some way South of the sea,” said Inyanasi, frowning. “You must have gone South not North.”

“So it would seem,” said Autumn, “although I kept Astauand at my back.”

“Ahh, there is your error,” said Inyanasi. “Astauand goes to the North

so you should have followed it.”

“That is not so,” said Autumn. “We have travelled much in Aferraron and Astauand rises in the East, heads to the South and sets in the West. It has never failed me before.”

“Perhaps that is so in Aferraron,” said Inyanasi, “but in Neander and those parts of Sassese’lte that I have been to, Astauand rises in the East, goes to the North and sets in the West.”

“How perplexing,” said Autumn, frowning. “Why would it go differently in another country? Logan?”

“Yes, Autumn,” said Logan, coming forward from where he had been talking with Dhru.

“Inyanasi tells me that in this place Astauand goes to the North not the South,” said Autumn.

“That is not right,” said Logan. “Astauand always goes to the South.”

“We are heading East,” said Inyanasi. “Where is Astauand now?”

“It is mid afternoon,” said Logan, “so Astauand must be to the North West,” and he pointed to Astauand then frowned.

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “If we are heading East then Astauand is in the wrong place.”

“But, ...” said Logan, “but It should be over there. Mayhap we are not heading East.”

“You are calling me for treachery?” said Inyanasi, scowling and putting his hand on his knife hilt.

“Definitely not,” said Autumn. “You know this land and can find your way across it so clearly you have the right of it. It is the understanding of myself and Logan that is at fault here.”

“I have wondered if Astauand goes the wrong way,” said Logan,

thoughtfully. "Not with any great thought but more with an uneasiness for It sometimes seems to be somewhere other than where I expect it. It also gets higher in the sky here than it used to in Aferraron."

"Now that you speak of it I have felt the same," said Autumn. "All my life I have known Astauand move in a certain way so when I felt it moved differently I dismissed it, thinking it is only my unfamiliarity with this land. For certain all the time we headed North looking for the sea we did not find it. Mayhap we were heading South after all but I would like to have an explanation."

"I cannot explain it," said Inyanasi, "and I wager none in Waaj will know for it is a poor place and small. If you go to Tulbeq you may find an answer for it is a port and receives boats from Aferraron and Wase. Them that manage those boats may know."

"Then we shall go to Tulbeq," said Autumn. "We travel in search of knowledge and this would seem a useful piece of knowledge to know."

"You say that as though you had no intent to go to Tulbeq," said Inyanasi giving her a sidelong look. "But there is little after Waaj except Tulbeq. If it is permitted, can I ask where you had planned to travel?"

"We have no plans," said Autumn. "We travel where circumstance takes us although as we are in Neander I had a vague hope to visit a friend of ours. He lives in the Skizze Mountains but I know not where they are."

"The Skizze Mountains?" said Inyanasi. "They are far to the East, between Cim-Irsou and Lizoote. Perhaps forty days travel depending on which part of the mountains your friend lives in."

"Then that would seem a good plan," said Autumn. "In forty days we will see much of this land."

"In that case," said Inyanasi, "if you do not grow too weary of our company I would be honoured if you would continue your travels with us. We only go as far as Cim-Irsou where we will sell our goods but from there to the Mountains is an easy path for the Limbis Rivers

flows from the Skizze Mountains to Cim-Irsou and it is a green and pleasant land. It is only a matter of following the river, although it will add some days to your journey for it winds and bends a lot.”

“Your offer is most kind,” said Autumn. “We normally prefer to travel alone and we had intended to part company with you at Waaj for you seemed uneasy with our presence but if you can tolerate us I venture it would be better if we did travel with you for there seem to be dangers in this land that we have not the knowledge to deal with. I suspect it will take some considerable time to learn the ways of the desert, for example.”

“A lifetime and longer,” said Inyanasi. “My family lives on the Eastern side of Cim-Irsou and I have travelled this desert for as long as I can remember and my father before me and there is much in its ways that I have yet to learn. I wager those as live in the desert their whole lives would make no claim to understanding it all. But before you make your decision there is something I must tell you.”

“Indeed?” asked Autumn.

“I have welcomed you into my family, Autumn and Logan,” said Inyanasi, “and while you were strangers I had to exercise caution and offered you an untruth. Now it would be less than honourable for me to continue with that untruth.”

“You have done us great honour, Inyanasi,” said Autumn, “and I respect your desire to keep private that which no other needs to know. But, although Logan and I seek knowledge, we do not seek any knowledge that may cause harm or suffering so please do not reveal anything to us that you would be better advised to keep to yourself, especially concerning your goods.”

“Explain yourself,” said Inyanasi, stopping suddenly and looking ferociously at her. “What do you know of our goods?”

“Nothing,” said Autumn, also stopping. Logan stopped too as it looked as though the conversation was about to become very interesting. “Save that you would not risk the life of Tejas for poor quality trinkets as you said. And, although I have little understanding

of trade and the buying and selling of goods, I cannot see that a man such as yourself would waste his time with so few goods of poor quality if they will yield him little if anything in the way of profit.”

“Yes,” said Inyanasi relaxing. “Dhru said that you would see through that deception very quickly for he sensed you had a keen mind even before we talked of the boat problem.” He started walking again. “It was a foolish deception and one I wager most would have seen through. In truth we carry spices.”

“Well, that is nice,” said Autumn. “Logan likes to add herbs to his cooking whenever he can find them and I confess I do not object to the added flavours. What spices to you carry?”

“Pepper, cardamom, cinnamon and saffron,” said Inyanasi, watching her out of the corner of his eye for her reaction.

“I have had pepper,” said Autumn, frowning slightly. “Sometimes a small quantity would find its way to my Esiyup but I do not know the others. Do you, Logan?”

“No,” said Logan. “I seem to remember there was pepper at the Roinad's palace but I did not have any and I have not heard of the others either.”

“You have been to the Roinad's palace?” said Inyanasi in surprise. “Is it not that the Roinad is the Karoi of Aferraron?”

“Yes, something like that,” said Logan, thinking he should probably not have mentioned being at the palace.

“And how came you to be at the Roinad's palace?” asked Inyanasi.

“Oh, we were imprisoned for treason,” said Logan then bumped into Inyanasi when he stopped walking again.

“Treason?” he exclaimed, looking from Logan to Autumn and back again. “Autumn, what manner of Krisana keeps company with a thief and a traitor?”

“The kind that knows her true friends,” said Autumn, “but calm yourself. It was a simple misunderstanding. We had taken our friend back to Neander and were arrested on our return. The Roinad had mistakenly got the idea we had been plotting with the Karoi which we had not. It was quite quickly resolved.”

“You do seem to lead exciting lives,” said Inyanasi, resuming walking. “Although I do wonder if the Karoi would look on you with favour or anger if you had been plotting against your Roinad. Still, it is of little import as I wager you would not be here now if you had been. Kings often deal promptly with those who threaten their position. And you are familiar with cardamom, you have eaten it with us.”

“It is a fruit then?” asked Logan. “I thought you said it was a spice.”

“It is a spice,” said Inyanasi. “We put a little flaked cardamom in the bread. It gives the bread a smoky flavour.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “And the cinnamon and saffron?”

“Cinnamon has a woody, sweet flavour,” said Inyanasi, “and saffron has a very delicate flavour that is difficult to describe but is highly prized.”

“That is interesting,” said Autumn, “and I thank you for sharing with us but if you do not mind me asking, why did you feel it necessary to tell us? Herbs and spices do not seem to be cargo worth lying about.”

“I see truth in your faces,” said Inyanasi, “but I find it hard to understand. Can it really be the case that you do not know?”

“Know what?” asked Logan.

“The value of these goods,” said Inyanasi. “The least valued of what we carry is the pepper and the profit on that alone will more than pay for the costs of this journey. The cinnamon and cardamom are worth far more and the profit on those will be immense.”

“And the saffron?” asked Autumn.

Inyanasi gazed around at the sky and the scrubby grass and lowered his voice.

“Saffron is one of the most expensive things in the world,” he said, “save only a handful of precious metals. One sack of saffron will pay for a house in Cim-Irsou.”

“It must taste very nice, then,” said Autumn, “although I wager no one will ever give me any to try. But I am still not clear why you are telling us this.”

“Have you wondered why this caravan is so small and ill guarded?” asked Inyanasi.

“No,” said Autumn. “This is the first caravan I have seen and have no previous knowledge on which to base a judgement. I had assumed this is how most caravans are.”

Inyanasi laughed. “Indeed not,” he said. “Most caravans have upwards of a hundred camels and are well guarded for there are bandits all over this land, not just in the desert. However, such a caravan attracts attention so we travel as though our caravan has little of value. If word gets out about what we carry then every bandit from horizon to horizon will come after us and in great numbers. As a general rule the presence of guards serves only as an indicator that there is something worth guarding and they are expensive and may well take the goods for themselves anyway.”

“I think what Inyanasi is trying to say,” said Logan, “is that he is telling us this because if word gets out we are likely to be attacked by more bandits.”

“That is right,” said Inyanasi. “If you travel with us there are risks and although you made short work of the bandits that attacked us this morning, you may find even you cannot cope with the numbers.”

“But has not word got out already?” asked Autumn. “Were those bandits not after your spices?”

“No,” said Inyanasi. “They were after whatever we carried but they did

not know of the spices. If they had known there would have been many more of them.”

“In that case,” said Autumn, “we will certainly travel with you to Cim-Irsou. I would not leave you unaided should you be attacked again.”

“I confess I was hoping you would say that, friend Autumn,” said Inyanasi. “I have doubted my strategy of insignificance ever since we left Sassese’lte. Let us now discuss your payment. I am thinking one fiftieth part of the profits after costs have been returned.”

“Is that a lot?” asked Autumn.

Inyanasi wagged his hands expressively. “If you chose to stay in Cim-Irsou you could buy a house and live well for many years,” he said.

“That sounds good to me,” said Logan.

“Decidedly not,” said Autumn.

“Perhaps one fortieth part would suit you better?” asked Inyanasi.

“You misunderstand,” said Autumn. “We have no desire for material riches for they have no meaning but being strangers in a strange land, all we ask is our food and instruction on the nature and customs of your land.”

“Are you sure?” asked Logan doubtfully. “We may have to fight bandits.”

“What more do you desire, Logan?” asked Autumn.

“A few paraks would be useful,” he said. “If only to pay for passage on a boat to somewhere else when we decide to leave this land.”

“We have grinar here,” said Inyanasi, “although I can give you a favourable exchange rate on paraks.”

“What are ‘exchange rates’?” asked Autumn.

“They are what one money is worth in another money,” said Inyanasi. “Do you truly not care about money?”

“We did have some money once,” said Logan, a little sadly. “A whole bag full, although it was not a particularly big bag. Autumn gave all of it away.”

“I did not give it all away,” said Autumn. “I seem to remember you bought some cheese. Besides, those people were in greater need than we were.”

“You see?” said Logan, with a shrug.

“Unbelievable,” said Inyanasi.

* * *

“Do you see that faint smudge on the horizon?” said Dhru, pointing.

Astauand was touching the horizon behind them and their shadows stretched out a long way in front.

“Yes,” said Logan. “What is it?”

“Waaaj,” said Dhru. “We should be through this section of stony ground before Astauand has gone completely and pick up the track. The walking will be easier then.”

“Good,” said Logan, stumbling again. “It is difficult to see the bigger stones because of the shadows. They all look much the same. Do you think Tejas arrived safely?”

“He is in the hands of Musafir,” said Dhru, “but I hope so. He is a good lad even though he can be annoying as all brothers are.”

“I do not know,” said Logan. “I never had any brothers, only a sister and I have not seen her for many summers.”

“Ahh, truly that is unfortunate, Logan,” said Dhru. “Family is all that matters in this world.”

“Well, perhaps,” said Logan, accidentally stepping on a sharp little stone. “Arghhhh.” He fell to his knees and put out his hands to stop his head hitting the ground.

“Are you hurt?” asked Dhru.

“No,” said Logan, staring at his hands. “I just stepped on a sharp stone. Autumn!”

“Yes, Logan?” said Autumn, stopping and turning back to look at him.

“Come and look at this,” said Logan, staying on his hands and knees.

“What is it?” asked Autumn coming back.

“Look at your feet,” said Logan. “See how your shadow touches your foot and goes away?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “All shadows are like that.”

“Mine isn't,” said Logan. “Look at my hands. The shadow starts a finger's width away. My shadow isn't joined to me.”

“How strange,” said Autumn peering at his hands. “What about your feet?”

Logan got to his feet and stared down at the ground. Dhru joined them.

“What is the matter?” he asked.

“It's Logan's shadow,” said Autumn. “Your shadow touches you, mine touches me, but Logan's does not. It seems to have come loose.”

Chapter Sixteen

Plakill was over the horizon when the first of the mud huts appeared, ghostly grey in its pale silver light. Nearby was the faint sound of running water and the breeze stroking the dry fronds of stunted palm trees. Several dogs started to bark when they smelt the approach of strangers with camels, followed by muffled curses and several yelps before they quietened. Pale scrawny shapes that could have been goats paused in their eternal foraging to look up and watch the caravan swish past, made majestic by the faint light and the setting and almost silent for the camels carried only sacks of spices and nothing that clanged or jangled.

Inyanasi looked around, his eyes probing the dimness looking for signs of his youngest son but there were none.

“Hobble the camels over there,” he told Reyansh, pointing with his stick to a flat area some way away from the huts and well away from a large group of mounds that were, most likely, another camped caravan. Some fires amongst them burned but dimly as their makers slept. “Unload them but do not leave them. I will look for Tejas.”

“Can we help you search?” asked Autumn.

Inyanasi hesitated then nodded.

“I had hoped the boy had made a fire,” he said, “but the only fires I see are those over there and I would not expect the boy to linger with another band. But I will talk with them first. Someone may have seen him.”

He strode off towards the other caravan and three shadows rose from beside a fire to greet him.

“If it was me,” said Logan, peering towards the edge of the village away from the other caravan, “I would not stay beside the track alone and in full view of everyone. I would find myself a spot where I could see who was coming but be unobtrusive. I am not sure in this dimness but I think I see something over by that wall. It does not look as flat as it should be.”

“You could be right, Logan,” said Autumn, peering where he was pointing. She looked over at the shadows where Inyanasi seemed to be involved in a lengthy discussion. “Let us go and look.”

There was a definite bulge around the corner of the hut but Plakill lay behind and the hut's faint shadow made the darkness deeper.

“Best approach with caution,” whispered Autumn as they got closer. “We do not want to alarm someone sleeping and mayhap disturb the whole village. Use Fiau to give some light.”

“Good thinking,” whispered Logan. “Fiau, could you give us a small light?”

The end of his staff started to glow but did not burst into flame.

“Thank you,” whispered Logan, edging closer.

A large head on a long neck rose from the ground and spat at him then grumbled disgustedly at being disturbed. Tejas was sound asleep, curled up against the camel's side. Not that the camel cared. It hoisted its rump into the air, waking him. He sat up as the camel lifted its front end and tried to bite Logan. He stepped back quickly.

“Ahh, you have arrived,” said Tejas. “Where is my father?”

“Over there,” said Autumn, turning to point towards the other caravan some distance away. There was a dark shape coming towards them.

“Father!” called Tejas. He jumped to his feet and ran towards the shape, leaving the camel alone with Autumn and Logan.

The camel shuffled forward in its hobble and looked disdainfully down at Autumn, being a good half body length taller than she was. It bent its neck and tried to eat her pony tail. She stepped back quickly, pushing its head away and got mouthful of regurgitated semi-digested grass over her arm and shoulder.

“It is my custom to be accepting of all life,” she remarked, moving some paces away and scraping the goo off with her other hand. The

smell was quite pungent and she tried to ignore it, “but I have great difficulty liking camels.”

“It is somewhat potent,” agreed Logan. “I suppose we had better bring the beast.”

Intrigued by the glow, the camel sniffed the tip of Logan's staff then tried to eat it. The glow went out and the staff suddenly contracted to the size of a twig and fell out of Logan's hand.

“Get off, damn you,” said Logan, pushing the camel and bending to pick up Fiau.

The camel pushed back irritably and Logan caught his foot on something and sprawled backwards. Autumn snatched the twig just before the camel's dark yellow front teeth, the length of her little finger, chomped on it.

“Be careful with that,” said Inyanasi, helping Logan to his feet. “That is our meal. Take it, Tejas, I will bring the camel.”

“Yes, Magide,” said Tejas lifting what looked like a large dish with a cloth over it.

Inyanasi waited until he was several paces away then turned to Autumn and took the twig. He weighed it in his hand then passed it to Logan.

“Is this yours?” he asked.

“Umm, yes,” said Logan, taking it.

Inyanasi looked at him for a long moment while Logan stood there wondering why he felt guilty then Inyanasi took hold of the camel's rope and started to follow Tejas.

“The desert is a strange place,” he remarked casually as Autumn and Logan went with him. “It is full of strange sights and wondrous illusions. As I walked towards you I fancied I saw a glow where you had no light and that your staff turned to a twig and fell to the

ground. This gloom and my tiredness are playing tricks on my mind and exciting my imagination.”

“Umm, it was not ...” started Logan, the twig returning to its normal size in his hand.

“You say you travel in search of knowledge,” said Inyanasi interrupting him and pretending not to notice the reappearance of the staff. “I respect your motives and honour you in your search but there is some knowledge in this world that I, for one, do not wish to know.”

Autumn drew in a breath to start to speak but Inyanasi held up his hand. “I am content with my knowledge of the world, such as it is,” he said. “It is enough for me to be in the presence of a krisana and I have no desire to pry into the skills of the krisana's companion. Let us speak no more on this.”

“But I ...,” said Logan.

“Enough,” said Inyanasi. “You are what you are and what you are is most decidedly not my concern. Leave it there.”

“Your wish, Inyanasi,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan, wondering what he thought Logan was.

Back at their caravan, Tejas was starting to build a fire and Reyansh and Dhru were unloading sacks and piling them on the ground, hobbling each camel as they unloaded it. With Inyanasi helping the camels were unloaded quickly. Autumn took their water bottle and started to rinse her arm and shoulder to get rid of the smell of regurgitated grass.

“There is a bathhouse in this village,” said Inyanasi, coming to join them, “although we have several more days of desert to cross before Tulbeq.”

“What is a bathhouse?” asked Logan.

“It is what it sounds like,” said Inyanasi settling himself on the ground, “although more of a hut than a house, and there is no steam or

masira.”

“What food did the boy find?” asked Reyansh coming over to where the boy was making shayi.

“Goat, maize and some fruit,” said Inyanasi. “And mark this, Reyansh, not only did he buy food at a fair price but he persuaded Codemuta of the other caravan to give him the loan of a dish and a fire to cook with.”

“Ahh, it is cooked already,” said Reyansh happily, rubbing his hands. “I have always said he is a good lad.”

Tejas snorted and pretended not to have when Reyansh glared at him.

“What is a masira?” asked Autumn, joining them, the top of her malu wet.

“Someone who beats you half to death,” said Dhru with a laugh, coming over.

“He means someone who pounds and rubs your muscles to relax and ease your strains,” said Inyanasi, scooping up a handful of fried maize and goat meat. “Do you not have these in Aferraron?”

“Not that I have heard of,” said Autumn, “and you have houses just for baths?”

“Indeed,” said Dhru. “Where do you wash yourselves?”

“We use whatever streams or rivers are handy,” said Logan, scooping a handful from the communal bowl as well. The bowl sounded strange when his knuckle knocked it.

“But is not the water cold?” asked Reyansh. “We prefer to use hot water where we can and only cold when travelling. The water here is very cold. It comes from deep underground, stays as a small lake then disappears underground again. It has a strong taste of being underground as well. The camels do not like it and drink it only reluctantly.”

“We did come across a hot water spring once,” said Autumn. “That was very nice and relaxing and that had an earthy taste to it as well.”

“When we reach Tulbeq I will take you to a proper bathhouse,” said Dhru, “and you can have a masir. I promise you will like it.”

“I shall look forward to that,” said Autumn. “It will be good to be clean again. I have not washed properly since arriving in this country.”

“Do not worry,” said Inyanasi. “We all smell bad, you no more than the rest of us. That is the desert for you. My wife will not let me back into the house when we return home until I have bathed three times and anointed my body with sweet smelling oils.”

“Can I ask what manner of dish this is?” asked Logan, deliberately knocking it to hear how it sounded. “This is not bronze?”

“It is brass,” said Inyanasi. “Do you not have brass?”

“I don't think so,” said Logan. “What is brass?”

“It is made from copper, like bronze,” said Inyanasi, “only with zinc instead of tin. It is much better for making things such as dishes than bronze but not so good for weapons. It is too soft, you see. A brass knife will not take much of an edge. Do you truly not know of brass?”

“There may be brass in Aferraron,” said Autumn, “but it is not common.”

“That I find surprising,” said Inyanasi, “for much of the supply of copper comes from the North of your country I am told although I hear that it is now becoming in short supply and prices are rising.”⁹

“Do you think there would be a profitable market for brass goods there, Magide?” asked Reyansh.

“Perhaps,” said Inyanasi, “although such goods would be bulky and heavy to transport. It might be advantageous to think on for small,

9 This may well have been due to the closure of the Sauizuxu Copper Mine after Autumn broke the pact between its owner Cymogene Hirao Sastruga and Ta'umboq from the Land of the Cysciec. See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Second Tale*.

expensive items such as jewellery that could be more easily transported. That said, I hear there is a new metal that is appearing that is better for weapons and cooking than either bronze or brass although I have not seen it as yet. It could be advantageous to start trading in that while it is still young and few others are involved."

"What metal is that?" asked Autumn.

"I know little of it," said Inyanasi. "It is called iron or eron or some such and it can be beaten thin and shaped and will take a very sharp edge, or so I hear, but its colour is grey and not pleasant to look at. Some say it turns red when wet but I find that hard to believe. It, too, is expensive but if the supply of copper is running out it may well become cheaper to use iron."

"Perhaps we should start thinking about trading in it, Magide," said Reyansh. "It is often good to be innovative and trade in new things."

"Not for me, my son," said Inyanasi. "I know only of spices and cloth and I am getting too old to learn of new things, but it might be a market for you to get into while it is still new."

"Forgive my lack of understanding of these things," said Autumn, "but as a trader do you not buy things and sell things? You do not make or grow things so you have no need of that special knowledge."

"Ahh, you are sorely wrong there, Autumn," said Inyanasi. "There is a great skill in being a trader for there are great uncertainties all around."

"What do you mean?" asked Logan. "Surely you bought your spices in Sassese'lte because you knew you could sell them in Cim-Irsou?"

"I hope to sell them," said Inyanasi, "and I expect to but for traders such as us who travel far we buy things in the hope of selling them at a profit knowing only what people wanted to buy half a summer or more in the past. When we come to try to sell what we bought people may not want to buy them or the price may have dropped considerably. With spices it is not too bad as the places where they grow are well established and the people seem to want to buy them

most of the time so the risks are not too big. Take brass though. The price is rising because the supply is short. What would happen if we sell all our spices then go to Aferraron and buy a lot of copper at a high price only to find another source of copper has been found and the price is now a lot less than what we paid for it?"

"Ahh, I see your problem," said Autumn.

"It is worse than that," said Reyansh. "As well as the cost of buying the copper there is the cost of transporting it as well. It could be the new source of copper is in the Skizze Mountains and is much cheaper to transport than from Aferraron."

"I did not think of that," said Autumn. "Is it expensive to bring things across the sea?"

"It is quite expensive," said Inyanasi, "although transporting across land takes much longer and there are tariffs as well."

"Is that why you carry your goods by camel?" asked Logan. "Could you not carry them by sea from Sassese'lte to Cim-Irsou?"

"Would that it were possible," said Inyanasi. "It would be more expensive, yes, but the profits are such that a little extra expense would not be a difficulty. No, the problem is that the spices do not like the sea air. If we carried them all the way from Sassese'lte to Cim-Irsou by sea no one would buy them for they would be ruined."

"And tariffs?" asked Autumn.

"Do not talk to me of tariffs," said Inyanasi screwing up his face. "They are a curse set upon us by those who rule over us but do not have to make a living."

"How so?" asked Logan.

"The Karoi, blessed be his name," said Dhru, "will, from time to time and whenever it is his whim, impose a tax on certain goods that are brought into the country. We know not what reason underlies it and the amount of the tariff varies and which goods they apply to vary as

well, and very often we know not whether a tariff will be applied to our goods when we buy them. It may be that after having bought these spices in Sassese'lte and paid for the cost of transporting them that, when we get to Cim-Irsou we will have to pay a tariff before we can even think of selling them. Aside from the additional cost of the tariff it means more money has to be paid before any money can be made."

"I see there is a lot more to this trading than I thought," said Autumn. "It would seem a complicated business with little certainty."

"There is always more to things when you look into them," said Inyanasi.

"This is true," said Autumn, "and I thank you for enlightening me."

"It is an honour to instruct a krisana," said Inyanasi, cheering up as they had moved on from tariffs, "and my pleasure as well. Let us now get some sleep, there is much to do in the morning."

"How so?" asked Autumn. "Are we not moving on?"

"We will spend the day here, and do some trading," said Inyanasi, leaning backwards to move some stones away from where he was going to lie. "We have provisions to buy and hair to sell."

"Hair?" asked Autumn. "Whose hair?"

"The camels'," said Inyanasi. "Tejas, fetch the blankets. Have you not seen us brushing the camels each evening, Autumn?"

"Aye," said Autumn, "but I assumed you were doing that to keep them clean."

"Nothing will keep a camel clean," said Inyanasi. "They piss on their legs to cool themselves. We brush them for their hair and sell the hair in poor villages such as this. They use the hair to make cloth. It is not as good as sheep hair but it is hard wearing."

Tejas started to hand out the cloths that went under the racks on the camels' backs. The nights were cold in the desert, even though the

days were hot.

“Thank you,” said Logan, taking one. “Inyanasi, you were talking of this new metal, umm, arun?”

“Iron,” said Inyanasi, wrapping himself in a blanket and lying flat. He used another as a pillow. “What of it?”

“You said it takes a very good edge,” said Logan thoughtfully, “which means it must be strong.”

“You would think so,” said Inyanasi.

“And you said it could be beaten very thin,” said Logan. “Could it not be made into boxes?”

“I do not know,” said Inyanasi. “Quite possibly, but what would be the benefit?”

“I am not certain,” said Logan, “but if it can be made very thin it would be quite light and yet strong. Could you not pack your spices inside and transport the boxes by sea?”

Inyanasi stared at Logan for some time then rolled over and swiped Reyansh with the back of his hand.

“Why did you not think of that, hmm?” he growled. “New uses for new things, that is the sign of a good trader! Think on it.”

Chapter Seventeen

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Logan and Autumn. Her eyes were closed as was her custom when meditating. She sat at the top of a dune, legs crossed, her hands folded in her lap and her face towards the dawn, her thoughts turned inwards although aware of the world around her. Logan lay on the sand nearby, his head at the top of the dune and his feet a little further down its sloping side. Ordinarily he would still be asleep when Autumn did her meditating but Inyanasi and the others loaded the camels before dawn ready for an early start and he only got in the way. He had tried to help in the beginning but had been shooed away gently. Apparently Inyanasi did not consider it fit for an honoured guest to do such menial labour but Logan suspected it was more that he had no idea what he was doing and they did not want to spare the time to teach him the arts of loading camels efficiently.

So he lay at the top of the dune while Autumn meditated, waiting for Inyanasi to call that it was time to leave. As Astauand touched his eyes he sat up to look at his shadow. It fell away down the side of the dune, massively elongated and distorted as it should be with the sun so low. He put his hand down beside his hip in the gap between his body and the shadow. The shadow was now a little more than a hand's breadth from his body and it bothered him. Why it bothered him he did not know. He felt no different, his movements were not affected in any way, it was just that when he looked down it was disconcerting to see his shadow not joined to him.

He looked around. This side of Waaj was different to the other side. There the sand had been everywhere, endless and unmarked, save by dunes and ripples in the sand but this side there were clumps of dry, brittle grasses, stones and rocks. Every now and then as they walked further East they came across outcrops of rock, low and flat but with a promise of small hills and canyons to come somewhere beyond the horizon.

“Stand on this stone,” Autumn had said the previous day. It had been a smallish stone, flattish on top but quite broad and stable. He had stood on the edge of the stone and they had both stared down at the shadow of Logan standing on the stone. The stone's shadow had

touched the stone, as do the shadows of all stones, but Logan's shadow had been three finger widths away from the stone's shadow. Autumn had measured it with her hand. It was as though Logan was floating a little way above the stone although he hadn't been. He had felt the stone under his feet and had seen his feet resting firmly on the stone. Then Autumn had got onto the stone beside him.

Her shadow had touched the top of the stone's shadow. The top of her shadow head was some three fingers below the top of Logan's shadow head, even though they were both about the same height.

It was ... worrying.

But a nameless worry. Shadows have no impact on your day to day life, they are just ... there. Except his wasn't. It was slightly further away than 'just there' and seemed to be slowly and inexorably moving further away, and there was nothing he could do about it. After all, how do you stop a shadow moving? You can't push it back and sew it to your feet.

Logan sighed and raised his arm. The shadow arm lifted as well and swept across the ground as he waved his arm, the way it should. Then he picked up his staff which lay on the sand beside him and held it up. His arm cast a shadow and the staff cast a shadow. Except that the staff in his hand didn't cast a shadow of the staff in his hand. The shadow of the staff crossed the shadow of his arm a little below his thumb. His grasping hand shadow was about a hand's breadth beyond the shadow of the staff where it was being grasped. He sighed and resolutely put the staff down. It was all very well for Autumn and Inyanasi and the others to say "it is only a shadow, do not worry about it," but it wasn't their shadow. Their shadows were still firmly attached to them. Autumn was intrigued by the possible explanations, not that any of them had been able to think of an explanation, but the others dismissed his shadow. As Dhru had said, "life has troubles enough without looking for more."

Logan sighed and looked down on the camp. The last two or three camels were being loaded and Tejas was making a final round of shayi for them to drink before departing. He glanced at Autumn and she showed no sign of coming out of her reverie, which wasn't unusual.

She always sat in such a way that she could move instantly and explosively should the need arise but until the need did arise she always seemed inert.

Logan screwed up his nose and twisted to look out over the desert behind him. From the top of the dune the view was, well, 'good' was perhaps not the right word. From the top he could see a long way but it was much the same all around and that wasn't particularly good. Even the clumps of grass were a similar shade of colour as the sand. Tulbeq was still two days away and, despite the changing nature of the desert, there was still nothing especially green or wet to look at.

A sudden movement caught the corner of his eye and he twisted further to look at it. There was nothing there.

"Wind is picking up," he muttered to himself as a gust of hot, dry wind hit him in the face.

There was a distinct hissing sound further along the top of the dune and he twisted even further to see what it was. A spray of sand was being carried by the wind over the crest of the dune and hissing as it splattered down the side. As he watched the small patch of sand where the spray landed slid down the side of the dune, leaving a small crater. Another movement caught his eye and he twisted back to look. A thin spout of sand leapt out of the ground near the bottom of the dune.

"Is that a rabbit?" he thought, watching intently. "Surely not."

The wind picked up and the gust turned into a continuous flow, blowing his hair out behind him. Several more spouts of sand appeared lower down, skipping and jumping as though alive. The hissing grew louder as more sprays of sand started to fly over the crest.

"How strange," thought Logan, shielding his eyes as fine sand dusted his face. His lips felt gritty and some grains went up his nose.

Autumn came out of her reverie and looked around, her pony-tail beginning to stream.

“What is happening?” she asked.

“I think we should go down,” said Logan, just as Inyanasi's voice bellowed “Autumn, Logan, get down from there!”

Startled, they both turned to look down the other side of the dune, just in time to see Tejas upend his shayi cauldron over the fire. The camels were agitated and Reyansh and Dhru were pushing them and making them lie down, the sacks of spices still on their back. Inyanasi was staring up at them, his arm repeatedly waving for them to come down.

“Get down here!” he shouted, “sandstorrrrrmmmm!”

Autumn jumped to her feet with Logan a fraction of a second behind, his staff in his hand, and they started down the slope just as the wind began to howl and the land went dark. Autumn glanced back to see a wall of swirling, billowing sand behind then a mighty hand picked them up and threw them down the slope, just as the slope itself disappeared into a maelstrom of sliding eddies and whorls.

* * *

“It is happening again!” said Subota, sitting up in bed suddenly. He looked around, probing with all his senses. He could see Astauand peeping over the horizon through the open window.

“That is most pleasing,” said Kishli, snuggling closer and letting his hand stray, “even though it is still early.”

“Not that,” said Subota, pulling Kishli's hand back up. “There is a sudden reddishness to the day.”

“But it is Wunsiku,” said Kishli, rolling onto his back. “It is a blue day.”

“And tinged with red,” said Subota throwing back the sheet. “It is the same redness that appeared when the Roinad come to our shores. Something is happening, I must fly.”

“Before your breakfast?” asked Kishli, getting out of bed.

“Yes,” said Subota, a touch of urgency in his voice. “I do not know what the redness means but there is some magic around the Roinad. I must find out what it is. Fetch my tufafi immediately.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Kishli, picking up Subota's aura of urgency but not understanding it.

“Bring it to my study,” said Subota striding out of the room and pulling on a simple white robe.

* * *

The sudden gust of hot wind dense with sand hit Logan on the back, winding him and throwing him down. Gasping, his mouth and nose filling with sand, he landed on the slope of the dune as it slid from underneath him. Blinded and with rising panic he dropped his staff and fell, tumbling and out of control, as sand poured over the top of him. Instinctively he threw his arms around his head as his body was tossed and twisted, unable to grasp anything solid to hang on to. All around was the rasping grating noise of sand then suddenly it was over. He was curled in a ball, head down by the feel of it, in darkness and the silence was complete. He tried to breathe but the breath was mostly sand. It filled his mouth and nose. Desperately he spat, trying to clear his mouth but there was little space for the sand to go. His head was covered. His lungs desperate for air, Logan tried to move his arms but they could do little more than wiggle. He tried to twist, to move his legs but he was held tight.

“Do not breathe,” came a quiet voice on the edge of his consciousness.

“Cloudgh,” said Logan, trying to push sand out of his mouth with his tongue.

