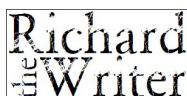


Lietapis Vosienskaj Savany

The Annals Of
Autumn Savannah

a new translation

Richard Jefferis



Self-published in Australia by Richard Jefferis,
aka Richard The Writer.

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› Cacviorty Kazka ‹

~ The Fourth Tale ~

Chapter One

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Ikamnadorahabandra and he swore. His head was thick and hurting and the swearing was lacklustre and faint-hearted. Despite his best efforts his sleep had been short and filled with dreams, memories resurfacing and distorting. His skin felt cold and clammy despite the oppressiveness of the air and his mouth tasted like the inside of a dead badger. Another day had dawned and, like the last, it promised to be pointless and fruitless.

Ikam opened his eyes and groaned and swore again. He would have got up if he had a good reason but he couldn't think of one so he just lay still, the already hot sun beating down. He glanced over and Joski wasn't there. He grunted, unsurprised. Joski preferred to sleep inside the hut these days, despite the lack of cooling night breezes.

“Storm's long overdue,” he thought to himself. “Chaahk be a useless old bugger.”

He swore softly again, more out of habit than any conviction. He got slowly to his feet and unsteadily made his way to the waterskin that hung from the roof where it was shaded and caught whatever breezes ventured along. It was tepid but it went some way to making his mouth more palatable. He splashed some over his face and head and left the drops to dry on their own. His scalp felt rough and he stuck his head through one of the openings in the wall to tell Joski it was time she shaved his head again but she was asleep. Laying on her back with just a thin cloth across her hips.

“She be looking old,” he thought. “Wonder when that happened?” then he shrugged his shoulders. He was probably looking even older. He glanced down at the loose wrinkled skin of his leg and grimaced. Not that long ago it had been strong and well muscled but he'd lost a lot of weight quickly and it was only slowly coming back. He leaned against the wall, just watching her.

Her eyes unexpectedly opened and, did he imagine it or not? He fancied there was a tiny flicker of wariness, perhaps even fear, before she twisted her face into a welcoming smile then a look of concern.

“Did you not sleep well?” she asked.

“Nay,” he said gruffly.

“Bad dreams again?” she asked sitting up.

“Aye,” he said, perhaps even more gruffly.

“I’ll make you a calhouny,” she said, pulling up the top of the cloth so it covered her chest. “There still be a few nuts left.”

“Oh aye,” said Ikam disinterestedly. He turned away and walked a few steps to the tree where he usually sat when he had nothing to do. In truth he often sat there when he did have things to do but couldn’t raise the desire to actually do them.

Joski came out a few minutes later with two clay pots in her hand. She stood in the doorway for a few moments just watching him then walked over.

“Here you are,” she said, standing over him with one pot held out a little way in front of her.

He took it with an almost furtive glance then resumed his gaze over the bay.

“Going to be a storm soon, right enough,” she said. “Air be thick and heavy.”

“Aye,” said Ikam with an unenthusiastic nod.

“Going out fishing today?” she asked, squatting down and looking at him.

“Mayhap,” he said, his eyes locked on the blue water.

“We need some fish to sell,” she said quietly. “We need a few things.”

“Oh aye,” said Ikam, sipping his calhouny.

Joski sighed. He had good days and bad days and this was clearly going to be one of his bad days.

"I wish you would tell me about it," she said quietly.

"Ain't nothing to tell," he said brusquely. "I were away for a while now I be back. That be all there is to it."

"If only that were true," she thought to herself, "something happened and left those scars but you can't make someone talk when they don't be wanting to."

She reached out tentatively to touch his arm then pulled her hand back. He wore his pain and loneliness like prickly spines and oft-times those spines stabbed and hurt. She'd been stung by them often enough.

There was a rustle and a patter of feet in the sandy soil and Nckool appeared.

"Hello," said Joski, "did you sleep well?"

Nckool stared at her for a moment then nodded several times then ran over to the waterskin. She gulped a few mouthfuls then went to sit where she usually sat when Ikam sat by his tree, two body lengths away, facing the bay, just as he did. Nckool didn't say anything. She hadn't spoken since the previous mid autumn and it was now late summer.

Tears came to Joski's eyes but she blinked them back.

"I have to be strong," she thought, "for the both of them, but I have no idea what to do."

The three of them sat in silence, each lost in their own private world. The waves in the bay, small and unhurried, continued to roll in, unconcerned with the fleeting lives of mortals. They had rolled in this way for an eternity and would continue for another eternity. The nearby stream tinkled and chattered happily as it made its way to greet the waves of the sea. It, too, paid the humans no mind. A gull

wandered along the sandy beach, inspecting a few clumps of seaweed. It ignored the trio as it had problems enough of its own. The tall palm trees swayed and the thick clumps of ferns rustled as a small breeze picked up. Birds, lost in the rich growth of foliage, chirped and tweeted their joyous songs at the new day and, in the distance, a small troop of monkeys discussed their night. Their whoops and howls unusually subdued, no doubt because of the damp tension in the air.

On the other side of the stream, a little way further into the jungle, Zyre emerged from behind his hut and waved. Joski waved back, as always her heart lifting a little at the sight of her first born. He disappeared into his hut then emerged again a few moments later. He strode down and jumped nimbly across the stream.

“Morning, Ma,” he said putting his hand on her shoulder.

“Zyre,” she said, looking up at him and putting her hand on his.

He glanced at Ikam then down at her with mute enquiry in his eyes. She wrinkled her nose slightly and shrugged. That was all the communication they needed. Zyre sighed and gripped her shoulder slightly.

“Morning, Da, Nckool,” he said, expecting no reply. “There be a storm coming. We going out today?”

“Up to you, boy,” said Ikam, not looking at him.

“Best we do, Da,” said Zyre. “We all be needing some fish to sell and best we be checking them amarau traps as well.”

“Aye,” said Ikam unenthusiastically.

“And I be thinking it best we go out and be back before the storm,” said Zyre. “I reckon it be hitting before dark.”

There wasn't a cloud in the sky but late summer storms could appear suddenly and with little warning.

“Aye,” said Ikam. “So you want to go now?”

“Yes,” said Zyre, waiting for his father to move.

Ikam sighed then slowly got to his feet.

“I just be getting Joise,” said Zyre.

He paused for a moment then bent to kiss Joski on the top of her head.

“How be Gia this morning?” asked Joski.

“She be throwing up,” said Zyre grinning, “just like you said she would be.”

“I best be going to help her then,” said Joski, getting up. “First babe is always the worst. For certain you were, the other four were easy compared with you.”

“But worth it, hey, Ma,” said Zyre, giving her a hug. “I be bringing you back a huge amarau, just for you.”

“Be off with you,” she said with a glance at Ikam that added the unspoken “before he changes his mind”.

“Aye,” said Zyre. “See you at the boat, Da.”

Ikam didn't reply, but he did start walking in the direction of the boat pulled onto the beach. Nckool followed him, her usual four paces behind him, ever watchful although no one quite knew what she was watching for. They'd asked, of course, all of them, but she never answered. The gull watched Ikam and Nckool walk towards it then ran along the beach before lifting off and skimming the waves.

* * *

It was mid afternoon when Joise saw the first of the clouds.

“Here it comes,” he called.

Zyre and Ikam both looked to the South East. There was a long thin

very black line on the horizon.

Zyre put his finger in his mouth then held it up to test the breeze.

“Coming in fast, I reckon,” he said. “Best be hauling in, what do you say, Da?”

“Aye,” said Ikam. “Reckon you be right.”

He glanced at the sky to the North with a vague feeling of anxiety knotting his stomach but there was nothing there, save only blue sky and a few small puffy little white clouds. He sighed and bent to the task of pulling in the net. Hand over hand, his wet fingers entwining the strings then a laborious pull backwards with salt water and sweat dripping, soaking everything, then forwards to entwine and pull again. The net slowly piled up in the bottom with fish flapping desperately, caught and unable to escape.

“I know how they feel,” he thought sadly.

“Faster, Da,” said Joise, glancing over at him.

It used to be the other way around, his father pulling in the net faster than Joise could handle but now his Da was slow, every pull an effort. He shifted over a little to pull in some of his Da's side of the net as well as his own. Zyre was standing impatiently at the sail, ready to haul it up as soon as the net was in.

“You want to steer, Da?” said Zyre when the net was on board and the sail almost up.

“No, you do it, Zyre,” said Ikam, shaking slightly as he sat in the bottom of the boat. “I be not remembering where we left the traps.”

Zyre glanced at Joise and raised an eyebrow but said nothing. They had set the traps only two days previously and only a little further North of where they normally did.

“Wind is picking up,” said Joise.

“Aye,” said Zyre, looking to the South East. The thin line of cloud was appreciably wider. “Storm be coming in fast. Going to be a big blow too.”

Ikam reached for the water skin and put it to his lips. The salt taste in his mouth was strong and it took two long swallows to clear it. He started to loop the tie back around the neck of the skin then glanced over to the North again. His stomach folded and wrenched and sweat broke out afresh on his face.

“Please Chaahk, no,” he muttered, his face suddenly tight with panic.

He dropped the water skin and the tie came off, fresh water spilling into the bottom of the boat.

“Da!” shouted Joise, lurching over to grab the skin before all the fresh water disappeared.

He grabbed the neck of the skin to stop the water then picked up the string to tie it with and felt his father's body shaking.

“What be wrong, Da?” he asked, a puzzled frown crossing his youthful face.

Ikam didn't reply, just stared at the sky, fear in his eyes.

“Da?” said Joise, leaning forward to grip his father's shoulder.

“Don't you be touching me!” yelled Ikam, jerking back and throwing up his clenched hands.

“It be all right, Da,” said Zyre, stepping around the mast. “There be nothing to be afraid of.” He looked where Ikam had been looking. “It be just a bird or two, Da, just a seagret, coming to see if we have any scraps for it. Look.”

Ikam forced his eyes to look at the creature which was now a lot closer. Its white and grey plumage was now just visible and it squawked loudly, just like a seagret. He breathed a sigh of relief and gave his two boys a sickly grin.

"'Twas just my mind playing tricks on me," he said. "I be all good now."

"You sure, Da?" asked Zyre, studying Ikam's face. "Mayhap we best be getting home right smart. Come back for the traps tomorrow."

"Nay, lad," said Ikam, forcing his mind to focus on the practicalities of life. "Best we be getting the traps before the storm throws them Chaahk knows where. Them's good traps, be a shame to lose 'em."

"If you say so, Da," said Zyre, glancing at Joise.

He went back to the rudder leaving Ikam and Joise to disentangle the fish from the net. It took a little while for Ikam to settle to the task and he kept an eye on the bird until it gave up and went elsewhere.

* * *

Nckool was sitting on her rock at the tip of the Southern arm of the bay when they got back. She had taken to sitting there all the time the men were out fishing. Despite Joski's remonstrations and chidings, Nckool abandoned any and all chores to go keep watch although, to her credit, she went back to the chores when the men returned. The wind was blowing strongly and the waves breaking hard when she sighted them and she ran along the beach as they sailed into the bay ready to help them haul the boat up. The sky overhead was thick with cloud and the sky to the South West was black and angry. Every now and then a jagged streak of lightning speared the sea and distant thunder grumbled.

"Help us get the fish to the huts, Nckool," shouted Joise as the boat was tossed onto the beach by a big wave.

She ran over and peered into the boat then grabbed two of the amarau. With a big grin she ran off up the beach waving them above her head.

"Bring back some sacks," shouted Zyre.

She disappeared into the hut they used for storage while the men

hauled the boat as high as they could up the beach and tied it fast to a large palm tree. Nckool reappeared with an armful of coarsely woven cloth sacks and the four of them started shovelling the fish inside. There was a sudden gust of wind and a wave came crashing up the beach, almost reaching the boat. The black clouds were almost overhead and a bolt of lightning stabbed downwards just off the headland and a crash of thunder made the trees shiver and shake. Carrying the sacks of fish the men ran for the store hut with Nckool carrying the other two amarau.

"We'll deal with them tomorrow," shouted Zyre over the noise of the wind tearing at the jungle.

They dumped the sacks of fish and the amarau at the back of the store hut and ran for their own huts.

"Good fishing?" asked Joski, ushering Ikam and Nckool inside.

"Aye," said Ikam. "Three sacks and four amarau. Not a bad haul."

Nckool nodded in agreement.

"I put the fire out," said Joski. "Twould seem like it be a bad storm and I saw no sense in risking everything catching alight. There be bread and dried fish for your dinners."

"I be not hungry," said Ikam.

"Nonsense, man," said Joski firmly. "You have to eat."

"If you say so," said Ikam, going to the back of the hut.

"If you be looking for your tuvic, there be none," said Joski, fetching the bread and fish.

"What?" demanded Ikam, angrily. "You be drinking it all?"

"Nay, man," said Joski, her eyes narrowing. "You did. You finished the last of it last night. Keg be over there," and she pointed with her thin cooking knife. "Ain't no more 'till we sell some fish."

Ikam grabbed the small keg and peered inside then upended it. A few small drops ran out and he shook it angrily.

“Don't you be throwing that at me or Nckool,” said Joski, warningly. “Come here, girl.”

“Bliad,” shouted Ikam and hurled the clay pot at the wall. It hit one of the posts and shattered.

Nckool ran behind her mother and peered round her, wide eyed and anxious. Stiff legged with fury Ikam stomped around the small hut searching for another keg of tuvic, muttering and cursing and throwing pots around after checking what was inside. Joski and Nckool kept their distance, keeping to the opposite side of the hut. There was a loud crash of thunder seemingly overhead and the wind howled through the hut, throwing more things against the walls and whipping the palm frond roof into a frenzy. Then the rain started to lash down.

“CHAAHK!” shouted Ikam at the top of his voice. He bent double, clutching his head between his arms. “I can't stand all this! Make it stop! Make it stop!”

“Go to bed,” whispered Joski into Nckool's ear, pushing her in the direction of where she slept.

Nckool hesitated, looking at Ikam then she looked at Joski. She was shaking with fear. Joski hoped it was fear from the storm and not fear of Ikam.

“Go,” she said giving the girl a stronger push.

Ikam howled as another crash of thunder broke over the hut and fell to his knees, sobbing and moaning. Nckool ran and hid inside her pile of fronds and Joski breathed a sigh of relief.

“Come on,” she said, going over to where Ikam knelt. She squatted down beside him and put her arms around him. “'Tis only a storm and will blow itself out soon enough.”

“Get away from me, you fiend!” shouted Ikam in terror, throwing off

her arms. He leapt to his feet and ran headlong into the raging storm outside.

"Ikam, no!" shouted Joski, rushing after him. "Come back!" but he disappeared into the pelting rain outside.

She stopped at the entrance but there was no sign of him so she slowly made her way over to Nckool's bed.

"Do not be afraid, little one," she said, putting her arms around her. "You Da just be not liking the sound of the storm. He will be back soon as it be over."

They lay there, holding each other tightly as the storm raged. "Will he be back?" thought Joski, sad and not a little scared herself. "Someone will be back I am sure, but will it be Ikam? That be not the man I used to know. What in Yammoe's name happened to him?"

The storm raged for much of the night.

* * *

When Astauand rose it found Ikam huddled under a small rock outcrop on the far side of the bay. He felt drained and helpless but at least his head didn't hurt this morning. He crept out from under the outcrop and cautiously stood up.

The beach was littered with torn off fronds and at least one tree had been wrenched from the ground and lay forlornly on the sand. Coconuts were scattered all over the place. On the far side of the bay he could just make out the family's four huts. They at least appeared to still be standing although it was difficult to tell from this distance.

Ikam felt very ashamed of his flight the night before and stood there for a while, just looking and wondering if it would be better for everyone if he simply turned and walked in the opposite direction.

"Or mayhap just out into the sea," he thought, "and end it all."

He turned and looked out to sea. It was calm again. The waves their

normal happy little selves. It all seemed very peaceful.

"'Twould be nice to be at peace again," he said quietly and started to walk towards the waves.

Then he stopped.

"No," he said. "This is not my destiny. I know not what it is but I still have Joski and Nckool to look after even if I know not how to do it anymore. All things pass in time and this, too, will pass."

Slowly he turned and started to trudge along the beach, wondering how he would be able to face Joski's contempt. Such was his focus on his own failings that he failed to see the body until he almost stepped on it.

"Joise?" he said alarmed, "what you be playing at?"

The man on the ground groaned and tried to lift his face out of the sand then his head fell back.

"That is not Joise," said Ikam, puzzled.

He rolled the man over and brushed the sand from his face. The man raised an arm weakly then rolled over and threw up a large amount of sea water.

"Who are you and where did you come from?" asked Ikam, staring at him. He looked faintly familiar but Ikam couldn't place him.

Ikam looked around, wondering if he should run back to the huts for help or try to carry the man there himself then he saw the other body some way away.

"Oh Chaahk," he cried and ran over.

It looked like a woman and she lay face down in the sand, motionless. She didn't seem to be breathing. Indecisively, Ikam rolled her over and brushed the sand and her long, matted hair from her face then he froze.

“Oh no,” he said. “Oh Chaahk no.”

He dropped the woman's head and lurched back. Then he turned and ran.

“Ahh, you be back,” said Joski when she saw him running along the beach towards her. “There be a right goodly amount of damage.”

She turned to survey the roof fronds that had been ripped from the hut and thrown across the stream.

“Joski!” shouted Ikam, gasping for breath.

She turned and saw his panic stricken face.

“What is it, man?” she asked. “The storm be over.”

“It be her!” shouted Ikam, almost tripping over his feet in his haste. He pointed back along the beach. “It be her, she has come after me. Chaahk help us all!”

Chapter Two

“Who has come after you?” demanded Joski in alarm. She ran over and grabbed Ikam by the shoulders. “What be you talking about, Ikam?”

“Her,” gasped Ikam, gesturing wildly at the beach behind him. “That twirly one I told you about. She be back for me. We have to get away from here, now!”

He tried to break away but Joski held him tight. Nckool ran out and planted herself behind him, facing the beach, her little legs planted firmly in the sand and a determined look on her face.

“It be all right now,” Joski said soothingly. “Calm yourself. 'Tis just the storm that be upsetting you. No one is going to harm you, not with me here to protect you. Come with me and we will find you something to eat. You did not have any dinner last night. Calm, now.”

She put an arm around Ikam as he began to relax.

“Nckool,” she said quietly, beckoning her over. “Go fetch Zyre. Tell him, oh, don't tell him anything, just get him here.”

She started walking Ikam gently towards the hut, deeply worried about his state of mind. Nckool tugged on her malu.

“What is it?” she asked, glancing down at Nckool.

Nckool pointed across the beach and tugged her malu again. Joski quickly glanced at the beach, nothing seemed out of the ordinary apart from the palm fronds scattered everywhere then a slight movement some way off drew her attention for a moment.

“Did you see something?” she asked, squinting.

Nckool nodded several times and pointed again then Ikam moaned and Joski lost interest.

“Get Zyre,” she said giving Nckool a push. “Show him what you saw

then bring him here.”

Obediently the girl scampered off to Zyre's hut. Joski made Ikam sit on a stool by the simple table and sat down beside him. He'd gone icily calm and withdrawn and just sat there, gazing at his hands clasped in his lap. She just sat and watched him, worry clouding her mind.

“You never used to get upset by storms,” she said after a while.

“Ahh,” said Ikam quietly, a tic jerking his cheek. “Twasn't the storm.”

“What was it then?” she asked.

“Twas the girl,” he mumbled, his eyes fixed on his hands.

“What girl?” asked Joski.

“The one on the beach,” he said.

“There be a girl on our beach?” asked Joski. “Who be she? Where did she come from? Did she walk through that storm to come visit you?”

“I don't know,” said Ikam, his head drooping and his shoulders sagging. “All I know is she be there now.”

“So why did you not bring her here to visit me?” asked Joski, not knowing what to say but feeling she needed to get him talking.

“She be dead,” said Ikam.

“Dead?” Joski sat back, lost for words.

Her man, troubled as he had been, was now seeing dead people. She wondered if it was now the time to bring in Ibu'oden, the erere who lived a day distant, and ask him to purge Ikam of his demons. She had been putting it off in the hope that Ikam would come back but he seemed to be going further away.

“If she be dead,” she said slowly, hoping his reaction would be

reasonably sensible, “how can she have come after you?”

“Mayhap she be of Foqoo,” whispered Ikam, looking at her furtively.

Joski drew in her breath sharply and started to chew a knuckle. “Foqoo?” she said. “Why would one of Foqoo's own be after you? What were you up to when you were away?”

He didn't reply, just sat there staring at the ground with his hands dangling. Joski watched him helplessly then took his hands in hers.

“Tell me,” she whispered. “How can I help you if you don't tell me what happened?”

“I ...” he muttered, “I ...” then he abruptly stood up. “It were nothing,” he said gruffly. “I need to go work on yesterday's catch,” and he strode out the back of the hut.

Joski just stared after him through the gaping holes in the wall where the palm fronds had been torn away by the storm, her mind a mass of confusion.

“Ma,” called Zyre from behind her a moment or a summer later, she wasn't sure which. “She still be alive. Come give us a hand.”

“Coming, Zyre,” she said automatically, getting up and turning round. Then it hit her. She was still alive? *She?*

“Bring her in here,” she said. “No, best put her in the shade outside, it be a right mess in here. Who is she?”

“Dunno, Ma,” said Zyre looking around then going over to a patch of shade under a nearby palm. “Ain't never seen her before. Joise be bringing the other one.”

“What other one?” asked Joski, going over to look at the girl. She hadn't seen her before either.

Joski knelt down and started to feel the girl's limbs and around her head, checking for injuries.

"It be a man," said Zyre. "He be awake and Joise be helping him walk over. Be she badly hurt?"

"Nothing seems broken," said Joski, sitting back on her heels and studying the girl. "She has a lump on her head but it ain't bleeding. Mayhap that man hit her or something. Where were they?"

"On the beach," said Zyre. "You reckon they be off a boat? Mayhap there be a wreck from the storm and they got washed up here."

"Could be," said Joski. "She ain't from around here that be certain. Her clothing be strange. Go and get the fire going, son. I wager she be needing some hot food soon enough."

The girl stirred and fluttered a hand feebly then rolled over and threw up a bellyful of sea water then groaned and fell back.

"There now," said Joski leaning forward and putting her hand on the girl's shoulder. "You be safe here. You just lie there and rest."

"Ugh," said the girl. Her eyes opened and she stared up at the fronds above. She seemed to be concentrating on something.

"Does it hurt anywhere?" asked Joski.

"What shall I do with him, Ma?" called Joise.

Joski looked around. Joise was standing not far away with the arm of a young man over his shoulder. The man's face was pale, his eyes were shut and he was breathing heavily.

"Sit him over there," commanded Joski, pointing to the next tree. "Is he bleeding or anything?"

"Not as far as I can see, Ma," said Joise cheerfully. "Although he be throwing up a few times."

"Get him some fresh water," said Joski. "I be over in a minute. You awake still, girl?"

“Aye,” said the girl weakly. “Where am I?”

“You be at the hut of Ikam and Joski,” said Joski. “Does it hurt anywhere?”

“My head,” said the girl, reaching up to touch her head then she threw up again.

“Are you hurt, Autumn?” called the man, struggling to get to his feet again. He stumbled over and dropped to his knees beside the girl. “Autumn?”

“A small pain in my head, Logan, nothing more,” said the girl, looking up at the man with a smile. “And you?”

“A burning in my belly and chest,” said the man, “and everywhere else aches.”

“Autumn and Logan?” said Joski, “those be your names?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “We thank you for your aid. What is your name?”

“Najoskipambarattasam,” said Joski, “but most just calls me Joski.”

“That be a relief,” said Logan with a smile. “It be a bit of a mouthful.”

It seemed a strange thing to say as her name was perfectly ordinary but Joise came back at that moment so Joski busied herself giving Autumn small sips. She looked around and saw Nckool standing several paces away, watching intently.

“Nckool, love, go get me a couple of coconuts,” said Joski. The child didn’t move. She just kept staring at Autumn. Joski sighed and glanced at Joise.

“I’ll get them, Ma,” he said.

“Good boy,” said Joski, “and cut the tops off them.”

“Aye, Ma,” said Joise heading off along the tree line. He came back

almost immediately and went to find Joski's small cooking knife.

Autumn struggled to sit up and Logan pushed her shoulder back down.

"Just lie there still," he said, "we be among friends here."

"I must have hit my head on something," said Autumn, feeling around the back of her head. She looked at her fingers.

"There be a lump," said Joski, "but there be no blood."

Joise come back with two coconuts with their tops removed.

"You be alright here, Ma?" he asked handing them to her. "Only I need to fix the roof of our hut. Lala be clearing up but she can't manage the roof and things."

"Aye, there be no difficulties here," said Joski. "You run along." She smiled up at him then turned to Logan. "Drink this," she said. "'Twill soothe your throat and settle your belly. You too, Autumn," and she held the coconut to Autumn's lips so she could sip the milk.

"What is it?" asked Logan, sniffing the coconut suspiciously.

"'Tis a coconut," said Joski in surprise.

"Drink it, Logan," said Autumn, having taken a couple of sips. "'Tis like milk only nutty and sweet. These people are not going to poison us."

Logan gave the coconut another suspicious sniff then dipped his finger inside and licked it.

"Hmm," he said and cautiously took a sip. He frowned as he rolled the milk around inside his mouth then swallowed and took a mouthful.

"That is nice," he said. "Can I ask why you have such thick pots?"

"That be a coconut," said Joski, confused.

“Oh,” said Logan, studying the green nut. “And what is a coconut?”

“That is,” said Joski, now confused and puzzled.

“Oh,” said Logan, also starting to get confused. “Why is it so thick?”

“It be thick like any coconut,” said Joski, her confusion and puzzlement being rapidly replaced with mystification. “There be nothing to eat otherwise.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “So you eat it as well?”

“Aye,” said Josie watching in astonishment as Logan tried to bite off a chunk of the coconut around the hole at the top. “No, no, you cannot eat the outside, it be too tough. Just eat the white part inside.”

“Ahhh,” said Logan, his front teeth feeling a little tender from trying to bite through the outer skin. He used his fingernail to pry off a little of the white inner part and chewed it. “Yes, that is quite nice.”

“You two are not from these parts, are you,” observed Joski dryly.

“No, we are from Aferraron,” said Autumn, sitting up.

“Aferraron?” said Joski. “I have heard of that place. It be over there somewhere, is it not? Across the water?”

“Yes,” said Autumn, finishing the milk inside her coconut.

“Fire be going now,” said Zyre coming over. He grinned at Autumn and Logan. “You two be looking much more alive.”

“They be Autumn and Logan,” said Joski. “This my my oldest, Lapanzyretetras.”

“Hello,” said Autumn, smiling back.

“Do people call you Lapan?” asked Logan, a trifle anxiously.

“No, Zyre,” said Zyre. “Where be Joise and Da?”

“Joise be fixing his hut,” said Joski, “and your Da be in the store with the fish.”

“Ohh,” said Zyre. He looked at the tattered walls and roof of Joski’s hut. “Reckon I best be getting back and fixing mine then,” he said. “Me and Joise be coming back to fix yours after. I don’t reckon Da will be doing much.”

“That be good of you,” said Joski. “You caught some amarau yesterday?”

“Aye, four,” he said.

“Tell Joise I be doing them all tonight for a feasting,” she said. “Give our thanks to Luleraim.”

“Right enough,” said Zyre. “Be back in a bit.”

He smiled again at Autumn and Logan then nodded and strode off.

“Does Zyre live nearby?” asked Autumn, sitting comfortably with her back against the tree.

“Yonder,” said Joski, waving towards his hut across the stream.

“And the one who helped me walk here be another of your sons?” asked Logan.

“Joise? Aye,” said Joski. “He lives a little further upstream.”

“What is his full name?” asked Logan.

“Karapanenjoise,” said Joski. “Why are you laughing?”

“I mean no offence,” said Logan, rapidly controlling himself. “Where we are from people usually have only short names.”

“You mean Logan is all of it?” asked Joski.

“Aye,” said Logan. “There be nothing more to me than that, although

Autumn be Autumn Savannah.”

“Ahh,” said Joski, “that be a nice name, Autumnsavannah although I would likely shorten it to Savan but Autumn be nice too. This one over here be Nckoolasadrambetan although we calls her just Nckool.”

“Hello, Nckool,” said Autumn smiling at the girl.

Nckool just glowered at her from under her thick mop of hair.

“Nckool don't be saying much,” said Joski with a sigh. “Right, you two sit here and rest and I be cooking you a little fish. I wager you be starved after all that throwing up and you need more than a little milk to bring your strength back.”

“That is very kind of you, Joski,” said Autumn, “although we would not wish to put you to any trouble.”

“Tis no trouble,” said Joski. “I need to make some food for Ikam and Nckool as it is. They have not eaten since last night. I will ready some food then we can talk some more. There is much I wish to ask you about.”

“Is Ikam your era'owen?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Joski, “although I do not expect you will see much of him. He, umm, well, yes. Be you in a hurry to be on your way?”

“No,” said Autumn. “We are travellers and exploring the world. We are in no hurry to be anywhere.”

“Then rest for the day and stay for the feasting,” said Joski.

She got to her feet and looked down at Autumn for a few moments then nodded. “Aye, we be having a long talk, I reckon.”

“Thank you again,” said Logan as she walked away.

“I wonder what she wants to talk to us about,” said Logan, watching Nckool watching them.

“No doubt we will find out later,” said Autumn, shifting her sitting position. “Mayhap she wants to talk of our travels or share some of hers.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan then he lowered his voice. “Be it just me or is there something a little strange here?”

“What do you mean, strange?” asked Autumn, lowering her voice as well.

“That girl for one,” said Logan. “Why does she glower at us but not speak?”

“Mayhap she cannot speak,” said Autumn. “There are them as cannot.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “But Joski said she does not speak much which means she can speak and I have never met a little girl who does not talk endlessly.”

“I thought you could not speak with girls,” said Autumn.

“Older ones, I cannot,” said Logan. “They make me nervous but children do not, although that one does by her very silence. And why will her Da not talk to us? It be right strange for the head of the family to ignore strangers.”

“We are in a different land, Logan,” said Autumn. “Mayhap their customs be different. For sure their names are. What do you suppose amarau be?”

“Some kind of fish, I wager,” said Logan. “Oh hello.”

Nckool had stalked over and was standing in front of Autumn, staring at her.

“Nckool be a nice name,” said Autumn. “How do you say your full name? I did not quite catch what your mother said.”

Nckool spat at her then clumsily tried to twirl around and kick

Autumn in the face. Autumn parried the kick easily and Nckool fell over in the sand.

“Sploop,” said Logan in surprise. “What is all this about?”

Nckool leapt to her feet and tried again. Again Autumn parried the kick without bothering to get up.

“Nckool!” shouted Joski running over. “What in Lulerain's name be you doing?” She gave Nckool a hefty swipe on the back of her head and Nckool burst into tears.

“Please, do not hit her,” said Autumn, reaching out to touch Nckool's arm. “We were only playing a game.”

“Be you sure?” demanded Joski. “It did not look like a game to me.”

“’Tis just a little silliness,” said Autumn. “Do not worry yourself,” and she surreptitiously jabbed Logan in the ribs with her elbow.

“Aye,” blurted Logan, managing to hide a wince. “Nckool was just showing us how well she can dance and got a little close.”

Joski narrowed her eyes. Having raised five children she knew when an elbow had been jabbed no matter how well the elbow's owner tried to disguise it and there was something very strange about this Autumn. How did Ikam know her and why was he terrified?

“Well,” she temporised. “If she be giving you any trouble just smack her and send her to me.”

“I am certain she will give us no trouble,” said Autumn.

Joski gave her another long look then slowly walked back to her hearth.

“Come here, Nckool,” said Autumn, beckoning her over. “Where did you learn to do that?”

“Would it not be better to ask why she did it?” said Logan.

"I thought I would try to gain her trust a little first by teaching her to do it properly," said Autumn.

"Ahh, my mistake," said Logan. "'Twas stupid of me not to realise that if someone attacks you without warning that you would teach them how to do it properly."

"You saw what happened, Logan," said Autumn. "Nckool attempted a kick but fell over. If she does not learn how to do it properly she could easily hurt herself next time. Besides, she is a girl and any skill at fighting will serve her in good stead. Girls are not by nature as aggressive as boys and that leaves them at a disadvantage. Whoever has taught her has not done it well. Come closer, Nckool."

Nckool had stopped crying and was listening carefully to what they were saying. She came closer but was careful to stay out of arm's reach.

"One reason you fell over was that your balance was wrong," said Autumn, standing up. "When you lift your leg to kick you need to move your upper body backwards so you stay balanced on the other foot. You tried to stay upright which means your body naturally falls forward and you are not in control. Try to do this."

She lifted one leg and held it out straight in front of her while tilting her torso backwards and stayed like that without moving.

Nckool studied Autumn's stance then tried to do the same. She wobbled and had to thrash her arms a little but managed not to fall over.

"That is good," said Autumn putting her leg down. "With practice you will be able to get it just right so you do not wobble. Another thing you did wrong was to try to spin around without moving the foot on the ground. You need to move that foot in a little jump, like this."

Autumn lifted one foot off the ground and hopped a few times on the other foot, twisting round to face in the opposite direction each time.

"You see?" she said and Nckool nodded. "You try."

Nckool tried hopping and spinning and, after a few attempts, managed to go through almost a half circle.

“You are getting the measure of it,” said Autumn, smiling. “Now if you put the two together you can kick someone without falling over but there is a little trick you can add as well to make the kick much harder. Would you like to know what it is?”

Nckool looked up at Autumn from under her thick fringe and nodded, once.

“Good,” said Autumn. “The trick is to keep your hitting leg bent while you spin then, just as you are about to hit, straighten your leg hard. That will make the kick much more effective. Like this,” and she demonstrated by spin kicking the palm tree. “Do you see?”

Nckool obviously had seen as she was repeatedly trying to kick the tree. She missed several times but, significantly, did not fall over and came close to doing it twice without stopping.

“She has talent,” said Autumn to Logan as she sat back down next to him. “Now, Nckool, if you practise doing that every day it will soon feel natural and you will learn how far away you need to be. Do you understand?”

Nckool nodded and tried to spin kick Autumn again. Again Autumn parried the kick but this time there was a little power behind the kick and, importantly, Nckool didn't fall over.

“That was much better, Nckool,” said Autumn. “So why did you attack me?”

“I hate you,” hissed Nckool, her face contorting into a ferocious mask. She ran off and rapidly climbed a palm tree some distance away.

“You know,” said Logan, picking up his coconut and trying to prise some more of the white flesh from inside, “I think I liked her better when she did not say anything.”

Chapter Three

“Ohh, I be right achy and sore,” said Logan after Nckool had disappeared. “My belly be doing strange things in spite of that milk and my throat feels like it has been ripped out by a tarcl¹. How is your head?”

“It feels like someone is stamping on it,” admitted Autumn, “and now I am dry my tunic feels like it be made of leather and my skin feels worse. Even my hair is stiff with salt. I venture a good scrub in clean water will be most beneficial.”

“Aye,” said Logan then paused and looked around. “Where be your robe?”²

“Ahh,” said Autumn, also looking around. “I was not wearing it. Mayhap it be somewhere on the beach still.”

“’Twould be a crying shame if it be lost,” said Logan. “I do not like it when you do not have your robe. Ohh, and Fiau? Where be my staff?”³

He stood up and peered down the beach anxiously.

“Sploop,” he muttered as Autumn pulled on the bottom of his tunic to get him to sit down again.

“We will find these things again, I am sure,” she said, “Mayhap these kind people have found them or they be on the beach somewhere. Sit for a while then we will go and see.”

“Aye,” said Logan sitting back down. “I feel in some way responsible for Fiau. I will be right sad if she has come to harm through my lack of care.”

“Fiau has many powers,” said Autumn. “I am sure she is capable of looking after herself. Could be she turned herself into a boat and

1 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Third Tale*.

2 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*. The significance being that Autumn's robe is decorated with a silver ribbon at the hem which provides her with magical protection against fatal injuries.

3 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Second Tale*.

sailed off somewhere. If it is meant to be we will find her again. Ahh, here comes Joski."

"Here is some fish," said Joski coming over. "Tis fried and not as good as soup but the flesh is good and will help bring back your strength."

"Thank you," said Autumn as Joski handed them a frond each. "We are most grateful for your aid."

"Indeed, we are," said Logan. "Was anything else found with us?"

"I know only of you two," said Joski. "Was there someone else with you?"

"Just our belongings," said Logan. "A pack, some clothing, our staffs and water skins."

"No, the boys didn't bring anything back," said Joski. "Mayhap your things be still on the beach. Bide a while and I will send someone to look. They be busy at the moment repairing the storm's damage. Anything on the beach will be there for a while, the tides be not high this side."

"I see your hut be made from tree branches," said Autumn. "Would not something stronger be less likely to be damaged in a storm?"

"Mayhap," said Joski, "but we get a lot of storms and woven fronds be easy to repair and there be plenty of them. We be not having to cut them either, the storms pull down plenty to use. I'll be back in a few moments."

She went back to the hut and fetched another frond and carried it to a hut some way further along the beach, half hidden by the trees. She disappeared inside then emerged a few moments later and walked back to the tree Nckool had climbed.

"There be some food for you in the hut," she shouted up then turned without waiting for a reply and walked back to Autumn and Logan. She sat solidly in the sand in front of them and watched as they ate

their fish.

“That was very nice,” said Autumn as she put down her frond, half of the fish eaten. She felt Joski’s tension and waited patiently to see how it would manifest itself. “There be some flavours I have not tasted before.”

“I used some herbs that grow nearby,” said Joski. “Mayhap you are unfamiliar with them.”

“Are you not going to eat that?” asked Logan.

“Enjoy,” said Autumn, pushing it over towards him. Logan smiled and picked up the frond, oblivious to the tension.

Joski sighed. “We need to talk,” she said firmly.

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “What would you like to talk about?”

Joski fixed her with a steady gaze. “How do you know my man and why have you come for him?”

“Ikam?” said Autumn frowning. Logan stopped chewing. “We do not know him and we have not come for him. We are here by chance only.”

Joski’s eyes narrowed. “I be not believing you,” she said. “When he found you he knew you and that you had come after him.”

“Then I venture he has mistaken me for someone else,” said Autumn, “and I have never been here before.” She paused for a moment and glanced at Logan. “At least, I do not think so but I know not where we are exactly. Mayhap we have arrived somewhere near somewhere we have been.”

“This be Zuit,” said Joski.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. Logan put down his frond and sat quietly. “Zuit be where we were going but we have never been here before.”

"Hmm," said Joski, frowning. She drummed her fingers on her thigh for a few moments. "Right then," she said appearing to make a decision. She got to her feet. "Stay here," she said and stalked off.

"I told you there was something strange going on around here," said Logan, pulling a fish bone from between his lips.

"I venture we will be finding out the truth of that very soon," said Autumn. "She be heading for the hut where she took food just now. Most likely she be getting Ikam. 'Twill be interesting to meet him and find out if we have met before."

Nckool took the opportunity to climb down from the tree and scurry over to get the food that had been left for her. She brought the frond out and sat on the beach not far away to eat it and watch whatever was going to happen.

"No!" came a loud voice from the hut to which Joski had gone. The breeze carried the sound of another voice but the words were indistinct. "Chaahk, no!" floated across then a bald headed man half stumbled and half fell through the doorway. Joski followed immediately and grabbed the man's clothing and started to drag him over. He resisted for a few moments then seemed to give up all hope and abjectly followed her. She retained a tight grip on the cloth tied loosely around his waist.

"This be Ikam," said Joski, making the man stand in front of Autumn. "You still say you be not knowing him?"

"I have never seen him before," said Autumn, studying the man. "Hello, Ikam, I am Autumn Savannah and this be Logan." He hung his head and ignored her.

Joski scowled. "And you, man, be you knowing this woman?"

Ikam grunted then tried to make a run for it but Joski had kept hold of his malu and dragged him back.

"Well?" she demanded. "You know her or not?"

“Aye,” whispered Ikam. “It be her.”

“Right,” said Joski. She let go of his malu and pointed at the ground. “Sit down!”

Ikam half turned as though to go and Joski slapped him hard on the back of his shaven head. “Sit down, I said!”

She was clearly getting angry and was starting to breathe heavily. Ikam collapsed to the ground and sat there, sideways on to Autumn and stared at the base of a tree. It was blindingly obvious he didn't want to be there but lacked the will to do anything about it. Logan sat quietly, his thoughts in a turmoil wondering what was going on. Autumn had a mildly puzzled look on her face as she waited.

“I have no idea what is going on here,” said Joski angrily, her eyes flashing, “but this ends now. No one leaves until I know the truth of it.” She stood there with her fists on her hips and glared at Autumn.

“Umm,” said Autumn, looking over at Ikam then back at Joski. “I am sorry but I am a stranger here and I have never seen this man before. I do not know what to say to you.”

Joski transferred her glare to Logan who went pale. “Nor I,” he said nervously.

The silence stretched and the tension grew. A muscle on the side of Joski's clenched jaw started to twitch.

“Perhaps I could make a suggestion,” said Autumn, leaning forward. “Umm, as we have no idea what is going on here and Ikam there does not seem to want to say anything either, perhaps if you told us what you know it might help. Please, sit down and explain your side of this.”

Joski stared at her belligerently then seemed to collapse inside herself. She slowly sat down on the ground and arranged the folds of her malu unconsciously.

“I be at my wits end,” she said quietly. “I know not what to do.” Tears

started to flow down her cheeks.

Autumn instantly jumped up and knelt to put her arms around Joski and hugged her until the tears stopped flowing. Ikam looked around then put his arms over his head and started gently rocking backwards and forwards.

“Tell me,” said Autumn gently. “Tell me what ails you.”

“It be him,” said Joski, her voice trembling. “Last Autumn he went away without saying and then he came back, all skin and bone and it be not him, he be different.”

“What do you mean, he is not him?” asked Autumn. “How is he different?”

“He was a big, strong man,” said Joski, “full of fun and afraid of nothing but now look at him. He be skinny as a fish bone and scared of his own shadow and he just sits and broods and gets angry over nothing and he won’t talk to me, to any of us. He be drinking too. Ohh he always used to like a drink now and then, what man doesn’t? But now he be drinking all night and not sleeping or be falling down in a stupor.”

“That is strange,” said Autumn, sitting back but keeping Joski’s hand in hers. “Where did he go?”

“I know not,” said Joski, sniffing. “He will not say.” Then she stiffened and looked suspiciously at Autumn. “Then you come here and you say you know him not but he be terrified of you.”

“Mayhap Ikam has mistaken me for someone else,” said Autumn, watching him rocking. She was about to speak to him then decided not to.

“He called you the twirly woman,” said Joski, “and I saw you twirling with Nckool so I reckon it be you all right.”

“Who taught Nckool how to do that?” asked Autumn.

"I know not," said Joski. "I have seen her do that on the beach, kicking trees and the like but where she got it from I have no idea. None of us knows how to do that stuff."

"Have you asked her?" asked Autumn, looking round to see where Nckool was. She was still sitting in the same spot, watching what was going on intently.

"Aye," said Joski. "But she be not talking either. She just stares back at me and now I be not even expecting an answer. What has happened to them? I be going out of my mind with worry and I have no idea what to do! Be they possessed by demons?"

"Tis possible, I suppose," said Autumn. "Have you angered any of the gods?"

"How would I know?" asked Joski, shrugging. "I know not what angers them buggers."

"Excuse me," said Logan, leaning forward. "Did you say he went away last Autumn?"

"Aye," said Joski. "What do you know?"

"Tis just the vaguest of thoughts," said Logan, "and not fully formed, but will you tell me exactly what happened when he went away?"

"He went away, what more is there to say?" said Joski angrily.

"Well, did he take anything with him?" asked Logan. "Did he just get up and walk away or disappear in the middle of the night? Did he go into the forest or the sea? What did he do?"

"What does it matter?" demanded Joski.

"I do not know," said Logan, "I just thought it might be important. Umm, where did those scars come from?"

"I don't know," said Joski. "He had a few scars from the fishing but when he came back there were a lot more."

“What are you thinking?” asked Autumn.

“I am thinking Ikam may not have gone on his own,” said Logan.

“Of course he did,” said Joski, angrily. “Nckool were with him and she didn't go anywhere.”

“Nckool?” said Autumn in surprise. “What do you mean, Nckool was with him?”

“Aye,” said Joski. “There was a storm and him and Nckool went off up the bay to see if anything had been washed up. Sometimes we find things that have been washed off boats or a dead animal or something.”

“So the two of them went off but only Nckool came back?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Joski then she thought for a moment. “No,” she said slowly. “Neither of them came back. Near dusk I went out to look and found her on the arm of the bay.”

“Was she hurt?” asked Logan.

“No, she was just sitting there,” said Joski, thinking back. “She was staring out to sea.”

“Did you ask her what happened to Ikam?” asked Autumn.

“Of course,” said Joski, “but she wouldn't say. She just sat there and I came running back and got Zyre and Joise to come looking. Next day we spread out beyond the bay looking for his body in case it be washed up somewhere.”

“I venture Nckool has not spoken since that day,” said Logan.

“Aye, you may be right,” said Joski thoughtfully. “I was out of my mind with worry and not thinking about them as was still here but it has been a long time since she has spoken.”

“But she was speaking before Ikam disappeared?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Joski. “I be sure I would have noticed if it hadn't of been worry over Ikam.”

“And this happened last Autumn?” asked Logan.

“You mean ...?” started Autumn, suddenly realising what Logan might be thinking. Logan held his hand up to silence her.

“Aye,” said Joski, seeing his hand and not understanding. “Why?”

“Was it early Autumn or late Autumn?” persisted Logan.

“Oh, what do it matter?” said Joski. She curled her lip, thinking back. “Pah, middle of Autumn, I reckon.”

“I see,” said Logan thoughtfully. “Ikam, umm, do you know Pacane?”

Autumn's eyes widened then she nodded and watched Ikam intently.

“Who be Pacane?” asked Joski looking from Logan to Autumn then Ikam in confusion.

“Ikam,” asked Logan again. “Where is Pacane?”

Ikam stopped rocking and sat up again, staring at the tree. “Pacane be dead,” he said tonelessly.

“Oh Voqev,” said Logan, looking at Autumn in dismay.

“Aye,” said Autumn, looking equally dismayed.

“Who the bliad be Pacane?” screamed Joski, slamming her hand down on the sand. “What is going on here?”

Unseen by any of them, Nckool had crept closer.

“Pacane be a man we met at a mine far in the North of Aferraron,”

said Autumn. "I am saddened that he is dead but that can wait."⁴

"How does Ikam know someone in Aferraron?" said Joski. "He has never been there. Would one of you please tell me what is going on?"

"Last Autumn we were travelling in the Mapdil Mountains," said Autumn, "and we came across a copper mine run by a woman who had made a pact with a creature from the Land of Cysciec."

"Cysciec?" interjected Joski. "Where be Cysciec?"

"It be a place beyond the Land of the Undead," said Autumn.

Joski jerked back in horror and her hand flew to cover her mouth. "Ikam were in the Land of the Undead?" she gasped. "But, but ..."

"Nay, calm yourself," said Autumn, reaching out to take her hand. "Ikam went no further than Aferraron although I wager it were as bad there as in Land of the Undead."

"Tell me," said Joski, her eyes staring and her face taut.

"It was the task of this creature to provide slaves to run the mine," said Autumn. "Pacane was one of them. He had been there the longest and I think Ikam must have been caught by this creature and taken to the mine."

"Oh Lulerain," said Joski, chewing on a knuckle. "Ikam, man, be this true?"

Ikam didn't answer. He just stared at the tree.

Tears started to flow down Joski's checks again as she tried to assimilate what Autumn had been saying.

"But how did he get away?" asked Joski suddenly. "How did he get back here?"

"It had wings," muttered Ikam.

4 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The Second Tale*.

“What was that, love?” asked Joski, looking over at him. “What had wings?”

“The creature,” said Autumn. “It would fly around snatching people to work the mine. Pacane said he was a fisherman and had been taken from his boat.”

“That would explain those scars on Ikam's sides,” said Logan. “There are four each side and Ta'umboq had four talons on each foot.”

“I do not think that is helpful,” said Autumn, quietly.

“Ta'umboq be dead, too,” said Ikam with a small laugh.

“Oh, sorry,” muttered Logan.

“Talons?” said Joski. “You mean it was a bird or something?”

“Not really,” said Autumn, frowning at Logan. “It had a human like body but it had wings and talons on its feet so I would think it snatched people up and carried them off.”

“Oh Lulerain,” said Joski, staring at Ikam's back. “But the other scars?”

“Umm, yes,” said Autumn. “I do not know for certain but there were other creatures at the mine that made the people work. From what little we saw they beat them a lot with sticks.”

“There was no food,” muttered Ikam, “so hungry, so hungry, then they gave us meat. I tried not to but I was so hungry, so hungry all the time.”

“Why did you not want to eat meat?” asked Joski. “If you were hungry then meat be a good thing, surely?”

Ikam started rocking backwards and forwards again, hugging himself.

“Umm,” said Autumn, looking at Logan.

"I think she ought to know," said Logan.

"Tell me," said Joski, going icily calm. "I have to know."

"Umm, the meat they had was the bodies of the slaves who died," said Autumn.

Joski sat there frozen, just staring at Ikam.

"Oh no," she whispered.

Nckool crept forward again and Autumn noticed her.

"You were there, weren't you, little one," she said. "When your Da was taken."

Nckool stared at her then nodded.

"Tell me what happened," said Autumn quietly.

"She be not ..." started Joski wearily but Autumn held up a hand to quieten her. "Tell me, Nckool."

Nckool's eyes burned into Autumn's.

"It came out of the sky," she whispered. "I was playing with a crab and it came out of the sky and I fell over and Da jumped on it and it took him away."

Joski stared at Nckool, her mouth slackly open.

"Bastard wasn't taking my little girl," shouted Ikam in sudden anger. He rolled onto his hands and knees and punched the ground hard. "By Chaahk, I be not letting it take my little girl!"

"What happened then?" asked Autumn quietly.

"It dragged me up in the sky," said Ikam, sitting back on his heels. "It hurt like buggery. Oh forgive me, Joski, I couldn't help it. I tried not to but I couldn't help it."

“Couldn't help what?” asked Joski.

“I pissed myself,” said Ikam, “all over my malu like a little baby.”

“I am not surprised,” said Logan to no one in particular. Autumn shushed him with a quick little frown.

“Don't you worry yourself about that, love,” said Joski, lost in the enormity of what she was hearing. “Washes out easy enough.”

“Twas all my fault,” said Nckool bursting into tears. “I shouldn't have let it take my Da!”

“Twas not your fault, baby,” said Ikam hurrying over to her on his hands and knees. “Tis my job to protect you and I did what I could.” He grabbed her tightly in his arms. “You be saved, that's what matters.”

Joski stared at them both, her mouth opening and closing and her hands twitching then she jumped up and grabbed them both and the three of them tumbled to the sand, tears flowing freely.

Autumn nudged Logan. “Let us go for a walk,” she muttered. “Give them some time alone together.”

“Aye,” said Logan getting up. “I do not remember seeing Ikam there but I wager he be one of the ones who got away after. How in Sploop's name did he find his way back here? And why does that little girl hate you?”

Chapter Four

“Hello,” said a voice from the jungle.

Autumn turned round quickly at the unexpected voice then realised that the sounds of the waves had probably masked the sound of the girl in the undergrowth.

“Hello,” she replied with a smile. Her head was still aching but it was beginning to ease.

Logan heard the voices from further along the beach and started walking back. They hadn't had any luck so far finding any of their belongings.

“Be you the strangers washed up in the night?” asked the girl. She was fairly short and stocky but decidedly voluptuous and had a faraway look in her eye.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I am Autumn and that is Logan. Are you one of Joski's children?”

“I am Lala, Joise's almost,” said Lala, wrapping a length of her hair around a finger. “He told me of you. What are you doing?”

“We are looking for anything else that might have been washed ashore,” said Autumn.

“Ohh, a treasure hunt,” said Lala happily. “Can I come with you? I love looking for things. Are you looking for something or just anything?”

“We would enjoy your company,” said Autumn. “We are looking for the things we had with us. My robe and our staffs and a few other things.”

“Oooh, a robe,” said Lala throwing her hair back and stepping fully out of the jungle. “You must be important people if you be wearing robes. Be it covered in gold and pearls and all fine things?”

“We are not in the least bit important,” said Logan. “It be just a simple robe for the warmth. It can get cold where we are from.”

“Oh,” said Lala, losing interest. “Then you won't be needing it here. 'Tis never cold. Where are you from?”

“Aferraron,” said Autumn.

“Where is that?” asked Lala, looking around the beach.

“I am not sure,” said Autumn, “but it is across the sea somewhere over there.”

“Really?” said Lala, opening her eyes wide. “How did you get here?”

“We were travelling in the Ahon Hara mountains,” said Logan as Autumn started to walk along the beach again. “When we got to the end of the mountains we found the coast. Way out on the horizon we could see a small dot and someone told us it was an island. Autumn wanted to go visit it.”

“And was it an island?” asked Lala, walking beside Logan.

“Yes,” said Logan, slightly taken aback as he'd meant the island they were standing on. “This is it.”

“Ohh,” said Lala with a giggle. “Did you swim all the way?”

“No, we built a raft,” said Autumn. “There were a lot of fallen trees so we tied some together with creepers and used that. We were almost here when the storm hit and broke the raft apart and the sea washed us up here.”

“I wonder where the trees of the raft ended up,” said Logan. “Mayhap they be on this beach too and our things be not far away.”

“If they are not then you will never see them again,” said Lala. “The storm came from the South East so this be about the last place they would be. If they went past this bay then they be floating on forever.”

"I know we are on Zuit," said Autumn, "but where on Zuit I have no idea."

"This be Bay of Sutajelen," said Lala. "We be at the far end of Zuit. There be nothing further North until you get to the edge of the world. Most likely your raft and things be fallen off the edge by now or eaten by the sea monsters what live up there."

"Oh," said Logan. "That be disappointing."

"We can replace what we need, Logan," said Autumn, her eyes scanning the beach for anything that wasn't a fallen palm frond or a coconut. "So, Lala, who else lives in this bay?"

"Just us," said Lala, bending to pick up a shell. She spat on it and rubbed it with her thumb.

"Who is us?" asked Autumn.

"Me and Joise," said Lala inspecting the shell closely. "And Zyre and Gia and Ikam and Joski and Nckool, although Ikam be not here for much longer, I wager."

"Why do you say that?" asked Logan.

Lala slipped the shell inside her malu. "Oh, he be mazed," she said with a shrug. "Be going to the Isle of the Lost soon enough, I reckon."

"What is mazed?" asked Logan.

"Mazed?" said Lala, "you know, doolally," and she waggled her finger beside her head.

"No," said Autumn, stopping walking to look at her. "I be thinking his mind is sound. He just had a very bad experience that has left him upset but I think he will recover in time."

"Oh yes," said Lala disinterestedly. She kept on walking. "I be not knowing him long but he be right strange. Joise says he has lost his mind. My Ma's brother's almost's sister's uncle were like that. He were

in a war and they lost his mind somewhere. He ended up on the Isle of the Lost as well, or so they say.”

“What is the Isle of the Lost?” asked Logan.

“It be a place for them as have lost their minds,” said Lala. “This be the end of the bay. Come on up, I will show you something.”

The beach had ended in a grassy, treeless ridge that ran out some distance into the sea.

“You see?” said Lala when they got to the top. “That be the end of the world over yonder. What ain’t on the beach be out there somewhere.”

The land ended abruptly here. It carried on off to the left but ahead and to the right there was nothing but water, and birds. A lot of birds.

“Oh,” said Logan flatly. He looked round to the right then back ahead. “So the storm yesterday was blowing that way?”

“Aye,” said Lala. “Bit a luck you be ending up on our beach else you be out there too, feeding the fish.”

“Well,” said Autumn, “we did not find our things on the beach so they must be out there somewhere. ’Tis unfortunate but that is how it is.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “I hope Fiau floated to somewhere safe.”

“Who be Fiau?” asked Lala.

“My staff,” said Logan. “I was fond of it.”

“Oh,” said Lala giving him a puzzled look. “Umm, shall we go back now?”

“What lies off that way?” asked Autumn, pointing to the left.

“Oh just a few folk,” said Lala. “Fishers like us. Ooqite be inland a little. That be the nearest village and that be where I am from.”

“Are there any towns on the island?” asked Autumn, rotating to look at the low mountain that grew out of the jungle behind them.

“Aye,” said Lala. “There be Uysoma down South aways. I have never been there but they say it be a huge place and full of fun and excitement and endless merrymaking. Have you been there?”

“No,” said Autumn, making her way back down to the beach. “This bay be the only place we have been on Zuit. Tell me more about Ikam and Joski.” She started to follow the water's edge to see if she could spot anything floating in the water.

“Not much to tell,” said Lala. “They just be old people what sits around and be not doing much.”

“How long have you lived here?” asked Logan.

“Just over four moons,” said Lala. “I be coming here before Ikam came back. It were quiet then but him returning made it quieter still. Hey, will you still be here in a few days?”

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “We have no hurry to be elsewhere and I would like to spend some time with Ikam. Mayhap I can help him some. What happens in a few days?”

“It be Tanavac of Ruglaa,” said Lala. “That be great fun.”

“What is the Tanavac of Ruglaa?” asked Autumn.

“It be a festival,” said Lala. “There will be eating and drinking and dancing and much merry making for the followers of Foqoo.”

“We are not followers of Foqoo,” said Logan.

“Neither am I,” giggled Lala. “I be a follower of tanavacs, not that there are many. Anyway, them as is Ruglaans be not minding.”

“Are Ruglaans followers of Foqoo?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Lala. “Right strange folk they be too.”

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“They be liking fire and things,” said Lala vaguely. “They cover themselves in ashes and do funny things.”

“So Fogo be a deity of fire?” asked Autumn.

“Can't rightly say,” said Lala. “Them as is Ruglaans don't be talking much about it but they put on a good tanavac which be all that matters.”

“Will you all be going?” asked Logan.

“Me and Joise will be,” said Lala, “and Zyre and Gia most like but not the others, they be too old and Nckool be too young. 'Twill be the best time if you both come too.”

“Aye, no doubt,” said Autumn, “but I do not dance.”

“Why ever not?” asked Lala, stopping to stare at her in astonishment. “Dancing be the best fun.”

“I do not know how to,” confessed Autumn.

“Then you must come!” cried Lala, dancing a few steps on the beach. “Me and Logan will teach you and you will have the bestest time!”

“Can you dance, Logan?” asked Autumn, curious.

“Very badly,” said Logan, “but from what I have seen it does not matter. Them as is dancing have usually had too much to drink and be mostly falling over and them as is not be laughing at them.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “We shall see. Mayhap we will have to move on before that time comes. So you be the almost-era'owen of Joise? He be the son of Ikam and Joski?”

“Aye,” said Lala. “He be middle son. Zyre be oldest and Gia be his almost, and Siplet be the youngest.”

“Does Siplot live here as well?” asked Autumn.

“No, he be in Uysoma, he be apprentice barrel maker,” said Lala. “Faswe be the oldest girl, she be in Ooqite with her almost.”

“So they have five children?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Lala, “and Gia be with child and me too soon, I be hoping.”

“Ahh, that is good news,” said Autumn, “for Gia at least and I hope the same will be true for you soon. The bad news though is that we are back at the huts and we have seen no sign of our things. I venture they be gone forever.”

“Aye, well, you can probably get what you need in the village,” said Lala. “I best be getting back to mine. Joise be almost finished repairs, I reckon.”

“It was nice meeting you, Lala,” said Logan. “Before you go, can I ask, umm, is Lala short for anything?”

“Sephiralalala,” said Lala, grimacing. “Horrible name is it not? At least they do not call me Sephi, that would be right bad. Be not forgetting the tanavac!” She ran off beside the stream with a wave and a happy smile.

“What I am not understanding,” said Logan watching her go, “is why they give each other long names then shorten them? Why not just give a short name to begin with?”

“’Tis only strange because we are not from here,” said Autumn.

