

Lietapis Vosienskaj Savany

The Annals Of
Autumn Savannah

a new translation

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aka Richard The Writer.

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› Piersaja Kazka ‹

~ The First Tale ~

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Introduction

A pertinent question in need of an answer introduces this work. Why do we need yet another translation of The Annals of Autumn Savannah?

The answer is decidedly simple. Recent developments in the studies of the physical sciences of the planet we know as Encote 21 C or, more colloquially, as Mottle Blue, have radically changed our understanding of the physical laws of that part of the Universe. More significantly, these developments require a reappraisal of works of what were previously understood to be myth and legend. Earlier translations have maintained the underlying assumption that The Annals of Autumn Savannah must be either myth or legend as some aspects of The Annals contravene our understanding of the laws of nature. Given our new understanding, or at least the understanding of those who specialise in the physical sciences, The Annals must be re-translated with the underlying assumption that they are *historical* documents.

Two specific developments in the scientific study of Mottle Blue underpin this. Firstly, the work of Professor Edvardine Schliemann and colleagues at the Frankfurt Institute for Planetary Science¹ has identified previously unimagined flaws in the fabric of space-time coincident with the location of Mottle Blue. Prof. Schliemann's interpretation of her team's extensive and radical work is that new dimensions are accessible from the surface of Mottle Blue. From this we must therefore conclude that references in The Annals to The Land of the Dead and The Land of the Undead may very well refer to worlds lying in those other dimensions and that transitions from Mottle Blue to those worlds are, in fact, possible. The fact that no other planetary body thus far discovered shares these transitional features has meant that elsewhere such matters are firmly entrenched as *myth* and, as such, are considered tales that illuminate the psyche of the writer and their culture. Given that dimensional transitions from Mottle Blue are possible, The Annals must therefore be reconsidered as *historical* and that these other dimensions, or worlds, are fact. Given that scientific conceptualisation, it is therefore reasonable to infer that The Land of the Dead and The Land of the

1 Schliemann E et al, *Interrelations of M SubManifolds in Multi-Codimensional Interface Adhesions on Encote 21 C*, Journal Of Planetary Science, 231:18, pp. 129-162

Undead are real places, populated by real beings and The Annals are a record of such interactions. This places The Annals firmly in the world of history rather than myth or legend.

Notwithstanding the multi-dimensional space-time aspects of Mottle Blue, a new development in the field of cyto-psychology adds credence to other aspects of the Annals. Doctors Aviv ben Abend of the Institute of Cyto-Technology in Beijing and Dong Duc Nguyen of the Pan Thiet Psychological Research Centre in Vietnam² have identified genomes with unusual characteristics in cell samples retrieved from well preserved remains found in glacial ice on Mottle Blue. Using highly sophisticated modelling on quantum computers, Abend and Nguyen have ascribed telekinetic and hyper-spatial-manipulative abilities to these genomes. In effect, Abend and Nguyen have concluded that, for certain individuals at least on Mottle Blue, abilities that we would dismiss as 'magical' could actually be possible. This gives further credence to The Annals as a historical document recording actual encounters between Autumn Savannah and people we would traditionally label *sorcerers*.

That said, any and all historical documents must still be viewed critically and not taken as gospel. Regardless of any previous translations, readers new to The Annals may benefit from some background to Aferraron and the Onaman culture underpinning them. This is further expanded in the Glossary at the end of this book.

The Onaman language is, in many respects, broadly similar structurally to Middle English with Medieval French overlays and is driven by strong didacticism rather than artistic finesse. Moreover, due to the many characteristics of their natural world, such as the two moons, there are aspects of the language for which there is no corresponding English equivalent.

This does not mean that Onaman lacks artistry, but 'honour' is at its core rather than 'love' although neither English word is truly representative of the nuances of the Onaman original. Perhaps a closer equivalent to 'honour' would be the classical Greek concept of

2 ben Abend A and Nguyen DD, *Genome Modelling And Cyto-Psychological Behaviours Deriving From Extant Encote 21 C Cryopreservations: Is Sorcery Real?*, Proceedings of the International Symposium On Encote 21 C, 2019, vol 2, pp.19-33

'arrete' which is variously translated into modern English as 'honour', 'virtue', 'positive strength' or even 'moral fortitude'. Equally, the English concept of romantic love is, in Onaman, more allied with respect, a co-joining of equals, the desire for healthy 'honourable' children and a mutual duty to produce such. Romance, as such, has no Onaman equivalent. A childless pair bonding would be an anathema, as would dishonourable children or, indeed, a child from an unbonded pairing, regardless of any, generally unexpressed, romantic feelings. Having said that, there are many dishonourable children (and adults) and a majority are born outside formal pair bonding. The formal pair-bonding, or Era'ow as it is known, is mainly limited to the upper classes.

Such then is the difficulty facing the translator; how to express concepts when there are no equivalent concepts to translate into. Consequently a certain 'freedom of expression' has had to be used when translating in order to express the 'feel' of a concept in broad terms to which a reader of this work may be better able to relate. In some cases, of course, there is a direct English equivalent, such as the Onaman 'Seryf' which is directly equivalent to the English 'Sheriff' (in the medieval sense) so I have used the title Sheriff where relevant. Conversely there are occasions when the Onaman language has no closely related English equivalent and I have therefore used the Onaman term. An example of this would be 'Piers Sakratar' which is loosely a position similar to First Secretary or Chief Advisor but with aspects of Commander in Chief as well.

The heroine's name, too, posed something of a dilemma. Unlike Onaman societal norms, in which few individuals' names have a direct meaning in the day to day world, Vosienskaj Savany translates literally as Autumn Savannah. Because of this, and the significance of both 'Autumn' and 'Savannah' I have elected to use the name Autumn Savannah throughout rather than the correct Vosienskaj Savany. All other personal names remain in the vernacular.

Guide to Pronunciation

When spoken, the Onaman language is fairly flat and guttural with emphasis placed usually, but not always, on the first syllable and each syllable is sounded individually, with no slurring or crossover. The

name 'Autumn', for example, would be correctly pronounced as 'or-tu-me-ne'. All vowels and consonants are short, so the 'au' of Autumn is pronounced as the English 'or' not 'awww'. Double letters, such as the 'nn' in Savannah are articulated separately so Savannah would be pronounced as 'sa-va-ne-nah'. As with most languages there are inconsistencies, both within the language and in terms of local dialects. Whether or not the final consonant is emphasised being a notable inconsistency. Savannah is pronounced with 'nah' at the end rather than 'na-he' whereas Autumn ends with 'me-ne' and not 'mn' or 'men'.

Exceptions

' is used in the written language to indicate that the preceding letter runs on from the syllable. So, Mor' is pronounced as 'mor' and not as 'mo-re'.

- is used in the written language to indicate the two connected syllables are conflated into a single syllable. So, a-sehen is pronounced as 'asen-ne' and not as 'ah-say-he-ne'. Thus, the deity of volcanoes Mor'upita-sehen is pronounced as 'mor-up-it-asen-ne'.

Generally 'c' and 'k' are interchangeable and are hard. The soft 'ch' of English is represented by 'q' and the longer 'chew' by 'qu'.

A Note On The Religious Pantheon

While the Onaman people recognise a varied pantheon, unusually all the deities are genderless, or perhaps hermaphrodite although there are no known children of deities nor any familial hierarchy. It appears from the Onaman creation myths that the deities are all siblings with no clear, overarching ruler, although each deity has its own sphere of influence in Onaman affairs. Even Mizule and Vallume, the deities of Men and of Women respectively, have no gender of their own. Intriguingly there is no deity for children. Mizule and Vallume's realms include all Men and all Women regardless of age and there is no coming of age ritual to indicate the child moving into the realm of the deity. Vallume is the deity of the new born girl as well as her mother and her grandmother.

Additionally each person has a personal deity and a family deity and, more often than not, a local village deity although the sophisticates of

the larger towns and cities reject the village deities as mere superstition.

A Brief Overview of Social Structure

As is so often the case, the Onaman are a multi-layered society. The top layer comprises the Roinad and the Opsablepsia who form the government. The Roinad is more of a 'first among equals' rather than a king (or queen as the Onaman do not exclude women from that role) and the Opsablepsia are the other 'equals'. Beneath them are lesser nobility and major landholders and at the bottom are tradespeople and peasants. Within the layers there are, of course, sub-strata of varying degrees of complexity depending on power, influence, status and so on.

The selection process for the Roinad is interesting. In principle the transition from one to another should be by way of acclamation from within the peer group. The Roinad should be one of the Opsablepsia and selected by them and this has, on occasion, happened peacefully when a Roinad has died through natural causes or stepped down. However, should a non-member of the Opsablepsia claim the role, generally by killing the current Roinad, the custom has developed over a long period of time for the matter to be resolved through the public arena, literally.

A usurper will defeat the Roinad either directly in battle or indirectly through assassination. But, in order to receive the support of the Opsablepsia, the usurper has to overcome any challenger at the Mundulgen. The Mundulgen being one-on-one combat in front of the general public in the Dulgenadr, the arena or stadium reserved solely for that purpose. In practice, however, it is commonly, but not always, the case for the combatants to be an apiakun (champion or guardian) rather than the actual person.

This custom has a number of benefits. Firstly, it minimises the carnage that did sometimes occur before this custom arose – the accession of Ramessantia being a notable example where, according to some estimates, some 40% of the population died in the four-way power struggle. Secondly, it discourages any potential usurper from rebelling unless the usurper is extremely confident of their or their

champion's skills. As is so often the case, talent goes where the money is so the most skilled champions are generally aligned with the Roinad and Opsablepsia members already. Furthermore, given the skills of the champions, although in theory anyone from any level of society can legally launch a challenge, very few do as it would be tantamount to suicide. Thirdly, it allows the general populace, or at least those who are able to attend the Dulgenadr, to witness for themselves the skill and power of the ultimate winner and provide their support to individual combatants during their combat, in much the same way that supporters at a football match feel that they can influence the outcome.

Chapter One

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn Savannah, causing a slight flickering of her eyelids. The dawn chorus of birdsong filled the cool, early morning air. A gentle breeze, redolent of distant rain, disarrayed some strands of her hair. A mosquito whined discordantly, provoking not a twitch. She sat, cross-legged, on an outcrop of rock, the woods behind her and the open meadow before. Dew glistened on the grass as Astauand's orb crept over the horizon. Eyes shut, back straight, her hands crossed in her lap, Autumn remained motionless, her breathing slow and even. The mosquito ceased its buzzing and settled on her forehead, near her temple where the warm blood pulsed through a vein.

An owl, still too hungry to sleep, spotted a mouse inquisitively nosing its way around the base of a tree on the edge of the wood, perhaps in search of nuts. Its search was short lived and its squeal as the owl's talons ripped into its carcass was momentary. The owl ascended and headed for its nest, its bed-time meal limp and bleeding. The mosquito resumed its buzzing, replete with its own meal. Very faint on the breeze came the sounds of humans stirring, beginning their day in the village behind the wooded hill. Through all these natural sounds Autumn's eyelids remained closed, her body unmoving, her mind roving far and wide yet mindful and alert. This was no Esyup garden, secluded and secure. This was somewhere in the world, unknown and fraught with yet more unknowns.

How long Autumn remained in this state varied from day to day. As always she had risen from sleep, partaken of a mouthful of water then taken up her solitary position. Oft times she remained this way for hours, exploring the paths down which her mind roved. Oft times also she stayed scant minutes, the paths familiar and well explored or short and leading nowhere. But today, ahh, this day was different. Different in many ways, yet unchanged in many others. Autumn was still Autumn, the world was still the world, Astauand still ruled and chased away the shadows of the night. But today, this day, perhaps inevitably, Autumn did not finish her path in her mind. Today, unexpectedly, a twig snapped.

What can be the significance of that you may ask? Twigs snap.

Snapping is part of the fundamental nature of twigs. A case could even be made, perhaps somewhat dubious, but a case none the less, for 'snapping' to be the primary purpose of a twig. Regardless, given a wooded area you would expect to find twigs and you would expect them to snap. But, as any philosopher will tell you, whether or not you asked, everything has a cause and a consequence. Nothing exists in isolation. Not even a twig.

Autumn had heard the death squeal of the mouse and the faint but discernable rush of air as the owl swooped. She had heard the flap of the owl's wings as it rose in the air after the kill. She had heard the buzz of the mosquito, its touch on her skin and the merest angel breath as it flapped its tiny wings departing, its body twice as heavy as before. These things were registered, noted and ignored. Causes, events and consequences, the normal pattern, familiar and thus disregardable. Not sufficient to disturb her reverie.

A twig snapped. In the wood behind her. An animal passing through the wood could have been the cause but there had been no rustle of leaves, no previous twigs snapping, no earlier grunting or sniffing of the air. A twig snapped and there was no consequence. No rustling nor snuffling. No cause, no consequence, save only Autumn's eyes snapping open. Motionless, save only the movement of her eyelids, Autumn examined her memory then expanded her awareness, probing the wood behind. Ears seeking any sound that may indicate the cause of the twig snapping. Skin and hair alive to the possibility of a movement of air unaccounted for by the breeze. Beneath her tunic, her lithe muscles readied. Her eyes examined such of the world as she could see without moving her head or neck.

A leaf rustled. Again with no discernable cause nor consequence. Too long after the breaking of the twig to be an animal in the wood, too independent to be the breeze. It takes a very precise kind of breeze to rustle a single leaf in a wood of leaves. The kind that comes not from the wind but from the brushing of a body working hard to not make a sound.

One foot was slightly out of position and Autumn minutely flexed a muscle to move it, ready in case an explosive leap was needed. As indeed it was. The faintest odour teased her nostrils. Not the odour of

an animal, not a bird or even a snake but a human. A human who had not washed for several days. A human close behind her, in the wood, trying very hard to not make a sound. Causes and consequences came full circle as Autumn, with the energy of youth and the skill of a lifetime's practice reacted. In less time than a single flap of a mosquito's wing Autumn had thrust up and forward into a somersault with a final twisting leap and landed, balanced on her feet a body's length distant, facing the wood. In a crouch both ready for further instant action and to avoid a blow at head height, one arm protectively before her, the other drawn back and ready to attack.

"By Sploop, what manner of fiend are you?" said the man, freezing in his stealthy approach, surprise writ clear on his unbearded face.

"I am Autumn Savannah," said Autumn, her voice unafraid and calm. "A traveller and stranger to these parts."

She remained in her pose, her senses straining for others who may be approaching from a different direction.

"I am Logan," said he, his voice a little high pitched and thick. "A traveller and no stranger to these parts."

He slowly straightened, slightly unsteady on his feet. He matched Autumn for height but had a slight edge in breadth. His tunic was sackcloth and stained and tied around the waist with a length of vine. He was barefoot.

Autumn slowly relaxed. His lack of beard was due to youth. Logan was not a man, nor a boy. He was on the cusp although his face was dirty, like a boy's. She quickly scanned behind her to confirm what her other senses had told. He was alone.

"Why do you creep up on me?" she asked.

"I did not want to scare you." said Logan.

"Perhaps an announcement of your presence would have been more friendly," she said.

“Did I scare you?” he asked.

“No,” said Autumn. “I knew you were there.”

“How did you know?” he asked, looking slightly puzzled.

“I smelt you,” said Autumn.

“Ahh,” said Logan, his voice losing its thickness as his fear abated.

“What do you wish with me?” asked Autumn. “Creeping or otherwise, you approached me.”

“Ah, yes,” he said and attempted a grin. “I was hoping you had some food.”

Autumn eyed him.

“You say you are a traveller and no stranger to this land and yet you carry no possessions nor provisions,” she said. “What manner of travel is this?”

“It is the manner of one who does not travel willingly,” he said. “I am from Biasdo, the village over yonder,” and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “A short distance.”

“And you did not eat before leaving Biasdo?” she asked.

“I did,” he said, “but I left some two days past and have not eaten since.”

“You remind me of the backside of the Lion King,” said Autumn, moving over to where her pack, staff and blanket lay on the ground. “And thereby hangs a tail.”

“I do not understand,” said Logan, watching her carefully.

“There is a tail on the backside of the Lion King,” said Autumn, “and likewise the back side of your appetite has a tale but one I venture I will not hear for some time yet.”

“I still do not understand,” said Logan.

“You show impressive self knowledge,” said Autumn. “Wise is the man who knows what he does not know. Come, eat with me. I have bread and cheese.”

Autumn squatted to open her pack and pulled out a cloth wrapped bundle.

“I thank you,” said Logan, “now give me your money or I’ll kill you.”

A knife flashed towards Autumn’s throat.

“And I thank you,” said Autumn, disarming him with barely a flicker of her hand. “A knife makes sharing the cheese easier. Sit or I shall return the knife in a way you would not wish.”

Breathless, Logan sat down and watched as Autumn neatly sliced the cheese in half. She wiped the knife on the cloth then placed it neatly on the ground, just out of Logan’s reach. She held out one half of the cheese. He stared at her.

“Take it,” she said. “Eat and enjoy. Cheese will better satisfy your hunger than money will.”

Slowly Logan reached out and took the cheese. Autumn tore off a hunk of the dark, coarse bread and handed that to him as well.

“Thank you,” he said, still watching her.

“I thought you were hungry,” said Autumn after a few moments.

“How did you take my knife?” asked Logan.

“You offered it, I took it,” said Autumn. “And very useful it was too.”

“But I threatened you,” said Logan. “Why did you not kill me?”

“I did not need to,” said Autumn, breaking off a small piece of cheese. “Taking the knife was sufficient. Killing you would not cut the

cheese.”

She smiled and put the cheese in her mouth.

“But I threatened you,” said Logan. “Are you not afraid that I will do it again?”

“Perhaps next time you will make a better job of it,” said Autumn. “If you do not want the cheese now, take the cloth to wrap it so it doesn't get dirty and eat it later. I'm sure your hunger will return.”

Logan broke off some of the bread and chewed it then ate a piece of cheese. Quickly the cheese and bread disappeared.

“Have some water,” said Autumn, passing him a waterskin. “Bread and cheese is dry eating.”

She watched as he drank deeply then she ate another small piece of cheese.

“Would you like some more food?” she asked, holding out her cheese.

“You have not eaten much,” said Logan.

“Your need is greater than mine,” she replied.

Logan grunted then took the proffered cheese.

“I thank you,” he said and ate it.

“The Lion King's tale,” he said, when it had all gone. “Did you mean that you think there is a story behind me being here?”

“There is a story behind everything,” said Autumn. “Tell me your story if you wish, or not. It makes no difference to the fact that we are here now, sharing food.”

“You say strange things,” said Logan. “You do not talk like other people.”

“That is easily explained,” said Autumn. “I am not other people.”

“You see what I mean?” said Logan. “That’s a strange thing to say.”

“You think the truth is strange?” asked Autumn. “Or do you think I should be other people?”

“I have no idea,” said Logan. “You’re just strange, that’s all. Where are you from?”

“I am from the East,” said Autumn. “Three days distant.”

“I have never been that far,” said Logan. “I was born in Biasdo and have never been as far as one day distant from it. What village is three days to the East?”

“I am not from a village,” said Autumn. “I am from an Esyup.”

“What is an Esyup?” he asked.

“A place where people live and study,” said Autumn. “Why did you leave Biasdo?”

“They stopped liking me,” he said, glumly.

“Unfortunate,” said Autumn. “Is being liked a requirement for living there?”

“It is and it is not,” he said. “I suppose it depends on why they stop liking you.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “Was the choice of leaving yours or theirs?”

“They made me leave,” he said, quietly. “They said they would hang me if I didn’t.”

“Ahh, so it was your choice,” said Autumn.

“No, it wasn’t!” said Logan excitedly. “I had no choice!”

“You always have a choice,” said Autumn. “You could have chosen to stay and be hung.”

“Not much of a choice,” he said sulkily.

“Some would have chosen that path,” said Autumn. “Not many perhaps, but each to their own. Why did the village people offer you that choice? It seems somewhat harsh. Are they always so hospitable to those they do not like?”

“I stole something,” said Logan quietly.

“I have heard stories like this before,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “I have to say I do not fully understand them. Stealing is when you take something that someone else thinks you should not take, am I right?”

“Yes,” he said, eyeing the bread that sat on the cloth on the ground. “Something that does not belong to you.”

“That be the part I do not understand,” said Autumn. “What is ‘belong’?”

“If something belongs to you,” said Logan, “it means you own it.”

“What does that mean?” asked Autumn. “Own?”

“It means ‘tis yours,” said Logan. “No one else can have it. Like the cheese. That was your cheese.”

“But you had it,” Autumn said. “Well, most of it, anyway and now it be gone so no one can have it. How can I still have it?”

“Maybe the cheese was not a good example,” said Logan. “Umm, is that your staff over there?”

“This?” said Autumn, leaning over and picking it up. “This is a length of wood.”

“But it be yours?” said Logan.

“I am using it,” said Autumn, hefting the staff. “But if you need to use it, then use it.”

“But it belongs to you,” said Logan.

“I do not understand,” said Autumn. “Did you not say that if it belonged to me no one else could use it? Anyone can use this staff.”

“Well, I suppose so,” said Logan. “But they have to ask first, do they not? And give it back afterwards.”

“Well, it would be nice to know it be gone,” said Autumn. “It would save me time looking for it, but they do not have to. The same goes for when someone no longer needs to use it but they do not have to give it back. I can always make another one.”

“But if I took your staff and do not give it back it would be stealing,” said Logan.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “So stealing is when you do not give something back. Now I begin to understand. So you stole the cheese! Excellent.”

“I did not steal the cheese!” exclaimed Logan. “You gave it to me!”

“But you will not be giving it back,” said Autumn, frowning. “Did you not just say that was what stealing is?”

“Now you are confusing me,” said Logan.

“I am deeply sorry,” said Autumn. “I can only say that it is because I am confused myself. However, let us put that to one side for now. You took something from someone in the village and did not give it back and they were going to hang you for it?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “If I ever go back they’ll kill me.”

“That would seem to be a good reason for not going back,” said Autumn. “Would they still hang you if you went back to give them what you took?”

“Probably,” said Logan.

“Then you seem to have made the right choice,” said Autumn.

“But I belong there,” cried Logan. “That was where I was born!”

“You belong to the village?” asked Autumn. “No wonder you have never left it before. That would be a hanging matter.”

“What would be?” asked Logan. “I do not understand. Why would they hang me for leaving the village?”

“You belong to the village,” said Autumn, “and if you take something that belongs to the village they’ll hang you. And if you leave the village you are taking yourself away so therefore you should be hanged for that.”

Logan stared at her.

“No,” he said. “That be not right. That be not what I meant at all.”

“What did you mean, then?” asked Autumn. “I really do not understand this at all.”

“Oh for Sploop’s sake,” said Logan, scratching his head. “That is my knife, is it not.”

“That be the knife you were using, yes,” said Autumn.

“And you took it,” said Logan. “That means you stole it.”

“So you are saying that I should be hanged because you tried to stab me with a knife?” asked Autumn. “What manner of people inhabit this village?”

“Noooo,” said Logan in frustration. “You should be hanged for not giving it back!”

“Oh,” said Autumn. “I did not know I had to. You can take it back any time you want, but I be happy to give it back if it be important to

you. Here.”

She picked up the knife and handed it to Logan.

“Thank you,” said Logan, leaping up and brandishing it at her. “Now give me your money!”

“I really do not understand,” said Autumn, taking the knife from Logan without bothering to get up. “Does this mean I’m going to be hanged twice for twice taking the knife from you when you have twice tried to stab me with it?”

“How do you do that?” demanded Logan.

“Easily,” said Autumn, handing him back the knife. “Let me show you, try it again.”

“Give me your money!” shouted Logan, thrusting the knife at her.

“Did you see?” asked Autumn, giving him the knife back again. “Where you are going wrong is by asking for the money. It slows you down. If you insist on doing this you would be better off stabbing me then taking the money without asking.”

“I give up,” said Logan, slipping the knife back inside his sackcloth. “I used to think I was a good thief but this is ridiculous.”

“You do have potential,” said Autumn, “but you are also making another mistake.”

“Oh really?” he asked, sitting back down again. “What’s that?”

“I have no money,” said Autumn. “If I did I would have given it to you without all this fuss.”

Logan grimaced.

“Are you going to eat that bread?” he asked.

“I was going to,” said Autumn, “but if you want it you can have it, or

are you going to show me your knife again?”

“There be little point,” he said, taking the bread Autumn passed to him. “Where did you learn how to disarm someone so easily?”

“At the Esyup,” she said.

“So it is a place for learning to fight?” he asked.

“It is a place where we learn about ourselves,” said Autumn. “And part of being yourself is preventing someone else from stopping you being yourself. It is more about avoiding fighting than fighting.”

“Well, you have put up a pretty good fight today,” said Logan, finishing the bread and reaching for the waterskin.

“No,” said Autumn. “I haven’t fought you. I have been very careful to avoid fighting you.”

“Hmmm,” said Logan. “’Tis a useful skill anyway, whatever you call it. How long did it take you to learn?”

“Learn about myself?” she asked. “I’m still learning.”

“Well, how long were you there then,” he asked. “At the Esyup.”

“Twenty summers,” said Autumn.

“That be silly,” said Logan. “I am sixteen summers and you be not that much older than me. How can you have been studying for twenty summers?”

“I do not know how old I am,” said Autumn, “but I have been studying at the Esyup ever since they found me and took me in. That be why they named me Autumn Savannah. I was found in the Autumn on the Savannah. Noxu thinks I may have been one or two summers old but he does not know.”

“Who is Noxu?” asked Logan.

“My guide and teacher at the Esyup,” said Autumn.

“So you do not have any parents, then?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn. “Do you?”

“No,” he said. “They were both killed when I was ten or eleven summers. That be why I steal, there was no one to look after me.”

“Did no one at the village look after you?” asked Autumn.

“Bumola let me sleep in his cowshed,” said Logan, “but he could not spare any food. Where are you going?”

“I was going to Biasdo,” said Autumn. “But I do not think I like the sound of the place now.”

“Why were you going to Biasdo?” asked Logan. “There be little there.”

“No reason beyond the fact that I have to go somewhere,” said Autumn. “I occupy a place in this world but where that place is matters little. I shall go somewhere else and see what awaits me there instead.”

“Oh,” said Logan, gazing out over the meadow. “Can I come with you? I have nowhere else to go.”

Chapter Two

“Where are we going?” asked Logan, following Autumn across the meadow.

Blue and white flowers speckled the thick green grass which grew almost to their knees. In the distance four deer grazed, keeping a watchful eye on them, ever ready to leap back into the woods. Two butterflies flitted from flower to flower, their multi-coloured translucent wings flashing an iridescent shimmer. Clouds were building to the south and there was a tang of dampness in the air. The deer with tall antlers froze at Logan's question, his large eyes staring, watchful, and grass hung from his mouth. The doe beside him skittered nervously away and returned, only to skitter away again, the two young ones mimicking her every move.

“This way,” said Autumn.

“Why this way?” asked Logan. “What lies ahead?”

“This is the direction my feet are pointing,” said Autumn. “As to what lies ahead, let us go and see.”

“Oh,” said Logan. “So you are not going anywhere in particular?”

“No,” said Autumn.

They walked on, the grass swishing against their legs.

“So do you mind me coming with you?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn.

She stopped to look at one of the small white flowers then bent to sniff it. She inhaled deeply then touched the petals.

“What are you doing?” asked Logan.

“I am smelling a flower,” said Autumn.

“Oh,” said Logan. He watched her for a moment. “Why?”

“I have a nose,” said Autumn. “What else would you have me do with it?”

Looking puzzled, Logan bent down and sniffed a flower as well.

“I do not smell anything,” he complained and ripped the flower from its stem. “Can you?” He thrust it under Autumn's nose.

“I smell death,” she said, gently taking the flower.

She sighed and lightly stroked its petals then parted the long grass and laid the flower on the earth.

“What are you doing?” asked Logan.

“Return to Aloidia, little one,” she said to the flower then released the grass to cover it.

“I am giving the flower the respect in death that it deserved in life,” she said, turning to Logan.

“But it was just a flower,” said Logan. “It did not matter.”

“It mattered enough to you to kill it for having no smell,” said Autumn. “But that was your choice.”

“So you are saying I should not have picked the flower?” asked Logan several paces further on.

“No,” said Autumn. “You should do what your conscience dictates and accept the consequences.”

“Consequences?” said Logan. He stopped walking but Autumn continued so he walked forward again. “What consequences are there from picking a silly little flower?”

“There are always consequences,” said Autumn, “even if we do not have the wit to see or understand them. For the flower, the

consequence was death but the flower's death has consequences as well. Perhaps it will fertilise the soil and help bring forth new life, perhaps it will not. For you or I, who knows what consequences there may be."

"Why would there be consequences for you?" asked Logan.

"Everything is interconnected," said Autumn. "From the gods around us to the land beneath us and the moons above us. An action in one place ripples through all. The only continuity is change."

"Oh," he said. They walked on in silence.

"Do you always talk like this?" asked Logan after a while.

"I know only one way to talk," said Autumn, pausing to watch a rabbit. "Air passes out of my chest and through my mouth. How do you talk?"

"No, I mean the things you say," said Logan, watching Autumn watching the rabbit. The rabbit's whiskers twitched as it watched Logan.

"I say what I believe to be truth," said Autumn, then she frowned.

"Now what have I done?" asked Logan, his face falling.

"You have given me a conundrum," she said. "If I repeat something I believe to be false then am I saying what I believe to be true or am I saying what I believe to be false?"

Logan looked at her in consternation.

"Consider that rabbit," said Autumn. "If you say to me that you too are a rabbit, I would not believe you as your form is different to that of a rabbit."

"Well, obviously," said Logan.

"So if I say 'you said "I am a rabbit"', said Autumn, "I am saying

something I believe not to be true, as you are not a rabbit. But, I also believe it to be true that you said that. So am I believing a falseness or am I not believing a truth?"

Logan stared at her worriedly, his lips twitching.

"Do you have any thoughts on the matter?" she asked.

"I think I be sorry for picking the flower," he said after a while.

"But are you as sorry as the flower?" asked Autumn.

"How would I know?" asked Logan, throwing his hands out to the side in exasperation.

Autumn looked at him speculatively. "That be a very good question," she said. "How would you know? How would anyone know?"

She started walking again and Logan followed.

"I think I see what you mean about consequences," he said after a while. "I picked the flower and now my head hurts. If I had not you would have talked about something else and my head probably would not be hurting."

Autumn smiled but didn't answer.

Astauand was high in the sky when they came to the far edge of the meadow and found a path, winding along between the grassland and the trees.

"I think this is the path to Pirend," said Logan.

"Which one?" asked Autumn.

"What do you mean?" asked Logan. "There's only one path here."

"There are two," she said. "One leads that way and the other leads in the opposite direction. Or do they both lead to Pirend?"

"I'm pretty sure Pirend is that way," said Logan, pointing up the path. "The other way is sort of roughly in the direction we have come so it probably goes back to Biasdo."

"That would seem sensible," said Autumn. "Why have a path that leads from somewhere back to itself?"

"In case you get lost in the night?" asked Logan.

"You may be right," said Autumn.

"So shall we go to Pirend?" asked Logan. "Only the other way is probably Biasdo and I do not really want to go back there."

"Or we could go somewhere else," said Autumn. "Just because we have found a path it does not mean we have to follow it."

"I begin to see why you have learnt to be so good at self-defence," said Logan. "You must annoy a lot of people."

"Interesting," said Autumn, looking startled. "I did not know I annoy people."

"Has no-one told you that before?" asked Logan.

"No," said Autumn, setting off up the path towards Pirend. "But you are the first person I have talked to outside the Esyup. How do I annoy people?"

"You say strange things and go round in circles," said Logan, following her. "At least I think you go round in circles. I cannot follow a lot of what you say so mayhap you do not."

"Oh," said Autumn. "This is how everyone talked at the Esyup. What do people outside talk about?"

"Oh, all sorts of things," said Logan. "But simple things, like 'what be for dinner?' and 'what will you give me for these two chickens?'. How is it you have never talked to anyone outside the Esyup?"

“The only people who came to the Esyup stayed there,” said Autumn.
“That be why I left.”

“You be doing it again,” said Logan.

“Doing what?” asked Autumn.

“Talking strange,” he said. “You left because no one leaves? That makes no sense.”

“You be right,” she said thoughtfully. “If no-one leaves, that would include me and yet I did, so clearly I am wrong in my statement. Thank you for pointing out the error in my thinking.”

Logan pulled a face. “That’s not what I meant,” he said. “I meant why would you leave somewhere where there are people to go somewhere where there aren’t people? Did you not like it there?”

“Yes, I did like it there,” said Autumn. “I was happy and contented. That’s why I left.”

“All right,” said Logan angrily. “That’s enough.”

He sat down on the path and leaned his back against a tree. “You keep walking and I will stay right here until you have gone then I be going my own way.”

Autumn stood there looking down at him.

“As you wish,” she said after a few moments. “Fare well, live long and prosper.”

She turned and continued walking along the path in the direction of Pirend, admiring the trees and listening out for birdsong. Logan watched her until she disappeared out of sight around a bend.

Several minutes later Autumn heard fast footsteps behind her and tensed but continued walking. A familiar smell eased into her nostrils and she relaxed.

“So why did you leave the Esyup?” asked Logan, his breathing a tiny bit heavier than before. “And give me a straight answer this time.”

Autumn bit back “What do you mean by a straight answer?”. She sensed he would find that ... not straight, whatever that meant. She stayed silent while Logan's breathing returned to normal, thinking.

“Sometimes Noxu would ask me a question,” she said. “A question with no obvious meaning. Such as 'What was my name before I was born?'. His purpose was to make me think in new ways, to not rely on things I thought I knew. Nine nights ago he asked me 'What is your place?'. ”

“What answer did you give?” asked Logan, somewhat happily. It wasn't as straight an answer as he wanted but it was straighter than the answers he'd been getting so far.

“I immediately discounted the obvious answers,” said Autumn. “Such as my place in the refectory or in the Garden of Vallume. He would not waste his time asking where I sat. I considered other possible meanings, such as my place in the system of the Esyup but he did not mean that either.”

“What was your place in the Esyup?” he asked curiously.

“I was a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume,” she said. “A warrior philosopher priest, if you prefer, and the second most senior female Krisana but he knew that and he knew that I knew that. Noxu wanted me to think more deeply. I considered the question for five nights.”

“What answer did you arrive at?” asked Logan.

“On the sixth day I returned to Noxu,” she said. “I told him that I did not know my place, only that I was in the Esyup but not of it. I was not part of its whole. My mind, my being, spread beyond its confines. It had been my place for twenty summers and may yet one day be my place again but at this time my place is elsewhere.”

“Was he upset?” asked Logan. “After all, he had looked after you for all that time. Was he insulted?”

“No,” said Autumn. “He knows that everyone has a place but it is not always the place that they are in. We have to find our own place. His place was in the Esyup. Mine was not. I left that day, with his blessings.”

“So where is your place?” asked Logan.

“That I do not know,” said Autumn. “I left the Esyup and I will travel this land until I find my place.”

“But what if you do not find it?” asked Logan.

“Then I shall die,” said Autumn, “and depart this land to continue my search among the deities for I have a place somewhere, even if it takes all eternity to find.”

“But you can go back to the Esyup if you want?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn. “I can only go back there if I know it to be my place. To be there when it is not my place would be a falsehood. That alone would be an insult to Noxu.”

“How will you know when you find your place?” asked Logan. “I know you have only been gone three days but mayhap you have already found your place and moved on. Maybe it be right here?”

“I will know,” said Autumn. “Of that I am certain.”

“Well, Aloidia be with you,” said Logan. “You will need good fortune, of that I am certain.”

“I am a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume,” said Autumn. “Aloidia is not part of my life, nor is Sploop. Things have occurred, are occurring and will occur and such as are within my control I control and such as are not in my control I accept. That is my way, that is the only way. To be otherwise is fruitless.”

“Well, good for you,” said Logan. “Personally I be ready for some good fortune, may Aloidia smile upon me.”

“Each to their own,” said Autumn. “Have you been to Pirend?”

“No,” he said. “I know of it but I have never been there. Biasdo be too small a place to have much to do with Pirend. It is a huge place and fabulously rich, they say there are as many as two hundred people there! There are only twenty eight of us souls in Biasdo, or were anyway. There are twenty seven now I’ve been exiled.”

“Two hundred?” said Autumn. “A big place indeed. There were nineteen of us at the Esyup.”

“Oh yes,” said Logan excitedly. “Bumola told me that the Roinad himself once passed through Pirend! Or herself, I forget which it is. It was before I was born, anyway.”

“I think the Roinad is Obvia Vasagle,” said Autumn. “We got occasional political reports at the Esyup. I believe she ascended the throne on the death of her father two or three summers ago but I am not sure. Still, two hundred people. We should be able to get some more food there.”

“Pirend has a market,” said Logan. “Bumola went there once when he had a cow he wanted to sell. He said you can get anything there.”

“I have never seen a market,” said Autumn, “although I have heard of such things but wherever this path leads, we are getting close. I can smell something unpleasant.”

* * *

Pirend stank. Of animals, of rotting vegetables, of fish and spices, but mostly of shit. Two hundred people and their livestock produce a lot of shit. You could even buy shit at the market for fertilising the soil or tanning leather but if you didn’t want to pay you could get bucket loads for free from the stream which meandered its way sluggishly between the simple dwellings on its banks.

“By all that is holy,” said Autumn, impressed despite her years of trained detachment, “look at that cloth over there, they have six different colours!”

“Best quality wool and flax mixture, lady,” said the stall holder, his belly quivering at the prospect of a sale. “Spun by angels and dyed by demons for your delectation and delight. Keeps you warm in winter and cool in summer and looks fabulous all the time. By Ept, you can even wash it, only not too often, see. Only ten paraks a bolt.”

“Is that a lot?” asked Autumn.

“It's cheap at half the price,” said the stall holder, his mouth grinning but his eyes as hard as congealed avarice.

“So it is a lot then,” said Autumn. “Double the going rate by the sound of it.”

“You want it or not, lady?” he asked, sounding irritated, “'cos if you don't want it leave your hands off of it. You'll get it all grubby, dirty fingermarks and all.”

“No,” said Autumn, “although I do like the blue-black colour of this one. It be very smooth to touch.”

“Nine paraks to you lady, can't say fairer than that now, can I?” he said. “That colour goes perfect with your hair.”

“I do not have nine paraks,” said Autumn.

“How much you got then?” he asked, “Might be able to drop the price a bit for a lovely lady, see.”

“I do not have any money,” she said.

“What, none at all?” he said surprised.

“No,” said Autumn.

“Then get the Yammoe off of my stall,” he yelled. “Go on, scarper or I'll get the lads onto you.”

“Please, come away,” hissed Logan. “Getting into a fight round here be not the best of ideas.”

"I am not going to get into a fight," said Autumn. "I only fight as a last resort."

"Sensible woman," said the stall holder. "Garn, get out of here."

"I apologise for upsetting your equanimity," said Autumn, pressing her palms together and bowing to him. "We are leaving."

The stall holder made a gesture whose meaning Autumn did not understand but Logan dragged her away before she could ask.

"You see?" said Logan. "You annoy people. Just stay quiet and keep looking. We need to get some food, but I haven't seen any ... ahh, there they are, past those hay bales. Come on."

He hurried off and Autumn slowly followed, not used to the crowds or the noise.

She caught up with him at a stall selling assorted slabs of meat and scrawny plucked birds, encrusted with flies.

"Fancy any of these?" asked Logan. "I have not had any meat for a long time. How about a chicken?"

"In truth, no," said Autumn. "This meat looks unfit to be eaten."

"What you calling unfit?" scowled the butcher. "This be prime pork and fowl. Killed it all meself only yesterday. A few flies don't hurt nobody."

"Please do not start again," implored Logan. "It be really important you do not draw attention to us. Now, what shall I get?"

"Bread and cheese," said Autumn firmly. "We can get some roots and fruit from the woods when we have left."

The butcher grabbed his long knife, caked in dried blood, and waved it at her.

"Don't you go spreading lies about my meat," he shouted. "Ain't no

one got sick from my meats, not for a long time.”

“If you call three moons a long time,” shouted a voice, then laughed.

“She be still alive, ain’t she?” shouted back the butcher, going red faced and turning to find the owner of the voice. “She’ll be back, I reckon she can’t get enough of my meat.”

Logan dragged Autumn away.

“I beg you, please stop talking,” he said in a low, tense voice. “You may be a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume but you do not know the first thing about markets. You are upsetting the stall holders.”

“Do you know about markets?” asked Autumn. “You are from Biasdo, I did not think they had a market.”

“Well, no,” he admitted. “But some of the people from Biasdo have been to markets and I have listened to them talking about it so I know more than you do and you are going to make it impossible to get any food. Now, we came in that way,” and he pointed back the way they’d come, “so I want you to go the other way and leave Pirend. When you get to the bridge over the stream, wait for me while I get some food.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “I find this place oppressive. How can anyone think here?”

“That be right,” said Logan. “Go and find a nice quiet spot by the stream and think nice thoughts.”

“Do you have any money?” asked Autumn. “If you do why did you want mine?”

“No I don’t,” he said, “but keep it to yourself.”

“But how ...?”

“This is what I do,” he said quietly. “Just leave it to me and for Aloidia’s sake, do not talk to anyone. You will probably start a riot.”

“Very well,” said Autumn calmly.

She turned and scanned the muddy road between the stalls. Between the people moving around she could just make out the low, wooden bridge so she headed towards it but paused at the last stall. It had half a dozen or so cages with brightly coloured birds inside but that wasn't what had caught her eye. On the ground beside the birds was another, larger cage. Crammed inside was a cat, hunched with barely room to move. The cat stared at her with large golden eyes. Autumn stopped and stared back.

“Ahh, you've seen my lynx,” said the stall holder, rubbing his hands together in a washing motion, although it was clearly something he hadn't done in a long time. “A wild Neander lynx from the Skizze Mountains, a perfect specimen for the collector.”

“What is a lynx?” asked Autumn.

“A cat,” said the stall holder. “Bigger than a house cat and smaller than a lion. Very rare, especially the Neander breed. Let me get him out for you to see properly.”

He took hold of a length of chain coming through the bars of the cage and kicked the front of it. The cat spat malevolently at him and inched back. The man undid the bolt holding the cage front closed and kicked the back of the cage to encourage the beast to come out. It did so, slowly. It was painfully thin and its black and silver fur was matted and dirty. The chain around its neck cut in deeply. It looked weak and staggered a little as it stood there dejectedly.

“Just look at that,” said the man proudly. “Be it not a magnificent specimen? Just two hundred paraks and it be yours. I'll even deliver it for you, no extra charge.”

“I do not have any money,” said Autumn, her heart going out to the creature. “Could I perhaps work for you instead?”

“Cash only darling,” said the man as the cat swung its head to look into Autumn's eyes. “Got a lot of expenses to meet.”

The man sniffed in disappointment and turned to speak to someone looking at a blue-green parrot.

Autumn knelt down and reached out to stroke the cat's head.

“Oy, don't touch,” said the man seeing her out of the corner of his eye.

Autumn withdrew her hand and he turned back to his prospective parrot buyer.

“You are suffering,” whispered Autumn, still kneeling. “You poor creature. What is your name?”

The cat's golden eyes bored into hers. “Wroowah,” he growled quietly. “I Darius. Help me.”

Chapter Three

Logan inspected the cabbages. They were tolerably sized and green enough and reasonably free of crawling things beneath the outer leaves.

“Two for a parak,” said the stall holder.

Logan grimaced. “They are very small,” he said. “Perhaps I will not bother.”

“Suit yourself,” said the man, moving over to talk to a woman inspecting his sack of potatoes.

Logan casually glanced to the side; yes! The man at the next stall had his back to him. With studied offhandedness, Logan turned away from the cabbages and headed towards the middle of the muddy road, brushing past the piled flat rounds of coarse bread. His fingers touched an edge and instantly transferred the loaf inside his tunic while looking in the opposite direction. It nestled against his body, held up by the vine around his waist, giving him a small bulging belly. He casually sauntered on, prepared to run if the stall holder cried out. He hadn't noticed.

Further on Logan spied a stall selling cheeses and paused to inspect them. There were piles of hard slabs of cheese wrapped in thin cloth, an assortment of round cheeses of different sizes, coated in beeswax and several gourds of soft cheeses. The woman behind the stall eyed him suspiciously. His apparent belly didn't match the rest of his slim frame.

“What manner of cheese is that?” he enquired, pointing to a gourd at random.

“’Tis goat cheese mixed with milk and dried herbs,” she said. “Try it.”

She broke off a tiny sliver from a loaf of bread and dipped it in the gourd and handed it to Logan.

“That be quite nice,” he said, eating it. “A bit strong tasting to my

mind but not bad, not bad at all.”

The sound of shouting came from down the road and Logan and the stall woman craned their heads to try to see what was happening.

“Sounds like a fight,” she said, jumping up onto an upended box to try to see over people’s heads. “Or will be any minute.”

“Oh Sploop, I told her to keep out of the way!” muttered Logan.

“What see you?” he asked the woman. “Be they men fighting or a woman?”

“Tis no fighting as yet,” she said, staring intently. “I see no woman either, just a group of men. Probably drunkards, most like.”

Logan let his fingers slide over a round waxed cheese, half as large again as his hand, then gripped it.

“I’m going to see what is going on,” he said. “Good day to you mistress.” He nodded politely and walked away, the cheese confidently held in his hand as though he had paid for it.

“Aye, be some blood shed soon enough,” the woman said, cackling. “Usually is on market days.”

Quickly Logan merged with the passers-by and hurried down to where a small crowd had formed.

“Oh no,” he groaned.

A large, bearded man was sitting on the ground, nursing his arm. Autumn was standing calmly a few feet away, beside an open cage, her pack slung over her shoulder and her staff held loosely at her side. Five other men were ranged in a semi circle around them, several carrying cudgels. One had a sword, as yet still sheathed, its scabbard hanging from a broad leather belt at his waist.

“What has happened?” Logan asked the woman beside him.

“Raingel says that woman stole his cat,” she said. “She says the cat ran away of its own free will.”

“Why are those other men there?” asked Logan.

“They’s come to help Raingel get his money or his cat,” she said happily. “Going to see a lynching, I reckon.”

“If I had two hundred paraks I would give them to you gladly,” called Autumn to Raingel. “What is mine is yours but alas I do not have any money. I have offered to work for you in recompense but you have spurned my offer. What else remains?”

“I want my money!” screamed Raingel, weeping in pain and frustration. He tried to struggle to his feet and fell heavily, his broken arm useless.

“Reckon she’s got money in that there pack,” growled one of the men.

“Best we takes a look,” growled another, “aye and strip her lest she be carrying more besides.”

“Insides most like,” leered a third. “Reckon we’d best all take a look. Come on lads, get her round the back and see what she’s got hidden. Have a bit of fun too.”

He walked towards Autumn, his cudgel tightly gripped in one hand and tried to grab her with his other hand. Deftly, with a sweeping sideways motion, Autumn stepped aside and he missed. There were a few laughs from the spectators.

The man spun round and swiped at Autumn with his clenched fist. She caught it and pulled and the man sprawled in the mud. With a shout of rage he clambered to his feet and raised his cudgel to strike her but sprawled in the mud again as her foot caught him in his belly.

“Get her, lads,” he cried, holding his belly.

Autumn whirled to face her other attackers and went into a crouch. She held her staff in one hand, its end tucked in her armpit and the

other arm outstretched. She waited, watchful, balanced on the balls of her feet.

Suddenly one of the men charged and she pirouetted, her flailing foot landing squarely in his face. He fell unconscious to the ground. Two others advanced, watchful now they had seen she was no easy prey. One circled left, one right and Autumn's eyes flicked as she watched each closely.

“Yes,” cried one and they both charged. One fell as Autumn's staff caught him across the throat and she ducked as the other's cudgel blurred the air over her head. Her arm shot forward and grabbed his belt, forcing him to lose balance. A swift blow with her staff rendered him unconscious too. The first man struggled to his feet and Autumn delivered a sideways kick to end his fighting for the day.

The man with the sword stood there, silent, massive, facing Autumn. Slowly she drew herself to her full height, watching him.

“I apologise for injuring your friends,” she said, “although I have been careful to make sure none are seriously injured. A few aches and pains, nothing more. Come, let us end this peacefully.”

She swung her staff around and held it in both hands, arms outstretched before her and bent to place it on the ground. She backed away one step, two steps, then knelt.

“The choice is yours,” she said calmly and sat back on her heels, her hands resting in her lap.

One of the men on the ground groaned and rolled over. The man with the sword glanced at him then slowly walked toward Autumn. He stopped at her staff and looked down at her. The spectators watched silently. Logan swallowed hard. Autumn was just sitting, apparently defenceless.

“Surely she is not surrendering,” he thought. “Surely not.”

The man slowly drew his sword from its scabbard and held it aloft. Its bright metal flashed in the rays of the setting sun. Suddenly he

rammed it into the ground. The spectators flinched but Autumn remained motionless, her eyes locked on the eyes of the man towering over her. He spat.

“I am Kizerain Qerrassa,” he said, his voice deep and rasping.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn.

“Go, Autumn Savannah,” said Kizerain Qerrassa unemotionally. “Go now, go far, go forever.”

Gracefully, Autumn rose to her feet, never once breaking eye contact. She stepped forward, the top of her head barely level with the bottom of his beard, tilted to look into his eyes. A full minute they stood, motionless then the man stepped back one pace. Unhurriedly Autumn bent, her eyes locked on his, and picked up the staff.

“As you say, so it shall be,” she said quietly then backed away.

Five paces distant she turned and walked towards the bridge, the spectators moving aside to let her pass.

“I want my money,” screamed the stall keeper, managing to get to his feet, his injured arm held tightly to his chest. Kizerain Qerrassa ignored him, his eyes never leaving Autumn as she crossed the bridge. A small solitary figure.

He turned to look at the stall keeper.

“Be silent,” he said. “I know her type. She be a Krisana of some order or another. Let it lie if you value your life.”

He turned to look at the distant figure on the far side of the bridge.

“Autumn Savannah,” he muttered. “That name I shall remember. Mayhap we shall meet again.”

He wrenched his sword from the ground and stalked off, leaving his companions prostrate.

“Autumn! There you are!” called Logan when he spotted her sitting beside the path. It was nearly dark.

He was panting when he caught up with her.

“Sploop, you can walk fast when you want to,” he said. “You have come quite a distance.”

“Hello” she said.

“I got a cheese,” he said, holding it out. It smelt rather unpleasant and Autumn didn’t take it. “I dropped it when I was running across the bridge after you and it rolled into the stream. Took me ages to find it again. I saw you in that fight! You were brilliant! Bam! Pow! Incredible! Why did you not beat that big man with the sword, though? I thought you were going to then you seemed to just give up. You could have taken him. One of the twirly kicks would have done it, just like that other man. Wheee, smash! You could have killed him just like that! I be never seeing anything like it!”

“There was no need,” she said. “He did not attack me so I gave him the option to end it peacefully which he did. He was a wise man although I would rather have stayed to help the injured men.”

“You should have killed them all,” said Logan happily. “We should have stayed there, you could have taken over the place.”

“They do not need me to run their village,” said Autumn, “they seemed content with the way it runs now and killing those men served no purpose.”

“But they attacked you!” said Logan. “They wanted to kill you!”

“No, I think not,” she said. “The stall holder had a genuine grievance, at least in his own mind, and his friends were only trying to help, as friends should. Once they were certain I had no money they would have let me go.”

“Well maybe, maybe not,” said Logan. “But if you think that, why did you fight then at all? Why not just let them search you for the money?”

“Because it would not have ended there,” said Autumn. “No, they would not have killed me but they did seem to want to do more than just look for money.”

“Yes, I heard that bit,” said Logan. “They were going to take you behind the stall and, well, yes, all of them.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “And that I could not permit. I would be breaking my vows so I had to prevent that from occurring.”

“What vows?” asked Logan.

“I made a vow of chastity,” said Autumn. “As a disciple of Vallume I vowed to protect the sanctity of women and as a disciple of Mizule I vowed to protect the sanctity of myself. The second is a requirement of the first since I cannot protect the sanctity of women unless I am myself inviolable.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “So all this started because of a woman. I thought it was just that you had annoyed someone too much then someone told me it was about a cat which made little sense. Why would you get into a fight with a gang of men over a cat?”

“It was about a cat,” said Autumn. “The stall holder was mistreating Darius and he was not happy with the situation. It was within my power to help, so I did.”

“Who is Darius?” asked Logan.

“Darius is the cat,” said Autumn. “He is a Neander Lynx from the Skizze Mountains. He asked me for help so I helped.”

“So this Darius just ran off, did he?” asked Logan. “He left you to deal with those men on your own? Where is he now?”

“He was weak and unwell,” said Autumn, “and I did not need his

help. I expect he will be along shortly. I told him to meet me along this path once the man had released the chain.”

“You seem to have had quite a conversation with this cat,” said Logan. “I did not know cats could talk.”

“No, it was a very short conversation,” said Autumn. “I did not know cats could talk either, but this is one of the many joys of life, finding out new things.”

“Just a moment,” said Logan. “You’re waiting for this cat? I thought you were waiting for me.”

“I was waiting for you both,” said Autumn, “although I would not wait indefinitely. In the morning I will move on, with either of you, both of you or neither. Your choices remain unaffected.”

“Very well,” said Logan. “Oh, I got us some bread to go with the cheese.”

“That was kind of you,” said Autumn. “It is too dark to search for fruit.”

“The cheese will be fine,” he said. “I know it’s a bit smelly but it’s protected by beeswax. Once the wax is off the cheese inside will be good to ...”

Autumn suddenly held up a hand to silence him and he froze.

“I heard a noise,” she mouthed, “but I cannot smell anything because of that cheese.”

“Were we followed?” whispered Logan.

“We should not have been,” whispered Autumn. “I complied with Kizerain Qerrassa’s request. I trust him to reply in kind.”

“It could be someone else,” whispered Logan, his ears straining.

There was a faint rustle in the grass and a clink of metal on stone.

Autumn focused her senses, trying to penetrate the gloom. There was another clink.

“Who goes there?” called Logan, his nerve breaking.

“Wroowah,” came the reply.

Autumn relaxed. “It be Darius,” she said to Logan, then called softly to the darkness, “come Darius, it is safe.”

A pair of golden eyes appeared and a dark shadow slunk slowly into view and collapsed at Autumn's feet.

“This is Logan,” she said. “My companion.”

Darius blinked slowly.

“Umm, hello,” said Logan, awkwardly.

“Hello,” said Darius and Logan jerked backwards.

“Ye gods,” he said, “it can talk!”

“I talk,” said Darius. “No walk more, tired am.”

“Umm, would you like something to eat?” asked Logan. “We have some bread and cheese.”

The golden eyes just looked at him.

“Cats do not eat bread or cheese,” said Autumn. “Darius, are you able to hunt?”

“Sick,” said Darius, “hunt no can, eat no can.”

“We will hunt for you in the morning,” said Autumn. “We cannot see in the dark as well as you can.”

“Eat no can,” said Darius again.

“I think he is trying to say he could not eat even if we did have meat,” said Logan.

“Wroowah,” said Darius.

“Why can you not eat?” asked Autumn.

Darius slowly shook his head and the chain clinked.

“Ahh,” said Autumn, “the chain around your neck.”

She leaned over and felt Darius' neck. “Yes, it is very tight,” she said. “You probably could not swallow any meat.”

“Is it held with a lock or a link?” asked Logan.

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “I am not familiar with these things.”

“If it's a lock I can probably pick it,” said Logan, “but a link will need a forge to break it.”

“Come and see,” said Autumn.

“Oh Sploop, do I have to?” said Logan nervously. “What if he bites me?”

“No bite,” said Darius. “Logan good.”

“Be brave,” said Autumn. “The only thing to fear is fear itself.”

“Well, I be more afraid of being eaten than I am of being afraid,” said Logan.

“He cannot eat you,” said Autumn. “At least not until the chain is off. Besides, he gave his word.”

“Oh Seiliu, preserve me in this time of trouble,” intoned Logan. “I implore you.”

He shuffled over on his knees and felt carefully around Darius' neck.

“It is a lock,” he said after a while. “A simple one by the feel of it. I should be able to pick it. I need a thin twig or stick.”

He started to feel around.

“Ahh, this should do,” he said. “I just need to thin it down a little.”

He took his knife out of his tunic and carefully pared the twig down.

“Right, let me try this,” he said and shuffled back to Darius. He grunted a few times then there was a click and the chain fell away from Darius' neck.

“Good,” said Autumn. “Are you still afraid?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “There's nothing stopping him swallowing now.”

Darius leaned his head forward and licked Logan's hand. Logan flinched.

“Logan good,” he said. “I thank.”

“You be welcome,” said Logan, wondering if his death would be quick or if Darius would play with him like a mouse.

“Is Seiliu your personal god?” asked Autumn, curious.

“Yes,” said Logan. “Seiliu protects cowsheds and those who dwell in them. Ohh, I have just had an idea. Why do I not go back to Pirend and get some meat for Darius? That way he will not be tempted to eat me. I be sure he will not mind a few flies.”

“Plakill is rising,” said Autumn. “You will be easily visible in the light of the big moon.”

“That should not cause a problem,” said Logan. “No one knows I be with you. I will just be another stranger in the village, passing through and spending the night.”

“It would be a goodness,” said Autumn. “But it is your choice.”

“I would like to,” said Logan. “I would feel safer and I probably will not get any sleep until Darius has eaten.”

“Are you asking me if you can go?” asked Autumn. “It is not for me to give you permission. You and you alone are accountable for your actions.”

“Then I will go,” said Logan. “Umm, Darius, would you prefer pork or chicken?”

“Chicken, yes,” said Darius. “I thank.”

“Right,” said Logan. “I will just have some bread then I will be off. I know not when I will be back as I do not know where the butcher lives. You be not heading off without me if I am not back by dawn?”

“As you wish,” said Autumn.

Chapter Four

Autumn lay on the ground just inside the tree line, Darius sleeping deeply nearby. In the dim shadows of Plakill's light they could not be seen from the path but the path, and any travellers thereon, should there be any after dark, could be seen by Autumn. So deep did Darius sleep, the sleep of new found freedom, a busy spider spun its web between a tuft of grass and a tuft of hair on Darius' ear, the movement of the ear no greater than the movement of the grass in a light breeze. Unconcerned with the scale of the affairs of humans or cats the spider spun on, dreaming of the juicy insects that would soon be ensnared, offerings to its mate and children, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth continuing unabated.

Slowly did Plakill rise up in the sky to nest among the tree branches and soon her little sister, Plifal, the small moon, followed in her wake, the two guardians of the night.

“Tonight the little sister follows the big sister,” thought Autumn. “Yet other nights the little sister leads and still other nights one or other is missing. Why is that so? How do they arrange their affairs and decide who leads, who follows, who stays home? Do they discuss who goes first or is it fixed? Perhaps their brother Astauand, whose brightness hides both sisters if they are still up when he awakes, determines their order, sets the patterns by which they travel.”

Darius' tail twitched and thumped on Autumn's thigh.

“Perhaps it is as Noxu suggests,” thought Autumn. “Plakill and Plifal are but two rocks thrown up in the sky by Mor'upita-sehen when battling with Luleraim for sovereignty over this land. But if that is so, why do they not fall back down? What makes them light the night sky? Could it be that their appearance is deceptive and Plifal is bigger than her big sister, yet higher in the sky? As a distant mountain looks small until you are close. And why, if they can change their order can they not change their paths? Why do they both appear in the East and fly to the West? Why do they never appear to the West and fly to the East or to the South or North?”

A small creature, a mouse perhaps, rustled in the undergrowth,

confused by the scents of human and cat but intrigued by the scents of cheese and bread grain, torn between food and fear, the eternal dilemma of all living creatures.

Slowly, not wishing to add to the small creature's fears, Autumn reached out and eased a morsel of bread from the loaf and tossed it in the direction of the rustle.

“Eat, little one,” she whispered. “Eat and fear us not, there are dangers enough in this world but I am not one of them.”

The mouse, for such it was, froze as the crust landed nearby, like the footfall of a predator. The scent of grain was strong, the scent of human and cat were fainter, the scent of predator far off. It was worth the risk. The mouse scurried forward and seized the crust, its whiskers trembling in agitation. A smell, a taste, a hurried movement and the mouse disappeared, taking the crust for it too had mouths to feed. An owl, high in a nearby tree heard the scurrying mouse and smelt the scent of human and cat. It tensed, ready for attack then subsided. The night was young and other opportunities would arise, the unknowns too great for the moment. The mouse would keep for another day, the human and cat would move on. Darius snuffled and twitched, his dreams troubled and confused. The spider kept spinning, oblivious. Autumn slept.

She awoke to the sound of faint footsteps on the path. Through half open eyes she saw a dark shape, similar to Logan. The shape stopped its movement when she softly hissed.

“Autumn, are you there?” said the shape softly. It sounded like Logan and there were no other shapes near the path, save trees and bushes.

“Over here,” she whispered back. The shape twisted in her direction, hesitant, reluctant.

“Rrrrrr,” said Darius softly, lifting his head. Two golden eyes flashed in the gloom and the shape came closer, reassured. The scent of Logan reached Autumn's nose and she relaxed.

“There you are,” said Logan sounding relieved. “I did not know where

you were.”

“Did all go well?” asked Autumn. “You were gone for a long time. Plakill is high in the sky.”

There was a muffled curse and a snarl as Logan tripped over a root in the darkness and trod on Darius’ tail, then a thud as Logan leapt backwards and hit the tree.

“Sorry,” said Logan rubbing the back of his head. “I did not see you there, you being a black cat on a dark night.”