His heart was pounding and his chest spasming as it tried to suck in air. Only the tiniest amounts came in from the gaps between the grains of sand.

Something jabbed him in the leg then started to work its way along his

body, getting wider as it went up his belly then his chest and back. It reached his head and some thin, hard tendrils started to grow around his face, forcing the sand away. Instinctively Logan spat the sand in his mouth into the gap and drank in air. There was sand in the air but it was still enough to feed his burning lungs.

“You can breathe now,” came the voice, thin and quivery. Logan needed no bidding and sucked in air, trying to filter it with his teeth and fighting to control his panic.

He was still upside-down but there seemed to be some freedom around his feet. He waggled them then felt something very hard wrap around his ankles. Then it started to pull. He became aware of sounds but they were strange and indistinct, as though someone was sweeping the floor not far away.

A few moments later Logan felt the pressure against his knees lift and he jerked his legs. Whatever was gripping his ankles let go and something gripped his chest and his head and pulled.

“Now I know what it feels like to be a carrot,” he thought as he was plucked from the sandpit into a howling gale of wind and sand. At least he could breathe now, even if half of what he was breathing was solid.

“Cover your face,” said the voice.

“Fiau?” muttered Logan, twisting and doubling over so his face was out of the direct wind. He spat sand then again and tried to dig some out of his nose with his finger. His eyes were encrusted with sand and he couldn't see beyond the knuckle under his nose.

“Yessss,” said Fiau, her voice barely audible over the howling hissing wind.

“Where is Autumn?” cried Logan suddenly as Fiau grew into a barricade behind him, cutting off the wind and sand.

“Nearby,” said Fiau. “I am trying to find her.”

* * *

The sudden gust of hot wind dense with sand that had hit Logan had also hit Autumn but she was better prepared. Instead of being winded her training made her automatically suck in as much air as she could so when she was buried she was able to hold her breath. Inevitably there was a momentary panic but her mind controlled it and she curled her arms and shoulders around her head, trying to make herself as large as possible. When she finally stopped moving she forced herself to relax, creating a small pocket of air. It wasn't much but it was enough. Controlling her breathing very carefully she explored her prison with what little movements she was able to make. She seemed to be fully encased although, unlike Logan, she wasn't head down. She seemed to be on her side. She started to dig with her fingers, careful not to push sand into her mouth.

She had dug perhaps a hand's length when she felt the first of Fiau's exploratory roots. Not knowing where Autumn was, Fiau had sent them out in all directions but when one, then a second then a third encountered something not sand she brought the others back and sent them to help. Once located it did not take long for Autumn to be hauled out of the sand and behind the safety of the barricade, beside Logan.

* * *

Subota laid out his mat and pillow himself and was lighting the four cones of incense when Kishli came in with his tufafi. Once in it he fairly threw himself on the mat and muttered the incantation as Kishli hurriedly pulled on his thick socks. By the time his slippers and hat were in place, Subota was already soaring.

Subota headed West, if such earthly directions could be said to apply in the paranormal realm, towards the kiramaj beacon he had set on Logan. The beacon flashed in time with Logan's heart and it was flashing very quickly.

"He is still alive," thought Subota as he flew towards it, "although he appears to be under great stress."

* * *

Autumn and Logan found that their situation wasn't overly different behind the barricade of Fiau to how it had been when they were buried. The main difference being, of course, that they could breathe but to say that gives a false impression. The word 'breathe' carries with it a certain freedom and fluidity to the air. In actuality the air was thick with sand and each breath was a struggle. It was only a matter of seconds before each thought to wrap a part of their clothing around their heads to filter out some of the sand and keep their mouths, noses, eyes and ears relatively free. The primary benefit of the barricade was that the flying sand, hurled by the gale force wind, did not flay their skin from their flesh. Instead, the sand swirled and collected on their laps and buried their feet.

They did not speak, the howl of the wind and drumming of sand on the barricade made speech almost impossible. They simply sat, huddled together, until the sand piling up behind Fiau started to spill over the top. Fiau grew a little larger then, as a vague headless shape solidified in the swirling morass a little in front of them, she collapsed back into a staff and fell on Logan's shoulder. Logan lurched at the sudden force from behind him but grabbed the staff just before it was blown away.

"I think that is Inyanasi," shouted Autumn into Logan's ear.

He barely heard her but the shape in front of them stopped then tugged on a rope around its middle before surging forward to get behind them.

"By the five faces of Hadari," he shouted, pulling aside the cloth around his head for a moment. "We thought you were lost. Hold on to the rope."

Dhru, judging by the colour of his robes as his face wasn't visible, came into view with the other end of the rope around his waist. With Autumn and Logan gripping the rope tightly they struggled down to the flat at the bottom of the dune then made their way back to the caravan, the wind forcing them to almost bend double. They nearly missed the caravan but Dhru, as far away as the rope allowed, spotted the last camel in the line and hauled the others after him. Reyansh and Tejas were huddled in the lee of the camels and Tejas gave

Autumn and Logan cloths soaked in water to cover their heads. The camels just kept their eyes and noses closed and grumbled constantly.

* * *

From his vantage point, Subota could see the extent of the sandstorm. It was not overly large but it raged and it was impossible to see what was happening on the ground. Importantly the beacon continued to flash and slowed considerably indicating that the Roinad was alive and calming down but frustratingly the redness to the day disappeared. Whatever was causing it was indisputably linked to the Roinad but had gone quiet again. For some reason the magic at its disposal was no longer needed, or at least not being used.

Subota stayed, circling in the air, as long as he could but flying takes energy and he could not stay up indefinitely. He was forced to return home before the storm ended.

* * *

It was late in the afternoon before the storm was over, ending as quickly as it had begun. The wind dropped and the sand ceased to be hurled at whatever lay in its path. Instead it hung in the air like fog and an eerie hush fell over the land, but not for long.

The camels opened their eyes and their noses and their mouths and began to complain, loudly. One by one they lurched to their feet and stomped around in their hobbles, shaking to throw off their thick coatings of sand. The people, too, got to their feet and pulled off their head coverings. They beat and shook themselves and the sand fell to form small dunes at their feet.

“Thank you for finding us,” said Autumn after she had had several mouthfuls of water and spat repeatedly to get the sand out of her mouth. Her damp face was encrusted with sand and more sand kept dropping onto her eyebrows from her hair.

“You are most favoured of Hadari,” said Inyanasi. “I saw you caught as the dune collapsed and the face of Guguwa fell upon you and you were buried. I feared you had both met your ends. Truly you are both

blessed by the gods. Iyali alone knows how you came to be unscathed and that we found you.”

Chapter Eighteen

Logan woke from a fitful sleep to find himself in a grey dawn and covered in a thick layer of sand. He wiped his face then sat up, feeling the sand slide off his blanket. His mouth felt gritty and his throat was blocked. He sat up and hawked and spat several times, each wad of phlegm stiff with sand. His eyes felt crusty and the inside of his nose was raspy and dry. It was horrible. He rummaged around and found the water bottle under a small mound of sand and poured water over his head and face before rinsing his mouth several times. It felt a lot better although his nose was still raspy.

“Tip some water in your hand and sniff it,” said Autumn coming over to join him. She had abandoned her meditation almost as soon as she had started. “That’s what I did.”

Logan tipped some water into his hand and sniffed. It smelt, as far as he could smell anything, like water. He gave Autumn a puzzled glance.

“Sniff it up your nose,” said Autumn. “It will help clear the sand out. Suck it up then snort it out several times.”

“Oh,” said Logan sadly. The water in his hand had leaked through his fingers so he poured some more and dipped his nose in and snorted several times. It seemed to work but it made the back of his nose burn for a few moments.

“I have had enough of sand,” he said mournfully to Autumn, wiping the traces of snot from his nose with the back of his hand.

“It does require more determination than most things,” she said, “but the essence is that this is the situation we are in so we must be accepting of it.” She sighed and grimaced slightly. “I can feel some sand between my teeth. It is most ... distracting.”

“It is misty,” said Logan looking around. He held out his hand then inspected it. “But it is not damp.”

“Inyanasi told me that the bigger grains of sand came down in the night,” said Autumn, “but the finer grains may take a day or two to

settle.”

“Oh joy,” said Logan, scowling at the world in general.

“We must look on the benefits,” said Autumn. “This misting of fine sand will obscure the heat of Astauand. This day should be cooler.”

“Well, that is a benefit, I suppose,” said Logan.

Tejas brought over two cups of shayi, hot and steaming, and a small flat bread each. Logan sipped his shayi cautiously and found it was slightly gritty and he grimaced. Inevitably the bread would be as well.

“It would seem the loading is finished,” said Autumn, holding her shayi and nodding towards where the others were congregating. Tejas was handing out shayi and bread. “Shall we join them?”

They got up and walked over. Dhru smiled, Reyansh ignored them and Inyanasi looked thoughtfully at the brightening dawn.

“We will be in Tulbeq tomorrow?” asked Autumn.

“It is in the hands of Musafir,” said Inyanasi. “Until the dust settles I cannot be certain which way is exactly East so we may take a little longer.”

“Is it not over there?” asked Logan waving his hand in the general direction of the growing brightness in the mist.

“Yes,” said Inyanasi, “but soon we must start to turn North and it is difficult to judge so we may end up heading a little too far to the North or fall short. We may end up travelling half a day more.”

“Might it not be better to stay here until the air clears?” asked Autumn.

“Whatever happens we have to go North and East,” said Inyanasi, “so it is better to keep going and adjust our travel when we have the means than to stay here.” He finished his shayi and tossed the cup to Tejas then tapped the lead camel on the shoulder to start it moving.

The camel bared its teeth at him and grumbled but did as it was bid.

“That is a shame,” said Logan, watching the camels irritably get started, one by one. “I was looking forward to wallowing in the sea. This sand gets everywhere.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but endure it we must. Dhru, I would speak with you.”

“You delight my day, Autumn,” said Dhru beaming at her as he walked past. Autumn fell in beside him.

“Your father spoke to me yesterday of Hadari,” said Autumn. “In my head there is an understanding that Hadari is your deity of storms.”

“Indeed,” said Dhru. “And a most powerful deity He is too.”

“He?” said Autumn. “Your deities are male?”

“Only the ones with destructive powers,” said Dhru. “Hadari is one of the most destructive of all and so it is with Alintakam, the deity of vengeance. They are both male. Our deities who are supportive and nurturing are female such as Rijiya and Lafiya, the deities of wells and good health.”

“That is interesting,” said Autumn. “Ours are neither male nor female. I wonder why that is so.”

“Why is any deity the way it is?” asked Dhru. “It is not for us to ask why they are as they are, any more than asking why water is wet or sand dry.”

“I am not certain that I agree with you there,” said Autumn. “If by asking we can find out why water is wet and sand is dry it may become possible to find a way to turn sand into water. Would that not be useful?”

“Perhaps,” said Dhru, “but do we need more water? It has always seemed to me that there is plenty of water, only that it is not always where we would wish it to be.”

“A good point, Dhru,” said Autumn. “The world is not arranged for our convenience which is why we carry water in places where there is none available.”

“And over to the East there is sometimes flooding,” said Dhru, “so there they carry sand to help stem the water from flooding the dwellings. It would seem we already have a way of sorts of turning sand into water and water into sand.”

“That does not seem a good enough reason not to know more about the world,” said Autumn. “Mayhap there may come a time when there is not enough water in the world but no matter. What I wanted to ask was why your father talked of the five faces of Hadari. This necklace translated the words but not the understanding. Does Hadari actually have five faces?”

“Most definitely,” said Dhru. “Hadari is the deity of storms but what storm we see depends on which face He is wearing. When Hadari is wearing Guguwa we see a storm of sand but when He is wearing Tumtyr we see a storm of rain. The others are Rih which is wind, Gajavij which is the crashing of thunder and Virali which is the flashing of lightning.”

“What is it when two or three of those are happening?” asked Logan. “Thunder and lightning and rain all at the same time?”

“That is when Hadari is most angry and is thrashing His head,” said Dhru. “I have twice in my life known all five at the same time and that is a most fearsome thing. Usually He is only shaking His head gently.”

“So yesterday's sandstorm was gentle?” asked Autumn.

“Most decidedly,” said Dhru. “Guguwa did not last a whole day and Rih was not overly strong. I have known much stronger and my father tells of a time several summers past and some way further to the West when Rih carried camels and men into the sky and Guguwa threw sand for five whole days and nights. My father only lived by hiding under a rock so Hadari could not see him.”

* * *

“A thousand blessings be upon you, Sarauta Matsafa Subota,” said Soros. He ambled in rather than strode as was his usual manner of walking.

Subota was waiting in the third best reception room and he was worried.

“And a thousand times a thousand blessings be upon you, oh Great One,” he said, bowing deeply.

There was nothing in Soros' manner to suggest that he was displeased with Subota which was a relief but it made his demotion all the more perplexing. As Sarauta Matsafa he was entitled to audiences with Soros in the second best reception room. The obligatory shayi had been a little below standard as well, more very warm than hot, although it had the usual slightly strange aftertaste.

“This matter of the Roinad has been much on my mind,” said Soros. “You bring me good news, I trust?”

“I cannot judge if it is good news, Great One,” said Subota, “but if it is good news that the Roinad still lives then I bring you good news.”

Soros squinted at him. “What are you talking about?” he demanded. “Why would the Roinad be dead?”

“The caravan with which he travels met with a sandstorm yesterday, Great One,” said Subota, now worrying about the Karoi's bluntness. It was unlike him to be so undiplomatic as to blurt out 'what are you talking about?'. Then his stomach knotted. Perhaps a comment had been made that the Karoi could not avoid hearing.

“Why did you not report this yesterday?” demanded Soros, drawing himself up to his full height and scowling down on Subota, himself not a short man. “An injury to the Roinad in my land would be a major diplomatic incident but his death? That would be cause for war!”

“May a thousand vipers feed on my entrails for my stupidity, Great One,” cried Subota bowing as obsequiously as he could. “I did not think on the political ramifications.”

Soros snarled at Subota then gestured for him to rise. "He is uninjured?"

"I was unable to find out yesterday, Great One," said Subota, slowly rising. "The sand obscured my vision and I was forced to leave. However, I did return this very morning and he would appear uninjured although he was coughing a lot. No doubt due to the sand still in the air."

"So it was only a minor storm then," mused Soros. "Hadari is not trying to force my hand. Good, good. And the rest of the caravan?"

"All the people seemed uninjured, Great One," said Subota. "There was a goodly number of camels and none seemed to be missing."

Soros nodded then stared at Subota thoughtfully. Subota stood and waited, wondering why he had not been told to sit. Soros had not sat either. It was most perplexing.

"He still makes for Tulbeq?" said Soros suddenly.

"Yes, Great One," said Subota. "They are one, perhaps two days away and are making good time despite the storm."

"Send for my clerk," said Soros, going over to his chair. He sat and rested his head on his hand, staring at Subota. "Why are you still standing?"

"You have not given me leave to sit in your presence, Great One," said Subota.

"You have privilege enough," said Soros. "We have known each other too long to warrant such formalities. Sit, sit, sit."

"Yes, Great One," said Subota, sitting rapidly. "Perhaps I am not out of favour," he thought, knowing he would never sit uninvited. The consequences could be dire regardless of the Karoi's apparent magnanimity at the moment.

"Have we heard from the Osaku of Tulbeq?" asked Soros as Buxar

hurried into the room.

“Great One?” asked Buxar, not immediately understanding the question.

Soros' nostrils flared and he took a deep breath. “The Roinad?” he said, tapping a finger ominously on the arm of his chair.

“The Roinad has not yet reached Tulbeq, Great One,” interjected Subota. “I would be surprised if the Osaku has gone to meet him.”

Buxar's face cleared as he realised what the discussion was about.

“It is his duty to do whatever he must to answer my questions,” snapped Soros.

“You will remember, Great One,” said Buxar smoothly, “that you expressly instructed that no suspicions were to be raised. The Osaku going to meet a caravan in the desert would excite much comment from all. Furthermore, it is unlikely that our messenger will have reached Tulbeq yet and certainly no message could possibly have arrived back from there so soon.”

Soros glared at Buxar who, from long experience, kept his eyes on the floor and did not allow the waves of antipathy to affect him.

“You are my Matsafa,” said Soros irritably, switching his attention to Subota. “Come up with a faster manner of communication. These delays annoy me.” He slapped the arm of his chair hard, making Subota jump.

“Your wish, Great One,” said Subota.

Soros stood up and walked to the verandah to look out over the rear palace gardens.

“Tulbeq,” he said thoughtfully. “Tulbeq. You think they will continue on to Ajoomi?”

“I think it very likely,” said Subota cautiously, “although nothing is

certain for we know not the Roinad's motives.”

“Then we shall ask him his motives,” said Soros spinning round. “I am tired of all this. Buxar, make arrangements for me to travel to Ajoomi. I would speak with this Roinad of Aferraron, face to face.”

“I cannot possibly arrange a Royal Excursion at such short notice, Great One,” said Buxar in shock. “There are protocols for a meeting between heads of state.”

“The Roinad travels incognito,” said Soros. “So shall I. It will be a meeting of two casual strangers.” He snapped two fingers in Buxar's direction. “Make it so.”

* * *

“I was put in the third best reception room, Kishli,” complained Subota. “The third best!”

“Have you offended the Karoi, Magide?” asked Kishli in consternation.

Subota slumped in his chair and allowed Kishli to remove his outdoor slippers.

“Not that I know of,” he said.

“And the Karoi gave no hint, Magide?” asked Kishli.

“None that I had the wit to understand,” said Subota. “All he wanted to talk about was the Roinad. He has decided to travel to Ajoomi to meet him. Incognito. Mark that, Kishli, incognito. As if that man can travel incognito. He stands out like a dagger in a plum.”

“To us undoubtedly, Magide,” said Kishli, “although I would expect few outside Cim-Irsou would recognise him. He has travelled widely and unrecognised before.”

“That was when he was still young and his father was Karoi,” said Subota, “but you may well be right but that does not explain why I was relegated to the third best reception room. Have you heard

anything?”

“Many things, Magide,” said Kishli, “but nothing concerning your status in the palace. Would you like me to make some casual enquiries?”

“If you would,” said Subota, “but keep them very casual. I do not want anyone to think I am worried about being put in the third best room. Perhaps it would be an idea if you spread the word that it was a deliberate thing, perhaps at my request. Something to do with the dictates of a problem in magic.”

“I suggest that might be premature, Magide,” said Kishli. “It would be best to find out the true reason before spreading a subterfuge to counter it. Can I get you something to help calm you?”

“Perhaps you are right, Kishli, soul of my heart,” said Subota. “No, I am calm, although perhaps some shayi.”

“You seem tense, Magide,” said Kishli. “Before I fetch the shayi perhaps I could massage your shoulders?”

“Now that would be nice,” said Subota. “Your fingers have always delighted me.”

Subota stood up to let Kishli remove his palace tufafi then sat down again so Kishli could work his own brand of magic.

“The Karoi has instructed me to find a faster method of communicating than sending messengers,” said Subota. “I have no thoughts on the matter and I wager if it were possible then it would have been done by now.”

“A challenging problem,” said Kishli, probing Subota's shoulder muscles deeply. “Although I have heard of the use of large fires to send warnings. It is the task of some minor but trustworthy person to watch for the fire and the fire is lit at times of great emergency and no doubt the watcher could light another fire to alert another watcher some distance further on. Assuming the watchers are watching and not sleeping then the message would travel great distances very

quickly.”

“That is an idea,” said Subota, stretching his neck and slowly moving his shoulders, “although it would not allow the sending of a message of any complexity. I wager the Karoi wants to exchange messages beyond 'we are being attacked' or some such.”

“Indeed, Magide,” said Kishli. “Perhaps you could discuss the problem with Picsel tomorrow. I venture few problems could not be solved by both your intellects in unison.”

“That is a thought, oh Kishli the Wondrous,” said Subota, beginning to relax, “although I had intended to discuss his item in the *Proceedings*.”

“Perhaps you can do both, Magide,” said Kishli, “or perhaps simply mention the Karoi's request and leave it for Picsel to think of something. The one who presents the solution to the Karoi will no doubt be the one who is remembered for it.”

“Would that not be unethical, Kishli?” said Subota frowning.

“How so, Magide?” asked Kishli pausing in his rubbing of Subota's shoulders. “Does not the Karoi himself get the praise for solutions to problems solved by those beneath him? Picsel is beneath you so I fancy the same rule would apply. Besides, you will think of a solution before him so the point is moot.”

“Don't be too sure,” said Subota. “I am getting old and old minds do not tangle with problems as easily as young minds.”

“You are far from being old, Magide,” said Kishli, resuming rubbing. “You are mature and maturity brings a more profound consideration of the issues at hand.”

“I am glad you still have faith in me, even if the Karoi does not,” said Subota, frowning at the recollection of the third best reception room.

Kishli felt Subota's shoulders stiffen up again and sighed inwardly. He didn't like to see his lover suffer.

"I did hear a rumour that may interest and amuse you, Magide," said Kishli.

"And what, pray, was that?" asked Subota.

"It seems that there is already some interest being expressed in the matter of your intended marriage," said Kishli.

"Oh Wahah!" exclaimed Subota. "I had hoped that would come to nothing. What is being said?"

"It seems that the wife of Gensam Himiu is of the opinion that such a match would be most beneficial for their daughter," said Kishli.

"Oh no," said Subota, hanging his head. "I hope the poor girl has not inherited her father's brains. I would ask little of a wife but it would be nice if she had some ability at least to converse with me. That man would win prizes for stupidity if there were any although he would not have the wit to enter such a competition."

"I believe the girl is not unintelligent," said Kishli, "at least for a woman."

"Why is she not married already?" asked Subota. "I presume she is of marrying age."

"She is, I understand, somewhat past marrying age," said Kishli, "and that her parents have expressed doubts as to her ever being married."

"She is beginning to sound a definite possibility," said Subota. "If she is unable to find a husband then she is unlikely to do anything to rid herself of one through careless talk. Is she terribly unattractive? Not that it matters, of course."

"I understand her difficulties lie in the persistent rumour that she is not the true daughter of Gensam Himiu," said Kishli with the slightest of sniggers.

"Ahh," said Subota frowning. "That will not do. I am not yet fully resigned to being married but if I am to be then one thing is certain. I

must have a wife of suitable rank. It cannot be said that the Sarauta Matsafa married beneath himself.”

One of the minor servants appeared in the doorway and coughed discreetly to attract Kishli's attention.

“Quite,” said Kishli. “Magide, if you would excuse me, I am needed by a servant.”

“Oh very well,” said Subota. “But try to get word to the wife of Gensam Himiu that such a union would not be looked on favourably and that it would be best if no formal request was made.”

“Magide,” said Kishli, moving away to deal with the servant.

“A royal bastard,” muttered Subota, stretching his arms. “As if my status isn't declining enough as it is. The third best reception room indeed.”

“Magide,” said Kishli, returning with a concerned look on his face. “There was a messenger from the Karoi.”

He proffered the document to Subota who took it and unrolled it.

“Well now,” he said in surprise, reading the message. “The Karoi will be departing for Ajoomi on Manasiku, the day after tomorrow.”

“Is that not rather sudden?” asked Kishli.

“Perhaps,” said Subota, “but that is not the worst of it. I am to travel with him.”

Chapter Nineteen

Logan emerged from the lake, beaming. He'd spent a considerable time just rolling over and over in the shallow water and wallowing in the cool freshness of it. Every trace of sand had been washed from every little fold and crevice of his body. Even his fingernails were clean and sand free. It was pure joy. Delightfully, he was also chilled to the bone from the iciness. He had goosebumps on his thighs and his fingertips were wrinkled from the immersion.

"That was wonderful," he said to no one in particular. He started to steam gently as the heat of Astauand, sinking in the West, began to dry him.

Not that anyone took any notice. Inyanasi and the others were a little way further down, watering the camels and Autumn was still in the water, washing her hair for the third time to get rid of every last trace of sand and the dried blood from the cut on her neck. The wound had healed and the scab, with grains of sand encrusted within it, was coming away in places to expose healthy new skin.

Even more delightfully there were green growing things along the banks and in the fields nearby which were fed by narrow channels snaking away from the lake and which shimmered in the sunlight. As far as the eye could see, provided the eye looked in the right directions, there were crops waving gently in the light breeze. On the banks themselves were patches of brightly coloured wild flowers and occasional clumps of trees. In the distance lay the sea, an expanse of silvery blue dotted with small fishing boats. Tulbeq itself lay at the far end of the lake, where it joined the sea. Looking in the wrong directions, back the way they had come, the land was parched and dry. Not quite desert but not good for growing things other than the scrubby grasses that grew in patches.

Incredibly there were even clouds in the sky. Not many admittedly and all floating far out over the sea but they made a change from the otherwise endless pale glaring blue and hinted at the possibility that it just might sometimes rain here. Logan had almost forgotten what rain felt like. For certain he had forgotten the numbing discomfort of the cold rain that fell in torrents around Biasdo, the tiny village where he

grew up.

He looked out across the small lake at Autumn who waved happily then rose to her feet. The lake came barely to her hip and she started to wade towards him, holding her arms out and enjoying the sun.

“I feel reborn,” she said when she got close. “It is wonderful to feel clean again.”

Logan laughed. “I think they like it too,” he said pointing to the camels. “They have gone very quiet!”

Not one camel was grumbling. They all had their heads to the water and were drinking deeply.

* * *

“Your guest, Matsafa Picsel, has arrived, Magide,” announced Kishli.

Subota stared at him uncomprehendingly for a few moments then put down the scroll he had been reading.

“Where is he?” he asked.

“Matsafa Picsel awaits you in the reception room, Magide,” said Kishli, “as is the custom.”

“Then bring him through to the garden,” said Subota, rising. “You have laid out the meal?”

“As you instructed, Magide,” said Kishli, withdrawing to fetch Picsel.

Subota tossed the scroll onto his cluttered table and strode out of his study to take up his place in the garden. A table had been set up with two chairs and some incense burners to discourage the early evening insects.

“Sarauta Matsafa Subota! This is indeed the greatest of honours!” cried Picsel, hurrying out into the garden with a pronounced swishing of his robes. He was a short man with a short beard and surprisingly

long incisor teeth and the perfume on his oiled hair competed with the incense burners.

“The honour is entirely mine,” replied Subota, bowing before Picsel with a small flourish of his hand. “May there be a thousand blessings on you and yours.”

“And a thousand times a thousand blessings on you and your most noble household,” said Picsel, bowing more deeply and with a more extravagant flourish, as befitted his lower status.

“I trust you will not object to dining with me in my humble garden, Picsel,” said Subota. “It is a warm evening yet cooler outside now the heat of Astauand no longer pierces the air.”

“The glory of your invitation blinds me to the setting, Sarauta Matsafa Subota,” said Picsel unctuously. Then he ostentatiously looked around. “But how could I possibly object to such a magnificent setting?”

“Please, Subota will be sufficient,” said Subota. “I hear the rest too much each time I attend the palace. It is a place of titles and no substance and thereby denigrates the title by association. Come, sit with me and let us talk as men of substance do.”

“With pleasure, Subota,” said Picsel, sitting where Kishli indicated. Kishli produced a small footrest and placed it under Picsel's feet so his formal slippers did not become grass stained as the evening progressed.

Subota sat as well and allowed Kishli to deploy a footrest for him, even though he disliked them. He much preferred the feel of the grass on his bare feet but that would have been inappropriate for the occasion.

“And how go things at the palace?” asked Picsel as Kishli disappeared to fetch some drinks. “I have not been there since I was presented to the Karoi upon my graduation.”

“I do not know your ambitions, Picsel,” said Subota, leaning back in his chair, “but it would be as well to avoid the place as much as

possible unless your heart is truly set on being there. It is full of scheming and treachery.”

Picseel smiled disbelievingly. “And yet you are there, Sarauta,” he said, his beaming face belying the implied inclusion of Subota in the scheming and treachery through his royal title.

“Had I known I would not have accepted the honour the Karoi did me,” said Subota, “although, of course, I would never have insulted him so by refusing. Ahh, perhaps you will like this drink, it is a concoction of my own invention.”

“A veritable nectar, I am sure,” said Picseel, accepting the pale greenish pink drink with dark blobs in it that Kishli offered him. “If I might enquire, what is in it? I regret I cannot drink alcohol.”

“Fear not, Picseel,” said Subota, “it is merely goats’ milk with the juice of limes and crushed raspberries, nothing more. Speaking of the palace, the Karoi has charged me with finding a means to send and receive messages quickly. I am thinking of assembling a group to consider the problem and knowing your reputation as someone with an original mind and unusual perspective perhaps you might find an outlet in such a group.”

“You flatter me, Subota,” said Picseel, “and surprise me at one and the same time.”

“How so?” asked Subota, a little put out that Picseel had not jumped at the opportunity to relieve him of the problem of the Karoi’s messages.

“Am I not here to be reprimanded?” asked Picseel.

“Reprimanded?” exclaimed Subota, “Why would I reprimand you? I have neither a reason nor the authority.”

“Forgive my forwardness, Subota,” said Picseel. “Much of my work is derided and denigrated and when I received your dinner invitation so soon after you refused my item publication in the *Proceedings* I naturally assumed I was to be taken to task and, shall we say, guided back into more mainstream pursuits. You are, after all, the Sarauta

Matsafa and head of the Guild of Metamagikers.”

“It is an honorary role, Picsel,” said Subota, “intended only to flatter the Karoi by the inclusion of his Matsafa, nothing more. Should any reprimands be needed the Board will do that, not I. Of course, I do have some influence but only rarely do I interfere in their deliberations. I confess I have little interest in such dealings.”

“If I might enquire, without being too presumptuous, why then am I here?” asked Picsel. “I understand that my item could be considered contentious and no doubt that is why it will not be published but dinner?”

“I suspect there has been a misunderstanding, Picsel,” said Subota. “Were you not informed of the reason for the withdrawal of your item?”

“Alas, no, Subota,” said Picsel, “only that it was not to be included by your express wish.”

“Then it would appear that the need for efficient and effective communication is greater than even the Karoi had anticipated,” said Subota. “My request, and that is all it was, was that your item be delayed until the next edition. As you may be aware any comment or endorsement by me gives an item a greater significance than it would have alone.”

“Am I to understand that you intend to endorse my item?” asked Picsel, frowning.

“Perhaps,” said Subota. “but I desire to discuss it with you first for as you say it is contentious and although I am intrigued I am not convinced.”

“I abase myself before you, Sarauta Matsafa,” said Picsel, getting out of his chair to kneel before Subota and prostrating himself. “A thousand apologies and a thousand more for doubting you.”

“Kishli, help the Matsafa back to his chair,” said Subota, a little embarrassed. “Come, Picsel, it was a simple misunderstanding,

nothing more.”

“Many of my ideas are too radical,” said Picsel, sitting down again, “and I will be the first to admit I am frequently wrong but I confess, how can I put this?, after repeated dismissals as someone of no consequence, it is difficult to consider the possibility that someone might see me as being of consequence. Especially by one held in such esteem by our Great One.”

“I am aware of your reputation,” said Subota, “but I like to believe that I consider every new proposal on its merits and not be influenced by the status of the proposer. After all, it is only through the development of radical ideas that any real progress can be achieved. As we age we have a tendency to become increasingly reliant on what is known rather than what may be. Indeed, it is fair to say that if an old matsafa says something is impossible then he is almost certainly wrong.”

“The Karoi showed us once again his sublime perception when he chose you as his Sarauta Matsafa,” said Picsel, spreading his hands before him. “The Great One is truly Great.”

“Indeed,” said Subota, “but I am sure you will appreciate that all new ideas carry inherent risks and that is what those more experienced are afraid of. Tell me, how did you first think of your proposal?”

“That shadows can have an independent life?” asked Picsel.

“You have to admit that is radical,” said Subota. “It is not the conventional viewpoint.”

“Indeed,” said Picsel. “But that is because the conventional viewpoint thinks of life in terms of people or camels or other large bodies that clearly exist in three dimensions. Consider a spider. Many are large but only in two dimensions. If you look at a spider from above, which is how we generally see them, they are the width of their legs which are splayed out. But if you look at a spider from the side, it is significantly smaller.”

“Agreed,” said Subota, “but even a spider is decidedly three dimensional.”

“I use that only as an illustration,” said Picsel. “Take it down a level to, for example, a flat worm. It is as its name suggests, flat. From the side you can barely see it. Or a leaf. A leaf can be quite large,” and he spread his hands to illustrate, “but with barely no thickness at all. And consider a jellyfish. If you see one in the sea it looks like a large pear but lay it on a flat surface and it almost completely disappears.”

“I grant your point,” said Subota, “but all these things have a measurable thickness.”

“Oh I would not dispute that,” said Picsel. “However you did ask where my thinking originated and that is where. Once I started to contemplate these living things with barely no thickness I started to speculate if there could be a living thing with no thickness whatsoever.”

“And hence the shadow,” said Subota. “It is a thing of no thickness.”

“If I may beg to disagree,” said Picsel, holding up a finger. “A shadow has no measurable thickness but that does not mean it has no thickness, merely that we cannot measure it. The two are not necessarily equivalent.”

“I concede that point,” said Subota, “for the moment at least. What leads you to think that shadows are alive?”

“That is a difficulty,” said Picsel. “But would you not agree that if something is able to move then it is alive?”

“No,” said Subota. “Something can move simply because of the wind. Sand, for example. It is carried by the wind but even you, I am sure, would not claim that sand is alive.”

“I am in error,” said Picsel. “I had meant, of course, the ability to move under its own volition. Sand kept out of the wind will never move.”

“Can a shadow move of its own volition?” asked Subota, sounding rather dubious.

“Again, it is a matter of how you look at it,” said Picsel. “You, I am sure, like most of us, including myself, think of your shadow as something that is joined to your feet. Where you step your shadow steps with you.”

“Indeed,” said Subota. “And this is not the case?”

“Decidedly not, Subota,” said Picsel. “I have made a study of shadows and it is quite apparent that they move. Often they are joined to the body at the feet but equally often they are joined at different places and sometimes are not even joined at all. For example, take my glass.”

Picsel held out his glass and, faintly bemused, Subota reached for it but Picsel wouldn't let him take it.

“Look at the shadow of your arm on the wall,” said Picsel. “Do you see the arm reaching for the glass?”

“Ahh, yes,” said Subota, twisting to look.

“And is it joined to you?” asked Picsel.