“Shhh,” hissed Joski coming out from her hut. “Keep your voices down. Ikam be asleep and I am not wanting him woken. It be the first decent sleep he has had for a long time. Come over here.”

She led them over to a shady part of the beach away from the stream.

“There is still much I do not understand,” said Joski sitting down, “but

I thank you for what you have done.”

“We have done nothing,” said Autumn.

“Actually you have done a lot,” said Joski, looking back at the hut. “’Tis the first time he has spoken anything about what happened to him and I venture his sleeping be because of that.”

“I know something of the healing of hurts to the body,” said Autumn, “but little of hurts to the mind. Mayhap what has happened to him be festering inside and needs to come out, like the lancing of a boil.”

“Let us hope so,” said Joski. “After you went he told some more about what happened. Something about beating rock into small pieces?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “The process as was explained to me is that the rock was cut from the mountain then made into a powder then mixed with water and dried then roasted and the copper was the end result. I do not pretend to understand it but I was told that the further through the process the shorter the person's life. ’Tis fortunate that Ikam be near the beginning.”

Joski shuddered. “’Twould seem a most evil thing,” she said. “Tell me, how came you to be involved?”

“We needed some paraks to buy warm clothes,” said Autumn, “and we were offered work helping a man deliver goods to the mine.”

“But you were not part of the running of the place?” asked Joski, watching Autumn's face closely.

“Most definitely not,” said Autumn. “When we delivered the supplies we were taken round the mine and it was apparent that it was a place of grievous badness.”

“Hmm,” said Joski. “Before he fell asleep, Ikam be telling me why he be scared of you. Seems he be thinking you be taking over the mine from them as was running it and he be afraid you be here to take him back.”

“Mizule!” said Autumn in surprise. “That be most definitely not so. The mine exists no more. It be ended and none shall return there.”

“You speak truth?” asked Joski, watching her intently.

“Yes,” said Autumn. “I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Mizule and Vallume of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup. On my honour I swear that I speak the truth.”

“I know not what any of that means,” said Joski, “but it seems to me that your face speaks the truth so I shall accept your word of honour. Tell me how it is that the mine is no more.”

“Autumn killed the woman who ran the mine and the creature that enslaved the people,” said Logan, knowing that Autumn would try to minimise her role. “And she sought the aid of the spirits of the woods and the rivers for the destruction of the mine.”

Joski stared at Logan then turned her gaze on to Autumn.

“You are indeed a woman of many talents,” said Joski at length. “To look at you I would not believe it possible.”

Autumn shrugged. “I cannot be responsible for how you perceive me,” she said. “I am what I am and that be the end of it.”

“A Krisana of whatchamacallit,” said Joski.

“Aye,” said Autumn.

Joski nodded thoughtfully. “And that twirly stuff you were doing with Nckool earlier?” she asked. “Be that part of this Krisana thing?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “My Esyup be of Morath, the deity of War, and I be a follower of Mizule, deity of Warriors. I have spent much of my life learning the skills of fighting.”

“Autumn has bested Yammoe,” said Logan proudly.

“Tis not so,” said Autumn. “I had the help of a powerful sorcerer.”

“Pah,” said Logan. “You brought me back from the Land of the Undead and Yammoe tried to stop you. You bested It else I would not be here now.”

“I would argue with you on that score, Logan,” said Autumn, “but I wager it be a debate Joski here has little interest in.”

“I, ..., ahh,” said Joski, looking somewhat overwhelmed. “You be speaking truth? Both of you?”

“Yes,” said Logan firmly.

“No,” said Autumn equally firmly. “I did not bring you back unaided.”

Joski sat there with a strange expression on her face.

“’Twould seem beyond belief,” she said after a while. “But if I am not mistaken, the essence of what you be saying is that if you wanted to take Ikam away no one here could stop you?”

“I do not want to take him away,” said Autumn.

“But if you did,” persisted Joski, “you could do so easily?”

“No,” said Autumn. “It would be immensely difficult for me as it would be contrary to every belief I hold dear.”

“Excuse me,” said Logan. “Joski, please forgive Autumn. She has spent much of her life in a remote place with only a handful of philosophers to keep her company and as such is not fully understanding the meaning of your question.”

“I do fully understand it, Logan,” said Autumn. “I was merely trying to explain that the scenario was an impossibility regardless of any skill, real or implied, on my part and, do not forget, we are not fully familiar with the circumstances here. Others may have skills unknown to me and a correct answer to the question needs to take that unknown into consideration.”

“Quite,” said Logan. “Now will you let me answer Joski?”

"If you must," said Autumn.

"Thank you," said Logan. "Joski, if Autumn wanted to take Ikam away, none here could stop her."

"Logan!" said Autumn with a trace of anger. "You misrepresent me."

"As I suspected," said Joski, ignoring Autumn. "Now, do you know how Ikam got away from that place?"

"Yes," said Logan.

"No," said Autumn.

"Of course we do," said Logan. "After you killed Ta'umboq the slaves were able to get away."

"We do not know this," said Autumn. "Ikam may have been one of the ones who escaped when we left the prison door unbarred."

"No, he did not," said Logan. "He must have been there when you bested the adnats and Ta'umboq."

"You cannot know that for certain, Logan," said Autumn, "you were not there yourself. You had been taken away by Cymogene. This is pure supposition."

"He must have seen you defeat Ta'umboq and the adnats," said Logan. "How else would he know of your twirly things?"

"Ah," said Autumn. "I did not think of that."

"Exactly," said Logan. "So we do know how he escaped. He escaped with the others."

"I have no idea what you two are talking about," said Joski, frowning, "but there were others?"

"Yes," said Logan, "although I have no idea how many did escape in the end nor what happened to them afterwards."

“Would you talk with Ikam about this?” asked Joski. “I feel it be most important that he knows the mine be all over and that you are not here to take him back. Mayhap even prove that you could take him back with ease if you wanted to but that you will not?”

“I am very happy to talk with him,” said Autumn, “but I venture proving my skills may make him more fearful than less. He may see it as a threat, especially if he does not fully believe me. He may think I am just playing with him as a cat does with a mouse.”

“Aye, there is that,” said Joski with a heavy sigh. “Oh Lulerain, I know not what to do for the best.”

“Oh, I think that is quite simple,” said Autumn. “You must give him all your love and support. Once he truly understands that the past is wholly in the past and will not return he will, I am sure, be able to come to accept what has happened and bring it to a close. I venture it will take time but it seems to me that something important has happened here today. I suspect that he has been trying to hide from his terrors and deny they happened but they come back in his dreams and things that may appear to be ordinary to you or I may bring back memories and play on his fears.”

Joski pondered this.

“Aye,” she said finally. “You may be right. Zyre told me that yesterday when they were out in the boat Ikam saw a bird in the sky and was frightened. You tell me this Tumblack thing had wings so 'twould seem he thought the bird was it. Lulerain knows what other things he saw.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and it seems to me that talking about these things with him be the way forward. Not to make light of it but to explain. For sure if you or any of the others laugh at him for being scared of a bird it will only add to his problems but if you can explain that what he sees is actually a bird and not the return of Ta'umboq he will, I venture, in time lose his fears.”

“I think you are right,” said Joski. “For sure it is the only way forward that anyone has thought of. Ayah, the poor man. My heart bleeds for him and what he must have suffered.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and now I have met Ikam I be wondering what has happened to the others who got away and what they are going through.”

“And Nckool,” said Logan.

“What?” said Joski, jerking backwards. “Nckool? What has she to do with all this?”

“Did you not hear what she said?” asked Logan. “She blames herself for Ta’umboq taking her Da away. I wager that be why she hates Autumn.”

“What on the beach are you talking about, man?” demanded Joski. “She be not hating Autumn. How could she? She has never seen Autumn before.”

“That be why she attacked her, I wager,” said Logan thoughtfully. “I told you she was showing us her dance but that was not the case.”

“But why would she hate Autumn?” demanded Joski.

“Mayhap she knows Ikam thinks she be here to take him away,” said Logan. “Mayhap she be trying to protect him, the way she thinks she should have done last Autumn.”

Chapter Five

The fallen palm tree lay across the stream, supported by its twisted and torn roots on one side and the sturdy branch of a gangan tree on the other and made a convenient bridge. The palm was near a waterfall; not so near that it was soaked by spray but close enough to lie over the deep pool that had been dug by the waterfall over the aeons. Beyond the pool the stream widened and became shallow and ran its final stretch through the lush green jungle, past the huts and down across the beach where it mingled with the waves.

Autumn and Logan had bathed in the pool the day before, washing the salt of the sea from their skin and clothes and some of the aches from their muscles and joints. That salt was now long gone. It had flowed with the stream and rejoined the salt of the sea. The tree had remained, inevitably. It was far from rotten and would be there for a long time yet. Autumn now sat on that bridge, cross-legged and unmoving, balanced over the centre of the pool. Her eyes were shut and her hands loose in her lap. Her mind wandered, unfettered, while her ears absorbed the unfamiliar sounds of this unfamiliar land, ever mindful but, as yet, unalarmed.

“Krrraaaaakk k k k k k kuwhip,” resonated, somewhere to the left. Probably a bird of some kind but perhaps not. It could even have been one of those large lizards she had glimpsed but it did not sound threatening. Threats were usually quiet and stealthy; they rarely broadcast their presence loudly.

A sudden barrage of screams caused Autumn's head to jerk and her eyes to half open but their quick mutation into howls let her relax. Some other unknown creature, or creatures by the multi-layered noises, were awakening, or possibly even announcing their intent to sleep. The separation of day and night in this dense jungle at the foot of this ridge wasn't clear. In the afternoon's intense light this pool had been dark and tranquil. Now, at the first light of Astauand's new day, it could as easily have been the middle of a moonless night.

Beneath the palm, hanging upside down from an improbable number of hook tipped feet, stalked a caterpillar. Twenty or more feet gripped the palm and twenty or more feet released their grip as the caterpillar

arched its back before flattening again to grip further forward. It was intent on the succulent palm leaves at the end of the tree. It moved as an undulating wave, unconsciously mimicking the waves out to sea, oblivious to the spider that watched. Perhaps intrigued by the smell of something new the caterpillar paused, its antennae twitching, then it started to undulate around the trunk of the palm, climbing up to explore the possibilities of what sat above. The spider edged round the trunk as well, tracking the caterpillar. It needed caution as the caterpillar, whilst good eating, was twice its length and a well placed flick could dislodge the spider to a watery death.

The caterpillar stopped, confused. The scents of Autumn were strange so its antennae spread and wavered, testing the air around her calf as it rested on the top of the trunk. Undecided, the caterpillar raised its front twenty or more legs and sought a grip on her leg. It didn't feel like bark or a plant stem so the caterpillar froze and tested the surface again with its antennae. All was not well in its world and the caterpillar twisted to the side and put its legs down onto solid palm tree bark. Normality restored it ignored the rest of Autumn and made its undulating way around her, drawn by the comforting familiarity of palm fronds not far away.

The spider followed. The bristly hairs on its back brushed Autumn's knee. It paused momentarily then sent out an exploratory leg to tap and feel. Whatever this was it went up so the spider started to climb. It sensed an opportunity to land on top of the caterpillar, to bury its fangs in the caterpillar's neck with its body held down by the spider's. Far more effective than biting the caterpillar from behind and risking the caterpillar flicking.

Autumn felt the spider climb onto her leg. She felt its hard little feet on her skin and the brush of the hairs of its belly. She suppressed the primordial urge to slash down with a hand and leap up and scream but could not stop her skin twitch and flutter as the spider moved. She inhaled deeply and deliberately calmed her mind and tried to ignore it.

"All things will pass," she reminded herself, several times, and slowly the spider passed.

The eight pin pricks went down to four then two then disappeared entirely from her lower thigh and she exhaled slowly, admitting in the clarity of her mind that it was from relief and not merely a breathing exercise. Her meditation disturbed she opened her eyes and suppressed her curiosity long enough to raise her arms above her head and stretch. Slowly she lowered her arms to rest her hands on her knees and only then did she allow herself to look.

In a light so dim as to barely qualify as light she saw something writhing, something almost as long as her forearm and as thick as her thumb. The spider, its body wider than her hand, had its legs wrapped tightly around the soft body of the caterpillar as it hung on, tossed up and down as the caterpillar arched and straightened, forty or more legs scrabbling to grip the palm tree as it tried to dislodge its attacker.

Autumn peered at the life and death struggle then, using her arms, she shifted herself a goodly way along the trunk to watch without becoming involved. The familiar cycle of life and death continued, even here, in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar creatures and it was good to become familiar with the unfamiliar.

“Krrraaaaakk k k k k k,” cried ... something ... not far away. Then, with a flurry of grey-white feathers and a small gust of wind the spider and caterpillar disappeared from the palm. An instant later, two huge eyes glowed at Autumn from a small, grey white body perched on the topmost root of the palm, a caterpillar in its beak, writhing and twisting on each side, and several spider legs tapping helplessly. The ariu blinked slowly at Autumn, assessing her as a potential rival then its head bobbed and the caterpillar and the spider disappeared, perhaps forever or perhaps only until their rebirth in some future cycle.

“k k,” said the ariu, perhaps in a friendly way, perhaps contemptuously, it was difficult to tell. It blinked one eye then flew off, climbing the waterfall effortlessly.

Autumn unfolded her legs and let them dangle then slid off the palm into the pool. She sank into its depth and the cool water closed over her head. Her feet touched the mud and weeds at the bottom briefly

then her head broke the surface again. A quick kick and she was at the bank. She climbed out and wiped the water from her face then followed the stream back down to the beach.

Logan was sitting on the sand with his back against a tree, studying a piece of fruit in his hands. He kept turning it over and over and occasionally prodding it.

“Hello,” said Autumn going over to join him. “What are you doing?”

“Hello,” he said glancing up. “Joski told me last night that this be a bligibery and be most delicious to eat but that it be poisonous when unripe.”

“Really?” said Autumn. She sat beside him and took the fruit and examined it. “How do you know when it is ripe?”

“Joski said it be ripe when it yawns,” said Logan, “but I have no idea what that means.”

“It shows no sign of yawning to me,” said Autumn, passing it back. “Mayhap it be waking up. Best you be asking Joski before you eat it.”

“Aye,” said Logan, tossing the bligibery onto the sand beside him. “Are you not doing your exercises today?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I still ache and my muscles are stiff so I should but I decided it would be best not to. I do not want Ikam to see me and become fearful again, thinking I be fighting another Ta'umboq or some such.”

“I think he has gone fishing,” said Logan. “Certainly Zyre and Joise have.”

“Tis not in my training to regret the loss of things,” said Autumn, starting to comb her wet hair with her fingers, “but I do regret the loss of my comb. I have not seen a nekmit bush as yet nor anything to use as a substitute.”

“I will ask Joski when I see her next,” said Logan. “I think she is still

sleeping. I woke in the night and heard her voice. Did you sleep well?"

"I slept very well," said Autumn. She paused her combing and looked seriously at Logan. "I wish to offer you my apologies."

"What for?" asked Logan, puzzled.

"Yesterday was a strange day," said Autumn, resuming her combing. "I was thinking on this in my meditation. We were washed ashore in a storm, carried to a hut and thrown into a confused and difficult situation amongst strangers. I had ills to my body and a blow to my head and my mind was awry so I took refuge in the familiarity of abstractions. I should not have argued such irrelevancies as who exactly brought you back from the Land of the Undead and such like when, as you rightly said, Joski was looking for another meaning. She was wanting reassurances and solutions not philosophy and exactitude. Her concerns be with the welfare of her man and not the purity of truth."

"You need never apologise to me, Autumn," said Logan, "and 'tis my fault for bringing up the Land of the Undead in the first place. I should not have done so as I venture it made Joski more fearful, not less. It just be that I wanted her to know that you be someone to trust."

Autumn smiled and put her hand on Logan's arm.

"I thank you, friend Logan," she said. "They say in my Esyup that when no one will support you you must walk forward alone and not walk backwards in company. 'Tis nice to know that you are always with me, whatever direction we go in."

Logan went pink. "Aye, and with you," he mumbled.

"And I thank you for your quick thinking yesterday, as well," said Autumn. "'On reflection I think it was right sensible of you to tell Lala that we be building a raft. I did not think so at the time as I fancied a family of fishers would know much of boat building and would be wanting details we could not supply but I now realise that such folk would not be asking about what they already know."

“I confess that had not occurred to me,” said Logan, “and thinking about it it would not have helped if they had decided we were liars. I was just reluctant to tell Lala we had a magic staff that could turn itself into a boat. Mayhap I be thinking somehow that they would find Fiau and keep her rather than return her to us.”

“Well, that be a good point as well,” said Autumn. “I wonder where she is now.”

“I venture she cannot be too far away,” said Logan. “I was thinking on this while you were back there. I seem to remember there was a big wave that hit us from the side and threw us into the sea but as you cannot swim and I can only swim poorly we must have been close to the beach. If we had been a long way out then we would surely have drowned.”

“You are probably right,” said Autumn. “I have no memory of falling into the sea. I remember the storm hitting us and our little boat being thrown around by big waves and that I was having to control my fear to the exclusion of all else. I confess I do not like water bigger than a stream. Mayhap Fiau stayed afloat and was carried further by the storm.”

“If that be so then she most likely be heading Northwards to the end of the world,” said Logan. “We searched this beach and I cannot see how she could have floated against the storm to another beach down to the South. Same goes with your robe. It would have floated, I reckon, but Sploop knows where to.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “And my pack most likely sank. My knife and my thinking stone and my pot of salve were in it and they would not have floated.”

“I lost my stone too,” said Logan. “’Tis a shame but I cannot see what we can do about it. Mayhap Mother Midcarn could drain the sea so we can search the bottom of it but we cannot.”

“Now that be a thought,” said Autumn. “I wonder if Mother Midcarn has decided we no longer need those things and she has taken them from us?”

"You think she sent the storm?" asked Logan. "Twould seem rather harsh."

"No, I think not," said Autumn. "Joski said they get a lot of storms in these parts but mayhap Mother Midcarn took the opportunity to separate us from those things."

Logan wrinkled his nose. "Why would she not just take them back?" he asked. "That would seem easiest."

"Well, yes," said Autumn. "And chance still has a hand in most things. Not everything is caused by Mother Midcarn. No matter, the end result is the same. Those things are gone and we are here so we make the best of it." She paused and looked along the beach. "There is something I would talk with you about."

"Ooooh," said Logan, looking mildly excited. "Autumn needs my help in deciding something? This be an exciting day!"

Autumn grimaced.

"Contain yourself," she said. "If you were not here I would decide on my own. It just be that you have a perspective on things that I do not."

Logan laughed. "I be teasing you," he said. "You often ask my thoughts on things."

"You mean that was another of your jokes?" asked Autumn, frowning.

"Aye," said Logan grinning happily at her. She had an endearing look when she was confused by things she couldn't comprehend which was why he teased her.

"You promised you would tell me when you do that," said Autumn, the endearing look turning into a frown.

"I did," said Logan.

Autumn sighed. "Before, not after," she said coldly.

“Ahh,” said Logan. “That would not work. Humour be like fighting, the art is in the timing. If I say ‘I am about to tease you,’ it be like you saying ‘I be about to hit you’ and the moment is lost.”

Autumn sighed and shook her head.

“This be one fight I wager I will not win,” she said softly.

“Hah!” said Logan delightedly. “You can best adnats, tarc, even Yammoe itself but you cannot best me! What does that say, hey?”

“That you be the most evil of all creatures,” said Autumn, staring him challengingly in the eyes.

“Oh well done,” said Logan, tapping his hands together. “You made your first joke.”

“I be not joking,” said Autumn, keeping her face straight.

“Oh,” said Logan. He pouted. “You be not meaning that, surely?”

“Of course not,” said Autumn, smiling radiantly. “Did I really make a joke?”

“Aye,” said Logan then he frowned. “If you be taking up the joking then mayhap I should be learning to fight like you.”

“I am very happy to teach you what I can,” said Autumn. “Twill not be easy as your body is already full grown and has not learnt suppleness but we will do what we can.”

“I was joking,” said Logan. “Mayhap I can stab someone with a knife but my limbs be too much all over the place to be learning your manner of control. Anyway, why do I need to fight? I have you to protect me and what better protection could anyone have?”

“Even so,” said Autumn, “twould be good if you can learn to hit someone with a staff and not hit yourself or me with the other end. That alone would be a benefit.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, suddenly feeling a touch disgruntled. “But as I have no staff anymore there be little need. Anyway, what did you want to talk to me about?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “What be your thoughts on moving on today and not tarrying for a time?”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “I thought you wanted to stay to help Ikam?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “That was my thought yesterday but while I was meditating it seemed to me that mayhap my being here might bring him continuing fears, an ever present reminder of what happened to him. Especially if I do my exercises. My twirling and what not may make him keep reliving my fight with the adnats and Ta'umboq.”

“Hmm,” said Logan. He thought about it for a few moments. “’Tis certainly a thought to consider, although it could be argued that you being here for a few days could help to reassure him that it is all over, especially if you do not do your exercises and so not remind him of the fighting.”

“I am reluctant to do that,” said Autumn. “If I cannot do my exercises then I cannot but if I do not do them for long then I become slow and lose control and ’tis laborious to regain that. One day such as today is not major but several days will accumulate badly. Sadly there is no clear space around here that I have found save the beach itself and that be too open.”

“You could do your exercises when he is away fishing,” said Logan.

“True,” said Autumn, “but there will always be someone around to talk of it.”

“A fair point,” said Logan, “and I wager your skills be such that they will talk endlessly. But what of Ikam?”

“I be thinking on that,” said Autumn. “We have arrived here and explained what happened and that Ta'umboq and the mine be no more. I dare say I might teach Ikam some ways of controlling his mind and thoughts but I venture he needs to get some way ahead of where

he is now before that might benefit him. It seems to me that now he is able to talk of these things and them as loves him are able to listen and understand then he should be getting past his demons. I be not seeing that I can do much more to help and in time Nckool will come to understand I am not a threat to her Da.”

“Aye, you make a good case,” said Logan, “although I venture Lala will be most upset.”

“Lala?” said Autumn, taken aback. “Why would she be upset?”

“Because we will not be going to the tanavac with her,” said Logan.

“Surely you are joking again,” said Autumn with a deep frown.

“Aye,” said Logan. “Seems to me that so long as Lala be going she be happy, regardless of who with. So, shall we talk to Joski? I think she be waking up.”

Chapter Six

“I suppose we will have to try to find some work again,” said Logan. The thought did not excite him.

Joski had tried to give them her cooking knife as a token of her thanks when they announced they were leaving but Autumn had refused it. In fact, Autumn wouldn't accept anything as Joski and her family had little beyond what they needed for fishing. All she did accept was an explanation of what was meant by a bligibery yawning, a coconut each, a couple of dried fish and the suggestion that they followed the coast South if they wanted to get to Uysoma.

“It be quicker going round than going over,” Joski had said, referring to the mountain that dominated the centre of the island.

The mountain wasn't as high as any they had encountered in the Mapdil Mountains or the Ahon Hara volcanoes but it was still high enough so they had set off without a goodbye to anyone other than Joski. And Nckool, of course, who had scowled but not attacked Autumn again so things seemed to be improving on that front as well. They were some way beyond the bay when Logan asked his question. Each had been quietly thinking their own thoughts up until then.

“There be no urgency,” said Autumn.

The lump on her head had not got any smaller – these things take time – but the stabbing pain from it had settled into a dull, continuous ache. Much like the small aches in various muscles and joints. Despite her vigorous daily exercises the storm lashed sea had pushed and pulled her body in new and unexpected ways and her body was letting her know that it was not entirely happy. Logan, on the other hand, walked with a slightly stiffer gait than normal and the back of his nose and throat still burned from some salt water that must have gone up it.

Logan sighed. “We have nothing,” he said after a while.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Is it not freeing?”

“I suppose it is in some sense,” he said. “But I can foresee a difficulty or two.”

“Joski said there be plenty of streams running off the mountain into the sea,” said Autumn, “so there be plenty of fresh water. We have no need of water skins, not for some time anyway.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, “but what of food? There be plenty of coconuts but we will need a knife to open them. Aye, and to prise off any shellfish we find on rocks too. I wager catching a fish will be nigh on impossible without a knife to trim a stick.”

“There be plenty of fruits and roots in the jungle,” said Autumn. “Although a knife will be useful, I admit. We do not need the blankets as it seems to be always hot here and I imagine we will pick some more thinking stones and a needle and thread from somewhere. Likewise some salve for my lips. This place is not deserted.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “but have you actually looked for fruit and roots? Most things here seem to be different and I know not what they are or whether they be good eating or poisonous and Sploop knows what dangerous animals be around.”

“Well, yes, there is that,” said Autumn. “Who knows how many died before they learnt what was safe and what was poisonous. Like those bligiberries. You would think that someone ate one and died and that all would shun them evermore but someone must have eaten one after it ripened and split and did not die. We need knowledge, I venture, not work.”

“If we had money we could buy our food from markets and the like,” said Logan, “and not forage in the jungle and risk death or worse. What if we eat something that makes us blind rather than kills us?”

“You do not seem as cheerful today as you normally are,” said Autumn. “Is there something bothering you?”

“Only that my body aches and I feel very lost in this strange land,” said Logan irritably. “Even though we have travelled a lot and encountered new things, much was familiar but here, pah, Joski did

not even have bread or cheese. Mayhap there be no bread or cheese on this entire island! Mayhap there be no enmern or cows. Coconuts be all very well but a bit of bread be the proper thing with dried fish not this funny white stuff which be full of milk that is not milk and despite that is still dry and crunchy.”

He stopped walking and slumped to the ground, staring out to sea as if wishing he was back on the mainland, or trying to think of a way to get back there. Autumn walked on a few paces then stopped when she realised Logan had fallen behind. She went back and sat beside him.

“I know how you feel,” she said quietly after a few moments. “For some reason I had expected this island to be much like other places where we have been but it seems to be all ferns. Even the trees be big ferns and there be hardly any with branches. There be little that is familiar.”

She put her hand on Logan's shoulder.

“When I left the Esyup I was looking to learn of the world and 'tis only now that I begin to realise how important the familiar is for calmness of mind. New and strange things are more easily accepted in small amounts. Ayah, what say you we carry on until we reach the next stream and camp for a few days until our aches and pains ease. We can spend the time becoming familiar with what is around us as well.”

Logan picked up a handful of sand and let it slide through his fingers then did it again.

“Aye,” he said, after the third handful. “At least we know the coconuts be safe to eat and we can use the time working out how to open them. Come on.”

They got to their feet and carried on walking along the narrow strip between the waves and the jungle.

“And when we reach somewhere with some people and a market,” said Autumn, “we can ask about some work. It has just occurred to me that if we are to leave this island we will need to pay someone to take us as

we no longer have Fiau.”

“Ahh, I did not think of that,” said Logan, “although I suppose we could make a raft of some sort. Do you think these palm trees will float?”

“I have no idea,” said Autumn, “although it will be easy enough to find out. Toss one in the water and see what happens but I venture it would not be the best idea to try to make our own. It would be better to pay someone who knows about these things else we be getting caught in another storm and ending up back with Joski and Ikam.”

“Sploop,” said Logan frowning. “You think we are doomed to keep trying to leave this place and getting cast back again?”

“Oh, I doubt it,” said Autumn. “I be sure that storms will come from other directions sooner or later so I wager one day one will blow us back to Aferraron but someone who knows of these things will be more reliable and, like as not, will not try to kill us in the process.”

“You do not seem overly cheerful yourself,” said Logan. “Tis unlike you to be thinking on death and dying.”

“I was making a joke to cheer you up,” said Autumn, “or trying to at any rate. Is it not funny to escape death from a storm only to die at the hand of an unscrupulous boatman?”

“No,” said Logan sadly. “Not really.”

* * *

“Well,” said Autumn sitting back on her heels. “That be right strange.”

She had reached the stream ahead of Logan because he had stopped to see if the fruit of what looked rather like an apple tree were actually apples. They presumably were because he was hurrying after her with several in his tunic and a half eaten one in his hand.

“What is strange?” he asked reaching her.

"This water," she said. "It is warm."

"Astauand be hot," said Logan. "That is probably why."

"Tis no hotter than when we were at that other stream," said Autumn, "and the water there was quite cool."

"Mayhap that was because of the dead thing in it," said Logan, "and all the flies provided shade."

"And yet I am unconvinced," said Autumn. "Put you hand in."

"Ahh," said Logan, putting his hand in the stream. "I see what you mean. Did you drink any?"

"No," said Autumn. "I was going to cool my face but it be too warm to be cooling much. It does have a faint smell."

"Aye," said Logan, cupping his hand and lifting some water to his nose. "But it does not smell of death or decay. 'Tis more like the smell of the ground, an earthiness. Do you think it is safe to drink?"

"Aye," she said, looking along the banks of the small stream. "There be animal tracks at the edge but no dead animals. I wager it be safe enough."

"Unless they drank and died somewhere else," said Logan warily.

"A fair point," said Autumn. She gazed at the water for a few moments then scooped up a handful and drank it.

"No, don't ... ahhh," said Logan, too late. "You should have let me drink first. I might already be dying from eating this thing like an apple so it would have been less risk for me."

"Not so," said Autumn. "If you have the apple and the water both and die I will not know which killed you. This way if you die I know not to eat the apples and if I die you know not to drink the water."

"You know," said Logan, frowning at her. "I think we be dwelling on

this dying too much. This place be full of animals and birds and insects so I venture most things here are not poisonous.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I was thinking on that as we walked but you were in such a bad humour I did not mention the thought. I wager too if everything be dangerous Joski would have warned us to avoid everything except those few things that are safe rather than just warning us of the bligiberries.”

“You could have told me that thought earlier,” said Logan curling his lip in disdain.

“You were not inclined to listen earlier,” said Autumn. “You were determined not to like this place.”

“And you were?” countered Logan.

“No,” admitted Autumn. “I was caught up in bad thoughts as well but I have removed them from my mind now.”

“How?” asked Logan. “That would be a skill I would like to learn.”

“If I were at the Esyup,” said Autumn, looking upstream, “I would say it be through the concentrated focusing of my mind on the removal of such thoughts but as we are alone here and there be only you to listen I will admit that it be because my headache has gone. A sore head is a powerful block to focused thinking. Besides, I can teach you little in that area.”

“You think it is beyond me to learn, then?” asked Logan. “I know I am not as clever as you, but surely ...”

“Oh, you could easily learn,” said Autumn. “But you rarely have bad thoughts and when you do it is for good reason and best listened to. You grumble from time to time but you do not truly believe bad things will happen. Where do you suppose this warm water is coming from?”

“I have no idea,” said Logan, getting a nasty feeling about what she was going to say next.

“Have you no curiosity?” asked Autumn, getting to her feet.

“Oh no,” said Logan wearily, recognising the look on her face. “Surely you are not serious? I thought we were going to camp when we found a stream, not go exploring to find out where it comes from. Are you not in need of rest?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but I am also curious. You stay here if you want.”

“Not likely,” said Logan, getting to his feet as well, if somewhat reluctantly. “Mayhap the water be warm because it has come past a baker and there be fresh bread up yonder. Mayhap even a meat pie or two.”

“You see?” said Autumn, stepping into the ankle-deep water. “You always have good useful thoughts. 'Tis I who thinks the bad and who needs to control those thoughts. It would never have occurred to me that there be a baker upstream.”

“Well, why did you think the water was warm?” asked Logan, paddling after her in the shallow warm water.

“I was thinking mayhap there be a fire in the jungle further upstream,” said Autumn, “and that it not be safe to camp here.”

“If that were so then would we not see or smell smoke?” asked Logan.

“Would we not smell the cooking of new bread?” asked Autumn.

“I venture the smell of a jungle burning would be more than that of a few loaves,” said Logan.

“You are probably right,” said Autumn. “Still, is not the search for new knowledge as good as a rest?”

“You have no idea how much I pray to Aloidia that that be so,” said Logan. “Almost as much as I pray there be a baker.”

* * *

“Am I imagining it,” said Logan when they came to a waterfall from a rock overhang not overly far inside the jungle, “or is the water getting warmer?”

“If you are imagining it, I am too,” said Autumn, studying the overhang. “Do you suppose it is warmer up there or if it is heated as it falls down?”

“I wager we are about to find out,” said Logan. “Shall I go first or will you?”

“You know I always go first,” said Autumn. “We do not know what is up there besides the water.”

“How are you going to get up?” asked Logan. “It is not particularly high but it leans out and I see no footholds.”

“But there are hanging creepers, over there,” said Autumn, pointing over to the left.

“Oh, yes,” said Logan unenthusiastically.

Autumn stepped out of the stream, which was now mid calf deep, and pulled one of the creepers. There was a faint snap and it slithered down like a hungry snake and coiled itself at her feet.

“Hmm,” she said and tried another. “This one feels strong.”

She quickly hauled herself up, hand over hand, then levered herself over the edge and disappeared. Logan waited for a few moments then picked up the end of the creeper that had fallen. It looked to have been chewed by something which would have weakened it so he coiled it up and slung it over his shoulder.

“What are you waiting for?” called Autumn, her head appearing over the edge.

“For you to come back down,” called back Logan.

“Tis a nice place to camp,” she called back. “Come on up.”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan.

He grabbed the creeper Autumn had climbed and tested it. It felt reasonably strong so he gripped it higher and tested it with his weight. His shoulder muscles protested vigorously.

“Oh dear,” he muttered and, gripping tightly, he swung his legs up against the rock face. Slowly his hands slid down the creeper until he sat on the ground.

“Is something wrong?” called Autumn.

“I am too tired,” called back Logan. “I cannot get a good enough grip on the creeper.”

“Oh,” called back Autumn. “Wait a moment,” and she quickly climbed down the creeper, nearly landing on Logan as he was still sitting there. “Oops, sorry.”

“All good,” said Logan. “Shall we go back to the beach?”

“You will like it up there,” said Autumn. “Come on, stand up.”

Logan reluctantly stood up then exhaled sharply as Autumn's shoulder jabbed him hard in the stomach. She straightened with Logan dangling over her shoulder.

“What are you doing?” gasped Logan struggling.

“Carrying you up,” said Autumn. “Stop struggling.”

“Oh no,” said Logan. “Sploop, please, no,” then he shut his eyes and clung on to Autumn as she climbed up, this time using two creepers, one in each hand.

“You will need to climb onto the top,” said Autumn a few desperate moments later.

“Where ...?” said Logan forcing his eyes open. There was no sign of the rock face, just the ground some way below.

"It is behind you," said Autumn.

Logan twisted round as far as he could without falling off Autumn's shoulder.

"How ...?" he said, his voice tense.

"Take hold of a creeper," said Autumn, "then jump when I push."

"How do I jump with my legs dangling?" asked Logan, quite reasonably he thought.

"With your back and belly," said Autumn. "Jump."

Logan lurched slightly then Autumn's hand pushed hard on his hip and he thumped to the ground at the top of the rock face. A moment later she jumped onto the ground beside him.

"Did you push me up?" he asked.

"There was no one else," she said, standing up.

"So you were holding on to the creepers with one hand?" asked Logan.

"One was enough," she said. "You are not heavy."

Logan raised a finger and opened his mouth to speak but couldn't think of anything to say.

"Thank you," he said after a few moments.

Autumn smiled. "Look."

"Ohhhh," said Logan turning round.

The jungle wasn't as densely packed here and streams of sunlight filtered through to dapple the lush greenery. The stream itself came from further back but had formed a pool behind the overhanging rock and overflowed to make the waterfall.

“There seems to be plenty of food here,” said Autumn. “Look at those trees, and someone has made a fire over there.”

Logan looked across the pool to where she was pointing. There was another rock, or perhaps part of the same one, that was covered in moss apart from a smallish patch that at some time had been burnt.

“This looks quite a nice place,” said Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I wager we could be comfortable here for a day or two.”

“If the fruit is safe to eat,” said Logan. “I do not recognise any of it.”

Autumn laughed and waded into the pool.

“Ohh,” she said. “This water be even warmer, come on in.”

“Oh yes,” said Logan, stepping gingerly in. “It is nice.”

“And I wager we can eat those big green things,” said Autumn, stepping out the other side.

“Why do you say that?” asked Logan.

“There are some skins over near where the fire was,” said Autumn bending to inspect them. “These be old and rotting but they are the same fruit as the ones on the trees.”

“Good,” said Logan. “I will make a fire in a bit and try some but first I am going to just lie here.”

“In the water?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Logan.

He lifted the coiled creeper from his shoulder and tossed it over by the fire then took the apple like things from inside his tunic and neatly stacked them on the rock. Then he took off his tunic and tossed it carelessly onto the rock as well then lay back in the water.

“Ohhh,” he said, his eyes shut. “That is just bliss.”

“How so?” asked Autumn, squatting on the rock and watching him.

“I can feel the heat seeping into my muscles,” said Logan. “I know not if it be the warmth or there be something in the water but it is sooooo relaxing.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn.

She took off her tunic as well and stepped into the water. She lay back near Logan, her bottom grazing the bottom of the pond and her feet and hands spread out, just floating.

“Aye,” she said. “You are right. I wager it be something in the water. My aches are beginning to ease already. I think I could lie here forever.”

“Oh I wouldn't do that,” said a man's voice. “Your skin will go all wrinkly.”

Chapter Seven

Autumn jack-knifed at the sound of the voice then leapt to her feet but one foot slipped in the thin mud of the bottom of the pond and she fell backwards with a big splash. She instinctively tried to roll to regain her feet but the water slowed her movements and absorbed her momentum so for a few moments she had her head under water with her legs flapping in the air before they fell back. Then she got herself under control and sat up before getting to her feet more sedately. Logan had also reacted, not as fast or as dramatically, but had got distracted by Autumn's chaos.

Autumn spat out a mouthful of water and pulled off a pale green clump of leafy water weed that was covering her eyes and tossed it back in the water.

"Who spoke?" she demanded. She dropped into a defensive posture and cautiously did a full circle, inspecting the banks of the pond and the undergrowth beyond.

"That was most enjoyable," said the voice. "Do it again."

Autumn whirled to face the direction the voice had come from and nearly lost her footing again.

"I do not see anyone," muttered Logan, getting to his feet.

"Show yourself," demanded Autumn.

"Here I am," said a man dropping off the branch of a tree a little way back from the pond. "Or do you want me to show myself as you do?"

He slipped his thumbs under the waist of his malu in a suggestive manner and raised an eyebrow at Autumn. He ignored Logan. He appeared to be alone and unarmed and was quite tall and slim with no hair or beard on his head. He was clearly no burgeoning youth nor did he have the wrinkles of great age but beyond that it was difficult to say.

"There is no need," said Autumn, relaxing slightly. "I am Autumn

Savannah and this be Logan. We are travellers.”

“And you are most welcome here, Autumn Savannah,” said the man, staying where he was. “Although you, Logan, do not interest me. I had thought you be two maids at first but clearly I was mistaken.” He looked her up and down lasciviously.

Autumn dropped her defensive stance and waded to the bank and climbed out, conscious that the man's eyes were following her every move. Quickly she slipped on her tunic and tossed Logan's to him. He didn't see it coming as he was watching the man so it bounced off his arm and fell in the water.

“Oh, what a shame,” said the man, his eyes never leaving Autumn. Then he quickly glanced at Logan. “Put it on, I prefer you covered.” Then he looked back at Autumn and smiled, his eyes clearly taking her tunic off again.

“Where we are from 'tis the custom to say who you are when meeting with strangers,” said Autumn firmly as Logan pulled on his sopping tunic.

“Oh Fogoo, that be even worse,” said the man, glancing at Logan again. “That wet cloth clings in all the wrong places. Mayhap you and Autumn Savannah should swap clothes.”

“This be mine,” said Logan a little nervously. “Autumn's has buttons.”

“And very fetching they are too,” he said walking forward. He stopped in front of Autumn and reached out to touch the top button.

“Hold,” said Autumn, instantly raising her hand to grip his forearm. “You will not touch me.”

“You touched me first,” said the man, not dropping his smile for an instant. He stood unmoving with one eyebrow raised until Autumn slowly released his arm.

“Ohhhh,” he said, pointing a finger at Autumn's eyes and slowly moving it in circles then he suddenly tapped Autumn on the tip of her

nose and laughed uproariously. Or tried to at any rate because somewhere between the tap on her nose and the laugh forming in his throat he found himself thrown over her shoulder and slammed to the ground. Before he had time to grunt in surprise her foot was pressing on his neck and the arm with the pointing finger was being bent over her knee in ways that elbows were not meant to bend.

“Perhaps you did not hear me rightly,” said Autumn, looking down at him. “I told you not to touch me. Is that clearer now?”

“Thh,” said the man through his constricted throat.

“I would be most appreciative if you would remember that,” said Autumn gently. She let go of his arm, took her foot from his throat and helped him to a sitting position. “I apologise if I hurt you. That was not my intent.”

The man rubbed his throat with one hand and his elbow with the other then grimaced. Looking at Autumn as though for permission he slowly reached down and pushed a hand under his buttock and drew out a large pebble.

“Ohh, that is better,” he muttered and tossed it away. “That bit did hurt.”

Autumn stepped back and looked at him.

“You have still not identified yourself,” she said.

“You know who I am,” said the man. He wriggled his bottom into a more comfortable position and sat there calmly, looking up at her. “Else why would you be in my pool?”

“As I said,” said Autumn, “we are strangers here and we did not know this was your pool. We apologise for any offence or trespass through our ignorance.”

“Do you really not know who I am?” asked the man, sounding somewhat surprised and, perhaps, a little hurt by this revelation.

“No,” said Autumn. “We were following the shore and found a warm stream so we decided to see where it came from, that is all.”

“Oh,” said the man, looking downcast. “I am Ibu'oden.”

“At last,” said Autumn. “Greetings, Ibu'oden.”

“At last?” said Ibu'oden, brightening. “So you have heard of me and have been hoping to find me?”

“Alas no,” said Autumn. “I was merely saying that at last you have given us your name. Should your name have some meaning for us?”

“You must be complete strangers and not long in this land then,” said Ibu'oden, “if you have not heard of me.”

“I have heard of you,” said Logan suddenly. “I know not where or when but I have heard the name.”

“Well, that is something,” said Ibu'oden. “So if you have not come to see me why are you here? Oh, yes, you were following the stream. Pah, 'tis a great shame. I was looking forward to doing you some service and claiming payment for it.” He grinned lasciviously at Autumn again.

Autumn sighed and gave him a cold look and he held up a hand placatingly.

“I know, I know,” he said, “I must not touch, but you said nothing about looking and, ahem, imagining.”

Logan laughed then stifled it when Ibu'oden scowled at him.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Only you can control your thoughts. So Ibu'oden, what manner of services do you provide?”

“Whatever your heart desires and more,” said Ibu'oden.

“That be a right useful skill,” said Autumn. “I wager many come looking for such services.”

“A few,” said Ibu'oden, “although oft-times my price be too high. Tell me, Autumn Savannah, what does your heart desire?”

“Peace and harmony in this world and the next,” said Autumn.

Ibu'oden burst out laughing.

“Why are you laughing?” asked Autumn, puzzled.

“I wager he thinks that with your skills you are surrounded by peace and harmony already,” said Logan, a trifle sourly.

“Ohh, the lad be right clever,” said Ibu'oden nodding happily. “That is exactly what I thought.”

“Would that that were so,” said Autumn. “There is little peace and harmony in this world although I do what I can.”

“And in the next?” asked Ibu'oden.

“Ahh, well,” said Autumn. “I have had little success there. But I would ask, will you provide peace and harmony in this small part of the world?”

“What do you offer in return?” asked Ibu'oden.

“The same,” said Autumn.

“And if I decline this splendid offer?” asked Ibu'oden.

“Then mayhap you will encounter the next world sooner than you expect,” said Autumn. “I am loathe to take a life unnecessarily but quick to do so when it is necessary. I have vowed to protect my sanctity and you, I fear, may have designs to the contrary.”

“I do not deny the thought had crossed my mind,” said Ibu'oden, “but such thoughts are like writing writ by a finger in the sand against the oncoming tide of your sanctity. Fleeting and gone forever.”

“So we are agreed?” asked Autumn.

“Insofar as two spirits tossed together by chance can ever agree on anything,” said Ibu’oden.

Autumn sighed. “We are tired and hungry,” she said. “We want nothing more than to rest a while.”

“Then bide your time here,” said Ibu’oden. “You will be at peace with me, although I cannot vouch for the rest of this world or the next.”

“I thank you,” said Autumn. She sat down a comparatively safe distance away from Ibu’oden and Logan sat down not far away from her, still dripping.

“So you live here?” asked Autumn.

“I live everywhere and nowhere,” said Ibu’oden.

“But you claim ownership of this pool?” asked Logan.

“Pah,” said Ibu’oden, snapping his fingers. “I care nothing for ownership.”

“I thought you said this was your pool,” said Autumn

“Did I?” asked Ibu’oden. “I may have done, I do not remember.”

“You said we should know who you are otherwise we would not be in your pool,” said Logan.

“That does sound like the sort of thing I might say,” said Ibu’oden, “but then my pool does not have to mean ownership. It could simply mean the pool that I happened to be in at the time.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, “but, umm, you were not in it.”

“Ahh, you be skilled with words,” said Ibu’oden. “I like you, more than I did before but not as much as I like her.”

Autumn raised a warning finger and Ibu’oden blew her a kiss. “A thought only,” he said with a smile. “Do not take it amiss.”

Autumn just stared at him, emotionlessly and he smiled happily at her.

“So where are you from?” asked Autumn, “if you are not from here?”

“A place of much ignorance,” said Ibu'oden. “And you?”

“I am from a place of vanity,” said Autumn, “but I am familiar with your place.”

“Indeed?” said Ibu'oden. “I am completely unfamiliar with yours.”

Logan snorted derisively and Ibu'oden glanced at him.

“You, I wager, are from a place of disrespect,” he said.

“Nay,” said Logan. “I am from Biasdo. It is so small no one has heard of it, not even those who live there.”

“Biasdo?” said Ibu'oden. “Now that is an interesting coincidence.”

“How so?” asked Logan, curiously.

“I have not heard of it either,” cried Ibu'oden, slapping his thigh in mirth.

“Ha ha,” said Logan, not smiling.

“Tell me,” said Autumn, “this pool. Do you know why it is hot?”

“It comes out of the ground some way up yonder,” said Ibu'oden waving his hand upstream generally. “There is much steam and hissing but I know not why it comes up hot. Mayhap there be a dragon underground.”

“Is it safe to drink?” asked Logan. “It has a smell of some sort.”

“I would not drink it back there,” said Ibu'oden, “but down here it is good for you. 'Tis good for aching muscles and tired joints as well. I have been using it for many summers.”

“Did you not say you do not live here?” asked Autumn.

“You have bathed in it and you do not live here,” said Ibu’oden. “And if you wish, please bathe in it again. Take no notice of me.”

“Perhaps later,” said Autumn.

“I remember where I heard your name, now,” said Logan. “Joski told me of you, She said you are the error or some such.”

“Erere,” said Ibu’oden, “although some do think it be an error,” and he grinned again.

“What is an erere?” asked Autumn.

“One who is enlightened,” said Ibu’oden.

“Enlightened?” asked Autumn. “In what manner?”

“In what manner are any enlightened?” asked Ibu’oden. “I have seen the light, nothing more.”

“I take it you do not mean the light of Astauand,” said Autumn.

“Ahh, Astauand,” said Ibu’oden. “For certain I have seen the light of Astauand. My every day is filled with It.”

“So you are a follower of Astauand?” asked Autumn.

“Sometimes I go behind Astauand,” said Ibu’oden smiling again, “and sometimes I go before. Perhaps Astauand be a follower of me.”

“Joski seemed to think you be able to help with the sick,” said Logan.

“Who is it this time?” asked Ibu’oden.

“Do you know Joski?” asked Autumn.

“I know everyone,” said Ibu’oden, “even you two.”

“Then you know her era'owen?” asked Autumn.

“This be Najoskipambarattasam from over yonder?” asked Ibu'oden.

“Aye,” said Autumn. She wasn't exactly certain but the name sounded long enough. “What manner of ills can you aid?”

“All manner of ills,” said Ibu'oden.

“So you be a healer, then?” asked Logan.

Ibu'oden shrugged and held out his hands. “Healing be in the hands of the gods,” he said. “I give such aid as I can where I can.”

“Astauand be not a healing god,” said Autumn.

“So it is said,” said Ibu'oden, “although I wager sunlight can cure some ills. Life is full of uncertainty.”

“Well, there be truth in that,” said Autumn. “Have you knowledge of ills of the mind as well as the body?”

“There are some who say living is an illness of the mind,” said Ibu'oden. “So be it Ikam who be out of his mind?”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “I know little of these things.”

“If he comes to see me I shall do what I can,” said Ibu'oden, “or mayhap I shall go and visit them. I have heard that there be a most delightful young girl living there now who may appreciate the guiding hand of an elder.”

“All the women there be tied to their men,” said Autumn, “save the youngest who is still a child.”

“What is her name?” asked Ibu'oden, frowning.

“Nckool,” said Autumn.

“No, not her,” said Ibu'oden. “She has been there a long time. Who is

newly arrived there?”

“Lala?” said Logan.

“Ahh,” said Ibu’oden, clicking his fingers, “that be her.”

“She be with Joise,” said Autumn. “Best you not be interfering there.”

“And she be part of your peace and harmony world?” asked Ibu’oden.

“Aye,” said Autumn.

“Ahh, you drive a hard bargain,” said Ibu’oden, smiling lazily at her. “You said you were tired and hungry. There be the hot pool to relax in and room to sleep here in peace and harmony, but what do you have for your hunger?”

“Some dried fish,” said Logan picking up one of the apple-like fruits, “and these. Are they safe to eat?”

“Aye,” said Ibu’oden. “Most things growing are. You know of bligiberries?”

“That we can only eat them when they yawn?” said Logan.

“Aye,” said Ibu’oden. “If you see a spider with a red stripe on its back run away and if you see a snake with a yellow belly and green eyes you be dead already. Not even this Autumn Savannah be fast enough to avoid it. Other than those, eat what you like.”

“Those big green fruit on the tree over there,” said Autumn, pointing, “what are they?”

“They be sadavina trees,” said Ibu’oden. “They be good eating if you like the taste.”

“What do they taste like?” asked Logan.

“Difficult to say,” said Ibu’oden. “Try one.”

“Can they be eaten raw?” asked Logan, getting up and going over to one of the sadavina trees, “or do they have to be cooked?”

“Up to you,” said Ibu'oden. “Some like them raw, some fry them, others roast them or boil them.”

Logan pulled one of the big green fruits from the tree and tried to cut the outer skin with his thumb nail.

“How do you open it?” he asked when he found he couldn't.

“Drop it,” said Ibu'oden. “They usually split open unless they be too unripe.”

Logan dropped the sadavina and it burst, showing its light brown inner flesh.

“Oooh,” he said, picking it up. “It looks like bread! Smells a little like bread too.”

He pulled out a wad with his fingers and cautiously took a bite and stood there, chewing thoughtfully.

“It does not taste like bread,” he said sadly, “but it is not unpleasant. Try some, Autumn,” and he handed her a wad.

“Tis like a nut,” she said after chewing for a few moments, “only sweet. 'Tis a strange taste. Tell me, Ibu'oden, is there bread on this island?”

“Oh yes,” said Ibu'oden. “Not this side, it be too steep and mountainous but the other side there be the flatlands where enmern grows and they make bread there.”

“There you are, Logan,” said Autumn. “When we get past this mountain you can have some bread again.”

“Ahh, that is right good news,” said Logan, cheering up immediately. “What about cheese?”

"I do not know what cheese is," said Ibu'oden.

"It be a hard cake made from the milk of cows," said Logan.

"There be no cows on Zuit," said Ibu'oden. "Goats, yes, but no cows. I do not know if anyone makes a cake from goats' milk. I do not like the creatures, they be smelly and vicious buggers. Which way are you heading?"

"Down to Uysoma," said Autumn. "We are hoping to find some work there and earn some money to get passage back to Aferraron."

"Oh yes?" said Ibu'oden. "I have heard of work but I have no experience of it but for certain, if it can be got on Zuit then it can be got in Uysoma. Cheese too, most like."

"How long will it take to get there?" asked Autumn.

"As long as you want," said Ibu'oden.

"If we walk quickly and do not tarry anywhere?" asked Autumn with a small sigh.

"Two days perhaps," said Ibu'oden, "but is not the delight of travelling to tarry on the way?"

"Aye," said Autumn, "but two days gives us an idea of the distance however long we take."

"If you like tanavacs then try to be there in five days," said Ibu'oden. "There be the Tanavac of Ruglaa then."

"We were told of that," said Logan. "It is a festival with lots of eating and dancing."

"Among other things," said Ibu'oden. "I be going to the one at Ooqite."

"What manner of other things?" asked Autumn.

“Oh, this and that,” said Ibu'oden. “’Tis a celebration of the People of Ruglaa and they know how to have a good time.”

“What is Ruglaa?” asked Autumn.

“’Tis the name for the followers of Foqoo,” said Ibu'oden.

“Foqoo?” said Autumn. “I have heard of it but know nothing. What is Foqoo?”

“Foqoo be a deity,” said Ibu'oden.

“The deity of what?” asked Autumn.

“Merrymaking,” said Ibu'oden with a laugh. “That be why they be so good at it.”

“Lala said something about Foqoo being a god of fire,” said Autumn.

“Well, a little,” said Ibu'oden. “’Tis easier to make merry when there be a fire. This be the Lala that be with Joski and Ikam?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Why?”

“Oh, no matter,” said Ibu'oden. “She just sounds like an interesting girl,” then he held up his hands placatingly. “I know, peace and harmony. Still, if you be in Uysoma you should go along. ’Tis a time of much merrymaking and being Uysoma there will be more than elsewhere. And this time around, Foqoo Itself will be there.”

“Foqoo will be in Uysoma for the tanavac?” asked Autumn in surprise.

“Aye,” said Ibu'oden. “It be on its way. I will show you tonight when it gets dark, if you like, and when Foqoo be in the arms of Plakill and Plifal It will come to the tanavac.”

Chapter Eight

Logan was lying in the pool with his head resting on a mossy stone when he heard the rustle. He had been enjoying the enervating warmth and letting his mind idly wander but when he heard the rustle he froze. The jungle was a cacophony of early morning sound, caws, gibbers, barks, coughs, twitters and more beside but the rustle didn't sound right and set his nerves jangling.

There it was again.

He sat up and reached for his knife inside his tunic on the bank then cursed silently when he remembered he no longer had a knife. As quietly as he could, he slid out of the water and padded off into the undergrowth then knelt and peered back towards the pool, hoping the rustler was Autumn. She had been gone for some time but he was sure she would have given him some indication of her return beyond a rustle or two.

There was not another rustle. There was no movement of the creepers by the top of the waterfall. There was no head appearing as she climbed over the edge.

So what had made the rustle?

Logan suddenly felt vulnerable. Even though cloth is very thin and can block little more than a mosquito bite it is better in the mind to be attacked while wearing a thin layer of cloth than nothing. Naked and hiding in the bushes does little to bolster the spirits. He leaned forward slightly to get a better view around the pool. It seemed quiet, perhaps too quiet. His anxiety grew. If the sound had been Autumn she would surely have appeared by now.

“Oh Sploop,” he muttered and slowly stood up. His plan, such as it was, was to step forward and get his tunic. If nothing else he would be better prepared to deal with his anxieties.

He parted the leaves and peered cautiously through. The pool looked as it had been, innocent and inviting. His tunic lay on the rock, not two paces away, the coiled creeper he had retrieved the day before not

much further away although it would be of little use as a weapon. Unaccountably the jungle went silent for a moment, as though every living thing had taken a collective breath and was holding it, waiting to see what happened.

There was no sign of Autumn.

“Oh, Voqev,” he muttered, peering around nervously.

Tensely, he stepped forward and screamed as the sword ripped into his buttock. He jerked forward in panic, both hands scrabbling at his bottom. He tripped on a root and fell headlong, one hand managing to release his bottom just in time to stop his head crashing onto the rock. As if released from a spell the jungle noises resumed, louder than before. He could feel the blood gushing from the wound as he rolled, desperate to see his attacker but expecting only to see his life blood splattered over the bushes and pooling on the rock beneath him. Red and glistening on a bed of green grey moss. He felt weak and faint despite his heart pounding in his chest.

“Hello,” said Autumn, idly brandishing a single leaf from a palm frond.

Logan stared at her, unable to speak.

“Your reactions are improving,” said Autumn with an evil little smile. She stepped through the undergrowth and stood looking down at him.

“You, you ...,” stuttered Logan. “You stabbed me!”

“’Twas only the tiniest of pricks,” said Autumn, waving the palm frond leaf. “See?”

She dropped the leaf on Logan's chest and went in search of food. He picked up the leaf. There was a small point at the tip. Reluctantly Logan let go of his bottom and slid his hand out from underneath. It was not thickly smeared in blood. There was no blood at all. He slowly got to his feet and felt his bottom. There was no gaping wound. There wasn't even a small gouge or bump and there was no red on the moss where he had been. He limped over to where Autumn was eating

some breadfruit, reluctant to admit there wasn't even any pain.

"That was not nice," he said. "So much for peace and harmony."

"I could not resist it," she said, smiling up at him. "I saw your bare bottom in the bush and it was an opportunity I could not miss."

"How did you know I was there?" asked Logan. "I did not see you come up the waterfall."

"I came up the other side of the waterfall," she said. "I did not see you anywhere but I saw your wet footprints going to the bush so I went round behind it. Was it not a good joke? Have I still not got the understanding?"

"Aye," said Logan slowly. "I wager it was a good joke but as always you are the teacher."

"How so?" asked Autumn.

"I am coming to understand that jokes are not always as funny to those receiving than they be to those giving," said Logan. "I thought I had been stabbed by a sword and that you would return and find my chopped up body being pecked by birds and infested with flies."

"Ahh," said Autumn. "No, it was never my intent to scare you. I thought only to make you laugh but 'twould seem I still have as yet a poor understanding of humour."

"Actually, I think you have grasped the essentials," said Logan ruefully. "Had there been others here I wager they would have thrown themselves about with laughter. I would counsel you to never do what you did to a stranger. They might not take it in good spirit. Humour is best kept to those you know well."

"I thought I had the beginning of an understanding of jokes," said Autumn, looking very confused, "but I now see I do not. There are more exceptions to the general principle here than an Esyup of philosophers could devise."

“And that be the truth of it,” said Logan. “Most people learn their humour and what they can do or not do as they be growing up. You have many skills far beyond the value of jokes. 'Tis no matter. You were not here when I woke, were you doing your exercises?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I felt very refreshed and in need of wide spaces so I went to the beach where this stream comes out. Last night's storm has lightened the air and made everything sparkle.”

“It was a strong storm, was it not?” said Logan, eating some of the bread-like fruit. “Why do you suppose this stream has not risen with all the rain?”

“Perhaps because it comes from inside the mountain,” said Autumn. “For sure all these trees kept much of the rain off and let us sleep. I am going to lie in the water again. It brings new vitality and I still have some aches which my exercises did not ease.”

She slid the grass stalk from her hair and removed her tunic then stepped into the pool. She wallowed and rolled a few times then found a comfortable rock on the bank and lay back, letting the hot water flow over her.

“Ahh, that is nice,” she murmured, her eyes closed.

“Why did you not lie in the water last night?” asked Logan. “I did. It was very nice and I wager it helped me sleep better than usual.”

“Ibu'oden was here,” said Autumn lazily. “I did not want to lie naked in the pool with him here. I did not like the way he looked at me.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “So you noticed as well.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I felt his promise of peace and harmony would only last as long as it amused him. I am glad he went in the middle of the night. I did not want a nasty situation to arise.”

“I noticed he had gone when I woke,” said Logan. “I was afraid for a moment that you had gone with him but I realised that you would never do such a thing.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “And even if by some strange chance I did I would have told you and not stolen away in the night like a thief. Still, he be gone now and I wager we will not meet him again. He has gone North and we be going South.”

“I confess I did not like him,” said Logan, scratching his bottom where he had been stabbed.