He shuffled forward and Autumn felt him feel her foot, deciding if it was another root or not. He made his way past and sat on the ground, Autumn between him and Darius.

“What was that? Oh, yes, I had difficulty finding the butcher,” he said. “He lives on the far side of Pirend, but I found him in the end. I got a couple of chickens. I thought Darius could have one and we could have the other.”

Darius stirred and sat up on his hind legs. “Meat,” he said, dripping some saliva on Autumn’s arm. “Give me.”

Logan started to unwrap the bundle he’d been carrying.

“Wait,” said Autumn urgently, sitting up. She wiped her arm in the grass. “It is known in the past that some at the Esyup who have purged themselves by not eating have fallen sick and oft times died when they ate again. I do not know the reasons but too much food after fasting can cause harm. It would be better for you not to eat a whole chicken too soon, Darius.”

“Grrrw,” said Darius unconvinced and hungry. “Give me.”

“No,” said Autumn as Logan continued unwrapping his bundle. “Logan, only give Darius one half of one half of one chicken. If he is well at dawn he can have another half.”

“As you say, lady,” said Logan, fishing out his knife. Slowly he cut a

chicken in half then halves again, slicing his finger only once in the darkness. He passed a piece to Autumn to give to Darius. Denying food to a starving wild cat was an activity he did not wish to do himself. There were two short crunching sounds in the darkness.

“More,” said Darius.

“No,” said Autumn. “At dawn.”

“GRRrrrrrr,” said Darius loudly, his tail swishing angrily.

“No,” said Autumn. “Too much too soon might kill you. In this I will not be swayed.”

She reached out to stroke Darius' head. “Trust me, little one. I have some knowledge of this and soon you will eat your fill, but not yet. Be patient.”

“Rrrrrr,” said Darius in disgust but he lay down again. “Grrrow.”

“Pledge me you will not eat the meat while we sleep,” said Autumn. Darius remained silent. “Pledge me!” she said again, more firmly.

Logan fancied he could see her will crackling in the cool night.

“Meat no eat,” said Darius after a long pause. He didn't sound overly happy.

“Good,” said Autumn. “Let us now sleep.”

Darius rested his head on the ground, his eyes glowing, and Autumn lay back, her head resting on her pack and her blanket lying loosely on top of her.

“So, umm, I will just lie over here,” said Logan, disgruntled.

“So much for any thanks,” he thought. “Go all that way and risk my neck for a scrawny chicken for that pile of bones. Splooop the pair of them! Probably be better off on my own.”

He lay down in the undergrowth, his mind festering.

“Logan do this, Logan do that,” he thought. “Just like being back in Biasdo. Never again if that’s how she’s going to treat me. She can do her own dirty work.”

Autumn rolled over onto her side.

“Logan,” she said softly.

“What?” he said irritably.

She reached out and took his hand.

“Thank you,” she said, squeezing his hand gently. “You are a good man.”

“You be welcome,” he blurted, his face feeling as bright as Plakill. “Any time, happy to help. Umm, I got you a gift in Pirend. I’ll show you in the morning.”

“That was nice of you,” said Autumn. “A gift freely given is beyond value. I thank you again.”

She squeezed his hand again then withdrew her own. Logan listened as her breathing slowed and she slid into sleep, his own sleep a long time coming.

“Meat,” said Darius as the first light of Astauand appeared.

“Wha’?” said Logan sleepily. His rough tunic felt slightly damp from the morning dew.

He rolled over and half opened his eyes. Darius was staring at him and Autumn was gone. Logan gulped and woke up quickly.

“Meat,” said Darius again. “Give.”

“Oh, your chicken, yes,” he said. “A moment.”

He took the half of a half of the chicken from his bundle and tentatively offered it to Darius. It disappeared and he checked his fingers to be sure they were all there. One had blood on it but it was dried, not fresh. Darius stared at him.

“Autumn said not to give you any more yet,” he said apologetically. “Umm, sorry.”

Darius continued to stare at him.

“Where is Autumn?” asked Logan.

“Gone,” said Darius.

“What? She's gone?” cried Logan, leaping up. “She's gone without me? Why by all Sploop did you let her go? Which way? Which way did she go?”

He looked around wildly.

“There,” said Darius, looking deeper into the wood.

“I have to find her,” said Logan agitatedly, “come on.” He plunged between the trees, looking desperately for any sign of Autumn's passage through the undergrowth. There! Some grass was disturbed, as though from a footstep. He ran in that direction. The trail gave out. Alarmed he searched for more signs. Yes! A foot mark in the dew, off to the left, going deeper into the wood. He lunged that way.

And there she was, sitting cross legged on a fallen tree trunk on the edge of a glade. Her eyes shut, her hands loosely clasped in her lap, her blue-black hair tied back. Motionless. Barely breathing.

“Aloudia!” said Logan, stopping his headlong rush. “There you are. I was worried about your safety.”

Even as he said that he realised how absurd he sounded. Autumn was more than capable of ensuring her own safety. She didn't need his help for that. Regardless, she ignored him.

“Are you well, lady?” he asked.

She ignored him.

“Autumn?” he said, approaching her.

She ignored him.

“Are you well?” he asked again, reaching out to touch her then he pulled his hand back. She had been like this yesterday morning – only yesterday morning! so much had happened since – but she had reacted with explosive force when he'd approached.

“I will wait until you come back,” he said and stood there for a few moments, admiring her smooth, unblemished face and the outline of her tunic then he turned and went to sit at the base of the tree where its roots twisted angrily at the sky, the ground rent and torn. A line of ants made their way from beneath the tree and disappeared into the undergrowth, unceasing. A bee lazily circled, checking his face for signs of pollen and, finding none, flew away. A hare poked its nose from among the tree roots, stared at him then withdrew. A lark began to sing, high in a tree, its song sweet and plaintive. His head nodded, then he slept.

He awoke some time later, his neck stiff. Autumn had moved from the tree trunk and was now in the glade, doing some sort of dance. He climbed to his feet and stretched to ease the stiffness in his shoulders. She saw him and waved then spun round and viciously kicked a tree trunk then somersaulted backwards in the same movement and sank into a crouch, one arm thrust before her.

“Hello,” called Logan.

“Greetings,” she called back then made a series of chopping movements with her arms then somersaulted again before slamming her fist into another tree trunk. Then she bowed to the tree and walked over to join him.

“Did that not hurt?” he asked.

“Did what not hurt?” she asked, looking puzzled.

“Hitting the tree,” he said. “That must have hurt.”

“I did not hit the tree,” she said. “That be the point.”

“But I saw you,” he said.

“No, you saw me miss the tree,” she said.

“But you punched it,” said Logan. “Like this,” and he punched the air hard.

“That be right,” she said. “And you did not hit a tree either.”

“I do not understand,” he said.

“I will show you,” said Autumn and viciously punched Logan in the face so fast he could not react. Her fist remained motionless a scant hair's breadth from his nose.

“Sploop,” he said, fascinated. “Do that again.”

She whirled round and her foot jabbed at his throat. She froze, balanced on the other foot. Logan reached up and tried to insert a finger between her heel and his neck. It was a tight squeeze.

“How do you do that?” he said, marvelling.

“Practice,” she said, dropping her foot to the ground. “Let us have some breakfast.”

“Is that what you were doing when I woke up?” he asked. “I thought you were dancing.”

“What is dancing?” asked Autumn, leading the way back through the forest.

“You know, dancing,” said Logan, jiggling his hips. “Like when there be a fair. Someone bangs a drum and someone else blows a whistle

and people jump around for the fun of it.”

“There was no drum or whistle,” said Autumn, “although it is better if there are other people. The trees are very predictable.”

“Yes, I suppose they are,” said Logan. “Oh Sploop!”

The cloth the chickens had been wrapped in was in a heap on Autumn's blanket and Darius was contentedly grooming himself. There was no sign of the remaining one and a half chickens.

“Darius! The chickens, you gave your pledge!” said Autumn.

“Autumn not sleep,” said Darius, looking up. “You sleep, I not eat, you not sleep, I eat.”

Autumn narrowed her eyes. “It was my error,” she said after a few moments. “You have done as you pledged. I should have extended the pledge for when I was not asleep. That was foolish of me. How do you feel?”

“Good,” said Darius. “Strong not, hunt, eat, be strong.”

“Perhaps the experience of the Esyup does not apply to cats,” said Autumn. “We shall see what happens with you. Did you eat the bread and cheese too?”

“No,” said Darius, “meat eat.”

“Then let us break our fast, Logan,” said Autumn, turning to look at him. “What is wrong?”

Logan was inspecting the cloth the chickens had been wrapped in.

“I was afraid Darius had damaged the cloth,” he said, “but it looks undamaged.”

“I have a needle and thread in my pack,” said Autumn. “If there is a tear I can repair it.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” he said. “But I got this cloth for you and I didn’t want to give it to you with holes in.”

“Ahh, is this the gift you talked of in the night?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Logan. “When we were in the market yesterday you said you liked the colour of the blue-black cloth so when I was in Pirend last night I, umm, got you some. There be little but I thought it would be enough to make a robe or something. Umm, you said you like its smoothness as well.”

“I did not recognise the cloth,” said Autumn coming over. “Yes, indeed I like the colour and the feel and these stains from the chickens will come off with some water. I thank you for this gift, Logan. As I said, a gift given freely is very precious. I will treasure this.”

“Do you think it will make a good robe?” he asked. “I mean, you said you are going to travel until you find your place and that could take a long time. The man at the market said it will keep you cool in summer and warm in winter and since you will probably still be travelling all through the summer and probably through next winter I thought it would be good for you to make a robe out of so it will keep you cool and warm and everything.”

Autumn held up the cloth to see how big it was then wrapped it around her shoulders.

“Yes,” she said, “There is more than enough to make a robe. Perhaps with a hood or a head scarf as well. This is a very fine gift. Thank you.”

“The man was right,” blurted Logan. “The colour matches your hair as well.”

Autumn pulled her loose pony tail around from underneath the cloth and held it against the cloth in front of her.

“Yes,” she agreed. “The colours are very similar.”

She paused. "Is that why you chose this colour?" she asked. "Because of my hair?"

"Umm, yes," said Logan, sheepishly.

"Why does it matter?" asked Autumn. "Surely what is important is that it is cool in summer and warm in winter?"

She slipped off the cloth and folded it neatly.

"Umm," said Logan, going a little red. "I thought girls liked to look good in their clothes."

"Oh," said Autumn, frowning. "I like clothes that do not interfere with my movement and this cloth is of good quality and will be hard wearing so it will last a long time. I thank you. Let us eat."

"Yes," said Logan. "'Tis a shame there be no chicken left." He looked pointedly at Darius who took no notice.

"I think it best, Darius," said Autumn, tearing off a hunk of bread, "if you stay with us for a few days until you have your full strength back. You may still be too weak to hunt properly."

"Weak yes," said Darius, looking up from grooming a hind leg.

"Where will you go? We can go part of the way with you," she said.

"Home," said Darius.

"Where is your home?" she asked.

"Know not," said Darius. "Man here bring. Know not this place. Know not where home."

"So how are you going to get home?" asked Logan, cutting slices of cheese. "It will be difficult if you do not know where you are from." He passed some cheese to Autumn.

"The man said Darius was from the Skizze Mountains in the South,"

said Autumn thoughtfully. “I wonder where they are and how far away?”

“Never heard of them,” said Logan, “although South is that way.” He pointed with his knife.

“Do you still wish to travel with me, Logan?” asked Autumn.

“Yes, if that sits well with you,” he said. “Why?”

“I do not know my place,” said Autumn, “and neither do you but it is not here for either of us. What say you we go South? It is as good a direction as any other and we can help Darius find his place.”

Chapter Five

“I hear water,” said Autumn, cocking her head. “Over there.”

“Good,” said Logan. “The waterskin is almost empty, although it be easier to carry empty than full.”

“It would be better if we had two waterskins,” said Autumn, veering off towards the sound of the water. “We could go further between fills.”

“Speak with Darius,” said Logan, following. “Tell him to bring back larger prey and to put fewer teeth holes in them.”

“Tis not for me to tell Darius what to do,” said Autumn. “He is his own master, not I.”

“And a typical cat,” said Logan with a snort. “Tell him to do something and he will do the opposite. What say you we stay at the water for some time and see what animal we can trap. We can make a second waterskin and eat some decent flesh, not the leavings of Darius.”

“I do not hunt or trap animal or fowl,” said Autumn, pausing to listen for the sound of the water. The sameness of the surrounding wood made it easy to lose a sense of direction, particularly for travellers not versed in its nuances. “But you do as your conscience dictates.”

“Alas I do not have the speed for hunting,” said Logan as Autumn changed direction slightly. “If we stay for a time I can set a trap. Perhaps catch something larger than a rabbit.”

The sound of flowing water grew louder and the undergrowth grew thicker.

“There is the making of a path here,” she said. “It is likely some creatures come here to drink but not often I warrant. There are tracks but the grass is not worn away.”

A few paces further on Autumn stepped out between two bushes onto

a narrow patch of stones at a bend in a wide stream. At the stones the water was shallow and slow but ran faster on the opposite bank.

“Good,” said Autumn, surveying the scene. “We can camp here for a time.”

“It would be better to camp further downstream,” said Logan. “While we are here no animal will come to drink or be trapped. Downstream we will leave no warning signs.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn.

She turned and led the way along the bank of the stream to another bend further along. Here the stream swung around a large rock outcrop that was free of trees and bushes although thick with moss. At some time past the rock had split or broken and part had fallen into the stream leaving a channel an arm's length wide through which the water tumbled before rejoining the main flow. Beyond the outcrop shallow water lay quiet, bypassed but not forgotten, replenished by a trickle. Small fish darted among the weeds, their bigger brethren further out in deeper water.

“This is a well formed place,” said Autumn, putting down her pack. “It has an air of tranquillity, of peace.”

She laid her staff beside her pack and removed her robe then lightly leapt across the small waterfall to the rock beyond and surveyed the wide stream with satisfaction.

“I will go back and set a trap,” said Logan, putting down the waterskin. “I fancy from the footprints there may be a badger in these parts who comes to drink perhaps at sunset. There may even be otters in the stream. I saw a half eaten fish back there.”

“And I shall collect wood for a fire,” said Autumn. “And search for some roots. I have seen no fruits this day. There are no fruit bearing trees in this wood.”

Logan knelt beside the stream and tasted the water.

“It tastes clean,” he said. “Untainted.”

He drank deeply then set off back upstream. When he returned there was a pile of dry branches beside Autumn's pack, a headless rabbit and some roots. Darius was lying on his back in the sun, his eyes closed, paws relaxed and claws retracted. He opened one eye and regarded Logan then closed it again.

“Where is Autumn?” asked Logan.

“Water,” said Darius. He stretched luxuriously.

“Helpful as always,” said Logan and walked to the edge of the rock.

Autumn was sitting in the shallows, washing herself. He watched for a few moments then felt he should not be doing so and turned away.

“Ah, you are returned,” called Autumn. “Come, join me.”

“What are you doing?” asked Logan, turning back.

“I am washing myself,” said Autumn. “You should do the same. It is good for you to cleanse your body often.”

“I wash every year, on Lulerain's Day,” said Logan, “same as everyone. What call is there to wash more often?”

“It is good for your health,” said Autumn. “You itch less and smell more sweet and wounds heal more quickly.”

“Sounds like nonsense to me,” said Logan. “We were born to itch and wounds heal or fester with the will of your personal god. Washing won't change that.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “There is good in all things. With you unwashed the flies and mosquitoes stay away from me.”

She stood up and wrung out her tunic then jumped agilely onto the rock and bent to lay out the tunic in the sun. Water pooled around her feet and made her skin glisten.

“Pass me my pack, would you?” she asked standing straight again. She gathered her hair and starting squeezing the water out.

Logan picked up her pack and brought it over, very conscious of her nakedness.

“My thanks,” she said, opening it and pulling out half a Nekmit frond. She tossed the pack on the rock and jumped across the waterfall.

“You will catch your death if you be not careful,” called Logan. “You be soaking wet.”

“I will dry in the sun soon enough,” called back Autumn. She sat cross legged on the rock, facing out across the stream and began to comb her hair with the serrated edge of the frond.

“Why are you pulling out your hair?” asked Logan.

“I am not pulling it out,” said Autumn. “I am combing it in case there are nits.”

“Everyone has nits,” said Logan. “Seems a foolish notion to me.”

“I do not have nits,” said Autumn, “and I wash my body and comb my hair whenever I can. Darius does not have nits. He grooms himself constantly when he is not sleeping or eating. You should try it. Do not condemn that of which you have no knowledge or experience.”

“Pah,” said Logan, scratching his head unthinkingly. “Itching and smelling is the way of the world and there be no getting away from it. I will get the fire going.”

He piled some dry leaves then rubbed two sticks until the leaves caught alight then carefully laid more sticks on top. He sat back, waiting for the sticks to burn strongly, watching the strange naked girl on the rock with mixed emotions. He found her desirable in many ways but her strange ways were distinctly off-putting.

She finished combing her hair and laid the frond aside, then slowly raised both arms above her head and brought them to her knees. In a

low clear voice she started to sing.

*Sto j pa moru, moru sinamu
Tam plavala, tam plavala
Tam plavala stada bielych liebiadziej
Sa malymi, sa malymi liebiadziatami
Adkul uziausia, syza-biely arol
Razbiu stadu usio pa siniamu moru
Chto budzie zbirać cyrvoņyja piory*

She fell silent. Darius lifted his head to look at her then rolled onto his stomach and began grooming his paws. Autumn gracefully got to her feet and returned to the outcrop.

“That was a sad song,” said Logan. “It was not of our tongue?”

Autumn bent to retrieve her tunic and slipped it on.

“It is a song in the Old Tongue,” she said. “I learned it at the Esyup.”

She pulled her hair out from under the tunic and let it tumble down her back.

“What does it mean?” asked Logan. The sticks were burning well and he leaned over to add thicker lengths of wood.

*What about the sea, the sea blue
She swam there, she swam there
A flock of white swans floated there
With the little ones, with the little swans
Where did the gray-white eagle come from?
Broke the flock all over the blue sea
Who will collect the red feathers?³*
intoned Autumn.

She sat facing Logan, her back to the setting sun.

“What is 'sea'?” asked Logan.

3 “Што й па мору” (Sztoj pa moru) Laboratorium Pieśni

"I am not certain," said Autumn. "I have never seen sea but it was explained to me as a big lake that goes from horizon to horizon and the water is bitter and not fit to drink."

"Is it bitter because it is blue?" asked Logan.

"I do not know," said Autumn.

"Oh," said Logan. "Why would someone collect red feathers? Swans are white."

"They are the feathers of death," said Autumn. "The eagle has killed the little swan and its mother mourns its death. All that remains of her child is a handful of blood soaked feathers floating on the blue water."

"It is a sad song," said Logan. "Why do you sing of such things?"

"It is a song of life," said Autumn. "A woman's life. She creates life only for it to die but it is a song of hope also."

"The baby swan is dead," said Logan. "Where is the hope in that?"

"Tam plavala stada bielych liebiadziej," said Autumn. "A flock of swans floated there. Tragedy struck one of them but the others still live. The mothers still live, more baby swans will be born. But it is deeper than that. Because of the death of the baby swan the grey-white eagle can also live another day and, if it shares the dead swan its kin will survive too. Thus is the cycle of life of one creature interlocking with the cycle of life of the other. It is a sad song in some respects but it is also a celebration of life, of continuity, of inter-relationships."

"Oh," said Logan.

He thought for a minute.

"Like this rabbit," he said, screwing up his face in concentration. "The rabbit died to feed Darius and Darius shares the rabbit with us so that we may have babies, just as the rabbit's kin have more babies."

“Yes,” said Autumn. “All creatures are inter-related and all take part in the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Except I.”

“Why not you?” asked Logan.

“I shall never be a mother,” said Autumn. “I have made my vows. I protect the sanctity of women where I can so that they may continue the cycle of birth and rebirth but I am not of that cycle myself. This is why I will not hunt or trap any creature except when attacked. Not for food nor sport.”

“But you do eat meat,” said Logan. “I’ve seen you. Why will you not catch and kill it for yourself?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “If the creature is already dead but I will not take its life. Chto budzie zbirac cyrvonyja piory? Who will collect the red feathers? I, I collect the red feathers. That is my destiny.”

“But you will kill someone to protect others?” said Logan. “Isn’t that against your vow?”

“That is the quandary of my life,” said Autumn. “If I must kill to protect then I will do so, but I will do so with a heavy heart and with profound regret.”

“So how many people have you killed?” asked Logan.

“None,” said Autumn. “And I pray with all my being that it remains so.”

“But what if you have to?” asked Logan.

“Then I will do so without compunction or remorse,” said Autumn.

“But is not remorse the same as regret?” asked Logan. “You said you would feel profound regret.”

“No,” said Autumn. “Regret is sadness for things done but remorse is guilt and guilt inhibits future actions. If I must kill I will be sad, deeply sad, but if I feel guilty then I will struggle to kill again if the

need arises and an innocent will suffer.”

“Wrrorh,” rumbled Darius. “Why sad kill? Kill is life.”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I must be like a cat, swift and ruthless and only when there is great need.”

“Cats be not swift about killing,” said Logan. “I have watched them. They will play with mice and rats for hours before killing the things.”

“True,” said Autumn. “But I said 'like a cat' which is different to being a cat. The death itself is swift and ruthless. But I admit there will be times when I will have to play before the act. Few, I imagine, will stand still and wait for me, they will try to stop me. But I must be ruthless and unyielding.”

“That does not seem a very nice thing to be,” said Logan. “Would it be so bad if you were not ruthless?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “If I am not ruthless their suffering will be drawn out. The death must be swift, with no suffering, regardless of the suffering they have caused. My task is to remove the problem, not exact revenge and if I can remove the problem without killing then I shall do so but if I have to kill, it will be swift and merciful.”

The flames of the fire danced in the fading light of the evening, the juices of the cooking rabbit causing it to hiss.

“It be nearly done,” said Logan, poking the roasting carcass with a twig. He sighed. “There's been too much talk of killing. It makes me sad.”

“Then let us not talk of it,” said Autumn. “Put it out of your mind.”

“Easier said than done,” he said and poked the rabbit again.

There was a sudden twanging thump from further up the stream.

“Surogou!” he exclaimed excitedly. “I have caught something!”

He jumped up and ran off along the bank of the stream, pulling his knife from his tunic.

“Bols cyrvonych piorau,” said Autumn softly. “More red feathers.”

She picked up Logan's cooking stick and started to spear the roots cooking in the fire's embers, tossing them to cool on the rock.

* * *

Autumn was washing her wooden eating bowl in the stream the next morning when she saw the water turn slightly pink. She blinked, thinking her eyes were playing tricks. The water turned clear again.

“How strange,” she thought.

She gave the bowl a final rinse then filled it then lifted it to her lips. It had a faint taste, familiar but distant.

“Logan,” she called. “Come, taste the water. It is ... different.”

“What do you mean, different?” he asked coming over.

Darius was curled up beside the embers of the fire. An ear twitched but he showed no other sign of life.

“It does not taste as pure,” she said. “And it changed colour, unless my eyes deceived me.”

“It looks fine to me,” he said and sipped from the proffered bowl. “There is a taste of something though.”

He looked at the bowl suspiciously then at the river.

“What is that?” he asked, pointing.

There was a pale pinkness in the water flowing around the broken rock. Autumn jumped over to the rock then exhaled sharply.

“What is it?” asked Logan. He climbed up onto the outcrop them

jumped across to the broken rock. “Ah.”

Autumn quickly swept the entire area with her eyes then again more slowly, probing.

“He was not here when I meditated,” she said, looking back down at the body caught by the rock.

“His throat be cut,” said Logan. “You can see under his beard and it looks like he has wounds to his belly. That must be his blood in the water.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “He must have floated down from upstream.”

She stared upstream, trying to sense any approaching danger. “We must leave this place,” she said.

“We should get him out of the water first,” said Logan, staring down at the body. “Give him a decent burial. I wonder who his gods were?”

“What for?” asked Autumn. “His days of suffering are over. What need has he of a covering now? Let him feed the carrion and complete the cycle. My concern is with the others.”

“What others?” asked Logan. “There’s just the one body here.”

“He stabbed himself in the belly then cut his own throat?” said Autumn. “Think Logan. Someone did this to him and may be coming our way.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “I did not think of that.”

The body twisted under the flow of water and slid off the rock to float downstream.

“That solves that problem,” said Autumn, “unless you desire to give chase?”

“No,” said Logan. “Let us pack up and be gone before trouble comes

after us.”

He jumped back to the rock outcrop and stamped on the fire. Darius growled and opened an eye.

“We have to leave,” said Logan.

“Groww,” said Darius, slowly getting up.

“Wait,” cried Autumn. “I hear something.”

“Is it a band of brigands?” asked Logan nervously.

“No, it sounds like a baby animal,” said Autumn, “only not.”

“What do you mean, ‘only not?’” demanded Logan.

“It is like a baby animal but not like a baby animal,” said Autumn. “I have not heard this exact sound before. And I see more pinkness in the water. There must be another body nearby.”

“Oh for Sploop's sake,” said Logan. “This is getting silly.”

“I was right,” said Autumn a moment later. “There is another body on the rock.”

Logan jumped across again, the dead badger in his hand.

“Looks younger,” he said peering down. “Hardly any beard but his throat has been cut as well. I cannot see any other wounds. Perhaps they were father and son.”

“You miss the bigger picture,” said Autumn. “Why would both allow their throats to be cut?”

“Maybe they had a fight?” said Logan.

“Aye, and slit each other throats by accident,” said Autumn. “This was done to them and by more than one, I venture.”

The thin wailing cry came again.

“That be a baby!” cried Logan, “not an animal.”

“But where from?” said Autumn.

“There,” said Darius, his golden eyes looking to the far bank a little further upstream.

“I think I see it,” said Autumn. “What looks like a basket, over there, against the tree root.”

“Can you swim?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn.

“Sploop,” he said. “S’pose I’ll have to go then.”

He jumped into the water which came up to his mid thighs and half waded and half swam across the stream, disappearing every now and then and reappearing again, spluttering and gasping for breath. He grabbed hold of the basket and peered inside.

“It be a baby,” he shouted across the stream. “It be still alive. What shall I do with it?”

“Bring it here,” called back Autumn. She raked the area again with her eyes, all senses on full alert.

Logan waded back, losing hold of the wicker basket each time he fell but grabbing it before it drifted downstream. Back at the broken rock he handed it up to Autumn then clambered up. His hand slipped and he fell backwards, only to be caught by vice-like claws in the chest of his tunic.

“You scratched me,” he said peering inside to look at his chest after Darius had hauled him onto the rock. “But thank you, I could have got swept away.”

Autumn held the basket tentatively. She’d never seen a baby before.

No one had been born in the Esyup in her time there. It looked very small and fragile.

“Are they always this noisy?” she asked.

“Usually,” said Logan. “Tip the basket the other way so it is not sitting on its head.”

Autumn tilted the basket the other way and the baby slid away from the end of the basket. Its cries slowly subsided. Two big blue eyes looked at Autumn and two tiny little hands waved and made grasping movements.

“I am Autumn Savannah, little one,” said Autumn. “What be your name?”

“It be too young to talk,” said Logan. “Probably does not even know its name yet.”

He took the basket off Autumn, to her relief, and jumped across to the outcrop. Autumn and Darius followed.

“There be some rabbit left,” said Autumn. “Do you think it is hungry? Maybe some cheese?”

“It will want milk,” said Logan. “I have seen women do this with newborns. They put it to their tit.”

“How strange,” said Autumn. “Why do they do that?”

“That be where the milk comes from,” said Logan. “Like a cow's udder.”

“Really?” said Autumn, looking down at her chest. “I have never noticed.”

“I think you have to be pregnant first,” said Logan. “I do not think all women have milk but I be not knowing for certain. Did they not tell you anything about this at the Esyup?”

“No,” said Autumn. “We hardly ever talked about our bodies although we did talk about the main differences between men and women. Men cannot have babies.”

“Well, be that as it may,” said Logan. “We do have something of a problem.” He put the basket on the ground and stared thoughtfully at the baby. “We have an infant here and no way to feed it. I suppose we have to find a village nearby and see if there are any new mothers who can do it. Or maybe a cow will do, but I haven't seen any around here.”

“One other thought occurs to me,” said Autumn. “We have a baby and two dead men. Where be its mother?”

Chapter Six

Two kingfishers sat on a branch overhanging the stream, silently watching the water, each ignoring the other. One scratched beneath its feathers then shook out its wings then settled back to watch again. A small silver fish, barely the palest of shadows in a mess of shadows, nosed along the bank, searching for grubs and insects. A kingfisher's eyes locked on to it, uncertain. Ants ranged the underside of the branch, busily scurrying in the manner of ants, a few returning with neatly cut pieces of pale green leaf. One, more adventurous than the others, perhaps more foolhardy, explored the leg of the kingfisher. The fisher ignored it, intent on bigger prey. The second fisher spotted a movement in the water, the fish darting to another spot, unaware of the eyes but cautious all the same. The first kingfisher tensed, aware now of its companion, a competitor. The second, alerted by the tensing of its companion, decided the flicker in the water was not just a flicker and tensed in turn. The ant sensed the sudden tension in the leg, the ripple of muscle, the merest lifting of a feather and hesitated then continued. A minute bug, a parasite to the kingfisher but food to the ant, focused the ant's attention. The two fishers poised to launch themselves at the fish, the ant poised to launch itself at the parasite.

A figure moved aside the edges of a bush on the bank of the stream and peered at the kingfishers. Alarmed, they both launched with loud rattling cries, the fish forgotten. The ant lost its grip in the sudden movement of the leg and fell, its six legs flailing helplessly, crashing to the ground below and protected by its hard outer skin. It bounced on a dead leaf and landed again, on the water. The fish struck then moved on. One kingfisher, slower to react to the movement of the bush, spotted the fish at the water's surface and swooped. A sudden splash then the fish was flying, flapping helplessly in the fisher's beak.

Autumn watched the bird fly away then looked across the cleared ground to the cabin. There was no movement. No one came to investigate the birds, their alarm part of the natural sounds of the woods. The cabin was simple, split logs and dried mud to keep out the drafts. A wicker screen, fashioned to fit an entrance, lay flat on the ground, torn from its binding to the wall. Beside the cabin leaned a crude mud shelter sufficient, perhaps, to shelter two cows against the winter rains and cold. Autumn could see no cows, nor people, but

she could hear them. Voices, men's, drifted across the clearing. Their words indistinct but their tone triumphant.

"What can you see?" hissed Logan, trying to peer through the bush.

"A clearing and a cabin," whispered Autumn. "I see no people but I hear voices from inside the cabin. At least three."

"So what do we do now?" asked Logan quietly. "Go and ask if they have lost a baby?"

"I do not know," said Autumn. "It all seems quiet. Perhaps this is not the right home."

Darius pushed through the bushes and stood there, flicking his tail. The silver tufts on his black ears glinting in the sunlight.

"Smell blood," he said, his nose ranging from side to side. He padded over to the water's edge, and sniffed the ground delicately, the smell of blood exciting his nerves. "Here."

Autumn slowly came through the bush and cautiously joined him. Moments later Logan was beside her.

"I venture those throats were cut here," said Autumn, touching the ground. "Their bodies thrown into the water. Look." She pointed to a spattering of blood on some stones.

"So this is the right place, then," said Logan. "The people who did this must be inside the house."

There was a sudden commotion from within, a voice raised, then a woman ran through the doorway and fell, sprawling on the ground. Logan leapt back behind the bush and Darius disappeared with all the quick stealth of his species, the ground seemingly swallowing him. Autumn alone remained and she turned to watch.

A man strode out of the cabin as the woman struggled to her feet and he grabbed her by the hair and forced her to her knees. He laughed then struck her viciously across the face with his other hand.

“HOLD,” echoed across the clearing.

The man froze, his back to Autumn. Slowly he straightened and twisted his shoulders to look behind him.

“So,” he said seeing Autumn.

He let go of the woman's hair and she dropped to the ground. The man turned fully, his eyes exploring. Seeing no others his eyes returned to Autumn.

“We have another, come to join the merriment,” he said. “Vulf, Gesog, get out here!”

Another man appeared at the entrance then looked where the first was looking. He too scanned for others then turned and said something to those inside before coming to join him. Another woman staggered through the doorway, as though pushed hard, and sprawled, half on top of the first. She pushed herself off and sat up, pulling the tatters of her tunic over her chest. A third man appeared.

“What have we here?” he asked, his gaze following his companions’.

The first woman got up and knelt beside the second. They clung to each other, their faces fearful yet strangely vacant.

Autumn slowly walked to the centre of the clearing, her hands held slightly away from her sides to show she was unarmed. One of the men stepped backwards, pulling a long knife from his waistband.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” she said, bringing her hands together and half bowing. “Krisana of Mizule and Vallume and late of Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup. Greetings.”

Darius leapt soundlessly onto the roof of the cow shelter and thence onto the roof of the cabin where he lay down in the sun and started licking his chest.

“I am Replitz,” said the first man. “Of the Naja'yak. These be Vulf and Gesog.”

“And the women?” asked Autumn.

“Them?” said Replitz. “I know not neither do I care. What do you want here?”

“I want their safety,” said Autumn.

The three men laughed and Replitz swaggered forward.

“And what do you offer in return?” he asked, running the back of his hand along his jaw.

“I have little,” said Autumn, evenly, “save a dead badger. It was to be food and the makings of a water skin but I would gladly exchange it for the women.”

“A dead badger, hey,” said Replitz.

He turned to his companions. “What do you reckon, lads? Two whores for a dead badger? Seem a fair exchange to you?”

“Reckon we should at least see the badger, Rep,” said Vulf, grinning. “Maybe it be made of gold or some such.”

Gesog, the man with the knife, started edging away from the other two.

“Aye, there is that,” said Replitz. “Need to see the merchandise afore judging it. Where be this most mighty of dead badgers, Autumn Savannah, Krisana of whatchamacallit?”

The two women quietly got up and started backing towards the wood.

“Up her arse, most like,” guffawed Vulf.

“My companion has it,” said Autumn quietly.

“Your companion, is it?” said Replitz. “And where be this companion? Be he a warrior or another maid?”

“Logan,” called Autumn, not taking her eyes off the men.

Logan stepped out from the bushes, carrying the dead badger.

“Here,” said Autumn, taking it and tossing it in the dirt in front of Replitz.

“What do you reckon, lads?” he asked. “Either of you fancy this badger?”

“Bit smelly,” said Vulf. “I say toss it in the river and take the girl instead. She be making it one each.”

“No!” cried Logan, jumping in front of Autumn. “Do not dare to touch her!” He pulled out his small knife and the men laughed at him. Autumn leaned forward and whispered “leave this to me”. Logan’s eyes narrowed and he took a step backwards.

“I grow tired of this,” said Replitz. He looked around for the other women and sighed. “They be trying to get away. You two, get the badger girl and I be fetching those two back. Time’s awasting.”

“And the warrior?” asked Vulf.

“Cut him and toss him in the stream,” said Replitz, “like the other two, unless you fancy a turn with him as well.”

He turned and started towards the women.

“Is there nothing I can offer you in exchange for the women?” asked Autumn. “I desire a peaceful solution.”

“I do not,” said Vulf. “I likes it just fine when they scream a little.”

He grinned broadly and reached out to grab Autumn. A swift kick to his belly sent him sprawling against the wall of the cabin with a thud.

Gesog leapt at her, his blade flashing wickedly. A flying heel caught him in the face and he sprawled on the ground. Fists flailing, Replitz lunged at her and she backed away, dodging each blow. Vulf pushed

himself away from the wall then screamed as Darius' paw engulfed his face, razor sharp claws at full extension. He went silent as Darius bent over the edge of the roof and removed his throat then dropped him, limp and tattered, to the ground. Replitz shouted in anger and renewed his efforts to hit Autumn. She dodged and parried then with a blur of motion, rammed her straight fingers into his throat. He collapsed to his knees, choking. Gesog climbed to his feet and looked at Autumn. She hopped gently on one foot, the other raised and ready to strike. Gesog ran for the woods. Logan started after him.

"Logan, no," called Autumn. "Let him go."

Reluctantly Logan stopped and went over to look at Vulf. Darius was lying on the roof again, cleaning his paw.

"This one be dead," Logan said.

"Let go of your throat," said Autumn, bending over Replitz, "you be only making it worse. Try to breathe gently, slowly. Lean forward."

She gently pulled Replitz's hands from his throat and pushed him forward. Automatically he put his hands on the ground and stayed there, wheezing and gasping.

"Your throat will hurt for a few days," she said. "I suggest you drink only milk and thin soup for a time but it will heal."

Replitz tried to speak but Autumn shushed him.

"Do not try to speak," she said. "'Twill only hurt more. Rest your throat. Can you stand?"

She helped him to his feet and he stood there, sagging, his face red and contorted.

"You will live," said Autumn, "and your hurts will pass soon enough but take one lesson from this."

He ignored her, his hands exploring his neck. Autumn reached over and tapped his face and he jerked back, his eyes wide with fear.

“Listen to me,” said Autumn. “Go now and offend women no more for next time I or another like me may not be so gentle. Do you understand?”

Replitz nodded and winced.

“Go,” said Autumn, “and when you can speak again, tell your friend the same.”

He stared at her then turned and stumbled off, his hands at his throat.

Logan watched him go as Autumn walked over to the two women.

“You should have killed him,” the older woman said coldly. “Evil like that does not deserve to live.” The younger woman had slumped to the ground and was crying.

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “But that judgement is not mine to make. I have given him a choice and he will choose and he will face the consequences of his choice. Either in this life or the next.”

“He be not giving us any choices,” she said and spat on the ground.

“You always have choices,” said Autumn. “Whatever happens you choose how to respond, even in death but let us talk of this no more, the deed is done and the men are gone.”

“That one is not gone,” said Logan. “What shall I do with him?”

“He has passed into the realm of Zeeth,” said Autumn. “His body serves him no more. Put it in the stream and let it return to the world.”

“That’s what they did with Chesture and Drearen,” said the older woman. “They made us watch.”

“Your menfolk?” asked Autumn and she nodded.

“We found them downstream,” said Autumn. “Along with a babe.”

“Bethes,” said the woman. “May her soul rest in peace.”

“The babe lives,” said Autumn. “We have it here.”

The younger woman jumped to her feet, her tears forgotten.

“Where?” she said forcefully. “Where is my baby Bethes? Tell me!”

“Behind the bushes, over there,” said Logan. “Come, I will show you.”

“Show me, show me,” she cried, dragging Logan away.

“Truly the child lives?” asked the other woman, searching Autumn's face.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “We found it in a basket, floating on the water.”

The woman staggered then composed herself. There was a scream of joy from the bushes and the younger woman re-emerged, the babe clasped tightly in her arms. Logan followed, carrying the basket.

“I am Headatist,” said the woman. “Yonder be my daughter, Tutadi, mother of Bethes. The men you found, Chesture be my almost-er’owen and Drearen be hers. We own this farm.”

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn. “Yonder be Logan, my travelling companion.”

“And be that your cat?” asked Headatist, nodding towards Darius.

“That is Darius,” said Autumn. “He is his own cat but he travels with us too, for now.”

Darius looked over from his place on the roof, his golden eyes gleaming.

“I thank you, cat,” said Headatist. “At least one lives no more.”

“Grrowww,” said Darius and yawned.

“Come to the house,” said Headatist. “It be but a small token yet I can offer you sustenance beyond our thanks.”

They walked over to the dwelling. Inside were two cots against the walls, a hearth and a table. Tutadi was sitting on a stool, feeding Bethes and Autumn watched with interest for a few moments. Logan was also watching, looking embarrassed.

“So,” thought Autumn. “that is how it is done. 'Tis good to know these things.”

“Who were those men?” she asked. Headatist was picking up broken things and restoring order.

“They arrived not long after dawn,” said Headatist, pausing. “They were on foot and they sought horses. They grew angry when Chesture said we had none and they did not believe him so they took him and Drearen to the stream and threatened to take their lives to make them reveal where our horses were. How can we deliver what we do not have? But they would not listen so they cut them and threw them in the water. Then they went to the dwelling and ransacked it for food and drink.”

“What happened to the babe,” asked Autumn. “Bethes?”

“Her crying made them angry,” said Tutadi. “So that one without a face picked up her basket and threw that in the water too.”

“ Replitz said he was of the Naja'yak,” said Autumn. “Is that a local village?”

“I know it not,” said Headatist. “Yonder is Sladrill, but they are not from there. The folk of Sladrill are peaceable and they be half a day distant. No one would come here from there to look for horses.”

“They must have been travellers passing through,” said Logan. “Mayhap their horses were taken from them and they thought you were the culprits.”

“Who knows what they thought,” said Tutadi. “I curse their memory,

whatever their reasons.”

“Come Logan,” said Autumn. “we must get rid of the body and be on our way.”

He followed her outside and they took an arm each and dragged the body to the stream. Darius jumped down and padded after them.

“I forgive you for your sins,” said Autumn. “May Zeeth also find favour with you.”

She rolled his body into the water and slowly it started to move downstream.

“Ayah,” she said quietly, watching him float away. “My first death.”

“You did not kill him,” said Logan. “Darius did.”

“I was the cause,” said Autumn. “I should have kept him out of Darius’ reach but I did not think to. That was remiss of me.”

“I think you should thank Darius,” said Logan. “He saved you the effort.”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn pensively. “Darius, you came to my aid. I thank you for your thought, if not your deed. There was no need to kill the man.”

“Kill, no kill,” said Darius. “Matters not.”

“I would debate that with you,” said Autumn, “but you are a cat. You cannot live outside your nature. So be it, the deed is done and cannot be undone. Ahhh, I do not remember that man’s name. Do you, Logan?”

“Vulf,” he said. “Why?”

“It is important to me that I remember the names of those who die at my hand,” said Autumn. “Vulf shall be a lesson for me.”

Autumn slowly walked back to the dwelling, Logan and Darius following. Logan stopped to collect the badger.

“We really ought to cook this soon,” he said, “or it be going bad.”

“Let me do that for you,” said Headatist from the doorway. “We have a large hearth.”

“That is kind of you,” said Autumn. “Take care with the skin, we wish to use it for water.”

“You can have one of ours,” she said. “We have several and it will save you drying and preserving this one.”

“We thank you,” said Autumn. “What will you do now?”

“That will need some thought,” she said. “With our menfolk gone our lives will not be as simple or as companionable. Ahhh, but first we must tend the beasts. The cows will not milk themselves, nor will the grain be ground. Mayhap we will enquire of my brother who labours in Sladrill. He may be desirous of joining us here.”

“He is not the hardest of workers,” said Tutadi, “nor the kindest of men and we are but three women, or will be when Bethes is more grown.”

“Aye,” said Headatist, “but 'tis an idea worthy of thought. Mayhap my brother and his almost-era'owen will want to join farms but I'm thinking the two may be too much. There is much to consider.”

“Could we not work this farm on our own?” asked Tutadi. “We are both strong and willing. Perhaps with a young lad from the village from time to time?”

“It is good that you do not despair,” said Autumn.

“You have never been a farmer, have you,” said Headatist. “Despair is always behind the door but you learn to live with it. Speaking of doors, would your lad repair ours? Your cat makes me nervous.”

“Happily,” said Logan, getting up.

“I will help you,” said Autumn, following him out.

“There are some reeds by the stream we can use,” he said. “They will make good bindings for the door.”

“Why do you not stay and talk with them?” he asked when they were out of earshot.

“They need to be alone,” she said. “They need time to understand what has happened and grieve for their loved ones. This is not a time for idle chatter. We should also move on soon, our presence is no longer a help but a hindrance. They need to find solace and solutions with their kin and neighbours, not strangers.”

“You could be right,” he said. “It be a lot for them to deal with.”

He gathered a few reeds and started to flatten and twist them.

“Do you smell smoke?” asked Autumn when he was about done.

“It be from the house, most like,” he said. “Headatist is probably cooking the badger.”

“The house is back there,” said Autumn. “I can smell smoke coming from the South.”

Chapter Seven

“We have two full waterskins, fresh cooked meat and a goodly supply of roots and nuts,” said Autumn. “We may get bread and fresh cheese at Sladrill but it matters not, we have sustenance aplenty. What are you complaining about?”

“I be not complaining about the food,” said Logan, red faced and puffing. “I be complaining about the carrying of it. We need a pack horse or something.”

“Every silver lining has a cloud,” said Autumn, breathing easily even though she was carrying slightly more than Logan. “Every benefit has disadvantages, just as every disadvantage has benefits. As in all things, contentment is about achieving a balance. We shall stop for the night soon and eat and thereby lighten the load.”

“Actually I be not even complaining about the carrying of it,” said Logan, stopping to rest. “I’m complaining about the carrying of it up this Aloidia forsaken hill. Could we not have followed the stream for longer and gone around instead of over?”

“We could,” said Autumn, “but we did not and hindsight is the greatest teacher. Besides, there were obstacles of a different nature along the stream. This side the bank was swampy and waterlogged and thick with foliage. This hill, while steep, has solid footing and easy walking although uphill. I venture fewer mosquitoes as well.”

“Well, it did not look so steep when we started,” said Logan. “My legs are hurting.”

“I push you too hard,” said Autumn, dropping her pack to the ground and sitting beside him. “For that I apologise. While there are benefits to testing our limits we should observe balance in that as well. Not every opportunity need be taken.”

“What say you we stop here for the night?” asked Logan, looking around. “Or just over there, where there is a flatter area.”

“I desired to reach the summit,” said Autumn, “for I wished to try to

see the source of the fire in case the woods themselves were alight. I would not wish us engulfed in the night but the smell of smoke is receding. It seems to me that the fire is out or nearly so.”

“Yes, I can barely smell the smoke myself,” said Logan. “But if the fear of the woods being alight concerns you we are safer this side than the other. Fire goes uphill a lot faster than downhill.”

“Is that so?” asked Autumn, looking at him with interest. “Why is that so? Surely the wood of the trees is the same?”

“It is like a candle,” said Logan, lying back and looking at the blue sky through the thin canopy. “If you grasp the candle below the flame your hand does not feel the heat but above, ahh, that way lies a burnt hand. So it is with woods. The trees above the fire catch light quickly in the heat but those below remain cool and are slow to catch.”

“You make a good argument,” said Autumn. “This is why we put wood on top of a fire and not underneath. Likewise meat and roots to cook. I had not thought to apply that thinking to a fire in the woods.”

“If you put food underneath a fire it will cook,” said Logan, “but a lot more slowly. If we stay this side of the summit and the fire comes over we will be able to escape. 'Tis faster to run downhill than uphill as well. Moreover, there is the stream at the bottom this side. Who knows what is at the bottom on the other side of the hill.”

“On the other hand,” said Autumn. “If we are cooked more slowly we will merely prolong our suffering but with the same result. Roast Logan is not a dish I wish to try, however long you cook. Boiled Logan does not tempt me either.”

“So you are saying we still go to the top today?” asked Logan with a groan.

“No,” said Autumn. “I am merely travelling avenues of thought to find a balance. It seems to me that the prospect of being roasted outweighs the time it takes so on balance the best avenue would be to stay this side and give whatever fire there is the other side the time to go away.”

“Likely it will rain in the night as well,” said Logan. “The clouds are building and rain does not bode well for fire.”

“Then we shall stay here tonight,” said Autumn. “If Chaahk bestows the blessings of rain upon us when the woods around us burn then we are indeed favoured.”

“Of course, the woods may not be burning,” said Logan. “The smell of smoke could have been a traveller's camp or some such.”

“So are you proposing we continue our walk to the top of the hill?” asked Autumn.

“Splloop no,” said Logan. “Over to that flat area will be enough for me and when my legs stop hurting I will fashion a shelter to keep the rain off. There is no need to escape a roasting only to be drowned.”

“How will you do that?” asked Autumn. “We have no axe to cut trees or split logs nor bricks to build with.”

“What did they teach you at that Esyup?” asked Logan giving her a sideways look.

“Philosophy,” said Autumn. “Self understanding, self determination, self defence and the paths to wisdom and understanding.”

“But not how to get out of the rain, by the sound of it,” said Logan. “Has it not rained since you left the Esyup?”

“We made bricks,” said Autumn. “They were sufficient for our needs and the Esyup has stood for many summers with little need for repair, and it has only rained once since I left.”

“What did you do then?” he asked.

“I got wet,” said Autumn, simply.

Logan laughed. “No doubt you gained from that experience,” he said. “Well, we do not need anything that will last longer than the night. Come, I will show you. Leave the packs here for now.”

Obediently Autumn followed Logan to the flat area.

“If we had a fallen tree that would be best,” said Logan. “Just pile some leafy branches against the other side from which the rain comes and shelter there but there are no fallen trees here so we look for two trees that are as far apart as you are tall.”

“Does the rain care about your height?” asked Autumn sceptically.

“Not at all,” said Logan, “it just be more comfortable. If the trees are closer you cannot lie full length.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “I see.”

“These two will do,” he said, pointing. “They look well formed and not likely to fall soon. Next we bend the lowest branches and bind them together so they form a roof between the trees, like this, and then you gather other branches with leaves and lay them from the roof to the ground and then you lie underneath. You have to have leafy branches though as they keep the rain out.”

“What if there are no leaves?” asked Autumn, watching closely.

“Then you need more branches,” said Logan. “You can weave them or if there is grass you can use that but leaves are best. There, you see? Very quick and you lie underneath and stay dry.”

“But what of the water on the ground?” asked Autumn. “Does that not flow under the branches and mean you lie on wet ground?”

“Yes,” said Logan, “but for that you make a small trench to take the water around you, like this, but you must do it on the higher side, not the lower.”

He used a large stone to scrape out a shallow trench in a crude semi-circle around the two trees then sat under the improvised canopy.

“I see,” said Autumn, sitting beside him, facing the layered branches. “There is much I have yet to learn. I am greatly impressed but one thing occurs to me.”

“Yes?” asked Logan, feeling very pleased to have impressed Autumn.

“The cover is narrow, we will have to lie close together, very close,” she said.

“If we had longer branches we could have made this wider,” he said, “but we do not. Think for a few moments and see if a solution occurs to you.”

Autumn looked at the canopy then twisted to face outwards then a slow smile crossed her face.

“One can lie here,” she said, “and the other build another shelter between two other trees, or mayhap we place a second mat of branches on the other side, and we each lie on separate sides.

“That's right,” said Logan. “You learn quickly.”

“You are a good teacher,” said Autumn. “You are as Noxu and teach through example and questioning. I see now how to answer my next question myself.”

“What question is that?” asked Logan.

“What do you do when you have no trees?” asked Autumn.

“A good question,” he said. “And your answer?”

“Be flexible,” she said. “Use whatever is available and do not expect bricks nor trees to be at hand. I thank you for your wisdom, Logan.”

Logan beamed, feeling absurdly pleased with himself.

* * *

“There is something amiss,” said Autumn the next day.

Scant drips had come through the shelter in the night and any problems of close proximity had been resolved by Darius coming inside and lying snugly between them when the rain began. Refreshed,

they had descended the hill and found the track that led to Sladrill. It wound through the dripping woods, now fresh cleaned and gleaming in the morning sun.

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

Darius paused and stared intently into the woods as some slight rustle attracted his attention.

“I hear no sound of activity,” she said, “from man nor beast nor smell any cooking of bread, but I do smell meat. Who cooks meat in the morning? There is an air of badness ahead but I know not what.”

“Maybe they be late risers and early eaters,” said Logan.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “We shall find out soon enough but take care.”

They rounded a bend in the track and the woods ended and became pasture. Beyond the pasture lay Sladrill, literally. The village was in ruins.

“So now we know the cause of the smoke,” said Autumn softly as they stood at the ford of the stream that fed the village. “And I venture I know the smell of cooked meat too.”

“Morath has visited here,” said Logan bleakly. “Sladrill is destroyed.”

They forded the stream and slowly walked towards the village, Darius left behind as he refused to go further. Instead he paced alongside the stream, back and forth, snarling. The split log dwellings were blackened and collapsed, consumed by fire. Logan went inside the ruins of the first then backed out quickly.

“Do not go in,” he said, white faced. “The family here are burned beyond description.”

He turned and threw up.

“Not all are burned,” said Autumn. “Look yonder.”

A man, or so his build suggested as he had no head, lay where he had fallen, a thick stick still clenched in his hand. Beyond lay more burned out ruins, more dead. Slowly Autumn and Logan walked between the ruins and the dead. Some lay burned, others mutilated, some crushed by the hooves of horses. Men, women, children. None still lived. One clutched a scythe, other sticks and branches, another a knife, many were unarmed. Handsome or ugly in life, they were now all alike, grotesque in death.

“What in the name of all the gods has happened here?” asked Logan.

“I know not,” said Autumn, her voice distant. “We had best check each house. Some may yet still live.”

“They are all burned,” said Logan. “Who could still live here?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “But we check all the same. Do you notice there are no animals here? None living nor dead. What village has no animals?”

“What?” exclaimed Logan, alarmed. He grabbed her arm. “You think this be a village of Yammoe? A village of the damned, the undead?”

“No,” said Autumn. “This is not the world of Yammoe. This village has been ... hold. Who comes here?”

Logan dropped her arm and turned to look. A man was lurching up the track towards them, dragging one leg. His head was caked in dried blood and one arm hung limply by his side. His face contorted in pain and hatred.

“You killed them all,” he gasped, “you bastards, you killed them all.”

Autumn caught him as he collapsed and gently lowered him to the ground.

“Give me the waterskin,” she said to Logan, “and some cloths.”

He passed her a waterskin and went to one of the bodies for some cloth.

“Try to drink,” said Autumn quietly to the man. “There now, not too much.”

“Will this do?” asked Logan, returning with a strip of homespun cloth torn from someone who no longer needed it.

Autumn splashed water on the cloth and gently started to clean the man's head then sat back on her heels.

“His skull is broken,” she said to Logan. “He is not long for this world.” She sighed and looked around. “So many.”

The man groaned and his eyes flicked open.

“What happened here?” asked Autumn.

“They came upon us suddenly,” the man croaked. “Out of the woods, scores of them, on horses.”

He coughed and fresh blood stained his beard.

“Who did?” blurted Logan.

The man stared into Autumn's eyes.

“Naja'yak,” he said. “They took everything and ...”

His body went limp. Autumn reached out and gently closed his eyes.

“He is at peace now,” she said.

“The Naja'yak?” said Logan. “Didn't Replitz say he was a Naja'yak yesterday?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, getting to her feet. “Those three must have been part of a raiding party and got left behind when they lost their horses. Come, there may yet be others who still live and who need our aid. We must look for them.”

They didn't find anyone else still alive.

“The Man wants to see you,” said the sentry.

Kizerain glared at him.

“Soon as you get back, he said,” said the sentry, wilting a little.

“His name is Loheckle natal Chant'ist ab Heck-noor,” said Kizerain, “and you will refer to him that way or, if you cannot manage it, then 'My Lord'.”

“Yes,” said the sentry. “My Lord, sorry.”

“Ohh, take my horse,” said Kizerain irritably, sliding off. “I need beer and a piss. Get lost.”

“Yes,” said the sentry, grabbing the horse's bridle.

Kizerain stomped off to his hut.

“Get me beer and some food,” he said, unbuckling his sword and tossing it to his servant.

The man caught it and disappeared.

Kizerain slumped in his chair, tired from his exertions. Slowly he kicked off his boots and loosened the ties on his jerkin.

“Beer,” said the servant, reappearing.

He held out a wooden goblet. Kizerain snatched it and drank deeply, draining it. He tossed it at the servant who caught it neatly, having had much practice. With his other hand the servant offered a platter with a cold chicken and bread.

“On the table,” growled Kizerain. “Get me more beer.”

The servant disappeared again. Kizerain pulled off his jerkin then got up and went outside to relieve himself. Coming back he pulled a leg

off the chicken and chewed it.

"I left instructions that you were to see me as soon as you returned," said Loheckle striding in as though he owned the place, as in fact he now did since it was no longer in the hands of its former owners. Being dead they were in no position to do anything about it.

"I was just coming," said Kizerain.

"Just coming' isn't quite the same as 'as soon as', is it?" said Loheckle staring balefully at Kizerain. "My Lord," he added, emphatically.

Kizerain stared back then dropped his eyes and belched. "No, my Lord," he said.

"Fool," he thought.

"And do not forget it," said Loheckle. "How can I maintain order in this rabble if you, their commander, be not setting an example?"

"Indeed, my Lord," said Kizerain. "Can I offer you some chicken?"

Loheckle waved the proffered carcass away.

"How went the assault?" he asked, sitting down in Kizerain's chair.

"We got twenty two head of cattle, seven sheep and five pigs as well as chickens and grain," said Kizerain, sitting on the stool. "The men are bringing them now. I came on ahead."

"That will not last over long," said Loheckle scratching his beard. "And recruits?"

"None," said Kizerain. "They were just peasants, not worth recruiting. We killed the lot."

"That was wasteful," said Loheckle frowning. "Surely there were some able bodied men among them?"

"None put up a fight worth a damn," said Kizerain. "That be why we

killed them all. That and to leave no one to answer any questions.”

“What about the women?” asked Loheckle. “Or did you kill all of them too?”

“The prettiest looked like my horse’s arse,” said Kizerain, “and smelt worse. No great loss there.”

Loheckle regarded him thoughtfully for a while and Kizerain shrugged and drained his beer.

“Sometimes I wonder who’s side you be on,” said Loheckle after a while.

“The side that pays me the most,” said Kizerain, “and at the moment that be you.”

“Are you planning to switch sides?” growled Loheckle.

“Are you planning to pay me less?” growled back Kizerain.

They stared at each other.

“Perhaps I should,” said Loheckle after a while.

“The Roinad is not short of ready paraks,” said Kizerain. “Best you remember that.”

Loheckle stiffened at the implied insult then relaxed.

“Bring me beer,” he shouted to the waiting servant.

He pulled a lump of bread off the loaf on the platter. “I be not short of paraks either,” he said. “And there will be money and more to spare when I win.”

“Take more than money,” said Kizerain, reaching for more chicken. “You need decent fighters too. Ransacking these country villages does not get us anywhere. Some food but that be about all.”

“It denies support and taxes to the Roinad,” said Loheckle. “Without support and taxes that bitch'll grind to a halt sooner or later. She will not be able to buy the support of the Opsablepsia who will turn against her.”

“Perhaps,” said Kizerain, “perhaps not, but you still need fighters and good ones at that.”

“Give it time,” said Loheckle. “We are still working the small villages. Soon we will start to move against the towns then the cities. We will have good recruits by the time we head for Uli-Rratha. How many in Sladrill?”

“Fifty or sixty,” said Kizerain. “And no more than thirty in that piss-hole Biasdo. Still, we should get better pickings in Pirend.”

“And Kaloolon upwards of three thousand,” said Loheckle. He chuckled. “It be just a matter of building up. It takes time. Uli-Rratha was not built in a day. Do not be impatient.”

“I know,” said Kizerain. “But it be not just good fighters I need. I need a figurehead. A great fighter and someone who can inspire the men. I am a great fighter and I can lead the men to victory but I have not the wit to inspire them. It takes more than killing and shouting orders but what it is I know not. All I know is that I do not have it.”

“And neither do you, you bag of rancid manure,” he thought but kept his face expressionless as Loheckle fed his coffers. “A good Roinad inspires people but you can never do that, that's why you need me to get you there.”

Loheckle's eyes narrowed again as he wondered if he was being insulted.

“A figurehead,” he said, deciding he hadn't been. “And where do we come by such a creature?”

Kizerain grunted.

“I walked around Pirend the day before we took it,” he said. “I met a

woman.”

“We be talking strategy,” interrupted Loheckle, “not your sex life.”

Kizerain ignored him.

“I thought she were a thief,” he said, “but she bested four of my men. Then just before we took Sladrill three of my men lost their horses and went to get more from a farm. She were there as well and bested them too.”

“I told you they were a rabble,” said Loheckle, shaking his head in disgust. “Imagine, seven men bested by a woman! Absurd.”

“She were no ordinary woman,” said Kizerain. “She be a Krisana.”

“A Krisana?” said Loheckle, jerking upright in the chair. “How do you know?”

“I recognised her type,” said Kizerain. “And she told the lads at the farm. She be a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume and not just any Krisana at that. She be from the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup. Name be Autumn Savannah, whatever that means.”

“What be a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume doing outside the Esyup?” said Loheckle, intrigued. “I thought they stayed inside for life?”

“Some get out,” said Kizerain. “It be rare but not unheard of.”

He belched again and picked up his goblet.

“But what has me thinking,” he said, “is that if we had a Krisana from the Yeinydd Esyup on our side we would get the best of the best flocking to us. A Krisana! That would be a mighty rallying call, not even the Roinad has got a Krisana. And if we can ... persuade her we might even get at the entire Esyup to band with us. We would be invincible.”

“Where is she now, this, what did you say her name was?” said Loheckle.

“Autumn Savannah,” said Kizerain. “I know not where she is now, but she cannot have got far.”

“Find her,” said Loheckle. “Find Autumn Savannah and bring her to me.”

Chapter Eight

“You are quiet,” said Autumn. “You have been these two days past.”

They were sitting in a clearing out of sight of the track they had followed after leaving Sladrill. A scant arm's length away a brook burred happily, hopping and skipping over its stony bed. Its water cool and clear, purposeful yet unhurried. Logan had not made a fire but their meat was already cooked and the bread not yet stale. A family of wood pigeons cooed on the other bank, watching yet unafraid. Astauand's orb was flirting with the distant horizon, the few clouds slowly turning red. A cloud of gnats blurred hazily over the brook, ignored by two butterflies weaving a complex pattern.