“I have to confess it is not,” said Subota. “It would appear to be touching the side of the table, or rather, the side of the shadow of the table.”

“Precisely,” said Picsel, putting his glass on the table. “Now, consider this. Again, the conventional view is that shadows disappear in the dark. Would you not agree?”

“Well, that was my understanding,” said Subota.

“But have you ever looked for a shadow in the dark?” asked Picsel.

“I confess I have not,” said Subota. “It would be like looking for a black cat in a dark room.”

“An excellent analogy,” said Picsel, “which leads me to suspect that you, as with the vast majority, see shadows as black.”

“Are they not?” asked Subota, leaning forward.

“Indeed not,” said Picsel. “To me shadows come in a multitude of colours. All muted, I confess. I have yet to encounter a shadow that is brilliantly coloured but that could be due to the land in which we, and they, live. They tend to be shades of grey or sometimes pale brown but because of this I am able to see shadows in the dark.”

“In complete darkness?” asked Subota.

“Alas, my eyes are not that good,” said Picsel, “I do need the faintest of faint lights although I do wonder if there are any shadows that have an element of phosphorescence.”

“And yet I am still unconvinced,” said Subota. “You have not yet shown me how a shadow can move of its own volition and, it occurs to me, what nourishment does it take? To be considered alive it would most certainly have to take nourishment.”

“I confess I have not yet found a satisfactory answer to that latter point,” said Picsel. “I have to agree with you that as a living thing a shadow would have to find a source of nourishment but I confess I have not studied that aspect of its life. It would be facile to assume that a shadow would consume the shadows of foods.”

“And the moving under its own impetus?” asked Subota.

“That I can demonstrate to you,” said Picsel, “but it is a complex process. You have to appreciate that in general shadows prefer to be linked to something, much like barnacles and limpets. A shadow, typically, will move with the thing to which it is linked, analogous to a flea that is sitting on your arm. Typically it will move with your arm in preference to jumping off and, unless carefully observed, it may be presumed that the flea is a part of the arm. The trick is in persuading the flea to jump off but when it does you can appreciate that the flea is capable of independent movement and, by inference, has an independent life.”

“I can see that with fleas,” said Subota, “and this is the part that I felt you glossed over considerably in your report. How does one go about

separating a shadow from that with which it is linked?”

“You agree that there are five dimensions, Subota?” asked Picsel, leaning forward to look intently at Subota. “Length, breadth, depth, the temporal and the magical?”

“Of course,” said Subota. “Every matsafa learns that on their first day.”

“But have you ever stopped to consider what holds those five dimensions together?” asked Picsel.

Subota rested his chin on his hand and stared at Picsel for a few moments. “Is that not the interstitial force?” he asked.

“Indeed,” said Picsel. “And we are taught on that first day that the five dimensions are unified through a single interstitial force and, because we move on to other things on the second and subsequent days, we do not think to challenge that. We become swamped in all things magical and do not go back to question the underlying assumptions.”

“Am I to take it that you have?” asked Subota.

“Indeed,” said Picsel, “and I have done some research into the matter. It would seem that there are two interstitial forces, one considerably stronger than the other. My researches are still ongoing so I have, purely temporarily of course, named them as the strong interstitial force and the weak interstitial force. Naturally, if you find merit in my researches I would be most honoured if you would assign them more appropriate names.”

“Two interstitial forces?” said Subota. “Why has this never been discovered before?”

“I do not know,” said Picsel. “In fact there may be more. I have, in the course of my studies, come across hints of a third force which may, somehow, inter-relate the five known dimensions with a sixth but I am very unclear on this and may well be wrong. Certainly the five known dimensions are held in place by the strong interstitial force.”

“And the weak?” asked Subota. “What does that do?”

“It holds shadows to their linked things,” said Picsel, sitting back with a somewhat smug self-satisfied air. “And, if you break that weak interstitial force and unlink the shadow, it is forced to take on a life of its own. Much like the flea we spoke of.”

“I am still not clear on this,” said Subota. “The flea on my arm is alive while it is on my arm, is it not?”

“Indeed,” said Picsel, “although if you were not already familiar with your arm you would not realise that the flea was a separate thing.”

“Yes, I can appreciate that point,” said Subota. “So when the flea is flicked off the arm and we observe it to move on its own we can work backwards from that movement to deduce that it must have been alive while it was on the arm.”

“Exactly,” said Picsel. “You detect the movement after separation and infer the life before separation.”

“A neat point,” said Subota, “but in order to do that you need to observe the movement after separation.”

“Quite,” said Picsel, with a half smile. He reached over to his glass and looked inside to see if any of his drink was left.

“By the five faces of Hadari!” said Subota suddenly. “You’ve done it. You have separated a shadow and observed it moving!”

Chapter Twenty

“This is a pleasant little place,” said Dhru, “but what makes it special is its Pleasure Garden.”

He had offered to show Autumn around Tulbeq and had managed to show good grace when Autumn had included Logan in the invitation. Inyanasi had gone off to do business somewhere with someone and Reyansh and Tejas stayed with the camels.

“I can see it is a very different place to Waaj,” said Autumn, as they walked alongside a high mud brick wall on the edge of the town. “What is a Pleasure Garden?”

“Exactly what it says,” said Dhru. “It is a garden that exists only for pleasure and not for growing food or housing animals, and the people of Tulbeq make the Garden available to all. It is not the garden of a single rich man.”

“That is a noble sentiment,” said Autumn. “How is it that Tulbeq is so very different to Waaj? That place was dry and dusty and sapped the strength but it is obvious Tulbeq is different even though the weather is much the same and it, too, is on the edge of the desert.”

“Money and water,” said Dhru, “but mostly water. Waaj and Tulbeq both have underground streams that feed into a lake but Tulbeq’s is much greater and it has the sea besides so there is plenty of water for things such as cleaning where there is no need for fresh water. All the water in Waaj has to be conserved for drinking so there is little left over for other purposes. The money comes from the port. It is only a small port, not like the huge port at Cim-Irsou but it still carries a reasonable trade with the region and the levy helps to pay for things like the Pleasure Garden. The Garden in turn brings in more visitors and so stimulates trade through the port. No one goes to Waaj unless they have to and only then on their way to somewhere else and because no one wants to be there no one makes the effort to make the place nicer. Perhaps one day someone may spend some money to improve Waaj but it hardly seems worth the effort.”

“That is interesting,” said Autumn. “I know little of trade and

assumed that it was carried out by individuals for their own personal benefit. I had not thought that trade could benefit an entire community. In Aferraron, where we are from, there is little trade. People live mostly through farming.”

“I hear tell that Aferraron is a much wetter place than this,” said Dhru. “Further to the East of Neander it is much wetter as well and there is plenty of good farming but here there is little. Tulbeq is blessed in that respect also as there is plenty of water which can be used to feed the crops. Would you like to see the port first or shall we go straight to the Pleasure Garden?”

“We have been to ports before,” said Logan, “and I wager they are all much the same.”

“Indeed,” said Dhru, “and they all reek of fish.”

“That is most certainly true,” said Logan with a laugh. “So where is this Pleasure Garden?”

“The other side of this wall,” said Dhru, tapping it. “The entrance is just ahead.”

“If the Garden is for everyone, why wall it in?” asked Autumn.

“It is to keep it separate and peaceful,” said Dhru. “The walls keep out much of the bustle of the town and serve as a reminder that what is inside is not just another piece of ground.” Then he gave a derisive little snort. “Besides, it makes it more difficult for anyone to take plants as they walk past.”

“If the Garden is for everyone, why should they not take plants?” asked Logan.

“Because the Garden is special only as a whole,” said Dhru. “If its plants and trees are scattered everywhere it would cease to be special. If anyone wants some seeds or cuttings they need only ask one of the gardeners but many of the plants need careful tending. Let us go in and you will understand.”

They turned in between two ornate birds of prey that were carved with their wings half poised for flight and their heads looking in opposite directions. They guarded a neat little path that wound between some shady palm trees and were dense with flowering shrubs. At the end was a small humped bridge over a slow flowing waterway. Beyond were the gardens themselves, surrounded by and segmented into four sections by more waterways, each spanned with a small rounded wooden bridge. Within each section were four more sections, separated by narrow sandy paths and each containing a grassed patch surrounded by flowerbeds. Some sections were below the paths and others raised higher and three had their own small ponds with water plants growing. Here and there, perhaps at random or perhaps in accordance with some grand overarching plan, single trees or clumps of trees were dotted, providing shade.

Although much of the Garden was shades of green, the whole combined to give the impression of riotous colour and birds and butterflies flitted everywhere. Here and there a few people strolled quietly or sat in pairs on grassed areas, enjoying the tranquillity. The slight breeze carried wafts of scents and perfumes and bees hummed busily. Two or three gardeners were leisurely watering beds or raking away fallen leaves.

“There are bigger gardens elsewhere,” remarked Dhru as they walked slowly past a section of a myriad of kinds of orchids. “The Palace Gardens at Cim-Irsou are particularly magnificent but this one, ahh, this one is small enough to preserve a sense of intimacy. Bigger gardens can be overwhelming in their grandeur. Do you like it?”

“It is lovely,” said Autumn, visibly impressed. “I have seen forests and plains in all their glory and farms, of course, but I had never thought such a thing of beauty could exist.”

“I thought you would like it,” said Dhru, smiling. “If it pleases you we can spend a while enjoying the gardens then I will take you to the bath house. We Neanderns love our baths but I hear they do not exist outside Neander.”

“We bathe in rivers and streams,” said Autumn, pausing to study a bed of roses of different colours, “and many in Aferraron do not bathe

at all. What is special about your baths?”

“Wait and see,” said Dhru. “You have known only the harsh side of life in Neander for the desert is a grim and desolate place. Our baths are pure luxury and I would be surprised if they are ever surpassed. The bath house is on the far side of the Garden, near the entrance.”

They continued strolling through the Garden, enjoying the scenery and exchanging polite greetings with other people doing much the same.

“I do not know the names of most of these plants,” said Dhru, pausing before some striking blooms with large, double flowers that had slightly ruffled petals. They were a fiery blend of red and orange tipped with yellow. “But these are probably my favourites. They are called Autumn Sunbursts.”

“They are unusual,” said Autumn, “and very pleasant to look at.”

“Indeed,” said Dhru, reaching out to touch one with a finger. “They have a quiet intensity and an unconventional yet distinctive beauty all of their own. Much like yourself.”

“You flatter me,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan, “although I fancy my colouring is not so intense and somewhat darker. Besides I do not count beauty among my attributes. I know some women favour their looks and cultivate them but my skills or attributes if you prefer, lie in more rational pursuits.”

“Indeed,” said Dhru, “and there are many facets to beauty and desirability beyond those that appeal solely to the eye. There is something I have been wanting to ask you.”

“Oh yes?” said Autumn, drawing back almost imperceptibly.

“You lose yourself in contemplation each day for a prolonged time,” said Dhru, not appearing to notice, “and you seem to be unaware of your surroundings. What do you do in your head for that time?”

“I think on things,” said Autumn. “When my body is still my mind can

wander freely and I let it wander where it wants. Oft times it follows paths I have followed before but oft times it goes in new directions and I see things that would not appear to me if my body was engaged.”

“That is what I thought,” said Dhru, “and in truth I envy you that skill. I have tried but my mind is unwilling to cooperate. I have not the knack of it.”

“There is no knack,” said Autumn. “It is simply a matter of emptying your mind of unwanted thoughts and then letting the thoughts your mind wants to think on come through.”

“You make it sound simple,” said Dhru, “but, alas, my mind is a whirl of thoughts and I find it impossible to stop them. Oft times the same thoughts go round in an endless cycle and to stop that I have to get up and do something.”

“That is not good,” said Autumn, pursing her lips and frowning slightly. “That way lies frustration and exhaustion, like a dwelling filled with unruly children.”

“I wager you would never allow your dwelling to be filled with unruly children,” said Dhru, watching her as she looked around the Garden.

“That is for certain,” said Autumn absently then she saw something. “Aha, come with me,” and she marched off towards an arrangement of stones that edged a bed of cacti.

“Where are we going?” asked Dhru.

“To play with some stones,” said Autumn. “They will help you. Kneel here and take this.”

She pointed to the ground in front of a large, flattish stone with interestingly jagged edges and picked up another which was rounded at one end and came to a point at the other. Dhru knelt as instructed and Autumn passed him the pointed stone.

“I do not think the gardeners will like you removing their stones,” he

remarked, looking around to see if they had been spotted.

“It is only for a short time,” said Autumn, “and I will replace it exactly as it was. Now put this stone on top of the one in front of you.”

Dhru did as he was bid, with a mildly puzzled air. “Like this?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “You see how it stays there?”

“Yes,” said Dhru. “What else would it do? It is a stone.”

“It could fall off,” said Autumn. She picked up the stone again and handed it back to Dhru. “Do it again but balance it on the rounded end.”

Again Dhru did as he was bid but this time it took several attempts as the stone kept falling over. Each time it fell off Autumn handed it to him to try again. On the seventh attempt it rocked back and forth a little but stayed upright.

“That is good,” said Autumn, picking up the stone again. “Balance the stone again, but this time on its point.”

“That will not work,” said Dhru, taking the stone and examining the blunt point at its tip.

“Of course it will,” said Autumn. “The big stone is strong enough to support the smaller and you have already proved it will balance twice. All that has changed is that you need to set it more precisely so that its weight is perfectly balanced. Try.”

“But the slightest breeze will knock it over,” protested Dhru.

“My challenge to you is only that you balance the stone for a moment or two, not forever,” said Autumn. “Success is never final so worry not about the future. Concentrate on balancing the stone and let the future take care of itself.”

“What is the point of this?” asked Dhru setting the stone on its tip and

watching it tumble to the ground when he let go.

“There is no point, except on the stone,” said Autumn. “Try again.”

She and Logan sat quietly and watched as Dhru repeatedly tried to balance the stone. At least Autumn watched. Logan let his eyes drift among the passers-by who sometimes smiled and sometimes frowned but didn't interfere.

It was somewhere around his fiftieth attempt that Dhru suddenly froze with his hands close to but not touching the stone. He cautiously inhaled with an agonised expression and edged his hands away very slowly. The stone remained, balanced just perfectly on the stone beneath it. Dhru turned to beam at Autumn and the stone majestically fell to the ground.

“Wahah,” snarled Dhru and he spat at the stone.

Autumn smiled and picked up the stone and carefully replaced it in the soil where it had been.

“Now do you see the point?” she asked.

“No,” said Dhru, getting off his knees to sit on the ground. “It seemed a fruitless exercise. I managed to balance the stone but only for a moment. I cannot see that it served any purpose.”

“No matter,” said Autumn. “Tell me, what were your thoughts when you were trying to balance the stone?”

“I had none,” said Dhru. “I was concentrating on feeling the stone and adjusting it by the tiniest amounts to get it to balance.”

Autumn nodded but didn't reply. She just sat there and gazed at a cactus that towered over her, its two arms held out sideways as though it was trying to catch something.

Dhru looked at her then at Logan, who was watching a gardener pour water from a large bucket with a lot of little holes in it, then at the cactus which ignored him. The silence grew.

“Was I supposed to think of something?” asked Dhru.

Autumn just smiled and turned her attention to another cactus that had small blue flowers with bright yellow centres scattered among its prickles.

“Ohhh,” said Dhru, suddenly realising. “I had no thoughts in my head. It was empty because I was focused on the stone. Is that the point?”

“It is a point,” said Autumn, “and it is your point as you thought of it. Are there any other thoughts that follow on from that thought?”

“It does occur to me that this could be a way to clear my mind of thoughts,” said Dhru thoughtfully. “If I try to balance a stone on top of another stone the trying of it needs concentration and clears my mind.”

“That is certainly a thought that follows on,” said Autumn. “Any more?”

“Ahh, hmm,” said Dhru, frowning. “It occurs to me that perhaps with some practice I may not need to balance a stone on another and need only to think of balancing it. Hah,” and he slapped his thigh in delight. “You are a most excellent teacher!”

“I?” said Autumn. “I have taught you nothing. All I did was ask you to balance one stone upon another. What arose from that was entirely your doing.”

Dhru burst out laughing, startling the watering gardener. “Truly you are like no other I have met,” he said delightedly, “and yet you are a woman. Ahh, Logan, I begin to see now why you follow her everywhere.”

Logan jerked his head around to look at Dhru then went slightly pink.

“No,” he said with a half smile, “you have the wrong of it. 'Tis Autumn that follows me everywhere. I am unable to shake her off.”

Dhru laughed again as Autumn gave Logan an unreadable look.

“It was only a joke,” said Logan, looking at her with wide eyes. “Autumn does not understand jokes, Dhru. It is her only fault.”

“Ahh, you two delight my life,” said Dhru, looking only at Autumn. He got to his feet. “Come, let me take you to the baths then we shall get some food and return to the caravan. My father will be nearing the end of his business and we will be moving on at dawn. Reyansh will be wanting to spend some time in the town and if he does not we will not hear the end of it.”

Autumn and Logan got up and followed Dhru out of the Garden towards the long low stone building that formed part of one wall.

“Tulbeq is a small town,” said Dhru, “and has only the one bath house which is why we are here early in the day.”

“I do not follow,” said Autumn. “What has the time of day to do with the size of the town?”

“Ahh, I keep forgetting you are not of this land,” said Dhru. “Larger towns have bath houses for men and for women but here there is only the one so both men and women have to use it but women are not permitted within after sunset. At this time of day there will be few if any others there and the masira should be available.”

“Why are women not permitted after sunset?” asked Autumn. “I do not understand why women are treated differently to men in this land.”

“I offer no explanations or justifications,” said Dhru, “other than it is the custom and customs are almost impossible to change. I dare say many find comfort or refuge in such customs.”

“It is unlikely many women will take comfort in them,” said Logan.

“You say that,” said Dhru, “but I wager few women fret at the lost opportunity to be crowded in with a group of sweaty men in semi-darkness. I am not partial to it myself and I do not draw their attention with my charms.”

“You are probably right,” said Autumn. “So what are we to expect in this bath house? I imagine it is not simply a matter of lying in cold water.”

“Indeed not,” said Dhru. “We will start in a room of steam and let our bodies absorb the heat and moisture and let our sweat bring the dirt from deep within our skins. Then we will move into a cool room where the dirt and sweat will be scraped off and our bodies cool down. Finally the masira will knead our muscles and smooth out any knots and tensions within them. It is most delightfully cleansing and relaxing. Tulbeq is fortunate to have Blind Esir. He was blinded in battle in his youth and has devoted his life subsequently to the arts of the masir. They say he can read the ills of the body through his fingertips alone. I do not know if that is true but he is uncommonly skilled and would command a good fee at any bath house in Cim-Irsou but he refuses to go elsewhere. He says he knows his way around Tulbeq and is too old to learn another place.”

“It is good that he has found his place in this world,” said Autumn. “Shall we go in?”

There is little point in talking of what occurred in the steam room as nothing ever occurs in a steam room. The steam saps the strength until even thought becomes wearisome and light conversation almost impossible. Those immersed in a steam room spend their time sweating and lolling until they can take no more then they slowly and with great effort drag themselves to the cool room. The shock of the cold and the heavy handed activities of those delegated to scrape the skins of those so recently steamed renders most speechless.

Feeling listless, cooked and sensitive to touch, Logan was the first to receive the ministrations of Blind Esir and recovered his power of sound quite quickly. He groaned and yelped and cried out as Blind Esir probed muscles he did not know he had and ploughed furrows in those he knew of. Then he was deftly flipped over and the process repeated until his head was swimming. Finally the battering ended and he was allowed to lie, moaning gently, on the flat stone bench, every fibre of his body quivering in supplication. Autumn had watched with interest and Dhru had laughed quietly to himself, not least because he had elected to go last.

Blind Esir was of medium height but very thin and wiry and a vivid scar ran from temple to temple. One eye was just an empty socket and the other was all white. The rest of his face was wrinkled and seamed and his head was shaved. He had worked on countless bodies over his lifetime and was not put off by cries and protestations. He knew his skill and could judge to perfection how much pressure each person needed. He was a master at his craft.

When Logan was able to get off the bench and weakly sit down with his back to the wall to recover Autumn took his place. She lay face down and Blind Esir bent to start working on her neck and shoulders. He stopped almost immediately.

“What is this?” he demanded, his voice gravelly with age.

“What is wrong?” asked Dhru.

“You seek to play games with me?” asked Blind Esir. “I do not know what this is but I only work on people.”

“I am a person,” said Autumn, propping herself on an elbow to look at him.

Blind Esir scowled and put his hand where her voice had come from. Autumn let him feel her face then his hand strayed to follow the length of her ponytail then returned to her neck.

“You sound female,” he said, “and you have the hair and neck of a female. There is a wound here, not from a knife but it is healing well.” His hand moved over her back and across her buttock to her leg. “You have the skin of a female as well,” he added then suddenly gripped the back of her thigh. “But you are not female.” He let go and turned away.

“Explain yourself,” barked Dhru, his hand reaching for his knife which was not there. “This is Autumn Savannah, a good friend of mine and decidedly female.”

“I cannot see her,” said Blind Esir, “but she has not the muscles of a female.”

“Are you saying she is a man?” demanded Dhru.

“No,” said Blind Esir. “This is not a man either. I have never felt muscles like these before. There is a hardness deep within that is not human.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn and Logan nodded his understanding and sighed.

“She is a Krisana of Mizule,” said Dhru, relaxing a little. “She is a highly trained warrior.”

“That's as may be,” said Blind Esir, “but her muscles are like no warrior's muscles and I've worked on a goodly number of them.”

Dhru stared at Blind Esir for a few moments, ineffectually as Esir could not see him, then looked at Autumn. “You do not seem surprised or insulted,” he said.

“I think I know what he is talking about,” said Autumn, sitting up and swinging her legs over the side of the bench. “I am as human as you and Logan. You have seen me bleed and my blood is as red as yours but there is also something else. It is of no consequence to anyone but myself but doubts are now in your mind and I would not have you think ill of me. It is best if we go somewhere and talk.”

Chapter Twenty One

Dhru gazed at Autumn for a few moments then abruptly turned on his heel and strode out of the masir room. Autumn looked at Logan who shrugged and got up.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Actually, quite good,” said Logan. “It hurt while he was doing it but now it is over I am feeling very relaxed and strong again. I’m quite impressed. Shall we go after Dhru?”

“It would be best,” said Autumn. “We need to get our clothes and things anyway.”

They walked back to the entrance where they had left their things to find Dhru’s robes already gone. They quickly donned their malus, picked up their staffs and Autumn slung her pack over her shoulder then, with a nod and a quiet ‘thank you’ to the attendant they walked out into the bright sunshine.

“There he is,” said Autumn, pointing back past the entrance to the Garden. “He’s talking to that man with the fire.”

“Where?” asked Logan peering at the market that was in progress some way up the dusty road. “Oh yes, I see him.”

As they walked over Dhru held up the fingers of one hand and one finger of the other hand then took some coins out of the small bag that hung from the belt of his robe and handed them to the gnarled old man. The man deftly scooped in his steaming cauldron with a large wooden spoon and emptied it into a fold of Dhru’s robe then added another scoop. Dhru nodded and said something and the man wagged his spoon and Dhru stepped back to make way for another customer. He turned to look back towards the bath house and saw Autumn and Logan coming towards him and smiled.

“I have got us some dampalingas,” he said as they got near. “Let us go to the river bank and eat them there and you can tell me what it is you wish to tell me.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” said Autumn. “What are dampalingas?”

“Let us skirt the market,” said Dhru, turning. “The river is not far.” He set off with the fold of his robe held out in front of him. “Dampalingas are balls of dough filled with finely chopped meat and herbs and steamed. You will like them.”

“Steamed?” said Logan. “What is that?”

“They’re cooked in a dish of woven palm fronds held over boiling water,” said Dhru. “There is a shady tree, let us sit there.”

“That seems a strange way of cooking,” said Logan. “I have always cooked over a fire or put the food in the water. It seems like extra work to me.”

“Well, yes, I suppose it is,” said Dhru, easing himself to the ground with one hand still holding out the fold of his robe. “But it means you can cook with sea water and the food doesn’t get too salty.”

“What happens to the salt, then?” asked Logan, sitting beside Autumn.

“It builds up on the sides of the pan,” said Dhru, “and can be scraped off and sold as salt or thrown back in the sea. Now, I got six but if that’s not enough I can get some more.”

Logan picked up one of the pale, slightly sticky balls and inspected it suspiciously. Autumn merely picked some fluff from hers before biting into it.

“The dough is a little unusual but it is very nice,” she said. “What spices are used?”

“That is every cook’s secret,” said Dhru. He bit into one himself then added “but these definitely have cumin in and, I think, there is a little nutmeg as well.”

“They are nice!” exclaimed Logan eating his. He reached for a second and rapidly ate it as well.

Dhru laughed. "I will get some more when we return to the caravan," he said, eating his second as well. "Now, what did you want to tell me?"

Autumn bit off half her second dampalinga and offered the other half to Logan who looked longingly at it but refused.

"You finish it," he said so Autumn shrugged and popped it in her mouth.

"There is little to tell," she said, settling herself into her usual cross-legged posture. "Last Autumn I was stabbed by a poisoned thorn and nearly died. The one who saved me used the seeds of a salodkaja tree and a little of their essence has entered my body.¹⁰ I fancy it is the effect of that that Blind Esir felt."

"I find it hard to believe that a few seeds would make Blind Esir think you are not human," said Dhru. "I have eaten many seeds in my life and stepped on thorns and I am unaffected."

"There was some evil magic on the thorn," said Autumn. "Look, it went in here," and she pulled up her malu to show the small scar on the inside of her calf.

"We all have scars from past hurts," said Dhru. "That little one proves nothing."

"The thorn went in there," said Logan, "and worked its way up trying to get to Autumn's heart. Khimera, she who tended Autumn, trapped it with the seeds. Show him your marks, Autumn."

Obediently Autumn pulled apart the midriff of her malu to show the faint U pattern of star shaped scars on her upper belly.

"She put in five seeds around the thorn," said Autumn, "and it was forced to jump out of my body and she was able to destroy it. You can still feel the seeds under the skin."

Dhru reached out a finger with an eyebrow raised in query. Autumn

10 See *The Annals of Autumn Savanna ~ The Second Tale*.

nodded and he gently ran his finger over the scars.

“Indeed,” he murmured and pulled his finger back before frowning again. “I do not know of this salodkaja tree but I accept your words. How have these seeds affected you?”

“They have made me stronger, faster and more supple,” said Autumn, putting her malu back in place. “I did not know until today that something had changed the feel of my muscles but it would make sense.”

“I have seen your speed and suppleness,” said Dhru, “and there is no doubting that you are faster in your reactions than anyone else I have met. How strong are you?”

“She can crack ...,” started Logan but Autumn hushed him.

“It is of little importance,” she said. “I am strong enough to have dealt with the things I have dealt with and I may prove not strong enough to deal with things that are yet to come. For certain I am not going to undergo trials of strength just to demonstrate something that needs no demonstrating. You have already accepted my speed so let that be the end of it and if I am to be judged, let me be judged on how well I live my life and not on how strong I am. As I said, this is of no consequence to any but myself and I am the same person as I was yesterday. I have told you this only to explain the strange remarks of Blind Esir so that you do not fret unduly over what you may imagine.”

“I understand,” said Dhru. “Did you also get these seeds, Logan?”

“No,” said Logan. “I am plain old boring Logan and much as I was born. I am no threat to anyone.”

“Nor am I,” said Autumn, “except to those who set out to cause harm and suffering.”

“As I can well imagine,” said Dhru. “From what I have seen there are few who could match you except through force of arms from a distance so if you chose to do evil it is unlikely you could be stopped. Am I permitted to ask a question?”

“Of course,” said Autumn.

“How was it that the thorn that stabbed you had evil magic on it?” asked Dhru. “Had you offended some matsafa?”

“That is a long tale and, I fancy, not worth the telling,” said Autumn. “Suffice it to say that the harm was done to me by one who had seen that I was a threat to it in the future and took steps to prevent me from doing it harm before I ever knew of its existence.”

“That makes little sense,” said Dhru, frowning. “If it could see the future then surely it would have seen that its actions would have made you stronger, not weaker?”

“I am not gifted in the arts of augury,” said Autumn, “but I understand that they are imprecise and there is always some element of chance.”

“Well, you could be right,” said Dhru. “Certainly you have given me much to think on. Shall we return to the caravan? Reyansh will be getting restless.”

“Certainly,” said Autumn, “and whatever happens in the future I thank you for showing me the delights of the Pleasure Garden of Tulbeq.”

“It was entirely my pleasure,” said Dhru. “I had a heavy heart thinking that you had only seen the harsher side of life in Neander and sought to show you that there is much that is pleasant as well. Would you like some more dampalingas?”

“I think Logan would,” said Autumn, “although we have no money to pay for them.”

“Look,” said Logan suddenly and nudged Autumn. “That man over there.”

“What about him?” asked Autumn as she and Dhru turned to look.

“His shadow is like mine,” said Logan. “It is at least a foot length in front of him.”

The man disappeared among the people at the market and Logan dashed off after him. "Wait for me here," he called. "I'll be back."

"It is indeed strange about his shadow," said Dhru, watching him go. "Another question if I may?"

"About shadows or me?" asked Autumn.

"You," said Dhru, turning to face her again. "Or rather the thorn. You said, if I remember correctly, that the thorn was used to stab you by one who saw you would become a threat to it. Not him or her but 'it' and I know you are careful in your choice of words. What was 'it'?"

"A creature from another land," said Autumn.

"From Neander?" asked Dhru. "Is that why you are here? To seek revenge?"

"No, not Neander," said Autumn. "Somewhere much further away and I do not seek revenge on anyone or anything."

"There is much about you that intrigues me," said Dhru.

"Logan is returning," said Autumn. "We had best be getting back to the caravan."

"Indeed," said Dhru. "Logan, did you find the man?"

"Yes," said Logan, "and I asked him of his shadow and he said he had not noticed. He did not seem overly concerned when I pointed it out although he was not happy that I was delaying him so I came back. I am none the wiser but somehow I find it comforting that this affliction, if that is what it is, affects others as well."

* * *

"You liked the Pleasure Garden?" asked Inyanasi when they got back to the caravan. "Tejas! Bring more shayi."

He seemed happy so it was likely his business had gone well.

“We liked it very much,” said Autumn. “We have nothing like it in Aferraron although if there was I am sure it would be popular.”

“I stopped there on my way back,” said Inyanasi, “but did not see you so I returned to the caravan.”

“I took Autumn and Logan to the bath house, Magide,” said Dhru, “then we went to the river and they had dampalingas for the first time.”

“Pah!” said Inyanasi scowling. “You young people and your taste for convenience food. Food is best when prepared at home not by some street vendor with a dirty cauldron.”

“As you say, Magide” said Dhru, settling himself beside a camel, “but our guests were hungry and I had not the means to prepare food with me although it seems that they have managed to get back here unharmed.”

“The curses of Lafiya will fall upon me,” said Inyanasi, clicking his thumbnail on his teeth at Dhru “for I have allowed my son to grow up lacking the necessary respect for his elders. I know not what will become of him for my failings. There is still yet hope for the youngest however. You respect your old father, do you not, Tejas?”

“With every breath of my body, Magide,” said Tejas passing out the cups of shayi.

Inyanasi ruffled his hair proudly and Tejas stuck his tongue out at Dhru when his father wasn't looking. Dhru smiled and managed to kick Tejas' backside before Inyanasi turned back.

“Fetch another cup, my son,” he said. “It would seem we are to receive a visitation.”

“Who is it, Magide?” asked Dhru, looking where Inyanasi was looking.

“It is that feckless idiot, Ubadah,” said Inyanasi contemptuously. “I saw him counting the camels in that caravan over there and now he comes this way, no doubt to count our camels although I wager even

thirteen will be too many for him to count. He has only ten fingers and thumbs and is too fat to reach his toes.”

“Ahh,” said Dhru, observing the fat man walking towards them with two others. “Perhaps he could count the other three on his chins.”

Inyanasi laughed then caught himself and backhanded Dhru gently in reprimand for his lack of respect for his elders.

“A thousand blessings on you and yours, Ubadah, Osaku of Tulbeq,” he called with an exaggerated flourishing bow. “Your presence honours our humble caravan.”

“And likewise a thousand blessings on you and yours, Inyanasi of Cim-Irsou,” acknowledged Ubadah with a bow that was neither as deep nor as flourished as Inyanasi’s. “It is a hot day, is it not?”

“Astauand rages like no other,” agreed Inyanasi, although the day seemed to be no hotter than the previous days. “You will rest and partake of shayi with us? Some food?”

“Perhaps a little something, Inyanasi,” said Ubadah, fanning himself with a section of palm frond. He gestured curtly with the frond then resumed fanning himself. One of his underlings leapt forward with a large cushion and placed it on the sand near Inyanasi for Ubadah to sit on. Tejas brought over a cup of shayi and a plate of assorted dried fruits and placed them in front of him.

“And these are your sons?” asked Ubadah, waving his fan in a general direction that included Autumn and Logan.

“Two are,” said Inyanasi. “My oldest is in Tulbeq but his brothers Dhru and Tejas are here to offer their obeisances,” and he snapped his finger at them.

Dhru stepped forward and knelt before Ubadah, touching his head to the sand. Tejas did the same and Ubadah graciously nodded at them.

“And these two?” said Ubadah, pointing at Logan with his fan.

“These are Logan and Autumn Savannah, guests travelling with us, Osaku,” said Inyanasi. “They are both from Aferraron.”

“Indeed?” asked Ubadah, raising his eyebrows. He leaned forward and selected some fruit before nodding towards his other underling who made a note on a sheet of recaisn. “He came here by boat?”

“No, Osaku,” said Inyanasi. “But yes, also. They were shipwrecked to the West and came upon us in the desert but they did not arrive in Tulbeq by boat.”

“Hmmm,” said Ubadah, licking his fingers. “So no import levies have been laid upon his goods?”

“They have no goods,” said Inyanasi. “They have but one pack of personal items and two staffs, nothing more.”

Ubadah's eyes narrowed and he scanned the camels ranged around them.

“All the camels and the goods on them are yours then?” he asked.

“Indeed, Osaku,” said Inyanasi, “and you will find all the baggage is in accord with the listing I deposited with your clerk this morning.”