“That does not surprise me,” said Autumn, opening one eye to look at him. “Ibu’oden is one I fancy who has the power to charm women. I felt that myself so ’tis no wonder you did not like him.”

“You think I did not like him because he can do what I cannot?” asked Logan. He felt a little insulted. Even though he knew his limitations where women were concerned he didn’t like others knowing it.

“I wager you could,” said Autumn closing her eye again, “but you choose to apply yourself in other ways and I am ever grateful for that. ’Twould be most vexatious if you tried to charm every woman we met.”

“Would that make you jealous?” asked Logan, surprising himself with how interested he was in her reply.

“You have a right to talk to whoever you choose,” said Autumn, keeping her eyes firmly closed. “’Tis not for me to put restrictions on that. but no matter. I had a strange thought while meditating.”

“What was that?” asked Logan with a vague feeling that something significant had almost happened. He started to pull slivers of dried fish from their bones and wondered what it might have been and what to do if such a moment arose again.

“It appeared fully formed in my mind,” she said. “You know how I have been looking to find my place in this world?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “That was why you left your Esysup. You think this is your place?”

“I did for a time,” said Autumn. “It is quiet, comfortable, well stocked

with food. It would seem a perfect place for meditation and deep thought.”

“I suppose so,” said Logan, looking around. The prospect of this place becoming a permanent home seemed to make it somehow less attractive but the thought of moving on without Autumn simply never occurred to him. “So you want to stay here?”

“Hmm?” said Autumn drowsily. “Oh no. The thought appeared in my mind but it went almost as quickly. 'Tis not my place to spend my time in meditation and deep thought, if it were I would have stayed at the Esyup. My mind moved on to thinking of the many things that have happened to us since then and it seems to me that mayhap my destiny is to be forever moving on and righting such wrongs as I encounter on the way.”

“We do seem to have had more than our fair share of encounters,” said Logan thoughtfully. “So is that your plan?”

“Had this thought come to me before we came to this island I would have said yes,” said Autumn, stretching her limbs then relaxing them again. “But more thoughts came to me while meditating that I find troublesome.”

“Oh really?” said Logan. He looked at the bare bones of the dried fish on the rock in front of him disappointedly.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I started to think of Ikam. 'Tis likely that his suffering after leaving the mine be common to them as have had a bad experience. We always move on right after so we have not stayed to see what follows.”

“Well, I suppose it is possible,” said Logan, rummaging through the sadavina skins to see if there was anything edible left. “What can we do about it if there are?”

“That I do not know,” said Autumn. “Mayhap if we went to one of the Esyups that dedicate themselves to healing we might find out more but I see no great benefit to that. Mayhap we could devote ourselves to the healing of minds but 'twould seem to me that there be a greater

need for removing the wrongs that cause the hurt to the mind in the first place. After all, helping Ikam would not prevent others suffering if the mine continued.”

“Well, there is that,” said Logan, scowling at the barren skins. “Did you have any other thoughts?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, looking up at the canopy overhead. “I started to think on those who I bested and wondered if any of them have suffered from that besting in the way Ikam has.”

“You are surely trying to make a joke,” said Logan, getting up and wandering over to a sadavina tree.

“No,” said Autumn, glancing over at him. “It seemed to me that if a grievous trial could affect the mind as it did with Ikam then mayhap that farmer I bested has suffered since in the same way.”

“You mean Foamo?” asked Logan, picking a fruit and dropping it to see if it was ripe. It burst nicely and he smiled happily.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I wager he lost much of his standing in his village as a result and that may have preyed on his mind. Mayhap even the villagers have found ways to take revenge on him and he be out of his mind with worry or remorse or his family now be starving.”

“Well, it be his own fault if it be so,” said Logan, sitting back down with an entire sadavina fruit to eat.

“But my task is to reduce suffering,” said Autumn, “not increase it. Mayhap his suffering as a result of my involvement to help Tolasy be worse than Tolasy’s was.”

“I think you think too much,” said Logan. “You will be worrying about how Ta’umboq fares back in its own world next.”

“That did cross my mind,” said Autumn. “You be not thinking that this is an issue?”

“No,” said Logan. “It seems very simple to me. As you often tell me,

we all have a choice and Foaumo made a choice and has to face the consequences of that choice, as did Ta'umboq. Tolasy did not have a choice, it was forced onto him by Foaumo so you stepped in to help Tolasy. Had Foaumo chosen to help Tolasy none of that would have happened but instead he chose to try to steal Tolasy's land."

"A fair point," said Autumn. She absent-mindedly scratched her belly where the star-shaped scars from the salodkaja seed were. "Although another thought did come to me."

"About Foaumo?" asked Logan, munching his way through a hunk of sadavina fruit.

"No, about Ikam," said Autumn. "Had we not been there and ended the mine he would have died not long after. I wondered if by besting Ta'umboq and Cymogene, if it is actually I who have created his present suffering. Mayhap if I had not he would have moved on to the Land of the Dead and be living in peace now."

"We have had this talk before, have we not?" said Logan, pausing in his munching. "Did we not agree that the best we, or you at any rate as I have little to do with these things, can do is reduce the suffering for as many as possible without knowing the ultimate consequences? For sure, it would be wrong to refuse to do anything to reduce suffering for fear that you might make things worse."

"Aye, but that is what concerns me," said Autumn. "Mayhap Ikam's suffering be worse for what I did. Mayhap Foaumo's suffering be worse than Tolasy's would have been. 'Tis a thought that I do not like but that alone is no reason to not think about it."

Logan sighed. "What about me, then?" he asked.

"What about you?" asked Autumn, opening her eyes and sitting up to look at him.

"We met just after I had been exiled from my village," said Logan. "If it were not for you I could have gone to another village and settled down to a happy life with some nice farmer's daughter and be growing enmern or chickens or some such. Instead I have been killed, sent to

the Land of the Undead, been to prison, been held hostage, attacked by Sploop only knows what and more. I was even made Roinad and if that be not suffering I know not what suffering is!"

"I had not thought of your suffering, Logan," she said quietly, her face a picture of sadness then a look of determination came over her face and she leapt to her feet. "Come, this ends now! I will not be the cause of any more of your suffering. We leave immediately!"

"Where are we going?" said Logan, gawping at her, a half eaten lump of sadavina in his hand.

"To find you a farmer's daughter," said Autumn, pulling on her tunic. "Ibu'oden said there be flatlands the other side of this mountain and where there be flatlands there be farmers and some are bound to have daughters. Come on, put on your tunic. There be no time to lose."

Logan stared at her then started to laugh.

"Be this another of your jokes?" he asked. "For sure it be funnier than sticking a sword in my arse."

"I am not joking," said Autumn. "You want to farm chickens and be with a farmer's daughter and I will do everything in my power to make that happen for you, friend Logan. It was very wrong of me to involve you in my travels and cause you suffering. Why are you still sitting there?"

"Because you are being silly," said Logan. "Take your clothes off and get back in the pool."

"Why?" asked Autumn, staring at him in consternation.

"Because I was making a philosophical point," said Logan. "I am with you because I choose to be with you and such sufferings that I encounter while I am with you are more than made up for by being with you."

"Even though you do not have a farmer's daughter or any chickens?" asked Autumn.

“Even then,” said Logan gravely. He looked over at her with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “And you are ignoring the likely suffering this poor girl would have to go through by being forced to live with me.”

“How would she suffer?” asked Autumn. “I travel with you and I have found your company most pleasant.”

“She may not have your philosophical approach to being with me,” said Logan. “After all, I do not have the skills to charm a girl nor to farm the land or raise chickens. All I be good for is holding your staff while you best some misbegotten ne’er-do-well or stealing the occasional loaf of bread. What girl would want a man like that?”

“Aye, there is that,” said Autumn with a smile. “No, you be right, not even Mother Midcarn could find a girl that would settle for as little as that.”

“Oh,” said Logan, feeling crushed. “Am I really as bad as that?”

“Of course not,” said Autumn. “Any girl with half a brain would jump at the opportunity. The problem be with you, not them.”

“How so?” asked Logan, not sure if he really wanted to hear her reply.

Autumn took off her tunic and lay back in the warm, soothing water again and Logan felt a small anxiety start in his belly and slowly spread throughout his body.

“Well?” he said.

“I think you would rather be with me, for some reason,” said Autumn, her eyes closed again and a faint look of satisfaction on her face. She didn’t see Logan start to go red.

“Mayhap,” he muttered, “Sploop knows why though.”

“What was that?” asked Autumn. “I had water in my ears.”

“Oh nothing,” said Logan, remembering the sadavina in his hand.

He'd suddenly lost his appetite so he dumped the fruit on a nearby palm frond, then he had a thought.

"We have been through a lot of trials and tribulations, have we not?" he said.

"Aye," said Autumn lazily.

"So if what you be saying about the ills of the mind being from the suffering of tribulations be right," said Logan, "why have we not had those same ills of the mind as Ikam?"

"That is an interesting question," said Autumn, opening her eyes and sitting up again. "Mayhap it be because a trained mind is better able to cope with the tribulations."

"I do not have a trained mind," said Logan. "I venture it be something a lot simpler than that. I wager it be because we win."

Chapter Nine

“Do not even think about it,” said Autumn, her back to him.

She was sitting on the rock beside the waterfall, her hands loose in her lap. her legs crossed and her eyes shut, her normal stance when meditating. Logan had crept up stealthily behind her, seeking retribution for the fright she had given him the day before. He had been confident that the sound of the falling water would mask any tiny noise he made. He had been wrong.

“Pah,” he muttered and tossed away the coiled creeper. He'd been going to drop it around her neck.

“Why did you keep that creeper?” asked Autumn without turning around or even opening her eyes.

“How did you know I had the creeper?” he asked, splashing noisily to pretend he was going away.

“There be nothing else to throw save food,” said Autumn, “and I know you would never do that.”

Logan suddenly scooped up a double handful of water and hurled it at Autumn's head. It would have soaked her except that she wasn't there anymore. The place where she had been sitting was now just empty space.

“Sploop,” said Logan, suddenly anxious that he had knocked her off the rock.

He leapt to the edge and peered over, afraid to look in case he saw her lying at the foot of the rock face, a broken bleeding body beside the stream. Something wet and slippery smothered his face then fell away.

“Splologh,” he exclaimed jerking back.

He wiped his face with a hand and spat then peered cautiously over the edge again, ready to jerk back at the next attack. None was

forthcoming. Instead he saw Autumn, hanging by one hand from a creeper, the waterfall breaking over her shoulder. She had a thick mass of some sort of weed in her hand.

“Good try,” she said, tossing him the weed.

“Pah,” he said and threw the weed back at her. She caught it and wedged it back against the rock where its roots might have a chance to re-establish themselves then, with a seemingly casual flick of her legs, she swung herself back up over the edge.

“How did you know?” asked Logan.

“I have been expecting you to try something since I poked you yesterday,” said Autumn, picking up her tunic. “But if you are going to pretend to walk away you should know that the sounds get quieter the further away you go.”

“Ahh,” said Logan, crestfallen. “Are you off to do your exercises?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, putting on her tunic. “Do you want to tarry here any longer or shall we move on?”

“Tis up to you,” said Logan. “I feel well rested and all my aches are gone but I am happy to stay if you want to.”

“I too,” said Autumn, “and much as I like this place I have an urge to move on but I am happy to tarry longer if you would prefer.”

“I leave it up to you, Autumn,” said Logan, going over to where his tunic lay. “If you have an urge then mayhap we should act on it.”

“Tis not so much an urge,” said Autumn, putting her head to one side. She pursed her lips and looked thoughtful. “Tis more of an impulse, or perhaps only a notion.”

“Then we must leave,” said Logan. “One of us has to make the decision and I venture you will fall into too much contemplation of your inner self if we stay much longer. It matters not if it be an urge, an impulse, a notion, a craving or an itch. It is there and that be the

end of it.”

“But does not the strength of the notion play a part in making it an action?” asked Autumn.

“Let me put it another way,” said Logan with a sigh. He was experienced in Autumn’s periodic bouts of introspection and self-analysis and was anxious to circumvent the process as they could become lengthy. “Is there any reason to stay here?”

“No,” said Autumn, “or at least none that I am aware of although there may be many factors of which I am unaware that may play a role in this ...”

“Stop,” said Logan, holding up his hand. “We are leaving. The only real question to consider is whether I should jump down or climb.”

“Climbing be safer,” said Autumn. “Even if you fall part way it will still be less of a fall.”

“Well, yes,” said Logan unenthusiastically.

He peered over the edge again, looking for a creeper to hold on to and Autumn gave him a shove.

“Whaaa ...” he cried, losing his balance. He landed on large bush below.

“Sometimes it is best just to do something,” came Autumn’s voice from above, “rather than think about it too much.”

“Exactly,” he said looking up at the shadow of her face rimmed by the brilliant blue sky.

“Besides,” said Autumn, landing beside him, her feet firmly on the ground and her knees bent. “I think it would be a good idea to go to the tanavac in Uysoma.”

Logan gawped at her in surprise.

“But you hate fairs and festivals and things like that,” he said. “They be too crowded and noisy.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but it occurred to me that they might have some sort of competition there with prize money which would save us having to find work. I dislike the constraints of work more than I dislike fairs. Are you coming or are you going to lie there all day?”

* * *

“There be another storm coming,” said Autumn, scanning the horizon two days later.

“There seems to be a pattern,” said Logan, stopping walking along the cliff edge to look. “Every two days, in the evening. I wonder if it is like this all the time.”

“And they all have come from the South East,” said Autumn. “Mayhap it is a seasonal thing.”

“It may be difficult to get back to Aferraron if the winds always come from the South East,” said Logan. “Although it would also be difficult if boats could only go one way in a season. Mayhap they have ways of sailing against the wind.”

They resumed their walking. The cliff was not overly high nor long and gently curved as it went downhill into the next bay.

“This be one reason why we need to find someone who knows of these things,” said Autumn. “I venture if we make a raft we will be blown to the edge of the world. Mayhap even beyond.”

She scratched her cheek thoughtfully.

“No,” said Logan firmly, giving her a hard look.

“What no?” asked Autumn, pausing for a moment to look at him.

“No, we are not going to explore what lies beyond the edge of the world,” said Logan. “I know that look of yours.”

Autumn gave him a half smile. "Twas just a passing thought," she said, "and mayhap if that be our destiny ..."

"If it is our destiny then so be it," said Logan, "but we leave it to Lulera and Chaahk to arrange it for us, not go searching."

"Aye, mayhap you have the right of it," said Autumn, unconvinced. "I venture it would be a goodly experience however."

"They say no one has ever returned from beyond the edge of the world," said Logan.

"Hah, they say that no one has returned from the Land of the Undead," said Autumn scornfully, "and we have both done that. 'Tis best not to put your faith in what other people say, oft-times they have no direct knowledge of the thing and just repeat hearsay."

"Well, there be some truth in that," said Logan, "and mayhap there be them as have returned but do not speak of it or if they do they be not believed."

He jumped onto a tussock then down onto the sandy beach and struck a defensive posture in imitation of Autumn when she felt she was about to be attacked.

"You, wave!" he shouted, pointing to a wave that was rolling up the beach towards him. "Advance no further for I have returned from the Land of the Undead and wish you gone!"

The wave ground to a halt, a bare hand's breadth from his toes and retreated back out to sea, foaming whitely in fear.

"Aha," cried Logan, turning to beam at Autumn. "The sea knows the truth of our power!"

"That be a right useful skill," said Autumn with mock admiration in her voice. "Try it again when the storm hits."

"Oh, we will be far inland by then," said Logan laughing. "Only a fool gives orders that will not be obeyed."

“And you, oh wisest of the wise, are not a fool,” said Autumn, bowing before him. They both laughed.

“Oh, I would not go that far,” said Logan, stopping walking to watch the next wave dapple around his toes. “Why do you suppose the sea is much colder than the sand? It has been in the same sunlight as the sand and for as long. You would think it would be as warm.”

“Mayhap it be something to do with the nature of sand and sea,” said Autumn. “A leaf on water can feel quite hot when the water is cold.” She jerked her head around and studied the jungle along the back of the beach. “What was that?”

“A bird crying, most like,” said Logan, also looking along the edge of the jungle.

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, stopping walking, “although the birds we can see have a different sound. That sounded more like a scream. A woman’s scream, I wager.”

“It seems unlikely,” said Logan, walking on, his feet leaving footprints in the glistening wet sand. “This beach seems to be deserted.”

“There it is again,” said Autumn, her eyes pivoting to where the scream had come from. “It came from inside the jungle, come on!”

She ran up the sandy beach, quickly for the first few paces then slower when she reached the part of the beach the waves had not reached. She plunged between the palms, Logan a short distance behind.

“Get your dirty hands off that!” came a female voice.

“Over there,” said Autumn, veering slightly.

“Give it to me!” came different female voice.

“Stop it, both of you!” The man’s voice lacked authority but made up for it in loudness.

“What is going on?” asked Autumn, stopping. Logan almost ran into

her.

"I kn ..." he started but was interrupted by another piercing scream.

"Mayhap they be killing a pig?" he said.

"I hate you, I hate you!" screamed a voice nearby.

Suddenly something large and red with a yellow belly burst out of the undergrowth and Autumn instantly lashed out with her foot. At the last moment she twisted slightly so her foot smashed into a tree instead. It gave a loud cracking sound and three or four coconuts fell to the ground. The girl froze, fear etched deeply into her face.

"Hah, got it," cried the second girl, crashing through the bushes. She snatched the red and yellow cloth from the first girl's hands then froze also.

"Who be you?" she whispered, staring at Autumn.

"I am Autumn Sa ..." said Autumn as Logan appeared beside her. The two girls screamed and ran headlong back into the bushes behind them, leaving the red and yellow cloth snagged on a palm frond.

"Da, Da, we be being attacked! Da!" they both screamed at the tops of their voices.

"Oh, now what?" came the man's voice. It sounded infinitely weary.

"Over there, over there, strangers," cried one voice.

"He attacked me," cried another. "He had a huge sword! It broke a tree!"

"Perhaps we should leave," said Logan.

"Aye," said Autumn. "But 'twould seem there be some suffering here, and not just the girls. Perhaps if I return this cloth it may ease things."

She lifted the cloth from the frond then stepped into the bushes.

Logan followed.

“Attacked?” came the man's voice. “Who would attack us? We have nothing anyone would want.”

“Him,” screamed one of the girls, pointing to Autumn as she emerged into a clearing.

“And him,” screamed the other, pointing to Logan.

They both hid behind the man as he stared at Autumn and Logan in astonishment.

“And that be my malu!” shouted the slightly larger of the two girls. She ran out and snatched the cloth from Autumn's hand then ran back. The other girl snatched it from her. “No, it be mine, I saw it first!”

They both started tugging on the cloth and wailing. The man shuddered then roared “Shut up, the pair of you! I cannot hear myself think!” and he walloped each of them across the back of their head and snatched the cloth and threw it high into a tree. The wailing dropped appreciably as both girls stared up into the tree, each trying to work out how to get the malu down without the other finding out.

“And don't neither of you be trying to get the blasted thing down,” he shouted.

“Oh, Da!” cried the slightly smaller of the two girls.

“Silence!” he roared, lifting one hand threateningly.

Both girls pouted at him but, mercifully, stayed quiet.

“That be better,” he growled, scowling at them. He turned and surveyed Autumn and Logan. “Do not ever be having daughters,” he said. “That will be the end of your sanity.”

“I have made a vow,” said Autumn, “and ...”

“Then best you be keeping it, no matter what promises your lad gives,” said the man. He scowled at his daughters again. “Two men,” he said derisively. “And a great sword. Pah.”

“But Da,” started one of the girls.

“Be quiet,” he said, holding up his hand. Logan smothered a laugh and Autumn looked on in bemusement.

“Right, now,” he said, limping forward. “I be Svengarinhara, pleased to meet you.”

He held out his hand, palm up.

“Oh, umm, I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, “and this be Logan.”

He stood there with his hand held out and an air of expectancy so, after a moment's hesitation, Autumn held hers out the same way. Svengarinhara smiled and slapped her palm then held his hand out towards Logan. Logan smiled and slapped his hand and the man's face clouded.

“Oh,” said Logan. “Did I do it wrong? We are strangers and know not your customs.”

“Aye,” said Engar, dropping his hand. “Strangers, eh? That would explain your outlandish clothing. You come in peace?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “We heard screams and came to help.”

“Well, I be needing help, that is for certain,” he said. “These two banshees be Ibibusensarma and Atfersandranan. They be answering to Bibu and Sandra if they be ever shutting up long enough for you to call them.”

“Da-aa,” said Bibu, outraged.

“She stole my malu!” said Sandra, as if that explained everything.

“Daughters, pah,” said Engar. “Lifelong regrets be a better name for them! Be off with you, go on. There be chores that need doing.”

“But my malu!” cried Bibu, looking on the verge of tears.

“Tain't your malu, it be mine,” shouted Sandra, stamping her foot.

“It be neither of you's malu,” said Engar loudly. “It be your Ma's! Get out of here.”

Reluctantly the two girls walked away towards the hut, casting longing glances at the malu up the tree. One pinched the other and got swiped in return.

“Aye,” said Engar, watching them go. He heaved a sigh of relief.

“We apologise for intruding on you,” said Autumn. “If it be no trouble, can I ask you the correct manner of greeting?”

“’Tis no intrusion,” said Engar. “You be visitors and welcome. I can only apologise in return for the manner in which you came to be here. ’Tis our custom to greet a stranger with an open hand of friendship. If the stranger does likewise we slap it to show acceptance but if the stranger be slapping the hand of friendship away then it be a sign of some dispute.”

“Ahh, I did not know that,” said Logan. “I should not have slapped your hand.”

“’Tis a silly custom,” said Engar, “but most customs are. If you come with ill intent I wager you not be warning me with a hand slap.”

“’Twas most definitely the opposite,” said Autumn. “We were on the beach yonder and thought someone was being killed. We came to help.”

“Aye, it can get like that sometimes,” said Engar. “My almost be dying several summers past and left the raising of them two to me and I freely admit the raising be beyond me. Still, two maybe three more summers and they be someone else's problem. Come, there be a storm

soon enough. Bide a while until it passes.”

He raised his hand towards their hut in a friendly gesture.

“How do you know?” asked Logan, following Autumn's lead and heading in that direction. “There be little sky to see from here.”

“’Tis the season,” said Engar, hobbling after them. “Heading into autumn we gets a storm every second day. Come the spring they be the other side of the mountain and the rains fall there. We just gets the winds here then. Can I offer you some sustenance? Travelling be weary work and you seem light on provisions.”

“That be right kind of you, Engar,” said Autumn. “We lost what little we had in a storm a few days past.”

“That be unfortunate,” he said.

He went around the back of the hut and shouted at the girls who were squawking louder than the chickens they were feeding. He returned with an armful of coconuts and deftly cuts the tops off several with a large knife.

“Can I ask if you made this clearing yourself?” asked Logan. “Other dwellings we have seen in these parts be on the edge of the beach.”

“Aye,” said Engar, awkwardly sitting on the ground with his back against the hut. “We were the same but a storm brought down a tree and took Kanas to the Land Beyond. I swore then I would not let that happen to my girls so I took out some trees and made this place so it be safe.”

“Kanas be the girls' mother?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Engar. He took a long drink of milk and gazed reflectively at the line of trees at the edge of the clearing. He sighed. “That were when my foot were crushed,” he added then, after a pause, “Bibu were five summers then, Sandra four. How they coped with a dead Ma and a broken Da 'till I could walk again be beyond my wit but cope they did. They be good girls.”

“How old are they now?” asked Autumn.

“Ahh, let me think,” said Engar. He started tallying on his fingers. “Bibu be thirteen summers now, I reckon, mayhap fourteen.” He winced as a burst of shrieking came from behind the hut. “And the sooner they be finding era’owens of their own the better, though I wager it’ll be over quiet here without them. So where be you travellers heading?”

“We are going to Uysoma,” said Autumn. “We were hoping to be there for the tanavac.”

“Ohh, you be smiled on by Aloidia, then,” said Engar. “Uysoma be but a short way from here and the tanavac be tomorrow. That be why the girls be fighting over the malu. It be the their Ma’s best and be the one I first saw her in. Stay the night and come with us.”

Chapter Ten

Engar was mumbling something. Autumn couldn't quite make it out so she stopped milking the cow and turned to listen more closely.

"'Tis unusually stormy," he called over. He was on the far side of the clearing, underneath one of the trees but looked to be very small.

Autumn looked around, content that Engar was the size of a beetle. The clearing was absolutely still and quiet. Nothing moved, not even a leaf in the undergrowth. Beyond the trees she could see the sea was perfectly flat and calm. Not even a ripple disturbed its brilliant blue smooth featureless surface.

"The chief concern of a philosopher is to ignore questions of no importance," she said, jabbing her finger into the sandy soil to emphasise her point. "And this be a question of no importance. I have milking to do."

"'Tis only a storm in a coconut," agreed Engar. Or was it Ikam? It was hard to tell from the shiny reflection off his hard shell. Perhaps it was a beetle after all, although the tree was now turning pinky-blue and seemed to be shrinking.

Autumn shook her head and ignored the tree. Up in the sky, waves of fluffy white clouds broke on the tops of the trees as the blue sky undulated and surged. Below, the sea turned dark and ominous, like storm clouds. A jagged shaft of grey lightning ripped upwards and the ground shook. Or was it the sky shaking? She turned back to the cow which buzzed its wings and raised the stinger at the end of its body threateningly.

"How do I milk a wasp?" asked Autumn, searching for its udder.

"With great energy and determination," said Ikam. Or was it the wasp?

A glistening green ball of venom oozed out of the stinger and the cow's head turned to look at her through angry eyes that glittered like gemstones beneath its soft, thick eyelashes.

“The real question of life after death is not whether it exists,” said the cow, “but what problem its existence actually solves.”

“Ahh, you be a gift from the gods,” said Autumn, patting the cow's head. “I must plant you and let you grow into the truth.”

She caught the ball of venom and passed it to Ikam, or was it Engar? Either way the face smiled and two thin, bristly legs mixed the venom with sand and started to mould the mixture over Logan's feet.

“The tanavac,” cried Logan urgently. “We must not miss the tanavac! There will be music and dancing!”

Autumn peered over the cow, or the wasp, or Engar, she wasn't sure which. Logan was lying comfortably on a bed of lush green grass with his arms around Bibu and Sandra. They were both naked, giggling and whispering in his ears. All three were encased to their hips with glistening green sand. Engar sat beside them, his deformed foot resting on a skull shaped coconut oozing milk.

“Fear not,” said Engar, “they are only after his body, his mind is yours to play with.”

He laughed and broke off Logan's green coated foot and started to chew on it.

“Try some,” said Bibu, holding out Logan's arm. “He be delicious!”

“That be my arm,” shouted Sandra, snatching it away. “I saw him first!”

“There be plenty for all,” said Mother Midcarn through a crack in the green sand. She wriggled out and spread her thin gossamer wings. They shimmered like rainbows and she flew away, taking the cow with her.

“I desire only to touch your buttons,” whispered the wasp, or was it Ibu'oden?

“They be my buttons,” said Logan, grinning happily as Bibu nibbled

his ear. Sandra bared her teeth and bit his neck.

"Leave him be," screamed Autumn, twirling to kick Bibu away. "I hate you, I hate you!"

"Autumn," whispered Logan, "Autumn, wake up, is everything all right?" He gently shook her shoulder.

"Aye, friend Logan," said Autumn, sitting up. "'Twas only a dream, nothing more. Is it day already? I must have slept long."

"Ahh, good," said Logan. "No, it be the middle of the night but the hut is on fire. 'Tis nothing. The wasps will put it out. Go back to sleep."

"But they have not enough green sand," cried Autumn, her eyes clenched shut and her face anguished. She tried to jump up but Logan held her down with a finger on her forehead.

"Let me kiss you first," he said, his face looming large. A green ball of glistening venom wobbled at the end of his nose and his lips puckered. His hand stroked her hair.

"Autumn," he whispered, "Autumn, wake up, is everything all right?" He gently shook her shoulder again. The ball of venom fell off and soaked into the sand.

"I thought you were going to kiss me," said Autumn, her head confused. She opened her eyes and saw Logan's shadowy shape in the faint pre-dawn glimmer.

"What?" whispered Logan. "You were crying out and you kicked me. Is all well?"

"I am sorry," she said, sitting up. The night air was warm but she shivered.

Behind her she could feel the rough timber of Engar's hut. Looking around she could see the clearing and the trees beyond, all dim and ghostly pale in the faint light. The familiar sounds of the waves and creatures of the night reassured her.

"I must have been dreaming," she said quietly, not wanting to disturb the others in the hut. "'Twas a most strange dream indeed."

"It must have been," said Logan. She could sense his grin.

"What?" she said, feeling suddenly somehow ... exposed, vulnerable even. She didn't like that feeling.

"You were dreaming of me kissing you?" asked Logan.

"It must have been a nightmare," said Autumn, a little flustered.

"Aye," said Logan with a snort, "I imagine it must have been. Still, it be over and you be wide awake now but I am not. I am going back to sleep."

* * *

"That is a most strange dance," said Engar.

He and Logan were sitting on the beach and had been watching Autumn do her morning exercises. She had finished by cartwheeling into the sea and was now striding along the beach towards them, dripping wet.

"It keeps her strong and supple," said Logan. "Aye, and fast as well."

"I can see the fastness and suppleness," said Engar, "and her strength be evident. Bibu showed me the tree she broke. I wager she not be one to pick a fight with."

"Who is picking a fight?" asked Autumn, joining them. She was sweating despite her immersion in the sea.

"None here," said Engar. "Although do not be surprised if some in Uysoma try."

"Why?" asked Autumn, fanning her face with her hand.

"Not all like outers," said Engar, "and your manner of dress marks you

as such.”

“Tis all the clothing we have,” said Logan. “I venture we can find some like yours in Uysoma.”

“Aye,” said Engar, “but it be not cheap. This cloth be made from hairy seeds and they do not grow on these islands. We bring in the cloth from Neander. Do you have much money?”

“None,” said Logan. “All we have are these clothes. We were hoping to find some work or some such in Uysoma.”

“You will find none while you be dressed like that,” said Engar. “No one will give work to obvious outers, or if they do they will cheat you.”

“This could present some difficulty,” said Autumn.

“Mayhap not,” said Engar, eyeing Logan. “Do you object to going bare chested?”

“No,” said Logan. “I wager it be more comfortable in this heat. Why?”

“All here wear the same,” said Engar. “Tis a simple cloth and women tie it under their arms and men around their waists. I have an old malu of Kanas’ that Autumn can have and I fancy you could manage with an old one of Bibu’s. It be too short for her now. I have been keeping it for her children but when she finds a man no doubt he will get one when they have a child.”

“That is very kind of you, Engar,” said Autumn. “I confess to being unwilling to accept one with all your memories attached. It will be of great value to you.”

“Tis just a piece of old cloth,” said Engar. “Both the malus I am offering be plain and simple. The one with the memories is the red and yellow one she wore at special times.”

“Then we thank you for your generosity,” said Autumn. “A gift freely given is most precious indeed.”

“Ahh, they are not that freely given,” said Engar with a grimace. “I confess I have a task to request of you.”

“If it is within my power it shall be done,” said Autumn. “What is it?”

“’Tis a task of great difficulty and not without some danger,” said Engar. “I warn you now that you may incur a lifelong hatred.”

“This sounds intriguing,” said Logan. “Do you have a score to settle with a neighbour or some such?”

“Oh, it be worse than that,” said Engar. “’Tis a matter that has been preying on my mind for some time and I confess I have been unwilling to bring that hatred down upon my head.”

“Ohhh,” said Autumn, her eyes narrowing. “I venture this be closer to home than neighbours.”

“Aye,” said Engar. “Kanas had only the one fancy malu for special times and because of my own stupidity I have somehow promised that both Bibu and Sandra can wear it to the tanavac.”

“I see your problem,” said Logan, nodding. “That was a mistake for certain.”

“I confess I do not see the problem,” said Autumn. “It seems a simple matter to me. Engar decides who wears the malu and that be the end of it.”

Engar burst out laughing. “If only life were as simple as that,” he said. “This be the first tanavac they be going to as young women and not as children and they will both have their eyes on the young men. Whichever be wearing the plain malu will hate me forever for making her invisible.”

“He be right,” said Logan. “I had a sister once and that was bad enough. I cannot begin to imagine having two.”

“But suffering and disappointment be the nature of life,” said Autumn. “They must both learn to be accepting of that which cannot be

changed. There be but one malu and two of them. One will have to accept disappointment and move on.”

“How long did that take you to learn that, Autumn?” asked Logan.

“I do not remember it being otherwise,” she said then she frowned. “No, wait. I remember when I was young, mayhap five or six summers of age, I found an injured mouse and tended it. When it was healed I wanted to keep it. I named it Ix.”

“What happened to Ix?” asked Engar.

“Noxu would not let me keep him,” said Autumn sadly. “He said it was wrong of me to imprison Ix and made me let him go. I cried myself to sleep that night. Ix was my friend.”

“And that was in spite of your training at the Esyup,” said Logan. “You wept from the pain of the disappointment.”

“Well, mayhap” said Engar. “This malu be like Ix in some small way but I wager it will not pass in a night of tears. Each of the girls will see her life as stolen from her if she do not get to wear it and will hate me 'till the day I die and beyond.”

“I think you are exaggerating,” said Autumn, “but be that as it may. What do you want me to do?”

“Decide who wears the malu,” said Engar, “and tell them. I wager you will be moving on and the other's hatred will not rest heavily on you.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “So I will be the cause of suffering and disappointment?”

“Great suffering,” said Engar, “even if it all be only in her mind.”

“In her mind?” said Autumn. “No, this I cannot do. I have seen suffering of the mind and I will not willingly inflict that on anyone.”

“Not even to help them learn to accept disappointment?” asked Engar.

“From what you are telling me, this will be more than simple disappointment,” said Autumn. “If it were, you would not be wanting my help. As their father you must have aided them through many disappointments already.”

“I will do it,” said Logan.

The other two stared at him.

“You?” said Autumn. “But you are scared of women and cannot talk to them.”

“Well, this be a different situation,” said Logan. “I can talk to women when it be a matter of business. It be in other ways I cannot talk to them.”

“That makes no sense,” said Autumn. “Talking is talking, whatever the reason.”

“It makes perfect sense to me,” said Engar. “When you want a piece of cloth or a pot of tunic or some such they be easy to talk to but when you want to make your life with them they be the scariest things in the world.”

“That be the truth of it all right,” said Logan.

“I do not understand,” said Autumn.

“No, I wager not,” said Engar, “but that be the way of it so just accept it like you say you can. So which one will it be, Logan?”

“Which one is the elder?” asked Logan.

“Bibu,” said Engar.

“Right,” said Logan. He took a deep breath and stood up. “Best I be getting on with it.” He walked determinedly over to the hut.

“Well,” said Engar admiringly, watching him go. “He be a brave man all right. You have a good man there.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, still looking puzzled. “That be true enough.”

* * *

A scream of anguish came from the hut and Engar's head jerked around.

“That sounded like Bibu,” he muttered. “Mayhap I should go and help.”

“Leave it,” said Autumn, putting her hand on his arm. “’Twas Logan's idea. Best he be left to finish it.”

Another scream, this time more of outrage, came from the hut.

“Sandra,” said Engar. “I'd know that one anywhere. Did he change his mind, I wonder?”

“Time will tell,” said Autumn.

There came a babble of voices, overlapping and indistinct and an aura seemed to grow around hut, tense and sparking with emotion. Then everything went silent.

“Oh, I do not like the sound of this,” said Engar, looking worried. “It be too quiet, that bodes ill. Look, here he comes.”

Logan came out of the hut. He looked weak and drained. He spotted them and came over, slowly. He seemed pale as well. Sandra ran out of the hut, holding the red and yellow malu to her chest and prancing. Bibu stood in the entrance, looking sourly at her.

“So, you chose Sandra,” said Autumn as Logan got close. “’Tis strange, I expected you to chose Bibu, as she be the elder.”

“I chose both,” said Logan sitting down. “Sploop, I be right glad that is over.”

“What do you mean, both?” asked Engar. “They cannot both be wearing it.”

“And that be something they both understood,” said Logan, “so I said Sandra should wear it in the afternoon and Bibu in the evening.”

“And they agreed?” asked Engar.

“More or less,” said Logan. “I explained to Sandra that she would get to wear the malu first and in the light, so she be making a good impression when she arrives.”

“And Bibu?” asked Autumn. “What impression will she be making?”

“Well,” said Logan. “I am not experienced in these things, but it has always seemed to me that boys and girls looking to meet each other usually do so after the sun has gone down and Bibu saw the sense in that, so she be getting to wear the malu after dusk. It seemed the most logical solution to me”

“And Bibu and Sandra agreed to that?” asked Engar, incredulously.

“Well, in a manner of speaking,” said Logan. He picked up a piece of seaweed and started to shred it.

“Oh no,” said Autumn, alarmed. “What else have you agreed to?”

“Nothing much,” said Logan, not looking at her.

“Logan,” said Autumn. “Look at me.”

“You see?” said Engar with a guffaw. “You have that same special voice all women have for when men be in the wrong.”

Autumn ignored him. “Logan,” she said.

“Well, someone had to,” said Logan, throwing down the seaweed. “Neither of you would do it!”

“Logan,” said Autumn. “What have you done?”

Logan look at Engar for support but Engar was just happy he had avoided the situation.

"I said I would get Bibu another malu," he said quickly.

"Oh," said Autumn, flatly.

"Bibu said she would not go to the tanavac wearing what Sandra had been wearing," said Logan defensively. "And Sandra said that once she had the malu on she was not going to take it off for anyone, least of all Bibu. What else could I do?"

Autumn sighed and stared thoughtfully at a coconut on the sand. "Mayhap we can sell our tunics," she said. "Engar, would anyone want to buy them?"

"Mayhap," said Engar dubiously. "Someone may want some thick cloth to make a shade, but I doubt it."

* * *

"It is a bit short," said Engar, studying Logan in his malu.

"How long should it be?" asked Autumn.

"To the ankles," said Engar, "but no matter. His knees be covered, that is what counts."

"My knees are bare," said Autumn. "Is mine too short?"

"No," said Engar, "women are supposed to have bare knees. Men must keep theirs covered."

"Never mind," said Logan. "It is much cooler. I like it."

"If anyone says anything, lad," said Engar, "tell them a crocodile chewed the end."

"What is a crocodile?" asked Logan.

"It be a big thing, twice as long as a man, with a lot of teeth," said Engar. "They be mostly the other side of the island. Say you come from Jaikai."

"Where is Jaikai?" asked Logan.

"It be in the south," said Engar. "Opposite Xive."

"Xive?" asked Autumn. "What be that?"

"It is the next island," said Engar. "Whatever you do, don't say you be from Xive."

"Why not?" she asked.

"That is where the Isle of the Lost is," said Engar, looking a little worried. "You don't want anyone thinking you are from there."

"So that is a real place?" asked Logan. "I thought it was a name for someone who was strange in the head."

"So you be knowing of it in Aferraron?" asked Engar.

"Oh no," said Autumn. "We first heard of it here. How can it be lost if people know where it is?"

"It be not the Lost Land," said Engar. "It be the land for them as is lost, you know, them as isn't where they should be."

"I do not understand," said Autumn. "Why would they be there when they should be somewhere else and why do they not just come back?"

"Ahh," said Engar, looking around nervously. "It ain't that they be going there, you see. No one goes there, not if they be right in the head. They be taken, see."

"Taken?" said Logan. "Who by?"

"Them as is wanting them," said Engar hoarsely. "I be not knowing who, mind, no one does or no one as will admit to it anyway but every now and then someone seems to go funny in the head and starts acting right strange then after a while they just disappears, see. Like someone took their mind and come back for their body later."

Chapter Eleven

"She be staying back there, in the trees," said Engar, catching up with the others. "She be saying she ain't coming down 'till you bring her a pretty malu."

Sandra giggled and gave a twirl to pointedly show off her red and yellow malu. "Serve her right," she said and waved happily to her sister half hidden at the tree line. "Let's go."

"She be in a foul mood," said Engar, looking back. "Aye, mayhap you should not have promised her things you could not deliver. She be blaming me for what you said. Can't rightly see how it be my fault but there it is. 'Tis the end of the world, or so she thinks."

"Ohhh, there be Leski," shouted Sandra excitedly. "Woo-ooh, Leski! Wait for me! Can I go, Da? Can I?"

"Aye," said Engar. "No drinking tuvic, mind."

"Oh Da-aa," said Sandra but she didn't stay to argue. She pulled up the slightly over-long malu and scampered off along the beach to join Leski and her family.

"Well, that be the last we see of her for a long time," said Engar. "So, lad, what you be going to do about the malu?"

"I be not rightly knowing at the moment," said Logan, looking around at the huts that were clustered along the banks of the wide stream. There were two made of wood at the far end but the rest were made from mud. "Is there someone here who sells them?"

"Aye," said Engar. "There be Jinnet, but you ain't got no money."

"Mayhap there be none Bibu would like," said Logan. "Best I at least see them first then I may think of something. Where would I find Jinnet?"

"She lives on the far side, up yonder," said Engar pointing with his chin, "but most likely she be on the beach today. That be where

everyone else is.”

“Right,” said Logan, looking around. “You two go off and do something and I will see what Jinnet has to offer.”

Engar looked at him quizzically but the prospect of some time alone with Autumn was not unattractive.

“As you wish,” he said. “Autumn, have you tried tuvici? It be made right here in the town.”

“I have not,” said Autumn.

“Then let me buy you one,” said Engar. “Logan, we will be over there, in that crowd in the shade.”

“I will find you,” said Logan.

“You go ahead, Engar” said Autumn, “I will catch you up.”

Engar nodded and set off, his bad foot dragging a little in the sand.

“Are you going to take one?” asked Autumn quietly, watching him go.

“Aye,” said Logan. “I be not thinking of any other way and I am a thief, after all.”

“I thought so,” said Autumn. “Some advice, if you will forgive the offering.”

“Your thoughts are always welcome,” said Logan.

“This be a small place,” said Autumn. “Not like Uli-Rratha or others. I wager this Jinnet will not have a lot of malus and will know when one goes missing. Do not take one that is overly distinctive.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “I be not wanting Bibu or Engar accused of anything after we be gone.”

“Fare well,” said Autumn. “I will ask at this drinking place if there be

any way of making some money. Mayhap if we can make some we can pay Jinnet for the malu, even if it be a little late in arriving.”

“I wager there will not be much money to be had,” said Logan. “This does not look to be a rich place.”

“Well, I’d best be joining Engar,” said Autumn. “I do not wish him to feel insulted.”

* * *

“You do not like it?” asked Engar.

Autumn had taken a small sip of the thin milky white liquid in the small pot and put the drink down on the plank that served as a table.

“It is not entirely to my taste,” she said, “and it has alcohol in it.”

“You do not drink such things?” asked Engar, slightly surprised.

“They dull my senses,” said Autumn. She glanced around at the milling people; they were all happily drinking.

“Is that not the point?” said Engar with a chuckle.

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “I have never understood why people drink themselves into insensibility.”

She spotted a large man look over at Engar and stiffen. A moment later he started to weave his way through the people.

“They do it to forget,” said Engar, finishing his drink. “You are not going to drink this?” and he pointed to Autumn’s.

“I thank you, but no,” said Autumn coming up onto the balls of her feet. The approaching man had a faintly dangerous aura about him. “Do you know this man?”

“What man?” asked Engar, turning to look in the direction Autumn was looking. “Zaac!”

“Engar!” shouted the man and surged forwards, pushing two others out of the way. He grabbed Engar around the chest and hugged him tightly. Engar hugged him back.

Autumn relaxed as they clearly knew and liked each other.

“Is all well with you and yours?” asked Zaac, holding Engar at arms length.

“Aye,” said Engar. “Life continues much the same as always. And with you?”

Zaac held out a hand and twisted it from side to side and laughed then his eyes scanned Autumn.

“Much the same, eh?” he asked, nudging Engar in the ribs. “Who be this then?”

“This be Autumn,” said Engar, turning to include Autumn in the conversation. “She be a friend who is travelling in these parts. This be Zaac, brother to my Kanas.”

“Greetings,” said Autumn.

She hesitated a moment, wondering if she should hold out her hand first but Zaac shoved his hand in front of her. She held out her hand beside his expecting it to be slapped, as was the custom. To her surprise, Zaac gripped her hand then bent over and kissed it at the base of her thumb. She stilled the urge to snatch her hand away, not wanting to appear rude, although she slightly shifted her stance to give her a better footing should the need for action arise.

“Her man be exploring the town,” said Engar dryly. “Do not be causing a ruckus.”

“Ahh, I thought this charming maid was with you,” said Zaac, smiling broadly and displaying too many teeth.

“All the more reason not to,” said Engar, “but she be not with me. What brings you here? Surely there be no prize fights or races at our

little tanavac?"

"That would be the day," said Zaac. "No, I am here because they say Gunder Ani be coming here."

"Who is Gunder Ani?" asked Engar.

Zaac caught the eye of the man selling drinks and held up three fingers.

"She be a daloni dancer from Neander," said Zaac. "I hear tell she be a contender and I am here to see her for myself."

"Ohh," said Engar, looking interested. "She be that good?"

Three more pots of tucv appeared and Zaac tossed a coin at the man.

"Zaac be interested in sports," said Engar, noticing Autumn's enquiring look. "He is very rich from wagering on winners and losers."

"So you are here to wager on Gunder Ani?" asked Autumn. "Ah, not for me, thank you," as Zaac pushed a pot in her direction.

He grimaced and looked at Engar for confirmation then drank it quickly.

"Mayhap, mayhap not," he said. "I need to see her first and decide for myself if she be the winning kind."

"I see," said Autumn, not quite fathoming what Zaac was saying. "What is daloni dancing? How can someone be winning at dancing?"

"Ahh, daloni is not a dance," said Engar with a smile. "It be more of a, well, I know not what really."

"It is a game people play," said Zaac, "and those that be good at it compete against each other."

"Oh," said Autumn, starting to lose interest. "So what sort of game is it?"

“Tis right simple,” said Engar. “There be a palm frond held up by two poles and the dancers have to walk under it.”

“Is that all?” asked Autumn. “Twould seem little to compete about.”

“Ahh, I should have said that when all as wants to try have tried,” said Engar, “the frond be lowered and they try again. The winner be the one who can walk under the lowest. Oh and without touching the sand, except for the feet that is. It be right difficult after a while.”

“I daresay it is,” said Autumn, looking around to see if Logan was anywhere in sight. “And Gunder Ani is good at this daloni?”

“So they say,” said Zaac. “I am told her real name is Anitigea.”

“So why is she called Gunder Ani?” asked Autumn, her eyes drawn to an irate looking man not far away.

“It be short for 'Go Under',” said Zaac. “They say she can go under a grain of sand, but I doubt that. So, Engar, how be your girls?”

“This be the wrong day!” shouted the irate man at another man beside him.

“The wrong day for what?” wondered Autumn as Engar and Zaac moved into updating each other about their lives. She moved a little closer to the irate man, curious.

* * *

“Ooooh,” squealed Bibu when she saw the malu. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

She gave Logan a bone crushing hug then held up the pale green malu to inspect it.

“It be a lovely colour,” she exclaimed, her eyes wide and happy. “Here, hold it for me.”

Logan took the malu then looked around nervously as Bibu undid the

knot on her plain, old, boring, dull, off-white malu and dropped it on the ground. He really did not want to be seen in the bushes on the edge of a strange town with a local naked girl. Half a moment later she snatched the green one from him and rapidly wrapped it around herself. Tying the knot she smoothed the malu over her hips and looked down, visibly pleased with how she looked.

“Thank you!” she said again and hugged Logan then kissed him on the cheek.

“Sploop,” muttered Logan, going pink and, if the truth be known, a little weak at the knees.

“Tell Da I be with Sandra and the others,” she called as she ran off towards the people milling about on the beach.

“What about this?” he called, holding out her old malu, but she was already out of earshot.

“Oh well,” he muttered.

He shook the sand from the malu and neatly folded it in half then in half again then rolled it up and slung it over his shoulder. Down near the water he could see some people were lighting a fire. Beside them, two others seemed to be trying to drive a long pole through a very large fish. It was probably dead since it was not making any effort to resist.

“That be strange,” he thought and wandered over to watch.

“Voqev,” he said in surprise when he got up closer. “That thing be huge.”

“Tis only a small one,” said one of the men. He hit the pole with a large hammer, driving it a little further through.

“It has a lot of very sharp looking teeth,” said Logan, staring into the fish’s mouth. “What manner of fish be this?”

“Ohh, you be an outer, then,” said the man.

"I am from Jaikai," said Logan, stumbling slightly over the unfamiliar word.

"Get out of here," scoffed the man. "You be from Jaikai and you not know a shark when you sees one? Pah."

"I am from inland around Jaikai," said Logan. "I have not seen the sea before."

"Ohh, he be a plowboy," said the man to his companion derisively.

"What are you doing with the shark?" asked Logan.

"Be spitting it for the roasting," said the man, hitting the pole again. The pointed end of the pole emerged from the tail of the shark. "C'mon, lads, let's be getting it on."

Six men who'd been standing watching, and sniggering at Logan, moved forward and between them they lifted the shark onto two stout posts flanking the fire. The fire was slowly beginning to build.

"Be a long time yet," said the man wiping his brow and looking irritably at Logan.

"Oh, right," said Logan, realising he wasn't wanted there. He turned and wandered off along the beach, looking for Autumn.

* * *

"This be the day the elders said," said another man, standing sideways on to the irate man. He didn't seem overly interested in what he was irate about.

"But they be wrong!" said the irate man loudly. He slammed his fist down on the plank. "It be still two days away!"

"Ahh, shut it," said the other man and turned his back. He said something to his companions and they all laughed.

"Foqoo will curse the lot of you," said the irate man, scowling. He

tossed back his drink and called for another. "Fools!"

"Excuse me," said Autumn. "I could not help but overhear. What is the wrong day?"

The man looked blearily at her. "And who might you be, girlie?" he asked. "Another piss head fool like them?"

"I am Autumn Savannah," said Autumn. "Seeker of truth and knowledge."

"Ohhhh," said the man. He punched the shoulder of the man he'd been talking to. "Hear that, fool? Her be one who wants to know the truth! More than you stupid buggers do!"

He tossed a coin at someone and grasped the pot he'd been given tightly.

"The wrong day?" prompted Autumn.

"Huh?" said the man. "Oh, it be you, Anton Sliver or some such." He belched and a wave of fermented coconut milk aroma surrounded Autumn. She did not flinch. "See here, this here tanavac, it be on the wrong day, see. This be not the day that Foqoo be in the arms of the sisters."

"Ahh," said Autumn, "I have heard something of this before but I am a stranger here. What is your meaning?"

"Don't you ever be looking at the sky, Shorten Panama?" said the man wearily.

"Every night," said Autumn. "The two sisters be Plakill and Plifal?"

"Aye," said the man. He lifted his pot to his lips then put it down again. "You be seeing they be crescents?"

"Aye," said Autumn, "like this." She held up her hands so the thumb and forefinger of each made a C with their arms facing each other.

“That be right,” said the man. He squatted down unsteadily and hit someone's leg to make them move it out of his way then drew a rough C in the sand with another, the other way around, facing it. Then he stabbed a finger between them.

“That be Foqoo,” he said. “Have you not seen It?”

“Ohh,” said Autumn. “Yes, I have seen it. It has been there for several days but I knew not what it was. So that be Foqoo?”⁵

“Aye,” said the man, straightening up. “That stuff streaming out behind It be Its hair.”

“I see,” said Autumn, thoughtfully. “So why is this the wrong day?”

“Tanavac should be when Foqoo be halfway between the sisters,” said the man. “Rule is, see, when each sister be in each half of the sky and halfway up their half and Foqoo be in the exact middle of 'em, then Foqoo be coming to the tanavac. Bloody fools have got the day wrong. Foqoo be not here for another two days and It will be right pissed off there be no tanavac in welcome.”

He glowered at the people ignoring him. “Right pissed off, you hear?” he bellowed but they continued to ignore him.

“Scum,” he muttered, turning back to his drink. “What did you say your name was?”

“Autumn,” said Autumn.

“See, Orland,” said the man, waving his finger at her. “The sisters be not exactly halfway yet and Foqoo be not exactly halfway between them.”

“So what happens when Foqoo gets here?” asked Autumn.

* * *

5 Astronomers believe that this was, most probably, the comet Necuia. It had an orbital period of approximately 58.8 Mottle Blue years, or 43.7 Earth years, around the time of *The Annals*. In this instance the comet was co-incident with a double lunar eclipse.

“Ahh, there she is,” thought Logan. He veered over towards the girl with the long blue-black pony tail and drab malu. She was standing quietly beside a large young man who was blocking Engar from view.

He wandered over, looking at all the pretty girls around in their brightly coloured malus. He thought he saw Sandra with a group of girls, all chatting excitedly with each other. He waved but their attention was on a group of young men who were tossing a coconut around and looking everywhere except at the girls. Sandra didn't wave back.

Autumn hadn't noticed him, no doubt because of all the noise around her.

“Hah,” thought Logan, slowing down. “Now is my chance!”

He slipped Bibu's old malu off his shoulder and held it loosely in both hands. Stepping cautiously he stole up behind Autumn. She was still standing quietly and appeared not to have heard him approach.

“Gotcha,” he shouted, throwing the malu around her neck.

* * *

Autumn spun around when she heard a girl scream, accidentally knocking into Zaac, making him spill his drink and tread on Engar's injured foot. Fortunately he had had no feeling in that foot for several summers. Autumn was just in time to see a large man slam his hand across the side of Logan's head, sending him sprawling. Almost as quickly, the people nearby spread out to create an empty space around Logan.

“Logan!” cried Autumn, running the ten or so paces to where he was.

“What the bliad you think you be doing,” growled the large man, bending over Logan.

“He attacked me, Hanik,” shouted the girl. “Sort him out!”

Hanik grabbed Logan around the throat and hauled him to his feet.

His fingers almost met at the back of Logan's neck.

"What in Voqev's name be you doing, crazy man?" he demanded.

He drew back an arm the size of a well established palm tree just as Autumn somersaulted over the people standing between her and Logan.

"Unhand him," she cried.

"Piss off," said Hanik, letting fly with his fist at Logan's face.

Autumn's foot caught his hand before it made contact and spun him off balance. He let go of Logan and Logan slumped to the ground, clutching his throat and gasping. Autumn spun onto the other foot and back-kicked Hanik in his thigh and Hanik dropped to his knees. The knot of her malu came loose and it slid down around her hips. She ignored it but there were a number of hoots and whistles from the spectators. Hanik stayed on all fours for a moment then got to his feet.

"You be dead, bitch," he growled.

A partially rolled up malu hit Autumn from behind and without thinking she grabbed it and lashed out with her foot, catching the girl on her shoulder. She fell back against Zaac who had run over after Autumn to watch. He pinned the girl's arms to her side and she kicked back against his shin. Zaac swore but didn't let go.

Hanik jumped on Autumn as her back was turned, forcing her to the ground. She twisted in the sand beneath him, got her feet under her bottom and thrust up hard, tossing Hanik onto the sand beside her. As he thudded into the ground she thrust upwards with her hands behind her shoulders and leapt to her feet in a single, sinuous bound and kicked Hanik in the crotch. He doubled over, his hands between his legs, whimpering.

Autumn backed away slowly, her eyes never leaving him. The girl lashed out and kicked Autumn in the bottom with her foot. Autumn immediately jumped forward and turned so she could see both antagonists. She was reluctant to hit the girl as she was not a serious

threat.

“Now then, be nice,” said Zaac, squeezing a little more tightly.

“You're hurting me,” gasped the girl.

“Calm down and I will let you go,” said Zaac.

The girl tried to kick him again then wheezed as the grip around her chest grew even tighter.

“Put me down,” she gasped.

“Will you calm down?” asked Zaac.

The girl nodded so Zaac dropped her. She fell to the ground coughing then crawled over to Hanik who was still moaning.

“Thank you,” said Autumn. She straightened up from her defensive posture and untied the malu and retied it properly then went over to attend to Logan. There were a few boos from the crowd.

“What happened?” she asked, pulling his hands away from his throat.

“Wah weh wah,” croaked Logan, very hoarsely.

As the excitement was clearly all over the spectators got bored and went back to whatever they had been doing and, no doubt, to discuss the short and fairly uninteresting fight. After all, no blood had been spilled so it couldn't have been that serious.

Autumn gently probed Logan's neck and he winced several times.

“There seems to be no damage,” she said. “Your neck is not broken and your windpipe is intact. I expect you will have a sore throat for a while and some interesting bruises. Oh, and a black eye.”

“Hergh,” wheezed Logan.

“Drink this,” said Engar, appearing beside Autumn. “Tis tuvic. Works

wonders for the pain.”

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Hanik slowly get to his feet and limp away, with the help of the girl. She was less than a third his size and struggled valiantly to support him. The danger now seemingly gone, Autumn lifted Logan's head and helped him sip the drink.

“Best we get him out of the sun,” said Engar.

Autumn let Engar help her get Logan to his feet as he seemed to want to help. Between them they got him over to the shade of a palm tree. People got out of their way. She propped him against the tree and sat beside him. Engar leant against the tree, a look of mild concern on his face.

“Do not try to talk,” she said. “Finish the drink.”

Obediently Logan continued to sip the tuvic. He coughed once and groaned, rubbing his neck.

“Well now,” said Zaac, squatting down beside Autumn. “Would you be interested in a little wager? I will put up the money and we split the winnings half each. What do you say?”

Chapter Twelve

“I do not fight for money,” said Autumn, “and I try to avoid fighting at all times. Anyway, now is not the time to discuss these things. I must attend to Logan.”

She watched Logan's face. It seemed to be returning to its normal colour.

“Ahh, like you did with that man a few moments ago,” said Zaac. “Not that it matters, I am not talking of fighting, or not today anyway.”

“I had to involve myself to protect Logan,” said Autumn glancing up at him, “and he gave me no opportunity to find a peaceful solution.”

“You didn't have to kick him between the legs, though,” said Engar with a laugh. “Lulerain, that must have hurt.”

“It seemed the quickest way to end the conflict without bloodshed or serious injury,” said Autumn. “Regardless, it is done now, whatever view you might have on its outcome. You two go and enjoy your tanavac and I will sit here with Logan.”

“But are you not interested in making some money?” asked Zaac. “Granted there be not much to make here but if all goes well we can move on to places where the pickings be greater.”

“As I said, I will not fight for money,” said Autumn, sitting cross legged in the sand beside Logan, “and you do, I understand, wager on the outcomes of prize fights.”

“I do,” said Zaac, deliberately sitting down in front of her so he could not be dismissed. “But we can leave that for another day. I am talking of the daloni.”

“What, that walking under a stick thing?” said Autumn. “You would wager I can walk under a stick? Who would take such a wager?”

“Tis something that requires great skill and strength of the legs,” said Zaac, “and from what I saw in that fight you are likely to have that

skill. I saw you throw that giant off with just your legs. The wagering though be not so much that you can walk under the stick but that you can walk under a lower stick than anyone else.”

“’Twould seem a pointless endeavour,” said Autumn. “Why would it matter?”

Zaac laughed. “Ahh, that be at the heart of wagering,” he said. “’Tis only something that matters when someone decides they want it to matter and then they puts their money down for what they want. From what I hear this Gunder Ani has a big following and it be likely there are them as would put money down on her being what they think she is.”

“And what do they think she is?” asked Autumn.

“Unbeatable,” said Zaac. “’Tis a strange thing, I know, but people will risk their money in the belief that someone they do not know will not be beaten at something they cannot do.”

“How strange,” said Autumn. She sighed. “But there be no harm to anyone in this venture?”

“Absolutely not,” said Zaac then he paused for a moment. “Well, I suppose it be possible that Gunder Ani or one of the others might strain a muscle pushing themselves beyond what they are capable of but that be of their own doing. You would not be doing it to them.”

“So how would this work?” asked Autumn.

“When the competition begins everyone will see you know not what you are doing,” said Zaac. “I will make wagers with anyone who will take them that you be winning and they will not believe it possible so when you win we will keep the wagers and split the money in half.”