Logan was watching a caterpillar, slowly making its way down the side of a thistle, pausing to check the air for danger and the smooth side of its highway for food, his knees drawn up and his arms locked around them. Darius lay in a patch of sunlight, the fur on his belly ruffling in the light breeze. The remains of a small hare lay nearby, feeding the last of the day's flies and wasps.

“Mmm,” said Logan.

He chewed a bite of meat and continued watching the caterpillar as it neared the base of the thistle.

“I am not privy to the thoughts of men,” she said, rolling a ball of coarse bread between her fingers, “but in the short time I have known you, quietness would seem a sign of discontent.”

“Mmm,” said Logan.

The caterpillar had reached the base and was undecided which way to go. Twelve legs gripped the thistle and four others explored its options. A decision reached, it arched its back then brought its front half onto the ground.

Autumn waited. She felt Logan needed to talk but would only do so in his own time. Her purpose was simply to let him know she was willing to assist if he wanted assistance.

“It is wrong to force help on someone when they do not want it,” she thought, watching a small bird watching the caterpillar. “Perhaps as bad as denying help when they do, and who am I to assume I can help anyway? Mayhap what ails Logan is beyond my small skills, if indeed anything ails him. This could just be part of what makes him Logan.”

The bird hopped towards the caterpillar, reassured by the stillness of Autumn and Logan. Darius half-heartedly scratched his belly with a paw and the bird flew away, only to circle and return, as watchful as ever. Darius rolled over and sat on his haunches to vigorously scratch the itch with a hind leg then flopped back, seemingly exhausted by the effort. The bird flew away to perch on a branch. The caterpillar paused to investigate a blade of grass, its shadow growing longer as Astauand sank lower. The butterflies had disappeared.

“Does it not bother you?” asked Logan.

Autumn paused before answering. She was fairly certain what the 'it' was but uncertain whether to reveal that. If she was correct Logan might take her presumption he was disturbed by the deaths at Sladrill as an indication of weakness and be offended.

“But if I ask what 'it' is, he might as easily be offended by my seeming indifference or my thinking he is indifferent and merely asking if I am bothered by caterpillars or some such,” she thought. “Or I might simply be wrong and some other matter ails him.”

“Yes,” said Autumn, choosing a middle way. “But I am trained to cope.”

Logan picked a blade of grass and started to chew it.

“I have seen death,” he said quietly. “In my village two women had stillborns and an old man died and we slaughtered animals from time to time, but none like these nor so many.”

“I have only seen one such,” said Autumn, “no two. Three winters past a novice by the name of Brisane was killed by falling rocks. We removed the rocks and gave him a decent burial. He was not a pretty

sight and lingered near two days before death claimed him. The other was Vulf.”

“Yes, Vulf,” said Logan, tossing the blade away. “Yet he was an attacker and deserved to die. The villagers though, they did not deserve it.”

“No one deserves to die,” said Autumn, crossing her legs and resting her elbows on her knees, “and yet we all do. It is the unchanging nature of life and, in any event, who are we to judge who is deserving and who is not. Vulf was an aggressor yet we have no way of knowing if any or all of the villagers were worse or better.”

“But how can you be so calm about it,” said Logan angrily, ripping up a handful of grass. He twisted to look at her. “Do you not care at all?”

“Yes, I care,” said Autumn calmly, looking at him as the last of Astauand sank below the horizon. “I care deeply but my manner of thinking is not the same as yours.”

“Well, pffhh,” said Logan. He selected a stalk of grass and began to shred it. “What is your manner of thinking, then?”

“That blade of grass is now dead,” said Autumn. “As will be that caterpillar soon and as will I and, yes, even you, one day. Everything that lives must die and we know not the time nor the manner by which it occurs, only that it is as inevitable as Astauand's walk across the sky each day. But you see death as important, I do not, and you see death as an end and I do not.”

“But it is an end,” protested Logan, “It's the end of everything and it is important!”

“How is it the end of everything?” asked Autumn. “The caterpillar dies yet you continue, you die and the caterpillar continues. A death changes nothing.”

“It does for the person dying,” said Logan.

“Does it?” asked Autumn. “If you lose a fingernail are you dead?”

“Of course not,” said Logan.

“What if you lose a whole finger?” asked Autumn.

“Bumola lost a finger,” said Logan. “It hurt terrible, but no, he was not dead.”

“What about an arm?” asked Autumn. “Or a leg or both legs? Would you still be Logan even if you lost both legs?”

“Of course I would,” said Logan. “What are you getting at?”

“You are not your body,” said Autumn. “There is a you that is more than your body and losing parts of your body do not change that which is you. In death you are merely losing your body. That which is you and separate from your body still continues.”

“But I would be dead,” said Logan. “My body would be dead and so would I.”

“If that be the case,” said Autumn, “what goes to Zeeth or Yammoe, to the Realms of the Dead or the Undead? Your body remains here, for all to see.”

“You bandy words with me,” said Logan. “My body dies and my spirit goes to Zeeth, or Yammoe if I be that unfortunate.”

“That be right,” said Autumn. “That which is you goes to Zeeth and your body remains because it is no longer needed. Nothing has ended except your use of that body and because we all die it must be that the body is temporary, just as a the body of a caterpillar body is temporary before it moves on and becomes a butterfly. Do we see a butterfly and mourn the caterpillar or do we marvel in the joy of the butterfly?”

“So you are saying I should be happy everyone in that village is dead?” said Logan, his voice rising. “That is ridiculous, they died horribly!”

“Ahh, that is the difficult part,” said Autumn. “But do you not see that

there are two different things there, the death and the manner of death?”

“What difference does it make?” said Logan. He threw the handful of grass down.

“Death is inevitable,” said Autumn, “and nothing we can do will change that, but the manner of death, ahh. Some die quickly, some linger, some in peace and some in great pain but equally many live in pain and suffering. Many live their lives on the edge of starvation or diseased or deformed. Some live with their bodies abused by those who seek to control them. Few manage to avoid suffering in their lives but in death we all have the same thing in common.”

“Hmmp,” said Logan. “We’re all dead, that’s what we have in common.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “And in death we have an end but an end to what?”

“Life, of course,” said Logan. “What else?”

“Suffering,” said Autumn. “Whatever has happened to that being in life, however much it suffered or suffered in death, death itself brings an end to that suffering. Yes, I am saddened by the deaths of those people in the village, and I mourn their passing but I also rejoice. I rejoice for the end to their suffering. For them their inevitable death has come and their suffering is at an end. They have been welcomed into the arms of Zeeth.”

“Or Yammoe,” said Logan sourly.

“Well, that is their choice,” said Autumn. “We always have a choice, even after death and some choose to go to Yammoe. It is not for us to criticise nor condemn them for that choice just as it is not for anyone to criticise or condemn you for travelling with me nor me for searching. We have made our choices as have they.”

“I suppose,” said Logan. “But what about those who killed them? Surely they at least deserve to die?”

“They will die,” said Autumn. “You can rest assured of that. No matter how much they seek the pleasures of life, or riches or power or to harm others, they will surely ... hold!”

“What?” said Logan.

“Shh,” whispered Autumn, listening intently.

In the darkness Logan sat still, his ears focussed on the sounds of the night.

“Someone comes,” he whispered, hearing the faint sound of hooves.

Autumn put her hand over his mouth. He licked her palm, his sense of humour returning, and she jerked her hand away quickly. The sound of the hooves got louder.

“Down,” she whispered and lay flat, twisting to look towards where the path lay. Logan flattened and did the same. Darius yawned and got up. He padded over to sniff the remains of the hare then went back to his spot and lay down again.

“Three men on horses,” whispered Autumn.

“Four,” said Darius, getting up. His inky blackness faded into the dark.

The thud of the hooves on the dirt path slowly faded then disappeared.

“So there were travellers on the path,” said Logan, sitting up again. “Why were we hiding?”

“Four travellers after dark?” asked Autumn. “Farmers and peasants do not have horses and who else would travel so? I also heard the chink of metal, perhaps they were armed. Mayhap they were innocent travellers, delayed on the road and hoping for a shelter for the night but mayhap they were not. There is some evil in these parts as we have seen and strangers may be part of that evil. T’would be wise to be cautious until we know their errand.”

“Hmm,” said Logan. “You are right, of course. I wonder where Darius went?”

“Ask when he returns,” said Autumn. “He was after another hare, most like, although in the manner of cats we will likely not see him again before dawn.”

* * *

Darius returned while Autumn was at her dawn meditations. She was mindful of him but did not break her reverie. He curled up beside Logan, who muttered in his sleep and rolled over, one arm across the cat. Logan was awake and watching when Autumn finished her morning exercises, Darius asleep beside him. He joined Autumn in the cold stream to wash.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked.

“Yes, I did,” he said. “After our talk last night, well, I am not certain that I agree with you, but, well, I did sleep a lot better.”

“Good,” she said. “Have you eaten?”

“Yes, I was hungry and, umm, I finished the meat,” he said. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” said Autumn, drying her face and hands on her tunic. “Shall we move on or shall we wait for Darius to awaken?”

“He be sleeping all day if we let him,” said Logan, “and after those horsemen in the night I do not think I want to stay here any longer than we have to. What’ll we do if the next village we come to has been burned as well?”

“We will accept it and move on,” said Autumn. “Perhaps if we arrive beforehand we can do something about it but after? No, once done it cannot be undone and to brood on it tires the mind purposelessly.”

“I suppose,” said Logan. “But it will take time, I suppose.”

“A lifetime,” said Autumn, rolling up her blanket. She opened her pack to stow her bowl and spoon then frowned. She upended the contents of the pack on the ground.

“What’s that?” asked Logan, pointing to a small earthenware pot.

“Salve,” said Autumn. “My lips go hard when it is cold and they crack and fester. The salve helps to prevent the hardness. Have you seen my snake stone?”

“What does it look like?” asked Logan.

“It is about the size of my finger,” she said, holding up one of her little fingers, “and it is grey with a green streak through it.”

“Is this it?” he asked, picking up the remains of the bread wrapped in a cloth. “It was under the bread.”

“Ahh, thank you,” she said and she held it in her clenched fist for a few seconds with her eyes shut. She wrapped it in a small cloth and placed it inside the pack and the other items.

“What is it for?” asked Logan. “It seems important.”

“It helps me keep my mind at peace,” she said. “The look of it and its touch in my hand is soothing so when my mind will not settle I hold it in my hand and it calms me. I have not used it for many summers but I carry it nonetheless. One day I may have need of it again.”

“I could use something like that,” said Logan. “My thoughts are often unsettled and race in circles like the dust in a whirlwind. Would it work for me?”

“This one? No,” said Autumn. “It is soothing for me but likely will not soothe you but we will find you one that fits your thoughts. A whirlwind in your mind is not good.”

“Where will I find one?” asked Logan. “Is there a special place?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “In your heart.” She smiled. “When you see a

stone that attracts your eye, pick it up and feel it with your heart. If it is the one it will speak to you.”

Logan rushed over to the brook and stood there looking intently at the stones on the bed.

“Aha!” he said suddenly and pounced. “What about this one?”

He held up a smooth round speckled brown stone, his hand dripping.

“Does it speak to you?” asked Autumn.

“What should it say?” he asked, holding it to his ear.

“Only you can know that,” said Autumn. “But listen with your heart, not your ear.”

Logan held the stone to his chest and shut his eyes.

“Pah!” he said casting the stone in the brook.

“It may take time,” said Autumn, “but when you find it you will know.”

Logan scowled and nudged Darius with his foot, none too gently.

“We be off,” he said. “Come on.”

“Grroww,” said Darius, giving him an indecipherable look.

“Stay here then, lazybones,” said Logan. “We are leaving.”

Darius ignored him and started licking his tail. He caught up with them some way down the path.

“Where did you go in the night?” asked Autumn.

“Follow men,” he said. “Long. Stop man cave. I hunt.”

“You went hunting after they stopped or you hunted them?” asked

Logan.

“Meat,” said Darius, “men sleep.”

“I think he means the men went to sleep in the cave,” said Autumn, “so he went hunting.”

“Yes,” said Darius.

“Ahh,” said Logan. “So where is the cave? There might be some nice stones there.”

“Long,” said Darius. “Not far. Two ways.”

“’Twould have been easier if you had found a cat that does not speak in riddles,” said Logan.

“He means the cave was a long way from where we were but it isn't far away now,” said Autumn, “and it's where two tracks meet, don't you, Darius.”

“Yes,” said Darius.

“Hope you are right,” said Logan, stooping to pick up a stone. He held it then tossed it away. “Who ever heard of a talking cat, anyway?”

“How many cats have you listened to?” asked Autumn. “Perhaps they all talk but you do not hear them.”

“If they all talk like him,” said Logan, “who wants to listen?”

Darius changed direction slightly and Logan tripped over him.

“Next village we come to,” he said, picking himself up, “I be getting a dog.”

“Grroww,” said Darius and his golden eyes gleamed. “Nice meat.”

“Is that the place?” asked Autumn a little while later.

There was a small hut on the side of a field some way ahead in the distance and they stopped walking to look at it.

“That is not a cave,” said Logan. “It is a hut.”

“Huts and houses are probably caves to cats,” said Autumn. “And he probably has different names for things we think are the same. This one is at a crossroad as well.”

“Man cave,” said Darius. “There.”

“Do you suppose they are still there?” asked Logan.

“I do not see any horses,” said Autumn. “Perhaps they stayed the night and moved on. There is probably a village not far away as this looks like a farm of some sort, even if it is a bit small.”

“So do we just walk up to it or should we go round it?” asked Logan.

“If they were just travellers there be no need to go round it,” said Autumn, “as we are just travellers as well. But if they are part of a raiding party or something like that I would like to know so either way we should go and talk to whoever lives there.”

They started walking again.

“If they are not dead already,” said Logan darkly. He checked his knife was still inside his tunic.

“The hut does not look to have been damaged,” said Autumn, “and if they are dead, well, that tells us a lot as well. Come.”

A little way further on she sniffed.

“Do you smell that?” she said. “There is death up ahead.”

“You see those birds in the field?” said Logan. “Are they pecking at a body?”

“I cannot see clearly enough,” said Autumn. “But there is something

on the ground.”

“I bet those men killed the people who lived there,” said Logan. “Let us go around. We do not have to follow this track.”

“We do not know for certain,” said Autumn. “We need to find out what is happening. If it is a killing is it because something bad is happening in this land or is it something that is going where we are going. Three times is becoming a worry.”

“There be someone in the field,” said Logan as they got closer. “Did you see that? A woman came out from behind the hut, and whatever is on the ground does not look like a body, it's too round, looks more like a cauldron.”

“The smell of death is much stronger though,” said Autumn. “Ahh, she is waving in a friendly manner.”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan. “She is coming over to meet us. Is she armed?”

“I do not think so,” said Autumn.

“Greetings,” called the woman. “That is a very fine cat you have there. Isn't he a big one! Here, puss, puss, wouldums pussy likeums some milk?”

Darius stared at her in alarm and waved his tail agitatedly.

“It is all right,” said Autumn quietly. “She be just being friendly.” She raised her voice. “And greetings to you, lady. The cat thanks you for your hospitality and regrets he does not drink milk.”

“No matter,” she said. “But for yourselves? I would not have it said that Mother Midcarn did not offer hospitality to travellers on these paths.”

“We thank you,” said Autumn. “Pray, what is that smell?”

“What smell?” said Mother Midcarn. She sniffed the air, looking

puzzled.

“There is a smell of something strong and not as fragrant as a wild flower,” said Autumn. “It comes from your field yonder.”

“My field?” said Mother Midcarn. “Ohhh, you mean my leather?” She laughed happily. “You know, I’ve been tanning the skins for so long I have forgotten what it smells like. Come on in, come on in, there be plenty of room inside.”

She beckoned them in and, after a moment’s hesitation, Autumn went into the small hut. By some trick of the light it seemed bigger inside than out, considerably bigger. Logan followed and Darius remained outside.

“Would you like milk or water?” she asked, “or some hot broth? And I have some fresh scones and honey.”

“You are most hospitable,” said Autumn. “Some milk would be nice.”

She sat on a stool at the large table and slowly Logan sat down beside her. There were eight stools around the table and another table on the other side of the room, littered with strange things. A cloth hung across an entrance and through the gap could be seen another room.

“Oh, milk for me too,” he said, realising Mother Midcarn was looking expectantly at him. “I thank you for your kindness.”

“Most welcome,” said Mother Midcarn, bustling away. She returned a moment later with two bowls of milk.

“There you are,” she said beaming. “Enjoy.”

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, “and this ...”

“I know, dear,” said Mother Midcarn. “I’ve been expecting you.”

Chapter Nine

Mother Midcarn chuckled happily. She loved surprises.

“How did you know we were coming?” asked Autumn, surprised. Logan was frowning.

“Oh, I've known for ages,” said Mother Midcarn. “I saw the two of you in my Window.”

“You saw us coming through the window?” asked Autumn, turning to look at the wall in the direction from which they'd come. “I see no window and how do you know our names?”

“My, you are a suspicious one,” said Mother Midcarn. “I would have expected a Krisana to be more trusting somehow. Come into my workshop and I'll show you.”

She jumped up, very agile for her years and weight, and bustled to the hanging curtain and pulled it aside.

“Do you think this is a trap?” whispered Logan, bending to Autumn's ear.

“Oh dear me no, it's not a trap,” called Mother Midcarn. “Why would I try to trap you? I'm on your side.”

She disappeared inside the room and Autumn gazed thoughtfully after her. Logan frowned suspiciously.

“Do not go in there,” he whispered. “I do not trust her. There be something strange going on here.”

“Why would she be on our side?” mused Autumn. “What is happening that needs sides and which side are we on and why?”

“Let us leave this place,” said Logan, standing up. “There are powers here I know not what but all feel bad. Why is this place bigger inside than outside and what lies beyond that curtain? Nothing good, I warrant.”

“You are free to go whenever you want,” said Autumn, standing up as well. “There seems to be something here that demands my attention and so my attention it shall have.”

“I beg you not to go in there,” pleaded Logan, clutching at Autumn's arm. “What if it is beyond your skills to escape?”

“Then I shall not escape,” said Autumn, undoing Logan's fingers. “I bid you farewell and await the day we meet again.”

She strode forward to Mother Midcarn's room and disappeared behind the curtain.

“Oh Sploop!” said Logan, gulping. “I'm going to die, I just know it,” and he plunged in after her.

“Woah!” he exclaimed, jerking to a halt. He stood there, gaping.

The room was light and airy and bigger than the room he'd just left. Several tables took up most of the space, cluttered with a tangle of skins, bones, boards, boxes, pots and more. The walls were covered with cloths with strange, complex designs on them. A sword hung by a thread from the roof. As he stepped forward, he knocked a human skull with his elbow. It was propped on a pole just inside the curtain.

“Beg pardon,” it said and leered at him, its teeth clicking.

Nervously he skittered over to where Autumn stood next to Mother Midcarn and dislodged a box balanced precariously on the corner of a table.

“Sorry,” he said as Mother Midcarn gave him a reproving look.

He picked it up and its lid fell open, revealing flat sheets of some yellowish substance covered in wiggly marks like ants. All the sheets inside the box seemed to be stitched together on one side.

“Just put the book back on the table, Logan” said Mother Midcarn, “and come over here.”

Autumn took it off him and looked at it.

Olde Panooks Booke of Admirred and
Esteemed Spells and Charms for Householde Uses moste tried and found
benificent but notte alle

“What is this?” she asked. “A book of spells?”

She opened the book to a random page and the purple lettering faded and reappeared, quivering gently.

Of sassafras take onne part thereof and same of harte
of myrtlebraine and finely choppe under the fullnes of
Plifal thence Steep in dew from onne what didst die a virginn
and lightly strewe uponne thine hose

she read aloud, using her finger to keep the letters in place.

“Very good for keeping the moths from your clothes,” said Mother Midcarn, taking the book and shutting it firmly. “Seems to work with cockroaches too although it's getting old and losing its effectiveness. Please don't touch things, they mightn't like it.”

“What's a book?” asked Logan.

“A book is where things are written,” said Autumn. “I'll explain later.”

“If there is a later,” muttered Logan grimly. “Spells!”

“So, you are a witch?” Autumn asked Mother Midcarn. “I have heard of such people but I have not met one before.”

“I dabble a little,” she said, “but I have no great talent for the art. I'm much better at tanning leather which pays for all of this, although some folk come to me for love potions and getting rid of the consequences. No, my talents, such as they are, lie in divination, prophecy and augury. I've got a certificate somewhere if you want to check, from the Infinite Indefinite Institute in Uli-Rratha, or the Third I as we alumni call it.”

“Oh, I believe you,” said Autumn. “So what did you want to show us?”

Mother Midcarn looked faintly bewildered then her face cleared and she snapped her fingers.

“You wanted to know how I knew you were coming, didn't you, dear,” she exclaimed. “Let me just get my Window.”

She turned to the table behind her and picked up a wooden bowl and handed it to Logan and picked up the cloth covered object underneath. The bloodshot eyes in the bowl looked mournfully at him and he quickly put it back on the table.

“Are those eyes?” he asked, feeling sick.

“Hmm? Those?” said Mother Midcarn. “No, they're red spot scallops, very tasty with a cream of garlic sauce and some pepper. Want to try some?”

“No thank you,” said Logan, backing away, swallowing hard.

“Your loss,” said Mother Midcarn. “Now, this is my Window. Cost me a pretty parak, I can tell you, but worth all of it.”

She unwrapped the cloth and tossed it onto the table. A corner landed in the garlic sauce unnoticed.

“There, my beauty,” she said, holding up a simple disk of polished ebony.

“What is it?” asked Autumn.

“My Window into the future,” said Mother Midcarn. “With this I can see what may be, what will be and what may have been.”

“How does it work?” asked Autumn, curious. She reached out to touch it and Mother Midcarn snatched it away.

“Ohh, you mustn't touch,” she said. “Only I can touch it. If someone else touches it it loses its integrity or some such. Now what I do is

when I get a feeling something interesting is going to happen I come in here and look through my Window until I see what it is and a score of nights past I got the strangest feeling so I looked. There you were, the two of you, walking down the road to visit old Mother Midcarn. What a nice surprise!"

"Is that all?" asked Autumn, frowning. "You just saw us coming to visit you?"

"Oh dear me no," she said. "The Window showed me all your possible futures and very interesting they were too. You are an impressive little thing, aren't you. Your parents will be so proud."

"I do not have any parents," said Autumn. "I was taken in by the Esysph when I was very young. What are my futures?"

"Oh I can't possibly tell you that," said Mother Midcarn. "If you know your futures your decisions now will be affected and will change them and that would throw everything out of alignment. It would cause chaos, my dear, and chaos in the infinite indefinite would be unimaginable. No, I can't possibly tell you. You're going to have to find out for yourself."

Autumn frowned.

"So what is the purpose of going to your Infinite Indefinite Institute and learning how to prophecise if you cannot do anything about it?" she asked.

"Oh, my dear," laughed Mother Midcarn. "It's essential, absolutely essential, that when I divine someone's future that I know what their future is so that I don't tell them by accident. Oh dearie me, that would never do. Just imagine if everyone knew what was going to happen, why, there'd be no point in doing anything, would there? They'd know it's going to happen so they won't bother to do what they need to do to make it happen so it doesn't end up happening. Chaos, total chaos. No, that would never do and I'd lose my licence to auger if I ever did such a thing as that."

"I be confused," said Logan. "You brought us in here to show us that

you cannot tell us why we're in here?"

"You don't sound confused at all to me," said Mother Midcarn, patting him on the arm. "You've got it in a nutshell. But there is something I can tell you. Someone is looking for you."

"What do you mean, someone is looking for us?" said Logan. "Did you not just say you cannot tell us what you saw?"

"Not you," she said. "No one is looking for you. No, they're looking for Autumn, and I would venture it's not because she's a pretty little thing, even though she is," and she smiled happily.

"Why do you think that someone is looking for me?" said Autumn. "Did you see that in your Window?"

"Oh, I can't tell you that," she said, "I thought I just explained. No, some men came here last night asking if I'd seen you. They had a description of you too, although it didn't do you justice, as well as Logan and Darius so whoever it is has seen you."

"Was it four men on horses?" asked Logan.

"Oh you know them, do you?" asked Mother Midcarn. "I rather got the idea they didn't know you."

"No, we do not know them," said Autumn. "We just heard them passing in the night. What happened to them?"

"They stayed the night," said Mother Midcarn, "although I can't say they were the nicest of guests I've had staying here. A bit rough and ready but they paid cash which always helps. They left this morning, bright and early."

"Do you know which way they went?" asked Autumn.

"They took the lane to Gleard," she said. "They were meeting up with their friends for some sort of party. I don't know what it was but they seemed to be looking forward to it. I overheard one of them was talking about an old flame and how they were going to paint the town

red.”

“They weren't Naja'yak, perchance?” asked Autumn.

“Now that you mention it, I think they were,” said Mother Midcarn. “So you do know them, after all?”

“Of them,” said Logan. “We do not want to get too personal with them. Which way is Glead?”

“Keep heading South,” said Mother Midgard. “The other two ways just go to small local villages. Glead is the nearest town.”

“That be unfortunate,” said Autumn. “We are heading South but I think it best if we do not go to Glead especially if there are people looking for us there. Is there any other way?”

“You could go across country,” said Mother Midcarn, “and skirt Glead. Is it due South you're heading or anywhere in the South? Glead is a tad to the West.”

“We are heading for the Skizze Mountains,” said Autumn.

“Ahh, the Skizze Mountains,” said Mother Midcarn, sucking her teeth. “Yes, I've heard of them but I can't rightly say I know exactly where they are. Hmm.”

She turned and gazed thoughtfully around the room then ran to a chest and started taking books out, looking at them and tossing them aside.

“Are those books as well?” whispered Logan.

“Yes,” Autumn whispered back and went to look at some of them.

Efficacious Love Philtres Potions and Persuasions

Toads and Newts and Alle Goode Things

Firste Steppes in Auzurey and Wot Notte

“Hmmm,” she said and put them back down.

“Here we are,” cried Mother Midcarn, triumphantly holding up a slim volume. “I knew I had one somewhere.”

“What is it?” asked Autumn.

“~~Modelflicks Almanac of All Things Known~~,” she said. “Now, let me see ...”

She slowly turned pages, studying them one by one.

“Aha,” she said. “Look at this.”

She turned the page so Autumn could see it. Logan peered over her shoulder but it was just a confusing mass of worm-like squiggles.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s a map,” said Mother Midcarn. “Look, we’re here, and the Skizze Mountains are there. They’re some way to the East of due South. I’d venture that you’d best leave here and head for Cheilith, then follow the Kiraric River down to the Chevesic Forest then to the city of Kaloolon. You should be able to find someone who’ll take you across the Sea of Looncan to the Skizze Mountains.”

“The sea?” said Autumn, looking somewhat alarmed to Logan’s surprise. “Go across the sea?”

“Yes,” said Mother Midcarn. “You’re going to have to cross the Sea of Looncan somehow and a boat is the easiest.”

“If it must be, then it must be,” said Autumn unhappily.

Logan frowned, he’d never seen Autumn look anything other than calm and relaxed, except when she was fighting where she looked calm, relaxed and intent. This was worrying.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said Autumn. “We have a path ahead and Chershoe will

guide our steps. Come, we must be on our way, we have far to go. One final question, Mother Midcarn, if you will indulge me?"

"Certainly, dear," said Mother Midcarn, tossing Modeflicks Almanac on the floor with the others.

"Where did the four men sleep last night?" asked Autumn. "Even though your dwelling looks large inside, it is full of things. There does not seem to be room for four travellers."

"Oh I just added another room for the night," said Mother Midcarn. "When they departed I got rid of it."

"How did you do that?" asked Logan. "Wouldn't it take several days to build another hut?"

"No time at all, dear," said Mother Midcarn, beaming and patting ~~Olde Panooks Booke~~. "It's all in here, you see. Old Panook knew a thing or two about houses. Are you sure you don't want to stay the night? You can have a room each if you want."

"No, we are travellers," said Autumn, "and most desirous of resuming the path. We thank you for your hospitality and will bid you farewell."

"Well, if you must, you must," said Mother Midcarn. "Now, there's something I'm forgetting. What is it, hey? What is it?"

She gazed fretfully around the room then slapped her forehead.

"I'm getting old and foolish," she said. "Come, I have gifts for you in the other room."

Autumn and Logan followed her back behind the curtain.

"I have three things," she said, picking up two from a niche in the wall. "For you, Autumn Savannah, I have this length of silver ribbon. It will look well as trim for your robe and may serve you in other ways."

"I thank you for your gift," said Autumn, taking it. "A gift given freely

is precious indeed. I shall cherish this ribbon.”

“And given with love,” said Mother Midcarn. “As it is with your gift, Logan. I know you seek a stone to calm your mind and so I give you this. May it serve you faithfully.”

“Thank you,” said Logan, taking the stone. It was the length of his hand yet barely a finger thick and was flat on one side. Pure black in colour with no marks or flaws. It felt solid and natural in his hand. “This is a very fine stone and its touch in my hand already eases my mind.”

“That is good,” said Mother Midcarn. “The third is not a thing but a thought. Cherish yonder cat for you may find in time he is no ordinary cat.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn. “I have never seen a cat such as he before but my knowledge of his kind is scant. In what way is he no ordinary cat?”

“More I cannot say,” said Mother Midcarn. “But should the time come, and I hope it does not, you may find there is more to him than meets the eye.”

“You speak in riddles, Mother Midcarn,” said Autumn, “but if it is as you say then we may hope that he remains an ordinary cat and that our curiosity is not assuaged. We thank you again for your gifts and your words.”

Mother Midcarn escorted them outside. Darius was nowhere to be seen.

“That is the path to Cheilith,” she said, pointing down the Eastern track at the crossroad. “It will take you East for a time but when you meet the Kiraric River you will head South again and this way you will miss Glead and whatever misfortune awaits you there. May you have every success in your venture to the South and whatever lies beyond.”

She went back inside her hut and pushed the door to without looking

back at them.

“Come,” said Autumn. “Let us be on our way without further ado.”

“Do you suppose those men and the Naja'yak have fired Gleard as well?” asked Logan.

“I cannot smell smoke,” said Autumn, “but I cannot smell anything other than the tanning. It fills my nostrils to the exclusion of all else.”

“Yes, it does stink,” said Logan. “I wonder why we didn't smell it in the hut?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, turning to look back at the hut. “Perhaps Olde Panooks had something to say about smells as well.”

“Ahh, the book,” said Logan. “What is a book?”

“A book is a place of memory,” said Autumn. “You saw the marks upon the pages?”

“I saw marks,” said Logan “but I know not what a page is.”

“No matter,” said Autumn. “It is sufficient that a page is a part of a book. What is important is that the marks in the book are a language that allows someone to speak when they are not there and tell of things they know or believe. Olde Panooks is long dead but his words still speak to those who have the language to hear them.”

“So that book is the words of Olde Panooks?” said Logan. “Truly that is the magic and not a hut that does not smell. Can you hear the words of those not here, Autumn?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I have that skill.”

“Can you teach me?” he asked, “or do I not have the wit to learn?”

“Aye, I can teach you,” said Autumn. “Although that path is long and arduous and can lead you astray but as with any journey into the unknown the most important step is the first. Once taken the second

is easier and so is the third.”

“When shall I take the first step?” asked Logan. “Tonight?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “If that is your desire.”

“Yes,” said Logan. “With this fine stone I feel at ease with myself. Mayhap my mind can stay still long enough to learn what you have to teach me.”

“Then it is an excellent stone,” said Autumn, “for some can never learn no matter what the teaching or the teacher.”

“And what of Darius?” said Logan. “He is no ordinary cat? He eats and sleeps and farts like an ordinary cat only more so as he is bigger than most.”

“Yes, that is a puzzle,” said Autumn. “We desire to know the manner in which he is not ordinary yet we may fear the knowing.”

“Grroww,” said Darius, joining them on the track.

“So how are you special, Darius?” asked Logan.

“I cat,” said Darius. “Is enough.”

“Pfft,” said Logan, walking on.

“Do you ever feel fear, Autumn?” he asked a while later.

“Yes,” she said. “I fear many things, but it is important to face your fears and become familiar with them and thereby overcome them. Once familiar those things you fear become small and easily managed.”

“Only I saw your face when Mother Midcarn talked of the Sea of Looncan,” said Logan. “Does it frighten you?”

“The Sea of Looncan,” said Autumn. “It stretches from horizon to horizon and is blue and bitter and I cannot swim. How do we cross

such a thing and what manner of creature dwells within? I am not familiar with sea nor can I think of any way to become familiar. Yes, I am fearful of it. It frightens me greatly and I see no way to overcome that fear.”

Chapter Ten

Contrary to their unspoken fears, the village of Cheilith was not a burnt out ruin filled with corpses although it was a poor place, ill-kempt and ill-favoured, suspicious of strangers. Many dwellings were in need of repair and such animals as were there gaunt. A beggar watched their passing and held out a grimy bowl with a derelict hand. He grunted his thanks when Autumn gave him the last of their bread unable to speak through the absence of a tongue, his face seamed with the sufferings of time and privation. A loitering child darted and stole the bread and scampered away, chased by a mangy dog. The beggar hammered the ground in rage then calmed when Autumn handed him the last of their cheese. Cheilith was still alive, if only by a thread.

“Which way to the Kiraric River?” she asked and the beggar pointed in the direction from which they had come and laughed, his long matted beard slapping his thin chest.

“You'll get no sense from him,” said a woman in a doorway. “Bugger be daft and addled in his mind, stroked by Voqev and the worse for it.”

She wore a sackcloth tunic with rents repaired with leaves, as dry and wrinkled as her skin. Her hair hung in matted hanks and her feet were thick with filth. A rat, limp and forlorn, dangled by its tail from her grasp.

“The Kiraric River be that way,” she said, pointing. “Follow the stream for it flows into the Kiraric but do not tarry. 'Twil be nightfall soon.”

“What ails this place?” asked Logan.

“Yammoe stalks this place,” she said and gave the rat a jerk. “Strangers be not welcome.”

She tittered and hid her face with her hair then spun and disappeared inside her door.

“We had best move on,” said Autumn.

They headed for the stream, past a dwelling whose roof had collapsed. A tall, thin man, naked save only for a cloth cap on his head and sores on his body came out.

“There you are, mother dear,” he said. “Where have you been?”

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn. “You are mistaken.”

“Plakill rises late and is blood red,” he said. “You promised me you'd feed the ducks and yet you baulk and wail like a cow lowing in the five meadows of a harlot's curse.”

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

“Yellow is my favourite,” he said with a vacant smile and danced a little jig. “Do you like my labours, mother dear?” He urinated at her feet then sucked his thumb, looking at her with calm brown eyes.

“He be mad,” said Logan suddenly. “Come away now, for Aloidia's sake.”

He grabbed Autumn's arm and started to drag her away. She let him, reluctantly.

“Aloidia, sploidia and all the little oidias,” sang the man. “Now there's a pretty maid. Come, dance with me fair maid, the night is still young.”

He lurched over to Darius and tried to grab him around the waist. Darius growled and backed away, the hackles on his back rising. The man chased him.

“Beloved,” he cried, “I beseech you, do not dally with the turnips.”

Darius hissed and lashed out with a paw then leapt past him and headed for the stream, his tail thick.

“Ohhh, she loves me, mother dear,” cried the man, turning to face Autumn, now some paces distant, four fresh scratches on his cheek and blood beginning to ooze. His nose ran.

The woman in the sackcloth reappeared and cackled, the rat still dangling in her hand. The beggar quietly reached out and grabbed it and she turned on him, screaming imprecations and beating him with her fists as he tried to take a bite out of the rat and fend her off.

The thin man wiped his cheek and looked at his fingers.

“It's raining,” he suddenly shouted. “Everyone, get under cover, now!”

He rushed into his hut and his face reappeared over the wall.

“Daffodils and daisies!” he shouted angrily then disappeared.

The woman in the sackcloth grabbed the rat from the beggar's mouth and ran screaming back into her hut.

“Crrgghh haa,” said the beggar, beckoning to Autumn.

“Sploop,” said Logan continuing to drag Autumn. She turned and they both ran.

“What manner of place was that?” said Autumn with an air of disbelief when they stopped some distance down the stream.

“I do not know,” said Logan, “but it be not somewhere we would want to spend the night.”

“Let us put some distance in before we camp,” said Autumn. “They may wander in the night.”

“Definitely,” said Logan and they turned to follow Darius, a long way ahead.

* * *

“There are two sides to this skill,” said Autumn. “The making of the marks which is called writing and the sounding of the marks which is called reading.”

They had made camp where the stream joined the Kiraric River and

Logan had made a fire while Autumn foraged for roots and berries. She put some roots in the fire to cook and scraped a patch of ground clear from grass.

“Good,” said Logan, “writing and reading. Which do I need to know?”

“Both,” said Autumn. “The one goes with the other, just as listening and speaking go with each other but just as one goes with the other there is only one learning not two.”

“I do not understand,” said Logan. “If there are two skills do I not need to learn both?”

“Yes,” said Autumn patiently. “but the key to both is the marks. You must learn which marks go with which sounds you speak and once you have learned you can make the marks for what you say and say the marks that others have made. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” said Logan. “What are the shapes?”

“Come, sit beside me,” said Autumn.

She poured a little water from the waterskin onto the patch she'd cleared and made it muddy.

“We can work with this,” she said. “The shapes we make go with the sounds we speak and the same sound uses the same shape. Look, these are the marks which mean your name, Logan, which has five marks.”

With the end of a twig she slowly gouged the letters in the mud.

“Five?” said Logan, staring at the marks on the ground. “But there are only three sounds in my name, Lo, Ga and Ne.”

“No,” said Autumn. “Lo is two sounds not one. Le and Oh and this is the shape for Le and this Oh. Your name could be Li or La or something else but each starts with the Le sound so we make the mark for Le and then a different mark for the Ih or the Ah, like this.”

She deftly gouged the shapes and sat back to watch him. He studied the shapes intently and ran his finger over them lightly, so as not to disfigure them.

“Let me do it,” he said.

“A moment,” said Autumn and wet her fingers then cleared the shapes in the mud. Deftly she rewrote LOGAN at the top, leaving plenty of space below.

“You copy the shapes as carefully as you can,” she said, passing him the twig.

Laboriously Logan bent to his task, his face screwed up with concentration. The results were shaky.

“Again,” said Autumn, wiping his work. “Copy the shapes exactly.”

“Better,” she said when he was done. “Now try from memory,” and she wiped the whole patch of mud.

Logan managed the L and the O but struggled to remember how the shape of the G looked.

Darius came over to see what they were up to and expressed his contempt by sitting on the mud patch. Autumn pushed him away and he stalked off, his tail twitching angrily. Again Autumn wrote the shapes and made Logan copy them many times.

“This be harder than working the fields,” he said. “My head is tired. How many shapes are there?”

“Twenty three,” said Autumn, “but I shall show you the others later.”

“Only twenty three?” said Logan surprised. “But there are so many names for things! How can just twenty three shapes mean them all?”

“That is the skill,” said Autumn. “Remembering the shapes is only a very small part of writing and reading. The skill comes in how you arrange the shapes. Look, this is the Le, this the Oh and this the Ge

but if that is all I write what have I writ?"

"The first part of my name," said Logan, puzzled.

"Say what I have writ," commanded Autumn, wiping all but the three shapes.

"Le-Oh-Ge," said Logan slowly.

"No, do not say it slowly," said Autumn. "Say it as a single name."

"LOG," said Logan. "What kind of name is that?"

"What are you sitting on?" asked Autumn.

"A log," said Logan.

"And what is writ here?" she asked.

"LOG," he said, watching her face for clues.

"Do you not hear what is writ?" she asked, eyebrows raised.

Logan looked at the shapes in the mud then at the log then back at her.

"Log!" he said suddenly. "What be writ there be log!" and he thumped the log in excitement.

"Now you begin to see?" asked Autumn. "We can only speak some sounds so all that we say is those sounds in different arrangements. Twenty three shapes is enough for most sounds although we do not have shapes for the sound the wind makes or the rain and many others."

Logan bent to gouge the mud then sat back looking perplexed.

"Oh-Ge-Ah," he said. "I know not what that is."

"It is nothing," said Autumn. "Not all arrangings make things we say

but one day if you find something that has no name you can make a name for it out of these shapes and, because you have written it, others will know what you have named the thing.”

“Ahh, this is too much for my small head,” said Logan. “This would seem to be a most difficult skill to master.”

“It will come in time,” said Autumn, “if you have the discipline to work and practice. You have seen me fighting, do you think I learned those skills in one afternoon? I have practised these twenty summers and I still have much to learn.”

“How so?” said Logan. “You are invincible! What more do you need to learn?”

“I am not invincible,” said Autumn. “I have been bested many times and I will be again. There are those with greater skills than I possess and yet those with lesser skills may still best me through force of numbers or mischance.”

“I do not believe that anyone will ever best you, Autumn,” said Logan. “You are the best fighter in this land!”

“I thank you for your faith in me,” said Autumn, “but there is one foe that will forever best me and that is over-confidence. I must know myself as I am and not as how I would wish myself but this does not help you with your writing and reading. Come, while there is yet light you must practice until you can write and read those five shapes with speed and confidence and then I will teach you five more. With practice and determination you will become skilled.”

“Will I ever be as good at reading and writing as you are at fighting?” asked Logan after writing his name four more times.

“If you are diligent,” said Autumn.

She got up and wandered the glade looking at the ground then suddenly stooped and threw a stone at Logan. Startled he managed to raise a hand in time to deflect the stone from hitting his face,

“What did you do that for?” he cried. “Have I displeased you?”

“Why did you raise your hand?” asked Autumn, coming back.

“You threw a stone at me,” he said.

“But did you see the stone and think about how to respond to it?” she asked. “Did you think of all possible things you could do then decide to raise your hand?”

“Sploop, no,” he said. “I just reacted.”

“That is right,” said Autumn. “You reacted without thinking yet why did you not spit instead or scratch your head?”

“Because those wouldn't have stopped the stone,” said Logan.

“But why didn't you start to spit then decide not to?” asked Autumn.

“What good would it have done?” asked Logan. “You threw a stone at me and spitting wouldn't have helped at all.”

“That's right,” said Autumn. “And so it is with writing and fighting. You must practice all the skills so that when a particular need arises you do it without thinking, you react but you react with the right thing not the wrong thing. Knowing the shapes or the moves is not enough, the true test is doing the right one without having to think about it. If someone lunges at me I do not need to think 'he come at me from this side or that and therefore I must do this', I just do it without thinking. So it is with you. You must practice so you do not think about the shapes for the sounds, you just draw the right shape when you hear the sound, without thinking. It will come but only with practice.”

* * *

“What does this say?” asked Logan. “I recognise the Oh and the Ne but not the others.”

“It says Choren,” said Autumn “and it seems to point along the left

fork.”

“What do you suppose Chorenn means?” asked Logan.

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “Perhaps it is the name of a village or town and this message tells folk which path to take.”

“Don't seem likely,” said Logan. “People going to a place must know where it is or else they would not be going there, they be going some place else.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “Or perhaps people who want to go there take the wrong path for some reason or maybe it is not the name of a place but of something else. Still, we want to go that way anyway. The other way heads too much to the North.”

“You do not think it be the name of a dragon that lives along here?” said Logan jokingly. He was in a good humour because he'd recognised the sound shapes.

“I would not think so,” said Autumn, taking him seriously. “This track looks well travelled. Would not people avoid a dragon rather than travel to see it? Perhaps the dragon is the other way and Chorenn means 'safety'.”

“I was joking,” said Logan.

“What is joking?” asked Autumn, heading off down the track.

“It be when you say something funny,” said Logan.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “What is 'funny'?”

“Obviously not that,” said Logan.

“I do not understand you,” said Autumn. “You say it is funny but that it is not. How can it be both?”

“It be too nice a day for your mind games,” said Logan. “Enjoy the sunshine and forget that I said anything.”

“How can I forget something deliberately?” asked Autumn. “Surely trying to forget something is going to keep it in the mind for longer. Now that you want me to forget what you said I am going to be thinking about what you said and what it meant since you will not tell me.”

“Oh look,” said Logan, pointing. “Mushrooms, I love mushrooms!”

He ran over to the cluster of mushrooms under a tree beside the path and started harvesting them with his knife.

“We shall have them for dinner,” said Autumn, joining him. “I like mushrooms too.”

“Plenty here,” said Logan. “Maybe there be some garlic growing nearby. Mushrooms with garlic are fit for the gods.”

Darius sprawled nearby, not in the slightest bit interested in mushrooms.

“Man comes,” he said after a while.

“Where?” asked Autumn.

Darius pointed with his head.

“Sounds like a lot of people,” said Autumn. “Let us get among the trees and let them pass.”

Darius disappeared into the woods and Autumn and Logan took refuge behind a fallen tree, its core dry and riddled with termites. What remained of its surface was hidden under layers of fungus, brown and red and dotted with black. A large spider, half the size of a hand, paused, sensing danger. It scurried to and fro then, drawn by a termite writhing, trapped, it danced across the translucent fibres of its web and began to weave the termite's death cocoon.

“Ugh,” muttered Logan and squashed it with the hilt of his knife. It burst messily and its eight legs spasmed in death.

“That was unnecessary,” whispered Autumn. “The spider was not threatening you nor, had it bitten, have caused you much harm. It was not a poisonous spider.”

“I just do not like spiders,” Logan whispered back. “Nasty crawly things, ughh.”

“So, not liking something is sufficient cause to kill it?” whispered Autumn. “By your philosophy, 'tis well I like you then, Logan.”

“You would not kill me even if you didn't,” he retorted quietly, a watchful eye on the path. “It be against your beliefs.”

“Nay,” she said, “unnecessary killing is against my beliefs, but if I decide to kill you, be assured there will be sufficient reason, and more than simply not liking you.”

“Such as?” he whispered, turning to look at her.

“Mayhap to defend a defenceless spider,” she muttered.

Logan snorted quietly and scraped the guts of the spider off the tree with his knife edge and wiped it on the grass beside him. Autumn reached over and gently tore the web around the termite, allowing it to regain a footing on the fungus. It paused, perhaps to assess its new circumstances or to offer up a prayer to the god of termites then hurried off to rejoin its companions, burrowing into the heart of the tree.

“All life is sacred,” whispered Autumn, wiping the remains of the web from her finger onto Logan's hair. “Treat it with respect. If you must kill, kill with good reason and know that reason.”

“It seemed a good reason to me,” whispered back Logan, “and I knew the reason. You be saying I need a reason that be good enough for you. What if you kill someone or something for a reason that others do not think is sufficient?”

“You make a good point, Logan,” she whispered thoughtfully. “And what, in turn, if someone wants me to kill another for what they

consider to be a good reason? Should that be sufficient for me?"

She twisted her head away from looking down the path to watch Logan carve an L in the wood.

"No," she said, returning her gaze to the path. "There can only be one criterion and that is my own conscience. I cannot be responsible for another's reasons, only my own and if another considers my reasons to be unworthy then so be it. Likewise, I would not kill for another unless their reason is sufficient of itself to be a reason for me. If it is not worthy by my conscience then I could not do it."

"So in effect you have agreed that my killing the spider for what I considered to be a good reason to be sufficient of itself," said Logan. "As I did not ask you to do it you have no say in the matter."

Autumn turned to look at him thoughtfully.

"You argue well," she said. "I had not thought you had that capacity."

"Neither did I," said Logan with a small laugh. "Maybe it be because I am learning to read."

Autumn raised an eyebrow but didn't respond.

"Here they come," she said a few moments later. "I venture there are twenty or more."

"Aye," said Logan. "But they move strangely and not as a group normally does."

"You are right," said Autumn, peering over the tree. "It looks as though some are bound to each other and there are women included. This does not look well to me."

"Nor me," said Logan. "Umm, Autumn?"

"Yes, Logan?" said Autumn.

"You were right," he said. "Not liking a spider be not a good enough

reason to kill it. It sits ill on my conscience now.”

Chapter Eleven

“I count nine men and seven women tied round the neck with ropes,” said Autumn, as the group got closer, “and six men not tied and another on a horse.”

“So do I,” said Logan. “Do you think they are prisoners or criminals? Or mayhap it be a strange form of ritual in these parts. Some god of something we know not what.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, watching intently. “But mark their countenances. Those tied have faces of defeat and resignation and shuffle as though unwilling. The others look bored but walk with confidence, save the one on horseback who has an air of command but none look priestly nor have an air of worship.”

“So you think they are captives?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but where from and whither going and who by is not apparent.”

“No matter,” said Logan. “If we stay here quietly they will pass us by without noticing us.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “If we stay here quietly.”

“Oh Sploop,” muttered Logan as she got up. “Here we go again.”

“I will not let injustice pass me by,” said Autumn. “Especially against women. You stay here and mind our packs.”

She grasped her staff firmly and stepped out into the middle of the path, facing the oncoming band. As they got closer she could see that all of the tied men had blood on their heads or bodies and all the women's clothing was torn. All sixteen were bound by the neck to each other and all had their hands behind their backs. As she watched one man stumbled and fell, unable to use his hands to break his fall and pulled the ones in front and behind to the ground with him. One of the not tied men cursed and hauled him to his feet using the neck rope while others kicked those who had fallen as they struggled to

rise. One tried to bite his tormentor but got a kick in his face for his trouble, causing fresh blood to issue forth. The man on the horse did not look back, his eyes upon the small figure on the path ahead. The horse tossed its head but did not stop.

“Greetings,” said Autumn as the band grew closer. “I am Autumn Savannah, traveller in these parts.”

She held up a hand in peaceful welcome. The man on horseback barked a command and the band stopped. Several of the tied men swayed with fatigue and one woman fell against the back of the woman in front of her and was pulled roughly upright by her hair by one of the guards.

The man urged his horse forward a few steps and sat there, regarding Autumn then he surveyed the woods on either side of the path. Finally he spat on the ground and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“I am Ynnis,” he said. “Summen of Loheckle natal Chant’ist ab Hecknoor, Lord of all he surveys,” and he spat again.

Ynnis looked around at the woods again then twisted to look behind him.

“All alone, are you?” he asked, turning back to Autumn.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “What be ...?”

“No,” cried Logan, jumping out from behind the fallen tree and going to stand an arm’s length from Autumn. “She is not alone!”

The horse skittered back a couple of paces and Ynnis yanked hard on the rope that served as a bridle.

“Quieten down, damn you,” he said angrily then kicked the horse forward again. It did as it was bid but with agitation in its eyes and flecks of foam on its jaws.

The horse and the man eyed Logan suspiciously.

“And who might you be?” he asked.

“I am Logan,” said Logan, trying to sound brave. “I can write my own name!”

“A wondrous feat,” said Ynnis sarcastically. “You be in my way, boy. Go play with your writing somewhere else before I use your blood to write your fate.”

His men laughed and gathered around him. Logan tried to spit but his mouth was too dry.

“I meant no ...” he started then realised his voice was a little high pitched. “I meant no offence,” he said again, forcing it to sound more normal.

“None taken,” said Ynnis. “Move out of my way, boy,” and he urged his horse forward.

“Hold,” said Autumn in a strong, steady voice and Ynnis reined in his horse.

“We have a long way to go,” he said, “and my men are tired. Speak your business quickly. I will not tarry long, girl, unless you wish to entertain me in the woods for a time.”

He grinned and tugged his beard.

“I merely desire to know your business with those in ropes,” said Autumn.

“They be prisoners of my Lord,” said Ynnis. “Destined to volunteer to join his noble army or be sold as slaves if they will not. The women will be put to other uses.”

Several of his men sniggered and leered.

“So there is a war happening?” asked Autumn. “Against whom does your Lord fight?”

“Aye, there be a war of sorts,” said Ynnis, “although we have not yet brought the Roinad to battle.”

“She be too scared of us,” called one of his men and the others cheered. The roped people looked on numbly although the one who had tried to bite a guard was now trying to gnaw through the rope joining him to the man in front.

“Well, that's as maybe,” said Ynnis, “although it may also be that she don't yet know Lord Loheckle be a-warring on her yet.”

“So Lord Loheckle is a rebel?” asked Autumn.

Ynnis stared at her, stroking his beard.

“I don't rightly reckon that's your business,” he said, “until it comes time to take sides. You be a follower of the Roinad, be you?”

“I am a follower of Mizule and Vallume,” said Autumn. “I know no other authority.”

“Big words for a little girl,” said Ynnis. “What did you say your name was again?”

“Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, “and he be Logan.”

“Aye, him what can write his name though he be not yet old enough for a beard,” said Ynnis. “I know him not but your name, ahh, that I have heard before. My Lord wants you, although I cannot imagine why. His tastes run to more buxom maids and not one as skinny as you. Vray, Janne, grab her and tie her behind the others. The boy as well, he might fetch a parak or two at the markets for them as wants a scribe.”

One of the men, Janne, stepped towards Logan who pulled out his knife and dropped into a crouch. They circled each other then the man disarmed him and threw him to the ground. The other man, Vray, walked nonchalantly towards Autumn and she put the end of her staff to his chest, blocking him. Vray grabbed the staff and they locked eyes.

"I beg you not to do this," said Autumn, "for your own sake."

Vray laughed and the others jeered. He wrenched the staff aside and stepped forward and was felled by a swift stabbing kick to the side of his leg.

"Arghhh," he cried out, clutching his lower leg. "It be broken, god cursed bitch broke my leg!"

The other four men rushed forward while Janne put one foot on Logan's chest to stop him getting up. Their rush was stopped by a wide sweep of Autumn's staff.

"We waste too much time dallying here," growled Ynnis. "Tie her or kill her but be done with it."

One of the men leapt forward and Autumn felled him with a swirling kick to the head. Two others jumped on her while the last circled behind and Autumn dropped her staff. As Autumn winded one with a fist to his belly and spun to kick the other, the one behind jumped on her and got an arm around her neck. She missed the one with her kick and he stepped forward to hit her in the face but caught her straight fingers in his throat and fell gasping and choking to the ground. Autumn instantly stamped back hard on the foot of the man holding her from behind and rammed backwards with her elbow to his lower chest then wrenched forward as he doubled up in pain and released his grip. Stepping forward she back kicked him in the head and he fell unconscious. Janne stepped off Logan to attack Autumn but Logan caught his foot and he stumbled then sprawled on the ground and Logan leapt on him, fists flailing.

Ynnis watched with ill concealed contempt.

"Useless scum," he muttered and pulled his sword.

He urged his horse forward, his sword pointing at Autumn. She backed away and he moved the horse forward another step.

"One move and I'll run you through," he growled, his sword inches from Autumn's heart.

She didn't move, just watched him closely.

“Grath,” called Ynnis to the winded man, his eyes never leaving Autumn. “Get some rope and bind her.”

Grath got to his feet, clutching his belly with one hand and half ran half stumbled over to Vray who was huddled on the ground, groaning and clutching his leg, a length of rope beside him. Grath grabbed the rope and Autumn raised her hands in front of her for him to bind them. Stupidly Grath went between Ynnis and Autumn to tie her hands and Autumn kneed him between the legs while simultaneous swinging both hands round to chop his neck as he doubled over then whirled around and sideways out of reach of Ynnis' sword. Ynnis cursed and raised his sword to slash down at Autumn then thudded to the ground as a black and silver streak cannoned into him from part way up a nearby tree. Ynnis screamed and Darius went for his throat.

“Darius! No!” cried Autumn and Darius froze, one tooth already breaking the skin of Ynnis' throat.

“Kill,” snarled Darius.

“No,” said Autumn. “Leave him.”

“Why?” said Darius.

Autumn looked over at Logan who was sitting on the belly of Vray with one foot on his throat and his small knife in his hand pointing at Vray's eyes.

“Logan?” she asked.

“He is no longer a threat,” said Logan.

“Grraggh,” spat Darius in disgust and released Ynnis.

“Stay down, all of you,” commanded Autumn. Ynnis stayed down and one of the men who was regaining consciousness sat up, holding his head.

Autumn picked up her staff and tossed it to Logan.

“Strike any who rise,” she commanded and bent to pick up Ynnis' sword.

Ynnis watched her with hatred in his eyes and half moved to grab the sword but she stamped on his wrist as Darius went for his throat again.

“Darius!” warned Autumn and Darius froze, his jaws around Ynnis' throat.

“Do not move again, Ynnis,” said Autumn.

“Yerghh,” said Ynnis, not moving.

Slowly Darius released his grip. Autumn watched him for a few moments then marched over to the first of the tied men. She cut the rope around his neck with the sword then his hands then handed the sword to him, saying “release the others.”

He looked at her for a moment then turned to start cutting the binding of the others. Autumn walked over to Vray and knelt beside him. Gently she rolled him on his back and wiped his forehead. He was white faced and sweating.

“Be calm,” she said. “I need to look at your leg. This may hurt a little but I will be gentle.”

She took his hands and lifted them away from his leg and gently started to probe.

“Arrgghhh,” cried Vray and tried to jerk his leg away.

Autumn released his leg and sat back on her heels.

“Ayah,” she said when he'd stopped moaning. “Your leg is broken below the knee. For that I apologise.”

“He deserved it,” called Logan, brandishing Autumn's staff and trying

to look fierce.

“Be that as it may,” said Autumn, standing up. “It needs attention so that it heals well and does not become infected.”

There was a sudden movement as one of the prisoners snatched the sword from the one releasing them and charged at the guard on the ground nearest him, the sword raised. With a bound Autumn leapt over and felled him with a kick to his shoulder and the sword flashed into the ground, missing the fallen guard by a hand's breadth.

Snarling like Darius he leapt up and launched himself at Autumn who stepped aside and he sprawled on the ground. Furious he leapt up and launched himself at her again and again went sprawling. One of the other prisoners put his foot on the man's chest.

“Hold yourself, Zanan,” he said. “She bested seven soldiers, what hope have you?”

Zanan wrestled with the man's foot then gave up.

“It was only six,” said Autumn, “but no matter. Where are you from?”

“Chorenn,” said the man. “I be Atorn, this be my brother Zanan.”

“Are you all from Chorenn?” asked Autumn.

The man who had been releasing the prisoners retrieved the sword and went back to work. One of the women fainted when he released her and the others huddled around her.

“Yes,” he said. “An army fell on us in the night and we could not fight back even though we outnumbered them for we were taken by surprise. They herded us into the town centre while they ransacked all our houses for food and animals then took some of us and bound us and dragged us away.”

“A sorry tale,” said Autumn, “and, alas, I can do nothing about your food or animals but you sixteen return to Chorenn. Your troubles are over for now although I know not what troubles will befall you in time

to come.”

“We will be better prepared,” he said. “Although how we will survive the coming winter I know not but survive we will, somehow. What is your name, lady”

“Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn. “Krisana of Mizule and Vallume and these be my companions, Logan of Biasdo and Darius.”

“I thank you for your aid, Autumn Savannah, and that of your companions,” said Atorn. “Mayhap Zanan will thank you in time to come when he has regained his senses but until then I thank you on his behalf.”

Atorn leaned forward, putting his weight on Zanan's chest and Zanan wheezed a reluctant “thank you” as well. There was a chorus of thanks from the others and some weeping.

“Go home,” said Autumn. “I shall deal with these others. You need not fear them coming after you.”

Atorn took his foot off Zanan and helped him to his feet.

“Again our thanks,” he said. “We shall sacrifice to Morath in your honour when we return to Chorenn and your name will be long remembered.”

“I beg you not to,” said Autumn. “There has been enough suffering already and adding a death will not help. We are merely travellers giving aid to other travellers in distress. If you must remember me, remember me for that and give aid to travellers in return when they need it. There is no need to kill for me, although I warrant you have no animals left anyway.”

“As you wish, lady,” said Atorn with a half bow. “We bid you farewell.”

Autumn watched them leave then gathered up the fallen ropes and started to bind the guards.

“Why do you bind them?” asked Logan, still waving the staff. Darius

was pacing, snarling whenever a man made a move.

"I must attend to this man's leg," she said, "and I need your help. These others may yet do mischief while we are both distracted."

Deftly she bound each of the six men hand and foot then went into the woods. She returned several minutes later carrying a bundle of stout branches and some vines. She put them on the ground beside Vray.

"Give me your knife," she said to Logan.

He stepped over and handed her his knife.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I need to bind the leg with sticks so it does not bend while it heals," she said. "It will also help to reduce his pain."

"Seems unnecessary to me," said Logan. "It was his own fault."

"No, it was mine," said Autumn, kneeling beside Vray. "I misjudged my kick. It was intended to hurt for a time and put him out of the fight but not break the leg."

She held up the knife and Vray cowered back, his eyes pleading.

"I am only going to cut your trouser," she said. "Do not be afraid."

He watched as she gently removed his sandal then slit the leg of the trouser to mid thigh and folded back the cloth.

"Ayah," she said, looking at his leg. "'Tis worse than I thought. The bone is through the skin."

"Can you still fix it?" asked Logan, "or shall we get Darius to end his pain?"

"I can heal this leg," said Autumn, "but I need some herbs and leaves as well. Wait, I shall not be long."

Autumn stood up and went into the woods again. She was gone for some time.

“What have you there?” asked Logan when she returned.

“Hamamielis,” said Autumn. “It is good for healing wounds, and caradace leaves to wrap around and hold the hamamielis in place,” she said. “Hamamielis is best dried and ground but we have not the time for that. This will suffice for now. Logan, put down the staff and come help me.”

Logan glared at the others then came over and put the staff on the ground within easy reach.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked, kneeling beside her.

“You see this bone?” she asked, pointing to a small segment of pointed bone that protruded through the skin of Vray’s shin.

“Yes,” said Logan.

“We need to pull his foot away so that it slides back under the skin and fits into the rest of the bone,” she said. “Then we need to wash off the blood and cover the wound with the hamamielis.”

“Don’t you dare touch it,” muttered Vray through clenched teeth. He had started shaking and his eyes were glazed.