“I do not doubt it,” said Ubadah, picking up another piece of fruit. “It is these two that I am interested in. Why is he here?”

“They are travellers,” said Inyanasi, keeping his face unreadable. “They travel in search of knowledge.”

“What manner of knowledge does he seek?” asked Ubadah.

“Knowledge of the world and the people and things in it,” said Autumn.

Ubadah ignored her and kept his eyes on Inyanasi.

“Knowledge of the world and the people and things in it, Osaku,” said Inyanasi as though Autumn had not spoken.

“To what purpose?” asked Ubadah with a frown. “It would seem a fruitless exercise to me.” That seemed to remind him of something and he leaned forward to take the last piece of fruit.

“They are from Aferraron, Osaku,” said Inyanasi with a shrug.

“I daresay we must make allowance,” said Ubadah. “And where are they going? They will be returning to Aferraron? There is a boat leaving for Kaloolon in two days. They intend to take it?”

“They continue with me to Ajoomi, Osaku,” said Inyanasi. “We leave at dawn tomorrow.”

“You have noted all this?” asked Ubadah of the underling busily scribing. The underling hastily added another scribble and confirmed he had.

Ubadah checked the dish but it was empty so he scratched his belly with the end of his palm frond.

“Then I wish you a most pleasant and speedy journey, Inyanasi,” said Ubadah. He grunted and the cushion underling bent to help him get to his feet.

“I thank you for your many kindnesses and concern, Osaku,” said Inyanasi getting to his feet also. “If I might be so bold, how is it that you take such an interest in our concerns? I have travelled this way many times without such a visitation from your illustriousness.”

“And would that it were so this time, Inyanasi,” said Ubadah fanning himself rapidly from the effort of getting up on such a hot day. “But it is the express wish of our most glorious Karoi, may Astauand and Plakill and Plifal light his noble path for ever more, that all small caravans be audited and particulars noted.”

“And how fortune favours me with the blessings of our glorious Karoi,” said Inyanasi. “I had not thought that he was aware of the smaller caravans.”

“The most mighty Karoi is aware of everything under Astauand,” said

Ubadah, tapping Inyanasi on the shoulder with his fan. “May Musafir guide you and your sons and your guests safely to Ajoomi.”

He waddled off in the direction of another caravan that had arrived while Dhru, Autumn and Logan were at the Pleasure Garden.

“Fat fool,” muttered Inyanasi, settling himself on the ground again and looking at Autumn and Logan. “Now why should the Poison Karoi be interested in small caravans? Could it be that he plans a new levy on spices or perhaps it is not the goods he is interested in?”

Chapter Twenty Two

“How would the Karoi know we exist?” asked Autumn.

“A fair question,” said Inyanasi, his good humour evaporating. “None except us knew of you before we reached Waaj and a report about you sent from there to Cim-Irsou will not have arrived yet. Certainly there has not been time for any message to come back to Tulbeq. Even if the bandits reported you to the authorities, and that would be inconceivable, there has still not been enough time. Unless ...” and he paused in thought, tapping his finger on his knee.

Autumn waited patiently and Logan studied his shadow. Tejas busied himself cleaning the cups and pots and Dhru gazed across the small lake, only half aware of the conversation.

“Another possibility comes to my mind,” said Inyanasi, stretching out in the sand on his side with his head propped up on one arm. “Which is that your movements were known to the Karoi before you arrived here.”

“That is unlikely,” said Autumn. “We left from Xive with the intent only of drifting on the currents with no destination in mind and even if word was sent from there the time is still insufficient. I wager the Karoi is not interested in us. Why would he be? We are little people of no consequence.”

“Unless you are not little people of no consequence,” said Inyanasi. “A Krisana and a whatever he is wandering in another land. Perhaps the Karoi knows more about you than I do.”

“Krisanas are known for their wanderings,” said Autumn. “My own mentor, Noxu, travelled in Neander in his youth and Xanos, an elder from my Esyup, died in the Skizze Mountains some two hundred summers ago.”

“I accept that,” said Inyanasi, “but you will no doubt accept that it is unusual for a Krisana to be joined with two Esyups. I have not heard of such a thing although it may well be commonplace. And him ...,” he pointed with his chin at Logan, “despite appearances he is not what

he seems.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn.

“My humblest apologies for disturbing you, Magide,” said Tejas, not looking in the least bit humble.

“Yes, my son?” asked Inyanasi, glancing at him.

“The utensils are washed and stowed, Magide,” said Tejas. “You said I could go fishing when I was done.”

“Are they polished and do they gleam brightly?” asked Inyanasi, scowling at him.

“Brighter than Astauand, Magide,” said Tejas, looking as wide eyed and innocent as he could.

“Then you may go fishing, my son,” said Inyanasi, “but mind that you do not catch all the fish. Leave one or two for the other caravans.”

“Magide?” said Tejas, puzzled.

Inyanasi laughed. “I know your skill with fishing,” he said. “Do not catch every fish in the lake for that is just greed. Catch only enough for our immediate needs. Go.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Tejas and he scampered off to fetch his fishing line.

“Ahh, how soon it is that they grow up and take on the responsibilities of men,” said Inyanasi, watching him run to the water's edge. He looked over at Logan and sighed.

“If word came to me that he is a matsafa or even a sorcerer I would not be surprised,” he said and immediately held up his hand to still any protestations. “I do not know and I do not want to know but I fancy all is not what it seems with you two. Be that as it may, that bumbling fool did say that he was interested in you both and I wonder why.”

“That is not so,” said Logan, drawing a line in the sand at the edge of his shadow. “He asked if Dhru and Tejas were your sons first and you introduced them then he wanted to know if we had any goods and if a levy was due on them. I wager he was only interested in finding out if he could tax us in some way.”

“Perhaps you are right,” said Inyanasi. “It is unusual for strangers to travel with a caravan and it could be that which excited what passes for his mind. He also said the Karoi had demanded an audit of all small caravans and not those with guests. I would prefer that you two were the objects of his interest but I suspect you are not.”

“Why would you prefer that?” asked Autumn.

“Small caravans are either travelling to become part of a large caravan or carry high value goods,” said Inyanasi. “If the Karoi is only interested in small caravans then my worst fears are coming to pass for he can only be interested in adding additional levies to my burdens. You two I can hand over to the Karoi or disguise you or let you follow some other path but there is little I can do about taxes and levies. I daresay I can bribe an official or two when we reach Cim-Irsou but that is still a cost and is burdensome to me. Pah! Knowing those foul bloodsuckers I could easily end up paying more than the additional taxes and there is the added weight of being caught. I spit on them and all their ancestors and their cursed offspring!”

He hawked and spat most vigorously and a nearby camel turned to look at him in surprise. It spat back to show its support.

“If you are a sorcerer or some such,” he added, looking at Logan, “find a way to make my camels invisible when we get to Cim-Irsou.”

“I would if I could,” said Logan, “but would it not be possible to unload the camels before reaching the city and carry the sacks in by hand? After all there are six of us and only ten camel loads. I wager it would only take a few trips.”

“I like you,” said Inyanasi thoughtfully. He waved a finger at Logan. “We shall talk on this more when we are out of the hearing of others. Hmmm.” He sank into thought, abstractedly drawing what could, just

possibly, have been crude maps of parts of Cim-Irsou in the sand.

Logan raised his eyebrows at Autumn then turned back to check the line in the sand. His shadow didn't appear to have moved any further away. He wondered if the other four people he had spotted in Tulbeq with shadow difficulties were worried. Three had said not and the fourth, a nervous looking woman, had run away rather than talk to him. He sighed and shifted and was relieved to see his shadow shifted with him, even if it was further away than it should have been.

Autumn watched Inyanasi for a few moments but as he seemed withdrawn and distracted she turned to Dhru.

"Can I ask what your father meant when he referred to 'the Poison Karoi'?" she asked.

"Hmmm?" asked Dhru, coming out of his reverie. "Oh, that is Soros. He is the Karoi."

"I did not know his name," said Autumn, "but why the 'Poison' Karoi?"

"If you do not know his name then you will not know his history," said Dhru. "Our Karoi is Amja Soros Hicwe Unwasi something or other. I can never remember all his names but he is the eighth in the Buogu family to be Karoi and the seventh to take the name Soros. It is difficult to keep track of them if you want to go through their history although it is easy enough to remember that Soros is the Karoi. No doubt his son will be Soros as well which makes life easier and saves having to spread the word when one dies and the next takes over. No doubt it is important at the Palace but outside of there no one really cares much."

"But why 'Poison'?" asked Autumn.

"Oh, they've all been poisoned," said Dhru. "All of them from Buogu Askefur onwards."¹¹

11 This is, in fact, incorrect. Buogu Askefur, the founder of the Buogu dynasty, died of old age and Soros III was drowned when he went swimming in the moonlight while intoxicated. Soros' I, II and IV to VI did, however, succumb to poisoning, generally at the hands of their successors.

“And Soros did the poisoning?” asked Autumn, a little confused.

“Oh no,” said Dhru, “apart from his father, of course. No, our Soros grew up knowing that all his ancestors had been poisoned and was determined not to be poisoned himself. When he was a youth, not much older than Tejas, or so the stories go, he left the palace alone and wandered the land to find out what life was really like for his people. Apparently, when he was somewhere in the South he was bitten by a small snake and lay near death for several days in a cave. The story has it that he survived and the idea came upon him that if he allowed himself to be bitten by more snakes, each bigger and more poisonous than the last, then he could build up his immunity and survive where his ancestors had failed. It is said that he moved on from big snakes to scorpions and other poisonous creatures and that he drinks a cup of venom every day to keep himself immune. How true this is I cannot say but his father believed him and allowed himself to taste Soros’ drink and died which is how this Soros became Karoi.¹²”

“How interesting,” said Autumn. “I know that you can build strength through repeated trials but I wonder if it would actually work with poison?”

“No doubt you will experiment to find out,” said Logan drily. “I would prefer that you did not. The poison on the thorn was bad enough.”

“Do not worry yourself, Logan,” said Autumn. “My curiosity does not extend that far.”

“And we cannot be certain it does work,” said Dhru. “As far as I know Soros has not been poisoned and it could be that no one has tried because of the tales although I have heard there have been one or two attempts to assassinate him by other means. Perhaps if someone does try to poison him then he will die like anyone else. We will never know

¹² This account bears striking resemblances to that of Mithridates VI (135–63 BCE) on Earth. Also known as Mithridates the Great and Eupator Dionysius, Mithridates spent several years as a young man in the wilderness inuring himself to hardship before becoming king of Pontus and Armenia Minor in northern Anatolia where he ruled from 120–63 BCE. Mithridates also reportedly built up an immunity to poison through repeated snake bites to the extent that, when he tried to commit suicide using poison in 66 BCE, he failed.

until it happens and we most likely will never know if someone tries.”

* * *

“Dhru, most curious and agile of my sons,” said Inyanasi after they had eaten. “What thoughts passed through your mind today that may occupy us until we sleep?”

The caravan had moved on from Tulbeq two days previously and had more or less followed the coast. They had camped some way back from the beach so that the salt water in the air did not affect the spices they carried.

“I confess I have no conundrums to divert you with today, Magide,” said Dhru. “My mind has dwelt much on something Autumn said to me when we were at the Pleasure Garden.”

“And no doubt you were too scared of women to take her up on it,” remarked Reyansh. “It is time you found yourself a wife or two, cika.”

Dhru smiled and did not respond, leaving it to Inyanasi to glare at Reyansh.

“It is dishonourable to cast aspersions on an honoured guest, Reyansh,” he admonished, brandishing his camel stick. “You will apologise to Autumn immediately.”

Reyansh scowled at his father but got to his feet.

“I offer you my humble apologies for that remark,” he said quietly, bowing his head. “My intent was only to belittle my absurd brother and was not directed at you. I was thoughtless.”

“Be grateful she is not quick to take offence, cika,” growled Inyanasi. “You would not last long if she did.”

“I took no offence,” said Autumn. “Always we have a choice in how to accept things that are spoken to us and always it is my choice to accept such words as being spoken in friendship even when I do not understand them, as indeed I did not understand what you said.

There is no need to apologise but if your offer is sincere then I accept it unreservedly.”

“Pah,” said Inyanasi. “You should have made him grovel on the ground!”

“To what purpose?” asked Autumn.

“For the enjoyment of it,” laughed Dhru.

Reyansh glowered at him then sat down.

“What was it that I said that has occupied you, Dhru?” asked Autumn, seeking to change the subject.

“It was when we were balancing the rocks,” said Dhru. “You said ...”

“Balancing rocks?” interjected Reyansh. “What manner of foolishness was that?”

“It was an exercise in learning patience, older brother,” said Dhru. “Something you would do well to learn.”

“Enough,” growled Inyanasi. “You both try my patience beyond endurance. Tell us what Autumn said and let us think on that and end this infernal bickering.”

“Magide,” said Dhru, nodding towards his father. “Autumn said that success is never final. I have thought on that and I am not certain that I agree for surely, if it is true, then it means that the seeking of success is futile and pointless and doomed to failure.”

Autumn nodded and waited for any reaction. It was a while in coming.

“Let me tell you, Autumn,” said Inyanasi leaning forward with one finger raised. “From my last journey to Sassese'lte, I and I alone, made a profit of five, mark that, five thousand grinar. Hah!” He looked at his sons to check their faces were suitably admiring. “Now tell me truly, is this not a measure of my success?”

"It would seem more a mark of inordinate time spent counting," said Logan thoughtfully. "It must have taken a while to tally that many grinar."

"Why you ..., " growled Inyanasi, his eyes burning angrily.

"Please calm yourself," said Autumn. "Logan meant no offence. He was merely remarking on the deficiencies that exist in our counting system. He has given much thought to an alternative and better way."¹³

"That is indeed the case," said Logan sitting up in alarm. "I meant no disrespect to either you or your trading skills."

"Mmm," said Inyanasi then inclined his head at Logan to indicate that either he had taken no offence or Logan was forgiven, it was unclear which. "How do you answer that, then, Autumn?"

"I venture by any measure that your journey was a success," said Autumn. "But if I may ask, after such a successful outcome, why did you embark on another journey? Is the profit all spent?"

"Some is spent, indeed," said Inyanasi. "I have a wife and daughters as well as these three sons and their upkeep is not cheap but much of that profit still remains. This journey is to add to that."

"And no doubt this journey will be very successful as well," said Autumn, "regardless of what new levies the Karoi may apply. Tell me, is your profit well protected?"

"As well as can be," said Inyanasi. "Thieves lie everywhere and one cannot be too well protected."

"Indeed," said Autumn. "But you would agree that if thieves do not take your profit and no other disasters fall upon you and your family that money will, one day, run out?"

"Yes," said Inyanasi. "Much as I might desire to keep it intact it is

13 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Second Tale*, in which Logan develops a method of counting and simple arithmetic using the place value system in base 5. Interestingly, after *The Annals* became popular in Aferraron the simple tallying system was replaced with the place value system although using base 12 instead.

impossible.”

“And if, by some great mischance, this journey turns out to not be profitable,” said Autumn, “its failure will eat into the success of your last journey?”

“It has already,” said Inyanasi. “The costs of this journey have to be met from the profits of the last until these goods are sold. If they are destroyed by fire or ruined by sea water then those costs will never be recovered.”

“And that is my point,” said Autumn. “No matter how successful you are as a trader your profits will one day disappear, through spending, theft or some disaster. Your success is never final, you have to always follow your successes with more successes.”

“I concede that may be true,” said Inyanasi, after a few moments thought. “But there are successes that can never be diminished.”

“I have never found any,” said Autumn. “You have remarked on my fighting skills and yes, I have been successful in acquiring them but I must practice daily else I lose those skills. It is the same with everything I have ever learned. If I do not work on these things and build on them I forget. It is the same for all of us and there are many failures that we oft times tend to overlook. There are fighting techniques I have yet to master and have failed many times in trying to acquire them.”

“But is it not true that we can look back on a life in old age and say that it was successful?” asked Dhru.

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and I wager all of you will be able to do that but, as I said, my comment was not on the existence of success but on the lack of finality of it. You, Dhru, will, I am sure, have a successful life but at some time you will die and that success comes to an end. You will need to either never die or be reborn as you are in order to continue that success and in the doing of that you may well encounter many failures and reversals of the successes you once had.”

“Can it not be said that the successes of my sons after my time is done

are my successes?” said Inyanasi. “Can I not take the credit for raising them well?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “But sooner or later your sons or your sons of sons will have no sons or sons who are not successful. It is inconceivable that your sons for endless generations will always have success and even if they do they will always have to be chasing success for success is never final. No one can sit back and say ‘I have succeeded in this thing and that is it for evermore’.”

“Yes, that is what I thought you meant,” said Dhru. “I, too, have been unable to think of any success that will never end. Even the ground on which we sit will one day vanish from the effects of the wind and rain and sea, and let us not talk of the successes of Karois for their success is fleeting indeed. No matter how well one problem is resolved another appears and they are constantly surrounded by those who seek to destroy them and take their power.”

“I thought you said you could not wholly accept the idea,” said Autumn, “yet you seem to be accepting of it here.”

“That is the conundrum,” said Dhru. “While I accept your statement in principle, surely it means that striving for success is doomed to failure and is therefore not worth pursuing?”

“Most decidedly not,” said Autumn. “Tell me, did you enjoy your meal this evening and the shayi that accompanied it?”

“Yes,” said Dhru. “It was a pleasant enough meal.”

“And yet because you ate it,” said Autumn, “Tejas’ success in preparing the meal has ended in failure because the entire meal is gone. Are you saying he should never prepare another meal for that reason?”

“I did not think of that,” said Dhru.

“But the preparing of the meal was a success,” said Reyansh. “Is that fact not final? Tejas knows we enjoyed it and are replete even though it is now gone.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “but therein lies the nub of it. It is gone. No matter how much you enjoyed it and how well Tejas prepared it, it is gone and if you are not to starve to death tomorrow he must do it all over again but it would be very wrong to say that it was pointless. Success should be enjoyed while it lasts. But there is also another consideration.”

“I thought there might be,” said Dhru. “I am beginning to know how your mind works.”

Logan gave Dhru a congratulatory burst of applause. “That is more than I have even done,” he said.

“Nonsense,” said Autumn. “You know me too well and I venture you could argue this point as well as I if not even better.”

Logan just looked quietly at her.

“Ahh, that was another of your jokes?” she asked.

Logan nodded.

“And you are about to ask if Tejas has ever burnt food, are you not?” he asked.

“You see?” said Autumn. “I do not understand your jokes but you understand my mind. Continue.”

“Has Tejas burnt food?” asked Logan.

“Of course,” said Inyanasi. “He was not born knowing how to cook.”

“Exactly,” said Logan. “And that is the point of trying even if you know the end result will be failure for it is only through failures that we can know of success, however fleeting it is.”

“That is all very well,” said Dhru, “for we all know that to succeed at something is to go through many failures first but my question is that if you know something is going to be a success but that that success will not be final then why bother to try?”

“Two reasons,” said Logan. “Firstly you can never know for certain that whatever it is will be successful but, more importantly, you can still enjoy the success and the process of striving for that success. Even though the profits will eventually disappear, it is still fruitful for your father to undertake these trading journeys, if only to provide for the care of yourselves, your mother and your sisters. But more than that, success can be defined in many ways. Even if there is no profit from this journey you all can still call it a success if you are willing to consider other aspects. You have all learned more of the world and gained from the experience of travelling, for example, and you have met others and your lives are the richer in the process, even if your pockets are not. And, yes, you may in time come to forget those experiences because even those successes are never final but you cannot deny that you had those experiences.”

“You are as bad as she is,” grumbled Reyansh. “I am going to bed before my head hurts more than it does.”

“Sadly that success is not final,” said Dhru. “You are still going to get up again in the morning.”

Chapter Twenty Three

Autumn dropped back to walk alongside Logan. She had finished her morning exercises and stopped for an update from Inyanasi.

“Inyanasi said we have made good progress and we will be in Ajoomi soon,” she informed him. “You see that farmhouse over there? It is less than half a day from here to the town.”

“Ohh,” said Logan, glumly.

“You seem ill at ease, my friend,” said Autumn. “What ails you?”

Logan jerked his thumb at the shadow that was following him.

“It is nearly a full body length away now,” he said.

“Ahh,” said Autumn, glancing behind. “But you do not feel any different in yourself?”

“No,” said Logan, “although it worries me that there is something wrong with my shadow.”

“I can see it would be a matter of concern,” said Autumn, “but I do not know what to say to reassure you. I have never seen nor heard of such a thing and I know not whether it is serious or not. Certainly it is encouraging that you feel unchanged within. That would suggest that your shadow is wholly outside you and its loss will be minor.”

“You think I am going to lose it?” asked Logan. “Will that not make me a freak of some sort?”

“Let us approach this rationally,” said Autumn, not knowing any other way to approach it. “In as much as being different to others you can rest your mind for we are both different to others and many see us as quite strange. And, of course, your appearance is unaffected unless someone happens to be looking for your shadow which is unlikely as we tend to take such things for granted. As to being a freak, well, that is in the mind of the one who thinks that and you cannot be held responsible for how others think. After all, them as think a woman

with hair on her lip or a man with a deformed hand as being a freak will think much the same of you if they choose to regardless of your characteristics. In this land, after all, your blue eyes would seem most unusual and some, I dare say, will call you a freak just for that.”

“So you think my shadow will go completely?” asked Logan, plodding forward.

“It would seem likely, I have to confess,” said Autumn, turning to walk backwards so she could watch his shadow. “It does not show any sign of coming back to join you.”

“Oh joy,” said Logan, “so I am going to be a freak.”

“Everyone is a freak to someone,” said Autumn, “but there may be compensations.”

“Such as?” demanded Logan.

“Umm, perhaps you could make some money at a fair as The Man With No Shadow,” said Autumn. “It would save you the effort of thieving.”

Logan jerked to look at her in surprise, caught his foot on a tuft of grass and stumbled.

“Were you joking?” he demanded, walking forwards again.

“Do that again,” said Autumn.

“Do what again?” said Logan.

He stopped walking because he had noticed Autumn had stopped walking.

“Interesting,” said Autumn, staring at his shadow.

“What are you talking about?” said Logan irritably.

“Stay with me for a few moments,” said Autumn. “Let us just stand

here and enjoy the scenery.”

“I think Astauand is getting to you,” said Logan. “This scenery is no different to what we have seen these two or three days past.”

“We will catch you up,” said Autumn to Dhru as he passed with a mildly curious expression on his face. “We are just stopping to look at the view.”

“Ohh,” said Dhru. He looked around but chose not to make any further comment.

“Let the caravan pass on,” said Autumn quietly to Logan. “I would speak with you alone.”

Logan looked at her then turned to look at the sea some way off as though it was fascinating. The camels continued to walk on and Tejas walked past, humming gently to himself. He beamed at them but refrained from speaking. When you have to respect your elders and everyone else is older you tend to stay quiet much of the time.

“What is it?” asked Logan when the last of the camels was some way distant.

“I do not know,” said Autumn, turning towards their shadows. With Logan standing next to her, the feet of his shadow were a little above the shoulders of hers. “But I happened to be looking at your shadow when you stumbled just now.”

“And?” asked Logan.

“Your shadow did not stumble,” said Autumn. “And when you stopped walking it took one more pace than you did.”

Logan scowled and stared at his shadow. It lay there apparently staring back at him. He lifted one arm to the side and his shadow did the same.

“It seems normal to me,” he said waving at his shadow, “except that it is so far away.” His shadow waved back at him.

“Perhaps I was mistaken,” said Autumn. She frowned at the shadow and it ignored her. “Try walking towards it.”

Logan stepped forward and the shadow did not move so he took another step and it leaped back in surprise.

“Did you see that?” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” said Autumn stepping forward as well. Her shadow moved in perfect harmony. “Try it again.”

Logan stepped forward again and the shadow moved with him.

“How strange,” said Autumn. “It would seem to be inconsistent. Flap your arms like a bird.”

Logan stepped forward slightly so he didn't hit Autumn and waved his arms up and down. The shadow did the same, except that it did not stop when he did. It kept flapping for two more arm waves.

“Should this make me feel better or worse?” he asked, staring at his shadow.

“I have no idea,” said Autumn, “but it is fascinating, is it not?”

“Not really,” said Logan. “I find it troublesome.”

He started stepping to the side and his shadow did the same, except that it stopped stepping one step before Logan did and stepped backwards instead so it was further away than ever.

“Well now,” said Autumn. “This is a puzzle.”

She scratched her head and her shadow scratched its head in unison so Logan scratched his head. His shadow scratched its head as well, only with the other arm.

“A thought does come to me,” said Autumn.

“Oh yes?” said Logan. “What is that?”

“Most of the time when you do something your shadow does the same,” said Autumn. “But when it does something different, such as when it stepped backwards just now, you did not. So it would seem that you still have influence over your shadow but your shadow has no influence over you.”

“But it isn't supposed to do anything I don't do,” said Logan, petulantly.

“That is a false line of thinking,” said Autumn. “Simply because something has always happened in a certain way does not mean it always will. Indeed, if a thing does something unexpectedly then that would tend to suggest that our understanding of that thing is lacking. I venture there is more to shadows than we had previously thought.”

“Well, that is no help,” said Logan.

“I venture it is,” said Autumn. “If nothing else we have redefined the problem which may enable us to proceed further with it.”

“How have we redefined the problem?” demanded Logan, giving a little jump in the air. His shadow jumped as well.

“Instead of being faced with the problem of your shadow moving away from you,” said Autumn, “we now have the problem of a *thing* moving away from you.”

“Are you serious?” said Logan, turning to look at her. Autumn noticed his shadow bent its head to look down at where her shadow head was. “What difference does that make?”

“Before, we both thought of shadows as something attached to us,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “But it is now clear that your shadow at least is capable of moving independently and seems to be able to make judgements. At any rate it looked at my head, or my shadow head I should say, rather than where you were looking which suggests that it can make judgements. Perhaps you should try talking to it.”

“Talking to it?” said Logan, staring at her incredulously. “What would I say to my shadow?”

“Well, you could always start with 'hello',” said Autumn. “I would suggest that you be friendly. It is a part of you, after all.”

Logan scowled at her then turned to look at his shadow. It turned to face him at the same time.

“Umm, hello shadow,” he said.

The shadow didn't answer.

“Now what?” asked Logan.

“Perhaps you could ask it to come back to you?” said Autumn.

“Please come back to me,” said Logan. perhaps a trifle plaintively.

The shadow didn't move.

“Perhaps if you stay there I could come to you,” said Logan. He nodded his head hopefully and the shadow nodded its head as well. He stepped forward slowly and his shadow didn't move. Encouraged Logan took another step and his shadow jumped backwards.

“Oh faff,” he said, discouraged again, and flapped his hand. The shadow flapped its hand as well. “Now what?”

“We don't seem to be getting anywhere, I have to confess,” said Autumn, going over to stand beside Logan. “Let us rejoin the caravan and think on the matter although I am at a loss at the moment about what to think.”

“I suppose so,” said Logan, “although I think it is pretty safe to say that I won't be having a shadow for much longer. Look.”

The feet of his shadow were now a full pace beyond the top of the shadow of Autumn's head.

* * *

“Ajoomi is smaller than Tulbeq,” said Dhru as the caravan found a

camping spot the other side of the town from the sea front, “and there is only the stream for water. They have no lake so there is no Pleasure Garden.”

He hobbled the camels that were in his charge and started to unload their packs. Reyansh and Inyanasi were doing much the same with the others and Tejas was unpacking some camel droppings to make a fire. It was a pleasant enough spot but another caravan a little further upstream took up most of the space and dirtied the water. Logan was standing on the bank wondering if it was clean enough to wash in. The expression on his face suggested it might not be.

“We will be leaving at dawn,” said Dhru, reappearing from behind a camel. “Father has no business here and Cim-Irsou is an easy four days away and lures us onwards. Perhaps you would let me show you what few delights this place has.”

“That ...” started Autumn.

“Do not let him lead you astray,” snorted Reyansh, walking past with what smelt like a sack of cinnamon to add to the growing pile. “The only delights in this place are those that every port has for sailors a long way from home.”

“As only you would know, brother,” retorted Dhru, pausing from untying a sack. “And no doubt you are looking forward to being reunited with your wife again and will be avoiding such delights. Take no notice of my brother’s jaundiced personality, friend Autumn. His temperament forbids him from enjoying any but the most base of activities.”

“At least I do not live with my head in the clouds, cika,” said Reyansh, dumping the last of his camels’ sacks. “What delights had you in mind for our guest?”

“I thought to show her the sisters by the harbour,” said Dhru, “but such sisters would have no interest for you.”

“Decidedly not,” said Reyansh. “I have better things to do with my time.”

He moved away to start unstrapping the racks on his camels' backs.

"Sisters?" asked Autumn. "You have relatives here?"

Dhru smiled and started to unstrap the camel beside him. "No, the sisters are not people. These are the Five Sisters. Five tall pillars of stone that stand in a line in the sea some way out. Those who are not mindful of the world around them take little notice but I thought you might be inclined to see them."

"I would," said Autumn. "Do any live on these pillars?"

"Only birds," said Dhru. "They are too thin for much else." He paused and cleared his throat. "I had hoped also that you would help me find two rocks among the many at the cliff nearby. Ones with a useful shape that will help me with my rock balancing. The pebbles from Tulbeq I have been using no longer challenge me."

"Of course," said Autumn. "When shall we go?"

"Let me water the camels," said Dhru, "then we can go, if you are willing."

"By all means," said Autumn. She looked around and spotted Logan, sitting beside the stream. "I will see if Logan would like to join us."

"As you wish," said Dhru, not looking overly enthralled.

"It has gone," said Logan, looking up when Autumn joined him.

"Your shadow?" asked Autumn.

"Aye," said Logan. "It is nowhere to be seen."

"But was it not still with you when we arrived?" asked Autumn, looking around to see if there were any unclaimed shadows lurking.

"Yes," said Logan. "I still had it when I came over to the stream but when I looked just now it had disappeared."

“Oh,” said Autumn. She checked and hers was still where it should be and further upstream the people and camels looked to have theirs as well. “Do you suppose it got washed away?”

“Who knows,” said Logan disconsolately.

Autumn sat down beside him and put her hand on his arm. “I venture we could look for it,” she said, “but I have no idea what to do if we find it. How would we even know it was yours and not the shadow of someone else that has moved away?”

“I know,” said Logan. “I confess I never took much notice of it when I had it but now it is gone I miss it for some reason.” He sighed then looked over at Dhru watering the camels.

“When he is done with the camels,” said Autumn, “he is taking us in to the town to look at some pillars of stone that stand in the sea. They are called the Five Sisters. Perhaps they might take your mind off your shadow.”

“I would prefer not,” said Logan. “I suddenly feel very exposed and afraid people will laugh at me for not having a shadow. I need to get used to the idea.”

“Do you wish me to stay with you?” asked Autumn.

“Ohh, no,” said Logan. “It is my shadow and my problem. I will get over it, I daresay. Astauand will set and if my shadow were here I would not see it. Most likely I will not notice it gone when Astauand rises again.”

“Or it could have returned,” said Autumn.

“Perhaps,” said Logan. “Go and look at your pillars. I am sure they are intriguing.”

“You are certain you will not come with us?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Logan. “I am not the best of company at the moment. You can tell me all about them when you return.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn.

She squeezed his hand then let it drop as Dhru came over.

“Logan will not be coming with us,” she said. “He would prefer to stay by the stream and rest. Is that well with you?”

“If Logan is content with that then so am I,” said Dhru with a faint air of barely concealed relief.

He looked up and caught Inyanasi's eye and nodded. Autumn noticed Inyanasi nod back then turn away.

“What is this?” she wondered. “Was that some sort of signal or merely a custom with which I am not familiar?”

“Shall we go now?” she asked, standing up.

* * *

Logan stayed beside the stream after Autumn and Dhru had left. The loss of his shadow had left him with a feeling of foreboding although he could never have explained why. But it was peaceful there in the afternoon sun and he had nothing more pressing to do. He lay back and put his arm over his eyes, very conscious that although his arm blocked the rays of Astauand there was no shadow of it across his face. It was strangely disconcerting.

It was not long before he felt the eyes on him. That was disconcerting too. He tried to ignore the feeling but it grew. There was something definitely watching him, as opposed to the casual glance of a camel or someone from the other caravan looking over. Slowly he lifted his arm off his face and sat up. There was a dog sitting perhaps three paces away. It was watching him.

As dogs go it was not a large one. In fact it was of a size similar to a farm cat, only a little broader in the chest. It had dark fur and long floppy ears and its ribs were clearly visible. It just sat there, staring at him. Logan tried to ignore it.

“I would speak with you, Logan,” said Inyanasi behind him.

Logan jerked slightly in surprise. He hadn't heard Inyanasi's approach.

“Please join me,” said Logan, twisting round to look at him.

The dog glanced at Inyanasi then returned its gaze to Logan.

“I have brought shayi and new baked bread,” said Inyanasi.

“That's nice,” said Logan, wondering what was going on. Normally Tejas brought round food and drink. It was his job as part of the caravan.

Inyanasi put the small tray down beside Logan then sat down and glared at the dog. It looked at him for a moment then started scratching its head with a hind leg. Inyanasi snorted then picked up a cup and handed it to Logan.

“Some bread?” he asked, proffering the dish with two pieces on it.

“Thank you,” said Logan, taking one.

The small dog lay down with its eyes fixed on Logan. Its small nose quivering.

“It is my belief that fresh shayi and fresh bread are one of the foremost pleasures for the traveller,” said Inyanasi.

“I could not disagree,” said Logan.

He broke off a piece and popped it in his mouth. It was still warm. The small dog sat up again. Inyanasi sipped his shayi and regarded Logan thoughtfully.

“It is my understanding,” he said, “that Autumn is an orphan.”

“That is right,” said Logan, breaking off another piece of bread. “She was found abandoned when she was but one or two summers old and taken in by her Esyup.” The dog watched his every move.

“That was most fortunate,” said Inyanasi. “A babe such as that would not long survive alone.”

“Indeed,” said Logan. He was puzzled by Inyanasi but the dog kept distracting him.

“And it is my understanding that you are the only companion of Autumn,” said Inyanasi. He had not touched the other piece of bread.

“That is so,” said Logan. He could feel the dog's eyes boring into him and for some reason the dog was making him feel guilty.

