

Lietapis Vosienskaj Savany

The Annals Of
Autumn Savannah

a new translation

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› Dziewiąta Kaza ‹

~ The Ninth Tale ~

Chapter One

The morning rain fell lightly on the hood of Autumn Savannah as she sat, cross legged, at the edge of the bower she and Logan had constructed the night before. Behind her, pressed into the branches of the bower, Logan stirred and grunted in his sleep but did not open his eyes. The early awakening enforced on him by the noises of Schtei had quickly reverted to his more customary later awakening once they had left that city. Autumn, however, unaffected by the noise, was awake as usual before the dawn. Her body apparently asleep, albeit in a sitting position, her mind followed pathways none but she could track as thoughts built upon thoughts, twisting and turning hither and yon before returning to an earlier thought and branching off in new, unexplored directions.

That is not to say she was unaware of her surroundings. A lifetime of training had left her senses honed and constantly alert. The faintest of movements of the air, the quietest of sounds, the merest whiff of a scent and some part of her mind, separate from that which thought her thoughts, assessed and analysed, ready at all times to jerk her body into instant action and reaction. The patter of raindrops on her hood, the dampness of the cloth on her neck and shoulders were normal. Perhaps less desirable than the gentle light of Astauand's early warmth but it was raining nonetheless and dampness was only to be expected. Such is the nature of things. To not be damp when sitting in the rain, ahh, that would be strange and that part of Autumn's mind which monitored these things would have called to the rest of her mind long before to ascertain the reason for her unexpected dryness. As it was she expected to be damp so the fact that she was damp was therefore in keeping and not a cause for alarm.

What was, perhaps, a cause for alarm, was that that part of Autumn's mind which soared over and above knew full well the dangers of being reassured by the expected. 'Tis human nature to relax when all proceeds in line with expectations and dangers, concealed by or disguised as expectations, can creep up unannounced. However, Autumn's lifetime of training had led her to expect the unexpected disguised as expectations and the dangerous unexpected camouflaged as benign unexpectations. Indeed, in times past her mind had explored all the possibilities for being caught off guard by expected

unexpectedness and unexpected expectations and the limitations of expecting the unexpected for it is impossible to actually expect the unexpected as the two concepts are exclusive. If you expect something that is unexpected then it must, by definition, be expected. So, to be truly unexpected, the unexpected can never be expected and the mere act of expecting it turns it into an expectation. Autumn was prepared for that as well, on a level that was disassociated with the paths that much of her mind followed during these periods around the dawn when Logan slept and the world woke up.

In short, while Autumn was often surprised she was rarely, if ever, caught off guard.

A faint rasping behind her suggested Logan was scratching his nose or cheek but the quality of his breathing did not change so it would likely be some while yet before he woke. The pattering of raindrops on the leaves and branches of the bower and on the leaves and branches of the trees themselves likewise suggested it would be some while before it stopped. Autumn did not need to open her eyes to see these things nor distract her mind from the thoughts she thought. Likewise the faint sounds of the sea on the shore some way distant were no distraction. Those sounds had been there all night and would doubtless continue all day unless some grave misfortune befell the island and the surrounding sea that made it an island dried up unexpectedly and the place ceased to be an island. In that event Autumn's mind would snap into focus although it is unlikely even she would be able to do much to restore the sea to its place in the world. Mother Midcarn, perhaps, might be able to but she was not there. Doubtless there were a few troubled people on the island who did expect the sea to disappear one day but it would be fair to say that not even they expected such an event today. Such things are generally vague future expectations for not even Mother Midcarn can accurately predict the whims of the gods in such matters.

Autumn sat at the edge of the bower and the bower sat at the edge of a wood. The wood in turn sat on the edge of a low plateau that overlooked the town of Coot-Tha. In its turn, Coot-Tha sat on the edge of the Island of Danornor. A series of edges that had briefly occupied Autumn's thoughts as she sat there. More significantly, from her point of view at least, she also sat on the edge of the past where it

joined the future and there was the merest hint of impatience in her thoughts. Their stay in Schtei had marked a period during their travels when they had not travelled and their six day voyage on a trading boat carrying goods to Danornor had done little to dampen her desire to move on. Although uneventful, the voyage had served to return Logan to his normal good spirits after his misfortunes in Schtei.¹ They had spent the previous day exploring the delights of the little port and had followed a path out of the town which led up the escarpment to the woodlands of the low plateau. Had it not been raining Autumn would have been able to see the smoke from early fires in the town not far distant.

* * *

Logan lacked Autumn's habitual awareness of their surroundings but he had a strong survival instinct that woke him abruptly. He sat up, his eyes open and narrowed, wondering what had woken him. He looked around but there was no sign of Autumn.

"Still raining though," he muttered to himself then froze. Over the sound of the rain on the leaves he could make out voices coming from some way off. He couldn't make out the words but there was a definite edge of anger.

"Oh Sploop," he said and crawled out of the bower.

Ignoring the rain he looked around, his ears straining. The voices were coming from lower down, past the edge of the plateau. He stepped forward, careful not to get too close to the edge in the rain, and peered over.

"I wonder what's happened?" he thought, spotting the green of Autumn's robe.

There looked to be two or three other people although it was difficult to tell in the rain and faint misting but there was definitely at least one angry person down there and whoever it was seemed to be getting angrier. Logan went back to the bower and grabbed his staff.

1 See *The Annals ~ The Eighth Tale*. Intending to spend the winter in Schtei Logan had his heart broken by Komorebi, the daughter of their next door neighbour.

Admittedly if things got nasty Autumn would be able to deal with it on her own but he felt better having it in his hand. He hurried along the edge to where the path began its descent then jogged down.

Autumn wasn't far away. She was on her knees bent over a man lying on the side of the path. He wasn't moving but Autumn wasn't looking at him. Her attention was on the large bushy-bearded man towering over her and gesticulating.

“What do I care about that useless heap of shit!” he exclaimed. “What about my horse, eh?”

He tried to shove Autumn and she grabbed his arm while getting to her feet.

“This man is injured,” she said calmly. “Please let me attend to him.”

“Let go of my arm, you Vogev cursed bitch!” the man shouted, trying to kick her. “I’m going to kill that muck faced shit!”

Autumn twisted to avoid his kick and bent his arm behind his back so he was forced to double over.

“Let go of me!” he yelled, going red in the face with anger. “Get your bloody hands off me or I’ll kill you too!”

“Please calm yourself,” said Autumn, pushing the man to the ground. “I will not let go of you until you calm down. Ahh, Logan. I need your help.” She knelt on the man's back, trapping his wrist under her knee while she grabbed one of his waving ankles and bent his leg back as far as it would go. The man cursed violently and banged his other arm on the ground.

“What do you want me to do?” asked Logan as the man started to struggle and try to throw Autumn off.

“Check if the other man is still breathing,” said Autumn, not in the least disturbed by the man's convulsions. “If he is check for any broken bones. You, there, lie still!” She leaned on his bent leg and the man screamed. “Lie still, I said.”

The man swore at her but stopped his convulsions.

“That’s better,” said Autumn. “Now take five deep breaths.”

“I will bring the vengeance of Mizule upon you,” shouted the man as best he could with Autumn’s weight on his chest. The red of his face was getting darker.

“Mayhap,” said Autumn, “and I will deal with that when the time comes. Until then, breathe deeply and calm yourself.”

“Rot in the depths of the Land of the Undead, bitch!” snarled the man. “Let me go or I will skin you alive and burn your remains!”

“I have had enough of this,” remarked Autumn, glancing at Logan who was cautiously straightening the injured man’s limbs and checking for damage. She leaned forward slightly and put her hand on the angry man’s neck. Feeling under his hair for the second bone down from his skull she squeezed hard and the man went limp.

“How is he?” she asked, getting off the man.

“He still lives,” said Logan. “He seems to be unconscious and I fancy his shoulder is broken but I found no other major injuries. Just some cuts and scrapes.”

“Good,” said Autumn, squatting down. “Get that man’s tunic off and bind his arms and legs with it. He will wake soon and doubtless will still be angry.” She started to check the injured man herself.

Logan struggled to get the man’s tunic off as he was large and heavy but he managed then used his knife to cut two strips off the material. As he bound the man’s legs he started to wake up so Logan cut off a smaller length and gagged him.

“I did not like what he was saying to you,” said Logan as Autumn glanced over.

“Twas only words,” said Autumn, “and I fancy he is upset about something but thank you for the peace. As you say, this man lives and

he is not badly injured. He has been hit on the head but there seems to be no bleeding. With Alodia's aid he will have little more than a bad headache. His shoulder is the bigger problem."

The bound man struggled against his bindings and tried to curse again. He started to chew on the gag while glaring balefully at Autumn. She ignored him.

"So what do we do?" asked Logan.

"Tis a difficult one," she said thoughtfully. "I need to strap his back to a board so he cannot move the shoulder but we do not have a board nor anything strong enough to use as binding. I will have to go back to Coot-Tha but in the meantime we need to get him off the path and make him comfortable but he will be difficult to carry with a broken shoulder."

"So what happened here?" asked Logan. "That man was saying something about a horse."

"I do not know," said Autumn, watching the injured man. His face was still overly pale and that concerned her. "I heard some shouts then a crash of some sort then more shouting. When I got here that man was kicking this one and shouting at him."

"A crash?" said Logan, looking around. "Mayhap there is a cart involved. I'll go and have a look."

"Good thinking," said Autumn absently. She put her hand on the injured man's forehead then bent to put her ear to his chest. "Hmm."

Logan picked up his staff and pointed it at the bound man who was still glaring balefully although the dark redness of his face was fading.

"Lie still," he commanded. "I will be back shortly."

* * *

"There are two smashed carts a little further down," he said a little while later when he returned. "I found some cloth and some wood.

Can you use these?"

"Ahh, perfect," said Autumn, taking the wood. "This looks like a piece of one of the shafts."

"It is," said Logan. "The rest of it is inside a horse's chest. The beast is dead though."

"Ahh," said Autumn. "'Tis fortunate. I do not have the skills for such an injury and if it were still alive it would be suffering greatly. Help me bind this man's shoulder."

"Is he still unconscious?" asked Logan, ripping the cloth into long strips.

"No but he is very groggy," said Autumn. "I wager he took a heavy blow to his head. You hold the wood in place while I bind his arms and chest to it."

The man cried out several times while they did this and his face was covered in sweat by the end but the pain seemed to have cleared his grogginess.

"By all the gods, that hurt," he exclaimed. "What happened?"

"You broke your shoulder," said Autumn. "It will heal but you must not move it so we have bound you to a piece of wood."

"Where am I?" he asked.

"On the road to Coot-Tha," said Autumn. "Do you remember anything?"

"Not really," he said slowly. "Coot-Tha, hey? I must have been on my way to market. Ain't no other reason to go there. Where's my horse and cart? Who's that? Who are you while we're at it?"

"I am Autumn Savannah," said Autumn, "and this is Logan. We are travellers and we heard a crash and came to your aid. I know not who this man is but he seemed most upset. What is your name?"

"I ... I ...," said the man then shook his head worriedly. "I don't remember."

"Tis not uncommon with head injuries," said Autumn. "All will come back to you soon."

"I know him too," said the man. "His face is familiar or what I can see of it anyway but his name does not come to my mind either. Why is he tied up?"

"He was kicking you when I arrived," said Autumn, "and would not let me aid you."

"Ahh," said the man. "So where is my horse and cart?"

"Down the path a-ways," said Logan. "There are two carts and only one horse so I do not know whose it is."

"What colour is it?" asked the man.

"Brown," said Logan. "What colour was yours?"

"I don't remember," said the man after a few grimaces. "What happened?"

"We were not here when it happened," said Logan, "but going by what is further down the path there was one horse and cart going downhill and one going uphill. I fancy the one going downhill broke free and crashed into the other. Both are in the undergrowth off the side of the path. My guess is you were thrown off your cart which is how it ran away downhill."

"Could not this other man have seen it coming?" asked Autumn.

"Tis on a bend," said Logan. "I wager he didn't see anything until it was too late."

"Are you calm enough to talk?" asked Autumn looking at the bound man.

He nodded.

“Very well,” said Autumn.

She untied the gag and the man spat and worked his jaw a few times.

“What is your name?” she asked.

“Madlek,” he said, “of Coot-Tha and that shit be Gesen of Zuasprit. That bastard killed my horse!”

“What do you mean, I killed your horse?” exclaimed Gesen.

“Umm, there is a dead horse,” said Logan. “The shaft of one of the carts is embedded in its chest.”

“You mean my cart broke free and killed his horse?” exclaimed Gesen.

“So it seems,” said Logan.

“And by Voqev you will pay for it,” snarled Madlek.

“If this be so then please, take my horse in payment,” said Gesen.

“That could be difficult,” said Logan.

“And why is that?” demanded Madlek.

“There's only the one horse there,” said Logan. “I fancy the other one has run away.”

“The bastard's hidden it,” snapped Madlek. “That's why he's pretending to be so willing to give it to me. He's just a pox ridden charlatan.”

“Your logic would seem to be at fault here,” said Autumn. “The horse was presumably attached to the cart before the accident and Gesen was unconscious afterwards. You know that for you were kicking him. At what point could he have hidden the horse?”

“The shit must have seen me coming and untied the horse,” growled Madlek, “then let the cart loose.”

“And broken his own shoulder?” asked Autumn. “I fancy your imagination is running away with you.”

“Pah,” exclaimed Madlek and spat on the ground. “Will you let me loose now?”

“Will you remain calm?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” he said reluctantly.

Autumn looked thoughtfully at him for a few moments then bent to untie his hands then his feet. Madlek stretched his cramped muscles then slowly got to his feet.

“I thank you,” he muttered and bent to pick up the remains of his tunic before slamming a large stone into Gesen's face.

Chapter Two

Instantly Autumn reacted but she was out of position. She lunged forward to intercept the blow and her shoulder caught Logan in the chest, throwing him to the ground. Her hand caught the inside of Madlek's wrist, pushing it past Gesen who had not even begun to react. The stone thumped hard against the wood bound to Gesen's shoulders, splitting the tip of Madlek's first finger open. His gasp of pain was drowned by Gesen's scream as the jarring grated his shoulder bones. Autumn kicked upwards into an uncontrolled somersault so she didn't land on top of Gesen and crashed awkwardly on the ground some way beyond his head, her heel thumping hard into Logan's thigh as he lay prostrate. She instantly rolled sideways and thrust herself upright with her arms while twisting to face Madlek, landing in a defensive posture ready for another attack.

None was forthcoming. Gesen had fainted from the sudden pain, Logan was sitting up rubbing his chest and his thigh with a confused expression and Madlek was standing with his back to the others alternately shaking his hand and sucking his finger. Autumn relaxed and bent to examine Gesen. The bindings were still intact and he seemed to have no further injuries.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, stepping over to Logan and putting her hand on his shoulder.

"I have had worse," he said, peering up at her. "Although some warning would have been nice."

"Alas, there was no time for a warning," she said. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Four," said Logan, experimenting with a deep breath. His chest seemed to be able to handle it.

"Are you certain?" she asked in concern.

"Two then," said Logan. "Or three. Mayhap even just one."

"Logan!" snapped Autumn, shaking his shoulder. "How many fingers?"

“Two,” he said looking over at Madlek and ignoring Autumn's hand. “You always hold up two. What's that man doing?”

“Logan, look at me,” said Autumn firmly, raising another finger. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Three,” said Logan. “Help me up. I think my leg is dead.”

“It will pass,” she said, helping him up. “Walk around so the blood returns.”

“I'm not sure I can,” said Logan, gingerly putting his weight on his leg. “It does not seem to want to move.”

“It will,” said Autumn.

She sighed and looked at Madlek who was now inspecting his finger.

“Madlek,” she said. “That was foolish of you.”

“You are fast, I'll give you that,” said Madlek. “Look at my cursed finger. 'Tis split and bleeding.”

“And what would have been the state of Gesen's face had you hit him with the stone?” asked Autumn.

“Why'd you stop me, eh?” he demanded. “That bastard deserves to die. Stay out of my way and let me do it properly.”

“Go and stand over there,” said Autumn gruffly, pointing to a bush a little way further down the path. “If you try to attack this man again I will be forced to hurt you.”

“You'd better do what she says,” said Logan mildly, “or she'll break both your legs or worse. I've seen her do it to better fighters than you.”

“Oh very well,” said Madlek. “But I'll remember your face, girlie, next time we meet and that's a fact.”

“Doubtless you will,” said Autumn, puzzled. “I don't imagine your memory has been impaired by this encounter.”

“He meant that as a threat,” said Logan as Madlek stalked away.

“Oh,” said Autumn. “So you think he'll attack me if we should meet again?”

“Probably,” said Logan. “At least, if he's with a friend or two. He may not if he's on his own. Now where's he going?”

“I have absolutely no idea what is going on,” said Autumn watching Madlek go past the bush and continue down the path. “Not one thing has made any sense since I got here. How is your leg?”

“Well enough,” said Logan. “I hope he isn't going to get a weapon.” He raised his voice. “Oi Madlek! Where are you going?”

Madlek stopped and turned to face them.

“To inspect my cart,” he said loudly, “and see what can be retrieved before the vultures in town find out and come to steal what is rightfully mine.” He paused then added sarcastically, “if that is well with you, of course.”

“Like as not he means to steal Gesen's goods as well,” muttered Logan.

Gesen groaned and tried to sit up.

“Stay down,” said Autumn, squatting beside him and putting her hand on his chest. “You are injured and need to lie still. Logan, go with Madlek and see he does not take any of Gesen's goods.”

“As you wish,” said Logan, looking around for his staff. He picked it up and hurried after Madlek who was once again walking down the path.

* * *

“Autumn!” called Logan. “Autumn! Where are you?”

“Up here,” called back Autumn, coming to the edge of the incline near their bower. “Where did you get that horse?”

“I wager it belongs to Gesen,” called Logan. “I found it a short way from the path eating some grass. Is Gesen with you?”

“Aye,” called Autumn. “I found some herbs for his pain and he is resting.”

“We’ll come up there,” called Logan and urged the horse forward.

It took only a short while for them to reach the top of the escarpment and Logan directed the horse off the path over to where Autumn was waiting.

“Is that Madlek’s cart?” she asked, meeting him part way.

“Aye,” said Logan. “Gesen’s has a broken shaft, a broken axle and a smashed wheel but this one had only a broken wheel so we put on the good wheel from Gesen’s cart. ’Tis a smaller size but works well enough.”

“Where is Madlek?” she asked.

“He has gone to Coot-Tha,” said Logan, drinking some water. “Ahh, that is good. ’Twas thirsty work despite all the rain. He has a friend with a cart and has gone to ask him to come and take back the dead horse. He plans to sell the meat before it goes off too much.”

“And these goods?” asked Autumn, inspecting the back of the cart. “Whose are these?”

“I am not sure,” said Logan, stopping the horse. “I wager the fruit and vegetables are Gesen’s as he was on his way to the market and the others are likely Madlek’s but to be safe I collected all of them and brought them back. When Madlek returns we can sort out who owns what.”

“You think he will return?” asked Autumn.

“Yes, for certain,” said Logan. “He wants the horse meat and this is his cart and goods which I fancy he will not give up lightly. He only agreed to this because he could not stay and guard them while going to get another cart for the horse.” He grinned. “It seems that despite everything he trusts us more than his neighbours. Well, me at least. He is not so sure about you.”

“I wonder why that is?” said Autumn frowning. “Granted I have come to learn that it is best not to wholly trust strangers on first meeting but some level of trust is required where there is to be cooperation and Madlek is cooperating, is he not?”

“Yes,” said Logan, “but I fancy that is through fear more than trust.”

“Ah, yes,” said Autumn, her frown deepening. “I wanted to talk to you about that. It does not sit well with me that you threatened Madlek with grievous injury by my hand. Why did you tell him I would break both his legs? Surely you know by now that I would only do such a thing under the greatest of provocations and only if there was no alternative?”

“I do know that, Autumn,” said Logan, trying to look contrite but not really succeeding, “but he does not and you had just bested him even though it wasn't really a fight. I said it so he would think twice about trying something else.”

“And yet you say he trusts you more than me,” said Autumn, her expression changing to mild puzzlement. “You are the one who deceived him and I did all I could to not hurt him and will do so again. Surely by rights he should trust me more than you.”

“Is this your vanity speaking?” asked Logan. “Are you upset that you are being mistrusted unfairly or that I am being preferred?”

“I am not upset, Logan,” said Autumn with the slightest of snorts. “Only Madlek can take responsibility for his own thoughts. I am merely somewhat puzzled by why he has such thoughts.”

“Well, if it helps, they are not his thoughts,” said Logan, “they are mine. He has not said who he trusts and who he does not. 'Tis only an impression I got. Shall I leave the horse tied to the cart or let it off to graze?”

“Let it off to graze,” said Autumn. “We will need it to carry Gesen to his dwelling where, with Aloidia's fortune, there will be someone who can aid him. 'Tis not my desire to stay with him until he is able to fend for himself although if needs be I will.”

“Ahh, I had not thought on how he would return from whence he came,” said Logan, untying the strap that bound the horse to the shaft nearest him. “My thoughts have been filled with the carts and goods down the path. Did you carry him up here or did he walk?”

“I carried him,” said Autumn, going around the horse to untie the strap the other side. “He could walk with only the greatest of difficulty and it seemed easier. He is asleep now which is good.”

Logan led the horse to a patch of grass and tied the reins to a tree.

“Come,” said Autumn. “There is something I would like your thoughts about concerning Gesen.”

“Oh yes?” said Logan. “What's that?”

Autumn took him over to the bower where Gesen lay awkwardly on his back. She'd placed a stone under his head so his neck was supported as his shoulders were forced upwards by the wood bound to his shoulders. A wad of grasses went some way to lessening the hardness of the stone.

“The break is in this bone here,” said Autumn, running her finger above Gesen's left collarbone. “'Tis fortunate the big flat bone behind the shoulder is uninjured but that is not what I wanted to show you. See here?” She gently tipped Gesen's head to one side so Logan could see the large lump that was pushing out from his hair.

“Ahh, nasty,” said Logan, screwing up his face. “He must have hit his head on a rock when he fell off his cart.”

“That was my first thought also,” said Autumn, “but after tending to his hurts I sat on the edge over there and tried to imagine how this accident happened.”

“Seems simple to me,” said Logan. “He fell off the cart, let go of the brake and the cart pushed the horse downhill into Madlek's cart.”

“So it would seem,” said Autumn, “but why did he fall off?”

“Perhaps he fell asleep,” said Logan, “or the cart hit a stone and jolted him off.”

“Look again at his injuries,” said Autumn. “His left shoulder is broken but the blow to his head is on the right side.”

“Oh yes,” said Logan slowly, studying Gesen while he slept. “So if he fell and hit his head how did he break his shoulder? And if he landed on his shoulder, how did he hit his head?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Perhaps he fell off some way back and broke his shoulder then fell off again and hit his head but that would seem too much misfortune.”

“Or perhaps the wheel of the cart went over his shoulder and broke it,” said Logan.

“A possibility,” said Autumn. “So I went and looked at the tracks in the mud on the path. Come.”

“Where are we going?” asked Logan, getting up.

“To look at the tracks,” said Autumn and led him down to where they had found Gesen's unconscious body.

“Well, that doesn't make things much clearer,” said Logan, studying the marks, “although it would seem the wheels passed close to his body but did not touch it. 'Tis a shame there are so many footprints though, unless ...”

Autumn made no comment. She merely waited for Logan's thoughts to

sort themselves out.

“Mayhap he did not fall off the cart,” said Logan after looking up and down the path two or three times then studying the marks again. “Mayhap something hit him on the head, causing him to fall that way and that is how he broke the shoulder on the other side.”

“We are of like mind,” said Autumn. “Come.”

“Now where are we going?” asked Logan.

“What could have hit Gesen on the head?” asked Autumn. “There are no trees close by so 'twas not a branch and there were no tracks of another cart that passed him going uphill. Those you see now were made when you came up. They were not here before.”

“So you think someone threw something at him?” asked Logan, following her into the wood on the other side of the path.

“'Twas only a thought,” said Autumn, “until I found these,” and she pointed to some trampled muddy grass.

“Ahh,” said Logan bending to look more closely. He straightened and turned to look back towards the path. “And there is a clear view of the path from here.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and it only started to rain as the last setting of Astauand was close. Someone has been here since then else there would be no mud on the trampled grass.”

“And there are footprints coming uphill and going back down,” said Logan. “Two people by the look of it.”

“Take no notice of those tracks,” said Autumn, pointing to some of the footprints. “Those are mine. I followed the others down as far as they went. 'Twould seem someone walked up then ran back. See how those marks are further apart?”

“How far did they go?” asked Logan. “As you do not seem to have walked all the way back to Coot-Tha 'tis my guess they go no further

than the bend.”

“And you are right in your guess,” said Autumn. “I skirted around you as you loaded the cart but could not find any tracks further beyond so 'tis my guess there aren't any.”

“Interesting,” said Logan. He looked back at the path again. “Hmm. There would seem to be an obvious conclusion. Let us return to Gesen while I think on this. There may be other possibilities.”

They walked back to the bower in silence and Logan sat on the edge of the escarpment while Autumn added some wood to their small fire then checked Gesen. He was still asleep and there was some more colour in his face although the grass wad had slipped from the stone. She replaced it under his head then went to sit with Logan.

“I daresay it is possible that a stranger walked up the hill, saw Gesen coming, threw a rock at him then ran back down to rob him of his goods and found Madlek coming up and ran away,” he said.

“It is possible,” said Autumn. “We are strangers here so it is possible that this is a well known spot for bandits to ambush unwary travellers.”

“But you do not think it likely?” asked Logan.

“No more likely than you do,” she said.

Logan laughed. “True enough. I fancy Gesen often takes this path to the market so he could not be counted among the unwary. Besides, there is also the bad feeling between them. Madlek's at least and likely Gesen's when his memory returns. So it was Madlek who lay in wait for Gesen?”

“Or someone with him who ran off when the two carts collided,” said Autumn. “Mayhap a relative who feared Madlek's wrath. Certainly there is more hatred here than would suggest a simple robbery, especially as it was Gesen who was attacked, not Madlek. If it were a robbery then Madlek would merely be an unfortunate bystander.”

“And Gesen still has no memory?” asked Logan.

“He remembered me when he woke up a little before you returned,” said Autumn, “and thought the name Gesen sounded familiar but that is all.”

“But you think his memory will return?” asked Logan.

“I have only known four others who lost their memories after blows to the head,” said Autumn, “and they were all at my Esyup and suffered those blows while exercising. I have not met anyone who has lost their memory from being hit with a rock so mayhap such an injury is different. I cannot be certain.”

“All the more reason to return him to his family,” said Logan. “If his memory does not return at least he will be with loved ones and will make new memories in times to come.”

“Unless that part of his mind which remembers is damaged,” said Autumn. “Tis possible he will never remember anything again.”

“Unfortunate,” said Logan, pulling a face. “Although them who fight in wars and suchlike often suffer grievous head injuries. Like whatshisname, you remember? The one who helped us find the Eyes of Samnosura.”²

“Yes, Richid was his name,” said Autumn, “although he suffered injuries to a different part of his head and lost all hearing. Mayhap Gesen will recover, mayhap not. Only time will tell.”

* * *

Astauand was halfway past Its peak when they heard another cart on the path. At least Logan heard it. Autumn was some way distant doing her exercises. He jumped up from where he was sitting with his back against a tree and hurried to peer over the escarpment.

“Well met, Madlek,” he called, waving down at the cart. “You have brought some friends to help with the butchering of the horse?”

2 See *The Annals ~ The Sixth Tale*.

“Aye,” called back Madlek, shielding his eyes as Astauand was behind Logan. “Tis not the smallest of horses. Where is the maid?”

“She is over there,” called Logan. “Come on up. We would speak with you.”

“And I with you,” said Madlek in a friendly tone. “Leave the cart here, Lutch. We will walk up there. Come on lads.”

Logan watched as the three men and three boys, all three younger than him but not by much, climbed off the cart. The three men carried large knives for butchering the horse and one of the boys carried a hook with a wooden handle for dragging large lumps of bloody meat. Madlek led them up the escarpment and stopped beside his own cart. He jammed his knife into the side of the cart and began inspecting what was in the back of it.

“Twould seem you have most of my belongings here,” he said, “and you found that bast ..., Gesen's horse or is it another?”

“Tis Gesen's,” said Logan joining them. “It hadn't gone far.”

One of the men laughed and nudged another and pointed at Autumn.

“That be a fine dance the maid be doing,” he said. “She be doolally in the head or what?”

“Oh that is something she does when she is in the mood,” said Logan. “I'll call her over. Her name, as we did not do introductions earlier, is Autumn Savannah. I am Logan.”

“Oh aye,” said Madlek. “Get her here then, whatever her name be.”

Logan frowned at his tone then whistled. Autumn finished her spin, looked over and waved. She picked up her robe and slung it over her arm before walking over.

“Greetings, Madlek,” she said. “I am Autumn Savannah.”

“So the lad says,” said Madlek, dropping the roll of cloth he'd been

fingering back into the cart.

“His name is Logan,” she said. “And your friends are?”

“Just willing friends,” he said, pulling his knife from the side of the cart. “Get the bitch, lads!”

Chapter Three

Autumn tossed her robe aside and backed away as Madlek, Lutch and the other man separated to stalk her from three sides. The lad with the hook smiled coldly at Logan and hefted the hook in what he thought was a threatening manner. Logan also backed away, towards Gesen in the bower, picking up his staff on the way. The lad with the hook blinked, doubtless having expected Logan to be scared, and adjusted his grip on the hook nervously.

“You do not need to do this, Madlek,” said Autumn, dropping into her defensive posture as Logan swung his staff up to hold it at the ready. “Can we not talk?”

“This was none of your business, bitch,” snarled Madlek, slowly waving his knife at her. “You be just interfering and now you get the consequences.”

He lunged at Autumn and a heartbeat later the other two men leapt forward as well. Autumn spun round, dropping low at the same time, and kicked the knife from Madlek's hand as the knife of Lutch stabbed the air viciously some way above her head. The other man, Pulk by name, slashed at Autumn and narrowly missed Lutch's hand. She continued the move and let her momentum roll her to one side of Lutch before jumping to her feet and heel kicking him on the side of his neck. He lurched into Madlek and both tripped over each other, landing in a heap. Pulk snarled and switched the knife to his other hand, intending to stab her in the back but Autumn twirled and kicked his forearm into his belly and the knife gashed his other forearm, just below the elbow. Autumn jumped back and glanced over at Logan just in time to see him ram his staff into the lad's belly. The lad doubled up in pain and dropped the hook.

Seeing this the other two lads rushed forward but Logan spun round, not as fast as Autumn but quickly enough, and lifted his staff a little so it hit one of the lads on his shoulder. The other grabbed the hook off the ground and, not being an experienced fighter, looked to see where Logan was. That moment's hesitation was enough and Logan brought the staff up and round and hit the lad solidly on the side of his thigh. The lad fell to the ground, narrowly missing stabbing

himself with the hook.

Disentangling themselves Madlek and Lutch again leapt towards Autumn but she sidestepped and brought the side of her hand down on the back of Madlek's neck. He collapsed unconscious and Lutch tripped over him and sprawled on the ground. The lad who'd been hit on the thigh tried to stand but Logan's blow had deadened the leg and he hopped backwards on one foot. The lad who'd been hit on the shoulder tried to grab the hook but Logan kicked it out of reach and caught him in the throat with the back end of his staff. With two clutching parts of their anatomies in pain and the third able to do little more than hop, Logan backed away again and looked to see how Autumn was faring. Pulk was on his knees, trying to hold the sides of the gash in his arm together and stop the bleeding while Madlek was flat out on the ground, face down. Lutch, on the other hand, was back on his feet and advancing towards Autumn in a slight crouch, staring at her while waving his knife slowly from side to side.

Autumn backed away again, unwilling to hurt Lutch but very conscious of the knife.

"Your five companions are down," she said quietly. "Can we not end this now?"

"Scared of me are you, huh?" he snarled. "Don't fancy this bit of metal between your ribs, huh?"

Autumn sighed and backed into a tree behind her. Urgently, Lutch leapt forward and stabbed at Autumn but she twisted around the knife and it embedded itself a short way into the tree trunk. She rammed the rigid fingers of one hand into Lutch's wrist so his grip on the knife failed while at the same time spinning round and landing her heel in the centre of his back, throwing him face first into the trunk. The knife hilt stabbed him in the belly just as his nose broke and he fell back, clutching it with one hand and his belly with the other.

Autumn dropped again into her defensive posture and rotated, assessing the situation. None were preparing to attack although Madlek was regaining consciousness and one of the lads was now able to hobble, albeit slowly. Logan was leaning on his staff, grinning at

her.

“What delayed you?” he asked. “I finished off my three some while ago.”

The lad who'd had the staff rammed in his belly suddenly launched himself at Logan and Autumn leapt at him just as he crashed into Logan. She landed on top of the lad, rolling him onto his back. She allowed herself to roll off him before jumping up and pushing her foot down on his throat.

“Enough,” she said, staring down at him. The lad looked up at her with frightened eyes and his body went limp. She smiled and nodded before taking her foot away. The lad stayed where he was.

“Alas, I spoke too soon,” said Logan ruefully, picking himself off the ground. “Thank you.”

“Never allow yourself to become complacent,” said Autumn. “A fight is not ended until your attackers are no longer in a position to continue it. Even now, at least four of these could yet do either of us some harm. Bind them with some of the cloth in the cart while I attend to those who are injured.”

“Yes, Autumn,” said Logan contritely. “I am sorry.”

“And one more thing, Logan,” she said squatting down beside Pulk to inspect his gash.

“Yes?” asked Logan.

“You fought very well,” she said, looking up at him with a smile. “I was particularly impressed by your back jab with the staff to that one's throat. That was most skilled and effective.”

“Ahh, you saw that, did you?” said Logan happily, impressed with himself.

“I kept one eye on you throughout,” she said, “although you did not need my aid until the end. Your footwork still needs some practice but

you are vastly improved.”

“Oh,” he said flatly. He hesitated then went to get some cloth, his pride in himself diminishing a little as he wondered how Autumn was able to defeat three armed men while watching his own performance at the same time.

* * *

“Now will you talk?” asked Autumn.

Logan had bound the others and sat them in a line while Autumn had stitched the gash in Pulk's arm and returned Lutch's nose to its rightful place. Then he bound Pulk and Lutch and sat them in the line as well. Gesen was now awake and was watching everything intently from his spot inside the bower.

“What is there to talk about?” asked Madlek. “You own us now.”

“No I do not,” said Autumn in surprise. “You are all free men.”

“And yet we sit here bound hand and foot,” said Madlek. “Free to go anywhere except elsewhere from here.”

“We will unbind you soon and you can then go anywhere,” said Autumn. “Your bindings are merely so we can talk without you attacking us again.”

“Then unbind us now and show your trustworthiness,” said Madlek.

“Was that a joke?” asked Autumn, looking at Logan.

“I think he is being serious,” said Logan. “He doesn't seem the joking type.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “Twas a most strange thing to say though. Madlek, surely you can see that we cannot take that risk? You have attacked us at least twice without provocation. If we unbind you now the likelihood is that you will do so again. As a minimum we must agree terms and, once agreed, we will then trust you to keep to that

agreement.”

“What terms?” demanded Madlek. “I will agree to no terms until I at least know what they are.”

“Very sensible of you,” said Autumn, confused by his attitude. “First, who are your companions and why are they here?”

“This one next to me be my brother Lutch,” said Madlek. “’Tis his horse and cart that sits yonder. Him at the end with the arm is my sister Anyi’s almost. He be called Pulk. These two lads be my sons Aunin and Saik and him with the sore throat be Lutch’s oldest.”

“So you are all of the same family then?” asked Autumn.

“As I said,” said Madlek, dismissively.

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “And you all came here looking for us?”

“We came to fetch the horse,” said Madlek. “That one what that bastard over there killed,” and he spat in Gesen’s direction. “And my cart and chattels.”

“The horse is further down the path,” said Autumn, “and your cart and the other things are over there yet you attacked us without hesitation. Why?”

“Because they be spawn of Vovev,” interjected Gesen. “’Tis their intent to kill me and all of mine.”

“Oh shut your mouth, viper,” exclaimed Madlek angrily. “Only reason you still be in this world is because of this bitch here. Aye, and that callow fool with the bumfluff still on his cheeks.”

“Hold!” commanded Autumn, holding up her hands. “Please, remain calm! You too Gesen.”

“Pah,” exclaimed Madlek and spat on the ground in the general direction of the bower. “You be strangers here, girlie? You and bumfluff there?”

"I am Autumn," said Autumn, "and my companion is Logan. I thank you to address us as such." Madlek just stared insolently at her and Autumn decided not to press the issue for the moment. "Yes, we are strangers to this island."

"So how much be them shits paying you?" he asked.

"Paying us?" asked Autumn in surprise. "Why would they pay us?"

"For protection," said Madlek. "Why else would a killer like you be here?"

"I am not a killer!" barked Autumn, "and most certainly not for money!" She paused for a moment to calm her mind. "Why do you think either of us is a killer?"

"You both be skilled fighters," said Madlek. "That much be obvious and like as not there be none on Danornor to match you. Why else would the likes of you be here if not for money? How much be them muck addled vipers paying you? I be doubling it."

"I say again, we are not here for money," said Autumn. "We are simply travellers exploring the world in search of knowledge. We arrived here two days past from Wase and will continue our travels when this ..., whatever this is, is ended."

"Then end it," said Madlek. "I have nigh on twenty kala with me and more at my dwelling. Kill that snake over there and the rest of his kin and all my kalas will be yours before this day is out."

"Aye, and mine too," added Lutch nasally. Pulk nodded agreement but was careful not to commit himself.

"You do not seem to be listening to me," said Autumn frowning. "I do not kill for money. Why can you not understand that?"

"Then what do you kill for?" asked Madlek. "Tell me and I will get it for you."

"This is getting us nowhere," said Autumn.

“Then we are in agreement,” said Madlek. “Unbind us and let us finish the job we came for.”

“Absolutely not,” said Autumn. “You do but confirm the need for restraint.”

“I am but a poor farmer,” said Gesen, “but if you are indeed for hire, I will pledge all I have and all that of three generations hence to rid this land of Madlek and his clan. They are but a pestilence that curses all who know of them. Aye, and all that don't.”

“Is no one listening to me?” demanded Autumn. “How many times do I have to say it? I do not kill for money!”

“Then do it for the sake of justice!” exclaimed Gesen.

“I am not going to kill anyone!” said Autumn loudly and slammed her hand on the ground. “Is that clear?”

Everyone just stared at her silently.

“Umm,” said Logan, after a few moments. “Can I ask a question?”

“Of course, Logan,” said Autumn, glancing at him with a fixed unreadable expression on her face. “Ask what you want.”

“Do you know who you are, Gesen?” he asked.

“Of course I know who I am,” said Gesen. “I am Gesen, from Zuasprit and farmer by trade. Who are you?”

“I am Logan,” said Logan. “I take it then that your memory has returned?”

“Some,” said Gesen. “I know I have a broken shoulder for Autumn told me but I have no memory of how it came to be.”

“But you do remember your time before?” asked Logan. “You remember leaving home with your goods for market?”

“Aye,” said Gesen. “I do the same every ten days come rain or shine.”

“That is good,” said Logan. “So, tell me, why do you want Madlek and all his kin killed?”

“Because that piss drinking whore monger be trying to kill me and all my kin,” said Gesen with feeling. “Is that not a good enough reason?”

“It will do for the moment,” said Logan. “Madlek, can I ask you the same question? Why do you want Gesen and all his kin killed?”

“You heard him yourself,” said Madlek. “Condemned from his own foul mouth. He and his be out to kill me and mine and that's a fact. Have I not the right to defend my family?”

“Pah! You cur, you snivelling rat bag!” shouted Gesen, wincing with pain from his shoulder. “Have I not that self same right? 'Tis typical of your deceitfulness and treachery that you claim a right yet deny the very same thing to me!”

“You killed our father!” shouted Madlek, straining against his bindings. “For that alone you must die!”

“'Tis all lies!” shouted Gesen, struggling to get up and failing. “That bastard died by his own hand after killing my uncle!”

“Please, contain yourselves,” said Autumn, holding up both hands again.

“Truth twister!” shouted Lutch. “My father killed your uncle because your uncle killed our mother's father's brother!”

“And so he should have,” shouted Gesen, going red faced. “Your mother's father's brother killed both my aunt's cousins and their father!”

“Silence!” roared Logan, surprising himself as well as everyone else. Even Autumn stared at him, speechless.

“Umm, thank you,” he said, uncomfortably aware that he was now the

centre of attention. “Umm, well, I am sure someone will correct me if I am wrong here, but is true, Madlek, that people in the family of Gesen have killed several of your family going back over a number of generations?”

“True?” exclaimed Madlek. “You think I would lie about such monstrous crimes?”

“Umm, I suppose that is a 'yes' then,” said Logan. “Gesen?”

“You believe that turd?” asked Gesen. “Him who sits there knowing how many of my family have been killed at the hands of his family? Give him some milk and watch it curdle in his mouth and feed the cockroaches!”

“So you are saying that it is true that people in the family of Madlek have killed several of your family over several generations?” asked Logan.

“Several?” demanded Gesen, his voice rising to a screech. “Several? 'Tis a wonder that there are any of us left!”

“There would be none left at all if I had my way,” exclaimed Madlek. “Untie me now, Autumn, and let us end this once and for all!”

“Stop!” exclaimed Autumn. “This is becoming ridiculous!”

“Fool,” exclaimed Madlek. “This was ridiculous from the start!”

“Be that as it may,” said Autumn staring at each person in turn. “I accept that each of you feels a grievance against the other family, whether it be justified or not, but can you not see ... can not any of you see that this path you are all on can only end with the destruction of both your families?”

“'Tis worth that price,” snapped Madlek.

“'Tis worth any price,” agreed Gesen.

“Oh Mizule!” exclaimed Autumn. “How can I get you all to see sense?”

“I do see sense,” said Gesen. “And the only thing that makes sense here is the death of that pus riddled piece of rotten gore and all his clan.”

“Him and that harlot he calls his era'owen both,” retorted Madlek. “Rid the world of them and their diseased and deformed offspring and Zeeth will heap praises and riches on you. Mind you, Yammoe will not thank you for sending them into Its world. The Land of the Undead be too good a place for them.”

“Please, stop hurling insults at each other,” said Autumn. “They cloud your minds.”

“Then give us weapons to hurl instead,” said Madlek. “You are the one clouding minds here. 'Twere not for you there'd be one fewer of them inbred shanks about.”

“Enough,” said Autumn wearily. “I have heard all I want to hear for the present time. Logan, I am at a loss. I know not how to unravel this situation and resolve it.”

“I know what you mean,” said Logan. “'Twould seem we are going backwards rather than forwards. Can I make a suggestion?”

“By all means,” said Autumn.

“I venture we will not be able to end this war between these two families before Astauand goes to bed,” said Logan, “so let us leave the problem as it is for now. After all, this war has been going on for many generations and both families still survive.”

“A fair point,” said Autumn. “I have vowed to end suffering wherever I can but I begin to wonder if there is any actual suffering here. 'Twould seem that both families' sole purpose is to rid the world of the other and I get a sense that both families revel in it. Like as not without the other each family would die out through lack of purpose.”

Both Gesen and Madlek snorted but Autumn held up her hand for silence before either could speak again.

“So,” continued Logan, “can I suggest that we find a solution to the immediate problem, which is that we have a man here with a broken shoulder and six others who are bound but intent on killing him. How can we resolve this so that Astauand sets with no further bloodshed?”

“Easy,” said Madlek. “When Astauand has set leave this place and we will finish the job in the darkness.”

“No,” said Autumn. “I will not permit that.”

“If I may summarise the situation?” asked Logan. “Gesen is unable to walk for he has a broken shoulder. He has a horse but no cart and ...”

“That be my horse,” interrupted Madlek. “He gave it to me in return for killing my horse. You both be witnesses.”

“But that was before we learnt the truth of the matter,” said Autumn, “and Gesen was not of right mind at the time anyway.”

“What truth?” demanded Madlek. “You do not believe my horse is dead?”

“I know it is dead,” said Autumn. “I have seen it, but was its death not caused by your own hand?”

“What?” shouted Madlek. “You think I killed my own horse? You be a mind addled little fool, girlie, and no mistake.”

“My name is Autumn Savannah,” said Autumn coldly, “and I expect you to remember that.” She stared at him and after a lengthy silence he looked away. “Tell me, Madlek, was it you or one of your sons who threw a rock at Gesen's head and caused his cart to crash into yours? Saik, mayhap or Aunin?”

Chapter Four

"Tis that dwelling yonder," muttered Gesen through clenched teeth. He pointed with his chin for his good arm was tightly gripping the elbow of his other arm to give some cushioning to the jolting of the horse.

Logan, leading the horse, looked around quickly but missed the chin pointing. Autumn, who was walking beside the horse and keeping Gesen steady, pointed to a muddy track with deep ruts that led to a large ramshackle wooden dwelling with thickly piled twigs forming its roof. Logan led the horse onto the track and its hooves sank into the mud. One hind leg slipped and the horse lurched before jerking itself upright again. Gesen nearly fell off and he groaned in pain as Autumn grabbed his clothing to keep him in place.

"We are almost there," she said encouragingly but Gesen did not react.

"We have been seen," said Logan. "There is a woman at the entrance. Ahh, she has gone back inside."

"Hopefully to get assistance," said Autumn, "and not a weapon. Gesen, would that be your almost?"

"Mayhap," said Gesen, not opening his eyes. "Or my mother."

Two women emerged from the entrance, one with a stout stick in her hands. The younger of the two said something to the elder then started walking quickly towards them. The older woman stayed at the entrance, leaning on the stick and watching.

"Where be the cart, Gesen?" called the woman as she neared, "and who be these people with you?"

"Greetings," called back Autumn. "We found Gesen on the path and are returning him to you. He is injured."

"And who be you?" said the woman, stopping several paces away. "I do not recognise you." Logan stopped the horse so as not to unduly

frighten the woman.

"I am Autumn," said Autumn, "and this is Logan. We are strangers passing through. Are you Gata?"

"Aye," said Gata, eyeing them suspiciously. "What ails my man?"

"His shoulder is broken," said Autumn, "and he has been struck on the head. Is there somewhere we can lay him down? The back of a horse is not the best of places for healing."

"Aye," said Gata, running her eyes over Gesen then looking back up the track. "You be alone?"

"'Tis just us three," said Autumn. "Have no fear."

"So it would seem," said Gata, stepping closer. She put her hand on Gesen's thigh. "Who did this to you, Gesen? These two?"

"Nay," said Gesen, looking down at her. "'Twas that bastard Madlek. These two be aiding me."

"Then I thank you both," said Gata. "Come, let us get him to bed."

Logan urged the horse forward and Gata went on ahead. She briefly spoke to the older woman then disappeared inside the dwelling. The older woman remained standing at the entrance, watching them.

"Be it an ambush?" she asked when Logan stopped the horse again. Her voice was dry and unemotional.

"'Twould seem so," said Autumn. "But let us get Gesen bedded down then we can talk."

"Aye," said the old woman. She watched as Autumn helped Gesen slide off the horse's back then carry him inside in her arms. "You always let women do the heavy work, lad?"

"Autumn is vastly stronger than I am," said Logan cheerfully. "What shall I do with the horse?"

"There be a stable round the back," she said, her eyes glittering. "Some hay too, or be you wanting your woman to do that as well?"

"Oh, I can manage a little hay," said Logan. He smiled and the woman stared coldly at him. "This way?"

"Aye," she said and watched him lead the horse around the side of the dwelling. Then she turned and stalked slowly inside the entrance.

"Hello?" called Logan, a short while later. He banged on the side of the building. "Hello?"

"Come in," called Autumn.

"I have put the horse in the stable," said Logan, going inside, "and given it some hay."

"Thank you," said Gata, emerging from a side room. "Gesen be comfortable now and I daresay he will sleep soon enough. Can I offer you both some food?"

"That is kind of you," said Autumn, "but not necessary."

"So you refuse our hospitality, do you?" remarked the old woman.

"Not at all," said Autumn. "I merely remarked that food was not necessary but if it will please you we will accept your offer of food with gratitude and thanks."

"You have a fancy way with words," she said. "Gata, bring some food then let us hear what fancy tales this one spins of Gesen's misfortunes."

"Be nice, mother," said Gata, going over to the hearth. "These two have brought Gesen back to us when they had no need to do so."

"But not the cart," said the old woman, "nor what was in it. Some explanation is due, I wager."

"You must excuse Swaven," said Gata, putting some bread and cheese

on the table. "Her leg pains her greatly and makes her ill tempered."

"Do not make excuses for me, girl," said Swaven, narrowing her eyes at Gata. "My leg pains me little this day but explanations are called for."

"All in good time," said Gata, adding a plate of some sort of fruit to the table. "Let them have something to eat first."

"Truly there is little enough to tell," said Autumn, "and I wager you know more of the background than we do for we are strangers here."

"How is it that strangers involve themselves in our business?" asked Swaven. "Mayhap you already know some who dwell in Coot-Tha?"

"We know no one on this island," said Autumn, "save Gesen and Madlek."

"So you admit it then?" demanded Swaven.

"I admit only to encountering two carts and their drivers a little after Astauand rose this day," said Autumn. "Do you imagine there to be some conspiracy here?"

"You say there is no conspiracy and yet you know Madlek," said Swaven. "Did that viper send you here?"

"Mother!" exclaimed Gata. "Doubtless Autumn will reveal all if you but give her a chance."

"I am waiting," said Swaven. "She says little however."

"And you blame her for that?" asked Gata. "She has but stepped inside and you lay accusations upon her. Give her a chance!"

"Very well," said Swaven, "but I expect a full account after they have eaten."

"I shall give it to you now," said Autumn. "As I said we are strangers to this land. We arrived from Wase but two days past and made our

camp last night on the escarpment overlooking Coot-Tha. Soon after Astauand woke this morning I heard some mishap on the path to the town and went to see what had happened. I found Gesen unconscious and being kicked by Madlek. I stopped him then attended to Gesen's injuries. While I was doing so Logan joined me then went further down the path to find Gesen's cart had run into Madlek's and killed Madlek's horse. Madlek returned to Coot-Tha to find a friend of his who had a horse and they returned to take Madlek's cart back to Coot-Tha. We brought Gesen and his horse here. Gesen's cart was too badly damaged to bring with us."

"Do not forget to tell of Madlek's companions," called Gesen from the other room.

"There is little to tell," said Autumn. "Madlek had some companions with him on his return and they took his cart away after some discussion."

"Discussion my arse," exclaimed Gesen. "'Twas six of them and they would have done for me had Autumn and Logan not bested them!"

"So the lad did not leave it entirely to you then," said Swaven drily.

"No," said Autumn frowning. "He played his part most admirably. Why would you think otherwise?"

"He left you to carry Gesen in here on your own," said Swaven. "He strikes me as an idle sod."

"You do Logan an injustice," said Autumn sharply. "I am more than able to carry Gesen on my own and another would merely have made the task more difficult."

"Mother, it is not for you to criticise," said Gata. "Doubtless they have their customs and doubtless those customs differ to ours."

"Mayhap," said Swaven. "So you had no hand in the crashing of the two carts?"

"No," said Autumn. "That was entirely the doing of Madlek. He or

someone with him threw a rock at Gesen which caused Gesen to fall off his cart and break his shoulder. The cart then ran away down the hill and crashed into Madlek's cart."

"There will be a reckoning," said Swaven coldly.

"There always is," said Gata sadly. "Why should today be any different?"

"Indeed," said Swaven.

"There would seem to be some ill will between your two families," said Autumn. "Why is that?"

"Because the Madlek clan are scum," said Swaven calmly. "They wage war against us and we do but protect ourselves in turn. You are not eating."

"Yes," said Gata, pushing the dish of fruit towards Logan. "Eat, eat."

"Thank you," said Logan, taking a piece of fruit. He eyed the cheese but decided to wait. There was a tension in the air that made him a little uncomfortable.

"From what was said by Madlek and his companions," said Autumn, "it would seem that they wage war against you because you wage war against them."

"That does not surprise me," said Swaven irritably. "They are all lying bloodthirsty scum and this land will be the better by far when the last of them is dead."

"But is it not the case that if you injure or kill one of them they will in turn injure or kill one of your family?" asked Autumn. "As they have done today with Gesen."

"Aye," said Gata. "Tis a stupid situation."

"And what would you have us do?" exclaimed Swaven. "You are but a recent addition to this family. What do you know of the wrongs them

vipers have levelled against us?”

“I know all that you have told me,” said Gata, “and I have seen what we have done to them these past summers since I came here.”

“So you would wish it to end, Gata?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Gata. “I see little future in it.”

“Then you are a fool,” spat Swaven. “You wait until one of Madlek’s spawn kills one of your children. You’ll soon change your tune then, my girl.”

“Aye, like as not,” said Gata, “although I pray to all the gods that day never comes.”

“It need not,” said Autumn.

“Pah!” exclaimed Swaven. “You be travellers passing by and yet you think you know everything!”

“I do not claim to know everything,” said Autumn. “That is one of the reasons we travel so I can understand more of this world but it is apparent to me that if each of your families seek revenge for every ill that is done to you then the cycle of revenge and counter revenge can never be broken until one or both families are destroyed in the process. That would seem ... a fruitless objective.”

Logan reached out to take some cheese as it was fast becoming apparent that no one else was going to eat anything. Gata noticed and pushed the bread closer to him as well. He smiled his thanks and took some.

“Fruitless?” said Swaven. “I would not say the obliteration of Madlek and all his kin is fruitless.”

“Doubtless he would say the same of you and your kin,” said Autumn. “Unless that cycle is broken that is how it will end.”

“Then so be it,” said Swaven calmly. “’Tis worth the cost.”

“How can it be broken?” asked Gata.

“Be quiet child,” said Swaven. “A hand for a hand is how we do things and that will never change.”

“It can easily be changed,” said Autumn. “All it takes is for both families to agree to end the cycle of revenges.”

“I venture it would not be that easy,” said Logan. “There are too many involved.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn. “Surely if Madlek agrees or whoever is head of the family? I would be entirely happy to begin discussions with him to bring this about.”

“I doubt even you can,” said Logan, “but my point is that even if the head of Madlek’s family and the head of this family agree there will still be others in both families who will take it upon themselves to seek revenge. I wager it will be impossible to get everyone to agree and even if they do some accident will befall someone and others in that family will blame the other family and it will all begin again.”

“But surely it is worth making a start, is it not?” asked Autumn, picking up a piece of bread but not eating it.

“How?” asked Gata. “I am of this family only these seven summers past so I see the sense of what you are saying but how do you go about getting the others to see sense?”

“I imagine it will take time,” said Autumn, “but if the head of this family can be persuaded then envoys can be sent to the Madlek family and discussions can begin. For certain I cannot see how peace can be brought about without discussions.”

“Tis a nice idea,” said Gata, “but it is doomed to failure from the very start.”

“How so?” asked Autumn. “Mayhap if I speak with the head of your family I can make a beginning at least.”

“You will not get far,” said Swaven. “Best you be saving your breath for all the walking you’ll be doing when you move on.”

“I can but try,” said Autumn. “Who is the head of this family?”

“I am,” said Swaven.

“Then let us talk,” said Autumn. “Can you put the past behind you for the sake of the future?”

“You are a fool,” said Swaven. “You have these silly little ideas in your head but you know nothing of the truth of the matter. I have lost my man and two sons to these swine. Aye and his brother too.”

“Nothing will bring them back,” said Autumn, “and certainly not more loss of life.”

“And my father and his sister,” said Swaven, “and two dozen or more besides going back over the generations since we came to this land. You expect me and my family to forswear revenge for their deaths?”

“How many of Madlek’s kin have died over those same generations?” asked Logan.

“Not enough,” said Swaven coldly. “Nowhere near enough.”

“But can you not see that revenge breeds revenge?” asked Autumn. “Gesen lies in that room and but for mere chance he would be dead. Can you not forgo revenge and seek out reconciliation with Madlek instead? Why put Gata’s children and future generations at risk?”

“Because they are at risk as long as any of that clan lives,” said Swaven. “You say they are at risk by taking revenge but I say their risk by not taking revenge is by far the greater. Without the prospect of revenge nothing will stay the hand of those who would seek to kill any of Gata’s children.”

“But surely if they agree not to?” said Autumn. “If they take an oath to end these killings can you not do the same?”

“Pah,” said Swaven. “Them take an oath? I would not trust any of them to keep it longer than it takes to pick their noses. I will never be bound by any oath when they will never keep it.”

“I see,” said Autumn. She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “I confess I cannot see any way forward on this for it surely comes down to trust in the end and no amount of discussion can make someone trust another for trust has to be earned through actions and deeds not words.”

“’Tis as I said,” said Swaven, “just fancy words and so much hot air. ’Twill take more than a stranger passing though to make me and mine trust them shifts no matter what fancy words you spout at the table.”

“I see that now,” said Autumn, putting down her bread uneaten. “But you will forgive me for trying?”

“Aye,” said Swaven. “And I thank you for the trying but until you have lost as many as I have you will never truly understand.”

“Likely you are right,” said Autumn. “We thank you for your hospitality but ’tis best we be going now.” She stood up and Logan quickly swallowed his cheese and jumped up as well.

“Bide awhile longer,” said Swaven. “You interest me and I would know more about you and your travels. Mayhap even stay the night if you desire.”

“That is kind of you to offer,” said Autumn, aware that Swaven may be offended again if her hospitality was rejected. She hesitated then sat down again. A little confused, Logan sat down too. “Perhaps you could also tell us of this island? We did not know it even existed until recently.”

“A fair exchange,” said Swaven. “Tell me, where are you from originally? You said Wase earlier but you are both clearly not Wasian.”

“We are from Aferraron,” said Autumn, “but we have been travelling widely these two summers past.”

“To what purpose?” asked Gata. “Surely your families miss you?”

“We have no families,” said Autumn. “I was found as a babe and nurtured in an Esyup and both Logan's parents died when he was a boy.”

“What is an Esyup?” asked Swaven.

“’Tis a place of learning,” said Autumn. “Much given to study and knowledge.”

“Ahh,” said Swaven. “And have you found that to be of any use?”

“That is a difficult question to answer,” she said, smiling. “It depends what you mean by 'use'. In any practical sense then probably no.”

“Then why bother?” asked Gata.

“That is why I travel the world,” said Autumn. “To find out why.”

“That makes no sense to me,” said Swaven. “You travel to find out why you travel?”

“It may make no sense now,” said Logan, “but when Autumn has found out it will be clear to us all.”

“And you?” asked Gata. “You travel to find out why you travel as well?”

“Me? No,” said Logan. “I travel because Autumn travels. When she stops I will stop also.”

“That I do understand,” said Swaven. “Family is important. Doubtless you will stop travelling when the first babe comes along?”

“That will n...” started Autumn but Logan interrupted.

“Doubtless,” he said, nudging Autumn so she didn't argue. He sensed Swaven and Gata would find her vows incomprehensible. “And let us hope that we are in a good place when that happens.”

“Aye,” said Swaven, “although children tend to come along regardless.”

“So I have heard,” said Autumn. “Tell me, is Danornor a large island?”

“I believe so,” said Swaven, “although I have travelled little. Our part is quite small though.”

“You mean your land here?” asked Autumn, gesturing around the dwelling.

“No, I mean our part of Danornor,” said Swaven. “We have only this northern tip of the island. The rest is forbidden to us.”

“What do you mean, forbidden?” asked Autumn, intrigued.

“We cannot go beyond the Wall,” said Gata, “although I must confess I have no desire to.”

“Wall?” asked Autumn. “What wall?”

“Do you not know of the Wall of Loriki?” asked Swaven. “I thought everyone knew of that.”

Chapter Five

“We know of no wall nor of Loriki,” said Autumn. “We are strangers here as I said.”

“I thought it was known and feared throughout Wase and Aferraron,” said Swaven frowning. “Aye and doubtless Neander as well. Truly you have not heard of it?”

“We heard nothing of even the existence of Danornor during our travels in Aferraron and Neander,” said Autumn. “’Twas only when we crossed into Wase that we met Kanikapila Hirao Five who traded with Danornor and told us.”³

“How strange,” said Swaven. She thought for a few moments, tapping one finger on the top of her stick, then her face cleared. “Clearly ’tis their fear of what lies beyond the Wall that stays their tongues. Aye, that will be what it is. Them as be across the seas be so afraid they dare not speak of it.”

“’Tis the only explanation, Swaven,” said Gata. “Us here have to live with it but those far off can avoid all mention. ’Tis only us who have it in our minds.”

“You intrigue me,” said Autumn and Logan sighed. He felt fairly sure that this Wall was fast becoming a place to visit. “Who or what is this Loriki and why is there a Wall?”

“I know not,” said Swaven, “save only that that is the name of the Wall. Like as not Loriki is the name of the monsters that lie beyond.”

“Aye, they be demons all right,” agreed Gata, “although I heard Loriki be the name of the leader of the demons.”

“Nay, girl,” said Swaven. “The land beyond the Wall is teeming with monsters and demons and they have no leader. They are so fearsome

3 See *The Annals ~ The Seventh Tale*. Kanikapila Hirao Five, also known as Iuo, came to the aid of Autumn and Logan when they were attacked by the forces of the Chanwar family of bandits. Mother Midcarn had given them a gift for such an eventuality but the magic on it, courtesy of the sorcerer Orgajatoby Miunitou Lopel Bai, failed.

and mindless that none can control them. Such as them cannot be led.”

“So am I to understand that most of the Island of Danornor is filled with these creatures?” asked Autumn. “And there is a wall that separates them from you?”

“Aye,” said Swaven. “’Tis only a short way to the south and stretches from coast to coast. ’Tis the only thing that protects us from being killed and eaten in our beds.”

“It must be a mighty wall,” said Logan. “How is it that these demons do not fly or climb over?”

“Oh do not speak of such things!” exclaimed Gata looking horrified. “I will not be able to sleep tonight for fear of their coming!”

“Pah, do not fuss yourself, girl,” said Swaven coldly. “You will sleep as well tonight as you did last night and the night before. None of the Loriki have been able to venture past the Wall in my lifetime nor that of my mother before me. ’Tis the stoutest of walls, you see, Autumn. ’Twas built many generations past and has served us well. ”

“Is the Wall far from here?” asked Autumn.

“’Tis but a day’s walk,” said Gata. “So close I can almost smell it!”

“Do not listen to her,” scoffed Swaven. “A day’s walk indeed! Do we not have my father’s brother’s son Vasau living two days away and him not close to the Wall?”

“So is the Wall far beyond Vasau’s dwelling?” asked Autumn.

“It must be for Vasau is no fool,” said Swaven. “He would not risk his farm and family by living next to demons and monsters. I wager the Wall must be at least another day’s journey beyond although not much further for most of this island is forbidden to us.”

“So it is these demons and monsters of Loriki that forbid you from going beyond the Wall?” asked Autumn.

“What a foolish question,” said Swaven. “Who else would forbid us from turning the entire island into farmland and trading at great profit with Aferraron and Wase? Were it not for these horrors we would not be living here in this hovel. We would have a vast estate and live in great comfort in a dwelling built of the finest stone.”

“So you know the rest of the island is good farmland?” asked Logan.

“Why would it be different to here?” asked Gata. “Tis the same island, is it not?”

“True,” said Autumn, “although land can change greatly in a short distance. Has anyone been beyond the Wall and seen what it is like?”

“Of course not!” exclaimed Swaven. “How could they? No one can get past the Wall!”

“Can you not sail around?” asked Logan. “This is an island after all and you said the Wall only goes from coast to coast.”

“Aye, and all around the coast,” said Swaven, “and it reaches as high as Plakill so there is no climbing over. And why would we want to, eh? To be eaten to death by ravening hordes of monsters? I think not.”

“What form do these monsters and demons take?” asked Autumn.

“They be giants with a hundred or more arms and legs,” said Gata, “and as many heads and each head has three mouths all filled with teeth as long as this house!”

“And they be black and hairy,” said Swaven, “and reek so bad you can smell them at five hundred paces.”

“That is a mighty smell,” said Logan. “I wonder how they can bear to live with each other.”

“They have no noses,” said Gata. “They cannot smell each other.”

“Ahh, that would explain it,” said Logan. “Three mouths and no noses. No wonder they need most of the island. What do they live

on?"

"Us, of course," said Gata. "Why else do you think we have the Wall? Without it we would all have been torn limb from limb and eaten by now!"

"A fair point," said Autumn, "and one that had not occurred to me. Logan, if it sits well with you, let us not trespass on the hospitality of these good people any longer. We have returned Gesen to his kin and we should be on our way."

"As you say, Autumn," said Logan.

"We thank you, Swaven, for your offer of beds for the night," said Autumn, "but we are travellers and the need for travel is upon us. Gesen will be well given time. He needs only rest and his shoulder will heal although he must not lift anything with that arm until the bone is fully rejoined. You say this Wall is some days travel to the south west?"

"You are intending to go there?" asked Swaven, fixing her with a stare. "I would caution you most strongly against it."