“This leg must be fixed,” said Autumn. “Else it will never heal and will become poisoned. In a short time you will have to submit to having your leg cut off or you will die. It is a simple process and will not hurt.”

“Like buggery,” growled Vray, holding out a trembling hand to try to stop Autumn.

“I promise you it will not hurt,” she said calmly. “Calm yourself. I will put you to sleep so you feel nothing. It will not take long. Now, Logan, when this man is asleep we must work quickly as he will not sleep for long. I need you to hold his shoulders while I pull on his foot and get

the bone back in position. Do you understand?”

“Hold his shoulders,” said Logan. “Yes, I understand, but how are you going to make him sleep?”

“Come,” said Autumn, moving round to Vray’s head. “Put your hand under his neck and feel where my fingers are. You feel the bones in his neck? Find the base of his skull then find the second bone beneath. Do you feel?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “What of it?”

“Hold still, man,” said Autumn as Vray tried to move his head. “Now, if I squeeze hard on that bone he will fall asleep but only for a very short time. Be ready to hold his shoulders as I said.”

Logan moved around and sat on the ground above Vray’s head and grasped him firmly under the armpits. Vray struggled weakly but Logan braced himself.

“Are you ready?” asked Autumn, her fingers under Vray’s neck. Logan nodded.

“Now,” said Autumn and Vray went limp.

Quickly she grabbed his ankle and pulled. Slowly the bone slid back under the skin.

“Again,” said Autumn, “it is not in perfect alignment.”

She hauled again on his foot and the lump where the bone had broken the skin subsided. She leaned forward and probed around the wound and Vray started to stir.

“Good,” she said. “It is done.”

“Sploop,” said Logan, letting go of Vray’s armpits.

“How does your leg feel?” asked Autumn.

"It hurts," said Vray, "but is much relieved."

"The bone is back in its proper place," she said. "Now I must clean and bind it. This will hurt but not as much. Be strong, it will soon be over."

"Why do you not just put him back to sleep again?" asked Logan.

"I cannot," said Autumn. "I have injured his neck in a small way but if I do it again too soon he will die. The neck needs at least a day to recover. Get me a waterskin."

While Logan went to get the skin, Autumn cut the ripped cloth from Vray's leg. She soaked it in water then carefully washed away the blood. Vray gritted his teeth and only cried out the once.

"Good," she said. "That is clean enough."

She took some of the hamamielis petals and crushed them in her fingers and pressed them into the wound. Vray screamed and tried to jerk his leg away.

"Nearly done," said Autumn and wrapped the leg with caradace leaves and secured them with a length of vine.

She sat back on her heels and surveyed the leg then Vray's face. He was still white faced but the sweating had stopped and he was no longer shaking.

"You will live," she said. "Now I must stop the leg from bending again."

She selected two of the straightest branches and stripped off all the leaves and smaller branches and broke them so they were shorter than the leg. She put one each side of the leg then bound vines around so the leg could not move.

"Can you feel this?" she asked, tickling Vray's toes.

"Yes," he said faintly.

“Good,” she said. “The bindings are not too tight. Now, you lie there while we decide what to do with your comrades.”

Chapter Twelve

“So, Ynnis,” drawled Kizerain Qerrassa, spearing a piece of fruit with his knife. “Let me see if I understand you rightly. Fifteen of the Roinad's men fell upon you in the woods and overpowered you and released all my captives and the women, yes?”

“Yes, my Lord,” said Ynnis, trying not to tremble.

“Ahhh,” said Kizerain, cutting the fruit in half and pulling the halves apart. “Tell me, Ynnis, why do you take me for a fool?”

“My Lord?” said Ynnis, standing to attention.

“If you were set upon by the Roinad's men and bested you would all be dead,” said Kizerain, pulling the stone from the centre of the fruit and tossing it at Ynnis, who flinched. “For certain they would not have set that man's leg, fashioned a stretcher for him and tied it to the horse then sent you all back home alive like good little children at bedtime.”

Ynnis didn't speak.

Kizerain slowly chewed on the fruit then levelled his knife at Ynnis.

“Tell me the truth,” he said with quiet intensity, “or I will personally cut off those peanuts you call balls and force them down your throat then rip them out of that fat gut of yours and use your intestines to make sausages.”

Ynnis told him the truth.

“Sooo,” said Kizerain with a long drawn out breath. “She reappears again like a morning mist, this Autumn Savannah. First Pirend, then Sladrill and now on the road to Chorenn. What do you make of that, Ynnis?”

“My Lord?” asked Ynnis, worriedly.

“Oh get out of here, you oaf,” said Kizerain testily and Ynnis

disappeared rapidly, glad to be out of there alive and intact.

Kizerain got up and went to a bucket of scrolls and selected one. He unrolled it on the table and put his knife at one end to hold it flat.

“Hmm,” he said thoughtfully, studying it.

“So you lost a group of new recruits and some bed warmers, I hear,” said Loheckle, throwing back the flap of the tent and striding in. “Damned if we don’t need some more women, the ones we’ve got are getting worn out. I was looking forward to some fresh ones.”

“If you weren’t quite so energetic they might last longer, my Lord,” said Kizerain, not looking up. “I be more worried about the recruits.”

“Yes, I’ve heard rumours about your tastes,” said Loheckle.

Kizerain fixed him with a beady stare and slid his hand over towards his knife.

“And what exactly do you mean by that?” he demanded, adding the “my Lord” as an afterthought.

“Come, man, simply jesting with you,” said Loheckle hurriedly, realising he might have pushed Kizerain too far. “A jest, nothing more. Calm yourself.”

Kizerain stared at him for a few moments then relaxed and bent to the map again.

“They were intercepted and released by Autumn Savannah it seems, my Lord,” he said. “Not far from Chorenn on the road to Cheilith.”

“That Krisana woman?” said Loheckle. “I thought you were going to bring her to me?”

“We haven’t found her yet,” said Kizerain. “Although it would appear that she has found us. It is difficult to find a single person travelling who knows where but I’m beginning to get an idea. Look.”

Obediently Loheckle bent to look at the map as well.

"I first encountered her here, in Pirend," said Kizerain, tapping the map, "then she turns up in Sladrill and now outside Chorenn. T'would seem she is heading South for some reason."

"Sladrill to Chorenn?" asked Loheckle. "Then I warrant she must have passed through Cheilith. My respect for her increases rapidly. I would not venture near that place alone."

"She has a companion, my Lord," said Kizerain, "and perhaps some sort of wild cat if that turd Ynnis is to be believed."

"Still, I would not venture there without twenty men," said Loheckle. "A village of madmen, every one a cannibal or so I hear."

"Just outcasts," said Kizerain, "but too dangerous to live in Chorenn for they be touched by Yammoe or Voqev or both but you are right. She and her companion got through that place without being put in the pot. No matter. If I am right and she is heading South then she is heading for the Chevesic Forest and Kaloolon most likely. I'll send a group of men that way looking for her. Even if they don't find her they can scout Kaloolon. It's time we stopped farting around with villages and towns and marched on a city. Or would you prefer Besl-oor?"

"You're my General," said Loheckle. "I leave such matters to you so long as we still aim for Uli-Rratha and the Roinad."

"I would prefer to capture Kaloolon then move on Besl-oor," said Kizerain. "Besl-oor has double the souls of Kaloolon and may already be committed to the Roinad. I have spies on their way but have not as yet heard back. Kaloolon is, I am informed, still undecided so I venture to suggest we help them decide, soon, and if we can get that girl in the process it will be a bonus. I'll send fifteen men, I think."

"Fifteen men?" said Loheckle. "Fifteen? For this girl and her companion?"

"You are right, as always, my Lord," said Kizerain. "Best make it thirty

to be safe.”

* * *

The Kiraric River was broad and slow. Large shady trees grew along its banks, some leaning over the water. Nearby, one had fallen in, its root arching up over a fresh rent in the earth, its leaves still green. An occasional large stone peeped above the water and fish stayed in their lee. Insects hovered across the water's surface.

“We will camp here for the night,” said Autumn, setting down her pack beside a tree at the water's edge. “Chorenn is downriver a short way so the water will be fresher here. Are you any good at catching fish?”

“That depends on the fish,” said Logan. “If they are fat and slow I can catch some but most times not.”

“How do you catch fish?” asked Autumn. “’Tis not something I have ever attempted.”

“It is best with a line and a hook,” said Logan, “but we have neither so I will try a spear.”

He wandered off and returned with a thin stick and sat on the ground sharpening the tip with his knife while Autumn laid a small fire.

“Does the stick not float away downriver?” she asked.

“Oh, you do not throw the spear,” said Logan, testing the point with his thumb. “You wade into the water and wait for a fish to come then stab it. Most times the fish is too fast but sometimes it is speared. The trick is not to aim at the fish but a little further away as fish are not where they seem to be.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn. “If you see the fish surely it is there where you see it.”

“Water bends things,” said Logan. “Look at the end of this stick, see how straight it is?”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

Logan pushed the stick into the water so the tip touched a stone at the bottom.

“See how it is now bent?” he said.

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Why is that?”

“I do not know,” said Logan. “But you see that small pebble on the bottom? Take the stick and aim for the stone and see where the stick finishes.”

Autumn took the stick and thrust at the pebble. The stick touched another stone a little closer.

“Intriguing,” said Autumn, staring into the water and moving the stick until it touched the right pebble. “Do you suppose there is some magic in the water or something given off by the water which touches our eyes?”

“I know not,” said Logan, “but it makes catching fish more difficult especially as they rarely stop still and wait to be hit. The deeper the water the more you have to adjust your aim.”

“I confess my mind is ensnared by this,” said Autumn. “This was never mentioned at the Esyup, although we had no rivers nearby and rarely had fish to eat. I must try this.”

Grasping the stick, she waded out into the water peering intently.

“You need to stand still and wait,” called Logan, “else the fish will stay away.”

Autumn froze, the stick raised in the air, like a small, dark haired statue fashioned from pale mahogany. She remained so for some time, the water peacefully swirling around her legs and a mild breeze teasing her hair. Suddenly the stick flashed into the water.

“Pah,” said Autumn, lifting the stick again. “Standing motionless slows

me down.”

She closed her eyes for a few moments and muttered to herself then started to move slowly in a slight crouch, her senses alert, her limbs tensed but relaxed. Then, with a blur of motion she stabbed sideways and downwards.

“Logan,” she called, holding the stick in the water. “What do I do when I get one?”

“Grab it in your hand,” called Logan excitedly, “so it does not fall off the stick then pull it out of the water and toss it onto the bank.”

Autumn bent down to grasp the fish and stood in the water, gazing at it flapping in her hand.

“It is smaller than it looked in the water,” she said. “I wonder if that is something to do with the bending as well.”

“Toss it here,” called Logan. “See if you can get another then we can have one each.”

Obediently Autumn tossed the fish onto the bank and started searching for another while Logan gutted the fish. It didn't take long for her to catch another and she waded back to the bank. He smeared the fish in mud from the water's edge and put them in the embers of the fire to bake.

“You made that look very easy,” said Logan.

“I imagined it was attacking me,” she said, “so I just reacted to its movement rather than tried to hunt it.”

“I am surprised you could do that,” said Logan.

“Why?” asked Autumn, lying back on the bank in the sun to dry.

“Does not imagining something to be a threat when it be not go against your principles?” asked Logan.

“Yes and no,” said Autumn. “It is the nature of things to eat and be eaten so to feed us those fish had to die.”

“We could just eat roots and fruits,” said Logan.

“Aye, we could,” said Autumn, sitting up. “But if we take the roots of a plant the plant must die and if we take the fruit the tree that would have grown from it can never live so it is all the same in the end. Life lives on death but I am pleased you are beginning to understand my thinking.”

“Yes,” said Logan. “I do not know that I agree with you but I can understand your reasoning.”

“Agreement is a matter for you to choose,” said Autumn, “but understanding is a wonderful thing and cannot be valued too highly.”

“Answer me this,” said Logan, thoughtfully. “Would you agree that starvation is a threat?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “It is a very great threat.”

“And if you have recently eaten then you are not in immediate danger from starvation?” asked Logan.

“I agree that would be so,” said Autumn, watching Logan intently.

“So if you kill a fish, perhaps, or a chicken not long after eating then you are not killing it to avoid starvation now but at some time in the future,” said Logan.

“Indeed,” said Autumn, a faint smile starting to flicker across her lips. She could see where he was heading but wanted him to work it out for himself.

“So you would be killing that creature not to avoid an immediate threat but a future one,” said Logan, frowning as he tried to express his thoughts.

“A fair point,” said Autumn.

“So would not it have been reasonable to have let Darius kill Ynnis even though he was not a threat anymore but because he will be a threat in the future?” asked Logan.

“An excellent argument,” said Autumn, picking up the fishing stick and using it to play with grass stalks. “Can you argue against it?”

“Sploop,” said Logan, turning to look at her with a bemused expression. “Does that mean you do not have an answer for me?”

“I do,” said Autumn, “but I be wondering if you can think of it for yourself without me telling you.”

“Pah,” said Logan, spitting into the fire, “I might have guessed you would give me an answer like that. Let me think on it awhile.”

He sat and gazed into the fire, lost in thought. Unconsciously he reached into the small bag he'd made that hung from his belt and pulled out the stone Mother Midcarn had given him and slowly turned it over and over in his hand. Its blackness gleaming in the early evening sun, its smoothness and solidity soothing.

Autumn watched three ducks on the water. They had glided slowly into view from upriver and were slowly making their way downriver, zigzagging as they went, creating a V shaped wave as they crossed the current. One quacked then upended, its pointed backside wiggling as it caught something under the surface then it righted itself, water rolling off its head and bill. It flashed brilliant green in a ray of sunshine then sped off to catch the others, the V widening in its wake. Another upended then all three started heading back, ignoring the two humans on the bank.

“I think I have an answer,” said Logan hesitantly as the three ducks drew level with them then veered and started back towards the opposite bank.

“You only think you have an answer?” asked Autumn, “or do you know you have an answer?”

“Do not make it more difficult than it is,” said Logan. “Do you want

to hear it or not?”

“Very much,” said Autumn.

“It seems to me,” said Logan slowly, “that you killed the fish now because we are hungry now not because we will be hungry tomorrow or the day after and when we are hungry again we will find more food. Likewise, Ynnis was a threat at that moment but once he was not a threat there was no need to kill him just as there would be no need to kill the fish if we had some other food to eat. Am I right?”

Autumn gave him a long look. “Yes,” she said, “you are right. If we had any bread or cheese we would eat that and spare the fish. Can you think of any other reason?”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan. “My head hurts just thinking of that one, how many more do you want?”

“As many as you can think of,” said Autumn. “The more you think the better you can think. Just as with fishing or hunting or fighting, the more you practice the better you become.”

“Well, if I become a better hunter we will eat better,” said Logan, “but how will being a better thinker help us?”

“What do you think?” asked Autumn.

“How did I know you were going to say that?” asked Logan with a bark of a laugh.

“You tell me,” said Autumn. “Shall we do some more with your reading and writing?”

There was a loud splash and water droplets spattered them both. Darius emerged from the river with a duck hanging limp from his mouth, his fur slick with water.

“It is as you say,” said Autumn. “Darius kills when he is hungry. He does not kill and carry food with him for the future, only when the need arises.”

“But surely with starvation the need will always arise sooner or later?” said Logan. “Ohh, I think I see another answer.”

He stopped, brow furrowed, the stone resting in his palm.

“Yes?” asked Autumn.

“Umm,” said Logan, “I be not sure, umm, is it not that starvation be something that is certain? If we do not eat we will surely starve?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, “and?”

“So starving is always a threat,” he said, “no matter what we do it is always going to be a threat, if not now then in the future.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “And it is becoming very close. Are those fish cooked yet?”

“Ahh, the fish, I had forgotten,” said Logan.

He went over to the fire and used a stick to push the baked mud out of the embers.

“But Ynnis may not be a threat in the future,” he said looking over at Autumn. “We may never encounter him again and if we do he may have changed his ways or something. Killing him now when he might never be a threat again would be wrong, leave it until he actually is a threat.”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “That is another good answer, Logan. Any more?”

“Maybe after we have eaten,” he said, “but I would rather do some more reading and writing, it is easier than thinking.”

He cracked open one of the fish and the mud came away, taking the skin with it. He passed the halves to Autumn and cracked open the other for himself. Darius stalked down to the river to drink, a green feather stuck to his cheek.

“Can you still remember the shapes of your name?” asked Autumn when she'd finished eating.

“I think so,” said Logan, tossing the baked mud pieces in the river.

He picked up a twig and laboriously inscribed his name in a patch of mud.

“That is good,” said Autumn.

“I was thinking about these shapes earlier,” said Logan. “I thought of this but I want to put it in the mud before I say it.”

He carved out the shapes again, in a different order.

“This is a word as well, isn't it?” he asked. “I think it says ALONG.”

“Indeed it does,” said Autumn. “Let me show you some more shapes. This is how you write my name.”

Logan watched as Autumn wrote her name beneath his.

“Ahh,” he said, “that one is the same as in mine, and you have another two times, I did not know you could do that. Let me try.”

* * *

“Highness, a moment of your time?” asked Hysleria, bowing as he entered the room.

“Yes?” asked Obvia Vasagle, looking up from a document she was reading. “What is it?”

“I have received a report that I consider worthy of your attention, Highness,” he said.

“It surely cannot be of any less import than this,” she said, tossing the document onto the table in front of her. “Why do I need to read about mining in the Looplab quarries?”

“Mining impacts your revenues, Highness,” said Hysleria.

“Paraks impact my revenues,” she said sharply. “When the mining becomes paraks I shall be more attentive. What, pray, is this new most urgent report?”

“I don't know that it is urgent, Highness,” said Hysleria, “but it may have far reaching consequences.”

“Oh very well then,” said the Roinad. “Divert me.”

“Highness,” said Hysleria, coming over to the table. She did not invite him to sit. “I have received a report from the town of Chorenn.”

“I know that name,” she said frowning. “'Tis a small town to the North West, is it not?”

“Your Highness has a most excellent memory,” said Hysleria. “It is indeed a small town, some ten hundred souls, I believe.”

“And something miraculous has occurred there?” she asked.

“Quite possibly, Highness” said Hysleria. “The town of Chorenn was raided some three days past and stripped of livestock and able bodied men and some women by Lord Loheckle natal Chant'ist ab Hecknoor. It would appear his strength is increasing. Thus far he has only raided small villages.”

“I see,” said Obvia, frowning. “The time is fast approaching when I must swat that wasp.”

“Quite so, Highness,” said Hysleria. “But that is not why I interrupted your Highness. It seems, from this report, that some of the men and women taken were returned. They were intercepted on the road, seven of Lord Loheckle's men defeated and the captives returned to the village.”

“By whom?” asked Obvia. “Is there one among the Opsablepsia who takes sides against Loheckle already?”

“Sadly not, Highness, I fear they still wait to see which way the wind blows,” said Hysleria. “No, it seems that Lord Loheckle's men were defeated by a single woman.”

“A single woman?” exclaimed Obvia. “Then this rebellion shall be easily quashed. I shall send two of my maids to defeat his army and be done with it. Who is this woman? Should I reward her in some way?”

“The report names her as Autumn Savannah, Highness,” said Hysleria, “but gave no further details.”

“What form of absurdity is a name like that?” demanded Obvia. “She has no lineage?”

“That remains to be seen, Highness,” said Hysleria. “I have this day also received a report from one of my associates in the camp of Lord Loheckle.”

“Ahh, excellent,” she said. “And what does this spy tell you?”

“It seems, Highness, that Lord Loheckle is searching for a girl,” said Hysleria. “A Krisana of Mizule and Vallume from the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup.”

“A Krisana?” said Obvia, sitting back in her chair. “There is a Krisana on the loose? What would Loheckle be searching for a Krisana for?”

“So it would seem, Highness,” said Hysleria. “My associate informs me that Lord Loheckle is looking for this Krisana in order to persuade her to join his forces. It seems that he believes she would be a figurehead for his insurrection and a rallying force for the peasantry.”

“Hmmm,” said the Roinad. “I imagine this Krisana has a name and that name is Autumn Savannah?”

“You are most perceptive, Highness,” said Hysleria. “It is an interesting coincidence, is it not? Lord Loheckle is searching for a Krisana by that name and, not far away, a woman by that name is

defeating his forces and returning his prisoners to their homes.”

“That would suggest that this Krisana is loyal to me, does it not?” said Obvia.

“Indeed, Highness,” said Hysleria, “as is the case of every right thinking soul in this land. But it goes yet further.”

“How so?” asked Obvia.

“The Yeinydd Esyup is noted for its philosophical enquiries, Highness,” said Hysleria, “particularly with regard to Mizule and Vallume, the Way of the Warrior and the fertility of women. The loyalty of this Krisana to you implies the rightness of your rule in the eyes of Mizule and Vallume themselves. This Autumn Savannah is a message from the Gods that you are, indeed, the rightful ruler.”

“You are absolutely correct in this, Hysleria,” said Obvia, visibly pleased. “Yes, it is clear that this is the way of it. Clearly this woman has been sent for this purpose.”

“And there is yet more, Highness,” said Hysleria. “If this Krisana were to be by your side she would be a clear statement to all of your rightfulness and be a rallying point for all who may yet waver in their loyalties to you.”

“You think I am not sufficient in myself as a figurehead?” demanded Obvia.

“I cannot conceive of any more rightly situated to be a figurehead than Your Highness, Highness,” said Hysleria smoothly. “But, I venture to suggest, there may be some in the more remote parts of this land who have had no opportunity to bask in your radiance and may yet be unclear in their thinking. A Krisana by your side would help them clarify their minds. Indeed, it may even clarify the mind of Lord Loheckle himself.”

“A fair point,” mused Obvia. “If the Krisana that fool covets were beside me he may abandon his ill-conceived venture and this can be resolved with little further expense.”

She drummed her fingers on the table for a few moments.

“Bring her to me,” she said. “I would meet this Autumn Savannah.”

Chapter Thirteen

The river was wider here, more than a stone's throw to the far bank, and was more placid. No large stones blocked its path and in places the bank was as high as Autumn and in others it sank to the water's edge. Small grassy beaches flattened with the feet of creatures that came to drink. Thrice since skirting Chorenna they had seen people in craft floating on the water who had waved in cheery greeting.

"Yonder must be Chevesic Forest," said Logan as they followed the bank as the river cut through the meadow, Darius lagging a few paces behind. "It looks a forbidding place."

"Aye," said Autumn, "it grows thick and dark from horizon to horizon, barely breaking even for the river. I fancy it would be most easy to get lost in there, mayhap even wander in circles endlessly, never finding an edge except by chance."

"You see how the trees and dense undergrowth go down even into the water?" asked Logan as they got closer. "If we stay with the river I fancy we will have to wade much of the time and who knows what rapids or waterfalls lie ahead."

"Indeed," said Autumn. "I had hoped to avoid the path as there are those who are looking for us but I believe it may be the easier choice and quicker too although we are not pressed for time."

"I agree," said Logan, eyeing the base of a tree as wide as he was tall and towering over him, its thick leafy branches entwining with those of the trees around. "Let us follow the forest's edge until we find the path and go through that way. If we hear anyone we can easily take refuge behind one of these giants or simply bury ourselves in the undergrowth until they pass. I wonder how wide this accursed forest is?"

"It did not seem overly wide on Mother Midcarn's map," said Autumn, peering up at the canopy, "but marks on a map and strides on the ground need not match. All we know for sure is that it has another side and there lies Kaloolon. A city, she said. I have never seen a city and know not what it is other than a dwelling place for

many people.”

“Neither have I,” said Logan. “Pirend is the biggest place I have seen and yet it was a town and a small one at that. Chorenn was a lot bigger I hear tell but we walked around it, not through it so how it looked I will never know. For certain it was a long walk around.”

“Well, regardless of its look and size this is still just a place of trees,” said Autumn. “There should be roots, nuts and fruits aplenty and perhaps a small animal or two to sustain us however long it takes to get through. I think I see a break in the trees ahead.”

“I be more worried about big animals,” said Logan, looking up at the branches. “There is plenty of hidden space up there for something to follow us and drop on us unawares.”

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained, Logan,” said Autumn. “Although with all those leaves we should be able to hear anything approaching from above. I wonder if there be any snakes in here?”

“Snakes!” blurted Logan. “Thank you Autumn for giving me something new to worry about. Now I have to watch down as well as up.”

“Grroow,” muttered Darius sleepily. “Snakes good, snakes meat.”

“I am glad someone likes them,” said Logan. “Although I daresay I will be happy to eat one if I am hungry enough. I just hope I am the one as does the eating, not the snake.”

“You worry too much about what may or may not be,” said Autumn. “Wait until it is before worrying although 'twould be better if you did not worry then either. Just accept and deal with whatever as best you can.”

“Easy for you to say,” retorted Logan. “You have been training like that all your life. I have not.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “’Tis not always easy to put words into actions but never forget you have a choice. You can choose to worry or you

can choose not to worry, the outcome will be the same either way.”

“It may not be,” said Logan, “so for safety's sake I will let you do the not worrying and I will do the worrying and that way we'll have all outcomes covered.”

“As you wish, Logan,” said Autumn. “This is indeed the path. Shall we enter or would you tarry in the sunlight for a while?”

“It is a path,” said Logan, looking at the narrow path suspiciously, “but is it the right path, I wonder? Would not a path leading to a city be wider?”

“It is a path and goes somewhere,” said Autumn, “and it goes in the right direction. There are no signs so either we take it and see where it leads or we go in search of another path.”

“What if it forks inside the forest?” asked Logan. “What do we do then?”

“We take the fork closest to the river,” she said. “The river goes to Kaloolon so if we always stay as close as we can to the river we should, one day, reach that city unless this be a magic path that moves and changes as we walk.”

“It does have the look of a magic path,” said Logan doggedly. “What say you we go back and wade the river?”

“I say we are here and we have a path,” said Autumn. “Let us take it and be done with it before we are too old and decrepit to walk at all and have to be floated down the river in funeral pyres.”

“I wish you had not mentioned funeral pyres,” said Logan unhappily.

He looked back towards the river, a faint silver streak a long way distant.

“Sploop,” he said firmly and stood up straight and pulled his shoulders back. “I am with a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume! What possible mischief can overtake me thus?”

“Logan chicken,” said Darius, strolling forward. “Come,” and he stepped onto the path between the trees.

Autumn looked at Logan.

“Grrr,” he said and wrinkled his nose in disgust. He stepped forward and Autumn fell in behind him.

Very quickly the path opened out to be wide enough for two people to walk comfortably side by side, if comfortably is the right word for there was nothing comfortable about the walking. The path may have opened wider but the forest closed in. The sunlight faded and it grew gloomy and chill, oppressive. The birdsong from the meadow died, replaced by a heavy blanket of silence. The sound of their footsteps swallowed, their talk flat and toneless. The air was thick and foetid, redolent with rotting vegetation, damp and something indescribable, something on the edge of sensation but never quite there. Every now and then there came a faint cracking rustling as something fell, first to one side then to the other then ahead, behind, nearer, further, but never seen. At times there was a murmuring as though of voices that faded into the rubbing of branches, the trees perhaps talking, spreading the news that something was on the path. A drip, a sigh, the glimmer of an eye, a swish then a fast fleeting scurry then that massive silence, aware and brooding.

The path wound its way between trees, never straight for long, twisting, curving, A butterfly, dark and heavy with none of the bright brilliance of the meadows flew overhead and paused, with a ripple of wings, to study them then, with a desultory flip, it continued on its way, dismissing the travellers.

“I make an effort to accept my surroundings,” said Autumn quietly, “but I confess to feeling oppressed by this. It saps my will.”

“How much further, do you think?” asked Logan.

“I have no way of knowing,” said Autumn. “We just carry on until we get somewhere.”

“By Chershoe, I pray we get somewhere soon,” said Logan.

The trees sighed as if in agreement then came a sudden patter which ended abruptly.

“What do we do if we be still in here when night falls?” asked Logan.

“We make camp and sleep,” said Autumn. “As we do every night, although sleep may be slow in coming.”

They plodded on, only Darius seemingly unaffected.

In time they came to a brook which cut the path, its water slow and dark and thick with brown slimy grasses. The path sloped down and disappeared and their feet sank into the marshy ground. Bubbles formed and burst with each lift of the foot, giving off a faint odour of corruption and decay. After a few paces the path re-emerged and led upwards and away from the brook, around and between still more trees, thick with hanging vines and encased in mosses and lichen.

Logan spotted some mushrooms growing between the exposed roots of a giant tree and went to investigate. He came back empty handed.

“They looked evil, close up,” he said. “On top they looked like nice plump mushrooms but underneath they were livid red and spotted with dark yellow. I have never seen their like before and I be reckoning they not be good eating.”

“We have some roots and nuts with us,” said Autumn. “Hopefully they will be enough to see us to the other side, although I have not seen or heard any animals for you, Darius.”

“Meat here,” he said, looking back at her. “Hunt, night.”

“Maybe the animals sleep during the day in here,” said Logan, “and come out at night.”

“We shall no doubt find out soon enough,” said Autumn, trying to be cheerful.

They plodded on.

“Hold,” said Autumn suddenly after an immeasurable time. “I thought I heard something.”

They all froze and listened carefully.

“Yes, I heard that,” said Logan. “I could not make out what it was though.”

“Horse,” said Darius disinterestedly. He sat down and started to lick his chest.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “It sounded like a horse, but some way off.”

“Is someone coming?” asked Logan.

“Probably,” said Autumn, “I warrant no horses live in this forest.” She listened intently. “Tis not coming closer, though.”

“Should we get off the path?” asked Logan, anxiously.

“Let us wait and see,” said Autumn and Logan breathed a small sigh of relief. He didn’t want to get off the path and go into the undergrowth. “We’ll go on a little further, but quietly.”

“Is it starting to get darker?” asked Logan quietly a short while later. “It is beginning to feel late as well.”

“I think you are right,” said Autumn. “And I think there’s more than one horse ahead.”

“Are they getting closer?” asked Logan.

“Yes, but I think it be us who are getting closer to them,” said Autumn. “I hear them whinnying but not moving. They are not being ridden and I hear no voices.”

“Mayhap they are wild horses that live here after all,” said Logan.

“Very possibly,” said Autumn, “in which case we have nothing to fear.”

"There is a lighter patch just ahead," said Logan after a while. "I think the horses are there."

"You two stay here," said Autumn, "I will go closer and look."

"Be careful," said Logan.

Autumn gave him a reassuring pat on his arm and moved stealthily along the edge of the path, ready to jump into the undergrowth. She reappeared quite quickly.

"There is a clearing in two bends of the path," she said. "There are three horses there, hobbled but no people. It is most strange. Come."

"Is that really a good idea?" asked Logan. "If they are hobbled then there must be some people close by."

"So you would think," said Autumn. "Let us find out."

"Oh Sploop," muttered Logan. "With all your brains I would hope you have more sense."

"Oh Logan," said Autumn, mimicking him but with a faint air of disappointment. "We have to go past anyway or go back to the meadow and find another way. Do you not see that?"

Logan curled his lip but didn't say anything and followed her along the path, Darius bringing up the rear.

"See?" said Autumn from the edge of the clearing.

Logan studied the clearing.

"I think there is the remains of a fire over there," he said after a while, pointing. "Next to where the path carries on on the other side."

"That does not make sense," said Autumn. "Three people rode the horses here and stopped to make a fire then left without their horses."

She walked across the clearing and put her hand in the fire.

"It be quite cold," she said. "It went out some time ago. It went out for lack of wood, it was not put out."

"You see how much grass the horses have eaten?" asked Logan, joining her. "I venture the horses have been here all day."

"So the people spent the night here," said Autumn, looking around. "But they left without the horses but took everything else, including the horses' bridles and left the fire burning. If something attacked them and they ran off, why take the bridles but if they were robbed why did the robbers not take the horses? If they were killed, where are the bodies? This is exceedingly strange."

"What shall we do?" asked Logan.

"We need somewhere for the night," said Autumn. "I venture we stay here and if no one comes to claim the horses by morning we move on and take the horses with us."

"But what if they were attacked in the night?" asked Logan. "We might be attacked as well."

"We run that risk wherever we spend the night," said Autumn, "and this is a convenient clearing. They even left spare wood for the fire. We take turns sleeping and be prepared. What more can we do? Do not forget the horses are still alive so if there was an attack it was not for food. Perhaps whoever brought these horses were followed as part of a vendetta or some such."

"Well, that makes as much sense as anything else does," said Logan. "You might as well get plenty of sleep though, I warrant I won't be sleeping at all."

"Come, make the fire burn again," said Autumn, "and we will eat. Things will no doubt be clearer with food in our bellies."

With a heavy heart Logan bent to make a fire. Its blaze was cheerful as the night deepened and the forbidding forest receded in the darkness. The three horses came over to be near the humans and lay down. Autumn scratched between their ears in turn and they

whinnied and shook their heads.

“Where has Darius gone?” asked Logan, looking around after they'd eaten some baked roots.

“Probably gone off hunting,” said Autumn. “Shall I take the first guard or will you?”

“I will,” said Logan. “I do not feel able to sleep yet.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “Wake me when you feel tired.”

“I will,” he said. “Sleep well, if you can.”

Autumn loosened her robe then lay down, her head on her pack and her staff at her side. She was asleep within minutes.

* * *

Something brought Autumn to full alertness.

She lay on her side, motionless, probing the night with her ears and eyes. The three horses had got up and were grazing quietly a little further away. Perhaps it had been them that had woken her but the fire was burning low. Why hadn't Logan added more wood?

She rolled over to ask and saw him lying on the ground, asleep. She started to relax and cast her eyes around again. Darius was not back but all was quiet. She closed her eyes again. A short, jerky moan brought her to full alertness again. She looked over at Logan. He lay quiet.

She sat up, now awake. Despite her robe there was a definite chill in the air so she got up and put some more wood on the fire. A stick caught light and started to burn. Logan drummed his heels on the ground, once, twice, then moaned again.

She looked over at him and, in the flickering light of the burning stick she saw it. A pale grey shape, squatting on Logan's chest, its grey feet clutching his chest and its head bent over his mouth. She froze. The

shape twisted to look at her. Its human-like face gaunt and grim, its skin lank, large eyes flat and dark, lifeless. It bent over Logan's mouth again. He moaned and drummed his heels.

“Mizule!” screamed Autumn and launched herself at the shape, knocking it off his chest.

She rolled and leapt to her feet and the shape crashed into her stomach, knocking her to the ground. In an instant it was on her chest, its grey hands gripping the sides of her head, the strength in its long fingers intense. Black lifeless eyes stared into her own then its mouth descended to hers. Those thin, grey lips slimy and slack, the smell of decay on its breath, its small, black pointed teeth rank and dripping.

Autumn's heart pounded as the slimy lips met hers and pressed hard. She could feel the thing sucking the air from her lungs. She tossed from side to side to try to shake it off but its legs gripped the sides of her chest. Desperately she clawed at its head and neck, her emptied lungs beginning to burn. She managed to get one hand around its neck then the other and started to squeeze. Momentarily its lips left hers and she managed to drag in a half breath but the lips returned, the fingers around her head tightening. Her heels drummed on the ground then she twisted her hips and brought up a leg. Forcing upwards with her hands around its neck she fought to get a knee under its chest. The taste of death and decay choked her. With a convulsive heave she kicked hard and its grip on her head was broken. She gulped in air then rammed her forehead into the creature's face. It screamed in anger and grabbed her head again, forcing its lips down to hers. She twisted her face away and those thin slimy, rotting lips chased hers. She twisted her face back then bit hard on its broad, flattened nose, willing her fingers around its neck even tighter. It squealed and relaxed its grip then, as her teeth met and its nose came off, its mouth sought hers again. Locked on, sucking the air from her lungs. She let go of its neck and forced her hands upwards, her arms inside its arms trying to force them away from her head. Blackness started to descend on her.

“RRRROOOOAAAAARRRRRR” split the night and a black form hurtled across the clearing and crashed into the creature. The horses

panicked and tried to run, their hobbles making their movements slow and awkward. Darius and the creature rolled twice, thrice then the creature started to fight back, its long thin fingers clawing at Darius' eyes. Darius reared back on his hind legs, slashing viciously with both front feet, razor sharp claws at full extension. The creature dropped back and Darius was on it, claws slashing, jaws ripping. It didn't take long.

Dragging her consciousness back, Autumn jumped to her feet and spat part of the creature's nose on the ground. She ran over to where Darius was standing, staring at the creature, writhing on the ground. Darius gave Autumn a glance then, with sublime indifference, bent and ripped the creature's throat out, ending its pitiful moaning.

"Taste bad," he said and bent to wipe his jaws in the grass.

Autumn staggered, weak, then fell to her knees and retched. Her stomach spasming from the taste and smell of death and decay.

"Logan," she said and forced herself to her feet. He was still lying there, motionless.

"Logan!" she cried and ran over. She dropped to her knees beside him and shook him, hard.

"Wha's sah," he muttered.

She shook him again then slapped his face, hard. Again she slapped him.

"Stop it," he said, weakly trying to sit up. "Awww, Sploop, what is that awful smell?"

"You are alive," said Autumn.

"Why?" he asked, trying to sit up. "Were you trying to kill me?"

"I woke and found ... that, on your chest," said Autumn, pointing to the remains of the creature. "It was ... kissing you. No, not kissing, sucking, I think. Anyway, Darius has killed it."

“I was dreaming,” said Logan, managing to sit up. “I was dreaming that someone had cut the waterskin and the water was draining out.”

“Your life,” said Darius, padding over. “Autumn save.”

“What happened?” asked Logan.

“When I saw it I attacked it,” said Autumn, fetching the waterskin. “It was besting me but Darius then attacked it and killed it. Thank you Darius.”

“Thank you both,” said Logan. He struggled to his feet and stumbled over to look at the creature. “You mean that was on my chest and was sucking the life out of me?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “It was sucking the life out of me too. I wonder what it was.”

“A soska,” said Darius. “From the Land of the Undead.”

Autumn filled her mouth with water then spat. She tipped some on her hands and scrubbed her face and mouth vigorously.

“A soska?” said Logan coming back. He picked up the waterskin. “I have heard of those. I thought they were just tales to scare children.”

“What are they?” asked Autumn.

“They are undead things that suck your spirit while you sleep,” he said. “They kill you but leave you in the Land of the Undead as well. According to the tales, they cannot be killed. If you catch one and cut it up, it will pull itself together again and come back the next night.”

“So what are we going to do with this one?” asked Autumn, going over to look at its remains again. She fancied the section of its nose she’d bitten off and spat out had moved from where she’d spat it.

“Burn,” said Darius. “In fire.”

Autumn dragged its mutilated remains over to the fire and Logan

piled on all the wood they had. The stench of the burning soska was appalling.

Chapter Fourteen

Darius lay in a small patch of morning sunlight that had filtered through the canopy into the clearing. His paws and tail twitched in his sleep and every now and then he snarled or made a high pitched keening sound. Logan sat quietly, practising his shapes in the ashes of the fire and looking up periodically to watch Autumn perform her daily routines. The horses had moved on to a fresh patch of grass. Nothing remained of the horror of the night except a foul memory and an oiliness to the fire's ash.

Autumn dropped suddenly to the ground and lay still for a moment, on her back. Then, in a single swift movement she brought her knees up to her chest and jerked her legs forward while pushing on the ground above her shoulders with her hands and landed on the balls of her feet in a crouch. Instantly she rolled sideways and came up again facing the opposite direction and rapidly kicked a tree trunk twice before leaping into a backward somersault. She lost her footing and her balance and went crashing through the undergrowth.

Logan paid no particular attention. This was, as Autumn had explained some time before, why she practised. Sometimes she deliberately made mistakes, such as aiming for a patch of slippery mud or a branch that could not support her weight or went head first at a large rock.

“If you only ever practice perfection,” she'd explained, “you have had no practice for when things go wrong in a real situation and things always go wrong and the unexpected always happens.”

Usually when something went wrong she got up and tried again but this time she didn't. Logan inscribed another row of shapes and mouthed the word to himself then looked over at the patch of undergrowth she'd crashed through. There was no sign of her, save a few torn vines and broken stems.

Puzzled he called her name. There was no reply.

“Autumn? Are you well?”

“Logan,” she called back from inside the undergrowth. “Come and look at this.”

Logan dropped his stick and got up, his knife in his hand. He went over to where she had crashed and peered into the undergrowth. He could just make out her tunic through the tangles.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Come, see,” she said, so he forced his way in.

After barely an arm's length he found he was in another, smaller clearing, devoid even of grass. In the centre was a tall, thin, jagged stone, planted solidly in the ground. It stood perhaps hip height. Around it were eight other stones in a circle, shorter but also upright. Inside the circle were three bodies, laid out in a triangle with the tall stone at their centre. They were naked and all three had once been men.

“I venture these are the riders of the horses,” said Autumn.

“They look strange,” said Logan, staying at the edge of the clearing. “Are they dead?”

“Decidedly,” said Autumn, going over to inspect one more closely, “yet there is no smell of death. Come closer and look. This one has no sign of injury and yet the body is somehow sunken, shrivelled yet not shrivelled. His skin feels like old parchment. This one too.”

She moved to the third and squatted to pick up his hand.

“This one wears ornaments on his fingers yet they are loose, as if his finger is shrunk. Aye, and he has no beard. Do you see the marks around his mouth?”

Logan swallowed, his stomach churning, and went over to look. Autumn rolled the body over.

“There are no injuries on the back either,” she said and prodded the man's buttock. “There is no vigour in the flesh, like a living body or

one fresh dead.”

“Do you think they were killed by the soska?” asked Logan, unwilling to touch the bodies.

“I would think so,” said Autumn. “The marks around this man’s mouth suggest the soska sucked his life essence out of him and left him a dried out husk. The others too, I venture, although their beards hide any marks.”

“And the stones?” asked Logan. “This is no natural formation.”

“Mayhap this be where the creature of the undead crosses over to this world,” said Autumn. “A quiet place beside a clearing where hapless travellers stop for the night.”

“These could be us,” said Logan quietly. “Where are their spirits now, I wonder?”

“Departed, that is certain,” said Autumn. “Ayah, this place disturbs me.”

“I too,” said Logan. “I daresay the soska sucked them dry then dragged their bodies here for some reason. Where do you suppose their clothes and belongings went?”

“Hmm?” asked Autumn reflectively. “Oh, they are over there.”

Logan looked over to where she gestured. Beside where they had come through the undergrowth was a pile of things. He went over to inspect the pile, as much to get away from the bodies as from curiosity.

“This is an unusual garment,” he said, holding up an embroidered tunic. “The other two are like mine but this, this I have never seen the like of before. And look, there are two heavy swords and two bows with quivers of arrows and this knife. It has shiny things embedded in its scabbard.”

“Those are jewels,” said Autumn, coming over. “I have seen things like

those before when a rich man visited the Esyup. I venture that the man with no beard was a rich man and the other two travelled with him to protect him.”

“They did not do a very good job, did they,” said Logan. “Look, this tunic has a flap of cloth covering a tear but it is only in the outer part, it does not go all the way through. See?”

He put his hand through the tear to demonstrate that it did not go through both sides of the cloth.

“Ohh, what be this?” he said, feeling something with his hand.

He pulled it out of the pocket.

“This feels like the same cloth as was in those books of Mother Midcarn,” he said. “There is something written on it.”

He held up the piece of paper and studied it.

“I think it says 'To Sire Galon Vens ab Toogrit, greetings,'" said Logan, stumbling over the unfamiliar words. “I direct you to ...,’ what is this word?”

“Ascertain,” said Autumn, peering at where he pointed.

“What does that mean?” asked Logan.

“Find out,” said Autumn.

“Ascertain, find out,” muttered Logan, “yes, I like that word, it has a nice sound. Umm, ‘... ascertain the loc, loc, location of one Autumn Savannah and invite her to attend me.’ What does ‘attend me’ mean?”

“Go to visit or go with,” said Autumn. “What else does it say?”

“Umm, something about the road from Kaloolon to Choren and it says what you look like,” said Logan. “She be a slight woman, raven haired and robed in black and be ac, accom, umm, accompanied by a callow youth.’ What is a ‘callow youth’? Be that me?”

“Yes, I venture it is you,” said Autumn, “and callow youth means young, that's all.”

“You are sure it doesn't mean handsome?” asked Logan.

“I am sure,” said Autumn. “But it is interesting that these men were sent to find us. Lord Loheckle would seem to be getting more serious about meeting us.”

“I do not see his name here,” said Logan. “Just a big R at the bottom.”

“Why would Loheckle sign it with an R?” said Autumn, frowning. She took the message from Logan's hand and studied it. “Unless that message was not sent by Loheckle.”

“Who else would be looking for us?” asked Logan.

“Who is Loheckle warring against?” asked Autumn.

“The Roinad,” said Logan. “Oh, you think the R is for Roinad?”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, “and that would explain why a rich man is looking for us and why it says the road from Kaloolon to Choren rather than Choren to Kaloolon. Loheckle is to the North, why would he send a message to the South telling someone to go North looking for us?”

“But why would the Roinad be looking for us?” asked Logan. “The Roinad!”

“Why is Loheckle looking for us?” responded Autumn. “I know not but I venture there is more here than meets the eye and the same reason may do for both of them.”

“What shall we do?” asked Logan.

“There is no need to do anything beyond carry on with our business,” said Autumn. “Them as wants to meet us will no doubt find us one day and we will cross that path when it happens, unless you desire to

meet the Roinad yourself?"

"No, I think not," said Logan. "This sounds serious and all these people looking for us does not bode well. What shall we do with the bodies and these weapons and clothes? Shall we take them with us? We may be able to sell them in Kaloolon."

"Leave the bodies," said Autumn. "Let them return to the earth and feed them as can stomach them although I think we should break the power of the stones lest another creature crosses over here. The clothes and weapons? I fancy the clothes and that knife may be recognised if this man is from Kaloolon and that may bring us difficulties. Let us leave them here. They may serve some other traveller in these parts."

"How do we break the power of the stones?" asked Logan, reluctantly putting the knife back on the pile.

"They seem to be laid out in a shape," said Autumn, "so let us scatter the stones and then move on."

"And the horses?" asked Logan.

"Yes, the horses. We had best take them with us," said Autumn. "They are not used to fending for themselves and may come to harm as a result. Can you ride?"

"No," said Logan. "Can you?"

"No," said Autumn. "Mayhap we will find someone who will care for them who can ride. Come, help me with the stones."

* * *

Astauand was high in the sky when they emerged from the forest. The path followed the edge of a cliff then descended to the plain below, past torn raw rock and huge jagged boulders. Further along, the river roared and foamed as it crashed down the cliff face to a lagoon before wending its way across the plain to the sea.

“Vallume!” said Autumn, “it is blue from horizon to horizon! I did not imagine it would look like this. I wonder if it is bitter to taste as I have been told?”

“That must be the Sea of Looncan,” said Logan. “The river is fresh and sweet and it runs into there so why would it be bitter and not the river as well?”

“I know not,” said Autumn, “but so I was told and the size is as was described to me. The taste we will discover when we get there. That must be Kaloolon where the river meets the sea. It is vast!”

She stood staring at the city of some thirty five hundred souls, fascinated by the idea of so many people.

“How do the people in the centre find air to breathe?” she asked.

“I know not,” said Logan, “mayhap they have learned not to breathe or they breathe the water from the sea instead. There is surely more than enough of that. Look, the blue goes to the horizon. There is no land beyond the sea. This must be the edge of the world and Darius' home be nearby.”

“Mother Midcarn's map showed Darius' land beyond the sea,” said Autumn. “Perhaps there is land beyond what we can see. Mayhap someone in the city will know. How will we cross it if there is?”

“They have boats,” said Logan. “We saw some on the river. I venture there will be someone who will take us to beyond, if there is somewhere beyond.”

“This place has an air of tranquillity, does it not?” said Autumn. “The gentle winding of the river, the flat calmness of the sea and the peaceful look of the city. They must be an industrious people, see how far the fields and herds extend around. Come, I am eager to explore this place.”

They descended the path with Darius following Autumn and Logan behind, leading the three horses. The path joined a wider road which snaked off to the East.

“There are many travellers on this road,” said Autumn as they neared the outskirts of Kaloolon. “Do you see how they stare at Darius and keep their distance?”

“Perhaps there are no wild animals here,” said Logan. “I have seen nothing but cattle and goats since the Forest. Mayhap they are afraid but I know not why. There must be giants in this place. Do you see the size of some of the dwellings? They be double or more the height of the others. If they live with giants why would they be afraid of a cat?”

“This is a strange place indeed,” said Autumn. “Look yonder, that dwelling has openings near the top, too high for a man to look through. Why so high unless there are giants inside but I have never heard of a place of giants except in the lands far to the North where the water does not flow.”

“How can water not flow?” asked Logan.

“I know not,” said Autumn, “but I have heard it is very cold there and the water is solid.”

“How can it be drunk then?” asked Logan.

“I hear tell that the water becomes water again when it is heated by a fire,” said Autumn, “but I know not the truth of it. Mayhap it is just a story.”

“It must be a story to entertain children,” said Logan. “It makes no sense to me. If the water becomes water when you heat it surely it will put out the fire and go hard again?”

“They could put the hard water into containers atop the fire,” said Autumn. “Let us go to the far North after we have delivered Darius and see for ourselves. Knowledge is worth travelling for.”

“This be strange too,” said Logan. “The road ahead seems littered with stones but they are all of the same size and lying flat on the ground and the people are walking on top of them. Why would they do that? Do they not throw their stones away or use them to make

dwellings?”

“Mayhap they are the stones left over after building,” said Autumn. “They seem to be of a similar size to the ones that make the dwelling walls. Your pardon, lady.”

The woman walking towards them with a basket made from woven reeds stopped and tore her eyes away from Darius to look at Autumn.

“Yes?” she said.

“We are travellers fresh arrived in your city,” said Autumn. “Pray tell, we are wondering why there are all these stones in the road?”

The woman looked at her strangely. “They are the road,” she said. “What else would we use? Is that cat dangerous?”

“Groww,” said Darius conversationally.

The woman jerked and held her basket protectively in front of her then backed away and half ran down a side road, looking back fearfully.

“How strange,” said Autumn, watching her go. “A road of stones?”

“I want to find someone who will buy the horses,” said Logan, “and we need to find someone who’ will tell us about the land across the sea and maybe take us there. I can hear many voices from over there, let us go that way and mayhap find someone who will talk to us.”

“A good plan,” said Autumn.

“Sploop!” said Logan as they rounded a corner. “What goes on here?”

The road was a solid mass of people, pushing and jostling, ebbing and flowing around piles of food and other things against the walls of the dwellings. A man carrying a scrawny chicken pushed Logan aside with a curse and he bumped into a woman carrying a baby.

“Your pardon, lady,” he said.

“Grrrr,” growled Darius, snatching his tail away from yet another man who had grabbed it. Autumn jumped to his defence.

“Give ya five paraks for the cat,” he said, grinning cheerfully at Autumn.

“It looks like a market,” said Logan.

“The cat is not for sale,” said Autumn.

“Aye, it is,” said the man. “Like the boy said, this is a market and everything is for sale. I’ll make it ten for the cat and two each for the horses.”

“I said the cat is not for sale,” said Autumn.

“Twenty,” said the man, “can’t say fairer than that now, can I?”

“Go away,” said Autumn. “We be travellers and not here to trade.”

“There’s someone selling bread over there,” said Logan. “Stay here, I’ll be back in a moment. Hold this.”

He slipped the rope holding the horses into Autumn’s hand and disappeared into the throng.

“So where’s you from, my lovely?” said the man, coming close. “If you need somewhere for the night I know just the place. The boy can sleep in the sty with the pig. What’s your name?”

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, scowling at him. “The cat is not for sale and I am not spending the night with you.”

“So what else you got?” asked the man. “What’s in that bag of yours? Some exotic spices, I warrant or perfumes to tempt and tantalise?”

He fumbled with Autumn’s pack and she stepped backwards, brandishing her staff.

“All right, all right, just trying to be friendly,” said the man, reaching

out to take a handful of Autumn's robe. "That's a nice robe, good material, where'd you get it? Don't see material like that round here very often."

"Unhand me," said Autumn, backing away.

"Oh, be like that then," said the man.

Darius reared up and put his front paws on the man's shoulders.

"Grrr," he said into the man's face, his golden eyes flashing.

"Ere, leave 'er alone," came a woman's voice, husky with age. The man turned and the old woman behind him swiped at him with large wet fish in her hand.

"Sorry, ma," he said, ducking. "Just talking to this 'ere traveller what's in need of a helping hand."

"Get home, right now," demanded the old woman, "and get back to work in that field. No sense you larking round here when there's work to be done. And you, you trollop, stop distracting the menfolk with your fancy ways. We don't want none o' your sort this side of town." She glared at Autumn then stalked off.

"My sort?" muttered Autumn. "There are Krisanas here?"

"I got some bread," said Logan re-emerging and pulling a loaf from under his tunic. "The woman said there are horse traders at the other end of the market and to avoid Besaine as he is a cheat and will not give a fair price."

"What is a trollop?" asked Autumn.

"I know not," said Logan. "Is it not some sort of big hairy creature that eats goats whole?"

"I know not," said Autumn. "Nor do I know why that woman would think I was a big hairy creature that eats goats whole. Still, she is gone and I cannot enquire further. How do we get to these horse traders? I

venture there are too many people down here to get the horses and Darius through alive.”

“Mayhap we can go back and find another road to go around,” said Logan. “Let us try this way.”

“I found that place very ... difficult,” said Autumn as they got back to the quieter road. “It was all confusion and noise, how can people think in a place like that?”

A small chicken fluttered out of a doorway, chased by a thin woman who managed to catch it. She looked up at Logan as he passed and smiled coquettishly.

“‘Allo 'andsome,” she said, wringing the bird's neck. “Fancy a good time?”

“We have some bread and dried fish,” said Logan. “But thank you.”

The woman stared at him then burst out laughing.

“Let us try down this way,” said Autumn. “It seems quiet enough.”

They turned down another road.

“There seem to be some horses down there,” said Logan pointing. “That must be the horse traders.”

“This place looked very peaceful and inviting from atop the cliff,” said Autumn, looking up at the high walls on either side of the road. “Appearances can be deceptive.”

An old man with a long greasy grey beard came out of a house further down the street and started towards the market. Despite the warmth he wore a thick stained green robe and a hat that bulged outwards and upwards. He stopped walking and sniffed the air suspiciously. He looked up then around and slowly turned, his eyes probing. He paused momentarily when he saw them then continued his search then he held out a hand, grasping at the air, fingers tense. Slowly he rotated.

“What ails him?” whispered Logan.

“I know not,” whispered Autumn, “but this place is as bad as Cheilith. Let us find these horse traders and move on.”

The man's hand went past them then came back. He stared then slowly came over.

“I am Varaunik,” he said. “Halouny of Sorcery and Alchemy. Who might you be?”

Chapter Fifteen

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn. “This be Logan and Darius and these be our horses. We be travellers in these parts.”

“Impressive cat to ride a horse,” said Varaunik, bending over to peer at Darius closely, “but this be no ordinary cat, I warrant.”

Darius just stared back at him, unblinking.

“Hmmm,” muttered Varaunik softly, straightening up again, “but he be not the source.”

He slowly cast his eyes over Autumn and Logan, his long nose twitching. Then he nodded vigorously and his hat flopped over his eyes.

“A thousand pardons for interrupting your ambulations,” he said. “You are no doubt exploring this fair city, seeking the market perhaps, with things to trade?”

“We have already found the market,” said Autumn, “and a right busy place it was too. We are looking for the horse traders.”

“Ahh, they are down the lane a pace,” said Varaunik, vaguely waving with his hand. “Why, pray, do you seek horse traders? Are not three horses sufficient?”

“We want to sell these horses,” said Logan.

“Then you are in the right place,” said Varaunik. “Hmmm, yes, indeed.”

He looked absently at the ground then up at the wall beside him then at Autumn as if not knowing what to say next.

“We will bid you good day then, Halouny Varaunik,” said Autumn as the silence dragged. “No doubt the traders will not stay forever and we desire to be rid of these horses before too long.”

“No, wait,” said Varaunik urgently then relaxed his tone. “They usually stay past sunset, in hope a foolish buyer needs a horse and has not the wit to inspect it in the light. You have plenty of time. Umm, I fancy it is time for the midday meal. Can I offer you my hospitality?”

“That is most kind of you,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan. “I am sure the business will not take long, perhaps on our return?”

“Your horses will be quite safe here, outside my house,” said Varaunik. “I am well known in this city and none dare to steal from me for fear I turn them into a snail or some such.”

“Do you have that power?” asked Logan, impressed.

“Sometimes,” said Varaunik looking a little embarrassed. “’Tis easy to make a mistake in the casting of a spell so oft times they do not work as intended but perhaps the fear of being turned into something unpredicted is as much a deterrent. Come, I shall not take no for an answer. I am most desirous of hearing of your travels and your destination.”

“Then we accept your kind offer,” said Autumn. “This is your dwelling?”

“Indeed,” said Varaunik, opening the door and waving them in. “Be it ever so humble there’s no place like home,” and he laughed happily.

“It is hardly humble,” said Autumn going inside. “It is a huge dwelling. Do you have a giant living here with you?”

“A giant? No,” said Varaunik. “I live here alone. Why?”

Logan followed her in and gasped. There were books everywhere. Stacked on shelves against every wall, piled against the shelves, on the tables, the chairs, even one in the fireplace with charred edges. Any space that did not have books had scrolls, tightly rolled and tied with lengths of red twine.

“Excuse the clutter,” said Varaunik. “Mimusia my cleaning lady has not been in yet today.”

He lifted a pile of books from a chair, oblivious to the weeks of dust upon them, and looked helplessly around the room for somewhere to put it. Then he put the books back on the chair and took a dusty stuffed owl from atop another pile leaning against a table leg. Holding one talon of the owl between his lips he moved the books on the chair and balanced it precariously on top of the pile by the table. The pile wobbled and he thrust his hand at it in a 'stop' movement and the pile stopped wobbling. With a small sigh of relief he put the owl on top and the pile cascaded to the floor. The owl flew over to the shelf over the fireplace and shook itself, billowing dust. "Whoo," it said.

"Pah," said Varaunik irritably, throwing his arms out in disgust. "Begone!" All the books disappeared.

"That's better," he said. "Now we've got room to move."

"Where did all the books go?" asked Autumn.

"To my library upstairs," he said. "Now, what were we talking about? Oh yes, giants. Why did you think a giant lived here?"

"This dwelling is so tall," said Autumn, sitting in the recently vacated chair at Varaunik's gesture.

Varaunik blinked at her.

"It is the same height as the houses next door," he said, "although I am perhaps a trifle shorter than my neighbours."

"And the roof would appear to be normal," said Autumn, pointing at the ceiling.

Varaunik looked at the ceiling then back at Autumn. "What is wrong with my roof?" he asked, his brow furrowing.

"Nothing as far as I know," said Autumn, also looking puzzled. "But outside your roof is very high and inside it is very low."

"That is because there is a room in between," said Varaunik, looking perplexed.

“In between what?” asked Logan, sitting in another chair.

“In between this room and the roof,” said Varaunik, pointing upwards.

“You mean you have rooms on top of rooms here?” asked Autumn.

“Of course,” said Varaunik. “Land is expensive here in the centre so we build upwards.”

“Rooms on top of rooms,” said Autumn, “what a clever idea. How do you get to these rooms? Fly?”

“Well I could,” said Varaunik, “but it is easier to use the stairs.”

“What are stairs?” asked Logan.

“Those things over there,” said Varaunik, pointing to some shelves jutting out of one of the walls at varying heights which had previously been piled with books. There was a square hole in the ceiling just above the topmost one. “Go on up and see.”

Logan went over to the stairs and tested the lowest with his foot. It creaked but did not give way. Cautiously he stood on it and tested the next one, then the next until he went through the hole in the ceiling.

“Autumn!” came a surprised cry. “There's another room up here! Come and look.”

“Go on,” said Varaunik resignedly, when she glanced at him for permission. “You'll be the first girl in my bedroom for many a year.”

“This is no humble dwelling,” said Autumn when she came back down. “Never have I seen rooms on top of rooms before.”

“Well, it's quite common, you know,” said Varaunik. “And this is a humble place. If you ever find yourself in Uli-Rratha go and see the Roinad's house. It is four levels high. Now, I have a chicken pie if you would like or some venison. Would you prefer beer to drink or tea?”

“What is tea?” asked Autumn.

“Where are you from?” asked Varaunik. “You speak our language yet you do not seem to be familiar with this land.”

“I am from Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup,” said Autumn, “and Logan is from Biasdo.”

“Ahh,” said Varaunik, “that explains everything. You are from isolated rural communities. Yes, the ways of the city must be very strange to you. Tea, by the way, is a drink made from seeping aromatic leaves in hot water. It's very refreshing. The leaves come from Wase, the land of the Dohi, which is far to the East. Try some.”

“Thank you,” said Autumn. She nudged Logan who blurted a 'thank you' as well.

Varaunik kicked the book out of the fireplace and replaced it with a small cauldron, into which he poured some water from a waterskin then clicked his thumb and forefinger. Flames appeared around the cauldron.

“Mugs,” he muttered, stroking his beard. “I've got some clean ones somewhere, where did I put them? Ahhh, yes.”

He plunged through a doorway and returned a moment later with three earthenware mugs. Taking a pot from beside the fireplace he put a large pinch of dried brown leaves in each.

“Won't take long to boil,” he said cheerfully. “Now, to business.”

He sat down and looked appraisingly at them.

“There is magic about you both,” he said. “I felt it as soon as I went outside but neither of you are sorcerers. Kindly explain.”

“I know not of what you speak,” said Autumn. “We know nothing of magic.”