“There is one obvious flaw in your plan,” said Autumn. “I will not know what I am doing and it be very unlikely I will win against those who have done this many times before so what happens then?”

“Well, if you lose then I lose my money,” said Zaac. “That be the long

and the short of it.”

“We have no money,” said Autumn. “We cannot pay half the losses.”

“No, I will pay all the losses,” said Zaac. “That be only fair since you will be doing the work.”

“That seems a most strange way of doing business,” said Autumn. “’Twould seem you be making a big wager on me for some reason.”

“That is because I think you can do it,” said Zaac. “And the beauty of it is that you are completely unknown so most will think you have no chance and will wager against you, certain they be taking my money. I think we could made a tidy little profit here, and no mistake.”

“’Tis worth listening to him,” said Engar. “He has made himself very rich doing this sort of thing.”

“’Tis something I need to think about,” said Autumn. “I am not certain of its rightness.”

“What could possibly not be right about it?” asked Zaac, frowning. “’Tis only a bit of fun.”

“Someone must lose,” said Autumn. “What if they cannot afford to?”

“Oh, tat,” said Zaac, dismissively waving his hand. “That be nothing. I will be taking lots of small wagers from them as will only be spending it on tuvic. If they lose they still have the fun of it and go home more sober than they would have.”

“And what if I lose?” said Autumn. “You will have lost all your money.”

Zaac guffawed heartily. “Not here,” he said. “Even if every single one of them wagers everything they have they will still not be taking all of my money. I have a tidy little amount put aside, do not be fretting your pretty little head about that.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “I am still not convinced. If you have all this money why are you looking for more?”

"It be what I do," said Zaac. "Some sell fish, others cloth and still more their strength. I be a seller of entertainment and there be plenty who likes to pay a pek or two for a little harmless entertainment."

"So you be saying it is a simple exchange?" said Autumn.

"Aye," said Zaac, "and it be their choice. No one be forcing them to lay a wager."

"Autumn," croaked Logan. He winced and put his hand to his throat.

"Yes, Logan?" said Autumn, bending over him. "Can I get you anything?"

"Do it," he said. "What Zaac says."

"Are you sure?" asked Autumn, frowning.

"Aye," said Logan. He swallowed painfully. "And can I have another of those drinks?"

"I will get it," said Zaac instantly, heaving himself to his feet. "Can I get you one too?"

"Thank you, no," said Autumn. She sighed. "I need time to think about this."

"Of course," said Zaac. "See that over there?"

He pointed further up the beach. Two men were hammering branches into the sand and people were beginning to gather.

"What is it?" asked Autumn.

"They be setting up to start," he said, "so don't be thinking too long."

* * *

"So who be that man?" asked Autumn, pointing to a thickset man in a richly coloured malu. His face was very serious and he was holding a

vicious looking knife. He kept testing it with his thumb.

“That be Pownan,” said Engar. “He is the son of the headman. He does the deciding if a walk be fair or not.”

“Why would it not be?” asked Autumn.

“Nothing can touch the sand except the feet,” said Zaac. “He will look at the sand and if there be anything other than feet marks he will say it be a bad walk.”

“And he will behead the dancer?” asked Autumn.

“Why would Pownan do that?” asked Engar, puzzled. “He be a kind man.”

“The knife,” said Autumn.

“Ohh, that be for cutting the branches,” said Engar. “So the stick can be lowered.”

“Ahh, I see,” said Autumn. “So how low does the stick go?”

“Until only one person can go under,” said Zaac.

“Well, it seems simple enough,” said Autumn. “And there be no fighting?”

“Well, there may be a fight or two among the people watching,” said Zaac, looking around. “There has been a lot of drinking going on already.”

“So how do we do this?” asked Autumn.

“What was his name again, Engar?” asked Zaac.

“Pownan,” said Zaac.

“Ahh. So Pownan will most likely call for people to do the walk,” said Zaac, “and they will try it then he will call for more. When no one else

wants to try he will lower the stick and it goes again. Do not go forward when he calls, wait until I say. That way you can watch them as have done this before and see what to do.”

“Will not Pownan want everyone to go with the first height?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Engar. “It be usual for those who have some skill to wait. If Gunder Ani be here she will not come forward for a long time, I wager. When will you start taking the wagers, Zaac?”

“Oh, be a while yet,” said Zaac, scanning the people standing round. “I want people to see Autumn has not done this before then I will see what's what. Ohh, I reckon that be her, over there.”

“Who?” asked Autumn, looking where he was pointing.

“Gunder Ani,” said Zaac. “That tall skinny woman with no hair.”

“She does have hair,” said Autumn, “it just be cut very short.”

“Hmm,” said Zaac. “You see what she be wearing?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “what of it?”

“We need to dress you the same,” said Zaac. “Your malu be too loose and will drag in the sand. You need a loin cloth like hers and a chest binding.”

“This is all I have,” said Autumn frowning. “Why would the malu touch the ground?”

“You will see,” said Zaac with a grin. “Where is that malu the girl hit you with?”

“It is with Logan,” said Engar. “It be Bibu's old one.”

“Can we tear it up?” asked Zaac. “I will get you another.”

“Of course,” said Engar, “and I venture she be not wearing it ever

again, Logan got her another. I'll go get it."

"Right," said Zaac, "Let us sit and watch for a while."

"Bring Logan back with you," said Autumn, "if he feels up to it."

* * *

There was a lot of jollity among the crowd for the first few rounds as a variety of people, young and old, fat and thin, short and tall had a go. A lot of tuvic got passed around and there was a lot of laughter, particularly when some, knowing they could not get under the stick, deliberately played tricks and joked. Nearby a group of men with drums made from hollowed out palm tree trunks and covered with tightly stretched skins beat out happy rhythms. After a while the atmosphere started to change as the stick got lower and the more serious daloni dancers started to come forward.

"Time you had a go, Autumn," said Zaac when the stick was around hip height. "Don't make it look too easy."

"I do not think it is easy," said Autumn. "I am not sure I can walk under that."

"Of course you can," said Zaac. "And there be a skill to it but I want you seen before Gunder Ani shows you how to do it. Go on, have a go. Pownan be calling for anyone else."

"'Twould seem a foolhardy venture," said Autumn, "but no matter."

"You can do it, easy," wheezed Logan.

No one took much notice as the slim girl with the long pony tail and the plain malu walked up to the stick. She leaned backwards, pushing her knees as far forwards as she could and, balanced on her toes, slowly edged her way under. The knot of her malu brushed the stick and it wobbled but didn't fall. Pownan declared it a fair walk and someone in the crowd cheered but to most it was obvious Autumn was at her limit already.

“Perfect,” said Zaac gleefully. “That wobble of the stick was a touch of genius.”

“I do not think I can get under if it goes much lower,” said Autumn doubtfully. “That was more difficult than I expected.”

“Do not try again,” said Zaac. “At least, not until you have seen Gunder Ani do her first so you be seeing how to do it.”

“Very well,” said Autumn. “But I fear you will be losing your money. Have you made any wagers yet?”

“No, not yet,” said Zaac, “but I am going to now they have seen you. Engar, get her ready.”

He got up and started to move among the watchers. Autumn sat and watched him for a while, talking to people and occasionally pointing at her. There seemed to be a lot of laughing and hand-slapping.

“Get me ready?” she asked after a while.

“Aye,” said Engar, tearing up Bibu's old malu. “Stand up.”

Autumn stood while Engar measured out a strip that barely fitted around her hips and another for her chest.

“What is the tail for?” asked Autumn.

“It goes between your legs,” said Engar. “Unless you be wanting to give Pownan a sight he most like never seen before.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn.

“You will,” said Engar, grinning. “Logan, you stand behind her while I tie this on.”

Autumn stood there patiently while Engar put his hands under her malu and wrapped the loincloth around her then knotted it very tightly at one side. He slid his hand between her legs and pulled the tail through and tucked it neatly into the waist band at the front. Then

he told her to take off the malu so he could wrap the chest band around her.

"This is very tight," complained Autumn when he was done.

"It has to be," said Engar. "Else it will drag in the sand. When you do a walk, keep your hair on your chest so you can see it."

"I really do not understand," said Autumn. She tried to sit down again but the loincloth cut into the tops of her thighs.

"It suits you," wheezed Logan. The bruises on his neck were beginning to get quite dark and there was a decent sized bruise appearing on his cheek and around his eye. His head throbbed.

"Ahh," said Autumn, studying the next few dancers. "That makes sense. The inside edge of the foot, not the toes. I should have thought of that."

"You would have," said Engar. "You have just never done this before. Keep as close as you can to one side as well. The stick sags in the middle."

"That is Gunder Ani," said Zaac, reappearing. He eyed Autumn's outfit and smiled. "Good," he said, "very good. Have you seen how to do it?"

"Yes," said Autumn. "It looks easier that way. Shall I try again now?"

"No," said Zaac. "Ali is preparing to do her first walk. Watch her carefully then try to do what she does."

"Does she do it differently to them?" asked Autumn.

"I don't know," said Zaac, "but from what I hear she be the best here so watch and learn from her. Ahh, here she is."

The tall woman had stepped forward amid some cheers from the crowd and was standing in front of the stick, studying it. Then she backed away and went to talk to the drummers.

“Now that be interesting,” said Zaac, watching intently.

“What is?” asked Autumn, standing up to watch as well.

“She is slowing the drums down,” said Zaac. “Clever girl.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn. “Why would she slow down the drums?”

“Have you seen the others hop forward with their feet?” asked Zaac, looking down at her as Autumn’s head only came up to his collar bone.

“Aye,” said Autumn.

“The music gets into your head,” said Zaac, “and you try to hop with the beats and mayhap end up going too fast. She knows this and is slowing them down to her speed. I wager she is in better control that way. I wonder if she will get them to speed up again for the others.”

Satisfied with the speed of the drums, Gunder Ani stalked back to the stick and stared at it, as if willing it to be higher than just above her knees. Then, with a sudden little yelping cry and a handclap she dropped backwards, her back arching and her head held up so she could see the stick while she carefully walked under it, lowering her head at the last moment. Then she thrust herself vertical and, with a beaming smile, bowed to the crowd. There was much stamping on the sand and hooting of appreciation.

“Well now,” said Zaac. “Did you see that? She didn’t hop!”

“She seemed to be doing a back and forwards walking movement with her feet,” said Autumn, “but it was in time with the drums. I was watching closely. Why do you think she had her legs so wide apart?”

“That is so her feet stay under her hips,” said Engar, “so she can stay balanced. Now do you see what that tail on your loincloth is for?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Shall I try again?”

“Not yet,” said Zaac. “We will wait until there be only Ani and two others left.”

“Why?” asked Autumn. “I would like to practice the style before it gets too low.”

“It be a mind game,” said Zaac. “When there be only three left in it they be thinking it is almost over. If you come in unexpectedly when they are near their limit it will stop them thinking straight. They will be wondering who you are and what you can do and they will loose sight of the stick.”

“You had this all planned,” wheezed Logan accusingly.

“Mayhap,” said Zaac, grinning. “But it works with other things, not just daloni.”

“This is true,” said Autumn. “Oft-times a weaker fighter can best the stronger if they have the right way of thinking. 'Tis interesting to see it used here.”

They watched as two other dancers failed to get under the stick. One hit it with his knee and the other let her bottom hit the sand.

“Watch this one,” said Zaac as the next came up to the stick. “He had the same gap as Ani last time. Mayhap he be as good as she is.”

The man stared at the stick as Ani had then took three slow deep breaths before dropping backwards. He edged forward, being careful to drop his shoulders in time.

“Ohhhh!” exclaimed Engar as gasps went around the crowd. “Did you see that?”

“What happened?” asked Autumn. “I was watching Gunder Ani.”

“He touched the stick with the tip of his nose,” said Engar. “Ahhh, Aloidia did not smile on him today!”

“So, we be down to the last three then,” said Zaac, nodding his head.

“Time you went back out there again. Wait a few moments.”

Pownan strode up to the poles supporting the stick and carefully cut two new notches and positioned the stick on them. The three remaining dancers went over to inspect it as Pownan called for any more who wanted to have a go. No one expected any to.

“When you go up,” whispered Zaac, “see which side be a little higher than the other. That Pownan has been drinking and I don't reckon his cutting be that good. Go on. May Aloidia smile on you.” He gave her a gentle push forward.

“I shall try,” called Autumn, striding out.

The other three stared at her in astonishment as many in the crowd cheered and applauded. They were at the point where they would cheer and applaud anything. More than a few stayed silent and looked worried, fearing that their wagers with Zaac were not as safe as they had thought. Autumn had not dropped out after all.

“You first,” said Pownan, irritated with Autumn. He had thought this was nearly over and wanted to do some serious drinking but she was delaying things.

Autumn went over to the stick. It was just below her knee on the left and about half way up her knee on the right so she stayed over on the right side. Focusing on what she had seen from Gunder Ani, she took a wide stance then slowly lowered herself backwards. She spread her knees wide then kicked a foot further out to lower herself slightly more. Keeping her head up she walked forward slowly, alternating between her heels and the sides of her big toes in time with the drum beats. Her thigh muscles trembled slightly. As the stick got close she let her head drop backwards a little and saw the stick pass barely a hair's breadth above the tip of her nose. Carefully she kept going until she was sure the stick was past her head then pulled herself upright. As the crowd cheered she turned. Yes, the stick was still on the poles.

Pownan glared at her and stalked over to inspect the sand. “Fair walk,” he shouted angrily.

Autumn smiled and walked back to the others.

“Well done,” wheezed Logan, giving her a hug.

“Good girl,” said Zaac appreciatively. “This next one won't do it. He looks nervous.”

Autumn looked over and caught sight of Gunder Ani staring reflectively at her. She smiled and waved and Ani looked away. Sure enough, as Zaac had predicted, the next one up knocked the stick off, his balance and timing seeming disturbed. The third to go paced up and down a few times in front of the stick and took several short sharp breaths before she tried. One shoulder touched the sand, to Pownan's evident delight. The competition was nearly over.

“If Gunder Ani fails then you have won,” wheezed Logan, getting excited now Autumn was involved.

“Do not expect her to fail,” cautioned Zaac. “If she really be a contender then she can take the stick a lot lower.”

Somewhat inevitably, Gunder Ani easily managed to get under the stick, with quite a lot of spare room.

“She will want to go first,” said Zaac, watching Ani as Pownan cut the new notches. “She be wanting to put the pressure on you, Autumn. Do not let it bother you.”

“It will not,” Autumn assured him, not in the least bit bothered. She felt confident now that she had tried the technique successfully. In fact she was looking forward to the new challenge.

Ali studied the stick for a few moments then went over to the drummers. They had speeded up a little so she slowed them down again. Then she stalked back to the stick and turned to face the crowd, her eyes seeking Autumn. Their eyes met and locked, each challenging the other silently. Then Ani lifted an eyebrow and jerked her head back with a contemptuous look and turned her back on Autumn. The crowd went silent.

Ali stood there for a few moments, a foot tapping to the beat of the drums then she splayed her legs and sank slowly backwards, every line of her body showing her total control. Slowly she walked forward. First her thighs went under the stick, then her hips then her chest. She paused for a moment to lift her arms high with a dismissive flourish then brought her shoulders under, bringing her arms down, then up again like the wings of bird. She paused again then dropped her head down and up the other side. She rose up and turned to face the crowd triumphantly. Pownan stalked over.

“Fair walk,” he shouted and the crowd cheered loudly. Ani raised both arms in salute then turned and gestured to the drummers. They started drumming faster and an irregular rhythm crept in.

“All down to you, now,” said Zaac, turning to Autumn. “Let me give you a hug for good fortune!”

He hugged her warmly and, without her noticing, pulled her pony tail so a small section hung below her shoulder.

“You can do it,” wheezed Logan, gripping her hand.

Autumn smiled and walked over to the stick. It was now near the top of her shins, although it seemed slightly higher on the left this time. She took up her stance, breathed deeply and lowered herself backwards. The rhythm of the drums felt not right so she closed her ears to them and edged forward, heel, toe, heel, toe. The stick passed her thighs, then her hips, then her chest. She toyed with waving her arms as Ani had done and decided not to then dipped her head backwards slightly to pass under the stick. Part of her ponytail dragged in the sand.

“No walk,” shouted Pownan, pointing to the scrape. He was delighted because it meant the competition was all over. Ani had won.

“Oh no,” wheezed Logan, bitterly disappointed.

“Oh well,” said Autumn, cheerfully when she walked over. “Twas not meant to be. Where is Zaac?”

“He has gone to collect his winnings,” said Engar.

Chapter Thirteen

"I wonder what is going on over there," said Autumn, pointing down the beach and over near the beginning of the town's huts.

Astauand had set and the beach was generally in darkness apart from shadows milling around the fire where the shark was being cooked. Two or three torches being lit had caught Autumn's attention.

"I have no idea," said Logan sourly. His throat was still sore but he'd stopped wheezing. "But I am unable to understand why you are not insulted."

"Why should I be insulted?" asked Autumn. "I agreed to take part in the wager and that be the end of it. It is no concern to me what the actual wager was although I confess I am still not yet convinced that wagering be right of itself. I think if the situation should arise again I shall decline to take part."

"But Zaac wagered against you!" said Logan. "That alone would seem to be an insult but when it looked like you were going to win he fixed it so you could not. I think that be a foul thing to do."

"I confess I was surprised by that," said Autumn. "My knowledge of wagers be slight and I had supposed all wagers were on the winning but Zaac says that wagering can be on anything. This is a learning experience for me and I am grateful for that. 'Tis fascinating that some will wager on which part of the body touches the sand or how many drum beats it takes someone to go under the stick. I confess I am intrigued and I had not imagined the range of possible wagers."

"But he wagered on you to come second," said Logan. "If it were me I would be insulted that he did not think me to win."

"I follow your meaning, Logan," said Autumn, "but as you know I am afflicted with vanity. 'Tis good for me to know that not all see me as I see myself and that second might be all I could achieve. I am grateful to Zaac for that reminder."

"Grrr," growled Logan. "But you might have won. He cheated so that

you could not.”

“Did he?” asked Autumn. “My hair could have fallen through wind or the brush of a passerby or my own actions. I venture the fault lies with me for not checking it before the attempt. If, when I am exercising, I kick the air and hit a tree it is my own fault for not seeing the tree, not the fault of the tree. Besides, you are forgetting that Gunder Ani had her own tricks. 'Tis only to be expected that such things will happen and it is my responsibility to deal with them.”

“You keep saying these things,” said Logan huffily, “but I have my doubts. I would be insulted for certain. In fact, I am insulted for you, even if you are not. He deceived us.”

“No,” said Autumn. “I do not recall him saying that he was wagering on me to win although he did give winning as an example of wagering which, through our ignorance, we both took as being the goal. With practice I could probably beat Gunder Ani but I venture I would not have done today and Zaac should be praised for knowing that. In truth, though, Zaac be taking my measure rightly. He also knew that I would not willingly have deliberately lost. He would seem a wiser man than I first thought. Besides, you are forgetting one important thing.”

“Oh?” said Logan, jabbing his hand into the sand, “And what be that?”

“This,” said Autumn, touching the piece of Bibu's old malu that sat on the sand between them. “Forty three paraks and nine peks and more to come. Zaac devised a strategy and saw it through to the end and should be commended.”

“Aye,” said Logan grumpily. “I will believe the more to come when I see it.”

“He will return,” said Autumn. “Of that I am certain. When he finds the last two who wagered with him.”

“And another thing,” said Logan, flaring up again. “Are you not insulted that afterwards he goes off to talk to Gunder Ani about working together and not you? You are better than she is!”

“Oh Logan,” said Autumn, patting his arm. “You are determined to be insulted, are you not?”

“Hah,” said Logan pulling his arm away.

“Why would Zaac waste a breath about doing this with me again in the future?” asked Autumn. “He knows I will not. It makes much more sense for him to work with her.”

“I just hate it that someone did not think you are the best,” said Logan. “I find that so ... insulting!”

“Ahhh, Logan,” said Autumn softly. “I thank you for your faith in me but you are wrong. I am good at what I do, that be fact and not my vanity, but there will always be someone somewhere who is better. I have been bested many times and will be in the future and that be the truth of it. Now, why do you not count the money again and let it soothe your thoughts?”

“It is not the money,” said Logan, “I have counted it twice already. 'Tis the idea of him not thinking you be the best that irks me.”

“Accept it,” said Autumn. “'Tis over now and harking back on it will not change things. We have more important things to discuss.”

“We do?” said Logan in surprise. “What?”

“There is definitely something happening or going to happen over there,” said Autumn. “There are more torches and people seem to be moving over. They are even leaving the drinking place. Shall we go too?”

“What about Zaac?” asked Logan. “He will not know where to find us.”

“Oh, I venture he will find us sooner or later,” said Autumn. “Same as Engar. He went to find his girls and they most likely be over there with whatever is happening. They seem the sort to want to be near the centre of things. Most likely we will run into both of them.”

“Aye, that be true enough,” said Logan getting to his feet. He twisted his head from side to side to ease the ache in his neck. “Will you carry the money or shall I?”

“I will if you prefer,” said Autumn, “but you know I will not worry about it as much as you.”

“Hah, that be true for sure,” said Logan, picking up the bundle. “Last time we had a bundle of coin you gave most of it away.”

“You could have stopped me,” said Autumn heading off up the beach. “After all, you stole that money and I dare say that gave you some right of ownership over it, even though I do not fully understand these things.”

“Indeed?” said Logan. “You think I could have stopped you? I could no more stop you doing something you want to do than stop Astauand from rising.”

“Tis simple,” said Autumn. “If I suggest you give some paraks to someone who needs them, all you have to do is say 'no' since you be the one holding them.”

“Believe that if you want to, Autumn,” said Logan, transferring the bundle to his other hand, further away from Autumn, “but if I say 'no' to you, you will give me so many reasons why I should say 'yes' that my head will hurt. 'Tis not worth the pain. Anyway, what do we have to discuss? My head hurts already so more debate will make no difference.”

“That,” said Autumn, pointing to the bundle.

“You mean the spending of it or do you want to give it away already?” asked Logan. “That be right quick.”

“No, not the paraks,” said Autumn, “the cloth. That be a piece of Bibu's old malu? Engar thought it was.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “I brought it with me when I was looking for you and that girl took it from me.”

“That was something else I wanted to ask,” said Autumn. “Why did she take it and why did she scream?”

“Twas just a misunderstanding,” said Logan, “nothing more. Why are you asking about the cloth?”

“If you have the malu, then Bibu is not wearing it,” said Autumn. “Which means she is either walking around naked or she is wearing another. Did you find her one?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “A nice green one. She was very pleased and she kissed me.”

“Ahh, something is starting,” said Autumn. “Do you hear the drums?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “I wonder what that wailing is?”

“People are gathering over there,” said Autumn. “Let us go and see. Did you take the green malu or was it freely given to you?”

“I took it,” said Logan.

“Then I think we should find the person you took it from and give them paraks for it,” said Autumn, “as we have some now.”

“No,” said Logan.

“Tis only fair,” said Autumn, glancing at him in the torchlight. “Whoever had it either bought it or made it and as we are in a position to do so we should compensate them for that.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, “but I still say no. The wailing seems to be coming from up ahead.”

“Then let us go see what is making that noise,” said Autumn. “But what if this person sees Bibu wearing it? She may come to some harm as a result. Or Engar, if he tries to protect her.”

“Tis a risk,” said Logan, “but I still say no. Do you think this is a procession of some sort?”

“It would seem so,” said Autumn looking around. “Everyone seems to be following the people in front of them and some be chanting something. Mayhap if we make our way to the head we will find out what is going on.”

“That seems to be where the wailing and drumming is coming from,” said Logan.

“And what of Bibu?” asked Autumn, as they started to weave between the people in front of them. “Do you think she will like wearing a malu that was taken? Mayhap she kissed you because she thought you bought it at great expense and would be horrified to find out you stole it.”

“They seem to be carrying something,” said Logan, “but I cannot make out what is is. I like to think Bibu kissed me because she wanted to kiss me, and not simply for giving her something but no matter. I still say no.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn, “I confess I still have a worry. What if she feels duty bound to give the malu back and has to go naked as her old malu is now in many pieces?”

“Do not be worried about that, Autumn,” said Logan. “I wager Bibu would not be greatly dismayed at the attention that will attract. I still say no.”

“Ohh, the procession would seem to be through the town,” said Autumn as they neared the front. “The thing being carried is going round the corner. Mayhap they will take it back to the beach. Still, Engar may not be best pleased. He may be driven to do something foolish so that he may find another covering for his oldest daughter so she may find a suitable partner and not be at the mercy of those who flock to look at a naked girl.”

“You see?” said Logan. “Just say no, you said. It be simple, you said. Ain't nothing simple about it. You will argue with me until I lose the will to live. We will find the woman who sells the malus and pay her for it. Most likely over the odds as well, but so be it.”

“All you had to do was say no one more time, Logan,” said Autumn. “I had run out of arguments.”

“Impossible,” said Logan. “You will no more run out of arguments than the sea will run out of water. You be just playing with me. It looks like they have someone held in the air up ahead. What do you think they are doing?”

“I cannot imagine,” said Autumn. “It is right strange. Look, they are heading back to the beach. Quick, come with me.”

She darted off down a narrow lane. Logan sighed then followed.

“How did you know she is down here?” he asked, catching her up.

“Who?” asked Autumn.

“The seller of malus,” said Logan. “Is that not where we are going?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I was trying to get ahead of the procession but if the seller be along here then we can get that business out of the way quickly. Where is she?”

“Umm, two houses further along,” said Logan.

“There be no one there, I reckon,” said Autumn, “it be all dark. Mayhap she is in the procession.”

“Hello?” called Logan, standing in the doorway. “Is there anyone here?”

No one answered.

“No, do not,” said Autumn, firmly. “We have no need of more.”

“I was just looking,” said Logan, looking pained. “I was not going to take another, even though she has left them unattended.”

“Mayhap if we left some coins,” said Autumn, “although I know not how many. Did you ask earlier?”

“No,” said Logan. “The woman was talking to someone in the lane and took no notice of me. I do not like the idea of leaving some coins, someone may take them. I am not the only thief in the world.”

“True,” said Autumn. “Would you recognise her again?”

“Aye, most like,” said Logan.

“Come, then,” said Autumn running off. “If we get to the head of the procession we can see those who are following. Mayhap you will spot her.”

The procession was moving quite slowly with much drumming, chanting, waving of torches and that strange wailing and they easily overtook it down the almost deserted lane.

“It is a strange looking man,” said Logan, standing at the edge of the beach watching the procession come towards them. It was still some way away and the waving torches added to the almost hypnotic sounds.

“Is it not a woman?” asked Autumn. “The chest looks more like a woman's although it be strangely lopsided.”

“But look at the legs,” said Logan. “Ain't never seen a woman with legs like that.”

“Is that you, Autumn,” came a voice. A shadowy figure broke away from a small group standing close to the end hut. A small flickering light like a small candle went out quickly.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Is that Zaac?”

“Were you looking for me?” asked Zaac, joining them.

“No,” said Autumn, “we wanted to see what is being carried at the head of the procession.”

“Ohh,” said Zaac. “That be Foqoo. I have the rest of your money. Four paraks, three peks.” He held out a fist.

“Thank you,” said Autumn, taking the coins. She passed them to Logan who fumbled with the bundle. “Foqoo? I was told Foqoo is a deity. Why would a deity be carried around like that?”

“Tis not really Foqoo,” said Zaac. “It be a figure of Foqoo. It be made from palm spines and stuffed with the leaves.”

“Ahh, That would explain why it looks strange,” said Autumn. “So are you a follower of Foqoo?”

“Oh no,” said Zaac. “My personal be Vahaj. A lot of those in the procession are followers of Foqoo though, and many just go along for the fun of it. When they get to the beach they will burn the figure and then feast on the fish and other stuff then drink themselves senseless. Mayhap one or two will drown themselves in the sea.”

“Sploop,” said Logan. “Why would they do that? Is it a part of their worship?”

“Yes and no,” said Zaac. “Mostly it be because they fall down senseless in the water, but there be a few who will want to cleanse themselves. Seems strange to me but then, I am not a follower.”

“Why is it strange?” asked Autumn. “Water would seem a good thing to cleanse yourself with.”

“Not them as follow Foqoo,” said Zaac. “Foqoo be cleansing with fire, not water. That be why they burn the figure, to be like Foqoo up there.” He turned and pointed to Foqoo in the sky, almost exactly halfway between Plakill and Plifal, although Plifal was barely over the horizon. “That stuff trailing out behind be the flames of Foqoo, they tell me.”

“How interesting,” said Autumn. “I had never heard of Foqoo before I came to this Island. I thought I knew of all the deities.”

“Aye,” said Zaac. “I travel in Aferraron and Neander and they ain't never heard of Foqoo so 'twould seem It not be much of a powerful god but they seem to take It seriously here.”

“The wailing is from some sort of pipe,” said Logan, watching the procession. “Looks like some sort of bent horn. Can't say I like the sound of it much.”

“How did your talk with Gunder Ani go?” asked Autumn. “Well, I trust?”

“Aye,” said Zaac, watching the procession coming closer. “She has agreed to think over what I said and we will meet again in Neander. Have you given any thought to your future?”

“I think a lot on my future,” said Autumn. “That is why I travel.”

“We could make a lot of money, you and I,” said Zaac. “You have skills the like of which I have not seen before.”

“I thank you, Zaac,” said Autumn, “but such skills as I have are not for sale.”

“I was not thinking of selling them,” said Zaac, his eyes glinting in the torchlight, “although there be them as would pay a pretty parak for your protection. No, I was thinking more of contests and wagers. We would make a good partnership.”

“Your world is not mine,” said Autumn. “I know not my place in this world but for certain it is not there.”

Zaac's teeth glowed briefly as he smiled. “No doubt we shall meet again, Autumn Savannah,” he said, “and we will continue this discussion further. I wish you every good fortune until then.”

“Are you not staying until the end of the procession?” asked Autumn. “It is almost upon us.”

“Ahh, no,” said Zaac. “I wager on contests not partake in them. There will be a few fights tonight, no doubt. Drink and religion do not go well together. Fare well, and you, Logan.”

He merged back into the darkness behind the huts as the procession spilled out onto the beach. Up close they could see the figure was half

as big again as a big man and somewhat ill formed. Its head wobbled backwards and forwards as the carriers danced and stumbled and one arm was threatening to fall off.

The three men beating a complex, lively rhythm on drums slung around their waists stopped walking and their drums fell silent. A woman carrying some sort of tube shaped like a snake joined them and stopped making the wailing noise. The group carrying the figure on their shoulders stopped their jigging and began to slowly march across the beach towards the water. The crowd following them started to spread out. Someone ran over with a pole and rammed it hard up the backside of the figure and Logan winced in empathy. The pole was planted in the sand and the carriers formed a loose circle around it. A quiet fell over the onlookers, although they were not completely silent. Some were already drunk enough to not realise that silence was expected.

A tall, thin man wearing a dark coloured robe and a mask of palm leaves stepped forward, carrying a flaming torch.

“As it was in the beginning,” he shouted in a loud, harsh voice, “then so shall it end. Almighty Foqoo, we commend ourselves to your cleansing flames!”

“That voice sounds familiar,” muttered Logan to Autumn as they watched from a distance.

“Fo-qoo, Fo-qoo,” chanted the crowd as the masked man lit first one foot of the figure then the other with the torch. The flames raced up the legs and soon the entire figure was burning brightly. The arm that had threatened to fall off now came loose and landed on the sand, writhing as the palm fronds shrivelled in the flames. The chanting got louder until, finally, the head of the figure was engulfed. Within moments the flames subsided, the dried fronds quickly spent. A sigh passed through the crowd then, as the glowing ashes fell to the sand, there was a general movement towards the cooked shark and the casks of tuvic. The celebrations began in earnest.

“There she is,” said Logan, pointing to a small, older woman standing on the edge of the beach. “The malu seller.”

“Aha,” said Autumn. “Come on.”

She marched over and the woman ignored her.

“Greetings,” said Autumn.

“Uh huh,” said the woman, her eyes locked on the dying embers of the burnt figure. Her hands were clasped tightly in front of her as if in prayer.

“I would like to pay you for a malu,” said Autumn.

“The green one?” said the woman, instantly attentive. “Two paraks.”

“Give this lady the money,” said Autumn.

“No,” said Logan.

Both women turned to stare at him.

“Oh, umm, all right,” he said, fumbling with his bundle of coins. “Here.”

“About time,” said the woman, taking it. She tested it between her teeth then dropped the coin into a small bag hung around her neck. She turned back to the ashes on the sand and it was quickly apparent she desired no further conversation with them.

“As you wish,” said Autumn and walked away, Logan close behind.

“That was over much,” he said. “Two paraks for one little malu?”

“It be done,” said Autumn. “Think on it no more.”

“Oh well, easy come easy go,” said Logan. “I did not see Engar or the girls anywhere.”

“Nor I,” said Autumn, pausing. “Although I venture we are about to see that man again.”

She gestured towards a group that was emerging from the shadow of a hut to their left.

“What man?” asked Logan.

“Hanik, I think his name was,” said Autumn. “And 'twould seem he has some friends.”

Chapter Fourteen

“No, it is not Hanik,” said Logan, after looking at them for a moment. “He was a big bastard, although they do seem to be heading this way. Four of them.”

“Perhaps they are going down the beach,” said Autumn, walking forward a little faster.

“Umm, I think not,” said Logan, glancing behind. “They are following us.”

“That is my feeling as well,” said Autumn. “Walk ahead of me and run for the trees when I say. There is something in their manner that suggests they are not going for a stroll along the beach in the moonlight.”

“Why us, do you think?” asked Logan, speeding up.

“Mayhap they saw the money you have in your bundle,” said Autumn. “’Twas well lit when the figure was burning. Ahh, we have more company.”

Two figures had detached themselves from the shadows of the trees and were standing, waiting.

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan despondently. “I do not think I can cope with this tonight.”

“There are only six of them,” said Autumn, “and if they want the money they can have it. There is no need to be alarmed.”

She stopped two or three paces away from the two waiting ahead.

“Greetings,” she said, smiling. “I am Autumn Savannah and this be Logan. Is it not a most pleasant evening?”

“I do not like you,” said one of the men.

“That is most unfortunate,” said Autumn, “but sadly there be little I

can do about it. Do you have a particular grievance or is it a more general dislike?"

"You cost me," growled the man.

"I do not understand," said Autumn. "Have we met before?"

The four following had now caught up and, perhaps foolishly, were standing in a group rather than spreading out to block their escape.

"I am Feagle," said the man.

"You say that in a manner which suggests I should know you," said Autumn, puzzled, "but I confess I do not. Do you know Feagle, Logan?"

"He does look familiar," said Logan, "but it is rather dark here and his shape is not overly distinctive."

"Hear that, Feagle," laughed one of the men behind them. "He be saying you be just an ordinary little shit!"

"Do not bandy words with me, bitch," growled Feagle, ignoring his friend. "You cost me and by Chaahk, you be paying for it."

Autumn regarded him thoughtfully for a few moments then sat down on the sand.

"This be another one of your tricks?" growled Feagle angrily as she gave Logan's malu a swift tug.

"Sit down," she hissed then, in a normal voice, "come, Feagle, sit with us. I do not know what ill I have done you but I will do my best to remedy the matter if you will but explain."

Surprised, Logan sat down. There was a faint chink as the bundle of coins hit the ground.

"Stand up," growled Feagle. He looked at his companion and stepped forward. His companion stepped forward as well. "Don't you be

escaping by sitting down!”

Logan glanced behind and the four appeared to be a little bored. They were restless and kept looking over towards the people further down the beach near the shark roasting fire. Cautiously he started to scrape sand over the bundle of coins.

“When we first saw you,” said Autumn in a conversational tone, “we thought you were bandits or such but 'tis now my belief that you have a genuine grievance and have no desire to attack us while we are sitting and unable to defend ourselves. Come, sit with us and talk. Perhaps one of your friends can fetch some food and drink and we can discuss this.”

“’Tis a thought, Feagle,” said his companion. “I agree she cheated you but I do not wish to take part in the killing of them as is defenceless.”

“Oh, stuff you, Threnek,” said Feagle angrily. “We ain’t never going to kill them, just teach them a lesson.”

“Well, I think the moment has passed,” said Threnek, sounding a little anxious. “’Tis obvious the maid has no idea who you are.”

“Your companion has the right of it,” said Autumn. “Come, all of you, sit with us and let us discuss this in a civilised manner.”

“You saying we be not civilised?” growled Feagle. He gave the impression he was trying to rebuild his anger now that he had lost the initiative.

“No,” said Autumn. “I am only suggesting that there are others ways to resolve problems than fighting.”

“So when are we going to beat them, Feagle?” called one of the four behind. “Only my girl be waiting for me and she has a temper on her. Just saying, like.”

“Aye, and I reckon there be not much left to eat,” said another. “I have had enough of waiting. Mayhap this be the wrong maid.”

“That be a fair point,” said Threnek. “Are you certain this be the maid, Feagle? ’Twould seem she has no idea who you are.”

“It looks like her,” growled Feagle, “although she be wearing different clothes. Hair be the same though.”

“Lots of girls here wear their hair like that,” said Logan. “I have made that same mistake myself.”

“Oh, Chaahk,” said Feagle, forcefully. He spat on the sand. “I am sure it be the same girl.”

“Mayhap it is, mayhap it isn’t,” said Threnek, scratching his chin and looking at a couple heading for the trees nearby, “but how can we beat them when they be sitting down and not fighting back? Seems wrong, somehow.”

Autumn and Logan just sat there, one calmly, the other pretending a calmness.

“Oh, I have had enough of this,” said one of the men behind them. “This be tanavac and time’s wasting. I’m off.”

“Aye, me too,” said another and there were swishes in the sand as they walked away.

“Come on, Feagle,” said Threnek, pulling on his friend’s arm. “You were beat and that be the end of it. Let’s get drunk and forget about it.”

“Beat?” said Autumn. “Feagle, sit with us and talk.”

“There be nothing to talk about,” said Feagle gruffly as Threnek let go of his arm and walked off to catch up with the others. He watched them go but made no move to leave himself.

“Were you in the daloni competition?” asked Autumn.

“So it were you!” said Feagle. He appeared to be scowling but it was difficult to tell.

“How can I answer that when I know not what you are talking about?” asked Autumn. “Come, sit with us and explain.”

Feagle stood silently for what seemed a long time then stepped forward. He seemed to crumple and ended up as a heap on the sand.

“’Twas my dream,” he said quietly. “Now it be just sand in the wind,” and he thumped the sand in front of him.

“What was your dream?” asked Autumn.

“Hmm? Oh, to beat Gunder Ani,” said Feagle. “I have been practising the daloni for two summers and when I heard she was coming I knew it was time. I was going to best her and songs would be sung about me across the world!”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “Now I understand. I am sorry.”

“I do not,” said Logan. “What has this to do with us?”

“I venture Feagle was one of the daloni dancers still there when I joined,” said Autumn. “Is that so, Feagle?”

“Aye,” said Feagle sadly. “’Twas just me, Gunder and that maid from Xive. I was going to best her, so I was.”

“But I joined in and surprised you,” said Autumn.

“Aye,” said Feagle. “My mind was fully on the winning and then you appeared. You stole it from me.”

“You say you have been practising for two summers?” said Autumn.

“Aye,” said Feagle. “’Twas a waste of time.”

“No, it was not,” said Autumn, shifting closer to him. “As I remember you passed under the earlier stick with the greatest of ease so in that your practice has been most useful. Did you practice alone?”

“Aye,” said Feagle, “mostly, although sometimes my friend joined me.”

“Ahhh,” said Autumn. She put her hand on Feagle’s arm. “Do you know what a Krisana is?”

“Some sort of greatly skilled fighter I think,” said Feagle. “Why?”

“In the training,” said Autumn, “Krisanas spend much time working on their skills, much as you have. But they also be working on surprises.”

“What do you mean, surprises?” said Feagle.

“I mean that the people who train them spend a lot of time devising ways to surprise and unsettle them,” said Autumn. “That way, when something unexpected happens they are not affected by it. It is not my place to criticise you nor to offer advice but it would seem to me that you would do well to work on that side of your skills.”

“How long have you been practising daloni?” asked Feagle.

“I have never done it before today,” said Autumn quietly.

“Pah,” said Feagle. “Now you are talking nonsense. You are too good to have not done this before. ’Tis impossible.”

“We have only been here a few days,” said Logan. “We had not even heard of daloni until just before the competition.”

“This I do not believe,” said Feagle. “Why would you take part if you knew not what it was?”

“’Twas the idea of a friend,” said Autumn, “but it does not matter. What I am trying to say is that if you want to best Gunder Ani and others like her you need to learn to handle surprises. Gunder Ani was not affected by my joining in. That is why she bested me. You have the skill to go under the stick but you have not yet the skill to win. Oft-times that skill alone be enough to win, not the trained skill.”

“I do not understand,” said Feagle.

“I am a Krisana,” said Autumn. “I have spent many years being

trained to handle the unexpected. I have been attacked by friends, while sleeping or bathing and while in discussions. I have had no practice at daloni dancing but when I entered unexpectedly it was not a problem for me because nothing is unexpected for me. I venture Gunder Ani is the same. Learn to be unaffected and you will beat her easily.”

Feagle let out a long sigh. “So that was why we did not frighten you,” he said, nodding. “I did wonder about that. Is that why you sat down?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Tis unlikely the six of you could have bested me but I do not like to fight. It serves no purpose. I felt you were not wholly intent on attacking us so I did what you did not expect and avoided injury to you and your companions. Mayhap I am wrong, but I venture this way has been more productive. Revenge on me will not help you next time you meet Gunder Ani.”

“If you do not like to fight, why did you become a Krisana?” asked Feagle.

“Tis a long story,” said Autumn, “but in short form it is because having the skill means oft-times I do not need to use it. Sometimes my simply telling another I am a Krisana avoids the problem and other times, by not being surprised, I am able to prevent a problem becoming a fight, such as now.”

“So what do I need to do?” asked Feagle.

“Enjoy the rest of your night,” said Autumn. “Put this behind you and move on then get your friends and your enemies to surprise you at every possible opportunity so that when you meet Gunder Ani again you will not be surprised by anything. Learn to expect the unexpected at all times.”

“Expect the unexpected,” said Feagle, “I like that. So you would have killed me?”

“I would have done everything in my power not to,” said Autumn, “but the fates do involve themselves in all things. There is much I do not and cannot control.”

“Aye,” said Feagle slowly. “Ayah, you know, it occurs to me that this day I may have been lucky rather than unlucky as I had thought.”

“No,” said Autumn. “’Twas not luck. You have demonstrated the greatest skill that few in this world have been able to master.”

“Oh really?” said Feagle, with a short laugh. “And what is that, pray? Taking defeat sitting down?”

“To listen and understand,” said Autumn. “Master that and you have mastered all.”

“Aye, perhaps,” said Feagle. He sat there silently for a few moments then stood up. “I confess it was not my intent to talk with you but now that I have I regret my earlier impulse. Fare well, Autumn Savannah, and if we meet again I will not let myself be surprised, you can be sure of that.”

“And I pray you fare well, too, Feagle,” said Autumn.

Feagle nodded his head then strode off to join his friends. Autumn watched him go.

“In time he may also discover that besting Gunder Ani is not all he hopes it will be,” she murmured. “Ah well. Logan, shall we leave and find somewhere peaceful for the rest of the night? This place has been too eventful for my taste and I am in great need of peace and quiet. Whatever is the matter?”

“I buried the money so they would not find it,” said Logan breathlessly, scrabbling in the sand. “Now I cannot find it again.”

* * *

“Ahh, ’tis good to have bread again,” sighed Logan contentedly the following evening.

Astauand had long since passed behind the mountain and he sat contentedly, his back against a tree and his belly full. He leaned forward and sliced a small piece off the lump of hard cheese, more for

the pleasure of using his new knife than for the cheese.

"I am not too sure about this cheese, though," he said, sniffing it. "It has a most strange smell."

"The woman said it is made from goat milk," said Autumn. "I wonder how it is that we have not had goat cheese before. There be goats a-plenty in Aferraron."

"There be cows a-plenty there too," said Logan. "Mayhap there be no cows here. I have not seen any. Did I show you the stone that came with the knife?"

"Aye," said Autumn indulgently, "and the little pocket for it on the side of the sheath. That be a right clever idea."

"Indeed," said Logan. "There be no excuse for not having a sharp knife now."

He took the small sharpening stone out of its little pocket and examined it then put it back neatly and patted it.

"So," he said, leaning back against the tree again. "Your thoughts on where we head next?"

"We could go back to Aferraron," said Autumn, poking their small fire with a stick. "That fisherman said there be plenty in Uysoma who would give us passage and we have the paraks."

"There is something in your voice that makes me think you do not want that," said Logan. He stifled a belch and touched the knife again. He had never had a new knife before.

"There be much of this island we have not seen," said Autumn. "I confess I would like to see the flatlands the other side of the mountain. What say you we continue South, head for Jaikai, mayhap even find passage to Xive. Engar seemed to think it a strange place and I am intrigued."

"What if we cannot get passage from there back to Aferraron?" asked

Logan.

“We will have to come back this way anyway, to get our tunics from Engar,” said Autumn, idly drawing shapes in the sand as the land grew dark. “These malu will not do there.”

An ariu appeared, flying low over the gentle swell. It circled over the beach then landed on a nearby palm frond with a soft rustle.

“Kraaakk k k kuwhip,” it said, its large round eyes studying them.

“Hello,” said Autumn, looking over. “I am Autumn, what is your name?”

The ariu shook out its grey-white wings, looking ghostly and ethereal.

“Iam, iam,” said the ariu. “Kraakk.”

Logan tossed it a sliver of goat cheese. The ariu caught it neatly in its beak, contemplated for a few moments then dropped the cheese on the sand.

“Hmmp,” snorted Logan. “The bird does not like it either.”

“Most likely it prefers a nice mouse or fish,” said Autumn. She studied her drawings then yawned. “Your thoughts?”

“I go where you go,” said Logan, “although I would prefer to follow the coast than climb over that mountain.”

“Then let us follow the coast,” said Autumn. She yawned again then looked up at the sky. “Plifal be coming up and that thing in the sky would seem exactly halfway between them. Do you think it really is Foqoo?”

“Tis strange neither of us have heard of this god before,” said Logan, “although you are more versed in these things than I. Why do you suppose we never saw it before we came here?”

“Mayhap Foqoo only shows Itself to this island,” said Autumn. She

jabbed her stick in the sand. “Ahhh, I am tired. These two days past have been full of excitement. I am going to sleep.”

She lay back in the sand, her head cradled on her arm.

“Mayhap it is a god,” she muttered, “and mayhap it be another thing that travels through the sky. It would be nice to know the truth of it.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “although I wager we will never know. Sleep well.”

* * *

Plifal was halfway up its climb when Autumn awoke. She lay there for a few moments. looking up at the sky. Plakill was halfway down the other side and, as far as she could tell, the thing, Foqoo or whatever it was, lay precisely between the two sisters. On the edge of her hearing came a burst of faint throbbing. It faded away. She closed her eyes again and settled herself for sleep then the throbbing started again, louder. She sat up, listening.

“Phleghh,” said Logan, rolling over. “What is it?”

“Can you hear that?” whispered Autumn.

“’Tis the sea,” said Logan. “Go back to sleep.”

His hand slid over the sand beside him and found the bundle of coins. It paused for a moment then slid further to touch his new knife.. He smiled and relaxed then sat up with a jerk as Autumn poked him.

‘It is drumming,” she whispered.

“Mayhap there be another tanavac nearby,” he said, rubbing his eyes.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, cocking her head.

The drumming suddenly got louder and more complex, as though another drummer or two had joined in.

“I do not like the sound of this,” said Autumn. “’Tis not like the

drumming at the tanavac yesterday. That was happy and joyous, this is dark and dangerous. There is something in it that chills me.”

The drumming took on an insistent, demanding tone, bringing a sense of urgency.

“Kraak,” said the ariu, making Logan jump. His sudden movement brought Autumn to a decision.

“It sounds near,” she whispered. “I am going to see what it is,” and she got to her feet.

“Is that a good idea?” whispered Logan. “Mayhap whoever it is will not welcome us.”

“Knowledge is always better than ignorance,” whispered Autumn. “You can stay here, if you wish.”

“Not likely,” muttered Logan. “A moment.”

He quickly scraped sand over the money bundle and put the cloth-wrapped cheese on top to mark its place then picked up his knife.

“Right,” he said, standing up.

“If my eyes do not deceive me,” whispered Autumn, looking intently into the undergrowth off to their right, “there be lights over there.”

“Oh Sploop,” muttered Logan, his heart suddenly beating faster. “But then, 'twould make sense. Must be hard to beat a drum in the dark.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I think I hear voices too.”

Chapter Fifteen

“Shhh!” said Logan anxiously.

They had left the beach they were camped in and crossed a thickly treed narrow peninsular before descending almost to sand again. They could see the torches flickering though the last of the undergrowth. The drumming was coming from very close by. There was a slow 'dum dum da da dum' with a higher pitched 'da da dum da da da-dum' overlaid above and an irregular deep 'boom-boom' that reverberated.

“Why?” asked Autumn reasonably. “I venture whoever is there will not hear us over those drums.”

“Umm, I do not know,” admitted Logan. “’Tis just my habit to be as quiet as possible when I am somewhere I should not be. Anyway, what did you say?”

“I wondered why there is no storm tonight,” said Autumn. “Engar said every second night and there were no storm last night either.”

“Mayhap it be the change of season,” said Logan then he grabbed Autumn's arm and pulled her down.

“What is it?” whispered Autumn.

“There be people there!” whispered Logan.

“Of course there are,” whispered Autumn. “Drums do not play themselves.”

She stayed kneeling, however, and they edged forward until there were only a few thin bushes between them and whatever lay beyond. Cautiously Autumn parted some leaves to peer through.

“What do you see?” whispered Logan, staying behind the thickest part of the bush.

“’Tis ... interesting,” whispered Autumn.

“What is?” muttered Logan in frustration.

“See for yourself,” whispered Autumn so Logan very cautiously parted some fronds and peered through.

It seemed to be a small beach, narrow, perhaps an inlet although there was no stream. Six torches on long poles, two lines of three, were thrust into the ground with small pots of flames scattered around seemingly with no pattern although none lay inside the shape of the poles. There was no need for light there. Inside the poles was the remnants of a big fire, the embers glowing brightly, perhaps half a pace across and five or six long. Five people, women most likely as their heads were topped with what looked like coiled plaits in elaborate patterns, sat cross legged on the sand, one between each pair of poles, each facing the embers. One pair of poles, those nearest Autumn and Logan, remained empty. Off to one side three drummers sat, their faces indistinct and ill-lit, their drums before them. None save the drummers moved. The torches and pots flickered, plumes of smoke rising to be lost in the darkness above. There was a smell in the air, both sweet and acrid, over and above the smell of the torches and burnt wood.

“That be right odd,” muttered Logan. “What be all this?”

“Tis some sort of ritual, I wager,” whispered Autumn as the closest seated figure was perhaps five paces away. “Come, best we leave them to their practices.”

“Aye,” muttered Logan. The combined effect of the drums and the flickering torches in the darkness was unsettling, if not downright frightening.

He let the leaves swing back and started to crawl backwards when the drums stopped. The sudden silence was almost painful in its intensity. Logan froze as Autumn lifted a finger to her lips in case he thought to say something although, in truth, he was too unnerved to speak. She remained unmoving. The silence grew and the tension in the air became palpable. Slowly Autumn lowered her finger. With a faint whir, an ariu landed on a palm frond high above them, its wide eyes taking in the scene.

“Boom-boom.”

The fronds jittered as the air vibrated from the deep tones. Logan almost leapt into the air in surprise and his knees went weak. The sound died away and the silence grew again. Logan started to crawl away, anxious to be somewhere else, but Autumn held up her hand to stop him. She pointed to her eyes then the bushes. She wanted to see what was happening. Logan half shrugged and cautiously crawled forward as Autumn peered through the fronds again.

“Boom-boom.”

This time Logan felt the vibrations in his belly. He swallowed, his throat tight, and peered through the fronds. A man had appeared. He was standing rigidly erect between the last pair of poles, his back towards Logan. He was tall and slim, naked save for ashes smeared over his body. He did not move.

“Boom-boom.”

The man's arms jerked up violently, clawing at the sky then he dropped them to his sides and bowed his head and slowly moved it from side to side as though searching for something, although his eyes were closed. Logan cowered back slightly. The man had a skull on his head, its upper teeth a ghoulish fringe on his forehead, the lower jaw missing. It looked like a human skull, reddish-ivory in the torch light, its eye sockets dark and staring. The man seemed deep in contemplation.

“Boom-boom.”

His head slowly lifted and a low moaning came from the five others. “Hrmm, hrmm, hrmm.” Their voices deep and in unison, rhythmic and menacing.

“Boom-boom.”

The man started to sway, slowly and sinuously, from side to side. His forearms were held in front of him, his hands moving in circles as though wafting the air towards him.

“Boom-boom.”

The man lifted one arm and beckoned with his hand, calling forth ... what? Logan felt a quiver of nervous apprehension. There was a movement the far side of the embers and ... something ... appeared, led by two lithe girls, their limbs daubed with dark red. The something, unknowable as it was fully encased in palm fronds, came hesitantly forward, guided by the girls, each with a hand deep inside the fronds. They halted the something a pace from the edge of the embers.

“Boom-boom.”

The seated women stopped their moaning. No one moved, save Logan, whose nose had become unbearably itchy so he scratched it. No one seemed to notice, save Autumn, who glanced warningly at him then returned her attention to the scene unfolding before her.

“Boom-boom.”

The two girls pulled the fronds away to reveal a woman. She was undoubtedly a woman. On the short side perhaps, but extremely and undeniably female. Her head was covered by a sack of woven fronds but otherwise she was naked and her limbs unmarked. Her skin glistened with sweat, perhaps from fear, perhaps from the heat of the embers. The girls and the fronds disappeared into the darkness beyond the torches. In the quiet Logan could hear the waves from the sea nearby but beyond the torches and pots the night was black. Only the pale crescents of Plakill and Plifal could be seen.

“Come to me, little one,” said the slim man, lifting one arm and beckoning, somewhat unnecessarily as she could not see through the sack. “Come to me.” His voice was soft and enticing, gentle, inviting.

“I know that voice,” thought Logan. He leaned over towards Autumn. “Is that not the man from the tanavac?” he whispered in her ear.

“I think so,” whispered back Autumn.

The woman shuffled forward a little, hesitantly, uncertainly. She

reached up and tugged at the woven fronds over her head as if to make them more comfortable then ran her hands over her arms as though she was cold. She could not have been. It was a warm night and the nearby embers were hot.

A different drum began to sound, higher pitched than the other but slow and ominous. "Dum da-da-dum, dum da-da-dum."

"Come to me," said the man in a conversational tone, warm and friendly with a hint of impatience.

The drum beat a little faster, its tone becoming slightly urgent. Again the woman shuffled forward, still hesitant. She stumbled and caught herself, her arms jerking outwards to steady herself. She paused again.

"Come to me," said the man, his voice now commanding. He folded his arms across his chest and stared at the woman. "Now!"

The woman jerked, her breasts visibly moving in the torchlight. Then she found her courage and drew herself upright and stepped onto the burning embers. The drum got faster and the woman half walked half ran across their red-black heat, lifting her knees high, her arms outstretched, searching. She stumbled into the man who caught her. He hugged her to his chest. The drum stopped and her ragged breathing became apparent, fearful yet somehow excited. "Oh," she muttered, "oh, oh."

"Calm yourself," he whispered. "'Tis over now."

The sack moved as though she nodded her head and her body relaxed. The man released her and she wiped her feet in the sand to clear them of any remaining traces of embers.

"Kneel," he commanded in a loud voice and the woman sank to her knees, her head bowed and her hands hanging limply by her sides.

"You are one with fire," proclaimed the man and a sigh came from the other five. "Foqoo welcomes you."

"Foqoo," said the five, almost in unison. They each clapped their

hands, once.

The man lifted his arm and beckoned with his hand again. The two lithe girls, or perhaps two others, Logan couldn't be sure, appeared. One was leading a goat, the other carried a long, thin knife. They skirted the embers, one each side, and stood beside the man. The goat gazed around nervously.

“Foqoo will see you,” said the man loudly.

“Foqoo,” intoned the five, each clapping once, the sharp sound made ragged with their timing.

The girl with the knife pulled the sack from the woman's head and tossed it onto the embers. Autumn gave a low hiss and Logan stared in astonishment.

“It be Lala,” he whispered. “What in Sploop's name be she doing here?”

The man half turned his head, his back tensing and Autumn touched Logan's arm, willing him to be silent. Then the man relaxed and focused again on the woman kneeling in front of him.

“Foqoo will tell us her name,” called the woman at the far end of the embers. The other four hissed, drawing out the sound like snakes for a few heartbeats.

“Foqoo,” the five intoned together and the sack flared briefly as it caught light then merged with the glowing embers.

The man leaned over and whispered something in the ear of the girl with the knife. He took it from her and she went over to the drummers.

“With a word truly spoken,” intoned the man, raising both arms to the sky.

“Foqoo,” intoned the five.

“With a blade swiftly moving,” he intoned, slicing the sky with the knife.

“Foqoo,” intoned the five.

“With a life blood fast flowing,” he cried and the girl pushed the goat towards him, pressing it against his leg.

“Foqoo,” intoned the five.

“A maid of no consequence,” he said, scowling and looking down at Lala. He put his free hand on her head.

“Foqoo,” intoned the five.

“Is now one with Great Foqoo,” he cried, throwing both hands back up into the air.

“Foqoo,” intoned the five.

“Possessed by the flame,” and he stabbed the knife towards the embers. He lifted his leg over the goat and gripped it tightly between his knees. The girl stepped backwards.

“Foqoo,” intoned the five.

“Geuhqooa be her name,” he declared. He put his hand on her head again then on the head of the goat.

“Geuhqooa,” intoned the five.

“Foqoo has spoken,” said the man, his voice ringing out. He pulled back the head of the goat.

“Foqoo,” intoned the five and the man slit the goat's throat in one quick, slashing movement.

Its blood spurted over Lala's face and chest and she lifted her face, her eyes closed and her mouth smiling. She raised her arms.

“I am Geuhqooa,” she cried, “beloved of Foqoo. Possessed by fire and blood. We are one.”

“You are Geuhqooa,” agreed the man. “We are one and so it is done.” He tossed the knife to the sand then turned to face Autumn and Logan, his face a mask of ash. “Bring them here.”

Panicked, Logan lurched back as the man's eyes seemingly looked into his and he hit against something solid and unyielding. It was one of the drummers. Logan recoiled and half stepped backwards into the bush, his balance unsteady. The man grabbed him with a thickly muscled arm, steadying him then let go. He smiled happily at Logan but otherwise didn't move. Another stood in front of Autumn, who had also turned, and the third stood a little further back, a spear in his hand but pointing at the sky not at either of them.

“I did not hear you,” said Autumn. “I commend your stealth. What is your name?”

The man in front of her smiled and half nodded in acknowledgement. If anything he was even more muscled than the first and was easily double the width of Autumn. “Foqoo wants you,” he said. “Come.”

He stepped forward and held the fronds so Autumn could pass through. She glanced at Logan then stepped through. Logan followed with the other two men behind him. The girl who had summoned them was nowhere to be seen.

The tall, slim man ignored them. He bent to help Lala to her feet then ran his hands over her bloody face and breasts then kissed her, slowly and lovingly.

“You will excuse me a moment, Geuhqooa,” he said. “I have a small matter to attend to.”

She smiled at him, her face and hair grotesque with congealing blood. He kissed her again then turned to face Autumn and Logan. The blood-soaked ashes around his mouth looked like a large hole at the bottom of his ghostly grey face. The skull on his head now at a slightly rakish angle making the overall effect even worse.

“Oh,” he said in surprise. “’Tis you again.”

“You know us?” asked Autumn, her voice betraying a trace of surprise.

“Aye,” said the man. “You are that peace and harmony woman.”

“Peace and harmony?” said Autumn, puzzled then her face cleared. “You are Ibu’oden?”