"And we take heed of your cautions," said Autumn, standing up. "We seek knowledge and understanding, not monsters and demons."

* * *

"I take it we are not returning to Coot-Tha," said Logan when they had walked some way back along the path they had travelled earlier.

"Is that where you would like to go, Logan?" asked Autumn.

"Where I would like to go matters little," he said with a smile. "I know you want to go to the Wall of Loriki."

"You would prefer not to?" she asked.

"I confess I would like to see for myself," he said. "Their tales of monsters and demons made little sense to me."

“And me likewise,” said Autumn. “A giant wall that goes all the way around the island save for a small part here would seem unlikely. If those that dwell the other side of the Wall are as fearsome as Swaven and Gata say then why would they not encompass the entire island?”

“Indeed,” said Logan. “If these monsters eat only people then 'tis likely there are none left for it has been at least two generations since they last had a meal. Do you think there really is a wall?”

“I suppose it is possible,” said Autumn. “There probably was in times past and Loriki is likely the name of the person who built it but the truth of it has long been forgotten. Did you note that neither Swaven nor Gata have seen the Wall and neither spoke of any they know who has seen it? Nor does Vasau live near it.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “and I find it hard to believe that no one has sailed around the island even if their way across the land is barred.”

“Perhaps someone has and they have told that this Wall goes all the way around,” said Autumn. “I fancy if you have a hundred arms and legs then the building of a wall would be easy but I do wonder why, if these creatures are as fearsome as we are told, they would want to build a wall. 'Twould seem more likely that the Wall was built by the people of the island to keep the creatures the other side and if that is so, why build all along the coast? Would it not be easier to build a wall around the small part the people inhabit rather than the large part they do not?”

“I didn't think of that,” said Logan, “but you are right. 'Tis like the wall around the Old City of Schtei. It is not a wall around the rest of the world.”

“That is a debatable point,” said Autumn. “If you build a wall around everything outside a city how would you distinguish it from a wall around the city? The two would in fact be the same wall as the wall lies between the city and everything else.”

“Hmm,” grunted Logan thinking about it. “I had not thought of it that way.”

“But here, it is different,” said Autumn. “’Tis not like the wall around the Old City at all. There the wall is between the city and everything else but here the wall is between the demon part of the island and everything else.”

“So you think the demons built the Wall to keep everyone else out?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn, “for we both agree that the demons, if they are indeed demons, would have nothing to fear. I think the Wall, if there is such a wall, is there only to separate the two parts of the island and does not go around the coast.”

“But surely then whatever lies beyond the Wall could go around the Wall,” said Logan.

“So you would think,” said Autumn, “which suggests that there is no Wall from coast to coast.”

“So why say there is?” he responded.

“Like as not in a time long past there was someone who built a wall,” said Autumn, “perhaps around their dwelling and tales have been told since then that have made this small wall a thing of great size. Did not Ratanbismet in Schtei change from being a thing of great foulness to the belief that it was the protector of the city over several generations?”⁴

“A fair point,” said Logan. “Mayhap the builder of the Wall was someone called Loriki and he built it to protect himself and his family from bandits or suchlike and fought to defend it and has become a demon with the retelling. So, we are going to look for the Wall?”

“If that sits well with you, friend Logan,” said Autumn. “I will not make you go there if you would rather not.”

“Well, I do not imagine we will come to any harm,” said Logan. “After all, if everything Swaven and Gata told us about the Wall is true then the Wall is stout enough to keep the demons at bay. If, when we do

4 See *The Annals ~ The Eighth Tale*.

find it and it is as they say then doubtless we will turn around and go somewhere else.”

He walked on for four paces waiting for Autumn's reply but none was forthcoming.

“We will turn around, won't we, Autumn?” he asked, stopping to look at her.

“Just suppose that everything they told us about the Wall were true,” said Autumn, not stopping so Logan had to hurry after her. “Would you not be interested to know what lies the other side?”

“Not really,” said Logan. “If everything about the Wall is true then I would imagine everything about what's on the other side will be true as well.”

“But we travel in search of knowledge and understanding,” said Autumn. “Imagining and knowing are not the same.”

“You do,” said Logan. “I don't. I am happy to imagine things and, once imagined, leave them alone.”

“But what if it is not how you imagine it to be?” said Autumn. “Would you not be missing a great opportunity?”

“You think you will find your place beyond the Wall?” asked Logan.

“I imagine not,” said Autumn, “but the possibility exists and so does the opportunity. Would it not be grievous ill fortune if my place is behind the Wall and yet, because I imagine it not to be, I never find my place?”

“I am not certain that is a valid argument,” said Logan after thinking about it for a few moments. “You could use it in any situation. You could, for example, argue the same about that patch of grass over there or some of the rooms in Gesen's dwelling but you did not explore the dwelling nor will you go over there to inspect the grass.”

“You think that patch of grass is my place in this world?” asked

Autumn, stopping to look at a patch some way off the path.

“No,” said Logan, “but would it not be grievous ill fortune if it is but you passed by without even noticing it?”

Autumn stared at the patch of grass with her lips pursed and a look of concentration on her face.

“’Tis a quandary,” she said after a while. “How can I find my place in the world if I do not inspect every blade of grass but to do so would take longer than I can reasonably expect to be in this world. ’Twould seem an impossible task.”

Logan burst out laughing.

“This is no joke,” said Autumn sternly. “You have set me a logic problem that I cannot see how to resolve.”

“Oh Autumn, Autumn,” said Logan still chuckling. “It was a joke but it was not intentional. I did not mean that you should inspect every blade of grass we pass. I meant only that you can use that argument to justify you going anywhere you have taken a fancy to going. Would it not be easier and I daresay truer to simply say you want to see what is on the other side of the Wall than try to provide a logical argument as to why you should see what is on the other side? After all, if you did not want to see what’s on the other side you would not force yourself to go there simply because it might possibly be your place in the world.”

“So what you are in effect saying,” said Autumn, staring at Logan with hard eyes, “is that I am not bound by truth?”

“Oh Sploop!” exclaimed Logan. “What manner of disaster have I created now?”

“I venture it is a disaster of sorts,” said Autumn. “I have always imagined myself to be bound by truth and logic and yet you are saying that I am not. You are saying, unless I am much mistaken, that I am a thing of emotion and swept along by every passing fancy.”

“Not at all,” said Logan. “You apply logic to almost every situation and when you see a truth you apply it ruthlessly. It is just that sometimes logic is not enough and this is one of those times. As you said yourself, if you stick rigidly to logic you put yourself in an impossible situation for it is simply not possible for you to inspect every possible place to see if it is your place for there are more places than can be inspected. In fact 'tis worse than that for a place may not be your place at the moment you inspect it but it may become your place afterwards and if it is impossible to inspect everywhere it is doubly impossible to inspect everywhere twice.”

Autumn folded her arms and continued to stare at him.

“All I am saying,” said Logan, starting to get nervous in case he'd upset Autumn, “is that there are times when you have to abandon logic. There are times when you have to put logic aside and say 'I imagine this to be a place not worth inspecting' and accept that.”

“Don't stop,” said Autumn.

“Sploop,” muttered Logan. “I don't think I have anything else to say.”

“I am sure there is more you can say,” said Autumn. “'Twould seem you know me better than I know myself.”

“Oh I doubt that very much,” said Logan. “I have only known you these two summers past and you have known yourself your entire life.”

“And yet you have uncovered a truth about me that I had not,” said Autumn. “It makes me wonder what other truths there may be about myself that I know nothing of.”

“So I haven't upset you?” asked Logan.

“That depends what you mean by upset,” said Autumn, starting walking again. “If you mean have you angered or hurt me the answer is no but if you mean you have altered my perception of myself then the answer is yes.”

“I did not mean to,” said Logan, following her. “I'm sorry.”

“Do not be sorry,” said Autumn, “for I thank you deeply. This has been a moment of learning for me.”

“How so?” asked Logan. “All I was doing was pointing out that sometimes you use logic to justify something you wanted to do anyway.”

“Exactly,” said Autumn. “I was not aware of that until you pointed it out. I thought my actions were always guided by logic but I see now there are times when I use logic to justify rather than guide my actions.”

“Well, I’m not sure that is entirely true,” said Logan. “After all, you are in search of knowledge as well so it makes sense to find out what is the other side of the Wall so that you know.”

“And that in itself is sufficient reason,” said Autumn. “But if I did not want to see what was behind the Wall I would not go past it and, if pressed, I would come up with a logical justification rather than simply admitting I did not want to. If I was as I thought I was then I would go past the Wall even when I did not want to because of my search for knowledge.”

“But you remember Cymogene Hirao Sastruga?” asked Logan. “You did not want to kill her but you had a valid argument to do so so you did.”⁵

“I am not saying it is always the case,” said Autumn, “merely sometimes. This is something I need to be wary of.”

“So are you saying that if we find the Wall and it is as Swaven says that you will not want to see what lies beyond after all?” asked Logan.

“Of course not,” said Autumn cheerfully. “We travel in search of knowledge, do we not, and I would like to anyway. If that sits well with you.”

“So did our discussion actually change anything?” asked Logan. “It was an arduous journey if it achieved nothing.”

5 See *The Annals ~ The Second Tale*.

“It achieved a greater self awareness on my part,” said Autumn, “and I am now happy to admit I want to see what lies beyond the Wall without invoking logical justifications.”

“And what of the dangers?” asked Logan.

“What indeed,” said Autumn. “You are forgetting something, however, which you are usually at pains to point out.”

“Oh?” said Logan. “And what am I forgetting?”

“We have no gifts from Mother Midcarn,” said Autumn, “so any dangers that arise are likely within our capability to handle ourselves.”

“There is a logical flaw there,” said Logan dourly.

“Oh yes?” said Autumn.

“There must come a time when we both die,” said Logan. “I know that has no great meaning to you but it could be that receiving no gifts from Mother Midcarn to aid us does not mean that we are invincible on our own. It could simply mean that our times have come.”

“A fair point, Logan the Worrier,” said Autumn, “but if our times have come then surely we cannot avoid that?”

“I don't know why I bother to argue with you,” said Logan. “It never does me any good.”

“I apologise,” said Autumn, stopping abruptly. “Come, let us return to Coot-Tha and get a boat to somewhere else. Mayhap there is even a boat to Sassese'lte. That is a land we have yet to venture near.”

“Why are we leaving now?” asked Logan. “I thought you wanted to find the Wall?”

“I did,” said Autumn, “but not at the cost of upsetting you in any way. A wall on an island is no great thing of interest and we have seen walls before. Come, Sassese'lte beckons.”

“But by all accounts this is a wall that surpasses any we have encountered before,” said Logan. “Imagine, a wall that goes as high as Plakill! Mayhap we can climb it and visit that place. Does that not renew your interest?”

“You would like to go to Plakill?” asked Autumn in surprise.

“More so than being eaten by giant demons with three mouths,” said Logan, “but you too forget something.”

“What's that?” asked Autumn.

“There is yet time for Mother Midcarn to give us gifts,” said Logan. “Come, the Wall beckons as well and it is closer than Sassese'lte and Plakill.”

Chapter Six

'Twas some way after dawn when Autumn completed her exercises to her satisfaction. The pebbled beach had been somewhat narrow and confining but the loose stones had presented an interesting challenge in maintaining solid footwork on unstable ground and Autumn had taken full advantage of the opportunity. She glanced up at the top of the steep slope to where Logan had been sitting watching her but he was no longer there.

She stripped off her tunic and folded it neatly on top of her robe on a large stone that had fallen down the slope. It was patchy with dried mud and moss so clearly it had not long fallen and been washed clean by the waves. Naked, Autumn felt the sharp chill of the incoming sea breeze on her skin and stretched her arms high above her head while arching her back. She held the pose for a count of ten slow breaths, every muscle tensed, then relaxed. A quick backward glance showed Logan had not yet returned from where he had gone so she stepped forward a few paces so the waves surged and gurgled around her calves. Two paces ahead small fish darted hither and yon and several paces beyond, where the water started to become deep and the stony bottom not longer apparent, she could see a large dark shadow of something gliding past. As she watched it twisted to glide back the way it had come.

“I wonder if it sees me,” thought Autumn, watching closely.

She breathed deeply and suppressed the beginnings of a rising fear for she had a deep mistrust of water too deep for her to stand in with her head in the air and her feet firmly on the bottom. Some way off to her right, just as the dark shadow was about to disappear into the general background of the sea it turned and glided back, all the time keeping much the same distance from the shore.

“Mayhap it is stalking me,” thought Autumn, stilling an urge to step backwards. “Mayhap it is too big to come this close in where the water is shallow.

Keeping an eye on the shadow as it glided back and forth, undisturbed by the shallow swells that surged around her ankles she

stooped and splashed water over herself, washing away the sweat from her exertions. With each scoop the small fish hurried away, staying together as though they were joined then returning a heartbeat later. Abruptly the dark shadow turned again, this time in the middle of its glide, and headed out to sea, disappearing from view. Autumn watched it go then ran her hands over her body to wipe off the drops of sea water.

She retreated back above the water line and stood with her arms outstretched for a few moments while the breeze dried her then picked up her tunic and put it on. What dampness still remained would soon be gone. A sudden loud splashing of water behind her made her spin, the stones beneath her feet scraping against each other. Reflexively she dropped into a defensive crouch, but there was nothing there. Slowly she stood upright again, her eyes scanning the surface of the sea then there it was! The large dark shadow, or another very like it, leapt out of the water some way distant, shimmering and flashing in the morning light before crashing back down, throwing up a fountain of water. Again it jumped, this time more distant still.

“Go in peace my fishy friend,” said Autumn softly, enjoying the spectacle. “I wish you well.”

As if in acknowledgement the creature jumped once more, this time higher, and seemed to hang motionless in the air for longer than seemed possible. Then it returned to the water and disappeared, leaving only a memory. Perhaps it had caught some prey for a crowd of birds launched themselves from the rocks and swarmed where the big fish had last submerged, screaming at each other and wheeling and diving as though foraging on the surface of the water.

Autumn smiled and picked up her robe before looking to see if Logan had been watching as well. He was still nowhere to be seen.

“I wonder where he is,” she thought. “Surely not even Logan would have gone back to sleep?”

The slope up from the small beach was steep but it was covered in clumps of grass and embedded stones and was an easy climb even for one without her agility. She emerged at the top, her breathing still

light, and looked around. Their camp was much as she'd left it, in a narrow strip of grass between the edge of the forest and the slope down to the beach. Their blankets and her pack were there, as was Logan's staff and the remains of their fire with but a single thin wisp of smoke still rising but not Logan himself. A trail of bent grass stalks led away from the camp along the top of the slope then veered off among the trees, suggesting Logan had gone that way. Autumn picked up the water bottle and drank then sat beside the fire and picked up a root that still sat in the ashes. It was cold now, of course, but she splashed a little water on it to get rid of the ash and a few ants that were investigating it then began to nibble the edges. It had a curious flavour, a mixture of dry earthiness and sweet fruitiness, but it was firm and chewy

"'Tis unlike Logan to wander off," she thought, looking around. "Mayhap he heard something among the trees and went to see what it was."

Half the root was sufficient to quell her hunger so she left the rest for Logan to eat on his return and went to investigate the trees for she needed a new staff. Her old one had been destroyed in her battle with Ratanbismet in the Library under the Old Palace in Schtei.⁶ The trees here were unlike any she'd seen before as their bark was like scales that wrapped around their trunks in the manner of straps and their branches grew up and out rather than simply out. Most of the branches were still attached to their trunks but she found one that had broken off which was a decent length and she picked it up. It was feather light and when she gripped it her fingernails sunk into the wood. Curious, she inspected it more closely but it showed no signs of being rotten. The branch snapped easily but inside it looked fresh, not hollowed by insects or disease. She discarded it for it would be useless as a staff and abandoned her search. All the trees in this particular place were of the same type.

"No matter," she thought, making her way slowly back to the camp. "Doubtless there will be a hardwood tree elsewhere. 'Tis just a matter of patience."

6 See *The Annals ~ The Eighth Tale*. Ratanbismet was a boq-hasuva, a highly destructive tree nymph that is the spirit of the alkarmasu creeper. During the battle Autumn's staff was partially consumed by the boq-hasuva.

“Ahh, you are returned,” she said, seeing Logan.

He was standing at the top of the slope looking down at the beach below.

“Autumn!” he exclaimed, turning. “I was wondering where you were.”

“Mizule, what has happened to your face?” she demanded, hurrying over to look at him closely. “Were you attacked by an animal?”

“Ahh,” he said, looking a little embarrassed. “So you noticed then?”

“You return with blood all over your face like something has tried to rip out your throat,” said Autumn. “Of course I would notice. What happened?”

“I was trying to get rid of the hair on my face,” he admitted, running his hand over his chin. He looked down at the smears of blood and grimaced. “Twould seem I did not make a good job of it.”

“Much of the hair is gone,” said Autumn, studying him. “Aye, and a fair amount of skin too. How did you do this?”

“I, um, found a shell,” said Logan. “Over in the next cove. It was flat and had an edge to it so I scraped my chin with it.”

“And did you not notice you cut yourself?” asked Autumn, pulling up a handful of grass. She wrapped the blades into a wad and poured water on it.

“I did feel some stings,” admitted Logan, “and after a time I saw blood on the shell but I thought it had stopped bleeding.”

“Facial cuts bleed for some time,” said Autumn, washing his face and neck. “Ears are the worst for some reason and you have, umm, two cuts on that ear and one on the other. You also have four, five, six, seven cuts on your chin and cheeks and three on your throat and a few are quite long although none are deep. Was it your intention to remove the hairs from the inside?”

“Not at all,” said Logan indignantly. “’Tis just that I have never done this before.”

“The facial hair of men is not something of which I have made a study,” said Autumn, “although I have seen people at markets shaving others’ faces. I shall return shortly for we need something to stem the bleeding. I think there was some seaweed on the beach that will work.”

She stepped back and looked at Logan again then ran quickly down the slope. Logan poured a little water on his hands and wiped them over his face. He was still staring at the thin pink wetness when she returned with a dripping handful of some grey-green weeds covered in blisters.

“Sit on that rock,” she commanded and Logan obediently sat. “Tilt your head back. This may sting a little.”

She dropped all but one of the weeds on the ground then squeezed a blister on the weed in her hand so it burst and touched it to Logan’s ear.

“Oww,” he exclaimed, jerking his head away. “Voqev!”

“Hold still,” said Autumn firmly.

“It hurt,” said Logan, putting his hand to his ear.

“’Tis a good learning opportunity,” said Autumn, slapping his hand away. She touched the cut on his ear again with the blister.

“Owwww,” exclaimed Logan jerking away again. “Is this really necessary?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “These little cuts will ooze blood for some time and already the flies are gathering or would you rather have flies all over your face for half the day? The cuts may also become pussy as flies and other insects can bring a foulness.”

“Oh all right then,” said Logan. “If you must.”

Autumn moved to Logan's side and clamped his head against her stomach with a vice like grip then smeared the contents of the blister over the cut on his ear. He tried to remain stoic but a faint whimper escaped his lips.

"Be strong," said Autumn moving round to the other side so she could coat the two cuts on the other ear. "Think calming thoughts of a time of great happiness."

"All I can think about is how much this stuff hurts," said Logan between gasps.

"The stinging should go almost immediately," said Autumn, releasing her grip. "Does the first one still pain you?"

"Ahh ...," said Logan as he thought about it, "... no, the sting has gone."

"Excellent," said Autumn, going behind him. She tossed away the length of seaweed and picked up another. "Now for your throat." She wrapped one arm tightly around his forehead while she daubed seaweed blister juice liberally. Logan wedged his feet under the rock to stop his legs jerking uncontrollably.

"All done," she said an excruciatingly long time later. She let go of Logan's head and he leapt up and backed away several paces.

"I hope you enjoyed that," he said bitterly.

"Not at all," said Autumn, tossing away the last piece of seaweed. "But I would have enjoyed scraping the pus and corruption from your ears and face even less. I left you some food. Eat and recover your good temper."

"I don't think I can eat," said Logan, gingerly touching his throat and around his mouth. "It feels all swollen and raw."

"I fancy that is your imagination," said Autumn. "You look much as ever to me. You can wash the black juice off in a little while."

“Am I still bleeding?” he asked, looking at his fingers.

“No,” said Autumn. “And the flies are avoiding you as well.”

“Ahhh, I daresay that is good then,” he said and slumped down beside the now smokeless fire.

Autumn sat down as well.

“Can I ask what prompted this?” she asked. “You have had hair on your face all the time I have known you. Not much, I admit, but some.”

“Ahh you will think I am stupid,” said Logan with some embarrassment in his voice.

“Never,” said Autumn. “Misguided at times perhaps but never stupid. Tell me and perhaps I can be of assistance.”

“Ohhh, if I must,” said Logan resignedly. “You always manage to worm things out of me one way or another. ’Twas that Madlek, if you must know.”

“Madlek?” exclaimed Autumn in surprise. “I do not recall him saying anything about removing your facial hair and why would you listen to him anyway?”

“’Twas not that,” said Logan, “leastways not as such.”

“In what way then?” asked Autumn.

“He called me bumfluff,” said Logan. “A callow fool with the bumfluff still on his cheeks if I remember aright.”

“Now you speak of it I do recall something along those lines,” said Autumn. “And that upset you?”

“Aye,” said Logan sadly. “I do not want bumfluff on my cheeks. If I cannot have a proper beard like a man then I want none at all!”

"Ahh," said Autumn, nodding her head. "Now I think I begin to understand. 'Tis not the hair itself that offends you but the questioning of your manhood?"

"I suppose," said Logan, "if you must put it that way. I am seventeen and no longer a boy."

"I am not a man and do not know what goes with being a man," said Autumn thoughtfully, "but I was once a girl and changes happened to me so that now I am a woman. I do not know my age for certain but I venture I am twenty two or twenty three or around there so I have some idea of your feelings on this. As I recall a few summers past I went through a period of no little confusion when I knew not what I was. It did not help that I have met a few others of like age with children and I wondered why no children came to me. 'Tis only since I left the Esyup that I have discovered a woman must lie with a man before she can be with child which I confess came as no little relief to me. I know not in what manner I must lie with a man for this to happen but at least it is not some fault or deficiency within me."

"So you are saying I must lie with a man before I can grow a beard?" asked Logan, frowning.

"Not at all," said Autumn. "I know little of most things in the realm between men and women but I do know something of men's facial hair as many at my Esyup were men and I passed nigh on twenty years in their company and observed the changes that came upon them as they went from boy to man."

"So what should I do?" asked Logan.

"Nothing," said Autumn. "Your beard will grow in time but it does not suddenly appear. When a boy begins to change into a man there is some growth of hair but it takes several summers for that growth to become a full beard. 'Tis like the changing of your voice. Do you recall that or has it not yet happened to you?"

"Ahh, yes, I have been through that," said Logan. "'Twas a sad time indeed. For an entire summer I squeaked and croaked and I tried to avoid talking to anyone. At first I thought I was ill and dying but I

survived. Did you feel the same way?"

"Changing of the voice does not happen to women, or so Noxu told me," said Autumn. "I know not why this is so but I venture 'tis one of the differences between us. Hair on the face is another. We both grow hair on our bodies but only men and a few of the oldest of women grow hair on our faces and even those women have only a few hairs. Why this is so I cannot begin to imagine for do not both men and women get cold faces in the winter?"

"Aye," said Logan. "So are you saying that I will be growing a beard in time but not yet?"

"Like as not," said Autumn, "although some men have a lot of hair on their chins and others have little. Likely that depends on the make up of each man in the same way that their stature and the look of their faces varies. I know not why but it makes people easier to recognise. Imagine how difficult life would be if all men looked the same."

"So you are saying I may not ever grow a proper beard?" asked Logan.

"'Tis possible," said Autumn. "Mayhap you should ask Mother Midcarn although I doubt she will tell you."

"Hmmpf," said Logan. "But I do not like having bumfluff. 'Tis as I said before, either let me have a proper beard or none at all but I do not like people calling me bumfluff."

"Which brings us back to the cuts on your face," said Autumn, reaching over to stroke his cheek. "I venture all the bleeding has been stopped so you can wash your face now."

"Ahh, good," said Logan. He grabbed the water bottle and scrubbed his face and neck vigorously.

"There is still some seaweed juice on your ear," said Autumn. "No, the other one."

"All gone?" asked Logan, swivelling his head from side to side so Autumn could check properly.

“All gone,” said Autumn, “although the issue of your hair has not.”

“There must be a better way,” said Logan. “I have seen men with smooth cheeks and others with shaved heads but no cuts. How do they do it, do you suppose? I tried with my knife but it was too blunt to make any difference.”

“I am surprised a shell was any sharper,” said Autumn.

“I rubbed it on a rock to sharpen it,” admitted Logan. “It was blunter than the knife to start with although I ended up with a jagged edge.”

“Which doubtless explains the cuts,” said Autumn. “I confess I have no idea how men shave although I fancy it would be easier if you have a mirror so you can see what you are doing.”

“Did Noxu have a beard?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn, “but he did have hair on his upper lip which hung down on each side of his mouth. He used beeswax so the ... I do not know what to call them. Ponytails, perhaps. 'Twas a little like he had two thin ponytails, one each side of his mouth. He used the wax so they hung straight and did not flop everywhere like my ponytail.”

“How did he get rid of the hair on his chin?” asked Logan.

“Noxu plucked those hairs,” said Autumn. “I remember seeing him sitting sometimes in the sunshine with a metal dish on his lap as he pulled the hairs from his chin. He used two thin slivers of stone.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “Perhaps that would be easier. Did he ever cut himself?”

“Not that I recall,” said Autumn, “although his face would be red for a time afterwards. 'Twas fortunate that he did not need to do the plucking often else he would have been red faced all the time. I also recall another elder called Nagasen who kept his head free of hair by rubbing it with a special stone he had.”

“What sort of stone?” asked Logan, interested.

"'Twas grey and had holes in it," said Autumn. "I have not seen stone like it elsewhere for it was like the froth of boiling milk that had gone hard. I seem to remember he got it from a trader who passed through when I was young but where the trader got the stone I do not know."

"But it worked?" asked Logan.

"Yes and no," said Autumn. "It got rid of the hair but for two days after each rubbing Nagasen would have red spots with yellow tops on them all over his head. 'Twas not an overly pretty sight but then Nagasen was not overly pretty at the best of times. His face and neck were much pitted with scars from an illness he had as a child."

"So it would seem I have other choices" said Logan thoughtfully. "I can rub the hairs off with a stone or I can pull them out and likely neither will cut me."

"Aye," said Autumn, "or you can accept your destiny and wait to see what manner of beard lies in store for you."

"And be called bumfluff," said Logan. "You think that is my destiny? To be bumfluff all my life?"

Chapter Seven

“Which way shall we go?” asked Autumn when they had packed their few belongings and covered the fire with soil in case it flared up again.

“Which way do you want to go?” asked Logan, checking their coins and the bits of jewellery they still had left were securely wrapped in his blanket.

“Tis fitting as you are now of the world of men that you have more say in the matter,” said Autumn, a glint in her eye.

“You will not let me forget this, will you,” said Logan with a sigh. “One silly little attempt to shave and you will doubtless tease me forever.”

“Forever is a very long time, Logan,” said Autumn, slinging her pack over her shoulder. “And doubtless your beard will have resolved itself one way or another long before forever ends but teasing you was not my purpose.” She paused for a moment then added, “or not my sole purpose at least.”

“And I do not feel I am a man anyway,” said Logan, grabbing his staff. “Inside I still feel like a boy, lost and alone amidst the confusion of this world. The more I see of strangenesses the more I come to realise there are likely endless strangenesses and many more lie before us.” He sighed and hefted his staff before idly jabbing it at a tree. “No matter. What was your purpose?”

“Twas only that your shaving has shown me that you have changed since we first met,” said Autumn. “We are but a short time from spring and it will then be two summers since I left my Esyup and we came together as companions and friends. In all that time you have made me take the lead but I wonder now that as you are a boy no more then mayhap you should have a fairer say in where we go and what we do. Is it not so that had we not met you would have children and some form of business of your own by now and be making your mark in this world?”

"You too have changed," said Logan with a laugh. "When we met you had no understanding of jokes and now you stand before me cracking them with the straightest of faces like a travelling entertainer. I had not thought it possible."

"How so?" asked Autumn, frowning. "What joke have I made?"

"Truly you do not see it?" he asked, leaning on his staff and looking at her.

"No," she said. "I was entirely serious. Why do you think otherwise?"

"Oh Autumn," said Logan, shaking his head in mock mournfulness. "Had we not met and you permitted me to travel with you I would be dead by now. You are forgetting I was exiled from Biasdo under pain of execution⁷ and doubtless had you not found me I would have returned there and been hung or gone elsewhere and been hung there instead." He sighed and looked up at the sky. "And that is not to say anything of my luck with girls."

"Komorebi was unfortunate, to be sure,"⁸ said Autumn, "but there will be others of that I am certain, particularly as you are no longer a boy."

"Will you please drop that?" said Logan scowling. "'Twas stupid of me to want to shave but 'tis done now and harking back to it constantly is unkind."

"A thousand apologies, friend Logan," said Autumn, going over to squeeze his hand. "Truly I was not making fun of you. Look ...," and she put her hands to his shoulders then brought them back to her own, "... you are near a hand's breadth wider than me now and taller. We used to be much the same size but you have grown and are filling

7 See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*. When Autumn and Logan first met he had just been offered the choice of exile or hanging for repeated stealing. At this point in *The Annals*, neither Logan nor Autumn knew that the village of Biasdo no longer existed as it was razed to the ground by the usurper Lord Loheckle not long after Logan's departure. Had Logan stayed he would undoubtedly have died in that confrontation anyway.

8 See *The Annals ~ The Eighth Tale*. Komorebi was their neighbour during their stay in Schtei and was under the mistaken impression Logan had wealth and influence. When she discovered otherwise she lost interest in Logan.

out into your manly form whereas I will stay much as I am now until I am old and bent. I venture you will catch the eye of many a maid in times to come. Komorebi was the first but if she is the last I will be greatly surprised."

"Now you do make fun of me," said Logan bitterly. "You know as well as I do that I cannot talk to girls. Mayhap I will catch their eye as you say but my tongue will let me down and their eyes will pass on to another."

"You talked with Komorebi," said Autumn.

"Aye, and much good it did me," said Logan. "'Tis my intention never to speak with another girl again."

"Well, we shall see," said Autumn, stepping back. "I fancy this is an intention that will soon fall by the wayside when the time is right. Let us be on our way for there is another matter I would talk with you about and we may as well walk while talking. Which way shall we go?"

"Which way do you want to go?" asked Logan.

"You choose," said Autumn. "'Tis time you had a greater say in what we do."

"So we are back to this again, are we?" asked Logan. "You are determined to make a man of me, hey?"

"'Tis nothing to do with me," said Autumn. "You are making yourself a man simply by virtue of staying alive. You cannot avoid it. Like as not I have been holding you back in your growing and that is wrong of me."

"Grrr," muttered Logan. He curled his lip then spat on the ground. "You still want to find the Wall of Loriki?"

"Do you?" asked Autumn.

"Please do not play games with me," said Logan. "I go where you go and ask nothing more of life. 'Tis you that has an unbounded curiosity

about the world, not I.”

“I suspect that is a falsehood,” said Autumn, slipping off her pack and letting it drop to the ground.

“Now what are you doing?” asked Logan. “I thought we were leaving.”

“We were,” said Autumn, “but now we are not. Come, sit with me and we will talk.”

She gracefully sat down and patted the ground beside her.

“Now I am confused,” said Logan. “I thought you wanted me to decide which way to go and now you have decided we aren't going anywhere.”

“We will go somewhere,” said Autumn, looking up at him, “but I would like to talk first.”

“Shall I make another fire?” asked Logan.

“I fancy we will not be staying long enough,” said Autumn, patting the ground again. “Sit.”

“As you wish,” said Logan with a shrug. He pulled the string holding his blanket over his head and let it drop then sat beside Autumn, laying his staff neatly on the ground beside him. “What are we going to talk about?”

“You said something that, ahh, intrigues me,” said Autumn, choosing her words carefully. “I would like you to speak more on that, if you are willing.”

“What did I say?” asked Logan nervously.

“You said you still feel like a boy, lost and alone amidst the confusion of this world,” said Autumn. “What did you mean?”

“Exactly that,” said Logan, picking at the grass between his feet. “Before my parents died I was happy.⁹ I helped my Da with the farm

9 Both Logan's parents died of disease when he was about ten years old. His older sister

work and my Ma with the housework after Emia left and played with the other children when I could but with them all gone I had to learn to fend for myself.” He paused. “But little of the world made sense to me. I stole because I knew not what else to do.”

“Because you had no parents or older sister to guide you?” asked Autumn.

Logan snorted. “Aye, and no one else either. ’Twas a world of adults and I was but a young child. I was just another mouth to feed and of little use to anyone.”

“And you still feel alone?” she asked softly.

“Of course not,” said Logan, lying back on his elbows. “I am with you. How could I be alone?”

“Mmm, we can come back to that shortly,” said Autumn. “But you feel lost?”

Logan lurched up again. “Mayhap,” he said gruffly.

“How so?” asked Autumn.

“Why are we talking on this?” asked Logan, grumpily. “I am here and you are with me. What more needs to be said?”

“I am not sure,” said Autumn, “but I would know more of your feeling of being lost if you are willing to talk of it.”

Logan snapped off a grass stalk and began to chew it. He didn't answer.

“Shall we move on?” asked Autumn after a while. She picked up her pack and cradled it while waiting for Logan.

“Look around,” said Logan suddenly. “Where are we?”

had by then gone to live with her almost era’owen and Logan did not know where she had gone. There is no evidence that word of their parents’ deaths ever reached her or that she came looking for her younger brother.

"We are on the Island of Danornor," said Autumn, knowing this was not what he was asking. "But that is not what you mean, is it."

"I don't know," said Logan and spat out the grass stalk. "I don't know what I mean, only this is ... well, this is not what I mean. Just look around. Where are we?"

"We are part way between somewhere and somewhere else," said Autumn. "I can only speak for myself here but I am on a journey, a quest if you like, and I venture I am still some way from my journey's end. I venture you are asking not 'where are we?' but 'why am I here?'. Am I right?"

"Aye," said Logan, "except I know why I am here."

"Why are you here?" asked Autumn.

"Because I have nowhere else to go," said Logan and flopped backwards again.

"Which may go some way towards explaining why you feel lost and alone," said Autumn.

"Not at all," said Logan, sitting up again. "I have nowhere else to be but I don't want to be anywhere else, not least because 'tis likely I will be hanged if I go back to my birthplace and truly there is nothing there for me anyway. Like as not Bumola has some other unfortunate living in his cowshed by now. Besides ..." and he petered out then plucked another grass stalk.

Autumn waited a while before asking "Besides ...?"

"I am with you and I don't want to be with anyone else," said Logan gruffly and tossed away the grass stalk before flopping backward again and rolling over onto his belly.

"So if I understand you rightly," said Autumn, "you feel lost and alone but you do not want to be anywhere else nor with anyone else? Is that a fair summary?"

"I suppose so," said Logan, his head buried in the grass. "Pretty stupid, hey."

"Not at all," said Autumn. "I understand you perfectly."

"Now you're just being kind, Autumn," said Logan. "How could you possibly even begin to understand let alone understand perfectly? You are Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup and possessor of the clearest and tidiest mind in the entire Universe! How could you ever feel lost and alone? You know not what confusion is!"

"How little you know me, Logan," said Autumn. "'Tis true I have a certain way of looking at things but that is because I have had a lifetime of the training of my mind at the hand of great thinkers and if I perhaps from time to time see things more clearly than others it is because I stand on the shoulders of giants and can see over the fog. 'Twas not always so."

"Oh pah," exclaimed Logan, rolling onto his back again. "You talk nonsense to try to cheer me up or whatever. You were born with a mind like a hatchet."

"You do me an injustice, Logan," said Autumn. "I have no recollection of the time before I entered the Esyup but once there I was a child like you and basked in the love that the others bestowed upon me. Even though their training was harsh and unyielding I knew I was cherished and protected and yet still I rebelled."

"Yes, yes," said Logan impatiently. "You decided the Esyup was not your place and walked away from there. You've told me that before."

"Indeed," said Autumn, "but that was not what I was talking about. Some seven or eight summers past, likely when I was fourteen or fifteen, I took it into my head that I was a prisoner there and that I had been stolen from my parents. I convinced myself that they still lived nearby and ran away from the Esyup several times to find them. The Elders were greatly considerate of me and explained as best they could that this was not so and in time I came to accept what they were saying but I, too, felt very lost and alone. For the best part of an entire

summer, or mayhap more, I refused to do what I was told and took every opportunity to disrupt and annoy everyone.”

“What did they do?” asked Logan, trying to imagine Autumn as a rebellious teenager with little success.

“They quickly discovered that beatings and starvings did little good,” said Autumn, gazing into the distance as if reliving those memories. “Noxu told me mayhap two years later that the Elders decided they could not control me and that I was best left to learn to control myself. They withdrew all teaching from me and opened the doors to the Esysup so that I might leave anytime I wanted.”

“Sploop!” exclaimed Logan. “I cannot begin to imagine you being like that!”

“Twas not the worst of it,” said Autumn, “and I still feel great shame for what I did.”

“For rebelling?” asked Logan, “or for running away?”

“Oh, not for those,” said Autumn. “For the other thing.”

“Oooooohh,” said Logan sitting up and putting his arms around his knees to stare intently at her. “What did you do?”

“The cause was Encator,” said Autumn. “She was one of our two Masters at that time although likely the cause was not truly her but my own state of confusion.”

“This is going to be juicy, I can tell,” said Logan with a little laugh. “What did you do?”

“Encator made some remark or other in my hearing,” said Autumn. “I do not recall the remark but it infuriated me and ... Oh Mizule, it shames me greatly still.” She buried her head in her hands.

“What did you do?” asked Logan again. “Did you hit her or something?”

“Oh I hit her many times,” said Autumn, lifting her head again. “That was the nature of the Esyup. We all had to attack all others at anytime and without warning. 'Twas part of our training.”

“Oh that's right,” said Logan. “I remember you telling me that.”

“No, my crime was unforgivable,” said Autumn, “and yet they forgave me.”

“But you aren't going to tell me what you did?” asked Logan, disappointed.

“I must,” said Autumn, “for to hide my sin is as great a sin.” She paused to take a breath. “I pissed on one of the Esyup's Holy books. Encator was reading it at the time.”

“Voqev!” exclaimed Logan. “You pissed on ...? Oh my word! Did they flay you alive?”

“No,” said Autumn. “'Twas worse than that. Encator stared at me in silence for the longest of times then called for everyone at the Esyup to assemble in the refectory and for all the Esyup's holy writings to be brought there as well. Then she brought me before the whole assembly and told me that if I truly wanted to piss on the holy books then I was to feel free to do so in front of the assembly.”

“Sploop,” exclaimed Logan in a long drawn out low voice. “And did you?”

“No,” said Autumn. “I ran away and hid for I was so ashamed. I did not come out for three days.”

“Did they flay you alive then?” asked Logan, fascinated.

“No,” said Autumn. “I went to Encator and asked her to assemble the Esyup once again for I desired to speak with them. She did so and I formally apologised to the assembly then went to each person in turn and apologised to each individually. Then I knelt before them and awaited their judgement.”

“So what did they do?” asked Logan, wide eyed.

“Nothing,” said Autumn. “Save only that Encator ordered the scroll I’d pissed on be hung on the wall of the refectory. Doubtless it is still there, dry but discoloured.”

“Oh my,” said Logan, breathing again. “I know not what to say! Autumn Savannah, a rebel? I cannot believe it.”

“Tis true,” said Autumn. “But do you see now how it is possible for me to understand how you feel? I had no grievance against Encator nor the book, I was just feeling very lost and very confused.”

“So you think if I piss on something this feeling will pass?” asked Logan.

“I very much doubt it,” said Autumn. “’Twas not the pissing that changed anything for I pissed every day as it was. No, the pissing was just an act of rebellion and I quickly saw it for what it was and that seeing ended my rebelling.”

“Until you walked out on the lot of them,” said Logan. “Your rebellious streak must have stayed with you.”

“Not at all,” said Autumn. “That was not an act of rebellion, it was a logical consequence.”¹⁰

“Perhaps,” said Logan, “but if you had no rebellious streak then you probably wouldn’t have actually put the logic into effect.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but that is by the by. What concerns me at the moment is that I may be the cause of your feelings of loss and confusion.”

“How so?” asked Logan.

“By always taking the lead,” said Autumn, “and leading you to places

¹⁰ See *The Scroll Of Autumn Savannah*. Until the discovery of the Scroll, Autumn’s statement here was the cause of much speculation as nowhere in *The Annals* is there any direct reference to why Autumn left the Esyup, other than the simple ‘to find her place’.

you may not want to go. It seems to me that now you are becoming a man you should be making your own decisions and taking responsibility for yourself and your thoughts and actions. I wonder if the time has come for you to break your dependency on me.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan, freezing in alarm.

“You are on the cusp of manhood, Logan,” said Autumn, “and I venture I am holding you back and keeping you as a boy. 'Tis time you ventured forth alone but this time as a man and not as a young child.”

Logan just stared at her.

“Mayhap 'tis time we went our separate ways,” said Autumn.

Chapter Eight

“But ... but ...” spluttered Logan when he regained the use of his tongue.

Autumn watched him steadily, her own feelings held tightly in check.

“What?” Logan finally exclaimed. “I mean ... what?”

“Tis for your own good, I think,” said Autumn calmly.

“For my own good?” said Logan, his voice tense and shrill. “You would just walk away and leave me here in this Voqev forsaken place all on my own for my own good?”

“I think it for the best,” said Autumn.

“So you do not like me anymore?” asked Logan, his eyes starting to feel wet. “Is that it?”

“Not at all,” said Autumn. “I like you greatly and I find your companionship most enjoyable and ... reassuring.”

“Then why do you want to cast me off like this?” said Logan, trying to control his shock.

“So that you can grow fully into manhood,” said Autumn. “My continued presence holds you back.”

“I do not understand,” said Logan, his face crumpling. “This is because I tried to shave? I promise, I will never do that again! I will grow whatever beard you want me to grow!”

“Tis not your beard,” said Autumn gently. “Tis that you are growing into manhood and you need to take on the responsibilities of a man. As long as you are with me you will defer to me and not accept those responsibilities.”

“So that has been your plan all this time, has it?” demanded Logan. “While I was a boy you were happy to have me along but now I am

growing up you want someone younger?”

“No, Logan,” said Autumn. “This is not about what I want, this is about you.”

“And what I want is just cast aside like yesterday’s food slops?” asked Logan as a tear slid slowly down his cheek. Autumn saw it and stared in wonder.

“Why do you cry?” she asked.

“Why do you think?” asked Logan wiping the tear away angrily. “That I am crying with happiness?”

“But do you not want what is best for you?” asked Autumn, concerned by Logan’s obvious unhappiness.

“I ..., I ...,” started Logan. “Oh Voqev!” and he flung himself face down in the grass.

“Logan!” exclaimed Autumn, pushing herself forward so she knelt beside him. “What ails you? Are you ill?”

“Oh leave me alone!” shouted Logan, his voice muffled by the grass. “That’s what you want to do anyway. Begone and get it over with!”

Confused Autumn took her hand off his shoulder and sat back on her heels, staring at him. After some moments she slowly got up and picked up her pack.

“Very well, if that is what you desire,” she said softly. “I wish you every happiness, dear Logan, and I hope you fare well.”

He did not react so after a few heartbeats she turned and walked away through the long grass.

She had not gone far when she heard Logan speak again although she did not make out the words. She turned and slowly walked back to where he still lay, her heart heavy.

"I did not hear what you said, Logan," said Autumn. "Can you repeat it for me?"

Logan rolled over and sat up, his face tear stained, a blade of grass stuck to his cheek.

"I said who are you to decide what is best for me?" said Logan. "Eh? What gives you that right?"

Autumn stared down at him, her mind working furiously.

"Nothing gives me that right, Logan," she said after a few moments, "save only my concern for your welfare."

"And you really think I will be better off without you?" asked Logan. "Do you really think so ill of yourself?"

"I do not think ill of myself," said Autumn. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you say I will be better off without you," said Logan, "which must mean you are a bad influence on me, or at least you think you are."

"No, no, you misunderstand," said Autumn. "'Tis not that I think I am a bad influence. 'Tis simply that I think my presence holds you back."

"Oh yes," said Logan with a touch of sarcasm. He wiped the grass from his face. "You think I should take up my responsibilities as a man. Tell me true, Autumn. How do you know what those responsibilities are? You who freely admits she knows little of men or the lives of men?"

"That is true," said Autumn. She dropped her pack on the ground and squatted beside him. "Yes, you have a point there. I based my judgement on what I have seen of men on our travels and on your own words."

"My own words?" exclaimed Logan. "When did I say I wanted you to go off without me?"

“You said you felt lost and alone,” said Autumn.

“Ahh,” said Logan. “So that is what this is all about?”

“In the main,” said Autumn, “although I am aware that my vows will not permit me to be with you as a woman should.”

“Aha!” exclaimed Logan, jabbing a finger at her. “Ah-ha! So you admit you are not upholding your responsibilities as a woman then!”

“How can I?” asked Autumn. “My responsibility is to my vows above all else.”

“And who said that is so?” asked Logan.

“No one,” said Autumn. “’Twas my choice.”

“And yet you do not permit me that choice myself,” said Logan.

“You have made no vows,” said Autumn, “or if you have you have never told me of them but, yes, you always have a choice.”

“So if I had made a vow you would respect that?” asked Logan.

“Of course,” said Autumn. “Who am I to turn another against their vows?”

“Then I make my vow now,” said Logan, jumping up. “What do I need to do to make it official?”

“Now I am confused,” said Autumn. “What vow do you wish to make?”

“What are your vows again, Autumn?” asked Logan. “You did tell me but I want to be sure I understand them aright.”

“Very well,” said Autumn. “As a disciple of Vallume I vowed to protect the sanctity of women and as a disciple of Mizule I vowed to protect the sanctity of myself. What is your vow?”

“A moment,” said Logan. He rummaged around inside his rolled up blanket and pulled out the thinking stone he had been given by Mother Midcarn.¹¹ He held the stone at arm's length in front of him. “As a disciple of Seiliu I vow upon this stone to protect the sanctity of Autumn Savannah.”

Autumn stared at him in consternation, her face tight with emotion.

“Do you fully understand the seriousness of the vow you have just made?” she asked. “It is not too late to revoke it.”

“Aye,” said Logan then his voice faltered. “Although ...,”

“Although what?” asked Autumn.

“Umm, can I ask you a serious question?” asked Logan tentatively.

“Of course,” said Autumn.

“And will you answer with the truth?” asked Logan.

“Naturally,” said Autumn. “I have never lied to you Logan, nor will I now.”

“I don't mean lying,” said Logan hurriedly. “I want to know what you want, not what you think as a logical consequence of something else.”

“You mean not logically?” asked Autumn, a puzzled frown appearing on her face. “I am not sure I can.”

“I need to know how you truly feel within yourself,” said Logan, “not how you would argue something without feeling.”

“I will try,” said Autumn, her frown deepening. “What is it you wish to

11 See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*. At their first meeting, Mother Midcarn gave Logan a small stone and Autumn a length of silver ribbon. The properties of the ribbon became readily apparent when it protected her from fatal injuries but the properties of the stone are less apparent. Clues within the text of *The Annals* suggest that Logan's stone facilitated his thinking and powers of logic for it would be remarkable for an orphan who grew up in a cowshed and depended on stealing to survive to be as intelligent as Logan indisputably is.

ask me?"

"Do you really want me to go away?" asked Logan. "I don't mean you worrying about my welfare or whatever. I mean from the heart. Are you tired of my company?" He was unaware he had stopped breathing.

"Ahhh!" said Autumn, her face clearing in relief. "Yes, that is a question I can answer without recourse to logic."

"Well?" squeaked Logan as she seemed to have stopped.

"No, I do not want you to go away," said Autumn. "All that I said before was based on my desire for your welfare and not my innermost desire."

Logan sucked in a ragged gasp of air and sagged with relief.

"Oh Sploop," he muttered. "You had me worried there."

"You can relinquish your vow," said Autumn. "I will not hold you to it."

Logan drew himself up and smiled then held out his stone again.

"I vow to uphold my vow," he said with great formality.

"I know not what to say, Logan," said Autumn after staring at him for a while. "No one has even done such a thing for me."

"There is nothing to say, Autumn," said Logan, wanting to hug her but afraid to. "A vow is a vow and that's all there is to it. Is that responsible enough for you?"

"I know not how any man could be more responsible than to vow to protect the sanctity of another," said Autumn, taking Logan's hand. "My heart is filled with ... I know not what word to use. Gladness is too small a word."

She lifted Logan's hand to her mouth and kissed it. Logan went bright red and his heart missed several beats.

"I thank you, Logan of the Vow," she said quietly, still holding his hand. "This was truly an unexpected conclusion to our discussion."

"Did you really think I would leave you simply because you had a logical thought?" asked Logan.

"Aye, I did," said Autumn. "My heart was heavy at the prospect but it had to be done."

"That is arguable," said Logan. "Umm, you know what this reminds me of?"

"How can I know that?" asked Autumn. "I am not a mind reader."

"When we were attacked by Chanwar's men on our way to Bufon,"¹² said Logan. "When 'twas all over you told me you wanted to cut all your hair off because it was too easy for someone to catch hold of you by your ponytail. That too was a logical conclusion that you did not truly wish to do, was it not?"

"Aye," said Autumn, pulling her ponytail round in front of her. "And then as now you persuaded me otherwise."

"What does that tell you?" asked Logan.

"That you are most persuasive," said Autumn. "Your techniques are most unlike those of the Elders at the Esysup but effective, none the less."

Logan burst out laughing, mostly to relieve all the stresses that had built up inside him. He was feeling more than a little light headed.

"Not at all," he said. "When it comes to persuasion I am more skilled with my staff. No, what I mean is that there are times when the logical path is not the most desirable path."

"True," said Autumn, "but all that means is that the desirable path is not a sensible one and should not be followed."

¹² See *The Annals ~ The Seventh Tale*.

“And yet I am still here and you have your hair,” said Logan.

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “but neither is the most sensible option. I am at a disadvantage if my hair is used in a fight against me and I still believe you will not fully develop your potential as a man while I am with you. The logic is inescapable regardless of the desires of the heart.”

“And yet you gave up in your attempts to persuade Gesen and Madlek to abandon their attempts to wipe out each other's entire families,” said Logan. “Yet another example of you abandoning logic.”

“I did not abandon logic,” said Autumn, dropping Logan's hand. “Logically the most sensible course is for both families to end their disagreement but I fancy no amount of argument will ever bring them to the point of agreeing. Further discussion seemed fruitless for their opinions were too entrenched and none could gainsay them.”

“True enough,” said Logan. “I cannot argue with that.”

Autumn smiled and got to her feet. “So, shall we be on our way or is there more to discuss?”

“No, let us be on our way,” said Logan.

“Which way shall we go?” asked Autumn.

“Oh not again!” exclaimed Logan. “Are you going to try to make me make every decision from now on?”

“Do you wish to revoke your vow?” asked Autumn, stooping to pick up her pack.

“What does my vow have to do with anything?” asked Logan, surprised.

“If I choose the way I may be leading us into adversity,” said Autumn. “Tis best you choose the way so you can protect my sanctity.”

“That is foolish thinking,” said Logan. “I am just as likely to lead us

into adversity as you are, perhaps more so.”

“So you did not find my remark funny?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Logan. “Was it meant to be?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “This has been a most surprising day and one of great learning for me. I was wondering if my understanding of humour had improved as well but clearly not.”

Logan burst out laughing.

“Now that was funny,” he said. “Do you want to be funny?”

“No,” said Autumn, “but I do want to understand funny. 'Tis like money. I don't want any but I would like to understand it. Mayhap when I do I will have found my place in the world.”

“I wager not,” said Logan. “Money and humour are not found in places.”

“Likely you are right,” said Autumn. “Still, you have not answered my question.”

“What question?” asked Logan. “The one about being funny?”

“No,” she said. “The one about which way to go.”

Logan sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Very well,” he said unenthusiastically. “I shall decide and try to be a responsible man about it. Will you go whichever way I decide or will you make me change my mind if it is not the way you wish to go?”

“What do you think, friend Logan?” asked Autumn. “No, I cannot call you that any more. You are much more than a friend now.”

“I think you will argue for you always do,” said Logan. “What will you call me if it is not friend?”

"I do not know," said Autumn. "There is but one thing I can think of beyond friend but I wager it is inappropriate. Mayhap 'tis time to think of a new word to describe us."

"What is beyond friend?" asked Logan. "I can't think of anything."

"Almost era'owen," said Autumn, "for it meets the requirement of a significant joining beyond that of friendship."

"You are asking me to be your almost era'owen?" gasped Logan in stunned amazement.

"Alas no," said Autumn. "There is much within that relationship that is not possible because of my vows and, I daresay, yours. To call ourselves almosts would be misleading to others."

"Although I can see an advantage to you," said Logan. "Have you not had at least four unwanted offers of marriage already?"¹³ If you were to tell people I was your almost would that not put an end to these offers?"

"I venture it would," said Autumn, "but would it not be the same for you? Likely the day will come when you meet a maid who you wish to take as your almost but she will reject you if she thinks you already have one."

"Tis not likely," said Logan. "Anyway, my vow now precludes it."

"Oh, Logan," said Autumn, putting her hand on his arm. "I will not hold you to that vow. We both know I am better able to protect my sanctity than you are."

"Now you insult me," said Logan. "I may not be able to give you much protection but I meant what I said. I would give my life for you."

"You speak truly?" asked Autumn in surprise.

"Aye," said Logan. "'Twas not a vow made in jest."

13 From Nirwa of Veobad in *The Annals ~ The Third Tale*; Ibu'oden in *The Fourth Tale*; Dhru, son of Inyanasi the trader in *The Fifth Tale*; and Subota, Sarauta Matsafa to Soros VII, the Karoi of Neander also in *The Fifth Tale*.

"I see," said Autumn slowly. "Umm, I know not what to say. Umm, yes, I can see the advantages that you suggest, Logan, and if I were ever to take an era'owen then that man would be you but alas I cannot live a lie. To say you are my almost when you cannot fully be my almost would be an untruth. If people at times assume that to be so then that is their choice but I cannot bring myself to say it is so."

"I know," said Logan. "'Tis sad but true and I would not ask you to do so. Keep me as your friend. I am happy with that for to be the friend of Autumn Savannah is a wondrous thing."

"You grow into manhood most admirably, friend Logan," said Autumn. "And I would let it be known to all that to be the friend of Logan is a most wondrous thing as well."

"So that is settled then," said Logan. "Which way shall we go?"

"You have not yet decided," said Autumn.

"Sploop!" he exclaimed. "You will not let that go, will you?"

"No," said Autumn smiling. "You decide."

"Then let us go south," said Logan.

"Are we still heading for the Wall of Loriki?" asked Autumn.

"I suppose so," said Logan. "Do you want to go somewhere else?"

"No, the Wall will be a good destination," said Autumn. "Did not Swaven say it was to the south west?"

"You see?" said Logan with a snort. "You make me decide but when I choose wrongly we go the way you wanted to go in the first place. 'Twould have been easier for you to say so at the start and save all this fuss."

"You wrong me, Logan," said Autumn. "I am not saying we should go south west, merely that Swaven said the Wall lay to the south west. You wish to go south so we will go south."

“And don't think I do not know this is a small island,” said Logan. “South or south west makes no matter for either way we will find this Wall if it is there.”

“Mayhap you are not as good a friend as I thought,” said Autumn, “if, as I suspect, you are accusing me of trickery.”

“No, I'm not accusing you of anything,” said Logan. “I am merely pointing out that it would have been easier if you made the decision at the beginning.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but you made it and that is what is important. South it is.”

Chapter Nine

A morning breeze touched lightly on the cheek of Autumn Savannah as she sat on a narrow rock that jutted out into the creek. The rock was skewed and angled both down to the water and to her right and was slippery with water and wet moss. Despite this she sat, as she invariably did, with her legs crossed and her heels resting upon her knees, her hands folded neatly in her lap and her head upright. Unusually, however, her right knee pressed against a stone wedged between the rock and the dark red soil of the bank. When she took up this position the stone had been a hand's breadth away but the slope of the slippery rock had slowly and inexorably drawn her down. She was aware of this, indeed she had even expected it, and the pressure of the stone on her knee did not distract her thoughts. What she was not aware of, however, were the two large eyes that peered down at her from the foliage that grew close to the bank.

Logan had been awake for a while. That is not to say he had awoken early. No, 'twas only that Autumn was longer in her contemplations than usual and had not yet come out of her reverie nor had she yet begun her exercises, not that there was much room for her to do her exercises. Logan sat on a tiny patch of grass between two large bushes on the other side of the creek, scarce wide enough to lie flat. The creek itself was a long pace wide and barely deep enough to be called a creek. There was a small patch of mud in its centre that held the slowly dissolving remains of a solitary footprint, left by Autumn before the dawn as she crossed to the rock. Logan had broken their last piece of bread in half and slowly chewed it while watching Autumn. The other half sat on her pack, waiting until such time as she was ready to eat it. He, too, was not aware of the two large eyes that peered down on Autumn.

The nose between the eyes caught the breeze and scented danger. From some way distant came the faint smell of a predator but the smell of the two humans nearby were more concerning. The owner of the eyes had not smelt such a smell before for it was barely three summers old and no human had visited this place in its lifetime. The small nose wrinkled and twitched as the mind behind the eyes tried to decide what to do. It was some way after dawn and the night's hunting was over. 'Twas time for a drink then sleep but this unknown creature

beside the creek was in the way. So the eyes stayed there, watching, waiting.

Autumn, too, caught the breeze. She felt the air stir against her cheek and a few tendrils of hair flutter. The scent of the predator detected by the owner of the eyes was too faint for her to notice among the rich earthy odours of the creek bank but she inhaled deeply and let her breath out slowly, her chest barely moving. Logan, however, was unaware of the faint breeze. He was on the other side of the creek and protected from the breeze by the bushes around him. He did notice the leaves of the bushes stir but thought nothing of it. After all, leaves move under the slightest of provocations and oft-times with none at all. Leaves are leaves, after all, at least in his world. In the world of a caterpillar, on the other hand, leaves are of monumental significance. Logan watched Autumn and asked no more of life, at least for now.

The owner of the eyes watched intently yet saw little. The slight movement of hairs against Autumn's cheek, the shallow rise and fall of her chest, a twitch of an eyelid, but nothing sudden, nothing threatening, nothing potentially dangerous. With great caution the owner of the eyes leant forward and grasped the stalk of the foliage, its over-long central finger curling round securely. A pause, a breath then its body edged forward. The stem bent slightly under its weight. Another pause, another breath then another hand came forward to grasp the stem a little further down. A shifting of weight then another shifting of hands. Slowly and with vast caution the owner of the eyes crept closer to the back of Autumn's neck. She remained unaware.

A rustle in the foliage caused the eyes to freeze. Autumn, too, heard the rustle. Her thoughts uninterrupted as that part of her mind which monitored the immediate world around her detected no sign of any approaching threat. Logan, too, heard the rustle. He momentarily paused his chewing of the stale morsel of bread in his mouth and his eyes shifted from Autumn to the foliage behind her. Was there the faintest of greys among the shades of green? He swallowed and watched carefully.

Unaware of Logan watching, as Autumn's head was in the way, the owner of the eyes edged forward again, both its hands keeping a firm grip in the stem as its nose stretched forward to sniff the leather thong

that bound her hair at the nape of her neck. The eyes knew not what leather was but the thong had a faint smell of animal. Cautiously it sniffed once, twice, thrice, uncertain of the unfamiliar yet somehow familiar smell. It paused then extended an over-long central finger to gently probe behind the thong as it would behind bark on a tree. Unfamiliar the thong may be but there was still the possibility that an insect lurked behind and only the most foolish of creatures wasted an opportunity to eat.

Autumn felt the gentle probing and stilled the urge to leap forward. This was no attack requiring an immediate explosive response. Most likely it was a fallen leaf but the possibility existed that it was an insect of some sort and a sudden move may cause it to sting or bite. Outwardly there was no sign she had been disturbed but her thoughts had ended and all her awareness was now focused on the nape of her neck. Logan, on the other hand, was intrigued. He had seen an indistinct patch of grey shift position slightly and had sensed through long familiarity a quiet alertness come over Autumn. Forgotten, the last crust of bread waited in his hand as he watched. Something was surely about to happen!

No insect found, the probing over-long finger touched the cloth on Autumn's shoulder. It, too, was unfamiliar but offered no cause for disquiet. The owner of the eyes was thirsty and this unfamiliar but apparently inert object lay between it and the water in the creek. The mind behind the eyes pondered its choices then, decision made, the other hand came forward to grip the thong. There was no reaction. Reassured the grey shape shifted its weight and first one, then the other hind hand came forward and the stem of the foliage sighed and flipped back as the weight of the shape moved to Autumn's shoulder. Her eyes snapped open but her head did not move. Logan's eyes widened but he could sense there was no alarm in Autumn so he stayed where he was, watching. The two large eyes, now looking over Autumn's shoulder, peered at him then blinked once, slowly.

Autumn's check twitched slightly as soft fur brushed oh so gently as whatever it was crept forward. Each small hand seeking a firm grip before any movement, the pointy nose quivering at the unfamiliar smells. As it began its downward descent along Autumn's upper arm the grey shape caught a faint whistle from Autumn's nose and froze.

Autumn held her breath as the shape looked back to see where that noise had come from and its two large grey eyes looked into Autumn's dark eyes. Involuntarily Autumn blinked and the grey shape panicked and hurried down her arm. It jumped from her hands to her thigh then paused and looked back.

"Go in peace, little one," breathed Autumn. "You have nothing to fear from me."

The grey shape sat back on its hind hands, its thin hairy tail stretched out and raised behind it. The eyes traversed the path it had followed along her arm then they once again looked into Autumn's. Not even Autumn's long eyelashes quivered as she held her body in total control. For three of Autumn's heartbeats, and perhaps twenty of the grey shape's, they looked at each other then the shape turned and jumped down to the rock. It scurried to the water's edge then looked suspiciously at Logan on the other side of the creek. He just sat and watched, a faint smile on his face. Unsettled by these strange shapes beside the creek the creature drank quickly then ran off into the foliage again, its dwelling not far away. Doubtless there were companions there with whom to discuss this unwarranted intrusion into their world.

"I have not seen such a creature before," remark Logan. "Did you see the size of its eyes?"

"They were undeniably large," said Autumn, getting to her feet. "Mayhap it was some type of squirrel although I have never seen a squirrel with a thin tail before. Did you see its hands?"

She stepped on the mud patch in the centre of the creek as she crossed and left a second footprint as she stepped to the other side.

"No," said Logan. "What was wrong with them?"

"Nothing," said Autumn, "but I noticed it had but three fingers on each hand and the centre finger was some way longer than the other two. I wonder why?"

"Who knows," said Logan. "There is some bread on your pack if you

want it. It is the last.”

“It may be some while before we find bread again,” said Autumn, “although we will not starve. These woods are lush and there are roots aplenty.”

“Aye, but no berries nor fish in the creek,” said Logan. “Tis not yet spring so it will be awhile before we get berries. At least I think so. Mayhap it is near autumn.”

“Twas winter when we left Schtei,” said Autumn, picking up the hard bread and looking at it. “Why would you think we have been gone an entire summer?”

She tapped the bread against a stone and it snapped in half. She looked at the pieces with a faint air of distaste then squatted down at the edge of the creek. She dabbled the fingers of one hand in the water before shaking the drops onto the bread to soften it.

“I was thinking while you were contemplating,” said Logan. “You remember when we came ashore in Neander we got lost because Astauand was going the wrong way?”¹⁴

“Aye,” said Autumn, swallowing the now soggy bread. “What of it?”

“I was thinking just now that we know not where we are,” said Logan. “Subota said there is an invisible path that Astauand travels along and north and south are the other way around when we are the other side of that path.”

“You think we have crossed that path?” asked Autumn, looking at him intently.

“Tis possible,” said Logan. “We headed south from Wase just as we did from Xive and we may be near Neander again for all I know.

¹⁴ See *The Annals ~ The Fifth Tale*. After crossing the equator, the sun appears to move in the opposite direction which makes navigation difficult if you are not aware of it. In the northern hemisphere the sun rises in the east and goes to the south before setting in the west. In the southern hemisphere, however, the sun rises in the east and goes *north* before setting in the west. If you are not aware of this it is easy to confuse north and south when navigating by the sun.

Mayhap we have crossed Astauand's path and north and south are back to front once more. How would we would know? If we have then according to Subota we will be heading north thinking we are heading south."

"Tis an interesting question, is it not, Logan," said Autumn thoughtfully. "How do we know if we have passed something invisible?"

"Aye," said Logan. "Any thoughts?"

"None immediately come to mind," said Autumn. She frowned. "Did not Subota say that when we stand on that path Astauand stays directly overhead all day?"