“There is definitely magic about you both,” he said, putting his fingertips together. “Not overly strong but strange and distinctive. Have you encountered anyone unusual on your travels?”

“We fought a soska two nights past,” said Logan.

“A soska?” exclaimed Varaunik wide eyed. “You came through Chevesic Forest?”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“So,” said Varaunik, putting the end of his beard in his mouth and sucking it, “the tales are true then. It is said that a soska inhabits the Forest but of those who have encountered it, none have survived to tell the tale. How did you manage to evade it?”

“Autumn killed it,” said Logan proudly. “It was sucking the life out of me and she attacked and killed it.”

Varaunik sucked in a breath sharply.

“No, I didn’t,” said Autumn. “I attacked it but it was besting me. Darius tore it to pieces and then we burnt its remains on the fire.”

“You attacked it?” asked Varaunik. “What sorcery helped you?”

“None,” said Autumn.

“She be a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume,” said Logan. “What need has Autumn of sorcery?”

“The lad speaks truth?” asked Varaunik. “Ahh, the Esyup, of course. I was foolish to have not immediately realised. The water boils, one moment.”

He grasped the hot cauldron using the corner of his robe and poured hot water into the three mugs.

“Leave it to steep for a time,” he said, putting a mug before each of them. “The longer the better.”

He sat back down, cradling his mug in his hands, deep in thought.

“No,” he said after a while, “this is not the magic of the otherland.

There is no mark of the soska upon either of you. There is another magic here. What other encounters have you had?"

"It would seem the Roinad and Lord Loheckle are looking for us," said Autumn. "I know not why and I would venture if either were using magic they would have found us by now."

"Indeed," said Varaunik. "If either were using magic you would have been before them immediately. Anyone else?"

Logan took a mouthful of his tea and spat.

"It is full of things," he said apologetically.

"I am sorry," said Varaunik. "I forgot you are not a tea drinker. You need to drink through your teeth and spit out the leaves after swallowing, although no harm will befall you if you swallow the leaves as well. Some people swear by them but I find they give me wind. Who else have you met?"

"A few people much afflicted in the mind," said Logan, "and Mother Midcarn, of course."

"Mother Midcarn?" cried Varaunik, spilling his tea. "That old bugger still lives? Well, well, well." and he chuckled and mopped ineffectually at the spilt tea with the sleeve of his robe.

"You know her?" asked Autumn. She sipped her tea and grimaced and put the mug back on the table.

"Know her?" said Varaunik. "I worship her! She was in the year ahead of me at the Institute in Uli-Rratha. She was the only student to graduate with perfect marks in living memory."

"Then this is probably another Mother Midcarn," said Autumn. "The one we met claimed only knowledge of divination."

"Hmm, unlikely," said Varaunik. "I sense a strange magic about you and you have met with Mother Midcarn. There can be no other. Tell me, did she chant anything over you? Make signs?"

“Not that I remember,” said Autumn. “She did give us gifts though.”

“Aha!” said Varaunik, leaning forward. “Show them to me.”

Logan and Autumn looked at each other then Logan slowly drew out his stone.

“She gave me this,” he said.

“Pass it to me,” commanded Varaunik, holding out his hand.

Reluctantly Logan did as he was bid. As the stone touched Varaunik's hand small flashes of light jumped from the stone to his palm and a smell of jasmine filled the room. Varaunik closed his eyes and stroked the stone with his other hand.

“Yes,” he whispered. “This has the mark of Mother Midcarn, I feel her presence all over it.”

He stopped stroking the stone and held it up to peer closely at it.

“Hmm,” he muttered. “Hmmm.”

Very reluctantly he reached over and gently placed the stone on the table. It gleamed blackly.

“Gifts, you say?” he said, watching the stone. “More than one? What others?”

“Only this ribbon,” said Autumn.

She dropped the small roll of silver ribbon in Varaunik's hand and he yelped and dropped it.

“Look,” he whispered, holding up his hand. There was a red welt the size and shape of the roll of ribbon on his palm. “This one is strong indeed.”

Autumn bent to pick it up.

“What magic have these things?” she asked, turning the roll over in her hands and inspecting it.

“I know not,” said Varaunik. “Mother Midcarn has bestowed such magic upon these things as is beyond my wit to understand. What did she say when she gave them to you?”

“Only that these were gifts,” said Autumn. “She said this ribbon would look well as trim for my robe but I have not as yet done anything with it.”

“Then you should, and soon,” said Varaunik. “Mother Midcarn would not give such instructions lightly. I fancy the power of this magic will not be apparent until it is sewn to your robe. And what of the stone?”

“She gave me the stone to help calm my mind,” said Logan. “Autumn has a stone she uses for thinking and I wanted one too. Can I have it back now?”

“My apologies,” said Varaunik. “I did not mean to deprive you of the stone. Please take it and accept my thanks for having shown it to me. Can I see your stone, Autumn?”

Autumn fished around in her pack then handed it to him.

“A very nice stone,” he said dismissively, “but it has no magic in it.”

“It has magic enough for me,” said Autumn calmly, taking it back. “You have no knowledge of the magic in my ribbon and Logan’s stone?”

“Alas no,” said Varaunik. “Mother Midcarn was my superior in not just years. Was she well?”

“Aye, she was well,” said Autumn. “Although she lived in a very strange dwelling, the like of which I have never seen before or since.”

“Stranger than mine?” laughed Varaunik. “You appear to have little experience of housing.”

“That is the truth,” said Autumn. “But yours, although large, is the same inside as out. Mother Midcarn’s was much larger inside than outside and she seemed to be able to add and remove rooms at will.”

Varaunik stared at Autumn then cast his hat in the air.

“Oh Mother Midcarn!” he cried and jumped up and kissed Autumn who, surprisingly, did not fell him. She just stared at him in astonishment as he danced around the room and slowly wiped her lips with her hand.

“She did it! She did it!” he cried. “Oh wondrous woman!”

“Did what?” asked Logan as Darius peered in through the door to see what the kerfuffle was about.

“Ohhhh,” said Varaunik breathlessly. He sat back down again, his feet still jiggling.

“At the Institute she was working on the mysteries of space and time,” he said. “She tried to explain it to a group of us once but I understood very little of it. None of us did, but if she can make an inside space bigger than its outside and create more space whenever she wants she must have finally discovered how to fold the universe. Ohhh, Mother Midcarn! Mayhap she can even fold time itself!”

He stuffed his entire beard inside his mouth and held his ears and giggled while drumming his feet. Autumn and Logan looked at each other in bemusement then back at Varaunik.

“I must go to her,” he said, spitting out his beard. “I doubt I will understand all she has achieved but still, I must go to her. Where does she dwell?”

“On the path from Sladrill to Gleard,” said Autumn. “At the crossroad with the way to Cheilith. She has a small mud hut in a field.”

“Sladrill to Gleard,” said Varaunik, nodding. “I shall find the place. I will leave as soon as our business here is ended.”

He paused and a confused look came over his face.

“Why are you here?” he asked. “Someone as young and pretty as you does surely not need a love potion? Unless it's for him.”

“You stopped us in the road and asked us to come inside,” said Autumn.

“Yes, of course, the magic,” said Varaunik. “My apologies.”

“What does a love potion do?” asked Logan.

“It makes someone fall in love with you,” said Varaunik.

“He does not need a love potion,” said Autumn. “He just needs to meet the right person.”

“Perhaps,” said Varaunik, “but don't tell everyone that. I need the income. Love potions are my best line. You are travellers, are you not? Where are you heading?”

“We are heading for Neander,” said Autumn. “We are taking Darius back to his home land.”

“Ahh, then you need to cross the Sea of Looncan,” said Varaunik. “Do you have a boat?”

“No,” said Logan. “We hope to find someone who can take us there and bring us back.”

“There are plenty of fishermen with boats in this city,” said Varaunik, “although many will try to rob you. If you go down to the shore look for a fellow called Pugwash. He is a friend of mine and if you speak my name he will be honest with you and not feed you to the fish after taking your money. Be sure to pay him well as it is a long voyage and he will not be fishing on the way and has no other means to feed his thirteen children.”

“We have no money,” said Autumn, “although we plan to sell the three horses. Will that be enough for your Pugwash?”

“It should be,” said Varaunik. “From what I saw they seem to be fine horses but a lot depends on who you sell them to. Besaine, for one, will not give you a good price. He buys low and sells high and is not above trickery although no horse dealer is completely honest. As a breed they are not well favoured.”

“Perhaps you could come with us and give us the benefit of your advice?” asked Autumn.

“I know little of horse trading,” said Varaunik. He thought for a few moments. “I venture to suggest that you bypass the traders completely. If you offer two of the horses to Pugwash directly he can use them or sell them as he wants and I will buy the third from you as I do not wish to walk all the way to Mother Midcarn. Here.” He picked a small bag from a shelf and tossed it to Logan. “Leave one of the horses and take the others to Pugwash.”

“Which one would you like?” asked Logan, trying to count the coins in the bag with his fingers.

“The oldest and slowest,” said Varaunik. “I am no great horseman and I dislike falling off the damned things. Let us now part, I to get ready to leave on my travels and you to find Pugwash. With good fortune you may yet catch the evening tide.”

“Farewell Halouny Varaunik,” said Autumn as he ushered them outside. “I trust you find Mother Midcarn and give her our best wishes.”

“I shall, I shall,” he said. “Farewell and may Aloidia smile on your ventures.”

“So much for the chicken pie,” said Logan after Varaunik had disappeared. “What do you suppose ‘the evening tide’ is?”

Chapter Sixteen

“That is a lot of water,” said Autumn in awe, standing at the top of the beach. “A powerful lot of water.”

“Tis a noisy beast,” said Logan. “It roars like, well, like something that roars and then that hiss then it roars again. Why does it move so much?”

“I know not,” said Autumn. “Mizule, that is a lot of water. Why is it here and other places have none?”

Logan shrugged and stared at the sea.

“Ponds and lakes have ripples,” said Autumn after a while. “Mayhap these are just ripples too but because this is just so fantastically big the ripples are big as well.”

“Ducks make ripples on a pond,” said Logan. “How big must the ducks out there be to make ripples that size?”

“Ayah,” said Autumn. “Knowledge is a good thing but I am not sure I want to know about ducks that big. I want to taste the water, come.”

She strode purposefully down the sand and a wave came to meet her. She scooped up a handful of water and sipped it then spat it out.

“Truly it is as they say,” she said, “blue but bitter. Mayhap this is where the gods keep the water that has gone bad.”

“The water is not bad,” said a voice behind her.

Autumn turned, a young woman had come over from a nearby boat.

“It tastes bad,” said Autumn. “Have you ever tasted it?”

“It is just salt,” said the girl. “If you take out the salt the water is good to drink.”

“How do you take out the salt?” asked Logan.

“You put a small pot inside a big pot,” she said, “and put the sea water in the big pot and cover it with a piece of hide. Leave it in the sun to heat and the freshwater moves to the small pot and leaves the salt in the big pot.”

“How does the water know which pot to be in?” asked Autumn.

“You must put the small pot under the lowest part of the hide,” said the girl. “The good water collects on the hide and drips into the small pot. It takes a time but it works. We always carry such pots and a hide in case we are kept at sea for too long.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn. “Why would you be kept at sea longer than you want to be?”

“Sometimes we get caught by sudden bad weather,” she said, “and we cannot make land. You must surely be strangers to these parts else you would know these things. I am Mizzen, I live here.”

“I am Autumn,” said Autumn, “this be Logan. We are from the North and have never seen the sea before.”

“Ahhh,” said Mizzen. “I was born on the sea and have never been North. ’Twould be nice to see just grass and trees with no water for once. Are you here to see the sea or for another reason?”

“We are looking for a fisherman by the name of Pugwash,” said Logan. “Do you know him?”

“I might,” said Mizzen, “but then I might not. A lot of fishermen in these parts. What is your business with him?”

“We seek passage to Neander,” said Autumn, “and we were told by Varaunik that Pugwash is a good man and dependable.”

“Varaunik you say?” said Mizzen, squinting at Autumn. “Be you sorcerers too?”

“No, we are just ordinary folk,” said Autumn and jumped back as a wave came in higher than the previous ones and soaked her ankles.

“Ordinary folk?” asked Mizzen. “Ordinary folk as what likes to travel to see the sea or ordinary folk as what is in the employ of the Roinad?”

“We are in no one's employ,” said Autumn. “We travel for the sake of travelling and to experience the world.”

“I'll take you to him,” said Mizzen, making up her mind. “He is my Da and we run that boat there. Come.”

They followed her to the boat lying on the sand. It looked old and worn and had shells and weeds on its bottom but was still a goodly size.

“Da,” she called. A gnarled older man looked up from the mess of netting piled in front of him on the boat. “These folk be looking for you.”

“Oh aye,” he said, not smiling. “Who be you then?”

“We are sent by Varaunik,” said Autumn. “We want passage to Neander and back.”

“Varaunik you say?” said the man. “And did he say what I would get in return?”

“He said to offer you these two horses,” said Autumn, “as you have thirteen children to feed.”

Pugwash gave a half smile. He finished knotting some of the net's twine then got up to look at the horses more closely.

“Aye,” he said, nodding. “Just you and the lad?”

“And the cat,” said Autumn, “although the cat will not be returning.”

“Seems a long way to go to deliver a cat,” said Pugwash, “but for these two horses I'll not complain. When do you want to go?”

“As soon as possible,” said Autumn. “Darius is missing his homeland.”

“Darius be the cat?” asked Pugwash and Autumn nodded.

Pugwash looked at the sea then at the sky, then at the boat then Mizzen then back at the horses then Autumn and then the sea again.

“We can leave on the morning tide,” he said, sucking his teeth. “make landfall around sunset and come back the next day. Be that soon enough for you?”

“Yes, that is good,” said Autumn. “Do you want the horses now or later?”

“Where are you stabling them?” he asked. “With Varaunik?”

“No,” said Autumn. “We have made no arrangements for stabling.”

“Then I might as well take them now,” he said. “They be safe with me for Varaunik will turn me into a snail or worse if I do wrong. Where be you spending the night?”

“Mayhap on the beach,” said Autumn.

“You can sleep on the boat then,” he said. “That way you’ll be here when it’s time to go. That be good with you?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “That is kind of you.”

“Then we have a deal,” said Pugwash. He spat on his hand and held it out, expectantly.

Autumn looked at him, her eyebrow raised.

“Seal the deal with a handshake,” said Pugwash.

“Ahh,” said Autumn and spat on her hand.

“Whoa, go easy,” said Pugwash, shaking his hand when she let it go. “You be a strong maid. You ever need a job let me know. Takes strong hands to haul in a net.”

“She be a Krisana,” said Logan.

“Oh aye, what be that then?” asked Pugwash.

“It is nothing,” said Autumn, “just a name we have in the North for women of a certain type.”

Pugwash nodded disinterestedly. “Right then,” he said. “We’ll be back at dawn.”

“A question, if I may,” asked Logan. Pugwash turned back.

“What is ‘the evening tide’?” he asked.

“It be the tide what’s in the evening,” said Pugwash evenly.

“Ahh,” said Logan. “Be there other tides then?”

“They be from inland, Da,” said Mizzen. “They do not know the sea.”

“Oh,” said Pugwash, “right then. There be one, two or three tides a day, depending on the moons and them as happens in the evening is called the evening tide, see, and them as happens in the morning is called the morning tide.”

“That makes sense, of a kind,” said Autumn. “Tell us, what is a tide?”

Pugwash stared at her. “A tide be when the water comes up high,” he said.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “And why does the water come up high?”

“I know not,” said Pugwash, “but the high water follows the moons. Highest when both are up, lowest when only Plifal is up. When Plakill only is up then the tide is in between.”

“How high does the water get?” asked Logan.

“You see there?” said Pugwash, pointing up the beach, “where the weed stops and the grasses begin? That’s how high the water gets

when both moons are up.”

“But that's higher than the boat,” said Logan.

“Aye,” said Pugwash, “and the boat floats on top of it so it ain't sitting on the sand so as we can sail it away. How else do you think we gets it in the water?”

“I was going to ask about that,” said Autumn, “as the water is a fair way from the boat.”

Pugwash grimaced and scratched under his thick black beard. “That's because the tide is out at the moment,” he said. “Still, I reckon as how you'll be seeing it in the morning. Oh, afore I forget, if you be wanting to cook anything, do it on the beach not on the boat. I be getting right angry if you set afire to it.”

“We will not be making a fire,” said Autumn. “We have no food in need of cooking.”

“Be there ducks on the sea?” asked Logan.

“No lad,” said Pugwash, “although there be other birds.”

“Are they what cause these big ripples in the water?” he asked.

“Are you jesting with me?” asked Pugwash, scowling at him.

“He is not jesting,” said Autumn quickly. “We have no knowledge of the sea. On ponds and lakes ducks and other birds cause ripples and we are interested to know the cause of ripples as big as these on the sea.”

“It be the wind,” said Pugwash. “The wind blows across the sea and pushes the water before it. When the wind is strong the waves be huge but it is quiet at the moment. If you still be here when there's a storm you'll know the truth of it. Well, we'll bid you good day and meet again at dawn or thereabouts.”

* * *

“Why is the water affected by the moons?” asked Autumn as they lay on the fishing nets on the boat, looking up at the night sky.

“I do not know,” said Logan, “and I am surprised you ask me as you know a vast amount that I do not.”

“Since I left the Esiyup, it has come as a surprise to me how little I do know,” said Autumn. “I see now that I was guilty of vanity in thinking that I knew a lot. Perhaps this is why I left, to discover how ignorant I am. But still, if the moons do lift the water, how do they do it?”

“Mayhap there is something attaching the water to the moons,” said Logan, “although what it could be I cannot imagine. A rope or some such would not move the water. Something invisible, at any rate. I wonder if it is just the sea or is it any water? Mayhap the water in your bowl is also affected but because it is so small we cannot see it lift.”

“A good question, Logan,” said Autumn. “I wonder if you can feel the rising of the water if you are sitting atop it in this boat?”

“We shall find out in the morning,” said Logan. “Pugwash said the boat will lift with the water.”

He sat up and reached over to get some more cheese and lay back chewing it.

“If we cannot feel the rising,” he said meditatively, “mayhap the land rises with the moons as well and we have simply never noticed. Mayhap the moons cast in invisible net over all the surface and drags it with their moving.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “If that were so then the water would not rise on the land, it would rise with it so the water would stay in the same place on the beach.”

“True,” said Logan. “Although perhaps the land does not rise as much as it is harder. Water is easy to move, rock less so.”

“Good point,” said Autumn. “How will we discover the truth of it?”

“That I do not know,” said Logan.

They both fell silent, watching Plifal rising in the East.

“There was another at the Esyup called Didiza,” said Autumn. “We oftentimes did our exercises together. She had the notion that the moons were not moved by the gods. Noxu tried to argue with her but he was unconvincing.”

“If they are not moved by the gods then how do they move?” asked Logan.

“Didiza could not answer that so she was unconvincing as well,” said Autumn. “But she did argue that if the gods moved the moons then the moons should move in other ways and not always follow the same path. She said that the gods were capricious in many ways so why were they not in this way?”

“It is not for us to know the reasons of the gods,” said Logan.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “But we do not need to know why Plakill moves the big moon in a different way to normal in order to see it moving so, but it never does. Nor Plifal nor Astauand nor any of the dust that was also thrown up in the sky. It all moves the same way, every day and every night.”

“You think strange thoughts,” said Logan. “No one else thinks these thoughts.”

“Didiza did,” said Autumn, “and she was not alone. I too have wondered if Plakill and Plifal are just large rocks moving across the sky at different speeds which may be why sometimes Plakill takes the lead and other times Plifal does.”

“If that be so, what keeps them up there?” asked Logan.

“Mayhap whatever keeps them up is the same as makes the water move with them,” said Autumn. “Mayhap it is the water moving that somehow keeps them up and not the other way around.”

“Or mayhap it is something else,” said Logan, “and the moons staying up there and the water moving down here are the consequences of that thing.”

“I cannot immediately argue with you on that,” said Autumn. “It is a thought to ponder.”

“I shall be interested to see if we know when the boat rises,” said Logan some time later, “for another thought occurs to me.”

“What thought is that?” asked Autumn.

“If we do not notice the boat rise because we rise with it,” said Logan slowly, “and if, as you say, the land might rise and we do not notice because we rise with it, could it be that the sky does not move around us?”

“How else would it move?” asked Autumn.

“Mayhap it be the land that moves under the sky,” said Logan, “rather than the sky moving over the land.”

“But would we not be thrown in the opposite direction?” asked Autumn. “If the land rises beneath us we are pushed up but if it moves sideways surely we would fall over?”

“Aye, you would think so,” he said. “But if the land rises it must also then fall and we do not drop, do we. In fact, if we jump up we come back to the ground. Does that not mean that there is something holding us to the ground? And, if that be so, mayhap whatever it is holding us to the ground stops us from falling over as the land moves under the sky.”

“An interesting thought,” said Autumn. “But if it is the land moving and not the sky, why do different things in the sky move at different speeds? Surely if the sky is fixed and the land moves everything in the sky would move at the same speed?”

“Aye, that is the truth of it,” said Logan. “Although what if the sky is not fixed? What if the things in the sky, Astauand, Plakill and the rest

are also moving, each independent of each other?”

“That would seem over complicated,” said Autumn. “It seems to me that you are speculating to justify a thought and not to explain what you see.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan. “When I get an idea it is sometimes difficult to drop it.”

“And think on this,” said Autumn. “If everything is moving, each independent of the other, what keeps them apart and stops them crashing into each other?”

“You know,” said Logan, “that would seem to be an argument supporting the gods controlling these things. Without the gods keeping order things would crash into each other. Did Noxu never think of that?”

“If he did he never said,” said Autumn. “How long have you been thinking these thoughts?”

“Oh, I never thought much at all before I met you,” said Logan with a laugh. “Food was pretty much all I thought about then. You have brought many strange new thoughts into my mind.”

“Have I?” asked Autumn, sitting up.

“Most definitely,” said Logan. “We have talked and you have taught me much, not least reading and writing.”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I was thinking about that.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan, scratching his belly.

“You remember the parchment you took from that man's tunic in the forest?” said Autumn.

“Sire someone,” said Logan. “I have forgotten the rest of his name. What of it?”

“I had not long shown you the last of the shapes,” said Autumn, “and yet you were able to read almost all of what was written there.”

“There were several words I did not know,” said Logan. “Ascertain be one of them.”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “And that does not surprise me. What surprises me is how many of the written words you were able to read so soon after learning your shapes. I have never known anyone learn as quickly as you.”

“You give me too much credit,” said Logan, feeling pleased with himself. “You are a good teacher.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “perhaps not.”

“How else could it be?” asked Logan.

“Think on this,” said Autumn. “It did not come to me until just now, but Varaunik said your stone had magic on it.”

“Aye, but what for we do not know,” said Logan.

“But what did Mother Midcarn say?” said Autumn. “She said she was giving you the stone to calm your mind. I think the stone not only calms you mind but helps you think and learn more quickly. Tell me true, did you start to think thoughts after you met me or after Mother Midcarn gave you the stone?”

“I do not know,” said Logan after a while. “I do remember when I first met you you said a lot of strange things and now I do not think them strange but when that change took place I cannot say.”

He sat up and took his stone out of the pouch he had made to carry it. It felt smooth and warm and very familiar in his hand.

“You think she put magic on this stone to make me as clever as you?” he asked. “If she did it cannot be strong magic because I fall far short of you and always will.”

“Not so,” said Autumn. “I have thought and talked about Astauand and the moons many times but have never thought to wonder if it is we that move and not them. I do not know the right of it but new ideas are hard to come by and explanations are in dire need of new ideas. It also took me many summers to read as well as you do now. I think Mother Midcarn has given you a most extraordinary gift.”

“A gift of thinking?” said Logan, turning the stone over in his hand. “Would not the gift of knowing be better?”

“You tell me,” said Autumn.

“Oh, we have had this conversation before,” said Logan. “Whenever you want me to think you say ‘you tell me’.”

“And what do you do when I say that?” asked Autumn.

“I think about what we were talking about,” said Logan, “which is what you want me to do. I always do what you want, if you had not noticed.”

“Why?” asked Autumn. “Why not just make me explain something so that you know?”

Logan stared at the glimmer of his stone in the dim light of Plifal.

“I suppose it be because not everything is simple knowledge,” he said after a while. “This stone is hard and I cannot cut it with my knife, that is a simple fact but oftentimes things are not so simple, such as what to do in a situation.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn.

“Ohh, such as when talking to someone,” he said. “Different people act differently to the same thing, even the same person may not act the same way each time. Knowing a person does not help with knowing another person and thinking helps. Thinking about how a person might act before the time gives me choices on how to respond when they do. Are you not always saying that we always have choices? Thinking gives me those choices. If I do not think I do not have a

choice, I just react and that may not be the best choice.”

“I recall a talk we had not long past,” said Autumn, “when I told you that when fighting I just react and do not think. How do you fit that into your thoughts?”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “But you also said that you need to react in the right way and not the wrong way and you can only react in the right way because you have thought before and practised so that you do not need to think when the need arises. Yes, you have knowledge of the movements but you need the thinking to use that knowledge and you do the thinking before you need to use it, not at the time.”

“So which is better?” asked Autumn. “Knowing or thinking?”

“You be fond of riddles,” said Logan. “Does it entertain you to befuddle and bemuse me?”

“You are neither befuddled nor bemused,” said Autumn. “Answer me.”

“Knowing without thinking would seem fruitless,” said Logan. “As does thinking without knowing. Mayhap both together are good although of the two thinking without knowing can lead to knowing but knowing without thinking cannot lead to thinking. Indeed, now I think on it, it could be that something I know may be false and it is only if I think about it that I can discover it is false.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “And it would be a terrible thing to go through life only knowing falsehoods and never thinking about them. But tell me, now we are talking of falseness, what if it is your thinking that is false? What if there is a falseness in the manner in which you think?”

“Something I have always liked about you, Autumn,” said Logan, sarcastically, “is how easily you make my head hurt and this stone does not help with that. Perhaps Mother Midcarn gave me the stone to hit you with and calm my mind that way.”

“Are you thinking right?” asked Autumn, “or is there a falseness in your manner of thinking?”

“Of course I’m not thinking right,” he said, laughing. He put the stone back in its pouch. “It is not possible for me to hit you with this stone, you would not permit it. That I do know!”

Chapter Seventeen

“So what be she doing?” asked Pugwash as he climbed on board the boat.

Autumn was sitting cross-legged at the front of the boat with Darius lying by her side and had not acknowledged Pugwash or Mizzen's arrival.

“She be deep in thought,” said Logan. “She does this every morning around dawn.”

“Oh aye,” said Pugwash. He set a tied cloth bundle down on the bottom of the boat. “What for?”

“I am not rightly sure,” said Logan, “but it is important to her. Umm, I ought to warn you that when she stops thinking she will probably attack things on the boat.”

“Oh aye,” said Pugwash, scratching his head. “Got a temper then, has she?”

“No, be about practising her skills,” said Logan. “She does that every day as well.”

“As long as she don't break nothing, I reckon,” said Pugwash. “Mizzen, lay out a spare line case she'n falling overboard. Can't swim, most like.”

“So just the two of you?” asked Logan.

“Aye, only need two to handle the boat,” said Pugwash. “Usually takes two of me sons for the fishing but don't reckon they's needed today. Just sail over 'n back, nice and easy although looks like we may be in for a squall.”

“What's a squall?” asked Logan.

“Li'l bitty wind and some rain, most like,” said Mizzen. “Da wouldn't be taking the boat out if we was in for a storm.”

Logan scanned the sky but there was only a single small cloud to be seen as Astauand began to peep over the horizon. Pugwash was doing things to a tall pole wedged in the middle of the boat.

“So when will we be leaving?” asked Logan.

“Soon as bottom's off the sand,” said Pugwash. “Won't be long. Morning wind's picking up nice, too.”

Logan looked over the side of the boat and saw it was surrounded by water, although it was still tipped to one side.

“Is there anything I can do?” he asked.

“Aye,” said Pugwash. “You can keep out of the way, that be best. Gi'us a hand with the steer board, Mizzen love.”

* * *

Kaloolon was a distant smudge on the horizon when Autumn stirred. The small cloud had arrived overhead and was briefly doing what clouds do and stirring small waves in the process. She leapt up and hung over the side of the boat.

“Vallume,” she said, clearly and distinctly then threw up again.

“Are you unwell?” asked Logan.

Autumn looked at him, her face pale and sweating.

“I am dying,” she said calmly, her body rigid and her hands gripping the side of the boat. “I feel my time is near.”

“Sploop, no,” cried Logan, jumping up and running over to her. “What ails you? Have you been poisoned?” He lurched as the boat crested a wave and fell against her.

“I fear 'tis so,” she said grimly and threw up again. “Mayhap that tea Varaunik gave me was a slow poison.”

Pugwash and Mizzen looked at each other and laughed.

“You not be dying,” he said. “You just be sea sick, 'tis all. It will soon pass.”

“Sea sick?” said Logan. “Have you been drinking that bad water, Autumn?”

“’Tis not the water,” said Mizzen. “It be the moving of the boat in the squall. Come and sit in the middle of the boat where it moves the least and it will soon pass. Be glad the water is mostly calm today. In a proper storm the water can be higher than the mast and the boat be tossed as high as Plifal.”

Autumn didn’t move, her knuckles white. She groaned pitifully.

“How deep is the water?” she asked after a while.

“As deep as a woman’s need for pretty things,” said Pugwash. “There is no bottom that I know of.”

Autumn backed away from the side of the boat, fear showing on her face.

“What if I fall in?” she asked, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand and staring at the water.

“You sink or float,” said Pugwash cheerfully. “Though I venture you being so skinny you be a sinker.”

“So I would drown and my body keep sinking forever?” asked Autumn.

“Nay, lass,” said Pugwash reassuringly. “Fish will eat you soon enough.”

Autumn tore her eyes away from the sea and sat cross legged at the foot of the mast with the sail behind her. She put her hands on her knees, closed her eyes and started to chant softly. A few minutes later she opened her eyes and stared past Pugwash at the steer board

towards the distant horizon.

“How do you feel?” asked Logan.

“My stomach still quivers,” she said, “but my mind is now at peace. Truly it is as Noxu says, expect the unexpected. I was caught by surprise and let my fears overcome me. If I am to die in this water then I now accept that fate with equanimity.”

“You what?” asked Pugwash.

“She has now got used to the idea of drowning,” explained Logan.

“Nobody's going to drown on my boat,” said Pugwash, irritably. “Varaunik be right fussy about things like that.”

He bent and pulled a small clay pot from the bundle on the bottom of the boat. It had a long, thin spout on it which he clenched between his lips. He bent again and pulled out another pot wrapped in a caradace leaf. Unwrapping the leaf he teased a tiny ember into the pot between his lips then puffed vigorously. Quickly the pot started to smoke and he rewrapped the other pot in the leaf and put it back in his bundle. Autumn and Logan stared at him.

“What be you doing?” asked Autumn.

“I be smoking my pipe,” he said.

“Why?” asked Autumn.

“I like it,” he said and blew a thick cloud of smoke out of his mouth.

“That be right pungent,” said Autumn, waving a hand in front of her face. Then she gulped and held her hand over her mouth and gulped again.

“Best weed in Neander,” said Pugwash. “You want to try some?”

“Thank you but no,” said Autumn. She'd stopped looking pale and was now looking a little green.

“Lad?” asked Pugwash, offering the pipe to Logan.

Logan took it.

“What do I do?” he asked.

“Suck on the stem,” said Pugwash. “Savour the smoke in your mouth then blow it out.”

Obediently Logan sucked hard on the stem then started coughing and held out the pipe. Pugwash took it back, laughing.

“See there?” he said, pointing behind him. “We’re out of sight of land and forward we’ll be seeing Neander soon.”

Autumn stood up and scanned the horizon then ducked under the sail and scanned the forward horizon.

“There is nothing but sea all around and below,” she said, “and nothing but sky above. I find that ... disquieting.”

“It be right peaceful out here,” said Pugwash. “Easy to forget the troubles of the world out here.”

“Aye, I can see that,” said Autumn, sitting down again. “Yet I would still prefer the solid land beneath my feet.”

“You’ll get used to it lass,” said Pugwash. “Give it time. Best cure for sea sickness is work but you be a passenger and there ain’t no work for you to do.”

“Ayah, I can do some sewing,” said Autumn. “I have a piece of ribbon for my robe which I have not found time to sew as yet. Now be as good a time as any.”

She got up again and retrieved her pack from the front of the boat. Sitting at the mast again she brought out the ribbon, her bone needle and some thread. She took off her robe and bent to measuring.

“This be very strange,” she said after a few moments.

“What is?” asked Logan.

“This ribbon be the exact right length to go all around the hem of my robe,” said Autumn looking at the ribbon she held against the cloth, “including the hood. How did Mother Midcarn know the exact length?”

“That is strange indeed,” said Logan. “And she did say to put it on the hem. Is it otherwise a normal ribbon?”

“It would seem so,” said Autumn, running it through her fingers.

“It be a pretty silver,” said Mizzen. “Looks well with your black robe.”

“I wonder if I should stitch it in any special way?” said Autumn.

“If there was need Mother Midcarn would have said, I am certain,” said Logan. “Mayhap the ribbon itself will not let you stitch it wrong.”

“How would a ribbon know about stitching?” asked Mizzen. “Be this a Northern thing? Down here we just stitch and be done with it.”

Autumn smiled. “You are right,” she said. “I am overthinking this. Let me get the stitching done and see what happens.”

“Why would anything happen?” asked Mizzen. “Tis a ribbon on a bit of cloth.”

“She be a woman,” said Pugwash. “A bit of ribbon be a big thing and all consuming. Leave her be.”

* * *

“Smell home,” said Darius, getting up and staring at the land ahead.

“Well, bugger me,” said Pugwash, dropping his pipe. “That old cat can talk!”

“Keep it to yourself,” said Autumn. “If you tell others they will not believe you and think you strange in the head.”

"Aye, that be the truth of it," said Pugwash. "And don't you go saying nothing either, Mizzen, else you'll not find yourself an era'owen."

"Tamash'll have me anyway," said Mizzen complacently, "no matter what I say."

"Well, he be strange in the head already," grumbled Pugwash, "but best you don't put it to the test, love."

He cleared his throat and looked at Autumn, then Darius, then Autumn again.

"Umm, where do you want me to make land?" he asked.

"Darius?" asked Autumn.

"Ahead," said Darius. He was staring intently at the woodland not far distant, his ears and whiskers taut and his nose twitching. His golden eyes gleamed in the fading light.

"Reckon that be easiest," said Pugwash. "Best stay away from the town. Don't rightly know what the dues be for bringing in a cat but they'll make the most of it, that be certain."

"Dues?" asked Logan.

"Taxes," said Pugwash, spitting over the side of the boat. "I has to pay a fee for anything I take onto land at either end, or s'posed to, like. Can't say as I always remember. Make your cat say something else."

Darius' eyes stared at Pugwash.

"There is no need," said Autumn. "He has said enough and he is not my cat, he is his own."

"Fetch a pretty parak at a circus, I warrant," said Pugwash. "Ain't never seen no talking cat at a circus. Saw a horse as could count once, remember that Mizzen?"

"Aye," she said. "But the horse couldn't count right. Kept making

mistakes. I reckon it was just tapping its hoof on the ground and not counting at all.”

“Reckon you're right, lass,” said Pugwash. He leant on the steer board and the boat veered a little to the left. “There be a small river over there. I'll take the boat in its mouth and we'll tie up for the night. What will be happening with the cat?”

“He is in his home land,” said Autumn. “He will be leaving us.”

“Prrrr,” purred Darius, his eyes bright and alert.

“Do you know this place?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Darius. “Family not far.”

“You have a family?” asked Autumn. “I never thought to ask.”

“Yes,” said Darius. “Not see long time.”

“Then it is time you did,” said Autumn. “You were right, Pugwash. Work is a good remedy for the sea sickness. I have nearly finished my sewing and all is well with my stomach. I will finish it tomorrow.”

Pugwash skilfully brought the boat a short way up the river mouth and tied it to a tree. Darius leapt off the boat onto the shore and Autumn and Logan followed.

“Ahh, 'tis good to stand on steady ground again,” said Logan. “This place smells different.”

“The plants look different,” said Autumn, “but no matter. We will not be here long. Darius, it is time to say good bye. Fare well, my friend. I wish you a long life and contentment with all it contains.”

“Yes, good bye, Darius,” said Logan.

Darius looked at the woodland then back at the two of them.

“I thank you for the great kindness you have done me, friends

Autumn and Logan,” he said. “I am forever in your debt. Listen now, if you should ever find yourselves in great peril, call my name three times and I will attend you. Fare well.”

With that he let out a mighty roar and was swallowed up in the darkness.

“Well, “ said Logan. “Fancy that. I never heard him say more than two or three words before. Turns out he could speak proper all along.”

“Mother Midcarn did say he was no ordinary cat,” said Autumn, staring at where Darius had disappeared. “I wonder what he meant by saying his name three times?”

* * *

“Loheckle is becoming a grievous nuisance,” said the Roinad.

“Indeed, Highness,” said Hysleria. “If you will forgive me, have we agreed to reject the terms of the trade agreement with the Dohi in its present form?”

“I suppose so,” said Obvia. “I really can't accept their levying a higher duty on our exports than we have on our imports. It is really quite intolerable. It would mean a net reduction in income.”

“Quite so, Highness,” said Hysleria. “I shall so instruct your ambassador for his continuing negotiations. If you will permit, it may facilitate those negotiations if Your Highness would hint at the possible lowering of restriction on salt exports to the Principality. They may well become more amenable to parity in the duties.”

Obvia scowled with regal haughtiness.

“Oh very well,” she exclaimed. “But only a hint mind. I want to see them toe the line before making any definite commitments.”

“Quite, Highness,” said Hysleria. He made a note on his scroll. “Now, Lord Loheckle?”

"I have received a report from Perica about Loheckle's depredations," said Obvia.

"She should not be reporting to you directly," said Hysleria, hiding the insult he felt. "All such reports should go through me. I am your Piers Sakratar, am I not? It is improper for a mere tax collector to report to Your Highness directly. There is a protocol for such matters."

"She is not a mere tax collector, Hysleria," said Obvia, please to have been able to prick his self importance for once. "She is the Chief Tax Collector and as such is high in my esteem."

"Quite so, Highness," said Hysleria. "Perhaps you wish me to instruct all tax collectors to report to you directly in the future?"

"Oh come, man, you take these things too seriously," said Obvia. "I merely ran into her in the courtyard earlier and we exchanged words, nothing more. Your position has not been compromised. A formal report will no doubt be sent to you in good time."

"Indeed, Highness," said Hysleria, now furious that he had not been informed of this courtyard meeting. "May I enquire the nature of Lord Loheckle's newest nuisance to your person?"

"Perica informed me that one of her staff had that very morning returned from Ferir'ama," said Obvia. "And that he had been unable to collect any taxes from there."

"How so, Highness?" asked Hysleria, frowning.

"It seems that Loheckle had not long been through the town and extracted taxes of his own," said Obvia.

"A most grievous liberty, Highness," said Hysleria. "But surely the collector was still able to extract taxes none the less?"

"Apparently not," said Obvia, feeling weak inside at the thought of the lost revenue. "This was the nature of Perica's concern. Loheckle had, by all accounts, removed all monies, livestock and grain from the town, leaving not one parak for the rightful collector."

“I find that hard to believe, Highness,” said Hysleria. “My understanding of the nature of peasants is that they always have money and food squirrelled away. I venture the collector did not press them hard enough.”

“Perica assured me that the collector concerned is greatly experienced in the matter of collecting taxes from the peasantry,” said Obvia. “The requisite number of hostages were taken pending delivery of the dues and were rightly dispatched to Zeeth when such dues were not forthcoming, although ...”

“Although, Highness?” asked Hysleria.

“This is a lesser issue,” said Obvia, “but notwithstanding a concern in itself. It transpires that a number of men of fighting age and a smaller number of women of comely appearance were also taken by Loheckle’s forces and thus the hostages were not in their prime.”

“Perhaps the townspeople deemed their loss to be acceptable,” said Hysleria.

“Quite so,” said Obvia. “And now you are fully appraised. Not only does Loheckle take those taxes that are rightfully mine, but he deprives me of the men and women as would lever the payment of my due. His sins are thus doubled and his nuisance to my person becomes most grievous. He must be stopped and brought to account, Hysleria. Do you hear me? Brought to account!”

She slammed her bejewelled hand on the table and rattled the candelabra.

“I shall attend to it forthwith, Highness,” said Hysleria. “I shall meet with your generals and formulate a plan this very afternoon. I think it would also be appropriate if we made Lord Loheckle an example, should any others of the Opsablesia be considering similar actions.”

“Good,” said Obvia. “Now I instructed Perica to make up the shortfall by increasing taxes on the other towns and villages. You will do the necessary formalities?”

“Indeed, Highness,” said Hysleria. “I will draw up an edict to that effect shortly. There is, alas, one other matter that I need to bring to your attention, Highness.”

“Oh not more,” sighed Obvia. “Food will be here shortly and I grow hungry and weary. What is it?”

“You recall, of course, Highness, that matter of the Krisana, Autumn Savannah?” said Hysleria.

“Isn't that the woman that Loheckle has been looking for?” asked Obvia. “What of her?”

“Your memory is indeed most excellent, Highness,” said Hysleria. “Doubtless you will also recall that Sire Galon Vens ab Toogrit was marked to locate this woman and bring her to your presence.”

“I seem to remember that was the plan,” said Obvia, looking at the doorway to the kitchen. A servant was hovering.

“It would seem that Sire Galon Vens ab Toogrit has gone missing,” said Hysleria. “He was last seen some days past leaving Kaloolon with two guards and has not been seen since.”

“You think he has absconded to Neander?” asked Obvia. “Kaloolon is the nearest port to that land.”

“He was seen heading towards Chorenn,” said Hysleria, “in accord with his instructions. I have, as yet, no reason to doubt his loyalties.”

“Then find him, Hysleria, find him,” said Obvia. “Why do you bother me with such trifles?”

“My apologies, Highness,” said Hysleria. “I only bother you with this because the man's horse has turned up, without him.”

“How so?” asked Obvia, her impatience growing as entertaining smells were now coming from the kitchens.

“His horse, and another which I infer to be one of his guard's, was

offered for sale in Kaloolon,” said Hysleria. “One of my associates there located the seller, a local fisherman and minor smuggler. It seems that the horses were given to this man in exchange for passage to Neander.”

“And yet you do not doubt Galon’s loyalties?” said Obvia, frowning. “Come, man, if he has exchanged his horse for passage it must surely mean I am no longer in his favour.”

“Indeed no,” said Hysleria. “The horses were exchanged by a woman by the name of Autumn Savannah. It was she who went to Neander and, for reasons I do not yet know, returned the next day.”

“How strange,” said Obvia. “And what do you make of this, Hysleria?”

“I fear it can only mean one thing, Highness,” said Hysleria. “Clearly this Autumn Savannah came upon Sire Galon Vens ab Toogrit in his quest and murdered him. This must in turn mean that she is wholly in league with Lord Loheckle.”

“Hmmm,” said Obvia frowning. “And what of the passage to Neander?”

“Had she not returned, Highness,” said Hysleria, “I would presume merely that she escaped this land after having killed a loyal member of your staff but her prompt return says only one thing to me.”

“And what is that, pray?” asked Obvia.

“Why, Highness,” said Hysleria. “It must surely mean that this Autumn Savannah is an agent of Lord Loheckle and went to Neander to establish an alliance between Lord Loheckle and Soros, Karoi of Neander.”

Chapter Eighteen

“Your pardon,” said Autumn to a man sitting on the ground outside a house. “What place be this?”

“This be Little Parede,” he said, pausing in his plucking of a duck. The naked hind half of the bird looked scrawny and pathetic. “Where be you folk from?”

“Kaloolon, some days past,” said Autumn. “We are travellers and seek bread and cheese and perhaps some dried meat.”

“Travellers, eh,” he said, brushing some small leg feathers from his beard. “Where be you heading?”

“North,” said Autumn. “I hear tell of places there where the water is as hard as stone and I have a fancy to see that for myself.”

“You don't want to go believing every tale you hear,” said the man, chortling. “Water hard as stone, my arse! You believe that, you'll believe anything.”

“I neither believe nor disbelieve,” said Autumn. “I travel to find out for myself. Where, pray, may we find someone with bread and cheese to spare?”

The man sneezed as a feather went up his nose then turned his head to look at half a dozen men on horses ride past.

“Seem to be getting a lot of travellers here today,” said the man. “That be the third group of horsemen I've seen so far, together with your good selves, of course. I venture something must be happening in Parede.”

“Is Parede far?” asked Logan, watching the men as they rode up the road in a trail of dust.

“Nay, lad,” said the man. “'Tis but a short walk. I go myself most days. There be a widow woman there of my acquaintance who likes the company.”

“Company is good when it is genial,” said Autumn.

“Oh she be most genial when I brings her a duck or the like,” laughed the man.

“Then the geniality is mutual,” said Autumn. “Bread and cheese?”

“What day be it?” asked the man.

“I know not,” said Autumn. “I confess the tracking of the days is not one of my recreations.”

“I’d ask what your recreations are,” said the man, grasping some more feathers but not pulling them, “but I fancy yonder lad be one of them. Good fortune to him, is what I say!” and he beamed at Logan.

“I venture we’ll find bread in Parede,” said Logan, bored with this exchange. “Let us move on.”

“Aye, you will,” said the man as Logan turned away. “If it be a market day then there be plenty what is selling bread and cheese, but if not best you seek out Ma Rennet. She has a skill with cheese that few can surpass. You’ll find her dwelling by the stream.”

“We thank you,” said Autumn.

“He seemed in need of talking,” said Logan as they walked on.

“But friendly enough,” said Autumn. “If he need ten words when one will do then it is of no importance if he be friendly.”

“I suppose so,” said Logan. “I wonder if it is a market day in Parede?”

“We will find out soon,” said Autumn. “I venture it may be since there would seem to be many strangers in town. Mayhap they be coming for the market. See yonder?”

She pointed to another group of horsemen joining the road from a side track up ahead, not far from the first dwellings on the edge of Parede.

“Mayhap,” said Logan, “although they do not appear to be carrying produce for sale.”

“I know that man,” said Autumn suddenly, spying a large man with a thick black beard hurrying his horse to catch the others. “He be Kizerain Qerrassa.”

“Where have I heard that name before?” asked Logan. “It sounds familiar.”

“He was in Pirend when I released Darius,” said Autumn.

“Ohhh, that man who thrust his sword into the ground and told you to leave forever,” said Logan. “I remember. Why did you not best him as well? I expected you to.”

“There was no need,” said Autumn. “He asked me to leave and I was leaving anyway. I wonder what business brings him here.”

“Well, I warrant he be not here because of you,” said Logan. “How would he know you are here and why would he care anyway?”

“True enough,” said Autumn, “but our parting was not on the friendliest of terms and with the Roinad and Lord Loheckle looking for us I wonder if there are not others as well. We seem to be right popular. Let us find the market or Ma Rennet and be gone. I prefer the quiet of the woods to the clamour of those wanting to seek me out.”

* * *

“You there,” said Kizerain, reining in his horse at the crossroad marking the centre of the town. “Who is the Chief of this place.”

The woman looked up at him and stepped back, a little fearful. She gathered her three children closer to her.

“Come, lady,” said Kizerain. “I would speak with him or her.”

“He be Wohif,” she said.

“And where would I find this Wohif?” asked Kizerain.

His horse shook its head and looked balefully at the woman.

“He be blacksmith,” she said and nervously pointed down one of the roads. “His smithy be down there on the edge of town.”

“My thanks, lady,” said Kizerain.

He cast his eye around to check his men were well dispersed. They were, for this was not the first town they had visited.

“You two, come with me,” he said, beckoning with his hand.

The three of them walked their horses in the direction the woman had pointed.

“Be you Wohif?” asked Kizerain, unnecessarily. “Chief of this town?”

Like all blacksmiths this man was heavily muscled and naked to the waist. He was adding wood to a stone hearth already blazing merrily.

“Aye, I am,” he said, straightening up and looking at Kizerain. “You be wanting a sword repaired, I wager.”

“No,” said Kizerain, drawing a sword that was clearly not in any need of repair. “I bring you tidings from Lord Loheckle and a message from him.”

“I know him not,” said Wohif looking from Kizerain to the two men behind him. Their swords were also drawn. “But I am happy to hear his message.”

“That be right cooperative of you,” said Kizerain. “This bodes well for the future.”

Wohif’s eyes narrowed and he reached for his heavy hammer. Kizerain smiled and tested the edge of his sword with his thumb.

“My Lord desires a small kindness of you and your townsfolk,” he

said. "My Lord asks that you do not pay your taxes to the Roinad this year and that instead you pay them to him."

Wohif sucked his teeth for a few moments.

"Makes no never mind to us who we pay our taxes to," he said. "Cepting I fancy the Roinad may have an opinion and it may be that she be not happy that we gave her taxes to another."

"A trifling detail," said Kizerain, "as the Roinad will soon not be in a position to do anything about it. Moreover, what the Roinad may or may not do be in the future and Lord Loheckle be in the present."

He used his sword to point up the road at the men on horseback as far back as the crossroad and beyond.

"I have two hundred and fifty men spread around," said Kizerain conversationally. "Barely half are experienced fighters, I admit, but the rest are keen and anxious to test their mettle and I fancy with most of this town's menfolk in the fields the women and children will be easy practice. What say you? Taxes or practice for my men?"

Wohif's arm muscles bunched and his singed beard jutted aggressively then he relaxed.

"Taxes be taxes," he said, "and it ain't for us to fight the Roinad's battles for her. I shall spread the word and the taxes be your Lord's. 'Twill take a day or two to organise."

"Tomorrow will do nicely," said Kizerain. "My men will spend the night here to make sure no spirits come and make off with trifles here and there. Oh, one last thing, the taxes have been doubled this year."

"Doubled?" said Wohif frowning. "We can barely get by with the taxes as they are. If they be doubled we will have nothing to get us through the winter."

"Do not trouble me with your tales of woe," said Kizerain. "I have heard it all before and peasants never seem to diminish in numbers. Double it is and double it shall be."

“And if we refuse?” asked Wohif, tapping his heavy hammer in the palm of his other hand.

“Why then,” said Kizerain with a broad grin, “we shall kill everyone and take everything. There now, that is a simple decision, is it not? A hard winter for all or no winter for any. The choice is yours.”

Wohif glowered at him and Kizerain let him stew, unconcerned.

“I shall return tomorrow,” said Kizerain after a while, “unless you choose the alternative, in which case we can begin now. All I have to do is give the order. Pray, what would you have me do?”

Wohif exhaled. “Tomorrow,” he said gruffly. “We will pay the taxes tomorrow.”

“You are a wise man,” said Kizerain. He smiled again and sheathed his sword. “I knew that the moment I saw you. Until tomorrow then.”

* * *

“Be you Ma Rennet?” asked Autumn.

The old woman paused from pouring off the whey from a large pot of curds. The bright sunshine made the pale green whey glow.

“I am,” she said. “You be wanting a cheese?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Have you a hard cheese to spare? I am a traveller and a hard cheese is easier to carry.”

“I have,” said Ma Rennet, “come into my cellar.”

The cellar was a long low room dug into the ground between her dwelling and the stream. Its simple roof of woven twigs let in some light, enough to see rows of cheeses of various shapes and sizes on planks set into the walls.

“Hard ones be down the end,” said Ma Rennet. “You be wanting a strong taste or mild?”

“As you see fit,” said Autumn.

Ma Rennet snorted. “This one here be nice,” she said, patting a cheese. “It be mild in flavour but has onion in it.”

“A smaller one, if you please,” said Autumn. “That one looks awkward to carry.”

“There's this one with mushrooms in,” said Ma Rennet, going further in, “but it be more mature and stronger in flavour.”

“Mushrooms?” said Autumn. “I shall take it if I may.”

“That be a half parak,” said Ma Rennet, solidly.

Autumn handed her a coin from the bag that Logan carried and Ma Rennet picked up the cheese and carried it out into the sunshine. She inspected the coin then picked up a small hatchet and broke it in half.

“Enjoy,” she said, handing the cheese and half a parak to Autumn.

“I shall,” said Autumn. “Good day to you.”

She turned to look for Logan and froze when she saw Kizerain watching her from his horse.

“So, we meet again, Autumn Savannah,” said Kizerain softly.

“Aye, Kizerain Qerrassa,” said Autumn. “You are well, I trust?”

He didn't reply.

“That lad yonder, washing his feet in the stream,” said Kizerain. “Be he your travelling companion?”

Autumn glanced quickly where Kizerain had gestured.

“Yes,” she said.

Kizerain turned and muttered something to the man beside him. The

man quickly fitted an arrow to his bow and drew it, aiming at Logan.

“My Lord Loheckle desires to meet you,” said Kizerain, turning back to Autumn. “You will come with me.”

“What does Lord Loheckle want with me?” asked Autumn.

“Merely the pleasure of your company for a time,” said Kizerain, “and I fancy he wishes to make you a proposition. What say you to a meeting?”

“And my companion?” asked Autumn watching the man with the bow.

“He will come to no harm,” said Kizerain, “and naturally he will come too.”

“Very well,” said Autumn.

Logan stood up and turned and started to wave when he saw Autumn then froze when he saw the arrow pointing at him.

“Come here boy,” called Kizerain.

Logan looked at Autumn who hadn't taken her eye off the archer. Slowly he walked over, the archer tracking him.

“Bind him,” commanded Kizerain to his other companion. “Stay well away from this one.”

The man slid off his horse and walked over to Logan, giving Autumn and the archer a wide berth. Roughly he wrenched Logan's hands behind his back and tied them then unsheathed his sword and held it to Logan's throat.

“You are a Krisana, are you not?” asked Kizerain.

“Aye,” said Autumn, her eyes now flicking quickly between the swordsman and the archer.

“Then you will doubtless understand why I must have you bound as

well,” said Kizerain. “There are only the three of us.”

Autumn's eyes narrowed and she remained silent, yet watchful.

“Put the cheese down,” said Kizerain. “Slowly or the boy dies.”

Slowly Autumn bent and placed the cheese on the ground. She rested the half parak on top.

“Look after this for me, Ma Rennet,” she said, not looking round. “I shall return for it soon enough.”

“Umm, yes, of course,” came Ma Rennet's nervous voice from behind her.

“Indeed, you are a philosopher,” said Kizerain. “From the Yeinydd Esyup, I believe.”

“Yes,” said Autumn.

Kizerain got off his horse, facing Autumn all the while.

“I am familiar with your Esyup's teachings on death,” he said slowly walking towards her. “And I know how lightly you hold your own death but I fancy you will not allow this boy's death needlessly. Remember that there is a sword to his throat and an arrow to his heart. Allow yourself to be bound and no harm will befall him.”

“Autumn, no!” shouted Logan then choked as the sword's edge nicked his flesh.

“Pay him no heed,” said Kizerain. “Mere boyish heroics.”

“You give your word on your honour no harm will befall him?” asked Autumn.

“I give my word,” said Kizerain.

“Then bind me,” said Autumn and held out her hands.

Quickly Kizerain bound her hands.

“I have seen your skills with your feet, Autumn Savannah,” he said. “I must bind them too.”

“Very well,” said Autumn.

Kizerain bent and bound her ankles as well.

“Bring the boy,” he called to the swordsman, “and you, fetch another horse.”

The archer eased the tension on his bow and returned the arrow to his quiver. He wheeled his horse and galloped away up the road and returned with another horse.

“Throw them both over,” said Kizerain and the archer grabbed Autumn and hoisted her over the horse so she hung face down then deposited Logan beside her.

“Where are we going?” she asked, twisting her head up to look at Kizerain.

“To see Loheckle,” he said, climbing back on his horse. “’Tis only a half day’s ride to our camp. We’ll be there before sunset.”

It was a long, uncomfortable ride.

* * *

“I have a small gift for you, My Lord,” said Kizerain, striding through the flap of Loheckle’s tent.

“Parede has paid its taxes?” asked Loheckle, “and you have brought more women?”

“They will tomorrow,” said Kizerain. He turned and barked through the flap. “Bring them in here.”

His two men brought Autumn and Logan in, carried over their

shoulders, and set them on their feet. Logan fell over, groaning.

“Leave him,” said Kizerain as the man bent to pull Logan to his feet.

Autumn stood upright, ignoring the pain in her stomach and chest.

“And who be these?” asked Loheckle.

“Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume,” said Kizerain, “and her companion, Logan the Limp.”

Loheckle stared at Autumn then raised an eyebrow.

“Why is she bound?” he demanded. “It is unseemly to bind a guest.”

“My apologies, My Lord,” said Kizerain. “A safety precaution, nothing more.”

“Release them,” said Loheckle, “and have food and wine brought immediately. And chairs.”

Autumn stood calmly, rubbing her wrists, after Kizerain had untied her.

“Why do you wish to see me?” she asked.

“All in good time,” said Loheckle. “Ahh, here is food and chairs. Come, dine with me.”

Two chairs were placed opposite Loheckle and two new men stood behind them, swords drawn, Loheckle pretended not to notice. Kizerain dragged over a stool and sat on it, his hand resting lightly on the hilt of his sword.

“Sit, sit,” said Loheckle. “Some wine? This was a good year and is quite palatable.”

“Some water, if you please,” said Autumn.

“And you boy? Do you decline my wine as well?” asked Loheckle, a

little displeased.

“Umm, water please,” said Logan, glancing nervously at Autumn.

“Humph,” said Loheckle. “As you wish.”

He gestured to a servant who ran to get water.

“Wellll,” drawled Loheckle. “I have heard a lot about you Autumn Savannah, but I know little of you Logan the Limp. What does your moniker denote?”

“His name be Logan,” said Autumn. “The limp be a jest by Kizerain to mark that Logan is unaccustomed to riding a horse belly down.”

“Ahh, I see,” said Loheckle. “A jest, eh. Be you a Krisana as well?”

“N-no,” stuttered Logan. “I’m just Logan.”

The servant reappeared with a waterskin and two goblets. He put them in front of Logan and Autumn and filled them with water. Logan drank thirstily and Autumn did not touch hers. She watched Loheckle and Kizerain and listened carefully to the breathing of the two men behind her.

“Some food?” asked Loheckle. “Fresh bread? Chicken? There is venison.”

“No, thank you,” said Autumn calmly. Logan shook his head.

“So much for hospitality,” said Loheckle, glancing over at Kizerain.

“Why do you wish to see me?” asked Autumn again.

“You are a woman of few words, I see,” said Loheckle. “Very well, I shall come to the point. I would like you to join my army.”

“In what capacity?” asked Autumn.

“It is customary to refer to me as My Lord,” said Loheckle.

“In what capacity?” asked Autumn again.

Loheckle sighed.

“I shall let that pass,” he said, “in the interests of our common friendship.”

“I was not aware that we were friends,” said Autumn, “although I would be interested to know what we have in common.”

“I would hope that we become great friends,” said Loheckle. “And that friendship would be common to us both.”

“You bandy words with me,” said Autumn. “In what capacity do you want me to join your army? I feel you have no need of a philosopher.”

Loheckle cleared his throat then poured some wine into his own goblet.

“Kizerain believes that you have distinctive skills,” he said, “and an association with that Esyup, damn, which one was it again, Kizerain?”

“The Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup,” said Kizerain.

“Yes, that one,” said Loheckle.

“What of it?” asked Autumn.

“Indeed, what of it,” said Loheckle. “Kizerain?”

“What I believe My Lord is saying,” said Kizerain, “is that he would like you to join us as my second in command.”

“To what purpose?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“I believe that you would provide an exemplar of excellence to My Lord's army,” said Kizerain, “and be a rallying point, a figurehead if you will, for the populace to mass behind. I know that you are an enemy of the Roinad and that she searches for you. We are a place of safe refuge and, when the time comes, which will be soon, and with

your aid, My Lord Loheckle will prevail and will be the next Roinad. He will be most beneficent to both you and your Esyup.”

“No,” said Autumn.

“I'm pleased that you gave that careful consideration,” said Loheckle sarcastically. “Why, pray?”

“I am no enemy of the Roinad,” said Autumn. “I am the enemy of no one save those who wish to be my enemy and only then when mine or another's life is in direct threat.”

“Many lives are being threatened,” said Kizerain. “A war is coming and vast numbers will die by the Roinad's hand. Do you not wish to stop that or at least reduce the number of dead?”

“I would prevent all the deaths that I can,” said Autumn, “but I will not kill at the behest of another and, in truth, this war is of your own making. Walk away from your ambition, Loheckle, for these deaths will be by your hand not the Roinad's. I would die before I would join your army.”

Kizerain made a weary gesture with his hand and a sword flashed to Logan's throat from the man behind him. Instantly Autumn's arm flew up and grabbed the hand holding the sword as she twisted and rolled to avoid the sword behind her, taking the arm with her. With a sharp intake of breath the man fell on top of Logan, knocking him to the ground where he landed on top of Autumn.

Kizerain and the man who had been behind Autumn leapt over and pressed their swords to her chest. The man who had been behind Logan untangled himself and got to his feet and retrieved his sword. Slowly Logan got to his feet and the man forced him back into the chair.

“Guards!” shouted Kizerain and three more men ran in, swords drawn. “Surround her,” he commanded, pointing to Autumn. “At the merest twitch of a hair on her head run her through.”

He sat back down, his sword still pointing at Autumn.

"I am loathe to do this," he said, "but if you do not willingly agree then your companion will die."

"You gave your word no harm would befall him, Kizerain Qerrassa the Liar," said Autumn calmly, lying flat on the ground.