“Do you then speak for Autumn?” asked Inyanasi. He picked up his piece of bread and broke it in half. “Or should I speak with another?”

“I'm sorry?” said Logan, tearing his eyes away from the dog. “What do you mean, 'speak for Autumn'? She speaks for herself.”

“It is true that she is free with her tongue,” said Inyanasi, “but she does speak words of wisdom and receives my indulgence as a result. In the matter of marriage, however, it is not seemly that a woman should speak. As Autumn has no father, with whom should I negotiate the marriage terms? I presume you but please tell me if there is another.”

Chapter Twenty Four

Logan's heart froze. Marriage negotiations? With Inyanasi? What?

“Voqev,” he whispered, his throat constricted.

He became aware that Inyanasi was watching him with a faintly puzzled expression.

“I'm sorry,” he said, trying to smile. “My mind was elsewhere and I did not hear you properly. Did you say marriage negotiations?”

“Yes,” said Inyanasi, taking another sip of shayi. “My son Dhru is of marrying age and he has asked me to begin negotiations but I do not know who to deal with.”

“Dhru?” said Logan, trying to come to terms with this. “With Autumn?”

“I see you are as surprised as I,” said Inyanasi drily. “My first thought was that the girl is too old but I am persuaded that need not be an issue. She has other qualities that may outweigh her lack of youth. So, do I speak with you on this?”

“No,” said Logan, “that is, umm, no, this is not, erm ...”

“Then who?” asked Inyanasi. “I know only of you so you must advise me in this.”

“I'm sorry,” said Logan. The dog staring at him wasn't helping. “No, Autumn speaks for herself. You will have to talk to her.”

“No doubt this explains why she is as yet unmarried at her age,” said Inyanasi. “You are certain she has no uncles or brothers?”

“No, she has no relatives,” said Logan. “Beside this is not how we do things in Aferraron.”

“How so?” said Inyanasi, looking puzzled. “You let the women speak for themselves? Does that not lead to emotional decisions?”

“Umm, I am no expert,” said Logan, “but I always thought that was the whole point. Anyway, in Aferraron if someone wants to wed another they just ask directly although most don't marry. They move in together. Only high ranking people marry and there is a ceremony of sorts, not that I have ever been to one.”

“How extraordinary,” said Inyanasi. “And what of the dowry?”

“The what?” asked Logan.

“The payment by the girl's family to the husband,” said Inyanasi.

“Why would they do that?” asked Logan.

“To contribute to the setting up of the household,” said Inyanasi. “A wife and children are a great burden to a young man and that needs to be taken into account.”

“I really don't know about such things,” said Logan. “Umm, you had best be talking to Autumn herself, although she has no money.”

“What am I saying?” he thought to himself. “Autumn isn't going to marry Dhru! I should just tell Inyanasi that.”

“Then I shall,” said Inyanasi. He looked inside his empty cup then got up. “You have been most helpful, thank you.”

“Umm, glad to be of assistance,” said Logan. He took a bite of his bread but it seemed overly dry and tasteless in his mouth.

“But she does seem to like Dhru,” he thought to himself, aghast at the idea. “She has gone into the town with him which is unlike her. Oh Sploop! What if Autumn decides to marry him?”

The dog's eyes bored into his and his stomach rebelled at the thought of food.

“No shadow and now no Autumn?” thought Logan. “Now what?”

He looked at his bread in despair then tossed it to the dog who

devoured it in two quick bites. The dog looked at him again and clearly decided he was of no further use and trotted off to see what pickings lay elsewhere.

“Exactly,” thought Logan, tears prickling behind his eyes. “I am of no use to anyone anymore.”

* * *

He was still sitting beside the stream when Autumn and Dhru returned. Dhru went off to talk to Inyanasi and Autumn went to join Logan.

“You should have come into Ajoomi with us,” she said, sitting beside him. “It was most strange,” then she paused. “What is the matter?”

“Are you going to marry Dhru?” blurted Logan, feeling bereft.

Autumn stared at him in astonishment. “Of course not,” she said. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Inyanasi was asking me soon after you left who he should talk to about you marrying Dhru,” said Logan, cheering up rapidly. She wasn't going to marry Dhru after all!

“Why would he do that?” asked Autumn. “Is it not for Dhru to talk to me about such matters not you and Inyanasi?”

“I didn't understand,” said Logan, “but I think it is their custom. He called it negotiating and he seemed to think you would pay him to marry Dhru.”

“I have no money,” said Autumn, “and I would not anyway. I have no intention of breaking my vows.”

“I had forgotten your vows,” admitted Logan, feeling a little stupid. How could he have forgotten such a thing?

“Ayah,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “This is something that needs resolving quickly lest ill feeling arises.”

She looked around to see where Dhru and Inyanasi were then looked back at Logan. "Is that what was bothering you?" she asked quietly. "The thought of me marrying Dhru?"

"I confess it did not fill me with happiness," said Logan. "After he spoke with me I could not eat my bread and gave it to the dog."

"What dog?" asked Autumn, looking around for a dog.

"It was making me feel guilty," said Logan.

"It seems there has been strangeness here too," said Autumn. "I do not know what you are talking about but for you to give away bread ... ahh, it must have been serious."

"Now I think on it I cannot imagine why I thought you would," said Logan. "But you seem to like Dhru and, well, I don't know. I think I thought I would lose you as well as my shadow and then the dog ran away as well and I felt very sad."

"I do not know what dog you talk of," said Autumn, taking his hand, "but I value your companionship and I confess to feeling pleased you were saddened at the thought. I should not feel that way because we are both free to move on as and when we wish, but there it is."

"When that time comes, you will tell me first?" asked Logan, squeezing her hand. "I do not want to be a burden to you but I would hate it if you left without saying."

"Most definitely," said Autumn squeezing his hand back, "and I trust you will do the same?"

"If such a thought could cross my mind," said Logan, "I would discuss it with you first for I could not accept that I was thinking it and would need you to show me the absurdity of it. Could you let go of my hand, please? You are stronger than you realise."

"Ahh, sorry," said Autumn, releasing his hand.

"Thank you," said Logan, shaking his hand and clenching the fingers

to get the blood flowing again. “What strangeness was there in the town?”

“It will keep until later,” said Autumn. “I need to clarify things with Inyanasi. Hmm. Best I speak with Dhru as well. Inyanasi may not fully understand and may pass on that incomplete understanding. I would not want Dhru labouring under a misapprehension and think I reject him as a person.”

“So you would consider it if it were not for your vows?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn. “I like Dhru but not well enough and, thinking on it, even if I did like him well enough I could not live in a place where women are so under valued.”

“I venture it would not be the best idea to say that,” said Logan. “It is one thing to reject him as a person but another thing to reject his entire people.”

“That is a good point,” said Autumn, “and I cannot hope to change the beliefs of the many by insulting the one. It is best, I think, to talk only of my vows. Both father and son should respect that, they are honourable people. I will do it now. Come.”

“You want me to come with you?” asked Logan in surprise. “Would it not be better done in private?”

“You are already involved,” said Autumn, “by virtue of Inyanasi talking to you of it and besides, it will do no harm for you to witness lest you harbour any continuing doubts.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Logan with a grin.

“I am not your Magide,” said Autumn firmly, “and you are not mine. We are companions and equals. Come.”

She got up and looked over to where Inyanasi was in deep conversation with Dhru and Reyansh. All three looked a little worried. She marched over with Logan in tow.

“I would speak with you, Inyanasi, and you, Dhru,” she said.

Inyanasi looked taken aback and Dhru looked suddenly apprehensive. Reyansh, on the other hand, simply looked irritated.

“Check on the camels, Reyansh,” said Inyanasi after several heartbeats.

Reyansh scowled but dutifully got up and walked away, his back stiff in silent protest. Inyanasi politely waved an invitation to sit and looked pointedly at Logan.

“I have no secrets from Logan,” said Autumn.

Inyanasi nodded acceptance and Autumn and Logan sat on the sand.

“Shayi?” asked Inyanasi.

“This will not take long,” said Autumn. “Let Tejas continue his meal preparations.”

“As you wish,” said Inyanasi.

“I regret I do not know the correct protocols,” said Autumn, “so I apologise in advance for any breaches. It is my understanding that you wish to discuss the possible marriage of myself with Dhru.”

Inyanasi blinked twice in surprise at her bluntness. “And it is my understanding that you have no one to negotiate on your behalf,” he said.

“I am a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume,” said Autumn. “No one can speak on my behalf.”

“As you wish,” said Inyanasi. “Ahh, it is our custom for the father of the prospective husband to detail the terms of such an arrangement and for the father of the prospective bride to accept or reject those terms and propose additional or alternative terms. Shall I do so now?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I am very conscious of the honour that is being

done to me with this proposal but I must make it clear that there are no terms that would be acceptable to me. I reject the proposal unequivocally.”

Dhru sagged slightly and Inyanasi looked affronted.

“If it is a question of your dowry ...” he began.

“I do not know what a dowry is,” said Autumn, “but I assure you it is not. I am a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume and as a disciple of Vallume I have vowed to protect the sanctity of women. As a disciple of Mizule I have vowed to protect the sanctity of myself. The second is a requirement of the first as I cannot protect the sanctity of women unless I am myself inviolable. Inherent within that is both chastity and the absolute rejection of any situation in which I would be subject to the authority of another. It is not possible for me to enter into any marriage and remain true to my vows nor am I willing to break those vows.”

“I see,” said Inyanasi. His finger tapped on his knee a few times. “Then this matter is now closed. I thank you for your speed and clarity.”

“Not entirely,” said Autumn. “At your invitation we had intended to travel with you to Cim-Irsou but I quite understand if you would prefer to withdraw that. We can part company here in Ajoomi and, I hope, without any ill feeling.”

“I see no need to change our plans,” said Inyanasi. “You have explained your reasons and it would be dishonourable for me to ask you to break your vows. There has been no disrespect nor loss of honour on either side.”

“I thank you,” said Autumn. “I imagine there are things you need to attend to now so Logan and I will withdraw.”

She rose gracefully to her feet and walked away with Logan not far behind.

“Aye-yai-yai,” said Logan when they found another spot to sit a little

further downstream. "That was very impressive," and he ran his fingers through his hair and sighed.

"What do you mean?" asked Autumn.

"You dealt with that the way you fight," said Logan. "Blindly fast, very hard and totally effectively. You did not pull your punches."

"Oh," said Autumn, looking worried. "Was I too harsh? I did not mean to be. I merely wanted to make the situation as clear as possible as quickly as possible. I did not mean to cause any offence."

"I wager it would be impossible to get out of such a marriage proposal without causing offence," said Logan. "If I had done it both would be after my blood by now."

"Oh, I doubt that," said Autumn, looking back to see what was happening. Inyanasi and Dhru were deep in conversation and Reyansh had joined them. "Generally when something has to be done it is best done quickly and cleanly, like the severing of a limb. If you dally and waver the suffering lasts longer and does not heal as well. Still, for good or ill the deed is done."

"Aye," said Logan. "Do you suppose we will still be included for meals or will we have to get our own?"

"I confess I am impressed by you as well, Logan Philosopher," said Autumn. "You have the knack of getting to the essence of a situation. We wait, of course."

"Why 'of course'?" asked Logan. "I let that dog have my bread and now I am feeling hungry, that is all. I did not mean to be philosophical."

"This dog seems to have figured much in your afternoon," said Autumn, "and yet there is no sign of it now despite that. Was it a real dog or did you imagine it?"

"It was real," said Logan. "It ate the bread. Why would I imagine that?"

“I confess I do not follow why you thinking I was going to marry Dhru would make you feel guilty enough to give your bread to a dog,” said Autumn, “but no matter. There is much in this world that is beyond my comprehension. Returning to Inyanasi, I venture it would cause him offence if we went foraging for food for it would show we do not honour his word and I am reluctant to do that.”

“You are probably right,” said Logan. “What was it you went to look at this afternoon?”

“The Five Sisters,” said Autumn, “and to find some rocks for Dhru to work with.”

“These are people of importance here?” asked Logan.

“No, they are pillars of stone,” said Autumn. “They stand in the sea outside the harbour. They were most intriguing for they look like needles that have been stabbed into water with some design for they form a straight line. I asked but Dhru did not know why they are called the Five Sisters. Mayhap they are the sisters of some deity who planted them here for some reason. They reminded me a little of Fiau for they were tall and thin.”

“I should have gone with you,” said Logan. “They sound interesting. I wonder why the sea has not knocked them down.”

“Perhaps there will be time to see them tomorrow before we leave,” said Autumn. “It is a small town and they are but a short walk away.”

“Let us wait and see,” said Logan. “It may yet be that we will remain here for a time if Inyanasi changes his mind.”

“He does not strike me as a man who changes his mind often,” said Autumn, “but we must accept the consequences whatever they are. Ahh, but I have not yet told you of the strangenesses we encountered. I was distracted by this other business. Logan, you are not alone!”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

“I saw a lot of people whose shadows were some distance from them,”

said Autumn, “much as you were yesterday or those few we saw in Tulbeq but, more importantly, I saw several with no shadows at all.”

“Really?” asked Logan. “That is interesting. Did you speak with them about it?”

“I wanted to but Dhru advised against it,” said Autumn. “I am not familiar with this place but Dhru is and he said that there was a great strangeness in the air.”

“What manner of strangeness?” asked Logan, his brow creasing.

“Dhru said that the people of Ajoomi are much as the people of any small town,” said Autumn. “Not overly friendly towards strangers but not hostile and intent on their own business yet helpful if approached with openness and good cheer. However, he quickly noticed that they have changed dramatically since last he was here which was not long ago as the caravan passed this way when heading for Sassese’lte.”

“How have they changed?” asked Logan. “I imagine they are less friendly than they were not more.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “First he noticed there was less bustle than before. There were fewer people out and about but there may be many reasons for that. More importantly those that were about seemed frightened and suspicious. They did not go confidently from place to place. Rather they hurried and avoided meeting our eye. The few we did greet hurried away, including one who Dhru has been friendly with in the past. He recognised Dhru and used his name but pleaded urgency of business and did not linger. Moreover, in the short time he did speak with us his eyes were constantly searching. For what I do not know and he offered no explanation.”

“How strange,” said Logan. “Tell me, did he have a shadow?”

“Ahh,” said Autumn thinking. “I think he did as we came upon him as we reached the centre of the town and before I began to notice those whose shadows were slipping away. I am not certain but I wager I would have remembered if he had not a shadow as it was not long after talking with you on the disappearance of yours. Certainly the

first person I realised had no shadow was after this man.”

“Ah well,” said Logan. “It was just a thought. I know full well that losing your shadow can make you edgy and ill at ease.”

“There may yet be a connection, though,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “Even if he still had his shadow and it was where it should be, I wager that if many of those around you are ill at ease through the loss of theirs it could make you anxious and afraid.”

“Ahh, I think we are about to get some good news,” said Logan, looking over Autumn's shoulder.

“Is your shadow returning?” she asked.

“No,” said Logan, “but Tejas is. Mayhap he is coming to tell us that the meal is ready.”

“That is good news indeed,” said Autumn. She looked behind her at Tejas then at Astauand. “It is still early. What say you we ask Dhru to take us both to see the Five Sisters after eating and while it is still light? It will save hurrying in the morning and, I venture, may help to overcome any shynesses that may result from my rejection earlier. It may also help to avert any teasing from Reyansh while the matter is still fresh in his mind as I am sure he knows by now.”

“Reyansh does seem to be reluctant to waste any opportunity to tease his brothers,” agreed Logan, “and I confess it would be better than us all sitting and watching each other all evening not knowing what to say. Mayhap I will be able to speak with some of those who have no shadows when they see I have none as well. They may be less wary of a fellow sufferer.”

Chapter Twenty Five

“Ahhhhh,” sighed Autumn.

She raised her arms high above her head, stretching as though reaching for the sky then slowly brought them down by her sides. The stream in front of her bubbled happily to itself and, upstream and behind her, massed ranks of camels grumbled, groaned and spat as they were loaded. A bell began to toll mournfully from Ajoomi, a little further downstream.

Autumn opened her eyes and looked around, at peace with the world. The other caravan, the one heading West, was almost ready to depart. It took them little time to load despite having only four men for some eighty camels because they were unladen and had only the racks to strap in place. She unfolded her legs and rose to her feet. She stepped off the bank and into the stream, for no reason other than to experience the cool water swirl around her feet and ankles.

“Hello,” came Logan's voice not far behind her.

“Is it not a beautiful morning?” asked Autumn, bending to immerse her hands.

She said this almost every morning and the weather had to be truly appalling for Autumn not to find some beauty in it.

“It may turn out not to be,” said Logan in a conversational tone. He wandered down to the water's edge to join her.

He did not sound as glum as he had the evening before. He had gone with Autumn and Dhru to look at the Five Sisters and had seen only one person in the town. Even though the man had hurried away as soon as he had spotted them, Logan was cheered to see that he, too, had no shadow. He had also been intrigued by the Sisters, even though their shadows stretched far across the sea as Astauand began to set. In truth, Logan was not of a melancholic disposition and his spirits bounced back quickly. Dhru on the other hand, had been a little quiet and withdrawn, perhaps disquieted by the unusual absence of people in the town or perhaps saddened by Autumn's rejection of

him. He did not say and refused to be drawn.

Autumn splashed water on her face and shoulders then stretched luxuriously again and turned to beam at him.

“Your voice is more cheerful even though your words are not,” she said. “Enjoy the beauty of the day and let whatever is to unfold unfold of its own accord. There is no need to race to embrace the future.”

She pulled off the thin leather thong that Dhru had given her to tie back her hair. She normally used a grass stalk but in the desert grass stalks had been few and far between and the one she had been using kept breaking and soon became too short to use. She shook her hair out and climbed onto the bank to fetch her nekmit frond comb from her pack. That too was looking decidedly worn and was missing several teeth. She made a mental note to enquire what people of Neander used instead of nekmit fronds as she had yet to see a nekmit bush in this land.

“I wager the future is coming to greet us,” said Logan. “A man came to talk to Inyanasi just before you surfaced and he is still talking to him. It does not look like a friendly conversation.”

Autumn straightened up from her pack with her comb in her hand and looked. Sure enough, Inyanasi was talking with a stranger and Reyansh was walking over to them. Dhru had stopped loading his camels to watch and Tejas had left his shayi pots to stand beside Dhru. Their voices were indistinct but Inyanasi's sounded terse and annoyed and the stranger's held tones of command.

“No doubt we will find out what is happening when we need to know,” said Autumn. “Inyanasi and his sons are capable people and know this place. Let us leave them to their deliberations.”

She bent over to let her long blue-black hair cascade over her head to touch the ground and began to comb it.

“Aye,” said Logan cheerfully.

He had checked at first light and found his shadow had not returned

and decided not to worry about it. It had occurred to him, as he lay in the darkness before sleep overtook him, that there could be decided advantages to not having a shadow. It could not betray his presence, for example, when he thought he was out of sight of someone and, if he reached to surreptitiously take some cheese or other morsel from a market stall, there would be less movement for the stall keeper to notice. On the other hand, if there were other people who did not have shadows either then Autumn's suggestion of appearing at fairs as The Man With No Shadow would not necessarily be that much of an attraction.

Still, as Autumn had observed, it was a beautiful morning and the stream was running clean as no camels had been near it since the previous night.

Autumn was retying her hair thong when Logan noticed Inyanasi's discussion had ended.

"The stranger is going over to the other caravan," he remarked.

Autumn looked over, and not a moment too soon. The caravan's leading camels had just got underway when the stranger hailed them and the lead driver brought his camel to a halt. She glanced over to Inyanasi and he was discussing something with Reyansh and Dhru with much arm waving and a decidedly unhappy air. Tejas stood nearby, listening but not taking part.

"Perhaps you are right," she said. "It looks like something untoward has happened."

She put her comb back in her pack as Logan stepped out of the water, his face and torso freshly bathed.

"Curiouser and curiouser," he said watching Reyansh and Dhru go back to their camels and start unloading them. Tejas was back at his fire and Inyanasi had gone some way away and was staring at the town, his hands on his hips and his stance decidedly annoyed. "Should we join them or wait here for a while?"

"I wager our presence will not annoy him further," said Autumn, "and

it is possible we may have some solution to their predicament, although I doubt it. If nothing else, Inyanasi may enjoy the opportunity to vent some of his emotions. He would seem angry.”

She picked up the staffs and her pack and passed Logan's staff to him and they slowly wandered back to the caravan.

“We are not moving on today?” she asked Dhru.

“Apparently not,” said Dhru. “We are forbidden from leaving. Them too,” and he pointed at the other caravan.

“Do you know why?” asked Autumn.

“It seems that some of the townspeople have died recently,” said Dhru. “There were some more deaths in the night and the Osaku has shut down the town until they find out who is behind it. None can enter or leave.”

“Was that man you were talking to the Osaku?” asked Logan, looking over at the other caravan. The stranger was surrounded by the drivers who were gesticulating wildly and seemed to be taking it less calmly than Inyanasi and his sons.

“Him? No,” said Dhru. “He is one of the local sanikar.”

“One man would not seem sufficient to stop either caravan leaving if they chose to,” remarked Logan.

“There will be others I am sure,” said Dhru, “but this man has the ultimate power over trading caravans. He knows our names and where we live and if we move on without permission large fines will be imposed and collected by the Osaku. My father is afraid of no man but he is afraid of being fined.”

“Do you know how long we will remain here?” asked Autumn.

“Most likely only a day,” said Dhru. “This is a small town and I am sure they will find out the cause of the deaths soon enough and let us honest travellers be on our way. Father is angry about it but in truth

we are a day or so ahead of schedule so it will not make much difference.”

“And we are to wait here?” asked Autumn, “or can we venture into the town again? I noticed the shop of a seller of scrolls when we passed through last evening and it may be open today.”

“I do not know,” said Dhru. “The sanikaran said we cannot leave and we did not ask about going into town. Woah, come back!”

The camel Dhru had been ignoring while talking to Autumn and Logan had grown bored with the conversation and had wandered off to see if there was anything edible somewhere else.

“More seem to be arriving,” said Logan, looking towards the town. “Mayhap these have been sent to enforce our stay here.”

A small group of men carrying spears were approaching and the sanikaran had managed to extricate himself from the other caravan and was heading over to join them.

“You know we have no money to buy any of the scrolls,” said Logan, watching them, “and it is unlikely that Dhru will buy any for you now.”

“I know,” said Autumn, “but we have not seen anything written as yet and I am curious to know if our necklaces work with documents. I am going to talk to those men and ask if we are permitted into the town.”

“Ohh, I had forgotten about the necklaces,” said Logan, putting his hand to his necklace, “and that they talk a different language.”

Two of the men had stopped not far away and two more were still walking along the road away from the town, no doubt to turn any new arrivals away. The original one was heading back into town so it was likely he was of a higher rank.

“Greetings to you,” said Autumn, approaching the two nearest.

The two men looked glumly at her but didn't speak. No doubt the prospect of standing all day in the sun did not fill them with

happiness.

"I am with that caravan," she said, pointing at it. "I am told we are not permitted to leave this place."

"That's right," said one of the men. "No one goes in or out, that's our orders."

"Indeed," said Autumn. "Are we permitted to go into town?"

"Our orders is no one goes in or out," said the man.

"But does that mean we cannot go into the town?" asked Autumn, "since we are already inside the limit set by your companions along the road."

The man looked uncertain and turned to his partner who shrugged.

"And the camels will stay here," said Autumn. "We do not intend to wander the town with them so we shall have to return rather than try to leave by a different route."

"Can't see as it really matters," said the second man. "The Osaku has shut the town down because of the dyings, see, but you lot weren't here when they started so it can't be you what's doing it."

"When did they start?" asked Autumn.

"Three nights back," said the first man. "Then there were some more the night after and more last night. I don't know how many but the Osaku is worried."

"Do they only happen at night?" asked Logan.

"Yes," said the second man. "If there were killings in the day someone would see but these are all at night in the dark and no one has seen anything."

"How unpleasant," said Autumn. "Did the people die in the streets?"

“No, they were all found in their dwellings,” said the first man.

“How did they die?” asked Autumn.

“No idea,” said the first man. “We don’t get told much, only that we have to stop anyone coming in or going out.”

“So will you stop my companion and I going into town?” asked Autumn.

The two men looked at each other then the first man made a decision, albeit reluctantly.

“Like you said, you’re already in,” he said, trying to look imposing. “Just don’t go trying to get out.”

“We won’t,” promised Autumn. “Thank you for your help.”

They nodded and half smiled, uncertain if they had tricked or not.

“Did they tell you anything?” asked Inyanasi when they returned from talking to the sanikarans.

“Only that there have been deaths these past three nights,” said Autumn, “which we already knew. There must be quite a few deaths to cause this alarm. People die all the time, it is the nature of things.”

“But did they say when we would be allowed to leave?” asked Inyanasi.

“No,” said Autumn, “only that we are free to go into the town as we are already here.”

“Which is of no use to me,” said Inyanasi irritably.

Autumn waited to see if Inyanasi wanted to talk further but he showed no sign.

“Logan and I are going to go into the town shortly,” she said. “We will try to find out more.”

“Yes,” said Inyanasi distractedly. “See if you can find out how many sanikarans there are. If this goes on too long we may have to slip out of here unseen.”

“Will you not be fined for doing that?” asked Logan.

“There will come a time when it will be worth it,” said Inyanasi, “and it is possible that as time passes the fine will increase so it may be worth leaving early while the fine is still low. It is a difficult situation and there is much to consider. Any information you learn will be most useful.”

* * *

“There are a lot more people about this morning,” observed Logan. “It looks much like any town now.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “But if you look closely few people are talking to others. It seems more that they are about their business as quickly as possible, although there are no boats in the harbour. I think that is a good sign.”

“You are right,” said Logan after watching the people a little more. “They buy their food and such like then leave quickly. It could be the harbour is empty of boats because people are leaving rather than going fishing which would be a bad sign.”

“Sadly there is no way of knowing,” said Autumn, “although it is likely that if the Osaku has stopped the caravans from leaving then he would stop the boats from leaving unless he was reasonably sure they would return.”

“True,” said Logan. “And it seems to me that at least one of three of these people have a problem with their shadows.”

“There is a woman over there with no shadow,” said Autumn, pointing to a woman returning from the stream with a basket of washing. Only the shadow of the basket followed her, although the small child following close behind her did have a shadow. It was disconcerting.

“And you notice we are being avoided?” asked Logan. “People seem to be crossing the road rather than come near us.”

“I had noticed,” said Autumn. “I presumed that it is because we are strangers and people distrust strangers in a time of crisis.”

“Let us go to your scroll shop and talk to the man who runs it,” said Logan. “He may not avoid us if he thinks he has a sale. Where is it?”

“A short way down that road over there,” said Autumn pointing across the square. “It was either the second or the third building from the corner. It had buckets of scrolls outside.”

There were no buckets of scrolls outside when they arrived. The door was firmly closed and the building looked exactly like all the others, mud brick fronted and with only narrow slits for windows.

“Are you sure this is the place?” asked Logan, looking up and down the road.

“Yes,” said Autumn, peering in through one of the slits. “I can see buckets of scrolls inside. I wager the owner is not open for business today.”

“Sploop!” said Logan, jerking back. “Did you see that?”

“See what?” asked Autumn, turning round.

“I thought I saw something,” said Logan. “It was only for a moment and it has gone now but it took me by surprise.”

“What did you see?” asked Autumn.

“Umm, this will sound stupid, I know,” said Logan, staring further down the road, “but I saw a shadow and when I looked again there was no one there.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn, looking down the road as well. “Which side of the road was it?”

“The sunlit side, of course,” said Logan. “I would not see a shadow on the shady side.”

“Mayhap there was someone in the shady side that you did not see,” said Autumn, “and their shadow was in the sunlit part.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, “but there is no one there now. This road is deserted, apart from us.”

“Which way did it go,” asked Autumn.

“Further along,” said Logan, “and I fancy it may have gone round the corner to the left.”

“Then let us follow,” said Autumn, striding off towards the intersection.

“This is deserted too,” said Logan when they rounded the corner.

The road was almost entirely in sunlight as Astauand was so aligned as to shine almost directly along it.

“Most likely those that are out are at the shops,” said Autumn, “and those not shopping are either in the fields or safely behind their doors.”

She wandered along the road into the sun, her senses tense and searching but there was little of interest. It was just a road of seemingly empty houses.

“What are you looking for?” asked Logan, following her.

“We have been looking at people with no shadows,” said Autumn. “Have you not wondered where their shadows have gone?”

“Of course,” said Logan then he stopped. “You mean you think I saw one of the shadows that has gone from its person?”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “But I have no idea what signs I am looking for so this would seem to be fruitless.” She stopped and turned then

froze. “Ahh.”

Logan instantly stopped and turned as well. “Sploop!”

Not far past the head of Autumn's shadow were three more shadows, grouped together and moving as though of three people in conversation but there was no one there. Only Autumn and Logan, one with and one without a shadow.

“Now what?” muttered Logan out of the corner of his mouth.

“Greetings,” said Autumn brightly, holding out her hand in welcome.

The three shadows froze, either at the sound of her voice or the touch of her shadow hand crossing them, then they slithered quickly across the road to disappear into the thin strip of shadow left by the dwellings.

“That was interesting,” said Autumn. “They would seem to be afraid of us.”

“Perhaps they did not understand what you said,” said Logan. “Maybe these necklaces only work with real people and not shadows.”

Autumn raised both her eyebrows and nodded thoughtfully.

“You may be right,” she said. “I have been wanting to see something written in Janire to find out if the necklace works with writing as well as speech but it has just struck me that we have been wearing them while with the camels and we have heard only the grumbling of the camels, not what they are saying. Did that dog that upset you yesterday say anything?”

“No,” said Logan. “It just stared at me.”

“And we have heard birds,” said Autumn, “so it seems that the necklaces have limitations on the languages they translate. Mayhap the language of the shadows is not the language of the people they were joined with.”

“I think you have missed something,” said Logan, staring at the shadow that edged the road.

“Very likely,” said Autumn. “What have I missed?”

“We do not understand the camels and birds,” said Logan, “and they are not people. Mayhap the shadows are not people either and so the necklaces do not translate for them.”

“That is a good point,” said Autumn. “But if the shadows of people are not people, what are they?”

Chapter Twenty Six

"There is something happening over there," said Autumn as they walked back into the square. "Someone is putting up a sign by the pond."

Half a dozen or so people had already gathered round to read the sign before the man hammering in the nails had finished.

"There is a curfew," said one of those gathered to the others. "Sunset to sunrise. Anyone outside in the streets will be arrested."

"Good thing too," said another, craning to try and look round the sign poster. "My wife's brother and his wife died night before last, younger than me they both was and not a mark on them, may Lafiya bless and comfort their spirits."

"I heard the Osaku's boy died last night," said another, peering at the sign. "I heard his face was contorted in terror and his body had been cut a thousand times."

"You should not believe everything you hear," said the sign poster. "Not one of those that have died had any marks on them."

"Can I ask how they died?" asked Autumn.

The sign poster glanced at her and ignored her. He tapped the nails with his hammer one last time then stepped back to let the others read it.

"How did they die?" asked Logan when it was apparent Autumn wasn't going to get an answer.

"No one knows," said the sign poster. He looked around at the other people crossing the square to read the sign and nodded in satisfaction. "They were found dead in their beds with no sign of injury although some did have a look of terror although others looked happy. No one knows how they died."

"How many have died?" asked Autumn. Logan had to repeat the

question.

“Nineteen have been reported this morning so far,” said the sign poster, looking only at Logan, “although one likely died from illness. Eleven the night before and five the night before that.”

“How many live in Ajoomi?” asked Autumn.

The sign poster clearly deduced that Logan was going to repeat the question so he sighed and answered her directly, without actually looking at her.

“Six hundred and four, last census,” he said then abruptly walked away.

“That seems a lot of deaths for a small town,” said Autumn, watching as people read the notice then either hurried away or briefly discussed it with someone else before hurrying away.

“Which is no doubt why the Osaku has called a curfew and closed down the town,” said Logan studying the notice. “I cannot read a word of it. I do not even recognise any of the letter shapes.”

“Nor I,” said Autumn. “It looks more like worm trails to me but as these others seem to be able to read it I venture this is how they write their words. For certain our necklaces are not helping us to understand.”

“Now that I see this writing,” said Logan, turning to scan the buildings around the square, “it occurs to me that these things I thought were cracks in the fronts of the buildings could be words written in the mud. I wonder what they say.”

“Perhaps they are the names of the people who live there,” said Autumn, “although I know not why anyone would do that. Those that live here would surely know their neighbours and those few strangers who look for someone need only ask.”

“So you would think,” said Logan, “but we must remember that this is a different land and has many unusual customs. What shall we do

now?”

“I would like to enquire of those who have lost loved ones about their deaths,” said Autumn, “but I doubt they will tell us much. We are strangers and they do not seem to like women overly much. Best we go back to the caravan and tell the others of the curfew. It would not do for them to be arrested for wandering in the night.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “But it could be we will all be arrested anyway. A curfew means we should stay inside but we have no inside to stay in.”

“A good point,” said Autumn. “All the more reason to tell Inyanasi.”

* * *

“Identify yourselves,” demanded the guard, “and explain your business here.”

“I am Autumn Savannah and this is Logan,” said Autumn. There were now at least ten sanikarans on the track around the camping area. “We travel with the caravan of Inyanasi.”

“This woman speaks for you?” demanded the guard, staring at Logan.

“Always,” said Logan calmly.

The guard snorted derisively and turned back to Autumn. “Who is Inyanasi?” he demanded.

“Him,” said Autumn, pointing to their small cluster of camels not far away.

The guard glowered at her then beckoned over another. “Watch these two,” he said. “They look like troublemakers,” and stalked off to talk to a harried looking man sitting on the ground with a flat board on his knees. The scribe referred to a scroll and scribbled with a large feather.

“Let them through,” called the guard.

The guard watching them lowered his spear and jerked his head.

"I thank you," said Autumn, as she walked past. Logan nodded and smiled.

"Do not leave the caravan again," said the first guard stalking back. "Your names have been noted and if you are found anywhere else you will be arrested."

"As you wish," said Autumn.

"It is not my wish," barked the guard. "It is my order."