"If he did I don't remember," said Logan, "although it is difficult to tell where Astauand is much of the time because of all the trees. Maybe it is one side of us, mayhap the other."

"A fair point," said Autumn. "What if we have been going north since leaving Coot-Tha, thinking we were going south."

"Or mayhap we are on that path and just going round in circles," said Logan, waving his finger in a circle.

"I venture not," said Autumn. "Whether or not we are going south we have kept Astauand in the same direction as best we can. I wager we are going either south or north and not going around in circles. Anyway, if we were would we not have returned to Coot-Tha by now?"

"I daresay," said Logan with a grin. "I was only teasing about going in circles. Are you going to do your exercises today?"

"Mayhap later," said Autumn. "There isn't really room here. If we find a bigger space further on I will do them there. No, I do not see this as a major difficulty. This is an island so if we continue the way we are going we will either end up on the north coast again or the south coast. For sure we will not keep walking forever and sooner or later we will meet someone who can tell us which way is north."

“What if they don't know?” asked Logan.

“Then we find someone who does know,” said Autumn. “And besides, this is their island. How can they not know which way is north?”

“Mayhap they don't know which side of the path the island is on,” said Logan. “Mayhap what they call north we call south.”

“Are you playing jokes with me again?” asked Autumn.

“Actually no, not this time,” said Logan. “We are strangers in a strange land and have no way of knowing what we think to be so actually is so. Do you know what language they speak here?”

“I thought it to be Shoxin,” said Autumn, “as Danornor is a part of Wase.”

“But did not Swaven say the people of Danornor originally came from Aferraron?” asked Logan. “Would they not speak our tongue?”

“A fair point,” said Autumn thoughtfully, touching the necklace around her neck. “I am so used to my necklace that I had not given it a thought.¹⁵ Well, 'tis easy enough to find out. When next we talk to someone I'll take off my necklace.”

“Ha,” said Logan, laughing at himself. “I didn't think of that. Come then, let us be on our way. Shall we follow this creek? It seems to be going roughly north south and will be a lot easier than fighting our way through all this undergrowth.”

“Actually you have a point there,” said Autumn, picking up her pack. “If this is indeed winter why is there so much undergrowth? Surely it should have died back to return in spring?”

“So you are thinking we have crossed the path of Astauand and we are coming to the end of summer?” asked Logan, picking up his staff. “Could it not be that this stuff grows all the time? For certain it rains

¹⁵ See *The Annals ~ The Fifth Tale*. Mother Midcarn gave them a necklace each which performs instantaneous translations within their minds and the minds of the people they talk to. The necklaces do not, however, permit Autumn or Logan to read documents written in another language.

aplenty here.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “’Twas late summer when we were in Zuit and Xive and the growth was much like this but they said it was like that all the time. Mayhap it is the same here. Despite the rain it is always warm but that could simply mean it is summer after all. There has to be some way of finding out wherever we happen to be. For sure we are not the only people who travel widely.”

“True enough,” said Logan, “but others seem to travel in groups along ways they have travelled before. Like as not they talk to others who have been that way before them and found out or perhaps they have other ways of finding the route than using Astauand. Inyanasi could cross the Sabon Mutum Desert going only by the colour of the sand.”

“As yet I have only seen one map and that was Mother Midcarn’s” said Autumn. “Perhaps in time to come there will be maps of the entire world and it will be easy to find our way from one place to another.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, “although I wager when that day comes travelling will lose much of its excitements. Just think, you will not need to explore the world to find your place. You need only look at a map and there is will be, right in front of your eyes.”

* * *

“I can hear someone up ahead,” said Autumn, pausing in her splashing through the water.

“Far?” asked Logan, balancing on a stone in the water behind her.

“No, not far,” she said. “I can hear a voice. ’Tis clearer now I am not splashing but I cannot make out what he says.”

“Just one voice?” asked Logan. “He is talking to himself?”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “It sounds more like singing though.”

“Good,” said Logan. “Someone singing is likely to be happy, unless it’s

a funeral dirge.”

“Mayhap it is a funeral dirge,” said Autumn, pursing her lips. “It sounds fairly monotonous and repetitive. Perhaps we should hold back.”

“Let us at least go and see,” said Logan. “If it is a burial then we can wait until it is all over before seeing if they have bread or cheese to spare.”

“Is that all you ever think about?” asked Autumn teasingly.

“Not at all,” said Logan indignantly. “I think on many things when I have bread and cheese. 'Tis only when I have none I think of little else. I am not like you. I cannot live on a blade of grass every three days.”

“Nor can I,” said Autumn. “I get as hungry as you do, I just don't complain about it.”

“Now you wrong me,” said Logan. “I was not complaining. I was merely pointing out that whoever is ahead may have some to spare.”

“And once again you point out the error of my ways,” said Autumn. “I should not have said you complained for you rarely if ever complain. My humblest apologies.”

“It is not like you to be saying something is so when it isn't,” said Logan with no little concern. “Do I complain a lot?”

“Not at all,” said Autumn. “'Twas only that I was trying out something you once told me but with little success.”

“And what was that?” asked Logan.

“That the basis of all jokes is an untruth,” said Autumn. “You said that that is what makes the joke funny.”

“Ahh, so you were trying to make a joke again, were you?” he asked. “My apologies, I did not realise.”

“No apologies are needed,” said Autumn. “I have many skills but I suspect humour is one I will never grasp even the basics of. I shall accept my lot and no longer try. Come, let us find out if they have food and what language they speak.” She took off her necklace and stowed it carefully in her pack before moving on.

“’Tis no language I have heard before,” she said a short while later when the voice became distinct. “What is he saying?”

“It sounds like nonsense to me,” said Logan. “He ho hum de da dum ra wa sam tim bim bum? Mayhap it is not a man but an animal of some sort?”

“Well, we shall find out soon enough,” said Autumn pressing on. “I venture the voice comes from around that bend up ahead.”

She stopped part way round the bend and held out her hand to stop Logan. There was a man in a clearing not far ahead.

“Oh my word,” exclaimed Logan. “What is he doing?”

Chapter Ten

It was readily apparent what the man was doing. He was skipping around in a circle, waving his arms and singing “he ho hum de da dum ra wa sam tim bim bum”. It was also readily apparent that the man had little other purpose in life than to utter a syllable each time a foot landed on the ground for the grass was worn away in a circle and he followed the circle endlessly. He was, moreover, almost naked with only a dirty and ragged cloth tied around his loins. Logan judged him to be of an age not much more than that of Autumn.

'Twas his face that caught the eye at first. The man had a face as round as Plakill and two small wide set eyes above a tiny nose that was some way off centre, being almost directly under one eye. The mouth, on the other hand, was more under the other eye. It was a disconcerting face, to say the least, and the patches of thin pale hair scattered with no apparent plan did not in any way lessen the effect. The rest of him was fashioned in much the same way, with one skinny shoulder some way lower than the other and legs that didn't seem to match each other for length. Despite the smears of mud and dirt and an open sore on his belly his skin looked to be as white as the underside of a toad.

“Ah,” said Autumn quietly as they stood in the creek watching.

The man did not notice them. He carried on skipping and waving his hands and showing every sign of being engrossed in an important activity.

“Shall we ask him which way is south?” asked Logan, matching Autumn's quietness. “I suspect he likely does not know.”

“I confess I am reluctant to speak with him,” said Autumn. “There is something about him that is ... off-putting.”

“Something?” said Logan. “I'd say everything.”

“Perhaps it is best we move on and not disturb him,” said Autumn.

“Definitely,” said Logan. “Mayhap he has family near and I would

prefer not to meet them either.”

“I try not to be unkind,” said Autumn, “but there are times when that is more of a challenge than it should be.” She paused and sucked her teeth, watching the man. “Ayeyah no, this is very wrong of me. I must not judge by appearances. Come, Logan.”

She waded through the creek and stepped onto the bank.

“Greetings,” she said, not getting too close. “My name is Autumn and my companion Logan. We are strangers here.”

The man stopped suddenly and stared, fear and confusion written all over his face. His eyes, however, remained vacant and snot dribbled from his nose into his straggly beard.

“We would speak with you, friend,” said Autumn, holding up her hands in peace. “Will you permit me to ask your name?”

The man backed away, making small grunting noises and pawing the air in front of him with his hands.

“My apologies for disturbing you,” said Autumn, taking a step forward. “We mean you no harm.”

The man screamed loudly as he backed into a tree then he turned and ran off howling.

“That did not go well,” said Logan, still standing in the water.

“It would seem not,” said Autumn. “Mayhap it was because I spoke in a foreign tongue.”

“More likely he is scared of strangers,” said Logan. “If he did not understand your words he would have said so.”

“Ah well,” said Autumn. “Perhaps he has gone to speak with those he lives with and they will come here. Shall we move on or wait a while?”

“I say move on,” said Logan, stepping out of the water to stand beside

Autumn. "I don't think I want to meet the rest of his family."

"Perhaps you are right, Logan," said Autumn, looking around. "I hear nothing of others coming to investigate."

She looked around again then headed across the clearing to rejoin the creek the other side. Logan hefted his staff and looked around as well before following.

"Who be you?" growled a gruff voice from the bushes.

Autumn spun round, searching for the voice.

"I am Autumn," she said, "and this is Logan. Please, show yourself."

A large grizzled man emerged from behind a tree. His beard fell to his waist and his head was bald but he looked otherwise normal, apart from the large club with a metal spike driven through the end.

"We be not liking strangers here," he said, scowling at Logan. He slowly swung his club back and forth.

A branch snapped and two other figures emerged. They were both men but younger. Each had the round face and pale skin of the skipping man but their features were more normally arranged. Their looks were not overly improved, however.

"That's right," said one, holding an axe. "Strangers. Nah, don't like 'em."

The other just grinned and tossed a rock from one hand to the other.

"We apologise for disturbing you," said Autumn. "We were passing by and would ask only directions of you."

"Why be you here?" asked the grizzled man, staring at Logan. "We don't like strangers."

"Which way is south?" asked Logan. "Tell us and we will be on our way immediately."

“South, is it?” said the one with the axe. “Hey Da, the stranger wants to know where south is. You believe that?”

“South!” exclaimed the grinning one. “South, south!”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Is south that way?” She pointed up the creek.

“You be after our womenfolk then, eh?” demanded the older man, ignoring Autumn. “That what you be after?”

“Ah, not at all,” said Logan, backing away a step. “Sorry to disturb you. We’ll be off now.”

“Get back 'ere,” growled the man, pointing his club at Logan. “You ain't leaving 'ere, not now, not never.”

“Yeah, back 'ere,” echoed the one with the axe.

“South!” giggled the grinner. He dropped his rock and hurriedly bent to pick it up.

“Da?” came a girl's voice. “Da? Where you be?”

“We don't like strangers,” said the axe man as Logan stepped forward.

“Over 'ere, girl,” called the grizzled man, shifting his gaze to Autumn. “Watch yourself. There be strangers here.”

“What don't know south from their arseholes,” said the axe man with a snigger. A trickle of drool slid down his chin and he wiped it away with the back of his hand.

There was a noise in the bushes and a woman burst through. She looked similar to the others but had a livid bruise down the side of her face and a trace of dried blood around the bottom of her nose.

“Strangers!” giggled the grinner, tossing his rock again.

“What be it, girl?” growled the grizzled man, watching Logan closely.

“Ma said if yous be a-killing 'em she'll 'ave 'em for the pot,” said the girl, going to stand behind the one with the axe.

“Not much meat on 'em,” growled the grizzled man. “Still, better than nothing, I reckon, aye. Go tell your Ma we be along presently with the makings. Just got to soften 'em up a bit first, like.”

“South!” grinned the grinner.

“All right, Da,” she said. “Do 'im first,” pointing at Logan. “He looks soft and tender already!” She cackled but stayed where she was.

“Right you two,” said the grizzled man. “Grab 'em and look smart about it.”

“They're all yours, Logan,” said Autumn, stepping back as the three men lunged at him.

“What?” exclaimed Logan in surprise, half turning then scrambling to escape their clutches.

He managed to get away and ran across the clearing before turning and brandishing his staff the way Autumn had taught him.

“Get the other 'un, girl,” growled the older man, advancing on Logan with his club raised. “Don't be damaging her clothes.”

The girl jumped at Autumn then fell as Autumn almost casually hit her on the back of her neck with the edge of her hand. Autumn put her foot on the girl's back then watched Logan as he jabbed his staff into the man's belly. The man doubled up just as the grinner aimed his rock at Logan's head. Logan ducked and instinctively brought his staff up so the rock clattered against it. Logan grabbed the man's arm and pulled him sharply forward so he lost balance and stumbled, dropping the stone. The older man swore and tried to swing his club but the pointed tip of the metal spike caught in the clothing of the grinner and ripped it.

Logan backed away and turned to face the axe man who was advancing with his axe raised. He swung the axe viciously at Logan's

neck but Logan timed his own swing perfectly and the staff whacked the axe man across the side of his head and he fell, blood spurting from the split.

“South!” shouted the grinner and tried to jump on Logan's back just as the older man swung his club again. Logan leapt to the side and the point of the spike buried itself in the grinner's arm. He screamed and the older man jerked backwards, ripping the grinner's arm even more. Without thinking Logan spun round with a two handed grip on his staff and smashed it into the older man's thigh. With a yell of rage the man tried to swing the club but his leg wouldn't work and he collapsed sideways. Logan jumped back but no one followed. Readying his staff he backed away, watching all three closely but they stayed on the ground. One unconscious, one whimpering over his ripped arm as it bled copiously onto the ground and the third glaring furiously at Logan as he tried to get his leg working again.

“Well done,” said Autumn, lifting her foot from the girl she had pinned. “I had every confidence in you.”

The girl groaned and tried to get up so Autumn pushed her down again with her foot.

“What was all that about?” gasped Logan.

“Can you hear me, girl?” said Autumn, bending over the girl while keeping her foot between the girl's shoulder blades.

“My Da will skin you alive!” shrieked the girl breathlessly.

“I wager not,” said Autumn. “I do not know your name, girl, nor those of your companions but tell them if they follow us they will not get away as lightly as they have here. Do you understand me?”

“You're dead,” said the girl, trying to spit at Autumn. “He will roast you alive!”

Autumn shrugged and lifted her foot off the girl's back. She half picked herself up and scrambled on all fours over to where her father was still cursing his leg.

“Come Logan,” said Autumn. She turned and hurried up the creek.

Logan looked back at the men then at Autumn before hurrying after her. It was some while before he caught up with her for she jumped nimbly from stone to stone whereas he kept slipping and tripping and having to retrieve his staff. When he did catch up she was sitting on the bank, calmly waiting for him.

“What was all that about?” he demanded, red faced, dripping and breathless.

“Come, sit beside me and rest,” said Autumn, patting the bank. “I have your blanket and it seems what was inside is still there.”

“Thank you,” said Logan, only then realising he had forgotten to bring it. “Why did you leave me to fight them? You could at least have warned me.”

“I would not have been a true test of your skills if I had warned you,” said Autumn.

“A true test?” Logan stared at her in blank astonishment. “You were testing me?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “You have learnt quickly and you practise well but practise is never like a real fight. I wanted to see how well you handled it.”

“But ... but ... what if I'd been hurt?” demanded Logan. “Or killed even?”

“There was little chance of that,” said Autumn, “although the possibility was there. A fight with no risk is not a real fight. That said, even together I believed them to be no serious match for you. They had not the signs of any skills at fighting.”

“But you just abandoned me!” exclaimed Logan.

“That is a view, certainly” admitted Autumn, “although had things gone badly for you I would have stepped in but they did not. 'Twas a

shorter fight than I expected to be honest. You did well.”

“Shorter ...?” exclaimed Logan, shaking his head in disbelief. “What?”

“I was particularly impressed when the one with the rock tried to hit you on the head,” said Autumn, “and you pulled him into the path of the one with the club. That was a very neat manoeuvre.”

“I did not know I had done that,” admitted Logan. “So this was all just to test me?”

“I did not arrange it so,” said Autumn. “After all, I did not know these people would be here nor that they would be unfriendly, but I did see the opportunity when it arose and made use of it. If you did not know what you were doing that is even better for it means you were fighting by instinct. That is very impressive for one with so little training.”

“So let me get this straight,” said Logan, his breathing going back to normal. “We came across some people who were spoiling for a fight and you saw the opportunity to test me and left me to fight them all on my own? Is that right?”

“Yes,” said Autumn. “Deftly put.”

Logan just blinked several times at her in consternation.

“Why?” he asked. “Why would you do such a thing?”

“Tis simple, friend Logan,” she said. “On the one hand I have been teaching you and all teachers must at times put their students to the test to find out the effectiveness of the teaching. I have been greatly pleased today. I wager even Noxu would not have found fault, at least not anything of significance. Doubtless he would have found something trivial to fault for that was his way.”

Logan stared at her then began to smile.

“You think I did well, then?” he asked.

“Very well,” said Autumn. “Twas an awkward situation with three

armed men.”

“But?” said Logan. “I am certain there is a but coming.”

“Not at all,” said Autumn. “You bested three men and have come away with no injury to yourself. There is no need for a but.”

“But you said on the one hand,” said Logan. “Is there not a but on the other hand?”

“Again no,” said Autumn. “I was merely going to say on the one hand you needed a test and on the other hand you have made a vow.”

“A vow?” asked Logan, taken aback. “What? You mean that vow?”

“How many others have you made?” she asked. “Of course that vow.”

“Oh,” said Logan, blinking at her again.

“Quite,” said Autumn. “You made a vow and I needed to know if you were able to uphold that vow if for some reason I am unable to defend myself.”

“Now you surprise me even more,” said Logan. “I cannot think of any situation where you would not be able to defend yourself better than I could.”

“I can think of many,” said Autumn. “What if I have been badly injured? What if I have already been bested or ...”

“If you have been bested then we'd best hope whoever it was has fainted with shock,” interrupted Logan with a laugh. “There is no possible way I can best someone who has bested you.”

“There are ways of besting someone without fighting,” said Autumn. “A potion of some sort, mayhap. Some such potion could have been given to me and left me unable to fight.”

“I suppose,” said Logan dubiously.

“And there may also come a time when I cannot fight because of the situation,” said Autumn. “I do not know how it would come about but there is the possibility that I am put in a situation where I cannot fight, perhaps because of my own vows. In such a situation you will not be bound by the same restrictions so 'tis good to know you can fight on my behalf.”

“Let us hope that day never comes,” said Logan. “I am certain if your life depends on it I will be found wanting.”

“’Tis the dark side of you talking, Logan,” said Autumn. “I am equally certain that should that day come you will prevail against seemingly impossible odds. By the by, you may have missed it but we did learn something of interest at that meeting.”

“That the people hereabouts eat other people?” asked Logan. “I confess I would rather not know that.”

“Aye, and that,” said Autumn, “but more importantly I understood every word without my necklace. They do speak Aferraron here.”

Chapter Eleven

“Aha!” exclaimed Logan, balancing on a rock in the creek. “What is that over there?”

“Over where?” asked Autumn, turning to look at him.

“There,” said Logan, jabbing his finger at the undergrowth on the bank. “Over by those bushes. Are they not parvans?”

“You mean those ones with the broad purplish leaves?” asked Autumn. “I think they are. Well spotted, Logan.”

“Let us hope they have fine roots,” said Logan, jumping over to the bank to inspect them. “We shall have good eating tonight! Oh, Sploop!”

“What is it?” called Autumn, staying in the creek.

“They are not,” he called back, the disappointment evident in his voice. “There are white streaks on the stems so they are not parvans.”

“Mayhap they have edible roots all the same,” said Autumn, jumping to the bank and going to join him. “Dig one up.”

Logan squatted down and probed the ground beneath one of the plants with his fingers.

“I cannot feel any,” he said, his face blank with concentration. “Ahh, what is this? There is something a little deeper.”

He looked around and spotted a stone on the edge of the creek that was fairly flat and small enough to hold in one hand. He grabbed it and hurried back to the plant. A few scrapes of the soil later he pulled out a dirty lump the size of two fists.

“’Tis a root of some sort,” he said, taking it to the creek to wash.

“I am not certain of the colour,” said Autumn. “I have not seen a blue vegetable before.”

“Neither have I,” said Logan, studying the root. “But I care little what the colour is if it is eatable.”

“Break off a piece and let me taste it,” said Autumn, squatting beside him. “There is a chance it may be poisonous although few plants are and the poison is mostly in the leaves not the roots.”

“Best I try it first, then,” said Logan. He broke off one of the lumps at the bottom of the root and pulled off the tendrils that sprouted. He chewed the lump thoughtfully then swallowed. “It tastes bland and there is no tingling in my mouth.”

“Then eat no more for now,” said Autumn, getting up and going back to the plants. “Wait a while and see how your belly feels. I will bring another for that one will not be enough to share.”

“It feels fine at the moment,” said Logan.

“There is some garlic over there,” said Autumn. “I will get some of that as well. ’Twill be nice to flavour these roots if they are bland. ’Twould seem there is a path as well.”

“A path?” exclaimed Logan, hurrying over. “Where does it go?”

“To the creek a little further up by the look of it,” said Autumn. “The other way doubtless goes to a dwelling as there are footprints here.”

“Shall we visit them?” asked Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Mayhap they can tell us which way south is but be on your guard. This path may lead back to the dwelling of those we have just left. We have not come far.”

“A fair point,” he replied, looking along the narrow path. “And mayhap even if it is a different family those around here may be much the same and will want to eat us too.” He looked around for his staff and hurried back to the creek to fetch it.

“I fancy not,” said Autumn. “If they all eat each other then dwellings will be few and far between.”

“But we are strangers here,” said Logan coming back with a tight grip on his staff. “Mayhap they take advantage of the opportunity when there are strangers.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn. “But I will go first, just in case.”

She set off up the path, her senses alert as always. Logan followed two paces behind, his senses alert as well. Without warning something large and brown crashed out of the bushes and hurled itself at Autumn. She spun with the attack and twisted and rolled, throwing the creature into the bushes. Logan leapt forward and tried to smash it with his staff but it clunked uselessly against an overhead branch and he dropped it. The dog, for that was what it was, thrashed its way back through the bushes and again hurled itself at Autumn just as another, perhaps even bigger, launched itself at his throat. He fell, his arms instinctively raised to protect his neck and the dog sank its teeth into his forearm. He cried out at the sudden pain just as the dog attacking Autumn was thrown and crashed heavily into the other, dislodging its grip.

“Fang! Ripper! Be away with you!” shouted a man, appearing suddenly and beating the thick pelts of the two dogs with a large stick. “Get out of it, you bastards!” He kicked one of them hard and both dogs backed away, saliva dripping from their jaws. “Sit!”

Both dogs backed away a little further but they dutifully sat and stared dangerously at Autumn and Logan. One of them growled and bared its teeth and the man brandished his stick angrily.

“Do not move,” he snarled dangerously. He stared at the dogs for several heartbeats until both dogs looked away. One lay down and started to lick its back leg where Autumn had kicked it.

“My apologies,” said the man after a few more moments of staring at the dogs. “We get precious few strangers in these parts.” He grunted and looked around. “Are you hurt, girlie?”

“No,” said Autumn going on hands and knees to Logan, “but my companion is.”

"It bit me," said Logan, holding up his arm with his other hand gripping the bite tightly. Blood was seeping between his fingers.

"Let me see," said Autumn, trying to prise his fingers away.

Very reluctantly Logan let her.

"Tis sorry I am," said the man coming over to look. "Best you be coming to the house. I have some stuff for that."

"A moment," said Autumn, untying the cord around her waist so her robe hung open. She wrapped it around Logan's arm just above the elbow. "Logan, keep this tight so it stops the blood flow."

"Tis only a short way," said the man. "Let me help you up, boy."

"I will do it," said Autumn firmly, jumping to her feet. "You lead the way."

She helped Logan to his feet, keeping one eye on the man and both dogs.

"Ripper, Fang, get you to the house," said the man, clicking his fingers at the dogs and gesturing sharply.

Both dogs jumped up and ran along the path. One was limping a little.

"You can manage alright?" he asked. "Only you be a little slip of a thing."

"I can manage," said Autumn. "You lead the way."

"My legs are all weak and quivery," said Logan apologetically.

"It will pass," said Autumn, getting a firm hold of him under his armpit. "Let's get you to this man's dwelling then I will see to your injury."

"My staff," said Logan, his voice shaking. "I tried to hit it but hit something else and dropped it."

“Be this your staff?” asked the man, picking it up.

“Aye,” said Logan. “Give it to me please.”

He reached out with his injured arm to take the staff but his fingers couldn't grip it and it fell to the ground again. Autumn stooped and picked it up before the man could. He shrugged and headed along the path, walking fairly slowly.

“Once again I apologise,” he said.

“You keep these dogs for protection?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said the man. “We have neighbours who leave much to be desired. The house is around the next bend. I heard your voices and thought it was them. You are fast and no mistake, girlie. 'Tweren't for that you'd be a goner.” He raised his voice. “Kenza, Kenza, you hear me woman?”

“Be it them bastards again?” came a woman's voice.

“Nay, it be strangers,” called the man. “Get the raso. One be injured.”

A long, low dwelling came into sight as they rounded the bend although it appeared to have no openings in the solid red mud walls save a single narrow doorway. A woman, close to middle age, was hurrying around the side of the dwelling, scattering chickens as she half ran. The two dogs were lying in the shade, watching everything. One jumped up and snarled threateningly as they appeared but the man was quick to make it lie down again.

“I thought you said there be injuries,” said Kenza when she got close.

“Logan was bitten on his arm,” said Autumn and Logan obligingly lifted his arm to show Kenza the blood.

“That be all them two did?” asked Kenza incredulously. “’Tis nought but a scratch. I feared a limb missing at the very least.”

“Enough of that,” barked the man. “Where be the raso?”

“Back at the house,” said Kenza. “By the fire.”

“Good,” said the man. “Get some cloth ready as well.”

“You be thinking I be a fool then, do you, Garrec?” said Kenza. “Of course I have a bloody cloth all ready and a twitch.”

“Less of your lip, woman,” said the man. “This boy be bleeding to death.”

“I think not,” said Autumn. “The bleeding has almost stopped. I thank you for your concern but I can deal with this myself although the use of a cloth to clean his wounds will be a kindness.”

“You be 'mazed in the head if you be thinking that,” said Garrec. “They be Turkueros and you will not be cleaning their bite with a cloth and water. Raso be the only thing unless the lad be wanting to lose his arm.”

“Their bite is poisonous?” asked Autumn in alarm.

“No but 'tis pretty foul,” said the man. “Leave the lad to me. I have dealt with their bites before. Bring him inside.”

Autumn hesitated but decided to comply as she knew the limits to her healing skills and Garrec may well be telling the truth. They were, after all, his dogs, and if he meant any harm all he had to do was turn them loose again. The inside of the dwelling was dark and lit only by the fire that crackled away merrily in the centre.

“Sit him on the floor in front of the fire,” said Garrec. “This will take but a moment or two.”

Deftly Garrec wiped the blood away from Logan's forearm and inspected the four deep punctures, two on the top of his arm and two on the underside.

“'Tis just a single bite,” he said. “You were lucky. What is your name, girlie?”

“Autumn,” said Autumn, “and this is Logan.”

“Right you are,” said Garrec, picking up a small earthenware jar. “Autumn, you and Kenza hold him still. This will hurt.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Autumn, readying herself in case she needed to defend Logan.

“Pour raso into the wounds,” said Garrec. “That will sting a bit but then I will fire them.”

“What do you mean, fire them?” asked Autumn.

“Put a burning twitch to the raso inside the wound,” said Garrec. “Twill get rid of any foulness from those bastards' jaws and seal the wounds so they do not bleed any more.”

“No,” said Autumn. “I have some hamamielis in my pack. That should be sufficient.”

Garrec laughed scornfully.

“Hamamielis?” he scoffed. “That stuff be good for a scratch mayhap but not the bite of a Turkuero. Raso and flame be needed else the lad's arm will fall off inside a few days.”

Autumn stared at him, her mind racing.

“I do not want my arm to fall off,” said Logan plaintively, his eyes screwed up in pain. “And my arm be throbbing like Voqev.”

“What is this raso?” she asked. “Is it a plant?”

“Tis a drink,” said Garrec with a grin. “Tis made from crushed peppercorns and garlic and fermented in vinegar for a full summer before being boiled to get rid of most of the water. Tastes worse than cat piss but 'tis more powerful than the kick of a mule. Ain't nothing else that will kill the foulness of the Turkuero's bite.”

“Tis hurting worse,” muttered Logan, shaking his head.

“Oh, very well then,” said Autumn reluctantly.

“You be a sensible lass,” said Garrec. “Both of you, hold him still.”

Kenza knelt and put her weight on Logan's left shoulder. Slowly Autumn did the same with his right shoulder, misgivings filling her mind.

“Ready?” asked Garrec.

“Do it,” said Kenza. “Ain't got all day.”

Garrec put one knee on Logan's upper arm then poured a little raso into the first puncture. Logan screamed and writhed briefly before fainting.

“Makes life easier,” remarked Garrec.

He poured some raso into the other puncture then picked up a thin split twig and held it in the fire for a moment until it was alight. He put the burning end on top of the first puncture and the raso burst into flame momentarily then went out. He did the same with the second puncture then took his knee off Logan's arm so he could turn the arm over. He did the same again, pouring in raso then firing it. A smell of burning flesh came from Logan's arm.

“You can get off now,” said Garrec.

He washed Logan's arm with a fresh piece of cloth soaked in raso then again with a cloth soaked in water.

“Right,” he said. “All be done. Liddon be right as rain after a sleep.”

“Logan,” said Autumn automatically.

She inspected Logan's wounds as best she could in the light of the fire and they looked well enough. The firing had stayed inside the punctures and the skin of his forearm was untouched save for a few singed hairs. Logan groaned and tried to sit up.

“Lie still, Logan,” said Autumn quietly. “Rest yourself.”

“You both be welcome to sup with us and stay the night,” said Garrec. “I have three sons who be off tending the beasts. They’ll be back when Astauand sets but they will not be disturbing you beyond a stare or two at strangers.”

“I thank you,” said Autumn. “I would prefer however to sleep outside. We have been travelling for several summers and we both are accustomed to the lights of Plakill and Plifal. Night inside a dwelling is a trial for us both.”

“Some would take that as an insult to their hospitality,” said Garrec, “but not I. I was a traveller once myself and know how you feel. ’Twas in Wase, afore I met this ’un with the over lively tongue.”

“Ahh get on with you man,” exclaimed Kenza, her tone of voice relaxed in the gloom. “’Twas a time when you liked my tongue well enough.”

“You spoke of neighbours earlier,” said Autumn, turning her attention from Logan to Garrec. “You do not live in peace with them?”

“I warrant you haven’t met them then,” said Garrec with a snort. “They be foul bastards much given to thieving and worse.”

“Does one of them have a face that is all over the place?” asked Autumn.

“So you have met them!” exclaimed Kenza. “Be they friends of yours?”

“Not at all,” said Autumn. “We were walking along the creek and came upon them by chance. They do not seem to like strangers.”

“’Tis a wonder you still live,” remarked Garrec. “’Tis not unknown for them to put strangers in the pot.”

“Aye, there was some mention of that,” said Autumn, “but we declined and left.”

"I fancy there be a lot more to that than a simple declining," said Garrec, thoughtfully. "I saw you both with the dogs. You be blinding fast, girl, and that boy be not much slower. You should have seen it, Kenza. Ripper leapt on Autumn here and she threw him in the bushes! Then Fang jumped on Logan and she threw Ripper at him! 'Twas a sight I would not have believed had I not seen it with my own eyes. Mayhap if I had not been there both my dogs would be dead by now. Reckon as how you did the same with them there sods downstream, eh?"

"You be joking, Garrec," said Kenza. "People be no match for them dogs."

"How be you explaining their lacking injuries, then?" said Garrec. "Tell us true, Autumn. Be them doolally bastards still live?"

"Aye," said Autumn. "They still live although I venture they will not be coming looking for us."

"You be a strange one," said Garrec. "Any I know who bested them would be boasting to all yet you stay quiet on the matter. Why is that?"

"'Tis not my way," said Autumn. "There was a disagreement that has been settled and nothing more needs to be said."

"Reckon I might take the boys and go a-visiting in the morning," said Garrec. "See for myself, like."

"'Tis your choice, Garrec," said Autumn. "Although it might not go amiss if you take your dogs as well. They are likely to still be in an ill humour."

Garrec stared at her then burst out laughing and thumped his knee with his hand.

"Oh I like you," he chuckled. "I like you greatly."

"If you will permit me," she said when Garrec had stopped laughing. "I have two questions, if I may."

“Ask away,” said Garrec. “If I know the answers I will tell you.”

“We came across this root not long before we met your dogs,” said Autumn, taking one of the roots from her pack. “I do not know what it is but it is similar to a root we commonly eat in Aferraron.”

“That?” said Kenza. “Tis only a totapo. They be common enough here too. Others farm them although we do not.”

“So they are good eating then?” asked Autumn.

“Aye, good enough although not strongly flavoured,” said Garrec. “Be careful to soak them well before eating though.”

“Are they poisonous?” she asked.

“Not at all,” said Kenza, “but if you eat them straight they make your mouth turn blue and you will piss blue for days afterwards. Best be slicing them and sitting them in water until they be yellow then put them in fresh water for cooking.”

“Ahh, that is good to know,” said Autumn. “What do you do with the old water afterwards?”

“We use it to colour cloth,” said Kenza, “but if you do not want to just throw it away. They be nice roasted as well and you can eat them raw but they will be tough.”

“And your other question?” asked Garrec.

“Which way is south?” asked Autumn. “We have been following the creek upstream thinking that way is south but we are not certain.”

“Aye, upstream is south, right enough,” said Garrec, “but why are you following the creek? Why not take the road?”

“I did not know there was a road,” said Autumn. “We followed a track leaving Coot-Tha but it was heading west so we turned south and found the creek which seemed to run mostly north south.”

“Ahh, I know where you went wrong,” said Garrec. “I take the road to Coot-Tha two mayhap three times a year to go to the market. Had you stayed on the road a little way further it would have turned south for it goes all the way to Hurabid which be on the coast. Is that where you are heading?”

“I have not heard of Hurabid,” said Autumn. “Is it a place worth visiting?”

“’Tis not as big as Coot-Tha,” said Garrec, “nor does it have as many delights but, aye, ’tis a well enough place if you like fish. Where are you heading in the south if not for Hurabid? There is little else down there.”

“There is a place we have heard of,” said Autumn, “which intrigues me and I would like to see for myself. ’Tis a wall of surpassing size or so we are told and it goes from one side of the island to the other.”

“Surely you do not mean the Wall of Loriki?” exclaimed Garrec in shock.

“So you know of it too?” asked Autumn.

“Know of it?” said Kenza, matching Garrec’s alarm. “You be staying well away from there unless you are tired of life, both of you. Whatever horrors you have encountered on your travels are nothing compared to what lies beyond the Wall of Loriki!”

Chapter Twelve

“Is it not a beautiful day?” asked Autumn happily, spreading her arms and turning full circle as she walked.

“Aye,” replied Logan, looking at the clouds gathering to the west through the gaps in the trees. “You said that when you finished your exercises and you say it every day whatever the weather.”

“Saying something every day does not make it any less true,” said Autumn, continuing to walk while turning circles. “’Tis a delight to be journeying with my dear companion on this warm and sunny day amid such rich and colourful forests. I fancy I can even hear the flowers growing as I speak!”

“I reckon it will rain later,” said Logan. “We have not been in this land many days but it has rained every day.”

“And is not the rain most delightful as well?” asked Autumn, now walking backwards so she could look at him.

“I just wish it was not so wet,” said Logan dolefully. “Why can we not have dry rain for a change?”

“Because it is the nature of rain to be wet,” said Autumn, cheerily. “If rain were not wet it would be something else.”

“I suppose,” he said.

“And you are forgetting our journeying in Neander,”¹⁶ said Autumn. “’Twas so dry there little grew and the land was harsh and brown. Doubtless the trees and plants here grow in such profusion and variety because of all the wetness.”

She studied him as he walked for his air was a little withdrawn and he was not his usual cheerful self.

“Does your arm pain you?” she asked, stopping momentarily so he drew level on the track.

16 See *The Annals ~ The Fifth Tale* and *The Sixth Tale*.

"Tis a little sore," he admitted, holding his arm up and flexing his fingers to show her the soreness, "but I have had worse. I know not what that stuff Garrec put on my arm but it seems to work."

"Aye," said Autumn. "When I changed your dressing before we left I was impressed that scabs had already formed and there was almost no redness. So what ails you, if it is not your arm?"

"Nothing ails me," said Logan, frowning. "Why?"

"You seem somehow less than your usual cheerful self," she said. "If you say nothing ails you then I take your word on that."

"Most gracious of you," said Logan with a touch of sarcasm in his voice. It went undetected as Autumn was as oblivious to sarcasm as she was to humour.

"Thank you," said Autumn, "although 'tis not graciousness on my part. 'Tis more that I know you have always spoken true to me and I know no reason why now would be different. 'Tis also that I constantly look for changes in what is around me and when there is no apparent explanation I look for one. When it concerns you I confess I do worry somewhat when you are different to your usual self with no obvious cause, especially when 'tis so infrequent."

"'Tis nothing, I assure you," said Logan and gave a small sigh without noticing.

"Nothing can have substance too," said Autumn quietly, "if only in the imagination."

"So you think I am imagining things?" asked Logan sharply. "After all the strange and scary things we have seen on our travels?"

"Not at all, Logan," said Autumn. "I was merely noting a philosophical point. Anything of substance can be described in terms of its form and the absence of things can also be described in terms of the form they leave in the substances that surround them. It therefore follows that nothing has substance as well."

“That sounds very dubious to me,” said Logan. “Are you saying that a hole in the ground has substance simply because there is the ground around it?”

“Not at all,” she said with a smile. “I said that only to see how you responded and divert you from thinking I am saying you are imagining things. 'Twas false logic and nothing more.”

“Oh,” said Logan flatly.

He pursed his lips and they walked on in silence, Logan looking at the dirt track they were following and Autumn looking at the trees and birds.

“Only ...,” said Logan after a while, “um, well ...”

“Yes?” asked Autumn, turning her head to look at him.

“Oh nothing,” said Logan, wagging the staff in his good hand dismissively.

“Be that a nothing of substance or one of no substance?” asked Autumn.

“What is all this about substance?” demanded Logan. “Why are you going on about it?”

“'Twas just a thought,” said Autumn. “Sometimes nothing is nothing and sometimes nothing is a cover for something. Forgive me. I shall not speak of it again.”

“It is just that I do not like to look stupid in front of you,” said Logan, inspecting a detail on his staff.

“You never look stupid, Logan,” said Autumn calmly. “We do not always agree on everything but you have good solid reasons for disagreeing.”

“There you go again!” said Logan huffily. “Bringing substance into it!”

"I apologise for speaking of solids," she said, looking a little surprised. "I meant only that when you disagree you disagree for good reason, nothing more. Please, what is it you are afraid to tell me in case I will think you stupid?"

"Oh. nothing," said Logan. "I'm just being stupid, that's all."

"Is it just me or is this discussion going round in circles?" asked Autumn, stopping. She grabbed Logan's arm so he stopped as well.

"What discussion?" asked Logan. "We are not having a discussion. All we are doing is talking pointlessly about things of no substance and how that is false logic."

"That would be a fine discussion if we were talking of it," said Autumn, "but are we not talking of something about which you will not speak for fear I will think you stupid? That, at least, is what I am talking of. You, on the other hand, seem to not be saying anything at all."

Logan stared at her for a few heartbeats then shook off her arm and carried on walking. Autumn let him go then followed two paces behind.

"Tis only ...," started Logan then realised she wasn't beside him and turned quickly. "Oh, there you are."

"Tis only what?" asked Autumn. "I may not be able to aid you but if you do not tell me then that will be a certainty."

"What will be a certainty?" asked Logan, walking backwards himself now. "I'm confused."

"I cannot aid you in any way until I know what ails you," said Autumn. "Or would you prefer me to guess?"

"Oh right," said Logan. "Well that is true enough, I suppose. No, there is no need to guess."

He turned and they walked on in silence again. After a few paces

Autumn caught him up.

"Tis only what we were talking on last night," blurted Logan a few paces further on.

"We talked of many things," said Autumn. "Was it one thing in particular or the entire exchange in general?"

"Oh Sploop! 'Twas Garrec and Kenza," exclaimed Logan, "and what they said of what lies beyond the Wall of Loriki."

"Ahh," said Autumn. "And you believed them?"

"Why would I not?" asked Logan, twisting to look at her. "We have, after all, encountered soskas and gangsis and adnaton'najas ourselves and doubtless draugrs and wraiths and much else besides are real as well."¹⁷

"True," said Autumn, "but I doubt very much if any lie beyond the Wall of Loriki. In fact I am not wholly convinced the Wall itself exists."

"Why then would they invent such a thing?" asked Logan, frowning.

"Why do people invent anything?" asked Autumn. "For certain people love stories and stories that they can shake their heads over and go to bed happy that what's in the story will never affect them seem to be greatly enjoyed. For some reason people like to be fearful but in a safe way. Mayhap that also played a part in how the people of Schtei changed the vastly dangerous Ratanbismet into a deity that protected the city."

"That is no answer," said Logan. "If we come upon someone on this track who tells us a hundred bandits lie in wait around the next bend you would not dismiss their words, would you?"

17 See *The Annals – The First Tale* and *The Second Tale*: In the former, Autumn and Logan encountered a soska and a gangsi when Autumn ventured into the Land of the Undead to bring back Logan after he had been killed by an arrow. In the latter, Autumn bested a number of adnaton'najas who had been brought in as overseers in the copper mine of Cymogene Hirao Sastruga.

“No, that would be foolish,” said Autumn, “for bandits are a real and ever present danger.”

“But we have encountered soskas and gangsis,” exclaimed Logan. “Are they not a real and present danger as well?”

“Less so, I would imagine,” said Autumn. “Granted we did meet a soska in the Chevesic Forest but it was alone and had made its home there for many generations. The gangsi we encountered was in its proper place in the Land of the Undead.”

“And the adnaton'najas?” demanded Logan. “Were they not roaming freely in the Mapdil Mountains?”

“Decidedly not,” she replied. “They were at the mine at the behest of Cymogene. 'Twas a very difference situation entirely.”

“How so?” asked Logan. “Could it not be another Cymogene has taken over the rest of this island and has brought these creatures here?”

“Highly unlikely,” said Autumn. “The Wall was built, if it was, many generations ago when people first came to this island and was intended to stop the newcomers from going past. I venture soskas and the like would not be put off by a simple wall. For certain nothing in the tales we have been told suggests there has been any visitations from beyond the Wall since it was built.”

“Does that not confirm that the Wall does stop soskas?” asked Logan.

“Again that is false logic,” said Autumn. “The fact that something has not crossed a wall does not mean it exists behind the wall. If it does not exist then it will not cross either.”

“I suppose,” said Logan, reluctantly. Then he brightened. “But it does not mean they don't exist! Mayhap they do but they have other reasons for not crossing.”

“Then why build a wall?” asked Autumn. “That act suggests that whatever was the other side had a desire to come this way.”

“Pah,” said Logan. “You do not entirely convince me.”

“Let me ask you a question,” said Autumn. “Soskas, gangsis and adnaton'najas are all creatures of the Land of the Undead, are they not?”

“Aye,” said Logan.

“And Yammoe rules the Land of the Undead, does It not?”

“Aye.”

“And Yammoe has great powers in the Land of the Living and yet chooses to remain in Its own Land, agreed?”

“Aye.”

“Why then would Yammoe take over part of this island and populate it with Its own creatures?” she asked. “Why not take over the entire island? Why not all the Land of the Living? Such would be well within Its power.”

“Zeeth would surely stop such a venture,” said Logan.

“Indeed,” replied Autumn. “So why would Zeeth permit Yammoe to take part of this island?”

“Who knows what Zeeth's reasons are.” said Logan. “I surely do not.”

“Then think on it another way,” said Autumn. “What if Yammoe did have control of this island with the full agreement of Zeeth. Why, when living people come to this island, does Yammoe fall back part of the way and permit a wall to be built? Why not take all the people to the Land of the Undead or leave this island entirely?”

“I don't know,” said Logan.

“Yammoe rules the Land of the Undead,” said Autumn. “Zeeth rules the Land of the Dead. Danornor lies in the Land of the Living. There is no need for any to cross into the other.”

“There was that soska,” said Logan. “In the Chevesic Forest.”

“True enough,” said Autumn, “and I have no explanation for that.”

“So does that not make the tales we have been told of the Wall of Loriki a possibility?” asked Logan.

“A very small possibility,” said Autumn, “but most unlikely. Were the rest of this island really filled with soskas and the like I venture none would have been brave enough to have built the Wall.”

“And yet it was built,” said Logan. “We come full circle again.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but this is why I am not convinced the Wall exists. Yes, we have heard tales of it but only from but two people and neither has ever seen the Wall. Like as not they are only repeating tales they have been told themselves.”

“But why would someone make up a tale about a wall to keep the Undead out?” asked Logan.

“Why would someone say a deity protects a city when it is not a deity and has ravaged the city in times past?” asked Autumn. “Mayhap there is some seed of truth in the tales of the Wall of Loriki but it has changed greatly in the retelling over many generations.”

“Hmmm,” said Logan and pushed his lower lip out thoughtfully.

“And mark something else as well, Logan,” said Autumn. “When first we heard of the Wall of Loriki from Swaven and Gata they spoke only of demons and monsters and could not agree if they had a leader or not. We are closer to the Wall now and Garrec and Kenza tell us of soskas and gangsis. Is it not interesting that the closer to the Wall we get the more detailed the tale becomes?”

“Interesting?” exclaimed Logan. “Worrying more like! When we reach the Wall doubtless we will know in great detail what lies beyond!”

“And that is what scares you?” asked Autumn.

“Of course it does!” exclaimed Logan. “As it would any right minded person!”

“Mayhap that is the point of the tales,” said Autumn. “Have you considered the possibility that these tales are intended to frighten people away so they stay clear of the Wall, if it exists?”

“I confess I had not,” said Logan.

“And if these creatures were from the Land of the Undead,” said Autumn, “surely all would know that their leader is Yammoe? 'Tis not a detail likely to be forgotten in the retelling.”

“You have a point there,” said Logan thoughtfully. “Even if these sorkas and gangsis have escaped the Land of the Undead the people likely would not know and would think they were sent by Yammoe.”

“Exactly,” said Autumn, “and they would not rename Yammoe as Loriki. That detail alone suggests much in the tale has been changed in the retelling.”

“So you do not think the Wall even exists?” asked Logan after thinking about it for a while.

“Mayhap it does, mayhap it doesn't,” said Autumn. “Mayhap it once did but does not now. After all, if it were as dangerous as people say who would be repairing it?”

“A fair point,” said Logan. “I did not think of that and it has been many generations. Even if it were built of stone it would be in dire need of repair by now.”

“All the more so if it has been under attack,” said Autumn, “which makes me wonder something else.”

“What?” asked Logan, tripping over a stone that jutted out from the track. He banged his injured arm against his staff as he thrust it out to steady himself. “Oww.”

“A good pain or a bad pain?” asked Autumn, reaching out to help

steady him.

"A good pain," said Logan. "'Twas nothing to suggest the wounds are turning foul."

"Good," said Autumn. "It came to me that if the Wall is there to keep whatever is behind from passing this side then there must also be guards and frequent patrols to ensure nothing does climb over or through. 'Twould be pointless building a wall only to let it fall apart through disrepair and lack of attention. No one has mentioned such things."

"You have me there," said Logan, continuing walking. "Now I begin to see why you doubt the wall exists."

"Mayhap long ago it was a political wall," said Autumn. "Mayhap people from Neander or Sassese'lte came to this island at much the same time the people from Aferraron did and the Wall marked a boundary. Mayhap there was even a war of sorts and the people here called those the other side demons."

"I did not think of that," said Logan. "In my foolishness I thought only of the soskas. It occurs to me that there have been several wars between Aferraron and Wase and the possession of this island has changed hands several times. Why do you suppose neither the Roinad of Aferraron nor the Moi of Wase have wanted to know what lies beyond the Wall?"

"Oh, I venture neither have ever heard of it," said Autumn. "Doubtless Danornor is too small a place to be of any real interest. So long as they pay their taxes the people will not be disturbed."

"But surely if Neander claims part of the island the Moi would want to know?" asked Logan.

"I do not say that Neander does claim part of the Island," said Autumn, "only that that is a possible explanation for there being a Wall although, I confess, if there is a Wall then that seems a more likely explanation than creatures from the Land of the Undead."

“So why are we looking for the Wall if you do not think it exists?” asked Logan.

“Because I am curious,” said Autumn. “I would like to know if there is such a wall and if there is why it was built and what lies beyond.”

“And you think there is no danger?” asked Logan.

“There is always danger,” said Autumn. “That is a sad fact of the world we live in.”

“I meant from soskas and whatnot,” said Logan.

“Some, perhaps,” said Autumn, “but likely not. More likely we are in danger from something falling from this wall that has not been repaired for generations.”

Logan laughed, his spirits much lightened by their discussion.

“Ahh,” he said several paces later. A frown briefly crossed his face.

“What now?” asked Autumn, ever patient.

“I recall you saying dragons did not exist,” said Logan, “and being most convincing but then we found Xanthous.¹⁸ Mayhap your logic is faulty here.”

“That is always possible,” said Autumn. “I am far from perfect. I would remind you though that I did say there are no dragons in our world. Xanthous is not of our world.”

“I do not remember if you did say that or not,” said Logan, pursing his lips.

“But as we are on the matter of remembering things,” said Autumn, “I recall something you have said many times.”

“And what is that?” asked Logan.

¹⁸ See *The Annals- The Sixth Tale*.

“You often say that if Mother Midcarn gives us a gift we are destined for great trouble,” said Autumn. “Is it not fair to turn that around and say that if we are headed for great trouble then we should have received a gift from Mother Midcarn to aid us by now?”

“Mayhap the danger is still some fair way off,” said Logan, “but I take your point. Not that I will rest easy for I will now be worrying about every little thing on our journey for fear it is a gift from Mother Midcarn.”

“Oh Logan!” exclaimed Autumn. “You are determined to worry! 'Tis fruitless to worry about what may be for it just as easily may not be.”

“Aye,” said Logan, “but I do not have your years of training. I have spent much of my life worrying about where my next meal will come from.”

“And it was wrong of me to judge you because of that,” said Autumn, stopping and putting her hand on his arm. “I was too quick to speak and too slow to think. Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive, Autumn,” said Logan. “You are absolutely right, as always. Until such time as we receive a gift from Mother Midcarn there is nothing to worry about.”

“And likely not then either,” said Autumn, “for her gifts are generally very useful in meeting the danger. What is that?”

She took her hand off Logan's arm and pointed to something brightly coloured sitting on a branch a little behind him.

“Oh Voqev!” exclaimed Logan, freezing so he could not see it. “That damned old woman was listening!”

Chapter Thirteen

“Perhaps it is best if Mother Midcarn is listening not to insult her,” said Autumn.

“Perhaps,” said Logan, still not turning round to look at what Autumn had seen. “But she values the truth and she knows full well she is a woman and old.”

“But I wager she is not damned,” said Autumn, “whereas you might be if you are rude.”

“Unlikely,” he said. “We are her favourites, are we not.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but in truth we have no idea how many others she favours as well. I seem to remember you once argued that we were not for, in your eyes at least, she was frequently leading us into danger.”

“Aye, but as you said she does give us gifts to help us,” he replied then let out a sharp breath. “What is it this time?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “It has not moved and is not as brightly coloured as it was when I saw it.”

“Perhaps it is fading and will disappear if we ignore it,” said Logan.

“Oh Logan, Logan,” chided Autumn. “Where is your curiosity? Your sense of enquiry?”

“Safely tucked away where nothing can get at it,” retorted Logan. “Has it gone yet?”

“No,” she said, “but my curiosity is fully intact.”

She let go of Logan's arm and stepped over to the branch.

“Well now,” she said after studying the object. “How peculiar.”

“What does the message say?” asked Logan, his back still turned

towards the object.

“I see no message,” said Autumn.

“Likely it has fallen off,” said Logan. “Try looking under the branch.”

“No, there is nothing there,” said Autumn, “save some grass and leaves. Do you want me to inspect every blade in case something is written on it?”

“Are you certain?” asked Logan.

“Come and see for yourself,” said Autumn. “If it is indeed a gift from Mother Midcarn refusing to look at it will not avert what is to come.”

“Oh Sploop!” said Logan. “There are times when your logic is greatly annoying, Autumn!”

He slowly turned and scanned the branch beside Autumn.

“Ahh,” he said in relief. “It has gone!”

“No, it is still here,” said Autumn. She tapped the branch with a finger. “Just here.”

“I see nothing,” said Logan, frowning. “Just a bulge on a branch. What of it?”

“Look closer,” said Autumn.

Logan stepped forward and peered at the branch where Autumn's finger rested.

“Is that all?” he said with a touch of exasperation. “A small lizard? I commend you for the fine quality of your eyes, Autumn, but a lizard? Why does that excite your curiosity? It looks dead to me.”

“It may be dead for it has not moved since I saw it,” she said. “It was brightly coloured with stripes of red and blue and yellow but 'tis now the colour of the branch.”

“Oh,” said Logan. He poked the lizard with a finger and its little jaws snapped at him before freezing again, this time with its mouth half open and one fore leg raised. “No, it is not dead. It must be pretending in the hope we will go away.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “and now I question myself as to whether I did see bright colours or if they were only in my imagination.”

“If you say you saw bright colours then you saw bright colours,” said Logan. “I know not the why of it but you do not imagine things like that. Let us move on and leave this lizard in peace.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. She put her palms together in front of her face and bowed a little to the lizard. “Go in peace little one.”

Logan was a full pace away when Autumn grabbed his arm.

“Look!” she hissed, pointing at the lizard.

“What is it?” asked Logan, turning back again.

“See the spot where you poked it?” she asked, pointing. “’Tis changing colour!”

“Surely not,” said Logan. “I did not poke hard. Is it bleeding?”

“No,” she said, peering at the lizard. “’Tis the colour of its skin that is changing but only where you touched it. The rest remains the colour of the branch.”

“How strange,” said Logan also peering at the lizard. Sure enough the patch where his finger had touched was now almost the same colour as his finger.

Very gently he picked up the lizard. Its mouth snapped shut and its body went limp.

“I hope it is still pretending to be dead,” he said, cradling it.

“I saw its eyes move,” said Autumn, watching intently. “Do my eyes

deceive me or is its colour fading?"

"I fancy you are right," said Logan, hunched over the little lizard. "That spot where I touched it is now the colour of my finger and is not changing but the rest of it is."

"Tis going the colour of your hand!" exclaimed Autumn in fascination.

"Aye," said Logan. "That is most exceedingly strange, is it not? Hold out your arm."

Obligingly Autumn lifted her arm and Logan carefully placed the lizard on the sleeve of her robe. Immediately the lizard leapt to its feet and went rigid again. One eye flickered towards Autumn's face and the other to Logan's hand.

"Vallume!" said Autumn excitedly. "It is now going green!"

"I wager it will end up the same colour as your robe," said Logan. "That is right clever! I wonder how it does that? Do you suppose it is a magical lizard? Mayhap it is a gift from Mother Midcarn after all."

"Perhaps it is," said Autumn absently. She was watching the lizard take on the dark green of the cloth of her robe. "And unless I am much mistaken the lizard is also taking on the pattern of the weave of the cloth."

"Ohh, so it is!" exclaimed Logan. "I have an idea. Pass me your thread from your pack."

"What are you going to do?" asked Autumn. "I will not permit you to tie this creature up."

"I just want to try something," said Logan. "I'm not going to hurt it."

Without moving her arm Autumn felt around inside her pack and pulled out her small ball of red thread and passed it to Logan. He pulled out her thick bone needle and the thin metal one that were stuck inside the ball and laid a strand of the thread on Autumn's

raised arm. Then he picked up a small yellow petal that had fallen to the ground and put it beside the thread.

“Let us see what the beastie makes of this,” he said with a grin and moved the lizard on top of the thread and petal. Breathlessly they waited to see what would happen.

Several heartbeats went by, then several more.

“Look!” exclaimed Logan, “tis making a thin red line around its body where the thread is and a broad yellow stripe from the petal! Is that not the most clever creature you have ever seen?”

“Aye, a lizard that can change from brown to the colour of your skin then to green, red and yellow,” said Autumn. “Truly that is, I think, the most incredible thing I have ever seen!”

“It can change the colour of its skin to match whatever it stands on,” said Logan. “Let me try with some other coloured things.”

“No,” said Autumn, stepping back so the lizard was out of his reach. “We do not know what effort or trials the lizard must go through to do this. I would not want it to drop dead from exhaustion for our amusement. Enough is enough.”

“Aye, I daresay you are right,” said Logan, dropping the stone with patches of moss on it. “What shall we do with it?”

“Put is back where we found it,” said Autumn, picking up the lizard. She carefully put it back on the branch and they both watched as it took on the grey-brown colour.

“Go in peace little one,” said Autumn when the lizard was barely visible. “We thank you for expanding our knowledge of the world.” She spotted an ant further along the branch and put a finger in its path so the ant climbed on it. She put her finger gently down in front of the lizard and both its eyes swivelled to track the ant. Suddenly a thin black tongue snaked out and the ant disappeared.

“Interesting,” said Autumn. “The tongue did not change colour.”

“Mayhap there was no need,” said Logan. “If it keeps its mouth shut none will see its tongue.”

“True enough,” said Autumn. “I wonder how deep the colour change goes? Is it just the skin or the flesh as well?”

“We will never know,” said Logan, “unless we cut one open to find out.”

“And cause suffering for the sake of curiosity?” asked Autumn. “That would be unconscionable.”

“I was only saying,” said Logan mildly. “I was not going to do that. So, do you think this lizard is a gift from Mother Midcarn? 'Twould seem a waste of magic if it is not.”

“That is a question, Logan,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “I know not how it changes colour but like as not it is not magical. I know not how birds fly nor how plants make seeds but that is no reason to assume sorcery is the cause. This world is a wondrous place if we but look and magic has its place but is not everything. Mayhap if this is the only such lizard then it could be a gift for us but mayhap it isn't. The trees could be filled with them but we cannot see any. 'Twas only a matter of chance I saw this one. Besides we have no message from Mother Midcarn and that is her usual way.”

“Mayhap she did leave one but it got blown away or the lizard ate it,” said Logan.

“There is another point against it being her gift,” said Autumn, turning to continue walking along the track. “Our only reason for thinking it might be from Mother Midcarn is because we were talking of such things when I saw the lizard. Had we been talking of other things, where to pass the night for example, like as not it would not have occurred to us to think this lizard from her.”

“True enough,” said Logan, following her, “but what if it is from her and we ignore it? Will we not be left to face whatever trouble lies ahead without her aid?”

“There is always that risk,” said Autumn, “which is doubtless why she leaves a message so there is no mistaking.” She walked on a few paces. “And think on this, Logan. Mayhap we have missed other gifts in the past. After all, we only know of the ones we found. It could be that she knows when we miss a gift and leaves another.”

“I suppose so,” said Logan, “although it bothers me that we found a wondrous lizard and left it behind as we walk towards unknown dangers.”

“And there you have the fatal flaw in your argument,” said Autumn, slapping Logan on the shoulder. “You are supposing we are walking towards certain danger when you cannot know anything of the sort. We were talking of Mother Midcarn, saw the lizard and the rest is your imagination.”

“Well, I suppose, if you put it like that,” said Logan. “Doubtless nothing lies beyond the Wall of Loriki save more forests and lizards.”

“And we will find out soon enough,” said Autumn. “There is no need to invent troubles.”

* * *

“This bodes ill,” said Autumn later that day when Astauand was halfway down in the sky. “That is a body lying beside the cart.”

“Aye, but where is the horse?” asked Logan.

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and why is the body the other side to which the cart fell? Tread warily, Logan. There is something amiss here.”

“Mayhap if we go around, through the bushes,” said Logan.

“I cannot,” said Autumn. “That body may not be dead and I must give what aid I can if he or she still lives. You stay back and keep watch while I see what is what.”

“It would be better if I do that and you watch,” said Logan. “If there is something amiss you are better able to deal with it than I.”

Autumn sighed and looked around slowly, probing among the trees for any sign of ... anything.

“Aye,” she said. “I have a bad feeling but I cannot place the cause. Be quick. Check only to see if that one be dead or alive.”

“Best you take my staff,” said Logan, passing it to her. “I cannot grip it properly because of my arm.”

Autumn moved off the track and into the bushes as Logan slowly walked towards the overturned cart. Stealthily and without a sound she moved to a better position.

Logan paused beside the cart and noticed the straps had been untied rather than broken or torn. His eyes narrowed as he looked around but there was still no sign of a horse, apart from some trampled grass and a few broken stems leading off through the trees. Cautiously he stepped forward towards the man who lay unmoving on the track. It looked as though the track narrowed a little at this point and, for some reason, the horse had bolted, overturning the cart and tossing the driver into the middle of the track. But, as Autumn had noted, if the cart fell towards the trees, why did the driver fall onto the track?

He paused and looked around. Apart from the usual sounds of creatures in the undergrowth and the mild breeze through the trees there was not a sound.

Logan stopped a pace away from the body. It was clearly a man, unless women in these parts grew thick beards. He could see the slight rise and fall of the man's back as he breathed while lying partly face down, one arm under his head and the other splayed out on the ground.

Cautiously Logan moved closer. A bird flashed out of a nearby bush, squawking loudly and making him jump. Not much else happened so Logan stepped over to the man and squatted down.

“Can you hear me?” he asked.

The man groaned and his arm moved a little.

"Are you badly hurt?" asked Logan.

There was no reply.

Logan stood up and looked back along the track. Autumn had disappeared.

"Now where has she gone?" he thought.

He looked back down at the man. He was breathing albeit shallowly. Logan bent and rolled him onto his back. The man flopped over. His face was covered in blood.

"Ayeyah," thought Logan. "This does not look good."

He looked back along the track and Autumn was still nowhere to be seen.

"Autumn!" he called. "Autumn! Where are you? This man still lives but he is covered in blood!"

"I am here," said Autumn, stepping out from behind the nearby tree. "Is he conscious?"

"I don't think so," said Logan. "There is a lot of blood but I could not see where it is all coming from."

"Let me look," said Autumn, walking over. She returned Logan's staff and bent to inspect the man.

"Now!" he screamed and jerked himself sideways.

Autumn leapt backwards instantly but her head, an arm and one foot got entangled in the net that fell from the tree above. Logan, slower to react, was completely engulfed. As she struggled to free herself there were some thumps and a sword tip touched her throat.

"Stop moving," said a voice, a little high pitched but disinterested and unfriendly.

Realising she was enmeshed in the net, Autumn did as she was bidden. Logan, too, lay still.

“Agav!” exclaimed the blood faced man, shaking his head. “All that bloody effort and we catch a couple of gnats!”

“Could be worse, Lakrar,” said the higher pitched voice. “Least one of ‘em be a girlie gnat.” He sniggered.

“Aye, but ‘tis a small mercy,” growled Lakrar. “Amel, Geyoro, you set ‘em loose and strip ‘em. Mikan, Ige, you watch ‘em closely. That there girlie was fast enough to almost get away. Reckon she’ll give you a run for your money.” He raised his voice. “Urde? Where are you, you snivelling little shit?”

“I’m coming, Da,” called a child, hurrying out of the bushes.

“Get me some water and a rag to wash this damned blood off,” growled Lakrar. “It be stinking and calling the flies.”

“Yes Da,” cried Urde, disappearing back into the bushes.

“Be you Amel or Geyoro?” asked Autumn as one of the men started to disentangle her head and arm.

“Geyoro,” he said in his strangely high pitched voice, “not that it makes any mind to you.”

“So you are Amel?” she asked the girl who was freeing her foot. “I am Autumn.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Amel with a sneer. Her voice was deeper than her brother’s but still that of a woman. She spat on the ground and wrenched the last of the netting off Autumn’s foot, not caring in the slightest if it hurt.

“Back against that tree,” said Geyoro, the tip of his sword once again at Autumn’s throat. “Ige, bind her.”

Autumn backed until she felt the tree trunk behind her, watching

Geyoro and Amel closely. Ige went behind the tree and grabbed one of Autumn's hands.

"Just try it," said Geyoro softly, leaning forward a little so the point of his sword pushed into Autumn's neck. Reluctantly she let Ige tie a piece of cord around her wrist then tie it to her other hand.

"Good little girlie," said Geyoro. "I'll be back for you later."

He strode over to help Amel disentangle Logan while Lakrar scrubbed as much of his face clean as he could.

"Nice hair," said Ige, running his fingers through Autumn's ponytail. He came round the front of the tree, wrapping the pony tail round the trunk. He yanked it tight so her head banged against the tree. He grinned then licked her cheek. With an effort Autumn managed to stop herself kneeing Ige between his legs. Until Logan was free of the net she had to go along with this.

"Mmm, tasty," he said and yanked her pony tail again.

Autumn just stared at him.