“That is one of my names,” said Ibu’oden. “I do use it from time to time.”

He put his arm around Lala’s shoulders and smiled down at her. She looked up at him, her expression unreadable. The drying blood was beginning to crack in places. Ibu’oden stroked her face then let his hand trail down her neck and cupped her breast then he seemed to remember himself and jerked his hand away.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, pointing at Autumn.

“We are travelling,” said Autumn, “as you know. We were in Uysoma yesterday and are heading for Jaikai.”

“Jaikai?” said Ibu’oden. He glanced behind him as the two lithe girls started to drag the goat away. “Why do you head for Jaikai?”

“We thought we would visit Xive,” said Autumn. “We are told it is an interesting island.”

“I see,” said Ibu’oden. He fell silent, watching them thoughtfully.

“Hello, Lala,” said Autumn, smiling at her. “Is Joise here?”

“I am Geuhqooa,” said Geuhqooa. “I know of no Lala nor Joise.”

“Sephiralalala was her name,” said Ibu’oden, “in an earlier life. That one be dead now and reborn as Geuhqooa and era’owen of Foqoo.”

“And Joise?” asked Autumn. “Is he still alive?”

“Who knows?” said Geuhqooa. She licked her bloody hand and grinned. “Who cares?”

“I care,” said Autumn as Ibu'oden took Geuhqooa's hand in his and gently bit her fingers. She gazed at him, open mouthed.

“You distract me too much,” said Ibu'oden, dropping Geuhqooa's hand and pushing her away. “Go see to the food.”

Geuhqooa snarled quietly at him then giggled then she looked at Autumn and pouted.

“Take this with you,” said Ibu'oden, pulling the skull off his head. It had been tied on with grass stalks.

Geuhqooa took it and reluctantly moved away. The lithe girls were raking up the embers and building another fire. The five women had disappeared and the three drummers were still standing behind Autumn and Logan. One of them cracked his knuckles and Logan glanced at him nervously.

“Was that Joise?” asked Autumn, quietly.

“The skull?” asked Ibu'oden. He laughed. “What a good idea! I shall remember that for next time. No, twas just a monkey. Why are you here?”

“We are travellers, as I said,” said Autumn. “Next time? What do you mean by that?”

“Aye,” said Ibu'oden. “Travellers, but that does not explain the why of travelling. Why here, why now? Be you seeking a joining, an ending or something in between?”

“A joining?” asked Autumn, “an ending? What do you mean?”

“Like her,” said Ibu'oden, looking Autumn up and down. He waved a hand in the general direction of Geuhqooa. “There be always room for more but not for him,” nodding at Logan. “Although mayhap I can find some other use for him.” He laughed. One of the torches nearby

guttered and died.

“There is much here I do not understand,” said Autumn.

“There is nothing here for you to understand,” said Ibu’oden, “unless you be here for reasons other than just travelling for the sake of travelling. I will ask you one last time. Why are you here?”

“As I have said already,” said Autumn. “Logan and I travel this world in search of knowledge and understanding but, if I judge the import of your questioning correctly, we are not travelling to understand you and yours in particular, only the world in general. If our understanding of you and yours bring you offence in some manner then I apologise and we will go on our way in continuing ignorance. We have no desire to unhide that which you seek to hide.”

“Is that so?” asked Ibu’oden. “You think I seek to hide things from you? Be that your reason for being here? You seek to know what happens when Foqoo takes a bride?”

“No,” said Autumn. “Tis your manner of questioning that makes me think this. You start with the presumption that we be here with a hidden motive but that is not the case. We merely left Uysoma after the tanavac yesterday and stopped for the night on a beach back yonder. Your music woke us and we came to investigate, nothing more. We did not know you would be here, nor Lala. To our best belief you were both back at Sutajelen Bay and Lala still with Joise.”

“Hmmm,” said Ibu’oden. He thought for a moment. “What happened to your clothing with the buttons?”

“We exchanged them for these malus,” said Autumn. “The tunics were too hot for comfort, these be much better.”

“And that be the only reason?” asked Ibu’oden.

“What other reason would there be?” asked Autumn.

“To pass for one from these islands, mayhap,” said Ibu’oden.

“Again, you question from a place of presumption,” said Autumn. “If you had not that presumption you would accept the word of strangers to a hot land that they changed their dress to suit the heat.”

“Indeed,” said Ibu’oden, “and ’twould be perfectly natural for such a traveller to do so, if their reason for travel be entirely innocent.”

“And what reason would we have for our travel to be not innocent?” asked Autumn. “Again, your manner of presumption suggests you have something to hide and much beside. Your guilt imposes guilt on us where none exists.”

“And if I have no guilt?” asked Ibu’oden. “What then?”

“Then you would accept our word and not seek to find a guilt that does not exist,” said Autumn. “You would have no reason to.”

“And what say you, Logan?” asked Ibu’oden. “As I recall you are skilled with words and gifted at divining meaning. You think I betray some guilt by my manner of asking?”

“Everyone is guilty of something,” said Logan, surprised at being unexpectedly brought into the debate.

Ibu’oden stared at him then burst out laughing and slapped his ash smeared thigh in delight.

“Ohh, how true,” he said, tears of laughter making his face more scarifying than before. “How true. You still adhere to your vow, Autumn?”

“Aye,” said Autumn.

“’Tis a crying shame,” he said. “Still, I have a new toy to occupy me and I wager she will take my mind off you, for a while at least. Be on your way and do not think that my manner of questioning be an invitation to enquire beyond what you may think you have seen.”

Autumn gave him a somewhat bleak smile. “Indeed,” she said. “And our parting will be no less sweet for it.”

“Humph,” snorted Ibu’oden. “Begone before I change my mind.”

“Can I ask one question before we go?” asked Logan.

Autumn sighed as Ibu’oden raised an eyebrow.

“What is it?” he asked, an edge to his voice.

“You said you had many names,” said Logan. “Is Foqoo one of them?”

“Oh dear,” said Ibu’oden. “You should have taken the opportunity when it arose for now I have changed my mind. Kill them.”

Chapter Sixteen

"I do not hear anything," whispered Logan, standing quite still.

This was, of course, not entirely true. He could hear the waves on the beach, the breeze in the trees and the myriad of small jungle night noises. What he meant was that he could not hear the sound of anyone following them. Autumn knew what he meant.

"Tis possible they are following us or searching," she said. "Those three were remarkably stealthy but they should only now be recovering the use of their legs."

"I was surprised," said Logan, relaxing a little. "You disabled them awfully easily, even for you. 'Twas almost embarrassing."

"Tis often the case with big men," said Autumn. Her nose caught a scent and she tracked it for a few moments before deciding it was no threat. "Big muscles mean bulk and bulk means slowness. Oft-times such men are bested by one who is smaller but faster. If you know where to hit, the strength required is not large." She gave a small laugh.

"Why do you laugh?" asked Logan.

"Those men had big muscles which made it easier for me," said Autumn. "In the torchlight I could see the shapes of the muscles in their legs so I could see exactly where to hit and they had no clothing or fat to lessen the blow. The muscles were like arrows. If you ever have to fight someone with big muscles, Logan, aim your blows between the muscles, not on them. The nerves there are unprotected."

"I wager when next I am in a fight I will not remember that," said Logan, "but thank you for the advice. Do you think it is safe to go back to our camp?"

"I think not," said Autumn. "Ibu'oden may have others at his command. Best we sleep somewhere else tonight lest they fall on us unawares."

"I was not thinking of sleeping there," said Logan, "but I left our paraks there, buried in the sand. 'Twould be a damned shame to lose them now."

"Will they be quick to find?" asked Autumn, "or like at Uysoma where you had to dig up half the beach?"

"I left a marker," said Logan indignantly, "and 'twas not half the beach, just around where we had been sitting."

"Then let us go now and fetch the coins," said Autumn.

"You know where the beach is?" asked Logan. "I am not sure which way we came and which way we ran afterwards."

"I do," said Autumn, pointing roughly in the direction of the sound of the sea. "'Tis but a short walk that way."

"There is the cheese," said Logan when they emerged onto the beach. "I put it on top when I buried the bundle."

He ran over while Autumn stood guard in case there were silent watchers among the trees.

"Oh Sploop," muttered Logan a few moments later. "It is not here!"

Autumn scanned the trees again then joined him. He was on his knees looking into a shallow hole in the sand.

"This be where the cheese was," he said, looking up at her. "I do not understand. Do you think someone came here and took it? Mayhap someone watched me bury it."

"Unlikely," said Autumn. "More likely some creature smelt the cheese and took it then found it did not like the taste and dropped it again. Come, walk backwards towards the sea with me."

"Why?" asked Logan standing up. "You think we will trip over the money if we are not looking where we are going?"

“Nay,” said Autumn, slowly walking backwards. “I am looking for signs of where we lay without walking there and leaving new signs although it all looks untouched in the moonlight. Ahh, stay still and do not move.”

She moved two or three paces further up the beach where there were two faint, smooth depressions in the sand and started probing with her toes. Then she dropped to her knees and scooped a few handfuls of sand before pulling out some burnt pieces of wood.

“’Tis the remains of our fire, I reckon,” she said. “Did you bury the bundle while you were still sitting or did you move somewhere else?”

“When I was sitting,” said Logan. “On my left side.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. She shuffled a little further over then started probing with her hands. Then she grunted and pulled out the bundle. “That was not overly difficult. Did you leave your knife here as well?” she asked, sitting back on her heels.

“No,” said Logan. “I still have it, tied to my leg under my malu. Can you see the bag of flour anywhere?”

“’Tis no sign of it,” she said getting up. “Where was it?”

“Beside the fire,” said Logan, coming over.

“A creature must have taken it,” said Autumn. “Catch,” and she tossed him the bundle of coins. “Let us be away from here and find somewhere to sleep. I suggest we go into the jungle aways.”

“Sploop,” said Logan sadly. “I was looking forward to some bread for breakfast and now there be only this cheese which no creature in its right mind will touch.”

* * *

Autumn was nowhere in sight when Logan woke. He lay quietly beside the fallen tree trunk for a few moments, working out why he was there and not on the beach then sat up. Still no sign of Autumn. He checked

the bundle of coins was still where he had left it then pulled up his malu and untied the thin leather cord that lashed his knife to his leg. He had forgotten to take it off before sleeping and the cord had cut in leaving a vivid red mark. He sat there quietly for a few moments, rubbing his thigh and wondering where Autumn might be.

“Down by the stream, I wager,” he muttered. His brain worked better in the afternoon and evening than it did early in the morning. “’Tis a silly place to tie a knife as well. Be hard to get at quickly.”

He sighed and stretched then looked around again, half hoping Autumn would magically appear, carrying some bread. She didn't. He picked up the goat's cheese and sniffed it and decided he wasn't that hungry and put it down again. He climbed to his feet and bent to pick up the bundle and his knife and the cheese then hesitated then put the cheese back on the ground. Something in the jungle might want to eat it. Ants, if nothing else. He took several paces then stopped.

“Is the stream this way?” he asked out loud, “or is it back that way?”

He looked around for inspiration then went back to the fallen trunk and sat on it.

“Blurrghhh,” he said, shaking his head. “Now, if I remember rightly, we crossed the stream then walked uphill away until we could no longer hear it. This tree was a little to the left and we slept on the stream side of it so, by rights, the stream should be that way.”

He got up and walked a few paces in the direction of the stream then stopped.

“No, that is not right,” he said. “The tree was lying in the direction we were walking, not across, so if we slept on this side then the stream must be over there.”

He rotated to the left and walked a few paces then stopped.

“Or did we sleep on the other side of the tree?” he said., frowning. “Did we climb over the tree or did I dream we climbed over the tree?”

He rotated slowly, studying the jungle in all directions. It looked completely different to the way it had in the middle of the night. He walked back to the tree and sat on it.

“No, I am certain we climbed over the tree,” he said at length, “which means ... Hmm, which side of the tree am I on now? Did we sleep this side or the other side?”

He studied the ground on this side of the tree. It could have been slept on but, then again, it might not have. There was some flattened grass but he could have flattened it while walking around. He leaned backwards and peered at the ground the other side. There wasn't any grass the other side.

He straightened up and put the bag of coins on the trunk and pondered some more. Then he studied the flattened grass this side of the tree.

“Could I have flattened so much just taking a few steps?” he asked the ground.

“Probably not,” he answered himself. “But mayhap Autumn has been walking this side as well. Mayhap she did her exercises here while I was asleep.”

He let his eyes wander around, looking to see if there were any other signs of Autumn's exercises. There weren't but there was a lump of discarded cheese, still wrapped in a palm leaf.

“You are a fool, Logan,” he said a few moments later, slapping his cheek. “The cheese be the side of the tree you slept on. Sploop!”

He got up and walked a few paces in the direction of the stream then stopped and went back for the bundle of coins. He headed off again then stopped.

“This is the side we slept,” he said, holding up his hand, “but did we climb over the tree or not? Is the stream this way or back that way?”

He went back and sat on the tree trunk again.

"Mayhap I should go back to sleep," he said. "This is all too difficult. Where be Autumn? She will know which way the stream is."

He looked around but she still hadn't appeared. He sighed, gazing uphill, wondering which way to go and how to get back if he didn't find the stream.

"Oh you mindless fool," he suddenly exclaimed, slapping his thigh hard. "We crossed the stream and came uphill to this tree. There be no damned point in continuing uphill. The stream is downhill! That way!"

He swung his legs over the tree and set off downhill at a fast pace, pleased that he had worked out the solution. Then he stopped and went back uphill to the tree to collect the bundle of coins.

"Tis so much easier at the beach," he grumbled. "You can see Astauand there."

A few moments of fast walking later, downhill, he could clearly hear the sound of the stream.

"Aha!" he said happily. "I am thirst ... urggggg."

Two feet had clamped themselves around his neck, making it difficult to speak. They lifted him up until he was balanced on his toes and he dropped the bundle of coins and his knife, quickly grabbing at the feet. They weren't there anymore. He looked up and the branch overhead was empty. There was a soft thud behind him and before he had time to twist round two hard fingers poked him in the sides. They hurt.

"Greetings!" said Autumn, far too cheerfully for Logan's taste.

"Huh," said Logan. He bent to pick up the bundle and his knife but she'd already picked them up.

"Thank you," said Logan, taking them. "Have you finished your exercises?"

“Not yet,” said Autumn.

She bounded two paces then did a somersault in the air before landing on her feet and spinning to kick a tree. Then she leapt up, caught a branch, hoisted herself to her feet and ran lightly along it before jumping down, going immediately into a roll. As she came to her feet again she launched a flying backward kick at a palm frond, missed and crashed into a bush.

“Ow,” she said, her voice muffled. “Ow, ow. Oww.”

“What be the matter?” asked Logan, strolling over. This was nothing new as she frequently made mistakes, oft-times deliberately so she could practise for when things went wrong in a real life situation.

“This bush has prickles,” said Autumn, emerging backwards. There were a number of tiny red pricks on her bare arms and shoulders.

“Are you ill?” asked Logan, teasing her. “It seemed an easy kick. How did you miss?”

“This malu be less easy to move in than my tunic,” said Autumn, scowling at the bush. “I could not get my leg high enough. I need something to make a belt so I can hitch it up.”

She hoisted her malu up so it came to mid calf then kicked the palm frond again. She caught the tip of it exactly perfectly so she spun and kicked it again.

“Good,” she said. “There is breakfast waiting for you at the stream.”

“Excellent,” said Logan, cheering up immediately. “You did not, by any chance, find our bag of flour?”

“No,” said Autumn. “But I did find some coconuts. Race you to the stream.”

“Oh, joy,” said Logan losing interest. She jumped up and caught a branch then swung and leapt to another then another further along. There was a splash as she landed in the stream. Logan slowly walked

down. There was little point in racing her; he had never yet won.

"I was thinking of you while meditating," said Autumn, as she watched him drink from the stream.

She was sitting on a rocky outcrop, cross legged as usual.

"Good thoughts, I hope," said Logan. He splashed water on his face then sat down and looked distastefully at the three coconuts lying side by side.

"I wanted to ask you why you asked Ibu'oden if he was Foqoo," said Autumn.

"Ohh," said Logan. He picked up a coconut and rolled it between his hands. "'Twas just a passing thought. He seemed over familiar with the woman. It seemed to me that he should be showing more respect for one who he had just proclaimed the era'owen of a deity."

"The era'owen?" said Autumn, frowning. "I thought Lala had been initiated into whatever order Ibu'oden was running. Why did you think she be the era'owen of Foqoo?"

"That was what he said," said Logan. He held a coconut to his ear and shook it. It sloshed faintly. "When we were talking afterwards. He said something about us seeking to know what happens when Foqoo takes a bride and it seemed to me that mayhap that was what had happened. She had to firewalk to prove her worth or some such and then there was the sacrifice of the goat and the soaking of her in its blood. Mayhap that was a joining."

"Aye," said Autumn nodding thoughtfully. "I failed to pick up on that point. He neither confirmed nor denied although he did seem a little upset at the asking. And he did ask if I wanted a joining as well. I did not realise what he meant at the time. So you think Ibu'oden is Foqoo and Lala now be his era'owen?"

"No," said Logan. "If Ibu'oden be a deity then why did It not strike us dead or some such during the fight? Why did It even leave the killing of us to the drummers? I know nothing of Foqoo but surely any god

should have some skills and Ibu'oden be showing none. Not even bravery for he ran away when you bested the first one. That be not god-like.”

“I agree with you on that,” said Autumn, “which is why I was puzzled by your asking if he were Foqoo. I follow your thinking now. Good.”

“What I do not understand is how and why Lala be here,” said Logan. “She be era'owen of Joise.”

“No,” said Autumn. “I was thinking on that too. As I remember she said Joise was her almost era'owen so there be nothing formal. I venture Ibu'oden went to call on her after we met him and persuaded her to run away with him. Do you think we should go back to Sutajelen Bay and tell Joise what has happened?”

“I see no reason to,” said Logan slicing the top off a coconut with his knife. “Maids run away from their men often enough and I saw no sign of her being forced. She seemed to be quite willing. It be her choice and not our concern. Do you want a coconut?”

“A sip or two from yours will be enough for me,” said Autumn. “Ayah, my thoughts went round in circles on this for some reason but you cut through to the essence. I even had thought to make some rescue of Lala and return her but you are quite right. Lala seemed entirely content with what happened last night and showed no concern for Joise. She seemed most willing to be involved with Foqoo and Ibu'oden. It is not for us to get involved.”

“There,” said Logan, passing her the coconut. She took two sips of the milk and passed it back. “I suppose we could send a message to let him know she is gone but is in good health. He is most likely worried.”

“I confess my mind dwelt for a time on going back to Uysoma and booking passage on a boat to Sutajelen Bay,” said Autumn. “Now I talk of it with you it would seem a fruitless venture. Perhaps we could write but I do not think any there could read such a message.”

“I suppose we could leave word somewhere and hope that word finds its way to Joise,” said Logan thoughtfully, “but 'tis likely Joise may

resent everyone and their dogs knowing his private business. For certain if I had an almost and she ran off with someone else I would not be wanting everyone to know.”

“So we are agreed?” asked Autumn. “Shall we continue on our journey to Jaikai and seek passage to Xive?”

“That was something else that puzzled me,” said Logan. “Ibu’oden seemed most intrigued about why we were heading for Jaikai and Xive. He seemed to find that suspicious. Do people from Uysoma venture that far South? Surely they would and surely them as travel in these parts would go there too? It seemed odd to me.”

“That whole conversation seemed odd when I was having it,” said Autumn. “He seemed to think we were at their ritual last night and heading for Jaikai as if we were interested in him and his doings. The more I think on it the more I am thinking that all he did was call attention to himself and his doings. His entire questioning arose from his guilt.”

“Aye,” said Logan. He drained the rest of the milk from the coconut. “But guilt of what, I wonder.”

“I know not,” said Autumn, “but it intrigues me.”

“I venture it be possible that he was merely concerned that we may be following Lala,” said Logan. “Mayhap he thought we would try to take her back.”

Autumn thought about that then shook her head.

“No,” she said. “Ibu’oden said something about there being room for more and why would he ask if we sought to know how Foqoo takes a bride if Foqoo only takes one bride? I venture there be more than Lala involved here which would then make you wonder why he would be overly bothered if she was returned to her family.”

“I did notice all there save him and the drummers were women,” said Logan. “Mayhap they were all his women?”

“Tis possible, I dare say,” said Autumn. “No, if he be coming from a place of guilt, I wager that guilt be something else.”

“What though?” said Logan.

“I do not know,” said Autumn, “but I have a fancy that we may find out in time, whether we want to know or not.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Logan.

“Look yonder,” said Autumn. “That ariu seems to be following us.”

Chapter Seventeen

The wave started as just another swell, a long way from the shore. It was difficult to see as Astauand was lost behind clouds as black as a moonless night and there was no reason to pay it any attention. It was just another distant swell and, close in, the breaking waves, driven by the wind, crashed mercilessly on the rocks below. They drew the attention and the awe that storms unleashed bestow on even the most mighty of people, emphasising their insignificance.

Two small figures sat atop the cliff, if cliff be the right word for the edge of a promontory that did not tower majestically. If truth be known, and anyone bothered to measure it, the cliff was scarcely five heights of a tall human at the edge but none had ever measured and few had been there. One figure sat cross legged, close to the edge, in full view of the wind that howled across the dark grey sea, her long blue-black hair streaming out behind. The other sat some way back, protected to no little extent by a large boulder, moss covered and scarred by time.

The first figure had noted the rising wind as Astauand's tendrils crept over the horizon and, eyes closed, had paid it no mind. The wind was bracing, invigorating, normal. Her eyelids had flickered briefly as the first drops of rain came, but rain was sweet, cleansing, and also normal. This rain was warm, drawn up from seas bathed by Astauand's heat and returned to the land as soft, fat, warm drops, soothing and sweet to the taste. Until the wind picked up, when the soft drops got harder, thrown by Chaahk to test the mettle of those who had the disdain, or lacked the wit, to seek shelter.

Defeated by Chaahk's building of layer upon layer of cloud, Astauand had risen with no blaze of glory, if indeed It had even bothered to rise. Mayhap Astauand had conceded the sky and gone back to bed, there was no way of telling, unless one could fly above the clouds like a bird. Or mayhap, as was debated for some days at Autumn's Esyup several summers before she left, the lightning that speared the clouds was thrown by Astauand and the thunder was Chaahk's shouts of pain as they struck. Certainly tempers had raged in that debate, as no doubt Astauand would rage when obscured by Chaahk, although few things of substance had been thrown or broken.

Autumn had not been involved in that debate, although she had listened to the arguments with interest. It seemed to her that if any deity cried out when speared by lightening it would be Lulerain or Mielikki or Mor'upita-sehen or whichever deity of water or land was actually hit. Lightning, as far as she could tell, appeared to go through the clouds of Chaahk so, in her opinion, Chaahk was unlikely to complain. On the other hand, as she would readily admit, it could be that the lightning that hit the sea or land was not what hit Chaahk and only the weak remnants of Astauand's spears descended to the ground. Autumn kept an open mind on the subject.

Be that as it may, thick clouds roiled, strong winds blew, large drops of rain spattered, lightning stabbed downwards and thunder roared. And, as a direct consequence, Autumn sat, soaked and windblown, forcing her mind to stay mindful of the storm yet thinking on thoughts that came unbidden. Logan, on the other hand, despite the protection of the rock, sat soaked and windblown and mindful of only caves and strong shelters. And the waves, whipped up and hurled forward, began as swells out to sea and ended as mighty thundering applause for the powers of Chaahk. On the beaches either side of the promontory the waves swept up the sand and mingled with the trees and bushes, dragging the weaker of those back out to sea to be tossed and thrown as a cat does a mouse. The beaches were no challenge, however, and the waves reserved their power for punishing attacks against the rock. Time and again they battered the rock, hissing and spitting their spray high into the air as each time they were repelled, the promontory contemptuous of the waves.

But this wave, ahh, this wave was different. Why it was different, no one will ever know. It was born in haste, lived but a short time and died in anger and none saw its beginnings although two felt its ending. Mayhap Chaahk changed the direction of the winds and the first swell from the new direction combined with the last swell from the old or mayhap Lulerain felt it time for a joke but whatever the cause, the swell was a little larger than its companions. Being larger it felt more of Chaahk's driving wind and picked up more speed as it charged headlong, sweeping up smaller swells in its path and growing ever larger.

Even when it was still some way distant from the seated Autumn and

still a swell it was near the height of the promontory. By the time Logan peeked around his rock it was above Autumn's head, a grey swirling mass against the black, roiling clouds. By the time the top of the swell started to break up into angry white, foaming and curling forward, seeking enthusiastically to engage with whatever enemies it would encounter, Logan was reaching out to grasp the back of Autumn's malu. When the wave finally hit the promontory Logan had dragged Autumn behind the boulder, all but her feet. Her eyes had opened only when she had been wrenched backwards and only the shock and surprise of the wall of water had prevented her from fighting back.

The promontory shuddered as the wave hit. Its mass of rock fighting to stay intact and upright. The wave angrily leapt into the air and crashed downwards, seeking to vent its fury from above. The beaches on either side disappeared, as did the trees and bushes for some distance into the jungle, except they did not wholly disappear. The trees and bushes reappeared some moments later, far out to sea and found new homes, in time, all along the island coast.

And what of the boulder? With the two figures, tangled, behind it? As chance would have it, the fury of the wave fell short, hitting the top of the promontory and rushing forward so the boulder was able to continue its protection, although at some cost to itself. After striking the top of the promontory the water surged forward and lifted the boulder and pushed it for a distance, leaving deep scrapings of soil behind it. It came to rest again, a solitary small island in a small sea atop the promontory, without toppling. The two figures, tossed and pushed forward, suffered no serious injuries, save a thick coating of mud as the scraped soil was shaken and stirred by the water swilling around.

Defeated, the wave fell back, returning to its natural home. The waters swept back down the beaches and poured off the promontory in a myriad of waterfalls. The promontory had won once more although the scars of this latest battle remained. In time it would submit and retreat leaving the island a little smaller but not this day. It had survived this day. Angrily Chaahk, or Astauand depending on your philosophical bent, roared in anger then gave up. There would be other days. The waves grew smaller, the wind grew weaker, the rain

grew lighter and the clouds, once thick and black, became thin and grey, mere shadows of their former selves.

The two figures disentangled themselves. First one, then the other, it was difficult to tell which was which as they were both coated with mud, peered out from behind the boulder then slowly emerged.

"I felt a hand upon me," said Autumn gazing around at the destruction. "I opened my eyes and they saw nothing but a grey maelstrom before me and I was dragged away from it. Was that you, Logan, or did I indeed feel the hand of Mizule?"

"It was me," admitted Logan. "I happened to look out from behind the boulder and saw the biggest wave I ever did see coming for you and I just grabbed you and ran."

"I thank you, Logan the Mighty," said Autumn. "'Twould have been a watery death and no mistake. See the havoc on the beaches?"

"Aye," said Logan, studying the boulder. "And I know not how we were not crushed by this boulder. I wager it has shifted five, mayhap six paces from where it was. Do you suppose Aloidia had a hand in this or was Lulerain being merciful?"

Autumn walked over to where she remembered the boulder as being and gazed back at it, not a little awed by how far it had been moved. "Unless there be some magic in this," she said. "I see no reason why Chaahk or Lulerain should be merciful judging by what has happened around us but mayhap Mother Midcarn helped in some way."

"You think?" asked Logan.

"No," said Autumn. "Storms are storms and some throw up mighty big waves. My continuing existence in this world is due only to you and your actions. There is no need to credit Mother Midcarn with this. I thank you again."

"'Twas the least I could do," said Logan going red. "You have saved me on many occasions."

“I dislike competition,” said Autumn, “and I will not turn our friendship into competitive life saving. I do what I can for you and, likewise, you do what you can for me. That is the beauty of it. Are you hurt in any way?”

“Just soaked,” said Logan, “but I will soon dry. Are you?”

“I would seem to be uninjured as well,” said Autumn, “although I think I will not do my exercises today. Let us head back to the stream. I desire nothing more than to wash all this mud off and rest for a while. It was an overly exciting experience.”

* * *

It was mid-afternoon when they heard the voice.

They had washed all the mud off at the stream and eaten some roots that had been unearthed by the wave. Refreshed, they had continued walking. The next two beaches were a mass of uprooted palm trees, ravaged bushes and dead fish caught among the debris. Beyond them lay the furthest tip of the promontory, higher than the one they had been on and it looked untouched. The wave had clearly not reached high enough. It was there, on that further beach, that Autumn stopped walking and cocked her head.

“Did you hear someone cry?” she asked.

“I heard a cry,” said Logan, stopping also, “but as to whether it was someone or something I cannot say.”

“Mayhap it was just a bird,” said Autumn, walking on. “Sometimes these gulls sound like a scream of pain.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “but it was not a scream, whatever it was.”

He stepped forward then stopped when the sound was repeated.

“It sounds more like a gasp,” said Autumn. “It seemed to come from within the jungle.”

“Mayhap it be an animal injured in the storm,” said Logan, veering off to the right to follow Autumn to the new tree line.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “although I venture not. I have noticed when a storm comes in from the sea the animals head inland before it hits.”

“Really?” said Logan, his interest piqued. “How do they know?”

“I know not,” said Autumn. “Mayhap they sense the weather changing and take precautions. ’Tis only fools like us who sit on the edge of a cliff and wait for the storm to hit.”

Logan laughed as they walked past a large palm tree, still standing although half its roots were exposed as the sandy soil had been swept away.

“There it is again,” he said, pausing. “My ears are playing tricks with me, it seemed to come from behind us that time.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, looking back towards the sea with an air of puzzlement. Then her head jerked back as she looked up at the palm fronds overhead. “’Tis coming from up there.”

The both peered upwards and Logan took a few paces back to get a better view.

“Errp meee,” came the sound again. Perhaps a human voice but if so, weak and pain wracked.

“I think there is someone up the tree,” said Autumn, stepping forward to touch the trunk and peer upwards.

“There is someone up there,” said Logan with an edge of excitement in his voice. “Come more around this side. There, up there.”

“Ohhh,” said Autumn, “yes, I see,” then raised her voice. “Hello, up there. Do you need aid?”

“Errp,” came the voice again and one of the fronds started to shake.

“Are you injured?” called Logan.

“Urgghhh,” came the voice.

“I am going up,” said Autumn.

She rapidly climbed the ridged trunk and disappeared into the thick mass of fronds at the top. Logan walked around the tree twice trying to see what was happening but he could only make out vague shapes.

“Is all well?” he called, unable to contain his patience.

“’Tis a man,” called down Autumn. “He is injured and only half awake. How he got up here I know not but the problem is how to get him down.”

“Can you lower him?” called up Logan.

“He would seem to have broken some ribs,” called back Autumn. “I cannot lower him for fear of damaging him more inside.” Her face appeared between two fronds. “Ribs can heal but if they cut something inside that may kill him. I cannot carry him either. If I put him over my shoulder it will break his ribs still more. I fancy his hip is broken as well but ’tis difficult to be certain up here.”

“So what are we going to do?” called Logan. “We cannot just leave him.”

“You are the practical one, Logan,” called down Autumn. “I have every confidence you will think of something.”

Her face disappeared and Logan heard her saying something to the man then she fell out of the tree and landed on her feet beside Logan.

“Have you thought of anything yet?” she asked.

“You mean you were serious?” said Logan. “You are far cleverer than I.”

“All I have thought of is that if Fiau be still with us she could make a

platform and lower him down but she is not,” said Autumn.

“Well, I wager we could make a platform of some sort,” said Logan. “There is plenty of fallen wood around but there are no creepers or vines to lower him with. I daresay I could go further into the jungle but there may not be any for some distance. I wonder how he got up there? He could surely have not climbed with a broken leg and broken ribs.”

“It be a puzzle all right,” said Autumn. “I wonder if he was thrown there by that wave?”

“’Tis possible, I suppose,” said Logan doubtfully, “but why would he be on the beach when ...” He trailed off, deep in thought. “Unless, ...”

“Unless?” prompted Autumn.

“Wait here,” exclaimed Logan. He looked around then dashed off.

“Where are you going?” called Autumn after him.

“To find a boat,” called back Logan.

“A boat?” said Autumn, frowning. “Why is he looking for a ... ahhh.”

Logan returned a few minutes later carrying a tangled fishing net and some broken staves.

“I found his boat,” he said proudly. “’Tis smashed into firewood so I brought the bigger pieces and mayhap we can lower him using the net.”

“I knew you would find a solution,” said Autumn. “What is your plan?”

“Umm,” said Logan. “Mayhap if you climb up again I can pass you the staves and you can somehow get them underneath him and wrap him with the net so you can lower him down to the ground.”

“I do not think the net will be long enough,” said Autumn, “but

mayhap it will be. The main thing is to keep him from bending. Let me see what I can do.”

“Do you want me to come up as well?” asked Logan, wondering if he would be able to hold on to the narrow ridges of the trunk.

“No,” said Autumn. “There is not much room up there and your extra weight could bend some branches and cause him to fall. Best you stay down here and mayhap try to catch him if he does.”

“Yes, well, I think that may not be the best plan,” said Logan. “Most likely it will end with the man dead and me with the broken ribs. What say you I collect some torn up bushes and pile them under to break his fall?”

“That is a good idea,” said Autumn. “Pass me the staves first.”

She climbed up the tree again with the fishing net over her shoulder and hung by her knees to reach the staves Logan held up.

“Two will be enough, I venture,” she called. “Tis only for a short time.”

The man cried out in great pain two or three times as Logan piled uprooted bushes at the base of the tree. He forced himself to shut his ears, knowing Autumn would be doing her best.

“Logan?” called Autumn after a while.

“I am here,” called up Logan.

“I am going to climb down,” she called. “The net is not enough to lower him with but he is wrapped and I should be able to carry him down.”

“You are going to climb down with a full grown man in one hand?” called Logan. “Do you think that is wise? What if you fall?”

“Pray you are not underneath,” called back Autumn cheerfully. “Ready?”

“No,” called Logan, “but it is not me doing this.”

The tree started to shake then the man's feet appeared. Cautiously Autumn slid his immobilised body through the fronds, keeping him balanced on just one. It sagged ominously. Then, holding him steady, she climbed over and around him to get one foot, then the other on the trunk. Then she climbed down a short distance, her upper body and head still hidden.

“That be the hard part done,” she called. “Here we come.”

Using a series of little jumps and holding on to the tree trunk with one hand, Autumn descended, her other hand entwined in the mesh of the fishing net as the man dangled. Logan hovered at the bottom of the tree, torn between wanting to catch either of them if she fell and not wanting to be underneath.

It was only a few moment before Autumn gently deposited the man on the pile of bushes and Logan grabbed the netting to steady him. She jumped down and between them they carried the man to the beach.

“Ahh, thank you,” muttered the man, his voice tight with pain. “I do not hurt so much now I am straight.

“Lie still,” said Autumn, probing gently. “Ahh, 'tis not as bad as I thought. There is definitely one, perhaps two ribs broken, several lumps on your head but none seem serious. I could not examine you properly up the tree for you were all bent and twisted but you do not have a broken hip. It is merely dislocated but that I can remedy easily enough. 'Tis just a matter of lifting and pushing.”

She put actions to her words and the man screamed and fainted.

“Good,” she said and proceeded to move his leg some more. At one point she leaned on it then suddenly his hip looked like a hip again.

“He should wake up again shortly,” said Autumn.

She sat back on her heels and looked towards the jungle.

“I do not know the plants here,” she said. “I would like to give him some things for the pain and to help the healing but I cannot. Mayhap if we can get him back to where he belongs there will be others there who have the knowledge. Ahh, he is waking.”

The man stirred and groaned then winced.

“How do you feel?” asked Autumn.

“Like Foqoo has trampled me,” said the man, his voice weak and breathing laboured. He felt around the top of his thigh then smiled. “My leg feels over sore and bruised but it feels right again but my chest, ugh.”

He touched the side of his chest and winced, his face contorting.

“What is your name?” asked Autumn. “I am Autumn.”

“Vinan,” said Vinan. “I am right glad you came along.”

He coughed and regretted it immediately.

“Do you live nearby, Vinan?” asked Autumn.

“Two beaches further,” he whispered, trying not to cough again. “My almost be there.”

“Then we shall take you there,” said Autumn. “Tis best you be with your family. How came you to be up a tree with these injuries?”

“I know not,” said Vinan, “but I was checking my amarau pots when the storm hit and lingered too long. I wager the storm put me there. Have you seen my boat anywhere?”

“I venture you be lying on what is left of it,” said Logan. “There are the remnants of a boat further along and where I found this net.”

“That be a right bugger,” said Vinan. “Boats be taking a long time to make. Still, it be time Nagep be learning.”

“Who is Nagep?” asked Autumn, picking up one end of the makeshift stretcher. Logan took the other.

“My son,” said Vinan. “What did you say your name was?”

“Autumn,” said Autumn. “Autumn Savannah, and this be Logan. We are travellers and passing through.”

“Indeed,” said Vinan. He nodded and stayed quiet for the rest of the somewhat painful trip to his hut.

* * *

Cralen screamed when she saw two strangers carrying someone between them. She had been out of her mind with worry since the storm began and Vinan had not returned. However, she was of a practical cast and, once over the shock, settled him in their hut and found some herbs to ease his pains.

“I thank you,” she said to Autumn and Logan after they explained how they had found Vinan up a tree. “If there is anything I can do for you in return you need only say and it shall be done.”

“We are travellers,” said Autumn, “and our needs are very slight. I venture there is nothing more that we can do here so we will be on our way.”

“You will at least eat with us and stay a night or two,” said Vinan. “I will not allow you to depart without even the barest of hospitalities.”

“That is most kind of you,” said Autumn, glancing at Logan. “One night at least would be most welcome. It is not far off dark now. We thank you.”

“I shall start the cooking,” said Cralen. “Do you like bread? 'Tis an unusual food but ...”

“We love bread,” interrupted Logan. “I did not think there be much in the way of enmern grown in these parts.”

“There is to the South,” said Cralen. “Not much as it is not widely liked but some. I will make extra for you.” She smiled and bustled off to start cooking.

“So, you be travellers,” said Vinan. He shifted on his bed to ease the pressure on his chest. “Where are you from and where are you going?”

“We were in Uysoma some seven nights ago,” said Autumn. “We have been travelling around the coast in the hope of finding Jaikai.”

“Jaikai?” said Vinan. “Ohhh, following the coast will take you forever. Quickest way to Jaikai be due West from here. Head inland, skirt the end of the mountain and cross the flatlands until you get to the sea. Stay heading due West and you will end up very close. 'Tis but a small part of the distance.”

“Is that so?” asked Autumn. “I venture that will be an idea. I have a mind to see the flatlands.”

“Are you sure you will not stay a second night?” asked Vinan. “It would be a pleasure to hear of your travels and the wondrous sights you have seen.”

“Well, why not,” said Autumn. “Mayhap you and Cralen can instruct me on the properties of plants on this isle. They are different to those I am familiar with.”

* * *

“Nagep,” hissed Vinan when all was dark and it seemed likely Autumn and Logan were asleep. “Nagep!”

“Yes, Da,” said Nagep from his sleeping place next to his parents’.

“I need you to do something for me, quiet like,” whispered Vinan. “I need you to go find an overseer and give him a message from me.”

“Why would he be doing that?” whispered Cralen.

“Hush now, woman,” whispered Vinan, “let me tell Nagep what to do.

You there, boy?"

"Aye, Da," whispered Nagep. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to go now, while it is dark," whispered Vinan, "and find an overseer. Tell him to get word to Lotadil that Vinan has Autumn Savannah and that she be going across the flatlands to Jaikai in the next day or two. You got that, boy?"

"An overseer," whispered Nagep, a hint of excitement in his voice. "Aye, I will tell him."

"And make sure you tell him it be Vinan what be sending you," whispered Vinan. "I be not wanting the reward to go to someone else."

Chapter Eighteen

“Well, I ain't never seen that before,” said Vinan in astonishment when Iam hopped over and took a piece of cooked fish from Logan's fingers. “Be it a pet or some such?”

He had spent the next day in bed and had got up to join the others for the evening meal. His colour had returned and he was much improved already, save taking frequent and shallow breaths.

“It seems to have adopted us,” said Logan. “It took up with us around the time we were in Uysoma and has been following us ever since. 'Tis a friendly ariu.” He broke off a piece of bread and tossed it to Iam. “There you go, Iam.”

“You have named it?” said Cralen, looking puzzled. “I thought only dogs and boats and babies be named.”

“'Tis the sound it makes,” said Logan. “Seemed easier that way.”

“Iam?” said Vinan. “Ariu don't go iam, they go kraak k k kuwhip,” and he started to cough, very gently.

“Kraak k k k, iam,” said Iam obligingly. “Kuwhip.”

“Well, I be buggered,” said Cralen laughing. “Ain't never heard one do that before. Make it do it again.”

“It will, in time,” said Autumn. “What is strange is that it follows us in the day. Ariu be mostly night birds where we are from.”

“Aye, here too,” said Vinan. “So where be you from, exactly? You said Uysoma but you clearly not be from this island.”

“We are from Aferraron,” said Autumn, taking another mouthful of fish.

“Big place, I hear tell,” said Vinan. “Ain't been there meself although I have seen it from afar when out in the boat. What business brings you to a little place like Zuit?”

“We are travellers,” said Autumn. “Neither Logan nor I had been to an island before so when we were told the tiny speck we saw on the horizon was this island we decided to visit.”

“Do you like it here?” asked Cralen.

“Tis hotter than we expected,” said Logan, “and most of the trees and animals be quite different.”

“Is that so?” asked Vinan. “How strange. I thought trees and stuff be the same everywhere. So why be you travelling?”

“We have been up in the far North of Aferraron,” said Autumn. “Tis very cold up there and people need lots of thick clothing to stay warm. The trees and things be different up there too. In some places little grows because it is too cold.”

“Sounds like a most fearsome place,” said Cralen, shaking her head. “What do people eat if there be nothing growing?”

“There be food growing in the summer,” said Autumn, “so they put stuff away to get them through the winter although not many live that far North. It was an experience but I would not like to live there myself.”

“So is that why you travel?” asked Vinan. “To find somewhere you want to live?”

“We travel in search of knowledge and understanding,” said Autumn.

“Understanding of what?” asked Vinan. “There be fish and animals and growing things to eat and children to produce and the rest be in the hands of the gods. What more be there to understand?”

“Ahh, that is why we travel,” said Autumn. “There be much in this world beyond eating and children and those things be what I want to know and understand.”

“Humph,” said Vinan. “That be a right strange thing to do, to my mind. You said you are heading for Jaikai? What new knowing and

understanding you hoping to find there?"

"I have no idea," said Autumn, smiling. "If I already know of a thing then there is no need to go in search of it."

"Well, Jaikai be a right small place," said Vinan after thinking about this for a while. "Like Uysoma only half the size. There ain't nothing there worth going for."

"We are hoping to get passage to Xive," said Logan.

"Xive?" said Vinan in surprise. "That be a piss poor little place and that be all the understanding you need."

"Oh faff, Vinan," chided Cralen. "There be them as likes living on Xive and you know it. Mayhap these two be liking it well enough too. They said they did not like Aferraron so mayhap they will stop there and start a family."

"I daresay it is possible," said Autumn. "'Twas not that I did not like Aferraron but that I knew it was not my place in this world. One day I will find my place and when I do I will, most like, stop there and travel no more."

"That is more like it," said Vinan. "All this guff about searching for knowledge, hah. You be looking for a nice place to live and that be all there is to it."

"Perhaps," said Autumn with a smile.

"What manner of place are you looking for?" asked Cralen.

"That I do not know," said Autumn, "but I venture I will know it when I see it. Although ...," and she trailed off, her eyes far away.

"Although?" asked Cralen.

"Ayah, this will sound strange, I know," said Autumn. She paused. Logan looked over at her with interest. "Do you know what an Esyup is?"

“No,” said Vinan. “Can’t say as I do.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “An Esyup is a place of study and learning and I have spent much of my life in one.”

“Oh aye?” said Vinan with a painful chuckle. “And still you go in search of more? I would think you be right sick of learning by now.”

“For some, perhaps,” said Autumn, “although not I. My Esyup was dedicated to the study of, umm, certain things, and one of them was healing. When I left I thought, in my vanity, that I knew much of healing but my travels have taught me that I was wrong.”

“You did will enough with Vinan,” said Cralen. “You set him to rights and he be right as rain soon enough. Is that where you learnt those twirly things you were doing on the beach this morning?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but what I learned of healing was of hurts of the body. I have been thinking on this these days past and it seems to me that there be hurts to other than the body and, no doubt again in my vanity, I have in mind that perhaps my place is to set up a new Esyup. One dedicated to healing the hurts of the mind rather than of the body.”

“Hurts of the mind?” scoffed Vinan. “How can the mind be hurt? There is nothing to break or get diseased.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, picking up a handful of sand and letting it dribble through her fingers. “That is what I thought as well. I had been taught that to live is to suffer and that all suffering can be accepted or rejected through the choice of the mind, but I am not so certain of that now.”

“What has changed your mind, Autumn?” asked Logan.

“Ikam,” said Autumn.

“Who be Ikam?” asked Cralen.

“Ikam is a man we met when first we arrived on this island,” said

Autumn. "He suffered greatly at the hands of another and it left him much changed. His almost said he was a happy hard working man before but after, as we saw, he was deeply sad, uninterested in his work and barely able to speak."

"You cannot undo the suffering that was done," said Vinan. "Mayhap his mind just broke but I venture there be nothing you can do about it. You cannot wrap his mind in a strap and bind herbs to it."

"Indeed," said Autumn, "and the cause of the suffering was ended, but I found that by talking with him and encouraging him to talk with me he started to lose his sadness. We moved on but I have been thinking about him and I wonder if we had stayed and talked with him more and somehow showed him that his suffering was ended and not his fault his ills would have healed. Mayhap they did but we were not there to see it."

"Sounds like old wallop to me," said Vinan, "no offence intended."

"Mayhap," said Autumn. "But you yourself said perhaps his mind just broke and cannot be strapped. It may be that with words or in some other way his mind could be strapped and allowed to heal. But what has been much on my mind of late is that there were others who suffered with him and mayhap some or all of them have the same hurts of the mind. 'Tis my thinking that mayhap if I set up an Esyup to study these things then some manner of healing may be found."

"Seems to me to be right simple," said Vinan. "Take away the cause of the suffering and then no more will be hurt. Them as is hurt be goners but there will be no more. Like when a shark is in the water and eats someone. Kill the shark and it be eating no more."

"That is an approach, certainly," said Autumn, "but if someone is not eaten by the shark, merely injured, you would say to leave them to die?"

"No, I be not saying that," said Vinan. "If they be able to be healed then heal them but if not then leave it to the gods."

"Aye," said Autumn, "I understand your meaning. Tell me, could you

have set your dislocated hip yourself?”

“Foqoo, no,” said Vinan. “It hurt too bad and I be not knowing what to do.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “But I did know what to do.”

“And thank you muchly for that,” said Vinan.

“But how did I know?” asked Autumn.

“I wager someone taught you,” said Vinan. “At that Easy Pie place.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “And how did my teacher know how to do it?”

“Well,” said Vinan. “Most likely they were taught themselves.”

“True enough,” said Autumn. “So who taught the first teacher?”

“You what?” said Vinan, looking puzzled.

“Someone must have worked out how to set a dislocated hip before they could teach it to others,” said Autumn. “And it may well be that they tried different things and mayhap some even died in the process but they studied the problem and eventually found a solution. Same with herbs and other healing. No one is born knowing these things. They have to be found out and taught to others. If I do create an Esysup for this that will be its purpose. To study ills of the mind and find ways of healing them.”

“Seems a pointless effort to me,” said Vinan. “Did you not say the cause of all this was ended? The shark be dead and will be biting no more.”

“But what if another shark comes?” asked Autumn.

“You think Cymogene will return?” asked Logan.

“Who be Cymogene?” asked Vinan.

“Cymogene was the cause of Ikam's suffering,” said Autumn, “and no, she will not, I think, return, but there may be others like her.”

“There is more to this, I warrant,” said Logan. “You have that look about you.”

“Ahh, you know me too well,” said Autumn. “Aye, I have had more thoughts on this matter. You know how, on our travels, we have met people who are always angry or are cruel or obsessed or any manner of things that are not happy and contented?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “People are a right strange lot when you think about them.”

“Tis a thought only,” said Autumn, “but I have been wondering if, mayhap only for some, their manner of living now be the result of some suffering they could not accept in their earlier lives.”

“Oh faff,” said Vinan. “They be born that way. Them as is angry as a babe is angry as an adult.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “perhaps not.”

“Pryvids ain't,” said Cralen. “There be plenty of them in these parts and they be not growing up like that.”

“Pryvids?” asked Autumn, looking at Cralen. “What are they?”

“They be old era'owens tales,” said Vinan, glaring at Cralen. “Pay her no never mind.”

Autumn gazed at Cralen for a few moments.

“Hmm,” she said. “Tis no matter. I was just saying of some thoughts I have been thinking but that is all they are, just the thoughts of an aimless traveller. And speaking of travelling, I am in mind to be on our travels in the morning. What say you, Logan?”

“As always, I go where you go, when you go,” said Logan.

“You be thinking of setting up your Easy Pie on Xive?” asked Vinan. “You be thinking there be a good reason to?”

“Oh no,” said Autumn. “’Tis just a vague notion and most likely will never come to fruition. If it does I venture it will need great thought and preparation beforehand and, very likely, a lot of paraks. Besides, if it is to be of any benefit it would need them as have hurts of the mind to study and a willingness to try ways of healing that have not been tried before. From what I hear, Xive is a small place with few people so it would not seem a good place to start.”

* * *

Striking West the following day, after Autumn's meditation and exercises which were watched and applauded by Vinan, Autumn and Logan made their way into the tangled, sweaty depths of the jungle. The palm trees quickly gave way to thick gnarled old trees covered with mosses, creepers and insects. Frequently they encountered knee deep ponds of dark muddy water topped with mats of floating green stuff, strong enough to support the occasional rat as it ran across. Twice Logan thought he saw snakes, lying on branches with coils hanging down to ensnare the unwary. Both times they turned out to be creepers.

At first they climbed, ascending the Southern end of the mountain's foot then, scarcely without realising they started their descent, more gentle than the climb and dryer, less sweaty. The trees grew thinner and the waters of the ponds and streams grew clearer. Perhaps halfway down they came upon a shelf of rock, thrusting outwards and a little upwards like a deity's axe head buried in the mountainside, its haft broken and gone. It was covered in moss with small patches of sparse grass growing in small pockets of earth. More to the point, it was treeless and, as such, offered an unobstructed view of the land to the West of the mountain.

“’Tis clear why they call it the flatlands,” said Logan when they stopped there for sustenance and a break in their walking. Not that walking was the right word. Climbing and falling would be more appropriate, or scrambling, as they had not Iam's ability to flit from branch to branch. They had come across no paths through the jungle

and what grew there took advantage of every space. "It looks to be as flat as anything. Is that the sea all the way over there, do you think, or a lake or part of the sky?"

"It looks to me like the sea," said Autumn, passing a hunk of the bread she had carried to Logan. "It goes all the way from horizon to horizon and it has a glimmer from Astauand that the sky does not. I wager that dirty little mark be Jaikai."

"Still, it is a nice view," said Logan. "All we have seen since we came to this island is a towering mountain on one side and an endless sea on the other. 'Tis nice to sit and gaze upon something different. It should be easy travelling once we reach the flat part. There be woods by the look of it but not overly dense or big. There seem to be fields as well, with paths or even roads between them."

"Aye, Vinan said something about the fields," said Autumn, "or was it Engar? No matter, Vinan said they be fields of amurk mostly."

"I do not recall Engar or Vinan talking of the flatlands," said Logan. "Although I remember Ibu'oden said they grow enmern there. Mayhap I was doing something else when you talked of these things. Did he say what amurk is?"

"He tried," said Autumn, "but 'twas not clear to me, save that is it tall and thin and brown and is sought after as it is sweet to the taste."

"Mayhap that be what those patches of brown are," said Logan. "Still, we will find out soon enough. Astauand still be a way off the horizon. Shall we go on or stay the night here? 'Tis a pleasant enough spot."

"I would prefer to move on," said Autumn. "There is no water nearby that I have seen so let us keep going. It will be irksome to go the night without a drink or a wash."

"As you wish," said Logan. "'Twill be nice to see a sunset for a change."

"If you did not sleep so long you would see the dawn," said Autumn. "Dawns are more contemplative for the mind than the sunset and they

mark beginnings not endings.”

“I do not doubt it,” said Logan, “but you neglect one point in your criticism of me.”

“I was not criticising,” said Autumn standing up, “merely offering an observation on your nature and your involvement with the world. What have I neglected?”

“If I get up before the dawn as you do,” said Logan, standing up and brushing crumbs from his malu, “then I will spend the time you use to meditate in idleness and slow you down later in the day because of lack of sleep. You use the time around dawn for contemplation, I use it for sleeping. Only time will tell which of us uses that time the more wisely.”

“Was that another of your jokes?” asked Autumn, leading the way back across the slab of rock and into the jungle.

“Sploop, no,” said Logan. “I was very serious. I would never joke about sleep. Or food, come to that.”

“Ahh, that is unfortunate,” said Autumn.

“How so?” asked Logan.

“Because I think I thought it was funny,” said Autumn, “although I am not sure.”

“Pah,” said Logan. “You have never found any of my jokes funny yet now you be laughing at me for sleeping. A thought occurs to me.”

“What is that?” asked Autumn. “I always take your thoughts seriously, Logan Philosopher.”

“Mayhap when you set up your Esyup for ills of the mind,” said Logan, “you should make your mind the first to be studied. You have a sense of humour but it is very strangely formed and no doubt the result of much suffering in your years at the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup. They must have been very nasty to you there.”

“Are you serious?” asked Autumn, pausing in her downward march and looking plaintively concerned. “You think I suffer some hurt to the mind from the hands of Noxu and the others?”

“Of course not,” said Logan, marching past her with a big grin on his face. “I was joking. You have no sense of humour at all and I wager you were born that way.”

Chapter Nineteen

Logan saw the man first.

He was weaving his way towards them through the amurk, a dim figure, some way distant, only fleetingly seen between the rows of tall brown stems.

“Someone comes,” he said quietly to Autumn.

They were following a rutted track either through an amurk field or between two separate fields; there was no way of telling. It was easier to follow the track even though it seemed to head a little North of the Westerly direction they wanted to go. To stay due West would mean passing between the amurk stems and losing all sense of direction. The plants were half as tall again as Autumn and, although uniformly spaced a pace apart, their dark green fronds formed a canopy making Astauand difficult to see. More than a few steps from the track and every direction looked exactly the same as they had quickly discovered when they stepped out of the jungle.

They stopped walking and waited as the man approached. He was of average height but his arms and shoulders were well muscled although his legs were on the thin side. Intriguingly, in a land where most men shaved their heads and chins because of the heat, this man had long shaggy hair and a thick beard. Both were matted and unkempt and he wore a simple, somewhat dirty, loin cloth around his hips. He continued to weave towards them, his gait practised. Two steps to the left then two to the right then two to the left again, always moving forward and passing between the amurk stems with great economy of movement. His face betrayed no surprise nor interest at the sight of two strangers on the track.

“Greetings,” said Autumn as the man drew near. “My name is Autumn and this be Logan.”

She paused, expecting the man to pause and give his name but he did not. He showed no discernable reaction, other than to step out from the amurk stems. Autumn held out her hand in the manner taught by Engar, but the man ignored it. He simply walked past Logan as if he

was not there and weaved around Autumn as though she was a stem.

“Does this track lead anywhere near Jaikai?” asked Autumn to the man's back as he headed off into the amurk on the other side.

“Rude bastard,” commented Logan, watching him go.

“Mayhap he be deaf,” said Autumn, “and did not hear me.”

“Have to be blind as well,” said Logan. He spat on the ground.

“Did you see his eyes?” asked Autumn, looking after the man as he became indistinct again. “He was not blind but his eyes showed no sign of seeing us. That was right strange. 'Twas as though he saw us but dismissed us as nothing.”

“Like I said,” said Logan, “a rude bastard.” He looked back along the track they had travelled then forward at what was to come. “Well, it makes no never mind. We either go forward or go back so directions be not a lot of use. Mayhap he just be sick of travellers asking what is obvious.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Although this is not a track for travellers. It started at the edge of the jungle where there was no path and I venture few travellers come this way. This be a track for harvesting, I expect.”

“Then why was he not surprised to see us?” asked Logan.

Autumn shrugged and started walking again. Logan followed.

* * *

The height of the amurk stems meant that only a narrow strip of blue sky was visible directly over the track. But, as Astauand edged into the strip and the shadows cast by the stems disappeared, it was Autumn who saw the second man first. Logan had got bored with looking at the endless brown stems and was watching two rabbits playing in the thin grass between some amurk stems. Iam had landed on a frond ahead and was watching the rabbits as well, leading Logan to wonder

what the ariu ate since it probably didn't hunt at night. He didn't see the man appear from the stems some way ahead nor his pause or his decision to walk down the track to meet them.

"Someone comes," said Autumn, continuing to walk forward.

Logan looked up in surprise, the rabbits forgotten. This man was shaven and wore a malu and he waved when he saw that they had seen him.

"Greetings," he called cheerfully as he got closer. "'Tis not often we get strangers around here, and certainly not one as pretty as you. I am Aqand."

Logan presumed he was referring to Autumn but there was a nigger of doubt as the man seemed to be looking at him as he said it. Still, as always, he left the talking to Autumn.

"Greetings, Aqand," said Autumn. "I am Autumn and this be Logan."

She held out her hand, palm up and Aqand did the same so she slapped it as Engar had taught her. Aqand beamed then did the same with Logan.

"We are travellers," said Autumn. "Can we get to Jaikai by following this track?"

"Yes," said the man. "This is a small island and you will get anywhere you want going in any direction sooner or later but if you want to get there sooner you need to be going further South. Come back with me to our camp and I will set you on a better track for Jaikai."

"That is right kind of you," said Autumn. "Can I ask why you are camping in these fields? Are you travelling through as well?"

"Oh no," said Aqand, "we are harvesting, two groves over, and have a camp there. Tell me, have you seen any one else since you left the jungle?"

"How did you know we left the jungle?" asked Logan.

“Where else would you have come from?” said Aqand.

“A good point,” said Autumn. “Travel here is not easy off the track. Aye, we met a man some while ago.”

“Ahh, and which way did he go?” asked Aqand.

“He came out of the amurk on one side,” said Autumn, “crossed the track and carried on the other side.”

“A while back, you say?” asked Aqand.

“Aye, mid morning or thereabouts,” said Autumn.

“Oh well, he be long gone then,” said Aqand and spat on the ground. “Don't expect we will be seeing him again. No matter, come with me and we'll head back to the camp.”

They started to walk up the track with Aqand.

“Were you looking for this man?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Aqand, “although with no great anticipation. 'Tis almost impossible to track someone through these groves. I had hoped to glimpse him from the track but seems I was too late.”

“Is he a criminal or some such?” asked Logan, wondering if the man had been dangerous.

“Oh Foqoo, no,” said Aqand, taking them off to the left along another track that had only become visible a few paces away. “He be one of the workers. I sent him off to get another cleaver and foolishly sent him in the wrong direction. 'Twas my mistake.”

“So why was he walking through the grove?” asked Autumn. “Surely he would have realised there were no cleavers that way?”

“Pah, no,” said Aqand. “He will just keep walking straight until he stumbles upon one or falls into the sea. He be doolally, like the rest of them.”

"I do not understand," said Autumn. "You mean he will just keep going forever? Will he not realise at some point that he has gone in the wrong direction?"

"He is a worker," said Aqand, glancing over at her. "They be hard workers but not the best of thinkers. I wager ten paraks he did not even see you, let alone say anything."

"That is a wager you would win, Aqand," said Autumn. "I asked about Jaikai and he did not even look at me. What is his name?"

"Wouldn't have any idea," said Aqand. "They not be that sociable, see. Just show 'em what to do then leave 'em to it. That be why we use 'em."