"An order is merely a wish expressed in a certain way," said Autumn. "There is no guarantee it will be carried out however it is expressed."

"Are you threatening me?" demanded the guard, lowering his spear so the tip pointed at Autumn.

"I never threaten," said Autumn, not moving. "I was merely pointing out a deficiency in your argument."

"Now is not the time for debate, Autumn," said Logan, taking Autumn's elbow and pulling her in the direction of the caravan. "She meant no offence and we shall rejoin our caravan and not leave, I promise you."

"You should have better control over your women, Farimi," growled the guard. He stared at Autumn for a few moments, trying to intimidate her, then slowly raised his spear. "Go and stay there. Things will turn out ill for you if you do not."

"Indeed," said Logan. Autumn smiled sweetly at the guard and they walked away.

"I know you can best them all," said Logan quietly, "but there is no need to antagonise them."

"I did not mean to antagonise him," said Autumn, "but he was wrong in his statement. If he is to guard us properly he should be aware that

orders need not be carried out.”

“I am sure he is aware of that,” said Logan, “and you should be aware that he will be watching you closely from now on.”

“Well, there is that, I suppose,” said Autumn, “although he should also be aware that the difficulties in the town are unlikely to originate from any camped here.”

“No doubt it is the same in Aferraron,” said Inyanasi when they reached him. He had been watching from where he sat with the others. “The more junior the official the more offensive he is.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but we have never experienced anything like this in Aferraron. I have not encountered a town shut down before.”

“It does not happen often here,” said Inyanasi, “but the Osakus have great power in their places. Tell me, what news have you from the town?”

“A curfew has been imposed,” said Autumn. “From sunset to sunrise. How will that affect those who cannot be inside a building?”

“It is the custom when a curfew is called for those camping to stay in that place and not move about,” said Inyanasi. “I expect most of these guards will leave before dusk as the town cannot have many sanikarans and they will be needed for the streets.”

“Indeed?” said Autumn. She nodded thoughtfully.

“No!” said Logan. “I know that look. You are thinking of going into the town after dark to see what is happening, are you not?”

“The thought did occur to me,” said Autumn, “although it is a foolish one. On reflection I suspect that few will welcome a stranger into their dwelling tonight and all the deaths have been inside dwellings and not on the streets.”

“You have heard more on this?” asked Inyanasi. “I asked some of the guards but they seem to have little idea of what is happening.”

Autumn quickly updated him with what they had heard.

"If that is so," said Inyanasi, "it would seem perhaps a little foolish to keep everyone inside where they are more likely to meet their deaths."

"No doubt the curfew is intended to catch anyone moving between dwellings," said Logan, "although I imagine it would be easy enough to move from one dwelling to another when there are no sanikarans around."

"Perhaps," said Autumn, "but I have a feeling that whatever is doing these killings will not be spotted even if they are in the street in front of the sanikarans."

"What do you know of this?" asked Inyanasi suspiciously.

"I know nothing," said Autumn, "but there is an interesting coincidence here."

"What coincidence?" asked Inyanasi, frowning.

"Do you mean the shadows?" asked Logan.

"Yes," said Autumn. "Think on it. Some days past Logan's shadow began to move away from him and when we were in Tulbeq we saw several others so afflicted. Then we arrive in Ajoomi and Logan's shadow leaves him completely and we see people in the town who likewise have no shadows. This morning we also saw three shadows on their own with no other people around and they disappeared into the shadow of a building. Perhaps it is the purest of coincidences but is it not strange that three nights ago people began dying in their sleep inside dwellings and no one knows why or has seen anything?"

"You think the shadows are doing this?" asked Dhru, leaning forward.

"I merely note the coincidence," said Autumn. "I cannot comment on cause and effect as yet."

"How can a shadow kill someone?" scoffed Reyansh. "Shadows have no substance, you can't even feel them!"

“The light of Astauand has no substance,” said Autumn, “but that can kill you if you have no water.”

“Pah,” said Reyansh, “I can still feel it though.”

“True,” said Autumn, “but not knowing something merely means you do not know, it does not mean something is impossible.”

“But how could a shadow kill someone?” asked Dhru.

“I do not know,” said Autumn. She paused for a moment. “But how does a scorpion kill someone? We know that there is poison in its sting but how does the poison actually kill? If you think about it we have no way of knowing if something is poisonous until someone dies from it. If you come across something you have no knowledge of, as we knew nothing of scorpions, you would not know they could kill you. Perhaps shadows have some way of putting a poison inside the body.”

“But if that is so then why has no one died from a shadow before?” asked Dhru.

“Do you know for certain no one has died from a shadow before?” asked Autumn. “I grant if you push one of those guards’ spears inside someone they will die but plenty of people die from other things and we know not the reason. Perhaps what we call death from old age is actually death from a shadow.”

“Oh now you are being absurd,” snorted Reyansh. “People live for a time then die, it is the manner of things.”

“But what causes death from old age?” asked Autumn. “Why is it that someone lives a life for a time then suddenly stops living? What is it about age that kills them and why is it not the same for everyone? One of the elders at my Esyup lived for ninety summers yet another did not see the end of his sixtieth.”

“You talk nonsense,” said Reyansh, waving his hand dismissively at her. “You waste our time with your prattling.”

“Enough,” growled Inyanasi. “We have nothing else to do at the moment than waste time so if you cannot be civil then be silent, cika.”

“Reyansh is right,” said Autumn. “I have no evidence for what I suggested. I merely note the coincidence but a coincidence is not a fact.”

“I wonder if there is any way we can find out, one way or another,” said Dhru, thoughtfully.

“That is why it crossed my mind to go into the town tonight,” said Autumn. “Mayhap if I happen upon someone as they are dying I can find out the cause and perhaps aid them as well, if it is within my power.”

“But as you said, no one will let you, a stranger, inside their dwelling in the night,” said Logan, “and if it is the shadows then you will not be able to see them in the street in the dark.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “which is why I dismissed the idea as soon as I thought it.”

“Then why are we talking about it?” asked Inyanasi, frowning.

“Because Logan spoke of it,” said Autumn. “Besides, I do not think the guards here will look kindly on my venturing into town in search of shadows in the dark and I would not wish any retribution on you.”

“It would seem a fruitless exercise,” said Inyanasi, “and even if it is the case that these shadows are killing people, what can we do about it? How do you stop a shadow?”

“There is that,” said Autumn. “But I do have a request to ask of all of you.”

“And that is?” asked Inyanasi.

“If you should happen upon a stray shadow in the night, could you wake me?” asked Autumn.

* * *

Astauand was low in the sky when Inyanasi felt the rumbling in the ground. He lifted his head from where he had been drawing patterns in the soil with his stick and looked around. Reyansh felt the rumblings moments later, then Dhru. They both looked up.

“Someone comes,” said Inyanasi. “A large caravan, some way off.”

He got up and looked to the East.

“I see them,” he said, sitting back down. “They are still some way off but it is a very large caravan. They have wagons as well.”

“Can you feel that through the ground?” asked Logan.

Inyanasi laughed. “My backside is not that sensitive,” he said. “No, I can see them. Some carriages as well. No doubt a wealthy man from Cim-Irsou is coming to inspect his lands.”

“He will be in for a surprise,” said Reyansh. “I wager he will not like the town being shut down.”

“When you have great wealth, my son,” said Inyanasi, “few things are beyond your grasp. I wager five grinar that the guards let his caravan through and the town is opened for his pleasure.”

“I will not take that wager, Magide” said Reyansh. “I would not waste even one sei on such a thing.”

“I will take the wager, Magide” said Dhru, “although I cannot match five grinar. Two sei is all I will spare but I wager that as soon as this rich man finds out about the dangers in town he will stay not one moment longer and will spend the night outside the town. Perhaps here or further upstream where it will be free of strangers.”

“Done,” said Inyanasi, spitting on his hand and holding it out. Dhru spat on his hand as well and they shook on the deal.

With the added spice of a wager to add to the always interesting spectacle of strangers arriving, all six of them moved to the other side of the camels so they could sit and watch without restriction. They did

not have long to wait.

Perhaps a hundred heavily armed men on camels led the way. Many had spears held across their camels necks while others had bows slung across their backs. All had swords that glinted. Behind them came four carriages drawn by horses, not particularly ornate but covered so their occupants were shaded from the sun. Behind them were two large wagons, laden with unknowable things. Bringing up the rear were more heavily armed men on camels.

"This looks more like an army than a rich man," said Inyanasi, watching in fascination.

"Do you wish to concede your wager, Magide?" asked Dhru.

"Wahah, no," said Inyanasi. "I would increase it if you would accept. No army is going to bother with a handful of sanikar. What say you we go to a full grinar?"

"Very well," said Dhru and they spat on their hands again.

Two sanikarans, their nervousness visible even at a distance, held up their hands to stop the approaching troop. A more senior sanikaran shouted for three more to join them and ran over himself. To everyone's astonishment the leader of the troop shouted an order and the procession stopped.

"This should be entertaining," said Reyansh.

The senior sanikaran went forward to talk to the leader of the troop who leaned forward on his camel to listen. There was an exchange, their voices sounding curt but not overly fractious. Then the leader of the troop turned his camel and rode back to the second carriage where he talked with someone. Then nothing happened. The leader of the troop waited patiently. The camels of the armed men grumbled and jostled each other as camels do and the six sanikarans waited, fidgeting and trying not to catch the eye of any of the armed men.

"What is happening now?" asked Logan.

“I would say the rich man in the carriage is deciding what to do,” said Inyanasi. “Get your money ready Dhru, you will be giving it to me shortly.”

“I wager if he is thinking he will decide to go somewhere else, Magide” said Dhru. “If he was going to insist on going into the town he would have by now.”

“Two grinar then, my son,” said Inyanasi, spitting on his hand and holding it out.

Dhru hesitated and stared at the carriage a little longer then, reluctantly, as if regretting his brave words, he spat on his hand and sealed the bet. Inyanasi beamed happily.

Unexpectedly the leader of the troop spun his camel away and a small man got out of the carriage. He walked sedately to the front of the caravan and started talking in a quiet voice to the senior sanikaran. The sanikaran, deferential from the start, suddenly froze then became blatantly obsequious.

“I was right,” said Inyanasi. “Clearly that sanikaran has just been told who is in the carriage. They will go into the town any moment now. Get your money out, my son.”

“I agree,” said Dhru, “but we do not yet know his intent. Wait and see.”

The senior sanikaran bowed deeply and turned to speak to one of the other sanikarans. The man listened for a few moments then started to run down the road. He hurtled past Autumn and the others and headed into the town, panic written clearly on his face. The small man watched for a few moments then returned to the carriage.

“No doubt he has been sent into the town to arrange for this rich man's welcome,” said Inyanasi. “You lose, my son. Let this be a learning experience for you.”

“We still do not know the man's intent, Magide” said Dhru. “The wager is not yet over.”

The leader of the troop resumed his place beside the carriage, no doubt waiting for more discussions to take place and instructions to be issued. At length he bent towards the carriage, listened then turned his camel and rode back to the front of the troop.

“The moment of truth,” said Inyanasi. “Have your money at the ready.”

Both he and Dhru leaned forward and watched intently. The leader of the troop looked around then pointed further upstream and said something to the senior sanikaran. There was a brief exchange then the sanikarans backed away and the leader of the troop ordered the caravan forwards. They wheeled away from the road and headed to a site further upstream.

“Pah!” said Inyanasi in disgust. “And he calls himself a wealthy man! What point is there in wealth if he does not do what he wishes?”

“Perhaps he wished to camp beside the stream all along,” said Autumn.

Inyanasi bit his thumbnail at her and scowled as Dhru held out his hand. He stared at Dhru, his eyes flashing, then slowly fumbled for his coin bag that hung from his belt.

“You have the luck of a scorpion,” he said angrily.

“I am my father's son, Magide,” said Dhru, wagging his fingers. “Two grinar, if you please.”

Inyanasi counted out two grinar and dropped them into Dhru's palm. Dhru smiled and ostentatiously counted the sei to make sure they came to two grinar.

“I thank you, Magide,” he said and the coins disappeared.

The troop stopped at the place where their leader had decided and started to mill around, organising themselves for the night. Several of them started to unload one of the wagons.

“Pah,” said Inyanasi. “If only I had known that sooner!”

“What is happening?” asked Autumn, watching the troop.

“They have a tent,” said Inyanasi. “I had thought they would stay in the town with the Osaku or some other person of importance.”

“Presumably they have camped on the way from Cim-Irsou,” said Autumn, “if that is where they are from.”

“As always, what is obvious is only apparent after it has been pointed out,” said Inyanasi, disgusted with himself.

Several people disgorged from the rearmost two carriages but whoever was in the second carriage either did not get out or got out on the far side so he wasn't visible. Only one person got out of the front carriage. He was tall and thin and seemed to have ropes for hair with things that flashed. He stretched, as people do after a lengthy stay in an uncomfortable carriage then looked around. His eyes travelled over the other caravan then over Inyanasi's then moved on to inspect the edge of the town further downstream then snapped back to Inyanasi's caravan. He stared intently then hurried around his carriage.

“That was odd,” said Dhru, puzzlement in his voice. “He seemed to recognise us.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

“Great One,” said Subota hurrying to the window of Soros' carriage. “It would seem that Aloidia favours us this day. Not only is the Roinad in Ajoomi but he is here, encamped on this very plain.”

Soros looked up from the scroll he was reading and regarded Subota.

“Where?” he said, after a long pause.

“With a caravan over there,” said Subota pointing through the other side of the carriage. “Barely fifty paces away.”

“Is this the caravan he has been travelling with?” asked Soros.

“Yes, Great One,” said Subota. “His apiakun is with him and I recognise the traders.”

Soros handed the scroll back to Buxar who rolled up it and put it neatly in the 'pending' bucket.

“This raises a small problem, does it not,” said Soros. He sighed and rubbed his temples. He did not like carriages, preferring to travel on horseback whenever possible but the carriage had one advantage. It allowed him to continue to work while absent from the palace. It was simply too difficult to deal with scrollwork on horseback.

“How so, Great One?” asked Subota.

“I cannot have him summoned before me,” said Soros. “To do that would necessitate revealing my identity and in so doing I would have to acknowledge his identity and then the summoning would be an affront to his person. I had hoped to encounter him by chance in the town and engage him in conversation but with us both encamped here that will be obviously contrived.”

“Ahh, I see the difficulty, Great One,” said Subota.

“If I might make a suggestion, Great One,” said Buxar.

“Proceed,” said Soros.

“I understand from the Okka that there are but two caravans encamped here, Great One,” said Buxar. “In your guise as a wealthy merchant might it not be seen as a magnanimous gesture for you to entertain the drivers of both caravans for a meal this evening, particularly in the light of the current difficulties the town is facing? Then it becomes merely a matter of arranging the seating.”

“That is an excellent idea, Buxar,” said Soros.

“I do foresee a possible difficulty with that plan, Great One,” said Subota.

Soros raised an eyebrow.

“I presume you wish to meet with the apiakun as well, Great One,” said Subota, “but until you acknowledge her status it would be most unseemly for you to dine with a woman.”

Soros frowned and looked at Buxar who pursed his lips and thought for a few moments.

“One avenue may be to delay meeting with this apiakun until such time as the Roinad reveals himself,” he said. “Another, and I suspect, preferable approach would be to accept the presence of a woman provided it can be established in advance that she is from Aferraron. It would then be presumed by all that you wish to talk to her of that country and nothing more.”

“Can we establish that without drawing attention to the enquiry?” asked Soros.

“I shall enquire of the local guards,” said Buxar. “Given that the town has been locked down by the Osaku it is likely that a record has been made of strangers here and their origin may well have been identified. Alternatively we can enquire of the Osaku when he arrives. I have not yet received his report of his enquiries into these travellers although it is likely that he has not yet made such enquiries. Other matters no doubt weigh heavily on him at this time.”

“Will we have to invite the Osaku to dine as well, Buxar?” asked Subota.

“Protocol would demand that,” said Buxar. “It would be normal for a respected merchant to invite the Osaku but I can couch the invitation in such a way that his other concerns should take precedence. I have, after all, informed him that his Karoi is here and enjoined him to secrecy. He will not want to break your trust in him by revealing your identity prematurely through his actions.”

“Good,” said Soros. “Make the arrangements, Buxar.”

“I have another thought, Great One,” said Subota. “If we can legitimately establish these two as being from Aferraron would it not be acceptable to invite only those from that caravan and not the other? As a merchant you may be interested in news from Aferraron and that would seem an entirely reasonable justification for meeting with them.”

“Even better,” said Soros. “I have no desire to dine with more camel drivers than I need to. Buxar, make it so.”

* * *

“Very little seems to be happening now,” said Inyanasi. “We still have not seen whoever is in that carriage.”

“I wager we will not,” said Reyansh. “Most likely he will stay in the carriage until the tent is up then disappear inside that. Those that travel in this way are unlikely to want to socialise with the likes of us.”

“Are you not a successful trader in your own right?” asked Autumn. “Would not one successful trader desire to meet another?”

“Decidedly not,” said Inyanasi, grimacing. “There are levels between traders and those at the higher levels prefer not to consort with those lower.”

“I did not know that,” said Autumn. “By what manner are these levels organised?”

“Money,” said Inyanasi. “Those with a great deal consort only with others with a great deal and those with little consort only with those with little.”

“That would seem inhospitable,” said Autumn. “Would it not be beneficial all round if those with great wealth aided those with little in increasing their wealth?”

Inyanasi burst out laughing. “Ohh, Iyali,” he gasped. “That would be impossible. If those with wealth ever aided those without then their wealth would diminish and they would never accept that.”

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“Eh? Oh, there is only so much money in the world,” said Inyanasi. “One man's gain is another man's loss.”

“That would seem remarkably unfair,” said Autumn.

“It is indeed,” said Inyanasi. “In a perfect world those who lose to the wealthy would in turn gain from others and those in turn from still others and it would go full circle so that ultimately some would gain from the wealthy and the wealthy in turn would lose but this is not a perfect world. Those that become wealthy fight tooth and nail to keep what they see as rightfully theirs and woe betide them as try to gain from them.”

“But to what purpose?” asked Autumn, her face creased as she tried to understand.

“Ahh, that I will not try to debate with you,” said Inyanasi. “I am beginning to know how your mind works and that you will twist me with endless logic puzzles that will demonstrate to all that the pursuit of wealth is a pointless endeavour. I shall spare myself the pain and suffering and merely say that this is the way of the world. Accept it or not but you will not change it. Those that are wealthy fight to keep their wealth. Those that have less wealth fight to join those wealthier and those that are poor fight to become wealthy at any level.”

“I do not,” said Autumn.

“Ahh, but you are a Krisana and not of this world,” said Inyanasi. “I wonder what is happening now?”

He pointed to where the small man was now walking over to talk to the senior of the sanikarans. They held a brief conversation then the senior sanikaran took the small man over to meet the scribe who sat with his writing tools. There was another conversation and consulting of scrolls then the scribe pointed to Inyanasi's caravan. The small man looked over then turned back to the scribe.

“Well now,” said Inyanasi, turning to Autumn. “We were recognised and I fancy we are now to receive a visitation. It is unlikely that I am the one of interest as I am many levels down from those who travel with private armies. Who are you two?”

“We are who we said we are,” said Autumn. “We have not lied to you.”

“There are lies and there are incomplete truths,” said Inyanasi. “No doubt more will be revealed in time. He is coming this way.”

Inyanasi stood up and his sons stood also so Autumn and Logan stood, presuming it was the correct thing to do.

“A thousand apologies for intruding on you,” said Buxar, running his eyes over the group. “I would speak with Inyanasi, leader of this caravan.”

“I am Inyanasi,” said Inyanasi.

“A thousand blessings be upon you and yours, Inyanasi,” said Buxar. “I am Saja, clerk to Upanama who has taken up residence over yonder.”

“And a thousand times a thousand blessings be upon you and yours,” said Inyanasi. “Please sit with us and enjoy our meagre hospitality.” He waved at the ground with a grandiose gesture. “Tejas, shayi.”

“Ahh, nothing would delight me more,” said Buxar making no move to sit, “but, alas, I am on a mission and cannot dally. My master, Upanama, a merchant from Lizoote with business interests in these

parts, desires me to invite you and your party to do him the honour of dining with him this evening.”

“Your master, Upanama, does us the honour,” said Inyanasi with a flourish. “Alas I am but a poor trader and my meagre wealth, such as it is, is tied up in the baggage of these unworthy camels. I cannot leave them unguarded.”

Buxar smiled a thin smile. “I hardly think your goods will be disturbed while my master’s guards are present, Inyanasi,” he said.

Inyanasi’s face, while normally inscrutable, struggled to hide the fact that he thought it highly likely that one or two of Upanama’s guards would be the likely thieves. After all, the aides of the powerful can generally get away with much that others can not.

“Assuredly not, Saja,” said Inyanasi. “Perhaps if I left two of my party here to oversee the welfare of my camels? Your master Upanama will surely not miss the presence of two lowly camel drivers.”

“I daresay not,” said Buxar. He smiled and let his eyes range over the camels and Inyanasi’s sons then back at Inyanasi again. “Your manner of dress is that of Sassese’lte but your name is that of Neander and you speak Janire surpassingly well. Where do you call home?”

“The Eastern side of Cim-Irsou,” said Inyanasi. He waved his hand down the front of his clothing dismissively. “Desert travel takes a great toll on cloth and we were obliged to acquire new clothing while in Sassese’lte. These, too, have little life left in them but they should last until we return home.”

“Ahhh,” said Buxar with an air of one for whom something had become clear. Inyanasi raised an eyebrow in mute query but Buxar did not expand. Instead he paused for a few heartbeats before glancing at Logan. “I am given to understand by the scribe to the town sanikar that you have among your party two from Aferraron? My master is most desirous of talking with them for he has business interests in Aferraron.” He studiously ignored Autumn to avoid having to notice she was female.

“Then they shall be included within my party,” said Inyanasi, “and will no doubt sing the praises of Upanama's hospitality on their return to that country.”

The invitation extended and accepted, Buxar and Inyanasi exchanged more formal pleasantries then Buxar took his leave. Inyanasi watched him go before turning to Autumn and Logan.

“So,” he said, “it is as I suspected. There is more to you than meets the eye.”

“Upanama merely wants to talk to us because we are from Aferraron,” said Autumn. “What is suspicious about that?”

“Saja did not return to speak with his master after speaking with the scribe,” said Inyanasi. “How could Upanama know you are from Aferraron unless he knew before he sent Saja to enquire?”

“Ahh, an interesting point,” said Autumn, looking over at Upanama's camp. “Why then send Saja to talk to the scribe?”

“Who knows,” said Inyanasi, “but I wager to cover the fact that he knows of you.”

“I cannot argue with you, Inyanasi,” said Autumn, “but I know not why a merchant from Lizoote would know of us. I do not even know where Lizoote is.”

“It is a large city on the East coast of Neander,” said Inyanasi, “but that is of no concern. Upanama is not from Lizoote and I wager he knows of you from Tulbeq at least. You recall the Osaku there asking questions about you?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and we both thought that strange at the time. You know him, then? Upanama, I mean?”

“Of him,” said Inyanasi, “for Upanama is known to be the name that the Karoi uses when he wishes to travel in secrecy.”

“Voqev,” said Logan in astonishment. “You mean the Karoi of Neander

is over there and wants to talk to me and Autumn?”

“Unless there is another Upanama,” said Inyanasi, “which I doubt for no one would be foolish enough to take the name of the Karoi. Why does the Karoi wish to talk with you and why does he come here to do it in secret? It would be simple enough to have you taken to Cim-Irsou, under arms if you protested too much.”

“Truly I do not know,” said Autumn. “Perhaps he does not know who we are, merely that we are from Aferraron. Saja did not use our names. Perhaps the Karoi really does want to talk to people from Aferraron to find out more about the land. I am sure that if he did know who we were then he would know we could tell him little for we have no knowledge of the things that would interest a king.”

“Perhaps,” said Inyanasi, looking serious. “I will know when I meet our host for I have seen the Karoi once. It was at a public celebration in Cim-Irsou. I was some distance away but in truth the Karoi is of a size that is not easily disguised. I am told in his youth he was a wrestler of some repute. I do not know who this man was that visited us today nor the one who recognised you, the one with the things in his hair, but I wager they are officials of some sort.”

Then he smiled. “For certain you are no threat to the Karoi or to Neander. You would both be openly dead by now if you were with none of this subterfuge. This promises to be a most interesting meal. Now who are they?”

Two men on camels had appeared and were talking to one of the armed men surrounding the merchant's, or the Karoi's, encampment.

* * *

“This is most strange, Great One,” said Buxar when he returned to Soros' side. “The scribe told me the two are indeed from Aferraron and that they gave their names as Logan and Autumn Savannah.”

Soros looked up from his portable desk and stared at Buxar. “You mean he admits he is Logan?”

“‘Admits’, may be the wrong word, Great One,” said Buxar, “as he has not been charged with having that name, but I find it strange that the Roinad of Aferraron would travel this land openly using his own name. I suppose it is possible that there is another by that name who is not the Roinad.”

“And who travels with a female companion who, by chance, bears the name of the Roinad Logan’s apiakun?” said Soros. “That beggars belief.”

“Unless ...,” said Subota thoughtfully, his hands clasped under his chin, “unless ...”

“Unless what?” demanded Soros.

“Unless there is a game of great subtlety going on,” said Subota. “Perhaps these two are not the Roinad and his apiakun but pretenders to those titles whose intent is to draw our attention away from the real Roinad.”

“Then where is the real Roinad?” demanded Soros.

“We have no way of knowing, Great One,” said Subota, “as all our attention has been on these two.”

“Are you telling me that I have been dragged all this way for nothing?” demanded Soros, his temper rising dramatically.

“Not at all, Great One,” said Buxar, frowning at Subota. “This is an excellent opportunity to establish the truth of the matter.”

“How so?” demanded Soros.

“Our plan thus far has been to try to coerce this Logan into revealing his identity and his intent in Neander,” said Buxar. “Now we know he openly travels as Logan you can greet him as such and require him to demonstrate that he is indeed the Roinad. If he is unable to then you can turn them both over to the Okka to determine his true motives and the whereabouts of the real Roinad.”

"I venture to suggest that you surprise him during dinner," said Subota. "If you accord him full honours upon his arrival he may be forewarned."

"Two of the caravan will remain with the camels, Great One," said Buxar. "It seems that the leader, Inyanasi, does not trust your bodyguard. Perhaps if, while this Logan and Autumn Savannah dine with you, someone could be sent to talk with the two who remain? More information may be gained that way if they think they talk with just a lowly servant."

"That is a good idea," said Soros. "Subota, you deal with that."

"Indeed, Great One," said Subota. "Leave it with me."

* * *

"Kishli," said Subota quietly, beckoning him over.

"Magide?" said Kishli, stopping unpacking Subota's overnight things and going over.

"The Karoi has invited some of the people from one of the caravans here to dine with us tonight," said Subota. "Buxar tells me that the leader of the caravan, one Inyanasi, will be leaving two of his drivers to tend the camels. When the meal is underway I want you to visit them and find out what you can from them about why they are here."

"Your wish, Magide," said Kishli. "This concerns the Roinad of Aferraron?"

"You should not know of that," said Subota, "but I imagine palace gossip has kept you better informed than I."

"Your wish, Magide," said Kishli. He lowered his voice. "Does this mean we shall be returning soon? I am not the outdoors type."

"No, you are most definitely the indoors type, my heart," whispered Subota. "But we cannot speak of this here. There is no privacy."

“Your wish, Magide,” said Kishli in his normal voice, but his eyes spoke quiet volumes.

* * *

“Excuse me, Great One,” came Buxar's voice from outside the tent.

One of the Okka guarding the entrance to the tent pulled aside the entrance cloth and looked to Soros for instructions. Soros grunted and continued reading his scroll. The tone of the grunt indicated that Buxar was to be admitted and the guard pulled the entrance cloth further back. Buxar entered and stood humbly, waiting to be noticed. Soros finished the scroll and sighed then raised an eyebrow in Buxar's direction.

“Two messengers have arrived, Great One,” said Buxar. “One from Tulbeq and the other from Waaj so I venture they are the reports we have been waiting for. The one from Waaj was heading for Cim-Irsou but met the one from Tulbeq on the way and they both came here which is fortuitous.”

“Spare me the organisational details and give me the essence,” said Soros, his face blank.

“At once, Great One,” said Buxar.

He broke the seal on the scroll from Waaj first and scanned it.

“It is indeed from the Osaku in Waaj, Great One,” said Buxar then he scowled. “He tells us nothing, however. It seems a sandstorm covered all the tracks and, despite searching, no sign was found of any cache buried or otherwise. He asks if you want him to dig up the entire desert.”

“Tell him he is a fool,” said Soros drily, “and an idle one at that. He should have started excavating the desert before writing. And the other?”

“It is from the Osaku in Tulbeq,” said Buxar, “and is little better. He writes that he interrogated the members of the caravan most intensely

and that there were two from Aferraron in the party who gave their names as Logan and Autumn Savannah. He gives a description of each which matches the two I saw earlier. He writes that they claim to travel in search of knowledge and understanding of the world but were unable to explain to what use this information would be put. Ahh, he does mention one other thing, it seems that the one named Logan was somehow separate from his shadow.”

“Dismiss him,” said Soros, “and appoint another Osaku. I will not have drunken fools in my service.”

“Your wish, Great One,” said Buxar. “Might I suggest the promotion of ...”

“What was that?” said Subota, coming out of his reverie.

“Our Great One wishes to appoint a new Osaku in Tulbeq,” said Buxar.

“No, before that,” said Subota. “Something in the scroll.”

“Umm, the Osaku interviewed these people,” said Buxar, uncertainly.

“Oh, give it to me,” said Subota testily then remembered where he was. “Ah, with your permission, of course, Great One.”

Soros nodded and Buxar handed over the scroll.

“His shadow?” muttered Subota, reading the end of the scroll very carefully. “His shadow? What does he mean, his shadow?”

Chapter Twenty Eight

Buxar ushered them into the tent, which was vast and lit with several burning torches. The ground was covered with embroidered cloth and wooden screens with hunting and fighting scenes painted on them blocked off other rooms within the tent. He coughed unobtrusively and a figure emerged from behind one of the screens.

The man was huge. In height he was not much more than a head taller than Autumn or Logan but from shoulder to shoulder he was only a finger's breadth or two narrower than the two of them standing side by side. His tightly braided hair was going grey at the roots and although he was by no means lacking in flesh it was undeniably apparent that he retained much of his youthful wrestler's physique.

Inyanasi glanced meaningfully at Autumn and nodded slightly.

"May I present Inyanasi the trader from Cim-Irsou and his party, Magide," said Buxar, with only the slightest emphasis on the Cim-Irsou. He waved them forward.

"A thousand blessings on each of you," said Soros, his voice disconcertingly high pitched for such a large man. "I am Upanama of Lizoote and a fellow merchant. I bid you welcome to my humble shelter."

"And a thousand times a thousand blessings on you and yours," said Inyanasi nervously. "If I may present my son, Reyansh, and our travelling companions, Logan and Autumn Savannah."

"You honour me with your presence," said Soros, his small eyes studying Logan. "and in turn I present my clerk, Saja, and Subota, my friend and travelling companion."

Buxar bowed and Subota inclined his head.

"Hello," said Logan brightly, trying to act normally but uncomfortably aware he was being studied. "Nice to meet you."

An expectant silence fell then began to feel a little strained. Autumn

surreptitiously nudged Logan.

“Ahh,” said Logan, as he remembered what Inyanasi had coached him to say in case he was addressed first. “Um, your magnanimity and hospitality honours us a thousandfold, Upanama, most noble of merchants. Erm ...”

“The gift,” hissed Autumn as Inyanasi's face started to turn anxious.

“We have brought you some esteem as a token gift,” said Logan abruptly. “No, I mean a gift as a token of, umm ...”

Reyansh stepped forward and held up a small bag. “Saffron from Sassese'lte,” he said, wondering whether to offer it directly to Soros or to simply hand it to Buxar.

Soros inclined his head in a show of appreciation while Buxar clapped his hands quietly. Someone, clearly a servant, stepped forward and relieved Reyansh of his bag and a second stepped forward with a cushion with a small pouch on it and offered it to Reyansh.

“Your kindness is beyond all riches,” said Soros. “It shames me that I can only offer you this most meagre of keepsakes of our fortuitous encounter.”

“Our memories of your kindness will be the greatest keepsake, Upanama,” said Inyanasi as Reyansh took the small bag. He desperately wanted to open it as his fingers could feel several small, hard objects inside but convention forbade him. His bowels twitched as he wondered if they were precious stones.

“Please, join me for dinner,” said Soros, moving to a large cushion on the floor. “Sadly the constraints of travel impose limitations on the fare but I trust there will be some small morsels that may tempt and tantalise your tastes.”

Buxar seated Logan on Soros' right and Autumn on his left with Inyanasi and Reyansh opposite. Subota sat beside Logan and Buxar took the last remaining cushion beside Autumn.

"I am given to understand you are from Aferraron," said Soros, leaning imperceptibly towards Logan.

"Ahh, yes," said Logan. "I am from a tiny village called Biasdo. It is so small no one has heard of it."

"I have only been to Uli-Rratha," said Soros. "Tell me, have you been there? It is a pleasant city."

"Only once," said Logan. "I confess I do not like cities."

"Are you from this village of Biasdo also," asked Buxar.

"I am from a place nearby," said Autumn. "A day or two travel, no more."

"Indeed?" said Soros, glancing at her. "But you have spent much time in Uli-Rratha?"

"No," said Autumn. "I was there with Logan. We spent only a few days there. I do not like cities either."

"But you will be visiting Cim-Irsou while you are here?" asked Soros. "It is a beautiful city on the shore of Kwan ul Cimsour and is much blessed with cooling breezes."

"We will probably visit there," said Logan, uncomfortable with being the focus of attention. "We plan to stay with Inyanasi until he reaches Cim-Irsou then carry on to the Skizze Mountains."

"Ahh, a most beautiful part of Neander," said Soros. "You go there for the scenery?"

"We have no particular reason to go there," said Logan. "We only had a vague idea of coming to Neander in the first place but now we are here we thought we might visit a friend of ours."

"Ahh, I know many people in the Skizze Mountains," said Soros. "What is your friend's name? Would it not be delightful if we had a mutual acquaintance?"