"Time enough for that later, Ige," shouted Lakrar. "Help Amel and Geyoro with the lad."

"I'll be back," said Ige, his eyes wide with anticipation. "Don't you be worrying, my pretty."

"I shall look forward to that," said Autumn but Ige did not hear the danger in her voice.

"Course you will," he said with a leer and yanked her pony tail again.

Autumn snapped the cord binding her hands but kept her hands behind the tree trunk.

"Ige!" shouted Lakrar. "I ain't be telling you again!"

"Yes, Da," called Ige, dropping Autumn's hair.

He ran over to tie Logan's hands behind another tree nearby while Geyoro and Mikan kept their swords on him. Amel was busy laying the net out flat so she could fold it neatly, ready for the next ambush.

"Right," said Lakrar, striding over to Logan. "So, what, you be traders or some such? Where be your goods and whatnot?"

"No," said Logan, "we are but simple travellers. We have no goods beyond what you see here."

"Travellers, eh," said Lakrar. "So, you be saying you have no goods nor money then?"

"We have money," said Autumn. "If that is all you desire you are free to take all we have. There are two rings of some value as well."

Lakrar stared at her then burst out laughing.

"Hear that boys? We be free to take what we want?" he said. "That be right nice of you girlie but you be making one little tiny mistake."

"And what is that?" asked Autumn.

"We be taking what we want either way, free or not," said Lakrar with a sneer. He tossed the bloody rag to Urde. "And where be this money and these rings?"

"In the rolled up blanket yonder," said Autumn nodding towards it with her head.

"Bring it here, Amel," said Lakrar.

Amel hurried over to Logan's blanket and picked it up then gave it to Lakrar. He ripped away the string holding it wrapped and let the blanket drop open. Some coins and the rings fell from its folds and he bent to pick them up.

"Nice little pretties," he said, inspecting the rings. "Wasian by the look and them coins be kalas. This be turning out better than I expected. Amel, you be wanting to play with the lad?"

“Aye Da,” said Amel, pulling a vicious little knife out from inside her tunic. “He don't look up to much but I wager he'll last a fair while all the same.” She ran her thumb over the edge of her blade to test its sharpness and grinned at Logan in anticipation.

“Right then,” said Lakrar. “Strip 'em both and search their clothes for more coins and gems but mind you not be tearing or staining them. We might get a few hakina for 'em at the market.”

“And after?” asked Ige, licking his lips and staring at Autumn.

“Do what you likes,” said Lakrar indifferently, “but be not taking too long about it. Chuck their bodies in the cart after you're done. Ain't much meat on 'em but Neski'll still take 'em.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Urde, go get the horse,” said Lakrar, striding over to the cart. As Urde scampered off into the bush he started pulling on the cart wheel in the air to topple it back onto the ground.

“I be going first, Ige,” said Geyoro, shoving Ige aside as he stared lustfully at Autumn. He was still three paces away so she did not move. She just stared back at him. “You always leave 'em a bloody mess. Ain't no fun at all when they're like that, see.”

“You be always spoiling my fun,” grumbled Ige as the cart thumped to the ground. “What gives you the right, eh?”

“A full summer on you, you shit,” said Geyoro. “Get behind and hold her legs while I strip her. Don't want the bitch kicking me where it hurts.”

Ige sniggered and turned to look at Mikan who was tying Logan's neck to the tree with a piece of cord.

“You girls need a hand there?” he asked.

“Nah,” replied Amel, standing closely in front of Logan. She stared into his eyes as she stroked his cheek with the flat blade of her knife. “This one shows little fear but he be finding out what colour his innards are soon enough.”

“Ige!” exclaimed Geyoro, running his eyes over Autumn. “You be wasting time. Get behind her, man!”

“Thought you'd be finished by now,” sneered Ige. “Can't get it up, then, eh?”

“Least I got something to get up,” retorted Geyoro. “Hold her tight, mind.”

“Pah!” exclaimed Ige, sauntering past Autumn.

One arm swung explosively up and round and Autumn's fist caught

him on the side of his neck. He staggered back just as Autumn followed the momentum of the move and rolled to the side of the tree.

“What?” exclaimed Geyoro, running forward.

Autumn jumped to her feet and ran around the tree before launching a twirling kick at Geyoro. It caught him on the side of his chest, winding him. He dropped to his knees, gasping.

“So, you be a lively one, eh,” demanded Ige, dropping into a crouch and pulling out a short stabbing blade.

Amel and Mikan both turned to see what was happening and Logan took advantage of the moment to kick Amel hard in the small of her back. She stumbled forward and Mikan tightened the cord around Logan's neck viciously.

“You'll pay for that,” snarled Amel, rounding on him with her knife raised as Logan gasped for breath.

Autumn faked a move to one side of Ige but went the other way as he jerked sideways. She did a cartwheel and clouted the back of Amel's head with her foot. Amel crashed headlong into Logan, dropping her knife. Autumn landed on her side and rolled then leapt up again to twirl and kick Mikan's head into the tree. She fell to the ground, groaning and clutching at her face where a dead twig had ripped her cheek open.

Geyoro came round the front of the tree and Ige behind, both lunging at Autumn as she landed on her back. Logan tripped Geyoro and tried to kick him as he fell headlong but missed. Autumn did her arm jerk jump and landed on her feet before instantly spinning backwards and to one side as Ige tried to jump on her. She hit him on the back of his neck with her fist and he went sprawling.

With a curse, Amel got to her feet just as Geyoro did the same and her shoulder caught him in the belly. He jumped back just as Amel fell forward and Autumn's kick, aimed at Amel, caught Geyoro in the chest and he fell backwards. Amel grabbed her knife and jumped up again.

“You be useless bloody idiots!” roared Lakrar, running over with his sword in his hand.

Amel stabbed at Autumn and she grabbed Amel's wrist and twisted, throwing Amel off balance. There was an audible crack as the bones in Amel's forearm snapped and she screamed as she crashed onto the ground. The scream cut off abruptly as Logan kicked her hard on the side of her head.

“Get out of my way!” shouted Lakrar, shoving Geyoro to the side.

He jumped in front of Autumn, waving his sword from side to side. Cautiously Autumn backed away, her arms raised and her knees bent in her defensive posture.

“Get your sword, Geyoro,” ordered Lakrar, not taking his eyes off Autumn as he slowly advanced.

Geyoro ran over to the tree where Autumn had been tied and grabbed his sword.

“You want me to kill that bastard, Da?” he called, running back.

“Nay,” said Lakrar. “Put the sword to his throat and slit it if this one makes another move.”

Geyoro jammed the edge of the blade against Logan's throat and stared angrily at Autumn.

“Very well,” she said and straightened from her defensive posture.

“You, at least, have some sense, girl,” said Lakrar, not taking his eyes off her. “Ige, you be awake yet?”

“Reckon so, Da,” said Ige, getting to his knees and shaking his head. He put a hand to the back of his neck and rubbed gently.

“Get some rope and bind her,” said Lakrar. “Geyoro, one move and you kill the boy. Got it?”

“Aye, Da,” said Geyoro. He rubbed his chest and his sword nicked the skin of Logan's throat.

“I am Autumn Savannah, Krisana of Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup,” said Autumn clearly. “My word is my bond and I give my word before Mizule and all here that if Logan dies you all will die soon after.”

“Big words for a little girl,” scoffed Lakrar. “Ige, what you be doing?”

“Getting rope like you said, Da,” said Ige, hurrying back from the cart.

“Then get the bitch bound and be done with it, you fool,” snarled Lakrar.

“Aye, Da,” said Ige nervously.

He went behind Autumn and roughly grabbed her hands and pulled them behind her. She knew he would and one hand immediately grabbed the bottom of his shirt. With every muscle in her body she dragged him round and hurled him at Geyoro while at the same time dropping and twisting so Lakrar's sword would miss her. Ige crashed heavily into Geyoro as Lakrar's sword whistled some way over her head. A heel rammed in his crotch brought his part in the proceedings to an end.

“Get off me you bastard!” exclaimed Geyoro, struggling to get out from under his brother.

“Quieten yourself, Geyoro,” said Autumn, going over to tower above him. “Ige be dead.” She pointed to Geyoro's sword which protruded from Ige's back.

“Voqev rot you,” snarled Geyoro, his voice still high pitched despite the weight on his chest.

“Perhaps that may yet come to pass,” said Autumn.

She searched the grass around Amel who still lay on the ground, although she was moaning and groaning and clutching her broken

arm. When she found Amel's knife she picked it up and cut Logan free from his bonds.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, scanning him for injuries.

"My neck is a little sore," admitted Logan. "That one wasn't kind with my noose and my toes hurt from where I kicked him."

"Good," said Autumn. She sighed and looked around. "I confess they put up a better fight than I expected. Go and fetch the boy while I tend to the living."

Logan slowly walked over to where Urde was holding the reins of the horse tightly and watching, wide-eyed with trepidation.

"Come, child," said Logan, beckoning. "We will not hurt you."

The boy didn't move so Logan grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and dragged him back, the horse following.

"Do not move," said Autumn, staring at Geyoro. "Your brother is dead and your father and sisters, if they are your sisters, are injured. This fight is over and you would be a fool to prolong it."

"Just get this useless shit off me," gasped Geyoro.

Autumn pushed Ige and the sword hilt came free from the damp soil. He rolled off Geyoro and the sword slid upwards through his chest. He stared sightlessly at the sky as Autumn pulled the sword out fully and wiped it on the grass.

"Catch," she called and tossed it to Logan. He grabbed at it clumsily as the muscles of his injured forearm were slow to respond and it fell to the ground.

"What shall I do with the boy?" he asked.

"Give him to me," said Autumn. "Could you find the rope and bind Geyoro and Lakrar? I do not trust either of them to know when they are bested."

"It's over there," said Logan, moving away.

"What is your name, boy?" asked Autumn.

"U ... Urde," said the boy nervously. He couldn't have been more than seven or eight summers old.

"Good," said Autumn. "I am Autumn and my friend is Logan. Tell me, Urde, do you have any more cloths or rags? I must attend to these injuries."

"Have a care," snarled Lakrar as Logan started to tie his legs.

"As you did with us?" asked Logan. "Just be glad we do not return like with like."

"I said do not move!" exclaimed Autumn, her hand jerking out to point at Geyoro as she caught a movement in the corner of her eye. She stepped forward and kicked the sword well out of Geyoro's reach.

"I were only tidying up," said Geyoro, full of bluster. "The sword needs cleaning or the blood will eat away the blade."

"Truly you must think I am stupid," said Autumn. "Blood does not eat blades and if it did then the world would be a better place. You think you can yet best me?"

"You killed my brother," said Geyoro, staring at her with anger in his eyes. "I will have vengeance."

"Actually, no," said Logan, pulling Geyoro's arms behind him so he could tie them together. "You killed him. Had you not had your sword at my throat it would not have impaled Ige."

"She threw him onto the sword," barked Geyoro. "Had she not done so he would still live."

"We could go back through every move of this affray and lay blame at each turn of events," said Autumn. "'Twould seem a pointless task. 'Twas the five of you, however, that lay in wait for the two of us with

killing in your hearts. Do not blame me if you were unable to achieve your goal.”

“I will blame you 'til the day I die and beyond,” snarled Geyoro. “You came here uninvited and set upon us treacherously!”

Autumn stared at him in astonishment.

“You blame us for not lying down and letting you do what you wanted with us?” she asked. “That beggars belief!”

“’Twas your job!” exclaimed Geyoro. “We set an ambush and all know that those ambushed are always bested! That is the whole point of an ambush.”

“Methinks you have misunderstood the one who taught you,” said Autumn. “Ambushes only succeed when they retain the surprise and you lost the surprise almost immediately.”

“So you be saying my Da is a fool then?” demanded Geyoro.

“Oh shut your mouth, Geyoro,” snarled Lakrar. “The bitch be right. ’Twas all the fault of Ige and Amel for wanting to play. Business before pleasure be the way of it, all right.”

“But you said we could, Da!” said Amel weakly, her face contorted in pain.

“Enough!” said Autumn loudly. “This blaming serves no purpose. You were bested and that is the end of it. I beg you all stop your arguing and let me tend the injured.”

“What kind of fool goes to the aid of those they have bested?” said Lakrar. “Even you, girlie, must know that all those bested must die else they return and best you another time.”

“Most learn from their mistakes and mend their ways,” said Autumn. “Are you saying this will happen again next time we meet, if we ever meet again?”

“You killed my brother,” said Geyoro. “Vengeance will be ours.”

“This is absurd,” said Autumn. “Logan, use some of the rags to gag them. I cannot listen to their babbling any longer.”

“And you have wrecked Mikan's looks,” said Lakrar, looking at Mikan who was still holding the remains of her face and moaning, “not that they were much to begin with but likely she will never find a man now.”

“Then we have done them a service,” said Logan, tying a rag around Lakrar's face. “Let Autumn tend their wounds then you can all go home. Do you live near here?”

“Why?” asked Geyoro. “You plan to kill the rest of us in our sleep?”

“Forget I asked,” said Logan, gagging Geyoro perhaps a little tighter than was strictly necessary.

* * *

“Do you think they will come after us?” asked Logan a while later when they had put some distance between them and Lakrar's family.

“I doubt it,” said Autumn. “For all their talk they have suffered no little injuries and by the time they are healed enough we will likely have departed this island.”

“I dare say,” said Logan. “Umm, while you were tending to the women I retrieved our coins and the rings. I found a few more coins but I left them. I did not feel ready to add the burden of thief to the long list of crimes they already hold us responsible for.”

“I expected you would,” said Autumn. “Indeed, I confess I hoped you would. 'Tis my practice to give what aid I can to those who are in need of money but them, ahhh, there was something wrong there and they did not seem somehow deserving.”

“I know what you mean,” said Logan. “We have been in many encounters and I saw other fights before I met you but never have I

known any to blame the victor for allowing themselves to win. 'Tis a strange way of thinking."

"Yes," said Autumn. "Great importance was placed at my Esyup for accepting defeat graciously and not revelling in victory in turn but truly I do not understand what happened back there. They laid an ambush for unwary travellers and intended to do foul things to us before killing us and yet it seems we are to blame. There is a strange kind of twisted logic at work here and I cannot fathom it."

"There is something else I cannot fathom," said Logan, looking sidelong at Autumn.

"And what is that?" asked Autumn.

"In all the time I have known you, Autumn," said Logan, "you have always said that you will not kill any except under the greatest of provocations, have you not?"

"Aye," said Autumn, "and I know what you are referring to. To my mind it was the greatest of provocations."

"That does surprise me," said Logan, grinning and going a little pink at the same time. "I have learnt that you are willing to sacrifice yourself to save me and I think that a wondrous thing but to threaten to kill everyone in revenge? True that was a noble thing to say but would you actually have done so?"

"I said that in the hope it would stay their hands long enough for me to do something about it," said Autumn.

"And 'twould seem it worked," said Logan, stopping and looking at her. "But that does not answer my question. Had that one with the funny voice slit my throat would you have killed them all?"

Autumn stopped and looked at him then looked up the track thoughtfully.

"I gave my word before Mizule," she said quietly. "Would you have me break my bond?"

“No, Autumn,” said Logan, matching her quietness. “Never in a million years would I ask you to break your bond.”

“Then let us say no more on the matter,” said Autumn, moving off. “Come, let us find somewhere to pass the night.”

“There is one more thing I would like to say,” said Logan, following.

“And what is that?” asked Autumn.

“I wager it makes no difference once I am already dead,” said Logan, “but I do like the idea that you will take revenge for my death.”

“I dislike the idea of revenge,” said Autumn. “The act of taking revenge cannot restore the one lost.”

“Perhaps,” said Logan, “but thank you anyway. I appreciate it greatly.”

“I would ask a kindness of you in return,” said Autumn.

“Tis unlike you,” said Logan, a little surprised. “Normally you give your aid with no expectation of any recompense.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but in this instance I would ask something of you.”

“If it is within my power,” said Logan. “You should know that without asking.”

“True,” said Autumn, “and I do know that ordinarily but this is a special case.”

“Sploop!” exclaimed Logan with mock alarm. “So I am a special case now, am I?”

“Of course you are,” she said, “which is why I ask this of you.”

“Ask away,” said Logan.

“If and when the time comes and I am bested and die,” said Autumn,

"I would ask you give me your word that you will not take revenge for me. It saddens my heart that you might put yourself at risk when I am not able to protect you."

"Absolutely not!" exclaimed Logan, slamming his staff hard on the ground. "Like as not if someone has bested you they will best me but never, ever ask me to forgo my revenge. Likely I will die in the trying but what of it?"

"Oh, Logan," said Autumn, shaking her head. "That is utter foolishness and you know it."

"Foolish it may be," said Logan, "but that is how it will be and you will never change my mind."

Autumn walked on in silence for a while.

"I confess your words please me," she said. "They should not and I know not why they do but they do."

"Good," said Logan. "Now we can end this discussion and talk no more on the matter."

"As you wish, Logan," said Autumn, a small smile playing on her lips. "What shall we talk of instead?"

"Something happy," said Logan. "I grow weary of all this talk of killings and revenge."

"And yet there is more that can be said," said Autumn. "I said there was a strangeness about Lakrar and his family but now I think on it there is a strangeness on this entire island."

"What do you mean?" asked Logan. "See there, where the track ahead crosses that brook? How about we pass the night there?"

"It would seem as good a place as any," said Autumn, "although I would prefer to be a little further off the track. If you cast your mind back to when we left Coot-Tha we came upon Madlek and Gesen whose families seemed locked in an endless blood-feud that had lasted

several generations and seems destined to continue.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “What of it?”

“And then we came upon those nameless people who wanted to cook and eat us,” said Autumn. “Then Garrec who set his dogs upon us without making any enquiry into who we were first, and now Lakrar. It has only been a few days and yet we have encountered more hostility and violence here than we have anywhere else. Even the Chanwars were willing to talk and let us go once they had our coins but here? No, 'tis a case of strike first and ask questions not at all and that is to say nothing of the eating of our remains.”

“Aye, I had wondered myself,” said Logan. “I put it down to a fear of strangers but we have been in other places where they feared strangers and were happy to see us go but they didn't try to kill us. Have you any thoughts?”

“Only one as yet,” said Autumn, stopping beside the brook. She looked around. “How about over there? 'Tis some way from the track but still beside the brook and yet secluded.”

“Looks pleasant enough,” said Logan. “There are sticks enough for a fire as well. Oh! I have just realised! 'Tis not far off Astauand's passing and yet there is no rain!”

As if on cue there was a distant rumble of thunder and a light smattering of rain began.

“I am impressed, Logan,” said Autumn, making her way to some leafy branches that would, when bound together, serve as a shelter. “You have only to speak and Chaahk listens!”

“I am as one with the gods,” said Logan dolefully. “Why is it Chaahk never listens when I want It to stop raining?”

“Listening and obeying are not one and the same,” said Autumn, pulling a branch down so Logan could tie it to another. “Chaahk has a mind of Its own and doubtless shares your understanding of humour.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan, “or simply delights in raining on me. What was your one thought so far?”

“Hmm?” asked Autumn as the rain got a little heavier.

“You said you had a thought about the amount of hostility and violence here,” said Logan. “I wager 'tis pointless even thinking of a fire.”

“Ah yes,” said Autumn. “Mayhap I was wrong about the Wall of Loriki. Mayhap it is their constant fear of what lies beyond that makes the people here strike first rather than wait. Mayhap they have learned striking first is prudent.”

“An interesting thought,” said Logan, looking up at the sky, “or mayhap it is the other way around.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn.

“Mayhap it is because they are a very violent people,” said Logan. He scowled as another crash of thunder sounded, this time a little closer. “Mayhap they invent demons and soskas and the rest to justify not going beyond the wall but there is actually nothing there to be afraid of.”

“Why would they do that?” asked Autumn, going under their crude shelter and sitting down, cross legged as usual.

“I know not,” said Logan, “but people are very good at inventing reasons why they shouldn't do something they don't want to do. On the other hand, seeing how violent and aggressive they are, mayhap what lies beyond the Wall is even worse than demons and soskas.”

“And while questions remain, so does my curiosity,” said Autumn.

Chapter Fifteen

"'Twould seem a perfectly ordinary village," said Logan as they approached, "save all the dwellings are red."

"That is because they are mud," said Autumn, "and the soil of this island is red in colour, at least where we have been. I cannot say about the rest of the island."

"Aye, I know," said Logan, "but that was not what I meant. I meant that the redness all around gives the village a melancholy air. When it is in the ground and covered with bushes and grass and the like 'tis barely seen and makes no matter, but like this? With every dwelling red 'tis almost like everything has been daubed with blood and left to dry."

"But if that were so then they would be black," said Autumn. "Blood goes black when it dries."

"Yes, I know that too," said Logan. "I have seen enough of it in my time. I was not saying they actually do daub everything with blood, only that the place gives that appearance."

"I daresay," said Autumn, "but what of it? You are thinking that this appearance of blood all around makes the people here violent and aggressive?"

"I was just saying this is how it looks to me," said Logan, holding up his hands. "'Twas not meant as a point of deep philosophical importance although it is interesting that you make that association, not I."

"You think I am becoming more violent and aggressive because of the colour of the soil?" asked Autumn, stopping to stare at him.

"Not at all," said Logan, "although it would seem you are becoming more argumentative. All I meant was that I find this dusty redness depressing. You could have simply agreed or disagreed but yet you seem to want to argue about it."

“My apologies, Logan the Insightful,” said Autumn. She nodded and started walking again. “Like as not I am arguing because I, too, find the colour depressing. Rows of little red dwellings with nothing but red soil between, grey sky above and grey sea beyond does not excite my imagination. Perhaps I should walk backwards so I can at least see the green of the forest behind.”

“And doubtless those who live here were born and raised here and think it normal,” said Logan. He stopped and sniffed the air several times. “Ah ha! Can you smell that? I think there is a maker of cheese nearby!”

Autumn paused and sniffed the air as well.

“Over there, I fancy,” said Autumn, pointing off to the right. “Is your sense of smell getting better? I had not noticed the cheese over the stink of fish until you spoke of it.”

“That is because you eat cheese when there is some,” said Logan with a laugh, “but you care not when there isn't any. I, on the other hand, dream of the stuff. 'Tis not my nose that smelt it but my belly! Like as not there is a bread maker nearby as well.”

“Do you dream of bread too?” asked Autumn as they headed off in search of the source of the smell.

“Sometimes,” admitted Logan. “When we have eaten nothing but roots for days my dreams turn to warm bread and soft cheese. I have even woken with the smell of cheese in my nose and the taste of bread in my mouth and found it was but a dream.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn. “What do you dream of when we have bread and cheese?”

“Hmm? Oh, nothing much,” said Logan. “Mostly empty spaces with paths going nowhere. Sometimes there is something big but unseen chasing me but other times I just follow the paths. Three or four times I have seen a girl beckoning me on but when I get near she runs away then stops to beckon again. I know not who she is but she looks somehow familiar. What do you dream of?”

“Oh that varies,” said Autumn. “Sometimes I dream of when I was at my Esyup but I am surrounded by strange faces and they speak in tongues I cannot follow. Last night I dreamt I was swept up by a ray of light from Astauand and taken far away past Plakill and Plifal and there was nothing but blackness and little dots of light. The night before though I dreamt of custard.”

“Custard?” exclaimed Logan. “You mean that mix of milk and eggs?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “There was a big vat of the stuff, mayhap twice as high as me and Fiau lifted me up to look inside and I fell in. It smelt strongly of spice but there were sultanas in it that could swim.”

“That is a strange dream,” said Logan. “Why did you not tell me of it?”

“It did not seem important,” said Autumn. “Most likely I was just craving some custard as you do cheese. My strangest dream though was some summers past when I was at the Esyup. I dreamt it was day and there was something very large flying through the air above me. ’Twas big and silver and like a fish but with a big fin on each side and smaller ones for its tail. It roared incessantly and never paused for breath. I was scared but it flew away and never came back. I have never forgotten it.”

“How old were you?” asked Logan. The smell of cheese seemed to be coming from a dwelling off to the left, near the beach so he veered off that way.

“I am not certain,” said Autumn, going that way as well. “I was still young but not a child for it was after my period of rebelling. I seem to remember not long after the dream I was given a novice to mentor but I do not see how the two could be related.”

“Dreams are strange,” he said. “Some say there is meaning in them and others say not and if there is meaning it is so twisted and laden with hidden meaning as to be almost impossible to decipher. I think this be the place.”

“Then let us go in and enquire,” said Autumn.

Logan stood beside the low entrance and peered inside but it was dark and there was no fire nor candle.

“Hello?” he called. “Is anyone there?”

He thought he heard a noise inside and called again but there was no response.

“Seems no one is here,” said Logan. “Ah well. We can come back later.”

“And mayhap there is another in the village,” said Autumn.

“No there ain’t,” said a cheerful voice. “My cheeses be the best around these parts for there ain’t no one else making them and that’s a fact.”

“Ah, greetings,” said Autumn, turning. A large woman of middle years with a carefree face had come round the side of the dwelling. “My name is Autumn and this be Logan. We are strangers here and smelt your cheeses.”

“Is that a fact?” asked the woman. “And me living here all my life and never having seen you before. Strangers, eh?”

“Um, yes, we are strangers,” said Autumn cautiously.

“And you be wanting cheese by the sound of it,” said the woman. “I be Ajanie. Come round the side for you won’t be wanting to go inside the house. It be a right mess, me being a lazy voo and all.”

“If I am not being rude,” said Autumn as they followed Ajanie, “but what is a voo? ’Tis a word I am not familiar with.”

“That’s ’cos you be strangers,” said Ajanie, happily. “Can’t be expecting strangers to know what goes on in this little place. A voo be a woman what ain’t got no man.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn.

“It be a bit rude, like,” said Ajanie, “seeing as how there be plenty of

men around here and not enough women but that ain't my concern. I've had three almosts in my time and I be right glad to be shot of 'em."

"That is a fair number," said Logan. "Do you have any soft cheeses?"

"Wrong time of year," said Ajanie, "although I got one what was meant to be hard but didn't work right for some reason. You can have that if you like."

"Can I ask why there is a surfeit of men?" asked Autumn, "and why, if it is not prying too much into your private life, you have had three partners?"

"Can I taste it first?" asked Logan, following Ajanie into a small hut behind the house that was filled with rows of round cheeses on shelves. There were small holes cut in the sides of the hut which let in the breeze and a little light.

"For sure, my lovely," said Ajanie. "'Tis that one at the end. No, me first drowned at sea and me second caught some illness and wasted away. Took all of two summers and was a bad time for all. I got with me third too quick after that I reckon. Should have had more sense for the bugger up and walks out on me. Ain't seen hide nor hair of 'im since. Mind you, it be a lot more peaceful with 'im gone and I ain't looking for another, leastaways not yet. Not unless this pretty little thing of yours be tired of you, sweetie." She burst out laughing as Logan's face turned red in the dimness.

"Logan is free to do as he chooses," said Autumn. "We are travelling companions only."

"Well now," said Ajanie controlling her mirth. "Don't be looking like that to me. I'd say the lad is besotted but it ain't none of my business. Where did I put that knife? Ahh, there it is. Try a bit of this, handsome. That'll put sap in your twiglet." She elbowed Autumn in the ribs and burst out laughing again.

"Thank you," said Logan taking the large morsel of cheese from the knife. Ajanie was confusing him and he felt it easiest to just

concentrate on the cheese. It was a mistake and he spat the cheese out almost instantly.

"I'm sorry," he said, immediately contrite. "It was, umm, ... it had an unexpectedly strong flavour."

"Don't you be worrying yourself, handsome," said Ajanie, slapping him hard on the shoulder. "Told you it didn't work out right. I been hoping to palm it off onto someone but reckon that won't be happening. Not even the dogs will eat it and that's saying something. Try this one."

She spat on her knife and wiped it clean on the front of her shirt before cutting a smaller sliver from another cheese.

"You said there was a surfeit of men here," said Autumn, curious.

"Aye, so I did," said Ajanie, rummaging through her cheeses for another for Logan to sample. "Too many being born, see, or not enough girls. One or the other. Seems like there be four baby boys being born for every three girls. Ain't right I reckon but that's how it is. Them as lives to become full grown stays much the same. Four men to three women. You want a man or two, Autumn sweetie, you've come to the right place."

"No, I am not in search of a man," said Autumn.

"No?" asked Ajanie, cutting off another sliver for Logan to try. "Why else would a young woman be coming to a forsaken place like this then? Ain't nothing here worth having otherwise, not that I'm saying any of the men be much of a catch."

"We are in search of a maker of bread," said Autumn. "One that will do justice to your fine cheeses."

"Ahhh," said Ajanie, "I know just the man. I will take you to him when handsome here has made his choice."

"That last one was delicious," said Logan. "I do not recall having tasted any better. There was a hint of something in it that I could not

place though.”

“Oh that be the dalorna,” said Ajanie. “Get a lot of it round here, we do, so I just grinds some up and chucks it in most things. Like as not I put too much in that 'un.”

“It is nice,” said Logan. “Could we have half of the cheese?”

“Only half?” asked Ajanie. “Strapping lad like you, won't be lasting long I reckon. Have the whole cheese.

“Umm,” said Logan. “How much?”

“A kala,” said Ajanie. “Can't say fairer than that.”

“And for half the cheese?” asked Logan.

“Two kala,” said Ajanie and burst out laughing. “The extra be for the cost of cutting, like.”

“Are you serious?” asked Logan. “You charge double for half?”

“I be teasing you, handsome,” said Ajanie, taking the cheese off the shelf. “Here, take the whole thing and give me eight hakina and a kiss.”

“Umm,” said Logan, feeling hopelessly lost. “A kiss?”

“Surely you be knowing what a kiss is?” asked Ajanie. She looked at Autumn in astonishment. “What do you two get up to at night then?”

“We sleep,” said Autumn drily.

Ajanie burst out laughing and gave Autumn a shove that nearly pushed her through the wall of the hut. “Oh, that's a good one, all right. We sleep! Oh my word!”

“Well, I will leave you to settle up,” said Autumn, taking the cheese from Logan. “I will be outside.”

Logan stared at her with panic in his eyes and Ajanie looked on in amusement. Autumn just smiled and walked out. She tried a piece of the cheese and found it had a mild but distinctive flavour that was not unpleasant. She broke off another piece and chewed it while watching the grey waves roll in. Ajanie emerged a few moments later, chuckling, and Logan followed her, looking bemused.

“Baker be this way,” said Ajanie. “T’other side of the square.”

She set off and Autumn followed. Realising he was about to be left alone Logan hurried after her.

“Tis kind of you to show us the way, Ajanie,” said Autumn.

“Ain’t got much else to do sweetie,” said Ajanie. “Only makes cheese every few days, there ain’t being much else for me round here. Time I have aplenty. ‘Sides, you might get lost and go to the wrong place.”

“Are there several bakers in the village?” asked Autumn.

“There are but two,” said Ajanie. “The other be charging you double the going rate seeing as how you be strangers and not knowing any better. I be taking you to Enzo. He be the almost of my cousin. Be you wanting any meat?”

“I think not,” said Autumn. “Do you want any, Logan?”

“What was that?” asked Logan, coming out of his reverie.

“Do you want some meat?” asked Ajanie. “Only there be two meat sellers in town and you don’t want to be going to Neski.”

“I have heard that name before,” said Autumn, frowning, “although I know not where. Why should we not go to Neski?”

“There be some bad tales about him,” said Ajanie. “Reckon you’ll be right if you be wanting straight meat but stay away from his pies and sausages. No one here will touch them.”

“Why is that?” asked Autumn, “and how does he stay in business if

none buy from him?"

"Oh that be simple enough," said Ajanie. "All his pies and sausages be taken to Coot-Tha for he does a ready trade there. Down here though, well, we knows what goes into 'em, like."

"I do not understand," said Autumn.

"Do you not?" asked Ajanie, stopping in the middle of the path. "You came from Coot-Tha?"

"We are from Aferraron," said Autumn, "but, yes, we arrived on Danornor at Coot-Tha."

"And have you met any of the folk between there and here?" she asked.

"Some," said Autumn.

"Like as not you'll have noticed a difference between the town folk and the hill folk," said Ajanie.

"We had little to do with the people of Coot-Tha," said Autumn. "We were there only one day and you are the only person we have spoken with here in Hurabid. I confess you are vastly more friendly than those we encountered on our journey here."

"Aye," said Ajanie. "Them as lives in the wilds are a law unto themselves and do not like strangers."

"There was one we met who wanted to cook us," said Logan. "And another who said he would sell our dead bodies to Neski. Would that be the same Neski?"

"Ahh, yes," said Autumn, remembering.

"These is only one Neski," said Ajanie, her face losing its normal cheerfulness. "Little is known for certain but it is said that from time to time someone goes missing and a day or two later Neski has a pile more pies and sausages to sell. That is why none here will buy them.

By the sound of it you both have done well to get here.”

“Autumn is skilled in persuading people to leave us alone,” said Logan.

“I be not surprised,” laughed Ajanie, her round face wreathed in jolly smiles again. “I bet the girls flock around you like flies around honey.”

“Umm, where is the baker?” asked Logan, getting embarrassed again.

Ajanie pinched Logan's cheek and laughed again.

“You hang on to him, sweetie,” she told Autumn. “Men like him be few and far between.”

“I know,” said Autumn, inwardly chiding herself for being amused at Logan's discomfort. “The baker?”

“He be the other side of the square,” said Ajanie. “Come.”

The square itself turned out to not be a square, more an open ended U shape. There were dwellings and shops on three sides, widely separated, but the fourth side was open to the beach and the sea.

“What is that?” asked Autumn, as they crossed near the dwellings furthest from the beach. She pointed to a pole set in the ground a little way back from the shore. There was a platform on top of the pole with a figure on it. “It is a statue?”

“Oh bless you, no,” said Ajanie. “That be Kad'idatou The Wise. You have heard of him?”

“Alas no,” said Autumn. “Who is Kad'idatou The Wise?”

“He is a very wise man,” said Ajanie. “He is our spiritual leader and advisor on all things.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “Why is he on top of a pole?”

“That is his home,” said Ajanie.

“Really?” asked Autumn in surprise. Logan turned to stare at Kad'idatou. “Is it not somewhat exposed up there?”

“Reckon so,” said Ajanie, “but he must like it up there for he has not come down for twenty summers or more.”

“You mean he sleeps up there as well?” asked Logan. “What about when it rains?”

“Doubtless he gets wet,” said Ajanie with a laugh. “Can't say as I've ever been up there to see. No one has.”

“If he does not come down and no one goes up, what does he eat?” asked Autumn.

“There is a bucket that kindly folk put food in,” said Ajanie. “I myself sometimes put in cheese. When he is hungry he hauls it up on a rope. Same with his piss and all, 'cepting it be a different bucket. Most of the time someone notices when he's let it down and empties it.”

“That is kind of them,” said Autumn. “You called him Kad'idatou The Wise. Does he spend his time thinking?”

“Must do,” said Ajanie. “Not a lot else to do up there all day. Mind you, most evening he talks with the people who gather round after eating. Leastaways he talks sometimes. A lot of the time he just sits there in silence.”

“What does he talk of when he talks?” asked Autumn, intrigued.

“Ohh, all sorts of things,” said Ajanie. “Sometimes people ask him questions when they have a problem and know not what to do. Other times he tells stories with a meaning. Sometimes he says things no one understands then tries to explain and confuses us even more. Bit of pot luck mostly but we be right proud of him.”

“So you are saying he is a philosopher and mystic?” asked Autumn.

“Couldn't rightly say, sweetie,” said Ajanie chuckling. “I know not what he's on about a lot of the time but there are them as say he talks with

the gods when no one else is around. May be true, may not be but either way I don't see him coming down for a long while yet. Mayhap he'll die up there but then again, mayhap the deities will preserve him."

"And he's not come down for over twenty summers?" asked Logan.

"Well, he has fallen off twice," said Ajanie. "'Tis only a small platform. One time there was a big storm and the wind blew him off."

"And the other time?" asked Autumn.

"Part of the platform broke away," said Ajanie. "Some of the wood went rotten. 'Twas three days before another was made and hoisted up there."

"I hope he was not hurt," said Autumn.

"Oh, nothing more than a scratch or two," said Ajanie. "Reckon his pride was hurt more, taking a tumble like that."

"You say he talks to the people of the village most evenings?" asked Autumn.

"Yes," said Ajanie. "Why? You be wanting to listen?"

"Aye," said Autumn. "I would be very interested to know his thoughts. He intrigues me."

Chapter Sixteen

“Yoo-hoo!” cried Ajanie, spotting Autumn and Logan sitting on the ground near the pole of Kad’idatou The Wise.

Astauand was not far off setting for the night and people were gathering in the square. Many had looked curiously at the two strangers but none had approached nor spoken with them.

“Ahh, ‘tis Ajanie,” said Autumn as they both looked around to see who had yelled.

“I thought I would find you here,” said Ajanie coming over with two younger people trailing behind. “These be two of my brats, Luik and Marji. These be them strangers what I was telling you about. This be Autumn and him be Logan. Say hello.”

“Greetings,” said Autumn, jumping to her feet. Logan did likewise.

“Hello,” said Marji, smiling shyly.

Luik nodded curtly and Ajanie whacked him across the back of his head.

“Hello,” he said gruffly. “Can I go now Ma?”

“Oh be off with the pair of you,” said Ajanie, waving her hand dismissively.

Luik strode away, trying hard to look like the man he was almost about to be. Marji hesitated then hurriedly said “nice to meet you,” before going off in a different direction to be with her friends.

“Kids of today, huh,” sniffed Ajanie. “Always under your feet then suddenly they be not wanting to know you.”

“There comes a time when all children must break away and make a life for themselves,” said Autumn. “You have other children as well?”

“Oh aye,” said Ajanie. “Six still living and five grand-kids too. You be

quite right 'cepting when they start to have little 'uns of their own then they be all over you wanting you to look after them while they do something else.” She laughed happily. “You been here long?”

“We explored the village for a time,” said Autumn as Logan sat back down. “Then we came here to hear Kad'idatou speak, if he does.”

“Seems a goodly crowd tonight,” said Ajanie, looking around. There were perhaps thirty or forty people there, sitting in groups and talking quietly amongst themselves. She waved at some who waved back. “Like as not many are here to see you strangers pay your respects to our learned one. We get few strangers here.”

“Please, if you would rather be with others do not let us keep you here,” said Autumn. “We are quite content to sit and enjoy the experience alone.”

“Oh, I be seeing them buggers every day,” said Ajanie, beaming. “Mind if I sit with you?”

Without waiting for a reply she sat heavily very close to Logan and patted the ground the other side in invitation for Autumn to sit.

“This be right cosy, ain't it,” she said, beaming at Logan.

“Ahh, yes, I suppose so,” said Logan, aware of Ajanie's thigh pressed lightly against his. He wanted to shift away a little but it seemed rude.

“You have eaten?” she asked. “Twas stupid of me not to invite you to sup with me.”

“We have eaten,” said Autumn. “Tell me, does Kad'idatou always sit facing out to sea? We have been here a while and not seen him move.”

“Mostly,” said Ajanie. “Sometimes he walks around his ledge for a time but mostly he just sits there. If he wishes to speak with us he will turn to face us.”

“Ahh,” said Autumn.

“We’ll find out soon enough,” said Ajanie. “Astauand be almost gone. So, do you like our little town? I dare say with you being from Aferraron it is too small for you, eh, Logan.”

“The place I was born was much smaller than this,” said Logan. “Twas just a handful of farmers and little else.”

“And you, Autumn?” she asked. “You be from a small place or a big city?”

“I, too, am from a small community,” said Autumn. “We have visited big cities but they are noisy and people seem to be always in a great hurry but do very little.”

“Is that a fact?” asked Ajanie. “Ain’t been anywhere bigger than Coot-Tha meself and the bustle there always seemed fun to me. Bet you like a bit of fun now and then, eh, handsome?”

She squeezed Logan’s knee tightly and he yelped causing her to burst out laughing.

“Ooooh,” she exclaimed suddenly, pointing to Kad’idatou. “He’s stood up!”

Others had also noticed and all conversation faded away as they watched.

On the platform, Kad’idatou stretched then scratched his head. He slowly walked around the edge of the platform then stopped and looked inside the food bucket. He pulled something out then slowly walked the other way around the perimeter several times while chewing on what he’d taken. Only when it was all gone did he seem to notice the crowd gathered below. In the increasing gloom it was difficult to make out his features but he was a small man seemingly dressed only in a loin cloth with a blanket around his shoulders although that could as easily have been his long hair and beard.

“So,” he said, drawing out the word and ending it with a slurred hiss. “Twould seem another night is upon us.”

He looked around then slowly sat back down, his thin legs dangling over the edge of the platform.

“I have nothing to say,” he announced, “save to thank those who gift me food. I thank you for your kindness.”

“Like as not it will be questions,” whispered Ajanie. “Or mayhap a tale.”

“If any present have questions,” said Kad'idatou. “Ask and mayhap I will be able to answer in some small way.”

“Told you,” whispered Ajanie, nudging Autumn. “Go on, ask him something.”

“I have nothing to ask as yet,” whispered back Autumn. “Mayhap later.”

“None have a question for me?” asked Kad'idatou.

“Umm,” came a hesitant voice from further back. “I do, if I may.”

“I recognise your voice, Jacan,” said Kad'idatou. “Speak your question.”

“Umm, well, it be like this, see,” said Jacan nervously as everyone except Kad'idatou twisted to stare at him. “My oldest, see, he be wanting to learn a trade, like.”

“Alas, I have no trade I can teach him,” said Kad'idatou.

“No, it ain't that, like,” said Jacan. “He be wanting to go to Coot-Tha, see.”

“That would seem a wise ambition,” said Kad'idatou. “What is your question?”

“Well, it be this, umm, Kad'idatou,” said Jacan. “He'll be wanting some money to tide him over for a time 'til he finds someone what will teach him but I ain't got much money, see. Just a little what we been

putting aside, like.”

Jacan paused but Kad'idatou remained silent.

“So, umm, I be wondering, well, it be like this, see, your worship, umm ...” stuttered Jacan.

“Your question?” said Kad'idatou.

“How much should I be giving him, like?” blurted Jacan. “All of it?”

All eyes returned to Kad'idatou and he sat there for some time, deep in thought.

“You have two other children, do you not?” he asked eventually.

“Aye, Kad'idatou,” said Jacan.

“Then give your oldest one fifth part of what you have put aside,” said Kad'idatou. “To send him away with less would be unfair to your oldest yet to send him with more would be as unfair to your others, your almost and yourself.”

A sigh of approval spread across the gathered crowd.

“See?” whispered Ajanie. “Is Kad'idatou not the wisest of the wise?”

“I confess I am a little surprised Jacan could not work that out for himself,” whispered back Autumn, “although perhaps a slightly larger share would have been better as the son will have to fend for himself in a strange place without the rest of the family.”

Ajanie burst out laughing again and hurriedly covered her mouth with her hand.

“More likely he wanted Kad'idatou's blessing to give the lad nothing,” she whispered back. “Him being a tight-fisted bastard an' all.”

“Ahh,” whispered Autumn. “Doubtless Kad'idatou knows that too.”

“Any other with a question for me?” asked Kad'idatou.

No one spoke.

“One last time,” said Kad'idatou. “Any questions?”

“Give us a story!” called someone from the back. Several others echoed the request and someone started to chant “a story, a story,” but was quickly hushed.

“Very well then,” said Kad'idatou.

“Tell us of the boy and the rebec,” called someone from way over the other side of the square.

“Oooh, that be one of my favourites,” whispered Ajanie excitedly.

“Very well,” said Kad'idatou. “I will tell you of the boy and the rebec. Listen closely and take the meaning of the story into your hearts.”

He paused and his shadowy figure could be seen to twist as he searched for his water skin. He took a drink then settled himself.

“Twas not so long ago and not so far away,” he said, his voice carrying clearly. “There was a boy who was not yet full grown and still enjoyed something of the mischief of childhood for he was not yet ready to take on the responsibilities of manhood. His father though was a man who took his responsibilities most seriously and decided that the time had come that the boy should begin to understand his responsibilities. So one day he called his son to him.

‘Son,’ he said. ‘It be time you learnt to be a man. Today I want you to take our small flock of sheep to graze in the pastures of the high grounds.’

The son looked on his father with joy.

‘It will be an honour, my father,’ he said. “Truly I will care for our flock with the greatest of attention for I know we only have these few sheep and the well being of our family is at stake.”

'You are a good son,' said the father proudly. 'But guard the sheep well for there have been sightings of rebecs on the high ground and rebecs prize the taste of sheep above all else.'

And so the boy went forth, filled with pride in his father's trust, and he took the sheep to the high ground and there set them to grazing on the sweet grasses that grew there.

But it came to pass, as Astauand rose higher in the sky, that the boy grew bored with his task. Sheep grazing on grass do little beyond chew and require little attention. The boy collected some stones and amused himself by throwing them at a rock but even that lost its thrall and he became bored again.

'This is the dullest thing I have ever done,' he said to himself. 'The sheep stand there and chew grass and do nothing else. I am so bored I think I am going to die.'

Then an idea grew upon him.

'Would it not be a great joke to run to the village and shout that there is a rebec?' he asked himself. 'That would surely be a thing of great excitement!'

No sooner had the boy thought this than he put it into action. Like the wind he ran as fast as his feet would carry him shouting 'Rebecs! Rebecs! Come quick! Rebecs!'

All in the village heard the cries of the boy and, seizing whatever weapons came to hand, all rushed out and hurried up to the high ground.

'Where are the rebecs?' they asked when they saw the sheep quietly grazing on the sweet grass.

'There are no rebecs,' said the boy. 'Is that not the bestest of all jokes?'

Grumbling, the villagers returned to the village.

The next day the father summoned the boy to him.

'That was not a good thing that you did, my son,' said the father, 'but I understand that there is little excitement in the watching of sheep while they graze. I will send you off to the high ground with our sheep again for it is important that you learn to take on your responsibilities. Go forth and guard our sheep well.'

'Yes, father,' said the boy. 'It was wrong of me, I know. I will take the greatest care of our sheep today.'

And so the boy went forth, filled with pride in his father's trust, and he took the sheep to the high ground and there set them to grazing on the sweet grasses that grew there.

And it came to pass that once again, as Astauand rose high in the sky, that the boy grew bored and, forgetting the words of his father, he once again flew down the hill shouting at the top of his voice that rebecs was attacking the sheep.

And once again the villagers took their weapons in hand and hurried up to the high ground. And once again they found only sheep, quietly grazing on the sweet grass. And once again they returned to the village, grumbling among themselves.

The next day the father summoned the boy to him.

'You shame me, my son, in front of all in the village,' he said. 'Twice I have sent you to the high ground to guard the sheep and twice you have shouted that there are rebecs when there are none. I will give you one last chance. If you come back to the village shouting there are rebecs when there are none I will cast you out of my family forever and deny you from this day forth.'

'I am sorry, father,' said the boy, filled with shame and contrition. 'I give you my word that I will never do that again.'

'So be it,' said the father. 'I will trust you this one more time. Take the sheep to the high ground and guard them well, my son.'

And so the boy went forth, filled with pride in his father's trust, and he took the sheep to the high ground and there set them to grazing on the sweet grasses that grew there.

And it came to pass, as Astauand rose high in the sky, that the boy grew bored. But he fought with his boredom, saying 'My father has given me this last chance else I will be cast out of the family. I will stay here and watch the sheep graze even if it kills me!'

So he stayed and watched the sheep.

And it came to pass, as Astauand rose yet higher in the sky, that a rebec came upon the sheep and, filled with hunger, set about attacking the largest and fattest of them.

Filled with fear, the boy ran as fast as his feet would carry him to the village shouting 'Rebecs! Rebecs! Come quick! Rebecs!'

'Pah.' said the villagers. 'It is only that trouble-making boy again. There are no rebecs,' and they stayed at their tasks and did not listen to the boy and all the sheep were eaten.'

Kad'idatou fell silent and all those gathered around him contemplated his words.

"So," said Kad'idatou after letting the silence continue for a while. "Are there any among you who can tell me the moral of this tale?"

"'Tis about the dangers of lying," called someone and many others shouted their agreement.

"'Tis not only that," muttered Autumn.

"Aye," said Kad'idatou. "Because the boy was known to be a liar the villagers did not believe him when the rebec came and so the sheep were eaten and doubtless the boy's family starved to death."

"Aye, that bloody kid!" shouted someone else. "Waste of bloody space, kids are!" Several people laughed.

“What did you say, Autumn?” asked Ajanie. “I did not hear you over the people shouting.”

“I said that is not the only moral of that tale,” said Autumn. “There be several other interpretations that can be drawn from it.”

“So you be saying Kad'idatou The Wise is in error?” she asked.

“No,” said Autumn, “only that there are other lessons that can be drawn from it.”

“Then say so,” said Ajanie. “Kad'idatou welcomes discussion and opinion.”

“Tis not my place,” said Autumn. “I am not of this village and it would be wrong of me to take issue with someone held in high esteem here.”

“Oh get on with you,” said Ajanie chuckling. “Twill liven the place up!” She clambered to her feet, leaning heavily on Logan's shoulder.

“Kad'idatou!” she shouted loudly. “There is one here who disagrees with you!”

The entire square went silent, save Autumn who muttered “Vallume!” under her breath.

“Is that you, Ajanie?” said Kad'idatou after several heartbeats. “You disagree with me? Come, astound me with your wisdom.”

“Not I,” said Ajanie. “You know damned well I ain't clever enough to argue with you. 'Tis my friend who sits with me.”

“I see,” said Kad'idatou. “Friend of Ajanie, what is your objection?”

“I have no objection as such, Kad'idatou,” said Autumn, standing up. “Only that there are other lessons that can be drawn from your tale, not just the one about lying.”

“Indeed?” asked Kad'idatou. “And what, pray, are they?”

There were mutterings among those gathered as people came to terms with someone arguing with Kad'idatou. Logan quietly began to gather their few possessions in case the crowd should turn nasty.

"Very well," said Autumn. "I grant that the boy should not have lied but could not a lesson be drawn that the father is at fault? Knowing that the boy has twice lied about the rebecs was it not foolish of him to entrust the boy with this task yet again? Surely not repeating the same mistake would be a good lesson to learn?"

In the first light of rising Plakill, Kad'idatou took on a ghostly silvery outline and the mutterings disappeared as the crowd strained to hear his reply.

"You said other lessons," said Kad'idatou eventually. "I take it you see more?"

"Aye," said Autumn. "Another also concerns the father. Knowing as he did that his son is prone to mischief, was it not foolish of him to entrust such a responsible task to his son so soon? Would it not have been better to entrust him with smaller tasks and build his awareness of his responsibilities gradually?"

The mutterings started again as people began to discuss these radical new ideas.

"So you find fault only with the father?" asked Kad'idatou, his voice still mild.

"Not at all," said Autumn. "There are other lessons that the entire village can learn."

"I beg you enlighten us," said Kad'idatou.

"As you wish," said Autumn. "You did not specify this in your tale but it seems reasonable to assume that others in the village kept sheep. If that were not the case then likely they would not have been so willing at first to rally to the defence of the sheep."

"That is a fair assumption," said Kad'idatou. "What of it?"

"If that is so," said Autumn, "then mayhap the fault lies with the villagers for not responding every time the alarm is raised even if it is a false alarm for surely the consequences to the entire village of not responding to a real alarm are far worse than responding to a false alarm."

"So you are saying the villagers should have gone to chase the rebecs even though they believe it to be a falsehood?" asked Kad'idatou.

"Yes," said Autumn. "If it turned out false again they would only have the minor irritation of the loss of a little of their time but, as was shown in the tale, by not responding the entire flock was lost. Could not a lesson be learned from that? I wager it is better in situations like this to act regardless of whether the alarm is true or false rather than risk not acting when it is true."

"I see," said Kad'idatou. He paused for a few moments. "Mayhap you have some more lessons or is that it?"

"Well," said Autumn, "Perhaps there are some more."

"This is turning out to be a more interesting evening than I had anticipated," said Kad'idatou drily. "Please continue."

"Correct me if I am wrong," said Autumn, "but did you not say that rebecs had been seen on the high ground at the beginning?"

"Twas a little after the beginning," said Kad'idatou, "but continue."

"I venture it was foolish, then, for the father to send the boy to the high ground knowing there were rebecs," said Autumn. "A lesson there would be to take note of what dangers there are and act accordingly rather than head recklessly into danger. However, I do not blame the father entirely for this as, knowing rebecs inhabit the area and that they are partial to sheep I question the wisdom of all in the village who keep sheep. Would it not be better if they farmed something the rebecs did not like to eat?"

"So you would blame the boy's father or the entire village rather than the boy himself?" asked Kad'idatou.

“Not at all,” said Autumn. “’Twould have been better if the boy had not lied. However, that is not the point.”

“And what is the point?” asked Kad’idatou, getting to his feet.

“You told a tale to encourage those gathered here to not lie,” said Autumn. “While I do not countenance lying it would be well for people to understand that other lessons can be drawn from the tale which may be better suited to their lives. Farming appropriately, for example, or not overburdening those not yet ready for responsibility. It seems wrong to me to blame the starvation of a family, perhaps even the entire village, on one who was given a task for which he was not yet suited. The father and the village should also bear at least some measure of responsibility as well.”

“If I might add another point,” said Logan, getting to his feet.

“And why not,” said Kad’idatou. “’Twould seem my little tale has stirred up quite a hornets’ nest of possibilities and blame.”

“I am sorry,” said Logan, “but it occurs to me that there is another possible lesson to be learned here.”

“Doubtless there are more lessons that can be learned from the tale than there were words in the tale,” said Kad’idatou. “I do not recognise your voice. Who are you?”

“I am the companion of Autumn,” said Logan.

“Autumn being the one who has been so generous with possible lessons to be learned?” asked Kad’idatou.

“Umm, yes,” said Logan.

“Excellent,” said Kad’idatou, starting to walk around his small platform. “And what do you see that your companion did not? I find it hard to believe there is something she missed.”

“Umm, only that might it not have been a good idea when the rebecs were first sighted to have gone out in force and driven them away?”

asked Logan. "It would have saved a lot of trouble in the end."

Kad'idatou stopped his pacing and stared in the general direction of Autumn and Logan and the square went silent as everyone waited to see what he would do.

"I have been atop this pole for twenty two summers," he said in a conversational tone, "and never before have I wanted to meet anyone. I would ask you to join me but alas, there is not room here for three. Someone, fetch me a ladder!"

Chapter Seventeen

It took some while for Kad'idatou to descend for the people were stunned by his words and thought only to stare in astonishment or discuss this development with their companions. When, at length and after two repeats of his request, someone did go to fetch a ladder it took some while to find one. Then more time was spent when someone else was sent to fetch a torch to light Kad'idatou's descent. But descend he did, albeit with caution and much anxiety with people clustered around the ladder to catch him should he slip, made the more likely by their jostling.

Slowly he made his way over to where Autumn and Logan sat. Ajanie rejoined them, very conscious and proud that it was her friends that had brought the wise man back to earth. To her eternal disappointment Kad'idatou waved her away so she sat three paces distant and the others formed a respectful circle around the three.

"My eyes are not as they once were," said Kad'idatou, peering at Autumn. "Someone, bring that torch over here."

Several people hurried to fetch the torch which had been left beside the ladder but Ajanie pushed them aside and carried the torch over herself. She jabbed it in the ground between Autumn and Kad'idatou and sat beside it but again Kad'idatou waved her away. In the light of the burning brand it was readily apparent that Kad'idatou had no blanket around his shoulders. Aside from a filthy loin cloth he wore nothing save the hair on his head which descended in a mat to the small of his back and was dark and streaked with grey. His beard, on the other hand, fell to the tops of his thighs and was mostly grey and streaked with white. He was broad in the shoulder but his bones had scant flesh on them and what little could be seen of his face was weathered although his eyes sparkled and seemed to jump in the light of the flickering torch.

"Well, well," he said, peering at Autumn again. "Now that I see you better it is clear it was worth the effort for you delight my eyes. And you, Logan is it?" Logan nodded. "You are not ill favoured either. My name is Yensil although I have not been called that for as long as I can remember save by myself for I speak it every day when I greet the

dawn to remind myself of my existence.”

“It saddens me that you feel you have need to remind yourself of your existence,” said Autumn.

“Yet in turn it pleases me that it saddens you, lovely one,” said Kad’idatou. “Do not be sad on my behalf for I live the life I have chosen and if I chose to live above all else and gaze down on the hustle and bustle of life around me and not be part of it then it was my choice and mine alone.”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “If such was your choice made freely then all is good. I would ask, if you permit, why you made that choice? Poles, I fancy, are more suited to birds than to people.”

Kad’idatou’s beard moved in such a way that suggested he was smiling.

“’Twas chance alone, although mayhap there was the hand of a deity involved as well, who can say,” he said. “I came upon this village after several summers of journeying, much bothered by inner turmoils. Someone had started to build a dwelling here and while it was but four corner posts and the beginnings of a roof it caught fire and much was lost and the building abandoned. With no ambition beyond seeing as far as I could out to sea I climbed the one remaining post and gazed for a long time and found my inner turmoils receding as I sat on what little of the roof remained. In time someone took pity on me and sent up some food and, until today, I have seen no need to come down from my perch.”

“I do not wish to pry,” said Autumn, “and I am most pleased you have found relief from your inner turmoils, but what was their cause?”

“A deep sense that I was not of this world,” said Kad’idatou, stroking his beard with one hand. “When I was passing from boyhood into manhood I was sent by my father to a place of great learning in order that I learned much myself for as a boy I had shown no aptitude for farming nor any of the other skills needed in the village. Alas I showed little aptitude there either and before two summers had passed I left that place and began to wander.”

“Where were you born?” asked Logan. “Are you from Aferraron as well?”

“A small place,” said Kad'idatou. “Doubtless you will not have heard of it. 'Twas named Elmon by those who lived there.”

“Sploop! Elmon?” exclaimed Logan. “I am from Biasdo, some two or three days away.”

“I confess I do not remember the name Biasdo,” said Kad'idatou. “'Twas a long time ago. I am sorry.”

“Pah, that does not surprise me,” said Logan with a laugh. “Biasdo was so small not even the people who lived there had heard of it.”

“You spoke of a place of learning,” said Autumn, leaning forward. “Was that nearby?”

“A fair way away,” said Kad'idatou, “but not overly far. 'Twas the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup. Have you heard of it?”

“I am from that place,” said Autumn. “I spent much of my life there.”

“Ahh, that explains much,” exclaimed Kad'idatou., throwing up his hands in delight. “Tell me, did you abandon your noviciate as I did?”

“No,” said Autumn. She hesitated. “I am a Krisana of that place.”

“How is that possible?” demanded Kad'idatou. “You seem little older now than I was when I departed there. You are far too young to be a Krisana! You are playing games with me!”

The people gathered around started to mutter, affronted that a stranger dares play games with Kad'idatou.

“I am still young,” said Autumn, “but I came to the Esyup as a babe. I was found on the savannah and brought there by Noxu. Mayhap you remember him?”

“Noxu?” said Kad'idatou, scratching under his loin cloth thoughtfully.

"That is a name I have not heard these many summers past. Aye, yes, I remember a Noxu. He was some way older than I and was not my mentor but yes I remember him. What became of him? Is he still there?"

"Yes, Noxu was my mentor," said Autumn, "and became a full Master. He was well when I left there two summers past. Who was your mentor?"

"Ogursa," said Kad'idatou. "Never will I forget that name! She was not kind to me."

"I recall no one of that name," said Autumn, frowning. "When did you leave the Esyup?"

"More than thirty summers ago," said Kad'idatou.

"Mayhap she died or left between then and my arrival," said Autumn. "'Twas unfortunate she was not kind however. Mayhap your life would have been different had she been otherwise."

"Perhaps," said Kad'idatou, "but mayhap her unkindness was a kindness in itself for I know now the life at an Esyup would not have suited me."

"Perhaps," said Autumn. "Few are ever expelled from there but those who are not suited are encouraged to realise that for themselves and leave by their own choice."

"As did I," said Kad'idatou. "I take it that you also left by choice?"

"Indeed," said Autumn. "I ventured forth to find my place in the world, as it would seem did you."

"Aye," said Kad'idatou, "I have found my place, such as it is, but it would not suit you, a Krisana. You have achieved much already whereas I, I have achieved nothing save a life up a pole."

"I would disagree with you there, Kad'idatou," said Autumn. "You have achieved the love and respect of the people of this village. That is

no little achievement for they look up to you and take your counsel.”

“I dare say,” said Kad'idatou, “but I grow old whereas you are yet still young. And you, Logan? You are from the Esyup as well?”

“Me?” said Logan. “Sploop, no! I was a cast out wastrel until I met Autumn.”

“Ahh, you are the Krisana's servant then,” said Kad'idatou. “My apologies, I thought you were her equal.”

“Logan is my equal in many ways,” said Autumn quickly. “My better in many other things as well. He is not my servant. He is my companion.”

“I apologise,” said Kad'idatou, putting his hands on the ground and bowing before Logan. “’Tis best I return to my post soon for on the ground I give great offence. Likely I should not have come down but I was curious to see who had the wit to go beyond the obvious. These people here are good people but they live small lives and their thoughts are fully occupied with those lives. I trust I have not insulted you too deeply, Logan?”

“You have not insulted me at all,” said Logan, “although if you will permit I have thought of another lesson that can be taken from your tale.”

“Ahh, is that so?” said Kad'idatou. “Enlighten me for only some of those that have been spoken of have come to me despite my telling the tale many times and thinking much on it.”

“Then doubtless I am wrong,” said Logan, “for ’tis unlikely that I will think of something not already thought of by you or Autumn, but it did occur to me that perhaps the father could have sent another of his children with the boy. That way the two could have kept each other amused and if a rebec did come along one could go for aid while the other stayed to aid the sheep.”

“A worthy idea,” said Kad'idatou, “but we do not know if the father had other children.”

“True,” said Logan, “but doubtless there were other children in the village. Mayhap it would have made more sense if the villagers brought their flocks together and grazed them as one flock with two or even three to guard them.”

“Now that is a worthy idea,” said Kad'idatou, nodding. “I had not thought of that and now you have spoken it 'twould seem obvious. Mayhap you have some more ideas as well, Autumn? After all, you have had scant time to think on the tale whereas I have thought on it for many summers.”

“I confess that my mind has not stayed on your tale,” said Autumn, “but since we have returned to it I notice that all talk has been of the boy or his father or the villagers as a group. Mayhap there is a lesson that can be learned by the mother.”

“The mother?” asked Kad'idatou. “What relevance has the mother in this? It is not her flock.”

“But the boy is her child,” said Autumn, “and she should concern herself with his welfare.”

“How can the mother's concern for the boy's welfare be a factor here?” asked Kad'idatou.

“Clearly the boy has wit beyond that needed for tending sheep,” said Autumn. “Rather than punish him for needing more stimulation might it not be an idea for the mother to encourage him in some other way that can also help him with sheep tending.”

“I am at a loss to see how,” said Kad'idatou. “Enlighten me.”

“Oh, let me see,” said Autumn. She paused. “How about the learning of music? Mayhap the boy could take up the drum or the pipe. He could then practise while tending sheep and the noise may even keep the rebecs at bay.”

“Mayhap I should have stayed at the Esyup,” said Kad'idatou, “although I wager even a hundred summers there would not have opened my mind as wide as yours for Logan here matches you in wit

and has spent not a day there. However, even though you give me a score of lessons that can be drawn from the tale there is still one that you miss.”

“Doubtless,” said Autumn. “Neither Logan nor I claim to be infallible. What is the lesson we miss?”

“That the tale serves the purpose for which it was intended,” said Kad'idatou. “Not long after the good people here started asking for my aid with their difficulties in life one came to me wanting advice on how to cure his child of making mischief and telling untruths. That was the original purpose of the tale.” He raised his voice without looking around. “Solene, are you here?”

“She ain't here,” said an older man, leaning forward. “She went to Coot-Tha eleven, twelve summers back. Be you forgetting?”

“Ahh, of course, I had forgotten, Derk,” said Kad'idatou, waving his hand. “Is she well?”

“I heard from her only last summer,” said Derk proudly. “She be well and she be Assistant to the Head Moneyer now, and the lass has three children of her own.”

“Is that so?” asked Kad'idatou twisting to look at him. “Well now, is that not a fine thing.” He turned back to Autumn. “Derk be the one who came to me and Solene be the one the tale was intended for although doubtless others could have benefited. Derk had thrashed her many times for lying but to no avail. Seems she took the tale to heart for Assistant to the Head Moneyer in Coot-Tha be a responsible position and not given to one who lies. The Mo'i of Wase would not take kindly to someone who makes up untruths about the collection of taxes.”

“Doubtless not,” said Autumn, “although I know little of money and taxes. So am I right in thinking that your tale was intended to counsel people against the telling of untruths?”

“Indeed,” said Kad'idatou, “and now I know you be a Krisana and all, I am a little surprised you took issue with that lesson and sought other

lessons from the tale. My recollection of the Esyup is that they prized truth above all else.”

“Your recollection is indeed correct,” said Autumn, “and I was brought up to believe the same.”