"Ahh," said Autumn, wondering what else to say. Nothing obvious occurred to her so she let Logan follow up with some social chit-chat.

* * *

The camp was surprisingly small when they reached it. It was really just a cooking fire in the middle of the track that ran beside the grove and crossed the one they had walked along. There was also a small shelter made from woven amurk fronds that could, perhaps, accommodate two people. It was certainly not large enough for the dozen or so, all shaggy haired and clad in loin cloths, who were slowly making their way across the grove, cutting down the amurk stems with short, heavy cleavers and leaving them where they fell. Another four were going backwards and forwards, dragging the cut stems to a long low wagon and loading them. There was one other man, shaven and wearing a malu, who was idly leaning against the wagon. He gave a loose smile and a nod but didn't come over to join them.

"If you follow this track," said Aqand, "it will join another coming in from the North after the amurk end and finish up in Jaikai. The one you were on just stops and you would most likely have got lost wandering around looking for another. Although, if you stop here with us for a while you can get a ride on the wagon to the yard with Kotal. Won't be any faster but it'll save you the walking."

“What is 'the yard'?” asked Autumn.

“It be the place where the stems go,” said Aqand. “They are stripped and chopped then sent on to Jaikai. Most like you will get a ride to there as well.” He didn't wait for Autumn to agree, just raised his voice. “Heya, Kotal, you have room for a pair of passengers, have you not?”

“Aye,” said Kotal, “if they are not minding sitting on the stems.”

“Well, that is settled, then,” beamed Aqand. “When are you off?”

“May as well stop now,” said Kotal. “No sense overloading the pullers with extra weight we can fetch tomorrow. I'll give 'em a bite then we be going.”

“Thank you,” said Autumn.

She watched in mild puzzlement as Kotal touched the shoulder of one of the men loading a stem onto the wagon and gestured for him to stop. The man did and stood beside the wagon expressionlessly. As each of the other three tossed their stems onto the wagon Kotal did the same until all four stood, silent and unmoving. Kotal took a cleaver from the front of the wagon and hacked off a length from one of the stems then neatly split the husk and pulled out a length of pale green pith. He chopped the pith into four and handed a chunk to each of the men who slowly started to chew. Throughout all this the men stayed silent and blank faced. It was more than a little strange.

“You want some?” he asked Autumn and Logan, his cleaver hovering over the stem.

“I would like to try some, if I may,” said Logan. “I have never tasted this stuff before.”

“Some like it, some don't,” said Kotal, chopping off another length. “Me, I used to but I be sick of the taste now. You can have too much of a good thing, I reckon.”

“A word before you go, Kotal,” said Aqand after Kotal had handed the

pieces to Autumn and Logan. He led him out of earshot and bent his head conspiratorially towards Kotal and talked briefly. Kotal raised an eyebrow and glanced over at Autumn and Logan and nodded a couple of times.

“Sploop, this stuff is sweet,” said Logan, licking his lump of pith. “I am not certain I like it. I wonder what he be saying about us. Nothing good, I’ll be bound.”

“Why would he have anything bad to say?” asked Autumn quietly. She had nibbled her piece and grimaced.

“If it was good he would be saying it in front of us,” muttered Logan. “Do you like this amurk?”

“Nay, ’tis far too sweet for my taste,” said Autumn. “Ahh, most likely it is nothing to do with us. Just some point about the stems that he does not want us to hear, I wager. ’Tis unlikely Kotal alone will cause us any harm. Are you not going to eat yours?”

“No,” said Logan.

“Give it to me then,” said Autumn. She broke hers in half and gave the pieces to two of the men then took Logan’s and shared it with the other two. None thanked her, they just took the pieces and kept eating.

“Have you noticed that there are no women here?” muttered Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “What of it? It looks heavy work.”

“Oh, I do not doubt it,” said Logan. “It is just that you are the only woman and yet none have stopped to look at you.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, looking around. “I had not noticed. None has even stopped working to look at us as strangers. They seem most remarkably dedicated to their work.”

“Right then, you two,” said Kotal, coming over. “You want to hop on the wagon and we’ll be off.”

“What about the horses?” asked Logan, a little surprised. “Do you not need to round them up and harness them?”

“Oh, Foqoo, no,” said Kotal, also looking surprised. “We have no need of horses here.”

“But how ...,” started Logan then stopped as Kotal tapped each of the men on the shoulder and gestured to the front of the wagon.

They mutely moved forward and Kotal pushed them, one by one, in front of crossbars attached to the wagon's shaft.

“That's how,” said Kotal. “Hop on.”

“The men will pull the wagon?” said Autumn.

“Aye,” said Kotal, climbing onto the driver's bench. “Are you coming or no?”

“I shall walk,” said Autumn.

“I too,” said Logan.

“As you wish,” said Kotal with a snort. “Move on.”

The four men leaned against the crossbars and the wagon started to move forward. Autumn and Logan watched for a few moments as it picked up speed then fell in behind.

“I confess to being disquieted by men pulling this wagon,” said Autumn, “but I cannot explain why. People push or pull hand carts all the time and that is not disquieting. How is this any different?”

“I understand your feeling,” said Logan. “I feel the same. Mayhap it is because this is a bigger cart needing four but that does not seem to be enough of a reason. It could be because it makes them seem like horses, but then there is nothing wrong with being a horse.”

“And they are better treated than horses would be,” said Autumn. “There be no whip nor reins. In truth, the men look well fed and well

treated.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “except they have less curiosity than horses. Mayhap that is why it is disquieting. You would expect people doing this to complain or make jokes or even just groan but these do nothing.”

“Aye,” said Autumn then quickened her step so she drew level with Kotal. “If I may ask, why do you not use horses for this work?”

“What work?” asked Kotal, looking down at her.

“The pulling,” said Autumn. “Elsewhere on our travels wagons are pulled by horses. A wagon such as this would probably have just one horse, mayhap two. Why use four men?”

“Can't rightly say,” said Kotal. “This just be how we always do it. Most likely it be cheaper as them what runs this plantation be always thinking about costs. They are less trouble than horses, anyway.”

“But how is it that the cost of four men's labour is less than that of a horse?” asked Autumn.

“Cost of labour?” said Kotal, squinting at her. “They ain't costing nothing, save a bit of food.”

“Ahh, I see,” said Autumn. She slowed and let the wagon get ahead then rejoined Logan. “There is something very strange here, but I know not what it is.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “Best we do not interfere, though. Not until we have a better understanding.”

“I was not thinking of interfering,” said Autumn. “I see no sign of suffering. In fact all seem most remarkably content although that Kotal is perhaps a trifle surly but that is not my concern.”

* * *

Astauand had Its eyes fixed on the horizon when the wagon rounded

a bend and entered a large clearing. Kotal stopped the wagon neatly behind three or four others, each loaded with cut amurk stems. In the centre of the clearing a large fire was burning and there was a constant noise from men, busily cutting the husks and fronds off amurk stems and chopping the inner pith into chunks and tossing them into the backs of other wagons.

“Bide a while,” he said to Autumn and Logan as he climbed down from the wagon. “I be telling the man you are here. He’ll decide what to do with you.”

He strode off towards a hut on one edge of the clearing, leaving the men standing docilely at the crossbars.

“Well that be right curious,” said Autumn. “What is there to decide? We have arrived here and we shall move on.”

“Mayhap they plan on giving us a meal,” said Logan. “They have a fire big enough for a feast.”

“I wager that is just for the waste,” said Autumn. “You see those men over there are cutting off the outer stems and fronds and tossing them in the fire. Most likely they have no use for them.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “’twas mostly wishful thinking. There are no women here either, just men, and still no one looks at you.”

“Except him,” said Autumn, pointing over to a man talking to Kotal. He was staring at them. Then he said something to Kotal and walked over, Kotal in tow.

“Greetings,” he said to Logan. “I am Wovekrestanivaj, headman of this yard. You can call me Wovek. You are Autumn Savannah?”

“No, I am Logan,” said Logan. “This is Autumn.”

“My apologies,” said Wovek. “Kotal wasn’t clear on who was who.”

“There is no need to apologise,” said Autumn. “How did you know my name was Savannah? I have told no one this, only Autumn.”

“That was the name given to me,” said Wovek. He glanced at Kotal who was moving the men from the wagon to a pond that lay on one edge of the clearing. “You are Autumn Savannah, are you not?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I was merely curious to know how my other name is known.”

“Well, Autumn is not a common name on this island,” said Wovek, “and we received word that someone by the name of Autumn Savannah was passing through these parts. Can I offer you some refreshment? What is mine is yours.”

“That is kind of you,” said Autumn. “Tis not far off Astauand’s departure and we have not, as yet, found any food for our evening meal.”

“Then join me in my dwelling,” said Wovek, gesturing towards his hut. ’Tis nearly time to put the workers to bed then we can talk undisturbed.”

“I confess I am still curious,” said Autumn, walking towards the hut. “Who would send word ahead of our travels and why? I know no reason why our movements would be of such interest.”

“Twas from a fisherman on the East coast,” said Wovek. “I do not know his name. As to why, well, that is simple. Lotadil has spread the word that he desires to meet you and that be a good enough reason for most.”

“Who is Lotadil?” asked Autumn.

“You will forgive my humble dwelling,” said Wovek. “Tis a place for working not entertaining. You be the first guests I have ever received here. Perhaps one day I will have the opportunity to entertain you properly at my home on the coast and my almost be a far better cook than I am. You would prefer coconut milk, calhouny or tuviv? Or perhaps some squeezed bligibery?”

“Some coconut milk would be nice,” said Autumn.

“Coming up,” said Wovek. “And you, umm, Leghorn?”

“Logan,” said Logan. “Some bligibery if I may. 'Twould seem you did not receive word of me coming.”

“Alas, no,” said Wovek, “but you are no less welcome, all the same. You know not of Lotadil? That surprises me. Lotadil is the owner of this plantation and many say he be the richest man on these islands so when he says he wants to meet you I wager there be those that hope to profit by it. He would not want to meet you without good reason.”

Chapter Twenty

“Interesting as that may be,” said Autumn, “it does not explain why Lotadil wants to talk to me.”

“’Tis the best answer I can give you,” said Wovek, chopping the top off a coconut. “I am just a lowly headman and for reasons beyond my understanding Lotadil does not consult me on his dealings. Well, on anything if the truth be known. He knows my name and that be about it. Here is your coconut.”

He passed Autumn the coconut and disappeared inside his hut. He returned almost immediately with a pot of bligibery juice for Logan and another of tuvic.

“Sit with me and enjoy your drinks,” he said and sat down on the ground with his back against the wall of the hut and smiled up at Autumn.

Autumn looked at him for a few moments then sat down as well. Logan followed her lead.

“When Astauand touches the horizon we will eat,” said Wovek. “’Tis simple fare but I wager as travellers you are not in search of luxuries. Will you stop the night or do you plan to move on immediately?”

“We are accustomed to stopping before the daylight ends,” said Autumn. “If you are willing for us to occupy some small part of your land here we will be pleased but ’tis as easy to walk on a short way and stop in the jungle.”

“Never let it be said I am lacking in hospitality,” said Wovek. “You are most welcome to sleep in the hut or anywhere else that takes your fancy although there are snakes in the jungle, but no doubt you already know that. You will not be disturbed unless you are late risers. We start work again at first light.”

“I am up before Astauand,” said Autumn, sipping her coconut, “but Logan here likes to sleep longer.”

“Then I apologise in advance for disturbing your dreams, Logan my friend,” said Wovek. “Am I right in thinking that you intend to travel on to Jaikai?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Is that where Lotadil lives?”

“He lives on Xive,” said Wovek. “That is where his family is and where the bulk of the amurk groves are. He keeps a place in Jaikai for when he is on Zuit.”

“And is he on Zuit now?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Wovek. “If you are going to Jaikai directly then I can offer you transport. We have two wagons going there every day.”

“Are these wagons pulled by men also?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Wovek.

“Then I prefer to walk myself,” said Autumn. “Unless Lotadil has given instructions on our delivery.”

“As you wish,” said Wovek. “No, Lotadil has sent no word other than he wishes to meet you. You are not captives, be not concerned on that score. You are free to go anywhere you please although if you do not go you may find someone is sent to find you.”

“Is that a threat?” asked Logan, perhaps a trifle curtly.

“Foqoo, no,” said Wovek in surprise. “It is simply that Lotadil will undoubtedly have received word you are in this area and I am duty bound to tell him you were at this yard and that I have told you of his desire. He may happily accept you do not wish to meet him but I somehow doubt it. My experience with rich people is limited but it seems to me that when they have their hearts set on something they usually get it.”

“Aye, that is our experience as well,” said Autumn. “No matter. I see no reason to alter our plans one way or the other. We will continue to Jaikai and we will meet with Lotadil or not as the deities decide.”

“Ohh, I wager Foqoo would rather you did not,” said Wovek with a snort, “but you are not from these islands so no doubt you follow the whims of some other god.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“Nothing whatsoever,” said Wovek. “’Twas just my little joke. Pay me no heed. Ahh, ’tis time to end the day. Excuse me for a few moments.”

He put down his drink and started to circulate around the handful of men overseeing the work being performed. Each stopped their men working and led them over to the pond. Intrigued, Autumn and Logan watched as each man waded into the pond, immersed himself then waded out again and stood, dripping, on the bank.

“How strange,” muttered Autumn. “I have never seen men bathing together at the end of the day before although no doubt it happens at places of heavy work but there is no conversation, no pleasure at the cool water.”

“Aye, they are a placid lot,” said Logan. “You would think someone would have enough humour to splash another or even ask how their day went. Do you suppose they sleep here or go to homes nearby?”

“We shall find out very soon, I wager,” said Autumn. “Look.”

She pointed to a handcart that had appeared which was piled with vegetables and fruit. When the men were all out of the pond their overseers started directing them over to the cart where they were each given food then they were directed to another part of the clearing where they sat and started to eat.

“Your workers seem uncommonly well behaved,” said Autumn when Wovek joined them again. “Do they sleep here as well?”

“Aye,” said Wovek. “Over yonder. Food will be brought to us shortly. I trust you do not mind not having any meat? We have little time for hunting.”

“We eat meat only occasionally,” said Autumn. “Vegetables are good

food.”

“We were just talking about your workers,” said Logan. “They seem to do nothing unless told to.”

“Well, that is the nature of the work,” said Wovek. “Tis hard and heavy and they use sharp blades. There would be all manner of injuries if they did not do as they were told.”

“Kotal said they are not paid for their labours,” said Autumn. “Is that so?”

“I do not pry too deeply into what does not concern me,” said Wovek, unconcernedly. “My job is to harvest the stems in these groves, prepare them and send them on to Jaikai and keep the workers healthy. When I need more workers I ask for them and they are sent although it sometimes takes a while. What arrangements are made with them are not my concern.”

“We encountered one of your workers this morning,” said Autumn. “He was walking through the groves and later we met Aqand who told us the man would keep walking until someone stopped him.”

“Aye, that does happen occasionally,” said Wovek. “Tis just part of the wastage.”

“Wastage,” murmured Autumn, watching the men eating. She suddenly switched her gaze to Wovek. “Was that man trying to escape?”

Wovek laughed. “No one escapes from here,” he said. “No one wants to.”

“Surely you must get someone every now and then who finds the work not to their taste and wants to leave,” said Logan.

“Oh Fogo, no,” said Wovek. “If they come here it be because they don't have the brains to do anything else.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn.

“Tell one of them to do something and they will do it,” said Wovek, “but they ain't got the brains to do anything else until you tell them to stop. Forget to tell them and they will keep on doing whatever it was until they drop dead from exhaustion. The most important part of the work of the overseers is to not let that happen. They have to be kept alive and healthy else we won't get the crop in.”

“So you are saying that if no one tells those men over there to eat they will sit there with food in their hands and starve to death?” said Autumn, somewhat incredulously.

“Aye,” said Wovek. “That be the long and the short of it.”

“Have you never wondered why?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Wovek. “’Tis my job to see the amurk be planted and harvested and I use whatever workers are sent to me. How they are like they are is not my concern. Most likely they are born like that.”

“’Tis scarcely believable,” said Logan. “How can someone born without a brain be able to survive?”

“Oh, they do have brains,” said Wovek, “I only said they didn't because it seemed easier. No, they have brains enough to do what they are told. It just be that none of them can make a decision. Give 'em a task to do and it never occurs to any to do anything else, if you see what I mean. Even if it did they wouldn't be able to decide to stop doing the task and do something else. They got brains but they don't think.”

“That is very sad,” said Autumn. “None there look any younger than me or Logan. I wonder how they fared as children?”

“No doubt they had loving parents,” said Wovek. “Mayhap it be the parents who found them this work which I reckon would be a blessing for them. Not many employers would want such as them as workers and they'd be no good working for themselves. Just imagine one of 'em milking a cow! They'd keep pulling until the udder fell off.”

“Well, yes,” said Logan. “I can see that could be a problem.”

"I have said this before," said Autumn as she and Logan walked the track to Jaikai, "but that amurk place be right strange, right strange indeed."

"Aye," said Logan, "but there are many strange things in this world and, in truth, there are many strange people. Remember that village we passed through with the woman and the rat and the man who danced and thought it was raining?"⁶

"Oh Vallume, yes," said Autumn stopping to look at him. "I had forgotten with so much happening since. Where was that? Chelth?"

"Something like that," said Logan. "No, Cheilith. 'Twas near Glead."

"And there have been others we have encountered," said Autumn, walking on. "Even the Roinad when we met her turned out to be most ... unusual."

"Aye," said Logan. "Mayhap all that be strange about this place is that there be so many all together in the one place but if whatever they suffer from be a common thing here mayhap it is good that the plantation employs them. After all, 'tis as Wovek says, few would employ them so if there is no one to look after them they would lead most unhappy lives and no doubt die young."

"Aye, and I warrant those looking after them would not be leading the happiest of lives also," said Autumn. "Look at Joski. She was suffering mayhap more than Ikam himself."

"Although with Ikam she knew him before he was afflicted," said Logan. "Wovek said his workers were born like that."

"Actually he did not," said Autumn. "He said he thought they were. Still, no matter. They are like that now and the plantation seems most useful for them. I do wonder, though, if my thoughts on a new Esyup are going in the right direction. It seems to me that finding a way to help these men could only be beneficial."

6 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*.

“How could they be helped more than they are being helped already?”
“asked Logan.

“Mayhap there be herbs that have not yet been tried,” said Autumn.
“Mayhap prolonged study of such people would lead to ideas. Mayhap there is something all of them have in common in their lives before it took hold or, if they be born that way, in their parents’ lives. Is it something that is passed from father to son?”

“Or to daughters,” said Logan. “We saw only men but mayhap this affects women as well but there be no place for them at the plantation.”

“Well, that is a disturbing thought,” said Autumn. She walked on a few more paces in silence. “You know,” she said, turning to look at him while walking backwards, “there is something we could try if we should meet one of them again. ’Twould be interesting to see what outcome there is.”

“Oh yes?” said Logan, “what is that?”

“Wovek said they will do whatever they are told to do,” said Autumn, turning around to walk normally again, “but they are unable to make decisions. What if one is told to make a decision? What would happen then?”

“I wager nothing would happen,” said Logan, “although if as Wovek says they keep doing what they are told until told to stop they may make a decision and keep changing it endlessly. Mayhap their brains will simply catch fire.”

“Aye, I venture it is something we had best not try,” said Autumn, somewhat reluctantly, “but would be interesting all the same. I think they are able to make some decisions, however.”

“Why do you say that?” asked Logan.

“I was watching while they ate last night and again this morning,” said Autumn. “I did not see any one of them try to drink their food or eat their water. Nor when they immersed themselves in water did any

simply stay under or need to be told to come up. They have some capacity to make decisions, mayhap that can be developed upon. After all, 'tis not in the interests of the plantation to cure them."

"Well, there is that," said Logan. "I wonder how these people are found when they are needed? Do you suppose Lotadil is known for employing them as have problems deciding things and their relatives bring them to him?"

"It is possible," said Autumn. "Mayhap it is a question worth asking if and when we meet."

"You are thinking of not meeting with him?" asked Logan.

"It has crossed my mind," said Autumn. "I have my doubts about why he wishes to meet with me. It concerns me what tales he may have heard."

"What do you mean?" asked Logan.

"This is a small island and we have not been here long," said Autumn. "There can be few tales about us that could have reached him."

"Mayhap he heard of your rescue of Vinan," said Logan, "and wants to reward you."

"I would doubt it," said Autumn. "I wager it was Vinan who sent word of us so he must have heard of Lotadil's desire before we met him. You noticed his son disappeared the night we arrived and did not return until the day before we moved on?"

"I confess I gave it no thought," said Logan.

"Nor I, at the time," said Autumn. "I shall decide whether or not to meet Lotadil when we arrive at Jaikai. For certain I would like to arrange passage to Xive before we do."

"You think he may try to stop us leaving?" asked Logan.

"'Tis a possibility," said Autumn. "And with Fiau gone it will be

difficult to leave if Lotadil has the wherewithal to stop us. I cannot swim and you cannot swim far.”

“You know,” said Logan, “it could simply be that Lotadil is a follower of daloni and heard of you from Uysoma. I would not be surprised if word of that has spread around this island.”

“True,” said Autumn. “But two times before people have looked for us and both times it boded ill.”

“You mean the Roinad and Lord Loheckle?” said Logan. “That was only because Loheckle wanted you to help him become Roinad.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “And what would the richest man on this island want? Hmm?”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan, stopping walking and looking aghast. “Surely I am not going to become Roinad again? I did not like it first time around!”⁷

“Let us hope it does not come to that,” said Autumn. “Anyway, you cannot become Roinad again.”

“Thank Voqev for that,” said Logan, visibly relieved. He started walking again then his curiosity overcame him. “Why not?”

“Because you are still Roinad,” said Autumn. “You were never replaced and I wager them as are in power in Uli-Rratha have not forgotten you.”

* * *

“Your pardon,” said Autumn, going up to the first of several fishermen on the beach at Jaikai. This one was disentangling his net.

“Mmph,” grunted the fisherman.

⁷ See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*. Logan became Roinad in a political power play after Autumn bested the challenger, Kizerain Qerrassa, for the Roinadship. He ran away at the end of the first day in that position and rejoined Autumn on her travels.

He looked up without letting go of his net.

"We are seeking passage to Xive," said Autumn. "Would you be willing to take us there?"

"Cost you," said the fisherman.

"How much?" asked Logan.

"A parak," said the fisherman.

"Will your family miss you while you are gone?" asked Autumn.

"Why in Foqoo's name would they?" asked the fisherman, astonished.

"Just idle curiosity," said Autumn. "If you have no objections, we will enquire of the others. Mayhap another will give us passage for a lesser price."

"Whatever," said the fisherman. "Don't be surprised if my price has gone up when you come back."

"That is a risk we shall take," said Autumn.

She turned and started to walk along the beach.

"Why did you ask about his family?" asked Logan quietly.

"It occurred to me that Lotadil lives on Xive," said Autumn, "and may allow us to go there. But, if we have passage arranged and after meeting him we decide to return to Aferraron it will be easier to persuade our guide to do so if he has no family here to return to."

"Ahh," said Logan. "You think it will be as bad as that?"

"No," said Autumn, "but I have a dislike of being trapped."

The second and third responded in much the same way as the first, although the third wanted a parak and a half. Autumn skipped the fourth and fifth and headed for the last. A surly looking old man who

was sitting on the sand beside his boat smoking a pipe, some way distant from the others. He had a look about him that suggested he had finished his tasks for the day and had no pressing desire to be somewhere else or, perhaps, anywhere else.

"Your pardon," said Autumn.

"I seen you," said the old man, jabbing the stem of his pipe at her. "You be talking to them others. What manner of ill do you bring me that they would turn down?"

"We seek only passage to Xive," said Autumn. "The others were too expensive."

"Oh aye," said the old man. He belched then sucked on his pipe. "Just the two of you, eh?"

"Yes," said Autumn.

"Three paraks," said the old man. He scratched the top of his head with the stem of his pipe then scowled at them.

"And will your family miss you while you are gone?" asked Autumn.

"Like buggery," said the old man. "My son's almost be desperate to see the back of me. She be a praying I gets drowned, I reckon."

"How sad," said Autumn. "And your son?"

The old man stared balefully at her then spat on the sand. "Do not be talking of that misbegotten spawn of Voqev," he growled. "Ungrateful little turd that he is."

"I see," said Autumn. "When can we depart?"

"When the tide turns," said the old man. "Or be you wanting to go tomorrow?"

"When the tide turns will be sufficient," said Autumn. "Umm, when will that be?"

“When Astauand be an orb's width above the horizon,” said the old man. “Cash up front.”

“One now and the other two when we arrive,” said Logan quickly, worried Autumn would agree.

The old man stared at him then hawked and spat. “Aye,” he said eventually and with the greatest reluctance.

“So we are agreed?” asked Autumn.

“Reckon so,” said the old man, holding out a gnarled, arthritic hand. “Let's be seeing the colour of your money.”

Logan fished the bundle of coins out of his malu and handed the old man a parak. The old man bit it and sniffed.

“I be leaving when Astauand be an orb above,” he said, “whether you be here or not.”

“No,” said Logan, “you will leave when we come back otherwise you will not get the other two paraks and we will tell your son's almost you have a parak for her.”

“You are a loathsome snake,” said the old man, a glimmer of respect coming into his eye. “So where will you be if you are not here?”

“Do you know where Lotadil has his house?” asked Autumn.

“Here or there?” asked the old man.

“Here,” said Autumn.

“See that stone place up yonder?” asked the old man, turning and pointing with his pipe at the end of the beach. “He be there. What be you wanting with that odious mosquito?”

“That is our business,” said Logan.

“Aye,” said the old man turning back to gaze out to sea. “Reckon it is

at that. Well, see you then.”

“What is your name?” asked Autumn.

“Umbu,” said Umbu.

She waited for a few heartbeats but he didn't ask.

“I am Savan,” she said, “and this be Ganne.”

“Oh aye,” said Umbu, “and two paraks be owing. Do not be forgetting that.”

* * *

“Why did you tell him wrong names?” asked Logan as they walked up the beach.

“I did not want anyone knowing we had arrived here,” said Autumn.

“That was good thinking,” said Logan.

“As was yours,” said Autumn. “I would have given Umbu the three paraks not thinking he may not be here when we came back.”

“I had a feeling he might try to cheat us,” said Logan. “Well, this is a big house, is it not?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Where do you suppose the entrance is?”

“Probably the side where the track is,” said Logan. “So you have decided to see Lotadil after all?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, crossing the strip of coarse grass between the beach and the track. “My curiosity will not let me leave this island without seeing him.”

Logan laughed and banged on the wall beside the entrance. There was no door, only a colourful hanging cloth. There was silence for a few moments then the sound of footsteps.

“Yes?” said a woman, pulling aside the curtain.

“We wish to see Lotadil,” said Autumn. “This is his dwelling, is it not?”

“Aye,” said the woman, “but does he wish to see you?”

“I fancy he does,” said Autumn. “I am Autumn Savannah.”

Chapter Twenty One

Logan and Umbu sat in the fishing boat, watching Autumn. The boat was floating a little off the sand, wobbling as the gentle waves tried to pull it out to sea but that were prevented by the cord tied to a large stone on the beach. Astauand was perhaps a half orb above the horizon and the tide was definitely going out. Autumn was sitting cross legged on the beach, her hands in her lap and her head bowed. She had done some deep breathing exercises then settled to meditate. There was a dark aura about her that caused the few passers-by to give her wide berth.

“She should not be much longer,” said Logan, apologetically.

Umbu gave a short bark of laughter. “I have lived long and seen every kind of anger a woman can have,” he said tamping down the burning weeds in his pipe with his thumb. “Hah, I have been the cause more often than not. This ain’t the white hot anger of her inner core burning nor the cold rage of grievous treachery but I wager it could still be days before she calms down.”

“I think it will be not much longer,” said Logan. “She has great strength of mind. We may yet catch the tide.”

“If you say so, lad,” said Umbu, unconvinced.

He carefully balanced his pipe on the bottom of the boat and climbed out. Ankle deep in water he dragged the anchor stone further down the sand so the boat floated in water a little deeper than before, just in case. Then he climbed back in without unbalancing his pipe.

“I remember when my second caught me kissing that girl,” he ruminated, “or mayhap it was my third. No matter, it were a long time ago. Eeee, that anger went on for nigh on a whole summer. Burned almost as bright as Astauand and shrivelled all it touched.”

He reflected for a moment then added, somewhat gleefully. “No, 'twas my first. The one I were kissing became the second.

“What happened to her?” asked Logan.

“The first or the second?” asked Umbu.

“The first, the one who was angry,” said Logan.

“Ohh, she ran off with some trader,” said Umbu. “She be in Aferraron now, if she still be alive. She be almost as old as me.”

“And the second?” asked Logan.

“She died of the flux,” said Umbu. “Must be, ohh, nigh on thirty summers ago.”

Autumn gave a shudder then let her breath out slowly. Logan and Umbu watched, one in vague alarm the other disinterestedly. Suddenly her head came up and her eyes opened.

“I must apologise,” she said. “I lost my temper.”

“’Tis only human, lass,” said Umbu. “You ready to go now?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. She got to her feet and came over to the boat. “Perhaps I should apologise to Lotadil.” She looked uncertainly towards his house.

“It be him what angered you?” asked Umbu.

“Yes,” said Autumn.

“Then ’tis he who should apologise to you,” said Umbu. “Do not waste your time on him. Tide be going out and if we wait much longer we’ll miss it.”

“Come, Autumn,” said Logan. “We should be going. Umbu be right. ’Tis Lotadil who should apologise for not getting his facts right, not you.”

“But I should have more control of myself,” said Autumn.

“Aye, so should we all, no doubt,” said Umbu, “but we ain’t and that’s that. Come on.”

“Ahh, so be it,” said Autumn and she climbed into the boat and sat down at the front, beside Logan.

Umbu untied the cord and let the boat drift for a while as the tide carried it out. Then he unfurled the small sail and let the breeze take over.

“So what did that sod say that upset you?” asked Umbu, settling himself at the back.

Autumn sat silently for a while and Logan could sense her anger rising again and her determination to squash it.

“I am not a killer,” she said at length, her voice flat. “Yes, I have killed but only under the direst of circumstances and only then to save others. I do not kill for money. I am not an assassin.”

“Oh aye,” said Umbu, sucking on his pipe. “That be a shame.”

“Why?” barked Autumn.

“I have three paraks,” said Umbu, “least I will have when you pay me, and I have a small list of them as I would like gone.”

“What are you saying?” said Autumn, her voice tense. “You, too, think me a paid killer?”

“Calm yourself, Autumn,” said Logan, putting his hand on her shoulder. “Umbu be only making a joke.”

“A joke?” said Autumn, frowning at Logan. “He is making a joke?”

“That depends on whether you be interested or not,” said Umbu with a laugh.

“I beg you, Umbu, do not joke with Autumn,” said Logan urgently. “She is skilled in many things but not the art of humour.”

“Ah well,” said Umbu. “I was only trying to pass the time, see.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn and stared at Umbu for a while. Umbu stared back with a relaxed smile on his face.

“I don't know how old I am,” he said in a conversational tone after this had gone on for a while, “but it be a very long time and I don't value this life much any longer. You be not frightening me, Savan, or should I say Autumn Savannah?”

“Why do you say that?” asked Autumn sharply.

“Lotadil put out word he be looking for an Autumn Savannah,” said Umbu, adjusting the angle of the sail. “Then a stranger turns up wanting to see Lotadil and calling herself Savan and her companion calls her Autumn. As I say, I am old, but please do not be thinking I am stupid.”

Autumn relaxed and shook her head and Logan heaved a sigh of relief. He had never seen Autumn angry before and, frankly, it scared him.

“Aye,” she said. “We are strangers to subterfuge and have much to learn.”

“So, you have killed people?” said Umbu, “and Lotadil has heard of this? You must be a right skilful killer if he be wanting to pay you for such skills. There be plenty here who would be willing but I wager their skills are not good enough for what he has in mind.”

“I have skills,” said Autumn, “and I confess I was not angered by Lotadil asking me to kill for him. Anyone with a skill will be asked to use it at some time and I should have politely declined the task and left quietly.”

“So why didn't you?” asked Umbu.

“Ahhh,” said Autumn, twisting to look out over the swell. “’Twas my vanity, my accursed vanity.”

“Makes no sense to me,” said Umbu.

“Nor I, I admit,” said Logan. “I would have thought you would be flattered by his seeking you out for your skills, not angered.”

“Much of my anger was at myself,” said Autumn. “When I was small I played a prank on the head of my order and was thoroughly beaten for it and I nursed a sense of unfairness for some considerable time afterwards. I was quick to anger and slow to forget what I thought were injustices but in time I learned to control my temper and sought to see the truth behind the emotions.”

“So what went wrong this time?” asked Logan. “He was polite enough in his asking.”

“As I say,” said Autumn, “’twas not the asking. He had heard things and come to conclusions and so made the request. My vanity was hurt by his request and I quickly became angry with myself as a consequence.”

“This is the part I do not understand,” said Logan. “How does your vanity come into this?”

“Ahh Logan, is it not obvious?” asked Autumn with a sigh. “I met someone who did not perceive me as I perceive myself and that hurt my vanity.”

“That needs some explaining,” said Umbu. “Ain’t obvious to me.”

“I have made vows,” said Autumn, earnestly. “I have committed myself to aiding others in their time of suffering and I have spent much time honing such skills as I have, yet my vanity makes me overly proud of both my skills and my intentions. When Lotadil asked me to kill for money it showed he did not share the same high opinion that I had of myself. In my mind I am Autumn Savannah, a Krisana of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup and defender of the weak and the oppressed. To him I was just another labourer for hire and no one of any consequence beyond the task I was being hired for. That ... hurt.”

“Ohhh,” said Umbu. “Now I begin to see. ’Twas like being called a wastrel when you be an honourable fisherman.”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Exactly so. I wager he has heard word of things about me but has not learned of the full circumstances and so reached an incorrect conclusion which makes him not to blame. Moreover, because of my vanity and my temper I am now in the wrong.”

“There you go again,” said Logan. “How does Lotadil making a mistake put you in the wrong?”

“I should have calmly explained to him the error of his understanding,” said Autumn. “That way he would have understood that my object is to avoid killing and only to kill when there is no alternative. He would not have simply increased his offer, thinking that was my object in refusing.”

“Just out of idleness,” said Umbu, “what was his offer?”

“Five hundred paraks,” said Logan, “although I wager he would have gone higher. Few open the bargaining with their highest offer.”

Umbu whistled and looked at Autumn with, perhaps, a small amount of respect.

“That be a tidy amount,” he said, “and Lotadil knows the value of a parak. You must have impressive skills indeed. So who did he want killed? For sure it ain't me. Half a parak be enough to have me killed several times over although I make efforts not to give him cause.”

“He did not say,” said Autumn, “although no doubt he would have if we had not left.”

“One more question if I may,” said Umbu, the whites of his eyes gleaming red in the light of Astauand as it began to go below the horizon. “You have overcome your anger and hurt vanity?”

“Aye,” said Autumn.

“Good,” said Umbu, “as this be a very small boat and you still owe me two paraks.”

Logan burst out laughing and Autumn frowned at him.

“Was that a joke?” she asked.

“Do not bother to think about it,” said Logan. “Accept it and move on.”

“Very well,” said Autumn. She took a long, slow breath. “How long will it take to get to Xive?”

“Not long,” said Umbu. “We should be there before full darkness.”

“Good,” she said. “Can you swim?”

“No,” said Umbu. “Swimming is not a skill boatmen like to acquire.”

“Why so?” asked Autumn. “I would think it a useful one should you be caught in a storm or some such.”

“Nay,” said Umbu, puffing on his pipe. “Swimming just makes the ending last longer.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

“If you fall overboard and can't get back quickly then you are going to drown,” said Umbu, “and swimming just means you will take longer to do it. Best get it over with I say. Besides, swimming attracts sharks.”

“Oh,” said Logan. “I have seen a shark. Big buggers with lots of teeth.”

“Aye,” said Umbu. “And partial to flesh.”

“Can we not talk of something else?” asked Autumn. “I have an irrational fear of the sea.”

“It ain't irrational,” said Umbu. “It be sensible. Them as lives off the sea and don't fear it do not grow old.”

“Have you always lived here?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Umbu. “I was born up the coast a little way.”

"I wonder if you can explain something to me," said Autumn.

"If I can," said Umbu, "although there be little I know about beyond fishing."

"We have met people on this island who are unlike any we have met before," said Autumn, "and not just one or two but many. Is there something particular to Zuit that makes this so?"

"Everyone here be strange in some way or another," said Umbu, "or so it seems to me but then, I reckon I seem strange to them. What be these people doing?"

"They were workers on the plantation," said Autumn. "They seemed perfectly normal except that it was like they were not there."

"You mean ghosts?" asked Umbu. "There be plenty of ghosts on this island."

"No, not ghosts," said Autumn. "Their bodies were here and working at cutting the stems and other tasks but it seemed their minds were not here. Wovek, he was the headman we talked with, said they they do not think and cannot make decisions."

"Ohh," said Umbu, "you mean pryvids."

"Pryvids?" said Autumn. "What are they?"

"They be what you said," said Umbu. "Bodies without minds. They look like ordinary folk but their heads be dead."

"I have heard that name before," said Logan, frowning.

"'Twas Cralen," said Autumn, "Vinan's almost. We were talking about people with ills of the mind and she said something about pryvids and them being different as children. I did not know what she meant but Vinan shut her up so I could not enquire further."

"Aye, people don't like to talk about pryvids," said Umbu. "They like to pretend they don't exist but it be the other way around. Them as is

pryvids were just like everyone else before they became pryvids.”

“So you are saying that someone, like me for example, could be born and grow up normally and suddenly become a pryvid?” asked Autumn.

“Ohh, I don't be reckoning you grew up normal,” said Umbu with a chuckle. “Them as gets offered five hundred paraks for something as simple as a killing and turns it down ain't normal, no way. And you be growing up in a whatchamacallit. Sounds like a mighty strange place to me and not for the likes of normal folk.”

“’Twas just a school,” said Autumn, “but no matter. Someone like Logan, then, or you.”

“Aye,” said Umbu. “I have known a few as have. They be much like everyone else then disappear for a time. When they come back they be pryvids.”

“So what happens to them?” asked Autumn. “Where do they go?”

“Ahh,” said Umbu. “That be the mystery, like.”

“So you do not know?” asked Autumn.

“I be not saying as I know or don't know,” said Umbu. “There be some things as is safest not to know. You got them two paraks handy? We be arriving soon enough.”

“I will give you the money when we arrive,” said Logan, “as we agreed.”

“Right enough, then,” said Umbu. “Only asking, no offence intended.”

“Perhaps Umbu would rather we gave him three paraks,” said Autumn.

“I am sure he would,” said Logan, “but two be what we are owing.”

“Four would be nice,” said Umbu.

"Then we shall give you four," said Autumn.

"What in Sploop's name for?" asked Logan, puzzled.

"For the pleasure of Umbu's conversation," said Autumn. "Am I not right, Umbu?"

"If you be willing to pay me two paraks over and above what be owed then I be happy to talk about whatever you want," said Umbu. He tapped his pipe on the side of the boat and some glowing embers cascaded into the sea only to be extinguished immediately.

"Pryvids," said Autumn.

"Ahh," said Umbu. He pulled a small pouch out from under his seat and started to refill his pipe. "Well, I can't say as I rightly knows anything, but I see things and I hear things and I spend a lot of time alone at sea and thinking."

"Thinking is a skill much underrated," said Autumn. "Tell me, what thoughts have you had?"

"You are strangers to this land," said Umbu. "You know of Foqoo?"

"We have heard of Foqoo," said Autumn, "but we know little of It, save that It is the deity of fire and can be seen in the sky."

"Aye," said Umbu. "And there be more than a few what be devotees of Foqoo around here."

"Are you one of them?" asked Logan.

"No, I be of Lulerain," said Umbu, "but many fishermen be of Foqoo. Still, them as is of Foqoo be having a lot of rituals and practices and that be something I have noticed. Almost all who become pryvids be followers of Foqoo."

"You think there is some connection?" asked Autumn. "If Foqoo is popular then I would think it likely that many of any affliction be of Foqoo. It does not seem conclusive."

“Mayhap,” said Umbu, putting away his pouch and rummaging around for his tinderbox. “But, like I said, them as is pryvids be not always pryvids. They become pryvids and there be something called Foqoo’s Tears which is involved in the doing.”

“Foqoo’s Tears?” said Autumn. “What is that?”

“I know not,” said Umbu, pausing to light his pipe. “It is just something I have heard. I reckon it is something that is given to them because I have heard it said that so and so did not get enough of Foqoo’s Tears and another got too much. Mayhap they really are the tears of Foqoo or mayhap not.”

“So you think that people go to a ritual and are taken somewhere else and given Foqoo’s Tears and that turns them into these pryvids?” asked Autumn. “The Tears take away their minds?”

“Aye,” said Umbu. “Like I said, I ain’t got no way of proving it. It just be bits and pieces I have picked up over the years. And something else, may be nothing but it be what my Da told me when I was just a little lad. Foqoo ain’t been around for that long. Not like the others what has always been there. Me Da said when he was a lad ain’t no one heard of Foqoo.”

“How odd,” said Autumn. “I thought all the deities were present at the Creation. Is that not one of the characteristics that makes them deities?”

“That mayhap be why we had not heard of Foqoo until we came to this isle,” said Logan thoughtfully. “Mayhap Foqoo be a newer god and is part of this place.”

“I suppose it is possible,” said Autumn, “although I have not heard of new deities. Are they born, do you suppose? Could it be Foqoo is still a god-child?”

“We are almost there,” said Umbu. “Do you want to go to Dashoo or somewhere else?”

“Dashoo is the town?” asked Autumn.

“Aye, biggest place on Xive,” said Umbu, “although not much bigger than Jaikai.”

“I would prefer not to go to a town just yet,” said Autumn. “I would like to go somewhere quiet where I can sit and think. Is there a quiet beach near by?”

“Oh aye, loads,” said Umbu. “I will set you down on a beach a little to the North then. ’Twill make it easier for me to get back, what with the currents and all.”

“That sits easy with me,” said Autumn. “Tell me, where do you think these people are taken when they get given Foqoo’s Tears?”

“That I do not know,” said Umbu, “although I do know that many of those who end up working at the plantation be coming over in boats from Xive.”

“That is interesting,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “Several people have seemed overly interested to hear we intended to visit Xive. So you think these people are taken to Xive, given Foqoo’s Tears then brought back again?”

“Could be,” said Umbu, “for sure they have to be taken somewhere else why would they be disappearing for a time? Besides, there be the others.”

“What others?” asked Logan. He was getting confused and this new point wasn’t helping.

“You remember I said almost all be followers of Foqoo?” said Umbu.

“Not really,” said Autumn, “but some are not?”

“No,” said Umbu. “Not many, mind, just a few, but I be knowing one or two.”

“You had best explain,” said Autumn. “This is getting right confusing.”

“’Tis simple really,” said Umbu. “There be some who are born doolally

and some who slowly become doolally over the years.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “’Tis the same in Aferraron.”

“What do you do with them in Aferraron?” asked Umbu, twitching the sail so the boat glided towards a ghostly grey beach not far ahead.

“Mostly they stay with their families,” said Autumn, “although some get cast out if they be dangerous.”

“Oh aye?” said Umbu. “Well, here we do it different. We take ’em to a special place and leaves them there. Thing is, one or two that I have known that have been taken there have come back to Zuit as pryvids.”

“So you think they have been given Foqoo’s Tears as well?” asked Logan.

“Mayhap, mayhap not,” said Umbu. “Just telling you what I know and happen as how I may be completely wrong.”

“I suppose this place is on Xive?” said Autumn.

“Aye,” said Umbu.

The boat jolted as it touched the sand and Umbu jumped out to drag it a little further up the beach.

“Right,” he said. “Here we be. Xive in all its glory.”

“A moment,” said Autumn, staying seated in the boat. “Are you trying to say that you think the place where the normal people are taken to be given the Tears is the same place as where the doolally people are taken?”

“’Tis possible,” said Umbu. “Or mayhap some of them what is doolally get taken to another place after they be left by their families.”

“So where are the doolally people taken?” asked Logan, climbing out of the boat.

"I do not know where exactly it is," said Umbu, "but it be called the Isle of the Lost."

"I suppose that makes sense," said Autumn, joining Logan on the beach. "Well, thank you kindly for bringing us here, Umbu. Oh Vallume!"

"What?" said Logan, looking around and expecting to be attacked.

"I have just remembered something Engar said," said Autumn. "He said the Isle of the Lost be for them as isn't where they should be. He said something else as well, ohh, what was it? Oh yes, he said it was like someone took their minds and come back for their bodies later. Now I understand what he meant!"

"I am glad about that," said Logan. "I have no idea what either of you are talking about."

"I am not sure I do either," said Autumn, "but I have been thinking that there is something right strange going on and it seems to be getting stranger and not going away."

"Speaking of going away," said Umbu, holding out his hand. "Ain't you forgetting something?"

"Oh yes," said Logan. "Two paraks, was it not?"

"Four," said Umbu. "I be doing a lot of conversationing like the lass wanted."

"Pay Umbu," said Autumn. "If nothing else it was worth the two extra paraks to take my mind off the sea and sharks and what not."

"Thank you kindly," said Umbu, grasping the coins firmly in his hand. 'Twas nice meeting you both. Fare well."

"Aye, fare well," said Autumn as Umbu pushed his boat back out into the water and climbed in.

They watched as he expertly manoeuvred his boat and sailed away.

“Best we be finding somewhere to sleep,” said Logan, “although I reckon I will be having dreams the like of which I have not had before.”

He turned and surveyed the jungle in the dim light of the newly risen Plakill.

“Sploop,” he said suddenly. “What is that?”

‘Tis only a bird,” said Autumn, looking where he was pointing.

“I wager that is Iam,” said Logan. “I thought he left us when we arrived at Jaikai.”

“Why would Iam follow us all the way to Xive?” said Autumn. “Most likely it is just another ariu.”

“Aye, most likely,” said Logan. “There seems to be a clearish patch under those trees. Shall we make our camp there?”

“Iam, iam,” said the ariu, flapping its wings but not leaving its perch. “Kraakk k k kuwhip.”

“It is Iam,” said Logan, peering at the bird.

“Surely not,” said Autumn walking over to investigate more closely. “And what is it perched on? That does not look like a tree. Oh!”

“What?” said Logan coming up behind her. “Oh Voqev, not again!”

Chapter Twenty Two

“Two poles stuck in the sand and a bundle of cloth in front does not mean they are our things,” said Autumn. “’Tis too dark to be certain and anyone could have left them here.”

“Oh they be ours,” said Logan. “Of that I am certain. Something strange is going on and we have not heard from Mother Midcarn? No, ’tis beyond belief. I was thinking about that only yesterday and wondering why we have not heard from her. ’Tis too much of a coincidence to be mere chance.”

“Well, there is one way to find out,” said Autumn. “Fiau, are you here?”

“Greetings, Logan, greetings, Autumn,” rustled Fiau materialising beside the staffs. Iam gave a quiet “kuwhip” in surprise.

“You see?” said Logan.

“What should I be looking at?” asked Fiau, her many ringed green eyes scanning the beach.

“My apologies, I was talking to Autumn,” said Logan. “Fiau, ’tis a pleasure to see you again. We thought you were lost at sea in the storm when we crossed over from Aferraron. How did you get here?”

“I know not, Logan,” said Fiau in her thin, quivery voice. “I felt myself sinking into the waters and you and Autumn were gone then I found myself here. Where am I? These trees are unknown to me.”

“This is an island called Xive,” said Logan. “Some way South of Aferraron. How long have you been here?”

“Astauand was setting when I found myself here,” said Fiau. “Then a bird landed on my head then you arrived. In your terms, perhaps a few minutes.”

“We have only just arrived as well,” said Autumn. “This is another strangeness upon a sea of strangenesses. I venture Mother Midcarn

has had a hand in this although I wonder why she delayed so long.”

“Mayhap we only now begin to have need of these things,” said Logan. “For certain there will be a gift of doubtful purpose which will turn out to be useful in the end. Mayhap even a note. Oh, Sploop, this is making me nervous.”

“Well then, best we look and see,” said Autumn. “Fiau, can we have some light?”

Fiau merged back into Logan's staff and, moments later, the end burst into flame. Iam squawked and flapped away hurriedly.

“Well, that be your staff for sure,” said Autumn, “and this looks like mine.” She squatted down and started going through the bundle. “These be blankets but they could be any blankets. I wager one blanket is much like another. Ahh, for certain this is my robe. There cannot be many robes of this colour with a silver ribbon on the hem. I am glad to have it returned, 'tis comfortable and warm.”

“I hope it still has all its charms,” said Logan, squatting down beside her. He reached out and touched it reverently.

“Well, that we will only find out through mischance,” said Autumn. “It would seem foolish to risk death testing it. Still, this looks like my pack underneath.”

“There be no sign of the water skins or our tunics,” said Logan.

“We have no need of water skins,” said Autumn, undoing the thong around her pack. “If this island is like Zuit there be plenty of water and to spare.” She sat back on her heels for a few moments with her pack resting on her lap. “As to our tunics, well, they were not lost. We exchanged them for the malus. Mayhap Mother Midcarn only returns what is lost.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan. “Are all your things still in the pack?”

“Hmm?” said Autumn. “Oh, let me look.” She opened her pack and grunted happily. “'Tis my nekmit frond,” she said, holding it up. “I can

comb my hair again, that is good news indeed. These be our bowls and my knife, my spoon, my pot and my snake stone and ... that is odd.”

“What?” asked Logan, peering at what Autumn was holding up.

“This is my needle,” she said, “but there is a ball of thread. I had used all mine. Where did this come from?”

“Mayhap you still had some left and forgot about it,” said Logan.

“I think not,” said Autumn. “Mine was grey and this be red. Mother Midcarn must have given me some more.”

“I wonder if that is her gift this time,” said Logan. “’Tis a strange gift if it is. What magic would a ball of thread have?”

“Mayhap it just be a kindness of hers,” said Autumn, “but there is more in here, underneath the bowls. Ahh, ’tis your stone and your knife.”

“That is good news,” said Logan, taking the stone. He held it in his hand and caressed it. “It may seem strange but I have missed holding this stone.”

“’Tis not strange,” said Autumn. “Thinking stones become part of the mind. No, there is nothing else. Either there is no gift or this thread is more than what it seems.”

“Well, if it is magical then we will no doubt find out about it when we need it,” said Logan. “Is there no note?”

“No,” said Autumn, “unless it has blown away.” She put down the pack and took out her pot. “I am glad to have my salve again, as well. My lips do not split in this climate but they do get dry. Well, now.”

She sniffed the little pot then dipped her finger in and peered at it.

“What is wrong?” asked Logan.

“The pot was near empty of salve,” said Autumn. “Now it is full and it smells different. It has a hint of nuts but there is something else as well. It is familiar but I cannot place it.”

“Mayhap it be Foqoo's Tears,” said Logan, suddenly urgent. “Do not put any on your lips. Mayhap these things have been put here by Foqoo, not Mother Midcarn.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, her hand freezing just before she touched her lips with the salve coated finger. “Now that be a thought.”

She looked closely at the pot again then carefully stoppered it and put it in her pack.

“No,” she said, “that is unlikely. 'Twould be more sensible for Foqoo to put Its Tears in our drinking water but the skins have not been returned.” She sniffed her finger again then sat there looking at it. “Fiau?”

“Greetings once again,” said Fiau, materialising. “How may I aid you?”

“Do you know of a deity called Foqoo?” asked Autumn.

“That name is not known to me,” said Fiau. “Of what is this Foqoo the deity?”

“Fire, I am told,” said Autumn.

“Ept be the deity of fire,” said Fiau. “Mayhap Foqoo be a name for Ept with which I am unfamiliar.”

“Now that is another oddity,” said Autumn, puzzlement clear in her voice. “I should have thought of that. Ept be the deity of fire as well as hearths. Why would Ept be here and be doing these strange things?”

Fiau merged back into the staff soundlessly.

“Aye,” said Logan. “We know Darius and he be a personification of Ept. This is not like Darius at all.”

“Surely there cannot be two deities of fire,” said Autumn. “No, this does not make sense, unless I have misunderstood. Do you remember who told us Foqoo was the deity of fire?”

“Oh Sploop,” said Logan. “Let me think.” He rocked backwards and forwards on his heels for a few moments. “It was soon after we were wrecked, and before we met Engar. I think it might have been Joski.”

“Ahh, no,” said Autumn. “’Twas Lala. I remember now. When we met her on the beach and she was telling us about the tanavac of Ruglaa.”

“Yes, I think you are right,” said Logan. “Yes, I remember. She said the followers of Ruglaa liked fire and when we were at the tanavac in Uysoma they burnt that figure on the beach.”

“’Tis possible that Lala was in error,” said Autumn. “Mayhap Foqoo be the deity of something else but fire is involved somehow.”

“What would involve fire if fire is not its realm?” asked Logan.

“Mor’upita-sehen be the deity of volcanoes,” said Autumn, “and volcanoes involve fire. A lot of it.”

“True,” said Logan. “I cannot think of any other, though.”

“Mizule,” said Autumn.

“Mizule be the god of warriors,” said Logan. “You should know that.”

“Aye, and sometimes warriors fight with fire,” said Autumn. “You should know that too.”

“Is that so?” said Logan. “I did not know that. How do they use fire for fighting?”

“Sometimes when warriors avoid a battle by hiding in a wood or a dwelling their enemy sets fire to it,” said Autumn. “I have also heard of burning arrows being shot.”

“Interesting,” said Logan, “so you think Foqoo be another name for

Mizule?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I am of Mizule and I would surely have heard of Foqoo if It were. Besides, there is something underhand and somehow secretive about Foqoo and Mizule is not like that. Warriors are proud and open. I confess there is much about Foqoo that disturbs me but I do not see a deity resorting to poisoning my lip salve. There is too much left to chance and why collect all these things? Why not just put a thorn in me or set fire to the boat we came to Xive on?”

“I cannot answer you,” said Logan, then scowled as Autumn rubbed her finger over her lips in a gesture of defiance. She licked her lips then frowned.

“It tastes of coconut,” she said, “and that calhouny. 'Tis quite pleasant and it feels like my other salve. Hmmm. So, Logan, I rely on you to report any changes in my ability to make decisions but I wager this is just a flavoured salve and not Foqoo's Tears and that it came from Mother Midcarn.”

“I hope you are right,” grumbled Logan. “Sloop help us if I be having to make all the decisions from now on.”

* * *

The morning light of Astauand showed a small solitary figure, sitting alone on a broad empty beach. Small waves slithered up the beach then slid back, leaving the figure to her thoughts. Some early birds paced the shore, dipping their beaks in the sand then moving on a short way before probing again. Occasionally one would find a worm or a tiny sand crab then there would be a scuffle as others tried to claim ownership then the victor would fly off to eat in peace. Others explored the clumps of seaweed, turning them over to inspect them for grubs. Far away, at one end of the beach, a turtle made its slow, ungainly way back to the sea, exhausted from a night of laying eggs in the sand. At the other end of the beach, prowling around pools in some exposed rocks, a weasel-like animal searched for shellfish. As the turtle reached the first of the waves the weasel found a barnacle. Its agile little fingers tried to prise the barnacle from the rock but this barnacle was old and strong. Too strong. As the turtle disappeared

under the surface, relieved to be back in the water and restored to its natural grace, the weasel abandoned the barnacle, its attention drawn to a slow moving sea snail. All ignored the solitary figure in the middle of the beach.

The morning light showed another solitary figure, this one lying just inside the treeline. He too did not move. He lay contentedly, his head on a pillow of rolled up blanket. He did not notice the black spider with a red stripe on its back approach his leg. The spider hesitated, its front legs raised and feeling the air. Cautiously the spider edged forward and climbed the smooth expanse of skin. Finding nothing to eat it descended the other side and moved on. The figure sighed and a hand briefly scratched the leg where the spider had been. A small blue-grey mouse saw the spider's descent and followed. Underneath a small shrub the spider sensed the mouse and suddenly spun. The mouse froze, alarmed. It was young and inexperienced with spiders. The spider sat back on its hind legs and waved its two front legs threateningly at the mouse, Despite its hunger the mouse decided the spider was too big, too threatening. Its whiskers twitched in agitation then it turned and hurried away. It was a sensible mouse, one destined to live long for the spider was deadly. One bite could kill a man in a few minutes. A small mouse would only take a tiny part of that to die. All eight spider eyes watched the mouse go then it turned and resumed its early morning walk along the tree line. It preferred small lizards to small mice. Mouse fur gave the spider indigestion. It knew that from experience.

Some time later the figure on the beach had finished its dancing. The gulls and other birds had fled in alarm and were watching from the safety of the trees or the sky, waiting until they could return. The figure at the tree line had also moved, but not by much. It too was avoided by the small creatures around it. Solitude comes naturally when the companionship of another kind is part of the endless struggle between life and death.

"Greetings," said Autumn, striding up the beach towards Logan. "'Tis another beautiful day."

"You seemed easy in your exercises," said Logan, holding out a coconut. "I have a coconut for you."

“Yes, it was a good session today,” said Autumn, taking the coconut.
“Tis a little cooler, I think.”

“Where shall we head today?” asked Logan.

“South,” said Autumn.

“Good,” said Logan.

“You wish to go South as well?” she asked.

“Any direction be as good as any other to me,” said Logan. “I was just pleased that you answered so decisively.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, touching her lips. “My salve.”

“Indeed,” said Logan. “Have you any particular reason for heading South?”

“Umbu said that this beach is North of Dashoo,” said Autumn, “so South seems a good idea as I would like to go there.”

“Why?” said Logan. “I did not think you would be interested in going to a town. I rather expected you would want to go to the Isle of the Lost as you tend to want to look for trouble rather than avoid it.”

“You think there will be trouble on the Isle of the Lost?” asked Autumn, nibbling on the flesh of the coconut now she had drunk all its milk.

“Not any more,” said Logan with a smile, “as you would rather go to Dashoo.”

“Ahh, Logan,” said Autumn shaking her head sadly. “The return of your thinking stone does not seem to be helping you.”

“How so?” asked Logan, his smile turning into a quizzical expression.

“We do not know where the Isle of the Lost is,” explained Autumn.
“The only sensible choice is to go to Dashoo and ask directions.”

“Oh,” said Logan, his face going blank. “I did not think of that.”

* * *

“’Twould seem a pleasant enough place,” said Logan as they breasted the top of the low ridge overlooking Dashoo.

The town, more like a village in truth even though it was the largest place on the island, was at the furthest end of a peninsular that jutted out into the sea. On the far Eastern horizon could just be seen, hazy with distance, the top of the mountain of Zuit. Dashoo sprawled, if that could be said of such a small place, across the tip and along the Southern end of the peninsular. It looked to be a single row of widely spaced dwellings, strung out along the edge of the beach. It did, however, have a jetty which extended the tip to the East, as though pointing the direction to Zuit, with several boats tied to it. There was also a well worn track leading along the Southern edge of the peninsular, no doubt heading further South.

“Most places seem pleasant from a distance,” said Autumn, “but yes, it does. The huts, though small, seem well cared for and none are in ruins.”

“They all look to be made of wood and fronds, as well,” said Logan. “I do not see any built of stone. Do you suppose Lotadil lives in Dashoo? Wovek said he lives mostly on this island.”

“Likely not,” said Autumn. “He probably lives on his plantation further inland. Come, let us see what this place has to offer.”

They continued down the slope of the ridge and headed towards the town, Autumn enjoying the walk. It was good to be carrying a pack again and using a staff. It somehow felt more natural than carrying nothing. They passed between the second and third dwellings at the Northern end, not far from the jetty.

“Your pardon,” said Autumn, going over to a man scraping shells off the bottom of an upturned boat on the beach. “We are strangers here and would ask directions.”

“Oh aye,” said the man. He stopped scraping and looked up happily. “You be strangers, all right. Ain’t never seen you two before. Where did you come from? I didn’t think there were any passengers on any boats yesterday.”