"Such is life," said Kizerain, "and such is death. This is how it is and what's past is past and what is yet to come is yet to come. You stand at the crossroad of this boy's life. Join us or he dies. Your choice is simple."

The tension in the tent crackled as Autumn lay on the floor staring up at Kizerain, her mind racing.

"Very well," she said. "Release Logan."

"No, Autumn!" cried Logan, lunging forward in his chair and nearly breaking the grip of the man holding him. "Do not do this thing!"

He was roughly forced back again.

"My choice is clear," said Autumn, her stare fixed on Kizerain. "On one path your death is certain while on the other path, their futures are still in flux. I will not cause your certain death while there yet remains alternatives."

"You choose wisely," said Kizerain. He reached over and took a goblet of wine from the table.

"Release Logan," said Autumn, still lying on the floor

"Ahh, you think me that much of a fool?" asked Kizerain, taking a gulp. "No, the boy stays, a hostage to your continuing loyalty."

Autumn nodded slowly.

"Take him away," barked Kizerain. "Do not harm him but keep him secure. Leg irons I fancy will be sufficient."

"Lord," acknowledged the man who had been holding Logan to his

chair. Roughly he dragged Logan to his feet by his hair. Logan struggled and was hit across the face and pushed out of the tent.

The tension in the tent started to subside, although Loheckle was looking flushed.

“What now, My Lord?” asked Kizerain. “We have the boy as surety of this maid’s loyalty. Do you wish her to remain tied or merely kept under guard?”

“I doubt she will stray, Kizerain,” said Loheckle. “She seems a sensible lass. Does she not look most helpless and attractive lying on the ground like that? Damned if I don’t deserve some entertainment after this fiasco else the night will be wholly wasted. You four, take her to my bed chamber. I fancy I may yet make her scream with joy and bind her to me in other ways.”

“I swore a vow of chastity, Loheckle,” said Autumn quietly. “I shall never break that vow.”

“Indeed?” asked Loheckle, licking his lips. “This night gets better and better, does it not! Still, you need not be concerned about your vow, ’tis I who will be breaking it, not you.”

“Do you think that is wise, My Lord?” asked Kizerain. “She be a Krisana and her mind is strong.”

“You have a point, Kizerain,” said Loheckle. “You men, tie her securely to the bed so her vows be not interrupting my pleasure.”

Chapter Nineteen

“Get out, you little shit,” growled the guard. “Kezit, go tell the smithy we’re needing some irons, I’ll take this little turd to the lock-up.”

“Them at smithy won’t be liking it,” warned Kezit.

“Boss’s orders,” growled the guard. “Smithies can go bugger themselves.”

He shoved Logan hard in the small of his back and Logan half stumbled through the tent flap.

“Move,” snarled the guard, prodding him with the tip of his sword.

Logan yelped and clutched his buttock and stumbled forward. Around were innumerable camp fires with men sitting around them, cooking food, sharpening weapons, complaining to each other. In the dancing shadows from the fires, a few tents could be seen. Ghostlike shapes moved among the fires, voices low and hard, words indistinct. Loheckle’s voice came from the tent behind him, “I doubt she will stray, Kizerain,”.

“That way,” barked the guard, using the flat of his sword to push Logan off to the right. “Ughh,” and fell to his knees, his sword clattering on some small stones.

Surprised, Logan glanced over as the guard fell forward onto his face. Logan half fancied he saw a black shadow disappear into the darkness beside the tent then froze, tense, expecting a trap. The guard groaned and stirred.

“ You four, take her to my bed chamber,” came through the tent flap.

“Bed chamber?” thought Logan. “Oh Voqev, what to do, what to do?”

There was a sound of some scuffling from the tent and the guard groaned again.

“May Aloidia have mercy on me,” prayed Logan and scuttled round

the side of the tent into the darkness.

Two guards came out of the tent, half carrying, half dragging Autumn between them, the other two guards behind. One tripped over the guard on the ground and cursed. He bent to investigate.

“Zeeth!” he exclaimed. “It’s Renk. My Lord, My Lord!”

“What the Yammoe is it?” demanded Kizerain, coming over to the entrance.

“Tis Renk, My Lord,” said the guard. “He be unconscious.”

He let go of Autumn’s arm, and she stood there quietly, her hands tied behind her back.

“Where’s the boy?” demanded Kizerain. “Where be Kezit? You! Go sound the alarm, I want that boy found. You three, get her to Loheckle’s sleeping tent then find Kezit. Move, you filthy scum or I’ll flog every last one of you!”

“What’s happening, Kizerain?” drawled Loheckle, coming over.

“The boy’s escaped, My Lord,” said Kizerain.

“Escaped?” exclaimed Loheckle. “How on ..., and the girl?”

“She be going to your bed chamber, My Lord,” said Kizerain.

“Oh good,” said Loheckle. “Well, you’d better find the boy, hadn’t you.”

“I’ve given orders,” said Kizerain, bending over Renk. “This man be unconscious. You there.”

A man running past stopped and came over.

“Drag him into the tent,” said Kizerain. “Excuse me, My Lord.”

Loheckle stepped aside and Kizerain went into the tent, the man

dragging Renk following.

“Over here, by the light,” said Kizerain.

Loheckle joined him.

“There's blood on the back of his head,” said Kizerain. “I wager he was hit but not by a fist and the boy had no weapon on him. Where is Kezit, I wonder. Mayhap he be a traitor.”

He snatched up the waterskin and upended it over Renk's head. Renk groaned and sat up.

“Mizule, my head,” he said, putting his hand where it hurt.

“Speak, man,” barked Kizerain. “What happened, where is Kezit?”

Renk looked in bemusement at Kizerain. “Kezit?” he said. “I sent him off to the smithy.”

“You, get to the smithy and find Kezit,” barked Kizerain to the man who'd dragged Renk inside. “Who hit you?”

“I know not,” said Renk, trying to stand. “It were someone from behind though.”

“He was right outside the tent,” mused Kizerain, “and it was no one from in here. Hmm. It can only have been the boy or Kezit. I'll have the truth out of him when he's found.”

* * *

Logan crept round the back of the tent and peered up the gap between it and the next.

“You three, get her to Loheckle's sleeping tent then find Kezit,” he heard Kizerain say and caught a glimpse of Autumn as she was manhandled into the tent beside him. His heart was thumping.

“I am not afraid,” he muttered to himself. “I am not afraid.” It didn't

seem to work and his heart thumped louder.

A candle was lit in the tent and Logan could see large shapes moving to and fro and hear muttered obscenities, then “lie still, bitch,” and a solid slap then more muffled obscenities then “that’ll do it.”

“What are they doing to her?” worried Logan.

He started to feel around for a stone or stick to use as a weapon.

“Right lads, let’s be looking for Kezit,” came a voice right in front of him. A shadow was outlined on the tent wall sharp and clear then it faded. Logan peered round the side of the tent again and saw the three men come out and stand, looking at the uproar going on.

“Don’t rightly know as where to start looking,” said one of them.

“We be right next to that bastard,” hissed another, “let’s go look over the far side of the camp where Lord Shitface won’t see us. Come on.”

They merged into the melee, trying to look purposeful.

“What is that?” thought Logan as his hand felt something solid. He tried to lift it but it wouldn’t move. “Oh, a tent peg,” he muttered, peering down.

“A tent peg!” he nearly cried out then clapped a hand over his mouth in case he had and looked around. No one had heard. Carefully he eased the heavy cloth of the side of the tent off the peg and lifted it. It wasn’t a big enough gap so he felt backwards for the next tent peg and eased that off as well.

“Autumn,” he whispered, sliding in under the side of the tent. “Are you well?”

“Logan!” she whispered back. “I am tied to the bed. Quick!”

Logan pulled his legs in under the tent side and started to untie Autumn’s wrist.

"There is nothing I can do here," came Loheckle's voice. "I'm going to bed. Call me if you need me."

"As you wish, My Lord," came Kizerain's voice.

"Go quickly," whispered Autumn.

"But ..." whispered back Logan.

"Go! If you are caught I am enslaved again," whispered Autumn. "Get away."

Logan's foot disappeared under the side of the tent as Loheckle pulled open the flap.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, my dear," he said leering at Autumn, spread-eagled on the bed.

He let the flap drop and came over.

"You are a pretty little thing," he said, looking down on her. "Too skinny for my taste but there's something about you."

He bent down and untied the cord around her waist and pulled the edges of her robe back.

"Yes," he said, sitting on the side of the bed. "A very strong sensuality, a power."

He ran his fingers down the side of Autumn's face then slowly let his hand trail down her neck and onto her chest then flew across the tent as her one free hand made contact with his head. Feverishly Autumn scrabbled to untie an ankle as Loheckle staggered to his feet.

"Ohh, I like it," he said, rubbing the side of his head. "The bitch needs taming, so much the better."

He smiled dangerously and unbuckled his sword belt. He slid his scabbard off and laid it on a low chair then took a couple of turns of the stout leather around his hand. Slowly he approached the bed,

watching carefully as Autumn tried to untie her other ankle. She tried to kick him and he dodged then lashed the belt down hard across her legs. Quickly Autumn kicked out again with both feet, one to his belly, the other to his head and he dropped to the ground, momentarily stunned. Urgently Autumn untied her wrist and leapt off the bed, ready to repel Loheckle's next attack. He got to his feet, his eyes glinting with malice, the leather belt hanging, ready to strike.

“Ohh, I do apologise,” he said, straightening up and letting the belt arm fall to his side. “There's been a terrible misunderstanding. Please let us shake hands and pray it never happens again.”

He stepped forwards, smiling congenially with his hand held out then lashed suddenly with the belt, trying to catch Autumn off guard. She whirled and caught him on the side of the head with her foot and he sprawled across the bed. She spun again and ran for the tent flap.

“KIZERAIN!”

Kizerain turned towards the sound of Loheckle's voice and saw Autumn sprinting away from Loheckle's bed tent with Loheckle standing stooped in the entrance, clutching the side of the tent.

“You there,” he shouted to a nearby man with a bow. “Fell that woman!”

“Sire,” called the archer, hastily fitting an arrow to his bow. He drew back the string, took aim and let it fly.

“Voqev!” said Kizerain, tiredly, closing his eyes and putting a hand over them as pandemonium hit and started to spread through the rest of the camp.

He opened his eyes and stalked over to Loheckle's bed tent.

“Be he dead?” he asked the archer who was bending over Loheckle.

“Almost,” said the archer, looking up at Kizerain, white faced and terrified. “I be right sorry, My Lord. I must have missed the woman and he be right in line.”

Kizerain stood and watched as Loheckle coughed, blood staining his beard then his body went limp.

“He be dead, My Lord,” said the archer. He slowly stood and backed away a couple of paces.

“What do you want done with this idiot?” asked another man, running over and pulling his sword.

He grabbed the archer who let his bow fall to the ground, resigned to his fate.

“’Twas an accident,” said Kizerain. “I saw with my own eyes. It was an accident in the confusion of battle.”

He turned to see a crowd gathering as men came running to see as the word spread.

“It was nothing but a grievous accident,” said Kizerain, raising his voice so all could hear. “Our noble Lord Loheckle natal Chant’ist ab Heck-noor was killed in the confusion but his spirit lives on! I, Kizerain Qerrassa, do pledge to continue his fight for justice in his name!”

“And Basel?” asked the man holding the archer. “What be we doing with him?”

“Kill him,” said Kizerain, hiding his smile. “We don’t want accidents like that happening again, do we.”

* * *

Logan had seen Autumn sprinting and had given chase but didn’t catch her up until they were some way distant when she slowed her pace.

“Have you seen or heard anyone following us?” she asked, a little out of breath.

“No,” panted Logan. “Have you?”

“No,” she said, “which be right strange. Many saw me run and would have marked my direction and I heard much shouting. Are you hurt?”

“A minor scratch, nothing more,” said Logan. “Did that Lord Shit touch you?”

“Only when his head hit my fist,” said Autumn. “Let us rest here for a time then move on. I venture this entire area is not a good place to be.”

“Where is your pack?” asked Logan.

“By the stream in Parede,” said Autumn. “Together with our waterskins, my staff and our cheese.”

“So we have no food or water,” said Logan, “and you have lost everything. We should go back to Parede and fetch them.”

“Most likely someone has taken them by now,” said Autumn. “Although Ma Rennet did promise to look after the cheese. Do you still have your money bag?”

“No,” said Logan. “It was taken when I was put on the horse, my knife as well although I still have my stone.”

“That is good,” said Autumn. “I shall miss my stone but nothing is forever. I shall find another and everything else can be replaced as and when we need it.”

“Tis a shame about the cheese,” said Logan. “I could do justice to some cheese right now. So they wanted you to lead their army? A pretty compliment if badly expressed.”

“They had a false understanding,” said Autumn. “They wanted me because I am a Krisana but could not see that a Krisana would never do their bidding. They could not see the contradiction in their thoughts.”

“Mayhap they did, Autumn,” said Logan. “They had a means of levering you and for that I thank you most humbly.”

“Thank me for what?” asked Autumn.

“You were willing to give yourself for me,” said Logan.

“It was because of me your life was threatened,” said Autumn. “I could not let that threat continue while I had the means to avert it.”

“But you would have led their army and let that, that awful man do things to you,” said Logan.

“No, I would have found some way to avoid the army achieving anything,” said Autumn, “and had you not freed me, either him or I would have died tonight.”

“I know you are a philosopher,” said Logan, “and can argue the opposite of whatever I say but one thing I know for certain is that you like me.”

“You are my travelling companion,” said Autumn, “and I have no objection to that. Do not take the actions of this night to be anything other than the application of my principles to a practical situation.”

“So you are saying you would have sacrificed yourself for anyone in the same situation?” asked Logan.

“Of course,” said Autumn. “Why would you think otherwise?”

“Ohhh, just an idle thought,” said Logan smiling, but deep inside he knew and hugged that knowledge tightly. “No one has ever sacrificed themselves for me before.”

“And let us hope no one else ever has to again,” said Autumn. “Are you rested? I should like to put some more distance between us and them before we sleep.”

“I suppose so,” said Logan, getting up. “But I don't think I will get any sleep, I be too hungry.”

“You should have eaten when Loheckle offered you food,” said Autumn. “I plan to continue heading North. Is that agreeable to you?”

“I was too scared to eat then,” said Logan, “and I go where you go, if that is agreeable to you, Autumn.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn.

The next morning Logan was dozing with a bellyful of raw roots when Autumn finished her morning routine.

“I thought you would rest today,” he said, opening his eyes when she joined him.

“I was slow today,” she said, sitting cross legged by a small brook. “My muscles ache and are stiff but it is good to practice in such a state.”

“Would not rest be better?” he asked. “I saved you some berries to go with the roots.”

“Thank you,” she said. “No, the time may come when I have to fight when I am stiff and ache and I will have to do so. I cannot ask that my opponent come back three days hence when I am rested and recovered. Tell me, what did you see of my flight from Loheckle?”

“I saw you run from the tent,” said Logan. “I ran after you.”

“Did you see a man shoot at me with an arrow?” asked Autumn.

“Yes I did,” said Logan. “But fortunately he missed, although I think he hit someone else but I am not sure.”

“You are sure he missed me?” asked Autumn.

“Of course he missed you,” laughed Logan, “you are alive and uninjured which you would not be if he had hit you.”

“So you would think,” said Autumn.

“Sploop,” said Logan. “Something is preying on your mind, I can tell. You have that tone of voice.”

“What tone of voice would that be?” asked Autumn, spitting berry seeds into the trickle of water beside her.

“There is a particular tone of voice you get when you are thinking great thoughts,” said Logan. “I cannot describe it but it is different to when you are just talking. You sound serious, I mean more serious as you always sound serious, even when you are exchanging pleasantries with a stranger. What thoughts are occupying you today?”

“Be that so?” said Autumn, picking up a root. “I did not know that. It is good that you tell me this. When I faced the dawn I reviewed the events of the evening past and contemplated how I might have changed the course of events through different responses. Perhaps I was too serious when a moment of levity would have diverted things.”

She washed the root in the trickle to clean the earth off before taking a bite.

“I don't think it would have been helpful to have told a joke,” said Logan. “They might not have seen the funny side.”

“I do not know any jokes,” said Autumn, “or if I do I do not know it. Perhaps I know many jokes but am not aware they are jokes as I do not understand what is a joke.”

“Oh, not everyone has a sense of humour,” said Logan. “You have other attributes that make up for that lack, but forget jokes. I'm not in the mood to try and explain them again. Why did you want to know if I saw that man shooting at you?”

“I have given it a lot of thought,” said Autumn, “and I have watched him shoot at me in my memory.”

“That does not surprise me,” said Logan. “It's not easy to forget being shot at I expect.”

“He did not miss,” said Autumn quietly.

“You see?” said Logan, leaning over to pick up some more berries. “You do know some jokes!”

“I am not joking,” said Autumn, staring at the brook. “It is very clear in my mind. I saw the man aim at me and I saw his arrow coming straight at me. Noxu used to fire arrows at me so that I could practice avoiding them but I was running too fast to avoid it.”

“How do you practice a thing like that?” asked Logan. “It seems to me that if you cannot avoid the first arrow you will not live long enough to practice on a second.”

“It is simple,” said Autumn. “At first he used blunt arrows and aimed around me then as I grew more skilled he aimed closer. When I was able to avoid arrows fired at me he started to use sharp arrows.”

“There you have it,” said Logan. “You merely avoided the arrow as you have practised without thinking. You have told me that your aim is to fight by reacting, not thinking.”

“You may be right,” said Autumn. “But I have a very clear memory of the arrow hitting me here,” and she tapped the left side of her chest, just above her breast.

“Do you have any injury or mark there?” asked Logan, half hoping she would show him but she didn't.

“No,” said Autumn, “although I have a memory of sorts of the feel of the arrow going through me but it is not clear and distinct.”

“It is just your imagination,” said Logan. “If the arrow had hit you it would be very clear and distinct.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “That is the truth of it. Come, I wish to try something.”

She picked up a stone from the ground and handed it to Logan then stood up and backed away a few paces.

“Throw the stone at me,” she said. “Aim for my chest.”

Logan tossed the stone at her, underarm, and missed completely.

“Try again,” said Autumn, picking up the stone and tossing it back.

This time it bounced off her shoulder.

“Again,” she said, tapping the centre of her chest. “Right here.”

“Third time lucky,” said Logan and tossed the stone again. This time it bounced off her chest very close to where she had tapped.

“Oh well,” said Autumn. “It was just a thought.”

“What was your thought?” asked Logan.

“I wondered if the silver ribbon of Mother Midcarn might have some protective property,” she said, sitting down again. “Varaunik said it had strong magic and as yet we have seen no sign of it. It seemed to me that an arrow passing through me unhurt would be a strong magic indeed but it seems not.”

“It is well we tested your thought with a stone,” said Logan. “It would be unfortunate to test it with another arrow and found it to be wrong.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “When did you go and collect my pack? I thought you slept all night.”

“I did sleep all night,” said Logan. “Your pack is in Parede, I did not collect it.”

“It is over there,” said Autumn, “against that tree, with my staff and the cheese with the half parak Ma Rennet gave me pressed into it. My mind was full of arrows else I would have said earlier.”

Chapter Twenty

The brook quietly wended its way from the woods and into the small clearing between low grassy banks. A rabbit on the far side cautiously watched them, nibbling on grass every now and then. Bees buzzed in the warm air and in the distance a dog barked. Another replied then both went silent. Autumn and Logan sat, one on the bank the other with his back to a tree. Both quiet, both contemplative, both looking at Autumn's pack and the cheese resting neatly on top of it.

"It's definitely yours?" asked Logan after a while.

The rabbit bolted at the sudden disturbance.

"I have not checked," said Autumn. "I saw it and thought you had got it. Is it possible someone else left a pack like that here, with a cheese and a staff?"

"I fancy not but what is the alternative?" asked Logan. "It did not walk here by itself."

"Well then," said Autumn decisively. "I had best check."

She got up and walked the few steps to the pile leaning against the tree.

"This could be any cheese," she said inspecting it. "It has mushrooms in it but so do any number of cheeses and mayhap it be commonplace amongst those with money to press their spare coins into their cheeses for carrying. Certainly one half parak looks much like any other to me. This is, without a doubt, my staff however. It is the right length and feel and I can tell you the tale of each of the nicks in it. And this is my waterskin and the other looks like yours."

She squatted down beside the pack and untied the twine holding it closed.

"This is my blanket," she said, laying it on the ground. "Here is my bowl and spoon, my stone, my needle and thread and, yes, my pot of ointment. These are all mine and very familiar to me although I seem

to be missing my small knife.”

“I didn't know you carried a knife,” said Logan coming over.

“Tis only small,” she said, holding up a finger and thumb to show its length. “I only use it to cut food or trim a stick or suchlike. It was too small to be a weapon except perhaps against a beetle or some such. I wonder what became of it.”

She put her possessions back in her pack and the knife fell out of the folds of the blanket. Wordlessly she held it up to show Logan then slipped it in the pack as well.

“Tis mine,” she said, sitting back on her heels. “’Tis a mystery and no doubt about it. Do you suppose Darius is in this land once more and followed us?”

“He would show himself to us,” said Logan. “These things were left in Parede and now they are here. Neither of us brought them so it must be that someone else did.”

“I would swear we were not followed from Loheckle's camp last night,” said Autumn, “and I have neither heard nor seen any sign of anyone since. Mayhap Kizerain sent someone to fetch these things but why then would they leave them here and not inform Kizerain of our location?”

“Unless it be an enemy of Kizerain,” said Logan thoughtfully. “I had not thought of it until now but when I was taken from his tent the guard was struck from behind and I was able to make my escape. I fancied I saw a dark shape slip away in the darkness after that deed. Perhaps whoever that was followed us and left your pack. But who would be an enemy of Loheckle and be our friend and why would they give back all your belongings but not my knife or money?”

“I know not,” said Autumn standing up, “but whoever it is I am grateful, if only for the cheese and the return of my stone. Let us be away. This place is losing its charm, knowing that there is some hidden presence watching us.”

“A presence?” said Logan. “You think there be some magic in this and not a person?”

“I know not,” said Autumn, settling her pack on her shoulder, “but there is magic in our lives. Did not Varaunik say your stone and my ribbon be enmagicked. Mayhap he is somehow watching us or the ribbon or stone be somehow guiding this pack and the other things.”

“’Tis a thought,” said Logan. “How can we find out for certain?”

“We could leave the pack here,” said Autumn, “and see if it be following us but it could be that the magic does not bring things left behind deliberately so we would be none the wiser and packless.”

“Can magic be deciding, then?” asked Logan, following Autumn into the wood. “My knowledge of magic be almost nothing. I do not know if it can make choices on its own. That would seem powerful magic indeed if it can do or not do things depending on whether you meant to or not.”

“I do not know either,” said Autumn. “But a thought occurs to me. All magic must depend on the wishes of the magician or sorcerer so mayhap a sorcerer can somehow attach that magic to the wishes of another.”

“Oww,” said Logan.

Autumn turned. “What ails you?”

“That branch you bent snapped back and hit me,” he said, rubbing his upper arm. “It hurt.”

“I shall be more careful in future,” said Autumn. “It is serious?”

“No, it's nothing,” said Logan. “It was just a sudden sting. Let's keep going.”

It was barely fifteen paces further on when Logan suddenly said “I wonder.”

“Hmm?” asked Autumn.

“I just had a strange thought,” said Logan.

“Strange thoughts are oftentimes the most interesting,” said Autumn. “Do you want to share it with me?”

“I am not sure what the thought is exactly,” said Logan, “but I was thinking about magic making choices. What if your ribbon has such magic?”

“What if indeed,” said Autumn. “Where is this thought going?”

“I do not know,” said Logan, “but if as you say the arrow did hit you last night but went through you and hit someone else that must indeed be magic, must it not?”

“I think there can be little doubt of that,” said Autumn. “It is hard to see how an arrow can be faulty and yet accurate.”

“Well,” said Logan, “and this is but an idle thought, what if the magic that let the arrow through is a magic that can make decisions.”

Autumn stopped walking and turned to look at him.

“You mean sometimes it lets me escape an arrow and other times it does not?” she asked. “That would be a strange magic to put on someone.”

“No, I was thinking if there was a magic that let an arrow go through your body it would be difficult to push a branch aside. The branch would just go through you like the arrow.”

“An interesting point, Logan,” said Autumn, turning and walking on. “But why would I need to push a branch aside? Surely I could just walk past the tree and let the branch go through me. Or even, perchance, just walk through the tree.”

“True,” said Logan. “It was just a thought.”

They walked on a little further.

“No,” said Logan. “If things passed through you because of magic, you would not be able to carry that pack. The strap would just go through you. You would not be able to wear your robe or tunic, they would just fall straight off. You would not be able to pick up food to eat as your fingers could not grasp the food.”

“And if you fed me,” said Autumn, “the food would fall out of my belly. An interesting thought but does it not mean that the arrow could not have gone through me, with or without magic?”

“That be what I mean,” said Logan. “If the magic was magic that made decisions it would know what is dangerous and what is not. It would know that an arrow will kill you but a pack will not and let the arrow pass through but not the strap of the pack or a piece of cheese.”

Autumn stopped walking and turned to look at him again.

“So are you saying that the ribbon that Mother Midcarn gave me protects me from danger but not from other things?” she asked.

“I know not what I am saying,” said Logan, “I was just following a thought but you have to agree that if the ribbon has magic that lets things pass through you it would be a sore trial indeed if you could never eat again. Indeed, it seems to me, now I think more on it, that you would not be able to walk as the ground would pass through you too.”

“Well, I cannot at this moment find a fault in your reasoning,” said Autumn. “Although perhaps your base premise is at fault. What you say makes sense if we allow the existence of the magic to begin with but you seem to be asking a lot of the magic if it be so.”

“Neither of us know anything about the creating of magic,” said Logan. “Mayhap it is a thing of the word itself. After all, if you protect me then you have, through the nature of the word itself, an ability to decide what I need protecting from. You would not protect me from that cheese for example but you would protect me from the knife used

to cut it if it were turned on me. Mayhap the very casting of a spell of protection gives the spell the ability to determine what is a threat and what is not.”

“Most interesting,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “If we allow that to be so, I wonder if it is possible to trick the spell in some way so that it does not protect when it should. By displaying false friendship, for example, or through deceit. Perhaps if someone cuts a piece of cheese and offers it to you on the knife then suddenly stabs you as you take it, would the spell see that deception in time to give protection? Would the protection include a poison on the cheese?”

“I know not,” said Logan, “but it is interesting speculation, is it not?”

“Indeed it is,” said Autumn. “Let us keep walking whilst I think on it some more.”

She ducked to go under a branch and Logan followed suit then she stopped with her hand resting on the branch.

“I wonder also what this protection would be from,” she said, thoughtfully. “Could the magic only give protection from things in this world or the other worlds as well? Could it have protected you from the soska, which was from the Land of Yammoe? And what about the intangible? Could it protect you from, perchance, old age or a wasting sickness? What about starvation? A protection spell that gave protection against death and hunger would be a most mighty spell indeed.”

“I fear you are right,” said Logan. “My thought started out as a simple one but it is becoming like the unravelling of a ball of spiders’ webs. ’Twould be easier to squash the ball and discard it than to separate the threads. Even something simple like a falling branch is fraught with complexities. It might land full square and kill and so warrant protection but it may miss and touch only with a leaf and not need protection from. Like the branch that swung and hit me earlier. It was only a little sting but a bigger branch could have caused more serious injury.”

“You are becoming good at this thinking,” said Autumn, walking on.

“How does it sit with you?”

“Well and ill together,” said Logan after thinking about it for a few moments. “I like it well being able to think through things and talking with you of them but at the same time I fear that there may be no end to thinking and it becomes all consuming. This magic, for example, the more we think about it the more there is to think about it and the less simple it becomes.”

“You have the truth of it,” said Autumn. “I fancy I see a path over there, let us head that way and avoid these branches. Thinking is not, of itself, any protection. At the Esysup, the elders would sit and argue their thoughts all day and it was a rare day when all four would agree on the same thing. You say that I can argue with anything you say but they would argue with all your arguments and when you ran out they would argue your part just to keep the argument going. Maybe that be one of the reasons I decided the Esysup was not my place. Ahh, yes, it is a path and, by its nature a path must go somewhere. As long as it continues North shall we follow it?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “It will be easier than ducking branches.”

“Or pebbles,” said Autumn, stopping walking again.

“We have not been ducking pebbles,” said Logan, puzzled.

“No,” said Autumn, “but a pebble is not going to hurt much. Help me find a decent sized rock.”

“I daresay not,” said Logan. “What about that one?”

He pointed to a moss covered rock beside the path that was half the size of Autumn's head.

“Perfect,” she said, going over to pick it up. “It even has sharp edges on one side. This will be ideal.”

“Ideal for what?” asked Logan.

“Here, take it,” she said, holding it out.

Logan took it and she backed away a few steps.

“Now throw it at me,” she said, “hard.”

“Sploop no,” said Logan. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I want you to hurt me,” said Autumn.

“You’ve been thinking too much,” said Logan, dropping the rock with a thud. “Thinking has addled your brains.”

“No, do not drop it,” said Autumn. “Pick it up and throw it at me.”

“I am lost in the woods with a woman that be touched in the head,” said Logan. “Perhaps we should stop for a while and you can get some sleep. Mayhap you will feel better then, or something to eat.”

“I did see the arrow, Logan,” she said, coming up to him. “I know it does not make sense but I did see it and it went through me. I need to know if this rock will go through me as well.”

She picked up the rock and held it out to him. Logan put his hands behind his back.

“The pebble did not,” said Logan. “Why do you think this rock will?”

“It is a test,” said Autumn. “I think you be right. I think there be magic, on the ribbon most likely, that gives me protection but I did not need protecting from the stone so it hit me. This rock will do serious harm if you throw it hard so let us find out if the ribbon protects me.”

“This be damned foolish nonsense,” said Logan. “What if the ribbon does not protect you? What then? You will be most grievously hurt and I will be at fault. I will not do it.”

“You are right,” said Autumn. “It is wrong of me to ask you to do this.”

She turned the rock over in her hands a few times, studying it then

suddenly tossed it into the air over her head. It thudded to the ground and bounced a little.

“Mizule,” she said, disgusted with herself. “I could not stand and let it hit me.”

She picked the rock up and tossed it in the air again. Logan grabbed her arm and yanked her out of the way.

“I will not let you do this,” he said. “It is madness.”

Autumn bent to pick up the rock again and Logan put his foot on it.

“I beg you,” he said earnestly. “This is folly of the direst kind. What if you are badly hurt or killed?”

“I do not think I will be,” said Autumn, straightening up. “Varaunik said the ribbon had strong magic and I am certain the arrow went through me without injury. I believe this rock will do the same.”

“And what if Varaunik is mistaken?” asked Logan. “What if he was lying?”

“Why would he lie?” asked Autumn.

“Who knows what reasons he had,” said Logan, “but we cannot know. It is the worst folly to put your life at risk in this way. Is it not in contradiction to your vow?”

“This rock will not break my vow of chastity,” said Autumn, “except by the greatest mischance.”

“Not that one,” said Logan, “the other one, the one to Mizule, where you vowed to protect the sanctity of yourself.”

“You think too much,” said Autumn scowling at him, “but you are right. But how can I test this idea without putting myself in need of protection.”

“I suggest you wait,” said Logan. “We know not if Loheckle has

abandoned looking for you and the Roinad is looking for you regardless. I fancy the time will not be long in coming when another arrow comes your way. Wait until the need for protection comes along rather than hasten it and use all your skills to avoid it even then. We know not if there be magic here and if there is we do not know if it protects you against yourself or against me at your behest. Mayhap this protection is only against the arrows of Lord Loheckle. We do not know.”

“And we will never know,” said Autumn. “You are like the elders at the Esyup. You argue but do not find out.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan. “But there is a reason why they are elders and not memories. I will not let you do this, or if you are fixed upon this path then let me don your robe and you throw the rock.”

“And you are devious too, Logan” said Autumn. “You know I cannot try to harm you.”

“Nor I you, Autumn,” said Logan, “and to harm yourself would break your vow. I would not wish you to do that.”

Autumn frowned then sighed. “You are right,” she said. “’Twas a foolish notion. Come, let us walk this path as good companions. What need have I of magic when you are here to protect me from myself? Mayhap whatever magic there is just makes my pack follow me around.”

* * *

“Others have used this clearing recently,” said Logan. “There are the remains of several fires and the flattening of the grass over there is recent. Shall we spend the night here or move on and find somewhere less well used?”

“There be arguments in favour of both,” said Autumn. “What be your preference, Logan Philosopher?”

Logan laughed. “I be no philosopher,” he said. “I be still a boy.”

“You are getting the beginnings of a beard,” she said. “Some way off that of Kizerain but the makings certainly.”

“Really?” said Logan, feeling embarrassed. He felt along his jaw. “Still feels like the arse of a peach to me.”

“You are on the cusp of manhood,” said Autumn, “so you choose. We stay here or move on?”

“Let us stay here,” said Logan. “Loheckle is moving against the Roinad so his attentions will be to the South and East and we are some way to the North now. We have seen no sign of any following so I venture he has abandoned thought of us, especially as he now knows you will not be an easy conquest.”

“A fair point,” said Autumn, going to the far side of the clearing and putting down her pack. “Any other reasons?”

“You are determined to make me think,” said Logan. “Very well. The way is clear for some distance in both directions so we should be able to observe anyone coming.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “And?”

“And?” asked Logan. “I cannot think of any other reasons.”

“We are tired,” said Autumn. “At least I am. I see no great benefit to continuing further today.”

“There is that,” said Logan. “I will make a fire so we can have cooked roots with our cheese.”

“A good plan,” said Autumn sitting on the ground. “Raw roots, while better than nothing, leave something to be desired.”

“We have company,” murmured Autumn a while later as Logan put some roots in the fire to cook.

“Be they soldiers?” asked Logan looking up.

“No, they are a man and woman in a cart,” said Autumn. “Local farmers or tradespeople, no doubt.”

The woman reined in the horse when they were a short distance away.

“Greetings,” said the man. “I am Glanan ap Dadr of Ethosien and this be my aide, Alerrawia. You be travellers?”

“Greetings to you, Glanan ap Dadr and Alerrawia,” said Autumn. “I am Autumn Savannah and this be Logan, my travelling companion. Ethosien you say? Be that far from here?”

A small frown passed Alerrawia's face and she reached behind her to pull a leather satchel from the cart.

“Tis but a short distance,” said Glanan. “We shall be there before dark.”

Alerrawia thumbed through a slim sheaf of parchments then stopped and read one carefully.

“We plan to spend the night here,” said Autumn. “Mayhap we will venture into Ethosien tomorrow.”

“It is a small town,” said Glanan, taking the parchment Alerrawia passed him. “But friendly and well stocked with supplies for travellers.”

He looked down at the parchment and read it then looked up at Autumn.

“A small matter of business, pay it no mind,” he said handing the parchment back to Alerrawia. “Stay here tonight, you say? The ground looks hard and your food would seem limited. If you would indulge an old man, I venture to open my hospitality to you for the night. I have warm beds and an era'owen who surpasses all with her venison stew. I would delight to hear tales from your travels and you can continue your wanderings in the morn with well rested limbs and full bellies. Come, I shall not take no for an answer.”

“That is most kind of you, Glanan ap Dadr,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan. “I know my companion be most partial to venison stew.”

“Then it is done,” said Glanan. “Climb into the cart and we will be in Ethosien ere long.”

“What manner of business occupies you?” asked Logan as the cart jerked away.

“I have a small farm,” said Glanan, “some distance from here but from time to time I travel round the villages and towns collecting news. It is a dull business for the news from a village is rarely of interest even to the villagers but it serves a purpose to them as concerns themselves with such things.”

“And who concerns themselves with such things?” asked Logan.

“That I cannot rightly say, lad,” said Glanan. “Tell me, Autumn Savannah, where do you hail from and why do you travel?”

“I am from a place of vanity,” said Autumn, “of opinions of myself which may or may not be truth. I travel to find that truth.”

“I see,” said Glanan, flatly.

He opened his mouth to say something else and then changed his mind.

“Ethosien be up ahead,” he said after a while. “With your leave I shall take Alerrawia to her dwelling before going on to mine.”

He bent over to Alerrawia and whispered in her ear and she nodded. Moments later Glanan reined in the horse outside a small wooden dwelling on the road into the town.

“As you say, Glanan,” said Alerrawia, getting out of the cart. She plucked her leather satchel from behind her seat and scurried into the dwelling.

“I be staying with my era'owen up ahead,” said Glanan. “It only be for

a few nights but she will welcome the company. Here we are.”

He pulled up outside a small, heavily timbered building with a small but solid looking door.

“Would you do me a kindness, Autumn?” asked Glanan, getting out of the cart. “Would you hold the horse’s head while I uncouple the cart? ’Twill not take long but he is apt to stray. Perhaps the lad will help me undo the ties on the other side?”

“But of course,” said Autumn.

She held the horse’s bridle and patted its long nose.

“Ahh,” said Glanan, looking up from the pole of the cart. “I see two of my friends coming along. Let me introduce you.”

“Greetings,” said Autumn as the two men came over. “I am Autumn Savannah.”

“She admits it,” said Glanan. “Put her in the lock-up, men, and the lad.”

Both men pulled their swords and pointed them at Autumn. One then turned to Logan and pointed his sword at him.

“What be the meaning of this?” asked Autumn, backing up a pace and coming onto the balls of her feet, ready.

“I am Glanan ap Dadr,” said Glanan looking at her coldly. “Sheriff of this district. You are both under arrest.”

“Arrest?” said Logan, surprised. “What for?”

“For high treason against the state and the unlawful killing of an official of the Roinad,” said Glanan coldly. “May you rot in Yammoe’s abyss forever.”

Chapter Twenty One

“I have not killed anyone,” said Autumn, “and as far as I know I have not done anything treasonable.”

“Well, that be what it is saying here,” said Glanan, tapping the parchment, “and who am I to argue with the Roinad? I am arresting you and you will be sent to Uli-Rratha where you can make your case to her in person. Get in the lock-up.”

The two men brandished their swords and Autumn hesitated, then she turned and quietly went inside the lock-up.

“You too, boy,” growled one of the men.

He moved closer threateningly and Logan scowled at him but followed Autumn. The heavy door slammed shut behind them and they heard a bar slide into place outside the door.

“Tis dark in here,” said Logan conversationally. A faint light from the setting sun came in through the narrow gap between the tops of the walls and the flat solid roof.

“There are no openings,” said Autumn, “save only the door which, I fancy, no longer opens.”

She sat down on the floor with her back to one wall, cross legged. Logan explored the walls briefly then sat down beside her, his legs stretched out.

“Your pack and things are still in the cart,” he said. “I wonder if you will get them back.”

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “I have never been arrested before, I know not how this works.”

“Nor I,” said Logan. “Do you think he will still give us stew?”

“I think not,” said Autumn. “Glanan does not seem to be a man of his word, thus far. I suspect we will not be getting warm beds nor have I

seen any sign of an era'owen. We have not even been left our waterskins and there be none in this place.”

“’Tis a shame,” said Logan. “My belly was looking forward to venison and does not cope well with disappointment.”

“Look on this as an opportunity for learning and self knowledge,” said Autumn. “Use this time to contemplate the suffering of expectations thwarted and how they may be avoided in the future.”

“I suppose the secret is not to let expectations get the upper hand,” said Logan. “Ahhhh, I venture this night will be long drawn out. Do you think we will be taken out in the morning or will we be left here for an eternity to rot?”

“I suspect we will be taken out although mayhap not in the morning,” said Autumn. “We have been charged but I imagine we have to be judged at some point.”

“Killing and treason,” said Logan. “I find it hard to imagine how the Roinad has thought of those charges. I find it harder to imagine why the Roinad even knows of us. We are but two lowly travellers passing by.”

“Mayhap it be in some way related to Lord Loheckle,” said Autumn. “I daresay we shall find out soon enough.”

“Too soon, I warrant,” said Logan. “Why did you not defeat those men so we could make our escape?”

“There was a time when this was a lawless land, Logan,” said Autumn, “and even now the law is not well established. But the rule of law is essential for any civilised society for without it the land would revert to barbarism and deep suffering for all. The fact that we as travellers and I as a woman can roam this land and not be molested at every turn is due to the rule of law and the enforcement of those laws by such as this Sheriff Glanan. Our involvements with Lord Loheckle are but a matter of mischance and ill fortune as we did not seek him out nor curry his favour. Be that as it may, I will not willingly break the rule of law for I am not a criminal in fear of

retribution.”

“But killing and treason!” said Logan. “How can we be justly arrested for those crimes?”

“There is no doubt an error or misunderstanding here,” said Autumn, “but I am confident that it will be resolved before too long. The rule of law depends at its heart on the fairness and justness of the lawgivers. Once the Roinad knows the truth of the matter we will be shown to be innocent of these crimes for there cannot be any proof and where the law is administered arbitrarily it cannot be effective and will not survive for long. Besides, what would you have me do? Kill Glanan, Alerrawia and the other two for doing what they are supposed to be doing? They are, do not forget, the providers of justice in these parts and justice will, I am sure, prevail.”

“No, of course not,” said Logan, “but we could just run away. They will never catch us.”

“I wager not,” said Autumn, “but this matter needs to be resolved. We cannot travel this land and run away from every Sheriff.”

“I hope you are right, Autumn,” said Logan, “but I be having bad feelings about this, so I do. I hear what you say and accept it in my head but 'tis my belly that be thinking much can go amiss and that not be just the absence of stew.”

He lay down but sleep was a long time coming. A cock crowing brought Logan to wakefulness.

“I suppose it must be near dawn,” he muttered, “even though it still be right dark.”

He felt by his side in the darkness and found Autumn. She was still sitting cross legged.

“Use the corner opposite on my side for your toilet,” she said. “That is what I did and if we are to stay here long we had best not befoul the place.”

“Have you done your dawn meditations?” he asked, getting up to find the corner.

“All night,” she said. “I was waiting for you to awaken before doing my exercises.”

“Is it not too cramped in here?” he asked.

“When the need arises I fight in whatever the circumstances,” she said. “This is a good opportunity for close quarter combat.”

She got to her feet and stretched to loosen her muscles. The early sounds of the townsfolk starting their day began to filter in.

“Stay in one place for a time,” she said, “lest I hit you by accident, then move around freely. I shall work around you.”

Logan stayed put and listened as the faint darkness of her body moved and twisted in the deep gloom of the lock-up. Thrice he felt the air move as a foot or hand came close then, taking his courage in his hands, he walked the several steps to the far wall. Her patch of darkness danced around him and once he felt her fingers touch his cheek with a force more implied than felt.

“You are good at this,” he said.

“I am never good enough,” she replied and touched his lips with her toes. “But at the Esys we often fought with blindfolds to practice with the ears and sometimes with ear coverings as well to practice with the skin and smell.”

“You must have practised a lot,” he said, resuming his seat.

“For half of every day for as long as I remember,” she said, “and yet there are many skills I have not yet mastered.”

Her foot thudded into the wooden wall beside his head and he flinched, even as he heard the timber crack a little.

“What have you not yet mastered?” he asked.

“Standing on my staff in my hand, for one,” said Autumn, stopping her moving and coming to sit beside him.

“How do you stand on your staff in your hand?” asked Logan.

“You plant one end on the ground and hold the other end and stand upon it,” said Autumn. “Some can stay that way for as long as two breaths but I have not yet acquired the balance. It is a failing as I should practice more but do not.”⁴

“Why do you not?” asked Logan.

“Because I am human,” she said. “The memories of that move are ones of pain and so I shy away. It is foolish but foolishness comes easily to me.”

“Did you hurt yourself a lot when you fell off?” asked Logan.

“No, I am agile,” she said. “The pain came from Noxu’s beatings for failing and my own shame. A sorry combination. Ahh, I suspect our fortunes are about to change in some way.”

There was the sound of the bar being lifted from the door then it was flung open.

“Out,” growled a voice.

They got to their feet and Autumn went out into the early morning sunshine first. She blinked several times in the brightness. Logan followed and rubbed his eyes.

“Get in the cart,” said the man.

“What be your name?” asked Autumn.

“It be Flerrian,” said Flerrian, “though be it none of your business. Get in the cart, both of you.”

4 For an example of this, in a broadly similar style, refer to Shaolin Monkey Stick techniques.

He jerked his head at the cart a few paces away. Two men armed with spears sat on horses behind it. They had bows slung over their shoulders and swords hanging at their sides.

“Where are we going?” asked Autumn.

“Uli-Rratha,” said Flerrian. “And it be my job to deliver you both there, but it makes no never mind if you be dead or alive when you arrive.”

“As you wish, Flerrian,” said Autumn and climbed into the cart. Logan followed.

“Do we get any food or water?” he asked.

“You got any money?” asked Flerrian, getting into the driving seat of the cart.

“No,” said Logan.

“Then don't ask stupid questions,” growled Flerrian. “You only gets what you pays for.”

He urged the horse and the little cart moved off. Autumn touched Logan's arm and pointed to where her pack and the waterskins lay, unnoticed by Glanan or the others, since the day before. Her staff lay neatly along the edge of the cart where she had left it.

“You will permit us to eat and drink what we already have?” she asked.

Flerrian spat. “Reckon so,” he said, “but that's all you're getting. Glanan gave me money for the taking of us all but I'll not be wasting any of that on the likes of you.”

“How long is the travel?” asked Logan, picking up a waterskin.

“Should be there afore sunset,” he said, “and don't be asking me no more questions. Either of you give me any bother and the lads'll run you through. Got it?”

“We will give you no trouble,” said Autumn.

Logan drank deeply from the water skin. He passed it to Autumn and took her blanket from her pack. Unfolding it he took out a cold, clammy half cooked root and passed it to her and took another for himself.

“So no venison stew?” he asked.

“Shut it, I said,” said Flerrian, twisting to backhand Logan with his clenched fist.

Autumn's arm flashed out and grabbed his arm, pulling it towards her so Flerrian lost his balance.

“’Twas a polite question,” she said. “Treat it as such.”

Flerrian sat back up again, red faced and rubbing his arm. The two spear men laughed.

“Pah,” he said and spat again.

“Yes, Flerrian,” said one of the spear men. “Learn some manners, there be a lady present,” and they both laughed again.

“Go eat turds,” growled Flerrian and turned to face the road, his back stiff with anger.

Autumn half nodded to the spear man and he smiled.

“Do you enjoy your work?” she asked.

“Can't say as I've done it before,” he said. “You two be first prisoners we've had to escort. Ain't had no traitors in Ethosien afore. A few killers mind, but they don't get sent to Uli-Rratha, we just hangs 'em here. Thanks to you we gets ourselves a nice little trip in the countryside and a day's travel pay.”

“I be glad to hear it,” said Autumn. “I would be sad to find you put to trouble on our account.”

“What is the penalty for treason?” asked Logan. “I am thinking the Roinad would think treason be worse than a killing and if a killing gets the hanging what would a traitor get?”

“I hear tell the traitor be pegged out in the sun and covered in honey and left for the insects and ants to devour,” said the spear man. “I hear tell some do last seven day or more.”

“Nah, that be too nice,” said the other spear man. “What they does is tie the traitor in a sack with a cat and snakes to be bitten and clawed to death. Ain't that right, Flerrian?”

“You both be full of shit,” said Flerrian. “What they does is tie the sad bastard to a wooden cross then hit his arms and legs with a big hammer, like, so's all the bones is broke into little pieces then when there ain't no bones left they slits his belly open and unravels his guts for the dogs to feed on then leave him in the sun to die. Or so I hear.”

“I wish I hadn't asked,” said Logan, going green and putting down his half eaten root.

“We are not traitors, Logan,” said Autumn. “Do not forget that and do not let these men's tales alarm you. If what any of them say be true then no one would get convicted of treason for any traitor would find a way for one of these men to run him through quickly and be done with it. Fear not, you will die of old age in your own bed. They merely be making mischief with you.”

The spear men laughed and Flerrian spat again.

* * *

Astauand had passed Its peak and was coming down again when the cart breasted the high point of a pass between two big hills. The view across the plain was clear and in the distance lay a huge sprawl with a thin grey-brown haze hanging over it.

“Be that Uli-Rratha?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said the spear man. “That be the capital of Aferraron and

home of Obvia Vasagle, Roinad and bitch-queen.” He spat on the ground.

“Don't you go talking like that,” cautioned the other spear man. “Hysleria has spies everywhere.”

“You be not liking the Roinad?” asked Logan.

“Can't say as I know anyone who does,” said the first spear man. “Old Oohoi weren't too bad, I reckon, but this 'un, she be obsessed with taxing us all into the next world. Least Oohoi kept his obsessions private like.” Both spear men sniggered.

“And who is Hysleria?” asked Autumn.

“He be Piers Sakratar,” said the spear man. “Nasty little shit they say. Got the Roinad wrapped round his cock by all accounts.”

“I heard tell him is what did old Oohoi,” said the other spear man. “Poisoned him so he could get that Obvia in his place.”

“Weren't no poison,” said Flerrian. “He died of a wasting disease. I hear tell he got thinner and thinner over two summers and died coughing up blood. He were nothing but skin and bone and white as a corpse while still alive.”⁵

“See them big rocks on that there hilltop?” said the spear man, pointing with his spear. “The flat 'un what's on the ground used to be resting on top of the round 'un. Folk in these parts called it Voqev's Anvil. They say the day Obvia Vasagle were born Voqev used his Anvil to make her heart out of the hardest metal and broke his Anvil doing it.”

“Aye, that be the truth of it,” said the other spear man.

“Is that why Lord Loheckle is rebelling against her?” asked Autumn.

“Loheckle?” said Flerrian. “That shit were a useless bugger what

⁵ Medical assessment of the symptoms listed in the official court records finds that Oohoi almost certainly died of tuberculosis, very possibly with the complications of renal failure.

fancied himself Roinad but didn't have the balls to do anything about it until that there Kizerling Chewbacca came along.”

“Do you mean Kizerain Qerrassa?” asked Autumn.

“Aye, some such fancy claptrap,” said Flerrian. “He were Obvia Vasagle's Champion at the Mundulgen, bought and paid for by Hysleria so they say afore Loheckle bought him back. Still, Loheckle wouldn't have been much better, he were just a money hungry shit an' all. This land needs a decent Roinad, one what cares about more than just buggering the people for more taxes.”

“You use the past tense,” said Autumn. “Does that mean Loheckle's rebellion is over?”

“Aye,” said the spear man with a sour laugh. “He were killed by one of his own men. Rebellion be just another piss in a pot now.”

* * *

“Highness,” said Hysleria, entering Obvia's private apartment. “I have good tidings.”

“Why do you persist in interrupting me when I'm eating?” asked Obvia.

“My humblest apologies, Highness,” said Hysleria. “Forgive the interruption. I shall return at a more felicitous time.”

He started to back out but Obvia waved him back.

“Stay, Hysleria,” she said, pushing her plate away. “This food is tasteless and captivates me not one jot. It is time I found another better cook even at the risk of poison. I swear this one tries to bore me to death. What pray, are your tidings?”

“The traitor Autumn Savannah and her consort are arrived, Highness,” said Hysleria. “They currently await your pleasure in the Court Room.”

“Excellent,” said Obvia. “I shall attend forthwith. The execution of a traitor should set my humour to rights again. Assemble the Court and let us see to justice.”

“The Court awaits your pleasure, Highness,” said Hysleria. “As always they welcome the opportunity to witness you dispense justice and applaud your merciful ways.”

“And so they should, Hysleria,” said Obvia. “One day it could be one of them standing accused before me.”

“Indeed, Highness,” said Hysleria with a half bow, “and when you let me know the name it shall be so arranged.”

“I can always rely on you, Hysleria,” said Obvia. “You know the appropriate forms and formalities. It be so much easier when one’s loyal servants know the protocols. Saves me the effort which is good for the whole land. Come, let us get this thing done and despatch the maid to a better life.”

“Your benevolence is a lesson for us all, Highness,” said Hysleria.

* * *

“Varaunik was wrong,” said Autumn as they stood in a large room, empty save themselves and fourteen guards. There was a row of chairs along one wall and a very large chair on a platform at the far end. Beside it and discretely set back was a small table and a stool. “Did you notice this building has only two floors? Varaunik said that the Roinad’s dwelling had four floors. I wonder what else he was wrong about.”

“You think mayhap he was wrong about the magic?” asked Logan. “Perhaps this is not the Roinad’s dwelling.”

Somehow he had expected a fancier place for the Roinad. This room, while large, was plain and undecorated, save some ornate patterns in the corners of the ceilings.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn.

A small unobtrusive door at the far end of the room opened and a small man scurried in carrying a pile of scrolls and a large feather. He sat at the table and stared at them.

“Greetings,” said Autumn. “I am Autumn Savannah and this be Logan.”

“I know,” said the little man. “I have all your details here. I am Rumble, Clerk to the Court of the Roinad.”

He pulled a small knife out of a pocket and started to trim the quill.

“Be this the dwelling of the Roinad?” asked Logan.

“Nay, lad,” said Rumble, busying himself with his scrolls. “This just be the Court House. The Roinad’s Palace be in the centre of Uli-Rratha.”

“Pray, how many floors does the Palace have?” asked Logan.

“Five,” said Rumble.

Logan glanced at Autumn and nodded. She raised an eyebrow.

“Umm, I heard tell it was only four,” she said.

“Your informant is out of date,” said Rumble, squinting at her. “Another level was added some three summers past.”

“I did not know that,” said Logan. “So Varaunik was right,” he whispered to Autumn.

Rumble resumed his busywork and Autumn and Logan stood there, not knowing what to do.

“There be an awful lot of candles in here,” muttered Logan. “More than I can count.”

Another small, wrinkled man came in and whispered something to Rumble who stood up. The other man withdrew and a large door the other side of the raised chair opened. Three men and two women

wearing black robes filed in and sat on the row of chairs. They all studiously ignored Autumn and Logan.

“I wonder who they are,” whispered Autumn.

“They are the Witnesses,” said Rumple, looking up. “Do you know nothing of Court Procedure?”

“No,” said Autumn. “Nothing at all.”

“How absurd,” said Rumple. “The task of the Witnesses is to witness the justice dispensed by the Roinad.”

“To what purpose?” asked Autumn.

Rumple stared at her in astonishment.

“Why how else would the commoners know of the magnanimity and compassion of the Roinad if the Witnesses did not witness it?” he spluttered.

“I see,” said Autumn.

The door opened again and Hysleria came in.

“Everything ready?” he asked Rumple.

“Yes, Piers Sakratar,” said Rumple standing up and bowing.

Hysleria stared at Autumn and Logan for a few seconds then scowled.

“Humph,” he snorted.

He turned and went back to the door and disappeared for a moment, then Obvia swept in. The five Witnesses leapt to their feet and bowed. Obvia stared at Autumn and Logan.

“Why do they not bow?” she asked Hysleria.

“I fancy they are mind-struck, Highness,” said Hysleria. “You two,

bow before your Roinad or stand forever condemned by your insolence.”

Autumn and Logan bowed.

“Hmm,” said Obvia, stepping onto the dais and sitting in the big chair.

The five witnesses straightened and sat in their chairs.

“Now, I have a ball to attend this evening,” said Obvia, “and I need to go and change so I can only spare a few minutes before I find you guilty. Can we not hurry things along, Hysleria?”

“Indeed, Highness,” said Hysleria. “Clerk of the Court, the charges if you please.”

“Piers Sakratar,” said Rumple, rising with a scroll in his hand. “You are Autumn Savannah of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup are you not?”

“I am,” said Autumn.

“You will address the Roinad as Highness,” said Hysleria.

“I am, Highness,” said Autumn.

“And you are Logan of Biasdo?” asked Rumple.

“I am, Highness,” said Logan.

“This is dragging on too long,” said Obvia, drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair. “Speed it up, Clerk of the Court, if you please.”

“Highness,” said Rumple. “You are jointly accused of the unlawful killing of Sire Galon Vens ab Toogrit, Officer of the Roinad, and two members of his staff, the theft of three pieces of the Roinad's property, to whit three horses, aiding and abetting a rebellion by Lord Loheckle natal Chant'ist ab Heck-noor against the lawful person of the Roinad and the seeking of a relationship with Soros, Karoi of Neander in

relation to the afore mentioned rebellion. How do you plead?"

"One moment, if I may, Highness," said Hysleria.

"Oh, what is it, Hysleria," said Obvia irritably. "Surely you don't want to raise a point of technicality already?"

"Indeed, no," said Hysleria. "I merely wish to add a further charge to the list, based upon newly acquired information."

"As if there aren't enough charges already," said Obvia. "Oh, very well, what is it?"

"I have received information from Kizerain Qerrassa, Highness," said Hysleria, "and on the basis of that information, we wish to further charge this pair with the murder of your loyal servant, Lord Loheckle natal Chant'ist ab Heck-noor."

"I thought his death was due to misfortune during a skirmish?" said Obvia, frowning.

"That was premature, Highness," said Hysleria. "Kizerain has conducted a full enquiry and has concluded that this Autumn Savannah did cold bloodedly kill my Lord Loheckle following a dispute in their love bed."

"How despicable," said Obvia, glaring at Autumn. "Very well, the additional charge is allowed. You two, how do you wish to plead before I find you guilty? Come alone, I haven't got all night, you know."

Chapter Twenty Two

Autumn and Logan gawped at each other.

“But, but, ...” said Autumn then pulled herself together. “We have not killed anyone, Highness.”

“So you intend to brazen this out, do you?” demanded Hysleria. “Very well then, let us look at the facts. Do you deny selling a horse to one Varaunik of Kaloolon?”

“Ah, no,” said Autumn. “We found those horses in the Forest of Chevesic so we took them with us.”

“Quite,” said Hysleria. “And do you deny meeting Sire Galon Vens ab Toogrit, the keeper of said horse? Don't bother lying, a letter from me to Sire Galon was found in your luggage.”

“He was already dead when we found him,” said Logan, breathlessly.

“Indeed? And how do you suppose he met his demise?” demanded Hysleria.

“He and his two men were killed by a soska,” said Autumn.

“A soska?” said Hysleria. “How convenient that the bodies were never found. Pray tell me, for I lack the wit to understand, how an imaginary creature that exists only in fairy stories to frighten small children came to kill an officer of the Roinad and his two aides?”

“I know not,” said Autumn. “We did not get there until the following afternoon.”

“Ahh, I see,” said Hysleria. “So despite not being there you are able to claim unreservedly that this alleged soska perpetrated this heinous act?”

“We were attacked by the soska the next night,” cried Logan. “It was on me and Autumn fought it off.”

“A most remarkable tale,” said Hysleria glancing at the Roinad and stifling a small laugh. “Notwithstanding that soskas are creatures of the imagination, they are, according to the tales I have heard, invincible and yet you, a lone female, were able to fight one off? Despite, I might add, three venerable soldiers of the Roinad having been earlier despatched? Perhaps the poor thing was tired!”

The five Witnesses tittered at this.

“Autumn is a Kris ...” began Logan hotly.

“Yes, yes, no doubt you have another absurd explanation,” said Hysleria dismissively. “Do you deny that prior to this incident in Chevesic Forest you had met with Kizerain Qerrassa in order to cement an alliance with Lord Loheckle?”

“I do deny it,” said Autumn. “Prior to meeting Lord Loheckle I had only met Kizerain Qerrassa once and not to form any alliance.”

“What was your purpose for meeting with Lord Loheckle, then?” asked Hysleria.

“He wanted to meet me,” said Autumn, “not I him.”

“Hair splitting, I think, Highness,” said Hysleria turning to Obvia who yawned. He turned back to Autumn. “And why, pray, did he want to meet you?”

“He wanted me to join his rebellion,” said Autumn.

“Aha, so you admit he was in rebellion against his rightful Roinad?” said Hysleria quickly.

“Well, yes,” said Autumn.

“You see, Highness?” said Hysleria, turning to face Obvia again.

“Indeed, Piers Sakratar,” said Obvia. “Will this take much longer?”

“We are almost at an end, Highness,” said Hysleria. “Now then, where

was I?"

Theatrically he looked at the scroll of charges again then looked up.

"The other two horses, the ones you claim you found in the Forest," said Hysleria. "What became of them?"

"We took those too," said Autumn.

"And did you sell them?" asked Hysleria.

"No, we gave them away," said Autumn.

"An uncommonly generous nature, I commend you," said Hysleria. "To whom did you give the horses?"

"A fisherman," said Autumn.

"That would seem a most strange gift to give a fisherman," said Hysleria, "unless, perchance, you mistook them for seahorses?"

The five Witnesses tittered again and Hysleria acknowledged their admiration for his wit with a nod of appreciation and a half smile.

"Come," said Hysleria, "the Court grows weary with your obfuscation. Did you or did you not exchange the two horses for return passage to Neander?"

"We did," admitted Autumn.

"And for what purpose did you go to Neander?" asked Hysleria.

"To return a cat," said Autumn.

The Court went silent then all five Witnesses burst into loud laughter. Even Obvia smiled.

"His name was Darius!" cried out Logan.

"Quite," said Hysleria when the laughter died down. "You stole horses

to exchange for passage to a foreign country in order to return a cat? Your arrogance beggars belief. You quite clearly believe this Court to be composed of fools and nincompoops. I venture no more need be said on the matter but we must observe the formalities and address the final charge although your guilt is readily apparent. Did you or did you not cause the death of Lord Loheckle?"

"We did not," said Autumn. "Can I ask a question?"

"It is not for you to question the Court!" said Rumple hotly, jumping up.

"Calm yourself, Clerk of the Court," said Obvia. "I confess I am curious as to how this traitor thinks to prove her innocence by asking questions. Ask your question, child."

"Thank you, Highness," said Autumn. "You refer to Lord Loheckle in the charges brought against us as a loyal servant?"

"Indeed," said Hysleria. "One of the loyalest."