“There is something in the manner of how you speak that suggests you no longer agree,” said Kad'idatou, “although I speak with others so rarely I could easily be mistaken in this.”

“No, you are right,” said Autumn. “In the two summers I have been gone from the Esyup I have found that some of what was believed there as absolute is lacking.”

“So you think lying is a goodly thing?” asked Kad'idatou. “If that is so how can I know the truth of your words? Mayhap you lie to me now about lying to test me?”

“I do not,” said Autumn, “but I have come to learn that speaking the absolute truth may not always be the best thing to do.”

“That is a statement that needs no little justification,” said Kad'idatou.

“Tis difficult to justify in the abstract,” said Autumn, “and I stress that I do not countenance lying as a way of living but there are occasions when the telling of the truth may not be right.”

“I daresay remaining silent would be acceptable,” said Kad'idatou. “After all, the constant clamour of people endlessly speaking the truth would be annoying but the telling of an untruth?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn, “and knowing when to remain silent is a skill many would do well to learn. Perhaps, an example might help.” She paused and looked round at the people gathered to listen. Only those near the front could be seen in the light of the torch but Autumn spotted a young woman with a small child asleep in her arms.

“Excuse me,” she said, getting up and going over. “What is your name?”

“Me?” exclaimed the young woman in alarm. “What have I done?”

“Be not afraid,” said Autumn gently. “You have done nothing wrong. I only wish to borrow your child for a few moments. You have my word that no harm will come to your child.”

“Umm,” said the woman hesitantly, clasping her baby tightly. “Umm, Kad'idatou?”

“Tis all well, Linel,” said Kad'idatou. “I also give you my word that no harm will come to the child.”

Still Linel hesitated. Someone behind her gave her a nudge and whispered something and, with great reluctance, she passed the baby to Autumn.

“Your concern does you great credit, Linel,” said Autumn. “See? I put the child on the ground beside Kad'idatou where it can come to no harm. I will return the child to you momentarily.”

Linel watched Autumn's every move as she put the child down then backed away to resume sitting where she had been. To everyone's relief the child did not awaken for he was known to be a howler and they all wanted to see how this stranger was going to best Kad'idatou.

“I would ask you to imagine something for me,” said Autumn. “Imagine it is full day with Astauand high in the sky. All the people of Hurabid are about their business, in their boats fishing or tending their fields and flocks or in their dwellings. There is no one in sight, save you, Kad'idatou, sitting atop your pole.”

“I do not need to imagine that,” said Kad'idatou. “Such a thing happens most days for a time.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “Imagine then that Linel comes to you and says she has great need to be elsewhere for some reason but cannot take her child with her. She begs you to look after him and puts him on the ground before your pole and hurries away. What would you do?”

“Piss myself, most likely,” said Kad'idatou and everyone, save Linel,

laughed. "I have no skills with babes." Linel looked as if she was about to burst into tears.

"Let us suppose instead you take the child up to the top of the pole," said Autumn. "That way you can see it comes to no harm."

"Aye, I suppose," said Kad'idatou. "Now what?"

"A hill person hurries into the square," said Autumn, "ill and hungry." There were a few gasps of horror from the crowd and Linel looked panic stricken. "He shouts up at you and you climb down to remonstrate with him and send him back to the hills from whence he had come."

"Tis difficult to imagine that," said Kad'idatou. "If there be a hungry hill man down below 'tis unlikely I will leave my perch."

"But let us suppose you do," said Autumn. "Let us suppose the hill man demands you give him the child to eat for he is hungry and can only eat the tender flesh of a new born babe. This babe. Linel's pride and joy."

Linel burst into tears and ran over to snatch up her baby.

"Did you see that, Kad'idatou?" said Autumn, going over to Linel. "There now, Linel. I am sorry I have caused you distress. Please, take your babe and keep him safe."

Linel looked at Autumn then ran off to her dwelling, a young man following close behind.

"So, Kad'idatou," said Autumn sitting down again. "The hill man demands to know where the babe is. Do you tell the truth, that the babe is atop the pole, do you stay silent and risk being killed yourself or do you lie and say the babe is somewhere else?"

Kad'idatou looked at her silently.

"I know what Linel would say," said Logan. "She would not hesitate for one moment."

"I question the tale," said Kad'idatou, harshly. "It is clearly not realistic."

"I grant that," said Autumn, "but I have not had time to embellish it into something more realistic. I have, however, been in similar situations myself and while the best solution would be to persuade the aggressor to change their mind oftimes that is not possible. Indeed, on occasions, I have had but a moment to decide what to do and quiet talk was not an option. You have had more than a moment, Kad'idatou. I ask again, what would you do?"

"Doubtless what you have done yourself," said Kad'idatou quietly. "I would lie and say the babe was elsewhere."

"Aye," said Autumn as a sigh of relief went around. "I have known some at my Esyup who would say that the truth must outweigh all other considerations but my own experience and reflections on them have led me to conclude that to value mere words above all else is oftimes wrong. And what, pray, is truth anyway but a collection of words? Mayhap those words be correct, mayhap they be wrong for truth sometimes changes its nature but they are still just words. Are words worth more than the life of a child?"

"But that does not justify persistent lying," said Kad'idatou.

"Indeed not," said Autumn, "nor lying for personal gain at the expense of someone else. I merely observe that the truth is not always the best policy."

"Aye, I suppose so," said Kad'idatou, "but my tale of the boy and the rebecs still holds merit, does it not?"

"Up to a point," said Autumn, "but is not the tale itself a lie? I venture you do not know the boy personally nor of the village where the events took place. You use a lie to justify not telling lies which is a questionable method. Regardless, I pointed out that other lessons can be learned for to stay blindly with the truth without consideration of the circumstances can be worse. Surely 'tis better to teach people to do what is best and to take responsibility for their actions rather than to stay rigidly with what they think is the truth then blame others for

teaching them that?"

Kad'idatou just sat and looked at Autumn for a while.

"I remember why I went up the pole," he said suddenly. "Twas being with other people that put my mind in turmoil and life atop that pole is simple. There is a clarity there that I never found on the ground. I see now why you are a Krisana, Autumn, and how Logan here has the makings and I beg your forgiveness for doubting you. Your minds are such that you can think clearly and reach wise conclusions. I cannot do that which is why I left the Esyup."

"Perhaps," said Autumn, "but I will not fault you for that. Your tales, if the others be like the one about the boy, are simple and easy for any to understand and for the most part their lesson is a good one."

"And now my mind is beginning to be in turmoil again," said Kad'idatou. "I venture 'tis time I returned to my perch. Do you intend to stay here long or will you be moving on?"

"We will be moving on," said Autumn. "If you have no objection we will pass the night on the beach yonder and leave in the morning."

"Tis not for me to object," said Kad'idatou. "When you return to Coot-Tha would you find Solene and give her my best wishes for her happiness?"

"I will," said Autumn, "although it may be a while before we return that way."

"How so?" asked Kad'idatou. "There is nowhere else to go from here."

"We are looking for the Wall of Loriki," said Autumn.

"Oh yes?" said Kad'idatou. "Why is that? You do not strike me as one with any great interest in ancient history."

Chapter Eighteen

“I was thinking last night,” said Logan as they headed east after Autumn had finished her morning exercises. “While you were talking with Ajanie and her friends.”

“Oh yes?” said Autumn. “I did wonder why you were quieter than your usual self. I put it down to Ajanie's daughter Marji joining us but she showed no sign of wanting to talk to you.”

“No, 'twas not her,” said Logan pensively. “I did not want to talk to her either. She giggles a lot and says little save of what which boy said to her and what she said in reply and whether some other boy saw and what he thought about it. It seemed fruitless to me.”

“Then that is good,” said Autumn. “'Twould be a sad day if you were pining after her or she you.”

Logan snorted and inspected the scabs on his arm.

“Do you wish to share your thoughts?” asked Autumn when it became apparent Logan was not going to make any further comment.

“'Twas about what Kad'idatou said,” said Logan. “You have told me of times long past when Aferraron was not Aferraron and how Wase came to be and I accept what you say but I do not truly understand.”

“You do not understand that groups of people oft times move to new places and start new lives there?” asked Autumn. “Is that not what we are doing after a fashion?”

“I dare say,” said Logan, “but wherever we go there are already people there and they are much like us. How can it be that some of our ancestors came to Danornor and found people who were very different? What was that word he used?”

“Uncivilised?” said Autumn. “That word?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “What does it mean? As far as I could tell it meant, oh, I don't know, stupid perhaps.”

“Oft times people use it to mean that or much the same,” said Autumn. “In truth it is a word I have difficulty with myself for it means that one group of people considers another group to be backward in many ways and thus not as good or advanced as they are but it may simply be that what they consider good or advanced is not considered the same way by the other group.”

“I do not understand,” said Logan.

“Like as not I don't truly understand either,” said Autumn. “I am speaking only from what I have heard discussed but I have no personal experience to guide me.”

“That's right,” said Logan, idling swinging his staff from side to side. “We have been to Neander and Wase and they are much as we of Aferraron are. Are either of those places uncivilised?”

“Doubtless many would think so,” said Autumn, “if they but knew the word. However, it is a word not widely known or used which is why you do not know it either. Wase, mayhap, would need a great deal of justification but Neander, yes, I wager we could call Neander uncivilised in some respects. That said they would likely say the same of us.”

“How so?” asked Logan, shifting his staff so it lay across his shoulders and his hands dangled over it.

“One aspect comes immediately to mind,” said Autumn, “and that is their attitude toward women. In Neander they see women as inferior whereas in Aferraron most men see women as their equals. One could argue that those of Neander are backward in that respect compared to us.”

“But is that not so?” asked Logan. “Surely to treat women as inferior is a sign of backwardness? After all, you could best any in Neander in a fight or in debate.”

“I confess my inclination is to agree with you,” said Autumn, “but the women of Neander seem content with their lot and doubtless two people having a conversation like this in Neander would consider

themselves to be more enlightened and we are backward because in their view the Onamans give their women too many freedoms. I can see that there would be arguments in support of either side.”

“Hmm,” said Logan. He walked on several paces deep in thought. “So you think that this Loriki built the Wall because the people the other side think little of women? That would seem overly harsh to me.”

“That is because you are thinking in today’s terms,” said Autumn, keeping clear of the end of his staff. “The Wall was built several hundred summers past and times were different. More likely Kad’idatou was referring to the original people here being uncivilised in other ways which may have led to the first Onamans here building the Wall for protection.”

“But how would they have been backward?” asked Logan. “That is what I do not understand. Surely if they are people much as we are then they would be much as we are. How can it be otherwise?”

“Oh you are definitely wrong there, Logan,” said Autumn. “Groups of people that live apart and rarely if ever have contact with each other will develop quite different cultures.”

“Different what?” asked Logan, twisting to look at her.

“Cultures,” said Autumn. “Umm, different beliefs and ways of thinking about things, different customs, different laws, even different tools.”

“But how can these things be so different?” asked Logan. “People are people!”

“Yes, indeed,” said Autumn, “but different groups of people grow in different ways. Take my Esyup, for example. We there have an aversion to the taking of life that is not shared throughout the rest of Aferraron where killing is frequent and goes mostly unremarked and yet the people of Danornor are different again even though the were Onamans themselves in times past. Here, at least among the hill folk, not only is killing people commonplace but the eating of them is as well. As far as I know, no one in Aferraron eats someone else. That is one example of how cultures vary and according to Kad’idatou there

were people on this island long before anyone from Aferraron came here so doubtless they had very different customs. Mayhap they were very warlike and Loriki had the Wall built to keep them at bay.”

“I suppose,” said Logan. “But if they were warlike would they not have simply killed all of Loriki’s people or driven them back to Aferraron?”

“Perhaps they were warlike but not skilled,” said Autumn, “or perhaps they did not have metal weapons and Loriki’s people were able to hold them at bay until the Wall was built.”

“How could they not have metal?” asked Logan in surprise. “Doesn’t everyone have metal?”

“Most do now,” said Autumn, “but back then? I know not when metal was discovered but perhaps it had only recently been discovered in Aferraron and knowledge of it had not spread widely.”

“That is something else I struggle with,” said Logan. “How is it that one people can use something that another people know nothing of?”

“I know not when the deities made the first people,” said Autumn, “but I doubt that They gave us bronze immediately. Someone somewhere came upon some metal in the ground and found a way to make it into things then found something else which they could add to it to make it last longer or be easier to work with. Did not Cymogene say that copper is no good for making tools because it is too soft but if you add something to it, I forget what, it becomes bronze and is harder?¹⁹ And do not forget that Inyanasi in Neander told us of a new metal which is better even than bronze.²⁰ Eron, he said it was called or iron or some such. Mayhap in time that will become widespread or some other new substance will be found which surpasses even that.”

“I find that very strange,” said Logan. “How can you cut trees or meat without metal?”

“With stones,” said Autumn. “Many stones, if you break them, have sharp edges. Doubtless you could use that to cut things. Mayhap the

19 See *The Annals ~ The Second Tale*. Technically, bronze is copper mixed with tin and brass is copper mixed with zinc.

20 See *The Annals ~ The Fifth Tale*.

ancients had other things as well but our metal is better and their tools are no longer used as a result and we have forgotten them.”

“But would not using a stone to cut down a tree be very slow and arduous?” asked Logan.

“I imagine so,” said Autumn. “But if you think on it that would explain why we now use metal axes instead. If stones were better we would still use them. But it is not only in the use of tools that our culture advances. Another example would be laws. We have laws and a small number of people to enforce them. As circumstances change laws change with them. There would have been a time when there were no laws and, I venture, in times to come there will be laws about things we cannot at this time even imagine. Aye, and mayhap many more people to enforce those new laws and yet more laws that govern how those people enforce those laws but these are not the only things that make up a culture. Take the stories that the bards tell. As they wander the land telling their tales they add things and make up new tales. Like as not at the time of Loriki there were tales told that no one has since told for a hundred summers or more. Tales of Loriki himself, I wouldn’t wonder as I have never heard of him and yet Kad’idatou said he was one of the early kings of Danornor before Aferraron became Aferraron and the first Roinad took charge.”

“I find it all very strange and confusing,” said Logan, shaking his head. “Had I ever thought about it I would have imagined that if Mother Midcarn sent me back two or three hundred summers I would have found things much as they are now but you are telling me things would have been very different. I am struggling to encompass that in my mind.”

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but if you did go back that far you may not even recognise the clothing people wore. We wear tunic now but in Zuit they wear malu and in Neander they wear robes and some here wear just loin cloths. Mayhap if Biasdo existed back then you would have worn something else.”

“I cannot imagine what,” said Logan. “What else is there to wear?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “It is even possible that no one had thought of

clothes and all suffered grievously from the cold in winter. But someone did at some time and until such time as someone else thinks of something new and different we will all say the same but when they do we will all be amazed then get used to it very quickly and wonder how it could have been otherwise. For certain 'tis false thinking to say that the deities created us and everything around us as we know things now. Change is constant and what we have now was new and most likely radical when it was first thought of. Consider my needle. I have been sewing with a bone needle for as long as I can remember but then I came to Wase and found a metal needle which is fine enough to sew the edges of a wound. I had never even thought of sewing wounds but someone did. Mayhap there was a time when no one had needles and someone had the idea and made one from bone and from that there came the idea of sewing clothes. Mayhap it was the other way around. There is no way of telling.”

“’Tis confusing,” said Logan, “but intriguing none the less. So, correct me if I am wrong, but was Kad’idatou saying that when the people of Aferraron first came to this island they found there were already people here?”

“Aye,” said Autumn.

“How would that be possible?” asked Logan. “Where did they come from then?”

“Mayhap the deities created some people here,” said Autumn, “or mayhap they came from Neander or somewhere else. They may even have come from Aferraron a long time before Loriki’s people and been forgotten. The possibilities are endless.”

“Do you think they look like us?” asked Logan.

“More than likely,” said Autumn. “Kad’idatou referred to them as people so if they were very different they would have been called something else but he also said they were primitive and uncivilised so likely their culture was very different even if their appearance was similar. We will not know until we find the Wall and get over it.”

“And this does not worry you?” asked Logan.

“No,” said Autumn. “Even though Kad'idatou assured us that the Wall is still there he did say there has been no trouble in living memory. I confess I remain unconvinced the Wall still stands but in the unknown summers since the Wall was first built there have doubtless been developments in the culture of the people beyond so if any do still remain they are likely less primitive and more civilised than they were. I wager by our values of today we would judge Loriki and his kin as primitive and uncivilised.”

“Still, 'tis nice to know they are not monsters and demons,” said Logan, sliding his staff from his shoulders and waving it at the forest that surrounded them for there was no track that led to the Wall.

“And there we arrive at a matter I gave much consideration to during my meditation this morning,” said Autumn.

“Oh really?” said Logan, bringing his staff up sharply and dropping into his 'ready' stance momentarily.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “We have heard tales of monsters and demons beyond the Wall, tales of soskas and gangsis and other things from the Land of the Undead and now we are told of a primitive people who were here before the first people of Aferraron arrived. Each person we speak to seems to have a different tale so where lies the truth?”

“Is that not why we are going there?” asked Logan. “To find out for ourselves? Why do you meditate on this? We'll be there soon enough.”

“'Twas not that on which I was meditating,” said Autumn. “'Twas the nature of the tellers.”

“You do like to occupy your mind with oddities,” said Logan. “What does the nature of the tellers matter? Surely 'tis the truth of the tale that is important.”

“Aye, indeed,” said Autumn, “but in the absence of any actual knowledge we can only assume a tale to have truth by the nature of the teller of the tale.”

“We are strangers here,” said Logan. “If we knew these tellers well we

would have some basis on which to judge the truth of their tales but we have met them only briefly and know them not at all.”

“Exactly,” said Autumn, “and therein lies the nature of my thoughts. Given only what tales we have been told and what little we know of the nature of the tellers, why is it that I find I am almost wholly inclined to believe Kad’idatou over Kenza or Swaven?”

“Because he is of your Esyup,” said Logan. “I would have thought that was obvious.”

“Not so,” said Autumn. “We were all trained at the Esyup to take no one’s word for anything and to dispute everything. By training, at least, Kad’idatou should be the last I would believe.”

“I have no idea, then,” said Logan, “but you mediated for a long time. Did you not think of anything else?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “The conclusion I came to was that Kad’idatou’s tale seemed the most reasonable but that in itself seems to me to be a foolish reason for believing his tale over the others. Something I have learned since leaving the Esyup is that this world is full of things that are unreasonable. Indeed, if everything was reasonable then the world would be a very dull place for the unexpected and the extraordinary make it more interesting. That creature we saw two days ago which changed colour would be an example. Surely such a thing would be wholly unreasonable and if someone had told me a tale of it I likely would not have believed it.”

“You are forgetting the world of Miesca,”²¹ said Logan. “Everything there changed colour including the sky.”

“I am not forgetting that place,” said Autumn, “nor will I ever but Miesca was the Land of Xanthous and is wholly separate from this world.”

“True enough,” said Logan. “So you are now thinking Kad’idatou’s tale was just a tale and has no merit?”

²¹ See *The Annals ~ The Sixth Tale*.

“And therein lies my quandary,” said Autumn. “As I said, Kad’idatou’s tale seemed the most reasonable and by that token is likely not to be true for an ages old wall in a jungle is unlikely to have a reasonable reason for its existence and yet I am still drawn to it. The truth of the matter we will doubtless discover tomorrow when we reach the Wall but that is not the issue. The issue is my discovery of myself and I would like to know why I am drawn to believe one and not the other.”

“I still think it is because he was of your Esyup,” said Logan. “The others were tales from ignorant people whereas Kad’idatou’s was from someone who had some training and displayed no little lack of ignorance. Even though he is not as clever as you he is still a long way cleverer than Kenza and Swaven.”

“So you think this is all down to my vanity again?” asked Autumn. “You think because Kad’idatou matches me for cleverness I am more inclined to believe him?”

“Seems reasonable to me,” said Logan. “I would not think it is your vanity though since he is some way off matching you there and I doubt you would believe someone cleverer than you simply because they are cleverer than you. I venture though because he spent some time at the Esyup he is less inclined himself to believe tales of demons and has sought out facts instead.”

“But is that the case?” asked Autumn. “I did ask where he got his knowledge from and all he said was that it was things he picked up in Coot-Tha. I would have liked to know more on that for he could simply be repeating tales he had heard which themselves have no basis in truth.”

“Does it really matter?” asked Logan. “We are going there to see for ourselves so mayhap none of the tales are true. What does it matter who told us which tale?”

“You are right,” said Autumn, “but also wrong. In this case we may well be able to find out the truth but what of situations where we cannot and have only tales to guide us? What do we do then? How do we decide which tale is the more likely to be true?”

“I confess I do not have your endless desire for truth,” said Logan. “If it is impossible to find out one way or the other then what does it matter? Pick whichever tale you enjoy the most and believe that until you hear another you enjoy more.”

“I daresay you have the right of it,” said Autumn, frowning, “but it does not sit well with me.”

“That does not surprise me,” said Logan with a little laugh. “It be like this Loriki fellow. Unless you persuade Mother Midcarn to take you back to his time you will never know with certainty if he did build this Wall or if he was even ever alive.”

“I know,” said Autumn with a sigh. “But I would prefer to know an unpleasant truth than believe a pleasant lie.”

“And the unpleasant truth is that even you cannot know everything, Autumn,” said Logan. “You’re just going to have to live with that.”

Chapter Nineteen

Autumn did a complex series of arm movements, so fast they were just a blur, before lashing out with a leg at an imaginary foe. She twisted in the air to land facing the other way then instantly leapt high in a backward somersault and caught a branch some way above her with one hand. A wide eyed grey monkey that had been clinging to the branch and gawping in frank amazement at her antics screeched loudly and hurtled up the tree in panic, its long tail held rigid behind it. The alarm given, all the trees nearby shook as the entire troop took flight, yelling abuse and flinging themselves from tree to tree. All the birds in and around those same trees launched themselves, raucously cawing and cackling as one. Autumn chased after the monkeys, swinging rapidly from branch to branch and was quickly swallowed up by the canopy. The screeching of the monkeys faded into the distance and an eerie silence fell over the forest as the birds found other trees or left the area entirely.

Logan sat at the base of a tree beside the tiny clearing where they had spent the night. He had smiled at the sight of the startled monkey but as the eerie silence lingered his smile faded. Surely Autumn should be making her way back by now?

Perturbed he leant forward, his ears straining. The eerie silence was lifting as the small wary creatures of the jungle cautiously began to move again and what little breeze there was pushed the leaves around with its humid breath. Of large creatures, those of a size with Autumn, there was no sign whatsoever. Slightly alarmed, Logan got to his feet and looked around but there was nothing to see save trees and undergrowth.

“I hope she did not fall and hurt herself,” he muttered, trying to remember exactly which way she had gone. “She takes a foolish pleasure in deliberately making mistakes and correcting them. One of these days she will surely do herself a serious injury.”

“Logan!” came Autumn’s voice, deadened by the foliage. “Logan!”

Logan twisted, trying to fix the direction from which her voice came.

“Autumn!” he shouted. “Where are you?”

“Over here!” called Autumn.

“Fat lot of use that is,” muttered Logan. He rolled his eyes then shouted “Where is here?”

“Follow my voice,” called Autumn. “This way!”

“Are you hurt?” he called, gathering his staff, Autumn's robe and pack and his blanket in his arms. One of the rings²² fell from the blanket and he rummaged in the undergrowth to find it, dropping Autumn's robe and pack in the process as his staff hit a tree and jerked him.

“No!” shouted Autumn, “but I have found the Wall!”

“Oh Sploop!” exclaimed Logan, momentarily forgetting the ring. “So the damned thing is real after all.”

He saw something glint under a purple-leafed bush and grabbed at it but it was not the ring. It was a brightly coloured snail that resented his intrusion and oozed itself back into its shell. He tossed it aside and resumed rummaging again.

“Logan!” this time with the merest hint of impatience.

“I'm coming, I'm coming!” shouted Logan.

He rummaged some more but could not find the ring. Irritably he snatched up their possessions again and spotted the ring almost an entire pace away from where he'd been searching.

“Vogev cursed thing,” he snarled, snatching it up. “You be more trouble than you're worth!”

“Logan! Where are you?” called Autumn as he stuffed the ring back

22 In *The Annals ~ The Seventh Tale*, Autumn and Logan bested two of Chanwar's bandits who tried to rob them. Logan took advantage of the situation to relieve the men of the proceeds of their previous robbery. The bracelet was sold to recompense a snake charmer whose snake was killed by Autumn who was under the impression it was attacking the man but Logan still carries the other two rings and some coins.

inside the blanket.

"I'm coming!" shouted Logan, hurrying off in the direction of Autumn's voice. After three paces he stopped and looked down at the things in his arms then hurried back to get their water bottle. "Keep shouting!"

Autumn's voice got steadily louder as he got closer and he only had to change direction twice. Then, unexpectedly, he burst through some bushes and ran into her. Her reflexes got her out of the way in time and Logan stumbled but did not fall.

"What kept you?" she asked.

"I lost a ring," he said, "but worry not, I found it again. Here is your robe and pack."

"Thank you," said Autumn, taking them. "I wager this is the Wall of Loriki."

Logan turned and gasped in astonishment.

"It is huge!" he exclaimed.

"No more than three body lengths high," said Autumn, "but it stretches as far as the eye can see in either direction."

Logan stared at the line of thick stone pillars that marched across the land then turned to look the other way. Yet more stone pillars, each separated from the next by a line of branch-less tree trunks.

"Ye gods!" he muttered.

"Indeed," said Autumn, putting on her robe. "A lot of work has gone into this. I confess I was expecting more of a simple fence."

"Why do you think there are gaps between the trunks?" asked Logan.

"I do not know," said Autumn, "but there are none I can see wide enough for us to squeeze through. They are not much wider than the

width of my hand. Look at this.”

She slipped a hand between two of the trees and, now she'd drawn his attention, Logan could see the far side of the trunks were flat.

“’Twould seem a lot of trees were felled for this,” said Autumn. “They were stripped of their bark and branches then split in half and embedded in the ground. If you look up all the tops are the same height as well. As you say, a lot of work has gone into this wall for doubtless it stretches from one side of the island to the other.”

“And that is not to speak of these,” said Logan, going over to inspect one of the stone pillars. “This be made of big stone blocks laid one atop the other and all cut and shaped the same size. I wonder how they brought them here.”

“And what purpose they serve,” said Autumn. “At first I thought they were here to support the wood but none of the trunks touch them. Why not simply use more trunks instead of stone blocks?”

“I have no idea,” said Logan. “’Twas a fearsome amount of work either way. Did not Kad'idatou say the island is a day's walking from side to side here?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Does anything else strike you?”

“Umm,” said Logan, looking around. “I confess I am no builder of walls but is not this wall rather close to the jungle? ’Tis barely two paces from the trees to the Wall.”

“True enough,” said Autumn. “I did not think of that. I was wondering why there were no gaps in the trees. The wood used for the Wall must have come from somewhere else.”

“A good point,” said Logan. “And if they did, how did they get them here? There is no track.”

“They would certainly have needed carts to bring the stones,” said Autumn, “and with all the rain there is here and the weight of the stones you would surely have expected a deeply rutted track and one

likely wider than the gap here.”

“Mayhap since the Wall was built the track has become overgrown again,” said Logan.

“Aye,” said Autumn, “but for two things. One is that the Wall is in good repair. See? There are two timbers that look to have been recently put in place and one of the stone pillars has a fresh block at the top that has but a small amount of moss on it.”

“Oh yes,” said Logan, peering up at the fresh looking stone at the top of the pillar. “What was the other thing or was that both of them?”

“Look through the Wall,” said Autumn. “See what lies the other side.”

Logan glanced at her then stepped up close to the timbers and peered through.

“Sploop!” he exclaimed in surprise. “Why did I not see that just now?”

“There is a lot to take in,” said Autumn. “With the immensity of this Wall an ordinary track is commonplace enough to not notice. I did not see it for a while myself. ’Twas only because you took so long to get here that I did notice it.”

“Well, that explains how they got the wood and stones here,” said Logan, studying the track on the other side of the Wall. “And it is, as you predicted, somewhat rutted.”

“And not much overgrown,” said Autumn. “It has been used in the not too distant past.”

“Which fits with the state of repair,” said Logan. He stayed for a few moments looking through then jerked back from the Wall in alarm. “Oh Voqev!”

“What?” asked Autumn, jumping over to where he had been.

“This is very wrong!” exclaimed Logan. He grabbed Autumn's arm and pulled her away from the Wall.

“What is the matter?” asked Autumn, letting herself be pulled for Logan did not do such things without good reason. “There is no one around.”

“Tis not that,” said Logan. “Tis the track!”

“Did you see something?” asked Autumn, shaking her arm free and hurrying back to the Wall.

“No!” exclaimed Logan. “Stay away!”

“What is it, Logan,” demanded Autumn. “What is wrong with the track?”

“Do you not see?” said Logan urgently. “Tis on the wrong side!”

Autumn froze then turned to stare at him.

“Oh Mizule!” she exclaimed and backed away from the Wall. “No, I had not realised that. My mind was much taken with the effort of building of the Wall. By rights the track should be this side for it was the people this side who built it and keep it in good repair.”

“Aye, so we have been told,” said Logan, scowling at the Wall, “but, as you said yourself, who knows what truth lies in tales.”

“And that would explain why there are no tracks from Hurabid to the Wall,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “Kad'idatou did say that Hurabid was the closest settlement and I thought it strange at the time but dismissed it for I assumed the Wall had been allowed to fall into disrepair. Clearly it has not for this looks as solid as the day it was first built.”

“Aye” said Logan, “and who first built it then? Like as not it was not Loriki even though it be named after him unless ...”

“Unless Loriki was left on the far side,” said Autumn.

“That was not what I was going to say” said Logan, “but you think they built the Wall and abandoned him?”

“Unlikely,” said Autumn. “He would be long dead by now and would not be repairing the Wall in any case. What were you going to say?”

“I was going to say that Loriki may not have been a king this side,” said Logan. “What if Loriki was a king of the people the other side and they built the Wall?”

“’Tis an interesting idea,” said Autumn, “but why would the people this side call the Wall by the name of an enemy king?” She went over to the Wall and peered through again.

“Why does anyone call anything what they do,” said Logan. “Mayhap the people this side told each other Loriki was building a wall and the name stayed with it.”

“More than likely you are right,” said Autumn. “As best I can tell this track stays near the Wall in both directions but it is difficult to see.” She stepped back and peered up at the top of the Wall. “’Tis no great height for me, but I think it is too high for you to climb.”

“So we are still going to cross to the other side?” he asked.

“Of course,” said Autumn cheerfully. “All we have done is add to our questions and not answered any of them. Give me your staff.”

Wordlessly Logan passed her his staff. She hefted it for a moment then ran along beside the Wall for a few paces before planting the staff solidly on the ground and vaulted onto the top of the timbers. Her foot missed by a hair’s breadth but she let go of the staff and grabbed the top of the timber with both hands and hauled herself onto it. The staff fell through the gap and clattered on the ground the other side of the Wall.

“The track stays close to the Wall all the way,” called down Autumn. “Are you staying down there all day?”

“You do like to force things, don’t you,” he called back. “Could we not have discussed it first?”

“We have already discussed it at length,” called Autumn. “What else needs to be said?”

Logan sighed and shook his head sadly.

“Fiau,” he said, peering through the Wall at his staff. “Fiau, are you awake?”

“How may I serve you, Logan?” asked Fiau, materialising from the staff.

She rustled as she looked around then came over to the Wall and peered through at Logan, the concentric green circles of her eyes pulsing slowly.

“What place is this?” she asked in her thin dry-leaf brittle voice. She slowly tapped on the timbers with her own woody finger.

“’Tis an island not far from Aferraron,” said Logan “and this is a wall on the island.”

“Aye, ’tis a long way from Havildar,” she whispered. “Why do you wake me from my sleep?”

“Could you lift me over this wall?” asked Logan.

Fiau stiffly tilted back as best she could and peered up at Autumn.

“Greetings, Fiau,” called Autumn, waving. “Are you well?”

Fiau regarded her with no discernable reaction.

“I am well,” she said in her whispery voice. She got even thinner and stepped through the gap between the timbers. Logan stepped aside.

“Let me be clear on this,” she whispered. “You desire to be on top of these with Autumn or the other side?”

“The other side,” said Logan. “I daresay Autumn will find her own way down.”

There was a sudden thud and Autumn landed beside Fiau, on the other side of the Wall.

“Here I am,” she said unnecessarily.

“Step onto my hand,” said Fiau, ignoring Autumn.

She bent and laid her hand flat on the ground. Logan stepped onto it and slowly Fiau lifted her hand up then her body extended so Logan was above the top of the timbers of the Wall. Then she stepped through the gap.

“Hold!” exclaimed Logan and Fiau stopped, swaying slightly. “There is something on that stone pillar over there. Could you take me closer?”

“As you desire,” rustled Fiau and stepped over to the pillar.

“What do you see, Logan?” called Autumn.

“There is a big stick on the pillar,” said Logan. “It looks strong enough for you to use as a staff. A moment.”

He reached out and picked it up and examined it.

“This is strange,” he said. “It is a staff. It has been stripped and polished. I wonder where it came from? Catch.”

He tossed the staff down to Autumn and she caught it and examined it herself.

“’Twould appear to be a fine staff and freshly made,” she said. “I wonder how it came to be on top of the pillar? Mayhap someone has crossed this wall recently. Is there anything else up there?”

“Only a small rock,” said Logan, picking it up. “Oh Voqev!”

“What is it?” demanded Autumn.

“’Tis a gift from Mother Midcarn,” said Logan bitterly. “You know what this means, don’t you.”

“She has left a message?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Logan grimly. “Fiau, take me down please.”

Fiau deposited Logan on the ground beside Autumn and he handed her the message.

“The staff is for Autumn,” read Autumn aloud, “to replace the last and the rock is for you, Logan. Mayhap it will help you make your mark in times to come. MM.”

“I just knew this would happen,” said Logan. “As soon as I heard of the forsaken wall I knew this would happen.”

“Clearly it shows you are her favourite,” said Autumn, handing the message back to Logan.

“But what does it mean?” asked Logan.

“What it says, I venture,” said Autumn. “The staff is for me and the rock is for you.”

“That is not what I meant,” said Logan testily. “Be they magic things, you reckon?”

“Mayhap the stone is,” said Autumn, “but I doubt the staff is for we already have Fiau.”

“Have you further need of me, Logan?” asked Fiau.

“No, thank you,” said Logan absently, staring at the small rock in his hand. “No, wait. Can you sense any magic in this staff or this rock?”

“The branch is not of Havildar,” whispered Fiau, passing her long gnarled hand over it. “I feel no magic in it.”

“And the stone?” he asked, holding it out.

“’Tis just a stone,” said Fiau, breaking a tiny piece off the end, “and not much of a stone at that. ’Tis soft and crumbly.”

“So no magic?” asked Logan.

“Who can say?” asked Fiau. “There is no magic I sense but that does not mean there is no magic beyond my senses. These are from the one

who fashioned me?"

"Aye," said Autumn, "or it would appear so."

"The one who fashioned me is learned in much that lies beyond the realm of Havildar," rustled Fiau. "You would be wise to take heed of her."

"That much we know," said Logan. "No matter. Thank you kindly for your aid, Fiau."

Fiau nodded slowly then returned to Logan's staff.

"I wonder what she does in there all day," remarked Autumn.

"She sleeps," said Logan, "or at least that's what she says she does. So, your thoughts?"

"'Twould seem a fine staff," said Autumn, stroking her new staff. "'Tis of a hard wood I have not seen on this island and is smooth to the touch. I will get no splinters from this one, I fancy."

"So you do not think it is anything beyond a staff?" asked Logan.

"Fiau thought not," said Autumn. "Can I see that message again?"

Logan handed it to her.

"You see?" said Autumn, showing it to Logan. "All she says is that this is a staff and it's replacing the one I lost in Schtei. The rock is the more interesting for she has left one of her little riddles."

"Aye," said Logan, "but there is nothing funny about it. Usually she leaves a rather silly joke."

"Mayhap she couldn't think of one this time," said Autumn, inspecting the rock. "Fiau was right though. This rock is soft and crumbly. For certain it cannot be used to build anything for it would fall apart."

"Mayhap it is not a rock," said Logan.

“Mayhap,” said Autumn. “It looks like a rock but that does not mean much.” She licked the rock thoughtfully. “It tastes much like a rock as well. I fancy it will not be good eating.”

“What should I do with it?” asked Logan.

“Keep it safe,” said Autumn, handing it back. “When the time is right doubtless its purpose will become clear. Mother Midcarn always gives gifts in plenty of time.”

“I suppose,” said Logan. He tossed the rock from one hand to the other a couple of times then stuffed it inside the blanket with the rings and coins he carried then gazed suspiciously at the woods that lay the other side of the track. “So, troubles lie ahead, do they? Where be they and what form do they take, I wonder.”

“We shall find out soon enough,” said Autumn. “And mayhap none will eventuate. Mother Midcarn gives these gifts as precautions but there is no certainty we will need to use them.”

“We always have had to so far,” said Logan. “Why should now be any different?”

“I have no answer to that,” said Autumn. “Come, let us concentrate on a different dilemma that is more pressing.”

“Oh what now?” exclaimed Logan. “Do we not have troubles enough?”

“I meant only that we need to decide which way to go,” said Autumn mildly. “Do we follow the track that way or that way or do we ignore the track and head off into the woods?”

“I suggest we go back over the Wall and return to Aferraron,” said Logan. “Mayhap we can visit Mother Midcarn in Gleard and ask her the meaning of the stone.”

“Was that one of your jokes, Logan?” asked Autumn, her eye catching something strange on a branch on a tree just across the track.

“Not really,” said Logan, “although I would be very surprised if you took it seriously.”

“Oh come now,” said Autumn, crossing the track. “You know as well as I do that when we have gifts from Mother Midcarn we always prevail. 'Tis the absence of gifts that is the more worrying.”

“I suppose,” said Logan, following her. “But the gifts make troubles certain whereas when there are no gifts there is likely to be no trouble.”

“You worry too much,” said Autumn, peering at the thing on the branch. “You need to learn to be more accepting and appreciative of what lies around you.” She looked up at Logan and smiled. “You never know, what lies ahead may bring you great pleasure and enjoyment.”

“I doubt it,” said Logan. “Somehow I do not associate those words with Mother Midcarn.”

“No matter,” said Autumn, looking back at the branch. “Come and look at this. 'Tis the strangest insect I have ever seen. 'Tis almost as long as my forearm but thinner than a twig and half its body sits upright on the rest.”

“So it does,” said Logan, also peering at the insect. “And it has no legs on the upright part, just those two feelers. I have never seen the like of it before.”

“Neither have I,” said Autumn. “I wonder if it can change colour as well.” She reached out and poked the insect very gently with the nail of her little finger.

Instantly it reared up and squirted a jet of liquid in her face and she staggered back, both hands clutching at her eyes.

“It burns!” she cried, dropping to her knees. “Oh Vallume, how it burns!”

“Autumn!” shouted Logan, dropping everything in shock. “What is it?”

With a choking gasp Autumn stiffened then moaned and collapsed on the ground.

Chapter Twenty

“Autumn!” cried Logan, dropping to his knees beside her. “Autumn!”

She did not respond, save for a few twitches and a single convulsion.

“Oh Voqev!” exclaimed Logan, his panic rising. He put his hand out nervously and pushed her shoulder. “Autumn?”

She groaned and one hand clutched at the grassy soil beneath her then went limp again.

“Say something, Autumn,” exclaimed Logan, leaning forward to try to look at her face but she lay face down. What little of her face that was not in the grass was covered by her pony tail that lay in an untidy coil like a snake.

Logan put one hand under her hip and the other under her shoulder and heaved her onto her back. He brushed her hair away from her face then recoiled in horror. There was a large purple-black stain over much of her upper face and beneath the liquid her flesh was visibly swelling. A thin trickle of blood from her nose stained her upper lip.

“Oh Voqev, no!” shouted Logan biting his hand in panic. An icy chill ran through his bowels. His heart was pounding and his limbs felt weak and helpless. “I’ve got to get help, I’ve got to get help!”

He jumped up and look around but there was no one in sight. A mindless fever took hold and he began to run, as fast as he could, along the track beside the Wall. Several times he cried “Help! Help me, someone!” but the jungle ignored his pleas.

He must have run a hundred paces or more before his sanity returned. He skidded to a halt.

“No!” he said forcefully and slapped himself several times in the face. “No! This is madness! Think, you damned fool, think! You cannot help her by running away!”

He forced himself to stand still and breathe slowly and deeply as he

had seen Autumn do many times. The pounding in his chest began to subside although his heart still beat fast.

“Five more,” he muttered and willed himself to breathe in deeply five more times, each time letting his breath out slowly. He could feel some strength returning to his limbs and they weren't shaking as much as they had been.

“Good,” he said, feeling the last of his panic ebb away. “Good. Now, fool, think. What would Autumn do if this were the other way around? She would not act like a silly little child, that is for certain. Come on man! Think! What would Autumn do?”

He turned and looked back along the track to where Autumn still lay. A vision of the stain and blood on her face came into his mind. He clapped his hands together in sudden realisation then started running again.

“Yes!” he muttered. “Wash that foulness off! 'Tis the first thing to do then we can see what's what. Mayhap when it is gone she will be herself again.”

He cast around for their water bottle and snatched up a handful of grass. Pouring some water onto the grass he began to gently wipe her face. The blood came off quite easily but the grass stuck to the purple-black stain. She moaned several times and twice tried to push him away but she had no more strength than a grass stalk in her arms. Worryingly there was a wheeze in her throat as she breathed.

“I need some cloth,” muttered Logan, tossing away the grass. He snatched up his blanket and tore a wide strip off the end. This time he poured all the water over Autumn's face and tried to wipe the sticky stuff away with the cloth. A little of the stuff came away. With great trepidation he wiped a little harder then harder still. Her eyes were now so swollen they were closed and where the sticky stuff had come away her flesh was red and raw looking.

He tossed away the dirty strip and tore off another then poured more water over her face.²³ Firmly but as gently as he could, he wiped all

23 It should be remembered that this water bottle was a gift from Mother Midcarn, see

the sticky stuff from her face, her hair coming away from her scalp at the top and sides of her forehead where some of the goo had reached. Then he used the corners of the strip of cloth to get into the creases and folds around her eyes and nose. The entire area was badly swollen and blisters had formed. They were oozing where his rubbing had taken the top skin away.

“Logan!” screamed Autumn suddenly and sat up, throwing him off balance. She looked around blindly, her eyes now completely closed. “Where are you?” Her arms waved around as she tried to find him.

“I’m here, Autumn,” he said, catching her arms. “I’m here.”

“Mizule,” she exclaimed, clasping him tightly. Her body was shaking. “Tis truly you, Logan?”

“Aye, Autumn,” said Logan. “I am here.”

She sighed and went limp in his arms.

“Oh no!” exclaimed Logan. “Do not be dying!” He shook her but her head lolled backwards.

“Voqev, no!” he shouted. “Stop! Think! What would Autumn do?”

He sat there for a few moments trying to get on top of his fear then laid her back on the ground. A thin trickle of blood emerged from her nose and ran across her cheek.

“Blood!” he exclaimed. “Check her heart still beats! Yes!”

He pulled apart the front of her robe and laid his head on her chest. Never having done this before he did not know what to expect but he could hear a rhythmic boom ba-boom although it was not strong and seemed a little irregular.

“Mayhap that was not her heart,” he thought, sitting back on his heels and gazing at her. “Ah, I remember she sometimes holds wrists.” He snatched up her hand and probed the inside of her wrist searching for

The Annals ~ The Fifth Tale, and has an unending supply of fresh water inside.

he knew not what. Then he found a pulsing a little way back from her thumb. It seemed to be much like what he had heard so he kept hold of her wrist and again bent to listen to her chest.

“Good,” he muttered. “Like as not that is her heart for the two beat together. And she still breathes although I do not like that wheezing.”

He sat up again and gazed at Autumn's face. The swelling was, if anything, worse than before and she looked to be unconscious.

“Why is she wheezing?” he wondered. “The stuff was on her upper face and did not go in her mouth. Or did it?”

Urgently he leant forward and pulled Autumn's lower jaw down. He couldn't see any sign of the sticky stuff but was there something dark at the back of her throat? He moved her head from side to side trying to see better but to no avail.

“I'm sorry,” he said to the inert Autumn, “but it has to be done,” then he pushed a finger inside her mouth. She groaned and tried to spit it out. He ignored her and probed deeper. Yes! There was something there. Holding her mouth open with one hand he pushed two fingers deep inside her mouth. Squeezing his fingers together he managed to get a slight grip on the edge of whatever it was and, ever so carefully, pulled it out.

“Pah, 'tis just a leaf,” he muttered inspecting it. “She must have breathed it in when she was lying face down.” He tossed the leaf away and flapped his hand at a couple of adventurous flies that were now inspecting the oozing blisters on her face.

“The swelling is not going down,” he muttered. “Mayhap there is still some of what was in that sticky stuff still on her face. What should I do?”

He leant forward and shook Autumn's shoulder.

“Can you hear me, Autumn?” he asked. “Autumn?”

She did not reply although she did moan. The wheezing sound had

gone, to Logan's slight relief.

"Aghh, you fool," he exclaimed suddenly. "I remember now, she put her hands to her face when that thing squirted her. Mayhap there is some of that stuff on her fingers!"

Quickly he inspected her hands and found more of the goo there. He wiped it away with the cloth. The tips of her fingers and parts of her palms were also swollen and raw.

"You should have thought of that earlier, numbskull," he muttered.

Quickly he checked all around Autumn's face and neck and forearms, including under the edges of her robe and tunic but found no more of the goo.

"Good," he said, sitting back on his heels again. "Now, what would Autumn do about these swellings? Well, she would go into the jungle and find some plant to make a paste, that's what she would do. Then she'd smear it all over. Mayhap even put a binding over but I'll think about that later. What plant would she look for?"

He had no idea.

"Autumn," he said. "I know not if you can hear me but I need a plant to make a paste to put on your swollen face. If you can hear me, tell me what plant to look for?"

"My eyes burn," muttered Autumn, her head flopping to the side.

"Yes," said Logan, bending over her. "What plant can I use to stop the burning?"

"My eyes," muttered Autumn weakly and lifted her hands to her face.

"Best not to do that," said Logan, lifting her hands away. She tried to resist but there was no strength there. Her eyes were now just tiny slits in mountains of puffiness.

"So, 'tis all down to me," muttered Logan, watching her. "'Tis a sad

day for Autumn when it all comes down to me. Fiau, are you there?"

"I am here, Logan," said Fiau materialising beside him. "What ails Autumn?"

"She was squirted in the face by some insect," said Logan. "I have got off all the stuff as best I can but her face still burns and she is badly swollen. Can you help?"

"Alas, I have no skills in these things," said Fiau. "I am but a fallen branch and I have not the lore nor the learning. Let me ask those who surround us."

"You mean there are people here?" asked Logan in surprise. "Where are they?" He looked around but couldn't see anyone.

"There are none of your kind here," whispered Fiau. "Those to whom I refer be the trees and the spirits that dwell within them."

"Oh, right," said Logan jumping up. "Let us ask them then. I should have thought of that myself for it was Awendene who helped Autumn last time she was dying.²⁴ How do we speak to them?"

"You do not," rustled Fiau. "Tree spirits stay well away from your kind for you are cruel to us," and she waved at the tree trunks of the Wall to make her point. "Mayhap they will not even speak to me for I am not of these groves."

"Oh," said Logan, at a loss for words. "Um, well, apologise for us most profusely anyway. And point out it was not Autumn who cut them down."

Fiau blinked her green circled eyes at him slowly then seemed to go into a trance. She stayed like that for some time while Logan tried to

²⁴ See *The Annals ~ The Second Tale*. Autumn was stabbed with a poisoned thorn by Ta'umboq, an augetreinn from the Land of Cysciec. The thorn tried to work its way through Autumn's body to her heart but it was stopped and removed by Khimera, a water naiad, summoned by Awendene, a tree nymph. As a point of reference, Khimera implanted five seeds from a Salodkaja tree in Autumn's belly to trap the thorn and some of the essence of the tree merged with Autumn's essence and increased her strength and flexibility.

comfort Autumn who groaned several times and tossed her head even though she was still not conscious.

"I am returned," said Fiau in a voice like dry twigs in a breeze.

"Will they help us?" asked Logan, looking at her with a mixture of hope and fear in his face.

"Alas, I have not been able to find any," whispered Fiau. "The birds tell me they have gone elsewhere."

"Where?" asked Logan, jumping up. "We will go and find them!"

"They know not," rustled Fiau. "None have been in these parts for many summers."

"Oh Sploop!" snarled Logan. "Now what do I do?"

"I fancy this one needs a covering of bark," whispered Fiau. "Her core is being eaten away."

"What do you mean?" demanded Logan, grabbing Fiau's hand. "Her core?"

"There is no bark here," said Fiau, disentangling Logan's hand and pointing to Autumn's upper face. "This one needs a cooling bark to protect and nourish."

"Oh, is that all?" said Logan heavily. "I know that. I just do not know what to do about it."

"Alas I cannot aid you, Logan," said Fiau. "But 'twould be best if you do something soon to counter the poison that eats her."

"But what?" exclaimed Logan flinging his hands out in his worry and frustration. "'Tis Autumn that has knowledge of these things, not I."

He started to pace, wringing his hands and muttering aimlessly. Then he suddenly stopped and slapped the side of his head.

“You are surely the most lowly of fools, Logan,” he cried. “I need some hamamielis or the like to counter the stuff and help her heal. Now I wager there is no hamamielis around here but has not Autumn oft times spoken of sour and bitter leaves? All I need to do is find something that tastes bitter like hamamielis. Or is it sour? Oh Voqev curse my wretched mind for I cannot remember! Fiau, what does hamamielis taste like? Is it bitter or sour?”²⁵

Fiau just looked at him, the green circles in her eyes spiralling in concern.

“Stupid question,” said Logan heatedly. “You do not eat.”

He went over to a nearby tree and started to bang his head against it.

“What are you doing?” asked Fiau, going to stand next to him.

“Trying to beat some sense into my addled mind,” he said, stopping. “I have to find something to counter the poison that was sprayed ... was sprayed ... counter ... Oh Logan you misbegotten son of a rotting cow turd! You are an idiot!”

He ran over to Autumn and snatched up one of the cloths he'd used to wash Autumn's face. Fiau watched him, her long thin face displaying concern.

“It does not matter if it is bitter or sour!” exclaimed Logan, waving the cloth at her. “I need to counter whatever this is so it just needs to be the opposite!” He licked the cloth and ignored the sharp tingling on his tongue. “’Tis sour, ’tis sour!” and he threw the cloth down and hurried over to the undergrowth. He ran around, snatching leaves from every different plant he could see and stuffing them in his mouth. A short while later he came back shamefaced.

“I have tasted so many they all taste the same now,” he admitted. “I need some cheese to clear my mouth.”

He pulled the remains of their cheese from Autumn's pack and broke off a small piece. He nibbled it then went over to a bush with dark red

²⁵ Technically, acids taste sour and alkalines taste bitter.

berries on it.

“Be slow and careful,” he said to himself. “And taste the cheese after each one so you do not get it wrong. Autumn is depending on you.”

He pulled a leaf from the bush and bit it in half then spat it out.

“Tis sour,” he said to Fiau who was watching him closely. He licked his piece of cheese then spat. “Let me try this.”

He hurried over to another bush that was covered with small but bright yellow flowers. He plucked a single petal and tasted that.

“Hmm,” he said and tasted another. “Yes, this one be bitter but not greatly. I fancy it will take a lot of these. Mayhap there is something stronger.”

He moved further into the jungle and spotted a bush with no flowers but its leaves were dark green and waxy. He broke one in half and tasted it. It was disgustingly bitter. So bitter he screwed up his face and wanted to retch.

“This one,” he muttered and pulled off several handfuls of leaves.

Back beside Autumn he knelt and took a deep breath before stuffing a handful of leaves in his mouth. He fought back his heaving belly and forced himself to chew. Then he spat the mess onto his fingers and gently smeared it over Autumn's eyes.

“Why do you not use two stones?” asked Fiau, watching intently.

“Because I am a fool three times over,” said Logan, cursing himself. “I have seen Autumn make a paste many times with stones and yet I still forgot.”

“That's nice,” muttered Autumn from the depths of her unconsciousness. She rolled her head to one side and the mess of chewed leaves fell off. “Tis cooling.”

“Try to lie still, Autumn,” said Logan, retrieving the mess. He smeared

it over her eyes again and propped her head against her pack. She rolled her head the other way and again the mess fell off.

“Fiau, could you hold her head please?” asked Logan. “When her face is covered I will bind it in place with some of the blanket but I cannot put it on if she keeps moving and letting it fall off.”

Fiau came over and put one hand each side of Autumn's head.

“Thank you,” said Logan.

He got up and found two stones, one fairly flat and the other rounded. He put some of the leaves on the flat stone and ground them into a paste with the other. He did this several times before all the raw swellings on Autumn's face were covered. Then he tore some more strips from his blanket and wrapped them around Autumn's head.

“Now for her hands,” he said and repeated the process, using the last piece of blanket to wrap her hands.

“Thank you Fiau,” he said. “You have been a great help.”

“’Tis my purpose,” said Fiau. “Do you have further need of me?”

“Not for the moment,” said Logan, sitting down and looking wearily at Autumn. He felt drained and empty. The thin trickle of dried blood on Autumn's cheek peeked out from under the bottom strip of cloth.

Fiau reached out and touched Logan on the shoulder.

“I fancy all will be well,” she said. “I know little of the affairs of your kind but like as not this little one has not come this far to only come this far.”

“Thank you, Fiau,” said Logan, touched by her gesture. “You are truly a friend to us.”

Fiau's thin solemn face cracked in what could have been a sympathetic smile then she dissolved back into Logan's staff.

“Aye-yai-yai,” said Logan softly. “Now what to do? We are a long way from anywhere and Autumn is badly sick. I wager she cannot walk for some time yet and for sure not until the swelling of her eyes subsides. We have plenty of water, a little cheese and likely there are some roots in the woods so we could stay here for a while but what if her face worsens? What if those leaves do not help? I am no healer and I know nothing about what I am doing. Mayhap I am just making things worse. What to do, eh? What to do?”

He looked around but there was no sign of the insect that had hurt Autumn, which was just as well for he would have beaten it to a pulp if it was still there even though Autumn did not approve of such things.

“And what does that mean?” he said, catching sight of his staff. “Autumn has not come this far only to come this far? Fiau speaks in riddles.”

Chapter Twenty One

“I wager it would be sensible to carry you back to Hurabid,” said Logan, not knowing if Autumn could hear him. “After all, 'tis the closest place where I know there are people and there may be people there who have experience of this insect. That said, Hurabid be a day away and likely two or three times that for there is no track and I will be carrying you. Mayhap even more for finding Hurabid will be no easy task. 'Tis a small place in a big jungle.”

Autumn moaned and tried feebly to pull the strips of blanket from her face.

“No, do not do that,” cautioned Logan, grasping her hands. They were hot and sweaty and he held them until she relaxed again. He sat and watched her for a few moments but she seemed peaceful.

“Do you sleep, Autumn?” he whispered, “or are you unconscious?” She did not react although her breathing seemed easier. A thread from the edge of a strip of the blanket hung over her nose and fluttered with each breath.

“On the other hand,” he continued, thinking out loud, “there is a track here that runs along the Wall so like as not it leads somewhere where there are people. Kad'idatou said the island be only a day's walk from side to side here so wherever they are they are likely to be closer and the walking will be easier. But what if I find them? Kad'idatou said they be primitive and dangerous so mayhap they will kill us both rather than help. For certain Autumn cannot fight anyone like this. So, what to do? Return to Hurabid and die trying to find it or follow the track and be killed sooner? Aye-yai-yai, Autumn be always saying I have a choice but what kind of choice is this?”

Autumn moaned again and tossed her head from side to side.

“Logan?” she cried in a thin, tremulous voice. “Where are you Logan?”

“I am here, beloved Autumn,” said Logan softly. He stroked the lower part of her cheek below the binding and her face turned towards him.

“Is that you, Logan?” she asked. “’Tis all darkness and I cannot see you.”

“Yes, ’tis me, Logan,” said Logan. “You have been hurt but I am taking care of you. How do you feel?”

“Water,” she muttered and tried to find her lips with her bandaged fingers. “Can I have some water?”

“Yes,” he said, reaching for the water bottle. “But only have a little. Do not gulp.”

Cautiously he tipped the bottle so a thin trickle ran onto her lips. She licked her lips so he gave her a little more.

“Ahh, thank you,” she muttered then threw up a thin bile over her chin. It dribbled onto the top of her tunic and smelt unpleasant. She drifted back into unconsciousness as Logan wiped the bile up as best he could.

“Well, that settles it,” he said. “We cannot stay here. Autumn needs more help than I can give her and I venture sooner rather than later. We will take the track for I know Hurabid be a long way whereas I do not know the people here will kill us. ’Tis a risk but one we have to take.”

He got up and put the things he kept inside his blanket into Autumn’s pack and slung it over his shoulder. He slung the water bottle over the other shoulder then propped the two staffs against a tree. Then he squatted over Autumn and grasped her under her armpits and hauled her to her feet. With an effort he managed to get her over his shoulders.

“How can such a little girl be so heavy?” he muttered, shifting her weight slightly so she was better balanced. “Still, what needs must. She carried me for a night and a day in Neander and now I must do the same.”²⁶

26 See *The Annals ~ The Fifth Tale*. Logan was stung by a scorpion and Autumn carried him through the Sabon Mutum desert, following the tracks left by the caravan of Inyanasi until she caught up with it.

He grasped the staffs in one hand then hesitated for a few moments wondering which way to go.

"I venture to the right," he decided. "We cannot be that far from the sea that way and mayhap there be a village on the coast."

He set off along the track with determination in his heart. Within forty paces he was sweating profusely. A scant thirty paces beyond that he was using both staffs to take some of the effort from his legs. His legs were weak and shaking by the time he'd gone a hundred and fifty paces and there were sharp pains in his calves, buttocks and lower back. Grimly he continued walking, fighting his body for every step taken until after some two hundred and fifty paces even he was forced to give up.

"I curse my body for being weak and useless," he panted after expending the last vestiges of his strength putting Autumn back on the ground without dropping her. He slumped to the ground and contemplated the rivers of sweat dropping from his face in disgust. "I am sorry, Autumn. I simply have not your strength. This will take forever and a day to get anywhere and if I die you will have no one to look after you."

He took a long drink of water then sat massaging his calves, his mind blank.

"'Twould be easy if I had a cart," he thought after a while. "Even if there was no horse I could pull it." He sighed and drank some more water. "But that be just foolish thinking. There is no cart and no chance of finding one here."

He wiped the sweat from his face and poured some of the cool water over his head. It felt good. Autumn stirred so he bent over and poured a little water on her lips. Without waking her tongue licked the water away and he watched carefully but this time she did not throw up. He poured a little more on her lips.

"Hopefully that is a good sign," he muttered. "I wonder if Fiau could help with the carrying?"

He contemplated his staff for a few moments, imagining Fiau, but in truth he could not see her thin twiggy body carrying Autumn for long.

"The staff would be better," he thought. "'Tis a strong staff but one staff on its own will be no use." He drank some more water and gave Autumn a tiny amount as well. Her hands were still hot and sweaty and her hair was damp with sweat as well.

His eyes narrowed as a thought came into his mind.

"One staff be little use," he muttered, "but two? What if I tie them together so Autumn can lie between them? That way mayhap I can drag her for her weight will still be mostly on the ground! 'Twill be like a cart but without wheels! Aye, but what can I tie them together with? There be none of my blanket left and the cord of her robe is nowhere near long enough. Creepers! 'Tis a jungle, there must be some creepers nearby."

He jumped up as best he could, his legs still protesting and went in search of creepers. He returned almost immediately with four, each as thick as his finger. Laying the two staffs on the ground so their tops touched and their bottoms were shoulder width apart he wound the creepers between them and knotted them.

"Aye, that might do the trick," he said jubilantly.

He picked up the narrow end and stuck his head inside so it rested on his shoulders and tried walking with it. It jammed uncomfortably against his throat and made it difficult to breath. He dropped the staffs and loosened the creepers so the ends were further apart. This time his throat remained free but the staff ends kept slipping off his shoulders.

"Vogev curse you both!" he shouted angrily, throwing the staffs on the ground.

He stomped back to where Autumn lay and threw himself on the ground in despair.

"How is it I cannot do what a damned horse can do?" he growled

angrily. "Granted I am not as strong as a horse but they can pull carts without the shafts coming off."

He snatched up the water bottle and drank, all the while staring that the staffs lying on the track not far away.

"Mayhap the deities can count how many kinds of fool you are, Logan," he exclaimed suddenly, "but I cannot for a fool you most certainly are. Horses do not pull a cart with their shoulders! They pull with their chests!"

He jumped up and ran over to the staffs. Yes! If the ends were further apart so they passed each side of his waist and hung from a creeper over his shoulders that would surely work!

He dashed back into the jungle and returned with more creepers. Hurriedly he reworked the staffs and slipped the carrying creeper over his shoulders. It worked, after a fashion, so he used another creeper to tie the ends together around his waist. That way his shoulders kept the stretcher off the ground and he could pull it with his belly.

Proudly he carried it back to Autumn, wishing she was awake and could see it.

"You still be a fool, Logan," he laughed. "Is she be able to see it you wouldn't be needing it."

He put the stretcher on the ground beside her then lifted her shoulders and chest onto it. Then he stepped back and cursed before lifting her off again and turning the stretcher around.

"Don't want her head dragging in the dirt," he muttered and pushed her hips and legs onto the stretcher. She muttered and weakly tried to climb off again so he used the last of his creepers to tie her to the staffs.

"Right," he muttered, going to the head of the stretcher. "Let's have another go." He squatted down and slipped the carry creeper over his head and settled it on his shoulders, checking the waist creeper was in front not behind.

“Sploop!” he muttered, standing up. “’Tis easier but not by as much as I hoped. No matter. Do or die, Logan, do or die. Autumn depends on you.”

* * *

“Pylwynnd na bistwyth?”

Astauand was mid way down when the voice spoke. Logan was so exhausted he continued plodding with his eyes shut, the strange words just another jungle noise. It was several moments before his mind was able to summon sufficient fortitude to notice the translation his necklace put inside it; “What are you doing?”

Logan plodded on, his body wracked with pain, the stretcher scraping noisily behind him, too tired to do much beyond continue. He would have walked into the man standing in the middle of the track had not the man stepped aside and put his hand on Logan’s shoulder.

“What are you doing?” he asked again.

“What?” muttered Logan, barely realising he was there. He shrugged the man’s hand off and kept plodding forward.

“I asked what you are doing, stranger,” said the man, walking beside him.

“Leave me alone,” gasped Logan, “I must save Autumn.”

“Oh,” said the man. He stopped walking and let the stretcher draw level. To his surprise what had looked like bundles of cloth-wrapped things was actually a body. He kept pace with Logan for a few steps, studying what was on the stretcher then caught him up.

“Stop your walking, stranger,” he said, putting his hand on Logan’s arm. “Let me carry it for a while.”

“What?” asked Logan, unable to comprehend. He plodded on, lost in his own private oblivion.

The man jumped in front of Logan and made him stop. Logan just stared at him blankly, unable to come to terms with the fact that he'd actually found someone.

"You are at your limit," said the man, not unkindly. "Put this thing down and let me carry it. My home be not far away."

He pushed down on Logan's shoulder and, too exhausted to resist, Logan collapsed onto his knees. The man lifted the stretcher from his shoulders and put the creeper around his own.

"Follow me, if you can, boy," he said. "If you can't then stay here and I shall return for you."

He marched off along the track, dragging the stretcher behind him. After a short distance he left the track and disappeared into the jungle.

"What?" thought Logan, still on his knees. He blinked several times then the awful truth dawned on him. Someone had stolen Autumn!

"Stop!" he shouted, forcing himself to his feet. "Bring her back!"

There wasn't even an echo. The jungle simply ignored him as he fell to his knees again then fell forward.

* * *

Logan stirred then opened his eyes lazily then closed them again. Moments later they snapped open, this time wide.

"Autumn!" he called, his throat dry and raspy. "Where are you?"

He tried to get up and found he was wrapped in something. By the time he'd disentangled himself a woman was kneeling beside him.

"So, you are awake at last," she said. "I was beginning to think you be dead but not yet departed." She laughed and held out half a coconut husk. "Drink some of this."

"Where is Autumn?" croaked Logan, staring wildly at her.

"She be right there," said the woman, nodding her head sideways. "Still be asleep though."

Logan scrambled from his bed and over to Autumn. The bandages around her head had been changed and the rest of her was wrapped in a coarsely woven blanket but her mouth and hair were clearly her own. More importantly she was breathing, calmly and evenly.

"Happy now?" asked the woman.

"Aye," said Logan, twisting round so he could see her without leaving Autumn's side. "Who are you?"

"I be Myri," said Myri. "Her be Autumn or so Nacsyn said. Who be you?"