“Umm, his name is Darius,” said Logan.

“Darius?” said Soros, glancing at Buxar. “I know no one by that name. What manner of person is this Darius? A trader, a landowner, a miner?”

“Darius is a cat,”¹⁴ said Logan.

Soros stared at him. “A cat?” he said slowly. “You travel all this way to Neander to visit a cat?”

“Ah, no,” said Autumn, inadvertently breaking protocol as Soros was talking to Logan. “We were on the Island of Xive and left by floating on the currents. Neander was not our specific destination for we had no destination in mind beyond going somewhere other than Xive, but as we ended up in Neander we thought we might see how Darius fares.”

“Forgive my interrupting,” asked Subota, “but how is it you know a cat in Neander if you have not been here before?”

“Ahh, that is because Autumn rescued him from a market in Aferraron,” said Logan. “He was being mistreated and we took him home.”

“How did you know where his home was?” asked Soros.

“He told us,” said Logan.

Buxar hid his snort by signalling for the servants to start bringing in the food.

“Logan means the man trying to sell him at the market,” said Autumn, not wishing to get involved in a discussion on talking cats. “As we travel for the sake of travelling we decided to take him back to Neander. A kind fisherman took us over and brought us back to Aferraron that same night.”

14 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*. Superficially, Darius takes the form of a Neander lynx. In actuality, Darius is the personification of Ept, the deity of hearths and fire.

“Indeed,” said Soros, looking bemused that anyone would go to such lengths for a cat.

Two servants brought in a large brass dish filled with steaming rice, fried lamb and sliced vegetables. Its spicy fragrance filled the air. More servants appeared with small brass bowls and spoons. Soros studied the large dish then pointed to a section and a servant with a large spoon scooped some of the mixture into his bowl which he then passed to Logan.

“Oh, thank you,” said Logan in surprise.

He sat there with an empty bowl in one hand and a full bowl in the other, not knowing what to do. He looked helplessly at Inyanasi who held up his bowl and pointed, trying to be unobtrusive, to the main dish. Logan frowned then pointed with the empty bowl at a random place on the main dish. The servant ladled a serving into the bowl and stepped back.

“Now what?” thought Logan.

He looked at Inyanasi again and Inyanasi nodded at Soros so Logan handed back the bowl Soros had given him. Soros frowned so Logan quickly pulled the bowl back and offered him the other bowl. Soros took it and his frown relaxed.

“So you have travelled much?” he asked.

Now that Soros and Logan had food the servant deferentially nudged his ladle in Autumn's direction. She took the hint and held out her bowl.

“Widely in Aferraron,” said Logan. “But not elsewhere.”

“Ahh, so you seek to know more of the people and customs of Neander?” asked Soros. “Tell me, how did you decide to arrive in such a desolate part of the land? Would it not have suited your design better to land in a more populated area?”

“We had no design,” said Logan. “As I said, we drifted on the current

then our boat came ashore further to the West. We started to walk but ventured into the desert and got lost.”

“That is true,” said Autumn. “For some reason Astauand moves differently here to in Aferraron. There it rises in the East, heads to the South and sets in the West but It seems to go backwards here for some reason. That is why we got lost for we headed South when we meant to head North.”

“How can Astauand move differently in different places?” asked Buxar while Subota and the two traders were served.

“It is really quite simple,” said Subota. “Astauand always rises in the East and sets in the West and follows the same line over land and sea each day. If you are to the North of Astauand's path then Astauand will appear to go to the South but if you are to the South of the line then Astauand goes to the North. It has not changed its path, you are simply the other side of it.”

“I did not know that,” said Autumn. “I thank you, Subota. Do you know where that line is?”

“It varies slightly with the seasons,” said Subota, “but in the main It travels along the Looncan Sea between Neander and Aferraron. The Zuit Islands lie almost directly under Astauand's path. When you were there you no doubt noticed that Astauand was almost directly overhead at Its highest.”

“Now you mention it, I believe that is so,” said Autumn.

“It was fortunate for you that you met up with Inyanasi and his caravan if you were lost,” said Soros. “The desert is not a hospitable place.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” said Logan. “Not that I disparage Inyanasi's company, but I was stung by a scorpion in the desert and was most grievously ill for a time and it was soon after that that we came upon the tracks of the caravan in the sand. We pressed on through the night following the tracks in search of aid. Had I not been stung we would most likely have continued South thinking it was North.”

"I see," said Soros, "so it was not your intent to meet with Inyanasi?"

"Splloop no," said Logan. "We had no idea who he was at the time."

"And did you have any other fortuitous encounters?" asked Soros.

"We did meet some nice people in Tulbeq," said Logan, wishing Soros would stop talking long enough for him to eat some of his food.

"I mean in the desert," said Soros.

"No," said Logan, "we met no one, except some bandits."

"One day this land will be rid of bandits," said Soros. "I, ahem, my Karoi is aware of them and intends to take action. Did you suffer much at their hands?"

Inyanasi laughed and Soros looked at him enquiringly.

"My apologies," said Inyanasi. "I was much amused by your remark. We only gained from the encounter. It was the bandits who suffered."

"How so?" asked Soros.

"My friend here does not like to speak of it," said Inyanasi, "but she is an uncommonly skilled fighter and killed four of them and drove the others away. We gained seven camels in the attack which I sold in Waaj. My youngest son became a man that day and killed another."

Soros exchanged knowing glances with Subota.

"An uncommonly skilled fighter," he said and gave Autumn a long look. "I find this hard to believe. You are a woman and a small one at that. How is it possible for you to kill four bandits? Were they already injured and dying?"

"They were fit and on camels," said Inyanasi. "Autumn was on foot."

"A thousand apologies," said Soros choosing his words carefully for he wanted to see what reaction he could provoke, "but I cannot accept

this as truth. I can accept much of what I have heard but this, no, this I find unbelievable. Admit that you are telling tales to entertain and we shall part as friends but continue in this deceit and I will not be pleased.”

“Ahhh,” said Inyanasi, fighting his temper, well aware that it is not a good idea to challenge the Karoi no matter how much he insults your honour. “All I can say is that this is no tale.”

Soros noted Inyanasi's sudden anger and instant control of it and accepted it. This was how Inyanasi should have reacted. All that remained was one final test.

“I do not believe this,” he said, turning to Autumn. “If you are the skilled fighter that Inyanasi claims you to be, then I require you to furnish proof of it.”

Autumn slowly put down her bowl, aware that the mood of the tent had changed and that the servants around the edges had gone tense. Subota and Buxar were watching her as intently as Soros. Inyanasi was watching Soros with narrowed eyes and a set face.

“What would you have me do?” she asked. “Kill someone for no purpose other than to satisfy your curiosity? That I will not do.”

“The words of a skilled fighter indeed,” said Soros, “or perhaps a charlatan. Which is it?”

“Or perhaps it is you who is the charlatan, Upanama,” said Autumn calmly. “Or should I say, Soros, Karoi of Neander and seventh of that name?”

“Ahh, so you know who I am,” said Soros. “Good. The time has now come to clear the air for it is indeed you two who are the charlatans.”

“How so?” asked Autumn, readying herself for an attack from behind.

Soros' massive hand flashed towards Logan and Autumn leapt to intercept it, throwing Soros on his back. Logan lurched backwards and crashed into Subota. The two servants behind Soros reacted a fraction

more slowly and jumped on Autumn but she made short work of them and was on her feet, ready and waiting when four armed guards, all with swords drawn, rushed into the tent.

“Hold!” shouted Soros.

The four guards froze, just as Autumn spun and launched a kick to the head of the one in front. She missed and her foot passed over Inyanasi’s head causing him to duck. She lost her balance and had to put her hands on the ground momentarily before using her momentum to jump back and land, ready for another attack.

Soros sat up and surveyed the room.

“You,” he said pointing at the guards, “get outside.”

The men looked confused but lowered their swords and slowly went back outside.

“And you,” said Soros, pointing to Autumn, “please to sit down again.”

“Only if you give your word of honour that you will attempt no harm to any in here,” said Autumn, not dropping her stance.

“I give you my word,” said Soros. “Please sit.”

“I must attend to these two,” said Autumn, nodding towards the servants who had jumped on her. One was groaning and trying to sit up and the other was still prostrate.

“You,” said Soros, waving at another servant, “take them away.”

The servant beckoned some others and between them they carried the two unfortunates away. Autumn watched then sat down again.

Soros grunted happily then started to brush the remains of his dinner from his front.

“I underestimated you, Autumn Savannah,” he said. “I was in error. I

only intended to point to Logan and tell that I know him to be the Roinad of Aferraron but I can see in retrospect how my action could be misunderstood.”

Buxar gaped at Soros, wide eyed in disbelief. He had been Soros' chief clerk for more than fifteen summers and had never once heard Soros admit he had been in error.

“I apologise if I overreacted, Soros,” said Autumn, “but your action immediately after accusing us of being charlatans was somewhat provocative.”

“Quite so,” said Soros, “but I asked for proof of your skills and you have given me proof. You are undoubtedly the apiakun to your lord.”

“Oh dear,” said Logan. “There seems to be some confusion here. I am not the Roinad of Aferraron.”

“I watched Autumn fight Kizerain Qerrassa,” said Subota, “and I saw your coronation. There may possibly be some confusion regarding you as you are not overly distinctive in appearance but there is none regarding Autumn as her appearance and skills are highly distinctive. Do you deny you are the Roinad?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “I admit Autumn did fight that man and I was crowned Roinad but I never wanted to be Roinad and I ran away in the middle of my first night there. It was a god-awful job.”

“This is true,” said Autumn. “I left Uli-Rratha that same day and Logan caught up with me the following morning. I do not know who is Roinad now but Hysleria is undoubtedly still Piers Sakratar.”

“Buxar,” said Soros, helping himself to another bowl of rice and lamb. “Fetch your bucket.”

“Great One,” said Buxar. He held up his hand and clicked his fingers and a servant appeared with a bucket of scrolls which he set down beside Buxar.

Buxar wiped his hands on the floor cloth and started flicking through

the scrolls. He selected one and pulled it out.

“Our, ahh, contacts at the palace in Uli-Rratha have informed us of a message that was recently received,” he said, scanning it. “The message was sent from someone called Logan on the Island of Xive to Hysleria, Piers Sakratar of Aferraron, requesting, in the name of the Roinad, that a newly formed Esyup be granted royal protection in perpetuity. The name of the Esyup is Yeinoba Vyliacennie im Rozum ny Duch Esyup.¹⁵ Does this mean anything to you?”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “Yes, I set up that Esyup before we left Xive. There was a possible threat from a local land owner so we had the idea to ask for the Roinad’s protection.”

“Ye-es,” said Buxar. “Except that the message did not ask for the Roinad’s protection. It is instead worded as an instruction to the Piers Sakratar from the Roinad.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “Well, that was really only to see if I had any influence. I thought if I told him to do it it might work whereas if I just asked he would probably ignore it.”

“Do you know what Hysleria’s reply was?” asked Autumn. “As you can imagine, I am curious to know the outcome.”

“We do,” said Buxar, unrolling the scroll further. “It seems that Hysleria replied the same day confirming the granting of the Roinad’s protection. It is unusual, I have to say, for Hysleria to respond so promptly.”

“I am glad to hear it,” said Autumn, “although I cannot imagine why he replied so quickly.”

“I would have thought it obvious,” said Subota. “If you are indeed absent from the Roinadship then this would be excellent proof that you are the Roinad and thereby reduce the likelihood of a claimant to a vacant throne. Hysleria would have been a fool to refuse the protection as it serves to bolster his own position.”

¹⁵ See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Fourth Tale*. The Esyup was established by Autumn to study and care for those with ills of the mind.

“Be that as it may,” said Buxar, waving the scroll, “the pertinent point here is that Logan is the Roinad and is so recognised by the Piers Sakratar of Aferraron.”

“Which begs the question,” said Soros, “why are you here in Neander? You travel incognito and have bypassed every protocol agreed between our two countries and yet you bring with you your apiakun, who is of the most surpassing skills, and you carry a staff with magic powers. What say you?”

Chapter Twenty Nine

A camel, on its belly with its long neck in the air, twisted and grumbled as the figure walked around its back end. It reached back and tried to bite him then turned its throat inside out in disgust when it couldn't. The camel tried again as the man came round the other side. That didn't work either. Dhru watched with amusement.

“Greetings,” said Kishli. He gave a polite nod of his head but could not bow because of the tray he was holding. “My apologies for coming upon you in the darkness and disturbing you.”

“We pass the time in idleness, Farimi,” said Dhru. “We bid you welcome.”

“I am Kishli,” said Kishli. “Servant to Subota who travels with Upanama's caravan. Your father said you had to guard your caravan so I have brought you some of the delights of the meal your duty has obliged you to miss.”

“That is most generous of you, Kishli,” said Dhru. “I am Dhru and this idle wastrel is my brother, Tejas. Would you share these delights with us and keep us company if your duties are not too pressing?”

“Your hospitality knows no bounds, friend Dhru,” said Kishli, “and I have no duties until the meal is ended. Gladly I will accept your offer and welcome your company.”

He placed the tray neatly on the ground beside the fire and sat, then pulled the spotless white cloth covering the food away.

“It is only humble fare as we are travelling,” he said, handing bowls of rice and lamb to Dhru and Tejas, “but there is yogurt and fresh bread as well as watermelon and figs.”

“A feast fit for a king,” said Dhru enthusiastically, then regretted his choice of words but Kishli did not react. He sat back and watched as Dhru and Tejas began to eat, clearly savouring the food.

“You are traders?” he asked after a suitable pause. “What goods do

you carry?"

"Oh, just knick-knacks of dubious quality," said Dhru. "We acquire them very cheaply in the West and sell them not so cheaply in the East. It is a living of sorts."

"Indeed," said Kishli. "So no doubt you carry fare paying passengers as well?"

"You mean the two from Aferraron?" asked Dhru. "No, they are not fare paying. They merely accompany us and take no part in our caravan."

"Is that so?" asked Kishli. "Why then do they travel?"

"They travel for the sake of travelling," said Dhru.

Tejas put down his empty bowl and looked enquiringly at Dhru as he reached for a fig. Dhru nodded and Tejas took one.

"That is a strange occupation," said Kishli. "That man, ahh what is his name?"

"Logan," said Dhru.

"Ahh, indeed," said Kishli. "What outlandish names these foreigners have. Yes, Logan must be very wealthy indeed if he can afford to travel all the time."

"It is my understanding," said Dhru, "they they are very poor. They have no possessions beyond a staff each and a single pack with oddments and they travel everywhere on foot. Truly, neither had ever even seen a camel before we found them, let alone ridden one."

"How is that possible?" asked Kishli. "Do they not have camels in Aferraron?"

"Apparently not," said Dhru. He put down his bowl and belched in appreciation. "Ahh, that was delightful. It has been forever and a day since I had meat beyond stringy old goat."

“Perhaps some watermelon?” said Kishli.

“I thank you,” said Dhru.

“I have been wondering,” said Kishli, “what manner of man would bring his wife to the desert for it is a place of nothing but hardship and women are not suited to hardship.”

“You are mistaken there, Kishli, my friend,” said Dhru, taking a slice of watermelon. “They are not married and the woman is well inured to hardship. When Logan was stung by a scorpion she cut his sting and sucked out much of the poison then carried him for a night and a day in search of aid. That is how they found us. She suffered only from mild heat exhaustion and was soon recovered.”

“You astound me,” said Kishli, “but how is it that her husband permits this?”

“She has no husband,” said Dhru, “nor will she ever.”

Kishli raised his eyebrows in surprise. “But she is well past marrying age and is not unpleasant on the eye. Even if she has no dowry how is it that no man has taken her? Could it be that she is in Neander in search of a suitable husband?”

“I am sure many have tried,” said Dhru, wiping watermelon juice from his chin with the sleeve of his robe. “I, myself, asked my father to petition for marriage negotiations but we were soundly rejected.”

“How did you bear such an insult?” asked Kishli. “Surely it would be intolerable for a reputable trader such as yourself to be rejected by such as these with no standing? Did they not appreciate the honour that you were bestowing?”

“Hah, you are quite wrong there, Kishli,” said Dhru. “In this you must not judge by appearances for Autumn is not a woman of low standing. She is a Krisana of the highest order and was appreciative of the honour. Moreover, once she explained her reasons, it was clear that there was no insult either real or implied and my father was satisfied. She is a Krisana of not one but two Esyups, no less.”

“Two?” said Kishli, whistling between his teeth. “I think I begin to understand now. She is a wandering philosopher and Logan is her acolyte, her servant?”

“In part,” said Dhru, “She is a wandering philosopher but Logan is not her acolyte nor her servant. In truth I do not know what their relationship is but on the surface, at least, they appear to be merely friends, if that is possible, and it is difficult to separate them. For certain she has no understanding of how a woman should behave but then, neither does Logan, so he has not been able to teach her. Mark this, though, friend Kishli, she has taken a vow of chastity. Incredible, is it not?”

“Indeed,” said Kishli, “for what purpose is there to a woman other than to bring children into the world?”

“Quite,” said Dhru, “but once we were made aware of that we could not, in all conscience, pursue the matter of marriage. It saddened me but there is much about her and more besides that commands respect and, just between you and me, I begin to wonder if there is more to women than meets the eye. Perhaps there are others like her, or who could be like her if suitable opportunities arose.”

“I confess I know little of women,” said Kishli, “but you would be well advised to keep such thoughts to yourself. Custom is very powerful and it always bodes ill for those who are contemptuous of it.”

“Indeed,” said Dhru, “But have you never wanted to break free of the constraints of custom?”

“Never,” said Kishli, who spent every waking moment wishing he was free of the constraints of custom. “It is custom that guides us in this life and provides the rock upon which all else is built.”

“Perhaps,” said Dhru, “but I confess that the life Autumn and Logan lead appeals greatly to me. To travel where they wish and think any thought they desire, free from any restrictions or material concerns. Yes, that does have a certain appeal.”

Kishli cocked his head and listened to the night, not because he had

heard anything but because he could see little way of gaining any further information from Dhru. The man was clearly captivated by Autumn and was unlikely to incriminate her in any way.

"I think the meal is coming to an end," he said. "I must return and be ready when my master needs me."

"Ahh, you too are bound by custom," said Dhru, smiling. "We thank you for your kindness and hospitality, friend Kishli."

They exchanged farewells and Kishli left, bearing the tray of now empty bowls. Dhru watched him go, wondering why Kishli had two shadows. One, quite faint, preceding him as he walked away from the flickering fire, and the other, fainter, following.

* * *

"I do not know where to begin," said Autumn. "We seem to be being charged with many crimes here but they all would seem to stem from one basic point. From that point two very different paths diverge depending on whether it is believed or not."

"And what point is that?" asked Soros.

"I am not certain," said Autumn, "but I wager it is whether or not Logan stepped down from the Roinadship. If he did, as we claim, and continued to travel with me, then one interpretation of subsequent events is apparent. But, if he did not, as you suspect, a very different interpretation can be laid, based on some apparent intent to deception."

"You try to simplify," said Subota, "but it is not that simple. If Logan were a farm labourer, for example, and walked away from that job then the consequences are minimal whether we believe him to still be a labourer or not. Here, the fates of two nations can potentially be significantly affected."

"I do not see that," said Logan. "Even if I am the Roinad, if I don't do anything then what difference does it make?"

“This difference lies in the fact that you and Hysleria are different people with different objectives for your country,” said Buxar. “Hysleria negotiating with us in your name is a different prospect to Hysleria negotiating with us in his name while pretending to do it in your name.”

“But he has never negotiated with anyone in my name,” said Logan in alarm.

“On the contrary,” said Buxar. “All negotiations with Aferraron since your investiture have been in your name and we assumed that you were the ultimate authority for Aferraron's agreement or disagreement. Now you say you know nothing of these matters and put responsibility directly on the shoulders of Hysleria who does not, I might add, have the authority.”

“Oh,” said Logan, having no idea how to argue with that.

“But surely,” said Autumn, “it makes no difference to you here in Neander. Whether or not Hysleria is authorised by Logan is a matter for Aferraron alone.”

“Decidedly not,” said Buxar. “Legally, if as you say, Logan has not been the Roinad in any practical sense since his investiture then every agreement we have entered into with Aferraron since then is not legally binding.”

“I know little of the law,” said Autumn, “and nothing of the law between nations, but as there is no court or higher authority to make a judgement, does it really matter?”

“There is the court of history,” said Soros. “If, for example, Hysleria breaks a treaty between us and can rightly claim that the treaty was illegal then the judgement of history will be that he was justified in the breaking of that treaty.”

“Is it not possible for you to do the same?” asked Autumn.

“Indeed,” said Soros, “but I am an honourable man and would not break such a treaty.”

“I am unable to argue with that,” said Autumn. “I am completely ignorant on this topic.”

“Actually it seems quite simple to me,” said Logan, “even though I have no idea what you are talking about. Why do I not just tell you that Hysleria operates in my name until such time as another Roinad is installed? Wouldn't that make everything legal? And historical?”

“Yes,” said Soros. “Is that your position?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “Hysleria operates in my name.”

“That settles the legalities,” said Buxar, “but, by your own admission you are the Roinad and your declaration does not answer the question of why you are here.” It wasn't often he got the opportunity to browbeat royalty and he wanted to make the most of it.

“As Autumn said,” said Logan. “We are travelling to see the world.”

“Incognito?” said Buxar. “In breach of all agreed protocols for visiting heads of state? There are those who would call that spying.”

“Oh,” said Logan, beginning to look panicked.

“At the very least it lays you open to being taken hostage and holding Aferraron to ransom,” said Soros. “Not that I would do such a thing.”

“It seems to me that we have a dilemma here,” said Autumn, “and whatever has happened in the past is not within our power to change. Would it not be more practical to attempt to find a solution for the future?”

“Indeed,” said Buxar, “but that solution depends on the Roinad of Aferraron's objectives for visiting Neander in this manner.”

“And we are back at the beginning,” said Autumn. “Divergent paths based on your decision on whether or not to believe what Logan says. Is it your intent to go around in circles for the rest of eternity?”

“Eternity is a very long time,” said Subota. “If I might make a

suggestion to shorten the time frame?"

"Your opinion is always valued," said Soros, with only the slightest emphasis on the 'opinion'.

"It seems to me," said Subota, "that now we are aware of Logan's identity as the Roinad of Aferraron two things follow. Firstly, that we are ourselves now in grievous breach of protocols by not according His Highness the courtesies due to his rank and, if history is to be our judge, at risk of being so judged to be placing him on trial and secondly, whatever ill designs an unenlightened person may suspect His Highness of harbouring must, through necessity, be unfounded. The Roinad of Aferraron is no longer travelling in Neander incognito."

He paused to assess Soros' reaction. None was forthcoming. Soros had sunk into that expressionless stare he affected when he was thinking, no doubt so that his expression did not allow the other person to pander to what he thought Soros wanted him to say.

"So," continued Subota, keenly aware of his role in misinterpreting Logan's movements and actions since he had arrived in Neander, "might I suggest that we accept that Hysleria acts in Logan's name, supported by the evidence of the protection afforded the Esyup, and that we accept that Logan travels with no other objective than to learn of the world and that we afford him whatever courtesies we can during the, undoubtedly very short, remainder of his time here."

Soros did not react. Nor, after years of experience, did Buxar who was keenly aware of his rank and on whom any blame for an international situation would be laid. Inyanasi and Reyansh, on the other hand, continued to sit in open mouthed astonishment as the debate flowed around them. Logan was the Roinad of Aferraron? Incredible! The bag of stones nestling inside Reyansh's robe lay, for the moment at least, forgotten.

"I might mention," said Autumn, taking Soros' lack of reaction as being negative, "that the town of Ajoomi is currently in a state of emergency."

“What relevance is that?” asked Soros, breaking his silent stare to look at her.

“There may be a link between the deaths that have occurred and a strange issue to do with shadows,” said Autumn.

Subota looked sharply at her while a confused expression momentarily crossed Soros’ face.

“Explain,” said Soros.

“When Logan and I were in the town yesterday,” said Autumn, “we noticed a number of people whose shadows were either distant from them or missing entirely. This morning, after the town was closed, we encountered three shadows in the street with no people and we learned that a curfew was being imposed due to a worrisome number of deaths over the last few nights. I do not know if this is the case but when two highly unusual events occur at the same time it is possible, perhaps even likely that they are related. If they are then I would wager the issue with the shadows is more likely to be the cause of the deaths than the deaths causing the shadows.”

“This is all very interesting,” said Soros heavily, “but what is it to do with me? Ajoomi has a perfectly capable Osaku who appears to be in control of the situation.”

“My reason for mentioning it,” said Autumn, “is that Logan, the Roinad of Aferraron, has also lost his shadow. I am not skilled in the art of politics but I would venture that the untimely death of the Roinad while in Neander could have repercussions.”

Logan stared at her in consternation and Autumn willed him to stay silent.

“Undoubtedly,” said Soros, keeping his face expressionless. “But how can Neander be held responsible if the Roinad is travelling incognito?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “but as Subota said, he is no longer incognito and is very much alive at this time. In front of witnesses, I might add.”

Inyanasi groaned inwardly and Soros' nostrils flared then he turned to Logan.

"It would seem," he said, his voice devoid of any inflection, "that your apiakun is greatly skilled in matters beyond fighting. In the interests of ensuring the safety of your Royal Person during a period of emergency, a vessel will be commandeered for you and your entourage at first light so that you may return to Aferraron without delay."

Logan looked at Autumn who nodded.

"Umm, thank you," he said.

"In the interim I will do everything in my power to ensure your continuing safety," said Soros. "Sarauta Matsafa!"

"Great One?" said Subota.

"You will immediately take charge in Ajoomi and resolve the issues," commanded Soros. "I shall hold you responsible for the safety of the Roinad and his apiakun. Buxar, inform the Osaku."

"Great One," said Buxar, feeling greatly relieved. If anyone was going to get the blame now, it would be Subota.

"This matter is at an end?" asked Soros. His look at the others made the question largely rhetorical. "Good. I am retiring for the night. Buxar, arrange for the appropriate ceremony to farewell His Highness and prepare for our immediate return to Cim-Irsou."

"Yes, Great One," said Buxar, scrambling to get to his feet before Soros stood up.

"We will speak again in the morning," said Soros to Logan then beckoned and whispered in his ear. Logan looked surprised but he nodded.

Soros turned his gaze on Inyanasi and Reyansh, still sitting on their cushions. He inclined his head in farewell then swiftly disappeared behind one of the wooden screens, closely followed by two servants.

“Well,” said Subota, “with your condescension, perhaps you would both accompany me to my tent where we can discuss these shadows? I am sorely lacking in information here.”

“Gladly,” said Autumn.

“If you will come this way,” said Subota, raising his hand. “You, fetch their staffs.”

A servant ran to do his bidding.

“What did Soros whisper to you?” asked Autumn quietly.

“He said to watch my back and always question your loyalty,” said Logan.

“And will you?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Logan with a laugh. “If you wanted to kill me not even Yammoe could stop you.”

“Was that another of your jokes?” asked Autumn frowning.

“No,” said Logan. “I was only pointing out that ..., oh, never mind.”

“Your staff, Great One,” said the servant, holding out his staff.

“I do not understand,” said Autumn, taking hers as well.

“All I meant was that I trust you totally,” said Logan. “Do not read into it anything that isn’t there.”

“We will go back to the caravan,” said Inyanasi. “We served very little purpose at this meal and I do not see our role increasing. If I do not see you in the morning, I would like to wish you a thousand blessings on you both and that the greatest of good fortunes comes your way.”

“We will see you again before we depart,” said Autumn, “of that I am certain. It would be wrong of me not to bid Dhru farewell, and Tejas.”

He and Reyansh strode out of the tent and the remaining servants started to tidy the room. Subota waited patiently beside the tent flap.

“A question, if I may,” said Autumn.

“If I can be of service,” said Subota. The flat beads at the ends of his long braids tinkled musically every time he moved.

“You said Logan carried a staff with magic powers,” said Autumn. “Why do you think that?”

“I can see the magic,” said Subota. “I am a matsafa and that staff has a purple hue. I venture it was the boat you used to get to Neander.”

“That is a surprising conclusion,” said Autumn. “How did you arrive at it?”

“I saw you struggling in the water,” said Subota. “I was called by a purpleness in the day and saw a branch come from the boat and pluck you from the water then it turned itself inside out. I puzzled over it at the time but now I realise that the boat was the staff. How did you come by it? I do not think either of you are matsafas”

“It was a gift from a friend in Aferraron,” said Autumn. “Her name is Mother Midcarn. She has ... powers.”

“Great powers, I would imagine,” said Subota. “It is strange I have not heard of her but then, we in Neander take little notice of those in other lands. Come, let us go to my tent and talk of shadows.”

“And you can fly?” asked Autumn, following him.

“It is one of my skills,” said Subota, “although in spirit only. My body stays on the ground and my trusted servant, Kishli, tends it while I am away.”

“A useful skill, I wager,” said Autumn, following him towards another tent nearby. “I have been to the top of a mountain but flying must be like that everywhere.”

“The views can be nice,” agreed Subota, “but it gets very cold. Why is it so dark in here? Kishli, bring some light immediately! Kishli!”

“Stop,” said Autumn, freezing with her hand out to stop Subota or Logan going any further. “There is something wrong here, I can sense ... Fiau, some light.”

Logan's staff burst into flame and Subota gasped appreciatively. For him the tent had suddenly gone purple as Fiau worked her magic.

“What is that?” said Autumn urgently, pointing to something lying on the floor. It looked to be someone wrapped in a black cloth.

“Urghh,” cried Subota, staring in shock and horror. “It is Kishli!”

Chapter Thirty

Subota dropped to his knees beside Kishli and tried to pull the black covering off but all he got was handfuls of Kishli's robes. Kishli groaned and tossed his head slightly then, unexpectedly, the black cover slid away rapidly, slithered across the floor and up the side of the tent where it hovered, seemingly watchfully.

"It is a shadow," said Autumn, watching it. It trembled slightly but that could as easily have been the breeze outside ruffling the side of the tent. "I wonder what it was doing to Kishli."

Subota gently brushed Kishli's hair from his face and studied him.

"He is alive," he pronounced, his voice shaking, "and seemingly asleep. Kishli, Kishli, wake up, come now, wake."

Kishli sighed and slowly opened his eyes. They were unfocused and his face was blank, devoid of any expression. He lifted his hand to touch Subota's face. "Ahhh," he sighed as his eyes slowly came back and focused.

"By all the deities, I thought I had lost you, my love," whispered Subota and hugged Kishli. They stayed like that, Subota gently rocking Kishli in his arms, until Kishli's face became animated again.

The shadow slid across the top edge of the tent wall where it met the ceiling, bending to match the cloth. Autumn watched it, her eyes narrow and her reflexes ready.

"Help me get him to a chair," said Subota, trying to lift Kishli to a sitting position.

"Take Fiau," said Logan, passing his burning staff to Autumn.

She took it and he bent to help with Kishli. Autumn held up the torch and waved it at the shadow. It didn't move, so she prodded it with her own staff. Still it didn't move although the end of the staff clearly bent the cloth of the tent.

"How strange," she said. "It is as though nothing is there yet I can see it. Is Kishli able to talk yet?"

She glanced over at where Subota and Logan had got Kishli seated in a chair. He sat like one coming out of a deep sleep. When she looked back the shadow had moved from the corner to the ceiling of the tent.

"Ugh, my mind is thick and fogged," said Kishli, shaking his head. He put his hands to his eyes and rubbed them.

"Perhaps something to drink," said Logan.

"Yes!" said Subota. He looked around then hurried over to a table which had some cups and flagons on it.

"Could you hold Fiau steady?" asked Autumn, holding out Logan's staff. "I want to get a closer look.

Logan stepped back from Kishli and took the staff. Autumn pulled over another chair and positioned it under the shadow. She stood on it and peered closely at the blackness. It slid to the side and fell, a thin inky blackness in the air. Instantly Autumn lashed out with her hand, her body twisting, but her arm passed through nothingness and the blackness engulfed Logan. He sighed and collapsed to the ground, the staff falling from his hand. Fiau flickered but did not go out. Autumn jumped off the chair and tried to grasp the shadow but, as with Kishli, she only got handfuls of Logan's malu. Desperately, she grabbed his hands and pulled him away but the shadow remained on top of him.

"Logan," she cried, and slapped his face but he was deeply asleep.

"I do not know what to do!" exclaimed Autumn, feeling an unfamiliar sense of panic beginning to rise within her. She looked over at Subota who was standing beside the table, a flagon in one hand. He was staring in horror at the shadow on Logan. "Help me!"

Subota didn't move. Autumn scrabbled at the shadow on Logan's face but her fingers could find no purchase. Then she stopped and stood up straight. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and drew an upright finger down her face and upper body, re-centring her mind

and quietening her thoughts. Then she opened her eyes and appraised the situation, calmly and dispassionately, as she had been trained.

“Fight fire with fire,” she said abruptly. “Aargh, and fight a shadow with another shadow.”

She jumped over to where Fiau burned and snatched her up.

“Hold this,” she said pushing the staff into Subota's hand. “Keep it behind me at all times!”

“What?” said Subota, coming out of his fixed stare at the shadow.

“Keep the light behind me,” said Autumn. “I need a strong shadow.”

She punched hard at the empty air, concentrating on making her shadow arm hit Logan's head. The shadow on top of him lurched backwards. It changed shape as though whatever was casting the shadow had turned and snarled at her.

“Yes!” cried Autumn. She spun round and launched a shadow kick that caught the shadow solidly in the centre of its darkness. It flew across the room and landed on the far side wall without making the slightest ripple in the cloth. It quivered and launched itself at Autumn. She jumped out of the way and brought her arm down hard but to no avail. Her shadow was going in the wrong direction.

“Get behind me!” she shouted at Subota.

Subota came to life and lurched behind her so her shadow once again fell towards the dark patch on the wall. She threw a punch and the shadow of her arm scored a direct hit. The shadow on the wall shook and changed its shape as though it was doubling up then it sprang at Autumn again. She jumped out of the way and again brought her arm down but Subota, slower to react, took a moment to get behind her and again her shadow blow missed its target. The blackness landed in a dark splotch on the floor. Subota managed to get into position and Autumn grasped the blackness with both her shadow hands. She couldn't feel anything as her hands were grasping only air but the shadow on the floor began to writhe and struggle between her shadow

hands.