"But how could he be loyal if he was rebelling?" asked Autumn.

"A mere technicality," said Hysleria, rustling his charge sheet. "At the time of his unfortunate demise Lord Loheckle had not rebelled against the Roinad and therefore his loyalty cannot be questioned."

"That seems a trifle absurd, does it not?" asked Autumn.

"Highness," said Hysleria turning to Obvia. "Please note that the accused refers to your person as 'absurd'."

"I have already noted that," said Obvia coldly.

"If I may interject at this time to make a related point?" said one of the Witnesses, standing up.

"Yes, Lady Dijana?" said Hysleria, turning to her.

"I would like the Court to note that the accused is in no position to

lecture us on the matter of loyalty,” said Lady Dijana. “Did she or did she not leave her lover’s bed in order to kill him?”

“An excellent point, Lady Dijana, thank you,” said Hysleria feigning surprise.

“He was not my lover,” said Autumn firmly. “I have taken a vow of chastity.”

“Were you or were you not in Lord Loheckle’s bed?” asked Hysleria. “And don’t deny it, Kizerain Qerrassa’s report states clearly that you were.”

“I was,” said Autumn, “but I was tied to it.”

“It is not for this Court to pass judgement on the games people play in private,” said Hysleria, “nor the contempt with which you clearly hold your vows. No doubt this was part of your game to titillate and entrap my Lord Loheckle in your web of deceit. The key point is that you admit you were in his bed. We may therefore take it as a given that you then subsequently stabbed him in the heart with an arrow. There is little point in denying it.”

“But I do deny it,” said Autumn. “I was running away from him when someone fired an arrow at me. It must have hit Lord Loheckle instead.”

“Oh, must we endure any more of this nonsense?” asked Hysleria, feigning exhaustion. “First you claim you were tied to the bed then you claim you were running away. You try the Court’s patience to the utmost. I suppose you are now going to claim that you were running away with the bed tied to your back?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I managed to untie myself first.”

“Then there was nothing to stop you stabbing my Lord Loheckle with an arrow,” said Hysleria triumphantly.

The Witnesses applauded and Hysleria bowed to them.

“The Crown rests its case,” he said, rolling up the scroll. “Do you have anything to say in your defence?”

“I would like to say ...” began Autumn.

“Silence in Court!” bellowed Rumpel, leaping to his feet.

“Excellent,” said Hysleria. “If your Highness pleases, are you ready to pass judgement on this pair of wretches?”

“What was that, Hysleria?” said Obvia, looking up from her shoes. “I must apologise, I wasn’t listening.”

“Are you ready to pass judgement, Highness?” said Hysleria.

“About time,” said Obvia. “Guilty the pair of them.”

The five Witnesses applauded again.

“And their sentence, Highness?” asked Hysleria.

“How many charges are there?” asked Obvia.

“Five, Highness,” said Hysleria.

“Death for each of the five then,” said Obvia.

“An excellent decision, Highness,” said Hysleria. “The Court Executioner has a most vivid imagination, I am sure he will come up with several interesting methods. Witnesses!”

The five Witnesses stood up.

“Do you all attest that this trial was carried out with all fairness and justice?” said Hysleria.

“We do,” said Lady Dijana.

“Be it so noted, Clerk of the Court,” said Hysleria. “Take the condemned away.”

“I protest!” shouted Logan but four of the guards grabbed him and Autumn and hustled them quickly out of the door through which they had been brought.

* * *

The cell was cold, bitterly cold, and the stone walls damp with mildew. A small hole high in one wall let in a cold ray of pale light from Plakill which illuminated nothing but a small pile of straw against the wall opposite. The air was heavy with the smell of fear, pain and urine. A voice cried out in despair from elsewhere, muffled by the thickness of the stones.

“Five times,” said Logan mournfully. “We are going to be killed five times! Each!”

“Do not be afraid,” said Autumn. “The last four times will not hurt.”

“I wager the first time will though,” said Logan. “I do sorely hope the executioner does not let free with his imagination until after the first time.”

“It will not come to that,” said Autumn. “Help me find a way out.”

She started feeling the walls carefully, testing for solidity or movement between the stones.

“I thought you were going to accept the rule of law,” said Logan, not moving.

“I do accept the rule of law,” said Autumn, pausing and sitting back on her heels, “but that was not the rule of law. That was a travesty. There was no attempt at justice. Our fates were decided before the case was heard and the evidence was, well, I do not know a word for what it was but it was absurd. I cannot begin to imagine why they even bothered. It would have been easier for everyone if we had simply been run through with a spear in Ethosien. I will not be beholden to such a mockery and perversion of the law.”

“So what shall we do?” asked Logan.

“Escape,” said Autumn, “unless you prefer to stay and die five times.”

“But what if we are caught trying to escape?” said Logan, getting onto his knees. “There are guards everywhere.”

“We shall probably die,” said Autumn cheerfully.

“Oh you are a ray of sunshine, are you not,” said Logan, disconsolately sitting back down again.

“You always have a choice,” said Autumn.

“How did I know you were going to say that?” grumbled Logan.

“Tis true though,” said Autumn. “Your choices here are to stay and be killed in five imaginative ways or attempt to escape, which is a just cause considering the injustice that has befallen us and which may lead to freedom. Even if it does not it will help pass the time and keep your mind occupied.”

“I suppose so,” said Logan and he got on his knees again and started feeling and pressing the stones that surrounded them.

The night slowly passed and the ray from the Big Moon slowly made its way across the cell.

“Nothing,” said Logan, flopping back down on the cold stone floor. “I doubt I could even get my arm through that hole. Seems the only way out be the way we came in and that be impregnable until someone comes and opens it.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Twould seem to be the only way but I wager there will be more guards than I can deal with. Still, denied the choice between life and death I venture an honourable death be preferable to one drowned in ignominy and falsehood. I confess I have no other thoughts on the matter,” and she kicked the wall in frustration.

“You recall when we left Darius on that shore?” asked Logan.

“You mean his final words? asked Autumn. “Aye, call his name when

we are in peril but what can he do? Not even a cat can get in here let alone get us out. I wager not even a mouse could get in.”

“But it is worth the attempt, is it not?” asked Logan. “It is a choice that as yet remains open to us. Would it not be folly to at least not explore that choice?”

“And what if Darius joins us in here?” asked Autumn. “Would not his life be forfeit if he be found?”

“If he did manage to get in I would think he would be able to get back out again, even if he cannot take us with him,” said Logan. “And mayhap he would scare the guards and make a passage for us or at least assist in the fight?”

“It would seem a futile venture,” said Autumn. “The best choice here would be to accept our lot and face the end of our sufferings in this world with equanimity. Death at the hand of our executioner or a fight and likely death at the hands of the guards.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, “but it seems to me that you are giving up too lightly. We have the option Darius gave us and to fail to explore that option would seem foolish to me.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “Say his name but do it quickly for I believe I do hear the guards coming along the passage.”

Logan took a deep breath then released it.

“I feel there should be some sort of ritual,” he said. “Simply saying Darius, Darius, Darius seems to lack any sense of significance.”

“If we had a candle we could light it,” said Autumn, “but we do not. Perhaps if you knelt in a posture of piety?”

“Groww,” said Darius, his golden eyes glowing in the darkness. “What ails you?”

“Sploop!” said Logan, startled. “Where did you come from?”

“You called me,” said Darius. “How can I help?”

“We are trapped in this place,” said Autumn, “and we will be executed very shortly. Guards are coming to get us now, can you hear them?”

“You wish me to help you leave?” asked Darius.

“Umm, yes,” said Logan, “and the sooner the better!”

There was the sound of a large key being fitted to a heavy lock.

“Hold my tail,” said Darius, “and do not let go whatever happens lest you be lost.”

“Lost where?” asked Logan.

“I am a cat,” said Darius, “and like all cats I can move between the worlds of the living and the dead. Let us depart this place.”

“Oh wonderful,” said Logan sarcastically. “Whatever happens we are going to die.”

“You realise a fundamental truth at last,” said Autumn, taking hold of Darius' tail. “Get a grip.”

* * *

The leading guard turned the key in the lock then returned the ring of keys to the hook on his broad leather belt. He grasped the handle on the heavy door and slowly dragged it open then stepped back. The guard behind him stepped forward and thrust in a burning torch.

“It's time,” he growled. “Get out here.”

Nothing stirred.

“Come on, scum,” he growled, “executioner be waiting and he ain't got all day.”

“Zeeth,” said the guard. “S'pose I'll have to get 'em out the hard way.

C'mon Slanne.”

A third guard appeared and they both went into the cell.

“Ain't no one here, Ulnik,” said Slanne.

Ulnik waved the torch around to double check.

“You be playing games, K'ath?” he demanded. “Get the right cell, for Zeeth's sake.”

K'ath held his torch over the mark on the door.

“This be the right cell,” he said.

“Then where in Zeeth's name be them prisoners?” demanded Ulnik.

“Don't rightly know,” said K'ath. “Best tell the Summen, mayhap they've escaped.”

“Best pray not,” said Slanne. “Summen be in a bad mood these three days past. His almost-era'owen ran off with a torch maker.”

“Aye,” said Ulnik heavily. “Can't say as I blames her either. Well, best get it over with.”

The three of them marched back to the guardroom.

“Summen,” said Ulnik. “Ahh, them prisoners what is due for Executioner, umm, they be missing.”

“What do you mean missing?” said Gazen, looking up.

“They's ain't in the cell,” said K'ath.

“Where the Vogeve be they then?” demanded Gazen angrily.

The three guards stood silently.

“You'd better find them then, you turds,” said Gazen quietly and

viciously. "Two live 'uns be expected by the Executioner and two live 'uns he's going to get even if it's two of you. Turn out the rest of the guards and find 'em or I'll be doing his job for him."

* * *

"You can let go now," said Darius after they'd passed through the door.

Logan let go of his tail and touched the door behind him. It was as solid as ever.

"How ...?" he started then stopped. He didn't really want to know.

"Where are we?" asked Autumn.

"Outside the room below the one you were in," said Darius.

"So we are still in the land of the living?" asked Logan.

"Yes," said Darius.

"Then let us make haste," said Autumn. "I fancy it will not be long before the guards start looking for us."

"Which way?" asked Logan.

"This way," said Autumn. "I can feel a draught from that direction."

She felt her way along the dark passage with Logan close behind, breathing heavily.

"Control your breathing," she whispered. "I hear people up ahead. Ahh, this feels like steps and it looks lighter up above."

Cautiously they made their way up the steps. At the top they paused and Autumn peered around the corner. In the early morning light she could hear people running and shouting, muffled by the stone.

"I think they know we are gone," she whispered. "Do not move!"

She flattened against the wall of the steps as three guards ran past, swords brandished. The leading guard carried a flaming torch which smoked and fanned backwards as they ran. Cautiously she peered around the corner again.

“Come,” she whispered and crept stealthily into the passage.

“What be you idle sods be doing?” shouted Gazen, aware of her presence as she passed the door of the guardroom. “Hey, who be you? Come here!”

He grabbed for her and Autumn slammed her straightened fingers into his throat then chopped him on the temple and he fell, unconscious.

“Come on,” she whispered urgently.

Logan followed, breathing as quietly as he could and Darius padded silently behind him.

“This be a dead end,” she said moments later. “We must go back.”

Gazen was sitting up and holding his head, groaning, when she reappeared. He tried to pull his sword but was felled a second time.

“There is another entrance over there,” whispered Autumn. “I can see full daylight through it.”

She stepped over Gazen's unconscious body and crossed the guard room, Logan following. Darius paused to sniff Gazen.

“Do not eat him,” said Autumn, glancing back.

Darius wrinkled his nose and flicked his tail from side to side but left Gazen alone.

“I can see the road,” said Autumn, peering around the door, “but we have to cross a clearing to get to it and go through an archway. There be several guards around and nowhere to hide.”

“What shall we do?” asked Logan.

“We can stay here and wait to be found,” said Autumn, “or we can make a run for the road or walk as though we are supposed to be walking here and pray no one takes any notice.”

“Run,” said Darius. “Tis faster.”

“Walk,” said Logan. “Running will draw attention.”

“We will do both,” said Autumn. “We will walk for the road and if anyone spots us we will then run as fast as we can. Ready?”

“No,” said Logan, “but I doubt I will ever be.”

Autumn took his hand and squeezed it.

“All will be well,” she said, “and if it is not we will be no worse off than before. Come on.”

She stepped through the doorway and started walking towards the road, her head held proudly. Logan followed, trying not to skulk. Darius loped along beside him.

“Good morning,” said Autumn pleasantly to the guard at the archway.

“Hold it,” he said, jerking round. “Who be you and what be you doing here?”

He drew his sword.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn then her hand flashed and the guard fell.

“Oi!” rang out across the clearing. “Stop them!”

“Time to run,” said Autumn, “Go, I will delay them for a few moments.”

She pushed Logan through the archway then turned to face the guards

running towards her.

“They went that way,” she screamed, pointing in the other direction to Logan and the leading guard hesitated then looked up the road.

Logan stopped running and turned to see what Autumn was up to.

“Run!” he shouted and Autumn turned and ran towards him as two guards lunged at her with their swords.

Another guard arrived and pulled an arrow from his quiver.

“Stop or I will shoot,” he yelled at Autumn's back as she ran.

“Keep running,” Autumn screamed at Logan.

“Behind you,” shouted Logan, “look out!”

The guard let fly with his arrow and it flew straight and true towards Logan.

Autumn glanced behind then flung herself in front of Logan and the arrow buried itself in Logan's chest. He fell to the ground clutching at the arrow.

“Logan!” screamed Autumn and fell to her knees to cradle his head.

“I saw it,” he croaked, “I saw the arrow pass right through you!”

“I am sorry,” she said, stroking his head. “I did not wish you to die.”

Logan grimaced in pain then his face relaxed into a beaming grin.

“You jumped in front of it,” he whispered. “You cannot deny it this time, Autumn.”

“I do not deny it,” she said. “Farewell Logan,” and he closed his eyes and went limp.

Rough hands grabbed her and pulled her upright. Another hand hit

her face but she did not feel it.

“Grrrrrooww,” roared Darius appearing before her, his teeth bared.

Several of the guards jumped back in surprise.

“Darius, hold,” said Autumn, still securely gripped by two guards. “Do not kill them. You said you can move through the lands of the dead?”

“Yes,” said Darius as more guards surrounded them.

“Then let us find Logan and bring him back,” said Autumn, reaching out with her foot to touch his back. “Now.”

Chapter Twenty Three

Autumn stumbled and fell backwards, the guards releasing her as she toppled. Instinctively when she landed she threw her feet in the air and pushed off with her hands to regain her feet then paused in surprise. The land before her was now grey and wet. The road she had been running down had blurred and faded into a mass of dank swampland and the last few buildings were covered in dark purple weed. Slime oozed slowly onto the road.

Darius padded forward a few steps then paused, twisting his head to look at her, his silver tipped ears cocked. Autumn turned to look behind and saw herself, collapsed on the ground with two guards bending over her prostrate body in the sun, Logan nearby, an arrow protruding obscenely from his chest, blood drying on his lips. More guards were running over from the prison enclosure in the bright sunshine. There was much shouting but she could not make out the words. They seemed far distant and echoey.

“Where are we?” she asked, turning back to Darius in the overcast light of the other side.

“The Land of the Undead,” he said, padding over to stand beside her.

“Is that me?” she asked, pointing to herself on the ground behind her. “Am I dead?”

“No, you are not dead but you are not alive,” said Darius. “You are no longer in the Land of the Living but you are not yet in the Land of the Dead. Your body remains there, your vitality is here.”

“So I am one of the undead?” she asked, unwilling to give up her body entirely yet.

“Yes,” said Darius.

“Why are you not there with me and Logan?” she asked.

“I am a cat,” said Darius. “I live in all three Lands and move freely between them.”

“And is Logan here?” she asked.

“Most likely,” said Darius. “It takes time to be judged and pass through to the Land of the Dead.

Autumn nodded thoughtfully then resolutely turned to face the murky swamps.

“He is there?” she asked.

“Somewhere,” said Darius. “We must find him.”

“When we find him can we go back to the Land of the Living?” asked Autumn, “or will we be here forever?”

“Alone you cannot go back,” said Darius. “You creatures of one Land cannot return to that Land once you have crossed over but I can take you back. Come, let us find Logan.”

“Mother Midcarn said you were no ordinary cat,” said Autumn. “I see now what she meant.”

“She was referring to something else,” said Darius. “All cats live in the Three Lands and to move between is entirely ordinary.”

“So what did she mean then?” asked Autumn.

Although she had turned her back on her old life she was not yet willing to move forward. It was a forbidding place that lay ahead and she feared it.

“Mayhap one day I will tell you,” said Darius, “but now is not the time. We must find Logan and there are dangers in this Land as well.”

Autumn looked at the vast swampland.

“It is huge,” she murmured, “how will we find him?”

“We will follow the Path,” said Darius, “and trust he has the sense to do the same for those we may meet will not, I fear, aid us in our

quest. If he has strayed from the Path then only Yammoe can help us find him and Yammoe may help us but It may not. It depends on Its mood for you are not supposed to be here at this time. Only Yammoe knows where those vitalities are that have strayed from the Path or been turned away.”

“What do you mean, 'turned away'?” asked Autumn.

“The Path leads to the gates of the Land of the Dead where Zeeth sits in judgement,” said Darius. “If Zeeth turns a vitality away then it can go no further and must remain here with Yammoe for eternity. Come, time is wasting and Logan, I would think, is travelling away from us.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. She took a deep breath and ignored her fear. She strode forward purposefully.

“This is the right Path?” she asked Darius, loping along at her side.

“There are many Paths,” he said, “but all lead to the same place. This is Logan's Path for it starts where and when he died.”

“Do I have a Path?” asked Autumn.

“One day you will,” said Darius, “but not yet. You should not be here so there is no Path for you now. You have chosen to follow Logan's Path.”

“Well now,” said Autumn, “so there is always a choice, even after death. Interesting.”

“Grroww,” said Darius. “Let us make haste. He cannot have got far but he may be hurrying to get through this Land.”

“We stay on this Path?” said Autumn, starting to jog.

“Yes,” said Darius, keeping up with her easily, “but be aware of what is off the Path. Logan may have strayed.”

The Path turned to mud as they approached the swamp then all but disappeared as it turned to watery grey slime. It was cold and

squelched unpleasantly and wound between gnarled leafless trees. Their boles wide and bulging but their trunks splitting and twisting like the death throes of octopuses. Between the trees black rocks covered with brown and purple grasses, ferns and mosses sat, sodden with the watery slime. A large black bird with ragged feathers and red eyes watched them from a branch then slowly launched itself, its slow flapping of wings like the sound of bundles of dry reeds landing on stone. As they ventured further in the light faded and the trees grew closer together. The air was full of decay and rot. Unseen things rustled and scurried among the dark ferns and mournful cries occasionally drifted from far away.

“I saw something,” said Autumn suddenly, “off to the side.”

She stopped jogging and backed up a few steps, peering between the misshapen trees.

“Oh no,” she said lifting a hand to her face in dismay, “surely that is not Logan? It looks like his tunic and his hair colour.”

She stepped between two trees and her feet sank to the ankles in the water-logged soil. The ground sucked her feet as she stepped forward and belching bubbles released foul odours when each foot came free. Barely ten paces from the path lay a body, slumped against the bole of a tree, half hidden among brown decaying clumps of grass.

“Logan?” whispered Autumn, reaching out to touch the body on its shoulder.

At her touch the body swung round and grinned at her. Beetles crawled through its empty eye sockets and a swollen mud-grey worm waved from its nostril. Its teeth were thick with green-brown mildew and its face was seamed and grey with patches of rot. Hanks of grey hair hung like seaweed in lumps and an open sore dripped dark green pus from where an ear should be.

Shocked Autumn jerked backwards and stifled a cry of disgust.

“Help me,” said the body mournfully. “I’m so lonely, please don’t go.”

"Tis not Logan," called Autumn to Darius who had remained on the Path. "Tis some unfortunate who, I wager, is beyond our help."

She started to make her way back to the Path.

"Don't go," whispered the body pathetically. A grimy hand, missing two fingers and the flesh from a third, reached out and touched her robe. "We can be friends, stay with me."

"I am sorry, but I cannot," said Autumn reaching out compassionately to touch the hand.

Faster than she could react the hand grasped hers tightly and started to pull.

"Kiss me," said the body, bringing its slimy lips and mildewed teeth close to her face. "Bring me back to life with your warm, firm flesh."

The worm in its nose writhed and its beetles stared deep into Autumn's eyes. Its foetid breath engulfed her. Retching Autumn turned her head away and wrenched her hand back. Both its hands reached out for her and it started to laugh, shrill and high pitched. A snake emerged from its armpit and slid into the thin grey water.

"Get away from me," cried Autumn, trying to run but the grip of the swamp on her feet slowed her down. The body grabbed her ankle. She stamped down with her other foot on the body's arm and pulled her ankle free then kicked the body in its chest. Her foot sank in and her stomach twisted. A scorpion scurried out of the cavity and up her leg, its sting alert.

"I love you," it said plaintively, holding out its hands pleadingly.

"You are dead," said Autumn grimly, swatting the scorpion with her hand. It splashed into the water and sank out of sight. She wrenched her foot from deep within its chest and the hole slowly filled in.

Darius' paw snaked out from behind her and his claws raked across the body's face.

“Leave her be,” snarled Darius.

“Nice pussy cat,” said the body through the shreds of its face. “Come to Daddy,” and its hand grabbed Darius’ front leg. Darius bit swiftly then spat the hand on the ground.

“We can be friends,” the body said. “I am so lonely, no one ever talks to me.”

“Autumn, get back to the Path,” said Darius, backing away. “This is a gangsi, a corpse that will eat you alive and you cannot kill it. Watch its hand.”

Autumn backed away and watched in morbid fascination as the gangsi picked up its severed hand and reattached it.

“Please stay,” it wailed, holding out both arms imploringly. “Please stay with me.”

Autumn hurried back to the Path as quickly as she could.

“Ughh,” she said, shuddering. “I pray Logan did not stop to talk with that.”

“They are slow eaters,” said Darius. “If it had caught Logan much of him would still remain. Let us move on.”

“If it was a corpse,” said Autumn starting to jog again, “why was it still alive?”

“In life someone stole its vitality through sorcery,” said Darius. “The body died but the corpse cannot rejoin the earth while its vitality still remains in the Land of the Living. Until its vitality is restored it must stay here, endlessly seeking its vitality. Rather like you, except your vitality is here and your body remains in the Land of the Living.”

“Is not my body dead?” asked Autumn.

“To all appearances, yes,” said Darius. “It still lives but your vitality is here and your body is alive but lifeless. The gangsi’s vitality is alive in

the Land of the Living but has no body. It is here.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn.

“Let us hope you never need to,” said Darius. “But whosoever stole that body's vitality is keeping it alive for some reason.”

“Why would they do that?” asked Autumn.

The slimy mud was getting deeper and she slowed to a fast, splashy walk in the ankle deep water. The ground beneath was soft and treacherous.

“Who knows,” said Darius. “Revenge for some slight perhaps, or some sorcery that went wrong.”

“’Twould seem a cruel form of revenge,” said Autumn. “Is there no remedy other than that of the sorcerer?”

“Mayhap another, more powerful sorcerer could do the joining,” said Darius, “but for what reason? Sorcerers shy away from meddling in each others sorcery.”

“What if the sorcerer who did this has himself died?” asked Autumn. “What then?”

“What then, indeed,” said Darius then his ears twitched and he stopped.

“I hear something,” he said. “Not far away but I know not what it is.”

“Be it Logan?” asked Autumn.

“Mayhap,” said Darius. “’Tis not the usual sound of this place. Let us keep going but with caution.”

They continued wading but more slowly.

“I hear it now,” said Autumn. “It sounds like someone crying up ahead.”

The crying grew louder as they moved forward, following the Path around and between the gnarled old trees.

“There he is!” cried Autumn as they rounded another tree and were confronted by a towering cliff face. “Logan!” and she started running towards him.

Logan was sitting on one of the many boulders strewn along its base, his knees pulled tightly to his chest, tears streaming down his face.

“Autumn?” he cried, looking up. “Autumn? Oh Autumn! And Darius!”

He leapt to his feet and came hurtling over and engulfed Autumn in a bear hug.

“Oh! Oh!” he kept crying and wouldn’t let her go. Autumn hugged him back, unfamiliar tears pricking her own eyes. Darius watched with the sublime indifference of a cat, his tail slowly waving from side to side. He yawned in apparent boredom.

“And Darius!” cried Logan, releasing Autumn and grabbing Darius. Darius stiffened in shocked surprise then condescended to allow himself to be hugged.

“This is a horrible place,” said Logan drying his eyes. “I saw myself lying on the ground with that arrow in me and realised I was dead and started to walk ... oh no! Are you dead too?”

“I do not think so,” said Autumn, “but truly I do not understand this place. Darius says that I still live in the Land of the Living even though I would seem to be dead.”

“But how did you get here if you aren’t dead?” asked Logan, worry etched deeply on his face.

“Darius brought me here,” said Autumn. “We have come to bring you back.”

“So you died to find me?” asked Logan, looking at Darius then back at Autumn. “You sacrificed yourself for me yet again?”

“Something like that,” said Autumn. “Or so I think, but I know not how this place operates.”

“What is this place?” asked Logan. “I always thought the Land of the Dead was a nicer place than this. There are nasty things here. Did you see that body back there? It was, ugh, disgusting.”

“It is the Land of the Undead,” said Darius. “That wall marks its end. Beyond is the Land of the Dead but you can go no further until you have been judged and found worthy.”

“It is a big wall,” said Logan. “I looked at it for a while trying to see how I could get round it or over it but it is as high as the sky and goes from horizon to horizon. I knew not what to do and I was so scared and lonely and there were some things that kept poking me and wouldn't leave me alone and then I just gave up and started to cry and they went away. Sloop I am so happy to see you!” and he started hugging Autumn again.

“And I you, friend Logan,” said Autumn when she was able to take a breath again. “Are you well?”

“I am,” said Logan, “now you are with me again, both of you.”

Darius retreated in expectation of another hug so Logan hugged Autumn again.

“Enough!” she said happily, then frowned when she saw the jagged tear in Logan's tunic from the arrow. “Did the arrow leave a wound?”

“I know not,” said Logan. “I did not give it a thought.”

“Show me your chest,” she said and Logan struggled out of his tunic.

“There is not even a mark,” said Autumn, running her fingers over his chest. “Interesting.”

Logan put his tunic back on again while Autumn looked at the cliff. It was sheer but had plenty of foot and hand holds, at least as far up as she could see. High in the air some black shapes circled.

“What things were poking you?” she asked, looking at Logan again.

“Those things,” said Logan, pointing behind her.

Autumn whirled, dropping into a defensive stance. Three thin clouds of smoke hung a few paces away.

“They are wights,” said Darius. “Pay them no more attention than you would a mosquito. They are harmless although they can be annoying.”

One of the clouds drifted over towards Autumn and a tendril drifted out and gave her a light poke on the nose. It tickled and she slapped at it and the tendril swirled and broke up.

“What are wights?” asked Autumn.

“No one knows,” said Darius. “They just are.”

Another cloud drifted over to Darius and poked the underside of his belly. He ignored it. The first one grew another tendril and Autumn felt it move under her hair. She slapped it away and the tendril broke up and evaporated.

“Right,” said Autumn. “Let us return to the Land of the Living. Do we go back the way we came?”

“We could,” said Darius, “but if we do we will return to the same situation as the Path leads back to the moment of Logan's death and those men may kill you both. It would be better to go somewhere and somewhere else so our return will be uneventful.”

“How do we do that?” asked Logan.

“We do not follow the Path,” said Darius. “We make our own Path.”

“You mean through this swamp?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Darius. “The further from the Path the further away from Logan's death we will be and the longer we take the longer after his death we will be.”

“But what if we get lost?” asked Logan. “I do not want to stay here any longer than I have to.”

Autumn jumped round as a tendril of smoke poked her bottom then scowled at her lack of self control.

“We must put our trust in Darius,” she said. “He has been here before and knows the way.”

“I come here not often,” said Darius. “The Land of the Dead is a nicer place. The creatures here are rarely good to eat.”

A fourth cloud of smoke appeared.

“Why do you come here, then?” asked Autumn.

“It can be a quick way to another place,” said Darius, “or a place to escape to when being hunted.”

“Could you not have come here to avoid being captured and taken to the market where I found you?” asked Autumn.

The fourth cloud of smoke hovered in front of Logan and the other three merged with it.

“I could have,” said Darius. “But I did not.”

“Why not?” asked Autumn. “I venture that would have been a sensible course of action.”

“It was my destiny to be found by you,” said Darius.

The cloud of smoke thickened and two tendrils reached down to the ground.

“By me?” said Autumn, ignoring the cloud. “Why, pray?”

“To set you on your path,” said Darius.

“Greetings, Ept, why are you here?” said the cloud.

“I am here to return these two creatures to the Land of the Living,” said Darius. “By your leave we shall depart now.”

“You do not have my leave,” said the cloud of smoke, coalescing into a human form.

“Why did it call you Ept?” asked Autumn, staring at the shape.

“That is one of my names,” said Darius.

“And this is Logan,” said the shape, an arm shaped tendril of smoke reaching out to point at Logan. “But you,” and another arm tendril snaked out towards Autumn, “you I do not know.”

A smooth face, devoid of features appeared.

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, drawing herself up. “Krisana of Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandramek Esysup and friend and companion of Logan. Who might you be?”

“I am Yammoe,” said the shape. “Sovereign of the Undead and Roinad of this Land. Why do you trespass here?”

Chapter Twenty Four

The smoke of Yammoe's face swirled gently and gaps opened up to form dark spaces that resembled eyes, a nose and a mouth. The effect was not friendly.

"Umm," said Autumn, nonplussed.

"Answer me," said Yammoe.

"I am of Mizule and Vallume," Autumn said forcefully to herself. "I recognise no other authority!"

She made a conscious effort to relax her body and clear her mind.

"I am here to return Logan to the Land of the Living," she said. "He is not yours nor will he ever be."

"That is not your decision to make," said Yammoe and an arm tendril encircled Logan's waist.

Logan jumped backwards and the tendril dissipated.

"Nor is it yours, Yammoe," said Autumn. "The decision lies with Zeeth who sits in judgement but I contend the time for such a decision is not yet here."

Another arm tendril reached out and lifted Autumn's chin.

"Zeeth will give the boy to me," said Yammoe softly. "He is a thief and not worthy to be in Zeeth's presence. It matters not what time it is. Logan is in the here and now and that is all that matters."

"Logan was a thief through necessity not desire nor nature," said Autumn. "Zeeth is respectful of that circumstance and will deem him worthy when the time comes. I say again, that time is not now."

Two arm tendrils reached up and fanned the mouth hole in the smoke into a smiling shape.

“We dispute time,” said Yammoe. “The boy is here now and the dispute is meaningless.”

“Yes, Logan is here now,” said Autumn, “but he will be elsewhere soon. You have no power over me here or now. I am of Mizule and Vallume and he is mine.”

She stepped forward and blew into Yammoe's face. The smoke swirled and dissipated then slowly reformed.

“So,” said Yammoe, reforming Its face into a scowl, “you wish to challenge me?”

“No,” said Autumn. “Tis you who are challenging me. Let me be about my business unhindered.”

The arm tendril reached out and gently stroked her cheek. Autumn did not flinch. The tendril slowly drifted down and formed a clenched fist over her heart. The other arm tendril drew a raised eyebrow in the smoke of Yammoe's face.

“You are not dead,” said Yammoe in a conversational tone, “but if you continue to argue with me you will die and be subject to me. You have no choice in this.”

“I always have a choice,” said Autumn, forcing her voice to be strong. “I am returning to the Land of the Living.” She paused then emphasised each word. “I. Will. Take. Logan. With. Me.”

The fist slammed into Autumn's heart with all the power of the Infinite and the silver ribbon on her robe glowed and hummed. She did not move. The tendril reformed into a scythe and sliced viciously downwards trying to cleave her from head to toe. The ribbon glowed, hummed and crackled.

“Thhhhhhhh,” hissed Yammoe and four more arm tendrils snaked out, reaching for her throat and again the ribbon glowed.

“You do not frighten me with your insubstantial games,” said Autumn and she blew contemptuously into Yammoe's face again. Again the

smoke dissipated.

“Go or stay,” she said. “The choice is yours but I will be about my business. Come Logan, come Darius. We have lingered here too long.”

Autumn forced her legs to move and turned away. With a conscious effort she started walking back down the Path.

“Umm,” said Logan looking from the smoke of Yammoe to Autumn then back again. “Umm, I have got to go now. It was nice, umm, meeting you.”

He sidled warily around Yammoe.

“You will be back,” said Yammoe. “We shall meet again.”

Logan gave a half wave and scurried off after Autumn. Darius watched them go.

“Well, Yammoe,” he said. “That was interesting.”

“Yes,” said Yammoe, Its face merging back into the ball of smoke. “No vitality has ever argued with me before. I venture even Zeeth will meet his match with that one.” Three puffs of smoke drifted away, following Autumn and Logan. “I look forward to that contest. Go with them and ensure they get back to the Land of the Living safely. Until we meet again, Ept.”

The rest of the smoke evaporated.

“You bested Yammoe,” said Logan, catching up with Autumn. He was wide eyed and shaking. “Yammoe!”

Autumn didn't answer. She just kept on walking.

“I cannot ... I do n ... oh Sploop!” said Logan, looking back then at Autumn again. “You did not even flinch!”

“I could not move,” said Autumn quietly then she gave a small snort. “I have never lied before. Never. Yet when I did my first lie was to

Yammoe Itself. My mind cannot comprehend this.”

“You did not lie,” said Logan. “You did come here to bring me back.” he stopped walking with a worried look on his face. “You did, did you not?”

“Yes, Logan,” said Autumn. “I did not lie about that.”

“Then what did you lie about?” he asked, relief spreading over his face.

“I said It did not frighten me,” said Autumn, stopping and turning to look at Logan. “That was a lie. I was so terrified I could not move.”

“But Yammoe!” cried Logan, unable to stand still. “You blew in Yammoe’s face! Ohhh that was incredible!”

Autumn blinked several times, her face white. “I do not know how I managed even that,” she said weakly. “Oh Vallume, I think I am going to faint.”

She lurched over to the nearest tree and sat down heavily, slouching forward with her head on her knees. Gently Logan lifted her by the shoulders so she was leaning back against the tree.

“Breathe deeply,” he said. “In, that’s it, now out, and in, good.”

“I am so cold,” said Autumn clasping her robe tightly around her, her eyes closed. “So desperately cold.”

“I cannot light a fire,” said Logan, “everything is too wet.”

“Gather some wood,” said Darius, coming up behind him. “I will light it.”

“But it is all sodden,” said Logan, holding up a dripping log to emphasise his point.

“Gather wood,” said Darius. “Autumn needs warmth until she has recovered from her ordeal.”

“If you say so,” said Logan and busied himself finding fallen branches. He piled them near Autumn on a patch of lichen covered rock.

“Stand clear,” said Darius and breathed on the wood. The small logs burst into flame.

“How did you do that?” cried Logan. “’Tis impossible for this wood to burn.”

“I am Ept,” said Darius. “Hearths and fires are my realm. Move her closer, but mind she does not get burnt.”

Logan knelt staring at Darius then shook his head and helped Autumn closer to the fire.

“Sleep,” she muttered and rolled over.

“Leave her,” said Darius. “She has done what no other human has ever done before and she is exhausted.”

“She will be well, though, will she not?” asked Logan anxiously.

“Aye,” said Darius. “And ’twill not take long. We will wait. I venture we will not be disturbed. Yammoe will see to that.”

Logan watched Autumn and slowly her face relaxed and she stopped shivering.

“What do you mean, she has done something no one has done before?” asked Logan, his eyes never leaving Autumn.

“She defied a deity,” said Darius, “and won.”

“That was the magic of the ribbon though, wasn’t it?” asked Logan.

“No, lad,” said Darius. “The ribbon protected her when Yammoe attacked but it was her strength of will that brought it about.”

They both sat silently for a while, watching Autumn sleep. The fire blazed, its warmth reinvigorating her.

“And all because of me,” whispered Logan softly. He reached forward and delicately smoothed the hood of Autumn's robe around her face.

* * *

“So is there anything in this place we can eat?” asked Logan when Autumn woke up.

“Not if you want to return to the Land of the Living,” said Darius. “Anything you eat here will bind you to this place.”

“But Autumn needs to eat,” said Logan. “She is still weak.”

“I am well,” said Autumn. “I am warm again and my blood is strong. Let us move on and return to our Land.”

“Gladly,” said Logan. “You are able to walk?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, standing up. “Come.”

They set off along the Path.

“Darius, you said something earlier,” said Autumn. “About setting me on the right path.”

“Yes,” said Darius.

“What did you mean?” she asked.

“Exactly that,” said Darius.

“Exactly what?” asked Autumn.

“You found me caged and helped me,” said Darius. “That set you on your path.”

“You speak in riddles,” said Autumn.

“Yes,” said Darius.

“I think he means that if you had not found him things would have happened differently,” said Logan.

“Obviously,” said Autumn, “but what I am asking is where that path leads and why.”

“It is best not to know your destiny,” said Darius.

“I wager it has something to do with Kizerain,” said Logan. “That was where we first met him.”

“True,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “And because of that encounter we became embroiled with Loheckle and the Roinad. Had I not released Darius at that market I wager none of them would know we existed. So how does this end, Darius?”

“There is no ending,” said Darius. “Lives end, lives begin, a never ending cycle.”

“He can be like this sometimes,” said Logan. “Unhelpful.”

“Grroww,” said Darius.

“No doubt all will become clear in time,” said Autumn. “The world is a stage and each must play a part.”

“What is a stage?” asked Logan.

“I know not,” said Autumn, “but it is a favourite saying of Noxu's. I think he meant that each of us has a task in life even though we may not know what it is.”

“He is a wise man,” said Darius.

“What be that?” asked Logan.

“You do not know what a wise man is?” asked Darius. “You will never become one if that is so.”

“No, I meant what is that, over there?” said Logan pointing.

“It is a pole with something hanging on it,” said Autumn. “Given where we are 'twould be best not to look too closely.”

“It looks very familiar,” said Logan as they got closer to the pole standing vertically in the mud beside the path. “I think that is your pack hanging from it.”

“That would be too much to ask for,” said Autumn. “My pack no doubt hangs in the home of one of the Roinad's men, if it has not been burnt.”

“Those look like our waterskins as well,” said Logan.

He ran up to the pole to investigate.

“Yes,” he said, lifting the waterskins and pack from the pole. “And I wager this is your staff too.”

“This is unbelievable,” said Autumn joining him and taking the pack. She opened it. “These are my things and here is the half cheese. How can this be?”

“I know not,” said Darius. “You should not be able to bring material things into this Land.”

He sniffed the pack suspiciously.

“Do you think the cheese will be safe to eat and the water to drink?” asked Logan.

“These things do not smell of this place,” said Darius. “Give me some cheese. If it is bad it will not harm me.”

Logan broke off a small piece and Darius ate it. He screwed up his face.

“I do not like cheese,” he said in disgust, “but it is not tainted. You may eat.”

“Me first,” said Logan as Autumn reached out for some cheese. “If it

turns out to be bad 'tis best it happens to me. I am already dead.”

He broke off some more cheese and chewed it then swallowed nervously.

“It tastes good,” he said. “And I feel nothing amiss. Am I changing into a soska or something?”

“You look the same as usual,” said Autumn. “And now I have my pack I can sew up the rent in your tunic. I have some thread left. I shall do it later when we stop to rest. Let us keep going and eat as we walk.”

She tapped her staff reflectively on a rock then walked on.

“I find this most perplexing,” she said after a few paces. She'd eaten some cheese and new life was filling her veins. “How does this pack and staff follow me from place to place?”

Logan paused in his chewing.

“You are serious?” he asked. “You are in the Land of the Undead, you have bested Yammoe, you walk beside Ept and you find your pack perplexing? That is the least of the mysteries that surround us.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “Perhaps you are right. How many names do you have. Darius?”

“As many as I want,” said Darius.

“A fair point,” said Autumn. “But why are you called Ept?”

“Why is anything called what is it called?” asked Darius. “Why are you Autumn?”

“I was found as a babe in the Autumn,” said Autumn. “That is why I am called so.”

“He is called Ept because he is Ept,” said Logan.

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn.

“He is Ept,” said Logan, putting the last remaining piece of cheese in Autumn’s pack.

“You mean it is not just a name?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Logan. “How do you think he lit a fire using sodden wood?”

“I did not think on that,” said Autumn. “I was asleep and woke to find the fire and thought no more about it. How did you light the fire?”

“He breathed on it,” said Logan and blew on his finger to demonstrate.

“But, ...” said Autumn then stopped walking. “Oh, you mean he is the Ept? The real Ept?”

“Hearths and all,” said Logan.

“But, ...” said Autumn then fell silent. “No ordinary cat,” she muttered. “Mayhap I should have stayed at the Esyup.”

“Indeed,” said Darius. “But think on what you would have missed had you done so.”

“It was peaceful there,” she said.

“And you seek peace?” asked Darius.

“With all my heart,” said Autumn.

“And that is why you left your Esyup,” said Darius. “You seek true peace for all and not just yourself.”

“You speak in riddles again, Darius,” said Autumn, “or should I call you Ept?”

“I like Darius,” said Darius. “It has a quality that Ept does not.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “How can I find peace for any other

than myself?"

"Only you can answer that," said Darius.

"You are right, Logan," said Autumn, resuming walking. "The pack is the least perplexing thing here."

She walked on a few more paces.

"So 'tis you who be making the pack follow me?" asked Autumn.

"It is not of my doing," said Darius. "I know not what lies behind it either. We are almost at the end of the Path. We must turn off and go into the swamp else we will return to the place where Logan died and where he will most likely die again."

"How far do we need to go?" asked Logan.

"Not far," said Darius. "Uli-Rratha is a big place and much goes on there that the guards do not know about but 'twould be best if we stay here for a time to let the clamour pass as well."

"Does night come to this place?" asked Autumn. "It has been this gloomy for all the time we have been here."

"There is a time that passes for night," said Darius, "and certain creatures do venture forth."

"Shall we spend the night here, then?" asked Logan, "or should we stay longer?"

"If we go back tomorrow to a different part of the City we should be unnoticed," said Darius.

"Then so it shall be," said Autumn. "Let us find a place and get some sleep. I am still weary."

They turned off the Path and ventured between the trees. The waterlogged ground sucked at their feet and the loathsome odours surrounded them.

“I shall not be able to sleep,” said Logan. “Even though you both are with me I am still most fearful. What if we are attacked by soskas again? They are creatures of the night.”

“We shall deal with them,” said Autumn. “And if needs must we run back to the city. At least the dangers there I am more used to.”

“Aye, and you need fear arrows no more,” said Logan. “But that causes me some difficulty. If we are shot at by a bowman I cannot stand before you or behind you for fear of being killed again.”

“Nor beside me,” said Autumn, “if their aim be not true. I venture 'twould be best if you avoid bowmen from now on.”

“And spear-men,” said Logan, “and swordsmen. Mayhap all men. Best I stay with the womenfolk.”

“Mayhap they can wound you most grievously in the heart,” said Autumn, “or so I hear.”

“Truly the Land of the Living is a dangerous place,” said Logan. “None get out alive.”

“Autumn did,” said Darius.

“Aye,” said Logan, “but she is special, is she not?”

“Rrrrrr,” agreed Darius.

* * *

“What about this place?” asked Autumn. “The swamp is close to the city so if we make camp by the edge we can easily run if we are attacked and there is a dry looking patch just over there.”

“As you wish,” said Darius.

“If we have a fire will we be seen from the city?” asked Logan, looking at the people going about their business in the twilight. He slipped off the two waterskins and put them on the ground.

“No, Logan,” said Darius. “The living cannot see into the Lands of the Dead and Undead.”

“Good,” said Logan. “I would hate to be attacked from there and have to run into the swamp for safety. Will we cross over tomorrow morning?”

“Yes,” said Darius, “but not here. We need to move on further.”

“Why not here?” asked Logan.

“Do you see that big building?” said Darius. “That is the Roinad’s palace. Cross over here and you may well be recognised.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “Then go further we shall. I shall collect some wood for the fire.”

Autumn put down her pack and laid her staff beside it then sat down.

“I am most weary,” she said. “It would be good if the night were uneventful.”

“I be sure it will be,” said Logan, returning with an armful of wood. “Darius, would you mind?”

“Stretch out here,” said Logan when the fire was burning. “You will be warmer.”

“Yoo hoo!” called a voice from the trees.

Autumn leapt to her feet, staff in hand.

“Hello dears,” said Mother Midcarn, bustling out. “Lovely to meet you again. Hello puss.”

She beamed happily.

“Mother Midcarn?” said Autumn, lifting her staff. “Be you real or be you an apparition?”

“Oh, I'm real,” said Mother Midcarn.

“Be you dead?” asked Logan.

“Oh my word no,” said Mother Midcarn. “I'm just visiting, like you. I'm only here for a moment, I need you to do something for me. Would you mind?”

“What do you want done?” asked Autumn. Logan moved over to stand beside Autumn.

“Only a trifle, my dears,” she said happily. “I just need you to step over here, that's all.”

She got down on her knees and made a folding motion with her arms then stayed there, as though she was holding something down.

“Why?” asked Autumn.

“You're too soon,” said Mother Midcarn.

“Too soon for what?” asked Autumn.

“I can't tell you that, dear,” said Mother Midcarn. “You'll just have to trust me.”

“Why should we trust you?” asked Logan. “This be a right strange place and it be full of things I know not what. You could be deceiving us.”

“Oh good, you found your pack and other things,” said Mother Midcarn. “I wasn't sure you would.”

“My pack?” said Autumn. “You mean it is you that has been making the pack follow me?”

“Well of course, dear,” said Mother Midcarn. “You surely don't expect a pack to move on its own, do you? I've been watching you through my Window and every time you leave your things behind I've collected them. Would you please step over here? I can't hold this for

much longer.”

“Hold what?” asked Logan.

“Come and see,” said Mother Midcarn, strain beginning to show on her face.

Autumn edged closer cautiously.

“I see nothing there,” she said.

Whatever Mother Midcarn was holding down jumped up and she forced it back down with an effort.

“Quickly dears,” she said, “I can't hold it much longer.”

Her face was beginning to go red and there were small beads of sweat on her forehead.

“What do you think?” asked Logan joining Autumn again.

“Tis most strange and perplexing,” said Autumn, puzzled. “Can we trust her?”

“You can trust Mother Midcarn,” said Darius going to stand beside the old woman. “Come, it is safe.”

Autumn and Logan looked at each other.

“Very well,” said Autumn, making a decision. She lowered her staff and went to stand beside Darius.

“I am having a very bad day,” said Logan. “If I am going to die again then please be to Aloidia, make it quick.”

He stepped over an almost imperceptible ripple in the air.

“Thank you dearies,” said Mother Midcarn. “Good fortune be with you!” and she disappeared.

The fire went out, plunging them into darkness.

Chapter Twenty Five

Plakill was low in the sky, its faint light giving the nearby city a pallor that the final rays of setting Astauand could not dispel. Behind them the gnarled gaunt trees seemed to crowd in. A bat fell from its hanging point on a high branch then swooped overhead before rising with a leathery flap of its wings. Something howled in the distance, a wavering despairing sound like a wolf that was not a wolf then abruptly ended.

“The fire has gone out,” said Logan in case the others hadn't noticed.

He looked towards the swamp and stepped backwards slightly when he saw three pale yellow eyes looking at him. They blinked then disappeared and something squelched in the mud.

“Sploop,” he muttered nervously.

“Where did she go?” asked Autumn, looking round, her staff held up defensively.

“I heard something go that way,” said Logan pointing to where the eyes had been, “but I do not think it was her. I will put some more wood on the fire.”

“I do not smell her anymore,” said Darius. “She is not in this place any longer.”

“What do you think her meaning?” asked Autumn. “Why did she want us to stand here and why are we too soon? Too soon for what?”

“I know not,” said Darius.

“But you are a deity,” said Autumn. “Do you not fathom what mortals cannot?”

“I understand hearths and fire,” said Darius, “and the worlds of cats and gods but what goes on in the mind of a mortal is beyond my grasp.”

“The fire is burnt out,” announced Logan, “and the ashes are cold. We will need you to light another, Darius.”

“Is Mother Midcarn mortal?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Darius. “She has powers but she is one of you.”

“And all the spare wood I collected has gone too,” said Logan. “I suppose I had best get some more.” He hesitated as though hoping Autumn or Darius would volunteer then started foraging along the edge of the swamp.

“Why would she be watching us?” asked Autumn. “Surely she has better things to do with her time?”

“Mayhap she has an interest in your doings,” said Darius.

“You think she knows of this path you say I am on?” asked Autumn.

“Darius,” called Logan, reappearing with an armful of wood. “Could you light these?”

“Mayhap,” said Darius. “Her gift of ribbon would seem to be serving you well.”

He padded wetly to where Logan had piled the branches and breathed on them.

“I will get some more wood,” said Logan. “It appears to burn quickly.”

“Why did the fire go out?” asked Autumn, coming over to where the new fire burned. “Fires do not go out suddenly, they fade and the embers glow for a time. You say the embers were cold? That is surpassing strange.”

“Mayhap the dampness here put it out,” said Logan.

“At the very moment Mother Midcarn left us?” said Autumn. “A most remarkable coincidence.”

“Do you think she put it out herself?” asked Logan. “What reason would she have?”

“I know not,” said Autumn. “Perhaps things will become clearer after some food, 'Tis a while since I ate last and food does fuel the mind. Did you leave any cheese?”

“I put what be left back in your pack,” said Logan. “I will get more wood for later.”

Autumn reached for her pack then stopped.

“Where is my pack?” she demanded. “I left it here, in the curve of this tree root.”

“It be over there,” said Logan pointing to another tree. “I will get it for you.”

He brought the pack over then went off to gather some more wood.

“I am certain I left it here,” said Autumn, looking puzzled. “I have no recollection of moving it. I put it here then sat down because I was very weary then jumped up when Mother Midcarn arrived. I did not stir otherwise.”

“I was not watching,” said Darius. “Mayhap Logan moved it.”

“I never touched it,” said Logan, returning with some more wood. He dropped it on the ground near the fire. “Maybe something else moved it while we were with Mother Midcarn. No matter. You get some rest now Autumn, while the fire burns and gives warmth. We have all night to wait.”

“Later, perhaps,” said Autumn absently, “I am no longer weary.”

She sat gazing into the fire for a few moments then suddenly stiffened.

“How strange,” she exclaimed looking at Logan then Darius. “I was greatly weary when we arrived but now I am not. I feel exceedingly

well rested. How can this be?”

“That is good,” said Logan. “I confess I was worried by your tiredness. I wager all you need is some food to set you to rights.”

“I have eaten little these two days past,” said Autumn, “save a sliver of cheese before we left the Path yet I am not hungry.”

“You should eat though,” said Logan. “There is still some cheese in the pack. You finish it.”

“We shall share it,” said Autumn. “It would be wrong of me to eat all the food that remains.”

She opened her pack and rummaged inside then frowned.

“There is no cheese in here,” she said.

“But I definitely put it back,” said Logan. “There was over half a half cheese in there. Look again.”

Autumn took each of the things in the pack out and laid them on her lap then turned the pack inside out.

“No cheese,” she said. “No matter, we will find food when we return to the city in the morning.”

She started to put the things back in the pack.

“My thread is gone as well,” she said, holding up a small spool. “I was certain I had enough to mend your tunic.”

“Mayhap it fell out,” said Logan.

“Then the spool would be gone as well,” said Autumn. “Look, the needle is still with it.”

She stared reflectively at the empty spool in her hand then replaced it in the pack and put the pack on the ground beside her.

“This is surpassing strange,” she said quietly looking into the fire.

She glanced over at Logan then leapt to her feet, grabbed the chest of his tunic and dragged him closer to the fire.

“What?” cried Logan in surprise, nearly losing his balance and falling into the fire.

“The rent on your tunic,” hissed Autumn. “It is repaired! Look.”

She pulled a fistful of cloth up and Logan teetered again but managed to keep his balance. He squinted down at the repair.

“Did you do that?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Logan pushing her hand down.

He held up the material to look at himself.

“A good job of sewing,” he said, “but not by me. Mayhap Yammoe did this, or Mother Midcarn.”

“Mother Midcarn,” said Autumn sitting down again. “A number of most strange things have occurred in the short time she was here. Hmmm.”

Slowly she crossed her legs and then sank into a reverie.

“I wonder,” she said a while later. “I wonder.”

“Hmm?” said Logan.

He had spent the time trying to ignore the eyes that came and went in the swamp and trying to stay calm. Darius' snoring had not helped.

“A fire that burns out,” said Autumn. “Food that goes missing and hunger that disappears. Weariness that has waned and a tear that is repaired. I venture there is water gone from the skins as well.”

“What are you thinking?” asked Logan.

“We were too soon,” said Autumn. “Mother Midcarn was most clear on that. We were too soon.”

“I hear your words,” said Logan, “but I do not follow your meaning.”

“Darius,” said Autumn, giving him a shake to wake him, “Darius.”

“Yes?” he asked, his golden eyes glowing like coals in the dark.

“Is it possible to move through time?” asked Autumn.

“Of course,” said Darius. “Everything moves through time, it is the way of things, to happen after other things.”

“Oh Aloidia,” said Logan, staring at Autumn with a sudden intensity.

“I mean to jump,” said Autumn. “To be at a certain time then jump to another.”

“If you have the skill anything is possible,” said Darius.

“Mother Midcarn has the skill!” gasped Logan. “Varaunik said so! Do you not remember? When we told him about Mother Midcarn’s house and how it was bigger inside than out?”

“And he said that she had been working on folding space and time,” said Autumn excitedly. “I am struggling to grasp this idea but I venture that we have moved to tomorrow.”

“That must have been what she was doing when she arrived,” said Logan. “She knelt down and did those things with her arms. Mayhap she was folding time somehow.”

“And we stepped across the fold!” said Autumn. “We stepped into tomorrow! That is why the fire went out. It was yesterday and was left unattended!”

“And we ate the cheese and rested and you repaired my tunic,” said Logan. “Ohhh, Aloidia! I venture even Yammoe can not do that.”

“But why would she do such a thing?” asked Autumn frowning. “Why would she steal a day from our lives?”

“I venture it was because we arrived here too soon,” said Darius, cocking his ears and looking towards the city.

“What was that noise?” asked Autumn. “It came from the city.”

“It sounded like a scream,” said Logan, getting up to look.

The scream repeated then faded into the night.

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “Something seems to be happening in the city. Why do you think we were too soon, Darius? And what for?”

“Mother Midcarn said we were too soon,” said Darius, “and if you are right we have been delayed for a day, mayhap longer. I also wager we are about to find out what we were too soon for. Look at the ground.”

“It is drying up,” said Autumn, looking down. She felt it with her hands then jumped up. “It is getting firm and clearing of these foul grasses and things. What is happening?”

“I think a Path is opening up,” said Darius. “Someone has died or is about to die. See? There is a gap widening between the trees and,” he swung his head to look the other way, “there is the beginnings of a Path coming from the city.”

“Do you see that shadow?” said Logan. “There is someone coming! Quick, we must get off this Path, it must be Yammoe come to get us again!”

“Yammoe does not need a Path,” said Darius, “but it would be well to get off this one else we get swept along someone else’s Path towards Yammoe and Zeeth and their destiny entangles us.”

Logan grabbed the waterskins and Autumn’s pack and followed Darius to the edge of the Path.

“Autumn,” he hissed, looking back. “Come on!”

Autumn was standing in the centre of the Path, her staff planted firmly on the ground.

“A moment,” she said staring along the Path. “That shape is familiar.”

“Come on, Autumn,” called Logan urgently. “Have you not faced enough troubles for one day?”

“This is a new day, Logan,” said Autumn, staring along the Path, “and I fancy this is not a trouble. This is a Path and a newly dead person is walking it. He or she may be in need of aid.”

“In need of eating us or worse,” said Logan, dropping the skins and pack on the ground. “Come on, get off the Path!”

He ran over to Autumn and grabbed her arm and tried to drag her away but she did not budge, merely planting her feet more firmly.

“Autumn, please,” pleaded Logan.

“Vallume!” said Autumn, ignoring him. “’Tis the Roinad!”

“You are jesting with me,” said Logan dropping Autumn’s arm. He peered at the shape limping slowly along the Path. “Oh Sploop, if she finds us here she will have us executed all over again!”

“She cannot,” said Darius coming over to join them. “A Roinad in the Land of the Living has no power here.”

“She may not be a Roinad anymore but she could be a soska or a gangsi,” said Logan.

“Mayhap,” said Darius, “but such things take time.”

“Greetings,” called Autumn as the shape got closer.

“Is that you, Hysleria?” came Obvia’s voice. “What manner of place is this?”

She staggered into the light of the fire holding her belly with both

hands.

“You look familiar,” she said. “Explain the meaning of this. Where is Hysleria? I cannot be expected to meet with peasants alone.”

“Hysleria is back in the palace,” said Autumn.

“You will address me as Highness,” snapped Obvia, “or I will have you suitably educated. Guards! Arrest this woman.”

She peered around wondering why no guards came rushing.

“There are no guards,” said Autumn. “You are dead.”

“Don't be absurd,” snapped Obvia. “I am the Roinad! How can I possibly be dead?”

“This is the Land of the Undead,” said Logan. “You are not in your palace any longer.”

Obvia stared haughtily at him then looked around then looked at Autumn and Darius. Finally she turned around and looked back at the palace at the end of the Path, torches moving as guards patrolled.

Slowly she turned back. “Dead?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“I remember you,” said Obvia, pointing at Autumn. “You are that traitor who died yesterday while trying to escape.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Although I am no traitor. Your trial was a travesty of justice.”

Obvia's eyes narrowed then she dropped her other hand from her belly.

“The pain has gone,” she said. “I am much relieved. Ahhh, now it comes back to me. I was eating dinner at a reception in my honour and I was overcome with stomach pains. I was carried to my

withdrawing room and the doctor was called but the pains got worse. I see it all now, that snake in the grass Hysleria must have arranged this poisoning. Oh how foolish I was to have got rid of my trusted and much beloved cook. That new one must have been an agent of Hysleria. That treacherous dog, purveyor of infamy and deceit. I should never have trusted him.”

“His time will come,” said Autumn. “Of that you can be certain.”

“I wager he manages to wriggle out of it,” sniffed Obvia. “He always does, the weasel. The Land of the Undead, you say? I should not be here. I should be in my rightful place beside Zeeth in the Land of the Dead. This place is beneath my contempt.”

“You need to pass through this place on the way to the Land of the Dead,” said Logan helpfully. “It is that way, through the swamps.”

“I am not going in that swamp,” said Obvia, the disgust evident on her face. “You boy, take that cat of yours and go fetch Zeeth. Bring It to me. There is much to discuss.”

She looked around again.

“And fetch me a chair,” she said. “I am not accustomed to standing and waiting. And get someone to clean up this mess on the ground. My slippers are ruined!”

“It does not work that way,” said Darius.

“Oh, the cat speaks, does it?” said Obvia. “A neat trick. Who trained it?”

“No one trained Darius to speak,” said Autumn. “I think you are under a misapprehension.”

“I fancy not,” said Obvia. “I have a perfect understanding of all things.”

“You are dead,” said Autumn. “You were assassinated by poison. Your life has ended and you are no longer in the Land of the Living. You

have no power here, no history. You are just another dead creature.”

“You are talking nonsense, child,” said Obvia. “I may be dead but I was the Roinad. What purpose is there in that if it does not continue into the afterlife?”

“Where are your servants?” asked Autumn. “Where are your riches? You are here with nothing.”

“And that is why Zeeth needs to come to me,” said Obvia. “It has much to arrange to make me welcome. Why are you still here, boy?”

“He is not your servant,” said Autumn. “He does not do your bidding.”

A mist started to form in the air.

“Odious child,” said Obvia. “Zeeth shall be told of this.”

“I fancy Zeeth already knows,” said Darius.

“Ohhh, the cat speaks again,” said Obvia sarcastically. “And how would you know? Friend of yours is It?”

“Yes,” said Darius. “Zeeth and I are well acquainted.”

The mist coalesced and two tendrils descended to the ground.

“I cannot believe I am talking to a circus act,” said Obvia. “Where is Zeeth? I demand his presence before me this instant!”

“Zeeth will be here in good time,” said Yammoe, growing two arm tendrils and rubbing their hands together happily. “Or bad time, it would be fairer to say, for you at least. I am Yammoe.”

An arm tendril snaked out and wove through Obvia's hair. She stared in horror at the blank, misty face. Slowly the tendril lifted and pulled Obvia off the ground.

“I've been looking forward to this for a long time,” whispered

Yammoe, Its voice full of loathing. “This is going to be tremendous fun.”

Obvia screamed and beat at the tendril with her hands but they passed through the smoke and Yammoe did not release Its grip. Another tendril snaked out and its tip gently stroked Obvia's cheek. Her skin split open and yellow-green pus started to ooze.

“No,” screamed Obvia, “you cannot do this!”

“This is my realm,” said Yammoe, “and Zeeth has already passed judgement. You are mine. Tell me, Obvia Vasagle, my dear, have you heard of soskas, gangsi, draugrs, ghouls, wraiths, liches?”

“They are but tales to frighten children,” stammered Obvia.

“Sooo,” said Yammoe, “mere tales are they?”

The tendril drifted down and softly wound itself around Obvia's hand. Patches of rot appeared and her fingernails came loose.