"Oh, ah, my name is Logan," said Logan. "Is Autumn all right?"

"Only time will tell," said Myri. "Come, drink. You have slept all last evening, all night and part of the day. I venture you were exhausted so drink. This will help bring your strength back."

"What is it?" asked Logan suspiciously.

"Tis not a poison," laughed Myri. "If we be wanting you dead we'd have left you on the road or killed you while you slept. Drink."

Logan thought this over for a few moments then took the husk and sniffed. It smelt of vegetables.

"You be an untrusting little bugger," said Myri, raising an eyebrow. "But then, you be from up there so can't say as I blame you. 'Tis a soup with four kinds of vegetables in it. 'Twill nourish you even though it be cold now."

"I am sorry," said Logan. He looked down at Autumn again. "A gift given freely is most precious. I thank you for your food and for helping us."

“Aye, so you do have some manners after all,” said Myri watching him start to drink. “Mayhap we won’t be killing you after all.”

Logan spluttered and little droplets of soup went flying.

“I am jesting with you,” said Myri laughing. “Drink up for I hear Nacsyn returning.”

She got up and went out through a doorway and disappeared into the brightness outside. Logan finished the soup and put the husk on the ground. He noticed it was sandy.

“Are you asleep, Autumn?” he whispered.

Her head twisted slightly as if to show she’d heard his voice but she made no sound.

“I will be back shortly,” whispered Logan. “I am going to speak with these people and find out what’s what.”

She didn’t react so he squeezed her shoulder gently then stood up and slowly went outside for he ached abominably and his limbs were stiff

“Myri told me you were awake,” said a tall, broad shouldered man with a definite belly. “Sit yourself down. Remember me?”

“I do not,” said Logan, sitting on a sawn-off piece of tree trunk beside Nacsyn. The day was bright and clear and a little way distant the blue sea washed up and down a silvery beach. “Are you Nacsyn? Have we met before?”

“I am and we have” said Nacsyn. “Myri you have met already. She be my better half. Your name is Logan?”

“Aye,” said Logan.

“And the maid inside be Autumn?” he asked.

“Aye,” said Logan.

“They be strange names,” said Nacsyn, “but no matter. Truly you do not remember me?”

“I am sorry, but no,” said Logan. “Umm, remind me.”

“’Twas me who found you on the road yesterday,” said Nacsyn. “You were far gone so I am not overly surprised you do not remember me. I took that contraption from you and brought the maid here. When you did not follow I returned and found you collapsed so I carried you here as well.”

“I thank you,” said Logan. “I confess I have little memory of yesterday.”

“So what happened?” asked Nacsyn. “’Tis obvious what happened to Autumn but why are you here and how is it she is still alive? Are you a healer?”

“Alas no,” said Logan. “I wish that I were but I am not. Is she going to be well again.”

“More or less,” said Nacsyn, “but you do not say why you are here in the first place. Clearly you are not one of us.”

“I do not know who ‘us’ is,” said Logan, “but Autumn and I are travellers from Aferraron. We came over to Danornor and yesterday we crossed the Wall of Loriki and were almost immediately struck by misfortune.”

“Clearly,” said Nacsyn, “and to be hit in the eyes is unfortunate indeed, but still you do not say why you are here. We call it the Wall of Duw and it is there for a purpose.”

“I imagine to keep people like us out,” said Logan tiredly. “I can only apologise for intruding but we travel in search of knowledge of the world and we heard tales of what lay beyond the Wall of Lo ... Duw that intrigued us. If you like we will return to the other side as soon as Autumn is able.”

“Well, that is out of my hands,” said Nacsyn. “I sent my son in the

boat to Ynyncc with word of your arrival and doubtless he will be there soon. You are free to come and go as you please for you are not prisoners here but be assured that someone will arrive from Ynyncc in a few days to decide what to do with you."

"Ahh," said Logan. "Have we broken a law then?"

"'Tis merely a custom," said Nacsyn. He smiled. "If you are not here when this person arrives no one will come searching for you. We are not a cruel people."

"That is good to know," said Logan. He eased his aching shoulders. "Will Autumn be able to travel tomorrow?"

"Certainly," said Nacsyn. "She was able to travel yesterday. The real question is will you be able to carry her for she will not be able to walk on her own."

"Ah," said Logan. "That wasn't really what I meant. I meant will she still be ill tomorrow. I venture you know what happened to her?"

"'Twas obvious as soon as I removed her bindings," said Myri. "She was squirted by a seskyvi."

"That be one of those long thin insects with a long bent neck?" asked Logan.

"Yes," said Nacsyn. "Did you apply the taree paste?"

"Um, yes," said Logan.

"You did well to choose that bush," said Myri. "'Tis the only one strong enough to counter the squirt of the seskyvi."

"So Autumn will recover?" asked Logan anxiously.

"Aye," said Nacsyn. "Twill take a few days for the squirt makes the mind go funny for a while but the swelling will go down and the blisters heal. Had you not applied the paste quickly all her skin would have burnt off and she would have died."

“Died?” exclaimed Logan in alarm. “Oh Voqev!”

“But she will live,” said Myri. “If she were going to die she would have yesterday for the stuff is fairly fast. 'Tis a shame she was squirted in the eyes though.”

“Why is that?” asked Logan, freezing.

“Oh, she be blinded,” said Myri. “'Tis a shame she be so young. Pretty too I shouldn't wonder.”

Chapter Twenty Two

“Blinded?” said Logan, frowning at Myri. “What do you mean blinded?”

“Her eyes are dead,” said Myri. “She will not see again.”

“Oh,” said Logan as an emptiness opened up in his belly. “But only for a few days, yes? You said she will be well in a few days. She just needs a little time to recover, does she not?”

“Sadly no, Logan,” said Myri, reaching out to touch Logan’s arm sympathetically but he jerked his arm away. “She will not get her eyes back.”

“What, never?” said Logan, his voice taut. He stared at Myri trying to will her to say she was only joking or something.

“Never is a long time,” she said. “What will happen to Autumn in the next life is between her and Yammoe or Zeeth but she will not see again in this lifetime.”

“No!” shouted Logan. “No, no, no!” He jumped up and balled his fists. “You lie! Just because we are strangers here! What is it you are really after, eh? Money? You want money?” He grabbed Autumn’s pack and flung the contents on the ground in front of Myri. “Here is money! And rings! Take them, take everything only do not try to tell me Autumn will never see again!”

“Calm yourself,” demanded Nacsyn, also jumping up in case Logan tried to hit Myri. “Shouting will not change anything.” He grabbed Logan’s arms and held them tightly. “Come, sit down. You will not be of any use to Autumn until you are calm again.”

“How can I be calm?” shouted Logan, beginning to rage as fear swept over him and drowned out his mind. “You are telling me Autumn will never see again! What kind of cruel madness is this? Get away from me, you bastard!” He tried to kick Nacsyn but Nacsyn stepped forward and pushed him off balance.

“Please, calm yourself Logan,” he said quietly. “You are not helping anyone like this.”

Autumn began to whimper and thrash around, tossing her head from side to side.

“Myri, tend her,” said Nacsyn, not noticing Myri had already gone to Autumn's side. He kept hold of Logan and shook him. “Logan!” he said loudly. “Logan!”

“You did this to her!” shouted Logan, twisting violently. “I will kill you for this!” He managed to break Nacsyn's grip and lashed out blindly, catching him on his shoulder.

Nacsyn let go of Logan's other arm and held up his hands placatingly.

“Logan!” shouted Myri from beside Autumn. “Stop this! Autumn is calling for you!”

“Your woman needs you,” said Nacsyn, watching Logan very carefully.

“Autumn?” cried Logan, pushing Myri out of the way. He dropped to his knees and picked up Autumn's hand. “I am here, Autumn, I am here.”

“Is that you, Logan?” croaked Autumn, turning her head towards his voice. She coughed and some phlegm appeared at the corner of her mouth.

“I am here,” he said as Myri backed away to stand beside Nacsyn. “I am here, Autumn.” He wiped away the phlegm with the sleeve of his tunic. “How are you?”

“Better now I know you are here,” she said, her voice less croaky. She squeezed his hand tightly. “I have been having such strange dreams!”

“They are only dreams,” said Logan softly. “I am here to look after you.”

“That is good,” said Autumn weakly. “Now you are with me I think I

will go back to sleep. I am so tired, so very tired.” She smiled and patted his chest.

“Yes, Autumn,” said Logan, stroking her head above the bandages. “Sleep is good. Sleep all you can and you will feel better.”

“Aye,” she said very quietly. “I will see you in the morning.”

“Oh Autumn,” whispered Logan, his tears beginning to fall. “Oh Autumn!”

Autumn's head lolled back as she drifted off into whatever dreams were still yet to play themselves out.

“Give him some space,” whispered Myri. “He will need some time to come to terms with this.” She tugged Nacsyn's hand and they both backed quietly away.

* * *

“Ah, there you are,” said Logan some time later. “I have been looking for you.”

“And now you have found us,” said Nacsyn, looking up.

He and Myri were sitting on the beach some way away from their dwelling making repairs to some netting.

“I, ahh, well, I wanted to apologise,” said Logan, going over to where they sat.

“No need,” said Nacsyn as Myri studied Logan. He looked drawn and haggard but seemed calm enough. “This has been a bad time for you.”

“Aye,” said Logan. He looked from Nacsyn to Myri and back a few times. “Umm, may I sit with you?”

“Certainly,” said Nacsyn, “but stay clear of the netting.”

“Aye,” said Logan absently. “So you be fisherfolk?”

“No,” said Nacsyn. “This be to keep the birds off the little 'uns.”

“Ah, right,” said Logan, not really listening. He sat down and stared at the sand.

“So how be the maid?” asked Myri.

“Autumn?” said Logan, looking up. “Oh she sleeps again.” He gave Nacsyn a sidelong look. “I, um, I did not mean to call you a bastard, Nacsyn.”

“I know,” said Nacsyn. “Do not bother yourself with that.”

“And I know you did not do this to her,” Logan continued. “I, ah, went a little doolally in the head. I am sorry.”

“Bad news can do that,” said Nacsyn. He paused in his tying of knots and gave Logan a long look. “You are no longer doolally?”

“No, I don't think so,” said Logan. “I am just incredibly sad.” He picked up a handful of sand and let it slowly dribble through his fingers.

“You need to be strong,” said Myri. “Autumn will have great need of you in the days to come.”

“Aye,” said Logan, watching the sand dribble. He looked up and saw they were both watching him. “Do not worry, I will not abandon her. I will never abandon her.”

“Good,” said Nacsyn. “She is young and doubtless has a long life ahead of her, as do you. 'Tis not the end of the world for either of you.”

“I suppose,” said Logan, “although everything has changed.” He stared out to sea for a while. “I had always thought Autumn was invincible and now it turns out she isn't. 'Tis funny in a way that such a small creature was her undoing.” He sighed. “What does she dream of?”

“No idea,” said Myri. “I have only known one other who was squirted

by a seskyvi although such a thing happens from time to time. He said his dreams were fantastically strange and terrifyingly wondrous but they did not last long. Three days, four at most then they ended.”

“Was he blinded too?” asked Logan.

“No, he was squirted on the leg,” said Nacsyn. “He swelled up and blistered like Autumn but they healed in time. Do not blame yourself, Logan. You did the right thing with the taree paste and dragging her for half a day was a mighty feat in itself. You were far gone when I found you.”

“Ahh well, what else could I do?” asked Logan doubtfully. “I could not abandon her, could I?”

“Of course not,” said Myri briskly.

“I have seen blind people,” said Logan, not really listening. “They seem to manage.”

“As we all do when afflicted with something,” said Myri. “As you yourself said, what else can you do? You either make the most of it or abandon life itself. Doubtless Autumn is strong in her mind or she would not have been travelling.”

“Autumn?” said Logan absently. “Aye, she has the strongest mind I have ever seen. She stood up to Yammoe once to save me, even though she was scared witless.”²⁷

Nacsyn and Myri exchange glances but did not comment. Clearly Logan was not thinking straight yet.

“When I was young, before I came here,” said Nacsyn after a few moments of silence, “I knew a man who had lost both his legs in an accident. He managed. 'Twas not easy for him but he managed. Probably still alive although this was many summers ago.”

“Oh yes?” said Logan. He let another handful of sand dribble between

27 See *The Annals ~ The First Tale*. Logan was accidentally killed by an arrow and Autumn went into the Land of the Undead to win him back from Yammoe.

his fingers as the silence grew.

“And you, Logan?” asked Myri after a while. “How are you holding up?”

“I ... do not know,” said Logan. He sighed. “Tell me true. Are all who are squirted in the eyes blinded? Has no one ever kept their seeing?”

“Mayhap some have,” said Myri. “None that I know of, I confess, but then I do not know many people. Mayhap your Autumn will be one whose seeing will come back.”

“Do not be giving Logan false hope,” said Nacsyn. “I have never heard of any keep their sight, save Tailo and only then because he was squirted in one eye. He kept his seeing in the other one.”

“You are going to need to be strong, Logan,” said Myri. “You have a day, mayhap two to come to terms with this then Autumn is going to stop sleeping. However bad this is for you it will be worse for her for she is the one who is afflicted and someone is going to have to explain that to her.”

“Oh,” said Logan flatly.

“Nacsyn or I can tell her,” continued Myri, “although I wager it would be best coming from you. Doubtless she trusts you or you would not be travelling together.”

“Aye,” said Logan quietly. “She trusts me. Mayhap she will not after this, who knows. Yes, I will tell her although how I cannot begin to think.”

“I am not skilled in the bearing of bad news,” said Nacsyn, “but I venture the best way be simple and direct. Once it is in the open then there can be explanations and discussions but to beat around the bush and try to hide what will only have to be unhidden will make things worse.”

“Mayhap,” said Logan. “I will think on it anyway. If you will excuse me I think I will go and check on Autumn and then try to get some sleep

myself. I feel like I have been turned inside out and stretched on a rack to dry.”

* * *

“How is Autumn?” asked Myri when Logan appeared on the beach.

“The swelling around her eyes is almost gone now,” said Logan, “and the rest of her face is looking much as it used to. She still sleeps but I don't think she is having those dreams anymore.”

“That is quick,” said Myri in surprise. “Tis only the end of the second day. She must be a very strong girl. Mayhap it is all the care you have lavished on her.”

“Aye, she is very strong,” said Logan. “Where is Nacsyn?”

“He is off at the next beach,” said Myri. “Tis the laying season. Would you like some food?”

“Oh, no thank you,” said Logan. “I will eat when you and Nacsyn do, if that sits well with you.”

“As you wish,” said Myri. “You look tired.”

“I have not been sleeping well,” confessed Logan. “I am worried about Autumn.”

“Which does you credit,” said Myri, “but you cannot look after her if you neglect yourself.”

“True enough,” said Logan. He sat down near where Myri sat. “I would also apologise for my rudeness in not asking after you and Nacsyn. We have been here two days and you have helped us greatly but I know nothing of you and your lives.”

Myri laughed. “And why would you ask things like that? You have had much on your mind and we are not interesting people.”

“Everyone is interesting in their own way,” said Logan. “There is no

one here except you and Nacsyn?”

“There is our son, Jyrif,” said Myri. “He is in Ynyncc at the moment, delivering word of you and Autumn. Do you not remember Nacsyn telling you this?”

“I do now,” said Logan, “although I had forgotten. Remind me, why did you send Jyrif there?”

“You be from outside,” said Myri. “Tis one of our tasks to send word of outsiders.”

“You mean from the other side of the Wall of Loriki?” asked Logan.

“We call it the Wall of Duw,” said Myri, “but yes.”

“Who or what is Duw?” asked Logan. “I have never heard that name before.”

“Duw is our protector,” said Myri.

“You mean like a deity?” asked Logan.

“No, not like a deity,” said Myri with a smile. “Duw is our deity.”

“Ahh,” said Logan. “Right, I see. And Ynyncc? It is a deity as well?”

“No, Ynyncc be the main town,” said Myri. “You do not know much, do you.”

“No, I know very little,” said Logan. “Does Duw dwell in Ynyncc?”

“Oh Duw bless you lad,” laughed Myri. “Deities be not dwelling in towns. Duw lives in Dwre and I daresay you have never heard of that either.”

Logan shook his head.

“You see them mountains back there?” said Myri, jerking her thumb over her shoulder. “They be the C'tan Peaks and Dwre be the highest

of them. Ynyncc be but a day's walk from Dwre or so I'm told. I've never been there."

"So Ynyncc and Dwre be to the south west of here?" asked Logan, getting up to look at the low mountains that were some way inland.

"Probably," said Myri. "I never did get the hang of this north south stuff."

"So where are you from then, Myri?" asked Logan.

"The other side," she said. "Both of us. The land the other side is flat and good for farming whereas this side is mostly jungle."

"So why are you here then?" asked Logan. "Wouldn't the other side have been better?"

"Depends what you mean by better," said Myri with a laugh. "If you like ploughing and weeding then probably but we don't, you see. That is back breaking work and we like the easy life."

"So what do you do here?" asked Logan. "Surely you still need to grow food?"

"Aye, but enough only for the three of us," said Myri. "We keep a small stretch cleared and plant things but it isn't a lot of effort for everything grows this side."

"Ahh, so that's what the nets are for," said Logan, nodding. "To keep the birds off your crops."

"Not at all," said Myri. "They're to keep the birds off the eggs."

"Eggs?" said Logan in surprise. "You keep chickens? I thought you only ate vegetables."

"We do only eat vegetables," said Myri. "The eggs are turtle eggs."

"Now I am completely lost," said Logan. "You grow turtles but you only eat vegetables?"

“That's why we are here,” said Myri, “that and the Wall of course.”

“I am none the wiser,” said Logan, scratching his head. “What have turtles to do with the Wall?”

“Very little and a great deal,” said Myri mischievously and slapped her thigh in amusement. “I suppose you'd like me to explain?”

“If it is not asking too much,” said Logan.

“You know we are the Crwban people,” said Myri, “which ...”

“I did not know that either,” admitted Logan. “I know very little of what lies beyond the Wall which is why me and Autumn came here.”

“Well, I suppose there is some sense in that,” said Myri, “although most people be staying away from what they know little of. Anyway, Crwban also means turtle in our tongue so we are the People of the Turtles.” She paused and frowned. “Just a moment, if you know little of this side of the Wall how is it you can speak our language?”

“Ahh,” said Logan, taken by surprise. “Umm, well, that's a rather difficult question to answer.”

“Try anyway,” said Myri. “For I have been thinking there is more to you both than meets the eye.”

“Why would you think that?” asked Logan.

“Don't change the subject,” she said. “You were telling me how you know our language.”

“I don't,” said Logan. “You see this necklace?” and he touched the necklace around his neck.

“I see it,” said Myri.

“Well, it was given to me by a sorcerer,” said Logan. “It lets me understand what you say even though I do not speak your language and also lets you understand me when I talk to you in my own

language.”

Myri stared at him.

“You speak true?” she asked. “That little thing lets you know what I am saying?”

“Yes,” said Logan.

“Well, Duw be praised,” she said. “’Twould seem a most miraculous thing. How does it work?”

“I have no idea,” said Logan. “All I know is it works only for me. If someone else wears it it is just another necklace and will not work for them.”

“So likely you be full of shit then,” said Myri laughing uproariously. “Ahh whatever. If you won’t tell me you won’t tell me. Makes no never mind to me. What was I talking about?”

“The Crwban People,” said Logan.

“Oh yes, that’s right,” said Myri. “Nacsyn and me be here on the one hand to look after the turtles and on the other hand to keep an eye on the Wall. Two or three times each summer Nacsyn walks the length of the Wall and sends back to Ynyncc if there be any repairs needing.”

“Ahh, so that explains why the Wall is so well kept,” said Logan. “What do you mean ‘look after the turtles’? Can’t turtles look after themselves?”

“These few beaches hereabouts be where they lay their eggs,” said Myri. “When Plakill and Plifal be right they come up on the beaches and digs holes in the sand during the night. Come the morning the birds come along to eat the eggs.”

“Ahh, so you lay out nets to stop the birds doing that?” asked Logan.

“That’s right,” said Myri. “Quite a few summers back the turtles almost disappeared because the birds were eating all their eggs so

Yufsad was sent to stop them. When he became old Nacsyn said he'd do it and I came with him. We also tend any turtles that are sick or injured."

"That is a very noble thing," said Logan. "You must like turtles very much."

"Aye, they be interesting little creatures," said Myri. "Fascinating in their own way. There are four that have been coming to this very beach to lay every summer since before Yufsad first arrived. He said that they were the only ones left back then. Of course there are a hundred or more now, mayhap even two hundred and they are laying along four beaches. We like to think of this place as a sanctuary for turtles. After all, there isn't much point in being the People of the Turtles if there are no turtles."

"Well, no," said Logan. "So is Duw a turtle as well?"

"Can't rightly say," said Myri, "seeing as how I've never seen It."

"Has anyone?" asked Logan.

"Some I daresay," said Myri, "but none have ever come back to tell us about It."

Chapter Twenty Three

“Arghhhhh,” said Autumn, rather throatily. She coughed to clear her throat then stretched her arms out.

Logan jerked from the light doze he'd fallen into at Autumn's side and scrambled to his knees. It was still day although the shadow of the awning over them now extended appreciably beyond the opening.

“Autumn?” he whispered. “Are you awake?”

“Aye,” she said, her face turning towards him. “Where are you?”

“I am here,” he said as she brought both hands up to touch her face.

“Ahh,” she muttered. “That explains much. 'Tis too warm for night yet everything is dark. Logan?”

“You have been hurt,” said Logan, watching carefully in case Autumn tried to pull the bandages off. “There are coverings on your face. Please do not try to take them off.”

“'Tis good to hear your voice again, Logan,” said Autumn. “There have been others clamouring for my attention but they have stopped. Who were they and where are they now?”

Her hands dropped from her face and started to move around her body.

“They are Nacsyn and Myri,” said Logan. “They helped us and they are about their business on the beach. They have not been clamouring though. They have left you alone mostly.”

“Only two?” asked Autumn, her voice sounding puzzled. “It sounded like many more but they were behind me and would not come forward. Can I have some water?”

“Of course,” said Logan, reaching for the water bottle. He tipped a little onto Autumn's lips and she grasped the bottle with her hands and took a long deep drink.

“Ahh, that is better,” she said, letting him take the bottle away. “I have been so dry since the fire. How long have I been asleep?”

“More than three days and nights,” said Logan. “There has been no fire.”

“Three days?” said Autumn. “You mean it has been three days since the fire? Was I burnt?”

“What fire?” asked Logan.

Autumn sat up and twisted her legs underneath her so she was in her usual cross legged position although her feet were under her knees rather than on top.

“I distinctly remember a fire,” she said thoughtfully. “You were beside me and we were looking at a tree and it caught fire for some reason I know not. The fire surrounded me and I felt its heat on my face and hands and smelt the burning wood and the sounds of trees falling and crackling with the flames. I remember the acrid taste of the smoke in my throat. Did you escape unharmed?”

“There was no fire,” said Logan. “You were squirted in the face by an insect.”

“This is one of your jokes, Logan?” she asked.

“No, definitely not,” said Logan. “I wager the burning you remember was the insect’s liquid on your face and hands for it caused much swelling and blistering.”

He wondered if he should tell her of the likelihood of blindness but decided it could wait. After all, there was still Mother Midcarn’s gift.

“I see,” said Autumn. She thought for some moments. “That would explain the strange events after the fire. Three days? It did not seem that long.”

“What strange events?” asked Logan.

"I am not certain," said Autumn. "Can I have some more water?"

"Certainly," said Logan, putting the water bottle in her hand. "Would you like something to eat?"

"If there is food to spare," said Autumn. "There is a rumbling in my belly."

She drank another mouthful of water then felt the sand before putting the bottle down.

"There is some fried doyta," said Logan. "It was cooked not long ago but it is probably cold by now."

"That would be nice, thank you," said Autumn. "Is my face badly burned?"

"It was but I found some bitter tasting leaves and made a paste from them," said Logan, pulling the coconut husk of doyta closer. "It seemed to help and I have been putting it on fresh three times each day. The swellings and inflammation have been going down and the blisters are healing well."

"Ahh, that is good of you, Logan," said Autumn, touching her face again. "My hands were also burnt? I can feel the roughness of the skin."

"Yes but not badly," said Logan. "I kept them covered for a while but there seemed little need. Here is some doyta." He put a piece in Autumn's hand and she felt it with both hands before raising it to her mouth. She forced herself to chew slowly despite her ravening hunger.

"That was good," she said when she finished it. "Is there more?"

"Plenty," said Logan. "Here."

He gave her another piece and she ate that as well.

"I have been trying to remember," she said. "Many things seemed to be happening at the same time but I think I fell asleep after the fire

although I have no memory of it ending. I have a strong memory of floating along a covered pathway with silent people going past, all dim and shadowy. There were some I remember who were walking upside-down on the top of the covering which seems most strange now but at the time seemed quite normal. Then the covering went away and there was clear sky above me. Then the spiders came.”

“Spiders? What spiders?” asked Logan, alarmed.

“I know not what sort of spiders they were,” said Autumn between mouthfuls. “But they were many colours and they fell from the sky and ran all over me. The tickling was very bad but I could not scratch. I remember one went in my mouth and I bit it and it tasted sweet, like fruit. Oh, and I remember being surrounded by tall trees which started to melt and form puddles at my feet. There was something else after that but I cannot remember what it was. Then the voices began. There were some people behind me talking loudly although I could only make out some of the words but it sounded like a discussion at my Esysup although something was stopping me from turning around to join in. Oh, they were discussing the meaning of some verses but what verses I do not know. I know only that they had the sound of verses. ’Twas all very strange. Three days, eh?”

“Yes, three days,” said Logan. “I wager you were imagining these things for you have been lying here for most of those three days.”

“Where is here?” asked Autumn. “Can I have another piece of doyta?”

“Help yourself,” said Logan, pushing the husk closer then he cursed himself silently and put the husk on Autumn's lap.

“We are at the dwelling of Nacsyn and Myri,” said Logan. “’Tis on the beach a little way past the Wall.”

“Ahh, yes, I remember the Wall,” said Autumn, her fingers selecting another piece of food. “So this insect was just after we crossed?”

“Aye,” said Logan.

“How did I get here?” she asked.

"I carried you," said Logan. "Umm, ..."

"I hear some distress in your voice, Logan," said Autumn. She reached out searchingly to touch him and he took her hand. "Did you suffer greatly in carrying me?"

"No, not greatly," said Logan. "I used our staffs to make a bed and dragged you. No, 'tis more about the insect that did this to you."

"Did you kill it?" asked Autumn. "I hope you did not for it was only protecting itself but I can understand if you did."

"No, I did not kill it," said Logan. "I thought only of aiding you and it went away. There is something else I must tell you."

"And what is that?" asked Autumn when he paused.

"Nacsyn and Myri have told me of this insect," said Logan, his voice beginning to quiver. "It is well known to them and its squirt is, well, it burns what it touches and some have died from not receiving aid in time."

"Ahh," said Autumn.

"And, well, there is, umm, something you need to know," said Logan miserably.

"Something that is causing you distress?" asked Autumn. "It cannot be that I am dead for I do not feel dead and 'twould seem that you gave me aid quickly. For that I thank you, Logan my friend. I thank you greatly."

She squeezed his hand but did not let go.

"Um, well, it is like this," stammered Logan, his distress worsening. "Umm, ..."

"I am blind?" asked Autumn, calmly.

Logan gawped at her. "How, ... how ...?"

“How do I know I am blind?” asked Autumn. She squeezed his hand again.

“Yes,” said Logan then added hurriedly “although that is not certain. You still have the coverings on and Nacsyn and Myri could easily be wrong about it. Mayhap you will be able to see when we take off the covering and there is still Mother Midcarn's gift.”

“All things are possible,” said Autumn. “Although as Nacsyn and Myri live here they are no doubt aware of the consequences of this insect. Mayhap they are wrong but probably not. No, I started to wonder when I found I could not see even a glimmer of light through these coverings even though they are not thick and it is still day. Eyes are very sensitive things and all sorts of things can leave people blind. A blow to the head, sickness. It does not surprise me an insect that squirts liquid fire can cause blindness.”

“How long have you known?” asked Logan.

“I did not know until now,” said Autumn, “although I had suspicions. Indeed I still do not know for I only have the word of others. I venture 'tis time to take the covering off and find out for certain.”

“Do you think that is wise?” asked Logan.

“When did you last apply fresh paste and change the covering?” asked Autumn.

“'Twas when Astauand was coming to Its peak,” said Logan, emotions tumbling over themselves inside his head for he had built himself up to telling Autumn only for her to already know. It was confusing, to say the least.

“And where is Astauand now?” asked Autumn.

“More than half way down from Its peak,” said Logan, peering out from under the awning.

“Then 'tis almost time to renew the paste,” said Autumn. “This time you can tell me what you see. Mayhap there is no further need for

covering or paste. There always come a time when wounds must be left alone to finish their healing.”

“Umm, are you sure?” asked Logan.

“Of course I am sure,” said Autumn. “I have some skills in healing do I not?”

“No, I meant, umm, oh I don't know what I meant,” exclaimed Logan.

“Did you mean am I sure I want to know?” asked Autumn, still holding Logan's hand.

“I suppose ... oh, I do not think I would want to know if it were me,” said Logan. He gave a grim little laugh of self disgust. “I would be too scared.”

“Ahh Logan,” said Autumn. “In that we are different. I need to know and sooner rather than later.”

“Are you not scared?” he asked.

“Of course I am scared,” said Autumn softly. “The thought of being unable to see fills me with horror but the sooner I know for certain the sooner I can come to terms with it. Besides,” and she put her other hand on Logan's as well, “as long as you hold my hand and I can feel you here with me I will not be frightened. If I am to be blind then I know of no one better to be my eyes for me.”

“Oh Autumn,” said Logan and burst into tears.

“Hush now, Logan,” said Autumn, sliding one hand up his arm to find his head then cradling it to her. “Hush now. All will be well. Doubtless Mother Midcarn's gift was intended for this. Come, let us take these coverings off and we will see what we will see.”

“I'm sorry,” said Logan jerking his head away a few moments later. “'Tis you who may be blind and yet 'tis me who is carrying on like a big baby. Let's get this done.”

“You are not a big baby,” said Autumn firmly. “You only prove yet again something I have known for some time.”

“And what is that?” asked Logan, hesitating before he undid the first of the strips around her head.

“That you care more about me than I do myself,” said Autumn. She raised his hand to her lips and kissed it.

“Well, that is not difficult,” said Logan, trying to make light of it. “Even that piece of doyta cares more for you than you do.”

“Was that a joke?” she asked. “It has the feel of a joke, I think.”

“More than likely,” said Logan. “I don’t really know what I am saying. Let’s get this covering off.”

Logan removed the strips of cloth from Autumn’s face then used a clean piece to wash her face clean of the taree paste while Autumn sat silent and motionless.

“The swellings have almost completely gone,” he said, inspecting her face. “There is still a little around the top of your nose and there is fresh pale skin where the blisters peeled away. I confess you look blotchy and unpleasant but I daresay a day or two of sun will change that.”

“Like as not there will be a scar or two,” said Autumn. “There usually is with burns.”

“But this was not a normal burn,” said Logan. “’Twas an insect not a burning stick.”

“True enough,” said Autumn. “Only time will tell on that and though my vanity plagues me I do not worry overmuch about my looks. How are my eyes?”

“I cannot say,” said Logan. “They are still closed.”

“But the skin on and around them looks well?” asked Autumn.

“A little redness, that is all,” he said.

“Good,” said Autumn. “From what you say it would seem there is no further need for the paste.”

She took a deep breath then opened her eyes.

“Sploop,” muttered Logan.

“Ah,” said Autumn, turning her head from side to side. “This is not good.” She lifted one hand and moved it in front of her eyes several times and her lips tightened. “I can see nothing more than a lighter patch over there,” and she pointed towards the beach that was visible from under the awning. “Mayhap a little dimming and lightning as I move my hand but nothing more. What do you see?”

“You mean your eyes or where you are pointing?” asked Logan.

“My eyes,” said Autumn. “I wager by your reaction it is not good.”

“No,” said Logan sadly. “Tis not good. With your eyes shut you look much as you usually do but with them open I can see there is a yellowy whiteness that covers much of your eyes. Not all but certainly the centres of your eyes.”

Autumn blinked several times then closed her eyes and massaged them with her fingertips.

“And now?” she asked, opening them again.

“I cannot see any difference,” said Logan, studying them.

“Nor can I,” said Autumn. She sighed. “Well, it was too much to hope that rubbing my eyes would cure them. Mayhap Mother Midcarn's gift will work.”

“Why would it not?” asked Logan, leaning over to grasp the string of Autumn's pack. “She is a most wise and learned person, is she not?”

“True enough,” said Autumn. “You have the rock?”

“Yes,” said Logan, taking it from her pack. “Umm, what should we do?”

“I venture it holds magic,” said Autumn, “so mayhap just touching it to my eyes will be enough.”

“Right, then,” said Logan. “Hold still.”

Carefully he touched the tip of the rock to each of Autumn's closed eyes.

“Did it work?” he asked.

Autumn opened her eyes and looked around.

“I venture not,” she said, “unless a darkness has suddenly fallen.”

“Hmph,” said Logan. “’Tis a soft crumbly stone. Mayhap I should make a paste of it with a little water.”

“As I recall her message said the rock was for you to make your mark,” said Autumn. “Perhaps you should mark my eyes with it.”

“What sort of mark?” asked Logan.

“I wager it does not matter,” said Autumn. “If the shape of the mark was important Mother Midcarn would have said so.”

“I suppose,” said Logan. He tested the edge of the tip with his thumb. “’Tis soft enough not to cut you and it seems to leave a white smear. Ready?”

Autumn closed her eyes again and Logan broke off a small piece and crushed it between his fingers. He carefully smeared her eyes with the stuff.

“I wonder how long this stuff should be left on for?” he said.

“Magic usually works instantly,” said Autumn, opening her eyes. “Ah.”

“You can see?” asked Logan excitedly.

“No,” said Autumn, flatly. “’Tis as it was before.”

“What kind of useless gift is this?” demanded Logan angrily, slapping his thigh. “Surely this is your greatest time of need and that cursed woman has failed you!”

“Or mayhap this is not the gift’s intended purpose,” said Autumn.

“What if you ate some?” asked Logan.

“I do not see how that would be making a mark,” said Autumn, “but if you think it is worth trying I shall.”

“I can’t think of anything else,” said Logan, breaking off another piece. “Here, chew on this,” and he put the piece in Autumn’s hand.

“’Tis bland and gritty,” she said after chewing it for a few moments. “And very dry. Where is the water?”

Logan shoved the water bottle in her hand and she took a drink and swallowed decisively.

“Well?” asked Logan, staring at Autumn’s eyes which were still covered by the yellowy white stuff.

“No, nothing,” said Autumn, looking around. “If anything ’tis darker than it was.”

“Oh Voqev,” exclaimed Logan and threw the rock hard on the sand. “When next I meet that damned woman I will throttle her!”

“Calm yourself, Logan,” said Autumn. “’Tis not her fault and mayhap even Mother Midcarn does not have the power of healing. Think on it. If she did then there would be no need for blindness anywhere.”

“Pah,” exclaimed Logan, feeling drained and despairingly disappointed. “I have spent the last three days convincing myself that the rock would cure your blindness if you were blind and now I am

bereft.” He paused and rubbed the heels of his hands in his eyes. “So what do we do now?”

“I do not know about you,” said Autumn, “but 'twould seem I have a deal more learning ahead of me.”

“What do you mean?” asked Logan.

“I must learn to live without seeing,” said Autumn. “Mayhap my sight will come back in time, mayhap it will not, but it would be foolish of me to stay sitting here indefinitely in the hope it might if it does not. I must learn to live with this.”

“I suppose so,” said Logan. “Umm, what can I do to help?”

“I have to learn to understand the world through the senses I have remaining,” said Autumn. She reached up with both hands then slowly brought them down and round in front of her. “There seems to be nothing around me. Is that so?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “There is an awning above your head but it is high enough for you to stand.”

Autumn got to her feet with a little less than her usual grace because she had been lying down for three days. She slowly rotated, feeling the air with her hands.

“Where are you?” she asked.

“Over here,” said Logan.

Autumn whirled quickly, one hand outstretched to find Logan. She hit him, not overly hard, and instantly pulled her hand back a fraction.

“I am sorry,” she said, resting her hand on his tunic. “I will get better at this. Did I hurt you?”

“I'm sure you will,” said Logan. “And, no, you didn't hurt me. Would it not be better to move slowly until you are better able to find your way around?”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but I have no intention of becoming a tree. Can I feel your face? I would like to see how the feeling of you matches up to my memory.”

“Of course,” said Logan and stood there stoically while Autumn felt the contours and outline of his face.

“Interesting,” said Autumn. “You feel quite different to how I remember you looking.”

“How so?” asked Logan, intrigued.

“Your head seems wider than I remember,” said Autumn, “and your nose longer but I imagine it is just a matter of learning to interpret things correctly. That is the way out of here?” and she pointed towards the beach.

“Yes,” said Logan. “This awning is tied to some trees but there is only sand in front of you.”

“Yes, I feel it with my feet,” said Autumn, digging her toes into the sand. “I can see a benefit to this not seeing.”

“Surely not,” exclaimed Logan. “What possible benefit is there to not being able to see?”

“I will learn to fully trust my other senses,” said Autumn. “Like the feel of this sand on my feet and know that it is sand without having to look down. If I walk straight ahead is there anything in my way?”

“No,” said Logan.

“Then let us waste no more time,” said Autumn. She marched determinedly forward and stumbled over a small mound in the sand. “What was that?”

“An unevenness in the sand,” said Logan. “I’m sorry, I should have said.”

“No, I should have expected it,” said Autumn. “’Twas a foolishness on

my part. How far to the next unevenness?"

"About two thirds of a pace," said Logan

Autumn moved her foot forward slowly until her toe touched the next mound then moved it back and forwards a few times.

"Interesting," she muttered. "I can feel the faintest of changes in the air when my foot is almost there."

She edged forward a foot's length then tried to step forward, her face expressionless with concentration.

"How far is the mound in front of my foot?" she asked.

"About the thickness of a leaf," said Logan.

"Really?" asked Autumn. "That close? Hmm. This will take some practice."

"Tis good to see you up and about," said Myri, emerging from the treeline. "How do you feel?"

Autumn whirled and dropped into her defensive posture, almost but not quite facing Myri. Myri stepped back among the trees in alarm and Autumn adjusted her position slightly to face her directly.

"Do not be alarmed," said Logan, putting his hand on Autumn's shoulder. "Tis only Myri. This be her dwelling."

Chapter Twenty Four

“My humblest apologies, Myri,” said Autumn, relaxing her posture and standing normally. “I heard you speak but could not see you. ’Twill not happen again for I know your voice now.”

Myri looked nervously at Logan who hurried over to her.

“And you should not be alarmed either,” he said, taking her hand. “Autumn knows now of her blindness and is still coming to terms with it. ’Twas simply that the sound of your voice without warning startled her.”

“I should have thought of that,” said Myri, looking relieved. “’Tis obvious now that every little sound will take on a new importance when you cannot see what made it.” She walked forward and Autumn’s ears followed every disturbance of the sand and her nose noted the increase in Myri’s smell. “Can I ask what you were doing just now? It looked like you were trying to kick some sand.”

“I was, in a way,” said Autumn, “or trying not to, at least. I have to learn to walk again without seeing where I am going. I fancy I will be stumbling over things for some time to come.”

“You bear this with great fortitude,” said Myri. “If it were me I would be panicked and helpless.”

“Autumn never panics,” said Logan proudly.

“That is true,” said Autumn, sensing that Myri had shifted slightly to one side. “I have spent much of my life controlling my fears and endeavouring to make the best of every situation as it arises. Losing my sight is simply an opportunity to develop my other senses.”

“Remarkable,” said Myri with admiration in her voice. “How do you feel?”

“I feel surprisingly well,” said Autumn. A disturbance of the air and the sound of sand shifting told her there was a movement to her right and she automatically looked that way to see what was happening.

“Are you leaving us, Logan?”

“I am going to get your staff,” said Logan. “It’s just occurred to me that it will help you not trip over things.”

“Ah, thank you,” said Autumn. “That is good thinking. Yes, Myri, apart from my eyes and a soreness on my face and a little stiffness from lying down for three days I am well. Tell me, do you know of this insect that squirted me?”

She sensed Logan return and was not surprised when she felt his hand on hers nor the feel of the wood of her staff as he put it in her hand. She smiled and nodded to where she thought he was and hefted the staff. It felt reassuring.

“Twas a seskyvi,” said Myri from a little further to Autumn’s left. Clearly she had moved when Logan brought the staff and Autumn turned to continue to face her. “Did you have strange dreams while you slept?”

“Aye, I did,” said Autumn. “Is that normal after such an encounter?”

“So I have heard,” said Myri. “I have not been squirted myself but I know of others who have. Apparently the liquid burns the skin and puts fantastic things in the mind. The priests of Duw oft times deliberately take a small amount of the liquid to help them speak with Duw.”

“Duw is their deity,” said Logan quickly.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. “I know not of a deity called Duw but I honour and respect Duw none the less.”

“That is good to know,” said Myri. “Come with me to my hearth for we will have visitors shortly.”

“You can predict the future?” asked Autumn.

Myri laughed.

“No, Nacsyn saw a boat some way down the coast so 'tis likely these are the people sent from Ynyncc to enquire after you,” she said. “They will be a little while yet as the wind is against them but Nacsyn has gone to the end of the beach to wait for them.”

“Is Ynyncc another deity?” asked Autumn, turning to the side and stepping forward to follow Myri. Logan took hold of her elbow and she shook it away. It was important to her that she learned to move around on her own.

“No, Ynyncc is the town on this side of the island,” said Myri.

Autumn touched some seaweed with her toes and instantly adjusted her foot to step beside it rather than on it.

“Nacsyn sent their son Jyrif to tell the people of Ynyncc we had arrived,” said Logan, watching Autumn's every move in case she fell. He knew there was no real need as she would undoubtedly roll or twist and leap up again but he couldn't help himself.

“I see,” said Autumn. “Forgive me if I seem a little distant but much of my mind is occupied with walking. Doubtless it will become easier in time but at the moment everything is strange and requires concentration.”

“I am amazed you can walk at all,” said Myri. “I have enough trouble going out to piss in the night and falling over things.”

“'Tis my intent to become adept as quickly as possible,” said Autumn, holding the end of her staff out in front of her a little way and moving it gently from side to side as she walked forward. “I venture it will be more difficult when I am off the sand as sand is, by its nature, fairly flat and featureless.”

“Aye but do not be disappointed if you do not. 'Tis hard enough to walk through that jungle yonder when you can see where you are going,” said Myri with a chuckle.

“Doubtless it will be a challenge,” said Autumn, stopping because she sensed Myri had stopped. “But when I have met that challenge and

conquered it, doubtless everywhere else will be easier.”

Myri stared at her for a few moments then looked at Logan with a raised eyebrow.

“Autumn has a strong mind,” he said, correctly interpreting Myri’s unspoken question. “If anyone can walk through the jungle blind it will be Autumn. May take a day or two to get the hang of it though.”

“I begin to see a serious disadvantage to this blindness,” said Autumn. “I cannot see the expressions on your faces so I know not why Logan said that. Am I right in thinking you asked him a question with just your eyes, Myri?”

“She did,” said Logan, “or so I thought. You can sit here, Autumn but do not move any further to your left for there is a fire there.”

“I know,” said Autumn. “I can hear its crackling and feel the warmth of it on my left side but not my right.” She sat down with much of her usual grace and laid her staff carefully beside her.

“I confess you astound me,” said Myri. “How can you possibly interpret every little sound and feeling around you so soon after waking up? ’Tis not as though you have been blind for several summers.”

“’Tis how I was brought up,” said Autumn. “’Tis a failing to use only one or two senses when we have five of them.”

“Hmm,” said Myri. “It seems I was right after all.”

“About what, if I may ask?” asked Autumn, turning her head as though to look down the beach.

“That there is more to you both than meets the eye,” said Myri. She paused. “’Tis interesting, is it not, how many commonplace sayings are about seeing? I had not thought about it until now when I cursed myself for talking of eyes to a newly blind person.”

“Do not let it bother you, Myri,” said Autumn. “’Tis a fact that I am

blind and making everyone stop any mention of it is pointless and futile. Are Nacsyn and your visitors approaching? I hear at least three people some way distant.”

“Your hearing is most excellent, Autumn,” said Myri. “Tis indeed Nacsyn and Jyrif with two others. Tell me, are they both men or both women or one of each?”

“One of each, I venture,” said Autumn. “There is a faint swish like that of a woman's dress but it seems not loud enough to be both of them in dresses. The woman be somewhat younger than the man, too.”

“How can you possibly say that?” asked Myri, pausing in her preparation of some food.

“I heard a man's voice say 'daughter',” said Autumn. “You have a son so I venture 'twas not Nacsyn therefore it is likely to be another man introducing his daughter to Nacsyn although there are many other possibilities. Do you know these visitors?”

“Aye,” said Myri. “Tis Iago, the headman of Ynyncc and his daughter Ffion. Are you a witch?”

“Not at all,” said Autumn. “I am as you are. So is Logan.”

“Oh I doubt that very much,” said Myri. “There is something about you that scares me greatly.”

“Please do not be scared of me,” said Autumn. “Nor of Logan. We are just ordinary people who are strangers to you, that is all. There is nothing to be frightened of.”

“You know too much,” said Myri. “It isn't natural.”

“Please,” said Logan, leaning forward. “I know nothing and Autumn only seems to because she thinks a lot. That is all and for certain we mean you no harm. You have been nothing but kindness to us and we thank you with all of our hearts.”

“Well said, Logan,” said Autumn getting to her feet as the people

approaching got closer. She reached out and touched Logan's arm. "What expressions do they wear?" she whispered.

"Curiosity and some tension, I think," whispered back Logan. "I do not see any ill intent on their faces."

"Tis good to see you back safely, Jyrif," said Myri. "And welcome to our humble dwelling, Iago and Ffion. It delights my eyes to see you both again."

"You look well, Myri," said a male voice which Autumn assumed was Iago. "And these are your two guests?"

"I am Autumn Savannah," said Autumn, putting her hands together in greeting. "And this is my companion Logan."

"Greetings and well met, Autumn Savannah, Logan," said Iago. "Allow me to present my daughter Ffion."

"Greetings," said Ffion. She sounded a little younger than Autumn.

"Tis a pleasure to meet you," said Autumn.

"Aye, a pleasure," echoed Logan.

"I am pleased to see you are up and about, Autumn," said the other man who Autumn assumed was Nacsyn. "How do you feel?"

"I feel most abundantly well," said Autumn. "I thank you for your aid and hospitality."

"You are the one squirted by the seskyvi, I imagine," said Iago. "You have the marks on your face but, Nacsyn, Jyrif said she would undoubtedly be blind but Autumn shows no sign of blindness."

"We were just talking on that," said Myri. "Autumn is indeed blind but her other senses are marked. She heard you coming along the beach and knew there was a woman among you by the sounds of her skirt."

"Indeed?" asked Iago, stepping closer. "Ahh, and now I am closer I

can see your eyes. I can only say how sorry I am that you suffered such a misfortune as soon as you ventured into our land.”

“These things happen,” said Autumn. “I wager the seskyvi was only protecting itself against my foolishness.”

“So you bear it no ill will?” asked Iago.

“None,” said Autumn. “Clearly I would have preferred a different outcome but the seskyvi is not to blame.”

“Interesting,” said Iago. “And you, Logan? You are well?”

“Yes,” said Logan. He was dimly aware of Ffion's scrutiny but ignored it. “I trust you both are well?”

“I am,” said Iago. “Are you, Ffion?”

“Definitely, father,” said Ffion. “This has been a most pleasant excursion although I am deeply saddened that Autumn has been injured.”

“Please everyone, sit down and partake of food with us,” said Myri. “I apologise for the poor fare but we have not the delights of the markets of Ynyncc. Our needs are simple and our visitors few and far between. Tell me, Iago, will we be having the pleasure of your company for long?”

“Alas no,” said Iago. “As I was telling Nacsyn, much as I would like to inspect your turtles and bide awhile I want to make good use of the wind while it blows along the coast. I venture it is close to turning and that will make our return as awkward as our voyage here. If you have no objection we will dine with you then depart.”

“Myri tells us you are the headman of Ynyncc,” said Autumn. “Doubtless you have much that occupies your time there.”

“That is indeed the pleasure and curse of my life,” said Iago, his voice happy. “Tis not an overly exacting role but there are times when it saddens me to sit in judgement on my fellows. Have you ever been to

Ynyncc?”

“Alas no,” said Autumn. “We crossed the Wall of Loriki but three days ago and have been here with Nacsyn and Myri ever since.”

“They call it the Wall of Duw, here,” said Logan quietly.

“My apologies,” said Autumn. “I did not know that.”

“Tis no matter,” said Iago. “You do know of Duw, however?”

“Only that Duw is your deity,” said Autumn. “Be assured that we both respect and honour that.”

“Thank you,” said Iago. He looked up and thanked Myri as well before taking the proffered plate.

“Which is your deity?” asked Ffion. She took a plate as well and smiled at Myri.

“I am of Vallume,” said Autumn. She hesitated then added, “and Mizule.”

“An unusual combination,” said Ffion. “And you, Logan. Are you of Mizule as well?”

“Me? Oh, no, just Seiliu,” said Logan.

“I know not that one,” said Ffion. “Is It a mighty deity? Mightier even than Mizule?”

Logan laughed and Ffion looked a little hurt.

“My apologies,” he said quickly. “I was not laughing at you. I was laughing at the thought of Seiliu being mighty. Seiliu be the deity of cowsheds, nothing more.”

“Cowsheds?” said Ffion, her brow furrowing. “What is a cowshed?”

“Tis a dwelling for cows,” said Logan.

“What are cows?” she asked.

“Umm, do you not have cows here?” asked Logan.

“I do not think so,” said Ffion. “Father?”

“I have not heard of cows,” said Iago. “What are they?”

“They are big animals,” said Logan, glancing at Autumn who was listening intently to the conversation. “Umm, they eat grass and give us milk.”

“Milk?” asked Iago. “You mean like the milk that mothers give their babies?”

“Umm, yes,” said Logan.

“How very strange,” said Iago. “However, we get very few visitors to Taliesin so our knowledge of the outside world is very small.”

“And we in turn are ignorant of you,” said Autumn. “If I may ask, what is Taliesin?”

“’Tis the name of this island,” said Iago, “or at least our part of it before the invaders came.”

“Ahh, now I follow,” said Autumn. “This island is known as Danornor by us.”

“By ‘us’, do you mean you are of the people occupying the north of this island?” asked Iago.

“They know this as Danornor as well,” said Autumn, “although Logan and I are not from there. We are from across the sea. Do you know of Aferraron?”

“Aye,” said Iago. “I have heard the name. ’Tis the place where the invaders came from or so I am told.”

“A long time ago,” said Autumn. “There are few places that have not

been invaded by others at one time or another.”

“Aye, and doubtless neither of you were among them,” said Iago with a laugh. “You would both appear far too young so we cannot hold you personally responsible. That said, it may well be that most places have been invaded but being one of many is scant recompense when it is your own land that is invaded.” He put his empty plate on the sand beside him. “Still, there is little point in us fighting old battles again. Tell me, what is your reason for crossing the Wall?”

“Logan and I are travellers,” said Autumn. “We travel the world in search of knowledge and understanding.”

“To what purpose?” asked Ffion. “Is it not enough to know your own place? What need is there to know of what lies beyond?”

“That is an interesting question,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “What if you do not know your place?”

“How can you not know your place?” asked Ffion. “Your place is the place where you were born and where you grew up. 'Twould be impossible to not know it intimately.”

“Ahh, my apologies,” said Autumn. “I misunderstood you. No, indeed, you are quite right. Few, if any, would not know intimately the place where they were born and raised.”

“I am at a loss here,” said Ffion, her face creasing in puzzlement. “How can you misunderstand me when it is clear that you agree with me?”

“I think what Autumn means is that someone can be born somewhere and grow up there and know that place intimately,” said Logan, “and still not believe that it is the place to which they belong.”

“You mean that you believe you belong somewhere other than where you were born?” asked Ffion. “How is that possible? If you were born somewhere then you belong there.”

“It is a viewpoint, certainly,” said Autumn. She hesitated for a

moment. "Tell me, would you like the entirety of this island back again?"

"Of course," said Iago. "This is the Land of Duw."

"So you would expel those that live the other side of the Wall?" she asked.

"If it were possible," said Iago.

"Even though it is their place?" asked Autumn. "Those there now were born there, were they not?"

"That is not the same thing at all," said Ffion. "They were born of invaders."

"But even so," said Autumn, "and I do not wish to pick a fight with you, but it seems to me that by your definition if they were born here and know the place intimately then it is their place. Just as this place is your place even though I daresay at some point in the distant past your people were also invaders here."

"Oh now you are just being ..." started Ffion angrily but Iago put his hand on her arm to quieten her. Dutifully she fell silent.

"Tis an interesting point," he said. "But to come back to my original question, why are you here?"

"As I said," said Autumn. "We are travellers in search of knowledge and understanding. We were in Wase when we heard of this island and we came here knowing nothing of it save that it exists. When we heard that there is a Wall that divides it we sought only to satisfy our curiosity about what lay beyond."

"And now you know what lies beyond," said Iago. "Are you satisfied? Will you now return to the other side of the Wall?"

"If you wish us to go we will," said Autumn, "but I venture there is a lot more to Taliesin than the dwelling of Nacsyn and Myri. With your permission we would like to explore further."

"I see," said Iago. "So it is not your intention to leave?"

"On the contrary," said Autumn. "We have every intention of leaving for there is much of this world that we have not yet visited."

"You contradict yourself," said Iago. "On the one hand you say you want to stay and on the other hand you say you want to leave. Which is it? Speak true, now."

"There is no contradiction," said Autumn. "Both statements are true. The only difference is one of timing. We would like to stay here a while and get to know this place before leaving to visit somewhere else. If that sits well with you, of course."

"In that case," said Iago, "Twould be best if you both accompany us to Ynyncc."

"As guests or as prisoners?" asked Logan. "Are we under arrest or something?"

Chapter Twenty Five

“Arrest you?” exclaimed Iago in surprise. “Why would we arrest you? Have you killed someone?”

“Killed someone?” exclaimed Logan, equally surprised. “Who says we have killed someone?” He shifted in agitation and wished he hadn't left his staff under the awning where Autumn had lain.

“No one as far as I know,” said Iago frowning. “Nacsyn, Myri, you know anything of this killing?”

“No,” said Nacsyn, looking puzzled. “There is only myself, Myri and Jyrif here and we are all well. If anyone has been killed it must be an outlander who came across with them. I know not where they crossed for I only found these two on the path some time later. Do you want me to go in search of bodies?”

“We killed no-one!” exclaimed Logan, scrambling backwards a little in alarm.

“Then why say you did?” asked Iago. “Who crossed the Wall with you and where are they now?”

“If I hurry it will not take long,” said Nacsyn, getting up. “Jyrif, stay here and protect Ffion.”

“Yes father,” said Jyrif, a little over-loudly. He looked excited and he jumped to his feet ready to throw himself upon Logan.

“Stop this,” said Autumn in a commanding voice. She thrust one hand out in front of her, palm forwards and fingers spread.

Everyone stopped and stared at her.

“There is a misunderstanding here,” she said. “Logan and I crossed the Wall alone and we have killed no-one. Feel free to check if you wish but it would seem fruitless for we crossed nigh on four days ago and if we left a body where we crossed then doubtless little of it remains. I know not what large animals you have here but some will

have been hungry.”

“But the fact remains, Logan said ...” started Iago.

“He did not say anything to suggest a killing,” said Autumn. “He merely asked if we were to be arrested. As strangers in a strange land that is always a possibility.”

“Killing someone is the only thing we arrest people for,” said Iago.

“As I said, we are strangers here,” said Autumn. “We have no way of knowing what you arrest people for although I fancy Logan should not have asked the question for if we were to be arrested doubtless more people would have been sent to do so.”

“However, the prospect of arrest was uppermost in his mind,” said Iago, “and doubtless for a reason. Is that not so, Logan?”

“I suppose so,” said Logan. “It hadn't really until you said we were to be taken to Ynyncc and I got the idea that you would do that whether we wanted to go or not.”

“Why would you think that?” asked Ffion. “You are free to roam here as you wish, unless you have killed someone, of course.”

“Please stop this talk of killing,” said Autumn. “It merely muddies the situation. Logan?”

“’Tis only that, well, um ...” started Logan then petered out in embarrassment.

“Say your piece, Logan, or would you prefer me to say it?” asked Autumn.

“You do it,” said Logan. “You tell things better than I do.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. She looked around out of habit although she sensed that everyone was looking at her and waiting. “When we came to Danornor we knew not of the existence of the Wall. ’Twas only a short time, however, before we were told of it and when we

asked of its purpose we were told that monsters and demons inhabited what lay beyond.”

“Ahh,” said Iago, his face clearing.

“Please let me finish,” said Autumn. “Later we were told that creatures from the Land of the Undead were here and later still, when we came closer to the Wall we were told that a very primitive and blood-lusting tribe lived here. Clearly there is no consistency in these accounts so we crossed the Wall to find out for ourselves. Given this, you will, I am sure, understand that we had no expectations beyond there being something which frightened those who we spoke with.”

“Yes, I understand,” began Iago but Autumn held out her hand again to silence him.

“I have not been able to converse with Nacsyn or Myri these days past,” she continued, “but Logan tells me that they have been exceedingly kind and generous with their hospitality.”

Myri smiled happily at this compliment although Nacsyn continued to watch Autumn and Logan with a faint air of suspicion.

“Moreover, both you and Ffion have been very polite and respectful,” continued Autumn. “However, given the tales we have been told and our own knowledge of the deceitfulness of creatures from other Lands I am not surprised that Logan erred on the side of caution when he asked if we were to be arrested.”

“And that is not unreasonable,” said Iago, “when you explain it like that. Granted my first thought was one of anger and dismay that we were not to be trusted when we came here in good faith to meet you but, as you say, you were not to know that. Strangers here are few and far between and you two are the first I have met since I became headman. The fault lies with me, however, for I had forgotten the knowledge that was passed on to me for, until now, I had little reason to remember it.”

“No fault lies with anyone,” said Autumn. “When strangers meet allowances must be made.”

“Indeed,” said Iago. “Alas I am unfamiliar with strangers for I know everyone in Taliesin and everyone knows me.”

“Then all is well?” asked Autumn.

“All is well,” said Iago.

“Good,” said Autumn. “If I might ask without causing offence, what knowledge was passed on to you?”

“You cause no offence in asking,” said Iago, “and doubtless I will cause no offence in replying that much of what was passed to me does not concern either of you at this time. If you choose to stay in Taliesin for the remainder of your days then that will change. However, I should have remembered the tales that are told of us beyond the Wall for those tales were started by Duw and on those rare occasions that one of us ventures past the Wall those tales are repeated and more added.”

“We take no offence,” said Autumn. “If I am permitted, however, can I ask why these tales are spread? From what little I have experienced these tales are very contrary to your true natures.”

“I’m glad you think so,” said Iago. “We are a very peace loving people and many many summers past when first came those from Aferraron who wished to take this island from us we suffered greatly and many died. We called upon Duw for aid and Duw lead us in a great battle which pushed the invaders to the northern edges but we were unable to vanquish them entirely. Duw then had the Wall built to deter any from coming further south and the tales serve to reinforce the Wall by making what remains of our land undesirable.”

“An ingenious solution,” said Autumn, “but in truth the Wall was not difficult to cross.”

“Aye,” said Iago, “and if you had but followed the Wall to where it meets the sea on either side you would not even have had to do what you did. You could simply have waded around.”

“Ahh, I see,” said Autumn. “So the purpose of the tales is to stop

anyone wanting to wade around. That is a clever idea.”

“But people forget in time,” said Iago, “which is why we need occasionally to go out and remind them. And, of course, some choose to cross regardless. Mayhap to impress their friends and families of their bravery or because they are simply tired of the life they have been leading. A few, like yourselves, do not believe the tales and come out of curiosity but it works well enough.”

“What happens to those who do come across?” asked Logan. “When they go back do not their tales counter the tales you have spread?”

“In truth few have ever gone back,” said Iago. “Those that have come here have mostly decided to stay. A very few chose to live in the jungle rather than in our company but that is their choice. I wager, however, that if any return and tell tales of a peaceable folk who desire only to be left in peace then they are unlikely to be believed. 'Tis my experience that people do not like to be deceived and any who say the tales their mothers told them were wholly false would not be believed.”

“Very likely,” said Autumn. “And doubtless most want nothing more than to live a peaceful life as well and have no desire to uproot themselves and invade the rest of the island.”

“Especially if they believe even a part of the tales,” said Logan. “'Twould not seem worth the effort.”

“Well, for whatever reason, it has served us many hundreds of summers,” said Iago. “We have a few such as Nacsyn and Myri who let us know if any do cross the Wall and someone is sent to greet them and discern their purpose. Where possible we also seek to persuade them to join us rather than return.”

“Am I right in thinking you discern no bad purpose in us?” asked Autumn.

“Indeed not,” said Iago. “Given the misfortune you have had fall upon you I venture none could maintain a pretence of civility with badness in their hearts and your words, although strange as we as a people

have little curiosity of what lies beyond our realm, have the ring of truth about them. Come, if you are willing. Let us go to Ynyncc so you can satisfy your curiosity about us and we of you. Do you feel able to travel, Autumn? 'Tis only on a boat and Ffion and I will manage it. You have little more to do than rest and relax and enjoy the meagre food we brought."

"Your thoughts, Logan?" asked Autumn, glancing at him as usual but unable to see his expression.

Logan shrugged. "We have to go somewhere," he said.

"Then we shall go to Ynyncc," said Autumn. "When do you wish to leave?"

"Now is as good a time as any," said Iago. "The wind still blows to the south and there are no signs of any storms brewing."

"If I might ask another question about the Wall?" asked Logan. "Why are there gaps in it?"

"You mean it is in need of repair?" asked Iago, frowning.

"Not at all," said Logan. "What little I saw seemed in most excellent repair. No, I meant the gaps between the split trunks. They are almost wide enough for a small person to squeeze through."

"Ahh," said Iago, his face relaxing. "Almost but not quite, eh? No, the Wall is there to stop people crossing but we had no desire to stop anything else."

"I do not understand," said Logan.

"The birds can fly over," said Iago, "and the fish around and the monkeys and such like can climb. But what of the creatures of the jungle who cannot fly, swim or climb? Would it not be wrong of us to stop them from moving freely?"

"Most commendable," said Autumn. "I venture few ever give any thought to the creatures when building their walls. Indeed, oft times

the walls are intended to trap the animals inside.”

“You mean like cowsheds?” asked Ffion.

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Part of the purpose of a cowshed is to protect the cows but part is to stop them going somewhere else. Logan, can I ask you to collect our things? I know not where they are and it will take me a long time to find them.”

* * *

“We will stop here for the night,” said Iago, steering the boat towards a small beach. “The light of Astauand is almost gone and there be reefs and rocks around these parts that will rip the bottom out from under us if we are not careful.”

“Let me help,” said Logan, jumping overboard into the knee deep surf before Ffion could.

She smiled and waited until he was on the beach before tossing him the end of a length of twine.

“When a wave carries us in, run with the rope as far as the boat will let you,” she called, “then loop it around a rock else the wave will carry the boat back out.”

Iago untied the rope that held up the small sail and the cloth collapsed. A wave carried the boat further in and Logan, timing his run as best he could, charged up the beach, the rope uncoiling behind him. Sadly the rope was wet and it slipped from his grasp as the wave stopped its headlong rush and began to surge back out to sea. With a yelp he jumped on the rope and pulled as hard as he could but the boat, or the sea, was stronger.

“Sorry,” he called, following the boat down the beach.

“Head for that rock,” called Ffion, pointing to one not quite as far up the beach as Logan had run.

Logan waved and veered off in that direction, waiting for the next

wave. This was more successful and he managed to get an entire loop of the rope around the rock before the boat tried to depart. The rope leapt up with a loud 'thwang' as it went taut and threw him off balance as he had had one foot on it. He let go again but this time Ffion caught the end as she jumped off the boat. Quickly she ran a second loop around the rock and the boat remained on the sand as the wave receded, hissing and splattering in disappointment.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

"Only my pride," said Logan with a grin.

"Ohh, that will never heal," laughed Ffion. "Quickly, grab the side of the boat and we'll pull it further up the beach with the next wave."

Iago jumped out of the boat and pulled as well. Between the three of them they dragged the boat past the line of seaweed that marked the high tide.

"I'll tie it off," said Iago, having noted Logan's skill with boats and ropes. "You help Autumn out."

"No," said Autumn, standing up. "I will do this unaided."

She felt along the edge of the boat then nimbly jumped over and landed on the sand.

"You should have let me look first at least," said Logan, urgently. "There could have been a sharp rock there."