“Now what do I do?” said Autumn, her hands gripping the empty air tightly.

“You get out of my way,” said a thin quivery voice as Subota gasped in surprise. Fiau pushed Autumn aside and stamped hard on the shadow on the floor with her long, thin foot. There was the faintest of faint sighs and the shadow seemed to collapse in on itself, even as it remained a shadow on the floor.

“What just happened?” said Subota, holding the burning torch in his hand with a bewildered look on his face.

“What did he say?” asked Fiau.

“What?” said Subota. “Who is this?”

“Later,” said Autumn.

She bent to inspect Logan. He looked to be sound asleep and had a half smile on his face.

“Logan,” said Autumn patting his face, “Lo-gaa-nn.”

“Hmm?” said Logan, then giggled.

“He is well,” said Autumn. “He is often like this when he wakes up. It can take a while. How is Kishli?”

Kishli realised he, alone, was sitting down and leapt to his feet in embarrassment.

“A thousand apologies, Magide,” he said in consternation. “I must have fallen asleep. Wahah, what is that?” He pointed at the tall slender creature clad in silvery bark standing beside Autumn. She, for it resembled a female human, had mossy braids for hair and her hands and feet were long and thin.

Fiau ignored him and started to merge back into Logan's staff.

“Please stay, Fiau,” said Autumn. “I have questions.”

“As you wish,” said Fiau and re-coalesced.

“Arghhh, this will burn the whole tent down,” screeched Kishli, snatching up the burning staff. He stopped in confusion when he saw the carpet underneath it was completely undamaged and dropped the staff again.

“Bring us some candles, Kishli,” said Subota. “Worry not about this torch for it is a magic torch and, I wager, will not cause anything to burn. Am I right?” He looked at Fiau who took no notice of him. Kishli kept a respectful distance around Fiau as he went to fetch some candles.

“Yes, you are right,” said Autumn as Logan sat up and looked around sleepily. “I think we have a language problem here. Fiau, do you understand what Subota says?”

“Who is Subota?” asked Fiau in her thin, wavering voice.

“This one,” said Autumn, pointing to Subota.

“His voice is as the grating of pebbles in a stream,” said Fiau, “and has no more meaning to me.”

“What did she say?” asked Subota.

“She cannot understand your words,” said Autumn. “If you will excuse me I will talk with Fiau first so she can return to the staff. She does not like to be out of it for too long.”

“Ahh,” said Subota, “she is the spirit of the wood?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Her name is Fiau.”

Subota bowed courteously before Fiau and spoke her name. Fiau graciously rustled at him and stiffly bent her head.

“If you could douse the light, please, Fiau,” said Autumn as Kishli

returned with two large fat candles on tall ornate candlesticks. Obediently Logan's staff returned to being a simple staff.

"Now," said Autumn, pointing to the black patch on the floor. "What do you know of that?"

"It is a shadow," said Fiau. "Strangely disconnected but a shadow none the less."

"Is it dead?" asked Autumn.

"Shadows cannot die," said Fiau. "They are without substance or life."

Subota moved over to stand beside Kishli who was a respectful distance away, as a good servant should be. He squeezed Kishli's hand surreptitiously.

"If it is without substance why did you stamp on it?" asked Autumn.

"I did not," said Fiau. "I stamped on the -----." She said something that sounded like a saw ripping through hard wood with an overlay of burning leaves crackling in a winter breeze.

"Ahh," said Autumn. "And is the ----- dead?" Her valiant attempt to say the word sounded more like a frog with a sore throat in a dense fog but Fiau took her meaning and nodded.

"I see," said Autumn. She thought for a moment. "Is the ---- part of the shadow?"

"No," said Fiau. "The ---- is from another place and was using the shadow. The shadow is now free of that encumbrance."

"What is she saying?" asked Subota.

"She says that there is some sort of creature that was using the shadow," said Autumn, "but that she killed it."

"Is that so?" asked Subota, sounding intrigued. He went over to the shadow lying on the floor and peered at it. "Oh yes, so there is,

although it would seem squashed.”

“I cannot see anything,” said Autumn, joining him and peering at it.

“Nor can I,” said Logan, coming over.

“It is there,” said Subota, pointing with his finger to the small gooey mess over to one edge of the shadow. “Can you see it, Kishli?”

“Alas no,” said Kishli, bending to look. “If only you can see it, Magide, then perhaps it needs the vision of a matsafa.”

“It is lit by the lights in that one's creepers,” said Fiau. She reached out a long, thin, twig-like finger and gently poked the bead at the end of one of Subota's braids.

“What did she say?” asked Subota, resisting the urge to jerk back.

“She said the thing is lit by your beads,” said Logan.

“My eolans?” said Subota, touching his beads. “Ahh, now it makes sense.”

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“These are not beads,” said Subota, selecting one and holding it out at braid length to show her. “They are eolans, stones with the power of magic. Without them I am powerless. Ask her what it looked like before she squashed it.”

Autumn conferred with Fiau for a moment.

“She says it is like a large weevil, about so big,” she reported, holding her thumb and forefinger about a finger length apart.

“Excellent,” said Subota. “Could you ask her where it came from?”

“The same place as did that creature from the valley of desolation,” said Fiau when Autumn asked her.

“Which valley of desolation?” asked Autumn.

“Where I called on Awendene to aid you,” said Fiau.

“You mean the mine?”¹⁶ asked Autumn. “Do you mean Cymogene or the augetreinn?”

“The one with wings like a bird,” said Fiau.

“Ahh, so this ---- is from Cysciec,” said Autumn, thoughtfully. “I wonder how it got here.”

“Cysciec?” said Subota. “This creature is from there?”

“So Fiau says,” said Autumn.

“That infernal Picsel!” said Subota savagely. “I shall string his intestines from Cim-Irsou to Lizoote for this!”

“Who is Picsel?” asked Autumn.

“I grow weary away from my tree,” said Fiau, unconcerned with Subota's flaring of temper. “Do you have further need of me?”

“Ahh, no,” said Autumn. “We thank you for your aid.”

Fiau rustled happily and merged back into the staff, watched in fascination by Kishli.

“Picsel is a young matsafa in Cim-Irsou,” said Subota, going to sit in a chair so he could think. “He and I have talked on the possibility of separating shadows from their objects and he gave me to understand that he had conducted very limited experiments with only small success. I venture the fool has taken things too far and caused widespread shadow separation.”

“How do you separate a shadow?” asked Autumn with interest.

¹⁶ See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Second Tale*. Cymogene Hirao Sastruga operated a highly destructive mine aided by Ta'umboq, an augetreinn from the Land of Cysciec.

“I do not know the manner in which he has done it,” said Subota, “but it will involve lessening the strength of the weak interstitial force between the five dimensions. It would not surprise me if he has somehow in the process disrupted the strong interstitial force and allowed a small separation between dimensions so these things from Cysciec can crawl through.”

“I know not of these interstitial forces,” said Autumn, “although I would like to speak more with you on this at another time. For the moment, however, we have people dying and perhaps this may be the cause. Is there anything we can do about this?”

“Perhaps,” said Subota, “but the cause is not yet established. Yes, we have shadow separation, and yes, we have creatures from Cysciec that would seem to be using those shadows but that does not establish causality. The deaths may be from another cause. Kishli?”

“Magide?” said Kishli.

“When we entered the tent you were on the floor covered by that shadow,” said Subota, pointing to the shadow that still lay on the floor. “What happened?”

“I do not know, Magide,” said Kishli. “When I returned to the tent it was all in darkness and as I went to fetch candles for your return I seem to remember becoming very suddenly very sleepy. Then I woke up in the light and you were all here.”

“Do you remember nothing of when you were asleep?” asked Autumn.

“I do remember a dream, of sorts, Farima,” said Kishli. “Thinking back I dreamt was caught in quicksand. I was being pulled down ever deeper and sand was filling my lungs and I could not breathe.”

“Was it the same for you, Logan?” asked Subota.

“For me?” asked Logan. “I was not asleep, was I?”

“The shadow fell on you,” said Autumn. “Do you not remember?”

“Ohh, yes,” said Logan. “That's right. I remember it falling now and I tried to jump out of the way then you were patting my face. I thought it had knocked me out.”

“It seemed you were asleep,” said Autumn. “Much as Kishli was when we found him.”

“Oh,” said Logan. His face creased as he concentrated. “Now you talk on it I do seem to remember a dream. I was floating, I think, oh, that's it. I was floating on a cloud, just drifting through the air and I was looking down on all the people below. They looked like ants!”

“This doesn't seem to be getting us anywhere,” said Subota.

“I beg to differ,” said Autumn. “I think this is very important. Do you not see that these two dreams are in some ways similar? Both slept and dreamt they were being carried away. Mayhap the ---- was somehow killing them through their dreams.”

“But the dreams were not of death,” said Subota, “or one, at least, was not. Perhaps the quicksand represented Kishli's life force sinking into death, but clouds?”

“Clouds ebb away to nothingness,” said Autumn. “And I recall the man who posted the sign in Ajoomi about the curfew saying some of those that died had terror on their faces yet others had looks of happiness. Logan was smiling in his sleep and he laughed.”

“So you are saying that this creature took the life from these people through their dreams?” asked Subota.

“And different dreams led to different looks on their faces,” said Autumn, “but none showed any other marks.”

“You could be right,” said Subota thoughtfully. He started to play with his braids then held one of the eolan out in front of his face and stared at it reflectively.

“Kishli,” he barked suddenly.

Kishli jumped. “Magide?” he said.

“Tell the Karoi I must speak with him on a matter of the utmost urgency,” said Subota. “No, I will come with you.”

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

“Purge the town,” said Subota urgently. “My eolans can show these creatures and we can squash them as your friend did. I must go to every house this very night and search for shadows. Come Kishli, Soros must give his authority to the Osaku.”

Chapter Thirty One

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn Savannah. A faint dampness in the air wafted into her nose as she breathed in deeply before holding the breath for a few moments then releasing it slowly. Her mind registered the dampness and dwelt briefly on the prospect of rain before moving on to other things. Around her, camels started to wake and grumble about the day ahead. Further away the ever vigilant Okka moved about, ensuring the safety of their Karoi. Some made their way to their sleeping places, others sought food before taking up their vigil. From still further away came the sounds of the town as people slowly began to begin their day. In front of her the stream ceaselessly continued to burble its way, unconcerned with people or camels in any of their guises. Likewise the birds which flocked to catch the early insects and the fish in the stream. Life and death continued unabated.

After a time she heard movement behind her. “Logan is awake,” passed through her mind which duly noted the thought and moved on. Moments later, or perhaps full summers had passed, it is difficult to tell when the mind journeys alone in abstract realms, the thought came to her that Logan was not alone. Her senses had already noted this and decided there was no danger so took their time in passing the information along to mix in her thoughts. She contemplated the journey of her mind that morning and considered the direction it was heading then she raised her arms above her head and came back to this world.

“Is it not a beautiful morning?” she asked, as she always did.

“It will rain before too long,” said Kishli. “I trust you are well, Autumn Savannah?”

“Most well,” said Autumn, gracefully getting to her feet. She looked around, Logan was returning from Tejas’ fire with three cups of shayi in his hands. She could see the faint shimmer of steam even from this distance. “How went the night?”

“My Magide Subota caught and killed seven of the creatures,” said Kishli. He was sitting cross legged on the ground beside the stream,

much as Autumn had although his heels were below his knees. She put her heels on top of her knees. "As yet there have been no reported deaths and the Osaku intends to lift the curfew and reopen Ajoomi if none are reported before Astauand reaches Its peak."

"That is excellent news," said Autumn.

"What is?" asked Logan, joining them.

Kishli repeated his news and accepted a cup of shayi with the caution of one accustomed to serve not receive.

"Where is Subota now?" asked Autumn. "Logan started to lose his shadow before we reached Tulbeq so I wager this problem must be widespread by now. I neglected to tell Subota of this last night."

"He already knows," said Kishli. "Even as we speak he is spreading the word amongst the other matsafas. They will do their part in their regions. Only when all understand will he sleep despite his desperate need for it has been a long and arduous night. As you can imagine not everyone was delighted to be woken and made to have their shadows checked by armed men."

"I can imagine," said Autumn. "Tell me, do you know what vessel has been arranged for us and when it will depart? I would speak with Subota again but if he sleeps I fear there will not be time."

"You need have no fear on that score," said Kishli. "My Magide Subota also wishes to speak with you on a personal matter. Mighty Soros, may his name be blessed forever, has been informed of your part in this. A vessel will be made available if you so desire but equally you are free to travel this land. He desires to speak with you himself when he arises and will give you a document instructing all to aid you in any way they can. My Magide Subota would ask that you delay your departure in either direction until he has had an opportunity to speak with you."

"That is most gracious of him," said Autumn. "Does that apply to both of us or just me?"

“It applies to the Roinad and his apiakun,” said Kishli. “My understanding is that there is but one condition, which is that you inform the local Osaku of your presence as soon as you can when you arrive in his district. No doubt for your protection but I venture that it will also enable Soros, in all his magnificence, to keep track of you both.” He smiled wryly.

“And you, Kishli?” said Autumn. “Should you not be sleeping? You look exhausted.”

“Alas, I cannot,” said Kishli, rising to his feet. “My Magide is flying and I must tend him until he returns. I need to return immediately and cannot tarry but I was enjoined to give you the news as soon as possible. My Magide Subota would also like to invite you both to dine with him this evening if that accords with your plans.”

“That is most gracious and hospitable of him,” said Autumn. “Please inform him that we would be delighted.”

“I shall,” said Kishli. “I thank you for your hospitality and look forward to conversing with you again in times to come.”

He bowed respectfully and headed back to Subota's tent.

“I wonder what he meant by that?” said Logan.

“I imagine we will find out soon enough,” said Autumn. “Would you prefer to continue our travels in Neander or return to Aferraron?”

“I go where you go, Magide,” said Logan with a smile. “You decide.”

“Please do not call me that,” said Autumn. “We are equals. We each have skills that the other does not.”

“Your wish, Magide,” said Logan with a broad grin. It disappeared when he saw her look.

* * *

“There still remains the problem of the shadows,” said Logan over

dinner that evening. "I do not have one and there are many others as well as shadows without anyone to join with."

"It is an issue," said Subota, "but Soros has appointed Picsel, on pain of death, to find a resolution to it."

"That would seem a trifle harsh," said Autumn.

"It is our way," said Subota with a shrug. "For certain it will help motivate him to reverse what he has done."

"Assuming he is able to rejoin people with their shadows," said Logan. "How will I know I have my shadow back and not someone else's?"

"I don't know if we will ever know for certain," said Subota. "I imagine that it will bear a close resemblance to you, in profile at least."

"I am not sure I would be entirely happy with someone else's shadow," said Logan. "I feel it would be like having someone else's hand or eye. It would not feel right somehow. But then, not having a shadow doesn't feel right either."

"At this stage it is difficult to say," said Subota. "It is possible that Picsel cannot rejoin the shadows at all. After all, it is one thing to break something apart and another thing to rejoin the parts seamlessly. I return with Soros to Cim-Irsou tomorrow by sea for we have been away for many days already. I will speak with Picsel myself and do what I can to aid him. Tell me of your plans."

"We plan to continue with Inyanasi to Cim-Irsou then explore the Skizze Mountains," said Autumn. "We leave at dawn although we will continue to travel by land. It seems that his spices do not travel well on the sea and Inyanasi is anxious to get to Cim-Irsou so he can start to sell his goods."

"Ahh," said Subota, suddenly looking harried. "Then I am pressed into raising a matter of some delicacy that I would have preferred to leave a little longer for we may not be able to meet again in Cim-Irsou as I will need to travel extensively to check these creatures from Cysciec have been truly obliterated."

“Then I shall leave you two to talk matters of state,” said Autumn rising from her chair. “Such things do not concern me.”

“Sploop, no,” said Logan, a sudden look of panic, fear and pleading in his eyes.

“My apologies,” said Subota. “It is with you, Autumn, that I wish to speak, not the Roinad.”

“Oh,” said Autumn, sitting back down. “I assumed, ..., my apologies.”

“Do you want me to leave?” asked Logan, delighted he wasn't going to be called on to decide to go to war or increase taxes or whatever else it was that Roinads did.

“I would prefer you stay,” said Autumn. “I venture Subota would have nothing to say to me that he would not want my Roinad to hear.”

“Quite,” said Subota, embarrassment adding to his harried expression. He carefully rearranged his cutlery and bowls so they were perfectly symmetric on the table. Autumn and Logan watched, wondering what this was all about.

“My Lord Soros, Wisest of the Wise,” said Subota suddenly, “has instructed me to marry.” He stopped equally suddenly.

“Oh yes,” said Autumn suddenly realising what was about to come.

“Indeed,” said Subota. He suddenly got up and started to pace the tent. “There is a matter of the lady to be chosen,” he continued, his voice tense. “Naturally, for a man in my position, the lady needs to have rank and standing in society and, on a more personal level, will need to have intelligence and, umm, not be overly desirous of having a family.”

Logan avoided looking at Autumn so he did not start to giggle and cause offence. He resolutely focused on looking as serious and stern as he could.

“As regards the suitable choice of such a person,” said Subota, not

looking at either of them, “I am reminded that you, Autumn Savannah, as the apiakun of the Roinad of Aferraron and as a Krisana have sufficient rank for the Sarauta Matsafa of Neander. I can also attest from my own observations you are generously endowed with intelligence. As regards the, umm, other matter, I am informed by my servant Kishli that you have taken a vow of chastity. Is this indeed so?”

“It is indeed so,” said Autumn, looking faintly puzzled.

“Excellent,” said Subota, with a faint air of relief. “All that remains then ...”

“A moment,” said Autumn. Subota turned to look at her for the first time since raising the matter. He looked apprehensive and, at the same time, affronted for not being allowed to finish. “Before you go any further, may I be permitted to ask a personal question?”

“By all means,” said Subota. “I understand personal questions are quite usual in these matters.”

“Am I right in thinking that your heart is already spoken for?” asked Autumn.

Subota froze mid pace. “What do you mean?” he asked. “What have you heard?”

“I have heard only what you yourself have said,” said Autumn.

“I?” said Subota, coming back to the table. He grasped the back of his chair and studied her. “What have I said?”

“When we got the shadow off Kishli,” said Autumn. “You called him ‘my love’.”

“Ahh,” said Subota, his dark skin going a little pale. “You heard that, did you?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan.

Subota slowly pulled his chair back and sat down. He rested his

elbows on the table and stared at the cloth for a few moments.

"I see," he said then raised his eyes to look at Autumn. "May I ask what you propose to do about it?"

"I?" said Autumn, surprised at his reaction. "It is nothing to do with me. Who you give your heart to is not my concern."

"It does not bother you?" asked Subota, matching her surprise. "Ahh, but then it leaves me in your power. Of course. Wahah, that was a grievous mistake on my part."

"I do not understand," said Autumn. "How does this knowledge leave you in my power?"

Subota raised an eyebrow and looked quizzically at her. "Our love is forbidden," he said. "Is it not the same in Aferraron?"

"Love is not forbidden in Aferraron," said Autumn, confused. "Why would it be?"

"The love of two men," said Subota, fearful yet relieved to have said it out loud for the first time. Quite possibly for the last time as well. "If you tell of what you know we will both be executed."

"Are you serious?" asked Autumn as Logan jerked upright in his chair. This was suddenly not funny after all.

"Decidedly so," said Subota. "One word from you and Kishli and I will face a Court of Iniquity and no doubt be garrotted that same day."

"I find this hard to understand," said Autumn. "Is Kishli already spoken for?"

"No," said Subota, then as an afterthought, "only by me."

"Then why would you die for being in love?" asked Autumn.

"It is our law," said Subota. "Truly, it is not the same in Aferraron?"

“No,” said Autumn. “I am no expert and these things are not overly common but I have heard of them.”

“Well, there it is,” said Subota. He spread his hands and shrugged helplessly. “Suspicion is beginning to spread and Soros has told me to get married before he has to officially intervene. What say you to marrying me?”

“This puts me in a very difficult position,” said Autumn. “If I do not marry you, you will be killed?”

“Not specifically you,” said Subota, “but I must marry someone and soon.”

“There is another solution,” said Logan.

“I will not give Kishli up,” said Subota firmly.

“I hadn't thought of that,” said Logan, “but it seems you have. No, my thought is why do you both not go and live in Aferraron?”

“I am the Sarauta Matsafa,” said Subota. “Soros would never permit it.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. He drummed his fingers on the table while Autumn faced the prospect of either married life or the death of two people because she would not marry him. It was a difficult choice.

“This is just a thought,” said Logan, “but coming back to Picsel and these shadows, is it possible that what he did could have affected the shadows of people in Aferraron?”

“I imagine so,” said Subota, a little taken aback at the change of subject. “Why?”

“Well, it occurs to me,” said Logan, “since everyone insists that I am the Roinad, that I could formally ask Soros to send you to Aferraron to consult with my Sarauta Matsafa, After all he won't want this to become an international incident.”

“Who is your Sarauta Matsafa?” asked Autumn, curious.

“Mother Midcarn,” said Logan, “and I wager she knows more about this than anyone else.”

“I am sure it is a viable proposition,” said Subota, “and, of course, I am happy to do what my Karoi commands, but if we could return to ...”

“You miss the point,” said Logan. “Naturally you would need to take your servant with you and I am sure that between Mother Midcarn and yourself you could come up with enough technical reasons why you cannot return. You could both stay in Aferraron indefinitely, together.”

Subota stared at him in disbelief.

“But Soros, ...” he said finally.

“Soros will not say 'no',” said Autumn, relieved at not having to make such a choice. “It is not just Aferraron either. What of the shadows in Wase and Sassese'lte and elsewhere? I am certain Soros would not like history to remember him as the cause of a worldwide epidemic, particularly if it is put to him that way.”

“But, ... but ...” said Subota in confusion. Then he sat up straight. “Kishli!”

“Yes, Magide,” said Kishli appearing. The look on his face suggested he had overheard the conversation.

“Begin preparations for travelling to Aferraron,” said Subota.

“Yes, Magide,” said Kishli, his face breaking out into a happy smile. “At once.”

Glossary

{Pronunciations given in curly brackets}

(In round brackets, OT refers to Old Tongue terms, N to Neander terms)

[where an entry is specific to a particular Tale, that Tale is in square brackets]

Ajoomi {ah-joo-mi}: A town of some 600 people on the Northern coast of Neander.

Alintakam {al-in-tak-am}: The Neandern deity of vengeance.

Anasil {an-as-il} [5]: Era'owen of Reyansh.

Balen {ba-len}: Son of Inyanasi the spice trader, lost in the desert some unspecified time before the incidents in *The Annals*.

Bini ul Demir {bi-ni ul de-mir}: An oasis in the North of the Sabon Mutum Desert.

Bistup {bis-tup}: The Monarch of Nagitere, broadly equivalent to a king but subordinate to the Karoi of Nender.

Blind Esir {es-ir}: [5] A masira at the bath house in Tulbeq.

Buogu Askefur {bu-oh-goo as-ke-fur} [5]: The founder of the Buogu dynasty of Neander and father of Soros I. Buogu Askefur Soros came to power through a coup lead by Rassan whom he assassinated just as Rassan was claiming the throne. Buogu Askefur was hailed as a saviour and, amid great protestations of reluctance, was given the title in perpetuity. Buogu Askefur is the only Karoi of that dynasty to die of old age.

Buxar {buc-sar} [5]: The chief clerk to Soros.

Cika {si-ka} (N): A general non-gendered term for addressing a child. An insult when addressing an adult, implying the one addressed so is either behaving childishly or, particularly with regard to a man, that they are not sufficiently physically developed to warrant being regarded as an adult.

Cim-Irsou {kim-ear-soo}: The capital of Neander and its largest centre with a population of some 30,000. Historically the city began as a small village on the estuary of the Limbis River where it joins the sea in the Kwan ul Cimsour and expanded East along the River. The Palace of the Golden Camel is set further around the bay to the West of the city, although the city has started to expand around the Place.

Codemuta {co-dem-u-ta} [5]: The leader of a caravan heading West from Waaj.

Dampalinga {dam-pa-lin-ga}: A steamed dumpling popular in Northern Neander. The dumpling is filled with minced meat, usually goat, and spices.

Dhru {drew} [5]: The middle son of Inyanasi the spice trader. Dhru had some basic medical training.

Eolan {ee-oh-lan}: A flattened pellet or bead with a hole through its centre and used by matsafas to help focus the energies used in their work. Eola can be plain or decorated with coloured laquers.

Evincar {ev-in-car} [5]: Leader of a band of nomadic bandits based to the West of Waaj.

Farimi / Farima {fa-rim-i / -ah} (N): A term of respect used when addressing a stranger or casual acquaintance. Similar to 'honoured sir', 'madam' or 'effendi'. The masculine form *Farimi* is used when the person addressed is of uncertain gender. Interestingly, but perhaps not unexpectedly, the use of *Farima* for a male is considered an insult whereas *Farimi* for a female is a sign of great respect, carrying with it the idea that the woman so addressed is 'good enough' to be a man.

Ferisiku {fer-i-si-ku} (N): The fourth day of the tano.

Gajavij {ga-ja-vij}: The Thunder face of Hadari.

Grinar {gree-nar} (N): The main unit of Neandern currency.

Gensam {gen-sam} (N): A low level nobleman in the Neandern aristocracy, equivalent to midway between viscount and a knight in the current British structure.

Guguwa {gu-gu-wa}: The Sand face of Hadari.

Hadari {had-ari}: The Neandern deity of storms. Hadari has five faces, one each for wind, rain, thunder, lightning and sand.

Himiu {him-ee-ooh} [5]: A low ranking Neandern nobleman.

Inyanasi {in-yan-ah-si} [5]: The leader of a caravan of Neandern spice traders.

Iyali {ee-ya-li}: The Neandern deity of families.

Joander {jo-an-der}: A shrub that grows only in Southern Sassese'lte. Its purple, waxy leaves are used as a mild pain killer.

Janire {jan-ire}: The language of the people of Neander.

Karoi {ka-roy}: The Monarch of Neander, part way between a king and an emperor as the Karoi rules over the kingdom of Nagitere, which has its own monarch, as well as Neander itself.

Karena {ka-re-na}: A consort of the Monarch of Neander.

Kiramaj {ki-ra-maj}: A colour that only exists in the magical realm, due to the limitations of the human eye. For more information, explore *impossible colours* in scientific texts on optics. Within the magical realm, however, such colours become 'visible' as the limitations of the human eye are no longer a factor.

Kishli {kish-li} [5]: Subota's manservant/housekeeper and his lover. Note that homosexuality was (and still is at the time of writing) an offence punishable by death by garrotting in Neander although in modern times clemency generally means an extended jail sentence. Consequently, wherever possible, one partner took the subservient role of servant in a long term relationship.

Kwan ul Cimsour {kw-an ul kim-soor}: A large bay on the North Coast of Neander.

Lafiya {la-fi-ya}: The Neandern deity of health.

Limbis River {lim-bis}: The major river in Neander which has its source in the Skizze Mountains and, unusually, flows West to join the Looncan Sea at the bay of Kwan ul Cimsour. The reason for the Limbis River's unusual path is the geology of Northern Neander. Much of the land is composed of sandstone or a sandstone/basalt/quartz conglomerate but the promontory of Central North Neander is granite, having broken away from the continental shelf of Aferraron several million years previously. Consequently the Limbis River follows the path of least resistance to the Sea.

Lizoot {li-zoo-tej}: A major port and fishing hub on the East coast of Neander. Population approx 10,000.

Madoe {ma-do}: A small wildflower common throughout Neander. The stamen of its blue flower is an effective antidote to the poison of the Neandern Desert scorpion, provided it can be administered in time. Typically the stamen are dried and powdered and administered orally.

Magide {ma-gi-de} (N): Literally 'my lord' or 'master' but only used

towards the head of the household.

Manasiku {ma-na-si-ku} (N): The first day of the tano.

Masir {maz-ir} (N): The Neandern term for massage. Formal massage, as opposed to simply rubbing a muscle injury, was unknown in Aferraron at the time.

Masira {maz-ir-ah} (N): The Neandern term for someone who performs masir. A masseur.

Matsafa {mat-sa-fa} (N): Broadly equivalent to a lower level sorcerer in Aferraron but with numerous subtle differences. For example, a matsafa generally has to ability to undertake self-directed out-of-body experiences which few, if any, sorcerers can. That said, sorcerers can achieve the same results through manipulation of the laws of magic without the need to leave their bodies.

Musafir {moo-saf-ir}: The Neandern deity of travellers.

Nagitere {na-gi-tar}: A small kingdom to the South of Neander and under the domination of Neander.

Navik {nav-ik} [5]: The owner of the boat that carried Inyanasi and his sons from Sassese'lte to Neander.

Neander {ne-an-de-re}: The land to the South of Aferraron, on the far side of the Sea of Looncan.

Okka {ok-ka} (N): The personal bodyguard of the Karoi, comprising the elite of the Neandern army.

Osaku {o-sak-u} (N): The administrative head of a town, village or region in Neander. Broadly equivalent to a mayor or prefect.

Paolim {pay-oh-lim} (N): A soft drink with a lemony-mint flavour. Depending on the availability of ice it is either served chilled or at air temperature. It is never served heated and to do so would be considered an insult.

Picse {pix-el}: [5] A young inexperienced matsafa with a keen imagination and radical outlook.

Rakumi {rak-umi}: The Neandern deity of camels.

Raotou The Bald {rayo-too}: The Bistup of Nagitere. Known for his lack of subtlety and blunt manner of speaking rather than any lack of hair.

Reyansh {ray-an-sh} [5]: The eldest son of Inyanasi and destined to take over the family trading business.

Rih {ri}: The Wind face of Hadari.

Rijiya {ri-ji-ya}: The Neandern deity of oases and wells.

Rysiku {ri-si-ku} (N): The fifth day of the tano.

Sabon Mutum Desert {sa-bo-ne mu-tu-me}: A major desert in the North West of Neander.

Saja {sa-ja} [5]: The pseudonym of Buxar while travelling incognito with Soros.

Sanikar {san-ih-kar} (N): The Neandern militia. The sanikar are distinct from the army in that the army are under the direct command of the Karoi whereas the sanikar are locally organised and under the command of the local Osaku. In times of dire national emergency the sanikar will aid the army as required but normally the sanikar fulfil the role of local law enforcers and manage local security issues.

Sanikaran {san-ih-kar-an} (N): A member of the sanikar.

Sarauta {sa-ra-ow-ta} (N): A term used denote someone or something appointed or designated by the Karoi. Depending on the context it could be translated as 'by royal command', 'the Karoi's own', 'supplier to the Karoi' or similar. Hence *Sarauta Matsafa* denotes the official position of the Karoi's own personal sorcerer.

Sei {say} (N): The smallest unit of Neandern currency, being one quarter of a Grinar.

Selti {sel-ti}: The language of the people of Sassese'lte.

Shayi {shay-ee} (N): A hot drink made from dried, crushed fragrant leaves steeped in boiling water.

Soros {sor-os} [5]: The Karoi of Neander, seventh of that name and eighth in the hereditary dynasty founded by Buogu Askefur Soros. His full name is Amja Soros Hicwe Unwasi Buogu Aximuoku Saosa Piauny. Soros VII was widely known as the Poison Karoi due to his progressive immunity to poison developed through his self-inflicted bitings and stings by ever larger poisonous snakes and scorpions. It is also said that Soros VII developed a cocktail of either poisons or known antidotes to poisons, the sources are unclear, which he consumed throughout each day. The reason for this was that of his

seven predecessors in the Buogu dynasty, only Buogu Askefur and Soros III did *not* die from poisoning. There is no medical consensus regarding the effectiveness of the Poison Karoi's strategy but it is undeniably true that Soros VII died from multiple stab wounds at the hands of his son Soros VIII and not poison.

Subota {su-bo-ta} [5]: The Sarauta Matsafa to Soros VII, the Karoi of Neander. References in *The Annals* suggest that Subota is a synesthete, in that non-visual information stimulates his visual cortex. For example, he 'sees' the days of the tano as being of various colours. There are some references to this in what remain of the official Court records of the Soros VIII era. For example, Subota forbade Soros, as a condition of his acceptance of the position of Sarauta Matsafa, from performing public functions on Rysikus as Soros' aura (pink) would clash badly with the day (green).

Tano {ta-no} (N): A regular period of five days corresponding, conceptually, to a week. The five days are, in order: Manasiku, Towasiku, Wunsiku, Ferisiku and Rysiku. Thus, Mottle Blue, which has an orbital period of approximately 325 days, has 65 tanos in a year. In terms of cultural development, Neander was administratively slightly ahead of Aferraron at this period in time and consequently had a formal system of days and tanos for identifying days. In Aferraron official dates were simply identified by the number of the day within the year of the reign of whichever Roinad was current. For example, the one hundred and seventh day of the third year of Obvia Vasagle. The Neandern system was only a slight improvement; for example, the fourth Towasiku of the fifth year of Soros VII. Regardless, the general populace of both countries took little notice of such matters and tended to live on a day to day basis.

Tejas {ted-jas} [5]: The youngest son of Inyanasi the spice trader.

Towasiku {tow-a-si-ku} (N): The second day of the tano.

Tufafi {tu-faf-i} (N): A long, loose robe with wide sleeves and several pockets that is worn only by matsafas.

Tulbeq {tul-bec}: A small port of some 1200 people on the Northern coast of Neander.

Tumtyr {tum-tire}: The Rain face of Hadari.

Ubadah {ooh-ba-da} [5]: The Osaku of Tulbeq.

Upanama {oo-pan-ah-ma} [5]: The pseudonym used by Soros when travelling incognito. Upanama is presented as a wealthy merchant from Lizoote with widespread land and trade interests.

Usos {ooh-sos} (N): An alcoholic drink made from fermented figs.

Virali {vi-ra-li}: The Lightning face of Hadari.

Waaj {waah-je}: A small village of some 80 or so people on the Northern edge of the Sabon Mutum Desert.

Wahah {wa-hah}: The Neandern deity of snakes and scorpions.

Wunsiku {wun-si-ku} (N): The third day of the tano.

Yashi {ya-shi}: The Neandern deity of deserts.

Ziasolo {zias-olo}: The Neandern deity of oases and gardens.