“We landed on a beach further North,” said Autumn. “We walked here this morning.”

“Oh right,” said the man. “Well, well, it be a nice day for walking, all right. Be you here sightseeing or on business or visiting folk?”

“We are sightseeing,” said Autumn. “We know no one on this island. We came in from Zuit.”

“Ahh, right you are,” said the man. “Aye, Zuit be a nice enough place as well. I have been to Jaikai any number of times and twice to Uysoma. Be going to take my almost there soon enough. My brother’s almost be from Zuit too. Where was you wanting directions to? I know everywhere and everyone on this here island. You be coming to the right person for asking directions!”

The man’s smile broadened into a grin.

“We are looking for a place known as the Isle of the Lost,” said Autumn.

The man’s face fell and became guarded, shuttered almost.

“Can’t say as I’ve ever heard of that place,” he muttered. “Most likely you be on the wrong island. Anyways, I can’t stand here idling and chatting all day, too much work to do, see. Bloody barnacles be not scraping themselves off. Been nice meeting you.”

He started scraping the bottom of the boat again with vigour.

“Ahh,” said Autumn, startled by his reaction. “Well, thank you for your time.”

The man started whistling and ignored them.

“How strange,” muttered Autumn as they slowly walked away. “You ask the next one, mayhap they do not like my face here or something. Talk to this woman coming along with the basket of fruit.”

“Your pardon,” said Logan as Autumn hung back, trying to be unobtrusive. “We are strangers here and would ask for directions.”

“Greetings,” said the woman. She too seemed quite happy. “Gladly, if I know the place. Would you like an orange?”

She held one out and Logan took it. “How much?” he asked, fumbling for his bundle of coins.

“Tis a gift to a stranger in welcome,” she said, smiling. “Now, where be you wanting to go?”

“Tis a place I have heard of,” said Logan. “It has a strange name which I may have misheard.”

“Tell me what you have heard,” said the woman.

“Umm, the Isle of the Lost,” said Logan.

The woman dropped her basket of fruit then bent to pick it up. Logan picked up a couple of oranges that had rolled away.

“There you are,” he said, handing them to her.

“Ohh,” she said, seemingly flustered. “Thank you. No, I have never heard of that place. Sorry. I have to go, My almost is expecting, ... umm, oranges, yes, oranges, umm, thank you.”

She snatched all three oranges from Logan and scurried away.

“Did I say something wrong?” asked Logan. “I was not rude, was I?”

“No more so than I,” said Autumn. “Well, let us keep on going and we will ask someone else. We have been told that the people of Xive be somewhat strange.”

“Let me try that man over there,” said Logan, pointing to a man sitting on an upended box. “He seems older and mayhap more knowing. I want to try something.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn, mildly curious.

“Your pardon,” said Logan, going up to the man. “We are strangers here. Is this the village of Illorst?”

“Illorst?” said the man. “Can’t say I have ever heard of Illorst. This be Dashoo.”

“Mayhap we misheard,” said Logan. “We are on our way from Aferraron to Neander and said we would deliver something to a relative of a friend of ours. I am sure they said Illorst. ’Tis a largish village, I believe.”

“Hmm, that be a tricky one,” said the man thoughtfully. “Dashoo be the biggest place here, but there be Isyrat on the other side, up in the North, and Ictozee down South. Ain’t nowhere else of any size apart from them and nowhere what sounds like Illorst.”

“That is unfortunate,” said Logan. “Mayhap it is not a village. Another island perhaps?”

“No, can’t rightly say there be an island here like that neither,” said the man, his face screwed up in concentration. “This be Xive and there be Zuit over yonder and Ove to the South. Ain’t no other islands round here. Least not with people on.”

“Are you sure?” asked Logan. “Perhaps it was not Illorst but the Isle of the Lost or something like that?”

The man froze then spat. “Best you be getting back to Aferraron,” he said coldly. “You be not welcome here.” He got up and walked away, his back stiff.

“I would certainly like to visit the Isle of the Lost,” said Autumn softly, coming over to stand beside Logan. “It intrigues me more than ever.”

Chapter Twenty Three

“Sploop!” cried Logan, jumping backwards a step or two and flapping his arms. “What did that damned fool bird do that for?”

“I wager he saw something nice to eat on the top of your head,” said Autumn.

Iam flew off and perched on a branch a little further down the bay. Logan glowered at him for a moment.

“I have no idea why he follows us anyway,” he grumbled, picking up his staff.

“Perhaps he likes our company,” said Autumn. “Then perhaps he has deeper reasons. As I recall you followed me after we first met and I have not been able to shake you loose since.”

“Well, that be different,” said Logan, hitching his malu up around his hips again. It slipped down sometimes when he moved suddenly as he had a tendency to knot it slightly too low, on his hip rather than just above it.

“Of course,” said Autumn. “’Tis always different when someone does something they complain of in others.”

“But Iam is a bird,” protested Logan. “Worse, he be a night bird that follows us in the day. Where be the sense in that?”

“Mayhap in the light he has confused us with another,” said Autumn. “But do you really let a small bird bother you?”

“No,” said Logan, “he only bothers me when he flies in my face. No matter. Let us move on.”

They had been following the rutted but, by the look of it, infrequently used track out of Dashoo which ran along the edge of the jungle where it merged with the shore. Although the silver-grey sand of the bay continued South the track itself bent sharply around a large moss covered mound and appeared to wind its way into the jungle, heading

West. In the distance they could see the bay curve back round to the East again. For want of any better suggestions they had elected to keep following the track. On the whole, by their very nature, tracks led somewhere and were used by people. Where the track led neither of them knew, being strangers in a strange land, but it had a sense of purpose and lent that purpose to them. Moreover, anyone they chanced to meet on the track may be forthcoming about the location of the Isle of the Lost.

Autumn looked back for a moment at the clear blue sea and the low waves rolling in over the sand then continued around the mound with Logan following. Iam watched them go from his branch until they disappeared behind a pair of close growing trees then launched himself into the air.

“Kraak k k iam,” he cried and flew into Autumn’s face. “Iam, iam, k k.”

Autumn reacted too quickly and accidentally hit Iam with her forearm, causing him to tumble backwards. He righted himself with a flurry of wings then alighted on the ground and shook his head.

“Kraakk,” he said mournfully.

“My apologies, little one,” said Autumn, dropping to her knees to inspect the arii. “You took me by surprise. Are you hurt?”

He stared accusingly at her with his large round eyes then started to walk along the track, back around the mound.

“I think you upset him,” observed Logan, wryly.

“Mayhap I have injured a wing,” said Autumn, watching the small rotund shape rock from side to side with his stiff legged bouncy gait.

“I think not,” said Logan as Iam suddenly took off and flew almost directly upwards to perch on top of the mound.

“Iam, iam, k k k,” cried Iam and gazed at them solemnly.

“That is good,” said Autumn. “’Twas not my intent to hurt the bird. I wonder why he flew at me?”

She watched him watching her for a few moments then turned and started along the track again. With a flurry of wings Iam swooped around her, not getting too close, and landed on the track a pace or two ahead. He stared at her, blinking twice, then walked down the track again, heading for the sea.

“As I said, ’tis a damned fool bird,” said Logan. “Take no more notice or we will be here all day.”

“Do you suppose he is warning us of some danger ahead?” asked Autumn.

She watched Iam walk onto the sand and turn to face the South. He swivelled his head around and stared at them.

“K,” he said.

“How would he know?” asked Logan reasonably enough. “He has not been further along this track than us. Come on.”

He brushed past Autumn and headed along the track and Iam swooped once again. He flew around Logan’s head then a second time, neatly avoiding Logan’s staff which he had raised instinctively, then flew back towards the beach.

“You are right,” said Autumn. “Iam is definitely behaving strangely.”

She started to walk slowly towards Iam so as not to frighten him.

“Pah,” said Logan and started walking along the track again.

“K k k iam,” said Iam and flew into the air again to fly around Logan. Then he flew back to the beach and watched Autumn watching him.

“Come this way,” said Autumn, beckoning to Logan.

“Why?” asked Logan, walking back up the track.

“See?” said Autumn. “Iam did not fly at you this time. Turn and walk away again.”

Logan sighed and turned around and started to walk into the jungle again. Iam launched himself and flew around Logan once more then went back to the edge of the beach.

“Now come back to me,” said Autumn.

“I am spending all day walking and getting nowhere,” said Logan but obediently walked back.

Iam did not move.

“Interesting,” said Autumn. “Let us both go onto the beach.”

Logan looked quizzically as she walked towards Iam then followed. Iam watched, his big eyes intent, then flew away, disappearing behind the edge of the trees.

“Now where did he go?” asked Logan, joining Autumn.

“He is there,” said Autumn, pointing to a branch further along the beach. “I think he wants us to follow him.”

“But I thought we were going to follow the track,” said Logan, waving at the track with his staff.

“Does it matter?” asked Autumn, walking in the direction of Iam.

“I suppose not,” said Logan. “But 'twould seem foolish to be following a bird that is following us.”

Iam flew further along the beach before perching on another branch to watch them.

“We have no particular reason to follow the track,” said Autumn, following Iam, “and as none will give us any directions we might as well follow Iam. I wager, this being a small island, we will find the other end of the track this way soon enough.”

“He is probably just leading us to a nest of especially juicy mice or some such,” said Logan, following Autumn.

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, “but if nothing else it is easier to go this way with him ahead than the other way with him flying at us.”

“I suppose we should be glad he is not heading out to sea,” said Logan. “Although I dare say with Fiau back we would not have to try to swim after him.”

“What was that you said?” asked Autumn, pausing in her walking to turn to look at Logan who was two or three paces behind her.

“I said we should be glad ...” started Logan.

“I know,” said Autumn, interrupting him. “I heard you the first time.”

She frowned and turned back to following Iam.

“Then why ask?” asked Logan, a little huffily.

“Mayhap we have the wrong of it,” said Autumn in a thoughtful voice.

“The wrong of what?” said Logan. “Oh, you are not saying we should follow the track after all, are you? My feet are beginning to wear out.”

“No, no,” said Autumn as Iam flew on further. “We expected to find a gift from Mother Midcarn and there was only thread and salve and we wondered what use those could be. Mayhap we be in error and those things were just fresh supplies. Do you suppose we had the gift all along?”

“All along?” said Logan. “You mean that bird?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. She slowed down to allow Logan to catch up with her. “I am just speculating, but mayhap Mother Midcarn sent Iam to guide us. We were going the wrong way so he made us go this way.”

“Why has he not guided us before, then?” asked Logan.

“Mayhap we have not been going the wrong way before,” said Autumn. “After all, since Iam took up with us we have been heading for Xive and while we have been here we have been heading South until just now. Mayhap where we need to be going is South. Or mayhap this be just the first time no one will give us directions.”

“Well, I suppose it is possible,” said Logan. “’Twould seem a little far fetched to me though. Why not just give us a map?”

“I cannot know Mother Midcarn's reasonings,” said Autumn, “although a map has the power to tell any who look at it where we might be heading but a bird is just a bird.”

“I suppose we could always kill Iam and see if Mother Midcarn sends us another bird,” said Logan.

“Aye, we could,” said Autumn, “but you know I will not let you do that.”

“Aargh, I would not anyway,” said Logan. “He be a friendly little chap and, besides, there looks to be little meat on him, mostly just feathers and beak. Come with me.”

He grabbed Autumn's arm and pulled her away from the beach and into the beginnings of the jungle beside it. Moments later Iam was flying low between the trees, 'kraakking' irritably.

“’Twould seem you are right about him wanting us to follow,” said Logan when they stepped back on the beach and Iam shut up again. “Although that be no proof Mother Midcarn sent him.”

“True,” said Autumn, “but who else would?”

“Foqoo, perhaps,” said Logan. “Mayhap Iam be leading us away or into a trap.”

“You have an untrusting nature, Logan,” said Autumn. “You look with suspicion on that which you do not understand.”

“Naturally,” said Logan. “’Tis most sensible in my opinion. I have not

your skills to get out of trouble.”

“Well, that is true,” said Autumn, “but you have me to aid you. Is that not enough?”

“Why do you think I am still following and not going somewhere else?” asked Logan. “You I trust. Strange birds that may or may not be of Mother Midcarn, I will reserve judgement. Besides, granting that Iam is leading us, where be he leading? Have you thought of that?”

“I confess until you mentioned it I assumed Iam is leading us to the Isle of the Lost,” said Autumn, “which is unwarrantable. Still, if we grant that the bird be from Mother Midcarn we can be assured that he is leading us to where we should be, even if it is not the Isle of the Lost.”

“And if it be from Foqoo?” asked Logan.

“Then I venture it will do no great harm to find out where Foqoo wants us to be,” said Autumn. “But, as always, we are in control of our destinies. Would you rather we went somewhere else? 'Tis easy enough to go back to Dashoo and find passage to Aferraron.”

“I suspect none there will take us,” said Logan. “I do not think they liked us at all.”

“Ohh, I expect a few paraks will overcome their dislike,” said Autumn, “especially if it would be getting rid of us.”

“Then yes,” said Logan. “Let us abandon this Isle of the Lost and return to Aferraron.”

“If you wish,” said Autumn, not missing a step, “but are you not curious now we are here? There have been many strangenesses leading us this far and now we have a bird leading us along the final stretch. Does that not intrigue you?”

“You may, indeed, have control over your destiny, Autumn,” said Logan, laughing. “But you control mine as well. You want to keep going and I wager no argument of mine will change that.”

“All you have to do is say 'return', Logan, and we shall,” said Autumn,

“Very well,” said Logan. “Return.”

“Are you sure of this?” asked Autumn, stopping to look at him.

“Sploop, no,” said Logan. “We shall keep following Iam. I just wanted to see if I could even stop you walking.”

“A joke, Logan?” asked Autumn.

“Strangely enough, no,” said Logan. “Do you suppose wherever we are going there will be something else to eat besides coconuts? I am getting tired of coconuts. Why do you suppose Mother Midcarn never gives us bread or flour to make bread?”

“Perhaps there is some in that sack over there,” said Autumn.

“The secret to a good joke is to be believable,” said Logan. “Tis not believable to find a sack of flour here or that Mother Midcarn would have sent it at just the moment I was talking about it.”

“Thank you for that insight,” said Autumn. “But I was not joking. Look.”

“Aloidia!” exclaimed Logan, looking over at the sack that lay at the foot of a palm tree. It was partially covered with sand. “Wondrous woman indeed! Oh, do you suppose she is watching us in her Window at this very moment?”

“Tis possible she is watching us now from tomorrow or yesterday,” said Autumn, “but mayhap it be best you check it is flour before praising her too highly.”

“Of course it is flour,” said Logan excitedly, hurrying over to where the sack lay. “Why else would a flour sack appear when we are talking of Mother Midcarn gifting us flour?”

He quickly untied the cord at the neck of the sack and peered in then turned away in disgust.

"'Tis green and mouldy and full of bugs," he said sadly. "Most likely it fell off a boat and got washed ashore. Pah."

* * *

It took the rest of the day, the night and a large part of the next day to reach the end of the bay for it was a large bay. At times the jungle pressed thick and dense against the shore and at other times it thinned and made way for streams but it remained ever present. As did the sea the other side of the narrow strip of silver-grey sand. It rolled in and swished out, an endless background to the cries of birds and monkeys. Once a large cat let its presence be known, more than a growl, less than a roar, nearby but unseen. No one appeared to live along this stretch of the coast although three times they had seen boats and waved. Twice people had waved back but none made any attempt to come to the beach.

There were plenty of footprints, but none human. All were from birds or the pockmarks of crabs' feet or the gouges of turtles' shells flanked by the indents of their flippers. Only once did it threaten to rain but the clouds passed, driven North Westwards by the wind. As they got close to the end of the bay the land started to rise and the beach narrowed then disappeared among a tangle of stones then rose up into a cliff. Not a high one by any means but a cliff none the less, the waves surging up and falling back.

"Well, this be the end of the island," said Logan, standing on the last of the sand and looking up at the trees leaning over the cliff. Some had already fallen and littered the tangled stones. Others looked to be in imminent danger of falling, seemingly the only thing keeping them up was the breeze off the sea. "Where to now or does Iam want us to start swimming? Where is he, anyway?"

"I have not seen him for a while," said Autumn, wading out into the surf to try to peer around the edge of the cliff to see what lay beyond. Nothing, apparently, although she did not go far out. The sea was the sea and full of unknown dangers despite its clearness and she held the bottom of her malu up so it did not get wet. A small shoal of tiny fish swirled around her calves and feet then, when she bent to look at them, they shot off at speed into deeper water.

As she waded back onto the beach, Iam glided over the top of the jungle and circled overhead.

“Kraakk k k iam,” he called and flew over a tree whose upper part had broken off and fallen to the ground. Its mass of fronds were grey and old and looked like a giant bird dead from exhaustion.

“’Twould seem he wants us to go that way,” said Logan. He glanced up at the cliff again then turned and headed back down the beach to where Iam had flown. Autumn was already beside the ruined tree.

“’Twould seem there is some sort of path the other side,” she said, peering through the pile. “Most likely this is the way Iam wants us to go.”

“Do you not find it strange that there is a path here yet we have seen no other paths along this beach?” asked Logan.

“I do,” said Autumn, “but then, this beach itself could be a path. ’Tis easier to walk along it than through the jungle and most likely the foot marks of any who have been along here have been washed away by the sea.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan.

He, too, peered through the pile of fronds, then sighed. It looked dark in the depths of the jungle after the clear brightness of the golden sun on the silver beach with the brilliant blue of the sea beyond. Dark and green and a little gloomy.

The path was narrow and wound between the trees, flanked by bushes. It was not frequently used as it was covered with grass and the undergrowth spilled across in places. As they went deeper into the jungle the rank smell of wet, rotting vegetation grew stronger. Unseen by either Autumn or Logan, the wizened brown hairy face of a small monkey watched them pass, relaxed but ready to warn the jungle of danger, its alert eyes incuriously curious. When they were out of sight the monkey went back to its important business of searching for berries.

The path wound on for some distance then turned and started to climb. Then it turned again and levelled off then descended briefly before starting to climb again. The sound of the sea now gone, deadened by the foliage.

“We must be near the top of the cliff,” said Autumn, “but there seems to be no break in the jungle up ahead.”

The path again wound off to the side for perhaps thirty or so paces then turned uphill again.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “I can see the sky. This path must run along the top of the cliff. Mayhap it takes us down to the other side of the island.”

She suddenly stopped walking. So suddenly Logan very nearly walked into her.

“What?” he asked.

“That is worrying,” said Autumn, pointing.

“What is?” asked Logan. “Ahh.”

They both stared at the skull on a branch at the edge of the path. It peered out between the leaves as if watching for whoever came up the path. Some wasps crawled out through one of the eye sockets and buzzed away.

“It looks human,” said Autumn. “It has a forehead.” She looked around at the trees. “Do you suppose someone was up one of these trees and fell onto this branch?”

Logan reached out and prodded the skull. It wobbled then slid off and dangled from a short length of cord knotted through a hole at the back.

“No,” he said, his stomach tightening. “This has been put here.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “I wonder why. Perhaps it is a message of some

sort.”

“Most likely to tell people to go away,” said Logan. “I venture we are going to ignore that message?”

“Of course,” said Autumn. She gently balanced the skull back on the branch. “I wonder if there are more up ahead.”

Logan looked at the skull again then followed her up the path.

“Well now,” said Autumn, stepping into a narrow clearing at the top of the cliff. “This is interesting.”

Chapter Twenty Four

A bare five paces beyond the edge of the cliff was another cliff, just as high, just as dense with jungle and with its own small clearing. Between the two cliffs the sea surged and snorted and gurgled, sending up an occasional spurt of spray as waves collided. It was as though the tip of the island had broken off and slid but a short distance and the sea had raced in from both sides to prevent their ever rejoining.

Interesting as though the natural topography might be, it was nothing compared with the unnatural features. Arrayed along the edge of the cliff was a line of stakes with mounted skulls, their lower jaws tied in place so they grinned disarmingly at any who came up the path. Around each stake, thrust firmly into the ground with the longest at the back and the shortest at the front, were ribs and strung from narrow crossbars affixed below the skulls were necklaces of what looked to be backbones. Presumably each circle of ribs, backbone and skull belonged with each other but there was no way of telling. On the far side grotesque faces scowled, grinned and leered, each carved into a tree and garishly painted. Their eyes red and staring, many with wide mouths and all with dark green skin. Beneath some, short branches had been painted to resemble male phalluses.

“Sploop,” said Logan, stopping and staring. “Pah, Voqev more like. What is all this?”

“I know not,” said Autumn, “but 'tis not a pretty sight. You see those faces over yonder?”

“Oh!” said Logan, his attention taken away from the skulls grinning at him. “Ugh!” and he shuddered.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “’Tis possible that these bones are simply the trophies of a battle that was fought here and were left as a warning or some such but those faces bother me. No, those faces carry some deeper import. There is a hand at work here that is sending us a message but I know not what that message is.”

“I do,” said Logan. “The message is 'go away and do not come back'”

plain and simple. I think we should take heed of that.”

“No, I do not think it is that simple,” said Autumn. “Only two of those faces are grim and angry but others are grinning and almost welcoming and there is nothing overtly threatening here. There are no weapons levelled at us nor talismans nor do I feel any malevolence directly.”

“Welcoming?” said Logan. “What sort of a welcome do you call it when your bones are left at the entrance?”

“I think you have the right of it, Logan,” said Autumn. “This is an entrance and these bones and faces are here to mark the boundary. I think we have found the Isle of the Lost.”

“And it can stay lost as far as I am concerned,” said Logan. He stepped forward to examine the closest stake. “This one seems fresh to me, it still carries the odour of fire and burnt meat. How many ribs do we have?”

“Twelve pairs,” said Autumn. “Most animals have thirteen pairs or more.”

“Well, there are twenty four ribs here,” said Logan counting them, “so I wager that these are human remains although this man was missing some teeth. If it was a man.”

“I know no way of telling,” said Autumn, wandering along the line of stakes. “Some of these skulls are smaller than the others but they could have been women or smaller men. None seem small enough to be children. I notice something else as well, none of these skulls have any injury to them.”

“There are many ways to die,” said Logan, looking at some of the others. “Mayhap their heads were cut off or they died of old age or disease.”

“Tis likely,” said Autumn. “I would expect if these died in battle there would be at least a few head injuries and none of the ribs are broken either, other than to separate them from the chest. I suppose it is

possible that these died of some pestilence and were left here but why then array their bones in this way?"

"Mayhap there are people who live on the other side," said Logan, "and they put these with the pox here and painted the faces the other side to protect themselves from the pox returning."

"'Tis possible," said Autumn, "but why are the skulls facing the path we came along? Would they not have left them facing the faces?"

"I suppose anything is possible," said Logan. "And, now I am over the shock of this, I confess it seems a little funny."

"How so?" asked Autumn, turning to stare at the faces gawping at them across the gap.

"I do not know," said Logan, "but it seems somehow too much, if that makes sense. All this has been put here in a very out of the way place that no one comes to."

"There is a path here," said Autumn, "which means some have come here and there looks to be a path the other side of the bridge. I am certain this place marks an entrance."

"A bridge?" exclaimed Logan, looking around. "Oh Sploop, I did not notice that."

Sure enough at the far end of the clearing was a simple slatted bridge suspended by ropes across the gap. The ropes were held each side by small stakes impaled in the ground. The bridge was narrow and looked insubstantial and full of gaps. It did not inspire confidence.

"Mayhap these bones be from those who tried to walk across and fell," said Logan, peering over the edge. "Although 'tis not all that far to fall and there is water at the bottom."

"And they would be washed away," said Autumn, peering over as well. "The sea seems powerful along here."

"Most likely because this gap is narrow," said Logan. "Oh well, I

suppose you intend to cross to the other side?"

"Well, there is a bridge," said Autumn, "so visitors cannot be entirely unwelcome. We have been looking for the Isle of the Lost and if this is it then it would be a shame to not visit, and if it is not then we need to find out why Iam brought us here."

"I knew you would have good reasons for not going away," said Logan. "Speaking of Iam, where is he?"

"Ahh," said Autumn, looking up and around. "I do not see him anywhere. That is strange."

"Nor I," said Logan. "I cannot hear him either."

"I do not recall seeing him since we started on this path after the beach," said Autumn. She peered over the edge of the cliff again then up at the sky. "I daresay he will turn up again. 'Twill be easy enough to find us from above, although mayhap his task is done and he has returned from whence he came."

"Oh, please do not say that," said Logan. "It worries me. Iam! Iam! Here, boy! Kraakk k k!"

Still there was no sign of Iam.

"Another reason to think this is the Isle of the Lost," said Autumn.

"Aye, and we are the ones who are lost," said Logan.

"We are not lost," said Autumn. "All we have to do is follow the path back to the beach then follow the beach back to Dashoo. Three days travel, two perhaps less if we hurry. That is not being lost to my mind."

"You know what I meant," grumbled Logan.

"Aye," said Autumn, "but you will die sooner or later, and would it not be better to die on a quest of discovery than in your bed of old age or some foul sickness?"

“No,” said Logan. “My sole purpose in life is to die in my bed of old age but you are doing your best to stop that from happening.”

“Ahh, Logan, you wrong me,” said Autumn. “I do what I can to help you die of old age as well. Enough of this talk of death. There is no reason to think you are going to die any sooner than the fates intend.”

“Easy enough to say,” said Logan, “but look around. These did not die in their beds.”

“You do not know that,” said Autumn. “’Tis possible they all died of old age in their beds and were put here to celebrate their lives and achievements.”

“Aye, ’tis possible,” said Logan, “but how likely?”

“Best not to dwell on that too much,” said Autumn, patting him on the shoulder. “Think good thoughts and good will be the result. Come, you decide. Shall we spend the night here or cross the bridge and find somewhere the other side?”

“I wager there is another choice,” said Logan.

“Going back is not an option when you are thinking only good thoughts,” said Autumn.

“Then let us cross the bridge,” said Logan. “If we have to go that way the sooner it be done the better, to my mind.”

“You see?” said Autumn. “Good thoughts bring good results.”

She marched over to the bridge then stopped.

“Ahh, I do not like the look of this,” she said, looking down at it.

“Why?” asked Logan joining her. “Ahh.”

They gazed at the bridge for a few moments.

“Do you suppose these slats are the thigh bones of those whose skulls

are over there?” asked Logan, “or of others?”

“I do not imagine it matters much,” said Autumn, “although I hope none who form this bridge had weak bones. I wager this rope is not rope either.”

She squatted down and inspected one of the ropes holding the bridge up.

“It looks like plaited hair,” she said, straightening up again. “How curious.”

“How is it curious?” asked Logan, “aside from a bridge of bones being curious of itself?”

“To make a bridge someone has to get to the other side to secure it before it can be used,” said Autumn, looking across to the far side. “Which means the bridge has to be made and ready first. Why would them as made this bridge have a collection of bones and hair ropes with them when they arrived here?”

“Mayhap they collected them with the intent of making this bridge,” said Logan. “I daresay those not making this bridge put the skulls and whatnot over there to pass the time and when they got across they painted those faces to celebrate.”

“There is a simpler explanation,” said Autumn. “Perhaps they made a bridge from trees or a rope from creepers to begin with and only made this one later. But you have to wonder why, given that there are so many trees here.”

“Perhaps it is just someone with a very strange sense of humour,” said Logan.

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “Have a care when crossing. These bones are wet from the spray.”

“Do you think it is strong enough?” asked Logan, looking at the bridge dubiously.

“For certain,” said Autumn. “Someone can sit in your lap without breaking your legs, although I suggest you step at the ends of the bones rather than in the middle. Shall I go first?”

“Oh I may as well,” said Logan. “If I fall I doubt even you would be able to save me so if it breaks while I am on it you can go back to Dashoo. Do you want the money just in case?”

“I have no need of money,” said Autumn, “and I am greatly impressed by your willingness to risk this bridge to save me. I will wait until you are across before adding my weight to it.”

“That is a point,” said Logan, hesitating. “We know not what dangers are on the other side. Perhaps you should go first as you handle danger better than I do.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn.

She stepped onto the first bone of the bridge and it clanged, startling Logan so he nearly fell over the cliff. Autumn froze, one foot on the bridge and the other on the cliff.

“What was that?” she demanded.

“It sounded like a bell,” said Logan, “unless the bridge is magicked.”

Autumn lifted up her foot and put it down on the bone again. Again there was a clang.

“Ahh,” said Logan, bending over and peering under the bridge. “Look. There is a bell there, hanging under the lowest part of the bridge.”

Autumn stepped back a little and bent to look as well.

“How very strange,” she said straightening up again. “Why would someone put a bell there?”

“I would think it obvious,” said Logan. “So they know when someone is crossing the bridge. Mayhap there is a toll for crossing and the toll keeper will be here directly.”

“Unless it is some sort of call to a deity for protection when crossing,” said Autumn, “although I have not come across that before and we have crossed other bridges.”

She pushed the bridge with her foot again experimentally and the bell rang out twice. She scanned the other side but no one appeared.

“Should we wait, I wonder?” she asked, “or just cross and see what happens?”

“I would wait,” said Logan. “That way we can leave if something happens.”

“A sensible answer, Logan,” said Autumn, “but it begs the question of how long. I will meet you on the other side.”

She stepped decisively onto the bridge and walked across confidently, her feet stepping on every third bone where the rope was tied around it. The bell marked her progress, clanging continuously as the bridge twisted and swayed, missing a beat only when she paused when a large muscular man appeared on the path on the other side. Then the bell clanged as she took the last few steps.

“Greetings,” she said, stepping onto solid ground again. “My name is Autumn Savannah and my companion yonder is Logan. We are travellers.”

“Greetings,” said the man smiling broadly and looking her over carefully. “Autumn, eh. Nice name. Pretty name for a pretty maid.”

“And your name?” asked Autumn.

“I am Olegri, not that it matters,” said Olegri. “You won’t be remembering it anyway. Not such a pretty name as Autumn, but then I ain’t so pretty myself.”

“Why would I not remember your name?” asked Autumn.

“This is the land of forgetting,” said Olegri with a chuckle. “Names don’t get used much here.”

The bell clanged as Logan took a tentative step onto the bridge. The man immediately held up his hand.

“Hold!” he barked looking sternly at Logan.

Logan froze, perhaps more from looking down at the churning sea below than from the man's command.

“Why may Logan not pass?” asked Autumn.

The bell clanged as Logan stepped back onto his side again.

“Mayhap he does not have the right,” said Olegri. “Why are you here?”

“We are looking for the Isle of the Lost,” said Autumn. “Is this the place?”

“That be one of its names,” said the man. “From this bridge to the sea over yonder. Why are you looking for this place?”

“We have heard tales of it,” said Autumn. “We travel to learn of the world and the tales have intrigued us. What manner of right is needed to pass here?”

“You need to be doolally,” said Olegri. “You know, in the head,” and he wagged his finger beside his head to make the point.

“Are you doolally?” asked Autumn.

“I must be,” said the man, grinning broadly, “as I am here.”

“You seem to have your wits intact,” said Autumn.

“Aye, well, that's as may be,” said Olegri. “I am one of the sentries of the bridge and 'tis my turn for a spell here. 'Tis your lucky day as others be not as accommodating as I and would, most like, have run you through by now.”

“Is that what happened to them the other side?” asked Autumn.

"Them who?" asked Olegri tilting his head to one side with a puzzled look.

"Them as whose skulls are on the stakes," said Autumn.

"Oh, them," said Olegri. "No, they be gifts to Foqoo. Them as cannot pass either go back where they came from or go down there," and he jabbed a finger over the edge of the cliff. "Be nothing left of them when the sea and the sharks have finished with them."

"So Foqoo has followers here?" asked Autumn. "Are you one?"

"All here are followers," said Olegri, "save Foqoo Itself. This be Its home."

"Ahh," said Autumn. "I would like to meet this Foqoo. Can we pass?"

"You can," said Olegri, "but not him."

"Why not?" asked Autumn.

"Look at him," said Olegri. "He stands there quiet and paying close attention to what we be saying. He ain't doolally, that be obvious."

"What signs are there of being doolally?" asked Autumn, curious and intrigued.

"Oh they be many and varied," said Olegri, "although if he wants to come over here and argue the point with me he is right welcome, although he won't be going back either way. Best he stays that side if he wants to live."

"And I?" asked Autumn, ever so slightly adjusting her position to be ready for an attack. "You consider me to be doolally?"

"Oh Foqoo, no," said Olegri. "You look to be about the least doolally person I ever did see. Are you?"

"I do not consider myself to be," said Autumn, "although no doubt there are some as would think I am. If I am not doolally, why then can

I pass and my companion not? You seem inconsistent.”

“Aye,” said Olegri, smiling broadly again, “but you be a fine looking maid and fine looking maids are always welcome here, doolally or not. Make him a pretty maid and he can cross over too.”

The bell clanged as Logan stepped onto the bridge again but this time it was Autumn who held up a hand.

“Wait, Logan,” she said, not taking her eyes off Olegri. “This matter is not resolved yet.”

Logan stayed put, one foot on the bridge. Olegri gave a snort and stepped over to his side of the bridge and made it sway with his foot. The bell clanged loudly and Logan hurriedly stepped backwards.

“Make up your mind,” said Olegri. “I don't mind either way. It be a quiet dull sort of job here. Not much fun so you coming over would brighten things up.”

“Stay that side,” said Autumn. “There is no need for you to come over just yet.”

“As you wish, Autumn,” said Logan. He stepped back a little further but carried on watching intently.

“You say I am allowed to pass but Logan is not?” said Autumn.

“That be right,” said Olegri. “See? You ain't doolally at all. Nor is he. He's got the sense to stay put.”

“And if I do pass, where can I go?” asked Autumn.

“Anywhere you like,” said Olegri. “Be courteous to let yourself be known to them as what lives here but you don't have to. They will find you sooner or later.”

“And where would I find them as live here?” asked Autumn

“Follow the path,” said Olegri, jerking a thumb at the path from which

he had appeared. "It is a way but not that much of a way. Leave now and you will be there before whichever moon is coming up tonight is high in the sky."

"I see," said Autumn.

She thought for a moment then turned to Logan, keeping Olegri in the corner of her eye.

"You stay there, Logan," she said. "I will go to meet these others and mayhap I will be able to get permission for you to pass into this place as well. I will be back before dawn either way and we can decide what to do after that."

Olegri chuckled.

"As you say," said Logan. "I will make a camp a little further along. I do not fancy sleeping alone with these companions."

"I will see you again in the morning," said Autumn, giving him a wave. "Why do you laugh, Olegri?"

"You may be seeing him again in the morning," said Olegri, "but you won't be going nowhere with him. You are here now and the only way out is across that bridge. This place is surrounded by sea."

"So I cross the bridge again," said Autumn. "There should be no difficulty there."

"Ohh, it is not as simple as that," said Olegri. "No one crosses from this side to the other. You are here to stay, my lovely."

Chapter Twenty Five

“Now that was a mistake,” said Autumn to herself as she strode along the path. “I may well be able to find these people and be back before dawn but I am not going to find out much if I do. They will most likely be asleep and it will be too dark to see anything. I should have told Logan mid morning or even later. I hope he does not do anything foolish.”

The possibility that Olegri, or others like him, might in any way impede her crossing the bridge back did not seriously cross her mind.

* * *

Logan stood for a few moments after Autumn had gone watching Olegri watching him. Then Olegri nodded and turned to go.

“A moment,” called Logan, a little reluctant to be left alone in this spot. “Is there a stream nearby?”

Olegri turned back, his thick arms on his hips.

“It has been a while since I was last that side,” he said, “but there used to be one at the bottom of the hill, a short distance that way,” and he pointed away from the direction to the beach.

“Ahh, thank you,” said Logan.

“There is little point you waiting,” said Olegri when Logan showed no sign of leaving. “She will not be coming back.”

“I venture not,” said Logan. “Mayhap it be best if I start heading back to Dashoo, then,” thinking that if Olegri thought he was going away it would be less likely that anyone would come looking for him. The possibility that Olegri, or others like him, might in any way impede Autumn crossing the bridge did not seriously cross his mind.

“Good idea,” said Olegri. “Have a pleasant journey.” He nodded and walked into the undergrowth.

Logan waited a few moments then put his foot on the bridge. The bell clanged.

“Well, that is only to be expected,” he thought, “and it is in the middle so I cannot do anything about it.”

He looked around at the bones on the stakes and the faces on the trees the other side.

“Best find this stream, then,” he muttered. “Then come back and find somewhere to sleep. I cannot stay down by the stream in case Autumn comes back before dawn. 'Tis a shame we had not the time to make a better arrangement.”

* * *

The path had angled sharply down the hill then levelled off, carrying on through jungle that got less dense. Before Astauand had set the jungle had ended and Autumn emerged onto a flat plain. The path continued, as far as she could see, roughly mid way between two beaches. Behind her, Astauand had sunk below the top of the cliff although there was still daylight left. Ahead she could see the flat plain widened out again and, in the distance, what looked like a collection of huts. Beyond them was the blue of more sea.

“This must be a narrow strip on the end of the island,” she thought, looking around. “Mayhap it broke away from the rest which is why there is that fissure and a strip of sea between. Still, it will be hard to get lost, even in the dark. Just stay on a beach until the land rises.”

She stopped walking when a thought came to her and scraped a line across the path. Then she walked on until the line looked to be as far away as the gap at the top of the cliff and scraped another line. She pondered the two lines for a few moments then scraped another a pace or so further away.

“That be more like it,” she thought, nodding.

She then walked a few paces away from the line, turned and ran back, leaping from the line. She landed half a pace or so away from the first.

“And into the sea,” she muttered to herself, disappointed.

She retraced her steps and tried again, this time landing perhaps a foot further than before.

“That is a nuisance,” she muttered and continued walking towards the things that looked like huts. “Mayhap if I explore the fissure there will be a narrower place that I can jump across. Using the bridge will only ring the bell and that will lead to a fight and someone may get hurt.”

* * *

Logan rinsed the last of the beach sand from his feet in the small stream then washed his face and hands before drinking his fill. He sat back and listened to the sounds of the jungle for a while then drank some more. There would be no water at the top of the cliff and he had nothing to carry water in.

He made his way back to the path, his belly sloshing faintly, collected a few pieces of fruit from a tree then slowly made his way back up the path. The skull he had dislodged on the way up the first time still dangled and he paused momentarily to replace it on the branch. It felt more respectful than simply walking past. He stopped at the edge of the clearing and peered out from the trees across the fissure. Olegri was nowhere in sight. Relieved he stepped out and considered which way to go.

“I wager it does not matter,” he thought, “although Autumn has a tendency to go to the left when she does not know which way to go.”

He visualised her coming across the bridge and heading left and went that way, towards the setting sun. He quickly spotted a space between the trees behind a bush and decided to sleep there. He would be out of sight of the skulls and of anyone in the clearing on the other side. With a sigh he put down his fruit, propped his staff against a tree and settled down to wait for Autumn or the dawn, whichever came first. After a few moments he untied his knife from his leg and put it on the ground beside him and practised reaching for it a few times with his eyes shut. Then he ate an banana and tried to think happy thoughts. It was going to be a long night.

Rising Plakill had lit much of Autumn's walk with a pale ivory light giving the vista a ghostly aura. Soon after darkness had fallen a flickering light had appeared between the huts, most probably a fire, and that had guided her until Plakill's appearance. Closer, when the fire was recognisable as a fire and the smell of wood smoke mixed with cooking food, Autumn could hear voices, several voices, indistinct but sounding calm. Closer still Autumn realised they were the voices of people, relaxing around a communal fire, whiling away the evening until it was time for bed.

Autumn left the path, seeking the shelter of a hut as she approached so she would not be seen. Moving cautiously, avoiding twigs that might snap and discarded things that might trip her, she came up behind a small hut. Belatedly she realised all the voices were higher pitched, female. There were no men talking, unless they had high pitched voices, although that did not mean there were no men there. She peeped around the corner of the hut just as one of the women stood up and turned to face her. Autumn jerked back behind the hut.

"I am off to bed," came a voice, clear and calm.

Autumn waited for the chorus of farewells to die down then peered around the side of the hut again. She caught a glimpse of a woman, probably the one who had spoken, just before she entered the hut, her belly prominent and a hand pressed into the small of her back. Small sounds of movement came from within then a sigh and some rustles. Most likely the woman was now in bed. Of itself it wasn't a problem but if Autumn could hear the woman it was quite possible the woman would hear Autumn so she stayed where she was.

There seemed to be several conversations going, weaving between the women still around the fire. Some spoke quietly with their neighbours then would turn and make some remark in response to a different conversation with no continuity to their existing conversation, making it difficult to follow any one conversation without being able to see faces. Still, there appeared to be nothing amiss. By the sound of it this was just a group of women discussing their day just past and the day to come. There seemed to be frequent references to children although

there were no children's voices nor were any visible but children often form a large part of women's conversations. Perhaps the children were already in bed, asleep.

It didn't last long. The woman going into the hut shielding Autumn sparked a slow but inexorable exodus of women, some going into huts alone, some with another. A handful went outside the circle of huts but soon returned. They, too, vanished until only Autumn and the dying fire remained.

Still Autumn waited. Perhaps if she had walked down the path and into the group she would have been welcomed, but to be discovered, crouched behind a hut as they went to bed, was inviting an altercation, perhaps even an alarm being raised and whatever that might expand into. So Autumn waited, her eyes scanning the area inside the circle of huts, her ears scanning the area outside. All seemed quiet. A faint muttering over there, a snore somewhere else, nothing unusual for a group of people asleep.

Slowly Autumn rose and emerged from behind the hut. The fire was now dim, mostly embers with the occasional flare as a sliver of wood caught light and proclaimed its existence to the world before dying in a small blaze of glory. Something small flew over the huts then headed off to the sea. Autumn watched it go then quietly started to walk around the huts, staying behind them as the entrances appeared to not be covered. She had noticed none leaving the fire pull back a curtain or open a door so it was possible she might be seen by someone lying sleepless.

A bucket, some container at any rate, scraped noisily against a wall as Autumn's foot caught it. She froze. There were no sounds of anyone being alerted by the scrape. No suggestion of anyone coming to investigate. Perhaps there had been the faintest of sighs from inside the hut that was scraped but even that was doubtful. Slowly Autumn crept on, full around the circle of huts but there was nothing of any significance, at least not visible in the ghost-light of Plakill. It seemed like a perfectly ordinary village of, perhaps, twenty five people. It was unusual to have the dwellings arranged in a circle but of itself it seemed to have no significance. People were entitled to arrange their dwellings how they wanted.

Autumn found the path again and continued on her way. It was some time before she realised that this little village was unlike any other village she had come across before. There were no men. No children. No screaming of babies. Not even any animals. Save the women, Autumn and the bird that had flown overhead there was apparently nothing else there. There were, of course, all manner of explanations. The men were away, hunting perhaps. Or at some ritual elsewhere on the spit of land, although no sounds of such floated through the night air. Perhaps they were teaching the young folk night skills. It was even possible these women were themselves on an expedition or engaged in a ritual of their own.

“Perhaps they are followers of Vallume,” thought Autumn with a brief smile.

The smile quickly faded when she remembered Olegri had said all were followers of Foqoo. He'd also said the pretty maids were always welcome. She stopped walking and thought back. It was night and difficult to see things clearly but, even though many of the women had had the fire behind them so their appearance wasn't clear, they had walked with the gait of the young not the old.

“Surpassing strange,” thought Autumn as she resumed walking.

* * *

Despite his solitude, the massed skulls and bones lurking nearby and his worries over Autumn Logan slept soundly. He had not expected to sleep at all but the unexpected happens nearly as often as the expected. He had expected, in the unlikely event that he would fall asleep, to dream of skulls and grotesque faces and strange phantasms dancing with necklaces of backbones but he didn't. He dreamt he was asleep in the cowshed where he had lived after his parents died. He seemed to be floating above the cowshed, looking down on himself as a lad, scared and alone, huddled against the warm bulk of a cow. He dreamed he was dreaming, of what he wasn't sure but he somehow sensed there was a pie involved. A sweet pie, packed with stewed bananas, steaming hot, the pastry thick and rich with butter. But the cow was eating it and wouldn't share.

He woke in the middle of the night, Plakill high overhead with a halo around it from the thin cloud. His bladder was bursting from all the water he had drunk earlier. He groaned and rolled over, hoping to go back to sleep without having to get up, and found he could not. There was something huddled against him. Something warm and hairy. It sensed his movement and squealed as it ran off into the undergrowth. He jerked backwards, wide awake, fumbling for his knife.

“’Twas a wild pig,” he muttered to himself, grinning ruefully at his brief panic.

Then he panicked again when he could not find the knife. He rolled over the other way and sat up. There it was, just where he had left it, beside his staff against the tree. He sighed and scratched his head then remembered his bladder.

“Not long until dawn,” he thought, lying down again, his bladder relieved. “No chance of getting back to sleep again, though.” Or did he only dream he thought that? Either way, the pig did not come back while he slept.

* * *

Autumn skirted two other small circles of huts as she followed the path. There was no one around so she had no way of telling if the men lived in one and the children in the other or if they were also all women but it didn't really matter. When the dawn came, and it was not far away, and the people awoke and went about their business she would be able to see them and perhaps talk to some before making her way back.

She was not far from the end of the island. She could hear the sea all around and she was intrigued. Not far ahead was another structure, all alone and squat and brick shaped. It was difficult to tell in the light if it was small and not far away or large and further away but it sat, silhouetted black against the dark grey sky. Seemingly not far away from it was a mound. It could be a small hill that looked close but was some way off or it could be a smaller mound very close to the structure. Either way it drew her attention as its silhouette was smooth with none of the blurring caused by trees or bushes apart from one

tall tree with no branches that stood at the very top of the mound. There was something about that mound that gave her sense of foreboding. And, given her nature and upbringing at the Esysup, it was inevitable she would want to know more. She kept going along the path as the path seemed to be heading directly for the mound.

* * *

Unusually Logan woke a while before the dawn. He normally woke some time after the dawn, even here where the first rays of Astauand were strong. Unusually he woke with a start. He normally slid into wakefulness as gently as he slid into sleep. Unusually he woke to find himself wide awake. Normally he would cling to sleep as strongly as life itself.

What he didn't realise, as he was normally asleep at the time and only registered this through his sleep, was that he had woken at the time Autumn would normally wake and start her morning meditations so perhaps, in her absence, he woke for her. In any event he did not meditate. He did not know how.

Autumn had tried to explain it to him.

"Just sit, relax and empty your mind," she had said. "Do not do anything."

"But what do I think about?" he had asked.

"Do not think of anything," she had said. "Empty your mind and let thoughts come unbidden."

He had tried, of course. He had sat somewhere several times and closed his eyes and relaxed and emptied his mind. It hadn't worked. He would concentrate on emptying his mind then, when he just about had it empty he would think, 'is my mind empty yet?' then he would realise that he had thought something and angrily squash the thought. Then he would be pleased for having squashed the thought then realise he was thinking again and get angry again. It seemed the less he tried to think the more thoughts came to him. He found it frustrating.

But on this day he woke early. He got up and looked around to see if Autumn had arrived but he couldn't see any sign of her. He tied his knife around his leg again, gathered his remaining bananas and picked up his staff and went back to the clearing to sit, his back against a tree, as he so often did while Autumn meditated and did her exercises. Only this time he watched the bridge and the clearing beyond.

* * *

The squat structure was a stone house. A large one. Autumn had felt the stones but not investigated any further. Even though the stones would muffle any sounds she made more than the walls of the flimsy huts she had passed, someone living this far from anyone else would be more inclined to investigate any noises. Besides, a house is a house and not, of itself, especially interesting. She passed on because she was more interested in the mound. Especially as it was close by. Barely fifty paces away from the house. The first rays of Astauand made it look grim and forbidding, black and red, stark.

Up close and in the growing light she could see it was not a circular mound. It was more of a pyramid. Four sided and shaped with a dozen or so steps cut in one side. After looking around and listening she cautiously climbed the steps.

The top was not rounded as she had thought. It was flat. It had only looked rounded because of the pile of ash that surrounded the tall stone post that was embedded in its centre. The pillar was scorched and blackened.

“Why would someone build a fire here?” she wondered. “’Tis a strange place to be cooking food. Mayhap it is something to do with Foqoo. They burned that effigy at Uysoma, after all. Mayhap they do that here as well.”

She wandered around the edge of the pyramid and gazed out over the sea as Astauand rose higher, almost directly ahead of her. Then she turned and saw something that didn't look like ash. It was much the same colour but it didn't have that insubstantialness that ash has. This looked altogether more solid.

She leaned forward and prodded it. It was solid. She poked around a little then picked it up. Yet another skull.

“This place is littered with skulls,” she thought, turning it over in her hands. “Why would there be a skull in these ashes?”

No sooner than she had thought that thought than another thought came into her mind. Putting the skull down neatly she started to probe the ashes with her foot. She found quite a few bones. And another skull. She put it down neatly beside the other, somewhat dismayed at what she was thinking.

“Hello,” came a voice from behind her. A male voice she realised as she whirled around. “Could you not sleep either? Oh! You're not ... Well, well, well. Autumn Savannah. We meet again. Welcome to my world.”

* * *

Astauand was a full orb above the horizon when the idea came to Logan. There was still no sign of Autumn and Logan was getting fretful. Admittedly it was unlikely that she had come to any harm but she had said she would be back before dawn and she wasn't. It was well past dawn.

“Olegri said to follow the path,” reasoned Logan, “so if she is on her way back she will be on the path. 'Twill do no harm if I go some of the way to meet her.”

He thought about this for a while and she had still not returned so he made up his mind.

“Fiau,” said Logan, standing up.

“How may I aid you, Logan?” asked Fiau, appearing from his staff.

“Could you make a bridge so I can cross this gap?” asked Logan.

“Assuredly,” said Fiau and merged back into the staff. A moment later

the staff started to grow and Logan took it to the edge of the cliff.

Fiau's bridge was far more solid than the bridge of bones and did not clang as Logan scurried across. When his staff had returned to its normal size he cautiously went over to the path and peered down it. It looked deserted so he started walking. He stopped three paces later when he heard something behind him and turned to see what it was.

"Hello," said Olegri, grinning happily. "That was a neat trick. How did you do it?"

"Oh Sploop!" said Logan and leapt around to run down the path.

It was a good plan. Unfortunately it didn't allow for the other man, even bigger than Olegri, who was blocking the path and into whose arms Logan fell. It was a very short struggle.

Chapter Twenty Six

“Indeed, we meet again,” said Autumn. “I had a feeling I might find you here.”

“Oh?” said Ibu’oden, beaming. “It would seem you were right to follow your feelings. You have found me at last!”

Autumn frowned slightly at the implication of his remark but decided to let it pass.

“And where is that companion of yours?” asked Ibu’oden, not noticing, or perhaps ignoring, her frown. “What was his name again?”

“Logan,” said Autumn. “I left him at the bridge. A man called Olegri would not let him pass.”

“Ahh, Olegri, yes,” said Ibu’oden. “Good man that. Strong as an ox and a very able fighter. Very able indeed. Why don’t you come down from there and break your fast with me? We can get to know each other. Have you been here long?”

“I arrived last night,” said Autumn, slowly descending the steps.

“Ahh, then you will not have yet found a place to live,” said Ibu’oden, holding out his hand towards her. “Afterwards I will show you around and you can choose, although you are most welcome to stay in my house for a time.”

He waggled his hand as though expecting Autumn to take it but she didn’t and, effortlessly, he changed the motion into a wave towards his house.

“Tis not my intent to live here,” she said, noticing two large men appearing from behind the mound.

“Oh, I dare say that is the case for many who arrive here,” said Ibu’oden, “but the delights of this place soon change their mind. Come.”

“Will you not introduce me to your friends?” asked Autumn, nodding towards the two men.

“You will be introduced to all of them in good time,” said Ibu’oden grinning. “My little world is one of sharing and cooperation.”

He started to move towards his house and Autumn stayed level with him, not too close. The two men quietly fell in behind.

“Indeed?” said Autumn. “Olegri said that this place is the home of Foqoo. Are you Foqoo?”

“I have that honour,” said Ibu’oden.

“Why did you not say that when Logan asked you on Zuit?” asked Autumn.

“The time is not yet right to reveal myself to the world,” said Ibu’oden. “It will come and soon but as yet I am content on my little Isle with my era’owen and a few friends.”

“These two following are your friends?” asked Autumn.

“Everyone is my friend,” said Ibu’oden contentedly. Then he stopped walking and his face clouded. “Well, some are not and they try to oppose me but their time will come.”

“Why would they oppose you?” asked Autumn, continuing to walk.

A quick scowl crossed Ibu’oden’s face as he hurried to catch up but his voice remained relaxed and friendly.

“They are unenlightened,” he said. “They cannot or will not admit the evidence that lies before their very eyes.”

“I am not sure of what we talk,” said Autumn. “Evidence of what?”

“That Foqoo walks among them,” said Ibu’oden. “But they will, soon enough.”

“Ahh, indeed,” said Autumn beginning to understand him. “So there are some who do not accept that you are Foqoo?”

“Exactly,” said Ibu’oden admiringly. “I know it is difficult to comprehend but that is indeed the case. Some people are not as clever as you nor as open and seem to be unable to grasp the simplest of things.”

“I have found that to be the case myself,” said Autumn. “Oft times it is difficult to persuade those who are not willing to be persuaded.”

“Ahh, you have a remarkable perspicacity,” said Ibu’oden, beckoning Autumn into his house.

A young woman appeared, naked save for some colourful shells on a thong around her neck. She hesitated momentarily on seeing Autumn and scowled.

“Ahh, Seidate,” said Ibu’oden, going over to stand close to her. “Bring us some food.” He ran his hand appreciatively over her bottom and she smiled up at him.

“Immediately,” she said and glanced at Autumn. “With or without?”

“With,” said Ibu’oden and watched her lasciviously as she walked away. “Mmm, lovely girl Seidate,” he commented to Autumn. “I am sure you will both be great friends.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, watching him closely. “Is Seidate your era’owen?”

“Most assuredly,” said Ibu’oden.

He sank nonchalantly onto one of the many large cushions that were scattered around the spacious, airy room and gestured to Autumn to sit on the one next to him. Autumn sat on another, a little further away. The two friends had not come inside although a partial shadow suggested they were standing beside the doorway.

“What, pray, happened to Lala?” asked Autumn. “I thought you

married her a few days past, near Uysoma.”

“Lala?” said Ibu'oden, his face creasing. “I do not recall such a name among my era'owen.”

“I am remiss,” said Autumn. “She took another name. Umm, Geuhqooa, I think it was.”

“Geuhqooa?” said Ibu'oden. “Oh, she is somewhere around the house. I do not track their movements.”

“I see,” said Autumn. “So, ah, you have more than one era'owen?”

“Of course,” said Ibu'oden, looking faintly astonished. “How else would the world be organised? I play with one and she becomes with child so I need others to play with, or mayhap at times I simply want some variety. Too often with the same can become tedious. Ahh, here is food now. Excellent.”

Seidate reappeared with a large flat dish of sliced fruits, nuts and bread and a smaller dish of yogurt with grated coconut on top.

“Shall I bring milk or water?” she asked.

“Your preference?” asked Ibu'oden looking at Autumn.

“Water, please,” said Autumn.

“A moment,” said Seidate, turning to go.

“Stay,” said Ibu'oden. “Where is Geuhqooa?”

He ran his hand up the inside of Seidate's leg and she shivered. “She is still sleeping,” she said. “Do you wish me to wake her?”

“No, let her sleep,” said Ibu'oden. “She had an active night. Fetch the water then go prepare yourself. I feel in need of some relaxation before taking Autumn on a tour.”

Seidate gave Autumn a smug look before leaving.

"If it is not too rude of me," asked Autumn, "can I ask how many era'owen you have?"

"I confess I do not know," said Ibu'oden. "They come and sometimes go since they are not true immortals and not impervious to mishap. 'Twould be difficult to keep track of them even if I wished to. I am not possessive, they are free to roam as they will."

"Do they all live in this house with you?" asked Autumn.

"Oh no," said Ibu'oden. "They live where they wish on the Isle. 'Tis convenient for them as it is for me and my men. That way I have the means of relaxation wherever I go. At present only Seidate and Geuhqooa are here."

He watched Seidate come back with two cups of water and did something behind her that made her jump as she bent to put the cups beside the dish of fruit. She smiled at him and wiggled a little as she walked away.

"Mmmmm," said Ibu'oden, watching her then scowled as a shadow crossed the entrance. "Yes, what is it?" he said irritably.

"Them at the break have sent someone, Foqoo," said a thin, nervous looking man.

"Is she young and pretty?" asked Ibu'oden, perking up.

"'Tis a man," said the thin man.

"Pah," said Ibu'oden. "Well, you deal with him."

"As you wish, Foqoo," said the man and turned to go.

Ibu'oden reached for a slice of peach and chewed on it for a few moments.

"Grimme," he shouted.

There was a quick patter of feet and the thin man returned.

“Foqoo?” he said obsequiously, washing his hands in their own sweat.

“On reflection this is most opportune,” said Ibu’oden. “Prepare him for tonight’s celebrations.”

“As you wish, Foqoo,” said Grimme. He waited for a few heartbeats in case there were more instructions then left.

“I do dislike that man,” said Ibu’oden staring after him with distaste written all over his face. “He curdles my blood and he is unwashed.”

“How so?” asked Autumn. “He seemed clean enough to me.”

“No, no, I mean he is as yet unwashed by My Tears,” said Ibu’oden, “besides he has a sly spirit and I do not trust him.” He leaned forward and tapped Autumn on her knee. “You know, he does not like to lie with women. How is such a thing possible?”

“I cannot imagine,” said Autumn, moving her knee slightly further away. “Why would you wash him with your tears?”

“He is good at organising and thinking,” said Ibu’oden. “There is none better, save myself of course, but why should I bother myself with piddly little details. Now I am all tense, ughhh,” and he gave a little shudder. “I am in dire need of relaxing and Seidate is waiting. You stay here for a time and eat and drink your fill. I will return shortly then we can go on our tour.”

He jumped to his feet and left, a little agitated.

“Well now,” thought Autumn, watching him go. “Unwashed by Foqoo’s Tears. ’Tis a strange thing to say. I wonder what it means.”

She glanced over at the entrance and sensed the two men were there even though there was no apparent sign of them. Then she leaned forward and picked up her cup of water and sniffed it. It smelt, well, like water. Quietly she leaned over to another cushion and carefully poured the water underneath it. Then she took some bread, scooped a large gouge in the yogurt with it and deposited that under a different cushion. Finally she took some slices of fruit and disposed of them the

same way. Then she sat back and let her mind drift, meditating but with heightened awareness, ignoring the sounds that came from elsewhere in the building.

* * *

"Ahh, I see you have eaten," said Ibu'oden, coming back into the room. He seemed more relaxed than when he had left despite the faint glistening of sweat on his face and chest. "And drunk," he added, glancing into Autumn's cup. "Excellent."

Autumn came out of her reverie and looked up at him.

"I thank you for the food and drink," she said. "Can I ask what manner of celebration you are planning for this night?"

"It is the celebration of what you desire most," said Ibu'oden, beaming down at her. "Tonight you will be joined with Foqoo."

Autumn managed to refrain from jerking back in shocked surprise but it took all of her training.

"Joined?" she asked after some heartbeats. "In what manner?"

"As era'owen, of course," said Ibu'oden. "Come, let us go on our tour. I will show you the dwelling places and so on and you can give some thought to your married name. Unless you already have chosen, of course. After all, you did come all this way so you have no doubt given it some thought."

"I have not yet chosen," said Autumn, rising gracefully to her feet. "But I will be glad of a tour."

She followed him out of the doorway into the bright light of Astauand.

"This, as you know, is where I live when I am not travelling," said Ibu'oden. "And yonder is the place of celebration. 'Tis where gifts are received by me in honour and love."

"What happens to those gifts?" asked Autumn. "I saw little in your

house except cushions.”

“Some are cleansed in the heat of Foqoo's breath,” said Ibu'oden, “and others in the sweetness of Foqoo's sweat. 'Tis only right none remain here after being offered and accepted.”

“I do not understand,” said Autumn, following Ibu'oden as he led the way back along the path she had followed.