"Mayhap," said Autumn, "but unlikely. Iago would not have risked his boat so close to rocks. Besides, I refuse to give in to my weakness."

"Tis not a weakness to accept help when you cannot see what lies before you," said Logan.

"Yes it is," said Autumn. "I must learn to trust my other senses more fully."

"What sense would have aided you if there had been a rock there?"

asked Logan, quite reasonably he thought. "Unless you touched it before you jumped."

"The sound of the water," said Autumn, marching up the beach and using her staff to tap for rocks. "There is a gurgling around rocks that is not there when there is no rock."

"Pah," exclaimed Logan. "You have an answer for everything!"

"If only that were true," said Autumn, trying to work out where Iago and Ffion were but they were standing still and watching, upwind of her, so she had no idea where they were save that they were probably not somewhere out to sea.

"You are a remarkable woman," said Iago and Autumn's head snapped round at the sound of his voice. She changed direction and headed towards him.

"Perhaps," she said, "if all that you mean is that you wish to make some remark about me."

"You need to be careful when talking to Autumn," said Logan who'd followed Autumn up the beach in case she tripped. "She will take what you say and twist it beyond all recognition."

"In that she is like all women," said Iago with a laugh and Ffion glowered at him. "No matter. We shall pass the darkness here. Come Logan, help me find wood for a fire. Ffion will prepare food and Autumn can rest for she has not long come out of her sickness."

"I confess to feeling a little tired," said Autumn. "The sea water has stung my face and it is burning again. I will wash it and put on some more of that paste."

"I will help you," said Ffion. "Twill be a while before a fire is ready."

"Thank you," said Autumn, sitting down, "although there is no need. I can manage."

"You do not like accepting help, do you, Autumn?" said Ffion.

"That is twice in as many moments that I have offended someone," said Autumn. "I am sorry."

"I am not offended," said Ffion, "but helping is what friends do and I hope we will become friends."

"You are right," said Autumn, "and I am sure we will. Moreover, Logan is my dearest friend. I must find a balance between managing for myself and accepting help that is offered freely for a gift offered freely is most precious indeed."

"Well, mayhap," said Ffion, grinding some of the taree leaves from Autumn's pack between two stones. "Sometimes it is just interfering."

"How do you tell the difference?" asked Autumn.

"I wish I knew," said Ffion. "Tilt your head back a little while I put on the paste. You know your hair is falling out?"

"I did not," said Autumn, putting her hands up to feel her hair. "Where?"

"Along your forehead," said Ffion, pushing Autumn's hands down. "Where the seskyvi squirted you."

"Hmm," said Autumn, resisting the urge to put her hands back up to her forehead. "I know 'tis only my vanity but I do not like the thought of my hair falling out."

"Oh, do not worry about it," said Ffion, smearing paste over Autumn's forehead and eyes. "Your hair will look a bit of a mess for a while but it will grow back as soon as your skin heals."

Ffion paused in the smearing and took hold of a lock of Autumn's hair a little way back from her forehead and yanked it hard.

"See?" she said. "Further back 'tis strong and healthy. This part at the front will be right soon enough."

"Good," said Autumn for she did not like the idea of being both blind

and bald.

“Although as it grows you should give some thought to it,” said Ffion, smearing the paste again. “For it will be a long time before the new growth is as long as the rest of your hair. Mayhap you should give some thought to changing your hair style.”

“What do you mean?” asked Autumn. “I have always had my hair like this.”

“I was thinking in the early stages a fringe would suit you well,” said Ffion. “Then, when it grows past your eyes mayhap you could braid the new growth so it hangs either side of your face. I think that would suit you most admirably.”

“Oh,” said Autumn flatly.

“Or you could have the rest cut short,” continued Ffion, “but you have such lovely long hair that would be a shame. Does Logan have any thoughts?”

“On my hair?” asked Autumn in surprise. “Why would Logan think about my hair?”

“He is your man, is he not?” asked Ffion. “Do you not want to make yourself attractive for him?”

“Logan is not my man,” said Autumn firmly. “We are the best of friends and we travel together but that is all.”

“Ohhh,” said Ffion and giggled. “I just assumed ... So you have no man and Logan has no woman or do you both have someone to return to when you have finished your travels?”

“No, we are each of us unattached,” said Autumn. “As to whether we will ever return from whence we came, ahh, that is another matter. Logan mayhap will one day but I? I venture not.”

“That is sad,” said Ffion, studying the paste on Autumn's face. She spotted a small redness she had missed in the fading light and leant

forward to coat it. "Everyone should have someone special in their lives."

"Do you?" asked Autumn.

"Mayhap, mayhap not," said Ffion. "I have two suitors but I am not overly inclined towards either. Perhaps if my mother was still alive she could advise me on which to choose but sadly she is not."

"You have my sympathy for your loss," said Autumn. "At the risk of opening an old hurt, has she been gone long?"

"Yes and no," said Ffion. She wiped her hands on her dress. "There all done. How does your face feel?"

"Much eased," said Autumn. "The burning is fading."

"Good," said Ffion, sitting beside her. "When I was very young my mother came down with a wasting disease. Father consulted every medicine man but none could cure her. She died these five summers past, just skin and bone and unable to get up from the bed in which she lay."

"That is most unfortunate," said Autumn. "I have heard of such things but I have never encountered one who has suffered that way."

"Oh she did not suffer," said Ffion quickly. "That was what was so strange. She wasted away but there was no pain. The pain was all mine and my father's. More so his I think for I was but a child through most of it."

"There is no need to bore our visitors with old news, Ffion," said Iago, returning with a heap of dry wood in his arms. "'Tis always best to think to the future rather than the past for the past cannot be changed but the future is what you make of it."

"Yes, father," said Ffion.

"And on that note," said Iago as he dumped the wood on the beach, "I am going to ask Ffion to tell us a tale after we have eaten. One that

will, I think, give you and Logan a better understanding of us as a people.” He looked around then raised his voice. “Where are you, Logan?”

Chapter Twenty Six

"I am over here," said Logan, lost in the gloom that surrounded them. "I'm sorry, I did not find any wood."

"I brought plenty, Logan," said Iago. "Sit yourself down and I will start a fire."

Logan came forward and quietly sat beside Autumn, some distance from where Iago was making the fire.

"Is all well?" she asked quietly. "You sound unhappy."

"Tis nothing," he said then paused. "Ohh, only that I was searching for firewood as it was getting dark and I tripped over a fallen branch which made me sad."

"Why would a fallen branch make you sad?" asked Autumn. "Tis the nature of branches to fall."

"Twas not the branch that made me sad," said Logan. "Twas the tripping in the darkness. It made me realise what your life is going to be like forever. It made me, well, I stayed down for a time and grieved for you."

"Oh Logan," said Autumn, groping for his hand and finding his calf. She squeezed it. "You worry yourself too much with things that cannot be changed. Have I ever told you of Wikram?"

"Not that I remember," said Logan sadly.

"I never met him," said Autumn, "but he was a Krisana at my Esiyup and was Noxu's mentor. He was blinded as a youth and yet still mastered the skills of a Krisana. I never met him for he died in old age two or three summers before I was found and brought there but he was much revered." She gave a half snort. "I quickly learned not to say 'I did not hear you' or anything like that as an excuse for the reply would always be that Wikram could hear a speck of dust float through the air or some such. My task for now is to practise my skills so I too can hear a speck of dust. Doubtless this is just my vanity but I wager I

will surpass Wikram. 'Tis my aim not only to hear a speck of dust but to cut it in half with my hand!"

"Are you serious?" asked Logan as Iago's twigs suddenly caught light.

"Aye, why not?" asked Autumn. "Tis always good to set the highest of goals."

"Well if anyone can you can," said Logan, feeling more cheerful. "I wager you could fit the two broken pieces of dust back together again afterwards!"

"That will become my goal after I have achieved the first," said Autumn.

"This sounds like an interesting talk you are having," said Ffion, joining them. "Why would you join dust together?"

"It is a task Logan has set for me," said Autumn, hearing Ffion sit down. It sounded like she had sat next to Logan and his sudden shift a fraction closer to her confirmed it. "It will help me grow and develop my touch."

"'Twould seem overly difficult and pointless to me," said Ffion. "Do you always set tasks that onerous, Logan?"

Logan laughed. "Not at all," he said. "Tis the first task I have ever set Autumn and I wager if anyone can do it, she can."

"Well, you will find no dust to practise with in my dwelling," she said primly. "Dust makes father sneeze dreadfully so I have banished every speck. You must think most highly of Autumn then if you think she can achieve such a thing."

"I do," said Logan, "but it was meant in jest."

"You have a strange sense of humour," said Ffion. "Tell me, Autumn, do you find Logan amusing?"

"Well now, that is an interesting question," said Autumn. "I am not

entirely clear on what is humour and what is not but certainly Logan's efforts in that direction keep me entertained, if somewhat baffled."

"Mayhap I should revise my opinion of you, Logan," said Ffion, putting her hand on Logan's arm.

"Mayhap you should," said Logan, letting it stay there. "Mayhap I am nothing like what you think I am."

"That is a strange thing to say," said Ffion. "What do you mean by it?"

"Ffion, the fire is burning well," called Iago.

"Ahh," said Ffion with a hint of irritation. "I must go. Perhaps we can continue this conversation another time?"

"If you like," said Logan.

Ffion got up with a swish of her skirt and sauntered over to the fire. Logan watched her silhouette.

"She seems a nice girl," remarked Autumn.

"Aye, nice enough," said Logan.

"What does she look like?" she asked. "Is she pretty?"

"Aye, I dare say," said Logan. "Although she is a big girl, at least half as big as you again and she has the most strange pale reddish hair. I have never seen hair like that before."

"And Iago?" asked Autumn.

"He is bigger than me," said Logan, "but not overly large. He, too, has pale reddish hair although it is not as abundant as Ffion's and he has no beard."

Autumn leaned a little closer to Logan.

"I have a request to make of you," she said. "When we go back on the

boat in the morning could you bring some pebbles with you?"

"Certainly," said Logan. "I saw some higher up the beach. How many?"

"Ohh a handful or two," said Autumn. "Not too large but not too small either."

"What do you want them for?" he asked.

"To help with my learning," said Autumn. "I doubt I will be able to resume my exercises while on the boat. It seems quite small."

"It is not the largest of boats but not the smallest either," said Logan. "There is room for you to sit and play with stones if that is your wish."

"Good," said Autumn. "I wager food will be ready soon and I do not wish to insult Ffion. Let us move closer."

* * *

"Well now, Ffion," said Iago settling back. "That was a mighty fine meal given what little we brought with us."

"Thank you father," said Ffion, smiling in the light of the fire. "Do you wish me to tell the story now?"

"That would be most enjoyable," said Iago.

"Tis called The Badger Cauldron," said Ffion, looking over at Autumn and Logan. She paused for a moment.

"Long ago," she began in a soft, almost singing, tone, "there was a man from Neander whose name was Ashmantoo. For reasons known only to himself he journeyed long and far and buried his nose deep into the affairs of others for he was a most curious man and much given to knowing what others were up to. He did, moreover, have an eye for a bargain and whenever he encountered one he snapped it up and congratulated himself for being the wisest of the wise.

One day, while journeying through Wase, he spied an old copper cauldron hanging from the edge of the roof of an old run down dwelling on the edge of the town.

“My own cauldron has a hole in it,” he said to himself. “That fool of a servant mistreated it and now it is useless. This looks to be a run down dwelling. Mayhap I can get that cauldron for a very small price.”

He shouted to his servant to stop their horse and ventured over to inspect the cauldron hanging from the roof.

“Tis a surprisingly fine cauldron,” he said to himself and smiled.

He banged on the wall of the dwelling and an old woman came to the entrance to see what all the noise was about.

“This dirty old cauldron,” he said pointing. “My horse has need of a drinking dish. What say you I give you two hakinas for it?”

“Oh my,” said the old woman. “It is worth far more than that but I am poor and my daughter is ill and needs medicine. What say you on five grinar?”

“Tis a mouldy old thing,” said Ashmantoo. “But I am a generous man and your daughter’s need is great. Let us agree upon five hakinas.”

The old woman hesitated but a cry of anguish from her daughter within made her agree on five hakinas. Ashmantoo’s servant gave her the coins and she hurried off to buy some medicines for her daughter.

Congratulating himself for another bargain Ashmantoo took the cauldron from the roof and handed it to his servant who tied it with all the other bargains Ashmantoo had acquired. With happiness in his heart Ashmantoo continued on his way for he was bound for home and a ship awaited him.

On the journey to Neander the ship stopped for a time at Danornor

and Ashmantoo took his servant and horse ashore to see what people were up to. As night fell he instructed his servant to make camp and prepare a meal. This the servant did. He made a fire and put some water in the cauldron and set the cauldron upon the fire to heat.

'Twas not long before the water grew warm and four furry feet emerged from the underside of the cauldron. As Ashmantoo stared in disbelief a furry badger snout with a broad white stripe emerged from the top of the cauldron and looked around.

"Who are you?" spluttered Ashmantoo.

The furry badger head looked at Ashmantoo then looked at the water beginning to steam around it. Then the head looked over the side of the cauldron and saw the fire.

"What?" exclaimed the head. "A fire? No wonder I am getting too hot!"

The cauldron jumped off the fire and ran towards Ashmantoo, its copper bottom banging noisily on the stones.

With a scream of fear Ashmantoo snatched up the cauldron and threw it at his servant.

"This is an abomination!" he shouted, "Take this thing and get rid of it! I never want to see it again!" and he cursed the waste of the five hakinas he had paid for it.

Frightened, the servant snatched up the cauldron and threw it high and far into the air. So hard did he throw the cauldron that it passed over the very top of the hill and crashed down on the other side. The cauldron rolled and rolled down the side of the hill and ended up with a thump against the side of a dwelling.

This dwelling, too, was old and run down and there were many cracks and holes in the mud of its walls.

An old man whose name was Eira came out to see what had made the thump.

"'Tis an old copper cauldron," he said in surprise. "I wonder where it came from?"

He looked around but could see nothing from which the cauldron could have come. He did, however, see a new hole in the wall where the cauldron had landed.

"Ahh, 'tis no matter," he said, picking up the cauldron. "'Tis only a mud wall and easily repaired. But this cauldron, this is a mighty fine cauldron. With a little spit and polish I am sure it will look very fine."

Eira carried the cauldron inside and set to with a great deal of spit and a soft cloth and soon enough the cauldron was gleaming.

"This is a most magnificent cauldron," he said, admiring it. "I think, when the new day comes, I shall fill it with soil and plant pretty flowers in it and set it beside my front door so I can gaze upon it and enjoy what remains of my life."

That said he set the cauldron beside the door and went to bed, happy with the thought of the gleaming cauldron and the flowers that would soon be growing inside it.

In the deepest part of the night he awoke. There were sounds of grunting and snuffling coming from the other side of the wall from his bed. Fearfully Eira sat up and listened. As well as the snuffling and grunting there were strange sounds. Wet slapping sounds and trickles of water.

"What trickery is this?" he wondered and climbed from his bed. He caught up a burning stick from the remains of his fire and saw his cauldron has gone.

"That is a shame," he said. "Someone has taken it. Oh well. Perhaps their need was greater than mine."

Eira made his way out of the dwelling and around the side and gasped. There was the gleaming copper cauldron but it had four furry feet and a furry badger head with a broad white stripe on it.

“Oh badger cauldron!” exclaimed Eira in wonder. “What are you doing?”

“I am repairing the hole I made in your wall,” replied the badger cauldron. “Tis the least I can do but I am finished now. What do you think?”

“You have done a magnificent job,” said Eira. “When it is dry it will be perfect, of that I am certain. Come inside and let me give you food and drink for your kindness.”

“I thank you,” said the badger cauldron and followed Eira inside.

Eira plied the badger cauldron with food and drink and in return the badger cauldron told Eira fascinating tales of life in Wase and the other places the badger cauldron had been. They sat up all night talking and when light broke Eira went to bed for he was an old man and needed his sleep. While he slept the badger cauldron repaired all the other holes and cracks in the mud walls of Eira’s dwelling.

When Eira awoke he saw the badger cauldron sitting beside the entrance, looking out.

“So you are not a dream,” said the old man in wonder. “I hoped you were not for you are a most delightful companion.”

“It pleases me to hear you say that, Eira,” said the badger cauldron. “While you slept I have repaired all the cracks and holes in your walls and collected enough food to last you through the winter.”

“But what about you?” cried Eira. “Is there enough food for you as well?”

“No,” said the badger cauldron. “Alas, much as I enjoy your company as well I have to leave.”

“But this is not fair!” cried Eira. “You have done all this work and left me all this food and I have done nothing in return. Please, before you go, tell me what can I do for you?”

“Stay as you are,” said the badger cauldron, “and be an example to others.”

“What do you mean?” asked Eira for he was greatly puzzled by this. “I do not understand.”

“You do not need to understand to be an example,” said the badger cauldron. “Fare well!”

“Fare well to you too, oh wondrous badger cauldron. May you bring happiness to others as you have done to me,” said Eira sadly but it was too late. The badger cauldron had disappeared.

A silence fell over the campsite as Ffion drew her story to a close.

“Well, there we have it,” said Iago after a while. “A fine story and wonderfully told, Ffion.”

“Thank you father,” said Ffion.

The silence descended again.

“If I may ask,” said Autumn after a few moments.

“Ask away,” said Iago.

“You said this tale would help us understand you and your people,” said Autumn. “How so?”

“What do you think?” asked Iago.

“Well clearly you are represented by Eira,” said Autumn. “Ashmantoo was a grasping cruel man who cared little for others. Eira, on the other hand, was a kindly man who accepted what came his way and delighted in it. Is that a fair assessment?”

“Up to a point,” said Iago. “What of the badger cauldron?”

“Clearly the badger cauldron is not a real thing,” said Autumn. “Nor, I venture, is it a deity or spirit.”

"I would agree with you, Autumn," said Iago, watching her in the light from the fire. "But it has to be something, does it not?"

"I daresay," said Autumn, "as it is an important part of the story. Mayhap it represents consequences for it showed the bad consequences of being mistreated and the good consequences of being well treated."

"A good point," said Iago. "Any other thoughts?"

"You bear more than a little resemblance to Noxu," said Autumn.

"Who is Noxu?" asked Iago.

"A man who taught me much," said Autumn. "His manner was to instruct through questioning rather than telling."

"Ahh," said Iago. "A wise man indeed for you can tell someone something a hundred times and they will still forget but if they work it out for themselves it stays in their mind."

"That is itself a debatable point," said Autumn, "but no matter. I venture the purpose of this tale is that good things come from kindness and bad things come from unkindness and exploitation. Eira was happy that the cauldron existed and polished it and wanted to give it a pleasing role in his life. Ashmantoo, on the other hand, saw it only as a way of saving money and did not care how much the daughter of the old woman suffered. Ashmantoo is therefore a bad example of how to live a life whereas, and this was what the cauldron meant, Eira was a good example. In that way, merely by living, Eira set an example for others and did not need to understand in what way he did this."

"Mayhap there is another small point," said Logan. "If Eira had understood how he was an example he may well have gone about telling other people what to do and likely annoying them. After all, few people like criticism. In that way it is better to let people work it out for themselves as well."

"An excellent point, Logan," said Iago. "Anything else?"

"Tis possible to draw from this tale a point about the dangers of money," said Autumn. "I confess I do not fully understand money nor why it has such a grasp on people but it does. It is possible to take from this tale the point that Ashmantoo was only the way he was because of the existence of money. 'Tis not possible to seek and find bargains if money does not exist."

"And how does Eira fit in with that?" asked Iago.

"Eira had no money," said Autumn, "or at least none was told of in the tale and his dwelling suggested he did not. Likely the tale is intended to show that he was happy and content and kind without money having any hold over him."

"But was he happy and content?" asked Iago. "Was not his dwelling falling apart around him?"

"No," said Autumn. "There were cracks and holes but all mud dwellings have cracks and holes. The badger cauldron performed a kindness by repairing them but there is nothing to say that Eira was not going to repair them himself."

"True," admitted Iago. "But what if he could not?"

"Then his kindness to others would generate kindness in return," said Autumn, "and they would make the repairs. Doubtless Eira would do whatever he was able to do in return for that. I wager the tale is about kindness breeding kindness and that money takes away the need for kindness to others for it is easier to simply pay someone to do something rather than be kind to them. Indeed, if you are unkind to someone, either unintentionally or intentionally, you can assuage your guilt by giving that person money whether or not they want it. If there is no money you would have no option but to be kind and considerate for you will only get unkindness in return otherwise. Is this how you and your people see life?"

"Indeed," said Iago. "We know of money but we have no place for it any more. When first the people of Aferraron came here they brought money with them and we toyed with it but we found it most unsatisfactory for it did bad things to us so we abandoned the idea."

“So how do you manage now?” asked Logan.

“We are a simple people,” said Iago. “Some like to hew trees and others to till the soil but not everyone. Others in turn like to compose verses or dance and that is good too. Each of us does what we enjoy the most.”

“And what of those who delight only in sleeping in the warmth of Astauand?” asked Logan.

“Then they can sleep in the warmth of Astauand,” said Iago. “The tillers and hewers provide for them as do the singers of verses. But think on this for a moment. There is only so much lying in the warmth you can do. What do you do when Astauand is hidden by cloud or when you simply cannot lie any longer and your body rebels?”

“I have no idea,” said Logan.

“Exactly,” said Iago. “We have few laws but many customs and one of them is that when you are not doing whatever it is you like doing you spend some time helping others. All our children are brought up with this idea and all willingly lend a hand for as the tale suggests, if you sow kindness to others you will reap it in turn.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

The morning sun touched lightly on the back of Autumn's head as she sat crossed legged before the mast. Her robe steamed gently as the overnight rain began to dry and some of the faint mist was drawn inside her as she breathed slowly and deeply as was her practice. Logan, woken before dawn to get back in the boat, lay propped against the wooden side, near the front, his eyes closed in sleep and his feet wedged against the other side. He breathed shallowly but rhythmically and he, too, steamed gently. A small pile of stones sat beside him, gleaming dully wet in the shadows.

Iago sat at the back of the boat with his hand on the steering board. He watched Autumn as she sat there, silent and unmoving, save only for the motion of the boat. His face had a look of faint puzzlement although a half of a half smile played on his lips from time to time. Ffion sat nearby, a cord from the bottom cross bar of the sail held in her hand, loosely ready to pull on it if her father commanded. Her eyes wandered lazily from her father to Autumn to Logan then to the horizon then full circle again. No one spoke for Autumn was deep in her thoughts, Logan was asleep and Iago and Ffion had little to say that each had not said before to the other.

A sea bird, small in body yet long in wing, spotted the boat and glided over, hoping for scraps. Iago caught its motion in the corner of his eye and looked away from Autumn. He smiled when he saw the bird and looked over at Ffion. She glanced back at him and he jerked his head slightly in the direction of the bird. She, too, smiled.

"'Tis the one that followed us up here, I think," she said, softly so as not to disturb the others.

"Reckon so," said her father.

Ffion leant over to rummage in the small bag of chopped doyta that lay with the remains of their other foodstuffs beside their water pots. She selected a piece and tossed it high in the air. With a squawk the bird wheeled and caught it neatly in mid air then quickly ascended some way to eat it in peace.

Autumn heard the squawk, as she had heard their voices, and allowed it to bring her out of her reverie. Slowly she stretched her arms above her head then, breathing out slowly yet fully so her lungs were emptied of all air, she brought them down and pressed her palms together in front of her chin. Ffion tossed another piece of doyta which the bird caught as gracefully as before. Again it ascended to eat in peace. Autumn slipped her heels off her knees as Iago and Ffion watched curiously and stretched her legs out in front of her, accidentally kicking Logan's hip.

"Wha'?" he grumbled, half opening his eyes just as the bird swooped down again in case Ffion had a third piece of food ready.

With a precision born of avian indifference and guided by the mischievous hand of Aloidia, the bird released a large drop of excrement which landed squarely on Logan's forehead. Being largely liquid, the drop spatting then trickled over the corner of his eye and onto his cheek. Almost instantly his hand came up to wipe it away.

"Ugh," he muttered, opening one eye to look at what was in his hand.

"Tis a sign of good fortune to come," said Iago with a laugh. "With all this expanse of water that bird yonder chose you to shit on. You are mightily honoured!"

Logan just looked at him, his sleepy mind processing things slowly.

"Here is a damp cloth, Logan," called Ffion tossing it over to him. It arrived just as Logan shifted to look at her and caught him wetly in the face.

"Thank you," he said morosely as both Iago and Ffion laughed good-naturedly.

He wiped his face several times then his hand then his face again.

"I'll have the cloth back, if you please," said Ffion. "Good rags are hard to come by."

Logan tossed the cloth back and she caught it neatly and rinsed it in

the sea before putting it on the floor of the boat where it sat in a damp puddle.

“Greetings, Logan,” said Autumn. “And greetings to you, Iago, and Ffion. Is it not a beautiful morning?”

“Aye, it’s fair enough,” said Iago. “Looks like the wind will be holding for a while longer.”

“What happens if the wind stops or changes direction?” asked Autumn.

“We row,” said Iago. “’Tis back breaking work but the choice be that or floating until Chaahk deigns to blow our way again. Can I ask what you were doing before you woke Logan?”

“Why did you wake me?” asked Logan. “Did something happen?”

“’Twas not my intent,” said Autumn, “and I apologise for doing so but I moved my leg and did not see you there. ’Tis my custom, Iago, to spend some time around the dawn sitting quietly and thinking on things and feeling the world around me.”

“Oh,” said Iago. He glanced at Ffion and she slowly shook her head and shrugged slightly.

“You do this every morning?” she asked. “There is food here if you desire, Logan,” and she help up the bag of doyta.

“Unless there is some pressing reason not to,” said Autumn, shifting round so she faced Iago and Ffion.

“Ahh, thank you,” said Logan and Ffion tossed the bag across to him. He caught it and smiled at her in thanks. She smiled back.

“What purpose does it serve, Autumn?” she asked.

“Two purposes mostly,” said Autumn. “It allows me a time with no distractions so I can think as deeply as I can and also to give me a space where I can renew my connection with all that surrounds me.”

"I confess I do not follow you," said Iago. "Can you not connect with the world around you all the time and think things when you need to think?"

"Aye," said Autumn, "but there are distractions and also the focus is different. When I am not thus engaged I am focused on what lies before me and what is happening in the world around me but when I meditate I am focused inside myself and think thoughts that could not otherwise come to me."

"Such as?" asked Iago.

"Mostly I cannot tell you," said Autumn. "Such thoughts as I think would often need many days of explaining the background before I could even begin to talk of the thoughts themselves. I am sorry but oft times I think on things that are not easy to explain."

"Humph," said Iago. "So that is what you were thinking about just now? Things beyond the wit of Ffion and me?"

"Actually no," said Autumn smiling. "And I meant no offence nor criticism of either of you. 'Tis that I have been doing this almost my entire life and things build on other things in my mind which are not easy to explain. Today, however, my mind was engaged on a simple problem to do with my blindness."

"Now that does not surprise me," said Iago and Ffion nodded in agreement. "If it were me it would fill my thoughts to the exclusion of all else."

"And that is something I must not allow," said Autumn. "I will not permit myself any amount of self pity for it serves no purpose. Situations arise and must either be dealt with or worked around and self pity does neither. I am now blind and there would appear to be no remedy for this so the only course of action is to work around it." She paused. "Ordinarily my thoughts wander but today they stayed almost entirely upon how to develop my other senses to compensate for the loss of my eyes."

"Most impressive," said Iago. "You must have a powerfully strong

mind to be able to do that so soon.”

“You don't know the half of it,” said Logan through a mouthful of doyta. A piece fell in his lap and he quickly picked it up and stuffed it back in his mouth hoping Ffion had not seen.

“Aye, reckon not,” said Iago, looking at Autumn. “So what thoughts came to you?”

“Not as many as I had hoped,” admitted Autumn. “My senses are so different it is not easy to see how to use them as eyes. This is why I asked Logan to collect some pebbles for 'tis my intent to spend some of the time while we sail working on this.”

“How will pebbles help?” asked Ffion. “You cannot hear them unless they knock together and you cannot touch or taste them unless you have them in your hand already. I don't think stones have a smell either, unless they've been sitting in something nasty.”

“Well, not necessarily,” said Autumn. “I suspect that it may be possible to hear them as they move through the air and feel the air itself move. Mayhap I will even, with practice, be able to smell them but I've not made the effort to smell stones before.”

“Well, may Aloidia be generous,” said Iago, “but I venture you be onto something of a fool's errand here.”

“Very likely,” said Autumn, “but I must do what I can and if it does not work, think of something else. To give up without trying anything is more of a fool's errand.”

“Well that be true enough,” said Iago. “If you just sit there and expect everyone around you to do your bidding you won't get far either. For all our teachings of our customs to our young 'uns every now and then one grows up to expect to be given all things in return for nothing.”

“What do you do then?” asked Logan. “You did say your only punishment was for killing.”

“Nothing,” said Iago. “It works right well,” and he laughed.

“Please explain,” said Autumn. “I do not see your reasoning here.”

“Oh 'tis simple enough,” said Iago. “Say Ffion here decided not to ever help anyone with anything again. For a while folk would continue to help when she needed help but after a time of seeing she never gave help back they would stop. Doubtless Ffion would manage well enough by herself for a time but sooner or later she will need some aid for there are always things that need to be done that cannot be done alone. When that time comes she will find no one will give her aid and in time she will work out for herself that she needs to be more forthcoming.”

“It does not please me that you chose me for your example, father,” said Ffion. “As if I would ever not help someone when they need help.”

“Because you are safe from all criticism, my girl,” said Iago. “You are a fine example of what it is to be one of us.”

Ffion smiled happily.

“I can see how that would work with big tasks such as harvesting,” said Autumn, “but how does it work with small day to day things?”

“Oh 'tis simple,” said Iago. “Say Ffion has a patch of ground to sow seeds and the rain makes the ground soft but also makes a hole in the roof of her dwelling. Like as not, as Ffion is a capable girl, she can do the sowing and fix the hole but she cannot do both quickly and more rain is coming. If she does not sow properly the rain will wash away the seeds but if she does not fix the hole the roof will collapse. There isn't time for her to do both. If she has any sense she will go to her neighbour and ask her to fix the roof while she sows or the other way around and the next day they share the neighbour's tasks. How we live is all about helping each other so all benefit.”

“But what if someone never needs any help?” asked Logan.

“Then more power to them,” said Iago. “For that means them as needs more help than others will be able to get it. Them as is sick or lacking in the mind, say. 'Tis the same with children who lose their parents as

does happen from time to time. There is always someone who will take the children in and care for them.”

Logan stared at him in astonishment for when his parents died he had been left to fend for himself with none save Bumola giving him any aid, and that only dwelling space in a small cowshed. Of food and love there was nothing.

“But what if someone does not have enough to eat?” he asked. “Bringing another child into a household will mean more mouths to feed.”

“Aye,” said Iago, “but not if you look at the whole community. There are the same number of mouths to feed there. Actually fewer since the child's parents be gone. We are each part of the community and the community looks after all within. None go short of food unless there be a bad harvest and then all go short equally. This is one of the reasons we got rid of money for money makes you think of yourself rather than of the community. Them as has money will likely buy all the foodstuffs for themselves and those without money will starve. 'Tis not fair and leaves a bad taste in the mouths of those without.”

“But what if someone steals food?” he asked.

“Why would they?” asked Iago. “Knowing stealing will be taking food from the mouths of others none of us would do so. We are all brought up to think of each other.”

“But if they did?” persisted Logan, thinking of the time he had been faced with exile or death for stealing food because no one would share theirs.

“Few, if any, would begrudge someone an extra mouthful or two,” said Iago with a shrug. “If someone be constantly taking extra food then after a time the food they are given will be cut. Can't say as it has ever happened while I've been headman but there you go. We are all about cooperation, you see. If we don't all cooperate we will end up fighting and what be the point in that?”

“Indeed,” said Autumn. “Fighting serves no useful purpose other than

to defend and if all cooperate then there will be no attacking and no need for defending.”

“Sadly that is not always true,” said Iago. “Different people have different minds and there will always be disputes for not everyone sees things the way someone else does. That is why we have a headman or woman for those times when cooperation has broken down.”

“And, I venture, as long as there are people outside of Taliesin,” said Autumn. “We have encountered no others on our travels that share your views.”

“Does that make us bad, then?” asked Iago.

“On the contrary,” said Autumn. “I wager if all the world shared your views there would be no wars and no crime. I am looking forward to seeing Ynyncc for it seems to me to be an ideal community.”

“We think so,” said Iago complacently. “Don't we, love?”

“Most definitely,” said Ffion.

“And once seen, doubtless I will have more questions,” said Autumn. “Logan, are you awake?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “Unlikely I'll be going back to sleep with all this chatter going on.” He smiled to take away any offence in his remark.

“Good,” said Autumn. “Would you help me?”

“Of course,” said Logan. “What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to throw pebbles at me,” said Autumn. “Gently at first until I learn how to catch them then harder and in different ways.”

“You think you will learn to catch them?” asked Logan, frowning. “'Twould seem an impossible task to me.”

“Most things seem impossible until they are done,” said Autumn. “The trick lies in the trying.”

“Be careful lad,” said Iago, leaning forward. “Throwing stones at a blind woman is not something to be proud of.”

“I will be careful,” said Logan, “but I will be surprised if any thrown hard enough to hurt will actually hit Autumn. You don't know her as I do.”

“You should put a stop to this father,” said Ffion, frowning. She, too, leaned forward anxiously. “It may seem like fun but someone will get hurt.”

“No,” said Autumn. “This is my desire and if I do get hurt it will be through my own lack and will serve as a lesson to me. One thing, though, Logan, have a care not to throw any so they may hurt Ffion or Iago.”

“Of course not,” said Logan, swivelling round so he faced Autumn. “Ready?”

“That is the last time you will ask me that,” said Autumn.

“Father!” exclaimed Ffion anxiously.

“I will step in if it looks to be going too far,” said Iago decisively, “but I confess I am curious to see how Autumn goes. She speaks fine words but does it go any further?”

Without warning Logan tossed a stone so it fell gently onto Autumn's lap. She did not react in any way.

“Umm, I've tossed one,” said Logan, feeling a little embarrassed for Autumn with Iago and Ffion watching.

“I know,” said Autumn calmly. “I was concentrating on what I could sense of it.”

“Oh,” said Logan. He tossed another and Autumn's hand shot out and missed it by a long way.

“Was I close?” she asked.

“You went the wrong side,” said Logan. “You were at least two hand breadths away.”

“Again,” said Autumn, putting her hands back in her lap.

This time she almost touched the stone but it bounced off her shoulder and rattled on the deck.

“Almost,” said Logan, his excitement growing. Iago and Ffion were watching attentively.

“What's that over there?” said Logan and tossed a stone at Autumn as both Ffion and Iago looked away. Autumn's hand hit the stone and it flew overboard.

“Well done,” said Logan and tossed another while speaking. That too flew overboard.

“Harder,” said Autumn.

“No,” said Logan, “you are not ready yet,” but this time he threw the stone rather than tossing it but aimed it above and to the right of Autumn's head. It thumped solidly into the palm of her hand and Ffion gasped in astonishment.

“How did she do that?” she breathed.

“Shush,” whispered Iago, his face intent.

Logan threw the next one high in the air and it splashed into the sea beside the boat, pushed by the wind. Autumn hadn't moved, her head cocked slightly to one side.

“Ooops, sorry,” he said. “Too high.”

This time he threw the stone directly at the middle of her thigh but her hand shot out and caught it a hand's breadth before it hit.

“That was good,” said Autumn, tossing it back to him. “It felt hard.”

Logan felt a pride in her brimming up for it pleased him greatly that Iago and Ffion were watching even though he knew full well that Autumn would not approve of that. He smiled and threw another, as hard as he could, at the centre of her chest.

“Is my hand bleeding?” she asked, tossing the stone back and holding up her palm. “It felt like it cut me slightly.”

“There is a drop of blood,” said Logan, “but 'tis not a cut. More of a tiny nick.”

“Ahh, good,” said Autumn. She licked her palm and Logan threw two stones at her. Both her hands shot out, one down to her leg and the other out to the side. She tossed both stones back to Logan.

“By Almighty Duw!” exclaimed Iago. “I would not believe it if I had not seen it with my own eyes!”

“I see it,” said Ffion, “but I do not believe it. How can she be doing this?”

“That went passably well,” said Autumn, getting to her feet in one graceful movement. “Logan, would you move around? 'Tis too easy when I know they are all coming from the front.”

Iago gawped at her in amazement then slapped his leg delightedly.

“I’ll just pick up the ones on the deck,” said Logan. “You may slip on one.”

“No, leave them,” said Autumn, dropping into her defensive stance. “Twill be good to practice my footwork as well.”

“If you like,” said Logan and hurled a stone at her foot.

Autumn twisted away and the stone ricocheted off the bottom of the mast and narrowly missed Ffion's head.

“Have a care,” growled Iago, intent on Autumn's every move.

“I’m sorry,” said Logan, apologetically. “I’ll move over a bit.”

Just at that moment the wind changed direction a little and the steering board slipped out of Iago’s inattentive grip. The boat lurched to the right and the bottom crossbar of the sail swung round and pulled the rope from Ffion’s hand. The crossbar hit Autumn on the hip and she instantly leapt out of the way while twisting and launching a hard kick at her surprise attacker. The crossbar snapped and the sail collapsed in on itself, pulling Ffion, who’d quickly grabbed the rope, from where she sat. The sail, now flapping limply, swung back again and the loose end of the crossbar crashed into Ffion. With a scream she tumbled over the side of the boat into the sea. An instant later Autumn jumped in after her.

Chapter Twenty Eight

With a strangled cry Logan leapt up to jump in the sea after Autumn as she could not swim but he lost his footing on the pebbles scattered around the deck and fell. He landed with the side of the boat in his belly and his head in the water. Gracelessly, with his legs kicking wildly and his arms flailing, he slid into the water. Fortunately he could swim, after a fashion, and managed to twist under water and get his head into the open air. Opening his eyes and gasping for breath he could see the boat several paces away with Iago gripping its side and staring back.

“Autumn!” he tried to scream while thrashing to turn around but a swell went in his mouth and it turned into a gurgle. Then something large crashed into him and forced him under, covering his face and one arm with a clingy grip. Struggling and choking he tried to disentangle himself but something caught his hip and pushed him deeper. Then suddenly he was free and bobbing on the surface.

“... an, are you well?” he heard Iago shout.

Coughing and spluttering as another swell hit him in the face, Logan managed to turn and saw Ffion swimming strongly towards the boat on her back, holding Autumn's head out of the water.

“Autumn!” shouted Logan and set off in pursuit as best he could.

He reached the boat just as Autumn got hold of the side and heaved herself in, not seeing Iago's outstretched hand.

“Where is Logan?” he hear her say.

“In the water,” said Iago laconically. “Here, Logan, take my hand.”

Gratefully Logan caught Iago's hand and he was pulled into the boat, aided by Ffion's hand pushing him up by his buttocks. He sprawled on the deck for a few moments then looked up at Autumn.

“Are you all right?” he gasped.

Autumn's head jerked round to face Logan.

"I am well, Logan," she said, squatting down and reaching out to touch him. "Did you fall in the sea as well?"

"I jumped in after you," said Logan in relief.

"I thank you for your efforts," said Iago, pulling Ffion into the boat, "but they were unnecessary. Ffion is a strong swimmer."

"I did not know that," said Autumn. "I heard her scream and thought I had kicked her in error. I thought only to aid her."

"I thank you too," said Ffion, inspecting her soaked skirt. There was a rip in it where Logan had clawed at it. "Ahh, 'tis easily mended. Good."

"Well that was a moment of excitement, was it not," said Iago, smiling. Then his face fell. "Unfortunately, Autumn, you did not kick Ffion, you kicked the crossbar of the sail and broke it."

"My deepest apologies, Iago," said Autumn. "Something hit me unexpectedly and I lashed out."

"Remind me never to touch you without warning," said Iago, "for if that's what you can do to a heavy beam I do not wish to think what you would do to my head. Well, 'tis not the end of the world for another crossbar can be easily fitted when we get to Ynyncc. Unfortunately this one is too badly splintered for the pieces to be lashed together and we do not carry a spare."

"Does that mean we have to row?" asked Logan, getting up and dripping everywhere.

"No," said Iago. "If you will permit, your two staffs will be sufficient. Neither is long enough on its own but bound together they should suffice. They are not heavy enough to keep the sail fully taut but it will still catch the wind. We will just take a little longer."

"Of course you can use our staffs," said Autumn. "Will the journey

take much longer?”

“If the wind holds we should be at Ynyncc when Astauand reaches Its peak or thereabouts,” said Iago. “Umm, I have a small request, if I may.”

“If it is within my power,” said Autumn.

“If you wish to continue with your catching of stones and kicking things,” said Iago, picking up a coiled piece of cord to bind the staffs, “would you mind going to the far end of the boat? Next time you might break the mast and that will be a problem.”

“Of course,” said Autumn as Logan burst out laughing.

* * *

“Tell me what you see,” said Autumn as Ffion untied the cord that held the sail up.

“Tis a village,” said Logan, standing up so he could get a better view as Iago steered the boat so it drifted towards the cluster of other boats on the beach. “All the dwellings are much like the ones in Hurabid for they are made of this red mud and have thick piles of leafy branches for roofs. The dwellings are all spread out though and do not cluster around a market square.”

“I wager that is because they do not have markets,” said Autumn. “What else do you see?”

“The jungle begins some way back,” said Logan. “The dwellings are on either side of a creek that runs from the jungle to the beach. The dwellings are set back from the beach and there are fields of crops between the dwellings and the jungle. I count seventy or so dwellings.”

“Seventy four,” said Iago. “You see those two big buildings on the edge?”

“Yes,” said Logan. “Is that where you live?”

“No,” said Iago. “My dwelling is over there,” and he pointed. “You are most welcome to stay with us for as long as you wish. Those big buildings be where we store all our food.”

“So when your people bring in the harvest they put it all in those buildings?” asked Autumn.

“More or less,” said Iago. “We keep enough for our immediate needs but the rest goes in the stores. If anyone is in need of food they can take what they need from the store for it is for everyone. We have a woman here called Cirys who is much in love with tallying and counting and she keeps track of what there is. If times are harsh she will restrict what people can take so there be some for all.”

“We have been spotted,” remarked Logan. “There are several people coming to greet us. Some are running.”

“Aye,” said Iago. “I have been away for several days. Doubtless they are coming to see me.”

“They run with joy at your return?” asked Autumn.

“More likely to get their side of a dispute heard by father before the other person can,” said Ffion drily. “Father told you some like to farm and others fish but he did not say some like to bitch and complain.”

“You are being overly harsh, child,” said Iago. “Their complaints oft times have merit. Ohh, what is he doing here?”

“Who?” asked Ffion, sitting up and shielding her eyes from the light of Astauand. “Well now, that be most strange.”

“Who is it?” asked Logan.

“’Tis Noddfa,” said Iago. “Our High Priest of Duw. ’Tis not often we see him in town. I wonder what he wants this time?”

“Which one is Noddfa?” asked Logan, scanning the people waiting on the beach.

"You see that one hanging back with all the hair and no clothes?" asked Ffion. "That is Noddfa."

"Tell me," said Autumn.

"There is a man on the beach," said Logan. "He is completely naked except for a short skirt of what looks like grass and his hair is very long."

"Down to his knees when he washes it," said Ffion distastefully, "which isn't that often."

"And he looks to have something tied around his face," said Logan, "but I can't quite make out what it is."

"That is his beard," said Iago. "He ties it into four plaits and has sacred things knotted within."

"Oh, right," said Logan. "Well, priests be strange folk, that is for sure. They are favoured by the gods."

It was not long before the waves carried the boat to the beach and Ffion and Logan dragged it up. Iago got out and was immediately surrounded by a small group of people clamouring for his attention.

"Father usually has one or two come to see him each day," remarked Ffion. "Now he is returned they cluster round him like flies."

"Are there that many disputes, then?" asked Autumn.

"Oh no," said Ffion. "Real disputes are few and far between. These be people who like to be seen with father although there may be one or two with small grievances."

"I greet you, Noddfa," said Iago, breaking free from the knot of people around him. "You are well?"

"These be them?" demanded Noddfa, staring at Autumn and Logan.

"These are the strangers who came across the Wall of Duw," said Iago.

“All praise be to Duw,” shouted Noddfa, throwing his hands in the air and closing his eyes.

“All praise be to Duw,” echoed everyone in earshot, including Iago and Ffion.

“Which one be the blind one, Autumn Savannah?” asked Noddfa, striding over to where they stood beside the boat.

Up close, Logan could see Noddfa wore a thong of knotted grass around his neck with a large wooden carving of a turtle hanging from it. It bounced against Noddfa's chest as he moved.

“This is Autumn,” said Iago, holding out his hand to her. “And this is Logan.”

“Greetings, Noddfa,” said Autumn and Logan nodded genially.

“Are you followers of Duw?” asked Noddfa, grasping the turtle and holding it tightly. He peered closely into Autumn's eyes and made a strange gesture with the first and little fingers of his left hand.

“Alas, no,” said Autumn. “How did you know my name and of my affliction?”

“Duw knows all,” said Noddfa. “Iago, hear me. Duw wishes to meet this one and her companion.”

“What?” exclaimed Iago in surprise. Ffion's mouth dropped open in disbelief.

“You heard me, headman,” said Noddfa. “Duw in all Its infinite wisdom wishes to meet these two.”

Autumn heard an undercurrent of bitterness in his voice.

“Oh,” said Iago. He looked around then back at Noddfa.

“’Tis unusual, is it not?” he asked diplomatically.

“’Tis unheard of,” said Noddfa. His lips tautened into a thin line. “Not even I, Noddfa, High Priest of Duw, have ever been called before the Great One in the Temple and yet two strangers ...” He parted his braids and spat on the ground, taking care not to let the spit go near Autumn or Logan. “And from across the Wall, no less!”

“I see,” said Iago. Ffion realised her mouth was still open and snapped it shut. “Umm, Duw told you this, did It?”

“Two nights ago Duw came to me,” said Noddfa. He looked skywards and closed his eyes for a few heartbeats in reverence. “Bring the blind one, Autumn Savannah, and the companion to me,’ It said.”

“Well, that’s unambiguous,” said Iago. “Two nights ago, eh? Did It say when?”

“When Duw speaks Duw speaks,” said Noddfa, staring once again at Autumn, “and Duw has spoken. I do not question Duw nor do I imagine Duw really meant in three summers time.”

“Well, quite,” said Iago. He turned to Autumn. “Umm, well I am sorry about this for I was looking forward to the pleasure of your company for a few days and to show you around Ynyncc but Duw has spoken. Mayhap you will give me the pleasure of your company, both of you, on your return?”

“So we are to go now?” asked Autumn, her curiosity roused.

“Duw has spoken,” intoned Noddfa.

“Umm, it would be best,” said Iago. “Duw is our protector, after all, and I would not like to see that protection withdrawn, even for a day.”

“Then so be it,” said Autumn. “If you will but tell us the way we shall depart immediately.”

“No,” said Iago. “’Tis a full day’s journey and the last part is through steep mountain trails. You would get lost. Noddfa will take you and show you the way.”

"I cannot!" exclaimed Noddfa. "I have not been invited! 'Twould be a blasphemy for me to venture into Duw's Temple."

"Well, who else then?" asked Iago testily. "I cannot for there is much here which needs my attention. I am headman after all."

"I will take Autumn and Logan, father," said Ffion. "I know the way for I have been there twice before."

"The first time was when you were but a babe," said Iago. "You would not remember that."

"No," admitted Ffion, "but I went there for the festival four summers past and I know the way."

"No!" exclaimed Noddfa. "'Twould be a blasphemy for this one to go inside the Temple uninvited. These two must go alone." He stepped back and held his turtle up threateningly.

"I will not go inside the Temple," said Ffion. "I will wait outside while they go inside. When they return I will lead them back here."

"That seems reasonable," said Iago. "So long as no one goes inside the Temple other than Autumn and Logan. That sits well with you, Noddfa?"

Noddfa stared at Iago for a few moments then raised his hands high above his head and stared at the sky, muttering inaudibly.

"Duw permits," he said after what seemed like a long time.

There was an audible sigh from the people gathered round and Ffion smiled.

"Come, Autumn and you too, Logan," she said. "I will find you fresh clothes and we will take some food for we will be gone at least two days. Three more like for we will not arrive until tomorrow morning."

"Thank you," said Autumn, reluctant to part with her robe, "but I am comfortable in the clothes I am wearing."

“As am I,” said Logan, wanting to support Autumn.

“As you wish,” said Ffion, her face falling for she wanted dearly to see how Autumn looked in the latest Ynyncc fashions. “But food we will definitely need.”

“Definitely,” echoed Logan.

“I’m not entirely sure about this,” said Iago, scowling. “My only child going off into the jungle for three days with strangers.”

“They are not strangers, father,” said Ffion, her eyes sparkling in anticipation of the adventures ahead. “They are Autumn and Logan! Besides, would you go against the Word of Duw?”

“’Twas permission not an instruction,” said Iago.

“And doubtless Duw will protect me,” said Ffion. “Else Duw would not have given permission, is that not so?”

“Your mother would not approve,” said Iago. “Going off with a young man and a blind woman? At your age?”

“Surely you are not accusing Logan of any impropriety, father?” asked Ffion. “That is no way to speak of a guest. Besides, I am nineteen. Almost.”

“Duw has spoken,” reminded Noddfa. As far as he was concerned that was the be all and end all of the matter.

“Oh very well,” said Iago, wagging his finger in Ffion’s face. “But mind you stay on the path. No straying or sightseeing.”

“Thank you father,” said Ffion, giving him a kiss. “Duw will favour you this day.”

“Doubtless,” said Iago, “as It favours me every day that you are alive, child. Be off with you before I change my mind. Autumn, I look forward with eagerness to renewing our acquaintance. And you, Logan, of course.”

"This is where we leave the path beside the creek," said Ffion. "There is a clearing here where we can spend the night then in the morning we start climbing. The path is well marked but it is steep. 'Twould be well to be rested."

"Where is the Temple?" asked Logan, scanning the mountain peak. Astauand had gone behind but there was still light to see. "Can we see it from here?"

"Yes," said Ffion. "You see that ledge all the way up there?"

"Aye," said Logan. "But I see no building on it."

"The Temple is not a building," said Ffion. "'Tis a cave."

"Oh, right," said Logan. "How far back does it go?"

"I do not know," said Ffion. "When we came here for the festival we were permitted to go only a short way inside."

"That must have been a disappointment for you," said Autumn.

"Not really," said Ffion. "Even with torches it was dark and there were many passages. Like as not I would have got lost if I had strayed but I did not want to. It was strange and echoey and I did not like the place. I will stay outside on the ledge while you both go inside."

"If it is full of passages how will we know which one to take?" asked Autumn.

"Doubtless Duw will show you," said Ffion. "'Twould be foolish to call for someone to visit and then let them get lost."

"Have others been inside before?" asked Logan. "I got the idea from Iago that this hasn't happened before."

"Ahh, well," said Ffion, looking around anxiously. "None have been invited, that is true."

“But ...?” asked Autumn.

“A few have ventured in,” said Ffion. “Mostly young men who are trying to show off how brave they are.”

“And did they see Duw?” asked Autumn.

“I know not,” said Ffion. “None have ever returned. Least not so far as I know.”

“This doesn't sound too good,” said Logan. “What if Noddfa made this invitation up just to get rid of us?”

“Oh, he would never do that!” exclaimed Ffion. “He is an old fuddy duddy and full of his own importance but he has never lied.”

“I am sure he has not,” said Autumn. “Logan is just being over cautious.”

“Good,” said Ffion. “Well, he does have to look after you, doesn't he,” and she giggled.

“Yes,” said Logan.

“Good,” said Ffion. “I will fetch some wood for a fire and prepare some food. Autumn, you stay here and rest for I venture we must make an early start in the morning. This journey is taking longer than I expected.”

Logan glanced at Autumn expecting her to make some remark about not needing to rest but she did not. Instead she sat down, her face expressionless. He waited for Ffion to move away then sat beside her.

“Is all well?” he asked quietly.

“All is well,” said Autumn, turning her face to him, “although my heart is heavy.”

“Why?” asked Logan. “Can I help?”

"Tis what Ffion said," said Autumn. "This journey is taking longer than she expected. I thought I was doing well to compensate for my blindness but I am not. I am slowing everyone down."

"I venture 'tis more to do with Ffion's chatter and her father not being here," said Logan. "This is an adventure for her and she is enjoying herself."

"In part, perhaps," said Autumn, "but in the main it is because I cannot see where I am going and have to move more cautiously as a result and stay close to you. How I will manage when there is no path is a question that preys on my mind for I cannot see a route ahead."

"But I can," said Logan. "And you will get faster as you become more used to your condition."

"You say that," Logan," said Autumn sadly, "but think on some of the places we have journeyed. Thick forests, rivers and the like. How do I find my way through a jungle when I cannot see what lies ahead? Even with you as a guide it will still take much longer."

"We can stay on paths and tracks as much as possible," said Logan, "and so what if it takes longer? We are in no hurry. It matters not one bit if we take two or three times as long to go from one place to another than it would have done."

"Perhaps," said Autumn. She sighed and moved her head as though looking around. "Is that Ffion over there?"

"Aye," said Logan. "She is coming back with wood for the fire. Please, Autumn, not not worry yourself. I will be your eyes and all will be much as it was before. Likely better for you can concentrate more on how things sound and feel and doubtless you will find much that is new and fascinating to you that way."

"You are a true friend, Logan," said Autumn as Ffion laid her wood down. "Yes, you are right."

"What is Logan right about," she asked.

“That I will become accustomed to my lack of eyes,” said Autumn. “He thinks I am pushing myself too hard and should allow more time to come to terms with it.”

“Oh yes,” said Ffion. “Well, doubtless he knows you better than I but you would seem to have a strong mind so I expect you will cope better than most. In truth you cope so well I forget you are blind much of the time.”

She paused to blow on a dry leaf that was beginning to smoke from the spark left by her flint. It glowed then faded then suddenly burst into flame. Quickly she put a handful more leaves over the flame then sat back to watch with some small twigs in her hand.

“What do you think of father?” she asked, leaning forward again to carefully put a few twigs on the burning leaves. “Do you like him?”

Chapter Twenty Nine

“He seems a goodly man,” said Autumn. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh nothing really,” said Ffion.

She watched the twigs start to catch light and let them burn for a few moments then added some more before making a small chimney with some larger sticks to channel the air. She contemplated them for a few moments then added some more.

“’Tis just that he is lonely,” she said, glancing over at Autumn. “He does not speak much of mother but I know he misses her.”

“I’m sure he does,” said Autumn.

“I know you have not had a chance to look around Ynyncc properly,” started Ffion then slapped her hand over her mouth and looked guilty. “Oh, I am so sorry! I did not think. I meant only that ...”

“Do not concern yourself, Ffion,” said Autumn. “It pleases me that you forget I am blind for if it was constantly in your mind it would show that I am not adapting well. What were you going to say?”

“Umm, well, only that it is a nice place,” said Ffion. “We have much music and dancing and singing whenever either Plifal or Plakill is full and there is much joy and merriment. ’Tis not all farming and labouring.”

“That is good to know,” said Autumn, wondering where Ffion was going with this.

“And we all look after each other, you know,” said Ffion. “I know we only have one healer at the moment but your lack of seeing will not hold you back. I venture most anything you want to do will be possible, save perhaps the drawing of pictures. I confess I do not see how a blind person can do that but most anything else.”

“Very likely,” said Autumn. “You think I should stay in Ynyncc?”

"'Twould be easier than continuing your travels," said Ffion. The fire was burning nicely now and she slipped some doyta underneath to cook. "And father likes you, of that I am certain. 'Twould be a good match for you have a strong clear mind and will be able to take some of his burdens from his shoulders."

Autumn frowned. "You are asking me to be your father's companion?"

"I suppose I am," said Ffion with a giggle. "Don't tell him, mind. He will be most angry and say I am interfering."

"So this is not his idea?" asked Autumn.

"Ohh, I wager he has had the idea," said Ffion. "I could see it in his eyes when he was watching you catching stones on the boat but if he does say anything it will be a long time coming. That is his way. 'Twould be good for him to have another woman in his life and I venture we would be more like sisters."

"I see," said Autumn. "Mayhap it would be best if you left it to him rather than try matchmaking on his behalf."

"Aye, probably you're right," said Ffion, unashamed. "But you being a traveller and all and likely to be long gone before he ever gets around to saying anything I thought I would put the idea in your head." She shifted so she could see Autumn's face in the light of the fire. "You could travel far and find worse. He is an honourable man and kindly with it."

"Yes, I have found that already," said Autumn. "You say there is a healer in Ynyncc?"

"Aye," said Ffion, "but please do not get your hopes up on that score. We have had others blinded by seskyvi but no cure has yet been found."

"I suspected not," said Autumn. "Doubtless if there was a cure then I would have been taken to the healer straight away."

"So, umm, my idea finds some merit for you?" asked Ffion after a

lengthy pause.

"I will think on it," said Autumn with a sigh.

Logan stared at her in blank astonishment for Autumn had instantly shut down such possibilities when they had been raised in the past.

"Good," said Ffion. "Twould make father very happy I am sure and you will find Ynyncc a pleasant enough place. Tell me something of your travels while we eat. I have never been outside Taliesin."

"Did I hear right?" interjected Logan. "You are considering staying in Ynyncc?"

"That is what I said, yes," said Autumn, keeping her face to the fire.

"I am lost for words," said Logan bluntly. "You are going to stay here?"

"I only said I would think on it, Logan," said Autumn. "No decision has yet been made."

"But why?" cried Logan, flinging his arms out. "Why here? Surely you are not considering being the companion of this man as well?"

"Ahh, Logan," said Autumn calmly, turning her face towards him. "Do you not see that my blindness has changed everything? Travelling in the past was the easiest of things but now it has become most arduous. 'Tis a challenge enough to walk on paths and tracks but going through the jungle will be most difficult even with you by my side. Most difficult indeed."

"I thought you saw it as a challenge," said Logan, his voice rising a little.

"It is indeed a challenge," said Autumn, "and I will not shirk that challenge if needs be but I wonder if there is more to this than meets the eye. Has it occurred to you that my blindness has arisen at an unusual time?"

"I wager any time would be unusual for blindness," said Logan.

"I used the wrong word," said Autumn. "I meant place. We come to Taliesin and I am blinded as we cross the border but it is not an interesting coincidence? Taliesin is a place where all share my views and values. 'Tis a place where all cooperate for the benefit of all and none are treated harshly simply because they lack money or friends. You have been with me since I left my Esyup in search of my place in the world. Tell me, have we been anywhere that more closely resembles somewhere that would be my place?"

"We do not know that Taliesin is truly as has been described to us," said Logan. "We have only the word of the headman and his daughter and doubtless they would not tell us of the bad things."

"There are no bad things," interjected Ffion. "'Tis a lovely place and I would not lie to you about that."

"Perhaps," said Logan. "And what of your vows, Autumn? You would cast them aside simply because you have lost one of your senses?"

"Aye, I hear your words, Logan," said Autumn. She nodded thoughtfully then sighed.

"What vows are these?" asked Ffion, looking curiously at Autumn.

"'Tis not something that need concern you at this time, Ffion," said Autumn, "but Logan does raise the matter and, in truth, Logan, I begin to wonder if indeed this is my place then mayhap my vows are no longer relevant. After all, if this place is as it is said to us then the sanctity of women should not be an issue in need of defending. If, indeed, this is my place then mayhap it is time I renounced my vows and entered more fully into the life of a community."

"You mean you are seriously considering being the companion of Iago?" demanded Logan.

"He is but one possibility," said Autumn. "You would be my first choice if this is to pass but nothing is yet decided. You forget we have been invited to meet with Duw."

"I had not forgotten," said Logan, hanging on tightly to the idea of

being Autumn's first choice.

"I thought Logan was not your era'owen?" said Ffion. a trifle huffily.

"He is not," said Autumn, "but we have been through much together and I have a fondness for him above all others."

"Then I wish I had not opened my big mouth," said Ffion, tartly. "I only suggested you stay so you could be father's companion not to heal any rift that lies between you two."

"I can see how you might think this is your place," said Logan. "I had not thought about it that way but I see now the idea has merit."

"There is no rift," said Autumn. "Merely my vows which have prevented me from taking any companion but if this is my place then mayhap it is time."

"Pah!" exclaimed Ffion. "You talk in riddles!"

"Mayhap," said Autumn, "and here is another. Why has Duw invited us when it seems It has never invited another before?"

"Who knows the whims of the deities?" said Ffion, beginning to sulk.

"I have been wondering much the same all day," said Logan. "I have not said anything for as you always tell me it is fruitless to speculate on what lies ahead but I will not deny I have been speculating."

"And what thoughts have you had?" asked Autumn.

"None of any use," said Logan. "I know nothing of Duw and cannot begin to imagine why It wants to meet us."

"That is not entirely correct," said Autumn. "We do know that Duw is the protecting deity of the Crwban people. Does that not tell you anything?"

"Not really," said Logan, frowning in puzzlement even though his heart kept repeating 'first choice, first choice.'

“As I said,” said Autumn, “on the surface at least, the Crwban people share my values and doubtless much of that is due to the influence of Duw for if Duw thought otherwise then the Crwban would be otherwise. The thought has crossed my mind that Duw wishes to meet us to welcome us to Taliesin and give its blessing to the renouncing of my vows for such a renunciation is a most serious thing and not to be undertaken lightly.”

“I wish you would either tell me of these damned vows or stop talking about them,” said Ffion irritably. “They seem like ghosts in the shadows to me.”

“Very well,” said Autumn. “I made two vows. The first was to protect the sanctity of women and the second, which is a necessary condition for the first, is to protect the sanctity of myself.”

“Is that so?” asked Ffion, a trifle contemptuously. “Then they are wasted here for women need no protecting, save from mosquitoes and the like. Is that your intent, Autumn? To protect us from mosquitoes?”

“You asked of my vows,” said Autumn quietly, “and I have told you. I did not ask you to sit in judgement upon them.”

“And my father?” asked Ffion. “Do his needs not mean anything to you?”

“Doubtless when the time is right he and I will discuss his needs,” said Autumn, “and should they concern you as well then you will be involved in the discussion. Mayhap Duw also has an opinion although I doubt that Duw gives much thought to the welfare of individuals but that is by the by. Logan, we have here some interesting coincidences. My becoming blinded, in a place that would appear to be in line with my values, a place, moreover, that only has one healer and one priest and arching over all of that we have a meeting with the deity of the place. Mayhap they are nothing more than coincidences but mayhap they are linked and if they are then I venture this coming together may be a sign that my search for my place is ended.”

“And if that is so,” said Logan, “I can see that your vows would serve little purpose. So you are thinking that you could be a healer here?”

“It takes many summers of learning,” said Ffion, “and you cannot see the plants and herbs. Doubtless you would collect bad things mistaking them for good.”

“That is a possibility,” said Autumn, “and I do not as yet have a solution but it did occur to me that perhaps Duw wishes me to become a priest of Duw for I am something of a philosopher.”

“I do not see Noddfa agreeing to that,” said Ffion.

“Then a story teller or a teacher,” said Autumn. “The possibilities for someone who cannot see are endless. Life does not end with the onset of such an affliction. Indeed, I am not wholly convinced it is an affliction.”

“Then you are not as much of a philosopher as you thought,” said Ffion. “I cannot think of anything worse than losing your eyes.”

“Losing your mind, perhaps?” asked Autumn. “Still, such decisions are for another day. For certain this is not a matter to rush into lightly. I will think on it and meet with Duw and see what It wishes to say then think some more if that is appropriate. After all, it may not be. Duw may wish to see us on an entirely different matter.”

“Probably to tell you to leave here,” said Ffion, rather nastily.

“That is possible,” said Autumn. “I do not pretend to know anything of the minds of deities but if that is the case then we shall move on and my vows will remain intact.”

“There is no need to be over hasty here,” said Logan quickly. “I had always thought that your vows were sacrosanct and you would never put them aside.”

“Nothing is forever, Logan,” said Autumn. “I have been trying to teach you that since we first met.”

“True enough,” said Logan, “but I venture I am too stupid to fully understand. So, umm, what else do you think would lead you to renounce your vows?”

“Ahh, Logan,” said Autumn with a laugh. She leant over and patted Logan's arm. “You are too easily seen through. When the time comes to renounce my vows I will renounce them but not before. Besides, you have forgotten the gift of Mother Midcarn. I wager there are still yet troubles that lie ahead and her gift will serve no little purpose.”

“I had indeed,” said Logan. “When the rock did not cure your blindness I confess I dismissed her gift from my mind.”

“Who is this Mother Midcarn?” asked Ffion. “I know no one of that name. Is she a friend of your from outside?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. She frowned momentarily.

“And she gave you a rock as a gift?” asked Ffion. “’Tis a most strange gift. What purpose does it serve other than to show she does not think highly of you?”

“Ohh, that is not so,” said Logan. “She does think highly of us and she has given us other gifts in the past that have been most useful. Why did you frown, Autumn?”