“They'll be telling tales about you, my sweet,” said Yammoe. “Long tales of terrible suffering, for I have fresh ideas for you. Tell me, do you like the name xuruain? I've dreamt up a whole new category of undead, just for you, torments the like of which no undead has even known before. I do so hope you like that name, for there is nothing else this side of eternity you are going to like, that I promise you.”

The tendril sank lower and one of Obvia's legs began to shrivel.

“I see you are still here, Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume,” said Yammoe, idly teasing a cockroach into Obvia's ear. Another tendril blocked the sound of her screams. “You will please leave my Land. You make this a better place and that is intolerable.”

Chapter Twenty Six

“Do you remember when I escaped from Loheckle's men?” asked Logan as they walked towards the city, staying well away from Obvia's Path.

“In more detail than I would like,” said Autumn.

“Ah,” said Logan. “Well, umm, when the guards took me away, and one of them fell to the ground?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, “I heard them saying he had been hit over the head.”

“It was not me,” said Logan. “I did not hit him.”

“If my memory serves,” said Autumn, “you said you saw a dark shape slip away in the darkness after that deed.”

“Yes,” said Logan. “Sploop!”

He tripped over a black tussock in the darkness and fell heavily.

“I am unhurt,” he said, picking himself up then limped forward. “My knee is a little sore, nothing more.” He bent to rub it then took another couple of steps. “Ahh, 'tis easing. Yes, that dark shape. Do you think that might have been Mother Midcarn as well?”

“That is a notion, Logan,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “’Twas not as though we had any other friends there and Mother Midcarn would seem to be able to move freely. If she can move a pack then she can move a club. Remember to ask her next time we meet.”

“You think we will meet her again?” asked Logan.

“She does appear to take a strong interest in us,” said Autumn, “and I venture folding time is no matter to be undertaken lightly.”

“An interest in you at any rate,” said Logan. “I am just your companion in this.”

“Not so,” said Autumn. “If that were the case then Mother Midcarn could have untied me from Loheckle’s bed directly. Felling the guard was to save you, not me. How is your knee?”

“It has eased,” said Logan. “These road stones jar somewhat, although they be better than that mud back there.”

“We are at the edge,” said Darius. “You see where that dwelling looses its weeds? From there is the Land of the Living.”

He stopped walking and Autumn and Logan stopped as well.

“Are you not coming with us?” asked Autumn.

“You have no more need of me,” said Darius. “We have brought Logan back from the Land of the Undead. My home is beckoning.”

“We can take you back to Neander,” said Autumn.

“There is no need,” said Darius. “I can cross over from here and in far less time. I shall bid you farewell. Remember my name if you have need of me again.”

“We thank you,” said Autumn.

She put the palms of her hands together in front of her face and bowed to Darius. Self-consciously Logan did the same then Autumn reached over and stroked Darius’ head.

“Would that there were some way for you to call us if we can ever be of service to you,” she said. “But I fear I know not how.”

“The sentiment is greatly appreciated, friend Autumn,” said Darius, “and you, friend Logan. I have no doubt we shall meet again. Farewell.”

He turned and loped off back towards the swampland and was swallowed in the gloom, the silver line down his back the last to

vanish.⁶

“I do not like the sound of that,” said Logan as they turned back to face the city. “I pray that if we meet him again it will not be under dire circumstances.”

“Perhaps our travels will take us back to Neander one day,” said Autumn. “’Twould be folly to go through life assuming the worst.”

“Aye, you are right,” said Logan as they stepped into the Land of the Living. “There seems to be a fair number of people in the street. Are cities always this busy after dark?”

* * *

People were appearing in every doorway and small groups were gathering in the road. Up ahead a knot of people burst into loud cheering then quickly stopped.

“Your pardon,” said Autumn to a man running past who paused, a wild look on his face. “Pray, what be the commotion?”

“The city is under attack!” he said urgently, “They have killed the Roinad and will destroy us all! Flee if you value your life!”

“Who is attacking?” asked Logan as the man turned away.

“Giant locusts!” he cried and ran off.

“Giant locusts?” said Autumn baffled. “The Roinad was killed by poison not a locust.”

“Mayhap she ate a poisoned locust,” said Logan, “although I expect she would have mentioned that. A moment, lady.”

6 There is an interesting reference in the Onaman mythology to a disappearing cat which leaves only its smile behind (see Grantly et al, *The Mythology of Aferraron*, Oxbridge Classical Press, 2017 p653) which may be supposed to be a reference to the silver line on Ept's back. The parallels to our own tales of The Cheshire Cat, popularised by Lewis Carroll in his *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* of 1865 but first referenced in 1788 by Francis Grose in his *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, are irresistible but untenable.

A woman was talking agitatedly with another woman and Logan tapped her on the shoulder. The woman screamed and jumped then tittered in embarrassment when she saw Logan.

“What is happening?” he asked.

“There be a great sickness in the city,” she said. “Roinad and all the Opsablepsia be dying of a plague as we speak. Aye and Hysleria himself, I’m hearing.”

“So it is not an attack by giant locusts?” asked Autumn.

“Giant locusts?” The woman’s eyes went wide in panic and she started to chew a knuckle of her hand. “D’you hear that, Unnor? We be under attack by giant locusts!”

“I must get back to my children,” shrieked Unnor, “I don’t want them being eaten by giant locusts!” She ran off up the road, pushing people aside in her haste.

“Giant locusts?” cried a man nearby. “That be false news, by Surogou. Nay we be under attack by the Dohi! I been a-warning of it these five summers past and now it be happening. You mark my words, we all be slaves afore Astauand be awake again or be murdered in our beds.” He smiled, happy that his grim warnings had finally come true.

A handbell sounded further along the road and people stopped milling and talking to look.

‘Dang-dang,’ went the bell, ‘dang-dang’.

“Gather you round, gentle folk,” called the man. “Gather you round for I have news, gather you round.”

‘Dang-dang,’ went the bell again, ‘dang-dang’, as people gathered to hear the news.

The man continued ringing his bell until he judged the gathering to be large enough. Autumn and Logan stood at the edge of the group.

“What be the news? called out someone.

“I be telling you,” said the man loudly, “listen and learn for you need to repent your sins! The end of the world is nigh! Morath Itself has come to war on all you idolaters and fornicators! Mor'upita-sehen is sending forth such a storm of brimstone and ash as will bury all sinners and Lulerrain will gush forth a great cleansing of water such as has never been seen before! A great fire and flood will engulf us all! Repent your sins now and you will be saved!”

“Oh get out of here,” shouted a burly man. “All you Fervids be poked and crazed in the head!”

“Listen to me,” said the man wagging his finger. “The time to repent is at hand!”

“Yes, you listen to him,” shouted another man, “he be saying the truth of it!”

“Don't you be talking that shit with me, Thagr,” shouted back the burly man. “You be only interested in putting up the prices for your buckets. Ain't gonna be no flood and if there be then it be putting out the fire and brimstone!”

“You are the biggest sinner in this city!” shouted back Thagr angrily, “I be giving away buckets to them what has the paraks to buy redemption!”

“I ain't no sinner, you scumbag,” shouted back the burly man and lashed out with his fist. The gathering descended into a brawl and Autumn and Logan quickly walked away.

“There seems to be a lot of confusion,” said Autumn, “although for certain the Roinad is dead. I venture we should find somewhere for the night and wait for the confusion to die down.”

“Why not just move on?” asked Logan. “There is no reason for us to stay in this city. Let us continue heading North.”

“I warrant we are not yet done with this place,” said Autumn,

stepping aside as two men came running along the road to join the brawl. “Mother Midcarn said we were too soon and I wager she did not just want us to witness the Roinad following her Path. There is something going to happen that she expects us to be involved with.”

“Oh I do hope not,” said Logan. “I have had a bellyful of adventures. I would like best to be back in the peace of the countryside.”

“As would I,” said Autumn. “It is not possible to think and know one's own self in a place such as this. It is all confusion and parak chasing. Look at this place! There is nowhere we can just stop and bide the night. There are people everywhere and no quiet spots.”

“Let us explore up here,” said Logan, pointing to a dark quiet lane. “Seems peaceful along here.”

“I have no better suggestion, Logan,” said Autumn so they turned the corner.

“If we are to be involved in something,” said Logan thoughtfully, “I venture it is somehow related to the Roinad's death. Mother Midcarn took us to that time.”

“Yes,” said Autumn, “but what would the Roinad's death have to do with us?”

“I know not,” said Logan. “What is this place? I hear horses inside.”

“Mayhap it be a stable,” said Autumn, “although it seems a mighty big place for a horse or two.”

She rattled the handle of a large gate but it would not open.

“Perhaps it is barred on the other side,” said Logan. “Let us look around the side, there may be another way in. I am thinking a stable would be a good place to stay the night. People do not often ride horses after dark so we should not be disturbed until the dawn or later.”

“A good idea,” said Autumn. “Let us explore down here.”

She led the way down a narrow alley beside the building.

“This door too is barred,” said Logan, testing a small door. He looked up. “Ahhh, good fortune,” he said. “Look, the roof is made of straw or some such. Give me a leg-up.”

Autumn cupped her hands and Logan used her as a ladder to reach the roof.

“Tis not well made,” he said, feeling around. “The bundles are ill fitting. I can squeeze in here.”

He scrabbled for a few moments then hauled himself up and into the roof. There was a long pause then the door opened.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” said Logan.

“I thank you, kind sir,” said Autumn and went inside.

She stood in the darkness and listened as horses chewed and stamped and snorted around her.

“There be a lot of horses in here,” she said.

“Aye and too many people,” said a strange voice, hoarse from the travails of time.

Autumn instantly went into a crouch, her head and arms facing the direction of the voice.

“Who be you and what be you doing here?” demanded the voice.

“I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume,” said Autumn, remaining poised, “and my companion be Logan. We are travellers and seek nothing more than a peaceful place to spend the night.”

“You be horse thieves, I warrant,” said the voice.

“On my honour, we are not,” said Autumn, creeping forward

stealthily. "If nothing else neither of us can ride a horse."

"Doesn't stop you selling them though, does it," said the voice.

There was the sound of a flint being struck then a torch flared. Several horses neighed in alarm. An old man came forward, carrying a rusty sword in one hand and the torch in the other. He pointed the sword at Autumn.

"You do not answer me," he said. "Mayhap I have the right of it."

"We have no need of money," said Autumn. "We are simple travellers heading North. There is some commotion in the city and we seek only peace and quiet. We mean you no harm."

"Hmm," said the old man, scratching under his beard and nearly setting light to it. "You be a Krisana, you say?"

"Yes," said Autumn.

"Then take my sword off me," said the man, waving it at her aggressively.

Autumn took the sword then handed it back to him and he chortled in delight.

"Oh, that was most impressive," he said. "I haven't seen the likes of you for nigh on sixty summers or more. You be a Krisana all right. You are welcome to stay the night here for I venture I could not stop you if you had a mind to press your case."

"That is not so," said Autumn. "If you say go then we go. We mean you no harm."

"Stay," he said. "'Tis a lonely old place and I be a lonely old man. Horses be nice enough but their company drags after thirty summers or more. There be fairly fresh hay all around so sleep where you like, only avoid old Blinders at the end there or my pile back here. She has a bit of a temper and don't like company much and I be too old for those sorts of games."

“You are most generous,” said Autumn. “May we know your name?”

“I be known as Old Hobson,” said Old Hobson. “A commotion you say? What form of commotion? Be it another fire?”

“No, there is no fire that we know of,” said Autumn. “The Roinad be dead.”

“Oh that is good tidings,” said Old Hobson, looking relieved. “This be a place of wood and straw and thoughts of a fire keep me awake at night. Roinads come and go and bother me not.”

He looked at Autumn steadily then turned his gaze on Logan.

“Be you hungry?” he asked. “I have some porridge to spare if you would like some. 'Tis only a day or two old and made with the best oats, same as the horses have.”

“That is most generous of you,” said Autumn. “What say you, Logan?”

“I thank you, Old Hobson,” said Logan. “A good porridge is a dish fit for Ept.”

“Then come into my room,” said Old Hobson, “and sit with me for a while.

He led them to a small room at the back of the stable. It had only a single chair and a narrow cot but a fire burned in the hearth. Old Hobson hung a small cauldron on a metal rod and swivelled it over the fire.

“Porridge be heating quick enough,” he said. “Sit you down , sit you down.”

Autumn sat on the floor as Old Hobson sat in the chair. Logan sat on the cot.

“So, the Roinad is dead,” said Hobson ruminatively. “Be that Wyyven ap Nagul Spey?”

“No, the one who just died was Obvia Vasagle,” said Autumn.

“Ah, yes,” said Old Hobson. “I seem to remember old Wyyven were bested now you mention it. Obvia Vasagle, yes, I've heard that name. So she be dead now?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “She were poisoned.”

“Indeed?” said Old Hobson. “That is unusual. When did this poisoning happen?”

“This very evening,” said Autumn. “I fancy the news is still spreading.”

“No wonder you say there is commotion,” said Old Hobson. “The folk round here be very excitable. They're probably saying there is a plague of bats from the realm of Yammoe or some such nonsense. Pah.”

“Giant locusts,” said Logan, “or the Dohi from the land of Wase.”

Old Hobson chortled then got up and stuck his finger in the cauldron.

“Seems warm enough,” he said sucking his finger. “I don't have no spare bowls though.”

“I have a bowl and spoon,” said Autumn, “in my pack.”

“That be right handy,” said Old Hobson as she got the bowl out. “You use my bowl lad and I'll eat from the cauldron.”

He ladled out two bowlfuls of porridge and left the cauldron hanging from its swivel beside him.

“Aye,” he said. “I've seen seven or eight Roinad come and go in my time. Don't remember as how any was poisoned though. Usually they gets killed in battle although what's his name was executed, ohh, thirty or thirty five summers past. There'll be some fun tomorrow.”

“This is most excellent porridge,” said Logan. “What is your secret?”

“A little bit of horse piss,” said Old Hobson. “Gives it that salty flavour.”

Autumn looked down at her bowl then over at Logan. Logan put his bowl on the cot beside him.

“Only jesting,” chortled Old Hobson. “Tis ordinary salt, pure and simple. I wouldn't waste good horse piss on porridge.”

“What do you use it for then?” asked Autumn, sniffing her bowl suspiciously.

“I sells it to the tanners and the dyers,” said Old Hobson. “Tanners use the piss to soften the leather, makes it supple, see, and the dyers use it to make their colours brighter.”

“There is much I do not know of life,” said Autumn, taking a mouthful. It tasted like any other porridge so she swallowed it. “This is why I travel. To learn and understand. Why will there be fun tomorrow?”

“Eh?” said Old Hobson. “Ohh, with the Roinad dead there'll be a Mundulgen. That always gets the crowds excited.”

“What's a Mundulgen?” asked Logan.

“You don't know what a Mundulgen is?” said Old Hobson, squinting at him in the flickering light of the fire. “Where you be from?”

“I am from Biasdo,” said Logan. “It is a tiny village, far to the West.”

“Can't say as I've ever heard of it,” said Old Hobson. “You from there too, Krisana?”

“I am from a little to the East of there,” said Autumn. “I have heard the word Mundulgen before but I not know the meaning of it.”

“You young folk,” said Old Hobson, shaking his head in disgust. “A Mundulgen is when them as wants to be Roinad fight it out in the Dulgenadr and winner gets the job.”

“What's a Dulgenadr?” asked Logan.

“It's where the Mundulgen happens,” said Old Hobson helpfully.

“Is it in the Palace?” asked Autumn.

“Nay, lass, it be a big field the other side of the city,” said Old Hobson. “Can't have a decent fight in the Palace.”

“So Obvia Vasagle fought in a Mundulgen and won?” asked Autumn looking puzzled. “That's how she became Roinad?”

“Aye,” said Old Hobson. “I don't rightly remember that one but she wouldn't have done the fighting herself, mind. Them as wants to be Roinad usually has an Apiakun what does the fighting for them.”

“You mean like an army?” asked Logan, resuming eating now that Autumn had finished hers and hadn't thrown up.

“You don't know nothing, do you, lad,” said Old Hobson. “The Apiakun is a fighter who fight on whoever's behalf.”

“You mean like a champion?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Old Hobson. “Them as wants to be Roinad sends an Apiakun to the Mundulgen and they fights it out. The one what wins gets to be Roinad. Simple, really.”

“So this will be happening tomorrow?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Old Hobson. “Can't let things go too long without a Roinad, people needs being fleeced so they can't waste too long leaving them alone,” and he cackled gleefully. “Still, the city folk like it. They gets to cheer on whoever they like and boo who they don't.”

“Sounds like fun,” said Autumn. “Sadly we will be moving on so we will not be able to watch.”

“'Tis a shame,” said Old Hobson. “Them Apiakun be the best fighters in the land. I would expect you, being a Krisana and all, would

appreciate their skills.”

“I do not like fighting,” said Autumn. “I avoid it whenever I can.”

“Tis wise,” said Old Hobson, nodding. “No matter how good you be there always be someone who is better.” He started to pick pieces of porridge off his beard.

“Obvia Vasagle?” he said suddenly, pausing in his grooming. “Obvia Vasagle? I remember her now. Yes, she had that special Apiakun. Vicious brute he was, best damned fighter I ever did see though. He made short work of the other three and no one else dared go up against him. Bugged if I can remember his name though. No matter. He's probably dead now, that kind don't usually live to old age. Either of you want some more porridge? No? Well, I'll be going off to bed. I'm an old man and I need my sleep. You two bed yourselves down out in the stable but mind old Blinders. She's got a kick like a thunderclap.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” said Autumn standing up. “You are a kind and decent man.”

“That you are,” said Logan, standing up as well. “The porridge was right nice after I got over your fun.”

“Don't take no mind of me,” said Old Hobson. “I say daft things sometimes just for mischief.”

He climbed into his cot and almost disappeared in the straw piled on it.

“Come on Logan,” said Autumn. “We best sleep as well.”

“Ohh,” said Old Hobson, “it be coming back to me. That there Apiakun of Vasagle's. His name be Kizerly Qerinsa or something like that. Damn me if he wasn't a fiend, though.”

“Kizerain Qerrassa?” said Autumn, freezing on her way to the stable.

“Aye, that's the bugger,” said Old Hobson. “Know him, do you?”

Chapter Twenty Seven

“What are you doing?” asked Autumn in the darkness. There was a lot of rustling going on in the straw.

“Moving,” said Logan irritably.

The rustling stopped then started again a little further away.

“Were you not comfortable?” asked Autumn.

“That misbegotten horse kept nibbling my face,” said Logan.

A horse nickered softly as if trying to find him. Another answered then there was a chorus of quiet whinnies and rustlings as the horses moved around. Old Blinder kicked the wall angrily and another snorted in alarm and stomped on the ground a few times. Autumn could sense their large bodies moving around and rolled a little closer into the corner.

“What now?” asked Autumn a few heartbeats later as Logan whacked the straw.

“I think there's a mouse in the straw with me,” said Logan. “Something just run up my tunic.”

“Do you want my blanket to wrap yourself in?” asked Autumn.

“Sploop,” said Logan crossly and whacked the straw a few more times.

“No,” he said. “I got it.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “Mayhap we can sleep now.”

She shut her eyes and started a slow, rhythmic chant in her head that helped her go to sleep on those rare occasions when sleep was not forthcoming. 'Sa .. ta .. na .. ma .. sa .. ta .. na .. ma ..', down a tone then another then up then up again to begin the repeat. She felt her heart slow even further to match the rhythm and her mind quietened. Something warm and slightly wet nuzzled her foot then pulled some

straw from underneath it. Her leg twitched and she re-focused on her chant then slowly the darkness thickened and she felt her mind start to slide into sleep.

“Are you asleep?” whispered Logan.

“Yes,” whispered Autumn.

“Oh,” said Logan. “Sorry.”

“What is it?” asked Autumn, wide awake again.

“Nothing,” said Logan.

“Go to sleep, Logan” said Autumn.

She scratched a straw prickles on the side of her neck then started her silent chant again.

“Do you really want to go to the Mundulgen tomorrow?” whispered Logan.

There was a whack in the straw again.

“Another mouse?” asked Autumn, sighing.

“Why are they all over here?” grumbled Logan.

“Mayhap you be where the oats are,” said Autumn.

There was a lot of rustling again then a sharp “oof” then a prolonged “arhhh” and what sounded like hopping.

“What is it?” asked Autumn, opening her eyes in the darkness.

“I was moving to another place,” said Logan, “and walked into one of those blasted horses then it stood on my foot. I think my toe is bleeding.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. “Badly?”

“Oh wonderful,” said Logan.

“What now?” asked Autumn.

“It was not blood,” said Logan. “The horse pissed on my foot.”

“Do not tell Old Hobson or he be wanting to give you some more porridge,” said Autumn, snuggling back into the straw.

There was more rustling then a hand landed heavily on Autumn's head.

“That be my head,” said Autumn.

“Oh, sorry,” said Logan.

He felt around a little to find out which way Autumn was lying then settled himself in the straw just beyond her head.

“That is better,” he said.

“I am glad to hear it,” said Autumn.

The straw around Autumn's head started to shake and move.

“Now what?” she asked.

“I am drying my foot,” said Logan.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. She wriggled her body further away.

“Sa .. ta .. na ..” she started again in her head.

“There are no mice here,” said Logan, lying down.

“That is nice,” said Autumn.

The long dark tunnel of sleep beckoned invitingly.

“Did you know you made a joke just now?” said Logan.

“How so?” asked Autumn, the tunnel of sleep disappearing.

“When you said about Old Hobson making some more porridge,” said Logan. “That was funny.”

“Oh,” said Autumn. She thought about it. “I was being serious.”

“Twas still funny,” said Logan, yawning.

“Explain it to me in the morning,” said Autumn. “Sleep well.”

“Sa .. ta .. na .. ma .. sa .. ta .. na ..” she started again.

“The Mundulgen,” said Logan.

“What of it?” asked Autumn, sleepily.

“Why do you want to go?” asked Logan.

“To experience more of life's wonders,” said Autumn, very patiently. “It will add another thread to the tapestry of our lives. Go to sleep.”

“Oh,” said Logan.

He lay there quietly then vigorously scratched his buttock.

“So it be nothing to do with Kizerain Qerrassa then?” he asked.

“Tis just a thought I have,” said Autumn. “Nothing more.”

“Only he was the Apiakun of the Roinad,” said Logan, “and then he was working for Loheckle and they wanted you to help fight the Roinad.”

“Ah,” said Autumn, abandoning any attempt to sleep. “So you made that connection as well?”

“Well, with Loheckle dead, mayhap Kizerain will be thinking about the Roinadship for himself,” said Logan. “I was wondering if that was why you wanted to go.”

“I confess to being curious,” said Autumn. “If Old Hobson be right about his skill then if Kizerain is at the Mundulgen on his own account likely he will win.”

“And you want to see him win?” asked Logan.

“I am reluctant to pass judgement on the destiny of others,” said Autumn, “but I do not think this land will be a better place with Kizerain as the Roinad.”

“So you want to see him lose?” asked Logan.

“I simply want to see,” said Autumn. “He will win or lose with me there or otherwise. I am curious, nothing more.”

“But we will head North afterwards?” asked Logan. “You be not planning on staying here longer?”

“I have not the skill to predict the future, Logan,” said Autumn, “but my plan is to head North. I do not know this city well but I am already certain this is not my place. I would move on as soon as possible.”

“But you want to stay for the Mundulgen?” asked Logan.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I believe this Mundulgen be what Mother Midcarn wanted us to see although her reason I do not yet fathom. Mayhap you have a thought on that score?”

Logan didn't answer for his breathing had become slow and even. Autumn lay there in the darkness, wide awake, her chanting forgotten.

“Why do you do this, Mother Midcarn?” she wondered. “Do you direct this path I am on or do you merely aid it? And where does it lead?”

* * *

“Old Hobson said to follow the crowds,” said Logan, “and this be where they are but there is nothing happening.”

They were standing in a large clearing not far from the Roinad's Palace beside a cord tied between two poles. Other poles and cords marked out an area of the clearing. On the far side was woodland and behind them were large brick buildings, several tall enough to have two floors. A vast throng of people ebbed and flowed, all waiting for something but none went inside the corded area. A few enterprising city folk had set up fire pits and were selling slices of roast meats, the carcasses being turned on spits by small children, sweaty and half roasted themselves. An old woman was hawking boiled eggs and a few others offered bread or ale.

"There be a strange feel to this place," said Autumn, keeping a tight grip on her staff. "A curious mix of excitement and foreboding."

"There be more people here than I know how to count," said Logan. "I have counted to fifty several times over and still not counted but a small number."

"That fault lies with me," said Autumn watching the people milling around. "We have worked on your reading so you are now skilled but I have neglected your counting. When we move on from here I will remedy that. The people here must number a thousand or more."

"What is a thousand?" asked Logan. "Be that more than fifty?"

"Far more," said Autumn, "as you can see from those here."

"I am puzzled by something else," said Logan. "Behind us are good solid dwellings made of brick but yonder are small dwellings that look most insubstantial. They flap in the breeze. Why would people live in such dwellings when there are better nearby?"

"I know not," said Autumn. "This city be crammed with oddities."

"They be officials' tents," said a man standing next to Autumn. "They were put up this morning ready." He crammed another lump of some dripping meat into his mouth and chewed vigorously.

"Put up?" said Autumn.

“Aye,” said the man, “and they’ll take ’em down as soon as new Roinad be decided.”

“Why would they be taken down again?” asked Autumn. “Why not leave them here?”

“So theys can be put up someplace else,” said the man, looking puzzled. “What else be tents for?”

“I know not,” said Autumn. “I am a stranger here.”

“Ehh up,” said the man, pointing with a piece of meat. “Something’s about to happen. Look.”

A man in tight trousers with a loose shirt and a cloak had come out of one of the tents and put a long tube to his mouth. It made a loud noise three times. The people stopped milling and pressed together, not venturing inside the corded area.

Two men emerged from behind a tent carrying a wooden box which they laid on the ground in front of the tents then they scurried away. The crowd fell silent and the man beside Autumn put the last of his meat in his mouth and wiped his fingers on his tunic. Gradually the noise levels rose as nothing else was happening.

Some more men emerged from behind the tents carrying chairs which they arranged on both sides of the box. The crowd fell silent but nothing else happened so they resumed their talking. Several people wandered off to buy more food.

The trumpeter reappeared and blew three times more. A number of men and women, richly dressed, appeared from the tents and slowly made their way to the chairs. They sat, talking unconcernedly amongst themselves. A tall slim man emerged from the centre tent and climbed on top of the box.

“That be Hysleria,” said Autumn, nudging Logan who’d been watching a girl a little further away.

“You be strangers here yet you know Hysleria?” said the man next to

Autumn.

“We met him a few days ago,” said Autumn.

The man gave her a hard, suspicious look then backed away a little. He could go no further because of the people behind.

“Hear me,” said Hysleria loudly, his voice carrying clear in the morning air. “Hear me.”

He stared with affected indifference at the crowd, waiting for silence. It was not long coming.

“Our much beloved Roinad, Obvia Vasagle, has died,” he said. “All of Aferraron mourns her passing.”

A cheer went up and Hysleria scowled at the crowd. He turned and said something to one of the men seated beside him who laughed. Hysleria waited for the crowd to settle again.

“In accordance with our laws and customs,” he continued, “Kizerain Qerrassa has declared culpability and claims the right of Mundulgen.”

He paused to let the boos die down.

“I call on Kizerain Qerrassa to show himself and lay down the challenge,” shouted Hysleria.

Kizerain flung open the flap of the furthest tent and strode out. He was bare chested and thick with muscle. His black beard bristled and he carried a long, heavy sword and a spear. He made his way to the cord and someone lifted it to let him stoop under. He stalked into the centre of the arena and stood there. Slowly he rotated, searching the crowd with his eyes.

“I claim the right of Mundulgen,” he roared, holding the sword and spear high above his head. “If there be challengers, let them come forth.”

The crowd was silent. No one moved.

“If you be Apiakun declare in whose name you challenge?” said Hysleria.

“I claim in my own name,” said Kizerain. “I, Kizerain Qerrassa, do bring this challenge.”

Again Kizerain rotated, glaring at everyone.

“There are no challengers,” called Hysleria. “In accordance with the law and custom, Kizerain Qerrassa, you must issue your challenge thrice. If there be no challengers by the third issuance, your claim to Roinad will be upheld.”

Kizerain thrust his sword into the ground then his spear. He turned his back on Hysleria and threw his head back.

“Arrrrggghhhhhhhhhhhhh,” he roared, the muscles on his arms taut and bunched as he raised them to the sky.

The people in the crowd in front of him jerked backwards.

“For the second time,” he roared, “I claim the right of Mundulgen. If there be challengers, let them come forth.”

“Go piss yourself” shouted someone from the crowd and there was widespread laughter.

“Buggers be too scared,” said the man next to Autumn and spat on the ground. “Looks like that shit be Roinad, Yammoe help us.”

“On the second issuance,” shouted Hysleria, “there be no challengers.”

Kizerain stalked up to the men and women in the chairs and looked at each of them in turn. Several of the men turned away. Kizerain spat then stalked to the centre of the arena again. Jeers and boos filled the air and Kizerain glared at the crowd. Someone threw a lump of meat and it splatted off Kizerain's chest, the juices running down.

“For the third and last time,” he roared, “I claim the right of Mundulgen. If there be challengers, let them come forth or forever be

condemned as cowards.”

There was a sudden shower of eggs and rotten fruit as the crowd vented its disapproval.

“I challenge!” floated across the clearing and the crowd fell silent as people craned to see who had issued the challenge.

Kizerain turned and scanned those seated in front of the tents.

“Who issues a challenge?” called Hysleria. “Identify yourself.”

“Looks like there's going to be a fight,” said Logan, turning to Autumn. “Oh Sploop! Noooooo!”

Autumn was ducking under the cord and Logan grabbed her robe.

“Do not do this!” he hissed. “I beg of you.”

“It is my destiny,” said Autumn, pulling her robe free from his grasp. “I shall return in a few minutes.”

She strode out into the centre of the arena to gasps from the crowd.

“I know you,” said Hysleria. “You're dead!”

“We meet again, Autumn Savannah,” said Kizerain. “I knew some day we would.”

“I am not dead, Hysleria,” said Autumn in a clear strong voice. “As you can see for yourself.”

“I am not certain of the legality of this,” said Hysleria.

“The law says that if there be a challenger then it be decided in the Dulgenadr,” called one of the seated men. “It be saying nothing about whether or not you think the challenger be dead or alive, Hysleria.”

“Oh very well,” said Hysleria looking decidedly annoyed. “Do you accept this challenge Kizerain?”

“I do,” said Kizerain.

“Challenger,” said Hysleria, “identify yourself.”

“I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume,” said Autumn proudly.

“And in whose name do you challenge?” demanded Hysleria. “Your own or another's?”

“I challenge in the name of humanity,” said Autumn, her voice rising clear over the hushed assembly.

A cheer went up from the crowd.

“I pray this is not happening,” said Logan shutting his eyes.

“This is most irregular,” said Hysleria turning to the seated watchers.

“Tis not against the law,” said the seated man. “The maid has declared in whose name she challenges as the law requires.”

“Very well, My Lord Justice,” said Hysleria.

He turned back to the crowd. “The challenge is declared valid. Master of the Time!”

“Piers Sakratar,” said a man stepping forward.

“Set the sand running,” said Hysleria.

The man stepped over to a sand timer on a small table and turned it over.

“Kizerain Qerrassa, Autumn Savannah,” said Hysleria, “when the sands of time run out the challenge will commence and will end with the death or capitulation of one of you. It is so ordained.”

Loud talking erupted from the crowd as they discussed this exciting development and two women came from one of the tents to rub oil on

Kizerain's body while he stood, silently watching Autumn. Autumn did not spare him a glance. Instead she walked calmly to where Logan stood.

"Please do not do this," he pleaded. "Look at that bastard, he be massive! He will rip you to pieces."

"He may be big and strong," said Autumn, "but that means he will be slow. I have speed on my side. Hold this for me."

She held out her staff and Logan took it.

"No, do not take off your robe," said Logan aghast. "He has got a sword and a spear, he will run your through!"

"And I have my staff," said Autumn. "Twould not be a fair fight if I wear my robe with the ribbon."

"But he will kill you," said Logan, almost in tears with frustration.

"If he kills me then he kills me," said Autumn calmly. "But to be unjust in the name of what is just would be a falsehood and diminishes that which is just."

"You be playing word games, Autumn," said Logan. "What about me? What do I do when this is all over? Hey?"

"You make your way to where Hysleria is," said Autumn, handing Logan her robe and taking her staff. "When this is over I fancy there will be legal issues and I need your mind to aid in resolving them, Logan Philosopher. Bring your stone, there will be need of it."

"What do you mean?" asked Logan.

"Think on it during the challenge," said Autumn, "but do not tarry. I wager this will not take long."

She turned and walked to the centre of the arena and turned to face Kizerain.

“I wish you good fortune, Kizerain Qerrassa,” she said bowing.

“I should have killed you in Sladrill,” said Kizerain, pushing the women away.

“You now have the opportunity to make up for that lapse,” said Autumn.

Kizerain smiled.

“Indeed,” he said. “How would you prefer to die? By the sword or the spear?”

“I would prefer not to die,” said Autumn. “I have already been to the Land of the Undead and I did not like it there.”

“Hah,” said Kizerain and spat.

“Was it you or Hysleria who had the Roinad poisoned?” asked Autumn.

“Who says she were poisoned?” asked Kizerain.

“She told me it was her new cook,” said Autumn. “But no matter. I fancy the sands are almost run out. You should get your weapons else this will not be a fair fight.”

Kizerain looked at her in bemusement then pulled his sword and spear from the ground.

“You irritate me with all your buzzing like a mosquito,” he growled. “But I fancy you have no sting. Prepare to die, gnat.”

Autumn smiled.

“Time,” called the Master of the Time.

Chapter Twenty Eight

“Time,” called Hysleria.

Kizerain instantly swung his sword at Autumn's neck and she spun round to avoid it and kicked Kizerain on the side of his head. He growled and shook his head then thrust with his spear at her belly. Autumn bent double around it then straightened and brought her staff down quickly on his shoulder. Kizerain grimaced then lunged again with his sword. Autumn grabbed his wrist and dropped to the ground pulling him down then pushed upwards with her foot so he somersaulted. Winded, Kizerain lay on his back for a moment then jumped to his feet as Autumn backed away.

“Arghh,” he cried and charged at her with the spear. Autumn ran backwards three steps then planted her staff and climbed it, balancing at its top as he charged helplessly past then fell down behind him and swung it round to hit him hard on the back of the head. He went sprawling on the ground.

“Au-tumn, Au-tumn,” the crowd started to chant, quietly at first then getting steadily louder.

“She did it, she did it,” shouted Logan excitedly to the man beside him.

“Bastard ain't dead yet,” growled the man, watching the fight intently.

“No, the monkey climb!” said Logan beaming. “She has never managed to do that before!”

“Oh shut up,” said the man. “Look, that bastard's getting up. He'll kill her for sure now.”

“Au-tumn, Au-tumn,” chanted the crowd.

Kizerain climbed to his feet and shook his head as Autumn circled him. Angrily he hurled the spear at her and she twisted to let it past. Suddenly Kizerain thrust his sword into the ground and stepped backwards and stood upright.

“Now what's he doing?” said Logan.

“He's realised this isn't going to be an easy victory,” said another man. “I've seen him fight before. Now he's going to start thinking.”

Kizerain stood there silently while Autumn watched him. He lifted one hand and brought it down the centre of his body as if to realign himself and visibly calmed. Autumn bent and put her staff neatly on the ground.

“Oh, now what's she doing?” said Logan worriedly. “I can't watch. Oh Sploop, I can't watch,” and he put one hand over his eyes.

“So you be a Krisana, then?” said Autumn.

“No, but I've had the training,” said Kizerain.

He whirled and lashed out with a foot and Autumn caught it with her hand and pulled him off balance while doing a scissor kick to his gut. Instantly Kizerain let forth a flurry of blurred chopping movements with his hands and Autumn crashed to the ground.

“Get up, girl, get up,” shouted the man and Logan peeked from under his hand.

“Au-tumn, Au-tumn” howled the crowd, “Au-tumn!”

Kizerain aimed a kick at Autumn's face as she was half up from the ground and she twisted on both arms and landed both feet in his face. He went sprawling then rolled and climbed to his feet. Autumn did a twirling squat and kicked his feet out from under him then, as he fell again, she jumped on top of him, a knee on his chest and a foot on his throat. Kizerain threw her off and she rolled then came upright, twirling to kick him again as he got to a knee. Blood started to flow from his nose. Grimly he wiped his nose with the back of his hand and they started to circle each other.

“Au-tumn, Au-tumn,” cried the crowd. Several of the seated men were now on the edges of their seats watching intently.

Suddenly Autumn launched a flurry of blows to Kizerain's head, chopping and jabbing then she jumped back and kicked, catching him in the throat. He sank to his knees, clutching his neck and gasping. Another kick to the side of his head and he sprawled unconscious on the ground.

Instantly Autumn jumped back but he did not move. The crowd went silent.

With infinite caution, Autumn approached him and rolled him over with her foot.

“Be he dead?” called Hysleria.

Autumn bent down and lifted one of Kizerain's eyelids then felt his wrist.

“No,” she called back. “he be unconscious.”

“Then kill him,” said Hysleria.

“No,” said Autumn. “That I will not do.”

“Then you capitulate?” demanded Hysleria.

“No, I do not capitulate,” said Autumn.

“Death or capitulation,” said Hysleria, “that be the law.”

“Then we wait until he wakes,” said Autumn. “Either he will capitulate or the fight continues.”

Kizerain groaned and tried to get up but collapsed again.

“So be it,” said Hysleria. “We wait.”

The crowd groaned and Logan started to shake in an agony of anxiety.

Kizerain struggled to his feet and stood there, his arms hanging

limply.

“Do you capitulate?” asked Autumn.

He shook his head and she twirled a kick to his chest and again he went down. She squatted on his chest as he lay there and took a firm grip of his beard.

“I will never kill you, Kizerain,” she said. “It is against my beliefs but I will beat you down every time you stand up. The choice is yours. Do you capitulate?”

“Get off me,” he rasped hoarsely and Autumn stood up.

Kizerain tried to stand but fell again.

“Help me to my feet,” he said, holding out a hand to Autumn.

She grasped him under his arm and helped him rise. He leant heavily on her as he faced Hysleria.

“I capitulate,” he said and spat blood on the ground.

The crowd went wild and Logan sagged with relief. The man beside him grabbed him and kissed him.

“She did it, she did it!” he shouted. “I always knew she would!”

Logan wiped his mouth as several others slapped him on the back and cheered.

“Oh Sploop, I should be over there,” he cried and grabbed Autumn’s pack and robe. “Make way, make way.”

He tried to struggle through the crowd behind him but they were too densely packed so he turned and ducked under the cord and ran across the arena to Autumn and engulfed her in a bear hug.

“You won, you won,” he shouted.

“Indeed,” said Autumn calmly. “Would you get my staff?”

Autumn put on her robe while Logan retrieved her staff. Two men were helping Kizerain back to the tent.

“I know you as well,” said Hysleria, coming over to join them. “Moran, is it not?”

“Logan,” said Logan.

“Ah, yes,” said Hysleria. “Give me your hand, and you Autumn Savannah. I need to proclaim you victor.”

He held up Autumn's hand to show the crowd the official victor of the contest and, after a moment's hesitation, Logan's.

“Autumn Savannah!” he shouted, “and her companion Logan!”

The crowd cheered repeatedly as Hysleria repeated the process three more times, so all parts of the crowd could see.

“Please join me in my tent,” he said quietly. “We have a small legal matter to discuss.”

He dropped their hands and, waving to the crowd, led them to his tent.

“Some refreshments?” he asked, gesturing towards some chairs.

“Some water, please,” said Autumn. “That was dry work.”

“And supremely well done,” said Hysleria smoothly, pouring some water into a goblet for her. Another man came into the tent. “Ahh, My Lord Justice. Welcome. Autumn, this is Lord Wogegenden, senior legal advisor to the Roinad.”

“Greetings,” said Autumn sitting down. “I believe there is a legal problem?”

“And Logan,” said Hysleria.

Logan nodded to Wogegenden and sat down as well. Wogegenden pulled over a chair and sat and Hysleria passed him a goblet of wine.

“There may be an issue,” said Wogegenden, “but there may not be. Do you intend to claim the Roinadship?”

“No,” said Autumn.

“Why not?” said Logan in surprise. “You won, didn't you?”

“I do not have the skills,” said Autumn. “To be a good ruler you must make decisions that affect everyone and oft times some will benefit while others will suffer. I cannot impose suffering on others so I will be unable to make such decisions.”

“They're only peasants,” said Wogegenden. “If your decisions always benefit the upper classes then your conscience will be at ease.”

“No,” said Autumn. “I cannot do that for all are equal in my eyes.”

“Extraordinary,” muttered Wogegenden. “I have never met such an attitude in all my life before.”

“You are firm in this decision?” asked Hysleria.

“Absolutely,” said Autumn.

“Then we have a problem, Wogegenden,” said Hysleria.

“Indeed, Hysleria,” said Wogegenden. “As the victorious Apiakun, your sponsor should therefore be the Roinad but, unfortunately ...”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan, suddenly understanding. “Autumn was Apiakun in the name of humanity.”

“Quite,” said Hysleria. “How can we make all humanity the Roinad?”

“There is no provision in the law for this, Hysleria,” said Wogegenden. “We will have to modify the law in case this situation arises again but for the moment we need a solution, and one that is acceptable to the

crowd. We don't want a riot on our hands."

"I may have a solution," said Logan hesitantly.

"What is that, Logan Philosopher?" asked Autumn. She had not drunk any of the water.

"Umm, well obviously you can't have all of humanity being the Roinad," said Logan, looking nervously from Autumn to Hysleria to Wogegenden.

"Obviously," said Wogegenden, brusquely.

"So why not have someone who represents humanity?" said Logan. "Someone chosen by the people rather than by fighting?"

"That's an absurd idea," said Wogegenden.

"I wouldn't rush into dismissing the idea," said Hysleria, eyeing Logan. "It does have some merit, if only as a temporary measure. Such a person would appease the masses and once in place steps could be taken to amend the law so the situation does not arise again. Thus it need only be a temporary thing."

"If you say so, Piers Sakratar," said Wogegenden. "I remain unconvinced but needs must as they say. Does this not present us with another problem, however?"

"Who this chosen person will be?" said Hysleria. "I fancy not. I rather think the crowd has already chosen."

"But she has already declined," said Wogegenden.

"Not Autumn," said Hysleria. "Him. The crowd loved him too."

"Me?" said Logan in blank astonishment. "Me? You mean me? As Roinad? Oh Sploop!"

"A philosopher Roinad," said Autumn, smiling. "I think you be doing a wonderful job, Logan."

Soon after dawn Autumn left Old Hobson's stable where she had spent the night and made her way out of the city, heading for Ethosien. She was not recognised by any of the few who were about and made good time.

Astauand was well past midday when she stopped to rest and drink some water at the top of a hill. A small procession of people caught up with her and greeted her as they drew level.

"Greetings," said Autumn in reply. "Where are you going? I venture it is a place of some significance by your attitudes."

"Indeed it is," said the woman leading the procession. "I am Esven Frear, priestess of Voqev."

"I am Autumn Savannah," said Autumn. "As I recall there is a place near here with connection to Voqev."

"Voqev's Anvil," said Esven. "Tis yonder, past the next brow."

"I have seen it," said Autumn. "I came this way some days past. A companion on that journey told me that Voqev used the Anvil to make the heart of Obvia Vasagle and in doing so broke it. I do not know the truth of it, however. Mayhap you, a priestess of Voqev, can enlighten me?"

"It is the truth," said Esven. "My mother was priestess before me and was at the Anvil the day it broke and attests that Obvia Vasagle was born that day."

"Tis good to know the truth," said Autumn. "Do you go there now, you and your companions?"

"We do," said Esven. "You have heard that Obvia Vasagle has died?"

"I have heard this," said Autumn. "I am fresh come from Uli-Rratha and was there when the new Roinad was confirmed."

“Then you know she died some two days past?” asked Esven.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“Here be the proof of Voqev’s benevolence,” said Esven. “For at the moment of Obvia Vasagle’s death the Anvil did rejoin itself. The stones are whole again.”

“Be that truth?” asked Autumn. “’Tis a wondrous tale if true.”

“It be truth,” said Esven. “Come, join us on our pilgrimage and witness for yourself the truth of it.”

“I thank you,” said Autumn, getting up. “I am honoured to be included in your numbers.”

* * *

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn Savannah, causing a slight flickering of her eyelids. The dawn chorus of birdsong filled the cool, dawn air. A gentle breeze, redolent of distant rain, disarrayed some strands of her hair. A mosquito whined discordantly, provoking not a twitch. She sat, cross-legged, on an outcrop of rock, the woods before her and Voqev’s Anvil behind.

A twig snapped behind her then a leaf rustled. Autumn did not stir. She knew that smell well.

“Greetings Logan,” she said.

“Hello, Autumn,” said Logan running over to her. “I nearly did not see you behind that great stone.”

Autumn opened her eyes.

“You look well,” she said. “Your new tunic fits better than the last. Being Roinad sits well with you?”

“I’m not the Roinad anymore,” said Logan apologetically.

“You were challenged so soon?” asked Autumn frowning. “Mayhap I should have stayed a while longer.”

“No,” said Logan, sitting down beside her. “I, umm, I ran away.”

Autumn turned to stare at him.

“You ran away?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Logan smiling with some embarrassment. “Umm, I jumped out of a window last night and climbed down a wall. I have been looking for you.”

“No doubt Hysleria will be pleased,” said Autumn. “No matter. Why, pray, did you leave?”

Logan plucked a blade of grass and started to tear it into little pieces.

“It was not my place,” he said, not looking at her.

“Ahh, I can understand that,” said Autumn. “Once you realise that somewhere is not your place you cannot stay, I can attest to that. Have you eaten?”

“I have done nothing but eat since you left,” said Logan. “That seems to be the main task of a Roinad. I fancied I would not be able to catch you for many days for the weight of my belly dragging on the ground.”

“I have some bread and cheese for when you recover your appetite,” said Autumn, “but your belly does not seem larger than before. So are we travellers passing in the dawn or companions again, each looking for our place?”

“We are companions,” said Logan, “if that sits well with you, Autumn. You see, I know my place.”

“Then you are indeed a fortunate man,” said Autumn. “Where is your place?”

“At your side,” said Logan smiling shyly.

Autumn stood and picked up her pack and staff.

“That sits well with me, Logan Companion,” she said happily. “Let us head North and to fresh adventures.”

Glossary

{Pronunciations given in brackets}

Aferraron {af-er-ra-re-on}: The country of the Onaman people.

Alerrawia {al-er-re-aw-ee-ah}: The aide of Glanan ap Dadr, Sheriff of Ethosien.

Aloidia {al-oy-di-ah}: The deity of harvests and good fortune.

Apiakun {ap-ayah-ku-ne}: The personal representative of a contender at a Mundulgen. A champion and skilled fighter.

Astauand {ast-ah-you-an-de}: The sun and the deity of the sun.

Atorn {ah-to-ar-ne}: One of a group of prisoners escorted by a detachment of Lord Loheckle's men following their raid on Chorenn.

Autumn Savannah: Found at the age of one or two years by an unidentified member of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup, Autumn was raised and educated in a mixture of martial arts and philosophical enquiry. At the age of approximately twenty two, unable to answer to her own satisfaction the question “what is your place?” posed by her mentor Noxu, Autumn chose to leave the Esyup and The Annals of Autumn Savannah follow her subsequent travels.

The Annals provide no clues as to the identity of Autumn's biological parents, the name they gave her at birth nor any clues as to her abandonment. A thorough search of the records of the Esyup finds only the entry “a babe was found and granted refuge and Autumn Savannah was the name given”. Confusingly the entry is undated and there is no mention of any other persons found, dead or alive, nor any property, although the latter is unsurprising given the Esyup's stance on material possessions. There is no mention in the Esyup's records of any subsequent enquiries about a missing child nor is there any record of a missing child in the public records. From this it would seem reasonable to conclude that Autumn was of middle to low birth.

Besaine {be-sa-in-eh}: A horse trader in Kaloolon with an unsavoury reputation.

Besl-oor {be-ss-loor}: A large city with a population of approx. 5000 people.

Bethes {be-et-he-se}: The baby of Tutadi and Drearen; rescued by

Autumn after a raid by Lord Loheckle's men on an isolated farmstead.

Biasdo {bye-as-do}: A village with a population of approx. 30 people. Logan's birthplace.

Brisane {be-ri-sa-ne}: A novice at Autumn's Esyup who was killed in a rockfall.

Bumola {be-um-ol-ah}: A farmer who let Logan live in his cowshed after Logan's parents were killed.

Caradace {ka-ra-da-ke}: A leafy plant with broad oval shaped leaves. The leaves have mild anti-septic properties and are often used for bandaging.

Chaahk {ka-ah-ke}: The deity of rain and wind.

Cheilith {ke-eye-li-thay}: A hamlet with a population of approx. 15 people. Cheilith is home to exiles from the nearby town of Gleard who have mental issues and who cannot be cared for within the community.

Chershoe {kay-er-sho-ee-ey}: The deity of ways, paths and roads.

Chesture {ke-hes-too-rej}: One of the men killed by during a raid by Lord Loheckle's men on an isolated farmstead.

Chevesic {ke-ev-es-ik}: A forest near Kaloolon in which Autumn, Logan and Darius encounter a soska.

Chorenn {ke-or-en-ne}: A town with a population of approx. 900 people that was raided by Lord Loheckle's men.

Darius {da-ry-os}: One of a species of wild cat native to the Land of Neander. Broadly similar to Earth's Central Asian Lynx or Siberian Lynx but with a black and silver colouring and are mid-way between a domestic cat and a lion in size. Darius is also the personification of the deity Ept.

Didiza {de-id-is-ah}: A friend of Autumn's at the Esyup, noted for her independent and original thinking.

Drearen {de-re-ar-en-ne}: Almost era'owen of Tutadi and killed by Lord Loheckle's men in a raid on an isolated farmstead.

Dulgenadr {du-lg-en-ad-dr}: The public arena in which the Mundulgen takes place. This is a sacred site not far from the Roinad's

Palace in Uli-Rratha.

Ept {ep-te}: The deity of hearths and fire.

Era'ow {era-ow}: A formal pair bonding limited primarily to the upper classes. The lower classes paired in an informal 'almost era-ow', what we would call a 'common-law marriage'.

Era'owen {era-ow-en}: Spouse in a formal era-ow. A de facto spouse is known as an 'almost era-owen'.

Esven Frear {es-ve-en frey-ar-re}: A priestess of Voqev.

Esyup {es-you-pe}: A school or commune dedicated to one, or occasionally two, deities. Esyups have a specific focus in addition to their religious and philosophical regimen, such as medicine or martial arts.

Ethosien {et-ho-si-en-ne}: A town with a population of approx. 350 people. The town where Autumn and Logan are arrested and held, pending transfer to Uli-Rratha for trial by the Roinad.

Feandra {fe-an-der-ah}: The deity of fertility.

Ferir'ama {fey-rir-am-ah}: A town with a population of approx. 350 people, raided by Lord Loheckle and stripped of assets, food and prisoners.

Flerrian {fl-er-ri-an-ne}: One of the guards who transported Autumn and Logan from Ethosien to Uli-Rratha for trial.

Gangsi {ga-ng-si}: An animated corpse in the Land of the Undead that feeds on living flesh.

Gazen {ga-ze-ne}: The Summen in charge of the guards at the prison in Uli-Rratha where Autumn and Logan were held pending execution.

Gesog {ge-so-ge}: One of the three men who raid an isolated farmstead, killing the menfolk and attempting to rape the womenfolk before Autumn intervenes.

Glanan ap Dadr {gl-an-an ap da-drey}: Sheriff of Ethosien.

Gleard {gle-ar-de}: A town with a population of approx. 450 people.

Grath {g-ra-they}: One of a detachment of Lord Loheckle's men escorting a batch of prisoners who are defeated by Autumn and their prisoners released.

Halouny {ha-lo-oo-ni}: An honorific denoting learning, similar to Professor or Maestro

Hamamielis {ha-ma-me-el-is}: A tree that produces small yellow-green petals, similar to Witch Hazel. The petals have antiseptic properties.

Headatist {he-ad-at-is-te}: One of the women rescued by Autumn following a raid on an isolated farmstead by Lord Loheckle's men.

Hysleria {hi-sley-ray-ay}: Piers Sakratar to the Roinad and effective 'power behind the throne'.

Janne {ya-ne-ney}: One of a detachment of Lord Loheckle's men escorting a batch of prisoners who are defeated by Autumn and their prisoners released.

K'ath {ka-they}: A guard at the prison in Uli-Rratha.

Kaloolon {ka-lo-oh-lo-ne}: A fishing town with a population of approx. 3500 people.

Karoi {ka-ro-ai}: The monarch of Neander.

Kezit {ke-si-te}: A guard at Lord Loheckle's camp.

Kiraric {ki-ra-ri-ke}: A river that flows through the Chevesic Forest and joins the Sea of Looncan at Kaloolon.

Kizerain Qerrassa {kis-er-ay-neh che-re-ra-es-sa}: The apiakun of Lord Loheckle and one time apiakun of Obvia Vasagle. Kizerain is a highly renowned professional fighter with martial arts training. A mercenary. It is unclear from The Annals whether Kizerain had long term ambitions on the Roinadship or was merely opportunistic when Lord Loheckle's rebellion ended with his death.

Krisana {kre-is-an-h}: A graduate of an Esyup. Broadly equivalent to a priest but with a strong worldly philosophical overtone, rather than purely religious.

Lady Dijana {di-ja-na}: The spokesperson for the Witnesses at the trial of Autumn and Logan. It is a curiosity of the Onaman legal system that trials were closed to the public but were witnessed by five officials whose duty was to certify to the public that justice and fairness prevailed. It is unclear whether this process applied to all trials or only those presided over by the Roinad or what liability the Witnesses had in the event of a miscarriage of justice.

Logan {lo-ga-ne}: Autumn's travelling companion. Orphaned at the age of ten or eleven, Logan was left to fend for himself although a local farmer allowed him to live in a cowshed. Inevitably Logan stole to survive and was exiled from Biasdo around the age of sixteen, presumably having been caught stealing once too often.

Loheckle natal Chant'ist ab Heck-noor {lo-he-kley na-ta-le ka-anti-st ab hey-keno-oor}: A warlord from the Central West who lead a rebellion against the Roinad.

Looncan Sea {lo-oh-ne-ca-ne}: The sea between Aferraron and Neander.

Looplab {lo-op-la-be}: The deity of mountains.

Lord Wogegenden {wo-geg-en-de-ne}: The Chief Justice to the Roinad.

Lulerein {loo-ler-aye-en}: The deity of water.

Ma Rennet {ma re-ne-ne-te}: A cheese maker in Parede. Note that 'Ma' is a merely name and has no connection with motherhood.

Mimusia {mi-mu-si-ah}: Varaunik's cleaning lady. One can assume that she has another role in Varaunik's life as it is clear from the Annals that Varaunik uses magic to do his cleaning.

Mizule {mi-zu-le}: The deity of men and warriors generally.

Mizzen {mi-ze-zen-eh}: The daughter of Pugwash, the fisherman.

Mor'upita-sehen {mor-up-it-ase-ne}: The deity of volcanoes.

Morath {mo-ra-th}: The deity of war.

Mother Midcarn {as in English}: A sorcerer of uncommon ability.

Mundulgen {mu-un-dol-ge-en}: The process of deciding the Roinad through one or more personal combats between contenders or their champions.

Naja'yak {na-jay-a-ke}: A term referring to the tribe of Lord Loheckle and also his army.

Neander {ne-an-de-re}: The land on the far side of the Sea of Looncan

Noxu {no-zu}: Autumn's mentor at her Esyup. It is unclear from The Annals whether Noxu found the abandoned infant and named her or became her mentor at some later point. What is clear, however, is that

Noxu was the closest person to a father that Autumn had.

Obvia Vasagle {ob-vie-ah va-sa-gley}: The Roinad.

Old Hobson {ole-de ho-be-so-ne}: The owner of a stable in Uli-Rratha.

Oohoi {ooo-hoy}: The Roinad before Obvia, assassinated by Hysleria on her behalf

Opsablepsia {op-sa-ble-ep-si-ay}: Parliament, or, more realistically, 'rest-among-equals' (ie those who aren't the first). Depending on the context, the Opsablepsia may include or exclude the Roinad.

Parak {pa-ra-ke}: The unit of currency.

Parede {pa-re-de}: A town with a population of approx. 1700 people. Autumn was captured by Kizerain in this town and taken to Lord Loheckle.

Perica {pe-ri-ca}: Chief Tax Collector.

Piers Sakratar {pi-er-se -sa-cra-ta-re}: First Secretary, Chief Advisor and Commander in Chief to the Roinad.

Pirend {pi-re-ned}: A town with a population of approx. 250 people. The town where Autumn rescued Darius from captivity and first encountered Kizerain Qerrassa.

Plakill {pla-ki-ell-le}: The larger of the two moons and the deity of 'The Big Moon'.

Plifal {ple-ye-fa-el}: The smaller of the two moons and the deity of 'The Small Moon'.

Pugwash {pug-wa-she}: The fisherman who takes Autumn, Logan and Darius to Neander in exchange for two horses. Pugwash is questioned by Hysleria's agents but his fate is never revealed.

Raingel {ra-in-ge-le}: A seller of live animals at Pirend market and from whom Autumn rescues Darius.

Renk {renk}: A guard at Lord Loheckle's camp.

Replitz {re-pl-it-se}: One of the three men who raid an isolated farmstead, killing the menfolk and attempting to rape the womenfolk before Autumn intervenes.

Roinad {ro-in-ad}: The monarch of Aferraron although conceptually more a 'first among equals' with the Opsablepsia being the 'rest

among equals'. This role is attained through prowess in the Mundulgen and not by divine right. It is not limited to men.

Rumple {re-um-play}: Clerk to the Court of the Roinad.

Seiliu {sey-il-i-ooh} The deity of cowsheds and Logan's personal god.

Sire Galon Vens ab Toogrit {Ga-le-on-ne ve-ne-se ab to-og-ri-te}: The representative of the Roinad sent to bring Autumn to the Roinad. A victim of the Chevesic soska.

Skizze {ski-zee-ez-eh}: A mountain range in Neander.

Sladrill {sl-ad-ri-el-le}: A village with a population of approx. 50 people that was razed by Lord Loheckle's men.

Slanne {sl-an-ne}: A guard at the prison in Uli-Rratha.

Soros {so-ros}: Karoi (monarch) of Neander

Soska {so-ska}: An evil creature from the Land of the Undead that preys on humans by sucking their souls out through their mouths. The victim becomes a soska in turn. Autumn and Logan are the only people whose survival from a soska attack is documented.

Sploop {speh-lo-op-pe}: The deity of misfortune.

Summen {su-me-meh-ne}: A military rank, broadly equivalent to a Corporal.

Surogou {su-ro-go-oo}: The deity of hunting.

Tamash {ta-ma-se-he}: the prospective partner of Mizzen.

Thagr {the-ag-re}: A bucket seller in Uli-Rratha.

Tutadi {tu-ta-di}: One of the women rescued by Autumn following a raid on an isolated farmstead by Lord Loheckle's men.

Uli-Rratha {ul-ir-re-at-ha} The capital and largest city of Aferraron with a population of approx. 12,000 people. It is home to the Roinad and members of the Opsablepsia.

Ulnik {ul-ni-ke}: A guard at the prison in Uli-Rratha.

Unnor {un-no-re}: A passing woman in Uli-Rratha.

Vallume {va-elle-oom-ey}: The deity of women.

Varaunik {va-ra-un-ik-ay}: A sorcerer and alchemist in Kaloolon.

Vogev {vee-chou-ev}: The deity of evil things.

Vray {vra-eh}: One of a detachment of Lord Loheckle's men escorting a batch of prisoners who are defeated by Autumn and their prisoners released. Vray sustains a broken leg in the fight which is set by Autumn.

Vulf {vulf}: One of the three men who raid an isolated farmstead, killing the menfolk and attempting to rape the womenfolk before Autumn intervenes. Vulf is killed by Darius.

Wase {wa-se}: The land of the Dohi, far to the East of Aferraron.

Wohif {wo-hi-fe}: The chief or headman of the town of Parede.

Wyvven ap Nagul Spey {wy-ve-ven-ne ap na-gu-le spey}: the Roinad before Oohoi.

Xuruain {zu-ru-eye-ne}: A new form of undead created by Yammoe specifically for Obvia Vasagle.

Yammoe {ya-me-me-we}: The deity of the undead and ruler of the Land of the Undead.

Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esysup {yay-in-ee-da-de ru mo-ra-th-kay ni fe-and-ra-kay-ke es-you-pe}: The school where Autumn Savannah spent her formative years. Specifically, the School for the Worshipful Discovery of the Essence of Morath and Feandra, the deities of war and fertility. Intriguingly, it seems from The Annals that Autumn is highly skilled in martial arts yet surprisingly ignorant of matters pertaining to fertility.

Ynnis {yin-ni-se}: Summen of a detachment of Lord Loheckle's men escorting a batch of prisoners who are defeated by Autumn and their prisoners released.

Zanan {za-na-ne}: One of a detachment of Lord Loheckle's men escorting a batch of prisoners who are defeated by Autumn and their prisoners released.

Zeeth {ze-et-huh}: The deity of the dead and ruler of the Land of the Dead. Zeeth sits in judgement on all who pass through the Land of the Undead and grants entry to the Land of the Dead only to those who are worthy.