“That is only to be expected,” said Ibu'oden. “You are as yet still only a mortal. Things will be clearer after your joining and you have received the gift of Foqoo's seed.”

“I see,” said Autumn, not following this at all.

“I am taking you to the five villages,” said Ibu'oden, not noticing her look of puzzlement. “Most of the women live in one or other of the villages although some choose to live apart and a few alone. It will be your choice and you can live anywhere you desire in this realm except on the land to the South.”

“What is in the land to the South?” asked Autumn.

“The men, of course,” said Ibu'oden. “They can visit any of the women whenever they wish but they cannot stay too long and the women cannot, ever, visit the land to the South. 'Tis for the men exclusively.”

“Why is that?” asked Autumn.

“That is their place,” said Ibu'oden. “There are those as are yet unenlightened and 'tis the task of the men to ensure the unenlightened remain in their own lands and those that seek enlightenment stay away from the land to the South until they have found enlightenment.”

“I see,” said Autumn, realising that there was clearly something of importance in the land to the South that needed to be protected. “May I ask what is in the land to the South that is of such importance?”

“Knowing the extent of your wisdom and curiosity,” said Ibu'oden, “I

expected you to ask such a question although such curiosity is not normal for those seeking enlightenment. However, you will not know the answer until you are joined with Foqoo and have become enlightened and it is best if you curb your curiosity in this matter.”

“My apologies, Ibu', umm, Foqoo,” said Autumn. “’Tis difficult to suppress a lifetime of seeking answers. Am I permitted to ask the nature of the tasks of the women who reside here?”

“You surprise me, Autumn,” said Ibu’oden. “The task of the women here is the same as that of all women everywhere. To provide relaxation and solace to me and the men when I am engaged elsewhere.”

“I see,” said Autumn. “That explains why I neither saw nor heard any men at the village I passed through in the night.”

“That must have been the village closest to the break,” said Ibu’oden. “My men be skilled fighters, although not, I venture, as skilled as you, but they do not like to travel far in the dark.”

“The break is the fissure in the cliff where the sea passes?” asked Autumn. “With the bridge of bones?”

“Yes,” said Ibu’oden. “If you desire to live in a dwelling not built you are free to build it or seek others to aid you. Some of the men have building skills from before their enlightenment.”

“That is certainly worthy of consideration,” said Autumn. “Tell me, where do the children live?”

“What children?” asked Ibu’oden.

“You said that some of the women become with child,” said Autumn, “and I saw several at the village who were pregnant but I neither saw nor heard any children or babies.”

“Ahh,” said Ibu’oden. “Now I understand you. All as are born here are offered to Foqoo with great ceremony and float in Foqoo’s sweat, safe and protected.”

“Ahh, yes, of course,” said Autumn bemused. “Tell me, why are there skulls on stakes and faces on trees at the break?”

“It pleases me that you take such an interest in my world, Autumn,” said Ibu’oden, reaching out to run the fingers of one hand through Autumn’s pony-tail. “I venture you will become my favourite soon enough for you stimulate my mind not just my senses. They are there merely to mark the extent of my realm and to warn those who come with bad intent.”

“So there is no magic there?” asked Autumn.

“Tis not necessary to invoke magic to scare the unenlightened,” said Ibu’oden. “Now, just over yonder is the most Southern of the villages. Let us look around then you can talk to those who live there while I seek some relaxation then we shall move on. What say you to that?”

* * *

It took much of the day to tour the five villages, particularly as Ibu’oden found it necessary to seek relaxation at every opportunity. This was aided by the, relatively few, women who were not pregnant clamouring for his attention and Autumn tried to talk with those not favoured by him this time. She found it an onerous task as they lacked any curiosity about their world and had few memories of their pasts. Every enquiry led, fairly quickly, back to Foqoo, Foqoo’s favours and pregnancies. Even the other men on the Isle seemed to have little significance in their lives. Those men she encountered who were either arriving at or leaving a village were singularly unforthcoming but they were all, she noticed, well fed and muscled and moved with the agile gait of those who had training in the arts of fighting.

This is not to say Autumn gave no thought to Logan. It seemed obvious that he was the man Grimme had reported as being brought from the break and, since he was to be involved in the evening’s celebrations it was unlikely that Grimme would permit him to be harmed. At least, not until the celebration was underway as it was fairly apparent to Autumn what his likely fate was to be. By staying with Ibu’oden she hoped to make as much sense of this place as she could and, in the process, find out where Logan was being held, if not

before the celebration then during it as it was unlikely that anything would happen in Ibu'oden's absence. Unfortunately, she saw no sign of Logan during her tour nor did Ibu'oden give any indications. Not until they arrived back at his house, that is.

"That was a most enlightening tour," said Autumn as they drew close. "I thank you."

"Have you decided upon your name yet?" asked Ibu'oden. "The time for naming is fast approaching."

"I confess I have not," said Autumn. "Can I not retain Autumn?"

"You must renounce your past," said Ibu'oden, "and you will have few memories anyway so Autumn will have no significance to you. I would suggest Luutal'hu."

"Then it shall be so," said Autumn. "Tell me, what is happening yonder? At the place of celebration?"

"Hmm?" said Ibu'oden. "Oh, they are building the vessel to carry the offering to Foqoo."

"Can I watch it being built?" asked Autumn.

"You are the first to express such a desire," said Ibu'oden, beaming. "All those who have joined before you have gloried in the offering and its acceptance but none have shown an interest in how. Come, let us go together."

"What is the nature of the offering tonight?" asked Autumn, although she was fairly certain of the answer.

"The man Grimme told me of this morning," said Ibu'oden. "Twill be he who is offered into the arms of Foqoo."

"Did we meet him on our tour?" asked Autumn seemingly innocently. "I would be most interested to look upon one who is to receive such honour."

“Ah, no,” said Ibu’oden, stopping in front of the mound. “He is of the unenlightened and so is being held in a safe place for his own good. I can see you feel this keenly and desire only to participate in every aspect of your joining but I cannot allow it.”

“Tis most unfortunate,” said Autumn. “But he is nearby? I think I sense his building anticipation.”

“Your senses are most highly attuned,” said Ibu’oden, looking admiringly at Autumn. “You are quite right. He is in a space under the altar and will be brought out when the time is right.”

“This is the altar?” asked Autumn, pointing to the mound.

“Yes,” said Ibu’oden.

“I sensed its power,” said Autumn, wondering if Ibu’oden really believed what she was claiming. “But how will he be brought out? I see no openings.”

“Tis at the back,” said Ibu’oden, “over-looking the sea.”

“Of course,” said Autumn, “twas foolish of me not to realise. Tell me, what manner of vessel is being built? I see it but do not understand its form.”

“Tis a vessel made from woven palm fronds,” said Ibu’oden. “They are light but very strong so the man will be safe from any foolish temptation to postpone his acceptance into the arms of Foqoo.”

“But how does it work?” asked Autumn.

“Tis very simple,” said Ibu’oden. “He will be placed inside the vessel, which is shaped to fit him, and secured. Then it will be put on its feet and supported by the post and the heat of Foqoo’s breath will be upon him and the burning vessel will carry him to Foqoo and eternal blessing.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

“Grimme!” shouted Ibu’oden.

“Your wish, Foqoo?” said Grimme, appearing from behind the mound. He sidled over, one shoulder lower than the other and leading the way, smiling nervously up at Ibu’oden. Ibu’oden curled his lip in distaste.

“I am going to visit Geuhqooa,” he announced, “then I am going to prepare myself for the celebrations. See that Autumn is instructed in the formalities and prepared for the joining.”

“As you say, Foqoo,” said Grimme in a weak whining voice.

Ibu’oden glared at him then turned to Autumn.

“Grimme will prepare you and attend to your needs,” he said, taking Autumn’s hand. “Contain yourself for just a short while longer and Luutal’hu will burst forth in glorious union with Foqoo! Ahh, parting is such sweet sorrow but I am certain you will cope with the privation.”

Ibu’oden bent to kiss her hand.

“I will do my utmost, umm, Foqoo,” said Autumn, staunchly refusing to allow herself to cringe or snatch her hand away.

“Until later, then,” said Ibu’oden. He glared at Grimme again before walking away.

Autumn and Grimme stood side by side watching him go then Autumn turned to look at Grimme.

“I would speak with the man who is to be carried on Foqoo’s breath,” she said, surprised to find Grimme was now somewhat taller and his shoulders were level.

“I regret that is not permitted,” said Grimme in a normal sounding voice. He looked around then lowered his voice. “Your name is Autumn? You are not, perchance, Autumn Savannah?”

“I am Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn, taken aback.

“And you are here, mayhap, at the bidding of Lotadil?” asked Grimme, his voice still lowered.

“I am here at no one's bidding,” said Autumn, lowering her voice to match Grimme's. “Least of all that of Lotadil.”

“Ahh,” said Grimme, “my apologies for my error, lady. Forgive me. If you will come with me we shall begin the preparations.”

“Wait,” said Autumn. “Why do you talk of Lotadil? What has he to do with this?”

“Mere rumour and gossip, lady,” said Grimme. “Once again I apologise for my stupidity. If you will please follow me?”

“No,” said Autumn. “Why do you bring up the name of Lotadil here? He made no mention of this place when we met. What is the connection?”

“You have met with Lotadil?” asked Grimme, his lowered voice not masking his surprise.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “He made me an offer which I rejected out of hand.”

“I see,” said Grimme. He paused, looking at Autumn as though weighing up options in his mind. “If I may be so bold as to enquire, can I ask why you rejected his offer?”

“Do you know of his offer?” asked Autumn, her mind busily trying to assess the implications of this new development.

“I, ah, hear things,” said Grimme, his voice getting even quieter and, interestingly, firmer. “I believe it was, shall we say, the removal of a small problem in his world.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. She, too, paused for a moment then made a decision. “I do not kill for payment.”

Grimme's gaze swept the handful of men standing around. They looked bored and were paying no attention to the discussion going on. Women being prepared for joining were no longer novelties.

"But you do, perhaps, kill for other reasons?" asked Grimme, his voice barely a whisper.

"I only kill to relieve the suffering and oppression of others," whispered Autumn. It wasn't until Grimme let out a long sigh that she realised he had been holding his breath.

"Then there is yet hope," he whispered and shut his eyes for a moment. "I must get you away from here so we can talk. Come."

"The man being held," whispered Autumn. "I will not go without him."

"Logan?" whispered Grimme. "He is safe. I will take you to him. Come with me." He turned. "You, there," he called over to the nearest loitering man. "If Foqoo should return before I do, tell him I have gone to fetch more Tears for the ceremony."

"As you say," said the man, picking his teeth with his finger nail. His upper arm muscles bulged alarmingly.

Grimme marched off and Autumn followed, somewhat reluctantly.

"Where are we going?" she asked quietly.

"There is a small cove a little further round," said Grimme. "It is out of sight and I put your friend there in case you turned out to be who I thought."

"Who did you think I was?" asked Autumn.

"Autumn Savannah," said Grimme, "the killer for hire but you would appear to be Autumn Savannah the killer not for hire, which is close enough for me."

"There is much here than needs explaining," said Autumn, "and that

remark as much as any.”

Her vanity stung almost as much at the soubriquet 'killer not for hire' as it had at 'killer for hire' for she did not like being seen as a killer.

“As I said, we need to talk,” said Grimme, “but not here. There are too many ears which may repeat even if the minds between do not understand.”

Autumn pursed her lips in irritation before forcing herself to relax. If it should be that Logan was safe then things could be pursued later. If not, then Grimme appeared to offer little in the way of obstruction.

“And you?” she asked. “Who are you?”

“I am Grimme,” said Grimme, walking along as though he had every right and nothing to hide. “Most favoured aide to Foqoo.” He glanced back nonchalantly and checked no one was taking any interest in them. No one was.

“Down there,” he whispered, giving Autumn a push.

She restrained her instinct to retaliate and instead allowed herself to be pushed over the edge and landed on a tiny sandy beach barely a body length below.

“Autumn!” cried Logan, jumping to his feet.

“Shhh!” exclaimed Grimme landing beside Autumn.

“Are you well?” asked Autumn, looking Logan over. He seemed well enough so she hugged him.

“Aye,” said Logan, hugging her back. He had felt very lost and lonely and, if truth be known, ashamed at how easily he had been captured. In the time he had been sitting alone in the cove he had realised that his mistake was to start to follow the path. In hindsight it would have been more sensible to cut through the undergrowth and follow the path from a distance.

“Good,” said Autumn when he finally released her. “Grimme, explain yourself quickly. Ibu’oden seems to spend little time in his relaxations and may come looking for us.”

“Ibu’oden?” exclaimed Logan. “What is he doing here?”

“That is what I intend to find out,” said Autumn. “Grimme?”

“He has gone to prepare which means he will be sleeping,” said Grimme, sitting down and making himself comfortable, “even though he pretends not to. He will sleep for some time. I wager we will not be missed until Plakill is high and even then he will invent some reason to justify our absence as a wish of his own.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, “so he is not a deity then. I thought not.”

“No,” said Grimme. He laughed sourly and spat on the sand. “In the land of the doolally he be the most doolally of all. It be only in his mind. There is no such deity as Foqoo.”

“So Ibu’oden thinks he is a deity and invented Foqoo?” asked Logan. “I confess I never trusted him from the start.”

“He thinks he is,” said Grimme, “but he did not invent Foqoo. His grandfather did.”

“Stop,” said Autumn. “I can already tell this is going to become complicated. Why are you here and how do you know of these things? How can we know what you say has any truth in it?”

“I can tell you much, Autumn, if I may call you Autumn,” said Grimme, “and I wager it will make sense of what you already know. As to whether I am telling the truth, well, you can be the judge of that for you will find that if you put aside what I say then you will be hard pressed to find any other explanation.”

“Aye, there be some truth in that,” said Autumn. “What I do know is strange and confusing and I have found little by way of explanation. Begin at the beginning and explain how you come to be here.”

“It begins long before I was born,” said Grimme, “but I will come to that later. As for my being here, well, that be because of Peesoa, my era’owen. I followed her here when Foqoo took her, some three summers ago.”

“She is one of the women here?” asked Autumn. “Does she suffer greatly?”

“She suffers not at all,” said Grimme. “I was able to get her away from Foqoo and she lives in a place on this Isle where he never goes. I have put it about that she is dangerously doolally and she remains undisturbed there although she misses her family. I visit her whenever I can and make sure she is well.”

“Then why do you not take her home?” asked Logan.

“There is no way off this Isle except by the bridge,” said Grimme, “and there are no trees here sufficient to make a boat that can best the currents for everything that floats is taken to the South and mayhap ends up in the land of Neander.”

“I see,” said Autumn. “So how did Foqoo take her?”

“I did not know it at the time,” said Grimme, “but Ibu’oden as he then was travelled around these islands pretending to be an erere looking for women for his lusts are insatiable. When he found one he liked, and there were many, he would give them a potion which made them compliant.”

“That would be Foqoo’s Tears?” asked Autumn, making the connection.

“Aye,” said Grimme. “I will tell you of that later but let me finish my story so you can decide my worthiness.”

“My apologies,” said Autumn. “Please continue.”

Grimme nodded. “He gave this potion to my Peesoa and brought her here. I followed and pretended to be mildly doolally so I could cross the bridge and I was able to persuade Ibu’oden of my abilities to aid

him. In time he came to rely on me although I wager he will never trust me.”

“Why not?” asked Logan.

“He thinks I am weak and spiritless,” said Grimme with a grim smile, “and I confess I play on that. If he thinks me any kind of threat he will make me take the Tears and I will be useless to my Peesoa.”

“You aid him in trapping women?” asked Autumn frowning dangerously.

“Most definitely not,” said Grimme. “He has no need of aid for that. He has considerable charm and I wager he would have great success with women even without the Tears. That just makes it easier for him. No, I aid him in his business affairs.”

“Now that surprises me,” said Autumn. “He does not strike me as one who labours.”

“Hah,” said Grimme. “Labour he does not. His business is in supplying labour. Do you know of the amurk plantations?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Ahhh, is that how Lotadil comes to be involved in all this?”

“Lotadil?” said Logan. “Is that not the man who made you lose your temper?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “So, Grimme, I accept your word as far as it goes. Tell me of Lotadil.”

“Lotadil is Ibu'oden's brother,” said Grimme. “He is the older of the two and runs the family plantations.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “So why did Lotadil want me to kill someone? I wager he has his own men who could do that and if not, surely Ibu'oden's men could. They would seem to have some fighting skills.”

“You do not know?” said Grimme, suddenly suspicious. “How is it possible you do not know who Lotadil wanted killed?”

“We did not talk long enough,” said Autumn. “When I met with Lotadil he said he wanted to hire me for a killing and I became immediately angry and left. We barely exchanged two sentences each.”

“I do not understand,” said Grimme, still suspicious. “You admit you are a killer but you are offended by being called such? It makes no sense to me.”

“I kill only as a last resort,” said Autumn. “Tis my mission to save life not take it and it offends me when others misunderstand my motives.”

“Autumn has taken vows, you see,” said Logan, more than a little proudly. He did not like it when people failed to take Autumn seriously.

“Vows?” said Grimme frowning. “What do you mean?”

“I am a Krisana of Mizule and Vallume of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup,” said Autumn. “I have vowed to protect the sanctity of women and the taking of any life is abhorrent to me.”

“Oh really?” said Grimme, his eyes lighting up. “That is good news indeed for the sanctity of women here is being most grievously harmed. But tell me truly, you really do not know who Lotadil wanted killed?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I did not ask and Lotadil did not tell.”

“Tis Ibu'oden,” said Grimme, “his own brother.”

“Well now,” said Autumn quietly. “That is interesting.” She pondered while Logan and Grimme watched her. “I wager it is because of Foqoo,” she added after a time.

“Indeed,” said Grimme. “Before I explain ...”

“But why does Lotadil simply not kill his brother himself?” asked

Autumn, interrupting.

"Ibu'oden has his own army," said Grimme. "That is what all these men here are for. 'Tis not easy for Lotadil to approach and I wager it is less costly to pay you or someone like you to do the deed rather than launch a full scale war. I am guessing, mind, but Lotadil's thoughts revolve around money. Cost is always a factor in his deliberations."

"You know him, then?" asked Autumn.

"I have met him three times," said Grimme. "The first was when he came here to meet with Ibu'oden and the other two were when I was sent with messages of refusal. He did not strike me as a man who meekly bows to circumstances. For certain Ibu'oden be the much weaker of the pair in the head so mayhap this be contributing to his desire to be a god and lord it over his brother. I know little of how the mind works."

"I suspect there is little truth in that," said Autumn. "If you have survived here for three summers and wriggled your way into his reliance upon you as well as depriving him of a woman then I wager you have a very good understanding of how his mind works."

"Perhaps," said Grimme. "For certain pretending to be in awe of him and ever fearful seems to work."

"Hmm," said Autumn. "So tell me, why does Lotadil want his brother removed?"

"That is where this sorry tale becomes confusing," said Grimme. "It took me a long time and a lot of digging to find out but 'tis a fascinating tale."

"Have we time to hear it?" asked Autumn. "Astauand is getting low."

"Aye," said Grimme. "Twill not take long in the telling as I am certain I do not know the whole story but it begins with Ekelle. He was either the grandfather of Lotadil and Ibu'oden or their great-grandfather, I am not certain."

“Did he start the amurk plantations?” asked Autumn.

“I do not think so,” said Grimme. “I think the family already had some although most likely not as big as they are now. For certain this spit of land was part of their holdings although it be no use in growing amurk. The soil be too salty.”

“So how does Ekelle figure in this?” asked Autumn.

“Did Ibu'oden tell you of the land to the South?” asked Grimme.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “He said the women are not allowed there, only the men. Is it another island?”

“No, it is a bulge on the South side of this strip,” said Grimme. “Tis swampy and useless for crops but there is a small plant that grows there and no other place. How long it has been growing there I know not but Ekelle discovered that it has a strong power.”

“Indeed?” said Autumn, intrigued.

“Aye,” said Grimme. “If you cut the bud before it blooms it oozes a clear liquid and if you taste that liquid it affects the mind.”

“Ahhh,” said Autumn. “This be Foqoo's Tears, I warrant. How does it affect the mind?”

“That depends on how much you have,” said Grimme. “If you have only a little it relaxes the mind and makes you happy but if you take a lot it stops you thinking.”

“I have come across things like this before,” said Autumn. “Mushrooms and the like. You see strange visions and the world goes most perplexing.”

“Ahh, no, this is not like that,” said Grimme. “With these Tears nothing changes, or so I am told. Peesoa tells me that she became very willing to do what she was told to do and it did not occur to her not to. That is how Ibu'oden stole her away.”

“But it wears off in time?” asked Logan, “or is Peesoa still affected that way?”

“It wears off most of the time,” said Grimme, “and that be where Ekelles did a most evil thing. If you take too much of the stuff it kills your mind forever. You become like an empty shell and only do what you are told to do but cannot do anything for yourself.”

Autumn frowned. “You mean like the workers on the plantation?” she asked.

“Exactly,” said Grimme. “Ekelles started to do this to his workers so he did not have to pay them so he kept more money for himself.”

“But surely if people were not paid they would not work on the plantation?” said Logan.

“Indeed,” said Grimme. “He only used it on a few and stopped because people were asking questions.”

“But it is still being used, is it not?” said Autumn. “When we travelled through a plantation on Zuit it seemed like all the workers were like that.”

“Aye,” said Grimme. “I have not found out who it was, mayhap Ekelles or one of his children but someone came up with the idea of Foqoo.”

“I do not follow,” said Autumn, puzzled.

“The plant is called Foqeen,” said Grimme, “which I suppose explains the name Foqoo but I have no idea where Ruglaa comes from. No matter. What is important is that he or someone else made up the deity Foqoo and used that to explain the workers who had no minds. ‘They be touched by Foqoo’, they would say and people came to accept that. In time all the workers were given Foqoo’s Tears. Most were given a lot to kill their minds forever and some just a little so they could be overseers. It be all about money, you see. There are not many plants and they be difficult to harvest so ‘tis much easier to give someone a single big dose than small doses every few days.”

“And the foqeen only grow here?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Grimme. “Eight or nine summers past, their father died and Lotadil took over the plantations for he had the head for business and Ibu’oden took over the harvesting of the foqeen for he did not. His task was to find workers and give them the Tears then send them over to work the plantations. ’Twas simple enough but then he realised what he could do with women if he gave them the Tears as well and it went to his head and now he thinks Foqoo is real and that he is Foqoo.”

“And Lotadil did not like that?” asked Autumn.

“Decidedly not,” said Grimme. “The Tears that went on women could not be given to the men so Lotadil started to get short-handed. He came avisiting last summer and there was a big argument and they fell to fighting. The long and the short of it is that Ibu’oden stopped sending men to work the amurk and kept them to guard him although he did not stop giving the Tears to the women.”

“I see,” said Autumn. “So that is why Lotadil wants Ibu’oden killed. So he can get more workers?”

“Exactly,” said Grimme. “He is running out and getting no new ones. ’Twill cost him a lot of money to buy fighters and his own men be too far mind dead to become fighters. You would have been the saving of him.”

“Hmmm,” said Autumn. “But the men Ibu’oden has here are not mind dead like the workers on the plantation?”

“They cannot be,” said Grimme. “Fighters have to know what they are doing and make decisions and the like. Same with the women, they be no entertainment for Ibu’oden if they are not enjoying his games, and that means everyone here has to be given a small dose every day or two or three depending and that needs a lot more than the one big dose to kill the mind.”

“’Tis a shameful situation and no mistake,” said Autumn. “But you are Ibu’oden’s aide and running all this for him, is that not so?”

“Aye,” said Grimme, “to my eternal shame, but I fear that if I stop the harvesting and the dosing then Ibu’oden may kill the women as they start turning against him and the other men so when I heard him call you Autumn this morning, I prayed you were the one.”

“The one for what?” asked Autumn. “Why are you helping us?”

“I cannot kill Ibu’oden,” said Grimme, his body showing his desperation. “I have not the skills nor the opportunity, nor am I permitted to carry anything which may be used as a weapon. There be two men with him all the time and I cannot do it and get away with my life and if I am dead Peesoa will have no one to look out for her.”

“So you want me to kill Ibu’oden?” asked Autumn, frowning.

“Aye,” said Grimme, “and ’twill not be for money. You have vowed to protect the sanctity of women and there be a desperate need for that protection here.”

“Aye, there seems to be indeed,” said Autumn slowly. “You say that if the women are stopped from getting their doses of Tears then they will return to their normal selves?”

“Yes,” said Grimme. “A few days but return they will.”

“And likewise the men here?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Grimme.

“But not the men on the plantations?”

“No,” said Grimme. “Sadly their lot in life is set.”

“Then I cannot kill Ibu’oden,” said Autumn. “Doing so will make little difference as Lotadil knows of the plant and no doubt others as well. Removing Ibu’oden will condemn many more to a permanent living death on the plantations as the harvesting and dosing will be returned to how they were.”

“But what else can we do?” asked Grimme angrily. “I have prayed for

someone to bring this to an end and you have been sent. Do something!”

“For certain there is a situation here that needs fixing,” said Autumn, “but I know not what I can do to end it.”

Chapter Twenty Eight

Grimme stared at her, aghast.

“But what about the babies?” he spluttered. “Ridding the world of Ibu'oden will save them at least.”

“What does happen to the babies?” asked Autumn. “All Ibu'oden would tell me is that they are bathed in Foqoo's sweat. Is that some other potion?”

Grimme groaned and leaned back against the side of the cove with his eyes shut. Then he shook his head again.

“No,” he said quietly. “Foqoo's sweat is the sea.”

“The sea?” said Autumn. “You mean ...?”

“Yes,” said Grimme. “He does not want them, you see.”

“What are you talking about?” demanded Logan. He was plainly baffled.

“When they are born?” asked Autumn, a strained look on her face.

“Very soon after,” said Grimme.

He opened his eyes and looked at Logan.

“Ibu'oden likes the women but not the babies,” he explained. “When they are born they are thrown into the sea. Ohh, there is a big ceremony, of course, he likes ceremonies, but that is what happens.”

“But do not the women protest?” asked Logan after a shocked silence.

“Tis my task to give them an extra dosage of the Tears for a few days afterwards,” said Grimme sadly. “It eases my conscience to think I am helping them to forget but, well, my conscience is eased only very slightly.”

“These Tears seem to be a most powerful thing,” said Autumn after they had sat there in silence. “Could you not have found a way to give some to Ibu’oden himself? Would that not solve the problem?”

She had been watching the gentle waves coming in and sliding back again, each time a little higher than before and it occurred to her that, before long, the cove would be flooded. They would need to be moving soon and a plan of some sort would be useful.

“Aye,” said Grimme. “I did try that not long after I arrived. I will not risk it again.”

“What happened?” asked Logan when it became apparent that Autumn was not going to.

“Mayhap I got the dosage wrong,” said Grimme, “or mayhap the effect of the Tears on a mind already far gone in misconceptions makes them worse but he started to scream and shout nonsense as the effects took hold then began to dance like a, well, like a mad man then he beat four women to death. That seemed to calm him and he ate food then fell asleep. When he awoke he was his normal self again. I dare not try again.”

“And none tried to stop him?” asked Logan.

“I tried,” said Grimme, “and was pulled away by some of his men who held me tight. There was nothing I could do although I have endeavoured to make sure as few women as possible stay in his house. There is little else I can do.”

“And if you are killed,” said Autumn, picking up a handful of sand and letting it dribble through her fingers, “what little you can do will be lost. ’Tis a dilemma and no mistake.”

“Surely we are over complicating this,” said Logan. “Did you not say that these plants grow only in the one place and nowhere else?”

“Aye,” said Grimme. “In the marsh to the South.”

“So can we not pull up all the plants and kill them?” asked Logan.

"I have already thought of that," said Autumn, staring at the sand dribbling through her fingers. "Aside from the fact that I am wholly against the destruction of an entire species because of actions that are not of their doing, there are still practical problems. We have no way of knowing if we have found every plant. There may be seeds in the ground which will grow after we have left and I daresay Lotadil has some seeds as well. He would be a fool if he has not tried to grow the plants elsewhere. Mayhap he also fears Ibu'oden may destroy the plants in the marsh from spite or who knows what."

"Aye," said Grimme. "And there is another reason as well. These plants are not wholly bad."

"What do you mean?" asked Autumn, twisting to look at him.

"'Tis a tradition in these islands to send them as are doolally to this place when their families can no longer care for them," said Grimme. "This has been going on far longer than amurk farming and it still continues. Every now and then another lost bugger turns up and I have found that for some the Tears can prove beneficial for the calming of their minds. Not all, but a goodly number. I wager the foqeen be the reason this tradition started."

"I had forgotten about those unfortunates," said Autumn. "We heard of them before we knew anything of the others but I confess they escaped my mind. Ayah."

She gave a long sigh then glanced over at Astauand.

"'Tis nearly dark," she muttered, "and Ibu'oden will wake soon. This problem does not get any easier." Then she jerked upright and stared at Grimme.

"Them as is already doolally before they get here," she said sharply. "What happens to them?"

"If they be pretty women they get treated like the rest although I have to be very cautious with the doses," said Grimme. "The Tears may ease their minds or make them worse and it be mostly a guess. If they be not so pretty or men then ..." and he waggled his fingers upwards.

“Foqoo's Breath?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Grimme and Autumn slammed her fingers into the sand in frustration.

“What?” demanded Logan. “Sweat and breath? What is going on here?”

“They be put in cages and burned,” said Autumn softly. Her eyes had gone very pale and hard.

“He enjoys it,” said Grimme.

“And that, I wager, is where the bones and skulls at the bridge come from,” said Autumn.

“Aye,” said Grimme. “When I first arrived there was just an ordinary wooden bridge there but he started to paint the faces on the trees when he began to think of himself as Foqoo and moved on to the skulls on the stakes. He thought it was something Foqoo would do, you see. Then after the falling out with Lotadil he had the wooden bridge burned and the bone bridge built.”

Autumn scooped up a handful of sand and started to hurl it back down then restrained herself and put it down gently.

“All my training has been based on the belief that all problems can be solved by thinking long and clear,” she said, smoothing the sand. “I confess that I am ... dismayed ... that I see no action that does not either leave the situation the same or make it worse. Mizule! I refuse to believe that there is no solution. Even if it lies not within my power there must be a solution!”

Grimme cocked his head.

“’Twould seem that time is not on our side,” he said. “It sounds like Ibu'oden is now awake, much earlier than I expected. Soon he will want to begin the joining. You two must get away. I will try to delay him as long as possible but the further away you are the better.”

“What joining?” asked Logan.

“Ibu'oden is expecting Autumn to become his era'owen this very eve,” said Grimme. He cocked an eye at Autumn. “I am guessing you do not plan to go through with it.”

“His era'owen?” exclaimed Logan. “You cannot be serious!”

“It will not happen,” said Autumn, putting her hand on Logan's arm. “Much as I desire not to, I would if I could see any benefit to it but alas, I cannot.”

“Head for the bridge,” said Grimme. “I wager you have the skills to best them as guard it. Would you do me a kindness?”

“If it is within my power,” said Autumn.

“My Peesoa lives close to the break, at the Northernmost end,” said Grimme. “Would you find her and take her with you?”

“What about you?” asked Autumn.

The sound of a voice raised in anger came across from Ibu'oden's house then what sounded like barked commands.

“There is little time,” said Grimme, looking anxious. “You must hurry, but there is a goodly chance that I will not survive this night. I know Ibu'oden was very much taken with you and he will be most displeased to find I have lost you. If I know Peesoa is safe then I can die happy and if, by some chance, I survive the night then I may well be able to make my escape. 'Twill be a lot easier on my own. If nothing else I can jump into the sea and try to swim past the break.”

“I thought the problem impenetrable,” said Autumn calmly, “but now you have added another dimension of difficulty. No, I cannot go. To leave would be to break everything I hold dear and make what remains of my life a travesty. Mayhap it is best to simply wait to be found and let the fates decide.”

“I have an idea,” said Logan. “It is a stupid idea but it just might

work.”

“Ahh, Logan Philosopher,” said Autumn. “I wager no idea of yours would be stupid. Tell me, quickly.”

“Grimme said Ibu'oden is much taken with you,” said Logan. “Why not try talking with him? If anyone can persuade him to change his ways I wager it would be you.”

“That is not a stupid idea,” said Grimme, staring at him. “That is so far beyond stupid I know not a word for how stupid it is.”

Logan half smiled apologetically.

“And yet it is the only idea we have come up with,” said Autumn pensively. “At the very least it will keep you alive and gain us some more time.”

Some feet ran heavily past the cove and Logan and Grimme ducked instinctively.

“And time would seem to have run out,” said Autumn. “Come, let us do this thing. While I live there is a chance, however small, that I may be able to reason with him. Logan, where are your things?”

“I dropped my staff at the bridge when I was taken,” admitted Logan. “My knife and the coins were taken from me.”

“I had not expected a highly skilled killer to be a fool,” said Grimme, scowling. “Mayhap you be the wrong Autumn Savannah. I have your money and knife, lad. I took them for safe keeping should this one turn out to be our saviour and I will return them to you if I get the chance. Much good they will do you on the pyre.”

“What pyre?” said Logan, scowling to match Grimme.

“I was not going to tell you,” said Autumn, “but now 'tis best you be prepared. Ibu'oden planned to burn you in celebration of my joining with him.”

“Oh joy,” said Logan, going white. “And you were going to let him?”

“Of course not,” said Autumn. “I would die before I let anything happen to you again.”

Intriguingly Logan's white face turned bright pink with no discernable changes of hue in between.

“This is all very touching,” said Grimme sarcastically, “but I wager we are all going to die this night and very likely not quickly.”

“Oh no,” said Logan happily. “Autumn will sort it all out, just you mark my words.”

“Pah,” said Grimme.

“Over here!” called Autumn, standing up and waving.

Chapter Twenty Nine

“I am deeply hurt,” said Ibu'oden. “My beloved, the light of my life, on the cusp of our joining for all eternity, ran away. I am bereft.”

He was standing in front of the mound. Autumn, Logan and Grimme were before him and some twenty of his guards were ringed around them. They seem a little twitchy at Ibu'oden's displeasure.

“I did not run away,” said Autumn. “I merely sought a place of refuge to calm myself from the agonies of anticipation.”

“Oh, well said,” thought Logan.

“Be silent,” said Ibu'oden. “Your actions have turned my heart against you. You will find I am not merciful.”

“Ah, this is not good,” thought Logan.

“And you,” said Ibu'oden looking at Grimme. “My most trusted, favoured and beloved servant. How have I wronged you to deserve your treachery?”

“I have committed no trea ...” started Grimme.

“Be silent!” screamed Ibu'oden.

Grimme fell silent.

“Who are you?” asked Ibu'oden, suddenly realising Logan was there.

“I am Logan,” said Logan, rather bravely he thought.

“I know you,” said Ibu'oden. “I have seen you before. Ohhh, now I see it all. You are the lover of this viper here. You both sought to overthrow me and you usurped my most faithful Grimme. Well, that was a mistake for how could mere mortals ever hope to overthrow Foqoo?”

“Umm, no,” said Logan. “Umm.”

“Silence!” roared Ibu’oden. “Twas all your doing I wager. You seduced this maid and induced her to exert all her wiles and charms upon me but I see your plotting and your malevolence. Your end will be as slow and painful as your ambitions.”

“Foqoo,” began Grimme but Ibu’oden held up his hand and Grimme spluttered into silence.

“Ahh,” said Ibu’oden walking over to stand in front of Autumn. “It could have been beautiful. ’Twill be a shame to see such as you shrivel and char in the heat of Foqoo’s breath.” He stroked her cheek sadly then turned his back on them.

“Seidate, Geuhqooa,” he shouted. “Foqoo has need of your succour. Come.”

The two women hurried out to join him and he put an arm around each and hugged them to him tightly.

“Olegri,” called Ibu’oden.

“Yes, Foqoo,” said Olegri, stepping forward from the men surrounding the scene.

“Prepare that one for the Breath of Foqoo,” said Ibu’oden, still with his back to the trio.

“Which one, Foqoo?” asked Olegri.

“The woman, you fool,” said Ibu’oden.

“Yes, Foqoo,” said Olegri. “And the others?”

“I shall decide their fates later,” said Ibu’oden, lifting his head to look up at the pillar on top of the mound. “Mayhap some fresh ideas will come to me as my breath engulfs this beauty with the rotten heart.”

“Yes, Foqoo,” said Olegri. He turned and pointed at several of the other men. “You and you, take her to the Pillar of Light. You four, take the others and bind them.”

The two directed at Autumn ran forward and fell to the ground as her twirling feet took out first one then the other. Three of the others heading for Logan and Grimme changed direction and leapt upon her. Logan clenched his teeth and took careful aim at the line clearly defined under the fourth's chest muscles and punched as hard as he could. The man grunted and collapsed in a heap, much to Logan's surprise.

Paralysed with astonishment, Grimme stared at Logan then at the three men trying to subdue Autumn then at the remaining men, fourteen or so, lunging towards them.

“Arggghhhhhh!” he screamed and hurled himself on Ibu'oden, years of hatred and despair bursting like a boil as Logan's knife appeared in his hand. Geuhqooa and Seidate were knocked to the ground by the force of his impact and they lay there giggling happily.

Two of the three men who had leapt on Autumn were dead before the others arrived and the third was unconscious on the ground, his nose bleeding profusely. Autumn herself was hopping on one foot, the other raised, ready to kick. Her hands were waving in front of her. The fastest two men fell to the ground from a swift scissor kick with both her feet and the third with Logan's leg entangled between his. The fourth accidentally kicked the third in the head, saving Logan the effort. He, too, fell and Logan was able to kick him in the crotch from his prone position.

The remaining men all arrived at much the same time and got in each other's way, allowing Autumn to jump free. From behind she quickly felled another three then ran to where her staff had been thrown, passing a blood soaked Grimme, still repeatedly thrusting the knife into Ibu'oden's lifeless corpse. By the time the men sorted themselves out and discovered Autumn was not underneath them she was back.

“Hold!” she commanded, the staff held threateningly in front of her. “Foqoo is dead!”

The men spread out, readying for another attack.

“Foqoo is dead!” screamed Grimme, appearing beside Autumn, the

knife held high and blood caking his chest and malu. “Stop what you are doing!”

“What?” said one of them, looking confused.

“Over there,” said Autumn, pointing.

One by one the men turned to look where she was pointing.

“Foqoo is dead!” said one of them incredulously. “Dead!”

The others stared disbelievingly then one of them tentatively went over for a closer look.

“Oh,” he said, staring down at the corpse. “Now what?”

“Go back to your dwellings,” said Grimme, lowering his knife arm. “This night is over. Go back to your dwellings.”

“But ...,” said Olegri, his face blank as he tried to comprehend.

“Go,” said Autumn, pushing him.

He stumbled then slowly started to walk away.

“Go,” said Autumn as Grimme started to push the others after Olegri. Numbly they followed him.

“Excuse me?” called Logan. “Can you get this bastard off me? My leg is trapped.”

“You fought most excellently, Logan,” said Autumn as Grimme collapsed to the ground in nervous exhaustion. He had never been a man of action.

She untangled their legs while Logan beamed proudly then helped the other man to his feet. He too walked away, albeit with some difficulty, his hands held tightly between his legs.

“Thank you,” said Logan, slowly getting to his feet. “You know, you

were right. I used that man's muscles as an arrow like you said,” and he pointed to the man lying prone on the ground.

“He is dead,” said Autumn, checking the man. “I saw you hit him on the chest. I wager you stopped his heart. You did well.”

“Thank you,” said Logan, “although I only did what you told me.”

“Even the remembering in a time of stress is an achievement,” said Autumn. “Ahh, that one still lives.”

She went over to the man with the broken nose who was struggling to get to his feet.

“Stay down,” said Autumn. “The fight is over and you still live, be grateful for that. I will attend to your hurts. Logan, find some water and help Grimme to walk to the house. I fancy he needs to lie down for a while.”

Chapter Thirty

“I had thought it would all be over with the death of Ibu'oden,” said Grimme as he sat with Logan and Autumn on the beach, watching Astauand rise the following morning. “I had thought I would take Peesoa home and that would be an end to it. But I was wrong.”

“How so?” asked Logan.

“I was too far gone to go to her last night,” said Grimme, “and as I lay recovering my strength thoughts came to me.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “I too.”

“You mean about the others?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Grimme. “I will not be dosing them anymore so the women and those of the men who survive will return to their normal selves as the Tears wear off. This place will be filled with lost and bewildered people who will not know where they are or how to get to their homes.”

“We must help them as best we can,” said Autumn.

“Obviously,” said Grimme. “But there is more. Some among them will return to the disturbed minds they brought with them and there is no one else here, save me, who knows how to harvest the Tears and how to give them succour.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Did your thoughts go any further?”

“Aye,” said Grimme. “I will talk with Peesoa before deciding but I would like to stay and help them and do what I can for those who have yet to come here. There has been too much suffering here and it would be good to make this a place of aid instead.”

“That is very noble of you, Grimme,” said Autumn. “But have you considered what will happen when Lotadil hears of his brother's death?”

“Aye,” said Grimme. “I was hoping to prevail upon you to stay as well

and to provide protection.”

“Alas I cannot,” said Autumn. “This is not my place and it is my destiny to wander this world until I find my place.”

“Tis a great shame,” said Grimme, “but I confess I expected you to say something like that. I will stay as long as it is safe and give what aid I can, but it burns my heart to leave all those plants to be misused by Lotadil and his kin.”

“There may be another option,” said Logan, an idea forming in his head.

“We would be pleased to hear it,” said Grimme. “Your last idea seemed absurd but turned out better than expected.”

“You are, at least for now, the only person who knows both how to use the fokeen plants and how to aid those for whom they might benefit, are you not?” said Logan.

“Aye,” said Grimme. “I know of no other, at least.”

“Then stay here,” said Logan, “under Autumn's protection.”

“But I cannot stay,” said Autumn, “or do you have a fancy argument to make me?”

“I wager mayhap I do,” said Logan, smiling. “Did you not say you would like to found an Esyup dedicated to the healing of minds?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, looking at Logan intently.

“Then why not set it up here?” asked Logan. “When it is known that it be your Esyup I wager even Lotadil will steer clear even if you are not actually here, for fear of your anger on your return.”

“But if I am not here, who would run it?” asked Autumn. Then she slapped her thigh in realisation. “Ahh, I follow your meaning. Now this is an idea worth thinking about.”

“I do not follow,” said Grimme.

“I have had in mind for a while to establish an Esyup dedicated to the study and healing of ills of the mind,” said Autumn. “Logan is suggesting I set it up here and that you run it, both in the studying and the healing and in the restricting of the foqeen to only good uses. It occurs to me that on my travels I may encounter some who have a skill or learning in this and mayhap I will be able to persuade some to visit you and pass on their knowledge. Mayhap one or two may even decide to stay. ’Tis not an unpleasant place after all.”

“But how will this be protected from Lotadil?” asked Grimme.

“If you put around tales and songs of the wondrous exploits of Autumn Savannah and it be known that she guards this place, I wager none will dare risk her displeasure,” said Logan.

“That is a thought,” said Grimme. “Mayhap it might even work, at that. The people here be a gullible lot else they would not have accepted Foqoo in the first place. Let me talk with Peesoa on this. Aye but I like the idea, at least. Tell me, do you have a name for it?”

“Ahh,” said Autumn, looking faintly embarrassed. “In my vanity I confess I have. I thought mayhap Yeinoba Vyliacennie im Rozum ny Duch Esyup.”

“’Tis a pretty name,” said Grimme. “What does it mean?”

“It is in the Old Tongue,” said Autumn. “For some reason Esyups are always named in the Old Tongue. It means ‘The School of the Worshipful Healing of the Mind And Spirit’.”

“I like that,” said Grimme, repeating the name out loud a couple of times. “I confess I do like that.”

“And you would be the Pravadyr,” said Autumn with a small smile. “It means Head or Chief.”

Grimme pursed his lips and nodded thoughtfully, then he smiled. “Peesoa would like that,” he said, “as do I.”

“I have another idea,” said Logan, frowning. “although it may not

work.”

“Your mind is remarkably active today,” said Autumn. “What is this one?”

“I am not sure,” said Logan. “Umm, do you think I am still the Roinad?”

“Whoa, hold up there,” said Grimme. “Are you one of the doolally who were sent here after all? You be like Ibu'oden with ideas above your station, imagining yourself to be what you are not? The Roinad be Obvia Vasagle.”

“No,” said Logan. “Your news is long overdue. Obvia Vasagle was assassinated and Kizerain Qerrassa challenged. Autumn bested him at the Mundulgen but refused to become Roinad herself so they made me do it. 'Twas a horrible job and I ran away after a half a day but I know not if anyone replaced me.”⁸

“Is he telling the truth, Autumn?” asked Grimme.

“Yes, he is,” said Autumn. “'Twas in the Spring of the Summer past. I venture Hysleria, the Piers Sakratar, never revealed Logan had gone so that he could rule in the Roinad's absence. Why do you bring this up, Logan?”

“Well, umm, I thought, mayhap, if I was still Roinad,” said Logan, “umm, mayhap I could send a message to Hysleria telling him to give your Esyup the Roinad's protection. That way if Lotadil or anyone else did anything they would be taking on the whole of Aferraron, not just Grimme.”

⁸ See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*. Kizerain Qerrassa was the Champion of Obvia Vasagle before defecting to Lord Loheckle in the latter's attempt to become the Roinad. Following Loheckle's accidental death Kizerain challenged for the Roinadship in his own right. At the Mundulgen, Autumn challenged Kizerain in the name of 'humanity' which raised certain problems of legality; hitherto challenges had always been made in the name of an individual. For the sake of expediency, Logan was named as Obvia Vasagle's successor.

Chapter Thirty One

The morning sun touched lightly on the eyes of Autumn Savannah. The sounds of the waves and the breeze and the sea birds wafted through the tendrils of her mind. A small crab scabbled sideways towards her then stopped, its single large claw snapping gently as it assessed whether she was worth eating. Autumn felt a shadow as Logan bent to pick up the crab and turn it so it faced the other way. Its potential meal suddenly vanished into thin air, the crab scurried on. There would be other delights to eat elsewhere on the beach. Autumn sensed Logan sit down not far away and felt his eyes upon her but her eyelids did no more than twitch. The sea, the breeze, the birds, the crab and Logan were all familiar and no threat, Logan least of all.

Her ears picked up the sound of footsteps quietly crunching the sand, coming closer. The tread sounded familiar but with several people no longer calmed by the oil of the foqueen she opened her eyes, her body ready for instant movement if the need arose. It did not. The footsteps belonged to Grimme.

She closed her eyes again then took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“Good morning, Grimme,” she said. “Is it not a beautiful day?”

“It is indeed,” said Grimme. “I thought you would like to know that the last of the women who are leaving have left. They went before the dawn with a man who was from the same region.”

“That is good news,” said Autumn. “And the letter?”

“One of the women took it with her,” said Grimme. “She is a trustworthy soul and will ensure the letter gets sent on to Uysoma and there are boats that take such things to Aferraron. It will take some time but it will reach Hysleria in Uli-Rratha sooner or later.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “And no doubt Olegri will have delivered the message to Lotadil by now as well. You are still comfortable with this venture, you and Peesoa both?”

“Aye,” said Grimme. “Now she has a purpose she is quite happy to stay here. After all, it has been her home for these three summers past and women do not give up their homes lightly.”

“I would not know,” said Autumn, “for I have never had a home beyond my Esyup although I did not leave there lightly.”

“Are you still determined to leave here?” asked Grimme. “This could be your home as well. It is your Esyup, after all, more so than the one you left.”

“I am,” said Autumn.

“Where are you intending to go?” asked Grimme. “Mayhap I can go part of the way with you. I confess I will feel lost here without you to guide me.”

“You are a thinking man,” said Autumn, “with a good heart and a most excellent era'owen to aid you. If you keep the healing of those with ills of the mind at the forefront of yours then I am certain all will be well with you. You told me some days past that the currents around here flow to Neander?”

“So I believe,” said Grimme. “At least, they flow to the South and to the South lies Neander.”

“We left a friend in Neander,” said Autumn, gazing out over the sea. “’Twould sit well with me to find out how Darius prospers.”⁹

She got to her feet and stretched.

“You have everything, Logan?”

“Aye,” said Logan, “although I have left what paraks remained with Grimme to aid him here.”

9 See *The Annals of Autumn Savannah ~ The First Tale*. Darius is a Neander lynx who is rescued from a market by Autumn. After Darius helps Autumn cross over into the Land of the Undead to rescue Logan, it transpires that Darius is the personification of the deity Ept who, in collusion with Mother Midcarn, led Autumn to the Mundulgen to prevent a successful challenge by Kizerain.

“Good,” said Autumn. “I wager he will have more need of them than us. Well, Grimme, we will bid you fare well. We shall return when we can to visit. I wish you and all here every success.”

“You are going now?” said Grimme in surprise. “To Neander? How are you going to get there?”

“Fiau is taking us,” said Logan.

“Fiau?” said Grimme. “Who is Fiau? I know no one by that name nor anyone with a boat.”

“Fiau is my staff,” said Logan, smiling.

“First he thinks he is the Roinad and now he think his staff is a boat and gives it a pretty name,” said Grimme. “Best you stay here, lad. Mayhap we can help you, given time.”

“Again, Logan is not mistaken,” said Autumn. “Fiau is a special staff, gifted to Logan by one whose knowledge of such things is surpassingly immense.”

“Indeed,” said Logan, putting his staff on the sand at the water's edge. “Fiau, we are ready.”

With a quiver and a shimmer the staff expanded lengthways and sideways and curled up until it looked like a boat.

“What in the name of all creation?” exclaimed Grimme, jumping backwards as though about to be attacked. “A boat!”

“Aye,” said Autumn, climbing in.

Logan pushed Fiau into the waves then climbed in himself.

“Fare well, Grimme,” he said, waving goodbye.

“If I had not seen it with my own eyes I would not have believed it,” exclaimed Grimme, his eyes staring in astonishment. “It be you two who should be deities, not that bloody Ibu'oden!”

Glossary

{Pronunciations given in curly brackets}

Amarau {am-ara-oo}: A pale green shellfish, similar to a lobster but with eight legs.

Amurk {am-urk}: A tropical plant. The amurk typically grows to some three metres in height and has a smooth, brown, tough, fibrous outer stalk of approximately five to seven centimetres diameter. The inner pith varies from pale green to dark yellow and is very sweet, although not quite as sweet as Earth based sugar cane. Amurk stems are harvested for the pith, as the leaves, roots and stem husks are inedible.

Anitgea (Gunder Ani) {an-it-ig-ee-ah}: A daloni champion from Neander. Her nickname, Gunder, is a contraction of 'go under' in reference to her skills.

Aqand {a-ch-an-de}: An overseer on the Zuit amurk plantation.

Ariu {ar-y-oo}: A species of bird native to Zuit. Ariu are carnivorous, have grey white plumage and are generally most active around dawn and dusk. Similar to owls but their harsh, guttural cry is more akin to a crow.

Bibu (Ibibusensarma) {i-bi-bu-sen-sa-re-ma}: Daughter of Engar.

Bligibery {bl-ig-i-be-ry}: A pale golden-skinned pear-shaped fruit naïve to the Zuit Islands. The fruit has pink-yellow spongy flesh that is poisonous when unripe but safe when ripe. The bligibery is ripe when its base splits open and its four black seeds are visible. When this happens it is said to 'yawn'.

Cralen {kra-le-ne}: Almost era'owen of Vinan.

Daloni {da-lo-ni}: A popular beach competition on the Zuit Islands in which participants take turns to move forwards, with only the feet touching the sand, under a palm branch resting on supports. The height of the branch is lowered after each round until there is a winner.

Dashoo {da-sh-oo}: A town of some 200 people, and the largest population centre on Xive.

Ekelle {ek-el-le}: Grandfather or Great-grandfather of Lotadil and Ibu'oden.

Engar (Svengarinhara) {se-ve-nig-ar-in-ha-ra}: A widower with two daughters. Kanas, Engar's almost era'owen, was killed by a falling tree which also crippled Engar's foot

Erere {e-re-rey}: A type of itinerant witch doctor/shaman/medicine man on the Zuit Islands.

Faswe (Jafasweswetenkam) {ja-fas-we-swe-te-ne-ka-me}: Oldest daughter of Ikam who lives with her unnamed almost-era'owen in Ooqite.

Feagle {fe-ag-el}: A competitor at the daloni competition on Uysoma.

Foqueen {fo-che-ee-ne}: A small perennial plant found only in the hot swamps of Western Zuit and Northern Xive. The sap from its buds has psychotropic impacts on the human brain. See *Foqoo's Tears*.

Foqoo {fo-chew}: The deity of the Ruglaa. A false deity created by Ekelle to cover the dubious labour practices used on the family amurk plantations.

Foqoo's Tears: The sap found inside the buds of the foqueen plant. This sap contains small amounts of the benzodiazepine, friniduazepam. Friniduazepam has properties similar to Rohypnol, widely known on Earth as a 'date-rape' drug, in that it suppresses decision making capacity and moral awareness thereby rendering the taker highly open to external control. In its natural state, Foqoo's Tears are very weak and the drug needs to be administered repeatedly to allow a progressive build-up in the brain of the taker thus allowing the administrator of the drug to control the level of compliance and decision making capacity of the recipient, although this becomes unreliable if the recipient already suffers from mental issues, such as PTSD, depression or similar. The process reverses itself naturally once ingestion ends. However, beyond a certain threshold, continued ingestion of Foqoo's Tears will effectively destroy the taker's higher brain functions permanently, inducing a zombie-like state. Foqoo's Tears is colourless with a mildly salty taste and so can be given surreptitiously mixed with food.

Geuhqooa {ge-oo-chew-ah}: The name taken by Lala after her initiation into the cult of, and marriage to, Foqoo.

Gia (Rangiafenar) {ra-ni-gee-ya-fe-na-re}: Zyre's almost era'owen.

Grimme {ge-ri-me-me}: Ibu'oden's clerk and personal assistant. He

becomes the first Pravadyr of the Yeinoba Vyliacennie im Rozum ny Duch Esyup established by Autumn Savannah on the island of Xive.

Hanik {ha-ni-ke}: A man who attacks Logan at the Tanavac of Ruglaa in Uysoma under the mistaken impression that Logan was attacking his lady friend.

Iam {ee-am}: A ariu sent by Mother Midcarn to aid Autumn Savannah and Logan in their travels through the Zuit Islands.

Ictozee {ic-to-ze-ee}: A village of some 50 people in the North West of Xive.

Isyrat {is-ee-ra-te}: A village of some 70 people in the South West of Xive.

Ibu'oden {ib-woe-de-ne}: Younger brother of Lotadil who believes he is the deity Foqoo.

Ikam (Ikamnadorahabandra) {ik-am-na-do-ra-ha-ba-ne-dra}: A Zuit fisherman and one time slave at the Sauizuxu copper mine.

Ix {ix}: The name Autumn gave an injured mouse that she nursed back to health when she was a child.

Jaikai {ja-ik-eye}: A town of some 200 people in the south of Zuit.

Jinnet {ji-ne-net}: A seller of malu in Uysoma.

Joise (Karapanenjoise) {ka-ra-pa-nen-joy-se}: Son of Joski and Ikam, about 18 and fisherman with his father.

Joski (Najoskipambarattasam) {na-jos-ki-oa-me-ba-rat-ta-sam}: Almost era'owen of Ikam.

Kanas (Kanaswadinganen) {ka-na-swa-di-nig-an-en-ne}: Almost era'owen of Engar.

Kotal {ko-ta-le}: An cart driver on the Zuit amurk plantation.

Lala (Sephiralalala) {sep-hi-ra-la-la-la}: Almost era'owen of Joise.

Leski {les-ki}: A friend of Sandra's who lives near Uysoma.

Lotadil {lo-ta-dil}: Older brother of Ibu'oden and owner of the Xive and Zuit amurk plantations.

Luutal'hu {lu-ut-alu}: The name chosen by Ibu'oden to be taken by Autumn Savannah upon her joining with Foqoo.

Malu {ma-lu}: A length of cloth that is wound around the body and

knotted either at the waist or in front of an armpit and is the standard item of clothing worn by both sexes in the hot climates of Northern Neander and the islands of the Looncan Sea. There are regional variations in terms of length and colouring. A benefit of the malu is that it can be untied and used as a light covering at night and, because of its loose weave, dries quickly.

Nckool (*Nckoolasadrambetan*) {ni-coo-la-sa-dra-me-be-ta-ne}: Youngest daughter of Joski and Ikam.

Nagep {na-ge-pe}: Son of Vinan.

Olegri {ol-eg-ri}: A member of Ibu'oden's private army.

Oogite {oh-och-it-te}: A village of some 40 people in the North of Zuit.

Peesoa {pe-es-oh-ah}: The era'owen of Grimme and an early conquest of Ibu'oden.

Pownan {po-we-na-ne}: Son of the headman of Uysoma and judge of the daloni competition.

Pravadyr {pra-va-die-re}: The Head or Leader of an Esyup, both in terms of the primary function of the Esyup (such as philosophical enquiry, martial arts or medicine) and administration.

Pryvid {pri-vid}: Someone who has no decision making capacity or moral stance created through an overdose of Foqoo's Tears.

Ruglaa {ru-ga-lah}: A manufactured religion of the Islands, created by Ekelle or a descendent as a cover for the family's nefarious purposes, one of which is the creation of pryvids to labour on their sugar plantations.

Sadavina {sa-da-vi-na}: A deciduous tree native to the Zuit Islands which bears some similarities to the Mulberry tree. Its large fruit bear more than a passing resemblance to breadfruit.

Sandra (*Atfersandranan*) {at-fer-san-dra-nan}: Daughter of Engar.

Seagret {sea-gr-et}: A large sea bird with white and grey plumage and a wingspan of approximately two metres.

Seidate {se-id-ah-te}: An era'owen of Foqoo.

Siplet (*Masipletambirayawen*) {ma-si-ple-tam-bi-ra-ya-we-ne}: Son of Joski and Ikam.

Sutajelen Bay {su-ta-je-le-ne bay}: A small bay at the Northern end of

the Island of Zuit. Home of Ikam and his family.

Tanavac {ta-na-va-ca}: The Zuitian term for a festival or carnival.

Tanavac of Ruglaa: An annual festival within the Ruglaa religion celebrating the entity Foqoo.

Threnek {th-ren-ek}: A friend of Feagle.

Tuvic {tu-vi-ch}: A milky white alcoholic drink made from distilled palm tree sap. Quality varies but the better brands can be up to 40% proof although in the time of *The Annals* the techniques of distillation available meant the drink was around 15-20% proof, making it equivalent to port or sherry.

Umbu {um-bu}: A fisherman who ferries Autumn and Logan from Jaikai to Dashoo.

Uysoma {oo-ee-so-ma}: A town of some 400 people, and the largest population centre on Zuit.

Vinan {vi-na-ne}: A fisherman caught in a storm and rescued by Autumn and Logan.

Wovek (Wovekrestanivaj) {wo-ve-ke-res-te-an-iv-aj}: Headman at one of the processing yards of the Zuit amurk plantation.

Yeinoba Vyliacennie im Rozum ny Duch Esyup {yay-in-ob-ah vi-li-ac-en-ni-eh im ro-zu-me ni du-ke-ke es-you-pe} : The School founded by Autumn Savannah on the island of Xive. Specifically *The School of the Worshipful Study and Healing of the Mind And Spirit*. Although the Esyup was founded by Autumn Savannah and remained under direct Royal protection until the eventual demise of the Monarchy, she did not remain there nor take any direct role in its development although the Esyup's records show that she visited on a number of occasions.

Zaac {zaak}: A friend of Engar who has a penchant for gambling and who bets on Autumn in the daloni competition.

Zuit {zoo-it}: The most populous of three islands extending South West from the Southern tip of the Ahon Hara Mountains. Physically, Zuit is slightly smaller than neighbouring Xive.

Zyre (Lapanzyretetras) {la-pa-ne-zy-re-te-tra-se}: Oldest son of Ikam, aged 20. Fisherman with his father.