“Because I have just remembered when Mother Midcarn gave us the gifts,” said Autumn. “’Twas when we crossed into Taliesin, before I was blinded by the seskyvi. Another interesting coincidence, is it not?”

“Gifts? She gave you more than just a rock?” asked Ffion. “Mayhap a handful of sand to eat as well?”

“’Tis not in your nature to be unkind, Ffion,” said Autumn. “I understand that you are disappointed that your plans have gone astray but accept that and move on. Ill feeling will not serve you well. That said, if you still desire me to be as a sister to you then that I will gladly do if we stay, even if I am not to be the companion of your father.”

“You can be my sister as well, if you like,” said Logan.

“No, I do not see you as a brother,” said Ffion. “Although if Autumn decides not to renounce her vows perhaps we can talk of other ways in

which we can be related. You would seem a loyal and virtuous man, Logan.”

“But do you not have two suitors already?” asked Logan, going red in the darkness.

“Aye, but neither suit me,” said Ffion. “Or have you made a vow as well?”

“Actually, I have,” said Logan with a sigh of relief.

“Oh wonderful,” said Ffion bitterly. “I wish I had not come on this damned fool expedition now. Everything is going wrong!” She picked up a stone and hurled it into the bushes. Startled and frightened some creature of the night ran off hurriedly.

“Oft times it is best to let things take their natural course,” said Autumn gently. “Trying to force something can make it break.”

“Mayhap I, too, should make a vow,” said Ffion. “If nothing else it will give me comfort as I die an old maid.”

“I will be astonished if that is the case,” said Autumn. “You have many virtues, Ffion, and from what Logan has told me your comely appearance is one of them. You will not die an old maid unless you choose to.”

“So you think I am pretty, then, do you, Logan?” asked Ffion. “Granted I am not small and dark like Autumn but I can sail a boat, plough a field and weave cloth. I have been told, moreover, that I have the hips for children although I know not quite what that means but I would like to have many children.”

“You are very pretty, Ffion,” said Logan with a shrug, “but, alas, my vow. You know how it is.”

“But if Autumn renounces her vow will you not do the same?” she asked.

“I will not,” said Logan, “and besides, did you not hear Autumn say I

was her first choice if she did?"

"Oh faff!" exclaimed Ffion.

"I do not hold you to your vow," Logan," said Autumn, "nor will I."

"Nonsense," said Logan. "With the loss of your eyes my vow becomes even more important than it was. I am your eyes and will be as long as we both live. Mayhap even beyond if Yammoe does not restore them."

"Kind words indeed, Logan," said Autumn, squeezing his arm and smiling at him. "That was the last time I will say I do not hold you to your vow for I realise that even if you did make it in jest you are wholly serious now. I take back what I said and will hold you to your vow for as long as I am of this world."

"Good," said Logan, feeling absurdly pleased.

"I'm going to sleep," said Ffion grumpily, realising that her plans had completely died. "Goodnight."

* * *

"Well, there it is," said Ffion after a long and arduous climb up the partially over-grown track. Autumn had fallen four times after stumbling into things, despite Logan's unceasing care. "I can go no further without Duw's permission."

She nodded towards a large cave opening in the side of the mountain. It was perhaps twice the height of a tall man and the width of three but none of the light of Astauand penetrated its depths. Indeed, no light penetrated more than a hand's breadth past the entrance.

"So, we go inside?" asked Logan.

"How else will you meet Duw?" asked Ffion. "I will stay on this ledge and wait for your return."

"And if we do not return?" asked Autumn. "How long will you wait?"

“You will return,” said Ffion. “You are here at Duw’s request and will be protected by It. There is wood for a fire and doubtless there is food of sorts nearby. I will not come to any harm.”

“There is the possibility, however small, that Duw will wish us to remain with It,” said Autumn. “If you stay here indefinitely your father will worry. He is expecting you back tomorrow. I suggest you leave in the morning whether we are back or not.”

“And if you return after I have left?” asked Ffion. “What then?”

“We will follow the path,” said Logan. “And when we reach the creek at the bottom we will follow it downstream.”

“Two nights,” said Ffion. “In truth I will welcome the peace for I have much to think about. The shape of my life is no longer as I saw it when we left Ynyncc.”

“Thinking is good,” said Autumn, “as is planning but there is much to be said for accepting those things which chance brings into our lives.”

“Aye, perhaps,” said Ffion. “Leave me. I am sure Duw is impatient to meet you and, I confess, I would like to be alone for a while.”

“Thank you, Ffion,” said Logan. “You have been very kind to us.”

“Mmm,” said Ffion, “but have I been kind to myself?”

“Ahh, you have the makings of a philosopher,” said Autumn. “Mayhap that is your path ahead.”

“As if!” exclaimed Ffion. “I like dancing and making merry too much for all that nonsense! Go and hurry back and tell me all about Duw.”

“As you wish,” said Autumn. “Logan, what do you see?”

“Nothing,” said Logan, “beyond a cave entrance. What lies beyond is entirely dark.”

“I feel no ills,” said Autumn, pursing her lips, “and hear and taste

nothing beyond the wind and the jungle. Lead on.”

With her staff tapping the ground ahead of her and Logan holding her other hand, they went into the cave and were swallowed up by the darkness.

Chapter Thirty

“There is much that smells strange here,” said Autumn, stopping not far inside the cave. “Tell me what you see.”

“Nothing at the moment,” said Logan. “It is as black as Yammoe’s armpit in here. Fiau, can we have some light?”

The end of his staff burst into flame and any number of birds and two foxes made a dash for the entrance in fright.

“Ugh,” exclaimed Logan, looking around. “This place has been much used by wild animals and their mess is everywhere. There is even a colony of bats hanging from the roof. What kind of deity would live in a place like this?”

“I venture Duw does not live this close to the entrance,” said Autumn. “I feel currents of air coming from different directions. What else do you see?”

“Ohh, umm, ’tis a big cave,” said Logan, peering around. “It seems to go back some distance and there are three tunnels that lead away. No, four. There may even be another at the end but I cannot see that far.”

“’Twould seem likely that Duw lives down one of these tunnels,” said Autumn, slowly turning her head from side to side so she could smell and taste the air currents. “And the entrance through which we came?”

“That is behind us,” said Logan. “I can see Ffion still watching us.” He waved but she did not wave back.

“Do you see anything else?” asked Autumn. “Some indication of which way to go, perhaps?”

“No, nothing,” said Logan after studying each of the tunnel entrances. “They all look much alike to me.”

“Hmm,” said Autumn. “And, I take it, Duw is not here to greet us?”

“Unless It is invisible,” said Logan, “or has the form of a bat.”

“Are you here, Duw?” called Autumn suddenly. “’Tis I, Autumn Savannah, here at your invitation.”

Her voice echoed and several bats let go of the roof and flew lazily around before finding new roosting spots.

“Anything?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said Logan. “Do you suppose Duw is shy?”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but ’tis more likely It is elsewhere. Then again mayhap this is some sort of test to see if we are in some way worthy.”

“Surely Duw would already know that else It would not have invited us,” said Logan.

“You would think so but the minds of deities work in mysterious ways,” said Autumn. “So, your thoughts? Do we search these tunnels or do we return to Ffion and await further instructions?”

“My guess is you wish to explore the tunnels,” said Logan, “but I see a difficulty.”

“That the tunnels may split and join up again and we will become lost?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Logan. “And this is a big mountain. Mayhap it is honeycombed with tunnels that lead nowhere except to starvation and death. What is it called again? I have forgotten.”

“Dwre,” said Autumn. “’Tis a dilemma. Mayhap if we could mark our path in some way then ... ahh, I wonder.”

“Mother Midcarn’s rock!” exclaimed Logan as Autumn started to rummage in her pack. “Of course!”

He snatched the rock from Autumn’s hand and hurried to the wall of the cave.

“It leaves a goodly white mark,” he said excitedly. “If we make a mark at the start of whichever tunnel we go down we will be able to find our way back easily. Which one shall we try first?”

“You choose, Logan,” said Autumn.

“Then this first one,” he said. “If it leads nowhere we can come back and try the next one.” He paused. “Ah, I have just had a thought.”

“What is it?” asked Autumn.

“What if the tunnel loops back and comes out as one of the others?” asked Logan. “Say we take this first one and it splits several times and we come back to an entrance we have already marked. We may think it is marking the way back when it is really a loop in the tunnel and we end up going round that loop endlessly. We have no idea how complicated these tunnels get.”

“A fair point,” said Autumn. “Let me think on it for a moment.”

She stood in the rancid smelling cave trying to visualise a complicated net of tunnels that split, twisted and rejoined.

“It seems to me,” she said after a while, “that such a tunnel will either come to a dead end or return to a point we have already been. It may be that Duw waits for us in some place but, in effect, that will be a dead end for after speaking with Duw we will doubtless wish to return the way we came.”

“Aye,” said Logan, who'd been drawing lines in the muck on the cave floor with his finger. “So if we mark one of these tunnels and follow it we will either come to a place where it splits or return to this cave. If we take another tunnel we will mark it but if we return to an already marked tunnel, what say you we mark it a second time? That way we will know it only leads back and so we will not follow it.”

“So where there is a split there will be either no marks, one mark or two marks?” said Autumn. “To find Duw we must take the tunnels with no marks but on our return, we will know the tunnels with two marks lead back to the same place and the tunnels with no marks lead

nowhere we have been so to find our way out again we must follow the tunnels with only one mark. Is that right or is there an error in my thinking? Would we need a third mark for any reason?"

"I cannot think of one," said Logan, studying his spider's web of interlinking lines in the dirt. "It seems to me there are only three possibilities. Either a tunnel leads us nowhere or it leads us somewhere or we haven't followed it yet and those tie up with two marks, one mark or no mark. If there are no marks then it cannot bring us back here since we haven't used it to get wherever we are, except by chance, and if there are two marks then we know it leads nowhere so the only possible return path is those tunnels with only one mark. Yes, I think you are right. To begin we follow only tunnels with no marks and leave a mark and to return we only follow tunnels with one mark. If we follow a tunnel and find a mark where it joins another then we leave a second mark to show it leads nowhere."²⁸

"And I venture we must sooner or later either find Duw or return here," said Autumn. "Dwre may be a big mountain but unless there is strong magic here we must eventually run out of tunnels."

"There is another possibility," said Logan.

"What is that?" asked Autumn. "You see a need for a third mark?"

"No," said Logan, "but what if Duw or some other creature goes round removing the marks?"

"At some point we have to place our trust in something," said Autumn cheerfully. "If we do not then we might as well go back outside straight away."

"Which is a thought worth considering," said Logan.

"Indeed," said Autumn. "You consider it while I follow that tunnel over there."

²⁸ Interestingly, Autumn and Logan have here derived an algorithm for finding a path through a maze potentially containing loops that was formalised by the French mathematician Charles Pierre Trémaux. This algorithm, as noted by Autumn, does not allow for mazes with multiple entry or exit points.

She started walking towards the tunnel with the strongest breeze coming from it, her staff tapping on the ground.

“And you thought she would learn caution,” muttered Logan under his breath. “You be a fool, Logan, and no mistake.”

“Another possibility has occurred to me,” said Autumn, pausing two paces inside the tunnel.

“What is that?” asked Logan catching up with her.

“There may be more than one entrance from outside to these tunnels,” said Autumn. “What if we do as we have said and find ourselves back outside somewhere else?”

“You do like to think up difficulties, don't you,” said Logan.

“I thought that was your role in life,” said Autumn. “Is it not you who usually thinks of reasons why we should not do something?”

“Only because I fear for your safety more than you do, Autumn,” said Logan, “but this is not a major difficulty. If it happens we will either choose to stay outside in which case we walk around the mountain until we find Ffion again or we will go back inside and start over. There is another possibility that is more serious, however.”

“Oh yes?” asked Autumn, walking forward. She swung her staff from side to side so it tapped on the walls of the tunnel.

“What if something happens to me?” asked Logan. “You will not be able to see the marks on the walls.”

“Then let us hope nothing happens to you,” said Autumn, “unless you want to carry a big pile of stones for me to feel. Did you mark the entrance to this tunnel?”

“Oh Sploop!” exclaimed Logan, horrified. “A moment.”

He hurried back and drew a thick white line on the wall beside the tunnel then hurried back to Autumn.

"I made a mark on the left side," he said. "If I always mark on the left then we should not get confused if two entrances are close to each other."

"That is good thinking," said Autumn. "What do you see? It seems to me the ground is cleaner here."

"Aye," said Logan. "The mess from the creatures that dwell here is gone. Likely they stay in the main cave and do not venture into these tunnels or but rarely. Ahh, there is another tunnel up ahead that goes off to the right. Shall we stay in this one or take it?"

"This tunnel was off to the left from the main cave?" asked Autumn.

"Yes," said Logan.

"Then let us go to the right," said Autumn. "I venture if Duw does live in here then It will more likely live near the centre of the mountain than on the edge."

"Sounds good," said Logan, drawing a thick white line on the left side of the tunnel going to the right. "Ffion spoke of lads from Ynyncc coming here to prove their bravery and not returning. Do you suppose they got lost in these tunnels?"

"More than likely," said Autumn, striding ahead. "Let me know if we come across any bones."

"We just passed some," said Logan. "That's what made me think of them."

"Ahh," said Autumn, stopping. "Did they look human? Do you think we should collect them and take them back to Ynyncc for burial?"

"No, they were more like rabbit bones," said Logan. "Although we are not far from the main cave. You would think the rabbit could have found its way back from here."

"Unless it was brought here by something else so it could eat in peace," said Autumn, carrying on walking again. "Do you think with

time and practice my sense of smell will match that of a dog? "Would be good if I could find our way out of here by tracking us the way a dog would."

"I doubt it," said Logan. "Dogs noses are considerably longer than yours so likely they have more of what allows them to smell things on the inside. You might end up with the hearing of a dog though, especially if you arrange your hair so it gives you flaps over your ears the way a dog does."

"Now that is a thought," said Autumn thoughtfully. "I use my staff as a way of extending my sense of touch so mayhap there are ways I can use other things to help with my other senses. How would I use my hair as ear flaps?"

"We can play around with that when we return outside," said Logan, "unless you really want to spend more time in these tunnels than we have to."

"No, it can wait," said Autumn.

"Left or right?" asked Logan as they came to another junction.

"I think left this time," said Autumn. "How do you think I could aid my tasting?"

"Nothing immediately comes to mind," said Logan, making the appropriate mark. "I suppose we could stretch your tongue but what if it no longer fitted in your mouth?"

"Yes, I can see that would be a problem," said Autumn. "Mayhap something else will occur to us later."

* * *

"How long do you suppose we have been in these tunnels?" asked Logan. "They seem to be endless."

"I wager more than half a day," said Autumn. "I fancy it is night outside. Shall we stop for food?"

"You brought some?" asked Logan, suddenly more alert.

"No," said Autumn, stopping and turning to face him. "I thought you did. Did you not put some aside to bring?"

"Aye," said Logan sadly, "but I forgot to bring it. I was hoping you had."

"Ahh, no matter," said Autumn. "'Twill not be the first time we have gone without food. Are we coming to a dead end? The echoes are changing."

"It looks like it," said Logan, holding Fiau up a little. He frowned. "No, wait. There is something there."

"What sort of something?" asked Autumn, walking slightly faster.

"I do not know," said Logan, "but I fancy it is a door of some sort."

"Ahh," said Autumn. "Perhaps our journey is coming to an end and Duw is behind that door."

"Perhaps," said Logan as Autumn's staff knocked against the door. His voice was filled with puzzlement. "But if it is Duw why is there a bar across it on this side?"

"Tell me what you see," commanded Autumn, reaching out to touch the door.

"'Tis a solid wooden door," said Logan, "and blocks the entire passage. There is a bar holding it shut and what looks like a small window but it is quite low down, below my hips."

"A window?" asked Autumn. "Why would someone put a window in a door that low? Can you see anything through it?"

Logan squatted down and peered through the hole.

"Not really," he said. "There is no light other than what comes from Fiau but I think I can see a shadow or two and I fancy I can hear

voices. I cannot make out the words but by the sound of it they are having an argument.”

“Perhaps if we knock someone will come,” said Autumn, listening intently.

“Perhaps,” said Logan, “but what good would that do? The bar is this side. Do you suppose this is Duw's prison or something?”

“Is there a lock on the bar?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Logan, straightening up. “Tis just a simple piece of wood that fits in a slot in the wall.”

“Could someone put an arm through the window and reach the bar?” she asked, running her hands over the door.

“Probably,” said Logan. “Mayhap not a child but an adult, yes.”

“Then I wager this is not a prison,” said Autumn. Her hands found the bar and explored its length. “Come, let us go inside for we have been invited and if Duw is not there then mayhap whoever is can give us directions.”

“Are you sure that's wise?” asked Logan.

“Perhaps not,” said Autumn cheerfully, “but I grow tired of these endless tunnels and I confess it irks me that Duw has not made better provision for us.”

“Aye,” said Logan. “That annoys me as well. Why could Duw not have met us in the cave at the start? I have half a mind to suggest we return to the outside. If Duw wishes to meet us that badly It can come to us.”

“Let us enquire behind this door,” said Autumn, “and if no success is forthcoming then let us return outside. I prefer the fresh breeze to this dead air in here” and she lifted the bar before Logan could respond. She leant it neatly against the wall of the tunnel and pushed the door.

It swung open noiselessly to reveal a lit room. Logan gasped in

surprise.

“What?” exclaimed Autumn staring, “I can see? Logan, tell me, is this a lit room with people in it?”

“Aye,” said Logan, staring at her. “Can you see this?”

“I cannot begin to imagine why,” said Autumn, looking around, “but it seems my sight is restored to me.”

“Oh Autumn!” exclaimed Logan, reaching out to hug her. “That is the most wonderful news!”

“But wait,” said Autumn, holding up her hand to stop him. “Is that not Ffion over there?”

“What?” exclaimed Logan. “Where? Sloop, so it is. And there is Iago coming through an entrance on the far side. Voqev! Did you see that?”

“That Iago hit Ffion,” said Autumn coldly. “Yes, I did see that.”

She hurried forward and cried “Hold, Iago! Do not strike her again!”

Iago turned to look at her with one hand gripping Ffion's hair.

“Shut up, bitch,” he exclaimed, his face turning into an ugly snarl. “This be my daughter and I be doing whatever I damned well please to her.” He shook Ffion's head roughly to emphasise his point and Ffion slashed at his eyes with her nails but missed.

“Then you will answer to me,” said Autumn, pushing between Iago and Ffion and forcing Iago to let go of Ffion.

“Hello, Logan,” said Ffion, turning to grin lasciviously at Logan. “You are looking mightily handsome today,” and she slipped her hand between Logan's legs and grabbed his crotch. “How about it, eh?”

Logan lurched backwards in shock just as Iago said “I be headman here and no whore-mongering slut be telling me what to do! Get out of my way, you filthy scum!” and he gave Autumn a hard shove.

Autumn caught his hand and twisted his arm and it bent like rubber.

“Pah!” exclaimed Iago and twisted his arm around her hand and smashed her in the face with his elbow.

“Over there,” exclaimed Ffion, pushing Logan so his back rammed up against the wall. She released his crotch and used her hands to pull her tunic apart then grabbed the back of his head and pulled his face between her bare breasts. “You like that, eh, big boy?”

Autumn headbutted Iago and his face bent and distorted just as Nacsyn grabbed her from behind and spun her round.

“Do what you're bloody well told,” he screamed in her face. “Turds like you deserve everything you get!”

Autumn rammed the flat of her hand into Nacsyn's face and it went straight through. She barely had time to register this before Noddfa and Myri pulled her away.

“Get away from me!” shouted Logan, pushing Ffion's shoulders hard. Both shoulders bent back and banged into each other behind her head. She laughed hysterically and tried to kiss him but he ducked out of the way and ran over to pull Noddfa off Autumn.

“Get against the wall,” he shouted as Autumn looked confused and lost. “Get against the wall!”

He pulled her arm hard to get her away from Myri who was trying to sink her teeth into Autumn's neck then kicked Myri. Her thigh bent around his foot and he lost his balance.

“Get away from her!” he shouted as he crashed onto his back.

Autumn lurched back then bent to grab her staff just as something large and grey flew over her head.

Iago and the others cowered back as a very large owl landed on the floor in front of Logan and spread its wings.

“Begone!” said the owl, slowly walking towards Iago and the others on its short feathered legs. “Get back to your caverns.” It twisted its head round to look briefly at Autumn and Logan. “You two, get out. Now!”

Iago, Ffion and the others backed through the doorway, their faces contorted in fear and their bodies cringing.

“Quick!” exclaimed Logan, jumping up. “Back that way.” He grabbed Autumn’s hand and dragged her through the doorway through which they had entered.

He slammed the wooden door shut and rammed the bar down.

“Voqev!” he exclaimed. “What happened in there?”

“Is Fiau still burning?” asked Autumn.

“Aye,” said Logan, picking up Fiau from where he had dropped her on the ground.

“Ahh,” said Autumn. She reached out and touched Logan’s face. “Is that you, Logan?”

“Aye,” said Logan, taking her hand. “Can you not see me?”

“No,” said Autumn, a little sadly. “’Twould seem I am blind again.”

Chapter Thirty One

“I thank you for your aid in there,” said Autumn as they hurried back along the tunnel. “I was greatly confused by the sudden restoring of my sight and the swirling of lights and colours.”

“That's what friends are for,” said Logan, panting a little. “Voqev knows what was going on in there and where Iago and Ffion and the others came from but I wager it was not real.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “My sight is gone again and I venture it did not actually return. Do you suppose all that happened in our minds?”

“Ahh, we are at the junction,” said Logan. “Let us stop for a few moments and gather our thoughts. Did you see that huge owl?”

“No, what owl?” said Autumn.

“At the end,” said Logan, adjusting his tunic that had got twisted from Ffion's manhandling. Something fell out and bounced across the floor. “A huge grey owl suddenly appeared and made everyone go into that other room.” He bent to pick up whatever it was and stared at it.

“Ahh, it was an owl?” said Autumn. “Something large and grey went over me but everything was beginning to fade and I could not make out what it was. Why would there be an owl in these tunnels and why would it come to our aid?”

“I know not,” said Logan, “but here is another mystery. I've just found a bean in my tunic.”

“A bean?” exclaimed Autumn. “What kind of bean?”

“It looks like an ordinary bean,” said Logan, turning it over, “although a little dry and withered. Oh, and there is something written on it. It looks like 'Tailo' although 'tis difficult to make out for the withering.”

“Tailo?” said Autumn. “I have heard that name before but I know not where.”

“So it's a name, is it?” asked Logan.

There was a whoosh and a large grey owl landed in front of him.

“This is not yours,” said the owl and snatched the bean from his hand with its beak.

“What?” exclaimed Logan, jumping back.

“What is happening?” asked Autumn, dropping into her defensive posture, her face tense.

The owl turned and launched itself into the air.

“Wait!” shouted Logan, running after it. “Wait!”

The owl landed again and twisted its head all the way round to look at him.

“What?” it said and dropped the bean. It grabbed it immediately with the talons of one leg without taking its eyes off Logan.

“Who is that?” asked Autumn, twisting to face in the direction of the owl.

“Tis the owl again,” said Logan. “Umm, greetings friend owl. I am Logan and this is Autumn. What is your name?”

“I do not have time to dally,” said the owl, “and I am no friend of yours. Be off with you.”

It started to launch itself again and Logan ran forward and grabbed its tail feathers.

“Let go of me,” snarled the owl, jabbing at Logan with its beak.

“I will when you tell us what is happening,” said Logan, wincing as the beak hit his forearm.

“You impede me in the performance of my duty,” snapped the owl,

blinking at him. "Leave me be. You have no right to be here anyway."

"We were invited by Duw," said Autumn, still in her defensive posture.

"Then go to Duw," said the owl irritably. "Stop wasting my time!"

"We are lost," said Logan. "We know not where Duw is."

"On the upper level," said the owl. "These be the dungeons down here."

"Dungeons!" exclaimed Logan. "What dungeons?"

"These dungeons," said the owl. "You are not supposed to be here. Go away."

It tried to take off again but Logan kept a tight grip on its tail feathers.

"Mayhap you are supposed to be here after all," said the owl, glaring at him. "You have the right attitude."

"How do we get to the upper level?" asked Logan.

"If I tell you will you release me?" asked the owl. "Time is running out."

"Yes, I promise," said Logan.

"Follow that tunnel," said the owl, pointing with its beak to the tunnel that branched off to the right, away from the one leading to the wooden door. "Then take the third tunnel on the left. It goes up to the next level. I know not where Duw is but if Duw is here then It will be on that level."

"Thank you," said Logan and let go of the feathers.

"Let us hope I am not too late," grumbled the owl and flew off with a whirr.

“Is it gone?” asked Autumn.

“Yes,” said Logan.

Slowly she relaxed her defensive posture.

“Tell me true,” she said. “Did you just have a conversation with an owl or was that in my mind again?”

“I did,” said Logan, “or mayhap it was in my mind as well. I venture not for the bean has gone.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn. “There is much here that raises questions in my mind but I fancy the answers here will be few and far between. What say you we find this tunnel to the upper level and put my questions to Duw?”

“I expect we have little choice,” said Logan.

“We always have a choice,” said Autumn. “We could follow your marks back to the outside and leave this place.”

“Ahh, indeed,” said Logan. “And that would be my first choice.”

“But are you not curious about how Iago and Ffion came to be in our minds?” asked Autumn. “And why they acted so strangely? And what of this owl, and the bean?”

“I would like an explanation,” said Logan, “but I can live without one.”

“Then we shall return to the outside,” said Autumn. “I will not have you suffering through a situation you do not wish to be in when there is an alternative. Come, find your marks and let us leave.”

“Now you make me feel guilty,” said Logan. “I know you are burning up with curiosity and likely, now we know the way, we will not fall into any further mishaps.”

“And if we do,” said Autumn, “I know you will cope well, as you did

back there in the dungeon. Did you enjoy your skirmish with Ffion?"

"I might have done had she not been so aggressive," said Logan. "To be honest she scared me witless. Come, let us find Duw and get this over with."

They set off along the tunnel the owl had pointed to and took the third tunnel to the left. It did, indeed, slope upwards.

"Has the stopper on the water bottle come loose?" asked Autumn as they started the ascent.

"No," said Logan, checking it. "It is tight. Why?"

"I fancy I can smell water," said Autumn. "'Tis very faint which is what made me think we had spilt a little."

"There is none on the ground," said Logan. "Mayhap it comes from up ahead?"

"It must do," said Autumn, "unless I am mistaken."

Perhaps a dozen paces further on she froze and Logan bumped into her.

"Why did you stop?" he asked.

"Shhh!" hissed Autumn, She cocked her head and listened intently. "Do you hear that?"

Logan listened but could only hear the sound of his own breathing. "No. What do you hear?"

"I fancy 'tis the moving of water," she said, "and the smell is a little stronger. There is also something else in the smell. Vegetation, perhaps? I am not certain."

"Then mayhap that owl has sent us to an entrance," said Logan, "rather than where Duw lives. It did seem certain we should not be here."

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “although I fancy not. 'Tis difficult to keep track of directions but my feeling is we are nearing the centre of the mountain not the edge.”

“The tunnel splits into three ahead,” said Logan, holding up Fiau to see a little better. “Which one shall we follow?”

“I do not know,” said Autumn. “If we are near the centre then like as not it makes little difference and if we are near the edge then my sense of direction is no reliable guide. Tell me when we reaching the splitting.”

“About fifteen more paces,” said Logan.

“This one,” said Autumn decisively twelve paces later, using her staff to point towards a tunnel. “It smells of vegetation and water and the other two do not. Which one is it?”

“The middle one,” said Logan. He sniffed the air. “I fancy I can smell it too. Vegetation anyway if not the water. There is a dampness to the air as well.”

“Now we are not moving,” said Autumn, listening intently, “I fancy that sound of water I hear is a waterfall. It has a tumbling quality that running water does not.”

“I can't hear it,” admitted Logan, also listening. “I mean, I can hear the faint sound of water but not well enough to make out any of its qualities.”

“My sense of direction must be well off,” said Autumn with a hint of disgust. “If it is a waterfall then we must be near the outside. Whoever heard of a waterfall inside a mountain?”

“Well, there must be water inside mountains for it to come out,” said Logan quite reasonably. “And if it flows inside the mountain mayhap there are times when it falls down inside the mountain as well.”

“Perhaps,” said Autumn, “but I am not convinced. More likely we are at an entrance and a different entrance to where Ffion waits for there

was no waterfall within earshot there.”

“Well, whatever it is can't be that far,” said Logan, “and if there is vegetation there will likely be something to eat. Come on.”

He walked forward into the centre tunnel and Autumn followed the sound of his footsteps.

Perhaps a hundred and fifty paces later Logan stopped in astonishment and this time it was Autumn who walked into him.

“Your pardon,” she said. “I was concentrating on the sound of the waterfall more than your feet. Have we arrived somewhere?”

“Most definitely,” said Logan, his voice filled with surprise and a little awe.

“Tell me what you see,” said Autumn, taking his sleeve and standing beside him.

“You can stop the light, Fiau,” said Logan.

“We are outside and it is still day?” asked Autumn.

“No, we are still inside,” said Logan, “and it is as light as day.”

“How is that possible?” asked Autumn.

“Likely this is where Duw dwells,” said Logan, “so anything is possible.”

“Tell me what you see!” said Autumn with a hint of impatience in her voice.

“’Tis a mighty cavern,” said Logan. “I can see the walls and roof but they are a long way off. The whole place is lit with a pale blue light but I cannot see where it comes from. ’Tis almost like the rock itself is glowing.”

“And the waterfall and vegetation?” asked Autumn.

“Ahh, yes,” said Logan. “’Tis almost like a swamp but there is a waterfall of sorts far off to the right. It is not high nor does a lot of water fall. ’Tis more of a wide trickle than anything. The water flows over most of the ground but there are rocks that sit up out of the water in places and there are a lot of bushes and trees, you know, the sort of bushes and trees that grow in marshlands.”

“We are not standing in water,” said Autumn. “Where are we?”

“We are on one side,” said Logan, “standing in the entrance to the tunnel and mayhap half a body height above the water. There are some rocks that lead down to the water’s edge and a shelf that looks to be dry. This is strange. From here it looks like some of the ground that is not covered with water or bushes is sand rather than soil. Look, over there. ’Tis almost like a beach.”

“I cannot,” said Autumn.

“’Twas foolish of me,” said Logan apologetically. “I forgot. I’m sorry.”

“’Tis no matter,” said Autumn. “Do you see any sign of Duw?”

“No,” said Logan, looking around. “I see no signs of life save the bushes and trees. In fact, although ’tis difficult to make out clearly I can see no other entrances. It would seem this is the only one.”

“Do you see any sign that someone or something might dwell here?” asked Autumn. “Some form of dwelling perhaps or the remains of a fire?”

“No, nothing,” said Logan, “although ...”

“Although what?” demanded Autumn. “Talk to me!”

“I fancy there is something on that flat rock over yonder,” said Logan. “Oh, umm, in front of where we stand the ground slopes down to the water’s edge then there is swamp or marsh for a distance then there is a pile of rocks. The one on top looks to be quite flat and there is something on it. I cannot make it out but it looks quite small and ... oh.”

“What?” demanded Autumn, perhaps a little more stridently than she had intended but it was frustrating not being able to see.

“The light is changing colour,” said Logan. “Mayhap it is just my eyes but it seems to be getting a pinkish hue and is no longer as blue as it was.”

“Mizule!” exclaimed Autumn, her grip on Logan's arm getting tighter. “Surely we are not there again?”

“You mean Miesca?” asked Logan. He frowned. “How can that be? Xanthous closed the rift we passed through and said there were no more. Anyway, was it not green that came after blue, rather than pink?”²⁹

“I do not remember clearly,” said Autumn. “Take me to that rock. I want to know what it is you see.”

“Is that wise?” asked Logan. “Xanthous was not happy when we stumbled into Miesca the first time. I venture It will be even less happy this time.”

“We have been invited,” said Autumn. “Mayhap Xanthous and Duw are one and the same.”

“And mayhap they are not,” said Logan. “Mayhap Xanthous and Duw are locked in battle as It was with Zeeth. We do not want to go though all that again.”

“This is our destiny,” said Autumn. “Did we not have an invitation and did not Mother Midcarn's gift make it possible to find our way here? Or do you think we could have found this place without the marks?”

“Oh Sploop!” exclaimed Logan. “Would that it were your logic that was lost rather than your eyes!”

“Help me down,” demanded Autumn. “I feel a need for haste here.”

29 See *The Annals ~ The Sixth Tale*. In the Land of Miesca the colour of everything constantly changed as they cycled through the range of colours.

“Oh very well,” said Logan and helped Autumn down onto the sandy ground. The swamp was shallow and they waded across to the pile of rocks with Autumn stubbing her toe only once.

“Voqev!” exclaimed Logan when he could see the top of the flat rock clearly. “I do not believe my eyes!”

“What do you see, Logan?” demanded Autumn.

“Tis a bell,” said Logan, his voice cracking. “A bell with a handle and there is a sign next to it. It says ‘Please Ring’.”

“A bell?” said Autumn, her voice matching his for astonishment. “Please ring? Is this another of your jokes, Logan?”

“Would that it were,” he said. “I wager this is a dream and I am sound asleep in a warm bed in Ynyncc. Slap me and wake me up.”

“This is no dream,” said Autumn, “unless I am dreaming the same thing.”

“I was afraid of that,” said Logan. “Voqev! What can this mean?”

“Ring the bell and let us find out,” said Autumn, regaining her calm. “Or do you want me to do it?”

Chapter Thirty Two

Nervously Logan leant forward and touched the handle of the bell with a finger. He jerked it away quickly.

“What happened?” asked Autumn, dropping into her defensive stance as she sensed his sudden movement.

“Nothing,” said Logan. “Umm, I just did not want to grasp it in case something did happen.”

“Sensible,” said Autumn. “And you say nothing did happen?”

“That’s right,” said Logan.

“So why are we waiting?” she asked.

“You asked me a question,” said Logan, “and I was answering it.”

He leaned forward again and this time grasped the smooth handle of the bell and lifted it. Its metallic surface gleamed pinkly.

“Well, here goes,” he said and cautiously waved it.

The bell sounded twice and its musical tones echoed through the cavern.

“Tell me what you see,” said Autumn, slowly rotating and straining with her remaining four senses.

“Nothing,” said Logan, looking around. “Everything is as it was.”

“Ring again,” said Autumn. “Mayhap whatever left this bell did not hear your first ring.”

Logan hesitated then rang the bell again, this time harder and seven or eight times. The echoes created a cacophony of tones.

“I wager even a deaf person would have heard that,” he said, putting the bell down carefully.

“And still nothing?” asked Autumn.

“No,” said Logan. “Do you want me to ring again?”

“Let us wait a while,” said Autumn. “Mayhap Duw or whatever left the bell is busy and will be here shortly.”

“As you wish,” said Logan. He sat on the flat rock and looked around. “So, how long should we wait?”

“Presumably until something does happen,” said Autumn, feeling the surface of the flat rock with her hands. She, too, sat on the rock and folded her legs on her knees in her usual way.

“What if nothing ever happens?” asked Logan.

“A good question,” said Autumn, “but I venture we should wait at least some reasonable time. ’Twould be foolish to ring the bell and run away immediately.”

“Aye, ’twould be foolish indeed,” said a deep whispery voice behind them.

Logan lurched sideways and fell off the edge of the rock. Autumn, however, jumped explosively to her feet and twirled to face the source of the voice.

“Calm yourself, Autumn Savannah,” said the voice. “I mean you no harm.”

“I know your voice,” said Autumn, backing away a half step for she knew the edge of the rock was close. “Are you Sayiya?”

“You have a good memory,”³⁰ said Sayiya. “I am indeed. You are uninjured, Logan?”

Logan peered over the edge of the rock.

“I have a scrape on my knee,” he said, “but it is nothing. What brings

30 See *The Annals ~ The Sixth Tale*. The turtle Sayiya is the Messenger of Xanthous.

you here, Sayiya?”

He jumped back onto the rock.

“This is my home,” said Sayiya. “Or, more correctly, my home when I am in your world.”

“I thought you lived in Miesca,” said Autumn, relaxing.

“I do,” said Sayiya. “This place is where I come to rest and relax. Being the Messenger of Xanthous is sometimes a tiring and stressful pleasure.”

“I can imagine,” said Autumn sympathetically. “I wager you are also Duw?”

“Duw is how I am known to those who live in these parts,” said Sayiya gravely. “We have a comfortable association whereby I give them such aid as I can from time to time and they do not disturb me.”

“Is that the purpose of those tunnels?” asked Autumn. “To ensure none disturb you?”

“Yes,” said Sayiya.

“And the dungeons?” asked Autumn. “What purpose do they serve?”

“How do you know of the dungeons?” asked Sayiya, wheezing in surprise.

“We stumbled upon them by mischance,” said Logan. “It hasn’t been easy following all these tunnels.”

“Did not Mother Midcarn give you aid?” asked Sayiya. “She said she would.”

“Aye, she did, of sorts,” said Autumn, “although I venture her aid will be more use when we leave than when we arrived.”

“Ahh, unfortunate,” said Sayiya. He thought for a few moments. “And

did you enter the dungeons?”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Most strange they were.”

“Indeed,” said Sayiya. “You were fortunate to get out unmolested.”

“We were saved by an owl,” said Logan.

“Ahh, that would be Uetnis,” said Sayiya. “He is my bean counter.”

“That would explain the bean,” said Autumn, “or at least to some extent. What, pray, do the beans mean and why do you have dungeons?”

“You have met the people of this island?” asked Sayiya. “By that I mean those this side of the Wall.”

“Aye, a few,” said Autumn. “And those few seemed also to be in your dungeon.”

“In part,” said Sayiya. “Tell me, what did you think of the people before you came here?”

“They seemed a goodly lot,” said Autumn. “Kind, considerate and cooperative.”

“Indeed,” said Sayiya. “And that is part of the agreement we have reached.”

“Explain,” said Autumn.

“When a child is born to these people,” said Sayiya, “I have it within my power to take that part of them which is bad and not suited to cooperative living. The people of this land have only good within them.”

“Ahh, so what is in your dungeons?” asked Autumn. “The bad?”

“Indeed,” said Sayiya. “That which is bad in each of them is contained therein.”

“Interesting,” said Autumn. “Why do you not destroy that which is bad or have you not the power?”

“Because each will die when their time comes,” said Sayiya. “And when that time comes each must sit before Zeeth who will pass judgement upon them. That which is bad within each must be shown to Zeeth as well as what is good. Zeeth has spoken and so it shall be.”

“I see,” said Autumn. She thought for a few moments. “And the owl? Your bean keeper?”

“That is Uetnis,” said Sayiya. “Each person has their name on a bean and Uetnis tallies the beans so none who die leave their badness behind. He has a large rack of beans and one is added whenever a new babe is born and one removed when someone dies. How else do we ensure that all is kept orderly?”

“I see,” said Autumn. “Uetnis came upon us in the dungeon with a bean so did that mean whoever's name was on that bean had died and their badness was to be taken to Zeeth?”

“More or less,” said Sayiya. “’Tis Uetnis’ task to reunite the badness with the good at the moment of death so that the two are reunited before going before Zeeth.”

“That would explain why Uetnis was in such a hurry,” said Autumn thoughtfully. “I do hope we did not delay him too long. What would be the consequence of a badness not being rejoined in time?”

“There will be the possibility of one destined to stay with Yammoe in the Land of the Undead remaining with Zeeth,” said Sayiya, “for their appearance would be one who is wholly good when in fact they may be largely bad.”

“I see,” said Autumn. “Is there any way to check? I fear we may have delayed Uetnis.”

“Uetnis would have informed me by now if such had occurred,” said Sayiya. “There is always some leeway within this for none are presented to Zeeth immediately upon death.”

“That is good,” said Autumn. “Umm, we are here at your invitation. Are you here as the Messenger of Xanthous? Has another dispute arisen between It and Zeeth?”

“No,” said Sayiya and shifted forward on his long flat feet.

His long leathery neck lifted his head so he could look closely into Autumn's eyes. She felt his breath on her face but did not pull away.

“You do not see me?” he asked.

“No,” said Autumn. “I have lost that ability. If I might ask, though, how was it possible for me to see in the dungeons?”

“Them as are there do not exist in mortal form,” said Sayiya and much of his neck retreated back into his shell. “What you saw was in your imagination and came from the forces that lie imprisoned there. I would offer you refreshments but such delights as exist here are for me and I venture you would not like them. Do either of you eat snails or dandelions?”

“I have eaten dandelions,” said Logan. “Not often for they are small but they are quite pleasant.”

“That pleases me,” said Sayiya. “If you wish to have some dandelions please help yourself. You will also find the water here is quite palatable.”

“Perhaps later,” said Logan. “Umm, will we be here long?”

“Not long,” said Sayiya, settling himself more comfortably. “I am here merely to deliver a gift from Xanthous and must return shortly. You are both welcome to stay as long as you desire, however.”

“Thank you,” said Autumn. She paused. “If it is not unseemly, what is this gift from Xanthous?”

Saiya pushed forward a large clam shell with his flipper, its gnarled surface scraping along the rock. It came to rest in front of Autumn. She put her hands down and ran her fingers over it.

“Mother Midcarn asked Xanthous for Its indulgence in the light of your role in settling matters between It and Zeeth,” said Sayiya. “As matters between the two remain stable Xanthous was inclined to grant her request. My task is to deliver it to you.”

“I thank you,” said Autumn. “I fancy 'tis a shell of some sort. What is inside?”

“'Tis a shell containing the fiery breath of Xanthous,” said Sayiya. “When you wish to be cured of your blindness, hold it up in front of your eyes and open it. You will then be cured of that affliction. A word of caution, however. Do not open the shell when anyone else is looking for the breath of Xanthous is exceedingly powerful and will cause them irreparable harm.”

Logan drew a sharp intake of breath in surprise but managed to refrain from jumping up and running around in delight.

“Truly this is a gift of great value,” said Autumn, feeling overwhelmed. “I do not know how to thank you, Sayiya.” She touched the shell again in wonder.

“'Tis not me to whom you owe your thanks,” said Sayiya. “I am merely the Messenger. If thanks be due then they are to Xanthous for granting the request and to Mother Midcarn for making the request.”

“I will thank Mother Midcarn myself, next time we meet,” said Autumn, feeling tears beginning to form in her eyes, “but I do not expect to ever meet Xanthous again. Would you convey to Xanthous my deepest and undying thanks for Its kindness in this.”

“I shall,” said Sayiya, “although Xanthous also asked me to convey to you Its thanks for helping with Zeeth and wishes you to know that this is but small recompense. I will now take my leave of you. Please, stay here as long as you wish and when you desire to leave, simply say 'drysfu'. It is a word with no meaning but speaking it will return you to the place from which you entered here. That way you will not risk entering the dungeons again.”

“I thank you, Sayiya,” said Autumn, putting her hands together and

bowing her head.

“As do I,” said Logan, copying her.

“Until we meet again, Autumn Savannah,” said Sayiya, “and Logan.” He shimmered a little then faded away.

“Well now,” said Logan. “I’ll go back into the tunnel, shall I?”

“Why?” asked Autumn, still sitting with her fingers lightly touching the shell.

“Are you not going to open the shell?” he asked.

“I ... do not know,” said Autumn, hesitantly.

“Sploop!” exclaimed Logan. “Why ever not?”

“I have remembered the name Tailo,” said Autumn. “’Twas someone in Ynyncc who had also been blinded by a seskyvi. I wager he has now died as Uetnis was carrying his bean. It does not feel right that sight is restored to me and yet others who are also blind live and will die in darkness.”

“Truly I do not understand you sometimes,” said Logan, aghast. “Many are blind, as you have been, but few ever get the opportunity to have their sight restored. I wager not one of them would ever turn down the opportunity if it was given to them and yet you do. You ... astonish me, I have to say. I wager you are thinking of giving this shell to some other blind unfortunate.”

“I am what I am, Logan,” said Autumn, “and I make no apologies for that.”

“Then think on this,” said Logan, wagging a finger angrily at Autumn even though she could not see it. “What makes you think the shell will work for them, eh? You heard Sayiya’s warning. Do you think Xanthous went to all this trouble just for you to give it away? ’Tis you It made this for, not someone else!”

“You have a point,” said Autumn calmly. “I must think on this. Would you look after the shell for me?”

“Aye,” said Logan grumpily. “Give it here.”

Autumn passed the shell to Logan and he wrapped it carefully in his blanket. That done, she took up her meditating position on the rock and closed her eyes. She remained like that for what seemed an eternity.

* * *

Slowly Autumn drew in a deep lungful of air then slowly expelled it. Then she raised her arms above her head, stretched then brought them down again. Then she twisted her shoulders and back before stretching her legs in front of her.

“So, you are returned,” said Logan who'd been lying on the flat rock with their blankets and Autumn's pack under his head.

“I am returned,” confirmed Autumn. “We are still in Sayiya's cave?”

“Aye,” said Logan. “Here is water, you must be very thirsty.”

Autumn reached out and took the water bottle and drank deeply.

“Have I been thinking all day?” she asked. “It seems to have been a long time.”

“Mayhap a little less or a little longer for there is no night in here,” said Logan, “but you have been gone a long time. Are you hungry? I've kept some dandelions for you and I daresay I could catch a few snails. They are not fast movers.”

“I apologise, Logan,” said Autumn. “I did not anticipate thinking this long. What have you been doing?”

“Mostly just sitting,” said Logan. “I did some exploring but this place is not overly large and the rest is much the same as here. How do you feel?”

"I feel good," said Autumn. "Tell me, did you go outside. Is Ffion still there?"

"I did not," said Logan, sitting up. "I thought of it but I was afraid to use that word Sayiya gave us in case it worked only once and I did not trust enough the marks I left either. I did not want to get lost in the tunnels and not be able to find my way back here, leaving you all alone."

"Ahh Logan," said Autumn, reaching over to find his hand, "you are a good friend. I wager Ffion is likely back with her father. I hope they do not worry themselves about us too much. Do you think we should leave here and return to Ynyncc to reassure them before we move on?"

"So you have decided Ynyncc is not your place?" asked Logan, his heart in his mouth.

"No, Ynyncc is not my place," said Autumn. "I have thought about that as well and I wager my inclination to stay was both because they had the appearance of being an ideal community and because my blindness left me feeling vulnerable. The former is built on a falsehood and the latter will shortly end."

"End?" exclaimed Logan. "You mean you have decided to use the shell?"

"Aye," said Autumn. "You hit the truth of it with your words. Xanthous gave me the gift in thanks for my past aid and not for me to pass it to another. Moreover, once I thought on it it seemed to me that passing the shell on would be a most difficult thing. Who should I give it to? The first blind person we meet or someone who is worthy in some way? And if that then how is it possible for me to decide who is worthy? I am not Zeeth. And what if it turns out that no one is worthy, however that is to be decided? What do I do then?"

"Absolutely," said Logan, happily. "I wager you will do more good for more people by having your sight restored than you would by giving the shell to someone else."

"Indeed, let us hope so," said Autumn. "You still have the shell?"

“Aye,” said Logan. He got up and went over to his blanket and fumbled inside. “Here it is.”

“Ahh, thank you,” said Autumn, also getting up. Without thinking she stepped forward to take it from him. Her foot slipped on the edge of the rock and she tumbled into the water, knocking the shell from Logan's hand.

“Sploop,” exclaimed Logan, jumping to catch it. He missed and the shell disappeared from view among the weeds in the swamp. “Oh Vogev!”

“Mizule, that was unexpected!” exclaimed Autumn, on her hands and knees in the water.

“The shell fell in the water!” said Logan urgently. “I can't see it!”

Autumn froze.

“Where did it fall?” she asked, controlling her emotions.

“Somewhere in front of you and to your left,” said Logan, jerking himself flat on the rock so he could reach over with his arms. He could only get his hands in the water up to his wrists and couldn't feel the bottom.

Autumn began to feel around among the weeds.

“It this it?” she asked, holding up a piece of rock that was a similar shape.

“No,” said Logan, his voice trembling. “That is a rock not a shell.”

Autumn dropped the rock back in the water and continued to feel around.

“What about this?” she asked, holding something else up.

“Ahh, that looks more like a shell,” said Logan, “but there could be lots of shells down there and I did not look at it closely. How does it

feel?”

“It feels like the one,” said Autumn, cautiously running her hands over it. “I fancy it is. 'Tis the right size and shape and I recognise this nick in the edge near the joint.”

She got to her feet, holding the shell very carefully, and climbed back on the rock.

“Well then,” said Logan. “Umm, I'll go and hide in the tunnel, shall I”.

“Not yet,” said Autumn. “Mayhap this is foolish of me but I have in mind that the first sight I see will be the wonders of the world before me, not the inside of a cave no matter how luxurious Sayiya has made it.”

“In truth it is doubtless luxurious for a turtle,” said Logan, “but to us it is just a swamp.”

“Aye,” said Autumn. “Say the word and let us return to the ledge. Mayhap Ffion will still be there.”

“I hope not,” said Logan with a shudder. “Even though I know she be a good person her bad side scared me greatly and every time I see her again I will remember.”

“I know,” said Autumn. “I had a similar thought with Iago. Say the word.”

“Drysfa,” said Logan. There was a faint shimmer in the air.

“Tell me what you see,” said Autumn.

“We are on the ledge,” said Logan looking around. “'Tis early morning and there is no sign of Ffion.”

“Good,” said Autumn. “Tell me no more for I wish to see for myself.”

“I'll go inside the cave,” said Logan. “You still have the shell?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, holding it up with both hands. “I will call you when it is done.”

“May Alodia be with you,” said Logan and hurried inside the cave. He turned his face to the wall and covered his head with his arms.

“Are you safe?” called Autumn.

“Aye,” called back Logan.

He was faintly aware of a bright light that lasted barely long enough to be called a light but he stayed curled against the wall.

“Voqev, I hope it be the right shell,” he muttered. “I hope it works. I hope it works.”

“Logan!” called Autumn. “’Tis done!”

“Oh Sploop,” muttered Logan, his heart threatening to burst out of his chest. He ran out of the cave, his knees weak. “Did it work? Did it work?”

“Aye,” said Autumn, looking out over the vast expanse of jungle. “Is it not the most beautiful day?”

“Aye, it is that,” said Logan, wanting to hug her but scared to interrupt her first sight of the new world.

“Never before have I seen such a beautiful day,” exclaimed Autumn, stretching her arms out in an ecstasy of joy. “Oh Xanthous! Thank you!”

She turn to look at Logan and her face fell.

“What?” asked Logan, alarmed.

“The bottom half of your face is red,” said Autumn. “Did you eat poison dandelions?”

“I did eat some dandelions,” admitted Logan, wiping his hand over his

chin and cheeks “but I found some snail ...”

“Then come quick,” interrupted Autumn, grabbing his hand. “We must find something to counter the poison before it is too late!”

“Noo,” exclaimed Logan, pulling her back. “’Tis not poison!”

“What is it then?” demanded Autumn.

“As I was trying to say,” said Logan, feeling embarrassed, “I found some empty snail shells while you were thinking and used them to pluck the hairs on my face. That is all.”

“Oh Logan, Logan!” exclaimed Autumn, throwing her arms around him and crushing him in a deep embrace. “You look as red faced as when a pretty girl talks to you!”

Glossary

{Pronunciations given in curly brackets}

(OT refers to Old Tongue terms, N to Neander terms, W to Wase terms)

[where an entry is specific to person in a particular Tale, that Tale is in square brackets]

Adnaton'naja {ad-na-toneh-na-ja} [2]: A species of humanoid creatures with a rigid exoskeleton, similar to beetles or cockroaches, and with limited cognitive skills. Adnaton'naja are native to the Land of the Undead.

Agav {ah-gav}: The Wasian deity of misfortune, known as Sploop in Aferraron.

Ajanie {ah-ja-ni-eh}: A maker of cheese in the village of Hurabid.

Amel {ah-me-el}: One of a group of bandits led by Madlek who ambush Autumn and Logan.

Anyi {ah-ne-ye}: Sister of Madlek.

Ashmantoo {ash-ma-ne-too}: A bargain hunter from Neander in a tale told by Ffion.

Aunin {ow-ne-in}: Son of Madlek.

Biasdo {bye-as-do}: A village in Aferraron with a population of approx. 30 people. Logan's birthplace and the place from which he was exiled for persistent thievery.

Bumola {be-um-ol-ah} [1]: A farmer who let Logan live in his cowshed after Logan's parents were killed.

C'tan Peaks {ke-ta-ne}: A range of mountainous peaks running the length of the Island of Danornor. The highest peaks, including Dwre, lie in the south-west whereas those in the north-east are more akin to hills.

Chaahk {ka-ah-ke}: The deity of rain and wind.

Cirys {ki-ri-ss}: The Keeper of the Stores in Ynyncc.

Coot-Tha {ko-oo-ta}: The capital of Danornor and the sole port for trade with Wase, Aferraron and Neander. Coot-Tha has a population of less than a thousand people and is the commercial centre for the island.

Crwban {ke-rew-ba-ne}: (literally 'The People of the Turtle') The original tribe who occupied the island that subsequently became known as Danornor after its partial occupation by people from Aferraron. Following the construction of the Wall of Loriki, the Crwban kept to the southern part of the island.

Dalorna {da-law-re-na}: A spice that is found on Danornor and in parts of eastern Wase. It is similar to turmeric but a pale green in colour.

Danornor {da-no-re-no-re}: A large island in the Southern Wasian Sea. At the time of *The Annals*, Danornor was under the political dominance of Wase.

Derk {de-re-ke}: Father of Solene.

Doyta {do-ee-ta}: A species of sweet potato common on Danornor.

Duw {doo}: The Deity of the people of southern Danornor.

Dwre {de-we-re}: The highest of the C'tan Peaks of Danornor and home of the deity Duw.

Eira {eh-ir-ra}: A kindly old man in a tale told by Ffion.

Elmon {el-me-on}: A village in Aferraron with a population of some 20 people. It lay some two or three days walk from Biasdo.

Emia {em-me-ee-ah}: Logan's sister.

Encator {en-ke-at-or-re}: One of the two Masters at the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup during Autumn's stay there. An original copy of her treatise *Meditations On The Self In And Of Nature* is preserved in the Library of the University of Uli-Rratha although no other writings of hers remain extant.

Enzo {en-so}: One of two bakers in Hurabid and the almost era'owen of Ajanie's unnamed cousin.

Ffion {fe-ee-on-ne}: Daughter of Iago.

Gangsi {ga-ng-si} [l]: An animated corpse in the Land of the Undead that feeds on living flesh.

Garrec {ga-re-re-ke}[9]: A farmer on Danornor and the owner of the dogs that attacked Autumn and Logan.

Gata {ga-ta}: Almost era'owen of Gesen

Gesen {ge-se-ne}: A farmer from Zuasprit whose family is engaged in a long running blood feud with the family of Madlek.

Geyoro{ge-yi-re-oh}: One of a group of bandits led by Madlek who ambush Autumn and Logan.

Grip {ge-re-ip}[9]: One of the two Turkuero dogs set on Autumn and Logan by Garrec.

Hamamielis {ha-ma-me-el-is}: A tree that produces small yellow-green petals, similar to Witch Hazel. The petals have antiseptic properties.

Hurabid {who-ra-be-id}: A small fishing village, population approx 75, on the north-eastern coast of Danornor.

Iago {ee-yah-go}: Headman of the Crwban people of Ynyncc, a widower and father to Ffion.

Ige {ee-ge}: One of a group of bandits led by Madlek who ambush Autumn and Logan.

Inyanasi {in-yan-ah-si} [5]: The leader of a caravan of Neandern spice traders.

Jacan {ja-ca-ne}: A villager from Hurabid.

Jyrif{ji-ri-fe}: Son of Nacsyn and Myri.

Kad'idatou The Wise {cad-id-ah-to-we}[9]: A mystic and teacher from Hurabid, notable for living on a small platform on top of a 3 metre high pole. Originally Kad'idatou was born in Elmon in Aferraron and named Yensil. He spent a little under two years as a novice at Autumn's Esyup although this was before Autumn's time there.

Kenza {ke-ne-za}[9]: Almost era'owen of Garrec.

Komorebi {ko-mor-eh-bee} [8]: Neighbour of Autumn and Logan during their time in Schtei and the cause of Logan's eventual heartbreak.

Lakrar {le-ak-ra-re}: Leader of a small band of bandits who ambush Autumn and Logan.

Linell {li-ne-el}: A young woman in Hurabid who permits Autumn to use her baby to illustrate a point during her discussions with Kad'idatou.

Loriki {lo-ri-ki}: Third king of Danornor during the Nine Kings period

between the Island's first colonisation by people from Aferraron and the First Danornorian War with Wase.

Luik {loo-ik}: One of the sons of Ajanie.

Lutch {loo-te-ch}: Brother of Madlek.

Madlek {ma-de-le-ke}[9]: A trader from Coot-Tha whose family is engaged in a long running blood feud with the family of Gesen.

Marji {ma-rij-ee}: One of the daughters of Ajanie.

Miesca {mi-es-ca}: A world created by Xanthous which is normally inaccessible to those in the worlds of Zeeth.

Mikan {me-ke-ah}: One of a group of bandits led by Madlek who ambush Autumn and Logan.

Myri {me-ri}: Almost era'owen of Nacsyn.

Nacsyn {na-ke-si-ne}: A member of the Crwban who found Logan and Autumn on the track beside the Wall of Loriki. Nacsyn managed a sanctuary for sea turtles, from his home on the southern coast of Danornor, near the Wall of Loriki, having replaced Yufsad after the latter's death.

Nagasen {na-ga-se-ne}: An elder at Autumn's Esyup, the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup.

Noddfa {no-de-def-ah}: The Priest of Duw for Ynyncc.

Noxu {no-zu}: Autumn's mentor at her Esyup. It is unclear from The Annals whether Noxu found the abandoned infant and named her or became her mentor at some later point. What is clear, however, is that Noxu was the closest person to a father that Autumn had.

Ogursa {og-err-sa}: An Examiner at the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup who was mentor to Kad'idatou during his brief stay there. According to the Esyup's records, Ogursa died of a wasting disease some years before Autumn was found and brought to the Esyup.

Onaman {oh-na-ma-ne}: The name used by the people of Aferraron for themselves.

Parvan {pe-ar-ve-an}: A species of plant native to Aferraron which had bulbous roots similar to a potato. Parvans are widely cultivated in the southern regions where the climate is not too dry or cold.

Pranjun {pe-ra-je-un}: Fifth king of Danornor during the Nine Kings period between the Island's first colonisation by people from Aferraron and the First Danornorian War with Wase.

Pulk {pul-ke}: Almost era'owen of Madlek's sister, Anyi.

Raso {ra-so}: An alcoholic drink from the Island of Danornor. Modern raso is only some 45% proof but in the times of *The Annals* it was more likely to be around 80% proof. Raso is made by fermenting crushed peppercorns and garlic in vinegar then distilling and concentrating the resulting liquid. It has a distinctive taste that many find unpleasant, being sometimes described as a mixture of cat urine, photocopier fluid and battery acid. Raso is also used as an antiseptic and as cleaning agent although it dissolves plastics and the glazes used on pottery. It is too inflammable to be used in internal combustion engines.

Rebec {re-be-ke}: A creature native to Danornor that is similar to a wolf.

Ripper {ri-pe-pe-er}[9]: One of the two Turkuero dogs set on Autumn and Logan by Garrec.

Saik {sa-ee-ke}: Son of Madlek.

Sayiya (say-ee-ya)[6]: The Messenger of Xanthous who takes the form of a turtle.

Schtei {sh-tay-ee}: The capital of Wase.

Seiliu {sey-il-i-oo} The deity of cowsheds and Logan's personal god.

Seskyvi {se-es-ki-vi}: A species of weevil found in Danornor. A full grown male is typically 25cm long with a short bulbous body protected by a hard shell. What makes the seskyvi distinctive is that some 80% of its length is taken up by a jointed neck which typically stands vertically for half its length then horizontally for the remainder, rather like a Z on top of its body. The seskyvi hunts other large insects using a sticky, mildly toxic, acidic fluid which dissolves their outer shells. If this fluid comes into contact with human skin it causes significant inflammation and blistering and the toxins in the fluid can be hallucinogenic. For this reason some religious practices amongst the Crwban use small amounts of the toxin to enter into a meditative state.

Shoxin{sh-ho-zi-in}: The language of Wase.

Solene {so-le-ne}: A native of Hurabid who took Kad'idatou's lessons on persistent lying to heart and moved to Coot-Tha to maintain the financial records of the Island of Danornor.

Soska {so-ska} [1]: An evil creature from the Land of the Undead that preys on humans by sucking their souls out through their mouths. The victim becomes a soska in turn. Autumn and Logan are the only people whose survival from a soska attack is documented.

Subota {su-bo-ta} [5]: The Sarauta Matsafa (sorcerer) to Soros VII, the Karoi of Neander.

Swaven {se-wa-ve-en}: Mother of Gesen and head of the family.

Tailo {ta-il-oh}: A member of the Crwban who was blinded in one eye by a seskyvi.

Taliesin {ta-li-es-in}: The name by which Danornor was known to the Crwban people.

Tanininus {ta-ni-ni-nu-se}: A Wasian historian born on Danornor approximately three hundred years after the time of *The Annals*. Tanininus' sole surviving work, *The Histries Of My Ilande*, is the only other contemporaneous source to refer to the Crwban people.

Taree {ta-re-eh}: A bush native to Danornor with dark green waxy leaves. A paste made from these leaves is an effective remedy to the blistering of a seskyvi squirt.

Tiba {ti-ba}: Son of Lutch.

Totapo {to-ta-po}: A species of plant native to Danornor which has large bulbous roots similar to turnips except that they are blue in colour.

Turkuero {te-ur-koo-er-oh}: A breed of hunting/fighting dog found mainly in Danornor. In looks and temperament they are broadly similar to the American Pitbull breed but size-wise they are only slightly smaller than German Shepherds. The Turkuero is known for its bad temper and extremely fast reactions as well as the copious quantities of bacteria in their mouths which can make a bite turn septic fairly quickly. Turkueros are next to useless when it comes to herding so they are relatively uncommon in agricultural communities.

Uetnis {you-et-nis}: A servant of Sayiya; an owl. Uetnis is responsible for monitoring the anti-social spirits of the Crwban people on behalf of Sayiya. Uetnis maintains a large rack which contains a bean for

each spirit. When someone dies Uetnis ensures the spirit is returned to the body before Judgement by Zeeth.

Urde {you-re-de}: One of a group of bandits led by Madlek who ambush Autumn and Logan.

Vasau {va-sa-ooh}: Swaven's cousin.

Voo {voo}: A local term in Hurabid for an unattached woman. Voo carries with it mildly derogatory overtones.

Wall of Loriki: A wooden defensive structure built across a narrow section of Danornor to keep the primitive savages in the south western part of the Island of Danornor at bay. According to incomplete records by an unknown author, held at the Japiasok Archive of the Wase National University, the Wall was constructed during the period when Danornor was an independent state occupied by colonists from Aferraron, initiated by Loriki, the third king of Danornor, and completed by Pranjun, the fifth king. However, the Crwban people of southern Danornor maintain the Wall was originally constructed by their deity Duw. Every member of the Crwban who was physically able was required to provide two days labour each year to repair the Wall. When, exactly, that custom ended is unknown, but *Tanininus' The Histries Of My Ilande*, dating approximately three hundred years after the time of *The Annals*, refers to the Wall of Loriki and a labour levy on the Crwbans at some unspecified time in the distant past. A project to search likely locations for the Wall and excavate any that look promising has been proposed by the The National University of Wase but, due to funding issues, has yet to go beyond the planning stage.

Wikram {wik-ram}: A Krisana of the Yeinydd ru Morathke ny Feandrakek Esyup who was blinded as a youth but still mastered the skills to become a Krisana. Wikram was Noxu's mentor and died of old age some years before Autumn was brought to the Esyup.

Xanthous {zan-th-oo-se} [6]: (aka The Creator) The deity and creator of Miesca.

Yammoe {ya-me-me-we}: The deity of the undead and ruler of the Land of the Undead.

Yensil {ye-en-si-le}: See *Kad'idatou The Wise*.

Ynyncc {in-ik-ka}: The main settlement of the Crwban people of

Danornor.

Yufsad {ye-uf-sa-de}: The first keeper of the turtle sanctuary on Danornor. Yufsad is notable historically for being the first recorded person to operate an animal sanctuary, in this case for sea turtles, from his home on the southern coast of Danornor, near the Wall of Loriki. After his death, the sanctuary was taken over by Nacsyn.

Zafer {za-fa}: Almost era'owen of Swaven and father of Gesen. Killed by disease some years previously.

Zeeth {ze-et-huh}: The deity of the dead and ruler of the Land of the Dead. Zeeth sits in judgement on all who pass through the Land of the Undead and grants entry to the Land of the Dead only to those who are worthy.

Zuasprit {zoo-az-pe-ri-te}: A small agricultural village, population 100, a little to the north of Coot-Tha.